

The McComber Switch

Complete

All Four Parts



By

Karen Singer

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Part 1 – Revenge of the Ducks

Part 2 – The Consequences of Conduct

Part 3 – From the Frying Pan to the Fire

Part 4 – Fame is a Four Letter Word

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The McComber Switch

By Karen Singer

Part 1

Revenge of the Ducks

Chapter 1 - 'Twas the Night

November 26th 2014

'Twas the night before Thanksgiving, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even... Wait a minute. Back up a bit! Someone was stirring. Eleven year old Jimmy McComber was wide awake in his room and fretting so much he couldn't possibly sleep. The nightlight that he always left on, cast dim shadows over everything in the room. But the one thing it seemed to highlight the most were the trophy ducks mounted and hung on his bedroom wall. Ducks that he had killed himself. And they terrified him!

Tomorrow would be Thanksgiving, and the men in the McComber clan always went duck hunting Thanksgiving morning. It was a tradition. He had been going duck hunting since he was eight. Forced to go by his father, because all the McComber men were raised to hunt from the earliest age possible.

He had killed the first duck on his wall his very first year, along with two others that day. Murdered the poor things. One minute they were beautiful living creatures, the next...dead! All too often he dreamed about being a duck, and then getting shot. Did the duck on the wall hold it against him? Jimmy wasn't sure. He only knew he felt horribly guilty about killing the thing. Stamping out its life, only to hang it on his bedroom wall.

The second duck on his wall was killed on Thanksgiving the following year, and the third the year after that. Each time his father had decided to "reward" him for his good shooting by having one of them stuffed and mounted, and hung with the first duck where Jimmy could always see them and feel a sense of pride in his shooting skills. But what they had really done was to remind him constantly that he was a murderer. That he had taken their poor lives and crushed them out. Their black beady eyes always stared directly at him...accusing him...blaming him...constantly reminding him of his guilt. He was afraid that somehow, someday, those ducks were

going to have their revenge on him. And now they simply terrified him.

And it wasn't just ducks. For the past two years his father had taken him deer hunting too. He'd never admit it to anyone, but he had purposely "missed" each time he had taken a shot, including every trip they had made this year too. Last year, his misses had been chalked up to being young and inexperienced, but that excuse wasn't holding up as well anymore. His father had been taking the whole family out target shooting more often lately, preparing for the winter hunting season. His father had made sure that, like all the rest of his family, he was basically a pretty fair shot...at targets. He just never wanted to kill another living thing again.

As he lay in his bed, he forced his eyes away from the ducks to the pile of clothing on the floor. His hunting clothes. Warm and waterproof. All of it waiting for him to put on in just a few hours... before he would be forced to go out and kill again.

He closed his eyes, trying not to think of any of it. Trying not to worry. Trying to fall asleep for a few hours. But sleep wouldn't come, and the ducks were already accusing him for killing more of their kind...and he hadn't even left home yet.

He could stand it no more. He got out of bed. Trying to sleep was useless. He left his room and went down the hall to the bathroom. Going out his door, he passed his sister's room directly across the hall. His twin sister Jasmine. She continually complained that she wanted to go hunting. What was wrong with her? Fortunately, all the hunting was left to the males in the family.

He turned into the bathroom, directly across from Tommy's room. His fourteen year-old brother loved hunting like all the rest of the men in the family. He loved it, and he was good at it. Their father was understandably proud of Tommy. So far, he was proud of Jimmy too, but how long would that last?

He had made his father angry last night – again. He had made him angry because he had pleaded to not go hunting. But hunting to the family was serious business. It was serious business to all their relatives too. Not just to put food on the table, that was pretty much secondary. But the extended family owned nearly twenty-eight thousand acres of prime northern Arkansas hunting land, and

managing hunting clubs and guiding hunting expeditions was one of the ways the entire family brought in their money. Hunting wasn't only important to all of them, it was vital!

The only problem was, Jimmy didn't just not like hunting, he hated it. It terrified him. But being a guy in the family meant that he automatically had to like it...or love it, as the rest of them did. Except that he didn't love it...or like it.

And shooting ducks was one thing. His father had been continually going out of his way this year to make sure Jimmy shot his first deer. And as he had done in the past, he had reminded Jimmy all too often of the special ritual that was so important whenever someone shot their first deer. The heart had to be cut out, and then eaten by the one who shot it, right where the deer was killed. It was a rite of passage into manhood, and the clan seemed to lay a big emphasis on it. But to Jimmy, just thinking about it made him sick to his stomach and made him shake with fear. He couldn't imagine anything worse in the world.

So now Jimmy was even more terrified of going hunting in a few hours with the rest of the men in the family, because killing ducks on Thanksgiving morning was only going to bring him one step closer to having to go out once again to try and kill his first deer. And just thinking about that little ritual made him gag and nearly throw up.

He peed, he washed his hands, and left the bathroom. Just as he got back to his bedroom door, his sister's door across the hall opened. She was startled to see him.

"Can't sleep?" she whispered, standing there in her flannel nightgown as she ran a hand through her long brown hair and stretched a bit. She was slightly taller than he was. As was common for girls at that age, she had grown a bit faster than he had. His parents had said that he would catch up and pass her fairly soon.

"No," Jimmy replied. "Not a bit."

"Too excited," Jasmine replied with a knowing nod. "Damn, I wish I could go. I'd love to kill some ducks."

"Don't even think it!" Jimmy exclaimed a little too loudly.

"Shh!" Jasmine hushed him, looking around to make sure they didn't wake anyone. "I know," she said with a roll of her eyes.

“Hunting is for the guys. The women all have to stay at home and cook! Phooey! I hate it! It’s not fair!”

“Huh! Better that than going out and killing poor innocent creatures for no reason at all!”

Jasmine’s eyes went wide. “What’s wrong with you? I’d do anything for a chance to go!”

“You can have it!” Jimmy exclaimed, again a little too loudly.

Jasmine looked around to make sure no lights went on in the other rooms, then she pulled her brother into her room and closed the door so they wouldn’t be heard as easily.

Jimmy’s eyes quickly scanned her dimly lit room as his sister switched on the overhead light so they could see better than by the single small light next to her bed. Unlike his room that had the ducks mounted on the wall, her room was painted light pink and had two rows of shelves stretching the entire length of the wall above her bed, then turning the corner and going almost the full length of the next wall. The shelves only stopped because of the door opening. But every inch of those long shelves was packed with dolls. Dolls, dolls, dolls. All kinds of them.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Jasmine whispered again. “Hunting is what we do. It’s what the whole family does. I’d do anything to be able to go!”

“You can have it!” Jimmy whispered back. “I’d just as soon never kill anything – *ever again!*”

“Why not?”

Jimmy just shook his head and stared at the floor. “I just don’t want to!”

“Why not?” Jasmine insisted again. “There’s got to be some reason.”

Jimmy looked up at her, but the two of them only stared at each other for a few moments before he could reply. “I’m scared! Okay? Just don’t tell anyone.”

Jasmine, for the life of her, couldn’t understand that. “Scared of what?”

He shook his head as he searched for an answer. “You never know what you’re going to run into out there. Do you know how many snakes crawl around in the woods? And there are bears and

wild boar, and...a bunch of other things that won't just hurt you, they can kill you. And..." He looked down at the floor. "I don't like killing things!" he added. "I always feel like..." But he didn't finish.

"Feel like what?"

"Like... Never mind. It's stupid."

Jasmine watched him for a moment, but it didn't look like her brother was going to give out any more details. "What's stupid? If it has you so scared, then maybe it's not stupid."

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Yes it is! Just don't tell anyone – please!"

"Don't tell them what? You're not saying anything that makes sense. What scares you?"

"The ducks," Jimmy finally admitted.

Jasmine blinked and tried to understand, but she couldn't. "You're afraid of ducks?"

"It's not that. Well, it is, but it's a lot more than that."

Jasmine still couldn't comprehend being afraid of ducks...or anything else. "Like what?"

"Don't ask."

"I am asking!"

Jimmy turned away from her and wandered a few steps around, but it wasn't his room and he had nowhere to go. He finally sat on her bed. "They're always staring at me," he said.

"Who's always staring at you?"

"The ducks! The stupid ducks on my wall."

Jasmine blinked again. "The ducks on your wall scare you because you think they're staring at you? They're dead!"

"That's just it! They're dead...and I killed them. It's as if they hate me now. All I can think about is how guilty I feel and..."

Jasmine was now firmly convinced that her twin brother had a screw loose – a major screw! "And what?"

"And they want to get back at me for it," he told her. He had another problem with dead things too. Nightmares sometimes that were too terrifying for him to even think about, let alone mention.

Jasmine's head was spinning. Her stupid brother was seriously messed up. "You're an idiot!" she exclaimed in no uncertain terms.

"So what? Tell me something I don't know."

“There is no way in the world that anyone can be afraid of ducks, especially not dead ones. And there’s no way that a dead duck is going to come back and do anything to you! You idiot!”

“I can’t help it!” Jimmy insisted. “I know it makes no sense, but that’s the way I feel. And don’t even get me started on the bit about killing my first deer. You have no idea how much I’m dreading that!”

Jasmine didn’t know what to do with her screwy brother. “Are you talking about the ritual, the one where you eat its heart right after you shoot it?”

Jimmy only nodded and stared at the floor. “I practically start gagging every time I even think about it.”

“You do?”

He nodded.

Wide eyed and mischievous, Jasmine said, “I’d love to do that. You have no idea how much I’d love to kill a deer and eat its heart. Maybe I could get to it while it was still alive! I would take my knife and plunge it right into the deer, right next to where its heart should be. I would cut all around it so I could get to the still beating heart and...”

“Stop!” Jimmy exclaimed, a bit too loudly. He got up and hurried toward the door.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m gonna puke!”

“Well don’t do it here!”

Jimmy actually had the door half-open before he got his stomach under control.

“You really are afraid of this stuff!” Jasmine exclaimed as he quietly closed the door again. She shook her head. “I can’t believe it.”

“Yeah, well just don’t tell anyone.”

“Why not?”

“You know perfectly well why not!”

“What are you going to do? Did you tell Dad you’re afraid of killing anything?”

He shook his head. “Of course not! I did ask Dad last night to let me stay home and not go hunting tomorrow, but I didn’t tell him I was afraid of anything. I tried hard last night to convince him to let

me stay here.” He rolled his eyes. “You have no idea how mad he got at me for it. I thought he was going to kill me for just suggesting I not go!”

“So what are you going to do?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Go and try not to hit anything, I guess. I’d just give anything to not have to go at all tomorrow!”

“Huh! You’re crazy!” she replied. “I’d give anything to be able to go.”

He shook his head. “Goodnight Sis.” He opened the door and went back to his room. He laid down in his bed and stared at the ducks on his wall, all of them staring back at him with menacing looks in their eyes.

Jasmine finally got to the bathroom. Her brother was screwy! What the hell was wrong with him? Afraid of ducks? Talk about dumb! Major dumb! Major stupid! God, what a wuss! A major wuss! She had no idea her brother was that much of a pansy. She’d give her right arm to be able to go hunting with all the guys. She’d give anything to be allowed to shoot at something – other than a stupid paper target. What good did that do? She was a great shot! Better than her stupid pansy brother.

She could shoot some ducks. She knew she could. With no problem at all. Then maybe her father would have one of them mounted and let her hang it on her wall. She’d love to look at that instead of just her dolls. The dolls were nice, but a real live duck, that would be so much better. It would be...amazing! Especially if it was one she shot herself. But she couldn’t go hunting. She was a girl. Girls don’t hunt! At least, not in this family. It wasn’t right!

If dumb Jimmy was too afraid of a silly duck, talk about dumb, then let him stay home and let her go instead! It was only fair. There was no reason in the world why she shouldn’t be allowed to go hunting with everyone else. No reason in the world – except family tradition. The women didn’t hunt. They all stayed home and cooked dinner. Ugh! And tomorrow, she would have to get all dressed up in her new dress, and go over to Grandma’s house and work on preparing Thanksgiving dinner for everyone else. A thousand people! Well, it seemed like it.

The men got to go out and have fun all the time, while the women stayed home and worked. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair! Let her stupid brother stay home and cook dinner with the women. Let him see how he enjoyed that instead of going out and doing something interesting. Let him see how much he liked that! It would serve him right. Let him do that...and let her go hunting with the men.

Her thinking stopped right there. She had gotten so worked up over it that she was still sitting on the toilet, long after she had finished peeing. She wanted to go hunting. Her stupid brother didn't. Could she? Did she dare? It only took a moment's thought to realize the trouble she would be in. Her father would kill her! Maybe literally! The rest of the men in the family might too! Did she dare?

But...was it worth getting killed, if she could just experience hunting once. It would be so worth it if she could just kill a duck. Just one! It would be...

Damn! She couldn't believe she was even considering it. What was wrong with her? She quickly washed her hands and headed back to her room. But when she got to the door, she stood in the middle of the hallway. Her room on her left, her brother's room on her right. He had said... She had said... Should she? No! He wouldn't! If he was that much of a pansy about being afraid of ducks, he would never agree to... But...what could it hurt to ask? He'd never tell anyone that she had suggested it. That is, not unless he actually agreed.

Her hand reached out to knock on his door, but she stopped herself. No. Not this way. Not this way at all. If she was going to offer to do this for him, then she wanted him to do something for her in return. But what she had in mind, well, she would have to make sure he didn't back out first.

If he was too afraid of a little duck to go hunting, would he be afraid of her too? With a sly smile on her face, she went back to her own room. She laid down on her bed, but her mind was working way too fast for her to fall asleep. A little while later, she got up again and headed for her desk. She would just have to see how desperate stupid Jimmy was to *not* go hunting with the guys!

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Jimmy was still wide awake and staring at the ducks on his wall when the soft knock came at his door. He heard his sister's voice softly calling his name. In a flash, he was up to open the door. "What?" he whispered.

"How desperate are you to not go hunting tomorrow?" she asked.

He rolled his eyes. "I'd do anything!"

She grabbed the front of his pajamas and pulled him out of his room and all the way into hers, where she shut the door behind them and switched on the overhead light again.

"Anything?" she asked.

He looked at her suspiciously. "What do you mean by anything?"

"I mean...*anything!*"

"Like what?"

"How desperate are you?"

"Pretty desperate, I guess," he replied.

"Desperate enough to kill more ducks and have them mounted on your wall? Desperate enough to go out and kill a deer and cut its heart out and..."

"Okay, okay! Geez! I already told you I don't want to do any of that stuff. I really will barf if I have to listen to you talk about that anymore."

"So you're pretty desperate to get out of it then?"

"You already know that," he replied suspiciously.

"So are you desperate enough to let me go hunting in your place...instead of you?"

He blinked and looked at her like she was crazy. "How could you do that? You know Dad won't let you."

"Most likely he's going to kill me when he finds out. I'm just hoping he won't find out until afterwards."

"How?"

"I don't know yet. But the question is, how desperate are you?"

He shook his head. "Look, if you want to try to take my place, then have at it. I don't want to go!"

She smiled. "Yeah, but if I go hunting, pretending to be you, then that means that you're going to have to stay here and fill in for me."

"Huh? Fill in for you? I can't do that."

"Sure you can. You just stay here and help Mom and the others instead of me."

"They'll never let me!"

"They'll have to if I'm gone and you're stuck here."

He thought about that for a moment. "Maybe. I guess," he finally conceded. "So you want to try to sneak out of the house and make them think you're me?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Then go for it," he replied. "Like I said, I'd much rather stay here."

Jasmine shook her head. "But you see, it's not going to be that easy."

"What do you mean?"

"If I'm going to get punished within an inch of my life for pretending to be you and going hunting, then you're not going to get out of this deal easy at all. You're going to have to do something that I know you'll hate almost as much as eating that raw, still beating deer heart."

"Like what?" he asked suspiciously.

Instead of answering, she ran to her desk and plucked a piece of paper from it. "These are my demands." She handed him the paper. "You've got to agree to all that, and copy it over as a note to Mom and Dad in your own handwriting, and then sign it saying that you're agreeing to do everything on that list, because I'm being kind enough to help you out so you don't have to go hunting."

He read the first item and his eyes went wide. "I can't do that!"

She nodded and smiled. "I didn't think you'd want to. I guess you better start looking forward to eating a nice warm, bloody, deer heart. Maybe it will even be still beating when you get it."

He could feel the bile rising up from his stomach.

"I wonder if it will still be beating after you cut it out of the deer's body. That would be so cool!"

He ran for her trash can, struggling to keep himself from barfing up anything that might be in his stomach.

She watched him in amazement. She couldn't believe it really did upset him that much and make him start gagging. What a wuss! What a pansy! Feeling cruel, she pushed a bit harder. "I wonder how it's going to taste. Will it be soft? Will it be hard to chew? I know it will be wet, and warm, and moist from all the blood – the blood that's going to fill your mouth and drip down your chin..."

"Stop!" he begged as he retched a bit over her can.

She watched him closely for a moment and smiled slyly. "So what's it going to be?"

"What else is on that list?" he asked, the trash can still in his hands.

She grabbed the paper from where he had dropped it on the bed and handed it to him. He read it in silence. All of it. Each and every demand was worse than the previous one. And the first item was already beyond his worst nightmare.

"Warm bloody heart," she said softly. "Dripping hot blood filling your mouth and running down your chin. Down your body. It's going to taste so good! And then you know Dad will have that deer head mounted and hang it on your wall."

He dropped to his knees and wretched harder than before. Nothing came out, but it wasn't for lack of effort.

She stayed silent for a while, letting him calm down. God, what a wuss! What a damn pansy! She just couldn't believe it. "So what's it going to be?" she asked once again.

He was gasping a bit, trying to calm himself. "I can't stand it," he said. "I don't want to go hunting."

There was no doubting the smirk on her face. "Stupid wuss! Drop that trash can and get over to my desk...or I guess it's going to be your desk now. At least for the next day."

It took him a long time to copy it all – word for word. And then he had to sign it...sign it and certify that he was agreeing to every one of her demands, and that he was too afraid of everything to go hunting anymore. The moment it was signed though, Jasmine

grabbed it and headed for the door. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"You don't think I'd leave this anywhere where you can find it and rip it up before Mom sees it, do you? You're not getting out of this deal at all!" With that she hurried out of her room. She went all the way out to the kitchen. She looked around for a good place to stash the note, and quickly settled on putting it on top of everything in the silverware drawer. Then she hurried back to her bedroom where her brother was still sitting at the desk.

"What did you do with it?" he asked.

"Hid it," she replied.

He was screwed! Totally screwed.

"Now get those pajamas off!" she ordered. "And hurry up. I've still got to get myself ready too!" While Jimmy was removing his pajamas, she dug into one of her drawers and pulled out a pair of her panties and a bra.

Jimmy reluctantly removed his pajama top, but it took a stern look from Jasmine before he could remove his pajama bottoms too, leaving him standing in front of her in only his boxer shorts.

"Get those off too!" she ordered.

"My underwear?"

"Isn't that what I said? Now hurry up!"

"But I'll be naked!"

"Tough! This is your problem...your punishment. So get busy!"

He finally found the courage to remove his boxers, leaving himself totally stark naked in front of his sister.

"Here," she said throwing the panties at him. "Put these on."

He gratefully grabbed the thin little piece of material and pulled them on. They were so light and thin that he was afraid they might rip. They didn't though. They just felt strange.

"Turn around and face the wall," she told him. "I've got to get undressed too." She watched until he was facing the wall, then she quickly shed her nightgown and panties, and pulled his boxer shorts on instead. She grabbed his pajamas and put them on, effectively dressing herself in everything that he had been wearing. "You can turn around now," she told him.

Jimmy slowly turned back around to see his sister, now dressed in his pajamas. And a moment later, he saw her heading towards him with one of her bras. "Sis, do I have to?"

"Of course," she said. "You won't look right without it."

She slipped it on him and fastened it in back for him...and paused to consider something else, something she decided she just had to fix. "Wait a minute," she said. "I'll be right back."

She hurried back to the kitchen where she and her mother had been working on sewing projects together. She found the little plastic box she was looking for and went back to the bedroom. "Turn around," she said as soon as she had the door closed again. With his back to her, she set the little box on the bed and took out a safety pin. She used it to pin his bra together so that it would be impossible for him to get it off by himself.

Feeling much more satisfied, she handed him the nightgown she had been wearing and told him to put it on. Once it was on him, she turned him around and buttoned the back neck button for him. But she again decided she didn't want him to be able to remove the nightgown either. It was important that Mom see him in it when she found him in the morning. Pulling one safety pin after another from the box, she pinned the back neck fastening closed with two safety pins, then she used two more to pin the back of the nightgown to the bra he was wearing under it. For all intents and purposes, she figured he would now have a pretty tough time getting out of the thing. But she wanted to make doubly sure. Taking every safety pin from the box, she went to work on his arms, pinning each of them straight down to the sides of the nightgown. Any movement from his arms now brought the material of the gown with them and didn't allow him to move them much at all.

"Isn't this a bit ridiculous?" Jimmy asked.

"Mm...maybe," she admitted. Actually she had been having more than a bit of fun with him. But there was one last thing she had to do, and it was vital! She hurried to her desk where she wrote another short note, then taking the last four safety pins from the box, she pinned the note to the back of his nightgown. He wouldn't be able to see or reach the note. And Mom would have no problem

finding it. "Now lay down in the bed," she told him. "It's time for you to go to sleep...and I've still got to get myself ready."

Feeling more foolish and worried than ever, Jimmy awkwardly laid down in Jasmine's bed and let her cover him up with her covers. With his arms semi stuck to his sides, he couldn't even move the covers she had put over top of him.

Jasmine turned out the light by the bed, leaving the overhead light still on so she could see. Then she opened the bedroom door. "Goodnight," she said to him, trying to keep from laughing. Then she turned off the overhead light.

"Hey!" Jimmy called. "Leave it on!"

She turned the light back on again. "Leave it on? Why?"

It was a moment before he answered. "I'm afraid of the dark."

Her mouth just dropped in disbelief. She rolled her eyes and shook her head. God, what a wuss! What a...sissy! She forcefully turned the light out again. "Good night...Sis!" she told him.

Chapter 2 - Thanksgiving Day Pardon

November 27th (Thanksgiving Day)

Jasmine was fully dressed, including wearing Jimmy's heavy camouflage coat and hat, with the hood of the coat pulled over top of the hat. His warm heavy boots were on her feet with heavy warm socks inside. She was sitting on the floor of his bedroom, sound asleep when the door opened.

"Jimmy," the soft voice called.

She woke up, and looked up, but not high enough to let whoever was there see her face. She realized her brother Tommy was there.

"Dad says it's time to go," Tommy told her.

She nodded and pried herself up from the floor as he left the doorway.

As she left the room, she saw faint light coming from the kitchen, and saw her brother heading that way. She went straight into the bathroom where she peed. Then she took a moment to stare at her reflection in the mirror. She had pulled her hair back last night and plaited it so that as long as the hood was in place, nobody would notice how long her hair was. The only problem with that was that Jimmy's hair was fairly long and full and usually fell across his face. But where his hair ended just below his ears, her hair went halfway down her back. Plaiting her hair was as good as she could get. She left the bathroom, trying to keep her head down and watch the floor to make it harder for anyone to see her face.

"There you are!" her father said as she got to the kitchen. "Grab those thermoses and let's go."

She picked up the three thermoses from the counter and cradled them between her arms as she headed for the back door. Her father turned out the kitchen light as soon as she got past him. She heard him locking the door behind them. It was dark, but the outside floodlight lit up the small area around her father's big pickup truck. Standing back out of the way, she watched as her father and Tommy

loaded the guns, a big cooler, and a few other things into the back of the truck.

“Take those into the back seat with you,” her father told her.

Gratefully, she climbed up into the truck, set the thermoses on the floor, and laid down on the back seat. A few moments later, the truck was started and the journey began. She breathed a sigh of relief that she had made it that far without being discovered.

There were a number of small lakes on their land. It was a tradition in the family to do only duck hunting on Thanksgiving Day, and they did it every single year. Her uncle, John Mercer, would be helping with a group of tourists who were in for the day at one of the other lakes on their land. Her uncle, Jack Cumberland, would be working with another group of hunters at another lake. Her father, Clint McComber, was taking his two sons to one of the furthest lakes on the property to do their hunting there with his three brothers and some of her cousins. Jasmine, still laying down in the back seat, knew from experience that it was going to take a while to get there. She let herself fall asleep on the way.

The slowing of the truck and the deep ruts in the dirt road pulled her awake. It was still completely dark outside as she expected. A few minutes later, her Dad stopped the truck next to three others. She grabbed the thermoses from the floor and awkwardly got out of the truck, still trying to keep her head down as much as possible.

Tommy got up into the back of the truck and pushed the cooler out onto the tailgate. Her father grabbed it and set it on the ground. Tommy got down, and the two of them each took a handle and started walking. “This way, Jimmy,” her father said as he turned on the flashlight in his hands. “We’ll come back for the guns in a few minutes.”

She followed them down the path between the trees. It was so dark she could hardly see anything at all. She stumbled a few times on the uneven ground. The air was bitterly cold, feeling fresh and clean in her lungs. She breathed it in, enjoying the smell of the trees and the forest around her. How could anyone not like this?

She thought again about her stupid brother. Had she really done what she had to him? Yeah! She had. She had probably screwed up his entire life! But anyone who was that afraid of such stupid

things deserved it! And now here she was, out with her father – hunting! She couldn't help but smile.

Her father's flashlight caught the almost invisible opening to the wooden duck blind that had been permanently built on the edge of the pond several years ago. She saw a dim light from inside the structure. She followed her father and Tommy in and saw one of her uncles and four of her cousins already there.

"Mornin' Clint," one of her uncles said to her father.

"Mornin' Jed," her father returned.

"Brian and Pete are already out on the water putting the decoys out. Looks like we're going to have a great day for it."

"Looks like it," Clint replied. He set the cooler down at the back of the blind and took the thermoses from "Jimmy" and set them on top of the cooler. "Let's go get the guns," he told his kids.

Jasmine followed her father and Tommy back up the path all the way to the truck. A few moments later, she was holding a large shotgun in her arms. Her excitement soared!

And then another truck pulled in, and Jasmine saw the one person she didn't expect to see get out of it. Her Grandpa! Everyone knew from the earliest age on that her Grandpa, Jacob McComber, ruled everything. His word was essentially law! He was the head of the clan and was easily the most loved, feared, and respected member. But it was his law that Jasmine was now breaking. What would happen when he saw who she really was? Her father finding out could only mean the worst punishment possible...most likely horribly painful punishment. But with Grandpa McComber there, it could only be worse! She listened as her father joked with Grandpa for a few minutes, then she followed them all back down the path to the duck blind.

Evidently, all the decoys had been set on the pond now because the place was practically full of hunters. Jasmine still kept her head down as she ran her hands over the shotgun her Dad had given her and cradled its heavy bulk to her body.

The sky was just beginning to brighten a bit. Everyone watched it closely. Of course, once the sun did come up, they still had to wait for ducks to land in the water.

“Just a few more minutes, I think,” Grandpa noted. The others nodded their agreement.

Jasmine saw her father turn to her. “Ready Jimmy?” he asked, his voice full of anticipation.

“Mm-hmm,” Jasmine replied, trying not to talk so that her voice wouldn’t give her away.

“Why don’t you take that hood off,” her father suggested. “It’s only going to get in your way in here.”

“I’m good,” she replied softly.

Clint stared at his son. His voice had sounded wrong. “Jimmy,” he said more forcefully, “take that hood off!”

Very slowly, Jasmine reached up and pulled the hood down from her head. She heard one of the guys gasp as her long hair was exposed. Then she pulled her hat off, and looked up at the shocked look on her father’s face. The same shocked look that was on the face of all of them.

“Jasmine?” her father finally got out. “What are you doing here?”

It was a moment before she could answer. “Hunting.”

“Where’s Jimmy?”

“Home, taking my place.”

“And you’re here instead? Why?”

“Because...” She had to find a way to tell them. “Because Jimmy is too much of a wuss! He’s too scared of his own shadow to go hunting. And...because I want to hunt!”

The anger in her father’s voice was evident. “We don’t allow the women in the family to hunt. They can get hurt! You know that!”

“I don’t care! I want to hunt!” she returned forcefully. She knew it was a mistake the moment she heard the gasps from all the men around her.

Clint looked around at the men, then his gaze fell to Tommy. The sound of his voice was filled with him trying to control his temper. “Tommy, take your sister back to the truck and wait for me there. I need to figure out what to do.”

Jasmine set her gun down on the floor and reluctantly followed her older brother out of the duck blind and back up the path toward the trucks. Well, she had almost made it. She only hoped that whatever punishment she got now would be less than her stupid

sissy brother would get. The thought of what her mother was going to wake up to in a little while though actually brought a smile to her face. Her brother was in for it – for sure!

Clint turned to his father. “I’m sorry, Dad. I had no idea she was here instead of Jimmy.”

“Yeah,” Jacob replied. “I didn’t notice it either. None of us did. So what are you gonna do?”

“Take her home. She can’t be here.”

“But the sun’s coming up,” Brian noted. “The ducks could fly in anytime now.”

Clint just shrugged. “I’m going to have to miss it today. Maybe I can get back before it gets too late.” He thought of something else. “Will you guys watch Tommy? There’s no reason he has to miss this.” He paused for a moment. “And it’s probably better if he’s not around when I get that girl home.”

He saw the heads nod all around him. “No problem,” one of them said.

“Can she shoot?” Jacob asked.

Clint shrugged. “Of course. But that’s beside the point.”

“Is she any good?” his father asked next.

Clint considered that. “Pretty good. Darn good in fact.”

Jacob nodded as he considered things. “Look,” he said, “I don’t like this. I don’t like it one bit! It’s wrong! But it’s also Thanksgiving. And if you say she shoots well enough, then let her stay this time.”

Everyone looked at him with amazement on their faces.

“It’s Thanksgiving,” Jacob said again. “You all know that Thanksgiving and Christmas are special to me. I’d rather not see any of the kids punished today. You can whip ‘em both good tomorrow, but not today.” He paused for a moment before adding, “Besides, I figure what she did took a lot of courage.” He grunted, “A surprising amount. And today of all days, it would be a shame for any of us to miss this hunt, includin’ you. It’s up to you of course, she’s your kid, but as far as I’m concerned, this time, she can stay. And let’s see if she really can shoot like you say.”

Clint stared at his father for several moments. “You’re sure?” he asked cautiously.

Jacob turned away. "About time for someone to put their duck calls to work, I would think."

Jasmine kicked the dirt next to the pickup truck and stared up at the small patch of sky she could see between the trees. The stars were fading so they were hardly visible anymore as the sun gradually took their place. In the distance, she heard the faint sounds of a duck call. She had almost made it! Her attention was caught by someone approaching up the path. Her father, as she had expected. She was in for it now.

Clint stopped at the end of the path and stared at his daughter. She was looking down at the ground. He had no doubt that she was expecting to be punished. Well, that part was going to have to wait now until later. "Let's go," he said as he turned back the way he had come. He took two steps, stopped and turned back again. "Coming?" he asked.

"I can stay?" Jasmine asked in disbelief.

Clint just shook his head and headed back down the path. A moment later, Tommy was by his side and Jasmine was right behind them. "Don't think you're not going to get punished severely for this," her father said without turning around. "It's just going to have to wait a bit."

Once back in the duck blind, Clint pointed at the gun she had left on the floor. "Pick it up and load it. Get ready. Ducks could fly in any time now." Then he turned away from her.

She couldn't believe it. Not at all! All the guys in the blind were looking at her – except her father. With a proud smile on her face, she picked up the gun and loaded it. She was ready.

The wait was long, and duck calls came frequently from several of the guys in the blind. But eventually a small flock of birds flew over, circled, and landed on the lake. It was a beautiful sight. Guns raised and aimed.

"Hang on a minute," Jacob whispered softly. He turned to Jasmine. "This is your first hunt. You get the first shot."

Amazed, Jasmine raised her gun again and aimed at a large male mallard that had landed in the middle of the lake. There was no pause, no hesitation at all. Her gun roared and the shotgun

kickback felt like it nearly broke her shoulder. A moment later, every gun in the blind followed suit. It was glorious!

Chapter 3 - Bad Business

November 27th (Thanksgiving Day)

Susan McComber padded down the hallway wearing just her robe, muttering to herself. “Geez that girl can sleep sometimes.” The doors to Tommy’s and Jimmy’s bedrooms were open as she expected, and as she expected, Jasmine’s door was still closed. “Jasmine!” she called louder as she opened the door. “Time to get up!”

She saw the head poking up from under the covers, but it wasn’t the head she was expecting to see. She had to look twice to make sure she wasn’t seeing things. “Jimmy?” she asked, totally confounded at seeing her son in Jasmine’s bed, when he was supposed to be out hunting with his father. “What are you doing here?”

Jimmy had gotten very little sleep during the night, worrying about what was going to happen. Over and over again he considered that maybe he really should have gone hunting after all. But now...now he literally had no choice in the matter, and Jasmine had made doubly sure he wouldn’t. Now he was staring up at his mother, but despite her question, he was speechless.

“Jimmy, why are you here in Jasmine’s bed?” his mother asked again.

“Um...hi Mom,” he replied nervously.

“Jimmy, what’s going on? And where’s your sister?”

“Um...hunting?”

“Hunting! She went hunting with your father? And you’re here? Why?”

“Um...I just am.”

“Jimmy, get out of that bed this instant! I want some answers!”

“Um...I kind of can’t.”

Susan blinked, not understanding anything that was going on. “What do you mean you can’t?”

“Um...I can't get the covers off.”

“You can't.... Jimmy, get out of that bed this instant!”

“Um...I'm afraid I need some help.”

“Why on earth?” she exclaimed completely exasperated as she hurried across the room and literally ripped the covers down from over top of her son. “Jimmy, now what's...” She stopped and stared at him. “You're wearing your sister's nightgown.”

“Um...yeah.”

“Why?”

“Um...so she could go hunting.”

Susan shook her head and considered going back to bed and then getting up again, hopefully to a world that made more sense. “What does you wearing that nightgown have to do with your sister going hunting instead of you? And get up from that bed!”

Instead of answering, Jimmy started struggling to awkwardly get out of the bed. Having his arms pinned to the sides of his gown made it somewhat difficult.

“Jimmy, why are you moving so...” She stopped and stared. “Are your arms pinned to the sides of that gown?” she asked, not believing what her eyes now noticed.

“Um...kind of.”

She grabbed his shoulders and helped him get to his feet. She stood back and stared in bewilderment as he stretched his arms as far from his sides as they could get, bringing the sides of the gown out with them. “Why?”

“Um...it was kind of her idea.”

“She did this to you? Well, obviously.” She stooped down so she could start unfastening one of the safety pins, but in doing so, she got a little bit behind him and now noticed the note pinned to the back of the nightgown. She turned him all the way around so she could read it.

Mom,

There's a note for you in the kitchen silverware drawer!

“A note?” One by one, she carefully removed the safety pins that held the note to his back, and in doing so, exposed even more safety pins that had been under it. “What are these attached to?” And then it dawned on her. “Jimmy, are you wearing one of her bras too?”

“Um...”

“Yes of course you are!” she finished for him. She noted the safety pins fastening the back of the neck so he couldn’t unbutton the thing there either. Shaking her head, she didn’t bother removing any of the pins and headed for the kitchen instead. Hopefully, the note would explain matters better. “I’ll be right back,” she told her nightgown wearing son.

“Um...Mom?”

She stopped before she got out of the room and turned to see what he wanted.

“Um...I kind of have to pee.”

She stared at him for a moment. “The bathroom is across the hall. I have no doubt you can manage just fine...even as you are.”

Rolling his eyes, Jimmy made his way to the bathroom while his mother disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

Just as the note on his back had said, she found another note tucked away in the kitchen silverware drawer. She pulled it out, but she carried it to the kitchen table where she sat down before she read it. The note was obviously written in Jimmy’s handwriting. A glance down to the bottom of the page showed his sloppy signature. She turned her eyes to the start of the note, bracing herself for whatever it might contain. From the very start, it seemed like her entire world had suddenly tipped upside down.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I have a confession to make. I’m a big coward. I’m scared to death of going hunting anymore. I’m scared of the ducks and everything else in the woods too. I can’t stand the thought of killing anything ever again.

I told all this to Jasmine and begged her to help me out and go in my place. She agreed, but only if I wrote this note agreeing to everything she demanded. I have agreed to do everything she wants because it's only right that she goes hunting instead of me since she isn't afraid of anything and I am. Since she really wants to go hunting and I don't, we've decided that it's only fair this way. Besides, she's a better shot than I am.

Since Jasmine agreed to help me out and go hunting as Jimmy, I have agreed to stay here and be her instead for the entire day, including for Thanksgiving dinner with the family.

I agreed that since I'm going to be her for the entire day, I will do everything possible to act like a girl in all ways, and I will do everything possible to not act like a boy at all.

I agreed that I will only answer to the name Jasmine all day, and not Jimmy. And if anyone calls me Jimmy today, I will correct them and ask them to call me Jasmine instead.

I agreed that I won't wear any boys clothes at all today, and since I don't want anyone to think that I'm even trying to be a little bit boyish, I agreed that I will only wear skirts and dresses in front of everyone instead – including Jasmine's new dress that she got specially to wear to Thanksgiving dinner with the family.

I agreed that for the entire day, I will do everything Jasmine would do, and will help Mom out as much as possible with anything she needs. I will also help out doing everything the girls and women do at Grandma's house for Thanksgiving when we go.

And while I'm going to do my best to be a girl all day, Jasmine is going to be Jimmy all day instead, and asks that you call her Jimmy. This way, since Jimmy is a boy and can go hunting, he's doing that. And since Jasmine is a girl and can't hunt, I'll be staying here.

Your son, Jimmy, but for today, your daughter, Jasmine

Susan read the note through twice, the second reading leaving her just as befuddled as the first. Her eyes went back to the top and started reading it through a third time. By the time she finished, Jimmy was standing in the kitchen watching her. She looked up at him, seeing him, but still not knowing what to think. "I don't understand any of this," she said.

Jimmy stared embarrassedly down at the floor and didn't answer.

She stared at her son for a few moments more, but she needed to be alone now. She needed to think. She needed to figure out how to handle the situation. And she had no idea where to even start. "Go to your room and stay there," she ordered, somewhat angrily.

Jimmy raised his arms to the limits that they would go. "Um... Mom, will you help me out here first?"

"No! Just go to your room!"

He turned and started to walk out.

"To your sister's room! Jasmine's room!" she added. "Just stay there! I may be a while," she finished a bit more softly.

Jimmy went back to his sister's room. He sat in her desk chair for a while, then he laid back down on the bed and waited...and waited.

Susan tried and tried to make sense of everything. And none of it really made sense. One of the big things that ran constantly through her mind was her daughter, Jasmine. She was out hunting with her father and the rest of the men. How had she accomplished that without them knowing? And...did they know Jasmine was out there with them? And worse, what would Clint do to her when he found out! For that matter, what would Clint do to Jimmy? That was going to be far worse.

One additional thought ran through her head. Clint's father was going to be hunting with them today.

Susan had never once done it before. Never! But she grabbed her cell phone and dialed. Cell phone service covering their entire land was a fairly new thing. The family had paid a lot for it, but it was something all the tourists and hunting clubs seemed to want, so the family had paid the price. Of course, all the rates they charged for everything had to go up to help pay for it. But since the system had been put in, she had never once called her husband when he was out hunting. She especially didn't want to call him today, and especially not during their annual Thanksgiving Day hunt. But she was so beside herself, she didn't know what else to do. Besides, she was desperately worried about her daughter.

She dialed the number and listened to the phone ringing. Did he even have it turned on? It wouldn't do for his phone to ring during a hunt. More than likely, she was going to have to leave a message. But she had no doubt that he would eventually get back to her. Perhaps not until he was ready to leave to come home, but eventually he would call back. Jimmy could just stay where, and as he was, until she heard from his father.

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The guys were all laughing and joking, enjoying a bit of something to eat from the coolers. Clint had done his best to put the fact that Jasmine was there instead of Jimmy out of his mind. It wasn't quite working. Especially since when Jed had gone out and grabbed the ducks they had shot, he had tagged that first one that Jasmine had killed and set it aside. And then his father had suggested that even though she was a girl, he might want to have the thing stuffed and mounted for her so she would always remember it. But despite that, he was doing his best to put Jasmine out of his mind and enjoy himself.

The odd vibration in his pocket pulled his attention. For a moment, he wasn't sure what it was. But he quickly pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. The caller ID showed it was his wife. No surprise. She must have found out that Jasmine was here with him instead of Jimmy. "Hello?" he said into the phone. The voices all around him dropped so they wouldn't interfere. Any call coming at a

time like that, meant that it had to be important, and everyone there had a pretty good idea of what the call was probably about.

"Clint!" Susan said, realizing that her husband had actually answered. She had been mentally planning the message she would have left. "You know who's out there with you, don't you?"

"Yeah," Clint replied. "We didn't find out until we were already here."

"Is...is she okay?" Susan asked.

"Huh! She's fine!"

Susan felt relieved. "You wouldn't believe what I found in her room this morning."

Clint's eyebrows went up. "In her room? Let me guess. Was it Jimmy?"

"Um...yes...and no."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Clint, it looks like the two of them worked out some really weird arrangement last night, and then Jasmine, being her usual over-do-it self, made sure that Jimmy wouldn't back out of the bargain."

"What are you talking about?"

"When I went into her room to wake her up, Jimmy was in her bed instead. And he couldn't get out of the bed since she had fixed it so that he couldn't get the covers off himself."

"What the heck?"

"And when I pulled the covers down, I found Jimmy wearing her nightgown. But that's not all. She pinned him into the thing six ways to Sunday so that he can't get the thing off. She even pinned his arms to the side of the gown so that he can't raise them. But all that is not the worst of it. Not even close!"

"Not the worst?" Clint exclaimed, totally shocked at what his wife had just told him. He looked up when every voice in the duck blind suddenly went silent. All eyes were on him.

"Clint," his father said, "put it on speaker. If you've got a problem, maybe we all should hear."

"Hang on a minute," Clint told his wife. "Dad wants me to put this on speaker." He pushed a button on the phone. "Okay honey, are you there?"

"Yeah, I'm here, although I wish I wasn't. And I'm not sure it's a good idea for anyone else there to hear this."

"We're all here to help," Jacob called loud enough so she would be able to hear. "So let us hear whatever your problem is. And I'm guessin' it has something to do with a certain young lady here."

Susan rolled her eyes. "Lady?" she said. "Just so long as she's alright."

"She's fine," Jacob told her. "Now what's your big problem?"

Where should she start? "I found Jimmy in Jasmine's bed this morning," she explained for the benefit of her father in-law. "He was literally pinned into her nightgown so that he couldn't get it off!"

Jacob raised his eyebrows and looked over at Jasmine, who was looking all too gleeful for the situation. "Okay," he said loudly. "Anything else?"

"Anything else?" Susan repeated. "The nightgown is nothing! It's the note that they left that's the problem!"

"What note?" Clint asked.

Susan took a deep breath. "Let me read it," she said. "I've read the damn thing over and over again, and I don't have a clue what to do about it!"

"Go ahead," Clint told her. "Read it to me."

Jasmine looked down at the floor the entire time her mother read the note over the phone. All the guys in the room heard every word, including her father and Grandpa. As bad as it was going to be for her, every word of the note still brought a smile to her face. She couldn't help it. She knew what she had done was bad, especially to Jimmy, but she still couldn't help but feel how funny it all was. She had known going in that her punishment was going to be bad. Really bad. So in reality, things hadn't changed one bit. And...she had even managed to go hunting now and she had shot some ducks. And...they were still hunting. They were only waiting for more ducks to land in the lake.

Clint stood up shortly after his wife had started reading the note. He was pacing what little bit of the floor he had room to move around in. He was wide-eyed with disbelief at every word his wife read. Basically, his son was too much of a coward to go hunting, and his sister had capitalized on that so she could go in his place. But

Jasmine hadn't stopped there, she had gone out of her way to humiliate her brother as much as possible.

He heard the final words of the note: "*but for today, your daughter, Jasmine.*" He wanted to scream. He wanted to hit something...or someone! He was angry beyond belief.

"Clint?" he heard his wife saying. "Are you still there?"

Clint brought himself back under control. He glanced at Jasmine, she was looking up at him now, no fear on her face at all! "Yeah," he replied. "I'm still here."

"So what am I supposed to do with him?" Susan asked. "I don't know what to do about any of it!"

"I don't know," Clint replied. "Let me think for a while and I'll call you back. Where's Jimmy now?"

"I sent him back to his sister's room to wait, still pinned into that nightgown."

Clint nodded. "Okay, I'll get back to you." He ended the call and looked up into the faces of all too many family members who were all staring at him in disbelief. He felt very embarrassed over the actions of his kids, and especially over what a coward his son had suddenly turned out to be. "Sorry guys," he said. "You probably shouldn't have heard any of that."

"What are you going to do?" his brother Pete asked.

"I haven't a clue," Clint admitted. He looked over at Jasmine. "You really went out of your way this time, didn't you?"

Jasmine knew she should have looked scared or even remorseful, but this time she just couldn't find it in her. "I did what I thought I had to do, Daddy," she replied boldly.

Clint rolled his eyes. "I'm going to kill you when we get home," he muttered.

"Not today!" his father quickly interjected. "Not today. It's Thanksgiving. You can kill her tomorrow instead. Jimmy too for that matter. But not today."

Clint rolled his eyes. "What do I do with him?" he asked, referring to his son that he was suddenly very ashamed of. Not wanting an answer, he walked out where he wouldn't have to face the rest of them.

Jasmine suddenly found everyone looking directly at her. "I did what I felt I had to do!" she repeated boldly.

Jacob grunted and shook his head as he turned over some of the things he remembered from the note. It was some of the bit at the end that had really caught his attention the most. "Hang on a second guys," he said. He stuck his head out the door. "Clint! Get back here!"

Clint had walked a ways up the path back toward the trucks, but when his father called, he turned around. When he got close enough, he saw his father's head still sticking out the door.

"Get back in here," Jacob told his son. "Let's talk this thing out." Once back inside the duck blind, Jacob's eyes fell on Jasmine. He turned his eyes toward her brother Tommy instead. "Tommy, take your sister out of here for a bit. She's too proud of what she's done to hear any of this." He watched Jasmine's face as she left. She obviously wasn't happy about being sent out, but that defiance was still there. Jacob looked around the duck blind. There were four other boys there of varying ages as well. "Boys," he said. "All of you that aren't adults, get out of here till we call you back. Head back up the path toward the trucks a ways. Now get!" He waited while they all filed out.

The duck blind was now occupied by only himself, and his four sons. "This is bad business," he said. "Especially today on Thanksgiving. Bad business!" He saw all of them nodding. His son Clint looked positively worried. No surprise. "What that girl has done goes way beyond her comin' here to hunt instead of her brother. Way beyond!" He turned his eyes on Clint. "Clint, what do you think?"

Clint shook his head. "Other than knowing I'm going to kill the two of them, I don't know what to think!"

Jacob nodded. "Any other thoughts?" he asked, looking around. But instead, all he got were blank stares. He nodded again. "Okay," he said to all of them. "This is what I think. Did you all hear that last part of what Sue read from that note? Did you?" He looked around again, but nobody said anything. "She said that since Jimmy is a boy and can go hunting, then she's supposed to be here as Jimmy today and not Jasmine. And that since Jasmine is a

girl and can't go hunting, then he's staying home and pretending to be her...a girl!" The looks on their faces showed that they had heard it, but still weren't sure what to make of it.

"You all know that I don't like women hunting. That's my rule! It was my daddy's rule before me and his father's rule before that. But I broke that rule today by allowin' that girl to hunt with us. But it's Thanksgiving. A special day. So I broke my rule and let her stay. And I'm afraid that was a mistake. Bad business!" He saw the nods of agreement from his sons. All except for Clint, who just looked like he had no clue in the world what to do.

"Okay," Jacob finally said, "so here's the way I want this to play out." He saw every eye on him more intently now. "Jasmine...is goin' to stay with us today and keep huntin'. But not as Jasmine. For the rest of the day, we're gonna go along with that note and call her Jimmy instead...and treat her just like one of the boys! Boys can hunt, girls can't! And just like her note said, later on we're all gonna call Jimmy, Jasmine instead." He looked at Clint. "And Clint, I do expect that boy to show up at dinner later wearin' a damn dress, and I do expect him to hang out with the women instead of the men."

Clint was shocked. "You can't be serious! You're not going to go along with this, are you?"

Jacob nodded. "I am. And here's why," he said, looking his son in the eye. "There's gonna to be a bunch of people at my house today. A bunch! And a bunch of kids as well. A lot of 'em! And I want every last one of them to see that boy dressed up and being treated just like a girl...so they'll all know exactly what awaits them if any of them decide to get it into their heads that they aren't man enough to go huntin' too!" The gasps from all of Clint's brothers were quite audible, although Clint didn't seem capable of uttering a word.

Jacob had one last thought. "And maybe the next time we go huntin', your *son* will think better than to try to chicken out. He needs to *grow up*!"

Clint found himself gasping as he stared at his father. Go along with the note? It was absurd! But at the same time, it did make sense in an outlandish sort of way. Either way, his father had spoken his piece, and his father's word was law. His son, his Jimmy, was

about to be subjected to a day of total abject humiliation. But... evidently it was his son Jimmy who had agreed to do all those things in the first place. Obviously, the ideas had come from his sister, from Jasmine, but in the end, it had been Jimmy's decision to agree to every last bit of it. So Jimmy had only himself to blame.

Not saying a word to anyone, he picked up his phone and called his wife. "Susan?"

"Hi Clint," she replied. "Did you figure out how we should handle this?"

Jacob called out loudly. "He didn't, I did, Susan."

"Dad?" Susan asked. "So what are we going to do?"

Jacob nodded toward Clint. "Tell her."

Clint took a breath before saying anything. "Susan..."

"Yeah?"

"That note they left..."

"Yeah?"

"We're going along with all of it."

"You're joking!" Susan replied with disbelief.

"Every last word of it! All of it! I'll explain more later. But for today, it looks like Jasmine is still home where she belongs, and Jimmy is out here where he belongs. The whole note, Susan. Just like it says."

Chapter 4 – Going Along With It

November 27th (Thanksgiving Day)

Susan set her phone down. The whole note? Go along with all of it? Was he crazy? But evidently the decision hadn't come from her husband, it had come directly from his father. And when Jacob decided anything, then that was it! As her husband had often said, it was law!

So what should she do? Before doing anything at all, she reread the note one more time, still not believing what she was reading. She finally got up from the kitchen table. She headed down the hallway, back toward "Jasmine's" room. She found him lying on the bed, waiting for her. "*Jasmine*," she said. "Get up!"

Jimmy hadn't missed her calling him Jasmine at all. His whole stomach lurched at the name. More fearful than ever now, he struggled to get off the bed as his mother approached.

"Let's get your arms free," Susan said. While Jimmy/Jasmine held his arms out as wide as the gown permitted, she removed the safety pins one by one, freeing his arms. Then she removed the pins at the back of the neck, and finally she removed the pins that held the gown to the bra his sister had made him put on last night. As she did so, she felt another safety pin underneath the gown, obviously fixing things so that he couldn't get that off either.

She motioned to Jasmine's desk chair. "Sit!" she ordered and waited until he sat down. She searched among the contents of the desk until she found what she wanted. She pulled out two bottles of nail polish, one light blue and the other one yellow. "I want you to paint your fingernails," she told him. "Put one color on one nail, then the other color on the next one. Alternate the colors."

Jimmy looked up at her wide-eyed. "Paint my nails?" he asked incredulously.

"You're a girl today? You said in your note that you agreed to do everything a girl would do and nothing at all like a boy? Jasmine

likes to paint her nails. And sometimes she alternates the colors like that. So do it!" She watched until he had unscrewed the light blue color polish and had actually started trying to apply it to one of his fingernails. "Try not to make a mess, or you'll be doing it all over again!" she added. "I've got to go get dressed," she muttered. "I'll be back later." She turned to him before she got out of the room. "And don't forget, that stuff takes a long time to dry. So be careful until I get back!"

Jimmy watched his mother leaving again. He was painting his nails. He couldn't believe it. And she had called him Jasmine earlier. He never in his wildest dreams figured that his mother would go along with what they had put in that note. He never believed it at all! Yet here he was, painting his nails – like a girl! What was going on?

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Jasmine noticed it immediately the first time one of her uncles called her Jimmy. Were they really going along with what she had put in that note? It was more than a bit hard to believe. She saw some of her uncles whisper quietly to her cousins, and then they would all look at her with strange looks on their faces. But later on, all of them called her Jimmy too. She was silently in heaven. And if they were treating her like a boy and calling her Jimmy, what was her brother going through back home?

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"You're the one who said you wanted to wear skirts all day," Susan said to her son – now daughter, "so don't complain!"

Jimmy didn't have a leg to stand on and he knew it. That note had really screwed him. His mother had dressed him in Jasmine's clothes. In some of her nicer clothes that he had seen his sister wear to school. He was wearing an orange sweater over top of a heavy bright plaid skirt. He had some multicolored tights on his legs to help keep him warm. The black shoes Jasmine usually wore to school were strapped to his feet. But before making him wear any of

it, his mother had first attacked his hair, brushing it, and then using the curling iron on it. Then she had sectioned part of it off and tied it that way with a bright orange bow to go with the sweater he was now wearing. But before the sweater, she had taken two pairs of Jasmine's panties and stuffed them into the cups of the bra Jasmine had fastened on him the night before. As he looked down, he could just see the "bumps" sticking out of his chest a little. The contrasting colors on his fingernails seemed to scream for attention. They couldn't be missed. About the only thing his mother hadn't done to him, was to make him wear any...

"Okay, sit down now and let me put some makeup on you," Susan said.

Makeup!

She didn't add much, but he had to sit through eye shadow, blusher, and a touch of pale lipstick that tasted weird. He wanted to wipe his lips off with his arm, but he didn't dare.

Susan stood back and studied the results. Not too bad if she did say so herself. Of course, his hair was fairly long and full, so that helped matters quite a bit. She had gotten a particular kick out of putting the bow in it. And now she had a daughter again...only a different daughter. "Good enough," she finally told him. "Now let's go, we've got a lot of work to do before tonight."

Jimmy felt totally weird walking out of Jasmine's bedroom, dressed like Jasmine. The tights and skirt were particularly odd – even more odd than the bra he was wearing. Of course, he had been wearing the bra for so long now that he was much more used to it. He was used to it, but not the padding that was now in it.

"Get the big glass dish out of the cupboard for me," Susan said as they got into the kitchen. "I think we'll start with the string bean casserole."

All day long Jimmy found himself working with his mother. And all day long he heard her calling him Jasmine. They cooked together, they did laundry together. About the only thing they didn't do together was when she sent him to make up his bed, and Jimmy's bed, and Tommy's bed, with orders that they better look perfect or he would be doing all three all over again.

He particularly paid attention later in the morning when he was working on cutting up potatoes for a potato dish his mother wanted to make. He paid attention because while he was doing that, he heard his mother calling Grandma and telling her what was going on, including reading her the entire note and telling her that Grandpa had come down with the decision to go along with every bit of what was in the note, including calling him Jasmine all day and treating him just like any other girl. Hearing that the decision had come down from Grandpa made him far more nervous!

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It was about two in the afternoon when they heard Pete's hunting dogs barking next door, signaling that the "guys" were home. Jimmy was washing dishes at the sink in the kitchen island, so he had a perfect view when his mother opened the backdoor and his father walked in.

Susan kissed her husband. "How'd it go?" she asked.

Clint's eyes immediately went to his son, who was totally dressed like a girl and was washing dishes. Appropriately! "Pretty good," he replied, unable to take his eyes off of his "son – daughter."

"And Jasmine?" Susan asked.

"*Jimmy*...did fine," Clint replied, his eyes still on his child at the sink. "Best shooting I've ever seen him do. *He's* got another duck we're going to have mounted."

Jimmy, gulped. He couldn't take his eyes off of his father, who hadn't stopped staring at him. And now he was going to have yet another duck staring down at him from the wall of his room? He wasn't looking forward to that.

"I got to help get the stuff," Clint finally said as he tore his eyes away from his child at the sink.

He walked out and Susan closed the door behind him. She glanced over at *Jasmine*. Then she grabbed her coat and went outside to help the guys. But what she really wanted to do was to check on her other youngest child.

To Susan, the real Jasmine looked perfectly fine. And except for her longer hair, dressed in all Jimmy's hunting clothes, she looked

pretty much like one of the boys as she scrambled around the back of the pickup truck handing things down to her brother and her father.

Jasmine saw her mother come out of the house. "Look at the ducks we got!" she exclaimed excitedly to her mother.

Susan went over to the truck where her unreal son opened the lid on one of the large coolers. Ugh! The thing was full of dead ducks, but she acted totally happy and excited to see them.

Jasmine dug into the cooler and found one particular duck and brought it out. "This is one of the ones that I shot," she said excitedly. "Dad says we're going to have it mounted!"

"So I heard," Susan replied. She looked up at Clint with raised eyebrows, unsure of the way things were. Then she grabbed the three thermos bottles and Tommy's coat that he had shed and carried them back into the house.

Jasmine, the real Jasmine, was in heaven. She couldn't wait to get back into the house and see her...sister! She giggled at the thought. Once everything was out of the back of the truck, her father and Tommy grabbed the guns to lock them away. Jasmine couldn't wait any longer. She headed for the kitchen, ready to laugh and crow over her brother's plight.

She opened the door, and immediately caught sight of him washing dishes at the sink. She stopped dead, unable to continue on with her planned jesting. He looked...surprisingly good – what she could see of him. The top half of him looked almost like a real girl. Mom had even put a big orange bow in his hair. She smiled broadly. "Hey...*Sis!*"

Jimmy felt himself blushing. He tried to say "hey," but the word wouldn't leave his lips. He just nodded instead.

Jasmine walked all the way in and around to the back of the island where he was working. She couldn't help giggling this time. He was wearing her plaid skirt and a pair of her colorful tights! "Love your outfit...*Sis!*" she told him.

"Um...thanks," Jimmy managed to get out softly.

"Turn around so I can see it better."

Fearful and very embarrassed, Jimmy removed his hands from the sink and turned fully toward his sister.

Jasmine's face lit up even more. He looked...amazingly good. And then she noticed his fingernails. "Mom painted your nails!" she exclaimed.

"Um...actually, she made me do it myself," Jimmy replied.

Jasmine giggled again.

"Jimmy!" Clint's voice came from the kitchen doorway. "Get into the bathroom and get cleaned up. And don't take all day. Tommy's got to get in there next!"

"See ya," the real Jasmine tossed at her brother-turned-sister as she happily headed back to the bathroom.

Susan had watched it all. She now watched as Tommy entered and joined Clint looking over at *Jasmine*. "Jasmine," she said. "Come over here and let them have a good look at you."

Nervously and shamefully, Jimmy turned the water off, wiped his hands on a towel, and came out from around the back of the island where they could see him fully. He saw his brother's eyes go up.

"Damn!" Tommy swore. "He almost looks pretty good."

Clint made no sound, no reaction. But Jimmy could see he didn't look happy.

"Back to work Jas," Susan said. "Tommy, why don't you go to your room for a while and rest till your brother gets out of the bathroom."

Tommy took off. But he didn't leave the kitchen until he said, "Love the outfit...Sis." Then with a laugh, he was gone.

Susan searched Clint's face. "I can't believe we're doing this," she said softly.

"Me either," Clint agreed. "Come on, let's go to the bedroom. I'll fill you in on everything that Dad said."

A short while later, Susan knew all the reasoning behind Jacob McComber's decision, what little reasoning there was. But as Clint had said, ultimately, it had been Jimmy himself who had agreed to all the humiliation he was going to get. So Jimmy had no one but himself to blame.

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The real Jasmine took a long hot shower. She really would have liked a long hot bath instead, but since she was being Jimmy today and he always took showers, she settled for the shower. She called into Tommy's room the minute she got out so he could go in. Then she went into her brother's bedroom. She grabbed and put on a fresh pair of his underwear. A fresh t-shirt. A fresh pair of his socks. And then she grabbed a pair of his jeans and one of his flannel shirts.

She looked in the mirror after getting dressed. Her hair was all wrong, but there wasn't much she could do about it other than to leave it plaited and out of the way like it was. But her brother...wow! With his somewhat long hair, Mom had made him look really good! She hadn't expected that. She hoped the stupid sap was "enjoying" every bit of being a girl today. She giggled a bit again at that. The stupid idiot. Afraid of a little duck.

She looked up at the ducks on his wall. Soon, she would have one hung on her bedroom wall too. She laid down on his bed, still staring at the ducks and remembering how wonderful her entire day had been. Since she hadn't slept much the night before, she soon fell sound asleep.

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Susan purposely kept *Jasmine* busy all day long, not letting him rest for long between chores. But in truth, there was a lot to do before dinner later that evening, and the real Jasmine would normally be the one to do all those things with her, especially since Jasmine was getting old enough now to really help. The fact that this new Jasmine wasn't as knowledgeable about how to do laundry or about anything at all in the kitchen was somewhat of a hindrance, but not a great one.

She had looked in on the "boys" earlier. They were all sound asleep, resting up after their tiring day of hunting. It was only herself and Jasmine that were up and still working – much as usual. The men did very little around the house, while the women did everything! This new Jasmine was going to learn a little bit about that lesson.

She remembered that part of the note said that *Jasmine* had agreed to wear *her* new dress for the family dinner. She would really have liked to keep Jas in the outfit he had on, she really did like it on him, but Clint had said to go with everything in the note. So while she had Jasmine thoroughly cleaning up the kitchen after washing everything the boys had brought back with them, including all their clothes, she went into the master bedroom and got herself dressed for dinner, while her husband was still sound asleep.

When she was pretty much ready, she dragged Jasmine back to the real Jasmine's bedroom to get him dressed. While Jas was removing his skirt, sweater, and tights, she pulled Jasmine's new dress out of the closet. It was really quite a fancy dress, especially for her daughter. Jasmine had always loved clothes and her closet was stuffed with them. But at the same time, her daughter had all too often liked to be a Tomboy as well. But in the last few months, her daughter had seemed to become far more interested in the more fancy and feminine clothes than she had ever been before. So Susan had been particularly pleased when her daughter had fallen in love with the dress and they had decided to buy it for her.

Except now it would be a different Jasmine who was wearing it. Not a girl at all, in reality. It would be her son wearing the pretty dress. With a deep sigh and a shake of her head, she laid the dress out on the bed and went to the dresser in the room. Jasmine liked tights in the winter. She had quite a collection, as was proved by the pair that the new Jasmine was currently trying to get off. But for today, Susan pulled a pair of plain white tights out of the drawer.

Once her new Jasmine was down to his panties and bra, she noticed something that would have to be fixed. There was a bit of hair on his armpits. His legs looked mostly hairless and the tights would hide anything that was there, but the dress was sleeveless with wide arm openings, so she had to do something about his armpits. "Come on, Jas," she said as she headed out of the room. "We've got to fix something before you can get dressed."

Wide-eyed and even more worried, Jimmy followed her. He paused at the bedroom door to look around since he was only wearing a bra and some panties. Seeing no one other than his mother, he quickly followed her into the bathroom. Having to hold

his arms up while she shaved his armpits wasn't exactly fun. He wasn't happy about her doing that to him at all. He was even more displeased when she decided to run the razor quickly over his legs as well. Ugh! And then it was back to the bedroom to get him dressed.

Susan had him sit in the desk chair and put the white tights on first. She made no move to help him and didn't say a word as to any suggestion to make the task easier for him. Consequently, it was more of a struggle for him than it should have been, and it took him longer. But eventually they were finally up and in place.

She toyed with the idea of adding more stuffing to his bra. The real Jasmine didn't really have much in the way of breasts to speak of yet. In fact, she didn't fill out the double 'A' bras that she owned. In reality, her daughter could easily get by without ever wearing a bra yet. But her vanity over her still tiny breasts had her somewhat paranoid over the issue, especially in light of the growing breasts a few of her cousins and friends had. Consequently, Jasmine never went without a bra. Ever! But earlier, Susan had put some panties into the cups of this new Jasmine's bra to fill it out more like the real Jasmine would be – which wasn't much. Despite this new Jasmine looking at least somewhat anatomically correct in that area, she decided to add one more pair of panties to each of the cups, filling them out a bit more. Once the panties were in place, the bra was fully stuffed, although it didn't really appear to add all that much in size to the actual fake breasts. It wasn't exactly true to form for the real Jasmine, but Susan decided to go with it anyway. Then it was time for the dress.

Jimmy was shocked at the outrage of more panties added to the bra he was wearing, but his mother wasn't giving him much of a choice. And then she told him to put the dress on. He looked down at it on the bed. The sleeveless dress was entirely burgundy in color. The skirt of it was all in satin while the top part was all sequined and sparkly with a wide rounded neckline. There was a satin sash sewn in all around the high waist with a big bow located just off-center in front. The center of the bow had more sequins and sparkles. Jimmy considered the dress to be oddly fancy, especially for Jasmine – the real Jasmine.

He picked the thing up off the bed and turned it around. The short zipper in back was unfastened. He stepped into it and pulled it up his body, putting his arms through the wide arm holes. He felt his mother behind him, grabbing the zipper and pulling it up. The thing suddenly hugged his body tightly – his upper body. The rest of it felt all too open, like he was still undressed. The material felt strange against his skin, especially the satin of the skirt. Parts of the dress hugging his skin felt all wrong, almost uncomfortable. Especially the waist of the thing since it wasn't anywhere near where he thought it should be. He tugged and tugged at the dress, but it was down as far as it would go. He felt his mother fastening the hook just above the zipper and then she was stepping away from him to look him over. How silly did he look? He was afraid to find out.

Susan nodded. Not bad at all! Since the real Jasmine was just slightly bigger than her brother, he had no trouble fitting into the dress. And she thought the extra padding she had added to his bust had actually helped matters in making the thing look and fit better.

She went to the closet to find some shoes. Jasmine had asked frequently for a pair of real heels, but since she was only eleven, Susan wasn't permitting anything that grownup for her yet. But Jasmine did have one pair of beautiful shoes with a slightly higher heel that would go perfectly with the dress. She found them in the bottom of the closet and pulled them out. She laid them on the floor in front of the new Jasmine. She didn't need to say anything. She just watched as he picked them up and carried them over to the desk chair where he sat to put them on.

Jimmy grabbed the shoes his mother had pulled out. They were Jasmine's black patent leather ones. The ones with the little bit of a heel. He sat down in her desk chair, immediately noticing how odd it felt to sit in that dress. He had to stand up for a moment and resettle himself since sitting on the skirt had caused the dress to pull uncomfortably on his shoulders. When he leaned down to put the shoe on his foot, he found he had to fight his way past the full skirt of the dress. And because of that skirt, it was hard to see his feet.

Susan shook her head as she watched her new daughter working to get the shoes on. She finally left him and went to wake up all the men. They needed to get ready too. She stopped last in

Jimmy's room. Once she had *him* awake, she laid out the clothes she would have laid out for the real Jimmy, then she left him alone. She had no doubt that that Jimmy would have no trouble dressing... *himself*.

She was happy to see Jasmine standing up, trying to get used to the new shoes he was wearing. The heels on them weren't all that much, but they were tapered so they were a lot thinner than anything he had ever worn before. They were also a bit higher too, even though they were only slightly higher than the other shoes that her daughter wore. But with the different heels, Susan had no doubt that her new daughter was going to find walking in them a bit more challenging than what he had been used to as a boy. Well, he would just have to get used to them like any other girl would.

She went to the jewelry box on the dresser and pulled out a necklace and a bracelet. She fastened both on her new daughter. She would have added some earrings, but the real Jasmine had pierced ears. She had no way to use them with this Jasmine.

She finally sat her new daughter down and removed the orange bow from his hair. She replaced it with a satin burgundy bow that she and Jasmine had shopped for together, just to go with the dress. She redid the bit of makeup she had put on him earlier, and *she* was ready.

Once again, Susan was more than a bit surprised at how much like a real girl her son looked. Surprisingly!

Jimmy felt totally stupid. He had been nervous when he had left his sister's room earlier that morning, dressed as his sister, but it was nothing compared to how he felt this time. Earlier, the only ones in the house had been himself and his mother. Now, the entire family was there as well. And now, he was wearing an overly fancy dress that felt even stranger on him than the skirt and sweater had felt to him earlier.

He had no choice in the matter of leaving the bedroom though, because his mother had practically pushed him out the door with her hand on his shoulder. But instead of guiding him down the hall toward the kitchen, she pushed him right across the hall and knocked on his own bedroom door – Jimmy's bedroom door. The

fake Jasmine's knees felt shaky and his stomach gave a lurch of nervousness.

Jimmy had the shirt on and had just pulled up the pants his mother had laid out for her to wear when she heard the knock at the door. She opened it and got a shock. Her *sister* and mother were standing there, but her *sister* was wearing the dress that she had planned on wearing. The special one that she and her mother had gone shopping for. Even the matching bow they had found was in her sister's hair. She knew that her brother was supposed to wear that dress today. She had actually set it up. But now seeing him actually in it was more than a bit of a surprise. And...he looked really good! The real Jasmine actually felt a moment of jealousy! "Oh my God!" the real Jasmine exclaimed as she stood back a bit to see him better. She looked up at her mother. "I was supposed to be wearing that dress today."

"You should have thought of that before you two cooked up this little scheme," Susan told her real daughter. She pulled the new Jasmine backwards and turned him around and pushed him further up the hall.

It had been a bit of a shock for the real Jimmy to see his sister dressed in his clothes too. He had been surprised to note that the real Jasmine had actually looked somewhat like a boy. If it wasn't for the longer hair on her head, the real Jimmy figured that Jasmine could have almost passed for normal. But today, nothing about either of them was normal.

Susan stopped her new daughter in front of Tommy's door next, and knocked. As before, the fake Jasmine felt waves of nervousness wash over him and his knees felt weak as he waited for his older brother to open the door. Moments later, Tommy was standing there with a sweater in his hands that he was intending on wearing.

"How does she look?" Susan asked her oldest son.

Tommy was more than a bit wide-eyed. "Damn!" he exclaimed.

"Please don't swear!" Susan cautioned him. "But I think you've about summed things up very nicely."

Once again Susan guided the new Jasmine down the hall, but not into the kitchen. She pushed him into the master bedroom

instead, where her husband was still getting dressed. “I think she cleaned up pretty nicely,” Susan commented as she pushed *Jasmine* into the room ahead of her.

Clint looked up at his...son. A feeling of strangeness washed over him. His *son* looked more like a daughter. More so now that *she* was all dressed up fancy. But now seeing his son like that made his feelings of shame over the situation increase. It was nearly overpowering. Of all the kids in the family, it had been his son that was proving to be such a...disappointment. He couldn't say anything, he dared not trust his voice. He only nodded instead and purposely looked away.

Jasmine had felt nothing but terrified at seeing his father look at him the way he had. It had been a look of total disapproval. And he couldn't blame his father at all. He felt his mother pulling on his shoulder again. This time, she guided him toward the kitchen. It was time to go. Time to put himself in front of everyone – in front of the entire family. All of them. Time for them all to see just what a laughingstock he had become. Why had he agreed to all those things that Jasmine had made him write in that note? But he had never really believed that his parents would actually go along with any of it.

Chapter 5 – Meet the McCombers

November 27th (Thanksgiving Day)

They took two vehicles to get there. Jasmine went with his mother in her car, along with all the dishes they had cooked all day, which took up most of the car. The guys would follow along in the truck later.

Before walking out the door to load the food into the car, Jasmine had to grab his sister's white faux-fur coat and put it on. It was bulky and felt amazingly soft on the outside, but he figured that at least it would be warm. It covered most of his dress too. Unfortunately, it didn't cover any of his white tights covered legs.

His mother picked up one of the larger dishes they had made for the feast, and he picked up one of the smaller casserole dishes. He followed his mother out the door. He immediately noticed that while his coat was nice and warm, it did nothing at all for the cold invading his thinly covered legs.

"Be careful with that thing," Susan cautioned him. "And watch your footing on the steps!"

Jasmine soon found that the warning had been necessary. The shoes he was wearing weren't as easy to walk in as his own shoes were. And getting down the steps was particularly difficult, especially with that casserole in his hands. He breathed a sigh of relief when he made it down to the car. But then it was back for more dishes. By the time they were done, the entire back seat and floor of the car were filled with food for the Thanksgiving dinner.

"You look surprising good tonight," Susan noted as she pulled out of the driveway. "Surprisingly."

Jimmy wasn't sure how to take that. "Thanks...I guess," he mumbled uncertainly.

"It's a gorgeous dress you're wearing," Susan commented.

Jimmy had no idea how he should really respond to that. "Uh... thanks," he replied again. "It...uh...feels really weird though."

Especially the waist. It's nowhere near where it's supposed to be. It's up way too high."

Susan smiled. "It's called an empire waist, just in case you wanted to know. It's supposed to be that way."

"It still feels weird."

Jimmy had walked to Grandpa's house many times in the past. It was only up the road, and around the bend. With the exception of his Aunt Jessica and Uncle Jack, the entire family all lived along this one road, so they passed several other family houses along the way. His Uncle Brian and Aunt Janet lived at the far end of the street. His Uncle Pete and Aunt Marcy lived in the next house. His family lived in the middle house. His Uncle John and Aunt Jane lived in the house on the other side of them. And his Uncle Jed and Aunt Valerie lived in the last house. Past his Uncle Jed's house, the road had been cut through the trees where it went up a hill and around a bit of a bend before it opened out to Grandpa and Grandma's big house. But just as with their house, all the lots were wide open and big. So the distance to Grandpa's house was in reality, a bit of a ways.

Grandpa's house was big. Much bigger than any of the other houses in the family. Jimmy figured that Grandpa had built it so big because his family was so big. Jimmy's father was the third of his grandpa's four sons. Plus, his father had an older and a younger sister as well. Six kids in their family total. And now all those Uncles and Aunts had lots of kids of their own...and all of them were going to be there tonight.

They were all going to be there, and so was he – dressed as his sister. And he was supposed to act like his sister. Like a girl. His mother parked the car next to several other cars that were already there. His mother got out, but he sat there staring up at the big log and stone house in front of him. He heard the back door of the car opening and his mother reaching in to get one of the dishes they had put there.

"Are you coming?" she asked.

He didn't bother turning around. "I wish I didn't have to," he replied softly.

"You should have thought about that last night," she said. "All you had to do was go hunting with the guys. That's all you had to do. Now, you've only got yourself to blame."

He knew that. Unfortunately. He opened the car door and forced himself to get out.

"Grab that string bean casserole first," Susan told him as she stood up with the dish in her hands.

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"Oh my God, they're here!" Valerie McComber exclaimed as she spotted Susan and *Jasmine* walking toward the back door of the house. She was immediately joined by two of her sister-in-laws, peering out the glass in the door.

"Remember what Dad said," Marcy McComber reminded them, "we have to treat him like a real girl and call him Jasmine."

"I know!" Janet McComber replied. "I just can't believe Dad would do it!"

"Jimmy's only got himself to blame," Valerie added before she opened the door with a big smile on her face. "Susan!" she exclaimed happily as she held the door wide. She gave a brief hug to Susan that wouldn't disturb the dish in her hands. "And Jasmine," she exclaimed next. "My you look pretty today."

"Uh...thanks Aunt Valerie," Jasmine replied. He could literally feel his face blushing. Aunt Valerie was his Uncle Jed's wife. And Jed was the oldest of his grandfather's sons. He followed his mother into the house.

"Here, let me take that for you sweetie," his Aunt Janet said.

He gratefully handed over the dish in his hands. His Aunt Janet was married to his grandfather's youngest son, Brian, who was a doctor. Aunt Janet was a nurse at the county hospital.

"Jasmine, will you please bring in all the rest of the dishes?" Susan told him.

"Uh...sure," he replied.

"Here, let me help..." Marcy started to say, but she was stopped by Susan putting her hand quickly on her arm and shaking her head.

"Let her do it herself," Susan told her sister-in-law.

Marcy looked at Susan questioningly. "Okay. If you say so."

With a look from his mother, Jasmine turned around and went back out into the cold.

Susan kept her hand on Marcy's arm as she watched Jasmine heading back out to the car. "Sorry," she said. "He's not used to those shoes yet. I wanted to watch how he's managing with them. And bringing all that stuff in from the car will make him be far more careful in them. And besides, I want to find some ways to keep him extra busy today."

The three women watched through the door as Jasmine headed back toward the car.

Jasmine was wondering why his mother stopped Aunt Marcy from helping him. If he was going to have to bring in all the food by himself, it was going to take a lot of extra trips. He had always liked his Aunt Marcy. She could often be fun. She liked to joke a lot and play with the kids. She was married to Grandpa's second son Peter, who was an electrician like his father. In fact, they worked together for the same electrical company. Of course, like all the rest of the men in the family, even the ones who had married his father's sisters, they worked as hunting guides too. Aunt Marcy though, worked with his mother and Aunt Valerie in the family's business office. They booked all the hunting trips and assigned guides for the groups as well.

"He really looked pretty good," Valerie noted as they all watched through the back door. "Surprisingly."

"Wait till you see him without that coat!" Susan replied.

"What are you all looking at?" Rose McComber asked as she entered the kitchen and saw her four daughters-in-law looking out through the back door.

"Hi Mom," Susan said as she turned and gave a brief hug to the older woman. "We're watching Jasmine. I asked...*her*...to bring everything in from the car. To keep her busy."

"I see," Rose replied as she craned her neck to look through a patch of the window as well.

"He looks pretty darn good!" Janet told her mother-in-law.

"Like I said," Susan replied. "Wait till you see him without that coat!"

Because each of the dishes was in a fairly large serving dish, Jasmine didn't feel safe carrying more than one at a time. And since most of it was in glass dishes that could easily break, he had to be more cautious than ever. Especially wearing the shoes he had on. The heels on the shoes still felt weird. He couldn't get used to the little extra height, and the heels were a lot narrower than anything he had ever worn. He had to be careful not to twist and break his ankle. So it was careful, easy going, one dish at a time...while the cold wind blew mercilessly against thinly covered legs.

As he got each dish to the door, one of his aunts would take it from him before he went back for the next one. Over and over again. As he was heading back to the car for his third trip, another car pulled up and his Aunt Jane got out, along with her three kids. Aunt Jane was Grandpa's oldest daughter. She was a year younger than Uncle Jed and was married to Uncle John – John Mason. Aunt Jane and Uncle John were two of the six teachers in the school he went to. Uncle John also acted as the school's principal.

"Hi Jasmine," Aunt Jane called as she got out of her car.

Jasmine felt his face blushing again. "Hi Aunt Jane," he replied somewhat shyly. It wasn't the face of his Aunt that kept him stopped in his tracks though. It was the faces on her kids – his cousins. They were all staring at him. He purposely turned away from them and continued on to the car. He heard Aunt Jane telling her kids to grab some of the dishes in their car to bring into the house.

Jasmine grabbed another dish from the floor of the back seat, and headed back toward the house, but his timing wasn't the best because he quickly found himself joined by one of his cousins – Olivia. He knew Olivia particularly well because she was one of several cousins that was his age, and like the rest of them, she was in his class at school. And even though he knew he shouldn't, since she was his cousin, he had found himself particularly interested in watching her for the last few months.

"Hi Jasmine," Olivia said, a little too brightly as she hurried up next to him.

"Uh...hi Olivia," he replied. He didn't miss that she had called him Jasmine. Why hadn't he gone hunting earlier?

"You look very pretty today," she said.

"Uh...thanks," he mumbled. "Uh...so do you."

Olivia laughed. "I do? I didn't even think you looked at me."

"I saw you," he replied.

"What am I wearing then?"

"Your coat."

She laughed again as they reached the door. Olivia got pulled all the way into the kitchen, while Jasmine's mother grabbed the dish he had been carrying and sent him back for another one. He passed his older cousin Hunter and his younger cousin Lucas along the way. Both had dishes in their hands. Both looked him over carefully, but fortunately, neither of them said anything.

He pulled another dish from the car and turned around to see another car pulling up, his Aunt Jessica. Aunt Jessica was the youngest of Grandpa's kids. She was married to Uncle Jack Cumberland who owned "Cumberland Sports," a huge sporting goods store where a lot of their things came from. Aunt Jessica was one of the managers in the store. He didn't see his Uncle Jack, but he noticed two of their three young kids staring at him intently from the car as they parked. He hurried with his dish toward the house. But all too soon, he was returning back to the car to grab the final dish.

"Hi Jasmine," his Aunt Jessica called as she got one of her kids extricated from their car seats.

Did they all know about him? Obviously, they did. "Hi Aunt Jessica," he replied. As he bent down to get the final dish from the floor of the car, he felt someone grab the back of his coat and pull. He turned to see two of Aunt Jessica's kids, Madison and Caleb. His Aunt was just now pulling Melody, the baby, from her car seat. Madison, who was only five was staring up at him with a smile on her face. Three-year-old Caleb just looked surprised. "You look like a girl," Madison laughed delightedly.

"Uh...thanks," Jasmine replied softly.

"Mommy says we have to call you Jasmine today," the little girl continued.

Yeah, everybody knew! And then some. Jasmine figured that the word of his plight had travelled through the entire family faster

than anything ever had before. “Uh...yeah. That would be best today,” he told her as he bumped the car door with his hip to close it.

“How come?” the little girl asked.

Good question. He didn’t bother answering.

This time, he was allowed all the way into the warm kitchen, where he found not only all his Aunts, but a whole lot of his cousins as well, all trying to get a look at him. He handed the dish in his hands off to his mother, and Aunt Valerie said, “Here dear, let me get your coat for you.”

Right there in the kitchen, he had to remove his coat and show everybody the dress he was wearing.

“My, you look lovely today,” Aunt Marcy exclaimed as she gave him a hug.

“You really do,” Aunt Janet added.

“Such a pretty dress!” Aunt Jessica remarked.

“Give your Grandmother a kiss,” Susan prompted her new daughter.

Shyly, with his eyes mostly on the floor, Jasmine walked over to his grandmother and gave her a hug. “Hi Grandma,” he said softly. She bent down a little and he kissed her cheek.

“You look absolutely lovely today,” she told him. “I’ve never seen you in such a pretty dress.”

“Uh...thanks,” he said once again.

“Now dear,” his grandmother said, “will you please help out with the little ones for a while? They’re starting to get in the way.”

Jasmine felt horribly silly and self-conscious as he left the kitchen and entered the huge family room. Everything he was wearing felt...weird! His tights felt weird, his shoes felt weird, and his dress – ugh! Now that he had his coat off, he was noticing how bare his arms really were. It was winter! Why had his mother and sister picked out a dress with no sleeves? The part of his dress that was driving him the most insane though, was the skirt. Since it started at the too high waist, an empire waist as his mother had called it, and then just hung down from there, other than his tights and panties, there was nothing attached to his waist at all. It had to be the strangest feeling in the world! And consequently, he felt totally exposed. Worse than that! And he now noted that everyone

was looking right at him. As he quickly looked around at all the others he could see, he noted that at least he wasn't the only "girl" there who was overly dressed up. Most of them had fairly fancy dresses on too. And a few that he could see were also wearing dresses that didn't have sleeves. But that still didn't make him feel any better.

The family room had been redecorated and completely rearranged. All the furniture had been pushed back to the walls and now a very long table dominated the room, filling most of it from wall to wall. He knew from past dinners like this that Grandpa and Grandma used big sheets of plywood placed on top of sawhorses to make the table each time. There was an army of folding chairs placed all around the table.

He saw several of his Aunts and his older cousin Ashley putting things out on top of the tablecloths that now covered the plywood surface. He saw Ashley look up and spot him. "Hi Jasmine," she called brightly. Then she headed straight for him. His knees felt weak again.

Ashley was Uncle Jed and Aunt Valerie's daughter. She was two years older than him. "Geez I love your dress!" she exclaimed as she came closer. Jasmine could tell it was all she could do to keep from laughing at him.

"Uh...thanks," he replied for about the thousandth time.

"Are you going to help set the table?"

"Uh...Grandma asked me to help with the little kids," he told her.

She rolled her eyes. "Please! Some of them are just plain nuisances. Like this one!" she quickly exclaimed as she suddenly reached out and captured eighteen-month-old Melody who had been running past. She picked the toddler up and gave her a big hug and kiss before setting her back down again where she immediately ran off.

Jasmine looked around. There were kids everywhere, and a lot of the boys weren't even there yet. All totaled, including him, there were sixteen kids in the family. He had thirteen cousins ranging in age from Melody at eighteen months, to Ethan who was eighteen years old now. Most of them though, were close to his age. And since they all were so close in age, and since they all were not just

family but friends, and since they all went to school together, he was worried about those cousins the most.

But he had been told to take care of the younger ones. And while there wasn't a lot of them, he realized by watching Melody running around with Caleb chasing her, that the little kids were indeed being a problem. He had just one problem himself...well, he had a lot of problems – major problems, but he had one main problem pertaining to the task he had been assigned. "What am I supposed to do with them?" he asked.

"Grab them and take them somewhere," Ashley told him. "I suggest out to the porch where there'll be less people around. Then just keep them busy. Play games with them or something."

"Games? What games?"

"I don't know. Figure it out."

Ashley looked at Jasmine, who was just looking back at her with a totally puzzled expression on his face. Ashley smiled and left him, heading for the kitchen. The poor guy would have to figure things out for himself.

Jasmine looked around at the kids he could see. Okay, Melody and Caleb for sure. Who else? The only other one he could think of that would probably qualify as needing tending was Madison, Caleb and Melody's older sister, who he didn't see anywhere around just then. All of them were his Aunt Jessica's kids. Of course, there were Aaron and Lucas who were both about the same age, he was pretty sure they were both eight, but he didn't think either of them needed special watching. He had to chase Melody down to the far side of the big table before he finally caught her. He picked Melody up and then held out his hand toward her brother Caleb, who wasn't the least bit interested in coming anywhere near him, and finally ran off. So, carrying Melody, Jasmine hurried after him. He got all the way into the kitchen before he found Caleb...and his sister Madison.

"There you are Jasmine," Aunt Jessica exclaimed as they got into the kitchen. "I can see you're already keeping them occupied, but can you manage Madison too? With so many people in the kitchen here, she's going to get trampled."

"Um...sure. I guess," Jasmine replied as he finally grabbed Caleb's hand. "Madison, come on. Let's go to the porch and play

games.”

“Kay!” five-year-old Madison yelled excitedly as she ran off in the direction of the porch.

Melody was getting awfully heavy in his arms, but he kept hold of her and also kept hold of Caleb’s hand as he followed after Madison. He couldn’t help but notice how many of the others seemed to be watching him closely. Why weren’t they helping him watch the little kids? Why him?

The porch wasn’t just a porch, it was glassed in and heated in the winter. It was large too, so it made a good playroom for the kids. There were also a few games and other toys out there for the kids to play with. He saw his cousins Nichole and Allison, two of his sister’s best friends, sitting and talking on the swing further down the long narrow room. They both looked up at him when he brought the little ones into the room. Allison was his Uncle Brian and Aunt Janet’s daughter, she was twelve now, but still less than a year older than him and his sister. Nichole, who was his Uncle Pete and Aunt Marcy’s daughter, was eleven too, just as was Olivia, Uncle John and Aunt Jane’s daughter. His sister and the three other girls usually stuck together like glue. He was only surprised that he didn’t see Olivia talking with Allison and Nichole. As he set Melody down on the floor, he noticed the girls were still watching him. Why weren’t they helping with the kids? But he had been told to do it, and the way things were, he wasn’t about to not do it. He already had more than enough trouble.

“What game do you want to play,” he asked, leaning down over top of Melody and Madison. He got only blank stares back in return.

“Need some help?”

He turned and saw Olivia approaching with a baby bottle in her hand. He felt a bit relieved. “All I can get,” he replied.

Olivia held out her arms toward Melody, and then sat down on the floor as the little girl crawled into her arms, took the bottle and happily sucked away. “Have a seat,” Olivia said to Jasmine.

“Here? On the floor?”

“With the little kids, it usually works out best.”

Jasmine started to sit, then realized he was wearing an overly fancy dress. He took note of the nice dress Olivia was wearing and

sank down carefully, trying to copy the position Olivia appeared to be in. It felt strange and awkward, but seemed to work best as far as modesty and practicality. Olivia passed Melody over to him to hold and he nearly got hit in the head by her plastic baby bottle swinging around.

"Mom said I should take pity on you and help you out," Olivia explained.

"Thanks!" Jasmine replied. "I don't know what to do with them."

Olivia laughed. "They're easy. You just don't want to let them out of your sight." She clapped her hands toward Caleb and he climbed into her lap. "How's my little man?" she said to him. Caleb made no reply other than to stick his thumb in his mouth and suck on it. He was just happy to be held.

Jasmine realized that Melody was content being held as well. But that brought up the question of Madison. "Where's Madison?" he asked, looking around in panic.

Olivia turned all the way around and finally spotted her. "Back over there looking for toys."

A few moments later, Madison returned with two dolls in her hands. She knelt down by the two older "girls." "Here," Madison said, holding one of the dolls out toward Olivia.

Olivia shook her head. "I can't play. I'm holding Caleb right now and he's too big." She looked at Jasmine. "But Jasmine can play with you instead. She's just holding Melody and your sister's not that heavy."

Jasmine was shocked. "Me? Play with the dolls?"

"You're supposed to be a girl today, aren't you?"

"Yeah...but..."

"Well then you should have no problem."

"But what am I supposed to do?"

"Play with her."

To make matters worse, Olivia climbed to her feet, still holding Caleb. "Come on little man, let's see if we can find you a cookie."

Jasmine was suddenly left alone with Madison and Melody. He looked down at Madison. What was he supposed to do?

"Here," Madison said, holding one of the dolls out toward him. With his free hand, he took the doll. It didn't look like anything

special, just a doll in the form of a young girl perhaps three or four years old. It looked like it had been through a thousand different hands though. Perhaps it had.

All of a sudden, Madison started shaking her doll around a bit and talking in a strange voice. It was a moment before he realized it was supposed to be one doll talking to the other. When it was obviously his turn for the play conversation, he turned his doll to face her doll and shook it around a bit too as he replied some off-handed remark in a silly high pitched voice as well, trying to make his reply somewhat funny. And Madison played back. Back and forth. She had her doll say things, and Jasmine tried to find funny replies for his doll to make. Not much sense to any of it, but...he realized he was playing. Weird!

"Gee! If I knew you liked playing with dolls so much, I could have given you some of mine. We could have had lots of fun."

Jasmine turned and saw his "brother" standing there with a bunch of the other boys. He suddenly felt even more ashamed of himself. "I'm trying to watch them for Aunt Jessica," he replied.

"Have fun!" the fake Jimmy laughed brightly and turned away, dragging the other boys off with her, but not all the other boys.

Jasmine heard more boyish laughter. Aaron and Lucas, the two eight year olds were still standing there watching him.

"Ha-ha!" Aaron more exclaimed than laughed, "You're playing with dolls."

Jasmine considered the way he was dressed. "So?"

"So you're a boy."

His words hurt, but not that bad. "Not today, I guess," he replied softly.

"You look funny!" Lucas teased. "Like a girl."

"Gee, thanks."

"We're supposed to call you Jasmine all day," Aaron said, "and call your sister Jimmy."

"Uh...that's the plan, I'm afraid."

"Dad said you're doing it because you didn't want to go hunting today," Lucas said.

"Um...something like that."

The forced fake teasing laugh came again. "And so you get to be a stupid girl instead," Lucas laughed. "Hunter says you're nothing but a big sissy."

That comment hurt too. It hurt enough that Jasmine turned his head away from him. Hunter was Lucas's older brother and the second oldest of all the cousins. Olivia was their sister. Jasmine didn't bother looking, but the fact that no more comments came from behind him, made him hopeful that the two boys had left. And immediately, Madison started the doll game again. He played, but more reservedly.

A few minutes later though, Melody in his arms started fussing and squirming around horribly. Now what? And then Melody started crying a little. He set her down on the floor where the toddler moved off a few steps, put the bottle back in her mouth again for a moment, then took it out as she half bent over for a few seconds before she started crying. He quickly picked her up again. "What's wrong?" Jasmine asked, fully concerned.

"I think she just messed her diaper," Madison suggested.

Jasmine's eyes went wide. And now he did notice a bit of an unpleasant odor coming from her. Helpless as to what to do about it, he looked down at Madison. "What am I supposed to do?" he asked, slightly panicked over the situation.

"You probably should tell Mommy," the little girl replied.

"Yeah, sounds like good advice." With Melody in his arms, he handed the doll he was holding to Madison and told her to put them back where she got them. Then with Madison following him, he went in search of his Aunt Jessica. He found her in the kitchen, naturally, working feverishly mixing something in a big bowl. "Aunt Jessica," he called from halfway across the room, the closest he could get to her with everything that was going on around them.

Jessica looked up. "What do you need Jasmine?"

"Um...I think we've got a problem. I think she messed her diaper."

Jessica sighed a bit. "Darn! Of all times. Look," she told Jasmine, "I can't stop what I'm doing for a few minutes. You'll have to hold her until I get finished here. Take her out to the porch and I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I can take care of it for you," Susan suggested. "I think Jasmine needs a lesson in changing dirty diapers anyway."

Jessica looked at her sister then at Jasmine holding Melody. She nodded gratefully. "Would you? I can't stop here right now."

"Don't worry," Susan replied "we'll handle it just fine! Where's your diaper bag?"

"In the downstairs front bedroom with the coats."

"We'll find it," Susan told her as she turned to leave the kitchen. "Come on Jasmine. We've got a baby to change."

Jasmine followed his mother out of the kitchen and into the hallway leading toward the downstairs bedrooms. At the far end of the hall, he saw his Grandpa coming out of the bathroom. He stopped and stared nervously at the older man as he approached. His stomach gave a very nervous lurch when Grandpa stopped right in front of him and looked down at him for a few moments. Deeply ashamed of himself just then, Jasmine finally dropped his gaze down to the floor. He had seen no smile on Grandpa's face at all. Jasmine couldn't tell if he had looked disgusted with him, or disappointed in him...or if he was satisfied seeing the way he was now dressed and what he was doing. He shifted the heavy toddler in his arms nervously.

"I hope you're learnin' your lesson today," his grandfather's deep voice finally spoke.

Jasmine had to look up then. But what reply could he possibly make?

"*She's* learning plenty, Dad," Susan told him. "And right now, she has a messy diaper to change."

Jacob McComber nodded as he continued to look down at his grandson dressed totally like a girl. He was surprised to note that Jimmy looked very much like any of the other girls in the family. He appreciated that Susan had dressed him up so girlishly – very fancy dress, even putting that big matching bow in the boy's hair. Susan obviously understood the punishment that was necessary to teach some boys their place in the world. He had no doubt that Jimmy was learning that lesson fully today. A lesson Jimmy would never forget.

He glanced from Jimmy to the little girl he carried on his hip like the women usually did with all the young kids. He couldn't

remember this one's name, but he knew it was Jessica's youngest. "Better get movin' then," he told his grandson. "Those young ones need lots of tendin'." He nodded again and headed off, his mind still on Jimmy. Yeah, no doubt the boy was learning his lesson real well today. Susan even had him changing the baby's diaper! He nearly chuckled at that. The part that stayed with him the most though, was how Jimmy had looked. Dressed overly girlishly, he supposed like many of his other granddaughters there that day, and yet the boy had still looked like he was one of those granddaughters instead of his grandson. His mother had really done a good job on him!

Susan found Jessica's diaper bag easily enough, then she moved coats around on the big bed, clearing a large working space. While Jasmine continued to hold Melody, she opened the bag and pulled out the padded changing mat that Jessica always kept on top of everything else. She laid it out on the bed. "Okay, Jas, lay her down."

Jasmine was grateful to get the heavy toddler out of his arms. Careful to not disturb the bottle the little girl was sucking on, he laid her on her back on top of the mat. Then he stood back so his mother could change her.

"Where you going?" Susan asked. "Get the stuff out of the bag."

"Me?"

"Yes you! Every woman in the world changes dirty diapers at some time in her life. Why should you be any different? It's about time you learn something you're going to need to do when you get older...no matter who you are then. Men have to be able to do this too you know."

Uncertainly, Jasmine started pulling things out of the bag. He grabbed one of several diapers. He saw a big plastic box of baby wipes and he pulled that out too. There was another baby bottle stuck into a pocket in the side of the bag and a few toys in the bottom as well. "Um...do I need anything else out of here?" he asked.

"We'll see. Now get that dirty diaper off her."

Under his mother's guidance, and after being cautioned to watch his dress so he didn't mess it up, he had to remove Melody's messy diaper, wipe the poop off her bottom, and rediaper her. He made no

comment at all when he removed the diaper and saw that she didn't have a little pee-pee part sticking out of her. Melody had a little mound with a bit of a crease in it instead. He tried not to look at that too much, but when he was forced to wipe it clean, there wasn't much choice in the matter. A few minutes later, he had fastened the tapes on the disposable diaper and was pulling the little girl's dress back down.

"How's it going?" Aunt Jessica's breathless voice asked as she hurried into the room.

"All done," Susan replied with a smile as she picked the baby up from the bed. "You're such a pretty little angel," she cooed at the toddler in her arms. She handed the baby over to Jessica who gave the baby a big kiss and a hug.

"Did Jasmine make my baby all nice and comfy again?" Jessica asked her baby as she gave her another hug. She turned to Jasmine, "Thank you dear." She spotted the dirty diapers on the bed and everything that still needed to be put away. "I'll take it from here. Why don't you go out and help Ashley. I think Valerie asked her to refill some of the snack dishes for the guys."

Susan led Jasmine back up the hall to the kitchen. It took a moment of searching among all the women in the overly busy and crowded room before she spotted Ashley over by the pantry door with bags and bowls of chips, pretzels, and other snacks. With a small bit of pressure on Jasmines arm, she said, "There's Ashley, go see if you can help her."

Jasmine dutifully headed for Ashley. "Can I help?" he asked somewhat unenthusiastically.

Ashley looked up at him and smiled. "Sure!" She pointed at some of the bowls she had been filling. "Take some of those out to the guys in the family room. I'll get the porch. You can probably just dump some into the bowls already out there," she suggested.

Jasmine picked up a large bowl of potato chips in one hand and a large bowl of pretzels in his other, and turned to leave the kitchen. Once again he was putting himself and the way he was dressed on display in front of the rest of the family. And once again he felt totally foolish about the way he looked. His dress still felt really strange on

him, and that didn't even count the odd way his shoes felt with every step he took.

He went into the big family room first, where he could already see a few of his uncles at the far end of the room, leaning against the doorway to Grandpa's big office that was right off the family room. That was where his uncles usually hung out. His eyes spotted his sister – Jimmy. She was laughing just as boldly and acting just like any of the other boys in the room. And what seemed really surprising, was that it looked like the other guys were all treating her like she really was a boy. No humiliation for his sister at all! None! She was having a good time.

He had to walk along the narrow aisle between the long table in the room and where all the furniture had been pushed back. His big cousins, Ethan and Justin, who were his Uncle Jed's two oldest kids, and Hunter, his Uncle John's oldest son, were all grouped in a spot talking together, no doubt about hunting earlier that day. He saw the bowl of pretzels on the small end table next to where they were standing, and he saw Justin reach into the bowl and pull out a handful.

Trying to be inconspicuous, he attempted to worm his way quietly in behind Justin so he could pour more pretzels into the bowl. They all stopped talking and looked at him. Justin moved out of the way to give him a bit of room. With his head kept down, Jasmine dumped some pretzels into the bowl, and then tried to push his way past them in search of the next bowl to fill. But Ethan stopped him before he could leave.

"I can't believe you're wearing a dress today," Ethan said. "But it serves you right for being too chicken to hunt anymore!"

Too embarrassed and hurt by Ethan's comment, Jasmine forced his way past the older boy and continued on, purposely not looking back. He came across a bowl of potato chips, but there were still plenty in the bowl.

He turned the corner and approached the next group of boys, the ones who made him the most nervous. His sister was one of the three "boys" there. His sister, his brother Tommy, and his Uncle Pete's oldest son, Elliot, who lived next door. Elliot was just a year younger than his brother Tommy, and despite his age, Elliot was

considered one of the best shots in the family. Tommy and Elliot had been best friends for as long as Jasmine could remember. Elliot's sister Nichole, and his sister Jasmine, were pretty much best friends too. But as far as Jasmine was concerned, Elliot was an idiot! He did terribly in school. But Jasmine had to pause to think about himself just then and the way he was dressed. Which of them was the bigger idiot?

There was a snack bowl by the boys, and he headed for it, wishing that none of them would pay him the least bit of attention. He didn't get his wish as Elliot looked right at him and said all too loudly, "It's Jaasmiiine," drawing the name way out. All the others turned to look at him.

Ashamed, Jasmine looked at the bowl of potato chips by the guys and not at them. "I just need to see if you need some more chips," he mumbled shyly without looking at any of them. Before he could do anything, Tommy reached into the bowl on the small table and pulled out a handful. Elliot did too. But his sister Jimmy didn't. Jimmy only smiled wickedly at Jasmine instead.

"Yeah, we need more!" Tommy said to his *sister*.

Jasmine had to push his way past them to get to the bowl. He filled it from his bigger bowl, but when he tried to move on, one of them grabbed his arm. He turned and found "Jimmy" holding him with a big smile on her face. Jimmy reached out her hand and grabbed a handful of chips from the big bowl in Jasmine's hand instead of from the smaller bowl on the table. With that same big teasing smile on her face she stuck one of the chips in her mouth and crunched it loudly. The guys laughed, and Jasmine pushed his way past them.

"You're such a pretty girl!" Elliot called after him.

Jimmy laughed at her stupid brother along with the other guys. She was totally delighted seeing her pansy brother all dressed up so prettily like a girl and being forced to act totally like a girl – while she got to simply hang out and have fun. The only problem was, as she stared after her idiot brother, *she* should have been the one wearing that dress. She and her mother had made a special shopping trip just to find it. She had picked it out and she had been looking forward so much to wearing it today. Looking forward to wearing it

and looking – pretty. And now her stupid pansy brother was wearing it instead. And she supposed that the dress was managing to make even him look – pretty.

Jasmine acted like he was ignoring the boys behind him, but the small encounter had been somewhat painful. He turned the corner to the far side of the table and headed toward the men gathered around his grandfather's office. The small bowl of pretzels he passed along the way was still full, untouched. He continued on. His Uncle John and Uncle Pete were pretty much blocking the doorway as they listened in on the conversation that was happening inside. Should he bother them? He didn't want to interrupt the men at all, especially not today, not in his...condition. He edged his way past his two Uncles.

"Hey, more chips!" Pete exclaimed happily, seeing the bowls Jasmine was carrying. He turned back toward the guys in the inner office. "You need any more chips in there?"

"Couldn't hurt," Brian said after checking both the now completely empty bowls in the room.

"Here Jasmine," Pete said, "just go on in."

Reluctantly, Jasmine turned around and went through the narrow gap as his Uncle Pete and Uncle John moved back out of the way a little. All the men were inside. All of them. Including his father and grandfather. He noticed right away that his father looked very unhappy to see him just then. He couldn't tell about the rest of the men, he dared not look at any of their faces. He concentrated on his task instead. He had to look around to find where the snack bowls were. With all the men in the room, they were hard to spot. He saw one on the table next to where his father was sitting. Still not daring to look at any of them, he headed for that bowl first.

The conversation had stopped as they all watched Jasmine come into the room. But in an effort to keep things as normal as possible and to keep the business at hand underway, Jacob restarted the discussion. "We didn't see any geese this morning at all. Just some ducks."

Jed shook his head. "There haven't been nearly as many of them this year. We get years like this though sometimes. This just looks like one of them." He noticed the others nodding knowingly.

Jacob looked over to Clint. "You're taking out that big group tomorrow morning?"

Jasmine listened to the conversation as he tried to transfer potato chips into the bowl somewhat quietly. His father actually worked most of the time as an electrician for the same company where his Uncle Pete was an electrician too. But all the McComber men were hunting guides. And often a return group requested a particular guide they had worked with before. It sounded to Jasmine like his father would be leading another hunting trip tomorrow.

"Yeah," Clint confirmed. "Valerie has us scheduled to go out to the southeast area where I brought the group last time we went hunting. The deer there last year were all over the place."

Jasmine, of course, knew that his Aunt Valerie, his Aunt Marcy, and his mother worked the small family business office, scheduling hunting groups and managing a lot of different things for the family. He finished with the bowl of chips and turned to try to see if there were any more snack bowls in the room. He didn't see any and headed for the door.

"Over here," Brian called as he picked up the bowl that was hidden on the table beside him.

Jasmine went over to the empty bowl near his Uncle Brian. It was hard to think of his Uncle Brian as a hunter. Uncle Brian was a doctor. But it seemed like Uncle Brian led more hunting groups than many of the others. The bowl he had to fill looked like it had contained pretzels. He started filling it.

"How are the herds looking now?" Jacob asked Jed. "We've been leading a lot of groups through this year. Has it been too many?"

Jasmine knew that his Uncle Jed acted kind of like the forest ranger for the family. He did most of the land management and kept a close eye on the animals. It was a huge job.

"Actually," Jed replied, "I think the deer still need to be thinned out a bit more. Especially up north where they're harder to get at. The boar are kicking things up a bit much up there too. They're going to get dangerous if we don't cut some of them back this year."

"Well, deer season isn't over yet," Jacob replied. "I'll tell the girls to try to move the groups more up north instead of where we have

been concentrating. And if we can thin out the boars a bit in the process, that should help.”

Jasmine finished what he was doing and hurried out of there. Whew! He considered himself lucky that things had gone as well as they did in there.

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Dinner was mass chaos – everywhere. Everyone at the table was arm-to-arm with the person next to them. The room was overly noisy. People were getting up to get things then sitting down again. People were either passing food around or leaning over the table to get more food from the trays that had been put in the middle of the table. Mothers were getting up to tend to kids, then sitting down again. Discussions were hard to follow. Drinks got spilled then had to be wiped up and refilled. Everything was a seemingly endless series of unrelated events constantly going on – except they were all centered around dinner at the enormously long table. It was wonderful! For most.

Jasmine did his best to sit there and not say much, trying to concentrate on the food that was piled on his plate. But all too often someone would comment about something to him...mostly about how pretty his dress was or how pretty he looked. Embarrassing comments. With his mother sitting right next to him, he had little choice but to say, “Thank you,” an endless number of times, each time a comment like that was made.

“Jasmine, sit up straight like a lady please.” Susan told him a few times. “Jasmine, please smile and act happier when people give you compliments. Jasmine, a lady never eats with her elbows leaning on the table like that.”

Jimmy, on the other hand, was having a total ball. Best Thanksgiving of her life! Best day of her entire life – period! For that one day, she was being one of the guys, and she found it fairly easy to let loose instead of acting like the rest of the girls. And watching her stupid brother trying to be her...that only added to the fun. The stupid idiot deserved every bit of the humiliation he had to be feeling. Afraid of a little duck. Ha! And he was afraid of dead ducks

as well. Even worse! She talked and laughed loudly and unreservedly with the guys, while the real Jimmy tried to stay quiet and unnoticed. She let loose and just had fun, while the real Jimmy just wished the day would end.

When dinner was finally over, it was like the earlier part of the day in reverse. The guys took off to be by themselves, while the women took things off the table instead of putting things on it. The guys went right back to their earlier discussions, while the women cleaned things up.

Jasmine had to take things from the table into the kitchen, he had to go around refilling snack bowls, and he had to help fold up table cloths. One thing after another, while he watched the men doing nothing more than talking. He counted himself lucky that he didn't have to wash dishes. The way things were in the kitchen, he wouldn't have been able to get near the sink, or the double dishwashers in there either. And through it all, he either continually got teasing remarks from the girls, or he was treated "mostly" like the other girls by all the older women. "Mostly" like the other girls, because it seemed like they got to rest and talk once in a while, and he didn't.

Most of the men finally left to go home, leaving most of the women still there cleaning everything up. The table suddenly disappeared as four of the remaining men took it apart and carried all the pieces outside. The furniture got pushed back to where it belonged, and Grandma led a few of her daughters in putting all the little accents back where they belonged.

As things wound down more and more, Jasmine found himself doing less and less, and he found fewer and fewer kids around to worry about as the number of people diminished. He also found that he was exhausted. He had barely stopped working all day. He was ever so happy when his mother had him put his sister's white furry coat back on. He kissed his Grandma and several of his Aunts goodbye, and he and his mother both carried all their now empty dishes out to the car. It was totally dark outside.

Ten minutes later, they were home and had to carry all the dishes from the car into the kitchen and put them away. It was way past his usual bedtime, and the fatigue, especially after not sleeping

hardly at all the night before, was getting to him. He was so glad when his mother said, "Let me help you get that dress off now so we can get you into bed."

The door to his own room was closed. The real Jimmy had no doubt that his sister was sound asleep in his bed. There was little choice for him but to go into her room instead. His mother unzipped his dress, and he pulled it over his head. With her watching, his shoes went next. He flexed his feet a bit to get the ache out of them. His mother didn't appear to be interested in leaving, so he pulled the tights he was wearing off next, leaving him in just his bra and panties. He reached behind him and tried to undo the bra, and found the safety pin still there that his sister had put in it the night before. "Uh...Mom, can you help me with this?" he asked as he turned around.

Susan went over to her son and started to open the safety pin holding the bra fastened. Then she stopped. She pulled all the panties out of the cups instead and threw them on the dresser. "Put your nightgown on now," she instructed him.

With a sigh of acceptance, he wearily crawled back into the nightgown. His mother came over to him and hugged him. There was no word about how he had done as a girl all day, no word from her about any kind of punishment, only a tight lasting hug and a simple good night kiss. She stayed at the doorway with her hand near the light switch, waiting for him to get into bed and under the covers.

"Goodnight, *Jasmine*," she said. "I love you."

Jasmine rolled his eyes. "Good night, Mom. Love you too."

She switched off the light and started to leave, but turned around quickly when the light next to the bed suddenly switched on. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Um...I'm afraid of the dark."

Chapter 6 – Not Again!

November 28th – 29th

It was nearly bedtime on the day after Thanksgiving by the time that Clint had a chance to talk quietly with his wife. After spending a long day leading a hunting group around the woods, then coming home and having to whip his two twins with his belt, each of them for what they had done, he was pretty much exhausted and done in.

"I think Jimmy's still crying," Susan said as she entered their bedroom. "No sound out of Jasmine's room though."

Clint grunted. "I whipped each of them pretty good," Clint told her. "Jasmine just as much as Jimmy." It was one of the main things that he hadn't been able to stop thinking about since he had punished them.

"Clint! Why did you hit her so hard too? She's a girl!"

Clint shook his head. "I hadn't intended on it. But when I strapped Jimmy, he started crying almost right away. Bawled his eyes out. But after the way he acted, he had to be punished – but good! He had to understand that he has to live up to his place in this world. Don't worry, I didn't kill him. He'll get over it. I just hope he's nice and sore back there for a while so he doesn't forget it!"

Susan hated anytime her kids had to be punished like that. Fortunately, those times were very rare. And she couldn't remember a single time that Jasmine had ever been punished with her husband's belt – until today. "And Jasmine? You said you hadn't intended on hitting her so hard."

"Yeah," Clint agreed, his mind still picturing that little episode. "Every time I've ever taken my belt to either Tommy or Jimmy, they started crying soon after. But with Jasmine...I don't know. She told me before I started that she wasn't sorry at all – for any of it. And then it was like she was totally determined to be defiant. No matter how hard or long I hit her, she barely let out a whimper. Oh, there were a few signs of tears in her eyes – eventually. But she never

really cried at all. She simply seemed that determined. That... defiant. If she had cried right away like Jimmy did, I probably would have hit her maybe three or four times and that would have been it. But the whole time I hit her, she acted more like she barely cared, like she still wasn't sorry at all. So I made sure she was sorry!"

Susan felt sick, but there was nothing she could do about it now. The punishment was done and over with – for both of them.

"Deer season is almost over. What about Jimmy?"

"I think he knows now what he needs to do, and I'm pretty sure he'll have no problem doing it. Especially after the day he spent yesterday. Damn, did you have to doll him all up that much? He looked just like any of the other girls."

"You said to go with everything that was on that note, and wearing Jasmine's new dress was on there."

Clint nodded. "Still, I'm sure Jimmy has learned his lesson now. I have no doubt he's looking forward to hunting again tomorrow morning. And I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to him getting his first deer." Clint smiled to himself. "And he's gonna love that rifle we bought him for Christmas. I can just see his eyes when he opens that thing now."

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Jimmy indeed had that deer hunt tomorrow morning on his mind. But not like his father thought. He was actually dreading it. But after the day he had spent on Thanksgiving, there was no way he was not going hunting. He figured he'd already be the laughing stock of every kid in school. And the only way he could ever hold his head up now, was to actually shoot a deer – and eat its heart. The thought of it turned his stomach to the point where he actually got out of bed once and started for the bathroom so he could puke. Fortunately, he got himself under control and climbed back into bed where he stared back at the ducks accusing him from his bedroom wall.

He was finally sound asleep when the knock came on his bedroom door at four-thirty in the morning. Tommy poked his head in and softly called his name. "Jimmy?"

Jimmy startled out of the troubled sleep he had been in. "Is it time?"

"Yeah," Tommy replied. "Ya going this time?"

"Yeah," Jimmy replied as he forced himself out of bed. "I'll be there in a few minutes." His bedroom door closed and he began dressing himself in all his hunting clothes. The same clothes his sister had worn instead of him two days ago.

A short while later, he quietly went out the back door to where his father and Tommy were loading guns into the truck. But there was another truck out there as well, and another person. He wasn't at all happy to see his Grandpa out there.

"Mornin' Jimmy," his Grandpa called.

"Mornin' Grandpa," Jimmy replied.

Clint looked at his youngest son. "You ready this time?" he asked.

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah." He didn't add that he just wanted to get this horrible event over with. A few minutes later, he was in the back seat with all the guns, and his father was following Grandpa towards the northern part of their land. He didn't know exactly where they were going, only that it would be another deer stand somewhere. He didn't really care which one. They were all alike. And it seemed like the family had about a hundred of them. He closed his eyes during the trip and wished he wasn't on that dreaded little expedition.

When they finally got where they were going, Jimmy was surprised to see his Uncle Jed there. Jed always seemed to be everywhere on the property, but he didn't lead hardly any of the groups that came to them to hunt.

Once out of the truck, his father grabbed the guns from the back seat and started handing them out. Tommy's was first. The next gun he handed to Jimmy.

"Make me proud today...please," Jimmy's father said to him.

Jimmy nodded. "I'll try." And the truth was, after what he had been through on Thanksgiving, he was going to try. He had to! He had to do something to redeem even a little bit of his honor. Besides, his backside was still a bit tender.

Under the narrow beam of their flashlights, Jimmy, his father, his brother, his Grandpa, and his Uncle Jed headed down the narrow

path toward the deer stand. It was a bit of a walk. Jimmy was just glad it was wintertime and there would be no snakes he'd have to worry about. No bears either. Unfortunately, that bit of happiness was ripped away when Uncle Jed reminded them to watch out for the wild boars. There were all too many signs that they had been through there very recently.

He didn't see the deer stand until they came to it at the very edge of a clearing in the trees. He knew his Uncle sometimes seeded the field with things to attract the deer and keep them coming to the spot. In the dark, he couldn't see anything out there just then. He climbed up the ten feet into the permanent wooden structure. Without the flashlights, he would have been completely blind. His father raised the lid covering the opening. The stars appeared. Jimmy knew it was going to be a long wait until dawn and they couldn't start shooting until then...if there was anything out there to shoot.

He leaned his gun against the back wall and sat down next to it. He closed his eyes and tried again to put out of his mind what he was there to do. He couldn't manage it at all, but at least he didn't start gagging and throwing up.

A hand touched his leg and he woke up. He had actually managed to fall asleep. The sky was light now. Light enough to see. His father pointed toward the long open window in the stand. Quietly, he moved to where he could see out of it. Several deer were just making their way out into the open area. He felt a tap on his shoulder, and turned to see his father handing him his gun.

"Don't miss this time," his father whispered. "I'll tell you when to shoot. Okay?"

Jimmy only nodded. He didn't want to shoot at all. He just didn't have a choice. If he didn't kill a deer today, he'd never live it down. If that was even still possible. Slowly and silently, he brought his gun up through the window, resting it on the ledge, watching the deer as they moved into the clearing – incredibly slowly.

It was a few minutes before his father tapped him on the shoulder again and pointed. "There! See him?"

Jimmy looked where his father was pointing. A buck with a fairly nice rack of antlers was just barely visible, just moving into the edge

of the clearing. Jimmy grabbed his gun with both hands and took aim.

“Not yet,” Clint whispered to him. “I’ll let you know.” The buck moved further into the clearing. “We’ll see if he turns,” he whispered to his son. “You’ll have a better shot at him that way.”

To Jimmy, the beautiful deer in his gun sights seemed to stand forever where it was grazing on whatever it was eating from the ground. He could almost feel how that magnificent deer had to feel out there just then – quietly eating, no problems at all. Just living the life it was supposed to live. And now he had to rip that life out of it. He glanced to the side, no other guns were raised. This was to be his kill. His deer. His first. He saw everyone watching the buck intently. He went back to aiming. The buck moved to the side, then a bit more. Then it bent its head down to the ground to eat again.

“Now!” Clint whispered. “Get him!”

Jimmy held his breath. He had to shoot it. But he just couldn’t stand actually doing it. All the eyes from the ducks on his wall looking down at him flashed across his vision. He tried to imagine how much worse it would be to have that deer’s head mounted up there staring down at him too. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t! He couldn’t shoot that magnificent specimen of a deer. He couldn’t just wipe out its life for so little reason.

“Get it!” Clint urged again.

Jimmy took another breath, held it...and raised the tip of his gun slightly before he pulled the trigger. The gun roared and the sound echoed loudly inside the wooden structure. The buck and all the rest of the deer turned their heads nervously in their direction, and then bolted for the trees.

“Get him!” Clint yelled...even though he knew it was already too late.

Jimmy said nothing for a few minutes as they all watched the deer disappearing. “Sorry Dad,” he finally whispered. “I guess I missed.”

Clint shook his head. His son had a perfect shot. And the deer wasn’t that far off. There was no way he should’ve missed.

“I’ll get the next one,” Jimmy promised.

Everyone had been watching the deer out in the field just before Jimmy shot. Everyone except Jimmy's Grandpa. "Clint," Jacob said. "He missed on purpose."

"What?" Clint replied. "No. He wouldn't do that."

"He did," his father insisted. "I saw him raise his gun just before he fired. He purposely missed."

Clint looked at his son. "Did you?" he asked.

Jimmy knew he had been caught. "Uh-huh," he replied looking sorrowfully down at the floor. "I just couldn't kill it."

Clint shook his head. "What am I going to do with you? You know we've got to thin the herd each year or they'll get sick and many of them will die. You know that! So what's your problem?"

Jimmy shrugged. "I just can't do it," he said, sorrowfully. He moved to the back of the stand and leaned his gun up into a corner. He sat on the floor, and cried.

Jacob McComber shook his head. "Let's get out of here. We're not going to do anything here today at all."

With tears still in his eyes, Jimmy climbed down from the deer stand. His father carried his gun back to the truck.

"Let's try this again tomorrow," Jacob told them before they climbed into the trucks. He looked straight at Jimmy, "Only without him!" He turned then and got into his truck and left.

Clint and Jed looked at each other. "Sorry," Jed told him. "I guess I'll see you out here tomorrow." Clint nodded. When he turned to tell Jimmy to get into the truck, he didn't have to. Jimmy was already in there, lying down on what little of the back seat was available.

When they finally got home, Clint sent Jimmy straight to his room with orders to stay there. In truth, he didn't want his younger son anywhere around just then. "We may as well leave the guns in the truck," he said to Tommy. But he did go into the back seat and lay them all down on the seat instead of leaving them upright in the corner. Everything else stayed right where it was.

Susan was worried something drastically wrong had happened when she saw her husband's truck pull into the driveway shortly after she had gotten out of bed. She saw her husband say something to Jimmy, and then her son came running into the house, ignoring her,

and headed straight for his room. What had happened? Nothing good she was sure. A few minutes later, Clint and Tommy came into the house. She noted they had left the guns and everything else in the truck. "What happened?" she asked.

"He missed," Clint told her. "Purposely. He had a perfect shot. There was no way he could miss that buck. But Dad saw him raise his gun just before he fired and shoot too high."

"Maybe he just pulled it a bit accidentally," Susan suggested.

Clint shook his head. "He admitted what he did after Dad said he saw him do it. He admitted that he couldn't kill that thing. And it was an easy shot!"

Susan shook her head? "What are you going to do?"

"I have no idea," he said. "No idea at all. Dad wants to go back out there tomorrow again, but without Jimmy. Can't say I blame him at all."

Susan nodded. What was she going to do with her youngest son?

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Jasmine came out of her room after waking up, intending on heading straight to the bathroom. Something had woken her from a really nice dream where she had been modeling clothes and everyone had been totally captivated by how beautiful she was. She wasn't surprised to see her brother's bedroom door open...he was supposed to be out hunting, but she was surprised to see him in there – crying on his bed. "What happened?" she asked.

"Go away!" Jimmy sobbingly replied. "Just go away!"

She turned and headed for the bathroom, but before she could get there, she heard a door slamming behind her. Her brother's door was now closed. What was up with the idiot?

It wasn't until she had a chance to talk with her mother a little while later that Jasmine got the whole story of why they were home so soon. Her stupid brother had wimped out again! She couldn't believe it. Even after what he had been through all day Thursday, he still couldn't do it! He had to be the biggest wuss on the planet!

Since Jimmy seemed to be staying in his room all day – out of sight, it wasn't until late morning when she knocked on his door. No answer. She knocked again louder. "Jimmy?" Still no answer. She chanced opening the door. He was in there at his desk playing a car racing game on his computer. She saw him turn his head toward her.

"Go away!" he said.

She ignored him and sat on his bed. "What happened?"

He turned his head and looked angrily at her, then went back to his game.

"You couldn't do it, could you?" she said. No answer. "You couldn't find it in you to kill that deer." Still no answer. "Was it the heart thing? Or was it that you just couldn't shoot it?"

He turned his head again, but he didn't answer. He went back to his game wishing his sister would just leave him alone. He finally sighed when she seemed to be staying where she was. "I couldn't shoot it," he told her, still concentrating on the game. "I couldn't take its life. It was a really beautiful...magnificent deer, and I couldn't just murder the poor thing."

Jasmine didn't say anything for a long time. "Jimmy, what are you going to do?"

Jimmy shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"What's Dad going to do?"

"I don't know," he said again. "Grandpa said they're going back there again tomorrow – without me!"

Jasmine nodded, even though his back was still to her. "I guess that makes sense. So they're going to try it again tomorrow, only this time, you won't have to go?"

He shrugged his shoulders again. "I guess." Then a moment later, he added. "I hope."

Jasmine went back to her room after that. She opened her computer and started looking around at some of her favorite websites. Not hunting websites surprisingly, but fashion websites. For the last few months she had been finding clothes to be more and more interesting. And in particular, she found herself often looking at fashion models, often to the point of looking some of them up individually to learn more about their lives. She often wondered what

it was like to walk down a runway like that, or even through a room, and know that everyone there thought you were pretty.

Thoughts of her brother though were hard to banish from her mind. He had worn her special dress for Thanksgiving. She should have never put that part in the note! That had been a big mistake. She was supposed to have worn that dress, if not on Thanksgiving, then eventually. Probably at Christmas. She couldn't help herself. She was actually jealous that her stupid brother had worn her dress – and he had looked so darn good in it! Too good in it. Who would have ever thought? When she had written that note, she really *had* hoped that Mom and Dad would do everything in it to her brother, but in the back of her mind, she hadn't really believed that they would. All she had really wanted was to go duck hunting – and kill a duck. Teasing her wuss of a brother had simply been a major bonus that was too good to pass up.

One of the fashion blogs she often read had a new link to another blog that the writer seemed to think was very good. And the link referred to a subject that Jasmine had found very interesting for the last few years. She clicked the link and smiled. "Cool!"

"Hi Jas," Susan said as she walked into her daughter's room. "What are you up to?"

"Look Mom," Jasmine replied. "This girl has a blog devoted entirely to tights!"

Susan walked over and looked at the blog. She saw quite a few pictures of the girl's legs wearing a rainbow assortment of different tights. "Very nice dear," Susan replied.

"I think I should start a blog about tights too," Jasmine said. "Only I think mine should be about multicolored tights. I like those the best."

Behind her, where Jasmine couldn't see, Susan raised her eyebrows. Jasmine often mixed and matched the worst colors and patterns...and somehow managed to make it all work and look pretty darn good. "You have a lot of different tights in your drawer dear, but not that many. And I don't think we can afford to keep buying you enough to support your own website about them."

"Yeah, I know. Still, it would be a cool idea."

“Listen,” Susan said, “I have to go into the office for a few minutes, but I should be back pretty soon. After that, I should have some time to help you with that new skirt you’re trying to sew for school. Do you want to go with me, or stay here?”

Jasmine thought about that, “Um...I think I’ll stay here and read this blog for a little while.”

“You could start pinning the pattern to your material while I’m gone,” Susan suggested.

Jasmine thought about that. “Okay. But I want to look at this for a few minutes first.”

Susan kissed her daughters head. “See you in a little while.”

Sewing was another new thing for Jasmine that she was surprisingly enjoying lately. Especially since her mother always let her choose the fabrics they bought. She really liked the bright bold patterns and colors. Her Home Economics class at school, which was actually just a group of the girls that were all supposed to be learning to sew and cook and clean and stuff, were all working on things to do a charity fashion show next spring. Between now and the end of school, all the girls were supposed to design and sew five different outfits, and then they would model them all in the show. Jasmine was actually looking forward to that. Lately, it seemed like a whole new world of interesting things had been opened up for her. She just had one little problem, she needed a bigger set of boobs to go with that world!

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All day long, Jasmine noted that nothing was said about Jimmy by either of her parents. She couldn’t get her idiot brother off her mind though. He hadn’t been able to kill the deer. Just the thought of killing it had stopped him. Their family practically lived from hunting – one way or another. The entire McComber clan did. Hunting and killing animals, and eating them, was a part of their lives since they were born! And yet her stupid brother couldn’t do it. He couldn’t do what every other male in the family loved to do. He couldn’t kill a deer. Or a duck for that matter – even worse!

Her brother was a wuss! A major wimp! She would have had no trouble taking that shot. She would have had no problem killing that deer. But she was a girl, and girls in the family weren't allowed to hunt. She smiled to herself. Except that one time. She was the one and only female in the family who had ever gone hunting. She was the one and only female to have ever shot a duck.

The idea didn't really come to her until the middle of the afternoon, long after she and her mother had finished sewing for the day. But when the idea did hit her, she found it hard to ignore. She spent a long time trying her best to tell herself what a bad idea it was and that she shouldn't do it. But she had enjoyed hunting so much on Thursday that she just had to try it again. She had gotten majorly beaten on Friday by her father for what she had done on Thursday. In fact, her backside was still a bit raw. But if she tried to do it again, how much worse would it be? How much worse could it possibly be? She had survived the whipping her father had given her just fine. Her backside might still sting a bit whenever she sat down, but she had survived it. And she had never once cried! Not like her sissy brother had done. She was somewhat proud of that fact. It had been close, but she had never actually broken down and cried during that beating. Never at all. She had been too proud of herself for managing to do what she had done. She was still proud!

But as it had been before, once the idea was that set in her mind, she just had to go through with it. There were of course just a few little problems she had to work out first. One of which was her idiot pansy brother.

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It was around nine-thirty that night when Jasmine kissed her father good night. She called goodnight to her brother Tommy, then she hugged her mother and kissed her. Then she headed to her bedroom to go to sleep. Except, all she really did was to turn out the overhead light, leaving the dimmer lamp next to her bed still on. She hadn't bothered to say goodnight to Jimmy. He was still hiding in his room. Of course, he wasn't going to be hiding in there much longer. He just didn't know that yet.

Half an hour later, she heard her brother Tommy going to bed. But still she waited. Since her father was going hunting early in the morning, she was fairly sure that he had gone to bed at the same time Tommy had. Half an hour later, she hoped that Tommy was sound asleep and that her mother had gone to bed as well.

She opened her door with the excuse on her mind that she had to go to the bathroom – in case anyone asked. But the house was mostly dark except for the faint light coming from the kitchen that was always left on at night so people could see at least somewhat if they got up, which was often. She went across the hall and opened Jimmy's door without knocking. The nightlight in his room let her easily see where she was going. Quietly, she crept over to his bed. He was sound asleep. "Psst!" she hissed in his ear as she shook his arm a bit. "Jimmy! Wake up!"

Jimmy startled awake. "Huh?"

"Jimmy, wake up," Jasmine whispered again.

"Huh?" he repeated again. "Jas? What the hell do you want? I just finally got to sleep."

She grabbed his covers and quickly pulled them off him. "Come on!"

"Huh? What? What are you doing?"

"Fixing things! Now come on."

"Where?" he asked as he finally sat up on his bed, trying to rub the sleep from his eyes.

Jasmine grabbed the front of his pajamas in her fist, and pulled. "Come on, I said!" She literally pulled him out of his room and all the way into her room where she closed the door behind them and turned on the overhead light.

"What's going on?" Jimmy asked sleepily.

"Like I said, I'm fixing things. And keep your voice down."

"Fixing what?" Jimmy asked a bit quieter.

"You!" she replied. "Now take your pajamas off!"

Jimmy suddenly woke up a bit more. "What?"

"I said get those pajamas off!"

"What for? I'm not going to do that!"

"Yes you are!"

"No I'm not! What's going on?"

“Like I said, I’m fixing things. And you’re the thing I have to fix first.”

“What do you mean fix me? I don’t need fixing!”

“Yes you do! Now get undressed.”

“No. What’s going on?”

Jasmine grunted in frustration. “I’m going hunting in the morning with Dad.”

Jimmy was shocked. “He’s letting you do that?”

“He doesn’t know it yet.”

Jimmy took that in. “But what does that have to do with me? Grandpa said I couldn’t go.”

“You’re not going...but you are going. I’m going instead – as you!”

Jimmy’s head spun for a moment, but he finally got caught up a bit more.

“You’re gonna get sooo killed.”

“I know. I don’t care. I’m still doing it. Now get undressed.”

“Why?”

“Because you idiot. Guys can go hunting, but girls can’t. Therefore if I go out hunting, then I have to be you again, which means that you have to be...”

“Oh no! Not again!”

“Oh yes!” Jasmine hissed. “You have to!”

“No I don’t. There’s no reason for it.”

“If you don’t, I’ll tell all the kids at school that it was your idea to wear my clothes on Thanksgiving. And that you saw my dress and loved it so much you pleaded with Mom to let you wear it instead of me.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“What do you think everyone is going to think? They all saw you in the dress. They all know you chickened out and didn’t go hunting. And by then, they’re all going to know that you wimped out today and couldn’t shoot a deer when it was practically handed to you. And trust me, if you don’t start doing what I tell you to do, I’m going to make sure everyone knows that the real reason you can’t hunt is because you want to be a girl so much you’d do anything to make it happen!”

Jimmy was shocked. "That's crazy! You wouldn't!"

"If you don't do as I say, then you know darn well that I will. I want this bad Jimmy. Real, real bad! And you know how determined I can get sometimes. You know how I'll get back at you if you don't do what I want. And besides, if all goes right, then maybe nobody will find out at all."

"Nobody will find out?"

"Tomorrow isn't Thanksgiving...or Christmas. I wasn't planning on going anywhere. You'd just be staying home all day. Nobody would see you."

"Mom would."

"And she already saw you dressed as me on Thanksgiving."

"That was different."

"Yeah. This time it will be easier."

"No it won't!"

"Jimmy, you know how I get when I'm determined."

"Yeah, you go overboard with everything!"

"So do you think I'd let anything stop me from making your entire life a total misery if you don't do what I want?"

Jimmy had to admit, she did have a point with that one. When his sister got something into her head that much, she went way beyond what she had to do to get it. "You really would make my life miserable."

"You can bet on it!"

"And you probably would tell a bunch of lies to everyone at school."

"I'd make up anything I had to. And you have to admit, I've already got plenty of ammunition to build those lies on."

Yeah, he had to admit that. And just thinking about it all, and what she was capable of doing, was making him seriously nervous. Hesitantly, he said. "And nobody but Mom will find out?"

"Well, Dad of course. And Tommy too. But there's nobody else here in the house. Please..." she pleaded. "Pretty please. Jimmy, I have to do this. I just have to!"

It was no use. Jimmy knew she would screw him one way or another. It was only a matter of choosing the lesser of two evils.

Hopefully. He shook his head disappointedly. "So what do I have to do?"

Jasmine smiled. "Get those pajamas off, of course."

The pajamas, and his boxer shorts. And of course she had another bra for him. He was more than distressed when she pulled out the box of safety pins again and pinned it so he couldn't get it off, just as he was even more distressed when she pinned the neck of his nightgown closed so he couldn't open it...as well as pinning the nightgown directly to the bra he was wearing.

"Okay," she finally said. "Now sit in my desk chair."

"What for?" he asked. "I'm tired. I want to go to sleep."

"Just sit!" she ordered.

Once he was seated, she pulled out a piece of paper she had been working on for a good part of the evening. "Copy it."

He read it. "I can't do this!"

"It's too late now," she told him. "Mom is already going to find you in my nightgown that you can't get off. You're not getting out of any of it."

Once again, he knew he was thoroughly screwed. He had copied another note saying he was willing to go along with every little demand that she had. Then he waited while she disappeared again to hide the note. Then to make matters doubly worse, she again pinned the arms of his nightgown to the sides of it. Only then did she put him into her bed, pull the covers up, and wish him a good night...before turning out all the lights and inadvertently leaving him completely in the dark.

She giggled as she hurried over to his room to start getting ready. Getting her stupid brother to go along with it all had been easier than she thought. But if he hadn't, she really would have made up every lie about him that she could until he started doing what she wanted. And besides, she didn't know what he was so worried about. Even though she had written all those things in the first place, and even though she made her stupid brother copy it all in his own writing and agree to it all, she knew for a fact that her mother and father would never go along with it. But Mom was still going to wake up and find Jimmy in her bed, and in her nightgown.

And the stupid sap was going to get to enjoy that little bit of humiliation all over again.

Chapter 7 – Stowaway

November 30th

In the dead of the night, Jasmine, now dressed in all of Jimmy's warm hunting clothes, grabbed the spare truck keys from the kitchen and slipped out the back door. The crisp cold night air stung her face, but all she did was to walk closer to the car, and push a button on the electronic key in her hands. She quietly opened the back door of the truck, then pushed the button to lock everything again, leaving the back door to the truck still wide open. She went back into the house and put the spare key back where it belonged.

Once again, she slipped out of the house, this time, locking the back door behind her. She got into her Dad's truck, having to crawl onto the floor of the back seat because the seat itself was full of guns. There were some old blankets stacked on the floor on one side. She threw one of them over her body to help keep her warm. Only then did she close her eyes and try to go to sleep. Only then.

The sound of the truck door locks opening jolted her awake. She didn't dare move. She didn't dare make a sound. She just laid still under the blanket on the floor and waited...and hoped. She heard voices outside the truck – her father, her brother...and it was a moment before she realized that Grandpa was out there with them too. If he rode in the truck with them, then Tommy would have to sit in the back seat and she would be screwed. Major screwed! But when she heard them getting into the truck, and the truck started without the back door ever opening, she felt a little safer. A moment later, they were leaving the driveway.

She had no idea where they were going and didn't even care. She just wanted to go hunting, and this time kill a deer. There were a lot of things that would have to go awfully right for that to really happen, but if she didn't try, then it could never happen at all. Not being able to see anything from where she was, she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

It was the sound of voices that pulled her out of sleep. Voices and the sound of the truck doors opening and her father and brother getting out. They were there! She heard her father talking with Grandpa...and another voice – her Uncle Jed. What was he doing there? From the sound of the voices and the cold air now filtering back to where she was, she realized that the front doors of the truck were still open. She listened carefully.

“How come you’ve got us stopped way back here?” Clint asked his older brother. “I’d think we’re still a good mile from that deer stand.”

“I came across a few deer a little while ago when I got here,” Jed explained. “So I backed up to here and got out for a better look. It looks like there’s a big herd about half a mile right up the road. I couldn’t see much since most of them are naturally bedded down in that stand of pines up ahead. But I was able to get close enough to see a few out on the road itself. If we play this right, we can get close enough to pick a few off right from the ground. We’ve just got to be careful going in so we don’t spook them.”

Clint smiled. “Sounds like fun.” He glanced at his watch. “Still about forty five minutes till daylight. That should give us plenty of time.”

“Get the guns, boys,” Jacob’s deep voice suggested. “We’ve got deer to thin.”

Jasmine twisted around on the floor of the truck so that she was now sitting on the floor. This was the moment of truth. This was the part where her father was going to discover that she was there. She was nervous, but absolutely determined. She had to do this! She just had to! A moment later, the back door of the truck was opened.

Clint pulled open the back door of his truck to get the guns. He leaned in...and nearly fell backwards. He stared in disbelief. His daughter was sitting on the floor looking up at him. “Jasmine?”

“Hi Daddy.”

“Jas! What are you doing here?”

“Hunting again.”

Clint stood up, balled his fists, and wandered angrily around in a circle. His brother and father hurried over. Both of them looked into the truck.

"Hi Grandpa. Hi Uncle Jed."

Both Jacob and Jed stood back and shook their heads. "What is that girl doing here?" Jacob asked angrily.

"I don't know," Clint replied. "I had no idea she was there." He walked over to his truck again and looked down at his daughter. "How did you get there?"

"Last night," Jasmine replied. "While you were all asleep."

Clint shook his head. "Jasmine you can't be here. You can't!"

"But I am here daddy. And I want to hunt again. I want to kill a deer. Jimmy can't do it, but I can."

"But you can't!" Clint insisted.

"Yes I can!" Jasmine returned determinedly.

"Jasmine, you know we don't allow the girls in the family to hunt. You know that."

"I did it before. And I was good too. You all even said how good I shot!"

"Yes, but you can't do this. It's not allowed. It's not right!"

"Well, it should be right! And I want to do it. I *can* do it Daddy."

"Jas, you just don't get it. It's not about whether or not you *can* do something, it's the fact that you're not allowed."

"Well I should be allowed!" Jasmine insisted. "And you all let me do it before. Why should this be any different?"

Clint shook his head. "Get out of there. Get up off that floor."

Jasmine pulled herself out of the truck and out into the cold still dark air. By the lights from the trucks, she could see the silhouettes of the others around her. "You all let me hunt before," she told them. "And I want to hunt now too."

"Jas, no! Girls don't hunt!" Clint told her for about the thousandth time.

"Then think of me as Jimmy again," she told them. "Besides, I left the real Jimmy home, in my bed, and in my nightgown again."

Clint blinked in astonishment. "You did what?"

"I put him in my nightgown again so he could be Jasmine today while I was here being him."

Clint's eyes went wide. He shook his head. What was he going to do with his daughter?

Jacob watched and listened to all of it. The girl was overly gutsy and manipulative. "Moxy," his father used to call it. But to him, she was just plain insolent. She didn't know her place.

"Sorry Dad," Clint finally said. "I'll take her back home. I don't know what I'm going to do with her though."

Jacob nodded. "I think that would be best."

"Um guys..." Jed interjected. "We've got a whole herd just up the road, just waiting to be shot at. This would be a bad time to leave an opportunity like that."

Jacob looked at his oldest son, then back at Clint. Then he looked down at Jasmine. "How many deer have you shot this year Clint?" he asked his son.

"Only two so far, and Tommy's got only one. We've got some meat put up, but we could use more before the season ends. I was hoping for another one today for Tommy and me both. Yesterday I was hoping that Jimmy would get one too."

"But I can kill one Daddy. I can be Jimmy again. I can do it! And besides," she giggled, "he's already being me."

Clint rolled his eyes. He didn't even want to think about that aspect of the situation.

Jed let out a soft curse while his father looked around at all of them, trying to figure out what to do. While all the men in the family spent a lot of time in the woods, they didn't often get the opportunity to actually shoot and kill something for themselves since most of the time they were guiding hunting groups. It was the paying people that needed to shoot and kill something, not the guides.

"Damn it!" Jacob finally cursed softly. "I don't like it! I don't like it at all. But you've got to have meat and the deer are right up ahead of us." He knew that Clint made more than enough money to buy all his meat and groceries, but deer meat was part of the entire family's main source of food for the year. Deer meat, and ducks, and hogs, and anything else they could kill. One way or another, the entire family lived off their land. And it was something they were all proud of. "Give her a gun and let's get moving. We've wasted enough time here that they're likely to be gone long before we get there."

Clint wasn't happy with that decision at all! Jed was happier, but was completely surprised. Tommy couldn't believe that his sister

was going to get away with it again. Jasmine was in heaven.

"You are gonna get so beat for this when we get home, young lady," Clint hissed to his daughter.

"I don't care Daddy. I knew that before we started."

And that of course was the whole problem. Jasmine was simply too determined. Nothing swayed her from her course. Clint had no doubt that the beating he would give her later, would have no more effect on her than the last one he had given her.

"And Daddy?"

Clint looked down at his daughter.

"Call me Jimmy today."

Clint rolled his eyes yet again.

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The gun in her hand was heavy, but not as heavy as the shotgun she had used to shoot the ducks with. This one was a rifle that would fire a single thin bullet, not like the wide scatter of the shotgun she had used the last time she had managed to go hunting. But this was the kind of gun she was the most used to. In fact, she was fairly sure she was holding one of the guns she had shot many times in their backyard.

Jed led the way down the dirt road. Once they had gone a short way, one by one, all the flashlights went off, except Jed's, and it wasn't that much longer until his light went off as well. Jasmine noticed though that there was a faint glow in the sky above the trees. It was a long walk in the semi-darkness. Jasmine followed them all, bringing up the rear. She nearly ran into Tommy's back when they all suddenly stopped.

"Watch for wild boar," Jed whispered softly. "It looks like a big bunch of them have been through here not that long ago."

Jasmine couldn't see the ground well enough to tell anything, but it did feel soft and spongy under her feet now where it had been frozen and hard a few minutes ago. They started walking again, and she followed.

Jed stopped them again and looked at the sky. They were just getting to the stand of pines. The deer had been just up ahead. The

thick pines closed the light off, but from what he could see, the sun was probably just now peeking over the horizon. They would have full daylight before long. He held his hands up to all of them, signaling them to move quieter. Placing one foot very carefully at a time, he started forward again, even slower than before, being more cautious than ever. All the men behind him did the same...except Jasmine, who walked the same as she had before.

They came to a small hill in the road and Jed stopped them again. "Just over that ridge," he whispered to his father.

Jacob nodded and made a hand gesture toward Clint. As he knew he would, Clint bent down low and started moving practically on his knees. They all did...except Jasmine.

Jed stopped them again just before they got to the top of the hill. Then he crawled ahead himself to have a look. He was back a few minutes later. They all gathered around so he could whisper. "They're all right there in the road," he said. "Easy pickin. We just don't want to spook them," he added as he looked down at Jasmine.

Jacob nodded. It was the signal to get things underway. This time, they all crawled forward, spreading out across the road, trying to be as silent as they could...even Jasmine.

Jasmine crawled, and dragged her heavy gun to the top of the hill. In order to see better, she had to move to the very right side of the road right next to her father, since all the men were lined up across the road in front of her. But when she could see over the little ridge, what she saw excited her to no end. Deer! Lots of them. All over the place. She saw a bunch on the road, and even more in the trees on either side.

It was a moment before she realized the men were bringing their guns up, getting ready to shoot. She did the same, but she couldn't see the deer well enough lying down from where she was. Cautiously, she got to one knee instead and raised her gun, and flipped the safety off. She had her target. A nice buck with a nice set of antlers.

Clint looked over at his daughter. He would much rather she not shoot at all, but she was obviously all too ready. "What's your target?" he whispered as softly as he could.

"The one with the big antlers on the right," she replied just as softly.

Clint nodded. He could see that Tommy was aiming for a different one. "Wait till Jed says to shoot. We'll all shoot at once," he whispered to his kids.

"Ready?" Jed whispered.

Clint raised his gun and sighted the deer he wanted to hit. And just before he heard Jed give the final word, he saw his daughter turn her gun at a big angle.

"Now!" Jed called.

The guns all roared and deer scattered everywhere. Clint tackled Jasmine and pulled her off the road and behind a tree to make sure none of them ran over her. He heard his brother and father both getting off another shot. A few moments later, he felt safe enough to release Jasmine from his arms. She was immediately up and on her feet, shouting excitedly.

"I got him!" she exclaimed, "I got him!" she was off and running in the direction of the deer she just knew she had hit...not the one she had originally planned on shooting though. She barely noticed the two dead deer out on the road. She headed into the trees instead to see the one she had shot, only...it wasn't there. She stopped and looked around confused. Her father was with her a moment later. "I shot it Daddy. I know it did."

"Come on," Clint said as he studied the ground and hurried after the tracks. He saw blood. A lot of it.

"Where is it?" Jasmine asked as she followed after her father.

Clint looked around desperately. "You can shoot them, but deer sometimes have this tendency to keep running, even when they're dead."

That sounded weird to Jasmine, but she followed anyway. She now heard some of the others following her and her father too.

Clint moved almost thirty yards into the woods before he found the deer Jasmine had shot. He stared down at it and shook his head.

"I told you I shot it!" Jasmine said excitedly. "I told you!"

"Geez!" Jed exclaimed as he caught up to them. "I never saw that one."

"I didn't see it either," Jasmine told them. "Not until just before you told us to shoot."

"Nice shot," Tommy told her as he now caught up with them too.

Jacob finally arrived and looked down at the dead deer that Jasmine had shot. "How many points are on that rack?" he asked as he watched Jasmine moving closer and kneeling down over top of the thing.

"I don't know yet," Jed replied as he watched Jasmine rubbing her hands over the animal.

"He's pretty," Jasmine exclaimed, full of excitement.

"He is that," Jed agreed. "I would guess, nine or ten points," he added as he knelt down to start counting them.

Clint just watched it all. He didn't know what to think. His daughter, who shouldn't have been there in the first place, had spotted the deer at the very last second. A deer that none of them had noticed. And in that split second, she had turned her gun, and hit the thing almost right in the heart! It was a great shot – at a great deer. A trophy deer for sure. One of the biggest that had been shot on their land that year. Maybe the year before too.

"I need a knife!" Jasmine suddenly exclaimed. "Somebody give me a knife!"

"What for?" Jed asked.

"I've got to cut its heart out and eat it."

"Jas," Jed said, "That's only something the guys do." But he got no further in what he was about to tell her as his father walked over and dropped his hunting knife down on top of the deer.

Jacob looked at Clint. "She's your kid. You want to do the honors?"

Clint would rather this wasn't going to happen at all. Not with Jasmine. "I had planned on doing this with Jimmy instead," he said reluctantly.

Jasmine turned her head up at him. "But I'm Jimmy again today. Remember?"

Reluctantly, Clint knelt down next to his daughter. "Take the knife and start your cut right here," he said as he pointed with his finger. With everyone looking on, he helped his daughter expose the entire heart, and then cut it out of the deer's body. He wasn't really

happy seeing her pull it out and hold the bloody thing in her hands. "Jasmine, when we kill the animals, we have to be thankful to them for providing us with the food we need to live. The animals are all very important to us. We need to respect them and be thankful to them each time. Taking a bite of the heart of this deer, makes all the animals a part of you. You need to remember that you are part of them...and you always will be. You need to remember to respect them, and be grateful for the food that they provide."

"I will Daddy," Jasmine replied. "I promise."

"Take a bite then," Clint told his daughter.

There was no hesitation in her at all. Jasmine brought the still warm bloody heart to her mouth and took the biggest bite she could. It was warm and tougher to bite through than she thought it would be. It tasted horribly strong in her mouth. The blood squirted and dripped everywhere. She had no way to stop it from getting all over her. But she took that bite, and she boldly and gleefully looked up into the face of her father, and her brother, and her uncle, and even her Grandpa, as she happily chewed, and swallowed that bit of meat.

As Jed was telling the others that they needed to find all the deer they had shot, since most of them had run off the same way Jasmine's had, Jasmine sat over her deer, still chewing a bit of what was left in her mouth, and thinking. She had done it! First she had managed to go duck hunting and kill some ducks, now she had gone deer hunting and killed a deer.

She had done it!

Chapter 8 – The Note

November 30th

Susan got out of bed half an hour later than usual. There was still no sound from either of her kids who were still home so she saw no need to get up any earlier. Heading for the kitchen, she noted that both Jimmy and Jasmine's doors were still closed. Let them sleep. They didn't have to worry about school until tomorrow. There was no reason for either of them to be up yet.

Going into the kitchen, she made herself a pot of coffee. She leaned against the island and paged through a magazine while the coffee brewed. When it was ready, she grabbed a mug and filled it. She pulled the sugar bowl over toward her cup, but there was no spoon set out to use. She opened the silverware drawer to grab one, and stared. There was piece of paper covering all the silverware again. Her nerves immediately went on edge as she reached to pull it out.

The paper was folded in half so she couldn't read it without opening it first. Not daring yet, she set the paper, just as it was, on the counter. She grabbed a spoon and added a spoonful of sugar to her coffee. The sugar wasn't exactly good for her never ending diets, but she didn't care. Especially not then. With her coffee ready, she grabbed the mug in one hand and the folded note in her other and carried them to the kitchen table where she sat down with them. She took several sips of her coffee while she just sat looking at the folded piece of paper she had set on the table. She was worried about what might be in it – especially after the last note she had found in that exact same place just a few days earlier.

With her coffee half gone, she finally found the courage to unfold the paper and look at it. She noticed Jimmy's writing again and her nerves immediately got worse. She didn't want to read it, but her eyes were already starting at the top.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Jasmine wants to go hunting again, and again she's convinced me that I have to agree to all her demands and to also be totally honest about myself.

The first thing I have to do is to admit something you already know. I missed that deer on purpose. I've always missed on purpose. It bothers me too much to even consider killing another living creature. I constantly worry that somehow they're going to haunt me and get back at me for it. I know it's silly, but Jasmine has demanded that I admit I'm simply too much of a wimp to go hunting anymore or even think about doing anything like that. Jasmine though is much braver than I am. She's not afraid of anything.

Since Jasmine has decided to go hunting as me again, then she has demanded that I agree to be her again, and I've agreed to do that. And since she's going to continue hunting as me, then I've agreed that from now on, any time she goes hunting, I will be her for not just that day, but now for two full days.

For those two days, I have agreed that I will try to act only like a girl and will do everything possible to not act like a boy at all.

I have agreed to help Mom as much as I possibly can for those two days.

I have also agreed that I will continue to wear mostly skirts and dresses since I don't want anyone to think I'm trying to be anything but a sissy girl.

I have also agreed that since I may have to be Jasmine more often now, that I will not get my hair cut so it can grow as long as her hair or longer.

I'm sorry that I have turned out to be such a disappointment. But Jasmine and I agree that this will be for the best – for everyone. This way, none of the family rules are being broken. Jasmine gets to go hunting, but she goes hunting as me. So anything she kills, she kills as Jimmy. And in return, I will stay home and be the girl of the family.

*Your loving son – and sometimes daughter,
Jimmy / Jasmine*

Susan finished the note, and folded it in half again. With two fingers she tossed it, not even caring where it was going. She didn't even bother to look and see. She picked up her coffee cup and took another sip. It was nonsense. Pure nonsense. She wondered if Jimmy was really her only child in the house. She also wondered if Jasmine had somehow convinced Clint to take her hunting too. That seemed very unlikely. So based on that, she was fairly sure that both her twins were still at home. The note hadn't actually said that Jasmine had gone hunting, only that she wanted to go. Trying to grab a little sense of relief from that thought, she finished her coffee before she dared check on her twins.

She finally walked down the hallway toward their rooms. Both doors to her twin's rooms were closed as she expected them to be when they were sleeping. Tommy's door of course was open. She knew he was gone. She stood in the hallway between their rooms, trying to decide which door to open first, Jasmine's room on her left, or Jimmy's room on her right. It was a moment before she found the courage to open either one. But when she did, she turned the knob on Jimmy's door, and pushed it in. The room was only dimly lit from the light coming through the blinds on the window, but there was plenty of light for her to see that Jimmy's bed was empty. It was a mess, but it was empty. Her stomach lurched with fear at seeing it.

She turned around, and actually closed the door to Jimmy's empty room before she put her hand on Jasmine's door knob. Very slowly, she turned the knob because she was afraid of what she might see. Very slowly she pushed the door open. There was

someone sleeping in the bed – still sound asleep. But closer inspection showed not Jasmine's head, but Jimmy's. Trying to calm her nerves, she backed quietly out of the room and just as silently closed the door again.

She went back to the kitchen where she poured herself a second mug of coffee. What had her daughter gone and done now? Was she indeed out hunting with her brother and father? It still sounded all too unlikely, yet her daughter wasn't in her room...and Jimmy was in there instead. Was it possible that Jasmine was somewhere else, sleeping somewhere else? She actually got up from the kitchen table and went into the family room to check the sofa. No Jasmine. No anybody. She went back to her coffee in the kitchen again.

The more she thought about the way things looked, the more it looked like her daughter had indeed convinced her husband to take her hunting – as unbelievable as it sounded. But what else was she supposed to think? She was betting that Clint didn't know about the note Jasmine had left though. She was betting that he didn't know that Jimmy was asleep in Jasmine's bed too.

She remembered the last time she had found Jimmy asleep in Jasmine's bed. He had been wearing her nightgown – all safety pinned so he could barely move let alone get the darn thing off. A bad thought suddenly hit her. She quickly got up to look at their sewing supplies on the small table in the corner of the kitchen. She searched for the box of safety pins and couldn't find it. "Damn!" she muttered.

She completely forgot about her coffee and purposely strode toward Jasmine's room...and Jimmy sleeping in Jasmine's bed. She made no pretense of being quiet this time as she opened the door. "Jimmy! Wake up!" she called loudly as she headed into the room, and directly for her son.

"Huh?" Jimmy opened his eyes and blinked at the light. His mother was heading straight for him. Before he could say another word, she grabbed the covers over top of him and pulled them all down to the foot of the bed.

Susan stared down at her son. Once again he was wearing his sister's nightgown and once again she had pinned his arms to his sides. "Jimmy, why did you let your sister do that to you? Why?"

“Uh...hi Mom?”

“Forget being nice,” Susan told him. “Just tell me why you’re wearing Jasmine’s nightgown again.”

Jimmy tried to brace himself up on his elbows, but it wasn’t working too well, he let himself fall back down flat on the bed again.

“Jimmy, tell me this instant why you’re in your sister’s bed again!”

Jimmy tried to find a good way to answer. “Um...she wanted to go hunting again.”

Susan waved her hand. “I know that part. I found her note already in the kitchen drawer.”

“You did?” Jimmy figured he was totally screwed now, like it or not.

“Yes I did! Now why are you in her bed again?”

“Well, like I said, she wanted to go hunting, and...she woke me up in the middle of the night – just when I was sleeping good. Anyway, she grabbed me and pulled me into her room and demanded that I put her clothes on again and write that note, or else...” But he didn’t want to continue with the or else part.

“Or else what?” Susan demanded.

“Um...or else she was going to make up a bunch of lies about me and tell all the kids at school that I really wanted to wear her dress the other day and...” He tried to stop there, but he had said one word too much. And now his mother was waiting for the rest of it. “And...and she said she would tell them all that I wanted to wear her dress because I really wanted to be a girl and not a boy.”

Susan shook her head. It was nonsense. Pure nonsense. “And you went along with all this?”

“She threatened to make my life as miserable as possible until I started doing what she wanted. She wanted to go hunting real bad and she told me that she wouldn’t stop making me miserable until I did whatever she said. And you know how she can be about some things.”

Susan did know. She knew all too well. Once started, her daughter could be absolutely obsessive about some things. Case in point was right in front of her. Once again, her daughter had gone overboard. Way overboard. “Get up from there,” she said. “Let me get those pins off you.”

Jimmy awkwardly got off the bed and gratefully let his mother start removing the pins. She found the note pinned to his back again, telling her that there was another note in the silverware drawer. She removed the note with the pins and threw it aside. One by one, she returned all the pins to the box, including the pins that held Jasmine's bra locked onto her brother. "Go get a shower and get cleaned up. Then get dressed – in your own clothes! I'll go make us some breakfast."

She left him to do as she said. What had Jasmine been thinking? She turned around before she got fully out of the room. "How did your sister convince your father to take her hunting?"

Jimmy shrugged. "I don't know. She told me before she left that Dad didn't know she wanted to go yet."

Susan nodded and left, still wondering how Jasmine had managed it.

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All morning, Jimmy worried about what his mother might make him do, or what she might do to him. But she never brought the subject up again. After breakfast though, she sent him back to his room to stay...just as his Dad had told him to do the day before when they got back from hunting. So basically, he was still grounded. He was just glad that his mother wasn't really going along with that note that he wrote!

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Susan was in the kitchen getting ready to make some lunch for Jimmy and herself when the hunting dogs in the pen behind Pete and Marcy's house next door started barking, signaling someone was driving up. She looked through the window and saw her husband's truck pull into the driveway. Her husband was back earlier than she expected. Obviously, Jasmine's presence had caused them to come back sooner rather than later. She was surprised then to see Clint's truck continue on from the driveway toward the very back of the yard where he had a hanging rack for his

kills set up next to the big metal garage-workshop where they kept all their four-wheeler ATVs. Clint used the rack whenever he had animals that needed to be hung and bled to prepare them for processing. Able to see the back of the truck now, she was surprised to see it filled with dead deer.

From the kitchen window, she watched as Tommy, her husband, and finally Jasmine got out of the truck. Jasmine looked just fine as far as she could see, and like the last time she had gone hunting, her daughter looked all too excited. Susan could tell that much, even from as far away as she was. From the distance though, it looked like the entire front of Jasmine's clothes were dark with dirt...or something.

Susan watched as Tommy and his father hung the first deer to the pole by its back legs, then they heaved the rest of the body off so that the deer was hanging upside-down. She watched as Clint attached the second deer to the pole, very close to the first one. He had to pull the truck away to get the deer off the back of it before it too was hanging like the first. She was surprised to see there was yet a third deer in the truck. Once again, Clint pulled the back end of the truck under the pole and the hind legs of that deer were attached, and once again, the truck was pulled away, leaving the deer hanging. She looked at all three deer hanging there, especially the last one. She grabbed her coat and headed outside to see them.

"Mom!" Jasmine called excitedly. "Look what we got!"

"Yeah, I see," Susan called back as she walked across the cold backyard. Her eyes were glued to her daughter's clothes. She could now see that what she had hoped was just dirt, was blood instead. But fortunately, her daughter appeared to be just fine. She walked up to her husband and accepted a small hug and kiss. "Three of them," she noted, looking at the now hanging deer. "That should get us through till next year." Her eyes went to the big one. The one with the huge set of antlers. "Who shot that one?"

Clint looked over at Jasmine. He wasn't sure if he was disappointed, or disgusted, or what. He only knew he wasn't happy about the fact that Jasmine had wormed her way into the hunt when she shouldn't have. But his daughter had shot the deer. "Three guesses," he told his wife.

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Jacob McComber poured three fingers of very expensive whisky into a glass and carried it back to one of the soft cushioned seats in his office. That damn girl! Clint's daughter. First he had allowed her to go duck hunting, and now she had managed to manipulate herself into an all too successful deer hunt. And then she had walked off with the trophy of the year to boot! It was bad business. Bad!

What if all the other females got it into their heads that they had to be permitted to hunt too? So many generations of family tradition would be tossed out the window. It was all Jed could do to manage the size of the herds now to make sure the hunting business stayed the best in the state. The best in probably five states! But if the women all wanted to go out and shoot the animals too, then too many would be killed. Too much of the kills would be for nothing more than sport. Too much of the meat would simply be wasted. Jacob didn't like that thought. It was bad business. Bad, bad business.

All because of that one overly bold and manipulative girl! "Moxy!" his father had termed it for women like that. Women with guts. Well, Jasmine had guts alright. Too much for a girl. And her twin brother didn't have any it seemed. He didn't blame his son Clint for that, he had a different theory as to what had happened there.

"Jacob?" his wife Rose asked from the open doorway. "Are you alright? You seem awfully moody."

He nodded. "Yeah. It's just Clint's kid Jasmine. She somehow managed to manipulate things again and took advantage of the situation to worm her way into the hunt. And then she walks off with the best deer that's been shot this year. This year, and probably last year too! My father used to say women like that had 'moxy.' I think she's just plain insolent and overly manipulative! She's bad business Rose. Bad business."

Rose listened to it all. She knew Jasmine well. Yeah, there was no doubt Jasmine could be manipulative. No doubt at all. But then, all her grandkids were to some degree or another. Especially the girls. Jasmine just happened to be...a little worse than any of the

others. Maybe, a lot worse. But other than that, Jasmine was a total delight. Actually, Jasmine was one of her favorite granddaughters. "So what are you going to do?" she asked.

Jacob shook his head. "I don't know, but something has to be done."

"She's Clint's daughter, Jacob, not yours."

He nodded and sighed. "Yeah, I know."

"And Jacob, you may be the head of the family, but whatever gets done has to come from her parents and not you."

"Yeah," he replied. "I know that too." He took a small sip of his drink. "I guess I better get them all up here and have a little talk."

Rose nodded. "You be fair when you talk. Jasmine is just a girl...a small girl at that."

"Huh!" Jacob grunted. "She may be a small girl, but she's got balls as big as a bull!"

Rose rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean, Jacob!"

He nodded. "Yeah, I know." He thought for a moment. "Maybe I'll ask Jed in as well. He has a lot of insight sometimes. His kids are more grown than Clint's. And besides, he knows the land and the animals here better than anyone."

Rose wasn't sure what Jed's knowledge of the land had to do with anything. But a cool, less biased opinion wouldn't hurt the situation. "It probably couldn't hurt," she replied. She had another thought too. "Why don't you invite Brian when you talk too?"

"Brian? Why him?"

"He's a doctor, Jacob. And he's had a lot of psychological training. He may have some ideas as to why the kids act that way. He may have some suggestions that may help too."

Jacob thought about that for a moment, then nodded. "I'll give him a call."

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Clint hung up the phone and set it carefully on the table. He and his wife had eaten lunch after the kids because he had started the bleeding process on the deer hung out back. Tommy was now taking a shower, Jimmy was back in his room, and Jasmine had

been banished to the laundry room to get every bit of the blood stains out of Jimmy's hunting clothes, or else! His wife had been furious when she had seen all that blood. "We've been summoned," he said to his wife. "All of us. Dad wants us up there to talk."

"About what?"

"What do you think?"

Susan nodded. She really had no doubt. "How soon?"

"About an hour," Clint told her.

Susan nodded again. She hadn't told Clint about the note that Jasmine and Jimmy had written. She had picked it up from the floor and hidden it away. She toyed with the idea of telling him now, but the note would only make matters worse. And besides, the note was pure nonsense anyway. "I'll tell the kids to change their clothes."

"What for?"

"The least they can do is to look decent when we go up there. Maybe it will take some of the edge off of everyone."

Chapter 9 – Family Meeting

November 30th

“I see Val’s here,” Susan said as they drove up to her father-in-law’s house.

“Jed’s truck is over by the garage too,” Clint noted.

A few minutes later, they entered the kitchen to find Jed and Valerie there, along with their daughter Ashley. After the greetings were done, Jacob pulled Jed, Clint and Susan into his office, with orders to the others to keep the kids away from the door until they were called. No sense in them listening in until they figured out what to do with them.

Jacob didn’t sit behind his desk this time. Since it was only the four of them, he sat in his favorite cushioned chair instead, while Clint and Susan sat together on one of the two small leather couches in the room and Jed sat in another of the single chairs. Jacob turned to Clint first. “We’ve got to figure out what to do about that girl of yours,” he said. “Actually, about both those kids, I guess.”

Clint’s frustration over the issues involving both his kids was evident. “I don’t know what to do with either of them, Dad. I’m at my wit’s end.”

“No doubt,” Jacob replied. “One of them won’t shoot anything when he should, and the other one goes out of her way to shoot something when she shouldn’t.”

Clint could only nod his agreement.

“Now understand me,” Jacob said. “I don’t blame you. I don’t blame either of you at all. I think the problem is the fact that they’re twins. From what I’ve heard, twins are usually closer to each other than other kids. But I also think that sometimes with twins, one of them can wind up with a little something that should have gone to the other, and vice versa.”

There was a small knock on the door.

“Come in!” Jacob called.

A moment later, Brian walked in. "Sorry I'm late," he explained. "I had a bit of an emergency at the hospital."

Clint was surprised to see that Brian had been called in too. For that matter, he had been surprised that Jed was there as well. Two of his three brothers. But he said nothing about it.

"So what's going on?" Brian asked as he took another seat.

"You know of course," Jacob said, "that Jasmine went duck hunting on Thanksgiving and killed some ducks."

"Of course. I was there. And what you put Jimmy through during dinner was more than a bit surprising."

Jacob nodded. "We'll get into that in a few minutes. But now that girl has gone and gotten herself into the middle of our deer hunt this morning too, and guess who walked off with the best deer in the last couple of years."

"Jasmine?" Brian asked, completely surprised. "Why did you let her go hunting?"

"She stowed away in my truck this morning," Clint explained. "We didn't know she was there until we got there."

"And then she manipulated the situation so that we finally allowed her to hunt," Jacob added.

"And she got a trophy deer? Why didn't one of you shoot it?"

"Huh!" Clint grunted. "None of us saw it. We managed to sneak up on a big heard. I saw the deer she was supposed to shoot, but at the last second, just before Jed told us all to fire, I saw her turn her gun in a different direction. She shot at the same time we all did. She shouldn't have even had time to aim it properly before she pulled the trigger. But she shot the thing practically right in the heart."

"Lucky shot, or is she good?" Brian asked.

Clint shrugged. "She's always been pretty good shooting at targets in the backyard."

"I wonder if she's gonna be like Elliot," Jed wondered. "He just barely looks at something and he can hit it."

"My daddy was like that," Jacob said. "Runs in the family sometimes. But the point is, she's a girl. I made a big mistake letting her shoot those ducks. Big mistake! And now she's manipulated things again and gone and killed a deer. And we don't

know what to do about it. Personally, I think a good beating wouldn't be out of order at all!"

Clint shook his head as he remembered strapping her all too recently. "I did that already. It was the one and only time I've ever taken my belt to her, but I beat her bad Dad. Real bad. As bad as Jimmy...maybe worse. But the thing is, it didn't do one bit of good."

He looked at everyone in the room before continuing. "Whenever I've had to punish Tommy or Jimmy that way, they always wound up crying. But not Jasmine. Not at all!" He shook his head. "She was too determined, too proud of what she had done to cry. She even told me before I started that she wasn't sorry in the least for what she had done. And so when I started hitting her, and she still seemed so damn proud of herself, and she absolutely refused to cry, well, I guess it made me hit her all that much longer. But she never cried. Not much past a few tears in her eyes at least. Not really at all. And today, when I told her she was going to get punished again, she said she didn't care. She expected it!" He looked back and forth between his two brothers and his father again. "She expected it...and she didn't care!" He shook his head again. "Punishing her like that, isn't going to do any good. Not at all."

It was a moment before any of them spoke. "She's still got to be punished somehow," Jacob said. "Jimmy too."

Before anyone could say anything else, Brian spoke up. "Dad, don't get me wrong, you know how much I like hunting. Heck, since I'm a doctor and I meet so many other doctors and professionals, I probably lead more hunting trips than anyone else. A lot of those people love hunting. But you've all got to understand this, the fact that Jimmy doesn't want to kill anything isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, in most places, that kind of attitude is not just common, it's the way people want everyone else to think. It's just not the normal thing in this part of the country, and especially not in this family."

"But that boy *does* live in this part of the country, and he *is* a part of this family," Jacob replied. "And he's got to understand his place not only in this family, but in this world. The fact that he doesn't necessarily like to kill anything isn't the point. He's got to understand the whole process. He's got to understand how it feels. Without

that, he'll never be able to relate to anyone around him. Not to mention, he'll probably feel the shame of it his entire life."

Brian nodded. "There is that of course. So what do we do?"

"Not a clue," Jacob replied.

"At least there wasn't any note like she cooked up last time," Brian noted. He shook his head. "I still can't believe you put Jimmy through that."

Susan hadn't planned on saying anything. The words just slipped out of her mouth before she knew it. "Actually, she did leave a note." She saw all the men looking at her. She was sorry she had mentioned it. "I...didn't want to tell you because it's such total nonsense."

Clint just sat there for a moment with his jaw open. "She left another note? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it's all just more of the same stupid stuff she put in the last one."

"Stuff they *both* put in the last one," Clint replied. "Because Jimmy signed the damn thing."

"Jimmy did the same with this one too," Susan told him. "Just like the last time."

"Where is it?" Clint asked, closing his eyes to the headache now threatening to hit him.

"In my purse. I wasn't going to bring it, but..."

"Just get it," Clint said in no uncertain terms. "I seem to remember Jasmine saying something this morning about Jimmy already being her."

"I found Jimmy this morning, just like I found him last time," Susan admitted. "She had him in her bed, in her nightgown, and he was all safety pinned together so he couldn't get the thing off if he tried."

Clint shook his head. "Where's the note?"

Susan went out to the kitchen where her purse was and pulled the folded paper out.

"How's it going?" Rose asked before her daughter left the kitchen.

"Not so good," Susan replied. She carried the note back to Jacob's office and closed the door behind her again. She tried to

hand the folded paper to her husband.

"You read it," Clint told her, not wanting to touch the thing.

Susan sat again and opened the note slowly, and started reading what she had only read once.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Jasmine wants to go hunting again, and again she's convinced me that I have to agree to all her demands and to also be totally honest about myself.

The first thing I have to do is to admit something you already know. I missed that deer on purpose. I've always missed on purpose. It bothers me too much to even consider killing another living creature. I constantly worry that somehow they're going to haunt me and get back at me for it. I know it's silly, but Jasmine has demanded that I admit I'm simply too much of a wimp to go hunting anymore or even think about doing anything like that. Jasmine though is much braver than I am. She's not afraid of anything.

Since Jasmine has decided to go hunting as me again, then she has demanded that I agree to be her again, and I've agreed to do that. And since she's going to continue hunting as me, then I've agreed that from now on, any time she goes hunting, I will be her for not just that day, but now for two full days.

For those two days, I have agreed that I will try to act only like a girl and will do everything possible to not act like a boy at all.

I have agreed to help Mom as much as I possibly can for those two days.

I have also agreed that I will continue to wear mostly skirts and dresses since I don't want anyone to think I'm trying to be anything but a sissy girl.

I have also agreed that since I may have to be Jasmine more often now, that I will not get my hair cut so it can grow as long as her hair or longer.

I'm sorry that I have turned out to be such a disappointment. But Jasmine and I agree that this will be for the best – for everyone. This way, none of the family rules are being broken. Jasmine gets to go hunting, but she goes hunting as me. So anything she kills, she kills as Jimmy. And in return, I will stay home and be the girl of the family.

*Your loving son – and sometimes daughter,
Jimmy / Jasmine*

There were more than a few grunts around the room when she had finished.

“Why does she have it in for her brother so much?” Jed asked.

“I don’t know,” Susan replied. “They’re twins, but since he’s a boy and she’s a girl, they’ve never really been that close. But there’s never been a problem between them.”

“It’s a shame,” Brian added thoughtfully.

“What’s that?” Clint asked.

“It’s a shame Jasmine has turned out to be such a tomboy, not into the usual feminine things at all. And Jimmy, I don’t know what he’s into, except evidently it’s not hunting.”

“He loves mechanical stuff,” Clint told him. “Anything at all to do with machinery. Lately, he’s been really interested in figuring out how to fix one of our ATVs. He’s got the manual for it in his room. I bought some new parts for it and we’re planning on working on it together, first free chance I can get. I figured I’d let him have at it by himself while I watched in case he needed help, but I have no doubt he can probably fix the thing almost as well as I can. And last month I took him with me when I had to go up to the old saw mill to fix an electrical problem. While I was working, that boy went over every belt, every gear, everything – just to see how it all worked. I have no

doubt that if the thing broke down now, you could send Jimmy up to fix it, and he would!"

"And Jasmine isn't a tomboy either," Susan added. "At least not that much anymore. In fact, she's not like that at all. She's always been very much into her dolls. She's got a huge collection of them. And now, for the last few months, she's been absolutely obsessed with fashion. She was even talking yesterday about starting her own blog about the tights she wears."

"What's a blog?" Jacob asked.

"It's...an internet website," Brian explained, trying to be as simplistic about it as possible. His father only nodded.

"And that's not all," Susan continued. "Don't ever get her started talking about her fascination with fashion models. She idolizes them. I think that's what's driving her sudden interest in this fashion show the school is putting on next spring. She's designing and sewing all the clothes herself. Well, she's just starting to. I'm afraid sewing like that is something new for her. But she's adamant about doing it."

"And that dress that Jimmy wore to Thanksgiving dinner, she picked that out specially. We even shopped for the matching bow to go in her hair. She was really looking forward to wearing it. And the odd thing is, she was actually jealous when she saw her brother in that dress instead of her. Jealous! Her only problem with all the fashion and modeling is herself. She's only eleven years old, but she wants breasts like...an eighteen year old. It's driving her crazy."

There was no sound in the room for a few moments as everyone took that information in. And then Brian grunted. "And there," he said as he continued to think, "may be the only possible solution to this whole problem."

It was a moment before anyone could reply. "What do you mean?" Clint asked.

But Brian continued to stare off into space as he tried to think through the idea further.

"Brian?" Clint prompted.

Brian finally shook his head. "It's a bad idea," he said. "Bad! But it's the only solution that I can see that might work at all right now."

"What is it?" Jacob asked.

Instead of answering that, Brian asked his father, "What is it you really want here, for Jasmine to not hunt anymore?"

"Of course," Jacob replied. "But the girl just doesn't seem to want to get that through that thick skull of hers. She's snuck off to do it twice now, and I have no doubt that she'll continue to try to do it again, especially after what she put in that note there."

"What if..." Brian continued as he tried to think through what he wanted to say. "What if we could get her to swear that she'd never hunt again? Isn't that what you want?"

"Pretty much," Jacob agreed.

Brian looked at Clint. "Is that the way you see it too?"

Clint nodded. "I guess. But if you bring her in here right now and tell her to do that, I don't think it's going to work. She can be more than a bit stubborn about some things."

"She *can* be stubborn," Susan agreed. "Very stubborn! She always has been."

Brian nodded. "I guess then it's all going to depend on how stubborn she is about wanting to keep hunting."

"She seems to be awfully determined," Clint replied. "I mean, she even stowed away in my truck last night without me knowing it."

"And don't forget what she said in that note too," Jed added. "Something about her going hunting more often now."

"There's that too," Brian replied. "But the question is, would she rather hunt, or have breasts?"

Everyone in the room was taken aback by the unexpected question. "What are you talking about?" Susan asked, clearly confused.

"What would Jasmine rather do, go hunting or have breasts?" Brian reiterated. "Would she be willing to swear off hunting, to have breasts like any other girl?"

"I'm sure she would," Susan replied. "But she's a girl, and while her breasts are just now starting to grow, they *are* growing."

"But they haven't grown much," Brian stated, more than asked.

"Uh...not really," Susan agreed. "She's only eleven."

"Then we keep her breasts from growing," Brian stated. Another idea suddenly hit him. "And this could work for Jimmy too. What if

we gave those breasts to Jimmy instead, until Jasmine swears to not hunt anymore, and maybe until Jimmy goes hunting and actually kills something again.”

Everyone’s head was spinning, but it was Clint who uttered a simple, “Huh?”

“You can’t keep her breasts from growing,” Susan said. “She’s a girl. And what are you going to do to Jimmy, make him wear a bra all the time and put stuffing in it?”

“Not really,” Brian replied. “Not that at all. And I can keep Jasmine’s breasts from growing. Look,” he said as he got to his feet. “The answer to this whole thing is right in front of us. Right there in that note that they wrote.”

“This?” Susan asked incredulously. “This is trash!”

“Of course it is,” Brian agreed. “But what if it wasn’t?”

“What are you talking about?” Clint asked.

“Look,” he said. “One of the areas in medicine that’s had a lot of major changes in the last twenty years has been in the field of transgendered people. Changing one sex to the other.”

“But Jimmy and Jasmine aren’t that way,” Susan countered.

“Of course not. But what if we forced them to be that way? At least to a point. Isn’t that what Jasmine herself demanded in that note? And isn’t that what Jimmy agreed to when he wrote it? She was to become Jimmy when she went hunting, and he was to become Jasmine.”

It was a moment before Susan could reply. “Maybe,” she conceded.

“Then we use that note against her,” Brian suggested. “What do you think would happen if Jasmine saw her brother developing breasts like she wants, and wearing all the clothes like she wants, and doing all those things she wants to do so much, while her breasts don’t develop at all and she isn’t allowed to play with the clothes or makeup or anything else she likes so much. And while her brother is doing all the things she really wants to do, she’ll start looking less and less feminine? Don’t you think she’d reverse her course about the hunting then?”

“Of course,” Susan replied. “But...”

"Then that's what we do," Brian suggested. "We go along with every one of Jasmine's demands. When Jasmine goes hunting, then she goes hunting as Jimmy, and Jimmy stays home and becomes the pretty little daughter instead."

"But what about the breast thing?" Susan asked.

Brian smiled. "I'm not an expert in this, but I do know something about it. I'd have to check with some of my contacts as to the best way to go about it, but I do know that I can put them both on a low dose of hormones that will take care of everything for us. They'll stop Jasmine's breasts from growing any further...and eventually give her a few more masculine features as well."

"Like what?" Susan demanded.

"Like eventually, a more masculine musculature and body. If this goes on too long, she could also develop a bit of a beard she might have to shave as well. Other boys her age would be starting to have some facial hair. So she could very well have to deal with that too."

"And Jimmy?" Clint asked.

"The hormone changes would probably show up faster in him," Brian told them. "His skin would soften, he'd lose muscle mass. And with enough time, his breasts would grow like any other girl."

"And what happens when Jasmine swears off hunting? Are they going to be stuck that way?" Susan asked.

Brian shook his head. "We just stop the hormones, or reverse them for a short time. Jasmine would have no problems at all. Her body would revert to a more feminine form, probably rather quickly, and her breasts of course would grow as well, possibly faster than they are now. Jimmy though, depending on how long it went on and how much breast growth there is, he might have to deal with a bit of surgery to get them back to normal. But in all other ways, he would revert quickly too. I would think at least."

"This is nuts!" Clint exclaimed.

"Thank you," Susan added, echoing her husband's opinion.

"Yeah, it is nuts," Brian agreed. "But it could work. And right now, I really don't see any other way."

"I think this would be punishing Jimmy more than Jasmine," Jed noted.

"Maybe," Brian conceded. "But if Jasmine really does want to be all grown up, with breasts like any other woman...and maybe even look further into all this fashion business that Susan says she's so focused on lately, then it's even more likely that in the long run it would be worse for her than it would be for Jimmy. To deny her the body she seems to want so much...it could be devastating for her."

He looked around at the others in the room as he saw a few heads nod in agreement. "And maybe it *will* be punishing Jimmy more," he continued, "but don't forget, Jimmy agreed to everything in that note. He's just as much a party to this thing as well. And maybe him seeing his sister doing everything that he'd rather be doing, while he's stuck sewing and doing women's work around the house will be the catalyst he needs to get his life back on track too."

Nobody said anything for a few moments while they all considered things.

"I still think its nuts," Clint said, although with a lot less certainty this time.

Susan heard it all. She agreed with her husband. She didn't even want to contemplate the thought, but... "But...it...could work," she hesitantly admitted. "Jasmine did say she wanted to be Jimmy. And Jimmy, heaven only knows why, agreed to all her demands and agreed to be Jasmine." She looked up at Brian. "But it was only for the times when she goes hunting. Not any other time."

"But she did say that Jimmy would have to be her for two full days now instead of one," Brian pointed out. "And by her own logic, that would mean that she too would be forced to be Jimmy for that extra time when she wasn't hunting. She wouldn't be able to do any of the things she really loves. She'd have to watch Jimmy doing it all instead of her."

"I wonder if she even thought about that." Jed threw out.

"Probably not," Susan replied with a shake of her head.

"Two days isn't going to matter much to that girl," Jacob noted.

"No, of course not, Dad," Brian replied. "That's where the hormones come in...and perhaps a few little tweaks of our own that we impose on this grand scheme that she cooked up."

"Tweaks?" Clint asked suspiciously.

"Look," Brian said, "Let's try to take this process from the beginning. We bring Jasmine in here tonight and tell her she's got a choice, she either swears to us that she won't ask to go hunting anymore, or we impose the very scheme she came up with on her and her brother."

"But that's what she wants," Susan replied.

"Exactly!" Brian pointed out. "Then we remind her that whenever Jimmy is being the girl, then she's still going to have to be him."

"Okay," Susan agreed, "but that doesn't get us anywhere."

Brian nodded. "Then we tell her that if that's the way she wants it, then she's going to have no choice at all in when or if she goes hunting...and it will be a lot more often."

"Except that most of the time, when any of us goes off into the woods, were not out there to hunt for ourselves," Jed noted. "Most of the time we're guiding groups or working the land. But if you're looking for suggestions, I guess we could have her do other things than just hunt." He noticed the looks of interest on all their faces. "I've been taking Justin out with me, just like I did his brother Ethan, to learn about the land and how to do the job," he told them. "I could start bringing her with me once in a while too. It's man's work for sure out there. And a lot of it is hard tiring work! So since it would be man's work she would be learning, then I would think that would probably work just as well as hunting. Wouldn't you think?" He saw nods of agreement all around.

"So basically," Brian continued, "we start sending her out more and more often as Jimmy, and in the meantime, those hormones in their systems are changing them more and more. We could even go so far as altering things a bit. Say for the first entire month, they've only got to be each other for two days, whenever she goes hunting. Then if she still hasn't agreed by the next month, we make it three full days. After that, four."

"But what about school?" Susan interjected quickly. "Even three days would mean we'd have to send them to school that way... unless we delay everything to just weekends."

"It's a problem," Brian conceded. "Something we'd have to work out."

"Why don't we ask John about it?" Jed suggested. "He's the school principal. Let's get him over here and get his take on all this."

"Hold on a moment," Jacob said, stopping everything. "I'm starting to think this here is too big a deal to just decide between the few of us. This could have some major consequences throughout the entire family. I think we should bring all the parents in. Not the kids of course. I'd rather none of them get even a whisper of this outrageous idea. But I think something like this should get the approval of all the family."

"I think it's a good idea, Dad," Brian conceded. He looked over at Clint.

Clint looked at his wife. "Do we really want to look further into this?"

It was a moment before she could reply. "Not really," she replied, "But we've got to do something, and right now I don't see where we have much choice. Especially in light of that note they left us."

Clint nodded. "I guess," he said to his father, "call them in. And while we're waiting, can you pass around something strong to drink? I think I'm going to need it."

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It was over an hour before they all arrived. The meeting had to be moved to the heated porch with the door closed so they all would fit. The kids that came were banished to the family room and Jimmy and Jasmine were sequestered in the kitchen under Rose's loving care. Rose decided she'd get all the details from her husband later.

Out on the porch, Jacob spent a few minutes trying to define the problem to all the rest, with a lot of help from Jed and Clint. And then Brian spent a long time trying to explain the course of action he was proposing. To say the newcomers were shocked by it all would be an understatement.

"So now we're down to the question of school," Brian explained as he looked over toward John and his wife Jane. "If we do it this way, they're both going to have to show up at school, at least

eventually, as the other person. And if this continues to go on, then it's going to be for more than just a day or two once in a while."

John was the principal of the school as well as one of only six teachers for all of the one hundred and eight students that attended from all around the area. And the students in that one school ranged from first graders up to seniors in high school. There were that few students, and consequently, the school was constantly worried about losing their state funding and accreditation.

John looked over to his wife, Jane, for a moment, but he could easily see that she wasn't going to be much help. Instead of just giving an answer, he finally stood up to speak to everyone. "Look," he said, "I think this whole thing is crazy...just like we all do. But to be honest, the way Jasmine and Jimmy have gone about things, I'm not sure we have much choice. The way I see it, every kid in the family saw Jimmy at dinner on Thursday, and that's a major part of the school. And I have no doubt that within the first hour of school tomorrow, every last kid there is going to hear all about it. Every last one of them will know. Personally, I don't know how Jimmy is going to be able to face any of them. Jane and I have been talking all weekend about it, trying to figure out how we want to handle the situation come Monday. So if you want to throw something like this in the mix, then believe it or not, on top of what everyone is already going to know about what he did, I don't think it's going to amount to much more than a fairly minor hill of beans. I think his bigger problem is going to come tomorrow."

"I may have a solution for that," Jacob spoke up. He had been silent for a long time now and everyone turned towards him. "How many of your kids know that Jasmine shot a deer this morning?"

"I hadn't heard until you all just told us a little bit ago," Pete said.

"Me too," Jack added.

Jacob turned to Jed. "Did you tell your kids yet?"

Jed shook his head. "Ethan and Justin weren't home. And I never got around to telling Ashley." He looked to his wife. "You Val?" But he saw her shake her head.

Jacob had been guessing that was the case. "So bottom line, none of those kids out there knows about it, unless Jasmine has been bragging about it to whoever is out there with them."

"Not this time," Valerie replied. "Rose and I have been keeping both Jimmy and Jasmine with us in the kitchen the whole time in case you needed them. As any of the others came in, they were sent off to the family room. We didn't know what kind of trouble Susan's kids were in, so we kept them separate from the others. And I can tell you, I never heard either of them mention anything about a deer."

"How about Tommy?" Jacob asked. But the looks on their faces told him that nobody knew about what Tommy might have done.

"If you're worried about it, we can ask him," Clint suggested.

Jacob nodded. "In this case, maybe we better. Somebody go get him."

A few minutes later, Tommy stood nervously in the room. "Tommy," Jacob said. "Who have you told so far that Jasmine shot a deer this morning?"

Tommy was surprised by the question. "Um...nobody yet. With those two in so much trouble, I figured it was better to not say anything about it yet."

Jacob nodded happily. "You figured right son. Good thinkin'. Now I need you to keep that little bit of knowledge to yourself. Got it?"

"Uh...yeah," Tommy replied. "I can do that easy enough. It never happened."

"No," Jacob told him, "it did happen. It just didn't happen quite the way you saw it. Your father will explain it to you in a little while. Now go on back out while I tell everyone here what really happened out there."

A minute later, Tommy was gone and Jacob told them all what he had in mind. "In that note that those two cooked up," he began, "Jasmine herself decreed that she wasn't going to be Jasmine out there. She wanted us to consider her to be Jimmy instead. So as I see it now, Jasmine didn't shoot that deer at all. Jimmy did. So as far as I'm concerned, Jasmine didn't go hunting. Jimmy did. Jimmy shot the deer. Does anyone see that any different?" He saw a few people shake their heads, but there was no dissent on his motion. "Good. And since Jimmy shot the deer, and the best trophy deer we've had in the last few years, then that ought to help his reputation

at school more than a bit I would think. How do the rest of you see it?"

There were nods and more than a bit of discussion all around as most of them agreed that it would help Jimmy's case.

"But that's still not going to help with them all knowing that Jimmy wore Jasmine's dress all day Thursday," Jane added. "They're still going to be all over him about that."

"Yeah, I know," Jacob replied, "but I figure this should take a bit of the sting off for him." He saw agreeing nods all around.

"Maybe it will work out for the best this way too," John added as he addressed everyone again. "They'll all know that Jimmy finally shot and killed a deer, and the best deer in a long time," he said, "so that should raise his reputation more than a bit. But at the same time, they'll still all know and remember what he did on Thanksgiving. So if he does have to start coming to school in a dress, they'll remember it was something that happened to him before, and it won't be such a total shock to them. It wouldn't hurt though to come up with some kind of plausible explanation for everyone as to why it's happening again, beyond Jasmine being punished for wanting to hunt so badly."

"You just tell 'em all that he and Jasmine are both being punished for what she's done!" Jacob called out. "The two of them are tied up together in this mess anyway."

John nodded and accepted his father's decision. "Everyone will just have to accept the fact that Jasmine and Jimmy are being punished together. What affects one, affects the other."

"You got it!" Jacob agreed.

John nodded again. "There's no doubt that Jimmy is going to take a major amount of ribbing over this. More so than Jasmine I would think. And him suddenly turning up as Jasmine at school will shock a lot of them. But if all the kids know that the two of them are still being punished together, then I don't think it will be any worse than what Jimmy's going to go through tomorrow. Deer or no deer."

"And Jasmine probably won't have much of a problem at school at all," his wife Jane added. "Heck, a few of the girls dress more like boys than the boys do. She'll probably be considered a hero."

“Jacob,” John said, “if it happens, we’ll try to watch it closely and we’ll do what we can. It’s a crazy situation, but if this is what you decide to do, we’ll live with it.”

“It isn’t what I decide,” Jacob told them. “It’s what Clint finally decides.”

Clint stood up to talk. “Listen,” he said. “I like this even less than the rest of you. They’re my kids and I love the heck out of them. But I guess Dad is right. Jasmine likes to manipulate things way beyond where they should ever go, and now she’s caused a parcel of trouble I don’t have a clue how to deal with. I hate this idea. I’ll tell you flat out, I hate it! But I also don’t have a clue in the world what else to do about it. Jasmine came up with those demands, and Jimmy copied and agreed to them in his own handwriting. Jimmy has suddenly gone all flaky on me and is too afraid of his own shadow to do anything he’s supposed to. And Jasmine is capitalizing on Jimmy’s problems for her own interests. And Jasmine refuses to give the least bit of credence to our family traditions, or even the wishes and feelings that any of her family has. She won’t listen to anybody but herself. I hate the idea, but something has to be done. And until somebody offers me a better idea, I don’t feel like I’ve got much of a choice in this. I can only hope that it doesn’t last more than a few days or so.” He looked down at his wife. “Susan?”

Susan shook her head. She didn’t stand, but she spoke. “I can’t tell you how much I don’t like this idea either. These are my kids you’re talking about. My babies. And what you’re proposing is... horrible! Blasphemous! I don’t know what it is, but it’s just plain wrong!” Her voice softened. “But like Clint, I agree something has to be done, and I don’t have a clue either. I just wish it wasn’t this.”

There was silence in the room for a few moments. “So what do we do?” Jacob finally asked.

Clint and Susan looked at each other sadly for a few moments. Susan finally shrugged. “I don’t know what to do,” she finally said.

Clint nodded. “Me either, but we’ve got to do something.” She nodded. A tear fell from her eye.

Clint looked at his father, but he said nothing for a few moments. “Do it,” he finally got out. “Start the ball rolling.”

The words were said, but afterwards, you could hear a pin drop in the room for several moments.

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“Do you want another cookie?” Rose asked her grandson as Jimmy and his sister sat at the kitchen table.

“No thanks,” Jimmy replied.

“Jasmine?” Rose asked, offering her a cookie too.

“No thanks, Grandma,” Jasmine returned.

Jimmy sighed loudly. “What’s taking so long?”

“I don’t know dear,” Rose replied. “I’ve been out here with you the whole time.”

“I just wish they’d figure out whatever it is they’re going to do to us so we can get out of here,” Jasmine added.

Rose had no answer to that. She didn’t know everything that was going on, but bringing in the whole family, and then having it take so long was wearing at her nerves too.

“Kids...” Clint’s voice came.

“Dad!” Jimmy exclaimed as he finally spotted his father in the doorway.

“We’re almost done, so just hang in there, okay. I need to tell you both first though, that neither one of you is going to get hit with my belt anymore. Okay? So that part you don’t have to worry about. But that doesn’t mean you’re not going to get punished pretty bad. Both of you! Understand?”

His words had brought happiness, and then more sorrow. “Yeah,” Jimmy replied sullenly.

Jasmine didn’t reply, she just looked halfway down toward the floor, while her eyes still stayed on his face.

“Jas,” Clint said. “Come on, we want to talk to you for a minute.” He looked at Jimmy, “We’ll get to you in just a couple of minutes,” he told his son.

Jasmine didn’t say a word, but kept her eyes contritely down at the floor as she followed her father back to the others. Before she went into the room, her father knelt down and hugged her tightly. “I love you, Jas” he said to her. To Jasmine, his words offered comfort,

but also the promise of something really bad coming at her. Her father pushed her into the room ahead of him. She saw her mother holding out her arms and she rushed into them. The comforting hug told her just as much as her father's hug how much trouble she was in.

"Jasmine," her father said to her. "I need you to pay attention to me." He waited a moment as she looked up at him. "You've managed to go hunting twice now, when you know perfectly well that you shouldn't have. It's been a family tradition for many generations now that the men all hunt...and the women don't! These traditions are very important to us. Important to the entire family. They're what bind us together. They're often what get us through some pretty tough times. Those traditions are things that help make us who we are. We're proud of who we are, Jasmine, and we're proud of our traditions too."

"Amen!" one of his brothers spoke loudly.

Clint looked up and saw more than a few of the family members nodding their agreements. He looked back at his daughter. He wasn't sure that anything he had just said had meant anything to her at all. In fact, he rather got the impression from the stubborn look on her face that she wasn't buying any of it. He had no choice but to move on. "Jasmine," he said, "In light of the fact that you have managed to hunt now, not just the once, but twice, we need you to do something for us. And Jasmine, your mother and I...and the whole family...are begging you to please do this, because if you don't..." But he didn't want to say what would happen if she didn't agree. He didn't even want to think about it.

He started again. "Jasmine, look. You can save everyone here, especially yourself and your brother, a whole lot of trouble, if you will just swear to us that you won't go hunting anymore. Will you do that? Please?"

Jasmine's heart fell. Swearing to never try to hunt anymore was something she didn't want to do. Not now. Not when she'd seen for herself how much fun it was. She couldn't wait to go hunting again... somehow. "But Daddy," she replied, "I like hunting. And I think I've shown everyone that I can do it. It's wrong that girls can't hunt. And I want to hunt!"

Clint closed his eyes as his anger and frustration grew...and his heart sank lower than he could ever remember it being. "So, in other words," he said. "You can't swear to us that you won't try to hunt anymore."

Jasmine's stubborn nature kicked in fully. "I'll go by myself if I have to!" she declared. "It's not right that Jimmy can hunt and I can't! He's a sissy wuss, and I'm not!" she said all too boldly. She knew she was going to get in trouble for it, but she wasn't sorry in the least.

"So based on that," her father asked, "you're willing to accept our punishment then?"

"I don't care!" she said emphatically. "It's not right that Jimmy can go hunting and I can't. You can spank me all you want, but I don't care!"

"I already told you, I'm not going to beat you anymore. We had something else in mind."

"I don't care!" she said boldly yet again. "I'm not sorry for what I did! Not at all!"

Clint nodded sadly. "I didn't think so." He saw disapproving looks all around the room. His wife broke out in tears, but Jasmine just stood there looking more defiant than ever. "Then you're going to get your wish," he told her. "You're going to get to go hunting, probably a lot more than you ever wanted."

Jasmine suddenly didn't know what to think. They were giving in to her? It was a moment before it fully registered and her face lit up in a big smile. "Really?" She was surprised to see everyone looking so sad, especially her father and mother.

"Come on Jas," he said as he took her by the hand, "we need to talk to Jimmy for a moment next. Then I'll be back for you again. I'm afraid there's a lot more to it than just this."

A very delighted Jasmine was returned to the kitchen, and this time Jimmy was brought into the meeting. Before taking him in, Clint hugged him and told him he loved him the same way he had done with Jasmine. Susan too hugged her son dearly before her husband got down to business.

When Clint finally had Jimmy's attention he asked. "Jimmy, why does Jas have it in for you so much? Why is she demanding you do

all these things?”

“I don’t know,” Jimmy replied. “I guess she just thinks I’m a total wuss.” He looked down at the floor. “I guess I am. I just don’t want to kill anything ever again.”

Clint nodded. “Don’t worry about it Jimmy. But hunting is our family’s strongest tradition. It’s what bonds our whole family together – and keeps us together. It feeds us and clothes us, and supports us in ways you’re too young to understand. And there are times when a man needs to know how to kill something, even when he doesn’t want to. Sometimes, Jimmy, killing something is absolutely necessary. Sometimes, we have no choice.”

Jimmy looked at the floor and shook his head. “That’s not the way I see it. And it’s not my real problem.”

“Then what is your problem?” Clint asked.

It was a moment before Jimmy could find the courage to reply. “I’m scared,” he said all too softly. “Just...scared.”

“Of what?”

But there were too many “whats” for Jimmy to put a name too. “Everything!”

“That doesn’t tell us much, Jimmy,” Clint replied.

Jimmy just shrugged as his answer.

Clint had no choice but to move on. “Jimmy, before I bring your sister back in here, I need to tell you that the punishment the whole family has decided on, is probably going to seem like it’s a lot worse for you than for Jasmine. Right now, Jasmine thinks she’s getting everything just the way she wants it, but I haven’t told her about the punishment part yet. So I want you to know first, that you’re probably going to think this is far worse for you than it will be for her, but trust me, after the whole family has talked about this, we think that in the end, it will be far, far worse for your sister than for you. Understand?”

Jimmy looked up at his father. “How can I? You haven’t told me what you’re going to do to me yet.”

“No, I haven’t,” his father conceded. “I just want you to keep what I said in mind when I bring your sister back in.”

Jimmy just shrugged. “So what’s next?”

“Now we get your sister in here again.”

"I'll get her," Jed offered.

Jed went out to the kitchen, "Jas, it's time for you again."

Jasmine got up from the table and headed for her Uncle, but Jed stopped her before they got out of the room. He looked up at Rose. "Mom, maybe you should come in now too."

Rose shook her head, "I'll get it all from your father later."

"You can, Mom, but I think it might be better if you were there too. You're one of the primary heads of this family. We all look up to you. I think it's important that you be there."

"Goodness!" she exclaimed. "What the heck is going on?" She didn't get a reply, but she followed them all out to the porch where she stood next to her husband.

Clint stood in front of the room. His wife was seated right in front of him. She held Jasmine in her left arm and Jimmy in her right. There was no way she wanted to let go of either of her kids. Clint couldn't blame her. But now where did he need to start?

"Jas," he finally said. "What the heck do you have against your brother so much that you would concoct those crazy demands of yours and then make him write it all down in a note to us? Why do you hate him so much?"

Jasmine was surprised. She was also feeling bolder and completely elated now that they had told her she would be going hunting again. "I don't hate him," she replied. "I just think he's a sissy wuss. He's afraid the most stupid things you can imagine. He's got to be a wuss and a pansy if he's so afraid of a little duck." She laughed. "Can you imagine that? He's afraid of ducks! Even dead ones!"

Clint closed his eyes for a moment to calm himself. "So you decided it would be funny to humiliate him so badly and make him wear your dress on Thanksgiving?"

"Something like that," she admitted, although a bit hesitantly. "And besides...I mean...it's just that...Jimmy can go hunting, but I couldn't as Jasmine. So I thought it would be only fair if he could get a little taste of being me, while I was out being him and hunting. Or I guess, I was being Jimmy, the way he should have been."

"In other words, you wanted to humiliate him. Make fun of him."

"I guess," she admitted.

“Where’s that note?” Clint asked.

“Here,” Brian said as he got up and handed it to him.

Clint unfolded that paper again, but he didn’t read it. He looked at Jasmine again instead. “Where did you ever come up with junk like this to punish your brother?” he asked her.

Jasmine shrugged. “I don’t know. It all seemed like a good idea at the time.” A bold sly smile suddenly crossed her face. “Besides, I knew everything in there would probably make him squirm like a worm!” She laughed, “And he’s probably afraid of worms too.”

Clint let the remark pass. He figured it was now time to get down to the bad part of the business. It was now time to tell the twins how they were going to be punished. He only hoped that Jimmy would really realize that his sister’s part of it all would be worse for her than for him. But he somehow doubted that Jimmy would be able to see that at all.

He held up the note where they both could see it. His voice was far harsher than before. “Jasmine, you made demands of your brother. Horrible demands!” he added. He was pleased to see Jasmine’s face suddenly look a lot less delighted. Clint looked over at Jimmy, “And you, Jimmy, you didn’t have the guts to turn any of this down! None of it! You even went and put it in your own writing. And not just this once! This is the second time you’ve done it. Based on that, this whole family feels that this note should be the basis of the punishment – for both of you!”

Both kids were shocked, but while Jimmy saw nothing but horror for himself, Jasmine saw nothing but a wild dream coming true. Jimmy looked horrified. Jasmine looked delighted. Never in Jasmine’s wildest dreams did she think that her parents would actually go along with all that junk. Well, she had really dreamed it. She had in fact dreamed the whole idea up. And now, just like on Thanksgiving, they were going along with all of it. It was all she could do to keep herself from giving a whoop of delight.

Clint looked at Jasmine. “Jasmine, until such time as you can swear to the whole family that you won’t try to go hunting anymore, and until such time as Jimmy can find the guts to go out and actually kill something again, then you are both bound by this agreement, and the changes we all decided to add to it.”

Jimmy felt his body start shaking and his knees going weak with fear.

As far as Jasmine was concerned, she knew she would never want to swear any such thing. They had all just handed her the best gift in the world!

Clint looked down at the paper in his hands. "First of all," he said, then he started to read: "*Jasmine wants to go hunting again, and again she's convinced me that I have to agree to all her demands and to also be totally honest about myself.*" He continued without stopping. "*The first thing I have to do is to admit something you already know. I missed that deer on purpose. I've always missed on purpose. It bothers me too much to even consider killing another living creature. I constantly worry that somehow they're going to haunt me and get back at me for it. I know it's silly, but Jasmine has demanded that I admit I'm simply too much of a wimp to go hunting anymore or even think about doing anything like that. Jasmine though is much braver than I am. She's not afraid of anything.*" Clint looked down directly at Jasmine. "Not afraid of anything? We'll see about that."

He looked down at the paper, "Next!" he proclaimed loudly before he started reading again: "*Since Jasmine has decided to go hunting as me again, then she has demanded that I agree to be her again, and I've agreed to do that. And since she's going to continue hunting as me, then I've agreed that from now on, any time she goes hunting, I will be her for not just that day, but now for two full days.*" Clint looked up again. "As per Jasmine's demand for Jimmy, and Jimmy's acceptance of that demand, from now on, every time Jasmine goes off to hunt, or also to do some things for Uncle Jed or any of the rest of us too, Jimmy will become Jasmine for two full days – *for now*, and Jasmine will become Jimmy for two full days as well. But here's the first little change the family has decided on. If after the first full month, Jasmine still hasn't sworn to not hunt, and Jimmy won't even try to kill anything, then those two full days will become three full days for both of you!"

To Jimmy, the horror didn't seem that much worse, only because he had yet to come to grips with the reality of what was about to

happen to him. Not to mention that the whole family was going along with it all.

To Jasmine, the decree didn't mean much either. Her stupid brother would be stuck in skirts for yet another day! It was all she could do to keep from laughing.

Clint continued. "And after the next month, it will become four days, and after that...well, we'll just have to see." He softened his voice. "Personally, I'm really hoping that this monstrosity won't go past tonight...or just a few days at the most. But I have no doubt that it will go on." He shook his head disappointedly as he looked down at the note again.

"Next!" he proclaimed loudly and began reading again: "*For those two days, I have agreed that I will try to act only like a girl and will do everything possible to not act like a boy at all.*" Clint looked down at his son who simply looked lost. "Very well," he said, "We're all going to do our best to help hold you to that. We're all going to make sure you learn how to act like a girl." He looked over at Jasmine. "And consequently, we're all going to do the same for you. If you're going to be Jimmy once in a while, then you're going to have to learn how to act like a boy and you won't be allowed to do anything feminine at all! Nothing!" This time, Clint was happy to note the look of surprise and uncertainty on his daughter's face.

"The next part!" he proclaimed loudly as he looked down at the paper again. "*I have agreed to help Mom as much as I possibly can for those two days.*" He looked down at Jimmy again. "Yes, you certainly will. You will help your mother and anyone else we ask you to help. You're going to learn to do all the womanly chores that need doing. All of it!" He turned to Jasmine. "And in return, you Jasmine, will be helping me with everything, and Tommy with everything, and your Uncle Jed with everything, and anyone else in this family that has man's work that you need to learn how to do." Once again, he saw a little bit of the delight fall from his daughter's face. Jimmy still looked lost by it all.

"Next!" he proclaimed again. "*I have also agreed that I will continue to wear mostly skirts and dresses since I don't want anyone to think I'm trying to be anything but a sissy girl.*" He looked down at Jimmy again. "Very well, if that's the way you see it, then we'll make

sure that it's only on very rare occasions when you're not wearing skirts of some sort." He turned to Jasmine. "And consequently, we'll also do everything we can to make sure you aren't mistaken for any kind of a sissy boy either. And that may be more difficult for you than for him."

Once again he looked down at the paper. "Next!" he declared loudly again. *"I have also agreed that since I may have to be Jasmine more often now, that I will not get my hair cut so it can grow as long as her hair or longer."* Again he looked down at his son. "Since you agreed to it, we'll go with it. You won't be getting your hair cut for a long time I'm afraid...unless you and your sister there can see the light and agree to the simple things we ask instead." He looked over toward his daughter, and then turned back to the note.

As Jasmine saw her father going back to reading the note, she was quick to realize that her father hadn't mentioned anything about her hair. She was very glad!

"And finally!" Clint announced as he looked down at the paper again, *"I'm sorry that I have turned out to be such a disappointment. But Jasmine and I agree that this will be for the best – for everyone. This way, none of the family rules are being broken. Jasmine gets to go hunting, but she goes hunting as me. So anything she kills, she kills as Jimmy. And in return, I will stay home and be the girl of the family. Your loving son – and sometimes daughter, Jimmy / Jasmine."* Clint looked down at his two kids. "Such a disappointment? How would you know how we feel? Yes, your mother and I are a little disappointed that Jimmy won't hunt anymore, but we don't consider him a disappointment at all. In fact, we're rather proud of so many things that he does. We don't consider Jimmy to be a disappointment at all!

"And as for this being the best for everyone, how can you figure that? You're not old enough to know what we would consider best for the family. But now, based on this, the whole family feels that what you put in this piece of trash, will be best for the two of you. Both of you!"

He took a deep breath before continuing. "And as to not breaking the family rules? You both have to know it doesn't really work that way. Not at all. But for your punishment, we've decided to

make things look that way – for you two. Whenever necessary, Jasmine will become Jimmy in every way possible, and Jimmy will become her instead. You two will switch places completely. Like it or not, both of you.”

He looked directly at Jasmine. “And as for that deer you shot this morning...”

“Hold on a bit Clint,” Jacob spoke up. “This was my idea, so let me tell them.”

“Sure Dad,” Clint replied, backing off.

Jacob walked over in front of the two kids. “Jasmine,” he said. “You didn’t shoot that deer this morning.”

Jasmine blinked. “Yes I did!”

“No you didn’t! You weren’t out there hunting, so how could you possibly kill anything?” He looked at Jimmy. “Jimmy, that was a fantastic shot you made at a deer none of us even saw. And you did it so quickly. Nice shooting son, nice shooting.”

“But...” Jasmine started to protest.

She didn’t get far before her grandfather interrupted her. “How could Jasmine shoot a deer if it was Jimmy that was out there?” he asked. “Didn’t you just tell us that you wanted us to see you as Jimmy whenever you were hunting? So because of that, I can only assume that it was Jimmy I saw out there, and it was Jimmy who shot that deer. Not Jasmine. Jimmy! Understand?”

Jasmine was totally disappointed, but she had no choice but to agree. “Yeah,” she replied disappointedly.

“Good! Now whenever anyone asks, Jimmy shot that deer this morning. The best deer that’s been killed around here in the last few years. Jimmy shot it, and that’s what you’re going to tell everyone.” He looked around the room. “Nobody outside this room needs to hear that Jimmy doesn’t want to kill anything. We’re going to hold that part here between us. So it’s still going to be up to him to prove that he can be a man again.” He nodded. He had said his piece. He walked back to his wife, who hugged him.

Clint watched his father walking away. Now it was all back on his shoulders again, where he didn’t want any of the problem at all. His voice was softer as he spoke to the kids. “If this thing goes on too long,” he said, “then it’s possible that you both may have to go to

school as each other too. Uncle John and Aunt Jane have assured us that they'll handle that problem if it comes up. They're more worried about Jimmy going through it all tomorrow after what happened at Thanksgiving. So Jimmy, if you need to, talk to them at school tomorrow. They'll help you all they can."

It was one of the big worries that Jimmy had been dreading. "I was thinking about being sick tomorrow," he replied.

"Don't!" his Uncle John called out. "You're going to have to get through this sooner or later. Better that it be now when we can keep an eye on things."

Jimmy nodded, but he still wasn't happy.

Clint knew that the time had come for the really bad part of their punishment. He looked to his wife, and the two of them stared knowingly at each other for a few moments. Then even softer than before, Clint spoke again. "And now, we're going to make it worse – for both of you," he said. "But I'm going to let your Uncle Brian tell you about that part." He went over next to his wife where he sat down and pulled Jimmy into his arms.

Brian stood up and looked down at the two kids. "Like your dad said," he said, "this is where it gets much worse for both of you. This is where the real punishment for both of you comes in."

Jimmy couldn't imagine anything possibly being worse. And his father had said that it would really be worse for Jasmine than for him? So far, he wasn't seeing that at all!

Brian continued. "I'm going to start giving you both some hormones...medicine," he explained. "The medicine is going to change you. It's going to stop both of you from developing any more...like you are now. Jasmine, it's going to stop those young breasts of yours from getting any bigger at all. In fact, they may even shrink."

Jasmine stared in horror. "You can't!" she exclaimed.

Brian ignored her and turned to Jimmy, "And Jimmy, I'm afraid those hormones may affect you faster than your sister. The hormones for your sister are going to eventually make her body look more like a boy, but the hormones you will be getting, if this goes that long, will make your body look like a girl. Your sister will

eventually lose those breasts she wants so badly, and you'll be growing them instead."

Jimmy's horror went into overdrive. He felt like the wind had been knocked out of his system. He wanted to scream, but there was no breath in his body.

Jasmine stared at her Uncle Brian in total horror now. She would have the body of a boy? No! It couldn't happen. It couldn't!

"Kids," Clint said from his seat. "After hearing all this. Is there any way you can try to do what the family wants? Jas, will you please swear now that you won't hunt anymore? Please?"

Jasmine's head was still reeling. Her breasts wouldn't grow anymore? She'd have a boy's body? They had to be kidding. It couldn't happen. Her own mother had told her that her breasts would eventually grow, and nothing on earth would stop that. Besides she could hunt now. Freely. Well, as her brother anyway. It couldn't happen. They were just trying to scare her. There was no way it could be real. No way at all. "No!" she replied stubbornly. "It's all a big lie! I won't do it!"

Susan felt like dying – completely. She leaned against her husband and started crying. "Don't let this happen," she said. "Please don't let this happen."

"It's too late," Clint replied softly. "They've doomed themselves."

Chapter 10 - Ya Gotta Have Friends

December 1st – 6th

The teasing started before Jimmy even got on the bus Monday morning. “Where’s your dress – *Jasmine*?” He did his best to ignore it, but it was pretty much impossible. He sat on the bus by himself and mostly kept his head down, not wanting to look at anyone. He felt terribly ashamed.

Jasmine, on the other hand, was still looked upon as a bit of a hero by many of the family kids, particularly the girls. She just didn’t notice it much because her mind was still reeling and worrying about the things that her Uncle Brian had said the night before. They couldn’t really take away her girl’s body and give her a boy’s body instead. They couldn’t do it. It was impossible! They had to be just trying to scare her. But none of her thinking stopped her from worrying about it.

The word about what Jimmy had worn to Thanksgiving dinner didn’t take a full hour to reach the ears of every kid in the school. Even before school actually started, it had taken only minutes. “Hey *Jasmine*, why didn’t you wear a dress to school today?” Jimmy tried to ignore them, but it was impossible. He was quickly getting to the point where he wanted to punch some of them in the face if they didn’t stop teasing him. “Hey *Jasmine*, I hear you looked soooo pretty on Thanksgiving.” The fact that a lot of the taunting came from his closer friends, the guys who were actually his age but weren’t part of the family, seemed to hurt the most. The family had all seen him. But now it was his friends, the ones outside the family, who were teasing him the most. The only thing that kept Jimmy from finally actually hitting one of them was the school bell ringing and the start of class.

And it was at the start of class that day that his Uncle John walked into his classroom. Even though John Mercer was one of the

six teachers in the school, he was also the school principal, so it wasn't really anything unusual for the kids to see him walk in.

"Excuse me," John said brightly to Mrs. Ansley, the teacher for the room. "I heard about what Jimmy did yesterday and I didn't get a chance to congratulate him." He turned to his nephew. "Nice shooting, Jimmy. I hear it was a great deer you got yesterday. Eleven points! Unless I'm mistaken that's the best deer that's been killed around here in years. And your Uncle Jed says you spotted the thing and shot it in no time flat – right in the heart!" He shook his head. "Amazing! I have to say, I'm a bit jealous of that."

He waved his hands to the class as he started to back out. "Sorry," he said to the teacher. "I'm done now. I just wanted to congratulate Jimmy there." And then he was gone.

The buzz in the room started immediately, as did the total change in the way all the kids had been looking at Jimmy. On Thanksgiving he had gone around in a fancy dress and pretended to be his sister, then yesterday he had gone hunting and gotten the best deer in the last few years. It took longer for that bit of information to make its way around the school, but by lunchtime, Jimmy was still getting teased about the dress, and then in the next sentence, congratulated on the deer he had shot.

Jimmy found it a strange situation. His bigger problem though, was the knowledge that it was all a big lie. Not the part about him wearing the dress, that part was all too true. The big lie was that he hadn't shot the deer. Yes, it had been Jimmy who shot it – by his Grandpa's decree, but it had been his sister who was that Jimmy. Not him. But either way, the kids all knowing about the deer did help him get through it better – a lot better!

Now all he had to do was to figure out the part where his Uncle Brian had threatened to give him a girl's body. He couldn't even imagine that.

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Jasmine had sat and listened at the start of the school day to her Uncle John congratulating her stupid wuss of a brother on the deer that *he* had killed. Ha! It irked her to no end that she couldn't take

any of the credit for it at all. It irked her even worse to have to confirm all too many times that her brother had indeed shot that deer. It was maddening! *She* had shot it, not him! She had done what he didn't have the guts to do. But he was getting all the credit, and she got nothing!

Yeah, they were still teasing him pretty steadily about wearing her dress on Thanksgiving, she was rather enjoying all that, but now everyone was following up the teasing with comments and questions about the stupid deer! Instead of him looking like the sissy wuss he should have, he was starting to be viewed more like a hero! And she got no attention at all. It wasn't right! Just like it wasn't right that the women of the family weren't allowed to go hunting. She had proven herself. She had!

And they couldn't really give her a boy's body...could they?

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"That was so weird on Thanksgiving," Nichole said as the four girls sat together at school, eating their lunch.

"Worse than weird," Allison agreed. "It was absolutely bizarre!"

"Beyond bizarre!" Olivia agreed.

Jasmine laughed. "Yeah, it was pretty weird for me too. But I have no doubt that my stupid sap of a brother found it even worse."

"That's for sure!" Allison agreed.

"You let him wear your dress!" Nichole exclaimed. "And you were so looking forward to that."

Jasmine's face fell. "Yeah, I was. I really was. And I wasn't expecting that he would actually look good in it."

"Yeah, he did look pretty good," Allison agreed.

"He almost looked like he was a girl," Olivia added. Then she giggled. "He was soooo lost that day!" She saw the others looking at her. "I had to help him out with Aunt Jessica's kids." She laughed again. "Madison made him sit there and play dolls with her!"

"I saw that!" Jasmine agreed. "I couldn't believe it! I can't tell you what a kick I got out of seeing him doing that. He always calls my doll collection stupid!"

"I guess he learned his lesson that day," Allison noted. "I mean, after going through that, he went out and managed to actually shoot a deer. Finally. And evidently, he got a real big one."

Jasmine said nothing. It hadn't been her brother who had shot that deer at all. And her brother hadn't learned his lesson on Thanksgiving at all either. It was she who had shot the deer. She had done what her sissy brother couldn't. And she wasn't allowed to tell any of her friends about it. And now she was getting punished for it all. Sort of. As she saw it, Jimmy was definitely getting the worst part of the deal. She could easily put up with dressing like her brother once in a while and going off to hunt. She couldn't wait to do it again. But the thought of him being stuck in her clothes instead, for two full days now, simply thrilled her to no end. How long would it be before she could go hunting again?

"Hey Jasmine," Allison said, interrupting her thoughts. "What was that big meeting about last night? All I know is that my Dad got a phone call from Grandpa and he came in and told us that he and Mom had to go up to their house for some kind of family meeting. And then the phone rang again and I wound up watching Aunt Jessica's kids while they were at the meeting too."

"Yeah," Olivia added. "I was there and all any of us know is that you and Jimmy are in some kind of really big trouble, but Mom and Dad won't tell me anything about it at all."

"Jas?" Nichole asked, seeing Jasmine's face suddenly look worried. "What is it? All Mom and Dad would tell me, is that it's bad. Really, really bad."

Jasmine didn't know what to say. The concerned faces of her friends told her how worried they were for her. But it sounded like her Aunts and Uncles weren't saying anything to the other kids about what happened. She wanted to tell her friends badly about what had gone on, but at the same time, she didn't because it was too... embarrassing. Too...troubling. Yeah, no doubt they would find out eventually. They all would. But if none of the parents were saying anything to the kids yet, then what was she supposed to do? "Um..." she said as she searched for something to say about the situation. She finally decided to take her cue from something that they each had said. "I don't know if I'm supposed to say or not," she told them.

"But...I guess I am in some big trouble. Jimmy too. And the whole family has decided they're going to punish us for it." Her face brightened more than a bit. "But I can tell you that my stupid brother is definitely going to get the worst of it. Definitely!"

"What did you do?" Olivia asked, her voice still full of concern.

It was all Jasmine could do to not tell them she had gone hunting again. Because if she did, then she would have to tell them that it was she who had shot the deer and not Jimmy. And Grandpa had been all too clear about what she could say about that matter. "I... can't say," Jasmine told them. "At least, I'm not supposed to. If I do, they might make the punishment worse." The shocked looks on her friend's faces told her all too much. And...they couldn't really give her a boy's body, could they?

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"My dad says you were too much of a sissy to shoot ducks," Elliot said to Jimmy as they were eating lunch in the cafeteria.

"And then they made you wear a dress instead on Thanksgiving," Hunter added with a laugh. "That was sooo funny!"

Jimmy was just glad that the boys were still talking to him and letting him be around them. But there was no way to deny any of it. "Yeah," he replied with more than a bit of embarrassment, even after a long morning of teasing over the situation. "I can't tell you how embarrassing that was. You don't know how much I'd like to forget it."

"I can belieeeeeeeve that!" Hunter replied. "But I guess you learned something from it," he continued. "Man, eleven points? That had to be some deer!"

"Yeah, I guess," Jimmy replied.

"You guess?" Hunter exclaimed. He turned to Tommy. "Your brother shoots a deer like that, and he says, 'I guess?' I'd give anything to shoot something like that!"

Tommy wasn't sure what to say about that situation. His father had been more than clear that no one was to know any different than the fact that Jimmy had actually shot the deer. As far as he could

see, the fact that the situation was all goofed up, was making things worse!

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As the week wore on, Jasmine noticed that the teasing of her brother grew less and less, and by Thursday, it had mostly died out completely. Fortunately, so did all the comments about the deer that she had shot instead of him. And fortunately, things seemed much more back to normal. But by Thursday, she was also starting to get antsy about going hunting again. They had said she would be going a lot more often, but she hadn't heard a single word about it yet. But she knew that she had to go to school, her stupid brother too for that matter, and her Dad had to work. As far as Jasmine was concerned, the job her mother had in the family business office barely qualified as a job at all. Most of the times she had been there with her mother, her mother had spent all day gossiping with her Aunt Valerie and Aunt Marcy.

Strangely, it was her mother who announced the next time she would be going hunting. It was during dinner Thursday night. "Clint," Susan said as she passed the big bowl of mashed potatoes, "Jed wants to try to clear out a few of those hogs tearing everything up in the North Sector. Would you mind helping him out Saturday?"

It was the way she often passed the family jobs down to him. Asking if he would mind, when in reality, it was work that the family needed doing. "Sure, no problem," he replied. He looked over at Jasmine, then purposely looked away. He recognized that Jed had asked for him as an opportunity to take Jasmine hunting again...or Jimmy. "I guess I should probably take Tommy and Jimmy with me. Do you think it would be alright?"

Susan was a bit surprised by the question. "That's your decision," she replied. But in reality, she knew that this farce of a punishment had to start somewhere for her twins. She would just rather it started later than now. To be honest though, she would rather it never start at all. She noticed the look of horror...or was it simply fright on Jimmy's face. "Don't forget to eat your string beans," she told him. She looked over at her daughter, the grin on her face

was from ear to ear as she suddenly started eating more animatedly. Susan didn't miss all the teasing looks her daughter gave to Jimmy all during the rest of dinner. Jimmy only looked worried, but Jasmine was all too delighted with the situation. If the girl only knew. If she only realized the heartache all this was causing, and all the heartache it was about to cause her.

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On Friday night, just before his kids would be going to bed, Clint walked into his daughter's room where she was still doing homework at her computer. "Jas," he said as he walked in. He waited until she finished typing something and was looking up at him. "Jas, will you please swear that you won't go hunting anymore? Please?"

Jasmine was shocked that he would ask. Why would she ever do a stupid thing like that? "Daddy, you know I can't wait to go hunting again, so why should I ever say I won't?" Her face lit up in a big grin. "And this time, I'm going to kill the pig we all eat for Christmas!"

Clint only nodded disappointedly. "Get up from there," he said. "Right now."

Jasmine suddenly got worried. Her father's voice had been stern and full of command. She was suddenly worried about getting spanked again.

Clint looked at his daughter for a moment, then said. "Get undressed. Now. All the way."

Jasmine was shocked. Get undressed in front of her father? Completely? But she watched as he grabbed her bathrobe off the back of her bedroom door, then he carried it out and shut the door behind him. She didn't undress all the way, but she did undress down to her panties and bra. When her door opened again, it was her mother who walked in, and she was carrying Jimmy's pajamas and a pair of his underwear in her hands. "Time to change, Jas," she said as she handed her daughter her son's pajamas.

Jasmine's excitement soared as she stripped naked and donned her brother's pajamas. "Can I finish my homework now?" she asked.

"You told me a few minutes ago that you had finished it already," Susan told her.

"No I didn't. I'm still working on it," Jasmine replied.

Susan shook her head. "That's Jasmine's homework. Jasmine will have to finish it. Definitely not you! And get those earrings out of your ears. Boys don't wear earrings!"

A few moments later, Susan took the new Jimmy by the hand and led her out of her room and into the hallway. The door to Jimmy's room opened and her husband walked out leading her son, now wearing her daughter's bathrobe, by the hand. Clint grabbed the new Jimmy's hand and pulled her into Jimmy's room, and Susan grabbed the new Jasmine's hand and pulled him back into Jasmine's room.

"Go to bed now," Clint told the new Jimmy. "And don't forget, we have to go hunting tomorrow."

"I know Daddy," she replied excitedly. "I can't wait."

"Well, we're not going until after breakfast, so you don't have to worry about getting up in the middle of the night. Just don't sleep too late."

"I won't, Daddy. I promise."

Clint looked at her sternly. "Don't call me Daddy!" he said harshly. "You sound like a sissy girl when you talk like that!"

Jasmine was shocked by the sudden rebuke. "Sorry," she replied softly. A minute later, her light was turned out, the bedroom door was closed, and she was staring up at the beautiful ducks on the wall – lit by the dim light of the nightlight that her idiot brother couldn't seem to do without. Heaven.

Susan saw to it that the new Jasmine got undressed and into his nightgown. "You can spend a few more minutes finishing up your homework now," she told him. "But no more than fifteen minutes. I'll be back then to wish you goodnight."

"But I told you, I finished it a while ago," Jimmy replied.

Susan shook her head. "You just told me that you were still working on it. Jimmy told me he had finished *his* homework, so you had better get busy young lady and finish yours. And if you need to, you can keep working on it after breakfast tomorrow."

The new Jasmine just looked up at her, totally surprised. Now he would have to do his sister's homework for her too? It wasn't right! It just wasn't right! With a shake of his head, he sat down at her desk to see what she was working on. "What's this?" he asked as he tried to comprehend the words on her computer. "What the heck is a...bodice, and crinoline? I have no idea what any of this junk is."

Susan walked over to see what her daughter was working on. "Hmm..." she said as she studied the short paper the real Jasmine had been working on. "Obviously, it's something for your Home Economics class. If you need any more help, I'll do what I can for you in the morning."

Jimmy's head was spinning again. Things had just gotten worse – again. "Can I just go to bed now instead?"

"Sure honey," Susan said as she hugged her new daughter and kissed the top of his head. "I'll tuck you in."

Minutes later, Jimmy laid in Jasmine's bed, in the total dark, purposely trying to go without turning on the bedside light. It scared him, but at least he couldn't see all the eyes from the hundred or so dolls in the room staring down at him from the shelves. The dolls though didn't scare him like the ducks did. The dolls hadn't been alive once. They had nothing to actually blame him for or accuse him of. He actually fell asleep and slept better that night than he had in a long time. No ducks to terrify him. And his arms, for once, weren't safety pinned to his sides.

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The following morning, *Jimmy* was mostly dressed for hunting as she ate her breakfast. Her brother Tommy and her father were dressed the same way. The only real difference was that her extra-long hair was now braided into a single braid that she had stuffed down inside the back of her shirt to hide it better. She should have thought about doing that the last time she had gone hunting. Her *sister* Jasmine and her mother were still wearing their robes over top of their nightgowns.

Jasmine sat quietly during breakfast, but he often stared across the table at his father and two *brothers*. They were all dressed pretty much alike, in camouflage, ready to hunt. He knew he should feel jealous, but he didn't. All he really felt was silly being dressed as his sister instead of himself again. And he knew that worse was yet to come. He was going to have to be his stupid sister for the entire weekend. Both days! How the heck was he ever going to get through it? He just prayed he wouldn't have to leave the house all weekend. He couldn't imagine the teasing he'd get from all the guys at school if they found out he had switched places with his sister again.

Tommy had seen his brother and sister getting switched around last night, and it had shocked him. He hadn't been expecting it. Neither his mother nor father had mentioned anything about it at all. He could only guess that it had something to do with the big family meeting last weekend. And now, this morning, seeing his brother and sister sitting at the table with him, wearing each other's clothes and being called by each other's names, was more than a bit unnerving. But since his parents were both seeming to go out of their way to make things look like the twins weren't switched around at all, he tried to do the same. Except it wasn't that easy. He wound up saying nothing to either of them at all. But that didn't keep him from staring constantly at the two of them.

"Jasmine dear," Susan said to her new daughter, "you didn't get your bath last night. Why don't you do that right after breakfast? I'll clean everything up here this morning so you don't have to worry about it."

He wouldn't have to work? He wouldn't have to clean up after breakfast like his sister and mother usually did? Bonus! "Uh...sure Mom," he replied.

"Better let the boys get in there first," Clint suggested. "We've got to get out of here pretty soon."

"That's fine," Susan replied offhandedly. "We're not doing much of anything today. Our baths can wait."

Jasmine was just glad to hear that they had no plans for the day. Things were at least looking up...somewhat. Since he had to wait a few minutes before he could get into the bathroom, his mother

sent him back to his room to keep working on his homework. He went. He sat down at the desk. He read through the paper his *brother* had been working on. And he was just as clueless about it all as he had been the night before. How the heck was he supposed to finish her homework? He didn't know the first thing about fashion, or clothes, or sewing. But he had a sneaky suspicion that he would be learning all too soon.

Susan had used the homework excuse to get rid of her new daughter for a few more minutes. She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down in the kitchen to wait while the boys finished getting ready to go out. There was something she had decided to do, and she really didn't want to do it. She hadn't even discussed it with Clint. But she had to try and make some effort to bring this stupid situation to an end, now instead of later. Especially instead of much later.

Her husband came back into the kitchen and grabbed his hunting coat and hat. He hugged and kissed her. "I'm going to start getting the four-wheelers onto the trailer. I just wish I could take them all. With Jimmy going, we could really use all three."

"You'll just have to try to get the other one fixed later," she told him.

"Yeah," Clint replied, troubled by the thought. He and Jimmy were supposed to work on it together. But he had a feeling that the Jimmy he would be hunting with today wouldn't have the first clue as to how to fix the thing. He wouldn't get nearly as much pleasure out of repairing the broken ATV with that Jimmy.

"Have a good time, dear," she wished him. "And stay safe!" She added, putting extra emphasis on the safe part. She was more worried than ever about her daughter being out there again. She hoped even more that she could now convince her to not hunt anymore. And in fact, she was very hopeful about that situation just then. This idea *had* to work!

She watched as her husband walked out and the new Jimmy entered the kitchen. "Jimmy, are you dressed warm enough? Do you have enough clothes on?" she asked.

Jimmy rolled her eyes. "Yeah Mom, I'm fine. I can't wait to go."

She nodded. "Please hang on a minute, before you leave," she told him. "I want to ask you something first."

"Sure, Mom, what?"

"In a minute," she replied as Tommy came into the room. She gave Tommy a big hug before he grabbed his coat and hat. "Your father's loading up the four-wheelers," she told Tommy. "I'm sure he needs a hand. I need to talk to your...brother for a minute before he can help."

Tommy soon went out the door, and Jimmy was left alone with her mother. "What is it, Mom?"

Susan stared at her fake son. The expression on her face was serious. Her voice was not only serious, it was pleading. "Will you *please* swear off hunting?" she begged. "Please! For all our sakes. It has to stop. It has to stop now! Please. Please!"

Jimmy was somewhat taken aback by her mother's attitude...not to mention her mother begging her to stop hunting when her mother knew perfectly well how much it meant to her. "Mom, don't worry about me. I'll be fine out there. I can't wait to go."

Tears moistened Susan's eyes. "You're sure about this? You're absolutely sure?"

"Yeah, Mom. You stay here and have fun with...*Jasmine*." It was all she could do to keep from giggling.

A tear fell from one of Susan's eyes as she nodded. "Then come here first," she said as she held her arms out. She hugged her once daughter and new son tightly, then she pulled back and turned her around. "Stay there!" she commanded, as her tears started flowing for real.

Jimmy didn't know what was going on, or why her mother had told her to stay where she was. She saw her go over to the table where they had been keeping their sewing supplies. Worry suddenly hit her as she saw her mother pick up the scissors and carry them back. "Mom?" she asked uncertainly.

Susan walked up behind her "son" and pulled the braid out from where she had tucked it inside her shirt.

"Mom!" Jimmy exclaimed, now frightened as she tried to turn around, but her mother now had a tight hold on her braid right at the back of her head, and she wasn't letting go. Her tight hold kept

Jimmy from being able to turn around. "Mom! What are you doing?" she asked as she struggled harder.

"Last chance," Susan managed to say as she fought to keep her daughter from pulling away from her.

"Mom, you wouldn't!"

"Last chance!" Susan said again, but it was said with more sobbing than words.

"Mom, you can't!"

"I can! Now will you swear off hunting? Please!"

"No, Mom. I'm not going to. And don't cut my..." Her knees went weak and she felt herself slipping downward as her mother pulled harder on her braid and the scissors suddenly started cutting straight across the back of her head. She was down to her knees by the time the scissors made it even partially across the thick knot of hair. "No...no...no..." she begged as her own tears fell fast and furious. But her mother's tight pull on the braid wouldn't let her get away, and the slow progress of the scissors was relentless. The scissors suddenly made faster progress as she felt only pressure from a small part of her braid now at one side...and then she fell forward as the pull on her braid vanished...and all her long hair was gone.

She turned back to her mother in heartbroken tears. "Why Mom. Why?" Her hand was already feeling the lack of hair that had always been there. Always!

"Boys don't have hair that long. And they certainly don't wear braids. Now go out and have your fun!" Susan spat nastily at her new son. When Jimmy still stayed there on her knees, crying her eyes out and looking shocked and heartbroken, Susan had no choice but to sternly say. "Go! Go on out and hunt with the boys. Go on out and have your fun! Your sister and I have things we're going to be doing here together. Now go!"

Jimmy didn't know what to think. Her hair was gone! All her beautiful hair. She looked down at the long braid now hanging from her mother's hand. All her hair, now reduced to...to...to that!

"Go!" Susan shouted again as she cried more heartbroken than her daughter.

Crying harder than ever, Jimmy ran for her coat and hat and carried them out the door. She was still shaking and crying as she put them on and walked across the big backyard. Even with her hat on, her hands never stopped feeling the back of her head...trying to feel what she had always felt...trying to feel, the new *him*. Her mother had taken away all her beautiful hair. She simply couldn't believe it.

Clint noticed Jimmy crying bitterly as she walked across the yard. Clearly Jimmy was trying to stop, but just as clearly, she couldn't. As she walked, Clint noticed Jimmy constantly rubbing the back of her head. Had she hit her head and hurt herself somehow?

Tommy saw Jimmy crying too. But this was the first chance he'd had to be alone with his father for a few minutes. "Dad, what's going on?" he asked softly before Jimmy had reached them.

It was a moment before Clint could answer. "It's part of their punishment," he told Tommy. "And until your sister sees the light, we're all just going to have to go along with it and live with it the best we can."

Jimmy was still crying when she reached the trailer where they were just getting ready to start loading the ATVs. It was only then that Clint noticed the missing hair. He was shocked, but not all that surprised. His wife had never once mentioned that she was going to do that. He was suddenly glad that he didn't have any reason to go back into the house. He had no doubt that Susan wasn't in any mood for him to be around just then.

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It was a while before Susan dared to look down at the braid of hair in her hand. And when she finally did look, it looked more like some kind of dead animal than the beautiful braid of hair it had once been. Still crying, she reverently carried it all the way into Jasmine's room. She saw her son, the new Jasmine, look up from the computer screen.

"Mom?" Jasmine said, seeing his mother in tears. And then he noticed what she was carrying. His eyes went wide with shock. She had cut his sister's hair! He watched silently as his mother went over

to the little bracket of hooks hung on the wall and selected a red ribbon from the many that were hung there. And he watched as she silently and slowly left the room, still sobbing. Damn! His mother had cut his sister's hair!

Susan carried the braid and the ribbon back into the kitchen. She pulled out a long length of paper towels and laid them on the counter before she carefully laid the braid on top. The tears in her eyes made it difficult, but she tied the prettiest bow she possibly could at the end of that braid. Then she wrapped the whole thing up in the paper towels as if it was the most precious object in the world. She had to hunt in the pantry to find the box of cling wrap, but a few minutes later, the paper towel wrapped braid was protected by layers of plastic. She carried it all into her bedroom where she sat on the bed and just caressed the thing for a while. Finally, she knelt down and opened her dresser drawer. She buried the braid under several old sweaters that she never wore anymore and closed the drawer again. Only then did she go into her bathroom and climb into the big tub.

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Jasmine had been shocked at seeing his mother crying, and even more shocked at what she had done. She had told him earlier to get a bath, but now he didn't even contemplate it. He couldn't. Seeing his mother crying like that disturbed him too much. All he could do, was to stay in his room and try to be as quiet as he could so as not to disturb her. Consequently, he was still in his nightgown and robe when she walked in an hour later. She looked better, but he could still see that "something wrong" look on her face. But she did look better.

"You didn't get your bath yet?" Susan asked, seeing her new daughter still in his nightgown.

"Uh...not yet, Mom," Jasmine replied.

"How's the homework going? Finished yet?"

Jasmine rolled his eyes. "I gave up. I don't have a clue about any of it."

Susan smiled and hugged his head...and dropped a kiss on top of his hair. How short was Jimmy's hair on top now? It still had to have some length to it, especially at the sides. But how short would it really be? "I'll help you with it later," she told him. "Now go get your bath so you can get dressed. We've got things to do today."

That surprised Jasmine. "I thought you said we were staying here all day?"

"Most likely," she replied. "But that doesn't mean that we've got nothing to do. Now come on."

Jasmine wasn't exactly happy when his mother followed him into the bathroom. "Do you need to pee, dear?" she asked.

"Kind of," he replied.

"Then I'll wait," she said.

Jasmine stood there, waiting for his mother to leave, but she didn't.

"Well, aren't you going to pee?"

"Aren't you going to leave first?" Jasmine asked.

"No! Of course not. We're both girls here. Now get your nightgown off and let's get to it."

Jasmine's jaw just dropped. Slowly, he shed his robe, then unbuttoned the nightgown and pulled it over his head. He was now totally naked in front of his mother.

"I'll start your bath water," Susan told him, "while you do your business on the toilet."

"Uh...okay," Jasmine replied very uncertainly.

While his mother started turning the tub water on, he turned around and stood in front of the toilet to pee.

"Jasmine!" Susan exclaimed loudly, sounding all too horrified. "What are you doing?"

"Uh...peeing?"

"Not like that, young lady! Where did you ever get such an idea to try to pee like a boy? Ridiculous! I don't know what gets into you sometimes. Now turn around and sit down and pee right – like a lady! Geez!" she exclaimed as she waited to see him turn around. "Just stick that thing down between your legs," she said in a slightly more reasonable voice.

Under his mother's scrutiny, Jasmine was forced to push himself downward, and pee sitting down. His mother didn't turn around and stop watching until he started peeing that way.

"Don't ever let me catch you trying to pee like a boy again. Ridiculous!" she exclaimed once again as she went back to adjusting the bath water.

A few minutes later, Jasmine was soaking in the overly scented bath water that was filled with tons of bubbles. The bath felt nice, he just wasn't sure how clean he was getting. He could have also done without the flowery smell that he had no doubt would still cling to him when he got out of the tub.

His mother left him there for a few minutes, but she was soon back again. From the tub, Jazmine saw his mother grab something from one of the drawers in the counter. When she turned around, he saw a razor in her hands. "Okay, Jas," she said as she held out the razor. "Better shave your legs again. I noticed that they need a little attention. You're going to have to keep after them better than you have. Your armpits too I'm afraid."

Jimmy hesitantly took the razor. Now he had to shave his legs too...and his armpits. When would it ever end? But he knew the answer to that one. It wouldn't end until his sister swore to not hunt anymore, and not until he himself went hunting and killed something. Neither of which was likely to happen anytime soon.

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"Mom, do I have to wear a skirt again?" Jasmine asked as he stood in front of his sister's closet after his bath. "Jas...I mean...the other Jasmine doesn't always wear skirts."

Susan raised her eyebrows. "Jasmine, wasn't it you who agreed that you would..."

"I know. I know," Jasmine interrupted her, feeling totally frustrated. "How can I forget? That note said I have to wear skirts and dresses all the time so everyone knows I'm a sissy girl! Ugh!"

"You agreed to it," Susan reminded him.

"I know!" Jasmine replied with all too much frustration.

“And Jasmine, you know perfectly well that there’s no such thing as a sissy girl.”

Jasmine was surprised by that. “There’s not?”

“Of course not. You’ve got girls that are into more feminine things. Um...kind of girly girls I guess. And those that...aren’t so girly. But we’re all just girls. And those that are into the more feminine things are just thought of as a bit...girlier than the others. But there’s no such thing as a *sissy* girl. Jasmine, to a girl, a sissy is another name for sister, and a rather fond name at that. Girls often refer to their sisters as sissy. But there’s no such thing as a *sissy girl* – at least not the way you’re thinking of it. And those girls who are a bit girlier are considered...treasures! And they’re the ones who are loved the most!”

“I don’t think that’s how...the other Jasmine...”

“Jimmy, you mean!”

Jasmine rolled his eyes. “Jimmy...meant it when she came up with it.”

“Or maybe she just wanted to think of you as her sister at the time instead. Now what skirt did you want to wear? Or were you thinking about one of your dresses instead?”

Ugh! Jasmine had to pick out his own underwear, and fight to get his bra fastened. Since his mother told him he needed some tights, he chose the plainest pair he could find – white. He finally picked out his sister’s plain brown straight skirt and one of her cream colored sweaters to wear with it. He wore the same shoes he had worn last time, the ones his sister always wore to school. And then his mother made him start brushing his hair. Fifteen minutes later, he was trying his best to tie a bow into the back of it. A white bow to go with his white tights. Why bother? They weren’t going anywhere. Hopefully. It was taking him an eternity just to get dressed.

Susan watched Jasmine dressing. She had purposely made him pick out all his own clothes. It wasn’t hard to see though that this Jasmine’s tastes weren’t as colorful as the real Jasmine’s. This Jasmine had literally picked out the plainest things he could possibly find. She watched him trying to tie the ribbon into his hair. She wasn’t going to make him wear one, but the real Jasmine had a huge

collection of ribbons and bows and wore them often. Tying ribbons was one of the things this Jasmine was going to have to learn. Like it or not.

The bow Jasmine finally wound up with wasn't exactly very good. She was tempted to make him do it again, but she reminded herself that it was his first time doing it. "Okay," she finally said, "Now, you want some help with that homework?"

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Jimmy loved riding the four-wheeler, even though she had to ride behind Tommy and hold onto his back. Even as Jasmine, herself, she had loved it. Riding the ATVs was one of the most fun things the family ever did – all of them. They actually rode them for fun quite often, just as everyone in the family did. There were lots of roads and paths for them to ride through the woods and across the open fields closer by their houses as well. She tried her best to ignore what had happened to her hair earlier as the cold wind pushed against her face. Despite her hair, and despite having to ride with Tommy, it was still pure exhilaration.

She and Tommy were riding right behind Justin, who was riding behind Ethan, who was riding behind her Uncle Jed in front. Her father was bringing up the rear. She had her gun slung across her back like all the rest of them, and now they were bouncing along on what little path Uncle Jed was able to blaze as they made their way deeper into the woods.

Her brother, who was driving, suddenly slowed down and came to a stop. Her father stopped right behind them. She saw her uncle Jed up ahead looking closely at the somewhat frozen ground. She could see where it was all torn up now.

Jed studied the ground, but it didn't take much for his practiced eyes to tell him everything. A large group of razorbacks had been through there all too recently. They had let the population in that part of the land get out of control, and a bunch of wild pigs like that could do a lot of damage. They were dangerous too. Very dangerous! But that area of the land was the furthest away from their homes and the areas where they hunted more often. This area of their land had

been ignored a bit too long. He had only himself to blame. It was his job to look after such things.

"We'll stop here," he called back, "and go on foot. Keep your eyes open!" he cautioned. "It looks like a big bunch of them." There were six of them hunting. If they each shot one, six of the big hogs would go a long way toward providing pork for most of the family.

With the heavy rifle now in her hands, Jimmy followed her brother as her Uncle Jed picked his way through the woods, following the wide path the hogs had left. Jimmy noted that the ground where the hogs had been was nothing but messy mud. The ground where they hadn't been was frozen and hard. Quite a difference.

"There they are," Ethan said as he pointed in the distance. Jimmy couldn't see anything from where she was. She walked up to stand next to the others in the group. She noticed that her Uncle and her cousins weren't even trying to stay quiet or hide. They were just talking normally. In the distance, through the trees, she saw something move. She looked closer. Razorbacks! Wild Boar. Hogs. Pigs. All names for the same thing. Excitement!

"You be careful!" Clint cautioned his new son as severely as he could. "You too Tommy. These things are dangerous! Especially in a big group like they are."

Jimmy had heard before that they could be dangerous, but this was the first time she had ever seen live hogs out in the wild. She had seen hundreds of dead ones that her father and Tommy had brought back though. And she liked to eat pork – any way she could get it. Although nice crispy bacon was her favorite.

"We'll move a bit closer and start shooting," Jed said. "Just watch which way they start to bolt. And if they start heading this way, run! Climb a tree or something. Frighten them off if you can. But just watch out. Sometimes these things are too stubborn for their own good and they can get just plain nasty."

"Dad," Justin replied. "We've done this a hundred times. We know what we're doing."

Jed nodded toward Jimmy. "This is Jimmy's first time though. He hasn't seen these bad boys in action."

Jimmy suddenly found all the guys looking at her. "I'll be fine," she told them. "I can't wait to shoot one."

Jed nodded. "Just watch yourself. Hear?"

"I'm good!" Jimmy insisted.

"Okay" Jed said. "Let's go. Ethan, lead the way."

This time Jimmy noted that instead of following single file, they spread out more. The others had their guns ready, so she held her gun more at the ready too. Her thumb flipped the safety off. It didn't take long before she had a much better view of a wild boar – in the wild. The thing seemed a lot bigger than the ones she remembered seeing after her father had shot them and brought them home. It really was...frightening. Somewhat. The excitement of the situation took a lot of the fear away though.

They were almost on top of them when everyone stopped and raised their guns. Jimmy did the same...and noticed that some of the boar had now turned towards them and were acting disturbed. One of them started running right at them. A gun roared and the boar dropped to its knees then laid there grunting. Shot after shot rang out. Some of the boar ran at them, some ran off in different directions. Jimmy saw one coming somewhat in her direction. She quickly looked down the barrel of her gun and pulled the trigger. The boar dropped and rolled right where it was.

But now she saw three more charging right at her. Three razorbacks with tusks that she knew they wouldn't hesitate to use on her. And to her, the wild boar didn't look like they were frightened of them or their guns at all. If anything, they looked angry. Surprised by the speed of the things, as fast as she could she chambered a new round then quickly aimed and fired again and the lead boar dropped. A shot rang out next to her from her father and another one fell, but the last one was almost to them, its small tusks looking all too menacing as it charged her. A hand grabbed her arm and pulled her backwards and to the side as her father ran in front, yelling and waving the stock of his gun at the boar bearing down on them. The boar finally turned and ran off...and Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief. Damn that thing had run fast! Now she knew why they had said to be careful. Now she knew that those things were more dangerous than they looked.

"You okay?" her father asked.

"Sure Dad," Jimmy replied as she collected her wits. "I'm fine. Thanks though. I couldn't believe how fast those things were."

Her father nodded. "Now you know. So you watch for that in the future."

She nodded. "Why didn't they run away like the others?" she asked.

Clint looked down at his once daughter. "Because they're too pig-headed – just like someone else I know," he added.

Jimmy stared at him for a moment before turning to look at the dead hogs. "I got two today," she said brightly."

Clint rolled his eyes.

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Why, why, why? Why was he having to work on his sister's sewing project? That was part of the stuff his sister was doing for school. He wasn't even going to be part of that fashion show she was preparing for, so why should he have to learn all this sewing junk? But his mother was adamant, and she continually kept treating him just like he really was his sister. The way she said everything was like she expected him to already know everything. "Jasmine, you know perfectly well that you need to pin the pattern in the other direction. Now fix it." It was crazy! But he didn't miss the fact that his mother was spending a lot of time doing just one thing – teaching him.

And then once he had cut the material, he had to sit there and try to sew the pieces together – by hand. They didn't have a sewing machine, so he guessed there was no choice, other than to not do it at all. But he had seen his sister sitting there in the kitchen doing the very same thing he was now doing. And while he was doing it, his mother continually looked on and made suggestions, and very often made him undo something and redo it properly – several times. It was maddening!

The sudden sound of someone knocking on their back door sent a shiver of fear through Jasmine.

"Just keep working," Susan told him. "I'll get it."

But he couldn't keep working. He was too afraid that whoever was there might see him.

Susan opened the back door and smiled. A moment later, she opened the screen door. "Nichole!" she exclaimed happily. "How are you?"

Nichole? Jasmine's fear doubled.

"Fine Aunt Susan," Nichole replied. "Is Jasmine home?"

"Of course dear," Susan replied as she stood back to let the girl from next door into the house.

Nichole entered the kitchen and immediately spotted...Jimmy... dressed as Jasmine again. Her jaw dropped. "What's...?"

"Jasmine," Susan said, "aren't you going to at least say hi to your friend?"

Jasmine was almost too afraid to say anything. "Uh...hi," he managed to get out. He really just wanted to run off somewhere and hide.

Nichole couldn't take her eyes off of Jimmy – dressed as his sister. And there was no doubt that he looked scared seeing her there.

"What's going on, Aunt Susan?" Nichole asked, still staring at Jimmy.

Susan knew that the cat would be out of the bag for all the kids sooner or later. That time had just arrived. And as far as she could see, there was no reason to delay it at all. Fortunately, her father-in-law had already decreed somewhat of an answer to Nichole's question. "Jimmy and Jasmine are being punished again," she told the girl. "That's all you need to know, so don't ask anymore. But from now on, you and everyone else, are going to have to figure out how to treat both Jasmine and Jimmy as not only themselves, but sometimes, as each other. And not just today since you're likely going to see it again. I know it's confusing, but I'm afraid it's something we're all going to have to go along with for a while."

"How long?" Nichole asked, her eyes still on – Jasmine.

"I'm afraid that's going to be up to Jasmine...and Jimmy."

"What did they do?" she asked.

"That's one of those things I'd rather not tell you, but they're both being punished together. So based on that, please..." she paused

for a moment, then started again. "Nichole, please try to treat whatever Jasmine you see as the same friend you've always had, as if they're the same person. Now, would you like to have a glass of Coke or something?"

Nichole wasn't sure what she should think. Consider Jimmy, dressed as his sister, as if he really was his sister? How the heck was she supposed to do that? "Uh...no thanks, Aunt Susan. I just came over to tell Jasmine that Jezebel had her litter of puppies last night, and I was going to see if she wanted to come over and see them. But..."

"Oh, that sounds like a wonderful idea," Susan exclaimed. "Another litter of puppies!" She turned to her fake daughter. "Jas, why don't you put that away for a while? You and Nichole go and enjoy yourself. Get out of here and have some fun for a bit."

Jasmine didn't want anything to do with such an idea, but he recognized the unspoken order when he heard it. Asking if he really had to do it was on the tip of his tongue, but the look on his mother's face kept him from asking. "Okay," he said shyly, looking down at the floor and unable to look up at Nichole anymore. He got up and set what he was working on back on the table. Still looking at the floor, he walked past Nichole to the coats hung on pegs near the back door. He looked through them, and had to turn back to his mother. "What coat should I wear? These are all hunting jackets."

"In those clothes, you better grab the coat you wear to school. It's in your closet, dear."

Still looking shyly down at the floor, Jasmine turned and started back to his new bedroom.

"You're not going to change into play clothes?" Nichole asked him.

"She can't, dear," Susan replied. "I'm afraid that's part of the punishment that Jasmine has to live with. She's going to have to stay in skirts and dresses from now on."

Nichole looked up at her, wide-eyed. "That's horrible!" she exclaimed.

Susan just shrugged. "I'm afraid it's just something Jasmine is going to have to learn to deal with." She looked at Jasmine, who was still standing there listening. "Aren't you getting your coat?"

As Jasmine left the room, Nichole looked back to her Aunt Susan. "How am I supposed to do this, Aunt Susan?" she asked. "Jasmine is my best friend!"

"I know dear, and I'm afraid that you're going to have to make an effort to treat this...new Jasmine...as your same best friend too."

"How?"

"I'm afraid I can't help you much with that. But..." She looked up to make sure her new daughter wasn't back yet. "This Jasmine needs help learning how to be more feminine. She needs help learning how to act more like a girl and not like a boy. In fact, she's not supposed to act like a boy at all, only like a girl. So if you can find any ways to help her, it would be a really big help."

Nichole shook her head. "I don't know what."

"That's fine, dear," Susan told her. "It's just if you see anything that you think might help. Okay?"

"I...guess," Nichole finally agreed. Actually, she was wishing she had never bothered to stop in to see Jasmine at all. "Would it be better if we didn't go get Olivia?"

"No," Susan quickly decided. "I think you all need to start getting used to this new Jasmine. And Jasmine needs to start getting more used to all of you too."

Once again the cold invaded Jasmine's thinly covered legs as he went down the back steps, this time with Nichole. He was more than nervous, but he also knew that the whole family would soon hear that he was back in his sister's clothes again, and if this thing went on too long, they were all going to start seeing him more often as his sister instead of himself. Like it or not, he had to start doing things he didn't want to, like spending time with Nichole.

"I can't believe they're making you do this again!" Nichole exclaimed the moment the door was closed behind them.

"Yeah, I can't believe it either," Jasmine replied a bit sullenly.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"Um...it's not so much what I did," he replied. "It's more like something I didn't do, and...something my sister did."

"What?"

But he couldn't tell her. "Don't ask."

"And how about Jasmine?"

"I can't say," Jasmine told her. "My Dad says that this is going to be worse for her than it is for me. But so far, she's having nothing but fun while I'm..."

Nichole stopped. "Hey, why can't you have fun too?"

Jimmy shrugged. "I don't see anything to have fun about."

Nichole turned and started walking again. "That's so sad."

"Where are we going?" Jasmine finally asked. He had just noticed that they were going the wrong way to her house.

"To see Olivia, of course."

"Olivia?"

"Why are you surprised? We always include Olivia in everything. Allison too."

He knew the four girls usually hung around together. His problem was mostly with Olivia. Of all the cousins, he least wanted Olivia to see him as he was now. Even though she was his cousin, he had found himself all too fond of watching her lately.

As they walked the large backyard toward Olivia's house, Nichole wondered how Olivia was going to take seeing Jimmy dressed up as his sister again. Nichole knew for a fact that Olivia had a small crush on Jimmy.

Jasmine stood back and stared at the ground as Nichole knocked on the back door. He really didn't want to be there. The door was opened, and he forced himself to look up.

Jane opened the door. She wasn't surprised to see Nichole there at all. The part that took her breath away was seeing – Jasmine. She forced herself to try to act normal as she opened the door. "Hi girls," she greeted them brightly. "I guess you're looking for Olivia?"

"Of course," Nichole laughed.

A moment later, Jasmine found himself going up the steps, and then into his Aunt's warm kitchen. Fortunately, he didn't see anyone else there.

"Did you want to go back to her room, or should I call her?" Jane asked.

"We were going to see if she wanted to see Jezebel's new puppies," Nichole explained.

“Olivia!” Jane called loudly. “Nichole and Jasmine are here! Jezebel had her puppies!” She was rewarded to hear an excited shriek coming from her daughter’s bedroom.

A moment later, Olivia ran into the kitchen. “Hi guys...” she stopped and stared as she caught sight of Jimmy – dressed as Jasmine. “What the...”

“Uh...hey Olivia,” Jasmine said shyly, then looked back down at the floor again.

“You’re supposed to be Jasmine again?” Olivia asked.

Jasmine only nodded.

“Is this because of that big meeting last week?”

Jasmine nodded again, still looking at the floor.

Jane watched the three “girls” carefully. But what she was dying to do was to pick up the phone to call Susan. “Aren’t you three going to see the puppies?” she asked.

Olivia looked surprised. “You’re sure?” she asked her mother. “I mean, should we?”

“Of course. Why not?” Jane said.

“Okay,” Olivia replied with a shake of her head. “Let me get a coat.”

As her daughter ran off, Jane looked to Jasmine. “Are you... doing okay?” she asked.

“So far,” Jasmine replied. Two minutes later, his legs were inflicted by the cold wind again as the three girls walked back toward Nichole’s house.

“I can’t believe it!” Olivia exclaimed as they walked.

“Aunt Susan says we need to try to help Jasmine here act more like a girl. She say’s Jasmine isn’t supposed to be allowed to act like a boy at all.”

“Is that true?” Olivia asked, looking at Jasmine.

“Friad so,” Jasmine replied.

“She’s not allowed to wear anything but skirts and dresses too,” Nichole added.

“You’re kidding?” Olivia exclaimed. “How are you going to do anything?”

“I have no idea,” Jasmine told her.

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Susan wasn't the least bit surprised when her phone rang. She had been sitting waiting for the call. "Hello?"

"Susan!" Jane said, "They were just here! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm afraid there wasn't any time," Susan replied. "Nichole just knocked on the door like she usually does and I figured that Jasmine had to learn how to cope with it all sooner or later."

"Yeah," Jane agreed. "We're all going to have to learn to cope with it. Does Marcy know yet? They're heading that way."

"Not yet," Susan replied. "I guess I should really call and warn her."

"Maybe you better. And...Susan,"

"Yeah?"

"Um...why don't we go down and meet there too. I mean, puppies are cute and all."

"In other words, you want to keep an eye on the girls."

"I didn't say that!"

Susan laughed. "I'll call Marcy now. See you there in a few minutes." A moment later she was dialing her phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey Marcy. I just talked to Jane, and I wanted to warn you that the girls are heading back to your house now."

"That's fine," Marcy replied. "Nichole said she was going to get them. Jezebel had her puppies last night."

"Yeah, I know," Susan replied. "It's just that, I wanted to warn you that the Jasmine that's coming may not be the one you're expecting to see."

On the other end of the phone, Marcy's jaw dropped. "Oh... my...God!"

"Something like that."

"Well, I guess it had to start sooner or later," Marcy replied.

"Jane and I were thinking of stopping in...to see the puppies."

"Oh sure!" Marcy laughed. "I'll put a fresh pot of coffee on." She stopped as a thought suddenly hit her. "I wonder if they'll stop in at Janet's house to get Allison. They usually do."

"Maybe I better call Janet now too," Susan suggested.

"Don't worry," Marcy replied. "I'll do it myself. I might as well invite her in for coffee with the rest of us."

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The three "girls" didn't go directly to Nichole's house since Olivia and Nichole automatically knew they were going to get Allison too. After all, she was one of the Four Musketeers. The walk from Olivia's house, all the way across so many huge backyards, was a long way. Jasmine's poor legs and feet were starting to feel totally frozen. Once again, he stood back shyly as Nichole knocked on the door.

Janet was still on the phone with Marcy when she heard the girls knocking at her back door. "They're here now," she told Marcy. "Let me let them in." With the phone still in her hand, she opened the door. "Hi girls," she said brightly to them all, although her eyes went immediately to Jasmine. He looked...cold. "Come on in," she told them as she stood back. She was quick to note that Olivia and Nichole were sensibly dressed, but Jasmine was only wearing a skirt and some tights. She was about to say something about that, when she remembered that part of his punishment had included that he could only wear skirts and dresses. She turned back to the phone in her hand. "Uh...I'll see you in a few minutes, Marcy. I've got to find Allison."

She hung up the phone and purposely didn't look at Jasmine as she said. "Let me get her for you." She walked back to her daughter's bedroom calling, "Allison! You're friends are here," much as she usually did. But this time she was waiting to talk with her daughter before Allison could see her friends. The moment Allison came hurrying out of her room, Janet stopped her. "Allie, hold on a moment."

"Yeah, Mom?" Allison asked.

"Remember that talk we had about Jimmy and Jasmine and the punishment they were going to get?"

"Yeah."

"We'll, I just didn't want you to be surprised about which Jasmine is out there. Okay?"

Allison's jaw dropped. "You mean?"

"Just remember that talk, okay? You try to treat him nice. He's going to need all the help and understanding he can get. Especially from you...you and Nichole and Olivia. You're all best friends. He's going to have no one else to help him, and no one else may even be nice to him."

She nodded. "Is he scared?" she asked. "That was one of the big things you thought might happen."

"I don't know," Janet replied. "Right now, he looks like he's just trying to cope."

Allison nodded. "Okay Mom. I'll try. It's just going to be strange, that's all. And how about Jasmine...I mean the other...I mean... Jimmy? She's the one that's my friend."

"You mean *he*. Getting the little pronouns right is going to be difficult for all of us. And I don't know about him yet," Janet told her.

Allison nodded again. "Okay, I'll try." Her eyes rolled a bit and her face contorted into an odd expression. "I guess I better get to work then."

"Thanks dear," Janet said as she gave her daughter a quick hug. She released her and literally shoved her in the direction of the kitchen.

"Hi guys," Allison said brightly as she caught sight of all her friends. As hard as she tried not to though, her eyes still went straight to Jasmine and stayed there. To her he looked...ashamed, and...cold? He had to be cold with just that skirt and some tights on. She forced her eyes away from Jasmine to Nichole and Olivia. "What's up?" she asked as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

Nichole and Olivia both noticed that Allison was saying nothing at all about Jasmine. "Uh...Jezebel had her puppies last night," Nichole said, although a bit hesitantly. "We thought you'd like to see them."

"Jez had the puppies?" Allison exclaimed, much as she usually would. "Let me get my coat!"

Two minutes later, Jasmine's legs were once again subjected to the cold wind blowing on them. How the heck was he ever going to get through the winter?

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"Oh they're so cute!" Olivia exclaimed as the girls looked over the low fence of the penned in area that had been arranged in the laundry room for the dogs.

To Jasmine, the little lumps didn't look much like dogs at all. And cute wasn't exactly a term he would use to describe the newborn puppies – all eight of them. His Uncle Pete and Aunt Marcy raised Bluetick Coonhound dogs for sale. His Uncle Pete trained some of them for hunting too. Most of the puppies were currently attached to Jezebel who was lying on her side while her puppies fed from her, but some of the little lumps had managed to move themselves further away on the blanket.

Nichole climbed over the low fence and carefully knelt down. Jezebel was a dog they bred often, and Jezebel knew that Nichole wouldn't hurt her puppies. This early in the puppies lives though, meant that it would be best if the other girls didn't touch them yet. She picked up one of the little lumps, with a careful eye on the mother dog. "This one is my favorite," she said as she held one up so they could see.

"It's so cute!" Allison said in a heartfelt voice. "Is it a boy or girl?"

"This one's a boy," Nichole told her. With a practiced hand, she laid the little puppy down closer to the mother and between two of the other puppies there. The newborn pup started wiggling closer to its food source. Jezebel raised her head to check on her baby, then seeing that it was alright, laid her head down again. Nichole climbed out of the pen.

"I can't wait till we can play with them," Olivia said, her eyes still watching them carefully. "Are any of them sold yet?"

"Two, I think." Nichole replied.

Allison noted that of all of them, Jasmine was the only one who wasn't saying anything. *She* was just hanging back out of the way.

“Jas,” she said. “You’re being awfully quiet today. What do you think?”

“Um...they’re nice,” he said, still looking down at the little black and white lumps of what would someday be big, powerful hunting dogs. Personally, to him, they looked more like rats.

“Just nice? Jas, you love puppies!”

“I do?”

“Of course! You love any kind of babies.”

“I do?” he asked again.

Allison went over to him and put her arms around him. “You okay?” she asked. “You gonna make it?”

“I guess,” Jasmine replied. “What choice do I have?”

“Right!” Allison agreed. “What choice do you have?” She backed off, and then suddenly sat down on the floor of the small crowded laundry room with her back up against the washing machine. She patted the floor. “Come on, sit with us.” Hesitantly, not just Jasmine, but Olivia, and Nichole sat as well. Allison leaned forward, her voice was just above a whisper. “Mom says you’re going to need my help...I mean *our* help! She says you won’t know what to do, how to act, or anything. And she’s afraid you won’t have any friends at all. She made me promise to try to help you all I can.” She looked around at the other girls. “I think...we all need to help you as much as we can.”

Jasmine shook his head. “Why would you bother? All I’m good for now is to be made fun of by everyone.”

Allison’s eyes went wide. “Because we’re your friends. Best friends. We’re the Four Musketeers.”

Jasmine rolled his eyes. “Isn’t that supposed to be Three Musketeers?”

“There was a movie once called The Four Musketeers,” Allison replied. “And besides, there are four of us. We watch out for each other. We help each other. We’re best friends.”

“But I’m not...”

“Doesn’t matter!” Olivia said, cutting him off quickly. The others all looked to her. “Allison’s right. It doesn’t matter which Jasmine you are. If you’re Jasmine, then you’re automatically part of us.

You're one of us. And we always help each other. We do everything together!"

"You told me a little while ago," Nichole added, "that your sister is having lots of fun, but you don't see anything to have fun about." She looked around at the other girls. "Maybe, we can try to find some ways to help him have some fun."

"Help *her* have some fun," Allison corrected her. "Mom says we need to try to get all the pronouns right when we talk about him...I mean her. See, even I can't get it right," she laughed. Her voice turned serious again. "But yeah. You're exactly right. We've got to!" She held her arms wide. "What say? Group hug? We all do this together? The Four Musketeers ride again?"

Olivia and Nichole immediately leaned in and locked arms for a group hug. Jasmine though held back. Allison continued to hold out her remaining arm wide, waiting for Jasmine to join them. "It takes four for us to be the Four Musketeers," she said. Slowly and hesitantly, Jasmine leaned in and joined the four-girl hug.

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Outside the room, Marcy just peeked her head around the doorway. She had stopped just outside the room to listen in. She saw the group hug, and then quietly backed away and went back to the kitchen where the others were waiting. "I think Jas is going to be just fine," she said with a smile on her face. They're all in there hugging right now.

Susan breathed a small sigh of relief. Janet getting Allison to pull all the girls together to help had been a stroke of genius.

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Susan was walking back across the yards on her way home when she saw her husband's truck pull into the yard and continue on toward the garage at the back. Her eyes automatically searched the windows of the truck for a sign of her kids. Tommy she could see in the front seat with his father, but the darkened smaller back windows didn't show her a sign of her daughter at all. As Clint drove the truck

around in a small circle to get the trailer lined up with the garage door better, she changed direction a bit and went out to meet them. A moment later, she was relieved as she saw Tommy jump out, obviously perfectly healthy, and right afterwards, she saw Jasmine climb out of the back seat as well. Jasmine had her hat on, so she couldn't see how bad her hair looked, but she did see more than a few long tendrils hanging down from the sides.

"Hi Mom," Jimmy called. "We shot a bunch today!"

"You did?" Susan replied. "Where are they?" she asked, although in truth she'd rather not see any dead animals.

"We took them down to Birkenrods to have him process and cut them up for us."

Susan, of course, knew that Rod Birkenrod made his living by processing the dead animals and cutting them up into the kinds of meats everyone liked. He was a pretty good butcher, and a pretty good taxidermist too, as evidenced by the animals mounted on both Tommy and Jimmy's walls. She wasn't about to have one of those things hung anywhere else in the house though.

Once her husband had climbed out of the truck, she gave him a brief hug before he headed back to the trailer to help the boys unload the two four-wheelers.

Clint unfastened one of the tie-down straps holding one of the ATVs in place. As he looked up, he saw his wife still watching. "Where's Jas?" he asked in much the same way he often did. There was just a hint more of concern in his voice this time.

"She's over at Nichole's with all her friends," Susan told him. "Jezebel had another litter of puppies last night."

"Jezebel had her puppies?" Jimmy exclaimed excitedly. "Ooohhh! I want to see them."

"Jimmy!" Clint's voice barked. "What the hell do you care about a bunch of stupid puppies? You sound like a damn sissy girl the way you say that. They're just dogs. Now get that strap off and let's get this thing in the garage."

Jimmy was shocked. Once again her father had rebuked her for acting too much like a girl. But she couldn't help it! She was a girl! And her dumb brother was over with all her friends playing with the puppies? She was suddenly so jealous. But all she could do was to

look sadly down and mutter, “Sorry Dad,” before she went about unfastening another tie-down strap.

Clint looked up at his wife. She was looking back at him with a rather surprised look on her face. He was glad to see the small nod of approval before she walked back to the house.

Jimmy went about helping with the ATVs, but she couldn’t stop thinking about her brother. Was he really there with Nichole, and Olivia, and Allison? The Four Musketeers? Well, three of them anyway. She was the fourth! She wondered how he was getting on with them. How were they treating him? She was dying to know all about it, but she had no real way to find out – yet! But first chance she got to talk with any of them, she’d get all the details – from all of them!

Chapter 11 – God and Jacob

December 7th

Jasmine wasn't the least bit happy to find out that the family was going to church on Sunday. They did go sometimes, but not all that often. Why now? And why when he had no choice but to dress like his stupid sister?

His mother had made him take another bath the night before, and then she had woken him up extra early that morning to start getting ready. He was now sitting at the breakfast table, with his bathrobe on, and his hair full of rollers. Ugh! He could just scream! Especially every time he saw his dumb sister look up at him and smile a bit too delightedly at him. Damn her!

He couldn't keep from staring back at her though. Her hair wasn't exactly normal either. He had been shocked when his mother had cut his sister's hair the day before. And the way she had done it, it looked weird. Messy. Pretty much awful! The sides were all somewhat long and straggly, while the back pretty much went straight across. It didn't look like any hairstyle he had seen on any boy...or girl! Ever since it had been cut, he had noticed his sister continually running her hands over her hair, feeling different parts of it constantly. She especially kept feeling the back of her head. He had a pretty good idea as to why that was since that was where his mother had cut the braid off of her yesterday.

And now their parents were making them go to church like this. Him, dressed as his sister, and her, dressed as he would normally be...as he should be. He couldn't imagine the reaction everyone at church would make when they saw him...or his sister.

After breakfast, Susan took Jasmine back to his bedroom where she pulled the rollers out of his hair and brushed it out for him. Much better! "What dress are you going to wear today?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied.

"Well go pick one please."

He got up and opened the closet. By his own handwriting he had doomed himself to wearing nothing but skirts and dresses whenever he had to be his sister. Unfortunately, his sister had plenty of both. And unfortunately, his sister seemed to love overly bright and bold colors. He picked the least bold dress he could find. A simple looking thing with small red flowers all over it. It had a white crocheted collar and a thin black belt that wrapped around the waist. And long sleeves! He pulled the dress out and showed it to his mother. "This one okay?" he asked.

"Very nice dear," Susan replied, seeing him hold up the one dress his sister probably wore the least. This new Jasmine wasn't as interested in the bright colors as her other Jasmine. Based on the dress he had chosen, she selected a hair ribbon for him from the many hung on the hooks on the wall. "This one should go very nicely with that." She smiled, "You finish getting dressed now," she said as she handed the ribbon to him. "I've got to clean up in the kitchen and then get dressed myself." She was curious to see how well he would do this time. As she walked out of the room, she realized she had forgotten to mention makeup to him. Oh well. She'd just see how he looked after she got dressed. At his age, she really didn't care that much if he wore makeup or not, but the real Jasmine did, mostly because she was obsessed with fashion and the way she looked. So why wasn't the real Jasmine caving in to their demands yet? She had really thought that cutting her hair like she did yesterday would do the trick. But no such luck. Consequently, Susan was at her wits end – still!

Jasmine looked at the dark red ribbon in his hand. Why did his sister seem to like wearing them all the time? An odd thought crossed his mind and he smiled a bit. She might love wearing them, but could she still wear them with her hair cut like it was? He was guessing she might have a little more trouble with that now than she used to.

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Jimmy was already wearing her brother's pants and shirt. Her brother didn't own a suit to wear to church, but very few of the boys

there ever did wear one. She was sure that most of them didn't even own a suit. She was a bit disappointed because she thought a boy's suit might be interesting to wear for a change. And a nice bright necktie to go with it! That would be so cool. But no, her brother, that she had to pretend that she was, had nothing like that in his closet at all. Pity.

It didn't take her long at all to get fully dressed, which seemed odd. No makeup to put on, no special fussing with her hair, no special fussing with anything! Basically, she had nothing special to wear at all. Dull, dull, dull! But knowing that her idiot brother was now having to deal with all that made her smile with delight. She couldn't believe that her mother had put the rollers in his hair that morning. She wondered how the poor sap had enjoyed that! Actually, she hoped he hated it. She hoped he hated all of it. And the best part was, she knew he was stuck with it. As long as she refused to swear off hunting, her brother was going to be stuck learning all the girly things in life. He was going to be stuck being made fun of by everyone else for a long, long time. Because she had no intention of ever quitting hunting. She loved it too much! And besides, anyone who was afraid of a stupid little duck – deserved it! She still couldn't believe that.

She had heard that he had spent a good part of the day yesterday with all her friends. She wondered how that went. She wondered too what her friends thought about it. She couldn't wait to ask them. But asking them about her brother reminded her that when she did see them, they were all going to see what had happened to her hair. And that was going to be major embarrassing – for her! Why did her mother have to do that to her? But she knew the answer. Her mother had pleaded with her over and over again before she cut it. Pleaded with her to quit hunting. But when her mother had asked, she never really believed that her mother would actually cut off all her beautiful hair. She had never believed it at all. Too late now.

She stared into the mirror over her brother's dresser and fussed with her hair a bit again. No matter what she did with it, she couldn't make it look decent at all. No matter what she did, it just looked plain bad! Not even masculine. It just looked – a mess! And her

mother hadn't made the least little effort to help her fix it now. Not even after the job her mother had done hacking her braid off. Helping her with it was the least she figured her mother could have done. But no. Her mother had never said a single word about her hair ever since. Not one! Was she supposed to leave it like it was? Was having her hair like it was, part of her punishment? She had no ideas. No answers. Only a huge anger over what her mother had done to her. How could she!

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Jasmine left the house that day with his sister's white bible in his hands, and her purse slung over his arm. To say that he felt nervous would be an understatement. The furry white coat he was wearing did nothing to make him feel any less ashamed. His sister seemed to be coping with it all much better than he was, but he was very glad to note how self-conscious she seemed to be about her hair. But as far as Jasmine was concerned, his sister's hair was the one and only thing his sister had to feel ashamed about. And he didn't consider that to be much of a big deal at all. Nervously, he rode in the middle of the back seat of his mother's car between her two "brothers." He was sitting in the spot that his sister would have usually occupied.

The little country Baptist church they went to was just that, a small, almost tiny, country church. The congregation came from the few people who inhabited that remote and mostly wild part of the state. In theory, the entire family belonged to that church, it was just that most Sunday's the majority of them either were too busy to attend, or they just didn't bother going, which was one of the reasons that Jasmine was so perturbed that they were going this time. Of course, his mother had explained it away with some piece of nonsense about Christmas coming up. Yeah, okay, they did attend more around Christmas time. Easter too. But why today of all days? As his father pulled the car into the dirt parking area, he was quick to note a lot of cars and trucks that he recognized as being family members, including the car that Olivia's mother drove, and also the car that Nichole's mother drove, and Allison's mother's car too. All his new "friends."

He could only call his entire day yesterday with them as being weird. Just like most everything else in his life was weird now. They had all been determined to somehow make him realize that the things they were all into were fun. Yeah right! Not as far as he could see. What was so fun about looking through fashion websites and magazines and talking about clothes? What was so fun about gossiping about all the boys in school? Okay, that had been surprising. He had no idea that some of those girls had those kinds of opinions about the guys at school! But fun? Not as far as he was concerned. But even when he had finally left them to go home, they were still talking about finding some way to help him have fun – as a girl. Right now, that didn't seem very likely. He was quickly resigning himself to a life of misery.

Getting out of the car and walking from the parking lot into the church, was another reminder to him of how bad his decision was to agree to all his sister's demands. How did the other girls stand the cold on their legs? As he looked around, he could see that for once, most of the other girls there were also wearing dresses! Well, most of them. To say that he was self-conscious about the way he was dressed was an understatement. He was getting shocked looks from people already, and they had barely walked in the door!

"Jasmine!" he heard Olivia exclaim as he walked in, calling too much attention to him. Yeah, his life was now basically over. Come school tomorrow, he'd never be able to live this down.

"Jasmine!" Olivia said again as she ran up to him. "You're... Jasmine again. Still!"

"Um...yeah. All weekend now."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"Uh...I guess I didn't think of it."

Olivia's eyes then caught sight of Jimmy, the real Jasmine. And she noticed immediately that there was something wrong with her hair. She stared wide-eyed at it for a moment.

Jimmy had never in her life felt so out of place. So...ugly. Her hair was gone, and it was the one thing she was sure everyone was noticing. There was certainly no doubt that Olivia was noticing it. Olivia couldn't stop staring at her. "Hi Olivia," Jimmy said nervously.

"Uh...hi...Jimmy," Olivia said, still staring.

Olivia forced herself to look away from the one who actually was her best friend. She forced herself to ignore the new Jimmy completely. Instead, she grabbed the new Jasmine by the hand and tried to be excited as she said, "Come on! Nichole and Allison are helping to put up a Christmas tree in the other room. Let's go help them."

Like it or not, Jasmine allowed himself to be pulled along.

Jimmy watched her brother being pulled off to go play with – her friends! Not his friends, they were *her* friends. But Olivia had barely said a single word to her. And then she had grabbed the wrong Jasmine and gone running off to have fun! How could Olivia ignore her like that? How could one of her very best friends do that to her? It wasn't right! It wasn't right at all! Wait till tomorrow when she saw her friends. She would give them all a good piece of her mind! Having nothing better to do, she followed after her "sister."

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Reverend Jordan Cosinger was in the big anteroom where some of the younger members of his congregation were busying themselves before the service by putting up one of the small artificial Christmas trees that would be only one of several in the upcoming weeks. But it was now December and this was a good way for the kids to occupy themselves for a few minutes before the service actually started. It didn't even matter if the job got finished or not. His main goal was to keep the kids busy for a little while.

The church had no Sunday school, although the subject had been brought up more than a few times lately, but most weeks, not enough kids came to make it worthwhile. In an area as remote as where they all lived, the small country Baptist church he presided over was rarely ever full.

As he watched the kids starting to put decorations on the small tree. A large patch of white caught his eye. He turned his head to see one of the girls entering wearing one of those furry white coats. But closer inspection showed him that the girl in that coat wasn't a girl at all. It was Jimmy! Clint and Susan McComber's son. What was going on? Angrily, he strode toward the boy who he realized

now was completely dressed as a girl, including wearing one of his sister's dresses. "What is this?" he asked angrily. "What are you doing here dressed like that?"

Total fear hit Jasmine as he stopped dead in his tracks and watched as Reverend Cosinger headed angrily toward him. He felt Olivia dropping his hand and moving a few feet away, leaving him on his own.

"What are you doing here dressed up like your sister?" Reverend Cosinger demanded. "Don't you know that this is blasphemy? Don't you know how wrong this is in the sight of God?"

"Um..." Jasmine automatically said as he searched for some way to respond. "Um...I kind of don't have much choice."

"What do you mean, not much choice? Where's your mother and father?"

Jasmine only pointed back out toward the church area where they had come in.

Reverend Cosinger grabbed Jasmine by the arm of his coat and literally pulled him toward the door. But he didn't get two steps before the door opened again and the real Jasmine walked in, dressed like her brother. "What is this?" Reverend Cosinger yelled. "Both of you?"

Jimmy wasn't sure what she had just walked into. Before she had a chance to react, Reverend Cosinger had grabbed her by the arm too and he was dragging her back through the doors along with her crazy brother.

The Reverend was quick to notice that there were more people attending church that day than usual. And it wasn't even time for the service to begin yet. Because of the extra people, it took him a few moments to spot Clint and Susan McComber, but when he did, the grip he had on the two twins didn't lessen one bit as he continued to drag them back toward their parents. What he was doing quickly caught the attention of everyone in the room. "What's the meaning of this?" he bellowed loudly and angrily. "Why are your kids dressed as each other? Don't you know that God prohibits this kind of thing?"

Clint did what any other man would do when faced with an angry confrontation such as he suddenly found himself in, he went into

confrontation mode himself, ready to fight. Especially for his kids. But before he could say one word back, his father's angry voice filled the entire church. "Hold on there, Reverend!"

Everyone in the church turned to look in the direction of Jacob McComber's deep voice. The people in the room cleared an empty space between Jacob, Reverend Cosinger, and Clint and Susan. The fact that the Reverend was still holding tightly onto both Jimmy and Jasmine made everyone in the church take notice of the way they were both dressed. But with an argument now going on in the very middle of the church, nobody had much of a chance to react to that for themselves.

"Stay out of this Jacob," the Reverend angrily returned. "This concerns God and the parents of these two kids!"

"I don't give a damn whether you think God is involved or not!" Jacob returned. "But this doesn't just concern Clint and Susan, it concerns the entire McComber Clan. All of us! And we all had a say in what those two young'uns are doin'."

Reverend Cosinger was shocked. "What are you saying? You all had a hand in this blasphemy?"

"It ain't blasphemy Reverend," Jacob said. "It's family business and nothin' else. And it sure ain't your business!"

"Not my business? Anything pertaining to God and this church is my business!"

"And anything pertainin' to my family is my business! And I don't give a damn what you think God may feel about the situation."

Reverend Cosinger was livid. "Jacob, this isn't right! It says right in the bible that..."

"I don't give a damn what the bible says," Jacob roared. "This is family business and not yours or God's. Our family. And if you don't like what the McComber Clan does, then maybe you ought to start looking to find yourself another church!"

This time, Reverend Cosinger was shocked. "Find another church? How can you say that?"

"I *can* say it and I've already said it," Jacob replied. "How many members of our family sit on the board of directors or whatever you call it here? How many? A big part of them I'll wager."

The Reverend Cosinger backed down a bit. It was true. The majority of the church's board of trustees was from the McComber Clan. Most of his paycheck came in one way or another from them. "You can't possibly think that they'll back you up on this!" he replied. "I know each and every one of those trustees very well. They're all God-fearing people. Every man and woman! None of them are going to agree with you this time. God himself decreed..."

"I'm on my father's side!" Brian McComber called into the argument, stopping the Reverend and catching him by surprise. "I side with my father...and I'm sure every last one of us does too. We all had a hand in this, and we all know what's at stake here. And it's a lot more than you could possibly imagine."

"I agree!" Pete McComber added.

"Me too!" Valerie McComber agreed. She was one of the trustee's as well, even though her husband Jed rarely ever attended the church.

"We all agree," Rose McComber told him. "Every last one of us."

Reverend Cosinger looked around the room. Every face either was against him, or clearly didn't know what to think. He finally relinquished his grip on the two twins. "I don't know how you can do this Jacob," he said. "It's not right! It's blasphemous in the sight of God!"

"Like I said, Reverend, I don't give a damn what God thinks when it comes to my family. We all know what's goin' on. We all know what we're doin'. It took a heap of serious discussion to arrive at this decision, so don't think we did it lightly. Those two kids are dressed as each other for a reason, and you're likely to see them that way quite a bit in the future. Maybe. I'm afraid that little possibility is going to be totally up to the twins as to how long this thing goes on. But this is family business, and it will stay family business, like it or not. So get off your high-horse Reverend, 'cause we know what we're doin' and what we've done. And we're stickin' to what we all decided – as a family."

Reverend Cosinger stood there and stared at Jacob for a few moments. Nobody moved. Nobody barely breathed the entire time. Finally he shook his head. "It's on your shoulder's Jacob. You're the one who's going to have to answer to God for this."

“That’s fine,” Jacob replied. “That’s no more than I expect. And when that time comes, God and me will talk it out and see. More than likely, he and I will have bigger issues than this to discuss. But in the meantime, you know where I stand. Where we all stand.”

The Reverend looked around at everyone in the congregation. He could see without a doubt that he was fighting a losing battle. He shook his head. “It’s on your shoulders Jacob,” he muttered. “You’ll answer to God for this for sure!”

“Like I said,” Jacob returned. “That’s fine with me. God and I can talk about it all he wants come that time. But this is the way things are going to stay right here and now.”

With another shake of his head, Reverend Jordan Cosinger turned and strode angrily out of the room.

Jacob watched the Reverend until the doors closed and he couldn’t see him anymore. He put his arm around his wife’s shoulders. “Thanks, Honey. I appreciate your support.”

Rose said nothing, but instead allowed herself to be guided by her husband’s arm still around her shoulders, not to where they usually sat when they came to church, but all the way up to the very first pew where he sat them down right at the center aisle. He was simply determined to put himself and his beliefs right up front. If he had turned around, he would have seen Brian McComber guide his entire family into the pew right behind him.

“Come on,” Clint said softly as he took Jasmine’s hand and led them all to the next pew. “Susan, you sit on that side. Tommy sit next to your mother. Jimmy, you’re next.” He waited while his fake son went into the pew next, then he pushed his fake daughter in, and then sat down on the aisle beside them. Three pews in a row dominated by McCombers. His brother Pete led his family into the pew directly behind them as one by one, all the McCombers took the inside seats on the aisle, showing their numbers. Showing their strength. Showing their unwavering support for each other.

If it wasn’t for the fact that there were many members of the congregation other than the McCombers, Reverend Cosinger would have cancelled the service. But the McCombers weren’t the only ones in his church. Not by a long shot. They just happened to control a lot of the money and power. Something they were all too

willing to throw about. As he tried to calm himself, he put his robe on and prepared himself to lead the church service. A service that would be heavily marred by the blasphemy of those two children in his church.

With the Reverend's wife playing the upright piano for the congregation to sing to, he started the service in his usual way, this time with a Christmas hymn since it was now December and Christmas was only a few weeks away. He followed with some announcements, then he got to the lesson for the day, taken straight from the bible. But as he opened the bible to the passage he had planned, his eyes fell again on Jacob in the front row, with each pew behind him backed up by more McCombers. And the worst of it was in the third row. The row where those two children were dressed the way God had demanded they shouldn't be.

The lesson for the day was supposed to be taken from the book of Mark, a lesson leading up to Christmas, but all thoughts of that went right out of his head. "Today's lesson," he said as he quickly thumbed the pages of his bible, looking for the proper spot, "is from the book of Deuteronomy. Those of you who have their bibles with you, please turn to Deuteronomy twenty-two, verse five." He waited a few moments to give those with bibles a chance to find it. But the whole time he waited, his eyes stayed on either Jacob, or the two twins. He finally looked down at his own bible and began reading in a strong and very determined voice.

The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.

He stopped reading and looked straight at Jacob. "I'm sure that God will add his blessing to the reading of *his* holy word." He was disappointed to see not a single sign that he had shaken Jacob McComber one little bit. Forcing himself not to curse, he finally pulled up his notes and launched into his prepared sermon for the week.

The rest of the service was somewhat normal. He made no other mention of the situation, and with the exception of knowing that

the two twins were dressed so wrongly, everything else seemed to be fine.

At the end of the service, Reverend Cosinger even stood at the door to the church, shaking hands and greeting each and every member of his congregation that walked out. He greeted every member, except a few from the McComber Clan. He refused to even hold his hand out toward Clint McComber when he and his family departed the church. He only stood back scowling at them instead. He did shake hands with Clint's brother Brian though, the doctor, and the current head of the church board.

The final person to leave the church was Jacob McComber. The Reverend wasn't going to shake his hand at all, but Jacob stood there with his hand held out, waiting, his eyes never once leaving the Reverend's eyes. Eventually, Reverend Cosinger gave in and shook Jacob's hand.

"Reverend," Jacob said as he gripped the Reverend's hand firmly, "the next time I even get the slightest *whisper* from you about our family's business, you can pack your bags and start lookin' for a new church." Jacob shook his hand and walked off, leaving the Reverend to think whatever he wanted.

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To Susan, there was no doubt that the mood of her entire family was strained. They all felt it. Her husband spoke the only words said on the way home. "I want us all to stay home today," he said. "Let this mess settle." Susan couldn't agree more.

Susan put Jasmine to work helping her get Sunday lunch together. Nothing fancy. She wasn't in the mood for anything that would take too much work. Without a doubt, the confrontation between her father-in-law and Reverend Cosinger was uppermost on all their minds.

Lunch was an odd affair. Susan could tell that she and her husband were trying their best to act normal, like nothing had happened, but all three of her children were silent through the whole meal.

Just before lunch ended, Susan decided that something had to be done to restore at least a bit more normalcy to their moods. She turned to her husband, "Are you and Jimmy going to finally try to fix that ATV this afternoon?" She wanted to keep them all busy somehow. Give them all something else to think about.

Clint scowled for a moment. He needed to fix the darn thing, but he had been planning on fixing it with his son – the right Jimmy. The Jimmy he had now wouldn't know the first place to start! "I don't know," he replied. "I'm not sure Jimmy is up to it."

"Then maybe you should get him up to it," Susan pushed.

Clint thought about it, then nodded. "Yeah, the thing's got to get fixed." He turned to his fake son. "Just as soon as you can get changed, we'll tackle fixing that ATV you wanted to fix so badly."

"But Dad..." Jasmine exclaimed. "That was supposed to be my job! I wanted to do it!"

"You Jasmine?" Susan said before her husband could say another word. "Since when have you planned on ever fixing one of those things? What would you even know about it?"

Jasmine's face fell. He was angry and hurt. Fixing that ATV was supposed to be his job. He had planned it all. He had even studied the manual for it until he had every word memorized. He could probably take the whole machine apart, piece by piece and put it back together again. And now his sister was going to work on it instead? He wanted to scream.

Jimmy was just as shocked. Her fix the ATV? She didn't know the first thing about it at all. She had absolutely no interest in knowing anything about the way it worked. She just like riding the things. That was fun! But fixing them? She couldn't care in the least!

Susan turned to Tommy next. "Why don't you go out and help them. I'm sure that the three of you can take care of it faster than just the two of them."

"I can't go see Elliot?" Tommy asked. "We were planning on building some new targets and putting them up in his backyard."

Susan looked to her husband. "That's fine," Clint told him. "Go on. Just don't go anywhere else."

Tommy was much happier.

With the guys all gone, Susan had Jasmine help her clean everything up from lunch, then she suggested that he sit down with his sewing project for school again. Like it or not, Jasmine once again found himself tediously pushing and pulling the needle and thread through the fabric.

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“Okay Jimmy,” Clint said to his fake son as he opened the big garage door, exposing everything inside. “Let’s get to it.”

“Dad, do I have to?” Jimmy whined in an all too feminine voice.

“Of course you do! Besides,” he said in a somewhat more subdued voice, “knowing how it all works will do you good. Now get the cover off of the engine while I get the parts.”

Jimmy looked around at the ATV. It wasn’t as big as the one that her father usually drove, but it was more than big enough to carry two people – and a dead deer on the back. But how the heck was she supposed to get at the engine? She could see part of it through the openings here and there. She found a latch and pulled, then tried to lift up on anything she could. Nothing budged.

“What are you doing?” Clint asked.

“How do you open it up?”

Clint stared down at this version of Jimmy. It was obvious that this Jimmy wouldn’t know a carburetor from a clutch. It would be useless teaching...him. But the bigger issue on his mind was that this was something he had wanted to do with the real Jimmy. That Jimmy had an insatiable thirst for figuring out how things worked – and fixing them. He had really been looking forward to doing this with that Jimmy. The right Jimmy.

“Tell you what,” he finally said. “Let’s go clean the guns instead.” That sounded much more interesting to Jimmy. By far!

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It was several hours later when Jimmy and Clint reentered the house. And when they did, Jimmy immediately saw Jasmine sitting and sewing on the project she had started. The project she had

designed and planned. He was working on the thing that she really had wanted to do the most all day! "What are you doing?" she shouted angrily. "That's my project! That's my outfit I designed. You shouldn't even be touching that stuff!"

"Jimmy!" Susan yelled at her fake son. "What are you talking about? You know perfectly well that this is Jasmine's school project and not yours!"

"I don't want him touching it!" Jimmy yelled back. "It's mine!"

"Not right now it's not! Right now Jasmine is working on it like she should, and you... I have no idea what you're talking about! Since when would a boy be interested in fashion design or sewing? Since when?"

Jimmy glared angrily at her mother and brother. "You better not mess it up!" she said to her fake sister.

"What do you care?" Susan asked with more than a hint of annoyance in her voice.

"Ugh!" Jimmy grunted as she balled her fists. It was one thing after another. "When is it going to stop?" she yelled as she started stomping out of the room.

"You know perfectly well when it can stop!" Susan shouted after her. She saw her fake son turn around. "You know perfectly well when and how to stop it all," she said to her. "You can stop it at any minute, any moment you want. Just give the word and it will all stop, right then and there, no questions asked! You know how to stop it, and you know what you have to do to end it all. Nobody else can do it. Nobody. Only you can stop this monstrosity of a mess! Only you. You know how to stop it, and you know what you're going to have to do to bring it all to an end. And once you do, you're going to make a lot of people a lot happier. So please, please, stop this before it goes any further. Please!"

But all Jimmy could see was the whole world piled against her. She deserved to be able to do the things she wanted. She deserved it! And there was nothing they could do to her to make her change her mind. She said nothing, only tromped angrily off toward her bedroom...the one with the ducks hanging on the wall.

Susan bowed her head and fought the tears. What was wrong with her pig-headed daughter? What was wrong with her? Why

couldn't she see the light? Her daughter was being hurt by one thing after another, and still she wouldn't give in. Why?

She felt two big arms wrapping lovingly around her. She leaned into Clint's big body and cried.

"It was a great try, Honey. Great try. I don't know what we're going to do with her."

Susan pulled back just a bit and looked up at him. "We're getting through, but she's just being too damn stubborn to see what's right in front of her."

Jasmine had sat and listened to it all. Every bit of it, every word. Only his sister could end it? He had no say in when they could end it all? Didn't anyone care about him? He remembered that they constantly asked his sister to swear not to hunt. But not once could he remember them asking if he would go hunting again. Not once.

"Mom? Dad?" he said, still somewhat stunned. "I have no say in this? Only Jasmine?"

His mother and father didn't correct him on the name he had used. "Do you want to go hunting?" Clint asked him? "I'll take you right now. We can even go looking for rabbits or squirrels or something. Something small and easy if you like."

Jasmine shook his head. "No thanks," he replied. He still couldn't bring himself to kill anything, even that small. "What I meant though, is Jasmine the only one who can end this thing? What if I do go hunting and kill something? Do I get to go back to being a boy again all the time?"

Clint looked at his wife for a moment before sadly answering. "No son. What affects one of you affects the other. Your bigger crime was not really missing that deer on purpose. Your bigger crime was agreeing to all her demands and putting it all in your writing. And because of that, you're stuck going along with all of it until we can manage to change her mind. Because of that, I'm afraid you're stuck doing this for as long as it takes for your sister to learn her lesson."

"But I'm being punished more than she is!"

Clint and Susan both shook their heads. "Not really, Jasmine," Susan told him. "Trust me. Not really."

Chapter 12 – Deeper in the Mire

December 8th – 9th

It wasn't so much that Jimmy got teased the next day at school. It was more like he was attacked. Word of what had happened at church spread like wildfire, and it was the one big thing on the top of everyone's mind.

Jimmy and Jasmine were back to being their normal selves again when they went out to meet the bus to take them all to school. They were back to normal...but not quite normal.

"Jasmine!" Nichole called excitedly the moment she saw her best friend walking up to the bus stop at the end of the road. She stared in astonishment at Jasmine's hair. She had seen it yesterday in church, but things the day before were so crazy she never had the opportunity to talk to her about it. "What happened to your hair?" she asked as Allison joined her.

Jasmine's hand automatically went to where her long hair should have been. The cold wind certainly hit her head a lot harder now, that was for sure. "What do you think?" she asked more than a bit angry over the issue.

"You cut it?"

"No, my Mom cut it," Jasmine corrected her.

"It looks..." Allison said, trying to find something nice to say about Jasmine's hair. But the truth was...

"It looks awful!" Jasmine finished for her as her hand again ran through her hair.

"Uh...yeah. Pretty much," Allison agreed. "Why didn't you fix it, restyle it or something?"

"I don't know if I'm supposed to or not."

"Bummer," Nichole muttered. She saw Jasmine nod her agreement.

"Jezebel had her puppies," Nichole told her, trying to bring her best friend up to date on the latest news. "Eight of them."

Jasmine nodded. "Yeah, I heard. I really wanted to go see them. I'm dying to see them in fact, but my Dad wouldn't let me even talk about it."

"That's crazy," Nichole replied. "Why not?"

"Because it's not something that a boy would be into," Jasmine replied with more than a bit of frustration.

"Does that mean you still can't come see them?"

For the first time all morning, Jasmine smiled. "I can now. I don't have to be my brother again until...I'm not even sure when. Maybe I can come over this afternoon and see them."

"That will be great!" Nichole exclaimed. "The Four Musketeers back together again!"

"Uh...we had Four Musketeers on Saturday," Allison reminded them.

Jasmine looked up at her. "How did that go?" she asked. "You have no idea how much I would have liked to get together with you all."

"It was weird," Nichole told her.

"We spent all day trying to show your brother how to have a good time," Allison explained, "but no matter what we did, we couldn't even get a smile out of him. All day!"

"It was so sad," Nichole added. "He seemed so down – all day."

Jasmine looked over at her brother, who was pretty much standing by himself. She noticed the other kids occasionally glancing at him, but nobody was talking to him. It didn't take any stretch of her imagination to tell that he probably preferred it that way. But then, her brother wasn't as close to as many kids in the family as she was. There were no eleven year old boys other than himself in the family. The closest boy in age to Jimmy was Elliot, and Elliot was thirteen. Not to mention that Elliot was Tommy's best friend. Jimmy sometimes hung around with them, but not all that often. She decided to say nothing to Nichole's comment about how sad it was for her brother.

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Things changed drastically for both Jimmy and Jasmine the moment they got off the bus and the other kids in the school found them.

“Jimmy! Is it true? Did you actually show up to church yesterday – in a dress?”

“Jasmine! What happened to your hair? It looks awful!”

“Jimmy! I heard Reverend Cosinger and your grandfather got into a big fight at church over you showing up in a dress!”

“Jasmine! Wow what a fight at church. And I couldn’t believe your grandfather made you and your brother show up dressed as each other. That was so incredible!”

“Jimmy, is the reason you and your sister are in so much trouble again, and you had to wear a dress again, because you cut your sister’s hair?”

“Jasmine, I couldn’t believe I saw you and your brother dressed as each other – and in church!”

“Jimmy, you must like wearing your sister’s dresses an awful lot!”

“Jasmine! What happened for your family to make your brother wear your dresses – to church no less?”

“Jimmy, I heard in church that you and your sister are going to keep dressing like each other. How come you didn’t wear a dress today then?”

“Jasmine, did you purposely try to cut your hair like a boy? Cause it looks terrible!”

Over and over, question after embarrassing question. Jimmy wasn’t sure if things would have been better if his grandfather and Reverend Cosinger had never argued, or not. On the one hand, a lot of the talk was about that argument instead of him wearing a dress. But on the other hand, not only did everyone know that he and his sister were being punished again, not only did everyone know that he had worn his sister’s dress – to church this time, but now they all knew that it was likely that he and his sister would keep dressing as each other in the future. And the biggest question each of them continually got asked was – why? What did they do to deserve that kind of punishment?

Both Jimmy and Jasmine got several visits during the day from both the principal and his wife, their Uncle John and Aunt Jane.

They were understandably concerned and tried their best to make sure both kids were okay, but basically, there was little they could actually do. Both Jimmy and Jasmine were pretty much forced into the role of accepting all the taunting and questions, like it or not. Especially Jimmy, who was by far getting the worst of it for wearing his sister's dress again.

Since there were so few tables in the school's multi-purpose room, Jimmy wasn't quite sitting by himself at lunchtime, but he did go to an empty table before anyone else could get there. If anyone wanted to sit at the table with him, then it was their problem, not his. He was doing his best to stay away from everyone. Eventually, most of the table filled up. But the seat next to Jimmy and the seat across from him stayed vacant. He was glad.

Jasmine sat at lunch with Allison, Nichole, and Olivia – as usual. The four hung around so much together that there weren't often any other girls sitting at the table with them. When she sat down, she was really hoping her friends wouldn't ask her anymore embarrassing questions. She'd had enough already. But it just wasn't to be.

"So what really happened?" Nichole asked. "We know the whole family got together to punish you and your brother. And after church yesterday, we know that you and your brother are going to keep being made to dress like each other. I guess every weekend?"

"I'm not really sure," Jasmine replied. "I don't think there's any set schedule to it. But they're making us be each other for two days each time, so I guess they're trying to stick to the weekends."

"So that means you won't be able to play with us next weekend?" Olivia asked.

"I don't know," Jasmine admitted. "It depends on what my parents decide."

Allison leaned forward and dropped her voice almost to a whisper. "My Mom told me a little bit about what's going on," she said. "She said that you're being punished for going hunting and killing something again. But she wouldn't say what."

Jasmine wasn't sure if she was surprised or not that Allison knew. "Yeah, I did," she confirmed.

“My mom also said that Jimmy is being punished because he agreed to do something that you wanted him to do,” Allison continued. “Although, when she told me, she kept using the word demanded instead.”

Jasmine giggled a bit. “Yeah I did. I came up with all these demands that he had to do...or else!”

“Or else what?” Nichole asked.

But this was the part that was getting into slightly tricky territory – as per her Grandpa. But she was absolutely dying to tell someone! And these were all her best friends. She leaned closer across the table and dropped her voice to almost a whisper. “You want to know what’s really going on?”

“What?” Olivia and Nichole asked together.

“Remember what happened on Thanksgiving?” Jasmine asked.

“How could we forget!” Olivia exclaimed.

“They made you and your brother switch clothes,” Nichole said. “My Dad said it was because Jimmy didn’t want to go hunting and you somehow went instead. So he was being punished for being such a...sissy, I guess.”

“Something like that,” Jasmine replied. “But actually, there was a lot more to it than that.”

“There was?” Nichole asked.

Jasmine’s grin was from ear to ear. “My idiot brother is suddenly afraid of the dumbest things you can possibly imagine. And I mean terrified!”

“Like what?” Allison asked.

“Like ducks!”

The girls all looked back at her, totally astonished. “That’s crazy!” Olivia exclaimed. “How can anyone be afraid of a duck? I mean, ducks are cute!”

“Yeah, they are!” Jasmine agreed. “But not only that, get this, he’s even afraid of dead ducks!”

“Jasmine, that makes no sense at all!” Allison said with more than a hint of exasperation at the obvious exaggeration.

“No! It’s true!” Jasmine continued. “He’s actually afraid of the stuffed ducks that are hanging on his wall. The ones that he himself killed!”

"Now I know your lying!" Olivia said. "Nobody can be afraid of a dead duck like that."

"Well he is. He's terrified of them. And it's not just that, he's afraid of everything in the woods! I mean, my stupid brother has to be the biggest wuss on the planet!"

"I'm not believing any of this for a minute," Olivia told her. "But go on anyway. What happened?"

"Well, on the night before Thanksgiving, he was so worked up over having to go out and shoot some ducks that he was actually getting sick over it. So I kind of...offered to take his place and go duck hunting for him. I mean, I've always wanted to go hunting. Always!"

"And he agreed to it?" Allison asked.

"Yeah, but not until I came up with a few really interesting demands to make him squirm a bit first."

"Demands?" Nichole asked.

Jasmine nodded. "Yeah. I figured if he was that much of a sissy wuss, and since I knew I was going to get major punished for pretending to be him, then there should be no reason why he shouldn't get punished even worse. So I came up with a bunch of really awful demands that I knew he'd absolutely hate. He either had to agree to them all, or he had to go duck hunting. I was actually amazed when he finally agreed! He's that much of a wuss!"

"And what did you make him agree to?" Allison asked.

"Well, if I was going to go out there and be him while I was duck hunting, then I figured it was only fair that he had to be me – at home! So I made him put in writing that he would be me all day long, including wearing my dress to Thanksgiving dinner!"

"And he was wearing it!" Olivia exclaimed. "Just like you said!"

"And everyone told us it was because he was too chicken to go out and kill anything ever again," Nichole added.

"But what about this last weekend?" Allison asked. "What about yesterday at church? Your brother did go out and kill a deer. And a big one. Everyone's still talking about it. He learned his lesson on Thanksgiving. So why are you two being punished now?"

Jasmine leaned in even closer and dropped her voice again. "You can't breathe a word of this to anyone!" she said. "Got it? You

can't tell a soul!"

"Can't tell what?" Nichole asked. "Just tell us already!"

"It's because Jimmy didn't kill that deer!"

The girls were all surprised. "But everyone said he killed it," Olivia replied. "Even my dad said he did."

Jasmine nodded with a gleam in her eye. "Yeah. Jimmy killed the deer."

"But you just said he didn't!"

"Right, he didn't," Jasmine told her. "Jimmy killed it."

"Wait a minute!" Nichole exclaimed. "Make up your mind. Did he, or didn't he kill the deer?"

Jasmine laughed. "Jimmy didn't kill the deer, but Jimmy did kill the deer."

"Girl, you need some serious medicine!" Olivia exclaimed.

Jasmine laughed and leaned in closer again. "That's because my idiot brother wimped out again. He went out hunting, and then missed a deer on purpose! And Grandpa saw him do it! He had no choice but to admit that he couldn't stand the thought of killing anything."

"So what happened that everyone said he did kill it?"

"When my dad and brother went hunting again the next day, I went too. They just didn't know it."

"You did?" Allison and Olivia exclaimed together.

"How did you do that?" Nichole asked.

"I stowed away in the back seat of my dad's truck. By the time they found out I was there, it was too late, and Uncle Jed and Grandpa said we had to hunt or miss the best opportunity to get more meat than we've had in a while. So...they let me hunt!"

"So you killed the deer?" Nichole asked.

Jasmine nodded.

"But why are they saying that Jimmy did it?" Olivia asked.

"Well, remember those demands I made up for my brother on Thanksgiving?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I kind of came up with some more for him before I went hunting this time too. I figured that since the girls in the family aren't allowed to hunt, then I would go out there and pretend to be Jimmy

again. But since I was doing that, then he had to stay home and pretend to be me again.”

“So that’s why they said that Jimmy shot the deer?” Allison exclaimed. “Because you were Jimmy that day instead?”

Jasmine nodded. “You got it!”

Allison shook her head. “Look, my Mom told me a little about your punishment this time. She wants me to kind of look after your brother when he’s being you. Help him out some. But she didn’t tell me anything as to why you two are being punished again. So what’s really going on this time?”

Jasmine’s face wasn’t quite as delighted now. “The whole family is mad at me for what I did, especially Grandpa. And now they’re punishing me for wanting to go hunting so much, and they’re punishing my wuss of a brother for not wanting to go hunting. But mostly I think they’re punishing him for not having the guts to stand up for himself and for agreeing to every one of the demands I cooked up for him this time.”

“And of course those demands included him and you changing places again,” Nichole said.

“Of course!” Jasmine laughed. “But this time, I wanted my idiot brother to suffer a bit more, so I made him agree to be me for two full days every time I go hunting now.”

“So that’s why he was still being you at church yesterday,” Olivia said. “You went hunting on Saturday, and so he had to be you for the entire weekend.”

Jasmine nodded. “That’s it exactly.”

“But you couldn’t be you either,” Nichole noted. “You weren’t allowed to be with us at all!”

“I know,” Jasmine agreed sadly. “That’s something I hadn’t planned on. There’re making me be him for two days now too. And you don’t know how much I hated that they wouldn’t let me come see you.”

“So you have to be him...and act like a boy all the time, while he has to be you, and act like a girl,” Olivia said.

Jasmine nodded her head. “That’s about the size of it.”

“But why can’t your brother wear anything but skirts and dresses?” Nichole asked. “Your mother told me he’s not allowed.”

Jasmine smiled again. "Yeah! That was one of the things I put in those demands to make him squirm a bit more. I figured if he was going to be that much of a sissy wuss, then he ought to look the part as much as possible."

"What else did you demand he do?" Allison asked.

"Not much," Jasmine said. "He can't get his hair cut from now on so it grows real long like mine."

"Like yours used to be!" Allison told her. "His hair is longer than yours now!"

Jasmine's hands went automatically to her head again as she felt what was left of her hair. "They're trying to make me swear off hunting," she told them. "This punishment doesn't end until I swear I won't try to go hunting anymore."

"So what happened with your hair?" Olivia asked.

"My mom," Jasmine told them. "She was trying real hard Saturday morning to make me agree not to hunt anymore. She tried real hard to make me swear that I wouldn't. And when I refused, she cut my braid off."

"God!" Nichole exclaimed. "How awful!"

"Why didn't you just agree not to hunt?" Allison asked. "Why would you want to that much?"

Jasmine was surprised by the question. "Do you have any idea how much fun hunting is? Do you have any idea how exciting it is? I love it! I absolutely love it! It's like...the best thing in the whole world!"

"But you lost your hair," Olivia replied.

"Yeah," Jasmine agreed sadly as her hand again went through what little was left on her head.

"Why didn't you agree to stop hunting after she cut it?" Allison asked.

Jasmine shrugged. "Why should I? It was already done. Mom had already cut it off. What would be the point? Besides, I really like hunting that much, and now I can hunt all the time. In fact, they said they're going to go out of their way so I can do it more often. And while I'm out having a great time in the woods, my sissy wuss of a brother gets to squirm and put up with things that I know he hates! And I still think that anyone who's that much of a pansy for being

afraid of the most stupid things in the world, deserves every bit of the punishment he's getting!"

"You're cruel," Olivia said sadly.

"Yeah, I am!" Jasmine replied with an obvious delighted smile on her face.

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Susan picked Jimmy and Jasmine up from school that day instead of letting them take the bus back home with their brother. She drove them both to see her beautician. She had talked with Sarah for quite a while earlier that morning, explaining the entire problem. Jasmine needed a haircut that could be something for either a boy or a girl. And Jimmy, well, his hair wasn't supposed to be cut at all, but she still wanted it shaped a bit better – even if it made him look a little more feminine all the time.

The one-room beauty shop that Sarah had at the back of her house looked more like an old storage room since it was overly stuffed with all kinds of things. But there were still a couple of chairs where Susan and one of her kids could sit while they waited on whichever of the kids was getting their haircut.

Jimmy went first. Sarah combed and brushed his hair and looked at it critically, then based on what his mother had said, she took her scissors and cut just a tiny bit here and there. Evening things up. Straightening out the back. Shaping it just slightly. The overall affect did make it look a bit more feminine, but only slightly. It took less than ten minutes before he was out of her styling chair.

Jimmy looked at himself in the mirror carefully. Like a lot of the guys at school, he had always kept his hair a bit longer, and it was still somewhat long. It just looked a little...different now. Not as wild and unkempt as it usually was. But in the end, he decided that it didn't look bad at all. It was just a bit...neater than it used to look. Now that he was done, he took the extra seat while his sister climbed up into the styling chair.

Jasmine was nervous, but she wanted her hair to look good again. She knew perfectly well how all the boys wore their hair. She had made careful note of it for years. Basically, all the boys she

knew wore their hair in one of two styles, either really short where you could usually see their scalp under what was left, or long and messy like her brother usually wore his. It seemed like there was no in-between. So now, as she looked at herself in the big mirror, she just prayed that it wouldn't get cut really short like all the boys with the super short hair.

As Sarah started brushing and working on her hair, Jasmine listened as Sarah and her mother talked. Jasmine answered questions when Sarah talked to her. But the one topic that was never mentioned was her hair. Still, she kept a close eye on the mirror as Sarah started cutting...and shortening it. She wasn't happy to see that at all. But a little while later, she starting to realize that her hair was starting to look feminine again. Her spirits soared at seeing that.

"What do you think?" Sarah asked as she finally finished Jasmine's new hair style.

Jasmine was delighted. She made several silly coy faces in the mirror, mostly faces as if she was kissing someone, like one of the cute boys she knew. Elliot perhaps. She was truly delighted with what she saw. "I look cute!" she finally exclaimed happily.

Susan nodded. "It does look really good on her," she agreed. "But how about...the other, when she has to be a boy? Can't you do anything to help that situation?"

Sarah nodded and picked up her comb, and started combing Jasmine's hair around again. It took her only a few seconds to rearrange the cute hairstyle that they had been looking at.

Jasmine's was suddenly horrified. Just that quick, her hair went from looking super cute, to looking all too much like a boy's haircut. It wasn't really the way any of the boys she knew wore their hair. The length wasn't short or long. It was really somewhere in the middle. But just that fast, she looked awful again and a lot less feminine. "Ugh!" she exclaimed. "Comb it back please. Fast!"

Susan nodded happily. Sarah had done better than she expected.

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Jasmine was in heaven the next day at school when all the girls commented on her cute new hairstyle. She was in absolute heaven! She had even managed to clip a small bow into one side of it to make it look even cuter. And later that day, she was even happier when she overheard one of the kids telling her brother that his hair looked like some kind of sissy hairdo now. Things were definitely looking up on that end.

But her delight in school that day only lasted until the end of school. It only lasted until she and Jimmy found their mother's car waiting to pick them up in the parking lot. Their mother picking them up from school was generally no problem. They often went shopping or had to run errands with their mother, so it was something that happened with all the kids fairly often. The problem this time was in where their mother took them.

"Where we going Mom?" Jasmine asked as her mother left the school parking lot and headed down the road.

Susan was having a hard time of it that afternoon. She really didn't want to do the very thing she was doing. And answering her daughter's simple question, wasn't so easy for her. "We're going..." but she didn't have the courage to say it out loud.

"Mom?" Jasmine asked, waiting for her mother to finish telling them where they were going. When she got no answer, she asked, "Mom, are you alright?" The reply she got wasn't what she expected at all.

"Jasmine," Susan said, "Please, tell me you won't ask to go hunting anymore. Please!"

Jasmine didn't miss the tone of her mother's voice. This was something that was clearly bothering her. But... "But Mom, why should I? You know I love hunting. And I see no reason in the world to stop now. None!"

Susan closed her eyes in frustration for a moment. But she was driving and couldn't keep them closed. "Jasmine, please, please do this. For me? For me, and your brother? For everyone – especially yourself! Please agree Jasmine. Please!"

Jasmine shook her head. "I don't know why you're getting so worked up over it. You already know I'm doing it because I love it.

And I don't see any reason to stop now at all. You all even said I could go hunting, a lot more often. And I can't wait to go again."

Susan didn't say another word. As she drove, she did her best to fight back the tears.

She didn't take them to the grocery store. She didn't take them shopping at all. She didn't take them to any place that they expected to go. She drove them instead to her brother-in-laws office...to Doctor Brian McComber's medical clinic. Her brother-in-law had a fairly busy office since he was one of very few doctors in the area. Oddly though, his wife Janet didn't work in the office with him. She had kept her job as a nurse in the county hospital where she had worked before she met Brian.

Susan dreaded this trip. She had talked on the phone with Clint a number of times during the day, looking for some way out of it. But after everything they had already done to convince Jasmine to change her mind, they both knew that this might be the only way to get their daughter to finally see reason. With no other choice, they both had come to the conclusion that it had to be done.

It was with a very heavy heart that she pulled into the parking lot at Brian's clinic. After turning the car off, she turned to her daughter one more time, "Jas, please agree to swear you won't go hunting anymore. Please!" she begged. But the stubborn expression that came over her daughter's face told her more than the words she finally spoke.

Jasmine was totally surprised to see where she was, and it was only then that she remembered the things her Uncle Brian had told her in that meeting. They were going to turn her into a boy! But she didn't believe that. Doing such a thing was impossible! It had to be a trick. And now they were just making it look like they could, when they really couldn't! "I already told you Mom. I'm not going to do it!"

"Why are you so pig-headed about this?" Susan exclaimed angrily.

"Because it's not right, and I want to hunt!" Jasmine replied. "Besides, they can't really turn me into a boy anyway," she added all too bravely, even though it was once again the biggest worry on her mind.

Susan felt like dying. "Yes they can," Susan said with all the emotion and sorrow she felt. "Yes they can. Please Jas. Please! Please agree to not hunt anymore." But her daughter only shook her head stubbornly. It was with a touch of anger that Susan finally got out of the car. "You've only brought this on yourself," she muttered. But the sickness she felt in her stomach made her want to grab her kids and run for the hills. Even still, she led them inside.

They had to wait a few minutes before Doctor McComber could see them. But all three of them were ushered by his nurse into one of the exam rooms together. Brian was there a few minutes later, along with a plastic basket containing lots of medical stuff.

Brian was about to ask Susan if she had talked to Jasmine again to see if she would swear off hunting, but the look on Susan's face was all the answer he needed to that question. He had spent a long time on the phone the night before talking to both Clint and Susan. He had explained in detail to both of them about what each of the drugs would do to their kids, and what things they needed to look for. He knew both Clint and Susan were against this, as he was, but he also knew that they had no better option for handling the situation. Jasmine still wasn't agreeing to stop hunting.

Oddly, he, Clint, and Susan had come to the conclusion last night to not tell the kids all the details about what the drugs would do. Hopefully, if they looked things up for themselves on the internet, or they saw for themselves what changes were occurring, it would all help to change their stubborn minds.

With a heavy sigh and a shake of his head, he turned to the kids. "I'm about to start both of you on a course of hormones," he told them. "They're not as strong as some I could give you, but I think they'll be enough. Now, before we start, I'm afraid I need to draw a little blood from each of you to check your blood levels and establish a baseline."

Both Jasmine and Jimmy were nervous and afraid as they sat next to each other on the exam table. Jimmy wanted no part of it, and neither did Jasmine. But Jasmine still didn't believe they could actually turn her into a boy. And she was still way too stubborn to swear off hunting. It just wasn't right! She hated the needle stuck in her arm to draw blood, she had to look away and not watch it. It

hurt, but she got through it. And then she watched as her brother had his blood drawn. The stupid sissy watched even less than she did and reacted like he was in even more pain, when in reality, she knew it hadn't hurt all that much.

When Brian was done taking their blood samples, he turned to Jasmine. "Jas," he said. "Please don't make me do this. Please tell me you'll swear off hunting." But like before, Jasmine remained completely stubborn and adamant. He had no choice but to pull out a small bottle of one of the drugs he had in his tray and take a hypodermic needle.

Jasmine watched in horror as her Uncle filled the needle with the drug. It couldn't really turn her into a boy, could it? It was impossible! And then her Uncle was grabbing her arm and swiping it with an antiseptic solution. She briefly tried to pull away from him.

His voice was kind, but firm. "Either let me inject this into your arm, or swear off hunting." He was actually disappointed when her face went into stubborn mode again and she turned around, letting him at her arm.

Jasmine felt sick to her stomach as she watched the drug being injected into her. She watched it this time. She watched it all! It couldn't really work, could it? And then the needle was withdrawn... empty. She didn't feel any different. How fast was it supposed to work? But she had a feeling that it wasn't going to work at all. She had heard about those fake medicines people sometimes got. They took them and then got well, when in reality, all they had taken were sugar pills. She hoped that whatever her Uncle had just injected into her arm was nothing but water. Plain water. She hoped.

Jimmy was nervous as he watched his Uncle inject the drug into his sister. Once again Jas had been asked to swear off hunting. They had been constantly asking her that. But as usual, his sister had remained adamant about the situation. He had noticed again that they never once asked him if he was ready to go hunting and kill something again. Never once! But as he had been told last night, they had more interest in stopping Jasmine from hunting than they were worried about him. And because of that, he was stuck in the same situation his sister was, until she decided differently.

And then his Uncle pulled a different bottle of medicine from his tray and took another hypodermic needle. Jimmy felt himself shaking with nervousness. Were they really going to turn him into a girl? Were they? How could they? Was it possible? He prayed it wasn't, but it sure seemed like they were about to try. And then his Uncle was grabbing his arm again. Jimmy looked away. He couldn't watch. He looked directly at his mother instead. His whole body tensed as he felt his Uncle grab his arm again. He felt himself shaking harder.

"Just relax," Brian told his overly nervous nephew. "It'll hurt a lot less if you try to relax."

Hurt? But Jimmy couldn't relax. It was impossible. He felt the prick of the needle and opened his mouth in a silent scream at the pain. He felt the cold of whatever had been in that needle going into him. And then he felt the needle being pulled out. He still stared at his mother as he felt tears welling up in his eyes. Had he been turned into a girl yet? No, of course not. But how long was it supposed to take? He prayed yet again that it was all just a big lie. He prayed again that nothing at all would happen to him.

Susan had watched her son's face the entire time he was getting the shot. He had never looked away from her. She saw the nervousness and hurt there. Was he accusing her? She was sure he was. Accusing her of being a bad parent. A bad mother. It broke her heart that had been already broken into a thousand pieces.

And when her brother-in-law was done, and the kids were allowed to get up from the exam table, she grabbed both of them and pulled them into her body...where she cried all over again. Why had she agreed to this idea? Why had her husband agreed? But she knew why. They had talked about it until they were both blue in the face. They were going through with it because they had no other answer to the problem.

Brian said he would see them all next month. Then he said goodbye and walked out. Susan noticed that there had been no smile on his face either. In fact, her brother-in-law had looked very troubled, even though this had been his idea to try in the first place. Even still, she could tell he didn't like it much more than she did.

This was the wrong thing to do. The absolute last thing they should have tried. But they had already reached that last point. They had no other options. And so, here she was, and it was over with now...or just starting.

As she got up from her seat, taking each of her twins by the hand to lead them out, it was the look on Jimmy's face as he had been getting the shot that stayed behind her eyes. Was she a bad mother? She hoped not. But she had no doubt that she was. Any other mother would have taken her kids and gotten the hell out of there. Disappeared! But she hadn't, because she was a bad mother. And because she loved her husband too much.

Chapter 13 - The Workshop

December 10th – 14th

The following morning, Jasmine studied the reflection of her entire naked body in the mirror. She had done the same thing the night before. She studied every square inch of her body. No change. At least, not anything she could see. She didn't feel any different either. That shot her Uncle had given her yesterday hadn't done anything at all! She knew it was all just a lie. She knew it! At least, she hoped she knew it.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she started massaging her breasts, urging them to grow bigger. "Grow breasts, grow!" she whispered. But even she knew that she wouldn't see any changes that fast. After another long look, she started getting dressed for school.

Across the hall, Jimmy stared at his body too. No difference that he could see. He particularly studied his nipples for any sign of breasts developing. Nope. He was very relieved. No changes to his body and he didn't feel any different. Feeling very relieved and much more confident, he got dressed for school. Now he just had to get past all the teasing from the other kids about dressing as his sister at church last Sunday.

The two kids somehow managed to make it through school again, and for the first time all week, they rode the bus home. Once inside, they both changed from their school clothes into play clothes that were more comfortable and they didn't have to worry about getting dirty.

Once changed, Jasmine hurried to find her mother, "Mom, can I please go see the puppies at Nichole's house now?"

"What about your homework?"

"I'll do it later," she pleaded. "Please? I haven't had a chance to see them yet."

Susan gave in. "Okay, but only for an hour. No more!" she called as her daughter was already taking off at a run.

While Jasmine was out of the house, Jimmy was at his desk doing homework. Most of it was easy. Some of it he actually enjoyed. The stuff he had to write for his English lessons wasn't anything he enjoyed at all. He hated learning all the parts of speech and how he was supposed to use them. And half the time what the book or the teacher said was the right way to write or say something, wasn't like anything he ever heard anyone saying. Which absolutely didn't help matters in the least. But just like his other homework, he got through the English part fairly quickly too. Forty-five minutes later, he was done.

Not wanting to stay in his room any longer, he got up from his desk and went out. "Mom, can I go outside for a while?"

"Are you done with your homework yet?" she asked.

"Just finished."

"The English too?"

"Yeah, Mom. The English stuff too."

"Okay," she said. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Just out I guess."

"Then stay somewhere I can call you for dinner," she told him.

"Yeah, Mom. No problem." Five minutes later, he had put his coat on and was walking across their big backyard. Being able to wear his normal clothes instead of a skirt and some tights outside was a true pleasure. He promised himself he'd never take that little situation for granted again!

With no real friends to call on and nowhere else to go, he found himself heading for the one place he usually went, his father's garage/workshop. The big garage door was heavy, but he muscled it up as he usually did.

Inside, he stared at his father's three ATVs. His father and...his sister...were supposed to have fixed the one he wanted to fix last weekend. He had planned on fixing it himself. He had even studied the manual for the thing from cover to cover. But they had left him in the house to sew while they went out to work on the engine.

He switched the bright overhead lights on and wandered back to the machine that had been broken. He found one of the engine cover latches still open. The rest seemed to be closed so he locked it like it should be. He climbed up into the seat and hit the starter

button. The engine turned over, but he could tell immediately that it wasn't going to start. Did they even work on it? That latch had been open, but the engine didn't sound any better than it had before they worked on it. If they worked on it. A minute later, he had opened all the cover latches and was pulling it away. He examined the engine. It sure didn't look like they had done anything.

He searched his father's messy workbench, but the bag he had been looking for was easy to spot. It was the only bag there. He looked inside. Spark plugs, solvent, and a carburetor rebuild kit. He pulled them all out of the bag. Obviously they hadn't done anything with the engine at all. Why not? With nothing better to do, he found a screwdriver and a couple of wrenches he thought he might need in his father's big tool cabinet. He switched the radio on. It immediately started blaring country music. He turned the volume up louder, grabbed his tools, and went to work on the ATV.

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"See ya!" Olivia called to Jasmine as the two girls crossed Jasmine's yard and Jasmine ran into the house. The Four Musketeers had been together again, playing with the new puppies. This time, they each got to hold some of the little darlings. Olivia saw the light on in the big garage out back and heard music coming from inside. She changed direction, heading for the open garage door.

To Jimmy, the carburetor was just a simple machine, attached to another machine called an engine, that was part of a bigger machine that was the entire ATV. It was all really simple if you just thought of the individual parts as one simple thing to fix. He had removed the entire carburetor from the engine, and now had it in pieces all over part of his father's workbench that he had cleared off. The rebuild kit had come with instructions that were spread out on another part of the workbench, but after looking at them only a few times, he was pretty much ignoring them now. Rebuilding the thing wasn't that hard. The country music was blaring loudly, and he was happily singing just as loud or louder. And every few minutes, while he had a part soaking in a bowl of solvent so he could clean it, he backed

away and danced to the music. Singing, and dancing a bit, and working, and getting something done!

The tune ended and he did a little final step and said, "Yeah!" as he raised a fist in the air in triumph. And then his world turned to embarrassment as he heard laughter. He turned and saw Olivia in the doorway watching him. He said nothing. He was particularly embarrassed because it was Olivia standing there, the one girl he really liked looking at the most lately. He stared at her as his face turned red. How long had she been there?

"You were great!" she exclaimed with a laugh.

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Not really." He turned away from her and went back to cleaning the carburetor parts in the solvent.

"No," she said. "It looked like you were having fun. I don't think I've ever seen you having fun before." She pointed toward the ATV he was working on. "Except when you're riding one of those things of course."

He looked over at the machine. "Yeah, I love it! They're a blast. But you've got to keep after them to keep them working!" He reached over and turned the radio way down.

"Is that what you're doing?" she asked as she walked closer.

He felt uncomfortable with her coming closer, but he did his best to ignore the feeling. "Yeah," he replied. "Right now, I'm rebuilding the carburetor."

"Sounds hard."

"Not really. You've just got to understand how it all works."

"And you do?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't I. It's not that hard."

She pulled up one of the tall stools that were kept nearby and took a seat. He immediately felt even more uncomfortable.

"Jasmine told us today that you didn't really shoot that deer," she said softly.

He looked at her with horror all over his face. "You're not supposed to know that! Nobody is supposed to know that!"

"Sorry," she replied. "We all just wanted to know what's really going on between you and your sister."

It was a moment before he made any reply at all. "I guess it doesn't really matter."

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “There’s nothing I can do about any of it anyway. The way things worked out, I’m totally screwed. Period! I have no way out of it by myself at all. Jasmine is the only one who can end this thing. She’s the only one! And she’s not going to give up hunting any time soon. I can tell you that much for sure! Which leaves me as being...screwed I guess. Just screwed!”

She sat and watched him for a while. “Is it really that bad?”

He looked at her. “You have no idea how embarrassing it is for me. No idea at all!”

“I can believe it,” she said softly. It was a while before she spoke again. She just sat there watching him work. Then she said softly, “We tried to help you.”

He refused to look at her. “I know.” A moment later he added. “I guess, I appreciate that.”

“But you couldn’t even smile for us. No matter what we did.”

He shrugged, still not looking at her. “Can you blame me?”

“Yes! We were trying to help you enjoy yourself. Trying to help you have some fun!”

He said nothing at all. He just kept working.

“No,” she finally admitted. “I guess I can’t blame you.”

He finished fitting one of the parts he had just cleaned and grabbed a new spring from the rebuild kit and pulled it into place. “There!” he said as he held up the rebuilt carburetor. “I did it!”

“Is it going to work now?” she asked.

“I don’t know yet,” he replied. “I hope so.” He took his rebuilt part over to the ATV and started installing it on the engine while she watched.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” she said. “There’s all kinds of parts in there. What happens if you screw something up and your dad finds out?”

He shrugged. “Hopefully, he’ll help me fix it. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve tried to fix something and screwed it up instead.”

Five minutes later, he backed away from the machine. “There! Now let’s see what happens.”

“You mean you’re going to start it?”

“Sure. Of course.” Not being able to sit on it wasn’t much of a problem with that machine. He pressed the starter button. The engine ground away for a few moments and did nothing, then just before he was about to give up, it caught and kicked into life.

“You did it!” she said over the noise of the ATV. “Or at least you didn’t make it worse!”

“It wasn’t running at all before!” he said as he listened to the engine. He shut the machine down.

“So is that it? You fixed it?”

“That’s part of it,” he told her. “I think it still sounds a little rough. But Dad got me some new plugs to put in it too. No use doing only half the job.”

He grabbed a sparkplug wrench from his father’s tool cabinet, and began changing the sparkplugs in the engine. Since Olivia wasn’t saying anything, he turned the radio back up. A few minutes later, they were both singing at the top of their lungs.

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Clint pulled his truck into the driveway and noticed the lights on out in his workshop. He got out of his truck and walked only a few steps out into the backyard before he heard the loud music coming from inside. He had no doubt that Jimmy was in there working on something. Probably that broken down ATV.

Continuing on toward the garage, the music only got louder. Once he got close enough though, he noticed Olivia sitting on one of the stools and Jimmy leaning over the engine. Both of them were singing. Both of them were obviously enjoying themselves. He rarely saw Jimmy that happy.

He turned around and left his son and Olivia right where they were. He wasn’t worried in the least about anything Jimmy might do to that ATV. More than likely, the boy would fix it. And if he didn’t... well...there was nothing Jimmy could do to it that he couldn’t fix himself. He entered his house with a smile on his face.

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“Hey guys!” the voice called loudly over top of the music and singing.

Both Jimmy and Olivia looked up to see Tommy walking in.

“Hi Tommy,” Olivia said.

“Mom’s been calling for a few minutes,” Tommy told his brother. “It’s dinner time.”

Only then did Jimmy look outside and notice how dark it was. He had been having such a good time he hadn’t even noticed.

“Oh my gosh!” Olivia exclaimed. “Mom’s going to kill me!” She jumped down off the stool she had been sitting on. “See ya!” she called as she ran off for home.

“It’s dinner time,” Tommy said again, this time noticing the big grin on his younger brother’s face. The smile seemed strange on Jimmy. Almost like there was something wrong with him.

“Okay,” Jimmy said, far more brightly than he normally would as he grabbed a rag to wipe his hands off. He realized he was feeling great. Happy. Absolutely super! He had been having so much fun working on the engine and singing the songs with Olivia. And even though Olivia had to leave now and he had to go in for dinner, he still felt – wonderful!

Fifteen minutes later, Jimmy was still feeling happier than he could ever remember as he sat down to dinner with his family. “Hey Dad,” he said brightly. “I got that carburetor rebuilt and put back on the ATV and the engine runs now.”

His father was somewhat surprised, but only somewhat. He had figured that Jimmy would be able to fix the thing. “That’s really good, Jimmy,” he told his surprisingly happy son. But then, if he had just managed to rebuild something that complicated at Jimmy’s age, he guessed he would be feeling pretty happy too.

“I think the engine sounds a bit rough though,” Jimmy continued just as excitedly. “I’m in the middle of changing the plugs now. But I really think the carburetor needs adjusting. I think it’s running too rich...or maybe lean...but I’m betting it’s too rich.”

Clint nodded. “I’m sure it probably is too rich. Tell you what, I’m hoping I can get off a little earlier tomorrow. If you can finish changing those plugs then we’ll work on it together just as soon as I get home.”

“That’s great, Dad!” Jimmy exclaimed loudly. “And finishing with the plugs will only take me a few minutes.”

Susan couldn’t help but notice Jimmy’s added level of excitement. It was so out of character for him that it almost scared her. And the fact that Jimmy continued to stay more animated and excited during dinner didn’t miss her attention at all. She noticed it wasn’t escaping her husband’s attention either when they both looked at each other over the strange sound of Jimmy talking almost non-stop about working on the ATV.

But the part that scared Susan the most, was something Brian had said to them on the phone the night before he gave the kids those hormone shots. He had said that one of the first things to watch for was big changes in their moods. Especially with Jimmy. He warned them that one minute he could break into tears for no reason at all, or the next he could be euphorically happy. And from what Susan was seeing now in Jimmy, euphorically happy didn’t seem too far off the mark.

The first pause in the dinner conversation for Jasmine didn’t occur until her weird brother had stuffed so much food into his mouth that he couldn’t talk. What was up with him anyway? He was acting weird. “I finally got to hold some of Jezebel’s puppies,” she told her mother. “They were sooooo cute!”

“I’m sure they are!” Susan replied, actually grateful for some more normal sounding conversation at the table. But Jasmine’s comment reminded her of something else she needed to bring up. “Jed radioed in today,” she said as she cut off a small piece of the venison she was eating. “He said he wants to fix that bad spot on the South Branch Road this weekend.”

“It’s about time,” Clint replied. “It’s been bad going through there since all the rain last spring.”

“He said something about putting in a culvert or something.”

“Probably needs it,” Clint agreed.

Susan sighed a deep breath. “He said Ethan is going to be doing something at school on Saturday, so he was wondering if Jimmy would be available to help him and Justin with what needs to be done.”

Just that fast, the mood at the table changed. "What did you tell him?" Clint asked.

"That I'd have to check with you first."

Clint nodded. It was an obvious attempt on his brother's part to make Jasmine be Jimmy again, and put her to hard work. Not hunting this time, but definitely hard *man's* work.

He looked straight at Jasmine, then he turned his gaze on Jimmy. Back and forth between them a few times. His gaze finally fell on Jimmy and stayed there. "Yeah," he said. "I think it's about time Jimmy got a taste of what Jed does for the family." Still looking only at Jimmy, he said. "Here that son? I'd like you to go out with your Uncle Jed this weekend. Do you good, I think."

As much as he tried, he couldn't help but look from Jimmy over to Jasmine now. Both of them were staring worriedly at him. But now his eyes stayed locked on Jasmine, and he couldn't tear them away if he tried. "What say, Jimmy. Will you help your Uncle Jed out this weekend?"

His eyes now were able to focus on both his twins at the same time. He saw the almost imperceptible nod from Jasmine to what he knew both twins recognized as a command from him. The response from his son came far later. And the almost imperceptible sound of his voice carried none of the happiness Jimmy had filled the room with earlier. "Yeah. Sure Dad."

Just that fast, the twins knew they would be switching places again that weekend. But this time, there was no joy in it for either of them. Jasmine was particularly unhappy because she was going to be stuck being her brother again, and this time, she wouldn't get to go hunting. She would be working instead. She would be working while, more than likely, her idiot brother would be off playing and having fun with her friends instead. It was so not fair!

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Clint managed to get home early from work Thursday afternoon. Since Susan was still down at the business office, he went in to check on Tommy, and didn't find him. He didn't find anyone in the house. Which told him that more than likely, Tommy was off with

Elliot somewhere, Jasmine was off with her friends, and Jimmy was most likely out in the workshop. He had already noticed that the door to the workshop was open.

Not worrying about his other kids since it was all family around, he headed for the workshop in the backyard. Jimmy was indeed in there, his elbows deep inside the ATV engine changing the sparkplugs. "Hey Jimmy," he called as he walked into the big garage.

"Dad!" Jimmy greeted him excitedly. "I'm almost done."

Clint stood back and watched his eleven-year-old son working. He tried to see what he could of the carburetor he had rebuilt, but getting a close look at it while Jimmy was changing the plugs was impossible.

Jimmy stood up. His arms were more than a bit covered in grease. "That's it," he said as if changing plugs was something he did day in and day out.

Clint moved in for a closer look at everything Jimmy had done. As far as he could tell, the carburetor was installed and hooked up properly. He stood back. "Ready to crank it up?"

"Sure," Jimmy replied. Then he stood back waiting.

"Well do it!" Clint said with a hint of a smile.

Jimmy hit the starter button and the engine came to life almost immediately, unlike the evening before when it had taken a few minutes. Jimmy smiled broadly at his father.

Clint wasn't sure if he should be surprised or not that Jimmy had managed to rebuild things so well. Jimmy had told him at dinner last night that he had managed to get the thing running. He listened carefully to the engine. "It does sound a bit rough," he told his son. "Get me a screwdriver." It took him a few minutes, but eventually he had the small engine running like it was new. When he was satisfied, he had Jimmy turn the machine off. "That's it," he said to his son. "Great job, Jimmy. I'm proud of you for figuring all that out and actually managing to do it."

Jimmy beamed at the compliment. "Thanks, Dad. But it really wasn't that hard."

"It was hard enough for someone who never did it before. And especially someone your age." He lowered his voice just a bit. "But

this is why when I came out here with your sister last weekend, I decided not to work on this. She didn't have a clue, and you're... well, let's just say that I enjoy doing this stuff a whole lot more with you than her. Okay?"

Jimmy was in heaven. "Thanks, Dad," he said again. But since he and his father were talking, and since his father had kind of brought the subject up. "Um...Dad," he said.

"Yeah, Jimmy?"

"Do I have to be Jasmine all weekend again?"

Clint looked sadly down at his son. "I'm afraid so, Jimmy."

"But it's not fair that I don't even have a say in when this all ends!"

"No it's not," Clint agreed. "But at the same time, you did write down that you were agreeing to every one of those demands that your sister concocted. Every last one. And the way everyone is looking at it is that it binds you to her and whatever it is that she's doing. Because of the way you both went about it, what affects her, affects you as well. So like it or not Jimmy, I'm afraid you're stuck, until she decides to quit hunting, or you can find some way to make her change her mind."

"Me?"

Clint nodded. "Why not? You're mother and I are at our wits end trying to find ways to change her mind. And so far, no matter what we've done, she's remained as stubborn as a mule. So if you can come up with any ideas, have at it."

"But I don't have any ideas."

"Neither do we," his father admitted sadly. "So I'm afraid we're going to have to keep on in the direction we're going and see what changes happen. And I have no doubt that some changes *will* happen."

"What changes?"

But Clint didn't want to go into that with his son. They had decided to not go into the details of what the hormone shots would do to them. "We'll just have to see," he replied. "In the meantime, I'm afraid you're still stuck."

Jimmy nodded sadly.

“Did you want to go hunting?” Clint asked, hoping that maybe Jimmy had changed his thinking on that matter. “There’s still plenty of daylight, and I know the family would really like to see that you killed something. Even something really small. And we can even take this ATV that you just fixed for a spin while we go back into the woods to find something to shoot at.”

Jimmy thought about that for a few moments. “No. It wouldn’t do me any good anyway,” he said sadly. “Besides, I still don’t think I could actually kill anything.” He dropped his gaze to the ground. “Sorry, Dad.” He lifted his head again with a smile on his face. “But I would like to take this thing for a ride!”

Clint laughed. “Go for it. Make sure it runs like it’s supposed to.”

Jimmy gave a whoop of delight. It took him no time to get the covers back on over the engine and locked down. He jumped on the machine again and started the now smooth running engine.

“Hold on! Wait a minute!” Clint yelled quickly.

“Jimmy looked to him to see what he wanted.”

“Don’t forget your helmet. You know the rules!”

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After school on Friday afternoon, Jimmy stopped into his sister’s room. She was at her desk, but he didn’t care what she was doing. “Hey Sis,” he said.

“Yeah,” Jasmine asked as she looked up from the fashion website she had been looking through.

“I’m guessing that they’re going to switch us around again tonight,” Jimmy said.

“Probably,” Jasmine replied as her eyes went back to her computer screen. “What of it?”

“Can you please try to get your homework done before that this time?” Jimmy asked. “It’s not right that I have to finish it for you, especially when I don’t have a clue about any of it.”

Jasmine smiled up at him mischievously. She had thought it was funny last week when he had to finish her homework for her. And he had even done a pretty decent job of it, with Mom’s help of course. “Why?” she asked. “You did a great job, for me!” She laughed. “I

hope you're having fun learning all about being a sissy girl," she teased.

Jimmy didn't appreciate her attitude at all. "Mom says there's no such thing as a sissy girl. Only some girls that are girlier than others."

"Well your wrong!" she told him. "Just look it up in the dictionary. You'll find it easy enough because there's a picture of you right there." She laughed and watched as her stupid pansy brother left the room. She might not like some of this switching around business, but tormenting her wuss of a brother was definitely one of the highlights.

That night the two twins were indeed switched around again, but this time Susan did it by herself. All she did was to hand each of them identical tan robes to put on after removing every stitch of their clothing. Then she simply sent each of them across the hall to the other bedroom. Jimmy, now becoming Jasmine, put his sister's nightgown on, and Jasmine, now Jimmy, studied her naked reflection in the mirror, just as she did every night. And just as she did every night, she rubbed and massaged her breasts, trying to get them to grow bigger. But to her they looked just as small as ever. Not much more than a puffiness on that part of her chest. With a disappointed sigh, she put her brother's pajamas on and became him.

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"Okay, take it slow and easy this time," Jed called up to Justin on the small backhoe.

"Jimmy" had never been so miserable in her entire life! What she was doing was bad enough, totally awful in fact, but why, today of all days, did it have to rain? And it was a cold and damp rain that soaked into everything! She was wet and cold and miserable, and covered in mud. And when she suggested to her Uncle Jed that maybe they should go home, he had just laughed and told her a little rain wasn't going to hurt her. Besides, the rain was making the ground softer and easier for them to work. Easier? That was a laugh. All it did was to make the mud she was shoveling heavier. And as to the rain not hurting her? How about catching cold, or

pneumonia, or picking up a virus, or any one of a hundred different things. But no, both her Uncle Jed and her cousin Justin acted like they barely knew it was raining.

She had been surprised when Uncle Jed picked her up that morning and he had the big backhoe, as he called it, on the trailer behind his truck. When she asked Justin what they needed such a big thing for, he had laughed and said they had brought the smallest one they had. He had actually called the thing cute! Cute didn't look like that. Cute was a little puppy or a bunny rabbit or something. But cute wasn't a big metal behemoth that looked like it could be the monster in some horror movie on TV.

She watched as Justin again lowered the big bucket on it to start digging a trench across the road. Evidently, this was Justin's first time driving the thing. She had asked why she couldn't drive it instead of having to work with a shovel. Her Uncle Jed had answered that one quick enough by tell her she wasn't old enough. So now she was working with a big shovel in her hands, trying to dig dirt out in a big deep trench across the road so they could bury a pipe there to keep the water from washing the road away. Ugh! At least Uncle Jed had a shovel in his hands and was using it too.

She was tired. She was covered in mud from her boots to her head. The mud she tried to pick up with her shovel was so heavy she could barely lift it. And she was wet, wet, wet. Miserable! Miserable! Miserable!

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"Jasmine" had watched his sister going out to Jed's truck earlier that morning. It had been raining a bit, but his sister had been wearing his waterproof hunting parka. So basically, she would get to enjoy the rain all day without fear of getting soaked. But the one thing that had interested him the most, was the small backhoe that Uncle Jed was taking out with them. He would have loved to see that thing in operation. It would have been so cool to see how it worked!

And now, here he was again, dressed in a pair of white tights, his sister's brown skirt, and her cream colored sweater. The exact

same outfit he had picked out last week.

"You're going to have to pin that straighter," his mother told him, "or the waistband is going to be all crooked and lumpy."

Ugh! He heard the phone ring as he was pulling the pins back out so he could straighten what he was doing. He let his mother answer it. The call wasn't going to be for him anyway.

"Jasmine," Susan said as she hung up the phone and walked back to her *daughter*. "Go ahead and put that away now. That was Nichole on the phone. All the girls are meeting at her house again. You might as well get out of here for a while and go enjoy yourself."

Enjoy himself? Not likely. But the look on his mother's face told him he wasn't going to have a choice in the matter. The rainy day had let him hope that he would be able to stay home and in the house all day where no one would see him. She had just ripped that hope out from under him.

As Susan watched Jasmine putting his sewing things away, she was relieved that he was going without putting up any argument. Nichole had asked to speak to Jasmine, but she had taken the call herself, only because she figured the girls were getting together as they usually did, and she wanted Jasmine to get out of the house and have some fun...or at least some companionship with other kids his own age. As Jimmy, that was something he rarely ever got. And Nichole had flat out asked her on the phone which Jasmine was home today. "Wear your rubber boots over there," she suggested. "It's muddy outside and I don't want you getting your shoes all messed up walking across the backyards."

Like so many other things his sister owned, her rain boots were a kaleidoscope of bright colors. He had to remove the school shoes he was wearing and slip his tights covered feet into the bright rubber boots. Despite the fact that he was basically wearing her school clothes, he selected her bright purple jacket that had a hood attached instead of the warmer coat she usually wore to school. The purple jacket was waterproof and he wasn't that worried about the cold since he was only running next door.

The ground certainly wasn't that muddy as he crossed the wide backyards. But he was glad to note that even though it was chilly, especially on his legs, it wasn't nearly as cold as it had been.

As he walked, he clearly remembered meeting his “friends” last week. They had all been shocked to see him instead of his sister. And then they had spent most of the day trying to “help” him have fun. Now he was bracing himself for another round of useless girl stuff. The Four Musketeers. How dumb!

He knocked on Nichole’s door and Nichole answered it almost immediately. He went quickly into their kitchen where he found Olivia and Allison as well. He felt a bit out of place as all three girls greeted him so warmly. He got the impression that they all expected that he would show up instead of his sister. He removed his wet purple jacket and Nichole told him to just hang it on one of the pegs near the door where it wouldn’t do any harm if it dripped. He slipped his rain boots off next, leaving him in just his stocking feet.

“Come on, let’s go play with the puppies,” Nichole suggested excitedly. All three of the girls ran off toward the laundry room. Jasmine followed much slower. Yeah, it was going to be a long day.

At least the week-old puppies didn’t look like rats anymore. That was at least something. And this time Nichole removed the fence they used to keep all the dogs in place. Before he knew it, Jasmine was sitting on the floor like the other girls, with a week old puppy in his lap. Nichole and Olivia each held two while Jezebel quickly sniffed each of the girls out briefly, before laying back down for a much needed rest.

“Oh...they’re so cute!” Olivia exclaimed.

Jasmine wasn’t exactly sure what cute really was, but he had to admit, now that they were a bit older, the puppies did look kind of... better, he supposed. At least he didn’t mind looking at them anymore. And actually holding one now wasn’t so bad either.

“How come you’re wearing the same thing again?” Nichole asked him.

“The same thing?”

“That’s the same outfit you wore last week,” Allison told him.

Jasmine shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s just what I picked out.”

“It’s boring!” Olivia said and then laughed.

Jasmine didn’t really care. “It was the best thing I could think of to wear.”

“You really need help, girl!” Allison exclaimed.

“And...I’m guessing you’re all planning on giving me that help?” Jasmine asked, already knowing the answer and bracing himself for another round of useless girl stuff.

“You got that right!” Allison declared excitedly.

“And this time,” Olivia added, “we’ve found a way that we know you can enjoy yourself and have fun!”

Jasmine shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I’m okay.”

“No you’re not!” Nichole exclaimed sadly.

“It’s not right that you can’t enjoy yourself,” Olivia added. “Even if...you don’t like being a girl.”

“You just don’t know how to enjoy being a girl yet,” Allison added brightly.

Jasmine looked around dubiously at all of them, but made no reply. Yeah, he was in for another round of stupid stuff.

It was only a few more minutes until they put the puppies away and Nichole closed them all inside the fence again. Olivia literally grabbed Jasmine by the arm as all the girls ran giggling toward Nichole’s room. All the girls giggled that is, except Jasmine, who was bracing himself for the worst.

By the time Jasmine got into Nichole’s bedroom, Nichole was already at her desk fiddling with something. A moment later, loud country music filled the room. When Nichole turned around with a rather happy look on her face, Jasmine saw what he recognized as a Karaoke machine...and then he saw her picking up a microphone. “Oh no!” he said with a shake of his head and holding his hands up as if to ward off trouble.

“Oh yes!” Olivia exclaimed excitedly as the music background filled the room. “We know how much you like to sing. So today we’re going to sing!”

“Uh-uh,” Jasmine said with another shake of his head, but that was when Nichole herself started singing into the microphone. A moment later, Allison leaned in and joined her. And then Olivia did too. The three girls sang at Jasmine for a minute, then Allison stopped singing long enough to grab Jasmine by the arm and pull him into the group with them. Like it or not, Jasmine found himself singing country songs with the girls. He was quick to note though that it was a female country song they were singing. Naturally.

The song ended, and all the girls laughed, except Jasmine, who was still too stunned by it all to know quite what to do. And then the next song started, followed by another, then another, then another. But with each song, the girls got more and more animated as they started dancing, each separately, then more and more together, as if they were all doing some pre-choreographed routines. And then Olivia and Allison both started urging Jasmine to dance the same movements they were all doing, along with them.

“You gotta thrust your hips out more,” Olivia told him.

“And harder,” Allison added from his other side as all three of the other “girls” shook their hips back and forth.

“Come on!” Olivia said as the others kept singing. “More than that...and harder,” she encouraged him. She watched him trying harder for a moment. “That’s better. Keep doing it!” she yelled before launching right back into singing along with the other girls.

Jasmine knew most of the words, but not nearly as well as the other girls. The songs they were singing weren’t exactly the ones he would normally sing since he wasn’t a girl. But he did know them well enough. And before he knew it, he was doing his best to not just sing with the other girls, but do the same dance steps they were all doing together too. With everything going on all at once, he never realized when he passed the point to where he was actually enjoying himself. He never even realized it when he started to have – fun. And when that song ended, he couldn’t help himself, he laughed right along with the other girls. But the break between songs wasn’t long, and he soon found himself singing and dancing to another song right along with everyone else, and then laughing again with all the girls at the end.

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Marcy peeked around the door frame into her daughter’s room where the girls were all having a great time and making more noise than she’d really like. But she had no intention of stopping them or even slowing them down any. In her hand, she held her phone, held out so that it could pick up all the sound in the room. After a quick look to see what was happening, she pulled her head back again

and waited until the song ended, and the laughter and excitement came from the four “girls.” When the next song started, she turned and headed back to the kitchen where she could talk and hear on the phone better.

“Did you hear that Susan?” she asked. “They’re all singing...and dancing too! All of them!”

“I don’t believe it!” Susan replied, hoping it would really be true, yet finding it hard to believe.

“Susan,” Marcy said. “Listen. He doesn’t quite look like a girl. He certainly doesn’t act at all like a girl. He sure doesn’t sound like a girl. And he absolutely doesn’t laugh like a girl. But...he is singing and laughing right along with them, and he’s having a great time!”

As hard as it was to believe, Susan breathed a sigh of relief. Her son didn’t have the friends like Jasmine did. He was alone way too much. Hearing him laugh was a very rare occurrence. Finding him truly happy about something amounted to an event to be remembered. So now, hearing that he was laughing and having fun, made her feel good. In the middle of all the problems and embarrassment her son now faced, this tiny bit of sunshine was the best thing that could possibly happen. She was happy for her son just then. She wanted the whole switching around thing to end – immediately! She hated that part. But to hear that he was having a good time for once, was...wonderful!

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Jimmy dragged herself up the steps and walked into the kitchen. She was exhausted. She was wet. And she was covered with mud. “Mom! I’m home!” she called somewhat weakly. As dirty as she was, she dared not move from the spot she was in.

Susan hurried into the kitchen. “Hi Ji...” She stopped and stared at her muddy daughter. “What happened to you?”

“Uncle Jed made me dig mud. All day!”

“Don’t move from that spot!” Susan ordered. “Just get your boots off and stay right there!” She hurried to her daughter’s bedroom, but she headed into Jasmine’s room first before she realized what she was doing. She quickly turned around and went

into Jimmy's room instead where she grabbed a bathrobe before hurrying back to the kitchen. "Strip! Right there," she said. "Just pile everything in one spot and put your bathrobe on. Then get straight into the shower. You're a mess!"

As Susan watched her daughter-turned-son slowly undressing, she asked, "So how did it go?"

"Ugh!" Jimmy exclaimed. "It was awful! Uncle Jed let Justin drive and dig with the machine thingy, but he wouldn't let me even climb up into it. We had to dig in the mud with shovels all day and then bury this big pipe and then cover it up again – all in the pouring rain! I'll be lucky if I don't catch pneumonia!"

"So you didn't exactly enjoy yourself."

"Are you kidding? Do you know how hard it is to shovel mud, and then have the rain wash it all right back into the hole again? It had to be one of the stupidest things I've ever done in my life! And both Justin and Uncle Jed laughed because I complained that it was raining. They're idiots! Both of them! And Uncle Jed said we need to do another place next week! It's so totally stupid!"

"You can end this anytime, you know. You could have even told Uncle Jed you wanted to end it today. Just promise not to hunt anymore and it will all end and *everyone* will be happy."

Jimmy looked at her like she was crazy. "Are you kidding? Uncle Jed said that after we finish the road next week, Justin and I can go hunting together. That's going to be awesome!"

Susan felt like someone had just pulled a major prank on her. A prank that left her hurting and scared and frustrated. "You're going to regret this someday."

"Not as far as I can see," Jimmy told her, the smile back on her face despite how bad her day had really been.

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Jasmine dreaded walking out of the house Sunday morning. But then, he always dreaded walking out of the house anytime he had to be his sister. In fact, if he had to be his sister, he'd rather not even leave the bedroom! But life wasn't giving him anything close to that kind of option. So here he was – again. Leaving the house – again.

Going to church – again. Dressed as he sister – again. Dressed as his sister, but how could he ever forget what had happened at church last week when he had shown up dressed as Jasmine?

He was wearing a different dress today, one picked out by his mother. This one was all some kind of heavy pink material with a white belt around the waist. And while it was sleeveless, at least it had a jacket with sleeves that came down past his elbows, but not much past his elbows. He found the weird shortened sleeves to feel...weird. He kept wanting to tug at them to get them to come down further.

Since he was “supposed” to be wearing a much warmer dress – ha! – and the weather was a bit warmer that week, his mother told him to go without the nice, soft, warm, white, furry coat. Consequently, he felt far more exposed and visible than he had last week.

Jimmy pulled at the necktie that her father had tied around her neck that morning. Her father had done the same for Tommy too. And instead of a decent coat against the weather, she and Tommy were wearing lightweight jackets that their father had said they should just leave on until they got home. She guessed the jackets were the closest thing they had to a regular suit jacket.

Her “brother” was wearing her favorite pink dress – without a coat today. When she had seen him in it, she had made the mistake of complaining that it was her favorite, and her mother had heard her. Once again she got the lecture about why should a boy care about what his “sister” was wearing...and then she had been offered the opportunity again to swear off hunting. She had smiled and replied, “Not on your life! I love seeing the little sissy in a pink dress!” She didn’t know if her mother got angrier at her for not swearing off hunting, or for the comment she had made about her sissy brother.

“Stick close to me today,” Clint told Jasmine as they got out of the car in the dirt parking area.

Jasmine looked around at the cars he was able to see and was surprised to note how many cars were already there. A lot! They weren’t really late as far as he could tell, but there were cars parked all over the place. But having no choice but to display the pink dress

he was wearing, sticking close to his father wasn't going to be a problem at all. In fact, he had no intention of getting far from his father at all!

As Jasmine did his best to step carefully through the parking area so he wouldn't get too much mud on his patent leather shoes, he saw his Uncle Jed walking into the church. He knew that even though Aunt Valerie rarely ever missed going to church, his Uncle Jed rarely ever stepped into the place. As they got closer to the doors, he noticed his Uncle Jack pulling their car into the parking lot too. This season of the year, so close to Christmas, was the busiest time of the year at their store. His Uncle Jack and Aunt Jessica rarely left the store for long in the weeks before Christmas.

Going through the doors into the church, he noticed immediately how crowded the place was. A minute later, he noticed all too many heads turning to look at him. Not just people who were near him, he saw quite a few who were much further off either craning their necks to see him or getting up from their seats to have a better look at him. And a few of the people had faces he didn't recognize at all. Why didn't he wear his sister's white coat today? Maybe he could have pulled it over his head and hid inside the thing.

"This way," Clint said as he nervously shepherded his whole family toward one of the pews in the middle of the church.

As Jasmine side-stepped into the pew behind Jimmy, he noticed more family members in the little church than he could ever remember seeing there. He sat right next to his father. Jimmy sat next to him. Tommy came next with their mother guarding them all from the far side.

"Pssst! Hi Jasmine!"

Jasmine turned his head around and saw Olivia moving into the pew right behind him. He smiled, then turned his head back toward the front as Jimmy said hi to Olivia too. So many family members were there! After last week, he started to worry about the kind of fight today might bring.

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Reverend Cosinger stood in the doorway at the side of the church, looking out over his congregation. A lot of people today. A lot! For once, it looked like his little church was going to be fairly full.

He certainly didn't miss seeing the entrance of the two McComber twins again. And again they were dressed as each other. He was betting that Jacob McComber had forced them to do it, just to spite him...and God. Blasphemy!

And there was the man himself, Jacob McComber, looking all too sure of himself walking into God's house. It was God's house, not his! Jacob McComber might own a big piece of the state of Arkansas, but he didn't own this church. He just provided a major portion of the money that went to supporting it...and much of his paycheck. But he didn't own the church!

As his eyes scanned the rest of the crowd, he saw more McCombers than he could ever remember seeing – adults and kids. Even Jed McComber and Jack Cumberland were there, and they hardly ever came. As far as he could tell, every last member of the McComber Clan was right there in his church. Set off a bomb and you could get rid of all of them in one fell swoop.

Forgive me Lord for even thinking such a thought!

After what had happened last week, he had fumed over it all week long. There were so many things he'd like to do and say to all of them. Things that would make them all see how angry God had to be with their entire clan. Not to mention how angry he was with them all.

As the time for the service grew nearer, the crowd in the church began to settle down more. His church appeared to be completely full. It was one of the best crowds he had ever had to preach to.

He caught the eye of his wife who sat nervously in front of the upright piano. She looked a bit scared. He walked over to her and put his arm around her. "Big crowd today," he said.

"Jordan," she said, "I think every last McComber is here in this church...including all their kids!"

He nodded. "I know. Even the Cumberlands are here."

"Don't you go saying anything to make them angry. You hear? Leave it alone!"

"Now dear, I'll be fine."

“Jordan, I’m not ready to go looking for someplace else to live. We don’t have any money at all put up if they fire you!”

He realized it had been a mistake to tell her that Jacob had threatened to have him fired. But unfortunately, his wife had a point. But still. It wasn’t right! “Don’t worry dear.”

“You just be nice today. There’s a lot of people here who haven’t been here before. Let them see how good you are. Maybe they’ll start coming more often.”

“Maybe they’ll start coming more often if they see how serious I am about the word of God!” he replied. “Maybe they should see that I’m not afraid of Jacob McComber!”

“Don’t you dare!” she hissed. “You do it nice today! Not a word about what happened last week!”

He shook his head. “Did you see those twins today? The boy’s got a pink dress on for heaven’s sake. They’re taunting us. Daring us! I can’t let this kind of insult stand!”

His wife shook her head. “Don’t do it! Be nice and ignore them all! Remember what it says in the bible – turn the other cheek! And remember, we need this job. Both of us! We’ve got a family too.”

He pursed his lips. His wife was right...and she was also wrong. She was wrong because of the blasphemy of those two kids and what that clan was doing with them. She was wrong because of the way Jacob McComber had argued with him last week, right here in church! But unfortunately, his wife was right as well. Getting fired wouldn’t exactly be very good for their family. Especially not this close to Christmas.

He checked his watch and nodded toward the piano his wife was sitting at. “Let’s get started,” he said. As his wife began to play, Reverend Cosinger said a quick prayer for courage as he walked out to begin the service.

They sang a hymn before he led the congregation in a prayer... while he never took his eyes off the two twins in the middle of his church, who stuck out like a sore thumb to him.

He tried to be lighthearted as he made all the announcements, mostly about the festivities the church was offering during the Christmas season. He saw McCombers here, McCombers there. And more McCombers in the back.

He read the lesson from the bible, this time, making sure to read something in keeping with the Christmas season. He particularly watched Jacob McComber as he did that.

And then he launched into his sermon. He had to keep looking at his notes far more frequently than usual because he kept getting lost in his thoughts as his eyes constantly found McCombers all over the church. There wasn't a single place he could look that he didn't see them. Unless he looked behind him...and he was getting tempted to do just that.

While it was his dream to have so many people in his church, today he found all those McCombers to be simply irritating. If this was a show of force on Jacob McComber's part, there was no doubt he was getting his message across. As much as he would have liked to deliver a spur of the moment sermon on the blasphemy those two twins were engaged in, he realized that he dared not! His wife had been right. He dared not lose this job, no matter what.

But the McCombers weren't the only ones in the church. A lot of the people he saw there were people he had never seen before. Did they come out just to see what would happen? Were they more friends of Jacob than he had brought in for help? Which side would they support if he and Jacob got into another fight?

But his wife was right. He dared not start a fight. Not now. Not this close to Christmas. The best he could do would be to continue on as if there was nothing wrong at all. Continue on as if the enormous monstrosity of those twins affronting the very word of God, right in the middle of his church, didn't exist at all. Continue on as if he loved every single person out there. It was difficult, but he had years of practice now doing just that, acting one way, while he wanted nothing more than to beat some sense into all the senseless people around him!

Despite himself, he breathed a sigh of relief when he finished his sermon without saying a word about the abomination of those two twins. He breathed another sigh of relief a while later as he said the benediction ending the service.

As he usually did, he stood at the door and shook the hands of everyone who had attended. But once again, he couldn't bring himself to shake the hand of Clint McComber, and he found it

impossible to not glare angrily at the two twins as their mother literally pushed them out and past him. That's right! Get them out of this church and don't bring them back! Oh how much he wanted to say that out loud to them.

The last ones out the door again were Jacob McComber and his wife. And just like last week, Jacob held his hand out, waiting for him to shake it again. He didn't want to, but again Jacob's persistence won out and he found himself shaking hands with the one man he now realized he hated so much.

"Nice sermon," Jacob told him. "Best I've heard from you in a while. More passion this time I think."

And with that, Jacob McComber and his wife walked away from the church and headed for their car. Reverend Cosinger hated the man. He hated the entire McComber Clan. But for now, he realized that the clan had won. His wife had been right, he did need this job too much – now and in the future. He would have to find some way to put up with the blasphemous abomination of those twins...and what the McComber Clan was doing with them.

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Susan McComber was just glad to get her family back home again. She and Clint hadn't really wanted to go, but when Jacob had called them the night before and said he wanted the whole family there today, then they had little choice. Things in church had been crazy enough last week. This week there had been a tension in the church that had been so thick you could almost cut it with a knife! And then the way Reverend Cosinger had glared at them as they left, just like he had done last week. Now she was just glad to be home again.

"Jasmine take that dress off and change into something a little less...good," she told her fake daughter. "Then come help me get lunch ready."

"Change into what?" Jasmine asked. "Can I wear some pants for a change?"

Susan pursed her lips. This business with Jasmine being only able to wear skirts was irksome, as was the entire switching around

business. "Um...no. Just find one of your outfits you wear to school instead."

Jasmine rolled his eyes and headed for the bedroom.

"Want me to find him something to wear, Momma?" Jimmy asked with more than a hint of teasing in her voice. The answer she got back from her mother was only another angry glare.

Not knowing what else to wear, Jasmine simply put the same clothes on that he had worn the day before.

"We've really got to fix your taste in outfits," Jimmy muttered to him when she saw what her "sister" had put on again.

"What's wrong with it?" Jasmine asked, somewhat irked by what his "brother" had said.

"Boooriing!" Jimmy proclaimed before walking off.

Jasmine simply ignored her.

After lunch, Jimmy went back to her room, but she had nothing in there she wanted to do. She played a few of her brother's video games for a few minutes, but they didn't really interest her. Instead, she turned to the internet where she found some of her favorite fashion websites. This was much better!

"What the heck are you looking at young man?" Susan angrily exclaimed when she saw from the doorway what "Jimmy" was looking at. Jimmy quickly closed the internet browser as his mother came in. "Don't let me ever catch you looking at things like that again!" She glared angrily down at her "son" for a moment before adding, "You know what you have to do if you want to spend your time looking through things like that again!"

"Sorry, Mom," Jimmy replied, with more than a hint of annoyance in her voice. "But there's nothing else to do."

"Then find something! But looking at anything like that is out! Hear me?"

"Yeah Mom," Jimmy replied disappointedly. An idea struck her. "Hey Mom, can I ride one of the ATVs for a while?"

Susan considered it. "Go ask your father," she finally replied.

Jimmy ran off to the family room where her father and older brother were watching football on TV. "Hey Dad, can I ride one of the ATVs?"

Clint considered it as he saw his wife entering the room. "She wants to ride one of the ATVs for a while," he said to her.

"I know. I told her to ask you."

Clint nodded. "Any hunters in this area today?" he asked.

"There's not supposed to be. We've got several in different parts of the land, but you know we try to keep them pretty far away from the houses. And as far as I know, if they just head out back that way, there should be no one hunting back there at all."

Clint nodded. "I think it would be okay then," he said to his fake son. All his kids had been riding the ATV's since before they could walk. He wasn't that worried about any of them. Which brought up another thought. "How about Jasmine?" he asked as Jimmy gave a whoop of delight and was about to run off.

"Jasmine?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah. Remember her? Your sister?"

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "What about...*her*?"

Clint looked up at his wife. "I wonder if it would do Jasmine good to get out of here and ride for a while too." He didn't add that it had been Jasmine who had fixed the broken machine in the first place, and it was Jasmine who he thought really deserved to ride the things the most. Before he wife could answer, he turned to Tommy, "How about you? Want to go for a ride today?"

"Dad! We're right in the middle of the game. Besides, I don't want to have to babysit with those two!"

Clint looked up at his wife. "How about Jasmine?"

Susan shrugged. "Let me ask him."

"Do I have to go with Jas?" Jimmy complained.

"If he wants to go, you do," Clint told her.

Jimmy rolled her eyes, much as her brother often did. Then she sulked off toward her room to get ready.

Susan knocked on Jasmine's door before she entered. Her "daughter" was sitting there staring at the...news...on the internet. "That's a strange thing for you to be looking at."

"It's the best thing I could find that wasn't related to fashion or girly stuff," Jasmine replied.

Susan let the remark pass. "Want to go riding the ATVs with your brother?"

Jasmine's face brightened. "With Tommy? Yeah sure!"

"No, I mean your other brother."

Jasmine's face fell again as he considered that. "Yeah. I guess so. Why not?" He looked down at what he was wearing. "Can I though? In this?" he asked as he motioned to the clothes he had on.

Susan looked at his clothes. The brown straight skirt he was wearing again would never make it for riding an ATV. He probably wouldn't even be able to climb on the thing properly in the fairly tight skirt. "Tell you what," she said, "Let's just find you something to wear that will work a bit better."

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It was nearly half an hour later by the time Jasmine left the house. He was still wearing the cream colored sweater he had worn the day before. He was also still wearing the white tights he had on too. But the tights were now covered up by a pair of heavy leggings his mother had found in the dresser, and over top of that, she had made him put on a different skirt. This one was bright green, and short, and flared out so much it would never cause him a problem sitting on the ATV. He was wearing his sister's purple jacket again and her overly colorful rain boots were on his feet. He felt...stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid! But at least they would be riding in the woods where nobody could see him.

Jimmy was waiting for him, already on one of the ATVs. He grabbed the helmet his sister usually wore and strapped it onto his head. Then he climbed up onto the ATV that he had repaired just a few days before. Hearing the soft purr of the engine the moment he tried to start it was almost as thrilling as riding the thing.

"Let's go!" Jimmy shouted as she took off as fast as she could push the thing. Jasmine was right behind her.

Riding the four-wheelers was nothing but fun. They were exhilarating. Especially when they got to ride them as fast as they dared. The forest path they were on was well travelled and no real problem, but that didn't mean there weren't enough ruts in it to make the ride more than exciting enough. The further they travelled, the worse the path they were on got. There were a number of junctions

where they could have gone different ways, but Jasmine simply stayed behind his sister. They both knew the land so well there was never a question of them getting lost.

They were gone almost twenty minutes before Jasmine realized where Jimmy was heading. No surprise, they stopped at the edge of a steep hill overlooking one of his favorite parts of all the land that the family owned. He pulled his ATV up alongside his sister's and shut the engine off.

"I love it here," Jimmy said as she looked out at the cascading waterfall that fell into a small shallow pool before the stream continued on down the small valley. "It's got to be one of the most beautiful places on earth."

"Yeah," Jasmine agreed. "It's one of my favorite places too."

The two of them sat there silently for a while. Each of them enjoying watching the waterfall. But sitting there also gave Jasmine too much time to think. He finally couldn't help but ask, "Jas?" He had purposely dropped the pretense of his sister being him. "Jas, why do you hate me so much?"

Jasmine was surprised at the question. "I don't really hate you," she replied. "I just think you're a major wimp. I can't believe you can be so afraid of the stupidest things. And besides, I love hunting, and I'm getting a kick out of seeing you having to act like a girl for being such a sissy."

"So you hate me," he said.

"No," she replied. "I don't. Not really."

"Well it sure seems like it!"

She laughed. "Tell me you'd rather be out hunting with the guys. Tell me you'd rather eat the heart of a deer like I did."

He could almost feel the bile in his stomach rising at the thought of it. "No thanks!" he said quickly.

"See," she said. "You're a sissy. End of story."

"So you hate me," he said again.

"Like I said, not really," she replied.

"But you love torturing me."

She considered that. "It is kind of fun. But really, I can't do much of anything to really *torture* you. I'm stuck being you, and

Mom won't let me do much of anything at all to really have much fun with you anymore."

He considered that for a few moments. "But Jas, you are torturing me. As long as you refuse to give up hunting, you're torturing me. I have no say in this matter. I have no way out except by you agreeing to not hunt anymore. Everything that happens to you affects me too, like it or not. And I have no say in it...only you. So every time you have to be me, you're torturing me by making me be you."

Jasmine thought about that. "I never really looked at it that way," she said.

"Then please stop this," he begged. "For me. Because you *are* torturing me."

She looked over at him. "That's not really the way I see it!" she said somewhat angrily. "I heard all about how much *fun* you had over at Nichole's house yesterday with *my* friends. You want to know what torture is? Torture is not being allowed to have even a friendly conversation with any of your best friends, while your screwy brother is singing and dancing and having a great time with them instead. You want to know what torture is? That's torture!"

"Then end this!" he pleaded. "Please!"

She shook her head. "Not on your life!" She smiled. "Besides, Uncle Jed said that after we do some more road work next week, I can go hunting with Justin. And I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to that."

Jasmine, the real Jimmy, just hung his head and sighed.

Chapter 14 – The Christmas Gift

December 24th – 25th

‘Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even... Oh darn. Not again! Once again, eleven year old Jimmy McComber couldn’t sleep. But this time it wasn’t the ducks that were keeping him awake, this time it was something more irritating. His nipples hurt. Actually, they had been giving him trouble off and on for the last couple of days. But as he laid in bed now, they were both just plain sore!

He rubbed them gently, but they seemed to be so sensitive that it only made matters worse. And when he gingerly felt them, his nipples almost felt like they were bigger than he could ever remember. And he had seen in the mirror that the dark area around the nipples was bigger too. And he wondered if he might be imagining it, but he was almost sure he felt some kind of a small lump right underneath his nipples.

He had heard about people getting lumps like that in their bodies before. All too often those lumps meant cancer! So now he laid in bed with his hands cupping his nipples so they wouldn’t rub against anything, and he worried that he now had a cancer that could end his life. He never even thought about sleeping. Sleep didn’t come until the wee hours of the morning. It came to him between breaths while he thought he was still awake and worried about dying.

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Jasmine woke up Christmas morning. The sun was shining brightly and the weather report called for somewhat warmer temperatures and no rain. A perfect day for hunting, except there was no hunting that day. At least not for her. A few of her uncles were leading tourists around in different parts of the land, but even

they weren't supposed to be gone very long today. It was Christmas, and Christmas was special to all the McCombers.

Even though the clock by her bedside said it was pretty early, since the sun was nearly up, she got out of bed and opened her bedroom door. Looking out, she could see that the doors to both of her brother's rooms were still closed. How could they possibly be asleep at a time like that? It was Christmas!

She headed down the hall to the bathroom, not bothering to be quiet at all. In fact, she made a bit more noise than usual as she went into the bathroom, and again when she came out. But it seemed that nobody else was interested in getting up yet. Ugh!

She walked down to the family room where the Christmas tree was. Presents! A bunch of them, right there spread out all around and under the tree. And some of them were big! And her stupid brothers were still sound asleep. The morons! Didn't they know what day it was?

She checked the door to her parent's room. Closed too. How could anybody still be asleep? It was Christmas! It was time to open presents!

Not wanting to wait anymore, she walked all among the gifts under the tree. She was mostly interested in those big boxes that were way in the back. Boxes that she couldn't get close enough to see who they were for. Drat! Come on everyone. Wake up! It's Christmas! But the house remained all too deathly still and silent.

Finally taking matters into her own hands, she went to her parent's door and knocked. "Anybody awake in there?"

Susan rolled over in the bed, her sleepy eyes staring at their closed bedroom door as she heard her husband grunt.

"Not already," Clint mumbled. "I think we just fell asleep!"

"Not very long ago," Susan agreed. But then she slapped her husband on the rump. "Might as well face it, we're not going to get anymore sleep today." She turned her eyes back to the bedroom door. "Come on in," she sang brightly to her daughter.

Jasmine opened her parent's door. Grownups! How could anyone sleep at a time like this? "Mom. Dad. It's Christmas! We've got gifts to open."

“Are your brothers up yet?” Susan asked as she managed to swing her legs out from under the covers in an effort to sit up.

“Not yet, but they will be soon!” Jasmine replied brightly. A moment later, she was running down the hallway shouting for everyone to wake up. She banged on both Tommy and Jimmy’s doors yelling, “Wake up! It’s Christmas.”

“Whose idea was it to have more kids?” Clint asked.

Susan slapped her husband’s rump again. “Get up. You’re not leaving me alone with a dangerous mob like we’ve got.” All she got in reply was another grunt.

Before any gifts were opened, before they did anything else, all the tree lights were turned on. In fact, all the Christmas lights inside and outside the house were turned on as well. They all gathered in the family room to open the gifts under the tree. But first, as was their immediate family tradition, they all emptied their stockings that had been so carefully hung from the mantle over the fireplace. Each stocking had been hand-made by Susan and lovingly bore the name of each family member.

Clint pulled his stocking down and acted totally surprised at the things he found when he dumped the thing out: A couple of new pens, some candy, a box of razor blades for his razor. And a hunting magazine he liked to read. He kissed his wife and handed her the stocking that belonged to her.

Susan already knew what was in each of the stockings since she had filled them all, including hers. But she too acted surprised at the little gifts she had found inside of her stocking. She handed Tommy his next, and watched with almost as much delight as Tommy had when he dumped the few things out from his stocking, including a new duck call that made far too much noise as it was passed around to all of them to try out before anyone else could open anything.

Susan then handed Jasmine her stocking next and watched as her daughter whooped in delight to see two more pairs of tights, several small clip-on bows that she could stick in her hair, a couple of different nail polishes, and a collection of flavored chap sticks for her lips.

Susan handed the final stocking to Jimmy who dumped it out just as everyone else had done. Jimmy was awed to find a Popular

Science magazine he could read, along with some candy, a few pens and pencils for school, and a small calculator.

With the stockings taken care of, it was now time for the main attraction – the gifts under the tree. Susan and Clint had taken care of their gifts to each other the night before...one of the reasons they didn't get much sleep that night. They also didn't want their kids giving them any gifts in return, so all the gifts were for Tommy, Jimmy, and Jasmine.

Not surprisingly, and as usual, all the kids got plenty of new clothes they could wear to school. Jasmine was delighted with even more colorful tights as well as a large box that contained a pair of leather boots. She was in heaven with those. The only problem with them was that the heels on them were flat. But...that was the style now. Of course, she also got several skirts and sweaters too. But oddly, no pants of any kind. It was something she didn't even notice in all the excitement.

Jasmine didn't notice that she hadn't gotten any pants, but Jimmy did. He noticed because he was paying closer attention to what clothes his sister was getting, because all too soon he would be stuck wearing them. He himself got lots of clothes. School clothes, play clothes, and clothes for hunting! He had no doubt which Jimmy would get the most use out of them.

Tommy too got clothes for school, clothes for play, and clothes for hunting, including a new camouflage coat that he put on and kept on while he opened other gifts. He also got a box of targets for shooting out in the back yard. He was particularly excited about that because he and Elliot often practiced out behind their houses. Now he had new targets and he couldn't wait to try them out.

Most of the gifts were opened, but there were still those three big boxes that had been stuck way in the back. The boxes that each of the kids kept looking at, wondering what was in them, hoping that the things they wanted the most would be there. Tommy wanted a new game machine for the video games he loved to play. Jasmine wanted a sewing machine to help her make her clothes better. And Jimmy wanted a toolbox and some tools to start his own collection. Someday he wanted more tools than even his dad had! Jimmy

particularly eyed the big rectangular box. It was more than big enough to be a tool box. In fact, it was the perfect size!

Clint finally grabbed the smallest of those three boxes and handed it to Tommy who tore into the wrapping paper like a badger after a mouse. He gave a whoop of delight before he had uncovered much of the box. It was the exact game machine he had wanted. And there were several games for it right on top! Yes, yes, yes! He thanked both his parents and gave them each a hug. Then he ignored everything and everyone else as he began opening the box so he could look at it closer.

Clint went to the one box that both Jasmine and Jimmy had been the most interested in. It wasn't the longest box, but it was still pretty big. The box was heavy, even for him, as he picked it up and set it down...right in front of Jasmine, who gave a shriek of delight.

Jasmine tore into the wrapping paper. "Yes!" she screamed excitedly as she saw the picture of a sewing machine on the box she was unwrapping. She quickly ripped the rest of the paper from the box and caressed it with her hands. Her hugs to both her mother and father were certainly exuberant and heartfelt.

And then it was down to the final box. The one that Jimmy knew would be for him. Except...he had a frightening suspicion as to what might be in that box. It was big enough. It was long enough. And if what was in there was what he thought it might be, he didn't want it at all. His father set the box down on the floor in front of him. Far more hesitantly than any of the others, he started opening it. He ripped a bit of the paper away, but he couldn't tell much from the small part of the box he had uncovered. He ripped it further, and all his worst fears came true. Removing the wrapping paper completely, he opened the box, revealing...a gun. A new hunting rifle.

"That's the perfect deer gun for you," Clint told him, although there was a lot of sadness in his voice. They had bought the gun quite a while back, in hopes of Jimmy finally getting his first deer. But now, both Clint and Susan knew which Jimmy would most likely get the most use out of it.

"Cool!" Jasmine exclaimed with obvious awe in her eyes as she saw the rifle revealed. "Can I see?"

Jimmy just pushed the box over toward her and got up, heading back to his room. He felt like crying. He had gotten a new gun for Christmas. All the other boys in the family would have been thrilled. But he wasn't. It was a gift he would never use. His sister would get all the use out of it. And he had no doubt at all as to which of them would probably be using that sewing machine the most.

It had happened a few times before recently, but usually only at night when he was alone. The deep depression that hit him forced the first heartbroken sobs out of him before he barely got to the hallway. Once again, he suddenly found himself emotional and crying and unable to stop himself. He ran to his room to cry privately, while his sister examined the gun all too interestedly.

Jimmy didn't see Jasmine caress the new gun. He didn't see her pick it up and put it to her shoulder to aim it. He didn't see the delight in her eyes. He really didn't care. He was too busy sobbing and feeling sorry for himself. Sorry for himself because he had gotten a gun for Christmas that he would never use...and sorry for himself because he was afraid he was dying.

Clint and Susan both looked at each other. They had a pretty good idea as to why Jimmy was crying. Clint started to get up to go to him, but Susan stopped him. "I'll go," she said softly. "You keep an eye on Jasmine and that gun!"

She walked softly down the hall back to Jimmy's room. The door was closed. She didn't bother knocking. She opened it and went in. Jimmy was sobbing bitterly on the bed. His hands were crossed in front of his chest in an odd way. "Jimmy," she said as she sat on the bed and ran her hand through his longish hair. "I know you didn't want a gun. But we got it a while back for you. We had big hopes that you would really love it. And then when all this...craziness started, we didn't take it back because, well, we had our reasons. Reasons we're still hoping for. Reasons that we hope will make your sister see the light."

Jimmy still couldn't stop crying. In fact, he now cried even harder. He couldn't help himself.

Susan stroked his head for a few more minutes before asking. "Jimmy, have you cried like this before, in the last few weeks?" The answer she got was only sort of a nod amid more deep sobs. Susan

pursed her lips. It was another sign of the hormones at work in his system. She hugged him as he cried and was surprised when he actually spoke.

"It's not just the gun," he managed to get out.

"What is it?" Susan asked softly.

"I...I'm...dying," Jimmy sobbed, and his crying reached a new level.

"What do you mean you're dying? Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm dying!" he said again.

"Why would you ever think such a thing? That's ridiculous!"

"I am!" Jimmy insisted. "I think...I think I've got...cancer!" Again his sobs reached a new higher height as he turned his head and buried it into his pillow.

"Cancer! What on earth would ever make you think that?" She was completely skeptical, yet her voice now held a note of worry. Cancer wasn't something to joke about – for any reason. But she got no answer from her son. She asked again. "Jimmy, why do you think you have cancer? If you do, you've got to tell me. We have to get help for you."

Jimmy half rolled over to where he could talk to her better. His sobs weren't quite as bad now. "I've got...lumps. Small lumps like cancer," he told her.

Susan was immediately concerned. Lumps were indeed a bad sign. "Where, Jimmy? Where? Show them to me." The fear in her voice was clearly there.

"On my chest," Jimmy replied, noting how concerned his mother was and how seriously she seemed to be taking what he had said.

"Show me!" Susan demanded quickly as she got up from the bed to give him room to sit up.

Jimmy slowly raised himself into a sitting position. He grabbed his pajama top and pulled it up as high as he could. With one hand, he held it up, while with his other hand he pointed at his sore and tender nipples. "There's lumps under there. And they hurt like you wouldn't believe!" he told her. "I can hardly stand to let anything touch them."

Susan was shocked. Her head went spinning. But her head was spinning because she quickly realized that what her son thought

was cancer, was nothing of the sort. Her son was starting to grow breasts! She stared hard at his nipples. They were both definitely bigger than they used to be. And the areolas around the nipples were now starting to get larger. "Can I touch them?" she asked cautiously.

Jimmy pulled his hand away. "They hurt when anything touches them," he told her.

"I'll be careful," she said. Her hands softly rubbed and felt each of his nipples. He obviously registered soreness with her touch. But underneath, she was able to feel the tiny bud of his breasts just beginning to grow. She wanted to tell him so much what it actually was. She *had* to tell him what it was. But she couldn't find the words. All she could say was, "It's not cancer, Jimmy. I'm sure of that."

"It's not?" Jimmy asked, not sure if he should believe her or not.

"No," she said. "It's definitely not cancer. So stop worrying about it."

"Then what is it?"

Again she wanted to tell him. But she still couldn't find the words. How do you tell your son...that his breasts are now growing like every other healthy girl in the world? How do you tell a son something like that?

"Tell you what," she finally said. "We'll talk to Uncle Brian about it later today and let him take a look. Okay? He's the expert."

Jimmy nodded. "Okay," he replied. But the fear that he might have cancer still rested underneath.

Susan walked out of the room fighting her own tears. Things had already reached an even worse point. Her son was growing breasts.

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"Grow, damn it. Grow!" Jasmine whispered to her breasts as she massaged them yet again, just like she did every single day. But there was still no more sign of growth than there had been last week or the week before. She had read that sometimes breasts did that. They sometimes grew in spurts. So she was just in one of those

periods where they weren't growing yet. That was all. The part that had her the most concerned though was that it almost looked like her nipples were a bit smaller than they had been. But if they were, it wasn't really much. In fact, she was sure she was imagining it. "Grow, damn you!" she whispered again. With one last frustrated look she gave up and turned toward her closet.

They couldn't really turn her into a boy, could they? But she knew for a fact that they couldn't. That stuff her uncle had injected into her had been nothing but water. Plain, old, water! It had even looked like water! Besides, she didn't feel any different.

Closing her robe around her, she went into the bathroom to take her bath. She saw the door to her brother's room still closed as she went into the hallway. The stupid wuss had started crying. Bawling his eyes out, because he got a gun for Christmas. The wuss! She would have loved to get a gun like that. She smiled because she knew that in reality, she did. The reality of the situation was that she got everything she wanted, while her sissy sap of a brother didn't get anything. And he was even in his room crying like a sissy now. What a wuss!

She dumped an extra amount of bath beads into her bath water. Lately, her skin wasn't feeling as soft as it used to. And when she finally got out of the tub a little while later, she grabbed a bottle of skin moisturizer that her mother had let her have last week and soaked her entire body in it. Only then did she put her robe back on to go back to her room to get dressed.

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Christmas for the McComber Clan was in many ways just like Thanksgiving. The women all cooked way too much food that was eventually brought up to Jacob and Rose's house where the family all met for dinner. The only big difference between Thanksgiving and Christmas, was the gifts that the Grandparents handed out to everyone. They wanted no gifts from their kids in return. Christmas was their gift to all of them.

Susan was glad to have the right Jasmine helping her in the kitchen. It certainly made things a lot easier since she had brought

her daughter up to be a big help right from the start. Someday, Jasmine was going to make some man a very proud wife!

She noticed that all day long, Jimmy stayed in his room by himself. She had talked briefly about it with Clint. He hadn't been happy. But they were leaving Jimmy alone for now. He had enough problems now that they didn't want to burden him with anything else. She and her husband both felt bad for him, but this was something they both knew might happen. They had hoped it would all end before this, but clearly, things weren't heading in that direction. Yet!

Later in the afternoon, Jasmine headed back to her room to get dressed. "What are you going to wear?" her mother asked. "That gorgeous burgundy dress?"

"I don't know yet?" Jasmine replied. "Probably. But since Jimmy wore it at Thanksgiving, I'm not sure I want to wear it now."

Susan was surprised. "It's a very pretty dress," she told her. "It deserves to be seen more than once. And don't you think it would look better on you than on him?"

"Maybe," Jasmine laughed, actually agreeing with her mother. "But you've got to admit, he did look pretty good in it. Everyone even said so."

Susan stopped and stared at her daughter as her lips pursed. "Yeah," she agreed. "He did turn out pretty good that day. And he hasn't looked nearly as good since."

Jasmine laughed. "That's because he can't dress himself very well at all," she laughed. "He's hopeless!" Still laughing, she ran back to her room to start getting ready.

As Susan watched her daughter leaving, she realized that Jasmine did have a point. When Jimmy was being his sister, he wore the plainest things he could find in her closet. He had no sense of what to wear at all. And he never bothered with nail polish or makeup or anything else that his sister did, things that she had noticed her daughter was using more often now than she ever did in the past. But then Jasmine was getting older, and without a doubt, more interested in things like that.

She didn't want the thought at all, but it was there in the back of her mind. What was Jasmine going to think when she found out

what was growing on her brother's chest? She didn't want the thought, but she was also hopeful that the fact that Jimmy was now growing the breasts that Jasmine wanted so badly, would finally spur her daughter to end this whole ridiculous business. She wanted her daughter back completely. Her *real* daughter!

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Unlike the white tights that her brother had worn with the dress, Jasmine chose a pair of burgundy colored tights instead. Before she slipped the dress on, she pulled two tissues from the box on her nightstand and stuck them inside her bra. "Grow breasts, grow!" Then she slipped the dress on over her head and zipped it up. She stared at herself in the mirror. She looked...okay. She studied her face. It didn't look as pretty to her today as it usually did. She didn't know why she thought that, she just did. Probably because now that she was wearing the gorgeous dress, she couldn't help picturing how her dumb brother had looked in it. Everyone had said he had looked amazingly good. Almost like a real girl. But she *was* a real girl, and after what they had said about her brother, she didn't feel all that comfortable in the dress anymore. She unzipped it and took it off, deciding not to wear it. Besides, with her hair now cut that short, she couldn't use the big bow that went with the dress anyway.

From her closet, she finally chose a much more colorful skirt outfit to wear instead.

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"You're not wearing your new dress?" Susan exclaimed a little while later when her daughter came back to the kitchen.

"No," Jasmine replied. "I decided not to."

"Why not? I thought we agreed that you should?"

Jasmine shook her head. "I started to wear it, but I decided not to."

"Why?" Susan asked again.

"Because I think Jimmy looked better in it than I do."

Susan rolled her eyes. "That's nonsense and you know it!"

Jasmine just shrugged. "He can have it," she replied. "Maybe I'll just stick it in his closet. The big sissy will probably love it!"

Susan let the remark pass. "Grab that big dish," she told her daughter. "We'll get the biggest things out to the car first."

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Grandpa's house was full of people by the time that Clint, Tommy, and Jimmy got there. All three immediately went into the family room where most of the men were. Clint continued on toward his father's office where he saw several of his brothers already inside. Tommy hurried over to Elliot so the two of them could compare Christmas gifts. Jimmy just walked into the room and stood there by himself.

Jimmy was still feeling sorry for himself. He was still worried that he was dying. He wanted desperately to talk with his Uncle Brian about it, but since he didn't see Allison or Aaron in the room, he was pretty sure his uncle wasn't there yet.

Several of the kids were watching the big TV set hung high on the wall. They had to crane their necks to see it since there wasn't much room to stand back from it with the big table once again filling the room. He didn't feel like watching TV. Of all the kids he saw, he was the only one not talking with other kids. But he didn't feel like talking with any of the others. The only person he really wanted to talk with was his uncle. Did he have cancer? His mother said she was sure that he didn't. But his mother wasn't a doctor.

He finally sat in a chair that was pushed up against the wall right next to a bowl of chips. His hand continually went into the bowl as he sat alone and watched everything happening in the room around him. Most of the business in the room though was in the form of the women constantly coming in to put stuff on the table.

People constantly passed by him going up and down the narrow walkway between the table and the furniture pushed back to the walls. He barely even looked at them. But when one of those people stopped right in front of him, he was forced to look up.

"Hi Jimmy," Olivia said brightly.

“Uh...hi Olivia.” He took note of the richly colored green dress she was wearing. “Uh...nice dress,” he said. “Real nice.” Had he just said that? It surprised him.

Olivia laughed delightedly. “Thanks! I just got it.” She stood there for a moment looking down at him. “How come you’re sitting here by yourself?”

Jimmy searched for a reason. “I guess...nobody really wants to talk to me. And to be honest, I think it’s probably better that way.”

Olivia felt the sadness in his voice. “Because they all know you have to dress as your sister?”

He nodded. “Yeah,” he admitted. He didn’t want to tell her that because of having to be Jasmine, he didn’t want to talk with the other kids either. Just like he didn’t want to tell her about the cancer. That was the biggest worry on his mind.

“What did you get for Christmas?” Olivia asked brightly, trying to lighten his mood.

“A gun,” he replied. “A hunting rifle.”

Olivia was shocked. “But...you don’t want to hunt, do you?”

He shook his head. “You know which Jimmy the gun was really for.”

She felt his sadness again, and it made her feel sad too. “Did... your sister get anything that you think you’re going to use instead?”

He nodded. “Unfortunately,” he said. “Lots of skirts and some dresses and...”

“And what?”

“A sewing machine.”

“You got a sewing machine?” she exclaimed excitedly. “I’m sooo jealous!”

“I didn’t get it. Jasmine did.”

“But you’re...”

“Don’t remind me.”

All the men coming out of Jacobs’s office interrupted their conversation. “It’s gift time!” someone called. The commotion in the room...in the entire house, went crazy! Everyone headed out to the porch, the only area big enough to fit the tree and all the gifts, and where everyone else could squeeze in.

Jimmy got to the porch and finally found the rest of his family. All the families tried their best to group themselves together. Jacob spoke a short little speech wishing them all the merriest of Christmases, and then the gifts were handed out by Jacob and Rose. They always started with the youngest kids first since they were all the least patient. Each person in the room got one gift from them, the grandkids and the parents alike, but everyone knew that Jacob and Rose always gave out nice gifts. Often expensive gifts.

Other than going from the youngest to the oldest, there was no set way that they handed out the gifts. Rose gave gifts to both boys and girls, and Jacob did the same. But Jacob himself had reserved his gift for Jimmy. He himself wanted to give it to him. When he got to Jimmy's gift, he picked the large heavy box up and carried it over to the boy, who all too often was dressed as a girl. He was particularly glad to see the two twins dressed as they should be that day. It made Christmas so much better. He set the box down in front of Jimmy. "I hear you did a good job fixin' that ATV," he said. "I'm more than a bit proud of you for doing that. Your father tells me you've got quite the knack for fixin' all kinds of things."

"I love doing it," Jimmy replied, not knowing if he should be awed or not that his grandpa was speaking so highly of him.

"Then I think you're gonna like that gift there," Jacob said with a smile on his face. "At least, I sure hope you do." With that, he turned and walked away to grab more gifts to hand out.

Jimmy looked at the big box in front of him.

"Well aren't you going to open it?" his father asked.

He found a spot at the side of the package where the wrapping paper had been taped together, and in one giant pull, he ripped a large swath of the paper away. He stared at what he hoped he was seeing. His hands quickly ripped the rest of the paper from the box. "Oh wow!" he exclaimed loudly and excitedly. "A tool box. And a hundred and fifty different tools! Wow!" He looked up at his grandfather who was still handing out gifts. "Thank you Grandpa! Thank you so much!"

Jacob heard Jimmy and nodded his head toward him. "Enjoy them son. You deserve them."

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It wasn't until after dinner that Susan had a chance to talk with Brian. But when she did, he was quick to agree to look at Jimmy right away. Susan went and found Jimmy, finally happy after receiving all those tools. He was talking animatedly with Olivia. "Jimmy," she said, interrupting the two cousin's conversation. "Uncle Brian wants to see you." It was all she had to say as she saw the serious worry collapse back into his face.

"What's wrong?" Olivia asked, seeing the sudden mood change in Jimmy.

"Nothing," Susan told her. "Nothing to worry about."

Jimmy followed his mother to one of the back bedrooms that stayed empty most of the time now. His Uncle Brian was there waiting for him. He went in and his mother closed the door behind them.

"I hear you're having some problems in your chest," Brian said kindly to him. "Can I see?"

Jimmy nodded and started unbuttoning his shirt. "I've got... lumps," he said. "And they hurt."

"I understand," Brian replied. "We'll take a look at them."

"I'm worried that it might be cancer," Jimmy told him as he started removing his shirt.

"I doubt it," Brian replied. "But we'll take a good look and see anyway."

With his outer shirt off, Jimmy pulled his t-shirt over his head and handed it to his mother. His hands reached up toward his nipples. "They hurt, all the time now."

Brian nodded as he looked at Jimmy's chest. "How long have they been hurting?"

"For the past few days I guess. Sometimes one. Sometimes the other. But it wasn't until last night that they both started hurting all the time. And they won't stop. But I can feel small lumps under there – just like cancer!"

Brian nodded and reached out to carefully feel Jimmy's nipples. It took very little time for his practiced fingers to feel exactly what he expected he would find. He nodded at Susan before he removed his

hand from Jimmy's chest. "It's not cancer Jimmy. It's definitely not cancer."

Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief. "Then what is it? Because they hurt!"

Brian knew that this was the part that Susan had suspected. The part that she had said she didn't have the heart to tell him. "Jimmy," he said, "what's happening, is that your breasts are starting to grow."

"My what?"

"Remember that hormone shot I gave you a few weeks ago?"

"Yeah?" he replied tentatively.

"Well, this is one of the things that it can do to you."

"Give me sore nipples?" Jimmy asked uncertainly.

"Um, that too I'm afraid. But those sore nipples are one of the first signs that your breasts are beginning to grow like any other girl's breast would. Those lumps you feel under your nipples are actually the first signs of your breasts starting to grow now. Those little lumps are called breast buds. They're like a little flower bud. And like a flower, they're going to grow and blossom out into a beautiful set of breasts."

Jimmy's mouth hung open. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to think. "I'm...I'm going to have..."

"Yes, Jimmy," Brian replied. "Those shots I gave you are slowly changing your body from a boy's body into a girl's body. And those changes are going to keep happening until your sister decides to finally not hunt anymore."

"But I'm going to have..."

"Sorry, Jimmy. We told both of you at that big family meeting. And because of those hormones I gave you, you're going to wind up with the breasts that Jasmine wants so badly, while she won't have any at all."

Jimmy simply couldn't come to grips with that fact.

"How about your skin?" Brian asked. "Is it feeling any softer to you yet?"

"It feels...weird," Jimmy told him. "It has for a few weeks now."

Brian ran his hands over Jimmy's arm, looking carefully at the skin. He looked up at Susan and nodded. "It's what I expected," he

told her. He looked down at Jimmy again. "You can put your shirt back on now."

"Jasmine asked for a bottle of my skin moisturizer last week," Susan told him. "Is that a sign that something is happening with her too?"

Brian nodded. "I'm sure of it." He looked back down at Jimmy. "Well Jimmy, it looks like the one big gift you got for Christmas this year, wasn't really those tools you got. Your big gift this year, is a set of breasts."

Chapter 15 - Family Traditions

December 27th

It was Saturday night, two days after Christmas, when Susan went into Jasmine's room to tuck her into bed and wish her a goodnight. It was the first weekend all month that her kids weren't all switched around, and she was enjoying the normalcy immensely. As she entered the room, she quickly noticed that Jasmine was looking at something on the internet. "Bedtime, Jas," she said brightly.

Jasmine quickly paused the video she had been watching. "Just a few more minutes, Mom. Pleeese? I'm watching this fashion show from Los Angeles, and it's only got...11 more minutes to go," she said after quickly checking the time remaining.

Susan walked over and looked at the paused video. The model on the runway was wearing a fairly outrageous outfit that Susan was fairly sure no woman alive would ever be caught dead in – for any occasion. Which meant that her daughter most likely loved it. It was bedtime, but since it was also Christmas vacation, she had no problem with her daughter staying up a little while longer. "Just till the end of that," she said as she turned to leave.

She walked across the hall to Jimmy's room, and immediately became concerned when she saw him lying on the bed, naked from the waist up, with his hands cupped over his nipples. "Jimmy? Are you okay?"

"They hurt!" he complained. "Sometimes, even just my shirt rubbing against them can make them hurt." He looked up at her with pleading eyes. "Isn't there anything you can do to make it stop? It's killing me!"

Susan felt for her son, but what he was feeling wasn't more than any girl would go through when her breasts first started growing. And unfortunately for Jimmy, Susan only knew of one way to handle the problem. She sat down on the bed, feeling nothing but sympathy for her son who was going through changes he didn't want. "It's like

Uncle Brian told you on Christmas,” she said. “Your nipples are getting bigger and much more sensitive, especially as the skin stretches because of the bigger size.”

“I know that!” Jimmy complained. “How do I get it to stop? At least so I can get some sleep!”

“Well,” she said, pausing a moment to try to find the best way to break the news to him. “The best way is to wear something really soft over top of them. That helps a lot.”

“It doesn’t work!” he replied. “My flannel pajamas are soft, I guess. But even they hurt to wear sometimes.”

Susan smiled, but it was a wry smile. “I mean,” she said, “you need to wear something very soft that won’t move around and rub against them like your shirts do. Something to protect them from anything rubbing against them.”

“Like what? Everything I have rubs on them.”

Susan was tempted to tell him, but she couldn’t bring herself to say it. “I’ll be right back,” she said instead. “I’ll see if I can find you something that will help.”

“Please!” Jimmy pleaded.

Susan left his room, and went back into Jasmine’s room.

“It’s not done yet, Mom,” Jasmine complained as she barely turned her head to see who had entered her room.

“I know,” Susan replied. “I need to get something for your brother.”

Jasmine looked briefly away from the computer again. “For Jimmy? What?”

Susan opened her daughter’s top dresser drawer and pulled out one of her bras. “This,” she said, holding it up. She turned and headed for the door.

“Mom! What are you doing?”

“Your brother needs one of your bras.”

“What for?” Jasmine asked, forgetting all about the video she had been watching.

“Remember how sore your breasts were when they first started appearing?”

“Yeah?” Jasmine replied tentatively. “But what does that have to do with Jimmy?”

"Well, since his breasts are growing now, he needs it. Besides..."

"He what? He's growing breasts?"

Susan realized that this could be a prime opportunity to finally change her daughter's mind away from hunting. "I'm afraid he has been for almost a week now. And since..."

"Almost a week! It can't be!" Jasmine screamed, totally horrified.

"As I was saying," Susan said to her shocked daughter, "Since your breasts aren't growing anymore, and..."

"Not growing! They are too!"

Susan was surprised. "They are?"

"They have to be!"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!" Jasmine replied as she remembered looking at them every single day and willing them to grow...but seeing no results yet. "You even told me that nothing can stop them from growing. And I read that sometimes it seems like they stop growing for a while, then they have a growth spurt and suddenly get bigger."

"I did tell you that nothing can stop them from growing," Susan agreed. "But that was before Uncle Brian put you on those hormones. Be honest Jasmine, have you seen any growth at all in your breasts since then? Huh? Any at all?"

Jasmine was beside herself. "They're just in one of those non-growing periods!" she replied, the fear now completely in her voice.

"In other words, no! They haven't grown one bit. Have they?"

"It's just that..."

"But your brother's breasts *are* growing now Jasmine. A little bit sooner than I expected I'm afraid, but there's no doubt at all that they're growing. And consequently, he needs this bra more than you do. In fact, I have no doubt that you can probably get along very nicely without any of them now."

Jasmine was totally horrified and beside herself. Her stupid brother was growing breasts? It couldn't be! Before she knew it, she was out of her chair and had run right past her mother. She ran straight into Jimmy's room where he was lying on the bed with his hands covering his nipples. "Let me see!" she screamed more than

demanded as she entered like a madman. She literally grabbed his arms and ripped them away from his chest, holding them out wide as she stared down at his nipples. They weren't all that big, but they did appear to be somewhat enlarged. The bit of area around them was pushed up a bit too. Of course, it had been a while since she had seen her brother without a shirt, but even still, she didn't think they looked right. "It can't be!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. "It can't be!"

"I told you," Susan said from the doorway.

"It can't be!" Jasmine screamed again.

"They hurt!" Jimmy said as he pulled his hands away from her and put them back over top of his sore nipples again.

"What's going on?" Clint asked, running up after hearing the screaming.

"Jas is upset," Susan told him, "because Jimmy's breasts are growing and hers aren't."

"We told you this would happen," Clint told her.

"Not this you didn't!" Jasmine screamed back.

She looked down at her dumb brother, still lying on his back on his bed. She pointed at him. "He's faking it!" she declared angrily. "It's not really real!"

"Of course it's real!" Susan countered. "Remember those shots that Uncle Brian gave you? You knew that shot you received would eventually give you more of a boy's body, and the shot he received would give him more of a girl's body. And guess what, his breasts are starting to grow now, just like any other girl. Just like yours did... or rather, just like yours used to, because they're certainly not growing now."

"But it's all a fake!" Jasmine screamed. "It's all a lie! There was nothing in that shot but water. Plain water! He didn't give us anything at all!"

"Then how do you explain your brother's breasts?"

"It's all a fake! All a lie!" Jasmine screamed. "He's like...like all those sick people I read about who they give fake medicine to and tell them it will cure whatever illness they've got. And they do get better just because they think the medicine is working, when it's

nothing but sugar pills! That stuff Uncle Brian gave us was just plain water. It can't really do anything at all."

She pointed down to her brother again. "It's just that he's so stupid that he actually thinks that shot is going to do something to him, and then it's like those people with the sugar pills, he starts growing breasts. But they're not real!"

"Jas!" Clint said. "You know better than that."

"No!" Jasmine shouted at him. "I know better than *he* does, because it's all a lie! A big fat lie! And he's just so stupid he believes it!" With that, she ran from the room, forcing her way between her parents. She ran to her room and slammed the door behind her.

She ran to her mirror and pulled her robe off and her nightgown off as well, leaving her standing there in nothing but her panties. She examined her breasts again. Nothing could stop them from growing. Nothing! Her mother had promised her that once. And she had read that sometimes they stopped growing for a little bit, then they would suddenly have a growth spurt. That's all it really was. She was just in-between those growth spurts, that's all. But as she stared at her reflection, she couldn't help but think that her nipples seemed smaller than they used to be. But the small mounds of her actual breasts that protruded from her chest were definitely just as big as they used to be. So they hadn't really gone down at all. She was just in-between one of those growth spurts.

Her door opened and she quickly grabbed her robe, even though it was only just her mother who had come in and closed the door behind her again.

"Can I see?" Susan asked. "I know you were looking. Let me see too. Maybe I'll see some sign that maybe they are still growing."

Hesitantly, Jasmine dropped her robe again. "They're just waiting for one of those growth spurts," she told her mother, her voice full of hope...and despair.

Susan looked closely at her daughter's breasts. But what she saw caused her face to fall. "Jas, I'm not seeing any growth there at all since the last time we checked them. In fact..." She really hated to say this to her daughter. "Your nipples and the area around them don't look as big as they used to be. It looks more like they've receded somewhat and gotten smaller."

Jasmine shook her head. "It can't be!" she insisted. "They're going to start growing again...any day now!"

"No they're not," Susan told her sadly. "There's not a chance in the world. At least, not a chance until you finally swear off hunting. And when you do, I promise you they'll start growing again. We'll make them grow again. Your Uncle Brian promised that he'll give you one of those shots he gave your brother to kind of kick-start the process again to make them grow faster. But Jas, you've got to swear off hunting first. Otherwise, they're never going to get any bigger than they are now, and maybe..." But she didn't want to finish saying anything more.

Jasmine turned to her mother. "Maybe?" she asked with more than a hint of nervousness growing in her voice.

"Maybe..." Susan continued. "Jas, if you don't swear off hunting, then maybe they'll even get smaller!"

The look of horror on Jasmine's face was very evident. "They can't! They can't do that! There's no way they can do that!"

"There is!" Susan insisted. "We told you that those hormones would give you more of a boy's body. And boys don't have breasts! But look what's happening to your brother. Already!"

"No!" Jasmine screamed again. Her eyes suddenly looked totally wild again as she angrily yelled, "He's just crazy enough to believe all that crap. And anyone who's afraid of the things that he is, probably just wants a set of breasts that badly so he'll think he has a valid excuse for being that afraid of dumb stuff. That, and it's all combining to make him break out in some kind of rash there or something. But it's not real! It's not real! There's no way any of it can be real!"

Susan shook her head. "Why are you being so hard-headed? Why?"

"Why are you trying to fool me, when you know none of it is true?" Jasmine shot back.

"We're not fooling you!" Susan replied sternly. "Get that through that thick skull of yours. It's real, Jas! Totally real! And it's happening whether you like it or not!"

"No it's not!" Jasmine screamed angrily. She was crying now, the angry tears rolling down her face. She ran to the bed and picked

up a pillow and threw it at her mother. "They're gonna grow!" she screamed. "My breasts are gonna grow! You'll see. Just watch! They're gonna grow just like they're supposed to!"

Susan ignored the pillow that had actually missed her. "I guess we'll both see," she said sadly. She walked over to Jasmine's dresser again and opened the top drawer. She pulled out two more bras. "I'll just move a few of these over to Jimmy's room. That way he can use them, even when he's not being you."

"Take all you want!" Jasmine replied angrily, the tears streaming down her face. "The big sissy probably just wants to wear them all the time anyway."

Susan shook her head and went to the door. Before she opened it, she looked back at her daughter. Jasmine was still standing at the far side of her bed, crying and looking totally miserable. "I guess we'll soon see," Susan said softly. She opened the door and walked out.

Her husband was standing in the hall waiting for her. "You heard?" she asked.

Clint nodded. "I don't get it. She refuses to see reason."

"She refuses to *believe* any of it," Susan corrected him.

"I don't know what we're going to do," Clint told her. "I have no ideas at all. She's gone totally crazy."

Susan shook her head. "At some point, she's got to stop denying what's happening. At some point, she won't be able to deny any of it. She'll have to see reason then."

"But how much longer will that be?"

"Who knows? Especially since she's so adamant that none of it is real."

Clint looked at her for a moment. "And where does that leave Jimmy?"

Susan just shrugged, then reluctantly held up the bras in her hand.

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Jimmy laid on his bed and stared at the ceiling. But he wasn't seeing the ceiling. He wasn't really seeing much of anything. He

had laid there and listened to the shouting going on in his sister's room. We'll, mostly he had heard Jasmine shouting. He hadn't heard much of anything else.

He was scared. If anyone asked him if he was scared, he'd admit that in a heartbeat. But he figured he had plenty of reason to be afraid. He just had too many things now that dealt with his life and body to really put a name to a single part of what he was actually afraid of. Basically, he was afraid for himself...and what was happening to him...and what might still happen to him...that he didn't really know.

His door opened and he turned his head and saw his mother coming in again. He stared at her without moving. He was too worried about everything to move a muscle. What worried him more, was what he saw in his mother's hand.

"You okay?" Susan asked kindly as she came over and sat on his bed again. His head turned and his eyes stayed locked on hers. But his face looked more like some actor in a horror movie. "You okay?" she asked again.

He shook his head. "I don't know."

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Besides your nipples hurting."

"I'm worried," he said.

"About what?"

He shrugged. "Me, I guess. What's going to happen?"

Susan closed her eyes in frustration. "I don't know sweetie. We'll have to see. Your sister is being more stubborn than I've ever seen her. She's refusing to see reason when it's right there in front of her face."

"It's not fair!" he said angrily. "It's not fair that I have to suffer for something she did, and for what she's refusing to do!"

Susan nodded. "Yeah. I agree. It's not fair at all. But Jimmy, don't forget, you signed up for this mess when you agreed to everything your sister wanted you to do in that note. You could have refused her. But you didn't. You wrote the note in your own hand. So even though it's not fair, the family is seeing it like you're both completely in this together. Like it or not."

"So I've got no choice," Jimmy said. "I'm screwed, one way or another."

Susan nodded sadly. "Something like that."

Jimmy closed his eyes and breathed in deeply for a moment, trying to calm his fears. But it wasn't working. "I'm afraid," he said.

"Of what?" she asked.

"Everything," he said. "Especially of what's going to happen to me."

She leaned down and hugged him as well as she could since he was lying on his back. "We'll do everything we can to help you and get you through it Jimmy. I promise."

"I know," he replied. "But it doesn't help much."

She leaned in closer and hugged him tighter...and felt him flinch.

"Umph!" he grunted. "Don't hug so tight. It hurts."

She backed off quickly. "Your breasts?"

But he didn't want to call them breasts. He didn't have breasts! "My...nipples," he replied. "Is there anything I can do to stop them from hurting?" He asked it, even though he had seen the bras in her hand and he knew what the probable answer was going to be. The look on her face told him everything.

"Just these," she said as she held the bras up. "They're very soft inside Jimmy, and they won't slip around and rub your nipples as much. It's one of the reasons girls wear them I'm afraid, because our nipples and breasts are so sensitive that they need that protection. And later, we need the support something like these things bring instead."

She got up from his bed and set the bras on his dresser. "You don't have to wear them of course, at least not whenever you get to be yourself...Jimmy. I'm afraid that when you have to be Jasmine it's another story. But when you're Jimmy, you don't have to wear them at all. I'll just leave them here in case you want to try them. They could really help, but if you wear one or not, is totally up to you. And Jimmy, they are about as small as they can get, so it's not likely that they're going to show under your clothes...too much anyway."

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“Dad?” Tommy asked, stopping his father before he could leave the hallway.

“Yeah son?” Clint asked.

“What’s so wrong about Jasmine going hunting? Why does it matter so much?”

Clint laid his hand on Tommy’s shoulder and guided his son back into his room. He pushed Tommy toward his bed to sit on, and then he sat down next to him. “What’s wrong with Jas going hunting? That’s a good question, Tommy. A very good one. Unfortunately, it’s also a bit difficult to explain.

“You know how tight our entire family is. All of us. We all watch out for each other. We all take really good care of each other. I’d bet that the entire McComber Clan is a much closer and tighter family than most single families are – outside of our clan. Each and every one of us is aware of how much the family means to all of us. And each and every one of us values the relationships of the family more than you have yet to understand.

“But in order for a family to be this close, this committed to each other, we have to live with certain guidelines that help us to know how to live with each other. In fact, those guidelines have helped all of us in so many ways I could never count them. Those guidelines, Tommy, are our family traditions. I know you’ve heard me talk about them. You know that they’re important to us. Each and every one of those little traditions are what make us who we are. They’re so ingrained in us that we wouldn’t know how to live any other way. Those traditions have seen us through an awful lot of bad times. And in the end, thanks to those traditions, we always seem to come out stronger than ever.”

He knew he was lecturing, but as long as Tommy was listening, he continued on.

“Tommy, every man and woman in this family has their place. We all have our place in life, but we also have an even bigger place in the family. We each do what we do the best. The men have always been the best at providing food and everything else for the family, while the women have always been the best at taking care of the individual family members, including taking care of the men! The

men and the women take care of each other, Tommy, but we do it in the roles that have always worked out best for us. That way, we understand each other better, and we relate to each other better. The women have their place and do all the things that they do...and don't kid yourself, often they work harder and contribute more to the family than the men do. While the men are the providers for the women and the rest of the family. We provide the food, and the clothing, and the money we need to live on. And one other thing that the men do, Tommy, we're the protectors of those women. Especially in this clan. The McComber men have always valued our women above everything else. And we protect our women more fiercely than anything else!"

He almost forgot why he was giving Tommy this little lecture.

"Tommy, if Jasmine continues to try to go hunting, and I mean including like she's done a few times now, where she's snuck out to hunt without anyone knowing she was there until it was too late. Or I can even see her taking off by herself someday when nobody is looking, just so she can go hunting when she shouldn't. Tommy, what do you think would happen then?"

Tommy shrugged. "I don't know."

"Tommy, our family traditions would be broken and tossed aside. It would be like Jasmine saying she didn't want to be a part of this family, like she's thumbing her nose at all of us and everything we believe in, all because she wants only what she wants and doesn't care about anyone else. Tommy, she wouldn't be fulfilling the role that God, and the family, has deemed best for her. She wouldn't fit at all into the role of a woman. A woman who should be taking care of the children. A woman who should be having babies to keep the clan going. A woman who takes care of the house and so many other things. And especially, a woman who cares about the man who loves her and is willing to do everything he can for her. Tommy, she wouldn't be fulfilling that role at all. Instead, she'd be trying to take the man's role. She'd be trying to replace the man and not letting him have his proper place. And in doing so, she'd be destroying the very kind of life we all were raised up to appreciate and value so much.

"Tommy, if Jasmine isn't stopped from trying to go hunting, then she'd pretty much be telling us that she hates us. That she doesn't believe in the family. That she doesn't want to be a part of this family anymore. And Tommy, the big reason we've got to stop her, is because the rest of us all love her too much to let that happen. The family loves her, Tommy. Just as the whole family loves you, and me, and your mother. The family loves her. And we don't want to see her lost. Not at all.

"So that's what it's all about, Tommy. Saving our family traditions so that we can save Jasmine and keep her with us. We love her Tommy. And because of that, she has to understand that the family needs her to be who she's supposed to be, and not somebody else."

"So why are you making her be somebody else?" Tommy asked. "Because it sure seems to me like you're making her do exactly the opposite of what you want."

Clint nodded. "You're absolutely right, son. That's exactly what we're doing. But we're doing it, because sometimes only by forcing the issue, making her see what life is really like on the other side of the situation, only then can she see how good she had it before, and finally realize that everything she really wanted, was exactly what she already had. Understand?"

Tommy shook his head. "Maybe. But I still think it's dumb. And poor Jimmy. I don't know whether to feel sorry for him or laugh at him like everyone else."

Clint looked at his son for a moment. "Tommy, you're quickly becoming one of the McComber men. And lately, it's looking all too likely that Jimmy is going to be spending more and more time living the life of his sister – a girl's life. Remember what I said about how the McComber men were about their women?"

Tommy nodded. "We protect them fiercely!"

Clint nodded and smiled. "Exactly!" He smiled broadly at his elder son. "When did you ever manage to get so big? Geez! You'll be almost as tall as I am soon!" He ruffled his son's hair. "One of these days I'm going to have to teach you how to drive the truck. You'll be sixteen in a few years. I think it's about time you started to get a bit of practice."

“Really, Dad?” Tommy asked excitedly.

“I don’t see why not. It would do you good. And there’s plenty of back roads on the property here for you to practice and learn on.”

He stood up and nodded at his son. “Night, Tommy. See you in the morning.”

He walked out the door, and ran right into Susan. “That was quite a speech,” she said softly as the two of them walked back toward their bedroom together.

“Huh!” Clint grunted. “Too much of a speech.”

“Did your father teach you all that when you were growing up?”

“Not in so many words,” Clint told her. “His lessons were more... practical. The rest, what I told Tommy tonight, I just made up on the spot. Sort of sounded good though.”

Susan stopped him and stood on her toes to kiss his lips. “My protector.”

Chapter 16 - New Year's

December 29th – January 3rd 2015

It was Christmas season. All the kids were out of school. Jasmine hadn't gone hunting in over a week now so both the twins had been themselves for the first weekend in nearly a month. Reverend Cosinger had smiled broadly when he saw the twins being themselves at church on Sunday. Susan wondered if he thought he had finally won the battle. But since Jasmine was continuing to be stupidly stubborn, she knew that he would soon find himself very disappointed.

The kids were themselves, for now, but Susan knew that in just a few days, all that was going to change. Not only were her kids going to switch themselves around again, but things were about to get worse for them both. She wasn't even sure if either of them realized that yet. But they certainly would – all too soon.

Susan was thoroughly enjoying her twins being themselves again. She was enjoying her whole family being normal again. But the fact that she was enjoying it so much, and the reason she was enjoying it so much, refused to stay far from her mind. It refused to stay away from her, because as each day of their Christmas vacation progressed, it brought them one day closer to everything becoming that much worse.

Susan had been amazed each day when Jasmine didn't get a call to either go hunting, or to go out and work with her Uncle Jed. Instead, she enjoyed watching Jasmine run off to be with her friends, or when she wasn't doing that, her daughter was literally throwing herself into finishing sewing her first outfit for the spring fashion show. Finishing it, and finishing her design for her next outfit. It was almost like her daughter was throwing herself into the feminine activities with a vengeance – as if she was doing it to deny the changes that Susan knew were already happening within her.

While Jasmine literally spent hours at her new sewing machine, Jimmy literally spent hours out in the garage with his new tools. Susan had no idea what he was doing out there with them, but Clint had told her that he was continually looking for little things he could look at and try to fix out there. Susan didn't really care, as long as he was happy. Which evidently he was.

Susan thoroughly enjoyed the afternoon she took off from working at the office to drive Jasmine into town to shop for the fabrics she would need for her next outfit. Fabrics that if it wasn't for the drawings that Jasmine had done, Susan would have thought her daughter had gone completely mad. Well, to her, Jasmine *had* gone completely mad, at least as far as seeing reason and accepting what her body was no longer doing.

Since everyone was enjoying everything being normal for a change, nobody even dared bring up the next possible switching time, which Susan could already see looming on the horizon.

She never knew if Jimmy was wearing one of the bras she had given him or not. Under his heavy winter clothes, she couldn't see them of course. She also didn't see any of them turn up in the laundry either. She suspected he was wearing them, but only at night while he was sleeping.

But thoughts about Jimmy, and thoughts about Jasmine, and thoughts about the switch that she knew would happen all too soon...and thoughts about the fact that things were about to get so much worse, for the twins and for everyone, brought back a little comment that she remembered Jasmine making to her on Christmas day. It was a trivial little thing. There was no reason for her to remember it at all. But she did. And the more she thought about everything, the more that trivial little thought refused to go away. "He's Hopeless!" Jasmine had declared that day. "He can't dress himself very well at all!"

Yeah, Susan had to agree with the assessment. But then Jimmy, when he was being Jasmine, didn't know the first thing about putting together outfits. Especially with the eclectic collection of colorful things that Jasmine's wardrobe consisted of. When Jimmy was being his sister, he literally picked out the plainest things he could find in Jasmynes fairly vast wardrobe. And he seemed to wear

those same things over and over again. She had also noted that he never once tried to paint his nails or apply any makeup at all. He was doing the absolute minimum necessary to get by. And she guessed she couldn't blame him at all. He was a boy. He was totally embarrassed by every bit of it. His knowledge of it all was so limited he didn't really stand a chance.

But in just a few more days, every time Jimmy would have to be Jasmine, he was going to have to be her for three days instead of just the two days that had plagued them all during the month of December. But things had gone on long enough now that unfortunately they were moving into yet another period of change.

How did things ever get this far? But the answer to that question resided in Jasmine's room. She herself was refusing to see the truth that was written on not just her mirror, but on her very body. She herself was refusing to believe that those hormone shots were really changing her. Changing her and her brother. And in just another week, her two twins would be due for their next round of shots. Susan dreaded it.

The New Year's season was usually a busy time for them. Not New Year's Day surprisingly, but the weekend following it. Susan figured that the only reason New Year's Day wasn't that bad, was because all the people were still too tired to hunt after staying up all night on New Year's Eve. There was only one request for a hunting guide for New Year's Day. Pete had been requested to take his dogs out with a group that would be there to hunt all three days. Since Pete and Clint worked together, one of them usually had to cover for the other when things like this happened. The electric company they worked for put up with one or the other of them being gone, but only so long as one of them was there to help keep the work going.

Because New Year's Day fell on a Thursday that year, that left Friday, Saturday, and Sunday for people to hunt. Most of the McComber men were scheduled for hunting groups on Friday, but it wasn't so bad that they all had to be pressed into service. Saturday and Sunday though were a different matter. The family literally had more requests for hunting guides than they could fill. Scheduling all the groups for deer hunting with bows, small game hunts, waterfowl

hunts, and where on the land they would all be allowed to hunt had been a major chore for Valerie, Susan, and Marcy. Having little choice, Valerie had even pressed Jed into service and had also made arrangements for Ethan to go with another group on his first solo guide experience as well. Ethan had been out guiding with his father many times though, so he easily knew what he was doing. Besides, he was in college now. It was about time he started doing work like that.

But Susan knew something that most of the others didn't know. Since they had been forced to press Jed into service that day, and since he was just going along as a guide and not to actually hunt, Jed had decided to take Justin with him as well so he could continue learning how to be a guide in the family's vast wilderness. There was one other thing that Susan and Valerie and Marcy had discussed in the office too. Jed had mentioned asking Jimmy to go along to start learning the business as well. Susan had purposely not mentioned it to anyone in her immediate family yet because she didn't want to spoil the enjoyment she was getting out of everything being normal once again. But she had little doubt that come Saturday, all the normalcy in everyone's lives would go flying out the window.

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On New Year's Eve, the entire family got together again. But not at Jacob's house up the hill. Instead, as always, they gathered in the road out in front of Clint and Susan's house since it was the central house on the street. In the cold dark of the night, all the McCombers gathered once again, this time to celebrate the coming New Year with fireworks. There were warm drinks aplenty passed around. The big urns of hot chocolate were certainly getting more than their share of use. But Valerie had also made a large batch of hot wine that the grownups were consuming in more than ample quantities as well. All except Pete that is. He was the one McComber scheduled to guide a hunting party the following morning. But he was looking forward to that. He hadn't had his dogs out on a hunt in quite a while now.

The area across the street from the houses was nothing but a wide open field that they often rode their four-wheelers on. It was a wide open field, but it sloped down drastically for quite a ways before the forest closed in again. The result was a view to die for from all the houses on the street, and a hill that provided hours of fun for the kids to slide down every time it snowed.

Pete, Clint, Elliot, and Tommy managed the firework display. They had spent most of the afternoon setting everything up in the open field, and about an hour before midnight, the entire family was treated to a loud colorful display of the best fireworks they had been able to buy. And when someone finally determined that it was midnight, as per family tradition, glasses were passed around and Jacob filled each one with a little bit of his special drink, including all the kids who each got a small amount too. The old year was passed into history, and together they all wished each other a Happy New Year as they downed Jacob's drink.

To the kids, the potent brew burned their tongues and throats and made most of them gag. The kids were never told exactly what the brew was. When they asked, all the grownups ever said was that it was something special that their Grandfather had. But Elliot had overheard his father talking to Uncle Jed about it and his father had asked how fresh the "shine" was. Between the fireworks that night and all the alcohol consumed, everyone had a very, very good time. But for Susan, that happy atmosphere was marred by the knowledge that it would all come to an end in just a few more days.

On New Year's Day, everyone in the clan slept late, except for Pete and his dogs who hadn't gone to bed at all. On that morning, Susan fixed a large brunch for her family instead of their normal breakfast. But by the time they all sat down to eat, Susan knew it was time to bring up the subject of "Jimmy" going out with Jed again.

"Don't forget," Susan said to her husband as she grabbed the butter from the middle of the table, "you've got that group coming in early Saturday for two days of hunting."

Clint nodded. "Yeah. No problem. I've been with them before, but I don't know why they asked for any guide at all. They're just after some geese – if the geese decide to fly over for once, and they pretty much know where the duck blind is."

"Don't knock it," Susan replied. "They asked for you personally. And it's good money Clint. Especially this weekend when it's so busy."

He nodded. "Yeah, it sure is. I can't argue that."

But Susan was wondering if there was something else he might argue about. Something she was about to bring up. "Um...Jed is taking a group out this weekend too," she said.

"I heard," Clint replied. "He mentioned it last night."

"He's taking Justin with him," Susan said as she spread some butter on another biscuit.

"He's been doing that more and more lately. With Ethan pretty much grown now and taking a group of his own even, it's only natural that he would."

Susan nodded. "He also suggested that maybe it would be a good idea for him to take Jimmy with him too."

Everything at the table stopped. There was no movement, no sound, as Clint stared at his wife, taking that thought in.

He finally nodded. "I think I'll have a little talk with Jed," he said. "Maybe it is time for Jimmy to hunt again. But if Jed doesn't mind, I think I'd rather take Jimmy with me instead of saddling Jed with him. I'll take Tommy too. I think it's time Tommy had another chance to go out with me as well. I'll talk to Jed and let you know."

Just that fast, no matter who "Jimmy" would be going out with, they all knew that their normal lives would be coming to an end. And the only one who was somewhat delighted with anything, was Tommy.

But that wasn't the end of the troubling business that Susan had to bring up to them. "I think," she said, looking at her husband because she couldn't look at the twins. "I think that since it's the start of another month now, then we pretty much have to remind everyone about the change with the twin's situation too." Clint and she had talked about it several days before, so she knew that Clint was aware of what she was talking about.

Clint nodded and looked straight at Jasmine. "As much as I hate to agree, I'm afraid we've got no choice."

"Change?" Jimmy asked uncertainly.

"What do you mean?" Jasmine asked, also sounding nervous.

"She means," Clint replied, "that it's been a month now since this switching around business started. All last month you had to be each other for two days. Now it's another month and Jas still hasn't agreed to not hunt anymore. So the situation gets a whole lot worse now. You're each going to be each other for three days now instead of just two."

The kids took that in for a few moments, but it was Jimmy who finally asked. "What about school?"

"I'm afraid," Susan said, "that Aunt Jane and Uncle John are already expecting you to show up as Jasmine at school now."

Jimmy was shocked and couldn't utter a word. But a few moments later, a small snigger escaped Jasmine's lips. "You're going to have to dress like a girl at school!" she teased as she pushed at her brother. "You're gonna get soooo creamed."

Jimmy tried to fight it but it was simply impossible. As he sat there his eyes started watering up and he found it impossible not to start crying. He got up from the table and literally ran for his room.

"What a sissy!" Jasmine said with obvious delight.

"Jas!" Susan hushed her sternly. "I'm afraid that's another sign of what those hormones are doing to him."

Jasmine laughed a bit. "I'm sure glad *I'm* not taking anything like he is," she said mockingly.

Susan could only stare at her stubborn daughter angrily.

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Once again the switch was made on Friday night. And in the wee hours of the morning, all the "men" left to guide the hunting party, leaving Susan and "Jasmine" the only two left in the house.

"Jimmy" wasn't the least bit happy about having to go out and be her brother again when she couldn't even hunt. They were going out on a hunting trip, and she didn't even get to carry a gun. And she was just itching to try out that new gun that Jimmy, well actually she had gotten for Christmas. Because it was perfectly clear that her brother would never use the thing.

She and Tommy rode the short distance from the house down to the office, in the truck with their father. She was surprised to see so

many trucks and people there, including her Uncle Pete's truck with the dog carriers in the back.

"Stay in the truck, guys," Clint told them. "Let me get this sorted out, and then we'll be on our way."

The wait wasn't very long. It only took a few minutes before Clint climbed back into the truck, started it up, and moved it a short distance away from the office while he waited for a few other trucks to follow behind him. Once they were all ready, he led them out toward the back roads that would take them all to one of the lakes and another duck blind. Since it was still completely dark, Jimmy fell asleep.

"Jimmy! Wake up!" Clint called.

Jimmy snapped awake. "Yeah Dad?" she asked, trying to gather her wits as fast as she could.

"When we get out of the truck, I need you and Tommy both to grab flashlights and then you can both carry the big cooler from the truck to the blind. And don't forget, if any of these men ask you something, it's 'yes sir,' or 'no sir.' You be polite and respectful. We're out here to take care of these people and cater to all their needs. And they're paying us plenty of good money to do it. Got that?"

"Got it, Dad," Tommy replied.

"Yeah, sure Dad," Jimmy agreed. As far as she could see, there was nothing about this little trip that sounded like fun at all. Just work!

As they had been instructed, Tommy and Jimmy carried the big cooler down the path to the duck blind, while their father stood around talking with all the men who had come to go hunting. Once in the blind, they set the cooler down out of the way and waited a long time until the men finally got there.

"Tommy," Clint said. "Give me a hand. Let's get these decoys out on the lake."

"Great, Dad," Tommy replied enthusiastically.

"Jimmy," Clint said next. "You just hang back here for a bit. This is going to take us a little while."

Jimmy only nodded and didn't say anything. A few minutes later, her father and brother were rowing the small flat-bottomed boat out

onto the lake. The boat was filled with fake ducks that they threw out into the water to attract other ducks to land on the lake. The process took a while, and in the pre-dawn light just starting to hit the sky, she could barely see them out on the lake.

The men around her all had their flashlights on in the dark wooden building. They were all just standing around talking and joking. She saw a few taking small sips from bottles that she knew contained things that her father had always said shouldn't be mixed with hunting. But she said nothing about it. And then she heard a whispered conversation between two of the men.

"I'm not sure if he's a boy or a girl."

"His father called him, Jimmy," the other one replied.

"Must be a boy then," the first one said. "I guess he's just so young yet that it's hard to tell."

"The dark isn't making things any easier either."

Jimmy turned her head further away from their direction and stared out at another area of the lake so they couldn't see her face as easily. She stayed that way until her father and brother finally got back.

Clint joked with the guys for a while, making sure everyone was having a good time. Jimmy and Tommy both sat on the cooler out of the way. And then Clint declared that it was light enough, and the duck calls the men all had were put to work. Tommy pulled his new duck call out from under his shirt. He waited until he could catch his father's eye and he held it up, obviously wanting to use it. Clint shook his head and pointed to the men who had come to hunt. He walked over to Tommy and quietly said, "This is their hunt. We'll let them have all the fun." Tommy only nodded and put his duck call away.

Jimmy fell asleep sitting there waiting. But the moment the first gunshot rang out, she bolted wide awake. Ducks! And she could also see a few Canadian geese out there too. And the roar from all the guns reminded her of her first duck hunt. She absolutely hated that she couldn't shoot something, but she still found it incredibly exciting. Even though she couldn't actually hunt, this was great! This was still what hunting was all about. Excitement!

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There was no reason for Susan and Jasmine to get out of bed early. Susan didn't need to be at work to relieve Marcy until lunchtime, so she basically had the whole morning off. But there was something important that she had in mind to do. Once again, it was something that she hadn't discussed with her husband, and even though it was something that she doubted would change Jasmine's mind anytime soon, in the future, it could indeed help the situation. But her primary reason for wanting to do it was a totally different matter.

Fairly early Saturday morning, Susan got Jasmine dressed to go shopping. This time she picked out his clothes for him so that he would stand a chance of looking a bit better while they were out. She chose a pair of red tights for him, and then handed him a skirt from the closet that was a lot of different multicolored zigzag stripes – and wasn't too short. She chose a soft red long sleeved top for him and then handed him a white sweater to go over it. Instead of the black shoes that Jasmine usually wore to school, she handed him the new boots that Jasmine had gotten for Christmas. Once he had zipped the boots onto his legs, she made him sit and try to tie a red ribbon into his hair. He clearly didn't like doing it, but he was going to have to learn to do it sometime. When he finally managed it, she also went to the extra trouble to add some makeup to his face as well. Jimmy was terrified when she did that. "Why the makeup, Mom?"

"Because we're going out," she told him.

"Where?" he asked, fully alarmed.

"Shopping!"

Susan could clearly see that Jasmine wasn't happy. He clearly looked scared as well. But Susan knew that he was going to be a whole lot less happy before they got home.

She let him sit and play video games on "her" computer while she got herself dressed. Once she was ready, she had him put on the coat that Jasmine usually wore to school and looked him over carefully. "Not too bad," she said out loud as she studied him. His body wasn't totally right, but it wasn't really that bad either. The

longer skirt and the boots helped to hide the fact that his legs weren't completely feminine looking. His face also wasn't exactly right, yet it seemed to look a little more feminine to her than it used to. She had particularly noted the softened change to his skin as she was doing his makeup. Yes, he was changing. Starting to anyway. But he had a long way to go. Fortunately! She'd rather this whole mess ended right now instead of later, but the way her real daughter was behaving lately wasn't making that possibility look very likely.

"Stay there," she told him. "I'll be right back." She left him in the kitchen and headed for Jasmine's bedroom where she found what she needed. A minute later, she handed him Jasmine's purse to carry.

"Do I have to, Mom?" he complained.

"Better get used to it, Jas. You're going to be needing that thing a whole lot more from now on."

Ugh!

Jasmine followed his mother out to the car. It was freezing cold outside again and there was even a light frosting of snow on the ground. He was grateful for the high boots he was wearing to help keep his legs warm. He quickly got into the car and out of the cold. Except he soon noticed that the cold seats of the car seemed even colder in the thin material of the skirt he was wearing. Before putting his seatbelt on, he looked around. "Uh...what am I supposed to do with this?" he asked, referring to his purse.

"Just put it on the floor, or keep it in your lap. Whatever you like," Susan said as she got the car started.

Jasmine opted for setting it on the floor where he wouldn't have to hold it or be reminded that he had to hold it. As they drove out past the family office though, he noticed that he kept kicking the thing because it took away some of the space his feet would have normally had. He figured the only solution to that problem would be to hold it in his lap. He left it where it was on the floor instead and opted to put up with the situation.

It was a forty minute drive from their home to the town where there was a large shopping center. The shopping center was large because it served as a major hub for such a large rural area. The

entire family went there frequently for almost everything they needed. Cumberland Sports was located in the area as well.

"Are we going to Cumberland's?" Jimmy asked.

"Um...we might stop in there later," Susan replied. "I hadn't really considered it."

"Then what are we shopping for, food?"

Susan shook her head. "Not this time I'm afraid."

"So where are we going?"

This was going to be troubling, and Susan knew it. She also knew that in order to avoid a possible unpleasant scene later, she needed Jasmine to be a bit more...cooperative than she had a feeling he was going to be. "Um...Jas," she said. "I'm going to need you to do something this morning that I'm afraid you're not going to be very happy about."

"I am?" Jasmine asked, already sounding nervous.

"I'm afraid so," Susan replied.

"What now?"

"Um...Jas..."

"Yeah?" he replied, his nervousness way up now. "I'm guessing that since you're having trouble telling me, then I'm pretty much going to really *not* like this at all."

Susan nodded. "Yeah. I'm pretty sure you won't." Since she was driving, she couldn't see him rolling his eyes.

"So what stupid miserable thing do I have to do now?" he asked, his voice full of worry and frustration.

"Um... Jas, we're going to get your ears pierced today."

Jasmine's eyes nearly bulged out of his head. "My..." But he couldn't make any other sound as he tried to contemplate and picture such a thing.

"Yeah Jas," Susan said. "But I'm going to need you to do something this morning."

"You mean besides getting my ears pierced?"

"Um...it's kind of all part of it," Susan told him.

"What?" he asked with more than a hint of anger and frustration in his voice.

"I need you to act like you really want your ears pierced."

"Say what? But I don't! Do you know what the guys are all gonna say when they see me show up at school with earrings!"

"Jas!" Susan stopped him quickly. "What are those guys going to say when you show up to school on Monday, wearing your sister's dress? Don't forget, you're going to school on Monday as Jasmine, not Jimmy. They're all going to see you as Jasmine!"

"They're all going to see me as an idiot in a dress!" Jasmine responded.

Susan nodded. "Most likely. But don't forget, you got yourself into this mess."

"Yeah," he replied sullenly. "And I have no way out until Jasmine decides not to hunt anymore...which isn't very likely."

"Unfortunately," Susan agreed. She looked over at him briefly as she drove. "But as long as you have to be a girl...as long as you have to be Jasmine, you might as well try to look and act the part a bit better."

"Why?" he asked sullenly, not looking at her and clearly not interested in the idea.

"Well, besides the fact that you put it in writing that you would act like a girl whenever you're being Jasmine, then maybe if you do, then when we go out places, like shopping today, then maybe the people won't realize that you're not a girl. Do you want to be laughed at by *everyone*? Or would you rather have everyone think that you really are a girl and that you're behaving just as they expect you should. They certainly wouldn't be laughing at you then, would they?"

Jasmine considered that for a moment, giving no thought at all to what he had agreed to with his sister in writing. "Maybe," he conceded. "But all they have to do is look at me and they can tell the difference."

"Um...I'm not so sure anymore," she told him. "I think you look pretty darn good today. I don't know if it's the hormones at work, or just the clothes I picked out for you this morning, but if you try to act like a girl today, then I seriously doubt *anyone* would know the difference. Nobody will laugh at you."

"Maybe!" Jasmine replied again.

“Maybe,” Susan agreed. “But I think you’ve got a pretty got shot at it. I think it’s worth a try anyway.”

Jasmine said nothing at all for a few moments. Susan thought he wasn’t going to respond to her suggestion at all when he suddenly said, “I guess I can try.” He turned to look at her. “But I don’t have a clue as to how to act any different than I do now!”

Susan nodded. “Yeah, that’s going to be a problem. Most likely, a big one.” She turned to look at him briefly again before looking back at the road. “But Jas, think about this, for what we’re doing this morning, most girls like to wear earrings. Most girls love jewelry – period! Your sister absolutely loves it and her ears are pierced. So getting your ears pierced today can only help your image as a girl. Think about that please, and try to act like you really want your ears pierced when we get there. Please?”

“Help my image as a girl?” Jasmine responded. “I guess. But what about my image as a boy? I only have to be Jasmine three days each time. What about all the other days?”

It was a moment before Susan could reply to that troubling question. “That’s...another matter,” she admitted.

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“Jimmy,” Clint said, “can you grab two more cups of coffee for these guys please.”

Jimmy nodded. “Sure Dad.” Now she was basically acting as a waitress for all these guys who were hunting. Jimmy get some coffee. Jimmy, they need some sugar over there. Jimmy, see if there’s any more of those biscuits still in the bag. She felt like she ought to be wearing a waitress outfit instead of the camouflage hunting clothes she had on.

Now that was a pleasant thought. What kind of outfit would a waitress wear for working in a duck blind? A smile lit her face as her mind contemplated that concept, while she went from small task to small task, serving this and getting that. A camouflage patterned material would be a must. A camouflage dress! Short skirt for sure! Definitely a little white tea apron over top of the skirt. A little matching camouflage cap for her head too. And on her legs – brown

tights. No! Green tights would go better with the camouflage! No! Better still, what about camouflage pattern tights! Now that would be really cool! Did they even make camouflage patterned tights? If not, then she definitely thought they should. She couldn't wait now to get home and go to the internet and find out!

And on her feet? The ugly dumb-looking practical shoes a lot of the waitresses that she had seen seemed to wear most of the time were definitely out! She didn't think sneakers would be appropriate either. But boots – yes, definitely! Hunting boots? No, she didn't like that image. Maybe boots like she had gotten for Christmas instead. No, not like those. Boots with a high heel to set off the sexy looking outfit her mind was picturing. In fact, not high heeled boots at all. Just a pair of plain high heeled pumps. But what color should they be? What color pumps would go best with camouflage tights and a camouflage dress?

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“Um...Clint?” one of the men said softly as he moved over to the guide.

“Yeah?” Clint asked, what do you need?”

“Um...please don't take this the wrong way, and I'm not complaining or anything, not at all!”

“Do you have a problem?” Clint asked.

“No! No problem at all. It's just that, a few of us were kind of wondering about your son over there.”

“Has he done anything you don't like?” Clint asked, fully concerned. “It is his first time out with me on one of these trips. His brother though has done it a few times now.”

“No. No,” the guy said quickly. “Like I said, there's been no problem at all. The kid has actually been pretty darn great I think. We were a bit surprised to see you had brought them, but they've been great. Both of them.”

“Then what's your problem?”

“Uh...please don't take this the wrong way, and I mean no disrespect at all!” the guy added. “It's just that, a few of us were wondering about him. He almost seems more like a girl than a boy

in some ways. Not that it really matters!" he added quickly. "It's just that...we keep looking at him, and watching him, and some of us think he may be a girl and not a boy. No disrespect intended!" he added again.

Clint nodded and looked over at Jimmy. Surprisingly, she looked happier than she had all day. She was even smiling for a change. But it was almost as if her head was somewhere else than there in the duck blind. "I need you to do me a favor," he said to the man. He nodded towards Jimmy. "I need you to treat Jimmy there, just like you do his brother. I need you to think of him just like you do his brother. No different. Can you do that?"

"Uh...sure, no problem," the guy replied, clearly surprised by the answer. "No problem at all."

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"Mom, do I have to carry that thing?" Jasmine asked as he pointed back toward the floor of the car at his sister's purse that he had left lying there.

"Yes!" Susan replied in no uncertain terms. "Get used to it!" she added.

Jasmine picked it up, feeling totally exasperated at the situation, and closed the door of the car. "I feel so dumb with it," he complained.

"Dumber than the rest of the way you're dressed?"

"That feels dumb too! Totally weird! I can't tell you how embarrassed I feel right now!"

Susan nodded. "I can imagine. But you've been dressing as your sister for a while now, so it shouldn't be so weird to you anymore."

"I guess," he finally admitted as the two started walking slowly towards the row of stores. "But this purse still feels dumb, and I still feel totally embarrassed."

Susan stopped and turned to him. "Jasmine, I'm afraid you're going to have to start getting used to it. And if this goes on much longer, you're going to be out in public a lot as your sister. Possibly more than the times when you get to be a boy."

Jasmine's eyes bulged. "More?"

"Possibly," Susan admitted. "In fact, the way things are going right now, that's looking more and more like something that could happen."

"Yech!" he exclaimed.

Susan looked down at him. "This shouldn't be coming as such a surprise to you," she told him. "You've known since this started what could happen."

"I know," he replied, looking down at the sidewalk and still feeling totally awkward about everything. He looked up again. "But that doesn't mean that I have to like it."

It was a moment before Susan could answer that. "No, it doesn't mean that. But it doesn't mean you have to hate it either."

"I know," he replied as his gaze went back to the sidewalk again.

"Jas," she said. "Try to enjoy it. Try to have some fun. Try. Just try," she pleaded.

He shrugged. "It's just that I feel so...embarrassed! How can I enjoy anything if I have to be this humiliated?"

"Jasmine, there's nothing humiliating about a girl being dressed like you are. In fact, you look rather nice. Very nice!"

"But I'm not a girl!"

"And that's the whole point! No, you may not be a girl, not really. But you are stuck having to behave as if you are. So the point is, for all intents and purposes right now, you *are* a girl. You *are* your sister! You just need to loosen up and act like it."

Jasmine rolled his eyes. "That's easy for you to say."

She looked at him for a moment. "Yes, maybe it is easy for me to say. And I have no doubt about how difficult this is for you. And maybe you don't have to like it. But like it or not, you are stuck living with it. So I see no reason at all why you can't at least try to relax and go with the flow a bit more. Try to behave like you really are a girl. Try to have whatever fun you can find with everything." She paused for just a moment. "And try to smile and act like you're at least somewhat happy."

Since there was no change on his face, she wasn't sure if she was getting through to him at all. "Jas?" she said. "Do you hear me?"

"Yeah," he replied somewhat sullenly as he looked back down at the sidewalk.

"Jas...maybe if you can at least try, you won't feel so embarrassed anymore. Just try! I can pretty much guarantee that if you'll just smile a bit more and act a little more confident about everything, then nobody at all is going to look at you and see anything out of place at all. I can pretty much guarantee that! Jas, if you can do that, you won't have anything in the world to be embarrassed about. Nothing!"

He looked up at her again. "How?" he said. "You make it sound so easy."

"It is easy, Jas," she told him as she looked kindly down at her fake daughter. "Just try it. Please? For me?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure it's going to help," he replied.

"It *will* help!" she said with a lot of certainty. "Trust me. It will help! Now let me see you smile."

He looked up at her and did his best to put some semblance of a smile on his face, but it was obviously not a very good attempt.

"Come on, Jas, smile...for real. Look like you're happy."

He tried again.

"A little better," she noted. "Act like...act like you're still with your friends. Remember that day when you and Olivia and Allison, and Nichole were all singing and dancing?"

Jasmine was shocked. "How did you hear about that?"

"Never mind," she said. "What's important is that you try to remember how you felt that day. Didn't you have fun?"

He couldn't have helped it if he tried. As his mind went back to that day and the fun he had, his smile completely lit up his face. "It was so weird," he said. "We were all just singing and trying to dance together."

"Wow!" Susan exclaimed as she stared down at her fake daughter in surprise.

"What's wrong?" Jasmine asked, suddenly alarmed.

"Wrong? Nothing! It's just that, for a moment there you smiled like I've never seen you smile. You looked happier than I've ever seen you. And when you did. Wow!"

"Wow good? Or wow bad?"

“Wow good! Very good! Can you smile like that again? Try to keep the way you felt that day in your mind?”

He shrugged. “I can try I guess.” He smiled again, trying to remember how he had felt that day.

Susan shook her head and then hugged him. “You need to do that more often. A lot more often. And when you’re dressed like this...well...you look absolutely sensational! I love you Jas. I love you a bunch!”

“I love you too, Mom,” Jasmine replied before his mother ended the hug.

“Now just keep smiling like that, and let’s go get your ears pierced.”

Ugh!

As they headed down the sidewalk toward the jewelry store, Susan couldn’t help but picture how his face had looked when he had smiled that first time. The apples of his cheeks had become even more defined and he had looked...amazingly feminine for just that one moment. Was it something she had never seen in his face before, or was it more of the hormones in his system at work? She knew that eventually those hormones would actually change his face somewhat and make it look more feminine. Was that starting already too? But for just that one moment, he had actually looked – pretty.

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Jimmy figured that if she couldn’t actually go hunting herself, then this tour guiding business had to be a close second. Well, maybe not that close. There was no real joy in having to stand back and watch while everyone else had fun, and you couldn’t. But it sure beat the jobs she had already done with her Uncle Jed. It beat those jobs by a mile! In fact, as far as she could see, her only real problem with the situation was...

“Dad...” she asked once they were back in the truck again and leading all the men back off the land after the hunt.

“Yeah, Jimmy?”

"When can I go hunting again? I mean, I've got that new rifle you gave me for Christmas, but I haven't had a chance to even shoot it yet."

What she asked was somewhat of a troubling thought for Clint. He had actually given that gun to the real Jimmy. He had bought it for the real Jimmy, and yet at Christmas, he and his wife knew that this new Jimmy would be the one who would actually be using the thing. For now anyway. He still had big hopes for his real son. But this Jimmy did have a point. Like it or not.

"Okay, Jimmy," he said. "I guess that gun does deserve a little bit of use. What say we set some targets up in the backyard later this afternoon, and we'll see how it shoots first. Then maybe tomorrow afternoon, if we get back early enough, the three of us can go for a little hunt out back."

"That would be great, Dad!" Jimmy exclaimed excitedly. But she noticed one other thing her father had said. "Um...am I going out with you tomorrow morning too?"

"I don't see why not," her father told her. "You did just fine out there today. You both did. So I see no reason why the two of you can't go out with us again tomorrow morning."

Jimmy thought about that for a minute, and discovered that she actually had no problem with it at all. "Great, Dad. I just wish I had been able to shoot some ducks today. But even still, when the shooting did start, it was great!"

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"Jas?" Susan said as she quickly looked over at her fake daughter sitting in the passenger seat beside her. One of the new pink earrings gleamed brightly from his left ear as she left the parking lot. "Are you okay?" Jasmine had seemed almost strange as they left the jewelry store and walked back to the car. In fact, Jasmine had somewhat hurried the last few steps and couldn't wait to get back into the car. But now...now he almost seemed...spaced out. "Jas?" she asked again.

"Yeah, Mom," he said with a bit of a sigh. "I'm okay. I guess." He was having a lot of trouble coming to grips with the fact that he

now had pierced ears – with pink crystal earrings in each one. He was also trying to keep from crying...again.

"You did real well today," she said. "Real well."

"Did I?" he asked. "Did you see the look on her face that one time when she started really looking at me? She had no doubt at all that I was a boy. And I was trying, Mom. I really was!"

Susan had noticed the surprised look on the woman's face. "Yes, but did she say one word about it?"

"No," he replied dubiously.

"And at any time, did she ever not treat you like a lady? With respect?"

"Like a lady?"

"Yes! Like a lady. Like a real girl who should be there. A real woman who deserved to be treated politely."

"No," he said even more uncertainly. "I guess not." Actually, he was still trying to figure out what being treated like a lady was supposed to mean.

"Then you shouldn't be worried about anything that happened at all. And Jasmine, if you think about it, exactly when did she notice that you *might* not be a real girl? Hmm? When?"

"I guess...not till she started working on me."

"That's right. Up until that point Jas, she didn't even think anything else."

Jasmine just sat there staring straight ahead, but not really seeing anything as he still tried to come to grips with what had just happened to him.

When he didn't answer, Susan briefly looked over at him again. That flash of pink seemed odd knowing that it was really coming from her son. If it had been the real Jasmine sitting there she would have thought nothing at all of it. "You okay?" she asked again.

"Mom...I have pierced ears! I'm wearing earrings for God's sake!"

Susan smiled. "And they look very pretty on you dear. You should be happy about that."

Happy? Jasmine didn't exactly see it that way.

"I'm very proud of you for the way you acted in there," Susan told him. "I think you did really well. And up until she got really close and

started working on you, she didn't even suspect a thing."

He shrugged. "I tried," he said noncommittally. "I did like you said and tried to remember how things were that day."

"Well you did really well the whole time," she praised him. "In fact...why don't we stop at Cumberland's and show them off to Aunt Jessica?"

"Do we have to?" he asked. "That would mean that I'd have to get out of the car again and go into another store. And their store is a whole lot bigger and busier than that little jewelry store was."

"Oh come on," Susan said, all too happily. "I'm sure Aunt Jessica would love to see you."

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In some ways, Cumberland Sports was an odd collection of buildings that looked like the store had just kept expanding and attaching new buildings to the old buildings wherever they could. Which was pretty much the case. But one of those renovations had added a huge new front section across it all that nicely proclaimed the primary outdoor theme of the goods inside with an inviting rustic appearance that made people seem to want to come in. And come in they did. Of course, it was also the largest sporting goods store in that part of the state.

When they finally parked the car, Jasmine didn't really want to get out of it. He didn't really want to carry the purse and feel like even more of an idiot. He didn't want to be there at all. It was Saturday! The store was jam packed! Well, at least the parking lot was. They had to hike a mile just to get to the front entrance. And of course, all along the way, people passed them and looked at him.

"Jas, smile," Susan reminded him. "Remember, you look so much prettier when you smile."

"I guess that's supposed to be a good thing?" he replied, once again feeling totally nervous and embarrassed, and not really feeling much like smiling at all.

Susan stopped walking and turned to him. "Jas, remember, you're a girl, not a boy. And being pretty isn't just good, it's

practically the primary objective of every woman and girl on the planet. So smile, and let yourself be pretty. Enjoy it Jas.”

He tried to smile again, doing his best to remember how things had felt that one special day with his...with Jasmine’s friends.

“Much better,” Susan said with a smile. “And those earrings just make all the difference in the world!”

Oh sure!

Even though the parking lot was pretty much packed, Jasmine figured there was no way that all the people they found on the inside of the store could fit into all the vehicles outside. They could barely move in some places! “Maybe this isn’t such a good idea,” he suggested hopefully.

“It’s just Saturday,” Susan replied as she pushed on. “We’ll try back toward her office first.” She looked down at Jasmine for a moment. “And Jas, smile! Remember, you should be proud to show off those earrings.”

He tried his best to put a smile on his face again, but the smile he momentarily showed his mother was a funny mock smile instead. They pushed on anyway while he tried to figure out why exactly he should feel proud that he now had pierced ears.

They had no trouble at all getting into the back office area since Susan was recognized as a relative of the owners. Getting away from the crowds was somewhat of a relief, especially for Jasmine. In the small row of inner offices, they noticed that Jack’s office was closed and dark. But he was out leading a hunting group too. They had been there a number of times in the past, so finding Jessica’s office was no problem at all.

“Susan!” Jessica called brightly, seeing her sister-in-law entering her office. “And...Jasmine,” she added somewhat happily as well, although her eyes stayed locked on Jasmine. There was no way she could miss the bright spots of color on his ears. “Somebody has some new earrings I see,” she noted with a bit of surprise.

“We thought we’d just stop in and show them off a bit,” Susan told her.

Jessica got up from her desk and walked around toward Jasmine, her eyes still locked on him, studying his face. He looked a bit scared and...maybe uncertain of everything. She held out her

arms. "Come give me a hug, Jas. Those earrings look very pretty on you."

Jasmine allow himself to be swallowed into his Aunt Jessica's arms.

As Jessica held him for a moment, she turned her head toward Susan. "How did it go?" she asked. "I had no idea you were even contemplating doing this."

Susan smiled. "He did great! Once I got him to smile that is. Once we managed that much, the woman at the jewelry store didn't even realize what was going on until she started seriously looking him over to work on him."

"What did she say?" Jessica asked as she finally relinquished her hug on Jasmine.

"Nothing! Not one little thing about it. She just treated Jasmine here like any other customer. Like I told Jas a little while ago, she treated him just like a proper lady."

Jessica nodded. "Good. I'm glad." She turned back to Jasmine. "And Jas, those earrings really do look very pretty on you."

"Um...thanks. I guess," Jasmine mumbled.

"Jas," Susan said to him, "smile for Aunt Jessica please."

He looked at his mother dubiously before turning his head toward his aunt and trying to smile – somewhat.

"Not like that," Susan said. "I mean like you did when you were remembering that day with your friends."

"That day with her friends?" Jessica asked.

"Allison, Nichole, and Olivia," Susan explained. "They were all together and singing country tunes with Nichole's karaoke machine."

"And you had a good time that day?" Jessica asked Jasmine.

He nodded, but didn't say anything.

"What happened that made it so special?" she tried again.

He shrugged. "We just had, I don't know, fun! They started singing, and then they made me start singing with them. And then they were all dancing the same way too, trying to do the same movements and all. And then they had me doing it too. And...I guess we just had fun."

Jessica had watched his face the entire time he had been talking. It had gone from somber, through a series of changes, and

had ended up in a big bright smile of delight. And the difference was startling. "My!" she exclaimed as she continued to stare at his face. "That sounds wonderful!"

"It really was kind of great," Jasmine admitted.

Jessica turned toward Susan. "His face really lights up when he smiles, doesn't it. I don't think I've ever seen him smile like that before."

"Me either," Susan admitted. "And I'm his mother!"

"It changes the way he looks – completely!"

Susan nodded. "That it does. I think that when he smiles now, he's actually starting to look pretty. I don't know if it's just those hormones at work making changes in him or not. But I kind of doubt he would have looked quite like that a month ago."

Jessica looked closely at his face, which wasn't smiling in the least now, and actually looked troubled. "Is it me, or does his skin look nicer...softer?" she asked.

Susan nodded. "Absolutely! That was one of the first things I noticed a few weeks ago. But Brian told me that his skin softening would be one of the first things we might see."

Jessica looked down at his troubled face again and smiled. "Don't look so worried," she said to him. "I think you look very nice!"

"Wouldn't you be worried if you were me?" he asked.

Jessica had to stop to consider that a moment. "I guess it depends," she finally admitted. "I guess it could mean one thing when you're being a boy, and another thing when you're being a girl."

"But I'm a boy *all* the time," Jasmine replied.

"Jas," Susan said to her son. "I think Aunt Jessica means that when you have to be Jasmine, that you need to stop thinking of yourself as a boy and think of yourself as a girl instead. And when you do, then you need to be happy with all these changes in you."

"But I'm really a boy – all the time!" he argued.

Susan shook her head. "Not today, you're not. Not tomorrow, or Monday either for that matter. For these three days you need to think of yourself as a girl and nothing else. Forget you ever were a boy if you can. And smile Jas. You're looking great, and that's half the battle!"

He shook his head and turned away from both of them. "Nobody seems to understand that it's not that easy. I don't want to do any of this! I'm just stuck with it because my stupid sister wants to torture me while she goes off and has a good time. Nobody understands how totally embarrassing all this is for me. Nobody! My entire life has been destroyed already, and nobody seems to care! And nobody but me has to face everyone at school every day and have them laugh at me all the time. And I'm sure they're all probably going to still be laughing at me a hundred years from now!" He turned around to face them again. "Nobody understands!" he said again. "Nobody understands any of that!"

Susan and Jessica both looked at him sadly. "We understand more than you may think," Jessica said first.

"And I *do* understand all of that," Susan told him. "Every bit of it. And I *do* care more than you think. Jasmine...and I'm going to keep calling you that right now." She saw him roll his eyes again. "You have no idea how much all this business is killing me. It's absolutely killing me! I hate it more than you do! You and your sister are my kids, my babies! And I know you probably can't understand this yet, but a mother loves her kids more than life itself. I'd give anything to spare you all this pain. But at the same time, the world we live in is a big complicated place. And things happen every single day that we don't like at all...and most of the time we can't do much about it.

"I'm afraid the entire family has churned around this mess that you and your sister started, and they've all come up with this solution. And until your sister can finally see the light and bring it to an end, then I'm afraid we're all stuck trying to live with it."

She walked over and hugged him. "And Jas, believe it or not, I'm actually trying to make things easier for you right now. Particularly today. I know you're going to get laughed at for having to wear your sister's clothes. I know that having your ears pierced will be almost just as bad. But if I can teach you to walk out the door and hold your head up and feel confident about yourself – no matter what you're wearing, then I'll have accomplished something pretty darn great out of this situation.

"Whenever you have to be a girl, wouldn't it feel good to be able to go out and have people think you really are a girl, so nobody

laughs at you? Wouldn't it feel great to be able to go out and be confident enough with yourself that you can actually have some fun? Wouldn't it? Wouldn't it?" she repeated again, looking for an answer from him.

Jasmine wasn't really sure what to think or what to answer. "I guess," he replied hesitantly. "It's just that..." but the frustration he felt wouldn't give him an answer to what it all was.

"It's so embarrassing?" Jessica offered. "So humiliating?"

"So frustrating?" his mother added.

"Yeah! All of it! And it's not right!"

Susan shook her head. "No, you're right, it isn't right. But it's what we have to live with right now. So I think it would help you a lot if you can at least try to think of yourself as someone else whenever you have to be your sister. Try to think of yourself as being a girl instead of a boy. Try to accept that maybe you might actually be pretty if you smile. And maybe...maybe people might just like seeing you smile, and seeing you look pretty, and maybe they'll actually like you that way and will want to talk with you and be with you.

"Face it Jas, as a boy, you're pretty darn amazing. Your father is so darn proud of you he can barely hold it in. I mean, when you went out and fixed that ATV, he was beside himself with pride. And me, I've always been proud of you too – about everything!

"But Jas, let's be honest about this too. As a boy, you're always alone. Your sister has tons of friends around the house to play with, and you've basically got nobody. And we never ever see you really happy. But that day with Jasmine's friends, you were happy. You laughed and had a great time. Evidently, better than I've ever seen you have. So Jas, if you have to be your sister once in a while, why not try to grab all the happiness and fun you can out of it. You said your sister is torturing you while she's going out and having fun. Why can't you have fun too? You've done it once already. Why can't you do it again?"

"And that's another thing," Jessica added. "If your sister is torturing you while she's out having fun being you, then if you're her and having a lot of fun with your...and her...friends, while she can't play with them and have that kind of fun, what do you think that's going to do to her? Do you think it might help change her mind

about this whole business so she can be with her friends again?" She saw a glimmer of some recognition in his eyes at that.

"Jas did get mad once while we were out riding the four-wheelers," he said. "She got real mad because she heard I had fun with her friends and she wasn't allowed to see them while she had to be me. She said I was torturing her!"

Jessica and Susan looked at each other knowingly.

"Then maybe," Susan said, "you learning how to be a girl and learning how to enjoy yourself...and learning to do some of the other things that she wants to do so badly, will be a really big way to convince her to finally change her mind. And the sooner she starts seeing more of that kind of thing, the sooner maybe this mess can be over with, and everyone will be happy!"

To Jasmine, the words all sounded good, but he was the one who had to live with the reality of the situation. But he did remember something that his Dad had said once. "Dad told me once that you were all at your wits end as to how to get Jasmine to change her mind. So he asked me to do whatever I can. But I don't have a clue what to do."

"Now maybe you do," Jessica replied. "You could easily be the one to make her change her mind."

"And that's kind of what this is all about anyway," Susan added. "Your father told Tommy about it not long ago, that maybe making her see what life is like on the other side of the fence, will make her finally see how good things were before, back where she belongs. Maybe once she finally sees that, then she'll come back home where she should be."

Jasmine shook his head. "You all always make it sound so easy. But it's not. It's not easy at all. Yeah, I'd like to make her change her mind. Sometimes I'd also like to hit her so hard she'd hurt for a week. But it's just not that easy! Yeah, I get it that you all think I should just go out and act like a girl and all. Get all dressed up and pretend I'm having a good time. But it's just...not...that...easy! I don't know where to start. I basically don't know how. I don't know how to be a girl. I don't want to be a girl. I don't even want to know how to be a girl."

“But you’re stuck with the problem,” Jessica interrupted him. “You’re stuck with it, and you don’t have much of a choice but to make the best of it and learn.”

He shook his head. “I just wish someone would understand. It’s not that easy.”

Susan went over and hugged him and kissed the top of his head. “I know Jas. I know. But we’ll be there to help you every step of the way. It’s going to be difficult. Very difficult. I know that and your father knows that. But we’re going to be there for you Jas, all we can. We’re going to be there and the whole family will be there for you every step of the way.”

“You can bet on that!” Jessica added. “The whole McComber clan will be behind you all the time.”

He shook his head. “The whole McComber clan is punishing me!” he complained.

“Yeah,” Jessica replied. “That’s true. But it doesn’t mean we all won’t be watching out for you too. Every last one of us! And you can trust me on that!”

He sighed and shook his head. “It doesn’t really matter. I’m the one who has to figure it all out. I’m the one who has to live with it. I’m the one who has to face...everything! And I just don’t know how.”

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When Susan and Jasmine finally got home, they found Clint’s truck in the driveway, and Clint, Tommy, and Jimmy all sound asleep in their rooms. At Susan’s suggestion, and with her help, she and Jasmine gathered up most of Jasmine’s sewing project and carried it all out to her car, minus the sewing machine that neither one of them wanted to lift. Together, they left the boys all sleeping and drove down to the office where Susan could relieve Marcy who had been there since very early that morning.

Marcy wasn’t at all surprised to see which Jasmine came in with Susan, but it took her no time at all to notice what was new. “Jasmine! You got your ears pierced, honey!”

Jasmine could literally feel his face turning red.

“Come here and let me see!”

Jasmine set his armload of sewing stuff down on one of the tables and dutifully headed over to his Aunt Marcy who held him at arm’s length and turned him a bit sideways, then turned him the other way for a closer look. “Beautiful!” she exclaimed. “I must say, I hadn’t expected this! Very nice though. Very, very nice!”

“Jas,” Susan said. “Smile for Aunt Marcy please.”

Not again! But he did his best to try to smile...which wasn’t a very good effort.

“You can do better than that, Jas,” Susan told him, not letting him get away with what little he had done. “Think about that day with the girls,” she told him. “Think about how much fun you had, and let us see how happy you were.”

Marcy looked from Susan to Jasmine trying to understand what it was all about. She well remembered the girls all having so much fun that day, the noise had been enough that she’d probably never forget it. But as she watched Jasmine’s face, which had turned a bit red with embarrassment, she saw him close his eyes and then concentrate. And slowly but surely, with his eyes closed, his face seemed to change. And he was smiling – happily. She was astonished. And then she saw him open his eyes. “Oh my God!” she exclaimed. “I can’t believe it! I never realized that you would look so...” she wanted to say pretty, but she remembered that this was actually a boy she was looking at. “So...nice,” she finished.

“I think he’s starting to look pretty when he does that,” Susan told her.

Marcy noted that Jasmine’s face had gone back to the dull somber look it always seemed to have – especially lately. “Um... that’s kind of what I thought too,” she replied, “but I was afraid to use the...*pretty* word.”

“Don’t be afraid of it,” Susan told her. “I think we need to get Jasmine a little more used to that kind of thing. He’s still way too uncomfortable about it all. And we decided that if he can ever get more comfortable with it, it should help a lot of things.”

“I have no doubt,” Marcy replied. She relinquished the light hold she had on Jasmine. “Valerie said she might be in early tonight,” she told Susan as she started gathering her things. She gave Susan

a brief rundown of what was still going on and the couple of different hunting groups that had camped out on their land. Then she waved goodbye and was gone.

“You might as well get the rest of your sewing stuff,” Susan told Jasmine. “It’s going to be a long afternoon.”

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By late afternoon, Jasmine had gotten tired of playing with the sewing things, so his mother was letting him surf the internet for a little while instead. The door opened, and Valerie came in, much earlier than expected. Once again Jasmine had to go through having his new earrings inspected, and once again he had to go through the same smiling routine that his mother had made him do with Jessica and Marcy.

As they packed all the sewing stuff back into the car, they could hear gunshots coming from not that far away. The way the shots sounded, they both knew that someone was target shooting, and most likely back at the houses. But it was such a common occurrence that neither of them even bothered to mention it.

When they pulled into the driveway, they weren’t surprised at all to see Clint, Tommy, Jimmy, and Elliot out in the backyard with their guns. They both remembered the gun that “Jimmy” had gotten for Christmas. Whenever anyone was target shooting out back behind any of the houses, Elliot seemed to always magically show up. But he was also Tommy’s best friend, so him being there was completely normal anyway.

“Come on, Jas,” Susan said to him as they were getting out of the car. “Let’s show your father your new earrings.”

Jasmine rightfully knew that it wasn’t just his father who she wanted to show the earrings off to, he figured that his sister was the primary objective here. He just wished that Elliot wasn’t there too.

The target was set up at the very back of the lot on the far side of the garage. There was nothing but woods back behind it so shooting there was perfectly safe. But more often than not, everyone shot the guns from fairly close behind the house so it

would be as long a distance as possible to practice their shooting from.

"Looks like your mother is home early," Clint said to Tommy and Jimmy as he watched the "girls" get out of the car. He turned back to Jimmy who was taking his turn again at the target. He nodded his head toward Jimmy. "Go ahead," he said and watched as Jimmy sighted down the new gun and pulled the trigger. He put the binoculars to his eyes, then dropped them down again. The bullet had hit just off the bull's-eye on the target. "Just a bit high and to the right," he told her. "But again it's almost right on the edge of the center circle. Nice shot." So far, even with the new gun, it was hard to tell who was the better shot, Jimmy or Tommy. Elliot had been allowed to shoot once too, he had put three shots right into the middle of the target. But everyone knew how good the boy was.

"Hi guys," Susan called as she walked up to them.

Jasmine was a few steps behind his mother as he shyly followed her out to where they were shooting. His mother had been the one who had spoken, but he noticed all the guys immediately looking at him instead.

"How's the new gun?" Susan asked.

"It's great, Mom," Jimmy replied excitedly as she quickly looked Jasmine over, noticing the more colorful outfit he had on this time. And then a bit of Jasmine's hair moved and she saw the sparkle at his ears. She stared in amazement as Jasmine's head moved a bit more and she got a better look at the pink sparkle. "You got your ears pierced!" she exclaimed loudly in amazement. She couldn't believe it. She simply couldn't believe it.

Clint looked carefully too at his fake daughter. He wasn't happy about what he saw at all. He looked to Susan to say something but she beat him to it.

"We'll talk about it later," Susan told him.

"My brother has pierced ears!" Jimmy exclaimed again. Then she covered her mouth with her hand and laughed, much as she often did when she was herself – Jasmine. "Oh God! This is so funny!" she exclaimed from behind the hand still covering her laughing mouth.

"Jimmy!" Clint yelled. "Stop that. You're acting like a silly girl!"

"There's nothing at all funny about your *sister* having her ears pierced," Susan added sternly.

"I'm sorry, it's just so funny, I can't help it," Jimmy continued, still covering her mouth and laughing.

"Jimmy! Stop acting like a silly girl!" her father yelled angrily. "If you want to act that way, then all you have to do is to swear you won't hunt anymore. You do that, and you can laugh and act as girly as you want. But if you don't, then get serious this minute and stop it! Act like a boy! There's nothing at all funny about a girl wearing earrings. My guess is that most of them do."

Once again her father had seriously rebuked her for acting too girly. But the thought of her stupid brother now having to wear earrings all the time like a girl too, made it very difficult for her to act even remotely like her father wanted. But she tried. "Sorry, Dad," she managed to get out as she tried hard to stifle her laughter. She still couldn't take her eyes off of her brother though.

"Jimmy," Clint said. "Hand that new gun of yours over to Jasmine. Let her take a try."

Jimmy was shocked. "Are you taking my gun away?" She certainly wasn't laughing now.

"No," Clint replied. "I want your sister to shoot that gun. You know the rules in this house, we all have to know how to handle and shoot the guns. We all have to know how to be safe with them! Now hand it over. I want Jas to particularly try shooting *that* gun." He turned to Jasmine. "Jas, let's see what you can do with it. You should have no problem shooting at a paper target."

Jasmine reluctantly headed towards his sister to get the rifle. He had no problem at all shooting at the paper targets. It was living things that he had a problem with. Actually, he found shooting at the targets to be somewhat fun.

"It shoots sweet," Jimmy told him as she handed it over. "It feels really nice to hold. I like the balance."

"Thanks," Jasmine replied. He pulled back the bolt and chambered a round. He raised it to his shoulder. His sister had been right about the balance and the way it felt. He pulled the gun away from himself for a moment and turned his head toward Jimmy. "You're right. It feels pretty good." He turned his head back and

sighted the gun at the target, and pulled the trigger. The kick wasn't nearly as bad as he expected.

Clint again raised his binoculars and looked at the target. "Nice shot Jas," he said. Just a bit high and left of the center. Try it again."

Again Jasmine sighted the target and pulled the trigger.

"You almost hit where your first shot went. Just a bit right of it. One more time, Jas."

Again Jimmy sighted and pulled the trigger.

Clint checked the shot. "You hit the edge of the bull's-eye that time Jas. Good one." He looked at Jasmine for a moment. "You remember, that gun is yours anytime you want to go hunting," he said. "Anytime! You just let me know. Hear?"

"Yeah, Dad. I hear," Jasmine replied reluctantly. He handed the gun back to his sister. "Here," he said sadly. "It's real nice. I hope you get lots of good use out of it." He didn't wait for his mother. He didn't wait for anything. With his head bowed sadly to the ground, he hurried into the house.

Chapter 17 - Cruel School

January 4th – 5th

To say that Reverend Cosinger had a fit on Sunday when Jimmy came to church dressed as Jasmine again, would be an understatement. He briefly wondered why only the one twin was there. The Reverend didn't know it, but the real Jasmine was out with her father and brother working with the hunting party again. But just the one twin, dressed the way he was, was more than enough for Reverend Cosinger. The people who saw him were treated to the sight of his face turning dark red with anger and his fists clenching over and over again as if he wanted to strangle someone. And then he walked out. His wife had seen it and ran after him.

Church was late getting started that day because it took the Reverend a long time to calm down enough to handle the service. But other than to stare all too angrily at *Jasmine* for most of the hour that everyone was there, he never actually said anything about it.

Nichole, Olivia, and Allison all got to see Jasmine's new earrings at church, and they all gushed on and on about it. Jasmine was inwardly convinced that even though he couldn't see it, they were all really laughing at him behind his back.

The girls got to see his earrings even closer that afternoon when Susan literally sent Jasmine out of the house to find his friends. He headed to Olivia's house first, but within half an hour, all four "girls" were together again. The Four Musketeers did almost everything together. There was no singing that day. No dancing. But once again the girls tried to help Jasmine have fun. Three of the girls had a lot of fun. One didn't.

While Jasmine was being subjected to playing with clothes, jewelry, puppies, and dolls; Jimmy, Tommy, and their father left in the middle of the afternoon to go hunting for themselves. Jimmy was especially looking forward to being able to actually kill something with her new gun. She was looking forward to it, but at the same

time, she was a bit irked that her stupid brother was off having fun with *her* friends. What were they doing? She hoped her brother was having an absolutely miserable time.

Thoughts of her brother having fun with her girlfriends though, was offset by thoughts of what would happen tomorrow. Her stupid brother was going to have to go to school dressed like a girl. And of course everyone would see that he now had his ears pierced. She couldn't wait to see what the other kids did to him then. That was going to be great! The fact that she was somewhat troubled over herself having to go to school dressed as her brother, was something she tried to put out of her mind. There wasn't much she could do about it. She'd just have to take things as they came. But it still worried her. But thinking about "Jasmine" and the teasing he was going to get, totally delighted her. He deserved it, the stupid sissy. What was he doing with her girlfriends all day anyway?

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The snow was falling gently Monday morning when Tommy, Jimmy, and Jasmine walked out of the house and headed for the end of the road where the bus would pick them up for school. The ground around them was already all white, and the forecast was for several inches to fall by the end of the day. "Jasmine" was grateful for the high leather boots he was wearing again. He was grateful that the coat he was wearing came down past his butt as well and covered half of his skirt. It was just that little bit of his legs between the bottom of his skirt and the top of his boots that the cold invaded the most. But it wasn't the cold that had him shaking. He was nervous with fear. This would be the first time he would be going to school – as his sister.

"Jimmy" scuffed the snow covered ground with her feet as she walked, kicking up the light snow and making it fly into the air. The boy's shoes she was wearing with their thick rubber soles and the thick leather on top were certainly a lot better for being out in the snow than a lot of the shoes that she usually wore to school. She stared at the boots her brother was wearing. She had gotten them for Christmas, and she hadn't even had a chance to wear them yet!

In fact, most of what her brother was wearing was clothes she had gotten for Christmas – and hadn't had a chance to wear. She had seen her mother in the bedroom with her brother picking it all out for him. And when he had come out of the bedroom, she had noted the bow in his hair and a bit of makeup on his face as well. It irked her that he was wearing clothes that she hadn't had a chance to wear yet, but the thought of what her sissy brother was doing somehow made it all seem worthwhile.

The talk her mother had with her and her brother just before they left the house was still weighing heavily on her mind. She had no doubt that "Jasmine" was seriously thinking about that little talk too. The things her mother had told her and her brother went right along with all the things she was most worried about. And there would be no getting around them because they were things that her mother had worked out with Aunt Jane and Uncle John over the phone the night before. Her mother had said that most likely Uncle John would be talking to them to make sure they understood as soon as they got to school.

And then her mother had handed her a few dollars for lunch money and told her to put it into her wallet. When she confessed that she hadn't bothered to grab the wallet, her mother had sent her immediately back to her room to get it. She had to put the money into the wallet and then her mother had "made" her put the darn thing into her back pocket where it felt really uncomfortable. She already had a pen and a pencil in her front pocket. Why couldn't she just put the money in with them? Having to carry the wallet too just made everything in her pockets feel that much more uncomfortable. Why couldn't boys just carry a purse for it all? It would make so much more sense!

As they got out to the road in front of their house, they saw Nichole and Elliot coming out from the side of their house next door.

"Jasmine!" Nichole yelled excitedly as she took off at a run to meet them. She stopped short of her three cousins, her eyes going back and forth, taking in how both "Jasmine" and "Jimmy" looked. She had known of course that they would be each other for school today. Jasmine had told them yesterday. But to see them both actually doing it was still somewhat of a surprise. "Hi guys," she

said, her eyes bright with excitement. She noted though that neither Jasmine nor Jimmy seemed very excited. She had no doubt that they were both pretty scared.

"Hi Nichole," the fake Jimmy replied somewhat happily, glad that her friend had come up to talk to her.

"Hi...Jimmy," Nichole managed to reply. She turned to Jasmine. "Hi Jas," she said.

"Hi Nichole," Jasmine managed to mumble.

As they all started walking together, Jimmy wondered which Jasmine Nichole had been calling for when she had first seen them. They were joined a moment later by Elliot. At the end of the road, they could already see Justin, Ashley, Allison, and Aaron. Hunter, Olivia, and Lucas had driven to school with their parents like they usually did since their mother and father were teachers there, and their father was the school principal. Even though they were all his cousins, Jasmine still felt more nervous as they got to the end of the road where the others were waiting for them.

"Geez!" Ashley exclaimed when she saw which twin was which.

"You okay, Jas?" Allison asked, seeing how nervous he looked.

Jasmine tried to answer, but couldn't. He nodded instead.

"Hey!" Ashley exclaimed brightly. "You got your ears pierced!"

As far as Jasmine was concerned, things were already getting worse.

Before he even stepped onto the bus, Jasmine could see some of the kids on the bus standing and trying to look at him through the windows. He tried to stop and turn around, but Ashley was behind him, and when she pushed him a bit, he was forced to keep moving. Once he climbed up into the bus, he saw a lot of the kids on the bus were standing to see him better. One of them pointed at him and laughed. "You look like a girl!"

If his arms weren't so loaded with his sister's books as well as her stupid purse, he might have hit the kid...maybe with his purse. The thing was heavy enough! Unfortunately he also knew the kid was right. He did look like a girl.

"Keep going Jas," Ashley told him. "Ignore them."

Ignore them? How? Ignoring them was impossible!

Nichole was in front of him and she moved past an empty seat. She suddenly turned around and literally pushed Jasmine into the seat and then went in behind him - trapping him where he couldn't get out. He saw Ashley take the seat across the aisle. And then he saw "Jimmy" stopping and looking down at Nichole.

"We're not sitting together?" Jimmy asked her, sounding hurt. "We always sit together."

Nichole shook her head a bit. "I always sit with Jasmine," she said. "And we're already sitting together." She didn't say it, but she was almost as uncertain about this as the real Jasmine was. But it was something that her mother had suggested that she do, and she knew that the new Jasmine was so scared that he needed all the help he could get.

"Hey! Jimmy!" Elliot called from a seat up ahead. "Are you coming or what?"

Jimmy looked ahead. Elliot was waiting to sit with her! Much happier, she moved down the aisle to sit with him. She was extra happy about that. Elliot was cute!

Tommy stood in the aisle for a moment. He couldn't believe it. Elliot had just asked Jimmy to sit with him. He and Elliot were best friends. They always sat together. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned his head to see Justin leaning down toward his ear.

"They both need our help today," he told him. "It looks like we're all going to have to watch out for them."

Tommy nodded, knowing that Justin was right.

One of the girls on the bus was sitting right in front of where Jimmy had sat with Elliot. She got up and turned around in her seat. "I can't believe how much you look like a boy today!" she exclaimed. "How come you and your brother are dressed like each other?"

Jimmy realized that she was obviously one of the ones who didn't attend church with them. She tried to find a way to answer the question, but couldn't come up with anything she felt like telling her.

"They're being punished!" Elliot finally said for her.

The girl's eyes went wide as saucers. "You're kidding!"

Jimmy could only nod her head. "I'm afraid that's pretty much it," she admitted.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"Something she shouldn't have!" Elliot replied. "And it's better if we leave it at that."

"But how about Jimmy? How about your brother?"

"I'm not sure," Elliot said, "but I think that maybe he didn't do something that he should have," Elliot told her.

The girl's head went spinning for a moment. "So Jimmy didn't do something he should have, and Jasmine did something she shouldn't? And now the two of them have to go to school wearing each other's clothes?"

"That's about the size of it," Elliot replied.

The girl clearly was having trouble understanding all that. She finally looked down at Jasmine and loudly whispered. "You look pretty good as a boy!" Then she giggled and turned around.

Jimmy rolled her eyes.

"She's right, you know," Elliot told her. "You're looking better each time I see you."

Jimmy wasn't totally sure how to take that. Elliot was cute. Yeah, he was her cousin, but he was still really cute. The way she wanted what he said to mean, was that she looked better as a *girl* each time he saw her. But she almost got the impression that he thought she looked more like a boy each time he saw her now. She didn't ask him to clarify that since she was afraid of what he might say.

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Since it was snowing, the school was open by the time the bus got there, and everyone went straight inside. But Jimmy and Jasmine found Aunt Jane and Uncle John waiting for them just inside the doors. The two twins were quickly pulled aside and into the principal's office. Both twins barely moved as they looked at their aunt and uncle uncertainly.

"We just wanted to make sure you two are going to be okay," their Uncle John told them. "If you have any trouble at all, you know where to find me. Your aunt too. We're both going to try to watch out for you as much as we can today. Okay?"

Jasmine could only nod. Speaking seemed to be too difficult.

"Yeah," Jimmy mumbled, but not loudly.

"Jas!" Aunt Jane exclaimed. "You got your ears pierced."

Once again, Jasmine could only nod.

"They look lovely, dear."

"Thanks," he finally got out. He couldn't wait till everyone stopped noticing his pierced ears!

"Listen dear," Jane said to him. "Today you two are each other still. And as long as you're being each other, we've decided that it would be best if you continued to be each other as completely as possible. That means that you Jasmine should sit where Jasmine usually sits, and you Jimmy need to sit where Jimmy usually sits. And Jasmine, you of course will go to Home Ec class like you always do, just like you Jimmy will go sit in on the Mechanics class like you usually do."

Their mother had told them they would be doing that earlier that morning, but hearing from their aunt and uncle that they would each be switching classes made it seem that much more real...and strange.

"And Jimmy," John said, "whenever you need to go to the bathroom today, I'm going to need you to let me know. I'll take you into the boy's room myself each time. Got that?"

Jimmy's mouth dropped. "Uh...I guess," she replied.

"And you Jasmine," Jane said, "you need to find me whenever you need the girl's room. Okay?"

Jasmine had been shocked to hear that Jimmy had to use the boy's room. But hearing that he had to use the girl's room was a double shock because he had been just coming to that conclusion based on what Jimmy had been told. "Um...okay?" he replied uncertainly.

"Good," Jane said. "I'm sure we'll have no problems."

"Remember kids," John continued, "you're both still each other. You Jimmy only answer when someone calls you Jimmy – your teachers included. And you Jasmine only answer to Jasmine. Got that? That means teachers and students both. And when you sign your name on papers or tests, you do the same thing. Jasmine signs everything as Jasmine, and Jimmy signs everything as Jimmy."

Both twins were shocked to hear that. "Tests too?" Jasmine asked.

John nodded. "Everything! Okay? Since according to your mother, it doesn't look like Jimmy here will be changing her mind anytime soon, then everyone here at school is going to have to learn to get used to treating you two all switched around like the rest of us at home are still trying to figure out. So I guess we're all going to have to get used to it for a while."

"Remember," Jane added. "If you need us for anything, just come find us."

"And don't forget who you're each supposed to be today!" John added.

"Yeah," Jimmy replied. "We got that. This isn't our first time."

"But it's your first time here at school!" Jane pointed out.

Jimmy only nodded.

"Okay," John said. "Jane, you want to take Jasmine to her locker and make sure she can get in it okay? I'll go with Jimmy."

The twins looked at each other, totally surprised. "Our lockers too?"

"Of course!" Jane replied. "Oh, you better let me write down both your combinations so we can get into them easier."

Five minutes later, Jasmine was trying to open his sister's locker while his Aunt Jane stood right by him. Jimmy and Uncle John were just a short way down the hall opening her locker. He finished the combination and tried to open it. He didn't know if he should feel surprised or not when it opened easily. Opening the narrow door revealed an all too feminine world. His sister had "decorated" the inside of it with colorful flowerlike stickers and pictures of fashion models. There was even a small mirror glued to the back of the locker door. Her locker was full of oddball stuff too that he recognized as some makeup, colorful pens, and sewing stuff. He found a place to put his books and his purse while he took his coat off and hung it up.

"You look very nice today Jas," Jane told him. "Very nice indeed."

"Uh...thanks," he replied. He found the books he would most likely need for the morning and pulled them out. He was about to

shut the door when Jane stopped him. "You're not going to take your purse?" she asked, sounding somewhat surprised.

"Do I need to?" he asked, hoping that he wouldn't.

"Um...you might need something out of it," she suggested.

"Like what?"

"Like maybe a pen or something?"

He rolled his eyes and grabbed the dumb purse. "Is there a pen in the thing?" he asked.

"Haven't you looked yet?"

"Why should I? The only time I've ever opened it was this morning to put my lunch money into it."

With that, Jimmy and Jasmine were turned loose to head for their classroom to wait for the start of the school day. "I'm scared," Jasmine mumbled as they walked side by side down the hallway.

"You're always scared!" Jimmy replied. "But yeah, I guess I understand that."

"How about you?"

"Me? Scared?" A moment later she admitted, "A little."

Since the day hadn't officially started yet, the door to their classroom that held the fifth and sixth graders was open and the room inside was total pandemonium. It grew worse the moment Jimmy and Jasmine walked through the door. Everyone turned to look at them.

"There they are!" someone shouted. And the laughing and taunting seemed to begin.

"Settle down everyone!" Mrs. Ansley shouted quickly. "Stop that!"

The twins were both grateful that their teacher was taking control of things, but her efforts didn't seem to do a whole lot. Both Jimmy and Jasmine had to pause a moment to get their bearings straightened out...or reversed...before heading to the desks where their opposites usually sat. They each did their best to continue on amid the laughing and comments leveled at them.

"I guess you're a *girly-boy* today," one of the kids said to "Jimmy" as she headed for the desk she was supposed to sit in.

"You sure look pretty today, Jimmy!" one of them said to "Jasmine" as he headed across the room.

“Hey Jasmine, trying out a new fashion style today?” one of the girls called to “Jimmy” as she reached her new desk.

“Hey Jimmy, you sure make one sexy looking girl!” one of the boys called at Jasmine.

“Hey Jasmine, you gonna try lifting weights now and gain some muscle? Because you’re starting to look like one ugly girl!”

That one hurt. Jimmy leveled a nasty look at the boy who just beamed back, proud that his taunt had evoked such a reaction. Jimmy forced herself to sit down where she glared angrily at the teacher, unable to look anywhere else. There were only boys sitting all around her. She had no friends nearby. None at all! She was angry at the taunting she was getting from the other kids, but a small part of her felt frightened and alone. She sat there glaring at Mrs. Ansley, wishing she would do more to stop the stupidity that was still coming at her. But Mrs. Ansley was just standing there looking back and forth between her and her stupid sissy brother.

“Hey Jimmy,” one of the boys far away called at Jasmine as he turned to sit in his seat. “I can’t believe how pretty you look!”

Jasmine did his best to ignore everyone. He reached his new desk, right behind Olivia and in front of Nichole, and sat down. Olivia had turned around and was still looking at him. She reached a hand out across his desk and he took it, holding on for a moment for the bit of comfort and support it seemed to offer.

“Don’t listen to them,” Olivia said. Her face screwed up into an apologetic look. “But...you do look really nice today,” she told him. “Love that outfit. Is it new?”

If it hadn’t been Olivia asking, and if he didn’t know that she was actually being sincere, he would have lumped it in with all the other taunting that was going on. “I think most of this was Christmas presents,” he replied.

“Hey,” a surprised voice came from the girl sitting next to him. “Your ears are pierced!”

Fortunately, at that point, Mrs. Ansley took a firm hold on things and put a stop to all the talking and chatter. Both twins were nothing but glad.

“As you all seemed to notice,” Mrs. Ansley addressed the class, “Jimmy and Jasmine are a bit...different today.”

The kids all laughed, but neither Jimmy nor Jasmine appreciated the comment.

"I've let you go on for a little while now because I wanted you to get all the fun of it out of your system. But that fun stops now!" she said in no uncertain terms. "I won't put up with any of you taunting or teasing either of them in any way – at any time! Understand? None of you better say a single thing to either of them that I even *think* might not be nice. And if I do hear anything, then that person will immediately find themselves down in Mr. Mercer's office. And I can tell you for a fact that he's not going to like it at all! And many of you know that Mr. Mercer is Jimmy and Jasmine's uncle, so he's particularly interested in watching out for them. Mrs. Mercer too," she added. "Don't forget that Mrs. Mercer is their aunt."

"So how come they're dressed like each other?" one of the boys asked.

How to handle that question was one of the major things that had been talked about in the teacher's meeting earlier that morning. "I'm afraid they're dressed as each other," she replied, "because they're each being punished."

"Isn't that kind of a weird punishment?" one of the girls asked.

She nodded. "It is indeed. But from what I've been told, their family now finds themselves with a situation on their hands, and Jasmine and Jimmy will, at times, have to become each other until that situation is resolved."

"What situation?" one of the boys asked.

She shook her head. "I honestly don't know. But we can only assume from what's happening here that it must be pretty severe." She looked at Jimmy, then at Jasmine, for confirmation, but both of them seemed to be staring straight down at their desks. Confirmation enough.

"At any rate," Mrs. Ansley continued, "from what I understand, this probably won't be the last time they show up to school as each other. But they're not going to be this way every day!" she emphasized. "We're just not sure exactly when those times might be that they'll have to be this way while they're here. So until whatever problem they have is resolved, we're all going to have to get used to

dealing with both of them – as the person they're dressed like whenever you see them."

She let that information settle into the kids for a moment, even though she wasn't sure how she was going to handle the problem herself. She looked to Jimmy. "Jimmy," she said, "stand up for a moment."

Uncertain, and feeling very embarrassed, Jimmy rose to her feet.

"From now on," Mrs. Ansley said as she pointed at Jimmy. "You are to call that *boy*...Jimmy. Whichever boy happens to be wearing the boy's clothes, you are to call *him*...Jimmy. Don't let me ever hear any of you making a mistake about that, or I think Mr. Mercer mentioned something about writing a thousand times some lines about treating people properly."

She looked over at Jasmine. "Jasmine, your turn. You stand up too."

Even though Jasmine now knew what was coming, he stood. He looked briefly back towards Jimmy who was still standing.

"Just like you need to call whatever boy comes in as Jimmy, you've also got to call whatever girl that's here, Jasmine." She pointed at Jasmine. "That is Jasmine today. Don't let me hear any of your call *her* anything else." She pointed to Jimmy and said, "Jimmy!" She pointed to Jasmine. "Jasmine! Get it straight! And I know it's not going to be that easy," she added. Her eyes went back and forth for a moment between the two twins. "Or maybe it won't be that difficult." She looked over at Jasmine. "Jas, I hate to say it, but you're looking pretty darn amazing." She turned to Jimmy. "You too!" She shook her head. "I don't know how you did it, but Jasmine, you do look more like a girl than I ever expected. And Jimmy, I can't believe that you could actually look somewhat like a boy at all. I simply can't believe it. I guess it's that new haircut you got."

She looked between them for a moment more, then motioned for them both to sit down. "So that's the big story," she told the class. "You treat them each, whichever one you're seeing, as the person they're supposed to be...whether they're actually that person or not." She let it all settle into their heads for a moment before saying, "Now pull your math books out. Sixth graders, turn to page eighty-

seven and start working on the problems there. Fifth graders, look up here at the board.” For the rest of the morning, she did her best to keep the class as normal as possible. And she felt like she even succeeded.

Jimmy and Jasmine both were grateful for the “somewhat” normalcy of the class, although viewing everything from the opposite sides of the room seemed strange. Jimmy felt particularly isolated because she was surrounded by boys who didn’t talk to her or make tiny little funny comments about anything to her at all. Not like the girls all did.

Jasmine on the other hand felt all too strange when the girl sitting next to him leaned over and whispered, “When did you get your ears pierced?” while Mrs. Ansley was working with the fifth graders.

“Saturday,” he whispered back, then turned back to the math problems he was trying to do.

“Are you going to be Jasmine tomorrow too?” the girl asked next.

“No,” he whispered back, hoping she would just leave him alone.

Nichole, behind him added. “She’s been Jasmine all weekend. We had a blast playing at my house yesterday.”

Jasmine wasn’t exactly sure that it had been a blast for him. But he knew the other three Musketeers had certainly enjoyed it.

On the other side of the room, Jimmy shifted in her seat – again. She reached her hand back and tried to move the stiff wallet that was stuck in her back pocket. Ugh! The stupid thing was uncomfortable to sit on. Part of it kept digging into her backside. Why did boys insist on carrying their money in a wallet like that, and then always putting it in their back pockets? Wouldn’t it be much more comfortable in their front pockets instead? She thought about that for a moment and realized it wouldn’t be more comfortable at all. She hadn’t been too happy about the way her keys and the pen and pencil had felt in her front pockets all morning. Way too uncomfortable! She was glad to have the pen and pencil out and sitting on her desk now. And her stupid brother’s key ring that held only his house key and a key to the garage out back, that was never

locked anyway, still felt uncomfortable in her pocket. So no, she guessed that a big bulky wallet in her front pocket wouldn't be fun to sit with either. How did boys stand it? Once again she wondered why boys didn't just wise up and carry a purse. It would be so much more practical. And...they could carry so much more stuff!

Most of the classes took a small break at mid-morning. Many of the kids headed off to the bathrooms while most of the teachers switched rooms. As usual, once the break started, everyone got up from their desks.

"How'd it go?" Nichole asked Jasmine as she stood next to his desk, waiting for him to get up too. Olivia got up as well and turned to join the conversation.

Jasmine stayed in his seat. "Not too bad...once class actually started," he replied. "Do you guys talk that much all the time?"

The two girls seemed surprised. "Don't you?" Olivia asked.

"No. Never. Well," he added, "hardly ever."

Nichole shook her head. "You really need some friends," she said.

"Coming?" Olivia asked as she grabbed her purse.

"Where?" Jasmine asked.

"To the bathrooms of course," then she stopped and stared at him. "Oh! Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"Uh..." Jasmine replied. "Actually, I do have to go. But I've got to find Aunt Jane. She's supposed to take care of me when it comes...to that."

"Oh," Olivia replied like it was of no consequence. "Okay. So you're still coming then, just not to the same place we're going."

Nichole laughed while Jasmine got out of his seat.

"Aren't you going to take your purse?" Nichole asked, when she saw he was about to leave it behind.

"Why should I?" he replied.

"Jasmine," Nichole told him. "You *never* leave your purse anywhere! You *a/ways* take it with you!"

"Someone could steal it!" Olivia added.

Jasmine reached down and picked his purse up from the floor. But as far as he was concerned, if someone stole the thing, he'd be

very happy. Why couldn't girls just carry everything they needed in their pockets? It would be so much simpler!

He walked between Olivia and Nichole out into the hallway and they all headed in the direction of the bathrooms, which was also in the direction of the classroom where he thought his Aunt Jane would be. But they didn't get very far before they saw their Aunt Jane heading straight for them.

"Hi girls," she said to the three of them. "How did the morning go?"

"Interesting!" Nichole replied.

Jane turned to her daughter, Olivia. "Not too bad," Olivia told her.

She turned to Jasmine next. "And how do you think it went?"

"I'm still here, I guess," Jasmine replied.

"I guess that's a good start if nothing else," Jane replied. "Need a bathroom break?" she asked.

"Yeah," Jasmine told her. "I was just coming to find you."

Jane turned and put one arm around her daughter and her other arm around Jasmine, and led them all toward the girl's room. Before turning in, she and Jasmine both noticed Jimmy heading into the principal's office at the end of the hall.

The teachers had their own bathrooms, but that didn't mean that they didn't often go into the student's bathrooms to make sure there were no problems there. So the kids often saw teachers there. But the minute Jane walked in with Jasmine, all heads turned and the looks of surprise were everywhere. "It looks like you're going to have to wait your turn," Jane said to him. Then she let go of him and walked over toward the sinks, leaving him standing in line to use the toilets behind Olivia. Olivia and Nichole were both just as surprised as the other girls that he was in there with them.

"Um...did you know this was going to happen?" Nichole asked him.

"They told me when I got here this morning," he replied.

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With a friendly hand on Jimmy's shoulder, John led the fake boy into the boy's room. It took only a moment for one of the kids in there to loudly exclaim, "Holy cow!" With all heads watching them, he shepherded Jimmy down to the other side of the room where the stalls were. Most of the boys were back by the urinals. The stalls rarely got used. "In you go," he said to Jimmy. "I'll be right out here till you get done."

It was a wide-eyed Jimmy that went into the stall and closed the door behind her. She was very nervous going to the bathroom in there, even though she was in a closed cubicle where nobody could see her and her uncle was standing guard right outside. She was as quick as she could possibly be, pulling her pants up and fastening them almost as fast as she had undressed. It took her very little time before she was out of the stall.

"Aren't you going to wash your hands?" John asked when it looked like she was going to head straight out to the hallway.

Jimmy always washed her hands afterwards. She always checked her hair. She always checked her face. Sometimes she even fixed what little makeup she wore. But she wasn't wearing makeup today, and her hair basically looked like she had just slept in it and done nothing more than to run her hands through it, which was very nearly the case. But she did always wash her hands. Nervously, and very aware that all the guys were looking at her again, she went to the sinks and turned the water on.

She had seen the guys over at the urinals. The ones who were using them had looked really nervous and had actually turned away from her some. Thinking about it nearly made her laugh. The girls sometimes talked about going into the boy's room and seeing what they had in their pants. And here she was. She just wasn't able to see, what as a girl, she hoped she'd see.

She finished washing her hands and had to stand under the hot air blower for a minute to let them dry. She looked around briefly again, but only briefly. She didn't want her Uncle John to think she was really trying to catch a glimpse of something she shouldn't. A minute later, she was alone out in the hallway and heading back to her classroom. She briefly wondered how her brother was getting

along in the girl's room. She hoped he had to stand in a very long line waiting to go!

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It seemed to take forever! But Jasmine finally got into an empty stall while his Aunt Jane still stood back by the sinks chatting with some of the other girls. Standing in line waiting to just go to the bathroom was a somewhat new experience for him. There were a lot of urinals in the boy's room for them to use and only two stalls, so there was never any long line to wait in. But here was a different case. No urinals at all and only five stalls. They definitely needed more! He had been surprised to discover that waiting in the line was yet another opportunity for the girls to talk, including to him.

"Did you know you were going to look that pretty?" one of the girls ahead of Olivia had asked him.

Geez! What a question to ask a guy! Didn't any of them understand how embarrassed he was? Didn't any of them realize that he'd just as soon nobody said anything to him at all? Didn't they realize he would be a lot happier if everyone would just leave him alone? Obviously not.

At home, his mother had made him sit down that one time to pee like a girl. He hadn't ever bothered to do that since. But this time, seeing where he was, he decided it might be a good idea to actually sit. Besides, pulling his skirt up and his tights and panties down wasn't all that easy, but he supposed that sitting down when he had to do it wasn't that much more difficult than trying to stand up like he usually did. So he sat, glad that at least the door was closed so nobody could see him.

Two minutes later, he was struggling to get his tights up again and then pulling his skirt down and into place. A moment later, he had picked up the stupid purse he'd rather not have to carry and was out of there...and another girl went in.

"All done?" Jane asked him.

"Yeah," he confirmed as he headed for the door.

"Jasmine," Jane said without moving from where she was. "A lady always washes her hands afterwards."

Jasmine was very tempted to tell her that he wasn't a lady, but he bowed to the inevitable. He walked over to the sink closest to his Aunt, and looked around, trying to decide what to do with his stupid purse. What a pain! It seemed like he was always trying to figure out what to do with it. He finally set it on the shelf under the mirror like he saw some of the other girls doing. He turned the water on and washed his hands. But then he had to dry them, and the dryers were down past where all the sinks were. He had to grab his purse and hook it over his arm just to go down and dry his hands. He was quick to note the girl using the dryer next to him had done the same thing with her purse. He looked up at his Aunt when he was done. "Ready," he told her.

"You're not going to wait for Nichole?" she asked.

He looked over at the sinks. Nichole was just finishing washing her hands and was heading for the dryers. He stood next to Olivia and his aunt and waited. A few moments later, all three "girls" left the room together and headed back to class. What an ordeal! All that just to go to the bathroom. Being a boy was so much easier! And the school really needed to wise up and install more stalls in there!

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They had a different teacher for all their late morning classes. Mr. O'Conner was actually one of Jasmine's favorite teachers because he also taught the Mechanics class too. Mr. O'Conner looked Jasmine and Jimmy over carefully before class, but he never said a single word about them being switched around. For the rest of the morning, the fifth and sixth graders were busy with lessons in science and history. The few times he called on Jimmy or Jasmine to answer a question, he was careful to call each of them by the names they were supposed to be using.

The next big break in the day came at twelve o'clock. Lunchtime. Jasmine followed Nichole and Olivia out to the lockers. He had to fish the combination to his sister's locker out of his purse in order to open it. But a few minutes later, his books were out of his hands once again. He wished he could leave his stupid purse in

there too, but he knew that both Olivia and Nichole would probably be all over him about it if he did that.

The school's lunchroom was also the school's auditorium and also the school's gym, although it was a lot smaller than most gymnasiums. The only basketball net they had was on a portable stand and the kids had to be careful of the ceiling lights whenever anyone played. The whole school had lunch at the same time. The teachers sat together at one table near the door and did their best to leave the kids alone to relax and have what fun they could, while at the same time, they kept a close eye on them all.

Once a week, on Monday's, the lunchroom staff collected money from each of the kids to pay for their lunches for the week. It wasn't a lot of money, but those lunches were the best meals of the day for a few of the students there. And on those weeks when a few of the students couldn't pay, they still got fed just as well.

Jasmine stood in line behind Nichole and Olivia, and Allison quickly found them after her class and joined the line with them too. The Four Musketeers.

"We got a mouthful in class this morning about you two!" Allison told them the minute she had caught up with them. "Mrs. Boyle was a bit over the top about us calling you what name and about not teasing you too much."

"Yeah," Nichole replied. "We got the same thing from Mrs. Ansley. Except that Jas and Jimmy were right there in the room."

"So how'd it go?" Allison asked Jasmine.

"It was...different," Jasmine replied. "I got through it anyway. So far." A minute later, he was digging the money his mother had given him out of his purse and handing it over to have his name marked off as having paid for the week.

"Which person am I supposed to put this under?" the lunch lady asked.

"Jasmine," he replied. "My...brother..." He stopped to look around and spotted Jimmy way back in the line. "Jimmy is back there." He watched as the woman put the checkmark next to Jasmine on her list. Then he had to figure out how to juggle carrying his heavy purse and still manage to hold his lunch tray and put food on it. It seemed like every time he turned around, he was finding

another way that his sister's stupid purse could be more of an inconvenience.

Once he had his food, he waited with Nichole and Olivia for Allison to finish getting her food. Then the four of them headed over to the girl's usual table. There were six seats at each table. But the four girls always sat at the same table. Sometimes other girls might join them, but the four girls had always hung together. Olivia set her tray down first and pointed across the table. "You usually sit there," she told Jasmine. A minute later, all four "girls" were seemingly in their usual place. To Jasmine though, it felt very strange. More often than not, he chose a seat by himself at lunchtime. Sometimes, some of his friends would join him. But mostly it was a case where if someone else sat at the same table with him, it was because they needed a place to sit too.

They had just started eating when Jimmy walked up to them with her tray in her hand. "You're not sitting with me?" she asked, clearly bothered by it. She kept staring at her stupid brother sitting in her place.

Olivia, Nichole, and Allison all stared at her, feeling out of place and bad about the situation. "We can't," Allison finally said. "We always sit with Jasmine. Always! And we're already sitting with Jasmine."

"But..." Jimmy started to say, but she said nothing else as she looked around at her friends. It was like they were abandoning her.

Nichole pointed to one of the empty seats at the table. "You can sit there if you like?" she said quickly. "We don't mind."

But all Jimmy could see was that her friends had cast her off. Her dumb brother was sitting in her place. The girls had even all stood in line together and hadn't waited for her. They had abandoned her and didn't really want her around anymore. Not saying anything, she took her hurt feelings and found a table where nobody was sitting yet. The very same table where her brother usually sat – alone. But alone was what she wanted to be just then. All her friends had abandoned her. She picked at her food, but she barely ate anything.

Jasmine watched his sister walking off. He could see how hurt she was. "Why didn't she sit with us?" he asked out loud. "You're all

her friends...her real friends."

"She's a boy today," Allison told him. "And I wish she had sat here too. But girls don't usually sit with the boys here," she said. Then she smiled. "At least not till they get into the upper grades. Then I think they sit together all the time! And that's going to be so cool!"

Three of the "girls" at the table laughed. One didn't. The one who couldn't seem to have fun like the rest of them could.

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Once Jasmine had finished eating, he waited a few minutes until their never ending conversation seemed to come to a point where he could change the subject. "I think I should find Aunt Jane now and go to the bathroom while I've still got enough time."

"Okay," Nichole replied as she stuffed another French fry in her mouth. "You get rid of your tray and find her while I finish eating. Then we'll all catch up to you."

Jasmine almost laughed. "Geez, you guys even go to the bathroom together all the time?"

"We do *everything* together," Olivia replied with a laugh. "Everything!"

For the first time all morning, Jasmine smiled as he got up and grabbed his tray. Like everyone did, once they were done eating, he dropped the tray off at a table along the wall and stuck the dishes into one of the empty dish pans that were lined up to hold them. Then he simply stacked his tray on top of the others there.

His Aunt Jane of course was eating with the other teachers on the far side of the room. He headed in her direction.

"Hey Jaaasmiine!" the taunting voice called.

Jasmine kept going, but he turned his head to see Billy Krause, one of the older boys in the school, standing and looking at him. He turned his head away and kept going. It was just more taunting like he had endured all morning.

"Hey Jasmine," Billy said again, "you gotta be the prettiest girl in the school. How about a little kiss!" He broke out laughing...him and all his friends who were sitting with him.

Jasmine stopped a moment, irked by the silly taunt. With some effort, he continued walking again.

"Hey Jasmine," Billy called again. "I guess it's true what they say about how much of a sissy you really are!" And then he started laughing with his friends again.

Jasmine stopped again, his head bowed down to the floor and his anger growing faster than it ever had before. He was getting tired of the jokes. He clenched his fists for a moment, then kept going, doing his best to ignore the taunting from the older boy.

"Hey Jasmine," Billy called. "I hear you're nothing but a big coward now. So much of a coward that you're whole family decided you're better off as a girl than a boy!" Once again he laughed, and so did his friends.

Jasmine stopped again. Again staring at the floor. But this time the strange unaccustomed anger he was feeling was quickly turning to rage. He turned and faced Billy. "Shut up!" he yelled back. "I'm no coward. I'm no coward at all!"

"Ooooo!" Billy said in mock fright. "Is the little sissy getting angry? What are you gonna do, hit me with your purse?" Again he laughed, and so did his friends.

"Keep it up, and I just might!" Jasmine replied. "I'll hit you with that...and my fists!"

Billy broke out laughing. "Hear that? He's gonna hit me with his purse!"

The teachers were already getting up from the table to put a stop to it. "Stop that!" John yelled. But they were far enough away that his words made no impression.

Jasmine, totally enraged now, stalked straight toward Billy. But he was suddenly pushed off course from behind as someone ran right past him. He turned back to see his brother Tommy in a full out run, heading straight at Billy.

Even though Billy Krause was much bigger and older than Tommy, Tommy didn't care. He ran straight at Billy as fast as he could. He was running so fast that Billy didn't have much of a way to defend himself as Tommy ran straight into him with his arms extended, pushing him back hard and almost knocking him to the

ground. "You leave my sister alone!" Tommy shouted angrily as he backed away. "You don't touch a hair on her head!"

Billy was fully incensed now. "You want to fight, Tommy?" he said as he came forward with his fists raised. "Come on. Come on. I'll fight you!" The teachers yelling in the background made no impression on him at all.

"You don't touch my sister!" Tommy yelled. "Either of them! We're McComber's and we take care of our own! We stick together and watch out for our own! So if you want to fight her, then you're gonna have to come through me first. But you better know in advance, we McCombers particularly watch out for our women! Nobody fights fiercer to protect our women than a McComber!"

"No problem you little twerp," Billy said as he started coming again with his fists ready to start swinging.

"And you'll have to go through me too!" Elliot said as he suddenly appeared at Tommy's side, ready and willing to fight.

Billy Kraus paused at the sudden intrusion, then he smiled. "No problem!" and he started forward again.

"And me!" Hunter added as he quickly ran up to Tommy's other side, more than ready to take on Billy, who was his own size.

This time Billy stopped completely as the unexpected addition of an older and bigger McComber suddenly appeared.

"And I know you don't want to mess with me!" Justin's deeper voice added as he walked up to stand next to Hunter. "Like Tommy said, we're all McCombers, and if you pick a fight with one of us, then you pick a fight with all of us. And trust me, you don't want to do that."

"Stop it!" John Mercer yelled again as he hurried to try to get through the mass of kids who now surrounded the fight that was about to start. But he suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder pulling him back.

"John!" his wife Jane was calling him. "Wait!"

He turned, surprised that she wouldn't want him to stop what was happening.

"Don't be too hasty here," she cautioned. "Just get close!"

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Jasmine wasn't sure what was going on. All of a sudden, all the boys in the family were standing between him and Billy. And then he felt Olivia, Allison, and Nichole standing next to him. A moment later, he saw Ashley dragging Jimmy by the hand to stand with them as well.

One by one, every McComber in the school took their place. The boys in the front line, the girls all grouped behind them. Even the eight-year olds, Aaron and Lucas, stood defiantly in the front line.

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With his wife holding onto his arm, John Mercer watched the confrontation playing out in front of him, even though he knew he should have stepped in and put a stop to it all. He had married into the McComber clan. He knew a lot about them. More than most people alive. But he didn't ever expect the kids would put up this kind of a front. Every last one of them! And then he felt his wife drop his arm and leave him to start working her way around behind all the kids.

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Jimmy was just plain scared. What was going on? One minute she was feeling cast off and adrift by her friends, and now she was standing in the middle of them, almost as if all the girls were protecting her too. She had seen the fight starting between Billy Kraus and her stupid brother, and she had been shocked to see her brother actually looking like he intended to fight with the big kid. She couldn't believe that! And now every kid in the family, at least those who went to school, were all here grouped together, the girls standing behind a wall of guys. But...but she was supposed to be one of those guys today, yet she couldn't find it in her to join that front line of boys.

She suddenly felt someone grabbing her hand and pulling. She was surprised to see it was her brother. And he wasn't letting go or

giving her much of a choice as he kept pulling her out toward the wall of boys in front of them.

Jasmine grabbed his sister's hand and pulled. She didn't seem to want to come, so he pulled harder...and she came. He pulled her right up behind Tommy. "Let me though," he said firmly.

Tommy turned and was surprised to see both twins there.

"I started this," Jasmine said, "and now I'm going to finish it!" He actually pushed his way between Tommy and Hunter, and dragged Jimmy along with him. Once in front he dropped Jimmy's hand and faced Billy Krause. Billy wasn't looking so mean anymore. In fact, he looked a bit scared. Jasmine didn't really care.

"Look at me!" he said to Billy. He turned to all the other kids looking on too. "Look at me!" he said to all of them as he turned so they could see him too. "Look at me...and look at my sister! Both of us! Look at us! You think we want to dress like this? You think we want to come here and get totally humiliated? You think we like this? You think we like getting teased and taunted like we've been all day? Well you're wrong! Totally wrong. I hate it! We...hate it!"

He looked around at all the kids...and surprisingly the teachers too, including his Uncle John and Aunt Jane, but he had started now and he wasn't nearly finished yet. "We're being punished!" he told them. "Both of us. My sister and I are being punished together for things neither of us want to change. We've already been whipped for it. We've already been through the whipping...and we've come out the other side. Both of us! So when the whipping didn't work, the family decided on this instead. But what you see is only a tiny bit of the problems Jas and I are facing. What you see, the way we're dressed, is only the smallest part of it. I guess it just happens to be the part that you all can see the easiest. And if this punishment goes on much longer, the things Jas and I are going to face are going to get worse and worse. I'm just hoping it won't go on too much longer, because it's already got me so scared I don't know what to do."

He looked all around him again. "So you can go ahead, call me a sissy if you want. Call me other names too. I guess I don't really care anymore. I'm a McComber too, and I know that even in the middle of the worst punishment possible, my family will still stand by

me. They're still going to all watch out for me. And I can't tell you what that means to me."

He faced Billy Krause again. "So go ahead, call me a sissy all you want. To be honest, I don't really care anymore. I don't care what any of you think! I don't care because I know what I am. But the one thing I know I'm not...is a coward! I'm no coward. I never was a coward. And I never will be! So you can all call me whatever you want. But don't ever call me a coward!"

He looked around again at all the McComber's behind him, then he grabbed his sister's hand and pulled her closer. "I'm a McComber," he told them. "Just like all the rest of my family behind me. So don't think for a minute that I won't stick up for my sister here if you give her the least bit of trouble too...no matter how I may be dressed. Cause if you do give her any trouble, you'll be pickin' a fight with me!"

"And me!" Tommy added quickly.

"And me," Hunter said.

"And me." Justin said too.

One by one, each boy, including the eight year olds, included themselves in that mix.

"And me!" John Mercer said as he finally stepped into the middle of it all. He saw his wife now over with the McComber girls. She had her arms on Ashley's and Allison's shoulders. "Don't forget, I married into the McComber clan too," John said. "And I can tell you for a fact, you don't want to mess with any of them. When it comes to family, there is nobody closer or more caring than the McCombers. No family that is so dedicated to *being* a family than the McCombers. Nobody!"

He turned to Jasmine, still holding his sister's hand. "Are you finished?"

Jasmine nodded. "Yeah," he said. "I've said my peace. But I meant ever word of it!"

John nodded. "Let's break this up now. All of you, finish up and head back to class."

Jasmine let go of his sister's hand and turned around to find his Aunt Jane standing with the other girls. "Aunt Jane," he said, "I think it's time for the bathroom again."

Jane smiled. "Sure Jasmine. Sure."

John Mercer stood where he was, watching everyone around him. There was a hushed whisper in the room from the few kids that dared to talk. Most of the kids though were still watching the McComber kids, especially Jasmine and Jimmy...and especially Jasmine. John was especially watching Jasmine too. And what he saw surprised even him. He watched as Jasmine headed out toward the bathrooms with his wife. But he had never seen his nephew Jimmy, walk with his head held that high. There was a defiant pride in him that was evident even from behind. Something had happened to him in the last few minutes. Something major. And John knew for a fact that all the talk in the family about what they thought was going on with him had to be wrong. Completely wrong!

As Jasmine walked out, John turned to look at Jimmy again. Her brother Tommy was now standing by her side, as if daring anyone to give her any trouble at all. Jimmy, unlike her brother though, looked frightened and lost. He walked over to her. "Bathroom time?" he asked.

Jimmy could only nod and go along with her uncle towards the boy's room. What had gotten into her brother? That wasn't like him at all! She simply couldn't believe it. Jimmy was afraid of his own shadow. But he had been ready to take on the whole school. And then, at the end, he had stuck up for her. Why? What had gone on with her screwy brother?

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John knew he needed to phone Clint and Susan and tell them what had happened, but he knew it was going to be a long phone call and he had to teach class first. Before class, he and his wife had talked briefly about it and agreed that their parents had to be told all about what had happened. Unfortunately, calling them was going to have to wait a little while. He didn't know how he was going to handle talking to Clint as well since Clint would be at work. Maybe just calling them this evening would be easier. There was another phone call he was considering making too. One that could be even more important than talking to Clint and Susan.

He went into his classroom of upper grade students and tried to put it out of his mind. He couldn't of course. He noticed the strange mood of all his students as the afternoon wore on. He figured he shared their strange mood as well.

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Jimmy and Jasmine were back in the same seats again after lunch, and Mrs. Ansley was back as their teacher too. There was no taunting or jokes from any of the kids after lunch. But both twins noticed the way everyone kept looking at them. Jimmy was surprised to see how straight Jasmine was now sitting in his chair, with his head held high, almost as if he was daring anyone to give him the least bit of trouble. What had gotten into him?

Across the room, Jasmine was half focusing on the classwork, but mostly focusing on what had happened during lunch. He wasn't trying to hide anymore. If anyone wanted to gawk at him, let them look. He had already stood in front of everyone and told them to do just that! He was past hiding now.

He had gotten angry at Billy Krause. He knew he shouldn't have, but it had all just finally come to a head and gotten to him. It had almost been as if he couldn't control himself. Had he really stood in front of everyone and dared them to make trouble? He knew he had. He still felt that way. He sat there, still ready for anyone to give him, or his sister, any grief at all.

He had been ready to fight with Billy Krause. The kid was in high school and a whole lot bigger than he was, but he hadn't cared. He had been ready to have at it with him. And then his brother had stepped in and started the fight instead. Only there hadn't been a fight. Not really. He couldn't believe it when every kid in the family came together. Every last one! Every boy had stuck up for him, when he knew that every boy in the family shouldn't have. The whole family had laughed at him...sort of. Well, maybe not so much anymore. The more he thought about it, it had been a long time now since anyone in the family had actually laughed at him, other than his sister when he got his ears pierced.

The whole family had been there for him today. All the kids had stuck up for him. He couldn't believe it. And now...now he wasn't quite sure what to think. He only knew that the whole family did really care about him, and that had been an enormous thing to find out. And he thought that maybe it made a difference in the way he thought about some things.

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When the mid-afternoon break came, Jane found Jasmine along with Olivia and Nichole, out in the hallway, heading toward their lockers. She asked if Jasmine needed another bathroom break, but this time he declined, claiming he was fine. She left him to prepare for his next class. She wondered how he was going to do in there. As Jasmine, he would be spending the rest of the afternoon in Mrs. Marker's classroom where she taught Home Economics for the last few hours of school. Jane did know of course that Jasmine had been doing a lot of sewing at home lately, so maybe he wouldn't be too lost. But she wasn't sure at all how Jimmy was going to get along in the Mechanics class that Mr. O'Conner held out in the auditorium.

She hurried through the halls to find her husband. She found him still in his last classroom. "Did you get a chance to call them yet?" she asked.

John shook his head. "Not yet. I'm thinking that since Clint is working, it may be easier if I just phone them this evening."

Jane considered that. "Maybe," she said. "But I still think Susan should know as soon as possible...before the kids get home from school and the rumors start flying."

"Yeah," John agreed. "I hadn't considered that." He looked around at the things on his desk. "I've got the computer kids coming in now for the rest of the afternoon. Can you watch them for a while so I can call her?"

"Tell you what," Jane said. "I was going to have my theatre group start reading a new play. I can have them do that, and then go phone Susan and just give her a heads up, and then tell her you'll call later after Clint gets home. How will that be?"

John smiled. "Sounds perfect. I'd appreciate it."

There were students coming into the room, but Jane didn't care. She walked up close to her husband and kissed him. "And I'm glad that you're part of the McComber family now too."

"Me too," John replied. "The entire clan may be one of the most amazing families I've ever seen. And your father...your father is nothing less than a force of nature! Speaking of which, I have to call him tonight too. I think we may have been wrong about what we thought was going on with Jimmy. I think we could be completely wrong."

Jane nodded. "I wondered about that too."

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There were no books, as far as Jimmy knew, that he needed for his brother's Mechanics class. As he headed for the auditorium where she knew Mr. O'Conner taught the class, she suddenly found Elliot walking next to her. He was in the class too. Elliot didn't say a word to her. He just walked next to her all the way to the auditorium. She liked that. But she realized that she liked it for several reasons. Not only was Elliot so cute, but he had been there, ready to fight for her...and her screwy brother. She realized she felt better, safer, having him so close, especially since he was so cute. She could almost imagine herself and him out walking together somewhere. Boyfriend and girlfriend. The spring trees in full bloom. It would be so...

"Hey Jimmy," the voice called.

She turned to see Brian Burch, one of the older boys in the room, calling her. "Yeah?"

Brian looked a bit frustrated. "You wouldn't happen to know what engine was in that ATV that...I guess it was *you* that worked on it and fixed it?"

What kind of engine? It was an engine. That's all she knew. Weren't they all the same? "It was...an ATV engine," she said. "What difference would it make?" She saw him roll his eyes and walk off. Well, weren't they all the same?

She saw Mr. O'Conner hurry into the room. "Everyone get your coats," he called loudly. "And hurry up. We're going outside today."

"But it's snowing!" one of the boys complained.

Mr. O'Conner's face lit up in a broad smile. "Yes. It is!"

Jimmy hurried back through the hallways and got her coat from the locker. Then she rushed back to the auditorium again. A few minutes later, the door to the outside opened and she saw Mr. O'Connor coming in, along with Justin and a few of the older boys, and they were pushing in...a snow mobile!

Mr. O'Connor addressed the now excited kids. "Okay everyone. In honor of the snow outside, I figured it would be only right for us to go out and have some fun in it with this thing." The noise of excitement was only what he expected. "But first!" he said. "I'm afraid it needs an oil change and a good going over."

He turned to Jimmy, as he naturally would, since Jimmy just had this knack for machines. But he saw his sister dressed as Jimmy instead. His face fell a bit. "Jimmy, you wouldn't know how to adjust the drive belts, would you?"

"Drive belts?" Jimmy asked. "What are they?"

Mr. O'Conner shook his head. "Never mind." He turned to another boy in the room to do it instead.

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Jasmine held his sister's notebook that he had grabbed from the locker before the Home Ec Class. He had no idea if he would even need it, but since he had done her homework for her that one time and he knew about some of the things she had in it, he figured it couldn't hurt to have it with him. He saw most of the other girls had notebooks with them too. But almost all the girls in the room had clothes and piles of material with them as well. He figured they were all clothes that they had made, or that they were working on.

Once again, he found himself sitting with Nichole, Allison, and Olivia. They really did do everything together. They all had the clothes that they had been working on for the fashion show with them too. He was the only one of the four that didn't. Was there something he should have known before he left for school today?

"Where's the new outfit you just finished?" Nichole asked.

"I didn't know I was supposed to bring it," he replied. "I didn't know I was supposed to bring anything." He saw Olivia shake her head and turn away. Well, he didn't! Nobody told him.

There was no actual class work going on that he could see. Instead, all the girls in the room were just sitting around talking. But he soon realized that while they were all talking, Mrs. Marker was going all around to look at the clothes everyone had brought with them. And he hadn't brought anything.

Mrs. Marker finally got around to where he was sitting with the other Musketeers. One by one she went through and carefully looked at the clothes they all had been making. Clothes that he himself was all too familiar with since talking about making them, and the stupid fashion show they were all going to have later in the year, was a major part of their everyday conversations.

And then Mrs. Marker turned to him. "And where's your outfit Jasmine?"

"Uh...I didn't know I was supposed to bring it. Nobody told me!" he complained.

Mrs. Marker's face looked frustrated. "I suggest you get a little better communication going in your family. Do you know if...your brother...has even finished...his...outfit yet?"

"Yeah," Jasmine replied. "It's done. I know because I had to sew most of it myself!"

Mrs. Marker looked totally surprised to hear that. "You did?"

"Yeah. My Mom helped me. I did most of the skirt by hand. And then we got a new sewing machine for Christmas and my, uh, the other me, finished everything with that. And now all weekend Mom has me working on this other new thing instead."

"Your mother helped you?" Mrs. Marker asked, still surprised.

"Yeah. She's been kind of...uh...adamant that I totally be my sister."

"I see," Mrs. Marker said. "And you say you've started working on something new?"

"Yeah. Mom made me cut out and pin a pattern to some really weird silvery stuff."

"Silvery stuff? What kind of silvery stuff?"

“Um...I don’t know. It was just this weird silvery material.”

“What kind of material?” Mrs. Marker asked.

“Uh...I don’t know. It was just slivery and weird.”

Mrs. Marker rolled her eyes. “I suggest you find out,” she said.

“And you should find out how to care for the material too.” She was about to say that she would be testing him on it the next day, but she didn’t bother. She was just surprised that the boy had done some of the sewing himself!

There was just one other little suggestion she had for him that she did feel she should tell him about. She got down close to him and lowered her voice. “Uh...Jasmine, it’s not really bad around here, or most places I would imagine, but in other places you might want to be a bit more careful.”

Jasmine was confused. “With what?” he asked.

“You might want to try sitting more like a lady.” She told him.

“Like a lady?”

“Put your knees together when you’re wearing a skirt, dear,” she told him. “Especially a short one.”

Jasmine’s face turned red as he quickly pulled his knees together, and the other Musketeers all started laughing.

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Jacob had an office at home, and he had a second office inside the family business office. He was there now talking with Susan, who was the only one working there that day. Since the major hunting season was starting to wind down, there wasn’t a whole lot for Susan to take care of on that end, but that left him time to work with her on the family’s latest major project, six small lodges they could rent out to hunters who wanted to stay there. They had always avoided getting into the hotel business, but it had also been something that had always been a sore spot with a lot of hunters since finding places to stay nearby was pretty much impossible without driving a very long way. So the family was building just these six separate small buildings to house the hunters if they wanted to stay...and rent them of course.

The new lodges had been Susan's big project. More than Valerie or Marcy, she was the one handling the details, all of which in reality bore Jacob's name.

"So as I see it," Susan told him, "the biggest problem we're going to face once we open, is cleaning them. Maid service. I'd hate to ask anyone in the family to try to do that every day on top of everything else they're doing.

Jacob nodded. "We'll have to hire it done," he decided. "I hate going out of the family for it, but right now, I don't see any other choice."

He was interrupted by the phone ringing in the other room. "Excuse me," Susan said as she hurried out to answer it. "Hello?"

"Hi Susan. It's Jane."

"Jane!" Susan instantly started panicking about her kids. "Are the kids okay? What happened to them? Is anybody hurt?"

"Calm down Sue," Jane laughed. "Yeah there was an incident..."

"An incident! What happened Jane?"

"Hang on!" Jacob's voice cut into the room. "Is there a problem with the kids at school? Put that thing on speaker so I can hear!"

"Hang on," Susan said into the phone, frustrated because she had to wait to hear if her kids were okay. "I'm putting you on..."

"I heard! Just do it," Jane replied.

"Okay," Susan said after pushing a button. "Are you still there?"

"I'm here," Jane confirmed.

"Now what happened to Jimmy and Jasmine? Are they hurt? How bad was it?"

"For heaven's sake!" Jane replied. "Settle down. They're both just fine. In fact, they may be better than fine."

"Better than... What happened?"

"Well, I told John that I would just kind of give you a heads up, and then let him talk to you and Clint tonight after he gets home from work. And I'm pretty sure he wants to talk to Dad about it too. It was pretty darn amazing Sue. Really something!"

"What was really something?"

"Sue, you never would have believed it. One of our more troublesome high school kids started to pick a fight with Jasmine..."

the Jasmine that's here today. And Jasmine was more than ready to have a go with the big kid. But then Tommy ran into it and kept Jas out of it. And before any kind of a fight could actually break out, every boy in the McComber clan lined up against this kid, ready to fight. And all the girls grouped right behind them with both Jas and Jimmy in the middle. It was amazing Sue. Just amazing."

"Why didn't you put a stop to it before it started?" Susan desperately asked. "Why didn't you and John both stop it?"

"It happened too fast," Jane told her, lying just a little. "But it was Jasmine – you know the Jas that's here today? Jasmine was the real star of the show. Oh boy! Was he ever!"

"What did he do?" Susan asked.

"I won't bother telling you now. I'll let John tell you later. But it turned out good Sue. Real good. You can be proud of that boy. Tommy too! He was right there ready to fight to the death for Jas."

"Jane..." Jacob said. "I'm still here too."

"Yeah Dad, I know. John wants to sit down and talk with you later about it too."

"That's fine," he said. "But maybe after school, you can just come here to the office instead. Sue and I are still busy with these new lodge things we're trying to build. Maybe we can see if Clint can get off of work early too. I'd rather hear all about it sooner rather than later."

"Okay, Dad. I'll tell John. I gotta go back to my class now. I just wanted to warn Sue before her kids got home and they started talking about it."

"Thanks Jane," Sue replied, only somewhat relieved. "I'll call Clint and we'll see you here later." She hung up the phone and looked up at her father-in-law. "What the heck happened?" she asked.

Jacob smiled. "We don't know all the details yet," he said, "but it sounds like we've got a bunch of kids in this family we can be proud of. Including yours!"

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While Jasmine was sitting around talking about sewing projects with the girls, Jimmy was finally outside waiting her turn on the snow mobile. Her second turn! She had never had a clue her brother sometimes got a chance to do fun things like this. She never had the slightest clue. But as far as she was concerned, right now, her stupid brother's life was a blast!

Chapter 18 - Bad Mother

January 5th – 7th

“Sue!” Clint exclaimed as he hurried into the family business office and spotted his wife. “Are you sure they’re okay?”

“Evidently they’re fine,” Susan told him as the two headed for each other. One quick kiss and they separated again.

“I hurried home as soon as I could,” he said.

“I appreciate it,” Susan told him sincerely. “Jane told me only a little, but I really want to hear all of it. Especially whatever it was that Jasmine did.”

“Jas?” Clint asked. “Which Jasmine?”

“The one who went to school today,” she replied. “Jimmy.”

“What trouble is he in now?”

“Evidently none, as far as Jane is concerned. She made it sound more like he’s the hero of the day. Tommy too from what I gather.”

“Clint?” Jacob’s deep voice called from the inner office. “Is that you out there?”

“I’m here, Dad,” Clint replied as he headed for his father’s office. He walked in. “Hi Dad. So we’re all going to meet here?”

“I thought it might be quickest,” Jacob explained. “You know I’m not one that likes to have to wait for the details.”

“Me either, Dad,” Clint agreed.

“I figure they all ought to be along any time now,” Jacob told him. “But in the meantime, take a look at these drawings we got for the new lodges. Susan has been checking on the water requirements today and from what she tells me, the current well we had dug for this building should handle all six of them, and about fifty more to boot.”

“Yeah, Dad. We had a good well put in when we built this place.”

“So the water will be good. Now tell me about the electric.”

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It wasn't until forty-five minutes later that John and Jane finally arrived...after dropping their kids off at home. The bus that would bring back the rest of the kids hadn't gotten there yet.

"Hi Dad," Jane called brightly as they walked into his office.

"Jane," Jacob returned as he got up and accepted a hug from his daughter. He accepted the handshake from John as well while Jane was saying hello to Susan and Clint. "So what the heck is going on?" Jacob asked as he returned to his desk.

Jane looked at John, and he looked at her. But he was the school principal. "What went on?" he said. "What went on was a minor miracle as far as I'm concerned. And it was something that made me awfully proud to have married into this family."

"But you said something about a fight earlier," Susan reminded him.

John nodded. "A fight that didn't quite happen. Well, not really as far as I'm concerned." He launched into as detailed an explanation of everything that had happened at the school as he could. His wife Jane continually filled in some of the finer details as he went. It took a little while, but between the two of them, they managed to get the whole story out.

Jacob was smiling and chuckling through much of it, but not the part where Jasmine stood in front of the whole school to tell them all what he thought. That part, Jacob listened to with even more interest. "And what about the girl...the real Jasmine," Jacob asked. "What did she do while all this was going on?"

John and Jane looked to each other again. This time it was Jane who answered. "When it all started, Ashley grabbed her and pulled her in the middle of the rest of the girls."

"Did she try to go out with the boys at all?" Jacob asked.

Jane shook her head. "Fortunately not. In fact, during it, and afterwards too, I think she looked a bit scared."

Jacob nodded as he considered that. "Maybe that's good," he finally decided. "One of the things that I find most interesting though, is Tommy. From what you say, he didn't waste a second to jump in

to protect his kin. And it sounds like he was pretty darn tough about it too."

Clint shook his head. "I'm afraid some of that may have been my doing. I gave Tommy my version of one of your old speeches a couple of nights ago, Dad. I told him about how the clan always sticks together and about how we all fight to protect our women. It sounds like he listened better than I thought."

Jacob nodded. "One of these days I'm going to write down all that stuff I used to tell you boys. Maybe it would be more use than I thought." He chuckled. "Only problem is, I don't remember most of it myself!"

"Dad," John said, trying to bring the discussion back to more serious matters. "I wanted to talk with you about something that Jimmy said...the real Jimmy...while he was out there talking to all the kids."

"I thought you pretty much told me all of it," Jacob replied.

"I did," John said. "But one of the things I particularly noticed during that little speech he made, kind of stuck out. And then afterwards when I saw him suddenly standing straighter and walking as if he wasn't afraid of anything, well, it made me give it all a lot more thought."

"Jimmy?" Jacob asked. "The one we've got all dressed up like his sister? Not afraid of anything?"

John nodded. "It was something he said when he was talking to all the kids. He said he wasn't a coward. He said he never was a coward and never would be. I found that particularly strange in light of the fact that he told everyone he was too afraid of so many things that he refused to hunt anymore."

"I'm not sure that he's exactly afraid of hunting itself," Clint corrected him. "I think it's more like he's afraid to actually kill anything."

"He is afraid of a lot of things," Susan told them. "He's even afraid of the dark! He sleeps with a nightlight on all the time."

"Either way," John said. "Either we're totally wrong about the way he said he was scared of everything, or he's suddenly found himself a whole lot of confidence. He sure had more than his share of courage today!" He looked briefly at his wife, then back to Jacob.

"I was thinking, that in light of the way he behaved in there, which was pretty darn brave if you ask me."

"Yeah, it was," Jacob agreed.

"Well, I was wondering if we might want to put an end to this whole business now. Stop it now before things get any worse, especially for Jimmy and Jasmine."

"Yes! Please!" Susan exclaimed quickly. "Please let's put an end to this business!"

Jacob sat and considered that. "I'll think on it," he finally said. "But I don't think it's me that can really end this thing. And I'm not sure it's time for it to end either."

Susan's face fell. "Why not?"

"Cause of Jasmine, the real one I mean. I always knew there was more to that boy of yours than it seemed. I think I had more faith in him than the rest of you. I think I still do. But it's his sister who's the bigger problem. We all knew that when we started this thing. She was the one that really controlled everything, not him. Until she learns better and decides not to hunt, we fixed it so that the two of them are stuck in it together – like it or not. And I still think that it's going to be Jimmy that somehow changes his sister's mind on the matter." He had another reason too. One he knew better than to share with Clint and Susan. He shook his head. "I tell you what though," he said. "I'll think on it some more tonight. I'll let you know tomorrow if I decide any different." He brightened a bit. "But in the meantime, I think I've got a bunch of phone calls to make tonight."

"To who, Dad?" Jane asked.

"All those kids, of course! I got to tell each and every last one of them how proud I am of them. And I mean really proud. They did the McComber name proud today. All of 'em. And I think they all deserve to know it!" He turned to Clint. "And that includes all those kids of yours too. I'm especially proud of them. Well, the boys anyway." He stopped to correct himself. "The real boys, that is."

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That night, while they ate dinner, Jacob told his wife Rose everything that happened. The two of them discussed a few things that he had said, particularly his concerns about Jasmine and Jimmy. And then, to Rose, it was as if Jacob had again gone off and gotten lost in the conversation as he started talking about his two younger brothers. His two brothers who had both died in the war so many years ago.

"I remember Brent," Jacob said with a far-off look in his eyes. "The army loved him. They loved Charlie too. They loved all of us boys. 'Course, we could all out-shoot anyone else and we'd been raised in the woods so the jungle wasn't all that much different. But they was younger than me. And while I got sent to Korea, they both wound up in Vietnam. And from what Brent told me, that was a hellhole for sure! Much worse than what I saw in Korea."

And then, to Rose, it was as if he changed the subject again. "Do you know how they make steel, Rose? How they make it extra strong?"

"I have no idea Jacob," Rose replied, just listening to his rambling.

"Well, they heat it all molten hot, and then they pound the living daylights out of it. Then they stick it back into the fire to heat it up again, then they pound on it again. Over and over. And the more they do it, the stronger it gets. Strange that."

"It does sound odd, Jacob," she agreed, not really caring.

"Well, that's what the army did to Brent, Rose. They took him and shoved him into the fire, then they pounded on him, making him stronger and better, then they shoved him into the fire all over again. And he got stronger and stronger, better and better. You saw all the medals he got. You know how good my brother was."

"Yes, I know," Rose agreed. All his brother's medals were in a display cabinet that was prominently hung in her husband's office in the house. "But it didn't keep him alive, Jacob. Did it?"

He shook his head. "Unfortunately not. But it took a bullet to the back of his head from somewhere long off to kill him! And Charlie... poor Charlie. That mine he stepped on never let him even have a chance."

Rose dared not say anything when Jacob got into one of his reminiscing moods. She knew from experience that all she could do was sit there and listen.

"Anyway," Jacob said, suddenly snapping out of it. "The point is, they stuck Brent into the fire and then pounded him hard over and over again. Making him stronger and better each time. And that's what I think we need to do with Jimmy."

Rose jolted in her seat. "With Jimmy?"

"Mm-hmm!" Jacob replied with a nod of his head. "I think there's more to that boy than meets the eye, even if I'm the only one who can see it. We're going to put him back in the fire and then pound on him some more. Over and over if we have to. And then we'll see what we get when we're done."

Rose was somewhat aghast. "But Jacob."

"Don't worry, Rose. Like I said. I've got faith in that boy, even if nobody else does. I'll keep my eye on him. I always have!"

"And Jasmine?" Rose asked. "What about her? You can't treat her like that!"

Jacob's lips pursed into an unhappy frown. "I think there's something missing from that girl Rose. Something important. Something I'd just as soon not tell her parents. This may be the only way she'll ever find that something again."

He got up from his seat. "Now I think I got a bunch of phone calls to make. Those kids did good today Rose. All of 'em!"

Rose sat at the table and sipped at her coffee. She thought hard about what Jacob had just said. Her husband was smarter than he seemed. But this time, she was pretty sure that he was wrong. She had a suspicion as to what Jacob had meant when he talked about Jasmine. She thought she knew what it was that he thought Jasmine didn't have...or had lost, which was more the case. And she was pretty sure that keeping Jasmine in the fire like he planned, wasn't going to help her get it back. Subjecting Jasmine to everything that was ahead of them wasn't going to bring back to her the one thing that every McComber woman had. The one thing that gave strength to every woman in the clan...and most other women too she was sure. Jacob's plan wasn't going to bring back

compassion to the girl. Because as she saw it, compassion was the one biggest thing that Jasmine seemed to have lost.

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“Hey Dad,” Jed said when he had answered the phone after his father had called. “I hear there was some kind of a ruckus at the school today.”

“That’s what I’m calling about,” Jacob told him. “I’m calling to tell Justin and Ashley how damn proud I am of what they done.”

“I’ll get them for you, Dad,” Jed said. “I know they’ll love hearing that from you.”

“Hold on a sec,” Jacob said before his son could leave the phone.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“I want you to continue pushing that girl of Clint’s every weekend, just like we discussed. Keep her as busy as you can. Don’t let any weekends go by anymore. I want to start pushing her even harder.”

“Harder?” Jed asked. “Well, there’s plenty of hard work to be done. Especially once the big hunting seasons are over at the end of the month. I’m sure I can keep her busy.”

“Good!” Jacob said. “And you better let her hunt as much as you can too. Send her out with Ethan or Justin...or her father for that matter. We did promise the girl she’d get to hunt more, so make sure you don’t forget.”

“I won’t, Dad. And like you said, I’ll try to keep her as busy with the tough jobs as I can.”

“Good!” Jacob replied. “Now let me talk to those kids of yours. You don’t know how pleased I am with the lot of ‘em.”

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The last house Jacob called was his son Clint’s house to talk with Tommy and...Jasmine. Clint and Susan listened in as several times Tommy said, “Thank you sir.” Or, “Thanks Grandpa.” Once he told his grandpa, “I just did what I had to.” Then with one final,

"Thanks Grandpa," he turned to his fake sister and handed him the phone. "Grandpa wants to talk to you now," he said with a smile. Tommy walked off feeling great. It wasn't often that his Grandpa complemented him like that. And Grandpa had said that he was more pleased with what Tommy had done by jumping in to protect his...sister...than what all the other kids had done. But he was nothing but very proud of all of them. The girls too!

Jasmine picked up the phone. "Hello?" he said nervously.

It was a moment before Jacob could reply. "I guess I have no choice but to call you Jasmine right now," he said, "but let's make one thing clear, I'm still talking to you. To Jimmy! Understand that son?"

"Yes sir, Grandpa," Jasmine replied, not sure why his grandpa was bothering to say that.

"Good," Jacob replied. "Now you listen, and you listen good. I've been on the phone half the evening with every last one of my grandkids...well, those that are in that school of yours anyway. But I've talked with every last one of them now except you and your... well, the other one of you that's supposed to be your brother. Damn this is confusing!"

Jasmine actually laughed a bit. "You should try it from our side. Half the time I'm not even sure who I am."

Jacob chuckled a bit. "Yeah. I'm sure son. Now listen, like I was saying, I've talked to all those other kids, but it's you that I wanted to talk with the most. I'm damn proud of what each and every last one of those kids did today, but your brother Tommy was a real standout."

"Yes sir," Jasmine replied. "I guess he kind of saved my hide. I don't know what I was thinking trying to fight with Billy. He's in high school and he's got a pretty bad reputation, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I'm sure I do," Jacob replied. "All the more reason for me to be proud of you and Tommy both."

"Me?"

"Hell yes, son. I'm so proud of you today I could spit! You may be all dolled up like your sister. But you had enough guts to stand up in front of all them kids and give them all a good what for! From the

way I heard it, you told them all just where to stick it! And then you went and stuck up for your sister and protected her too. That took guts Jimmy...I mean...oh hell, you know who you are! It took guts to do that. And I just want you to know how proud of you I am.”

“Yes sir,” Jasmine replied with some surprise. “I just don’t know what came over me. I got mad I guess. But nobody gave me any trouble the rest of the day. I can tell you that!”

“Good son. Real good! I just want you to know, you may be stuck in your sister’s skirts for a while, but I’ve got faith in you boy. Lots of faith. More than you know. I just want you to know that. Okay?”

“Yeah,” Jasmine replied, happy for most of what he had said, but his spirits were suddenly crushed by the last bit his Grandpa had said. “Thanks, Grandpa,” he replied as his disappointment started to grow. His Grandpa had said he was going to still be stuck in his sister’s skirts for a while. That one comment had taken a lot of the pride he had started to feel away.

“Now let me talk to your father,” Jacob told him. “I need to have a word with him too.”

“Yeah sure, Grandpa. And thanks again.”

“You’re welcome son.”

Jasmine turned the phone over to his father with somewhat of a heavy heart. His grandpa had said he was going to be stuck in skirts for a while. Feeling totally despondent, he headed back to his bedroom as the gloom seemed to close in tighter. He had known before that he would be stuck being his sister until she gave up hunting. But his Grandpa’s words had only made it seem worse. And that was even right in the middle of all the really nice things he had said to him. But that one little comment. That one little fact, seemed to take hold of him hard. The tears started falling from his face by the time he was halfway down the hall. The emotions rushed over him to the point where he ran the last few steps into his sister’s bedroom where he dove onto the bed and buried his face in the pillow. With seemingly countless dolls looking down from the shelves above, he cried his eyes out. He couldn’t help himself. He knew he shouldn’t, but he couldn’t help himself. He just felt like crying, so he abandoned himself to the misery.

Susan noticed the sudden emotional turn in Jasmine as he handed the phone over. As she heard her husband greeting his father, she heard a snuffle coming from her new daughter as he reached the hallway. She was desperately torn. She wanted to hear what Jacob was about to tell Clint, but she also wanted to comfort her child. She was praying for Jacob to put an end to this whole mess. He had to see that now! He had to! She couldn't wait to hear that word from him, or at least from her husband. But her child.... Her heart won out. She would hear what Jacob had to say later. She hurried to Jasmine's room instead.

She found him sobbing miserably on the bed. She sat next to him and held him. "What's wrong sweetie?" she asked. "What did Grandpa say?"

"He said he was proud of me," Jasmine sobbed. "Real proud. More than any of the others."

That surprised Susan, only because Jasmine was crying so hard. "But that's a good thing," she told him. "So why are you crying?"

"I don't know!" he replied through more sobs. "It was just something he said, I guess."

"Something he said? Did Grandpa say something that upset you?"

It was a moment before Jasmine could reply. "Kind of."

"What was it sweetie?"

"He said I might be stuck in Jasmine's skirts for a while." He started sobbing bitterly all over again.

Susan let him cry for a minute. Jasmine had just given her Jacob's decision on whether he would end this switching around business or not. And as he had said he probably would do back at the office, he had decided to let it continue. Susan laid down next to her sobbing child and wrapped her arms around him as silent tears fell from her own eyes. She knew that much of Jasmine's tears were due to the hormones now running through his system, but it didn't matter. Since there was no end coming any time soon to it all, she figured they both had reason to cry.

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Jimmy peeked silently into Jasmine's room – her own room in reality. Her room that she figured she would be going back to sometime before bed that night. She couldn't believe that both her mother and brother were laying there crying. What had Grandpa said to them? Whatever it was, it had to be pretty bad. But then, her wuss of a brother seemed to cry over the stupidest stuff lately. What a sissy! But her mother was crying with him too, so whatever it was, it must have been really bad.

She had noted that her Grandpa had talked with both Tommy and Jasmine, but not to her. Why not? She had no idea what Grandpa had said. She wasn't even sure if she cared. She only felt...left out.

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It was a while before Susan and Jasmine stopped crying. "Feeling better?" she whispered into his ear as she continued to lay with him...holding him.

He nodded. "Yeah. Some," he replied. "Sorry. It was just one of those spells I seem to get lately."

"Do you get them often?" Susan asked.

"Sometimes," he admitted. "Mostly at night when I'm in my room."

Susan nodded. "It's the hormones. Uncle Brian said they would do that to you."

"It's not...fun," Jasmine said.

"I'm sure it's not," Susan replied.

"But at the same time, it feels kind of...I don't know? Like I need to cry. Like I've just got to let go and do it, you know?"

"Perfectly," Susan told him. "I know perfectly well how it feels. And it feels good to just let it out sometimes. Sometimes it can be...cleansing, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah," he admitted. "Something like that."

"So don't worry about it," she said. "I expect it to happen. Okay?"

"Yeah," he replied. "Thanks."

“Good!” she said as she started to get up. “Now get yourself undressed and get that robe on again. We need to get you back in your right bedroom.” With a slight love-tap to his backside, she got off the bed and waited until he got up as well. She watched to make sure he was going to start getting undressed, but she saw him pause before he even got started, to stare at his face in the mirror. And then he turned to her.

“Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“What about my earrings? Can I finally take them out now?”

She went over to him and started pulling them out of his ears herself. “I’m afraid that you’re going to have to keep wearing them most time for the next month or so.”

Jasmine was surprised. “But you’re taking them out now,” he noted.

“Yes,” she said as she started on his other ear. “We need to put some different ones in instead. I don’t want those holes to close up.” She went to Jasmine’s jewelry box and searched around for a moment. Her fingers reached in and plucked out two tiny earrings. She brought them back to him and held out her hand to show him.

Jasmine saw the earrings his mother had in her hand. They were just tiny gold balls. Really tiny.

“Put these in now,” she told him. “You need the practice.”

Reluctantly, he took one of the earrings, removed the back piece from it and tried to find the hole in his left ear. It wasn’t easy.

“Whenever you’re not in school,” she told him. “I want you to keep these in your ears. You really need to keep them in all the time, but let’s see if we can make this work if you leave them out just while you’re in school. Okay?”

Jasmine looked at her as he took the other earring from her. “I guess. It’s better than having to wear them to school too,” he replied.

She nodded. “That was my idea.”

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After hearing all about it from her husband, the praise that her father-in-law had lavished on Tommy and Jimmy, the real Jimmy, was nice, but it did nothing to quell the disappointment that Susan felt when Jacob refused to bring matters with her twins to an end. If anything, he said he was more determined than ever to let things play out. He just wasn't forthcoming with any details as to why he had decided that. And because of that, Susan felt doubly despondent on Wednesday afternoon when she picked her two twins up from school again. Since she didn't need Tommy with her, she sent him home on the bus with his best friend Elliot. Neither Tommy nor Elliot seemed to mind.

"Where we going?" Jasmine asked.

The best Susan could manage was a weak smile as she said, "Out." She felt even worse a short while later when she pulled into the parking lot of her brother-in-laws medical practice.

"Mom?" Jasmine said with more than a bit of alarm when she realized where they were.

Susan was fighting the tears as she parked the car. She knew how frightened her kids had to be – both of them. With the car finally stopped, she left the engine running and turned to her daughter. "Jas, please tell me I can go home now. Please! Please let's end this now, before it gets any worse." Her daughter looked wary and concerned. Jimmy looked just plain scared.

"Mom..." Jasmine replied. "As far as I'm concerned, we *can* just go home. Just turn the car around and let's go."

Susan almost breathed a sigh of relief. Almost. "So you're saying now that you *will* swear not to try to hunt anymore?"

Jasmine looked at her like she was crazy. "No! Of course not! Why would I? You know I like hunting."

"But Jas," Susan argued. "Uncle Brian will give you another shot today. He's going to put more of those hormones into you. You and your brother!"

Susan watched as Jasmine's face changed right in front of her. It started in fear, then quickly settled in a determined sneer. "That stuff isn't anything but water that he's giving us, and you know it! It's not doing anything at all!"

“How can you say that? You saw for yourself what’s happening to your brother. He’s growing breasts for God’s sake. And your breasts have totally stopped growing.”

“It’s not real!” Jasmine insisted. “And I’m just in one of those non-growing periods. That’s all. You’ll see, any day now they’re going to start growing again. Any day!”

Susan shook her head. “It’s not going to happen Jas, and you know it! You know perfectly well that that stuff is changing you.”

“No it’s not! It hasn’t changed me at all!” she yelled. “Not one bit! Now let’s get out of here and just go home!”

Susan shook her head. She was crying now, but she didn’t care. “We can’t Jas,” she cried. “We can’t. Because of you, the family is expecting to hear that Uncle Brian has given you both another dose of those hormones. Why Jas? Why are you too stubborn to admit what you see right in front of your eyes? Why are you too stubborn to put an end to it all?”

“Because it’s not real!” Jasmine yelled back. “None of it. All you’re trying to do is fool me. I haven’t changed one little bit. It’s all just some scheme that the family cooked up to make me want to quit hunting. But I like hunting, Mom. I love it. And there’s no way I’m going to stop doing it now. No way!”

The yelling match between her and her daughter had Susan beside herself. She turned the car off and forced herself to get out. “Get out of there then. Both of you!” she said angrily through her tears. “You’ll see how real it all is. You’ll find out all too soon! And then we’ll see who’s right and who’s wrong.”

She watched them only long enough to see them both finally get out of the car – Jimmy even more reluctantly than Jasmine. Susan pushed the button on her key fob to lock the doors so they couldn’t get back in again. Still crying, she led them into her brother-in-law’s clinic.

She was crying because of the argument. She was crying because her daughter refused to believe the simple truth that was all too evident. She was crying because of what had already happened to her kids. She was crying because of the added changes she knew that the new dose of hormones would bring. But she was mostly crying, because she placed the blame for it all squarely on

herself. She was the one who was really to blame here. Not them. Not them at all. She was to blame because she was a bad mother. A very bad mother. Because what mother in her right mind would ever consent to the things that she had consented to. What mother would ever allow her kids to be changed the way her kids were? She was a bad mother, and she didn't have any idea what to do about it. None!

One thing about entering a doctor's office in the state she was, they never even had to sit down and wait. The moment the nurse saw who Susan was and how distraught she was, they were all immediately shown back to one of the exam rooms. They all shed their coats nervously while they waited. Susan still hadn't gotten herself under control when her brother-in-law rushed in two minutes later.

"Susan!" he exclaimed. "Are you okay?"

Susan had to think about that for a moment. "No," she finally admitted, still totally distraught.

"What's wrong?"

Susan shook her head, and looked over at her kids who were both looking on, wide-eyed and scared. "What do you think?" she said. "I'm a bad mother. That's the problem. I'm a bad...*terrible* mother."

Brian took her in his arms and let her cry. He looked over to the kids. "I take it you still won't agree to not hunt?" he said to Jasmine.

"It's not real!" Jasmine replied with some vehemence. "None of it is real!"

Brian shook his head. "It is real, Jas. Totally real. The changes have already started in you. In both of you."

"Ha!" Jasmine returned.

Brian stared at her. He was more than sure that the bravado attitude that Jasmine was giving them wasn't what it seemed. He was fairly certain that her attitude had now become something else – denial, but only somewhat. He was fairly sure that she did believe it all deep down, but she wasn't letting herself admit the truth. Her problems weren't letting her let go of anything enough to face the truth. And he also knew that until such time as she did manage to

see it, she would never agree to the simple things everyone wanted from her.

"Susan," he said to their still sobbing mother. "You're not bad. You're not bad at all. Jasmine's not able to see what's happening yet. She can't admit to herself what's really happening."

"Nothing's happening!" Jasmine yelled.

He ignored her. "Susan," he said again. "You're not a bad mother. You're a good mother. You love those kids more than life itself. And right now, that's all you can do for them."

"I could take them out of here and run!" Susan suddenly exclaimed as she tore herself from his grasp. "I *should* take them out of here. I need to go right now!" she finally yelled in a near panic.

"No!" Brian yelled back. "If you do that, you'll never get through to your daughter. If you take them away from it all now, what's already happened to her will fester in her mind until she goes completely mad."

"And what about me?" Susan cried. "I'm already going completely mad!"

Brian held her again. "I know," he said. "I know. But those two kids need you to be strong for them now. And they're both going to need you to love them even harder now." He held her for a moment longer. "You're not a bad mother, Susan," he said. "You're not bad at all. You're about as good as a mother can get." The woman in his arms sobbed harder than ever. And all he could do was hold her. Hold her until she could get the crying out of her system. Out of her system for now. He knew perfectly well that she would cry again, especially as Jasmine's mental problems continued to escalate, as he was fairly sure now that they would.

In the state they were in, Brian didn't dare leave them for long. He only ducked out long enough to grab the things he would need, then he hurried right back to them.

Once again, he seated the two twins right next to each other on his exam table. The sneer on Jasmine's face was pure defiance. He took her blood sample first. Then he turned to Jimmy. The poor boy was almost shaking with fear. He could see he was trying to control it. He himself wasn't sure how much better he would do if he

was in Jimmy's position. "Relax Jimmy," he said. "I'm just taking a little bit of your blood again to make sure you're still okay." As he had done last time, Jimmy looked away the entire time the needle was in his arm. He heard Susan let out another sob again as the blood was being drawn. "All done," he said as he started taking care of the things he had needed.

When he was ready, he turned back to the twins with his stethoscope. "Take your shirts off please," he told them. "I need to continue the exams." He noticed that both kids had trouble carrying out that request.

"Do it!" Susan's voice commanded from the side, stronger and more determined than he had heard her speak yet.

It was only at her words that the twins slowly and reluctantly removed the shirts they were wearing. With the shirts gone, Brian was quick to notice all the tissue that Jasmine had stuffed inside her bra. She was glaring at him as if daring him to even mention it. He took his stethoscope instead and listened to their lungs and hearts.

Since Jimmy's chest was bare, he examined his growing breasts next. He felt them as thoroughly and as tenderly as he could. "They've definitely gotten a little bigger since Christmas," he said. "I'm noticing that they're starting to expand out from behind your nipples now so they're starting to push out on a larger area of your chest."

"Bullshit!" Jasmine muttered.

Brian ignored her. "Do they still hurt as much?" he asked Jimmy.

"Sometimes," Jimmy admitted. "I try to ignore it."

"Yeah, right," Jasmine commented nastily. "The little sissy just wants to wear a bra all the time like I do," she said. "I think he loves it."

"Jasmine, shut up!" Susan told her. "You're being obnoxious."

"Huh!" she grunted. "It's all fake anyway."

Brian shook his head. "Let me see you next," he said to her.

She looked at him like he was crazy. "See what?"

"See what?" he asked, surprised at her question. "Quite likely, nothing. Which I'm sure could be just the case. Take your bra off and let me have a look."

"No way!"

“Jasmine!” Susan’s voice lashed out quickly. “Get that bra off!”

Reluctantly and angrily, Jasmine reached behind her back and unfastened her bra. In one motion she tore the thing from her shoulders, removing it from what little breasts she had, before she set it down between her and her brother. Most of the tissues she had stuffed into it spilled out onto the floor. She ignored them as if they didn’t exist.

Brian studied her small breasts carefully. There was very little breast tissue mounded up, and as far as he could tell, her nipples and the areolas around them didn’t appear to be as big as he would have expected either. “As far as I can tell,” he said, “there doesn’t appear to be any recent growth at all.” He looked up at his niece. “They’re not growing, Jas. They’re not growing, and they’re not going to.”

“Bullshit!” she replied nastily.

He shook his head, slightly offended by the way she had spoken to him.

“Jas,” Susan said angrily. “Watch your mouth!” All her comment got her was an angry glare from her daughter.

“When was your last period?” he asked her.

“Not since before Thanksgiving,” Susan told him. “But then she’s kind of been this sporadic since she started having them.”

“I spotted a little for a couple of days about week ago,” Jasmine told them, but that uncaring attitude was still in her voice.

Brian nodded. “Late or nonexistent periods are to be expected. If this continues to go on long enough, they could even disappear altogether.”

“Good!” Jasmine replied. “That would be a plus!” She nodded her head towards her brother. “He thinks he’s growing my breasts, maybe he can have my periods too. It would serve him right, the dumb sissy! He can have them!”

Brian let the comment pass and went back to his basket of things he had brought in. He grabbed a hypodermic needle and filled it from one of the small bottles he had with him. “Since you’re so convinced none of this is real,” he said to Jasmine, “then let’s get you out of the way first.” The angry sneer he got from the girl was nothing but disturbing. The entire time he worked on her, she glared

angrily at him. Never really watching what he was doing. Only looking straight at his face. Daring him to do exactly what he was doing. By the time he finished with her, he was glad it was over.

"Told you it was all fake!" Jasmine exclaimed nastily as he finished up.

He shook his head and went about preparing to do Jimmy next. A moment later he reached out and grabbed Jimmy's arm...and Jimmy pulled his arm back. "Try to relax Jimmy," he told him. "We've got to do this, one way or another now." He reached for his arm, and again felt resistance, but he held on. "Jimmy..." he said, cautioning the boy. He felt Jimmy relinquishing control of his arm. Before he could do anything though, he heard a snuffle, and looked up to see the tears in Jimmy's eyes as Jimmy watched closely. "Don't look," he said softly. "It will be easier that way." But it was almost as if Jimmy didn't hear him at all. Jimmy continued to watch as Brian plunged the needle into his arm. And the moment he did, he heard Jimmy start crying a little harder. And when he finally pulled the needle out again, Jimmy was sobbing. Susan was there immediately to hold him and love him.

"Stupid sissy!" Jasmine exclaimed nastily.

"I'm done," Brian told them. "Let's just hope this all comes to an end soon. Otherwise...." He wasn't going to continue, but it was Susan who finished his thought.

"Otherwise," she said softly and with tears in her eyes, "we'll see you here next month too."

"Yeah," Brian replied softly. "Better get dressed now kids," he told them.

Jimmy reached for his shirt, and Jasmine picked up her bra.

"Stop that!" Susan suddenly barked at Jasmine.

"What?" Jasmine replied angrily.

Susan ripped the bra out of her daughter's hand. "You don't deserve to wear this!" she hissed. "You haven't acted one bit like a woman today at all. She handed the bra to Jimmy. "Here," she told him. "Put it on. You deserve it more than she does. As far as I'm concerned, you probably need it more than she does now too."

"Mom! How can you do that?" Jasmine exclaimed.

“I can do it because the only thing you’ve been today, is obnoxious! You certainly haven’t behaved anything at all like someone grown up enough to need one of those things. You want to wear one so badly like the rest of the women of the world? Then start acting like you deserve to be one of those women! Now put your shirt on and let’s get out of here!”

Susan was positively shaking by the time she got her kids back in the car. Once in the car though, her daughter actually started crying. Jimmy refused to look at her or at anyone. He got into the car and stared out the window. She didn’t like Jasmine’s crying, but it was a far more normal way for her daughter to behave than the way she had been in the doctor’s office. It was almost as if Jasmine had become another person while they had been in there, and then she had changed back again the moment they got back to the car. What had happened to her beautiful daughter while they were in Brian’s office? Jasmine had acted like a deranged maniac in there!

Chapter 19 - The Doll

January 7th – 10th

Jasmine stood in front of her mirror, mindlessly staring at her body. Her Uncle Brian had given her another shot a few hours ago. She didn't feel any different. Not really. But then, all he was injecting her with was water. Just plain water. Wasn't he? She didn't really see any changes in her body. None! Of course, that was part of the problem. There were no changes in her breasts at all. And he had said that her nipples and the area around them was smaller. Ha! How would he know? They weren't his breasts! But she was bothered by the fact that she thought her nipples might look a little smaller than they used to.

She had really lost it at her Uncle's office today. Really lost it! She didn't know what came over her. It was like she couldn't control it. Of course, at the time, she didn't want to control it at all. Wow, she had lost it!

She grabbed her robe and put it on and headed to the bathroom to take her bath. She poured a double amount of bath beads into the water. Her skin lately was feeling horrible! She needed to ask her mother to get her another bottle of moisturizer for it too. She was going through a lot of that lately. She grabbed a fresh razor before she climbed into the tub to soak her troubles away. The water felt oh-so-good. For the most part it felt good. The stupid hair on her legs was bothering her too much. She quickly put the razor to work on them, removing the harsh stubble that seemed to be there almost constantly lately. She shaved her underarms...and noticed all the hair on her lower arms as well. She shaved them too. She needed to tell her mother to get her more razors too. She was going through them more than the moisturizer. Feeling smoother and better now, she finally relaxed in the scented bath water, that was nowhere near as warm as it was when she had first gotten into the

tub. Why had it cooled off so fast? All she had done was to shave her legs.

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In the quiet solitude of his room, Jimmy stared at his naked body. As always, his hands felt softly around his nipples and the slight puffy area surrounding them. They were growing. Even his uncle had confirmed it. And now his uncle had given him yet another shot. What would happen now? His brain refused to even want to picture what might be ahead of him now. He only knew it was going to get worse.

Not wanting to look anymore, he climbed into his pajamas again and turned out the light. The soft glow from his nightlight lit the ducks on his wall. The ducks that he had killed. The ducks that blamed him for taking their lives. Was this their revenge? Was this the way their dead spirits were getting back at him? He knew it was stupid, but that's the way it seemed. He rolled over so he wouldn't have to look at them. He couldn't see them now, but he knew they were still watching him. What changes would this second shot make in him?

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The Four Musketeers were the Four Musketeers – again. The way they were supposed to be. Every last one of them felt it. The day after Jasmine and Jimmy had been to school switched around as each other, all four girls had hugged and talked about how wrong it had all felt to have the fake Jasmine as part of them. The only problem was, they all knew it was going to happen again. Most likely, a lot.

There was one other problem too. The subject of the fake Jasmine kept coming up over and over again. The real Jasmine wished desperately that they would stop mentioning her stupid brother, but it was almost as if all her friends were fixated on him. She wanted to yell at them all and tell them to get a life! But she was too desperately happy to just be part of the pack again.

“He’s hopeless!” Nichole had complained to Jasmine later in the week, when the subject of Jimmy being Jasmine came up yet again.

Jasmine felt like screaming! Couldn’t they leave the subject alone? Talk about clothes, talk about boys, talk about movies, talk about anything, but stop bringing up her stupid brother! “I agree!” Jasmine replied, trying her best to control her temper. “He’s the most hopeless wimp I’ve ever seen!”

“No!” Nichole replied. “You know what I mean. The poor guy can’t do anything like a girl at all. And no matter how we try, he never even smiles.”

“We only got him to have fun that one day,” Olivia reminded them. “And that was it.”

Jasmine was growing more perturbed that her friends were now solidly back on the subject of her brother. She bit her tongue and silently willed them all to move past it.

“We could always try it again,” Allison suggested.

“Sure,” Nichole replied. “Why not? We had a blast!”

“I think we need to do something else with him,” Olivia told them.

“What?” Nichole asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “But there’s got to be more that he can enjoy than just singing with us. It’s not right that he can’t enjoy any of the things we like.”

Jasmine wanted to say that as far as she was concerned, it was perfectly right! As far as she was concerned, she wanted her sap of a brother to be totally miserable. They were all *her* friends – not his! Why couldn’t they just leave him alone? Why couldn’t they simply leave him out of everything?

“I know what you mean,” Allison agreed. “But he’s a boy. He’s not into any of the things that we all like.”

“I think he’s afraid of everything we like,” Olivia suggested.

“How can he be afraid?” Nichole asked.

“My dumb brother is afraid of everything!” Jasmine told them. “Everything!”

“He is not!” Olivia returned. “He certainly wasn’t afraid when he stood in front of the whole school and told them all off!”

Jasmine rolled her eyes. “I don’t know what the heck got into him that day. Trust me, that wasn’t him at all!”

Nichole laughed. "Of course it wasn't. He was Jasmine that day. Not Jimmy." Both Allison and Olivia giggled, but not Jasmine.

"But that still doesn't help us with helping him have some fun, or even just to enjoy something a little bit," Nichole said.

"How about you Jas?" Allison asked. "He's your brother. You've got to have some idea about the things he likes."

"Not girl stuff. That's for sure," Jasmine told them. She toyed with adding something about him liking her bras, but she knew that the reality of that was that he didn't. Plus, her goal just then was to keep her brother away from her friends and the things they liked to do.

"But what does he like to do?" Olivia asked. "That's the question."

Jasmine only needed a moment to think. "Tools!" she replied, knowing full well that the answer was perfect for her purposes. "Safe, harmless, totally dumb – tools!"

"That's right!" Olivia exclaimed. "He likes fixing things."

"But that doesn't help us at all," Allison replied. "None of us are into that kind of thing. The only thing I like to fix is my hair...and of course what outfit I'm going to wear that day."

Nichole laughed. "Yeah, and he's definitely not into doing those things. I mean, have you seen what clothes he picks out to wear? Unless his mother picks them out for him, he's got the worst sense of fashion in the world!"

Something in what Nichole had just said tickled the back of Jasmine's mind. "He is really, really bad at it," Jasmine added with a small giggle. "He literally picks out the same thing to wear nearly every day, unless what he wants to wear is in the wash. And it's all stuff that I don't ever wear!"

"Like I said," Olivia told them, "I think he's afraid of it."

"That's silly! How can you be afraid of clothes?" Nichole asked.

"Trust me!" Jasmine replied. "If it's possible to be afraid of something, that's him!"

"No! I'm serious," Olivia said. "I think he's afraid to like the clothes. He may be afraid to like a lot of other things too."

"Like I said," Jasmine replied. "He's the world's biggest wimp!"

"Oh stop it!" Olivia told her. "I'm serious. He's a boy. What if he's just too embarrassed to like it?"

"Too embarrassed?" Nichole asked.

"That does kind of make sense," Allison agreed. "Since he's a boy, he could be too embarrassed...to let himself like it. He could be so embarrassed about doing the feminine things we like to do, that being worried about it is keeping him from having fun, or at least enjoying any of it."

"And what we do *is* fun," Nichole added excitedly. "So he could be just too embarrassed to admit it!"

"Trust me," Jasmine said. "My dumb brother is too much of a boy. He just doesn't like anything the least bit feminine."

"But that's where we come in," Allison replied. "We have to help him to stop being so embarrassed by it all. And we *can* do that. I know we can!"

"I don't know," Olivia said. "I kind of like Jimmy. And I just don't see him ever being able to enjoy any of it."

As the conversation swirled around her, bits and pieces of it began fitting themselves together into Jasmine's head. She hated that her brother could possibly ever take her place with her friends. But Olivia was absolutely right, Jimmy would never like all the clothes and the girly stuff that all of them enjoyed so much. And that thought seemed to stir that last little idea that had dimly lit in her head a few moments earlier. It was still a very dim light, but the light was definitely on and it was growing in intensity. And to her, it would be the perfect way for her to get back at her wimp of a brother for trying to steal all her friends!

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It was no surprise to either of the twins when they found out that Jasmine would be working with her Uncle Jed again that weekend. No surprise at all. The only parts of it that Jasmine wasn't thrilled with, was that she would be working on something with her Uncle Jed and Justin again instead of hunting...and that the Musketeers were still determined to help her stupid brother have some fun. Why couldn't they just leave him be to his own miseries?

While Jasmine wasn't happy about her brother spending more time with her girlfriends, Jimmy simply dreaded the whole next three days that were approaching.

The routine had already become familiar to the twins. Just before bedtime on Friday night, they both stripped naked, put on one of the tan robes, and went across the hall to the other bedroom. It was that simple for them to switch places and become each other.

Like last time, the switch was initiated and supervised by Susan. She went to Jasmine's room first to tell her to get ready, but when she got there, she saw something strange. "Jasmine, get undressed now and put that robe on. It's time!" she said in no uncertain terms. But as she was saying it, her eyes were drawn to the things piled on top of her daughter's dresser.

"Okay, Mom," Jasmine replied brightly. "I just need ooonne second!"

"Now!" Susan said as she headed for the dresser.

Jasmine finished scribbling the note she was writing. "Done!" she exclaimed as she picked the paper up and rushed with it to the dresser. She deposited it on top of one of the piles of stuff she had set out.

"What's all this?" Susan asked as she now realized that her daughter's dresser held four piles of things. Each pile was covered by a piece of paper, including the last pile where her daughter had just added the note.

"I'm trying to help Jimmy," Jasmine told her brightly.

"Trying to help Jimmy? With what?" she asked as she started reading one of the notes – that turned out to be a list. She quickly figured out exactly what was going on though.

"I'm helping him learn to dress better," she said. "Everyone's talking about how bad he looks," she said.

"Hey," Susan interrupted. "I personally don't think he looks too bad at all. Especially not lately," she added, half under her breath.

"Um...no, that's not quite what I mean," Jasmine replied. "He looks good when you pick out what he wears. But it's all the rest of the time that he looks...well...pretty awful."

"Awful?"

"Well, yeah. He always wears the same dreary stuff."

Susan had to admit that her daughter did have a point. “And what of it?”

“So this way, I’ve put everything together for him. He’s got a list of what to wear on Saturday. What to wear on Sunday to church and then another list for after church. And he’s got a list of everything to wear to school on Monday. I’ve even gone so far as to pick out all his jewelry and everything else and put it all in piles so he can find it all easily. It’s simple! It should even be simple enough for him to figure out.”

“Um...” Susan said as she looked over another list, then looked at the pile of things underneath the list – including panties, a bra, jewelry, two colors of nail polish, and a ribbon to tie in his hair. The outfit her daughter had put together on paper looked very much like the outfits she usually mixed and matched when putting things together to wear to school. To Susan, none of it sounded like it should work, but when her daughter wore the outfits, they always looked great on her.

“Um...” she said again. “Suppose he doesn’t want to wear them?”

Jasmine shrugged. “His loss.”

Susan decided not to rule one way or another on the issue. She’d let Jimmy decide if he wanted to try it or not. “I’m waiting,” she said. “Undress...now!” With a shake of her head, she left to get Jimmy started. Five minutes later, the new Jimmy was in her new room and the new Jasmine was in his room.

“What’s all this?” *Jasmine* asked seeing the piles on the dresser.

“Your...other self, decided you need help picking out your clothes. It looks like she was being her more than thorough self about it.”

“Do I have to?” he asked.

“No,” she told him. She thought a bit better of that after she said it. “But you might want to consider it. She did have a point when she said you always choose the dreariest stuff in her closet. Now get ready for bed. I’ll be back in a few minutes to tuck you in.”

It wasn’t until after the new Jasmine had gotten into his nightgown and Susan had turned the light out on him, without a complaint for once, that she realized what the real Jasmine was

doing. Jasmine, the real Jasmine, had always loved playing with dolls when she was younger. As far as Susan could see. She was playing with dolls again. Only this time, one particular doll.

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Jasmine was the only one running around in the huge backyard wearing a skirt. And the fact that his legs were only protected by a thin pair of multi-colored tights that were all blotches of blue and yellow and purple, wasn't helping his legs stay warm at all. His sister's bright colorful rubber rain boots on his feet didn't help that situation either. Especially since the ground was still covered in snow. But he was out there with all the other Musketeers, chasing around black and white puppies in the snow. With eight puppies, it seemed like there were little wagging tails running everywhere!

"Aaaahhh!" Nichole screamed joyously as she took off at a run with three of the little puppies chasing right after her. After a short way, she turned around, running backwards a few steps, then fell backwards into the snow with her arms stretched out wide. Moments later, she was attacked by all three puppies as they did their best to climb on top of her. She laughed with delight.

While Allison had two more puppies chasing her, it was Olivia who noticed it. Jasmine was smiling his face off! Of all the girls though, he was the only one who wasn't dressed to play in the snow. Despite the broad smile on his face, she could see him huddled into his coat, trying to stay warm. "Run!" Olivia called to him. "Let them chase you!"

With his arms still wrapped around himself to try to keep warm, Jasmine took off at an awkward trot through the snow covered ground. The minute he did, one of the puppies ran after him. He turned around and saw it following him, so he kept going, changing direction a few times, never quite letting the small dog catch up to him. And then he saw the small dog give up and just sit down in the snow. He couldn't help himself. "Awww," he said as he walked back to the puppy.

Not thinking about what he was doing, he picked the thing up and held it in his arms, and just stood there, looking at and holding

the little dog. The dog naturally loved being held. Or maybe it was the warmth of the material of his coat. It snuggled into his arms contentedly. Jasmine just stared down at the thing. Totally fascinated by it. Unable to take his eyes off of it as he cradled it in his arms. Holding it lovingly. He wasn't thinking in the least about what was going through his mind at all. He never realized what he was feeling. He was strangely lost in the wonder of the little puppy nestled to his chest. It was just sooo...precious!

Olivia watched him carefully. He suddenly seemed to be in his own little world. She picked up another of the puppies and walked over to him, surprised that he didn't seem to notice her coming. "Whatcha' got there?" she asked as she got close to him. She was surprised to see the sudden look of surprise on his face.

"Oh! Um...I got a dog," he said. "I think."

She giggled. "What were you thinking just then?" she asked.

"Thinking? I wasn't thinking anything."

"You had to be," she said. "You looked like you were a million miles away."

"I was..." He shook his head and set the dog down in the snow. "It's just cold out here," he said as he wrapped his arms around himself again.

Olivia reached down and picked up the puppy he had just set down and held it out for him to take again. "Here," she said to him. "Keep holding it for a while."

He looked down at it in her hand, but he kept his arms wrapped around him. "Why?"

"Because it's nice," she said. "Now take it and hold it again."

Almost reluctantly, he took the small dog in his arms again, but this time, instead of it being content to nestle in his arms, it squirmed around and wiggled its way up almost to his shoulder where it suddenly started licking his face. He couldn't help himself, he laughed as he grabbed it harder so it wouldn't fall, but he let it lick his face for a few moments more before he brought it down again to cradle in his arms.

Allison came running up to him. "I know I didn't see you laughing," she said brightly.

Jasmine put a mock shocked look on his face. "Of course not," he replied, not realizing how broadly he was smiling.

"He laughed!" Allison called to Nichole who was still playing with some of the other puppies.

"He did?" she replied excitedly before she ran over with another one in her arms. "You laughed?" she asked, not believing it.

"Not me!" Jasmine replied, still with the same broad smile on his face.

"Be careful Jas," Nichole said to him. "You're smiiiiiiiiiiiiing!"

At the realization, Jasmine tried to back away and not smile, but he suddenly found it impossible. And...he laughed again. "Sorry," he said. "I...couldn't help myself."

"No! That's good!" Olivia exclaimed.

"It's great!" Nichole added.

"It's what we've been trying to get you to do for weeks," Allison told him.

"Do you like the puppy?" Olivia asked him.

He looked down at the small dog in his arms again. "No way!" he said as he brought it up and snuggled it to his face again, which only earned him another face licking, which extracted another small laugh from him.

Allison did a small double-take. "I know I didn't hear you just giggle," she said as she giggled a bit herself.

"Me?" Jasmine replied in mock surprise, which in reality was all too surprising to him.

"Yeah you!"

Jasmine knew he had never giggled like a girl in his life! "I don't even know how to giggle," he replied. "I don't think it's even possible!"

"Well you just did it!" Allison told him.

Jasmine though wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. The smile left his face. "It's freezing out here," he told them to change the subject.

"Why couldn't you wear something at least a little warmer?" Nichole asked. "We know you've got to wear skirts and stuff, but that doesn't mean you can't dress a little warmer."

"I didn't know we were all going to be outside today," he told them. "So I just left on what my sister put out for me."

"Jasmine put your clothes out for you?" Olivia exclaimed.

He nodded. "Yeah. You should see what she did. I've got a pile of everything I'm supposed to be wearing today, two piles for tomorrow, and a pile for Monday too. And everything is complete with written instructions!"

Nichole giggled. "You're kidding!"

"No! For real!" he told them.

"I gotta see this!" Allison exclaimed.

"Me too!" Olivia added.

Jasmine shrugged. "I don't think my Mom would mind."

"Come on," Nichole said. "Let's round up the puppies and get them in. I can't wait to see what he's supposed to be wearing!"

As Nichole and Allison started chasing down puppies, Jasmine stood there with the one dog he had in his hands. Once again, he stared down at it...and he smiled.

"You like it!" Olivia said as she watched him closely.

He lifted his head. He was smiling. He couldn't help himself if he tried. "Yeah," he replied. "I don't know what it is. There's just something about it that...I don't know. I just think it's...cute." He didn't think he had ever thought of something as being "cute" before, but he guessed, now he did.

Olivia heard what he said, but just barely. She had been watching his face and the moment he had looked up and smiled, she had almost gasped. His face looked so different! It looked so...but her mind refused to actually put a name to the way she thought it looked, because she knew such a thing was impossible.

A little while later, Jasmine was very glad to get back into the warmth of his house. The brief trip into Nichole's house with the puppies had done nothing to warm him up. Once inside with all his friends, he ran to find his mother, "Mom!" He found her in the family room with a cup of coffee and a magazine.

"What is it sweetie?" she asked, noticing the red glow on his face from the cold as his girlfriends all ran up behind him. And was he... happy again?

"Can we play here in my room for a while?" he asked.

"Sure," Susan replied. "Why not?"

"Great!" he exclaimed. "Come on!" he yelled to the girls.

Susan stared after him. Was that her son? Was that Jimmy? And despite how red his face had looked, there was something else that his face had looked as well. Something that confused her. His face had looked feminine again. She figured it must have been the smile. She tried to go back to her reading, but her mind couldn't help but stay locked on the way her son's face had looked.

Once in his bedroom, all the girls shed their coats and threw them carelessly on the bed.

"Jas!" Nichole exclaimed as she saw what he was wearing. "Nice outfit today!"

Jasmine could feel himself blushing. "Uh...thanks. It's what my...um, the other me, picked out. Some of it anyway."

"Some of it?" Olivia asked.

"Hey guys!" Allison exclaimed. "Look at this!" She had already found the piles of stuff on the dresser along with the notes. She picked up one of the notes and started reading it. "One. Panties and bra..." She turned to Jasmine. "I guess you're wearing them?" She giggled and turned away without waiting for an answer. It was then that she noticed the bra on top of a pair of panties...on top of the pile where the note she was reading had been. "God!" she exclaimed, "she even set everything out for you!" She looked back at the note. "Gold tights." She looked down at the pile under the note and saw the gold color sticking out a bit under the panties. "They're here," she said before turning back to the note.

"Where's the list for today?" Olivia asked as she noticed the small pile of jewelry at the end of the dresser.

"On the desk," Jasmine replied.

Nichole was closest to it. It took her no time to find it. "One!" she read, then looked up at the others. "Okay everyone, this is what Jasmine is supposed to be wearing today.

"Not what I'm *supposed* to be wearing," Jasmine corrected them. "Just what my...you know...suggested for me."

"Same thing," Nichole said with a shrug before going back to the paper. "One!" she said again. "Bra and panties." She looked up. "I guess we've already covered that much. And I'm not seeing them

on that end pile on the dresser either.” The girls all giggled. Jasmine came close to laughing himself. “Two!” Nichole read. “Tie-dye colored tights.” She looked up. “Definitely got it!”

“They were in the pile,” Jasmine explained.

“Three!” Nichole read. “Pink pleated skirt with large grey-flowers. It’s hung in the closet with the yellow sweater top.”

“Pink skirt...check!” Allison exclaimed. “Yellow sweater top too.”

“Four! Yellow sweater top. Hung with the pink skirt.”

“Are all the clothes she suggested hung up with each other?” Olivia asked.

Jasmine walked to the closet and opened the door. “Believe it or not,” he told them as she stood back. Olivia looked in. “Your sister couldn’t have made this any easier if she tried.”

“Um...it wasn’t all easy!” Jasmine told her.

“What’s next?” Allison asked.

Nichole looked back down at the list. “Five! Black Mary Jane shoes. The ones I wear to school dummy,” she said. The girls all giggled.

“Where are your shoes?” Olivia asked.

“Out in the kitchen,” Jasmine explained. “I took them off and put the boots on before I went out in the snow.”

“Good thinking,” Allison said. “But you could have grabbed something warmer to put on too!”

Jasmine didn’t comment on that.

“Okay,” Nichole said turning back to the note. “Six! Big pink clip on bow for your hair.”

“Hey!” Allison exclaimed. “What happened to the bow?”

“I didn’t bother with it,” Jasmine told them.

“Why not?” Olivia asked.

“Hey guys. Here it is,” Allison told them. “Right on the dresser with this pile of jewelry and stuff.” She held it up so they all could see it.

“Here give me that,” Olivia said. She took the bow from Allison, then brought it back to Jasmine. “Turn around.”

“What for?”

“So I can put it in your hair!”

“What for?”

“Jasmine,” Nichole said, “How can we get the full effect without it?”

Jasmine rolled his eyes and turned around and let Olivia clip the bow into his hair. He felt really silly.

“There!” Olivia exclaimed as she stood back. “Much better!”

Jasmine wasn’t exactly seeing it that way.

“Okay, we’ve got the bow,” Allison said. “What’s next?”

Nichole looked back down at the list. “Seven!” she said. “Nail Polish. Bubblegum Pink. It’s the pink bottle, dummy. You might want to do this before you get dressed.”

“I see you didn’t bother with that either,” Nichole mentioned.

“Like I said before, why should I?” Jasmine replied.

“Okay, we’ll move past the nail polish,” Allison said. “For now!”

Nichole looked back down at the list. “Eight!” she said. “Pink heart necklace, clear crystal necklace, gold heart necklace.” She looked up. “I see you didn’t bother with those either.”

“I’ve got them,” Allison said as she picked them up carefully from the dresser. She carried them over and handed two of them to Olivia. “Turn around again,” she said to Jasmine. One by one, they either hung the necklaces over his head, or in the case of the gold heart one, unfastened it, and refastened it around his neck. They made sure his hair was clear. “Turn around now,” Allison told him. Then she straightened each one. The three necklaces were all different lengths. “See,” she said. “That looks really nice. How hard would it have been to simply put them on?”

Jasmine made no reply.

“What’s next?” Allison asked.

“Nine! Gold charm bracelet – right wrist. Four rubber friendship bracelets – left wrist.”

“Hold on,” Allison said, “I’ve got to get them.”

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Out in the hallway. Susan stood back where she could just barely see into the room. She couldn’t believe that Jasmine, her Jimmy, was allowing them to dress him up like that. She watched Allison and Olivia put the bracelets on his wrists before she turned

and headed back to the kitchen to pour herself more coffee. As far as she could see, Jasmine and the girls were playing dolls again. Only this Jasmine was a different Jasmine. And this time, Jasmine himself was the doll they were dressing up.

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“Anything else?” Allison asked.

Nichole looked down at the list. “Last item. Ten! Makeup. Use the darker ruby blush and the Bubblegum Pink lipstick.”

Allison checked the dresser. “Just the lipstick is here but I don’t see the blush.”

“It’s probably with the rest of her makeup,” Olivia suggested.

Nichole searched the top of the desk where Jasmine kept all her makeup. “Here it is!” she said as she held it up.

Allison looked over at Jasmine who didn’t look so comfortable anymore. She figured he was worried about them making him wear any makeup. “Anything else on that list?” she asked Nichole.

“That’s it,” Nichole said as she tossed the paper back on the desk.

“So the only thing he’s missing now is the makeup and nail polish,” Allison said. “And I think we can do without the makeup until later.” She saw a bit of relief on Jasmine’s face.

“Well,” Nichole said with an overly broad smile. “I guess then that there’s only one thing left to do!”

“What?” Jasmine asked with some alarm.

“We’ve got to do your nails, dummy,” Olivia told him.

Jasmine tried to find a quick way out of it. “Um...but if we do that, then I’ve only got to take it off again before I go to bed.”

“So? What difference does that make?” Allison asked. “It only takes a couple of minutes.”

“But then there’s another one listed for tomorrow that I’d have to worry about,” he told them. “It would be a lot easier to just forget it.”

“Jasmine, what’s wrong with you?” Nichole asked teasingly. “You love nail polish!”

“Since when?”

“Since...forever!” Olivia replied for her.

"You've got to do it," Allison said. "You've got to!"

"Besides," Nichole added with a big grin. "We're not going to give you any choice!"

"Come on, girls," Olivia said loudly. "We're doing our nails!"

Somewhat horrified, Jasmine realized what Olivia had just said. "We?" he asked.

"Of course," Nichole told him. "You don't think you're the only one who gets to enjoy a manicure do you?"

"Hey!" Allison exclaimed. "I've got an idea. Since Jas is supposed to be wearing different nail polish tomorrow, why don't we just do his nails in that color today?"

"Perfect!" Olivia exclaimed. "What color is for tomorrow?"

Allison ran to the dresser and checked the list. "Here it is," she said. "Nail polish - Plum Sparkle Delight. It's the glittery purple bottle." She looked down on the dresser and found it easily. "Here it is!" she said as she held it up.

"Hey!" Allison said. "Where's Jasmine's white nail polish. "After we do our nails, I'll put a white star on one of them for each of us!"

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Half an hour later, Susan again walked back toward the bedroom, only because she hadn't heard a sound from back there in a while. She briefly peeked in again and saw Jasmine getting his nails done by Olivia. With a shake of her head, she turned around and went back to the kitchen to start dinner.

She had just barely started when the back door opened. She expected to see Tommy coming in, but she saw "Jimmy" instead. Jimmy looked...awful. And it was all she could do to keep from laughing at her. Jimmy's face was streaked with dirt. Her clothes didn't look that much better. She looked drawn and exhausted. But there was something about the look of her face that disturbed her and wiped her amusement away. Just as she had thought that her son's face had looked more like a girl's face earlier, this time she thought her daughter's face looked more like a boy than a girl. That thought sobered her up quickly.

"Tough day?" Susan asked.

"The worst!" Jimmy replied. "Uncle Jed had me and Justin out trying to move a bunch of tree branches into a big pile, so he can burn them, and it was nearly impossible! Those things are heavy! By the time I got one into the pile, Justin had done three or four!"

Despite herself, Susan smiled. "It sounds like pretty awful work," she said.

"The worst!" Jimmy replied.

"You know you can end this any time you want," Susan reminded her. "You won't have to deal with any of that at all. Just say the word and everyone will be happier than you can imagine – including you!"

Jimmy looked at her like she was crazy. "Are you kidding? Uncle Jed said that since we did so good today, then I can go hunting again tomorrow morning with him, Ethan, and Justin. We're gonna look for more hogs to thin out. I can't wait!"

Susan shook her head. It would be so much better if they hadn't told Jasmine she would be hunting more. So much better!

"Go on back and get a shower," she told her. "And watch what you do with those dirty clothes! I don't want them thrown all over the place."

"I won't," Jimmy replied as she kicked off her boots and headed for the other side of the kitchen.

"And don't disturb your sister and her friends!" Susan called after her. "They've been playing nice all afternoon!" Susan had sudden hopes that if the work Jed had her doing wouldn't stop her, then maybe seeing what Jasmine was up to would. Because she had no doubt that Jimmy couldn't possibly pass up stopping in to see what they were doing. She decided to follow after her.

All thoughts of getting a shower or even how tired she was went immediately out of Jimmy's mind when she heard the "girls" were all playing in the house. She made a bee-line for her...her *sister's*... bedroom to see. She turned into the doorway and stopped. They were all there. All of them...including her screwy brother! And they were... "You're doing your nails?" she asked.

The girls all looked up at the sound of the voice. All of them were shocked at how "Jimmy" looked.

"Jas...I mean Jimmy?" Nichole said.

"You look awful!" Olivia added.

But all Jimmy cared about was what her friends were all doing – without her! "You're doing your nails...without me?" she asked, the hurt clearly evident in her voice.

"Well, sure," Allison said. She was about to add more, when she heard Jimmy's mother talking to him in the hallway.

"Jimmy!" Susan said. "Leave those girls alone. What do you care if they're doing their nails? They're girls for heaven's sake. They're supposed to be doing things like that."

"But Mom! They're my..."

"Jimmy!" Susan cut her off quickly. "If you want to go back to doing things like that, then you know what you have to do! And every one of us is begging you to do it! If not, then leave those girls alone. You've got no business with them at all."

The angry sneer that hit Jimmy's face frightened Susan for a moment. She was reminded of how Jasmine had been at Brian's office. She was almost relieved when she turned on her heel and went into her own room, where she slammed the door behind her. Disappointed that she hadn't given in yet again, Susan turned sadly away.

"Wow," Nichole whispered. "I never expected that!"

"That was nothing," Jasmine said, still staring at the empty doorway. "You should have seen her when we went to Uncle Brian's office last week. She was like some screaming monster from the time we got to the parking lot."

"Jasmine?" Olivia asked.

"Jimmy," Jasmine corrected her.

"What were you at my Dad's office for?" Allison asked.

Jasmine looked at her, but it was a moment before he could find any words at all. "Trouble," he finally said.

"What do you mean?" Olivia asked. "You mean because of the way...Jimmy acted there?"

He shook his head. "Worse! And don't ask why!"

The seriousness with the way he had said it made them all stop asking questions. But Allison looked back at the empty doorway again, remembering all too clearly the way "Jimmy" had looked before her face had turned into pure rage. Yeah, she had looked

dirty. Yeah, she had looked pretty beat. But it was something else. Something about her face that seemed all wrong. And it was kind of the way Jasmine's face had looked all wrong earlier when she had gotten it into her head that his face suddenly looked more feminine than it should.

Chapter 20 – Faces of the Future

January 10th – 11th

Having a late dinner was more normal than not at Brian and Janet McComber's house. Since he was a doctor and she was a nurse, their work often kept them out long hours. It was after eight o'clock at night when Allison and her brother Aaron sat down to dinner with their parents.

"What did you do today, Allie?" Janet asked her daughter as they all started eating. "I see your nails are a different color."

Allison looked briefly at her sparkly purple nails. There was a white starburst painted on the nail of her left ring finger. Her nails matched all the other Musketeers. "Yeah, we did them at Jasmine's house today."

"Jasmine?" Janet replied, only surprised because she knew which Jasmine would have been there today.

"Yeah, we think he's so embarrassed by all the girly stuff that he can't seem to relax and have fun. We're trying to help him get over it."

Janet was having a bit of a hard time imagining the real Jimmy "enjoying" doing his nails or anything else that was feminine. "How's that going?" she asked.

"Um...I think we actually made some progress today. He not only smiled a lot, he actually laughed earlier when we were out playing with Nichole's puppies."

"He did?" Janet replied. "I guess that's good to hear...knowing him."

"Yeah," Allison agreed, but there was an odd note in her voice as she went back to eating.

"You sound like there was some kind of problem," Janet noted.

"Kind of," Allison agreed.

"What was it?"

"I don't know," Allison replied as she sat back in her chair and set her fork down. "A couple of things I guess."

"Like what?" Janet asked, paying full attention to her daughter.

"Well," Allison said a bit wistfully. "The real Jasmine showed up at one point." She shook her head. "Wow, talk about fireworks!"

"Oh?"

"Yeah. She got all bent out of shape because we were all there doing our nails – without her! But Mom, she wouldn't be allowed to do that as long as she has to be Jimmy. Right?"

"As far as I know, that's pretty much the way I think they're looking at it. In fact, I think what happened today might be exactly what your Aunt Susan told me they wanted to happen."

"Aunt Susan wanted that to happen? But you should have seen her! Jas got really ugly today!" She stopped to think for a moment, then added, "But part of the problem with Jasmine today was that her mother was right there too, and she told Jas that if she wanted to play with us, then she had to do something, and Jas didn't seem to want any part of it. And wow, you should have seen the look on her face then!"

"I think that's the whole point. They want Jasmine to want her old life back so badly that she'll finally agree to what the family wants."

"You mean to swear off hunting?"

Janet looked to her husband, before nodding. "Yes. Exactly."

"But Mom," Allison said, "I mean, you should have seen her. And her face! It was awful! And then Jasmine...I mean the real Jimmy...I mean..."

"We know who you mean," Janet told her.

"Yeah, well he said that she was a lot worse last week when they went to..." She turned to face her father. "Did they go see you at your office last week?"

Brian looked at his wife, then back at his daughter. "Yes, they were there."

Allison waited a moment, hoping he would give her more details. When she realized he wasn't going to say anything else she continued. "Anyway, Jas said that the real...his sister, was really bad that day. He made her sound like some kind of a monster or

something.” It was the look in her father’s eyes that told her it must have been true.

“Or something!” Brian agreed.

“Daddy, what did they have to see you for? Neither of them is sick...as far as I know.”

“Um...” he replied, “I’m afraid I can’t say why they were there, Allie.”

She nodded, disappointed that she hadn’t received an answer. Another thought struck her. “I saw something weird today. Or strange, I guess.”

“What’s that?” Janet asked, glad that the conversation was moving away from where it had been.

“Both of them.”

“Both of who?”

“Jasmine and Jimmy of course.”

“What about them?”

“I think it was their faces,” Allison replied. “They both looked... different. Really odd.”

“Oh?” Janet replied. “In what way?”

“Um...I know it sounds silly and all but...” She paused to consider just what she was saying, then she just blurted it out. “Jasmine, you know, the real Jimmy, well, he suddenly seemed to look more like a girl than a boy, and Jimmy, you know, the one that’s really my friend, she looked more like a boy today than a girl. At least their faces. I mean...I know it sounds silly but that’s just the impression I got.”

Janet and Brian looked at each other. “Should I call Susan and ask if it’s okay to talk a bit more?” Janet asked her husband.

Brian considered that. “Maybe you better.”

“What’s going on?” Allison asked. But instead of getting an answer, she watched as her mother immediately got up from the table and went to make a phone call. Allison was nearly done eating by the time her mother came back.

“Go for it,” Janet told her husband. “Susan noticed the same thing herself. And with everything else that’s happening, and I guess that’s going to keep happening, then it’s going to start being a lot more noticeable.”

Brian nodded. "I thought that might be the case." He turned to his daughter. "I'd rather you not spread this around too much," he said. He turned to Aaron. "You too," he said. "Don't go blabbing to any of your friends what I'm about to tell you. Although I fear they're all going to find out too soon as it is."

"What is it Daddy?" Allison asked.

It was a moment before Brian could figure out where to start. "Remember that big family meeting we had about those two?"

"Yeah. I was here watching Aunt Jessica's kids while you went up to Grandpa's house."

"Yeah. Well anyway, you already know that Jimmy and Jasmine are being punished pretty severely."

"By having to dress as each other," Allison replied. "Last month it was only for the weekend though. Now they're going to school on Monday's like that too."

Brian nodded. "Something like that," he said. "But actually, that part, where they're having to be each other, that's not the worst of their punishment...by a lot!"

Allison was shocked. "They both said something like that to us, Daddy. But neither of them would say what the worse part is."

He nodded. "I'm sure they wouldn't. But anyway, Jasmine and Jimmy have been to my office twice now for shots."

"Shots? For what? I mean, I hate getting shots myself, but they're not that bad."

"Not that kind of shots I'm afraid. I've been giving both of them hormone shots. I know you know what estrogen is," he continued.

"Of course. That's what Mommy and me have. That's what makes us women."

"Right," he said. "And testosterone is the opposite hormone."

"That's what you and Aaron have," she said. "I know all that."

"Well, I've given Jimmy two long-lasting doses now of estrogen. And Jasmine has gotten testosterone instead. There are a few other things mixed in with them to suppress their natural hormones, but those are the main ingredients I'm afraid."

Allison was suddenly confused. "But Daddy, what will that do? Won't that..." She hesitated. "I mean, couldn't that..."

“Yeah, Allie. Jimmy’s body is now in the process of becoming more female. And Jasmine is becoming more male.”

Allison was totally shocked. “That’s horrible! But...I mean... could that actually affect the way their faces look? Is that why I thought their faces looked so...”

“That’s it,” Brian confirmed. “They’re already changing Allie, just a little so far, but they are changing. Both of them. Even if Jasmine refuses to admit it. And I’m afraid that was a lot of the reason why she got so ugly last week and probably again today. Those hormones are ramping up all their emotions to overload status sometimes. Both of them! There are times when they each feel overly happy, or overly sad, or they might get mad and behave in ways we can’t imagine. I’m afraid they’ve both shown some of all that already. But they’re changing now Allie, and those changes are going to start becoming more and more noticeable.

“But that’s awful Daddy! That’s...horrible! Who came up with an idea like that?”

Brian laughed a bit. “Trust you to be grown up enough to ask the bad questions. I’m afraid it was my idea Allie. Mine. But it was based on something those two had already done. I just took things a bit further in order to try to change Jasmine’s mind.”

“But Daddy. That’s about the worst thing I could ever imagine. I mean. I don’t know what I’d do if I suddenly started to turn into a boy. It would be...beyond awful!”

Brian smiled. “That’s kind of the idea, Allie. If *you* think it’s that bad, don’t you think something like that could make Jasmine change her mind?”

“Well of course! I’d do it in a second!”

“That’s what we were hoping for,” Brian told her. “Unfortunately, Jasmine doesn’t seem to see it that way. And as far as I can tell, she’s refusing to admit that anything is really happening to her at all.”

“But Daddy, I saw it. I saw it in both of them. At least, I think I did. I wasn’t really sure to tell the truth.”

“No, you probably did see it,” her father told her. “It’s just beginning right now, but the problem is that Jasmine can’t see it at all yet. Or more likely, she can’t bring herself to admit there are any changes at all yet.”

“So what should I do?” Allison asked. “I mean, she’s one of my very best friends!”

Brian looked briefly at his wife.

“Get her to change her mind,” Janet told her daughter. “The sooner the better. For everyone.”

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Susan would have much rather not gone to church, but Jacob was still being adamant that they go. She was sure it had more to do with what had gone on between Jacob and Reverend Cosinger than anything else. So now the family was about to walk out the door and go to church once again. Most of the family. “Jimmy” was out hunting with Ethan and Justin again.

As she waited in the living room, Tommy came in. She smiled to see him wearing the necktie his father had been working with him earlier to teach him to tie. She went over to him and adjusted the tie a bit. “You look very nice today,” she told him. “If we keep going to church, we’re going to have to get you a nice suit. You’d look so handsome in a suit.”

“I’m sure he would,” Clint agreed as he walked into the room too. “But I think he’s growing so fast again, he’d be out of it before he wore it even once!”

Susan smiled. “Most likely,” she agreed. Now they were just waiting for Jasmine to come back from his room, where she had sent him because he had forgotten to grab his purse and his coat. Susan figured that he had really just wanted to get out of carrying the purse again.

She had spent a long time that morning helping Jasmine get ready. They had both washed their hair last night and this morning she had put the rollers into it again. He had “attempted” to wear most of what his sister had listed for him, and she had to admit, he did look pretty good. Especially with his hair all fixed nice and after she had “redone” the awful job he had done with the makeup. He hadn’t wanted to wear the makeup at all, but she had made him go in and try. When he came back, she wasn’t sure if making him try on his own was a mistake or not. So she had done it for him, and

afterwards she had again been surprised at how feminine his face looked. If you looked at him just right, sometimes he was starting to look – beautiful.

She saw Jasmine finally come back into the living room, trying to figure out how to juggle his purse so he could slip into the white fur coat. She again was struck by how feminine he looked. And how nice. His sister might have some bold tastes, but Susan had to admit, she could really put an outfit together. The dark blue sheath dress over the gold tights and then the bright yellow short jacket on top were nothing she would ever wear. But just as they were on her real daughter, they seemed to look more than nice on...her new daughter. Especially with the necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and the big yellow crystal ring he was wearing today. As he buttoned the bulky coat up, Susan felt it was almost a shame to hide the outfit he had on. Of course, she was sure that Jasmine didn't see things that way at all.

"Ready?" Susan asked when Jasmine had finally finished with his coat. The others started heading for the door while Jasmine only rolled his eyes. She watched as Tommy followed his father outside. She waited for Jasmine to go out. But before he stepped out of the house, she saw something strange happen in him. He stopped and stood in front of the doorway, and then he suddenly stood up straighter...taller. And she noticed a different expression on his face and a new set to his jaw, as if he was just daring anyone in the world to give him any trouble. It was an odd confidence she saw in him as he went outside. Totally different than anything she had ever seen in him before. Was that what John had talked about after her son had given that speech in front of all the kids at school? Was that the attitude he had assumed? One thing about it for sure, the odd look to his face had wiped away some of the feminine look he had shown just a moment earlier.

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Reverend Cosinger could already tell that there wasn't going to be as many people in church as there had been the week before, and especially not as many as there had been in the weeks before

that. But then it was now January, and those that only came out for Christmas were no longer bothering. Most likely, none of them would be back until Easter...if then!

As he watched the people coming in, he saw Clint McComber entering with his family. Most of his family. It appeared that one of the boys was missing. He was very happy to note that the girl was back to being herself. But then they got a little closer and he was able to see the girl better, and his stomach turned. How dare they! Once again that boy was dressed as his sister. He had heard rumors now that the two twins had even been sent to school that way. It was outrageous! An abomination! The school should have never allowed it. But then, he knew the principal had married into the McComber clan too.

How long was this abomination going to go on? And why for heaven's sake, did Jacob McComber insist on bringing those kids into this church? Into God's house! Was it only to irritate him? Reverend Cosinger had no doubt that was what was really going on here. No doubt, Jacob McComber was trying to use those twins now to get rid of him.

Well, as bad as it was, he wasn't about to quit because of Jacob McComber. He would let Jacob play his little games. God would deal with Jacob in the end. God would deal with all of them! In the meantime, he would just do his best to ignore them all and not let it show how badly it irritated him. He would pretend like it wasn't happening at all. Even though he wanted nothing more than for God to pick up the whole lot of that clan and send them all straight to hell! He knew they were all going there anyway. Eventually!

Once again he went through the Sunday service. And even though he did his best to ignore the boy who was all dressed up as his sister, he found it impossible to not continually look straight at that one child who was a black spot of abomination right smack in the middle of his church. All too often, he found himself preaching right at that child, when in reality he was trying to preach to the whole congregation. He just had trouble tearing his eyes off of him, because it appeared that the family was now going out of their way to make him look even more like a girl. But there was something more as well. It was the look in the boy's eyes the whole time he

preached to him. He could tell that the boy was just daring him to say something about the way he was dressed. Daring him to bring it up...because Jacob McComber was once again sitting right in the very front pew.

The whole situation turned his stomach. But he wasn't about to let Jacob McComber win. He wasn't about to get kicked out of his own church because of one blasphemous family! And besides, he and his wife really did need this job. The job barely paid enough for them to get by. And they had nowhere else to go.

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Allison bided her time. She wanted desperately to talk with Jasmine...the real Jasmine. But she had seen their family going out to church, so there was no way she could get to her for a while. Her mother had to work again that morning, and her father wasn't interested in going to church, so she and her brother were home. While her brother played video games, she worked on her latest project for the school's fashion show. She worked on that, and she continually watched the clock, waiting for the time when she figured Jasmine would be back again. Because she had to talk to Jasmine now. She had to! It was vital that she somehow convince her friend to give up all this silly hunting business. Because if Jasmine wouldn't agree, then.... But the consequences of that were too horrible to think about.

She had spent some time on the internet doing just a little bit of research. Surprisingly, she found more about boys becoming girls than the other way around. But she didn't have to look too far to find exactly what she really wanted to know. Those hormones her father had said he injected into them really would turn her best friend into a boy. She had watched a few of the videos where those "boys" had been talking about their progress after only one month on the hormones. And since it had been over a month now since her father had started Jasmine and Jimmy on the hormones, then she was betting there were probably more changes in Jasmine than she knew about. And after watching just a few more videos, it was very obvious that if she didn't change Jasmine's mind very fast, then her

friend wasn't going to be the same person that she was now. She had no doubt that her best friend wasn't going to be a girl at all anymore! At least, not in all the ways that really counted. If she didn't change Jasmine's mind, then she had no doubt she was going to lose her friend. She would barely know her...or him. And she had no doubt, that before long, Jasmine would no longer be girl enough to do the things they usually did together.

Allison was afraid of losing one of her very best friends. A friend that was all too precious to her. She couldn't stand that thought. She had to do something!

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Jasmine hurried from the car to the back door. But he couldn't get in. He had to wait until his father finally unlocked the door and pushed it open. But the moment he got inside, he ran for his room.

"Jas?" his mother called after him. She had noticed his mood in the car. And now that they were home, she could tell things were bothering him even more. She hurried after him and found him in his room, sitting at his desk chair, still wearing the white furry coat. He was staring at the floor looking very upset. "Jas? What's wrong?" she asked.

"Did you see him? Did you see the way Reverend Cosinger looked at me? He hardly ever took his eyes off me the whole time we were there. Did you see him?"

"Yes, honey. I was sitting right next to you. I couldn't miss it. And it was very...irritating."

"Irritating? He was making me mad! It was like he was yelling at me the whole time he was preaching. Yelling at me for the way I'm dressed, when there isn't one damn thing I can do about it."

"I saw," Susan told him. "But he didn't actually say one single word to you, or even about you. Nothing!"

"Well, it sure seemed like it to me. The way he stared at me through the whole service." He stood up angrily. "I was just waiting for him to say something to me. Anything! I wanted to stand up and rip my coat off and let him have a real good look at me. Just like I did with the kids at school. I wanted to give him a real piece of what

was on my mind. I wanted to let him know just what I thought about the way he was glaring at me.” He looked up and saw his father in the doorway. “Next week,” he said. “Next week when we go, I dare him to do that again. Because I *will* stand up and give him a piece of my mind. I *will* do it. Right in front of everyone...and nobody’s gonna stop me!”

“Jas,” Susan said as she walked over to him. She put her arms around him. “I know you’re angry. You have every right to be angry. But dealing with things that way isn’t always the answer. Especially not in church.”

“Frankly,” Clint said from the doorway, “I wouldn’t blame him.”

Susan gave her husband an angry annoyed look. “Jas, you know that’s not the way to handle situations like that.”

Clint walked further into the room. “Sometimes,” he said, “that’s exactly the way to handle them. That’s the way a real man would handle things.”

Jasmine looked up at his father. “Thanks,” he said, some of the rage leaving him. “I appreciate it. But I know Mom is right too.”

“Thank you for realizing that!” Susan replied.

“But it doesn’t make it any easier.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Susan agreed.

He pulled away from his mother and put his hands into the pockets of the soft coat and pulled it tighter around him. With his hands still in the pockets, he sat down in the desk chair again and stared at the floor. “What am I gonna do?” he asked despondently. “What am I gonna do?”

“The best you can, son,” Clint replied. “And I want you to know that I’m proud of you for the way you’re managing so far.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Jasmine said. He looked up at his mother and father. “I mean, what am I gonna do about me? I’ve been looking up on the internet what all those hormones can do to me. I’ve been doing that since Christmas now. Do you know what’s going to happen? Do you know what they’re going to do to me? What they *are* doing to me? Because everything I’ve seen on the internet, is already starting to happen to me.”

“I know son,” Susan told him. “Your father and I both know. We knew before it all started.”

Jasmine shook his head. "I've watched a bunch of videos of guys who are actually trying to turn themselves into girls. And every last one of them talk about the same things happening to their bodies that's happening to mine. Mom, I'm seeing those exact same things happening to me! All of them! And do you know what's going to happen next?"

"I'm afraid I've got a pretty good idea," Susan replied softly.

"I'm going to keep changing more and more. I won't look anything at all like a boy anymore. Not at all. I'm going to look totally like a girl! And it's happening, Mom! It's already happening!"

"We know," Susan told him. "Unfortunately, we know all too well. Why do you think we keep trying to convince your sister so hard to finally quit hunting? Because we see the changes in you... and in her."

He looked at his mother, and he felt the tears coming to his eyes. "I'm changing, Mom. I'm turning into a girl. And I can't do anything to stop it."

Susan hugged his head as he sat in the chair and cried. She saw Clint leave the room, leaving them alone. She figured that most likely he didn't want to deal with the crying. She continued to hug her son...who was now supposed to be her daughter...and who was also acting more like a daughter now than her real daughter. She felt him finally pulling away from her. His hands were still stuck into the pockets of his coat.

"Sorry, Mom," he said. "Sometimes I just have to cry."

"I know," she said. "It's perfectly alright. I understand perfectly. From what your Uncle Brian told us, your emotions are going to be hard to control for a while. They'll even out somewhat eventually and get better, but for now, they're going to be a bit...difficult. Sometimes you're going to feel wonderfully happy, and sometimes, you're just going to need a good cry. And sometimes...I'm afraid you're going to get overly angry about things."

He rolled his eyes as he looked away from her. "Tell me about it!"

"But you've been happy once in a while too," she mentioned. "I've seen you happier at times than I think I've ever seen you."

He looked back at her again. "Maybe," he conceded.

“Maybe? I think it’s a little more than maybe!”

A smile actually crept onto his face. “Yeah, there have been a few times, like when we were all singing together. And then yesterday I really enjoyed playing with the puppies, even though I was freezing out there.”

“How about yesterday, right here in your room?” Susan reminded him.

His face turned more troubled. “I’m not sure about that.”

“Why? From everything I saw, it looked like you were having a great time.”

“Maybe,” he conceded. “But...it’s all just so...embarrassing!”

“Why? You’re a girl and...”

“No I’m not! Not really! Playing with all the clothes and the nail polish and stuff is just plain...embarrassing!” He pulled his hands out of the coat pocket and looked at his purple sparkly fingernails. The ring finger of his left hand had a star painted on it just like all the rest of the Musketeers. “Do you know how weird it is to keep seeing my fingernails look like this? And it makes me feel all, I don’t know, funny inside. It all does. Especially the stupid dresses I have to wear all the time. It’s all just...embarrassing!”

“I know,” Susan agreed sadly. “But you need to get over that. For this time when you have to be your sister, you need to try to think of yourself as a girl, and not as a boy at all. Relax and let yourself enjoy it.”

“I know,” he replied. “That’s what you told me the day you had my ears pierced.” He reached up and fondled the earring in his left ear. “And I can’t tell you how crazy that makes me feel too.”

“They look very nice on you though. Even those little gold ball earrings you wear around here when you’re being Jimmy.”

“Looking nice on me doesn’t help much. Trust me! That’s what the girls all say about them too.” He stuck his hands back into the pockets of his coat and sat on the bed next to his mother. “Mom, why are the girls all being so nice to me?”

“What do you mean dear?”

“It’s just that, they’re all going out of their way to be...nice to me. They’re all totally determined to find ways to make me have a good

time. As I see it, they shouldn't even be talking to me! They shouldn't even want to be anywhere near me!"

"I think your selling yourself a bit short," Susan told him.

"I don't think so," he replied. "They're all Jasmine's friends, not mine. I'm not really all that interested in any of the things they like to do. And they're still treating me like I'm supposed to be one of them. Why? Why would they bother?"

She had to consider that for a moment. "I'm not completely sure dear, but I know that Aunt Janet asked Allison to look after you somewhat. We were all afraid that with what you're going through, nobody would talk to you at all, either here or at school. Face it Jas, as a boy, you're usually alone. You don't have other boys living around here that are really your age. Not like all the girls. So I for one am really glad to see you have some friends in your life – for once! And as far as I'm concerned, as long as you have to be your sister, you may as well enjoy that as much as you can. Because this isn't going to last forever. Eventually you will be totally back to being Jimmy again. You'll be totally back to being a normal boy again. And I'm so afraid that when that happens, once again you won't have any friends at all. You'll be...alone all over again."

"It won't last forever? That's not the way it seems now. If Jasmine doesn't agree to not hunt, I could be stuck as a girl for the rest of my life!"

"No you won't!" she told him. "I guarantee it! We're not going to let it go that long."

"How long then? What if Jas doesn't agree to stop hunting? How long do I have to put up with it?"

"I don't really know, Jas," she said sadly. "We never really put a time limit on it. All I know is that nobody in the family is happy about what's happening at all. We're all watching out for you more than you think though. Eventually, we will put a stop to it. I just don't know when yet."

He looked down at the floor and shook his head. "I just hope it's soon. Or I'm going to have boobs that will be impossible to miss. And they'll never go away!"

"We've already discussed that with the family. All of us. And if things get that far, the whole family will make sure that your breasts,

and anything else that needs it, will get taken care of so you're completely back to normal again. I promise you we will! I don't want you to wind up like that either. So don't even let something like that be any kind of a worry for you at all. We're going to bend over backwards to get you, and your sister, back to normal again for the rest of your lives. This family takes care of its own, Jasmine. They take care of their own like nothing I've ever seen. You know that. We all look out for each other. And I promise you, we're all going to do everything we can to take care of you."

"So what am I supposed to do in the meantime?" he asked. "Because I don't want big boobs or a girl's body...or any of it! But I'm already starting to get all that."

She smiled, but it was a sad smile. "Try to enjoy what you can out of it," she suggested. "It's the best I can suggest for you. Try to like it. And who knows, maybe you will start to enjoy some of it. But if you don't try...or don't let yourself try, you'll lose before you've even started."

He shook his head. "It's still not easy."

She hugged him again. "I know, dear. I know."

The sound of her husband's voice calling her reached her ears. "What is it?" she yelled back.

Clint's voice was a little hard to hear when he replied, "Maybe you better get out here."

"Oh dear!" she said, expecting the worst as she hurried out of Jasmine's room to find her husband. Thoughts about something bad that might have happened to her real daughter filled her mind.

She found Clint in the kitchen...with Allison. "What's up?" she asked, not knowing why Allison should be any kind of problem.

"I was looking for...I guess it's Jimmy today," Allison told her. "I've got to talk to her!"

"Jimmy is out hunting today," Susan explained. "What's the problem?"

"*She's* the problem!" Allison exclaimed. "Dad told me last night about the hormones he's giving them, and I've got to talk to her!"

"Yeah," Susan replied. "I talked with your mother about it last night. I told her she could tell you. We're seeing more visible signs of those hormones in both of them now. But I'm afraid they're each

reacting to those changes differently. Jimmy, the Jimmy you want to talk to, won't admit they're doing anything to her at all, and the other Jimmy, the one who's Jasmine today, is moping around and crying because those changes are all he can think about."

"That's why I've got to talk to Jas...I mean Jimmy. I've got to convince her to stop hunting! If I don't, she's going to become a boy! And I know that will absolutely kill her!"

"Yeah," Susan replied. "That was the whole idea of the hormones in the first place. But I'm afraid that so far she's refusing to see reason at all. But I do hope you can find some way to change her mind. Because the moment you do, everyone will be a whole lot happier!"

"But she's not here today."

"No. I'm afraid not. She's out hunting somewhere again with Ethan and Justin I think."

"That's what Uncle Clint said," Allison replied. "You don't know when she'll be back, do you?"

"No idea," Susan told her. "Jasmine is in his room if you want to go back there. But I'm afraid he's feeling rather sorry for himself right now. So be prepared if you do go in."

Allison considered it for a moment, then nodded. "Maybe I should just look in on him. I guess he's kind of my friend now too. Which is really strange because I'm friends with Jasmine...and Jasmine."

Susan smiled. "It's all strange dear. And I wish none of this were happening so it wouldn't be strange at all. But like I told him a few minutes ago, if nothing else, I'm really glad that you girls are being nice to him and treating him as a friend. He's never had any real friends around here at all, let alone close ones. So for that alone, maybe I'm grateful for all this...and to you...and the other girls."

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Allison went back to Jasmine's room and found him lying on his bed, his white fur coat still on, his hands in his pockets, and he was

staring straight up at the ceiling. "Why don't you take your coat off and stay a while," she said.

Jasmine was startled to see Allison suddenly there in his room. "Why should I?" he replied before going back to staring at the ceiling.

Allison walked further into the room. "Aren't you hot in that coat?"

"A little," he replied.

"Then take it off, silly."

He briefly looked at her, then stared at the ceiling again.

Allison went over and sat on the bed next to him. His face was filled with evidence that he had been crying. "What's wrong Jas?" she asked softly. She saw his eyes move to look at her for a moment, then his eyes went back to the ceiling again. "Is it the hormones?" she asked.

His head turned fast. "You know about that?"

"My Dad told me last night," she said.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I was wondering about some of the changes I saw in you. You and your sister. You don't look the same anymore. Neither of you!"

"You can see it already?" he asked, his voice now full of worry.

"Yeah, sort of," she said softly. "A little at least."

He went back to staring at the ceiling. Then he closed his eyes as tears started leaking from them again.

"Hey Jas, don't cry. It's not that bad."

"To you maybe," he sobbed.

"Why should it be so bad for you?"

He looked at her like she was crazy. "Because I'm a boy, stupid! I'm not supposed to look like a girl. I don't want to look like a girl. But thanks to my crazy mixed up sister, I've got boobs now that are probably bigger than hers!"

"You do?" she asked, totally shocked.

He just laid there and sobbed at the ceiling again.

"Are you really growing breasts?" she asked.

He stared her straight in the eyes as he cried for a moment. "Among other things," he finally admitted. Then his head turned

back to the ceiling.

Allison wanted to tell him that she'd love to see his breasts, but she knew that would be a very bad idea. Not to mention what her Aunt Susan would probably do if she found out. "Are they really bigger than your sister's?" she asked softly.

"I don't know," he sobbed in reply. "Your dad just told her that hers weren't growing anymore at all, but he sure couldn't say that about mine. In fact he was all too graphic about the way they're starting to fill out now."

"Geez!" she breathed softly. Then a few moments later she asked, "So, do you wear a bra all the time now? I mean, even when you're not being your sister."

He looked at her, then away again. "Sometimes at night," he said. "Mostly when they're bothering me too much. You don't know how they can hurt sometimes!"

She giggled a bit. "Yes I do," she replied brightly. "You forget, mine have been growing longer than yours. I know how sensitive they can be at first. And later they can be kind of a pain too."

"Oh gee thanks!" he replied. "More fun to look forward to."

"It's all part of becoming a woman," she said, before realizing that wasn't exactly what he would want to hear. "At least you don't have to worry about having periods like the rest of us. At least you've got that much."

He looked back at her again, but this time he kept his eyes on her. "Don't give them any ideas, because they'll probably try to give me those too!"

She laughed...and was rewarded to see a bit of a smile from him. Then his face turned serious again.

"What am I gonna do, Allie?"

She smiled at him. "Hey!" she said. "If you got 'em, flaunt 'em!" Her little joke earned her some eye rolling from him – and a bit of a smile.

"Hey, you were looking for me?"

Allison looked up and saw "Jimmy" in the doorway. She was dressed entirely in camouflage hunting gear and she looked more than a bit dirty. "Oh God yes!" Allison exclaimed as she jumped up from the bed. She ran to her friend and hugged her, not the least bit

concerned about getting dirty herself. "Jas, we've got to talk. I mean really talk. Somewhere private!"

Jimmy was a little surprised. "Sure. Of course," she said as she backed up and turned around. It was only two steps to her bedroom door. She went in and waited for Allison to join her, then she closed the door behind her. But the moment the door was closed, she rushed for Allison and hugged her dearly. "Thanks for coming to visit me," she said. "I miss you all so much!"

"Then quit hunting!" Allison told her. "Because we all miss you too! Let's face it, your brother is not you!"

Jimmy giggled a bit. "No, but I can't tell you how much I'm enjoying seeing how much of a sissy that stupid wuss really is."

"Jas!" Allison said, shocked that her friend should say such a thing. "He's hurting! He hates all this!"

"He loves it!" Jimmy replied. "He even thinks he's growing breasts! I mean, really! Give me a break!"

"Jas, he *is* growing breasts!"

"Yeah? How do you know?"

"He told me!"

Jimmy laughed. "And you believe him? Trust me, Allie, it's all a big act. It's nothing but a big conspiracy to make me stop hunting. It's not real, Allie. None of it is real."

"Jasmine!" Allison exclaimed angrily. "It is real! I can already see the changes in him...*and* in you! Both of you!"

"There are no changes in me!" Jimmy replied firmly. "None! None at all! Nothing about me has changed at all!"

"Yes it has Jasmine!" Allison replied quietly. "You only have to look in the mirror to see it. You're whole face is changing already."

"Ha! The only thing I'd probably see on my face right now that's different, is dirt! And that's only because I've been out hunting with the guys."

Allison was getting frustrated with her friend. "Jasmine, if you don't quit hunting, you're not going to be a girl anymore. It won't be long before you won't even be able to pass yourself off as a girl anymore – no matter how you're dressed."

"Don't give me any of that junk! I told you, it's not real. None of it is real! I've got nothing at all to worry about. Nothing!" A sly smile

cracked on her face. "But my stupid wuss of a brother has plenty to worry about, because I'm working on making sure everybody knows what a big sissy that crazy wuss is."

Allison was shocked. She had heard Jasmine say hateful things about her brother a number of times lately. This wasn't the friend she had grown up with! "Jas, what do you have against your brother? He's not that way at all!"

"Sure he is," Jimmy replied. "He totally is. And I want everyone to know it."

"But he's not, Jas. He hates it all. Trust me! We've all spent a lot of time with him lately trying to help him to like at least a little something about what we do, and we're not having hardly any luck at all!"

But what Allison had said did nothing but totally anger Jimmy. "That's right," Jimmy said, "throw it in my face! Throw it in my face that you've all been having fun with him, while I can't spend any time with any of you at all! That's it, just throw it in my face!"

"Jas! What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? The fact that you don't care about me at all! None of you do! You'd rather all spend time with my jerk of a brother than with me!"

"Jas, that's not true!"

"Sure it is! You all don't think I can't see what's happening? You all don't think I know what's going on? You're all part of this plot against me too! You're all part of it! Well it's not working, because I'm not buying it! It's all a big lie! Every bit of it! And I'm not buying any of it. You want to have fun with the big sissy? Then have at him. Have all the fun you want. Because the more you make him act like a girl, the more of a sissy everyone will see he really is. And when this is all over and they all see that I haven't changed at all, then they'll be left seeing how right I am...and just how much of a sissy that wuss really is! That's what they'll see Allie. That's what everyone will see. They'll see that I'm right, that I have the right to hunt with the guys, and my stupid wuss of a brother is in reality nothing but a big...sissy...wuss!"

"Jasmine!" Allison screamed. "Get hold of yourself! Listen to yourself! You've gone crazy!"

“Not me, Allie. Not me! It’s everyone else who’s crazy, Allie. Everyone else. But their plots against me aren’t going to work. They’re not going to work at all!”

Allison couldn’t take any more. She ran from the room, ran down the hallway, and ran out of the house. Jasmine, one of her very best friends in the world, was crazy. She was totally deranged! And even though those hormones hadn’t made all that many changes in her friend yet, she felt like she had already lost her friend. And it hurt worse than anything Allison could have imagined, because Jasmine was one of the Four Musketeers. She was one of the real Musketeers. But the way things were looking now, she didn’t even deserve to be a Musketeer at all anymore. She didn’t deserve to even be a friend anymore. And it hurt Allison more than she ever imagined.

The McComber Switch

By Karen Singer

Part 2

The Consequences of Conduct

Chapter 21 – Attitude is Everything

January 12th

On Monday morning, Susan watched as her kids got ready to head out the door for school again. Tommy of course looked his normal self. Jimmy and Jasmine, not so much. Of course, Jimmy was still Jasmine again and Jasmine was still being Jimmy. Once again they were going to school as each other.

She hugged Tommy and gave him a small peck of a kiss on his cheek just before he walked out the door. She hugged “Jimmy” and kissed her the same way before she walked out. She hugged Jasmine more firmly and gave him a bit of a stronger kiss. “Good luck,” she whispered. “You look very...” She was about to say the word ‘pretty.’ She wanted badly to use that word, but she dared not. Not with him. “...very nice,” she finally finished. She reached past his face to the bits of the big red bow at the back of his head and tugged at the ears of it to tighten and straighten it a bit, then she stood back to let him out the door. But as he had done the day before when they were leaving for church, Jasmine stopped for a moment, and once again she watched the bit of transformation that came over him. He stood up straighter, and his face assumed a more determined look. She almost wished he hadn’t done that. It really did spoil much of the new feminine look to his face. But before she could say anything, he walked out the door to join his brother and sister. “Good luck,” she whispered again – to all her kids.

As she walked back to the bedroom to start getting herself ready for the day, she reflected on the morning so far. Much of it she had spent with Jasmine. He again tried to wear everything his sister had put out for him. And again, he was wearing another outfit made up of things she never figured should go together. But once again, they seemed to look pretty good on him. Her daughter’s love of overly colorful tights was a big part of her problem she guessed. The ones Jasmine was wearing today were all flower designs with not a

square inch of the pattern not belonging to one colorful flower or another. And they should never have been paired with the purple and blue flower pattern on the short skirt he was wearing. She guessed that somehow the solid dark red knit top and maybe even the dark red bow in his hair made it all work a bit better since there was no pattern to them at all. A kaleidoscope of flowers on the bottom. Completely solid on the top. Totally wrong, but they seemed to work for her...daughter. Daughters.

Unlike last week, this time Jasmine was wearing several necklaces and bracelets with his outfit too, and she had noted several rings on his fingers as well. His sister had specified changing his nail polish, but he hadn't done that, only because all his girlfriends had their nails done exactly the same. She found that fact interesting that he wanted to keep his nails matching theirs.

Unlike last week, this week he was wearing a bit of makeup too. After the mess he'd made of it before church yesterday, she had made him sit and do only his own blusher while she looked on, and that was all. Then she came in and finished him up of with just a touch of eye shadow before she coated his lips with the berry colored lipstick his sister had specified. She didn't allow the real Jasmine much makeup at all. She was too young for it. But what she did allow she considered more than enough.

All in all, her fake daughter had looked nearly every square inch like a fairly pretty girl when she was done with him this morning. That is, until his face had changed just before walking out the door.

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Attitude! Jasmine figured it was all about his attitude. And he wanted everyone to know he wasn't going to put up with any of the bullshit jokes that the kids were most likely going to throw at him again. So he was ready for them. Ready for any or all of them. He just dared anyone to give him any lip at all about the way he was dressed, because if they did, he was just as ready to give it right back to them. Any way he could!

He hurried to join Tommy and Jimmy as they reached the road. Up ahead, they could already see all the others who met there every

morning. He knew they were a few minutes later, only because his mother had insisted on retying the stupid big bow in the back of his hair all over again before he put his coat on. He was already wishing he had not bothered with the thing.

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Jimmy was still fuming about his stupid brother being with all her girlfriends on Saturday. And they had all been having fun! Doing stuff she wanted to do with them! Except – she wasn't allowed. Ugh! She hated that! But seeing her stupid wuss of a brother getting his nails polished had been a major plus! And she had really loved the star that she figured Olivia had painted on one of his nails. Olivia liked doing things like that.

She might really hate seeing him hanging around with her friends, but it was going to get very obvious to everyone very soon how much of a big sissy her brother really was. Especially in the outfit she had put out for him today. And he was wearing all of it. Right down to the tights and that very short skirt. The only thing he hadn't done was to change his nail polish, but she figured that since he was still wearing some, then everyone would still notice it for sure. Everyone was about to realize how big a sissy her stupid brother really was. And there wasn't a thing in the world he could do about it. Especially since she planned on helping matters as much as she could in that direction.

Once they reached the other kids, Jimmy was quick to notice the warm friendly greeting that her brother got from Allison and Nichole, but all Nichole and Allison did for her was to look at her...for a strangely long time. And she was sure that Allison was glaring angrily at her. Maybe she shouldn't have lost it like she did yesterday with her, but that was no reason for her to glare like that! And then she noticed their nails. Allison, Nichole, and her brother all had the same purple sparkly polish on their nails – her nail polish! That stuff belonged to her, not them!

She wondered if Olivia had her nails done the same way, including that little white star painted on one of their nails too. Most likely. Most likely they all had their nails done exactly the same way.

She wanted to scream at them all! They were her friends, not her brother's. And that nail polish had belonged to her! It wasn't right that she was left out. It wasn't right at all!

She turned away angrily from them so she wouldn't have to look at them. If they preferred to be with her stupid pansy brother, then so be it! She would look for friends somewhere else. Like...there was Elliot, looking just as cute as ever. "Hi Elliot," she said. "Did you go hunting this weekend?"

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Jasmine saw all the kids on the bus craning their necks to look at him again, but none of them got out of their seat to have a better look. As he walked back to an empty seat, he angrily met the gaze of each and every one of them. Then with one final warning glare at them all, he turned around and sat down.

Allison moved into the seat next to him. "Lighten up!" she said to him. "Geez! You look like you're trying to pick a fight with everyone on the bus!"

"Maybe I am," he replied.

"God!" she exclaimed, totally exasperated. "You're getting as bad as your sister! Ease up!"

He looked at her. "I'm not going to take any of their stupid teasing today," he told her.

"Nobody's said a single word to you!" she replied.

"Yet!"

"God!" she exclaimed. "Just lighten up. Okay? Save it for if you really need it!"

He said nothing more to her the entire way to school. He only stared out the window, ready to react should anyone give him the least bit of trouble.

When they arrived at school, he again met the gaze of everyone who looked at him, which was every single kid in the school. All the way into the building and all the way to his sister's locker, he never once stopped.

"You're starting to be obnoxious!" Allison commented as she stopped for a moment at his locker with him. She left him and

continued on to her own locker.

"What's up with you today?" Nichole asked as she started opening her own locker.

"I don't want anybody giving me trouble today," he told her.

"Well, you're starting to make me not want to be anywhere near you. Is that what you want, for everyone to leave you alone?"

"Yes!" he replied. "That's all I want!"

"Even me? Even Olivia and Allison?"

He had to think about that. "No," he admitted. "Not really. I don't think you guys would tease me like the rest of the school probably will."

"How do you know everyone's going to tease you today?" she asked. "I haven't heard one bad word to you all day...except about the lousy way you're acting."

"They will," he said, sounding very sure of himself.

"Maybe they won't!"

"Trust me," he replied. "They will!" He had to try three times to remember the combination to his sister's locker before he could get it open. He set his books and his purse inside and took off his coat. When he turned, he saw Nichole staring at him. "See. Even you're ready to start teasing me now."

Nichole shook her head. "No way! Definitely not! Jas, that's a great outfit! You look...great! Of course, you'd look even better if you could smile a bit. But you still look...great!"

"Trust me," he replied. "I don't feel great at all. I feel...silly!"

"Come on," Nichole replied. "Get your stuff and let's get to class." She waited while he got the things he needed, then they both turned to head toward their classroom. "I love that little flowered skirt with those flower tights. I can't believe how good they look on you!"

"I'm not sure if I should be saying thanks or not."

"Trust me," Nichole told him. "Any compliments you get on your outfit will be real! Because you really do look great!"

"I just wish I felt that way," he replied.

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Jimmy closed her brother's locker door and turned in the direction of the classroom. A short way down the hall, she could just see her brother and Nichole turning to head for their classroom too. Her brother was very noticeable today in the colorful outfit she had put together for him. Way too noticeable – for him! The only problem was, he looked a lot better in it than she thought he would, even in that short skirt. At times, if she looked at him just right, she'd never be able to believe that he wasn't a girl. Fortunately, that screwed up attitude she had seen on his face took care of that little problem.

As she walked down the hall toward the classroom, she casually bumped one of the guys in the hall and pointed toward her brother. "Did you see what a sissy he's turning into?"

The boy looked questioningly at Jimmy. "That was your brother?"

"Sure was!" she replied with a smile. "You should see him at home, he's even worse!" With that much said, she walked off to the classroom, knowing that the rumors were about to fly.

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"Jas!" Olivia exclaimed as he started down the aisle toward his seat. "You look great! But...what's wrong? You look like you're ready to start a fight with someone."

"He's been like that all morning!" Nichole answered for him as Jasmine took his seat behind Olivia. She went to her own desk behind him.

Olivia turned around. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing...yet!" he replied. "I'm just waiting for it to happen, that's all."

"For what to happen?"

"The teasing and rude comments."

"Maybe they won't. Besides, I really love your outfit today. I think your sister did a great job of picking it all out for you. She really did try to make you look nice. It's just that..."

"See! Even you're ready to tease me about something!"

“Stop that!” she hissed back quickly. “I was about to say that the only thing wrong with the way you look today is your face! Because it’s all screwed up in a bad attitude!” With that she turned around angrily.

“You really do look nice,” whispered the girl next to him.

He looked over at her. He felt sorry for the way he had treated Olivia. Especially Olivia. “Thanks,” he whispered. He reached up and tapped Olivia on the back. When she turned around, he said, “Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you mad. It’s everyone else I’m worried about.”

She looked at him for a moment. “Just lose the attitude, okay? You’d look so much prettier!” She turned back around again.

Prettier? But he didn’t want to look pretty!

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Mrs. Ansley couldn’t help but notice when Jasmine entered the room. His colorful clothing had been hard to miss. What she did miss at first though, was exactly who that “girl” really was. And when she did realize it, she found it hard to take her eyes off of him. Once again she knew that the two twins in her class were switched around, something that was only confirmed a minute later when his sister came in, dressed as a boy. She did her best to brace herself for whatever might lie ahead.

As she waited for the rest of her students to get into the room, her eyes continually went back and forth between the two. The one who was supposed to be the boy – Jimmy, had a delighted smirk on her face...or was that *his* face? But the one who was supposed to be the girl, looked nothing but...defensive! She guessed she couldn’t really blame him, especially since he had shown up to school dressed so overly feminine. If it wasn’t for the look on his face, she would have almost sworn he was a real girl today! And the other one, the one who *was* a real girl. She was starting to look a bit more boyish than she had been expecting. At least she wasn’t hearing any of the teasing they had gotten a week earlier. But then the one that was dressed as Jasmine had pretty much taken care of

that little problem last week – and it looked like he was prepared to tackle it all over again today.

“Okay class,” Mrs. Ansley said as she stood up, grateful she didn’t have to explain about the switched twins again. “Sixth graders turn to page one hundred and thirty five in your English books and start reading. Fifth graders take out your math books.”

Ugh! Jasmine hated English!

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Since Allison was a little older than the rest of the Musketeers and in the next grade up, she didn’t get to see the other girls again until lunch. But it was something that she had overheard in her own classroom before lunch that had made her angry. She had heard one of the boys whispering to another boy about how much of a sissy Jimmy McComber was now. And that his own sister had confirmed that he’s even worse at home. It angered her enough that she stood up right in the middle of her classroom...right in the middle of when their teacher, Mr. O’Conner, was working with the upper grade in the room, and she angrily declared to the boys, “No he’s not!” All eyes turned to her.

With everyone looking at her, she addressed the room. “My cousin Jimmy isn’t a sissy at all! You have no idea how much he hates having to be his sister! No idea at all! So stop believing these stupid rumors that his sister is trying to spread about him, because they’re not true!”

“Wouldn’t she know better than you?” one of the boys replied, which only caused a bit of chuckling among the entire class.

“Jasmine...I mean the real Jasmine,” Allison told him, “has been nothing but cruel to him lately. And I mean really cruel. Trust me, she’s not herself at all!”

“No,” one of the boys called out. “She’s Jimmy instead!” Which earned him a bunch of laughter.

“Settle down!” Mr. O’Conner yelled, putting a quick stop to it all. He, for one, didn’t believe for a moment that Jimmy was any kind of a sissy at all. The kid had even shown that to the entire school a week ago. But he had no doubt that the rumors were still going to

fly. He did his best to bring everyone back to their lessons...after he strongly cautioned Allison not to disturb his class like that again.

Allison sat down again, but she glared angrily at the boys for a moment. One of them only made rude funny faces back at her. Boys! How stupid they all were. And that included her dumb cousin Jasmine who was turning into a boy...in too many ways it seemed.

In the back of the room, Elliot had heard it all too. He had heard the rumors as well. But none of the rumors he was hearing today matched what Tommy had told him or what he had seen with his own eyes. According to Tommy, Jimmy, the real Jimmy, hated being his sister with a passion! And he certainly didn't blame him for that. Elliot figured he would feel the same way if he had to dress up as his sister.

Based on that, he said nothing at all about the matter, but he was kind of glad that Allison had finally stood up for Jimmy. And if things got out of hand, well, he was always up for a good fight!

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"Jimmy" didn't have too many chances to spread the sissy rumors about her brother during class, but she did whisper a few things to the boys around her so she was feeling fairly pleased with herself by the time lunch started. She hadn't gotten a single teasing remark herself from anyone all morning long, and she wasn't really expecting one anymore. She was however expecting most of the kids to visually look her over all too carefully again. She guessed she couldn't blame any of them for staring at her so much. But at least nobody said anything insulting to her.

It wasn't herself that she wanted everyone staring at that way though. She wanted them staring at her stupid wuss of a brother instead and making him as uncomfortable as possible. It didn't take her long though to figure out that he actually was getting more looks than she was. A lot more! From both the boys and the girls. "At home, he's the biggest sissy you could possibly imagine!" she whispered to a few of the guys around her as he stood in the lunch line. "You wouldn't believe all the dolls he keeps in his room!" Yeah, she just knew those rumors would be flying fast!

She got her lunch and headed for the solitary table where her brother usually sat. But she was surprised a few minutes later when her brother Tommy and Elliot sat down with her. And then Hunter joined them a few minutes later.

"So you didn't get to shoot at anything at all on Sunday?" Elliot asked.

"We didn't even see anything to shoot at," Jimmy complained. "Ethan finally just called it quits and we went home."

"Some days are like that," Tommy commented.

"Sure are!" Elliot agreed. "How do you like hunting with Ethan and Justin?" Elliot asked.

"It's a blast...mostly," Jimmy replied. "Man they're picky about how you walk through the woods and not make any noise at all. They're constantly on my case because I'm not as quiet as they are. And they've got all these hand signals they use instead of just saying anything. I think they can hold whole conversations that way and never actually say a single word."

"Yeah," Elliot agreed. "Uncle Jed sure trained them good. I like going out with my dad and the dogs better. The dogs make so much noise, nobody has to worry about being quiet. It's a whole lot easier. Besides, the dogs find things for us to shoot at."

"It is fun," Tommy agreed. "When's your father going out again with them?"

"I'm not sure," Elliot replied. "But this season of the year he likes to spend a lot of time training them. And he's been talking about another nighttime coon hunt, so most likely we'll be going pretty soon. Want me to ask if you can come?"

"Of course!" Tommy replied. Actually, Elliot made sure that Tommy got asked on most of his father's hunts since the two boys were together most of the time.

"Any chance I can go?" Jimmy asked, slightly put off that she hadn't been included in the invitation.

Elliot looked at her, then nodded. "I'll ask my dad," he said. "As I see it, there's no reason why you shouldn't be included with the things the guys do...when you're being a guy that is. Heck, you and your brother have been doing so much switching around lately, that

you're getting really good at it. So good that you're even starting to look more like a guy. I don't know how you do it!"

Jimmy went back to eating her lunch. Having Elliot tell her she looked more like a guy wasn't what she wanted to hear from *him* at all!

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The Four Musketeers did everything together, and lunch at school every day was a major part of that. Once again Jasmine set her tray down at the same seat his sister usually sat in and before long, all four "girls" were together again. "Ooo! I got so mad in class this morning," Allison complained.

"What happened?" Nichole asked.

"The stupid boys were all whispering about what a sissy Jasmine here is now. But they were mentioning that *Jimmy* had told them that he was. And they believed it! I actually stood up in class and gave them a piece of my mind right there and then!"

"Really?" Olivia gasped.

"I sure did!" Allison replied. "But the boys all remained jerks, and Mr. O'Conner wasn't exactly very pleased with me."

Nichole laughed a bit. "I can believe it!"

"Thanks," Jasmine said quietly.

"For what?" Allison asked.

"For sticking up for me."

"No problem. Believe me, I can't believe what your stupid sister is doing now. Of course, I can't believe a lot of what she's doing now."

"Why?" Nichole asked.

But her question only brought sobering looks back and forth between Allison and Jasmine.

"What's going on?" Olivia asked, seeing the conspiratorial looks between them.

"I don't know if I should say," Allison told her.

"So something *is* going on?" Nichole noticed. "Hey, Jasmine is my very best friend. You all know that. So what's up with her?"

"I can't..." Allison started to say.

"Tell her," Jasmine said softly. "They're all going to find out soon enough anyway." He looked around the lunchroom. "Just try to keep your voice down though. I'd rather not have everyone knowing about it."

"What?" Olivia asked.

"Shouldn't it be you that tells them?" Allison asked Jasmine.

He shook his head. "I don't think I can. You do it. Please!"

"If you're sure?" Allison asked.

He nodded. "Just keep your voice down. Okay?"

Allison leaned in across the table, and Olivia and Nichole leaned in as well. Jasmine just sat back in his chair and tried not to even look at them. His face turned sadder and more troubled with every word he was still able to hear Allison whisper. The gasps, the "Oh my Gods," the "Your kiddings," the "That's awfuls," in fact, all the little comments he heard from Nichole and Olivia did nothing but support his own feelings on the matter. Before Allison had even finished, he got up so he wouldn't have to hear anymore. Not feeling hungry in the least now, he carried his tray to the bins to empty it.

"Hey Jaaasmiine," one of the boys at a nearby table called. Jasmine looked, but he knew he shouldn't have. "Your *brother* tells me you're an even bigger sissy at home. He says your room is filled with dolls!" The other boys at the table all laughed with him.

The perpetual determined look on Jasmine's face turned to anger. He balled his fists and started to take a few steps toward the boy, who wasn't looking the least bit frightened. But he stopped himself before he got very far. "Stuff it!" he said angrily to the boy. Then he turned and walked back to his table...to the sound of the other boys all laughing at him.

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"Oh shit!" Tommy exclaimed as he saw Jasmine suddenly heading towards one of the tables filled with boys. He was concerned because he could tell that Jasmine was about to start a real fight. He jumped up from his seat to help out, and then stopped when he saw his brother stop, say something to the kid at the table, then suddenly turn away and stomp off. He watched until Jasmine

got all the way back to the girl's table. "That was a close one," he said to Elliot and Hunter, who had both gotten to their feet as well.

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Jimmy wasn't sure exactly what had gone on, but she was betting that one of those little rumors she had started earlier was hitting the mark. The part that surprised her, was that her stupid wuss of a brother had actually been ready to fight about it. She found that hard to believe. Anyone who was afraid of dead ducks would never pick a fight with anyone. But he had almost done it. Fortunately, he had chickened out like she figured he would. The wuss!

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The Musketeers all had rather horrified looks on their faces. Jasmine wasn't sure if it was because of what had just happened, or because of what Allison had just told them.

"You okay?" Allison asked as he sat angrily in his seat.

"Fine!" he spat. "Just fine!"

"I was so afraid you were going to start fighting!" Olivia said.

"I was sure ready to," Jasmine replied.

"What stopped you?"

"I figured they weren't worth it."

"Good for you!" Allison exclaimed. "What did they say to you?"

"That...*Jimmy* told them my room at home is filled with dolls."

It was a moment before any of them said anything. "But it is!" Olivia exclaimed.

Jasmine actually let out a laugh and his face actually broke into a smile. "Yeah, it is, isn't it!" All four Musketeers laughed together for a few moments.

Olivia was watching Jasmine though the entire time they were laughing. She couldn't take her eyes off of Jasmine's face. "Oh my God!" she suddenly exclaimed, still looking at him. "You're so right, Allison."

"What now?" Jasmine asked, his brief happy mood suddenly gone again.

"You do look so much more like a girl when you're smiling. I mean, it's amazing!"

Jasmine wanted to bury his head in the table, but doing so wouldn't be much help. "Don't remind me."

"But that's a good thing!" Olivia exclaimed. "You're actually kind of pretty!"

As far as Jasmine was concerned, Olivia was making it worse, and she didn't even realize it. "You don't understand," he said. "I'm a guy...at least in my head. I don't want to be pretty."

"But being pretty is a good thing!" Olivia exclaimed.

"Not to me," he complained.

"Is it true?" Nichole asked seriously, before anyone else could say anything. "What Allie just told us about you and your sister...and the hormones. Is it true?"

Jasmine's face fell even further. "I told you that just dressing like each other wasn't the worst of our problems."

There was silence at the table for a moment, before Nichole replied. "Poor Jasmine."

Jasmine wanted to say poor *him*. But he remembered that even though all three girls there were really close friends with his sister, it was Nichole that his sister was the closest with. He was searching for words to say when he suddenly saw Olivia look up behind him... and a hand came down lightly on his shoulder. He turned his head and saw Mrs. Marker behind him, and then she was moving to the side of the table.

"Hi girls," Mrs. Marker said brightly to all of them.

"Hi Mrs. Marker," Nichole and Olivia replied together.

As Mrs. Marker looked at all the girls sitting together, her eyes immediately caught sight of their purple fingernails. "Goodness!" she said. "You all did your nails the same! How sweet!"

Jasmine couldn't help looking at his nails, as did all the other "girls." He wasn't exactly sure how "sweet" it was that his nails matched everyone else's.

"I think it's wonderful the way you four girls do so many things together. I know it's so good to have close friends you can count

on.”

“Yes, Mrs. Marker,” Olivia said.

“We do count on each other,” Allison told her. “All the time!”

“I’m sure you do,” Mrs. Marker said with a smile. She looked down at Jasmine. “I just wanted to come over and tell you how nice I think you look today. I know you might not want to hear that, but I wanted to tell you anyway. I know you’re probably having to be as brave as you can to dress so...nicely.” She didn’t want to use the word girly or femininely for him...this time.

“You have no idea!” Jasmine mumbled.

“Well,” she said, “I just wanted you to know that. I guess I’ll have you in Home Ec again this afternoon?”

He nodded. “Just like last week.”

“Then I look forward to seeing you there,” she said. She leaned her head down a little closer to him. “Just a little suggestion, Jasmine,” she said softly. “I know I’ve mentioned something like this to you before, but with a skirt that short, you need to be extra careful how you sit in it. Don’t worry, nobody can see anything. You’re just fine. But you might want to be a little more conscious of it from now on. Especially in skirts like that. Okay?”

Jasmine quickly pressed his legs together as the other girls at the table started giggling.

“See you later girls,” Mrs. Marker said before walking off.

“See,” Olivia said to him, “even she agrees with how nice you look!”

“Yeah,” Jasmine said rather dully, overly conscious now of trying to keep his knees pressed together. “But that still doesn’t mean that I like it.”

Allison sighed. “We’ve really got to work on your self-image!”

“Why?” But before anyone could answer, they were interrupted again.

“Hey Jaasmiine!” one of the older boys in the school called as he walked up to the table.

All the “girls” looked up at the boy. Jasmine was already turning angry, even before the boy said anything. “I hear your favorite thing in the world to do is to paint your fingernails!” He didn’t get a chance to say anything more as an angry voice behind him stopped him.

“Back off!” He turned and saw Hunter, Elliot, Tommy, and Jimmy standing there with their food trays in their hands. He realized that the voice had been Tommy’s. “Leave my sister alone!” Tommy told him. “Both of them! And don’t believe any of those stupid rumors you’re hearing, ‘cause I can tell you for a fact that none of them are true!” There was a bit of a stare down between the boy and Tommy, then he turned and started to walk away. Tommy, Elliot, and Hunter headed for the bins to empty their trays. Jimmy quickly bumped the side of the guy they had just faced down. “But they are true!” she whispered quickly before hurrying off. The boy just looked after her, trying to figure out what was going on.

Olivia stared at Jasmine’s face. She could tell it was all he could do to hold the anger in. “Ease up, Jas, he’s gone.”

“But there’s more like him, just waiting to have at me.”

“Don’t let them get to you!” Allison told him.

“Besides,” Nichole said, “didn’t you tell everyone last week that you don’t care if they call you a sissy anymore?”

The look of frustration on his face was obvious. “I don’t care... but I really do. But I don’t, but I do. But I really don’t.”

“Geez!” Nichole replied. “When you got out of bed this morning, you really didn’t get your head screwed on straight!”

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The Mechanics class was really more like the Mechanics Club since it held students from the fifth grade through seniors in High School. Mr. O’Conner did his best to keep the lessons divided up between different levels of knowledge, but more often than not, everyone was working on exactly the same things.

Jimmy had been looking forward to the class all day. After getting to ride the snowmobile around for a few hours, it had been one of the most fun times she had ever had at school. But when she walked into the auditorium, she was immediately handed a quiz by Mr. O’Conner, who had only looked at her questioningly for a moment, before handing the thing to her. What the heck was she supposed to do with it? But since everyone was taking seats at the tables, all spread out so they weren’t next to each other, she chose a

seat by herself too, which was dumb because she couldn't even talk to anyone that way.

She looked at the quiz. It was about tools. One by one she read down the questions. When she got to the end she nearly laughed. She had no idea what any of it was talking about. And most of the list had been a list of different kinds of wrenches. Who cared that there were different wrenches and what they were supposed to be used for. What the heck was a wrench anyway? She signed her brother's name at the top of it, not worrying about the test at all. Why should she worry, it was her brother's test!

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Jasmine walked into Mrs. Marker's Home Ec class with Nichole and Olivia. They quickly found Allison and sat down near each other. But once all the girls were there, Mrs. Marker started going around the room passing out a test to each girl. Some girls got one test, some got another, depending on how long they had been in the Home Ec class. But when she came to Jasmine, she skipped right over him.

"None for me?" Jasmine asked softly, surprised but glad that she was skipping him.

"Not unless you want to take it," Mrs. Marker replied. "But I don't see you knowing much about the proper care of some of these fabrics. Last week, you didn't even know what kind of material you were working with."

"It was silver lame," he told her. "I asked my mother about all the materials we were working with."

"And how about how you're supposed to care for it?" she asked.

"Mom says we can just throw it in the washer, but it needs to be in the gentle cycle. She said though that doing it by hand would be better."

She looked down at him thoughtfully, then she selected a test and started to hand it to him...then she pulled it back. "Tell you what," she said as she selected a different test. "This is the quiz for the beginning students in here. Let me see what you can do with it. Okay?"

"It's all fine with me," he told her. "If I don't know something, I promise I'll find out. My sister may let me down in my other courses, but I'm not going to let her down with the stuff I have to do – if I can help it."

Mrs. Marker nodded happily. "Let's see what you can do with that test, then we'll take things from there. And Jasmine, you really do look very nice today. You should try smiling more though. I'm sure you would look even better!"

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Later that afternoon, John Mercer sat at his desk listening to the two teachers in front of him. It was stuff they had all discussed briefly over lunch a while back, but it was stuff that also involved the two twins. And, it was stuff that was now becoming a concern.

"I can't in good faith enter this test to the real Jimmy's grades," Mr. O'Conner told him. "She didn't complete any of it. None! She didn't even try marking down wrong answers."

"And how about in Home Ec class?" John asked. "How did... Jasmine do there?"

Mrs. Marker smiled. "I guess a lot better than his sister did in Mr. O'Conner's class." She handed him the test she had given to Jasmine to take. "I decided to give him the test I gave to my beginning students today. As you can see, she almost got a 'B' on it. Not quite, but almost."

John looked carefully at the test then handed it back to her. "At least he tried. How would the real Jasmine have done on it?"

"I wouldn't have given her that test. She would have gotten the intermediate test instead. But with the things I have the girls all working on now, I have no doubt that Jasmine would have done very well on even the advanced test I gave to the high school girls. Jasmine has a flair for design. Even at her age, she's pretty darn good at it. Some of the other things we do like meal planning and nutrition, she's not so good at. But with the things we've been working on lately, she's very interested in it, and she's just plain got a talent for it."

"So that test," John said, indicating the test he had just given back to her, "would have hurt her grades too."

"Somewhat," Mrs. Marker admitted.

"But not as badly as what happened with Mr. O'Conner's test."

"No," she admitted. "Not even close. I can't imagine that Jasmine wouldn't have even tried to take his test...wrong answers or not."

"I think I was lucky that she even wrote down her brother's name on it," Mr. O'Conner replied.

"Alright," the principal replied. "For this time we'll try something else. Is it possible that those two can "retake" their tests tomorrow, when they're back to being themselves again?"

"I don't see why not," Mr. O'Conner replied.

"I have no problem with it either," Mrs. Marker replied, obviously happy with the solution.

"Good! And for now, is it possible to not give them any tests on Monday's?"

"I guess I could easily arrange that too," Mrs. Marker replied.

"No problem," Mr. O'Conner agreed.

"Good!" John told them. "I'll talk with Mrs. Ansley about it too. That should hold things for the rest of the month."

"Is this going to go on that long?" Mrs. Marker asked. "To the end of the month?"

"Let's hope not," John told her. "We keep hoping every day that it will end immediately. But I'm afraid it's not looking very good. And if it goes into next month, then, well, let's just say we may have to revisit this no tests on Monday situation."

"Why? I have no problem with it," Mr. O'Conner said.

"Because if it goes that long, then those two will be each other here on Monday and Tuesday too. And I have no doubt that by that time, things will be even more difficult in other ways for them as well."

"Two days a week!" Mrs. Marker exclaimed. "They might as well just start coming to school as each other and stay that way! At least we could come up with a consistent plan to deal with them."

John nodded. "Let's just hope it doesn't get that far."

"Let's hope not!" Mrs. Marker agreed.

"I wonder," Mr. O'Conner said, "if we wouldn't be wise though to start taking some extra time with each of them...when they're being each other now," he added.

"In what way?" Mrs. Marker asked.

"Start trying to catch them up on the things they should already have learned. At least the basics that will get them through the classes."

"Why bother?" Mrs. Marker asked. "There's only a few more weeks left in the month."

"And what if, like John here said, it goes past this month. The real Jimmy has a brain for mechanical things. He loves figuring out how everything works. And like you said his sister is with the design stuff, Jimmy is pretty darn good at knowing how to tear into something and actually fix it. He's what, eleven? But he can probably do most of it better than the kids who are in high school. I'm not worried about him in my class at all, but his sister is another matter. She not only doesn't know anything, I get the impression she's not interested in knowing anything. As far as I'm concerned, starting her off learning the basics would do her nothing but good. I would think it would be the same for her brother in your class too."

Mrs. Marker shook her head. "I may have an advantage over you as far as that's concerned. His mother seems to be already helping him learn some of it. And he told me in class today that if there's anything he needs to know, then I should just tell him and he would find out about it. But it was the last thing he said that I think makes the big difference here. He said that he wasn't going to let his sister down, no matter what she did to him."

Mr. O'Conner smiled. "Yeah, that sounds more like the Jimmy I have in my class. And it sounds like the Jimmy who stood up in front of the school last week wearing his sister's clothes and told everyone that he was going to protect his sister too. But I don't get that kind of feeling from the girl at all."

"Maybe because she *is* a girl," Mrs. Marker suggested.

"So where does that leave us?" John asked, trying to bring the conversation back to how they were going to handle business.

"Like I said," Mr. O'Conner replied, "I'll start trying to spend a little more time teaching the girl some of the basics. I guess I can even

assign her some homework so she can get caught up on it.”

“That may not work out too well,” John told him. “According to my wife, once their mother switches them around, they even do each other’s homework as well.”

“That’s crazy!” Mrs. Marker exclaimed. “How can they learn properly?”

John only shrugged.

Chapter 22 - Ducking Homework

January 13th – 14th

“Dad,” Tommy said quietly, just before his bedtime. “Can I talk to you?”

“Sure son,” Clint replied. “What’s the problem?”

“Jasmine. I mean, the real Jasmine.”

“What’s she done now?” Clint asked, his voice full of frustration and concern.

“She’s spreading bad rumors about Jimmy at school. And she seems to be going out of her way to do it. Jimmy, I mean Jasmine, I mean...my real brother, almost got into a fight over it today.”

“What happened?” Clint asked, very concerned now.

“Jimmy, I mean Jasmine backed off and just walked away before it got too far, but me and Elliot and Hunter were all ready to jump in and help him out if we needed to.”

Clint nodded and smiled a bit. “Thanks for looking after him.”

“Yeah, no problem. I just thought you should know.”

“Yeah,” Clint agreed. “Thanks. What kind of rumors is she spreading?”

“Just all stuff about what a big sissy Jimmy is. That’s all. But it’s making a lot of the guys start teasing him again. Which is really bad because before she started it, I kind of got the impression that Jimmy’s attitude today was making everyone shut up about it and back off. But Jas’s little rumors only stirred things up. You know?”

“Uh...I think I get the picture. So basically, your brother would have been fine at school today, until your sister got into the act.”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

Clint nodded. “Thanks. At least they’re back to being themselves now.”

“I don’t think it’s going to matter much,” Tommy told him. “The kids are still going to rib him one way or another.”

"No doubt," Clint agreed. "Just keep an eye on him, okay? From what your Uncle Brian told us, Jimmy probably doesn't have that much control over his emotions right now. There's no telling what those hormones in his system will do to him in some of those situations."

"Yeah." Tommy agreed. "I guess we got lucky today."
Clint could only agree.

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The following morning, Clint was on Jasmine's case before breakfast even started. He stopped her right in the hallway on her way to the kitchen. "Why do you hate your brother so much?" he demanded angrily.

The sudden verbal attack by her father had Jasmine a bit taken aback. "What are you talking about?"

"All the vicious rumors you're spreading about him at school. That's what I'm talking about!"

Jasmine was surprised. "You heard about that?"

"Of course I heard about it!" Clint yelled. "Why are you spreading junk like that around?"

In the path of her father's anger, it was a moment before Jasmine could reply. "Well, they are kind of true."

"That's absurd!" Clint yelled. "No they're not! Your brother may be stuck wearing your clothes, but that boy is anything but a sissy. In fact, lately, I'm more proud of him than ever!"

"You are?" Jasmine asked, totally surprised, and also not sure she was glad to hear that.

"I damn well sure am! He's shown me several times in the last few weeks that he's got more man in him than a lot of people have been giving him credit for lately."

"He has?"

"Damn straight, he has! So I don't want to hear anything more about you spreading any kind of rumors like that about him. Your brother is stuck in a place he doesn't want to be, and your refusal to quit hunting is keeping him there!"

“But he still doesn’t want to go hunting either!” Jasmine shot back.

“I...don’t...care! As far as I’m concerned, he’s already proven himself more than I ever expected! So take this as a warning young lady...if you are still a young lady...you lay off the lies about your brother. ‘Cause if you don’t, I can promise you some very meaningful sessions with my belt on your naked backside! As many as it takes!”

Jasmine was shocked by the forcefulness of her father this time. He was even worse than he had been about her hunting! “Okay, okay!” she replied. “I’ll lay off. But I still think everything I said is true. Cause anyone who’s afraid of the things he is, and especially since he thinks he’s actually turning into a girl – what a laugh! Anyone like that, can’t be anything but a big...stupid...sissy!”

“You watch your mouth *and* your tone of voice with me Jasmine. I’m just two steps away from hauling you out to the workshop right now and blistering you good!”

“Okay already,” she replied. “I said I’d lay off the little wimp.”

Clint backed off some. “You can keep your opinions about that to yourself too, ‘cause I can tell you right now that you’re wrong. Dead wrong!”

“Okay already. I get the picture!” Jasmine replied.

Clint stared at her for a moment. He didn’t know if he could trust her, but he supposed he had to start somewhere. “Go eat your breakfast. You don’t want to be late for school.”

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In the kitchen, Jimmy and Tommy had heard almost every word since much of it had been shouted. “Good!” Tommy said softly at one point.

Jimmy said nothing, but just continued to listen. What came through to him the most though, was that his sister was being yelled at for the rumors she had spread about him yesterday, and more importantly, how proud his father was of him. That part made him feel really good. Unfortunately, he hadn’t heard anything that would indicate that they were going to end this switching business between

him and his sister anytime soon. But still, his father putting a stop to Jasmine's rumor spreading about him, and knowing that his father was so proud of him made him feel better than he had felt.

He watched as his sister finally entered the kitchen. He wasn't sure if she looked like she had just been yelled at or not. As far as he could tell, she just looked...angry.

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Of course, the twins were their own selves as they left the house with Tommy and walked through the freshly snow covered ground towards the bus stop. Ahead of them, they saw, Ashley, Justin, Elliot, and Nichole. Allison and her brother Aaron weren't there yet.

"Hi Jimmy!" Nichole said to him first. She said it very emphatically. Then she turned towards Jasmine. "Hi Jas," she said a lot more reservedly.

Jasmine didn't miss the change in her best friend's tone of voice. "Hi Nichole," she replied, letting the difference in the way Nichole had spoken to her pass. "Where's Allison?"

Nichole gestured back up the road. "Here they come now," she replied as she spotted Allison and Aaron coming down the hill.

"Hi Allison," Jasmine called brightly as she and her brother got close enough. But Jasmine was shocked by the angry glare Allison leveled back at her.

Allison looked angrily at Jasmine for a moment, then turned her gaze to Nichole instead. "Hi Nichole," she said nicely. "How's it going today?"

"Okay, I guess," Nichole replied uncertainly.

"I'm good too," Jasmine added. But she was shocked when Allison stuck her nose in the air and turned away from her, and walked over toward Ashley instead. "What's up?" Jasmine asked her, clearly hurt by her friend's actions. "Don't you like me anymore?"

Allison turned back toward her. "Don't I like you? I'm not sure anymore. In fact, I'm not sure I even know you anymore. Because you're sure not the same person I used to know. I don't know if I even *want* to talk to you anymore."

"Allison!" Jasmine exclaimed, clearly very hurt now. "How can you say that to me?"

"How can I say it? I can say it all too easily. I don't know that I even want you near me anymore!"

"Why Allie? What did I ever do to you?"

"To me? Not just to me, but to everyone else too. You're being nothing but a major pain in the ass! And I mean that!" She purposely turned away.

"Are you talking about the way I yelled a little when you were at the house this weekend?" Jasmine asked. "Because I'm really sorry about that. I kind of totally lost it."

Allison looked back at her with a surprised expression on her face. "Lost it? You think you might have lost it? You went way past that! For the last few weeks Jas, you've become nothing but cruel, not just to me, but to everyone. Especially to your brother!"

"Yeah," Jasmine replied. "I heard about that from my Dad this morning. He wasn't exactly happy with me."

"With good reason, Jas!" Allison replied. "Now just leave me alone, because I'm not interested in talking to you now. Maybe not ever!"

It was a shocked and hurt Jasmine that walked back toward Nichole to wait for the bus. She should never have lost it like she had when Allison had been there. She just...couldn't help herself. As usual, Nichole sat with her all the way to school, but Jasmine noticed that Nichole never really said a single word to her. Nichole didn't seem to be particularly angry, she just seemed...sad.

Even when she got to school and passed Olivia on the way to her seat, Olivia looked up at her and gave her a small smile, but that was about it. In fact, all morning long, neither Olivia nor Nichole bothered to talk to her during class. She felt like she was being shut out and abandoned.

It wasn't until lunchtime that Jasmine had a chance to really talk seriously with the other girls. Nichole and Olivia had been in front of her in the lunch line, so they had just sat down. Allison was still getting her food. Jasmine carried her tray to her usual seat, but by the way they had all been treating her that morning, before she set her tray down, she had to ask, "Can I still sit here?"

Nichole and Olivia both looked up at her. "It's your usual seat," Nichole said, but there wasn't any enthusiasm in it.

Jasmine gratefully set her tray on the table and sat down. "Look, I'm sorry," she said to the two girls already at the table. "Whatever I did, I'm really sorry!"

"You should be!" Allison told her. She had walked up while Jasmine had been apologizing. She set her tray down and turned to Jasmine. "But I'm not sure it's just us you need to be apologizing to."

"Who else?" Jasmine asked, frustrated that her friends weren't happy with her.

"How about your brother for one?" Allison replied, still standing and obviously still angry with her.

"My brother? I told you, my Dad had it out with me this morning about him."

"But don't you think you owe him an apology? As I see it, you owe him an awful lot!"

"An apology? Why should I apologize for him being such a major wimp? Not only that, but why should I apologize for him being such a sissy that he actually thinks he's turning into a girl? Talk about stupid! He's an idiot!"

"You're the idiot!" Allison returned angrily. "Cause if you can't see what's really happening to you and your brother both, then you're nothing but a major idiot!"

"I'm the idiot? He thinks he's turning into a girl! As far as I can see, he loves hanging around doing girl stuff with all of you!"

"He hates it!" Olivia told her. "He absolutely hates it. No matter what we try, he still hates it!"

"You sure could have fooled me," Jasmine replied. "I think he does like it, and he's too afraid to let any of you know it."

"Jas, you're being cruel again," Allison told her. "And you know perfectly well that your brother doesn't like any of it!"

"Ha! I don't know that at all. As far as I'm concerned, he's nothing but a big sissy!"

Allison glared at her. "Jas, you're so wrong! I don't know how you can possibly hate him as much as you do. Your brother does nothing but stick up for you, no matter how you behave toward him... and all you do is stab him in the back! You're cruel Jasmine! Cruel!"

"He stuck up for me? When?" But she didn't get an answer because Allison was picking up her tray.

"Girls! What's the big argument?" Janet Mercer asked as she hurried up.

"Sorry, Mom," Olivia replied. She looked glaringly at Jasmine. "Jasmine here is being...difficult!"

"What's the problem?" Janet asked.

"No problem!" Jasmine replied angrily. "No problem at all."

Allison grunted in frustration, turned, and walked off to find somewhere else to sit.

"Are you sure there's no problem?" Janet asked.

"We're fine!" Olivia said with her eye on Jasmine.

"Keep it down then," Janet replied before walking off. She would get it all out of her daughter later tonight after they got home. Hopefully.

"When did my brother stick up for me?" Jasmine asked.

"Yesterday in Home Ec," Nichole replied.

"How could he do that there? How could he do anything in there?"

"He told Mrs. Marks that he wasn't going to let you down, no matter what you did to him."

Jasmine grunted a bit of a laugh. "The stupid wuss!" But she had no intention of actually apologizing to her silly wimp of a brother.

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Clint pulled into the driveway and turned his truck off. He had a bit of a difficult time getting into the house because of what he carried in his hands. Once he had the door open, it was much easier for him to push inside. He saw his wife and Jasmine working on getting dinner ready. He saw them both look at him coming in. And he saw Jasmine go into total excitement.

"You got it! You got it!" she screamed excitedly as she rushed to him.

Clint had to almost fight his way past her to set the stuffed duck that she had shot, down on the counter.

“Oooh! It’s so beautiful,” she breathed as her hands ran across the stretched out wings. The bird had been posed as if in flight, with the wings outstretched and the iridescent green head turned slightly to the side. The bird had been mounted to a piece of tree branch with the bark still on it, ready to hang on a wall somewhere.

“We’ll hang it in your room after dinner,” Clint told her, but there was no enthusiasm about it in his voice at all. He’d rather not mount this duck anywhere. He’d rather just throw the thing out and forget about where it came from and who had shot it. But it was way too late for that now. Jasmine had known that her grandfather had suggested having it mounted for her. “The deer head is still going to be a few weeks,” he said. “Those things take some time and Rod said he’s been pretty busy lately.”

“That’s great, Dad,” Jasmine replied as if she had barely heard him. She was still running her hands over the duck and admiring it. “It’s so beautiful,” she said again.

“Enough!” Susan said, “You can look at it later. Help me get dinner on the table now.”

When Tommy and Jimmy came into the kitchen for dinner, they both immediately went over to look at the duck. They both had very different reactions to it.

“Cool!” Tommy exclaimed. “It’s just a little different pose than the ones in my room.”

Jimmy said nothing. It was another duck that should have been alive and living the life it was intended to live. Now it was nothing but a wall ornament, fit only for collecting dust. At least he wouldn’t have to worry about it being hung in his room. His sister had shot the thing. And then he realized he would have to worry about it. He would be stuck looking at it every time he had to be his sister. Ugh!

All during dinner, Jasmine glanced up to look at the duck. It really was fabulous! Every time she looked at it, it reminded her of that first time she had managed to go hunting. It had been so exciting! And that duck had been her very first kill. She was the only girl in the entire family to ever go hunting, and this beautiful duck was the prize she had now so she could always remember it. It was going to look so great on her bedroom wall!

She was the only girl in the family ever allowed to hunt. Sort of. The family was insisting on viewing things as if it was her brother out there instead of her. What a laugh! Especially since everyone knew she was actually the one who was really out there hunting – while her brother was stuck home wearing her dresses and skirts. And it was all so fitting! He didn't deserve to be allowed to go hunting. As far as she was concerned, her stupid wimp of a brother deserved to be doing nothing but girly stuff for the way he was so afraid of everything. But she wasn't afraid of anything! So it was only right that she should be allowed to go out and hunt with the guys instead of him.

She was the one who had been brave enough to sneak out to go hunting, even when she knew she shouldn't, even when she knew she would get punished horribly. She had been the one who was brave enough, while her stupid sissy brother was so much of a wimp that he was even afraid of the dead ducks hanging on his own wall. And because of that, whether the family admitted it or not, they had rewarded her bravery by letting her hunt, while they rewarded her brother by making him dress in her clothes. The stupid sissy! Literally now! But his silly fear of the dead ducks on his wall had been the thing that had led to her now being allowed to hunt – and hunt a lot. And now she would have her own duck hanging on her wall. She nearly giggled out loud. He was going to be tormented by them every night now – even when he had to be her. And wait till that deer head got here. What was he going to think about sleeping in her room then?

That little thought sobered her thinking a little. Yeah, what would her stupid wuss of a brother think then, if he had to be faced with the dead ducks on the wall in his own room, and then a duck and a dead deer on the wall in her room? And that deer head was going to be big. Huge! It was going to take up a major piece of her wall. What would her brother think about having to sleep with that thing looking at him all night?

She was silent through the rest of dinner. Her mind was too busy thinking about things.

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While Susan and Jasmine were cleaning up the kitchen after dinner, Clint went out and got the few things he would need to hang the duck. "Okay, Jas," he said when he got back into the house, "show me where you want it."

Jasmine shook her head. "I've been thinking about that Dad," she told him. "We can't hang it in my room."

Clint was clearly surprised. "Why not?"

"Because I didn't shoot it. Everyone in the family knows that it was supposed to be Jimmy out there that day hunting instead of me. So how is it going to look if someone comes into my room and they see it there? Everyone knows that girls aren't supposed to be allowed to hunt in this family. What are they going to think?"

Susan raised her eyebrows and looked at her husband, who she could see was equally surprised. "They'll think that it's just a beautiful stuffed duck that we decided to hang there for you, that's all," she suggested.

Jasmine shook her head. "No. I think it might raise too many questions. Besides, it won't go with all the dolls I have in there now, and I'm not taking any of them down! It needs to go in Jimmy's room instead."

"But you won't be able to see it if it's in Jimmy's room," Clint argued.

"I will when I have to be him. And it'll be that much more special to me then."

Clint looked to his wife and saw her just shrug. "Okay, I guess. We'll hang it in Jimmy's room."

Jasmine smiled. "That will be much better!"

Jimmy was doing homework when his room was suddenly invaded by his father, his mother, and his sister. "What's up?" he asked.

"We came to hang the duck," Jasmine told him.

"Not in here!" Jimmy argued.

"Of course in here," she replied. "You shot it!"

"I did not!"

"Don't bother arguing," Susan told him. "It may be better for everyone if it's hung here instead of her room."

“Why?” Jimmy asked. But he got no answer. Better for everyone? As far as he was concerned, it certainly wasn’t better for him.

“Okay, where should we put it?” Clint wondered out loud as he stared at the wall.

“I think we may have to move all the ducks around,” Jasmine suggested. “Don’t forget, that deer head will need to go there too. I think we’re going to need to leave a big space for it, and then put all the ducks around it.”

“The deer head!” Jimmy exclaimed. “Oh no you don’t! This is my room!”

“Of course...” Jasmine started to say, but she was stopped by her mother’s hand on her shoulder.

“I’m afraid that when that thing arrives, it’s probably going to need to go in here too,” she told her son.

“But it’s my room. Don’t I get any say as to what gets hung on the walls?”

Jasmine laughed. “But everyone knows that you shot that deer. So it’s only right that it gets hung on your wall.” She laughed with delight, while her mother leveled a nasty look at her.

Jimmy got up from his desk and walked out. He didn’t want to be anywhere around just then. Not even in his own room.

That night, the dim glow of his nightlight lit up four ducks instead of just three. And all the ducks were spread out more now with two on the left half of the wall and two on the right, leaving a big space in the middle for the deer head his mind kept picturing would soon be in that place.

He had a hard time going to sleep that night. He had another duck looking down at him and blaming him for taking its life, even though it hadn’t actually been him that had shot it. Even though it had been a different “Jimmy” that had shot the duck, the duck was still blaming him.

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By the next day, the Four Musketeers were back together again. But it was a more strained, and restrained, relationship. But the girls

had always been best friends, and always would be. No matter what! Jasmine was just glad to be included again, even though things still weren't quite what they used to be. Allison especially seemed to be colder toward her.

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At lunchtime, Jimmy took his tray over to a table and sat by himself, as he usually did. He had heard a few whispers from some of the guys that had included the word "sissy," but he did his best to ignore them...and everyone else. He had stayed quiet all morning and just tried to be by himself. Alone. Which wasn't that hard since nobody was talking to him anyway.

Eventually, as usually happened, some other kids sat at the table too, but as usual, the seat next to him and the seat across from him remained empty. He preferred it that way. Alone. No taunting. No teasing. Not bothered by anyone or anything. He kept his head down and concentrated on eating his lunch and nothing else. Alone, with his own troubles.

He was alone, until a large presence suddenly at the edge of the table next to him forced him to look up.

"Hi Jimmy," Mrs. Marker said as pleasantly as she could.

"Uh...hi, Mrs. Marker," he replied uncertainly. He noticed the book she was carrying in her hands.

"I know you're being yourself today, and that's particularly why I wanted to talk with you now."

"What about?" he asked.

"This," she said as she carefully set the book down in front of him. "It's the book that the beginning girls are using in Home Ec right now," she said. "I know you're only supposed to be doing this stuff when you have to be your sister. But if you could, I think it would do you a lot of good, and it would be a big help, if you can sort of...catch up on the things you don't know yet. And I don't see any better way than to give you the book and hope you can at least study it somewhat when you're still being...you."

Jimmy suddenly heard some stifled laughter from one of the other guys who had sat at the table.

Mrs. Marker looked up at the laughing boy. "Do you have a problem with it?" she asked him sternly. "Because I can tell you right now that if you do, I can start giving you Home Ec assignments too. I'm sure that Mr. Mercer will be more than glad to agree with me!"

The kid backed off...somewhat. The smirking smile was still plastered on his face. Mrs. Marker glared sternly at him for a moment before turning her attention back to Jimmy, and lowering her voice into a much kinder tone. "If you can do this, Jimmy, I really think it would be a big help, and it would do you a lot of good." She looked up at the boy who was still smirking delightedly. "And it would do you a lot of good too!" she added. "All the boys in this school in fact! So just give me a little reason, and I'll be more than glad to take it up with Principal Mercer!"

She looked down at Jimmy again. "What say?"

Jimmy looked at the book. He looked at the boy who was still smiling all too broadly. Then he looked up at Mrs. Marker. "I... guess," he replied hesitantly.

"Good!" Mrs. Marker exclaimed happily. "Now I left a note in the beginning of the book with some instructions. If you can just start working on chapter one I think it would be wonderful. And if you have any questions at all, you know where you can find me, anytime at all. You know I'll be more than glad to help you with any of it. Then, if you have to be your sister again next week, I'll spend a few minutes with you in class and we'll go over it all. Okay?"

"I...guess," Jimmy said again. "So basically, I've got more homework now?"

Mrs. Marker nodded sadly. "I'm afraid so, Jimmy. But I really hope you'll do this. I'm only trying to help."

"Yeah," Jimmy said sadly. "Everyone's always only trying to help. But the one thing I need the help with the most, I can't get any help with at all."

"What's that?" Mrs. Marker asked, fully concerned.

"Getting out of this whole problem completely!" he replied emphatically, his voice full of his frustration.

"Jimmy," she said, "I'd do that gladly if I could. But I'm afraid that my hands are tied just like everyone else. So I'm doing what I can for you. Okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Thanks," he replied sadly. "I guess."

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Mr. O'Conner watched the kids coming into their classroom after lunch. He had gotten back from lunch a few minutes earlier than usual that day. He and Mrs. Ansley had to switch classrooms for a few hours of course, but they did that every day. Some days they switched in the mornings, some days in the afternoons. It all depended on what schedule worked out best for both of them. Today, he was watching for one of his students to enter. And there she was, as usual, in the middle of all her friends. "Jasmine!" he called. "I need to talk with you for a minute."

"Yes, Mr. O'Conner?" Jasmine asked as she walked up to his desk, that was more Mrs. Ansley's desk than his.

"I was very disappointed," he said, "that you didn't even try to answer any of the questions on that test I gave to the Mechanics class."

"Why bother?" she replied, already frustrated and feeling defensive. "I don't know any of it. That's all stuff my stupid wuss of a brother needs to be worried about instead."

Mr. O'Conner was a bit put off by her attitude, but he pushed on. He picked up a pile of print-outs he had made and handed them to her. "Here," he said. "Take these and study them. Since it looks like we're going to be stuck with each other once in a while, then I see no reason why you shouldn't learn at least a little bit about what we're doing. And as I see it, it's all things that girls should know about as well as the boys."

Jasmine angrily glanced down at the papers in her hand. "Tools and What They're Used For?" she asked as she read the title on the top of the first page.

"I'll be testing you on that the next time you're in class!" he said.

"Let my dumb brother do it instead," she replied.

"No! He's way past that stuff. You're *dumb* brother as you call him, could probably take the high school tests right now and stand a good chance of passing them with no problem. But you didn't even bother to try to answer any questions at all on that simple little quiz I

gave you. None! And so I'm starting you from the top. You're going to have to learn that stuff, like it or not!"

"And what if I don't?" she asked, still determined to not do any of it.

"Then I'll not only get Mr. Mercer involved, I'll take my case directly to your parents as well. If they're going to insist on you coming to school as your brother, then I have no doubt that they're going to insist on you learning these things too. I really have no doubt at all!"

Jasmine backed off, totally surprised. She was fairly sure that her parents would side with him too. Maybe. But in the fraction of a second she had to think about it, she realized that maybe they wouldn't make her do that stuff at all. "Tell you what," she said, "I'll ask them and see what they say."

Mr. O'Conner raised his eyebrows at her attitude. "And I'll talk with Mr. Mercer too and see what he says as well. Tomorrow we'll compare notes. Got it?"

Jasmine pursed her lips angrily. Without another word, she turned and headed for her desk.

"What was that all about?" Nichole asked her urgently.

"Mechanics homework!" Jasmine replied angrily. "But I'm not doing it!" At least, she hoped she wouldn't be doing it.

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After school, Jasmine rushed into the house before any of her brothers. "Mom!" she called. But she didn't have to look far to find her since her mother was already entering the kitchen.

"Hi Jas," Susan said brightly. "How was school today?"

"Awful!" Jasmine replied quickly, then she held out the papers that Mr. O'Conner had given her. "Look!" she said. "Mr. O'Conner wants me to start doing Mechanics homework now, every day, even as myself when I don't have to be Jimmy!"

Susan was surprised, but before she could answer, she saw Tommy and Jimmy coming in through the back door. "Hi guys," she said brightly. "How was school?"

"Fine," Tommy said as he took his coat off. "Can I go over to Elliot's?"

"Do you have any homework?" she asked.

"Of course," Tommy answered, his voice full of frustration.

"Then not until after you've finished. And I have no doubt that Elliot has homework to do too." Tommy clearly wasn't as happy as he headed for his room with his books.

Susan looked up and saw Jimmy just hanging up his coat on the pegs. He was moving a lot slower than his brother had been. "And how was your day, Jimmy?" she asked.

Jimmy shrugged. "Okay, I guess. Mrs. Marker gave me a book at lunch that she wants me to study for Home Ec. Even when I'm still me."

Susan's eyebrows went up. "So you too?" she asked.

"What do you mean me too?" Jimmy replied.

"Mom!" Jasmine said, trying to bring the conversation back to where she wanted it. "It's not right that I should have to do that junk at all. Especially when I don't have to be Jimmy."

Jimmy walked up to the counter and saw the papers in his mother's hand. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Your sister got some homework from Mr. O'Conner," she told him.

Jimmy reached out and pulled his mother's hand around so he could see the papers. "That's all easy stuff," he said as he let her hand go again. "She should have no problem with it at all."

"I shouldn't have to do it at all!" Jasmine argued. "Especially when I don't have to be you!"

Jimmy just shrugged. "Figures," he muttered.

"And how do you feel about it?" Susan asked. "You said that Mrs. Marker gave you some homework too."

He shrugged again. "It doesn't matter," he said. "It's easy stuff too. All about cleaners and poisons in the house and stuff. If she wants me to learn it, then I can do that."

Susan nodded. She was about to say something to Jasmine but Jasmine was faster.

"But Mom, I shouldn't have to do any of that stuff. If the sissy here wants to learn all the girly stuff, then that's just what I would

expect from him. But I don't see any reason at all that I should have to learn his stuff!"

Susan was quickly becoming perturbed with her daughter now. Especially after she had mentioned the "sissy" word. "I don't see where any of this is going to hurt you at all, young lady. And stop calling your brother a sissy!"

"Well he is!" Jasmine returned angrily. "And I shouldn't have to do any of that!"

Susan glared at her daughter. She really didn't want to get into another shouting match with her. Lately, Jasmine had been completely uncontrollable. "Tell you what," she said. "We'll talk to your father about it later."

"Good!" Jasmine replied. "I know Dad will agree with me!" With a turn of her head, she stomped off as if she had just won a major battle, leaving the papers behind with her mother. She had no interest in seeing those papers ever again.

"We'll talk to your father about it," Susan said more reasonably to her son.

"It doesn't matter," Jimmy replied as he started walking out. "No matter what Jas does to me, I won't let her down."

Susan's jaw dropped. He had said it as he was leaving, and he was gone before she could even reply.

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Susan and Jasmine had dinner almost ready by the time Clint got home. Susan had been anxiously waiting for him. The moment he got through the door, she hurried to him, surprising him with a quick kiss even before he got his coat off. She turned to Jasmine. "Jas, start setting the table please, I need to talk with your father."

Jasmine actually smiled. But it was a sly smile. "Sure, Mom," she agreed. "No problem. Hi Daddy," she said as brightly as she could. "Have a good day today?"

Clint didn't miss anything of what had just happened. He was immediately aware that there were problems he was going to have to handle. And by the way Jasmine had just greeted him, he had no

doubt at all that they involved her. "It was fine," he replied to her question. "Until now, I think."

"Daddy," Jasmine continued. "Mr. O'Conner..."

"Wait!" Susan interrupted her. "This is a conversation I need to have with your father. Not you!"

"But Mom," Jasmine argued back. "It concerns me!"

"Yes, and your brother too."

Jasmine wanted badly to reply that she wasn't interested in her brother in the least, but she dared not just then. "But shouldn't he hear what I have to say?"

"Later!" Susan replied. "Let me talk with him first."

"But Mom..."

"Stuff it, Jas!" Susan said sternly, being far more forceful with her daughter than she wanted. She immediately felt sorry for the rebuke, but not that much.

"What the heck is the problem?" Clint asked.

Jasmine was quick. "Mr. O'Conner..."

"I said stuff it!" Susan yelled. This time she didn't feel any remorse at all. She turned to Clint. "Let's go to our room. I'll tell you there."

"Maybe we better," Clint agreed, never taking his eyes off of Jasmine.

Two minutes later, he was behind the closed bedroom door with his wife. "Now what's going on?" His day had started out bad having to yell at Jasmine, and now it looked like she was involved in yet another problem.

"Jas came home from school today with these," she said as she handed the papers Jasmine had given her to him.

Clint looked at them briefly. He was surprised to see what they were. "Tool stuff?" he asked.

"From Mr. O'Conner," she told him. "Jimmy's Mechanic's teacher."

"What of it?" he asked. But he barely got the question out when his cell phone rang. "Darn!" he breathed as he hurried to answer it. "Hello?"

"Clint? It's John," John Mercer replied.

“Hey John,” Clint replied, quickly looking at his wife. He saw her eyebrows go up. “What’s happening?” he asked.

“I wanted to talk to you a bit about Jasmine,” John replied.

“What about her?” Clint asked, now fully concerned. Then he added, “Hey wait, Sue is right here with me and we’re alone...I think. Is this something we both need to hear?”

“Might be a good idea,” John agreed.

“Hang on,” Clint replied. He pressed a button on his cell phone to put it on speaker. “You there?” Clint asked.

“I’m here,” John replied.

“Hi John,” Susan called toward the phone.

“Hi Sue,” John replied.

“Now what’s this all about?” Clint asked.

“You know Mr. O’Conner is Jimmy’s Mechanics teacher,” John said.

“Yeah. What of it?” Clint replied.

“He was in my office right after school on Monday. Actually, both he and Mrs. Marker, our Home Ec teacher, were here at the same time.”

“Okay,” Clint said. “I take it this has something to do with the twins then?”

“Yes,” John told him. “Right now, especially Jasmine I’m afraid.”

“Okay, what’s she done now?” Clint asked.

“Well, it’s not quite that,” John replied. “It’s more like what she didn’t do. On Monday the twins were all switched around, having to be each other.”

“Yeah, we couldn’t exactly miss that part,” Clint replied.

John laughed, “Of course not. But that means that they were each in the other’s classes. Jimmy was in Mrs. Marker’s Home Ec class, and Jasmine was in Mr. O’Conner’s Mechanics class instead.”

“Okay,” Clint replied. “I got that much. What of it?”

“Clint, both teachers gave quizzes on Monday. Surprisingly, Jimmy did fairly well on the one in Home Ec. I understand Susan was a big help toward that.”

Clint was surprised. “I guess that’s good,” he said. “But what about Jasmine then?” Jasmine was the one he was most concerned with.

“Clint, Jasmine signed her name to the quiz and that was it. She didn’t even bother trying to write down wrong answers on it. She just didn’t bother!”

“Okay,” Clint replied. “So what should she have done? I’m pretty sure she doesn’t know anything at all about that stuff.”

“That’s why I’m calling,” John said. “Mr. O’Conner feels that since Jasmine didn’t even try to answer the questions, then he should at least try to help her learn a little bit of what they’re doing in there. He wants to take her back and work with her on all the basics from where the beginner students start. But when he brought the subject up to her today, she was more than a bit rude to him.”

Clint looked down at the papers he now held in his hand. “Yeah,” he replied. “I’m holding some of that stuff he must have discussed with her in my hands right now. I’m sorry she was so rude to him though. I’ll have another little talk with her about it tonight.”

“That’s not really what I meant,” John replied. “Mr. O’Conner said that Jasmine was going to check with you and Sue about whether or not she would have to do that work. And frankly, I’m not sure where the family is going to stand on the matter. I mean, she’s not really in the class. But at the same time, she is...sort of. And based on that, personally, I don’t think it would hurt Jas at all to at least learn a little of it.”

“John...” Susan spoke up. “Did you know that Mrs. Marker gave Jimmy a Home Ec assignment today too?”

“No, Sue. I didn’t. But I’m not surprised. Both of them were very concerned about it when they were in here together. I worked out with them that from now on, they won’t be giving any tests to the kids on Monday’s. I talked with their other teacher, Mrs. Ansley, about it too.”

“John,” Susan said, “Jimmy told me he didn’t really care that he had to do the Home Ec assignments. He said it was all easy stuff anyway. But...um...he did kind of say one thing that caught me by surprise about it.”

“What’s that?” John asked.

“He said that no matter what Jasmine did to him, he wasn’t going to let her down.”

“He said that?” John asked. “That’s what Mrs. Marker said he told her in class.”

Clint looked at his wife, clearly surprised to hear what his son had evidently said – twice now.

“John,” he said into the phone, still looking directly at his wife. “I don’t know how the rest of the family will feel about the matter either, and I don’t intend on bringing the matter up with any of them. Listen, if Jimmy is determined to not let his sister down in that Home Ec class, then the very least we can do for him is to help him out in his own class. I’ll see to it personally that Jas gets a little extra help with the tool stuff. In fact,” he said as he glanced down at the papers in his hands, “I think she and I will go out back to the workshop tonight! Maybe for more than just a little lesson on tools.”

Susan’s eyes went wide at hearing that. “Clint?” she asked cautiously. “Is that really necessary?”

“It is if she’s being rude again. Especially to her teachers. And I ain’t having that at all!” He turned back to the phone in his hands. “John, you can expect them both to study that stuff as hard as they do anything else. And you can tell that to both those teachers. Hear?”

“Got it Clint,” John replied. “I’ll let them know.”

“Good! And thanks John. I appreciate the heads up.”

“No problem, Clint.”

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Jasmine tried to talk to her father the moment he and her mother came back from the bedroom. “Daddy,” she began.

“No!” Clint told her sternly. “Don’t even bother. I got the whole story already, so don’t go there Jas.”

“But Daddy...” Jasmine replied.

“Don’t ‘but Daddy’ me,” Clint told her. “I just got finished talking with your Uncle John and we’ve come to a decision on the matter.”

“What?” she asked.

“You and me are going out in the workshop after dinner to have a little discussion about how to treat your teachers politely, and then

another discussion about tools. And I mean, we're going to discuss things fully!"

Jasmine wasn't totally sure, but it almost sounded like she was about to get another whipping. Of course, she had only gotten hit with her father's belt once in her life, for going hunting when she shouldn't, so she wasn't totally sure.

"You mean you're going to make me learn all that tool junk when I shouldn't have to?" she asked incredulously.

"You better believe it Jas," he replied. "And now I've got to go have another little talk with your brother. I think he deserves to know that he's going to have to do the Home Ec stuff too. And...I think he deserves to know that I'm real proud of him again. Very proud!" he added as he turned and walked back toward the bedrooms.

Chapter 23 - Urgent Worries

January 14th – 16th

Ten! Ten swats! Ten...*somewhat* hard slaps across her naked backside with his thick belt. And all he had seen for his efforts was the look of pure stubbornness and defiance on her face. No remorse, just...defiance. Afterwards, he had opened the first drawer of his tool chest and begun showing her the tools, explaining what each screwdriver was for and what it was called. Then he did the same with the wrenches in his second drawer. He had to make her repeat back to him what he was telling her, because he could see that she simply didn't care. Defiance! And stubbornness. It had remained written all over her face. She didn't believe she should have to do it, so she was refusing to show any more interest than the bare minimum that she could possibly get away with. He had promised her that they would be going through the tools every single evening from now on – until he was satisfied with how much she had learned towards that Mechanics class she was now part of.

"I just don't get that girl!" he complained to his wife as they were climbing into bed together. "I swatted her backside, and I don't think it did any good. You know that look she gets when she goes all stubborn on us?"

"All too well!" Susan replied, remembering her frequent frustration with it.

"Well, imagine that look times ten!"

"Ugh! That bad?"

"Worse!" he replied. "I'm going to have to go out there with that girl every single night to make sure she learns something."

"Not to whip her again!"

"No. At least I hope not. But like it or not, it won't hurt her to know the difference between an Allen wrench and a crescent wrench."

"I have no idea what either of those things are either," Sue told him. She snuggled up to his big body. "But that's your business to know, not mine. Now show me what that other wrench that you've got is capable of doing."

"Oh my!" he said. "Are you in for some lessons tonight!"

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By Thursday, the relationships between the Four Musketeers was better, but it wasn't quite what it used to be. Allison still remained somewhat at odds with Jasmine. But the girls had all been best friends for their entire lives, nothing was going to keep them apart for long.

For her part, Jasmine continually tried to watch herself around the other girls. There was one brief time during the day when she simply couldn't help herself, and she had quietly let loose to a few of the guys about how her brother loved wearing bras all the time. But when she did it, none of the other girls were close enough to know what she had said. The recent fallout between them had left her scared. Her friends were too valuable to her. She was still trying to get back into their good graces again, with all of them. She wasn't about to do anything at all that would jeopardize their friendship. At least, not where any of them could possibly find out.

She was angry though. She just dared not let the other girls know it. She was angry at her stupid wimp of a brother. She blamed him solely for the problems that she'd so recently had with all her friends. He was trying to replace her with them. Move her out. He wanted to take her place completely with them and leave her completely out. He wanted to be one of the Musketeers and make sure she would never be part of that special group again. She hated him for that. She hated him! And...she especially hated him for the way he had somehow manipulated her father into thinking that he was so wonderful, and she was anything but! As far as she was concerned, him doing that, was nothing but despicable! But getting back at her two-timing wimp of a brother was more difficult now, because she couldn't dare do anything to further jeopardize the friendship she shared with all the Musketeers.

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For most of the week, Jimmy was alone, and it was more noticeable to him at school than it was at home. Ever since he came back to school as himself on Tuesday, all the other kids seemed to avoid him completely. None of the other kids talked to him at all. Boys or girls. Almost.

“Jimmy, what are you doing here in the boy’s room? Don’t you belong in the girl’s room instead?”

“Jimmy, what are you doing standing up to pee? Don’t girls sit all the time?”

The taunting in the boy’s room was basically the only words any of the kids ever said to him anymore, all day, all week. Whenever possible, he now raised his hand in class to be excused to go to the bathroom at times when the taunting would be less likely. It helped. It also left him even more ignored. He had even noticed that now that his sister was back with her friends again, none of them really said anything to him either.

Alone. Maybe it was better that way. But it didn’t stop his growing feeling of isolation and depression.

By Friday, he couldn’t wait for the weekend, just so he could stay home and not think about how everyone avoided him. Even if he had to be his sister for a few days again, he would be able to just stay home for those days and forget that nobody liked or even cared about him enough to say anything to him. Even when he had been himself at home, he had always been mostly by himself anyway, so even being his sister, things would still be somewhat more normal. And maybe this time it would be better if he avoided all his sister’s friends. He wasn’t really a Musketeer anyway. He didn’t really belong with them. He wasn’t a girl. Not really. Something that was pretty much confirmed by the fact that none of them bothered to say anything to him at school either. No, staying home for the weekend, even if he had to be his sister again, would be much, much better, if only so he could forget for a few days that nobody liked him or even wanted him around.

And not only that, Monday was a school holiday. It was Martin Luther King Day. He would have three whole days without school. Three whole days where he could forget that not one kid in the school would talk to him...other than to tease and taunt him. Not the girls. Not the boys. Three days when he could stay home and do... But he didn't know what exactly he would do at home. He supposed that most likely he would have to keep sewing and working on his sister's school project for the Home Ec spring fashion show. Ugh! He would much rather just go out to the workshop and try to do something useful with his tools. It was frustrating to have all those great new tools, and every time the weekend came up when he might spend more time with them, he had to spend his time being his sister instead. It was so, so frustrating! But it would still be a whole lot better than being at school. Alone.

Day by day. Hour by hour. His isolated and depressed state grew, even though he wasn't aware of how bad it was really getting.

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At lunch on Friday, the girls were all talking animatedly, much as they usually did. Their relationship with each other was continually getting better, especially between Jasmine and Allison. All the girls were happy. They were all talking excitedly, when Olivia noticed something out of the corner of her eye. The conversation swirled around her and with her. After a moment, she looked again. As her friends continued on, she stopped hearing what they were saying as she stared at another table. Of all the girls, she had the best view of where Jimmy usually sat. And no surprise, he was alone. Again.

She had noticed it often. She had noticed it for a long time in fact. But this time, there just seemed to be something wrong with Jimmy. And now that she thought about it, she had been watching him looking worse and worse all week.

"Olivia!" Jasmine exclaimed. "Hello! Are you there?"

Olivia turned quickly. "Sorry," she said. "I was...somewhere else."

Jasmine turned around and looked, but the only thing she saw that might catch Olivia's eye was her stupid brother. "Are you still

hung up on him?" she asked Olivia. "Forget him. Move on. He's not worth it. Besides, he's your cousin."

"Well heck!" Olivia shot back with a smile. "Don't dare anyone get you started on Elliot. *He's so cute!*" she added in a mocking high pitched voice.

"Well, he is!" Jasmine exclaimed happily. "Besides, he's an incredible shot!"

"Who cares," Nichole replied. "That's all he does is talk about guns and hunting. My brother has to be the most boring guy on the planet."

"He is not!" Jasmine exclaimed.

"Well you can have him!" Nichole told her. "Maybe instead of switching you and Jimmy around, they could switch Jimmy and Elliot around instead."

Jasmine laughed delightedly. "I think I'd like that. Have I ever mentioned that your brother is cute?" The laughter from all the girls felt so good to Jasmine.

Olivia was back in the conversation again, but not for long. Once again her eyes kept finding Jimmy, sitting alone. Looking so... sad. He always looked somewhat sad. For as long as she had known him he had been that way. But lately, he just seemed... worse.

"Will you forget about him!" Jasmine said to her. "Really!" She turned to the rest of the girls at the table. "I don't know why any of you bother with him when he thinks he's trying to be me. You ought to just forget him. Besides, you all keep talking about how he keeps spoiling your fun."

"How can you say that?" Olivia asked, suddenly angry. "How can you even suggest such a thing?"

"It's easy," Jasmine replied. "He's not worth it. He's just a big sissy who's afraid of his own shadow."

Olivia got angrily to her feet. "I hate you!" she hissed at Jasmine. Then she picked up her lunch tray and walked off. How could Jasmine continue to say such cruel things about her own brother? Obviously, Jasmine hadn't gotten any better about her attitude toward Jimmy at all!

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Jimmy was lost in a swirling bog of self-pity. Nobody talked to him. Nobody wanted him anywhere near them. Nobody liked him. In the middle of all that murky musing, he was startled by a lunch tray suddenly being dropped on the table across from him. And when he looked up, Olivia was sitting down.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked.

"Uh, of course not," he replied. Actually, he wasn't totally sure he wanted his "aloneness" being interrupted.

"You okay?" Olivia asked as she started eating again.

Jimmy only shrugged. He didn't feel like making any other kind of answer, mostly because he wasn't sure if he was okay or not. "How come you're eating here?" he asked. "You were just over with all your friends."

"Your sister is being a pain in the ass again," she replied.

He rolled his eyes. "She's pretty good at that sometimes."

"Are you going to have to be Jasmine again this weekend?" she asked.

"All three days," he confirmed.

"Cool!" Olivia said brightly. "And it's a three day weekend too! The weather report is calling for a lot of snow tonight and tomorrow. Maybe we can all slide down the hill again."

That thought startled him somewhat. "Um...that would be kind of fun," he admitted. He hadn't even thought about doing that. But then he remembered something else. "But...I don't think I'm going to be able to do it."

"Why not?"

"Have you noticed the way they make me dress when I have to be my sister?"

She stared at him for a moment. "Um...that could be a problem," she admitted. "But if you talk to your mother, I'm sure she'll let you wear something so you can play out in the snow."

He thought about it and nodded his head. "Hopefully!" he replied. "But if not...I guess it doesn't matter anyway," he replied.

"Why not?" she asked.

"It just...doesn't." he replied.

“Well, either way,” she said. “I’m sure we’ll have a great time this weekend. I mean, we can’t spend all our time outside.”

But that thought brought up something else he had been thinking about. “Um...Olivia.”

“Yeah?” she said as she stuffed more food into her mouth.

“Maybe it would be better if you all just forgot about me. I mean, face it, I’m not a girl. Not really. I don’t really belong with you guys. And yeah, I really appreciate how you’re trying to help me and all, but I’m not really one of you.”

She stopped eating and just stared at him. “You don’t like us? You don’t like being with any of us? ‘Cause we were really trying hard for you.”

“No!” he replied quickly. “I do like you. I like you all!” He briefly looked down at the table before softly saying, “Especially you.”

“Me?” she asked as her heart suddenly skipped a beat.

He looked up at her shyly. “Well, face it, you are the prettiest girl in the school.”

The quick emotional rush she got was like nothing she ever expected. “Wow!” she said breathlessly. “I never expected that. Especially from you.”

“Why not?”

“Because...” But she didn’t want to say that she had always had a crush on him. “Just...because. Anyway, I think your sister has the prettiest girl in the school title all sewed up. She always has.”

“Jasmine?” he asked.

“Do you have any other sisters?”

“No, but...” He searched for words that wouldn’t be too awkward for him to say. “Who wants to look at her anyway? I sure don’t!”

She giggled. “I guess you wouldn’t.” Her face screwed up into a slightly strange look. “Um...your sister though hasn’t been looking... quite as good lately though,” she said seriously. “She just looks a bit...different.” Before he could say anything, she added, “So do you.”

He could have handled replying to her comment about the way Jasmine looked, but he didn’t want to face the words that she had just said, especially coming from her. He sighed sadly as he looked

down again. "Don't remind me," he said so softly she almost didn't hear him.

It was a moment before she replied. "Is that because of what those hormones are doing to you?" she asked.

He looked up quickly, horrified that she had said it, and looked around at the other guys who were sitting at the table too. He saw one of them suddenly looking over at him as if he was suddenly surprised or interested. Jimmy couldn't answer the question. He got up from the table instead and grabbed his tray. "Look," he said. "Maybe it would be better if you just forgot about me from now on. I'm not worth it." He walked off quickly then to empty his tray.

Olivia stared after him. In the space of just a few minutes, she had felt his utter sadness, then she had experienced total euphoria from what he had told her, only to sink back into total despair again. She felt so sad for him. So sad.

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Janet was late getting home from the hospital that night. When she did finally get home, she briefly greeted her husband before going straight back to check on her kids. Aaron was already in bed, but he hadn't fallen asleep yet. She went into his room and kissed him, wishing him goodnight. Then she left him again, closing his bedroom door all but a crack.

She headed to her daughter's room next, where she could still see the light on. From the doorway, she could see her daughter sitting in front of her vanity, brushing her long hair. "Hi Allie," she said as she entered her room.

"Mom!" Allison exclaimed happily as she turned around in her seat. "You had to work real late tonight."

"Yeah," she agreed. "Then with all the snow coming down, I wasn't sure if I was going to get to come home at all. Some of the other nurses in the next shift couldn't even get there. And then when I did get the okay to leave, I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to drive home or have to call your father to come get me in the truck. But...I'm here," she said happily. She hugged her daughter's head and planted a kiss on top of it. She took the brush from her hand

and started brushing Allison's long hair herself. "So how was school today?"

"Okay," Allison replied as she sat enjoying her mother's attentions. "A little strange and troubling though."

"Oh? Why?"

"Jasmine again. She mouthed off some not so nice things about her brother at lunch today, and she got Olivia so mad that Olivia picked her tray up and left us. Totally! She went over and sat with Jimmy instead."

Janet paused her brushing for a moment as she thought about that. Evidently, Jasmine was still being a problem. She remembered something else. "Didn't you once tell me that Olivia has a crush on Jimmy?"

Allison laughed a bit. "Yeah. Big time! I know they're cousins and all, but that doesn't mean she doesn't like him. Like a lot!"

Janet smiled. "Yeah. She would. But how about when Jimmy is Jasmine? How does she see him then?"

"I'm not really sure," Allison replied thoughtfully. "I don't really think she's seeing him quite the same way. I mean, when he's being Jasmine now, he's starting to look more and more like...a real girl."

"Yeah, I think I've noticed that myself," Janet admitted. "Marcy says he actually looks pretty when he smiles."

"He doesn't do that very often," Allison said. "Hardly at all – no matter how hard we try."

"Maybe you're trying too hard."

"Mom, we've tried everything. Mostly, we've pretty much given up lately. About the only time recently that I've seen him look happy is when he's holding one of Nichole's puppies. He suddenly seems to like them an awful lot for some reason."

Janet nodded and considered that as she continued to brush her daughter's hair. "Most likely, that could be from the hormones in his system. From what your dad and I have found out, he's going to start seeing a lot of things differently now. And don't forget all those strange emotions he can't really handle. I have no doubt that it's all combining and mixing things around to create kind of a whole different person."

Allison thought about that. "Mom, could that be part of what's happening with Jasmine too?"

"Yeah, Allie. It's very possible."

Allison thought about that for a moment. "Mom, Jasmine keeps suggesting that we shouldn't pay any attention to her brother at all... not include him in with us when we do anything. And even after Olivia left today, she still seemed like she wanted us to stay away from him."

"She did?" Janet replied. She wasn't sure if she was surprised to hear that or not. "I would think something like that would make her want to quit hunting instead."

"Not so far," Allison replied. "Which is a real shame, because we all miss her. At least, I think we miss the *old* Jasmine...the way she used to be. Right now, she's just plain...a pain in the ass sometimes. And she gets so cruel toward Jimmy. You wouldn't believe it!"

"I'm sorry to hear that," Janet replied. "You girls have been so close, all your lives!"

"Yeah," Allison replied softly. "You want to know the strange part though?"

"What's that?"

"Jimmy told Olivia today that we should just forget about him too. He told her we shouldn't bother with him anymore. That he wasn't worth it."

The brush stopped again in Janet's hands. As tired as she was, there were things her daughter had just said that sent warnings straight to her head. "Allie," she said seriously. "Tell me about Jimmy. Has he been...depressed lately?"

"You mean more than his usual non-smiling self?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

Allison considered that. "I don't know. Maybe. I haven't really talked to him."

"Have you talked to him at all?"

She considered that. "Not really. I haven't had any reason to talk to him since Monday, when he was still being Jasmine."

"Allie," Janet asked. "Who *has* talked to him? Think please, because it's important. Has anyone from the family talked to him

recently?”

“I don’t know,” Allison replied. “I’m not in their class with them, so I wouldn’t know. The only time I ever see him is on the way to school, at lunch, and then on the way home. And I always talk with the other girls then, or Ashley sometimes too. Why would I talk to him? The only one that I’ve seen talking to him recently was Olivia today, and that’s it.”

“Who does he usually have lunch with?” Janet asked. “Anyone from the family? How about his brother?”

Allison shook her head. “No. He pretty much stays by himself all the time now. I don’t think the other kids want anything to do with him anyway.”

Janet was becoming more alarmed. “Allie, he doesn’t talk to anybody at all during lunch?”

“Not usually,” she confirmed.

“And you said the other kids don’t want him anywhere around them?”

“That’s the impression I get.”

“Damn!” Janet said as she dropped the brush in her daughter’s lap and rushed out of the room. She needed to make a phone call. Several phone calls. But who to call first? She decided that since it was so late she would talk with Jane first. She pushed the button to dial her sister-in-law’s number as soon as she could. She noticed Allison had followed and was watching her from the distance. “Hi Jane,” she said as soon as she heard her sister-in-law’s voice. “Listen, I know it’s late, but by any chance, is Olivia still up? I was just talking with Allison and I’m real worried about Jimmy.”

“Jimmy? Why?” Jane replied. “He hasn’t come to either of us with a problem. And we’re both watching as close as possible to everything that goes on around those two.”

“Jane,” Janet said as she now saw her husband coming into the room to hear a well, “it’s not what’s going on around them that has me worried. I think it’s more like what’s *not* going on.”

“What do you mean?” Jane asked.

“Jane, I’m getting the impression that Jimmy may be slipping into some major depression here. And I mean major! I want to talk with

Olivia to see if she's seen or heard of anyone at all talking with him in school."

"Olivia? Why her?"

"Because according to Allie, Olivia is the one and only person she's seen saying two words to him all week. And she said that Jimmy himself suggested he wasn't worth the girls bothering with him anymore."

"Janet!" Brian said, coming closer. "Put that thing on speaker. I've got to hear this!"

"I'm getting Olivia now," Jane replied while Janet switched her phone over.

It was less than a minute before they heard Olivia's voice saying. "Hi Aunt Janet."

Janet forced herself to be patient. "Hi Olivia," she replied. "Olivia, listen to me. This is very important. Allison tells me you're the only one she's seen talking to Jimmy in some time now. Is that right?"

"I don't know," Olivia replied. "I talked with him for just a few minutes at lunch today. But that's it."

"Olivia," Janet said, "how often do the other kids talk to Jimmy at school?"

"Huh!" Olivia grunted. "Are you kidding? Unless they're going to say something nasty to him, nobody says anything to him at all!"

Janet looked up into her husband's eyes. Alarm was written across both their faces.

"Olivia," Brian said urgently.

"Hi Uncle Brian," Olivia replied.

Brian ignored the greeting. "Olivia, what exactly did Jimmy tell you when you talked to him today?"

"Um...are you sure you need to know?" Olivia replied uncertainly.

"Olivia," Brian told her, "unless you want to take the chance that you'll be attending Jimmy's funeral soon, then it's vital that we know!"

That shook Olivia, and Allison who had been listening in the background too. "Um..." Olivia replied uncertainly. "I think we started off talking about maybe getting to slide down the hill

tomorrow in the snow, but he wasn't sure if he'd be able to because of what he has to wear and all."

"Okay, what else, Olivia?"

"Um...I really remember that at one point he said we shouldn't bother including him when all the girls get together again. Which I thought was really sad because Jasmine had just been telling us that we shouldn't bother including him too. Which I'm afraid kind of pissed me off to the point where I left all the girls and went over to talk with Jimmy instead since he was all alone and seemed so...I don't know, like really sad. You know?"

"He told you not to include him anymore?" Brian asked for confirmation.

"Yeah. He said he wasn't worth it. But Uncle Brian, I think he is worth it. I really do!"

"Of course he is!" Brian confirmed. "Olivia, you said he seemed really sad?"

"Yeah. I mean, I could tell from halfway across the lunchroom. But he's been kind of getting that way more and more for the last few days."

"Oh God!" Janet breathed softly.

"Olivia," Brian said. "What else did you two talk about?"

"Um..." she didn't want to mention the one biggest thing he had said that she would never forget. "Not much really," she told him.

"But you did talk about other things," he realized.

"Well...sort of."

"What Olivia? Remember, we're really worried about him right now. I'm about to go over to his house to check on him myself. *Everything* is important right now."

"What's wrong with him?" Olivia asked, even more worried now.

"Hopefully, nothing major at all," Brian told her. "Hopefully! I'm hoping we found out about this in time so we can do something about it. Olivia, we don't know anything for sure yet, but it's possible that if he's being ignored by everyone so much, he could be dropping down into a very bad depressed state. Olivia, sometimes when kids get like that, they commit suicide. They kill themselves. So it's very possible that you just going and talking with him at lunch

today may have been the best thing possible. Now was there anything else at all that you talked about?"

They all heard Olivia's whimper of fear over the phone. Brian and Janet also heard their own daughter's gasp as she came right up to them and stared down at the phone in Janet's hand.

"You're scaring me, Uncle Brian," Olivia said.

"I'm sorry, Olivia. I didn't mean to do that. But that's how serious this is. And I really need to get over to their house quickly now to check on him. But it sounds like you're the one and only person who's talked to him lately. So you're the only one who knows anything about him at all. Now was there anything else that you talked about?"

"Um...are you sure you need to know this, Uncle Brian? 'Cause it's kind of...private and...I don't know...embarrassing."

"Olivia, we're talking about saving his life! We have to know *everything*."

Olivia gave in. "He told me he thought I was the prettiest girl in school."

Janet almost felt like laughing. She put her hand on her husband's arm as a sign of relief.

"But Uncle Brian," Olivia said, "I didn't tell him that I felt the same way about him. I mean, I know it's wrong because he's my cousin and all, but...I like him, Uncle Brian. He's...nice. But I was just too embarrassed to tell him that."

"It's okay, Olivia. Now was there anything else? Anything at all?"

"Not really. We only talked for a few minutes before he got mad all of a sudden and walked off."

"He got mad? Why?"

"I don't know. All I mentioned was that he and Jasmine both seem to look different lately. And all of a sudden he seemed to get mad. He said not to bother with him again, and he walked off."

"Umph!" Brian grunted softly as he took that last bit of information in. "Olivia, are you sure there wasn't anything else that you two talked about?"

"Not that I remember," she said. "What can I do?" she asked. "I mean...I've got to do something now to help him!"

"Don't worry about it right now, Olivia," Brian told her. "We don't really know what's going on ourselves right now. Now let us talk to your mother again."

"Okay," Olivia replied. "Just let me know what to do!"

"We will," Janet replied. "Don't worry, we will."

"Brian?" Jane said as she took over the phone. "We had no idea he was getting that bad. None! I feel so...responsible for all this."

"Nobody knew," Brian said. "Now I'll let you talk with Janet. I've got to call Clint and Susan and tell them I'm on my way over there."

"I'm going with you!" Janet told him in no uncertain terms. "Jane?" she said into the phone. "We'll have to get back to you tomorrow."

"Would it be better if we came too?" Jane asked.

"No," Janet replied. "We'll let you know."

"Call us tonight!" Jane told her. "Don't wait till tomorrow. Neither of us will sleep otherwise."

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For Susan, the phone ringing at that moment, at that time of night, was nothing but an irritating headache. They had switched the twins around again a little while ago and had sent them each to bed.

For once, she had been hoping that they wouldn't have to switch them at all that weekend because of all the snow that was falling, but a short phone call to Jed had dashed that hope all too quickly. Because of the snow, he was planning on going out to plow the main roads that the family used as soon as the sun came up. He was planning on having Ethan, Justin, and Jimmy shovel the snow in a few places where the plow on the front of his truck wouldn't be able to get. After that, he had said the kids could go out and have some fun. But most likely, he was going to need them to do it all over again later that night, and probably the next day too if the snow continued to come down.

So her hopes had been dashed, and the kids were reversed once again, for the next three days. At least they would be home all weekend. No school on Monday, and the way things looked, nobody would be going out to church on Sunday either.

Her husband and Tommy had already been talking about what a pain it was going to be to keep the driveway clear if the weather forecast held. The latest expectation was for well over a foot of snow where they lived. Possibly more. From experience, Susan knew that because of where they lived, more would be the likelier possibility.

It took her a minute to get to the phone since she wasn't interested in answering it. "Hello?" she finally said.

"Susan!" Brian's urgent voice said quickly. "Janet and I are getting ready to walk out the door to come see you. But I need you to do something for me quickly."

"Brian, why would you be coming here now? And if you don't mind, I'd rather not have any company tonight. It's awfully late."

"Susan, I need you to go check Jimmy. Right now!"

The urgency in his voice was reaching her now. "What's wrong?" she asked. "I just put them to bed an hour ago. They were fine then."

"Please humor me," Brian urged, "and just check on him. I need to know that he's alright."

"What the heck is going on?" Susan demanded as she nearly ran down the hallway. She stopped a moment and stared at the two bedroom doors. "Um...Brian, which Jimmy are we talking about? You know we switched them around again earlier."

"The one that's actually your son. The real Jimmy!" Brian told her. "Please just check to make sure he's okay."

Susan opened the bedroom door. The only light was coming from further down the hall. She quickly switched the overhead light on and saw him stir in the bed.

"Mom?" Jasmine said as he turned over and looked at her. "What's up?"

"Are you okay sweetie?" she asked her switched around son, who just then looked all too much like a real girl with his hair all messed up from being asleep.

"I was," he replied. "I was sleeping. What's the problem?"

Susan turned back to the phone. "Brian, he's fine. Now what's going on?"

"I'll tell you as soon as we get there," he told her. "And if he's awake now, you might as well keep him up so I can talk to him."

"Okay," Susan agreed as she realized her husband was now in the room with her. "I'll throw some coffee on," she told him.

"Don't worry about the coffee," he told her. "We'll be right there."

"I'll put some on anyway," Susan replied. "Something tells me we're going to be up all night now."

Five minutes later, Clint opened the back door to let Janet and Brian into the kitchen. "What's the problem with Jimmy?" Clint asked even before he had closed the door behind them.

"We're worried that he may be overly depressed," Brian told them. "Allison said some things about him to Janet this evening that made us both real worried about him."

"What kind of things?" Clint asked.

"Like the fact that nobody has said two decent words to him at school all week since he went back to being himself. According to Olivia, he's been looking more and more depressed every day. And when Jasmine made her angry at lunch today, Olivia went over to talk to Jimmy instead. I think she was the first person to actually talk to him all week, and then he walked off on her because he got angry at something she said."

"So now Olivia is being a problem with him too?" Clint asked.

"No," Brian replied. "She may have helped the situation in ways she doesn't even know."

"So what's the big concern?" Clint asked.

"Clint," Brian said. "With some kids, when they get isolated like that, there's a real concern for suicide. If he gets depressed enough, it could happen!"

"Oh my God!" Susan breathed quickly. "But he seemed fine all night!"

"I'm sure he is," Brian replied. "But I just want to check to make sure. There could be another reason for him to feel depressed too, and I've got to check."

"I left him in his room," Susan said as she partially pointed toward the hallway.

Jasmine was just falling asleep again, this time with the overhead light on which made him happier, when his room was

invaded by all four adults. “Ugh!” he grunted as he rolled over and saw them all walking in on him. “I’m never going to get any sleep.”

“Sit up, Sweetie,” Susan told him. “Uncle Brian needs to talk to you.”

Jasmine reluctantly scooted himself up in the bed, trying to pull a pillow behind him better for more support. “What’s going on?” he asked.

Brian sat on the bed with him. In the feminine room, and in the nightgown, and with his hair growing longer, he looked very much like a real girl. Of course, the hormones had started changing his face a bit too. “Jimmy,” he said, and saw his nephews eyes open wider in surprise. He backed up a bit. “I know you’re supposed to be Jasmine right now, but I don’t care. I need to ask you about a few things.”

Jasmine did her usual eye rolling again before asking, “What did I do now?”

“Nothing,” Brian told him. “And that’s part of the problem?”

“So there was something I should have done? What?”

“No, nothing like that,” Brian said to him. “Jimmy, do the other kids ever talk to you at school? Any of them? Family, and also the ones who aren’t family? Anyone at all?”

“Sure,” he said, starting to sound a bit more frustrated. “Every time I walk into the boy’s room they talk to me. The only problem is, what they’re always saying isn’t things I want to discuss.”

“Like what?”

Jimmy shook his head while he tried to think. “Like...why am I using the boy’s room instead of the girl’s room. Like why am I standing up to pee like a boy instead of sitting down like a girl. Like asking if I’m wearing a bra under my shirt. Like asking me why I didn’t wear a dress that day. Like...”

“Okay,” Brian said quickly. “I get the picture. How about other times?”

He shook his head again. “No,” he replied. “Nobody says anything to me. And it’s a lot better that way. I really prefer it.”

“Nobody talks to you at all? Decently anyway.”

He shook his head. “Even my sister’s friends don’t bother me,” he said. “As soon as she’s back with them again, they barely know I

exist.” He suddenly smiled shyly. “Except Olivia today. She came and sat with me for a minute during lunch. That was kind of...” He would have said nice, but it hadn’t fully turned out that way. “...okay, I guess,” he finished.

“Yes,” Brian said to him. “I talked on the phone with Olivia a little while ago.”

“You did? Then why are you bothering me? As far as I know, I didn’t say anything to her that should get me in any trouble.”

“No,” Brian said to him. “You didn’t, and we weren’t interested in anything like that. It was something that Allison told us earlier that had us worried. And then when we talked with Olivia, we became even more concerned.”

“Why?”

“Because Olivia noticed that you’ve seemed to look sadder and sadder every day. And that’s the part that has us worried.”

Jasmine shrugged. “So?” he said. “I know the hormones you put in me are doing weird things to me. Too many weird things to me! So what if I’m not exactly jumping for joy anymore.”

“Jimmy, does the fact that nobody talks to you bother you?”

He shrugged. “Some,” he admitted.

“Possibly more than just some?”

Jasmine stared at him, then replied. “It’s better that way,” he replied.

“Why? Why would you think that?”

“Because at least they’re not teasing me or making crude comments to me,” he said. “Most everyone is laughing at me whether I’m around or not. So it’s better that I just stay by myself. It’s a lot easier.”

“But Jimmy, that’s not good,” Brian said softly.

“Sure it is!” Jasmine replied. He shrugged again. “Basically, I guess I’ve always spent a lot of my time alone. Even here at home. I’m used to it. Why should it matter now?”

Brian just looked at him for a moment before he replied. “Jimmy, sometimes when some kids get real depressed...”

“Who says I’m depressed?”

“Aren’t you?” Brian asked. “Haven’t you been feeling sorry for yourself because of all the teasing you’re getting, and because

nobody seems to talk to you anymore. Because nobody admits that you're even alive!"

Now it was a moment before Jasmine could answer. "I guess," he finally mumbled. "So what?"

"As I was saying," Brian replied, "some kids, when they get that depressed, they get so far down the hole that they commit suicide."

Jasmine jerked his head back in surprise. "I'm *not* going to kill myself!" he said in no uncertain terms. "Why would you ever think that?"

"Because some kids do it!" Brian told him. "For a lot less reason than you have. We care about you Jimmy. We all do! We don't want anything bad to happen to you. None of us!"

"You don't call having to walk around wearing a dress in front of all my friends, bad?"

Brian nodded. "Yes I do, Jimmy. It's real bad. But you've been handling it very well so far. We just don't want anything...else...or worse happening to you."

Jasmine shook his head. "I'm fine," he told them. "And I'm not going to kill myself! Besides, I know my Dad is proud of me. You don't know how much that means to me, especially now, in the middle of all this. And I also know that all the other kids in the family will be there and stand up for me if I need them. I know that! I know because I saw them do it for me. All of them! So don't worry about me. I'm not going to kill myself. Nobody may talk to me, and like I said, I think it's better that way, but I'm fine. I really am. I'm fine!"

Brian looked at him for another moment, then he nodded. "Okay," he replied, feeling very relieved. "But you just remember, from now on, when you start feeling really sorry for yourself, like you have been, you come find one of us. Any of us! You come find us and tell us. We love you Jimmy. We all do. We all care about you more than you may think. We'll be there to help you Jimmy. I promise! But you've got to give us the chance. Understand?"

He nodded. "Yeah," he replied. "Thanks. I guess. But I'm making it. I may not like this at all. But I'm making it."

Brian smiled and got up from the bed. When he turned to the others, he saw that now Tommy and the real Jasmine were in the room looking on too. "Why don't we let these kids go back to sleep,"

he suggested. "And if you did make some coffee, I think a cup would definitely be in order now."

As the others were leaving the room, Clint walked over to Jasmine, still sitting up in the bed. He held out his hand and waited until Jasmine grabbed it with his own hand. "I'm glad you understand how proud of you I am," Clint told him. "Very glad! Because I really am that proud of you...dresses or not, I'm damn proud that you're my son."

"Thanks Dad," Jimmy replied. "It means a lot to me."

Clint nodded. "Night...Jas," he said before turning to walk out.

Susan moved in and sat on the bed. She leaned over and hugged him dearly. "And don't make any mistake," she whispered. "I'm awfully proud of you too. I love you...Jas. More than you'll ever know."

"Thanks, Mom," he replied. "I love you too."

She settled him in the bed and turned out the light. "Night Jas," she said before closing the door. When she turned around, she saw the real Jasmine standing behind her. "Jimmy? What are you still doing up?"

"How could I not be with all the noise everyone is making?"

Susan smiled. "Come on, let's get you back into bed." She shepherded her fake son back into the room with the ducks and got her settled.

"Mom," the real Jasmine said, "what's wrong with Jimmy? Is he faking being sick or something?"

"No, Jas...I mean Jimmy," Susan replied. "He's not faking anything. In fact, we're worried that he may have something very seriously wrong with him, and he's not letting anyone know about it."

"Seriously wrong with him?"

She nodded. "Very!"

"Mom?" she said very uncertainly.

"Yes?"

"Is it possible that what's wrong with him, could be wrong with me too?"

She looked at her real daughter for a moment before replying. "Yes, Jas. Yes. It is possible. Why?" she asked fully concerned.

Jimmy shrugged. "No reason I guess. I was just wondering."

Susan stared at her for a moment, then nodded. "Okay," she said as she hugged her real daughter and kissed her head. "Your Uncle Jed is coming for you early tomorrow. Don't forget."

She rolled her eyes, much like the real Jimmy did so often. "How could I?" But as she said it, she wondered if whatever was wrong with her screwy brother, was anything like her own moods that she couldn't seem to control anymore.

Chapter 24 - Blasted Phone

January 17th

After being up most of the night, Susan nearly had a fit when she heard someone knocking on the back door so early in the morning. She and Clint weren't even out of bed yet! In fact, the only one in the family that she knew was up, was Jimmy, and she was out somewhere plowing and shoveling snow with her Uncle Jed. "Ugh!" she grunted through her teeth as the urgent knocking came again.

"I'm coming," she called as she reached the kitchen to the sound of someone knocking again. She opened the inner door, then quickly opened the outer door. "Olivia! What are you doing here so early?"

"Sorry, Aunt Susan," Olivia replied. "I've got to talk to Jimmy. It's real important!"

"Jimmy is out..." Susan started to say. "Or do you mean Jasmine today?"

"Jasmine, Jimmy, what's the difference?" she said sounding frustrated. "I need to talk to the real Jimmy. Your son Jimmy. And it's important, Aunt Susan."

Susan stood back and let her in. "He's not even up yet," she told the girl who was just coming in from outside where her eyes now turned. It looked like there was more snow on the ground already than she expected. And it was still snowing heavily.

"I need to talk with him. Please, Aunt Susan," she pleaded.

It was all Susan could do to keep from groaning. "Is this about last night?" she asked.

"Last night?" Olivia asked. "It's about what Uncle Brian told me last night," she said.

Susan shook her head. "Jasmine is fine!" Susan told her. "We had a long talk with him last night. He's just fine."

"No he's not!" Olivia insisted. "Because I have to tell him something important!"

"What is it?" Susan asked, really just wanting to go back to bed.

"It's...personal," Olivia replied. "Please, Aunt Susan?"

Susan looked down at her. "Does your mother know you're here this early?"

"Kind of."

That startled Susan. "What do you mean, kind of?"

"Um...she was still in bed when I told her I was coming here."

"Did she say you could come this early?"

"Kind of," Olivia admitted shyly.

"In other words, most likely, she'll never remember later on."

"I don't know! She probably will. But it doesn't matter because this is important!"

Susan sighed, realizing that most likely she wasn't going to get anymore sleep. "Okay, just get those boots off first. I'll wake him up."

"I can do it," Olivia told her. "I kind of want to talk to him...in private anyway."

Susan just shook her head and headed for the coffee pot. "I don't suppose you care that he's been up half the night too," she said.

"I've been up *all* night!" Olivia exclaimed as she finally kicked off her first boot. "I couldn't sleep at all. I couldn't! Not till I can talk to him first!"

"What's so urgent?" Susan asked as she pulled the coffee grounds out of the cupboard.

"Like I said, it's kind of private."

Susan shook her head and dropped the matter. A moment later, Olivia literally ran past her on the way to Jasmine's room.

Olivia had hurried to the room, but once there, she opened the door quietly, and closed it just as quietly behind her. "Jas," she said somewhat softly at the lump under the covers on the bed. No reaction. "Jas," she said again as she moved closer. Still nothing. She sat on the side of the bed and again said, "Jas!" as she put her arm over the lump under the covers. This time the body under there jerked quickly, and a head full of rumpled hair appeared from under the covers. She giggled.

“Huh?” Jasmine gasped as his body was jerked from the deep sleep he had been in. The feminine giggle that reached his ears was not what he was expecting to hear. And a moment later as his eyes tried to focus, seeing Olivia sitting on the edge of his bed wasn’t what he was expecting to see either. “Olivia?” he said, still trying to get his brain somewhat working. “What’s up?”

Olivia giggled again. “I needed to talk to you,” she said. “It’s important.”

Jasmine laid his head back down on the pillow and closed his eyes. “Tell them I’m fine,” he said. “I’m just fine. I’m not going to kill myself.”

“That’s why I want to talk to you,” she said as she crawled up on top of his covers and laid next to him. It was a long moment before she felt him rolling over onto his side so he was facing her. She smiled at his sleepy face. “You look sweet when you look all sleepy like that.”

Ugh! “Trust me, I don’t feel sweet at all. I just feel tired!” he groaned. “I don’t think I slept hardly at all last night!”

“And I *know* I didn’t sleep at all,” she told him. “It was all I could do to wait this long to come over here to talk to you.”

“Mm!” he half grunted. “What about?”

“Um...remember yesterday when we were talking at lunch?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Did you really mean it when you said I was the prettiest girl in the school?”

Her question jerked him much more awake. His eyes opened wider and he fully realized for the first time that she was laying practically on top of him. He realized she was looking at him, waiting for an answer. But that answer was easy. “Of course I meant it,” he replied. “I mean, I don’t know. Of all the girls I know, for some reason I just like you a whole lot better. And I’ve always thought you were the prettiest girl around.” He was suddenly worried. “I hope that I’m not offending you by saying that,” he added quickly. “Cause I really don’t mean to.”

She giggled and stuck her head forward...and kissed the tip of his nose. “That’s the nicest and best thing anyone has ever said to me in my whole life!”

"That's hard to believe," he said.

"It's true," she confirmed as she looked into his eyes. "It's really true."

He laughed a small grunt. "You need to get out more then," he told her.

She ignored his remark. "And you know what?" she said to him.

"What?" he asked.

"When you said that to me yesterday, I wanted to tell you something too, but I couldn't bring myself to say it. I was...too embarrassed then to tell you."

Even lying down he rolled his eyes. "Too embarrassed? Why worry? My whole life is an embarrassment."

"No it's not!" she insisted.

"Maybe not to you, but it sure is to me."

She looked at him for a moment. "I wanted to tell you...*Jimmy*... that I've had a big crush on you for a long time now. And even though we're cousins and I shouldn't, I still like you better than any boy I've ever met."

He grunted another laugh. "You really do need to get out more then." He thought better of his words. "But thanks," he said softly. "I guess...I really appreciate hearing that."

She smiled. "I should have told you yesterday," she said. "I'm sorry I didn't."

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"It does matter! It matters a lot!" she told him. "After Uncle Brian talked to me on the phone last night and said he was so worried about you, it was all I could think about all night long! I didn't sleep at all last night because I was so worried about you. I kept picturing you trying to cut your wrists or standing naked out in the snow until you died! All night! And I couldn't sleep 'cause I was so worried! I just thought, if I had told you yesterday, then maybe you would know that somebody does love you and cares enough about you that they don't want you to hurt yourself. So as soon as I could get out of the house this morning, I had to tell you. And...I had to know that you're...okay."

He smiled. "I'm fine," he told her. "Just fine. Sleepy still, but just fine. Don't worry about me, I'll make it – somehow. But I guess it is

nice to know that I've got someone out there who does really care that much. Especially since it's you," he added softly.

She reached out her head again, and this time kissed him on the lips, and lingered in the fabulous feeling of him kissing her back. When she finally pulled away, she laid her head back down on the edge of his pillow and looked at him. "You know, that was my first kiss with a boy. Ever!"

"It was?"

She nodded. "Mm-hm."

"Well, it was my first kiss with a girl too."

She smiled broader. "For both of us then."

An odd thought hit him. "Um...you know I'm supposed to be a girl right now, don't you?" he said.

"I don't care," she replied. "I know who you are on the inside. That's all that matters. No matter how much like a girl you may look, and from what they tell me, you could really look totally like a girl someday, which I really believe since you're starting to look that way already."

"Don't remind me," he said.

"But you see, I like you anyway, because I know who you are on the inside. And you're the nicest boy I've ever met in my life, and most likely the nicest I'll ever meet, no matter how you look or who you're supposed to be on the outside."

He stared at her and felt the familiar feeling now of the emotions he couldn't control bringing tears to his eyes. He sniffled as he continued to stare at her smiling face through his tears. One more time, she raised her head to his lips and they kissed. And he cried.

The arm she rested over top of him felt nice. Comforting. Under the covers as he was, he could do nothing to hold her back. But he didn't really want to that much. He really just wanted to enjoy the sensation of her arm over top of him, and the sensation of her liking him that much, despite what he had become, or what he was still becoming. He found it hard to believe that she could still like him despite all that, and despite the fact that everyone else considered him to be nothing more than something laughable. It was... unbelievable.

The tears finally slowed down. He closed his eyes, even though she was still watching him.

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Susan dialed her phone and waited for an answer. "Jane, did you know that Olivia is here and not there?"

"She is?" Jane replied, suddenly totally panicked. "Oh wait a minute, I seem to remember something from early this morning, and I think it was her. But I can't remember the details."

"Well, she's here," Susan told her. "She actually got here a couple of hours ago. We were all still asleep too, but she said it was real important and it couldn't wait."

"What could possibly be that important?" Jane asked. "Although I'm betting it has something to do with what she told Brian last night."

"I'm sure it does," Susan replied. "But she wouldn't tell me whatever it is she's so concerned about."

"Is she being a nuisance at all?" Jane asked. "Cause you can just send her home and it will be fine."

"No. No nuisance at all," Susan replied. "In fact, they're both sound asleep in Jasmine's bed right now. The two of them are dead to the world."

"Oh my! Sorry about that," Jane told her.

Susan laughed a little. "Don't worry. It's just fine. We'll call it, *this* Jasmine's first slumber party."

Jane laughed. "Don't tell the other girls. They'll all be jealous!"

"Speaking of which," Susan replied, "if Allison or Nichole call this morning, they'll have to wait a while for Jasmine and Olivia. If you don't mind, I think I'll just let them sleep. I doubt Jas got much sleep at all last night."

"Fine with me," Jane told her. "You just send Olivia home when you're ready."

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Susan had barely hung up the phone when she heard the back door opening. She watched as "Jimmy" came wearily into the

house. She looked tired and exhausted. "How'd it go?" she asked, trying to sound at least a bit cheerful.

"Ugh!" Jimmy grunted. "It wouldn't have been so bad if the snow wasn't still coming down so hard. Even with three of us shoveling, by the time we finished one sidewalk, where we had started was an inch deep again. We should have just waited until it stops snowing."

"Why didn't you?"

"Uncle Jed says it would only make it more difficult later today. As far as I'm concerned though, it only doubles the work."

"Well you can end it anytime you want. You know that."

"Forget it, Mom. I'm not giving up hunting. Even though I can't go this weekend at all."

Susan nodded. "I figured," she replied. "Be quiet going back to your bedroom. Your sister and Olivia are sound asleep back there."

"Olivia?" Jimmy exclaimed. "What's she doing here?"

"Right now, sleeping. But I have no idea why she came. She got here so early she probably just missed seeing you!"

"Maybe she was trying to see me," Jasmine decided hopefully.

"Nope!" Susan told her. "She was pretty specific about which one of you she needed to talk to. All I know is that she said it was important, and now they're both pretty much dead to the world. So be quiet. Please!"

Jimmy actually felt like she was being shut out by her friends again. Abandoned. She went back to her room, but she wasn't exactly quiet about it. But the two "girls" in Jasmine's room were both so sound asleep, neither of them knew she had come home.

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Late in the morning, Susan and Clint were enjoying a quiet cup of coffee together in the kitchen. Jasmine, Olivia, and also Jimmy were sound asleep in their rooms. Tommy was awake playing with his new game machine in his room. Susan and Clint's nice quiet time was pretty much shattered when the phone started ringing again. Susan grunted at the disturbance, but answered it anyway. "Hello?"

"Hi Susan," Janet replied. "Did you ever get any sleep last night?"

"Bad question!" Susan replied. "But some of us got more sleep than others," she said as she looked menacingly at her husband.

"Yeah, I'm afraid it was a while before I could get any sleep too."

"Yeah," Susan said, "but did you have a young girl knocking on your door at the break of dawn this morning demanding to see one of her friends right away?"

"You're kidding!"

"I haven't been to sleep since!"

"Who was it? Although I can make a pretty good guess that it was Olivia."

"You win the prize," Susan replied.

"What did she want at that hour?"

"I have no idea. All I know is that I've now got three kids still sound asleep in my house, and I haven't slept hardly at all."

"Poor girl," Janet laughed. "Well get ready for World War Three. Allison wants to go sliding down the hill, and of course she's planning on getting together with the rest of the girls to do it with her. And we both pretty much came to the conclusion that there's no way that the Jasmine you have with you this morning should be left out at all. Especially after last night! So I was getting ready to send her out to start rounding all her friends up – including Jasmine. I just wanted to warn you first and also to let you know that even though Jimmy told Olivia not to include him, we think it's more important than ever now that he spends some time with the girls."

As tired as Susan was, it took her no time to agree. "Yeah, for sure Janet. Thanks. I'll go wake them up so they can start getting ready."

"No wait!" a voice in the background of Susan's phone called. Susan realized that Janet must have had her phone on speaker. A moment later, Allison's voice was clearer. "Don't wake them up yet, Aunt Susan. Let me do it instead," she giggled.

"Are you sure?" Susan asked.

"Yeah. Why not. I'll stop by and get Nichole first, then we'll be right there."

"Okay, Allison. I'll be here. I may be sound asleep on my feet. But I'll be here."

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Two girls crept silently down the hallway in their stocking feet. Well, almost silently. They were both having a difficult time not giggling too loudly. As quietly as possible, the older girl opened the door. They both crept towards the bed with two sleeping "girls" in it. Allison went to one side of the bed while Nichole went to the other side. Very carefully, Nichole set the puppy she was carrying down between the two heads sharing the pillow. The puppy quickly wiggled around and started licking faces.

Olivia let out a very loud girlish sheik that echoed through the whole house as she quickly sat up in the bed.

"Hey!" Jasmine shouted as he awoke with a start. It was Jasmine though who grabbed the puppy and pulled it into his arms as he sat up.

"What are you guys doing here?" Olivia asked, seeing Nichole and Allison there.

"Trying to wake you two sleepyheads up!" Allison told her.

"And we brought along some help to do it with," Nichole added.

"Yeah, we see that," Jasmine replied as he stroked the puppy's neck and back.

"There's snow on the ground!" Allison told them. "And it's all just waiting for us to go out and play in it."

"Alright!" Olivia exclaimed happily as she jumped to her feet. "I just got to go home and get ready."

"Uh...guys," Jasmine said, "just count me out today okay? I appreciate it and all that you invited me, but I think it's better if I just stay in today."

"Not on your life!" Susan said from the doorway. She couldn't help but smile though at the sight of the puppy snuggling around Jasmine's face. "You're not getting left behind," she told him. "Like it or not!"

Jasmine wasn't sure if he was happy with that decision or not. Especially since sliding down the hill really was fun. "But Mom," he

said. "What am I going to wear?"

"Don't worry," Susan told him. "We'll come up with something. There's so much snow out there already though that I think your usual dress code is going to have to be forgotten today."

"Yes!" Jasmine exclaimed happily in an all too husky voice.

Five minutes later, Nichole, Olivia, Allison...and the puppy were gone. Leaving Jasmine and his mother in the bedroom. Before finding something that Jasmine could wear out in the snow, she went across the hall and woke up Jimmy. "The kids are all getting ready to slide down the hill in the snow," she told him. "Are you going?" The wide-eyed look of excitement told her more than the simple quick reply that Jimmy made.

She left him and went back towards Jasmine's room, only to see him disappearing into the bathroom, but he was back a minute later. Susan made no pretense of trying to make him look feminine at all. She simply picked out the warmest clothes she could think of for him to put on and laid most of it out on the bed for him. Without a word, she left him to get dressed.

Jasmine stared at the play clothes on the bed, including a pair of his sister's older red jeans. Jeans! Pants! He gave a silent whoop of joy as he grabbed the warm tights his mother had set out for him to put on under a pair of heavy knee socks.

Less than ten minutes later, Jasmine headed out toward the kitchen, fully dressed, including a heavy warm sweater. "Mom," he called as he headed for the coats hanging on the wall by the back door, "what coat should I wear?"

Susan had just been telling Tommy and Jimmy that she would feed them all lunch as soon as they came in for a rest from the snow. She felt somewhat guilty that none of her kids had even had breakfast yet, but she tossed it off to just being one of those mornings. But the sight of her fake daughter coming into the room had somewhat made her pause to stare at him.

It wasn't exactly his face that made her stop to look, although once again he seemed to be smiling and looking all too feminine there. It wasn't exactly the heavy sweater that he had on that completely hid any sign of even a padded bra underneath, which she was sure wasn't padded out at all like her real daughter was doing

now. Instead, what caught her attention, was the red jeans he was wearing. But to be honest, it was really all of it combined. As he hurried across the kitchen, something about the jeans made her breath catch. Her eyes stayed on him as she told him what jacket and what boots to put on. And her eyes never once left him until he disappeared out the door with his two “brothers.”

She couldn’t believe it. She guessed she hadn’t noticed it before because the skirts that he always wore as Jasmine and the boys pants that he wore as Jimmy, pretty much hid what she had seen today. But his backside and hips were now, without a doubt, starting to fill out a bit to look a little more feminine than she had noticed before.

Her son was still changing. His body was still becoming what he didn’t want. And today she was starting to see yet another sign of that change beginning to happen.

She wanted to throw something at the phone when she heard it start ringing again. She picked it up and said hello anyway.

“Hi Susan,” Janet’s voice greeted her. “Since everyone is home today, I thought I’d get all the girls together for some coffee later this afternoon. Are you interested?”

“I don’t know,” Susan replied. “I guess so. I’m just tired today. I haven’t even fed my kids breakfast or lunch yet so it’s going to have to wait until later.”

“I was thinking about twoish,” Janet told her.

“Yeah, that should be fine,” Susan agreed.

“Um...Susan,” Janet said.

“Yeah?”

“You said you haven’t fed the twins yet today?”

“Okay, I admit it, I’m a bad mother!”

“No,” Janet laughed. “I mean, I know Brian mentioned he wanted to get some fresh blood samples from both of them this weekend.”

“Yes,” Susan said, “I remember him mentioning it last night over coffee.”

“Well, the best time to get those samples would be when the kids haven’t eaten anything for some time.”

"Well, they're all out in the snow right now," Susan told her. "Do you want me to send them over there right now? They're not going to be too happy about that."

"Let me talk to Brian," Janet told her. "See what he wants to do."

"Okay," Susan said, her sleep starved mind feeling all too foggy. "Let me know."

A minute later, she was carrying her phone into the bedroom. Her kids were all outside playing and her husband was parked in front of the TV set. She laid down on the bed with her cell phone still in her hand, praying it wouldn't ring anymore. She didn't get her wish.

"Susan?" Brian's voice came over the phone.

"Yes?" she replied dully.

"I'll come over to your house as soon as I see the kids starting to go back in for lunch. Don't let the twins eat anything till I can get some blood from them. Okay?"

"Yeah, sure," she replied. "No problem."

Thirty seconds later, she was sound asleep.

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An hour and a half of napping didn't do a whole lot for Susan's overly tired mood, but she counted herself lucky. The kids coming in for a lunch break because they were hungry had woken her up. She put the new Jasmine to work making sandwiches while she tried to wake up a bit more. It wasn't until after she had set Jasmine to work that she remembered that Brian had called her earlier. "Don't eat anything at all!" she told Jasmine. "Your Uncle Brian wants to get another blood sample from you before you have anything."

"But Mom, I'm hungry!" Jasmine complained.

"I know, sweetie. I didn't get a chance to feed you breakfast today. Hopefully he'll be here soon and you won't have to wait very long." She went off to find Jimmy to tell her the same thing. Jimmy didn't mention having to wait to eat, but she wasn't happy at all about having to have blood drawn.

Brian showed up ten minutes later and set up at the kitchen table. Clint and Susan both looked on as he was getting ready.

They were also there to make sure neither of the twins ran off or started any kind of an argument before he could do it.

Jasmine stood watching his uncle preparing to get his and his sister's blood. "Mom?" he asked uncertainly. "Are we getting more hormone shots today?"

It was Brian who answered though. "Not today," he told him. "I just want to get a fresh sample of your blood so I can have it analyzed before I have to see you again."

"But that shouldn't be till next month!" Jasmine told him.

"That's right," Brian replied. "I just want to make sure there's no serious imbalances in your system. Okay?"

"I guess," Jasmine finally replied.

Brian noticed though that "Jimmy" had said nothing at all. She had simply stood there staring at his equipment.

He did Jasmine first. Once again, Jasmine looked away from the needle through the whole procedure. But this time he looked at his father instead. He was as careful as possible to not show any sign of pain on his face, even though it did hurt. He didn't want his father to see him being anything but brave. Mostly. He still didn't want to look at the needle in his arm.

Jimmy held back when it was her turn. "Do we have to do this?" she asked.

Brian nodded. "Yes, Jimmy. I'm afraid it's very important. More so than ever!"

She had seen that he just took some blood from her brother. Cautiously, she sat down in one of the kitchen chairs and put her arm up on the table for him to work on. She didn't look away at all as he stuck the needle in her arm. She never once looked away as the blood was removed from her vein and the needle finally removed. She didn't look away, so she knew for a fact that he hadn't injected anything into her. She breathed a silent sigh of relief when her uncle left through the back door just a few minutes later.

Soon after lunch, all the kids were back outside in the still falling snow.

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Jasmine was having a blast. The smile on his face was from ear to ear every time he slid down the big hill. But then, all the kids were having just as much fun. A few years ago, Grandpa had bought every last kid in the family, large round aluminum disks made for sitting on and sliding down snowy hills. The disks all had rope handles on each side and the slightly rounded bottoms on them were perfect for sliding down the hill – rather uncontrollably. Which only made the whole exercise that much more fun.

Every kid who lived on the street was there, including Ethan for a little while. The rest of them stayed through most of the afternoon. While they were all close and playing together, Allison, Nichole, Olivia, and “Jasmine” were the ones who were together and closer than any of the others. Something that Jimmy took careful note of. He did his best to hang as close to them all as possible. And even though not once was he ever really shut out, it was clear that they were going out of their way to include her brother in everything more so than anyone else. She watched all afternoon as those four “girls” slid down the hill together, often linking arms as long as possible. She watched as they all grouped together before starting the long arduous climb back up the hill. And she watched as they all found yet new ways to slide together down the hill as a group. She was with them. But she wasn’t. And she felt left out...and hurt. If it wasn’t for the other guys paying more attention to her than the girls were, she would have been more hurt. Still, she really did enjoy herself all afternoon. It sure beat shoveling snow...that was still lightly falling.

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Right around two o’clock, Susan left her back door and started trudging her way through the snow in the driveway out toward the street where Jed had plowed it earlier that morning. The snow under her feet was really deep. She was glad she had decided to wear an old pair of her leather boots. Otherwise the snow would have been over the top of them. As it was, the snow came nearly to her knees. A little over a foot? Ha! And it was still snowing lightly. Across the street, she saw the kids all having a great time as heads slowly

appeared walking up the hill, and other heads disappeared sliding back down again. Oh to be young again and have such fun.

She finally reached the street. Since it had been plowed at some point, the snow was only half as deep, which is why she had gone that direction instead of across the backyards. She supposed that half as deep was a lot better than trudging the distance in the deeper snow. Ahead of her, she saw Marcy just reaching the road. Obviously her sister-in-law had the same idea. Two minutes later, the two women were trudging down the road together.

"Why are we doing this?" Susan asked as the two of them worked their way towards Janet's house.

"Beats me," Marcy replied with a laugh. "Pete is inside napping in front of the TV."

"Clint too," Susan replied. "You have no idea how jealous I am."

Eventually, they reached Janet's driveway, the only driveway that showed any sign at all of being shoveled that day, but the snow was still fairly deep, just a little less than what was on the road. Marcy knocked on the back door and the two women were soon inside where it was warm. They saw Jane and Valerie already there.

"You two came the easy way," Jane said as she watched the two women taking their coats off. "Val and I were dumb enough to plow our way across the back. We won't make that mistake going home!" All the women laughed. Coffee was poured for Susan and Marcy a few minutes later, and the pleasant feminine gossip and companionship felt good to all of them.

As always, the subject of all their kids was one of the main topics of conversation. And this time, the conversation also included the bit of a scare about "Jasmine" the night before. Near the end of it, Susan told them all how Olivia had woken her up at the crack of dawn.

"I'm so sorry about that," Jane apologized profusely. "I was so out of it I never really realized what she had said."

"I'm sure," Susan replied. "I think most of us were pretty out of it at that hour."

But that subject reminded Jane of something else. "Um... Susan, do you remember what you said to me this morning about Olivia being there?"

"I don't remember what I did just before I left the house a little while ago," Susan replied. "I haven't had enough sleep."

The women all laughed again.

"You made a bit of a joke and said that it was that Jasmine's first slumber party."

"I did? Oh yeah, I kind of remember it now. It was kind of... sweet. He was all bundled up under the covers, and she was sacked out on top of them. And they both were somewhat sharing the same pillow." She smiled at the thought of it.

"Well, I had this kind of crazy idea earlier, and I wanted to see what you think."

"Idea?" Susan asked.

Jane nodded. "I keep hearing little suggestions about how the real Jasmine is resenting the way that...today's Jasmine is spending all his time with her friends, while she can't."

"What of it?" Susan asked.

"Well, you kind of gave me the idea this morning. What if the real Jasmine had to sit by and watch as...today's Jasmine had a slumber party with all her friends. I'm wondering if that might just push her over the edge enough to make her finally quit wanting to hunt so much."

The women all sat staring at each other in silence for a moment. "It...might work," Janet said first.

"It sounds like it may be a good idea," Marcy added.

"I think it's worth a try," Valerie agreed.

Susan looked around at all of them. "Not tonight!" she said. "I'm just way too tired for anything like that."

"No," Jane said quickly. "But tomorrow night would be perfect. The kids don't have school on Monday anyway."

"Um..." Marcy said as a thought hit her. "Pete mentioned earlier that he was thinking of taking the dogs out for a hunt in the snow tonight or tomorrow. He also mentioned seeing if *Jimmy* wanted to go since he's supposed to be hunting more."

"But we'd need Jimmy there to watch the girls having fun!" Marcy replied.

"Can Pete go hunting tonight instead?" Valerie asked. "You did say he wasn't sure which night he was going to go."

"I can call him," Marcy said with a smile.

"Hey wait!" Susan exclaimed. "I haven't agreed to any of this yet!"

"Yes you did," Janet told her. "You just don't realize it yet," she added with a giggle.

"You're probably too tired to realize it," Marcy joked.

Susan shook her head. Now she was going to have to put up with a bunch of giggling girls all night tomorrow. Well, she was going to get some sleep tonight for sure!

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Pete had already been considering going out hunting with his dogs that night. But the phone call from his wife only moved him into action. Elliot was outside on the hill with the rest of the kids, but he knew Elliot would be ready to go hunting in thirty seconds if given the chance. Susan and Clint would make sure that Jimmy went as well. But that brought up some other thoughts. He knew that Jed had been trying to make sure that "Jimmy" got to hunt as much as possible. He decided to call Jed and let him know what he was doing.

"Hey Jed," he said as soon as his older brother had answered the phone. "I'm taking the dogs out tonight for a coon hunt, and I just wanted to let you know that I was going to invite *Jimmy* along with me."

"Sounds like fun," Jed replied. "And I'm glad you're asking Jimmy. This isn't a good weekend for any other kind of hunt I can send her out on." A thought hit him. "Hey Pete, want some more company too? I'd sure enjoy a good nighttime coon hunt myself."

Pete wasn't all that surprised. "Sure, why not? The more the merrier. You know how that goes."

"Yeah," Jed replied happily. "Hey, what do you think about seeing if all the guys want to go, the older kids too. It could be a real good time."

Pete thought about it for only a second. "Yeah," he agreed, "let's call them all. We haven't done anything like that in a few years now. It should be great!"

Chapter 25 - Drunken Slumber

January 17th – 19th

Susan watched the back door close behind Clint, Tommy, and “Jimmy” as they all went out hunting. Finally! She walked back to Jasmine’s room. He was sitting at the computer looking at the news again. “Since you keep reading that stuff,” she said to him, “you probably know more about what’s happening in the world than anyone else.”

He looked up at her. “I’m just bored, I guess,” he replied. “And it’s the best thing I can find that I’m allowed to look at.”

She wanted to tell him that he should be looking at more feminine things instead, like his sister did, but she let it drop. “Have fun today?” She asked. The smile that hit his face was everything a mother could ever ask for.

“A blast! It was so great!”

“Well, there’s still plenty of snow left out there for tomorrow too,” she told him

“Yeah,” he agreed. “It didn’t stop snowing until pretty late this afternoon. I didn’t even see Uncle Jed plowing the road later like I thought he was going to.”

“He decided to go hunting instead with your Uncle Pete. You know how hunting takes precedence with all of them over anything else.”

Jasmine nodded. He knew that all too well. His “brother” had been overjoyed and crowed about it all afternoon.

“Um, honey?” Susan said to him. “The ladies and I came up with an idea to kind of put a little more pressure on your sister to try to persuade her to finally quit hunting.”

“Anything!” he told her quickly.

“Are you sure?” she asked with a sly smile on her face. “Because it looked to me like you were having an awful lot of fun out there with the girls today.”

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I'm sure. Even though we had a blast out there. Probably the best time I've ever had sliding down that hill."

"You've never had that many close friends with you before."

He thought about it and nodded. "Yeah. I guess not."

"Anyway," Susan said, bringing the subject back around to where she intended. "We've come up with this little idea, and we're hoping it might work...or at least help."

Something about the way she was telling him made him wary of it though. "I'm guessing that whatever it is, I'm not going to really like it much."

"Oh, I don't know. I guess it depends."

"On what?"

"On how much fun you might want to have with your friends."

"Fun? What do you mean? We had a blast today outside. All of us."

"We were thinking about a different kind of fun."

"What?"

"A slumber party!" She watched as his face went through a series of changes, and finally settled on what she was guessing was a look of shocked horror.

"Mom, how am I supposed to have fun with something like that?"

She shook her head. "It's all in your attitude, Jas. All in your attitude."

"When?" he asked still trying to come to grips with how bad a slumber party might be. He had seen his sister host a lot of them in the past, he really wanted no part of any of it!

"Tomorrow night," she told him. "Right here!"

"Here?"

"Of course! I'm sure you'll be the perfect hostess for all your friends. You always have lots of fun at those parties. You all do."

Hostess? Fun? "Not me! That's... the other me!"

"But it's you now," she told him. "So plan on having as much fun as you possibly can."

He tried to digest that? "How?" he asked.

She smiled, but her face was completely serious. "You need to find a way, Jas. The point of all this is to show your sister, *you*

having a world of fun, right here in front of her, with all your friends. So you need to find a way to make it look like you really are having a lot of fun. And besides," she added more brightly, "I have no doubt, that if you can make it look like you're at least enjoying yourself somewhat, then you really will enjoy it. Most likely, a lot!"

He didn't believe that for even a minute.

"Now I'm going to bed," she said. "I'm so tired I could scream. Don't stay up too late!" She glanced at his computer. "And it wouldn't hurt you at all to look at some more feminine things on that computer. Try searching for fashion or clothes. You do have that fashion show coming up in the spring. It wouldn't hurt you to learn more about them."

She got up and kissed him goodnight, and trudged her way wearily toward her room to go to sleep. Finally!

Jasmine sat there trying to take everything in. A slumber party? Enjoy it? How? There was no way! He really wasn't looking forward to that at all. He also wasn't interested in looking at fashion or girl's clothes on the internet. But with another inevitable roll of his eyes, he opened the web browser and started looking for fashion shows. A minute later, his eyes bulged and he nearly broke out laughing at the strange things some of the models were wearing. They were ridiculous! He enjoyed himself looking at some of it more than he thought he would.

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Jimmy was freezing and tired. At least the snow they had to trudge through wasn't nearly as deep in the woods. It was actually kind of fun to walk in. They had already walked for what seemed like ten miles, following the sounds of the dogs barking far ahead. The coon hunt was really more of a social event than she had figured it would be. She was surprised to see every guy from the family there...except Lucas and Aaron and her Uncle Jack of course. But there was no way her Uncle Jack could get there through the snow clogged roads. Even her Grandpa was there this time, trudging through the snow along with everyone else.

One of the things she liked the most about being out there, was that a lot of the boys actually talked to her about guy things. Well, mostly hunting and shooting, but they were things she loved to talk about just as much. And nobody on this hunt was the least bit worried about not making any noise like when she hunted with Justin and Ethan, and especially her Uncle Jed. The parts she didn't like, were the cold, having to carry her heavy gun so far, and of course not being able to see much at all except what her flashlight showed her.

They walked for hours, literally, or at least it seemed like it, before she heard her Uncle Pete exclaim that it sounded like the dogs had treed something. And then everyone went from a nice walk in the woods, to sort of a run. She didn't like that part much at all, but she had little choice but to keep up with everyone else or get left behind. Fortunately, they really weren't moving all that fast in the dark.

Even hurrying, it took a little while for them to find the dogs. All the flashlights were turned up into the tree the dogs had surrounded, including the big spotlight that her Uncle Pete carried.

"There he is," Pete said as he trained his light way up into the tree.

"Damn!" Clint exclaimed. "They don't usually climb that high."

"It's going to make getting a decent shot at it pretty difficult," Jed agreed.

"Well," Jacob said, "we got us a coon up in a tree. We might as well see if we can get it. Who's gonna try first."

"The honor's all yours," Brian told his father.

Jacob nodded gratefully and pulled his gun to the ready. With Pete trying to keep the light on the raccoon that could just barely be seen between the branches of the tree that high up, he took careful aim, and finally pulled the trigger. "Damn it!" he exclaimed. "Missed the bugger. I just can't get a clean shot around all those branches up there." He turned to Pete. "Pete, you give it a try. Let someone else hold that light of yours."

Pete handed the light over to Jed and pulled up his gun. He too took careful aim. And he too missed. He shook his head. "We may not be able to get this one."

"We got a bunch of guns here," Jacob replied. "And we walked a hell of a long way already. I see no reason why that damn coon should go loose."

There was a lot of agreeing laughter from all of them.

Jed tried next. He came close, but all his shot did was to drive the raccoon up even higher, making it even harder to hit.

"Let's let Jimmy here try," Clint suggested. "He can't do any worse than the rest of us, and I'd like him to have another chance to at least shoot at something."

Jimmy was thrilled. She pulled her gun up and chambered a round. She took careful aim where the light was shining way up in the tree, but she could just barely see a tiny bit of the raccoon up between the branches. She took her best shot, and missed. "Damn it!" she exclaimed angrily.

One by one, they all tried to hit the raccoon, and one by one they all failed. All of them tried though, except Elliot. But Elliot knew beforehand that all the others would have to try to shoot whatever they would find first. He didn't really mind that much.

"I guess it comes down to you, Elliot," Jacob said. "Don't let us go home without that varmint up there."

Elliot smiled. "I'll try," he replied. He found his best position, pulled his gun into place, barely sighted what he wanted to hit, and pulled the trigger. The raccoon fell from the branch, hit numerous branches on the way down, and finally fell to the ground amid a pack of dogs all going crazy over it. Pete rescued the dead raccoon from the dogs. "Nice shot, son," he said. "Damn nice shot."

Elliot only smiled. "No problem," he replied.

Jimmy had of course seen Elliot shoot the raccoon. She also knew that Elliot was probably the best shot in the entire family. But she still felt somewhat disappointed that he had been able to hit the thing and she couldn't. But then, neither her dad nor Tommy had managed to shoot the thing either. None of them had, except Elliot. What made him so good? Of course, she knew he practiced with the targets out in his backyard more than anyone else. She also knew that he seemed to like just shooting more than anyone else. But what really made him that good?

With the raccoon finally shot, Pete turned his dogs loose to hunt yet again. Jimmy wasn't too happy about that. But once the dogs were gone, the men didn't go anywhere. And then she saw her grandpa passing around a small jug he had pulled out of his backpack. One by one, he offered a drink to every guy there. When he got around to her, Jasmine asked what it was.

"Just a little something to help warm you up," her grandpa replied.

She took a small sip from the jug like all the others had done. The liquid was horrible! It burned her throat and made her start coughing. "What is that?" she asked with a horrible look on her face as the other guys all laughed.

"Just my special drink," Jacob replied with a small smile. "But I guarantee it'll help warm your bones."

As Jimmy watched her grandpa moving on to offer some to Hunter, she realized that there was indeed a tiny warm glow in her stomach now. And it seemed to be spreading. But whatever had been in that jug had tasted horrible! And it had reminded her of whatever her Grandpa had passed around to toast the New Year with. In fact, it had burned her mouth exactly the same way. The jug went around to all of them twice. They all got two sips from it. And since it had added some warmth to her stomach, Jimmy did her best to swallow a little more of it the second time around. And then they all took off after the dogs again.

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Saturday morning, Olivia let out a shriek that her mother figured could probably be heard up at her father's house on the hill. "Mom!" she called excitedly as she ran toward the kitchen with the phone in her hand. "Jasmine is having a sleepover tonight. Can I pleeeeee go?"

Jane tried to smile now that her nerves were calming down after the loud sheik her daughter had let out. "Of course," she replied. "I think tonight's a great time for you girls to have a sleepover."

"I can go!" Olivia yelled excitedly into the phone. She listened for a moment, then said. "Okay! I'll see you outside in a little while!"

As she had hung up the phone, she said, "Thanks Mom!" Then she stopped and seemed to stare at her mother for a moment. "Um...Mom," she said far more seriously. "You do know which Jasmine is there this weekend, don't you?"

"Yes, of course I know," Jane replied. "And I see no reason why all you girls can't have a good time anyway."

"But Mom," Olivia said, "that Jasmine doesn't like to do the kind of things the rest of us do."

"Didn't he just invite you though?"

"Yeah, he did. I wonder what's up. Because this isn't like him at all."

"What's up," Jane replied, "is for you four girls to have a really great time!" her mother told her.

Olivia tried to smile. "Yeah, I guess. It just seems...strange."

"Would it seem strange if it was Nichole asking?"

"No. Not at all. But Jasmine? I mean, that Jasmine?"

"Olivia, you go and you have the best time you possibly can. As much fun as possible. And don't worry about anything else. Okay?"

Olivia looked strangely at her mother. "I almost get the impression you knew about this."

Jane smiled. "Maybe I did."

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The excited shrieks were echoed at Nichole's house, and then a few minutes later at Allison's house too. All four "girls" planned on making plans for the party while they were out playing in the snow.

One by one, the girls brought their big round aluminum disks out to the hill. Strangely, the only boys out there were Aaron and Lucas, the two youngest boys in the family. But then, none of the other men and boys had gotten home until almost dawn. They were all still asleep. And Olivia mentioned it had been such a long night for them all that her mother had said that Hunter had seemed almost drunk when he came in.

"I can't believe you're holding a slumber party tonight!" Nichole exclaimed as soon as Jasmine was able to join the other girls.

“Um, me either,” Jasmine replied. “Uh, it was kind of my Mom’s idea actually. But she seems awfully determined that I do this and that I try to have a real good time.”

“It’s about time!” Allison exclaimed.

“Yeah,” Jasmine replied, “but she really wants us to do this for another reason too, and it’s really why I need to...try...to figure out how, or at least to pretend like I’m having fun.”

“Hey,” Olivia said, “what are you talking about?”

“What my Mom really wants,” Jasmine said, “is for Jimmy, you know, my sister, to get so jealous of me having fun with you all, that she’ll finally decide to quit hunting.”

“Oooohh!” Nichole exclaimed. “Well, that certainly takes a lot of the fun out of it.”

“You can say that again!” Nichole agreed.

“But wait!” Allison said, “We’ve got to do this! We’ve got to convince Jasmine to quit hunting! Because otherwise...” She stopped right there for a moment before she very softly and sadly added, “she won’t be a girl anymore.”

It was a somber moment for all of them...except Jasmine. “Can you guys do it?” he asked. “For me anyway? ‘Cause as much as I’ve loved being with you and everything you’re all doing for me, I’d still like to someday get back to being me again. Even if I’ll never hear the end of it from everyone else.”

Olivia took his hand. “You know we’ll do it for you Jas. You know we will.”

“Besides,” Nichole added. “As much fun as we’ve had with you too, we really want to get your sister back to being a girl all the time again. At least I do. I miss her. I really do. Except of course when she’s being all crazy like she’s been lately. I don’t know what the heck is up with that!”

“Yeah, they’re right,” Allison said. “This is real important for both you and Jas. And...I guess for us too since we don’t want to see your sister turn into a boy.”

“Ugh!” Nichole grunted. “I can’t imagine anything worse than that!”

“Who’d ever want that?” Olivia echoed.

“Hey! I would!” Jasmine told them.

"I sure don't see why you would!" Nichole replied with a shake of her head.

"You don't count anyway!" Allison said. "But I think your Mom is right, the only way we're going to convince your sister to quit hunting, is to make her see what a great time we're having, so she'll want to be part of us again. We've already seen how mad she gets sometimes when she sees...you...with us," she said indicating Jasmine. "Which means that tonight we've really got to pour it on. We've got to do things that she'll be so jealous of not being able to do with us, that she'll *have* to quit hunting!"

"Like what?" Olivia asked. "Cause remember, this Jas here right now doesn't like any of what we do."

Allison smiled wickedly. "Then I guess he's just going to have to learn!"

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It was long after lunch before Clint, Tommy, and Jimmy were all awake. Jimmy woke up to find her head still groggy after the long arduous night. It had been a really strange but fun night too. She had no idea how many miles they had all actually walked, but a hundred didn't seem too far off the mark. And it seemed like the longer the night went on, the more often Grandpa passed around the jug of whatever it was that they were all drinking to keep them warm. Just a few sips of it sure seemed to warm her up though, which is why she figured they were all drinking it. She had only shot her gun twice all night long, and the second time, she didn't even come close to hitting what she was supposed to be shooting at. She figured she was just way too tired by that time.

She awoke though to a lot of seeming activity going on, particularly across the hall in her "sister's" room.

She opened her bedroom door to see what all the commotion was about, and saw Nichole in Jasmine's room with...her Karaoke machine. "Hey!" she said, still somewhat groggily. "What's going on?"

"Oh, hey Jimmy," Nichole replied. "We're just setting up my Karaoke machine for the slumber party tonight."

Jimmy's eyes nearly popped out of her head. "Slumber party!"

"Yeah! Of course," Nichole replied. Then she turned back to setting the music machine up.

"Not here, you're not!"

"Sure we are," Jasmine replied, doing his best to put a big grin on his face, when all he really felt was nervous and scared.

Jimmy simply couldn't believe it. "*You*...are having a slumber party...here?"

Jasmine shrugged. "Sure. Sorry you're not invited though. Girls only."

Jimmy nearly had a fit. "Mom!" she screamed as she ran down the hallway.

Nichole grinned at Jasmine and held up her hand. Jasmine smacked his hand against hers. "Nice job!" Nichole told him.

Jimmy found her mother in her bedroom. "Mom! Jas is having a slumber party?"

"Sure," Susan replied as she sorted through her old makeup. "Why not? It's a perfect time for it since none of you have school tomorrow."

"But a slumber party?" Jimmy asked again. "With my girlfriends?"

Susan looked up with a stern look on her face. "First of all, they're not *your* girlfriends. At least not right now. But don't forget, they can be again any minute you want. The moment you agree to stop this hunting business, you can be right there with them again, and your poor brother will be out."

"But Mom!"

"Are you ready to quit hunting?" Susan asked hopefully.

Jimmy's mouth worked up and down, but no sound came out. She was tempted, but she knew better. And last night had been a real blast! What was that drink that her grandpa had passed around anyway? Her face finally settled into one of her all too stubborn expressions. "No!" she said with too much finality. "I'm not going to do it!"

Susan sighed. For a moment there, she had actually thought that her daughter would give in.

"Then leave your sister and her friends alone. They're planning on having a good time tonight, and I won't have you spoiling it!"

Jimmy just glared at her mother for a few moments. She certainly wasn't happy in the least! She noticed that her mother was working with her makeup, and her mood changed completely when she noticed. "What are you doing?" she asked.

Susan noticed the abrupt change in her daughter's attitude. "Going through my old makeup," she said. "I'm going to let the girls play with the stuff I don't need anymore."

Once again Jimmy's eyes nearly bulged out of her head. "Mom!" she complained. "You never let me do that!"

Susan tried to put a stern look on her face, but her smile was more sly than anything else. "Why would I ever let...a boy...play with my makeup? Don't be ridiculous! But remember, anytime you want to give it a try, just say the magic words. You know what they are, and you know we all are waiting desperately for you to say them."

Once again the stubborn expression washed over Jimmy's face. But this time it was stubbornness mixed with anger. Susan was very much afraid she was about to have another shouting match with her daughter, but Jimmy finally turned and stomped out. Susan actually breathed a sigh of relief. But she had been hopeful. More hopeful than ever! It was without a doubt, the closest they had come yet. Maybe they should have tried this idea sooner.

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Since the party was going to be held in the room next to his, Tommy got permission to spend the night with Elliot. Jimmy pleaded to be allowed to go too, or to be sent anywhere, but Susan and Clint remained firm on their stance that she had to stay home, with the excuse that there weren't really any boys in the family her age to spend the night with anyway. But what Susan and Clint really wanted was for her to hear every last thing going on in the bedroom right across the hall from her room. "Jimmy" would be forced to hear it all, but wouldn't be allowed to be a part of it...until she agreed to

quit hunting. Both Susan and Clint practically held their breaths with hope.

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Four girls were dressed for bed, but they didn't stay that way. Not by a long shot! One of the great things about the slumber parties that the old Jasmine used to have, was her wardrobe. She not only had lots of clothes, she had lots of different kinds of clothes and more than an ample amount of accessories to go with them. While country music blared in the background out of Nichole's Karaoke machine, the girls all raided Jasmine's closet and drawers, all in the name of coming up with the most outrageous outfits possible. The noise was plenty loud, and so was the laughter. And strangely, Jasmine himself couldn't help but laugh far more often than he thought he would.

He only had a few big problems he had to get past. He didn't have a clue what clothes to pick for an outrageous outfit. As far as he was concerned, everything his sister owned was outrageous! Another big problem was that he wasn't really a girl. And his final big problem was that he didn't know if he could, or even *should*, be enjoying what they were all doing. That was his biggest hang-up... until the other girls started shedding their pajamas to get changed. He nearly had a fit! Fortunately, his mother showed up to check on them shortly after the changing started.

"Mom!" he whispered desperately. "What am I supposed to do?" He simply couldn't believe that the other girls had stripped down to their panties and bras right in front of him before starting to get dressed.

"What's your problem?" Susan asked, as if she had no clue at all. "You're all girls. Enjoy yourself."

"But Mom..."

"Jas, don't worry about it. Have fun. As much as possible, and don't let anything stop you or worry you. Just have fun!" She looked more seriously at him for a moment. "Just be reasonable!" she said in a slightly lower voice.

"What's reasonable?"

“Just have fun, sweetie. Go with the flow!”

His mouth was still open in shock as his mother walked out, heading across the hallway to Jimmy’s room.

“Jas!” Olivia called. “Hurry up and get changed!”

Still in disbelief, he slowly started unbuttoning the top to the flannel pajamas he was wearing.

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Susan opened Jimmy’s bedroom door. She saw her real daughter sitting at the desk. There was a car racing game playing on the computer in front of her, but she got the impression she wasn’t really playing it. “You okay in here?” Susan asked. The look she got from Jimmy spoke nothing but anger.

“No, I’m not okay in here!” Jimmy returned nastily. “You’re making me sit here and listen to all that going on across the hall!”

There was a sly smile on Susan’s face. “What’s your problem?” she asked. “Your sister has had lots of slumber parties with her friends. Why should this one bother you any more than the others?”

“You know what I mean!” she returned angrily. With a grunt, she turned and shut the game off on the computer and got up from her chair. “I’m going to watch TV.”

“Okay,” Susan replied like it was of no consequence at all. “But just for a little while.”

“Whatever!” Jimmy sighed as she walked past her. But she didn’t get three steps out of the room before she stopped to look in on what the girls were doing. She couldn’t believe it. They had all her clothes out of the closet and strewn all over the place, and they were all wearing different outfits – of hers!

And then she saw Nichole spot her there, and shriek! A moment later, Allison was at the door exclaiming, “No boys allowed!” And Allison continued to stand there glaring at her with her hands on her hips.

“Jimmy!” Susan’s voice lashed out. “I told you to leave those girls alone!” She said it sternly, but it was all she could do to keep from laughing. The angry glare she got back from Jimmy though was nothing but frightening. Jimmy turned to head for the TV and

Susan followed her, but as she passed Allison, she held her thumb up as a sign that she had done a good job.

Allison watched Jimmy and her Aunt Susan head down the hallway and then disappear in the direction of the family room. She figured that they would be alone for a while. She hoped anyway. She turned back to the party. Jasmine was still in his pajamas, although at least his top was unbuttoned now.

"Come on Jas," Olivia complained. "You've got to pick something to wear."

"But what?" Jasmine asked.

"Anything!" Olivia replied.

"Something interesting and fun," Nichole added.

"What's fun supposed to mean?" Jasmine asked.

Nichole rolled her eyes. "Hopeless!" she exclaimed.

Allison figured it was time for her to step in. Besides, she had an ulterior motive in mind that was more...personal. "Let's pick for him!" she declared excitedly. "We'll dress him up!"

"What?" Jimmy exclaimed, totally horrified. But the sudden excited laughter coming at him from the rest of the girls quickly let him know that nothing on earth would probably stop them.

"Get those pajamas off!" Allison told him in no uncertain terms, "or we're going to rip them off you."

"My...pajamas?" He got no further than that before Allison grabbed his pajama bottoms from behind and started pulling them down. "Hey!" he exclaimed. But by the time he got that much out of his mouth, she had already ripped them down to his ankles. Before he knew it, he was standing in front of all of them in just his bra and panties. The bra he didn't care about, but he was more than embarrassed by his panties, or rather, the unfeminine little bulge that was in them. That part of him was nothing like a girl at all, and never would be!

He was totally surprised though when the rest of the girls seemed to ignore his panties...and his bra, although he saw Allison giving him more than a passing glance in that area, as Nichole started pulling one of his sister's dresses over his head. A moment later, his arms were through the sleeves and the other girls were all pulling the dress down.

“Hey!” Olivia said. “You’ve got a cuter butt than I figured.”

Not exactly what he wanted to hear! Five minutes later, he was laughing. He couldn’t help it if he tried. The girls were all acting outrageously funny as they grabbed one piece of clothing after another and tried all the different things on, going out of their way to strike oddball funny poses in the process. A little while later, he found himself grabbing necklaces, or scarves, or anything at all and throwing it on or around his body, and laughing like, or rather, with the rest of them. He was having such a good time, he never realized that he was having fun instead of being miserable.

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Jimmy was sitting in front of the TV with her father, but her mind was completely on what was happening back in her “sister’s” bedroom. More than occasionally she could hear laughter coming from back there, above the noise of the music even. She didn’t last twenty minutes before she “had” to get up and wander back to her room, just to “check” on something in there. Her head was turned completely towards the party in Jasmine’s bedroom as she “wandered” by. But the sight of her brother laughing with the other girls and then throwing a scarf around his neck, striking a funny pose, and then laughing again, totally stunned her. They were all having a blast. All of them. Including her screwy brother! All of them...but not her.

“Jimmy!” Susan’s voice echoed down the hallway. “I told you to leave them alone!”

The look Jimmy leveled back at her mother was pure menace. She continued on into her bedroom. She stared at the ducks on the wall. She stared harder at the spot that would eventually hold the deer head that she had shot. But her ears strained for every last sound she could hear from the party across the hall.

Eventually, the laughter died down and seemed to stop. The country music playing didn’t. She could only hear small brief sounds of laughing now. What were they doing? Too curious to stand back and wait, she walked out of her room to look in on the party. She was sorry the moment she looked. She was sorry and she was

angry. All of them, her sissy brother included, were playing with the makeup. Making each other's faces up as best they could. Including all the eye makeup that her mother would never let her have! She had never once been allowed to use or even play with any mascara or eye liner, but now Allison was applying it directly to her brother's eyes! Damn him! Damn them! She was growing furious.

"Jimmy!" Susan's voice lashed again. "I told you to leave them be! I told you what you had to do if you wanted to be a part of what they're doing. You know what you have to do!"

Jimmy turned on her heel and went back to her room...and slammed the door as loudly as she could.

Susan stood in the middle of the hallway and shook her head sadly. Why wouldn't her child give in? Why wouldn't she see reason? And the girls across the hall were giving her plenty of good reason. She continued on to the "party" room. She couldn't believe that Jasmine was sitting there letting Allison make up his face. He was dressed...outrageously, as they all were, in an odd collection of clothes, scarves, jewelry, and of course, makeup now. But, her... son...looked happy for once, as if he was actually enjoying himself. She didn't know if she should feel happy or sad for him. She decided she should feel happy. How many times had she wished he could enjoy being a girl...at least somewhat enjoy it!

"Who wants to make popcorn?" she called into the party. A sea of half-made-up faces ran past her for the kitchen. Yeah, no doubt about it, so far, Jasmine's little slumber party was off to a darn good start. Now if the real Jasmine would just wake up and see the light! Damn her! She was right across the hall, pining away for what she knew was only steps away. Why wouldn't her hard-headed daughter give in? Why?

Susan opened the door to Jimmy's room. Jimmy was sitting up on the bed staring at the ducks on the wall. Susan was almost awed by how angry she looked. "Popcorn?" she asked.

"Go away!" Jimmy spat nastily. Susan turned around and left, but she left her bedroom door open again.

The girls were into their second bag of popcorn cooking in the microwave when Jimmy pretty much slunk into the kitchen. From

her out of the way seat at the kitchen table, Susan saw Jimmy stand quietly just inside the doorway to watch, or was it glare, at the girls making their snack. The look on Jimmy's face was pure hatred, but Jimmy never said a single word. Susan mentally willed, over and over, for her to give in, but she just stood there glaring angrily.

And then Susan saw Nichole turn toward Jimmy, and despite the looks from the others, Nichole headed directly for her. She stopped just a few feet away. "Please come back to us Jimmy," she begged. "We miss you. We want you part of us again."

Her plea as so heartfelt, it nearly broke Susan's heart. She was doubly shocked and disappointed when Jimmy angrily replied, "Go to hell!" And then she turned and literally ran back to her room again.

Later, when the girls all went back to Jasmine's room, Susan saw that the door to Jimmy's room was firmly closed again. But a moment later, she knew her closed door wouldn't do her any good at all when she heard Nichole start singing on the microphone that went with her Karaoke machine. It was more than loud enough to be heard through the whole house. Clint even retreated behind the closed door of their bedroom to get away from the overly loud noise.

But it was only a minute after the singing started, that Jimmy stomped out of his room and glared angrily at the girls, before turning and heading for the family room again. Susan had a feeling that watching TV in the family room would do him no good at all. The darn music the girls were making echoed all through the house. She was sure that Clint was fuming about it in their bedroom, but she also knew that this time he wasn't about to complain at all that it was too loud. This time, neither of them dared to tell the girls to turn the volume down. They wanted Jimmy to hear it, and hear all of it. "Keep at it girls," she whispered to the noisy air around her. "You've got to be wearing her down."

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Jasmine figured he was drunk. It was the only explanation he had for the way he was behaving. Of course, he had never been drunk before. He had never really had more than a sip of beer in his life! So he had no idea at all what it felt like to be drunk, but he

figured just then that drunk was the only thing he could be. He was singing with the other girls, he was dancing with the other girls, and both Allison and Nichole had commented that his “hip” action was better today than the last time he had danced with them. Drunk! It was the only explanation. But he couldn’t help it, he was totally lost in whatever fun they were all having, and he was...enjoying himself. He decided that despite all the bad things he had always heard about being drunk, he kind of liked it.

And then he heard Olivia shout, “It’s hair time girls. Hair time!”

The loud shrill shrieking of the three girls in the room with Jasmine nearly burst his eardrums. Hair time? Did he even want to know what they had in mind?

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Jimmy of course heard the excited shrill shrieking. She knew perfectly well the kind of fun and excitement it meant. She just didn’t know exactly what her friends were all “shrieking” about. Despite how loud the TV was playing, she had heard every single word that had been sung from back in the bedroom, including the very noticeable times when her brother had been singing. No doubt about it, the stupid sap couldn’t sing very well at all! And he sure didn’t sound like the rest of the girls. But what ate at her more than anything else, was that he was having so much fun with them, and she had been totally cut out! Replaced! Turned away! She hated every last one of them. She was just waiting for a good reason to give them all a piece of her mind.

The music dropped way down in volume as the country songs started playing in the background again. What were they doing back there? What new things were they doing just to torture her? And she was convinced that everything they were all doing was only just to torture her. Well, she wasn’t about to let them succeed. Damn them all! They could all just go hang. All her friends...and her stupid screwy brother too. All of them!

But the not knowing ate away at her until she “had” to get up again to “wander” back to her room. And when she passed the party room, again she had to pause. And stop. And stare. Her brother

had his hair full of rollers. And now he was wrapping Olivia's hair in rollers, as Allison told him what to do. Her screwy brother! As far as she was concerned, he was totally proving now what a stupid sissy he really was. Totally proving it! Just wait till she got back to school. Oh the rumors she was going to spread about him now. And every last one of them was going to be totally true!

"Jimmy!" Susan's voice lashed. "You know how easily you can be part of them again. Just give the word. That's all it will take. Just one simple promise and you can have so much fun again. Please Jimmy, please." But all she got was another angry glare, and then Jimmy's bedroom door slammed behind her again. Susan was getting more and more annoyed at her daughter's refusal to give in.

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Naturally, the hair rollers were followed by manicures and pedicures. But this time, every nail on every girl was done in a different color, including their toes. They literally tried out every bottle of nail polish that Jasmine had, and all the nail polish that Susan had added from her own collection.

And once again, in the middle of it, "Jimmy" appeared in the doorway. "I hate you all!" she screamed at them. "I hate you, hate you, *hate* you!" And then she turned and ran back to her room, slamming the door again.

Susan ran down the hallway. She hadn't peeked in on the "girls" in quite some time, so this new outbreak by Jimmy wasn't exactly expected. She saw them doing all their nails. She was only surprised that they hadn't gotten around to that earlier. She ignored the girls and went into Jimmy's room instead. Again she was sitting up on her bed, glaring at the ducks across from her.

"Why won't you give in?" she asked her. "Why won't you be a part of your friends again?"

"You're just doing this to me to torture me!" Jimmy angrily shouted back. "That's all that's going on tonight. You're doing this to make me quit hunting. That's all it is! You're torturing me! You're using my own friends to torture me!" she shouted again.

Susan held her temper, but it wasn't easy. "First of all," she said, "as long as you're being Jimmy, they aren't *your* friends at all. They're Jasmine's friends!"

Jimmy turned her head and glared at her. "Yeah right!"

"But every last one of those girls only wants you back for a friend again."

"Bullshit!" Jimmy muttered as she stared at the ducks again.

"Every last one of them!" Susan emphasized. "But you can't be their friend if you're not a girl. But to be a girl again, all you have to do is to give up hunting. You know that. That's the one and only thing you have to agree to. And if you don't..." But she didn't want to finish.

Jimmy turned her head toward her mother again. "Bullshit!" she exclaimed angrily again. "It's all bullshit! I can't be a girl if I'm a boy? Well let me tell you, I'm a girl right now. You're just making me act like a boy."

"Then give up hunting and start acting like a girl instead," Susan pleaded. "I know you want to. *You* know you want to. Your friends all want you to as well."

"Bullshit!" Jimmy exclaimed again before going back to staring at the ducks.

"Jimmy," Susan said, "if you don't give this up, you're going to become less and less of a girl. Eventually, people are going to start seeing you as a boy dressed up like a girl – even when you're all dressed up pretty."

"Bullshit!" Jimmy shouted at her again. "Don't hand me that! You know none of it is real! None of it. Not...any of it!"

Susan's lips pursed in anger. "I can't believe that you refuse to see what's right in front of you!"

"Go away!" Jimmy yelled back. "Go away and leave me alone!"

"We'll see!" Susan told her. "Eventually, you'll have to see. I just hope that by the time you do finally realize what everyone has been telling you is true, that it won't be too late."

"Bullshit!" Jimmy exclaimed again. "Every last bit of it is nothing but bullshit!"

Susan wanted to hit her so hard! But she held her temper and backed off. "We'll see," she finally said again. She left the room,

and left the door open again. She stopped in the doorway where the girls had all been having fun. All four curler filled heads were looking desperately at her. All she could do was shake her head sadly.

When she turned, she saw Clint at the other end of the hallway. She shook her head again and walked to him, and let him embrace her firmly. She was fighting back tears. "Why won't she see reason? Why is she acting like this?" But Clint made no reply at all as he led her back to the family room where he sat holding her on the couch.

Susan continued to fight a losing battle with her tears. Why couldn't her daughter stop being so stubborn? Why couldn't she see what was right in front of her? Sadly, she laid her head in her husband's lap, knowing that the party in Jasmine's room would most likely be winding down now for the night, and knowing that things would be all too noisy and busy again when they woke up again tomorrow morning.

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Things were still winding down in Jasmine's room. With curlers still in their hair, multi-colored nail polishes decorating all their fingers and toes, and way too much makeup over-decorating their faces, the girls started removing the odd assortment of clothes they were wearing and started donning pajamas again.

But Allison was curious about something, and as she hurriedly got just the top to her pajamas on, she watched Jasmine, waiting for just the right moment. "Jas," she said quickly as soon as he had undressed down to his bra and panties. She saw him look up at her as he held the dress he had been wearing up in front of him to cover himself somewhat. She walked over to him. "Jas," she said again, somewhat softly. "Please. Will you let me see your breasts?"

Jasmine was shocked. "Why?" he asked embarrassedly.

"Because I'm a girl. And tonight, you're a girl. We're all girls," she said. "And my dad said that they were starting to grow on you now. And since I've started to see some other little things starting to change about you, I just wanted to see how they look. Please?" she asked again.

Jasmine wanted to refuse, but there were suddenly three overly interested girls standing right in front of him instead of just Allison.

"You told me you thought they might be bigger than your sister's," Olivia added softly.

Jasmine shrugged. "I don't really know," he replied. "They just seem big to me. Bigger than I want them to be."

"That's because you don't want them at all," Allison said.

Jasmine tried to smile, but failed. "I guess that's pretty much true."

"So take your bra off for a minute and let us see," Allison told him. "We're not going to blab it all over the school. We already know what kind of things are supposed to be happening in you. We just want to see something for ourselves."

Jasmine shook his head again. "I really don't know if I should," he said.

"Didn't your mother tell you to not worry about it earlier?" Nichole suggested. "Didn't she tell you that you're a girl tonight?"

"Yeah!" Allison agreed. "And since we're all girls and this is a girl thing, please Jas. We're all just curious."

Jasmine stood there for a moment looking into the faces of all his friends. He shook his head, but he finally reluctantly said, "I guess." He lowered the dress he was holding in front of him and started to toss it aside, but it had been hiding his panties...and the embarrassing unfeminine little bulge that was in them. He was confused for a moment since he didn't know what to do about the problem. He was confused until Allison pulled the dress right out of his hands and tossed it on the bed, leaving him with nothing to hide behind at all. His hands quickly went down to hide the front of his panties.

Nichole giggled a bit at him. "Don't worry about that," she said. "We've all got brothers. Just forget about it."

"Want me to help with your bra?" Olivia offered, tearing his mind from his panty problem.

He shook his head, but she was already moving behind him. He stood there feeling his face literally turning red with embarrassment as he felt Olivia unfastening his bra, and then pushing it down over his shoulders and arms, and then pulling it away from him

completely. Jimmy stood there feeling like a total fool as the girls “inspected” his young still budding breasts.

“Geez!” Nichole whispered. “I can see where your nipples and the area around them are getting bigger and they’re pushing out now.”

“I can tell they’re starting to get wider now,” Jasmine told them embarrassedly. “They’re spreading out. But at least they’re not jutting out more from my chest.”

“Don’t worry, Jas,” Olivia told him, “they will soon. I’m sure they will.”

Allison didn’t say anything. Yes, his breasts were indeed growing...a little. But as far as she could tell, it was very little. But then, the real Jasmine had always complained about her breasts not growing like they should. Even Nichole, who was only a few days younger than Jasmine, had bigger breasts than Jasmine had. Since Jimmy was Jasmine’s twin, did that mean that his breasts were growing extra slowly like his sister’s? She had no answer. But there was no doubt now in her mind at all that the hormones in Jimmy’s system were starting to turn him into a girl. Which could only mean one thing, the hormones in the real Jasmine’s system, had to be turning her into a boy. The most horrible fate ever!

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Four Disney princesses were lined up next to each other on the floor of the bedroom. Four sleeping bags, all bought by the girls at the same time, each with their favorite princess decorating the top. Side by side, heads full of curlers rested on pillows at the top of each bag. They had talked for hours, even Jasmine, *after* the music had been turned off and only a small pink glow came from a decorative lamp by the bed.

But slowly the talking ceased as the girls all started to feel sleepy.

“*I hate you!*” the voice whispered menacingly into the semi-dark room. “I hate you all!”

Four heads quickly jerked up to see a darkened shadow in the open doorway. And then they saw Jimmy disappear, and a moment

later, they heard the bathroom door closing.

“What’s wrong with her?” Nichole gasped.

“I don’t know,” Olivia replied, “but I hate it!”

“Me too!” Allison added.

Jasmine, stuck between Olivia on the outside and Nichole on his other side, turned over onto his side and buried his head completely inside of his sleeping bag, as the tears and desperate sorrow again washed over him.

“Hey, he’s crying!” Olivia exclaimed. “Jas! Jas! What’s wrong?” But her efforts were ignored as the crying inside the sleeping bag next to her continued. Nichole and Allison, still in their sleeping bags, sat up to watch. Olivia laid closer to him and put her arm over top of him. “It’s okay Jas. Whatever the problem is, it’s okay. We’re here for you Jas. It’ll be okay.”

But buried inside his sleeping bag, Jasmine knew it wouldn’t be okay. It wouldn’t be okay at all. His sister wasn’t going to give in. She wasn’t going to quit hunting. In fact, she seemed worse now than ever before.

He felt Olivia remove her arm after a minute, then he felt the top of his sleeping bag being pulled open. He looked up to see Olivia start unzipping his bag. “What are you doing?”

“Shh!” she hushed him. She stuck her legs into the bag with him and tried to zip it up as much as possible, but she couldn’t get it very far. She pulled his curler filled head onto her arm and laid down next to him. “It’ll be alright,” she whispered softly to the crying boy she was now holding. “It’ll be alright.”

Jasmine allowed himself to cry harder. It was one of those cries he just had to get out of his system. But he shook his head at Olivia’s words and sobbed. “No, it won’t be alright.”

“What won’t?” Nichole asked from his other side.

Jasmine tried to turn, but he only got so far. “My sister’s never going to quit hunting. This is never going to end.”

Allison levered herself up onto her elbow. “Jas,” she whispered. “Was it really so bad tonight? Was it really that bad for you?”

Jasmine managed to get himself rolled over in the now overly tight confines of his bag as he stared at the ceiling, letting the tears

run down the sides of his head. “No,” he admitted. “And that’s the other part of my problem.”

“What do you mean?” Olivia asked. “Why should it be a problem that you enjoyed yourself tonight? And you know you did!” But the only answer she got was harder sobbing out of him.

Jasmine cried. He cried because his sister wasn’t going to give in and quit hunting, and he cried even more for himself, for all the changes happening in him, and especially because of something else. Because how could he admit, how could he even come to grips with the fact that he was a boy, and he had had fun tonight doing the most girlish things possible? How could he ever admit that to anyone? He’d had fun, when he knew perfectly well that he shouldn’t have.

In the tight confines of his sleeping bag, he felt Olivia put her arm over him again, and then he felt her kiss his wet cheek. “Night Jas,” she whispered.

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On Monday morning, Susan sat at her kitchen table sipping coffee. Clint had gone to work, and based on what she saw in front of her, she figured he should be glad he wasn’t around. She had no doubt that he would find the sight of so many different nail polish colors covering so many different fingers to be disturbing. She herself simply found it – sweet. The part she couldn’t figure out, was Jasmine. He seemed to be one of the girls. Almost completely! His head was even still full of rollers, although some of them now looked as if they were ready to fall out.

All four girls were making breakfast – pancakes! And all four girls were again having an awful lot of feminine fun. Susan just prayed they wouldn’t leave her kitchen in too much of a mess.

All four girls had slept very late, which she had fully expected them to. Jimmy had slept almost as late as well. Susan had checked on all of them several times since she got up and each time she had left them sleeping, including Olivia in Jasmine’s sleeping bag with him. Odd. Very odd. Troubling, but they were all girls. Sort of.

She had seen Jimmy wander briefly into the kitchen for a few moments during the hustle and bustle and noise that the girls were all making, and then she had seen her turn around and leave again. What was wrong with that girl? Why wouldn't she just give in? In her opinion, the four girls had done a masterful job last night of putting the pressure on Jimmy, and she was still refusing to give in. And Jimmy's mood seemed worse than ever!

Slowly but surely, Susan watched the stack of completed pancakes on the plate growing as each girl seemed to try to do a part of what should have been a one person operation. Susan was particularly pleased to see Olivia constantly going behind everyone and wiping the counters off with a damp cloth. The pancake stack grew, and the smell of bacon being cooked on another burner also filled the room. Jasmine and Olivia set the table together, including a plate in front of Susan, who knew she would have to eat some pancakes, even though she could really do without. She noticed particularly the sixth plate on the table. There could be no doubt that they were expecting Jimmy to join them as well.

Jasmine was back by the stove and Olivia was setting more forks on the table, when Susan felt she just had to ask. "How come you were in Jasmine's sleeping bag last night?" The serious troubled look on Olivia's face did not seem to go with the very lighthearted mood the rest of the girls all shared. "He was crying again last night, Aunt Susan," she said. "Real bad."

Susan just nodded and whispered. "Thanks." Evidently, not all the "girls" were as happy last night as she had thought.

When the pancakes were ready, all the girls moved their non-stop discussions to the table. But as they were sitting down, all of them looked toward the place set for Jimmy.

"Aunt Susan," Allison said, "Can you get Jimmy for us please. I don't think any of us want to go back there and do it."

"Why don't you just leave her out this morning," Susan suggested. "After the way she behaved last night, it might be better."

"No!" Nichole exclaimed.

"We particularly want her here this morning." Olivia added.

"Please, Aunt Susan?" Allison asked.

Susan realized that the girls weren't giving up on their friend yet. She had no idea what they had in mind, but any hope at all was worth trying. She got up and went to find Jimmy. No surprise, she found her sitting on her bed again, staring blankly at the ducks. "Jimmy," she said, trying to sound pleasant. "The girls have breakfast ready. Come and join us."

"No thanks," Jimmy replied without even turning her head.

"Jimmy," Susan said a little more firmly, "Come have breakfast. The girls went to an awful lot of trouble and they specifically asked me to get you to join them."

This time Jimmy did turn her head. "No thanks!" she replied more firmly.

Susan wasn't about to take any more of her attitude. "Get your butt in that kitchen right now!" she yelled. "And don't you dare say one single thing to any of them that's not nice. They want you there because they love you. Now go!"

Jimmy looked at her menacingly for a moment, but she got up from the bed and headed for the door.

"And wipe that nasty look off your face!" Susan ordered. "The least you can do is be civil to everyone else. Wash your face if you have to, but hurry up and get in there, and you...be...nice!"

Hating life, Jimmy headed for the bathroom instead of the kitchen.

Susan waited for her at the kitchen door. When Jimmy came out of the bathroom, she at least looked a little better. "Remember," Susan said firmly but softly. "You be nice!"

Jimmy wanted to be anything but nice, but she went into the kitchen.

"Hi Jimmy!" Nichole exclaimed happily. "Come join us, we just finished making pancakes."

Jimmy saw an outrageous stack of pancakes on a plate in the middle of the table. There was a plate full of bacon next to it. "Her" usual seat at the table seemed to be waiting for her, so she slid into it.

"Hi Jimmy," Allison said brightly. "Grab some pancakes."

Jimmy's eyes glanced around suspiciously at all of her ex-friends. Not saying a word, she picked up a fork and grabbed one of

the pancakes from the top of the stack, only then did the others reach out and take some for themselves, which still left a surprisingly large amount still on the plate.

Susan allowed herself to sit down and grab one of the pancakes. She even took two pieces of bacon as she noticed Nichole pouring an overabundance of syrup over top of the two pancakes on her plate. "Here Jimmy," Olivia said brightly as she passed the syrup over to him.

Jimmy took the syrup, but she felt nothing but suspicious. She just knew her ex-friends were up to something. She just knew it! She poured some on her one pancake and passed it down the table to her brother.

"Thanks, Jimmy," Jasmine said as brightly as he was able as he took the syrup, poured some out and passed it on.

Jimmy turned her suspicious eyes on her "brother." He was acting like a girl. Just like all her...his friends. She couldn't believe it. What, was he just extra happy now, now that they had found a way to shut her out? He really was a big sissy. More so than she ever believed!

"So Jimmy," Allison said as she chewed a mouthful of pancakes. "Did you sleep okay last night? I know we were making gobs of noise until real late!" Her remark brought giggling from the rest of the girls – even Jasmine.

Jimmy wanted to say something mean, but her eyes caught sight of the warning look on her mother's face. "I slept...fine," she said.

"Good!" Allison relied. "I'm so glad."

"So why wouldn't you join us?" Olivia asked.

Jimmy's eyes nearly bulged out of her head. "Join you?"

"Sure," Nichole replied. "We asked you to. We wanted you to. I especially wanted you to."

Jimmy's head went into a whirl. "How could you?" she asked.

"It's easy," Allison replied. "We wanted you there, because you belonged there. We missed you...uh...Jimmy."

"It sure didn't look like it to me!" Jimmy replied nastily. "It looked like you were all having lots of fun."

"Yeah, we did!" Nichole replied brightly.

“That’s exactly right,” Allison confirmed. “We had a lot of fun. But how much more fun would it have been for all of us, if you had been there with us?”

“We missed you Jas,” Olivia said.

“It sure didn’t look like it to me!” Jimmy replied.

“But we did!” Nichole insisted.

“Jas,” Allison said, “why won’t you quit hunting and be one of us again? We really want you back. We don’t want to see anything bad happen to you at all.”

Jimmy looked at her. Allison was six months older than even Olivia. They all usually looked to her as their leader. “I miss you guys too,” she finally admitted. “More than you know.”

“We figured that easy enough by the way you were acting,” Olivia told her.

“That’s for sure!” Nichole added.

“So why not be one of us again,” Allison asked. “Please Jas?”

Jimmy looked around at all her friends. She could see it in their faces that they really did want her back. But... Her thumb jerked in the direction of her brother. “But what about him?”

“Hey!” Jasmine exclaimed. “You give the word, and I’m outta here. Gladly!”

“Gladly?” Jimmy said. “It sure looked like you were having an awfully good time last night. And all it did was to prove to me what a humongous sissy you really are!”

The embarrassment over it hit Jasmine all over again. “Maybe I am, maybe I’m not,” he conceded. “Who knows? I’m not even sure I care anymore. All I know is that I want to be me again – all the time.”

Jimmy laughed. “Yeah, sure!”

“I do!” Jasmine replied.

“So Jas, please come back to us,” Allison pleaded. “Please quit this stupid hunting business now. ‘Cause we really do want you back.”

Susan was all but holding her breath. More so, as Jimmy started looking around at all her friends again. And then her hopes were crushed.

“No,” Jimmy replied. “None of you know how much fun hunting is. None of you know how it feels to be able to walk through the woods and feel so powerful, knowing you can shoot and kill anything out there. None of you have any idea how much I love it.”

“I’m the only girl,” she continued, “the only girl in the entire family who can hunt, and I can’t tell you how important that is to me. I can hunt, and I deserve to be able to keep hunting. And all this is nothing but a stupid lame plot on your part to keep me from hunting!”

“But Jas,” Olivia exclaimed. “If you don’t stop, you’ll turn into a boy! You won’t be a girl at all!”

“Bullshit!” Jimmy exclaimed. “That’s nothing but total bull! Allison’s father said he gave me a couple of shots that were supposed to change me into a boy, but they didn’t do anything to me at all. Nothing! So I know for a fact that none of that is real. None of it! And if you believe any of it, then you’re almost as crazy as he is!” she said as she jerked her head and her thumb at her brother again. “‘Cause he’s so mixed up about it, he actually thinks he’s growing breasts!”

She pushed her chair back and got up from the table. “To hell with all of you!” she exclaimed. “I had a fantastic time hunting with all the guys this weekend. We were all out there together. Me included! I was a part of them. They treated me like a part of them. I’m not giving up hunting for anything! You can all go to hell!” With that, she quickly stomped out.

Susan tried to control her anger. The hurt looks on all the faces at the table told her exactly how all the girls felt...Jasmine included. Especially him! “Nice try girls,” she said to them. “Really...nice try.”

Chapter 26 - The Doctor is Out

January 19th – 24th

Allison waited patiently all day for her father to come home. She had briefly talked about the party and everything that happened with her mother over the phone while her mother had been at work, but she still wanted to talk to her father too. Her mother had agreed, her father needed to know.

Late in the afternoon, she collected her younger brother from her Aunt Jane's house where Aaron seemed to spend more time than at home. Of course, her brother and Lucas were pretty much inseparable, much like the Musketeers...were.

Her mother was home on time for once, and together they started dinner, spending most of their time talking about the party. There was actually a lot to tell. But the most important part, they both felt that Allison's father needed to know.

Brian walked through the door, also almost on time. He was only a little late because the snow still on the roads had slowed him down. He greeted his wife, Allison, and Aaron warmly, and noted the looks of patient concern on his wife's face, and especially on Allison's face. "So how was your party?" he asked.

"Better than expected," Allison replied. "Actually, way better than expected. And worse too."

The last part caught Brian by surprise, especially after hearing how good everything seemed to go.

"Allie," Janet said before her husband could say anything else. "I can hold dinner for a while if you two want to go and talk."

Brian looked from Allison to his wife, and knew that something serious had happened. "Why don't we go to my study," he suggested. He wasn't sure if he was surprised that only Allison followed him. He sat behind his desk where he always sat, but his daughter stood in front of the desk. "Don't you want to sit?" he offered.

"I'm not sure," Allison replied. "I may just stand instead."

Brian knew that something was really bothering his daughter now. "What happened?" he asked.

Allison gave him a brief rundown of the entire party, from the time the girls had all gotten there, through breakfast that morning. The part that she wasn't so brief telling him, was everything she knew that had happened with Jasmine, the real Jasmine, and she was very careful to let him know exactly which of the twins she was talking about each time. She especially filled him in on what they had tried to do that morning, and the things that Jimmy had said back to them. But she didn't skimp at all on how nasty and cruel Jimmy had seemed through the whole thing. She even told him about some of the shouting she had heard between Jasmine and her mother while the rest of them were partying.

Brian listened to it all very carefully. But what he quickly realized was that Jasmine was getting worse. He had already heard about all the previous times she had flown off the deep end and started screaming and ranting. And now here was more proof that she still wasn't any better, and in fact, seemed to be getting worse. He was afraid of something now. Something he had been worried about earlier that weekend when they had thought Jimmy, the real Jimmy, might commit suicide. Despite what Jimmy had told them, he was still very worried about that possibility. And now he saw only more reason to be concerned.

"Thanks, Allie," he said sadly. "I'm sorry you couldn't convince her to stop hunting. More sorry than you can imagine. I took some blood samples from both of them this weekend," he told her. "I managed to get them sent off for analysis today. It'll be a few days before I hear anything though. I'll tell you this though Allie, I'm worried about them. Worried about both those twins. Do me a favor please, will you?"

"Sure Dad, anything."

"When you go to school this week, please watch out for Jimmy, you know, the real Jimmy. I'm still very worried about him. Maybe more so now than before. In fact, I'm now worried that either of them could commit suicide at any time. From what I can tell, they're both getting overly depressed, and that's a very bad thing. If you can,

Allie, don't let them be alone at any time. Especially in school. If you can, try to keep an eye on them so nothing worse happens to them. Okay? At least until I can get a better handle on what's happening with them. Because I have no doubt at all that something is really wrong here."

"Sure, Dad," Allison replied. "No problem." The seriousness of the way her father had told her, and the fact that he had mentioned blood work made her more frightened for Jasmine than ever – both Jasmynes!

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That night, Clint stopped in Tommy's room as he was going to bed. "Tommy," he said, "I need you to do something for me tomorrow."

"Sure, Dad. What is it?"

"Keep an extra close watch on your brother...your real brother. He seems to be extra depressed again today and I can't get a word out of him as to why. But I'm still afraid if something bad happens then he might still try to hurt himself."

"Geez!" Tommy breathed. "I didn't think he was that bad?"

Clint nodded. "He's trying not to show it," Clint told him, "but I can see that he's really bothered by something. And if you can, don't let him be alone at lunch anymore. Okay? Find some way to keep him company."

"Sure, Dad. That's easy."

"Thanks, son. I appreciate it. And I know he will too."

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Nichole and Elliot were the first kids at the bus stop on Tuesday morning. Allison and Aaron joined them a few minutes later. They soon saw Tommy, Jimmy, and Jasmine coming down the hill towards them. Even from a distance, they could tell which of the twins was which. Fortunately, they were both back to being themselves. They couldn't help but notice though, that Jasmine was walking behind her

two brothers, and she was walking further behind them than what would have seemed normal.

"Hi Jimmy. Hi Tommy," Nichole called brightly as they both walked up.

"Hey Nichole," both boys replied. Jimmy nodded his head toward Nichole and Allison, trying to let them know how much of a friend he thought them now, but neither girl was looking at him. They were looking at his sister instead.

"Hi, Jasmine," Nichole said softly and sadly.

"Hey!" Jasmine said curtly, and then turned and walked away from her two friends.

Both Nichole and Allison gasped. What the heck?

Justin, and Ashley were coming down the hill now. Allison and Nichole watched as they greeted everyone pleasantly. Including Jasmine. They watched as Jasmine said a simple greeting back, and then turned away from them too. What was up with Jasmine? And then when the bus came, instead of sitting with Nichole, Jasmine continued on towards an empty seat further back in the bus. Nobody could believe it.

At their lockers, Nichole asked Jasmine, "What's up? How come you're avoiding me?"

Jasmine just shrugged. "I just don't feel like hanging around with you," she said.

Nichole felt like someone had just kicked her in the stomach.

All morning long, Jasmine barely talked with either Nichole or Olivia. She was polite enough, she mostly answered any questions they had, but she never really talked as if she was their friend. Both Nichole and Olivia felt hurt.

At lunchtime, Jasmine hung back from the other girls. Instead of going directly to her locker and then to the lunchroom, she went to the girl's room instead. By the time she got to the lunchroom, she saw Nichole, Olivia, and Allison ahead of her in the line. She had been so slow that Tommy and Jimmy were only a little in front of her. But she had wanted to be behind them all instead of right in the middle of them.

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Nichole, Olivia, and Allison sat in their same seats, but the missing person was obvious. They all searched the line and saw Jasmine further back. Well, it happened sometimes. Allison knew better than any of them since she was the one who was most often late. While they waited, Nichole and Allison filled Olivia in on how Jasmine had acted toward them that morning while waiting for the bus. None of them could wait to talk to Jasmine now to find out what was wrong – this time.

Keeping a watch on the lunch line slowly moving, they saw Hunter and Elliot get their lunches and head to a table together. Jimmy wasn't far behind them, and he headed to his usual table as well. But before he could actually start eating, Tommy was there, pulling him out of his seat and almost forcing Jimmy to go to the table with Hunter and Elliot. And while Jimmy and Tommy were heading for the other table, they noticed Jasmine finally getting her lunch, and heading directly toward them. But then they all saw Jasmine turning and going to the table where Jimmy had been originally sitting instead. All the girls felt slighted at the obvious way Jasmine was avoiding them.

"It's not right," Allison said. "It's just not right!" After a moment's reflection she added, "Girls, I'm going to do something now, and you're probably going to kill me. But I'm going to do it anyway."

"What?" Nichole asked.

But instead of answering, Allison got up from her seat and headed for the table where Tommy and Jimmy were. She walked right up beside Jimmy. "Nice try, guys, and we appreciate it," she said as she grabbed Jimmy by the arm. "But he's one of us now. He doesn't belong with any of you."

"Hey!" Jimmy shouted as she literally pulled him to his feet. Allison grabbed his lunch tray for him and carried it back to the table with the girls. She set his tray right down in the place where he always sat when he was being his sister. "You're one of us now," she told him. "You don't sit by yourself anymore."

"But I wasn't by myself," Jimmy complained.

"Jas," Allison said to him, purposely using his alter name. "You're growing breasts now like a girl. You're turning into a girl."

You don't belong with the guys anymore, even though you were never really with them in the first place. Your sister doesn't seem to want to be around us anymore, so we're going to look out for you now. Your sister can stay with the guys. She's turning into one anyway. So from now on, you're a part of us. You're the fourth Musketeer now and we'll be watching out for you, just like we know you'll watch out for all of us too." She turned to the other girls. "Isn't that right girls?"

Nichole and Olivia were both totally surprised. "I...guess so," Nichole replied uncertainly.

Olivia considered it. She glanced over at Jasmine, purposely sitting away from them. Purposely avoiding them. Purposely wanting nothing to do with them. Then she looked up at Jimmy, who had been Jasmine all weekend. "As far as I'm concerned," she said, "nothing has changed at all. As far as I'm concerned, you're Jasmine now, because I don't know who that other person is anymore. She sure doesn't act like the Jasmine I used to know. She sure doesn't act like the Jimmy I used to know either. And she sure doesn't act like she likes the rest of us anymore too. But you were willing to have a great time with us all weekend, and then some. So as far as I'm concerned, Jasmine never left us, and still hasn't. Except that you're Jasmine now. So sit down so we can have some lunch!"

Hesitantly, Jimmy sat down. "I don't feel right sitting here," he said. "Not when I'm not supposed to be my sister."

"So wear a dress to school tomorrow," Olivia told him. "You'll be doing it soon enough anyway."

Allison broke out laughing and the other girls all watched her. Then Olivia joined her, and finally Nichole laughed with them too. And last but not least, *Jasmine* broke out into a smile and laughed with his friends as well. Everything was all turned around and strange. Nothing was as it should be. But just then, he was grateful to have some friends again.

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At the table by herself, Jasmine watched the girls all laughing. She had seen Allison go and get her brother and then seat him where she should have been sitting. Allison's intention had been obvious. None of the girls wanted anything to do with her anymore. They much preferred her brother, the stupid sissy. Somehow though, she found it to be somewhat liberating. As far as she could see, she could now tell everyone, to her hearts content, what a sissy her brother was. And if they didn't believe it, all she had to do was to point in his direction so everyone could see who he was hanging out with.

With a smile coming to her face, she began planning what little tidbits of actual truth about him that she could start spreading.

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Late Thursday afternoon, Doctor Brian McComber finished with a patient and hurried into his office. He sat at his cluttered desk and dialed the phone. He was returning a call from another doctor in Little Rock who had just called him a little while ago. It took him only a minute to get through to the other doctor, a specialist in endocrine systems.

"Doctor Bolling," the almost bored voice on the other end of the phone answered.

"Doctor Bolling, this is Doctor McComber. Did you get the blood work I sent you?"

"Ah yes!" Bolling replied, no longer sounding quite as bored. "Two interesting patients for sure, being so young and in the same family."

"What do you think?" Brian asked.

"As you suspected, the hormone levels for both of them look awfully low, at least in terms of the new hormones taking over from the old ones. I know you said your family wanted these kids to go slow, and at their ages I'd have to particularly agree. But what I'm seeing is an imbalance in both of them that personally I wouldn't be happy with."

"What do you recommend?" Brian asked. "Remember though, we're trying to hold them back, keep this as slow as possible."

“Slow but still moving forward can also cause problems,” Bolling told him. “The drugs you’re using on the patient going from a girl to a boy are fine. They’d probably be what I would recommend as well, although certainly in a heavier dose. I’d also be giving the shots every three weeks instead of once a month.”

“Like I said, we’re trying to go slow with it. Is it too much of a problem to wait until the beginning of the month before they can get another dose?”

Bolling thought about that for a moment. “Shouldn’t really be,” he admitted. “It may just mean that their hormone levels will drop a bit more in that final week. But it shouldn’t be too noticeable. I’d go ahead and double the dosage you’re giving that patient. That will help cover the extra time lag as well. At least somewhat.”

“I was thinking more in terms of increasing it by only half what you recommend,” Brian told him.

Bolling considered that. “It’s been my experience, that patients usually want to see some results faster than you’re going to be allowing them to happen. I’d be very worried about them becoming frustrated over the issue when they know they should be seeing more results than they are.”

Brian knew he had to be careful here. As far as Doctor Bolling knew, both of his patients *wanted* these transitions. “But what will happen if I only increase it by half? Remember, I’m trying to go slow for the family. What I gave them each was the minimum amount where I understand that some changes would still be visible.”

“Yes,” Bolling replied. “I know, but I still think you’d be making a mistake. There are all kinds of psychological problems involved here when there isn’t enough of one hormone and also not enough of another. I can give you the name of a really good gender transition psychiatrist here in Little Rock that you can talk with about it. She’s actually a male to female transition herself. But she’s damn good at what she does. She can actually explain it better than I can. As far as I’m concerned, I’d be worried about what the wrong amount of those hormones can be doing in their systems. Yes, you may see some physical results, but don’t forget, hormones can affect the psychological elements as much if not more. And it’s those psychological affects I’d be most concerned with here.”

"I see," Brian replied thoughtfully. "And what about my other patient? The male to female?"

"Same thing with that one," Bolling told him. "Again, you're facing some psychological issues if there aren't a proper amount of at least some kind of hormones in his system. But the issue I have here is that those shots you're giving him, may not be the best way to go. I'd suggest a daily dose of both the testosterone blocker and an estrogen for him. That's the way it's usually done. And there are various methods of delivery for both, but that's the way I would go."

"Hmm," Brian mused. "I think we're better off here with the once a month shots. That way I know I'm controlling it better."

"I have a suggestion for you then," Bolling said.

"What's that?"

"Implants for both of them. They're easy, they last, and they take care of everything perfectly."

"I had thought about them once," Brian admitted, "but I was hoping all this would be over with by now."

"If those kids want to change their sex like you say, then it's going to take more than what you're doing now. Do you want me to send you the information on what I recommend?"

"Yes, would you? I think I may have to strongly consider it. And while we're at it, how can I get in touch with that psychiatrist?"

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The following afternoon, Brian hurried out of his office and got into his truck and started the long drive down to Little Rock. It took him nearly three hours to finally get there and find Doctor Cynthia Hapkins' office. Once there, he had to wait while she finished up with her final patient of the day. Finally, he was allowed into her office. He wasn't sure what to expect as to her appearance, but he was very pleasantly surprised to be faced with a completely normal looking woman.

"Doctor McComber," she said as she got up from behind her desk to shake his hand. "I'm so glad to meet you. Please. Have a seat," she said.

"Thanks," Brian replied as he tried to study her closely. He wondered if her hands might be a bit big, but if they were, it certainly wasn't really noticeable. He waited while she went back around to sit behind her desk. "I appreciate that you agreed to see me so soon," he told her.

She waved the comment off with her hand. "Doctor Bolling and I go way back," she told him. "He seemed to think this was a fairly important case."

"Two cases, actually," Brian told her.

"Yes," she said. "A boy and a girl," if I remember. "And they're in the same family. And they both want to transition. I must say, that's very odd!"

Brian nodded. "Yes it is. And the entire family...and by family, I mean the extended family, they all want things to go as slow as possible. We're hoping to change their minds. But so far, I'm afraid things have already gone far longer than any of us hoped."

"I see," she said. "And I understand fully. You know of course, that some children who feel they're the wrong gender, commit suicide if they're held back too much."

Brian nodded. "I'm afraid we had a little scare over that a week ago. Fortunately, it turned out we were wrong. There was no problem like that actually happening. Just a lot of depression."

She nodded. "And of course, you know where that depression can lead," she said.

"That's why we were so concerned. The entire family is watching those two very closely."

"I'm sure they are," she replied.

"One of the things I most wanted to discuss with you," Brian said, "is the female to male patient. I'm...well actually the entire family, is very concerned with her mood swings. And from what I can tell, they seem to be getting worse. She's actually becoming a problem with the way she goes into major screaming matches, even with her own mother. And her behavior towards one of her brothers is sometimes even worse."

Cynthia nodded. "I'm actually not surprised."

"You're not?"

"No. Doctor Bolling was kind enough to send me his blood analysis on both of them. I'm actually surprised to see such low levels of the hormones in both of them, even at this early stage. The dosage he told me you gave them seems to be a bit low to me, even for an initial trial dose on pre-teens of their age. But if I understand correctly, you haven't increased it yet."

Brian shook his head. "Not yet. The family really wants this to go slowly. Not too many changes. They really want the whole business to end."

"Yes," she said, "but at the same time, children who are determined, need to see those changes, or at least some of them. You can only hold them back so much. And don't forget, it's still early stages for each of them. All of it can easily be reversed still."

"Doctor Bolling strongly suggested I increase the dosage as well. We talked about implants for them instead of what I've been using."

She nodded. "Implants are an excellent way to go," she confirmed. "Far better than what you're using right now. In my opinion anyway."

"But will they help with the violent mood explosions from the girl?" Brian asked.

She thought about that for a moment. "Doctor McComber, let me put it this way. You're basically taking a girl, and injecting her with testosterone, the *aggression* hormone. Testosterone alone can bring on all kinds of aggression problems if you're not careful with it. But in this case, I believe that her natural estrogen hormones are at war with the amount of testosterone that's in her system, and the resulting confusion is coming out as far worse mental swings than she should have. Does that answer your question?"

Brian nodded. "Yes, unfortunately. So increasing the testosterone, will most likely actually mellow her out instead of making her worse."

"Most likely," she said. "Because her system will be going one direction instead of trying to go two different directions at the same time."

Brian nodded again. "And how about her brother, the other patient. He's shown some small signs of aggression, but not that

much. In fact, what he's shown has the whole family rather proud of him lately."

"I'm not sure what you mean there," she said, "but at any rate, I would expect that getting his hormones into a more normal state would only help his well-being as well. Once again, for each of them, they'd be moving in one direction, instead of their systems being at war with each other over which way to go."

Brian nodded. "I guess, no matter how I look at it, we'd be better off increasing their new hormones."

She nodded. "I'd highly recommend it."

By the time Brian got home that night, it was too late for him to phone anyone. And he particularly needed to talk with Clint and Susan. He had good news for them, which unfortunately they would also see as bad news.

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Jimmy was out working with her Uncle Jed, and this time Ethan again. For once there wasn't a shovel in sight. No other tools as far as she could see either. Instead, her Uncle Jed was driving them all out to look at some property that Jacob was considering buying that adjoined their hunting preserve.

Mostly, it was a really nice trip since all they were doing was riding in the truck and talking. And she enjoyed talking about hunting with both Uncle Jed and Ethan. Her only problem, was her. She wasn't feeling totally right. And the way she wasn't feeling right was similar to some of the problems she had been experiencing on and off for the last six months, when her periods had started. Somewhat started, because even though she was plagued by periods now, they really didn't happen as often as they did for all her girlfriends. And while she had spotted a bit about a month ago, it had now been a long time since she'd had a "for-real" period. But as far as she could tell, that feeling wasn't...quite right this time. So she didn't know what her problem was and she did her best to ignore it.

When Jed finally pulled off the road, Jimmy saw another pickup truck waiting for them. A large older man got out of the other truck as Jed parked next to it. While she and Ethan got out of their truck,

she saw Jed go over and shake the man's hand. The land they were on was filled with tall pine trees, all of them planted in long straight rows. Ethan shook the man's hand too and then the man held his hand out toward Jimmy. Jimmy shook his hand as firmly as she could. She was surprised to note that as far as she could tell, the man didn't seem to notice that she wasn't a boy. But then, he looked to be getting pretty old.

And then they started walking deep into the forest of pines. While Jed and Ethan and the man talked, she followed them. From what she gathered, the man was having all his pine trees cut and sold, and then he was going to sell the land to whoever wanted it. She took it that her grandpa probably wanted the land to add to the huge amount of forest they already owned. The only problem was, that she kept hearing Ethan discuss tree farming with the man, as if the family was considering growing trees like farmers grew corn or something.

They walked a long way as the man pointed out various things and landmarks, showing them a large part of what he wanted to sell.

And then Jimmy felt something bad. That feeling she had been worried about started worrying her all over again as she realized she was most likely starting to bleed into her boxer shorts. Now what was she going to do? If she was bleeding, she knew it couldn't be too bad yet. But with her pants on and walking around like they were, she had no way of looking to check. She was very worried though that all the walking she was doing would only make it bleed worse.

They had started walking to yet another part of the property when she felt she had no choice. "Um, Uncle Jed," she finally said.

"Yeah Jimmy?"

How could she tell him without it being too embarrassing? "Um, can I talk to you a minute?"

"Sure," Jed replied. "What do you need?"

"Um, I've kind of got a problem."

"What's that?"

"Um, a personal problem." They all stopped and looked at her. "Um can I talk to you in private for a minute? Please?"

Jed was confused, but he nodded his head. "Okay," he said. Then he led Jimmy off to the side a ways. "What's your big problem?"

Ethan stood back with their neighbor land owner watching Jed and Jimmy talking. But what they didn't expect to see was Jed suddenly tilt his head back and start roaring with laughter.

"Hey guys," Jed called to Ethan and their neighbor. "I'm afraid we've gotta head back. We've got a little...personal problem here that needs attending to."

Jimmy felt so embarrassed.

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It was mid-morning by the time Brian phoned Clint. "Clint, are you and Susan going to be home for a little while," he asked.

"I guess so," Clint replied. "I wasn't planning on going anywhere. Sue mentioned something about going shopping this afternoon, but she's here right now."

"Good," Brian said. "I need to come over and talk with both of you about the twins."

"Good news or bad?" Clint asked.

"Both. Sort of. Hopefully better news than bad."

"We'll brace ourselves for the bad stuff anyway. Come on over."

It was twenty minutes later by the time Brian got to their house. Sue handed him a cup of coffee as soon as he walked in, and they all sat at the kitchen table.

"So what's the problem now?" Clint asked, getting tired of all the problems with the twins.

"Well," Brian replied, "the problem I think, is me. Or at least I guess I'm the cause of a lot of it."

"Okay," Susan replied. "What problem, and why are you the cause?"

"I just got back from Little Rock last night," Brian told them. "I've been consulting with some very knowledgeable doctors about the twins. And they both were very concerned that the low dosages of the hormones I've given to them so far could most likely be causing some major psychological problems in them. Particularly the temper

tantrums that Jasmine has been throwing. According to both the doctors I talked with, I haven't given either twin enough to fully subdue their natural hormones and so they're winding up with all those hormones in their systems fighting with each other. As one doctor put it, the hormones are at war with each other and are trying to drive their bodies in two different directions at the same time. And that hormone war is without a doubt contributing to the major psychological problems that each of the twins could be having – Jasmine for sure!"

"Okay," said Clint. "So what do we do about it?"

"Can we just stop it altogether now?" Susan asked.

Brian shook his head. "That's not up to me. You'll have to let me know. But I just wanted you to know that Jasmine's little tantrums were most likely due to me not giving her enough of the male hormones. When they come in for their next dose, I'm going to put each of them on implants instead. They'll release the different medicines much more evenly and for a much longer period of time. The result should be much better for both of them."

"So will the new drugs you're going to give them be stronger?" Susan asked.

Brian nodded. "Definitely. They have to be. We've got to get their systems going in one direction completely instead of what's happening now."

"But what will that do to them?"

"Other than improve their psychological outlook? Most likely it will make all the little changes in them happen a bit faster and make them more noticeable. There's only a little over a month now until they turn twelve. Their bodies would normally be moving into a period of rapid change. It's possible now that each of them could start experiencing the changes that the other would normally be getting instead."

"Like Jimmy's breasts growing," Susan replied.

"Most definitely I would think. How much though, I don't know. From what you've told me, his sister's breasts weren't growing all that fast to begin with. So I'm not sure how much breast growth there would be anyway. Certainly not all that much over the next

month for sure. But then with the increase in age, they could grow slightly faster now.”

“Okay,” Clint finally decided, “then if this is supposed to be good for them, and especially since it’s supposed to help Jasmine’s little moods, how soon can they get these implants?”

“Not for a few days at least. I still have to order them and wait for them to get here. I’ve already got them set up on my calendar for the first week of the month. That’s not very far away. As far as I’m concerned, I think we should leave it until then.”

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Jimmy felt so embarrassed as she walked, straddle legged, from her Uncle Jed’s truck to the back door of the house. Her Uncle Jed had made her sit on a piece of plastic all the way home so she wouldn’t mess up the seats of his truck. They had walked so far to get back to the truck that the blood had started dripping down her legs a bit. It had also started staining the crotch of her pants a little.

Inside the house, Susan and Jasmine were just getting ready to go out shopping. Jasmine was anything but happy over the idea as his mother searched the closet for something he could wear that would at least be a bit more colorful and presentable than what he had on.

“Mom?” Jasmine said, “Do I have to go shopping?”

“Yes, dear. I’ve let you slide along at home long enough. Your sister and I go shopping all the time. Besides, it will do you good.”

Jasmine didn’t see any way that going out shopping while pretending to be his sister could do him any good at all.

Susan was staring into Jasmine’s closet when she heard a timid voice call, “Mom?”

She turned and saw “Jimmy” standing in the doorway. “Back already?” she said. “How was it today?”

“Um, Mom? I’ve got a problem.”

“What’s that dear?” Susan asked as her eyes went back to the closet.

“Um, my period started while I was out there and...”

"It did?" Susan gasped as she now turned all her attention to her real daughter. She saw her standing with her legs apart. And...was that a dark stain on the crotch of her pants?

"Um, I'm a mess Mom. We were way out in the middle of nowhere when it started and we had to walk miles to get back. Uncle Jed made me sit on a piece of plastic all the way home so I wouldn't mess up his truck!"

Susan smiled. "Go get a shower then," she told her.

"Um, when I get out, I need some pads to wear, but how can I do that with all Jimmy's boxer shorts?"

"All *your* boxer shorts," Susan corrected her. "But I see your problem."

"Um, can I just wear a pair of my panties for a few days until this stops?"

Susan thought about that. "I guess for now we don't have much choice. I'll see what I can find for you though while we're out in the stores." She headed for Jasmine's dresser and opened it. She selected a pair of the panties that the real Jasmine would have worn in such a situation and handed them to her daughter. "Don't tell your father," she said softly.

Jimmy rolled her eyes like her brother usually did. "As if I would."

For Susan, her daughter getting her period right then when she was supposed to be her brother was bothersome, but it was far more of a relief. Jasmine's periods had always been very sporadic, so each one was particularly important. But more importantly for Susan, it was a big sign that her daughter was still her daughter.

Chapter 27 - Attitude Shopping

January 24th – 26th

Bright yellow tights. His sister's colorful zigzag skirt. A black knit top with a white cardigan sweater over it. The nice boots to help keep his legs warm. And a yellow bow in his hair to match his tights. If Jasmine wasn't so used to it now, he'd literally scream, which is what he really felt like doing. But he was more used to it now, and he knew perfectly well that screaming wouldn't do him any good.

With his sister's school coat over it all, he grabbed his sister's heavy purse and followed his mother out to the car. He was more used to carrying the purse around now, but it still irked him.

"So how has school been?" Susan asked as she left the driveway. "You haven't said much about it all week."

"Weird!" Jasmine replied.

"What's weird?"

"School!"

"What's weird about it?"

"Everything!"

"Like what?"

"Well, ever since Jas..."

"You mean Jimmy!"

He rolled his eyes and sighed. "Whatever! Ever since she decided she wasn't going to hang around with her friends anymore, they've..."

"Jas isn't spending time with her friends?" Susan asked, shocked to hear it.

"Not since Tuesday," Jasmine replied.

"When did that happen?"

"I just told you. Tuesday."

"No, I mean...why?"

"I don't know. Jas just got it into her head to pretty much disown them all. And when she did it, Allison came and got me and literally dragged me to their lunch table and said I was now a part of them instead. Trust me, it's all weird!"

"Um...yeah. I bet. So what happened?"

"Well, ever since then, they all seem to be hanging extra close to me. And whenever anyone says something about what a sissy I am now, the girls all get real huffy about it and won't let me even say a word back at them. And sometimes, Mom, I really want to punch some of those guys out so bad it hurts! But the girls won't let me."

"Thank heaven!" Susan exclaimed. "Um, is your sister still spreading trash about you again? I thought your father put a stop to that."

"I'm not real sure," he replied. "I kind of think so, but since the girls all keep me away from the guys so much, I don't really know. In fact, the only time I seem to be near any guys at all is when I'm sitting at my desk in class. And that's about it."

"Remind me to thank the girls later!" Susan said. "The last thing we need is for you to start a fight somewhere."

"Hey, I wouldn't be starting it. They would, by saying all that junk about me."

Susan looked menacingly over at him for a moment before turning back to watch the road. "What kind of things are they saying?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. It's all mostly stuff about what a sissy I am now and how I actually think I'm a girl now instead of a boy."

"And do you think it's your sister that's spreading these things, or is it just the things the others see in you now?"

"Things they see in me?"

"Like you showing up to school every Monday dressed as your sister. Or like the fact that you're constantly hanging around with your girlfriends. Or...um...I guess your hair is starting to get more than a bit long for a boy now too. Although what I really think is that it needs some shaping again."

His hands automatically went to his hair, feeling the length of it a bit. "I don't know," he replied. "I guess it could be all that. Maybe it

would be better if I didn't hang with the girls now. I'm not really one of them anyway."

"Don't you dare!" she cautioned him quickly. "It sounds to me like they're the only thing that's keeping you from starting a fight."

"Like I said," he replied, "I wouldn't be starting it!"

She again glared at him angrily. "Just don't stop hanging with the girls. Okay? Promise me?"

"Unless they don't want me around anymore," he replied. "Which most likely will be the case if Jas...I mean Jimmy finally decides to start hanging with them again."

Susan didn't know which would be the better thing, her daughter once again back with her friends, or her friends protecting Jimmy.

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"Don't forget your purse, dear," Susan said to him once she had parked the car.

"Ugh! Why do I always have to carry this thing? I'm not going to need it anyway."

"All women carry purses," she replied. "Get used to it!"

"Ugh!" he grunted again as he pulled his sister's purse up from the floor and got out of the car. "Why is her stupid purse so heavy?" he asked as they headed for the stores.

"First of all, it's *your* purse. And how should I know? What do you have in it?"

"I don't know. The only time I ever open it is to put my lunch money in it or take it out, or to grab a pen or something."

"Well it's your purse," she told him. "If you think it's too heavy, then clean it out."

"Does Jas have another purse that I can use instead that isn't so...heavy? I don't want to get rid of anything she might need."

"You have lots of purses. And you know perfectly well where they are."

"Maybe I'll just do that," Jasmine decided. "Maybe I can set one up just for me that won't have so much junk in it."

"That's up to you dear," Susan replied. "In fact, while we're out, if you see a new one that you'd like, then maybe we can get it for

you.”

Shopping for a new purse wasn't exactly high on Jasmine's list of things he wanted to do.

“Now don't forget,” Susan told him. “Smile! You really do look so much nicer.”

Ugh!

Jasmine followed his mother into one of the major department stores. “What are we looking for?” he asked.

“I don't know,” she replied. “We're just shopping today. I was thinking though of looking at some new leggings while we're out. They're very popular right now.”

“Where are they?” he asked.

“I don't know. We'll find them eventually.”

“Should we ask?”

“Jas, we're here to shop. There's lots of things for us to look at. I really just want to enjoy the afternoon shopping with my daughter. Okay? Relax...and smile!”

He showed her one of his mock smiles, then broke into a more honest grin afterwards because he thought it was funny.

“You really do need to do that more,” she told him.

He put the mock smile back on his face.

“Not that!” she exclaimed.

Once again, the genuine smile returned.

“That!” she told him with a laugh. She shook her head. “Jas, you could be beautiful if you just smiled more.”

He didn't dare tell her that he wasn't the least bit interested in being “beautiful.” Of course, just then, the thing he really wanted was to not get laughed at, so he did his best to keep at least some semblance of a smile on his face...as if it would really help, which he seriously doubted.

He wasn't at all comfortable going into the women's department of the store, and he never had been. The girl's department either. Fortunately, in the past, every time he had been there with his mother, she had never lingered there long. However, that wasn't the case now. Now he was more uncomfortable than ever because she was there to shop specifically in that department. And since she was obviously moving casually and slowly as she looked and picked at all

too many things, he felt more uncomfortable than ever in that overly feminine world.

Susan didn't often buy dresses, but that didn't mean that she didn't look at them often. She just rarely went anywhere where she could wear them. As Jasmine stood back watching her, she allowed herself the luxury of flipping through dress after dress on the racks in her size, stopping occasionally to examine some of them more closely. She pulled one out for a closer look, then she turned to Jasmine as she held it up in front of her body. "What do you think?" she asked.

Jasmine didn't know what to think. "Um, it's nice, I guess?"

Susan's face pursed up in a look of annoyance. "Jas, you've really got to get more interested in this stuff. Don't your girlfriends all talk about clothes with you?"

Once again he rolled his eyes. "Constantly!" he sighed. "You should hear them sometimes. They never stop!"

"Maybe you should start listening a little closer to what they're saying," she said. "Start forming some of your own opinions."

"Why?" he asked.

His question was exasperating. "What do you mean, why? Why not? It wouldn't kill you to try to get interested in what would look nice on you or not. Don't you have opinions about what you see others wearing? Don't you ever notice if someone looks nice or not? You've got to notice that sometimes."

He thought about that for a moment as his mother put the dress she was holding back on the rack. "Everyone pretty much always looks nice," he decided.

"They do?" Susan replied. "All the time?"

He shrugged. "As far as I can see."

"What about if a woman's hair isn't fixed or if she hasn't bothered to put any makeup on. Would she look nice?"

"I don't know. I guess it depends."

"On what?"

"On what she was doing."

"Let's say she's out shopping...like we are. Would she look nice for that?"

"I don't know," he said again. "I guess I'd have to see."

This time it was Susan who rolled her eyes. “Well, if you spot anyone today who doesn’t look nice, then let me know!” She looked at him again. “And while you’re at it, don’t forget to smile again.”

Ugh! “My face is starting to hurt.”

She ignored him and went back to looking at the clothes, moving slowly and casually, not purposely taking her time except to enjoy being out in the stores. Twenty minutes later, they found some leggings and Susan began going through them.

“They look like Jas’s tights, only heavier,” Jasmine told her as he looked over her shoulder at some leggings that were all brightly colored patterns.

“You mean like *your* tights,” Susan corrected him. “And yes, they certainly do,” she replied as she studied the bold patterns seriously. “I know they’re really popular right now, but do I dare wear something like these? Like you said, they do look an awful lot like some of those tights you have.”

“I wish I could wear those instead of skirts,” Jasmine replied. “At least they’d be warmer. And they would be something to wear other than a skirt.”

Susan looked at him. “You’ve got a couple of pairs of these things in your drawer. You can wear them anytime you want – under one of your skirts. You don’t have to always wear tights like you do.”

“I don’t?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Can I get a few more pairs of those then?” he asked.

She smiled. “Sure!”

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Two and a half hours later, Susan and Jasmine were both carrying a number of bags. One of the bags Susan held contained two pairs of leggings that Susan was a little worried about wearing in public, or even in the house for that matter. They really did look like some of Jasmine’s brightly patterned tights! But she had noticed so many women wearing them under skirts or long tops that she felt she just had to buy them. Of course, she held another bag that held two more pairs that pretty much looked like jeans. She would have no

problem wearing those. She also had hopes that her husband would have even less problem with her wearing them around him, like when she was interested in getting him into the bedroom after the kids had settled down to sleep.

She thought about the leggings that Jasmine had selected and finally tried on. One pair, in plain black. He had wanted the same jean pattern she had bought, but she had told him she didn't want him wearing jeans of any kind to school. So he had chosen plain black. Definitely not something his sister would have chosen. But they would certainly go with just about anything.

She had sent him into the changing room to try them on, with orders to come out so she could see how they looked on him. It took her no time at all to decide that wearing skirts over top of them would have to be mandatory for him, even if he wasn't already supposed to be wearing skirts. The tight stretchy fitting slacks had been thin enough to show that while she thought his hips were starting to grow some, they hadn't grown enough to look convincing enough for him to pass that well. And that had been the view from the back. It was the view from the front that had been the worst. His crotch had just looked all wrong! So skirts of some type over top of them were going to be essential – one way or another.

Susan had noticed that for most of the day he had only stood back and watched her shop. The only time he had ever shown the least bit of interest was very briefly while they had been trying to pick out some leggings for him. And even then it had been a bare minimal interest, as if he really just wanted to get away from there as quickly as possible. It wasn't hard for her to figure out that he was just too embarrassed to shop for girl's clothes.

Later, when she had taken him through a store that had a really good handbag collection, she had to literally talk him into selecting a new purse for himself, after he had expressed an interest in getting one earlier. And even then, he had seemed so nervous that it had really been her that had chosen one for him. The most he had done was to nod his head and agree that the one she had selected had been fine. She was tempted to just forget the whole thing and leave the purse on the shelf. She still thought that she should have.

But it was in that same store a little while later where she had seen him finally take an interest in something. Sort of. She had been looking at some nice long sweater tops in the store to go with the new leggings she had bought, when she had noticed him looking across the aisle at a rack full of skirts. She had stood there for quite a while just watching him, and he had kept looking at them. "Like them?" she had finally asked.

"Like what?" he had replied quickly as he turned his head back toward her. She couldn't help but notice his face starting to turn red.

"The skirts."

"Um...what skirts?"

She had almost totally lost it with him then. "Stop it Jas!" she had said. "Do you like the skirts?"

"Um...I was just thinking..."

"What?"

"Well, they all look pretty long."

"Yes," she had said. "They are. They're supposed to be that way."

"Oh." And then he hadn't said another word about it and had remained turned away from them. She had continued shopping for a few more minutes, when she saw his eyes turn briefly back toward them again. "Oh for heaven's sake!" she had exclaimed. She had literally dragged him into the girl's department at that point, and took him to every rack of long skirts they had. Knowing his reluctance, she had forced him to pull skirt after skirt off of the racks and hold them up to look at them better, and also hold them up against his waist to get some idea of how they would look and how long they would be. He hadn't exactly been comfortable doing it, but she had felt that it was time to start getting him past all that embarrassment. And he really didn't need to be embarrassed. She hadn't seen one person all day who gave him a second look as if he wasn't really a girl. Which was something that did help her day to be much more pleasant.

By the time they had left the store, he was carrying a bag with a new pair of leggings, a bag with his new purse in it, and a bag with a long pink skirt. She had really liked the skirt they had *both* chosen. While it was fairly fitted at the waist and across the hips, it then

widened out into a nice wide skirt that would be comfortable for him to wear. To her, the style of it looked a bit western, and the pink color would really go well with the pink leather purse *she* had picked out for him.

And now with their arms fully loaded, especially hers, they were heading back to the car again. And that was when he said, "There's one!"

"There's what?"

"There," he said, "That woman over there," he said indicating a woman just then hurrying toward the stores.

The woman was obviously in a hurry, and obviously didn't look like she had planned on being out shopping for any length of time like they had been. "What about her?" she asked.

"You said to let you know when I see someone who doesn't really look good."

She stared at the woman, but only for a moment since she could tell that the woman had seen them looking at her and was a bit embarrassed. "Stop staring, dear," she said as she forced herself to keep walking. "But you're right. She isn't exactly dressed as nicely as most others here, is she?"

"You said to let you know."

"Yes. And because she wasn't as nicely dressed, did she seem to stand out to you more?"

It was a moment before he replied. "I guess," he replied.

"How about a little more than you guess! Face it, you only noticed her more because she wasn't as nicely dressed as everyone else."

"Okay," he admitted.

"So the point is, maybe taking an interest in what you're wearing and how you look, might keep people from taking too much of an interest in you. Isn't that what you really want?"

She didn't have to look at him to know he was doing his usual eye rolling again. "Ugh!"

"Now what's wrong?"

"In other words," he replied, "in order to keep people from noticing me too much, I've got to become even more of a sissy."

This time it was Susan who rolled her eyes. "Not a sissy, Jas, a girl! You're a girl right now, not a sissy! Get that through that thick skull of yours. And besides, didn't I tell you once that there's no such thing as a sissy girl in the way you keep thinking of it?"

"Try explaining that to Jimmy!"

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Jimmy was lying on her bed, trying to ignore the mild cramping in her stomach now and trying to think about things. Her "brother" was out shopping with their mother. Why couldn't her mother have waited to go later in the week when she could have gone instead of the stupid wimp? She loved shopping with her mother. She loved shopping – period! What were they shopping for? Anything in particular? She knew her mother just liked to get out of the house sometimes and just enjoy the day out somewhere.

She was jealous that her brother had gone and she didn't. Why couldn't her mother have taken both of them? She was starting to really, really hate being left out of everything. First her girlfriends didn't want her anymore, and now her mother was leaving her out. It wasn't right! And it was all nothing more than a big plot to get her to quit going hunting. Well, she liked hunting, and she knew she was getting better at it. They weren't about to stop her now. Not with this. Not with anything!

As she lay there, she heard some noise in the distance and some voices. They were home! She didn't bother to get up. A few minutes later, she saw her sissy brother stop before entering his room to look in at her. He didn't say anything at all to her, he just paused a moment to look at her before going into his room. He had bags in his hands. What did he buy? She stayed where she was, just looking out at the empty hallway through her open bedroom door. And then her mother was there.

"Hi sweetie," Susan said as she walked into Jimmy's room with a small bag in her hands. "How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad," Jimmy replied. "It's better when I don't move around too much."

"I'm sure," Susan replied as she sat on the bed. She opened the bag in her hand and pulled out a package of boy's briefs underwear. "Here," she said. "I got you these to use instead of those panties you've got on."

Jimmy sat up on the bed and grabbed the package. She found a flap in the plastic where she could open it and pull the underwear out. A moment later, she was holding three pairs of colored boy's briefs in her hands. "They're sort of like panties," she said, "only different."

"Yeah," Susan replied. "Lots of men prefer these for underwear instead of the boxer shorts all the guys around here seem to like. They should work very well for you now. Go change your pad and put a pair of those on instead. I'll take those panties you're wearing to the wash. I'm sure you'd rather *not* be wearing them anyway," she added firmly.

It was all Jimmy could do to tell her she would much rather be wearing the nice light comfortable panties. In fact... "Why can't I just wear panties for a few days? Nobody's going to know anyway."

"Boys don't wear panties!" Susan said plainly and firmly. "Now go change. We bought fried chicken for dinner tonight, so hurry up."

Jimmy wasn't the least bit happy. She looked down at the new underwear. "At least they're colorful instead of just plain white."

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After dinner, the "guys" all headed to the family room to watch TV while Susan and Jasmine cleaned up the kitchen. The routine was getting so familiar to Jasmine now that he thought nothing at all of it. It was just something that had to be done. Jimmy, on the other hand, was absolutely loving watching her sissy brother doing all the "women's" work around the house. It sure served the stupid wimp right! Once everything was cleaned up, Susan joined everyone else in front of the TV while Jasmine headed back to his bedroom.

He pulled his new leggings out of the bag and laid them on the bed. Black. And plain. As far as he was concerned, they would be much better to wear than the overly colorful things the rest of his sister's outfits consisted of. Unfortunately, he would still be stuck

wearing a skirt over top of them. But he still had to consider them an improvement. They were...almost pants.

He pulled his new pink skirt out of another bag. He held it up to his waist. It came down halfway between his knees and his ankles. If he wore the boots with it, his legs would stay totally hidden. That was why he had really been interested in the long skirts. They would simply cover a lot more of him. He wasn't overly crazy about the pink color of the one his mother had decided would be best for him, but again, as far as he was concerned, it was an improvement. Besides, in a skirt like that, he was sure that Mrs. Marker would have no problem with how he sat, like a lady or otherwise.

From the last bag, he pulled out his new pink leather purse. Dumb! Why had his mother insisted that he buy it? He had told her he would just use one of the ones that Jas had in her closet that she wasn't using just then. But her mother had seemed to be convinced that he really wanted to get a new purse – just for himself! Totally wrong! As far as he was concerned, he still saw no reason in the world why he should have to bother carrying one. He never needed it for anything at all. But now he had one that had been bought just for him. And why did it have to be pink? Ugh! Just because his mother had “claimed” that most of the other bags they saw were “too old” for him? Ha! He was convinced that his mother had selected it just because it was pink and – girly! But since he wasn't planning on putting much of anything into it, if he put anything into it at all that is, there would be no doubt that it would be a lot lighter and easier to carry. The pink patterned leather purse not only had a small handle on top to hold it, but it also had a long strap that he could use to put it over his shoulder too. It gave him – options!

He opened the purse to look into it. Empty. Could he just leave it that way? Maybe. Why not? He carried it over to the desk where he found a pair of scissors and removed the tag from it. Then he used the scissors to remove the tags from the leggings and the skirt.

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Jimmy had noticed when her mother had come in to watch TV with them, but she also noticed that Jasmine hadn't come with her.

Where was he? In the bathroom? She waited, but he still didn't show up. He had come home with bags in his hands. What did he buy? Not boy's underwear, she was sure of that! When he still didn't come back, she decided she had to go see what he was up to. Maybe she could find out what he had bought...that most likely would be stuff she could use when she got to be herself again.

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With the tags removed from everything he had bought, Jasmine left it all right on the bed and grabbed his sister's heavy purse. What the heck did she have in it? As far as he could see, the cloth material shouldn't weigh very much, but the thing was stuffed full of...he didn't know what. Junk! His mother had said he should clean it out if he wanted to. He wanted to, but...it was all his sister's stuff, which is why he had been thinking earlier of grabbing a different bag of hers to carry instead. Curious about it all, he sat on the bed, opened his sister's purse, and turned it upside down to dump it all out. He had to go through the pockets of it to get everything in it, out and on the bed before he set the purse aside. It was certainly a mountain of junk, that was for sure!

"Hey! What are you doing?" Jimmy's angry voice exclaimed as she headed into his room. "That's all my stuff!"

"Not today it's not!" Jasmine replied. "Not for the next three day!"

"Put it all back!" Jimmy told him angrily. "And don't touch it!"

"Don't worry, I intend to. Mom just told me to clean it out since I thought it was so heavy."

"Put it all back!" she screamed. "And it's not too heavy! It's the stuff I need."

He looked down at the pile of junk on the bed. "How can you need all this stuff? You've got so much junk here you probably don't even know what's there."

"I know everything that's in there, and right where everything is! And now you're probably going to mess me all up so I can't find anything!"

Jasmine rolled his eyes. "Don't worry," he said, "I was just curious, that's all. Besides, I got a new purse for myself so I won't

have to worry about your stuff anymore. I shouldn't even need to touch this thing anymore."

"Just put it all back!" she said as she glared at him angrily, then she realized what he had said. "You got a new purse?"

He pulled the new pink purse over from where it had been laying on top of his new pink skirt. He threw it across the bed toward her. "This one," he said.

She reached down and picked it up. And then her eyes noticed the new long skirt and the black leggings on the bed too. "Is this the stuff you bought?" she asked, no longer sounding angry in the least.

"That's it," he replied. "Although I'd rather have only gotten the leggings and nothing else."

"The leggings are black," she said.

"Uh...yeah."

"There's no color in them at all."

"That's the idea."

She shook her head. "I like the skirt though," she said. "And it's pink. Just like your new purse," she said, her mood brightening considerably. "Just the perfect color for such a sissy like you!"

"Yeah, right!" he replied, his anger starting to grow as a scowl crept over his face.

Jimmy, seeing that her teasing was having the desired effect, stared at him with a delighted smile on her face, while he glared at her angrily for thinking him nothing but a sissy again. And then Jimmy's eyes went down to the pile of things that he had dumped out on the bed from her purse. "Hey," she said as she reached into a pile and pulled out a gold bracelet. "I've been looking for this!"

Jasmine shook his head. "See, you don't even know what's in your own purse!"

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The totally empty pink purse made its first public appearance the next morning at church. Olivia had been there to see it, and had been excited over how cute it was. She was just surprised that it was totally empty. "Why would you want to carry an empty purse?" she asked. "That's crazy!"

“My Mom seems to think I need to be carrying one,” he replied.

“Well...yeah. Of course! But why didn’t you put something into it?”

He smiled. “Because I didn’t want to.”

“That’s just dumb,” Olivia replied.

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Reverend Cosinger stared at the two “girls” talking together before the church service started. Why had the family again brought that blasphemous boy into his church? He had noticed that the boy’s sister wasn’t there again. So why insist on bringing the boy? As far as he was concerned, he would have had an easier time seeing the girl there dressed as her brother than seeing the boy wearing a dress. Girls often dressed so much like boys it was sometimes hard to tell the difference. But there was certainly no missing the fact that the McComber boy was once again dressed totally like a girl – in God’s house! Blasphemy! An absolute abomination!

His eyes turned toward the front door of the church. And there was the reason for the abomination himself. The only reason, he was sure, why that “boy” was there in the middle of his church when he shouldn’t be. Jacob McComber was once again entering the church. The Reverend glared at him the entire time Jacob and his wife strolled through, stopping to talk here and there with a few of the people who had bothered to come, including that “boy” and his family. He continued to glare at Jacob as he and his wife finally took their now usual place in the front row. He had no doubt at all that Jacob was still trying to get rid of him. But the Reverend had no intention of letting Jacob McComber win this game. He had God himself on his side. God himself would punish Jacob McComber and the whole McComber clan. And the Reverend fervently hoped that God would punish them all – sooner rather than later.

Once again Reverend Cosinger went through the service. And once again he couldn’t seem to keep his eyes off of the blight right in the middle of his church. The blight that was symbolized by a boy wearing a red and white dress right in the middle of his

congregation. He particularly noticed that the boy was glaring back at him again, and he couldn't help but notice when the boy had taken his white fur coat off near the beginning of the service. He didn't know what his mother had whispered to him at that point, and he didn't care. Most likely the mother had wanted him to show off what he was wearing because they had again dolled the boy up to look all too much like a girl. And as far as he could see, they were getting better at it. Total unabashed blasphemy! That's all it was. Total blasphemy! But he wasn't about to let Jacob McComber's little games get to him as he preached to the boy...to the congregation.

Once again, at the end of the service, he stood at the outside door and shook everyone's hand except the hand of Clint McComber. And once again Jacob McComber had waited to be last. This time, as Jacob held his hand out, Reverend Cosinger didn't even bother waiting, he simply shook Jacob's hand, just wanting the man finally gone and out of his sight.

"I got to say, Reverend," Jacob told him, "your sermons are getting better and better. And I mean a lot! I never knew you were capable of speaking with so much passion. I think it really makes a difference." With a nod of his head, Jacob and his wife walked off, and Reverend Cosinger glared at his back. Jacob was baiting him. And he wasn't going to let it get to him.

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The new pink purse wasn't quite empty when Jasmine left the house on Monday morning. It now held one pen, one pencil, and his lunch money that would be removed at lunchtime. And those few items weighed practically nothing.

There had been no outfit selected for him that day like his sister had done for him the last time he had to go to school as a girl. This time, he had to pick out his own clothes. But the new pink skirt was a must, just because it would hide his legs more and he wouldn't have to worry at all how he sat in it. There was no bow in his hair, and no makeup on his face. There was no jewelry other than some pink crystal earrings stuck in his pierced ears. A simple black knit top was the only other thing he had bothered to put on. His mother

had “asked” if he didn’t want to go back and get some accessories. He had declined and she had left it at that. Fortunately.

It hadn’t taken him long to figure out that walking in the new skirt was weird! It constantly brushed his legs or tried to worm its way between his legs, so he was far more conscious of it than the shorter skirts his sister preferred. But it did cover his legs completely. Especially with the boots he was wearing. He had chosen a simple pair of pink tights from his sister’s vast collection of them to wear under it to help keep him warm. He needed something like them on his feet anyway to wear inside the boots.

As she always did, Susan gave a small kiss to each of her kids as they left the house for school. Tommy, as always, looked his usual self. Jimmy, looked a bit more uncomfortable than he had last week. “Do you have a couple of pads in your pocket?” she whispered to her as she kissed her goodbye. Jimmy had only nodded. “Good luck,” Susan had told her. And then it was Jasmine’s turn. “How’s the new purse?” she had asked as she kissed him on the cheek.

Jasmine smiled. “A whole lot lighter!”

And then Susan had watched once again as he stopped at the door and that determined attitude washed over him. He hadn’t looked nearly as good this time as the last time he had gone to school as his sister, but the last time, his sister had picked out his entire outfit. This time, he hadn’t bothered with hardly anything. She supposed she could have insisted, but she hadn’t. It was his choice. But that attitude he had assumed before walking out the door again, it just seemed to make things so much worse.

With a shake of her head, she closed the front door. She had to get ready for work herself. She and Jacob were meeting with one of the contractors today about those new guest lodges. She decided to go with some of the colorful new leggings, thinking they would be fun to wear.

Once again, instead of greeting her usual girlfriends, Jimmy stuck with Tommy and headed for Elliot and Hunter instead. “Hey Elliot,” she said. “Guess what I shot yesterday.”

“You went hunting again?” Elliot asked, surprised to hear it.

Jimmy saw Hunter completely interested now too. "Of course," she replied as if it was of no consequence.

"What did you get?"

"A rabbit!"

"Hey," Elliot replied, "at least this time you found something to shoot at."

"Yeah, but there really wasn't much. But hunting in the snow is sure different than when there's not snow."

"But you can see the tracks easier," Hunter added.

Jimmy nodded. "That's what Ethan and Justin were mostly interested in. That's how we found all the rabbits."

"Did they shoot any?" Elliot asked.

Jimmy nodded. "They each got one as well."

"Sounds like you had a pretty good day," Hunter told her.

"It was great...while it lasted." She didn't bother telling them that their hunting trip had been cut short because they had been told not to keep her out too long in case she needed to go change her pad or something. Boys! As if she couldn't have found a way to handle that little problem out in the woods. At least she had some extra pads with her then.

As she stood there, she glanced back and saw Allison and Nichole talking with Jasmine. They all seemed fairly happy. As much as she enjoyed talking with the guys once in a while, just then, she really missed her friends.

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"Jasmine!" Nichole exclaimed. "You got a new skirt...and a new purse! I love them!"

"Uh...thanks," Jasmine replied.

Nichole looked at his face. "You've got that same screwed up expression on your face again though, and I see you didn't bother with any makeup either."

"Nope!" Jasmine replied. "Not today."

Nichole shook her head. "I really wish you'd lose the attitude. It was a real pain the last time."

But Jasmine had no intention of losing the attitude again. And he was just waiting for someone to say something to him about what a sissy he was, especially after the way Reverend Cosinger had seemed to preach directly at him in church the day before. He had wanted so badly to stand up and tell the Reverend off! But his mother had noticed the moment he had shed his coat and put a quick stop to it. She should have let him do it. It would have served him right!

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Mrs. Ansley couldn't help but notice when the twins entered her classroom again. It had been so nice going the extra week without seeing them all switched around like they were again. But that time was now past, and as she understood it, if this continued to go on, then they would be spending two days a week in the school as each other. She really wasn't looking forward to that at all.

She noted that "Jimmy" looked pretty much just like a boy again, although his face seemed to look like something was troubling him a little. But with their situation, she had no doubt that there were probably a hundred different things that could be bothering her. She also couldn't help but notice the bad attitude on the face of "Jasmine" again when he entered the room with his sister's girlfriends. She noticed that, and the fact that while he was dressed fairly nicely, he wasn't nearly as "turned out" as he had been last time. She did like the long pink skirt he was wearing and she also noted the new handbag, but other than that, it didn't look like he had bothered with anything else the way his sister would have. But it was the defiant attitude on his face that seemed to bother her the most.

"Okay class, take out your pencils. Fifth graders turn to page one hundred and twenty eight in your math books. Sixth graders turn to page one hundred and nineteen and begin doing the problems there."

Jasmine's nearly empty purse became a little more empty. He certainly had no problem finding the pencil. Not one little bit!

Things were becoming more familiar to both twins now as they took each other's places in school: where they sat, the kids around

them and how they all interacted, the bathroom breaks, the lunch breaks, everything they did all day. Jasmine continued to “annoy” all his girlfriends with the nasty look he kept on his face, and they continued to complain about it. They complained particularly during lunch, but he refused to give in and even think about smiling. Especially since he noticed that by the end of lunch, he still hadn’t heard one word from the other kids about what a sissy he was. He decided then and there that his new attitude was going to be his permanent attitude at school from now on, no matter how he was dressed.

“Jimmy” also couldn’t help but notice her brother’s screwed up attitude. It certainly didn’t help matters when she managed to whisper to some of the guys that her “brother” had gone out shopping just to get himself a new skirt to wear and a new purse. And the pink color he had chosen for both of them was the perfect color for such a sissy. She spread the absolute truth about him, as she saw it, but what she wasn’t seeing, was any of the teasing he usually got. She was going to have to do something about that bad attitude her brother had. It was really messing things up!

And another thing he was really messing up, was her girlfriends. What were they all talking about? Why should they all seem so happy? Well, probably not her screwy brother. For the first time, she seriously wondered if she hadn’t really messed up again. Watching her brother with her friends was only making her hate him all the more. And like it or not, was making her miss her friends as well.

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In Mechanics class that day, everyone was looking at three different lawn mowers that had been put on top of the tables. Almost everyone. Jimmy didn’t appreciate being called away from the rest of the kids to talk with Mr. O’Conner.

“Did you look at any of the things I wanted you to study?” he asked her.

She nodded. “My Dad took me out to his workshop nearly every night and made me look at his tools,” she replied, obviously still not

happy about it. "He didn't give me much of a choice."

"Good!" Mr. O'Conner replied happily. He then led her over to another table and handed her a quiz. "Let me know when you're done with that."

Jimmy glared at his back as he walked off. Now she even had to take a test on the junk. Ugh! She pulled a pencil from her pocket and looked at the quiz. At least it was all stuff that she knew – now.

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Mrs. Marker had noticed Jasmine's new skirt earlier in the day. She approved of it thoroughly. She approved of it, but not the all too uncaring way he sat in it. She also didn't approve of the nasty expression that seemed to dominate his face.

She had two sewing machines set up in the room. She set the older girls to work practicing making waistbands on one, and the intermediate girls practicing installing zippers on the other. The younger girls in the room sat and worked with her on a new hand stitch she felt they all should know. She would have called Jasmine into the group with the younger students, but she had already seen that his mother had taught that stitch to him when she had examined his sister's latest project the week before. And while she knew that he was now capable of installing a zipper like most of the rest of the girls he now seemed to be a part of, a little more practice wouldn't hurt him at all.

Once she was done teaching the stitch to the younger girls and had set them practicing, she called Jasmine to her desk. "Did you do any of that first chapter assignment I gave you?" she asked quietly.

He nodded. "I did that, and chapters two and three too. My Mom worked with me most nights after dinner."

Mrs. Marker was surprised. "It sounds like your mother is taking a very big interest in you learning this."

"Too much sometimes," he replied, totally exasperated. "But like I said, if I need to learn it, I will."

She nodded and smiled. "I really like your attitude about all this." Her face clouded. "But I don't like the attitude that I've seen

on your face all day, including here in this classroom. What's going on? You look like you're ready to start a fight with the whole world!"

He nodded. "That's exactly the way I feel. And I'm ready for them!"

"Why?" she asked. "Did something happen to you?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm just ready for it in case it does."

She shook her head and pulled out some papers. "Since you said you've done so much in the book, let me see how you do on these quizzes. And I really wish you'd stop with the angry glaring at everyone. You're making even me nervous."

He shook his head. "Not gonna happen," he told her. "Because nobody's said one thing to me all day about me being a big sissy. Not one person all day long. And if they see I'm ready for them in case they do, then eventually they'll all know not to mess with me."

She shook her head. "So sad," she replied. She pointed to the quizzes she had just given him. "Let me see if you learned anything there."

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John Mercer sat in his office listening to Mrs. Marker and Mr. O'Conner. Both of them had very different stories to tell than they had two weeks ago.

"One hundred percent!" Mr. O'Conner exclaimed happily as he set the quiz Jimmy had taken down on John's desk. She *definitely* wasn't happy to learn it, but evidently her father made sure she knew all of it."

John nodded happily. "I don't care if she's happy or not, as long as she behaves and learns something."

"I agree," Mr. O'Conner replied. "You should have seen the look she gave me though when I handed her the next assignment to start studying. I thought she'd kill me."

John nodded. "I have no doubt." He didn't bother telling him that hopefully, in a few weeks anyway, *Jimmy's* nasty moods should start to ease up, according to what he had learned from Brian. He turned to Mrs. Marker. And how about in your Home Ec class?"

Mrs. Marker smiled and set three quizzes down on his desk. "His mother took him through three whole chapters of the book instead of just the one chapter I had assigned. He didn't answer all the questions correctly, but he came very close. He really did far better than I expected."

John nodded happily. "It sounds like his mother did a good job with him then."

"Absolutely!" Mrs. Marker replied. "I just wish she could do a better job with that attitude he seems to have adopted."

John scowled. "Yeah, I saw some of that earlier at lunch. It's that same defiant look he had after he stood up and gave his little speech to the whole school."

"He said that as long as he acts like that, then nobody is teasing him at all about being a sissy."

"He said that?" John asked, totally surprised.

She nodded. "And he seems a bit too determined over the situation. I'm just afraid that he really might pick a fight with someone if they say anything wrong to him at all."

"Yeah," John agreed. "That could be a problem." He was particularly worried about that possibility too after the things he had discussed with Brian as well. He wondered if it might be better to get the new dose of hormones into both twins sooner rather than waiting another week. "I'll discuss it with his parents," he told her.

"I think it might be advisable," Mrs. Marker agreed. She hesitated, then added. "There's another thing I wish she'd look into with him as well."

"What's that?" John asked, even more concerned now. "Well, it's not something that's really bad, it's just something that always bothers me about him. And I really hate to bring it up, but..."

"What is it?" John asked.

"His deportment. The way he acts. The way he moves. The way he does everything. And especially the way he sits. The poor boy is all dressed up like a girl, but he doesn't have a clue about how to act or behave like a girl at all. And I think he really needs help. As far as I'm concerned, if he ever has to go out in public as his sister, like he does here at school, then he should at least know how to act the part better."

John thought about that, then nodded. “I’ll let them know.”

Chapter 28 - Four and a Half

January 29th – 30th

The final week of January brought more snow, and for Jasmine, more heartache. But she knew that it was a heartache of her own making. She missed her friends, all of them, but it was obvious that they didn't want anything to do with her anymore. And it was equally obvious that they preferred being with her screwy sissy brother instead. Not being able to hang around with any of the girls in so long was really starting to hurt.

She missed talking about clothes with them. She missed talking about boys with them, and she had a whole bunch of new stuff she could tell them all about the boys now. A whole bunch! But she had no one she could share any of it with. No one. She simply missed being with her friends...female friends! The ones she had always been so close to.

When she could, she tried to compensate somewhat by hanging around and talking with Ashley, but Ashley had recently turned fourteen and was a lot older than she was. But she was still great to talk with. Plus, Ashley was a girl! But talking with Ashley only seemed to make her miss her real friends all the more. And all too often it seemed she would be talking with Ash, and look back, and there would be her sissy brother, right in the middle of all her real friends, talking with them. What were they all talking about?

For her part, Ashley was anything but dumb. She saw over and over again how Jasmine kept looking at her old friends. She had no doubt in the world that Jasmine wished she could be part of their old little group again. She did find it rather fascinating that the girls had now seemed to adopt Jimmy somewhat permanently into their group. He wasn't a girl. Not really. But they were sure treating him as if he belonged with them. And she wasn't sure if he did belong with them or not. Of course, Allison had told her that the girls were doing their best to protect him. Ashley wasn't totally sure exactly

what they were protecting him from, but there was no doubt that they all appeared to be just as close together as they had been when Jasmine had been part of them. Appeared to be anyway.

More than any of the other girls in the family, Ashley talked with Allison the most, so she usually had a pretty good idea of exactly what was going on, things that her grandpa often asked her about, just as he asked Justin to keep him filled in on the twins too.

She knew that Jasmine had made the others mad, especially Allison. And as forgiving as Allison was, Allison didn't seem that interested in forgiving Jasmine any time soon. And the result now was that she often found Jasmine coming up to talk with her. Not that she really minded at all. She wasn't part of that amazing little group the other girls had become, the Four Musketeers as Allison usually called them. But she had never really felt left out...probably because she was older than the rest of them. And the rest of them had all been born so close together that there was no way they couldn't be the kind of close friends like they were. Allison though, had been born six months before any of the rest of them, but she was still closer to the other girls than to her.

It was no surprise when Jasmine again walked up to her while they were waiting on the bus Thursday morning. "Hi Ash," Jasmine said to the older girl.

"Hi Jas," Ashley replied. "I hear Dad's taking you to work on some of the deer stands with him this weekend."

"Yeah," Jasmine confirmed. "I found out last night."

"Do you like working with him?"

"It's okay," Jasmine replied. "A lot of it is really hard work though."

"I'm sure it is. I don't think I'd enjoy any of it."

Jasmine looked up at her. "Don't you start on me too!" she said.

Ashley was surprised. "What do you mean?"

"That's all everyone does. They all constantly hound me to quit hunting. Well it's not going to work!"

"Uh...okay," Ashley replied. "I wasn't trying to talk you out of anything. All I said was that I didn't think I'd like doing that kind of stuff!"

"Sorry," Jasmine told her. "It just makes me so mad sometimes."

“So I heard.” She saw Jasmine turn again to look back at the other girls. And she continued to look back at them. “Miss them?” Ashley asked.

Jasmine sighed as she turned so she wouldn’t have to see her ex-friends. “More than you know.”

“So why don’t you try to get back with them again? You’ve all been so close all your lives that you’re all practically like one person. Not having you with them is probably hurting them too.”

Jasmine shook her head. “I doubt it. They all seem too close to my stupid brother now. They’ve all abandoned me.”

“They abandoned you?” Ashley asked, surprised. “Didn’t you abandon them? Because that’s the way I heard it.”

Jasmine thought about that for a moment. “Maybe,” she admitted. “But it’s too late now.”

Ashley looked briefly back at the other girls...and Jimmy. “Who says it’s too late? I’m sure it’s not. Not if you talk to them.”

“Talk to them? How? About what? They don’t like me, remember?”

“How about talking to them about just that. Jas, if you want your friends back, maybe it’s you who has to make the effort. And it’ll never happen if you don’t at least try to talk to them. Go! Do it! What can it hurt?”

“They can tell me to get lost again,” Jasmine replied. “And that would hurt.”

“Yeah, I guess it would. A lot! But you’d really be no worse off than you are now. So I still think you should at least try to talk to them.”

Jasmine looked back at her friends, but talking to them just then required more courage than she thought she had. She continued to wait with Ashley for the bus to arrive instead. But what Ashley had told her, didn’t leave her mind.

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It was after dinner that night when Marcy’s phone rang. When she answered it, she was surprised that it was Jasmine calling for Nichole. She was surprised, and very glad. Of all the girls, Jasmine

and Nichole had been the closest. Incredibly close! Always! Until lately anyway. "Nichole," she called, "it's for you!"

"Who is it?" Nichole asked, as she came running up.

"Jasmine," she said. "The real Jasmine." Marcy wasn't happy with the look on her daughter's face just then as she handed over the phone.

"Hello?" Nichole asked.

"Hi Nichole," Jasmine said somewhat shyly.

"Hey Jas," Nichole replied without any enthusiasm at all.

"Um...Nichole, is there any way I can come over and talk to you for a few minutes?"

"About what?"

"About me," Jasmine replied. "Please?"

It was a moment before Nichole answered. "Hang on," she said. She looked up at her mother who was hovering nearby. "Can Jasmine come over for a few minutes?" she asked.

Marcy was surprised. "Yes. Sure. Of course!" She was suddenly hopeful that her daughter would get her best friend back again.

Nichole turned back to the phone. "Come on over," she told Jasmine in the same dull voice. "Do you want me to call the others?"

"No!" Jasmine told her quickly. "I...I really just want to talk to you first."

Nichole sighed a little. "Okay," she replied. "I'll see you in a few minutes."

Ten minutes later, the two girls sat across from each other on top of Nichole's bed. "I miss you so much!" Jasmine told her. "You wouldn't believe how much!"

"Yeah?" Nichole replied. "If you miss us, just think how we felt when you didn't want anything to do with us anymore."

"Yeah, I know. I'm...sorry about that."

"Sure you are," Nichole replied.

"I am!" Jasmine insisted. "Nichole, you and I are like sisters! Maybe closer! How can I not miss you? Especially you!"

"You don't act like you do," Nichole told her.

Jasmine's face fell. "Yeah, you're right. I haven't exactly been acting very nice at all."

"You think?" Nichole replied nastily.

"I know!" Jasmine agreed. "But I miss you. I miss you all! But especially you Nichole."

Nichole shook her head. "I miss you too Jas. More than you know. You have no idea how it hurt me when you refused to be with us anymore. No idea."

"Like I said, I'm sorry. Real sorry."

Nichole looked at her for a few moments in silence. "So I'm guessing you want to be friends again?"

"More than you know!"

Nichole nodded. "Me too," she admitted. "More than you know. But...I'm not sure how I can handle some of these weird things you keep doing! I mean, wanting to go hunting is one thing, and I can't for the life of me understand why you like it so much, but the way you keep going all crazy sometimes is something else. And Jas, you keep doing stuff that's not nice! How do I deal with that? And then there's the other thing. Jas, according to what Allie said, and my mother told me it's all true, those shots that Uncle Brian is giving you are turning you into a boy! How can I deal with that? How can you deal with it too? Jas, if you keep on as you are, you're not going to be a girl anymore. How can we be friends then?"

Jasmine's face immediately turned stubborn again as the anger flared up in her. "It's not true, Nichole. None of it is true. Those shots aren't doing anything to me at all. Nothing! I've always been a girl and I always will be. It's all one big lie to make me quit hunting!"

"See," Nichole said, "you're doing it again! You're not even talking nice right now. And we were just talking!"

Jasmine closed her eyes and balled her fists, trying to calm down and bring herself under control. She was taking a big chance reaching out to Nichole just then and she really didn't want to ruin it – no matter how she really felt. She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. "Sorry, Nichole. I didn't mean to get that way. I just...can't help myself sometimes."

"So how am I supposed to deal with it?" Nichole asked. "How are any of us supposed to deal with it?"

"I don't know," Jasmine admitted. "But I'm sorry, okay? I'm trying to control myself, but sometimes I just can't."

Nichole actually smiled. "You're worse than your brother," she said. "Half the time he walks around ready to kill someone."

Jasmine allowed herself to smile. "Yeah, I've seen that weird attitude of his."

"It's worse than weird," Nichole laughed. "He's really screwed up!"

"You're telling me!" Jasmine agreed. But she dared not go into all the different ways she knew her stupid sissy brother was screwed up. She didn't know how Nichole would take hearing any of it. But now that they were laughing... "Nichole," she said, "can you try to do something for me...please?"

"What?"

"Can you talk to the other girls for me? Find out how bad it is. Find out if we can ever be friends again?"

Nichole's face showed that she wasn't too sure of that possibility. "I'll ask them," she replied. "But I really can't make any promises."

"Thanks," Jasmine replied. "But I'm really just glad to know you're still willing to be my friend."

"Hey," Nichole said quickly. "Not friends, sisters, remember?"

Jasmine quickly crawled across the bed and hugged her.

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On Friday morning, Jasmine left the house with her two brothers. Once they reached the road, they saw Elliot and Nichole waiting for them down by their driveway. Tommy never broke stride as Elliot fell right next to him and the two of them continued on down the hill toward the bus stop. But the others stopped right there.

"Hi Jimmy," Nichole said to him first, then she turned toward Jasmine. "Hi Jas," she said just as warmly.

Jimmy was a bit surprised that Nichole had finally said something to his sister. "Uh...hi Nichole," he replied.

"Hi Nichole," Jasmine said too with a smile.

The three of them continued on down the hill.

"Did you ask yet?" Jasmine asked Nichole.

“Sort of,” Nichole replied. “I think both Allison and Olivia want to discuss it later. I’m not sure how either of them feel about it.”

“What’s up?” Jimmy asked.

“Jas wants to try to be friends again,” Nichole told him. “But I’m not sure the others are exactly interested.”

As they walked, Jimmy first felt like he was about to be replaced, removed from the friends he had started to count on as real friends for the first time in his life. But then he thought about the way his sister had always been with the other girls, especially Nichole. They had always been incredibly close. They had literally done everything together! They had done things together in ways that he was still learning. The four girls had been together their entire lives! “They have to let her back!” he suddenly exclaimed as they walked. “Especially you, Nichole. You’ve got to start being friends again, just like you were before. Just like you’ve always been.”

Nichole stopped and starred at him in surprise. The others were waiting for them at the bottom of the hill, but she stopped right there. “Jimmy,” she said, “I think Jas and I will always be friends, no matter what. We may have a few falling outs now and then, but we’re more like sisters than friends. So eventually, I have a feeling we’ll always find each other again. But how do you feel about it? How can you want us to have her back as our friend again after she’s done so many cruel things to you?”

“I just told you how I feel,” he told her. “She’s the real Musketeer. Not me. She’s the real girl. And I’m just...a fake.”

Nichole grabbed his arm. “Jimmy, I’m not sure being one of us is about being a girl anymore. I’m not sure at all. Of course, that’s only me speaking. There’s others we need to think about too.”

Jasmine wasn’t totally liking the way the conversation was going. It almost sounded like Nichole wasn’t interested in dropping Jimmy as her friend, especially from their close group. “Come on,” she said, “we don’t want to miss the bus.”

The three started walking again, but nothing more was said.

“What’s up?” Allison asked Nichole the minute the three reached the others. Although after the brief phone conversation she’d had the night before with Nichole, she had a pretty good idea of what they had been talking about.

Nichole just shook her head. "Don't ask," she said somewhat sadly.

Jasmine stared at her friends for a minute, but when Allison didn't say anything at all to her, she sadly walked off to join Ashley. "Well, I tried," she told the older girl.

"They don't want you back?" Ashley asked, completely surprised. "None of them?"

"Nichole and I are okay," Jasmine told her, "but the others aren't exactly sure."

"Well, it's a start," Ashley replied.

"Yeah," Jasmine agreed. "Better than nothing."

"A lot better as I see it."

Jasmine smiled at that, but it was still a sad smile.

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For the first time in a while, Nichole said a few things to Jasmine during class. But Olivia, sitting in front of them, never once turned around. But still, Jasmine felt more relief than she imagined that Nichole was talking to her again. When lunchtime came, Jasmine continued to hang back away from the others since they obviously didn't want her with them again.

Jimmy met the other girls in the lunch-line, and a minute later, Allison was there as well. He let Allison go ahead of him as he often did so that he was bringing up the rear, as usual. Before they reached the food, he looked back in the line and saw his sister a short way behind them. She was looking back at him. With a shake of his head and a sigh, he turned back away from her.

Olivia got her lunch and headed for their usual table. Nichole got her lunch and headed for their table. Allison got her lunch and followed the other girls, and Jimmy got his lunch and more slowly, followed behind too. But when he got to their table, he started for his usual seat, his sister's old seat, and he stopped, staring at it. His sister wanted to be one of them again. And as much as he liked being with them, his sister was the one who really belonged there. "I can't sit there today," he said softly.

"What?" Allison asked.

"I said," he said a bit more firmly. "I can't sit there today."

"Why not?" Nichole asked.

"Because Jasmine wants to be your friend again. And she belongs there, not me."

"That's your seat now," Olivia said firmly.

He shook his head. "I can't sit there today," he told them. "I'm not trying to be mean or rude to any of you," he added quickly. "And I hate doing it, but if Jas wants to be with you again, I don't want to be in the way." He jerked his head over toward his old solitary table. "I'll be over there today," he told them before walking away from them. He hated doing it. They had all been his friends. They had all done more for him than they knew. But he wasn't really one of them. But his sister was. And like it or not, she needed to be back with them again. Besides, he was used to being...alone.

He set his tray down where he could sit by himself again and started eating, as he saw his sister now standing still between the table with the girls, and his table. She looked as if she was unsure where to go. He also saw all the girls turned now to look at him. He tried not to look back at them, but it was hard.

Jasmine didn't know where to go. She had seen her screwy brother leave the girl's table. But she also knew that the other girls didn't want her back. Unsure where to go or what to do, she hesitantly headed for Jimmy's table where she set her tray down across the table from him. "What's going on?" she asked as she sat down. "Why are you over here?"

Jimmy was totally surprised to see her there. "Why are *you* here?" he asked. "I left you your seat with them."

"Did they say they wanted me back?" she asked hopefully.

"No," he admitted. "But that's where you belong. That's where you need to be."

"But they didn't say they wanted me," Jasmine replied, feeling a little hurt again. "So there's no reason for you to be here too... unless they told you not to sit with them."

He shook his head. "No, they wanted me to sit with them. But you need to sit there, not me."

She shook her head. "You're screwy, you know that?"

"Tell me something I don't know."

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Olivia stared at Jimmy and Jasmine together, along with the rest of the girls. "What's going on?" she asked. "Is he leaving us again now too?"

"I don't think so," Nichole replied. "I think Jimmy likes being with us, but like I told you all last night, Jas wants to be friends with us again, and Jimmy wants her to be friends with us too. He just doesn't want to be in the way of that."

"That sounds so much like something Jimmy would do," Olivia replied.

It was a moment later when Allison added, "Yeah, it does."

None of them had eaten anything yet. None of them could look away from the two twins sitting at a lunch table together, something none of them had ever seen before.

"What do you think?" Allison finally asked. "Do we let Jasmine be a part of us again?"

"As far as I'm concerned," Nichole replied. "We never really kicked her out. She's the one who decided she didn't want anything to do with us."

"That's kind of the way I see it too," Olivia added. "She's always been a part of us. She belongs with us. I guess, even if she does really weird things. My only problem is...Jimmy. He's kind of been one of us too. Lately anyway. Even if he only partly enjoys it. And besides, I kind of feel like we need to keep watching out for him. I mean, what if he suddenly does start a fight with one of the other kids. I'd hate it if I knew I might have been able to stop it. Especially if he gets hurt!"

"Yeah, but you've still got a crush on him," Nichole replied.

"I can't help it," Olivia answered, "I like him. He's...nice."

"Yeah," Allison said with a sigh, "he is nice. Too nice sometimes. And Olivia's right too. Sometimes it's like he's not interested in being nice. Sometimes he's all too ready to pick a fight with someone. But according to my Dad, that's because the hormones he gave him have him really messed up right now. Jas too."

"I still don't think we should just abandon him," Olivia said. "Not after we went out of our way to be so nice to him. And we asked him to be with us. He wasn't looking to be our friend at all. We grabbed him!"

Allison got up from her seat. "You're right," she said. "You're both right. And I think it's time we sorted this whole mess out before it gets any worse. Coming girls?"

It was the first time either Jimmy or Jasmine could remember sitting across from each other and just talking. But it didn't last long at all as three girls suddenly surrounded them. "What are you guys doing over here?" Allison asked as if there was nothing wrong at all. "Why don't you both come join us?"

Jasmine looked up at Allison hopefully. "Are you sure?" she asked tentatively.

"Jas," Allison said, "we've got to figure this out one way or another. And we can't do it if you're over here, while we're over there. Now do I have to pick that tray up for you and carry it myself, or are you coming?"

Jasmine smiled as she pushed her chair back. "Thanks, Allie," she replied.

Jimmy smiled and sat there as he watched his sister picking up her tray.

"Jimmy," Olivia said, "that means you too! Now either you carry your tray yourself or I'll carry it for you, but you're not staying here by yourself."

The smile left Jimmy's face. "You're sure?" he asked. "I'm not... well, you know."

"Come on, Jimmy," Olivia replied, totally exasperated with him. "We're not giving up on you either. Especially me!"

With a nod, he too got up and grabbed his tray. Together, they all headed back to their usual table. But when they got there, both Jimmy and Jasmine headed for Jasmine's usual seat. He backed away quickly.

"No," Jasmine told him. "I guess that's your chair now."

He shook his head. "It's always been your seat," he said. "And it always should be." He carried his tray to the far side of Allison where he sat down. With nobody sitting across from him, he felt

somewhat left out. But that was okay too. He didn't really belong there in the first place.

"I'm sorry everyone," Jasmine said as they all started eating – finally. "I just can't control myself sometimes. I just get so...angry!"

"We noticed!" Olivia replied.

"I don't think any of us want to argue with you anymore," Allison said. "But it's really hard when you start being so unreasonable."

"I know," Jasmine replied sorrowfully. "But I just wanted you to know how much I missed you all."

"We missed you too," Nichole told her. "Well, I certainly did!"

"We all did," Allison added.

"So I guess we're all back together again?" Olivia asked.

All four girls looked around at each other, but Jimmy purposely stared at the food on his tray. "I guess so," Allison declared.

"I'm so glad!" Nichole exclaimed.

"Me too!" Olivia replied.

"And you wouldn't believe how happy I am about it," Jasmine added.

Allison smiled. "The Four Musketeers, back together again." She laughed. "It sounds like the name of a movie or something."

"They all laughed."

"Except..." Olivia said thoughtfully. "There are five of us now."

That thought sobered them all up quickly.

"Hey," Jimmy said, "don't count me! You guys are the real Musketeers. I'm just a nobody."

"No you're not!" Olivia replied sternly. "Stop putting yourself down. You're the nicest boy I know!"

He came close to laughing. "Except when I have to be my sister instead," he replied.

"That doesn't count," Olivia replied as the other girls laughed a little.

"But it does count!" Nichole added. "That's why we had you with us in the first place!"

Allison nodded. "I think you're right Nichole. Even though you aren't really a girl, we still have to consider that you are one sometimes. And because of that, you're as much a part of us now as all the rest of us."

"But I'm not!" Jimmy argued.

"Yes you are!" Olivia told him.

"Don't fight it," Allison added. "We're not abandoning you at all, whether you like it or not. We've just got to try to figure out how to deal with both you and Jasmine now."

"What do you mean?" Nichole asked.

"I mean, now we've got to watch out for Jimmy here and keep him out of trouble, and at the same time we've got to watch out for Jasmine too when she starts going off the deep end. Both of them!"

Jimmy was surprised to be mentioned. "Hey," he said, "don't worry about me. I'm fine."

"No you're not!" Olivia told him forcefully. "How many times would you have started a fight if we hadn't been there?"

"Hey," he said, "they started it by saying those things about me!"

Olivia just shook her head, totally exasperated with him. "Boys!" Allison muttered.

But Jasmine was surprised. Her brother would have gotten into some fights if the girls hadn't kept him out of them? That was news to her. Maybe all those little rumors she had tried to spread about him really were working. That was a very happy thought.

"So does that mean that the Four Musketeers are the Five Musketeers now?" Nichole asked.

All the girls looked around the table at each other uncertainly.

"No!" Jimmy said firmly. "I'm just hanging out with you for a while. That's all."

"Yes, it does mean that!" Allison replied instead. "I guess...there *are* five of us now."

Jimmy just looked at them all for a moment. They weren't going to give in. "Why don't we call it, four and a half?"

It took a moment, but one by one, every girl at the table started giggling.

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The feeling of dread in Susan's stomach that night as she and Jasmine fixed dinner for the family was almost more than she could stand. Later that night, they would have to switch the twins around

again. But this time the switch would be compounded by the beginning of yet another month. The twins would have to start being each other for four days each week instead of just three. For the first time, they would literally be spending more time as each other, than as themselves.

There was another worry on her mind too. The hormones her twins would be receiving next week would be far stronger than the mild doses they had already been given. In the past two months, she had seen changes in both of them. Changes she didn't want to see at all. But they were changes that the family had been hoping would make Jasmine change her mind about hunting. But so far, Jasmine had done nothing but deny any changes had taken place in her at all, despite the evidence on her own body. But Susan had no doubt that these new hormones would change her far more than the small dose she had already received.

As Susan saw it, this weekend would mark the beginning of her losing her daughter, her real daughter. Not only would the new hormones make more drastic changes in her body, changes that would remove more and more of Jasmine's femininity, but now her daughter would have to act as her brother instead for most of the week.

She was losing her daughter. She was losing her son. And she was gaining a different son, and a different daughter. Sort of. But what kind of son and daughter would her new children be? Because they certainly weren't going to be anything like her son and daughter were supposed to be. Of that, Susan was quite certain.

Because just thinking about it made her nearly sick, Clint had to deliver the news to the twins during dinner. Susan wasn't sure if either of the twins had actually realized that the added day would have been happening that weekend. But she didn't miss the look of surprise and concern on each of their faces after Clint had told them.

Feeling sick, she got up from the table to go lay down...and cry.

Chapter 29 - The Department of Deportment

February 2nd – 4th

After a month of watching Jimmy and Jasmine trying to be each other at school every Monday, the excitement for most of the kids there had pretty much worn off. Even for Jimmy and Jasmine – somewhat. It was still difficult for each of them, but they were starting to become more used to it.

On Monday, there were five of them at their lunch table again. Four girls and one boy. Except that one of the girls and that one boy wasn't what anyone would normally expect. Each of the kids took their usual seats at the table, with "Jimmy" across from Olivia, leaving "Jasmine" in his now usual seat off to the side.

The conversation and eating started, but it didn't last long before Olivia had a problem. "Stop!" she suddenly exclaimed, ending all the conversation around her. All the girls looked at her. "I can't stand it!" she said. She looked at "Jimmy" sitting across from her. "I'm supposed to have a girl sitting there, not a boy. You two have got to switch seats, because otherwise, nothing is going to seem right!"

Nichole and Allison laughed. Jasmine and Jimmy didn't. The two twins looked at each other. Jasmine shrugged and started to get up. Seeing her brother getting to his feet, Jimmy also got up. The two of them switched places. "Better?" Jasmine asked.

Olivia looked at the two of them. "Much!" she said as she started eating again.

"Jimmy" once again felt like she was being shut out, even though she was still with her friends. She did wonder though if Olivia's brief little outburst had anything at all to do with the crush she had on her brother.

But now that Olivia once again had a "girl" sitting across from her, she found she had a different problem. With her mouth full of food, she said, "Now all we have to do is get *this* Jasmine here looking better again."

Jasmine was totally surprised by what she said. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean, that's exactly the same outfit you wore to school last week," Olivia told him. "And once again you didn't bother fixing yourself up much at all."

"Fixing myself up?" Jasmine asked. "I thought what I have on is pretty good. It's simple. And with this longer skirt I don't have to worry about Mrs. Marker being all over my case over the way I sit!"

Jimmy, further down the table, suddenly started laughing and nearly spit the food out of her mouth. She may have been slightly further from the action in her new seat, but she suddenly found herself enjoying the conversation. "Mrs. Marker doesn't like the way you sit?" she finally asked once she got herself under control.

"You should hear her," Jasmine replied. "I mean, she's real nice about it and all, but who cares if my knees aren't always together? Have you any idea how hard it is to sit like that? Well, okay, of course you do. But at least with this longer skirt, I don't have to worry about it."

"You still sit like a jerk," Nichole commented.

"Oh thanks!" Jasmine replied.

"Well you do!" Nichole insisted.

"And you *should* still be worried about it!" Allison told him.

"Why? All I'm doing is sitting down."

"That's not the point!" Allison told him. "You don't act like a girl at all!"

"But I'm not a..."

"Don't say it!" Olivia stopped him as she quickly pointed her fork menacingly at him.

"But I'm not!" Jasmine insisted.

"But Jas," Allison said, "if...Jimmy over here won't quit hunting, then you *are* going to be a girl."

"Don't remind me," Jasmine muttered.

"Not only that," Allison continued, "but you're *supposed* to be acting as if you *are* a girl right now. And girls act like...girls!" she finished. "At least they're supposed to," she added with a scowling look toward Jimmy.

"Hey, don't look at me," Jimmy said. "He's the one with the problem."

"That's a matter of opinion," Allison replied as she turned back toward Jasmine.

"I don't have a problem," Jasmine replied.

"Yes you do!" Olivia insisted. "Lots of problems!"

"Well, okay, I do. Absolutely. More than I want. But all my problems are really one big problem."

"That may be," Allison said, "but that doesn't mean you can't do something about some of the little problems that make up your big problem."

"Like what?" Jasmine asked.

"Like learning how to sit nicer," Allison replied.

"Or how about dressing better!" Olivia added. "Because you sure need help with that too."

"Hey, like I said, I like this outfit."

"Yeah, just because you don't have to worry about how you sit in it...even though you should!" Nichole replied.

"So what's so wrong with that?"

"Everything!" Nichole told him. And I'm with Olivia. You could have at least taken some time to try to make yourself look a little better."

"I thought I looked fine."

"You do," Nichole replied. "Sort of."

"What do you mean, sort of? My Mom didn't say there was anything wrong with the way I look at all."

"Like I said," Nichole replied. "Sort of."

"Jas," Olivia said, "You could have taken a little bit of time to do a little more with the way you're dressed."

"Like what? As far as I can see, I don't need anything else."

"Ugh!" Olivia grunted. "Hopeless!"

"My Mom didn't say one single thing to me about what I'm wearing."

"You're wearing a skirt and a top and that's it!" Allison told him. "And I mean, that's it!"

"What do you mean? I've got tights on and boots, and..."

"No, you idiot. How about doing something better with your hair. Or how about adding some accessories to dress yourself up better. Things to help make yourself look...nicer at least."

"Like what?"

Nichole jumped into the conversation. "Some accessories might have helped."

"Accessories?"

"Yeah, you know, jewelry and stuff."

"Hey, I'm wearing these earrings," he pointed out as he fingered the pink crystal in one of his ears.

"Yeah, but nothing else."

"Why do I need anything else?"

"Jas," Olivia said, "Stop arguing. How hard would it have been to add some accessories to dress your outfit up a little?"

"I don't know. Why bother?"

"Oh God!" Allison exclaimed. "You really do need lessons in how to be a girl."

Nichole turned to Jimmy. "Jimmy, how hard is it to add accessories?"

"Accessories are the best part!" Jimmy replied. "I never get dressed without at least adding some things. Even to bed," she laughed. "You want to know what the worst part is about dressing like a boy. It's dull! Boring. There's literally no accessories to put on at all. And it's driving me crazy!"

"So quit hunting," Allison suggested.

"Not on your life!" Jimmy laughed.

"Okay," Jasmine said, with one of his usual eye rollings. "From now on I'll try to remember to grab a necklace or something too."

"You need more than that," Jimmy muttered.

"You really do need help," Nichole added.

"Face it," Olivia said, "the only times you really looked good was when either your mother put your outfit together for you, or when... Jimmy down there picked everything out for you. And that time you really looked pretty much fantastic! Nobody could believe it!"

"Yeah," Allison agreed. "He really did look good that day, except for his screwed-up face. That really spoiled everything."

"Pretty much like he's still doing today!" Olivia pointed out.

"That's for sure!" Nichole replied. "Jas, you've really got to lose that attitude."

"I need that attitude," Jasmine told them.

"Why?" Nichole asked. "It's awful!"

"I don't get as many kids teasing me with it," he replied seriously.

"Hey, so what if they do?" Olivia asked.

"Yeah, besides, you've got us to protect you," Allison told him.

Jasmine said nothing to that. Just the concept of him needing a bunch of girls to protect him sounded all too wrong to him.

"So how are we going to teach him to dress better?" Olivia mused.

"I'm not worried about it," Jasmine told her.

"We could talk to his mother about it," Nichole suggested. "I'm sure she'd be glad to help."

"Good one!" Allison told her.

"I'm not worried about it!" Jasmine said again.

"Maybe Jimmy can do something to help out a little," Olivia suggested.

"I told you, I'm not worried about it," Jasmine insisted.

"You know we're not listening to you, don't you?" Allison told him.

"Ugh!"

"I don't know," Jimmy replied to the suggestion. "I wouldn't mind so much, but the problem is as long as I have to be Jimmy, I'm pretty much not allowed anywhere near my stuff."

"Total bummer," Nichole said.

"Tell me about it!" Jimmy complained.

"So quit hunting," Allison suggested.

"Forget it!" Jimmy replied.

"So I guess the best solution is to talk to Aunt Susan about it," Nichole decided.

The girls all looked at each other. "Why not?" Allison replied. "But I think one of *us* needs to talk to her about it, because...you know who over here, will never do it himself."

"Hey," Jasmine replied. "Like I said, I'm not worried about it."

"And we're still not listening to you," Allison told him.

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Dinner was long over and cleaned up. "Jimmy" was outside in the garage with Clint discussing tools. And Susan leaned over Jasmine's home economics book on the kitchen counter. "Okay, Jas," she said, try it again. Now think carefully. Name all the appliances you can use to mix food together when you're preparing something to eat."

Ugh! The questions should have been so easy! But he had forgotten a couple of things the last time through them and his mother was being all too insistent that he do as well as possible. "Can't we just move on to cooking something instead?" he asked.

"We don't get there until the next chapter, Jas," Susan told him. Then you can have some fun with it. But this stuff has to come first. Now what appliances..."

Someone knocking at the back door interrupted her. Jasmine's first thought was that he had been saved by the bell...or the door knocking in this case. "I'll get it," he said hurriedly as he ran to the back door. "Hey!" he exclaimed happily when he saw Olivia, Nichole, and Allison there. He quickly let them in. "Hi guys!" He turned to his mother. "Mom, can we quit for a while?"

Susan rolled her eyes. "I guess so," she replied. Actually, she wasn't very interested in the Home Ec lesson either.

"Hey Aunt Susan," Olivia called brightly as she came into the room.

"Hi girls," Susan said to all of them.

"Aunt Susan," Allison said as they all finally got through the door. "We came to see you tonight."

That stopped Susan. "Me?" she asked.

"You're not here to see me?" Jasmine asked.

"Yeah," Nichole told him. "We're here to see you too, but we need to talk to your mother first."

"What about?" Susan asked.

"Something we figured out during lunch today," Olivia told her.

"Oh no!" Jasmine exclaimed, suddenly realizing what they were talking about. "Not that!"

"Not what?" Susan asked.

"No, Mom!" Jasmine said. "It's nothing!"

"No it's not nothing!" Nichole insisted.

"What's..." Susan started.

"Aunt Susan," Allison said interrupting her, "we think Jas here needs some help."

"With what?" Susan asked.

"No I don't!" Jasmine insisted.

"With everything!" Nichole told her aunt.

"I don't need any help!" Jasmine said again.

"And we're not listening to you again," Allison told him.

"Ugh!"

"What are you talking about girls?" Susan asked. "Help with what?"

"Being a girl!" Nichole told her.

"Dressing better," Olivia added.

"And especially, acting more like a girl!" Allison added.

Susan's head was swimming. "Um...I thought you girls were doing a pretty good job of handling everything yourselves. To be honest, I've never seen him this happy before."

"I'm not!" Jasmine said.

"Yes you are," Olivia told him.

"It's not that, Aunt Susan," Allison said, "it's all the stuff we either can't help him with or we really don't know how."

"Like what?" Susan asked. "Can you give me anything specific?"

"Dressing better!" Olivia said immediately.

"And acting more like a girl," Nichole added.

"What do you mean by acting more like a girl?" Susan asked. "Because I'm not real sure that that's something that I can really teach him. But you girls are certainly helping a lot already."

"No," Allison said, "I mean, like...the way he sits and the way he moves and all that."

"Have you ever noticed how he does anything?" Nichole added. "Geez!" she said with a small shake of her head.

Susan looked over at Jasmine, knowing that the girls were right. But... "I think that's all just things that are going to have to come with time. Him hanging around all of you should help that a lot! What brought this on?"

"We were talking about it today at lunch," Nichole told her.

"Jasmine said that the reason he likes to wear that skirt," Olivia added, "is so that Mrs. Marker can't complain about the way he sits with it on. And he still sits like a boy!"

Susan remembered that John had told her last week that Mrs. Marker had suggested that it wouldn't hurt Jasmine to learn a bit about proper deportment...whatever that was supposed to mean. "Um..." she said. "Actually, I think Mrs. Marker did complain about it."

"She did?" Jasmine asked, totally surprised. "She didn't say anything to me!"

"There, see!" Olivia exclaimed. "You've still got to watch how you sit down in that skirt!"

"When did she complain?" Jasmine asked.

"She mentioned it to Uncle John last week," Susan told him. "I didn't bother bringing it up."

"Thank you!" he replied emphatically. "See," he told the girls. "It's not a problem!"

"I didn't say that!" Susan told him.

"Huh?" Jasmine grunted in surprise. "But you just said..."

"I said I didn't bother bringing it up. I didn't say it wasn't a problem."

Once again, Jasmine rolled his eyes. "Oh great!"

"So can you help him?" Allison asked her.

Susan considered it. "To be honest," she said, "I'm not totally sure I can."

"Why not?" Olivia asked.

"Because like you, I'm not sure I know *how* to help him."

"Oh," Olivia said, her enthusiasm crushed.

"How about at least helping him to dress better," Allison asked.

Susan raised her eyebrows. "How much better are you talking about?" she asked uncertainly.

"I mean, for at school. At least help him so he doesn't wear exactly the same thing every single day!"

Susan smiled. "I think I can do that much," she agreed. "And maybe Jas and I can look at a few other things too about the way he moves, but I wouldn't expect much there!" she told them.

"Well," Allison said, "I guess it will have to do."

"It's better than nothing," Olivia agreed.

"Tell you what," Susan told them. "I'll see if I can get in touch with Mrs. Marker. I don't really know what she had in mind since she only mentioned it to Olivia's father, and he didn't seem to be very worried about it himself."

"That would be great, Aunt Susan," Allison exclaimed happily. "Maybe between all of us we can figure out how to help him."

Susan looked over at Jasmine who was looking on with wide-eyed horror. She nearly laughed. "Don't look so worried," she told him. "It's not that bad. And I'll be glad to help you pick out what you want to wear to school tomorrow. In fact, all you ever had to do was to ask."

"Tomorrow?" Allison asked. "Don't you mean next week?"

Susan shook her head. "No, I mean tomorrow. It's another month now since this all started. Jasmine and Jimmy have to be each other for four days every week now. That means that they're be going to school as each other again tomorrow too."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Olivia asked Jasmine.

Jasmine just stood there with his mouth working, but no sound came out.

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Jasmine's pink purse contained one pencil and one pen when he left the house Tuesday morning. He had insisted on wearing his new black leggings when his mother came in to "help" him get dressed. It was everything else he was wearing that he wasn't quite so happy with. The plain white knit long sleeved shirt he had on wasn't really bad at all. In fact, the soft material felt really nice. But he wasn't that happy with the short bright blue and white diamond print skirt he was wearing over top of the leggings. And then his mother had found a blue vest for him to put on over top of his shirt. His mother had made him pick out one long necklace and one shorter one to wear with the outfit. She had also made him pick out a bracelet and a ring to wear as well. He chose only one of each. He really didn't like the way the bracelets bounced around on his

wrist all day, so he was happy she only made him wear one. He found their constant movement to be very distracting, and sometimes irritating. Some blue crystal earrings in his ears completed all the jewelry that he didn't feel he needed in the first place. And then he had to sit for an eternity while his mother attacked his hair with a curling iron before making him tie a white ribbon in it. Ugh! But after all that, he still wasn't allowed to leave the room until his mother first put a small amount of blush on his cheeks followed by a bit of lip gloss.

"Here," Susan had said when she finished with his lips. "Why don't you put this in your purse? You may need it later."

"No thanks," he had said, and promptly left it behind. He was so glad she didn't make an issue out of it. But he seriously didn't see himself using it at school at all. Or anywhere else for that matter! So his purse still contained only one pen and one pencil. Perfect! Of course it would have been more perfect if he didn't have to carry the darn purse at all.

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For something that had already happened a number of times in the past, the twins showing up at school as each other again, for the second day in a row now, sent a minor shock wave through everyone in the building. Both twins had to field pretty much the same questions more times than they wanted.

"Jasmine," the girl sitting next to him in class said as soon as he had sat down, "you're Jasmine again."

He nodded. "Um...yeah."

"But you were Jasmine yesterday!"

He had no choice but to explain again. "It's another month now. And remember that punishment they're forcing on us? Well, it just got worse again. We've now got to be each other for four days instead of just three."

"Wow!" she had said wide-eyed. "Pretty soon you'll be coming to school all the time that way!"

Jasmine didn't say it, but it was one of the major worries on his mind.

"I can't tell you how much better you look today," Olivia exclaimed to him as she turned around in her seat.

"You really do look a lot better," Nichole added from behind him.

"Yeah," the girl sitting next to him added. "You look a lot nicer than yesterday. How come?"

Before he could answer, Olivia reached out and took his hand. "You'd look a whole lot better though if you'd just lose that screwed up attitude on your face!"

Not likely!

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Before going to lunch, Mrs. Marker headed to the office where she could make a phone call first. The school's secretary had left her a note asking her to please call Mrs. McComber, Jasmine and Jimmy's mother. From the office, she quickly dialed the phone number on the note. "Hello, Mrs. McComber? This is Mrs. Marker, Jasmynes Home Economics teacher. You asked me to call?"

"Hi Mrs. Marker," Susan replied. "Thank you for getting back to me."

"What can I do for you," Mrs. Marker asked.

"I wanted to talk to you about my son Jimmy, when he has to be Jasmine at school."

"Yes," Mrs. Marker replied. "I appreciate the time you're taking, helping him to learn some of the basics that his sister already knows. I was very pleased when I tested him on the things you've worked with him on so far. And it was far more than I hoped you would do with him. Is there a problem I can help him with? Perhaps spend a little time with him on something?"

"Um...not really on that," Susan replied. "The problem is with something else."

"Oh, what's that?"

"A while back, you mentioned to John that you were concerned with...um, Jasmine's deportment. What exactly did you mean by that?"

"Oh yes!" Mrs. Marker replied. "I hope you'll please understand that I didn't mean that in an ugly way at all. And I certainly hope you

didn't take any offense at it."

"None taken, Mrs. Marker," Susan replied. "But I'm a simple country girl. I was raised on a farm and now I'm living in the woods. And while I think I know what department means, I'm not sure what exactly you were concerned with."

"Oh, of course," Mrs. Marker replied. "And I'm glad you aren't taking my little suggestion the wrong way. What I've noticed now, is that...um...Jasmine comes to school once in a while looking surprisingly convincing as a girl. But he doesn't seem to have a clue as to how to act like a girl. And I'm afraid my real concern is that learning how to behave more convincingly might make things easier for him not only here at school, but also if he has to go anywhere else in public. Of course, I'm not sure that you do take him anywhere. It was just a thought I had that I felt I should pass on."

"I see," Susan said thoughtfully. "And yes, he does go out in public, although I've kept that to a fairly strict minimum up until now. However things have gone on with this far longer than any of us hoped, and to tell the truth, I think he looks good enough now that I see no reason not to take him out places with me. In fact, I had him shopping all afternoon a few weeks ago, and I'm fairly sure nobody gave him a second glance."

"Does he act more like a girl would when he's out with you?" Mrs. Marker asked.

"Um...not really," Susan replied. "I'm pretty sure he doesn't have the slightest clue how to act like a girl. Not to mention that I'm also fairly sure he has no interest at all in acting like a girl."

"Oh, I see," Mrs. Marker replied. "That's too bad, because he really does look astonishingly...um...good. Once in a while."

"Yes," Susan replied, "he does. But only whenever someone dresses him properly like I did with him this morning. His...uh...girlfriends were all at the house last night asking me to help him dress better. And they were particularly interested in me helping him act the part better as well. However the whole time we were talking about it, I'm afraid that he showed us that he was not only not interested in it, he would have preferred that we not even discuss it. But I'm afraid that little discussion I had with the girls reminded me that John had mentioned you were concerned about it once."

“Um...yes I was,” Mrs. Marker replied. “I still am to tell the truth. And what did you decide with the girls?”

“That I would help pick out what he wears from now on. But as to the rest, I’m afraid I pretty much told them that I don’t have a clue as to how to teach him any of it. Actually, it’s not a subject I’ve even thought about much. I’ve been more concerned with hoping this all would end by now.”

“I see,” Mrs. Marker replied thoughtfully. “To tell the truth, this all started for me with one thing, and I’m afraid it still remains the one biggest thing that I’ve noticed. Well, maybe the second biggest thing now. But either way, the one thing I noticed that always bothers me so much is simply the way he sits down. I’ve spoken to him several times about it now, however I think his solution to the problem seems to be that he’s wearing long skirts to school now. However as far as I’m concerned it’s still no reason for him to continue to sit so carelessly.”

“Have you seen him today?” Susan asked.

“Not yet,” Mrs. Marker replied. “Although I heard rumors that they’re here once again as each other.”

“Yes, it’s the start of yet another month, so they’ll be there on Mondays and Tuesdays like that from now on.”

“So Mr. Mason told us.”

“Yes, well anyway, today, instead of the long skirt he wore yesterday, he’s wearing a pair of leggings under the skirt I chose for him. And he was fairly insistent on wearing them today. So most likely you were right about the longer skirt being the way he’s trying to deal with the problem.”

“Oh dear. Well, at least he’s trying something. I guess we should be grateful for that. But personally, I’d rather see him at least be a little more concerned with sitting...um...”

“A little more ladylike?” Susan suggested.

“Yes,” Mrs. Marker replied. “Exactly.”

“I see what you mean,” she replied. “I’ll speak to him about it, but to be honest, as I said earlier, I really don’t know how to go about teaching him, or even what to teach him. I have a feeling though that if things continue to go as they have, then this will be a very big month for both the twins.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, from now on, they’ll each be literally spending more time as each other than as themselves. And I’m afraid...um...well, there will most likely be other changes we’ll all have to worry about as well that I’d rather not go into.”

“Other changes?”

“As I said, I’d rather not go into that,” Susan reiterated. “Did you say earlier that you had another complaint that was bigger than the issue of how he sits?”

“Yes!” Mrs. Marker replied. “I’m afraid I do. I have no idea how he is at home, but the whole time he’s here at school, he walks around with the worst look on his face. I’d swear he just wants to pick a fight with someone – all the time! And he seems very determined to keep that attitude.”

“Unfortunately,” Susan replied, “I know exactly the attitude you mean. In my opinion, it really spoils how nice he’s capable of looking.”

“I have no doubt that it does. But the bigger problem is that it’s simply very disturbing!”

Susan sighed. “I’ll speak to him about that too,” she told her. “I can’t promise anything,” she said, “but I’ll look into it. And for the life of me, I have no idea in the world how I’m going to convince him to even try acting a little more femininely. Especially since he seems so set against it. So if you ever have any ideas on the matter, please let me know. As I told all the girls last night, I really don’t have a clue as to how I can help him.”

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Dinner was done. The dishes were done. “Jimmy” was out in the workshop with her father again, and once again the Home Economics book was out on the counter.

“Can’t we just skip this chapter?” Jasmine complained.

“No!” Susan replied. “But I will admit, it’s certainly not one of the best. And as far as I can see, it is pretty much useless.”

“So let’s skip it.”

"No!" She looked at her son, who was now supposed to be her daughter. At least for the next few hours. "I talked with Mrs. Marker on the phone today," she told him.

He rolled his eyes. "And she said we have to do this chapter too?"

"No, we didn't talk about that...other than she was very happy with the progress we're making together."

"So why did she call you?"

"Actually, I called her."

He looked at her, and once again rolled his eyes. "You called about what the girls wanted last night."

"Yes, I did."

"Ugh! And what did she say?"

"She said you need to learn to act more like a girl when you have to be your sister."

"I'm not interested!" he said in no uncertain terms. "Besides, later tonight we're switching back anyway." He looked at her nervously. "We are switching back, aren't we?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "But whether you're interested in acting better or not, is not the point. When you're a girl, you do need to act like a girl."

"Why?"

"Because it's not nice to behave like a boy when everyone is looking at a pretty girl."

"I'm not a pretty girl!"

"You could be!"

"Not interested, and I'm definitely not worried about it."

Susan was starting to become perturbed with him. "Either way, girls have to be concerned with things like modesty. And learning to act a bit more femininely can only help that problem."

"What problem? How can I have a problem with...modesty...whatever that's supposed to mean."

"It means things like, being polite about the way you do things, especially the way you sit down!"

"Says who?"

"Says Mrs. Marker. Says all your girlfriends. And especially, says me!"

He grunted. "Who cares? Especially if I wear that long skirt or the pants under one of the other skirts."

"We all care. It's something you need to be aware of and learn."

"Not the way I see it."

She was growing more irked with him by the minute. "And that's another thing that Mrs. Marker told me."

"What?"

"Your attitude. She says you walk around all day looking like you want to pick a fight with everyone. Stop it Jas. There's no reason in the world for you to do that. And it's going to get you in trouble someday."

"Not the way I see it. So far, it's done me nothing but good!"

Susan wanted to hit him. It was all she could do to control her temper. To calm herself, she looked back at the text book. "Tell me all the appliances you can use to mix food with!"

Ugh!

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"He's just so dead set against it!" Susan complained to Clint that night as they were getting ready for bed.

"I can't say that I blame him," Clint replied. He was careful not to say it, but inwardly, he not only didn't blame his son, he was proud of him for not wanting to act like a girl.

"But Clint, when he has to be a girl, he does everything all wrong!"

"So what?"

"Darn it! You sound like him. It wouldn't hurt him at all to act at least a little more proper. Evidently Mrs. Marker and his girlfriends all are particularly irritated at the way he sits down. He can at least learn that!"

"What's wrong with how he sits?"

"He sits like a boy!"

"He is a boy."

"Not when he's all dressed up in skirts and dresses! And evidently everyone is noticing how carelessly he sits down then. He's not the least bit concerned with modesty at all! Face it Clint, if

he has to be his sister, which is most of the time now, then it wouldn't hurt him to act the part better."

Clint shook his head. "Okay," he replied. "I can see the part about not sitting down with your legs all splayed apart I guess. I get that much. But as far as I'm concerned, I don't really care if he learns the rest. Like I said, I don't blame him one bit."

"Damn you!" she said angrily. "You're no help at all."

"Not when it comes to something like that!" he replied.

Susan shook her head, trying to control her temper. "Are you still coming tomorrow?"

"I said I would. Pete's going to cover for me again. And after what happened last time, I think I better be there."

She nodded. "Thanks for that at least."

Clint could tell she was still irked over the fact that he didn't care that Jimmy should learn how to act like a girl. He wasn't the least bit surprised a little while later when Susan wasn't feeling "up to" having sex before going to sleep. He wasn't surprised at all.

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Normal again! After having to be his sister for four days in a row, Jimmy practically celebrated as he dressed for school. Pants again! And no stupid purse to carry. Hooray! His spirits were certainly a lot brighter as he went out to the kitchen for breakfast.

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"Jasmine! You're going to be late for breakfast!" Susan called.

"Coming, Mom!" Jasmine yelled back from her bedroom. It was sooooo good to be a girl again. Jasmine fussed with the last of her makeup. She had spent more time than usual on her hair, trying to make it look good – which was becoming more and more impossible. She needed a haircut so bad! But after her hair, she had gone as girly as possible. She was wearing a positively tiny skirt over top of some of her favorite multicolored tights. She had padded her bra a bit more that morning as well, which made her feel even better as she surveyed the resulting bulges in the mirror. She was

wearing more makeup too. More makeup, more jewelry, more of everything girly that she could. It was sooooo good to be a girl again.

She blew a kiss at herself in the mirror, as if she were blowing the kiss at Elliot. Then she hurried out for breakfast.

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Despite Jimmy being himself again at school, the bad attitude remained locked on his face. Other than his girlfriends, nobody talked to him at all. Which meant that nobody had said one stupid teasing thing to him so far. But he was totally ready for any of them if they tried something. But even dressed as himself now, he still saw a lot of the kids at school continuing to stare at him. Was it now becoming more of a novelty for him to be dressed as himself instead of as his sister? It was all he could do to not tell some of them where to stick it!

When lunchtime came, he was right behind his sister in the lunch line. They both got their lunch, and they both headed for the table. He took the same seat he had been sitting in and Jasmine automatically took her seat at the end.

"No you don't!" Olivia exclaimed as she walked up with her tray. "You two have to switch places again."

Jimmy rolled his eyes, but he got up and picked up his tray. As he passed his sister, he couldn't help but notice the broad smile on her face. "Are we going to have to do this every time we switch places?" he asked.

"Of course!" Olivia replied. "Jasmine is supposed to be sitting in front of me. If she's sitting somewhere else, then I can't deal with anything."

He saw nods of agreement from both Nichole and Allison. Her reply didn't make much sense to him, but he supposed it did to the rest of them.

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Jimmy's final few hours every day were always in Mechanics class, unless he was being his sister and had to go to Home Economics instead. But today, as Jimmy, he gladly walked into the Mechanics class. And ten minutes later, realized how much he had missed being out the two previous days. They were still working on lawnmowers. But it became obvious after a few minutes that he had missed a lot of what Mr. O'Conner had told them concerning small engine repair. He felt very left out – in a class where he had always done exceptionally well. If it wasn't for what he already knew about the small engines he would have been completely lost. Fortunately, all the things he had learned on his own were enough to enable him to understand most of what was going on. He had no idea what things Mr. O'Conner had actually taught everyone. He paid very close attention, but for a while, he was tempted to just call it quits and go sit somewhere until Mr. O'Conner had time to talk with him.

And then when Mr. O'Conner stopped teaching and the students started actually doing some of the hands-on things the class required, instead of chipping in to help, he found a table by himself and just sat and watched. He was by himself until Mr. O'Conner walked up and sat next to him.

"It's not like you to not be trying to do it all yourself," Mr. O'Conner commented.

"I guess I probably could," Jimmy admitted without looking at him, "but..."

"But what?"

Jimmy turned his head towards him. "I don't know what I missed for the past two days. Was it anything important?"

Mr. O'Conner leaned toward him. "If it wasn't important, I wouldn't be bothered teaching it. But you're right. All this switching back and forth business between you and your sister is getting harder now. I can manage well enough I guess with just the one day every week, but two days will definitely make things more difficult. I agreed with Mr. Mason that I wouldn't give any tests on Mondays, but today is Wednesday now. With you out two days, how could you take the test?"

"So what am I supposed to do?" Jimmy asked.

"I don't know, Jimmy," Mr. O'Conner replied. "But I'm certainly going to talk with Mr. Mason about it later. I know how much you like this class, and I'd certainly hate to see you miss out on any of it."

"It's the only thing in school that I do like!" Jimmy replied.

O'Conner smiled. "I understand. And I'd hate to see you deprived of it. Especially since it's something you're obviously so good at."

"Yeah," Jimmy said, a small smile coming to his face, briefly erasing his bad-attitude look. "I can't tell you how good it makes me feel when I can tear into something that's broken, and then fix it the way it's supposed to be."

"Oh, I fully understand how that feels," Mr. O'Conner replied. "Trust me, I understand that completely. I'll help you all I can Jimmy. I promise. But right now, I still don't know how we're going to continue to manage this."

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Tommy was the first in the family out the school door with Elliot right by his side as usual. But he didn't get ten feet from the door before Tommy spotted his father on the sidewalk waiting for him. "Dad?" Tommy said. "What are you doing here?"

"Your mother and I came to pick you and the twins up. We need to go into town for a bit today. Your mother's waiting in the car."

"Okay," Tommy replied. He waved goodbye to Elliot and headed towards their car that he could now see in the small parking lot.

Jasmine was the next of Clint's children that he spotted, along with Allison, Nichole, Olivia, and Jimmy bringing up the rear. The four girls were talking animatedly. Jimmy was just following silently behind them. It was the look on his son's face though that surprised Clint. To him, it looked like Jimmy must have had a very bad day or something, because he looked like he was ready to start a fight. But he had seen that look on Jimmy's face before – at church. A few minutes later, he had his entire family packed into his wife's car and he drove off toward town.

"Any chance we'll stop at Cumberland's Dad?" Tommy asked from the rear seat.

"Most likely later," Clint replied.

"Where are we going first?" Jasmine asked. "Cause I'd like to look at some more material if we've got time."

"I'm not sure if we'll be able to do that or not," Clint replied.

"Where we going first then?" Jasmine asked.

Clint looked over at his wife. "To the doctor, Jas," she replied.

"The doctor?" Jasmine asked, the worry immediately coming into her voice. Jimmy sitting next to her looked up at the question too."

"Yes, Jas. It's another month, and it's time for your shots again."

"No Mom!" Jas said quickly, her voice full of alarm now. "I don't want another shot! We can just forget it today!"

"Jas?" Clint said. "Are you saying you're going to quit hunting now? Because if you are, then I'll drive you straight to look for that material or anything else you may want."

"No! Jasmine replied, an edge of stubbornness creeping into her voice. "I'm not saying that at all. There's just no need for any shots!"

Both Clint and Susan felt the moment of hope pulled away from them once again. Clint shook his head. "As long as you want to keep hunting, Jas, then I'm afraid we've got no choice."

The car was suddenly rocked by Jasmine's angry yelling voice. "I don't want any shots!"

Clint immediately pulled the car over to the side of the road and stopped. As fast as he was able, he undid his seatbelt so he could turn around and look at her. His voice carried every bit of the frustration he felt with her. "You either make up your mind to quit hunting, or you make up your mind to get the shot. Because you can't have it both ways. Now what's it going to be?" The angry glaring monster that he was suddenly faced with was much the same defiant monster he had faced when he had beat her with his belt. "What's it going to be, Jas? You either quit hunting right now, or you shut up and you take whatever medicine Uncle Brian decides to stick you with."

She glared angrily at him while the entire family watched her. But her father wasn't backing down at all – but then, he never did. Never! "What the heck," she finally said. "Let him stick me with whatever he wants. It's all bogus anyway. It's all nothing but one big

lie to make me quit hunting!" she added with her voice raising to an angry pitch.

"Then you sit down and shut up about it," Clint told her angrily. "And when we get there, I expect you to behave yourself, or whatever pain you may feel from those shots, will seem like nothing at all."

"Ha!" she laughed. "It's all nothing anyway!" With a defiant turn of her head, she stared out the window past Jimmy, refusing to look at any of them.

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Doctor McComber's clinic wasn't as busy as it often was, but they still had to wait a few minutes before they were all shown back to one of the examination rooms. Tommy was told to wait out in the waiting area, something he readily agreed to. A few minutes later, Brian came into the room carrying the basket he usually had with everything he would need. He shook hands with Clint first, grateful that his brother was there this time. He briefly hugged Susan as well. Then he turned to his two patients.

He looked briefly at Jimmy and noted how uncertain he looked. He nodded and smiled kindly toward him. Then he turned his full attention on Jasmine, who looked like she was nothing but seething lava under her skin. "I take it since you're here, that there's no need for me to even ask if you're ready to quit hunting yet."

"It's all bogus!" Jasmine hissed at him. "It's all nothing but a big fat lie!"

"Jasmine!" Clint's voice cut in sternly. "Watch your mouth!" He was rewarded for his effort by another angry glare from her.

Brian just looked at Jasmine for a moment. Then he said, "Get your shirts off kids, and jump up on the table." Two minutes later, both twins were sitting next to each other again. Jasmine still had her bra on, and all the tissues she had stuffed inside of it couldn't be missed since they were all but falling out. But it was Jimmy's chest that Clint couldn't help but stare at. It was his first sight of his son's budding breasts. Jimmy's nipples were somewhat enlarged and there was no doubting the tiny mound that was pushing them out

from underneath. He was very glad that they hadn't grown any bigger. Unless his son was wearing a tight shirt, he was fairly sure they wouldn't really be noticed. However he had no doubt that his nipples at least would be noticed under some types of shirts. He once again felt very sorry for his son just then.

Brian listened to their hearts and lungs and checked their eyes, ears, and throats. Then he took a closer look at Jimmy's breast growth. "They've increased some," he said sounding somewhat satisfied, "but at least they haven't blossomed out quickly like some girls would." He turned to look at Jasmine who was glaring at him daringly again. "I see no reason to check your breasts," he told her. "Obviously there's been no growth to them at all."

"Go to hell," she said quietly.

"Jas! Watch your mouth!" Clint told her angrily. All he got in reply was another angry glare.

Brian shook his head. "Jimmy, why don't you get down from there now? I'll do your sister first."

"Get down?" he asked. "You usually just stick us both while we're here together."

"I'm not doing any blood work today," he told them. "And I'll be giving you both a different drug instead. I'm afraid we'll have to go with implants instead of the usual shots I was giving you. I found out last week that some of your more violent mood swings could be caused by what I was giving you."

"You mean what you weren't giving us!" Jasmine said. "It was nothing but water in those shots, and it didn't do anything to me at all."

"Jas!" Clint cautioned her.

"It's all right," Brian said. "Think what you like, Jas, but those shots were very real. Now I need you to take off everything you're wearing below the waist so I can get at your hip."

"My hip?"

"That's the best place for me to do this," he told her.

"Come on, Jas," Susan said as she stepped forward. "I'll help you if you need me to."

Jasmine looked at her mother with a surprised look on her face. "I can undress myself. It's no problem."

"Then do it Jas," Clint told her. He was rewarded with another angry glare before she actually undressed.

Once Brian had her lying on her side on his exam table, he turned to Jimmy. "You may not want to watch this," he said. "It can be a little more disturbing than someone getting a simple shot."

Jimmy looked up at his father, but before anyone else could say anything, Jasmine turned somewhat toward him and said. "You better watch what he does! And you watch closely for me. If I can't see what he's doing then I need you to tell me exactly what he did to me! I want to know if he puts anything at all into me. And I'm betting that all I really get again is nothing but plain water!"

"Trust me Jas, there won't be anything plain about this at all. In fact there never has been."

"Ha!"

"Lay back again then and let's get this over with."

Once he had her ready, he swabbed her hip with antiseptic, then he took a small needle and stuck it into her, injecting the solution close to where he wanted to work. "This is just something to numb the area for a few minutes," he said, "so there won't be any pain." When he was ready, he took what looked to Jimmy like tiny metal tube of some kind with a point on the end. Jimmy watched as he used that to put a small hole in Jasmine's hip, breaking the skin before he set the instrument aside.

"You okay son?" Clint asked as he saw Jimmy watching all too closely.

"Yeah Dad. It's really kind of interesting. "What's that?" he asked Brian as he saw the metal object he now had in his hand.

"It's called a trocar," Brian told him. "This is what I'll use to put the implants into her." With that, he stuck the trocar into the tiny round incision he had just made in Jasmine's thigh and worked it deeply up under the skin. He went back to his basket and pulled a small packet from it. After opening the packet he very carefully extracted three tiny cylindrical pellets. Jimmy watched closely as he put the pellets into a slot on the end of the trocar.

"Hey," Jimmy said, "It's kind of like loading a bullet into a gun."

Brian's eyebrows went up. "Pretty much exactly like that," he replied. A minute later, he pushed the plunger on the trocar,

inserting the pellets fully into Jasmine's hip. The trocar was removed leaving a tiny hole that bled only a little. Brian wiped the bleeding clean and put a gauze pad over it, then bandaged it securely. "That's it," Brian told them. "You can get up now Jas."

"That was cool!" Jimmy said. "You've got all kinds of interesting tools that you use."

Brian, knowing Jimmy's love of tools, could only smile. "I sure do. But now it's your turn. Get those pants down and get up on the table."

"What did he do?" Jasmine asked.

"I'll tell you later," Jimmy replied. "And it was really cool! Did it hurt much?" he asked.

Jasmine shook her head. "The first shot did, but I didn't feel much after that. It still feels weird back there though."

"It's probably going to be a little sore later," Brian told her, "but it should be just fine in a day or two."

The one thing that Brian, Clint, and Susan all noted, was the attitude difference now in Jasmine. She wasn't being nearly the defiant monster she had been.

As Brian started working on Jimmy, Jasmine watched as closely as she could. But the moment he stuck the trocar into Jimmy's hip, Jasmine had to turn away. "Oh God," she said, "I think I'm going to be sick!"

"Me too," Susan said sadly as she hugged her daughter. "Me too." Susan felt sick though for a different reason. She felt sick because now her children would be changing much more and much faster. She felt sick because she was going to lose the son and daughter she now had, only to be replaced with something else that she wasn't sure of at all. And she felt very, very sick, because once again she knew she was a bad mother. Because no mother in the world would ever allow what was being done to her children.

Chapter 30 - In Kneed of Help

February 4th – 8th

It was fairly late in the evening when Susan poured coffee for John, Jane, and Clint. She filled her own cup last before putting the coffee pot up and sitting down at the table. She still felt awful. She felt sad, depressed, and totally frustrated over what was happening to her kids. And now she had to sit down and discuss how they wanted to proceed with school, because things had simply gone on far longer than anyone ever thought they would.

“Is there any sign at all that Jasmine might eventually come around?” John asked.

“Actually,” Susan said as she stopped to think a moment, “there have been a number of times now when we’ve seen her teetering on the edge. But every single time she’s backed away and gotten stubborn again.”

“Do you think there’s any chance that these new hormones in them will help?” Jane asked.

“That’s what we’re hoping,” Clint confirmed.

Susan shook her head. “They’ll either help, or...I’m about to lose my kids.”

Jane reached over and grabbed Susan’s hand, giving it a comforting squeeze.

“Wasn’t the whole idea of this to bring out some changes in their bodies in the first place, to push Jasmine toward giving up hunting?” John asked. “Maybe with these stronger hormones in them, those changes will show up more to the point where Jasmine will finally realize what’s going on.”

“We can only hope,” Clint replied. “Because every time the subject comes up now, she’s pretty adamant about not recognizing any changes at all.”

Susan shook her head again. “The changes in Jasmine have been fairly small. The biggest thing actually for her has been that

her breasts have stopped growing. The rest have been minor enough that she either won't see them as changes or they haven't been significant enough yet to convince her that it's all real. But to tell the truth, I think she does think it's real, at least somewhere in that brain of hers, but she's simply not willing to face the truth at all."

John nodded. "Denial," he said.

"Completely," Susan agreed. "That's what Brian thinks too."

"And until she does recognized the truth," Jane added, "I guess we're stuck going forward too." The slight nods she got from everyone were all too sad.

"So how do you want us to proceed with their schoolwork?" John asked.

"I haven't a clue!" Susan replied. "I haven't even thought about it, or wanted to think about it."

"What do you recommend?" Clint asked. "It's your school. You've got more experience in this than we do."

John smiled. "Not in this I don't. But I do know the school and the teachers better."

"Have any of the teachers said anything about the problem yet?" Clint asked.

"One has," John confirmed, "but not as far as their regular class work. Mr. O'Conner was in my office yesterday after school because he was concerned about Jimmy missing too much of the Mechanics class on the days that he's not there. And since Jimmy is so avidly interested in the program, he doesn't want to see Jimmy missing out on any of it. He's willing to work with Jimmy all he can, but he can't do everything and it's not going to be easy."

"Especially if this goes into next month," Jane added.

"Let's hope it doesn't!" Clint replied.

"But I think we need to plan, just in case," Jane returned. "Let's face it, there are times when Jasmine can be all too stubborn."

"Sometimes more than you'd believe!" Clint lamented softly.

"So what do we do?" Susan asked.

But before John could answer, Jane had another question. "How are they doing in their regular classes?"

"According to Mrs. Ansley and Mr. O'Conner," John replied, "they're both doing well enough that right now it's not making much

of a difference. Jimmy does better in Math and Science, and not so well in English, and Jasmine does fairly well in English and she pretty much hates Science. But their grades are close enough that at this stage in their school lives it's not going to make that much of a difference no matter what they do – as long as they keep their grades from falling down toward the failing mark. And if they start to fall like that, then just like any other student in that position, I would have some serious talks about it with them.

"So you're mostly worried about Jimmy's Mechanics class?" Clint asked.

"And Jasmine's Home Ec class too," John confirmed. "But to be honest, we need to come to an agreement about all their schoolwork now."

"How so?" Clint asked.

"Well," John said. "When they first started coming to school as each other, we pulled them aside and told them they would be doing everything as their sibling. Including taking tests! And their teachers were told to mark those test scores for the child they were supposed to be. But at that time, I don't think any of us figured this would go on so long. And we've pretty much stuck to that so far. The only thing is that they haven't really taken any tests yet as each other, except for those few quizzes last month that were both thrown out anyway."

"So there's been no real harm done yet anywhere," Clint noted.

"Not yet," John confirmed. "But as I said earlier, as long as they continue to do at least somewhat well, there's really no harm that can happen, school-wise, for either of them. But the question now is, how do we want to handle them taking tests as each other for the long run, in case this thing does continue on for a while, because it's going to be pretty much impossible to avoid it."

"And what do you recommend?" Susan asked.

"Well, there's a few ways we could go, but what I'd rather do is have them take the tests as whichever person they're supposed to be, but have the teachers record their grades in the computer for the correct child, and not for who they may be dressed as. I think that's only fair in the long run."

"Sounds good," said Clint.

"I thought you'd do it that way anyway," Susan added.

"The problem though is in their two elective classes, Jasmine's Home Economics and Jimmy's Mechanics class. They're not in those classes together, at least in theory, or at least not at the same time. And as I understand it, Mr. O'Conner has been giving Jasmine beginner material to learn while Jimmy is way ahead of that. And I believe Mrs. Marker is doing the same thing with Jimmy in her class too. So the question is, how do we deal with the situation when it comes to tests and grades?"

"Not only that," Jane added, "but if this continues to go on, they'll each be spending less and less time in the classes that they really want to be in. And don't forget, Jimmy is particularly interested in the Mechanics."

"Jasmine likes the Home Ec stuff too," Susan told her. "At least some of it."

"As I said earlier," John added, "Mr. O'Conner is very concerned over the issue. Particularly since I get the feeling that Jimmy, as young as he is, is something of his favorite student in there."

"Yeah," Clint agreed. "Jimmy loves it. It'd hate to see him miss out on something he loves that much."

"So what do we do?" Susan asked. "We can't exactly rip them in half and send them to both classes at the same time."

John smiled. "No," he replied. "But I can easily add Home Economics onto Jimmy's curriculum and Mechanics onto Jasmine's. It would take about five minutes at the computer and they'd both be in each of those classes – officially."

"But they can't attend them at the same time," Jane pointed out.

"No," John agreed. "And so we're stuck with the problem. And I don't know how we can deal with it properly."

The four of them sat and drank coffee without saying anything for a few moments while they mulled the problem over. "You know," John said, "there have been times in the past where a student has gotten seriously sick or injured and couldn't attend classes for a while. I guess it would be possible to work each of them something like that."

"What do you mean?" Susan asked.

“What we do is we have the teachers put together several days, or perhaps a week’s worth of material for them to learn, and then we send it home to them. What the students can’t get from the books, their parents usually help with. Once in a while, one of the teachers here will make a short trip out to their house. But basically, the kids are able to at least somewhat keep up that way. They usually send in their homework with one of the other kids or the parents drop it off at the school themselves. Sometimes, we do the tests like that too.”

“It could work,” Jane replied hesitantly. She looked at Susan, “Of course, it would be more work for you and Clint, I would think.”

John shook his head. “It would be a lot of work. Maybe too much. You’d each have to be concerned with both Jimmy *and* Jasmine learning not one, but two subjects. They would be getting as much attention as possible in school, but it would mean that both of you here at home would have to do either the brunt of the teaching, or at least make sure they each stay up on their studies – for both classes.”

Clint grunted a bit before saying, “I’m still spending a few minutes out in the workshop every night with Jas, trying to teach her some of the stuff that Mr. O’Conner sends home with her. Getting her to learn it though is like pulling teeth!”

“And I’m spending time with Jimmy every night helping him learn the Home Ec stuff. Mostly it’s been going very well with him, until this last chapter we’ve been working on. And I’m afraid he’s not exactly interested in it. Of course, I can’t blame him one bit this time.” She looked at Jane, “Tell me, can you name every kitchen appliance available for mixing food?”

“Say what?” Jane asked.

“Don’t worry,” Susan said, “I can’t do it either. Or at least, I couldn’t before we started this chapter. I’ve got half a mind to just skip over it and let the test scores be what they may.”

“Why don’t you give me that chapter number,” John suggested, “and I’ll mention your concern to Mrs. Marker directly. I don’t cook much, but it doesn’t sound all that interesting to me either. What’s coming up next in the book?”

“Boiling eggs,” Susan replied.

John nearly laughed. "Well, I would think that should be easy enough."

Susan smiled. "Even for Jimmy. He's done it enough now when he has to be Jasmine that he could probably fix dinner without any trouble at all. To tell the truth, when he's being Jasmine, I have him doing everything around the house that the real Jasmine usually does. Just like I do with his sister, I have him doing cooking, cleaning, laundry...anything at all that needs doing. And all of it is Home Ec related. So the truth is, it hasn't been much of a struggle with him at all. Plus, as he told us, he seems determined to learn it, even though I can tell that he's not that interested in it. That is, until this last chapter we've been doing. And I think he's just hit a brick wall with it."

"As I said," John replied, "I'll speak with Mrs. Marker about that one."

"But if it comes to it," Susan added, "I could probably manage to work with both of them for at least a few minutes every night, at least to the point where I'm making sure they each are keeping pace with where they should be. I may have to just spend a little less time with them than I am now."

Clint stared thoughtfully at his wife for a moment. "And," he said, sounding as if he didn't really have much choice in the matter, "I guess I can do the same with the stuff for that Mechanic's class. Heck, once I'm done with Jasmine, I mean the real Jasmine, I'd probably enjoy spending the time with Jimmy – on anything that teacher passes on for him to learn."

"Are you sure?" John asked.

"Yeah," Clint replied. "We may not be able to do this every night, but I would think that even a few times a week should help. We'll give it a try anyway and see where it gets us."

"Very well," John said, "I'll talk to the teachers."

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While her parents were in the kitchen talking with her Uncle John and Aunt Jane, Jasmine once again stood naked in front of the mirror. She hadn't done that in a while now. She stared at herself

critically, but could see no sign of any change in her body. And that was part of the problem that bothered her so much. She should be seeing changes, especially in the size of her breasts. But they still hadn't grown at all.

She rubbed the spot on her hip where her uncle had put something inside of her. It was totally black and blue all around the area and very sore. According to her brother, her uncle really had put some kind of small pellets in there. He had even gone into graphic detail over the way that silver thing he had stuck into her had worked. If it wasn't for his stupid overly avid interest in it, she might not have believed him. But she had seen her uncle do the same thing to him too. Except, she hadn't been able to watch all of it. Totally gross! Ugh! She still didn't want to think about seeing her uncle stick that big silver thing right inside of Jimmy. She didn't want to think about it, but it had been so horrible that it was hard to not think about it. And evidently, according to Jimmy at least, he had done the exact same thing to her.

She never really believed that those shots her uncle had given her the last few months had done anything. But what had he really put into her this time? Was it another trick? Would whatever it was suddenly turn her into a boy? Or would it all be just a lot of nonsense like those shots had been? She really hoped that it was all a lot of nothing, but this time she was more afraid. Was it possible that since she had seen through the shots being fake, that now they were trying the real thing? She didn't know, but she could only hope that it was still nothing but one big trick to convince her to give up hunting. It would be just like everyone in the family to do that. Wouldn't it?

With a sigh and another silent wish for her breasts to grow, she put her pajamas on and got ready for bed.

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Across the hall, Jimmy rubbed the sore spot where his uncle had stuck that thing in him and had injected those pellets up under his skin somewhere. The spot hurt still and was all black and blue. They had changed the hormones they had given him. Why? Wasn't

what was already happening to him bad enough? What would this new stuff do to him? He tried, but couldn't really imagine it.

Jasmine had grilled him rather extensively on what had happened when they had finally gotten home. He had been all too thrilled to recall each detail of the procedure for her, especially since he could tell that his graphic description had been disturbing to her. But, it had been that interesting! The part he wasn't happy about though, was that after he had seen his uncle do it to his sister, his uncle had turned around and done exactly the same thing to him.

So now what was going to happen? With that fear weighing heavily on his mind, he put his pajamas on to get ready for bed.

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The snow was falling heavily again when the kids all left for school on Thursday. It was so cold that Jimmy was thanking his lucky stars he didn't have to dress as his sister that day. He was wearing one of his warmest sweaters under his coat, and he could see that Jasmine was bundled up more than usual too. Of course, his sister was allowed to wear pants though, unlike him, which is why he was so thankful that he didn't have to be his sister that day. Wearing a skirt, even with a pair of those thin leggings on under it, would have been way too cold!

Jasmine huddled into her coat as they walked down toward the bus stop. It was cold and snowing heavily again. She was glad for the new boots she had gotten for Christmas. They really did help! But why couldn't they have had at least a little bit of a heel? She was old enough now! But at least they were nice and warm and comfortable.

As she walked, she was aware of the extra bulges in her coat pockets that she hoped nobody would notice. Most likely, nobody would, especially with all the snow coming down. The contents that bulged her pockets a bit made her smile. Why hadn't she thought of this before?

Once she got to school, she opened her locker and put her books inside. Then, while Nichole was busy in her own locker, she took the things from her pockets and hid them under some material

she had in the bottom of her locker. With a smile, she grabbed her books, picked her purse up from the floor, and closed her locker. Yeah, it was a great idea! She had no doubt at all how much her idea was going to be “appreciated!”

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At the start of class that day, Mrs. Ansley walked around and placed a pink flyer on the desk of all the sixth graders. “Take those home to your parents,” Mrs. Ansley told them, “in case any of you are interested. Now please take out your math books.”

Jimmy looked down at the flyer. A Valentine’s dance to be held at Eagle Rock Academy. Well, that was one piece of paper he could throw in the trash right now. He pulled his math book out and turned to the page to begin working on the problems there while his teacher began explaining other things to the fifth graders in the room.

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At lunchtime, shortly after everyone had gotten their food. Principal Mason stood on the small stage at the end of the room and turned the microphone on. “Eagle Rock Academy has decided to invite all the junior and senior high students to their Valentine’s dance on Saturday the fourteenth,” he announced. “You should have all gotten the flyers about it this morning. It would be nice if our school could be well represented this year since they did decide to invite us. I’d particularly like to see as much participation from the high school student’s as possible, but I think it would be a wonderful opportunity for the junior high students as well.

“As the flyer said, we will provide a bus for transportation that will leave from here and will bring you all back to the school again afterwards. And in case any of your parents are interested in chaperoning the dance, we would be especially happy to hear from them. Please let any of your teachers know if you will be attending.” With that, he thanked everyone and left the stage.

“I’m going!” Nichole announced firmly as soon as the announcement was over.

“Yeah,” Olivia agreed. “I have to go since my parents are both going, but I know it’s going to be a blast!”

“I can’t wait!” Allison added excitedly.

And then all of them turned towards Jasmine, who only stared back sadly. “I won’t be going,” she told them sadly. “Most likely, I’ll be working with Uncle Jed again.”

“So quit hunting!” Allison urged. “You know you want to be there with us.”

Jasmine shook her head firmly. “I’m not doing that! And especially not for some stupid dance!” She looked further down the table toward her brother’s head that she could just see. “He can enjoy it instead!” she added with more than a bit of contempt in her voice.

“Um...I’m not going!” Jimmy stated firmly. “So for this one, don’t even consider that I’ll be there.”

“I guess I get that,” Allison replied. “I guess, I totally get that. But you wouldn’t have to dance with any of the guys. You could just dance with the girls.”

Jimmy shook his head. “I think it’s better if I don’t go at all!”

“I hate to say it,” Olivia said, “but this time, I agree with you. You showing up as Jasmine might be a little...awkward.”

“You think?” Jimmy replied with a small laugh.

Nichole laughed a little too. “Yeah, no doubt it would be.”

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Susan saw the flyer for the Valentine’s dance when Jasmine brought hers home with her. She never did see one from Jimmy. She agreed with Jasmine’s decision to just throw it in the trash, but not until after she tried to use the dance as another excuse to get Jasmine to quit hunting, even offering to buy her a new dress. But when Susan started the argument, she already knew it would be a lost cause.

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On Friday morning, the weather was warmer, but once again Jasmine's coat pockets bulged a little. And once again she quickly transferred what was in those pockets to the bottom of her locker and hid everything under some spare material she had down there. Yeah, it was a great idea! Now all she had to do was wait for Monday. And she already knew she would be switching places with her brother again that night. Her Uncle Jed had told her that they would either be working on more of the deer stands or shoveling snow again, depending on what the weather decided to do. She was really hoping she wouldn't be shoveling snow. Unfortunately, the weatherman had said that another major storm was going to blow through.

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After school that day, Jasmine sat in her room making another list. Strangely, she realized that she was feeling better than she had in a while. She felt calmer, almost like she was more in control of herself. She didn't attribute the feeling to anything at all, she just relaxed and enjoyed feeling more like herself for a change.

She got up from her desk and opened her closet. She grabbed one of her skirts and one of the tops and put them together, then she went back to her list again.

"Jas?"

She turned and saw her mother in the doorway. "Hi Mom."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm putting together some outfits for Jimmy to wear again."

"Why?"

"Well, I just thought instead of you having to help him with it, I would plan it all out for him again. That helps him and you."

Susan was a bit surprised by her logic. "Um...okay," she replied. "Thanks, I guess. But now I need you to help me make dinner. You can come back to that later."

"Sure Mom," Jasmine replied happily.

"How was school today?" Susan asked offhandedly as they started working together in the kitchen.

"Okay," Jasmine replied. "Mrs. Marker said something about next week she was going to try to put together a week's worth of stuff for me that I would need to cover. I have no idea what she was talking about though."

"What she was talking about," Susan told her, "is the way we're going to keep you in that Home Ec class you like so much."

"What do you mean?"

"Jas, if you don't quit hunting soon, you'll be spending less and less time as yourself, and also less and less time in that class. You'll be missing too much. We made arrangements with the school for Mrs. Marker and Mr. O'Conner to give you assignment lists so that we can make sure you keep up with everything in both classes. Otherwise, you might as well just drop out of the class right now."

Jasmine looked totally surprised at her mother for a few moments. "You made arrangements with the school?"

"The other night when Uncle John and Aunt Jane were here."

"You could have told me."

Susan shrugged. "Maybe we should have. To be honest, I didn't think about it."

"So how are we going to work it?"

"I'm not really sure, honey," Susan replied. "We'll just have to wait and see what we need to do. Right now, you're still spending more time in that class than in Mr. O'Conner's class, so you shouldn't need too much help there. But Jas, if you don't stop this silly hunting business soon, then next month you might as well not even be in the class anymore."

Jasmine looked at her mother. What she had said brought the stubbornness back to her again, but at least she didn't feel the outright rage she had been feeling for a while now. "It's not silly!" she told her mother in no uncertain terms. "And I'm not quitting!"

Susan sighed. "I didn't think so. But you might want to give it some more serious thought."

"Not...likely!"

Susan could only shake her head.

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Being all switched around was starting to feel all too familiar to the twins now, and all too nerve wracking too – for the entire family. The fact that the twins were literally spending more time as each other than themselves seemed to bring a strange unsettling feeling among all of them, even to the twins who were each feeling strangely better than they had in a while now. Not that they mentioned it to anyone.

Jimmy became Jasmine Friday night, finding his new dresser once again piled with clothes his sister had figured he should wear. He briefly looked over what was on the dresser and in the closet. Then he went to bed, trying to put it all out of his mind. He woke up the next morning to more heavy snow coming down. The pile of clothes his sister had put out for him that day didn't get touched. He spent the day out with his girlfriends, sliding down the hill again. Most of the kids were there. And even Jimmy was able to join them by late morning, after again spending much of the morning shoveling snow. Once again they all had a blast. For much of the day, the Four...and a half...Musketeers played together on the hill as if they had been together all their lives. Which was exactly the case, for most of them.

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“Jasmine” did wind up in the outfit his sister had put out for him on Sunday. And this time his mother had made sure he didn't forget anything at all. The night before she had made him sit down and put some pink polish on his nails. Then she had put some curlers in his hair again for the entire night! Ugh!

“We've really got to do something about shaping your hair again,” Susan had told him.

Jasmine just wanted her to forget it – unless it would mean no hair rollers!

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The whole family went to church again the next day. But this time, not only did Jasmine get preached to by Reverend Cosinger,

so did Jimmy. And this time both of them noticed how emphatically the Reverend would punctuate what he was saying by pointing his finger, usually right at them. It was very unnerving.

"The Reverend has sure been getting better with his sermons lately," Clint noted as he drove the family home. "I never figured he was capable of being that good."

"I just wish he'd preach to everyone else and not just to us," Susan replied. "He can really get on my nerves sometimes."

"There is that," Clint agreed.

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"Jasmine" hadn't enjoyed the sermon at all. He didn't enjoy any of the church service. He never did. He hated the way Reverend Cosinger always seemed to be preaching directly at him. At least he had felt more in control of his temper this time. But he didn't enjoy church for a different reason that day. Somewhere in the middle of the Reverend's sermon, his darn nipples had started bothering him again.

It had been a few weeks now since he had felt much from them, but right in the middle of church they had started bothering him again. He had unconsciously been rubbing them with his hand when his mother had leaned over and whispered for him to stop it and had told him that it wasn't polite for him to be touching his breasts like that in public. It was only then that he had realized what he had been doing, and just how much both his breasts were bothering him again. And then his mother had added, "And sit like a lady. Put your knees together and keep them that way!" Ugh!

They were still driving home when Susan looked toward the back seat where "Jasmine" was sitting in the middle between *her* two brothers. "Don't forget," she told him, "we've got to fix dinner when we get home."

"Don't we always?"

"Yes," Susan replied. "But I don't want you changing out of that outfit until later."

"But Mom," Jasmine whined, "Olivia said she was going to go back out to the hill this afternoon. Why can't I go out too?"

"You can," Susan told him, "but not until later. I want you dressed pretty for dinner today."

"Why?"

"Because I like what you're wearing," Susan told him. He really did look fairly good again, despite the fact that she needed to do something different with his hair soon. But what she had told him wasn't her real reason at all for wanting him to stay in that dress.

Fifteen minutes later, Jasmine had an apron tied over top of his dress as he started working with his mother to prepare dinner.

"Jas," Susan said.

"Yeah?"

"Go over to the table and sit down for a minute please."

"What for?"

"Because I said so!"

Rolling his eyes, he went to his usual chair.

"Don't sit there," Susan said quickly. "Sit in my chair at the end of the table."

With another roll of his eyes, he pulled his mother's chair away from the table and sat. "Now what?" he asked.

Susan shook her head. The girls and Mrs. Marker had been right. He really did need help! "Stand up again," she said.

"But you just told me to sit!"

"I know. But now I want you to stand."

"Make up your mind," he complained as he got up.

He had taken only one step away from the table before Susan told him to sit down again.

"What?" he asked, not believing what she wanted him to do.

Susan leaned over the counter, studying him intently. "I want you to sit down again, but this time when you sit, put your knees together *before* you sit down, and keep them that way!"

"Ugh!" Jasmine grunted loudly with yet another roll of his eyes.

"Do it!" Susan commanded.

Only rolling his eyes half-way this time, Jasmine very obviously put his knees together and sat down. "Satisfied?" he asked.

"Now stand up again."

With another roll of his eyes, he stood.

“No!” Susan said quickly, keep your knees together when you stand up too.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I said so!” Susan replied. “Now do it again, only this time, before you sit down, pull your skirt under you so it stays neat and doesn’t get all bunched up when you sit on it.”

“This is crazy!” Jasmine replied as he “attempted” to do just as his mother wanted.

“That was much better,” Susan declared. “It still needs a lot of work, but at least it was better.”

He stood up again. “Are we finished now?” he asked hopefully.

“No,” Susan said. “Do it one more time.”

“Ugh!” Jasmine grunted aloud as he did it again.

“Get used to it Jas,” Susan told him, because it’s something you need to make a habit!

As far as Jasmine was concerned, he had no intention at all of making anything like that a habit. It was all just...humiliating!

As they worked to prepare dinner, Susan would occasionally send Jasmine over to sit down again, just for practice. After four more times doing it though, he still didn’t look much better with it. But at least his knees were together when he sat and when he stood. She guessed that was some progress. As far as sweeping his skirt under him, well, he just looked plain awkward trying to do it. She had no doubt that it would take time and practice for him to get used to it where it would look more natural. And judging by the last time she made him do it, it might take a lot of time!

With the whole family at the table eating, Susan purposely got up halfway through dinner to get something from the counter. Coming back to the table, she carefully checked for what she wanted to see. “Jasmine!” she said quickly, “put those knees together and keep them together!”

“Jasmine rolled his eyes again. “But Mom, we’re sitting at the table. Nobody can see!”

“That’s not the point! The point is that you’ve got to get used to sitting that way all the time. Now stick them together and sit up straight!” She stood and watched him until he had repositioned

himself completely, and then glared back at her while his sister broke out laughing.

Susan finally sat down and ignored her real daughter. "I swear, Jas, if you don't learn to start sitting like a lady, I'm going tie those knees of yours together and leave them that way!" The laughter out of Jimmy intensified, while Jasmine only rolled his eyes again.

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That night, after spending an "exhausting" day sliding down the hill, Susan kept after Jasmine again as they prepared their evening meal together. Basically, Jasmine was getting annoyed with the constant sudden commands to go sit down. It was so totally stupid! And especially since for once he was even wearing pants! What did it matter then?

That night as they were all eating, Susan got up from the table to pour herself more coffee while the rest of the family talked. When she came back, she noticed that Jasmine's knees were once again not only splayed apart, but he was unconsciously swinging one of his knees around as he talked. Saying nothing, she set her coffee on the table and left the kitchen. She came back a few minutes later with the belt tie from the tan bathrobe that Jasmine wore when they switched them around.

"Jas!" she said firmly as she approached the table. "Pull your chair back for a minute."

"What?" Jasmine asked as he now noticed the long cloth bathrobe belt in her hands."

"I said pull that chair back!"

Unable to take his eyes off of the belt, Jasmine pushed himself and his chair away from the table. "What are you doing?" he asked.

Susan moved in quickly. She wrapped the soft cloth belt twice around his legs just above his knees. "Since you can't seem to manage to remember to sit like a lady, then I'm going to fix it so you don't have to worry about remembering it." With that, she tied the ends of the tie belt into a big bow, while "Jimmy" once again broke out into peals of laughter. "Now push yourself up to the table again

and finish eating,” she told him. “And for heaven’s sake, sit up straight!”

Jasmine wasn’t sure what to think of this new affront. He was definitely embarrassed, especially since his sister was laughing at him again, and Tommy looked like he could barely contain his laughter too. Jasmine was very annoyed with what his mother had just done to him. Now he couldn’t sit with his legs apart if he wanted to. And it was very uncomfortable!

Instead of eating, he stared angrily at his plate for a few minutes while the conversation finally continued on now as if nothing had happened. It was only after he had calmed down and gotten somewhat over the affront of what had just happened before he could begin to pick at his food again.

When dinner finally ended, Jasmine stayed in his seat until everyone but his mother had left the kitchen. “Can I untie myself now?” he asked.

“No!” Susan told him. “You can leave it that way until you go to bed. Maybe it will help you remember to sit properly from now on.”

“But Mom! How the heck am I supposed to move? I won’t be able to even walk!”

“Try!” Susan told him. “You’ll just have to do the best you can. Now get up from there and start helping me. You won’t have to walk much if you just do the dishes.”

Wanting to scream with frustration, Jasmine managed to push himself backwards and stand up. It was very awkward having his knees tied together like they were. Hesitantly and awkwardly, he managed to turn and take a tiny step toward the kitchen island. Moving the other foot to try to walk was just as difficult, but he managed it. Being only able to move from the knees down was certainly not easy. “This is totally stupid!” he complained.

“Yes it is,” Susan agreed, feeling surprisingly happy with the situation. “Just like the way you insist on sitting. So you learn how to not sit so...stupidly, and we won’t have to resort to this anymore.”

Ugh!

Chapter 31 - Hair, Hair, the Gangs All Here

February 9th – 10th

One pencil and one pen, and a couple of dollars to cover his lunches for the week. They were the only contents of his new pink purse as Jasmine left the house on his way to school Monday morning. He was wearing the outfit that his sister had put together for him for that day, including the jewelry, the colored tights, the hair ribbon, and having to change the color of his nail polish. It was an awful lot of work just to get ready to go to school. His mother had done his hair for him though. That had been a big help. He had just been stuck sitting there with his knees together, while she worked for an eternity with the curling iron, and again complained that something needed to be done with his hair. He agreed. His hair needed to be cut short again like he used to keep it! He was smart enough not to mention that thought to his mother though.

As he made his way down the driveway, he enjoyed the freedom of not having his knees tied together. He had spent all evening last night with them that way up until he got ready for bed. And then this morning his mother had again tied them up after catching him with them apart at the breakfast table. But at least he was free and able to walk now.

He had thought it was embarrassing last night when his sister and Tommy had laughed at his tied up knees. He had thought it was embarrassing when his mother had tied them together again that morning and his sister and brother had laughed. But the embarrassment seemed even worse when “Jimmy” immediately told all the other kids about what he had to endure, all because he couldn’t sit like a lady. Ugh! Who cared? Why did it matter so much?

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Susan watched the clock. She needed to make some phone calls and one of them fairly soon. But she couldn't make it too soon...or too late either. She would have to try to time it perfectly.

She hadn't watched just Jasmine last night. She had taken a good look at, and watched, all of her kids. And as any mother often knows, sometimes things have to be done and taken care of. And this was one of those times. She had talked for a while about it with her husband before they went to bed. He had been concerned... somewhat, but he had actually agreed. Especially in Tommy's case. So this morning, Susan had some arrangements to take care of that would require three different phone calls. Well, two phone calls really. The other person she would probably talk with in person.

She knew that since John was the school principal, he usually got to the school before anyone else. As soon as she figured that he would be there, she dialed his cell phone number, hoping it was still on since she also knew that he had it turned off for most of the day. She felt lucky when he answered, although she would have just tried calling him through the school office instead. "Hi John. This is Susan."

"Hi Susan," John replied, very surprised that she would be calling, and so early. "Is there a problem?"

"Um...yes and no. I'd like you to do something for me today if you can."

"Sure," he replied. "What's that?" He listened for a moment. "Say what?"

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An hour later, Susan drove her car down to the family office. She was the first one there so she unlocked the door. There wasn't much business or many phone calls during the winter months, but the family had plenty of other business they were working on. Her big responsibility was those new lodges. Valerie was looking into buying some land that Jacob wanted where they would eventually plant pine trees for farming. And Marcy had lately been looking into doing some advertising for the family. All of them pretty much new ventures for the entire clan.

Marcy arrived about ten minutes later, before the coffee that Susan had put on was even finished. The two women were talking and halfway through their coffee before Valerie finally walked in. There wasn't much going on, especially since they didn't expect Jacob to arrive for at least an hour, so they did as they usually did. They sat and talked over a second cup of coffee.

"Val," Susan finally said at one point. "My boys need haircuts badly. Are you going to be doing any cutting anytime soon?"

"I can do them anytime you want," Valerie replied. "You know I'll be glad to do it." Since Valerie had two boys, and they were older than any of the others, Valerie had long ago simply cut their hair herself. It was easy, quick, and didn't cost anything. And very often, she cut the hair of all the boys in the family. Most of the men though had their hair done by barbers somewhere else, except for Jed. He always had his wife cut his hair for him.

"Wait a minute!" Marcy interrupted quickly as she turned toward Susan. "You said your boys? Both of them? But...which boys?"

"Tommy and Jimmy of course," Susan replied.

"I thought that Jimmy wasn't supposed to get his hair cut now," Valerie replied.

A sly smile crept onto Susan's face. "Not that Jimmy," she replied.

The looks of surprise were evident on both Marcy and Valerie's faces. "What kind of haircut are you talking about for Jimmy?" Valerie asked.

"Like his brother's of course," Susan replied offhandedly. "Just like you always do it."

Valerie stared at her, totally shocked. "You're sure?"

Susan set her coffee cup down. "The twins are now spending more time as each other than as themselves," she said. "And they're both starting to look really ratty in the hair department. Jasmine, and I mean the real Jasmine, has asked me several times now to have her hair cut. And it really does need it. But since she's spending more time as a boy than as a girl, I see no reason to have it professionally done again. Especially not in such a way that she can quite so easily make it look real feminine like she likes it."

"So you're hoping this will help make her change her mind?" Marcy asked.

"Something like that," Susan replied. "Although to tell the truth, I seriously doubt it will have much of an effect on her at all, other than making her furious because it won't be anything feminine like she wants."

Valerie shook her head. "Well, if you're sure, Justin needs a haircut right now too. I can do all three this afternoon if you like."

"That would be great," Susan replied. "Thanks."

"Um, Val..." Marcy said. "Any chance you have time to do another one too? Elliot is looking more than a bit shaggy as well."

Valerie laughed. "No problem. Bring them all and just line them up. In fact, if you like, we can do it right here as soon as they get home from school."

"Sure," Susan replied. "That would work out great!"

Valerie smiled. "Since I'm going to be doing it, maybe I'll call John and Jane at school and see if they want to add Hunter and Lucas into the mix as well."

"And if we're doing that," Marcy added, "then we might as well call Janet and see if she'll want Aaron's hair done too. He'll be with Hunter and Lucas anyway until they get home from school."

"This office is going to be a regular barber shop this afternoon!" Valerie replied with a laugh.

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Susan made her final phone call of the morning shortly after that. "Hello, Sarah?"

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At lunchtime, "Jimmy" told the others that she would find them after she went to the bathroom first, which meant that she had to find her Uncle John to take her into the bathroom before lunch started. The others thought nothing of it.

She did indeed quickly find her uncle, and once she was done in the bathroom, she started back toward the schools multi-purpose

cafeteria. But she didn't go far before she turned and went to her locker instead. Her locker when she was actually herself. With nobody in the hallway to see her, she retrieved the pile of things she had hidden under the material at the bottom of the locker, and carried it to her current locker, her brother's actual locker. She didn't have much time, so she simply dumped it all in, then hurried back to the cafeteria to get her lunch.

After lunch, she returned to "her" current locker where she had left everything. Before taking out the books she would need for the afternoon, she took a few moments to paste three big pink flowers onto the back of the locker door. She smiled as she looked at them. The dull dreary locker was looking much better already, and she had a lot of stuff to paste into it when she could. Later that afternoon, she took the time to paste a few more things before she went to her Mechanics class.

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"Jasmine," Mrs. Marker called as she saw the boy dressed as a girl walking in with his usual gang of friends.

Fearing another test, Jasmine went to see what she wanted. "Yes?" he asked.

"I'd like you to stay with the younger girls for the lesson today," she told him.

"Am I going to have to take another test?" he asked.

"How far have you gotten in the book?"

"We're working on chapter eight," he told her.

Mrs. Marker was a bit surprised. "My, you're really moving quickly," she told him. "Do I need to give you a test, or do you think you can answer everything pretty much perfectly?"

He thought about it. "Most of it is no problem," he replied.

"Most of it?" she asked with a raise of her eyebrows.

"I don't like chapter eight," he told her.

Mrs. Marker remembered that that was the chapter that the principal had mentioned he and his mother both were having trouble with. "You're moving too fast," she said with a smile. "I didn't get a chance to tell you not to bother with that one."

"So I can skip it?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes, dear," she replied. "Just move on to the next one."

"Thanks!" Jasmine replied gratefully.

"In fact," Mrs. Marker said as she searched her desk for a moment. She handed him a piece of paper. "Here's a list of everything I'd like to see you accomplish this week, both in the material for the younger students and for with the older girls as well."

"All of it?" he asked, surprised at the amount of work it would be.

"I'm afraid so," Mrs. Marker replied. "But you're doing so well already, that I have no doubt you won't have much trouble at all."

"But you still need me to be here with the younger girls instead today?"

"Well," Mrs. Marker replied, "what we're going over today isn't in the book."

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Susan had made two phone calls fairly early that morning. Later in the afternoon, she received two phone calls. The first one came before school was even over. "Hello?" she said as her cell phone rang and didn't show her a number she recognized.

"Hello, Mrs. McComber? This is Mrs. Ansley, Jasmine and Jimmy's teacher."

"Oh, hello, Mrs. Ansley. Thank you for getting back to me. So how did it go today?"

"Well," Mrs. Ansley replied, "I'm afraid that he sat just as he always does in class."

"In other words," Susan noted, "not very ladylike."

"Not even close I'm afraid. Um...while it is a little disturbing to see him sit like that, why are you so interested in it now?"

"Because as you said, it is disturbing. And a few others have brought it to my attention as something that's become somewhat of a problem."

"I see," Mrs. Ansley replied. "Well, I guess I'd have to agree. It is something that could use a little work. And if he's going to continue to have to be his sister for a while, then it really is something that should be addressed."

"Thank you, Mrs. Ansley," Susan replied.

"Do you want me to continue to watch him now?" Mrs. Ansley asked.

"Yes, if you would. From now on in fact. I think it's past time I got this little problem of his under control. And if I do ever get him sitting correctly, then I don't want him to start backsliding either."

"Of course," Mrs. Ansley agreed. "And it's no problem for me to simply give you a quick phone call after school if you like."

"Thank you, Mrs. Ansley," Susan told her. "I appreciate that."

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The second phone call that Susan received was from Mrs. Marker, although after talking with Mrs. Ansley she hardly needed it. "Hello, Mrs. Marker," Susan greeted the teacher after hearing who was calling.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. McComber," Mrs. Marker replied. "You asked me to call you about Jasmine?"

"Yes," Susan said. "How did it go today?"

"Um...let's just say it was all I could do to do like you asked. I'm afraid I didn't mention anything to him at all about not sitting correctly."

"I was afraid that was going to be the case," Susan replied. "I just wanted you to know that I'm working on it and I'm doing everything I can to correct the situation."

"Once John told me what you wanted me to watch for today, I was guessing that you were looking into it," Mrs. Marker told her. "And do you think you're making any progress yet?"

"Not as far as doing it when I'm not looking," Susan replied. "But I had a feeling that today wasn't going to be very good as far as that goes. I'm hoping that tomorrow will be much better. Will you let me know about it tomorrow?"

"Why certainly!" Mrs. Marker replied. "Anything at all that I can do to help. And by the way, I gave him a list of assignments for both levels to work on for my class. And that chapter that you mentioned to John that you were concerned with, skip it. I'm afraid you've been moving faster with him than I ever figured you would. I never had a

chance to tell you not to cover it. I always skip over it. He has a list now of things that you can make sure he knows. And of course, I'll continue to do everything I can with him in class."

"Thank you, Mrs. Marker. I appreciate that," Susan told her.

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As per a phone call to the school, the school bus made an extra stop once it reached the McComber property. Instead of going directly to where the kids usually got on and off, the bus stopped first outside of the business office where Marcy and Susan got on for a moment.

"All the McComber boys on the bus get off here," Marcy announced to everyone. "The girls can go on home like they always do." Susan looked towards "Jimmy." "That includes you too! Off with the rest of the boys."

"What's going on, Mom?" Elliot asked as the boys all got up and started down the aisle to leave the bus.

"You're getting off here," Marcy told him as she turned and walked off the bus.

"Mom!" Jasmine called from his seat, just before his mother left the bus.

Susan turned toward him. "You can go on home," she told him. "We'll be home later."

"But Mom," Jasmine replied. "I don't have a key to get in."

"Why not?"

Jasmine only shrugged his shoulders.

"Here," Tommy said quickly as he reached into his pocket. He pulled out his own house key and threw it to Jasmine.

Five minutes later, the bus was out of sight and all the boys walked into the office, where they found Valerie all set up to cut hair in the kitchen area toward the back of the building.

"What's going on?" Jimmy asked her mother as soon as she had the chance.

"You've been telling me you wanted your hair cut for a while now. And I'm afraid I have to agree, it needs it pretty badly. So

since you weren't the only one, Aunt Valerie is simply taking care of everyone at the same time."

While Jimmy was glad to hear that her hair would finally be taken care of, she was suddenly afraid of what was about to happen. "Um...Mom, is she going to fix it nice like I want it?"

Susan smiled at her, but it wasn't the kind of smile that Jimmy wanted to see. "Most likely, not!" she replied. With a hand on Jimmy's shoulder, she pushed Jimmy straight toward the solitary chair set in the middle of the kitchen area. "Get that coat off, Jimmy," she told her. "You might as well be first."

"But Mom..." Jimmy replied.

"Save it Jimmy," Susan said, cutting her off before she could argue anymore. "You're getting a haircut right now, and that's it! So let's get this over with."

"But Mom!" Jimmy replied, totally horrified.

"Jimmy, are you going to swear off hunting now? Right now? Because if you do, I'll take you right out of here and drive you to the hairdresser instead. And I'm sure we can convince Sarah to take care of you and make you look pretty again before we go home. I'm sure she'll be glad to do it. But if not, then stop arguing with me and get that coat off, and get in that chair, and just shut up about it! Now what's it going to be?"

Jimmy glared at her mother. "You can't do this to me!" she replied angrily. "What's Dad going to say?"

"He told me last night to go for it, so don't waste your breath even thinking that he'll back you up. Now, do you sit in that chair and get your hair cut, or will you swear off hunting and let me take you straight to the hairdresser, which is the one thing I'd much rather do."

Jasmine continued to glare angrily at her mother for a few moments. She didn't care that everyone in the room was watching her closely. "I hate you!" she exclaimed. Then she turned and stomped over to the chair, threw her coat on the floor, and sat down, continuing to glare angrily at her mother. "I take it you're going to cut it all off?" she said to her Aunt Valerie without looking at her.

"That wasn't the plan," Valerie replied. "But I can if you want."

"I don't care!" Jimmy replied angrily, still glaring at her mother.

“Well, *Jimmy*, I was going to cut it just like I usually do for you. Why don’t we start with that, okay?” When she didn’t get an answer, she took large towel and draped it over her shoulders. She picked up her clippers, and as every boy in the family watched, she began cutting her hair, just like she had always done for her brother. With years of practice behind her, the simple haircut didn’t take very long.

Jimmy sat glaring angrily at her mother the entire time Valerie worked on her hair. The electric clippers her aunt was using on her were a new and very unsettling experience, but she wasn’t about to let anyone see that. All she wanted them to see was how angry she was, and that she wasn’t about to back down and give in to what they all wanted. That’s all this was anyway, just another ploy by the family to make her give up hunting.

A few months ago, her mother had cut her long braid off, then taken her to the hairdresser where it was shortened a little bit more. But the hairdresser had at least fixed it so it could look cute and feminine – most of the time. As Jimmy sat feeling his hair being removed quickly and almost carelessly, she had no doubt that it wasn’t going to look cute or feminine at all, if there was any hair at all up there when her aunt was done. But at least Jimmy had always worn his hair a little bit long, not real short like some of the guys, so if her Aunt did as she said she would, at least she should still have some hair left on her head.

Before she could believe it, Jimmy heard her aunt say, “Okay, that’s it. All done.” And then her aunt had removed the towel that had been draped over her.

Jimmy ran her hand over her hair, feeling what was left. Some. She ran to the small bathroom and looked in the mirror. Hair. But not cute. Not feminine. Not anything she could ever fix to look even a little bit like a girl. She wanted to cry but she wasn’t about to let any of them see her do that. Especially not after how angry she was at her mother for doing that to her.

It was a while before she left the bathroom. By that time, Hunter was almost done having his hair cut. Most of the guys were just standing around talking and not paying much attention to what was being done to Hunter, but she knew that they had all watched closely as she got her hair cut.

"Let me see," Susan said as she walked up to Jimmy.

Jimmy didn't know if she was embarrassed or still angry at her mother, but she just stood there as her mother moved a few stray hairs.

Susan looked at her daughter's head critically. She still looked like a girl, somewhat, but she looked even more like a boy than ever. "Not bad at all," Susan told her. Then she turned and walked away.

Jimmy walked over and found Elliot talking with Justin and sat down with them. She didn't say much, but just mostly listened as they talked. Often though, she saw each of them look quickly at her, then look away again. She knew they were just checking out how she looked now. She didn't look like she wanted to look, that was for sure. Especially in front of Elliot.

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Jasmine stopped doing his homework for a few minutes and pressed his hands against his breasts. They hurt again. They had for much of the day. The night before too. He really wished it would stop, not only because he knew it signified that they were growing again, but because it was really irritating. He pressed firmly once again, sighed, and picked up his pencil.

He heard a noise in a distant part of the house and figured the others were finally home. A moment later, Jimmy stomped by so fast he barely even saw her. And when Jimmy's door slammed a moment later, he figured that once again something had happened to upset her.

He had wondered from the moment all the boys had gotten called off the bus what was going on. Nothing like it had ever happened before. And strangely, he felt left out. He heard Tommy go into the bathroom, and a minute later, his mother was at the door to his room.

"Hi Sweetie," she said as she walked in. "Doing homework?"

He held up his pencil. "Of course!" he replied a bit sarcastically. "What were you all doing?"

"Aunt Valerie gave all the boys in the family haircuts today," she told him.

Jasmine was quick to realize something. "Including...Jimmy?"

She nodded. "Including Jimmy."

Before he could respond, Tommy walked into the room. "Do you have my key?" he asked.

"Sure," Jasmine replied as he picked the key ring up from the bed behind him. He handed it to his brother. "Thanks," he said as he looked a bit closer at Tommy's fresh haircut.

"No problem," Tommy replied before turning and walking out.

"Where's your key?" Susan asked.

He nodded his head toward his door. "Jimmy has it."

"He has his key, *and* your key?"

"No, he's got my...my real key."

"Where's her key then?"

He shrugged. "I guess in her purse."

"Why isn't it in your purse?"

"It would just be another big thing that I have to carry. And I never need it, so I left it where it is. Besides, the whole idea of having my own purse was so I don't have to mess with her private stuff."

"All that private stuff, is *your* private stuff right now Jas!" she told him. "And from now on, I think you better start keeping *your* keys with you all the time."

He rolled his eyes. "Do you know how big her key ring is? It's got like a hundred different things attached to it. You can hardly find the keys!"

"So fix it like you want it," Susan told him. "But I suggest you keep those keys in your purse from now on!"

Once again he rolled his eyes. "Okay," he replied.

"Now," she said, "we have a problem!"

"A problem? What's that?"

"Both Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Marker told me today that you sat anything but ladylike in class all day."

"You talked to my teachers?"

"Both of them," she confirmed.

"Why?"

“To find out just what they told me,” she said as she headed for his bedroom door. From the back of the door, she pulled the material tie belt from overtop of where the tan robe now hung. She carried it back to him.

“Mom, not again!” he complained.

“Yes again. And we’re going to do this every night from now on until you learn to sit properly – always!”

“But Mom...”

His pleading got him nowhere as his mother quickly tied his knees together again. “Now come help me with dinner,” she told him as she walked out.

Help with dinner? He could hardly walk now!

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When dinner was ready, Jimmy walked into the kitchen and stared at Jasmine who was trying to add something else to the table while his legs were once again tied together. Actually, she stared more at Jasmine’s tied together legs. The sight brought the first smile to her face since she had gotten off the bus after school.

While Jimmy stared at Jasmine, Jasmine turned and couldn’t help but stare at Jimmy, or rather at Jimmy’s hair. It was a lot shorter than it had been. And it was without a doubt, a boy’s haircut, as far as he could see anyway. In fact, it was pretty much the way his aunt used to cut his hair for him. He immediately wondered how she was going to fix it when she got to be a girl again. He had no doubt that she would probably put a few more bows and things into it to hide the way it really looked.

With his knees still tied together, Jasmine had no problem keeping them that way all through dinner. And of course they stayed that way while he helped to clean up after dinner, and while his mother went through the next Home Ec assignment with him. Boiling an egg really didn’t give him any problems at all, other than trying to do it while he could hardly stand, let alone walk.

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While Jasmine was boiling an egg in the kitchen, Jimmy was out in the workshop once again with her father.

“Okay,” Clint said to her. “Tell me about the different kinds of pulleys and how they work.”

“Jimmy” really hated tools!

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In the kitchen, the Home Ec lesson didn’t last long, and neither did the cleanup.

“Okay, Jas,” Susan told him, “you need to go out to the workshop now and do some things with your father.”

“I do?” Jimmy asked, the excitement obviously in his voice.

She nodded. “At least a few times a week from now on so you can stay up on your Mechanics work too.”

“Alright!” he exclaimed happily. “Can I untie my legs now?”

“No! The belt stays. It stays there till you go to bed tonight.”

He was majorly disappointed over that. But at least he was going to get to go out and work with his father and the tools for a little while. Five minutes later, he was struggling to make his way through the snow covered backyard toward the workshop. He was wearing his sister’s multicolored rain boots, which didn’t help at all to keep his legs warm. But the cold was something he barely thought about. Instead, he concentrated fully on trying to walk that long distance, trudging his way through the still deep snow without falling down. If it hadn’t been for the footprints blazing the trail for him already, he didn’t think he would have made it.

The heavy door to the workshop had been dropped nearly down to the floor. Only a block of wood stuck under it showed him any light at all. He reached for the handle and had to struggle more than usual to get the door up. He figured the door was harder for him to raise because of his legs being tied as they were. He saw his father and sister looking at him as he came in, and then pulled the door down again so the space heater could keep the garage warm for them.

“Mom sent me out here,” he told them.

“We’re almost done,” Clint told him before turning back to Jimmy.

“Okay Jimmy,” he said. “Explain the block and tackle pulley again.”

Jasmine waited patiently while his sister tried to explain how the double pulley system worked. Easy stuff! He was only surprised that he didn’t see any of his father’s pulleys out where they could work with them. A few minutes later, Jimmy gladly ran to the garage door and opened it easier than he had, and then closed it again from the other side. He hobbled on towards his father. “Hi Dad,” he said brightly.

“Hi...uh, Jas,” Clint replied. He shook his head. “Your mother’s not around right now, so get that stupid belt off your legs!”

“Thanks!” he replied gratefully. It took him only seconds before he was free and could move around more easily.

“Did Mr. O’Conner give you any work assignments for the week?” Clint asked.

“No,” Jasmine admitted. “I haven’t seen him. I had Home Ec today instead. But Mrs. Marker laid the assignments on me. A whole week’s worth of stuff the younger girls are doing as well as the older girls too.”

Clint nodded and picked up some of the papers he had gotten from Jimmy. “It looks to me like O’Conner has been working on some basic maintenance for power tools around the house. Mostly garden things.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy agreed. “We were looking at lawn mowers the last time I was in class.”

Clint spent another moment looking over the notes, then threw them on the workbench. “It’s a little early for me to be doing this kind of stuff, but I guess if we do it now, then we won’t have to worry about doing it come spring. And I have no doubt that any of it is stuff you haven’t either already done, or would give you the least bit of trouble. So you say you’re working on lawn mowers?”

“Push mowers,” Jasmine replied. “At least that’s what we had last week.”

Clint nodded. “Well, I’ve got some oil and stuff here from last year. How about you change the oil in the small lawn mower tonight. Then tomorrow I’ll try to remember to get some filters and stuff for it.”

“Great Dad. No problem!” Jasmine said excitedly.

Between the two of them, they managed to pull the old push mower out from behind the riding mower and move it to where they could work on it. Clint found the oil for Jimmy and set it on the workbench. Together, they spread out an old tarp and laid it under the mower.

Jimmy took a look at the engine and where the plug was to empty the oil already in it, then he headed to the workbench to find what he would need. But the minute he came back to the mower, his father stopped him.

“Hold on there!” Clint said quickly.

“What’s wrong Dad? Did I grab the wrong tool?”

“Nope! We got a bigger problem. A much bigger problem.”

“What?”

“There’s no way I’m letting you do anything even remotely like you’re going to do while wearing that outfit. We shouldn’t have even touched anything in here while you’re dressed like that. I just hope we haven’t gotten you dirty already.”

Jasmine looked at his hands. They were already dirty. He dared not touch any of his clothes as he looked down and tried to find any signs of dirt on his clothes.

“I think you’re okay,” Clint told him. “Just don’t touch anything.”

“But Dad, how am I gonna work?”

Clint shook his head. “We’ll have to think of something. In the meantime...” He headed for a little used part of his workbench where he found a can. He pried the lid off of it and pulled out some of the white cream from inside. “Here,” he said to his son. “This is hand cleaner, and it’s particularly good for grease. Rub this in while I find a rag or something to wipe it off with. Two minutes later, disaster had been averted as Jasmine once again had perfectly clean hands. Mostly.

“Now that Jasmine was more aware of the problem, he was almost afraid to move in the workshop. “How am I gonna work?” he asked.

Clint looked at him for a moment as he considered that problem. Then he smiled. “I got an idea,” he said. He went to one of the cabinets in the shop and pulled out a pair of coveralls. “Someone

gave me a couple of pairs of these a long time ago, but I never used them. Now I'm glad I didn't bother throwing them out. Put these on and I think they'll do the trick just fine."

Happily, Jasmine kicked his colorful boots off his tights clad legs and climbed into the coveralls. They were way too big for him, but he put them on anyway. He zipped the front up, despite the fact that they were so big on him, and despite the fact that he realized his father was trying hard not to laugh at him.

"They're a bit big on you," Clint finally told him.

Jasmine shrugged. "I guess they'll still be better than getting dirty."

"That's for sure!" Clint agreed. "I don't know who your mother would kill worse, you...or me!"

Clint rolled up both the legs and both arms on the coveralls, and Jimmy put the colorful boots back on again.

"Now let's change that oil!" Clint decided.

It was one of the more pleasant times Jasmine had ever had while having to be a girl. He loved working with the tools and fixing things! When they were done, the coveralls came off and Clint again tied his knees together, tighter than what his wife had done before. Then the two of them made their way back to the house, Clint blazing the way and Jasmine hobbling after him.

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One pencil. One pen. And "technically" one key ring were the contents of his purse when Jasmine walked out the door to go to school on Tuesday. It was "technically" one key ring, because even though he had spent almost half an hour trying to get most of the oddball stuff off of the key ring, he had discovered that the ring itself was permanently attached to a doll. So now his pink purse was mostly filled with the doll on the key ring. Well, if he ever needed it again, he was sure he would have no problem finding the thing in his purse!

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Jimmy wanted to wear a hat. She wanted to wear one and keep it on all day. Her mother handed her an old pair of Tommy's earmuffs instead. When she walked out of the house, the earmuffs were left behind. They would do nothing to hide what had been done to her hair. Feeling horribly self-conscious, she walked with Tommy and Jasmine down toward the bus. All the other kids were there ahead of them, but Jimmy knew that everyone would see her hair before the day was over. There would be no avoiding it.

There were no pleasant greetings from the girls as Jimmy got closer. Instead, there was only wide-eyed gawking as Nichole said, "Oh my God!"

"They cut your hair too?" Allison exclaimed.

Jimmy rubbed the hair on his head. "They didn't give me much of a choice," she replied.

"It looks..." Allison started to say, but she couldn't finish.

"You look more like a boy than ever!" Nichole blurted out.

Embarrassed, Jimmy turned away from them and walked over to talk with Elliot instead. "Are you going to that Valentine's dance?" she asked him.

"I don't know yet," Elliot admitted. "You?"

"No way!" Jimmy replied.

Elliot nodded. "Yeah, well my sister wants to go pretty bad, and my Mom says I may have to go to keep an eye on her. Like she really needs it!"

"Yeah," Jimmy replied. "I'm sure she probably doesn't."

"Well, you should know," Elliot said, "but try telling that to my Mom."

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It seemed strange to see that every McComber boy on the bus had a fresh haircut that day. It almost looked like the entire family was preparing for some special occasion. Except that there was no special occasion happening. As far as "Jimmy's" new haircut was concerned, other than a lot of kids staring at her, nobody actually said anything about it, to her, or anywhere she could hear what was being said. But there were lots of whispers about it all over the

school. As far as most of the kids could see, Jimmy was now doing everything she could to try to turn herself into a boy. The word “punishment” was thrown out a lot in the quiet discussions, but most of the kids were more inclined to go with what their eyes told them rather than whatever the truth might have been.

Once she reached her locker, her brother’s actual locker, Jimmy had more time to redecorate it than she had the day before. While the rest of the kids dropped off and picked up books, she pasted more girly things all over the inside of the locker door as well as inside the locker itself.

“What are you doing?” the boy with the locker right next to hers asked.

“Decorating it,” Jimmy said with a sly smile.

“Why?”

“Because I just know my stupid brother is really going to love it now. You know what a major sissy he is!”

The boy shook his head. “Why do you even bother saying junk like that? You can just look at him and know it’s not true!” With a shake of his head, he walked off.

Know it’s not true? How could he say that? But Jimmy had a feeling that the perpetual angry look on her brother’s face had a lot to do with what the kid had just said. Somehow, she had to erase that stupid attitude of his!

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Since he knew now that his teachers were all reporting to his mother, Jasmine had no choice but to be extra careful about the way he sat down. He hated it! It was stupid! It was silly! He felt silly doing it! It was uncomfortable! And it was really, really difficult – especially the longer he had to sit there like that.

Over and over again he cautiously glanced at the other girls to see how they were keeping their legs. Yes, most of them had their knees together, but not all of them. Although to be fair, the ones who didn’t were wearing pants. And some of the girls who were also wearing pants, also kept their knees together, or mostly together, or crossed, which amounted to the same thing.

The more he watched, the more he realized that most of the girls moved their knees around quite a bit too. Just not like he did, or had to do, because keeping his knees together was hard! He supposed that they all simply had a lot of practice to make it easier, because the more he tried to keep them together, the more tired his legs became.

By mid-morning, he was tempted to find something to tie his own knees together with, just so he wouldn't have to fight to keep them together anymore.

To relieve the stress, he had no choice but to "occasionally" let his knees swing apart and move them around. As the day wore on, he had to do it more often. Of course, things weren't so stressful for him whenever he occasionally found himself really interested in what was happening in class. It was during those times that he never even thought about what his legs were doing. But there were a number of times throughout the morning when he "caught" himself and quickly pressed his knees together again, hoping that nobody noticed.

He was particularly careful in Mrs. Marker's Home Ec class. He was grateful that by the time he got out of there, she hadn't complained one time about the way he was sitting. Of course, by the end of the class, he also figured she could have said something nice about how careful he had been too. He was really looking forward to getting out to the bus where he wouldn't have to worry about it anymore. But what he didn't know, was that the bus wasn't in his future as far as a way for him to get home that day.

Before he even got out of the building, he found his mother standing inside by the door, talking with his Aunt Jane.

"There you are, Sweetie," Susan said as he approached the door amid the rest of the Musketeers. "Wait here with me," she said, "we've got to go out again today."

They weren't words that Jasmine wanted to hear.

"I'll check on it for you," Jane told Susan. "You can call me whenever you get home tonight."

"Thanks Jane," Susan replied happily before her sister in law had to leave.

A few minutes later, Jimmy and Tommy caught up to them too and Susan pulled them aside. "Boys, Jas and I have some things we've got to do this afternoon. Go on home on the bus and start your homework. Aunt Marcy said she'll check on you later before your father gets home. Is there anything special you want us to pick up for dinner tonight?"

Jimmy was trying to be funny when she suggested chocolate cake.

"We'll try to find one if you like," Susan agreed.

On that note, Tommy and Jimmy happily went home on the bus, and Susan and Jasmine got into the car. Jasmine wasn't the least bit happy about having to go grocery shopping with his mother. Except that they didn't go grocery shopping. At least, not until much later.

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Once again Jasmine entered the cluttered little room that served as Sarah's hairdressing shop. Once again he sat in her chair, although this time with the added question from his mother asking if she needed to worry about the way he was going to sit there. Once again he listened as Sarah and his mother talked, and occasionally he answered a question or two from Sarah. But mostly he watched the mirror closely as she worked, and worked, and worked on his hair, without seeming to cut it that much. He was not particularly happy to be there. He was even less happy having to endure all the little rollers being put into his hair all over his head! After which Sara put some stuff on the rollers that smelled so bad he was afraid he'd pass out. And through it all, Sarah and his mother just kept talking as if they were drinking coffee together.

The hours he sat there seemed like an entire day before Sarah finally started brushing his new hairdo out. And when she did finally start brushing it, his hair wasn't nice and smooth anymore. It was filled with tiny soft curls. All of it! He couldn't take his eyes off of his image in the mirror. He wanted to scream! Once again his mother had found some new way to humiliate him.

His hair was much fuller than it had been. Much! He figured that was because of all the curls in it, literally in all of it now. It was cut to be straight across all the way around the bottom, even though it seemed to bush out more the further from the top of his head it got. He knew without a doubt that there would be no way on earth that he could ever fix it to look even remotely like a boy might wear his hair. No way on earth!

“Oh, it’s darling!” his mother gushed as she stared at him. “I absolutely love it!”

Darling? As far as Jasmine was concerned, it was a total horror!

“That’s what I suggested for...your other daughter, a long time ago,” Sarah told her. “Only I planned on keeping her hair longer. His hair is still growing in, but I have to say, it really seems to be getting thicker and silkier. Really nice. It was actually a pleasure to work with.”

Susan didn’t tell her that most likely the change in the texture of his hair was due to the new hormones in his system.

Jasmine’s stomach was still in a state of panic as he and his mother finally walked out to the car. “Mom,” he said, “how am I going to go to school tomorrow with my hair like this? Is there some way you can fix it so it will look okay?”

“Jasmine,” Susan replied, “it looks wonderful right now. Really nice! I’m sure that tomorrow everyone will be complementing you on how pretty your hair looks.”

“But Mom, I’m still going to get to be me tomorrow – a boy! Right?”

“Of course,” Susan replied. “But that’s no reason why your hair can’t still look pretty.”

Jasmine of course, didn’t exactly see it that way.

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The family’s actual dinner that night was fairly late since they had to do some grocery shopping first, including stopping in the bakery of the supermarket to buy a chocolate cake for “the guys.” Shortly after they got home though, and each of the “boys” in the

family had gotten a look at Jasmine's new hairdo, each of them had slightly differing reactions.

Clint had seen it first since he helped carry the groceries from the car into the kitchen. He stared at it, feeling very sorry for his son. But at the same time, he couldn't help but think how much more like a real girl his son suddenly looked.

Tommy had pretty much registered shock at seeing what had been done to Jasmine's hair. "Damn!" he had exclaimed. "Are you going to have to go to school as Jimmy with it like that?"

"Why not?" Susan had answered before Jasmine could say anything.

Tommy had shaken his head and softly whispered, "Sorry about that."

It didn't make Jasmine feel any better at all!

And then there was Jimmy's reaction when she first saw it, which was outright laughter. The laughter continued on and off as she stared at her brother over and over again during dinner. But it was later that night when she "had" to wander into his room that she registered a very different reaction. "Geez your hair looks good!" she said totally seriously. "I'm guessing from all the curls, that that's how Sarah had suggested doing mine a few times."

"She mentioned something about it," Jasmine admitted.

"I should have let her do it," Jimmy said as she reached out and touched his hair in a few places. "I can't get over how good it looks on you! And Jas, I know you don't want to hear this, but I think it really helps you look even more like a real girl!"

"Yeah," he replied sullenly, "but what about tomorrow? What about the days when I get to be myself – a boy? What am I going to do then? Mom seems to think that I'm going to wear it just like this."

"I'm not sure what else you can do with it," Jimmy replied. "Unless of course you put a bow in it or tie a ribbon somewhere. And I think anything like that would look totally awesome!"

"Maybe for you, but it's not exactly the effect I'd be looking for," Jasmine told her.

"Why not?" Jimmy replied. "If you're stuck with it like that, then you may as well flaunt it."

Jasmine had a vastly different opinion on the matter.

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Jasmine was still doing his homework later that night when his mother walked into the room. "I just talked with Aunt Jane," she told him. "She talked with both Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Marker after school today. They both said you did a lot better sitting today, but Mrs. Ansley said that while you did a lot better, you still couldn't seem to manage things for very long."

"I tried!" he told her. "But it's hard! And it's real uncomfortable!"

"It's not that hard and it's not uncomfortable at all!" she told him. "So get used to it!" She went to the back of his bedroom door and grabbed the belt tie for his tan bathrobe again.

"Not again!" he complained.

"Since we'll be switching you two back in about an hour, you've only got to put up with it for a little while tonight," she told him. "But next weekend, be prepared to practice a lot harder! We've got to get you used to doing things correctly!"

He knew better than to ask why or even complain about it. Complaining wouldn't help him anyway. Instead, he asked, "Mom, what am I going to do about my hair tomorrow. I'll be a boy again, but how do I comb this to make it look okay?"

"You don't comb it," she said. "The permanent that Sarah put in it will keep it looking very nice with almost no effort. I'll help you brush it out in the morning so it looks good again."

"Won't it wash out in the shower?"

Susan found his question amusing. "Jas, depending on how you take care of it, that permanent should keep your hair looking nice for a month or two! Washing it in the shower won't change that at all. And besides, since Sarah washed it today, then you don't need to wash it tomorrow. So don't even bother."

"Two months!" Jasmine exclaimed, totally horrified. "How am I going to live with this for two months?"

"Jas," Susan told him, "it's very pretty! Trust me. Everyone will love it!"

Everyone? Everyone was going to laugh at him! Especially tomorrow at school when he would be going there as himself, as a

boy again. A boy with a fancy girl's hairdo.

Chapter 32 - Deer Valentine

February 11th – 14th

“Oh...my...God!” Nichole exclaimed at the bus stop the moment she got a look at Jimmy’s new hairdo.

“Holy cow!” Allison echoed.

The two girls were quickly joined by Ashley who couldn’t seem to believe his hair either. “It looks fantastic on you!” she exclaimed.

“Yeah,” Jimmy replied sullenly. “It looks fantastic...for a girl!”

“Well, yeah,” Allison replied.

“Except, I’m not a girl today. Not ever, to be honest.”

“Close enough though,” Ashley replied.

“Yeah,” Allison agreed. “Close enough.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes. “How am I going to get through school like this?”

“I don’t see what your problem is?” Nichole replied. “It really is pretty. I just still think you would look a whole lot better if you would just lose that stupid attitude of yours. Smile once in a while!”

“That’s for sure!” Allison agreed.

Once again Jimmy rolled his eyes. He didn’t bother telling them that he wasn’t the least bit interested in being pretty. And there was no way he was ever going to go to school again without that look of determination on his face. Although to be honest, lately he didn’t feel nearly so much like fighting all the time, which he figured was probably a good thing, just so long as nobody said anything wrong to him or gave him a good reason to fight.

“Hey Jas,” Nichole softly greeted her best friend after the shock of Jimmy’s new hairdo had worn off. “Your hair looks...”

“Bad!” Jasmine replied.

Nichole shrugged. “Not that bad really. Just...”

“Bad!” Jasmine said for her again.

“No! Really! It just looks...different. And I really like all the little bows you put in it. They’re really pretty.”

Jasmine allowed herself a small smile. "Thanks," she replied. "It's kind of the best I could do. You have no idea how hard it is to make this haircut look the least bit feminine."

"Well I think you did a great job!" Nichole told her. "Really!"

"I think so too," Allison added, now joining the conversation. "You've at least managed to make it look a lot more like a girl would wear her hair. I don't think your brother really has that option anymore."

That thought brought a real smile to Jasmine's face. "No, he doesn't, does he!"

"It's kind of a shock to see though," Nichole added.

"Yeah, I guess it is," Jasmine replied. What she didn't add, was that she had a feeling that her brother was going to get a bit of another shock in a little while, just as soon as he opened his locker. Because by the time she had left school yesterday, she had way outdone herself in making it look girly. About the only thing she couldn't put into it that she really wished she could have was a mirror. And the only reason she didn't, was because she didn't have time to find one for him. Maybe next week she could add that to his locker as well. She was sure he would "appreciate" it.

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Jimmy had no trouble at all keeping the angry determined look on his face. The stares he got from everyone, boys, girls, and teachers alike, gave him plenty of reason to keep the look on his face. With his eyes just daring anyone to make the wrong comment to him, he made his way to his locker and unlocked it. He opened the door and nearly fell over as a whole new world seemed to greet him. He stared angrily into the locker for a moment, trying to take it in, and then he literally slammed his books down on the floor before slamming his locker door closed again. His actions caught the attention of everyone around.

Jimmy ignored everyone as he once again unlocked his locker, and then opened the door. He couldn't believe it. He just couldn't believe it. Big pink flowers. Cut out pictures of a couple of his sister's favorite teenage boy singers. Pictures of puppies, and baby

rabbits, and ponies. Colorful rainbows. And a big sign that read: “I love being a girl!” All of it combined to make the inside of his locker a kaleidoscope of femininity that did nothing but disturb him. How could his sister do that to him? Well, he figured that knowing her, she had absolutely loved doing it. It seemed like she looked for any opportunity at all to make fun of his situation, and to rub it in.

He reached for the poster that proclaimed that he loved being a girl, and tried to rip it down, only to discover that he couldn't. The darn thing was glued to the back of his locker instead of just taped. He stuck what books he didn't need into his locker and kept only what he did need, then once again, he slammed his locker door shut. If it wasn't one thing to humiliate him, it was another. When would it ever end? But he knew the answer to that one. It would only end when his sister finally decided to give up hunting. And from everything he could see, that was going to be never. He was going to grow old and die – still wearing skirts!

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Mrs. Ansley first thought that the head full of curls walking into her classroom was one of the girls. It wasn't until Jimmy headed for his own desk that she realized exactly who it was. She actually stood up and walked closer to get a better look at him. Darn! What had his mother done to him now? But there was no doubt about it, even dressed as a boy, he now looked all too much like a girl. And there was something about the way his hair now fell around his face and chin. It almost made his neck look a little bit thinner...and longer. Of course, that was silly. But then, that's what a nice hairstyle could do sometimes.

If it wasn't for that screwed up attitude on his face, there was no doubt that the boy might actually look pretty. But unfortunately, as she had seen day after day now, Jimmy seemed to be determined to keep that attitude about him. And it seemed to be especially strong on his face today. Such a shame.

She glanced over to the other one, the real Jasmine. She had been shocked to see what her mother had done to her hair yesterday, but it hadn't seemed so bad since yesterday Jasmine had

been Jimmy instead. She wasn't surprised to note the small bows in her hair now. While they did little to hide the bad hairdo for her, the bows at least did help...some.

As far as she could see though, it was her brother that was going to have a harder time of things with his new hairdo. At least when he was being a boy. She had no doubt that it would be fabulous all the other times, when he was a girl. But evidently, he was now being his sister more often than himself.

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It was lunchtime before Jimmy had a chance to complain about what his sister had done to his locker. He and his sister had again traded seats at the table so that his sister again sat in front of Olivia, who still declared that the world would end if she wasn't sitting in front of a girl. Dumb! As soon as his sister had sat down at the table he looked down past Allison. "Did you have to do that to my locker?" he asked loudly and angrily.

"Hey," Jasmine replied with a delighted smile. "It's my locker too."

"What's wrong with your locker?" Nichole asked.

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "You should see it!"

"Yeah," Jasmine agreed delightedly before he could say anything else. "You really *should* see it!"

"What?" Allison asked.

"She...uh...let's just say she redecorated more than a bit!" Jimmy finally said, the anger still in his voice.

"Redecorated?" Olivia asked. "How?"

But it was Jasmine who excitedly jumped in to answer. "Oh God!" she exclaimed happily. "I found some of the most precious things to put up in there. Pretty flowers and pictures of cute little animals and things like that."

"Yeah," Jimmy added angrily, "and pictures of the boys you idol and a big sign that says I enjoy being a girl!"

"Sounds heavenly!" Nichole exclaimed.

"It really is!" Jasmine told her.

"No it's not!" Jimmy said.

"I don't know, it sounds pretty nice to me too," Olivia added.

"You've all got to see it later!" Jasmine told them.

Jimmy rolled his eyes. While he ate, he only barely registered what the girls were talking about. His mind was more interested in having time to rip everything out of his locker. He was planning on doing it after lunch, but that was when Jasmine led all the girls over to see what she had created in there.

"It's gorgeous!" Nichole exclaimed.

"It's so colorful!" Olivia added.

"Jas, I think you've outdone yourself," Allison declared.

Jasmine was in heaven. "I do think it came out pretty well myself."

Jimmy moved back in towards his locker. "I'm not happy with it at all!" he declared. He reached again for the sign declaring that he enjoyed being a girl. He intended to rip it down again, but as he searched for a place to grab the edges of it, he still couldn't find any. Besides, there were a lot of other things pasted over top of the edges. "What did you stick all this up with?" he asked.

"All I had was a bottle of craft glue," Jasmine told him. "It should still be in the bottom of your locker somewhere in case you need it."

"Craft glue!" Jimmy exclaimed. He quickly searched the bottom of his locker and came up with a bottle of white glue. "This stuff will never come off!"

"All the better!" Jasmine replied happily. "And don't forget, I have to use that locker sometimes too." With a happy smile she headed back to class.

Jimmy threw the bottle of glue back into his locker. He grabbed what books he needed, and he slammed the locker door again. Removing all that stuff wasn't going to be easy. Craft glue! What was she thinking? Everything would be stuck there almost permanently!

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Jimmy was glad to get back into the Mechanics class again. He was also glad to not walk into another test as soon as he got there.

But Mr. O'Conner did come over to talk with him before class started.

"I gave your sister a list of things that both of you will need to know about for the whole week," he told Jimmy. "Most of it this week is stuff I'm sure you won't have any trouble with. From now on, I'll try to put everything together so your father can help you with it all. I don't want you to miss out on anything in here," he added.

"Thanks," Jimmy told him. "I appreciate that more than you know. In fact, yesterday, even though I was still having to be my sister, Dad and I got together out in the workshop last night and we changed the oil in our old push mower."

"That's something that I know is really easy for you by now," Mr. O'Conner noted.

"Yeah, but you have no idea how much I enjoyed just being out there and doing it. Especially with my Dad there. You have no idea at all."

Mr. O'Conner smiled. "I'll try to keep those assignments coming for you. Okay?"

"Please!" Jimmy pleaded.

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Susan had noticed it the night before when Jimmy had been sitting at the dinner table as Jasmine. Tonight, when he was supposed to be himself, she noticed it again, more than before. With the new hairdo, his face and neck seemed different. Of course, that was the whole point of most women's hairstyles, to bring out certain features and to make someone look their best. But with Jimmy being Jimmy again, the new hairstyle really did make him look more feminine.

His hair had grown a lot in the last few months, and it reached down just a little short of the level of his chin. But with it being cut so straight all the way around, and perhaps it was the fullness of it at the bottom, and she was sure the curls had a lot to do with it too, but she almost got the impression that his neck looked longer and a little more feminine than it used to. The power of a good hairstyle! Or was it the power of those new hormones in his system? Either way,

whether he liked it or not, her son was looking more like a girl than ever.

It really was a great hairstyle for him. Really great. If...he was a girl.

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On Friday the thirteenth, Clint was later getting home from work than he usually was. The reason for it was something he wasn't happy about at all. He walked in through the kitchen door and spotted Jasmine, the real Jasmine, laying things out on the kitchen table for dinner.

"Hi Daddy," Jasmine proclaimed happily when he entered.

"Hi Jas," Clint replied somewhat more reservedly. His daughter was his daughter again, for now, but later that night she would be his son again instead. The whole business was becoming very unsettling for him. More so it seemed with each passing day.

He walked over to where Susan was working at the kitchen island and gave her a kiss. Susan of course knew why he was late. "No time like the present, I guess," he said to her. "Do we have time?"

Susan nodded. "Don't take long with it," she replied. "Dinner won't wait forever."

Clint nodded. "Jas," he said, "I need your help."

"Sure Daddy," Jasmine replied. "With what?"

"Help me get something in from the truck outside."

Without replying, Jasmine grabbed her light jacket and slipped it over her shoulders as she went out the door just ahead of her father. She didn't even get the door closed before she spotted it. "Daddy!" she screamed. "You got it!"

Clint didn't feel like an answer was necessary. He walked around and opened the tailgate to his truck, further exposing the deer head that filled up a good portion of his truck bed.

"It's beautiful!" Jasmine exclaimed as she stared at it. She couldn't reach the head where it was, but she longed to run her hands over it and touch it.

"Hold the door open for me, Jas," Clint told her as he reached in and hefted the heavy thing up. With Jasmine holding the door open as wide as possible, Clint carefully carried the huge deer head into the kitchen.

"Don't put that thing in here!" Susan told him. "There's no room."

Clint carried it all the way into the family room instead where he deposited it on the floor.

"It's incredible!" Jasmine proclaimed as she happily knelt down over it and began rubbing her hands lovingly over the entire thing. "He's so beautiful!" she said over and over again.

Tommy came into the room to see what all the commotion was about. "Oh wow! You got it!" he exclaimed. "Man that thing is big! And look at those antlers! Nice deer Jas. Great one!"

"Thanks," Jasmine replied as she continued to caress the deer head lovingly.

Clint noted that the only one who hadn't seen it yet was Jimmy. He decided not to push the issue and bring him in. Jimmy would be faced with the thing soon enough, right after dinner in fact, when Clint planned on hanging it in Jimmy's room. But of course, later tonight, the twins would be all switched around again and Jimmy, the real Jimmy, would be in Jasmine's room instead.

"What's going on?" Jimmy's voice sounded as he entered the family room. But no explanations were necessary as he saw what now took up a major portion of the floor.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Jasmine said as she continued to pet the head.

"Yeah," Jimmy replied sullenly. It was beautiful alright. Another beautiful animal that should be alive and living the life that was intended for it. Not the life of a wall ornament. He wasn't looking forward to seeing that thing mounted on his bedroom wall.

After dinner, it took Clint and Tommy both nearly half an hour to get the deer head hung on Jimmy's bedroom wall, and that was after Clint had gathered everything they would need to hang the thing. The wall suddenly looked too crowded, and the room itself seemed far smaller now that the deer resided there. To Jimmy, the room seemed darker and more foreboding than ever. He was suddenly very glad that he wouldn't have to sleep there that night. Not until

next Tuesday night, which was still a long way off. But as much as he hated being his sister, he wasn't looking forward to having to come back to...*that* staring down at him all the time.

As usual, the switch was made again that night. Jimmy became Jasmine to a room again full of outfits all laid out for him to wear, and Jasmine rushed to become Jimmy, where she could lay on the bed and stare up at the incredible head of the deer she had shot, conveniently lit up for her all night long by the soft glow of Jimmy's nightlight.

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It was another three-day weekend for all the kids. No school on Monday due to President's Day...or Washington's Birthday as some called it. Either way, nobody cared. Another day without school was a big plus for all the kids.

On Saturday, Valentine's Day, as she did every Saturday now, "Jimmy" was out of bed very early, and out of the house shortly after that. She jumped into the back seat of her Uncle Jed's truck, and rode with him out to do whatever the job was for the day. That day, Ethan and Justin were in the truck too.

"Remember that deer I shot last Thanksgiving?" she asked them excitedly.

"Yeah?" Jed replied from the front seat.

"My Dad hung the head on my bedroom wall last night. You should see it! It's beautiful!"

Jed nodded. "No doubt. It was a darn good deer."

In her excitement, Jimmy started telling them about how the head was posed and about how big the antlers were, when all of a sudden her voice went haywire. She stopped talking for a moment, totally surprised that it had happened. She cleared her throat before she continued.

Ten minutes later, they were all discussing the job they were going to tackle that day, including Jasmine. "But that stuff is so heavy!" she started to complain. But as she tried to say the word 'heavy,' her voice went all crazy again. Once again she cleared her throat, but there was no need for her to continue.

In the front seat, still driving, Jed had heard the odd cracking of “Jimmy’s” voice. Remembering hearing that same problem in each of his sons when they had been younger, he slightly raised one of his eyebrows.

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It was one of those few Saturday afternoons where Clint was off of work, there was nothing worth watching on TV, and he didn’t have a whole lot to do. “Jimmy” was still out with Jed doing who knew what, while his son, Jasmine, was outside again sliding down the snow covered hill with all of his girlfriends, looking way too much like a real girl now with that new haircut he had. Darn, did his wife have to go that far with him? It was positively disturbing! Far worse than the boy’s haircut that his daughter now sported, that she managed to fix fairly well by putting a couple of bows in it. Jimmy though, didn’t have any option like that to make himself look more like a boy again.

With the TV playing nothing but sappy Valentine’s Day movies that only his wife seemed to care about, he went out into the snow and made his way out to the workshop. The oil in the push mower had been changed twice now that week. Once by Jimmy and once by Jasmine. But since he couldn’t remember the last time he had changed the oil in the thing, he figured the double change couldn’t really hurt anything.

As he poked around at things to possibly look at, he found all the papers that Mr. O’Conner had sent home for the twins, outlining his plans for the next week. Mostly, it was more of just the same simple maintenance on a few simple machines. None of it was difficult, perhaps with the exception of for the real Jasmine. But he figured that was because she was still so dead-set against learning any of it. But Jimmy, he really enjoyed working with Jimmy. Jimmy, even when he had to be Jasmine, simply had a love for tools and working with them. And...he had the knack! That was one of the most important things. Basically, Clint simply loved working with his son. More so than even Tommy who would rather be out shooting with Elliot than doing anything else.

Thinking about Jimmy and the work that Mr. O'Conner had outlined he wanted covered, he went back into the house to find his wife. She was still watching TV, tears now falling from her eyes. Oh brother! He knew better than to stick around. He had presented her with his own Valentine's Day gift early that morning, before breakfast. His wife was now displaying a new necklace with three birthstones in it. Two diamonds for the twin's birthday in April, framing a green peridot for Tommy's birthday in August. She had cried when she saw it and kissed him enough that he figured it had been worth the hefty price. But it wasn't worth the price of having to sit through a full day, and most likely a night, of sappy Valentine's Day movies.

"I'm going to run to the store," he told her. "I need some stuff to work with the twins out in the garage this week."

Susan, fully interested in the movie, only raised her hand. She didn't care in the least.

Clint just wanted to get out of there.

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It wasn't until dinnertime that night that Clint had a chance to "discuss" his plans for the rest of the evening with anyone. He already knew that his wife was trying to sit through a Valentine's Day movie marathon on TV that he wanted no part of. In fact, "Jasmine" had fixed dinner that night, by himself, and right then, his wife was eating in front of the TV! As far as Clint could see, everything about the dinner on the table looked just fine. He wasn't sure if that was due to that Home Ec class he was in or simply his wife's teaching and supervision. He was guessing it was mostly because of his wife.

"Jimmy" was telling them all, rather animatedly, about trying to clear out one of the deer stands where a family of raccoons had decided to den up and make it their home. "You should have seen them Dad, there were five of them and they were all over the place! And when Uncle Jed and Ethan tried to chaaass!" She stopped as her voice again went haywire. She had to clear her throat again before she continued. "Anyway," she said a lot less strongly, "they were a real pain to get out of there."

"I can believe it," Clint replied. "So what are you doing after dinner?"

"Tonight?" Jimmy asked. "Nothing that I know of. I thought that maybe I'd watch some TV with Mom."

Clint shook his head. "Not tonight," he said. "At least, not for a while. I'd like to cover a little more of those lessons Mr. O'Conner passed on to you while we've got some time this weekend."

Jimmy was a little tired from working with her Uncle most of the day, and she would have really liked to watch some of those movies with her mother, but she agreed. "Does that mean we won't have to spend as much time with it next week?" she asked hopefully.

"I hope so," Clint replied. He turned to Jasmine, "And we'll get to you again right after I'm done with Jimmy."

The smile on Jasmine's face was certainly genuine.

As soon as dinner was over, Clint checked with Jasmine first. "Can you manage cleaning all this up yourself?"

Jasmine rolled his eyes. "Yeah Dad. It's really no problem. I can get it."

Clint nodded. "Thanks. I'm sure your mother will be grateful too." He turned to Jimmy. "Ready to get started?"

But Jimmy's face clouded as she quickly checked the clock. "Right now?" she asked.

"That was the general idea," Clint confirmed.

"But..."

"What's the problem?"

"But...I have to go see Nichole and Elliot first," she said.

"What on earth for?"

"They're leaving for the Valentine's dance in a few minutes and I've got to see them."

Clint was a little perturbed. "Is this one of those *girl* things you're not supposed to be doing?"

"Um...no. Not really," Jimmy replied very hesitantly. "They're just my friends. Elliot too!"

Clint shook his head. "Just get out to that workshop as soon as you can. Hear?"

"Sure Daddy, thanks!" Jimmy replied.

"And stop calling me Daddy!"

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"Can I get you anything?" Pete asked Jimmy as she stood in his kitchen waiting to see Elliot and Nichole.

"No thanks, Uncle Pete," Jimmy replied. "I just wanted to tell Nichole and Elliot to have a good time tonight."

"I'm sure they will, whether you tell them or not," Pete replied.

"I'd still like to tell them myself," Jimmy told him.

"That's fine," he said.

She had to wait a little while, but eventually Nichole came out to see her. "You look fantastic!" Jimmy told her.

"Thanks," Nichole replied. "What are you doing here?"

"I had to come see how you looked!" Jimmy told her.

"But aren't you supposed to be a boy now?"

"As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't mean I can't be interested in what you're wearing."

Nichole smiled and laughed. "At least not for you!"

"I think that's one of my favorite dresses you're wearing tonight," Jimmy told her. "And your hair looks fantastic too."

"Thanks," Nichole replied. "Mom spent half the afternoon pinning it up for me."

"It looks soooo grown-up!"

"Thanks," Nichole said again with a slight smile. She looked at her best friend. "Are you...jealous?" she asked cautiously.

"Like you wouldn't believe!" Jimmy replied softly.

"So give up hunting!" Nichole pleaded. "Jas, you're missing out on so much! Not to mention that I think we're seeing less and less of you now. You're always busy with Uncle Jed or something."

Jimmy shook her head. "I'm not going to quit hunting. Especially not for something like a simple daaaannce!" Once again her voice went crazy on her and she had to clear her throat. "Not for this dance anyway," she finished softer and in a slightly lower tone of voice.

And then Elliot walked into the room. Jimmy immediately took in how nice he looked in his sport jacket and tie. The new haircut didn't

hurt things either. "Hi Elliot," she said in that same slightly lower pitch so that her voice wouldn't go crazy on her again.

"Hey...Jimmy," Elliot replied as he pulled at his uncomfortable tie a bit.

"Um...you look really nice tonight," Jimmy told him, still in the same voice.

Elliot looked at her strangely. "Don't say things like that!" Elliot complained. "When you're being a boy, it's downright creepy!"

"Um...sorry," Jimmy had to reply. Nichole was all dressed up fancy, and Elliot looked absolutely scrumptious. And she herself looked? With a shake of her head she sadly said, "Have a good time guys. I've got to go now to work with my Dad."

She left their house and sadly walked across the backyard toward the workshop where she knew her father was waiting for her. Was she really missing out on too much? She really wished that she had been able to get all dressed up to go to the dance. And maybe one of the boys there might even ask her to dance. And even if no one did ask her, well, she knew she would still have a great time. It would have even been fun just for the chance to get that dressed up for a change. And Nichole had looked...really great. And so had Elliot.

Was she missing out on too much? Was it worth giving up hunting? But hunting was so special for her. And she was the one and only girl in the family that was allowed to hunt, even though everyone *claimed* that it was really a boy, Jimmy, that was out there shooting at things. Ha!

Thoughtfully, and sadly, she pulled up the heavy garage door and stepped inside. "Okay Dad. I'm here," she said.

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There were a surprising number of McCombers at the dance. John and Jane were there of course to chaperone their students, not to mention that two of their kids, Olivia and Hunter, were there with them. Jane had spent more time getting Olivia ready than she did herself. Like Nichole, Olivia's hair was now done in a fairly formal up-do. The only one of the Musketeers that wasn't wearing her hair

up was Allison. Her long hair still hung down, but it had obviously been curled and pinned into a “special” style. All three of the girlfriends looked gorgeous! To Jane, the only thing wrong was the one girl that wasn’t there – Jasmine. But then, Jasmine, the real Jasmine, was being Jimmy again.

Like their own school, Eagle Rock Academy was a fairly small school. Just not nearly as small as their school was. Plus, it was a private school. But there were times when the two schools joined together for activities like this. As far as John and Jane were concerned, the music was too loud and not at all appropriate for a Valentine’s Day dance. And while all the McCombers had shown up dressed as nicely as possible, not all the students had gone to the trouble. Some were even in jeans and sweatshirts! All totally wrong. But John and Jane both rightly figured that if things weren’t quite up to the standards they’d like to see, then that meant things were pretty much perfect for all the kids. So they endured the evening, and even danced when they dared!

Olivia, Nichole, and Allison were all asked by several of the Academy boys to dance, and by the end of the evening, each of them had more or less paired off with one of those boys and was staying with them. For each of the girls, it turned out to be a very special experience, especially during the slow dances. But for Olivia, as much as she enjoyed what was happening, it wasn’t really what she wanted. She said nothing at all about it though.

All the kids had thoroughly enjoyed the evening by the time they got back onto the school bus and headed home. John and Jane were simply glad they didn’t have to clean up the mess afterwards. The bus was only ten minutes late getting back to their school, and all the parents were already waiting there to pick their kids up. Twenty minutes later, John, Jane, Olivia, and Hunter climbed into their car to drive home. But all the way home, Olivia had only one thought on her mind.

As soon as she got into the house, Olivia ran for the phone. She didn’t even bother taking her coat off first. She pushed the automatic dial for the number and waited, and waited until someone answered – not who she expected. “Hello? Uncle Clint? Is...Jasmine there? You know, Jimmy Jasmine?”

"He's still out back in the workshop," Clint told her. "Do you want me to have him give you a call as soon as he comes in?"

Olivia was disappointed. "No thanks," she replied. "I'll have to call him later. Thanks."

She hung up the phone. Jasmine was outside in the workshop. What the heck was he doing out there? He was supposed to be Jasmine! Not waiting for anything else, she ran straight for the door.

"Where are you going?" Jane asked as Olivia ran past.

"Out!" Olivia called before she opened the door and ran outside. The shoes she was wearing weren't good for walking in the snow and she worried they might be ruined, but she kept on. All the way across her backyard and all the way across the yard next door, heading straight for her Uncle Clint's workshop. The closer she got, the more she could see the faint bit of light spilling out from under where the door was mostly closed except for a small little bit. She reached the door and grabbed the handle. It was freezing cold. She pulled up, but the door barely moved before she had to let it down again. Damn that thing was heavy. She grabbed the handle again and actually managed to lift it slowly up. She got it high enough to where she could step inside, then she let go of it and let it fall down behind her. The workshop was dimly lit and she could hear country music playing again.

"Olivia?" Jasmine's voice called. "What are you doing here?"

She finally saw him towards the back of the workshop. What she saw surprised her. He was wearing a jump suit of some sort that was really way too big on him. "I came to see you," she said as she headed toward him.

"Me? Why?"

"Because you weren't at the dance...and I missed you."

"You missed me?"

"Well, yeah! Of course."

Jasmine wasn't sure why she should miss him for something like that. He looked at her for a moment. "You look...*really* nice tonight," he told her. "And that dress, I know I haven't seen that one before." Had he just said that?

"Thanks," she said, praying she would remember his words forever. She had gone to a lot of trouble to get ready all afternoon,

but the one thing on her mind all day was getting ready for him to see her, even though she knew that he might never get to see her all dressed up since he not only wouldn't be at the dance, he was going to have to be Jasmine too.

The two of them stared at each other for a long moment without saying anything. "So how was the dance?" Jasmine finally asked.

"It was...really nice," she admitted. "I just wish you had been there."

"He shook his head. No thanks. Especially not now."

She nodded and laughed a little. "Yeah, it would have been pretty strange."

"Huh!" he grunted. "You think?"

She laughed again. "Yeah, I do think!"

It was another moment of silence before he asked. "So...did anyone ask you to dance?"

She suddenly swallowed hard. "Yeah," she admitted. "A couple of boys. And one who..." She didn't really want to tell him, but she did. "One who I kind of spent a lot of time with all night."

He nodded. "That's good. I'm glad you had such a good time. I know how much you were hoping that even one boy would ask you to dance."

She barely heard his words. "But Jimmy...I mean Jasmine, it wasn't him that I wanted to be there with. I wanted *you* to be with me tonight."

He smiled. "Not likely," he said. "Especially the way I'm dressed now."

"Yeah," she said as a curious expression crossed her face. "What are you wearing?"

"Oh this?" he said as he pulled at the way too big coveralls. "My Dad gave me this to protect my clothes when I'm working out here."

"So what are you wearing under it?"

Jasmine looked around. "I guess I'm done now for the night anyway." He started removing the coveralls, revealing one of the colorful outfits his sister had laid out for him. Once the rain boots were back on his feet. He picked up a couple of rings from the workbench and slipped them back on his fingers.

"You look real nice tonight too," Olivia told him. "Really nice."

“Not like you!” Jasmine replied with a big smile.

She looked at him again, looking so much like a *her*, yet what she still saw was the boy underneath. She heard the country song on the radio change to one of her favorites. A slow one. “Will you dance with me?” she asked.

“Me?”

“Of course you! Turn the music up a little.”

The music grew a bit louder, and the two of them stood in front of each other for a moment, neither one of them knowing quite where to start. Olivia held her arms up, and Jasmine awkwardly moved forward and put his arms around her. The two of them loosely held each other like that as they slowly did nothing more than rock back and forth together, looking into each other’s eyes through the whole song. It was the only dance all night that really meant anything at all to Olivia.

Chapter 33 - Cleopatra

February 16th – 18th

There was no school on Monday, something Jasmine was eternally grateful for. He hadn't shown up to school yet as his sister – *with* the new hairdo, but all the kids had already seen his hair now since he had been there as himself that way, as a boy. So how much worse could it be when he showed up as a girl with his hair now? He figured it probably wouldn't be any worse at all. Except that he was sure someone would try to complement the way he looked. Was that any reason to start a fight? No, he supposed not. How was he supposed to handle it though if anyone did complement the way his hair looked? He put that thought out of his mind. Being complimented as a girl wasn't exactly the kind of thing he really wanted to hear, let alone think about.

He finished the long run of stitches he was working on and pulled the material out from the sewing machine, cutting the thread on the machine's built-in blade. He examined his work. Perfect! As far as he could see. Once again he was doing more of the work for his sister's stupid fashion show than she was. Although for once, he knew that this was something she would much rather be doing herself. In fact, she'd much rather that he didn't touch the work at all. It was only their mother that was making him do it.

Where he loved his tools and fixing things, his sister loved making clothes and designing outfits, including the colorful outfit he was wearing just then. In his opinion, a totally weird outfit! Okay, for his sister, maybe not so weird. But as far as he was concerned, it was too many wild colors all stuck together. Personally, he didn't care for the outfit she had put together for him at all, and that was on top of the fact that it was her clothes that he had to wear.

Since it was Monday and no school, he had planned on spending the day sliding down the hill with the other girls again, but instead he was stuck in the house all day. And instead of being

allowed to wear pants for the day while he was outside in the snow, since he was in the house, he was once again in one of his sister's skirts. He wasn't out playing with the others, because once again his legs were tied together at the knees. Ugh! And he hadn't even done anything wrong that day. His mother had noticed him sitting all wrong at church the day before. But he had relaxed his legs only because the sermon had been so long. And since Reverend Cosinger had again kept pointing his finger at him, he had started to become more than a bit perturbed over it. He had been thinking more about the Reverend than his darn legs. So consequently, the minute they got home from church, his mother had bound his knees together again – for the next two days. And since she was determined to keep his legs like that, then he wasn't allowed to go out and play in the snow. He had to stay inside and practice "sitting" while everyone else was outside playing in the snow. Total bummer! But with nothing better to do, at least his sister's school project was getting done.

He heard the phone ring and his mother answering it. He put it out of his mind as she continued to talk a while. And then she came in to see him. "How's it going Jas?" she asked.

"Pretty good, I think," he replied, careful to sit up straighter now that she was in the kitchen again, since she had been after him to do that too.

"That was Grandma on the phone," she said. "If I untie your legs, do you think you can behave like a lady long enough to go up to her house and help Ashley for a little while?"

Untie his legs? "Sure!" he replied quickly. "What's Ashly doing?"

"The same as usual," Susan replied. "She goes up there a few times a week to help Grandma clean and stuff. I figured I'd go up for a cup of coffee. And since you're not doing much, I thought I'd see if you were interested in going up to help."

"Why not?" he replied. "Anything to be able to walk again!"

"Okay," Susan replied with a small smile as she reached down and untied the bow holding the tan belt tied together. "But I'll stuff this in my purse just in case!"

Jasmine only rolled his eyes.

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“Holy cow!” Ashley exclaimed the moment she got a look at the outfit that Jasmine was wearing. “That’s some outfit!”

Jasmine did one of his usual eye rollings. “Personally, I don’t like it much at all,” he said. “I get dizzy if I look at all the colors and patterns in the mirror.”

“Why did you wear it then?”

“My sister put it out for me. She’s been putting together all my outfits lately, including jewelry and everything else.”

Ashley shook her head. “Your sister usually puts together great outfits. Colorful, but pretty great. I think she missed with that one.”

“That’s my opinion too,” Jasmine replied. “Now, how can I help,” he asked. “And I hope it’s not something where I have to sit down.” Ten minutes later, Jasmine started with the vacuum cleaner in Jacob’s office, with the purpose of doing all the rugs downstairs, and then the entire second floor. As long as he didn’t have to sit down, he would be perfectly happy.

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Susan and her mother-in-law sat at the table drinking coffee when Ashley came back into the kitchen. “I think that’s it, Grandma. The dusting is done and the rest looks pretty good. Would you like me to get the laundry started?”

“No thank you dear,” Rose replied. “I’ll get it myself later. How’s Jasmine doing?”

“I think he’s almost done with the downstairs bedrooms, and then he said he would do upstairs too.”

“I don’t think the upstairs needs it so much,” Rose replied. “Why don’t you tell him not to bother.”

Susan put her hand out on Rose’s arm. “I think he wants to do it so he can avoid sitting down.”

Rose looked shocked. “Avoid sitting? Did you beat him or something?”

Susan smiled. “Not exactly. Since he can’t seem to get it into his head that he needs to be careful about the way he sits when he’s

wearing skirts, then I've taken to tying his knees together to try to get the point across. And I'm afraid I got more than a bit perturbed with him yesterday about it and told him he'd be spending all day today with his legs like that too."

"Oh my!" Rose exclaimed. "Is it necessary to do something like that?"

Susan shrugged. "I can't seem to get through to him any other way. He's completely not interested in any of the finer points of femininity."

"I see," Rose replied as Ashley stifled a bit of a laugh. "Ashley dear, why don't you make yourself a cup of tea. Or there's coffee there if you'd like."

"I'll make some tea, Grandma," Ashley replied as the kitchen door opened and Jacob walked in. "Hi Grandpa," Ashley called.

Jacob simply walked over and gave her a bit of a hug. He grabbed a coffee mug and filled it from the coffee pot. Then he pulled a glass jar out of one of the upper cabinets and poured a tiny bit of the clear liquid into his coffee before putting the jar back in the cupboard. "What's the news?" he asked as he turned around and leaned against the counter.

"What kind of news?" Rose asked.

"Any news!" He turned towards Ashley who was pulling a tea bag out of a canister on the counter. "What's happening with the twins? I haven't asked *you* about them in a while now."

"Well," Ashley replied, "Jasmine is back vacuuming the downstairs bedrooms right now, and then he's planning on moving upstairs."

"He's here? Vacuuming the rugs?"

"Right now," Ashley confirmed.

"How come?"

It was Rose that replied though. "Susan came up for a cup of coffee and brought him with her to help Ashley for a bit."

Jacob nodded. "How come he's not out on the hill with the rest of the kids? I think they're all out there today. The hill's packed with them. Why aren't you there either for that matter?" he asked Ashley.

"I was out there earlier, Grandpa," Ashley told him. "I've had enough for today."

"So you come here to work instead?"

"Something like that, Grandpa," she replied with a small smile.

"Remind me to give you a kiss before you leave today," he told her. Then he leaned over with a smile and kissed her cheek anyway. "So what else is new with Jimmy and Jasmine?"

Susan was very surprised that Jacob would be asking Ashley about her kids. She found herself listening very closely, daring not make even a sound.

"Well," Ashley said, "I guess you heard about Jasmine's haircut and Jimmy's trip to the beauty parlor."

"I saw Jimmy, or I guess it was supposed to be Jasmine, yesterday at church. He turned to Susan. "I didn't realize he had that much hair!"

"It's the curls," Susan told him. "It makes the hairstyle look fuller."

"How the heck does he change it when he gets to be a boy?"

"He doesn't," she replied. "It's not long enough to do anything else with and it's too long for any other hairstyle. Besides, I think it looks pretty."

Jacob shook his head. "Poor kid. What do the kids at school say about it? His sister too for that matter?"

Ashley shrugged as she worked with her tea. "Mostly, they were all just really surprised at first. Other than that, it doesn't seem to be that much of a problem. Of course, they're spending two days a week at school as the other person now, so it's only Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday that they seem out of place. But I keep hearing kids say that they might as well start coming as each other and stay that way permanently, because Jimmy is looking more like a girl now than a boy, and Jasmine is starting to look more like a boy than a girl, at least when she has to be Jimmy. Of course, Jas can totally look like a girl again still, even with that boy's haircut she has. But I can tell you that she's having to do a lot more work to keep looking like herself. Jimmy though has the bigger problem."

"So the kids aren't giving them any trouble about it?"

"Not as far as I can see. Jas never really had any problem at all, but Jimmy, well, he goes around with this really mean look on his face all the time like he's ready to start swinging at anyone if they

even look at him wrong. But by this time, I don't think he needs the attitude anymore. And it's more than a bit disturbing, trust me!"

Jacob grunted. "That boy may not want to hunt, but I'd still bet he's got more sand in him than most! "So nobody gives them any problems?" Jacob asked.

"Not unless you count Jasmine giving Jimmy problems."

"Is that girl still trying to spread those rumors about him being a sissy again?"

"Um...I think so," Ashley replied. "Actually, I think she keeps trying, but nobody believes or even listens to her anymore. They all see the way Jasmine, I mean Jimmy, goes around with the angry look all the time, and of course Tommy has pretty much told them all that Jimmy isn't really a sissy. So I don't think anyone is really listening to Jas about it anymore. Or maybe they don't care. I don't really know." Her face suddenly lit up. "But you should have seen what she did to his locker this week!"

"To his locker?"

"Yeah!" Ashley replied laughingly. "She decorated the whole thing in about as girly a fashion as you could ever imagine! And trust me, I saw it. It was really beautiful! Any girl would have been thrilled with it. Me included!"

"But I take it he wasn't?"

"Not by a long shot. He was pretty much furious. And I understand she glued everything to the locker to make it all nearly impossible to remove, so it's all still there now."

"So Jasmine is still causing him trouble then," Jacob replied. "If not one way, then another."

Ashley nodded as she took a sip of her hot tea. "Pretty much," she replied.

"And it doesn't look like Jasmine is ready yet to give up on the hunting either?" Jacob asked.

"Not as far as I can see. But I can tell you this, I think it was really close there for a while when her friends weren't talking to her."

"You told me about that last time," he said to her. "But I take it they're all back together again?"

"Just like before, only now they're trying to keep Jimmy in with them too. At least to some degree. I know he hangs with them, but

I'm not sure how really interested he is in everything they do."

"That figures!" Jacob muttered.

The phone rang and Rose got up to answer it. While she was on the phone Jasmine came into the room. Jacob's eyes nearly fell out of his head looking at all the bright colors he was wearing.

"I'm done with the downstairs," he announced. "I think Ash said there's another vacuum upstairs I can use instead of lugging that one up the steps."

"It's in the hallway closet," Ashley told him.

"Don't bother with the upstairs, dear," Rose said as she came back to the table. "It doesn't need it yet."

Jasmine wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. He didn't want to have to practice sitting down again.

"That was Jane on the phone," Rose said. "She was looking to borrow my old sewing machine for Olivia to use for her school stuff."

"Need me to haul it down there?" Jacob asked.

"No dear. I'm afraid it's not working anymore."

"What's wrong with it?"

"I don't know. It just isn't working."

"Want me to try to fix it?" Jasmine asked hopefully.

"I don't know that you can," Rose apologized.

But Jasmine wasn't interested in just sitting at the table – like a lady – with nothing to do. "Can I at least try?" he asked. "If it's broken, I can't really hurt it much, and maybe I can even get it working again."

Rose looked at him skeptically. "I don't really care," she told him. "If you're that interested, it's in the upstairs back bedroom. You can play with it all you want."

"Thanks!" he replied as he turned quickly and ran for the stairs.

Jacob shook his head. "Pardon me for saying it, but his fashion sense could use a bit of work! Damn! You could pass out from just looking at all those colors together!"

Susan laughed. "Actually, his sister put the outfit together for him. She's been doing all his outfits lately. Most of the time they look really good. That one...doesn't!"

"Maybe he ought to figure out what he wants to wear for himself instead," Jacob suggested.

“Trust me,” Susan replied. “What he has on now is preferable to that! His own sense of fashion is worse than horrible!”

Jacob shook his head. “I think I’ll just peek in on what he’s doing with that machine up there.”

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Jasmine was sitting, leaning over the old sewing machine, trying to see what he could on it before he did anything else. He heard someone come into the room and he immediately sat up straight and pulled his knees together as he turned around. “Oh, hi Grandpa,” he said as he turned back to the sewing machine, careful about the way he was sitting.

“I just came to see if you could find anything wrong with it,” Jacob told him as he stood behind him and sipped at his coffee.

“I haven’t really done anything with it yet,” Jasmine told him. He moved the hand wheel on the top of the machine and watched the needle go up and down. “Wow,” he said. “That’s really stiff.”

“Is it supposed to be stiff?” Jacob asked.

“Not like that,” Jasmine replied. “It should move a lot easier. I think anyway. At least our machine does.”

“And you’re familiar with these machines?”

“More than I’d like to be,” Jasmine replied. “It’s kind of all part of the stuff I have to do when I’m Jasmine.”

“I understand,” Jacob said.

Jasmine opened the drawer in the sewing table the machine had been set on. He looked around and found a small screw driver. There were needles, thread, and a number of other things in the drawer too. He checked the bigger drawer under it and pulled out several old pieces of material that he was guessing were all scraps. He checked the machine. It appeared to be threaded correctly. He switched the machine on and his foot found the switch on the floor to make it work. He could hear the machine trying to do something, then it just sat there and buzzed. He took his foot off the switch and turned the power off on the machine.

“Broken!” Jacob told him. “May as well throw the damn thing out and get a new one.”

"I hope not," Jimmy replied. "Let me see what I can find."

"Why bother?"

"I don't know. I guess because I just like working with stuff." He found the small screw driver in the top drawer again and located the screws holding the bottom of the machine together. Then he found more screws in other parts of the casing and removed them. By the time he was done, he had removed much of the housing on the entire machine. He moved various parts, fascinated in the way the machinery was put together and how it all worked. But something seemed odd. "Hmm," he mused. "I wonder."

"What?" Jacob asked as he finished the last of his coffee."

Jasmine went back to the small top drawer and searched through it. In the very back, he found a small tube of sewing machine oil. He pulled it out and held it up for his grandfather to see. "May as well try it," he said. He turned back to the machine, and one by one, oiled every part that he thought might need it. He moved the wheel on the machine with his hand, and gradually, the thing started moving easier and easier. When he was done, he tediously put the pieces to the case back together again. Then he turned it on and tried it. This time, there was no odd buzzing sound. This time, the machine worked perfectly.

"That's all it was," Jasmine told his grandfather. "It just needed a little oil."

"Looked like it needed more than a little," Jacob told him. "So that there machine is all fixed now?" he asked.

"As far as I can see," Jasmine told him.

Jacob nodded. "Nice work, son...or girl...or...oh hell, you know what I mean!"

Jasmine laughed. "Yeah. Sometimes, even I don't know what I am."

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"He fixed it!" Jacob told the women proudly as they walked back into the kitchen.

"He did?" Rose asked, completely surprised.

"All it needed was a good lube job," Jasmine told her.

"It was good work, no matter what was wrong with it," Jacob told him. "Good work!"

Jasmine felt real proud, especially hearing it from his Grandpa.

"Well," Rose said happily, "I guess I better call Jane back and tell her she can have the machine after all."

Ten minutes later, Susan and Jasmine had left, dropping Ashley off at home along the way. As soon as they got home though, Susan tied Jasmine's legs together again. Jasmine wanted to go back to Grandma's house to vacuum the upstairs rugs instead. He didn't get his wish.

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Jacob poured himself a fresh cup of coffee and sat down next to his wife. "The boy done good on that sewing machine up there," he told her. "Real good. Took the whole damn thing apart, figured out the problem, fixed it, and then put the whole thing back together again like it was nothin'.

"We've heard a few times now that he likes doing things like that," Rose replied.

"Yeah, well it's one thing to hear it from someone else, and another thing to stand there and watch him. He keeps on like he is, that boy could be real useful in the future."

"That's nice," Rose replied, only half listening to him. While Jacob was more fixated on Jimmy, the real Jimmy, she had something else in mind altogether. She had come away from the little family visit with three things that day. Her house cleaned, her sewing machine fixed, and the knowledge that Jasmine, the real Jasmine, still hadn't found her feminine compassion yet.

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One pencil, one pen, his key ring attached to a doll, his lunch money, *and* a hair brush, *and* some pale pink lipstick. They were the contents of his pink purse as Jasmine left for school on Tuesday, trudging through another layer of snow that had fallen the night before. The snow was starting to get deeper than he could

remember. With just those few things in his purse, it was starting to get pretty full. His biggest problem there was the stupid doll, and now the hairbrush as well. Both of them were too big. As far as the stupid doll was concerned, he had to wonder why anyone would ever attach something like that to a keyring. It was too big! As far as he was concerned.

Thanks to the day off on Monday, this would be the first day that he had to show up at school, as his sister, with his new hairdo that he still wasn't used to yet. And he was guessing that it was because of his new hairdo that his mother had spent more time than usual on his appearance that morning. Either that or the fact that the outfit his sister had put together for him the day before had been so awful. Maybe because of both. But his mother had been there in his room for way too long that morning.

She had deemed the outfit his sister had put together for him as colorful, and actually quite nice. Lucky him! He wondered if he could bribe his sister to include pants with some of the outfits. He was betting his mother would probably be against the idea though.

Once all the jewelry had been added, his mother had sat him down and made him do his own blusher and lipstick, before going back and redoing them herself, and adding a little bit of eyeshadow as well. Ugh! Awful! Why add so much more. And then his mother had handed him the lipstick to put in his purse with the instructions that he would probably want to freshen it up a few times during the day. Not likely! But he had dropped the lipstick in his purse as she had suggested. At least it was small.

And then she started in on his hair. Arrrggghhh! She had said the week before that the purpose of all the curls that were permanently put into his head, was so that he wouldn't have to do hardly anything with it to take care of it. And then she had started brushing it and brushing it, then sectioning off different parts of it to see how it would look, then tying one of them off to the side with a bright blue ribbon, and then she had attacked his head with the brush once more. It was maddening! And then she had handed him the brush, telling him to put that in his purse too. He nearly screamed. Why have so much junk in his purse that he had no intention at all of ever using? It was bad enough that he had to carry

the stupid thing just to hold just the one pencil and one pen that he really needed!

And when she was all done with him, his mother had gone on and on about how “pretty” he was. Ugh! She had no idea at all how little he could possibly care about that. Well, maybe that was wrong. He did care about it because he’d rather *not* be called “*pretty*” by anyone. It was very disturbing! And then after breakfast, she had *made* him dig the silly lipstick out from the bottom of his purse and “touch up his face.” Ugh! Why bother?

But finally she had declared him to be very pretty again, and finally he was out of the house. Now if only his stupid breasts would stop hurting. They never seemed to stop aching anymore. Double ugh!

“Jas!” Nichole exclaimed as he got down to the bus stop with the other kids, “you look great today!”

“With the way you’ve got your hair today, you look really pretty!” Allison added.

Yeah his day was still going downhill. Especially when Ashley just had to come over and agree with them. He hated it when they all teased him like that. And they were all family. He couldn’t start a fight with any of them. Which reminded him.... A moment later, his fighting mad look was back on his face.

“Jas, what the heck are you doing?” Nichole complained. “You’re ruining it!”

Yeah, getting his attitude back was the best thing he had done all day!

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Mrs. Ansley fully expected which Jasmine would show up in her classroom that day. She had seen his new hairstyle so she expected that too. But she was still unprepared for how nice and actually “pretty” Jasmine looked when he walked in. Mostly. That darn expression on his face still ruined everything. But even still, she couldn’t help but think that he still looked fairly...pretty. She was very tempted to tell him that. She was also very tempted to tell him

to wipe the bad attitude off of his face and try smiling for a change. But she left him alone about it.

She watched him sitting down. Better, mostly she figured because he had seen her watching him as he sat down, so he was being extra careful about it. At least that was an improvement. Now if she could just get that darn expression off his face.

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“Jimmy” made several valiant efforts to express to the other kids about what a sissy her brother was, especially with the way he was looking in school that day. And she went out of her way to mention the tiny bit of lipstick on his lips. But it was as if she was speaking the wrong language. Nobody seemed to care! And after lunch, while the other girls were all heading to the girl’s room in the company of her Aunt Jane, she made two more efforts to spread the rumors on her way to find her Uncle John to take her into the boy’s room. Same reaction. She might as well not have even bothered. No doubt about it, she had to get that stupid sneer off of her brother’s face! She figured that look of his had to be the whole problem with getting the other kids to believe the rumors she was trying to spread, because it was the only thing she could see. Consequently, getting the other kids to tease him was starting to get nearly impossible!

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Jasmine was comfortable enough in the girl’s room now to actually talk pleasantly with some of the other girls while he was washing his hands. He talked to his Aunt Jane too. When he was done with his hands, as he always did, he grabbed his purse, intending to go dry his hands and then wait by the door, this time for Olivia to finish.

“Jasmine,” Jane said before he could leave the sinks. “Your mother texted me this morning about something.”

Jasmine rolled his eyes. “What did I do now?” he asked, fearing that once again he would wind up with his legs tied up for the rest of

the night.

"She asked me to see if I can get you to touch up your lipstick after lunch. She said you were so pretty when you left this morning that it would be a shame to not keep up your appearance."

"She said that?"

Jane nodded. "Of course she did. And I have to agree, you look very nice today. Except for that mean look on your face. You really need to lose that attitude Jas and smile a little."

"No way!" Jasmine declared. "And I'm not interested in touching up my lipstick either!"

"Jas!" Jane cautioned him. "Be polite!"

Ugh! "Sorry, Aunt Jane. I'm just not interested."

"Jas, your mother texted me specifically about it. Now I'd rather tell her that you did it than that you outright refused!"

He rolled his eyes. "Do I have to?"

"I think it would be nice."

Ugh! Feeling like he had no choice at all in the matter, he went to a lot of trouble to find the small lipstick in the bottom of his purse, making a bigger deal out of finding it than it actually was. Under his Aunt's scrutiny, as well as all of his girlfriends, he was forced to stand there and do his best to touch up his lips in front of the bathroom mirror with several other girls looking on and giggling in the background.

"There," Jane said, sounding very happy. "That looks very nice. Now please stop frowning so much and smile. You could be so pretty!"

He did nothing more than flash her one of his silly mock smiles, which actually made her laugh, before turning and putting the scowl right back on his face. Touching up his lipstick. How...humiliating. How...totally unnecessary! Ugh!

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The switch was made again Tuesday night. And for the first time, Jimmy actually dreaded it – in a way. He was very glad to get back to being himself again, a boy, despite his girly haircut. But the part he wasn't so happy about was having to sleep in his own room

again. Not with that monstrous deer head dominating his room. The thing was so oppressively large that there was never any way to ignore it. And half the time he was afraid it would either fall off the wall and either crush him, or those monstrous antlers would impale him and possibly kill him. And that was the easy part, the part before he tried to go to sleep. It was the nightmares he had after he fell asleep that were the worst.

With only his nightlight on to see by, Jimmy tossed and turned, trying to sleep. But sleep was impossible. Not with that monster deer head looking straight down at him. It was as if all the ducks on the wall around the deer had gotten together with it, and they were all now blaming him for taking their lives, even though he had only killed three of the ducks! But of course, that was more than enough. He was a human who had killed some of them, and now since they were hanging uselessly in his room, then of course, they had to blame him. And he just knew that they were all plotting ways to get back at him for it.

Unable to take it anymore, he got up, grabbed his pillow and a blanket, and headed for the family room. The soft light coming from the one kitchen light that was always on helped him to see most of the way, but the deeper into the family room he got, the darker it got. But he knew where the couch was and he headed straight for it. Unfortunately, in the dark, he got a little too close to the coffee table, and banged his shin against it. "Shit!" he exclaimed between his clenched teeth as the pain radiated up his leg. And of course he berated himself for the noise he had made when he had yelled "shit!"

He hobbled the rest of the way to the sofa where he laid down and worked to pull the blanket over his whole body. Despite the pain in his leg that he was still suffering from, just being away from that monstrous deer filled him with relief. As the pain in his leg settled down, he tried to settle himself down into sleep as well. No deer head hanging over him. No ducks either. So nice.

And then the light came on.

"Jimmy?" Susan exclaimed as she saw her son trying to sleep on the couch. "I heard a noise and came out to see what the problem was. What are you doing on the couch?"

"Sorry Mom," Jimmy replied. "I banged my leg on the coffee table. I didn't mean to make any noise."

"But what are you doing on the couch instead of in your bed?"

"I can't sleep there!" Jimmy complained.

"Why not?"

"That darn deer head! The ducks were bad enough, but now with that deer head trying to fall down on top of me, there's no way I can sleep there."

"Fall down on top of you..."

"What's the problem?" Clint asked as he wandered sleepily out into the family room as well.

"Jimmy is afraid that deer head is going to fall on top of him."

Clint shook his head. "Jimmy, trust me, there's no way that deer can fall down. No way! I put it up there real well, and I took every extra precaution just because the thing is was so big. So you don't have to worry about it. Besides, the wall it's on is on the other side of the room. It can't fall on you."

"I know," Jimmy replied, "but it doesn't help. I just can't sleep with that thing up there."

"Jimmy," Susan said, somewhat exasperated with her son. "Get up and go back to your room. You can't sleep here. Now go!"

Jimmy rolled his eyes and got up from the couch. Susan grabbed his pillow and Clint grabbed his blanket. The three of them headed back to his bedroom.

"See," Clint said as they walked in, "it's still there, and it's going to stay up there. There's no way that thing can fall – ever! So don't worry about it."

Jimmy again rolled his eyes as he laid down on his bed. His father threw the blanket over him and his mother stuffed his pillow under his head and kissed him goodnight again.

"Now just close your eyes and ignore the deer and the ducks, and anything else that you think may be bothering you. Ignore them all and just go to sleep! Nothing here is going to hurt you."

But Jimmy knew better, and he knew that neither his mother nor father would understand.

"What's going on?" Jasmine's voice asked from the doorway to his room.

“Nothing,” Susan told her. “Just go back to sleep.”

But before leaving, Jasmine peeked around her mother at her brother. And then her eyes went up to the deer head on the wall facing him. She smiled as she turned around and went back to her room.

As the house gradually quieted down again, Jasmine laid in her bed thinking. Back when her father had brought home the duck she had shot, she had known that her crazy brother would be just as afraid of it as he was the rest of the ducks on his wall. And she was very sure that the deer head would be twice as bad for him. Evidently, she had been right. It was the only reason she had insisted that they be hung in his room instead of hers.

But now that she knew that they did indeed bother her screwy brother so much, she figured there had to be some way she could use that to her advantage. The only question was...how? Her idiot brother was afraid of the dark, afraid of the dead ducks, and of course he was afraid of that deer. She had been afraid of things at night once, a long time ago. But she had gotten over it. Her brother hadn't. If anything, her dumb brother was worse about it all now more than ever!

But Jasmine remembered that she had help getting over the fear. And of course, if it worked for her, she had no doubt it would work for her sissy brother as well. So the only question was, if she helped him, what did she want in return? One big thing of course immediately came to mind. But if she was going to go to the trouble of helping him, she was going to need more out of him than that!

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Jimmy tried to sleep, but it was impossible. There was just this huge oppressive feeling in his room now because of that big deer head. And even though he kept his eyes closed, all his mind could picture was that deer and those ducks wanting to get back at him for killing them and turning them into wall ornaments. And they were furious at him for it. So despite his exhaustion, sleep for Jimmy was impossible.

The very soft knocking on his bedroom door actually jolted him. Before he could react, he saw his bedroom door opening.

"Jimmy?" Jasmine whispered. "Are you awake?"

"Not because I want to be," Jimmy whispered back.

Jasmine giggled and came into his room, closing the door behind her. She switched on his overhead light and blinked at the sudden brightness.

"What are you doing?" Jimmy asked, moving up in the bed to a sitting position.

Jasmine had to stifle the giggle that nearly escaped her lips. "You're afraid of the deer, aren't you?" she asked. "Too afraid of it to go to sleep."

Jimmy rolled his eyes, slunk down in his bed again and rolled over away from her. "Go away."

This time the small giggle did get past Jasmine's lips. She sat on the edge of his bed. "I used to be afraid of the dark too," she said. "But that was a long time ago now."

"What of it?" Jimmy replied without bothering to turn back towards her.

"So I got over it," Jasmine told him.

Even turned away from her with his head half buried in his blankets, Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Good for you. Now go away."

"But Jimmy, if I could get over it, then I know you can."

"Please get lost!"

Jasmine ignored him. "But I had help getting over being afraid of the dark," she told him.

"Whoopee," Jimmy's dull voice came back.

"And I can give that same help to you. I know it will work. Trust me. I know it will!"

Jimmy finally turned over so he was facing her. "What will work?"

"How to get over being afraid of the dark."

"I'm not afraid of the dark. It's everything that's in the dark that's the problem."

Jasmine giggled again. "Same thing. But trust me, it will work."

"What will?"

"Are you sure you want to try it?" Jasmine asked mischievously.

“Try what? You haven’t told me what it is yet?”

“And I’m not going to until you agree to do some things for me.”

Jimmy stared at her with his mouth open for a moment. “No! I’ve had more than enough problems from you. Now go away!” He rolled over again away from her.

“Are you sure you don’t ever want to be able to go to sleep again?” Jasmine asked. “Are you sure you want to suffer, night after night, with not being able to relax and go to sleep? And how about the ducks and the deer? You know they’re going to find some way to get down off that wall and get you. You know they will! They’re up there looking at you, just waiting for you to go to sleep so they can come down and get you.”

Jimmy rolled over again quickly. “Get lost!” he exclaimed. “You’re making it worse!”

Jasmine giggled again as she got up off his bed. “Just remember, I can help. I have something that I know will definitely take care of your problem for you.” With a sly smile, she headed slowly for his door. She put her hand on the doorknob and paused. “Last chance,” she said.

“Go away!”

With a smile, Jasmine opened the door and walked out.

“Jas...”

She stopped and turned around.

“What is it?” he asked. “What can help?”

She walked back into the room and closed his door again. “I told you, not until you agree to do some things for me.” His eye rolling was totally expected.

“Like what?”

Jasmine giggled again and went back to sit on the edge of his bed. “First of all,” she said, “whenever you’re being me, you’ve got to start smiling all the time instead of that mean look you’ve always got.”

Jimmy rolled over again. “Forget it!” He pulled the covers over his head.

Jasmine let out a very obvious sigh as she got off his bed. “I guess no more sleep for you...ever.”

Ugh! “Anything else?” the voice under the covers asked.

Jasmine giggled and sat on his bed again. "From now on, you can't deny that you're a sissy. If anyone asks, you've got to admit that you really are a big sissy girl." She paused a moment. "Heck, it's so obvious anyway with all the things you're afraid of, not to mention how girly you're starting to look, that you might as well just come out and admit it anyway."

"Bullshit!" the muffled voice under the covers exclaimed.

Jasmine shook her head and got up from the side of his bed. She took two steps toward his bedroom door when she heard him say. "Is that it? Anything else?"

Once again she went back to sitting on his bed. "Those are the main things," she told him, "but there's a couple of other little things too."

He pulled the covers off his head and rolled over again. "Now what?" he asked.

"I need some help," she told him.

"You? With what?"

"My designing."

"Your designing? You mean the clothes and stuff?"

"Yes! I need help."

He shook his head. "But everyone keeps talking about how good you are. How can you possibly need help?"

"I do, trust me."

He shook his head again. "So how can I help? Because you know I'm no good at anything like that at all!"

"Doesn't matter," she replied. "With what I need, you'll be perfect."

"And what's that?"

"I need you to model some clothes for me once in a while. Whenever I need in fact. Even when you're still a boy."

"Just model some clothes? What for?"

"So I can get a better idea of how things might look."

He thought about that for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I can do that much. As long as you don't need me to go around all the time dressed as you!"

She smiled. "No, just when I need help for my designs."

He nodded. "I guess that much I can do for you, even if I don't agree to do the rest."

She was surprised. "Really?"

"Really."

She stared at him for a moment. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

"You're welcome. Now how can I get some sleep?"

She shook her head. "There's just one more thing I want you to do."

He rolled his eyes again and flopped back onto the bed. "What now?"

"All my dolls." She said.

"What about them?"

"I want you to spend some time with me learning about some of them."

He sat up again. "Huh? What are you talking about? They're just dolls. What's to learn?"

The frustrated smirk on Jasmine's face was very evident. "And that," she said, "is why you need to learn about them." She watched yet another major eye rolling from him as he fell back on his bed again.

"Anything else?" Jimmy asked.

"No, that's it," Jasmine replied.

"Go away!" Jimmy told her. "It's all stupid and I'm not doing it."

Jasmine was surprised that he didn't agree. She was also very disappointed. "Suit yourself," she told him as she once again headed for his door. She stopped halfway and turned back to him. "You're still going to model for me once in a while though?"

"Yeah," his frustrated voice replied. "I'll do that."

"Thanks," she said sincerely. "I really appreciate that."

"You're welcome. Now let me get some sleep."

She laughed a little. "Good luck with that!" Once again she opened his door and walked out.

"Jas..."

Again she stopped and turned back to him. But he didn't say anything more. He just laid on his bed staring up at the ceiling. Instead of leaving, she turned and walked back into his room and

closed the door again. But she stood there next to the door... waiting.

"I just need to smile?" he finally asked.

"And admit you're a sissy," she replied.

"And the stupid dolls," he added.

"They're not stupid! And you need to know that. And I need you to model for me."

He said nothing. He didn't even turn his head. He only stared up at his ceiling.

"What's it going to be?" she finally asked. Even from where she was, she noticed his crazy eye rolling again. But it was another few moments before he answered.

"I guess it depends," he finally replied.

"On what?"

"On if it works."

"It will," she said confidently, the sly smile returning to her face. "I know it will!"

"Okay," he finally agreed. "So what will help?"

She nearly giggled. "You've got to promise that you'll do all that for me," she insisted.

His eyes were certainly getting a lot of exercise as they again rolled around. "Okay," he finally replied, his frustration clearly evident. "I promise! Now what's going to help me sleep?"

She didn't even try to stifle the giggle that came out. "I'll be right back," she said excitedly. She ran to his door and opened it, leaned down and picked up something from the hallway where she had left it earlier, and came right back into his room. "This!" she exclaimed happily.

Jimmy sat up on his bed to see what she was holding. He blinked as he stared at it in total disbelief. His sister was crazy! She had lost her marbles! Completely! In her hands was her large stuffed lion. One of the many stuffed animals she had in her room. "Jas, that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard of. That's not going to help me at all."

"Yes it will," Jasmine replied laughingly. "Trust me, I know it will."

"How?"

She came over and put the large stuffed lion in his lap. "That's Cleo," she said. "Um...short for Cleopatra."

"Cleopatra? But it's a male lion! It's got a big mane all around its head."

"Doesn't matter!" Jasmine said sternly. "It can be a girl lion if I say it is, and I say *her* name is Cleopatra!"

If Jimmy rolled his eyes much more, they would probably fall out of his head. "And how is...Cleo...supposed to help me get any sleep?"

Jasmine was actually surprised by the question. "Everyone knows that lions are the king of the jungle. Nothing bothers them. Cleo will protect you all night long so you don't have to worry about anything."

Once again Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Jas, you've lost it. You're crazy."

"No I'm not. Trust me. It'll work."

"Jas, it's a stuffed animal!"

"And the ducks and the deer are stuffed too!" Jasmine replied. "And for a lion, a duck is nothing more than a tasty snack. And they eat deer for breakfast, lunch, and dinner! All the other animals are afraid of lions, so nothing will bother you. As long as you keep Cleo in bed with you when you sleep, you don't have to worry about anything, because she'll protect you."

"That's the dumbest thing I ever heard."

"Try it," she insisted. "I promise it will work. Cleo will protect you, and you'll be able to sleep with no problem at all."

"Yeah right," he replied with yet another rolling of his eyes.

"Do it!" she said as she backed away from him toward the door. "Try it. You'll see." With a sly smile, she quickly turned and opened his door. This time she switched off his overhead light before leaving. "Night...sis," she giggled before closing his bedroom door.

Jimmy sat on his bed with the large stuffed lion in his lap. How totally stupid! With nothing better to do, he laid down again, not bothering to throw the lion off the bed. Cleo! Cleopatra! And it was a male lion! His sister was screwy.

With the weight of the stuffed lion still resting on top of him, he closed his eyes and did his best to go to sleep. Between his pure

exhaustion and the dreams he had of a lion chasing all the dangers away from him, he finally managed to drop into a deep sleep. Cleo. How stupid.

Chapter 34 - Growing Shopping

February 19th – 21st

The high-pitched scream coming from one of the bedrooms brought Susan quickly out of the kitchen where she had been making breakfast. She saw Jimmy briefly poking his head out his bedroom door to see what was going on. Susan knew immediately that he hadn't been the one to scream. The door to the bathroom was closed and the door to Tommy's room was open, so Tommy was in the bathroom, but she knew from the start that Tommy hadn't screamed. She had only one child capable of screaming like that, even though the scream hadn't sounded all that much like her child used to scream. The door to Jasmine's room was closed, but Susan hurried in anyway. Her daughter was standing, mostly naked, in front of her closet.

"Mom!" Jasmine exclaimed in surprise, suddenly seeing her mother standing there.

"What's wrong?" Susan asked immediately, going all the way in and closing the door behind her. Jasmine's room was a mess, and there was a pile of clothes thrown on her bed.

"Argh!" Jasmine grunted in frustration. "I tried on four different tops already, and none of them fit! And they're all some of my favorites! What the heck did he do to them when he washed them? Because they've all shrunk!"

Susan glanced at the pile of clothes on the bed. "I seriously doubt they shrunk, Jas. When was the last time you wore them?"

"I don't know. I don't get to wear my clothes as much as I used to."

"Jas, you're probably growing again. That's all. Find something a little looser in your closet instead."

"Argh!" Jasmine grunted again as she went back to searching her fairly vast wardrobe for something different.

While her daughter was searching through her closet, Susan stared at her back. With just her bra and panties on, Susan had a pretty good view of her daughter's body. She hadn't missed all the tissues Jasmine had stuck in the front of her bra to fill it out, but now, staring at her back, it was other changes she couldn't help but notice. Her daughter's back and shoulders weren't looking nearly so small and feminine anymore. In fact, her body was starting to look more like Tommy's body when he had started to fill out. It was a very troubling and disconcerting thought. Her daughter's body was beginning to fill out to look more like a boy. Yes, no doubt her daughter was still growing, but she was also sure that the hormones were the main reason why her daughter's tops didn't fit anymore.

She stayed long enough to watch her daughter slip a very loose flowing top over her body. A top that was loose enough to probably fit any sized body.

"Mom," Jasmine said as she pulled on the top, straightening it a bit. "If I'm growing again, then I'm going to have to go shopping for more clothes."

Susan shook her head a little. "No doubt, Jas. It's been a while since we've been shopping together anyway."

Jasmine was suddenly all smiles. "Yeah. It's been a really long time. Way too long. I can't wait! Can we go today?"

Susan shook her head, "I promised to close up the office today, so it will have to wait a day or two." She smiled. "But I am looking forward to shopping with you again."

"Me too!" Jasmine replied. "I really do miss it."

"Then quit this stupid hunting business," Susan urged. "That's the only thing that's keeping us from shopping together like we used to. And trust me, shopping with your brother isn't anything at all like the fun we had when we went together."

Susan was delighted with the smile that lit up her daughter's face, but she wasn't delighted with her reply. "Yeah, but I can just see him out shopping for dresses. Do you have him try them on when you go out with him?"

Susan shook her head. "Jas, so far, the one time we've really shopped together, all he got was that one skirt and a pair of leggings. And he didn't want to be shopping for either of them."

"That's the point," Jasmine replied. "I just know it's all making him squirm."

Susan was perturbed. "Why do you hate your brother so much?"

"I don't hate him," Jasmine replied. "I just think he's the biggest wuss on the planet."

With a disappointed sigh, Susan turned to leave.

"Mom?"

"Yeah?" Susan asked as she stopped before leaving the room.

"Can we get me some new shoes too? All the ones I've got now are getting a bit tight."

Susan said nothing to that. She just sadly left her room and closed the bedroom door behind her. Her daughter was changing, even if Jasmine refused to see the evidence of it. She was changing, but she wasn't changing in any way that Jasmine was going to like. If they didn't get her to quit hunting soon, her daughter was going to look more like her son Tommy instead of her daughter. She was already heading in that direction.

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After breakfast, just before the kids went out the door to school, Susan took the time to look more critically at all three of her kids. Yeah, Tommy was definitely growing. But she and Clint had mentioned that fact to each other many times over the last few months. At the rate he was going, he was going to be as tall as his father before long. But she spent more time looking at Jasmine and Jimmy, trying not to let them know she was studying each of them so critically. She had been watching the tiny changes in both of them for a long time now. She wondered if Jimmy's neck was now longer and thinner than Jasmine's? Or was she just imagining it. And were Jasmine's shoulders now bigger than Jimmy's? Was she imagining that too?

She knew her kids were growing, that was only natural and what she wanted, but she also knew about the other changes that were starting to show in her two twins. Troubling changes because of the hormones. Very, very troubling changes.

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It was shortly after the kids had left for school, and shortly after her husband had departed for work. Susan walked into Tommy's bedroom and made the bed. A mindless task of mere moments. It was especially mindless because the easy task got quickly done while Susan's mind was occupied with trying to figure out what she wanted to do. She had not one, but two kids that needed new clothes. Both Tommy and Jasmine needed clothes pretty badly, but Jimmy it seemed, had grown less than her other two kids in the last few months, and so far was doing just fine. Normally, shopping for clothes for her kids was something she enjoyed, especially when she could go with her daughter, her real daughter. But things weren't quite that easy anymore.

Once the kids had all gone off to school, she had kept Clint from going to work for a few minutes so she could talk to him about it. Although she had a pretty good idea that Clint already knew what she needed to talk to him about since she had questioned all three kids during breakfast as to whether they needed new shoes or not. Tommy had immediately and rather emphatically said yes, and he had meant to tell her about it before. Jasmine of course had already told her, but it was Jimmy that hemmed and hawed around a bit before he finally decided that while his boy's shoes were getting a little tighter, they really weren't that bad. And Jasmine's shoes that he now wore more often than his own shoes had always fit him tighter, but even they weren't that bad. He was fairly certain that Jasmine's shoes really fit him tighter only because of the style difference.

Once the kids were out of the house and off to school, Susan had talked with Clint about the problem. She fully expected to see the unhappy face Clint had put on about needing to spend money on clothes for both Tommy and Jasmine, despite how they had both noted for a while now that Tommy was growing again and all his clothes were getting too small. But after the initial mention of the problem, Clint had surprised her. He of course knew that Tommy needed some new and bigger clothes, and he had no doubt that

Tommy's feet were probably badly in need of some new shoes as well. And then Clint had further surprised Susan by mentioning that in the last few months he had actually been quite pleased over the fact that she had spent very little on clothes for the kids, particularly Jasmine who she usually bought way too many clothes for. So he had no doubt that all the kids needed things again. And most likely Jimmy too. So for once, he wasn't opposed to her going shopping for them. He was only opposed to her getting them all more than they might really need right now and spending too much money, particularly in Jasmine's case.

And then they had discussed the subject of birthdays coming up before too long, including Tommy's birthday shortly after the twins. But the bottom line was that the birthdays were still a little ways off, and at least two of their kids needed things now, before their birthdays came up.

And then Clint had brought up something that had taken some of the joy out of Susan's planned shopping trip. Susan would have to figure out how to handle buying both boy's *and* girl's clothes for Jasmine, because he had no doubt she would need both. In fact, she would probably need the boy's clothes more than her girl's clothes.

Susan hadn't even anticipated that Jasmine, her real daughter, might be outgrowing Jimmy's clothes now too. And since her daughter was literally spending more time now as her brother, she wouldn't need as many girl's clothes. Jasmine would need more boy's clothes instead. She really didn't want to have to take Jasmine shopping for boy's clothes at all. Unfortunately, as far as she could see, there would be no way around it.

What she was now considering, was to take Jasmine out shopping tomorrow, just herself and her daughter, just like they used to do together. Susan was quite looking forward to that. And then maybe on Saturday, when her daughter would be Jimmy instead, after she got back from working with Jed, she could take Jasmine, as Jimmy, out shopping for boy's clothes along with Tommy. That seemed like the best way for her to handle it. And the real Jimmy would be stuck with the leftovers and whatever she wound up buying

for his sister, from both the girl's departments and boy's departments.

All thoughts about shopping went out of her head when she walked into Jimmy's room to make his bed, and she had to stop and stare. What the heck was Cleo doing on Jimmy's floor? That was the last place she expected to see one of Jasmine's stuffed animals, and one of her favorite ones at that. When she was done with Jimmy's bed, she picked the stuffed lion up and carried it back to Jasmine's room where it belonged.

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Cleaning up after dinner was always business as usual for Susan and Jasmine, whichever Jasmine happened to be the girl at the time. As much as Susan had heard of those men who liked to cook dinner or clean up afterwards, as far as she knew, there wasn't a McComber man in the entire family who had ever lifted a finger in the kitchen, with the minor exception now of her own son Jimmy. But that was only when he was forced to be Jasmine instead of himself. So he didn't count. There was no use complaining or even mentioning it. Cleaning up after dinner was women's work in the McComber clan.

As she and Jasmine finished up the last of what needed to be done, Susan said to her daughter, "Jas, I need you to go through your closet now and pull out everything that absolutely won't fit you anymore. I'll be in to help you in a few minutes."

Jasmine had been through the exercise before. But cleaning all the old stuff out of her closet only meant making more room to fill it with new stuff. So as soon as she could, she ran excitedly to her room to get started.

Susan headed to Tommy's room first where he was still doing homework. "Tommy," she said as she walked in. "Time to go through all your clothes. See if you can find anything that still fits you properly." She smiled at him. "And I'm betting it won't be much. If you don't stop growing so fast, we're going to have to start sending you to school naked!" With a laugh from her oldest son, she headed

next for Jimmy's room where she found him playing a game on his computer.

"Jimmy," she said as she walked in, "are you sure you don't need any new clothes?"

Jimmy thought about it, then shrugged. "As far as I know I don't. And as far as my own boy's clothes, why bother? I don't get to wear them much anyway. So whatever you get for Jas will work just fine for me."

Susan stared at him, then nodded. "Okay," she said. She headed for his closet though and started looking through the shirts. She selected three that she knew got worn fairly often by both her twins, and carried them out toward Jasmine's room.

Jasmine looked up quickly at the sudden intrusion into her room, but mostly because she was in the process of trying on yet another top. She had already thrown five of them on her bed since they didn't fit her as well anymore. She relaxed as her mother closed the door and continued buttoning the blouse she was in the process of trying on.

"That was always such a pretty blouse on you Susan commented as she watched her daughter.

"Yeah," Jasmine agreed. "It's great." She wasn't even done buttoning it yet, but she could already feel how tight the blouse was getting in her shoulders. She sighed. "This one's getting too tight too," she complained as she started unbuttoning it again.

Susan also noted how tight the blouse was in the shoulders. With a shake of her head, she said, "Here Jas," as her daughter pulled the blouse off. "I need you to slip these on to see how they fit."

Jasmine grabbed one of Jimmy's shirts and slipped it on. "It's a little tight too," Jasmine decided.

"Turn around," Susan told her. "Let me see the back." She watched as Jasmine turned around. Yeah, there was no doubt the shirt was pulling a bit across her shoulders. Not bad, but it was indeed getting tighter than she figured it should be. The shirt would still be wearable for a while, but at the rate Jasmine seemed to be changing now, it wouldn't be wearable for long. She had Jasmine try

on the other two boy's shirts she had brought with her. One of those she deemed okay, but the other one was also too tight.

As Jasmine went back to trying on literally every top in her closet, Susan grabbed all three of the boy's shirts she had brought in with her, and then searched through the discarded "too small" tops on the bed and chose three of them. Then she brought them all back to Jimmy's room.

"Okay, Jimmy," she said. "Your turn. "I need you to try on some of these tops for me."

Jimmy rolled his eyes. What a bother. But he quickly finished up with his game and turned it off. Then he pulled the sweatshirt he was wearing over his head to remove it.

Susan watched her son closely as he started to undress. The sweatshirt was certainly no problem. It was more than big enough for him. But once the sweatshirt was off, she looked closely at the way the flannel shirt he was wearing fit him. And what she thought she was seeing looked fairly troubling. Yes, there was no doubt that the shirt was big enough for him, but that wasn't the problem. As he pulled the shirt off, his arms stretched wide in the process and she had no doubt at all what she was seeing under his t-shirt.

"Jimmy," she started, "is there any chance you're wearing a bra under your t-shirt today?" She asked, but she was already pretty sure she knew the answer to that one.

Jimmy felt his face blushing. "No, not today," he replied. "I usually only wear them once in a while at night when things get too bad. And I'm trying not to do that too much either. I have to wear the darn things more than enough now when I have to be Jasmine."

Susan nodded. She understood his reasoning. "So your... breasts aren't bothering you as much anymore?"

Jimmy grabbed the first blouse to start putting on. "Bothering me?" he asked, as if he was shocked. "They never stop hurting anymore. They're either really sore, or they simply ache all the time! I can't tell you how much I just want to scream sometimes."

"Jimmy," Susan said quickly. "Don't put that blouse on over top of your t-shirt. Take the t-shirt off first."

Jimmy wasn't exactly happy hearing that. He put the blouse down on his bed, and with his back to his mother, and after waiting a

moment, he grabbed the bottom of his t-shirt and quickly pulled it off. With his back still to his mother, he quickly grabbed the blouse to put it on. But he didn't get far before he felt his mother grabbing his shoulders and turning him around.

"Let me see," Susan told him as she turned Jimmy around so she could see his front side. Obviously Jimmy was embarrassed. Obviously he was reluctant. But he stood there staring at the floor while she looked down at his chest. She stared at his growing breasts for a moment, then she pulled him into her body where she held him tightly for a few moments and ran her hands through his long hair. She finally pushed back from him a bit. "Put a bra on," she said simply. "So I can see better how that blouse fits."

Susan watched as Jimmy reluctantly pulled one of his sister's bras out of his drawer. She could see how embarrassed he was as he slipped it over his shoulders and easily fastened the thing behind him. She watched even closer as he adjusted how the thing fit over top of his boobs. She closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. When she opened her eyes, Jimmy had turned around to grab the blouse again.

"Jimmy, wait." A moment later, Jimmy had turned around and Susan went over to him for a closer look at how the bra fit him. It fit him all too well. She said nothing about it though. After a moment, of looking, she said, "Okay, put that blouse on and let me see how it looks." In the end, the blouse that she had already seen was too tight in the shoulders on her real daughter, fit just fine on Jimmy. The pretty blouse that she had always liked seeing on her real daughter actually fit him very nicely. There was no missing the small bulges of his breasts under the blouse, but in Jimmy's case, those bulges were entirely due now to his real breasts, unlike his sister who was doing nothing but stuffing her bras with tissues.

It had only been a few weeks since she had last seen Jimmy's breasts. That had been when Brian had put the implants into her twins. But in those few short weeks, Jimmy's breasts had already blossomed out to fill that double 'A' cup bra he was wearing. At the rate his breasts were growing, it wouldn't be regular clothes shopping she would be doing with him, she would soon have to take him bra shopping instead, for bigger bras!

She quickly had him try on the other two blouses she had brought in with her. In each case, they fit him just fine. She had him remove the last blouse and told him he could put his own shirt back on again. She took the blouses to take back to Jasmine's room. But as she was walking out, she noted that Jimmy had left the bra on while he was pulling his t-shirt back over his head. She said nothing about it as she walked out.

She brought the blouses back into her daughter's room. The pile of things on her bed had grown quite a bit in the short time she was across the hall. "Put them all back Jas," she said as she went in and laid the three tops she was carrying on the bed with the rest of the clothes there.

"Mom? What do you mean?" Jas asked.

"Put them all back," Susan told her again. "These all fit your brother just fine. So I have no doubt he can wear everything that you've pulled out already. And right now, he's spending more time as you than you are."

Jasmine wasn't all that glad to hear it. "But Mom, I still need some things. Are we still going shopping together?"

"Of course Jas," Susan replied. Just as she had hugged Jimmy a few minutes earlier, she now pulled her daughter into her embrace. But as she ran her fingers through Jasmine's hair, she was more aware than ever of how short her daughter's hair now was. When she had been in Jimmy's room, even with just the bra on, Jimmy had looked more like a girl than her daughter did now. His longer styled hair, the tiny spots of gold on his ears from the gold studs he kept in them whenever he was home, and of course, his face was beginning to change. It was all making him look more like a girl than a boy. And in her real daughter's case, her shorter hair and all the other changes were having just the opposite effect. She was holding her daughter, but it was her daughter that was now looking more like a son, despite the way she was dressed, or half dressed as the case was.

She finally relinquished her hold. "Let me help you hang all this up again," she told Jasmine. As Susan helped her hang the clothes back in the closet, her mind was again on shopping. She would go shopping with Jasmine tomorrow. Mother and daughter shopping.

The kind both of them liked best. But she had this nagging little worry now. Would it be the last time she ever got to do that with her daughter? Her real daughter?

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"So did you sleep better last night?" Jasmine asked quietly from Jimmy's doorway just before bedtime. Both of them were ready for bed. They were just waiting for their mother to come in and wish them goodnight.

Jimmy shrugged. "I slept. Finally."

Jasmine giggled. "But Cleo helped. Didn't she?"

Jimmy shook his head. "No. I slept because I was so tired!" he insisted.

Jasmine's face clouded. "I'll bet Cleo had a lot to do with helping you though. I know she did!"

"You're crazy!" Jimmy shot back.

"And you're even crazier!" Jasmine returned. "And there's no way you can deny that. Just look at all the stupid things you're afraid of. Totally crazy!"

"Whatever," Jimmy sighed with a roll of his eyes.

"Do you want Cleo back again tonight?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Jimmy replied. "It's just a dumb stuffed animal."

"Cleo is not ridiculous!" Jasmine shot back as she now brought the stuffed lion out from behind her back and hugged it to her chest.

Jimmy just stared at her for a moment, then said, "Whatever," once again before turning away.

Jasmine was disappointed. "Well, if you want her, then you know where she'll be – in bed with me! Just come and get her." She turned and headed straight back to her room.

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A little while later, the only light in Jimmy's room was the dim nightlight that was always on. And once again Jimmy couldn't shake the feeling that the huge deer hung on his wall was somehow going

to get him and hurt him badly, if not outright kill him. And the ducks surrounding the deer wanted their revenge just as much.

Sleep was difficult if not impossible. His mind kept picturing that deer chasing him and trampling him or goring him with its antlers. And if it wasn't that, then the darn ducks were flying around him and pecking at him. And no matter where he ran, they were always faster. He had no one to protect him. No one to keep the deranged angry animals away. And later, in the brief few times he did fall asleep, those thoughts became even worse as his mind lapsed into the dreams that truly terrified him and he started dreaming of getting killed and what it would be like to actually be dead – over and over again.

He tried to put them from his mind. He tried to sleep, but it was impossible. With a sigh he finally rolled out of bed. Instead of going to his sister's room to ask for Cleo back, he decided to head for the bathroom instead. There was no way he was going to break down and ask his sister for the stupid stuffed animal to sleep with again. But as he came out of the bathroom, he found Jasmine standing in the hallway waiting for him, with Cleo already in her arms.

"Can't sleep?" Jasmine asked.

Jimmy said nothing, he just stood quietly in the hallway, glaring at her.

With a shake of her head, Jasmine suddenly reached out and grabbed the front of his pajamas and pulled him straight into his bedroom and shut the door behind them so they wouldn't be heard as easily. "Admit it!" she insisted. "You can't sleep because the silly deer head is going to somehow get you!"

"You're crazy!" Jimmy replied, but there was no conviction in his voice.

"Admit it!" she insisted again. "Admit you're the biggest wimp on the planet and you need Cleo to help you sleep!"

Jimmy just stood there, saying nothing. He briefly glanced down at Cleo, but he realized what he was doing and he quickly looked back to his sister's face again.

"Admit it!" Jasmine said again, this time more menacingly.

Jimmy shook his head and headed for his bed. "I'm going to sleep," he said instead. "Night Jas." He pulled the covers over top

of him and rolled away from her.

Jasmine was angry. "You know where Cleo is if you want her," she finally told him. She left him and went back to her own room where she threw Cleo into his usual place on the floor on top of several other stuffed animals she had there. She turned out the light by her bedside and closed her eyes. Sleep didn't come quickly. She was too perturbed over her stupid wuss of a brother.

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A small noise, and then the whispered word, "Jas," literally startled her out of the sleep she had just fallen into.

"Jas?" Jimmy whispered again from her doorway.

Jasmine quickly found her bedside light and switched it on. "Jimmy. What do you want?"

"Um...is there any chance. Um..."

"You want Cleo," Jasmine stated for him.

"Um...maybe," Jimmy replied reluctantly.

Jasmine rolled out of bed and found the stuffed lion where she had thrown it. She carried it to him. She was quick to note how Jimmy reached for it, but she pulled it back. "Not yet!" she told him.

"No?" Jimmy asked, surprised because she had been bringing the dumb animal to him.

"Not until you admit you're the biggest wuss on the planet."

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "You're so dumb!" he exclaimed.

"And you're nothing but a wuss. Now admit it or you don't get Cleo."

Again Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Okay, I'm a wuss. Now can I have..."

"No," Jasmine interrupted him. "Say you're the biggest wuss on the entire planet!"

Jimmy was getting very frustrated. "Okay! I'm the biggest wuss on the planet. Okay? Now can I have Cleo?"

"What's Cleo's full name?"

Ugh! "Cleopatra," Jimmy replied.

"And is Cleo a boy or a girl?"

Jimmy was tempted to hit her. "A girl," he replied angrily through his clenched teeth.

"And are you going to keep her with you in bed all night?"

"Yes!" Jimmy replied, more frustrated than ever.

Jasmine held Cleo out toward him. "Give her a kiss," Jasmine told him. But she quickly pulled Cleo back as he reached to take it.

Jimmy looked at his sister angrily.

"Give her a kiss!" Jasmine insisted as she again held the stuffed animal out toward his face.

Jimmy finally planted a small kiss on the head of the dumb lion.

Jasmine smiled and continued to hold Cleo out toward him.

"Very good," she said "You can have her now."

Jimmy finally grabbed the stupid stuffed lion.

"Now tell Cleo that you're sorry for thinking she wasn't brave enough to help you."

"What?"

"Tell her you're sorry!"

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry, Cleo!" he said. Then he turned to the door to leave.

"Tell Cleo you promise to always love her!" Jasmine said quickly to his back.

Jimmy shook his head and walked out. He quickly carried Cleo into his own room where he closed the door behind him. A minute later, he was in his own bed, under his own covers, and he could feel the bulky weight of the stuffed lion resting against him. He mentally fussed over the things his sister had "insisted" he had to do before she gave Cleo to him. Because of that, it was a while before he dropped down into sleep. But never once did he have any bad dreams about the animals on his wall getting him. Never once, all night long!

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On Friday, Susan picked Jasmine up after school to go shopping, letting her two boys take the bus home. Susan was very happy to be going shopping with Jasmine again, and it was quite obvious from Jasmine's behavior that she was just as happy about

it. It was something they used to do fairly often, just the two of them. But in Susan's case, there was a desperation inside of her that she couldn't shake. A desperation born of the worry that this might be the last time she would ever do this with her real daughter again.

As Susan finally drove away from the school and headed for their favorite shopping stores, she glanced often at Jasmine as the two of them talked about school and friends. It was nice, light, feminine, mother-daughter conversation that Susan cherished more than ever. But it was those quick glances at her daughter that continually piled more worry on top of Susan's other concerns.

Yes, her daughter looked like a girl, as she should. Especially with the three little bows that Jasmine had clipped into her too short hair. But the bows were nothing but a reminder of what they were trying to disguise. And now as Susan glanced more frequently at her daughter, it was almost as if her mind was fixated on seeing those things that the bows were trying to compensate for. Those little things that were starting to become more and more obvious to her.

Her daughter's face was definitely changing. Without a doubt! The more she thought about it, the more she could almost imagine that Jasmine's face looked more like a boy's face. Jasmine's neck seemed shorter and thicker too, not nearly as delicate. And there was something different about Jasmine's voice too, despite all the occasional throat clearing she had heard her daughter doing over the last week or so. Something she kept meaning to ask Brian about. Susan was worried that Jasmine might have caught a cold or something. Fortunately, her daughter wasn't exhibiting any other symptoms of getting sick. They were disturbing thoughts as she headed down the road on what she desperately wanted to be a happy, "special" occasion.

The stores weren't very busy at that time of day and on that day of the week, which made shopping all that much more pleasant. Susan and Jasmine both were able to enjoy each other's company more completely. But despite that, Susan still couldn't stop worrying about the changes she still couldn't stop noticing, that she desperately didn't want to notice. Changes she wanted to ignore and forget, but that were all too impossible for her to ignore and

forget. So because of that, despite trying to be happy and upbeat about shopping with her daughter, underneath, Susan was worried, depressed, and desperate.

There were lots of smiles from both of them as Jasmine picked out more tiny bows that she could clip into her hair. Smiles from both, but for Susan those bows did nothing but force her to see the changes in her daughter's face that was making her look more masculine than feminine. And when Jasmine slipped a bracelet over her wrist to see it better, Susan had to worry, were Jasmine's wrist and hands looking more masculine now? And all the necklaces Jasmine tried on just for the fun of it, did nothing but make Susan worry more about Jasmine's neck looking thicker and less feminine as well.

One thing Susan was quick to realize, and very glad to realize as well...sort of, was that her daughter's taste in overly bright and colorful clothing was still perfectly intact. And as Jasmine picked out and looked at too many things in wild patterns and colors, Susan, as usual, had to wonder how her daughter would ever wear such things, or even what other clothes Jasmine might pick to match them with. As far as Susan could see, the wild clothes Jasmine liked couldn't be agreeably worn with anything! But then Susan knew all too well now that her daughter had a knack for making the bright colors and patterns work perfectly together for her. Even though Susan had no idea how she did it.

Despite all the clothes they looked at and all the things Jasmine "insisted" that she had to try on, Susan didn't let her buy all that much, even though she desperately wished she could allow Jasmine to buy all of it. Because even though she and her daughter were having fun with everything, every time Jasmine came out of the changing room wearing something different, Susan couldn't help but stare at Jasmine's body and worry about the changes she was already starting to see. Changes that continually reminded Susan that the clothes they were shopping for, were clothes that were barely needed anymore. It was simply more depressing thoughts that added injury to Susan's worries that she was trying to suppress as she and Jasmine continued shopping.

And then they happened to wander through the underwear section of one of the stores. “Mom,” Jasmine started, “I need a bigger bra.”

“No!” Susan replied right away.

“But Mom...”

“I said no!”

“But I need one!”

“What for?”

“Because...well...”

But it was at that point that all those worrying little thoughts that Susan had desperately been trying to keep pushed to the back of her mind came out and hit her fully. “Jasmine,” Susan said with more of an edge to her voice than she wanted, “as far as I can see, you no longer need a bra at all. You’ve got no use for one anymore!”

Jasmine was immediately hurt, and on a day when everything had been going so wonderfully for her. “But Mom, I need a bigger bra – badly!”

“Why? What for?”

“Because...because...because all the other girls...”

“Jasmine! Stop right there. You don’t need a bigger bra because the only thing you’re putting into the ones you’ve got now are tissues! You think you need a bigger bra to make you look more like all your friends? Well forget it! If you want to look more like your friends, then start acting like them. Until you finally decide to quit this stupid hunting business and go back to being a girl all the time, you can forget about getting any new bras. Your body doesn’t need them. And as long as you continue hunting and trying to be a boy, then you certainly don’t deserve them!”

The sudden angry rebuke from her mother brought tears to Jasmine’s eyes. Hurt and crying, she turned and quickly walked away.

Susan felt awful about the way she had just crushed Jasmine’s spirits. And she felt worse about ruining what had otherwise been a fairly pleasant and nice day, despite all the worries that continually nagged at the back of Susan’s mind. She quickly followed after her daughter. “Jas!” But Jasmine kept going like she didn’t even hear her. Susan hurried after her. She didn’t catch up to Jasmine until

they had gotten completely out of the women's department and into the home goods section of the store. That's where Jasmine stopped and just stood there crying between two shelves of nick-knacks. "Jasmine," Susan said much softer. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so harsh."

Jasmine looked up at her with tear-filled eyes. "All everyone always wants me to do is to quit hunting," she said. "Even here today you can't leave me alone about it." She looked up at her mother with tears...and determination in her eyes. "But I like hunting. I love it! And I'm not going to stop just because everyone thinks I should!"

"Jas," Susan replied, trying to control her temper, "it's not just the hunting. It's all the changes that are happening to you and your body that have me so upset."

"There are no changes!" Jasmine spat back angrily. "So don't go trying to throw that in my face. There are no changes to my body at all!"

"Don't yell at me!" Susan shot back. "And whether you believe what you said or not, there *are* changes happening in you, and they're not changes I want to see. You're starting to look more like Tommy than a girl!"

"Bullshit!" Jasmine returned angrily.

"Jas! Stop it!" Susan stared down angrily at her daughter. Things had been going so well until now. It had been such a nice, pleasant day. And as Susan feared more than ever, this could be her last mother-daughter shopping trip with Jasmine, at least until Jasmine finally saw the light and decided to quit hunting. "Look," Susan said to her. "I'm sorry. We were having such a nice day. I'd like to continue having a nice day with you again."

"Can I have some new bras then?"

Susan actually considered it for a moment. "No," she finally said. "For all the reasons I already gave you." Her daughter's renewed tears tore at her heart, but she wasn't going to give in over this. "I'm sorry about it," Susan told her. "But I meant everything I said. I just didn't mean to be so angry in the way I told you. I'm simply at my wits end worrying about all the changes in you."

"There are no changes!" Jasmine insisted. "There are no cha...." her voice went haywire on her again and she had to stop and clear her throat.

"Jas," Susan replied, trying to sound calm. "There are changes, and I don't understand why you're refusing to see them."

"Like what?" Jasmine shot back. "I look at myself in the mirror every single day, and I haven't seen one single change yet!"

"You look at yourself every day?" Susan asked.

Jasmine glared at her mother for a moment, before her face softened ever so slightly. "Wouldn't you?"

Susan nodded. "I'm sure I would. I doubt I'd be so hard-headed though about seeing things that are right in front of my face."

"There are no changes!" Jasmine insisted angrily.

Susan shook her head. "I'm not going to argue with you today Jas. I've been enjoying myself up until now. But there are plenty of changes already, and you're just refusing to see them."

"There are no chang..." Jasmine's voice again went haywire and again she had to clear her throat.

Susan didn't let her get a chance to continue the argument. "Come on Jas," she said somewhat wearily. "Let's go find you some new shoes instead."

Jasmine was still perturbed but she silently followed her mother. As they walked, she cleared her throat again. What was up with her voice lately?

Twenty minutes later, they were both happy once again as Jasmine and Susan looked at every pair of shoes available in the large shoe store. Although to be honest, most of the shoes they were looking at were shoes Susan would never even consider allowing Jasmine to wear, and she herself would never wear them either. But that didn't mean that they both couldn't enjoy looking at them.

"I want these!" Jasmine exclaimed at one point as she held up another pair of shoes for her mother to see.

Susan smiled and rolled her eyes. "Yeah Jas, there's no doubt they're definitely you!" The multicolored and patterned heels were all too much like most of Jasmine's other clothes.

Jasmine laughed. "They are, aren't they? But I'm serious. I want them."

Susan smirked and shook her head. "Dream on, Jas. Dream on!"

"But Mom, why not?"

"Jas, they're too old for you. And where on earth would you ever wear them?"

"To school!"

Susan burst out laughing. "You'd wear a pair of five inch stiletto heels to school?"

"Sure! Why not? It would be fun!"

Susan had no doubt that her daughter would enjoy it.

"We're supposed to be looking for shoes we can actually wear!" Susan told her, even though they seemed to be spending all their time looking at everything else.

"I know," Jasmine replied as she put the heels back on the shelf. "Mom, can I finally get some shoes with higher heels?"

Susan looked back to her daughter. "What do you mean by higher heels?" she asked suspiciously.

"You know, something more feminine. Something higher than all the tiny heels I have now."

Susan shook her head. "You mean something grown up and dressy?"

"Of course!"

"No Jas. You're too young."

"But Mom, I'm almost twelve!"

"Not yet you're not. Not for another few months. And even then you'll still be too young. Besides..." But Susan stopped right there, not wanting to continue and possibly ruin their day again.

"Besides what?"

It was a moment before Susan could answer. All the fun had suddenly drained out of their shopping trip again. "Besides," she said again and then paused. "As long as you insist on trying to be a boy instead of a girl, then I see no reason to get you high heels at all. They're too feminine. And if you're going to insist on being a boy, then like those bras you wanted, you shouldn't have anything

like them either.” The immediate anger on Jasmine’s face was not what Susan wanted to see, but she did fully expect it.

Before Jasmine could make any kind of angry reply, Susan said, “But even if you weren’t doing all this hunting like a boy, I probably wouldn’t buy you a pair of heels anyway. Like I said before, they’re too old for you.” The angry determined look on her daughter’s face didn’t change much, but at least Jasmine wasn’t arguing back. But Susan offered one more chance. “But I’ll tell you this Jas, if you finally swear off hunting so you can go back to being a girl all the time again, then I promise, I will buy you some new bras – immediately. And I’ll also buy you some small heels. But they’d be small heels Jas, not those super high heels that are nothing but ridiculous. All you have to do is quit hunting Jas, and I promise you, I’ll be more than happy. In fact, I’d be super happy, to buy you all of it, and a lot more clothes to boot. But Jas, you’ve got to quit hunting first.”

Susan watched Jasmines face, but her daughter was doing nothing but glaring angrily back at her. And finally Jasmine spoke. “Forget it!” she said nastily and walked off, heading for the racks of sneakers instead.

Susan shook her head. She had tried...again.

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On Saturday morning, “Jasmine” put his left hand in Nichole’s hand, his right hand held Olivia’s hand, and he screamed! Together, all four “girls” had linked hands in a circle as they started sliding over the edge of the hill. As they slid ever faster, the uncontrollable aluminum disks began circling as all four girls tried hard to remain linked together. Basically, all of them screamed the entire way down.

As the sleds all came to a stop at the bottom of the hill, all four of them tumbled over top of each other and laughed as they finally got clear of each other and just laid in the snow for a moment to recover. It was all nothing but total fun. A few minutes later, they were all trudging their way back up the hill, dragging the big disks behind them. As far as “Jasmine” was concerned, the times when

had to be his sister and he got to slide down the hill with his friends, were without a doubt some of the best times he had ever had in his life!

“Hey, there’s Jimmy,” Nichole shouted as she noticed “Jimmy” had finally come out to the hill to join them. She waved and they all saw “Jimmy” wave back.

Jasmine wasn’t sure if he felt sorry for Jimmy or not. He and the girls had all been having a great morning on the hill, while he knew his “brother” had been out shoveling snow again with Uncle Jed, Ethan, and Justin.

“Yooooooo! Watch out!” a masculine voice yelled from the top of the hill.

All four girls had to side step quickly to get out of the way as Tommy, Elliot, and Hunter, riding their disks on their bellies, tried to race each other down the hill again. The disks though didn’t let them steer very well and it took no time before the girls noticed that Hunter was undoubtedly going to win that round. The boys usually raced each other. As the “girls” again turned their heads toward the top of the hill, they now saw Ashley up there too, talking with Jimmy.

“Hey Ash!” Allison yelled, welcoming the older girl out to the hill to join them. “What kept you?”

“Helping my Mom,” Ashley yelled back.

As the girls finally reached the top of the hill, the discussion immediately turned to how they wanted to go down the hill next, and naturally, not one of them even thought of leaving Jimmy or Ashley out of it. That was all part of the fun. The more the merrier.

They had almost figured it out, when they heard Justin yell, “Hey Jimmy! Race you down!”

“Jimmy” turned toward the older boy who was just getting out to the hill. She had spent all morning so far with him and Ethan shoveling snow – again. She was really starting to hate that job. But now that Justin had asked, she was torn. Should she stay with her girlfriends, or go race with Justin who she had been working with all morning? There wasn’t a lot of time before they’d have to go in for lunch, and then afterwards she was supposed to go out shopping with her mother. She wanted to be with the girls...and surprisingly, she wanted to race Justin too.

Ashley noticed the confusion on Jimmy's face. "Hey," she said. "You're supposed to be a guy today, right? Go have fun."

That fast, the decision had been made for her. Jimmy never gave another moment's thought to the situation as she hurried to drag her disk over to where Justin was getting ready. A moment later, the race was on, heading straight at the other guys who were just now starting to head back up the hill. Justin won that race, but "Jimmy" didn't care. It had still been fun. As they headed back up the hill, Tommy, Elliot, and Hunter were waiting for them halfway. As they all headed to the top together, they couldn't miss all five girls, now linked together in a straight line, sliding down the hill. Jimmy felt a moment of guilt and jealousy as she watched them all screaming their heads off with fun. But that only lasted a moment, until Elliot said, "Okay guys, this time we've got to go down backwards. On our backs!" For "Jimmy," her usual girlfriends that she always hung out with were quickly forgotten.

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Susan felt strange. Not sick strange, but emotionally strange. And it was a strangeness that had been growing all day long. It was after lunch now. She and "Jasmine" had just finished cleaning up after the meal, and now Susan was waiting for "Jimmy" to change so they could go shopping again. Again, because she was waiting for the same child she had been shopping with the day before, but yesterday they had shopped for girl's clothes. Today they would be going with Tommy to look for all boy's clothes. And of course, her real daughter would be a boy all day today, and tomorrow, and for the next two days after that as well.

She briefly thought back to the times she had taken her fake daughter, "Jasmine," out shopping. But she hadn't taken her fake son, "Jimmy," shopping yet. It wasn't really a big problem, but Susan simply felt nothing but strange about the situation. At least today, the child who was now Jimmy, wouldn't be asking to buy any bras or heels. Hopefully anyway.

As she waited, Clint walked into the room. "Do you still want to meet at Cumberland's later?" he asked.

“Absolutely! I’d rather have you fit them for hunting boots instead of me.”

Clint smiled. “No problem. I want to pick up some more ammunition while we’re there anyway.”

“While you’re at it,” Susan replied. “You wouldn’t be willing to take them shopping for school clothes too, would you?”

Clint smiled. “Not a chance! You know I’m no good with stuff like that.”

“Huh!” Susan grunted. “A likely excuse just to get out of it.”

Clint kissed her on the cheek. “I gotta’ go see Pete for a little bit,” he told her. “Have a good time.”

“Yeah, right,” she replied sarcastically. “See you guys later. And don’t forget to check on Jas once in a while.”

Clint smiled and walked out. A minute later, both Tommy and Jimmy walked into the kitchen. No second glances were needed. As far as Susan was concerned, she was looking at two boys. Two growing boys to be exact. How had one of them looked so much like a girl the day before? But that question brought back all the memories from that day when all she could think about were all the changes she had seen in her daughter that were making her look too much like a boy. Yeah, Jasmine, as she was yesterday, did look like a girl, but even then Susan had noticed that she had also been starting to look too much like a boy. A boy wearing girl’s clothes. But now, dressed completely as a boy, it was getting very hard to see the girl in her own daughter.

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Having to be a girl is a whole lot better when you get to wear pants! As far as Jasmine was concerned anyway. Especially when his mother wasn’t around and he didn’t have to worry about the way he was sitting or doing anything else. He’d had a blast out on the hill all morning with his girlfriends. One of his best times ever! But now that lunch was over, so was the fun. He was back in his room, once again wearing an outfit that his sister had set out for him to wear for the day, and his darn legs were once again tied together. Ugh! All because his mother didn’t like the way he had sat down at lunch.

But after all the fun he'd had all morning, how could he possibly worry about something like that? He had been way too excited. And he had still been wearing his sister's pink jeans instead of a skirt. Pants! It wasn't fair!

As he sat at his desk, actually, his sister's desk, but if she didn't decide to quit hunting pretty soon, maybe it really would be *his* desk! As he sat there, he heard his mother calling goodbye to him. "Bye!" he yelled back loudly. His mother had already been in to kiss him goodbye. Now she and Tommy and his brother would be leaving to go shopping. He was glad he didn't have to go with them. Not till later anyway. Later, he and Dad were supposed to meet them at Cumberland's. Why couldn't they just let him stay home? He didn't need anything from Cumberland's. Certainly not any new hunting boots, and certainly no ammunition. Nothing else the store offered either as far as he was concerned.

The house was very quiet now. His mother was gone. His two *brothers* were gone. The only one in the house besides himself was his father. Did he dare untie his legs now? He actually reached for the tie to free himself, and stopped. No, better not. He didn't know what his mother had told his father about the situation. He didn't need to get in even more trouble for undoing the tie before he was told he could. Did he dare go ask his father about it? Why not? What could asking hurt?

With a great deal of difficulty, he got up and wandered out toward the kitchen. Nobody there. Nobody in the family room either. He went into the master bedroom. Empty. "Dad?" he called out. But only silence filled the house. Being all alone in the big house was a little bit unnerving, even though he had always spent much of his life alone. Not daring to untie his legs in case his father should come back and catch him, he hobbled back to his bedroom, the bedroom that was supposed to be his just then.

He headed for the desk chair again, but his eyes caught sight of Cleo laying on the bed where his mother had put her when the two of them had made the beds earlier that morning. He didn't need Cleo to sleep with when he slept in his sister's room. But his sister had insisted he keep the stupid lion with him anyway. Before sitting down at the desk, he reached over and grabbed Cleo. The stuffed

lion laid in his lap as he sat back at the computer to surf the internet. All alone in the big house. Everything was so quiet. Where had his father gone?

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With Tommy sitting next to her in the front seat, things almost seemed perfectly normal to Susan. It was only the knowledge that one of her kids was pretending to be a boy in the back seat that was bothering her. Just as she had tried to put certain things out of her mind the day before, she tried to put that out of her mind as well. It wasn't working at all.

The trip in the car was fairly quiet. Unlike the day before when she and Jasmine had talked continually, today there was no feminine chatter or discussions for her to enjoy. In desperation, she had finally turned the radio on to fill the quiet of the car. She took them to the same stores she had shopped at with Jasmine the day before. Well, not all of the stores. Tommy and Jimmy, no matter which "Jimmy" was with her, wouldn't need to shop for feminine accents like bows and pretty hair clips.

Susan took her *sons* straight into the boy's department in one of the stores. Unlike the day before, today, everything was all business. Well, for herself and Tommy anyway. While she looked at clothes on the racks for both Tommy and Jimmy, Tommy stood back and just watched and waited. But Jimmy was doing her own searching through the clothes, as if she was back in girl mode again, only shopping for boy's clothes instead. Susan soon heard Jimmy muttering to herself and sounding fairly disgusted.

"Boring," Jimmy muttered, then moved the shirt she had been looking at to stare at another one. "Boring," she muttered again before moving to the next shirt. "Boring..."

"What's the matter, Jimmy?" Susan asked, trying to keep the smile off of her face and sound serious.

"Mom, there's nothing interesting here at all!"

"What do you mean?" Susan asked as she pulled a nice long sleeved button down shirt off the rack where she had been looking. "Look at this one. I think it's very nice."

Jimmy looked at the shirt and rolled her eyes, much like her... other self...did so often. "Mom. It's boring!"

"No it's not!" Susan insisted. "I think it will look great on either you or Tommy. She held the shirt up to Tommy's chest. "See. It'll look great on him. And I know that it would look great on you too."

"Let him wear it then," Jimmy replied all too exasperated. "Everything here is just...boring!"

"Well for heaven's sake. What did you have in mind instead?"

"I don't know. Something with some color and pattern to it. Something that's totally different. Something more...interesting. Something, you know, brighter that will stand out more."

"In other words, something more like the things in your real closet back home."

"Well...yeah," Jimmy replied.

Susan turned to Tommy who looked all too skeptical. "Tommy would you ever be caught dead in something like that?"

"Hell no!" Tommy replied rather emphatically. "Don't even think such a thing."

Susan turned back to Jimmy. "I rest my case." She glanced around. There wasn't any other shoppers too near, but she lowered her voice way down anyway. "Jimmy, if you want to buy clothes like that, then you know what you have to do. Just give the word and I'll be glad to turn this trip for you and Tommy into a trip for Jasmine instead, and we'll head straight over to the girl's department."

Jimmy just scowled back at her. "Never mind," she said before turning around and walking away. She didn't go far, but she didn't bother looking through the clothes anymore either.

Susan shook her head before turning toward Tommy. "I've never met anyone so hard headed in my life!"

Tommy only nodded.

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"Jas," Clint yelled as he came back into the house and headed for the hallway. "Are you still here?"

"Back here," Jasmine called back.

Clint went straight back to Jasmine's bedroom to check on him. He found his son, dressed as his daughter and looking too much like a real girl, sitting in front of the computer at his desk. "You okay?" he asked.

Jasmine shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

"Just checking," his father replied. "Sorry I was gone so long. I got held up next door." He noticed the stuffed lion in Jasmine's lap. "What's the stuffed animal for?"

Jasmine was surprised by the question and more than a little embarrassed. He picked the lion up and tossed it back on the bed. "I don't know, I just grabbed it."

Clint nodded and was about to walk out.

"Um...Dad?"

"Yeah?" Clint asked, stopping to find out what was needed.

"Um...can I untie my legs now? Please?"

Clint looked closer and noticed that the tan tie his wife had wrapped around Jasmine's legs was still there. "Oh hell yes!" he exclaimed. "As far as I'm concerned, you should have taken that thing off earlier."

"I couldn't find you to ask you about it," Jasmine replied as he started removing the thing from his legs.

"Oh," Clint mused with a small smile. "Sorry about that. Look, I've got to change into something a bit less...dirty. Are you all set to go?"

Jasmine held up the tie that had been around his legs and smiled. "I am now."

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Two "boys." Two changing rooms. And a large stack of clothes. Tommy, as it turned out, didn't need to go up just one size in everything, he needed to go up two or three. And if Susan didn't buy him things that were big enough, at the rate he was growing, he'd be too big for everything she was buying before he even got the chance to wear it all. Over and over again she had to go back to the racks to find bigger shirts and pants for Tommy.

Jimmy was less of a problem. But after “explaining” to Jimmy that boy’s clothes weren’t usually as colorful as the girl’s clothes that “Jimmy” liked when she was a girl, and after trying unsuccessfully once again to convince her to quit hunting, Jimmy had remained rather mute on the subject and hardly even bothered looking at the clothes that Susan suggested for her. Still, Susan tried to be as lighthearted about it as she could as she did her best to select some of the more colorful shirts she could find for...Jimmy. Tommy, she knew, couldn’t care less. As long as they fit, he didn’t seem to care at all. And if Susan didn’t watch him, he was just as likely to wear a nice school shirt out hunting as anything else...or a hunting shirt to school.

Every time Tommy came out of the changing room, he made comments like, “This one fits great,” or “I don’t think this one is going to work so well.” But with Jimmy, every time she came out, she made no comment at all. Ever since Susan had again tried to get her to stop hunting, Jimmy seemed more like she couldn’t care less about anything that was picked out for her. But knowing...that child’s...real taste in clothing, Susan did try to find things that were a little brighter and more colorful.

It was the same way with shoes. Neither “boy” really had an opinion on the shoes, although she did notice Jimmy’s eyes turning fairly often to stare at the other side of the store at the women’s shoes. Why wouldn’t her child simply give in and stop hunting? It was obvious she wanted the things she loved most back again. Susan had even promised to buy her more clothes, including bigger bras and, well, sort of a pair of heels. But her stubborn child had remained just that – stubborn!

In the end, the only thing that remained firmly on Susan’s mind, was contrast. While she and Jasmine had laughed and enjoyed so much of the day before, today was a big marked contrast. Today, the child she had shopped with and had fun with, had become quiet and almost surly. Where the trip the day before had been, for the most part, fun, today the trip was nothing but business. She missed her daughter. Her *real* daughter. Because shopping with the child who was now still home and who was currently her daughter wasn’t nearly as much fun.

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"This is so strange for me," Clint muttered as he drove his truck toward the stores.

"What's that?" Jasmine asked.

"Shopping with...you...as, um, who you're supposed to be today."

Jasmine smiled. "If you think it's strange for you, imagine how I feel about it. I've only been out with Mom a few times. That's all. And now I'm going out with you too."

Clint nodded as he drove. "Yeah, well, it's just odd that's all. At least you look..." But he stopped right there, not wanting to continue.

"I look what?" Jasmine asked, troubled that there might be something wrong.

It was a moment before Clint could reply. "Damn it!" he exclaimed. "At least you look like a girl. At least I don't have to be embarrassed about being seen out in public with you. The only problem is, you're not a girl. You're supposed to be my son! But instead you... Well, you know."

"Yeah," Jasmine replied sadly. "I know. I wish it wasn't this way too."

"Me too, son. Me too."

Jasmine stared at him for a few moments while his father drove. "Dad," he said quietly. "I'm sorry if I disappointed you. I don't want to do that – ever! But...well..." He dropped his head to stare at the floor of the truck. "Things just didn't work out that way. Sorry," he muttered again.

Clint nearly drove the truck off the road. He was tempted to pull over and stop for a minute, but he didn't. "Don't worry about it," he told him. "I know you don't want this. But now I guess we're all stuck with it for a while. And one other thing...Jas," he said, trying to use the right name for the day. "You do know I'm still very proud of you, don't you?"

Jasmine looked up at him. He wanted to smile, but he couldn't. "Yeah Dad. And you have no idea how much that means to me. No

idea.”

Clint nodded. “Just so long as you know. And you know I love you – a lot! Got that?”

This time, Jasmine did smile. “Yeah Dad. And I love you too. A lot!”

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It wasn't just that they needed clothes for school. Both Tommy and Jimmy needed clothes for play as well. Well, clothes that they could wear for things other than school where they might get dirty. Susan nearly laughed at the thought. Who was she kidding? They would be clothes that would definitely get dirty. If not from hunting then from working or doing a hundred other things. So with a pile of things that would be perfect for school, Susan now turned her attention to jeans and shirts and sweaters that the boys could wear when they weren't at school.

Once again, Tommy just stood back and watched, letting her pick out what she thought would be suitable. And once again Jimmy was pretty much doing the same thing. As Susan looked through another rack of shirts, she noticed Jimmy looking around and shaking her head. “What's wrong dear?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Jimmy replied as she stopped her looking around.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It's just that most of the stuff here is even more dreary than the other stuff we were looking at.”

“What did you expect?”

“I don't know. Something...nicer. And the only color they have for jeans is blue. Boring.”

Tommy grunted. “Duh...that's why they call them blue jeans dummy.”

Jimmy rolled her eyes and ignored him.

“We had this discussion a little while ago,” Susan reminded her. “If you want something more colorful like you say, then you know what that means. And you also know perfectly well that it will make me extremely happy. Happy enough to probably buy you a whole

new wardrobe. And for once, I doubt your father will mind one little bit."

Once again Jimmy leveled a nasty look at her. "Blue is a great color for jeans!" she said with a note of anger in her voice. And then she walked away.

Susan shook her head yet again as she watched where her daughter was going. At least she didn't go far. A moment later, she saw Jimmy looking through another rack of clothes, much as she had done when they first started shopping. Girl or boy, that child was definitely interested in clothes!

A few minutes later, Susan was holding up a shirt against Tommy's body, and guessing it was going to be too tight on him, when Jimmy came hurrying back. "Mom," Jimmy said, sounding fairly excited. "Can I try this one on?"

Susan was a bit floored that Jimmy would suddenly be taking more of an interest. She was even more floored that Jimmy had picked something she wanted. She looked at the knit shirt that Jimmy had found. "You actually found something that you like?"

"Here," Jimmy said. "Feel it. It's so soft. Just like some of my other... Um it's soft," she finished, not wanting to compare it out loud to her girl clothes.

Susan reached out and felt the shirt. It was nice and soft. She smiled. "If it fits, you can certainly have it. Any others you see that you like?"

Jimmy literally ran back to the rack where she had found the shirt.

Susan shook her head yet again. Yeah, maybe the men's clothes weren't as interesting for Jimmy...this Jimmy...but she was still managing to find some things she liked. If not the color, then the fabrics. And Susan had to admit, that shirt did feel nice and soft. She turned to Tommy. "You want one too? It did feel really nice."

Tommy shook his head. "If she likes it, maybe I better avoid it."

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It was Saturday, so there was no way Cumberland's wasn't going to be crowded. But at least it wasn't nearly as bad as it was

during the Christmas season. That still didn't mean that Jasmine was totally comfortable being there. He did his best to, if not exactly smile, at least act confident. At least his father had said he looked like a girl, but that didn't help him much. Bundled up in his coat and wearing the boots on his legs made him feel more hidden. Still, he tried to keep his head down and not look at anyone else as he followed his father through the enormous store.

The gun department was toward the very back so there was a lot of store to walk through to get there. Jasmine noticed though that his father simply headed straight there, as if he was totally determined to get there and not bother with anything else. If he had been out shopping with his mother, he had no doubt that they would have stopped at a dozen places along the way to look at things. But he knew his mother liked to shop. Evidently, his father didn't.

Jasmine nearly ran into his father's back when his father suddenly stopped as someone called, "Clint!" Jasmine looked and saw his Uncle Jack heading for them. It had been a while since he had seen his Uncle Jack. He was embarrassed enough being out in public, but he found himself feeling even more embarrassed as his uncle approached.

"Clint! And Jasmine," Jack said. "Hey you two. I wasn't expecting to see you here today."

The two men shook hands. "I'm running a bit low on some ammunition," Clint replied. "And then we're supposed to meet Susan, Tommy, and Jimmy here to fit them for some new boots. They're growing so fast we don't know what to do with them."

The two men laughed and Jack looked down at Jasmine. "Jas," he said with a smile on his face. "You're getting to be a really pretty young lady." He turned back to Clint. "I kind of thought that...the other Jasmine would be here today...Jimmy." He looked down at Jasmine. "I thought that she was supposed to be her brother all weekend."

"That *is* Jimmy," Clint replied. "He's just...changing now."

Jasmine suddenly felt overly embarrassed, and quickly found himself fighting emotions that would do nothing but bring tears. He looked down at the floor and tried to keep his emotions under control.

Both men noticed though that he wasn't feeling exactly happy about the situation. "Jas, it's okay," Clint told him. He reached down and with one finger under Jasmine's chin, lifted his son's face. "It's okay," he said again. "And under the circumstances, the fact that you look more like a girl now, may be a good thing. Nobody will know what you really are Jas. Think of it that way. Nobody will know. As long as you've got to be the girl in the family, isn't it better if nobody else can tell?"

Jasmine nodded. It was the same advice his mother had given him a number of times when they had been out shopping. Except his mother had constantly hounded him to smile. He didn't feel much like smiling just then.

"I think Jessica is back in the office," Jack said. "Would you be more comfortable waiting back there instead of being out here in the store?"

Jasmine considered that, then finally decided he would. At least he'd be out of the main store area where there were too many people there to see him. "Uh...sure. I guess," he replied.

"Do you need us to take you, or can you find it yourself?"

Jasmine rolled his eyes. "I've been there a hundred times, Uncle Jack. I think I can find it."

As he turned to leave, he heard his Uncle Jack talking to his father. "Hey, have you seen the new ATVs we got in?"

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"Jasmine!" Aunt Jessica exclaimed with a broad smile on her face as he walked into her office. "Come give me a hug girl." Jasmine headed for his Aunt who was sitting behind her desk. "My you look pretty today," she told him.

"Uh...thanks, Aunt Jessica," Jasmine replied uncertainly as he let himself be hugged by his aunt.

Jessica, still sitting at her desk, held him back at arm's length. "Hey, didn't we tell you before that looking pretty is a good thing? And trust me, Jas, you're looking better and better. Much better even than the last time you were here. Now smile for me. Please?"

Jasmine did his best to put something of a nice smile on his face.

"Much better," Jessica declared. "Now tell me, what are you doing here? Where's your mother?"

"I'm here with Dad today," Jasmine explained. "Mom's out shopping somewhere with Tommy and Jimmy. They need...boy's clothes."

Jessica nodded. "Well, I can see why you don't need to be out with them. Did your father send you back to me?"

He shrugged. "Yes and no. Uncle Jack found us out there and he thought I might be better off back here than out in the store."

"Why is that?" Jessica asked, not understanding why that would be.

"Um...because I'm not exactly comfortable around all those people out there," he replied.

"Oh come off it," Jessica replied with a wave of your hand. "Jas, you're starting to look really nice. You've got nothing at all to worry about or be ashamed of girl. So just smile and enjoy it."

Jasmine was tempted to say something sarcastic, but he chose to remain silent on the matter.

"Is your mom bringing the boys here after their shopping?" Jessica asked.

"They're supposed to. They need boots too, and I guess Mom wants Dad to make sure of what they get instead of her."

Jessica nodded. "I don't blame her." She picked up her phone and pushed some buttons...and waited. "Hi Susan, it's Jessica."

"Hi Jessica," Susan returned brightly. "Hey, we're heading over to see you in a little while. In fact, Clint and Jasmine should be there any time now. The boys need some new boots. If they don't stop growing I'm going to make them start going around naked!"

Jessica laughed. "Well, I've got a very pretty young lady here with me right now," she replied. "Clint is off with Jack somewhere in the store, and Jas is back here visiting with me."

"Is she being any bother?" Susan asked.

"She's being a doll!" Jessica replied. "Why don't you give me a call when you get here, okay? We'll come out and find the guys together."

"Sounds like a good plan," Susan agreed. "See you in a little bit."

Jessica hung up her phone. "There," she said. "All set. Now why don't you take your coat off?"

Jasmine dutifully pulled his coat off and threw it over the back of one of the chairs in the office.

"That's a very pretty outfit you've got on today," Jessica noted. "Did you pick it out yourself?"

Jasmine shook his head. "No, my...other self...picked it out for me. She puts together most of the outfits I wear before I...become her. My dresser at home is piled with stuff for each day I have to be her."

"My! It sounds like she's going to an awful lot of trouble for you."

Jasmine shrugged. "Evidently, nobody likes the clothes I pick out to wear for myself."

Jessica only looked at him with a skeptical look on her face? "Do you want a snack?" she asked.

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Where Jasmine had been embarrassed about going into Cumberland's and everywhere else, Jimmy wasn't the least bit shy. In fact, she was rather looking forward to it. "Mom," she said as they traipsed the distance from where they had to park to the front door. "Can we go back and look at some of the guns?"

"Yeah!" Tommy suddenly exclaimed. "That would be so cool. I wonder if they got any new ones in yet."

Susan was somewhat aghast at the subject, but knowing where they were and what boys liked, especially Tommy, she replied, "that's not what we're here for."

"Oh Mom..." Tommy lamented.

"Check with your father when we find him. Maybe he'll let you look. But not until *after* we get you two some boots!"

"All right!" Tommy exclaimed happily.

Susan pulled her cell phone out as they walked and pushed a few buttons. "Hi Jessica. We're here. Where do you want us to meet you?"

A few minutes later, Susan, Tommy, and Jimmy stood waiting inside the store, just past the main cash register area. They didn't have to wait very long as Jessica and Jasmine worked their way through the people toward them. Susan noticed that Jasmine was no longer wearing his coat. She also noticed that Jasmine looked pretty good, even for a boy trying to be a girl. But there was no doubt that he looked nervous again. She really wished he'd start smiling more. Especially in public. But at least he wasn't wearing his "mean" face today. That alone was a major improvement.

"Susan!" Jessica said as they approached and she took a moment to hug her sister-in-law. "How goes the battle with clothes shopping?"

"Ugh! I think I'm going to start shopping for Tommy here in your tent department!"

Jessica laughed. "I'm sure we've got some tents back there that would look fabulous on him."

Susan looked down at Jasmine. "Have you been behaving like a *lady*?" she asked, putting an extra emphasis on the last word.

Jasmine knew what she was talking about. He didn't want to admit that he hadn't been the least bit concerned with the way he had been sitting. Fortunately, Jessica answered for him.

"She's been real good," Jessica told her. "In fact, I put her to work helping our staff with stuffing envelopes for our next big sales mail-out."

Susan noted that Jessica was referring to Jasmine as being a *she*. And the more she stared down at him, she supposed that the pronoun fit far better than anything else now. She finally tore her gaze away from Jasmine and back to Jessica. "I suppose we better find Clint," she said. "From the sizes of everything else I had to find for Tommy, I'm wondering if a pair of rowboats will fit his feet better than some new boots."

Jessica smiled at the joke and pulled out her cell phone. She pushed a few buttons and waited a minute. "Hi Jack. Susan and the boys are here. Where are you?" A moment later she hung up. Funny you should mention the rowboats. Guess where they are?"

"Looking at boats," Susan replied.

"Good guess."

The minute they started walking, Jimmy quickly moved over next to Jasmine. "Hey!" she said quietly but firmly. "You agreed to smile now whenever you're out and you have to be me."

"We're not at school," Jasmine replied.

"Doesn't matter. You need to do it anywhere. All the time!"

"Why?" Jasmine asked, exasperated with the situation.

"Because you look stupid if you don't. And besides, if you're supposed to be me, then I don't want anyone to think I looked that bad!"

Jasmine rolled his eyes. "I don't think you've got anything to worry about."

"Yes I do!" Jimmy insisted. "And if you don't, then I'm going to take Cleo back and you can't sleep with her anymore."

"So?" Jasmine replied. "It's just a dumb stuffed animal. It can't do anything anyway."

"You're the one who wanted her. You're the one who came looking to get her from me. And besides, you promised. And since you promised, then you have to start smiling and looking nice."

Once again Jasmine rolled his eyes. He had promised. Unfortunately, he remembered that all too well. There wasn't much hope for it. He stuck another of his mock smiles on his face as he turned his head toward his sister. "Better?" he asked.

"You're so stupid!" Jimmy replied. "Just smile nice."

Ugh! He tried to smile, sort of, but he still spent most of his time looking down at the floor instead of looking at anyone else.

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During the summer months, Cumberland's put a lot of their boats outside for people to look at. But in the winter months, all the remaining unsold boats crowded the display room floor. Every boat was marked way down in price, but that didn't mean there were a lot of customers that were interested in buying one at that time of year. So the boat department didn't hold a lot of people. Despite the overabundance of boats, Clint and Jack were fairly easy to find.

"Hi Jack," Susan called as they walked up.

"Susan!" Jack exclaimed happily. "How are you?"

"Pretty good," Susan replied. "How about yourself?"

"Couldn't be better!" Jack turned towards Tommy. "Geez!" he exclaimed. "Now I know what everyone is talking about. You *are* getting big." With a broad smile on his face, he reached his hand out and shook Tommy's hand, which made Tommy feel really good.

"Hi Uncle Jack," Tommy replied.

Then Jack turned his attention to Jimmy. "And Jimmy," he said. "You're certainly looking pretty good too. Bigger than I expected to be honest."

As Jack shook Jimmy's hand now, Susan replied, "That's why we've been out clothes shopping all day. The two of them are growing like weeds. Especially this one," she said with a mock punch at Tommy's arm.

"Susan wants to know if you have any rowboats that will fit Tommy's feet," Jessica added.

Jack looked over towards Tommy as if he was studying him for that exact question. "I'm not really sure if a rowboat is going to work. Maybe something in a big bass boat would fit him better."

Tommy laughed. "I'll take the bass boat. That would be so cool!"

"I've got just the thing! I was getting ready to show your father," Jack replied with a smile.

"Uh Jack," Jessica interrupted. "I've got to get out of here soon and rescue the kids from your mother." She turned to Susan, "Why don't you all come to the house for dinner tonight? Unless you need to shop for anything, we could all head there right now while the guys play with their toys."

"Sounds good to me," Susan replied happily.

Jessica turned to Jack. "We ladies will leave you guys to play," she said. "Just don't be late tonight."

"No problem," Jack replied. "We'll see you later."

"And Clint," Susan added, "don't forget to get the boots!"

As the women, including Jasmine, walked off, Clint turned to Jack. "Did you notice she didn't ask for our opinion on having dinner at your house?"

Jack laughed. "Would it have made any difference if you didn't want to?"

“None at all,” Clint replied. He smiled. “Besides, it saves me the price of buying dinner out like we had planned.”

Chapter 35 - Cooking With Kids

February 21st

“There she is!” Susan said as she finally saw Jessica’s car coming up the street.

It was all Jasmine could do to not say – finally! They had been sitting in the car out in front of his aunt’s house for the last twenty minutes while his aunt was getting her kids from Uncle Jack’s mother who watched them every day while they were at work.

Their house was a really nice one with a stone and log exterior. It didn’t sit on a lot of land like the rest of the family had, but it was a bigger house than most of the others in the family had, except for Grandma and Grandpa’s house. Jasmine unbuckled his seat belt as his aunt’s car pulled into the driveway and the garage door magically began opening.

“Jas!” Susan said before he could get out of the car. “Don’t forget. I expect you to act like a lady today. And you know what I mean by that.”

Jasmine rolled his eyes. “Yes Mom,” he replied, totally exasperated.

“Okay,” Susan said. “But don’t think I won’t tie your knees together again if I don’t see you moving and sitting like you’re supposed to. Even here at their house. Understand? I’m sure I can easily find something to use on you while we’re here.”

Jasmine was shocked. “Here too?”

“Anywhere Jas, anywhere. I’m afraid I’m to the point now where I’ll do whatever it takes to get you to act properly. And as long as you have to continue to be my daughter, then it’s for your own good, whether you think so or not. So I’ll do anything I have to, to make you start behaving properly, and by that, I mean like a lady.”

Jasmine had to fight to keep from rolling his eyes again. “Yeah. I get it, Mom. I’ll try. Okay?”

Susan nodded. "Good. Now let's go help Aunt Jessica with the kids."

By the time they got to the garage, Jessica already had the back door of her car open and was undoing one of the seat belts to one of the three car seats in her back seat. She stood back, and a moment later Madison jumped down. "Haaaaaaayyy," Madison yelled as she ran straight toward Jasmine.

Jasmine was nearly knocked down as Madison ran straight into him and hugged him. "Hi Madison," he said brightly as soon as he had recovered his balance. The little girl ended her hug and stood back to look up at him. "Can you play with me?" she asked.

"Um...I have to see what's happening first," Jasmine replied uncertainly.

Madison continued to look up at Jasmine's face. "You look different," she said.

Jasmine wasn't sure how to handle that. Was it because he had changed a bit? Or was it because it had been a few months now since he had really seen and talked with Madison? Or was it because she was expecting him to be his sister instead? "Um... maybe it's my hair." He looked briefly at his mother who was looking back with a somewhat skeptical look on her face as if she didn't know what to make of it either.

"Can I get a hug too?" Susan asked the little girl as she knelt down to her level.

Jessica was now working on the other side of her car, and a moment later, Caleb jumped down. He ran towards Susan and Jasmine too, but Jasmine was glad he didn't try to run into him. "Hi Caleb," he said to the little boy.

"Hi Caleb," Susan said too while she was still down at Madison's level. A moment later, she got a nice hug from the little boy before standing up.

Jasmine saw his Aunt Jessica struggling to lift little Melody now out of the car. A moment later, she set her down on the garage floor. Jasmine looked at the small toddler, and something inside of him seemed to lurch. The little toddler was so cute! Melody uncertainly wandered over toward him and it was all he could do to

keep himself from bending down to hug her. His mother however had no problem with it.

"How's my pretty girl?" Susan asked as she bent down and picked the little toddler up. She planted a big kiss on Melody's cheek. "Do you know how scrumptious you are?" she said with a giggle before kissing her again. She shifted the tiny girl to her hip as Jessica closed the car door.

"Jasmine, can you grab the other bag for me?" Jessica asked.

"Sure," Jasmine replied, tearing his eyes off the cute little child. He noted that his aunt already had a diaper bag in one hand and another soft suitcase in her other hand. The bag on the floor was like the soft suitcase, but this one was pink and decorated with ballerina dolls. He was guessing it held Madison's stuff.

They followed Jessica straight from the garage into the large kitchen where Jessica finally took the bag from him. As they took their coats off and waited while Jessica tended to the kids, Jasmine looked around. He had always been amazed at how bright and modern the kitchen here was. It wasn't as big as Grandma's kitchen, but everything here was fairly new. But then the house was only a few years old and Uncle Jack had tried to fix things just the way they would need them. Jasmine knew that his uncle and aunt did a lot of entertaining because of the big store they owned, so he guessed the modern kitchen was something they really needed. Besides, the more he looked around, the more he decided he really liked it.

"Whatcha' lookin' at?" Susan asked.

"I think I like their kitchen," Jasmine replied.

Susan looked around. "It is a dream, isn't it?"

"It sure is."

Jessica breezed back in. "Okay," she said as if she was a bit winded. "I guess we better get busy. We've got four hungry guys that will be expecting to be well fed...if they ever pull themselves away from that store!" She went straight to one of the drawers under her counter and opened it. She pulled several pieces of cloth out of it. One went on the counter in front of her. The second she handed to Susan, and the last one she tossed to Jasmine.

"What's this?" he asked, but he might not as well have even bothered as he saw both his aunt and mother spreading out folded

aprons.

"I don't want you to get your clothes dirty, Honey," Jessica said offhandedly as she slipped her own apron over her head and then tied it behind her.

Jasmine saw his mother doing the same. It took him a moment to sort the thing out, but eventually he slipped the top of his apron over his head and was tying it behind his back. Once done, he smoothed down the front of it. It was an older apron since he noticed the material looked a bit faded, but it was still fairly nice. The material was white with large red roses all over it. There was a wide but fairly flat ruffle all around the apron and two pockets on the skirt of it that were trimmed in red. He followed his mother over to the sink where they both rinsed their hands before drying them on a dish towel.

As Jessica opened the door to her large refrigerator, the sound of small running footsteps sounded briefly from the hall before Madison ran into the kitchen. She had two Barbie dolls in her hands. She ran straight to Jasmine and immediately shoved one of them into his hand.

"Um...I think I might have to work right now," Jasmine told her.

"But I want to play!" Madison insisted.

Jessica came out of the refrigerator with her hands full and bumped the refrigerator door with her hip to close it. "Madison," she said, "don't you want to be Mommy's big helper and help us make dinner?" she asked.

The doll still in Madison's hand went immediately onto the table as Madison ran to the drawer where Jessica had pulled the aprons from. A moment later, Madison had plucked another one from the drawer, a much smaller one with wild designs and patterns and three rows of different colored ruffles along the bottom. Jessica quickly tied it onto her daughter. "Get up in the chair," Jessica told her. Madison ran to one of the chairs at the end of the table, pulled it out and kneeled expectantly on it, ready to do whatever her mother wanted.

While Madison was climbing into the chair, Caleb wandered into the room with a plastic truck in his hands. He looked around but didn't say anything. Instead, he sat down in the middle of the floor

and started playing with his truck. And that was when Melody wandered in.

Jasmine's stomach felt strange and his heart did a small flip. He couldn't help himself. Now with her coat off, the little toddler looked even cuter than she had earlier in the garage. He sat down on the floor and held his arms out. "You're so adorable!" he exclaimed. A moment later, Melody was in his arms and he hugged her. He finally let her go, but all he could think about was how cute the little girl was. He didn't think he had ever felt that way about anyone – ever. Even the dumb pacifier in her mouth didn't detract from how cute she was.

"Jasmine," Susan cautioned. "Watch how you're sitting please."

With the inevitable roll of his eyes, Jasmine stood up, but all he really wanted to do was to hug Melody again.

With a sly smile on Jessica's face, she grabbed a cutting board along with the carrots from among the vegetables she had taken from the refrigerator, but as she was heading around Caleb to get to the kitchen table, she stopped and stared at Jasmine for a moment before turning to Susan. "Can she cut up vegetables?"

Susan let out a snort of a laugh. "Almost as well as...her other half can."

"Why don't you grab that big roast from the bottom shelf of the refrigerator," Jessica said to Susan, "while I get these two started here." She brought everything over to the kitchen table and set the cutting board down just a little bit away from Madison. The carrots she set down next to the cutting board. She went back to the counter and grabbed a sharp knife and brought it back to the table. "Watch yourself with that," she said to Jasmine. "It's very sharp! And whatever you do, don't let Madison touch it." She turned to her daughter. "Hear that, Madi, don't touch the knife! No arguments!" She stared down at her daughter for a moment, but Madison only stared determinedly back up at her.

"I do this all the time with her," Jessica said to Jasmine, "so you should have no problems. I'll bring you a pot. You cut the carrots and put them in a pile. Every once in a while, let Madison move them into the pot for you. I recommend you let her do it often," she cautioned.

"Got it," Jasmine replied. "I think we can manage this," he said as he looked toward Madison. "Can't we?"

"I wanna' do it!" Madison exclaimed determinedly. "I can do it myself!"

"No!" Jessica told her in no uncertain terms. "And no more arguing about it or I'll send you to your room until Daddy gets home."

Madison stared at her mother, fuming, but she didn't say another word. "Just watch her," Jessica told him.

While Caleb played in the middle of the floor and Melody sat on the floor watching him, Jasmine picked up the large bunch of fresh carrots and separated a few. He set two of them on the cutting board and grabbed the knife. A moment later he was producing small pieces of carrots for Madison to move into one of the pots. He already had a decent pile by the time Jessica returned and set a pot on the table. "Looks good," Jessica noticed before leaving them alone again.

Now that the pot was there, Jasmine waited while Madison gradually moved all the cut carrots into it. With her very small hands, she was only grabbing a few at a time. Jasmine figured he could grab them all and put them into the pot in about two seconds, but with Madison, it took forever. When the pile was gone, he went back to cutting more carrots. Every few seconds, he had to wait while Madison automatically reached to grab the cut pieces before she should, but Jasmine said nothing about it and let her. He just tried to be very careful about the sharp knife in his hand. The task that shouldn't really take that long was made very long by Madison's slow tiny hands.

"Wouldn't it be easier," Jasmine suggested at one point, "if you let me get a little bit ahead of you?"

"No!" Madison declared without looking at him while she transferred the latest couple of carrot slices into the pot.

Jasmine shook his head and let it go. He said nothing at all to the couple of carrot pieces that he saw Madison stick into her mouth instead of the pot. The raw carrots did look really good, and after watching Madison eat a few more, he realized he was getting a bit hungry. But then he had found for the last few weeks that he was hungry more often than he used to be. Taking a cue from Madison,

he grabbed one of the slices and stuck it into his mouth too. Madison saw him do it and laughed, before grabbing another one for herself. "Okay," Jasmine told her, "we better get the rest into the pot or your Daddy won't have any!" The delighted smile on Madison's face made something in him jump. Darn, she was so cute too! Why would he think such things?

With Susan working on the roast, and Jasmine and Madison working on the vegetables, Jessica kept a sharp eye on not only her three kids, but Jasmine as well. She hadn't seen him much in the last few months, but there was no missing all the changes she saw in him now. To her, his whole body simply looked more feminine than he had that day when he had been to the store with his freshly pierced ears. There were other things she noticed as well. She seriously doubted that before, the child who was Jasmine today, would ever sit down on the floor to hug Melody or exclaim how adorable she was, which was totally true. Jessica was proud of how cute her two daughters were. And her son was going to be extra handsome as well. But then so was her husband. She smiled at the thought.

As she gathered the ingredients to throw a quick pie together for desert, she purposely moved closer to her sister-in-law. "Jas certainly seems to be perfectly at home in the kitchen," she said softly.

Susan briefly looked back to where Jasmine was working and talking with Madison. "He better be," Susan replied. "I don't let him out of anything. I've always done everything with his...you know, the other Jas, and if he has to be her, then he's going to learn to do it all. Properly!"

Jessica smiled. "It looks like she's off to a pretty good start."

Susan looked back at Jasmine again for a moment. He seemed perfectly comfortable and happy with what he was doing. "Yeah," she agreed. "He is."

"I noticed that he's looking a lot more feminine now than even the last time I saw him," Jessica said. "And in the store, I couldn't help but notice how much...Jimmy has changed as well. How do either of them manage anymore when they have to be themselves?"

Susan sighed. "I guess they're doing okay. Jasmine...I mean Jimmy, well, the one who's behind you right now, he can't hide the hairdo of course, and his face is changing more than I'm happy about, but I haven't heard of any other problems he's having, other than with his sister. And as for Jasmine...um...the real Jasmine, she puts a couple of bows or hairclips in her hair, and with some makeup, she still manages to look pretty good."

Jessica nodded. "I guess the makeup would help a lot." She turned briefly back to look at Jasmine and Madison, then went back to her pie. "How much makeup does this Jasmine need now to look like a girl?"

It was a moment before Susan answered. "Not as much as he used to, *if any* anymore," she added, frustrated and unhappy over the situation.

"Tee-tee! Tee-tee!" the tiny voice shouted from behind them.

Jessica turned quickly and saw her youngest daughter standing right behind her. "You've got to go tee-tee? What a big girl you are!" she praised the toddler who she was trying to wean out of diapers. She knew she had to get her daughter to the potty chair in the bathroom quickly, but just then her hands were full and a mess. "Oh darn," she muttered.

"Tee-tee, Mommy. Tee-tee," the little girl cried more urgently.

"Okay, dear," Jessica replied, trying to figure out the fastest way to stop what she was doing and clean her hands so she could take care of her daughter. Her eyes fell on Jasmine who had turned to watch. "Jasmine," she said quickly. "Can you please take her to the bathroom for me? My hands are a mess." Before Jasmine could reply, she added. "Quickly! Things like this can't wait."

Jasmine set the knife down out of Madison's reach and started for the door leading to the hallway.

"Take her by the hand," Jessica told him. "And hurry!"

Jasmine went over to Melody and grabbed her hand, turned her and tried to get her to hurry toward the bathroom.

"Her potty chair is next to the toilet. You can't miss it," Jessica yelled after him. "And make sure you wipe her real well before you pull her clothes back up!"

Susan watched it all with wide open eyes. "That was surprising," she said as Jasmine and Melody disappeared from sight.

"Yeah. Melody still missis more often than she manages to let us know when she has to go, so we've got to be quick about it every time."

"No," Susan replied. "I mean, that you asked Jasmine to do it for you."

Jessica smiled slyly. "I figured she has to learn these things sometime. Why not now? Besides, even if Melody doesn't make it, there's no real harm." She turned back around to check on her other two kids again. Caleb was still sitting playing in the middle of the floor. But... "Madi! Don't touch that knife!" To her relief, she watched as Susan went over and took the sharp knife from the table.

"But I wanna do it!" Madison insisted.

"No, Madi. I told you that already."

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The potty chair couldn't be missed in the bathroom, even in as large a bathroom as they were in. Trying to figure out what he needed to do, Jasmine watched Melody struggle desperately for a moment to pull her pants down, but she wasn't managing very well. He quickly moved in and pulled them down for her, revealing a diaper underneath. But the diaper didn't have any tapes to pull apart like the one he had put on her that one time he had to change her diaper at Thanksgiving. He quickly realized this diaper was a pull up kind and he yanked that down too. Melody tried to head for her potty, but with everything down around her ankles, she couldn't. Jasmine had to pick her up, turn her around, and set her down on the thing. Then he stood back to watch while the little girl laughed.

"Tee-tee," Melody said again, this time delightedly.

Jasmine had never seen a girl pee before. And the only times he had seen that part of a girl naked, was his sister in Uncle Brian's doctor's office, and Melody that time at Thanksgiving when he had diapered her. But now he was a little shocked to watch the pee

coming straight out of that slit between her legs as she sat on the potty chair.

"Tee-tee," Melody said again.

"Yes, I see," Jasmine replied, unable to take his eyes off of what was happening. It was over amazingly quickly and Melody immediately started squirming to get up. Jasmine picked her up and set her on her feet. He reached for the toilet paper and pulled out a small length of it. Very carefully, he used it to wipe the little girl in a place he felt very uncomfortable even looking at. He pulled up her diaper and pulled up her pants. "There you go," he told her and watched as Melody took off at a run. He was about to go after her, when his eyes caught sight of the potty chair again. He looked into it. There was pee collected in the bottom of it. Not sure about what he should do, he quickly figured out how to remove the pan that held the pee. He emptied it into the toilet and flushed it away. And before leaving the bathroom, he washed his hands extra well.

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"Tee-tee, Mommy. Tee-tee," Melody yelled as she ran delightedly into the kitchen.

"Did my big girl go tee-tee in the potty?" Jessica asked.

"Tee-tee, Mommy," Melody said again. "Oh what a good girl you are," Jessica praised her again. She bent down and wrapped an arm around her daughter for a brief hug, being very careful not to touch her with her messy hands. She released her daughter and stood up again. Jasmine still hadn't come back to the kitchen. "I guess it went okay," she said to Susan.

"Evidently," Susan agreed.

It was a few moments before Jasmine returned. "Any trouble?" Jessica asked as he came into the kitchen.

"No. No problems at all."

"Good," Jessica replied. "Oh, we had to move your knife to keep it out of...you know who's hands! It's on the counter here."

"Uh...thanks," Jasmine replied.

"Did you wash your hands?" Susan asked.

"Thoroughly," Jasmine told her.

“Then see if you can finish getting those carrots cut up and into the pot...despite Madison.”

Jasmine retrieved the knife and went back to the table where he had been working. Madison was still there, but this time she had both Barbie dolls in her hands and she was playing with them. He said nothing at all as he went back to cutting up the carrots. The pile of carrot slices grew, but Madison made no move to put them into the pot while she played with her dolls. When he finished cutting, he grabbed all the carrots and stuck them into the pot himself. He was afraid that Madison would complain, but she barely noticed. “Where do you want these?” he asked Jessica as he picked up the pot.

“On the stove please,” Jessica told him.

He started for the stove, and nearly fell as he just barely avoided tripping over Caleb where he was playing on the floor. Carefully making his way around both Caleb and Melody, he continued on and deposited the pot on the stove top. “What now?” he asked.

Jessica looked around. “Do you think you can fix some baked potatoes?”

Jasmine shrugged. “Sure. How many?”

Jessica consulted with Susan on the matter, then told him, “Seven! There’s butter in the fridge, and aluminum foil to wrap them in the pantry with the bag of potatoes. Everything else you need should be on the counter.”

Jasmine made several trips to the pantry to bring everything he needed back to the table. With each trip, it seemed he had to go around the kids playing on the floor. They really needed a better place to play where they would be out of the way. At least Madison was happy playing with her dolls at the table.

Jessica finished preparing her pie to put in the oven and as she glanced around to check on her kids, she also saw Jasmine standing and working at the table. “Jas,” she said, “you don’t have to stand there. “You can sit down if you want.”

Jasmine looked at her, then shrugged. But he pulled out the kitchen chair next to him and sat.

“Jasmine!” Susan’s voice lashed immediately.

Jasmine was on his feet again in an instant. “Sorry, Mom,” he muttered just before he swept his skirt under him with one hand,

pressed his knees together, and sat down again.

"You remember what I told you earlier!" Susan told him sternly.

He was facing away from his mother, so she couldn't see him rolling his eyes again. "Yes, Mom," he said yet again as he went back to working on the potatoes.

"What was all that about?" Jessica asked quietly as she heard Madison giggling in the background.

"He may look like a girl," Susan replied, "but he simply refuses to act the part. It may not be much, but I'm doing my best to try to get him to move and behave a bit more femininely. And I'm about at my wits end to get the point across."

"Does it matter?" Jessica asked.

"Let me put it this way," Susan replied. "What would you think if you saw a nice looking woman out somewhere, but she moved and acted totally like a man?"

"Hm!" Jessica grunted. "I'd think it was one of those crossdresser types. A man dressed up like a woman."

"Exactly!" Susan exclaimed. "I'm trying to save him some of that embarrassment. Besides, even his girlfriends have complained about it."

"Girlfriends?"

"Jasmine's usual mob of cousins. The four of them, despite which Jasmine is being part of them, are still pretty much inseparable. Although I keep hearing bits and pieces now that the four have somehow become five to include both Jimmy and Jas."

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While his mother and Aunt Jessica talked in the background, Jasmine prepared and wrapped potatoes in aluminum foil, getting them ready for the oven. As he worked, he watched Madison still playing with her two Barbie dolls.

"I'm going hunting," Madison said in a deep voice as she shook one of the dolls. "You need to kill a turkey so we can have it for dinner," she said in a high pitch voice as she shook the other doll.

"No!" Jasmine exclaimed quickly. "Don't shoot the poor little turkey."

“But we have to have one for dinner,” Madison replied in the deep voice again as she shook that doll.

“But turkeys are nice. It’s wrong to kill the poor little animals,” Jasmine played.

On the other side of the kitchen, Susan watched the two of them playing back and forth. She shook her head. It didn’t sound like her real son was going to be interested in going hunting any time soon.

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There weren’t that many of them, but there were enough that with all the people sitting at the big dining room table, and with all the commotion because of the young kids, dinner seemed a lot like Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner at Grandpa and Grandma’s house, only with less people. Jasmine helped his Aunt Jessica set the table, but Susan made sure that Jasmine sat next to her when they all sat down to eat. And Jasmine barely got into his seat when Susan was on his case about how he sat. “Jasmine!” Susan’s voice lashed. “You sit properly, or I swear I’ll tie your knees together right here and now.”

Jasmine wanted to scream. Couldn’t he ever get a break? He stood up again and sat down properly, holding his skirt under him and making sure his knees were together through the whole operation.

“Don’t push that chair under too far,” Susan told him. “I’m going to be checking those knees all through dinner.”

“Yes Mom,” Jasmine replied, totally frustrated with his stupid life. He noticed everyone at the table looking worriedly at him as if there was something major wrong. Everyone looked worried except Jimmy, who was doing her best not to laugh. Jasmine sat straight in his chair like his mother had so often lectured him to do, and he did his best to keep his knees pressed together, even though nobody could see them under the darn table! Ugh!

Jessica watched the whole exchange with more interest than most. From her seat between Melody and Caleb, she had a very good view of both Jasmine and Jimmy. With three young kids, much of her mealtime was spent tending to their needs, but there were a

few long spans when she did get a chance to eat and talk with everyone else.

No surprise, the men started talking about hunting and guns. She remembered that Clint and Susan had bought Jimmy a new gun for Christmas, even though she was sure that it really went to the wrong child. But in their conversation, she didn't hear the gun mentioned. And...she had a personal reason to want to hear about that gun. When a small chance in the conversation gave her the opportunity, she asked, "Jimmy, was it you that got a new rifle for Christmas this year? Or was that Elliot?"

Jimmy's face broke into a broad smile. "No, I got it. Well...I mean Jas...I mean...um...no, I got it."

Jessica smiled. Obviously it was awfully difficult even for the twins to talk about themselves. "Have you had a chance to try it yet?" The delighted answer she got back was wonderful to hear... sort of. But Jimmy's answer was only part of why she had asked the question. And the moment Jimmy ended telling about how great the new gun was, Jessica turned to Jasmine and asked, "And didn't I hear that you got a new sewing machine for Christmas? How is it?"

Jasmine blushed a bit before answering. "Yeah," he replied. "I guess it really is pretty nice. A lot better than trying to sew all that stuff by hand."

"And are you still working on things for your fashion show?"

For *his* fashion show? More like his stupid sister's fashion show. But the only way he could answer was, "Yeah. Still working. But it's going a whole lot better with that sewing machine than without it."

"That's wonderful to hear," Jessica replied before getting up to pick up the bottle that Melody had "accidently on purpose" dropped to the floor again.

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With dinner over, it was only right that Susan and Jasmine spend a few minutes helping to clean everything up. But once everything had been brought into the kitchen from the dining room table, Jessica asked Jasmine if he would mind spending a few minutes

playing with Madison and Melody, and she asked Jimmy to see if she could occupy Caleb for a few minutes. With Clint and Jack talking avidly somewhere else, that left her and Susan alone in the kitchen to talk. "I must say," Jessica said as Susan rinsed dishes and handed them to her to stack in the dishwasher, "the differences in the twins now are more than I imagined. You really can't miss it anymore."

It wasn't exactly the kind of thing Susan wanted to be reminded of. "They're starting to change a bit more now," she replied, "but thankfully it's not that much yet."

"Not much? Goodness! I looked at the two of them today, and for the life of me, I can't figure out how...Jimmy, the real Jimmy, can dress like a boy anymore. I mean, his face...his whole body looks more feminine than it used to. And I can tell that even though I don't get to see him all that often. And the same thing with Jasmine. To be honest, she doesn't look much like a girl anymore either."

"It's the haircut," Susan told her. "Jimmy too. It makes a big difference."

"I'm sure it does," Jessica replied, but I'm looking beyond the hair. I mean, Jasmine's voice is even lower now than Jimmy's. And I went out of my way during dinner to listen to both of them talking, just so I could confirm it."

Susan stopped dead and just stared at Jessica for a moment. What do you mean her voice is lower than his?"

"Just what I said. Your real daughter's voice is now lower...kind of deeper...than your real son's voice. I first noticed it earlier, and at dinner tonight I asked them both some questions just so I could hear their voices right after each other. Are you going to hand me that plate?"

Susan gave her the plate, but didn't move to grab any other dishes. "I...I hadn't noticed the change in their voices," she said tentatively. "Are you sure?"

Jessica nodded. "I'm sure. Like I said, I even went out of my way to listen to them during dinner."

Susan turned away from her and wrung her hands.

"Hey," Jessica said softly, coming behind her and placing an arm around her shoulder. "You knew this was one of the things that

could happen.”

Susan nodded a bit, but it was a small sob that left her throat. Jessica hugged her harder and she sobbed again. “I keep seeing little things in both of them, and I keep hoping I’m just imagining it. I keep praying I’m imagining it. But I know there have been some changes. My God...I’m going to have to take Jimmy shopping for some bras pretty soon. His breasts are growing to the point now where he’s not going to be able to wear those double ‘A’ bras of his sister’s much longer. And Jasmine...” She sobbed again.

Jessica led her sister-in-law over to the kitchen table where she pulled out one of the chairs for Susan to sit in. She took another chair and pulled it closer.

Susan’s eyes were moist, but she looked at Jessica. “The reason that I had to take Jimmy...my...um...the real Jasmine shopping for clothes today, is because her shoulders and body are filling out and getting bigger, kind of like Tommy’s did when he started growing. Jessica, she’s starting to look more like a boy than a girl!” She sobbed again.

Jessica took her hand in hers. “You knew these were all things that could happen. Things that would most likely happen.”

“But that doesn’t mean I *want* them to happen. I don’t! I don’t want it at all!” She sobbed again. “I want my kids back. My *real* kids!”

Jessica said nothing but just let her be for a moment before saying. “But at the same time, I couldn’t help noticing that you’re still pushing Jimmy...your real son... pretty hard to act like a girl.”

Susan stared at her sister-in-law with moist eyes for a moment. “Oh Jessica,” Susan said. “I had a daughter. A beautiful, beautiful daughter. Now...I don’t know what I have. And I just want her back again.”

“So you’re pushing your son hard? Trying to replace your real daughter with him?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m not! Well, not really. Well...maybe...maybe a little,” she admitted. “But what I really want is my right kids back. I want them both back the way they’re supposed to be.”

“But Jasmine still refuses to quit hunting.”

Susan was obviously upset over the issue. “We keep trying to convince her, try to make her see what’s happening. But she refuses to see or believe any of it. *You* can see what’s happening. You saw the changes in both of them. You see it, and I see it. Everyone sees it except Jasmine. She’s still refusing to believe anything’s happening to her at all. She’s got to be the most hard-headed...pig-headed girl ever! And sometimes I think all she really cares about is herself!”

Susan wiped her eyes with her hands. “So many times we’ve tried to make her give in. Tried to make her quit hunting, and every time she’s gone all stubborn again and refused.”

“Susan,” Jessica said. “Do you think there’s any chance that Jasmine really wants to be a boy instead? I mean, for real?”

Susan shook her head. “No. She doesn’t. I’m very sure of that. That’s a lot of what we keep pushing at her, showing her what she’s missing. And each time she goes nearly crazy with wanting to do the things all her friends are doing again. But each and every time, she backs down and refuses to give in. She wants to be a girl, but she won’t quit this stupid hunting business that the family doesn’t want.”

Jessica nodded. “I agree, it’s kind of a dumb thing. But it’s the way things have always been in our family, and it’s the way everyone seems to want to keep things too. Especially Dad.”

Susan nodded. “I know there are women out there who like to hunt. So what? That’s fine as far as I’m concerned. Let them. I don’t know, maybe it’s even fun – for them. But it’s not something I’m interested in doing at all.”

“Me either,” Jessica agreed, “and look at the family I grew up in.”

Susan smiled for the first time in a while. “When Jasmine grows up, maybe she’ll marry someone and move off. She can go hunting with him for all I care. I just know that the family here doesn’t want to hear about it. But that’s all in the future. My problem is here and now. Jasmine seems to want to hunt so badly that even if we let the kids go back to being themselves, full time, then I have no doubt at all that she’ll sneak off and grab a gun and just go. And Jessica, she’s just a child. She could get hurt out there. Even the guys rarely

go by themselves. And they're always talking about things out there that are dangerous. Jessica, my daughter could get hurt out there! Especially if she sneaks off alone, which I know she will if we don't let her keep hunting once in a while. She could get hurt...or worse!"

Jessica stared at Susan. "I know it's dangerous," she agreed. "Heck, how many times have we killed snakes right on our own doorsteps?"

Susan rolled her eyes. "There are times of the year you don't take two steps outside without looking first. Or even step out the door for that matter. But we've all grown up with little problems like that. Even me."

Jessica nodded. "Yeah, I know. You're a farm girl through and through. At least, you used to be."

Susan almost laughed. "Some farm girl. My vegetable garden last year was half the size it usually is."

Jessica smiled, glad to see Susan coming out of her depression. "So make it bigger next year again. But the point is, the land the family lives on can be dangerous. And I think you're right being worried about Jasmine going out there by herself. And even though the rest of us don't like it, maybe the family is right about this. Maybe it is the only way to make her see that she shouldn't be hunting. At least not right now. As you said, what happens when she gets older and moves off to start a family of her own, well, what's to say she can't hunt then? But in the meantime, maybe it's best to do everything we can to keep her from going. At least this way, if she's insisting on hunting, then at least someone will always be with her to look out for her."

Susan nodded. "And so we're back to square one. Nothing's changed."

"Except the twins. They're changing into each other."

Susan sighed with frustration. "And I still hate each and every last little thing that's happening."

"But Susan, with all the changes taking place now, maybe Jasmine will finally be able to see what's really going on. Maybe she'll finally see it and agree to quit hunting."

Susan stared at her for a moment, but there was skepticism written all over her face. "We can only hope. We do keep hoping!

But somehow Jessica, I doubt it's going to happen. That girl is just too...stubborn!"

Chapter 36 - Holy Trial

February 22nd

Jasmine hated church. In the past, before he had to be his sister every weekend, he hadn't really minded it that much. They rarely went so it was something that was somewhat tolerable. But now, now that he had to be his sister all the time, he hated it. It was as if the full weight of Reverend Cosinger's wrath was aimed right at him, every single week, through each entire service. And worse, now that he had to be his sister most of the time, they were going to church every single week, when by his estimation, church should be a place to avoid. But no. According to the powers that ruled his life, which was just about everyone, the whole family was stuck going week after week. Well, most of the family. More often than not, his lucky sister got out of it because she was out hunting on a lot of Sundays like she was today.

Was it worth going against everything he hated and didn't want to do, go out hunting and kill a bunch of helpless animals for no reason at all, just so he could get out of going to church? He was starting to feel like it. But in the end, him going hunting wasn't going to do him the least bit of good. His dumb sister had to finally agree to stop hunting, and he knew perfectly well now that that was never going to happen. So he had no choice but to sit through church, week after week, and let Reverend Cosinger yell at him. Sometimes, he still felt like standing up and giving the Reverend a piece of his mind. It would serve him right!

Depressed, he sat down at his sister's desk to wait until it was time to leave. He was all dressed for church, once again a bit too colorfully for his taste, but then all the outfits his sister put together for him were too colorful for what he liked, which would be invisible if he could somehow manage it.

With an elbow propped on the desk, he rested his head dejectedly in his hand. His eyes glanced from the desk contents to

the large mirror mounted behind the desk. He looked like a girl. He hated looking at himself. Even in the past, before all the problems he was facing now were dropped on him, he had never bothered to look at himself much in a mirror. What would be the point? Who cared how he looked? He certainly never did. Not really anyway. But life was different for him now. A lot different. Now he was forced to look at his reflection day in and day out. Often many times a day.

His eyes stayed locked on his reflected image for a few moments before he forced himself to look away. His eyes fell down to the desk again. His sister's laptop was closed. He could surf the internet for a few minutes, but he didn't really feel like it. His eyes wandered over all the makeup and lingered on the many small bottles of colorful nail polish. His nails were glittery purple again. Most of them. His sister's instructions had been for him to paint the ring finger of each hand in yellow instead. He wondered why. He seriously considered not doing it, but somehow the yellow nail polish had wound up on those fingers anyway. It was done now, even though he didn't really care for the look.

From the nail polish, his eyes wandered over to his sister's jewelry box. He was wearing a large ring with a purple crystal on his right hand and a tiny ring with a small yellow crystal on his left. Two different gold bracelets dangled from his left wrist and he was wearing a gold pendant necklace around his neck. His ears held the blue studs he wore fairly often. Not thinking about what he was doing, his hand reached out and lifted the lid on the jewelry box. Inside, it looked like a pile of junk. Nothing was organized. Everything was just all thrown in together. A bunch of shiny bright objects all rolled up into one big lump. That's what it looked like to him.

Strangely, there were a number of things in that pile of junk that caught his eye. Shiny things with colors, patterns, and shapes that were oddly interesting, oddly pleasing. His hand reached into the pile and plucked out a long shiny shape that seemed more interesting than some of the others. Once free of the rest of the things, he quickly saw that it was an earring. He removed his head from his hand and searched through the junk until he found the matching one. He held them up to look at them. They were...

interesting. Something about the way they looked pleased him. He didn't know why he liked the way they looked, but they interested him.

He set one of them down on the desk and took the other one and held it up against his ear as he looked at his face in the mirror again. He had never worn a pair of earrings yet that dangled. All the earrings he ever seemed to wear were studs. He knew though that with newly pierced ears the stud style was better for him for the first few months. In truth though, he wasn't interested in wearing any other styles. In real truth, he wasn't interested in wearing earrings period. How long would it take for the holes in his ears to close up after his sister quit hunting? The answer was obvious. Never, because she wasn't ever going to quit hunting.

With his hand holding the earring up to his ear, it was hard to see what the earring would look like there. His hand was in the way. Curious though, he took the wire from the earring and hooked it over the top of the blue crystal in his ear, trying to get it to balance and stay there so he could see better.

"What'cha doin'?"

He turned abruptly and saw his mother walking in. The earring that had been precariously hooked over top of his blue stud went flying to the floor. "Um...nothing," he replied, embarrassed that she had probably seen him.

Susan walked in, reached down, and picked up the earring. "That's a nice one," she commented. "Very pretty."

Before Jasmine could get out of his chair, she came over to him and started removing the earring from his left ear. A moment later, she hooked the dangly gold earring through the hole in that ear. Then she went around to his other ear and repeated the process with the matching earring. "Very nice," she declared. "Ready for church?"

"You mean, I should leave them on?" he asked, immediately noticing that he could feel the earrings move with each tiny movement of his head.

"Of course. Why not? They're really a lot prettier than the ones you were wearing. Now get your coat and let's go," she said as she

started to walk out. “And later, after we get home, you can plan on spending the day with your knees tied together again.”

Jasmine nearly died as he heard that and watched his mother walk out of the room. It was only then that he realized he hadn't bothered worrying about the way he was sitting. But damn it. He had just sat that way because he had been alone – and bored!

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Week in and week out, Reverend Cosinger stood watching the people come into his church. He was always interested to see who came in, always interested to get a friendly comment or two from the ones who bothered to come talk to him before the service started. But lately, week in and week out, he was there instead watching and waiting for the McCombers to arrive. Two McCombers in particular. The first of course was Jacob. The other was Jacob's grandson Jimmy, who now came to church every single week dressed as his sister, and who looked too much like a real girl lately. Such blasphemy! Right here in God's church. Week in and week out!

It angered the Reverend to no end. There was no doubt in his mind at all that Jacob was making the boy do it, just for the purpose of making him angry, just for the purpose of inventing a way to get rid of him. The manipulation only fueled his anger, but he wasn't going to give in over it. Never! God would back him up if he just stayed true to his calling. God would back him up and God himself would eventually deal with Jacob McComber – and all the rest of the McComber clan. God had sent the McCombers to be his one big trial in life. His one big test to show his true faith. God had sent them...or the devil had.

And there he was, the devil himself. Jacob McComber. Walking into the church with his wife like he owned it. Well Jacob McComber didn't own the church. God did! Jacob just acted like he owned the church...and everything else. Damn the man – soon!

The familiar white furry coat coming through the door was the usual herald to the other part of the problem. The abomination itself had arrived. If the Reverend didn't already know better, he would have simply thought it was another young girl coming in. But he did

know better! He noted that once again the other twin was missing. What were they doing with the girl, denying her the right to hear God's word spoken truthfully? What kind of trash was the family filling her head with at home?

And then his eyes locked with the eyes of the abomination. Determined eyes. Eyes determined to punish him and get rid of him. The Reverend stared back with equal determination and saw those eyes become angrier. But the Reverend refused to back down, refused to give in. The McCombers were his holy trial. A trial he would face determinedly and never give in to. He continued to stare back at the blasphemous boy while the rest of his family talked with some of the others in the church.

And then, suddenly, the boy started removing his coat, as if he was determined to make him see how girlishly his family had dressed him. And it was quickly obvious that the family had gone out of their way to do just that. Overly bright clothing in a place where tasteful modesty should reign supreme! And...was the skirt the boy was wearing a bit too short? He wasn't sure if he could truthfully say that since many of the girls often wore fairly short skirts, but he had no doubt that the family was probably pushing that issue too.

He saw the mother, Susan, turn to the boy and speak to him. The boy seemed to back down some, but their eyes remained locked on each other. He saw the mother speak to him again, and finally the blasphemous boy turned away, but as he continued to watch, he saw the boy's head swing again and again in his direction. Those eyes still holding all too much hatred.

And then everything changed with the arrival of another girl. Olivia. Another of the McCombers. Her last name might not be McComber but she was a McComber through and through. At least with her arrival, the staring match seemed to have ended. He watched as the two of them talked, much like any other two girls. He even saw Olivia reach up and touch one of the abomination's earrings. What were these people up to? What were they playing at?

In disgust, he turned away to start getting ready for the service, but his mind was filled with thoughts of the evil that was already far

too prominent inside his church.

The service started like all the others. But it was only at the start, as he stood in front of everyone there, that the Reverend noticed that there were more people in his church than usual. He had been so intent on the blasphemy that now “decorated” the middle of his church that he hadn’t noticed how many others had come in. The increase in people pleased him, unlike the blight in his church that he couldn’t seem to get rid of. The blight that was usually a bright white furry spot, but was instead today a multicolored blaring of femininity, placed there just to make the abomination in his church even worse than usual.

As he made the morning announcements and welcomed the newcomers, his eyes fell to Jacob McComber, right there in the first pew as usual. And the blasted man was simply staring up at him with a smile on his face. A smile that the Reverend was sure was there only to mock him. Over and over again, as he went through the various parts of the service, he looked to Jacob McComber first, and then automatically back to the blight of the boy that was dressed as a girl. It was only by force of will that he ever looked anywhere else at the congregation that was obviously larger than usual. And not larger because of an increase in McCombers. But even the new people couldn’t keep his eyes pulled away from the blasphemous boy for very long.

When the time for his sermon came, he again stood there and surveyed the people. But as usual, his gaze was magnetically pulled briefly to Jacob then far more forcefully back to the blight. A blight he simply couldn’t overlook. As it did each week, the blight fueled his anger. The more he had to look at it, the angrier he got. His eyes often scanned down to his notes to remind him of what point he wanted to talk about next, but when he brought his head up again, his head automatically went to the blight in the midst of all those people. And he didn’t care if he was preaching harder to that boy than to the others. Maybe some of it would sink in that way. Unfortunately, so far, it didn’t seem to be working.

But the McCombers were his holy trial, and he wasn’t about to give in, or give up. Instead, he determinedly gave them his all!

After the service, he was pleased to stand at the door and welcome all the new people, as well as some of his old congregation that hadn't been out since Christmas. And he was also pleased to receive so many nice comments on his sermon. A sermon he barely remembered giving, other than having to stare at that colorful bit of total sin throughout it.

As he shook yet another friendly hand, his eyes noticed the abomination and his family moving quickly out of the church. None of them even bothered trying to shake his hand. He was glad. He wouldn't have shook Clint McComber's hand for anything in the world.

A few minutes later, the man himself was there. Last as usual. The man and his wife. He had no problem with Rose McComber, other than that she was simply another McComber and damned for eternity. It was Jacob that he hated with such a passion. There was no getting out of shaking his hand, so he didn't even try.

"Reverend," Jacob said. "You are simply getting better and better every single week! I can't wait to hear you speak next week." With a nod of his head and a smile, Jacob concluded with, "We'll see you then."

Reverend Cosinger watched Jacob and his wife walk off as his parting words rang in his ears. 'We'll see you then.' Indeed! He turned and nearly ran into his wife.

"Jordan, did you see all the new people today?" she mentioned delightedly.

Reverend Cosinger did his best to smile at his wife. "Of course I did."

"And some others that don't usually come were here too."

"I noticed," he replied as he turned to walk her back into the church.

"Your sermon was extra good today," she told him. "In fact, they've been getting better and better. I have no doubt that it's the reason more people are starting to come."

He shook his head. "Maybe," he conceded. In truth, he didn't know if it was that, or if more people were coming just to see a church, God's holy place, with a huge black spot of abomination right in the middle of it. That was the more likely reason more people

were there. They were waiting for more fireworks between him and Jacob McComber, the devil himself! But this was his holy trial. His test of faith from God...or Satan. And he wasn't about to waver one bit from his holy path.

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"I...don't...want...to go to church...anymore!" Jasmine stated angrily as they got into the car.

Clint looked to his wife at the comment. "I don't blame you," he replied as he started the car. He was more than a bit perturbed as well.

"I have to agree with you too," Susan said. "The Reverend was getting a bit disturbing at times."

"I don't know," Tommy spoke up. "I thought he was kind of funny."

"Funny?" Susan asked incredulously.

"Oh yeah. I mean, he gets all worked up when he talks, and his face turns all red, and he pounds his hand on stuff all the time, and he yells a lot."

"But he's yelling at me!" Jasmine replied.

"So what? I still think he's funny."

Clint shook his head as he drove out of the parking lot. "I don't know why Dad is still insisting we go every week."

"I noticed he doesn't care as much about the rest of the family going," Susan mentioned. "It's just us."

"Yeah, I noticed. The rest of the family members who were there today, were most of the ones who do go every week."

"If the Reverend is going to continue to act like that towards us, then I'd rather not go at all."

"Me either," Clint replied. "I'll talk to Dad about it. We don't need this kind of aggravation every week."

Jasmine was certainly glad to hear that. He didn't ever want to go to church again! But now that that had been settled, it was time to try for something else. "Mom, can I go out to the hill with my friends when we get home?"

"No dear," Susan replied. "Uncle Brian wants to see you before lunch to get another blood sample from you. He'll do your...um... brother, when she gets home later. Then after that, you'll be spending the rest of the day with your knees tied together again."

"Oh Mom..."

"Jas, I've told you a thousand times, I'm at my wit's end with you over this. You're going to learn to behave properly if it kills you!"

"I'd rather sit through another of Reverend Cosinger's sermons," he muttered.

"That can be arranged too," Susan replied.

Jasmine sat silently in the back seat, fuming over his lot in life. It wasn't fair. None of it was fair! It seemed like God had come down on him and decided to make his life a total miserable mess, all because he didn't want to kill some animals. Didn't the bible say, "Thou shalt not kill?" So why was God punishing him so badly for it? It wasn't fair. And then God sent Reverend Cosinger to yell at him for it, week in and week out! What had he done that was so bad to deserve that? Nothing that he could see. All because he didn't want to kill any more animals. All because he...was too afraid.

Chapter 37 - Name That Smile

February 23rd

“You remember what you promised!”

Jasmine turned his head and saw his sister standing at the open doorway to his room...actually her room, but...well lately he wasn't sure exactly whose room it really was, but he was using it more often now than she was. “What promise?” he asked.

“All those promises you made when I gave you Cleo last week.”

“That was a week ago!”

“So? It doesn't matter. You promised!”

Jasmine rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. I remember,” he said somewhat disgustedly.

“So I better not see any of that stupid mean attitude of yours today,” Jimmy told him. “You promised to smile whenever you're being me, and that's what I want to see on your face from now on!”

“Go away,” *Jasmine* replied. “I've got to finish getting ready for school.”

“And what else did you promise?” Jimmy asked, having no intention of leaving yet.

“What else?”

“Yeah. What else?”

Jasmine had to think for a minute. “You wanted me to model clothes for you so you could design better,” he replied.

“That's one thing, but there was more. What else?”

He tried to think. “Um...oh yeah, the dolls,” he said. “You were going to show me something about some of your dolls I think.”

“That's right,” she said. “And what else?”

“There was more?”

“You know there was. One big important thing.”

“You mean besides smiling once in a while?”

“Smiling *all the time*! Now what was the last thing?”

Again he rolled his eyes. “Go away.”

"What was the last thing?" she demanded, coming angrily into the room. She stopped only a few feet away from him where he glared back at her without speaking. "What was the last thing?" she demanded once again.

"Go to hell," he muttered as he grabbed his coat and slipped it on.

She reached out and grabbed his arm and pulled him around to face her. "What was the last thing?" she demanded once again.

Jasmine realized he wasn't going to win this argument. "I have to admit I'm a sissy," he replied.

"That's right!" Jimmy replied, backing off her threatening manner a bit. "Just you don't forget it!"

"What the hell's gotten into you today?" Jasmine asked, totally irritated over his sister's manner.

"Nothing!" Jasmine replied more angrily than Jasmine figured she should. "You just remember. I'll be watching you."

"Yeah, yeah. Now let me finish getting ready."

With another angry glare, Jimmy left him.

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Susan planted a light kiss on Tommy's cheek and watched him walk out the door to go to school. She knew he was anxious to get out of the house because as soon as the door was opened he saw Elliot standing out in the road waiting for him. He was gone but where were her other two? "Jimmy! Jasmine!" she called. "It's time for school!"

"Coming Mom," one of the voices replied. But oddly, she wasn't sure which one of them had said it. A moment later, Jimmy came into the family room. She looked her over. Once again Susan's stomach lurched at seeing her daughter looking more like a boy than a girl. In fact, there wasn't all that much girl to be seen in her anymore. And that fact hurt. She kissed her the same way she had kissed Tommy and a moment later, Jimmy walked out as well. "Jasmine!" she yelled.

"I'm right here," Jasmine replied, hurrying into the room.

"Where've you been?" she asked.

“Getting ready!”

Susan noticed that the green stud earrings he had worn to breakfast had been replaced now with a different pair that dangled. She wondered what brought that change on. She said nothing about it though as she gave her son, who looked like a girl, a big hug and a kiss on his cheek. Then she stood back and let him leave. As he usually did before school though, she watched him pause at the doorway. Her disappointment was already hitting her over the facial expression she expected him to assume. The facial expression that took all the prettiness out of his face.

Jasmine stood at the doorway, intending on grabbing the attitude he needed to get him through the day. But standing just outside on the sidewalk, looking right back at him, was Jimmy. Damn her! And he had promised. Not having much of a choice, he did his best to “fight” some kind of a smile onto his face before walking through the door to go to school. It was a smile, but as he carefully went down the icy front steps, he was trying to figure out how he could keep his “don’t mess with me” attitude, and still manage to smile. It was a bit of a problem.

Susan’s eyebrows were still raised as Jasmine reached the sidewalk and he and Jimmy walked out to the road together. Had she seen him smile instead of the angry scowl he always wore? A smile? And the change in earrings too? What was going on?

She closed the front door, still bewildered over it all. She had to get ready for work. They were meeting with the contractor today for the guest units they were building. Even though the ground was covered in snow, they were going to start staking out where they wanted to put the buildings. Construction would start just as soon as the weather warmed up enough. If it ever warmed up. So far, it seemed like they had had a record year for snowfall. But the new month would be here soon. A month that would mean warmer weather – finally. But that thought was also a very troubling one. It would be another month that would mean more changes for her twins. And her twins would seemingly almost never be themselves anymore. That was a very worrying and depressing thought.

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"You just remember," Jimmy said through clenched teeth as they got closer to their friends, "you keep smiling all day. All the time. Got it?"

Jasmine refused to answer. And he had no intention of actually smiling all the time. That would be totally stupid. He'd just do it when...there was a chance his sister might find out.

"Hey guys!" Nichole called as they got close.

"Hi Nichole," Jimmy replied brightly.

"Hey," Jasmine replied as well.

But Nichole's interest was totally on Jasmine. "Jas, are you actually smiling for once?"

Even though he didn't really want to, her question actually broadened his smile. "Maybe," he replied embarrassedly as he fought unsuccessfully to "reduce" the amount he was smiling.

"What's up? Why the sudden change?"

Jasmine now noted the others gathering around. He glanced briefly at Jimmy who was looking all too pleased. "Nothing's changed. I'm just trying to...um...smile a bit more."

"It's about time!" Allison exclaimed.

"So are you done trying to pick fights with everyone just by looking at them?" Nichole asked. "I hope!"

Jasmine wasn't really sure about that answer. "Um...maybe," he conceded. "We'll have to see."

"You better be done!" Jimmy told him.

He smiled broadly at Jimmy. "We'll see!" he said firmly.

As Jasmine climbed up on the bus, he was still worried about how the other kids would treat him if he didn't still show he was ready for anything they might throw at him. Since Jimmy was around, he continued to "try" to smile, but as his eyes searched the faces of all the kids already on the bus, he could see that, as usual, most of them were looking directly at him. He purposely paused before going into his seat. As he stood there, his eyes stopped to meet the eyes of every last kid that was looking at him. He somehow managed to keep smiling, but that "I dare you" attitude still came back and washed over him. But because of the forced smile, it came back with a difference.

He couldn't see it of course, but the result was a smiling face, with eyes that still dared anyone to cross him the wrong way. While not being really disturbing like his usual scowl had always been, it had a very strange effect. It didn't really detract from any possible prettiness in his face, but his eyes seemed to command attention. To others, it was more like he suddenly wanted everyone to pay attention to him, which in reality was the very last thing he wanted.

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Mrs. Ansley noticed the difference the moment Jasmine entered her classroom. She watched him as he walked across the front of the room with his girlfriends, heading toward his...his sister's...well, his desk. "Jasmine," she exclaimed as he was passing. "You look very nice today. And you look almost happy for once." She said it as she studied his face, but it was something about his eyes that seemed to capture her attention.

"Um...thanks," Jasmine replied before continuing on toward his seat.

From her desk, Olivia watched Jasmine as well. "Jas," she said before he could walk past her desk, "for once you don't look like you're out to kill everyone."

Jasmine stopped for a moment and shrugged. "Actually, I still am," he replied. "I'm...uh...trying not to show it as much."

"Good decision!" Olivia replied. "And Jas, you really do look so much better."

"Uh...thanks," he muttered before continuing on and taking his seat."

"Hi Jas," the girl who sat next to him said. "Hey, new earrings?"

"Um...they were in my...I mean my sister's jewelry box," he replied as he noticed Olivia turning around to join the conversation.

"Did you pick those out too?" Olivia asked. "Like the ones you wore to church yesterday, or did your sister put them out for you?"

Jasmine could feel his face turning red. Maybe changing his earrings wasn't a good idea. "Kind of," he replied embarrassedly.

"What does 'kind of' mean?" Olivia asked.

“Um...I just had this last minute thought about them, and decided to change them from the studs I was planning on wearing.” He didn’t add that the real reason he had decided to change earrings was because he had found the dangling ones he had worn the day before to be fun. Well, interesting anyway. Or maybe just different.

“In other words, you picked those out too.”

“Um...I guess so.”

Olivia smiled. “I like them. They’re pretty.”

As she was talking, Jasmine’s eyes noticed every bit of jewelry that Olivia was wearing. Her ears held very simple tiny studs but... “And I love your necklace,” he noted. “That’s not one you usually wear.”

Olivia was shocked. “You noticed?”

“Um...maybe.”

“You noticed!”

Jasmine shrugged. “So?”

Olivia’s smile broadened. “Maybe there’s hope for you yet.”

They were interrupted by Mrs. Ansley telling everyone to pull out their math books.

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Across the room, Jimmy was feeling very smug and satisfied. She had just convinced a few of the guys to talk to her stupid brother later and actually ask him again if he was a sissy. And this time, she had no doubt as to what her screwy brother’s answer would be. At least she knew what it better be. Because if he didn’t answer properly, she was going to go way out of her way to make his whole life a living hell!

And today she was in no mood at all for any kind of nonsense. Today she was simply having one of her “bitchy” days. She thought she knew what that might mean, but things didn’t always work out the way her mother had said they would, so she wasn’t really sure. As usual, it would be a case of wait and see, and hopefully it would all pass her by without any further problems to deal with. Of course, if she was a real boy, she wouldn’t have to even think about such

things. If her screwy brother wanted to be a girl that badly, let him have her periods! That would serve the dumb wuss right!

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There was no smile on Jasmine's face of course during class. And without having to keep his eternal "scowl at the world" attitude going all the time, Jasmine was more relaxed during class, with the exception of course of his legs. Since his mother seemed to be hitting the warpath extra hard lately over the issue, he was trying harder than ever to keep his legs together. It was simply...difficult to keep them that way all the time.

The new attitude automatically went back to his face as soon as he got up from his desk for their break. He and the other girls headed out to the girl's room, all of them now first going to find Olivia's mother so Jasmine could be escorted in. Jane met them out in the hallway as she usually did, but she was quick to notice the difference in Jasmine's face as well. She unconsciously noted that there was almost a look of importance about him, but what consciously registered the most, was the small smile and lack of angry scowl. "Jasmine," she said, "you look very nice today." She purposely didn't mention the lack of his usual bad attitude.

"Um...thanks," he replied.

"Must be the new earrings," Nichole teased as she elbowed him a bit.

Jasmine only rolled his eyes as they all headed for the girl's room together.

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Further down the hall, Jimmy stopped near a few of the guys she had recently come to know a bit better through the Mechanics Class. "Did you check out my screwy brother today?" she asked.

"Not really," one of the replied. "What about him?"

"He's finally embraced the fact that he's a total sissy. And he's even proud of it."

"Huh?" one of the guys exclaimed. "That would be different."

“Go ask him,” Jimmy suggested. “You’ll see. Do it. And I can guarantee that he won’t mind one bit.”

“Are you trying to start a fight or something?” one of them asked suspiciously.

“Me? Heaven’s no. Not at all. I’m only letting you know what’s going on with him. Just ask him.” With that, she purposely walked off to find her Uncle John so she could go to the bathroom.

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It was just before lunch when the first kids asked Jasmine about being a sissy. He was at his locker with Nichole digging into her own locker right next to him when it happened.

“Hey, uh...Jasmine.”

Jasmine turned and saw two of the boys from his class, coming toward him. He smiled, somewhat, at their approach, but he could still literally feel that determined attitude he tried to keep all the time washing through him stronger than ever. “Yeah?” he asked as the guys stopped in front of him.

“Um...your sister...um...you know, Jimmy?”

“Yeah?” Jasmine replied, already having a sneaking suspicion as to what they were about to ask.

“Well she...I mean he...uh...hey we’re not looking for a fight or anything, but he wanted us to ask you if you’ve really decided you’re a big sissy.”

Jasmine’s face clouded, but only momentarily. He forced a bigger smile onto his face as the determination became even more obvious in his eyes. “Oh yeah,” he said, the sarcasm literally dripping from his voice. “It’s totally true.”

The two guys just stared at him for a moment, then they both broke into big smiles. “Yeah right!” one of them laughed. “What the heck is your sister doing?”

“Same as always,” Jasmine replied. “Same as always.”

“Yeah right,” the guys agreed with a laugh and moved away.

“Wow,” Nichole said. “You handled that one really well. And you didn’t even come close to starting a fight.”

Jasmine was still watching the guys walk off. "It doesn't mean I wouldn't have been ready to fight them if I had to."

"I'm sooo glad you didn't!"

Jasmine looked at her and smiled a bit broader. "Me too." As they walked toward the lunchroom, he had to wonder if maybe he had just found a new way to deal with the problem. It might take a bit of trial and error to find out. But either way, he was still willing to fight if any of them so much as showed the least sign of giving him any real trouble.

Olivia was waiting for them in the hallway and the two girls soon became three. "What did the guys want?" Olivia asked as they started walking together.

"Jasmine here just avoided a fight – brilliantly!" Nichole told her.

"He did?" Olivia asked, leaning around Nichole to look at Jasmine. He was looking down at the floor, but he looked pretty proud of himself. "What happened?"

"Um...Jimmy again," Nichole explained.

"Not again!"

"It sure sounded like it. They even mentioned her by name."

"What are we going to do with her?"

"Hey guys," Nichole greeted them as Allison and Jimmy finally caught up to them in the lunch line. "You should have seen Jasmine here a few minutes ago."

"What happened?" Allison asked.

Jimmy wondered too, but she was hoping it had something to do with the rumors she was again trying to plant as heavily as possible.

"A couple of guys from our class came up and asked him about being a sissy again." She leveled a nasty look at Jimmy. "The same old stuff Jimmy here had been trying to spread before."

"Jimmy!" Allison exclaimed. "You're not back to that junk again are you?"

Jimmy shrugged. "If the shoe fits, wear it," she replied. But as soon as she said it, she was suddenly afraid for her friendship with the other girls again. Especially after the nasty look Allison leveled at her.

"Damn you!" Allison exclaimed. "You're being cruel again!" She purposefully turned away from Jimmy and looked back to Nichole,

“So what happened. I didn’t hear about any actual fights starting.”

“Nope,” Nichole replied. “No fight.”

“Didn’t Jas admit that he’s a sissy though?” Jimmy wanted to know.

Nichole looked at her best friend and scowled at her. “Actually, he did. He looked them right in the eyes and said he was, and when he did it, they clearly didn’t believe him! He was brilliant!”

“They didn’t believe him?” Jimmy asked, not wanting to believe it. “And he admitted to them that he *was* a sissy?”

“Um...I guess that’s about right?” Nichole replied.

“Geez!” Jimmy exclaimed. “Are all guys that dense?”

“Well you should know,” Allison told her. “You spend more time as a guy than...the real guy here.”

“I agree with Allison,” Olivia added. “You’re just being cruel again. I wish you’d stop it!”

“Me too!” Nichole added.

“We all do!” Allison echoed.

Once again, Jimmy was feeling worried about her friendships with all her very best friends. But what had happened with her screwy brother? Evidently he had indeed admitted that he was a sissy, but the guys didn’t believe him. And just look at him. He was looking more like a girl now than many of the real girls in school! What more did it take to get the point across to the stupid guys in the school?

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Tommy and Elliot picked up their lunch trays and headed for the bins to drop them off. Ahead of them, they saw Jasmine, Jimmy, Nichole, Allison, and Olivia at the bins getting rid of their trays. The five friends were moving off by the time Tommy and Elliot got to the bins. Once free of their trays, Tommy and Elliot turned, intending on going back to the same seats they always sat in until the lunch period was over. Ahead of them, they saw the pack of girls...and Jimmy, heading for the teacher’s table as they often did. Tommy knew they were going to find his aunt and uncle so that Jimmy and Jasmine could go to the bathroom. Talk about an inconvenience!

He didn't know how his brother put up with it. He didn't know how his brother put up with any of it! But so far, his brother Jimmy was managing just fine...he supposed.

As usual, Tommy saw the girls forced to break into a single file line to get between the tables. This time his brother, "Jasmine," was behind everyone else. But as he was passing a table full of guys that Tommy recognized from his own class, one of them reached out and touched Jasmine's arm stopping him. "Oh shit!" Tommy muttered as he saw Jasmine stop and stiffen. Tommy and Elliot continued to watch carefully as they hurried directly for the confrontation.

Jasmine felt someone reach out and grab his arm.

"Hey Jasmine."

Jasmine immediately stopped and turned. One of the older guys in the school had turned in his seat to talk to him. Jasmine had been trying to keep his face at least somewhat pleasant all through lunch, but the angry scowl was like a reflex as he felt his arm being dragged. Before the guy could say anything, Jasmine did his best to try to put something of a pleasant look back on his face, but once again he felt that extra surge of determination behind it all. "Yeah?" he replied. He felt a touch on his arm and noticed Allison hovering next to him.

"Hey," the guy said, then he nodded his head in the direction of Jimmy a few girls away, standing between Nichole and Olivia. "Uh... Jimmy there wanted us to ask you about being a sissy again. She says you've really decided you're happy with it and wanted everyone to know. He turned his head and saw Tommy and Elliot now standing there too. "Look," he added quickly as he held his arms up, I'm not looking for a fight. I'm just asking like Jimmy wanted us to."

Jasmine felt his brother Tommy moving closer, but he quickly held up his hand, stopping him. Once again the smile on his face broadened, and so did his determined attitude. "Oh yeah," he said with a nod of his head. "It's absolutely true. Every word of it."

Even though Jimmy was standing a few people away, she felt like crowing with delight! She had just heard her brother totally admit to the guys at school that he was nothing but a sissy!

Jimmy had heard the words, and the guy who had asked the question had heard the words, but what the guy had heard that Jimmy hadn't was the total sarcasm behind the words. He smiled and nodded. "Yeah right!" he said. "Just what we thought!" He held his fist out toward Jasmine and a moment later, Jasmine bumped fists with him.

Jimmy's mouth was totally agape. What had happened? They didn't believe it. Even though her stupid brother had just totally admitted it. And the fist bump? It was getting worse!

"So what's going on?" the guy asked Jasmine as he again nodded his head toward Jimmy.

But before Jasmine could reply, Allison stepped in and grabbed Jasmine's arm. "What's happening," she said determinedly, "is that Jimmy over there," she paused to look directly at Jimmy, "is trying to prove that she's no longer enough of a girl to hang with us anymore!"

Jimmy was shocked. She stared disbelievingly at Allison, who continued to stare angrily back at her. Wide-eyed, none of the other girls moved or said a word.

"What are you saying?" Jimmy finally tentatively asked.

"I'm not saying anything!" Allison returned. "At least not yet. We'll talk about this later."

Jimmy stared back at Allison for a moment more, the anger in her suddenly building. She finally turned and pushed her way past Nichole to find her Uncle John.

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Jimmy was angry all afternoon. After that little confrontation during lunch, none of the other girls had said one word to her at all. Of course, since lunch had ended, she had been sitting on the opposite side of the room from the rest of them, and for the last few hours they were all in the Home Ec room while she was here in the lunchroom again for Mechanic's class. But even between the short break between the classroom and heading to the Mechanic's class, Olivia had purposely turned away from her rather than speak to her. And Nichole, her very best friend, had only looked at her for a moment, and then moved on too.

Jimmy wanted to yell and scream at all of them! They were supposed to be her friends. They were supposed to back her up and look out for her all the time. But instead, they were abandoning her again in favor of her stupid screwy brother. The sissy that nobody except herself seemed to be capable of believing that he really was a sissy. The dumb wuss. And now she was in trouble with all her friends, and her stupid brother – the sissy – was looking like some kind of hero again. All because he had finally admitted that he was a sissy and nobody believed him. It made no sense at all. She wanted to hit everyone in the school and knock some sense into them.

The bell finally rang and she piled out of the room with the rest of the guys and headed for her locker. Before getting there, she had to pass her brother, Olivia, and Nichole. She stopped by Nichole to just say hi. “Nichole?” she said uncertainly. She wasn’t happy to see the look on Nichole’s face when she turned around to see who had spoken to her.

“Don’t talk to me right now Jimmy,” Nichole said before turning back to her locker again.

“Why not?” But Nichole only turned her head to look at her, before turning back to her locker again. Jasmine, right next to her, was watching the whole thing. “Damn you,” Jimmy said to her brother before moving on towards her own locker.

Ten minutes later, they were all getting ready to climb up into the bus. In the jumble of kids, Allison wound up right next to her. “How was Home Ec?” Jimmy asked her.

Allison looked at Jimmy, and almost answered before putting a rather determined and disgusted look on her face. “Don’t ask!” she said.

Jimmy was surprised. “Was class that bad?”

“Class was fine. Just don’t ask anymore.”

Jimmy was getting frustrated. “So you’re not talking to me at all anymore?” Jimmy asked.

Allison looked at her. “Oh, we’re talking to you, just not right now. Not till we figure out *why* we’re still talking to you. So just leave us alone for a while.”

Totally dejected, Jimmy turned away from her and pushed herself a few kids forward so she could get on the bus sooner. At least as long as she was being Jimmy, she didn't have to sit with any of her...so called...*friends*.

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Dinner at Brian and Janet's house was a bit later than they usually managed, but not by too much. Janet and Allison had just finished cleaning up afterwards and Allison had headed into the family room to watch the end of a game show on TV, when Janet heard the phone ring. "Hello?" she said a few moments later.

"Hi Aunt Janet," Ashley's voice came over the phone. "I was just wondering what Allison was doing."

"Hi Ashley," Janet replied. "Wait just a minute and I'll call her." She pulled the phone away from her face. "Allison! Ashley."

Allison hurried to the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey Allie," Ashley said. "I'm bored here and was just wondering what you're up to."

"Nothing at all," Allison replied. "Want me to come over?"

"Um...I was thinking of coming down there. Dad is talking about trying to get Uncle Pete to go coon hunting again, and if he comes over here and they start planning then..."

"I get the picture," Allison laughed. "Hang on a minute." She pulled her head away from the phone. "Mom!" she yelled. "Is it okay if Ashley comes over?"

"Of course," her mother called back.

Once again addressing the phone, Allison said, "Sounds great, I'll see you in a few minutes."

"Ashley's coming here?" Janet asked as she walked back toward the phone.

"She said her Dad is talking about trying to get Uncle Pete to organize another coon hunt and she wants to get out of the house."

Janet considered that for a moment. "Another hunt. When?" she asked

"She didn't say."

Janet nodded. "I guess it's no use trying to keep that knowledge from your father. He'll find out one way or another."

Fifteen minutes later, Allison opened the back door to one of her best friends. "Hey Ash," she said as Ashley came into the kitchen. "What's happening?" Further back in the house the phone was ringing again. Allison had no doubt the call was for her father to talk about coon hunting.

Ashley started removing her coat. "Not much. I just needed to get away for a bit." She hung her coat up on one of the hooks by the back door where there were already a number of other coats. "Hey," she said. "What happened in the lunch room today? I saw you and the others, and Tommy and Elliot were all gathered together. Did I miss something?"

Allison smiled. "You did, and you didn't."

"Huh? What happened?"

But before Allison could reply, she heard her mother calling. "Allison! Olivia's on the phone."

Allison hurried to the phone while Ashley followed more slowly behind her. "Hello?" Allison said.

"Hey Allie," Olivia's depressed voice replied. "Um...I'm really worried about what's happening with Jasmine...I mean Jimmy...I mean...you know the one who was Jimmy today. What are we doing?"

Allison sighed. "Yeah. It's a problem. And I probably overreacted earlier."

"So what are we doing? Jasmine is one of my best friends. I mean, the real Jasmine."

"Yeah, I know," Allison replied. "She's one of my best friends too. Even though she sure isn't acting like it lately."

"So what do we do?"

Allison thought about it for a moment. "Hold on Olivia," she said. She looked up at Ashley. "Mind if I invite Olivia over too?"

"Heck no. That would be great," Ashley replied.

"Olivia," Allison said into the phone. "Ash is here with me right now. Why don't you come down and let's talk about it for a bit."

"Sure," Olivia replied. "Sounds great. See you in a minute."

Allison hung up the phone. "Mom!" she yelled. "Olivia's coming over too!"

"Okay," Janet yelled back from in front of the TV.

Allison and Ashley headed back toward the kitchen. "So what happened in the lunch room? And what problem were you talking about with Olivia?" Ashley asked.

"It's all kind of the same thing," Allison told her. But before she could say anything else, someone knocked on her back door.

"That was fast!" Ashley noted.

"Too fast!" Allison laughed. She opened the back door. "Nichole! Come on in."

"Hey Allie," Nichole said as she entered the warm kitchen. She noticed Ashley. "Ash!" she said happily. "What's happening?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," Ashley replied. "Because evidently something is happening...or has happened. And I'm guessing it was today at lunch."

"Olivia just called," Allison told Nichole. "She's on her way over too."

Nichole nodded. "Maybe that's good. How about Jas and Jimmy?"

Allison shook her head. "They didn't call, but that doesn't mean they won't just show up at the door too."

"Maybe it's better if they don't come right now," Nichole decided.

"Yeah," Allison agreed. "This time, maybe it is better."

Janet walked into the kitchen and was startled to see Nichole. "Nichole!" she exclaimed. "I thought it was Olivia who was coming over."

"She is," Allison told her. "Nichole showed up at the door."

Janet smiled. "I guess Jasmine will be coming too?" Her face clouded a bit. "Um...one or both of them."

"I don't know," Allison replied. "This time, we're hoping not."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"Because we need to figure out what to do about them...well, mostly about one of them."

"Is there a problem I need to know about?" Janet asked.

Allison shook her head. "No, Mom. It's not that big a deal."

"You're sure?"

Allison nodded. "Yeah. No problem."

"Okay," Janet said as she headed to the coffee pot to pour herself another cup of coffee. But once her coffee was poured, she found an old magazine and opened it to look through it. Her real intention though, was to keep one ear listening for whatever problem the girls were having.

Since they were waiting for Olivia, Allison led the way to the kitchen table where she sat down. Ashley and Nichole joined her.

"So what happened today?" Ashley asked.

"Jimmy again," Allison replied.

"Um...which Jimmy? Just so I'm sure."

"The one who is being Jimmy today," Nichole told her. She looked to Allison. "We really need to come up with some better names for them. It's always so difficult to talk about either of them."

"It sure is!" Allison replied.

"That's for sure," Ashley agreed as well. "So what really happened?"

"Well," Allison started, "it seems that Jimmy has been trying to stir up problems again for Jasmine – you know, the real Jimmy."

"Yeah, I get which one. But what kind of problems is she causing now?"

"The same stupid stuff," Nichole replied. "She got some of the guys in the school to ask Jasmine – you know which one, the one who was the girl today..."

"Yeah," Ashley replied. "Go on."

"Well she got a few of them to ask Jas if he had really decided that he was a sissy after all."

"So it's the same stupid stuff again that she was doing before," Ashley stated.

Nichole and Allison both nodded. "I don't know why she keeps doing it," Allison said. "I mean, we all know he's not really a sissy. We all know he absolutely hates having to be a girl."

"Not as much as he used to," Nichole noted. "But you're still right."

Allison nodded. "Yeah, I guess he's getting a bit more used to it, and sometimes he does manage to have some fun with us."

“Especially sliding down the hill in the snow!” Nichole pointed out.

Ashley smiled. “Yeah, but everyone loves to do that!”

“But he had a good time at the sleepover at his house too!” Nichole pointed out.

“That’s true,” Allison agreed. “He did have a good time with us. Even though the whole purpose of it was to get Jasmine...I mean Jimmy...” She paused again. “You all know who I mean.”

“Yeah,” Ashley replied.

“See!” Nichole pointed out. “Every time we talk about them we get ourselves all confused!”

Allison nodded. “So true. But anyway, the whole point was to get his sister to agree to stop hunting. And even though it looked like she really wanted to, she never did give in.”

“But even still,” Nichole said, “Jasmine...I mean...oh you know who, but he cried that night too because his sister wouldn’t stop hunting. All he wanted was to get to be himself again.”

There was a knock on the door and Allison jumped up to answer it. A moment later Olivia came into the kitchen. “Hey guys,” she said, surprised to see Nichole there too. “Um, where’s Jas?”

“Not here,” Allison told her.

“It’s probably better if she’s not here today,” Nichole added.

Olivia paused in taking her coat off. “If she’s not here, or he’s not here. Which one?”

“Both of them,” Nichole replied.

Olivia nodded and took her coat off. She took another seat at the table. “So have you decided anything?”

“Only that we need new names for them,” Nichole replied. “Most of the time, whenever anyone talks about them, it’s so confusing you get yourself all mixed up.”

“That’s for sure!” Olivia replied with a laugh. Her face turned serious. “But how about what happened today. I mean, Jasmine... and by that, I mean the real Jasmine, is still one of my very best friends. She’s one of all of our best friends.”

Allison nodded. “Yeah, she is. And we just went through a long time without her. And I’d rather not go through that again!”

“Me either,” Olivia said. “And everything was all strange then!”

“Yeah, it was,” Allison agreed.

“I don’t want to stop being friends with her – you know with the real Jasmine,” Nichole said. “She’s always been my very best friend. In fact, I can’t stop being friends with her. We’re kind of more like sisters...I think. Of course, I don’t have a real sister, but I kind of think of her that way anyway. I think I always have.”

“None of us have a real sister,” Ashley pointed out. So instead, we’re all kind of like sisters. Especially you two.”

Nobody said anything for a moment. “So what does that mean as far as Jasmine – um...Jimmy...uh...darn it all, the real Jasmine. Do we just stop worrying about her and forget about what happened today?”

“I guess, yes and no,” Allison replied. “That’s how I feel anyway. We’re not going to stop being friends with her – uh, with the real Jasmine. There’s no way we’re going to ever do that. But at the same time, she’s going all crazy, and...I don’t know. I don’t know how to deal with her.”

“She’s just cruel!” Olivia stated. “Especially to Jimmy – you know, her brother.”

“That’s for sure!” Nichole added.

“So we don’t do anything?” Olivia asked, just to be sure. “We just act like nothing happened?”

Allison looked at her. “I guess so. I don’t know what else we can do.”

“I know one thing we can do,” Nichole spoke up.

“What’s that?” Allison asked.

Nichole took a deep breath. “I vote that we give them both new names. Names we can use from now on so we’ll always know which one of them we’re talking about.”

Allison laughed along with all the other girls.

“I vote we do it too,” Ashley replied.

“So what names do we use?” Olivia asked.

On the other side of the kitchen, Janet nearly laughed as well. It seemed that Jasmine, the real Jasmine, was still causing the same kind of problems she had been trying to stir up before. But at least this time the girls all still wanted her for their friend. The only question was, where did that leave Jimmy – the fake Jasmine?

She listened for a few moments to the spirited light-hearted conversation that was mostly a bunch of names that the girls threw at each other. And oddly enough, she thought the girls might have a good idea. Even Susan and Clint had trouble whenever they talked about the twins.

"Anyone want popcorn?" she asked. The excited squeals of delight from all the girls echoed loudly through the kitchen.

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"All the ones on the top right," *Jimmy* said. "All the special ones."

Both twins were in *Jasmine's* room, but the mood wasn't anything like the mood a few houses down the street where the rest of the girls were. Jimmy's period had started again and she was feeling anything but good. If she wasn't doing this with her...*sister*... then most likely she would be laying down on the bed, hoping the cramps would go away. Laying down earlier hadn't really helped matters any, so now she was back in her own room. It was time to start teaching her dumb brother about her dolls. And he had promised he would learn.

She was still upset over what had happened at school. She was upset and she was worried about her friendship with the other girls. But damn it, why didn't any of the boys at school believe that her wuss of a brother was a sissy? Why? It was as plain as the noses on their faces. Even when he was dressed as a boy, he still looked totally like a girl. And a lot of the real girls didn't even look that good! And now that their mother was after him so much, he was starting to finally act a bit more like a girl. A little bit anyway. What more evidence could anyone ask?

"I don't get you," Jimmy said as Jasmine carefully reached up and grabbed doll after doll and set each one carefully down on the bed.

"What do you mean?" Jasmine asked.

"I mean, why don't any of the guys believe that you're a sissy? I was even there when you flat out admitted to them that you were. What more does it take?"

Jasmine shrugged. "Maybe it's because they know I'm not a sissy."

"Hey!" she said. "Anyone who's afraid of all the things you are, and especially anyone who dresses so much like a girl all the time, has to be a big sissy."

"I only dress like this because I don't have much of a choice."

"But you're even making yourself look more like a real girl than a lot of my friends."

"It's not by my choice," he replied. "It's those stupid hormones and what they're doing to me."

"Ha! You still believe all that crap?"

Jasmine knew it was no use arguing with her. His sister still wasn't going to believe that any physical changes had taken place at all, probably in either of them. "Is that it?" he asked, referring to the dolls. "Any others?"

"Not right now," she told him.

Jasmine looked down at the large collection of dolls he had moved. Twenty-two of them. All of them were wearing colorful costumes from different parts of the world.

Jimmy waited until he sat on the bed across from the dolls that were carefully laid out between them. "These are all some of my favorites," she said. "And they're all collectable so you've got to be careful with them." She picked up one of the dolls. The colorful costume on it was full of broad multicolored stripes running around the bottom half of the skirt, and the rest of the skirt was another colorful design. The stripes around the bottom of the skirt matched a jacket the doll was wearing, and it was all set off by a wide brimmed hat on the doll's head. "This is Valentina," she said. "She's from Argentina. I just love the way her dress is designed. Don't you?"

"Uh...I guess," he replied uncertainly. The colorful outfit on the doll could almost rival some of the outfits his sister liked to put together.

Jimmy picked up the next doll. "This is one of my favorites, this is Keiko, from Japan. Her kimono is absolutely do die for!" She stroked the bright red kimono with its big bold white flower design and fingered the long hanging sleeves on it. She looked directly at

Jasmine for a moment. "I want a kimono like this someday. I think it would be incredible to wear!"

She set Keiko down and pointed at the first doll again. "Valentina." She pointed at the Japanese doll. "Keiko." Then she picked up the next doll. "This is Elsa. She's from Germany. The dress she's wearing is called a dirndl." She fingered the body of the doll. "I really love the way the bodice of these things lace up the front." She looked up at him again with pure interest in her eyes. "I should use that in one of my designs!"

Jasmine looked critically at the dress on the doll. It didn't look very comfortable. It looked more like it would squeeze the waist of whoever was wearing it. If his sister did come up with a design like that, he just hoped he wouldn't have to wear it.

Jimmy pointed to the dolls she had already finished with. "Valentina...Keiko...Elsa. She picked up the next doll. "This one's from Ireland. Her name is Nora."

"Do you name all your dolls?"

Jimmy looked at him like he was crazy, which she knew he was. "Of course. How else would anyone know what doll I'm talking about?"

Jasmine looked around at the two shelves lining the two walls of her room. "But you've got so many! How do you remember them all?"

"I just do! And the names are important. It's part of who each doll is."

"Who they are?"

"Of course! Each doll is like a real person."

Jasmine had strongly suspected it before, but now he knew his sister had a major screw loose in her head.

Jimmy stood up and pointed all along the two rows of shelves. "All these dolls are like my friends. They're all really good friends. So of course I know all their names." She looked at him. "You need to spend some time with each of them. Hold them and look at them. Talk to them too."

"Talk to them?" Now he knew she was even crazier than he thought!

“Of course you’ve got to talk to them. How else would you really get to know them...know what they’re like?”

“Why can’t I just look at them?”

“You should do that too. But they liked to be taken down and played with sometimes. And talked to!”

He shook his head. He had no intention of even touching any of her dolls. They could stay right on the shelves where they belonged.

Jimmy stood up and surveyed her shelves full of dolls. But her eyes fell on one particular doll at the very far end of the bottom shelf. “You need to play with all of them except...” She walked around to the other side of the bed and headed for that one doll in particular. It was by far the largest doll on her shelves. “Don’t touch this one,” she told him as she pointed to it. “Don’t even think of touching it. It’s too fragile.”

“Isn’t that the one you got for Christmas a few years ago?”

She nodded. “Grandma and Grandpa gave it to me. Just don’t touch it. Promise? Or I’m going to have to move it into Mom’s room.”

He had no problem at all with that. “Don’t worry,” he replied. “I promise not to touch it – ever.” As if he even cared!

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“Douglas!” Nichole declared laughingly with her mouth half full of popcorn. “I love the name Douglas.”

“You like the name?” Olivia asked. “Or the Douglas that’s in our class.”

Nichole looked at her for a moment. “Both!” she declared, which sent all the girls into a raucous round of laughter again.

“I still like Robert,” Ashley said. “Or Bob which is usually used as a nickname.”

“Yeah, I like that too,” Allison agreed.

“No, no, no!” Olivia exclaimed, suddenly totally serious. “We can’t use any of those names!”

“What do you mean?” Allison asked. “I thought we all agreed we needed better names for them.”

"We did...and we do," Olivia replied. "But I mean, Jasmine and Jimmy both have names that start with the letter 'J'. That's important! So whatever names we find for them, have to start with 'J'!"

"And I guess you're going to insist on this?" Allison asked.

"Of course. It won't be right if we don't."

"She's right," Nichole added. "I think we do need to find names for them that start with 'J'."

Allison looked at Ashley who merely shrugged. "Maybe they've got a point," Ashley told her.

Allison took that in for a moment, then turned back to Olivia and Nichole. "Okay, so what boy's names start with 'J'?"

"John!" Nichole exclaimed quickly.

"Jack!" Ashley added.

"No!" Olivia interrupted. "We can't use a name that's already being used by someone else in the family. It has to be different."

"Yeah, you're right," Ashley agreed. "The whole idea of this is so that we know who we're talking about. If we use a name that someone else already has, then it won't work very well."

"So what else is there that's not already taken?" Allison asked.

Janet was still listening from the far side of the kitchen. "Why don't you get your computer and look up some names?" she suggested.

The girls all looked at each other for a moment, before Allison got up from the table and literally ran to her bedroom. Two minutes later, she was back with her laptop computer and was typing in "Boy's Names" into the search box as all the girls crowded around her so they could see the screen. The search brought up lots of entries for lists of names so she clicked on the first one.

"Those all start with 'A', Nichole said. "Find the 'J's'."

It took a few more clicks, but the girls were soon presented with a long list of options to go through and choose from.

"Oooo," Olivia said, "I like Jason."

"It's great!" Nichole agreed.

"No," Allison said, "I think this one is better." She pointed to the name. "Joseph!"

"Joseph?" Nichole asked.

“Yeah, Joseph,” Allison said. “Or just Joe.”

“She could be...Jimmy Joe, or Jasmine Joe,” Olivia decided. “I kind of like it.”

“Yeah,” Ashley agreed. “Especially Jimmy Joe.”

“Jimmy Joe,” Nichole said, trying to work the name on her tongue, “or Jasmine Joe.” She paused in thought for a moment. “Or Jas Joe.”

“Jassy Joe?” Allison suggested.

“Jazzy Joe!” Nichole suddenly exclaimed as a bright smile lit her face.

“It’s perfect!” Olivia declared.

Allison nodded. “Okay, we’ve got a new name now for Jasmine. But now what about Jimmy? We need a girl’s name for him.”

“What does the computer say?” Ashley asked.

Allison clicked a few buttons on the same website and was soon looking at a list of girl’s names that began with the letter ‘J’.

“Jennifer is nice,” Ashley suggested as her eyes quickly scanned the list.

“I like Jillian,” Nichole suggested.

“No,” Olivia said. Her eyes had scanned down the list of names, but they had immediately returned near the front of the list. “I know what I want to call him. She pointed to one of the names. “Jade! It’ll be Jimmy Jade...or Jasmine Jade.”

Chapter 38 - Name Those Tears

February 24th

Susan didn't tell them. She did look at her twins more than usual Wednesday morning as they both went about the business of eating breakfast. Her twins were back to being themselves again, but they were so rarely themselves anymore that when they were themselves, it was starting to seem like they were still each other instead, especially since Jimmy still looked all too much like a girl. She supposed that maybe the hairdo she had given him might have been a bad idea, but when he was a girl, which was most of the time now, she still liked it on him. And Jasmine, well, she did still look like a girl, but there were starting to be some things about her that weren't looking exactly as they should. And Jessica had been right, if you listened carefully to the twins talking, Jasmine's voice was indeed a little lower now than Jimmy's. But still, she didn't tell them.

Susan didn't tell them because she herself didn't know how she felt about it. She had told her husband last night before bed, but he had pretty much grunted and dismissed the whole issue as if she hadn't mentioned anything at all. But she couldn't do that. Was it good? Or was it bad? Or should she do as her husband had and ignored it? But as silly as it was, she couldn't ignore it. And it was somehow making her take an even closer look at her twins today.

Yeah, her twins were back to being themselves. But things were rapidly getting to the point where they might as well never bother switching back again. And in just a few more days, things would get so much worse with the coming of the new month. At that point, there would be only two days in the entire week when her kids would get to be themselves. And that point was coming in just a few more days! It terrified her and left a panic in her stomach that refused to go away, despite the odd fact that things were reaching the point where changing back to being themselves might be worse than staying in the roles of each other.

And then there was the other terrifying thought that refused to go away. The twins were now just one week away from getting another fresh dose of hormones stuck into them. And that last batch that Brian had given them had seemed to cause all too many changes – all too fast! If Jasmine didn't quit hunting, what would they be like a month from now? She didn't even want to imagine it.

But still, she didn't tell the kids. And it was such a dumb simple thing. Or maybe not so dumb. She couldn't decide. And then there was the other issue. Was it her place to tell them?

All three of her kids seemed to jump up from the breakfast table all at once, heading toward their rooms to get ready for school. "Wear your raincoats today!" she called after them. "It's supposed to rain all day!" She wasn't sure if any of them actually heard her.

"If it warms enough," Clint said as he held his coffee mug close to his mouth, "the rain could clear away most of the snow."

"And leave us with mud everywhere," she replied.

"Most likely," he said. "I'm ready for some warmer weather, and no snow for a long time. I don't think I've ever seen so much."

"It's still February," Susan noted. "Still plenty of time for more."

Clint nodded. "And most likely we'll get some. Just hopefully, not too much."

A few minutes later, Susan was giving all her kids the once over as she kissed each of them and sent them out the door to school. It wasn't raining yet, but the skies were grey and angry. She hadn't told them. She hadn't even mentioned it. She put it down to it not being her place. Besides, maybe her husband was right. Maybe it was all a lot of nothing. But as likely as her husband thought that, she had a different opinion. And...did it really matter?

As she closed the front door behind her kids, she remembered again the phone call she had gotten last night from Janet. The girls, evidently including Ashley, had all decided that new names were needed for her twins. And Susan could easily understand their reasoning for it. Even she and Clint had trouble with it sometimes. And anyone saying anything to them about the twins always had to go out of their way to make sure everyone understood which twin they were talking about. So the idea was certainly reasonable. But.... Heck! They were her kids and she and Clint had named

them when they were born, and the entire family had approved of the names, and a big family party was always held right after each of the kids were born to present the new family members, by name, to the entire family.

But still, this was only kid's play. This was nothing more than a nickname that a child could pick up at school from their friends that "might" stick with them for a few years. That's all it was. So why did it weigh so heavily on her mind? Perhaps because they were her kids, and neither she nor Clint had a say in the names that their friends had decided for them.

She was trying to rationalize it all now, and she knew it. And she knew it was silly. Most likely the kids would call them the new names for a few days, and then forget about it. Most likely. So why couldn't she put it from her mind?

"Jade?" she said aloud, trying to get the feel of it as she pictured Jimmy in her head. She mentally shook her head at the thought of it and tried again picturing Jasmine instead, "Joe?" No, the names felt all wrong. She tried again. "Jimmy Joe," she said aloud, listening to the feel of the name. It did kind of work pretty well that way. "Jasmine Joe," she said to the quiet of the room around her. It was okay, but not really as good. She tried one more time. "Jazzy Joe." Immediately her head pictured the colorful bright clothing that her daughter favored. Yeah, something about Jazzy Joe did seem to work pretty well. Despite herself, she smiled at the thought.

As she stood in the quiet of the family room, she pictured Jimmy again in her mind. "Jimmy Jade." The name was okay. Not really too bad at all. "Jasmine Jade." No, she didn't really like the feel of it as much. But again, it was okay. But Jazzy Joe, she still couldn't help but smile over that one. "Jazzy Jade?" She thought hard about that one. But where Jazzy Joe brought up images of how her real daughter was, Jazzy Jade simply didn't do the same thing. What were the girls thinking?

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"Here they come!" Nichole exclaimed excitedly as she spotted the twins and Tommy heading down the hill. For once, all the girls

were out at the bus stop early. And all the girls were excited. Some of their brothers weren't even there yet.

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Jasmine was very apprehensive over what kind of day it was going to be. When she had left school yesterday, none of her friends were talking to her. All because she was trying to point out the truth about her screwy brother. What was so wrong with that? But now she was once again in trouble over it with her friends.

As they crested the hill going down to where the bus would stop for them, she saw that most everyone was already down there. She noted Tommy suddenly walking faster, most likely because Elliot was already there. And then Jasmine noted that all the kids there were looking at her a bit too intently. That scared her, especially since none of them seemed to look anywhere else the whole time they approached.

Ahead, they saw Tommy reach Elliot and the two of them talking for a moment, and then Tommy too was staring back at them.

"What did we do?" Jimmy asked from next to her.

"I'm not sure if it's you or me," Jasmine replied. "But I'm betting I'm in trouble again."

Jimmy wanted to say, "Good," but he left it alone.

It didn't take long before the twins saw the broad excited smiles on all their friend's faces, which only confused them even more. And then both twins were stopped in their tracks as Allison, Ashley, and Nichole all said together, "Hi Jasmine Joe. Hi Jimmy Jade."

Jasmine blinked in surprise. Jimmy's eyebrows went up and stayed there. "Huh?" Jimmy grunted.

"What was that?" Jasmine asked.

"We decided you two needed new names," Nichole blurted out excitedly.

"So from now on," Allison said, "you're going to be Jasmine Joe, and he's going to be Jimmy Jade."

"And when you're switched around," Ashley added, "like you are most of the time now, then you'll be Jimmy Joe instead and he'll be Jasmine Jade."

"Huh?" Jimmy said once again, trying to take it all in.

"We decided it was too hard trying to talk about either of you since you keep switching around, including your names, so we gave you new names last night," Ashley explained. "We decided on 'Joe' for you Jasmine, and 'Jade' for Jimmy. So that way, we'll always know which of you we're talking about."

"Huh?" Jimmy said again, still trying to figure it all out.

"Actually," Nichole said, "I plan on calling you 'Jazzy Joe' instead she said to Jasmine. "I like the sound of it."

"Jazzy Joe?" Jasmine repeated. She thought about that for a moment, and then she burst into a big smile. "I do kind of like it."

"It's you!" Allison told her. "It's totally you!"

"And I'm...supposed to be Jade?" Jimmy asked tentatively.

"Olivia picked it out for you," Ashley told him. "She was very insistent on it."

Somehow, that thought made Jimmy feel much better about it. It even brought a small smile to his face. "Jade?" he said again.

"That's it," Nichole said. "Right now, you're Jimmy Jade. Next weekend when you switch around again, you'll be Jasmine Jade. Or I guess maybe Jazzy Jade. Either way, it will be Jade."

Jimmy's head was spinning a bit, but the part that meant the most to him, was that Olivia had picked the name out just for him. And she had insisted on it.

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"Hi Jazzy Joe," Olivia said with a small laugh as Jasmine was about to pass her desk.

Jasmine stopped, nicknames were often bad, but...she kind of liked Jazzy Joe. "Hey Olivia," Jasmine replied brightly before continuing on to her own desk.

Olivia turned around. "Do you like the new name?" she asked excitedly.

"It's...different," Jasmine replied.

"We all loved it for you. Especially the Jazzy Joe name. It's so you!"

"Yeah, it is!" Nichole added from her desk behind Jasmine. "I came up with the Jazzy part."

"What are you talking about?" the girl next to Jasmine asked. She was soon thoroughly filled in by both Olivia and Nichole. And naturally, all the other kids around them heard the conversation.

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Nothing was ever said about it, but Jasmine continued to worry about her friendship with the other girls. She desperately wanted to ask Olivia and Nichole, but they were both acting like none of the tension from the day before had even existed. So because of that, she dared not upset her friend's lighthearted mood and ask.

It didn't take her long though to figure out that her friends, in fact all the kids around her, were purposely calling her Jazzy Joe every time they spoke to her. It was getting a bit annoying, but she gladly put up with it, especially after being in such hot water with her friends the day before. If having to be called Jazzy Joe for a few days was what her punishment would be, then she would gladly endure it. Besides, she did kind of like it. She never once gave a thought to what her brother might think about his new nickname.

Jimmy didn't hear anyone calling him Jimmy Jade until the morning break when he headed back to his overly decorated locker. Olivia caught up to him in the hall as he was walking. "Hi Jimmy Jade," she said as she started walking alongside him.

"Uh...hi Olivia," he replied.

"Do you like your new name?" she asked, her voice full of excitement again.

"Um...I guess," he replied.

"I picked it out just for you," Olivia told him.

"That's what they said this morning at the bus stop."

She grabbed his arm, stopping him and turning him to face her. "I really do hope you like it," she said. "It wouldn't be good if it's a name you really hate."

He couldn't help himself as he stared at her. "I like it," he said sincerely. "Especially since you picked it out for me. It means a lot to me because of that."

Olivia almost hugged him right there and then. But after a quick look around at the other kids filling the hallway around them, she backed off a bit. "I'm just glad that you approve," she replied.

He nodded. "Thanks." He quickly looked up and down the hallway. "We better get our stuff." With another smile at her, he headed for his locker. Jimmy Jade. The name again wandered through his head. "He guessed he could get used to it. Especially since Olivia had come up with it for him. But he was really hoping that the name would be totally forgotten in a few days. Most likely, it would.

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All through dinner that night, Susan noted that neither of her kids had mentioned new nicknames. Had the other girls forgotten about them? She was fairly sure they hadn't. But neither Jimmy or Jasmine mentioned anything about it, and neither did Tommy for that matter. So maybe the girls decided not to go forward with the new names. And oddly, she didn't know if that was a good thing or bad. She did have to admit that talking about which twin was which was all too often difficult. And besides, she had been rolling the name Jazzy Joe around in her head all day and it was starting to stick with her.

Still, she was curious to know. While she and Jasmine were cleaning up after dinner, she decided not to wait any longer. "I talked with Aunt Janet," she said as she was bent over to load some silverware into the dishwasher. She didn't mention that she had talked to Janet last night and not today.

"What's happening?" Jasmine asked as she scraped some food from a plate into the disposal in the sink.

Susan stood up straight. "She said that the girls all got together last night and came up with some new nicknames for you and your brother. I was wondering if you heard anything at all about it."

Jasmine stared in shock at her mother. "You heard about that?"

Susan only nodded.

"Did Aunt Janet tell you what names they came up with?"

Again Susan nodded. "Yes, she did." She paused, waiting for her daughter to say something, but when she didn't she asked, "So did they call you by any new names today?"

Jasmine rolled her eyes like her brother did all too often. "All day long," she replied as she went back to scraping plates.

"What name did they call you?" Susan asked.

"Didn't Aunt Janet tell you?"

"She did," Susan replied.

"Then you already know," Jasmine said as she handed her mother a plate to stick in the dishwasher.

"They were going to call you Joe. Or Jasmine Joe. Or..."

"Jazzy Joe," Jasmine finished for her. She turned and smiled. "The funny thing is, I kind of like Jazzy Joe. And that's pretty much what they called me all day. All of them. And then later some of the other kids too."

"So you don't mind so much?"

Jasmine thought about that for a moment. "Not really. Most likely, it won't last that long anyway."

"Most likely," Susan agreed. "And how about your brother?"

"Jade?" She thought about that for a few moments. "I guess it's okay," she said. "As far as I could see, Jimmy didn't really mind it that much. At least, I never heard him really complain about it."

Susan accepted another plate from her daughter for the dishwasher. "Just so long as neither of you feel offended," Susan told her.

Jasmine shook her head. "No, I'm fine," she replied. "And like I said, I kind of like the Jazzy part. And that's what they all seem to call me the most."

Susan smiled. "I kind of like the Jazzy bit too," she admitted. "It really does bring to mind how much you like the bright colorful clothes and how bright and sunny you can really be." Her face clouded. "The brightness I don't get to see much anymore." She stopped and stared at her daughter. "Jas, please stop hunting. Please. Please come back and be my bright little girl again."

"Mom, I'm right here. I'll always be right here. I'm not going anywhere. But I'm not going to stop hunting."

Susan looked at her daughter's face, that even now when she was being a girl, didn't look that girlish anymore. She looked at her shoulders and arms that didn't appear nearly as feminine as they had just a month ago. And she looked down at her daughter's chest that displayed breasts that she knew were nothing but tissue inside her bra. The tears leapt to her eyes. Unable to help herself, she ran for the comfort and safety of her bedroom to cry. To cry over losing her daughter. Her beautiful, bright...Jazzy...daughter.

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"Stand still!"

"What if Mom catches us?"

"So what? You agreed, remember. Now stop moving around and stand still. I can't draw you if you're moving all over the place."

Jimmy stood still, somewhat, and waited while his sister went back to her drawing. She would draw for a bit, then look up and study him, then go back to drawing him again. He saw her look up at him again and just stare critically for a while. "What? I'm not moving."

Jasmine got up from her desk and shook her head. "Take that top off. It doesn't work like I want it to."

"It covers my chest. What else is it supposed to do?"

"You're so hopeless," Jasmine replied as she turned back to her closet to find something else. Perhaps something a little less baggy. She dug further back into her clothes and pulled out a red stretchy top that she had worn frequently last summer. One that most likely she had outgrown now. But could her screwy brother still wear it? She turned back toward him with it in her hand. "Didn't I tell you to get that top off?"

"I'm waiting for something else to put on," he said.

"Well you can't put something else on until you take that one off!"

"Oh." He walked over and took the top from her and started to leave the room.

"Where are you going?"

"To change."

She couldn't believe it. "Just change here. You're only putting on a different top. I don't know why you're so afraid of getting undressed in front of me tonight. It's stupid. Besides, I've seen you naked before. Now just change that top so I can change my drawing."

Jimmy rolled his eyes and turned so his back was to her.

"Stupid!" Jasmine declared as she headed back to her desk.

With his back to her, Jimmy pulled off the white frilly blouse he had been wearing and then started pulling on the new red one. This one was tighter than any he had worn before. It was stretchy so he could still get it on, but it hugged his body like none of his sister's clothes ever had. He pulled it down, and could immediately see his breasts pushing out against the material. When he had insisted on changing in his own room into the first outfit his sister had wanted him to wear, since he was wearing her clothes again, he had naturally pulled a bra from his drawer and slipped it on. Now he wasn't sure if that was a good idea or not. Not having much of a choice, he turned around to face her again.

"Finally!" Jasmine exclaimed as she saw him turn around. She picked up her pencil preparing to start drawing again. She started studying his figure with the new top, and she blinked. She stared and blinked again. "What did you stuff in your bra?" she asked. "And don't deny that you're not wearing one because I can see the outline of it through the material."

"What do you mean?" Jimmy asked.

"What did you put in your bra?" she asked again. "You've got it stuffed out even bigger than I do mine."

Jimmy could feel his face turning red. "Um...nothing." He replied.

Jasmine shook her head in frustration as she got up from her desk chair again. "Idiot!" she exclaimed. "You've got to be putting something in there."

"Um...just me," he replied as his sister came all too close.

"You lie like a rug!" Jasmine told him. "Now take that top off and let me see."

"Um..." Jimmy hesitated, not wanting to do that. He was very self-conscious about how big his breasts were getting. He almost

always wore loose fitting shirts and sweaters to cover them up. And now if his sister found out how big they were, he had no doubt that she would spread it all over school all too quickly. "Um..." he said, trying to find a way to avoid letting her see his chest.

"What's going on?"

The two twins turned to see their mother in the doorway.

"Jimmy, what are you doing dressed as your sister again. You're not supposed to be doing that."

"Um...I'm helping her," Jimmy told her.

"Helping?"

"He promised to help me with my designs," Jasmine told her.

"With your designs? By wearing one of your outfits?"

"I need him to do it so I can draw him better. If I can see how something is going to look on him, then it's easier for me to come up with better designs. Here, come look at what I've done."

Susan followed her daughter to her desk. There were three drawings already done that Jasmine spread out for her. Susan was immediately surprised. "Jas," she said, "these are pretty good. Much better than any I've seen you do before."

"That's what I need him for," Jasmine told her. "So I can see better how things are supposed to look. Especially on a real body. And you have to admit, whatever he's doing lately, he's starting to look more like a girl than ever. And did you notice how much he even stuffed his bra this time?"

Susan turned to study her "son" again. The top he was wearing was stretchy and made his breasts all too prominent. The never ending worry in her stomach gave another major lurch. She walked over to her son, who again looked completely like a girl. She couldn't help herself as she pulled him into a tight hug. "How much padding did you put in there?" she asked softly.

"Just me, Mom," Jasmine replied just as softly. "It's all just me."

Susan nodded as the tears threatened to come to her eyes again.

"Mom," Jimmy said, "I don't mind helping Jas out if it's something that will help her designs."

Susan released her hug and stood back but she kept her hands on his shoulders as she looked down at him.

"I know how much she loves clothes and designing them," Jimmy told her. "Everyone even talks about how good she is all the time. So if she needs me to help her out once in a while, then I don't mind. It's easy enough." He moved his head so he could look past his mother at his sister. "It's just hard standing perfectly still for so long."

Susan snorted a laugh, but the tears were still glistening in her eyes a bit. She looked at Jimmy, then turned to look at Jasmine. "Okay," she finally said as she released her hold on him. "As long as you're okay with it."

"I'm fine, Mom," Jimmy replied. "For now anyway."

"Okay," Susan said again. "But I don't want to see you in your sister's clothes any longer tonight! Jas, you've done enough tonight. Jimmy go change back to yourself again. I don't get to see you that way enough anymore, and it's going to get worse soon."

Neither of the twins needed the reminder that very soon they would have one less day each week to be themselves. As Jimmy left the room to go change, Susan walked back to look at her daughter's drawings again. "These really are good, Jas," she said. "And this outfit, if it was something a bit more mature, I could almost wear it."

"Thanks, Mom," Jasmine replied happily. "I think that's going to be the next outfit I make for the spring fashion show."

Susan looked down at her daughter. "Jas," she said, "I know we haven't really talked about this, but how are you going to even be in that show? It's on a Sunday. And you spend most of your time now as your brother, especially on Sundays. If you don't quit this hunting business, by then you'll be living as your brother all the time. So how can you possibly be in the fashion show?"

Jasmine face fell. "I know," she replied. "I think about that a lot."

"Then when are you planning on quitting?"

"I'm not!"

"Then why are you still working so hard for this Home Ec project?"

Jasmine looked up at her. "Because it's everything I've always dreamed of. Modeling. The clothes. Everything!"

"But how can you do any of that if you're a boy?"

Jasmine's face clouded even more. "I don't know," she admitted.

"Jas," Susan tried again. "Please quit. Please come back and be my beautiful daughter again."

"I'm not quitting hunting!" Jasmine insisted.

"Then I don't know why you're even bothering with all this," Susan said sadly. She turned and walked away.

"I'm just hoping," Jasmine muttered to herself as her mother walked out of her room. But her mind was clouded with worry about that very same subject. And it was something that had been worrying her more and more lately.

The tears were back in Susan's eyes. She went back to her bedroom and once again cried. What was wrong with her all too stubborn daughter?

Chapter 39 - Fire and Brimstone Party

February 28th – March 1st

The loud shriek echoing from the phone Saturday morning was enough to force “Jasmine” to quickly jerk the phone away from his ear. It was also loud enough to make his mother’s eyes threaten to cross as she was passing nearby. “Good God,” Susan muttered as she stopped still and stared at the phone in Jasmine’s hand.

“Are you awake now?” Olivia’s laughing voice came from the telephone.

“Uh...I am now,” Jasmine had to admit after a moment to collect himself.

“I’m having a sleepover for my birthday!” Olivia announced excitedly. Except I’m having it next Saturday since my birthday comes on the Wednesday after that.

Despite himself, images of his own sleepover and all the fun he had somehow enjoyed, sprang to his mind. He looked up at his mother. “Olivia’s having a sleepover next Saturday for her birthday.”

“Yes dear, I know already,” Susan replied before moving on toward her bedroom. She had already talked with Jane on the phone about it, as had all the other mothers. Once again Jane was also going to allow Olivia to invite a bunch of girls from their class at school. It was something the girls usually did every year for their birthdays. Sometimes the girls also went to the movies together beforehand or they did something else, but monster sleepovers for their birthday had somehow become the norm for all the girls in the family.

Susan paused for a moment before entering her bedroom as another thought once again crossed her mind. What was going to happen less than a month later for her two twins’ birthday? She had already checked carefully. Her twins had been born on April third. And this year, Good Friday fell on April third so there would be no school that day. And if things continued on as they had, if Jasmine

didn't quit hunting by then, that Friday would be the only day of the week when her kids would get to be themselves. At least Jasmine, her real daughter, would be a girl again for that day, so Susan had no doubt that the monster sleepover was going to be inevitable. And since Nichole's birthday was only a few days after her twins', then she and Jasmine usually held their sleepover birthday parties together, which made things much better for both herself and Marcy.

Susan figured that this year they would probably have to arrange to delay switching the two twins until the next day – after all the invited girls had left. But the following day, Saturday, just as all the other mothers in the family did for a birthday, she would be taking the twins shopping for new clothes. Lots of new clothes. She usually took only one twin on Saturday and then the other twin on Sunday. It was easier and more practical. But her main reason for doing it that way was so she could enjoy shopping with her daughter more. But this year Easter Sunday was that weekend so Susan wasn't sure what she was going to do. She'd just have to figure it out when the time came.

Birthday clothes shopping had been another surprising little family tradition she had learned when she married her husband. And she supposed she approved. It was certainly practical. And when the family had been poor, back long before she had met Clint, it had been even more important. But the family was fairly wealthy now, or so she had come to believe. As far as she could tell, nobody in the family was hurting for money, and Jacob made sure of it. The hunting clubs and hunting guide business had become amazingly lucrative for all the family. And working in the family's office, Susan had firsthand knowledge about that. But the newfound wealth for the family hadn't seemed to change any of the little traditions that filled her life now. Traditions that most of the time she barely paid any attention to since they were all just a part of her everyday life now.

"Mom!"

Susan turned to see Jasmine approaching. She smiled at her... him. It was getting more difficult to think of him as a boy.

"Olivia's going to invite a bunch of girls from school to her party."

"Doesn't she always?" Susan asked. "And don't the other girls do the same thing? And didn't you..." she stopped. "I mean

doesn't...the other you...Jasmine Joe," she forced the name out for clarity, "do the same thing every year?" It had been difficult for her using that name, but it seemed to have no surprising effect on the Jasmine in front of her.

"Um...I guess," Jasmine replied. "I'm not usually here when she's got more than just the four of us. I mean, more than just Nichole, Olivia, and Allison."

"Hm!" Susan grunted. "Yeah, we usually ship you and Tommy off to stay with Elliot for the night. Count yourself lucky. I've got to be here through the whole thing."

"It's not usually that bad, is it?" Jasmine asked, remembering his one and only sleep over party.

"Not that bad? Jasmine, did you ever bother to count all the times you girls went mad screaming? And did you ever notice how loud you all are?"

"Hey, it wasn't me!" Jasmine replied. "It's the other girls. Especially Olivia...and Nichole. I think Olivia is louder though."

"Yeah, I heard her on the phone a few minutes ago. Geez that girl has some lungs!"

Jasmine only smiled. "Is it okay if I go over to her house? We're all going to meet there today to plan the party next week."

"That's fine," Susan said with a sigh. "You're partying next week, and the guys are all going off hunting and partying tonight. I just want to know when my turn comes."

"Um..." Jasmine wasn't sure how to handle that question. He suddenly felt bad for his mother.

"Don't worry about it," Susan said with a smile as she gathered him up in her arms and hugged him. "It kind of goes with the territory of being a wife and a mother."

"It doesn't sound right," Jasmine muttered inside of his mother's continuing hug.

"It's the way it is," she replied. "Don't worry about it though. Mothers get their rewards sometimes in watching their kids have fun. So you just plan on having fun next week. Okay?"

"Um...sure, I guess," he replied.

"Good!" Susan said as she released him. She studied him critically. He was still in his pajamas and his hair was still

unbrushed. She reached out and smoothed his hair a bit with her fingers. "The permanent is starting to grow out now," she said. "It's getting to be time to start worrying about what else we want to do with it."

"Can we cut it short again?" he asked hopefully.

"Don't plan on it," Susan replied.

As usual, Jasmine rolled his eyes. "I'm going to see Olivia," he said as he turned to go back to his room.

"Not yet you're not!" Susan said sternly.

Jasmine turned around quickly, wondering what was going on now.

"Not until you get yourself dressed!" The smile she got was everything a mother could hope for.

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Jimmy caught up to her father as they crossed the backyard heading for her Uncle Pete's yard next door. Her brother Tommy was already there and had been for quite a while. She had carried the gun in her hands enough now that it was a familiar and comforting object to hold. Almost a part of her. She couldn't wait to shoot it again.

The dogs in their pens next door were barking like crazy. They already knew something was up. Jimmy was sure the dogs knew they were going hunting again. The dogs were anxious and couldn't wait.

The sun was going down and the light was quickly fading as they joined those who had already arrived. Jimmy was dressed just as warmly as she usually was for hunting, her father had made sure of it since even though the weather had turned a bit warmer the last few days, it still got pretty cold every night. The last time she had been on a coon hunt with the guys, there had been snow all over the ground. Now there was no snow, and an overabundance of mud. She had no doubt she'd be covered in it by the time she got home. Oh well, her mother and...*sister*...could take care of it tomorrow for her. She laughed at the thought.

It wasn't long until most of the guys were there, and then her Grandpa finally arrived. The dogs were turned loose, and in a big mob, everyone headed together for the path that led into the woods. Her excitement was high as she walked next to Elliot in the growing darkness.

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Susan watched the men heading into the woods through her kitchen window. After the rush of getting all three "guys" ready for their hunt, the house was quiet now. Only herself and Jasmine were left. She was looking forward to the house staying quiet for the rest of the night. The guys would be back sometime, but she planned on being sound asleep and not hearing them at all – if she could help it. Of course, there were times in the past when they didn't get home until well after she had gotten out of bed the next day. She cared, but she didn't. Tonight, she just wanted things to stay quiet. She had big plans for tonight. Major plans! She was going to start with a nice long hot scented bath, then she was going to put her nightgown on, and then she was hoping to find a good movie on TV. Something with some emotional content that was worth watching. Maybe even Jasmine would be interested in joining her. She thought again about that as she remembered which Jasmine was in her...his room further back in the house.

With a relaxed smile on her face, she headed toward her bedroom and the big tub in the master bathroom inside. Her body was already relaxing as thoughts of the warm scented water filled her head.

The phone ringing shattered her nice quiet thoughts. Knowing it was inevitable that she answer it, she headed for the phone and picked the darn thing up. "Hello?" she said in a much nicer voice than she felt about answering it.

"Susan!" Rose's voice came over the telephone. "Did those lazy good for nothing guys ever get off on their hunt yet?"

Susan would have laughed if she wasn't so perturbed over her bath being delayed. "They're just heading into the woods now," she replied.

“Bout time!” Rose replied. “I swear, as much as they all hunt, you’d think they could get out of here with a whole lot less fuss!”

“Too true, Mom,” Susan said, the amusement coming into her voice despite herself. “What’s up?” she asked, wanting to get on with the phone call – and her bath.

“Since the guys are probably going to sleep most of the day tomorrow,” Rose said, “I thought it would be nice to hold a little ladies get together here at my house after church. It should be fun.”

“Uh...okay, sure,” Susan replied, knowing that going was a foregone conclusion if Rose invited her. “Um...do you mean just me, or Jasmine too?”

“That’s up to you,” Rose replied. “If Jasmine want’s to come, then that’s totally fine.”

“Um, you do know which Jasmine is here today, don’t you?” Susan asked.

“Of course I know! It makes no difference. If *she* wants to come, then like I said, she’s more than welcome.”

“Okay, Mom. I’ll ask her.

“Good. We can all just sit down and have a nice afternoon. Okay?”

“Sure, Mom. Sounds great. Um, Mom?” Susan interjected quickly.

“Yes?”

“Do we have to go to church tomorrow? I know that Jacob said he still wanted us to go, even though it seems like Reverend Cosinger spends the entire time yelling at us. But, well, the guys won’t be there, so why should we have to go?”

Rose thought about that for a moment. “I don’t know Sue,” she replied. “But Jacob was awfully insistent that we continue to go. Especially your family. That’s all I can tell you.”

Susan was disappointed. She had figured that would be the answer. Once Jacob decreed something, then that’s the way things went. “Okay,” Susan said. “See you after church tomorrow. Should we bring anything?”

“Not necessary dear, but some kind of desert might be nice, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Of course not, Mom. See you tomorrow.”

Susan mentally sighed as she hung up the phone. Now she had to whip up some kind of desert for tomorrow too. And tomorrow, a day when she figured it would be mostly quiet again because all the guys would be sleeping, was now going to be anything but quiet. "Jasmine!" she yelled. A moment later she saw his head sticking out from his bedroom doorway. "Did you just happen to mention to Aunt Jane what I said this morning about not getting any fun time for me?"

Jasmine suddenly felt very guilty. "Um...I...well...maybe. Kind of."

"Thought so," Susan replied as she turned her back on him. She really needed that bath now. If the phone rings, you answer it," she called without looking back at him. "And if it's for me, tell them I died!"

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Jasmine had no idea why they still had to go to church. He certainly wasn't looking forward to it. He knew his father had asked Grandpa about it, and he also knew that his Grandpa wanted them to keep going. He just couldn't understand why. And by the small little comments his mother had frequently made all morning, his mother didn't understand either. But the end result was that here he was again, all dressed for church and getting out of the car. Only this time it was just he and his mother.

The "guys" hadn't gotten back from their hunt until it was nearly time for him to get out of bed that morning. The noise had woken him up. He had been shocked to see how filthy and muddy they all were, and "Jimmy" had been so tired he had seen her literally stumble a few times and she even missed the doorway going into her bedroom and had run into the doorjamb. If that's how tiring those hunts were, then he had even more reason now to avoid hunting.

With only his mother this week for protection, he followed her through the front door of the church.

"There you are dears," Rose's voice greeted them.

Jasmine saw his Grandma already there with his Aunt Valerie and Ashley. He saw his Grandma holding out her arms to him and a

moment later he got a real nice hug from her. While the ladies talked, he spoke briefly with Ashley before Olivia came in with her mother and Lucas. One by one, all the women in the McComber clan arrived for church. Jasmine was even surprised to see his Aunt Jessica there, although he noted that her kids weren't with her this time.

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Reverend Cosinger didn't have to look twice to make sure he was actually looking at the McComber boy and not the McComber girl. After watching him come in dressed so inappropriately week after week, it didn't take him long to figure things out. Besides, his sister now had very short hair like a boy. The thing that had confused him at first, was that this time the boy wasn't scowling angrily at everyone like he always did, but the Reverend had no doubt that all too soon he'd see that defiant look back on the boy's face again.

His eyes desperately scanned the people who had come in. He saw Rose McComber, but not Jacob. Where was he? Valerie McComber and her daughter Ashley were there as usual. A few moments later the McComber gang of women were joined by Jane Mason and two of her kids, but not her oldest son Hunter. He was more than a bit surprised to see Jessica Cumberland show up, not only without her husband, but also without any of her young kids. And then he saw Marcy McComber come in with her daughter Nichole, but not her son Elliot. The Reverend was beginning to wonder what was going on. If you didn't count the abomination that looked so much like a girl, the only McComber boy that was there was Lucas. And when Janet McComber arrived a few moments later with Allison and her young son Aaron in tow but no husband, the Reverend had all the proof he needed that the men had all gone off hunting together.

But why were all the McComber women there that day? Even Jessica Cumberland had shown up! While he was grateful that Jacob was absent for a change, this display of every woman in the clan was still daunting. The Reverend had no doubt at all that Jacob

McComber was still trying to send him a message. And the message was still crystal clear. Jacob McComber still wanted him gone! But Reverend Cosinger had no plans to give in to Jacob McComber. He was determined to walk his chosen righteous path and see it all through – to the end of the McCombers!

He was still watching when all the McComber women began moving into the seats to sit down. Unlike they usually did where they were spread out all over the church with their families, this time they all sat somewhat together. There were three rows of them all together in the middle of his church. Right where he couldn't miss them if he tried. And there in the very first row of those McCombers was the dark spot that was only there to scoff at the word of God.

He forced himself to turn away and prepare for the morning service that would start in a few minutes. He wasn't grateful for the display of strength among the McComber women. He wasn't grateful for the blasphemous boy sitting among them. But he was grateful that not only Jacob, but all the McComber men weren't there for a change. And, he was grateful because he had noticed that once again his church held more people than usual. Other than the blasphemous spot that radiated out from the middle of his church where the McComber women all sat, he was very pleased with the congregation he would be preaching to today.

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Jasmine sat between his mother and his grandmother, waiting for the service to begin. The moment he saw the Reverend coming out from the back wearing his robe, his face automatically went into an angry scowl. He wasn't looking forward to the Reverend yelling at him for most of the service again.

Susan glanced over at Jasmine and noticed the look on his face. She really couldn't blame him, but for the whole last week he had managed to finally get rid of that attitude. And despite the situation, she didn't really want to see him with it again. "Stop looking so angry," she whispered. "Church hasn't even started yet."

"I'm ready, either way," Jasmine replied.

“Well stop it, either way!” Susan told him. “You’ve been smiling all week. Don’t go spoiling everything now.”

“Wouldn’t you with the way he treats me?”

Susan stared at him for a moment before answering. “Just smile and try to put up with it.” She watched his face to make sure he wiped the angry look away. And oddly enough, she did see him actually smile. What she couldn’t see though, was that even though he was actually smiling, that attitude he held so dearly was still there behind the smile. And it shone through crystal clear in the determined look of his eyes.

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It was such a pleasure for Reverend Cosinger to not have to look down into the very first row and see Jacob McComber as he began relaying the morning announcements. But it took only a moment before his eyes once again locked on the blight in the middle of his church. And the moment he locked eyes with the demon boy, he nearly stumbled backwards. He was forced to correct what he was saying because the sight of the boy today made him stumble over his words and completely lose track of his thoughts. Today, the boy was smiling directly at him. And it was without a doubt the most evil smile the Reverend had ever seen. He once again pictured a demon from hell inside the boy, come to church with the sole intention of wreaking destruction inside his congregation.

He tried to look away from the boy, but those eyes seemed to demand all his attention. It was as if that smile on his face was just daring him to say something wrong. Without realizing it, literally every word he said went directly to the demon blight sitting in his church. Even when the congregation sang a hymn, his eyes constantly went from the hymnal back to the eyes of the abominable blight.

It wasn’t until after he had started his sermon that the Reverend realized he had been ignoring the rest of his congregation. For a few brief wonderful moments, he preached happily to everyone else in the church. But those eyes above that mocking smile. The moment

his own eyes passed over that part of the congregation, he was once more held captive. And when it happened, he fought back against those eyes with everything he had. His sermon went from being one thing, to a sermon filled with fiery passion and determination. The more those eyes held him, the angrier he got, and consequently, the louder and more animated he got. His voice echoed through the church and his hand slapped the railing punctuating nearly every point he tried to make.

And eventually, he saw that evil face slip back to the angry scowl he was more used to dealing with. And the Reverend knew he was winning!

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Susan was growing angrier by the second. The Reverend was being worse than ever today with the way he was giving his sermon. Once again he was yelling straight at her son, and since she was sitting right next to him, it felt like he was yelling at her too. She was doing her best not to stand up and tell him to stop it! She was doing her best to try to be a lady. Doing her best to show that she was above the actions of the way he was preaching.

She looked over at Jasmine again. His face had once more lapsed into that angry scowl. She could tell from the way things were going that if she didn't do something soon, she would have a real situation on her hands. She leaned over to Jasmine. "Smile," she whispered to him. "Try to ignore him."

Jasmine looked at his mother as if she was crazy. Smile? He was getting ready to yell right back at the Reverend!

"Smile!" Susan insisted. "And just sit there like proper lady."

Like a lady? Jasmine jolted a bit in his seat and pressed his knees more firmly together. He hadn't been thinking about the position of his legs at all. In fact, he briefly marveled that his knees hadn't managed to wander apart – yet. But with his mother staring so intently at him, he sat up straighter like she continually hounded him to do, and forced the smile back to his face. And when his mother finally looked away, he did his best to keep that attitude on

his face as he turned back to the Reverend and tried to ignore the “noise” coming from the Reverend’s mouth.

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Reverend Cosinger couldn’t miss the boy’s mother talking to him of course. The moment the boy sat up straighter and that evil smile came back to his face, he knew that the mother had told him to not give up. But he had seen the demon fail, if only briefly. And now he knew that the demon inside the boy could be beaten! He was winning the battle. He was winning! And despite the smile once again plastered on that angelic face that hid the demon blight underneath, the Reverend pressed on more determinedly than ever.

And when his sermon had ended, and when the final hymn of praise to God had been sung, it was with pride that the Reverend took his usual place at the door to the church to shake the hand of every God fearing person who had come out to side with him against the McComber blight. And with every word of praise for the way he had preached that reached his ears, his pride grew stronger and stronger.

Once again he watched as this time the mother, Susan McComber, shepherded her son quickly out of the church behind the backs of the people he was speaking with. To him it was obvious that they were sneaking out with their tails between their legs in defeat. That raised his spirits even more.

And then there was one person left in the line. One last person. Not Jacob McComber, but his wife Rose instead. Until a few months ago, a dear woman and a trusted friend. But she was Jacob’s wife! And she stood there waiting to shake his hand. But he had won today, so he grabbed her hand firmly and offered her his brightest smile – of victory.

“Jacob’s not here, Reverend,” Rose started nicely as she shook his hand. “So stick it up your ass!”

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By the time the car reached the house, Jasmine had managed to put Reverend Cosinger out of his mind as he anticipated the afternoon ahead. Before church, the Four Musketeers had gotten permission to get together instead of sitting through the ladies luncheon at Grandma's house. They were all going to meet at Allison's house together. The only provisions being that the girls keep an eye on both Lucas and Aaron, and that they don't wake up Allison's father. The promise of agreeing to stay quiet got all four girls out of the trip up to Grandma's for the afternoon.

Once through the door, Jasmine ran to his room to change into the next outfit his sister had laid out for him. Whatever it might be.

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Susan wasn't the least bit worried about Jasmine. Well, she always worried about him, but here at home or with all his friends, she knew he would be just fine. As she walked to the counter to pick up the pie she and Jasmine had baked last night, she couldn't help but remember the nice evening the two of them had spent together. Yes, she hadn't really wanted to be stuck making a pie at the last minute, but somehow it had turned out to be a very nice mother-daughter bonding situation, even though the daughter in this situation had really been her son. And then afterwards the two of them had sat on the couch together and watched movies on TV. Well, she had sat. Jasmine had laid with his head in her lap through the second movie while she played endlessly running her fingers through her...his long hair. The entire evening had become a special time for both of them. The two of them had even cried together at the ending to each of the movies. It was something that had surprised her, but had also made her feel closer than ever to him.

With the pie in her hands, she left the kitchen. She saw the door to the master bedroom was closed. She didn't bother going in and possibly waking her husband. She headed down the hallway. Tommy's door and Jimmy's door were of course closed as well. As was Jasmine's. She opened Jasmine's door.

Jasmine was undressed down to his bra and panties when his door suddenly opened. He gasped and momentarily froze at the intrusion before he brought the blouse in his hands up to cover the front of him. He was only a little relieved to see his mother there.

"I'm going up to Grandma's now," Susan told him. "Are you going to be alright?"

Jasmine was surprised by the question. "Of course."

Susan nodded. "Good," she said. "You go straight to Allison's and nowhere else. Hear?"

Jasmine nodded. "Yeah, sure," he replied.

Susan stared at him for a moment. The blouse he was holding in front of him did little to hide the size of his growing breasts. She walked into the room, and careful not to drop her pie, she gave him a one arm hug and a kiss. "See you later, okay?"

"Sure, Mom," he replied. "Love you."

"Love you too," she told him before she walked out. She left the house with her mind still remembering the nice time the two of them had the night before, and with her mind still picturing how much his breasts had grown. He was rapidly becoming the daughter...that she was losing.

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There was never a lull in the conversation, there was never anything organized. All the women just seemed to come in and take care of everything without anyone ever mentioning anything that needed doing. And in the process, they all enjoyed talking to each other – nonstop. Seven grown women, with Ashley making it eight, all crowded around the big kitchen table. It was crowded there like that, but the women wouldn't have it any other way. Besides, it made talking easier.

There was never an agenda of topics covered, but at one time or another, the women covered them all. The biggest laugh came when Rose told them about her parting comment to Reverend Cosinger. They discussed their lives, they discussed the family business and the new guest lodges they were building, they

discussed their dreams, and of course they discussed their kids. All of their kids.

“Did you all hear the new names the girls club came up with for Jasmine and Jimmy?” Janet asked at one point as most of them were beginning to nibble on bits of desert.

“Oh I certainly did!” Jane replied. “And even though nicknames may not always be the best thing, I think the girls did have a good idea with it.”

“At least they’re not anything nasty or even silly,” Marcy added. “In fact, they’re really rather nice names. I like them.”

“New names?” Jessica asked.

“The girls all got together...” Janet started.

“Me too,” Ashley threw in.

Janet smiled at her for a moment before continuing. “They all decided that when anyone talks about the twins now, it’s too hard to figure out which twin they’re talking about. So they came up with some new names for them. They found a permanent girl’s name for Jimmy, you know the real Jimmy, and they found a boy’s name for Jasmine to use all the time.”

“What names did they pick?” Rose asked.

“Well, Jasmine – the real Jasmine, is supposed to be known now as either Jasmine Joe, or Jimmy Joe. The Joe part follows her no matter who she’s being.”

“Most of the time though they call her Jazzy Joe,” Marcy added with a laugh.

“And how about Jimmy?” Jessica asked.

“They decided on Jade for him.”

“Jade?” Jessica replied. “That’s a nice name, but I expected something different. I mean, Joe is often used to follow another name, even for a girl. But Jade...I don’t think I’ve ever heard it used that way.”

“Olivia picked it out for him and pretty much insisted on it,” Ashley explained. “And you know how she has to have everything just the way she thinks it should be.”

There were a number of smiles around the table at that comment.

“So,” Jessica asked, to be clear on the matter, “Jimmy then is supposed to be either Jimmy Jade or Jasmine Jade?”

“That’s it,” Janet replied.

“And then Jasmine is either Jasmine Joe or Jimmy Joe,” she stated.

“Except that everyone, especially the girls, are calling her Jazzy Joe instead,” Marcy added.

“And how do you feel about it, Susan?” Rose asked.

Susan shrugged. “It is a good idea. And they’re just nicknames, and like Marcy said, they’re not bad names in any way. Most likely, they won’t even last very long. It’s just that...they’re my kids. Clint and I named them. And neither of us even had a say in it. Neither did the twins, for that matter. The girls just sprang the names on everyone. But...it does kind of make a lot of sense, and you all know how much confusion there’s been whenever anyone tries to talk about them.” She paused and smiled shyly. “And, I do kind of really like Jazzy Joe. It really suits her pretty well I think.”

“So you’re okay with it?” Rose asked, just to be clear.

Susan nodded. “Yeah, of course. I mean, they are nice names. And the idea just might help everyone.”

Rose nodded. “Good,” she replied happily. “So the girls just got together and what, decided they wanted new names for them? What happened to suddenly bring this on?”

“They’ve mentioned it a few times in the past, Grandma,” Ashley told her. “It just came up again when they were discussing something else.”

Rose smiled. “Let me guess, birthday parties!”

Ashley laughed. “Not this time. In fact, nobody’s even mentioned a party until Olivia called me yesterday.”

“She nearly ruined our phone when she screamed,” Susan told them.

“I heard her do the same thing with Nichole from way across the room,” Marcy added. “And then of course the two girls had to have a screaming match to see who could scream louder. But trust me, I put a stop to that one pretty fast!”

“I’m glad I wasn’t there!” Susan replied. “In fact, for once I’m glad it was...Jasmine Jade on the phone instead of Jasmine Joe,

because Jasmine Joe would have done the same thing.”

“I can’t tell you how glad I was when Jane and Jessica outgrew that phase,” Rose mentioned.

“Tell me about it,” Jane said. “I’m still waiting. I think Olivia is simply proud of how loud she can shriek. Someday I’m going to book her a part in a horror movie.”

The women all laughed for a moment. “So what were the girls talking about?” Rose asked, trying to get back to her original question.

Janet and Ashley exchanged a sobering glance at each other for a moment before Janet nodded to her daughter. “We were discussing Jimmy...Jimmy Joe,” Ashley explained. “She was causing trouble for...Jasmine Jade again.”

“Trouble?” both Rose and Susan said at the same time.

“Kind of,” Ashley replied. “Actually it’s just more of the same old stuff she was doing before. She’s determined for everyone in the school to think he’s some kind of sissy, when in reality, he’s anything but.”

“And what did you decide about that, aside from giving them both new names?” Rose asked.

Ashley looked a bit frustrated. “We didn’t decide anything. None of us knew what to do about it. So we pretty much ignored it and tried to forget about it. And then we got all interested in the new name thing instead.”

Rose nodded. “I see,” she replied soberly. Her face brightened a bit. “Have another piece of pie, dear,” she told Ashley. Ladies,” she addressed all the women, forget about your diets for just a little while more and indulge yourself. We’ve all earned a bit of sweetness I think. Many times over!”

Rose herself smiled and laughed and dished out slices of the pie to several of the women at her table, but the one thing that remained firmly on her mind, was that Jasmine – or Jasmine Joe to be correct now, still hadn’t found her compassion. And it was beginning to look like she never would.

Chapter 40 - Snow Storm

March 2nd – 4th

New month, new rules. Kind of. Actually, it was the same old rule as all the previous months, just applied one more time. This time the twins would remain as each other for five of the seven days in each week. The only two days now when they could be themselves anymore was on Thursday and Friday. And that was it!

It had reached the point now where the only person who really didn't think they should just stay as each other all the time, was Susan, and even she was beginning to wonder. But she was their mother, and she still did treasure the time when her two kids could finally be themselves again. Her only problem was, it was also getting to the point where even when her kids were being themselves, they still looked more like their opposite selves should look. Jimmy Jade still looked like a girl, even when dressed like a boy, and Jazzy Joe still looked like a boy, which was even more disturbing because Susan was starting to worry that someone might think she was a boy dressed as a girl. Fortunately, other than school, neither of her kids went out in public too much, although Susan was feeling more comfortable about being out now with... Jade, than she did with...Joe.

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Since Olivia's father was the school principal, and her mother was one of the teachers, Olivia, Hunter, and Lucas were usually among the first people to arrive at school every day. Olivia was usually in her classroom even before Mrs. Ansley got there. On Monday morning, as all the kids gradually came into the classroom, Olivia met each girl at the door and handed her a handmade invitation to her birthday party. The only girls that didn't get one were Nichole, and Jade, but then they had helped in the making of the

cards. As Olivia was greeting all the kids and handing out her invitations, Jimmy Joe walked in through the door and saw her handing one of the girls an envelope.

"What's that?" Jimmy asked, noticing that Olivia wasn't giving her an envelope.

"Invitations to my birthday party," Olivia told her as her face clearly showed a bit of distress. "We'll talk later about it, okay?" she added quickly so she could grab another of the girls in the class and hand her a card too.

Jimmy Joe headed to her seat. She should have realized right away that Olivia would be handing out party invitations. It was March now and Olivia's birthday was coming up soon. Still, not getting an invitation or even hearing about the party was rather frustrating. She was suddenly feeling very left out again. Would she get to go? She wanted to go. Olivia was one of her very best friends. But...would her mother let her go? So far, since she had to start being her brother, she hadn't been included in any of the sleepover parties they had had. Of course, the only one that she actually knew about was the dumb party her brother had thrown, that she already knew was done just to try to get her to quit hunting. Ha! Like something that stupid would actually make her quit. Ha! But she was betting her dumb wuss of a brother was going to Olivia's party.

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Olivia didn't get a chance to talk with Jimmy Joe until lunchtime, and she desperately wanted to talk with her. She, Nichole, and Jade got to the lunch line ahead of everyone else, but Olivia tried to hang back, specifically waiting for Jimmy Joe. The moment Jimmy reached the lunch line, Olivia went and grabbed her hand and dragged her up to where the other girls were. But she didn't let go of Jimmy Joe's hand as she turned to talk with her. "Jimmy Joe," she said, her voice obviously showing how sorry she felt. "I'm afraid you can't come to my party this year. I begged my Mom to let you come, but she said that this had to be a girls only party and there was no way you could come."

Jimmy had been afraid of that, but hearing the words still made it feel like a slap in the face. She did appreciate that Olivia had tried to get her into the party. "Thanks Olivia," she replied, trying not to show that she was hurt in any way." She nodded toward Jade. "How about my brother?"

Olivia was surprised by the question. "Of course he'll be there!"

"Even though it's a girl's only party?" Jimmy asked with a sly smile.

"Urrrgh!" Olivia grunted in frustrations as she let go of her hand. "You can be so frustrating sometimes. "I just wanted to let you know I did try hard for you. Real hard!" With that, she angrily turned around so that Jimmy was staring at her back.

Jimmy felt a bit bad. She tapped her on the shoulder and waited until Olivia turned around. "Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

"Jade is more of a girl than you are now!" Olivia replied angrily before turning around again.

Once again Jimmy felt like he had been slapped. More of a girl than she was? Not hardly. It was only her darn short haircut that was making the difference. Her short hair, and his longer hair. And of course the fact that he was wearing a nice colorful skirt outfit that she had put together for him, while she was dressed like a boy. But he wasn't more of a girl than she was!

They got their lunches and went to their usual table. Since it was a day that Jimmy Joe was being a boy, she was forced to sit as the odd person out while her brother sat across from Olivia. The position irked Jimmy a bit, but she was fairly used to it now. At least she was still close enough to hear what everyone was saying and join in the conversation herself. Allison soon sat down with them in her usual chair and the discussions began, but this time the discussion was totally centered around Olivia's party, and at the first mention of it, Jimmy felt angry that she was being left out again.

"Mom's going to take everyone to the movies on Saturday!" Olivia announced excitedly.

"We're going to the movies?" Nichole exclaimed.

"That's what I just said," Olivia replied with an air of nonchalance.

They all laughed, except Jimmy. She sat there quietly fuming over her situation. Her dumb brother was going to the movies with all *her* girlfriends. Her dumb stupid brother was going to get to go to and have fun at Olivia's party, while *she* couldn't. All because her moron wuss of a brother actually thought he was turning into a girl. So...totally...stupid!

It was bad enough that everyone even thought he was starting to look totally like a real girl, which she did have to admit, he did. But take away all the clothes outfits she carefully and painstakingly planned and set out for him, and take away the fancy haircut her mother had gotten him, and what would you have left? The old Jimmy that looked like and was nothing but a boy. How had the stupid sap managed to pull the wool so thoroughly over everyone's eyes?

Bottom line? The silly wuss was a sissy! Plain and simple, no two ways about it. A great big sissy! Totally! And yet despite the way he looked and even acted a bit more now, nobody believed it. How could they not? It was so obvious! And every time she "tried" to point out the truth about him to some of the guys, not only did they refuse to believe it, but she got in hot water with all her friends over it. It was so wrong! So totally wrong. And so...stupid! And now her silly sissy *sister* was going to have fun with all the girls, while she, the real girl, couldn't! It...wasn't...fair!

Her fuming over it all had made her lose track of the conversation. It was her brother's voice that pulled her back to what was being talked about. She nearly choked on her lunch when she heard Jade mention that he would grab all *her* nail polish to help with the mani-pedis. It was all *her* nail polish, not his! The stupid sap. She absolutely couldn't believe that he could be interested at all in doing anything for Olivia's stupid party. She couldn't believe it!

As she sat there silently listening to everything that they were discussing, including her stupid brother, a major thought dropped itself into her fuming brain. She stopped eating. She stopped listening. She just stared straight ahead as her eyes focused on future events that only she could see.

"Jimmy Joe. Jimmy Joe!" Nichole called again.

Jimmy finally broke herself out of the disjointed state she had been in. Her eyebrows were still raised at the truth of it all. "Yeah?" she finally asked.

"Where've you been?" Nichole asked. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," Jimmy replied.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure," she replied happily. "I did get a little sick Saturday night, but trust me, I'm not sick now," she declared with total certainty as what she had seen in her mind continued to course through her brain.

"You were sick Saturday night?" Nichole asked, fully concerned. "After the coon hunt?"

"Um...more like during it. Mostly towards the end."

"What happened?" Jade asked, even more concerned that his sister had been sick. He remembered seeing her stumble when she had come in from the hunt, and then she had run straight into the door frame while going into her bedroom. No wonder. She had been sick!

"Um...well...I just seemed to get dizzier and dizzier as the night went on. And even the drink Grandpa gave me wasn't helping. I think Dad even unloaded my gun on me at some point so I wouldn't accidentally shoot someone."

"That's good!" Olivia said.

"But you're fine now?" Allison asked, just to be sure.

"Yeah. I was fine when I woke up yesterday afternoon. Perfectly fine."

"Gee, that had to be awful," Nichole said. "I know how much you were looking forward to that hunt, and then you went and got sick during it. That had to be terrible!"

Jimmy shook her head. "No, the funny thing was, I was having the best time of my life! Totally! It was a blast!"

The girls all shook their heads. They all knew that Jimmy Joe was crazy, and now she had just shown that again. How could you possibly have fun doing anything if you were sick?

Jimmy though, was smiling to herself. While the girls had all been talking, she had realized something that none of them even thought about. She had no reason at all to try to spread the "truth"

about her sissy brother. She had no reason anymore to even worry about it. Her stupid sap of a brother was going to take care of all that – all by himself. And he was going to do it so thoroughly, that nobody would ever consider him to be anything but a major sissy again. Ever!

Because what Jimmy Joe has seen in the back of her mind, was her silly sissy brother, doing everything the girls would be doing at Olivia's party. She had seen him having nothing but total fun with all those girls while they all did nothing but the most feminine things possible – all day, and all night long! And not only would the Musketeers see him, but every single girl in their class that showed up, which going by all their past parties, Jimmy Joe knew would be most of the girls from their class as well as some from Allison's class too. And all those girls would see her silly stupid brother acting like and being the total sissy that only she fully realized that he was. And once those girls saw him acting that way, Jimmy Joe had no doubt about how fast the word would spread throughout the entire school about him, and most likely beyond the school too. Her stupid brother was going to literally prove to everyone what he was – a stupid, silly sissy, and a dumb total wuss!

Jimmy Joe's entire day was suddenly much brighter. She wished more than ever now that she could be at that party to see it, but she was already looking forward to next Monday at school when she had no doubt at all that she'd be hearing all about it. And she was looking forward to fully enjoying every single time she heard someone use the word sissy about her silly brother – Jade.

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On Wednesday, the snow started falling shortly after they left for school, with the weather forecast calling for not only another major snowstorm, but perhaps the worst snow storm of the year for their area. Everyone hoped it wouldn't be too much snow, and most of them hoped it would be the last snowfall of the year. Most people were looking forward to warmer spring weather.

The kids in school had long gotten used to seeing Jasmine and Jimmy coming to school as each other, first on Mondays, then on

Mondays and Tuesdays, but when they showed up still as each other on Wednesday this time, they both got questions asking if they were going to start coming to school all the time as each other. Neither twin had a good answer for that question. Both of them did hear comments about how senseless it was for them to go back to being themselves anymore. And the reasons the kids gave them were not only because it was only two days when they could be themselves, but both twins heard more comments than either of them wanted to hear about how Jasmine Joe couldn't pass for a girl anymore, and Jimmy Jade couldn't pass for a boy. In fact, both twins were becoming a bit angry over the issue. Jade however, disappointedly knew it was all too true, especially in his case.

It wasn't just the comments from the other kids that weighed heavily on the two twins that day, and it wasn't anything to do with the weather either. They were certainly factors, but neither was the reason why both twins had come to school worried and upset. Both of them had left the house that way. Both of them had been nervous and irritable during breakfast. Both of them had spent restless nights since their father had dropped the bomb the night before. After school, their mother and father were taking the twins back to see their Uncle Brian – Doctor McComber. It was time for their next dose of hormones.

All morning long, everyone in the school kept glancing out the windows. The snow was coming down as hard as anyone could ever remember seeing it. And it was piling up on the ground awfully fast. The words "snow day" were continuously whispered around the school, not just by the students, but most of the teachers as well. It was one thing to have a lot of snow from several different snowstorms, where the road plows could clear the snow from the roads before things got too bad, but it was another thing when the snow came all at once and the plows didn't have time to clear the roads. Neither twin said anything, but both Jimmy Joe and Jasmine Jade were hoping that the snow would prevent them from going to see Uncle Brian, and mostly from getting another dose of the hormones.

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Since he was the school's principal, John Mason watched the snow falling all morning too. And the more he watched it, the more worried he got. He left his upper grade students more than once to go check on things and to make some phone calls. None of the answers he got were encouraging. An hour before lunch, while his class was doing nothing but talking and goofing off, he stopped at the school secretary's desk. "Start calling the parents," he told her. "We dare not chance waiting till the end of the day to send everyone home. We'll try to get the busses back here by lunchtime and get the kids out of here as soon as we can."

After that, he briefly checked on his own students and filled them in on his decision, before walking the halls from room to room and letting every other class know that he was cancelling school just as soon as the busses could get there. He himself would stick around as long as it took for any of the other students to get picked up. From that moment on, in nearly every class, school was basically over. Jasmine Jade and Jimmy Joe were more hopeful than ever that they wouldn't be getting more hormones.

In the heavy falling snow and wind, it took the busses more than an hour to finally get to the school to pick up the students and take them home early. The moment the word was given, those students that rode the busses were out of their seats and running for their lockers. Plans for playing in the snow were on most of their lips, including Jimmy Joe and Jasmine Jade. But Jimmy Joe was also worried that she would have to be shoveling snow with her cousins and Uncle Jed instead. But still, she'd be getting out of school. And if they had to leave school early because of the snow, then she wouldn't have to let Uncle Brian stick anything up inside of her – even if it was all totally fake. Whatever he had done to her last time had left her all black and blue there and had hurt for days! But at least as far as she could see, nothing else had happened at all from what he had done. It was all totally – fake!

She got her things from her locker and pulled her heavy coat on, then hurried amid all the other kids toward the doors leading out to the busses. But just before she got to the doors, she saw her father coming into the school, where he stomped hard on the floor to get

the snow off his boots. She stopped, totally surprised to see him there. "Dad?" she said. "What are you doing here?"

"The snow's coming down so hard," he said as he started removing his gloves, "that they called off work and sent everyone home." He saw Tommy in the distance heading for them. "Tommy!" he called. A moment later, Tommy was there as well. "You two head for the truck, I'll wait here for Jas."

Clint searched the faces of the kids coming through the halls. His height made it fairly easy. Where was his...he didn't know whether to call him his son or daughter. He didn't know if he should even think about his child as Jimmy, or Jasmine...or Jade. It had recently started becoming more of a problem for him than ever as... his child...had started looking even more feminine than before. And then he saw...his child. He/she was walking right along with the rest of his friends, Nichole, Allison, and Ashley. All four seemed to be more interested in talking together than in going home. Four girls – to all appearances.

He forced himself to use the name. "Jas!" he called, and was rewarded to see...his child...look up.

"Dad!" Jasmine said as the four girls reached him. "What are you doing here?"

"Picking you up. Everyone else is in the truck already. What took you so long?"

"I had to put my coat on," Jasmine replied.

"So did your two...brothers, but they're already in the truck.

"Hi Uncle Clint," Nichole said. "Did my Dad come for me too?"

Clint shook his head. "No, when we left work, he thought the roads were still okay for the bus." He looked to his...child. "Let's go," he said. "The roads are getting worse by the minute." He headed out, but Jasmine stopped to look at her friends and say a quick goodbye. "I guess I'll see you all out on the hill in a little while." He smiled. "And if Dad is taking us home, then I'm going to be there first!" he proclaimed with a laugh.

"Jasmine! Let's go!" Clint yelled.

Still laughing, Jasmine hurried after him. Outside, the wind howled around his face, and especially his legs. The snow was nearly blinding. Since he was going home with his father, they

couldn't walk all the way to the truck on the path where the rest of the kids had already packed down the snow with their feet. They had to go off into the deeper snow. Jasmine stepped carefully, trying his best to step in his father's big footprints. He wasn't wearing boots or anything that would be decent for the snow. He was wearing shoes that were all too thin and open. He could literally feel his feet getting freezing cold through his shoes.

He reached the truck and opened the back door and climbed up.

"Hi Jas."

He looked up as he was still climbing into the back seat where Tommy and Jimmy had made room for him. "Mom? What are you doing here?"

"Picking you all up!" Susan replied.

"Oh," Jasmine said as he reached through the cold to grab the truck door and close it. The truck was warm inside since the engine was running, along with the heater. After being outside for just a few minutes, the warmth felt good. "Whew, it's bad out there," he mentioned.

"It is that," Clint agreed as he put the truck in gear and headed out.

The surprise came only seconds later as the kids saw their father turn in the wrong direction to head home. "Where are we going?" Jimmy Joe asked. "Home is the other way."

Susan looked back towards Jimmy. "We've got to see Uncle Brian. Remember?" She didn't miss the looks of horror on the faces of both her twins.

"But Mom, it's snowing," Jasmine Jade said hopefully.

But it was Clint who answered. "It's not bad enough yet that this truck can't get through it. And I already called Brian. He's still expecting us whenever we get there."

"But Dad..." Jimmy Joe whispered disappointedly.

Susan heard the soft breathless words that Jimmy had uttered. She turned as much in her seat as she could to face her. "Jas," she said, and then realized she had used the wrong name. She shook it off and continued. "We went through this last night, and again this morning, and you refused to quit hunting. I'll ask you again, please agree to quit – permanently. Please. For all our sakes, especially

yours. Please quit.” She was disappointed and frustrated as she immediately saw the stubborn anger wash over the face of her daughter...her daughter that didn’t look so much like a daughter anymore.

“I told you before, it’s all fake! Every bit of it! And I’m not going to quit hunting. Now stop asking me that!”

Susan and Clint looked at each other. Susan’s lips pursed in anger, and Clint simply looked frustrated. Neither of them said a word as Clint continued to drive slowly and carefully through the snow as the visibility seemed to be getting even worse.

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Clint felt a surge of relief at reaching his brother’s parking lot. The roads were indeed getting bad. They had gotten much easier halfway there as they reached a road that had been more recently plowed, but even there the snow was piling up quickly again. He didn’t say it, but he was very interested in getting this whole damned thing over with and getting home. This was not a storm to be out driving in.

Before getting out of the truck, Susan again turned back toward her real daughter.

“Don’t say it!” Jimmy Joe said before she could ask again. “Don’t even ask!”

The anger and frustration Susan felt grew much worse for a moment. Everyone else was already out of the truck before she could get herself under control enough to join them.

The parking lot and the sidewalks hadn’t been plowed or shoveled. They did their best to walk in some tire tracks from another vehicle until they reached the sidewalk, but they were forced to walk in the snow after that. Susan felt for Jade as she watched him trying to pick his way in everyone else’s footsteps. She should have been smart enough to tell him to wear boots to school today, but as usual, he had worn everything his...brother...had set out for him to wear. And the outfit didn’t include boots. Pity.

The office was wonderfully warm after coming in from the snowy weather outside. The guys all stomped their feet to get the snow off

their shoes. Jasmine didn't do that. He had been lucky that between his father's feet and Tommy's feet, he didn't have to step directly in the snow. The waiting room wasn't quite empty. Despite the snow, people still got sick and injured. But there weren't many people there. Susan checked in, and then they all found seats. It was only about fifteen minutes before they were called into one of the exam rooms. Tommy, as usual, stayed in the waiting area. It was another fifteen nervous minutes after that before Doctor McComber got to them.

"Clint...Susan," Brian said, greeting his brother and sister-in-law. He looked to the two kids. "And how are you two on this snowy day?"

"Mmm...not sure," Jade replied softly.

The only answer Brian got from Jimmy Joe was a suspicious glare. He shook his head and looked to Clint and Susan. "I guess there's no use in asking if she'll quit hunting again?" The frustrated look from Clint and the small shake of Susan's head were all the answer he needed. He shook his head. "Let's get on with this then." He turned to Jimmy Joe. "I guess we'll do you first," he said. "Get undressed and up on the table."

Jimmy Joe glared at him again for a moment.

"Jimmy Joe!" Susan's voice came quickly. "Do as you're told. If you're going to be so disagreeable about the hunting, then you better darn well be agreeable about getting your medicine!"

Jimmy Joe glared back at her mother for a moment, then pulled her coat off and began getting undressed. She was down to her t-shirt and boxer underwear before she started climbing up on the exam table.

"You might as well get the t-shirt and underwear off now," Brian told her, "I'm going to have to examine you before I give you the hormones again."

Jimmy Joe got back to the floor. "You mean the fake stuff," she mumbled before she grabbed the bottom of her t-shirt. She paused a moment to glare at him again, then literally ripped it up and over her head. Just as angrily, she pulled her boxers down to her ankles and stepped out of them. "Satisfied?" she asked.

"Watch yourself!" Clint threatened angrily.

“Up on the table,” Brian told her.

Jimmy Joe gave him an angry glare, but it didn't last long as Brian moved in with his stethoscope. “Any periods since last month?”

While Brian was checking Jimmy Joe's health, Clint and Susan had time to see their daughter's naked body. Once again Susan saw too many signs that her daughter was indeed changing. Signs that simply made her stomach knot up. Clint wasn't as aware of all the signs as his wife was, but he too got the impression that she didn't look nearly as feminine as she should. And then there was the issue of her breasts. She was almost twelve years old. She had none at all.

“You seem healthy enough,” Brian noted as he stood back to look at other things about her. “I see your breasts have receded down to almost none at all now. It's starting to look like there was never anything there to begin with. Even your nipples and the areolas around them are smaller than they were last month.

“Bullshit!” Jimmy Joe muttered.

“Jimmy Joe! Watch your mouth!” Susan told her.

“Stand up a moment,” Brian told her.

With a somewhat shocked look at him, and then at her mother and father, Jimmy Joe slipped down off the exam table to stand totally naked in front of everyone. “Go ahead and get a good look,” she said nastily.

Brian ignored her, but only stood back further. “Her torso is definitely changing,” he said to Clint and Susan. You can see where she's starting to lose the feminine shape and her body is starting to look more straight than curved.” He moved around to her side. “Her hips and backside also seem to have changed. There's no doubt as to the fat distribution changing.” He lifted one of her arms. “The muscles are developing too,” he said. “You can really see it in her shoulders.”

“We had to get her some new clothes because of it,” Susan told him.”

Brian nodded. “Up on the table again,” he said. “Let's get this over with.”

Once again, Jimmy Joe looked to her parents, but this time, there was fear in her eyes.

"Either do it," Clint said, "or agree to quit hunting."

"It's all bullshit and fake!" she muttered as she climbed up on the table. "She looked at Brian. "And you're just lying about me!"

"Jimmy Joe!" Clint cautioned again.

Brian held up his hand. "It's okay," he told his brother. He looked back to the girl on his exam table. "I don't believe that you can't see the changes yourself."

"Bullshit!" Jimmy Joe muttered angrily again.

Jade watched the whole procedure once again. The last time, it had fascinated him completely. It still did. But this time he was simply too worried about what the next dose of hormones in his system might do to him. Even though the procedure took a few minutes, for him, it was over all too quickly. And then it was his turn.

"Okay, young lady," Brian said nicely to him, get your coat off and undress. It's your turn."

While Jimmy Joe put her clothes on, Jasmine Jade removed his coat and began slowly and fearfully undressing. He didn't want this, but since his darn sister had gotten the hormones, then he had no choice in the matter at all. It wasn't right! One by one, he removed everything he was wearing until he was down to his bra and panties.

"Hm!" Clint grunted as he got his first look at his son's breasts just peeking out from behind his bra. But he made no other comment.

"All the way," Brian told Jade. "Just like...Jimmy over there." He looked to Jimmy who was still finishing getting dressed. It was obvious that she was being careful around where the implants had been put into her.

Unlike Jimmy Joe, Jasmine Jade pulled her panties off first, and then he reached behind his back and unfastened his bra. Very embarrassedly he pulled it off his body.

Brian noticed how much his breasts had grown in the past month. "It looks like..."

"Nooo!" Jimmy Joe screamed in horror as she got her first real look at the breasts on her brother's chest. "Nooooo!" she screamed again as she pushed her way forward to stand disbelievingly right in

front of him. She looked from his breasts to his face, then down to his breasts again. "It can't be! It's not real. It's not..." Not wanting to believe it, she reached out to touch them.

Jade backed away and blocked her hand. "Don't!"

But Jimmy Joe was too horrified by what she was seeing. She easily pushed his hand away and grabbed her brother's breasts with both hands. Jade backed up against the exam table where he couldn't move any further as he fought with his sister to get her hands off of him.

"It can't be!" Jimmy Joe screamed again. "It can't be! It's not real!"

"Jimmy!" Susan yelled. "Stop it!"

"It is real!" Brian said at the same time.

"Jimmy Joe looked from her mother, to her father, to her Uncle Brian, and back to her stupid brother – who had breasts! "Aaaaaahhh!" she screamed loudly as she ran in a panic from the room.

All three adults ran after her. Left alone, Jade didn't know what to do. He was totally naked and everyone else had gone. When nobody came back after a few minutes, he started getting dressed again. He was suddenly hopeful that now he wouldn't have to get anymore hormones. He held that hope strongly as he continued to get dressed.

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In a panic, Jimmy Joe ran through the office. She looked wildly around, but never stopped moving. The door was ahead. She ran through the waiting area, past her brother who was the only one there now, and nearly broke the door trying to get outside. Behind her, she could hear her father and mother calling her, but she had to get away, she had to get out of there. It couldn't be true. None of it could be true!

With nowhere else to run, she headed through the snow for her father's truck. It was already covered in snow. She ran to the truck and tried to open the door, but it was locked. She pulled and pulled against it, trying vainly to open the door so she could get in, but the

sturdy truck held firm. She screamed in frustration again as her father caught up with her.

"Jimmy, stop it!" Clint yelled as he grabbed his daughter – son. She fought against him, but despite the new muscle strength she had, he was far bigger and stronger. He held her firmly, trapping her arms to her sides so she couldn't get away.

Susan ran up breathlessly. Her daughter – her real daughter – was fighting against her husband's strong grasp, and she was crying. "Jas!" she said.

"Let me go!" Jimmy Joe screamed. "Let me go! It's not real! It's got to be a trick!"

"Stop it!" Susan yelled as Brian now reached them too. The snow was falling heavier but she ignored the snow and the even worse freezing wind that blew against them all.

"You saw that it's true!" Brian told her. "You touched his breasts. You felt them. You know that it's true!"

"Bullshit!" Jimmy screamed as she fought harder against her father's grip. "It's not real. It's impossible. It can't be real!"

"It *is* real!" Susan yelled. "You saw it yourself. And I have a feeling you've known for quite a while now that it's real."

"No it's not!" Jimmy insisted as her crying intensified. "It's not real at all," she cried as she collapsed inside her father's arms.

Susan reached out with both hands and framed her daughter's face. She moved her daughter's head so she had no choice but to look at her. "Jas," she said, purposely using her real name. "You know it's real. You know it! You see now what the hormones have done to your brother, and you know perfectly well what they've done to you." She felt her daughter tense and start fighting again against the grip she had on her head and the grip her husband had on her body. Neither parent relented. "Please, Jas. Please agree to quit hunting. You see now what it's doing to you. You see what it's doing to you and your brother. Please quit hunting, and be my little girl again. Please!" She finally released her daughter's face and stood back a bit. The howling wind made her shiver, but she ignored it.

Jimmy suddenly tensed and started kicking and screaming in a total rage again. "Noooo! Noooo!" she screamed. Even in the driving wind and snow, the panic in her voice was all too clear.

“Nooooo! It’s not real. None of it’s real. It’s all fake!” She tried again to pull free from her father’s grasp, and again she failed. “Let me go! Let me go!” she yelled. “Let me go!”

“Jas!” Susan yelled to get her attention again. “Will you please stop hunting now?”

Jimmy’s wild eyes looked at her mother. The desperation she saw on her mother’s face was plain to read. “Nooooo!” she yelled back at her mother. “It’s...not...real! It’s not real! It’s not real!” She struggled uselessly again against her father’s grasp before finally breaking down and just sobbing. She hung completely limp in his arms.

“Jas,” Clint said. “You’ve got to stop hunting now!”

“No!” the voice from her came defiantly amid her tears as she recovered control of her body and tried to stand free. “I won’t quit. I won’t! Take me out of here. Take me home!”

Susan shivered, more from her daughter’s answer than from the driving cold. All three adults looked to each other. All three adults were nothing but disappointed. “I’ll stay with her here in the truck,” Clint told them. “You go take care of Jim...Jasmine.” As his tearful wife turned and started back inside, Brian stayed to look at Clint for a moment before he too turned sadly back toward his office.

Still holding onto Jimmy, Clint unlocked his truck and lifted her up into the back seat where she collapsed into a mass of tears. He ran around to the driver’s side and got in, quickly starting the engine so the heater would warm the inside again. The windshield was already covered in two inches of snow that hadn’t been there when they arrived. Driving home was going to be a mess.

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Jade was all dressed, except for his coat. He didn’t know why the wait was so long, but he remained hopeful. He finally heard sounds of someone coming. Looking out through the door, he saw his mother and Uncle, but not his father or sister. His mother was crying. His uncle looked sad. “Do I still need to get the hormones?” he asked hopefully.

A moment later, he collapsed to the floor, sobbing pitifully in disappointment.

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Susan watched it all as if from a distance. She watched as Brian carefully examined her son and made note of all the feminine changes that were now all too evident. And Jimmy...Jade...just looked defeated. She felt for him. She really did. But she was too brokenhearted to say anything. She could only stay silent, and watch. She had to look away though when Brian stuck that one big instrument up into him. It was too sickening for her to continue to watch that, but it was over with quickly and she was able to see him putting the bandage over the wound he had made.

She helped...Jade...get dressed. He seemed so out of it. So defeated. Once she got his coat on him again, she held him to her and hugged him. Kissing his long hair as the tears once again hit her eyes.

She finally pulled herself together, sniffed a bit, and looked to her brother-in-law. "Are you going home now too?" she asked.

Brian shook his head. "It looks like I'll be spending the night here. I'll send my staff home as soon as you're gone. But in this kind of weather, I'm needed more often than not. I'll be here if anyone needs me."

Susan nodded. "How about Janet? Is she still at the hospital?"

"I don't know," he replied. "I was just about to call her. She may not be able to get out of there tonight."

"Do you want us to watch the kids for you?" Susan asked.

Brian thought about it a moment and reached for his cell phone. It took a few minutes, but he finally got to talk with his wife. Between them, a decision was made. After the call, Brian looked back to Susan again. "Janet is pretty sure she'll be working all night too. Aaron should be fine staying with Lucas. I'll call John after you leave and let him know. But if you can look after Allison, we'd appreciate it."

Susan did her best to smile. "Of course," she replied. "We'll be happy to."

“She’s either home right now,” he told her, “Or possibly up with Lucas at John’s house playing with Olivia.”

Susan shook her head. “It’s snowing. I’m betting their all out on the hill again.”

Brian smiled. “And I’m betting you’re right.”

Susan reached out and grabbed Brian’s arm and gave it a small squeeze. “Thanks,” she said simply before leading...Jade...out.

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The drive home had been torturous. Clint was never so grateful to get home. Not a single sound had been made from any of his three kids in the back seat, and his wife had barely said anything either. The long dangerous drive though the blizzard like weather had tested Clint’s nerves. But even that wasn’t as bad as what his daughter had done to his nerves – his real daughter, who evidently was becoming all too much of a boy now. And yet she had still broken down sobbing like the girl she really was.

He was losing his kids. He was losing two of the most precious things in his life. Both of them were becoming someone else. He was a man, not capable of expressing the emotions his wife could. He was grateful for that. He didn’t want any of them to see the fear he held inside over the issue.

As he drove up the road and pulled into his driveway, he wanted to look back at his real son, at his real Jimmy. He wanted to look at him, and hug him, and tell him he understood how he had to feel. He wanted to tell his son that he still loved him, no matter what. But his male chromosomes didn’t let him. And the truth was, he didn’t really know how Jimmy felt. With all those weird hormones in his system now, he didn’t really know what Jimmy was experiencing. Clint only knew that he felt for his son. And somewhere deep down, he was still very proud of him. Maybe later he’d have another talk with him and just mention that. He had a feeling that just saying he was proud still, would go further than anything else.

As Clint finally killed the engine, Susan broke the long silence. She had seen the kids out on the hill having fun. No doubt, Allison

was there too. "Tommy," she said. "Are you going out to the hill to play for a while?"

But the silence and the all too raw nerves from everyone in the truck had seeped their way into Tommy too. "I don't think so," he replied. "Not tonight."

"I need someone to tell Allison that she'll be staying with us tonight," Susan told him. "Can you go over and let her know before you come in the house?"

"Yeah, sure," Tommy replied halfheartedly.

"I'll go," Clint said. "I'll let her know."

Susan nodded and squeezed his arm in thanks before she got out of the truck.

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Allison couldn't miss the mood throughout her Aunt Susan's entire house. Everyone seemed as if they were on pins and needles. And Jimmy Joe...she wasn't sure what was going on with her. She just looked angry at the entire world. She didn't know where they had all been since they had left school, and none of them had mentioned where they had gone, so with the mood in the house, she didn't feel that asking was the right thing to do.

Everyone was polite to her, except Jimmy Joe, who mostly just glared at her and never said a single word, but that feeling of trouble between all of them was beginning to really worry her. It was one of the more difficult evenings she could ever remember.

Most of them were sitting in the family room watching TV after dinner. All except Jimmy Joe who had disappeared into her room and didn't seem to want to be around anyone else. Nobody was saying much of anything to anyone until her Aunt Susan turned to her.

"Allison," Susan said. "Tomorrow is Thursday. We've got to switch the twins back to themselves again in a little while. Do you want to sleep with Jasmine, or if you like, we can fix you up right here in the family room for the night."

Most of the time, Allison wouldn't give the situation a second thought. In fact, most of the time the question would never even be

asked. She'd simply stay with her friend. But this wasn't most of the time. "Um...do you think she'd want me to stay with her?" Allison asked.

"I don't know," Susan admitted sadly. "We'll just have to ask." She stood up and looked at Jasmine who was now watching what was going on. "Come on, Jas," she said. "Changing time. Time to get you back to your own room."

Jade nodded and got up from the chair he was sitting in. He stopped to look at Allison as a sly smile lit his face. "See ya," he said to Allison with a small giggle.

It was the first lighthearted thing Allison had heard all evening. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I won't be back for a few days," Jade replied with a smile. "I'll be someone else. Kind of. So you won't see...this me, for a few more days."

Allison smiled back. "See ya then," she replied. She watched as Jade hurried out of the family room, half skipping like a girl for a moment until she lost sight of him. She looked up at her Aunt Susan. "Can I watch?" she asked.

"Watch what?" Susan asked.

"How you switch them around."

"There's nothing to see," Susan said. "But if you want to come, I guess you're welcome."

Allison followed her aunt down the hallway toward the bedrooms. Jade's bedroom door was open. Inside, she saw him removing the earrings he had been wearing. "What are you doing?" she asked as she looked inside.

"Getting ready to be me again," he replied as he picked up a tiny gold earring and stuck it in his ear in place of the fancier earring he had been wearing.

Behind her, Allison heard Jimmy Joe's bedroom door opening.

"Time to get undressed and switch back to being you," Susan told her.

Jimmy Joe saw Allison standing behind her mother. She locked eyes with her friend for a moment before looking back at her mother. "Okay," she replied before her mother closed her bedroom door again.

A few minutes later, Allison and Susan stood in the hallway and watched as Jade came out of her room wearing only a tan robe. He stood there waiting. A minute later, Jasmine Joe came out wearing an identical robe. The two of them looked at each other for a moment, then walked past each other into their own rooms where the doors closed behind them.

"That's it?" Allison asked.

"What more did you expect?"

"I don't know?" Allison replied. "It just seems so...simple."

"It is," Susan said as she moved toward Jasmine's...the real Jasmine's door. She knocked briefly before opening it. Inside, her daughter was just pulling a pair of pajamas out of her dresser. "Jas," Susan said, "do you want Allison to stay with you here tonight?"

Jasmine shrugged. "Sure," she replied dully. "I guess."

Susan nodded and backed out, and Allison went in. She sat on the bed and watched as Jasmine unfolded the pajamas.

Jasmine started to undo her robe, and stopped. She didn't want Allison seeing her body the way it was now. All – ugly. "Turn around," she said.

"Turn around?" Allison asked. "Why?"

"Cause I don't want anyone to see me."

"Why?" Allison asked again, not understanding.

"Just turn around!" Jasmine replied forcefully.

"Okay!" Allison replied as she turned her back to her friend.

"And stay like that till I say," Jasmine told her. She removed her robe and quickly pulled on a pair of panties and then the bottoms to her pajamas.

"What's eating you tonight?" Allison asked with her back still to her.

"Never mind," Jasmine replied as she picked up her pajama top. But she decided not to put it on yet. Not until after she had gotten a bra from her dresser and put it on with plenty of stuffing inside.

"What's taking you so long?" Allison asked, clearly annoyed.

"There!" Jasmine replied as she pulled the top over her. She felt more like a girl now as she cupped the fake breasts on her chest. "You can turn around again."

Allison turned. "You okay?" she asked, her voice full of concern.

Jasmine just stood there and stared at her for a moment. "I'm fine!" she finally replied.

Allison shook her head as she watched Jasmine sit down at her desk and grab a pair of earrings and stick them in her ears. She continued to watch as her friend reached out and grabbed a bottle of nail polish from the many on her desk.

"Want to do our nails?" Jasmine asked, more brightly than she had seemed all evening.

"Yeah, sure!" Allison said, completely relieved that her friend seemed to be coming back to herself again. The two of them did fingernails and toenails together, but never once did Jasmine mention what her big problem was. For a while, it was almost like they were the two friends they had always been. For Allison, it was a huge relief.

She and Jasmine sat and played and talked about this and that for a little while, until her Aunt Susan came in and announced it was bedtime. While Jasmine pulled the covers down on the bed, Allison went out and got her bag from the kitchen where she had left it when she came in. When she went back to Jasmine's room she paused in the hallway between her door and her brother's room. Through her brother's door, she could hear faint sounds of crying. It was all she could do to not open that door to go in and check on him.

Five minutes later, she and Jasmine were tucked under the covers in Jasmine's bed. Ten minutes later, she had been mostly asleep when a noise woke her. Crying. Soft crying. "Jas," she said. "What's wrong?" The crying got louder, but no answer came back to her question. "What's wrong?" she asked again as she scooted over and put her arm over top of Jasmine's body. Again she heard the crying get a little louder, but this time, she got an answer.

"I'm not me anymore, Allie," Jas sobbed. "I'm not me."

"What do you mean, you're not you?"

"I'm not me anymore. I'm not...a girl anymore."

The McComber Switch

By Karen Singer

Part 3

From the Frying Pan to the Fire

Chapter 41 – Eureka

March 7th

For Jasmine Jade, waking up in the bedroom that had always been his sister's room was feeling more normal now than waking up in his own bedroom across the hall. But he preferred sleeping, and waking up, in his sister's pink bedroom now. Without all the dead ducks, and especially without that humongous deer head hanging on the wall, her room was a lot less oppressive.

The rows of shelves lining two walls with all his sister's dolls didn't bother him at all. He'd never admit it, but lately he had begun to think of some of the dolls as...interesting. His stupid sister literally had names for every one of the dolls she had. Hundreds of them! Or so it seemed. Lately, she had been trying to make him learn all their names. So far, they had only covered the top shelf of one wall. He could name some of them, but he wasn't even close to being able to name even most of them. His sister could though. She seemed to know each one intimately. Including the personality that she claimed some of them had. How could a doll have a personality? That part still boggled his brain.

He tossed Cleo aside and forced himself out from under the heavy covers and headed for the bathroom. He absently rubbed his hands over his aching breasts as he headed for the bedroom door. His breasts always seemed to ache lately. Most of the time he could put it out of his mind. But that didn't stop them from constantly bothering him. And the heavy flannel pajamas he was wearing didn't seem to help much against his nipples. The constant motion and rubbing of the flannel against them, while not really painful, was bothersome. Why did they have to be so stupidly sensitive? But at least his pajamas were big and didn't press against his breasts like all his bras did...his sister's bras. Well, he supposed they were mostly his bras now. His stupid sister didn't have any breasts at all anymore. None. He had them now instead. And more and more

now, he was finding that all his sister's bras...his bras...were starting to get simply uncomfortable. When he spread his hands out to cover his breasts now, they filled the palms of his hands. While he knew they were in reality pretty small still and not nearly as big as the breasts all his girlfriends had, he also knew without a doubt that he was catching up quickly. That thought alone terrified him.

As he left the bedroom and wandered sleepily toward the bathroom across and down the hall, he didn't worry about not wearing a robe over his pajamas, he rarely did. His body was more than adequately covered. The heavy pink flannel pajamas he was wearing with the little dolls all over them were his favorites and he wore them fairly often. He needed to wash them today – this morning! He wanted to take them to Olivia's birthday slumber party that night. He was really looking forward to that party. And he was dreading it even more. And the reason he was dreading it was the same reason he had been in pretty much of a funk for the last few days. He was afraid.

After the bathroom, he wandered down the hallway to the kitchen. His mother was inside by the sink, still in her bathrobe. "Mornin' Mom," he muttered sleepily as he shuffled his feet right up to her and wrapped his arms around her.

"Morning Sweetie," Susan replied as she pulled him into her and returned a nice lasting hug. It was a moment before either of them pulled away. "Want to help me make breakfast?" Susan asked.

Jasmine of course knew that the question of *if* he wanted to help, was more like a command that meant "you *will* help!" "Sure," he replied, not really minding at all.

"How about some French toast today?" Susan asked.

"French toast? That's not in my Home Ec book."

"No, but it's something fairly common that you should know how to make. Don't worry, it's easy."

Jasmine shrugged. "Whatever," he said as he stretched and let out a big yawn. Ten minutes later, his mother had him standing over the frying pan with a spatula in his hand while she worked on getting some bacon ready to put into another pan.

"Are you looking forward to the party tonight?" Susan asked.

It was a moment before Jasmine could reply. "I don't know. I guess so."

"You guess so? I thought you and all your friends had this thing all planned. And you've even got Aunt Jane and me all set to be the judges for some of your games."

"That's because you and Aunt Jane are going to be the only grownups there."

"But weren't you part of all that planning?"

"Yeah," he replied.

"So from what I could see, you seemed to be looking forward to it all."

"I was. I mean, I am. I guess."

"So what's your problem?"

He sighed heavily. With spatula in hand, he turned to face her. "What if... What..."

"What if, what?"

He rolled his eyes and turned back to the frying pan.

"What if, what?" Susan asked again. "What's your problem?"

Again he turned to her. "What if...I like it?"

Susan blinked, not really sure she had heard him correctly. "What if you like it? Isn't that what you're supposed to do? Isn't that why you're going?"

He turned away from her again. "Yeah, but..."

"But what?"

Again he turned back to her. "What if I like it? What if I do have fun? What then?"

Susan was lost. "I don't understand. What's your problem? What's wrong with liking it?"

"I mean, I'm not really a girl. Should I go and try to enjoy it all? Or should I go and try to not enjoy myself?"

"Why would you go and not enjoy yourself?"

"Because I'm not a girl. Not really."

"You lost me somewhere," Susan told him. "What's that got to do with anything?"

Jasmine was clearly frustrated. "I mean, the last sleepover, the one I had here, we just did it to try to get Jas...I mean Jimmy... Jimmy Joe..."

"Yeah, yeah. I know who."

"We were only doing it to try to get her to agree to quit hunting."

"So? And didn't you enjoy yourself? And don't try to tell me you didn't, because I know better!"

"That's just it. That's the problem. I did enjoy it!" He turned away from her and mumbled, "Too much."

"What do you mean, too much? Why should enjoying yourself be a problem?"

"Because...I'm not a girl."

"So what?"

Jasmine rolled his eyes, shook his head and turned away from her. "Never mind."

Susan looked at him for a moment, then walked over and gathered him into her arms again. "Are you thinking that you're not supposed to enjoy anything because you're a boy?"

"Kind of," he replied with his arms around her and his head resting against her chest.

She pushed him away from her and looked down at him. "Jas, nobody ever said that you having to be a girl doesn't mean you can't like anything or can't have fun. I know this is hard on you. I know you don't want it, but it doesn't mean you *have* to not like everything. As I see it, you might as well grab everything you can from this experience and try to have as much fun and enjoyment as you possibly can. You're only young once kiddo, and trust me, I'd give anything to be your age and be able to enjoy that time again."

"So you're saying I shouldn't worry that I'm really a boy and try to go along with everything and just have fun?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying!"

He shook his head.

"What's wrong?"

"It's just that..." He shook his head and turned back to the pan. "Darn! I'm burning them." He quickly flipped the two pieces of French toast over. "Is that too well done?" he asked.

Susan looked at the pan. "No, I'll have those. I like mine a little more done anyway."

"No," he sighed. "I'll eat them. I'm the one who overcooked them."

Susan watched him for a few minutes. "So what's wrong with having fun?"

He sighed again. "I don't know. It's just...not right."

"But you are starting to enjoy yourself with your girlfriends now, aren't you?"

He looked up at her as visions of some of the things he had done flashed through his mind. He suddenly realized that tears were again threatening to spill out of his eyes. "Damn," he muttered as he put the spatula down and hurried out of the room. He went straight back to his bedroom and closed the door and buried his head into the pillow on his bed. She didn't understand. His mother had no idea of his real problem. No idea at all.

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Snow...and mud. Snow, mud, and a million tree branches that had broken off and fallen all over the roads. Big tree branches. Jimmy Joe tried to keep most of her footing in the snow, but more often than she liked, she had no choice but to tromp through the slippery and messy mud. And way too many of the branches they had to clear off the roads were big and heavy. When she could, she tried to do most of the smaller branches and let Uncle Jed and her two cousins move the big stuff. But all too often she had no choice but to grab a branch that would make a nice size tree all by itself, and try to drag the darn thing off of the road and into the woods where it wouldn't be in the way. She was proud of herself each time she managed it though. Although she thought the least the others could do would be to mention how well she was doing once in a while. Nobody ever praised her for anything she did. Of course, none of the others praised each other either. They all simply worked, nonstop, to get the jobs done.

There was an added bonus too from all the hard physical work she had to do. With nothing better to think about, she was spending a lot of time thinking about Olivia's party later that night, and the fact that they were all going to have so much fun, and she wouldn't be allowed to go. Her screwy brother was going though. That point had been made abundantly clear. All the physical labor gave her

something to work out her frustrations on over the issue. And she had an awful lot of frustrations to work out because of it. She used that frustration to help give her the added strength she needed to do the heavier work.

“Jimmy!”

Jimmy Joe looked up toward where her Uncle’s voice had come from. She had nearly finished dragging yet another big branch into the woods. “Yeah, Uncle Jed?” she called.

“Give me a hand up here,” her uncle’s voice called back.

Jimmy quickly finished dragging the branch out of the way and hurried back to the road and around the bend. Her uncle was there with his big four-wheeler. An entire tree had uprooted and fallen across the road. “Yeah, Uncle Jed?” she asked as she hurried up.

“Wrap the chain around that tree while I turn this thing around,” he told her.

“Me?”

“You see anyone else here?”

She grabbed the monstrous chain. The damn thing was so big and heavy that a few months ago she couldn’t hardly pick up the end of it. Now, she was grateful to be able to lift part of it and drag it over top of the tree. Having to get down on the ground, she fished the chain around the trunk and between a few branches, and fastened the hook between some of the links in the chain just like she had seen her uncle and her cousins do many times. When she was done with that part, she grabbed the other end of the chain and dragged it up to the back of her uncle’s four wheeler. Just as she has seen her cousins do, she fastened the chain to the back of the heavy-duty machine. She stood back as her uncle slowly gave gas to the engine, first tightening the chain, and then giving it more power until the tree began to move. She was amazed that his machine was strong enough to pull that big tree the way it did. A few minutes later, she was removing the chain from the tree while her uncle removed it from his four wheeler.

Clearing the road was hard work, but even though nobody ever praised her for what she did, she figured the job had its own rewards. The road that had been impassible was now open. At least up to that point. There were still a few million more branches to

clear in order to open all the roads on their property. A job that according to her Uncle Jed would probably take months. That last storm that hit them, had hit hard and caused a lot of damage.

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After moving his pink pajamas from the washer to the dryer, along with an entire load of heavier clothes, Jasmine had nothing much to worry about doing for a while. At least not until the dryer finished running. Bored, he wandered around the house, but nothing interested him. He finally decided to put his coat on and head out to the workshop for a while. Maybe he could find something interesting there that he could do that wouldn't get his clothes too dirty. That was the problem with having to wear skirts and dresses all the time. He couldn't really wear any play clothes, except of course when he got to go sliding down the hill in the snow. But it was a lot warmer today, and just looking at it, he could tell the hill was becoming one big sloppy wet mess. He put on his sister's coat that he wore far more often than she did, and his sister's colorful boots that still fit his feet well enough but for some reason no longer fit his sister, and he headed out into the backyard.

The ground was still covered with snow, but it was wet and slushy snow and was melting quickly. The snow storm had hit hard and fast and had shut everything down for a day or two, but now the weather had warmed up again and the snow was melting faster than seemed possible.

With the boots on to protect his feet, he blazed a trail out to the workshop in the back of the yard. The snow on the ramp in front of the big door had long been cleared away since that's where his father kept the snow shovels. Shovels that had seen a lot of use this year. He bent down and grabbed the handle on the garage door and lifted...and soon gave up. Damn, the door was stuck. He grabbed the handle again and put more effort into it. The door finally started to come up, but darn it was heavy. Much heavier than usual. It finally started moving easier the higher he got it.

"Jasmine!"

He turned as he finally got the door all the way up and saw his Dad coming back from his Uncle Pete's house next door. "Yeah?" He waited while his father walked the distance across the yard all the way to the workshop.

"What are you doing?" Clint asked as he got to the workshop.

"Um...I don't know. Just bored, I guess," Jasmine replied.

"Is something wrong with the door?" Clint asked.

"I don't know. I could hardly lift it."

Clint grabbed the door handle and pulled it all the way down. Then he lifted it all the way up again. "Seems fine now. It was probably just stuck from the cold and dampness."

"Probably," Jasmine agreed as he went on into the shop and switched on the lights.

"Are you staying out here," Clint asked, "or just getting something?"

"Um...I don't know. Staying probably."

Clint nodded and pulled the door almost all the way down to keep more of the cold out. He stuck a block of wood under the bottom of it so it wouldn't close all the way. "I hear you're going to the movies this afternoon," Clint said as he headed toward the workbench.

Jasmine was simply wandering among some of the junk in the back of the shop. "Yeah. Mom and Aunt Jane and Aunt Marcy are all driving. We'll pick some of the girls up at the school and then go straight to the movie from there."

"Well, have a good time," Clint told him as he searched the workbench for one of his tools.

Have a good time? Jasmine winced at that and turned away from him.

"I think your Uncle Pete and I are going to take Elliot and your brothers into Eureka Springs this afternoon while you're off having fun," Clint mentioned.

Jasmine turned quickly. "You're going there?" he asked in disbelief. Compared to everywhere else they went, the tourist town of Eureka Springs was a special place.

"Since it looks like Elliot is doing a little better with his school work lately, Pete is going to sign him up for a shooting competition

later this month. We're going up to check it all out."

"A shooting competition!" As far as Jasmine knew, none of the family had ever entered anything like that. "Wow!"

Clint smiled. "Well, you've got to admit, Elliot is a pretty good shot."

Jasmine had seen Elliot shooting at targets in the yard frequently. He doubted anyone in the family got more shooting practice than Elliot. "Yeah," Jasmine agreed. "He is pretty good."

"Well, your Uncle Pete wants to see how he stacks up against some really good shooters."

"I wish him luck," Jasmine said as he turned back toward the junk all around him.

As Clint continued to search his workbench, he kept more of an eye on Jasmine as he wandered around among the machines and junk. He had noticed that his son had seemed rather down lately. Especially since he had gotten that last dose of hormones on Wednesday. He also remembered that he had been meaning to have another little talk with him. "You okay?" Clint asked.

Jasmine turned to him and shrugged. "I guess."

"So in other words, the answer is no, you're not okay."

"I'm okay. I guess," Jasmine replied.

Which pretty much told Clint that he did have a problem. He sat down on one of the old bar stools. "Take a seat," he told his son, who was now much more his daughter.

Jimmy looked to the other stool and shrugged. A moment later he headed in that direction. He carefully climbed up on the stool, trying to be very aware of what his legs did in the process. Wearing skirts all the time was nothing but irksome!

"I don't give a damn about the way you want to sit," Clint told him. "Just be comfortable!"

Jasmine smiled, perhaps for the first time in a few days.

"What's bothering you?" Clint asked.

Jasmine shrugged again. "I don't know."

"You've been pretty much moping around for the last few days."

Again another shrug, but no answer.

"Is it the hormones?" Clint asked. "You've been pretty much out of it since we left Uncle Brian's office a few days ago."

"Kind of," Jasmine replied sheepishly as he looked down at the floor.

"And what else?"

"I don't know. Just...everything I guess. Just...me."

"What about you?"

"I don't know. It's just...everything."

"Jas, everything what? You're obviously worried about the hormones again. And I guess what they're doing to you."

Jasmine looked up at him briefly, then back down to the floor before he nodded.

"Jas, I see you changing," Clint told him. "And geez, I really couldn't miss some of it at the doctor's office. It's getting so that even a blind man can probably see some of those changes in you."

The tears suddenly threatened to fall from his eyes again. He couldn't stay there. He got up and headed a few feet further back into the workshop. But there was very little space for him to go in that direction so he wound up standing not far away with his back to his father.

"Jas," Clint said, watching him carefully. "You do still know I'm proud of you, don't you? You do still know that I love you, no matter what."

His words caused a total damn break of Jasmine's tears. He stood with his back to his father and sobbed. A moment later, he felt his father's hand on his shoulder. He turned around and let his father pull him into a hug while he cried.

For Clint, having his...son...cry the way he did was very troubling, but he had to remind himself of what all those hormones were doing to his son...his son who was all too much of a girl now. "Don't ever doubt it," Clint told him. "Don't ever doubt that I love you...that we love you. Both your mother and I. And don't ever doubt that we're both not really, really proud of you. Ever!"

Jasmine sobbed harder. How could he possible tell his father that that was the one big thing he worried about the most? Because he was so afraid that very soon he might make his father very disappointed in him. And that thought frightened him and worried him far more than anything else. The way things were going, he was going to have no choice but to make his father mad at him, and

without a doubt, his father would no longer be so proud of him at all.
Without...a doubt!

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Susan looked her son over...her son who was now her daughter. "You look very nice," she said.

"But that's the problem," Jasmine replied, "all the other girls are going to be wearing pants. Play clothes."

"I know dear," Susan told him. "Having to wear skirts all the time isn't exactly practical."

"So can I wear some jeans or something for a change instead?"

Susan actually took a moment to consider it. "No," she finally said. "Right now you're just going to the movies. You might as well look nice for that."

Jasmine's face fell. "Then how about later?"

Again Susan took a moment to consider it. "I'll think about it." She stared down at him for a moment. After their conversation earlier that morning, she felt she had to say something to him. Something important. It hurt her to say it, but she had to – for his sake. "Jas, forget what you really are, and just be a girl today. Forget what you ever were before and don't worry about it. Okay?"

"But Mom..." he replied worriedly.

"Don't worry about it!" Susan insisted. "All I want to see is you enjoying yourself today. Got it?"

It was a moment before he answered. "Okay. I guess."

"Good!" she replied. "Now grab your purse and let's go. And Jas, don't forget, I'll be watching how you act today!"

"But Mom, didn't you just tell me to enjoy myself?"

"That's no reason to not act properly, and you know it. Now let's get going."

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Jane's car, Susan's car, and Marcy's car all pulled into the school parking lot together. There were already a number of other cars there waiting, and all the girls were out of their cars and

gathered together to talk. There was another group of people there as well – all the parents. The moment their cars stopped, Olivia and Ashley jumped out of Jane's car, and Allison and Nichole jumped out of Marcy's car. Jane and Marcy soon got out of their cars as well and headed toward the group of adults. Jasmine stayed in his mother's car, not sure what to do.

"Aren't you going?" Susan asked as she opened her own car door.

"Um, I guess," Jasmine replied before opening his car door. He wasn't so worried about the other girls seeing him, they saw him every day at school. But there were a lot of parents there waiting too. This time, they would see him as well, and Jasmine had no doubt that all those parents knew about him. He also figured that since he was wearing a skirt outfit again, that he was going to stick out like a sore thumb. Why couldn't his mother let him wear play clothes instead? As he walked the short distance toward the rest of the girls, he noticed most of the parents looking at him. He did his best to ignore them.

Jane walked up to the group of adults. Most of them were women. She casually knew all of them. "Hey everyone," she said, her eyes noticing that most of them were watching something. She turned and saw Jasmine joining the girls.

"I heard that...he...was going to be there," one of the women said to Jane. "I almost didn't let my daughter go this year because of it."

Jane did her best to smile. "Don't worry," she said, "it'll be fine. I'll be watching them the whole time, and Susan will be there the entire time as well." She turned toward Susan who had just joined the group. "Won't we be watching them?"

Susan was surprised by the question. "Um...that's what we'll be there for," she replied.

"Trust me," Marcy added to the woman, "you've got nothing at all to worry about."

"So how come he's all dressed up in a skirt today?" another of the women asked.

"My fault!" Susan told her. "Actually, he usually wears skirts all the time, but he asked me today if he could wear something more

suitable to play in, and unfortunately, I decided he looked really nice and it would be a shame to waste it. So for the movies, I had him stay in the skirt. I'll let him change after the movie into something a bit more casual."

"Oh good for you!" Marcy declared.

"I have to say," another woman noted as she continued to look at Jasmine, "he really does look amazingly like a girl. A real girl. At least from here."

"My daughter tells me he's looking so feminine now in school that nobody can tell anymore that he's not a girl," another woman added. "And on those days when he does get to be a boy anymore, she says he still looks like a girl."

Susan's stomach was in knots again. She didn't want to be reminded of the problem, yet here were all the parents of his friends at school, telling her just what she didn't want to hear. And she had no way at all to deny it. In fact, even they didn't know how much like a real girl he was now becoming.

When Susan was slow in answering, Jane jumped in quickly. "I think a lot of it is the haircut," she said. "He wears it like that all the time."

"So I heard," one of the women commented. "But I have to admit too, from here, he does look sort of pretty."

It was all Susan could do to not exclaimed, "Sort of?" As far as she was concerned, her child looked very pretty. The only problem was, that child was really a boy.

A few minutes later, the girls all sorted themselves out into the three cars. Twelve girls total. Three cars full of them. As Susan followed Jane out of the parking lot, she mentally braced herself for the rest of the day and evening ahead.

"I think you look real nice today," Susan heard one of the girls tell – her son!

"Thanks," Jasmine replied to the girl that sat next to him in school.

"It's a shame you've still got to wear a skirt, even for a party like this," another of the girls noted.

Jasmine shrugged. "That's the way it goes, I guess."

Susan made a mental note, Jasmine was definitely changing into play clothes as soon as they got back from the movies!

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Eureka Springs! Just the name was enough to make Jimmy Joe shiver with delight. The fabled little town had to be one of the most beautiful places in the world! It was only about an hour away from where they lived, but she had still only been there a few times. It was such a tourist place that it didn't have the kinds of things that the family usually needed. And most of the family liked to avoid the tourists at all cost.

It was late afternoon when Pete drove his truck down into the town. Clint was in the passenger seat next to him and the three boys were in the back seat. All of them ogled the buildings as Pete drove right through the center of town to the far side.

"Good thing it's still winter," Pete noted. "This would be a mess to get through otherwise."

"This place has way too many tourists," Clint agreed. "It's too busy for my taste. Even now."

"Got that right!" Pete replied. Past the end of the town, he turned and headed up a zigzag mountain road that finally led him to the sporting goods store he was looking for. The store specialized in guns, so they had a close interest in the many shooting clubs and matches that were held in the state. Pete wasn't surprised to see the small parking lot packed with cars and pickup trucks.

"Looks like its busy today," Clint noted.

"It's Saturday," Pete replied. "Worst day of the week to come here."

They all piled out of the truck. Jimmy Joe took a good look at everything around her. What she saw, didn't look anything at all like her Uncle Jack's big store. This place looked old and more like someone's big house. But there was no doubt about all the cars there. She followed everyone inside. The first thing she noticed in the store, was all the people in the small spaces. The next thing she noticed was all the guns. Lots of them. Elliot took off quickly for a

better look, followed closely by Tommy. Jimmy figured that Elliot was in heaven in this place.

"Where's Elliot?" Pete asked when he turned around.

"He went that-a way!" Jimmy replied as she pointed to the left.

Pete nodded and headed after his son.

"Don't get lost in here," Clint warned Jimmy.

"Dad, how can I get lost? This place is tiny!"

"But it's busy enough," Clint replied before following after his brother.

Jimmy followed after everyone else, but not in so much of a hurry. She was twelve years old...well, almost. Most of the people there towered over her. But not all of them. She was surprised to see quite a few kids in the store too. And after looking around for a few minutes more, she noted that all of those kids were boys. And a lot of them were looking at her. Of course, she was looking at them too. Some of them were cute!

A little while later, her father, Elliot, and Uncle Pete were all standing at one of the counters talking with someone. Tommy hovered close by, trying to hear what was being said. Jimmy stayed back out of the way. With nothing better to do, she wandered around to another display a bit further away. She saw a group of three boys she had noticed earlier. Two of them she had labeled as really cute.

"Hey, it's the sissy kid," one of the bigger boys said.

Jimmy Joe was shocked and outraged.

"Sissy! I'm not a sissy!"

"Sure fooled me," the boy replied laughingly. Right after that though, the boy's father called him and the group of boys headed toward the door. But not before that one boy turned around again and called, "Sissy!"

Jimmy balled her fists. She wanted to clobber the kid. It was a good thing the boy's father was taking him home, otherwise she would! How could that kid possibly call her a sissy? Besides, she was a girl. Even her brother had said a few times that there was no such thing as a sissy girl. Angrily, she headed back to find her father.

She had to wait a long time while they finished, and the whole time she waited, Jimmy Joe couldn't get that boy off her mind. The

nerve of him! She really should have gone over and clobbered him right away. That would have set him straight.

The men finally finished and Jimmy followed them all toward the door. Finally!

As they were all getting back into the truck, Clint noticed that Jimmy was looking out of sorts and angry. She certainly wasn't acting friendly at all. "What's got you in a funk all of a sudden?" he asked.

"Nothing," Jimmy replied sullenly. "Nothing at all."

"Well it must be something!" Clint replied, because you were all smiles and happy to be here a few minutes ago."

"One of the boys in there," Jimmy said. "One of the stupid boys."

"What about him?"

"He called me a sissy!"

Clint shook his head and said nothing else.

"I don't know why you're worried about it," Elliot said.

"Wouldn't you if someone called you a sissy?" Jimmy replied.

"Yeah, but I mean, you're really a girl. You may not look like a girl anymore, but you are one. I think."

"See," Jimmy replied. "That's the point. I don't look like a girl anymore. But he still called me a sissy."

"Yeah, well," Elliot said, "you may look like a boy, but you don't exactly act like one."

Jimmy was shocked. "What do you mean?" she asked angrily.

"Well face it, sometimes you move more like a girl, and when you talk, the way you say things sometimes sounds more like a girl than a boy. It's not really the way you look, 'cause to me, you look too much like a boy for comfort. It's the way you act I think that makes people think that about you."

"I'm glad you said it, and not me," Tommy agreed. "I've noticed it a bunch of times."

"I think everyone in school has noticed it," Elliot agreed.

"Everyone in school?" Jimmy asked, horrified at the thought.

"Pretty much," Tommy agreed. "It's just that nobody really says anything about it."

"Stupid boys!" Jimmy said as she crossed her arms and looked angrily out the window. "Stupid boys and stupid kids!"

Clint had listened to all of it with an air of amusement. He should have said something, but he couldn't. As bad as it was, after all the trouble that Jimmy Joe had given her brother over the sissy issue, he was finding it amusing now to see the shoe on the other foot.

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Noisy! Noisy, noisy, noisy! That's all Susan could think as the movie let out and all the girls loudly made their way through the lobby out toward the parking lot. They were all talking excitedly and laughing. And who was that girl who kept holding Jasmine's hand? She was happy to note though that Jasmine looked just like the other girls, smiling, laughing, talking, and having a lot of fun. It was just that he was the only one there in skirt. Maybe she should have let him change before they left the house. Oh well. She still thought he looked really nice, and his sister hadn't put that outfit together for him. For the first time in a long while, his sister hadn't set any clothes out for him. Jasmine Jade had been forced to dress himself. And she was happy to note that he did a very nice job of it. Now, what was the girl's name that kept holding his hand so often?

"Do we have everyone?" Jane asked as they reached the doors.

Susan looked around. "I've got my four."

"All mine are here too," Marcy agreed.

With a nod of her head, Jane said, "Let's go then. Girls!" she called. Make sure you all stay together please."

Susan noted more than a few of them holding hands as Jane led everyone outside...and not to where any of the girls expected to go.

"Mom!" Olivia called. "The cars are over there."

"We're not going there," Jane called back with a big smile.

"So where are we going?"

"It's a birthday party, right?" She pointed across the large parking lot to a group of row-stores. "We can't have a birthday party without ice-cream."

If Susan thought the girls were all loud a few minutes ago, it was nothing like the excited squeals that they all emitted now. The mothers had to look carefully to make sure all the girls stayed

together and didn't get hit by any cars as most of them literally ran for the ice-cream place that was straight ahead. Once inside, they all got in line and started ordering whatever ice-cream they wanted.

For Susan, it was a relief when she finally got to sit down again with Jane and Marcy. The girls were all taking up several tables in a long row and were all talking animatedly as they ate. Susan had gotten herself just a small scoop of chocolate ice-cream. Marcy had gone for the mint flavored, and Jane had gone for strawberry.

"The movie was better than I thought!" Jane noted.

"Funny too!" Marcy replied.

"Yeah," Susan agreed. "I'm not usually one for animated films, but this one was pretty good."

"Thank goodness!" Jane replied. "It makes having to do this all the more bearable!" The women all laughed. The girls were all having fun and behaving themselves, and as far as they all were concerned, for the moment, life was good.

Jasmine looked around. He had finished his ice-cream a few minutes ago. But he had a problem. A big problem, and he didn't know what to do about it. The movie had been much better than he thought it would be. And despite himself, he had found himself having a lot of fun again with all the girls. They were all even talking to him and treating him just as if he really was a real girl. He wasn't sure how to take that, so he tried to just fit in as best he could with the rest of them. But that didn't help with his problem. With any of his problems!

Finally deciding that he dare not wait much longer, he got up from his seat and headed for his mother.

"Having fun Sweetie?" Susan asked as she saw Jasmine approaching. He had been smiling and laughing as he talked with the other girls just a moment ago, now he looked more serious.

Jasmine couldn't help but smile again. "Yeah. I think I am," he replied.

"What can we do for you?" Marcy asked.

"Um...Mom," he said, "I've kind of got to go to the bathroom."

The women were all shocked. None of them had even thought about that problem. They had all noticed several of the girls heading for the rest room at different times, but none of them had considered

Jasmine. "I'll go with him," Jane said quickly. "We do this all the time at school."

Susan shook her head. "Don't bother, I'll go."

"Why don't we all go?" Marcy suggested. "I could use a stop before we go home myself. Just let me finish my ice-cream first."

"Mmm. Good idea!" Jane replied. "Let me finish mine too."

Susan looked down at her own cup of half-eaten ice-cream. She made a spur of the moment decision. "Just go ahead and go," she told him. "We'll be along in a few minutes."

Jasmine was surprised, and he noticed so were his two aunts. They were all looking between him and his mother.

"You do this all the time," Susan told him. "Don't worry, we'll be there soon if you need us."

Jasmine stared for a moment. "Ooookay. I guess," he replied as he turned around slowly and headed back past the rest of the girls toward the restaurant's rest rooms.

"Where you going?" Olivia called to him.

He just pointed toward the bathrooms.

"Wait for me!" Olivia said.

A moment later, not just Olivia joined him, but so did Nichole and Allison.

The three mothers watched it all. "And once again, things are back to normal," Marcy noted. "Once again, all four girls are inseparable."

"It is strange," Jane added. "All four are together, just as they've always been. Jasmine, Nichole, Olivia, and Allison. But this time, it's a different Jasmine, and they're still the same."

"As much as I hate to say it," Susan replied, "I'm glad to see it. For the first time in his life, *Jimmy* isn't alone."

"And how about the new Jimmy? Jimmy Joe?"

Susan had to think for a moment. "You know, I think she's either so busy with Jed and his kids or she's hanging around so much with Tommy and Ethan, that I haven't noticed her being alone like her brother usually is...was. So at least she's not alone either."

Both Jane and Marcy nodded happily. "Well, at least that's a good thing!" Marcy decided.

"Sure is!" Jane agreed.

A few minutes later, all three women headed into the lady's room, but as they just got inside, they passed Jasmine, Allison, Nichole, and Olivia on their way out. "Hey, Mom," Jasmine said offhandedly as he passed her without so much as another glance, and then went right back to the conversation he had been having with the girls.

All three women watched as the girls left, and the door swung closed behind them. "Why did he even bother asking?" Susan wondered.

"I'm wondering something else," Marcy said. "How much do all the girls consider him to be a real girl now?"

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Susan didn't drive straight to her house, which was right next door to Jane's house, but with a car full of girls, she had to drop them off where none of them would have to worry about walking through the snow or mud. As the girls in the backseat all started to get out, Susan put her hand on Jasmine's arm, delaying him. "Once they get inside, you come back home with me. We've got to find you something better to wear."

"Like what?"

"Like something better to play in than a skirt."

Jasmine gave an all too loud, none too feminine, whoop of delight. Five minutes later, he was at his bedroom door, yelling back up the hallway toward the kitchen. "Mom!" He had to wait a moment till his mother poked her head out the kitchen doorway. "Help!"

"With what," Susan asked as she headed towards his room.

"What should I wear?"

"Something comfortable that you can play in."

"Yeah, but what?"

"You put your own outfit together this morning," she told him. "Just pick something out for this."

"But I don't know what I should wear," he insisted. "I've always got to wear dresses and stuff."

Susan shook her head and went into his room. She looked through the huge selection of clothes in the closet and pulled out a

pair of blue jeans with bright decorations all over them. "Here," she said, "try these on."

Jasmine undressed in no-time down to panties, bra, and just the tights he had on. He grabbed the jeans and started to put them on, and a moment later, he stopped. "They're tight!" he told his mother as he noticed how closely they were already hugging his legs.

With raised eyebrows, Susan said, "They're supposed to fit tighter than the pants you usually wear. Pull a bit harder. See if you can wear them. If not, we may have to seriously consider a skirt again."

"No way!" he declared. Besides, I know the pink jeans I wear out to the hill fit just fine."

"Try these!" Susan insisted. "Those pink ones are old and after all the trips down the hill in the snow this year, they're really starting to look it."

Determined to wear the pants, Jasmine pulled them all the way up. They were tight, but... "No problem," he declared once he got them all the way up. The waist fastened just fine. It was around his backside and the top of his legs that they were the tightest.

Susan looked at the pants on him. Once again that knot in her stomach pulled itself too tight. She forced herself to look away from him and pull a long-sleeved top out of the closet for him. As he was pulling it on, she couldn't help but notice his breasts again, filling out his tiny bra all too well. She was going to have to take her son bra shopping. Soon!

"Do I look okay?" Jasmine asked desperately.

Susan pulled herself together after her troubling thoughts. "Just fine," she declared.

"How about jewelry?" he asked. "Don't I need a necklace or something?"

"That's up to you," Susan told him. She was surprised to see him rush to the jewelry box where he pulled out a different necklace than he had worn earlier, a simple gold tennis bracelet, and a ring for one of his fingers. She thought he was finished until he seemed to delay for a moment before diving back into the jewelry box and pulling out a small pair of earrings that dangled a bit.

"Am I okay?" Jasmine asked uncertainly but hopefully.

Once again, Susan was confronted by the image of a girl. A total girl. The knot in her stomach tightened a bit more. "Just fine," she said. "Hurry back now," she told him. "I'll be along in a few minutes. And don't forget your sleeping bag and overnight bag!" As she watched Jasmine grab his things and literally run for the back door, she sat on his bed...his sister's bed that was more his now than hers. She needed a few moments to calm herself again. In those tight jeans, the changes to his body were all too evident. And when he ran out, it wasn't a boy that left the room, it was a girl. What had happened to her son?

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Jasmine didn't bother to knock on the door to Olivia's house. He simply opened the back door and struggled to get all his stuff inside. He could hear the rest of the girls in the family room. He hurried past them to Olivia's room where he dumped his stuff, then hurried back to them. They were all munching on popcorn from big cans and talking. A moment later, so was he.

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Susan wearily climbed the steps up to Jane's back door. She considered knocking, but didn't bother. With that many kids in the house, Jane was most likely busy. She opened the door and went in. She immediately spotted both Jane and Marcy at the kitchen table.

"What took you?" Marcy asked.

Susan shook her head, shed her coat, and took a seat with them. Jane immediately got up and checked her coffee pot. Two minutes later, she delivered a mug of hot coffee to both Marcy and Susan, before going back to get a mug for herself.

"Are you okay?" Jane asked Susan. "You look a bit...tired."

"I don't know," Susan replied. "I was fine till Jas asked me to help her find something to wear."

Marcy noted that Susan had referred to Jasmine as *her*. She didn't usually do that. She said nothing about it though.

"What happened?" Jane asked.

"It's not so much what happened, as what I picked out for her to wear."

Once again Marcy noted that Susan had used the word "her."

"*She* didn't like it?" Jane asked, purposely using the same pronoun that Susan had.

"It wasn't that he didn't like it," Susan replied, "but he discovered that the jeans were tight."

Both friends noted that Susan had gone back to calling Jasmine a he. "So?" Marcy said. "I don't think Nichole owns a pair of pants that aren't too tight. Especially since she needs too many new clothes and we're trying to hold out till her birthday next month."

Susan smiled. "Yeah, I've got the same problem with both of mine. All three of mine!"

Jane was just glad to see Susan smile a bit. "So what happened?"

Susan shook her head. "Did either of you happen to get a good look at him since he got back here?"

"Um...not really," Marcy admitted. "I just got here a few minutes before you did. He was already back by then."

"I saw him in the room with the girls, but I didn't notice anything different," Jane told them.

Susan nodded. "Later, if you think about it, take a good look at the way he looks in those jeans." She stopped as another wave of emotion hit her again. "My son is gone now," she told them. "He's gone. I've got another daughter instead."

Marcy reached out and put her hand over top of Susan's. "You've always had a daughter," she said, "now you've just got a different one."

Susan shook her head. "But I just want my kids back again. My *real* kids. The way they're supposed to be!"

"But Jasmine won't quit hunting," Jane said quietly.

Susan looked at her, then finally nodded. "Not so far. And the longer this goes on, the less likely I think it's ever going to happen."

"Moooooooooommm..." Olivia's voice was clearly heard and a moment later, Olivia, Nichole, and Jasmine ran into the kitchen.

Olivia spotted all three women, not just her mother. "Oh!" she exclaimed in surprise.

"Not Mom," Jasmine joked, "Moms! It's all our Moms. Hi Mom," he called happily.

Susan's heart wanted to tear apart. One minute she was lamenting over the loss of her son, and the next he...she...was right there looking and sounding so wonderful. And he was obviously having fun! Her heart wanted to soar at the sight of him. "Hi Jas," she managed to struggle out as she couldn't help but feel a smile creeping onto her face.

"We need you!" Olivia declared.

"What for?" Jane asked.

"Games! We want to play some games. And you agreed to be one of the judges."

"You too, Mom!" Jasmine added.

Jane rolled her eyes. "So much for coffee."

"While you're doing that, I'm going home", Marcy said. "Those boys should be back from Eureka...eventually."

"No Mom!" Nichole exclaimed, sounding all too horrified. "You're here. You can be a judge too!"

"But you've already got your judges figured out," Marcy argued.

"Forget it Marcy," Jane told her. "How often do you win an argument like this anymore?"

Marcy shook her head. "Never! When did we lose all the control?"

Jane laughed. "I don't think we ever had it. Olivia's had both her father and me wrapped around her little finger since she was born."

"Jasmine too," Susan agreed with a smile. "So you may as well come along Marcy, trying to get out of it just isn't going to work."

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Jasmine enjoyed the games. As much as he didn't really want to, he couldn't help but get caught up in the excitement and spirit of the competitions. And he even won a prize in one of the games, a set of press on nails with fancy patterns painted on them. He didn't know it of course, but whenever the girls held these big birthday

sleepover parties, there were always lots of little prizes like that, and they were handed out lucratively. No girl ever left a party without some little gift. Most left with several.

While it wasn't really a family tradition, that's the way all these parties were purposely arranged. When the invitations were handed out, each invitation specifically indicated that no gifts for the birthday girl were to be brought. Many of the kids in school were very poor and couldn't afford things like that. This stipulation allowed more of the girls to attend, and those girls coming away with simple little gifts like they did only made everyone that much happier.

As much as he didn't want to enjoy it, Jasmine found himself enjoying all the social contact and talking. He knew all these girls from school, and now he was getting to know them all better. He was enjoying it so much, that it was a while before he realized that they were getting to know him better too. That bothered him a bit, but he didn't know if it was something he should worry about or not.

And despite not wanting to enjoy anything, he enjoyed the pizza that his Uncle John had delivered, and he even enjoyed the birthday cake and singing happy birthday to Olivia along with all the other girls. Despite himself. Despite not wanting to enjoy any of it, he did. He simply couldn't help it. Especially since all the other girls kept talking to him and including him in everything exactly the same as they did everyone else.

And then, after a late pizza dinner and birthday cake, things got much more serious, at least as far as girl things went.

"Isn't it time you girls changed into your night clothes?" Jane suggested.

She winced as Olivia ran off and her overly loud voice yelled, "Pajama time! Pajama time!"

Jane looked at Susan. "Whoever thought that getting ready for bed could cause such pandemonium?"

"Who said anything about them going to bed?" Susan replied with a grin. "You know they'll be up most of the night."

"Too true!" Jane said with a shake of her head.

Jasmine wasn't sure what to do. He grabbed his overnight bag with his favorite pink pajamas from Olivia's bedroom, but all the girls were grabbing their bags and heading back to the big family room

with them. Unsure about things, he followed. As they got back to the family room, he was relieved to spot his mother and Aunt Jane watching from the kitchen doorway. He headed for his mother. "Um...Mom, what should I do?" he asked.

Susan's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Change," she told him.

"But Mom..."

"But what? You've got your pajamas don't you? Or did you decide on a nightgown instead?"

"No, I've got my pink flannel ones."

Susan nodded. "So change. Everyone else is. And I know you don't want to wear those clothes to bed."

For a moment Jasmine wondered if maybe that would be better. "Change?" he asked dubiously again.

"That's what everyone is doing," Susan told him. "Now go be with your friends. And Jas, remember, have fun. Enjoy yourself."

With a shake of his head, Jasmine walked off carrying his overnight bag into the family room. He found a small space of clear floor next to Ashley and between a few of the girls from school. When he turned, he could still see his mother watching him. That made him feel a little better. As he glanced around, all the girls were in some state of undress. Of course, they were all talking continuously as they got changed so the process went slower than usual.

He unzipped his bag and pulled out his pajamas. With no other real option, he grabbed his shirt and pulled it off over his head, leaving only his bra to cover his breasts. As he looked around the room, he saw some girls leaving their bras on and some taking them off. As far as he could see, many of the girls had breasts that were a lot bigger than his, but not all of them. There were quite a few, especially all the younger girls from the grade below him, that had breasts that were smaller than his.

"You need some help?"

Jasmine turned and saw Ashley there. She was just buttoning up the top to her pale blue silky pajamas. "Um...no, I'm fine," he replied. He grabbed his pajama top and slipped one arm in.

"Wait! Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait!"

Jasmine looked up to see one of the girls from school staring at him. She had been changing near him, and now he realized she was staring at his breasts. He continued to pull his pajama top on.

“Wait!” she exclaimed again as she hurried over to him.

Out in the kitchen, Susan muttered a soft, “Uh-oh!” and started for the family room. But Jane’s hand grabbing her arm stopped her.

“Wait,” Jane said. “Maybe it’s time to let the girls sort this out for themselves. I have a feeling it’s going to need to happen sooner or later.”

Susan wasn’t at all sure about that, but she stopped and nervously watched.

Before Jasmine knew it, the girl had pulled his pajama top off of his arm. He tried to raise it to cover his breasts a bit, but she just pushed it away. He realized that all the girls in the room were staring at him – and nobody was talking anymore. He quickly backed away a step as the girl reached out toward his breasts, but in the tight confines of all the room, he couldn’t move but half a step before he quickly ran into Ashly behind him. Before he knew it, the girl had grabbed the edge of his bra and was pulling on it a bit. “Don’t!” he exclaimed.

The girl paid no attention to him at all as she let go of his bra and stared up into his face in amazement. “No wonder you look so much like a girl,” she said. “You *are* a girl.”

Jasmine felt nothing but totally ashamed. “No, I’m...”

“Don’t try to lie about it! I can see it. We all can see it. You’re a girl. A real girl!”

All too quickly, Jasmine found himself crowded by way too many girls and struggling against their hands as a few of them grabbed the edges of his bra and pulled it out a bit so they could see for themselves.

“It’s true!” another girl exclaimed.

“Oh my God!” another one gasped.

“What is it?” another one wanted to know. “You’ve been trying to be a boy all your life and now your family is finally letting you be a girl again?”

Jasmine shook his head. “No! It’s nothing like that. And I’m not...”

"But you are!" one of the girls insisted. "The proof is right there. So don't try to kid us about it. You're a girl. You really are!" She shook her head. "I can't believe nobody ever found out before now."

Jasmine suddenly didn't know what to think or do. He tried to look to his mother, but with so many girls crowding so closely, he couldn't see her.

"Okay girls," Ashley said, breaking into things. "Leave her alone now. Let her get dressed. You've all had your look see. Now let her be. Jasmine is what she is. And that's all we have to worry about. Sometimes she can be a girl, and other times we still have to think of her as a boy. Nothing's changed."

The girls all backed off, but slowly. Most of them continued to look back at Jasmine in wonder. And then Jasmine felt someone lightly grab his arm. He turned to see the girl who sat next to him in school. She had held his hand a few times during the day when they were walking together.

"I'm glad you really are a girl," she said to him with a big smile. "That makes everything so much better."

"But..." Jasmine started to protest again.

"Jas!" Ashley cut him off quickly. "Just get your pajamas on. Okay?"

Out in the kitchen, Susan was still holding her breath.

"That was different." Jane said, still watching the girls. "I didn't expect that at all."

Susan nodded. It was a moment before she could find her voice. "Me either. And why did Ashly not let him correct any of it?"

Jane shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe, it's for the best."

As Jasmine put the top to his pajamas on, his eyes quickly scanned the room for his friends. Nichole was staring at him wide-eyed and so was Allison. Olivia looked equally surprised. The Musketeers all passed a few glances toward each other, then slowly went back to other things.

"Just go with it," Ashley whispered into Jasmines ear. "You don't have to say anything else about it. Got that?"

He looked back at her uncertainly.

"Just go with it," she whispered again.

Not really sure, he finally nodded and went back to buttoning up his pajama top. Once that was on, he unfastened his jeans and pulled them down his legs and stepped out of them. The top to his pajamas was long enough to almost cover his panties, but he quickly pulled up the bottoms to his pajamas. He felt much better then. Safer. He looked around him. Nobody was really staring at him anymore. He noticed Ashley now whispering something to Allison, and Allison looking at him and nodding. He figured Ashley was telling Allison to just go along with what the rest of the girls had decided about him too. As he packed the clothes he had been wearing into his bag, he glanced up and noticed Allison whispering something to Nichole. She too looked toward him as she nodded. His friends were passing the word among them. They were all going to go along with it. But was that a good thing, or bad? He really wasn't sure. He had always been told that lying was bad. But...his whole life was a lie!

"Where's your necklace? You didn't take it off, did you?" the girl who sat next to him asked.

He pulled it out from under his pajama top so it could hang outside.

"That's really pretty," she said as she reached to look at it closer. "I always liked it on...um...Jimmy too."

Jasmine smiled. No matter what names the others tried to tag him and his sister with, talking about them was still difficult.

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There was a small soft knock on the back door. It opened before Jane had a chance to get there.

"Hi," Marcy said brightly as she came in and saw Jane and Susan sitting together at the kitchen table. "How's it going?"

"Pretty good," Jane replied. "Strange, but good."

"Strange?"

As Marcy took a seat at the table with them, the women filled her in on what had happened earlier with Jasmine. Like Jane and Susan, Marcy didn't quite know what to make of it.

"So you're not saying anything about it?"

Susan shook her head. "Not right now. And evidently, neither are the girls. As far as we can tell, all those girls from school think that...my son...really is a girl."

"Who ever thought..." Marcy mused. "Do you mind if I check on Nichole?" she said as she got up from her seat. "I'll just peek in at them and not disturb them."

Jane and Susan both followed her to the door where they could all see into the family room. There were girls literally everywhere in the room and it was filled with quiet conversations. The girls seemed to have sorted themselves out into groups of two. Marcy quickly spotted Nichole. She and Olivia were sitting on the floor facing each other while Nichole painted Olivia's toenails. Nichole's toes were all separated and obviously had already been done. She saw Ashley and Allison doing the same thing. Her eyes soon found Jasmine further back in the room. He too was sitting doing toenails with another of the girls. She didn't mention it, but she was sure it was the same girl she had seen holding Jasmine's hand when they had walked from the movie theater to the restaurant. Obviously they were closer friends than some of the other girls.

Marcy's gaze lingered on Jasmine for a while, then slowly took in all the other groups of girls in the room. "Are you sure the girls aren't right?" she whispered softly so that only Jane and Susan could hear."

"About what?" Jane asked.

"About Jasmine. Maybe...maybe he really is a girl. From everything I see right now, I can't see one bit of difference between him and any of the rest of them. From what I'm seeing, maybe the best thing is to let them all think what they will. Truth or not. Because to me, the evidence as to what they believe, probably far outweighs all the little things they don't see."

The knot in Susan's stomach, that had barely had time to relax, was back again. She knew she should say something about what Marcy had just noted, but her brain refused to come up with any kind of rebuttal.

Jane too thought about what Marcy had said. "There's another thing too," she whispered. "Trying to argue the point with them and tell them anything different right now would most likely just confuse

them all. And besides, maybe this will be better for Jas. Look at him. He's in there with them. He's one of them. They've accepted him as one of them. They believe he's one of them. If we push the issue as to the truth right now, they may not treat him as nicely as they are right now. For his sake, maybe it is better that we just leave things as they are and not say anything."

"Leave it as if we never heard what happened," Marcy agreed.

Susan still said nothing. But what she felt was another wave of losing her son. It wasn't happening slowly. It was like he was being pulled out of her life in one fell swoop! He was still there, but he wasn't. He was a boy, who wanted to be a boy...who wanted to be her son. But he was also a girl who only wanted his old boy's life back. Yet as she watched him sitting and talking and doing the most feminine things possible, he looked happy, content, and relaxed. He looked at peace with himself. For the first time in his life, he had friends, more now than before. And for the first time in his life, she had seen him smile.

"I got to get back," Marcy said as she pulled herself away from the scene in the family room. "*I'm* going to bed," she told them with a small smile. "I'll let you two enjoy all the...fun...all night."

Jane laughed as they headed for the door. "Just remember, Nichole's birthday is coming up pretty soon. Payback is hell."

"Ugh! Don't remind me," Marcy replied with a big smile. "Good luck," she wished them.

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There was still light, but it was dim now. Jasmine was inside his sleeping bag, just as all the other girls were. He had been in it for what seemed like hours as they all had talked endlessly. But the talking was mostly done now. He could hear most of the girls sleeping. He turned his head to one side, Olivia was asleep. He looked the other way, Allison was asleep too. He closed his eyes, but sleep wasn't ready for him yet. His mind was too busy thinking back over his day.

He had enjoyed himself. A lot! Too much! He had really, really hoped he wouldn't. But he had. Despite not wanting to like any of it,

he had wound up liking it all. Even that little problem when he had been getting changed hadn't really been too bad. And afterwards, the girls had gone right back to treating him like they had been, like a real girl, only maybe more so. He almost felt more like he was one of them, only, at the same time, he was more aware than ever that he wasn't. It was so confusing!

Why had he enjoyed himself? Why had he been able to hold endless conversations about things he didn't want to be interested in, and yet lately, had found all too much of it to be interesting? Why? About the only thing he hadn't been really comfortable talking about, was boyfriends. And it seemed like every girl there had their eye on some boy or another, except him. Fortunately, none of the girls seemed to notice that he wasn't interested in any of the boys. But boys had always been a major topic of conversation, even among the Musketeers, so he had been used to it. And tonight, he guessed that he had pretty much even enjoyed that too.

He hadn't wanted to enjoy himself. He hadn't wanted to like any of it. But he had. In the quiet of the night, he rolled over in his sleeping bag and pulled it over his head. Soft tears formed in his eyes. He cried, but silently. He hadn't wanted to like it, but he had. And now, because of that, he didn't feel like he had a choice anymore. Because of that, he was going to have to do something. Something that horrified even him. He was going to have to do something that was going to make his father horribly angry with him. Perhaps more angry than his father had ever been. And afterwards, he had no doubt that his father would no longer be proud of him at all.

No doubt about it. The fact that his father kept telling him that he was proud of him, meant everything to him. It meant the world to him! Sometimes, it was the only thing that kept him sane. And yet, because of what he now knew he had to do, he had no doubt at all that he was going to lose his father's love. His father's trust. His father's...pride.

In the silence of the night, buried deep inside his sleeping bag, a small quiet sob escaped his lips. He cried.

Chapter 42 – To Be, Or Not To Be

March 8th

“Mmmm...”

“Mmmmm. Mmmmm...”

“Mmm. Mmm. Mmmmmmm. Mmmmmmmmm. Mmmmmmmmm.
Mmmmmmm.”

Jimmy Joe’s breathing came in short gasps, not that she really noticed. It was very early in the morning, and she was in bed still. The urgent feelings she was experiencing were nothing but total ecstasy. She had heard some of the girls whisper about sex once in a while, but it was something that they never really talked about. But for the last month or so, and much more often lately, she was finding it more and more difficult to keep her fingers out of that one special place down between her legs. The forbidden place. “Mmmmmmm,” she gasped, only able to concentrate on the feelings and nothing else. “Mmmmmmmmmmm!”

She always tried to be as quiet as possible about it, including now. But with her stupid brother away for the night over at Olivia’s house, there was even less chance of anyone hearing her. She was so wet...so desperate...and there was no way she could even think about anything else just then. “Mmmm. Mmmm.”

There was this new little part of her now that was suddenly not quite so little anymore. She had been surprised to find that when she stroked her fingers over it now, it kind of grew! More than she imagined it might. And in the process, it was giving her the most wonderful feelings imaginable. “Mmmmmmmmmmm!”

The pressure and speed of her fingers grew, and so did the pleasure. A minute later, her whole world seemed to explode into wondrous multi-colored feelings like nothing she had ever felt before. Only she *had* felt those feelings before. Today, they were simply more intense.

Her fingers kept lightly working away as the intensity slowly faded. She opened her eyes and happened to see the clock. Something was wrong, but in the middle of all the wonderful things her body was still enjoying, her brain couldn't put that something together...for a while.

"Oh shit!" She jumped out of bed in a panic and grabbed some clothes to pull on. Now that she was out of bed, she was aware that the light was dimmer than usual at that time of morning. The clocks had changed an hour ahead in the middle of the night to daylight savings time. Her father had made sure she had gotten it right before she went to bed last night. But this morning she had forgotten all about it. Her Uncle Jed had told her yesterday that he would be there to pick her up half an hour later because of the time change, and it was that time now! Half dressed, she ran for the bathroom.

She did her best to wipe herself clean and dry, but she didn't have much time.

"Jimmy! Jimmy Joe!" her father's voice yelled.

Jimmy opened the bathroom door. "Coming!" she yelled back.

"Uncle Jed is here waiting for you. Get going!"

"I'm coming!" she yelled again as she ran back to her room to get the rest of her things. She wouldn't be hunting today, unfortunately. There was still too much work to do after that snow storm. But Uncle Jed had promised her yesterday that today he would show her how to use the chain saw. She was looking forward to that. So far, all she had gotten to do was to watch her cousins cut the wood, while she was stuck lugging it all to wherever it needed to be put. More often than not, into piles of firewood for the family to use later.

Grabbing her jacket, she put one arm into one of the sleeves and ran for the back door. Her father and Uncle Jed were there. "Sorry," she told them breathlessly. "I overslept." She didn't dare mention what she had really been doing.

Jed looked at her and only nodded before going back to the conversation he had been having with Clint. "Yeah, I'm afraid we're going to have an awful lot of firewood to cut up this year. There's trees down all over the place."

Clint nodded. At least none of us will have to worry about cutting any for a while."

"No problem there. We can all be grateful for that."

"I'll get Tommy to help me move some of it later," Clint told him. "We'll stock our wood pile here and then try to bring some in for some of the others too. Once Pete wakes up, I'll ask if he and Elliot can lend a hand as well."

Jed nodded. "Sounds good," he replied. "Thanks." He glanced down at Jimmy for a moment, then back at his brother. "Did Susan spend the night with the girls last night?"

"No, she's in bed right now. She came in around one or so. I know she's going back pretty early again, but I wouldn't think she needs to go too soon. The way these things usually go at our house, the girls all sleep pretty late."

Jed nodded. "Let her sleep."

"Too late!" Susan's tired voice came as she walked into the kitchen. "What's up with all the yelling at this hour? I had enough noise last night to deal with."

"Sorry, Mom," Jimmy replied. "I overslept."

"I should be so lucky," Susan replied as she walked over and hugged her daughter turned son. She looked up at Jed. "Want some coffee?"

"No, we've got to get busy. We're already getting a later start than I'd like."

"Not me," Susan replied. "I'm up way too early today."

"Are the girls being any problem?" Jed asked.

"No. They're all good as gold. It's just all the noise and commotion of everything going on all the time. Non-stop! They're all having a ball! And after the movie yesterday, maybe too much of a ball."

Jed smiled. "Yeah, I heard they were going to the movies. Ash was pretty excited about it."

"It turned out to be a pretty decent movie," Susan told him. "Even I enjoyed it."

The knock on the door interrupted the conversation. Ethan stuck his head in. "Are you coming or should we go on without you?"

“No,” Jed replied quickly. “We’re just coming now.” He turned to Susan and Clint and said a quick goodbye before ushering “Jimmy” outside.

Jimmy’s mind though wasn’t on what she would be working on very shortly. Instead, it was fully occupied with what her mother had said about the party next door. They were all having fun. Too much fun! And the movie had been really good. And she hadn’t been allowed to go. She was seething over the issue as she got into the back of her Uncle Jed’s truck. Her girlfriends had all had a great time – without her. Her stupid brother had been there and she had no doubt that he’d had a great time too – instead of her. Didn’t anybody care about her? Why was it that everyone else could have fun, except her? Why? It wasn’t fair!

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Reverend Cosinger stood in his usual spot and watched the people coming in. His spirits went down a bit at seeing Jacob and Rose enter, but he did fully expect to see them. Both of them. Now he was really watching for that blasphemous boy to enter, and he had no doubt that all too soon that little piece of abomination would be once again planted squarely in the middle of his church.

He watched as his little congregation grew again. The larger congregation in the past few weeks had pleased him greatly. It looked like once again he was going to have a good group to speak to. But where was the evil blight? No sign of him yet. He saw Valerie McComber come in and speak with her mother and father. No surprise there, except that her daughter Ashley who usually came with her hadn’t come. He gave very little thought to that point. So where was that blasted McComber boy?

He fully remembered how things had gone the week before. That boy had come into his church, all dolled up like a girl again, and had the gall to smile at him the whole time, as if he knew something wicked and sinful that he was planning on, or perhaps as if daring him to say just the wrong thing. But last week he had truly risen to the occasion. Last week, in the middle of his sermon, he had seen his words wipe that smile right off the face of that blasphemous boy.

That blasphemous boy who this week wasn't in his church yet, but the Reverend still had no doubt that he soon would be.

Last week, the Reverend had felt like he had truly won the battle. But now that the service was going to start soon, he had to wonder if maybe he had won more than he thought? The boy wasn't there at all. Neither was his mother or father. Just Jacob, once again sitting in the very first pew where he had started sitting ever since planting the abominable black spot in the middle of his church. With one last glance around at the congregation, he was starting to feel hopeful that maybe he had won the whole battle. The boy was missing. His entire immediate family was missing. Only Jacob remained that he had to be concerned with. In a very good mood, Reverend Cosinger went back to get ready for the service to start.

A few minutes later, with his heart feeling the pride of God smiling down on him for his unwavering dedication and perseverance, Reverend Cosinger stood in front of his small congregation with a smile on his face. As he stood there, his eyes immediately searched the people in front of him for the boy who they always dressed as a girl. No sign of him still. He went through all the morning announcements, still expecting that sinful boy to walk through the doors. But once the service started, the doors never opened.

He went through the hymns, through the reading of God's word, and through taking up the collection, and still he watched for the boy to arrive. Surprisingly, he was becoming more nervous over the issue. Were they planning on springing that bit of blight on him at a key moment in an effort to somehow upset him? With that thought on his mind, he launched into his planned sermon. His eyes spoke to everyone in the church, but what they were really doing was searching for the blasphemous boy. Was he hiding out there amid them somewhere?

Without the boy to be angry at, he was far more in control of his emotions. In his opinion, far more elegant and proper in his presentation. There was none of the yelling and fist pounding that he had done so often in past weeks, only calm intelligence. The cornerstone of righteous religion.

When he finished his sermon and the boy still hadn't arrived, he knew without a doubt that he had won the war. They weren't going to be sending him to desecrate God's church anymore. There would be no more sinning in this church – God's holy church!

At the end of the service he stood at the door to his church and proudly shook the hand of every person who had been there. There was nobody trying to sneak out this time. Nobody there had a reason to. And once again, Jacob McComber and his wife were the last ones to leave. And as usual Jacob was there offering his hand. Knowing that he had won, even against the likes of Jacob McComber, Reverend Cosinger shook his hand in the spirit of Christian fellowship.

"You okay Reverend?" Jacob asked. "You seemed a little off today. Don't let this crazy weather we're having give you a cold. Nasty stuff this time of year. You watch yourself. Hear?" And with a smile, he was gone.

Reverend Cosinger looked after Jacob and his wife as they walked off toward the parking lot. Seemed a bit off? Was he catching a cold? Nonsense. What had Jacob been implying? With a shake of his head, he happily headed back inside to find his wife.

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"Jimmy! Be careful with that thing! Go easy. Let the saw do the work. Don't try to force it. You're going to wind up hurting yourself."

Jimmy was frustrated. Let the saw do the work? Go easy? She was mad! Boiling mad. And the chain saw was the perfect thing to help her work out her frustrations. The damn thing was heavy, even though it was the smallest saw they had. But it was still so powerful it had no problem cutting right through any of the logs. And as far as she was concerned just then, the bigger the log, the better.

She eased up on the pressure she was putting on it. The cutting continued, but slower. She wanted to go faster. She wanted to cut that log apart as fast as possible and move onto cutting the next spot. But her Uncle Jed said that the saw had to go at its own pace.

All her girlfriends had had fun. Too much fun! Oh how that irked her.

She watched as the saw blade slowly bit into the hard wood. Deeper and deeper.

The girls were probably still all over at Olivia's house. She was sure that by now they would all be up. Were they having breakfast? She hadn't. She clearly remembered many sleepover breakfasts. All the girls. All the fun.

Why was the saw taking so long? Yeah, it was a big log. Yeah, Uncle Jed had said it was oak and hard to cut. But it still shouldn't take so long!

All her friends had too much fun yesterday, and they were still having fun. But nobody cared if she had any fun. Nobody cared if she enjoyed anything – except work! And she didn't really enjoy that much at all! It was hard, and it was tiring, and it was dirty, and it was smelly, and it was awful! And nobody said two words to her about if she was doing a good job or not. Not two words.

But her girlfriends, she had no doubt they were all saying lots of things to each other. What were they taking about? What were they discussing? No doubt, they were talking about her and the fact that she couldn't be there with them, but her dumb screwy brother could. And no doubt, they were all laughing at her.

The saw kicked wildly in her hand. The power of it made it jumped out of the slot she had been cutting. Scared out of her wits as the blade seemed to come back toward her, she let go of it and jumped back out of the way. The deadly chain just barely missed her arm. Scared, she could do nothing but stand back and look down at now quiet saw lying on the ground, right where she had been standing. She had just barely avoided getting killed by the thing.

"Jimmy!" Jed yelled as he ran over to her. "Are you alright?" He got no answer from her, but he could see that at least she wasn't bleeding anywhere. She was just scared. "I told you to ease up. That's what happens when you don't watch what you're doing!"

Between the fright and her frustrations, Jimmy did exactly what she shouldn't. She yelled back. "What do you care?" she yelled. "What does anybody care?"

"Jimmy! What are you talking about? Of course I care. I don't want to see you get hurt!" He waited while she seemed to stare angrily at him for a few moments. "Now," he said, "are you going to

pick that thing up and do it right, or do you want to go back to stacking logs again?"

Now that the danger had passed and she had yelled briefly, Jimmy felt a bit ashamed of her actions. "No," she said sullenly. "I'll do it." She reached for the saw.

"Jimmy!"

"What?" she asked as she picked up the saw.

"What's eating you today? You've looked like you're mad at the world all morning now. What's your problem?"

"Nothing," she replied with a shake of her head.

"I don't believe that for a minute! There's something bothering you, and we better well get it sorted out before you kill yourself...or me! Now what's going on?"

"You don't want to know."

"I don't want to know? Or you just don't want to tell me? And you're not starting that thing up again until I find out!"

Jimmy was angry. Angry and frustrated. "Nobody cares," she muttered.

"What do you mean? I care! I don't want to see you get hurt!"

"Not that! It's not that at all," she added.

"Then what is it?"

"Nobody cares about what I want."

"What you want? Like what?"

"Like..." Once again the frustration over her entire life hit her full force. "Like my stupid dumb wuss of a brother can go off and have nothing but fun all day, but I can't go at all. Like everyone is always going off and doing things they like and I'm not allowed. Nobody ever asks if I'd like to do something. Nobody cares what I might like. Nobody cares about me at all!"

Jed stood there staring at her for a moment. "Let me guess," he said. "You're upset because you can't be part of Olivia's little birthday party."

"Little! Do you know how many girls are there? Lots!"

"And what do you care?" Jed fired back. "You're the one who decided you wanted to go hunting more than being with your friends. As I heard it, it was you who came up with the idea for you and your brother to switch places. You're the one who pushed the

issue to humiliate him so bad he'll probably never outlive it. And you're the one who's keeping him *and* yourself in the situation that you know perfectly well he doesn't want to be in. And from what I'm seeing from you right now, evidently, you don't want to be in it anymore either. So are you finally ready to decide to quit hunting now? If so, I'll drive you right over to Olivia's house immediately. I don't know if they're still there or not, but we'll find some of your girlfriends somewhere for you to play with."

Jimmy was still seething, but being yelled at by her Uncle Jed like he did made her back down. Was she ready to quit hunting? She loved it so much! She was the only girl in the family to ever hunt. The only one! But that thought made her pause. Was she still a girl? She was, but she wasn't. In some ways, her stupid dumb brother was almost more of a girl than she was. At least he looked like a girl now. She didn't want to admit it, but the thought was all too prominent on her mind – she didn't look much like a girl anymore. The thought hurt, and it hurt a lot. She was a girl! She was! And she would always be a girl, no matter what she looked like.

But did she want to quit hunting now and get her old life back again? Was it worth it to no longer be the one and only girl in the family who was allowed to hunt? Was it worth it to no longer be allowed to hang around with the guys and talk with them the way she did. Was it worth it to no longer be so close to Ethan or Justin, or even her brother Tommy, or...Elliot. Even though she couldn't act the way she wanted to with Elliot, she could still hang around with him more. A lot more. And if she was a girl again, then since they were cousins, he hardly knew she existed.

And then the final issue hit her. What would happen if she did back out now? What would everyone think about her if she just gave up and quit? Gave in to what everyone wanted? She would be the laughingstock of everyone instead of her screwy sap of a brother, who totally deserved all the humiliation. What would everyone think of her?

Jed stood there watching her. He stood there for a long time. He saw her turning things over seriously in her mind. Would she finally quit? Would she finally give in? She was so damn hard-headed! Way too hard-headed. He was almost holding his breath in

the hope that she would agree to quit hunting and let everything and everyone go back to the way it should be. And the longer he stood there watching her, the more that hope grew...until he saw her suddenly reach down and grab the handle on the chainsaw's pull cord, and yank it, causing the saw to roar into life. Disgusted and frustrated, he turned away. What the heck was wrong with that girl?

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The trip to the school to drop the girls off was somewhat like it had been the day before. Susan followed Jane and Marcy with her car loaded with girls, including one who was really her son. The girls weren't quite as talkative or animated today as they were the day before, especially Jasmine. Susan easily put it all down to them being overly tired and worn out. She knew she certainly was. About the only positive side to this whole birthday party thing was that this time it kept them out of church. The way Reverend Cosinger had been lately, anything was better than listening to another of his yelling matches.

In the passenger seat next to his mother, Jasmine absently fingered one of the new friendship bracelets on his arm. He and the girls talked a bit once in a while, but mostly, nobody was saying much of anything. He was glad. He had other things on his mind. Serious things. Things that were far more important than silly bracelets or talking about clothes or...boys.

When they got to the school, he got out of the car right along with everyone else. There were a few girls he hugged, or who in reality, who hugged him. They all said their goodbyes. They all said how much fun they had. And they all talked about seeing each other in class on Monday. Finally, Jasmine was alone with his mother again as they headed home. The party was over. And each passing minute brought him closer to what he knew he had to do as soon as he got home. His father's face was foremost on his mind all the way home. How would his father's face look when he found out?

"Tired?" Susan asked.

"Yeah, I guess," Jasmine replied.

“Me too,” Susan told him. “I may take a nap this afternoon. How about you?”

But Jasmine didn’t want to tell her what his plans were. “Maybe,” he replied. “I don’t know.”

“I think,” Susan said, “maybe we’ll get your father to take us out to dinner tonight. What do you think?”

“Um...okay, I guess,” Jasmine replied. He tried to picture the family going out to dinner. They rarely ever went out for dinner. If they did, he would be going out in public as a girl again. He tried to picture himself doing that. He found it easy, yet still embarrassing. He knew however that them going out for dinner that night was going to be highly unlikely. His mother just didn’t know that...yet.

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Jacob pulled his truck around the bend and spotted Ethan and Justin hard at work cutting up logs that had recently closed the road. The road was wide open now, and there were several good sized piles of cut wood just waiting to be picked up and taken where it could be split and used in their fireplaces. He didn’t see his son Jed’s truck though. Just Ethan and Justin. He stopped next to where they were working and rolled down his window. “Where’s your father?” he asked. “I thought he said he was coming out this way too.”

Ethan pointed up the road. “He and Jimmy are working further up,” he said. “I’m not sure how far though. We haven’t seen them in a little while now.”

With a wave of his hand, Jacob said, “Thanks boys.” He rolled up his window as he continued on up the road. Several bends later, he saw “Jimmy” putting a chain saw to good use while his son Jed piled wood into yet another pile. He stopped a little bit back from them and got out of his truck. Jed walked over to see him and the two men shook hands.

“Hey Dad,” Jed said, glad for the break in moving logs.

“Just wanted to come out and see how things were going,” Jacob told him. “What do you think about the roads? Are any of them open enough yet if we get hunters coming through?”

Jed nodded. "Yeah, we've got three open far enough. There may be others, but I still haven't had a chance to check them all. I've been concentrating on the ones we use the most."

Jacob nodded. "That's good." His eyes caught "Jimmy" cutting more wood. "How's she doin'?"

Jed turned to look back at Jimmy. He shook his head. "Right now, she's doing just fine. But I'm afraid we had it out a little while ago. For a little bit there, I thought I finally had her convinced to give up hunting and go back to being a girl again."

"What happened?" Jacob asked.

"From what I gather, she's all hot and bothered about her friends having fun and she can't. And she seems to think that nobody gives a damn about what she wants or about her having any fun at all."

"Huh!" Jacob grunted. "She's getting to hunt. That's what she wanted in the first place."

"Yeah, well right now I can tell you she's pretty darn jealous of all her friends. She wants to hunt, and she wants to be with her friends too."

Jacob shook his head. "She can't have it both ways. None of us can. But I guess it's good to know that once again she came close to givin' it all up."

"I think she may have been closer this time than ever before."

Jacob nodded. "Good to know. So she's finally leaning a bit more. Now we've just got to figure out how to push her over the edge."

"Maybe," Jed replied. "But in the meantime, I think I'm glad to have her out here workin' with us. She's holding her own...mostly. She's not as strong as a boy, but I suspect she's starting to get there. And even though she's a bit green, there's more than enough work to go around. She's been a help, no matter how we slice it. It's just that every once in a while I've got to watch for things with her that I wouldn't have to think about with a boy."

"I suspect none of it is anything you can't handle," Jacob told him.

Jed smiled. "I think Ashley is turning out just fine. And if we can ever get Jimmy Joe there straightened out, no doubt she'll turn out

just fine too. But if we don't...I don't have a clue what we're all going to do."

Jacob shook his head. "I guess we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. Just keep pushin' her. Keep after her. She's leaning, just not enough."

Jed nodded. "Will do."

"Now, how about loading up my truck with some of this wood. I might as well take some back with me while I'm at it."

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Jasmine wasn't happy to see that his father's truck wasn't in the driveway when they got home, and when they went inside, his brother Tommy wasn't there either. He wasn't happy, but he also felt relieved at the small bit of reprieve. It would be a while now before his father found out.

"I'm going to lay down for a while," Susan told him.

"Okay, Mom," he replied. "And Mom, thanks for your help with the party."

Susan smiled and went back to him and hugged him. "Thanks," she said. "I'm just glad you were able to enjoy yourself."

Yeah, he had enjoyed himself. Too much. And that was why he now had to do something about it.

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Clint pulled his truck into the driveway and drove it on into the backyard, parking it just behind the house where there were already two truckloads of the fresh logs dumped on the ground. He had several stacks of wood piled back there that he could draw from all winter. The wood in the back of his truck though was too green to use yet and still needed to be split. But that was all part of the process. By next year, it would be perfect for the fireplace in the family room.

Tommy scrambled out of the passenger seat and had the tailgate open before Clint could get there. The two of them climbed up and started throwing down the logs. They didn't stack them, their

goal just then was to get them out of the truck. They would stack it all when they were done getting all the new wood they needed.

As they were throwing the logs down, Clint noticed Jasmine standing back by the driveway watching them. He was quick to note that for once his son wasn't wearing a skirt. Yet the jeans he had on seemed to fit him a little too well. Too well because they suggested a shape he wasn't really happy about his son having. Since Jasmine wasn't moving and didn't seem to want anything, he and Tommy continued to work. He did wonder though why Jasmine simply continued to stand back out of the way and watch.

When the truck was empty, Clint turned to Tommy. "Let's get a drink before we go back for more."

"Sounds good," Tommy replied before he jumped down from the back of the truck. He was halfway to the house before his father managed to get down from the truck. "Hey Sis," Tommy said as he passed Jasmine. He didn't even notice that Jasmine didn't reply.

"Hi Jas," Clint said as he headed for the back door. "Have a good time at the party?"

"Dad, can I talk to you?"

It was the tone of his voice that really caught Clint's attention, although he didn't really think that much of it. "Sure. What do you need?"

"I mean, can I talk to you seriously?"

That stopped Clint where he was. "What's up?" he asked.

"Um..." Jasmine looked around. "Um...is there any way we can talk...privately."

Clint looked around him. "There's nobody here. What's on your mind? What's wrong?"

But Jasmine wasn't comfortable talking outside like that. "Um... is there somewhere we can go where we can be alone for a while?"

"Jas, we're alone now." He thought about that for a moment. "You want to go out to the shop to talk for a bit?"

"Um...it might be better."

Clint nodded, but he was worried now. The way Jasmine was acting, something had to be seriously wrong. "Okay," he said. "Let me tell Tommy we're going to be a while. Is your mother in the house?"

"She's still laying down," Jasmine told him.

Clint nodded. "I'll be right back. You go open the workshop and I'll be there in a minute."

Jasmine headed carefully across the backyard toward the workshop. There was still snow on the ground, but in many places now it was gone. He figured that in another day or two it would all be gone. He wasn't looking forward to this. He wasn't looking forward to it at all, but he knew his father had to know. Better to tell him now than later. Better to get it over with. But would he ever have his father's love again? Would he ever have his trust?

He was nearly to the workshop when he heard the back door closing again. He looked back to see his father now heading for him. He climbed the small ramp and looked back again. His father was still coming. He felt like running – far away. But he knew he couldn't. Better to get it over with now. He bent down and lifted the garage door...or tried to. Once again, it was stuck, and then with a bit more effort, it slowly began to move. Darn the thing was heavy! Why was it so hard to lift all of a sudden?

"Something wrong with that door again?" Clint asked.

"It's hard to lift!" Jasmine complained.

Clint reached out and easily lifted the door the rest of the way.

"Thanks," Jasmine replied.

"You got it past the hard part," Clint told him. But as he said it, his eyes took in his son's too feminine frame. More than likely, his son was having trouble with it because he had less muscle than he used to, even at his age. Even under the light jacket Jasmine was wearing, there was no doubt that his arms and shoulders were skinnier than they used to be. The fault of those damn hormones. "Get the lights," he told Jasmine. "I'll close the door again since you want to talk alone."

A minute later, with the big garage door closed behind him, he headed for the stools in front of his workbench. Jasmine was already sitting in one. "What's up?" he asked. He could see how troubled his son's face looked, not to mention so feminine.

But now that the time was here Jasmine wasn't sure how to start, let alone tell him. "Um..." he tried. "Um..."

"Jas, just tell me. Okay? Whatever it is, we'll figure it out."

“No!” Jasmine exclaimed full of frustration as he stood up and paced around.

“Jas, what’s the problem? Tell me.”

“Ugh!” Jasmine grunted. “I... I...” But the words didn’t want to come to his lips.

“You what?”

“I...I did something.”

Clint’s eyebrows went up. “You did something? What?”

But now there were tears forming in Jasmine’s eyes and he didn’t know how to stop them.

“Jas, is this going to be another one of those talks where you cry most of the time?”

“Damn you Dad!” Jasmine yelled. “I’m trying, okay? This is really hard for me. And I can’t help it if I start crying. I can’t help it!”

“Okay, okay,” Clint replied, trying to calm his son down. He went over to him and put his arms around him. “Okay,” he said. “I’ve got you. Cry all you want. And when you’re ready, tell me what you did.”

Jasmine hugged his father. Would it be the last time he ever got to do that? “You’re going to hate me,” he said through his tears as they continued to hold each other.”

“I will? I hope not. In fact, I seriously doubt it. But so far, you’ve told me nothing that I can go by.”

“You’re going to hate me, and you won’t love me anymore.”

Clint looked down at the mop of hair on the head of the child he was holding so closely, and who was holding onto him for dear life.

“Jas, nothing could ever make me do that. You know I love you. You know your mother and I both love you. And you know how proud of you we both are.”

“You won’t be,” Jasmine said before sniffing and continuing to cry.

“Okay, Jas. Take your time. I’ll be here. Just tell me when you’re ready.”

It was only a moment later that Jasmine found the words leaving his mouth. He was still hugging his father, his head was still resting against his father’s strong chest, and his father’s strong arms were still holding him. “Dad,” he said. “I lost something.”

"You lost something? What? And whatever it is, don't worry, we'll replace it."

"We can't replace it. Nobody can."

"And why is that? What did you lose?"

"Me."

"What do you mean, you lost you? You're right here. I've got you right now."

Jasmine knew he wouldn't understand. Even snuggled against his father's chest, he shook his head. "No Dad. You see...I had fun."

"You had fun? So? When? Why is that a problem?"

"Because the fun is why I lost me."

Clint was confused. His son was making no sense at all. He pulled Jasmine back toward the stools and he sat down. As big as Jasmine was, he still lifted him up and sat him in his lap and held him. "Now start at the beginning and explain this to me. What exactly is your problem?"

"I had fun Dad."

"So?"

"So the truth is, I've been having fun for a while now. More and more."

"I don't understand why that's a problem."

"Dad, you don't understand."

"Then explain it to me. Someway that I can understand."

"You're going to hate me."

"I doubt it, but I still need to hear what the matter is."

Jasmine sat on his lap for a moment, then leaned his head against his father's shoulder. Very softly he said, "Dad...I'm starting to like it."

"Like what?"

Jasmine closed his eyes and mentally gulped. "Being a girl."

Clint took that in. As simple as the words were, they hit him deep inside. And those simple words troubled him a lot.

"Dad...please don't hate me. Please!"

It was a moment before Clint could find his voice. "I don't hate you...*Jimmy*. I don't hate you at all. I never will. Your mother and I

will never stop loving you.” It was a while before thought to ask. “Why would you think I would hate you?”

“Because I keep finding myself having fun, even when I don’t want to. More and more lately, I keep finding myself liking being a girl, even though I know I shouldn’t. I’m liking it more and more. And now...” He searched for the words. “Now I don’t know who I am anymore. I don’t know who, or what I am...or what I’m supposed to be...or anything. Who am I? What am I? What am I supposed to be? What is it you *want* me to be?”

He paused for just a moment again. “Dad, I’m afraid. I don’t feel like myself anymore. I know I sure don’t look like myself anymore. And Dad...I’m just afraid. I guess like with everything else in life... I’m afraid. I’ve lost...me.” He thought about that quickly. “Or I guess, I’m losing me. I’m still not really sure. I only know I’m all confused about everything.”

He sat up straight and looked pleadingly into his father’s eyes. “Please don’t hate me for it Dad. Please. I try not to like it, but I do. I just can’t help it. But I still love you. I still want to be your son, or... I don’t know! Damn it!” he exclaimed. “Sometimes now, I think I want to be your daughter instead, like Jasmine is...or was...or something. I don’t know. I’m just all confused! And...”

“Hey! Hey!” Clint said quickly, holding his son tighter. “Calm down! I don’t hate you. I said that before and I mean it. So don’t worry about it. And as for the rest?” He shook his head. “I don’t know right now, but I think maybe what you’ve said is something we should have talked about a long time ago. And...” He paused as his thoughts tried to fully focus. He looked seriously at his son on his lap. He looked so scared. So afraid. So worried. “Jas...Jimmy...I think it’s time we did something about all this.”

“What?”

Instead of answering, Clint eased him down off his lap so he was standing. Clint stood up and looked down at him. “I think it’s time I did something I should have done a long time ago.”

“What Dad?”

“Put an end to this whole piece of nonsense!”

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Susan was still asleep when Clint went into the bedroom and woke her up. "Susan," he said firmly but gently. "Honey. Wake up."

Susan reluctantly came out of her slumber and opened her eyes. There had been a serious tone in her husband's voice, and the look on his face had her concerned. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Clint sat down on the bed next to her. "What happened at that party?" he asked.

The question surprised her. "Um...one little thing that was a bit surprising, but other than that, only a bunch of girls having fun. Why?"

"Because I'm getting ready to call Dad," Clint replied. "I think it's time we put an end to this switching farce."

"Finally!" Susan exclaimed, happy and totally relieved over the idea.

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Rose opened the back door that led into her kitchen. "Hi son," she said as she gave Clint a warm hug. "Susan dear," she said next as she hugged her daughter-in-law. She looked behind them. "Where are the kids?"

"Home," Clint replied. "Where's Dad?"

"Have a seat, I'll call him for you." She started to leave the kitchen in search of her husband, but he was already heading that way.

"Are Clint and Susan here?" Jacob asked. A moment later, he was in the kitchen where he could see them. "Clint...Susan," he greeted them. "You wanted to see me about something?" He took his usual seat at the head of the kitchen table while his wife headed for her usual seat.

Clint waited only until they were all sitting down and they had Jacob's full attention. "I think it's time to put an end to the twins being all switched around. I think it's time to straighten out the whole business and stop it."

Jacob took that in and nodded. "And what brought this on?"

"It's way past time!" Susan told him.

Clint nodded his agreement then added his own thoughts. "Jimmy...the real Jimmy."

"Jade," Rose offered.

Clint rolled his eyes. "My real son, had a little talk with me a little while ago. He's afraid, Dad."

"Huh!" Jacob grunted. "From what I hear, he's afraid of a lot of things."

"Not like this, Dad. He was so upset by it, that he was pretty much convinced Susan and I would hate him for it. And I have to tell you, once he told me his problem, it pretty much made me sick." He paused for only a moment before saying, "Dad, he said he's starting to like being a girl now and he's really afraid of losing who he is. And after listening to him, I'm afraid that if we don't end this right now, he'll never be able to get back to being his old self, afraid of everything or not. He's scared, Dad, truly scared by it. And he's confused about everything. And this time he's got good reason. And like I said, he's desperately worried that we won't love him anymore because of it. It's time to end this, Dad. It's time to put a stop to it right now."

Jacob thought about that for a moment, then nodded. "Did you talk to Jed today by any chance?"

"Not since he picked Jimmy...I mean Jasmine up early this morning."

"Joe," Rose said.

Clint only gave her an annoyed glance.

"I met them out on the west road earlier this afternoon. Jed and...Jimmy Joe...were out there working together. Jed though told me something very interesting."

"What's that?" Susan asked, concerned about her daughter.

"It seems that he and...Jimmy Joe...had a little discussion today about things. And according to Jed, that girl came real close to swearing off hunting forever. From what I gather, she's real pissed that all her friends were having a bunch of fun, but she couldn't. And Jed mentioned that she seems to think that nobody cares about her or what she wants."

"Nobody cares!" Clint exclaimed. "We all care! More than we'd like. The whole damn family cares!"

"I know that, and you know that, but evidently, she don't see it that way."

"But she wouldn't quit," Clint said.

"Nope. Jed says though that it was a real close thing. He said he really thought she would for a while there. But I guess in the end, she wouldn't do it. Don't know what goes through that girl's mind sometimes. But there's no doubt she's got a real good stubborn streak in her like nothin' I've ever seen. Those kids are all screwed up, Clint. She's stubborn as all hell, and that boy of yours won't hunt. There's just something unnatural about that...a McComber boy that won't hunt."

"Well none of it matters anymore," Clint told him. "We're putting a stop to it all. Tonight! Just as soon as we get home, and Jimmy, I mean Jasmine gets back from working with Jed."

Jacob nodded. "They're your kids," Jacob told him. "That's up to you. Maybe it is time." He shook his head. "This damn thing has gone on way too long. Who'd ever think it would go like it did."

"Nobody did, Dad," Clint replied. "Nobody did."

Susan felt nothing but relief. It was over. She was going to have her kids back.

"Horseshit!" Rose exclaimed.

Everyone looked at her with total surprise.

"I think you're all full of horseshit!"

"Mom?" Susan said.

"Rose?" Jacob said at the same time. The outburst and language were so totally unlike his wife.

"You want to know what I think?" Rose said. "Well no, you probably don't. But you can all just sit there for a change and I'm going to tell you anyway. So listen up – all of you!" She could see that her language and the way she had spoken had fully captured the attention of all of them. She rarely ever spoke her mind on family matters, but this was one time when she was bound and determined to have her say and she wanted them to all hear her out.

"First of all," she said, "you all know perfectly well that this should never have been done in the first place. Switching those two around should have never happened at all. I don't know what got into Brian to even suggest such a thing."

"But we're putting a stop to it now," Clint said.

"Shut it, Clint!" Rose told him. "Just sit there and listen without yackin' for a change till I've had my say."

"Sorry, Mom," Clint muttered.

"Like I said," Rose continued. "It never should have happened in the first place, but it did, and so now we're all stuck with the problem. Those two twins more than any of us. But in the meantime, we've learned some things about those two that maybe we didn't know before. I know I certainly have."

"I've kept a damn close watch on both of them," Jacob told them. "I know everything there is to know about those two!"

"And you're blind as a bat too," Rose told him. "So for once you can sit there and listen to what I have to say too!" She saw the surprised looks on everyone's faces for that, including her husband's, but at least he wasn't saying anything back.

"Now," she said. "As Jacob just pointed out, it doesn't seem natural for a McComber boy to not want to hunt, but evidently *Jade* doesn't. But making him go tromping around all dressed up like a girl isn't really going to solve that problem. But hunting is only one thing. Yes, it's a big thing in this family. But times have changed. We're not exactly starving anymore. Heck, this house is practically a mansion! So while it's odd that a boy in this family doesn't want to hunt, I don't see where that should be held so much against him." She noticed her husband was going to say something but she quickly hushed him.

"Now Joe on the other hand...Jimmy Joe...she's always been the real problem. And personally, I don't see what the big fuss is over about a girl wanting to hunt. I know it's family tradition, and maybe it's not something any of the rest of the women and girls in the family want to do, but I know that other women certainly do it. The problem here is that that girl doesn't seem to have any *respect* for what anyone else thinks about the matter. And from what I've seen since, I can't say she's got much respect for what anyone thinks on *any* matter, not just hunting.

"Rose!" Susan started to say.

"Hush!" Rose silenced her quickly. "Now don't get me wrong. Heck, to be honest, before all this happened, she was one of my

favorite granddaughters. That girl is bright and pretty and can be really nice. Or at least she was. But since then we've been seeing a whole new side to her that I never bothered to really notice before. And from what I've seen there's a whole bunch of troubling things about her that look to me like they keep getting worse! Not only does she not care what anyone else thinks about things, but as far as I can see, she's become nothing but a bully!" She saw the surprised looks on their faces at that. "That's right, a bully! What the heck does she have against that brother of hers? He's nice as can be, other than being a bit timid about some things. But all I keep hearing about is her going out of her way to make him miserable! That's being nothing but a bully!

"I don't know if it happened before this all started. Actually, I figure it probably did. But somewhere along the way that girl lost something. Something important. Something that's very important to most women. And something that every last woman in this family has buckets of, and I would guess most other women in most other families too. But that girl has lost it somewhere. And that one thing is compassion. What's a woman without compassion? But I haven't seen one ounce of compassion in her these last few months at all. All I've seen instead is her manipulating everything so she can get her way, and to hell with the trouble it causes anyone else.

"Now the boy, Jade, he seems to be loaded with compassion. I sometimes wonder if he was born with a double dose of it, his...and hers! Even in the worst of times, no matter what his sister does to him, he's still ready to support her and stick up for her. But Joe... Jimmy Joe...I haven't seen one time yet when she was willing to go out of her way to stick up for her brother, or anyone else."

"She's been putting all his outfits together for weeks now," Susan interrupted. "Until this week anyway. She doesn't have much time for it anymore."

Rose nodded. "But is she doing it for him, or is she more interested in trying to make him look like some kind of total sissy she keeps trying to tell everyone he is?"

Susan was suddenly a bit more uncertain.

"I thought so!" Rose told her. "My bet is that anything she's ever done for her brother was only done so that it gained her something.

The girl is a selfish brat and she only thinks of herself and nobody else. Ever! As far as I can see anyway.”

“That’s a bit harsh, Mom!” Clint protested.

“Bull! It’s the truth and you darn well know it!

“Now as I understand it, this whole situation was done to make Jimmy Joe stop hunting. To make her finally go along with the family wishes on the matter. Well that’s all well and good. So you did it. And in the beginning I heard a bunch of times where everyone seemed to think that Jimmy Joe was going to suffer more than her poor brother Jade. But from what I’ve seen, the only one who’s been doing much suffering is Jade. It’s only now, lately, that we’ve heard anything at all about Jimmy Joe not liking something. Jade has been suffering nothing but what should be for him total humiliation, day in and day out. While she’s going off skipping through the woods hunting with Jed and his boys, doing exactly what she wants! And of course, the other thing she seems to want so badly is to grind her poor brother into the ground. And I’m not sure if she’s accomplished that or not. As Jacob once pointed out, that boy’s got more to him than most give him credit for. A lot more!”

She looked directly at Susan. This whole situation was based on what she would do when she found out her brother was getting breasts and she wasn’t. But as I heard, it took a while for Jade’s breasts to start coming in. Has Jimmy Joe even noticed them yet?”

Susan looked troubled. “Not until a few days ago at Brian’s office.”

“It was World War Three when she saw them,” Clint added. “She literally ran out screaming.”

Rose nodded, so in other words, the very thing you were all waiting on to make her quit hunting, is something she’s just now discovered?”

Susan and Clint both nodded sheepishly.

“Figures!” Rose muttered. She looked around at all of them. “Here’s the way I see it,” she said. “You sent those two twins on a trip into hell, but only one of them has been burned. And it’s only now that the other one is beginning to feel the heat. How fair is it to Jade if you stop it all right now? As far as I know, Jimmy Joe has only had a few times where she didn’t exactly get her way, but she

didn't suffer much at all. She's just now getting to the point where she's got so little girl time that the time she does have to do the things she likes so much is really being squeezed. She's just now found out that her brother has her breasts. And I figure she's just now realizing that she doesn't really look all that much like a girl anymore. In the past, she's been flitting around here happy as a lark thinking nothing has happened. She hasn't suffered at all! It's only now that she starting to face any of it.

"Now Jade on the other hand, well, my heart goes out to the boy. He's suffered nothing but humiliation for months. But despite that, not only has he impressed most of you, but he's been nothing but a total angel – boy or girl. At a time when most others would probably be holding everything that's been done to him against everyone, he's trying to reach out and be nothing but helpful. Heck, he even managed to fix my darn sewing machine for me!

"Mom, what are you saying?" Clint interjected. "We've got to stop this now so that Jimmy doesn't suffer any more than he has!"

"Hogwash!" Rose exclaimed. "Jacob keeps saying he's got more faith in that boy than anyone else, and so do I. He'll survive and get through it. But the only thing is, even stopping it right now ain't going to work anymore. Not like you want anyway."

"Mom? What do you mean?" Clint asked, not liking what he was hearing.

Rose shook her head. "I hate to say it Clint, but that poor boy's been lost for a long time now. In fact, as I see it, I think he's been lost since that day I heard all the girls in the family took him under their wing and started looking out for him. I'm pretty sure that was when things really ended for him. Face it, the boy was always alone. All I keep hearing about was how he never even smiled. But now he's got friends. Tons of friends. And I keep hearing how pretty he looks when he manages to smile once in a while. Heck, even Jane told me earlier today that all the girls from school seem to think he's one of them now. That boy may think he wants to go back to being a boy, but face it, he'll always yearn for the good times and friends he had when he had to be a girl. They gave him friendship and love as a girl, Clint. What did he ever get as a boy? Nothing!

He had no friends, so there was no one around to give him anything.”

“I was always there for him!” Clint argued. “Sue and I both! Jimmy knows that!”

Rose shook her head. “I have no doubt he knows that. And the fact that he went to you so worried and upset you wouldn’t love him anymore means he still knows it. But you loving him is one thing. Having friends who make him happy is something else again. He knows you love him for who he is, for who he’s always been – a boy. But what happens now that he’s starting to enjoy all the attention he gets when he’s being a girl, which is most of the time now. Does he know you’ll still love him if he not only looks like a girl, but he starts to think of himself as a girl? And Clint, will you still love him then? Will you still think of him as your son? Will you still be proud of him if he decides he’d rather be a girl than a boy? What then? Damn right he’s got something to be worried about!”

“All the more reason we’ve got to end this right away. Tonight!” Clint told her.

Rose shook her head. “I’m sorry, son, but changing him back, forcing him to be a boy again right now won’t help him much. He’s going to need an awful lot of time and patience, and most likely a pile of help too. What’s going to happen to him when he suddenly has to be a boy all the time now, and he can’t be with the friends he’s come to like so much? What happens when he suddenly finds himself being a boy again, and also finds himself alone all the time like he used to be. What then? Helping him get back to being a boy again is going to have to go slow and be done with a lot of love and care... and no doubt a lot of tears too. I have no doubt it’s going to be miserably hard on that boy now.

“Then shouldn’t we get started right away?”

“To what end? He’s already past that point. Why bother starting now when you’ve still got the real problem to consider – Jimmy Joe, not Jade. She’s the one you’re going to have to be the most concerned with. And things have just now finally reached the point where everything you hoped would start happening with her, are actually happening. It’s only now that she’s starting to feel the real pressure of what’s been going on.”

"And what about her?" Clint asked. "Do you think it's too late for her too?"

Rose shook her head. "She doesn't have the same problem that Jade has," Rose told him. "From what I hear, she's been hanging around with Jed and his boys, or with her brother Tommy and Pete's son Ethan, so she's never been alone. Even during that time when she and her usual girlfriends weren't getting along, she was still never really alone.

"As I see it, her real problem is that she's just lost all respect she had for everyone and everything else...her compassion. But because of all the things she seems to really still want, at heart, I have no doubt that she's still all girl. The trick now is going to be to put the pressure on her enough to want to stay a girl and finally quit hunting. That's going to be the tricky part now."

"So Mom," Clint said, "you're suggesting that we *don't* end this now?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm telling you! Don't end it! If you end this now, that girl ain't ever gonna learn her lesson. To be honest, until she learns some compassion and starts thinking about someone other than herself for a change, I don't think I want to count her among the women of this family. But your son on the other hand, he seems to be loaded with compassion. Jade is full of compassion, and Joe isn't. And until Joe can learn some, I'd much rather count Jade among the women of this family instead of Joe."

Rose shook her head. "Now they're your kids of course. I don't really have a say in this. But I've said my piece now for better or for worse. You do what you have to. I just think it would be a damn shame to end it now that things are finally getting to the point where you thought they would be months ago."

Susan had been growing more and more upset, but now she broke down and sobbed miserably. Clint rushed over and held her. "It's okay, Honey. It's okay. We'll switch them back tonight."

"We can't!" Susan sobbed in his arms. "We can't!"

"We can!" Clint told her.

She shook her head as she cried. "It's too late. Like she said, it's too late. I can see that now. I understand it. It's too late for our

Jimmy.” She forced herself to look up at her husband. “But it’s not too late for Jasmine. Clint, we’ve got to save her.”

“We will!” Clint told her. “We’ll switch them back tonight. Both of them.”

She shook her head again. “No! You don’t get it. Clint, she right. A woman without compassion isn’t a woman at all. And Jas has got to learn that. We’ve got to make her see that!”

“But there are other ways,” Clint told her. “Better ways!”

She shook her head again and looked away from him, still crying, the tears still streaming from her eyes. “Not now there isn’t.” She looked back up at him. “The way things stand right now, keeping this thing going may be the best way we can teach her. Like it or not.” Still staring up into his face, she let the sobbing loose again. “I just wanted my kids back!” she cried. “I just want them back again – the way they were! But I’m a bad mother. A bad, bad mother!” She cried into his arms pitifully.

Rose got up from her seat and moved in. “Let her go, son,” she said quietly. “I’ll take her from here.” She took Susan and held her in her arms and ran a hand soothingly over her hair. “Sshh,” she hushed her softly. “It’s alright, Susan. It’s alright.”

Susan now sobbed into Rose’s shoulder. “I kept telling him to have a good time. I kept telling Jimmy there was nothing at all wrong with having fun. I even kept telling him to smile.” She sobbed again. “I kept telling him to enjoy being a girl! But all the time I was doing it, it was killing me that I was telling it to my son.” She sobbed pitifully again. “All I really wanted was to have him back the way he was. Jasmine too. I kept telling them both one thing, while all I really wanted was for them to be the way they used to be. And it’s too late now. It’s too late. All because I’m a bad mother. A bad, bad, mother!” Once again she sobbed pitifully.

“No, Susan!” Rose said softly but sternly. “You’re not a bad mother at all. You’ve never been bad. All you’ve done is exactly what the whole family told you to do, even when you didn’t like it. You’re not to blame Susan. We are. You’ve done nothing but love those kids and worry about them. We just made you put them into an impossible situation that’s obviously going to have an awfully big

effect on them. And now we've all got to work together to fix it. But you're not a bad mother Susan. Not at all."

She moved back and grabbed Susan's shoulders, forcing Susan to look at her. "It's our fault, Susan, not yours, and now we're all going to have to fix it. But not until we get that girl of yours straightened out. That's the first part Susan. We've got to fix this, but that's still got to be the first thing we do. We've got to finish what we started."

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Jasmine Jade sat in his room, desperately holding onto Cleo and the hope that his ordeal would be all over with – tonight. It had been a long time since his mother and father had left to go up to Grandpa's house. A very long time. But still he sat in his desk chair with Cleo still in his lap, just as he had been sitting since they left. The longer the wait went on, the more nervous about it he became. He was so worried and stressed over everything that his muscles were pretty much locked in place. Even his knees were pressed tightly together, despite the fact he was wearing jeans.

He finally heard the back door opening. Were they home? Or was that his sister finally coming back from working with Uncle Jed? He couldn't tell from where he was. He also couldn't find the courage to get up out of his chair to look. But as he waited, he started shaking a little with fear.

And then his father walked into the room. His father, and right behind him, his mother. Their faces looked awful. Frightening in a way. But he could tell that neither of them seemed to be angry at him...he hoped. And his mother...it was obvious that she had been crying again. Too obvious. His nervousness went way up at seeing that. And his fear. And then his father sat down on his bed right across from him, and looked at him. Jade wanted to ask, but he never even made the attempt.

Clint looked at his son, or his new daughter, he wasn't sure which. He only knew that the child sitting holding the stuffed lion in his lap was his child. And he knew that he loved him. "We went and

talked to your Grandpa and Grandma,” he finally said. “And they totally understood.”

Jimmy Jade breathed a big sigh of relief. “Thank...”

“But we’re not stopping this yet,” his father quickly interjected.

Jade stared at his father’s face, not believing what he had just heard. Behind his father, he heard his mother break down in tears, crying openly. But Jade could only look in his father’s sad face. The longer he looked, the more he felt himself shaking again. He wanted to say something, but what? All he could do was sit there hugging his lion, and shake.

Clint, seeing the state his son was in, reached out and grabbed him and pulled him onto his lap, lion and all. He held him tightly as Jimmy Jade began crying. His wife came over and hugged both of them. Clint tried to fight his own tears, but a few still leaked out of his eyes. “I’m so sorry son,” he said over and over. “I’m so sorry. We tried. We were going to stop this. But after discussing everything, we all decided that, like it or not, it has to continue. I’m so sorry, son. So sorry.” He held his son even tighter.

Jasmine Jade cried harder for a moment, then he pulled his head back a bit. “It’s okay, Dad. It’s okay. I understand. It’s okay. Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine. I’ve always been fine. You do what you think you have to. I’ll be fine.”

Susan heard his pitiful words and couldn’t help herself anymore. She pulled Jasmine out of his father’s arms and into hers as she sat down in the chair. She held him close and cried with him.

“It’s okay, Mom,” he finally said. “It’s okay.”

“No it’s not!” Susan replied firmly through her tears. “It’s not okay, but we’re going to make it okay. Somehow, we’re going to make everything alright. The whole family will. We just have to wait a little bit longer now. That’s all. We just have to wait.”

Clint sat watching his wife and child crying together. To all appearances, mother and daughter. But in reality, mother and son. His son. He reached to hold his child again, but Susan held him tighter and shook her head. She looked at him with nothing but hurt in her eyes. “You need to leave us now,” she told her husband. “You need to leave us alone for a bit. This is my job now.”

Hoping he understood, Clint nodded and got up. He started to move away, but turned back again instead. He put his hand on his son's shoulder. "I love you son. Don't ever forget or doubt it – ever! I love you, and your mother, and your sister. No matter what! Don't forget it. Ever!" With that, he slowly walked out of the room and closed the door behind him.

Tommy was waiting wide-eyed in the hall. "What's going on?"

Clint shook his head. "Come on. Let's go stack that firewood we got earlier. We need to get out of here for a while."

Susan held Jade for a long time, holding, caressing, rocking him...and crying with him. "I need you to know something," she finally said softly. "I need you to know, because I need to confess something important."

"Whatever it is, don't worry about it, Mom. Whatever it is, it doesn't matter."

"It does to me," she whispered. It was a few moments before she could continue. "I'm sorry," she finally said. "I knew that as a boy you wouldn't want to do anything that the girls would all do. But I kept pushing you to do them. Of course, you did agree when this all started to do everything possible to act like a girl, but I still knew you wouldn't want to. But I also kept telling you I wanted you to like it. I wanted you to enjoy it all." She sighed deeply. "Oh Jimmy, you've been so alone all your life. So sad. I just wanted to see you smile and be happy for a change. And this was that one chance! Even though I knew how wrong it all was. I just wanted to see you happy! I never thought this whole mess would go on for so long, so I never gave any thought to what it might be really doing to you. And now I'm so, so sorry – about everything."

She forced herself to push him back away from her some. His face was a mess, completely wet from tears, as was her own face. She pushed him a bit more until he was standing in front of her. She did her best to summon up the courage to tell him. "We have to keep on with this for a while more," she said. "We have to keep going, just like we have been."

"How long?" he asked. His voice sounded troubled and strange.

She shook her head. "I don't know. We still don't know. And as much as we hate this, Jimmy, as bad as it's been for you, we're

continuing on for only one reason. We have to help your sister. Jimmy, we've screwed everything up for you so bad we don't know where to start to fix it. But we know about it now. We know how bad it is and how difficult it's going to be to help you when it's all over. But never forget, we *are* going to help you. Everyone will. In the end, you'll be just fine. I promise. We promise. The whole entire family promises. But Jimmy, I'm afraid that if we don't find a way to help Jasmine, then she too will be a horrible mess, not just you. I'm so sorry about that Jimmy. So very, very sorry. That's why we couldn't end this. That's why you're still going to have to remain a girl...at least when it's time for you to be a girl."

He stood there shaking for a moment again. And then he finally asked. "What am I supposed to do?"

She tried to smile, but it was a halfhearted effort at best. "Just what I've always told you to do. If you feel like laughing, then laugh. If you feel like crying, then cry. And every once in a while, if you find yourself smiling, then smile and enjoy it." Her face turned all too serious. "If you feel like being a girl...Jasmine...then be what you want. Have fun if you want. And don't be afraid to come to me with anything at all. I'll always be there for you. More so now than ever."

She hugged him tightly again as the tears once again threatened. Her words were meant to be a comfort to him, but they were having the opposite effect. She needed to leave him now. She knew from experience that it would be best now for him to cry it out for himself. She sat him down on his bed, still holding the silly stuffed lion. "Love you," she said softly. She forced herself to walk away. To go to the door. As she opened it, she heard him sobbing all over again. She turned back, he was lying on his side on the bed, clutching Leo to his chest. Sobbing. The tears came fully to her own eyes, even as she fought against them. She went out and closed the door...and saw Jimmy walking down the hallway toward them.

"Is the big sissy crying again?" she asked.

"Leave your sister alone!" Susan told her sternly. "This is all your fault!"

"Me? What did I do?"

"Nothing! Nothing at all! And that's the whole point! You didn't do anything at all!"

“What was I supposed to do? Nobody said anything.”

“Nobody should have to!” She glared angrily at her real daughter for a moment. “Just go get cleaned up and then go to your room. I can’t talk about this anymore with you right now.” She walked off toward her bedroom, but behind her she heard Jimmy asking.

“What did I do?”

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Jimmy Joe took a long hot shower, then went back to her bedroom...her brother’s actual bedroom. She looked at the deer head and the ducks on the wall and admired them. They were so great! How could her stupid brother ever be afraid of such beautiful things?

Alone in her room, she went over to her mirror and stared at her face. It had been a while now since she had looked at her chest and tried to will her breasts to grow. She didn’t bother now, there was no need for her to bother doing that anymore.

In the silence of her room, very softly, she spoke to herself. “I’m still a girl. I’m still a girl. I’m still a girl. No matter what anyone says about me, I’m still a girl. I’m still a girl.”

Chapter 43 – Impression Complications

March 8th – 9th

The last thing Susan wanted Sunday evening was for her phone to ring. It had been a horribly trying day for her, and her mind didn't want to think about anything, let alone polite conversation. But habit born of years of answering to the bell, made her pick the darn thing up. "Hello?"

"Susan! There you are," Jane's voice came over the phone. "I tried to call you earlier, but you were out."

"Yeah," Susan replied dully, "we were up at Mom and Dad's."

Jane caught the hint of something wrong in Susan's voice. "Susan, are you alright? You sound really tired."

"I am!" Susan replied, not in the mood at all for conversation. "Jane," she said, "is this something that can wait, because I've got to tell you, right now I don't think I can handle any more problems."

"Susan. What happened?"

"Not now Jane," Susan replied. "I'm just not in the mood. Is this something really important or can it wait?"

Jane considered it. It was important, but... "No Susan. Why don't I call you tomorrow? Okay?"

"Thanks," Susan replied. "That will be much better."

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Early Monday morning, Jane, John, Hunter, and Olivia got into their car and headed to school, just as they did every weekday morning. As they passed Susan and Clint's house, Jane couldn't help but remember the brief phone conversation she'd had with Susan the night before. It had sounded like Susan had some kind of major problem yesterday. And because of that, she hadn't told Susan something that she felt it was important for her to know, and especially for her two twins to know.

Jane and her husband had discussed it briefly the night before. She would call Susan from school later and talk with her then. Their big question now though was if they should tell the twins about it before school today, or wait and let their mother tell them later. It was important, but there was also a good chance that it wasn't. These things were always hard to tell. And then of course there was the other side of the coin, should she tell her own two kids. That might be just as important.

As they were passing the family business office, Jane turned toward John. "I think maybe we should at least discuss it with Olivia and Hunter."

John immediately knew what his wife was talking about. "It could be nothing," he said.

"I know," Jane replied. "But just in case."

"What, Momma?" Olivia asked from the back seat.

John turned his head away from the road for a moment and looked at his wife. With a small shrug of his shoulders he said, "Go ahead. What can it hurt?"

Jane turned around in her seat as much as she could so she could at least somewhat see her two kids. "Um, Olivia...and I guess you should be aware of this too Hunter, it's possible that something may come up in school today that I think we ought to talk about now."

"What Momma?" Olivia asked, full of concern.

The discussion Jane had with not just Olivia, but also with Hunter and her husband, lasted all the way to the school. And in the course of it, Jane used words she had never used before, or even thought she would ever use.

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"Dude!" Elliot's friend said as Elliot took his seat in class Monday morning. "Did your father sign you up for that shooting match?"

"Better believe it!" Elliot said proudly.

"No way!"

Elliot looked over to where Tommy had just sat in his seat. "Tommy, didn't my dad sign me up for that competition."

Tommy turned around in his seat. "He sure did!" Tommy replied with a smile. "I was there. I saw it."

"Too cool!" Elliot's friend replied. "I hear those competitions get packed."

"I don't know," Elliot replied. "Never been to one. This will be something new. I can't wait though."

"Where did you have to go to sign up?"

"Eureka Springs," Elliot told him. "But after my dad signed me up, we found out that a lot of guys don't actually sign up until the day of the match when they get there. But you should have seen the place we went to sign up. Wall to wall guns and nothing else!"

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing! And the place was packed with people."

"Man I wish I had been there. I'd love to see that!"

"It was great man, really great!" Elliot laughed a bit and lowered his voice. "Something kind of funny happened while we were there though, but don't spread it around."

"What?"

"You know Tommy's sister, or brother...Jimmy Joe?"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, well some kid in there called her a sissy, and man did she get in a huff over it. She was practically boiling!"

"Did she start a fight?"

"No, the guy left right away. But man was she pissed. And would you believe it, she couldn't understand for the life of her how the guy could possibly say that about her."

"You're kidding! I mean, yeah, she may look like a guy, in fact, lately it's getting a bit disturbing. And she's starting to look too much like a guy even when she's all dressed up like a girl again, you know? I think, at least. But even when she's trying to be a guy, there are times when she seems really...um...different. You know? Like she's kind of gay or something."

Elliot nodded. "We told her. Let's just say she was none too pleased to hear that either. Don't spread that around though. No use stirring up trouble where there shouldn't be any. She's a girl and can't really help it. And I guess even when she's dressed like a boy, she's still a girl. She's just not supposed to be acting like one."

“Kind of like her brother all dressed up like a girl. Just to look at him, you’d think he was a big sissy too, but he’s not. I guess you just have to know them and try to remember what’s really going on. I guess with both of them.”

Elliot nodded. “Got that right! Trust me, it’s a real bummer for the whole family.”

The class started soon afterwards. But even though Elliot had told his friend not to mention the story to anyone else, things like that have a way of slipping out no matter what. Later that morning Elliot’s friend mentioned it to someone else, and he of course told some others, and so the story got around. But early on, the request to not tell anyone got totally left out and forgotten.

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For Jasmine Jade, the day was just like any other, except he was now more conflicted than ever. He was still depressed over not being able to end his situation. He was depressed over it, but in a way, he wasn’t. Once again, he wasn’t allowed back into his old life because of his sister. Only this time there were other concerns for him. He thought he vaguely understood what his mother had meant when she had told him that they had screwed up his life so badly they didn’t know where to start to fix it, but now what was their big concern over Jasmine? Whatever it was, it was bad enough to keep him dressed in skirts. To keep him living most of his life as a girl. And because of that, he didn’t know what would be better, to be able to go back to his old life again, or... Or to let him live the rest of his life as a girl, which strangely and very troublingly, he was beginning to think he might prefer. As wrong as the thoughts were, they did keep circling around in his mind. Would it be so bad to live the rest of his life as a girl? He briefly tried to picture himself in the distant future, a grown woman. He sort of could, but mostly he couldn’t, and the image disturbed him. Frustrated and angry at himself for thinking such things, he quickly put those thoughts out of his mind.

His mother had stressed last night that they would help him. She had promised that the whole family would help him. They would help him get totally back to normal again. She had promised! But

did he want to get back to normal? He knew he had to want to get back to being himself. He had to! But did he? Because of that, he had been still conflicted when he left for school that morning, after an extra-long hug from his mother.

With little else to do, he had no choice but to go on as he had been, day after day now, pretending to be a girl. He would keep fighting it of course. He would try not to like it, but he knew he wouldn't fight it as hard as he used to. His mother's words kept circling in his head. "If you feel like laughing, then laugh. If you feel like crying, then cry. And if you feel like being a girl, then be what you want. Have fun."

The whole family wanted him back to normal. The whole family was going to help and make sure he got back to normal. But his mother had said that if he felt like being a girl, then he should, and he should try to enjoy it. Yeah, he was definitely conflicted.

Those thoughts were still on his mind as he entered his classroom right behind Nichole. As always, Olivia was in her seat before he got there. He was surprised by the look in her eyes as he approached. "Morning Olivia," he said as he was passing her desk.

Olivia had watched for Jasmine to enter. She had followed his progress right behind Nichole. But when he said good morning to her, her arm automatically seemed to reach out and grab his arm, stopping him. She looked up at him, feeling troubled about what her family had discussed in the car. But she couldn't mention it, especially not here in class. "Good morning," she finally said after a moment before letting go of his arm.

"You okay?" Jasmine asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost or something."

Olivia nodded. "I'm fine. How about you?"

That of course was a good question. Jasmine wasn't totally sure of the answer, but the automatic answer came out of his mouth. "I'm fine." He went on to his seat behind her and sat down.

"Psst! Jasmine!"

He turned to look at the girl who sat next to him.

"We've got to talk later!" she said to him.

"About what?"

But the girl shook her head. "When we have more time."

Olivia had heard what was said and turned around briefly. She was suddenly more worried. Should she excuse herself and tell her mother? In the end, she sat there unsure what to do. It could be nothing at all. Most likely it was nothing at all. Jasmine and the girl next to him had talked a number of times during her party. Most likely it was about something they had talked about then.

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As Jimmy Joe headed for her desk, she was listening more intently than ever to whatever conversations were going on around her. She was sure that after Olivia's big party that weekend she would now be hearing about what a big sissy her brother really was. She had no doubt in the world about that. But so far, she hadn't heard a single thing. But it was early. She told herself that as she sat in her seat. Most likely, it wouldn't be until after lunch before things really started to spread about it. She couldn't wait!

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A few minutes before the bell was supposed to ring announcing the morning break, Jane stuck her head into Mrs. Ansley's classroom. "Mrs. Ansley," she said, interrupting the teacher as she was working with a few of her younger students. "Can I see you for a second please?" She waited a moment while Mrs. Ansley came to the door. Very quietly, Jane whispered what she needed.

Mrs. Ansley smiled. "Of course. No problem. I'll be glad to."

"Thanks," Jane said before hurrying back up the hall toward the office. The bell signaling the break rang just before she got there.

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"Jasmine," Mrs. Ansley called quietly as he and his friends were getting ready to walk out. She waited until the boy who looked a bit too much like a girl reached her desk. "Mrs. Mason asked me to escort you into the girl's room this morning. She said she had something she had to take care of right away."

Jasmine only shrugged. "Okay," he replied. "Actually, I don't think it matters much if you or Aunt Jane are there at all anymore."

"Just the same," Mrs. Ansley said, "I think it's best if one of us is still with you."

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Susan, Marcy, and Valerie were all discussing what an ugly muddy mess they would have to put up with while the workers were building the new lodges. Their discussion was interrupted by Susan's cell phone ringing, which immediately worried Susan since her phone almost never rang while she was working at the office. "Hello?"

"Hi Susan," Jane's voice came back. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Um...better, I guess," Susan replied, only then remembering that Jane had called her the night before. "Sorry about last night," she said. "I was really kind of out of it." She was becoming more concerned now about problems because Jane was calling during school hours. Her mind immediately started worrying about her twins. "What's the problem now?" she asked.

"It's not really a problem...I don't think," Jane told Susan. "But I got phone calls from two of the mothers of the girls at the party yesterday."

That feeling of dread hit Susan's stomach again.

"And they both called about the same thing," Jane continued.

"What's that?" Susan asked, already knowing she didn't want to hear whatever would be coming next.

"Well, it seems they were talking with their daughters about the party, and both of them heard from their daughters that Jasmine is really a girl and never was a boy."

The knot in Susan's stomach was starting to twist, even though Susan had no idea why it should. "And what did they have to say about that?"

"Well, it seems they both knew that Jasmine and Jimmy have to dress as each other because they're being punished."

"Yeah," Susan replied. "I have no doubt the entire world knows about it now."

"Pretty much," Jane agreed. "At least everyone associated with the school."

"And then some!"

"Yeah, maybe," Jane replied. "Anyway, the first one flat out asked me if Jasmine was a girl, and apologized for being under the impression that Jasmine was being punished somehow."

"She apologized?"

"That's what she said. But then she asked me again if he really was a girl."

"And what did you tell her?"

"I'm afraid I had to admit that Jasmine isn't a girl, and that Jasmine really is dressing that way because of a punishment."

"Okay," Susan replied, "so you just set things back the way they were."

"Well, yes and no, because then she wanted to know what kind of punishment would last the way it is, and on top of it, she wanted to know why her daughter suddenly thinks that Jasmine is a real girl."

Susan grunted a bit. "Well, the first one is a question I ask myself every single day. What did you tell her?"

"Basically, I put her off and told her it was family business that I couldn't discuss. She wasn't exactly pleased with hearing that. But after that, I pretty much had to remain firm."

"Okay," Susan replied. "It doesn't sound too bad at all. You had me worried there for a minute."

"No, that's not really too bad," Jane agreed. "We need to watch it I think, but I just wanted to let you know what had happened."

"Thanks," Susan replied. "I'm just relieved it's not something I'm going have to worry about too much right now."

"Well, then there was the other call," Jane told her.

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"All done girls?" Mrs. Ansley asked as she continued to wait for not only Jasmine, but all of his friends to finish too.

"Thanks," Mrs. Ansley," Olivia told her as she, Nichole, and Jasmine, turned and left the bathroom.

Mrs. Ansley had been surprised that Jasmine didn't leave the restroom as soon as possible, but insisted on waiting for all her...his friends. And like Jasmine had suggested, she wondered why she even bothered escorting him in. But she knew that being safe about the matter was very important.

Out in the hallway, the three girls hurried back to their classroom to pick up some books they no longer needed before going to their lockers to get what they would need for the rest of the morning. Olivia still desperately wanted to talk to Jasmine privately, but so far, she hadn't had the chance.

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"The other call?" Susan asked, now remembering that Jane had said that two of the mothers had called.

"Yeah," Jane replied. "This one pretty much started out the same way, with her asking if Jasmine was a real girl or not."

"And you of course told her about the punishment," Susan tried to finish for her.

"Um...no," Jane replied. "Not at that point. I just told her that no, Jasmine was really a boy."

"Oh!" Susan exclaimed a bit more brightly. "Even less of a problem."

"But then she asked me if Jasmine was one of those transgendered girls they keep talking about on TV now."

That one stopped Susan. She hadn't been prepared for that one at all. She felt the knot in her stomach twisting again. "And what did you tell her," Susan asked cautiously.

"I told her that he wasn't of course."

Susan breathed a small sigh of relief. "Of course!" she replied a bit more brightly. But in the back of her mind, that was the one big thing she was worried about now with her son. She had just never placed the "T" word up against the situation.

"To be honest," Jane continued, "I'm surprised it hasn't come up before."

"Before? What do you mean?"

"Well, let's face it Jane, the twins have been going to school as each other for a long time now, and they're both looking way too much like the other sex now. Especially Jasmine...I mean..."

"Jade," Susan finished for her.

"Yeah. Jade. Since it's gone on so long, you've got to wonder why someone didn't come up with that possibility before."

"I certainly didn't think of it," Susan told her.

"Well of course not. You know him. You know what's really going on."

"I hope," Susan replied.

"Yeah, well, with kids I guess you never know everything."

"All too true," Susan agreed, remembering the events of the day before.

"Anyway, since someone did ask about it now, and since all the girls at the party got a look at the breasts sticking out of his bra, then I have to wonder if that question isn't going to start popping up more often."

Susan thought about that for a minute. "I guess that's a real possibility," she admitted.

"I've already talked with Olivia and Hunter about it in case it comes up to them in school. But I was wondering if maybe we should have a little talk with Jimmy and Jasmine too to warn them about the possibility as well. And like I did with my kids, maybe we should make sure they know exactly what we were talking about."

Susan considered that. "Maybe it would be a good idea. I'm not even sure if my kids know anything at all about that stuff. And to be honest, I'm afraid I don't know very much myself! All I know is what little I've passed by on the internet while I was looking at what those damn hormones are doing to them. Although to be honest, it's entirely possible that the kids may know more about it than I do. But like you said, maybe it would be smart to make sure they're prepared, just in case someone asks."

"That's kind of the way John and I saw it. Do you want to talk with them, or do you want John and I to try to do what we can?"

"Um...maybe it would be better if you do it first," Susan told her. "Then Clint and I can fill in the blanks later." She didn't mention that

it would be after she did more research and found out a few things first to make sure she knew what she was talking about.

"Okay," Jane agreed. "I think we may try to grab them before lunch then, just in case it comes up sooner than we expected."

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"Jasmine!"

Jasmine had grabbed his books from his locker and was just getting ready to close it when he heard his name being called. He turned and saw the girl who sat next to him in class hurrying toward him. He couldn't help but smile.

"Jasmine!" the girl said again as she hurried up breathlessly.

"Hey. What's up?" Jasmine asked as she came to a stop right in front of him.

"I've been trying to find a minute to talk to you alone since we got here this morning," she said.

"What about?"

The girl looked over at Nichole who was looking on. "Um...I don't know if this is something I should talk about in front of anyone else or not," she said softly.

Jasmine turned to look at Nichole, then back to the girl. "Is it something you don't want her to hear? Because Nichole is one of my very best friends. There isn't much about me that she doesn't know."

The girl looked uncertain, but she nervously nodded. "Um...remember at the party where we got to see that you're really a girl?"

Jasmine sighed. "Um...yeah, about that..."

"Well, my mom called Mrs. Mason yesterday about it, and Mrs. Mason told her that you're really a boy, but that you are still being punished, like you told everyone before."

"Yeah, I'm afraid it's still going on," Jasmine admitted sadly.

"Well, what we were wondering..."

"We?" Nichole asked.

"Me and my mom," the girl replied. "Anyway, what we were wondering is that, since I saw that you've really got breasts like a girl and everything, well, we were wondering if you were one of those

people they talk about now who are going to change what sex they are.”

Jasmine’s jaw dropped, and so did Nichole’s. “Um...” Jasmine replied, “I *wasn’t* planning on it.” What he didn’t add, was that he was now starting to worry that he might really be like some of those people he had read about on the internet.

The girl looked disappointed. “So how come you’ve got breasts then? And why does your whole body look like a girl now instead of a boy, because I’m pretty sure it didn’t used to?”

“Um...” Jasmine searched for something to say. He really didn’t want to tell her about the hormones he had been on for so many months now. He didn’t want to talk about the subject at all. “Um...” he said again. “Look, it’s something I can’t talk about right now. I’m not even sure it’s something I’m allowed to talk about. Can we leave it there?”

The girl looked disappointed. “I guess,” she replied. “It’s just that, something weird has to be going on for you to be a boy, but now you’ve got a girl’s body. So I don’t know what else to think.”

Jasmine desperately searched for a way to answer, when Nichole stepped in. She put a hand on Jasmine’s shoulder and said, “Can you give us a little while? And you’re right, he really does have a girl’s body now. I guess mostly anyway. But more and more for sure, so he probably is a lot more girl than boy now. At least the way I see it anyway. But the reason for it is something I’m pretty sure we’re not supposed to be talking about – I think mostly because my parents haven’t really even told me yet. Although since Jas and Jimmy are my best friends I do kind of know it all. Okay? Just let us find out if we can talk yet or not.”

The girl was obviously still disappointed. “I guess,” she replied. “But he really does have a girl’s body now? I mean, that’s what I thought I saw. That’s what we all thought we saw.”

Nichole nodded. “Yeah. Believe it or not.”

The girl seemed to brighten a little at that confirmation. She looked back to Jasmine, then startled all of a sudden. “How come you’re blushing so much?”

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Olivia stopped in the hallway as she saw Jasmine, Nichole, and one of their friends from class talking. She saw how serious Jasmine seemed to look. Nichole too for that matter. She was very much afraid of what they might be talking about. She hurried forward to find out what it was all about, but the girl was just then walking away. She saw Jasmine and Nichole look at each other as she hurried up. "What was that all about?" she asked worriedly. She noticed then that Jas's face was a bit red.

"You wouldn't believe it!" Nichole replied. "She wanted to know if Jas here is changing his sex."

Olivia's eyes went wide for a moment, but only for a moment. "I'm too late then," she said.

"Too late?" Nichole asked.

"I wanted to talk to Jas about that. My whole family had a big discussion about it in the car this morning."

"You're whole family was talking about it?" Jasmine asked. "Why?"

"Because Mom got a couple of phone calls after the party yesterday, and one of the girl's mother asked her if you were...um... transgendered and changing your sex."

Once again Jasmine's jaw dropped open. But he was surprised to hear Nichole start laughing. "What?" he asked.

"I think it's funny," she said.

"Why?"

"Don't you think someone should have told you you're that way first?"

Her comment brought a smile to Olivia's face, but Jasmine only looked more worried. He turned and headed toward the classroom and the girls followed with him. "So what did you tell her?" Olivia asked.

"We put her off," Nichole replied. "I think we need to find out if we're allowed to say anything more about what's going on before we say too much."

"Good idea," Olivia replied. "That was one of the things my Mom was worried about."

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As the school clock ticked its way down to lunchtime, Jimmy wondered if he would finally hear some of the guys talking about what a sissy her stupid brother was. Yeah, it's possible it was still a bit too early, but by now the word really should be spreading. And the best part was that she wouldn't get in trouble for spreading the word at all. Her dumb sissy brother had taken care of that all by himself.

When lunchtime finally came, Jimmy Joe filed out of the room along with everyone else. As always, she headed for the boy's room to wait for her uncle to get there to escort her in. As sometimes happened, she saw him already waiting for her.

"Hi Jimmy," he said as she walked up. He turned and led the way inside between several other boys in the school.

Jimmy had been in there so many times now that it no longer seemed strange at all. And there had been times while she was in there that she had seen things she knew she probably shouldn't have. Fortunately, her uncle John had never mentioned those things any time it happened.

She did her business in the stall and came out as always to wash her hands while her Uncle John was talking with one of the guys. She had learned long ago that the majority of the guys never even bothered washing their hands. While she was at the sink, she heard some of the guys over by the urinals talking briefly, but not about anything she wanted to hear. As she headed for the dryers, she saw two of the other guys looking at her strangely, their eyes remained on her even though they were talking to each other. As she dried her hands, she turned her head and noticed them talking. One of them was still looking at her. She couldn't really hear them since the one talking was speaking quietly and the noise from the dryer was too loud, but at one point she was almost sure she heard the word sissy.

The dryer cut off, and feeling very satisfied with herself, she nodded to her uncle to signify that she was done and was leaving now.

“Hold on, Jimmy,” her uncle said quickly. “I need to talk to you for a minute before you go to lunch.

That surprised her, but only a little. Her Uncle John hurried over and the two of them headed for the door together. The two boys were still talking and still looking somewhat at her. And just before they opened the door to walk out, she thought she heard one of them say, “See what I mean?” She left, not knowing what they were referring to. But she was sure now that the word about her brother was finally getting the attention it deserved.

“What do you need?” she asked her uncle as she followed him in the direction of his office.

“Your aunt and I are a little concerned about something that may come up,” John replied.

“What?” she asked as they turned onto his office.

“Let’s wait for your, um, sister to get here.”

“Why?”

“Because it concerns both of you.”

Jimmy Joe breathed a silent sigh of relief. Since her twin was also involved, it didn’t sound like she had done anything wrong. She hoped!

It was only a short wait before Jane escorted Jasmine Jade into the office. Jimmy had seen him all morning of course, but she still automatically looked him over. He looked like a girl of course, but she had no doubt she could have made his outfit look a lot better. Better tights would have made a big difference, and the jewelry he had chosen was all wrong. And why did he insist on wearing those stupid boots so often? And his hair...it was definitely getting time for him to seriously learn to do something else with it. But the part that bothered her the most was that he was wearing almost no makeup at all. The only little bit she could see was some eyeshadow that was barely noticeable. Not even any lipstick or lip gloss. He was supposed to be a girl! She herself wore more makeup than ever lately. Why shouldn’t he?

Jasmine said nothing as he sat in the seat his uncle motioned to with his eyes. He didn’t think he was in any kind of trouble. At least he hoped he wasn’t.

"We wanted to talk to you two for a minute about something that may come up," John said to them. Then he looked to his wife to continue for him.

"I got a few phone calls yesterday from some of the mothers of the girls at the party," she said. "And one of them mentioned something that I'm worried may come up. And by that, I mean, you two may be asked about it."

"I wasn't even there," Jimmy Joe said with a hint of annoyance in her voice. "Why should I be worried about it?"

"Because it involves both of you," John replied.

Jimmy gave an overly loud sigh. "What did I do now?"

"Nothing," Jane replied quickly. "You haven't done anything wrong at all. You just need to be prepared. Just in case."

"In case of what?" Jimmy asked.

Jane shook her head. "How much do you two know about transgendered people or even transvestites?"

Jimmy's jaw dropped. "Say what?"

"One of the mothers of the girls at the party asked me if Jasmine was like some of the transgendered people they talk about on TV or in the news."

"Too late!" Jasmine said, interrupting her.

"What do you mean?" Jane asked.

"You're too late. One of my friends from class already asked me that earlier this morning."

Jane was surprised. "Oh," she replied. "And what did you tell her?"

"We kind of put her off because we didn't know if it's something we're allowed to talk about or not."

"Who's we?" John asked for clarity.

"Nichole and me. We were at our lockers when she asked."

"And when you said you put her off," John continued, "what exactly did you tell her?"

"That I *wasn't* planning on changing my sex, and that we had to talk to the family first before we could tell her what was really going on. Everyone knows of course about the punishment, but only the family knows about the hormones."

John looked to Jane. "Maybe they gave exactly the right answer for now. I'm wondering if maybe we need to sit down with Clint and Susan and discuss this more fully."

"I think you're right," Jane replied. "Just how much of this do we want to get out? And all the girls at the party were thinking he was a real girl after they saw his breasts, but..."

"You were showing your boobs around at the party?" Jimmy Joe asked, shocked. "What kind of pervert are you?"

"No! I didn't!" Jasmine replied. "They just kind of...saw them in my bra when I was changing."

"In your bra? You need to stop stuffing them so much!"

"I don't put anything in my bras except me!" Jasmine fired back.

"Okay you two. Stop it!" John said quickly. He didn't miss the dirty hateful looks Jimmy Joe was levelling at her brother. "Let's get back to the subject. For now, let's continue to keep it quiet about the hormones until we decide what to do about it, and in the meantime, I'd like both of you to start studying about transgendered people, transvestites, crossdressers, and anything else along those lines."

"What do you want to know about it?" Jasmine asked him.

"What do you mean?" John asked.

"I mean I've been reading about all that stuff since this whole thing started."

"You have?" Jimmy Joe asked.

"Of course! Haven't you?"

There was no doubting the sheepish look on Jimmy's face. "Only a little. And only...lately."

John nodded. "Then I think you should start looking at it more seriously. I'm going to look at a few things too, and together we'll sit down in a day or two and talk about it. All of us together. Like it or not, I think you two need to be prepared if the subject comes up."

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"Geez! It's about time you got here," Nichole exclaimed as Jasmine finally set his lunch tray down across from Olivia. Jimmy Joe was only a few moments behind.

“What did my mom want to talk to you about?” Olivia asked.
“And I’m guessing she wanted to talk to both of you.”

“I thought I was in trouble for a minute when your father took me down to his office,” Jimmy added.

“So what was the big deal?” Allison asked.

Jasmine leaned forward and lowered his voice. “They’re afraid that some of the kids are going to start asking us if we’re changing our sex like some of those people on TV.”

Nichole giggled. “They’re a little too late then. It’s already started. What did they say you should tell everyone?”

“Nothing yet. They want to discuss it with the family first and find out.”

“Maybe they’ll finally decide to end this whole stupid thing,” Allison said.

“We can only hope!” Jimmy replied.

Jasmine said nothing.

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John and Jane were both a little late joining the rest of the teachers at their lunch table. It happened once in a while with all of the teachers, but more often for John, so none of the other teachers thought anything of it. Mrs. Ansley though had been waiting to talk with them. She waited until they were both finally seated and ready to eat before speaking. “I overheard something...odd this morning from one of the girls in my class.”

“What’s that?” John asked as he stuffed a bite of bread into his mouth.

“She was telling one of the other girls that Jasmine...um, the one who’s...”

“Jade,” Jane said, to clarify things. “The girls decided to nickname her Jade. I mean they named *him* Jade.”

“Yes, so I heard,” Mrs. Ansley replied. “And maybe that’s exactly the point. I overheard her whispering that, um, Jade is a real girl and not a boy at all. And I’m sure she said she saw his boobs – to use her words.”

Jane and John both stopped eating and looked at her seriously.

"His boobs?" Mrs. Marker asked.

"That's what she said," Mrs. Ansley replied. "I'm sure I heard her say she had seen them."

John and Jane looked at each other with somewhat troubled looks.

"Ha!" Mr. O'Conner grunted. "I'll admit that, um, Jade looks a bit too much like a real girl lately, and Jimmy, um, the other one..."

"Joe. Jimmy Joe or Jasmine Joe," Jane supplied.

Mr. O'Conner nodded. "Joe then...looks way too much like a boy to be comfortable about. But you know kids, they think they see something when in reality they don't."

Mrs. Boyle, who taught all the really young students, felt she had to speak up. "I don't know about that. Some of those kids see more than we think."

"Yes, true," Mr. O'Conner replied, "but it's the interpretation of what they see that all too often comes into question."

"Mrs. Boyle rolled her eyes. "Sometimes, Mr. O'Conner. I'll admit that's true all too often, but there are also a lot of times when the kids see things that we ourselves should. It's been my experience that as adults, we sometimes try to not see what's plainly in front of our faces."

Mr. O'Conner grinned. "Also true. But in this case, I seriously doubt that Jasmine...or Jade if you will, is a real girl." He looked to John. "Am I right?"

John could barely find his voice. "Um, of..." he cleared his throat and continued on more firmly. "Of course you're right. Jasmine... Jade is really a boy and Jimmy... Joe, is really a girl."

"To tell the truth," Mrs. Marker tossed out. "I'm beginning to wonder about the both of them. Especially Jasmine...Jade!"

John and Jane quickly glanced at each other again, but neither of them said anything. They attempted to dismiss the subject by going back to their lunches.

"Now I know I'm probably wrong about all this," Mrs. Marker continued after a few moments and two more bites of her lunch, "but you've got to admit, both those children have changed rather drastically in the last few months. Way too much to be dismissed by just some makeup and some clothes. And what in the world is

Jimmy Joe doing when she's being her brother? What's she doing with her breasts, binding them up every day? The girl is what, twelve years old now?"

"Not for a few more weeks," Jane told her.

"But close enough," Mrs. Marker replied. "Every other girl her age has breasts that show, at least somewhat. Yes, okay, I see them when she's being a girl, which isn't very often anymore, but breasts the size that I see them when she's being herself I would imagine would be getting difficult to hide. What the heck is she doing with them all the rest of the time when she's supposed to be Jimmy...or Joe?"

She waited for an answer from either Jane or John. When she didn't get one, she continued. "And then there's Jade. Yeah, I know that hairdo of his makes him still look like a girl, even on the few days now that he's supposed to be a boy, but the hairdo is growing out now, and he's still looking more and more like a girl than ever. And have you noticed his body shape, even when he's supposed to be a boy? Last week I saw him in the hallway as a boy, and I was convinced he was still wearing a bra under his shirt and stuffing something in it. And don't get me started on the shape of his hips and waist lately. Even dressed as a boy, he still looks way too much like a girl – a real girl!" She looked straight at John and Jane. "What the heck is going on with them, because obviously something major really is happening?"

Both John and Jane searched for words. "I'm..." Jane started to say, but she didn't know how to continue.

"We can't discuss this right now," John told them plainly.

"If not now, then when?" Mrs. Marker asked. "As their teachers, I think we all need to know what's going on."

John nodded. "I'll have to let you know. But right now, we can't discuss it. Especially here in the lunchroom."

Mrs. Marker nodded. "I look forward to another teachers meeting. Soon!"

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After lunch, Jimmy Joe followed the rest of the girls to drop his lunch tray off. Afterwards, she again saw some of the guys looking at her. She didn't know why she got the impression they were looking at her. More than likely they were looking at her dumb flaky brother right in front of her. But once again she thought she heard the word "sissy" softly whispered. Yeah, her dumb brother was in for it for sure! And just before they got out of the lunchroom, she heard the words, "real girl" used. She didn't know who had said it, but those kids were obviously talking about her! At least they all could see that she was a real girl, no matter how she was dressed.

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Later that day in Mechanics class, Jimmy Joe again noticed a few of the guys talking quietly and then giving her those weird sideways glances. But twice she heard the word "sissy" whispered, before she figured out what was going on. The word about her brother was finally being passed around, and they were all now realizing that everything she had told them before was the truth. So those glances they were giving her were nothing but acknowledgement that she had been telling them the truth all along. She was feeling very proud of herself when the final bell rang and school was over.

She rode the bus home sitting next to Elliot again, like she did more often than not now. But if only she could be sitting next to him as a girl, and he could be thinking of her as a girl too. That would be sooooo much better. Perfect in fact! But it wasn't, and for now she was glad to settle for what she could get.

The bus finally stopped at their usual bus stop and all the McComber kids started to get off. Since she was sitting further back with Elliot, she was one of the last of the clan kids to leave the bus. Unfortunately, as she was walking down the narrow bus aisle, one of the boys turned and looked up at her. "Bye, sissy," he said with an all too big grin on his face.

Jimmy stopped, totally shocked. "What did you say?" she asked angrily.

“Shut up and move!” Tommy’s voice came quickly as he shoved her forward toward the exit.

But Jimmy didn’t want to go. She looked angrily back at the boy while her brother continued to push her to leave the bus. “Don’t you call me a sissy!” she yelled back at the boy. Her anger increased as she saw him start to laugh, just before Tommy pushed her down the steps. She nearly fell getting off the bus. As soon as she had recovered her balance, she took a few steps away from the bus and looked back toward the window where the boy had been sitting. “Don’t you dare call me a sissy!” she yelled again.

“Shut up!” Tommy yelled, grabbing her and pulling her away from the bus. “Just drop it!”

“But he called me a sissy! You heard him.”

“So what?”

“So I’m not a sissy and you know it!”

“Then stop acting like it!” Tommy yelled back.

“I’m not!” She looked to Ethan. “Tell him. Tell him I’m not a sissy.”

Ethan shook his head. “Man, mostly you look like a guy,” he said. “Too much like a guy. But if you’re going to look that much like a guy, then you’ve got to stop acting so much like a damn girl!”

“But I am a girl! A real girl!”

“Could have fooled me,” Ethan muttered as he turned and started walking up the hill.

Jimmy just stood there angrily looking after him. She balled her fists. She wanted to hit something...or someone, but there was nobody she could fight with. How dare they? How dare they? How dare they? And she was a real girl! No matter what those damn hormones were starting to do to her now. She was a real girl, and nothing and no one could ever take that away from her. And someday, she was going to be a real girl again. All the way.

Chapter 44 – Deciding the Future

March 9th

“I’m not comfortable talking about this,” Clint said as he sat down at the kitchen table with his wife, John, and Jane.

“Neither am I,” Susan agreed.

“None of us are,” John added. “But we’re stuck with a problem now and we better decide how we want to handle it.”

“Can’t we just ignore it and hope it goes away?” Clint asked.

“Unfortunately not,” John replied. “Mostly because all the teachers in the school are now demanding to know what’s going on. They’ve all noticed too many changes now in the twins and they want to know why.”

“Let ‘em wonder,” Clint said.

“But that’s not going to help the problem. It’s already worse than we thought, and now people are demanding to know why.”

“But what if we don’t say anything at all about the hormones?” Clint asked. “Just tell them it’s family business. Heck, this family pulls a lot of weight in this part of the state. What’s anyone going to say?”

“Unfortunately, they can say too much. They could cause big trouble for the school. And if we wait much longer and those kids show even more changes, then it’s only going to make matters worse.”

“More changes? Have you looked at my son lately? He looks like a damn girl! What more changes do you expect?”

“To be honest, I don’t really know,” John replied. He looked to his wife. “You’ve had time to look into this more than I have, what do you think?”

Jane shook her head. “Changes continue to happen in everyone all the time. We just don’t always notice them. But in the case of the twins, we’re noticing them more because of the situation.”

"So what other changes in them do I have to worry about now?" Clint asked. "Frankly, what's already happened has me scared to death!"

Jane shook her head. "I'm not an expert. In fact, I barely know anything. I guess Brian would be the one to ask."

"Call him then," Clint said. "I don't know how much more of this I can take."

"I'll call," Susan told them. She got up and found her cell phone and dialed the number as she headed back to the table. She pushed the button to set it on speaker. But Janet answered instead of Brian. "Hi Janet?" Susan said. "Is Brian there?"

"What's wrong?" Janet replied quickly. "Who got hurt?"

"My nerves!" Clint replied loudly. "We've got some questions about the twins."

"Oh," Janet said. "Hold on."

A minute later, Brian held the phone. "Hey Clint. What's the problem?"

"Brian. We've got John and Jane here with us at our house and we're talking about the twins. I want to know what other changes we've got to look for next. Because quite frankly, I'm not sure I can take much more."

"What brought this on?" Brian asked.

"People are starting to ask too many questions," John replied.

"Who?"

"Teachers and students both!" John told him.

"Have there been any problems?"

"No. Not really. Just a lot of sudden questions."

"I think it's all coming from Olivia's birthday party this past weekend," Jane called into the phone. "The girls there got a good look at Jasmine's bra and realized he had real breasts. They somehow got it into their heads that he's really a girl and not a boy. And now we've suddenly got people asking things we don't know how to answer."

Brian thought about it for a minute. "Hang on a few minutes," he told them. "I'll be up to talk with you about it as soon as I can get there." He saw his wife motioning about something. "Um...I guess Janet and I will both be there. See you in a few minutes."

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“What are you doing?” Jimmy Joe whispered loudly up the hallway.

Jade turned around. He was standing just out of sight from his parents in the kitchen, trying to hear everything that was being said. He saw his...brother...standing in the doorway to her room. “I’m listening,” he whispered back.

Jimmy Joe left her room and headed for him. “But they said to leave them alone.”

“I know,” Jade whispered, “but they’re talking about us. Don’t you want to know what they’re saying?”

Jimmy Joe tried to peer a bit into the kitchen. “They’re not saying much of anything right now,” she said.

“They’re waiting for Uncle Brian to come up and talk to them,” Jasmine explained.

Jimmy again tried to peer into the kitchen. But without going too far, there was nothing she could see. “Come on,” she whispered as she grabbed his arm and pulled him back toward the bedrooms.

Jasmine held back. “I’m trying to listen!”

“Listen later. Now come on!”

Rolling his eyes, Jasmine finally followed Jimmy back into her bedroom where they could talk easier. “What do you want?”

“Did you really show everyone your boobs at the party?”

“Yes and no. Not really, but sort of.”

“So you did!”

“No, I didn’t!”

“But you just said...”

“No! It’s not like that!”

“Then what?”

Jasmine sighed. “All I did was take my top off so I could put my pajamas on, and...”

“You changed right with all the others?” Jimmy asked incredulously.

“Uh...yeah. I asked Mom about it, but she just sent me back in with the rest of the girls and told me to not worry about it.”

Jimmy's mouth fell open. "Damn, I wish I had been there!"

"So quit hunting and next time you can be."

"Forget it!" Jimmy replied quickly. "Besides, what I really would have loved to see was you trying to change clothes in the middle of all those girls."

Jasmine shrugged. "It was no big deal...other than for my... um...breasts. And if one of them hadn't noticed them, then no one would have said anything at all."

"That's only because you stuff your bra so much."

"I do not!"

"You do too!"

Jasmine shook his head. His dumb sister wasn't going to listen to reason.

"So what did the girls all say?" Jimmy asked when she realized she had finally won that argument. She just knew he was stuffing his bras. He might have a little bit of growth, but it had to be hardly anything at all!

Jasmine rolled his eyes again. "You don't want to know."

"Yes I do!"

"No you don't. Trust me!"

"Hey idiot sissy brother, trust me, I do want to know!"

Jasmine's eye rolling was getting another workout. "They all pretty much went crazy trying to grab my bra to get a better look."

Jimmy started giggling. "See, I told you I should have been there to see it. So what happened, did they start laughing when they saw all the stuffing in your bra?"

Jasmine glared at his sister for a moment before answering. "No! They somehow all decided that I was a real girl and always had been. And I don't stuff my bra!"

But Jimmy barely heard the last part as she broke up laughing. "That's just so dumb! Talk about stupid! How could anyone ever come up with a conclusion like that?"

"Jerk!" Jasmine muttered as he turned to walk out.

"Hey wait a minute!"

"What for?"

"Because I want to know something?"

“Like what? And it better not be what we’ve just been talking about.”

“It’s not,” Jimmy Joe replied. “At least, not exactly.”

Again Jasmine rolled his eyes. “What then?”

“I heard some of the kids whispering the word ‘sissy’ a few different times today,” Jimmy Joe said with a sly smile on her face. “How’s it feel to know that you’ve just proved to everyone in the school what a real sissy you are by going to Olivia’s party?”

The gleeful grin on Jimmy’s face made Jasmine scowl angrily at her. “The only one I heard being called a sissy all day today – was you!” With that he started out again.

“Hey, wait!”

“What for?” Jasmine asked as he stopped once again.

“How come you’re the one acting so much like a total sissy, but I’m the one getting called a sissy? It’s not right!”

Jasmine shook his head. “I heard both Tommy and Ethan explaining it to you when you got off the bus today. Maybe you should listen to them.” With that, he finally walked out and headed back up the hallway to try to listen some more to the conversation between way too many adults now for his liking. It was almost an entire family meeting.

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Brian and Janet both listened patiently as John and Jane filled them in on what happened at school. And right on top of that, Susan and Jane filled them in on what had happened at the sleepover birthday party. And after that, Clint and Susan filled everyone in on what had happened with Jacob and Rose the day before. To say there was some wide-eyed amazement at the last part would be an understatement.

“Damn!” Brian muttered. “You almost ended it!”

“I can’t believe it was Rose who decided this thing had to keep going,” Janet added.

“Me either,” Jane replied, equally astonished to hear about it. “No wonder you didn’t feel much like talking last night!”

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Out in the hallway. Jasmine was now sitting on the floor, trying to keep any of his crying from being heard. His parents had tried to stop it. They really had. But it was Grandma, not Grandpa, who had decided that it had to continue. But the part that hit him the hardest, was that they kept saying that he was already lost, and they only had to continue now to keep his sister from winding up with the same problem. Already lost? What exactly did that mean? His mother had said something like it the night before when she had said they had screwed everything up so badly for him. He could only guess they were talking about the same thing. But to him, the words 'already lost' sounded all too much like saying there was no hope for him anymore. No hope at all.

He crawled a few feet back up the hallway before he stood, then he ran to his bedroom and threw himself on his bed. Hugging Cleo to his chest, he cried.

Jimmy saw Jasmine running into his room, and he had looked awfully upset. Not even thinking about it, she hurried over to see what the problem was. She found him lying on his bed, hugging Cleo. "What happened?" she asked.

"Go away!" Jasmine replied, turning over so his back was to her.

But Jimmy wasn't listening to what he wanted. She wanted to know what the grownups had said that had him so upset. She went in and sat in the desk chair so she could be closer to him. "What did they say?"

Jasmine cried and looked at his sister for a few moments without replying. But as he looked at her, he suddenly got more fearful. Still crying, he quickly sat up on the side of the bed, unconsciously still hugging the stuffed lion to his chest. "Jas, you've got to quit hunting! You've got to! And you've got to do it now! Before it's too late!"

Jimmy Joe was shocked. "Don't be ridiculous! I'm not going to quit hunting. Why should I?"

"Because they keep saying it's too late for me. They're saying the only reason our switching around has to continue now is to save

you. Jas, they say I'm hopeless. They just don't want you to wind up like I am. You've got to quit now before it's too late!"

Jimmy Joe couldn't help herself, she broke out laughing. "Hopeless is right! I've never seen anyone as hopeless as you!" She stood up from the chair to leave. "And one thing is definitely for sure, I'll never have to worry about being anything at all like you! Ha!" With that, she headed for the door, but she paused to look back at him just before walking out. He was staring after her with a look of horror on his face, still holding onto the dumb stuffed lion. "Give Cleo a little kiss," she told him. "Maybe she'll protect you from whatever's eating at you now. You dumb sissy!"

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The knock at the back door was answered quickly, and Jacob and Rose both walked in. Instead of suggesting everyone come up to their house, it was easier for the two of them to come down to Clint's house. As soon as they were seated and Susan had placed mugs of fresh coffee in front of each of them, once again the long explanation of what had gone on all day was gone through, this time for their benefit. And then Brian went on and explained that he and Janet were there only because Clint and Susan had been worried about any other changes they needed to watch for in the twins.

"And are there any other changes we all need to worry about from those hormones?" Jacob asked.

Brian shook his head. "Yes and no. But really the answer is no. Not really."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well," Brian replied, "naturally if they stay on them forever, Jimmy...um, Jade will grow up into a woman, and um, Joe will grow up into a man. Just like any other kids would who have those hormones naturally in their systems."

Jacob nodded. "So the main damage is already done."

Brian tried to consider that. "Kind of. But none of it is irreversible yet. It's just going to be more difficult and will take more time the longer this goes on."

"But basically, we're not talking about any new surprises," Jacob said.

Brian shook his head. "No. There shouldn't be any. Of course both twins will continue as they have been to become more and more the opposite sex. There's still a long way to go as far as that's concerned. It's just that most of those changes are now pretty much visible. They'll just continue to improve."

"Or get worse!" Clint noted.

Brian nodded. "Depending on your point of view."

"Worse!" Clint said again.

"And now your big problem is what to tell everyone else," Jacob stated, trying to make sure he had all his facts right.

"That's it," John replied. "After that party this past weekend, we're suddenly getting a lot of questions being asked."

"I still don't see why we can't just ignore everyone and tell them to mind their own business," Clint said.

Jacob nodded. "That would be nice," he replied. "But unfortunately I can see where it won't help, no matter what. Even if that girl of yours decides to swear off hunting tonight, both of them twins are still going to look all too much like each other for a while." He looked to Brian. "Is that correct?"

Brian nodded. "Pretty much exactly."

Jacob nodded. "So we better figure this thing out pretty darn quick then."

Rose shook her head. "I don't know what all the fuss is about. Just tell them the truth! It's the only thing that makes sense anyway. Tell them the kids are on the hormones. If you start making stuff up you'll only make things more complicated than they already are, and things are only going to get worse."

"But telling everyone about the hormones will start raising even more questions," John argued. "What kind of punishment would force two kids to change their sex?"

"The kind we all thought needed to be done!" Jacob replied. "It's family business. The whole family had a say in it. And nobody outside the family needs to be concerned about it."

Brian nodded. "Dad, you know that, and I know that, but it's going to be hard to convince anyone else that this kind of

punishment was needed.”

“Hell, it’s not so much a punishment as trying to teach those two kids their proper place in life! And in this family!” Jacob argued. “The punishment part is really secondary! This is all because those kids have to learn something. Something important!”

“We know,” John said. “The whole family knows that, but how do we explain it to everyone else. Right now, my bet is that all those teachers in our school are thinking we lied about the punishment part, and that Jimmy and Jasmine are both really some of those transgendered kids – kids who really want to change what sex they are. My bet is that they think the punishment was just an excuse to let the kids each have a try at it. But since it’s going on so long, I figure everyone is thinking now that Jimmy and Jasmine really do want to change their sex.”

“Huh!” Clint grunted, even though he was now very worried about that for his son.

Nobody said anything at all for a few moments. Then it was Rose who said, “So tell them just that. Tell them about the hormones. Tell them that the twins both were interested in seeing what it’s like to be the other sex. Tell them they’re...what was that word? Trans-something?”

“Transgendered,” Brian offered.

“Whatever,” Rose replied. “Heck, we know it’s true for one of them, whether you want to recognize that fact or not! It’s the other one now we’ve got to worry about, Jimmy Joe. So tell them they are trans-something. In fact,” she added, “tell them they really were being punished by having to be each other. Maybe you can tell them that’s how the whole thing started for them. But as I see it, telling them as much of the truth as possible is your best bet now. And like I said, for one of those two twins, it really is the truth. Our concern now is for the other one. We don’t need two lost kids in this family to worry about. That one is going to be hard enough to deal with when the time comes.”

Everyone stared at her in silence for a few moments. “Maybe it would be best,” John suggested. “Tell them it started out as a punishment, but somewhere early on the twins really decided they wanted a taste of what it’s like to be the other person.”

“It’s the best option I can see,” Brian agreed. “Especially since even ending it all now is still going to mean so much time to get them both back to normal again.”

Clint shook his head. “And that’s my problem,” he said. “Even ending it now, means it’s not really ended at all. My kids are still going to look all wrong for a very long time.”

“So there’s nothing to lose this way,” John said to him.

“Except time,” Clint replied. “Nothing except more time for them to become themselves again.”

Chapter 45 – And the Truth Shall Imprison You

March 10th – 11th

“I still think it’s dumb,” Tommy said as he accepted a small kiss on the cheek from his mother.

“It’s the best we could come up with,” Susan reminded him. “Just don’t say anything at all unless it’s necessary.”

“Yeah, I know,” Tommy replied. A moment later he was through the front door and out into the lightly falling rain, heading for the school bus stop.

Susan hugged and kissed Jimmy Joe. “You remember what I said!” she told her firmly as Jimmy pulled the hood up on her coat.

“I’m not talking to anyone about it at all!” Jimmy Joe replied. “Period! And I’m not changing into a boy! Not permanently at least.”

“I know dear. It’s just in case someone asks you about it. We need you to tell them you’re like those people I showed you on the internet this morning.”

“Let the sissy tell them,” she replied. “He’s the one who wanted to be a girl all along.”

Hearing her daughter again use the “sissy” word immediately sent a flash of anger through Susan. She was so frustrated with her daughter she didn’t know what to do. “Just do as you’re told! It’s for the best!”

“Huh!” Jimmy Joe grunted as she pushed her way out into the rain to follow her brother, who was already way ahead and walking with Elliot. “Hey! Wait up!”

Susan turned, looking for Jasmine, but he still wasn’t there. “Jasmine Jade!” she yelled. “Hurry up. It’s time for school.” After a moment’s waiting, there was still no sigh of Jasmine and no answer either. She grunted. If that girl was changing her earrings again....

She hurried back to his bedroom and found him sitting at his desk chair staring at the floor. He was already in his raincoat and the hood was already pulled over his hair. He looked ready to walk

out the door, except she could see that he mentally wasn't ready at all. She and Clint had spent a long time that morning talking with all three of their kids about what they had decided the night before. Tommy had accepted it, but had been obviously skeptical about it all. Jimmy Joe had pretty much protested the whole thing and simply ranted that she wasn't changing herself into a boy. But Jasmine Jade hadn't said a single word about it. He had only looked sad, on a day he had come in for breakfast already looking very sad. "What's wrong?" she asked softly as she came in and sat down on the bed across from him.

"Me!" he replied, still looking at the floor. He turned his head to look up at her. "Mom, if I tell them what you want, am I kind of dooming myself? Am I telling them I really want to be a girl, when I'm not sure about that at all? Am I committing myself to it, when..." but he didn't know how to finish. "Mom, like I said before, sometimes I find myself liking it now. That's all. I don't know if I want to be a girl or not. Sometimes I think I might, but other times I know I don't...or at least I think I don't. I'm not sure. I just don't know! I have no idea what I want at all. And it's so...frustrating!"

Susan stood up and hugged his head. "I know Jas," she said. "And the fact that you're really not sure is the best thing I could possibly hear right now. And no, it doesn't mean you're committing yourself to a sex change. Especially not at your age! And you know perfectly well that all the changes that have happened in you so far are completely reversible. One way or another. This is just so we can have an explanation of some sort to satisfy everyone else.

"But is it the truth or not?" he mumbled as he leaned into his mother's body and hugged her back.

She looked down at the hood covering his head. "Not if you don't want it to be."

That of course was part of his problem. Did he want it to be – or not?

"Come on now and hurry or you'll miss the bus." She had only time for a quick kiss on his cheek before rushing him out the door. "Hurry!" she yelled after him. "You're late as it is."

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As the students gradually arrived at the school, they went to their lockers, got the things they would need for the morning, and headed into their classrooms. None of them found their teachers there. Of course, that was no major problem. Many times a teacher would be doing something in another classroom and then wander in a few minutes later. What the students didn't realize was that none of the classrooms in the school held a teacher. They were all in a meeting in the Principal's office.

"So that's the story," John Mason told them all. "As close as I can come anyway."

"And you expect us to believe that?" Mrs. Marker asked.

John looked directly at her. "Whether you believe it or not is up to you. I'm only trying to tell you exactly what happened. And trust me, we're still hoping those two kids straighten themselves out before this goes too much further."

Mr. O'Conner grunted. "If you ask me, they're both going in the wrong direction."

John nodded. "That's pretty much what we're afraid of." He looked around the room. "That's all I can say on the matter. We all better get to our classes now before we've got mass chaos on our hands."

Mrs. Marker headed out, but she delayed a bit to walk next to Mr. O'Conner. "Did you believe any of that?"

Mr. O'Conner thought about it. "Some of it. In fact, most of it may be true. There's no doubt about the hormones those kids are taking. None at all. And I have no doubt at all about the punishment thing – as weird as I always thought it was. I just can't see both those kids wanting to swap places – permanently."

As they walked next to each other for a few minutes, Mrs. Marker thought about that. "To be honest," she finally said, "I can't see either of them wanting to change."

Mr. O'Conner stopped, and turned to her. "I don't see it either. I just can't see Jimmy as wanting to become a girl. He's too much into the mechanical stuff and all the tools. He literally thrives on things like that. Or at least he used to. Lately he's hardly ever in my class and even though his father is working with him at home, I get

the feeling that he's more and more lost since he misses so much. And his sister..." He shook his head. "As much as her father works with her too, I just don't get the feeling she's interested in any of it at all. Which I know she's not! She's only there because she has to be."

"But none of that has anything at all to do with what sex they each want to be," Mrs. Marker noted as they continued slowly walking again. "I'm sure there are a lot of girls who are very much into the mechanical things. Somewhere. But I pretty much see the same thing in my Home Economics class. Jasmine...I mean Joe, she's so into the fashion stuff it's hard to slow her down, which I really don't want to do. The girl has a real talent for it. Of course most of the other stuff they have to learn in there she's not interested in at all. And her brother, well, he's the strange one I can't figure out. He's bound and determined to learn it all, but it's mostly for his sister's sake. I wonder if he knows he's getting a separate grade in the class than his sister now. Not that it matters. He's actually doing quite splendidly, and I see him talking and seeming to enjoy himself with all his girlfriends, but there are other things too. For someone who wants to be a girl, he fought tooth and nail to not sit correctly or act much like a girl at all, which he still does only marginally."

She stopped walking since they had reached her classroom. She turned to look at him again. "So I think for me, it's no, I don't believe either of them want it. But at the same time, I've seen hints of other things that make me not so sure."

"It still seems highly unlikely to me," Mr. O'Conner agreed. "But stranger things have happened. And if you say you've noticed things that make you uncertain, then maybe there is something to it. I just haven't seen anything from either of them. Nothing I can say points in that direction for sure. I guess for now, we have no choice but to go with what we've been told."

Mrs. Marker smiled, but it was a sly smile. "Maybe," she said before turning and walking off.

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Jasmine followed Nichole toward their seats. He smiled and said hi to Olivia as he passed, but again she reached out her hand and grabbed his arm. "Mom told us this morning about..."

"Yeah, I know," Jasmine replied softly. "They put the word out to everyone in the family."

"You okay with it?" she asked.

He shrugged. "No, but what choice do I have?" He couldn't bring himself to add that his real choice would be to either totally agree that he wanted to change his sex, or to totally disagree. He knew he really wanted to disagree, but there was just something stopping him. He continued on and sat at his desk. As soon as he had unloaded his books and things, he looked to the girl next to him. The teacher wasn't in the room. Very softly he said to her, "Remember what you asked me about yesterday?"

"Yeah?" she said.

"Well, it's kind of true." Saying those simple words sent an icy chill right through his stomach. He immediately noted the other girls around them all trying to listen in. Just...great!

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Jasmine Jade counted himself lucky that none of the other kids asked him about it all day. By the time he got into Home Ec class that afternoon, he was feeling a lot more relieved. But his relief lasted all of ten minutes into the class. While the girls were all paired off to work on several different things that the teacher had set out for them for the day, Mrs. Marker quietly went over to Jasmine and took him out into the hallway where none of the other kids could hear.

"Mr. Mason told us today that you and your sister both are trying to change what sex you are," she told him. "He said you're both to be officially considered transgender. Is that true?"

Jasmine's stomach went into one massive knot. "I didn't want to talk about it," he told her.

"Why not?"

"It's...embarrassing."

She nodded. "So you really are transgendered? You really do want to change your sex?"

He looked up at her for a minute. "Do we have to talk about this?"

She shook her head. "No. I guess not. Not if you don't want to."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Can I go back to class now? Please?"

"Sure," she said as she opened the door for him. Did he? Or didn't he? She still wasn't sure. Just looking at him, there was no doubt that he was already more than halfway there. He was already showing up at school dressed that way, even when he was trying to be a boy! What was his problem with not wanting to talk about it? She tried to think about his situation again, and had to admit she still wasn't sure. Maybe he did, and maybe he didn't. Mostly she couldn't see it, but when you took the time to really look at him and the way he was around his friends, then...maybe. But for her, it was still only maybe."

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Mr. O'Conner's eyes roamed around the small auditorium. There were boys grouped in half a dozen places around the room as they worked on taking apart several different types of motor assemblies. His eyes fell on Jimmy Joe and stayed there. She was standing with the other boys and talking to them like she was one of them, but through the whole class he hadn't seen her getting down to do any of the real work. He had seen the same thing with her many times before. She not only wasn't interested, she didn't want to get her hands dirty. But then she didn't want to be in his class at all. She was stuck there because of her situation. Her weird situation.

He watched as she elbowed the boy next to her and said something to him. The two of them laughed, and then bumped fists. So did she really want to become a boy? Or not? In most ways, he didn't see it in her. But at the same time, he could see a familiarity that she had developed with the boys now, as if she really was one of them. Of course she didn't really move or completely act like the rest of the boys. She still had way too many feminine mannerisms

that he would expect she would be trying to shed. But at the same time, she did look all an awful lot like a boy. So did she want to change? Or not?

He finally went over to her and tapped her shoulder. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Jimmy was immediately concerned. "Did I do something wrong again?"

"No, not at all. I just wanted to ask you about something."

"What?"

He looked at her for a moment then jerked his head to one side indicating he wanted to move away from the others. "Let's talk over there," he said as he headed for a more private spot in the room.

"Oh shit!" Jimmy muttered as she started to follow. She had no doubt at all what he wanted to talk to her about. When they were more alone she asked. "What is it?" but she was hoping she was wrong in what she expected.

"Mr. Mason had a talk with all the teachers this morning," Mr. O'Conner told her.

"Yeah, I know," she replied. "My mother told us he was going to do that."

He nodded. "I just want to know if it's true. Are you really trying to become a boy? Permanently?"

Her stubborn anger hit her again. She wasn't trying to do that at all, it was the stupid hormones her family made Uncle Brian stick into her body that was doing it to her. But her mother and father had been very insistent that morning in telling her she *had* to tell them that she was changing her sex, even though she wasn't. All because too many people were starting to ask questions now and the questions were the kind that her mother and father had both claimed could be really bad for the family. And it was possible those questions could even hurt the school and Uncle Brian. "Can we *not* talk about this please?" she asked much louder than she should have.

"Why not?" Mr. O'Conner asked, noting how agitated she suddenly was over it.

"Because it's not something I want to talk about," she replied.

“All I’m asking is if it’s true, what Mr. Mason told us. That’s all. Nothing more. I don’t need the details on anything. I’m just trying to satisfy myself. Just yes or no. Are you one of those transgendered kids or not?”

Jimmy was suddenly seething inside. This was just what she didn’t want to happen. Just what she was determined she wouldn’t discuss with anyone. But he was leaving her no way out, and her mother had been very insistent on what she had to tell anyone who asked – like it or not. “Yes!” she hissed angrily. “Yes I am!” she said, her angry voice rising even further in volume. “I’m just like those kids you’ve heard about. I’m transgendered!” she finally stated, still full of anger.

If she had been paying attention to anyone else but Mr. O’Conner, she would have noticed that every boy in the room was now looking at her. Her angry response had been loud enough to carry through the whole room.

Mr. O’Conner looked at her, then nodded. “Okay,” he said softly. “I was just asking. That’s all. Go on back to what you were doing.”

She turned, but she saw everyone looking at her. “Uuuhhhh!” she screamed. With one last angry look around at everyone, she literally ran from the room.

She slowed down when she reached the hallway and the door swung closed behind her. She didn’t know where she was going, she was just walking. Walking and muttering, “I’m not a boy. I’m not a boy. And I’ll never be a boy.” Over and over.

Mr. O’Conner hurried after her. He had no idea why she was so upset over the issue. But she had said it. He had heard her admit it. And most likely, so had all the other kids in the room. He had heard it, but he still didn’t know if he believed it. He went out the door into the hallway. She was walking now, far ahead of him. He could tell she was still angry. He let her go. There wasn’t a lot of time left before the end of the day. No sense making her even more upset.

Jimmy Joe’s angry muttering stopped when she found herself standing in front of a door, the door to the boy’s room. Not hesitating at all, she went in. At that time of day the room was empty, which was just what she wanted. She angrily walked around in there for a

long time, her thoughts centered on only one thing. "I'm still a girl. I'm still a girl. And I'll always be a girl." She wanted to shout it as loudly as she possibly could. She wanted to shout it so that everyone in the whole world could hear her. But she was stuck. Because of what her mother and the whole family had decided, she couldn't say that at all. And now because she had been dumb enough to get angry about it, the whole world thought she really did want to turn herself into a boy. Permanently! Well she didn't! She was just stuck saying she did. "I'm still a girl. I'm still a girl. And I'll always be a girl!"

She stayed there in the boy's room, wanting to remain alone with her anger. The school bell ringing startled her but she stayed where she was. She stayed, but she didn't stay alone for long. All too soon the door burst open and a flood of guys burst into the room. They seemed surprised to see her there.

"Jimmy!" one of the older ones greeted her. "Is it true? We just heard you tell Mr. O'Conner that you're transgendered. So does that mean you really are changing your sex?"

Growling angrily again, she pushed her way through the guys and out into the hallway. She hurried to her locker, grabbed her things, and almost ran out to the bus. The rain was pouring heavily but she didn't even bother pulling the hood up on her coat. With soaked hair, she was the first kid on the bus and she took her usual seat and tried to ignore everyone else getting on the bus. When Elliot came in and sat down next to her, she refused to even look at him or anyone else. She stayed that way all the way home, ignoring everyone who even tried to talk to her. She didn't even know the bus had stopped on McComber land until Elliot got up from beside her.

"Coming?" he asked. "Or are you going to pout about something and stay on the bus all night?"

She got up quickly and angrily. It was everything she could do to not push Elliot to get him to move faster so she could get off the bus sooner. Once off though, instead of heading home in the pouring rain with everyone else, she hurried straight toward the woods. She could hear the bus leaving behind her but she didn't bother looking. At the very edge of the woods she stopped...and yelled. "I'm still a girl! I'm still a girl! And I'll always be a girl! I...am...a...girl!"

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Early Wednesday evening, Rose McComber climbed onto her ATV and headed down the hill. For her, the ATV was the easiest way to get around when going between the family houses. Her husband preferred his truck, but for her, the ATV she usually rode was easier to deal with. Besides, as old as she was, she still found riding the things to be fun. Memories of long rides through the woods with her husband often went through her mind. It was still one of the things they liked to do together. But for her, even just going down for a quick visit with one of the kids was made even better by jumping onto the machine and heading down the hill. She might not drive them as fast as she used to, but she hadn't slowed her driving down all that much.

The ground was still soaked from the last rain they had all day yesterday and this morning too, but at least it had been dry all afternoon. She didn't have far to go, and before long she had reached her destination. This was a happy trip. A chore she had claimed for herself long ago. And with the passing years, it was something she got to do more and more often. The joyful task was made that much more enjoyable ever since the family's wealth started growing. She didn't know if it had ever been a family tradition in the past, but since she had married Jacob, she had made it one. One she was very proud of.

She parked her ATV behind her son-in-law's truck, and headed for the back door. Nobody in the family ever knocked on a front door. She wasn't even sure she knew why they bothered putting front doors in their houses. Tradition she guessed. The sound of her ATV had obviously alerted everyone in the house because the door was opened before she could get there.

"Mom!" Jane said happily as her mother climbed the few steps up into the kitchen.

"Hi dear," Rose said as she gave her daughter a warm hug.

"Grandma!" Olivia exclaimed from the other side of the kitchen as she hurried over.

"Happy birthday darling," Rose said as she gave her granddaughter a big hug. "I heard you had a wonderful time at your party last weekend."

"It was great!" Olivia agreed.

"I'm so glad," Rose said as she gave her another squeeze. She looked up and noticed the small birthday cake on the counter, obviously waiting until after dinner. The family would have their own birthday celebration now. Most likely the only gift Olivia would receive today might be something small from both her mother and father, but that would be it. But Olivia wouldn't lack at all for birthday gifts. Not after her visit.

"Hi Grandma," Lucas said as he came into the kitchen.

"Lucas dear. How are you?" Rose asked as she gave her young grandson a hug. "My, you're getting bigger every day!" She looked around. "Where's your brother?"

"Down at Elliot's house," Lucas told her. "Practicing again."

Rose nodded. Elliot being signed up for the shooting competition was becoming a big deal to the whole family.

"Hi Mom," John said as he walked into the kitchen.

Rose went over and hugged him too. "Hi John," she said. "Good day at school?"

"Better than yesterday," John told her.

Rose reached into her coat and pulled out an envelope and handed it to him. "For Olivia," she said.

"Thank you," John replied.

"I'll leave all of you to celebrate yourselves now," Rose told them. She hugged John, she hugged Jane, and she hugged Olivia and wished her a happy birthday. She went back outside and climbed onto her ATV. The check she had just delivered to John was to be used to buy things for Olivia, clothes and whatever else she might need or want.

The checks she delivered were the same amount for each grandchild. And for the past two years, business had been particularly good, which meant that the birthday checks that Jacob signed were particularly good. Today she had just delivered a check for a thousand dollars to be used for whatever Olivia might need. In a few weeks, she would deliver two more thousand dollar checks,

one for Jimmy and one for Jasmine, and a few days after that, she would be delivering one for Nichole as well. So many birthdays right in a row! But that was one of the reasons why those girls were all so close. Her mind immediately turned toward Jade. He had been born at exactly the same time, but now he was almost more a member of that little girl's pack than his sister was. And if his sister didn't watch out, she wouldn't be a member of that special little group at all anymore.

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The switch was made again Wednesday night just before the twins were sent to bed. Each of them had to strip down to nothing and don their matching tan bathrobes and walk across the hall into their correct bedrooms. Nobody said anything about the stuffed lion that one of them carried with him. Once again Jimmy Jade got to be a boy – himself. And once again Jasmine Joe got to be the girl she knew she was – inside.

While Jimmy Jade was putting his pajamas on in his bedroom across the hall, Jazzy Joe was sitting in her bathrobe on her bed, staring at her mirror. She could be a girl again. She was so relieved about that. It had seemed like forever since she could let herself, be herself. She stared at the image of her face, but it didn't look like her face. It looked like someone else staring back. It looked like a boy, not a girl. A moment of anger at the situation ran through her. She wanted to throw something at the boy in the mirror that wasn't her! But unfortunately, she knew all too well now that it was her. It was so depressing.

As she stared at her image, her mind flashed back across her day. It had been a better day than she'd had yesterday. At least today nobody bothered to ask if she was transgendered at all. She was still mad about having everyone hear her say that. She was still mad at Mr. O'Conner over making her say it. And now...now everyone seemed to think she really was trying to turn herself into a boy. They all seemed to believe it, even though she wasn't. The question now was, what could she do about it? No solution was coming to her mind – yet.

It had been a long time now since she had seriously inspected her body. What would be the point? She knew full well that her breasts weren't growing, and they weren't going to grow. Not until they stopped putting those damn hormones up inside of her. Darn them! It wasn't right! Now she was stuck with a stupid ugly body. A body no girl on the planet would want. And no boy on the planet would ever want a girl with a body like hers either. Even worse!

Still staring at the mirror, she stood up and slowly removed her robe. Once again she looked critically at her body. No breasts at all – of course. The one big thing that would have defined her as a girl was missing. Well, there was that special place down between her legs that was the ultimate definition she guessed. It was certainly still there. And to tell the truth, there were things about that little place that she was very much in love with lately. Whoever knew anyone could have feelings like that? As far as she was concerned, it was the biggest discovery of her life! And it was the one and only thing she seemed to like about what those hormones had done to her. Yes, she knew all other girls felt pretty much the same thing, but she had read on the internet that the hormones could increase what they kept saying was her sex drive, making her want to feel those things more. And besides that, they had also changed things down there so that fun little part of her got bigger than usual. She figured it worked pretty much like what the websites said happened to that part of a boy's body, although she had yet to see that little miracle in person. She had seen her brother's tiny little penis. There was no way it could ever become anything at all like the big things all the websites showed. No...way! Besides, with all those hormones in his system now, she had read that he probably couldn't do anything at all with that thing like the other boys his age were supposed to be figuring out now. She nearly laughed at that. The stupid sissy!

She turned sideways and looked at her reflection, then she turned her other side to the mirror to look at herself. No matter how she viewed herself, as far as she was concerned, her body looked way too much like a boy. As far as she could tell anyway. Her brother Tommy though had a much bigger chest and...muscles! And Ethan's muscles were even bigger. Her stupid brother Jimmy though didn't have any muscles. As far as she could remember, he never

did. Not really. Of course lately he was looking skinnier and scrawnier than ever. At least his arms and shoulders did. More effects from the hormones. She had no doubt that if the two of them got into a fight now, she would win hands down. But then, she figured she probably could have always beat him up if she wanted to. Maybe. Maybe not. But there was no doubt about it now.

She bent her arms up and tried to show her muscles. Wow! There was more there than she thought! A lot more. No doubt about what the hormones were doing to her body. Of course all that work with her Uncle Jed probably did something to her too. Shoveling snow all winter and now dragging and cutting up heavy logs had probably added muscle to her body as well. She was nothing like her brother or Elliot of course, but they were both older and a lot bigger. She could already tell though that her body was starting to follow the same path they had gone through.

In a way it was kind of fascinating to be strong for a change. But it wasn't strong she wanted for her body. It was pretty. She wanted her body to be pretty and feminine, with all the right feminine curves and shapes. Instead she now had...muscles. Ugh! She could just barf!

She turned again to look at herself from a slightly turned view instead of full on or from the side. A boy's body. A damn boy's body! How could she let this happen to herself? How? It was so depressing. Would she ever be pretty again? Would she ever at least be feminine? Her mother had promised she would be. She had promised. But then her mother had also promised that nothing in the world could stop her breasts from growing. That had certainly turned out to be wrong.

She turned a bit in the other direction. She wasn't feminine anymore. She wasn't pretty anymore. She didn't even think she was cute. Just...she didn't know what. She used to be really pretty. Really, really pretty. The prettiest of all her friends. But not anymore. Definitely not anymore. In fact, not for some time now.

Allison was pretty. Really pretty! Jasmine had always envied Allison's long hair that came all the way down to her waist. Her own mother had let her grow her hair pretty long, but she had never let it get that long. Yeah. Allison was really pretty. Nichole was pretty and

cute, but she always considered Nichole to be more on the cute side. Olivia was just plain beautiful! Almost as pretty as she...used to be. Ugh! She supposed that Olivia might be the prettiest one of the Four Musketeers now. Well, maybe Allison. It was certainly close.

And then there was her screwy brother. Who in the world would ever believe that he could look anything at all like a girl? It was downright disturbing. But he always had looked like a girl, right since that first time when he had worn her dress at Thanksgiving. Such a mistake. She was supposed to have worn that dress. That was something she should have never put into that note. Too late now. Too late for a lot of things. Now she looked like a boy, and her stupid brother looked like a girl. And even though she was reluctant to admit it, he did look pretty – when he smiled. Disturbingly pretty. Ugh! How could he?

All the girls were pretty – except her. All the girls were cute. Heck, even Elliot was cute! Darn cute! And the older and bigger he seemed to get, the cuter she thought he looked. But he was her cousin, and because of that, he wouldn't even look at her as a girl. Of course, now he didn't ever seem to see her as a girl at all, which was so depressing. But there was no doubt he was cute.

She turned her body again and bent her head down a bit. Was she cute at all like Elliot was? Was she cute in any way at all like a lot of the guys were? Was it possible that some girl might look at her and think that she was cute? It was a really odd thought. It disturbed her, but at the same time she was fascinated by it. She wondered if she dared ask any of the other girls what they thought about it.

The sound of her mother across the hall wishing her dumb brother goodnight made her grab her robe and rush for her desk chair. She grabbed the first bottle of nail polish she could, crossed her legs at the knees and started putting polish on her toes, trying to hide the fact that she hadn't been getting ready for bed at all. Her door opened and her mother walked in.

"Not ready for bed yet?" Susan asked her daughter, who was finally her daughter again, even though she no longer looked like her daughter.

“Not yet, Mom. I’ve got to finish here first.”

“Well don’t take too long,” Susan told her. She went over and kissed her good night. “See you in the morning,” she said brightly before walking out.

“Night, Mom,” Jazzy Joe replied.

It was a little while before her toenails were done and her fingernails were dry as well. She grabbed the most feminine nightgown she owned and put that on instead of a pair of pajamas. She wanted to feel like a girl again. And once into bed with her lights turned off, she wanted to feel all those delicious feelings that the only girl parts she had left could bring her. It was late into the night before she finally fell asleep. And when she did, she was exhausted.

Chapter 46 – Rotten Day

March 12th

Despite going to sleep so late the night before, Jazzy Joe was up earlier than usual the next morning. Primary on her list of things to do was a heavenly scented bubble bath that she wished she could make a long one. Unfortunately, she didn't have that kind of time. She shaved her legs, her arms, and her armpits, removing all the tiny stupid hairs that seemed to insist on growing all over her. They were so disgusting. But at least she was free of them again and the bath water did make her skin feel a lot better. She climbed out and patted her body dry. She turned to look for the skin lotion and couldn't find it anywhere. Where had her dumb brother put it? If he used it all up and didn't tell Mom to replace it, she'd kill him! She needed that stuff!

Slipping her robe on again, she hurried back across to her bedroom to get dressed. Fresh panties and a bra with plenty of extra stuffing made her feel much more like the girl she really was. She sat down at her desk that was also her vanity table and started in on her makeup. She had been using more and more makeup all the time, trying to make herself look right. Fortunately, her mother was very understanding and never seemed to argue much about buying her more. Her mother had even made some helpful suggestions as to things she could do to make herself look better.

Jazzy Joe did her eyes and was quite satisfied. She even smiled at the way they looked. No problem at all there. Her real problem was with the rest of her face. It just didn't seem to have the right shape to it anymore, which was why she looked so darn much like a stupid boy! Ugh! She was about to add some contouring makeup and blusher to make her face look better when she noticed something odd on her face. Not just on her face, but sticking out from her face, particularly down towards her chin. Hairs! Not just one, but several. They were all thin and light and blonde, but they

were still there. Where did they come from? She stared at them in horror and couldn't believe she was really seeing them.

Dropping the makeup she had picked up, she ran for the bathroom. She needed tweezers. She searched the drawer where they should have been in case any of them got a splinter, but she couldn't find them. Where were they? Most likely Tommy had them. He seemed to have the most trouble with that kind of thing. The door to her older brother's room was closed. He was still getting dressed for school. Ugh! She needed tweezers, and she needed them fast. She ran for the kitchen to find her mother instead.

"Mom!" she said urgently. "Where's your tweezers?"

"In our bathroom, dear," Susan replied. "What's wrong? Do you have a splinter somewhere?"

"A splinter!" Jasmine exclaimed. "A splinter? I've got lots of splinters! They're all sticking out of my face!"

Susan was clearly confused. "Your face? What are you talking about?"

Jasmine ran up close to her. "Look! Look at my chin. There's hairs sticking out! I've got to get them out of there."

Susan stared hard at the tiny hairs that were now just starting to appear on her daughter's face. Her own face fell into a worried state. "Jasmine," she said to her daughter, "that may be more signs that those hormones are still at work. Jas, it is possible that what you're seeing may be the first signs of a beard starting to grow. I guess you could be old enough for it now."

Jasmine was horrified. "A beard? No way! I'm not growing some ugly kind of beard." she exclaimed in no uncertain terms. "There's no way that can happen, so don't even suggest such a stupid thing. Just tell me where the tweezers are!"

Susan shook her head. "There's some in our bathroom drawer," she told her. "But Jas, those hormones are still working on you and you know it. If you don't swear off hunting soon, Jas, like it or not, you're going to have a regular beard like all the other boys."

Jasmine balled her fists and screamed in frustration. "Aaahhh!" Then she turned and ran for her mother's bathroom to grab the tweezers. She wasn't going to have any stupid ugly beard on her

face. She was going to pull every single hair out before anyone could ever see them.

“What’s wrong with Jas?” Clint asked as he walked into the kitchen. “I heard her scream and then she ran right past me without saying a word.”

Susan looked in the direction her daughter had run. “I think those hormones in her may be doing something else to her now.”

That wasn’t anything Clint wanted to hear. Bracing himself for bad news, he asked, “What now?”

“It’s possible she may be showing the first signs of a beard growing.”

As he expected, the news wasn’t anything he wanted to hear. “When is she finally going to decide to stop hunting? What’s it going to take?” he asked as he headed for the coffee pot.

Susan shook her head. “I wish I knew. We can only hope that this latest problem will finally convince her.”

“Huh!” Clint grunted. “Nothing else has worked so far.”

“Hey Mom. Hey Dad,” Jimmy Jade said as he wandered into the kitchen. He automatically went directly to his mother and gave her a hug. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Just cereal this morning dear,” Susan replied as she gave him a quick look over. The permanent that Sarah had given him had pretty mostly grown out now and of course his hair was longer. She had thought several times over the last few weeks that it could use a little bit of shaping to make it look nicer, but just leaving it loose like he had it still left it looking all too feminine. Of course, despite his hair, her son looked all too feminine – his face and his... “Jimmy,” she said quickly before he reached the kitchen table.

“Yeah?” he asked as he pulled his chair out.

“Go change your shirt.”

“What’s wrong with this one?”

Susan stared at his shirt. He wasn’t wearing a sweater like he often did. And even though it was a shirt he had worn often in the past, today it looked a little bit small on him, as she had noticed many of his clothes were starting to look. But with that shirt today it was not just the arm length she was concerned with, it was looking a little odd in his chest. Despite the still small size of his breasts, the

tightness of the shirt gave the distinct impression that he had something under it that made his chest look strange for a boy. "It's a little too tight on you now, dear," she told him. She didn't want to mention that the reason was his breasts.

Jimmy looked down at his shirt. "It's not that bad," he said. "And it's one that I like."

"I know, dear," Susan said, "but go change it anyway. I don't want you wearing it anymore."

Jimmy rolled his eyes and headed back to his room, nearly colliding with his brother Tommy on the way.

"What's for breakfast?" Tommy asked as he came in.

"Cereal," Susan replied, barely thinking about him as she watched Jimmy leaving. A moment later, she decided to follow Jimmy to his room.

Jimmy had barely closed his bedroom door and was just about to look through his shirts for a bigger one when his door opened and his mother came in. "What's up?" he asked.

"Are you wearing a bra today?" she asked.

Jimmy was surprised by the question. "No."

Susan nodded. "Do you ever wear a bra to school? I mean, when you're being a boy?"

Jimmy blushed. "I've done it," he admitted sheepishly. "But only a couple of times. It's just that, sometimes they hurt, you know? And sometimes it bugs me when anything rubs against my nipples. But I only did it a couple of times and that's all," he added quickly.

Susan nodded. "It's okay," she said. "I don't mind. And I know that when your breasts are growing like yours are that you're going to need that bit of protection sometimes. We've talked about it and I've told you that before. And now that they're starting to get a little, um...bigger, we may have to consider your breasts a bit more when you have to be a boy, like today. But you're not wearing a bra today?" she asked just to be certain.

He shook his head. "Not today. Like I said, I only did it a few times."

She was tempted to tell him that with the tiny bra size he wore, it was possible that the bra might actually hide his breasts more. She

decided not to mention it though. "Just find something that fits a little looser across your chest. Okay? That's should be all you need."

He smiled. "No problem. Thanks, Mom. I've got enough problems with the other kids asking about things like that."

Susan nodded and smiled. A little while later, she noted that the shirt he had chosen was definitely better. But it still did very little to hide the fact that his whole body seemed to be shaped differently now. And that didn't include the way his hips and backside seemed to fill out his pants lately either. From the front and the back, he looked more like a girl than a boy, even dressed as a boy. Her main problem now with the way he looked though, was his hair. It was starting to look sloppy. Once again, she said nothing about it since she could see that he was just happy for the chance to be himself again.

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For Jazzy Joe, it seemed like she almost never got to sit in her usual seat at school anymore. She was more used to the view now from the other side of the room where most of the boys were. The moment she started sitting down at her desk, she noticed the girl that sat next to her looking at her as if there was something wrong with her. "What?" Jasmine asked.

"Nothing!" the girl said quickly as she shook her head. But what she had really been looking at was how Jasmine's didn't seem to look right anymore. Up close, to her, Jasmine's arms and shoulders just looked all wrong. But obviously she still had breasts, as she figured Jasmine should have. The odd part was that so did her brother.

Jasmine sat down uncertainly, only to find the girl leaning over towards her. "Jade said that he's transgendered and might be changing his sex," she whispered. "And I heard that you are too! And I just couldn't believe it! I mean, you, of all the girls I know, I just couldn't believe you wanted to be a boy. But I just want you to know I'm sorry for thinking so wrong about you. And I want to wish you luck with whatever you do. And I promise, I'll still think of you as my friend and not say anything bad about it at all." She paused to smile

and see if her words had any reaction. Instead, she wasn't sure what Jasmine's face was showing, only that Jasmine didn't look happy. "Anyway," she continued. "I wanted to let you know that if you're going to be a boy, then I think you're off to a really good start. I'm not sure why you still want to come to school as a girl anymore, but you're sure starting to look pretty good as a boy."

Jasmine wanted so badly to get up and run out of the room and find somewhere where she could scream her lungs out at the world, and then let out a good cry. She felt her body shaking a bit, but she didn't know if it was from frustration, fear, anger, or disappointment. As much as she badly wanted to tell her friend otherwise she forced herself to say, "Thanks. I guess." She saw the girl smile and then lean back to sit up straight.

Nichole had watched and listened to it all. She tapped Jasmine on the shoulder. "You okay?" she asked quietly when Jasmine turned around.

Jasmine looked at her very best friend for a moment. "No," she replied truthfully. "But what can I do about it?"

Nichole only looked at her and shrugged a bit.

Jasmine turned back around in her seat. So far, her day wasn't off to a good start. First the tiny little hairs on her face and now one of her friends talking about her changing her sex. And then on top of it, her friend had said she was starting to look pretty good as a boy. What did she have to do to get people to realize she didn't really want to be a boy? She had even worn a nice dress today and taken the time to do her nails last night and even her toenails. What did it take? Starting to look good as a boy!

But then she wondered what exactly had the girl meant by that remark. She knew already that she looked all too much like a boy. Did her friend mean that she was starting to look like a cute boy? Kind of like Elliot was cute? She wondered that, and she wondered how she felt about it if she was. She really needed to ask her friends – if she dared!

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On the other side of the room, Jimmy Jade was trying to get used to his old seat again.

"Yo! Jimmy. I mean Jade," the voice half whispered.

Jimmy half turned around to see one of the guys in his class calling him.

"Man I thought there was something weird up with you and your sister. Although I guess she's supposed to be your brother now, or soon will be. But then again, she's sitting over there wearing a dress, even though she looks too much like a guy for it. So if you two are kind of switching things around kind of permanently, how come you're still coming to school as a guy again?"

It was not the kind of question that Jimmy even wanted to think about let alone try to find an answer for. Especially now with all the guys around him paying such close attention. "Um...well...you see...it's all still part of the punishment thing. We have to keep doing it this way."

"Oooh," the boy replied as he nodded his head. "So there is still some kind of punishment thing going on?"

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah, for sure."

"Damn it's lasting an awful long time. You'd think you'd be over it by now."

Jimmy nodded seriously. "You'd think! But so far, it's not working out too well. For me anyway."

"But now you've gone and decided that, uh, being a girl is somehow better, huh? So I guess for you it's not so much of a punishment anymore. I guess for your sister either since she's decided to become you."

"Trust me," Jimmy replied. "There's a lot more to it than you think. And it's all stuff I'm not allowed to talk about. But believe me, it's pretty much got me scared to death."

"What the hell did you do to get some kind of punishment like that?"

Jimmy shook his head. "Don't ask. And in a way, it's more because of my sister than anything else. But I guess I really screwed up too because of it, and now the whole family is keeping us in it together. Like it or not."

"So how long is this thing going to last for you?"

"No telling. And I guess it's really up to Jas over there. I don't seem to have much say in it at all."

"Damn! She must really like being a boy. But you'd think that even though she kind of looks the part now, you'd think she'd start acting like it more. You know? Sometimes she just comes off as...I don't know...weird!"

Jimmy smiled. "That's what everyone's been trying to tell her. I don't think she believes it yet."

"Well hey dude...or dudette...whatever you decide you're going to be. I'll be more than happy to lay my opinions on her."

"Go ahead," Jimmy suggested. "Just watch out for the fireworks when you do tell her. She's got a real bad temper."

"Huh! So she's not very lady like at all then."

"I guess...not anymore," Jimmy agreed.

"Huh! No wonder she wants to be a boy then. But heck, if it's true, then I guess I don't mind pointing a few things out to her. Let her bitch. At least someone will have tried to show her the light."

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When lunchtime came, Jimmy Jade hurried out of the room in the middle of a crowd of kids to head for the boy's room. At least he didn't have to go and search for his Aunt Jane to accompany him in there. He reached the boys room and went inside and headed for the urinals.

"Jimmy! I mean Jade," one of the boys in there exclaimed as if he was surprised to see him there. "What are you doing in here? I thought you people who were changing your sex were supposed to use the bathrooms for your new sex now."

"Who said that?" Jimmy asked.

"I don't know. I just read it somewhere."

Jimmy shook his head. "I'm supposed to be a boy today," he said. "So I use this bathroom."

"Oh," the boy replied as he looked at him. "I guess that makes sense. It's just that...um...even though you're supposed to be a boy today, um, it's just that, to me you still look an awful lot like a girl. But

then I guess you're supposed to look like that since you're changing your sex and all."

"Don't remind me," Jimmy muttered as he pushed his way toward one of the open urinals.

"So how come you're still coming to school as a boy?"

Once again Jimmy was being asked the question he didn't want to answer. And once again he tried to explain about the punishment still being in affect.

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"Yo! Joe!"

Jasmine heard it, but since the voice had been calling Joe, she didn't react. The Joe the voice was calling had to be someone else. She continued on toward the lunchroom with Olivia and Nichole.

"Yo! Joe Jasmine!" the boy called again as he caught up to Jasmine and her friends. He reached to grab her shoulder to get her attention, but she was turning around just then.

Joe Jasmine? Jasmine stopped and turned around questioningly, just as she felt someone grabbing her shoulder. She saw one of the guys in her class there. "What's up?" she asked.

"Hey," the boy replied. "I was talking to your brother this morning, who I guess is supposed to be your sister instead."

Jasmine couldn't help herself as she giggled at that. "Yeah?" she asked, still trying to stifle the giggle.

"So anyway, the Jade babe and me was discussin' how much you really look like the rest of the dudes now, except you don't act like one. You know?"

Jasmine could feel the anger washing over her at hearing that, but what came out of her mouth was, "The Jade babe?" She could hear Nichole and Olivia giggling behind her.

"Well sure. You gotta admit, even though he's trying to look like a guy today, he pretty much still looks like a girl. And he's lookin' mighty fine now when he dresses all up like a girl, if I do say so myself, for someone who's doin' what he is, I guess."

"So I understand," Jasmine replied, trying to hold off the anger she had started to feel.

“So anyway,” the boy continued, “I just wanted to let you know, that if you’re going to be a dude and all, then man, you gotta start acting more like it. I mean, you look okay, but you kind of move all wrong. Know what I mean? It’s like, you need to study the guys more and see how they do things. Like your arms, your head, the way you walk and all that. Get it together. You’re lookin’ okay, but if you’re gonna do the big switcharoo, then you gotta look at the rest of the picture too.

“Now I’m just sayin’ all this to try to be helpful, you know? What you do with your life is your business. I’m just tryin’ to be the good guy here and help you out. Point some things out that maybe you need to think about. You got a lot of the guy thing down pretty good. I mean, shit, you look just like a guy most of the time now. You just gotta work on the rest of it too so there’s no questions about it. So you good?”

Jasmine stared at him for a moment trying to figure out how to reply. What she really felt was anger. Couldn’t this guy see that she really didn’t want to be a boy? Couldn’t he tell that she had just been forced to say that she did? She had even worn a really nice dress today to get the point across! A really nice one! And she had done her nails and everything!

“She’s good!” Nichole said when Jasmine didn’t reply after a moment. “And we’ll make sure of it.”

“Thanks,” Olivia added.

“Just tryin’ to be helpful,” the boy said before turning and walking off.

Jasmine balled her fists as she stared at the boy walking away. “The nerve!”

“Oh hush!” Olivia said. “He’s just trying to be helpful. The rest of the guys have noticed the same thing when you have to be a boy and they told you that. He just noticed it too.” She looked up and smiled as Allison and Jimmy caught up to them.

“You’re not in the lunch line?” Allison asked.

“One of the guys was just telling Jas here that she needs to learn to act more like a guy when she has to be Jimmy,” Olivia told her.

“And he called Jimmy, the Jade babe!” Nichole added. She and Olivia both giggled again at that. Jimmy felt himself blushing.

Allison’s eyes went wide as she tried to keep herself from giggling too. “Well come on Jade babe, I’m hungry. Let’s get some lunch.”

It was about ten minutes later when they all finally sat down to eat. “I can’t believe that guy!” Jasmine muttered angrily.

“Oh for heaven’s sake. Just drop it,” Olivia told her.

“But can’t he see that I’m really a girl? Can’t he see that I don’t want to change my sex? Isn’t this dress girly enough to get that point across to him? Or is he just that stupid? He is one of the dumbest guys in the class. How many times has he been held back anyway?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Allison replied. “And neither does your dress. The way I heard it, you pretty much announced the matter to practically the whole school while you were in Mr. O’Conner’s class. “You told them all what you’re doing!”

“That doesn’t mean I’m actually going to do it,” Jasmine stated.

“They don’t know that,” Allison replied.

Jimmy leaned over to where he could say something somewhat quietly down the length of the table to where his sister was sitting across from Olivia today. “And according to Mom and Dad, we dare not tell anyone anything different than what you already said.”

Jasmine just glared back at him. “This whole thing stinks!”

“So quit hunting,” Nichole told her.

“Yeah,” Olivia agreed. “Quit hunting and go back to being a girl with the rest of us. We really do miss you Jas.” She quickly looked over at Jimmy. “No offence Jimmy Jade.”

Jimmy shook his head with his mouth full of food. He quickly swallowed. “Don’t worry about it. I couldn’t agree more!”

Jasmine sat eating her lunch, but not participating much in the conversation. She didn’t care one bit about what that guy had said about her not acting like a boy. She didn’t care in the least about acting like a boy because she didn’t want to be a boy. She was just stuck looking like one far more than she was happy about. But she was still a girl, and she would always be a girl! But there was one thing that the boy had mentioned, and one thing that her friend who

sat next to her in class had mentioned, and one thing she had wondered about the night before. She looked over at Nichole during a slight lull in the conversation and softly said, "Nichole. Do you think I'm cute?"

All heads at the table turned to her and Nichole's eyes went up. "Are you what?"

"Jas," Allison said quickly. "I'm not sure you want to go there right now."

"No," Jasmine replied. "I know I shouldn't. But I don't mean that the way you think I do. I know I don't look right anymore – as a girl. I see that in the mirror every day, and I can't tell you how disgusted it makes me."

"So quit hunting," Olivia suggested.

Jasmine looked at her, then purposely ignored her. "No. What I mean is..." She leaned forward and whispered to her friends. "When I have to be a guy. Do I still look cute? I mean...cute, as a guy?"

It was a moment before any of them could say anything. "I'm not answering that!" Allison declared.

"I don't think I want to go there either," Olivia agreed.

Jasmine looked to Nichole, her best friend. "Cole, what do you think? When I'm being a guy, am I at least kind of cute? Do I look like the kind of guy a girl might be interested in?" She noticed her brother leaning in as close across the table as he could so he could hear better. "Back off sissy. This has nothing to do with you!" She watched as her brother sat back, but he was still paying too much attention. "Nichole? What do you think?"

"Why are you asking me?" Nichole replied.

"Because nobody else will say anything."

"And why should I?"

"Cause you're my best friend. You're like my sister."

Nichole knew she had been put on the spot. "How should I know?" she finally said. "You're my best friend too. I know you too well to think about something like that. Why would you even ask such a thing?"

"Because I keep hearing people say that the dummy down there is pretty, at least when he dresses right and smiles once in a while,"

she added with a nasty look down the table toward her brother. Her effort got rewarded with more of his usual eye rolling. "And a couple of times now people have told me I look pretty good as a guy, but I don't know what they're talking about. I mean, do I look okay? Which I guess I do. At least kind of. Or are they saying I look really nice like a good looking guy?"

"Why should you care?" Allison asked.

"I don't know. I was just wondering, that's all."

"So drop it," Allison suggested.

Jasmine sighed and went back to eating her lunch while the conversation slowly started in another direction. And then she blurted out, "Because I'm a girl!" Her interruption to what they had been talking about stopped the conversation and all eyes turned toward her again. When she saw she had their attention she continued. "I guess maybe it's because I'm really a girl. I care about how I look. And unlike the moron down there who can't decide if he's my brother or my sister, I care about how everyone else thinks I look, just like all the rest of you do."

"Hey! I care!" Jimmy Jade replied.

"Shut up," Jasmine told him. "You don't count."

"Gee thanks!" Jimmy said with another roll of his eyes.

"So that's why it's important to me," Jasmine said to them. "And that's why I guess I need to know." She looked around at all her friends. "So what do you *all* think? Do I just look okay as a guy? Or do I look really nice. Cute?" She looked from one, to another, to the next. Not one of them appeared to want to answer. She sighed. "Okay," she finally decided sadly. "I guess the answer is a big no. You don't have to tell me. And I guess you're all right about it. I look okay, but not cute. I'm not pretty anymore as a girl, and I'm not cute like a guy either. I'm just...I don't know."

"Yes you are," Nichole finally said softly.

Jasmine looked up quickly. "I'm what?"

"Cute! As I guy I mean. And I hate to say it, but damn it Jas, you still look...um...well...okay, maybe you don't look so good as a girl anymore. I'm sorry about that and I hate it. But maybe that's why you still look kind of cute as a boy. Because you really are a girl...or you were...or something. And sometimes I think you can

almost look like you're kind of pretty, for a boy. So because of that, I guess I'd have to say yes, you are cute. But it's cute for a guy. And I'm sorry Jas, but I'm not that sure how cute you really are as a girl anymore."

Jasmine nodded and looked to Olivia and then to Allison, but she couldn't tell anything from their faces other than they didn't want to answer. She nodded. "Thanks Nichole," she told her best friend. I guess that's at least something. I know I don't look right as a girl anymore. I'm just glad I'm at least not ugly as a guy."

"You're certainly not that!" Olivia told her. "No way! It's just that, well, sorry Jas, but even like today. You dressed up real pretty and all, but you still look kind of like a guy. And that is a real pretty dress. But...well...um...I just don't think your body is the same anymore."

"Sometimes you can look kind of strange dressed like that," Allison added very softly.

"Strange?" Jasmine asked. "Do I look strange today?"

Allison forced herself to turn and look at her friend. "Kind of," she admitted softly. "Jas, something just looks all wrong with your whole body, especially your shoulders and your arms. And face it, the shape of your waist is different now too. You're just not shaped the same. And Jas, despite all the makeup you're wearing, which I can tell is quite a bit now, Jas, your face looks okay, but just looks... different."

They were not words that Jasmine wanted to hear. And her bigger problem was that she knew that every word Allison had just said was true. She knew it not just because Allison was one of her best friends, but because everything she had just said was things she had seen in the mirror every day.

Feeling suddenly crushed with depression, she said, "Excuse me. I gotta go." She stood up and picked up her tray, intent on leaving the lunch room to find someplace to be alone. But she barely turned away before she felt someone grab her arm and pull her back. She turned to see Allison holding her.

"Sit down Jas," Allison told her. "We're all still your friends. We all still love you and we all care about you. So just sit down and stay with us."

Almost reluctantly, Jasmine set her tray back down and sat again. "What do I do?" she mumbled.

"Just what you are doing, I guess," Allison replied. "I don't see anything else you can do. Except to finally quit hunting."

Jasmine ignored the remark. "Do I look that bad as a girl now? Even today?"

"No! Olivia replied quickly. "You look fine! Don't worry about it."

"How can I not worry?" She got no reply to her question.

"Just don't run off on us," Allison said after a few moments. "I don't know what you're going to do or what's going to happen in the future, but just don't run off again. We're still friends. Okay?"

"Best friends!" Olivia added.

"Sisters!" Nichole said.

"And you're my sister. Although I guess sometimes you're my brother too," Jimmy said softly.

Jasmine turned to look at her brother, who did really look too much like a girl. "Shut up," she said.

"Jas," Nichole said, "whatever comes, we'll get through it with you. Okay? Somehow, we'll all get through it."

Jasmine nodded. "Thanks," she said softly.

Allison stuck her hand out flat in the middle of the table. "Musketeers stick together?"

"Always!" Olivia said as she put her hand on top of Allison's.

"You bet!" Nichole said as she put her hand on top of Olivia's.

It was a moment before Jasmine added her hand. "For sure," she said softly as a smile finally came to her face.

Jasmine started to pull her hand away again, but Allison quickly stopped her. "Wait!" she said. Then she turned to Jimmy. "How about you? You're still one of us too now?"

Jimmy wasn't sure what to do. "You're sure?"

"Jimmy, how long have we been helping you now, huh? How many things have we done together? So are you in, or what?"

Tentatively, Jimmy reached over and put his hand on top of the pile. As he did, he and Jasmine looked at each other, neither knowing quite what to think about the situation – or each other.

"Good!" Allison declared as she set her other hand on top of the pile. She drew her hands away and everyone pulled back. "Now for

heaven's sake, can I finally finish my lunch?"

There were smiles all around as everyone went back to eating. And then the girls heard Jasmine giggling softly.

"What's so funny?" Olivia asked.

"Jasmine looked up at them all. "Want to hear something weird?"

"What?" Nichole asked.

"I've got muscles. And you should see them!"

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It wasn't difficult for Mr. O'Conner to find the one thing that was out of place in his Mechanic's class. The problem was easy to spot. It was Jimmy. And he was mostly standing by himself, away from everyone else and just looking on from a distance. He didn't even think about it as he headed straight for the only person in the room that looked like a girl, even though he wasn't. Yet. "You okay Jimmy?" he asked.

"Yeah," Jimmy replied.

"You're not helping them today. Usually you're trying to do all the work yourself."

Jimmy shrugged. "I know."

"So what's your problem?"

"I don't know. I guess...I guess...maybe I missed too much."

"Isn't your father still helping you?"

"Yeah. In fact, he's spending more time with me now than my sister. And Mom is having to spend more time with her now than me with the Home Ec stuff."

"So what's your problem?"

"I don't know. It's just...all different now. They've been working on those motors all week. And I've been doing...other stuff."

"Do you know what it is they've been doing in here?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Taking them apart and putting them back together again. I just don't know why it should take them so long. It's not that hard."

Mr. O'Conner was glad to hear Jimmy say that. He had no doubt then that Jimmy could do it fairly easily. "Sometimes," he said,

“when you’ve got a group of people who all have to work on something together, it can slow things down a lot. And a lot of these guys aren’t as good at the mechanical stuff as you are.”

Jimmy shrugged again. “It’s still not hard.”

Mr. O’Conner stood next to Jimmy and watched the other students working for a few minutes. A thought hit him. “Jimmy, how much of the assignments I sent home for you did your father go through with you?”

“All of them,” Jimmy replied. “It only took a couple of hours and it was all stuff I already knew. The rest of the time we’re together, my Dad and I redo stuff or just find things to work on together.”

Mr. O’Conner nodded. He wasn’t the least bit surprised. “Then maybe it’s time to switch things up for you a bit. Move you on to things you might not know yet.”

“Like what?” Jimmy asked, suddenly interested.

“I don’t know, but I’ll see if I can come up with something.” He looked down at Jimmy for a moment. “So you’re really going to become a girl.”

Jimmy wasn’t happy at all about the sudden turn in the conversation. “It’s not something I really want to talk about,” he replied.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not!”

“So do you want to do it, or not?”

Jimmy looked up at him, feeling agitated at the question. “Look at me. I’ve got boobs now! Believe it or not. And they’re real! And you wouldn’t believe how incredible my skin feels. And it still seems to be getting softer and softer. Even I can’t believe it’s still changing. And there are things that I keep finding myself looking at differently, or feeling things differently that I never imagined I would. So don’t ask that question. Like I said, it’s not something I want to talk about.”

Mr. O’Conner nodded. “Okay. I won’t,” he replied. But as he stood there still watching his class, he decided he wasn’t really sure. Did Jimmy want to become a girl – a woman? Or didn’t he?

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"Hi Honey," Valerie said as her husband came into the office.

"Hey," Jed replied, including all the women in his greeting. "Are there any hunters scheduled for this weekend that we know about?" he asked as he closed the door and started across the room.

"None asking for guides," Marcy told him.

Jed nodded. "Well the only thing that's really legal for them to shoot at right now is the small stuff, so I don't expect to see too many for a while." He went to the big map of their land that hung on the wall. I'm still seeing signs of more pigs than I'd like, but they're not as far north as they used to be."

"Don't we have a bunch of them pretty much all over the place?" Marcy asked.

Jed nodded. "Of course, but there's been way too many up north all winter. We thinned them a bit, but I'm still thinking there's too many of them. So if anyone calls about what they can hunt, recommend they come out and shoot some pigs.

"Are the roads all open up there now?" Valerie asked.

Jed nodded. "Pretty much. Good enough anyway that they shouldn't be a problem."

"Okay," his wife replied. "If anyone calls, we'll make the suggestion and try to send them north.

Jed nodded. "Good. Now I gotta take a look at those foundations they're building for the new lodges. It looks like they've got the plumbing all roughed in."

"They're supposed to pour the concrete tomorrow," Susan told him.

Jed nodded. "Pretty much what I figured." He headed for the door.

"Jed!" Susan called, stopping him.

"Yeah?" Jed asked as he turned around.

"Can I ask you about something?"

"Sure."

Susan took a deep breath. "The twin's birthdays are coming up soon. April third, which is Good Friday this year. Right before Easter."

Jed nodded. "Okay?"

"Well, Jasmine and Nichole usually have their birthday sleepovers together."

"They were born only a few days apart," Marcy added.

Jed nodded. "I know that."

"Well," Susan said, "I was wondering..."

"We were wondering," Marcy added.

Susan continued, "Since they'll be out of school for Good Friday, then they'll probably have their party that night. And well, since it's Easter weekend and all."

"You want to know if Jimmy Joe can have a break from all the work I've got him doing," Jed stated for them.

"Yes," Susan admitted.

"That's exactly what we were wondering," Marcy added.

Jed smiled and nodded. "Sure. I don't see why not. Since it's Easter, we won't be doing much of anything on the property anyway."

Susan felt nothing but relief. "Thanks Jed," she replied. "I really appreciate it." She was suddenly looking forward to finally having her twins be themselves for...for how long really? If Jasmine didn't have to be a boy on the weekend, would she have them as themselves for the full week? Over a week? She suddenly couldn't wait!

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It seemed strange to Mrs. Marker to have Jasmine once again in her class. She hardly ever saw the girl anymore – in class. She remembered talking with her brother about if he wanted to really be a girl, and she remembered that she still hadn't drawn any definite conclusion about the matter. But how about the real Jasmine. What did she really want?

She wandered around the room looking at the papers all the girls were working on. Household budgets. One of the most important things she felt she could teach them. She had the entire class working on it. The same lessons on the subject she taught them every year. She felt the subject was that critical. When she got to Jasmine's desk, she paused as she did with most of them to look

over her shoulder. "Not too bad," she said with approval as she looked over Jasmine's work.

"I hate this stuff!" Jasmine said, still looking down at her paper. "It's all math!"

"But it's important, dear. Very, very important. It's something everyone needs to know how to do, whether they're single or married. And all too many men go to work every day, leaving their wives home to deal with paying the bills and handling all the family finances. So it's not just important, but vital that every girl learn about this." She paused a moment. "And that includes you too, even though I guess you're going to be one of those men someday."

Once again Jasmine felt the anger washing over her. Why had she even bothered with the pretty dress today? Obviously it wasn't working.

"Is that what you're planning on, Jas?" Mrs. Marker asked.

Jasmine felt trapped. Trapped by her own words...at her mother and father's decree. It could be trouble for the family, the school, and even her Uncle Brian if she said anything different. "Of course," she finally managed to get out of her mouth.

Mrs. Marker nodded. "Well, good luck with it then," she said just before moving on to the next girl. In truth, she had heard what Jasmine said, but she still didn't know if she believed it or not.

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Jimmy Jade stared at his naked reflection in the mirror. He didn't have his desk set up like his sister did where it doubled as a vanity table. He had to use the narrow full-length mirror on his bedroom wall. He was supposed to be a boy, but to him, he looked just like a girl. And everyone kept telling him that even as a boy he still looked like a girl.

He reached up with both hands and cupped his breasts. Breasts! Boobs! He had them! He knew they were still small, but they were a lot bigger than he was happy about. He thought anyway. There were times when he wasn't really sure anymore. He lightly massaged them and rubbed his hands over them. It felt good. Very good. Very nice. He forced himself to stop.

He let out a big sigh as he continued to stare at himself. As far as he was concerned, he was a boy with a girl's body now. Except he wasn't a girl. Not really.

He looked down at the small part that sort of hung between his legs. Compared to all the pictures and videos he had seen on the internet, it looked so tiny. He had heard the other guys talk about doing things with it. He had heard some of them referring to what that thing was supposed to do. In researching the hormones in his body, he had read a lot about what that small part of him was supposed to do. But his part didn't do much of anything.

Before all this started, he remembered how a couple of times he had woken up in the middle of the night because it had gotten huge and stiff and it was giving him the most incredible feelings. And then it had done something he had never imagined. He had kind of wet the bed because it had shot something out. Something he now knew was his sperm. It was one of those guy functions that every man did. Every man he figured, except him. Because he wasn't really a man...or a boy...anymore. Not enough of one anyway. Those hormones had changed him too much now.

His hand reached down and pulled on it, pulling it out as far as he could. It still looked tiny. Not just small, but tiny. He let it go and it snapped right back to the way it was. Minuscule. Minuscule and useless really. What was the sense in having it? What good would it ever do him?

He had watched countless videos now about people who had changed their sex from being a man to a woman. Most of them had gone and had an operation to remove the thing. He didn't blame them one bit for that. In their position it would be nothing but an embarrassment. As far as he was concerned, that part of him was already an embarrassment. He was pretty sure that it was now smaller than most of the other guys. He thought anyway. Smaller. And useless.

With another sigh, he grabbed his pajamas and started putting them on. His mother would be in soon to kiss him goodnight. It had been a long day. And kind of a troubling one with all the questions the kids had kept asking him. The kids...and Mr. O'Conner too.

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Across the hall, while Jimmy was staring at his naked body, Jasmine was also staring at hers. It had been a rotten day. Rotten, rotten, rotten! When she had been stuck being Jimmy, she had been pretty much forced to declare to the whole school that she really wanted to be a boy and not a girl at all. So wrong! So this morning she had managed to squeeze into her favorite dress and she had gone all out to show everyone that she was just as much of a girl as she ever was. Only it hadn't worked at all. In fact, all everyone seemed to want to do was to tell her how much work she needed to do towards becoming a boy. Which was exactly what she didn't want to do. Trying to be a boy would be going in the opposite direction. She wanted to be a girl again. She sighed and rolled her eyes. She wanted to be a girl that could hunt.

Feeling depressed, she pulled her nightgown on and started sorting through all the many colors of nail polish on her desk. She loved nail polish. She loved all the colors. She loved color – period! Pulling out a bottle of light blue and a bottle of yellow, she grabbed the bottle of nail polish remover and started removing the color that was on her nails just then. She cleaned her fingernails and her toenails. Then she let herself be lost in enjoying the new colors as she added them to her fingers and toes. Most of her nails got painted in blue, but the two outside fingers of each hand were done in the yellow. It pleased her.

Her bedroom door opening was no surprise. Neither was her mother walking in.

“Almost ready for bed?” Susan asked.

“I’ve just got to let this dry a bit more,” Jasmine told her as she held her fingers up and blew on them.

Susan went over and hugged her and kissed her. Then she sat down on the bed. “I had a little talk with Uncle Jed today,” she told her daughter.

Jasmine sighed. “What’s he need me to do for him now?”

“That’s not what we talked about. Your birthday is coming up pretty soon. And it’s on Good Friday this year, right before Easter.”

Jasmine shrugged. “So?”

“So are you and Nichole planning on having your usual combined sleepover?”

“We haven’t talked about it,” Jasmine said. “Besides, can I?”

“Next month, Jas, if you don’t decide to finally stop this hunting business. You’re only going to be allowed to be yourself for one day each week. Only one day Jas. That’s it.”

Jasmine sighed sadly. “I know.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to finally put a stop to all this business now so you can be yourself – all the time?”

Jasmine felt a bit of the stubborn anger hit her again. “No!”

Susan shook her head. She had tried. “Well anyway, next month, it looks like the only day you’re going to be yourself anymore will be on Fridays. But since that Friday, when your birthday is, will be part of the holiday weekend, I asked Uncle Jed if he can leave you out of everything for that weekend.”

Jasmine’s eyes went up. “I won’t have to work?”

“Not that weekend.”

“So would that mean that I could be me all weekend?”

“Longer than that as I see it. I actually counted the days Jas. Since you won’t have to become Jimmy to go hunting or do any work, you’ll be able to be you for eight days. That’s over a week!”

“Eight days? Eight days to be me again?”

Susan nodded. “That’s right.”

Jasmine’s face lit up in a broad smile. “Cool!”

“It’s just something to think about Jas,” Susan told her. “But in the meantime, you might want to get with Nichole and plan that party of yours.”

“So I can have a sleepover? Me and Nichole both?”

Susan nodded. “Of course. Don’t you always? But Jas, before that party, you’ve still got only the two days a week to be yourself. I suggest you make the most of them.”

“Don’t worry, I will!” Jasmine said happily. Another thought hit her as she remembered the last few sleepovers that she hadn’t been allowed to be part of. “And what about him?” she asked as she nodded her head in the direction of Jimmy’s room. “Will he be there?”

Susan purposely put a surprised look on her face. "Your brother will be a boy at that time, Jas. You can't have a boy at an all-girls sleepover."

The grin on Jasmine's face went from ear to ear as she contemplated that thought. Finally the sissy would be left out and she would be the one to have all the fun!

Susan got up and hugged her daughter again. "Night Jas," she said. "Let me know what you and Nichole want to do for your party." She started out, stopping at the doorway. "Do you want me to turn the overhead light off for you?" she asked.

Jasmine nodded. "Sure. I don't need it."

Susan nodded. "Night Jas," she said happily before switching the light off and closing the bedroom door behind her.

Eight days! Eight days when she could be herself again. She blew on her fingernails again as she got up from her desk chair. She was pretty sure her nails were pretty much dry now. Eight days to be a girl again – fully! She couldn't wait!

From the corner of the bottom shelf over her bed, she reached up and very carefully picked up the large doll that she kept there. The one doll she had forbidden her sissy brother from touching. Being careful to not let the head roll back, she pulled it down and cradled the surprisingly heavy doll in her arms like it was a real child. It was almost like a real child. That was what made the doll so special. It was a life-sized baby and everything about it was done to make it as close to a real baby as possible. It had been given to her for Christmas two years ago by her Grandma and Grandpa. She knew it had cost a fortune and she had heard her mother mention several times that it must have. It was by far the most special doll she owned. And it was her baby.

With it still cradled in her arms, she carefully sat herself on the bed and pulled her legs up. She looked down at the doll. "Have you missed me my baby? I've missed you. I'm sorry I haven't been taking care of you like I used to. I'm sorry my baby that I've neglected you so long. But I still love you my baby. I still love you so much!" She pulled the doll up and lightly squeezed it before holding it again the way she had been.

“They don’t let me be a girl much anymore,” she told the doll. “They don’t let me be your mommy much, so I can’t love on you like I used to. I’m so very sorry about that. But I’m here now my baby. I’m here now for you and I still love very much. You’re my pretty baby. My pretty, pretty baby.” One of her hands caressed the white lace on the bottom of the dolls yellow dress. Her hand ran over the dress, smoothing it. Then she felt the arms and legs of the doll. So soft. So lifelike. Her baby.

“They’re trying to turn me into a nasty old boy,” she told the doll. “They keep trying, but I promise you my baby, I’m still here, and I’m still your mommy. They may make me look like a boy, and maybe they can even find some way to make me act like one. But I’ll never be a boy, my baby. Never! Not really anyway. I’ll always be a girl, even if I’m not so pretty anymore. I’ll always be a girl, and I’ll always be your mommy. And I’m sorry that I can’t take care of you as much as I used to, but you need to remember that I still love you so very much! I love you and I’ll always love you my pretty baby. Mommy will always love her pretty baby Lucy.”

Chapter 47 - Show and Shoot

March 14th

Two days of her kids being themselves wasn't enough for Susan. Not nearly. But at the same time, neither of her twins really seemed to look like themselves, even when they were being themselves. Both of them now looked more like the other...or perhaps at times, something in between, which was even more disconcerting. Still, for those two days, she could at least pretend that her family was normal. It was the visual reality of the situation that continually spoiled the illusion.

Saturday morning once again brought with it the change in her kids that now had them appearing all too normal – even though it was all too wrong. And for once, on a weekend, Jimmy Joe was at the breakfast table. Her Uncle Jed wasn't picking her up until later in the morning. Susan didn't know where they were going, only that he was taking her and his two boys out to look at some new equipment. Susan had an idea that the real Jimmy would probably love looking at whatever machinery Jed was after more than Jimmy Joe would. But that option was currently out for her real son, who once again appeared to be too much of a girl, messy hair and all.

"You couldn't at least run a brush through your hair before you came out of your room?" Susan asked him.

"What for?" Jasmine Jade replied. "I've got to wash it later."

With kids, sometimes there was just no winning. "Don't make any plans today with your friends," Susan told him. "We've got shopping to do."

"Oh Mom..." Jade complained. "Again?"

"We need groceries! Between the three of you kids, you're eating us out of house and home."

Jade rolled his eyes. "Whatever. It's okay. And besides, Olivia won't be around today anyway. She and Aunt Jane are doing her birthday shopping."

"I know dear. Aunt Jane told me."

Jade suddenly felt himself being kicked under the table. He turned to his sister who was now unfortunately his brother. "What?" he asked, totally annoyed with her.

Jimmy Joe didn't want to say it out loud, but she mouthed the words. "Ask her!"

Jade rolled his eyes again. "Um...Mom?"

"Yes?" Susan replied, not missing the little interchange between her twins.

"Um...we're out of the skin lotion in our bathroom."

"No you're not," Susan replied. "I took it out last week. You don't need it! I wish my skin was half as soft as yours is now." She turned to her other twin. "And you certainly don't need it! That's not stuff for boys to use!"

"But Mom," Jimmy Joe complained. "I don't use it when I'm being a boy. I need it for when I get to be me!"

"Forget it. It's not going to help anymore."

Jimmy Joe felt like screaming again. Was the whole world against her?

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It wasn't that Jade minded taking a bath. In fact, he was rather starting to enjoy them. He didn't even mind the nicely scented bath water or the smell that clung to his body afterwards. It was really kind of nice. What he minded was having his mother in there with him to wash his hair. He didn't like being naked in front of her, and he particularly didn't like having to dunk his head continually under the tub faucet to rinse his hair out three different times while his mother not only washed it for him, she also took the time to fill it with conditioner that had to be massaged in and then rinsed out again too. He could have done it all very easily in the shower by himself, but his bath had been interrupted and invaded before he got out of the tub.

"Okay," Susan told him as she started the tub draining, "get out of there and dry yourself off. I'll be back in a minute."

"Mom?" Jade asked as he stood up and reached for a towel.

“Yes dear?”

“Um...what’s going on? How come you did my hair?”

“Because it’s a mess,” Susan told him. “Now I’ll be right back. Oh, and don’t dry your hair. Just rub the towel over it a little so it doesn’t drip too bad and then leave it wet.”

Jade dried himself off, but his mother hadn’t returned yet. Was he supposed to wait in the bathroom or could he go back to his room and get dressed? Since she wasn’t there, he put his robe back on and was just about to walk out the door when his mother opened it. He noticed that she had a brush, a comb, and scissors in her hands.

“Okay dear,” Susan told him as she closed the door behind her. “Sorry I took so long.” She looked at him. “Why don’t you take that robe off and just wrap your towel around you again so your robe won’t get wet.”

Once again, for just a brief moment, he was naked in front of his mother. He grabbed his bath towel quickly and wrapped it around his waist.

“Not like that Jas,” Susan told him. She shook her head. “Look, from now on, whoever you’re having to be, I think you’re going to need to wrap that around you much higher. You’ve got boobs now that need to be covered up. Wrap it just under your armpits and over your breasts.” She waited until he had awkwardly done that. “Much better,” she declared happily. “Now sit down on the toilet lid and let me trim your hair a bit.” With him turned as much away from her as possible, she grabbed the comb and started combing his hair straight down and straight back.

“You’re not going to have your hairdresser do this again?” Jasmine asked.

“Why? I’m only going to trim it a bit to even it out. I used to do your sister’s hair all the time.”

Once she had his hair where she wanted it, she eyeballed where she wanted to cut it, and trimmed just a tiny bit off from most of the bottom all the way around. It took longer than Jasmine figured it should, but he sat there not daring to move a muscle.

“There!” Susan declared happily. “Now grab your blow dryer and dry it out before you get dressed.” She left him there so she could put the things she had brought in away.

Jasmine looked at his hair in the bathroom mirror, but he couldn't tell much of a difference, other than it all looked to be about the same length, coming down about halfway between his chin and his shoulders. The hairstyle the hairdresser had given him had been very easy to take care of. Mostly he didn't have to do anything with it until fairly recently. He had a feeling he'd be spending a lot more time trying to take care of his hair now. With another roll of his eyes, he grabbed the blow dryer and turned it on.

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For Jasmine, getting dressed was another thing that wasn't as easy anymore. It used to be great when his sister planned all his outfits for him ahead of time, even leaving him easy to follow instructions for it all. Now he had to figure everything out for himself. He had just gotten his bra and panties on and was in the process of figuring out which pair of ridiculously colored tights he was going to wear for the day, when his mother opened his bedroom door and walked in.

"Mom! I'm still getting dressed," he complained quickly.

"I know dear. Don't worry about it. That's partially why I'm here. Now that your hair is dry, let's see what else we can do with it."

He grabbed his robe to slip over himself.

"Don't bother with that, dear, just sit in your chair and let's play with your hair a little."

Oh goodie! Not! He sat down with his back to her and stared at himself in the mirror over his desk. His hair of course was just barely brushed. But that didn't stop his mother from brushing it again, and again, and again.

Susan pulled the brush through his hair, but her eyes not only noticed his hair, they also couldn't help but notice his bra and the sides of his breasts sticking out from it. She pursed her lips at the situation, but her son really did need a bigger bra. She didn't mention it. Instead she said, "Your hair feels nice and soft."

He reached up and felt some of his hair again. He did that a lot more now than he used to. "I guess," he replied noncommittally. But

it did feel nice and soft. More so than usual. "Is that because of the conditioner you put in it?"

Susan stopped brushing and looked at his face in the mirror. "You don't use the conditioner every time you wash it?"

"I never use it. Why should I?"

"To make your hair look and feel better. Also to help with the tangles."

"Oh."

Susan shook her head. Obviously it wasn't a big deal to him. She brushed his hair around several different ways trying to find something different to do with it. She finally sectioned off part of the middle and pulled it all straight back. "Now this could be nice," she told him.

"What?"

"Grab one of your hair clips," she told him. "A nice wide one."

He leaned forward, and started searching in the box on the desk. He pulled out three and his mother selected the biggest one, then she went back to arranging his hair again.

"Your sister...um...the other you..."

"Joe," Jasmine said.

"Yes, dear. Um, Joe will be having her annual birthday sleepover with Nichole in a few weeks."

"I know," he said.

"And I told her that since it's the only day of the week that you two are going to be yourselves anymore, then you won't be allowed to be there."

"I know," he said again. "She took an awful lot of delight in telling me that over and over again. And then I had to sit there and listen while she and the other girls all planned the party."

"Why did you sit and listen?"

"I don't know. I had nowhere else to go, I guess."

Susan nodded. "Jas, how do you feel about not being able to be at that party? I mean, really. How do you feel?"

He shrugged as she pulled extra hard on that sectioned bit of hair behind his head. "Ow!" The pressure eased up as he felt her slipping the hairclip in place and then fastening it.

"Sorry," Susan said as she tried to flatten and fan out the hair where it came out of the hairclip. "Does not being able to go to the party bother you?"

"Not really," he said. "It's fine."

But the way he said it, seemed to indicate that he wasn't really all that fine with it. "So in other words, you're disappointed."

It was a moment before he answered. "A little, I guess." He turned his head to look somewhat back at her. "I don't know why I should feel that way. I mean, they're really all her friends. And she didn't get to go to the parties I was at. Why shouldn't she get the chance to go to this one? Besides, it's her birthday."

"And it's your birthday too, and they're also your friends."

"So?"

"So, is there anything you want to do instead? Grab your curling iron from the drawer please."

The dreaded curling iron! He pulled it out of the bottom drawer and handed it up to her.

"Nothing special you want to do for your birthday?" she asked again after she had plugged it in.

He thought about that. "Not that I can think of."

"Well, let your father or me know if you think of anything," she told him as she waited for the curling iron to heat up. "How about the other girls? How do they feel about you not being able to be there?"

"I don't know. They haven't really said anything. Except Olivia, I guess. She seemed kind of disappointed."

"But the other girls haven't said anything?"

"Not to me."

Susan nodded and pulled lightly on the hair she had pulled through the hairclip to look at it. A small thought struck her. "You know what we should try sometime?"

"What?"

"Some blonde highlights. Especially now that the weather is getting a bit warmer. I think they would look really nice in your hair."

Ugh!

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Two hours later, Jade watched as his mother drove straight past the grocery store. "Mom. The supermarket is back there!"

"I know dear," Susan replied. "I think we're going to need to pick up a few other things first."

"Oh. You didn't tell me that."

"No," Susan replied with a sigh. "I didn't."

Jasmine Jade wasn't all that surprised when they stopped at one of the larger department stores he had been to with his mother before. "What do you need?" he asked as they got out of the car to walk across the parking lot.

"It's not what I need. I'm afraid it's what you need. Underwear."

"I do? Why?"

"Because it doesn't fit you anymore."

"Oh. It doesn't?"

"Jas, have you seen how you're already hanging out of those bras you're wearing? And I'm afraid your panties are getting too small too."

Jasmine stopped and stood there. "You mean...I have to get some new bras?"

"You need them Jas. I'm afraid you've needed them for a little while now and I just didn't want to believe it."

"You mean they're going to be bigger?"

"Friad so. You've really outgrown those tiny little training bras." She started walking again and was glad to see that he was now walking with her.

"So does that mean that they'll be more noticeable?"

"Of course! And they should be more comfortable for you too."

"Comfortable would be very good!" he decided. "I'm just not so sure about the noticeable part."

"Jas, every girl your age wants bigger boobs. You should be glad."

"I'm not every girl."

"No. That's true I'm afraid. But you might as well enjoy it and be happy about it."

"And suppose I'm not?"

That surprised Susan. "I thought you said you were liking being a girl now?"

It was a few moments before he could answer. "That's my problem. I do. Too much sometimes."

"So why should this be any different?"

"I don't know. Maybe because it's one of the things I still haven't decided about yet. It's just...kind of embarrassing!"

"Jas, what's embarrassing about a girl finally growing breasts?"

"I'm not a girl!"

"Close enough, Jas. As much as I hate to say it, you're close enough."

He wanted to say that he wasn't close enough to attend the birthday sleepover, but he didn't mention it.

They reached the doors and Susan paused before opening one of them. "Now smile Jas. Getting a bigger bra is a big event for a girl. You should be really excited about it. So smile!"

He didn't exactly feel that way, even though a tiny part of him was interested. Once again, he showed her his "worst" mock smile. And once again he was rewarded to see her laugh.

"Your impossible, young lady!" Susan joked.

Jasmine Jade couldn't help himself, his little joke had him smiling broadly as he walked through the doors into the department store.

"You're so much prettier when you smile like that!" Susan happily told him.

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Olivia was in heaven. After unexpectedly spending a few hours in Sarah's styling chair, she now had a new hairdo that she absolutely loved! To her it seemed much more grown-up, and all the little curls that Sarah had put in it really made it look so much fuller. But the biggest difference now was the color. After a lot of careful consideration, she and her mother...and Sarah, had decided to turn her already dark hair completely black. As far as Olivia was concerned, the difference was totally striking. And now both she and her mother had several shopping bags in their hands full of new clothes for her, and their shopping had only just begun.

"Okay, baby," Jane told her.

"Not so baby anymore!" Olivia quipped.

“Tough, girl. You’ll always be my baby, and you know it!” To Jane, her daughter’s laugh had always been the most wonderful sound in the world, unlike all the loud shrieking she did so often.

“Hey look,” Jane said as they entered another part of the store.

“Lots of underwear on sale. Today is our lucky day!”

“I want to find some stuff that’s more grown up,” Olivia told her. “And maybe some thongs.”

Jane looked at her horrified. “Not on your life!” She smiled a bit. “But I think a twelve-year-old may be ready for some things that are slightly more interesting.”

Olivia laughed. Okay, maybe she wouldn’t get any of the thongs she wanted to try, but she had no doubt that all her new underwear would be much sexier than her old underwear was. She briefly wondered what Jimmy Jade would think about it, not that he’d probably ever get to see her in any of it.

Her eyes caught sight of someone and it totally surprised her. “Hey, isn’t that Aunt Susan?”

“Um...goodness. Yes it is. And there’s Jasmine with her too.”

“Jas? Oh wow, it is. And her hair is different too!” Olivia didn’t even think of waiting. She literally ran to see her friend. “Jade! Jade!”

Jasmine turned at hearing someone calling his “Jade” name. “Holy cow! That’s Olivia!” A moment later, he was hurrying toward her. The two friends met halfway between their mothers. “Wow. Look at your hair!” Jasmine exclaimed. “You look sooooo great!”

Olivia giggled, obviously glad for the complement. “And your hair is all different too!”

“Not like yours! You dyed it all black. And it really looks...great!”

“Thank you,” Olivia said with an air of haughtiness, before she laughed again.

“My Mom was talking today about maybe highlighting my hair for the summer. But to me it sounds kind of...I don’t know. I’m just not sure it’s something I want to do.”

“Oh God, Jade. You should totally do it! It would look so good on you. I know it would!”

“Hi Olivia,” Susan said as she finally walked up. “Your hair looks really nice! And I love the new color.”

"Thank you Aunt Susan. I was just telling Jade that he should go for the highlights he said you were talking about earlier."

"He didn't seem all that interested before," Susan replied.

Olivia looked straight at Jasmine. "Just do it. You'll love it!"

Jasmine shrugged. "Maybe," he said as his Aunt Jane walked up. "Hi Aunt Jane."

"Hi Jas," Jane replied. "Hi Susan. I didn't know you were coming shopping today."

"I was just going after groceries, but someone here needs some bigger bras and I decided this morning that it really can't wait anymore."

"I wonder who that someone could be?" Jane said as she looked down at Jasmine.

Jasmine looked surprised. "Don't look at me. It wasn't my idea."

"No," Susan replied. "But you could at least be a little more conscious of what fits and what doesn't."

"How should I know if it fits or not? I don't know anything about it. And they're what I've always worn."

"And I guess that's part of the problem. Now come on and let's see if we can find some help. We may have to have you measured to find out how bad things are really getting for you."

"What do you mean, measured?" Jasmine asked.

"You'll find out in a few minutes," Susan told him.

"Oooo!" Olivia exclaimed. "Can we watch, Mom?"

Jane shrugged. "I don't know. I guess that depends on what Aunt Susan says."

Susan thought about it for a moment. "I don't have any problem with it, as long as you help make sure he doesn't run away before we get out of here."

"Hey," Olivia replied. "I can totally do that!"

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"Do what?" Jasmine asked, totally not believing what his mother had just said.

"Take your top off. They can't fit you for new bras with your top on."

“You mean here? In front of everyone else?”

Susan shook her head. “Jas, we’re surrounded by nothing but changing rooms. We’re not out in the middle of the store. Now get that top off. The saleslady will be right back.”

Jasmine started pulling his top off, then stopped and looked around at Olivia and his Aunt Jane. “You’re sure?” he asked his mother.”

Olivia laughed. “Jas, I’ve seen you in a bra before. All the girls did at that sleepover. Remember?” Since he was so hesitant about it, she didn’t add that she was fairly sure he would have to remove the bra he was wearing too.

With one final uncertain look at everyone, Jasmine pulled his top off, just as the saleswoman entered the changing area.

“Ah,” the saleswoman said with a big smile as she walked up with a tape measure in her hand. “What’s your name?” she asked Jasmine.

“Jasmine,” Susan told her.

“Jade,” Olivia said at the same time.

The woman looked confused. “Jasmine Jade,” Jasmine finally told her. “Some people call me Jasmine, and some call me Jade.”

“Oh. And what do you prefer?”

He shrugged as his eyes met with Olivia’s, “I guess, Jade for today.”

“Very nice,” the woman said with a smile. “I can already see that the bra you’re wearing is way too small. Isn’t it uncomfortable?”

“I don’t know,” Jade replied. “It’s the only kind I’ve ever worn.”

“Then I think it’s way past time we got you into something a bit more your size. And I know you’ll be very happy about it.” She physically grabbed his shoulders and turned him around. “Now let’s get this little thing off of you and measure you for something better!”

Off? Before he knew it, he felt the woman unfastening his bra. He looked up at his mother with horror in his eyes, only to see her smiling back. He looked at Olivia as the woman started pushing the straps over his shoulders and down his arms. Olivia was trying not to giggle, and wasn’t exactly succeeding. And then he felt the bra cups popping off of his tiny breasts, leaving them totally bare. He gulped with his eyes wide. His hands went up to his now naked

breasts to cover them as his eyes went back to Olivia, who seemed way too interested. And then before he could react anymore, the woman turned him around to face her.

“Arms out away from your body please?”

Jasmine held his arms away from his body as he looked up uncertainly at his mother again. He looked down quickly though as the woman wrapped the tape measure all the way around his body and pulled it tight to check the measurement just below his breasts. And then she eased up on the tape measure and moved it up a little and did it again – right over top of his breasts! Once again, Jasmine looked up, wide-eyed at his mother.

“Relax Jas,” Susan told him.

Relax? His mother had to be kidding!

“Hmmm!” the woman muttered as she looked at the tape measure. Then she dropped the end of it and it and pulled it away from the “girl” she was working on. “Pretty much what I thought.” She looked down at Jade and smiled. “Jade, you’ve been wearing those tiny bras way too long. You’ve still got a little growing to do, but you’re well on your way to being a full ‘A’ cup.” She looked at Susan. “I really wouldn’t go with anything less for her. Especially since girls her age tend to grow quickly for a while.”

Susan nodded. “That’s pretty much what I was guessing.” She turned to Jasmine. “Put your top back on now. Let’s go pick out some better bras for you.”

Jasmine quickly grabbed his bra that he had set on the nearby bench along with his top and his purse. He wanted to get it on and cover himself up as quickly as possible. It was embarrassing having everyone see how big his breasts had grown now. Especially Olivia and his Aunt Susan.

“Don’t bother with the bra,” Susan told him. “No sense putting it on again when it’s too small. You can wear one of the new ones after we buy some.”

Uncertainly, Jasmine set the bra back on the bench, picked up his top and pulled it over his head. He shook his hair out and ran his fingers through it a bit while his mother picked up his old bra and stuffed it down in her purse.

Olivia walked over close to him and giggled. "We wear the same bra size now."

"Just don't tell anyone."

"That's stupid. Why not?"

"Because it's embarrassing."

"Why? There's nothing at all embarrassing about it. In fact, I'm pretty sure all the Musketeers wear the same bra size now."

He shook his head. "Not all of them."

"Who doesn't?"

"The real Jasmine. Jimmy Joe."

"Why? What size is she now?"

"Zero!"

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"Stand up straight dear and stop trying to look at yourself," Susan told Jasmine as they headed back toward the car.

"It's kind of hard not to," Jasmine replied.

"Just try to forget they're there."

"That's pretty much impossible now. I mean. As far as I can see, you can't miss them anymore."

"And what's so wrong with that? Didn't Oliva and Aunt Jane both tell you how nice you look?"

"Yeah..."

"Well then stop worrying about it. Smile. Be happy."

"That's easy for you to say."

"You're the one who wanted all the padding, dear."

"I didn't say that! All I asked was if we could get something soft!"

"And that's what you got."

"But I didn't know that it would mean that the bras would be that thick!"

"Oh for heaven's sake Jas, they're not big and they're still one of the smallest bra sizes available."

"But they still stick out more."

"Not that much, Jas. Not that much."

"Well it seems like it to me."

“Jas, stop a minute.” Susan said as she stopped walking and turned to him.

“What?”

“Stand up straight!” She ignored his eye rolling. “Straighter. Back straight and hold your head up.”

It was all Jasmine could do to not roll his eyes yet again. But he did as his mother asked. And then he looked down at his chest again. “See! They stick out even more if I stand like this.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Susan told him. “You look more normal that way.”

“I don’t feel normal. I feel silly.”

“Why? Because you’re a beautiful young girl?”

“No, because I’m not a beautiful young girl.”

“Then smile Jas, and you will be.”

He couldn’t stop his incessant eye rolling this time. He also didn’t feel much like smiling.

“Now stand straight again,” Susan told him. “No...straighter. And keep your head up. Stop trying to look at the ground. And stop rolling your eyes!”

He rolled his eyes at that too. “Can’t we just leave now?”

“Not until you start smiling.”

“What?”

“Smile!”

“But my boobs are sticking a mile out.”

“Stop it. And they’re just barely more noticeable than they were before.”

“They don’t feel like it.”

“You said that earlier.”

“Well I meant it earlier. Can we just leave now?”

“Not until you put a nice smile on your face and decide to keep it there while we go back to the car.”

“Do I have to?”

“We’re not leaving until you do.”

He started to think about that for a moment.

“Jas, the longer you don’t smile, the longer we’ll stay right here. Is that what you want?”

“No.”

"Then smile. Please?"

Once again he rolled his eyes, and once again he tried to force a smile to his face.

"And don't forget to stand up straight while you walk."

Ugh!

Susan only had to stop him twice more on the way back to the car to get him to keep walking upright and to keep smiling. After the second time, Jasmine didn't even bother rolling his eyes, he mostly automatically corrected himself and they were able to keep going.

"Very good, dear," Susan told him. "Now we've just got to teach you how to move a little more femininely when you do anything else."

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The gunshots had been echoing through the neighborhood for most of the day. In fact, they had echoed through the neighborhood for most of the week once the kids got home from school. It was pretty irritating to most of the family, but Elliot competing in his first shooting competition kept everyone from complaining. In fact, all the boys and most of the men in the family were in Pete's backyard watching Elliot practice.

But during the afternoon hours now, Elliot wasn't the only one shooting guns, Pete had lined his son up right in the middle between Tommy, Hunter, Jimmy Joe, and Justin. He wanted all that shooting going on at once so that Elliot could get used to all the gunfire around him and not be distracted by it. The result was a tremendous amount of noise. Enough noise that nobody even heard Susan and Jasmine arriving home. And so naturally nobody came to help them unload the groceries from the car either. Not that either of them expected any help.

Jasmine was just glad to be home. From the department store they had gone to have lunch at a nice but cheap restaurant. And while there, his mother had continually hounded him to sit up straight and smile. And then she had started in with little things like, "Jas, please sit up straight and hold your head up. Or, "Jas, please be a little more polite how you put your food into your mouth." Or, "Jas, have you ever thought about the way you use your eyes when you

talk? You should really watch your girlfriends sometime and take notes.”

Ugh! And then once they had gotten to the grocery store, his mother had started in all over again. “Stand up straight Jas.” Or, “Smile Jas.” Or, “Jas, try holding your elbows a little closer to your body. You’re not a cowboy.” Or, “Jas, you don’t have to be so stiff when you walk. Relax!” Grocery shopping had been bad enough. Having to go out in public as a girl again had been bad enough. Having to walk around in public now with bigger boobs was bad enough. But now getting lessons on how he should do things and move every part of his body was downright aggravating! And then his mother had started all over again while they put the groceries away. The constant loud annoying thunder of the guns in the background pretty much echoed the way his nerves felt.

“Thank you, Jas,” Susan said once they had finished. “Why don’t you get out of here and find some of your friends for a while.”

But going out and possibly having his friends notice his bigger boobs wasn’t exactly high on his list. “Can’t I just go to my room and relax?”

“Why would you ever?” Susan said. “Now go say hi to everyone. Either that, or we can spend more time practicing arm and hand movements. And I noticed earlier that you’re not quite looking normal or comfortable yet when you sit down in that skirt.”

Jasmine’s jaw dropped. He turned and ran to grab the light jacket he had been wearing all day. He was out the door to the sound of his mother chuckling in the background.

Once out the door, even though the weather had turned really nice, he made sure to zip his jacket up all the way, trying to cover his new boobs as much as possible. Of course, the jacket wouldn’t hide the skirt or tights he was wearing, and it wouldn’t hide what his mother had done with his hair earlier that morning either. He tried his best not to think about any of that as he headed next door to Nichole’s house, where most of the family seemed to be hanging out in the backyard watching the guys shoot.

He found Nichole, Allison, Ashley, Lucas, and Aaron all standing back by the house watching the shooting. All the girls were watching with their fingers in their ears to block some of the noise. With all the

gunfire going on, Jasmine simply raised his hand to say hi, and stuck his fingers in his own ears as he stood next to Nichole to watch everyone shooting too.

His father was there standing behind Tommy and Jimmy Joe, ready to give them a few pointers to help in their own shooting, and he noticed that his Uncle Jed was there as well watching Hunter and Justin, neither of whom seemed to need any help at all. Jasmine seriously doubted that any of the boys needed any help. It was his Uncle Pete though that was heavily paying attention to what Elliot was doing. He was paying attention, but he didn't seem to be offering much help as he watched Elliot take shot after careful shot. But then there was no doubt that Elliot was very good at it.

The gunfire finally stopped, much to everyone's relief. "Any problems with all the noise going on around you?" Pete asked his son.

Elliot shrugged. "Some, but not much. It's harder to concentrate, but I don't think it made much of a difference."

Pete nodded. "But if it was harder to concentrate, then it did make a difference." He looked around at everyone else. "Let's change those targets out and try it again."

The noise in the backyard increased again as the boys grabbed some new targets and started walking the length of the backyard. But it wasn't the noise of gunfire. Some of Pete's dogs started barking at everyone crossing the backyard. Nobody paid any attention at all to the dogs.

The new targets were put in place and the guns were reloaded. But before anyone got ready to shoot, Clint turned around and looked at Jasmine. "Hold on a minute," he said to Pete to make sure nobody would start shooting yet. Then he turned again toward Jasmine. "Jas, get over here and take a turn. I want to see you shoot this gun again."

"Dad?" Jimmy Joe said, not happy to hear that at all.

"Me?" Jasmine said, totally surprised and not interested in the least.

"Jas, you know the family rules. Everyone has to know how to shoot the guns. There could be an emergency of some kind, and it's been a while now since you've done it."

“Good idea,” Pete said as he turned to look at all the girls still watching. “Nichole, you get over here too.” He turned to Hunter. “Hunter, let her use your gun for a turn.”

“Ashley, you too,” Jed said to his daughter. “You can use Justin’s gun.” He looked to Allison. “Don’t think you’re getting out of this either. Get over there and grab Tommy’s gun.”

“This should be good!” Hunter said with a laugh as he handed his gun to Nichole.

“Real good!” Tommy agreed as he handed his gun to Allison.

“Okay everyone, don’t start firing until I tell you,” Pete announced. “Take your time. Aim carefully, and do your best. And let’s see if any of you young ladies can do better than Elliot here. None of the guys seemed to manage it.” There was some laughter from all the boys at that remark.

“Okay,” Pete said. “Is everyone ready?” He looked around. “Then start shooting!”

The shooting didn’t start quickly. All of the girls had shot the guns before, they just didn’t do it often. Elliot though was the first to take a shot. Allison had to be reminded by Clint to take the safety off before the gun would fire. Ashley was the second one to shoot. Of all the girls, she and Jade probably had the most experience shooting the guns. Jade because he was really Jimmy, and Ashley because Jed pretty much made sure his whole family was very familiar with the guns and the dangers of where they lived. Of all the girls, Allison probably had the least experience. Her family was busier with their medical responsibilities and had less time for target shooting in the backyard. But that didn’t mean she didn’t know how to shoot. She just rarely ever did it.

Jasmine actually enjoyed the target shooting and he found the sudden competition to be exciting. It wasn’t anything at all like killing some poor animal. The gun had been given to him for Christmas, but it was really his sister’s gun. He had only fired a couple of rounds out of it once, so the gun was still new to him, but as he fired it he remembered now that it had been a fairly comfortable gun to shoot. As the rifle shots rang all around him, he sighted in over and over again on the target and slowly pulled the trigger. With the targets so far off, it was difficult to tell how he was doing. He just

hoped he was doing better than the rest of the girls...in the spirit of competition. He knew he didn't have a prayer of beating Elliot.

One by one, everyone finished shooting. Allison being the slowest and last. But everyone waited patiently for her while Clint watched her closely. Once all the guns had been put down, everyone, girls, boys, and men, headed across the yard to the barking of the dogs in the pen. The men pulled the targets down to compare them. Elliot's was quickly thrown out. Nobody even came close. But it was the other four targets that were scrutinized carefully. As expected, Allison didn't do that well. Only a couple of shots actually hit the target, and two of them were on the paper border. Nichole was a lot better. The majority of her shots had hit the paper, but they were very widely scattered. It was the targets that Jasmine and Ashley had shot at that were compared really closely, and it was fairly evident that Jasmine had outshot her, despite the fact that Ashley had done really well.

"Nice shooting Jas," Clint said with very satisfied smile. "Not quite as good as Jimmy, but darn good."

Jimmy playfully punched Jasmine's arm. "Ha! Got ya! I'm still a better shot."

"Yeah, but you practice and get to shoot that gun a lot more," Clint told her. "Jas here almost never gets to fire a gun anymore."

"Doesn't matter," Jimmy Joe replied. "I'm still the better shot."

Jimmy's stupid taunting grated on Jasmine's nerves. He desperately wanted to say something that could put his sister in her place, at least in something. And finding that something to taunt back with was all too easy. "Yeah," he replied. "But I've got bigger boobs, and you don't have any!" Despite their situation, Jasmine was glad to note the angry look that flashed across his sister's face. He walked away before she could say anything back.

Chapter 48 – Still in the Family

March 15th

Reverend Cosinger stood proud as he watched the members of his congregation slowly filtering into his church. He smiled and nodded as a few of them caught his eye. He waved and called a bright, “Good morning,” to a few others. But mostly he just watched the people coming into his small church.

He was proud because in the last few months, his congregation had grown to nearly half again its usual size, and he had dreams of adding even more new members. But his particular reason for feeling pride, was because he had seen last week the results of his steadfast faith. Last week, the blight had been abolished from the middle of his congregation. Last week, the McComber clan had finally stopped sending that blasphemous boy dressed as a girl into the middle of his congregation. He was feeling prideful because he had won the battle. God himself had stood over his shoulder and given him the strength, the fortitude, and the words to cast the demon right out of his church! For good!

He was feeling prideful, which he knew was wrong, especially in light of the sermon that he had prepared for the day that dealt in just that – feeling too prideful. But in contrast to the words that he planned on speaking, he decided that under the circumstances, a little bit of pride couldn’t really hurt. Besides, he had every intention of acting nothing but humble about the situation should anyone bring the subject up, which he honestly hoped that someone would. He knew that anyone who did bring the subject up would only be giving him praise for the job he had done in ridding the church of such a nuisance and a black spot in the eyes of God. Yes, he hoped that someone would mention it, and he had even rehearsed in his mind the kind and humble words he would say in reply to the situation. He just hoped that someone would give him that little chance to speak those words.

Ah! There was Valerie McComber and her daughter Ashley. He saw them wave and smile. He waved back. "Good morning," he called to them. They were smiling too. No doubt they knew the error of their family's ways and were glad to see the situation suitably corrected. He watched as a few others came in, and then he saw John and Jane Mason and their daughter Olivia. Goodness, their daughter looked extra nice with that new hairdo. No doubt a new dress too. Moments later, he saw Jane speaking with her sister-in-law Valerie and the two teenage girls talking, obviously about Olivia's hair.

One of the older members of his church came in and walked up to him. He silently prayed she would mention the way he had handled the blight.

"Good morning, Reverend," the elderly woman said. "It's such a beautiful day today. Isn't it?"

"It certainly is," Reverend Cosinger replied. He was so disappointed when she didn't mention the other subject. But that was fine.

He watched, waved, and greeted a few more parishioners, when his eyes caught sight of Jacob McComber walking in with his wife Rose. He wondered how Jacob felt about losing the battle. Not that he really cared, and not that Jacob would ever admit to losing. But in reality, he hoped Jacob was choking on the situation. He watched as Rose joined the women in the family to gossip while Jacob walked over and shook hands with John.

He waved, he greeted, and he nearly had a heart attack when his blood pressure made his face turn red, and he could literally feel his blood boiling as he once again saw the ugly blight walking right into his church along with his mother and father. And to make matters worse, there was the other blight with them too. Both children dressed as each other again, right inside his church. A double dose of abomination! Reverend Cosinger balled his fists and stared hard at those two pieces of blasphemy. He wanted to yell and shout and rant and physically throw those two sinful children out of his church, along with the entire McComber clan, who he had no doubt had planned it all just to get back at him for winning the week before.

His eyes locked with the eyes of the boy, and he saw that face once again break into its angry defiant sneer. And then he saw his mother speaking to him and the boy's face turned away, but he looked back again a few moments later, once again smiling that look that just dared the Reverend to make the wrong move or say the wrong thing.

Doing everything possible to control his temper that was on the verge of cracking, Reverend Cosinger stomped off to prepare himself for the church service ahead.

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"Well that was easy to decide," Rose laughed. "So first thing after lunch we'll all get together at my house to plan the Easter activities. Oh, it went over so well last year and I have no doubt it will be even better this year."

"Mom!" Valerie said quickly. "We've got to take our seats. They're getting ready to start the service."

"Goodness!" Rose said as she hurried off to sit with her husband in the very front row. Valerie and Ashley took their usual seats and Jane and Olivia moved into the pew where her husband was already sitting. Susan and Jasmine hurried into the pew just in front of them to sit with the rest of their family. After church, they would all go home and have lunch with their families. Then all the ladies in the family would get together to plan for the Easter festivities that the McComber family sponsored at the church every year. It was something that the McComber family had started many years ago and it had become a popular church function ever since. Last year, nearly the entire congregation had stuck around after church to take part. The family had noticed all the new people in church this year, so they had to make plans for even more people to attend.

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Reverend Cosinger eyed the congregation as he slowly stalked out to stand at the front of his church. He eyed the entire congregation, but his eyes lingered the longest and the cruelest on

those two awful children sitting in the middle of his church. He saw the angry sneer come back to the face of the one who looked totally like a girl. As his eyes lingered, he saw the mother elbow him and whisper. The sneer was quickly wiped from his face, but not that glaring, daring look in his eyes. His eyes fell on the other one, the one who looked all too much like a boy but was really the girl of the family. That one just looked lost, as if she didn't know what was going on. It was the girl...or rather the boy that was dressed as a girl that he was the most concerned with. That was the one the family had been bringing to church, week after week, just to torment him. It was that child who was better at tormenting him. It was that child that got the most under his skin.

He began the service as he always did, doing his best to ignore the blightful children in front of him. But doing so was truly all but impossible. Already his voice had the ring of anger and determination in it, though he hardly realized it. In his list of announcements, he reminded everyone of the annual Easter Festival that the church held every year. He didn't add that the McComber family planned and sponsored the entire thing. He was fairly sure he couldn't even utter the McComber name without spitting his fury at them.

The morning hymns were sung, although he didn't even bother trying to sing. He couldn't. His eyes instead searched out each and every McComber in the church, those two blasphemous children of course getting most of his attention. They were there just to spite him. They were there as Jacob McComber's way of trying to get rid of him. But it wasn't going to work. He had bested the McCombers before, and he would do it again. He had no doubt in the world!

God was on his side. God would stand shoulder to shoulder with him as he faced the very devil himself – and never once would he waver. God himself would stand with him in his fight.

Once again, when the time for his sermon arrived, he was sorely tempted to give an on the spot sermon on the blasphemous situation that sat in the middle of his church. But doing so was no doubt the very thing that Jacob was waiting for, just so he could fire him. The Reverend had no intention of giving Jacob McComber any kind of satisfaction at all. Instead, he launched into his prepared sermon on

the sins of pride, but once again, the power was back in his voice as he continually looked to the two bits of black abomination sitting just a short way in front of him.

The longer he talked, the more his eyes seemed to linger again on the two children, and particularly on the girl...the boy who looked like a girl. Nearly completely now. Enough anyway that if the Reverend didn't know better, he'd never be able to tell the difference. But there was no doubting that look of evil intent in the eyes of that sinful child. That sinful child of Satan!

His voice rose! His voice lowered. But never once did he back off on the determination of his words as he did everything possible to pound his message into not only those two pieces of blasphemy, but also into every McComber in his congregation. Over and over again he pounded his hand on the railing to help make his point. Over and over again he yelled his discontent to show them all his unwavering determination to walk God's holy path and nothing but. And over and over again he glared defiantly into the eyes of the people in front of him, particularly the McComber family, and particularly those two blightful children. And particularly into the eyes of Satan's daughter, who was in reality a very sinful boy.

And when his sermon finally ended, the entire church still echoed with the power of his final words. He held his chin high and turned his back on them all. He knew he had shown them the power of God. He knew it! Now let them see if they had the courage to face God's wrath again.

A few minutes later, he stood once again shaking the hands of everyone as they left his little church. Once again he noticed Clint McComber sneaking his family out while he was busy shaking the hand of someone else. And no surprise, once again Jacob and Rose McComber were the last in line. The Reverend proudly held his hand out to Jacob, daring him to shake it this time. He was and he wasn't disappointed that Jacob seemed to have no trouble shaking his hand.

"Nice to see you back on form again, Reverend. That was a reel rip-shooter today. Real good! See you next week."

Jacob let go of his hand and walked off with his wife, but the Reverend saw Rose McComber turn back to him just as they were

leaving and mouth, "Blow it out your ass!"

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While Susan and Jasmine were preparing to head up the hill to meet with the other ladies up at Rose's house, Clint, Tommy, and Jimmy Joe climbed onto their four-wheelers and headed off up the road with their guns strapped across their backs. Clint took the lead with Tommy bringing up the rear. Their trip up the easy roads lasted almost twenty minutes before Clint turned off onto an all but unnoticeable path and started plowing the way further into the woods. The three four-wheelers continued on much slower for another fifteen minutes before Clint brought them all to a halt. They all climbed off their machines, unslung their guns, and started walking slowly and carefully. This time, Tommy took the lead and Clint brought up the rear.

Clint watched his kids carefully. He hunted with Tommy often and was proud of the way he handled himself in the woods, it was Jimmy Joe that was his bigger concern. But he was surprised to note that this Jimmy Joe was a different Jimmy Joe. This Jimmy Joe walked comfortably through the woods, stepping carefully and barely making a sound. This Jimmy Joe was suddenly very skilled. It looked like all the time Jimmy had spent with her Uncle Jed and his two boys had paid off. The difference was startling.

They halted as they crested a small hill where they could see deeper into the forest through the trees. "There!" Clint whispered softly as his practiced eyes caught sight of a fox travelling through the woods with a rabbit in its mouth. As they watched, the fox headed for a pile of fallen branches. The fox slowed and almost disappeared, but they could still see just see the tail of the thing and not much else.

"No clean shot from here," Clint barely breathed. "We'll have to get closer." He felt a hand on his arm and looked to see Jimmy Joe staring up at him. The hand signals Jimmy flashed were another surprise, but their message was clear. He nodded. A moment later, he watched as Jimmy Joe started moving with all the stealth of a

Special Forces ranger, sneaking up toward the fox. Yeah, Jed had done a real good job teaching him...her!

Clint and Tommy watched as Jimmy got just so far, then turned around and came back.

Jimmy shook his head and whispered. "She's got three pups she's feeding there. Must be their den. We'll have to look elsewhere."

Clint nodded. "Good job, Jimmy," he said. "Tommy, take us a bit further south. We'll go way around them." Like all the men in the family, Clint wasn't about to shoot an animal taking care of its young. Not only would it leave the babies defenseless, but he wanted those young foxes to grow and breed more young foxes – that they could hunt.

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Jacob barged angrily through the side door of his house and into his kitchen. As he came through the door, he noticed his wife over by the sink. "That dang blasted kettle is leaking again!" he complained bitterly as he walked in.

"Again?" Rose asked.

"Again!" Jacob confirmed. It was only then that he noticed that Rose wasn't alone in the kitchen. He now noticed Valerie, Susan, Ashley, and...Jasmine, who his wife usually called Jade lately. "Oh," he said as he stopped himself short. He remembered that his wife was meeting with all the women to discuss the Easter celebration the family did every year.

"Didn't you just fix that thing last year?" Rose asked.

Jacob nodded. "And the year before that." He was uncomfortable now because they were talking about a subject that he never spoke of around others.

"Why don't you just replace the thing?" Rose asked.

"Replace it? Are you kidding? That thing is over a hundred years old! My Granddaddy built that thing!"

"Sounds like all the more reason to replace it to me," Rose told him.

“Rose, you don’t go replacing something like that. It’s priceless! Things like that are the whole secret to...um...” He looked around and stopped speaking. The other women in the room shouldn’t be hearing him talk about such things. Especially the two girls.

“So what are you going to do?” Rose asked.

“Fix it of course! Just like I did last year and the year before that...and about a hundred times in the past.”

“Well, I know you’ll do a good job of it dear.”

“Huh! Don’t I always?” He turned toward the door. “Better get busy, I guess. That dang thing won’t fix itself.”

“Grandpa!” Jasmine called quickly as he stood up. “Can I come? I’d love to see you fix something!”

Jacob turned and saw which child had spoken. “Um...no, J...um...” But he didn’t know what name to use. He never knew what name to use anymore with that particular child of Clint’s. And lately, he didn’t even know if he was supposed to call her...or him...a boy or a girl. “Um...sorry, but it’s not a good idea. Besides, you’re all dressed up fancy like from church, and that ain’t good for walkin’ around in the woods.”

“But I can change!” Jasmine offered quickly. He turned to his mother. “Mom, please can I go change into something better. Please? I really want to go with Grandpa and watch. Please? You let me wear pants before.”

Susan was totally taken aback. She had a pretty good idea that Jacob was talking about his still, but that was a subject that was never spoken of in the house. Never! She had never even heard her husband mention anything about it. “Um...I’m not sure that Grandpa wants...”

“Please Mom. Please?”

“Now hold on there, Ja...um...whoever you are. I didn’t say you could go.”

Jasmine turned back to his grandfather. “Please Grandpa. You know how much I like fixing things.”

Jacob stared down at the child that was begging him. He fully remembered watching him fix the sewing machine upstairs. A machine that was far more complicated than his simple still was. He remembered that this was the child that the whole family kept talking

about as having the knack for taking things apart and putting them back together again – fixed! And then he remembered that this was the *boy* that it seemed like he had more faith in than any of the rest of the family. He finally nodded. “Okay. But only if it’s okay with your mother.”

The sound of Rose’s coffee mug shattering on the floor grabbed everyone’s attention and wiped the slack jaws off everyone’s faces.

Jasmine ignored the shattered mug as he turned to his mother. “Mom. Please? Pretty please? I really want to go with Grandpa.”

Susan could easily see that Rose’s reaction to the offer had surprised her even more than she herself was surprised. “Um...I guess,” she finally got out.

Jasmine gave a big whoop of joy as he grabbed his purse from the floor behind him and started moving away from the table. “I’ll be right back Grandpa,” he called as he literally ran for the door.

“Jasmine!” Susan called after him to stop him.

“Yeah, Mom?”

“I’ll drive you. Just hold on.”

“Don’t bother,” Jacob told her. “I’ll drive him home myself, soon as I can get the stuff I need.” He turned to Jasmine as he too headed for the door. “I just hope you’ve got something better to wear out there than a damn dress.”

“Don’t worry, Grandpa, I’ve got some jeans that I know will be perfect!”

A moment later, Susan watched as the door closed behind Jasmine and her father-in-law. She turned to look at Rose who was still standing staring after them with a shocked look on her face. “I’m guessing he’s talking about a still somewhere?” she asked quietly. “As long as I’ve been in this family, I’ve never once heard anyone actually mention it.”

Rose finally turned her head to look at her. She nodded. “I can’t believe it,” she said. “Even I’ve never been there. And I have no idea in the world where that thing is stashed.”

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Outside, Jacob stopped halfway to his big garage and turned to Jasmine. "Now look here," he said with a troubled look on his face. "I really don't know if I should be takin you where I'm goin'. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I'm thinkin' I shouldn't."

"But I want to watch," Jasmine told him.

"I know," Jacob replied. "But that's not the point. Where I'm goin' isn't exactly the kind of place that anyone else needs to know about. You understand?"

Jasmine was a bit confused by that. "Not really."

"Hm!" Jacob grunted. He spent a moment looking at the nicely dressed "girl" in front of him, and again remembered that this was the child that was all too good at fixing and mending things. This was the child that was really into things like that and really loved it. He remembered too that this was the *boy* that wouldn't hunt. And he remembered too that he still did believe in the boy. "Jas...I mean Jimmy...I mean Jade. Heck! What the heck am I supposed to call you? Hell, I don't even know if I should be calling you a boy or a girl anymore."

His words actually disappointed and came close to hurting Jasmine. "It doesn't really matter," he replied softly. "I pretty much answer to anything, boy or girl."

"But that don't help me much. First off, am I supposed to call you a girl or a boy now? Am I supposed to refer to you as a she or a he?"

His question sent more disappointment through Jasmine. "Nobody ever really said," he finally replied. "Mostly, I guess, everyone calls me a '*he*'. But sometimes lately, my Mom keeps saying '*she*' instead. So I guess it doesn't matter."

Jacob nodded. "And what do you want me to do?"

Jasmine looked down at the ground, the disappointment and hurt over the matter clearly on his face. "I guess...I guess..." He looked back up at his grandpa. "I guess I look too much like a girl now. Everyone says I do, even when I get to be a boy. So if you want to call me a girl, that's fine. It doesn't really matter anyway."

Jacob nodded. "Maybe it would be easier for an old cuss like me. As much as I hate to say it, all I can see standing in front of me is girl. And as odd as it sounds, especially to me, a somewhat good

lookin' girl at that. So if it don't bother you none, then I'll try to refer to you as a girl...least until we can get this whole mess straightened out again. And I really hope it won't be too long."

"Me too," Jasmine replied, trying to smile a bit more. He was just glad to hear that his Grandpa wanted things straightened out too, even though there was that small part of him that wasn't so sure anymore.

"Now," Jacob said, "that just leaves us with the one big question. Do I call you Jasmine now, or should I do like Rose does and call you Jade. And don't hand me none of that 'it doesn't matter' stuff. What do *you* want?"

Once again Jasmine looked down at the ground, then back up at his grandfather as he thought about it. He shrugged. "It doesn't matter," he replied.

"I told you it does matter. At least to me. Now what do you prefer?"

Jasmine had to think about that for a few moments. It was a long few moments and Jasmine was surprised that his grandfather continued to wait so patiently. He finally looked up at him with somewhat of a decision finally reached. At least a partial one. "To be honest," he began, "after some of the things my sister has done to me, I'm not really sure I want people to call me Jasmine anymore. After what she's done, I'm not sure I want anyone thinking I'm the same person that she is. So because of that, maybe Jade would be the better name. But it really doesn't matter."

Jacob took that in and nodded. "Jade," he said, wrapping his head around the name. "Jade." He looked at the "girl" in front of him for another moment. "Maybe you're right. I heard lots of what she's done to you. So maybe I can't blame you for not wanting to share her name. Jasmine is a good name for a girl. Real good. But I can't seem to fault Jade none either. So I'll do my best to call you Jade from now on. Least, like I said, till we get the whole mess sorted out."

He continued to look down at Jade. Then he stood up straight and the look on his face became much more serious. "Now then Jade, that just leaves us with a much more serious matter."

“More serious?” Jade asked, not sure what his Grandpa could mean.

Jacob nodded. “Much more serious. And I mean that!”

“Uh...okay.”

Jacob tried to figure out where to start with his problem. “You know of course, that to us McCombers, our word is pretty darn sacred to us. When we say somethin’, we mean it. And we stick to it. We give our word and it’s our solemn bond.”

“Um...yeah,” Jade replied. “I remember my dad saying that once.”

“Good,” Jacob replied. “But just how do you see the matter?”

“Uh...well...I guess it makes sense,” he said. “If you want people to trust you and all.”

Jacob nodded. “Good thinkin’,” he replied. “Real good. Now where we’re goin’ and what we’re doin’ there is something you can’t tell another living soul. It’s something you never, ever mention...to anyone! Got that?”

“Where?”

“I ain’t sayin’ yet. I just want you to know that you don’t talk about it with anyone at all, not even your mother. Um...your father pretty much knows all about it of course, but if your mother asks, then you gotta tell her that you can’t talk about it – as per my orders. Got that? You don’t even mention this little trip or anything about it to anyone. Period! Understand?”

“Um...yeah. Of course. I can do that.”

Jacob looked down at him for a moment, then nodded. “Okay then. I’ll take you at your word. You just see that you keep it. Got it?”

“Yeah Grandpa. No problem. I won’t mention it to anyone. I promise.”

“Good! Then let’s get busy.” He turned and headed for his garage again to get his tools.

“Where we going?” Jade asked.

“I ain’t sayin’” Jacob replied. “We’re just goin’.”

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Since his Grandpa wasn't saying anything, Jade didn't say much either, other than to thank his Grandpa for letting him see him fix something...whatever it was that needed fixing. After grabbing a few things from his workshop in his garage, Jacob drove them down the hill to Clint's house where Jade literally ran into his house as fast as possible and changed as fast as he could. He was in such a hurry he almost forgot his purse before heading back outside and had to run back to his bedroom to grab it.

The drive wasn't long, just up the main road for a short distance, then a turn to the right on a much smaller road that headed back in the direction of their houses. Jade saw the big building where all the big machinery was kept that his Uncle Jed used to maintain the roads. He thought they were stopping there since that's where the road ended. He was very pleased about that. He had only seen inside that big building once before when his father had taken him there. He'd love to have the chance to look around at all that big equipment again. But his grandfather didn't stop there. He drove around behind the big building, and then turned off into a small work road that headed off into the woods. He drove a short way, then turned his truck around and parked it so it was facing out again in a small clearing between the trees.

"Got to walk from here, I'm afraid," Jacob told him as he got out of his truck.

Jade grabbed his purse and climbed down from the big pickup truck. He hurried around to the other side of it to catch up to his Grandpa. Jacob looked him over. The jeans, shirt, and sweater that Jade had picked were a lot more suitable than the dress Jade had been wearing earlier, if not still a bit too feminine for the woods. The sneakers on his feet were better than the pretty shoes he had been wearing earlier too. Jacob's only big problem with the clothes were that they appeared too tight. Especially the jeans. And the shape they were giving his body looked a bit too much like the way the rest of his granddaughters looked. It was positively disturbing to him. He also had one more bit of a problem. "Um...Jade. Why don't you leave that damn purse of yours in the truck. You ain't exactly goin' to need it out here."

Jade followed his Grandpa down the almost invisible path through the woods. They had to step over lots of fallen brush and branches and logs in the way, making the walk fairly difficult. "Why don't you clear this out and make it easier," he suggested at one point.

"Cause I don't want anyone findin' this path," Jacob replied. "It's too easy to spot as it is. But since I gotta come out here so often, not much I can do about it."

Jasmine was surprised by all the turns his Grandpa took off the path. And he saw a lot of other very faint paths leading off of the paths they were taking. "How do you know where you're going?" he asked at one point. "There's so many different trails."

Jacob grunted. "Been comin' here all my life. And those others are all false trails that do nothin' but lead back the way they came from. Mind the sticker bushes up here. There's lots of 'em."

Jade found that he had to be very careful walking past the stickers. He noticed that even his Grandpa was being extra careful as they made turn after turn going past even more of the dangerous bushes. And then the path suddenly opened out into a very small clearing, right up against the side of a small cliff. And right in front of them was a shallow cave of sorts. But it wasn't the cave that surprised Jade. "What the heck is that?"

"That Jade, is the biggest pride of the McComber clan," Jacob replied with obvious pride in his voice. "That's the very still that my Granddaddy built, and that my Daddy kept going, and that I've tended all my life too."

"Still?"

Jacob looked back at Jade and realized that this was a young child that wouldn't know much at all about such things. "That's what it's called," he said.

"What does it do?"

Jacob smiled. "I'm so glad you asked! Come on over here and let me give you a little sample."

Jacob led the way into the shallow cave to a corner at the very back. He had a good size jug there that he uncorked before pouring some of the clear liquid out into a fairly dirty glass jar. "This here is

genuine, top grade, best you can get, McComber moonshine. Take yourself a little sip and see how good it is.”

Jade took the glass jar from his Grandpa and looked at it. He wasn't too sure about it being so dirty, but the liquid inside it looked like nothing but clear water. Curious, he raised it to his lips to drink it. He could smell it a bit. A strange smell that reminded him of something he couldn't quite place. He sipped some into his mouth and soon spat it out again as it burned and filled his mouth with the worst taste imaginable.

Jacob laughed. “Better sip that stuff slow when you're just startin' out. It's mighty powerful. But your sister seems to have developed quite a taste for it.”

“Jasmine?”

“Well, I'm guessin' she was supposed to be Jimmy every time she had some,” Jacob replied. “Now slow and easy to start. You'll see how nice and smooth that there shine really is.”

Jade was nothing but skeptical, and he didn't really want to take another sip, but he put it to his lips and forced himself to sip the barest little bit of it. It went into his mouth, and he swallowed it. Just that little bit burned his throat all the way down – and he immediately remembered what it reminded him of. “That's the stuff you give us to drink on New Year's Eve!”

Jacob was delighted. “Good, isn't it?”

“It was all Jade could do to not declare a big fat no! Instead, he said, “Um...yeah. Real good. Here, want the rest?”

Jacob took it from him and took a big swallow. “Ummm. Nectar of the Gods!” He handed the jar back to Jade. “Have some more.”

Jade took the jar, but he didn't really want to drink anymore of the horrible stuff. “Um...weren't you going to fix something?”

“Oh yeah,” Jacob replied as he turned around. The darn kettle is leaking again.”

“The kettle?”

Jacob spent a few minutes going over the entire still with Jade, explaining how the thing worked. And when he was done, surprisingly, Jade repeated the entire process back to him, just to make sure he understood it all. And Jacob was pleased to note that

Jade hadn't said one bit of it wrong. The boy...or girl...seemed to understand it all perfectly. "Real good!" Jacob praised him.

"So what's the problem with it?" Jade asked.

Jacob pointed out where the big pot was leaking before he went about fixing it. All through the process, Jade looked carefully over his shoulder and asked a few very worthwhile questions.

"And that's it. All done," Jacob finally said as he turned the propane torch off and set it down.

"Now what? Are you going to make any moonshine now?"

Jacob laughed. "No, not today. We need to carry in a few bags of corn first."

"Corn?"

"You know anything better to make moonshine from?"

"I don't know anything about it at all," Jade replied.

"Well, don't worry your head over it now."

"So now we go home?" Jade asked.

"Nope! Now we gotta test it. We'll just boil some water and see if she leaks. Now grab that old bucket over there. I pull the water from a stream just a little ways from here. And that's another thing you gotta be careful of with moonshine. The water's got to be good. And I'm proud to say that the water we use is nothin' but the very best!"

While Jacob fetched the water from a nearby stream, Jade was asked to find some firewood, having to be extra careful to not get too close to the sticker bushes again. He dared not go back through the bushes the way they had come because he figured he wouldn't be able to find his way with all the turns they had taken. But fortunately, there was plenty of dead wood along the way to the stream where Jacob was getting the water from.

He watched carefully as Jacob took the big hood off the still, poured the water in, then fastened the hood back down again. At his Grandpa's direction, Jade himself laid out the firewood under the big pot and Jacob told him that he had done a good enough job. Then Jacob lit the fire and they watched it slowly start burning. Jacob tended the fire for a few minutes, adding wood to make it bigger, getting it to the size he wanted. Finally he nodded. "There," he said. "That should do just fine. He walked to the back of the shallow

cave and grabbed a pipe. He stuffed a bit of tobacco in it and carried it out to a piece of sawed off log that Jade figured had been put there just to sit on. Jacob pointed to another cut off log. "Have yourself a little sit" he said as he stuck the pipe in his mouth. "We just gotta wait now till she boils. Shouldn't be too long."

"How'd you learn all this?" Jade asked him.

Jacob grunted as he pulled the pipe from his mouth for a moment to study it. "My daddy taught me. Been doin' it all my life. But heck, there ain't much to do with it anymore. Not like the old days. Not like the old days at all."

"What do you mean?"

Jacob looked surprised. "What do you mean, what do I mean? I mean, times ain't like they used to be. There was a time when moonshine makin' was how we got most of the money for the entire family. There wasn't no pay for huntin' back then. Nobody ever heard of hunting clubs and such. Silly! No, we made top grade moonshine and sold it wherever we could. Course, the government decided at one point that makin' it had to be illegal. And then the damn government used to keep comin' up here and trompin all through our land tryin' to find the still so's they could tear it apart. Tryin' to keep us from makin' and sellin' any." He smiled. "They never did find the thing. That's when my daddy and granddaddy started plantin' all them stickers, tryin' to dissuade anyone from comin' too close over in this direction.

"I wouldn't want to walk through there."

"To tell the truth," Jacob replied. "I don't like it much either. But they're there and I figure they served their purpose pretty good."

"But you don't have to worry about the government anymore, do you," Jade noted.

"Huh! Worry about them all the time. Way, way back, the government decided that all liquor makin' was illegal. Then later they saw the error of their ways and started allowing it again, but they didn't seem to include moonshine as something they wanted to allow. So it's still illegal to make it...or sell it! Unless you've got some special license for it or something. Damn silly. Why leave out the best kind of liquor there is?" He removed the pipe from his mouth and shook it out. "Anyway, that's why you can't breathe a

word to anyone about this.” He pointed his finger straight at Jade. “And that especially includes all those girlfriends of yours!”

“I won’t mention it. Promise!” Jade told him quickly.

Jacob nodded and got up from his seat. He kicked the logs in the fire around a little. “She’s startin’ to boil already,” he noted. “We’ll let ‘er cook for a bit.” He sat down again.

“So you used to sell the moonshine?” Jade asked.

“Didn’t I say that a few minutes ago? Sure we did.” He chuckled a bit. “As I heard it from my daddy, business for the family was especially good during the prohibition days. That was the time when they had declared all liquor makin’ illegal.” He smiled as he pulled his pipe out again. “My daddy told me so many stories of how they used to drive all over the place just as fast as the cars and trucks could go back then. Just a racin’ around, trying to fool the government agents or just flat outrun them. Course, they never did catch us runnin’ the shine around. My daddy was too smart for them.”

“He was?”

Jacob nodded. “Sure was. Of course, neither my daddy or his daddy or any of the men in the family back then was actually drivin’ any of the shine anywhere. Turns out, my momma was takin’ it around with her whenever she did her shopping.” He laughed. “Them agents was lookin’ in the wrong place every single time!”

“Grandpa?”

“Yeah?”

“What happened to the rest of the family? Was it just your daddy and his daddy?”

Jacob’s face quickly turned sad. “No Jade, there was more. War took ‘em. Just like the war took my brothers. Oh there are McCombers spread all over Arkansas and Missouri. Other places too, but we never hear from them anymore. Now I guess I’m the last.” He looked up and brightened. “Until you that is. You and your father and all your uncles. We’re kind of growin’ the family all over again. And so far, I think we’re doin’ pretty good.”

“There’s lots of us!” Jade replied.

Jacob chuckled. “Not quite. But we are growin’. Changin’ too. The whole way we all live is different. Heck, we all hunt, but all the

food we eat don't come from what we kill anymore. But a lot of it does, so hunting for our food is still almost important to all of us as when we had to kill nearly everything we ate." He pointed at Jade again. "And I'm afraid that still goes for you too. Somehow, we've got to get a gun back in your hands and teach you to kill something!"

Jade felt nothing but sad and disappointed. "I...I just don't think I can do it anymore. I just don't want to kill anything."

"Why the hell not? Every other male in this family loves it. It's what we're all born to do! You've got to learn to kill something!"

"I killed some ducks. A couple of times," Jade replied. "I did it. I didn't like it, but I did it."

Jacob shook his head. "Ducks ain't much more than some overgrown pigeons. They don't hardly count. You got to kill something with meat on it. Something worthwhile."

"But we eat ducks all the time."

Jacob nodded. "Sure we do. I'm rather partial to them myself. One of my favorites. But you've got to learn to kill other things too." He leaned back a bit and smiled. "Course, one of the things I've had on my mind lately, since the weather started warming up and all, is some of your Grandma's tasty squirrel stew. That is some mighty fine stuff there. Mighty fine! In fact, I was considering going out squirrel hunting tomorrow, just so your Gandma can make me a batch. Why don't you come with me? We could have a great time just you and me, and I would think that shootin' some little old nuisance squirrels wouldn't bother you none at all." He looked hopefully at Jade about that.

Jade shook his head. "Grandpa. I've got school tomorrow. Remember?"

Jacob's face fell. "Oh. But hey, for something like that, we'll keep you home. And I'm sure that John will totally agree with me. You and me can go huntin' for squirrels, and to hell with school for that one day. And you can start getting' back into what you should be doin' again." Again he looked at Jade hopefully.

Jade only felt sadder. He shook his head. "Sorry Grandpa," he said softly. "I just don't think I can. I can't kill anything else. Ever!"

"Why the hell not?"

Jade shrugged. "I have nightmares," he said. "Bad ones. I keep dreaming that I'm some animal and I get killed. Over and over again. One minute I'm alive and beautiful, living a beautiful simple life, and then suddenly something rips my life right out of me and there's nothing but blackness. Nothing! And I can't tell you how that scares me."

Jacob stared at him seriously. "Jade darlin', nightmares like that are something to seriously consider. They're a bad sign. Bad! I'm going to have to do some serious thinking about them." He looked at Jade for a moment. "Tell me though, are these nightmares any better at all when you're being a girl than they are when you're a boy? Does it seem to make any difference?"

Jade thought about it for only a moment. "It's some better. Actually, it's a lot better. I don't have any of the dead animals on my wall staring at me all night. All the dolls in my sister's room where I have to sleep don't seem to bother me at all. It's just the animals that used to be alive that seem to bother me the most."

Again Jacob seriously considered that. Then he slowly nodded. "Look," he said, "as much as I hate to say it, until I can figure things out better, maybe you're in a better place right now the way you are. At least this way, you're not having to face the killing every day so you're not reminded of it so much. As much as I hate to say it, Jade darlin', maybe it's best for you for now. And in the meantime, I think I need to have a little chat with your Uncle Brian about it all. And I mean a serious little chat."

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"He went where?"

"Dad took him to his still, somewhere."

Clint looked with disbelief at his wife. "He was actually talking about his still, around you and Jasmine?"

"Well, not exactly. He never really used the word 'still'. But it was pretty easy to figure out. Your mother confirmed it though as soon as they left."

"Mom knew he took her...I mean him?"

"She was right there. Val and Ashley too."

Clint shook his head. "I just don't believe it! Dad never talks about his still. Never! Yeah, I know it exists. We all know it exists. But do you know how many times I've been there? In my whole life? Two! Dad's only had me out there twice – in my entire life. I have a vague idea of where it is, but I can pretty much guarantee I couldn't find the thing if I had to. The only one I'm pretty sure that Dad has had out there regularly is Jed. And that's it! But now he's taken Jasmine? Our Jasmine? I just don't believe it!"

Susan shrugged. "Believe it or not. That's where she is."

Clint shook his head. "It just don't make sense. What's Dad thinking? What the hell is he planning? You know Dad, he doesn't do anything without a reason. Nothing! Why the hell would Dad take our Jasmine out to his still?" He looked up at his wife. "It boggles my mind."

Chapter 49 – Nightmares in Black

March 16th

On Monday morning, Olivia waited desperately for something to happen. And then the best part was that it didn't happen just once, but twice! The first time it was Nichole who noticed and said the magic words, but the second time didn't happen until they were just getting into the lunch line when Jimmy Joe and Allison both managed to catch up to them. And it was Jimmy Joe who noticed first and became the second one to utter the magic words that thrilled Olivia so much.

“Olivia! You're wearing heels!”

Somehow, having it noticed twice like that made Olivia forget having to put up with being so cold all morning in class because she had decided to wear one of her new lightweight dresses to school and had foregone anything covering her legs, just to make the new sandals she had gotten look better. All her shopping with her mother had been done with one theme in mind – wanting clothes that made her look more grown up. She didn't want to be looked at and considered a little girl anymore. She had been thrilled when her mother had allowed her to buy the pretty shoes with the wide inch and three-quarter heels. And besides, Ashley and Allison wore heels sometimes, why shouldn't she?

Olivia had seen Jimmy Joe in church the day before and Jimmy had commented on her new hair and the new dress she had worn. But since she had gotten four new pairs of shoes on Saturday, none of the girls had seen this pair yet. And when they had been up at Grandma's house to talk about the Easter preparations, the other girls had talked some, but both Jimmy Joe and Jade hadn't been there.

It wasn't until all the girls sat down at their usual lunch table that Jimmy Joe finally had a chance to ask Olivia about what clothes she had gotten. As she ate, Olivia was more than happy to mention item

after item to the other girls, who she just knew were all totally jealous! And then she got around to mentioning something else.

"And you should see some of the new panties and bras I got," she told them excitedly as she put a sly look on her face and lowered her voice. "Satin and lace! Very...ooh-la-la!" She giggled and leaned closer across the table. "The panties I'm wearing today are the same kind that Jade got. So we're matching today."

Jade looked at Olivia with disbelief. "Don't tell them that!"

"Why not?" Olivia asked with a giggle.

"You got new panties?" Jimmy Joe asked as she leaned to see him past Allison. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why should I?" Jade replied.

"He got new bras too," Olivia mentioned. "I was there to see it."

"Olivia!" Jade complained.

"Why? What's wrong with telling them that? We had fun!"

"Maybe for you," Jade muttered. "For me it was just embarrassing."

"Oh don't be silly," Olivia replied.

"You got bras too?" Jimmy Joe asked, but her question was ignored.

Olivia leaned into the table again and lowered her voice. "It's official, anyway," she said. "Jade now wear's the same size bra as the rest of us."

"Olivia!" Jade complained again. "Stop it!"

"No!" Olivia replied with a big smile on her face before going back to finishing what she was saying. "I was there. We ran into Jade and Aunt Susan and they let us go back with them while they measured Jade to see how big she is now."

"You got measured?" Jimmy Joe exclaimed with disbelief.

Olivia ignored her and continued. "I got to see it all!" she said. "The saleslady who took care of him couldn't believe that he was still wearing those bras that were way too small."

"It's all fake!" Jimmy Joe muttered as she went back to her lunch.

"Oh trust me, it's not!" Olivia laughed. "Believe me, I was there. And like I said, I saw it *all*!" She giggled. "And then we went out and we both got all new underwear." She giggled. "It was Aunt Susan who suggested the prettier panties for Jade. He was looking at

some that were so plain they could almost be called disgusting! And the ones that Aunt Susan suggested were so nice that I decided to pick up a few pairs for myself too.”

Olivia started laughing, and so did Nichole and Allison. Jade was very embarrassed, but he couldn’t help smiling. Jimmy Joe was the only one who didn’t smile. She felt nothing but disappointment... and anger. Lots and lots of anger.

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It hadn’t rained in several days – much, but that didn’t mean the ground throughout the entire construction area wasn’t muddy. Actually, it wasn’t really all that wet, but Susan still had to step carefully to avoid getting mud all over her shoes. She lined up her next shot and took a picture. She had been trying to document all the construction since the very beginning. The cement foundations and slabs had been poured over the weekend for the new lodges, and now there were six blank slabs with plastic pipes sticking up out of them, but no construction workers in sight. She had figured that now that the slabs had been poured, they could get on with the rest of the construction. Why weren’t they doing anything?

She saw Jed’s truck pull into the office next door and she briefly turned her head as he went inside, before she moved onto yet another spot to start taking even more pictures. Five minutes later, she was standing just outside the construction area reviewing all the digital pictures. She heard the door to the office open again and saw Jed walking out. She didn’t pay him any attention until she heard him calling her name.

“Susan!”

She turned and watched as he approached. “What’s up Jed?”

“Just checking to see what’s happening,” he replied.

“Well, at least they got the slabs poured this weekend.” She waved toward where the buildings were “supposed” to be being built. “As you can see, today they’re hard at work – again!”

Jed smiled as he looked around. “I don’t see any materials that have been delivered yet. Have you heard anything about it?”

"Only that they were supposed to deliver a load of lumber today, but I'm still waiting for it."

"Which means the construction crews don't have anything to work with yet."

"I think they all just wanted a longer weekend," Susan replied.

Jed smiled again at her comment. "Hey," he said, "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"What's that?"

"Next weekend is Elliot's shooting competition, and as far as I know, everyone in the family is planning on attending."

Susan nodded. "Yeah, we'll be there. I don't think Clint, Jimmy Joe, and especially Tommy would let me ever live it down if we all didn't go and watch."

"Yeah, I guess it's a big deal for all of us."

"Do you think he stands a chance of winning? Everyone says he's pretty good."

Jed nodded. "He is, but I've never seen one of these rifle competitions so I don't really know what he's up against. But I think that just getting him into the competition to find out what it's like is what Pete's really interested in. And although Pete knows how good Elliot is, I think he's looking at this as more of an experience building thing for him than anything else. Even if he comes in last, Elliot may learn quite a bit."

"Last?"

"Okay, I seriously doubt the boy's going to do that bad. Hell, he may even win for all I know, but it will be good experience."

Susan nodded. "I'm sure it will."

"Anyway, since the competition is on Saturday," Jed continued, "I won't be doing anything at all with Jimmy Joe that day. So you'll have to decide if she should stay as herself or if you want her to become...Joe again. I'll probably take the boys out hunting on Sunday. I'm afraid I like doing that more than going to church. More than likely, I'll probably take her with me again then. But that means that if we keep to the rules then it would throw their days off when they have to be each other. So as I see it, we've got a couple of decisions to make. Do you want to let her still be a girl at that competition, and if you do, then should we just still try to keep to the

schedule and ignore that one odd day for her, or should we send her to the competition as Jimmy Joe?"

Susan thought about it for only a moment. Her daughter would get to be her daughter again for another day. Thoughts of the entire week having her twins be themselves at Easter ran through her mind, and how much she was looking forward to it. "I think I'd rather let her be Jasmine again for that day. We can switch them around again later that night, and I think we better just ignore the change in the routine and stick to the schedule for the next week."

Jed nodded. "Sounds good," he replied. "I gotta go check in with Dad now and see what he needs."

Susan watched him walk back to his truck and leave. Her kids would get to be themselves for three full days this week! She smiled as she made her way back to the office. Three days this week, and eight days coming up soon!

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"Hi guys," Susan called as her kids came in from school together. "How was school?"

"Fine," Tommy said as he hurried past. "I'm going over to Elliot's," he added as he hurried quickly for his room.

Susan had no questions as to why. The boys were still practicing for the shooting competition – way too much.

She got no answer from her twins. Jasmine was taking his jacket off and hanging it on the pegs on the wall, but all her attention was on Jimmy who hurried right past her, and it was obvious that something was bothering her again. "Now what?" she muttered. "How was school?" she asked Jasmine since she wasn't ready yet to deal with whatever problems Jimmy had.

"Okay," Jasmine replied.

Susan knew that in other words, it had been just another normal day for him. Which she figured was about as good as it could get under the circumstances. She watched as he too headed for his room. And then Tommy came running through the kitchen again and

didn't even look at her as he nearly crashed through the door going back outside.

Jasmine headed for his room. His room that was actually his sister's room. But when he got there, he found Jimmy Joe going through all the underwear in his dresser. "Hey, what are you doing?"

"Trying to see what you got!" Jimmy Joe replied. She picked up one of his new bras and held it up. "I see you got some that you don't have to worry about adding anything else to pad them out. They're already extra padded. And they're all so stiff you probably don't need to bother putting anything into them at all. They'll stand out all by themselves."

"All I asked for were some that were soft," Jasmine replied. "That's just the way they came."

"Bullshit!" Jimmy exclaimed.

"Put those back!" Susan's voice lashed from the bedroom doorway. "You've got no reason to be going through your sister's underwear."

Jimmy glared angrily at her mother as Susan came over and literally took the bra she had been holding out of her hand.

"I left your old bras in the dresser for the days when you get to be yourself," she said softly. "You don't need anything like these yet." She shook her head. "You don't need any at all! But if you want, you can still wear your old ones when you have to."

Jimmy glared angrily at her again for a moment, then stomped out.

Susan took a chance and called after her. "You can have the bigger ones anytime you want, you know!"

Jimmy turned around in the doorway, the angry look still on her face.

"All you have to do is agree to quit hunting. That's all you have to do to get everything you want."

"Bullshit!" Jimmy muttered before going to her room and slamming the door.

Susan shook her head and sighed. "I tried," she said, more to herself than to Jasmine.

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"Hi Dad," Brian said as he walked into his father's home office. "Sorry I couldn't see you last night. I didn't get home from the hospital until real late.

"That's okay," Jacob told him. "No harm done." He waved toward one of the comfortable seats in the room as he got up and started pouring his son a glass of expensive whiskey.

"Rumor has it that you took Jasmine out to the still yesterday," Brian said as he sat down.

Jacob nodded. "Yeah, that I did. And I got my reasons for it too." He finished pouring the drink, handed it to his son, and took a seat across from him. "While I was out there," he said, "I had a nice little talk with the boy. And it was something that he told me that has me more than a bit concerned. And that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"What did he say?"

But Jacob didn't go right to the point. "I always heard," he said, "that the boy was havin' bad dreams because he was scared of the ducks and other animals, including the dead ones hangin' on his bedroom wall."

Brian nodded. "Allison told me that a long time ago. Jasmine... the real Jasmine..."

"Jimmy Joe," Jacob said.

Brian nodded. "Evidently, Jimmy Joe used to talk about it a lot, how they scared her brother."

Jacob nodded. "Well, seems that ain't the whole story. Not by a long shot."

Brian sat back and took a sip of his whiskey, and waited for the rest.

"He told me yesterday," Jacob continued, "that he has nightmares a lot about being an animal, and then getting killed. And the way he told it, almost sent goose bumps up my arms. As he said, he keeps dreaming it over and over again. One minute he's some kind of living animal, and then suddenly he feels his life getting ripped right out of him. He says it leaves him in nothing but an empty blackness of some sort. He says it scares him real bad, and I

got to tell you, I believed him. Somehow, I think he's trying to imagine all the time what it's like to get killed."

Brian sat forward, completely concerned. "I think I better have a little talk with him. Tonight! I may need to put him on some kind of anti-depressants or something to help him sleep."

Jacob nodded. "That's why I wanted to have a little talk with you first about it. I also asked him yesterday if it was any better when he was being Jade than it was when he was being Jimmy. And by the way, he's decided he likes being called Jade better than Jasmine. He ain't too pleased with some of the things the real Jasmine has done to him. Doesn't want to share the same name as much anymore."

Brian grunted. "I can't say I blame him."

"What I'm worried about," Jacob continued, "is all these TV commercial's I keep seeing about all these drugs you doctors prescribe. From what I see, the drugs themselves are more of a problem than what the original problem was."

"Sometimes it happens," Brian admitted. "It's something we have to be careful of all the time. "All drugs can have side effects."

"Yeah, but it's the ones that can mess him up even worse that I'm most concerned about. From what I hear, lots of them seem to make them want to commit suicide."

"That's possible with many of them," Brian told him. "A lot of the psychiatric drugs can have that effect on some people. But not on everyone. As I said, it's something we have to watch for."

Jacob nodded. "And how do you watch for it, if that someone don't talk to you about it and tell you?"

"Well, that of course is always the big problem."

"From what I can tell, Jade don't talk about himself much," Jacob said. "Oh, he's perfectly happy to talk about other things. He even seems to be happy talking about some of the girly things he's got to put up with. And let him get a chance to see how something works or give him a chance to take something apart and fix it, and the boy's in heaven. But as to what he feels? Well, I think he still acts more like most men do than most women. He bottles it all up and holds it in so nobody knows. And mind, what I want is for that boy to become more of a man, not what we're puttin' him through right

now. But what I don't want is for him to run off and kill himself, and nobody even knows why.

"We need to look into this Brian and find some way to deal with it. But I don't want to take any chances of makin' this any worse than it already is. That boy's already been through enough. Too much! And right now, your mother is being awfully persistent about keeping things just as they are. She put the big stop on lettin' those two go back to being themselves."

"So I heard," Brian replied. He finished his whiskey in one big swallow. "I guess maybe I better go and talk with...Jade, right now."

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The sun had set, but there was still just enough light for Elliot to take a few last shots at the target. His final gunshots were echoed by Brian's knocking on Clint and Susan's back door.

"Brian," Susan said, surprised to see her brother-in-law there. "Come on in." She turned and went to the other side of the kitchen and yelled. "Clint! Brian's here." She turned back to Brian. "He'll be right here," she told him. "Take your jacket off. Want some coffee?"

"No," Brian replied. "No coffee." He took his coat off and hung it over the back of one of the kitchen chairs. "I just need to talk to you and..."

"Hey Brian," Clint said as he walked in. "What's up?"

"I just got back from Dad's," Brian told them. "He's more than a bit concerned about Jimmy....I mean Jade."

"He is?" Susan said as she moved forward since she was now concerned too.

Brian nodded. "Yeah, and he may have good reason to be."

"What's wrong?" Clint asked. "Sue told me he took him up to the still, but he refused to talk to either of us about it last night."

Brian grunted a little laugh. "Figures! Dad probably put the fear of God in him about it."

"That's pretty much the way I saw it too," Clint agreed. "So what's the problem now?"

"Nightmares!" Brian replied.

"He hasn't mentioned anything about it to me," Susan told him. "And I haven't noticed any problems like that."

"From what Dad says, I think he's had them for a long time. But surprisingly, when he's being...Jade, evidently they're not so bad for him. At least, that's what Dad told me. I want to ask Jade about them myself. Oh, and Dad made a point of telling me that he seems to prefer being called Jade over Jasmine now. Dad says he's not exactly happy with some of the things his sister has done to him, so he's not that happy about sharing her name."

"That's ridiculous," Clint said.

"No it's not!" Susan countered. "In fact, the other day when we were out shopping, he told the saleswoman that he'd rather be called Jade."

Brian nodded. "Well, whatever. But right now, I'd kind of like to talk to him about those nightmares. Dad is real worried about them."

"What kind of nightmares?" Clint asked.

"The kind where he keeps dreaming about what it's like to be killed. Over and over again."

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Three adults, and one child sat at the kitchen table. The three adults had cups of coffee in front of them. Jade had nothing.

"Jade," Brian said to him, "I just had a little talk with your Grandpa. He was very concerned about the nightmares he said you're having."

Jade shrugged. "He said he was going to have a talk with you about it."

"Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"What for? Besides, they're not so bad anymore. I don't dream about it as much."

"Tell me about them," Brian said.

Jade shrugged again. "What's to tell? I have these dreams where I'm some kind of animal."

"What kind of animal?" Brian asked.

"All kinds. All different ones."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Ducks, deer, wild hogs, rabbits, foxes. He laughed a bit. Sometimes I'm even a little squirrel."

Brian nodded. "So it's not just one particular kind of animal?"

Jade shook his head. "No. All kinds."

"Okay, so what happens?"

"Well," Jade said as his eyes turned toward the ceiling, trying to find a way to explain it. "All the time, I'm like something else, you know. And I'm some beautiful wild creature just living my life and enjoying it, you know? And then all of a sudden, I get killed."

"How?" Brian asked. "How do you know you get killed?"

"Well, sometimes I get shot, and I can kind of feel what it's like to have the bullet hit me. A few times I remember it was an arrow that killed me. That was even scarier. But sometimes I don't know what does it. I just realize that I'm suddenly dead."

"And what happens?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"That's just it. I dream that once I'm dead, there's just...nothing at all. Except that everything is all black and I can't see anything or feel anything or...I don't know. I just know that I'm dead and I never know why. And that there won't be anything else for me. And...and it scares me."

"It would me too," Susan breathed.

Clint nodded. "Why didn't you tell us?"

Again Jade shrugged. "Why? They're just dreams."

"But they're bad dreams," Clint told him.

"I didn't think all dreams were supposed to be good," Jade replied.

Clint didn't have an answer for that.

"I can put him on some drugs to help him sleep better," Brian told Clint and Susan, but Dad is concerned over the side effects of them.

"Side effects?" Susan asked.

"All drugs can have side effects. But that doesn't mean that they will. It's just something we have to constantly watch for."

"I don't want any more drugs!" Jade declared. "Aren't the ones you keep giving me bad enough?"

"They sure are," Brian agreed. "More than bad enough. But sometimes you've got to add other things to counter the side effects that you're getting from those other drugs."

"I don't want any more drugs!" Jade stated again. "And besides, I had those dreams long before this whole mess started."

"How long before?" Brian asked.

"Years!" Jade declared.

"Do you have any idea when they started?"

Jade tried to think about that. "I don't know. It's been a long time now. I guess maybe I kind of got used to them."

"So they don't bother you anymore?"

"Are you kidding? They terrify me!"

"So they're still real bad then."

"Not much I can do about it," Jade told them.

Brian thought for a minute. "Jade, I had heard once from Allison that you had other bad dreams too."

"Maybe," Jade replied cautiously.

"What kind of bad dreams?"

"What did she tell you?"

"According to her, your sister talks a lot about you having bad dreams where the stuffed animals on your wall keep trying to get back at you for killing them."

Jasmine rolled his eyes. "She still won't leave that alone."

"Does she still do it?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes."

"And do you have dreams like that?"

"Sometimes."

"I'll take those things down tonight!" Clint declared. "I wish I had known it was that bad."

"Don't bother," Jade told him. "Besides, I don't sleep in there much anymore, and to tell the truth, I haven't had any of those dreams in a while now."

"But you're still having the dreams about getting killed," Brian tried to confirm.

It was a moment before Jade could answer. "Sometimes," he admitted. "But not as much anymore."

“Jade, can you think of any particular time when they get worse for you? Do you think anything happens, like during the day, that may trigger those dreams for you?”

Jade tried to think about that. “No. I guess, maybe they’re worse when people start talking about hunting. Or when I see some of the animals that get killed. I think they may be worse then. But like I said, I don’t seem to be having them as much anymore.”

Brian nodded. “According to Dad...your Grandpa, he says that you told him they’re not as bad when you’re being Jade as they are when you’re being Jimmy.”

Jade thought about that. “Pretty much, I guess. But then when I’m Jade, we don’t talk much about hunting and killing things like all the rest of the guys do.”

“But you still have the nightmares,” Brian pushed.

Again Jade had to think about that. “Sometimes,” he admitted. “Just not nearly as much.”

Brian nodded, then looked to Clint and Susan. “I’m not sure what to do here. I can give him something to help him sleep, but...”

“I don’t want any more drugs!” Jade stated firmly again.

Brian paused and looked at him, then continued with what he had been saying. “As I was saying, it doesn’t sound as bad for him when he’s being Jade.”

“It’s not!” Jade told them.

“But either way, we need to get at the root of the problem here and find some way to deal with it.”

“I don’t want any more drugs!” Jade said again.

Brian continued to ignore him.

“You said Dad was concerned about the side effects?” Susan asked.

“Yeah. And he does have some valid concerns. He was mostly worried that some of them can cause the patient to want to commit suicide.”

“I’ve heard that one mentioned a lot on TV,” Susan replied.

“It’s actually a somewhat uncommon side effect with a lot of drugs, but it is possible.” Brian explained.

“Hey,” Jade said, “I’m not interested in killing myself. Being killed in my dreams is bad enough!”

"But it's possible that some of these drugs can make you want to kill yourself – to end it all," Brian explained to him.

"Then don't give me any. Like I said, I don't want any more drugs. I'm fine. I'll deal with it. I always have."

"But it's not good!" Brian told him.

"Neither is having to go around wearing dresses everywhere. You think that's good? Believe me, it's not! And mom, I'd really like to be able to wear pants a little more often."

Susan rolled her eyes. "We'll discuss that later. We're worried about your dreams right now."

"Don't worry" Jade said. "Like I said, I've always had them, and I probably always will. But I'm not going to kill myself because of them. It's the dying that has me scared to death!" He looked around at all the adults. "Shouldn't it?"

Clint nodded. "Yeah, son, it should. Without a doubt."

"Then don't worry about me. I'm fine." Jade replied.

Susan reached out and grabbed his hand. "Jas," she said, her voice thick with her concern. "Are you really? Having nightmares all the time is not fine!"

"I don't have them as much anymore," he said. "So maybe they're getting better."

"But they're still less when you're being Jade, than when you're being Jimmy," Brian stated, trying to make sure the facts were correct.

"I guess," Jade replied.

Susan shook her head. "I guess we could just keep him as Jade all the time now." She rolled her eyes. "He pretty much looks like a girl all the time anyway, even when he gets to be himself."

"Please don't!" Jade said quickly. "I don't hardly ever get to be me anymore. Hardly ever!"

Susan looked at Brian, then her husband. "So what do we do?"

Both men shook their heads.

"Don't do anything!" Jade said. "And like I said, I don't want any more drugs!"

Clint swallowed as he looked at his wife. "Maybe...right now... it's for the best."

Chapter 50 – Shooting and Hitting

March 21st

Going anywhere with the whole family was much easier in Clint's truck than in Susan's car, especially for the kids who all rode in the back seat. And as far as Susan was concerned, she'd much rather have her husband chauffeur her and the kids around instead of her having to drive anywhere herself. That was particularly true that Saturday morning as they wound up following John's truck toward Elliot's shooting match.

While Clint drove, Susan was able to sit back and relax and just enjoy the hilly scenery. They really did live in a gorgeous area. They just rarely took the time to appreciate it. In fact, Susan wasn't sure if her kids appreciated it at all!

The country music playing on the radio had Susan softly humming along to the catchy tune. She was feeling good. Beautiful scenery. Good music. And Jasmine was Jasmine, and Jimmy was Jimmy. On a Saturday! She sat back and relaxed, and purposely didn't think about the fact that her son was once again her son, but he looked way too much like a girl, and that her daughter was once again her daughter, despite the fact that she looked way too much like a boy. They were simple little things she purposely refused to focus on, and tried to forget. It was something that was much easier to do in the car since they sat behind her and she didn't have to look at them.

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Jasmine Joe sat in the middle between her two brothers. It was where she usually sat when she was being the girl. She'd much rather sit on the outside where she could see out the windows better. But from her seat in the middle she did get a better view ahead. Unfortunately, the road ahead was about all she could see.

She was herself again. The third day in a row! It had been weeks since she had gotten to be herself for that long. And the way things had been going lately, one of the best parts now about getting to be herself, was that nobody ever accused her of not acting enough like a stupid boy. As if she'd ever want to!

She had hurried to get dressed that morning because they had left the house really early. Why did they have to hold these competitions so early in the morning? Weren't they worried about waking people up with all the noise of the guns? Dumb! She had rushed more than usual to get dressed too. First she had to help her mother pack one of the coolers with lunch because they didn't know what they would be able to find there. Then when she was able to get dressed, she had to rush because she didn't know what to wear. What do you wear to a shooting competition? She was a girl and was getting to enjoy being a girl. She really wanted to wear a nice colorful skirt outfit, but she already knew that skirts were probably not the best thing to wear to something like that. So she had finally decided to go with a simple pair of jeans and a really pretty sweater top. She wanted everyone to see that she was a girl.

She had tried to wear one of her stupid brother's bigger bras, despite the fact that her mother had told her not to. And darn it, even twice the number of tissues she put into her old usual bras didn't seem to fill the craters inside the thing. Unfortunately, her mother had caught her and made her go back and put one of her own tiny bras on instead. Damn! How's a girl supposed to feel like a girl without the primary equipment showing? Because of all that, she barely had time to do a little eye makeup before her father had almost forcibly gotten her out of her room, grabbed her jacket for her, and hurried her into the truck where the rest of the family was already waiting. Didn't he know it takes a girl longer to get herself ready for these things? Stupid men!

Stupid men, but at the same time, she just knew there would be lots of cute boys where they were going. She couldn't wait to get there!

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Jimmy Jade sat staring out the window as they rode past hills, and trees, and hills, and trees, and hills...it was monotonous. Why did he have to go to this shooting match anyway? Just because all the rest of the family was going? Unfortunately, he wasn't given much of a choice in the matter.

He was a boy again. Third day in a row. It felt weird not switching back yet. He was doing his best though to enjoy being himself as much as he could. He already knew that his Uncle Jed would be taking his sister hunting in the morning, which meant that he would be turning himself into her later that night. It didn't scare him at all. He was glad to be himself, but he was used to being his sister now too. Either way, it didn't much matter to him anymore. It was just easier to sleep at night with a thousand doll eyes on him than sleeping under the stares of the animals hung on his bedroom wall. He didn't believe for a minute that Cleo helped him sleep through it. But he wasn't about to try sleeping without her.

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"That must be it," Clint said as he reached and turned the music down.

As Clint pulled into the field and then turned his truck to the right, Susan could see a few tents and special trailers set up in the other direction. She noticed there was quite a number of people there already. She also saw quite a few folding chairs with people sitting in them. "Looks like we should have brought some chairs with us."

"We didn't know!" Clint replied. He parked his truck right next to John's truck.

"There's Ethan and Justin!" Tommy called. A moment later, he was out of the truck.

"Watch the cars!" Susan yelled, trying to get him to be careful. She saw Tommy turn his head, barely, but he kept running. A moment later, Hunter and Lucas had joined the older boys too.

"You all watch yourselves out here," Clint warned his two remaining kids. "We don't know what this is going to be like, so try to stick together, or with family anyway. If you need us, your mother

and I will be...somewhere. Just find us. Hopefully it shouldn't be too hard."

By the time Jasmine Joe and Jimmy Jade got out of the truck, Olivia was standing and waiting for them. Together, the three of them headed for the festivities.

"It's like a little fair!" Olivia exclaimed happily. "Look, there's places where we can buy food and stuff!"

"With what money?" Jimmy Jade replied.

"We'll have to get some," Olivia conceded.

There were men and boys carrying guns everywhere. In a way, it was somewhat frightening. Most of them had big numbers taped to their backs. They finally saw their Uncle Pete sitting at a table not far from one of the trailers that offered coffee and some breakfast sandwiches. He was sitting reading over some paperwork with Elliot while Uncle Jed looked on. Nichole, Ashley, and Allison were standing and talking behind them.

"Cole! Ash! Allie!" Olivia called as she took off at a run toward their friends. When Olivia started running, so did the rest of them.

"Hey," Ashley called brightly. "You finally got here."

"How long have you been here?" Olivia asked.

"I just got here a little while ago," Allison told them.

"Me and Dad came earlier to help get Elliot all set," Ashley explained. "Ethan was supposed to come later with Justin," she added.

"They're here," Jasmine Joe replied. "They got here just before we did."

"They'll find us then," Ashley was certain.

"Want to see what else is around?" Olivia suggested.

"Sure," Nichole replied. "She turned to her father. "Daddy, mind if we wander around a bit?"

Pete looked around, then nodded. "Have fun, but you girls might want to stick together."

"That's what my dad said earlier," Jasmine told him.

Jimmy didn't bother pointing out that he was supposed to be one of the guys today.

A moment later, all the girls, and Jimmy, were off to see whatever there was.

"What time does this thing start?" Jimmy Jade asked.

"Not till ten," Ashley replied. "Elliot probably won't start until eleven though. They've got to do the real young kids first. Air rifles! Can you believe it?"

"You're kidding! Air rifles?" Jasmine exclaimed. "What kind of shooting can you do with them? They're toys!"

"Dumb huh?" Nichole said.

"Totally!" Allison agreed.

Ten minutes later, they had wandered past all the tents and they turned around. When they got back to where their Uncle Pete had been with Elliot, they now saw most of the rest of the family, including their Uncle Jack and Aunt Jessica. They saw the parents anyway. Other than Elliot, all the boys were gone.

"You girls okay?" Olivia's father asked them.

"We're fine, Dad," Olivia replied. "Hey, can we have some money?"

"What for?" John asked.

"So we buy some snacks and things?"

John shook his head. "We packed lunch and a few snacks for later," John told them. "And the shooting should start here in just a few minutes."

Jane punched her husband playfully in the arm. "Oh for heaven's sake, John. Give her a few bucks. They're not interested in the guns." She winked at Olivia. "Neither am I, she whispered loudly.

John looked up somewhat annoyed at his wife, but he pulled out his wallet and handed Olivia a ten dollar bill.

"Thanks, Daddy," Olivia said as she went over and gave him a quick hug.

"Just don't spend it all at once!" John told her. "Make it last."

"Don't worry, Daddy," Olivia replied.

"Um...Dad?" Allison said to her father. "Um..."

"I know, you want some money too!" said Brian. He reached into his wallet and pulled out a bill and handed it to her.

Ashley's father did the same for her, and Pete gave Nichole some money as well, but when Clint pulled his wallet out he had to complain. "It's not fair. I've got two kids here."

“Just wait,” Susan told him. “As soon as any of the boys catch wind that they’ve got money, you know they’ll be around for a handout too.”

“Don’t remind me,” Clint replied. “Hide that money girls!” he said jokingly.

“Come on!” Allison said quickly. “Let’s go!”

As the girls all started to run off, Jimmy Jade was stopped by the sound of his Grandpa calling his name. “Jade! Hold on a minute!”

Jimmy turned around and went back to his Grandpa. “Yeah?” he asked.

“You’re supposed to be a boy today, right?” Jacob said to him.

“Uh...yeah. Of course,” Jimmy replied.

“Well then, since you’re supposed to be a boy, I’d rather see you try to hang out with them today instead of with all the girls. If you’re gonna be a boy, then stick where you belong. Got it? Least, that’s the way I see it. Clint, you think any different on the matter?”

Clint was surprised by that. “No. Not really. It would probably do him good for a change to stay with them.”

Jacob nodded. “I think the boys are all back over toward where the official’s tent is,” he told Jimmy.

Jimmy shrugged. “Okay,” he said. As he turned to go, he saw the girls all standing and waiting for him. “I can’t stay with you today,” he told them. “Grandpa wants me to spend some time with the guys.”

Olivia looked disappointed. But it was Jasmine Joe who shouted, “Come on, let’s go!” Olivia was the only girl who didn’t start running off right away. She paused briefly to look at Jimmy Jade before she too turned and ran after her friends.

Jimmy didn’t run. He started walking through the crowd. But even in the crowded area, without any of his friends around, he felt somewhat alone. When he joined the other guys, none of them even questioned it. He was with them, but since they were all talking about shooting and hunting, then none of them really seemed to pay the least bit of attention to him. Because of that, he still felt somewhat alone. At least with the girls he didn’t feel that way. At least with them, he felt a little bit of moral support.

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Jimmy Jade stood with the other boys in the family and watched the youngest kids shooting. Air rifles. They didn't make much noise and the targets weren't all that far off. Somehow though, the group of watching boys grew larger. Much larger. It was almost as if all the teenage boys in the area congregated together in that one place. Jimmy Jade noticed that many of the boys that joined them had numbers attached to their backs. It looked like they were going to be Elliot's competition.

With the growing number of boys, there was quite a bit of lighthearted talking and joking that went on between all of them. Jimmy was particularly surprised when several of the boys he didn't know started mentioning things to him or asked him questions. Maybe the guys in his own family weren't talking to him just then, but at least a few of the guys he didn't know were being nice.

After a while he realized that a couple of the guys in particular were staying near him and were talking to him quite a bit about the little kids shooting that was going on. They were acting almost as if they were regular friends. Jimmy didn't know what all his girlfriends were doing, but he hoped they were having a good time. He was just glad that since he had people to talk with, he was able to enjoy himself somewhat too.

It took quite a while. The young kids had to shoot at three different targets from three different positions, standing, kneeling, and laying down. But eventually they finally finished and the officials went out to collect the last set of targets. There wouldn't be much to see until the winners were announced after they checked the results. He turned to one of the kids he had been talking to. "I think I'm going to get a drink or something."

The boy's face brightened. "Hey, sounds like a plan! I'll come too."

Jimmy looked around for his brother and finally spotted him. "Tommy!" he called. When he finally got this brother's attention he yelled. "I'm gonna get a drink!"

Tommy, who was busy talking with Hunter and some guy Jimmy didn't know, only waved and yelled back, "Okay!"

Jimmy and the other boy headed slowly to join the long lines in front of the places that were selling the food and drinks.

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The girls had all watched the shooting – for a few minutes, but had quickly gotten bored. Even with the targets closer for the little kids you still couldn't see if anyone even hit one of them. They wound up going back toward where there were some tables set out near where the food and drink places were. While everyone else was watching the shooting, they sat and talked.

“Hey look!” Allison said at one point. “It looks like Jimmy has found a friend.”

“I wonder who he is,” Nichole added.

“He's not one of the guys in the competition,” Olivia noted since there was no number on his back.

“But he's still cute,” Jasmine Joe said.

Nobody said anything else as they all watched Jimmy and the boy select a long line to stand in to get something to drink. They saw the two boys say a couple of words to each other, then Jimmy turned in the direction the line was going while the other boy stood behind him. Nichole and Jasmine looked away to start talking again, but it was at that point that Ashley said, “Oh my God!” and her jaw dropped open.

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Jimmy had just been standing there for a moment, when he suddenly felt a hand come around him from behind and grab and squeeze his right boob! He jumped in shock and spun around. “What the hell are you doing?” he yelled.

“Sorry,” the boy said with a big grin on his face. “I just had to be sure, that's all.”

“What do you mean?” Jimmy asked as he rubbed his boob and then realized what he was doing before he forced himself to stop.

“Well,” the guy said, still with the big smile on his face, “I wasn't totally sure for a few minutes there. I mean, you look like a girl and

all, mostly, but it looks more like you're wearing guy's clothes and you don't really act like the other girls. You act more like a guy in some ways, and I think that's totally cool. From the way you talk and move and all, you don't seem so all stuck up and prissy like most girls are, so I'm guessing I don't have to worry so much about the things I say or how I act around you."

Jimmy was shocked. The guy was actually convinced he was a real girl! Even though he was dressed as a boy today. "Um..." He was about to set the guy straight on the matter, but he realized that he did still look too much like a girl.

Before Jimmy could really say anything, the boy asked, "So what's your name?"

Jimmy was still trying to decide if he should set the record straight on whether he was a boy or not. And then he realized that as far as the boy was concerned, he already had his proof. And because of that, how could Jimmy explain the fact that the boy had felt a real breast under his shirt and jacket. "Don't squeeze my boobs!" he said instead. "That hurts!"

"Sorry!" the guy said, still with that same big smile as he held up his hands. "I promise, I won't. I'll even buy your drink for you. So what's your name?"

Jimmy was still staring at the guy, not knowing what to make of what had just happened. But the name, "Jade," came out of his lips.

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"Did you see that?" Ashley asked in disbelief.

"He squeezed her boob!" Allison confirmed, equally amazed.

All the girls watched closely as Jimmy Jade rubbed his boob and complained about it. They couldn't hear what was being said, but the anger on Jimmy Jade's face pretty much said everything. "Come on," Ashley said quickly as she got up. "Let's make sure he doesn't need any help."

"Hey Ash," Allison said as they were still getting to their feet. "Is that guy hitting on Jade?"

Ashley watched them for a moment. "I think he is! Come on girls!"

Jasmine Joe was stunned. Some idiot boy, and a rather cute one at that, was actually hitting on her dumb brother! And he was supposed to be a boy today! What was he doing, trying to convince everyone that he wasn't a boy? While she was mentally berating her idiot brother, the one thing she really felt, was jealous. The boy really was good looking.

Ashley quickly led the way up to Jimmy Jade. "Jade, are you okay?" she asked, her voice full of concern.

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just a bit...surprised."

Ashley turned to the boy. "What the hell did you think you were doing?" she yelled. "You don't just go and grab someone's boob! That's rude. I've got a mind to see you run out of here! See what you're parents think of the way you acted."

"Hey," the boy replied quickly as he backed off a bit. "I just wanted to make sure, you know. You know how it is with some people these days, sometimes you don't always know what they are. And with the way she's dressed, I wasn't totally sure. So I had to find out."

"But you don't go squeezing their boobs!" Ashley told him in no uncertain terms. "You could have just asked."

"But what if they lie? Lots of people lie about things all the time. So I had to be sure."

Ashley backed off, not sure what to say to that. "Well you still could have found a better way."

"But now I know she's just as much a girl as the rest of you." He looked around with a hungry smile on his face. "And a mighty fine lookin' bunch of girls you sure are. His face clouded though as his gaze fell on Jasmine Joe.

Jimmy Jade was just then recovering his wits. "I think I'll go sit with Mom and Dad. I'll get in less trouble there. Thanks guys," he said as he walked off.

"So," the boy said who had been hitting on Jade. "Any of you want a drink or something? You are all knock-em-dead gorgeous!"

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"You're back, Sweetie," Susan said as Jimmy walked up to join the grownups. "Why aren't you with the guys?"

"One of them just squeezed my boob," Jimmy told her.

"He what?" both Susan and Clint exclaimed at the same time. "Who?"

"Just some guy," Jimmy told them. "We went off just to grab a quick drink and he was trying to see if I was a girl or a boy...so he says."

"What did you do?" Susan asked.

"The other girls got there quick and Ashley kind of baled me out. I'm afraid that the guy does think I'm a girl though. So I decided that maybe it'll be safer if I stay here with you."

"I think that may be a good idea," Clint agreed.

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Elliot carried his gun out to his designated shooting spot, position seven. There were enough boys in his age group that had signed up that they had been divided into two groups. Elliot was in the first group. He figured that was because he had signed up for the competition before many of the others. Like the younger kids had done, there would be three separate rounds – standing, kneeling, and prone position where he would be laying on the ground. He would shoot his first round, then the next group of boys would come out and shoot the same position before he went back for his next turn at the targets.

He reached the divided off spot he was supposed to shoot from. He took the time to look around. All the people behind him scared him a bit, but he did his best to shake that nervousness off. He was also nervous because this was something that was all new to him. Was he good enough? His father seemed to think so, but even his father had never been to a shooting competition before so he didn't really know. All they could do was try...so his father said. Elliot had no doubt that his father was looking for him to win.

He took a deep breath and tried to concentrate on the target that so far off now. Much further away than where they had been for the little kids. This was it. This was what he had been practicing for so

much for the last few weeks. It was time to see how good he really was. He was just having a hard time ignoring all those people behind him who were watching him so closely. He could literally feel how nervous he was.

One by one, the names of each of the shooters were announced. Noticing what the other shooters did, when his name was called, Elliot raised his hand and turned to the entire crowd. There had been applause and shouting for each name, but he thought there was even more for him. Of course, the entire family had come out to see him shoot today. They were all there to support him. And despite what his father had told him, many times now, he knew that like his father, the entire family expected him to win. It added a lot of pressure to his situation.

The first of the targets were already in place. He would shoot his rounds at it while standing. It was the way he practiced the most. It was also the most difficult of the three shooting positions when it came to really scoring. It took a few minutes, but the announcement finally came for the shooters to begin. He raised his rifle, sighted carefully, and pulled the trigger.

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“How’d he do?” Jacob asked.

Pete, Clint, Jack, and Jed all had high powered binoculars and had them trained on Elliot’s target. “A little high and to the left,” Pete replied.

“It’s in the outside ring,” Jed added.

As each shot was fired, the spot he hit was spread around. “Any of you checking the competition?” Jacob asked.

“He’s doing pretty well,” Clint replied, “but have any of you checked the target of the guy two positions to the left of him? I’m afraid he’s got Elliot beat right now.”

“Three down from that kid is doing better too,” Jed replied.

“Settle down, Elliot,” Pete breathed. “Settle down.”

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Since they didn't have seats, the best place the girls could find to watch Elliot shooting from was where all the boys seemed to have gathered. None of the girls minded mingling among the boys at all, especially Jasmine Joe. Just being near a bunch of good looking guys was doing things to her enhanced sexual drive that kept her all too interested in them.

Despite the shooting competition going on that all the girls were "mostly" looking at, each of them was also spending time surreptitiously watching the boys as well. Whether they realized it or not, few boys can resist checking out a bunch of pretty girls as well. And the guy who had squeezed Jade's boob was now trying to talk exclusively with Allison, who wasn't sure if she should tell him to get lost for what he had done to Jade or go ahead and be nice. Jazzy Joe was right, the guy was pretty cute.

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The last three shots in the first round were fired and after a few moments of checking what they could see of the targets, the men all lowered their binoculars. "Those last few shots were some of Elliot's best," Jed said. "I don't think they were enough though to catch those other two guys."

As the officials headed out to collect and replace the targets, Elliot and the group he had shot with moved off the range and the next group of boys headed for their places. Since Elliot would be off the range for a few minutes, Pete quickly headed over to where he could talk with him.

"How's it going?" Pete asked his son as soon as he got there.

"Okay, I guess," Elliot replied. "It's harder than I thought with all these people here."

"Ignore them!" Pete told him. "Just concentrate on taking your shots."

"It's kind of hard to ignore that many people. And there's so much noise back there all the time."

"Yeah, we didn't plan for a circus like this. And there's no way we could have known there would be this many people here." Pete thought about it for a moment. "Got an idea you can try."

"Yeah?" Elliot asked.

"When you get ready to shoot, imagine yourself out in the woods, hunting. It's nice and quiet out there and you're generally pretty much alone. Just you and whatever you're hunting. Do your best to picture yourself like that. Maybe it will help."

Elliot thought about that and nodded. "It's worth a try," he replied.

Pete slapped his son on his shoulder. "You're doing great, Elliot. Just try to keep it up, okay?"

"I will, Dad," Elliot replied.

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With no shooting to watch for a few minutes, the joking among the boys started up again. There were just less of them now since many of the ones who had been there earlier were now out on the shooting range. The girls all found themselves being paid attention to by some of the boys as the boys talked with them too. All except Jasmine Joe. The boys seemed to look at her, and then all look away. It left her feeling more and more frustrated and hurt. That is, until she heard one of the guys say, "Hey look, it's the girly boy!"

She turned and recognized the same rude kid that had said that to her in the gun shop a few weeks ago. "Don't call me that!" she said angrily.

"Why not?" the guy laughingly taunted. "It's pretty obvious that you're...that way."

"That way?" Jasmine asked, not knowing what he was talking about. All she really knew was that she didn't like the tone of his voice and the way he seemed to be making fun of her.

"Well, yeah. You know. It's obvious that you're one of those gay guys."

"I'm what?" Jasmine practically screamed, attracting the attention of almost everyone around.

"Like I said," the boy continued to taunt. "You're a girly boy. You're a boy who acts more like a girl." And then he laughed.

Jasmine didn't even think. She launched herself straight at him, her hand coming around to try to slap his face. But the guy easily

blocked her attempt to hit him and landed a big punch right in Jasmine's face instead. As Jasmine staggered backwards trying not to fall, they were both surrounded and grabbed by more boys than it seemed possible. Tommy and Hunter grabbed Jasmine and pushed her back, while Justin grabbed the boy who had hit her and threw him to the ground.

"Get her out of here!" Justin yelled to Tommy. He turned to the kid that was now just scrambling to get to his feet as Hunter joined Justin to stand against him in case of a fight. "Trust me," Justin said to the boy, "you don't want to pick on the McComber family. Every last one of us will fight to the death. And we always do it together, not alone! So don't let me hear you say one bad word against that girl again! Or about any of us for that matter."

"That was a girl?" The guy asked, not sure he believed it.

Justin nodded. "Believe it or not."

"But...she doesn't look like a girl."

"So what? It don't change the facts!"

"She ought to try looking a little more like a girl then," the boy muttered sullenly.

Justin didn't say anything, he just watched the boy carefully until he backed down and moved away.

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"What the hell happened?" Clint yelled angrily as Tommy practically dragged Jasmine over to the adults of the family.

Jasmine jerked herself out of Tommy's grasp but didn't answer, she turned away and rubbed at the sore spot on her face.

"She started a fight," Tommy told his father.

"You what?" Clint roared at his daughter as Susan hurried over.

Jasmine turned around quickly. "He started it!" Jasmine returned angrily.

Clint looked at Tommy for confirmation.

"I'm not sure," Tommy said. "But I saw her move at him and try to take a swing first. He hit her before any of us could get there."

"Where's the boy now?" Clint asked angrily.

"Justin and Hunter were watching him."

"I'm going," John said quickly as he hurried off.

"Me too," Jed replied as he joined John.

"What happened," Clint asked Jasmine.

"He called me a girly boy again."

"Again?"

"It was the same jerk of a kid that said that to me in the gun shop a few weeks ago."

"So you decided you had to start a fight over it?"

Jasmine shrugged. "It just happened. But he shouldn't have said it!"

Clint shook his head. "Whether he said it or not doesn't matter. You weren't defending yourself. You attacked him!"

"He deserved it!" Jasmine muttered sullenly.

"Let me see your face," Susan said quickly as she moved in closer to check the condition of her daughter. She looked carefully at the bruise that was beginning to grow where Jasmine had been hit. Susan backed away a bit. It looks like you're going to have a black eye for a few days, Jas. Looks like he hit you pretty good."

"Not as good as what I'd like to do to him!"

"You stay here with us!" Clint ordered. "No more wandering around. I'm not going to take a chance on you starting anything else."

Susan turned to her husband. "I've got to get some ice for that eye of hers. We've got plenty in the cooler in the truck. I'll be right back."

"Susan!" Rose called. "Don't bother. I'll get it. You stay here."

"No Mom. You don't have to do that. I'll take care of it." She turned to Jasmine. "Come with me, Jas, the sooner we can get the ice on it, the better."

"Susan," Rose said again. "Let me go instead." She looked at Jasmine. "I think it's time she and me had a little talk anyway."

Susan looked skeptically at her mother-in-law. "You're sure, Rose?"

"Very!" Rose replied as she turned and started heading for the cars. "Let's go Joe." Behind her, the shots from the next round of the competition were already sounding.

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Jasmine walked with her Grandma out toward the parking area. She silently rubbed her face where she had been hit and fumed at what that boy had done to her. Her face hurt, especially up near her left eye. When they finally reached the truck, she opened the tailgate.

"Can you pull that cooler out here?" Rose asked.

Jasmine gave her a look that seemed to say that the question was ridiculous. She easily climbed up into the truck and pulled the cooler out to the tailgate.

"Sit down there," Rose told her. She opened the lid on the cooler while Jasmine sat down on the open tailgate. "Hmm," Rose said as she stood on her tiptoes to look through the contents. "This might be easier to work with." She reached in and plucked a soft drink can from the ice. She handed the can to Jasmine. "Hold that up against your eye for a while. And don't take it off." While Jasmine did that, she reached back into the cooler and pulled two more cans out. She opened one and handed it to Jasmine. She opened the second one and took a drink herself. "So you got yourself all flustered because some boy called you girly or something."

"He called me a girly boy," Jasmine told her.

"So?"

"So what?"

"So you decided to start a fight?"

"No...yes. I don't know. I wasn't thinking. It all happened so fast. He just made me mad! I'd like to..."

"Don't bother even thinking it!"

Jasmine said nothing to that.

"So, you don't want to be a girl at all now," Rose said.

"I what?" Jasmine exclaimed in surprise.

"You don't want to be a girl at all anymore. You want to become a boy. Permanently!"

"Who told you that? It's not true at all!"

"Well what else am I supposed to think? You refuse to give up hunting so you can stay a boy all the time. *More and more* all the

time,” she added. “And now you’re getting all bent out of shape just because some boy thought you acted like a girl.”

“But I am a girl!” Jasmine insisted.

“Are you sure about that?”

“Huh? Of course I’m sure. How can you say that to me?”

“Like I said, what else am I supposed to think? With the way you’re acting, you sure don’t seem much like any of the other girls in this family at all.”

Jasmine was shocked. “How can you think that? Especially after that stupid jerk just called me girly. And all the guys at school keep complaining when I have to be a boy that I still act too much like a girl. How can you think any such thing?”

“Because I don’t see a girl sitting in front of me. Oh, never mind the fact that you simply look too darn much like a boy. I’m not talking about that at all. And I’m not the least bit interested in the way you move your arms or the way you walk or any of the other little cute expressions or habits you may have. I’m not talking about that at all.”

“Then what?” Jasmine asked.

“You know what I see...what I’ve seen for months and months now? I see a spoiled little brat who only wants her way and nothing else. I see a kid that doesn’t care the least bit for anyone else, and only does anything for someone else if it gains her what she wants. I see a kid that completely lacks the one big thing that sets all the women apart from the men in this world, and especially in this family. I see someone who lacks compassion. That’s what I think you’re missing Jas...or Joe...whatever you decide you want people to call you. You lack the simple compassion that one human being should have for another. Especially women! Females!”

“That’s not true!”

“You want what you want, and to hell with anyone else or what it does to them. Look at your poor brother. From what I see, you don’t care in the least what all this has done to that poor kid. You don’t care at all that he’s most likely so psychologically messed up now that he may never fully recover from it.”

“Well how about me?” Jasmine shot back. “Who cares anything about me or what I want?”

“Seems to me like maybe everyone cared too much about what you wanted. You wanted to go hunting when you knew perfectly well that the rules in this family don’t allow it. Even as dumb and stupid as the rule is, you still don’t give one shred of acceptance for any of the things this family cares about, or what anyone in this family cares about, other than yourself!”

“You’re just trying to be cruel,” Jasmine accused.

“Hell yes!” Rose told her. “And it’s about time someone did!”

Jasmine was shocked.

“Did you know your mother and father came up to the house a few weeks back to put an end to this whole switching around thing? Did you know that?”

Jasmine was surprised. “They did?”

“Sure as shootin’ they did! They came to your Grandpa and me and told us they were ending it. And your Grandpa agreed that maybe it was time. In fact, he pretty much thought it was past time!”

“Then why are we still switched all around?”

“Because I wouldn’t let them stop it.”

“You?”

“Me! And I’ve never been so certain of anything in my life!

“Why? I’d give anything to be a girl again.”

Rose shook her head. “Sure doesn’t seem like it to me. You don’t deserve it. You won’t give up hunting, and you won’t look around you enough to care how anyone else feels about anything... other than yourself! Compassion Jas. Compassion! Caring about someone else for a change and what they may need – beyond your own wants. Doing something for someone else, even if it hurts you in the long run or doesn’t let you get something you want. Simple caring about someone other than yourself! That’s the way most women in this word think and behave. The willingness to do things for others is what sets us apart from the men.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. There’s lots of men with tons of compassion in this world. Lots! Your poor brother is loaded with it. Sometimes I think he got all your compassion along with his own allotment. So don’t get me wrong about that. I’m not saying that men don’t have compassion at all. All I’m saying is that there’s a womanly compassion that’s different. It’s more loving and tender.

And it really sets the women apart from the men. And Jas...from everything I've seen, you don't have it!"

Jasmine was hurt, but there was a bit of anger in her too. "So what am I supposed to do about it?"

Rose shook her head. "Start thinking for once about someone other than yourself. Put them first for a change!"

"I do! All the time!"

"Like when?"

"Like...I don't know. I just do!"

"And I don't see it!" Rose looked at her for a moment. "Jas, I'll be honest with you. That day your parents came to put an end to the business, the one thing I kept thinking about was that with the way you seem to behave, I'd rather not count you among the women of this family at all. I'd rather think of you as one of the boys instead."

Jasmine's jaw dropped.

Rose continued. "But your brother, well, from everything I've seen and heard about him, I'd be proud to think of him as a McComber girl. He's got that caring gift that you don't!"

"Again with my stupid brother!" Jasmine complained. "All I ever hear from everyone is how wonderful that stupid jerk is. Nobody ever says anything nice about me! And he's not nice at all! He's just fooling you! Every one of you!"

"I don't think so Jas. In fact, I know for a fact that's not true."

"Sure seems like it to me."

"Well it's not!" Rose took a moment to change her tone. "Jas, you used to be one of my favorite granddaughters. What happened to that little girl? I miss her and I'd really like to have her back again."

"Someone gave me hormones!" Jasmine replied sullenly.

Rose shook her head. "No, Jas. The problem started before that. Long before that." She stared at Jasmine for a moment. "Can't you try to find that little girl again? I know she's got to be in there somewhere."

"I doubt it," Jasmine replied. "I haven't changed at all, other than the way I look. Everyone just seems to be against me. The whole world is against me!"

Rose shook her head again. "Jas, the world isn't against you. You just won't open yourself up enough to see that."

"Sure fooled me," Jasmine replied.

"Jas, you've got to start taking a good long look at yourself and the way you think. It's time you started looking at what other people may want or need instead of what only you want. Do that Jas, and you'll see how things really should be for you."

"I already know how things should be for me," Jasmine returned.

"Think again Jas. Because until you figure things out, as far as I'm concerned, you don't deserve to be treated like a girl anymore. You don't deserve to be given the close tender loving care that the girls in the family all get. You deserve instead to be treated more coldly and hard like the boys are. So think on that for a while Jas, because until you change your ways, you don't deserve to be girl at all."

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Elliot was back out on the shooting range preparing to shoot his next round. He had noticed the short skirmish that had happened back in the crowd. Whatever it was, he had seen mostly McCombers in the middle of it. And he wasn't sure, but he thought he saw Tommy getting Jasmine away from it. A few minutes later, he had seen his Uncle Jed and Uncle John there talking with everyone. Now they had left, and it didn't look like they had done much except to check things out.

The official announced for the shooters to all get ready. He turned around and got himself in position for his second round, the kneeling position, but his mind was still wondering what problem had happened back in the crowd. And why had it involved so much of the family? The announcement came for the shooting to begin. He tried to put the incident out of his mind, but it was difficult.

A few of the shooters had started firing. He aimed at the target and pulled the trigger. The shot was decent, but things didn't feel right and he couldn't get whatever problem had happened behind him out of his head. He fired another shot. Again it was okay, but that's about all he could decide it was.

The words of his father came into his mind. He tried to picture himself out in the woods where he loved to be. He was hunting, and up in front of him he had just spotted a nice fat rabbit. The shot was a difficult one since the animal was so small and so far away, but he knew he could hit it. He had done it many times before. He pulled the trigger.

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“Bullseye!” Jed exclaimed after Elliot had fired the shot. A few minutes later, he exclaimed, “Damn! He did it again. I’m not sure what he did wrong with those first few shots, but whatever it was, he seems to have got it fixed now.”

They waited while Elliot shot again.

“Geez!” Jack exclaimed. “Almost a bullseye again!”

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Rose and Jasmine once again joined the family. As soon as they returned, Jasmine stuck the cold soda can up against her eye again.

Susan noted that Jasmine didn’t exactly look happy. In fact, she looked more angry than when they had left. “What happened?” Susan quietly asked Rose.

“Hopefully, I stuck a few burrs under her seat,” Rose replied. “Gave her something to think about. Hopefully anyway.”

“She doesn’t look too happy,” Susan noted.

“She’s got good reason not to be.”

“What did you say to her?”

“Just the truth and nothing else. I just let her know how I feel about things.”

“Mom! Why would you do that?”

“To get her to start looking around at things other than herself! Besides, I figure if Jacob can play his little games with Jade, then I may as well start working on this one too.”

“Dad’s playing games with Jade?”

“Why do you think he took him out to that still of his.”

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With Elliot's second round of competition finished, Nichole's thoughts turned more toward whatever had happened to Jasmine. Jasmine had gotten hit. Punched in the face. That worried Nichole. Jasmine was still her best friend. She was like a sister to her, no matter how much like a boy she looked. "I want to check on Jas," she said to the other girls.

Ashley looked at her, then she glanced at the boy who had accosted Jade and was now leering a bit too closely at Allison again. "Yeah, maybe that would be a real good idea."

They found Jasmine standing with the family, holding a soda can up against her eye. Her brother was there too. "You okay?" Nichole asked Jasmine Joe the minute the girls all got close enough.

Instead of answering, Jasmine pulled the can away from her eye so the girls could all see it. She turned her face a little so they could all have a good look at what had been done to her.

"Ouch!" Olivia said.

"Your eye's turning all black and blue!" Allison exclaimed.

"It looks really painful," Nichole added sympathetically.

"It is," Jasmine replied. What she didn't add was that the things her Grandma had said to her were even more painful.

The girls all examined her eye closely for a few moments, but just as they were starting to pull away, Nichole saw something weird. "Hey Jas, what's sticking out of your face?"

"Huh? Where?" Jasmine replied.

"On your face. Kind of all over it. It looks like tiny little hairs."

Jasmine's free hand went to her face and rubbed it. She couldn't really feel much, but she knew exactly what Nichole had seen. It had been a while now since she had looked at her face close enough to search for any of those hairs and pull them out with the tweezers. Anger over getting punched in the face, and anger over what her grandmother had said to her, and now anger over the tiny hairs once again sticking out of her face, not to mention the embarrassment that her friends had seen them, it all seemed to grow into one massive amount of frustration. "Shiiit!" she screamed. She

turned away from them all and ran off in the direction of the trucks. She just wanted to get away from everything and everyone!

"Now what?" Clint yelled as he heard Jasmine scream. He saw her hurrying toward the parking area. "What happened?" he asked the girls.

"We just noticed that she's got some hairs on her face, that's all," Allison told him.

"And then she got all crazy again," Olivia finished.

Clint hurried after his daughter. Would his problems with his kids that day never end? A moment later, Susan caught up with him. Together they hurried after their daughter.

"Jas! Jas!" Clint called, trying to get his daughter to stop. But she just kept going, still heading for the parking area. "Jas! Wait!"

Once away from all the people, Jasmine broke into a full run heading toward the truck. She got there and tried to open the doors, but they were all locked. Frustrated, she kicked at the back tire before trying to open the back door again.

"Jas!" Clint said as he and his wife hurried up. "What the hell is going on?"

"I want to go home!" Jasmine replied, not looking at them. Again she pulled on the locked back door.

"Jas," Susan tried. "What's wrong?"

"Everything!" Jasmine replied, still holding onto the door handle and looking into the truck instead of anything else.

"What's everything?" Clint asked.

Jasmine thought for a moment, but she was still too upset to think clearly. She just knew that the entire world was stacked against her.

Not getting an answer, Susan grabbed Jasmine's hand and turned her to face them. The black eye her daughter had stood out clearly now. Susan didn't see the soda can that she had been holding and figured her daughter must have dropped it somewhere.

"Is this because of what Grandma said?"

"Some," Jasmine finally admitted.

"Some?" Susan replied. "What else?"

"What did Mom say to her?" Clint asked.

"Later!" Susan told him. She turned her attention back to Jasmine. "What else?"

"Just everything!" Jasmine replied angrily. "The whole world hates me!"

"Why would you think that?" Susan asked. "Just because you got punched in the face by some stupid kid who should never have done that in the first place?"

"Damn right he shouldn't have done it!" Jasmine yelled. "I'd like to find him and kill him!"

"Settle down, Jas," Clint told her. "You're not going to kill anyone. And you're the one who started the fight."

"Well he shouldn't have said what he did about me?"

"And what did he say?"

"I already told you. He called me a girly boy."

"But you are a girl. Especially today," Susan pointed out.

Jasmine rolled her eyes like her brother often did. "It's the way he said it," she replied. "He was just trying to be mean!"

"So because of that and what Grandma said, now you're all mad again," Clint said, trying to make sure that was all the reasoning.

Again Jasmine rolled her eyes. "Yeah. Plus the other problem now."

"What other problem?" Clint asked.

"The girls all saw the hairs growing out of my face! Do you know how embarrassing that is? It's awful! Especially since they all saw it. They all know now!"

"So what?" Susan said. "They already know what the hormones are doing to you. They can't help but see what they've already done to you. And Jas, if you don't stop this hunting business soon, you know that even more changes are going to happen. And I'm afraid that growing a beard like a boy is one of them."

"Just take me home!" Jasmine replied. She turned and again tried to open the locked door to the truck.

Clint looked at Susan. "Elliot's still got another round to go. The way he was shooting, we're pretty sure he won the second round."

"Do we have to stay?" Susan asked.

"No, but we came a long way this morning to get here and watch." An idea occurred to him and he turned back to Jasmine.

"Jas, I thought that you and Elliot had become pretty good friends lately. You seem to hang out with him and Tommy enough."

Jasmine thought about that for a moment. "I guess. What of it?"

"Then don't you want to be there for him and watch him shoot? We think he has a good chance of winning this thing. And even if he doesn't, I'll wager he'll come in good enough for some kind of trophy. Don't you think he'd want all his best friends to see him get it?"

The words of her grandma rang in her head. Think of someone other than yourself and what you want for a change. She just wanted to go home. But in truth, she did want to watch Elliot shoot, and she would want to see him get his trophy, especially if he did manage to win. And as far as she was concerned, Elliot was still way cuter than any of the other boys there that day, including that clod who had hit on her stupid brother. "I guess," she replied sullenly as she hung her head.

Clint breathed a silent sigh of relief. "Then let's get back to it."

"While we're here, should we take some sandwiches and drinks back with us?" Susan asked.

Clint thought about that. "We'll just grab the whole cooler. Someone can sit on it if they want." He opened the tailgate. The cooler was still at the very back. He hefted it down. He grabbed one side and Susan grabbed the other side and together they all started walking back toward the festivities.

Jasmine saw her mother struggling a bit under the weight of the cooler. "Mom," she said, let me take that. Then she laughed a bit. "I carry heavier things than that for Uncle Jed all the time. I've got muscles now."

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Elliot was lying prone on the ground, his rifle pointed at the target way out in the distance. This was the position he could shoot the most accurately from. But he knew it would be that way for the rest of the shooters as well. But that's not what he was thinking about as he pulled the trigger. "Got it!" he whispered. "That is now one dead raccoon." He sighted again. "And there's another one,

just up above that branch where I can barely see it. Got to shoot it through those branches.”

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“Damn!” Jack exclaimed. “If he keeps this up, there won’t be much left of the center of that target.”

Jed moved his binoculars down the line to check the competition. “Most of ‘em are doing well,” he said. “But Elliot’s pretty much got them all beat so far.”

“But will it be enough to get him past that first round where he was a bit shaky?” Brian asked.

“I don’t know,” Pete replied. “But I would certainly think so. Especially if he keeps doing this well for the rest of his shots.”

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Out on the shooting range, Elliot was enjoying himself. Yes his eyes saw the target ahead, but mostly, his mind was seeing the tiny forest animals he loved to hunt. “Oh look, a squirrel! It’s so small and a bit far, but I bet I can get it.” He pulled the trigger. “Chalk up another squirrel for dinner tonight.”

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“You okay now?” Nichole whispered to Jasmine. “I’m sorry I said that earlier about the hairs and all.”

Jasmine didn’t want to be reminded of it. “Don’t worry about it,” she replied. “It’s not your fault. I just had too many things going wrong today. That’s all.”

“Just so long as you’re alright,” Nichole replied. “How’s your eye?”

“It hurts, but I’ll live.”

“At least you’ll get to be a boy for another week and you won’t have to worry much about hiding it with makeup.”

That was something else Jasmine didn’t want to be reminded of just then. It seemed like every time she got to be a girl, things just

went too far wrong. She purposely didn't reply as she listened to the official announcements and watched as two boys she didn't know walked out onto the shooting range.

And then she heard the official's final announcement, and she nearly went wild. "They called him!" she exclaimed. "They called him. Elliot's getting a trophy!" A moment later, she saw Elliot walk out to stand with the other two boys who were getting the trophies. They didn't know who had won yet, but those three names had been called out.

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Elliot proudly ran out onto the shooting range when his name had been called. An official there pointed to where he was supposed to stand. He waved happily as the people all cheered for him. He especially waved toward all his family members who looked almost as happy as he was. Three names had been called including his, and all three of the boys were placed next to each other. The boy to his left nudged him and shook his hand. Then he went and shook the other boy's hand. Elliot did the same.

There were more announcements. And then the second place winner was announced. Elliot's fear went up. He hadn't come in second place. Second place would have been a lot better than third place, but it only meant that he still had a chance to be the winner.

"And the winner is..." There was a long pause that made Elliot's heart start racing. "Elliot McComber!"

The cheering was loud. Elliot raised his arms and danced around in a circle. He had done it. He had won. And all he had really done was to go hunting. Hunting for all the small little critters he loved to shoot at.

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The entire family seemed to be going crazy. Especially all the girls. And especially Jasmine. And when Elliot was handed the biggest trophy and held it up for everyone to see, she screamed louder than anyone else. He had done it! Elliot had won the match.

Her boyfriend had...well, okay, he wasn't her boyfriend and couldn't ever be. At least not the way she wanted to think of him. But he was a boy, and he was her friend. Not to mention her cousin too.

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Twenty minutes later, after Elliot had been overly congratulated by the entire family, as well as many of the other people there, Clint turned to his wife. "Maybe we should get out of here now before something else happens to the kids."

"I thought you wanted to stay for the whole thing?" Susan replied.

"I did," Clint told her, but that was before we had so many mishaps. We saw Elliot win and that was the big thing."

Susan nodded. "I'd just as soon go home as well."

Clint knew everyone else was planning on sticking around to watch the men all shoot. And evidently there were enough of them that Clint figured it would take a few hours before everything was all sorted out. He said goodbye to everyone. Tommy asked to stay behind to watch with Elliot, and Clint and Susan both agreed. Clint and Jasmine carried the cooler back to the truck again, and a short while later, they were all back on the road. Jasmine was glad. She really wanted to get home. Home where she could think.

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The minute she got into the house, Jasmine hurried to her room and closed the door. She didn't want to talk to anybody. She didn't want to even see anyone. She just wanted to be by herself. Her eye still hurt and she took a minute to examine it closely in the mirror. It was all black and blue. Ugh! Ugly, just like the rest of her body.

With a sigh, she stood up and looked at herself in the full-length mirror. She was supposed to be a girl today, yet all she could see in the mirror was another boy. She took her jacket off and threw it on the bed. Removing the jacket helped display the tiny bumps on her chest more, that she knew all too well were totally fake. The pretty

sweater top she was wearing was still pretty, but that was about the only thing about her that was.

Turning away from her mirror in disgust, she looked up at all the dolls on the walls. Her eyes fell to her one special doll. She went over and carefully pulled it down, cradling it in her arms. "Hi Lucy," she said ever so softly. "Did you miss me?"

She again sat up on the bed with the doll in her arms. She moved a pillow behind her back so she could be more comfortable. "Elliot won the shooting match today," she told the doll. "You should have seen him. He was great! But there were other things that happened today that weren't so great.

"Remember Jimmy? No, I haven't introduced you to him yet, and I'm not going to. You're my baby, not his...no matter how much he looks like a girl now and I don't anymore. I'm still your mommy, my baby, and I always will be. Well, anyway, some boy was hitting on him today. Do you believe it? He was dressed as a boy, but the other guy still thought he was a girl. And the guy squeezed Jimmy's boob!" She laughed a bit. "You should have seen that poor sucker jump." Her soft spoken tone became more somber. "Why couldn't it have been me that the boy was interested in? Why couldn't he have felt one of my boobs, baby? He was pretty cute. I could have handled it a lot better than my stupid brother did. But nobody looked at me that way today, nobody at all. The boys all looked at the other girls like that, but nobody looked at me. And I'm afraid my baby, that they all thought I was a boy again, even though I wasn't. And because of that, your mommy got in some trouble again.

"I've got a black eye now, Lucy. I got into a fight with some stupid jerk of a boy who called me girly. Yeah, I know it was stupid and I shouldn't have, but I just couldn't help it. I've told you before how I get all these feelings sometimes that I still can't control. They're not nearly as bad as they used to be, but sometimes...I just can't seem to stop myself. And so I guess I started a fight when I shouldn't have. And now I've got a black eye to show for it, and I'm pretty sure I'm in deep trouble again because of it.

"It was just one bad thing after another for me. All day today. Nichole and the other girls all saw the hairs on my face today. Those stupid hormones they stick in me are starting to make me have hairs

on my face now. It's just one more way to make me look uglier than I already am. I can't tell you how much I hate it. How much I hate all of it! But I don't think there's much I can do about any of it anymore my baby. I don't think anything at all can change things for me anymore.

"I'm ugly now. I don't look like a girl at all anymore. I hate it so much! I'm sorry I'm not pretty anymore like I used to be, but there's nothing at all I can do about it. And even if I decide to quit hunting, I don't think that will help make things any better anymore either. You see, Grandma had a little talk with me today. Actually, I guess we had a big talk. She was mean to me my baby. She was really mean! She said things just to be cruel I think. But one of the things she kept telling me was that I didn't deserve to be a girl anymore. She doesn't even want me to be a girl anymore. She want's my dumb brother instead. Not me! She just thinks I don't deserve to be a girl anymore at all. What does she know! I'm a girl now, and I always will be!"

Jasmine took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Events of the day ran through her head. Events from the past ran through her head. So many things, and it seemed like the only good things she could think of were the times when she got to go hunting. They were the only times she could remember anymore when she got to enjoy herself. Except...she wasn't enjoying herself then, she was enjoying *himself*. She only got to enjoy things when she was a boy now.

She was ugly. She had hairs growing out of her face. The only times she got to enjoy anything at all were when she got to go hunting. Nobody seemed to want her as a girl anymore. Nobody! She sat with her eyes closed and thought about those things for a long time. When she opened her eyes again, there were tears in them.

She looked down at the lifelike doll in her arms. "I love you my baby. I love you so very much baby Lucy. But mommy's got to go away for a while. Maybe for a very long time. But I promise you, I'll be back. I promise, baby Lucy. I promise!"

She hugged the doll and kissed its face, long and tenderly. She got up from the bed and just as tenderly put the doll back on the shelf. She sat down at her desk and looked hard at her face in the

mirror. So ugly. Not a pretty girl's face anymore. The one black eye just looked awful. It still hurt, but not as much. She grabbed a wipe and gingerly removed the bit of eye makeup she had managed to put on it that morning. The makeup color came off on the wipe, but it didn't seem to change the color of her eye at all. Since she had removed the makeup from the one eye, she removed it from her other eye as well. It was all the makeup she'd had time for that morning.

Her hand reached out and grabbed the nail polish remover and a few minutes later, her fingernails were free of the pretty color. She removed her shoes and socks and the color on her toes was removed as well. She left her shoes and socks off.

She stood up and looked at herself in the big mirror again. She was wearing a pretty sweater top, but she still looked like a boy. Too much like a boy. She went back to her doll again and reached up, grabbing one of the tiny lifelike hands. "Bye-bye, my baby Lucy. Mommy will always love you."

Turning, she headed for her door. She stopped for a long moment to take a few deep breaths and to find the courage and determination for what she had to do. The determination wasn't hard to find at all, it was mixed right in there with a ton of anger. The courage was another matter.

Moving now, she didn't pause at all as she quickly opened her bedroom door. The door to her brother's room was open and he was in there at his desk looking at his computer. She didn't care what he was doing. She marched straight into his room without saying a word. She saw him turn his head as she went straight to him.

"What?" Jimmy asked seeing his sister angrily stomping toward him.

Jasmine didn't say a word until she had grabbed him by his shirt and was already pulling him up and out of his chair. "Up!" she commanded as she continued to pull on him.

"What the heck are you doing?" Jimmy yelled as he got to his feet, mostly in self-defense.

Jasmine pulled on him for a moment, pulling him right across the floor. Halfway to the door, she spun him around, nearly throwing him

down in the process, but she held him up and then started pushing.

"What are you doing?" Jimmy yelled in alarm as his sister literally pushed him toward the door.

"Out!" Jasmine finally said to him. "Get out of my room and *stay out!*"

Jimmy couldn't believe the strength his sister seemed to have. And he seemed to have none against her. "Jas!" he yelled.

"Stay out!" Jasmine screamed loudly as she finally got him through the door. "Stay out," she screamed again, "and don't ever come back in here again! You stay in your own room from now on. Not mine!" With that, she turned and went back to the room with the ducks and the deer head hanging on the wall, and she slammed the door.

Jasmine stood in the hallway, not sure what was going on or what to do.

"What happened?" Susan called as she literally ran down the hallway.

"She just threw me out of my own room. Bodily! And I mean she really threw me!"

"What's happening?" Clint asked as he too ran down the hall.

"Jas just literally threw me out of my room and told me not to go in there anymore."

Just then, the door to the room that Jasmine was in, opened. Jasmine saw everyone standing there, but it was no more than what she expected...and wanted. She threw Cleo at Jimmy. "And keep your stupid stuffed animals out of my room too!" she yelled. Once again, she slammed the bedroom door. She figured that should to get the point across.

Susan didn't delay. She headed straight into the bedroom. "Jasmine! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Switching us around again. Permanently!"

"You can't!"

"I already did, and I mean it," Jasmine replied. "I can't go back to being a girl again. Maybe never!"

"Jasmine," Clint said, "you know perfectly well that all you have to do is quit hunting and you'll be a girl again."

“No!” Jasmine exclaimed angrily. “The only times I have any fun at all is when I’m hunting now. I’m not switching back to being a girl again. Let the stupid sap out in the hall be me now. I’m done with it. From now on, this is who I am.”

Susan shook her head. “How hard can you fight something before you finally give in, Jas? Huh? Jas, you can’t...”

“Don’t call me Jas anymore! My name is Joe from now on.”

Susan got mad. “I had two twins and I named them Jasmine and Jimmy. Your name is not Joe!”

“Then call me Jimmy Joe for all I care, but don’t call me Jasmine anymore. I’m not Jasmine anymore, and I don’t want to be!”

Susan stared at her hard, then shook her head. She looked up at her husband. “Maybe it’s for the best now. Everyone keeps telling me neither of them can really pass that well as themselves anymore. So maybe it’s time to just keep them this way.”

Clint thought about it for a moment. “Jas, please quit hunting. Please. Soon!”

“I’m not Jasmine anymore, Dad. I’m Jimmy Joe. And I’m staying Jimmy Joe.”

Chapter 51 – Arguing with a Brick Wall

March 22nd

The odd thing about the following week wasn't anything to do with Jimmy or Jasmine. The odd thing was that there was no school at all. The school's spring break was scheduled for that entire week. And then they would go back to school again for all of four days, before school let out for Good Friday, marking the start of Easter weekend.

On Sunday afternoon, the day after Elliot won his first rifle competition, Jade sat in his bedroom staring at the walls. He was really just glad to be home again. Spending an entire hour having Reverend Cosinger yell at him was a major irritation that he would really like to do without. Of course, having to be his sister from now on was something he knew should be something he could do without too, he just wasn't as certain of that anymore as he used to be.

He had no idea what was going to happen now. Were his parents really going to let his sister be him from now on...not switch them around anymore? He was almost afraid to ask. And if that was the case, then what was he supposed to do about it? Probably nothing, except continue to be the girl in the family. Be his sister. She certainly seemed to like being him.

His eyes scanned the rows of dolls on the walls. So many of them. But at least they weren't dead animals. The dolls weren't oppressive at all. In fact, he'd never admit it, but there were some he actually thought looked pretty nice. He'd just didn't dare let anyone know he thought that about any of them. His eyes lingered for a moment on the one big doll at the end of the bottom shelf. The one his sister had told him not to touch. Not that he had any interest in touching it. What for? Why would he? It just looked so much like a real baby that it was almost frightening.

He moved his gaze from the dolls to the mirror over his sister's desk that doubled as a vanity. He had already spent a lifetime

staring at his face in that mirror. Well, maybe not that long, but it sure seemed like it. He also would never admit it, but lately he had grown rather interested in all the different earrings he could find. They were pretty. They were interesting. He'd just never ever admit that to anyone!

There was a pile of material on the floor just past the desk. Homework! Homework for Home Ec class. Well, sort of homework. It was all stuff he was supposed to be working on for that stupid Spring Fashion show they were supposed to be doing. He thought about that for a few seconds. Did he still have to do it? His sister wasn't going to be in it. In fact, he had rather doubted for some time now that she would be able to be in it, even if she did finally agree to quit hunting and they started to turn back into themselves again. She looked way too much like a boy now. How could she ever be in that show? He doubted that any of the clothes they had made for the show would even fit her anymore. So...did he still have to sew them? That was a major thing he wanted to find out. And soon!

"Jasmine!"

He heard his mother calling from the kitchen. "I'm coming!" he yelled back as he headed out of his bedroom. It was time to help his mother make lunch for the family.

Susan was a little surprised when she saw Jasmine come into the kitchen. "I thought you were going to change out of that dress."

Jasmine just shrugged. "I was going to, but what else would I wear?"

"Whatever you like?"

"Pants?" he asked hopefully.

Susan looked at him skeptically. "Maybe," she conceded.

"Can I go change now?"

"No! We'll discuss it later. And again, that's only maybe!"

As usual Jasmine rolled his eyes.

"What have you been doing all this time?" Susan asked as she pulled some cans out of the cupboard.

"I don't know. Thinking, I guess."

"About what?"

"Are you and Dad really going to have us be each other all the time now? No more switching back."

Susan sighed. "Right now, it looks like it. I can't say for certain though."

"And how about all those clothes I've been sewing for the fashion show? She was supposed to be in it, not me."

"Don't you want to be in it?"

"Heck no!"

"Why not? You did most of the work."

"That doesn't mean I want to be in it."

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Because it would be embarrassing!"

"Embarrassing? Still?"

"Heck yes!"

Susan shook her head. "One of these days we're going to have to sit down and have a discussion about lady-like ways to say things. But at least you didn't say Hell."

"Hell yeah!" Jasmine said with a teasing smile. "That works even better!"

"Ugh! Please don't!"

"Why not? I hear a lot of grownups say that all the time."

"That doesn't mean that you have to use terms like that. There are nicer ways of speaking."

"I know, more lady-like."

"Exactly!"

"So do I still have to sew that stuff for the fashion show, even though I'm not going to be in it?"

Susan thought about that for a moment. "I'm pretty sure that's part of the grade you're getting for that class. But I'll call Mrs. Marker about it when school starts again and talk to her."

"Good! And tell her I'm not going to be in that show. I don't want a lot of people seeing me and pointing at me and knowing what I really am. I don't need that at all!"

Susan looked at him for a moment before answering. "I'll tell her," she said. "Now get some potatoes out and get started on them while I get these string beans into a pot."

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Late Sunday afternoon, Nichole knocked on Jasmine's back door. She had no illusions about which Jasmine would be there today, she had already seen him in church. But it wasn't "that" Jasmine she needed to talk to, and because of the circumstances, she was fairly certain that her Aunt Susan would let the real Jasmine talk with her for a few minutes about what she needed to talk about. She smiled as the door was opened.

"Hi Nichole," Susan said brightly, opening the door and welcoming her niece into the house. "Jas is back in his bedroom. You can just go back if you want."

"Um...Aunt Susan," Nichole said hesitantly. "I kind of need to talk to Jimmy instead. You know, Jimmy Joe. And I know I shouldn't be talking to him right now about this, but...there just isn't much more time and we've got to get some things straightened out for our birthday party."

The subject made Susan stop. "Um, Nichole, there might be some problems with that party now."

"Problems? Like what?"

"Like *that* Jasmine has suddenly decided she's not going to be herself anymore. She wants to stay a boy – all the time!"

Nichole was shocked. "Even for the party? We've always had our birthday parties together. Always!"

"I know," Susan replied sadly. "But tell you what. She's back resting in her room after hunting all morning. Maybe you can convince her to go back to being a girl, at least once in a while. Although I'd rather you found a way to convince her of it – permanently!"

"I don't know how many times I've tried, Aunt Susan," Nichole told her. "All of us have tried. But you know Jas, she can be like the most stubborn person I've ever met."

"Unfortunately, I know that all too well, Nichole. But do what you can anyway. Please?"

"Sure," Nichole replied. "Besides, this is a big party. It wouldn't be right without her."

Susan nodded. "I know. And it wouldn't be right for me either."

Nichole headed down the hallway. At the very end of the hall there were two doors, one on each side. The one on the left,

Jasmine's real bedroom, was open. The one on the right, the one that really belonged to Jimmy, was closed. From what her Aunt had just said, she was guessing that Jimmy Joe was napping. Since the door on the left was open, she stopped there first and stood and watched for a minute. "I think I like the other ones better," she said after a few moments.

Jasmine quickly turned around, feeling very embarrassed. "Nichole! What are you doing here? I didn't hear you coming."

Nichole laughed as she went in. "Obviously!" She walked over and sat on the bed. "Trying on earrings?"

Jasmine could feel his face turning red. "Kind of," he replied. It was all he could do to keep himself from removing the pair he had just put into his ears. "What's happening?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

"I need to talk with...the other you. Jimmy Joe. About our birthday party."

That was something that Jasmine hadn't even thought about. "Is she still going to be there?" he asked.

"I guess that's what your mother says I need to find out. She said that your sister doesn't want to be a girl anymore."

"Yeah," Jasmine replied. "You should have seen her yesterday. She literally threw me out of my own room, with orders to never go in there again."

"So you don't know what she wants to do about the party either," Nichole said.

Jasmine shook his head. "Not a clue."

Nichole nodded and got up. "I guess I have no choice but to find out. And I really hope she's still going, because we've got a lot to do before then."

She walked out of his room and across to the closed door. She knocked softly on the door, but after waiting a moment, there was still no answer. She knocked again, louder. "Jimmy Joe!" she called. She heard a muffled sound from inside and a moment later, the door was opened.

"Nichole!" Jimmy exclaimed. "What's up?"

"I came to talk to you about the party," Nichole said as her eyes lingered a moment on Jimmy Joe's still slightly black eye. "But now I

hear that you may not want to even be there.”

Jimmy Joe turned and walked back to her bed and sat on it. “Yeah,” she finally said. “I’m afraid you’re going to have to do it without me this year. I’m not going back to being a girl anymore. I can’t anymore.”

“But you have to!” Nichole argued. “We’ve always had our birthdays together!”

“I know,” Jimmy replied sadly. “And you don’t know how much I’d like to be there, but I just can’t anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because it would be too embarrassing. ‘Cole, nobody sees me as a girl anymore. I’ve changed too much now. I’m too much of a boy now. At least my body is.”

“Jas, when are you going to finally stop hunting?” Nichole asked, her voice full of frustration. “When are you going to stop being so damn stubborn about it? Aren’t you ever going to be a girl anymore? Don’t you even want to be a girl anymore?”

“I do, Nichole,” Jimmy Joe replied. “Believe it or not, I really do! But I’m afraid it may be too late for me now. No matter what I do, I’m still going to look like a boy!”

“You mean, you’re stuck like that, forever? Why the heck didn’t you quit sooner?”

“I don’t know if I’ll be like this forever,” Jimmy Joe replied softly. “They say I won’t, if I stop hunting and they stop giving me those stupid hormones. But I’ve changed so much now. I don’t see any way at all that I can ever be...pretty again. I just don’t see how it can happen.”

“Did you talk to Uncle Brian about it?”

“Not really. Everything everyone always tells me is always aimed at making me want to quit hunting. How can I know what’s real and what isn’t?” She looked at her best friend for a moment. “Nichole, I let it go too far. I should have stopped it a long time ago. But I didn’t want to stop it then, and I’m not sure I do even now. Hunting is the only fun thing in my life anymore. And trust me, that’s the *only* thing that’s fun. And because it’s gone on so long, I’m not a girl anymore. At least not on the outside. I’m definitely all girl on the inside, but nobody can see that. All they see is what I look like on

the outside. And 'Cole, I'm ugly. Just plain ugly now. So I can't be at the party this year. I just can't do it."

"You're not ugly!" Nichole stated firmly.

"I'm not pretty," that's for sure. "I might look okay for a guy, but if I were to try to be a girl at that party, a girl like everyone else is, face it Nichole, everyone would just laugh at me. I'm just too ugly for it now. I can't do it! I'm ugly, and the only thing left for me now is to try to be a boy."

"You should have quit long ago!"

"Maybe, but I didn't want to then, and I still don't want to quit now. I like it too much. Actually though, I didn't see what those hormones were doing to me. Or maybe, I didn't want to see it. I don't know. Either way, it's too late for me now. So I've got no reason to quit hunting. I've got to enjoy something in my life. And Nichole, I'm good at hunting. Uncle Jed even says I am. And I'm getting better at it all the time. So I can't quit now."

"Why not? If you don't, won't things get even worse for you?"

"Jimmy Joe shrugged. "I don't know. I guess they probably will. But as I said, it's already gone so far that I can't be a girl anymore. What's the use?"

"What's the use? You could go back to being a girl again! All the time! You could enjoy something more than just stupid hunting!" She paused for a moment, then said, "But I get the feeling that you don't really want to be a girl anymore."

"No Nichole, I do!"

Nichole shook her head. "No you don't. 'Cause if you did, you'd already have quit hunting. I think you're just using all the rest as an excuse to stay a boy – forever!"

"I'm not Nichole. I swear, I'm not."

Nichole shook her head. "I don't believe you anymore. If you still want to be a girl, then you've got to quit. At least that's what everyone says."

"But it's too late for me now."

"But you didn't talk to Uncle Brian about it."

"Like I said, how can I believe anything anyone tells me anymore? I just can't."

"That's just sad. It's stupid too."

Jimmy Joe nodded. "Maybe. But that's the way it is now 'Cole." She looked up at her best friend with sad eyes. "I can't be at the party this year, Nichole. I just can't do it anymore. You're going to have to work with my stupid brother instead."

Nichole grunted in frustration. "But he's not you! He's not the one who's always been like my sister. He's not the one who's always done this with me."

"I know, 'Cole. And I'm sorry. But that's the way it is now. I just can't do it anymore. Go see him. I'm sure he'd be glad to help you. And I have no doubt the stupid sissy will jump all over the chance to go to that party. He probably can't wait!"

Nichole shook her head. "But I don't want him there! Well, I do kind of," she corrected herself. "But I want you more!"

Jimmy Joe stood up. "I'm not going Nichole. Not anymore. It would be too embarrassing. You're going to have to work with the sissy over there instead. I'm finished." She headed for the door and held it wide open, waiting for her friend to leave.

"You're throwing me out?"

"Only because I'm not going to change my mind. I can't. I'm too ugly now. I'm not a girl at all anymore. At least not in all the ways that anybody seems to care about."

"But..."

"Bye Nichole. And I really do hope you have a good time at the party."

In disbelief, Nichole slowly walked out of the room, her eyes never leaving the sad eyes of her "former" best friend and almost sister. And once she was out in the hallway, the two of them stared at each other for a moment before Jimmy Joe slowly closed the door between them. But as the door was closing, Nichole hadn't missed the tears that were starting to fall from Jimmy's eyes.

Still dazed, Nichole glanced into Jasmine's room. He was sitting at his desk looking at her. She ignored him as she felt the tears starting to fall from her own eyes. By the time she reached the kitchen, she was crying fully.

"Nichole!" Susan exclaimed as she rushed toward the crying girl. "What happened?"

Nichole let herself be buried in her Aunt's arms as she wept. "She won't do it," she finally said. "She won't go to the party and she won't quit hunting."

Susan continued to hug her and she gently rocked her back and forth. "Sh...don't cry Nichole. Jas already said she didn't want to change back again. I guess maybe she was more serious about it than I had hoped."

Nichole sniffled a bit but let herself stay in her Aunt's loving arms. "She said she's too ugly now to be a girl. She thinks it's too late now to ever change back again. And she can't trust what anyone else tells her about it."

"She what?"

"That's what she said."

Susan continued to hold the crying girl until she finally pulled away. "Sorry," Nichole said as she wiped her wet eyes and cheeks.

"It's okay, Nichole," Susan told her. She pulled off a length of paper towel and handed it to Nichole to dry her face off with. Then she went to the refrigerator and pulled out a can of soda for the upset girl. "Here," she said as she set the drink on the counter for her. "Why don't you sit here for a few minutes and drink this while I go back and try to have another little talk with her. Okay?"

Nichole nodded gratefully and grabbed the drink as she watched her Aunt Susan walk out of the kitchen.

Susan didn't knock. She just opened the door and went in. Jimmy Joe was sitting on her bed crying. "What the heck is wrong with you?" she asked as she walked in, trying her best not to show any sympathy for her crying daughter. "Nichole and you have always been best friends. You've always had your birthday parties together. You look forward to that party every year."

"I can't anymore!" Jimmy Joe cried. "I'm too ugly. Everyone there will only laugh at me now."

"Because you don't look like a girl anymore?"

"I'm not even close anymore!"

"I think you're being a bit too harsh on yourself."

"No I'm not! Face it, I look too much like a boy now to do anything with the girls."

Susan stood there and looked at her for a moment, and the problem was that she was right. Susan could see how embarrassing it would probably be for her daughter to attend that party and try to dress nice and pretend she still looked like the rest of the girls, whether she really was a girl or not. "Nichole told me that you think it's too late to change back again. You know that's not true. You know all you have to do is stop hunting and Uncle Brian will start everything going the way it's supposed to be."

"It's too late for me now," Jimmy Joe replied sullenly.

"Whatever gave you that idea? Of course it's not too late! Jas, just give the word and that's all it will take. And I know that Uncle Brian will jump at the chance to get this business reversed. Now will you please agree to finally quit this hunting business? Please, Jas? Let's get you back the way you belong."

"No!" Jimmy Joe replied firmly. "It's too late, and I'm too ugly now. I'll never be pretty again! Never!"

"Jas, you know that's not true. All you have to do is quit hunting, and the sooner you do that, the sooner we can get you started toward being pretty again."

"It's too late now. I'm too ugly!"

"No you're not!"

"I am too! And I'm not giving up hunting! It's the only thing I get to enjoy anymore. The only thing! So just leave me alone about it."

Susan shook her head. "You're being unreasonable again. But then you've been stupid and unreasonable about this since the very beginning."

"Ha!" Jimmy Joe replied nastily.

Susan did her best to hold her frustration in check. "I'll tell Nichole you won't be there this year."

"I already did that! Let the sissy across the hall take my place instead."

"Stop calling your brother a sissy!"

"Why not? That's what he is! He loves all the girly stuff. He probably wants to go to that party so bad it's killing him!"

"Something's killing him," Susan muttered, "but it's not wanting to go to that party!" Frustrated with her real daughter, she walked out of the room. She glanced into Jasmine Jade's room and saw him

watching. She just shook her head and continued on toward the kitchen. Halfway back to the kitchen, she heard Jimmy Joe's bedroom door slamming behind her.

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Nichole stood up from the kitchen chair she had been sitting in the moment her Aunt Susan walked back into the room. The look on her Aunt's face didn't look promising.

Susan shook her head. "Sorry, Nichole. I just don't know what gets into her sometimes. She just won't quit this hunting business. And to be honest, the way she's acting right now, I don't think she deserves to be at your party anymore. I'm afraid you're just going to have to do it without her."

Sadly Nichole nodded. "Thanks Aunt Susan. I just don't see why she won't stop hunting and be a girl again. I just don't see why."

"Me either, Nichole," Susan replied sadly.

Nichole headed to the door and was about to open it when she turned back to her Aunt. "I guess Jade will be at the party now?"

"If you want," Susan told her.

"Of course I want him there. He's one of my best friends too. And he is practically a girl now."

Susan nodded. Nichole's mention that her son was practically a girl was a troubling thought, but then she had been troubled by that thought for a long time now.

Nichole started to open the door, then stopped again and turned back to her Aunt. "I guess I could ask him if he wants to help plan the party. We do still share the same birthday, so it will be his birthday party too."

"Yes it will," Susan said softly, but with a lump in her throat. Things were getting all turned around again.

"Do you mind if I ask him?" Nichole asked. "I always share my birthday party with Jasmine. This would just be...a different Jasmine. Jasmine Jade."

"Go ask him," Susan replied with a small nod of her head.

"Thanks, Aunt Susan. I really didn't want to have to do all those party invitations myself. And then there's all the shopping we have

to do for it, and...a bunch of other things too.”

Susan said nothing, but just watched as Nichole left the kitchen and went back up the hallway. She knew for a fact that Marcy wasn't going to let Nichole make any of her party invitations yet. But Nicole didn't need to know anything about that – yet.

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This time when Nichole went back to Jasmine's room, he was sitting on his bed looking at one of the dolls he was holding in his hands. She knocked softly.

Jasmine startled. “Nichole!” he exclaimed. Embarrassed, he quickly threw the doll onto the bed away from him. “I didn't expect you to come back again.”

“Don't throw your dolls around like that,” Nichole said as she went in. “And that's one of your real good ones.”

“It's just a stupid doll,” Jasmine replied as Nichole sat next to him on the bed.

“When are you going to stop being afraid of anything the least bit feminine? Huh? If you like the doll, then you don't have to pretend you don't.”

“Who says I like it?”

“You're almost as dumb as your stupid sister. You know? I could tell by the way you were looking at it.”

Jasmine could feel his face turning red. He decided to change the subject. “I'm sorry that Jas...I mean Jimmy Joe won't be at your party. I know how close you two are.”

“Were!” Nichole replied. “Although I guess we still are – somehow. She's always been like my sister.”

“That makes it even worse.”

“Yeah. Tell me about it.” Nichole looked at him. “So how about you?”

“Me? What about me? She's already my sister...or brother...or something.”

“No, you idiot! Are you going to help me with the party or not? It's your birthday too you know.”

“Me?”

"Is there anyone else here? And anyone else around that has a birthday at almost the same time I do?"

"Um..."

"Oh for heaven's sake! Are you and me going to work together on this party or not?"

"You mean you want me there?"

"Duh! I think those hormones are making you more stupid every day. Of course I want you there! I always did. It was just that before, you weren't going to be a girl for the day of the party, so you couldn't be there. But now..."

"Um. Yeah, sure. You know I'd love to be there."

"Yeah, well since we'll be sharing our birthday party, then are you going to help with all the work we have to do for it or not?"

"Um...sure, I guess. I just don't know what you'll need me to do."

Nichole looked at him for a moment, then she suddenly pushed him back onto the bed by his shoulders as she jumped right on top of him. "Well, for starters," she said, trying to control her laughter, "you can stop being so afraid of being a girl. You know you like it. So start acting like it!" The two of them laid on the bed together laughing hysterically, as Nichole stayed right on top of him and playfully punched him in the shoulders again and again. "You will like it! You will like it! You will like it!"

As he laid there getting playfully hit, Jasmine laughed like he hadn't laughed in a long time.

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Early Sunday evening, Brian walked down the hallway toward Jimmy Joe's bedroom. Clint and Susan followed close behind. Neither Tommy nor Jasmine were anywhere around since they were off with their friends again. The door to Jimmy's room was open when Brian got there. Just his large presence alone was enough to alert Jimmy that he was there.

"Uncle Brian," Jimmy said quickly as she turned away from her computer.

"Hi Jimmy," Brian said as he walked into the room.

Jimmy's eyes turned to the doorway where she now saw her mother and father standing and watching. "What's going on?"

"Your father asked me to talk to you because it seems there may be a little bit of confusion about the hormones in your system."

"Confusion?" Jimmy asked. "How could there be any confusion. All you have to do is look at me to know what they've been doing to me."

"That's not what I meant. From what I hear, you don't think that if we stop the hormones then you can return back to the way you were before."

Jimmy rolled her eyes much like her brother did all too often. "How can I? It's gone too far now."

"Who told you that?"

"Well isn't it obvious?" Jimmy said with more than a hint of annoyance in her voice. "Just look at me. I'm ugly now. I look like a stupid boy!"

"We told you that's what would happen if you kept hunting," Brian told her.

"Yeah, well. I didn't want to believe it."

"And now you know that everything we told you was true."

Jimmy shrugged. "Too late now."

"No, it's not too late! Jimmy, all you have to do is swear that you won't try to go hunting anymore, and we'll stop the hormones immediately. Your body will start returning to what it was as soon as those hormones are gone from your system."

"Back to what it was? How can it? I was pretty before! Real pretty! The prettiest girl in the school!" Her voice backed down a bit. "Now I'm just...ugly. I've got a stupid boy's body now. And none of the other boys will even look at me."

"Jimmy," Brian said, "I just told you, as soon as we get those hormones out of your system, you'll start turning back into a girl again. I promise!"

"Huh!" Jimmy grunted. "But I won't be pretty anymore. Not like I was. So what's the use?"

Brian couldn't believe she could look at things that way. "What's the use? Jimmy, you will be pretty again. Look, if we can take someone like your brother and turn him into as pretty a girl as he is

now, just think what we can do with someone who was a real girl to begin with. And a damn pretty girl to boot.”

Jimmy Joe shook her head and turned away from him for a moment as she went and sat on her bed before looking back at him again. She chose her words carefully. “And how long before it’s too late for me to ever turn back again?”

Brian was flabbergasted by the question. “How long? Jas, there is no time length on it. But I will tell you this, the longer you continue to resist and stay as a boy, the harder and longer it’s going to take. And to be honest, if you do stay on those hormones too long, then some of your female reproductive parts may be affected.”

Jimmy was shocked. “You mean...I might never be able to have a baby?”

Brian finally felt like he was getting through to her. “Yes. Well, maybe. I’m not an expert on that, and thankfully you’re nowhere near having to worry about anything like that right now. But some of those parts in you could atrophy or be affected in other ways if you continue on the hormones too long.”

“How long?” Jimmy pressed.

“I don’t know. A while yet, I’m sure.”

“Months?” Jimmy asked.

Brian shook his head. “Most likely, more than that.”

“Years?”

Brian shrugged. “I don’t know about years, but it should still be a while. More than just a few months.”

Jimmy sat and thought about that for a moment. “Good!” she finally said.

“The sooner we can get you off of those hormones, the better,” Brian told her. “Now, will you please agree to stop hunting? I promise, I’ll do everything I can to get you back to being just as pretty as you ever were. And the sooner we can get started, the faster and easier it will be. And if you do, then I won’t have to come back here tomorrow or Tuesday night and get another blood sample from you, and next week I won’t have to put any more of those hormones into your body. And trust me, nothing could please me more!”

Jimmy Joe just looked at him and smiled. "Stop hunting? Are you kidding? Hunting is the only thing in my life that I like anymore. And I love it. So if I don't have to worry about any major problems with the hormones for...a long time yet, then why should I ever want to stop doing what I love so much? No way! That would be just plain stupid!"

Brian couldn't believe it. Behind him, he heard both Susan and Clint gasp. Brian shook his head. "That's the wrong attitude to take, Jas," he said.

"Not as far as I'm concerned, Uncle Brian. As far as I can see, stopping hunting now would be the biggest mistake I could make. So I'm going to keep hunting and keep enjoying myself. And someday I'm going to be just as good at it as you, and my Dad, and even Uncle Jed. That's what I want, and that's what I'm going to do."

Brian shook his head and turned to the shocked looks on Clint and Susan's faces. "I can't reason with her," he said. "It's like talking to a brick wall."

It was a moment before Clint could answer. "Thanks, Brian. I guess we had to try." He stood back and let his brother out of the room.

Susan leaned through the doorway into Jimmy Joe's bedroom. "Damn you!" she said as the tears ran from her eyes again. "Why do you have to be so stupidly stubborn? Why?" Not waiting for an answer, she followed Brian back toward the kitchen.

Clint stayed there in the doorway for a moment while the others headed back toward the kitchen. He finally walked into the room and sat on the bed with her. "I'm real disappointed," he said, "that you won't finally agree to stop hunting and go back to being what you really are...what you should be."

"I know, Daddy," she replied. "But that's the way I feel!"

Clint shook his head. "This damn thing has gone on way too long, and we still can't seem to stop it. So I guess we've all got no choice but to try to live with things the way they are for a little while more until we can figure out what to do about it all."

Jimmy said nothing.

Clint took a deep breath, trying to figure out what to say next. But that was all too easy. It now came down to the conversation he

would normally be having with his real son at this time of year. "So," he finally said. "You've got a birthday coming up. Twelve years old now."

"Pretty soon," Jimmy Joe acknowledged, not sure at all what her father was getting at.

"I'm sure the girls are all planning one of their usual big parties to celebrate."

"Of course," Jimmy replied. "Don't they always? Besides, I already helped Nichole with a lot of the planning."

"But you won't even try to be there this year," Clint stated.

"Dad, I told you. I'm not quitting hunting. And trying to be a girl anymore is starting to be just plain too embarrassing. Probably for everyone! So I'm not going to do it. I'm staying a boy! For a long time!"

Clint shook his head as he tried to control his temper. "That's not what I was getting at."

"Oh. Sorry," she replied. "Then what?"

"Since the girls are all celebrating in their usual way, how about you? Is there anything special you want to do for your birthday?"

Jimmy shook her head. "Not that I can think of."

Clint nodded. It was the same answer that the real Jimmy usually gave him. Tommy too, for that matter.

"Well, if you think of anything. Just let me know. Okay?"

"Sure Dad. I will," Jimmy replied.

Clint got wearily to his feet and headed for the door.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?" Clint asked as he turned back to her.

"Um...for my birthday, can we maybe go hunting? Just you and me?"

Clint smiled. "Now that I think we can arrange." His face clouded. "Just probably not on the day of your birthday now. We may have to do it another time. But I promise you, we will."

"Why not on my birthday?" Jimmy asked.

"Um, because I'm most likely going to be busy that day."

Jimmy nodded disappointedly, knowing that her father most likely couldn't get off work again.

"But maybe we can go some other time?"

“Count on it!” Clint confirmed, trying to force a smile to his face. With a nod of his head, he left his stubborn daughter, who was all too hell-bent on being his son.

Chapter 52 – Pounding It Out

March 23rd – 24th

Marcy answered the office phone late Monday afternoon, hoping it would be her husband calling instead of another call about the lodges they were building or even from someone wanting to know about the hunting clubs. She was getting tired of putting her daughter off and not letting her and Jasmine get on with making the invitations to their birthday party. “Hello?” she said into the phone.

“It’s on!” her husband’s voice came back. Clint and I were able to get everything all set.

Marcy breathed a big sigh of relief. “Fantastic. I know the girls will all love it!”

Pete grunted. “Yeah, no doubt. Can you call Susan? I’ve got to get back to work again.”

“She’s right here at the office with me,” Marcy replied. “I’ll tell her. See you tonight. Love you!”

“Love you too,” Pete replied before hanging up.

Marcy immediately turned to Susan. “It’s on. The guys were able to get it all set up.”

Susan smiled. “That’s a relief. I don’t know what we would have done otherwise.”

“I guess we better tell Nichole and Jasmine. I wonder where that pack of girls is right now.”

Susan thought about that for a moment. “Are we still going shopping tomorrow?” she asked.

“I’m planning on it,” Marcy replied.

“Then why don’t we wait to break the news to them until then. And I know just the right place to do it!”

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On Tuesday morning while most of the men were off at work, Jimmy Joe was out working with Justin and her Uncle Jed. Ashley was up at her grandma's house helping her clean and do laundry. Tommy and Elliot and Hunter were the only ones in Elliot's house as they searched the internet looking into rifle competitions and competition rifles for those matches. Allison and Olivia were at Olivia's house helping to keep an eye on Aaron and Lucas, even though John and Jane, the only adults around just then, were right there in the house with them. Valerie was the only one minding the business office where Jacob kept popping in and out. And Susan, Marcy, Nichole, and Jasmine Jade were all in Susan's car on their way to do some shopping for the upcoming birthday party.

"Aunt Susan, where are we going?" Nichole asked as she saw them passing their usual shopping center out the back window of the car.

"I thought we'd start somewhere else today," Susan replied.

"Where?" Nichole asked. But she got no answer.

It was a few minutes later that Susan found the place she was looking for and pulled the car into the parking lot.

"What the heck?" Jasmine exclaimed.

"What are we doing here?" Nichole asked as she saw where they were. "What's a...Feed and Tack store?"

"They have a lot of interesting clothes here too," Marcy replied as Susan pulled into a parking place that was close to the front door.

"I thought we were just getting gifts and things for the party." Jasmine said.

"We are," Susan told him, trying to suppress the grin that was threatening to invade her face. She opened her car door and got out, as did the others.

"So we're buying clothes as gifts now?" Jasmine asked as they headed for the door. "Olivia didn't have anything at all like that for her party."

"No," Marcy told him as she opened the door and held it wide for everyone to walk through. "The clothes aren't for gifts for your friends. They're for you, for the party."

"We get to have new clothes for the party?" Nichole asked excitedly as they all stopped just inside the entrance.

“Well, we just thought you might like some,” Susan replied. She looked at Marcy, unable any longer to suppress the smile on her face.

Marcy couldn't wait to break the news any longer either. “Your fathers arranged for horses to be brought in for your birthday party on Friday. They're going let you go horseback riding through the woods all afternoon.”

“Horses!” Nichole exclaimed. “Yahoo!” She immediately started going crazy with excitement, running around as if she didn't know what to do with herself. She finally ran over to Jasmine and grabbed his arm. “Hear that, Jade? Horses! We're gonna get to ride horses! Hey! We've got to change what we were going to do for the party. We've got to have a cowboy theme!” She looked at Jasmine for a second before blurting out. “Horses, Jade! I love horses!”

“Yeah,” Jasmine laughed, totally amused by the antics of his friend. “I can see that.”

Nichole looked all around her. “Hey, they have western clothes here!” She looked to her mother. “We've gotta have cowboy outfits for the party!” she exclaimed. “We gotta!”

“That's why we're here dear,” Marcy replied.

Nichole grabbed Jasmine's hand and pulled. “Come on, Jade, we gotta find outfits for the party!”

Jasmine started off with Nichole, then pulled away and stopped. “Wait a minute!” He turned back to his mother. “Mom, is there any chance at all that I can wear pants? Jeans maybe?”

“You're *not*...going horseback riding in a skirt young lady!”

Jasmine Jade suddenly threw his hands into the air. “Yes!” he exclaimed excitedly.

“Come on!” Nichole called.

Jasmine was quick to run after her.

“I think they took that rather well,” Marcy said as she watched the two “girls” disappear into the racks of clothing.

“You think?” Susan replied.

Nichole's excitement was still evident as she quickly found all the racks of the “fancier” shirts that the store had, especially the racks in the sizes where she could shop. Jasmine was further away keeping an eye out for wherever the jeans might be. He wasn't nearly as

animated as Nichole was. Susan and Marcy did their best to stand way back out of the way and just let the two “girls” shop for themselves, for a while anyway.

“Jade, what the heck are you doing?” Nichole asked as she saw her friend just standing and looking around like he was lost.

“Looking for some jeans,” Jasmine replied.

“Don’t worry about them now. We’ll find them. We gotta find some great shirts first. And look at these!”

Jasmine wandered over and looked, but he still stood back at a distance as Nichole sorted through the different overly western but still very feminine shirts on the rack. Mostly what Jasmine was seeing was a lot of fringe and pearl buttons.

Nichole looked back at Jasmine again. “What are you doing?” she asked him.

“Watching,” Jasmine replied.

Nichole stopped what she was doing and turned to him. “Is this another one of those things where you’re afraid to be a girl?”

“Um...no, not really.”

But Nichole didn’t believe that for a moment, she moved into him quickly and started landing playful right and left punches against his stomach, backing him up right into one of the clothing racks. “I told you, I’m going to pound those problems right out of you!” she said as she continued to land the mock punches against him.

Jasmine couldn’t help himself again, he started laughing wildly as he finally grabbed her arms. “Okay, okay!” he laughed. “I’ll try.”

Susan and Marcy had seen Nichole suddenly start attacking Jasmine and had started to hurry toward them, but when Jasmine started laughing suddenly, they could tell it was all in play. “What was that about?” Marcy asked.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Susan replied.

Neither of them bothered moving any closer, but the two ladies did notice that now Jasmine was actively looking at the fancy western shirts along with Nichole.

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By the middle of the afternoon, Susan and Marcy were getting a bit tired, but it seemed like Nichole and Jasmine were just as excited and fresh as ever. The girls had gotten their cowboy outfits, complete with jeans, shirts, cowboy boots, hats, big buckled belts, and even colorful neckerchiefs to wear. And both Marcy and Susan thought the two of them looked adorable in the outfits. They did have to insist however that the girls couldn't wear the outfits until the party, mostly because both of them wanted to wear the outfits while they were out shopping that day. So instead, both girls were back in their normal clothes, both of them wearing somewhat similar skirt outfits that Susan knew they had decided on together the day before.

There had been a few times during the day when Marcy and Susan had witnessed Nichole playfully punching at Jasmine, which always seemed to start the two of them laughing together, and after which, Jasmine would seem to be more interested in what they were supposed to be doing together. Since it was all obviously just in play, neither Marcy nor Susan worried much about it.

They had spent most of the day looking for and buying little gifts to give away at the party. After lunch, they spent much of their time in a small store that specialized in cheap accessories for girls. And once again, shortly after they got into that store, Nichole was playfully pounding on Jasmine.

"Stop! Stop!" Jasmine cried as he started laughing once again.

"Girls! What on earth are you doing?" Susan asked.

"Nichole, stop hitting Jasmine!" Marcy chastised.

"It's okay, Mom," Jasmine replied. "We're just playing."

"Besides," Nichole added. "I warned him. If he doesn't stop acting afraid of being a girl, then I'm going to pound all that fear right out of him till he stops!" Once again she broke out laughing. "And I think it's working!" She turned to Jasmine. "Isn't it?"

"Um..."

"I said it's working, isn't it!" she insisted as she raised her fists again.

"Yeah! Yeah!" Jasmine replied quickly. "It's working real well!"

"See!" Nichole said rather proudly to her mother.

Susan looked to Marcy. "I knew we shouldn't have asked." The two women laughed a little too. But once again, Susan noted that

Jasmine stopped hanging back and started looking more seriously at the things in the store.

As Susan watched Jasmine and Nichole trying to find more little gifts that they could give out at the party, she was quickly realizing that Jasmine had a growing fascination with jewelry. She had already noticed that he was becoming rather fond of earrings, but now she saw that he was becoming interested in other types of jewelry as well. She found it surprising when he kept trying on bracelets and then showing them to Nichole.

By the time they left that store, they were down to just needing a few special touches for decorations before they would finally head home. But that's when Susan's phone rang. As Susan pulled the phone out of her purse, she noticed that it was the family business office number where Valerie was the only one working that day. "Uh oh. It's Val," she said as she hit the button to answer the call. "Hello?"

"Hi Susan," Valeri's voice came back. "How's the shopping going?"

"Pretty good," Susan replied. "We're almost done. What's wrong? More problems with those lodges?"

"No. Not unless you count the fact that there are no workers here again."

"I would call that a big problem," Susan said. "So why are they missing this time?"

"I have no idea," Valerie replied. "That's not why I'm calling."

"Oh," Susan said. "So what else happened?"

"Um...Jed and Justin and Jimmy Joe are here with me right now."

"Is she alright?" Susan asked immediately, her voice full of concern.

"She's fine. They all are. But Jimmy wants me to do something for her and I wanted to check with you first."

"Oh, good. No problem then. What's she need? Does she need me to pick something up for her while we're out?"

"No. It's nothing like that Sue. She wants a haircut."

"A haircut?" Susan thought about that. "I guess her hair is starting to look a little straggly again. I'm sure all the guys are. So I

guess I have no objections to that at all.”

“That’s not the problem,” Valerie replied. “She wants it cut real short. And I mean really short!”

“Short?” Susan exclaimed, a touch of horror in her voice.

“I told her I wouldn’t do it until I checked with you first.”

“Oh Val,” Susan said, not happy about the situation at all. “I don’t know. If we can ever get her to quit hunting, then it will only take that much longer to...” Her voice trailed off as she noticed Jasmine and Nichole. They were looking into a large mirror together in a store window, and Jasmine was pulling absently on his long hair and making funny faces with Nichole at their reflections. The way he was pulling on his hair and the faces he was making, as odd and funny as they were, were simply all too feminine.

“Susan?” Valerie’s voice called over the phone.

But Susan ignored Valerie as her eyes stayed locked on the two “girls.” Her only thoughts at that moment were of how much Jasmine once again looked so much like a real girl, especially as he played with his hair.

“Susan?” Valerie called again. “Are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” Susan finally replied. “Sorry. I was...looking at something. Val, go ahead. If she wants it that short, then give it to her. Let her have it!”

Valerie was skeptical, but replied. “Okay, if you’re sure.”

“I am, Val. If she wants it, then go for it!”

“Okay,” Valerie replied. “Did you get the girls their new Easter dresses yet? I’ve still got to take Ashley, and I think I’m going to treat myself to a few new spring dresses as well. I’ve been wearing the same old ones to church for way too long now.”

“Easter dresses?” Susan replied questioningly. “I hadn’t even thought about it.” She looked over at Marcy who raised her eyebrows in surprise as well.

“Oh,” Valerie said. “I just thought that you might...in light of the pageant and all.”

“The pageant!” Susan exclaimed, now remembering the annual Easter pageant that was always a big part of the Easter Festival at the church every year. She saw Marcy’s eyes go wide at the mention of the event.

"I forgot about it!" Marcy whispered urgently.

"Um, Val, we both kind of forgot about it. We've had so much else to worry about with their birthdays happening when they are this year, not to mention those lodges not getting built on time."

"Oh. Okay," Val replied. "I didn't know if you were shopping for dresses now or not, or if you wanted the girls to go with Ash and me when we go."

Susan took a deep breath. "No, we better do it today while we're here with them. Thanks for reminding me."

"No problem," Val replied. "And one very short haircut, coming right up!"

Susan hung up her phone. "I guess we better extend our shopping trip a bit. I totally forgot about that darn Easter Pageant."

"Me too!" Marcy agreed. She looked questioningly at Jasmine. "Are you going to put him in it?"

Susan thought about that. "I have a feeling he won't like it at all, but I don't think I have much of a choice. We go out of our way every year to make sure every girl there gets included, and every girl there goes home with a prize or a gift of some sort."

Marcy nodded. "I'm just glad that Mom and Val are doing that shopping. We've got enough to worry about for just this party. That Easter Festival is huge!"

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Jimmy Joe had been listening to everything her Aunt Val had said. She picked up quickly on the fact that her mother was letting her get her hair cut shorter, although from what she gathered, her mother hadn't exactly been fond of the idea. But at least she had said yes. That was good! The bad part was the other thing. They would be shopping for new Easter dresses. And her aunt had mentioned the Easter Pageant. She was suddenly feeling very sorry for herself.

She loved getting new dresses, and she had won that Easter Pageant last year. And two years before that! And if she wasn't so miserably ugly now, she had no doubt she would have won it again. In her mind, she once again remembered how it felt to have

everyone looking at her and everyone talking about how pretty she was. And then to win, that was just the icing on the cake. But even if she didn't win, then she would still know that she was really pretty and that everyone knew it.

Ugly, ugly, ugly! That's all that was left of her now. Too ugly for anyone to ever think she was really a girl. Too ugly to even think of herself as a girl anymore. The only thing left for her now, was to be a boy. A boy on the outside, that didn't match at all the girl on the inside.

"Make sure you cut it real short!" Aunt Valerie. "Real short!"

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Susan and Marcy were horrified to witness Nichole doing her rapid hitting on Jasmine three more times while they were out looking for new dresses for Easter. And the one time they had told Nichole to stop it, Nichole simply told them she wouldn't stop it until Jasmine stopped it by not acting like he was afraid of everything anymore. Since Jasmine was laughing about it each time, and he did start acting more interested in things each time, both Susan and Marcy didn't say much more about it.

"But I like this one!" Jasmine argued.

"Jade," Nichole replied, "it's not sexy enough. We're gonna be twelve years old. We're not babies anymore."

"But this one is comfortable. Really comfortable," he said about the full skirted, pastel flower patterned dress he was wearing. "It's not all tight like those other ones are."

"Oh come on!" Nichole argued. "Those dresses aren't that bad at all. And who cares if they're a little tight. The tighter, the better! Show some figure girl!"

"But all those other ones show...my boobs!"

"Huh? Of course they do. That's the whole point!"

"But I don't want them too."

"Do I have to start pounding on you again? Eventually, if I keep at it, it's bound to stick."

"No," Jasmine replied. "It's just that...I like this one better. Besides, I think it's pretty."

"Yeah, it is pretty. Real pretty, Jade. It's just not as sexy."

"I don't think I care. I'm not interested in it looking sexy."

"Like I said, you're not a baby anymore Jade. Live a little. Have some fun."

"I can't have fun in this dress?" He quickly held up his hand to keep Nichole from answering. "No, of course not. It's too nice. And having fun in any kind of dress is a bit difficult."

"Jade, you just...don't...get it!"

"I don't care. I still think I'll be more comfortable with this one than any of those others."

Nichole rolled her eyes. "You're exasperating! You know that?"

Jasmine beamed mockingly. "Thank you. I try." He turned toward his mother who was standing back with his Aunt and just trying to stay out of the way, although he wished she wouldn't. He would much rather his mother picked out the clothes for him. This business of being old enough to decide for himself what he wanted to wear was irksome. "Mom?" he asked, "is there anything wrong with this one? Or do you think I need to get one of the others like Nichole wants."

Susan's eyebrows went up at the question. "No. If you like that one better, then go with it. Besides, I agree with you. It really is a pretty dress."

"See," Jasmine said to Nichole.

"You're hopeless, you know that?"

While the girls were getting changed back into the clothes they had been wearing all day, Marcy asked Susan, "Are you going to get him some new shoes to go with that dress?"

Susan shook her head. "No, he's already got a nice pair of black patent shoes that should work just fine. Besides, I'm trying to wait until we do our real clothes shopping after Easter. After Mom hands out their birthday checks.

"Me too," Marcy agreed. "But I think I'm going to have to get Nichole some today anyway, if you don't mind. She doesn't have anything decent to wear with the dress she picked out, and most of her shoes are simply too small for her anyway. So I think I'll splurge a bit more on her today while I've got the chance. It's all going to get made up anyway with the check for her birthday."

Susan smiled. "True, but Clint doesn't always see it that way. He'd rather have the money first. Actually, he's probably going to kill me for what I've already spent today."

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"Jade," Nichole said, "why don't you try on some heels? You at least need some sexy heels to go with that dress."

But Susan answered before Jasmine could. "I'm not buying him shoes today," she said to Nichole. "He's got some that will look just fine."

Nichole looked from her Aunt Susan, to her mother, and then she looked apologetically toward Jasmine. "Sorry girlfriend."

"It's okay," Jasmine replied. "I'm totally happy about it."

"You would be!" With one foot in a pair of her usual shoes, and her other foot wearing a pair that had a slightly higher heel, Nichole started searching the racks once again. "Oh cool!" she said as she spied another pair and pulled them out to look. "I'm gonna try them on!"

"Nichole, no!" Marcy interjected. "They're too high. You don't need shoes like that at your age."

"But Mom, I'm gonna be twelve!"

"I know how old you are, and I said no!"

"Can't I at least just try them on?" Nichole pleaded.

Marcy shook her head as if disgusted. "Go ahead. But we're not buying them!"

"Cool!" Nichole said quickly. A minute later, she was slipping on a pair of red four inch pumps. "Don't you just love them?" she said to Jasmine.

"Uh...sure. I guess." Jasmine replied.

Nichole noticed his lack of attitude about them. "Jade, you really need to get a life."

Jasmine only smiled and laughed a bit.

"You need to try these on while I find something else."

"What for?"

"Cause they're fun. They're sexy!"

"Who cares?"

Nichole looked up at her Aunt Susan. "Can I pound some sense into him again? Please?"

"Not this time," Susan replied with a smirk.

"Have I told you you're hopeless," Nichole said to Jasmine as she started to carefully inch her way along the shoe racks in those sky-high heels as she looked for another pair to buy. She pulled another pair off the shelf to look at them, then found a box in her size to try on. She carefully made her way back to the seat with the box and took the red heels off. Then she opened the box. "Huh?" She stared at the shoes in the box. "These aren't what I wanted." She held the box up so her mother could see. "They've got the wrong shoes in here."

"I'll see if I can find you another pair," Marcy replied.

While Marcy went looking for a box of the right shoes, Susan stared at the shoes that were in the box as Nichole set the box aside. Then she went and picked the box up for a closer look. She looked at Jasmine, then at Nichole, then back at the shoes. She checked the size. Wrong shoes in the box, but they were the right size. An idea formed in her mind. "Jas, try these on please," she said as she held the box out toward Jasmine.

"Me?" Jasmine replied.

"Is there another Jasmine here?" Susan asked.

Jasmine looked around. "I don't know. Is there?"

"Just try them on!" Susan insisted.

Jasmine rolled his eyes and started removing the shoes he was wearing. When he was down to just his colorful tights, he pulled one of the shoes out of the box. It was a pair of yellow pumps. "Yellow?" he asked.

"They'll go perfectly with your new dress," Susan explained.

"And they've got a real sexy heel!" Nichole added.

Jasmine rolled his eyes yet again at that comment. He slipped one of them onto his foot and looked skeptically at it. "You're sure about this?" he asked his mother.

"Put the other one on," Susan told him.

A moment later, Jasmine had both the yellow shoes on his feet and was holding them up and wiggling them around.

“Cute!” Marcy declared as she walked up with another box of shoes. “Here Nichole,” she said as she handed her daughter the box. “I think these are the ones you wanted.” She turned to Susan. “I thought you weren’t getting any for him.”

“I wasn’t,” Susan replied. “But they’ll go great with that dress he just got.”

“They’ll be perfect,” Marcy agreed.

“Besides,” Susan added, “his sister has been after me to buy her a pair of heels for a long time now, and I’ve pretty much refused her.” She nodded toward Nichole. “Like this one here, she wants some that are way too old for her.”

“Trust me,” Marcy replied. “I fully understand.”

“Well anyway, since that Jas wants them so badly, then I figured if she saw this Jas here wearing these, then maybe she’ll get jealous again.”

“In other words, you’re not giving up on her yet.”

Susan shook her head. “Not by a long-shot. I can’t! I just can’t!”

Marcy grabbed Susan’s arm sympathetically. “I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t either.” She looked at the shoes that Jasmine was still wiggling around in the air. “Will they be enough?” she asked. “The heel is high, but not that much. Not at all like I know Nichole wants.”

“Probably not. But right now, I’m willing to use anything at all against her – to help her!” She turned to Jasmine again. “Stand up so we can see how they look.”

“Stand?” Jasmine asked incredulously. “In these?”

“Jas, stop complaining and just stand up.”

Jasmine set both feet back down on the floor. The high two inch heel had his feet bent downward at a very odd angle. He looked up skeptically at his mother. “Stand?” he asked uncertainly.

“Jas, just do it!” Susan told him.

Very carefully, Jasmine stood up. The heels felt really strange. “These are weird!” he noted.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get used to them,” Susan replied, tossing off his remark.

“Used to them?” Jasmine asked incredulously. “How the heck am I supposed to walk in them?”

“One foot in front of the other, Jas. One foot in front of the other.” Then she lowered her voice just a bit. “Just do it carefully, that’s all. Go slow and do the best you can.”

Very tentatively, Jasmine took a step with one foot, then with the other. His arms were held out wide to help him keep his balance. “This is weird!” he said again.

“They’re super!” Nichole proclaimed. “Jade, you’ve got to get them.”

Again Susan answered for him. “Oh, we’re getting them. There’s no doubt about that!”

“Hear that, Jade? We’re both getting high heels today!” Nichole said happily.

Jasmine turned around and went back to the seat and sat down. “I think I’d rather do without,” he replied. “These are impossible to walk in.”

“Don’t worry,” Susan said. “You can get plenty of practice when we get home. In fact, I’m going to insist on it. Especially when your sister is around!”

Nichole finished buckling the straps on the shoes she had found and stood up in them. Happily, she took a few steps.

“They look real nice on you Nichole,” Marcy noted.

“Thanks Mom,” Nichole said happily. Then she turned and looked back at the shoes Jasmine was still wearing. “Hey,” she complained. “His shoes have a higher heel than mine!”

“Live with it!” Marcy told her.

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The cool air hitting Jimmy Joe’s scalp was something she had never experienced before. She had wanted her aunt to cut her hair real short in a buzz cut like some of the boys had, and now she had it. She wasn’t sure or not if she was happy that her mother had finally agreed. Now she figured she would look even more like a boy. She ran her hand again over the short stubble that was all that

was left of the long beautiful hair she once had – when she was a girl.

But she wasn't a girl anymore. Not in body anyway. What she was on the inside was another matter. But it seemed that nobody cared what you were on the inside. Everybody only cared what you looked like on the outside. She had learned that lesson the hard way all too recently. Her still slightly black eye was the proof of that matter. What wasn't proof, was all the envy she held toward her brother just then. What kind of dress was he getting for Easter? How would he look in it? And was her mother really going to make him participate in that pageant? If she did, she had no doubt that it should prove funny. Maybe. He did tend to look too much like a real girl sometimes.

So now she had her hair cut even shorter than before to help her be more of a boy. But now that she had come this far, she knew she was going to have to do something else that was going to be even harder. Like it or not, people seemed to expect you to act like what you looked like. If she didn't want another black eye, and if she didn't want people constantly telling her that she was one of those gay guys, then like it or not, she was going to have to learn to act less like a girl, and act more like a boy. Her only problem was, she didn't have a clue as to how.

Her Uncle Jed stopped his truck out in front of her house and she opened the door to get out. She stopped though before jumping down. "Uncle Jed?" she started.

"Yeah?" Jed asked.

"I need to learn to act more like a boy now. How do I do it?"

Her question surprised Jed even more than her request earlier that she wanted her hair cut. "I don't know, Jimmy. I'm not sure at all what you can do."

Jimmy nodded sadly and jumped down. "Tomorrow?" she asked before closing the door.

"If you want," Jed replied. "You don't need to be working with me during the week like this. You should be out having fun with your friends."

Jimmy Joe shook her head. "See you tomorrow, Uncle Jed. And thanks."

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Clint drove his truck into the driveway and parked. As he pulled in, he immediately noted that Susan wasn't home yet. But she had already phoned him and told him they were running late. He wasn't exactly happy about that. But the part he was happy about was that she said she was bringing home pizza for dinner instead of her cooking. Clint never really mentioned it, but he loved pizza. Particularly any kind with lots of different stuff on it.

The back door wasn't locked when he went in, but he didn't see anybody in the kitchen. He went out to the hallway. "I'm home!" he called. "Anybody here?"

"Back here!" a voice called.

He headed straight for Jimmy Joe's room, noting that Tommy's room was empty as he passed by. The door to Jimmy's room was open and went in. Jimmy was seated in front of her computer playing a game. It took only a second for Clint to notice Jimmy's shorter hair. "What happened to your head?" he asked as he walked up behind Jimmy.

"I asked Aunt Valerie to cut it," Jimmy replied, without looking up from her game.

"Does your mother know?" Clint asked.

Jimmy sighed, but didn't stop playing the game. "Yeah, she knows. Aunt Valerie called her and asked her about it before she cut it."

Clint nodded. "For a boy. I guess I approve," Clint told her.

"Thanks," Jimmy Joe replied, felling a bit relieved.

"For a boy," Clint repeated. "Your mother is bringing pizza home tonight," he mentioned before walking out.

"Pizza! Yeah!" Jimmy replied happily.

Clint's phone rang as he was heading back up the hallway. Expecting it to be his wife, he was surprised to see his father calling instead.

"Hi Dad," he said as soon as he connected the call.

"Hey Clint," Jacob replied. "Good day at work?"

"Busy," Clint told him. "That and finally getting all those horses arranged for was a lot."

"How many did you manage to get?"

"Twenty!" Clint told him.

"Goddamn! That's a bunch! You need that many?"

"Have you ever seen how many girls come to those sleepovers? That and we've got to have enough for several adults to shepherd them all through those trails so they don't get lost."

"Good idea," Jacob replied. "Look Clint. The reason I called is about Jimmy Joe working with Jed. You know she's done it for a long time now and her birthday is coming up. We've never really discussed compensation for what she's done, other than she gets to go hunting. But Jed tells me she's been pulling her weight more and more lately. And we both kind of figured it's gone on so long now that she ought to get paid a little something for it."

"Wow Dad. I hadn't considered that. I know she'd appreciate it. And I'm sure she's worked hard for it."

"That's pretty much how Jed felt," Jacob replied. "Anyway, I wondered if you wanted to break the happy news to her."

"Yeah, sure. I'd love to."

"Um...Clint?"

"Yeah, Dad?"

"Um...about the other one."

"You mean Jasmine?"

"Yeah. Jasmine or Jade or whatever. You know he ain't getting' anything."

"Uh...yeah Dad. Of course. I'll make sure he understands."

"Good. No sense in him getting all mad about it. But we just felt that all the work Jimmy done shouldn't go unnoticed."

"Yeah Dad. Right. I'll take care of it. For both of them. Just how much were you going to give Jimmy?"

"We figured about five hundred should be enough for now."

"Wow!" Clint exclaimed. "Yeah, that should really thrill her."

"Good. Just let them know and I'll have Rose drop a check off with Susan sometime tomorrow."

"Great Dad. Thanks."

Clint turned around and headed back to Jimmy Joe's room. To say that Jimmy took the news well, was an understatement!

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Jasmine was holding two large boxes of pizza as his mother opened the back door for him so he could carry them into the house. He barely got into the kitchen before he saw his father heading towards him.

"Here, I'll take those," Clint said as he quickly relieved Jasmine of the large boxes. He held the boxes long enough to give Susan a quick peck on the cheek before he set them on the kitchen table. "Pizza's here!" he yelled toward the back of the house where Tommy and Jimmy were.

"Jas, start bringing in the things we bought please," Susan said to Jasmine.

"Now Mom? I'm hungry."

"Yes now. Well, at least bring in your new shoes. I want you wearing them right away."

"But I can't even walk in them."

"That's why I want you to get plenty of practice."

Jasmine rolled his eyes, but he went back out to the car.

"Why would you get him shoes he can't walk in?" Clint asked as he pulled a piece of pizza out of the box and set in on a plate.

"Because I'm trying to make the real Jasmine jealous," Susan told him. "She's wanted a pair of heels for as long as I can remember, and I've always told her no."

"Heels? At her age?"

"Exactly!"

"But I'm guessing you got...that Jasmine some anyway."

"I wasn't going to, but I'm willing to do anything at all to get my real daughter to change her mind. And I'm more than desperate!"

"Desperate about what?" Tommy asked as he walked into the kitchen.

Susan saw Jimmy Joe right behind him. "Never mind," she told him, but her eyes were on her real daughter and how her head looked now. Valerie had indeed cut it short. She could see her

daughter's entire scalp through what was left of her hair. "Wow, Val did cut it short."

"That's what I wanted," Jimmy told her as she headed straight for the table and the pizza.

Susan only shook her head at that and went to set her purse on the counter. By the time she got back to the table, Jasmine was finally pushing his way into the house. His arms were loaded with things including his new dress in a large bag, and Susan was happy to note he had also found the bag from the shoe store. "Hurry up dear," she told him.

"I'm trying!" Jasmine complained. "Hey! Save some for me."

"Don't worry, there's plenty," Susan told him.

Rolling his eyes, Jasmine hurried toward his room. He literally dumped everything on the bed, glad to get it all out of his arms. Wear the shoes. Was his mother crazy? But he found the bag and pulled the box out. He opened the box. The yellow pumps stood out boldly against the interior of the box. He remembered how weird they had felt on his feet when he had tried them on in the store. He also remembered how strange and difficult they had been to try to walk in. Yeah, his mother was crazy for sure!

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It wasn't so much the odd slow clomping sound that caught everyone's attention, it was the way Jasmine "walked" into the kitchen, literally trying to keep from falling on his face and grabbing onto anything he could. But one look was all it took for the bright yellow shoes on his feet to be easily noticed. It was Tommy though who made the observation, "What the heck?"

"Hey, this wasn't my idea," Jasmine said quickly as he carefully made his way across the kitchen.

Susan forced herself to turn her eyes away from Jasmine walking in, to the real Jasmine already sitting at the table. Her eyes were wide, and her mouth was wide open, despite being filled with pizza. As the stumbling Jasmine got closer to the table, Susan could literally see the envy in the real Jasmine's eyes, and it didn't take long before her protests started.

“Mom...why is he wearing heels?”

“Because I told him to,” Susan replied as she took another bite of her pizza.

“Why?”

Susan was forced to answer with her mouth still full. “Because he can’t wear them on Sunday unless he learns to walk better in them. And they do go so well with the pretty new dress he just got for Easter.”

“But Mom, you never let me wear heels. Never! And how many times did I ask you for some?”

Susan purposely put a mock surprised expression on her face. “Jimmy Joe. Why on earth would I ever let a *boy* wear high heels? It’s ridiculous!”

Jasmine reached his seat and gratefully sat down, thinking about the fact that him having to wear the heels just then really was ridiculous.

Jimmy Joe’s ire was growing though over the issue. “Damn it, Mom, you know what I mean. You never let me have any!”

Susan set down the piece of pizza she was just about to take another bite of and looked at her once daughter, whose head looked nearly bald. “I seem to remember telling you once that all you had to do was to agree to quit hunting and go back to being a girl, and if you did, then I’d have no problem at all with buying you a pair of heels.”

“Yeah, but you also said that you wouldn’t get me anything like he’s wearing now!”

“No, you’re right. But that was then and this is now, and the shoes will go perfectly with his new dress – that he picked out himself, and I think is really pretty.”

Jimmy Joe was surprised. “*He* picked the dress out?”

“He sure did,” Susan replied. “Of course you should have seen the ones that Nichole wanted him to get instead. And I have no doubt that you would have liked them better too. But for my taste, I like the one that he chose.”

Jimmy Joe shook her head and looked to Jasmine. “I can’t believe that *you* picked out your own dress.”

Jasmine shrugged. “What of it?”

"I just can't imagine it. You couldn't even find a pair of decent looking panties if you tried. And I suppose you picked out those high heels too?"

"Um...no," Jasmine replied. "Mom kind of insisted on them."

"You insisted?" Jimmy Joe exclaimed as she looked back to her mother. "You wanted him to get a pair of high heels?"

Susan smiled. "I'm afraid so. They really do go so well with his dress. And of course, I wanted you to see him wearing them all around the house so he can get used to them."

Jimmy Joe's jaw dropped. "You bought them just to make me jealous?"

"Something like that," Susan admitted with a sly smile on her face.

"It's not fair!" Jimmy Joe exclaimed. "You never let me wear any before. Never!"

"That's the point...*Jimmy Joe!*" Susan replied. "If you want to wear them, then you know what you have to do. It's so simple. But you don't get any until you finally agree to stop hunting. And let me tell you this *young man*, if you do finally go back to being a girl, I'm so desperate now that I'll be glad to buy you any pair of shoes at all. And I don't care what kind of heel they have. Any! Or what kind of dresses you might want too. I just want you back again!"

"So this was all just something else to make me quit hunting again," Jimmy Joe stated angrily.

"That...and they really do go very nicely with his new dress. But you're right, I want you to see that I'm letting him have them, and you can't! So I suggest you start getting used to seeing him around here in them a lot, because he needs lots of practice walking in them."

The angry look on Jimmy Joe's face was almost frightening. "I hope you fall and break your neck!" she said angrily to Jasmine. Then she got up from the table and ran out.

Clint let out his breath that he hadn't realized he was holding. "Another good try, Honey," he said. "But once again she just won't give in."

Susan shook her head. "I just don't get how she can be so stupidly hard-headed. I just don't get it!"

“Mom,” Jasmine said softly. “Do I really have to wear these dumb things around the house now?”

“As much as you can,” Susan replied. “Besides, like she said, I don’t want you breaking your neck in them.”

Chapter 53 – Jealous

March 25th – 26th

“Thank God for small favors!” Marcy exclaimed as she set the phone down at work on Wednesday.

“What happened?” Susan asked.

“The girls have all decided that since they’re having a western theme for their party, that instead of just doing the normal karaoke thing, they want to put on some kind of show as well.”

“And that’s good?”

“No, the part that’s good is that I’m down here in the office and I don’t have to listen to them practicing.”

Susan couldn’t help but laugh.

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“But you’ve got to!” Allison exclaimed. “It’s your birthday!”

“So what?” Jasmine Jade replied. “Since it is my birthday, then don’t I get a say in whether or not I want to sing?”

“No you don’t! It’s your party. You’ve got to be one of the stars.”

“Oh come on,” Olivia said. “You can do it. You’ll be fine.”

“No I won’t. It’ll be embarrassing.” Jade replied.

“Jade,” Nichole argued. “You sound fine. And like Allison said, since it’s your birthday too, then you’ve got to be one of the stars.”

“But I don’t want to, and I can’t sing like the rest of you can.”

“So sing like you can,” Allison told him. “And we all know you don’t sing that bad.”

“Now stop arguing,” Nichole said, “or all of us will start pounding on you instead of just me!”

Jade couldn’t help but smile at that. “You would too! Wouldn’t you?”

“Pounding session!” Nichole called.

Three girls immediately rushed at Jade from all sides and started landing very fast playful blows all over his body. They didn't exactly tickle, but they certainly didn't hurt either. And despite himself, Jade couldn't help but start laughing uncontrollably the whole time they went at him. "Stop, stop," he laughed over and over again.

"Not until you stop trying to get out of everything and start acting like you like it, which we all know you do!" Nichole told him.

"Stop, stop," Jade kept calling while he laughed. "Okay, okay, I'll do it. Just stop."

"Okay girls," Nichole said as she finally backed off. "We'll see how he does."

Jade was still laughing, but he was glad the girls finally stopped hitting him.

"Now take the microphone and sing," Nichole told him. "Olivia, start the music."

"How can I sing if I'm still laughing?" Jade complained.

"I don't care," Nichole replied. "At least if you do laugh, you'll look like you're enjoying yourself, which I know for a fact that you are. Olivia, hit the button."

Jade rolled his eyes once again as the introduction music started to one of the latest female country songs out on the radio. There was no question as to if he knew the words. The girls all listened to the music so much, and they always sang along each time, so the words came somewhat easy. It was the thought of having to sing up in front of a bunch of people that scared him. Especially having to do it as a girl.

"Louder!" Olivia yelled. "Sing it like you mean it!"

Despite himself, Jade smiled and tried to sing louder. He really wished he did sound better, but he wasn't a real girl. He had no choice but to try to do the best he could.

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On Wednesday evening, Brian and Janet both walked into Susan and Clint's kitchen. Their hands were full of everything they needed. Janet stopped for a moment to just listen. "Ah..." she breathed. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Susan asked.

"No singing! Allison is going crazy at home trying to learn her parts to the songs the girls have decided to sing at that birthday party you and Marcy are throwing."

Susan giggled. "I heard about that. Allison is doing a lot of practicing?"

"All the time!" Brian replied. "She doesn't hardly stop."

"Marcy says that Nichole is pretty much doing the same thing," Susan told them.

"Yeah, but Nichole likes to sing, and she's pretty good at it. And while Allison isn't half bad, she somehow thinks she has to be better than everyone else, so she keeps practicing."

Susan shrugged. "Well, at least she won't be bad when they put on that show."

"As if it really matters!" Janet replied.

"It does to them," Susan said with a laugh. "Let me call the kids." She went out to the hallway and called, "Jimmy! Jasmine! Uncle Brian and Aunt Janet are here."

Oddly, it was Jimmy Joe who left her room first and walked boldly down the hallway. "Let's get this over with," she said as she walked past her mother and straight into the kitchen.

Susan looked back down the hall. She saw Jasmine just sticking his head out the door. "Mom, do I have to keep wearing these shoes?"

"Yes!" Susan replied. "Now get out here. Uncle Brian is here to take another blood sample."

It was fairly obvious that Jasmine wasn't too happy about anything as he left his bedroom. The yellow pumps on his feet again couldn't be missed, but at least he was walking a lot better in them now. "My feet hurt," he mumbled as he walked past his mother.

"Welcome to womanhood," Susan replied as she followed after him.

"Let's just do this," Jimmy Joe said as she sat down at the kitchen table and started to roll up her sleeve.

Brian and Janet both looked at Susan and Clint in surprise. "Okay," Brian finally said as he started getting everything he would need out of the bag he had brought with him. A few minutes later, he

was drawing blood. When he was done, he taped a piece of cotton over where the needle had been in her arm. "That's it," he said to her.

"Good!" Jimmy Joe replied, even though she didn't sound happy about it. She got up from the seat and said, "See you next week." With that parting remark, she walked out, while everyone just looked after her.

"What's going on?" Janet asked.

Susan shook her head. "Heaven only knows." She turned to Jasmine. "Okay, Jas, your turn."

"Nice shoes," Janet noted as Jasmine headed for the table.

Jasmine only rolled his eyes. He'd already had more than enough of wearing the stupid yellow heels. But at least he wasn't so afraid of falling in them anymore.

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"Jade," Nichole said to him on Thursday afternoon, "you've got to learn to write better than that. It looks awful!"

"I can't!" Jade replied. "This is the best I can do!"

"Well try harder! Here, try to copy the way I write. Just do it real slow and careful."

"But you write all...curly and stuff."

"That's the way you're supposed to write. See how much nicer it looks than the way you do it?"

"Yeah, but I can't write like that. Besides, it takes too long."

"No it doesn't. Now try it. Just go slow and do it kind of one letter at a time. And for heaven's sake, don't be afraid if it starts to look feminine. It's supposed to, okay? Get over it already!"

Jade did his usual eye rolling again, but he put the pen to the envelope and tried to address it as "nicely" as he possibly could, trying to use the way Nichole did it as something to model his writing after."

"See," Nichole said as he finished the first word, "that's already looking a lot better."

"Yeah, girly," Jade replied.

Nichole was up immediately out of her seat and started pounding her fists lightly against his back.

"I was just kidding. Just kidding!" Jade laughed.

"Well don't!" Nichole replied. "Because I'm not letting you start getting all afraid of stupid things again."

"I can't help it!" Jade laughed.

"Well try harder!" Nichole replied. "Now keep writing! We've got lots of these to do."

Once again, Jade started trying to copy the way Nichole wrote her letters. It seemed like each one was done with more circles and curlicues than there should be. But he did have to admit, her handwriting did look very nice.

Nichole did twice as many as he did, but she counted herself lucky that he was helping at all with the invitations. And at least her mother had let them design the letter itself on the computer and then print them out so that all they had to do was to address the envelopes and make them as pretty as possible. Most of the envelopes were now addressed and they had pasted some blue and white check bows on them along with adding some pretty western stickers.

Nichole watched as Jade finally finished the very last one. "Finally!" she said as she grabbed the envelope from him and started pasting on one of the bows.

"I want to do one more," Jade told her.

"Another one? But we already agreed on who should be there."

"I know, but this one is special. And I don't think she'll be able to be there, at least not for all of it. But I want to make one for her anyway."

"Who?"

"My sister."

"Jimmy Joe?" Nichole asked incredulously. "But she can't be there. Not as long as she's decided she's going to be a boy."

"I know," Jade replied. "But she loves horses. Like a lot!"

"I know," Nichole replied.

"So I want her to have a chance to at least ride with us if nothing else."

Nichole just looked at him for a moment. "You're too nice. You know that?"

"Not really," he said as he started to laboriously write 'Jimmy Joe' on the envelope. "But it's her birthday too."

Nichole nodded. "Yeah," she said. "It is. And you're right, we should invite her. But not for all of it!"

Jade just continued writing.

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The sound of his yellow heels seemed to herald him into her room. Jimmy Joe didn't even look up from her computer game. "What the hell do you want?"

Jasmine Jade stopped halfway across the room. "To give you one of these."

"One of what?"

"An invitation to our party."

Still not looking up, Jimmy Joe rolled her eyes. "You know I can't be there."

"But you can be there for some of it. I already asked Mom and she said you could."

Now Jimmy Joe turned around to look at him, disbelief written clearly on her face. And then she figured it out. "This is just another plot to try to get me to quit hunting. Well it's not going to work. So forget it!" She turned back away from him again.

"No it's not!" Jasmine replied. "And just so you know, this was my idea, not Mom's."

Jimmy Joe turned back around again. "Your idea?"

"Yeah. And Nichole agreed with me too. Jas, we're having horses. Horses!"

"So I heard!" Jimmy Joe replied sullenly.

"So I know how much you love horses. And I wanted you to get a chance to ride with us too."

Jimmy Joe looked at him for several long moments. "You wanted to do this...for me? Just because you know I like horses?"

"Yeah. Of course. Besides, it's your birthday too. Why shouldn't you got to enjoy something I know you really love?"

“And Mom said I could?”

“Ask her. She said you could. In fact, she and Aunt Marcy are considering having us do some of the things we’re planning on outside in the backyard instead of in the house, and Mom said you could watch and be there for that – if you want.”

Jimmy Joe suddenly looked horrified. “Not likely!” She looked at the envelope in his hands. “But I may think about the horses. That could be really cool.”

Jasmine smiled and held out the envelope toward her. Jimmy Joe hesitated a moment before taking it. “Thanks,” she said simply. “I appreciate it.”

Jasmine smiled broadly. “It’s your birthday too. I just wanted you to be there.”

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It was about half an hour later when Jimmy Joe made an appearance in Jasmine’s room. Jasmine didn’t even hear her coming in. He was looking at, of all things, a fashion show video from Japan, and marveling at how utterly stupid some of the outfits were that the designer had not only created, but was trying to show off. Did he expect anyone would actually buy silly stuff like that?

“Oh hey!” Jimmy Joe exclaimed as she saw what he was looking at. “I loved that one! That guy comes up with the coolest stuff.”

Jasmine turned quickly, embarrassed that anyone had seen what he had been looking at. He quickly turned back to the computer and closed the website.

“Hey!” Jimmy Joe said, “I’m not here to watch it with you. I’m sure I won’t get in trouble for just seeing it over your shoulder.”

“Um...that’s not why I changed it.”

“Then why?”

“Um...because...I don’t know.”

“You mean, you were embarrassed that you were watching a fashion show?”

“No...I mean...um...maybe.”

“You’re just stupid, you know that?”

“Nichole tells me that constantly.”

"Well maybe you should listen."

"What do you need?" Jasmine asked.

"I wanted to know if it was really your idea to let me ride the horses."

"I told you it was."

"But, I mean, Mom didn't even suggest it first or anything?"

"Mom was totally surprised when I asked if I could give the invitation to you."

"So it *was* your idea."

"Do I need to take a lie-detector test or something?"

Jimmy Joe smiled. "No. And I guess knowing you, it does kind of make sense."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know. You're just...one of those kind of people."

Jasmine didn't like what he thought she had inferred. "I'm not some crazy fag type that people hate!" He lowered his head to the floor. "Despite the way I look."

"No, you idiot. I mean, you're just one of those weird people that's always being too nice to everyone else. You really need to get over that, you know."

"Get over it? I thought that was a good thing."

"Jas, nobody acts like that anymore!"

"Well, I'm only doing what I think I should."

"And that's part of your problem." She sat on his bed. Her eyes fell on his bright yellow shoes. She nodded her head toward them. "And that's not going to work, you know."

"What isn't?"

"Those shoes. I'm not caving in just because Mom wants me to see you wearing them."

"I never believed you would for a minute."

"How are they to walk in though? Are they really cool? They're so grown up!"

"They're a pain. Literally! I can't tell you how much my toes start hurting after a while. They're getting better though. I guess wearing them a lot is helping."

"Don't tell Mom, but I can't tell you how jealous I am," Jimmy Joe said quietly.

Jasmine rolled his eyes. "I think she already knows. That was why she made me get these in the first place."

"Well it's still not going to work!"

"I think she knows that too. But she keeps hoping...and so do I."

"Don't give me that. You love all this stuff. You're even watching fashion shows now." An idea struck her. "Hey! Where's my drawing pad?" She quickly got up and started looking for it. "Where'd you put it?"

"I stuck it in the closet with the rest of the clothes...we...were making."

Jasmine hurried to the closet and quickly found her drawing pad on top of a pile of clothes on the floor. "What did you put it all in there for?"

"Cause it was in the way! I'm not interested in it anyway."

"But you're interested enough now to watch fashion shows?"

Jasmine again rolled his eyes. "Do you know how totally stupid some of those outfits are that they show off? I mean, some of them are downright silly! They're funny!"

"They are not, and you know it. Admit it, you love it!"

"Me? Never!"

Jimmy Joe quickly threw her pad on the desk and hurried toward him. She grabbed his arm and pulled him out of his chair."

"Hey! What are you doing?" But before he knew it, he found himself literally thrown face-first down across the bed. And then she was there on top of him, grabbing one of his arms and pulling it back behind him and twisting a little. "Stop! Stop!" he yelled.

"Admit it! Admit you like it!" Jimmy Joe insisted as she continued to pull on his arm.

Jasmine realized that his sister wasn't really hurting him, she was really just playing. Kind of like Nichole did, only his sister was much stronger. He tried to pull his arm back and realized his sister really was a lot stronger. The more he tried to fight her, the more she overpowered him. But despite his situation, because she was playing, he couldn't help but start laughing – a little. "Stop!" he said again, a touch of laughter still in his voice.

"I said admit it. Admit you like watching fashion shows!"

"No!" Jasmine replied, laughing a little more this time.

Jimmy Joe pulled harder on his arm.

"Ow!" Jasmine cried, "Stop! That hurts!"

"Then admit it!"

"Okay, okay, I like them. Okay?"

Jimmy Joe released his arm and got off of him. "There, now we've got that out of the way – I hope!"

Jasmine didn't know if he should laugh or be angry.

"Hey, what's up?"

They both looked up and saw Tommy in the doorway.

"Nothing," Jimmy Joe replied. "We're just playing."

"You're sure?" Tommy asked, looking straight at Jasmine.

"Yeah, we're good," Jasmine replied, this time managing to put a smile on his face.

Tommy nodded and walked away.

"Now," Jimmy Joe said, "since you like fashion shows so much. I want to see your new dress."

"My dress? The one I got for Easter?"

"Do I have to beat you up again?"

Jasmine tried to smile. He knew that Jimmy Joe was just playing, but he had no doubt that Jimmy really could beat him up if she had a mind to. With one of his usual eye-rollings, Jasmine got up and opened his closet door again. But as he was reaching for his new dress, Jimmy Joe noticed something else. "You got new boots! Cowboy boots!" She made a bee-line for them, pushing Jasmine aside so she could pull them out to look at them better.

"They're for the party," Jasmine told her. "Nichole and I got complete western outfits for it, including those boots."

"But Jas, these are great! And boots are so in this year. Really, really in."

Jasmine shrugged. "So? I'm only wearing them for the party."

"You're so stupid!" Jimmy Joe declared as she brought the boots over to the bed with the intention of trying them on.

"What are you doing?" Jasmine asked.

"I'm..." Jimmy Joe stopped herself. "Damn it! I wanted to try them on. They're so cool. And Jas, they've even got a bigger heel than anything I was ever allowed to wear."

"All the cowboy boots are like that," he told her. "I checked. Men's and women's."

"I know! But I never got to wear any." With a shake of her head, Jimmy Joe reluctantly handed the boots to Jasmine. "Here. Put these away before I get in trouble again. And show me your new dress."

"You still want to see it?" Jasmine asked as he took the boots from her.

"I said I did. Didn't I?"

Jasmine set the boots back on the floor of the closet, pulled his new dress out and held it up for his sister to see.

"Nice," Jimmy Joe replied. "And Mom was right, it is kind of pretty. But you should have gone with something sexier."

"You mean all that tight stuff that Nichole thought I should get?"

"Of course!" Jimmy Joe looked at him seriously. She spoke very somberly. "You've most likely got the body for that stuff now. No reason why you shouldn't show it off some and have some fun."

Jasmine's eyes went wide at the statement. He was about to protest, when he noticed the look on his sister's face. "You're jealous," he said softly.

"Jealous? Me?" Jimmy Joe lowered her voice as the somber expression came back to her face. "Like you wouldn't believe, but just don't tell anyone. You don't know how jealous I am! And I'm especially jealous because you, of all people, have..." She waved her hand at him, trying to find the words. "You're...I mean... Damn it. Face it, you're body is getting to be the way I should be."

"You don't have to tell me. I'm not so happy about the situation either. So why do you still insist on hunting and not going back to being a girl?"

"Because I like hunting too much. It's the one and only thing in my life that I really love anymore. My biggest problem now though, is you!"

"Me?"

"You! Every time I look at you now I can't help but get almost... mad!"

"What did I do?"

“Nothing! The problem is... Oh damn it. Forget it!” She started to walk out.

“What’s your big problem with me?” Jasmine insisted as he threw his new dress across the bed where it would be out of the way.”

Jimmy Joe turned around. “You don’t want to know.”

“Yeah, I do want to know! What have I done that’s such a big problem for you?”

“Like I said, you didn’t do anything.”

“Then why am I making you mad? I promise, I’m not trying to.”

“I know!” Jimmy Joe replied, her frustration over the issue causing her voice to rise.

“Then what’s the problem?” Jasmine insisted, his voice also rising in volume to match his sisters.

Jimmy Joe didn’t want to talk about it. She didn’t want to even think about it, but because her brother was pushing the issue so much, the words came out of her mouth anyway. “You want to know what my problem with you is? It’s you! You and the way you’re starting to look, and the way I look now. That’s my problem. And because of that, you’re stealing my dream!” she nearly shouted. “You’re standing there looking all too pretty, and I’m too ugly, and you’re stealing my one very special dream that I’ve had all my life! You! And you don’t even know it!”

“Your dream?” Jasmine asked, totally mystified. “I’m not trying to do anything or take anything from you. What dream?”

“I could hit you right now, you idiot!” Jimmy Joe replied, the ire completely filling her voice. She pointed at the computer. “Did you see that fashion show you were watching? Did you see those women in it? Those beautiful women? That’s what my dream is! *Was!* That’s what I wanted to be when I grow up. I wanted to be one of those beautiful, beautiful women that everybody looks at and admires all over the world. I wanted to be a fashion model you stupid idiot! But instead, well, now I’m just...ugly.” Most of the steam went out of her as she started to sink down into depression over the situation again.

Jasmine’s voice was soft. “So why don’t you quit hunting?”

Jimmy Joe sighed. "I can't anymore. At least not right now. And besides, I've got to enjoy something in my life."

"But they said that as soon as you stop hunting everything will go back to the way it's supposed to be!"

Jimmy Joe smiled now and looked up slyly at him. "Yeah," she said with more than a hint of mischief in her eyes. "But Uncle Brian assured me that I've still got a long time before I have to worry about any permanent bad effects. And Jas, I'm only twelve! Twelve! Well, I will be in another week. I've still got plenty of time to go hunting, and then work on becoming a fashion model later. And Jas, the family promised me they'd do anything at all to get me back to being pretty again. Anything! I may even have them get me a boob job if I think I still need it. And who knows, maybe the family will cave in and let me really hunt by then. Who knows? It could happen! Jas, I might be able to have it all. Everything!"

"But you're still mad at me," Jasmine replied, his mind still trying to come to grips with everything she had just told him.

Jimmy Joe looked at him. "Sorry," she said. "I just can't help it. I'm...jealous I guess."

"So because of you, I'm going to be stuck like this forever?"

"You love it and you know it. You always have. So just stop pretending otherwise. You don't fool me one bit. You never did. You were always jealous of how pretty I was, and you wanted to be just like me. You always wanted to be a girl instead of a boy. Always!" With that, she turned and walked out and went back to her room.

Jasmine watched her go, and he watched as she closed her bedroom door behind her. "No I didn't," he said softly. "No I didn't."

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One door over, Tommy stood listening from his bedroom doorway. After leaving Jasmine's room, he had never gone further than that. He had heard all of it. Everything that Jimmy Joe had said. He didn't even think about what he was doing. He headed straight to find his mother to tell her.

He found both his mother and father together watching TV. He told them about what he thought was an argument, but actually

wasn't. Then he relayed as best as he could, everything he could remember about what the two twins had discussed, especially the last part where Jimmy Joe had declared that she wasn't planning on changing her mind for a long time yet, and then she was hoping she could get it all.

Both Susan and Clint found everything that Tommy told them to be very interesting. They were surprised to hear just how jealous Jimmy Joe really was of Jasmine for having the body now that she should have had instead. And the part about her dream of becoming a model was something of a surprise to Susan and Clint as well, although Susan remembered that Jimmy Joe had been completely fascinated with fashion models before all the switching around ever started. The part that worried them the most, was Jimmy Joe's declaration that she wasn't going to quit anytime soon, because she wanted to have her fun hunting and she knew that she still had time before she might have to worry about any permanent effects.

"I think I better have another little talk with Brian about all this," Clint said.

Susan could only agree. Jimmy Joe's jealousy made things look hopeful. But with her now knowing that there wouldn't be any permanent consequences for a long time, it was also much less hopeful. What were they going to do?

Chapter 54 – Busyness

March 27th – April 1st

Early Friday morning, Susan was just finishing making some coffee and was wondering where Jasmine was. She had already called him to get up out of bed to help her make breakfast. A slight noise made her turn her head toward the kitchen doorway, and she couldn't help but laugh. "Should I run for my life?" she joked as Jasmine, his feet bare and still in his nightgown, sleepily stumbled into the kitchen. His longish hair was a mass of tangles. "You look like a zombie!"

Jasmine, his body bent and limp, walked up to his mother and just laid his head on her chest. "Mornin'" he managed to get out without removing his head.

Susan hugged him to her. "Good morning! It's about time you finally woke up."

"I'm not awake," Jasmine replied. "I'm still sound asleep. I hope."

Susan laughed again. "You're not fooling me!" she said as she pushed him off her. "Now go pour some orange juice for everyone. And don't forget yourself this time."

"Uuuuhhh," Jasmine groaned as he stumbled his way sleepily toward the refrigerator.

Susan couldn't help but laugh again. "Do you have any big plans for today?" Susan asked as he opened the refrigerator door.

Jasmine finally raised his head, for the first time all morning, and managed one of his patented eye-rollings.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Susan asked.

"Nichole and the others are all insisting that we keep practicing those songs we're supposed to sing at the party."

"That should be fun," Susan replied as she started cracking eggs into a large bowl.

"For them maybe, but I can't sing!" Jasmine told her as he hefted the bottle of orange juice out of the refrigerator and closed the door.

"Oh, you'll do fine," Susan told him. "And if you're that worried about it, then a little more practice can't hurt."

Jasmine stopped and stared at her in mock horror. "Can't hurt? They keep pounding on me for the least little thing I try to get out of!"

"They're only trying to help, dear," Susan told him.

"Yeah, help me..." But he didn't know how to finish it.

"Help you what?"

"Help me..." he shrugged. "I don't know. Be more like the rest of the girls," I guess.

"And that's a bad thing?"

He stopped a moment to think about it. "I don't know." He saw his mother turn to look at him skeptically. "I don't know!" he repeated. "I guess it's really a good thing. Considering."

Susan nodded. "Well, considering everything you're stuck with right now, maybe it is a good thing. It's certainly *not* going to hurt you!"

Once again, Jasmine rolled his eyes. "You're not the one that keeps getting pounded on."

Susan laughed again. "They're not hurting you and you know it!"

"No," he admitted. "I guess not. Not like..." He looked up at his mother. "Do you know how strong Jas...I mean Jimmy Joe is getting?"

Susan turned all the way around with a somewhat troubled look on her face. "I have a pretty good idea," she told him. "Why?"

"We were just kind of playing in my room last night...I think. But anyway, she's like way stronger than me now!"

Susan just looked at him for a moment. "Welcome to one of the facts of life for all the rest of the girls in the world."

He shook his head. "I knew she was starting to grow some muscles and stuff. And I guess I've kind of gotten a little weaker. But...damn!"

"Please don't swear!" Susan told him. "It's not lady-like."

Jasmine rolled his eyes again. "But I mean, really. She's gotten a lot stronger than I realized."

"I'm sure she has," Susan replied as she turned back around. Discussing the muscles that her real daughter had now was not something she wanted to dwell upon. She needed something else to discuss instead. "What time are you girls getting together to practice?" she asked.

"I don't know. Later this morning, I guess."

"Well, until you do, I'd like your help with the garden."

"The garden?"

"It's about that time of year to start getting it ready again. And I don't have to be to work until after lunch, so I think this morning would be the perfect time to start getting it ready. And I think I'm going to make it bigger again. It was way too small last year."

"But what do you need me for?" Jasmine asked. "Besides, can I even do that kind of stuff in a skirt?"

"You don't wear skirts for that kind of work, and you know it!"

"So you're saying I can wear pants today?"

"Ones you can get dirty in!" The whoop of delight Susan got in reply, was not exactly something she would ever consider ladylike.

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"What do you think Jas?" Susan said as she set her work gloves down on the ground. "If we make it this wide, then we should have plenty of room for a lot more vegetables than we had last year. And your father should still be able to fence it in nicely."

Jasmine looked at the spot her gloves were marking and looked back at the current confines of the garden. "But Mom, isn't this a lot bigger than we've ever had it?"

"Some," Susan admitted. "But if we're going to have a garden, then we might as well do it right! And if your father needs to buy a little more fencing to go around it, then...well, it will be worth it."

"But didn't you make it a smaller last year because it was too hard to keep up?"

"Who told you that?" Susan replied, knowing full well that he was perfectly right about it. "We're going to have a proper garden this year. And it's going to be bigger than ever. Now, let's get that old tiller out of the shed and get to work."

Since the garage door was heavy, they both bent their backs to lift the thing. But once they had access to the garage workshop, they still had to get to the tiller. Since it only got used once a year, if it was used at all, most everything in the shop was in front of it.

They had to move four-wheelers, lawnmowers, and a host of other junk that had been piled in front of and on top of the darn thing to get it out of the workshop. Jasmine stood back and let his mother push the heavy thing over to the garden area.

"Are you going to put gas in it before you start it?" Jasmine asked.

Susan stopped what she was doing and looked at the tiller. "Oh. I should have thought about that while it was still in the shop. Will you grab the gas can for me?"

Jasmine wasn't happy about lugging the heavy gas can all the way out to the new garden area. When he got there, he expected to have to pour the gas into the tiller. In fact, he would have done it happily, but his mother took over and did it herself. At least he didn't have to keep lifting the heavy can.

Susan finished pouring the gas, then let Jasmine put the cap back on the gas can while she grabbed the starter rope and pulled. Nothing happened. But then, it usually didn't start right away. In fact, getting the darn thing running every year was usually a major battle. Again and again she pulled on the starter rope, getting more frustrated, not to mention tired, with each pull. But the machine refused to start. "What's wrong with this thing?" Susan complained.

"Probably a clogged carburetor from sitting too long," Jasmine suggested.

Susan looked at him. "And how would you know?"

Jasmine shrugged. "It's the most likely problem."

"And is there a way to fix it?"

"Mom, it's not hard. You've just got to clean out the carburetor. It should start then."

"I don't even know what a carburetor is. Do you?"

"Mom," Jasmine replied with another eye-rolling. "It's so easy!"

"Maybe for you!" She looked at him for a moment. "Do you think you can fix it?"

"I can if you'll let me."

Susan considered that for only a moment. "Do it!" she told him.

Jasmine grabbed the heavy tiller and started pushing the thing back to the shop.

"Wait a minute," Susan said, stopping him as she noticed Jimmy Joe and Tommy on their way over to see Ethan. "Boys!" she called. "We need your help!" It was only moments until both Tommy and Jimmy Joe were there. She noticed Jimmy looking very carefully at Jasmine.

Susan ignored her. "I need one of you to please push this thing back to the workshop so Jas here can fix it."

"Sure," Tommy said. "No problem."

Jasmine gratefully handed the heavy dead machine over to him.

"Mom finally let you wear pants for a change?" Jimmy Joe asked.

"What does it look like?" Jasmine replied.

Jimmy Joe didn't say anything else to that.

"Tommy," Susan said as they reached the shed. "Do you know how to fix this thing?"

Tommy looked at her like she was crazy. "I don't have a clue!" he admitted. "According to Dad, we need a new one."

"Never mind then," Susan told him. She turned to Jasmine. "You're sure you can fix it?"

"Mom," Jasmine replied, "it's only a two-stroke engine. There's not much to it."

"So you *can* fix it?"

Jasmine rolled his eyes. "Let me get my tools."

"You're letting him play with his tools?" Jimmy Joe asked.

Susan turned to her real daughter. "Can you fix this thing instead?"

"Not a chance!" she replied.

Susan nodded. "Then don't worry about it and let's see if he really can do it." She changed the subject. "When is Uncle Jed picking you up today?"

"Not until after lunch," Jimmy Joe replied.

Susan only nodded as she watched Jasmine struggling to carry his tool box outside. "How long do you think this will take?" Susan asked.

Jasmine examined the engine. "Give me about half an hour."

Susan nodded. "Okay," she replied, somewhat frustrated that it would take so long. "I'll come back out when you're done."

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Jacob pulled his truck into Clint's driveway. He had just come from the business office where Valerie had told him that Susan wasn't working until that afternoon. That seemed to work out perfectly for his plans.

As he approached the back door, he heard an engine start up in the back yard, then go dead again. Instead of knocking, he headed toward the backyard where he saw Jasmine working on an old rototiller.

"Dad?" Susan called from the doorway as she quickly came outside. "I thought I saw your truck."

Jacob turned around. "Hi Sue," he replied. "Val told me you weren't working until later today."

"Not until this afternoon," she told him. "What's up?"

"I'm just checking to see what...Jade back there is doing this afternoon."

"I'm not sure," Susan replied. "Probably playing with his friends."

"Well, I've got something else in mind that I'd like him to help me with."

"What's that?"

"Um...I'd rather not mention it, if you don't mind."

Susan was guessing that it had something to do with Jacob's still again.

"You want him now?" Susan said. "He's been trying to fix that old tiller so I can get the garden started. I heard it crank up a minute ago, but I don't hear it running now."

"No. I don't need him till later this afternoon," Jacob replied. "I just wanted to make sure he could go."

They both heard the tiller start up again and continue running. "It sounds like he got it working after all," Susan told him as the two of them started toward the backyard.

Jasmine looked up with a big grin on his face as he saw his mother and grandfather walking into the yard. "I got it," he said happily as he wiped his hands on an old rag.

"It sure sounds like it," Susan replied. "If I turn it off, will it start back up again?"

Instead of answering, Jasmine turned the engine off, then pulled on the starting cord again. The engine caught immediately and purred away. "See, no problem." He turned it off again.

"Jas," Susan started, "Grandpa says he needs you this afternoon."

"Sure," Jasmine replied, still happy over being able to fix the engine. "Do you want me to help you now instead?"

"No," Jacob replied. "Not till later. I'll come calling for you then." He looked down at the boy who looked way too much like a girl. "You just make sure you're still wearing pants then, hear?"

Jasmine well remembered his last trip out to his Grandpa's still.

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The signs of spring and the trees just coming to life were everywhere as Jasmine followed behind his grandpa late that afternoon. Jasmine enjoyed looking at the fresh new signs of life, but the rest of what he was doing he didn't like at all. His grandpa wasn't giving him much of a choice in the matter though. Instead of doing something at his grandpa's still, they were wandering way out back behind his grandpa's house – hunting squirrels. Well, his grandpa was doing the hunting. He was just supposed to be grabbing the dead animals and putting them in a cloth bag to take home...if his grandpa ever actually hit one of them. So far, his grandpa had shot at four of the poor creatures, and fortunately he had missed every last one of them.

"There!" Jacob said softly as he came to a quick stop and raised his favorite squirrel hunting rifle. He sighted and pulled the trigger. "Darn it all!" he complained. "Missed 'em! Did you see that? The varmint moved just as I pulled the trigger! Now where is he?"

Jasmine had been holding his breath. He really didn't want to see the squirrel get shot. And the thing hadn't moved until after his

grandpa had pulled the trigger. Jasmine was quite sure of that. "Um...I don't know where he got to, Grandpa," Jasmine lied. He didn't want to point out where the squirrel was now.

"Wait!" Jacob exclaimed. "I see him. He just moved up a bit higher in the tree." Once again, he lined up his shot, and pulled the trigger, and missed.

Jasmine was glad. He was beginning to think his Grandpa couldn't hit anything anymore.

"Darn it all!" Jacob complained as he looked around for more squirrels to shoot at. He once again began moving deeper into the woods. Five minutes later, he spotted another one. He again raised his gun and sighted...then lowered it again. He turned to Jasmine. "Here," he said, "give me that there bag you got."

Jasmine handed over the empty bag, but when he did, his Grandpa handed him the rifle he had been using.

"You try," Jacob told him. "I can't seem to hit anything anymore. These damn eyes of mine don't seem to work as good as they used to."

"Me?" Jasmine asked, horrified. Shooting something was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Sure, you!" Jacob replied. "You can do it!" He turned and looked up into the tree. "Now he's right up there on that branch."

Jasmine stared up at the squirrel. The longer he looked at it, the more he couldn't imagine killing the poor thing. And it was cute! Major cute! How could anyone even think of shooting something like that? He especially couldn't imagine himself killing it. The nightmares had already been threatening his vision even before his Grandpa had handed him the gun.

"Now just get that gun up to your shoulder and sight down the barrel, real easy like."

Jasmine considered it, but the more he tried to think of himself doing it, the more the visions of actually killing the squirrel seemed to haunt him. And then he seemed to imagine that he was that squirrel, and he was getting shot. And the blackness of death seemed to try to overtake him. He started shaking. "I...I...can't," he stammered as he backed away.

Jacob saw the horrified look on Jasmine's face. It wasn't a good sign. "It's just a little squirrel," he said. "Just a little varmint. We got way too many of them around here. They need thinnin' out."

Jasmine shook his head and tried to hand his Grandfather the gun again. "I can't!" he said.

"Sure you can," Jacob said encouragingly. "And I seen you shoot a gun before. I know you can do it."

Jasmine could only shake his head. He propped the butt of the gun on the ground at his grandpa's feet, and let go of it, the visions of being a poor little squirrel and getting killed still filling his brain. He backed away quickly, and half fell, half tripped to the ground. He hugged his knees. He couldn't do it. He couldn't!

Jacob shook his head. He had tried. He had really hoped that just something simple like squirrel hunting would help bring the boy out of it. But the trouble was still rooted too deep in his head. He would try this again another time. He wasn't about to give up on the boy at all. And next time, he'd start out at the still. A little moonshine before the hunt would most likely be all the medicine the boy needed to give him the courage to pull a trigger again. He should have realized that before. Sometimes, moonshine could be the perfect tonic to fix anything!

"Okay," he said as kindly as he could. "We won't push it again today. I just figured you might be ready now. That's all. Can you still help me with the bag?"

Jasmine didn't really want to do it. He didn't want anything at all to do with hunting. But his grandpa had wanted his help and he was there. He looked up and wiped his eyes. He hadn't quite started crying, but he hadn't been far from it. "Do I have to?" he asked.

From his question, Jacob realized that this would be a bad time to back down. "Yeah," Jacob replied. "The least you can do right now is to help me get the critters."

Jasmine stood up again and took the bag. He followed his grandpa deeper into the woods. Three minutes later, his grandpa stopped, aimed, and fired. Jasmine felt sick as he saw the poor creature fall from the tree.

"Got one!" Jacob exclaimed as he hurried in the direction of where the squirrel had fallen. There was no use in missing on

purpose anymore. Jade wasn't going to try to shoot anything yet.

Jasmine followed after him, although he didn't really want to. A moment later, he was looking down at the body of the poor dead squirrel. He felt sick.

"Good one!" Jacob said happily. "Grab that and let's go get another one." He purposely moved away from the boy so that Jasmine would have to deal with the dead creature by himself.

Jasmine was horrified that his grandpa wanted him to pick up the dead squirrel. Yuck! He felt absolutely horrible. It had been alive, and cute, and just having fun a few minutes ago. Now it was dead – and ugly – and horrible! Trying not to throw up, he reached down and grabbed it by the tail with two fingers. Eeewww! He dropped it into the bag he was carrying and closed it up. He felt sicker. The visions of being wild and free, then dead seemed to claw at him again. Dead. And for what? So his Grandpa could enjoy his favorite squirrel stew? Yuck! Yuck! Yuck! He never wanted to eat the stuff again...even though he did used to like it.

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After dinner, Jimmy Joe walked into Jasmines room. "I heard you went hunting today with Grandpa," she said.

Jasmine turned to look at his sister. "Don't remind me."

"So how was it?"

"Ugh! One of the worst experiences of my whole life!"

Jimmy Joe laughed. "You big sissy! Did you shoot anything?"

"No! And I'm not going to!" He lowered his voice. "But Grandpa sure tried to get me to."

"So why didn't you?"

Jasmine just looked angrily back at his sister. "Get lost!" he finally said and turned away from her.

"Dumb sissy!" Jimmy Joe replied as she watched him head for his desk. "Hey, where's that notepad I dug out yesterday?"

"Back in the closet where it belongs. Why?"

Jimmy Joe didn't answer. She opened the closet door and found it on top of the pile of clothes again. She pulled it out, then went to

his desk where she opened one of the drawers and pulled out a package of colored pencils.

"What are you doing?"

"Get changed," Jimmy Joe told him.

"Huh? What for?"

"Cause I want to draw you again."

"You can't!"

"Hey! You promised to model for me anytime I want. So let's find you something better to wear so I can draw you."

"That was a long time ago!" Jasmine protested.

"So? You promised. Remember? Any time I want."

"Maybe."

"Maybe – yes!" Jimmy Joe said firmly as she started looking through the closet.

"But aren't you supposed to not be doing this anymore?"

"Says who?" Jimmy Joe replied. "Besides, Mom let you play with your tools. She let you fix the tiller this morning."

"That was different!"

"But you did it. So why shouldn't I be allowed to do this?"

Jasmine had no answer for that.

Jimmy Joe spotted a dress in the closet that seemed promising. She pulled it out. "Here," she said. "Put this on."

"And suppose I don't want to."

"Do it anyway. Or I'll beat you up again."

Jasmine rolled his eyes, but he took the dress. He looked around. "Aren't you going to leave?"

"Why?"

"So I can change!"

Jimmy Joe shook her head, but she walked out. "Come on over to my room when you're ready."

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The TV shows were getting ready to change and the prime-time shows would be starting soon. Susan realized that neither Jasmine nor Jimmy had come out to the family room yet. In fact, things had been awfully quiet back in their bedrooms. She got up from her seat

and walked down the hall to see if they were going to watch TV with the rest of the family or not. She was surprised to find both of them in Jimmy's room. And she was surprised to see Jasmine in a dress again. But what surprised her, and angered her a bit, was seeing Jasmine standing and posing, while Jimmy was drawing him. "What are you doing?" she asked somewhat angrily.

"Oh, hi Mom," Jimmy replied. "I'm drawing Jas again. Only I'm fixing the dress he's wearing."

"What do you mean you're fixing it? And you're not supposed to be doing any of this stuff anymore. You're the one who decided you didn't want to be a girl anymore!"

"This doesn't have anything to do with being a girl or not," Jimmy Joe replied confidently. "Do you know how many men are fashion designers? I think most of the great designers are men. And besides, you let him play with his tools! You even had him fix that dumb tiller thing this morning."

"That dumb tiller thing was broken!"

"So? You still let him fix it. So if he can play with his tools, why shouldn't I be allowed to draw stuff? I sure don't do much else around here that's interesting."

Susan was going to point out that she was still getting to hunt. But she refrained. Besides, she was wondering if Jimmy had made a point with her arguments. There were a lot of men who were top-notch fashion designers. And she did let Jasmine use his tools. She walked over and took the drawing pad away from Jimmy.

"Mom!" Jimmy complained.

But Susan just stood there looking at what she had drawn. Even though Jimmy Joe hadn't done much drawing lately, the drawing was still exceptional. And what she had done with the dress Jasmine was wearing looked truly excellent. Actually, what she had done with everything but the lines of the dress, because everything else about it was different. "Why do you need him for this?" Susan asked.

Jimmy Joe was surprised by the question. "Cause I gotta see how everything hangs and I need it to try to get the proportions at least somewhat right."

Susan nodded. She had to admit, "This is very good."

"Thanks," Jimmy Joe replied. "Can I keep drawing and finish it?"

Susan didn't really want to, but she handed the pad over. "Are you going to watch TV tonight?"

"Yeah!" Jasmine replied enthusiastically.

"Not till I'm done!" Jimmy Joe complained.

Susan looked to Jasmine and jerked her head toward the door. "Take off!" she said.

"Mom!" Jimmy Joe complained again.

"You want to draw him? Then do it when he's not doing anything else. Try being a little more considerate. If not, you won't be getting that back again."

Jimmy Joe tried to consider herself lucky. At least she could draw again and have fun designing some clothes. At least that was something.

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For Reverend Cosinger, this was the holiest time of the year. And they were fast approaching what he considered to be the holiest and most important day of the year, Easter Sunday. The sight of so many people in his congregation on that Sunday before Easter gladdened his heart. The sight of the two children dressed and looking so wrong in the very middle of his church ripped much of that gladness away. Blasphemy! How long was Jacob McComber going to try to undermine the good name his church? How long was he going to insist on inserting those two pieces of sin right into the middle of something that should be joyful, and free of sin, and completely holy? How long was this outrage against God going to continue?

As he gave the morning announcements, he did his best to ignore the two twins who each looked all too wrong for the sex he knew they actually were. In fact, the two had been being the other twin for so long now, that he could hardly tell anymore what each of them really was. And the new shorter haircut on the girl only made that situation worse! It was pure blasphemy right in the middle of God's holy house. Because of the blasphemous twins, he still couldn't bring himself to say that it was the McComber family that was sponsoring the Easter Festival activities next week. He simply

used the phrase, “ladies of the church,” instead. It was as close as he could come.

He couldn’t help but continually wonder if Jacob McComber would insist on those two pieces of sin being at church next week. Easter Sunday! As far as he was concerned, on that holiest of days, it would be like Jacob trying to slap the very face of God! And he knew all too well that most likely those two twins would be desecrating the Easter Sunday service next week. Maybe it was time he had a little talk with someone about it. The question was – who? He had no doubt at all that Jacob McComber was just waiting for him to raise another complaint about those two...children!

Once again, when it came time for his sermon, he found it impossible to ignore the blight in the middle of his church. Most weeks it had been only one of them, but today there were two again. The Reverend had no doubt at all that Jacob was leading up to something with those two now. No doubt at all! And if he were to place any bets, he just knew that Jacob McComber had something big planned with those two for Easter Sunday. Next week! Just thinking about it made him angry, and his voice as he spoke carried that anger, despite the words he used to the contrary.

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On Monday morning, the school was buzzing with excitement. Even before anyone headed for their classrooms, most of the kids had noticed Jimmy Joe’s new haircut. And when she was asked about it, she flat out told everyone that she wasn’t going back to being a girl again. The other news that got out quickly before anyone headed to their classrooms, was that Elliot had actually won the shooting match he had entered. Both items were enough for the buzz of excitement and interest to start running through everyone at the school.

In Mrs. Ansley’s class, the excitement started slow and then seemed to explode. It exploded the moment one of the girls opened her party invitation and yelled, “Horses!” From that moment on, all hope that Mrs. Ansley had for a quiet morning seemed to vanish. She heard about Jimmy Joe not going back to being a girl at all

when she overheard the conversation between several of her students. And if Jimmy Joe wasn't going back to being a girl, did that mean that Jasmine Jade wasn't going to ever be a boy again either? She would have asked him about it just then, but he was still over by the door handing out party invitations to every single girl that walked into the room. Nichole wasn't in the room just then, she was out visiting Mrs. Boyle's classroom, the next grade up, to hand out a few invitations there.

And horses? The girls were going to get to ride horses at their birthday party? It sounded awfully nice to Mrs. Ansley. Some kids were really lucky! But then, could she call Jimmy Joe and Jasmine Jade lucky? Their problems started with them being punished. But now it seemed they liked being each other a little too much!

The only moment of uncertainty in the room came when a couple of the girls asked Jade if he was going to be the one at the party, or if his sister was going to be there instead. Jade had to tell them that he would be there, but that Jimmy Joe was going to get to ride the horses with them. The fact that he was going to be the main twin at the party, seemed to make some of the girls a bit uncertain, but the fact that they were all going horseback riding completely overwhelmed any doubts that any of them had.

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The word about Elliot winning the contest, the word about Jimmy Joe and Jasmine Jade not being themselves anymore, and of course, the word about having the horses at the party, spread all over the school in almost record time. And naturally, they were the main subjects of conversation at the teacher's table during lunch. But one of those topics was very much a concern for several of the teachers, and it wasn't anything to do with the horses!

How am I supposed to grade him if he's never in my class anymore?" Mr. O'Conner asked John Mason. "At least I'm seeing him a couple of times a week now, or I was. But suddenly he's not going to be there at all anymore?"

John nodded. "It is going to be a problem. And we're too close now to the end of the school year to cut him from the class entirely."

“Not to mention that he’s one of my star pupils,” Mr. O’Conner replied. “He loves the stuff we do in there. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“And the same for his sister in my Home Ec class,” Mrs. Marker complained. “What am I supposed to do as well?”

John nodded. “I agree. We’re going to have to work something out for both of them. I’ll talk to their parents tonight and figure out how we should handle this. I don’t want to see either of them cheated out of anything for either class.”

“I guess we could still require them to come to our classes at least twice a week,” Mrs. Marker suggested. “Like they are now...or I guess, like they were. As long as their parents continue to make sure they keep up with the work, I think that would work out just fine for me.”

John nodded. “Sounds reasonable.” He looked to Mr. O’Conner.

“I can live with it,” Mr. O’Conner replied. “That’s what we’ve been doing for the last month.”

John nodded again. “I’ll suggest it when I talk with their parents.” He looked to Mrs. Marker. “But that brings up another little problem that their mother asked me to check with you about.”

“Now what?” Mrs. Marker asked.

“It seems the new Jasmine...”

“Jade?”

John nodded. “He doesn’t seem to want to be in your fashion show coming up in May. His mother wants to know if he still needs to keep sewing or can he stop.”

Mrs. Marker thought about that for only a moment. “Those outfits the girls are making are a big part of their grade. I’m afraid I can’t see letting either of them out of it, no matter who is doing the actual sewing. And I know for a fact that it’s Jimmy Joe that designed everything, but that Jade is doing most of the work to make the things, so I’m seeing it as kind of a joint effort. And as for him not being in the fashion show, I guess I can understand that, and I don’t think I can actually require him to be in it, but it is a bit disappointing. Those outfits his sister designed and that he’s done most of the work on, are some of the best we have for the show. And I think he actually looks plenty good enough to model them.”

John nodded. "I'll tell their mother then that they need to keep working on everything, but that you understand he won't be in the show now."

"But please convey to their mother how disappointed I am about the show, and that I do think he would have been fine in it. But I do also understand. I'm disappointed, but I won't plan on him being there."

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The party invitations had been given out on Monday, even though most of the girls who got one already knew they were getting one. It was the part about the horses that nobody knew before. The girls were all excited about it, but that excitement didn't completely register with all the parents of those girls. It wasn't the horses that were the problem. Most parents were pretty much thrilled over that part, if not completely jealous. The problem was in which Jasmine was now going to be at that party...particularly the sleepover part.

The invitations had been given out on Monday, but while Susan was at work Tuesday morning, she got several phone calls from concerned parents. Most of them she was able to assure that the party would be well monitored at all times and that no "funny business" would be going on at all among the girls. But there were a few parents who still had reservations. They weren't sure yet if they were going to allow their daughters to attend the party or not. Susan hoped the parents would finally relent. Their daughters would no doubt be missing out on a lot of fun if they didn't.

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Wednesday marked the beginning of a new month – April. The problem with that Wednesday, was that the twin's standing appointment with Doctor Brian McComber was set up for the first Wednesday of every month. Which meant that it was time again for their next dose of hormones.

Clint managed to get off from work again, and he and Susan were at the school to pick up all three of their kids as they were

leaving the school for the day. Both Clint and Susan felt mildly ill about what they had to do. Neither of them wanted their kids to get another dose of hormones, but neither of them still had any solution to the problem. Oddly, the two that should have been most concerned with what would happen, were less concerned, although neither of them said anything about it. For their own separate reasons, each of the twins didn't mind as much that they would be getting yet another dose of the life-changing drugs.

When they arrived at Doctor McComber's clinic, they had to wait a little while for an exam room to open up. It seemed that the doctor was busier than usual that day. But eventually, Tommy was left behind in the waiting room while everyone else went in to wait for the Doctor to get to them. Fortunately, the wait wasn't long.

Brian entered the exam room with his usual basket containing the things he would need. He nodded to both Clint and Susan. "I had hoped we'd be long past doing this by now," he told them somberly. "I never imagined we'd still be doing it at this point."

"Us either," Clint agreed.

Brian looked to Jimmy Joe. "I guess there's still no chance of you changing your mind anytime soon?"

Jimmy Joe smiled. "Are you kidding? Things are going better than ever!"

Her reply only caused more concern in Brian. His concern was felt even more so by Clint and Susan.

Brian nodded. "Okay then. I guess we better get on with it then. Who's first?"

"You might as well do me first and get it over with," Jimmy Joe told him. She immediately started unbuttoning her shirt.

Brian looked skeptically at Clint and Susan. Jimmy Joe's attitude seemed to be very different this time.

Once she was down to just her underpants, Jimmy Joe stopped and smiled at her uncle. "Want to see my muscles?" she asked. Then she raised her arms and bent them at the elbows, showing off the muscles that had been developing over the last few months in her arms. "Pretty good, aren't they?" she asked.

Brian only looked at her skeptically. He wasn't at all happy to see the way she was behaving this time. He wasn't sure if this was

better than the way she had behaved previously or not, which had always been nothing but horrible!

“Jimmy! Stop that!” Clint said sternly.

Jimmy Joe lowered her arms and climbed up on the exam table. Brian moved in with his stethoscope and began his examination. He looked her over thoroughly, but it didn’t take him long to decide she was still in very good health. All the outdoor exercise she was getting with Jed wasn’t hurting that category. It was this new attitude she seemed to be showing that had him the most concerned. “Okay,” he finally said. “Lay down and let’s get these hormones into you.”

There was no hesitation or complaints at all from Jimmy Joe. She just laid down on her side and waited while her uncle got everything prepared. Brian did note that she looked more than a little uncomfortable during the entire procedure, but she didn’t say one additional word about it. When it was done, she got up from the exam table to get dressed. Again, she didn’t say a single word, but her face didn’t seem as determined anymore. She simply remained quiet and reserved while she watched her brother getting undressed.

As Jimmy Joe put her clothes on, she paid more attention to Jasmine removing his clothes. She particularly tried to get a look at his body now.

“Um...do I need to remove my bra too?” Jasmine asked when he was down to just his panties and bra.

Brian shook his head. “Not really.”

“Yes!” Jimmy Joe said at almost the same time.

“No you don’t,” Brian reiterated softly.

Jasmine smiled gratefully. He was about to climb up onto the exam table, when his mother suddenly said, “Jas!”

He turned to her.

“Take your bra off please.”

Jasmine was obviously a little disappointed. But he reached behind him and unfastened his bra.

Jimmy Joe watched her brother carefully. She knew the bra he was wearing wasn’t all that large, but it was certainly a lot bigger than any that she had ever worn. As his bra came off, she particularly noted that his breasts had seemed to fill the inside of the

bra without any other stuffing in there. And once the bra was off and his naked breasts were exposed, there was no doubt at all as to the prominence of their size. The size she should have been! She bit her lip as well as biting back any further comments she might have made. She finally turned away to finish getting dressed, unable to look at him anymore.

Ten minutes later, Jasmine got up from the exam table, the fresh dose of hormones inserted into his body as well. He was concerned about what this latest dose would do to him. Very concerned! But at the same time, he wasn't overly worried about it. He had been living most of his life for the last few months as a girl. So what if his body developed a little more. Would it really be all that bad? He'd still never admit it, but there were now a lot of things about his new life that he was finding very...interesting. He just didn't want anyone to know it.

Chapter 55 – There Be Horses

April 3rd

Very early Friday morning, Susan was faced with three closed doors. That didn't surprise her at all. Tommy's door was the first one that was closed. But then Tommy had no reason to get out of bed early, unlike herself and Clint. She stopped and stared at the other two closed doors. She had no reason to go into Jimmy Joe's room on the right. Despite it being her birthday, Jimmy Joe had no major plans for the day. But Susan did need to go into Jasmine's room on the left. She opened that door and went in. By the dim early morning light filtering through the window, all she could see of him was a bit of messy hair barely sticking out over top of the covers.

"Happy birthday, Jas," she called softly. The hair moved a bit, then stopped. "Jas...happy birthday," she said again as she sat down on the bed. This time the hair moved a bit more, and a moment later, a head appeared and turned over to reveal a face. "Happy Birthday," Susan said again.

"Uh...thanks," Jasmine replied. He woke up enough to notice that it was still somewhat dark. "What time is it?" he asked sleepily.

"Early!" Susan replied.

"But it's my birthday. Can't I sleep a little while more?"

"Not today," Susan told him. "We've got a lot to do today, so I need you up now."

"A lot to do?" And then Jasmine woke up enough to remember something. "Mom! We've got horses coming today. Horses!"

"Yes dear, I know. Your father is already getting dressed to start getting things ready. And now I need you to get in the shower and start getting ready too!"

"Me? But what do I have to do?"

"Start getting ready for your party."

"But the party isn't until this afternoon."

"But you need to start getting ready now!"

Jasmine rolled his eyes. "Okay. I'm getting up."

Susan smiled. "Get your shower. And make sure you wash your hair. And don't forget the conditioner!"

"Yeah, yeah. Okay."

Susan got up from the bed. She stopped and watched him until his legs actually got out from under the covers.

"I'm getting up. I'm getting up," he complained.

Susan smiled. "After your shower, don't dry your hair," she told him. "Just put your robe on and come find me."

He looked at her for a moment. "Okay," he said. "I'm guessing you're going to do something with my hair then?"

"You guess right," Susan told him before walking out.

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"Tell me again why we're doing this," Clint said as he climbed into Pete's truck.

"Because we're both suckers for our daughters," Pete laughed as he started his truck. "Face it, they've got us wrapped around their little fingers, and there's no way out!"

Clint shook his head. "Yeah, except that my daughter is really my son. So how did I still get roped into so much?"

"Doesn't matter," Pete replied. "Jimmy is now Jasmine...or Jade, as most of the kids call him now. And from everything I've seen, he's now your daughter instead. And since he...or she...or whatever you want to call him, is still your kid, I don't think there's any hope of things being any other way."

"Maybe," Clint replied. "Or maybe it's just that my wife got too many big ideas into her head, and once she's that set on something, there's no stopping her."

"Not just your wife. Don't forget, my wife is just as much to blame for all this too."

"And the result is that we're going to deplete the family fortune – by a lot!"

Pete just laughed, but Clint sat there quietly wondering about things. His son was going to have a fancy girl's birthday, and his

daughter was going to have a basic boy's birthday, with no frills at all. And he really wished things were the other way around.

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Wearing only his robe, Jasmine Jade sat on a kitchen chair while his mother worked on his hair. His hair was still dripping wet. So wet that he could feel it soaking the shoulders of his robe. His hair was long enough now that it nearly touched his shoulders when it was wet and his mother combed it straight down. But when she did that, it seemed to drip all too much water with each stroke of the comb.

"You could have at least run a towel over your hair when you got out of the shower," Susan told him.

"You said to leave it wet!"

"Well, it's not just wet, it's soaked! Now hold still." She ran the comb down his hair again, then took her scissors and trimmed along the very bottom of his hair, trying to even up the edges. She did that over and over again, all the way around his head before she finally set the scissors down.

"Are you done now?" Jasmine asked, already knowing that his hair was just as long now as it was before.

"With trimming it," Susan replied. "Now let's see what else we can do with it."

What else? Ugh! But he sat there silently and waited while his mother disappeared then came back again. When she returned, he wasn't the least bit happy to see what she had with her. Twenty minutes later, Jasmine had two very, very large rollers seemingly pasted vertically against his temples, slightly smaller rollers were now plastered firmly all over the rest of his head, and his hair wrapped around each of those rollers had been treated with a healthy dose of styling gel.

"Okay," Susan told him. "You can get dressed now, but don't you dare put on what you're going to wear for the party. We need to keep that clean!"

"Oh Mom!" Jasmine replied. "Do I have to wear another skirt?"

Susan thought about that, then she considered everything that was going on that morning before the party. "Better not. Find some jeans that aren't...too good."

Jasmine was quick to disappear before his mother could come up with anything else to make his birthday uncomfortable. Finding a pair of jeans to wear was easy. Finding a top to go with them was easy too. Getting the top on over all the huge rollers stuck in his hair wasn't so easy. In fact, it was somewhat of a challenge. But eventually he managed it, and then chose a sweater to go over it that he wouldn't have to pull over his head. How long was he going to have to keep the dumb rollers in his hair anyway? Hopefully not too long.

By the time he got back to the kitchen, his mother was well into creating a large pile of pancakes.

"Go wake your brothers and tell them breakfast is ready," Susan told him.

Jasmine turned around and headed back down the hallway. All the big rollers stuck on his head felt weird. Surprisingly, his head felt cooler. But that was probably because his hair was still wet. He knocked on Tommy's door. "Tommy! Breakfast is ready," he called. He heard his older brother reply that he'd be there in a minute.

He headed for Jimmy Joe's room. He knocked. "Jimmy Joe! Breakfast!" he called. He waited, but got no answer. He knocked again. "Jimmy Joe!" Again he waited without an answer. He took a chance and opened the door. The room was dimly lit, but he could see the big lump still filling the bed. He walked over to the bed. "Jimmy Joe!" he called. "Happy Birthday. Time to get up."

There was no movement from the bed, but after a moment, there was sort of a sound. "Go away."

He leaned over and shook the lump under the covers. "Happy Birthday!" he said more firmly. "Mom's got pancakes made."

"I said, go away," Jimmy Joe replied.

"But Mom said to get you up."

"Ugh!" Jimmy Joe grunted loudly, showing how frustrated she was. The covers came back revealing her head. "I was having a really great dream, and you ruined it!"

Jasmine laughed a little. "Sorry," he said. "What were you dreaming about? Killing another deer?"

Jimmy Joe looked surprised. "That would have been great too. I can't wait for deer season to get here again."

"But that wasn't what you were dreaming."

"No. This was even better."

"Better than hunting – for you?"

Jimmy Joe sighed. "Yeah, it was. Tell Mom I'll be there in a minute."

"But what were you dreaming?"

Jimmy Joe shook her head. "You don't want to know."

"Did it involve killing anything?"

"No. Nothing like that."

"Then I'm interested. What was so great?"

Jimmy Joe looked at him for a long moment. Then she looked at the open door. Nobody else seemed to be around. She lowered her voice. "I was a model in a fashion show. And I was rich and famous. And everyone was talking about how beautiful I was."

Jasmine looked at her incredulously. Then he thought better of that. "You did say that was your dream...or it used to be. I guess you're still dreaming about it. Literally!"

Jimmy Joe blushed. "Get out! I'll be there in a minute." Her face turned more serious. "Don't you dare tell anyone what I just said!"

Jasmine laughed a little. "Don't worry. Nobody would ever believe me if I did."

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Just because it was his birthday, didn't mean that Jasmine could get out of cleaning up after breakfast. But that was something he did so often that he hardly thought about it. He wasn't quite done loading the dishwasher though, when he heard the dogs next door start barking. He couldn't see what was going on, but a minute later, he saw Nichole out in her backyard watching something. He quickly finished what he was doing and ran to grab his jacket. He didn't

even ask if he could leave the house. He ran for Nichole's backyard. "Nichole!" he called as he ran across the yards.

"Jade!" Nichole replied excitedly.

Now that he was outside, he saw his father up in his Uncle Pete's pickup truck that was loaded with hay bales. "Hi Dad," he called up.

"Hey Jas," Clint replied. "Happy birthday!"

Jasmine smiled. "Thanks. What's all the hay for?"

"Target practice!" his Uncle Pete replied.

"Target practice!" Jasmine replied uncertainly. It was a moment before realized his uncle was only joking. He finally smiled.

"Happy birthday, Jade," Nichole told him excitedly.

"Yeah, you too!" Jasmine Jade replied.

"Thanks, but I've still got a few more days."

"Close enough!" Jade replied. "Besides, we're both celebrating today."

Nichole brightened at that. "We sure are!"

Jasmine turned back to his Uncle Pete who had grabbed one of the bales of hay that his father had thrown down off of the truck. He watched as his uncle carried the bale over next to another one and set it so they were side by side. "What are you doing?" Jasmine asked.

"Building an area for you to perform in, or dance in, or whatever. And of course you can sit on these things too," Pete told him. "And the rest of these will go toward feeding all those horses...that I thought we had cancelled!"

"You better not have!" Nichole exclaimed.

Pete smiled. "Don't worry. Your mother would probably kill me if I did." He looked at Jasmine. "What's the matter?" Pete asked. "Can't get good radio reception or something?"

Jasmine was confused. "What are you talking about?"

"All those antennas stuck on your head."

Jasmine rolled his eyes and blushed. "I need to ask Mom if I can take them out now."

Pete looked at him with a quizzical look on his face. "Why? If our cell phone tower ever goes out, I'm sure we can stick you up on the hill and everything will work just fine."

“Uncle Pete...” Jasmine complained as he tried unsuccessfully to stifle his laughing. “I guess I better go get these things out of my hair. I’ll be back as soon as I can!” he told everyone as he hurried home.

“Mom!” Jasmine called as he ran into the house. He found his mother in her bedroom. “Mom. Can I finally get these rollers out of my hair now? Uncle Pete keeps making jokes about them.”

Susan laughed. “No dear,” she said. “I’m afraid you need to put up with them for a little while more. We’ll take them out when you get dressed again after lunch.”

“After lunch! But that’s hours away!”

“Sorry dear. It’s all part of what we’ve got to put up with for pretty hair.”

Jasmine wasn’t sure if he cared about having “pretty” hair or not. “But I’m going to be wearing a hat all afternoon,” he argued.

“But your hair is still going to show, and I won’t have my daughter looking second rate. Especially on her birthday!”

Jasmine had noticed that once again his mother had called him her daughter and had referred to him as a her. “So I’ve got to put up with this all morning?”

“It’s not that bad Jas. Just go and have a good time.”

Jasmine shook his curler filled head and went back outside. He was in time to see his Uncle Pete driving the truck from their backyard into his.

Nichole ran over when she saw him. “I thought you were getting the rollers out of your hair.”

“Mom says not until later – after lunch!”

“Bummer!”

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By the time all the hay had been dropped off, John and Jed came out to help too, along with most of the boys in the family. Together, they all lugged every picnic table from every yard into Pete’s back yard. The more people who showed up, the more Jasmine felt embarrassed about everyone seeing the curlers in his hair. Jimmy Joe certainly seemed to be enjoying his situation

though. The amused smirk on his face over the issue couldn't be missed. But despite that, Jasmine stayed out where he could watch everything. There was too much going on, and he didn't want to miss any of it.

Once the picnic tables had been moved, Clint and Tommy moved their gas grill over to Pete's house too. By the time they got it there, John and Hunter were bringing their gas grill over for the party too. There was going to be plenty of hot dogs and hamburgers for everyone. Jasmine Jade, Nichole, Allison, Olivia, and Ashley were all tasked with blowing up lots of balloons, and while they were doing that, under Marcy and Susan's direction, Ethan, Pete, Clint, and Tommy hung big colorful birthday banners and streamers from the eaves on the back of the house. There could be no doubt at all that the backyard of Pete and Marcy's house looked ready for a party.

With most of the preparations made, it was finally time for everyone to grab a quick lunch. And Jasmine was more than ready to get the stupid rollers out of his hair!

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Huge soft curls spiraled down from each side of his face and partially hid the long gold earrings in his ears. Smaller curls gave interest to the rest of the hair on his head. There was no hairclip or bow in his hair since they would only get in the way of the cowboy hat that Jasmine planned on wearing all day, but Jasmine was pretty sure his mother had used nearly an entire can of hairspray to keep his hair in place. Jasmine hadn't planned on wearing any makeup, but Susan did his makeup herself, just to be sure it looked extra good.

The satiny gold cowgirl shirt that Jasmine wore had white pearl buttons up the front and at the cuffs. There was white fringe running from each shoulder down across his bust, and more fringe from his elbows to the cuffs of his shirt. The blue jeans he was wearing were tight from his waist to the bottom of his legs and seemed to accent the young girlish shape that his body now had. The jeans had colorful stitching across the back pockets and Jasmine was wearing a wide belt with big silver buckle. And on his feet of course, were the

cowgirl boots they had bought to go with the outfit. Susan tied the gold silky neckerchief around his neck, stood back, and didn't know whether to cry or be happy. He looked – beautiful. She finally grabbed a bottle of perfume from Jasmine's dresser and added just a touch at each side of his neck and to both wrists above his hands with their freshly painted pink nails. Again, Susan stood back to look at him, before rushing forward to crush him in a loving hug. "Happy birthday darling," she said to him. "I can't tell you how pretty you look today."

"Thanks," Jasmine replied. He knew his mother was completely thrilled about the way he looked, but he was trying to figure out if he should have mixed feelings about looking pretty or not. Oddly, he supposed he did like it. It certainly felt nice to know he looked pretty, according to his mother anyway. He was just worried that maybe he shouldn't be quite so happy about it. But even if he shouldn't, there was little he could do about it anyway. Not that he would change anything at all.

Susan let him go and grabbed his hat from the bed and placed it on his head. She adjusted it the way she wanted it to look and stood back again. "Perfect!" she declared. "You're going to be the prettiest cowgirl anywhere today!"

Again, Jasmine felt a little too good about the compliment, and again he wondered if maybe he shouldn't. But he only smiled and said nothing to it at all.

"Now go and have a good time today," Susan told him.

"Thanks Mom," Jasmine said to her. He finally hurried off, finding that the cowgirl boots on his feet felt kind of strange. The heel on them was a bit higher than usual, but fortunately he now had gotten plenty of practice walking in his yellow heels, that had a much higher and narrower heel than the boots on his feet.

He purposely avoided grabbing a jacket. The day was warming up nicely and he didn't want anything to spoil the look of the shirt he was wearing. He opened the back door to go outside, and jumped back as a large trailer went past and into the backyard. The horses! As soon as he could, he was out the door. There was already another horse trailer parked in his backyard and the second one pulled in right behind it. Jasmine had to move out of the way as a

third horse trailer arrived, followed by a fourth, and then a fifth! How many horses did they get?

“Jade!”

Jasmine Jade looked and saw Olivia racing toward him. She ran up to him and gave him a big hug. “Happy birthday, girl,” she said happily. She stood back to look at him. “Oh wow, you look great!”

“Uh...thanks,” Jade replied, feeling a bit embarrassed about it, although the compliment certainly was nice to hear. Before he could say anything, Allison and Ashley came running up as well.

“The horses are here!” Allison yelled as she ran up. She too hugged Jade, as did Ashley. Both girls told Jade how good he looked.

“Where’s Nichole?” Jade asked.

“Still getting ready, I guess,” Allison replied. “Let’s go see the horses!”

All the kids in the family, and many of the adults, were in the backyard watching as the horses were slowly unloaded from the trailers. There were two great big trailers, and three smaller ones. The big trailers each held six horses, and the smaller ones each held four. By the time all the horses were out of the trailers and tied up to the sides of them, Jasmine Jade counted twenty-four horses. He had never imagined they’d find so many. They weren’t even supposed to have that many girls coming to the party later...or in a little while now, because more than likely their guests would be arriving pretty soon.

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Jimmy Joe hadn’t missed seeing Jasmine in his shiny gold fringed shirt. She didn’t miss seeing his hat. She didn’t miss seeing his jeans. She didn’t miss seeing his boots, or his belt, or the scarf tied around his neck. She didn’t miss anything at all about him, especially his hair which seemed to look soft and beautifully curled around his face. She didn’t miss anything about him, because it was hard to look away from him. The pains of jealousy made her stomach hurt. That should have been her standing there, not her

screwy sissy brother! Angry at him, she forced herself to turn away to look back at what she'd rather be looking at, the horses.

She moved as close to the horses as she dared while they were being unloaded. She didn't bother moving down to watch the other trailers being unloaded, she stayed right by the first big trailer and admired the horses there. When they were all unloaded, she watched as one of the workers who came with the horses set out some hay for each of them to eat. As he was putting down the hay for the final horse, Jimmy Joe saw the guy turn to her.

"Did you want to pet him?" he asked.

Jimmy felt like her insides were melting. "Can I?"

The man motioned her over. "Come right over here," he said, bringing her to the head of the horse. "Don't worry, he won't hurt you. He likes kids. Now just take your hand and stroke his head like this," he said as he showed her what to do.

Jimmy Joe reached out and pet the horse, which took a step closer to Jimmy Joe. Jimmy Joe started to back away.

"Don't be afraid of him. He just likes you," the man told her.

Jimmy Joe moved forward again and continued to stroke the horse's head. "What's his name?"

"He's called Willie," the man said. He watched her for a moment, then backed away to tend the other horses.

Jimmy Joe found herself alone with the horse. "Willie," she said softly. "Do you know how beautiful you are? I can't believe I'm getting to touch you." The horse snorted a bit as if it understood and then suddenly pushed his head softly into her shoulder. Jimmy Joe found herself hugging the horse's head. Her insides felt like they were buzzing with excitement. Or was that amazement?

She looked around her. A good part of the family was out there with her, but none of them were close to her. "Do you know what I really am?" she said softly to the horse as she continued to stroke the side of its head now. "Can you tell that I'm really a girl inside, even though I look like a dumb boy?" He stroked the horse's head for a few more moments, then she hugged its head again and whispered, "Do you know how much I like getting to love on you? You won't be mean to me, will you? You don't mind if I'm really a girl even though I have to look and act like a boy. You don't care how

ugly I am now. But I want you to know that I think you're the most beautiful horse out here."

"Jimmy Joe!"

She looked up to see her father approaching. She was glad to see the big smile on his face.

"What'cha got there?" Clint asked as he walked up to her.

"This is Willie," Jimmy told him. "Isn't he beautiful?"

"He certainly seems to like you."

"Dad, do you think I can ride him later?"

Clint smiled. "I don't see why not." He watched Jimmy Joe happily loving on the horse, who seemed to be eating up all the attention he could get. "You need anything?" Clint asked her.

"No, I'm good," Jimmy Joe replied. "Can I stay here for a while?"

"If you want. You just be careful around those things. Hear?"

"Yeah Dad. I will." She reached down and grabbed some of the hay from the ground. Willie ate it right out of her hand. Despite being supposedly a boy, she giggled.

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"Ta-daaaaa!" Nichole sang as she struck a pose before completely reaching her friends. She had finally gotten outside, all dressed for the party. Her outfit was almost the same as Jasmine Jade's, except that her shirt was red with the white fringe instead of the gold like Jade's shirt.

"Nichole!" Allison exclaimed. "You look fantastic!"

"Damn girl!" Ashley added. "You look hot!"

Nichole giggled and hurried over to Jade and grabbed his arm as she stood beside him and struck another pose. "Two gorgeous cowgirls, ready to party!" she exclaimed.

"You got that right!" Olivia laughed.

All five girls moved down toward the horses. By that time, Jimmy Joe wasn't the only one petting some of them.

"Jasmine!" Susan yelled. "Don't you dare get dirty!"

Jasmine Jade rolled his eyes. "Okay, Mom," he yelled back. "So much for having a good time."

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Slowly but surely, the crowd in the two backyards seemed to get bigger and bigger. Almost everyone from the entire family was either there, or stopped in to see what was happening, including Jacob and Rose. The only ones in the family who weren't planning on coming, were the Cumberlands.

It seemed like all of a sudden, a group of a dozen horses seemed to miraculously grow riders, and they rode off into the woods with Pete leading the way next to one of the horse owners. There were actually several McComber adults in that group, as well as Jimmy Joe atop Willie. Jimmy Joe was in heaven.

Jasmine Jade and Nichole were "forced" by their mothers to ignore the horses for a while and stay by Nichole's driveway to greet their guests. Some of the parents simply dropped their daughters off, along with their sleeping bags and whatever other bags the girls had. Elliott and Tommy were detailed to bring everything into the house for the girls. More than a few of the parents stayed to see the horses. Most of them even accepted the opportunity to ride with their daughters. The second group of horses disappeared into the woods following the first.

There were however two mothers of the girls that had come, that stayed at the party, but not to ride the horses. They were the two mothers who seemed to be the most concerned over which Jasmine was going to be there. When they arrived, they each parked on the grass along with several other cars, then each of them went in search of Susan. Susan wasn't hard to find though since she and Marcy were staying close to see who arrived.

The first woman who found Susan was polite, but she was also firm, almost to the point of being rude. "Mrs. McComber," she said, "we talked on the phone last week. You assured me that this party would be well chaperoned and that I wouldn't have to worry about your...son...being one of the girls here."

"That's right," Susan replied. "I assure you, there are plenty of us here to look after the girls at all times."

The woman looked around. She noticed a group of horses heading into the woods. There were a surprising number of people

back behind not only the house they were at, but the house next door as well where she knew from past parties that Susan really lived. Quite a number of the people she saw were adults, including the school principal and his wife Jane. She also saw her daughter talking with Nichole and, the one who was *supposed* to be Jasmine...or Jade as her daughter seemed to call him now. Both of the birthday *girls* were decked out rather extravagantly in fancy western outfits. She noted that both of them looked pretty darn good, including and surprisingly, the one who was supposed to be Jasmine. Her daughter didn't seem to be having any problems with him. She was talking with him now just as if he were any other girl. "I can see there really are quite a few adults around...right now," she said. "But if my daughter is going to remain tonight, then I am going to have to *insist* that I stay the night as well."

Susan was surprised. "I can assure you, there will be no problems tonight. Really!"

Marcy jumped in before anyone could say anything else. "But if you'd like to stay and help watch the girls, then of course you'd be more than welcome. And while you're here, if you want to do as many of the other mothers seem to be doing and take a horseback ride with your daughter, you're certainly more than welcome to do that too."

The woman looked between Marcy and Susan. "I just might," she said with a smile.

"The horses are right back..." Marcy paused as she didn't see any more horses. "Oh, I guess they're all out right now. But they'll be back soon. Rest assured."

"Thank you," the woman said as she nodded and left the two women, heading in the direction of the horse trailers.

"Whew!" Susan breathed.

The second woman that had seemed to have a problem with which Jasmine was going to be there, arrived a few minutes later. "Susan?" she said politely as she walked up.

"Oh hi," Susan replied. "I'm so glad you let your daughter come." She turned and saw the woman's daughter running toward Jasmine Jade and Nichole. It was the girl that she had noticed had liked holding Jasmine's hand quite often at Olivia's party.

“To tell the truth, the woman said, I wasn’t going to. But I decided to let her come anyway.” She smiled. “It was either that or I’d never hear the end of it from her.”

Susan laughed. “Well we’re just glad that she can be here. I’m sure she’ll have a good time.”

The woman seemed to look uncertain for a moment. “Um...it’s just that, I’m not sure I’m going to let her stay tonight. I’m just not all that certain that things will be...okay with...um...the daughter you have now.”

Before Susan could reply to that, Marcy again butted in. “If you like,” she said, one of the other mothers also has the same concern, and she’s decided to spend the night to help keep an eye on the party. You’re more than welcome to do the same.”

The woman looked from Marcy, to Susan, to her daughter, who was just then running off toward the horse trailers with the two birthday girls, again holding onto Jasmine Jade’s hand.

“Um...if you’re sure it wouldn’t be an imposition,” she said, “I did bring an overnight bag, just in case.”

“We’d love to have you,” Marcy told her. “Why don’t you go back with your daughter and wait till the horses get back. I have no doubt you’d enjoy a nice horseback ride through the woods with her.”

The woman walked off and Susan and Marcy looked at each other uncertainly. “If many more parents decide to spend the night,” Marcy said, “we’re going to have to move the entire sleepover outside as well. There won’t be enough room in my house!”

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Once Susan and Marcy were fairly sure that most of the guests had arrived, they headed in search of Nichole and Jasmine. They weren’t hard to find. Not only did their outfits stand out, but they were right where the two mothers expected them to be, waiting on the horses to get back. Susan knew that Clint and Pete had asked for twenty horses, but she had heard that the stable they were working with had rounded up and brought twenty-four instead, from three different stables. Seeing all the people who were there and that wanted to ride, both Susan and Marcy were glad.

There were quite a number of girls gathered around the two birthday girls, all of them talking while they waited for the horses. Susan had noted that Jasmine and Nichole were sticking close together all the time, and it brought up something in her mind that she felt they might need to address. "Um, Marcy."

"Yeah?"

"We've got more people here to ride the horses than we anticipated."

"I noticed. Even with the extra horses they brought, we've still got too many people waiting."

"I noticed that Jas and Nichole are staying together all the time," Susan told her. "Since there's so many, and we've got two birthday girls, I'm wondering if it wouldn't be wise to split them up. One birthday girl rides with each group."

"That may be a very good idea," Marcy agreed. "We don't want any of these kids to feel like they're being left behind or slighted in any way. Especially with so many of their mothers still here."

"That's what I thought," Susan replied.

"Girls," Marcy called as they stopped short of the group. All the girls looked at her. "No, I mean just Nichole and Jasmine. We need to borrow you two for a minute."

"Yeah Mom?" Nichole said as she and Jasmine Jade removed themselves from the middle of the pack of girls.

Susan spoke to them instead of Marcy though. "We've got a lot of people who want to ride today. More than we anticipated," she told them. "Since we've got two birthday girls, we think it would be advisable if the two of you split up and didn't ride together, so we'll have one birthday girl with each group. Okay? We don't want any of these girls to think they're being left out."

"They wouldn't think that!" Nichole replied.

Jasmine Jade shook his head too. "Yeah, I don't think they would. But I do kind of get what you're saying, so I guess one of us will have to wait a little longer."

Susan smiled. "That's all we want," she told them. "Now go back to your friends."

"So who's going to ride first?" Nichole asked as they walked back to the others.

"I think the group with your dad will be back first. You should ride with him, and I'll ride with my dad. How does that sound?"

"Perfect!" Nichole replied happily.

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The sound of a four-wheeler entering the yard made both Susan and Marcy turn to look. They saw Rose pulling her machine around to the back of the house and then parking it. "Look who's back," Susan said as she and Marcy headed over to say hi...again.

"Come for a horse ride?" Marcy asked as Rose was still climbing off of her machine.

"No. I just wanted to see how things are going," Rose replied as she noted yet another group of kids riding off. She noted Nichole's bright red shirt up on one of the horses, right behind her father and one of the stable guys.

"I think it's going better than expected," Susan replied.

"We've got more people riding than we anticipated," Marcy added, "but things are going pretty well.

Rose spotted Jasmine Jade's bright gold shirt by the horses. "How come Jade isn't riding?"

"I think she's going out with the next group when Clint gets back," Susan told her.

Rose nodded. "That should be good."

The three women wandered over closer to where the girls were all looking at a few of the horses that weren't currently carrying riders. A few of the stable hands were letting all the girls pet the remaining horses and feed them some of the hay. Jimmy Joe seemed to be prominently among them, boldly stroking one of the horses and talking to it. Rose noted one girl though that was hanging back, not getting so close. And to her, the girl looked out of place. Or perhaps, a bit afraid of the big beasts. She looked again at Jimmy Joe, who obviously wasn't the least bit afraid of the horses. "Jimmy Joe," she called. When Jimmy turned, she crooked her finger, indicating she wanted her.

"Hi Grandma," Jimmy said as she walked back to see what she wanted.

“Happy birthday, dear,” Rose told her and accepted a nice hug from Jimmy. She noted that Jimmy smelled a lot like the horses. “How much time have you been spending with these horses?” she asked.

“All I can,” Jimmy replied happily.

Rose didn’t bother telling her that she smelled like it. Instead she pointed toward the girl who seemed a bit afraid. “Do you know her?” Rose asked.

“Yeah, of course,” Jimmy Joe replied. “She’s in my class at school.”

“Why isn’t she up there with the horses?”

“I don’t know,” Jimmy Joe replied.

“I think she looks a bit afraid of them, if you ask me,” Rose told her.

Jimmy Joe shrugged. “She could be. Who knows?”

“Don’t you think it would be nice to find out, and maybe help her a bit?”

Jimmy Joe shrugged. “It’s not my party.” With that, she went back to the horses.

“Well that was rude!” Marcy exclaimed.

“Damn her!” Susan said at the same time. She started after Jimmy Joe, but Rose stopped her.

“Jade!” Rose called. “Come give me a hug!”

Jasmine Jade immediately stopped what he was doing and headed for his grandma. “Hi Grandma,” he said as he gave her a big hug.

“Happy birthday, dear,” Rose said to him. She noted that he didn’t smell hardly at all like the horses. She was guessing he hadn’t had as much time to spend with them. She pointed at the girl who was hanging back. “Does she look like she could be a bit afraid of the horses to you?”

Jade didn’t say a word. He left the older women and headed straight for the girl. “Hey,” he said as he walked up behind her. The girl turned. “You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” the girl replied tentatively.

“Do you want to pet the horses?”

The girl seemed very uncertain, then she just shook her head rather violently.

“Are you afraid of them?”

It was a moment before she reacted. Then she just turned to him with pleading eyes and nodded a little. Jade grabbed her hand. “Come on,” he said softly. The girl hesitated a moment, but she followed. She did stop before she got too close to the horse though.

“He won’t hurt you,” Jade told her as he went up and pet the horse’s head. See?” But the girl was just standing back and watching. “Come over and try it.” Again there was no reaction from her. She just remained back where she was, too afraid to come closer. Jade wasn’t sure what to do. He looked around and spotted the hay. He grabbed a handful and went back to the girl. “Here,” he said. “Take this.”

The girl took the hay uncertainly. Jade put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her a little closer. “You’ve got to get closer to his head,” Jade said. The girl managed one more sideways step. When the horse turned its head to look, she tried to step away again, but Jade held her shoulders firmly. “Now reach out and let him take it.” The girl didn’t move. “Go ahead,” Jade said softly. “You can do it. He won’t hurt you. Just hold the hay out for him.”

Slowly, the girl’s arm came up, reaching as far as she was able, and the horse’s head strained to grab it. The horse was just barely able to get to the hay and take it right out of her hand. The girl gave a little scream of fright as she let go of the hay. And then she laughed. “He took it!”

“Yeah,” Jade said encouragingly. He left her and grabbed another handful of hay and handed it to her. “Move just a little closer so he can get it easier,” Jade told her.

The girl took half a step closer. The horse was looking at the hay and waiting. She held it up for him, and once again the horse took the hay right out of her hand. A few minutes later, with Jade standing right with her, she touched a horse for the very first time and stoked his big head.

“And that,” said Rose, “is why I don’t think Jimmy Joe deserves to be back with the girls yet.”

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All the girls got to ride many times. And so did most of the mothers who stayed with their daughters. All the boys in the family took their turn, and so did a few of the men, trying to spell both Pete and Clint. Susan and Marcy of course got to ride along with their husbands and daughters. Jimmy Joe was constantly looking for opportunities to ride again, on any horse, although she seemed to prefer Willie.

As the afternoon wore on, the time finally came when the horses needed to be put back into their trailers to go home. All the girls watched closely, often saying goodbye to some of the horses. Jimmy Joe made sure to pet Willie one more time before he too was put into his trailer. As all the trailers were towed away, the girls all waved.

"Well, that was certainly fun," Marcy noted to Susan. "Exhausting, but fun."

"Totally!" Susan replied. "Totally fun...and exhausting!" The two women laughed.

Susan looked around at the people. "Are all these women staying the night?"

"They weren't supposed to," Marcy said as she too noted how many mothers were still left.

"I guess we better tell the guys to fire up the grills. We may have more to feed tonight than we planned."

Before the women could find their husbands to relay their concerns, loud music filled the air, and so did the sound of Pete's howling dogs.

"Oh darn," Marcy said. "Nichole's turned her karaoke machine on already."

"So much for the peace and quiet," Susan replied.

Before long all the girls were gathered around the loud country music, dancing to the tunes.

"Thank God we moved all this outside!" Marcy told Susan.

Before Susan could agree, several of the mothers walked up to them and thanked them for allowing them the chance to go horseback riding with their daughters. Several more followed suit.

Before long, almost all of the mothers had departed. The only two that remained, were the two that had spoken with Marcy and Susan earlier.

The music stayed loud, even as the sunlight gradually faded. The spotlights were turned on in the backyard, and even though the evening was beginning to turn much cooler, none of the girls seemed to notice. Susan and Marcy however grabbed some warm sweaters to wear. Clint, Pete, and John cooked lots of hamburgers and hot dogs, and the picnic tables were full of girls eating and talking. Susan and Marcy were kept more than busy tending to them all, and fortunately, the two mothers that remained helped out as well. Susan was more than sure though that their daughters would much rather they went home.

Susan and Marcy were just about to bring out the big birthday cake, when suddenly Nichole made a loud announcement on her karaoke machine microphone. "It's show time, girls!" The girls all screamed. Susan and Marcy watched as Allison, and Olivia hurried toward the stage. Jasmine Jade went too, but he seemed to be moving much slower and more uncertainly. Once he got there, they saw a bit of discussion going on between the Musketeers, and then they were suddenly all doing their mock pounding on him again, which fortunately didn't last long, even though it brought peals of laughter from all the girls. Olivia hit the switch on the machine again, and all four "girls" started their first song. With nothing better to do for a little while. Susan and Marcy grabbed a couple of the lawn chairs that had been brought into the yard and sat way in the back for a much needed rest. The two extra mothers soon joined them.

Susan watched Jasmine carefully. While all four girls who were singing into the microphone were decked out in somewhat western outfits, Jasmine Jade and Nichole stood out in their bright colorful shirts. As hard as she looked, as much as she wanted to see something otherwise, Susan could only see another girl as she studied Jasmine standing between Nichole and Olivia. As much as she wanted to, she could see no sign of her "son" there at all. She was no longer sure she should have spent so much time and effort on doing his hair and getting him ready for this party. But her pride had made her want her "daughter" to look as good as possible. As

she watched, the part that seemed to stand out the most about him, was that with all the choreographed movements the girls were doing, he pretty much looked just as feminine as they did, which was odd because most of the time the way he moved wasn't that feminine at all.

The song ended and everyone applauded, except Susan. She had wrapped her arms around herself, hugging herself as if she was cold. The evening was getting cool, but it wasn't the temperature that was bothering her.

Then it was time for Nichole's solo song. Susan knew Nichole loved to sing with her karaoke machine. Marcy often complained about it. But as Nichole stood there singing in front of all her friends, Susan could only think about how comfortable Nichole appeared to be with it...and how good she seemed to have gotten.

"Darn," one of the mothers noted. "She's really good!"

"She sure is!" the other mother agreed. "I had no idea!"

Marcy smiled. Her daughter was really good. Much better than even she knew.

As soon as the song ended, all four girls were back to sing a rather lively country tune again. And once again all Susan could see was how much like the other girls her son had become. But when that song ended, Nichole was back on her microphone again, but not to sing. This time she told everyone that Jade was going to sing for them.

Susan watched as Jasmine Jade seemed to hold back when Nichole held the microphone out toward her. After a moment, she saw Olivia pounding lightly on his back and talking to him. And then she saw her "son" walking out with a big smile on his face to take the microphone from Nichole. The music started. And a moment later Jasmine Jade started to sing. It was a slower song. A female country western song, Susan noted. But he was standing there singing, and even smiling somewhat.

Susan watched him closely. So very closely. She studied him. Every little thing about him. Everything about the way he looked, and everything about the way he seemed to stand and move, which wasn't much at all. He didn't look nearly as comfortable out there singing as Nichole did, but then Susan didn't think she herself could

stand there and sing like that at all. She would be too nervous. And just as she studied everything else about him, she listened to his voice as well. Looking at him, and listening to him, she would have sworn she was listening to just another girl. No, his voice wasn't nearly as good as Nichole's, but it certainly wasn't bad. Not bad at all. He was even managing to sing nicely on key. Susan had no idea he could sing that well. When she closed her eyes to try to concentrate on his voice even more, she felt a tear slip out of her eyes from the moisture that had threatened to obscure her vision.

The song ended, and of course everyone applauded...except Susan, who continued to hug herself. Only now it was with even more distress. Susan was just glad she was sitting so far behind all the other girls. She did worry about the women who were sitting with her though. And then she watched as Nichole once again came out and took the microphone, but Jasmine Jade stayed right there with her. Another song started, and the two birthday "girls" began singing a duet together.

Susan blinked hard to clear her eyes. One hand briefly came up to wipe the tears away. She couldn't have looked away from the two "girls" on the stage if she tried. It was another slow song. Most of the time the girls either sang the melody together, or Nichole took the lead while Jasmine Jade sang a harmony line that wasn't too high for his voice. And once again, all Susan could see was two girls in front of her.

When the song ended, Allison and Olivia rushed out as another fast song started, and once again all four girls sang together and danced together. Susan watched it all, and the tears started flowing heavier, and a moment later, a soft sob escaped. Her son was gone. Rose had been so right about that. He was lost. She had no doubt about it at all anymore. Her son was gone, and had been replaced with someone else. A girl. Not the daughter she should have had, but a different one. Her son was gone, and all that she could see now, was Jade.

"Susan?" the mother that was sitting next to her exclaimed softly. "Are you all right?"

"He's gone," Susan sobbed softly. "My son is gone. I don't want him to be gone, but I can't see him anymore. All I can see is..."

another daughter.”

Marcy leaned over and put her arm around her sister-in-law. “None of us saw this coming.”

The mother sitting on the other side of Susan turned back to watch the show. But her mind was no longer on what was happening there, it was on Susan, and the monstrous conflict that the poor woman had to be facing. She herself didn’t think she would be able to handle it if her son had suddenly decided he wanted to become a girl. And to all indications, not only Susan’s son wanted to change, but so did her daughter. How monstrously awful it had to feel for this mother sitting next to her, to know that not just one, but two of her children wanted different lives. And as she looked around, she could easily see that neither of the children had bad lives at all. She wished she could give her own daughter as much.

The final mother, sitting in the outside chair, had heard it all as well. She too wondered how she would feel in Susan’s situation, and she couldn’t even imagine the horror of it. But at the same time, it was something that her daughter had told her about Jade that came foremost to her mind. She leaned over so she could be heard over top of the music. “My daughter tells me that she could never believe that Jasmine, I mean your real daughter, could possibly want to be anything but a girl. She said that she was always into so many really feminine things. But what strikes me as the most strange, and excuse me for saying this, but she now says that Jade is much nicer and kinder than what his sister is. And she seems to like being with him more. She says that in some ways, he’s a nicer girl than his sister ever was.”

Susan looked at her and listened, and remembered her “daughter” going over and helping the girl earlier to get close to the horses. “She” had done what her “son” had refused to do. And perhaps Rose was right, maybe her real daughter didn’t deserve to be back with the girls yet, but Susan was still bound and determined that one day she would be. She would have her real daughter back again, and she would also have her real son back too. The only problem was, her real son was now all too much of a girl. He seemed to be gone completely now. And her real daughter...didn’t deserve to be a girl anymore.

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Way in the back, back by the dog pens, Jimmy Joe watched every last bit of it too. She particularly watched her sissy brother singing and dancing with all of *her* old friends. Friends she was purposely abandoning...again. But in watching them, it was obvious that they didn't seem to miss her at all. Not one little bit. She had been moved out, and her brother had moved right in. Once again, he had stolen what was so precious to her. And she hated him for it! She hated him for stealing all her friends. She hated him for looking so damn good up in front of all those girls. And she mostly hated him, because he was stealing away every dream she ever had. Yeah, she had good reason to hate her stupid sissy brother.

But at the same time, she still felt somewhat grateful to him too. Because of him, she had spent most of the day touching, and feeding, and riding the horses. And it had been a truly wonderful day. She had noted that a lot of the other guys in the family had gotten to ride the horses, but none of them had been allowed to spend so much time with them like she did. And she supposed that the party invitation that her stupid brother had done up for her was a lot of the reason for that. He had known how much she liked horses, and he had found a way to make sure she could get to see them. So she guessed she was grateful to him for that.

So she was grateful to her brother, and she hated him as well. Her stupid, sissy, twerp of a brother.

Chapter 56 – Holy, Holy, Holy Cow

April 5th

The air was cold and crisp and clean. Reverend Cosinger breathed it in deeply, filling his lungs with it for the pure joy of breathing the mountain fresh air. A faint wisp of fog hung nearly invisible in the pre-dawn light as he made his way across the damp grass behind the church and out toward the pond behind it. He carried a lighted lantern in each hand to help him see the way, which was hardly necessary. The pond was one of his favorite spots.

The sound of a car arriving in the dirt parking area caught his attention. The headlights helped light where he was for a short time before they went out. In the dim light, he couldn't see who was arriving for his Easter Sunrise service. Everyone of course was welcome. Well, almost everyone. He was only glad that someone had shown up.

He continued on down toward the edge of the pond and placed the lanterns a good distance apart. He looked up toward the people approaching. Rose McComber, Valerie McComber and her daughter Ashley. Church members he could always count on. Valerie McComber rarely ever missed a service, even though her husband rarely ever came. It was such a shame they were all so closely related to the blight that infested his church every Sunday morning. And they weren't just closely related to it, they were partially responsible for it. But that was something he didn't want to think about at that early hour and on such a wonderful occasion.

"Good morning Reverend," Valerie called softly. In the quiet still mostly dark morning, loud talking didn't feel appropriate.

"Good morning ladies," the Reverend replied, happy that they had shown up. If nobody came, he would have stood and watched the sunrise with his wife and kids, and then said a simple prayer, and that would have been it. Now they would sing a few standard hymns

and he would give a short little sermon as well. He was delighted to see the headlights of another car pulling into the parking area.

Twelve people, plus his wife and their two toddler children. It was the best Easter sunrise crowd he had ever had. And two of the couples there were ones that had only recently started attending his church services. It was his first service of the day that celebrated eternal life...or new life. And the welcome influx of new parishioners to his church had certainly sparked a new life for his little church. A new life that needed the black cancer cut out of it!

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Early Sunday morning, Susan opened the door to Jasmine's bedroom and stuck her head in. "Time to get up, Jas." She saw him semi-sitting up in his bed. Most likely trying to sleep in that position. He turned his head towards her and looked fairly miserable. She knew the feeling well. Trying to sleep with a head full of large curlers was pretty much impossible. "Good morning," she said to his mostly glazed-over eyes.

"Mm," Jasmine managed to reply.

"Get your robe on and help me with breakfast."

Jasmine rolled his eyes without moving his head as his mother closed the bedroom door again.

He didn't think he had gotten any sleep at all. At least not more than a few minutes here and there all night long. He desperately longed to lay his head down *comfortably*, and just sleep. The price, his mother had said, for having beautiful hair. Well, if that was the price, then he was sure he had just found the cure that anyone who was thinking of transitioning from male to female needed. Spend a few nights with your hair in over-sized rollers and just try to sleep that way. No doubt all those people would go back to being boys and men real fast. Probably with very short haircuts!

He wearily forced himself out of bed and slipped his robe on. He felt like death warmed over as he tied it around his waist while he was walking toward the kitchen. "Why is it so early?" he complained as he spotted his mother in front of the oven.

"Because it's Easter Sunday and we've got a lot to do. The whole family has a lot to do today."

"How about getting these rollers out of my hair?"

"That's on the list too," Susan told him.

"So I can take them out now?"

"Of course not. Not until we're ready to style your hair."

"Can I get a haircut like Jimmy Joe has? At least I'd be able to sleep."

Susan gathered him into her arms to hug him. He looked miserable. So tired, dressed just in his robe, with no slippers on his bare feet, and his curler filled hair covered by a net to help keep it all in place while he was sleeping, she knew just how awful he had to feel. "It will all be just fine later. Totally worth it. You'll see. Now get the biscuits started while I get the eggs out."

Just fine later? Totally worth it? Jasmine Jade didn't see any way at all that everything could possibly be "just fine" or "worth it."

"Mom?" he asked as he searched for the pan they usually made the biscuits on. "Do I have to be in that stupid pageant after church today?"

Susan stopped a moment to look at him. "I'm afraid so, Jas. We go out of our way to make sure every girl at the festival gets included. And that's going to include you too I'm afraid."

Jasmine shook his curler filled head. "That's going to be major embarrassing!"

"Why? How many times did I tell you how great you looked at your birthday party?"

"But this is different!"

"Why?"

"Because the pageant is more like, I don't know, a beauty pageant I guess."

"So? And it is a beauty pageant of sorts."

"So that makes it so much worse!"

"Why?"

"Because...I'm not beautiful! I'm not even really a girl."

"You're close enough Jas. Close enough. And when you bother to smile once in a while, you really can be beautiful."

"But it's major embarrassing! Everyone there will know what I really am. I don't belong in the pageant."

"Do you belong in the games the guys are going to be playing instead?"

"No."

"And didn't everyone at your party know what you really are?"

"I guess."

"Then why should this be any different for you? Besides, a lot of the people at the church now are new. I doubt many of them know what you really are."

"Most will though," he replied.

"You stood up in front of all your friends on Friday and sang. Beautifully! All you have to do today is parade around the room and then stand on the stage for a few minutes."

"Yeah, while everyone judges me."

"What's so bad about that?"

"I don't want to be judged!"

"And I guess I don't really blame you – at all! But you're going to have to do it. Like it or not!"

"Ugh!" he exclaimed as he pulled the pan out and set it on the counter.

Susan let him be for a few minutes while they each were working. "So tell me something," Susan finally said.

"What?" There was no emotion, no interest in his voice. He was still fuming over having to be in the stupid festival pageant.

"Why is it," Susan said, "that during that show you girls put on at your party, you looked so much like a real girl?"

"Huh? I thought I pretty much looked that way all the time."

"You do. That's not what I meant."

"But you said..."

"Yes, I know. Bad choice of words I'm afraid. I mean, why is it that while you were performing in front of all your friends, you suddenly moved and acted more like a real girl. I've been watching you ever since, and you've gone right back to moving like you usually do."

"What's wrong with the way I move? It's...me."

"Yeah, too much you. The old you anyway."

He shrugged. "That's just...the way I move. I can't help it."

"But you moved so differently during the show. The way you moved your hands, your arms, your whole body. It was totally different than you usually do."

He rolled his eyes again. "Do you know how much the girls all harped on me about all that? And they made me practice it all over and over again. Move your hands this way. Stick your butt that way. Hold your fingers like this. It was awful! Why do you think we had to do so much practicing? None of them liked the way I did anything." His voice dropped to a mumble. "I'm surprised they didn't try to change the way I brush my teeth! Geez!"

Susan let out a little chuckle. "Poor baby. You could have learned something from it all."

"I did!" Jasmine replied rather emphatically. "Don't sing in front of anyone – ever!"

"That's not what I meant and you know it. There's no reason why you can't move like that all the time."

"I'd look like a dork all the time."

"Don't be silly! It wouldn't hurt you to act more like a girl once in a while."

"I act like a girl all the time. Remember?"

"I mean the way you move. Take some of those things the girls taught you and use them all the time."

"Why? I'm not entering any beauty pageants – if I can help it! And I'm not planning to start singing on stage either."

"Just think about it, okay? And if you need any help from me, I'll be glad to do anything I can for you. Anything at all."

"Anything?" he asked, looking up at her.

Susan had a suspicious look on her face. "Like what?"

"Can I get more hugs once in a while?"

She went over and grabbed him, pulling him into another loving hug. "Anytime you want, Jas. Anytime at all. Except now!" she added as she pushed him away. "We need biscuits for breakfast, and you're not getting your job done."

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The curlers were gone, and in their place were the same soft curls that had made his hair look so good the day of the party. After being stuck in the damn curlers all night, Jasmine was afraid his hair might be permanently curled that way, not that it looked bad at all he had to admit. In fact, it looked all too...nice. He wasn't about to break down and go so far as to use the word "pretty." Once again, his mother tried to kill him by spraying too much hairspray at his head. He was so glad when the can ran out and she couldn't use any more of it.

No cowboy outfit this time. Instead he was wearing the soft pastel dress he had just gotten. And of course, his feet were stuck in the darn yellow pumps. Clomp. Clomp. Clomp! Ugh! But he did have to admit that they looked good with his dress. So he thought anyway. And evidently, so did his mother...and his stupid sister who seemed all too amused over him being stuck in curlers all night, and the fact that he would soon have to be in the festival pageant. And she didn't really think he was going to win the thing, did she? His mother either for that matter. Things were bad enough for him. He didn't even want to consider the possibility of having to win the darn thing. Besides, how would that make the real girls feel?

"You can't carry that purse!" Jimmy Joe exclaimed as he came out to the living room, ready to leave for church.

Jasmine Jade looked hopefully to his mother. "Can I leave it home?"

"No you idiot!" Jimmy Joe told him. "It doesn't go with that dress."

"Who cares?" Jasmine complained. Then he looked questioningly back to his mother.

"Um...I'm afraid she's right," Susan told him. "You've got better purses in your closet that will go much better with what you're wearing."

"Grab the yellow one," Jimmy Joe told him. "It will go perfectly."

Susan smiled. "I forgot about that one. Go get it Jas. And hurry."

"There's a yellow purse in my closet?"

Jimmy Joe shook her head. "Mom, do you mind if I find it for him? We'll never get out of here if I don't."

Susan nodded. "Just hurry."

"But suppose I don't want to get out of here," Jasmine Jade complained as he followed Jimmy Joe back to his room.

Jimmy Joe laughed. "Are you kidding? I can't wait to see my sissy brother competing in a girl's beauty pageant. Who knows, maybe someday you could go for Miss America!"

Jasmine said nothing. But what he really wanted to do was to hit his stupid sister with his purse, the one he was carrying already.

"Here it is," Jimmy Joe said as she extracted the yellow purse from the closet. "Now swap over what you need and hurry up."

In order to do it quickly, Jasmine just dumped his purse out on his bed.

"Holy cow!" Jimmy Joe exclaimed. "And you used to complain about how much junk I kept in my purse. Look at you! Is there anything at all left in the jewelry box?"

Jasmine looked at the pile of junk that was on the bed. It was pretty bad. "I've really got to clean this stuff out," he decided.

"Well do it later. Grab what you need and let's go."

Jasmine didn't see any reason to hurry at all. He didn't want to go at all. For many reasons. He moved some of his stuff to the yellow purse, but not all that quickly. By the time he was done, his father was complaining about them being late.

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Reverend Cosinger was dressed in his most formal robe and was standing outside the door to the church, welcoming everyone to his Easter Sunday service. The crowd of people seemed to be everything he had ever hoped for and more. The parking lot was already full, and people were still coming. His mood was joyous and happy...until....

He had just welcomed a family of newcomers to the church, when he looked up and saw Clint McComber and his family approaching, and he especially saw the two twins. His joyous mood turned angry. This was Easter Sunday. The holiest day of the year for him. It had been nothing but a wonderful day so far, and he wasn't about to see this holy day desecrated by having those

abominable twins placed right in the middle of his holy church for everyone to see. This was God's house, not Jacob McComber's. And it especially wasn't anyplace for those two twins that they had somehow managed to make look all too much like the real thing! His stomach turned at the sight of them, and his anger grew. "No!" he suddenly shouted as his feet unconsciously moved him in Clint McComber's direction. "No, no, no!"

Clint stopped short and grabbed his wife. His whole family stopped with him as the Reverend angrily approached.

"I won't have you desecrating God's holy house any longer! Take your family out of here and never cross the threshold of this sanctuary again! Be gone heathens!" he shouted. "Be gone!"

"Clint?" Susan said, somewhat frightened.

Clint wanted to yell back at the Reverend. But the truth was, he didn't really want to be there. And he had no doubt that the rest of his family didn't either. With a nasty look back at the Reverend, he said to his family, "Come on. Let's just get out of here." His entire family was more than glad to leave.

The Reverend had never felt more proud in his life. He watched until he saw the blightful family pull out of the parking lot and head home. Only then did he turn back toward the church. There were people watching from various places in the parking area and directly in front of the church. It was with a smile of pride that Reverend Cosinger once again took his place by the front door to welcome the last few arrivals.

"You turned them away!" one of the newcomers said, looking and sounding totally surprised.

"Of course!" the Reverend replied. "I won't have that unholy family fouling God's holy church. Not anymore, and especially not today!" He was very surprised to see the family turn and head back to their car. Other people came in though, and the Reverend gladly shook the hands of every last one.

But the service was about to start, and he needed to get to the front of the church to lead it. With all the people packed in, the only practical way he could do that was to go around the outside of the church and enter by another door.

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Jacob checked his watch. The service was about to start. He was still standing and talking business with a few friends. He said his goodbyes and promised to talk with them again later and began heading for his seat next to Rose in the front pew. His eyes noticed the spot that he had arranged to be held for Clint and his family when he realized they were going to be late. It was still empty. He stopped to look around. He saw everyone else in the family, except Clint. Even his daughter Jessica and her family was there. But not Clint, or Susan, or any of their kids. "Where's Clint?" he asked Rose.

Rose immediately stood up to look around. "He's not here? I hope nothing's happened to them." Seeing that the service hadn't started yet, she quickly pulled her cell phone out and called Clint. When she asked if everything was alright, the answer she got back drained the blood from her face. She looked up at her husband. "They were here, and the Reverend wouldn't let them in. He sent them away."

"He did what?" Jacob roared, his anger catching the attention of everyone around.

"I better call you later," Rose said into her phone. "Your father is a bit upset right now."

Jacob looked toward the front of the church and saw the Reverend just then entering. Before he could say anything, the Reverend's wife started the music. "Hold on here!" he yelled loudly and angrily, stopping everything. A hush fell in the entire church. Jacob locked eyes with the Reverend as the Reverend headed to stand behind his pulpit. Jacob didn't like the way the Reverend appeared to be all too proud of himself. "Did you turn my family away and not let them into this church?" Jacob accused loudly. There were gasps and loud murmurs all over the room. Many of the people stood up to see better.

"I saw him do it!" one man called out. The murmurs increased for a moment.

The Reverend proudly took his time getting to the pulpit. He looked Jacob straight in the eyes as he said, "The blasphemy of those children will not be allowed in God's house."

"If they ain't gonna be allowed here, then I'm leavin'...and so is my family." With that, Jacob stepped out into the center aisle of the church, waited while his wife joined him, then arm in arm they strode toward the door. Only a moment later, every McComber in the church started leaving too. And they weren't alone, many of the other people got up to leave as well.

"Jordan! What have you done?" the Reverend's wife yelled.

"I did what I had to," the Reverend replied. He turned back toward the people that were still there. So many were now leaving. The others all seemed to look uncertain. His voice was strong and full of conviction. "I will not abide those children in this holy place any longer. God himself has said, 'The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are an *abomination* unto the Lord thy God.' There is no place in this church for those two unholy children who are nothing but an abomination to our Lord!" He noticed more people getting up to leave now as the murmuring increased again. "This church shall stand as a holy place where..."

"Jordan, shut your mouth!" his wife yelled angrily.

But the Reverend wasn't listening. "...where God's holy laws *will* be obeyed."

"Jordan! Stop!" she yelled again as she headed for him.

"We shall not let the blasphemy of those two children abide in the middle of..."

The Reverend's wife was angrier than she had ever been. She grabbed her husband in mid-sentence and spun him around, and slapped his face with every bit of anger that she now felt. "You stupid fool!" she screamed. "You've ruined everything!"

The Reverend was shocked that his wife would hit him like that, but he was still too full of conviction. "I will not abide those two blasphemous children to be allowed in this church any longer!"

"And how long do you think everyone else will allow us to *abide* here too?" his wife countered. "You stupid fool, you just got us fired and kicked out!"

The Reverend was no longer as sure of himself as that fact sunk in. "I'm sure that the board will back me up. This church doesn't belong to Jacob McComber."

“No, but how many of his family sit on the board of trustees? He told you once before not to interfere in their family business, and now you’ve just stuck your big foot right in the middle of it.” Disgusted with her husband, she turned and walked away, not toward the piano where she would normally play the music for the church service, but right out of the church, heading for home...that most likely wouldn’t be her home for much longer.

When the Reverend turned back toward the people, the doorway was still packed with people leaving. And now that the fireworks between him and his wife were over, most of the other people there started leaving as well. And all he could do was to stand there and watch them all walk out. As he watched everyone leaving, it took a moment for things to fully sink in. He had blown it. He had just gotten himself fired. Maybe the final notice wasn’t there yet, but it soon would be. And he doubted there was anything he could do about it now. He still felt completely justified by what he had done, but only now was the reality of what it would mean to him, and his family, sinking in.

As the doorway finally unclogged, he noticed now that there were still people sitting in his church, looking at him. They were all sitting somewhat toward the back. He walked down toward them. It was a moment before he realized that everyone that remained were among the poorest families in his little parish. “I’m sorry,” he said somewhat apologetically to them. “Do you still want me to hold an Easter service for you?”

“Is the festival dinner still happening?” one of the mothers there asked.

The Reverend noted that her question seemed to bring the most interest to the eyes of everyone else. He shook his head. “It doesn’t look like it.” A moment later, he watched as everyone else still in his church got up to leave.

He had blown it. His temper had ruined the lives of himself and his entire family, on this the holiest day of the year. Sadly, he removed his robe as he headed for the back door of the church. He needed to fix this. He needed to find some way to undo all the damage he had just done. The only problem was, he was fairly sure there was no way at all to heal the wounds he had just created.

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Jasmine Jade knew he should have felt elated that they weren't in church, but all he felt was nervous. He couldn't believe that the family had been turned away and not allowed in the church. All the way home, nobody had said a single word about it. Nobody said a single word – period! As much as he always hated being there, it felt awful to be rejected like that.

Once they were home, Jimmy Joe stopped a moment to talk with her father. “Dad, since we're not doing anything else today, any chance we can go hunting?”

Clint shook his head. “I doubt it. I have a feeling we haven't heard the last of this yet. And there may be lots of repercussions because of it.”

“Like what?”

Clint shook his head. “Let's just wait and see. No use worrying about things unless they become a problem.”

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Jacob and Rose were also silent all the way home, but as Jacob was pulling up to his house, Rose said, “First thing I'm going to do, is call a meeting of the trustees. The Reverend's actions today can't go unpunished.”

“I would think so,” Jacob replied. “And while you're doing that, I better call Clint and tell him what went on in church. He probably has no idea since they left before any of it happened.”

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When the phone rang, the Reverend's wife was reluctant to answer it. Any minute now she expected to hear that her husband had been fired. The phone continued to ring and her husband wasn't answering it either. She hadn't seen him since she had slapped him in church. He was currently sequestered in his office and hadn't come out.

The phone rang again, and like it or not, her hand reached for it. "Hello?" she said tentatively. She listened for a moment. Spoke for a moment. Listened, and spoke again. Then she hung up. It wasn't the call she was expecting at all. But most likely it wouldn't be the only one like it that they would get tonight. There were poor people among their parish that had been counting on the Easter festival banquet for their food for that day. Most years, all the leftover food was handed out to those people in need afterwards. And the McCombers usually brought enough food to feed twice the number of people at the annual festival.

She had already fed a small lunch to her two young children. She herself didn't feel much like eating. Most likely, her husband didn't feel much like it either. She still felt like killing him. What he had done was so reckless and stupid.

She went and knocked on his office door. "Jordan?" No answer. She knocked again. "Jordan!" No answer. She opened the door. He was sitting behind his desk, a glass of wine sitting on the desk in front of him. "How much of that have you already had to drink?" she asked.

Reverend Cosinger wasn't happy to see his wife at all. He wasn't happy with the situation, and he especially wasn't happy with himself. "None," he replied. "I just keep looking at it, wondering if I should. But I keep thinking that getting drunk isn't going to help anything now."

"No it's not!" she replied firmly. "I'm afraid we have something else to consider now too."

The Reverend closed his eyes for a moment. "What now?"

"All that food that the McCombers brought in. The poorer families in the church usually get the leftovers. I just had a call from one of them, asking if any of it was available. They're hungry. They have nothing to eat today."

Once again the Reverend closed his eyes. "We can't let them go hungry."

"No, we can't. Especially not when we've got all that food sitting and going to waste!"

The Reverend nodded. "I guess we should start handing it out then."

His wife nodded. "But it belongs to the McCombers. We need to check with them first. I doubt they'll mind, but under the circumstances, things may have changed."

Once again the Reverend squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the damage he had done. Once again it didn't work. "I can't call them," he told her. He shook his head. "I just can't."

"So you're going to make me do it?" she asked.

"Or don't do it. Just grab some and take it to whoever needs it."

"I can't in good conscious do that, and you know it!"

"And we can't let them go hungry," he countered.

"And you won't do anything at all to help?"

He shook his head. "I...can't."

Her husband was too depressed and feeling too sorry for himself to do anything yet. With a feeling of disgust, she left him and closed the door again. Once again she picked up the telephone, only this time she dialed out. Her call was answered faster than she thought it would be. Faster than she wanted. She still wasn't prepared for what she needed to say. "Hi Rose," she said tentatively. "I can't tell you how sorry I am about what happened today. More sorry than you think."

Rose wasn't sure if she should have been expecting the call or not. And if so, shouldn't it have come from the Reverend instead of his wife? "I'm sure you are," Rose replied. "It was not something we wanted to happen...today of all days!"

"That's for sure!" the Reverend's wife replied. "Look Rose," she said, "I don't know what we're going to do. He's made a major mistake and he knows it. But right now we've got a bit of a different problem that I'm sure none of us ever figured on."

"What's that?" Rose asked.

"All that food you and your family brought in last night and this morning. It's all going to waste. And I've already had a call from one of the poorer families in the church, asking if any of it might be available. But I can't say yes or no without asking you. You made it all. You brought it all out here for the festival. It's up to you to decide what to do with it."

"Oh my God," Rose said, "I've barely even thought of all the food there. I figured we'd go back and clean it up tomorrow or

something. But if there's people who need it, we've got to get it to them."

"Rose, I hate to ask this, especially after the way things went today, but some of those families are hungry right now. They really need it. I'll take what I can to them myself, but there are more who could really use it. Is there any way you, or someone in your family, might still be willing to help? I know it's a lot to ask, especially under the circumstances, but I hate to see it all go to waste."

It took Rose only a moment to figure out what to do. "Tell you what, you go start sorting things out and make a list of who we need to take anything to, and I'll arrange things here. We'll handle it all this afternoon. Okay?"

The Reverend's wife breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks Rose. And again, you don't know how sorry I am."

"No use worrying about that right now. You said there's people who need our help. That's more important today than anything else. We'll see you at the church in a little while."

A minute later, Rose walked into her husband's office. "Jacob, there's a lot of food going to spoil over at the church, and the Reverend's wife tells me there's people who can really use it right now. I'm going to organize something to start dealing with it all."

Jacob nodded. "We better do it. Besides, a little extra charity on our part right now couldn't hurt."

Rose nodded and walked out. Her first call was to Valerie to get her involved. Her second call was to Susan. "Hi Sue," she said when Susan had answered. "I'd like to recruit your help this afternoon."

"Sure Mom. Whatever you need."

"There's people who were at the church that are hungry, and we've got all that food going to spoil over there."

"Oh my God! You're right," Susan exclaimed.

"And I'd really like you and Jade, and especially Jimmy Joe there to help deliver it all."

"Jimmy Joe?" Susan asked.

"Especially her! And like I said, Jade too."

"You're sure about that?"

“Most definitely. And if Clint and Tommy aren’t too busy, we could probably use a few more muscles than just the ones Jimmy Joe is sporting lately.”

“If you’re sure, Mom,” Susan replied. “After what happened this morning, I’m not sure how close to the church Clint will want to get right now. The others too for that matter.”

“Don’t you worry none about that! I’ll see to it that there’ll be no problems – personally!”

“Okay, Mom. If you say so, we’ll be there.”

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The Reverend’s wife walked into the annex room off to the side of the church. It was full of completely set tables and nicely decorated for the Easter festival that should have happened that day. A wave of despondency washed over her from just looking at it all. She forced herself to move on into the small kitchen off to the side of the room. There were boxes in the way everywhere. She opened one and looked in. Gifts. Lots of small gifts to hand out to whoever would be there. The McCombers had this thing about giving out little gifts to everyone for the least little thing. Her husband always said it was just the McCombers way of showing off. She wasn’t so sure.

She opened another box and found a stack of envelopes in the top of it, on top of more gifts. Curious, she pulled the envelopes out. She briefly shuffled through them and realized they were more handout gifts. Larger prizes for whatever fun the McCombers had in mind. She shuffled down to the last envelope, barely glancing at it, but her name and her husband’s name were written clearly on it. She couldn’t have missed it if she wanted to. Curious about it, she set the other envelopes down and opened it. Her knees threatened to give out as tears filled her eyes and a sob escaped her lips. A Caribbean cruise. The McCombers had arranged for her and her entire family to take a Caribbean cruise. It was the dream of a lifetime for her. And now she was holding it in her hand. Except that now what she held was totally worthless. Crying now, she ran for home with the envelope in her hands.

The door to her husband's office was open so he could keep an eye on the kids, but he was still sitting behind his desk. The glass of wine was still sitting in front of him – untouched. She ran in, brandishing the envelope in front of her. "Look!" she said angrily. "Look what else you've done to us!"

Seeing the way his wife was now crying, the Reverend was even more concerned. Not really wanting to find out what was in the envelope, he took it and opened it anyway. It took only a moment before he closed his eyes and sank back in his chair. "I'm sorry," he whispered as tears hit his eyes too. "I'm so sorry," he sobbed. "I had no idea."

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This time, they took Clint's truck instead of the car. This time, Jasmine Jade wasn't wearing his new dress, but he was still stuck in another skirt outfit. His mother had insisted on it. This time he was carrying his usual pink purse instead of the yellow one, but it was decidedly much lighter than it had been before. He really did have too much stuff from his jewelry box stuffed in there. How had it gotten that way so quickly? Right now the only jewelry it held was two extra pairs of earrings and another bracelet, in case he decided to swap with the one he was wearing just then, or perhaps wear both of them, which he was strongly considering.

This time, they followed Jacob's truck with Jacob, Rose, Valerie, and Ashly in it. This time the parking lot was empty when they got there. This time, the Reverend wasn't outside to either greet them or chase them away. This time, they found the Reverend's wife in the small annex kitchen waiting for them. And this time, the Reverend's wife broke down and started crying as soon as Rose walked in.

"I'm sorry," she cried pitifully. "I'm so sorry," she sobbed again. "I don't know what got into him." She sank down in a chair, completely despondent, completely unable to face anything.

There was no hesitation on Rose's part at all. She went over and hugged the poor woman. "We know you had nothing to do with it," Rose told her. "We know."

"But what he's done..." she sobbed.

"We know. But today isn't the day to deal with it. Today we need to help those who have different problems. And you especially have always led the church's efforts in helping the poor."

The Reverend's wife allowed herself to be held by Rose for a few moments more while she continued to cry. She finally pulled herself away and stood up. She walked over to a counter and picked up the envelope. "I found this a little while ago," she said, trying hard to control her emotions. "It was always a dream of mine."

"I know," Rose replied, sorry to see that she had found that envelope. "You mentioned it once."

"And now...it's all gone!" Once again, she broke down crying. "Everything is gone. Our jobs, our home. Our life! What are we going to do? How am I going to take care of my kids? My family?"

"Shh..." Rose said as she went over and hugged her again. "We'll cross those bridges when we come to them. I'm sorry you found that envelope. It was supposed to be something to bring you and your husband happiness. The church has grown a lot in the last few months. We just wanted to say thank you."

"And now it's all gone. Ruined! By..."

"Shh... Don't say it," Rose told her. "What's happened has happened. We can't undo it or try to say it didn't happen. We've just got to deal with it. But not today. Today is not the day for dealing with problems such as this."

The Reverend's wife finally pulled away and nodded.

"Now, do you still think you can help us? Do you have a list of who needs some of this stuff?"

"I keep a list all the time," she said. "And yes, I'll help. Just give me some time to collect myself."

"Take all the time you need," Rose told her.

"And where's the Reverend?" Jacob asked.

She looked at him and shook her head. "In the house watching the kids. And as far as I'm concerned, he can stay there!"

They filled bag after bag with what food they thought would be best. Other bags got filled with some of the gifts they were planning on handing out for the kids. Most bags were labeled for which families they needed to go to. Clint, Tommy, and Jimmy Joe made

trip after trip out to the trucks to load the bags as they were finished. It took quite a while, but it was a fairly efficient operation.

Near the end, as she was carrying more bags out to the truck, Jimmy Joe noticed a strange man standing out in front of the church taking pictures of it. As she reached the truck, she saw him turn his camera towards her and snap another picture. With her eyes watching him carefully, she went back into the church.

"Who's the guy outside taking pictures?" she asked as she got back to the small kitchen where everyone was working.

"Someone's taking pictures?" Valerie asked.

"Outside," Jimmy Joe replied. "He was taking some of the church, then I think he took a few of me while I was out there."

Concerned, both Clint and Jacob hurried out, but when they got there they didn't see anyone. "Must have gone already," Jacob decided.

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The knock on the front door was totally unexpected. And unwanted! Irritated, the Reverend had to open the door himself since his wife wasn't there. He found a strange man on his doorstep. "Yes?" he asked.

"Reverend Cosinger?" the man asked.

"Yes?"

"I'm from the County Chronicle. I heard your Easter church service got cancelled this morning, and I wonder if I might have a word with you about it."

The newspaper! Fear ripped through the Reverend. "No. Not today," he replied firmly.

"But I'm sure our readers will want to know..."

"Not today!" the Reverend replied.

"Well then, could I possibly make an appointment to speak with you tomorrow about it?"

"No. Not tomorrow. Not today. Not at all right now. I'm sorry," he said as he started to close the door.

"But Reverend..."

“No!” He closed the door firmly. The newspaper! Things had just gone from bad to worse!

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At her request, Rose now rode in Clint’s truck with his family, while Susan went with Jacob and everyone else. The Reverend’s wife somehow managed to squeeze herself into the back seat of Clint’s truck as well. Jacob had a list of places to go, and so did they. It wasn’t far from the church to the first stop, a very ramshackle hut that could barely be called a house. Yet it held a husband, his wife, and their four kids.

“This is it?” Jimmy Joe asked.

“You’ve seen houses like this before,” Rose told her. “You know how many people live in places like this.”

As they parked in front of the house, they saw the door open. A moment later, the entire family started spilling out of it. As soon as the Reverend’s wife could get out of the truck, she went to talk to them. With Tommy’s help from the back of the pickup truck, the right bags were found. Rose handed the very first one to Jimmy Joe. The next one she handed to Jade. Susan got a bag, and Rose took the last one.

“Jimmy Joe,” Rose told her. “You go first and give that bag to the mother.”

“Me?”

“You!” Rose replied.

With a shake of her head, Jimmy Joe led the way toward the waiting family.

“Oh thank you!” the woman exclaimed. The relief on her face was obvious.

The father of the family walked over and shook Clint’s hand. “Thanks,” he said softly. He hated taking charity like this, but feeding his family was getting to be more and more impossible.

“Glad to help,” Clint replied.

Jimmy Joe handed her bag directly to the mother. “Here,” she said.

The woman took it. "Oh, thank you so much! You have no idea how much this will help."

Jimmy Joe looked around. All the kids appeared pretty young. The oldest one she thought she recognized from the youngest grades at school. "These your kids?" Jimmy Joe asked, already knowing it was a stupid question.

"Yes," the mother replied. "Do you know Marcus there from school?"

"Kind of," Jimmy Joe replied. She left the mother and walked over to the boy. "Marcus?"

The boy kind of nodded. "You're Jimmy Joe. Right? The one that's really a girl."

"That's me," Jimmy Joe replied, a hint of exasperation in her voice. "Take care," she said as she intended on heading back to the truck. But as she turned, her eyes caught a brief glimpse through the open door of their house. What she saw was...disgusting. It looked dark and everything looked nothing but old and worn out and broken. And that was from just that one brief glance. She turned to the boy again and nodded, then headed back to the truck.

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The second house was much like the first, except that instead of a house, it was a small trailer. The yard was a total mess of stuff that belonged in a junk yard. The entire place seemed to scream how poor they were. Once again, Jimmy Joe handed a bag of food to the mother. But her eyes couldn't help but take in everything they could see.

House after house, Jimmy Joe looked at them, or into them if she could. How many poor people were there in the area? How many more were her grandpa and the others visiting? It was positively depressing. More than a few houses held kids she knew from school. Many held kids she knew from both school and church. She never had a clue they were all that poor. Why didn't their fathers do something to make more money? Take better care of them? Why? It made no sense to Jimmy Joe at all.

By the end of the afternoon, both Jimmy Joe and Jasmine Jade had a better understanding of the way many of their friends at school lived. Some of those kids had been to Jade's big birthday party. They had been to Olivia's party too. They had all been to parties that Jimmy Joe had had in the past. Yet neither Jimmy Joe nor Jasmine Jade ever had a clue about how those friends really lived.

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Once home again, Jasmine Jade sat in his room and looked around at all the things in it. He walked all around their house, really looking at it. He stared out the windows at the shed in the back and the vehicles in the driveway, and he remembered how much his family had, and compared it with everything he had seen all afternoon. His little problem with the Reverend became a thing of miniscule importance. He seriously doubted he'd ever be able to look at all those kids at school again and not feel sorry for them.

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Jimmy Joe sat in her room and stared at the ducks on the wall, her eyes glancing past the humongous deer head that today was only in the way. As beautiful as the deer was, the ducks were more beautiful. Colorful. And she needed a bit of color and cheer just then. How could those people all live that way? How could they exist if they were that poor? Did they always need people to bring them food?

How many kids from school had she seen that afternoon? How many? Yet she never knew they were that hard up. She never had a single clue. Yeah, she knew they were supposed to be poor, that they didn't usually have the money to pay for their lunches every week, but she never had the first clue before as to what being poor really meant. She realized that she never really cared before. She existed in her own little world with her own things that she was interested in, and everything else that might be a problem wasn't a part of that world. Should it be? Should she be more aware of things like she had seen today? Should she worry about it at all? Or

should she just continue on as she always had. There was nothing she could ever do about it anyway.

Late that night, when Jimmy Joe went to bed, thoughts of all those poor families and the way they lived weighed heavily on her mind. Should she worry about them? Did she have to worry about them? What business was it of hers?

Yet none of what she had seen would go away. All of it had burned its way too deeply into her.

The McComber Switch

By Karen Singer

Part 4

Fame is a Four Letter Word

Chapter 57 – No News Would Be Good News

April 6th

Brian McComber was the first one in the family to see it, after one of his office staff brought the newspaper into work just to show him. “*Transgender Twins Prevent Easter Church Service.*” It wasn’t the main headline, but the story still ran prominently on the first page. He read the article and couldn’t believe it. He immediately called his father. “Dad, go buy a newspaper. The twins have made the front page!”

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Since the kids had gone back to school, Susan, Marcy, and Valerie were all in the family business office Monday morning. The phone that rang though wasn’t the business line, it was Susan’s personal phone. “Hello?” she said, not recognizing the number.

“Mrs. McComber?” the voice asked.

“Yes?”

“I’m with the County Chronicle. I was wondering if there would be any chance I could come out this afternoon and interview your family, and particularly your twins?”

Susan was shocked. “You want to interview... Absolutely not!” she said as firmly as possible. She clicked her phone off as quickly as she could. She turned to Valerie and Marcy, “The Chronicle wants to interview the twins.”

“Oh my God!” Valerie exclaimed. “They must have heard about the church service yesterday.”

“I wonder if we should call Dad?” Marcy asked.

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The nearest place for Jacob to buy a newspaper wasn't anyplace close. He wasn't even to the store yet when his phone rang. He hated answering calls while he was driving, but he never thought about not answering it. "Hello?" he said into the device as soon as he could get it to connect.

"Dad," Susan said. "I just got a call from the County Chronicle. They want to interview the twins!"

"Damn!" Jacob cursed. "Brian called me just a little bit ago about an article in the paper about them. I'm on my way to buy a copy now. What did you tell the paper?"

"I told them absolutely not!"

"Good!" Jacob replied. "Let's just hope all this blows over real quick and easy. I'll see you as soon as I can get back to the office."

It was another thirty minutes before Jacob could get back to the office. In the store, he had taken one look at the headline on the front page and immediately bought five copies of the small local newspaper before hurrying back to his truck and driving home. He didn't want to read the article until he had time to properly deal with it. If there was anything he could deal with.

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There were only three people in the small storefront office that was home to the County Chronicle newspaper. They were the only three people that were usually there. But their excitement ran very high that day. It was the first time that one of their stories had been picked up and distributed by the Associated Press. And now the Press had suggested a follow-up story with more pictures. All three knew that it was only a matter of hours until reporters from a bigger newspaper, or possibly even a TV station out of Little Rock, arrived in the area to dig up their own information on the situation.

"Okay," the editor said, "the Reverend won't talk to us and the family won't talk to us. What does that leave us with?"

"Not much," his chief contributing reporter replied.

"Friends," the paper's secretary suggested. "I only knew what happened because I was there and saw it. But there's got to be a lot of people in that church that know the family well. I've only been

going there a few weeks now, but the McComber family appeared to be a pretty big deal there from what I saw on Sunday.”

“Huh!” the editor grunted. “Jacob McComber is a pretty big deal no matter what he’s tied up in. I just never expected it to be a church! From what I know of his background, church is the last place I would ever expect to see him.”

“I only heard about the church and how good the Reverend there was getting from a friend of mine who suggested that we should try it. She’s the one who told me that the twins were both transgendered since her daughter is in their class at school. But the Reverend, you wouldn’t believe the passion the man puts into delivering his sermons. The only thing is that most of the time he seems to stare at just one place in the middle of the church while he speaks. But he does speak beautifully.”

“You said a friend of yours suggested the church, and her daughter is in their class?” the reporter asked. “Do you think she might help us, or could there be anyone else that was there that we might tap into for information?”

“I’m sure you can try talking to her,” the secretary said. But there were at least half a dozen other’s that I recognized as well. In fact, one of the families that I saw leaving along with the McCombers was John Mason, the principal of the county school out there. I’m pretty sure it was him.”

“I’m sure it was,” the editor replied. “John Mason’s wife is one of Jacob McComber’s daughters. So he’s pretty much a McComber too.”

“But maybe we can talk with him,” the reporter suggested. “Are the kids going to school as each other too, and if so, how do they deal with it? What’s the school’s position on the issue? And how do the other kids react to the situation?”

“Great questions,” the editor replied. “Get up to that school this morning and find out.” He turned to the secretary. “And you, get on the phone and start talking to any friends you know that you think were there. See what they can tell us about the family, and especially about those twins!”

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Jacob, Susan, Marcy, and Valerie all had their own copy of the newspaper to read. They checked through the whole thing, which didn't take long, but the only article they saw was the one on the front page. As far as any of them could tell, the twins were only referred to as the McComber twins and the short article mentioned that they were both transgendered and were both transitioning their sex to completely swap places. The paper described what the twins were doing as "bizarre."

The article pretty much described how Reverend Cosinger had been waiting out in front of the church before the service, with the sole intention of not letting the family with the twins into his church. And then it went on to describe how the Reverend stood in front of the entire congregation and declared that they would never be allowed into his church again. At which point, the entire McComber family walked out of the church, followed immediately by almost everyone else.

The paper had a short paragraph on how prominent the McComber family was in the region, and that Jacob was the head of the family. It even favorably mentioned the hunting clubs the family ran, which pleased Marcy since it was good advertising for their business.

"As far as I can tell," Jacob finally said, "there ain't much here that looks too bad for the family. Most of it seems to be directed toward what the Reverend done. I ain't too pleased though about them calling what's happening with the twins, bizarre. That might make people look twice at it and bring some questions we can do without."

"I don't like any of it," Susan said. "Things have been going along nice and quietly for months now, even at school. Other than a few questions from some of the parents about it for the birthday party, nobody seemed to have a problem with it at all. And once those parents who did question what was happening spent some time at the party, they too didn't seem to have any problems with it either."

"It's just a small country paper," Valerie said. "It can't have more than ten pages to it. Most people around here already know about

the twins from school. And as far as I'm concerned, the rest don't matter anyway. More than likely, the paper knew about the twins before this too, but they only had to print it because of what happened in church. *That* was the part that was major news."

Jacob looked to her and nodded. "Most likely you're right. But let's just try to keep quiet about it anyway. I don't see much else we can do. Hopefully, it will all blow over right away."

Valerie shook her head. "I think the thing that may keep people interested, is going to be the church. Namely, what are we going to do about Reverend Cosinger."

Jacob nodded. "You could be right. Any ideas yet on what the rest of the board members think?"

"I haven't a clue," Valerie replied. "I haven't discussed it with anyone yet. All I know is that we're meeting about it tonight."

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John Mason was annoyed when the school's secretary called him out of his class. But when she told him that someone from the county newspaper was in his office to speak with him, he quickly gave his students some busy work and went to meet with the reporter. He couldn't imagine what the reporter was there for, but the county was always coming up with ideas for this and that, and more often than not it meant less funding for his school. He walked into his office, shook hands with the man and sat down at his desk. "What are the county commissioners thinking about now?" he asked.

"The two McComber twins," the reporter replied.

John was surprised. "The twins? What about them?"

"Did you see this morning's paper?" the reporter asked.

"No, why?"

Instead of answering, the reporter passed over a copy of the newspaper and waited while John read the article. "The twins didn't *prevent* the church service from happening!" John stated angrily. "They had nothing at all to do with it."

"But they were still the cause," the reporter replied. "If they weren't switching places, then the Reverend wouldn't have thrown them out."

John shook his head. "This is an issue you need to take up with the Reverend, not me."

"Do the twins attend this school?"

"Why?" John asked suspiciously.

"Because I think it's important that our readers know how the school deals with the problem if they do."

"What problem?"

"So the children do attend this school then?" the reporter stated more than asked.

John looked at him. "You know perfectly well that this is the only school for this entire half of the county. There is no other school for any of the kids in this part of the state to attend."

"Do the twins come to school dressed as each other?"

John shook his head and stood up. "This meeting is over. For everyone's sake, don't go digging up too much about the twins. All you'll wind up doing is causing a lot more harm than already exists."

"What harm is that?" the reporter asked quickly.

John shook his head. "Goodbye!" he said as he walked out.

By the time the reporter got out to the hallway, he saw John Mason entering one of the classrooms and closing the door behind him. Instead of leaving the school, he turned around and went back in to speak with the secretary.

"Do you need something?" the school's secretary asked pleasantly.

"Yes," the reporter replied. "The two McComber twins. Mr. Mason mentioned their names, but I didn't write them down. What are they again?"

"Oh, you mean Jimmy and Jasmine."

"Jimmy...and Jasmine McComber," the reporter replied happily as he pulled out a notepad and wrote the names on it. He looked back at the secretary with a broad friendly smile on his face. "So I'm guessing that things seem pretty strange around here now with those two."

"Strange?" the secretary asked. "In what way?"

"Because the two of them are transgendered," the reporter stated.

“Oh that,” the secretary replied. “No, things really aren’t strange at all anymore.”

“Anymore?” the reporter asked.

“Well,” the secretary said, “things were a bit odd in the beginning, but now everything seems to be pretty much like it should be.”

The reporter was surprised. “Oh, so they’re not...um...dressing as each other anymore?”

“No,” the secretary replied, “of course they are. It’s just not... strange anymore.”

“Ooooh,” the reporter said, still trying to sound as friendly as possible. “So everyone is used to them looking all odd now.”

“Odd? What are you talking about?”

“Well, wouldn’t the one who’s really a boy, Jimmy I think you said his name is. Wouldn’t he still look pretty much like a boy, even though he’s wearing his sister’s clothes?”

“Oh that!” the secretary said. “No, trust me, if you didn’t know them, you’d never know that either of them were anything but who they appear to be. Jimmy Joe, she’s...”

“Jimmy Joe?”

“That’s what the kids all call her...or him I mean. And they call the other one Jasmine Jade now. Or more often, just Jade I think.”

“Oh,” the reporter replied. “So they’re using middle names?”

“No. I don’t know where these new names came from. Maybe Jimmy Joe and Jade just decided they wanted different names too.”

The reporter wrote down the new names in his notebook. “You were saying that they both seem to look like a boy and a girl?”

“Like I said, if you didn’t know them, you’d never be able to tell. Jimmy Joe, I don’t know how she does it, but she looks just like any other boy. And Jade...” She laughed a moment. “She’s pretty as a picture. Really! But then all the McComber girls have always been really pretty. I guess he’s just following in line with the rest of them.”

“So what happens when either of them have to go to the bathroom when they’re here?”

The secretary was a bit confused by the question. “Didn’t you ask Mr. Mason? Really all this is things he should have told you.”

“He had to get back to his class,” the reporter replied. “He said to come back later this afternoon. I’m just trying to get a handle on things now, before I come back.”

“Oh yes,” the secretary replied. “It is very difficult for him when he has to teach class and be the principal as well.”

“So what happens in the restrooms?”

“Oh, that’s no problem. They both get escorted in by teachers every time.”

“So both twins are using the opposite bathroom?”

“Not if you consider that Jade is now a girl and Jimmy Joe is now a boy. They’re perfectly correct now. They just don’t go in without one of the teachers present.”

The reporter nodded. More information for his article. Do you think there’s any chance I could talk to the twins? Or at least one of them?”

“Really, you’d have to speak with Mr. Mason about that. And I can’t go calling them out of class for something like that either. Besides, I’m sure their parents would want to be involved as well.”

“Of course,” the reporter replied, broadening his smile as much as possible. “I just thought I’d ask...since I was here.”

The reporter was halfway back to the newspaper office when he got a call from the paper’s secretary. “How did it go at the school?” the secretary asked.

“Mason wouldn’t talk to me at all once he found out what I was there for, but the school’s secretary turned out to be most helpful. I’m on my way back now to see what I can write up out of it all.”

“Well you might want to stay out there for a little while more. I’ve managed to talk with a couple of women I know who were at church, and if you like, you can go and talk with them about it now. And while you’re at it, don’t forget to ask about the twins’ birthday party.”

“Their birthday party?”

“Evidently they both just turned twelve, and the family brought in an entire herd of horses for all the kids to ride.”

“Sounds like fun!”

“Let me give you some names and addresses,” the secretary replied.

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In her Little Rock office, Doctor Cynthia Hopkins stood up and came out from behind her desk to receive her guest. The man who came in was good looking and appeared very confident of himself. But the doctor had no doubt that he would be since he was a reporter for one of the local TV stations. The doctor had only agreed to this quick interview out of curiosity, and with the provision that since he worked for a TV station, there would be no cameras. This was to be an informational meeting only. After shaking hands, she motioned the man to one of the seats in front of her desk while she walked back around and took her own chair.

“What can I do for you today?” the doctor asked.

The reporter got right to business. “There was an Associated Press article released yesterday about a church up in North Arkansas where two transgendered kids prevented the Easter church service from happening. The entire congregation walked out on the preacher and the service was cancelled before it even started.”

Doctor Hopkin’s eyebrows went up. “What on earth did the kids do?”

“Showed up at church. Well, not quite, evidently. All I know is what little information the article said. It said that the family with the twins was turned away at the door by the preacher, and because of it, the entire congregation walked out on him.”

“Wow!” the doctor said with a smile. “That’s some show of support for the kids.”

The reporter nodded. “I would guess so.”

“So what can I do for you?”

“Do you know who these children are?”

The doctor shook her head. “There are transgendered people living all over the state. Many more than anyone realizes.”

“Well, according to the article, the two kids are twins, a boy and a girl, and they’re completely swapping places. The article called it a bizarre situation. Because of that, I thought that you might have heard of them, or at least you might be aware of them.”

From what little the reporter had just told her, the doctor had no doubt who the twins were that he was talking about. And the article had been correct, it was a bizarre situation. But she still asked, "Did the article mention any names?"

"It referred to them as the McComber twins. From what we've dug up, the McComber family owns an enormous amount of land up in that part of the state that they use for hunting." He paused to study the reaction on the doctor's face, but he had been a reporter for far too long not to know the immediate recognition she had shown over both the oddball twin swap, and now especially the family name. "So I see you do know the twins," he prompted.

The doctor shook her head. "No. I've never met them."

"But you've heard about them. You know all about them."

Again she shook her head. "I'm aware of them, of course. There are several of the most prominent specialists in the medical community here in Little Rock that are watching those two very carefully."

"But you're not their doctor? You're not seeing them as your patients?"

Again she shook her head. "No. I've never had any contact with them at all."

"What can you tell me about them?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. And if I were their doctor, then I'd be bound by patient privilege to not tell you anything about them."

"Of course," the reporter replied. "But since you're not their doctor, then you're not bound in any way. We've got a film crew heading up there right now to look into this further," he told her, "but we still want to get our facts straight. So is there anything at all that you can tell me about this bizarre twin swap of the McCombers?"

The doctor was horrified to hear about the film crew. "You've sent a film crew?"

"Of course. We're a TV station."

The doctor again shook her head. "That's a big mistake. The harm you could be causing those two is...incalculable!"

"Harm? All we're trying to do is get to the bottom of a situation."

"Then I highly recommend that you leave the twins alone and focus solely on the church. Don't even mention the twins if you don't

have to.”

“But isn’t a situation like this, where the twins swap genders and places, highly irregular, even among transgendered situations?”

The doctor looked angrily at the reporter. She pulled a notepad down in front of her and grabbed a pen and began writing.

“Doctor?” the reporter said, trying to get her attention. He got no reply from her at all as she continued writing.

When she was done, Doctor Hapkins looked back up at the reporter. “I’ll tell you what,” she said firmly as she held the piece of paper out towards the reporter. She waited until he had grabbed it. “If you want to talk to me about the McComber switch, then you answer all of those questions I put on that paper first. And be prepared to fully discuss them with me. As soon as I feel you have a full working knowledge of those questions, then I’ll be more than happy to tell you everything I know about it. Until then, I won’t say another word. But I suggest you get digging into those questions fast, before your film crew gets where it’s going. Otherwise, you could be causing irreparable damage to the lives of two children, and perhaps many others.”

The reporter looked at the paper. It was a list of questions. The first one was: *How many transgendered people commit suicide every year?* The second question was: *How many transgendered people are murdered every year?* And the third question was: *How many families are uprooted and forced to move because of hateful prejudices toward their transgendered family members?* “But this is all things that I came to find out from you.”

“No you didn’t,” the doctor replied. “You’re digging into the lives of those two children.”

“But can’t you simply tell me the answer to these questions?”

“No. You’re a reporter, you dig the answers up yourself. They’re easy to find. It should take you very little time on the internet. But I suggest you do it fast, and while you’re at it, I highly suggest you call your film crew and tell them not to even consider those two twins.”

“And if I do, you’ll talk to me about them?”

“What little I know,” she agreed.

The reporter looked at the doctor for a moment and studied the resolve on her face. Then he nodded.

"Do it fast," the doctor suggested.

As soon as the reporter had left her office, she called her secretary and asked her to look up the number for Doctor Brian McComber for her. It wasn't until after she had met with one of her patients that she was able to speak to Brian. "Doctor McComber?" she asked when the line connected.

"Yes," Brian replied.

"This is Doctor Hapkins, from Little Rock."

"Doctor! How are you?" Brian asked, surprised at the call.

"I'm doing fine," she replied. "But I'm very concerned about those two twins."

"You are?"

"I had a TV reporter in my office a little while ago who was trying to dig questions out of me about them. Something to do with them causing everyone to walk out of a church service yesterday."

"Yeah. One of my staff showed me the newspaper article this morning," Brian replied. "You said a TV reporter?"

"I'm afraid so. I've managed to put him off for a little bit and steer him away from those children, but only for a little while I'm afraid. At least I hope I managed it. But the condition for it was that once he learns a bit more about the transgendered issues involved, that I would tell him everything I know about those twins, which fortunately, is almost nothing. And as much as I'd like otherwise, I need to keep my knowledge to nearly nothing now because of it."

"So this is mostly a heads-up call?" Brian realized.

"Yes. To warn you that trouble may be on the way. The TV station has already sent a film crew up into your area."

Brian was horrified to hear that. "Thanks for the warning," Brian replied. A film crew! What trouble could that bring? He turned his attention back to Doctor Hapkins. "Strange that they would send someone to talk to you."

"He was digging, and obviously the TV station is trying to do a thorough job on the story. At least they came to me. I'm guessing he was here to try to get their facts straight before they air anything."

"That's something at least," Brian replied. "What did you tell them?"

“Only that I would talk to him about it...after he digs further into the questions of transgender suicide, murder, and prejudice.”

“Hm! A few minute’s worth of work,” Brian replied.

“True. Which means that I expect him back here anytime now.”

“Okay,” Brian replied. “Anything you suggest I do?”

“Just pray that they concentrate on the church and not the children. Unfortunately, I don’t see that happening.”

“No,” Brian agreed. “As soon as the article labeled the situation as bizarre, I’m sure it caught the eye of everyone who read it. Which brings up something else. The article only came from our local county newspaper. It’s a tiny thing that barely has anything to it at all. How did a TV station in Little Rock hear about it?”

“He said the Associated Press. Which means, I’m afraid, that that story could have been picked up anywhere. News sources all over the world most likely had access to it.”

Brian was silent for a moment. “That’s not what I needed to hear.”

“No, it *is* what you needed to hear. I suggest you be prepared, just in case.”

“Thanks,” Brian replied. “I really appreciate the heads-up.”

“You’re very welcome. I know you’re pretty much alone up there and you’re not an expert on transgendered issues. The medical community here in Little Rock will continue to do what we can to help out. As little as it may be.”

“Thanks” Brian replied again. “It’s very much appreciated.”

“And doctor...”

“Yes?” Brian asked.

“As much as I’d rather know nothing about those twins right now, if you ever need me, I would be more than glad to talk to them. I’m afraid their situation has held my attention as well, right from the beginning.”

“No doubt,” Brian agreed. “Look, I don’t know what the family is going to do about it now. But I appreciate the warning.”

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“You must be the man from the newspaper,” the woman said somewhat excitedly as she opened her front door. “Please come in.”

“Thank you for agreeing to talk with me,” the reporter replied as he entered what he would barely call a house. As a reporter, he had seen many houses in the county just like it. Most of the time, places like this meant trouble. This time though, he was at one of them for a different reason.

Just climbing the front steps and walking across the porch to the door, he was worried that the roof would fall down on him. Being inside didn’t make him feel any less nervous about it. He saw three young kids in the house, one of them grabbing onto his mother’s leg. At the woman’s polite offer, he sat in one of the ancient chairs, that he noticed the rear leg was covered in duct tape. He didn’t want to think about what had happened to it. The chair seemed to hold his weight – fortunately. He waited until the mother sat down and pulled the toddler boy onto her lap. “Our secretary tells me that you know the McCombers,” he started.

The woman’s face lit up. “Well, not all that well. But we do go to church with them every week, and my daughter is in class with them. I’ve been to their house a few times to drop my daughter off for birthday parties and things. Susan and Marcy McComber just had a really huge party for their daughters on Friday.” She leaned forward excitedly. “They had a western theme for it and the family brought in a whole bunch of horses.” Her face lit up from ear to ear. “They even let me and most of the other parents ride back through the woods with our kids. It was one of the nicest afternoons I think I can remember.”

“The horseback riding wasn’t just for the kids?”

“Well, the McCombers have always been very generous. It really was a very nice day.”

“Were there a lot of kids there?”

“From what I could tell, quite a few.”

“Lots of presents for the kids then,” the reporter said with a small laugh.

“Oh no! None of the McComber’s ever lets anyone bring them presents, for any of their parties. In fact, every time my daughter

comes home from one, she's got some little nice piece of jewelry or some kind of trinket like that."

The reporter was very surprised by that. "So they give the presents instead?"

The woman shrugged. "As I said, they've always been most generous. If it wasn't for them..." But she stopped talking after that.

The reporter noticed that the woman looked very uncomfortable suddenly. "What about them?"

The woman shook her head. "I'm sure you can see that...we're not the richest people around. Sometimes my husband can't bring home enough money for us to eat. This week, especially with Good Friday and all, was one of those times. And I'm afraid that we were kind of counting on the Easter Festival at the church for our meal for Sunday. But when the Reverend went all crazy and the church service was cancelled, so was the festival."

"So you had nothing to eat," the reporter surmised.

"Nothing," the woman said sadly.

"What did you do?"

"I called the Reverend's wife, and a couple of hours later, a pickup truck pulls up out front and some of the McCombers got out. One of the twins himself handed me the first bag of groceries from the food that had been planned for the festival. We got five bags in all. I can't tell you how much that meant to us. We're trying to make it last until my husband's next paycheck on Friday."

"Have the McCombers ever done that before?"

The woman blushed. "We get food from them a couple of times a year. Usually they hand it out at the church though." She looked around. "For obvious reasons, I prefer that people don't come here."

The reporter nodded as he too looked around. "So one of the twins was here on Sunday?"

"They both were."

"Were they dressed as each other?"

"They've pretty much *been* each other for a while now," she replied. "According to my daughter, they started coming to school a few days a week as each other, then more and more often. Now I hear they've gone and declared themselves to both be totally transgendered and are simply living that way."

"And nobody seems to mind?"

"Mind? What do you mean?"

"Nobody has any problems with the fact that they're not really... how they look?"

"Not that I know of...except for the Reverend of course. I know my daughter doesn't seem to have any problems with it."

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The reporter thanked his lucky stars that the second house on his list wasn't anything at all like the first one. This one was in a very nice neighborhood that seemed very middle to upper class. This time he wasn't afraid the building was going to fall down on him as he climbed the steps up to the house. He rang the doorbell, something the last house didn't have. He didn't have to wait very long until the door was opened. "I'm from the County Chronicle," he told the woman. "I was told you might be willing to talk with me about the church service that was cancelled, and the McComber twins."

"Yes, of course," the woman replied politely as she held the door open for him to enter. "This is very exciting for me. Will my name get into the paper?"

"If you like," the reporter said with a smile. The woman beamed excitedly as she sat on the sofa. The reporter took a chair across from her. The living room was bright and open and very nice. He wasn't the least bit uncomfortable in it. "How do you know the McCombers?" he began.

"Well, I don't really know them well. And not all of them, of course. Just a few of the mothers from when their daughters have their birthday parties every year. But we've recently started going to a new church...you know which one of course, and I was surprised to see that most of the McComber family went there as well."

The reporter's real interest was in the twins, but he decided to start with the problems in the church. "So what can you tell me about what happened at church?"

"Well, the Reverend was out front greeting everyone who came in."

"He does that every week?"

"No," the woman replied. "I've never seen him do it before. He greets everyone as they leave, but never as they're coming in."

"So you think he was waiting for the twins to get there."

"I couldn't say, but it seemed to look like it."

"You didn't happen to see him turn the family away, did you?"

The woman again smiled broadly. "I certainly did! We were so shocked. We had just gotten out of the car and were walking towards the front door, hoping we'd be able to get a seat. There were so many cars that we had to park off the side of the road quite a ways from the church! When we got close though, my daughter saw Jade...that's one of the twins. She was about to run over and say hello, but that's when the Reverend seemed to go all crazy and get really angry. He wouldn't let them even come near the front door. He turned them away and told them to never come back!"

"So what happened?"

"The family turned around and left."

"They didn't argue or say anything?"

"No. Not that I saw. Nothing. They just turned around and went home."

"So I take it that the twins were dressed as each other."

"Of course. From what I understand, they both pretty much live that way now. Permanently. In fact, from what I've seen of those two in the past, and now especially after Friday...they had a big birthday party bash on Friday. They had horseback riding and all. What a fun day! Oh, sorry, but anyway, from what I saw of those two, I don't think they could ever look like themselves again if they tried. I mean like their old selves. Of course they look like themselves now, just their new selves. I knew them somewhat before, or I had met the girl before, not the boy, and I don't know how she could possibly change that much to ever look so much like a boy now. It's almost crazy. And her brother, the one who's the girl now, she looks absolutely amazing! And her mother had her all dolled up so adorably in a beautiful western outfit for the party. Nichole too. The two birthday girls were dressed almost alike, just in different colored shirts."

"Nichole?" the reporter asked.

“Oh, she’s Jasmine’s cousin. They live next door to each other. They always have their big birthday parties together every year since their birthdays are only a few days apart.”

“I see,” the reporter replied.

“Oh! You want to see a picture?”

“You have pictures of them?”

“I was at the party with my daughter, and I stayed all night for the sleepover too.”

“To help out?”

“Well, no. I was concerned for my daughter. Um...because of Jade really being a boy. But Susan and Marcy both assured me that everything would be well chaperoned and that there would be nothing...funny happening. If you know what I mean. I just wanted to make sure of it.”

“And did anything...funny happen?”

“Not at all. And to tell the truth, I stopped worrying about it after I was there just a few hours. Jade is...totally a girl now. In fact, after Olivia’s party, my daughter came home claiming that he really was a girl. A real girl! I can’t tell you what a strange thing that was to hear!”

“And...is he...or she...a real girl?”

“No, of course not. She’s just one of those transgendered types you hear about on TV all the time now.” She leaned forward excitedly. “Do you think the TV stations might be interested in them too?”

“Um...I don’t know,” the reporter admitted. “I guess it’s possible. You mentioned pictures?”

“Oh yes, let me get my phone.”

Two minutes later, the reporter was scrolling through picture after picture that she had taken of the party. “Is there any chance I can get you to email all these to the newspaper. I’m sure the editor will pay you a few dollars for them.”

Once again the woman’s excitement rose. “They will?”

“Not much, I’m afraid, but if we use any, then I’m sure he’ll agree.”

“Just tell me where to send them!”

The reporter gave her the email address and watched as she sat and started sending the pictures. "So, do you have any idea how the family feels about the twins switching places?"

The woman looked up from what she was doing, the expression on her face turned somber and troubled. "I can tell you for a fact that Susan is devastated by it. I was sitting in the back with her while the girls all put on kind of a show, and she started crying in the middle of it. Oh the heartbreak that poor woman is feeling for her kids. All she kept saying was that she's lost her son. She's lost him, and she won't ever have him back again. Both her kids I guess. It's just that we were watching Jade singing with her girlfriends at the time, so I guess that's the one that was most on her mind. It was... heartbreaking. I don't know what I would do if it were my son...or daughter."

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The Reverend's wife almost fell over and fainted when she opened her front door and saw the man holding the big TV camera pointed at her, and the woman in front of her was holding a microphone.

"Mrs. Cosinger?" the woman asked. "I'm Amanda Dwyer from Little Rock News."

The Reverend's wife now recognized the woman from the TV news. She had seen her on TV numerous times, often wondering what her life must be like to always have nice clothes to wear...and she had never noticed her wearing the same thing twice. "Yes?" she replied hesitantly.

"Is the Reverend home?"

"No," she replied firmly. "He's not here right now."

"May we talk to you then?" the reporter asked.

"No, I'm sorry. I'd rather not."

"Tell me, Mrs. Cosinger, how do you feel about what happened in church on Sunday?"

"Awful!" she replied as she started to close the door.

"Mrs. Cosinger! Does your husband hold any regrets for the things he said?"

"I can't talk to you. You'll have to speak to him. Goodbye."

"When will he be home, Mrs. Cosinger?"

"I don't know." She closed the door firmly and stood there staring at it in fear. Now the TV was interested. They'd never find another church!"

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"Cosinger!" the older pastor said as he shook the Reverend's hand. "Good to see you again." His face turned more serious. "Sorry to hear you had a problem in your church on Sunday. And Easter Sunday at that."

Reverend Cosinger nodded. "It...wasn't good. I have no doubt that I'm soon going to be out of a job. The church board is meeting tonight about it."

"Good luck," the older man replied softly as he sat in one of the easy chairs in his office. "What happened?"

"I lost my temper," Cosinger replied as he took another of the chairs. "I got stupid."

"It happens from time to time with all of us. We're only human."

"But as you've told me in the past, nobody else views us as human."

"So true. And I still don't know any way around it. So what happened?"

"Those twins!"

"The transgendered ones of course. The news mentioned them and you yourself have complained about them to me in the past."

"You saw the newspaper? Our newspaper? All the way out here? We're nearly in Little Rock!"

The older man shrugged. "It was there in the Little Rock paper that we get. Front page I'm afraid."

Cosinger shook his head. "I came to see if you know of any churches that are in the market for a new Reverend."

"There are always churches looking. I'll keep my ear to the ground for you, but after this, I'm not sure how easy it's going to be for you. The paper said everyone walked out on you."

Cosinger nodded. "I shouldn't have lost my head. It's just that... it was Easter. And such a beautiful day to boot! Things were going so nicely, and my church was full to overflowing with people. The most ever!"

"You said you were hoping that maybe because of the way your church was growing that it would help you land a better one."

"I was hoping," Cosinger replied.

"But now...."

"But now..." Cosinger agreed. "What am I going to do?"

"I don't know. Have you tried apologizing to the family? Have you talked with any of the board members yet?"

"No. Not yet. I only know that the board is meeting tonight about it. That's all."

"You might want to at least try apologizing. It's the least you can do."

"Apologize? But you know how I feel about the matter. You know perfectly well what the bible says about it. It couldn't be clearer! 'The woman shall not wear'..."

"Don't go quoting the scriptures to me," the older man said. "I know them at least as well as you do."

"They're an abomination!" Cosinger replied. "They don't belong in the church!"

"But now you've gone and stuck your foot in the political problems of the people, and because of it, your entire congregation walked out on you."

"I was only following the word of our Lord!"

"Were you? Or were you following your own prejudicial inclinations?"

"My own... I was following the word of God!"

The older man backed down to collect his thoughts. He finally spoke. "You know the Baptist religion is different than most others. We don't have the internal political structure above us to answer to that most religions have. Most of us have to find our own churches to lead and we do our best to help the many people that choose to follow us. Remember the old joke about putting two Baptists in a room together? Neither one has the same religion. That's pretty much true all the time. We have so many followers of our faith, but

we don't all believe things exactly the same way. Oh, we have a core list of tenets, but there are many finer points that get interpreted and viewed according to the individual. You, for example, take every word of the bible more seriously than most."

"Shouldn't I? It's the word of God himself!"

"Of course it is! But that doesn't mean we don't have to look at things from someone else's point of view once in a while. For instance, those two twins."

"What about them?"

"According to the article, they're both transgendered."

"According to the article," Cosinger replied.

"You mean they're not?"

Cosinger shrugged. "What difference does it make?"

"Have you talked with them about it?"

"No!" Cosinger replied firmly. "They're an abomination! That family should know better. The entire clan!"

The older pastor took a deep breath. Cosinger was set too firmly in his beliefs...which was usually a very good thing. He chose another tactic. "Two years ago," he said, "I had the sorry duty to comfort a family who had just lost their son. He committed suicide."

Cosinger nodded. "It's horrible. I'm so glad I've never faced anything like that."

"Yet!" the older pastor replied. "But do you want to know why the boy killed himself? Why he chose to take a walk along the Interstate, and then suddenly throw himself in front of a tractor-trailer?"

"Why?"

"Because he kept insisting he was a girl and not a boy, and the family wouldn't listen to him or allow him to express himself femininely at all. They totally shut his feelings on the matter down. And the result...."

"So he killed himself."

The older man nodded. "And he's not alone. I had to do a lot of research on the subject after that. Turns out that the suicide rate for these individuals is through the roof! It's unbelievable! And if it's not suicide, then so many of them get attacked, raped, or murdered – often!"

"It's horrible," Cosinger agreed. "But what does that have to do with me?"

"Those two twins you keep complaining about. The boy I had to deal with killed himself because he couldn't be who he wanted to be. He thought he was a girl inside, not a boy at all. What do those two twins think? You live in Northern Arkansas. Not exactly the most open minded place in the world. Wouldn't their family put a stop to the business of them switching around if it wasn't so serious?"

"Huh! The McComber Clan. Hunting and showing off for everyone around is their game."

"So what's really going on with those kids? How do they feel about things? Is it bad enough that the family is just trying to prevent them from...shooting themselves or something?"

Cosinger looked horrified. "They wouldn't!"

"The boy I dealt with, purposely ran in front of a truck – on the interstate. There was a good reason why the casket was closed. Horrible!"

Cosinger said nothing, he only sat there and looked horrified.

"All I'm saying," the older man suggested, "is that maybe you should go back and try to see things from their perspective and not just your own. If a boy really thinks he's a girl, then is it an abomination for him to be wearing girl's clothes or not? He wouldn't think so. He believes he is a girl."

"You're splitting hairs!"

"Of course! But that hair is still someone else's concept of reality."

"Maybe," Cosinger replied as he tried to wrap his head around the concept. "I guess I can think about it."

"Good! Do that. The way all this transgendered stuff keeps popping up on the news, I have no doubt that we'll all be dealing with it more in the future."

"The word of God..."

"Is what each of us interpret it to be," the older man finished. "Whether it's true in the bible or not. As preachers, we're not human...according to everyone else," the older man said. "But by

that logic, everyone else is even more fallible than we are. Just think about it!"

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The editor of the County Chronicle was pouring over all the birthday pictures that had been sent to the newspaper. "What a shindig!" he exclaimed.

"That's one of the twins there," the reporter pointed out as they looked at a picture of the two birthday girls with their arms around each other, smiling for the picture. "The one in the gold shirt."

"Great outfits!" the secretary exclaimed, looking at the pictures from over the editor's other shoulder. "And she actually looks pretty! Astonishingly so."

"Which one is the other twin?"

The reporter searched through the pictures. "There isn't much on her...or him. Here!" he said as he selected one and enlarged it.

"Nice!" the editor exclaimed. "Perfect picture. And with him sitting on the horse, it makes it look even better."

"Goes with the western theme of the party. Quite nice," the secretary agreed.

They all looked up as the door opened and two people walked in. The editor thought the beautiful young woman looked familiar. "Can I help you?" the editor asked.

"Amanda Dwyer," the woman introduced herself. "Little Rock News."

"Little Rock!"

"We're here about that story you uploaded last night to the Associated Press. I was wondering if you had any more information about any of it. We tried to talk to Reverend Cosinger, but he wasn't home, and his wife wasn't interested in talking."

"I've been digging into it all day," the reporter told her.

"And?" she asked.

"And..."

"And I'm not sure we should be sharing what we found," the editor interrupted.

"We're all just trying to get the story out," Amanda told him. "Anything you give me will be duly accredited to your paper. I can promise you that."

"Everything?"

"Everything!" Amanda agreed. "Professional curtesy. We do it all the time."

"I don't know much about television," the editor replied.

"So what have you found? My editor put me on hold as to talking with the McComber family for now, and the Reverend wasn't there. So can you throw me anything at all?"

"How about some pictures?" the editor suggested.

"And I've got some interviews that were very enlightening," the reporter added.

"But I want full credit for everything we give you!" the editor insisted again.

Amanda Dwyer smiled. Twenty minutes later all the birthday pictures were being sent to her TV station, with the added provision that the paper would be well paid for each and every one. As soon as she could, she and her cameraman were back in their van and heading back to the church. Even without Reverend Cosinger, she had a lot of great material for a story. Most of it was about how generous the McComber family seemed to be. The same family that now held a bizarre set of twins.

As her cameraman drove, she furiously wrote notes on what she would say in front of the camera. And who knew, maybe by the time they got back to the church, the Reverend would be there! That would be a double bonus. This little story that she had complained about being assigned to was rapidly turning out to be very interesting!

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Late in the afternoon, Doctor Hapkin's office was again visited by the same reporter. Again, the doctor got up to shake his hand before the two sat down again. "So, did you get the answers to my questions?" the doctor asked.

"I did," the reporter replied with a nod. "It wasn't exactly difficult. As you suggested, there's a lot of information about it on the internet."

"And did you manage to keep your film crew away from that family?"

"For now," the reporter agreed. "Seems they dug up more than enough material from other sources for a story tonight."

"At least the children won't be on TV."

"That part I can't guarantee."

The doctor was disappointed. "Why not?"

"Because we've got a bunch of pictures of a big birthday party bash that was thrown for them on Friday. And it includes pictures of the kids. Pictures we'd be crazy not to run with."

The doctor shook her head. "You know the jeopardy you're placing those children into."

"You're worried about hate crimes."

"That, and the problems that the publicity might bring to their quiet little life. Too many people might recognize them. They won't be left in peace."

"Not my call anymore. Newspapers and TV stations everywhere have picked up on this story. It's too bizarre! And the fact that the Easter church service was cancelled because everyone walked out on Reverend Cosinger is simply too big a story right after Easter for all the news sources not to run it. I'm afraid it's already being broadcast pretty much everywhere. If it hadn't been Easter when it happened, they might have stood a chance. But the big holiday simply assured it would get picked up by everyone."

"That, and what's happening to those twins was labeled as bizarre by the paper," the doctor said with more than a hint of annoyance.

"Afraid so. So now, what can you tell me about them?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. "Or rather, I'm glad I can't tell you much, for obvious reasons. I was first made aware of them by one of my colleagues who is consulting on the twin's case. I was brought in as an additional consultant on the hormone levels of the two. I talked with their doctor right here in my office about them as well."

"Is it normal for that much consultation?"

The doctor shrugged. "Sometimes. Actually, more often than you think. But in this case, what's happening with the twins isn't something the family wants at all. They were trying to keep things going slowly. And unfortunately, too slowly."

"What do you mean, too slowly?"

"The twins are both on hormones. They have been since just after Thanksgiving. The hormone levels they were being given were actually too low for the first few months, which was causing undo emotional stress to the twins, particularly the female to male one."

"Jimmy Joe," the reporter replied.

"Jimmy Joe?"

"The name he evidently goes by now."

"I don't know any of that," the doctor said. "Anyway, the hormones they were being given were so low that their bodies natural hormones were at constant war with them, resulting in drastic mood changes that I'm afraid came out as somewhat violent, particularly in the case of the female to male patient. Fortunately, nothing too bad. Adjusting the hormones to more proper levels solved the issue, and I have no doubt made each of the twins much happier too since the changes they each were after began showing up more prominently."

"And that's your only knowledge of them?" the reporter asked.

"That, and I get monthly reports showing me their blood levels. But that's it. I have no other knowledge of them at all. I didn't even know their names until now. Jimmy Joe, you said?"

"Jimmy Joe," the reporter confirmed. "I have some pictures. Would you like to see?"

"I'd love to," the doctor replied, very curious now.

The reporter pulled out his cell phone and found one of the pictures. "This one is Jimmy Joe," he said as he passed his cell phone to her. "If you move to the next picture, that one is Jade."

"Jade?"

"Evidently that's the name she chose for herself."

The doctor studied the picture. It showed a boy on the back of a horse, obviously very happy to be there. And without a doubt the one now called Jimmy Joe looked just like a boy. She move to the next picture and smiled. "And this is Jade?"

"That's her," the reporter confirmed again.

"She's...beautiful."

"I got to tell you, they both surprised me. A lot!"

"I can see why," the doctor agreed. She passed the phone back to the reporter. "Look at those pictures again, and tell me what you see."

The reporter looked again. "Two kids. One boy, and one girl. No doubt about either of them from the pictures."

"No, that's not what I see."

"You don't?"

"No, what I see is two perfectly happy kids. Two kids that look for all the world like they're living just as they want to be. That's what I see."

"The reporter nodded. I think you're right. At least that's what the picture seems to show."

"And a picture is worth a thousand words."

The reporter nodded. "Yes, but if each picture is worth that much, how much more is TV video of them worth?"

The doctor shuddered at the thought.

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"Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn!" Jacob swore as he watched the evening news. He was only watching it because Brian had warned him there might be a story about the church and the twins. And unfortunately, Brian had been right. He watched the attractive blonde woman standing in the church parking lot with the church right behind her, talking about what had happened on Sunday. But then she went on to mention the charitable food that the McComber family had given out, some of it by the bizarre set of twins themselves. She was being nothing but nice about the family. None of that bothered Jacob at all. It was when she turned her comments to talking only about the twins that got him upset. And mostly, because along with her speaking about them, the TV station was now airing a picture of each of the twins side by side. Jimmy Joe was smiling down from the back of a horse, and Jasmine Jade was smiling at the camera in her fancy cowgirl outfit.

Little Rock TV was airing the story, and Jacob had no doubt that there would be more requests directly to the family for more interviews – and pictures. And there were things about what was happening with this family business that nobody but the family needed to know. Not to mention, he didn't think he wanted those twins plastered all over everyone's TV sets.

As soon as the piece was finished, he turned to his wife. "We got to keep the press away from those kids."

"How?" Rose asked.

Jacob thought for a few minutes. "From what I heard they're almost focusing more on us than on what the Reverend done. Any way we can turn this thing back so they're more interested in him instead?"

"I don't know how. And don't forget, the paper labeled the twins as bizarre. That reporter herself even used the word on TV."

"Maybe you can discuss it with the church board tonight. See if any of them have any ideas. I don't want this thing blowing up any bigger than it already is."

Rose nodded. "I'll bring it up. See if we can come up with anything. But don't hold your breath."

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Reverend Cosinger sat quietly in the church office waiting. His wife was next door in their home...on pins and needles. Both of them knew what the end result of the church board meeting had to be. He was only surprised that the meeting was taking so long. Forty-five minutes now! And he already knew that most of the people on that board wanted him gone for what he had done. And he couldn't blame them.

He had talked with his best friend and mentor. He had talked with his wife. He was ready to accept the board's decision and move on. Most likely moving on would mean moving far away. But that was fine too. He would start again, and he would do better next time.

His phone suddenly ringing almost made him drop the thing. "Hello?"

“Reverend?”

“Yes?”

“Could you come over to the church and talk with us?”

“I’m already here,” he replied. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

He hung up the phone and took a deep breath. It was time. He solemnly walked the short distance from his little office to the church annex door. He paused for another moment to take a big breath, and opened the door. His eyes scanned the faces of each of the seven church board members. Four of them were McCombers – Rose, Valerie, Brian, and Pete McComber. And the rest...old and faithful church members who were also good friends with each of the McCombers. He had no chance...but then he knew he never did. He deserved this.

He walked up to the head of the long table. “Before we begin,” he said, “I’d just like to apologize for what I’ve done. Words can’t begin to undo the damage I’ve caused, not just to this church, but for my wife and I, and those two twins. I’d undo it all in a minute if I could. Every bit of it. I only wish I could do something to make up for it. I know you’re going to dismiss me now. And I agree, I deserve it. It’s time for my wife and I to move on. I just wanted to say again...that I’m sorry. So very, very sorry.” He stood there and looked at each of their somber faces, waiting for one of them to speak.

It was Brian who finally broke the silence. He was the current president of the board. “Do you want to leave?” he asked.

The Reverend was surprised. “I think I deserve it.”

“That’s not what I asked. Do you really want to leave?”

An odd question. “No. Not really. My wife and I need this job... this church. I’ve been proud of the number of people that have been coming lately. Very proud! Trust me, I’d do anything to be able to stay. Including, and especially, apologizing to those two twins! I’ve never really talked with either of them since this situation all started. I know nothing about either of them anymore. According to a good friend of mine, it was presumptuous of me to believe so strongly against them, when I really know nothing at all about them.” He watched as all the church board members seemed to look at each other for a moment. He hoped he had said something helpful.

"You said you'd do anything?" Brian asked.

"Are you willing to give me another chance?" the Reverend asked hopefully. Because trust me, I'd relish the opportunity.

"Maybe!" Brian replied.

"*Maybe!*" Rose echoed firmly.

The Reverend's hopes had been rising, now they sank a bit. But there was still hope.

"We find ourselves with a situation concerning those twins," Brian told him. "And it's not so much anything to do with this church, but it is related because of what you've done. Because of that, you're tied directly to their problem."

"Their problem?" the Reverend asked.

Brian nodded. "The news is trying to make a big deal about them switching places. Susan and Clint have received several phone calls from different news sources asking for interviews with them."

The Reverend shook his head. "My wife fielded quite a few phone calls for me as well," he replied. "One TV station out of Little Rock even showed up at our door. Fortunately, I was out at the time."

"We don't want the TV..."

"Newspapers either!" Rose added quickly.

Brian nodded his agreement. "We don't want them bringing the twins up. We want this to just settle down and be quiet again."

"And what do you want me to do?" the Reverend asked.

"Find some way to keep the interest on you, and take it away from them," Brian told him. "At the family's request, the board here has been dickering with trying to come up with some way to help the family, and we're pretty much stymied by the problem. We were going to dismiss you right now, but one of us suggested that maybe you can somehow help." He nodded toward one of the members who wasn't part of the McComber family. He continued speaking to the Reverend. "You're the one who caused the problem. See if you can help fix it! If you can, then you can stay."

The word "stay" was almost a relief. "I guess, I can try," the Reverend agreed quickly. "But to be honest, I don't know how to do what you're asking."

It was Rose who spoke next. "You're dismissal will be brought up again at our meeting next month," she told him. "If any of us feel you need to go, it will take very little convincing for the rest of us to go along with it."

The Reverend nodded. He was being put on probation.

"Find a way to help those twins!" Valerie implored. "Please!"

"We don't want our family business aired all over the planet!" Pete added.

The Reverend looked at each of them and shrugged. "I can only promise to try. But I don't know how I'm going to do it."

"That's all we ask," Brian told him.

"May I speak with the twins?" the Reverend asked. "I'd like to get to know them a bit better. And I'd really like to apologize to them and their family."

"No!" Brian stated firmly. "And we don't know if they'll be in church next Sunday or not. We don't know how we're going to handle this situation right now. From what I heard, the story was picked up all over the country because of it being Easter Sunday. Now we're at our wit's end."

"So am I," the Reverend said quietly. "But you've given me another chance at least."

"Now give us another chance too," Rose requested quietly.

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Susan walked into Jimmy Joe's bedroom. "All set for bed?" she asked, trying to sound as normal and happy as she could.

"Yeah, kind of," Jimmy Joe replied as she got into bed and under the covers. Her mother pulled them up a bit higher towards her head. "Mom! That was so cool! I was on TV tonight. They had my picture, and they even mentioned that I had delivered that food to one of the families. I wonder which one it was."

Susan was less thrilled about it. "I don't know," she replied. "There were quite a few."

"It was still so cool!"

Susan didn't want to think about all the possible trouble that little news story could be for not only her twins, but the entire family.

“Good night Jimmy,” she said as she leaned over and kissed her new son.”

“Night, Mom,” Jimmy Joe replied, still sounding excited about what she had heard on TV.

Susan left the room, turning out the light and closing the door. The family had only watched the news because Brian had warned them that it was possible something about the twins could be on it. The news had hinted about the report all through their broadcast, but had saved the actual news piece until near the end. At least it hadn't been first. She crossed the hall and went through the open door into Jasmine's room. He was already in bed, waiting for her. “Good night Jas,” she said as she went over and kissed his cheek.

“Night, Mom,” he replied. “Mom?”

“Yes?”

“That picture of me on TV. Did I look that pretty at the party? The reporter even said the picture showed how pretty I was.”

Susan stared down at him. “You were better than that,” she told him. “You were gorgeous!” She wasn't sure now if she was glad she had gone to so much trouble dressing him up or not. As a mother, her pride was certainly at stake. But if she hadn't, maybe the news wouldn't have paid so much attention to him...either of her twins. She knew better though. That one word – bizarre! If not for that, maybe this whole thing would have blown over.

“Thanks, Mom,” Jasmine said with a big smile on his face.

“Good night, Jas,” she replied.

Chapter 58 – Problems with the TV

April 7th – 8th

On Tuesday morning, the headline that was printed by the County Chronicle; the headline for the article that the Chronicle filed with the Associated Press the night before; the headline that was picked up by news agencies all over the country and in several other countries as well, read: “*Bizarre Transgendered Twins Completely Switch Places.*” It wasn’t really a newsworthy event, not in the sense of more important stories, yet because of the previous article about the twins preventing the Easter church service from happening, this new article garnered far more interest than it usually would. The Chronicle of course, was ecstatic.

The TV station in Little Rock was also ecstatic. And Amanda Dwyer from that TV station was particularly ecstatic, because her little film epic from the previous day was being rebroadcast all over the country by many other TV stations as a piece of interest. The phones had started ringing the night before for more information on the bizarre twins. This time Amanda didn’t protest at all about being sent to dig up more on the twin’s story. Nobody however mentioned the Reverend or the church.

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Jimmy Joe and Jasmine Jade were the subject of excitement from the moment they stepped onto the bus to head to school.

“Hey, I heard you were on TV last night!”

“They were, I saw their picture myself!”

“How’s it feel to be a TV star?”

Jimmy and Jasmine didn’t know what to make of it, or what to do about it.

“I wish it never happened,” Jasmine Jade told everyone as he headed for his seat next to Nichole.

“Are you kidding?” Jimmy Joe said. “It was the coolest thing ever. My picture was on TV! I’m famous!” she declared loudly as she threw her hands in the air, preening a bit while she headed for her seat. All eyes were on her, and she loved it.

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The kids had only been out of the house a short while when Susan’s phone rang. “Hello?” she said.

“Mrs. McComber? This is Little Rock TV, we’d really like to come out there and do a...”

Susan hung up the phone quickly. She wasn’t about to make things any worse than they already were. As she was getting dressed to go to work, she got another call, this time from the Chronicle asking for an interview. This time she actually said, “No!” before she hung up on them. She hoped that would put an end to it all.

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Reverend Cosinger was sitting in his office, trying to figure out what he was going to do about the wishes of the McComber family, when his phone rang. The call was from his friend and mentor. “Hello?”

“Jordan,” his friend said. “How bad was it when they let you go?”

“That’s just it,” the Reverend replied. “They didn’t let me go. Not yet anyway. I’m kind of on probation right now.”

“They’re keeping you on? They must like you more than you thought!”

“Not really,” the Reverend replied. “Staying, comes with kind of a stipulation, that I have no idea in the world how to accomplish.”

“What’s that?”

“The McComber family is looking at all the attention their getting from the media as my fault, so they somehow want me to get the attention off of them.”

“How are you supposed to do that?”

"I have no earthly idea."

"I saw that news article on TV last night," his friend said. "Good luck!"

"Yeah, thanks. I think I'm going to need it."

"At least you didn't lose your job."

"Not yet anyway. They're bringing the subject up again next month, so I guess I've got that long to find a way to settle things down."

"I'd be surprised if you can. Not after what I saw on TV last night."

"So what do you suggest I do?"

"Pray!"

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Susan was overjoyed to arrive at work and see not only workers for the new lodges, but a truck delivering a huge load of lumber. She hurried into the office, dropped her bag on the desk she usually used, grabbed her camera, and hurried back outside to take pictures. There wasn't much she could photograph though that was worth her time, except the truck being unloaded. She soon went back into the office and told Marcy and Valerie all about the phone calls she had been bothered with that morning.

"Damn!" Valerie exclaimed. "I don't know what we're going to do."

"Me either," Marcy agreed. "When Dad gets here, we better tell him though."

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Amanda Dwyer didn't know where to start. The family wasn't giving interviews...at least the mother wasn't open to the idea. She didn't know if she could find any other family members she could try to talk with. Some friends of the children would be nice too, but they would all be in school. She made a note later to look up where their school was located and get some interest footage there. Not having any other ideas, she and her cameraman headed once again for the

County Chronicle's office. It was a long drive and late in the morning when they got there.

"Miss Dwyer," the editor greeted her from his desk when he saw her walk in. "I saw your TV piece last night. Very nice!"

"Thank you," Amanda replied with a smile. "And I read your latest article as well. Very nicely put together."

"Thank you," the editor replied in kind.

Amanda looked around. "Um...is your reporter here?"

The editor shook his head. "He's out. We've got other things that have to be covered besides the McComber twins and the church."

"Any new leads for information on those twins?"

The editor shook his head. "Not yet. Not that I know of anyway. You have any ideas?"

"Not much," Amanda replied. "The mother hung up on us when we called to try to set up an interview."

"Us too," the editor replied. "We tried first thing this morning."

Amanda nodded. "I have to find more information on them. Our phones have been ringing off the hook about them since the piece aired last night."

"We've had a ton of calls about them as well. And I'm pretty sure none of them were from any place close. First time I think I've ever had a call from New York City. And San Francisco too!"

Amanda smiled. "You never know where an interesting story might break. In the heart of the big city, or even out here in the middle of..." she waved her hands around searching for a good word.

"Nowhere!" the editor laughed. "Don't worry. We all know it. And I doubt few of the people out here would want to live anywhere else. But have you looked around? This is gorgeous country around you. Why do you think all the tourists come up here?"

"Tourists? Here?"

"Sure. There are rental places all around these hills. It's kind of a big business for some of the local people."

"What do the people come here for? There's nothing to see. Nothing to do."

“They come here, just to be here. They want the scenery and the atmosphere...and mostly the peace and quiet and escape from their hectic city lives.”

Amanda shook her head. “I’ll take the city any day!” She got back on track, but made a mental note to include some footage of the area and put in a word or two about tourism if she needed it. “How about the McComber family. Do they have places to rent?”

“Not that I’m aware of. In fact, from what I hear, a lot of hunters that come up here to hunt their land would really like some place to stay that wasn’t so far from their land.”

“Their land,” Amanda repeated. “Do the twins live where everyone goes to hunt?”

“You don’t know much about the McCombers do you,” the editor replied. “Go look up how much land they own. The whole damn family! Although actually it’s all probably listed under Jacob McComber’s name. He’s the head of the clan.”

“Clan?”

The editor chuckled. “Clan, family. Call it what you will. This is northern Arkansas. And the McCombers are an old hillbilly kind of family. Only not so hillbilly anymore. Since they discovered the money they could rake in from letting people hunt all that land they own, they’ve pretty much been raking it in. And...I don’t think his sons do much with the land, other than they often work as hunting guides. I think they’ve all got other jobs. One of them, um...I not sure which one, is a doctor up there. He’s got the only real medical facility in that area.”

“Brian!” the secretary interrupted from her desk. “Brian McComber. I’ve met him. Nice guy. I guess a good doctor since from what I hear he stays pretty busy.”

Amanda looked to her cameraman. “I wonder if we can interview him. I would think this transgender issue is pretty much a medical issue as well. Let’s see what he can tell us.” Do you know where we can find any other family or friends of the twins?”

The editor shook his head. “Friends? No idea, except maybe through their church. As to the family, from what I hear, they all live up on that mountain of theirs. You can try stopping at their family

business office though. I wouldn't doubt that some of them should be there."

"Family business office?"

"Nice place...sort of. When you get to their property, you can't miss it."

"And the whole family lives nearby?"

"As far as I know."

"The Cumberlands don't," the secretary added, not bothering to look up from what she was working on.

"Cumberlands?"

"I forgot about them," the editor replied. "Jack Cumberland married one of Jacob's daughters, and they live near their store. Best sporting goods store in the state! As far as I'm concerned anyway. Cumberland Sports."

When Amanda left the little newspaper office, she had directions to not only Cumberland Sports, but to Brian's office and the family's business office as well.

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Cumberland Sports wasn't far from the office of the newspaper. Amanda was surprised to see how big it was. It very much reminded her of some of the other major chain sporting goods places she had seen but never been in.

A TV cameraman walking into the store, and the camera already panning around filming things, caused quite a stir among the store employees. One of them took off at a run to find the owners.

"A what?" Jack Cumberland exclaimed when his worker told him who was out front. He hurried out of his office, stopping only briefly at his wife's office next door. "There's a damn TV crew in the store asking for us!" he said quickly, before hurrying off to see what was going on.

The two people from the TV station weren't hard to find. They hadn't gotten far from the main entrance. "Can I help you?" Jack asked warily.

"Amanda Dwyer, Little Rock News," Amanda said to him as she and her cameraman hurried forward, her microphone out and ready

to pick up anything he said. "We understand that you're related to the bizarre McComber twins."

Jack was quickly put off by the word bizarre. "Please don't call them bizarre! They're children. Regular children. And being labeled bizarre is simply wrong! And it's especially not something they should ever hear on TV...or anywhere else! What if their friends started calling them that?"

"My apologies, Mr. Cumberland," Amanda said. "What kind of kids are they?"

"Huh? What do you mean? They're kids. Regular kids."

"I mean, what are they like? What kind of things do they like to do?"

Jack shook his head. "The family isn't talking about the twins. Period! We want things to remain quiet. They don't need all this publicity!"

Amanda shook her head. "It's too late for that now I'm afraid. Our stations phone system has been lit up like a Christmas tree asking about them since the story broke. Everyone wants to know about this bizar...cut!" she said quickly. She paused and started again. "Everyone wants to know about this amazing switch that they're doing."

Jack shook his head. "Everyone doesn't need to know. We're not talking about the twins – period! Now if you'd like a tour of our store, or if you'd like to know about the some of the planning for the big spring sales campaigns we're working on...which I happen to know a lot of your TV viewers would probably be very interested in, then I'll be glad to help you. But I won't discuss the twins!" He stood there glaring at her.

Amanda wasn't the least bit interested in doing an advertising piece about a sporting goods store. Even if it was very nicely decorated inside. At least the entranceway was. The huge fish tank built into one of the long walls was particularly attractive. "You won't give us anything?" she asked.

"I've said too much already," Jack replied.

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Amanda's next stop was at the office of Doctor Brian McComber. She took a few minutes to take some footage from outside the place, then she and her cameraman went inside. There were a number of patients in the waiting area but she went straight to the reception desk with her microphone held out and ready. "Amanda Dwyer," she said right away. "Little Rock News. Is Doctor McComber in?"

"I'm sorry," the nurse replied. "But the doctor left instructions that he's not giving any interviews, and we've all got strict orders to not speak with you. So I'm sorry. Goodbye." With that, she slid a sliding glass panel closed, blocking off her desk from the waiting room.

Amanda shook her head. What's it going to take to get an interview with this family?

"Maybe their main office," the cameraman suggested.

Amanda shrugged, but she wasn't so hopeful.

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"What are you going to do about the twins?" the Reverend's wife asked from the doorway to his office.

The Reverend shook his head. "I still have no idea."

"Please try to come up with something!" his wife pleaded. "Please!"

"I'm trying, dear. I promise, I'm trying. I'm just not getting anywhere yet."

"For someone who does dumb things sometimes, you're a very smart man, Reverend Jordan Cosinger. You'll think of something. I know you will."

The Reverend smiled. "I'm glad someone thinks so highly of me."

"Not just me! Look at all the people who have been coming to church lately. More and more every week! We've been talking about doing two services on Sundays instead of just one."

He nodded. "I guess I blew that situation too," he said disappointedly.

"Do those people know you'll still be there to give the sermon?"

The Reverend thought about that. "I don't know."

"Maybe you should tell someone. Get the word out."

He nodded. "Probably a good idea. But if I do, then I also need to figure out what I'm going to tell them."

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Susan stared at the amazing progress the workers had already made that day on the new lodges. She would have never believed they could build as much as they did so quickly. It was only a little after lunch and already they had much of the framework completed on two of the lodges. For the first time, she got a sense of how big they were going to be. And for the first time, she started to feel a sense of accomplishment at what she had taken on as her special project. Her camera was taking lots of pictures to add to her scrap book for the project.

A vehicle driving up to the business office distracted her for a moment. She glanced over at it, more intent on lining up her next picture, but one look at the vehicle horrified her. The large writing all over it proclaimed that it was from the Little Rock TV station. Horrified, she took off at a run for the business office. But to get there, she had to go right past the van and the people getting out of it.

"Ma'am!" Amanda called, seeing the woman trying to hurry past them. "Ma'am?" she called again to get her attention. But the woman only looked troubled and never stopped. Amanda was forced to wait until her cameraman got ready, a process that always took way too long.

Susan ran into the office. "There's a TV truck outside!" she exclaimed to Valerie and Marcy. She ran straight to Jacob's office, glad that he was there. "Dad. There's a TV truck out front!"

Jacob hurried out of his office. "Stay here!" he commanded. He headed for the door. By the time he got outside, that woman reporter he had seen on TV and her cameraman were heading for the front porch of the office. He was distracted a moment as Marcy came out to stand next to him. "Keep Susan inside," he told her.

"Don't worry Dad, she's not going anywhere."

"What do ya' want?" Jacob asked as the TV people approached.

"Mr. McComber?" Amanda asked.

"That's me," Jacob replied.

"May I ask which McComber you are?"

"Who you lookin' for?"

"Well, actually, any of them to be honest."

"Well then, I guess I'm any of them."

"And which one are you?"

"Jacob."

"Oh?" Amanda said excitedly. "She turned to face her cameraman. "This is Amanda Dwyer, Littler Rock News. I'm here with Jacob McComber, the head of the McComber clan himself." She turned around to face Jacob. "Mr. McComber, how do you feel about the big switch that Jimmy Joe and Jade are doing?"

"I ain't answerin' no questions!" Jacob replied stubbornly.

"But Mr. McComber, those twins are big news."

"Not as far as I'm concerned."

"Do you feel that allowing them to switch places like they are is the right thing to do?" Amanda asked next.

Jacob was about to tell the woman where she could stick her microphone, but Marcy grabbed his arm. "Let me handle this," Marcy said. She took a step forward. "I'm sorry," she said, but the family is not talking about the twins. If you want to discuss our hunting clubs, or our land conservation programs, or our guided hunts, or even the new lodges we're building here," she pointed toward the construction area, "then I'll be more than glad to talk to you, but we're not talking about the twins."

"You either talk about huntin'" Jacob added, "or get off our property." He grabbed Marcy's arm and nodded. The two of them turned and walked back into the office and closed the door behind them.

"Damn!" Amanda exclaimed. "Shut down again! What is it with this family?"

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With no useful leads or information, Amanda and her cameraman were heading back toward Little Rock when her phone rang. When she checked the number she winced. "It's that local yokel reporter," she said to her cameraman who was driving. "Hello?" she said into her phone.

"If you're interested," the reporter told her, "I've been talking with Reverend Cosinger, and I got him to agree to do an on camera interview – if you're interested. But..." he said. "He'll only do it if I'm there to ask questions too."

"You?"

"I'm from the area," the reporter explained. "He knows and trusts me, and anything the local people will see on TV will sound better if I ask those questions."

"How about me? I'm not going to let you do an interview for our TV station by yourself."

"I thought we might go at him together," the reporter explained. "I'll ask my questions, then you can ask yours."

"Turn around," Amanda told her cameraman. "We're heading for the church."

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Reverend Cosinger stood just inside the open front door to his church. The sky was clouding up, not threatening to rain yet, but he figured it wouldn't be too long. Tonight or tomorrow maybe. It had been a few days now without rain, so they were overdue. He saw the reporter from the Chronicle drive into his parking lot. He waited where he was for only a moment before he walked out to meet him.

"Reverend," the reporter said as he got out of his car and shook the Reverend's hand. "I appreciate you willing to do this on camera, as well as what you told me over the phone."

"Least I can do," the Reverend replied. "The more we can let everyone know I'm still here, the better." He looked up as the TV van came into the parking lot, way too fast. "I guess they're here."

As soon as the van had stopped, Amanda climbed out of it and hurried over to the Reverend. "Reverend Cosinger?" she asked as she held out her hand toward him.

"That's me," the Reverend replied as he shook her outstretched hand.

"I really appreciate you taking the time to speak with us," Amanda told him.

"My pleasure," the Reverend replied.

"Where did you want to do this?" Amanda asked.

The Reverend shrugged. "Why don't y'all come on in?" He led the way into his church and up toward the front.

Amanda and the reporter followed while the cameraman was still getting his gear. Once inside, Amanda looked around. It was a fairly small church. Not exactly tiny, but...small. And horribly plain. No beautiful stained glass windows they could film. Nothing rich or ornate in any way at all about the church that would look good on camera. It was just...plain. "Nice," she said as she stopped looking around.

"Thanks," the Reverend replied, pleased that she had noticed the small efforts he had made to clean the place up. "It's not much, but it's mine. Well, God's house really. But I'm happy to still be here."

"I'll bet!" Amanda replied as she saw her cameraman hurrying inside.

"How do you want to do this?" the reporter asked her.

Amanda wanted to tell him she didn't want to do it with him at all, but she smiled and said, "Why don't I start with my station introduction, then I'll turn the microphone over to you. When you're done, I'll take over."

The reporter nodded. "Sounds good."

"Where do you want me?" Reverend Cosinger asked.

Amanda looked around. The church was so plain that one place looked as good as another. But the raised area behind the Reverend seemed to be the most "religious" looking area and would probably film best with the camera. "How about if we all just move up to the raised area and you stand in the middle there," she suggested.

They all moved a few feet further and higher into the church. Amanda turned to her cameraman and waited until he signaled that he was ready. She smiled her "on-camera" smile. "This is Amanda

Dwyer with Little Rock News. I'm here with my colleague from the County Chronicle newspaper to speak with Reverend Cosinger. The Reverend here had the misfortune of having his entire congregation walk out on him Easter Sunday over the unfortunate incident concerning the strange McComber twins who are trying to completely swap genders and places with each other." She turned toward the Reverend. "Thank you Reverend for your willingness to talk with us today."

"My pleasure," the Reverend replied with as much of a patient loving smile as he could muster.

Amanda turned back to the camera. "I'm going to turn the microphone over and let my colleague from the local Chronical newspaper begin. Those of you that are watching don't usually get to meet the man who writes the words you read in the paper. Well, this is him." She handed over the microphone.

"Thank you Amanda," the reporter said. Now that he was holding the microphone and looking directly into the camera, he found things very strange and difficult. More so than he imagined. "Um..." He turned to the Reverend. "Reverend, you told me earlier that you were planning on holding church services just as usual, next Sunday."

"That's right," the Reverend started.

"Sound!" the cameraman said quickly.

Amanda quickly reached over and pulled the reporter's hand that was holding the microphone toward the Reverend's face.

"Sorry," the reporter said quickly. "You were saying Reverend?"

"That's right," the Reverend said again, now with the microphone in front of his face. "We'll be here Sunday morning at eleven o'clock. Just as usual. Come on out and join us...even if you don't usually go to this church. Everyone is welcome." He tried to chuckle a little bit. "And this time I promise to be a bit friendlier."

When it looked like the Reverend was done speaking, the reporter pulled the microphone back toward himself. "Reverend, you said that everyone was welcome."

"That's right," the Reverend agreed. Fortunately, the microphone still caught his words.

"Does that also include the McComber twins?" the reporter asked. Amanda mentally thanked him for asking it.

"Of course!" the Reverend agreed. "Absolutely! I was wrong to do what I did. I was very, very wrong. And I apologize for it from the bottom of my heart."

"I'm sure they'll be glad to hear that," the reporter replied.

"I hope they do," the Reverend said, the microphone being shoved quickly back toward his face after he had begun speaking.

"Tell me Reverend," the reporter continued. "The general consensus seems to be that you would lose your job over this. What happened?"

The Reverend's face wasn't smiling anymore. "Yes, I was sure the church board was going to let me go too. But it seems they believed in me more than I thought they would. And they've allowed me to stay on. This church has been growing," the Reverend continued. "More and more people have been coming out each and every week. We're starting to become a church where we can begin offering more than just a simple Sunday morning church service. If we can get all those people back again, then we're going to start offering Sunday school and most likely go to two church services on Sunday instead of just one. We've had that many people who have been coming out to worship the Lord with us. So if you like our church and the way I give my sermons, then please, come out and join us. As I said, all are welcome, and we'd love to see you."

The reporter pulled the microphone back again. "Thank you Reverend." That was all the business he needed to go through with the Reverend. But he had no doubt that the big city TV reporter had some questions of her own. "Amanda," he said as he handed over the microphone.

"Thank you," Amanda said graciously, glad to have the microphone back again and have things back the way they should be. She turned to the Reverend. "Reverend, why did you chase the McComber family off last week? What made you do it?"

This was the part that the Reverend was more worried about. But he had agreed to do this interview for the camera, partly out of hoping to find some small way to begin taking the emphasis off of the McComber family. "I'm a man of God," he began, his voice

unconsciously beginning to rise into his preaching voice. "I believe in the word of God with all my heart. The bible has been given to us by God as his holy word. And one of the things I've always believed about the bible, is that it contains the perfect plan for us to live by. It's worked for thousands of years, and there's no reason why it can't work for a thousand more. God's plan is that good. That perfect. But a tiny part of the word that God put into his instructions for us, says that *'the woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are an abomination unto the Lord thy God.'*" The Reverend paused for only a moment. "I'm afraid that seeing those children coming to church, week after week, dressed in the wrong clothes, was to me, nothing but a blasphemous mocking of God's word. It was like they were mocking the very face of God. Especially on that one most holy day of the year."

Amanda quickly pulled the microphone back to speak into it. "So do you still feel that the twins, dressing as each other, are...mocking the face of God, as you put it?"

The Reverend looked at her for a moment before answering. "It was pointed out to me yesterday, by a very dear friend and colleague, that perhaps I don't know all the facts. I don't know the full story."

Amanda brought the microphone back again. "About the word of God, or about the twins?"

The Reverend tried to smile, but was mostly unsuccessful. "I was speaking about the twins, but there is always more that all of us can learn about God's will and his word."

"So according to God," Amanda asked, "you believe those twins are an abomination."

Again the Reverend took a moment before he replied. "I did," he admitted softly. "I'm...just not so sure now. As I said, it seems I don't know much about them at all."

"What do you mean?" Amanda asked quickly.

"The truth is, I know the twins, but only in the way I know all the children of my usual parishioners. But I don't *really* know them. I don't really know what they're like, what they think, what problems

each of them have. I honestly don't know much of anything at all about them. And it seems, I need to."

"And how will that change things?" Amanda asked.

The Reverend shrugged. "I don't know. We'll have to see."

The reporter from the Chronicle reached over and grabbed the microphone, pulling Amanda's arm with it towards his mouth. "But the twins are still welcome here on Sunday?" he asked before letting go of the microphone.

The Reverend smiled his most loving smile again. "Trust me, I would welcome them here with open arms."

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Amanda was just glad she had a decent piece to air that night. With a little good editing, it should make for an interesting article. She quickly checked her watch. "If we hurry," she said, "we should still be able to get to the school before the kids get out. I'd like to get some footage of where the twins go to school. And who knows, if we time it right, we might just get lucky."

Her cameraman grinned and stepped harder on the gas. He got them there with plenty of time to spare. Once at the school, he started panning his camera around, trying to film all the additional footage they might need to fill out their story. Several busses were lined up and waiting for the kids to climb into. The parking lot was also full of cars, some of which were waiting to pick up kids. Once the school bell rang, he stopped filming and got ready for Amanda.

"We'll wait a minute till the kids start coming out," Amanda told him. She positioned herself with the school to her back for the best camera position, and where she could see the busses just in case she could notice the twins getting onto one of them. It didn't take long for the kids to start running out of the building. Most of them heading for the busses.

"Okay, let's go," Amanda told her cameraman. She put her best camera smile on her face and began. "I'm Amanda Dwyer with Little Rock News, here at the county school in Northern Arkansas where the McComber twins attend classes. If you'll remember, the

McComber twins are that bizarre set of twins that are each trying to change their genders, and completely switch places with each other.

"The family of the twins has been reluctant to..."

"Yo! Lady!"

"...speak to us about the twins, and..."

"Yo! Lady. You with the TV or somthin'?"

Amanda ran her finger across her neck. "Cut!" she said, although the cameraman kept rolling anyway, now focusing on the kid that was standing off to the side and behind her. Amanda turned around and saw one of the kids from the school. She tried her best not to sound impatient. "Did you need something?"

"You doin' some TV stuff?" the kid asked.

"Yes we are," Amanda said, trying to sound polite. "Can you just stand back and stay quiet and out of the way?"

"You here to like, try to get some pictures of my friends, Jimmy Joe and his sister?"

Amanda stared at him for a moment, then glanced back at her cameraman. Her cameraman motioned with his hand to indicate he was still rolling. Amanda turned back to the kid. "Are you friends with the McComber twins?"

"Didn't I just say that? Jimmy Joe and me is real tight!"

Amanda quickly moved over to talk with him, knowing the camera would follow. "What can you tell me about your friends?"

The boy was a bit surprised when she practically stuck the microphone in his face. He automatically reached out to grab it.

"I'll hold the microphone, just speak and it will pick up your voice just fine."

He dropped his hand and looked at the camera and smiled broadly. "Hey y'all. It's me! On TV! Ha! What a trip."

Amanda pulled the microphone back. "So you know the McComber twins?" she prompted again before putting the microphone back in front of his mouth.

"Sure I do. They're in my class. Jimmy Joe and me is like real tight! I'm the one who told him that if he was gonna be a dude and all, then he had to learn how to act a bit more like a dude. You know?"

"So Jimmy Joe didn't act like a boy before you mentioned it to him?"

"Well, he did, and he didn't. You know. He kind of moved kind of all wrong a lot, and it sort of gave people the wrong opinion about him and all. Like he was gay or something. But I'm happy to report, that thanks to me, he's startin' to move a lot better now. Hear that? I was the one who had the guts to go up and talk to him."

Amanda was surprised at his last statement. "What do you mean you had the guts? Did he pick fights or something?"

"Jimmy Joe? Well, he kind of had this real bad temper for a while, but he never tried to pick a fight. Not like his sister."

"His sister? Did...she...fight a lot before um...he because a she?"

"No man! He was always walkin' around though with this really bad attitude after he started dressin' like his sister and all, on account of that he didn't like gettin' teased about it. But heck, I guess if you think about it, you can't blame him."

"So were there any fights over it?" Amanda asked.

"Not really, except that one time in the lunch room. But that wasn't really a fight. One of the big kids kind of got on him. But lady, you don't mess with a McComber. Any of them! Period! They is one close clan for sure! And nobody sticks up for each other and watches each other's back like the McCombers do. I think every McComber in the school was there to stand up and protect her. All of them. Even those third-grade squirts were ready to jump in and fight for Jade." He smiled broadly. "Man, you should have seen that. It was somethin'! All them McCombers standin' together and facin' everyone off. And then Jade herself gets up in front of them all and tells everyone off. It was incredible! Man, you don't ever want to mess with a McComber. That's for sure!"

"What did the teachers do?"

"The teachers? Heck! Mr. Mason's name may not be McComber, but his wife teaches here too. And she's a McComber. So he's pretty much a McComber too. But no, I think it all happened so fast that none of the teachers had time to do much about it. Not that there was really any fight or anything for them to stop. It was

just the McComber clan all stickin' together to watch out for their own. You know?"

"I see," Amanda said, looking into the camera for a moment. "So what are the McComber twins like? It sounds like they like to start trouble."

"Trouble? Them? Heck no! Whatever gave you a stupid idea like that? Jimmy Joe, he's like really cool! And man he knows so much about hunting, it's incredible. He loves it!"

"And how about Jade?" Amanda asked. "You said he went around looking to start fights all the time."

"No lady! She just looked that way so nobody would pick on her. But lately, she's kind of mellowed out a bunch. I don't hang with the girls of course. Man they're all so tight and stick-togethery, so I don't know as much about her anymore. But word is that she's like really nice. Nicer than her sister used to be."

"So you knew Jade before she became a girl?"

"Hey, I used to sit practically right next to him in class."

"So what was she like before?"

"She was kind of quiet, you know. Like real quiet. Hardly said a word to anyone. But man, word is she loved to take stuff all apart to see how it works, then put it all back together again. I hear she's like the Miss Fixit of the Universe, you know. Like she's got this real knack for it. You know?"

"So do you like the twins better now than the way they were before?" Amanda asked him.

"Huh? I never thought about it. But I guess so. I mean, Jimmy Joe, he likes to talk and stuff where her brother didn't, and about really cool stuff that his sister never was into. And from what I hear, Jade, she seems to hang with all those girlfriends of hers...her cousins, you know? They all like live together or somthin'. At least it seems that way. But she and the other girls seem to get on real good. You know?"

"So Jade seems to be very happy to be one of the girls and they don't seem to mind her at all?"

"Not from what I seen. They're both like really cool."

"Unless you pick on them, and then they get mad and their whole family gets together to protect them."

“Somthin’ like that, I guess. But really, that one time in the lunchroom was it. There ain’t never been nothin’ else that I really know of. Course back when that happened, they was still claimin’ that they was dressin’ like each other cause of some kind of punishment they wouldn’t ever tell us about.” He smiled broadly and laughed. “I guess it’s pretty easy to see what they was really bein’ punished for now!”

“What do you mean?” Amanda asked.

“Well hell lady, it’s so obvious now. Their clan was punishin’ them for wanting to be each other. So they made them come to school one day each week dressed like the other one. You know? And then when they still wanted to be each other, they made it two days a week, then later three. And now they just stay each other all the time. That was kind of when they came out and told everyone they was really some of those trans something people. You know, the ones who want to change what sex they are and all.”

“Transgender,” Amanda filled in for him.

“If you say so.”

“So they told everyone they were being punished?”

“Well, I guess they were,” he laughed. “But for sure they ain’t anymore. Like I said, Jimmy Joe, he’s gettin’ to be a really cool dude. Man, I’d love to be able to go hunting like he does. Him and all his cousins and stuff. Man, it must be great!”

Shouting from off to the side made Amanda turn her head. Another of the boys was waving at them and shouting.

“Hey,” the boy she had been talking with said. “That’s Jimmy Joe now.” He yelled toward Jimmy. “Hey look Jimmy! I’m on TV!”

Jimmy Joe stood there and waved happily at the camera. “Hi everyone!” she yelled loudly toward the camera.

Justin was there to see it and ran over to her. “Stop that!” he said quickly as he grabbed Jimmy Joe by the arm. “Come on. Get on the bus.”

“It’s one of the twins!” Amanda exclaimed. “Quick, get him.” She took off, trying to hurry toward Jimmy Joe, the length of the microphone cord attached to the camera slowed her down. “Jimmy Joe. Jimmy Joe,” she called. “Wait!”

“Come on!” Justin yelled as he continued to drag her toward the bus. “Hurry!”

“No. Let go.” Jimmy Joe complained as Justin kept pulling her. “Hi everyone,” she called and waved with her free arm. She saw the reporter lady and the man with the camera trying to hurry towards her. “Let me go!” she complained to Justin.

“No! Now get on the bus, and hurry! Don’t talk to them!”

“Jimmy Joe! Wait!” Amanda called again as the bigger boy dragged Jimmy Joe right to the door of the bus. “Wait!” she called one more time.

“Hi!” Jimmy Joe called again and waved, until Justin literally dragged her up the steps and into the bus. She immediately pulled out of his grasp, raced for her seat, opened the window and waved again.

“Stop it!” Justin told her once again, but Tommy who had gotten on the bus before them was already there. He grabbed her from behind and pulled her across to the other side of the bus where he sat next to her to keep her in her seat.

“Jimmy Joe!” Amanda yelled as she reached the bus and frantically started searching the windows. She ran around to the other side, dragging her cameraman along with her. She spotted Jimmy in one of the windows. “Jimmy Joe!” she yelled again, and saw Jimmy Joe smiling and waving frantically through the window at them. “Can you talk to us please? Open the window.”

“No!” Tommy said quickly, pulling her away from the window and out into the aisle. “Stay!” he commanded as he stood there, hoping to stop her if she made a break for anywhere else. He was grateful that Justin was still standing in front of them to keep her from running off the bus.

“I want to be on TV!” Jimmy Joe complained. “They’re right there. They want to talk to me!”

“No!” both Tommy and Justin said to her.

“Just stay there and be quiet!” Justin ordered.

Jimmy Joe watched as the lady and the man with the camera ran around to the other side of the bus again looking for her. “I’m a star!” she said excitedly. She watched as the lady continued to

search the windows. She waved from where she was, but the lady and the cameraman kept going.

Amanda wasn't going to be denied. She pushed some of the kids out of the way and climbed right up onto the bus. When the bus driver tried to stop her, she ignored him and dragged her cameraman right past him. She could see Jimmy Joe standing in the aisle, trying to see her, but there was that one really big kid standing in the way and blocking them. "Move aside, please. Let me talk to him!"

"No Ma'am," Justin replied politely but firmly as he held his arms out to the side to block as much as possible. He didn't see Jimmy Joe leaning down to wave under his arms at the camera. "Please stay away from us and get off the bus."

Amanda shook her head. "I'm not going to do that until I get a chance to talk with Jimmy Joe."

But just then, Jimmy Joe noticed someone in the crowd of kids who had followed the lady onto the bus. "Jade! Jade! Hey look! I'm on TV!"

Amanda and the cameraman turned so quick that the film would later show nothing but a blur.

"There!" Amanda shouted to her cameraman. "In the middle of all those girls! That's got to be her!" Later, the camera would only show a brief glimpse of Jade that they had to pick out from the bunch. But instead of being excited like Jimmy Joe was, Jade looked only worried and afraid.

"Get her out of here!" Justin shouted to the girls. "Get her away!"

"Wait!" Amanda shouted as the group of girls all surrounded Jade, blocking the camera from being able to see her. "Wait! Let me talk to her!" she shouted again as the girls all stayed in a really tight group and hurried back off the bus. "Jade!" she yelled again. She didn't know whether to stay and try to talk to Jimmy Joe, or follow Jade and try to talk to her. One look at the size of the big kid protecting Jimmy Joe was all it took to make up her mind. "Follow her!" she said to her cameraman.

Amanda followed her cameraman off the bus. The pack of girls surrounding Jade was hurrying toward the school building. "Wait! Please wait!" she yelled as she ran after them. She was lucky enough to catch up to all the girls just before they reached the

building. “Jade!” she shouted. “Let me have just a brief word with you.”

“Don’t talk to them!” Ashley shouted as she held her arms wide, trying to block and protect Jade.

Jade looked around again and now saw the lady and the man with the camera almost right on top of them. It was actually somewhat frightening. He had looked back a number of times since they left the bus, and each time he saw the woman and the man with the camera still running after them and getting closer and closer. Every one of his girlfriends in the family was surrounding her though, and Ashly was doing her best to rush them all back into the school.

“Hey!” a loud male voice shouted angrily. “Stop that! Girls, get back into the school!”

Amanda turned and found a man now coming around the pack of girls to stand in the way. “Amanda Dwyer, Little Rock News,” she said quickly before she held her microphone out toward the man. “Who are you?”

“I’m the principal of this school and please stop accosting these children! Leave them alone!”

“We’re not accosting them,” Amanda replied quickly. “Tell me Principal Mason, what’s your opinion of transgendered kids in school? Should they be allowed to express themselves as who they believe they are?”

John Mason didn’t know how the woman reporter knew his name, and he didn’t care. “No comment!” he replied quickly. “I’m not giving any interviews! Now please leave the school grounds.”

Amanda could see that he wasn’t going to budge. She turned around quickly. “Back to the bus!” she said to her cameraman.

“No!” John yelled. But his word had no effect on the TV woman at all. He literally ran past them and positioned himself in front of the bus door to prevent them from entering. But that didn’t stop them from again searching the bus windows for their prey. “Stop it!” he yelled again. He quickly motioned to a few of the kids who usually rode the bus but were still standing outside of it and watching everything going on. “Quick,” he said to them. “Get on the bus!”

“Can you see him?” Amanda asked her cameraman. “He’s still in the aisle. That big kid is still trying to block him.”

"I see him," the cameraman replied. "I can just make out that he's still waving."

"Jimmy Joe!" Amanda shouted. "What's it like to go to school now as a boy instead of a girl? Jimmy Joe? Can you hear me?"

She thought she saw Jimmy Joe raising his hands up in the air and trying to tell her it was great.

The last of the kids was on the bus. "Get this bus out of here. Now!" John ordered the bus driver. He watched as the bus driver closed the door and started the engine. The bus seemed to move off too slowly though, with the camera still following its progress.

"Principal Mason," Amanda called after a moment as she again hurried toward him. "Just a minute of your time please!"

"No!" John said as he moved off toward the school building again.

Amanda and her cameraman stayed with him step for step. "Principal Mason, how do you feel the students have accepted this bizarre gender swap of the McComber twins?"

"No questions please!" John replied. "The family doesn't want all this publicity. Now please leave everyone alone!"

But Amanda wasn't going to back down. She kept firing questions at him. "I understand that your wife is Jacob McComber's daughter. How does the McComber family as a whole feel about this situation?"

John ignored her and kept walking.

"Mr. Mason," Amanda tried again. "What will it take to get a real interview with the family?"

John kept walking, but he turned toward her. "There won't be any interviews. Period. Now kindly leave this alone!" He reached the door, and his wife held it open for him. He could see all the family girls standing just inside. He pushed his way in and let his wife close and lock the door behind him. "Move away," he told all the girls. "Move down the hall where they can't see you."

Amanda had no choice but to finally give up. She knew she had filmed some good stuff, especially with that one kid in the beginning. She would have to see what they could boil down from the film after that.

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The scheduled commercials finished and the Little Rock News anchorman watched for his cue to begin speaking again. When he got it, he said to the camera, “Since we aired our story last night about the bizarre incident at the church in northern Arkansas where the two McComber twins were turned away from the church service, our station has been flooded with calls asking for more details.” He turned to his left and the camera now picked up Amanda Dwyer sitting next to him. “Amanda, I hear you’ve had an interesting day looking into this story.”

That was Amanda’s cue for her to continue as the camera focused on her and her alone. “That’s right,” she began. “I was fortunate to be able to speak directly with Reverend Cosinger who had turned them away at the church door. And later, we’ll air another portion of our trip up there and show you some of the excitement at the school where the twins attend classes. But for now, we’ll start with the interview that I and my colleague from the County Chronicle newspaper did with the Reverend. And according to Reverend Cosinger, he says he will definitely still be at the church next Sunday, and he urges everyone to come out and visit – and especially the two twins he turned away last week.”

The image of Amanda was immediately replaced with one of her inside the church with the Reverend and the reporter from the Chronicle. Very little was edited out of the piece, and the result was that the fervor when the Reverend spoke about the word of God was plainly evident, and it actually made for some fairly dramatic footage, as did his softer, more apologetic tone when he tried to explain what had happened.

When the taped piece was over, the camera switched back to Amanda in the studio again. “Later in the program,” she said, “we’ll have more, as well as a couple of shots of each of the McComber twins. Stay tuned.”

The TV show once again went to commercials.

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“Damn!” Jacob swore as he and his wife watched the commercials now playing. “She said they got shots of the kids too?”
“That’s what I heard,” Rose agreed. She too was troubled by it.

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Down the hill, Susan, Clint, Tommy, and both twins were watching the TV just as closely. Only one of them was excited – Jimmy Joe, naturally.

“I hope they got me!” she said hopefully. “Stupid Justin and Tommy wouldn’t let me talk to them.”

Clint looked angrily at her. “It’s a good thing! We told you we don’t want you talking to anyone from the news about this.”

“But that’s TV. They had a man with a camera there and all!”

Clint closed his eyes and shook his head.

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The next part of Amanda’s story didn’t run for another fifteen minutes. Before any of the film ran, Amanda, again sitting at the anchor desk, told the camera audience how difficult it had been to get any kind of interview from any of the family. “We started with Cumberland Sports where the store is owned by relatives of the twins.” The short footage that followed only showed Jack Cumberland refusing to talk about the twins. There were however some very brief but nice shots of the interior of the entrance to the store.

After that, Amanda was back to say, “After that, we tried to speak with Doctor Brian McComber, another close relative to the twins, and though we can’t confirm it, we believe that he is the twins primary doctor.” The only brief film footage they had to show for that, was the nurse closing the glass window and walking away.

The camera cut back to Amanda. “From there we went to the McComber family’s business office to try to speak with someone. We were lucky enough to have Jacob McComber, the head of the McComber clan, come out to speak to us, as well as another of the twin’s relatives. This footage was only slightly longer, but it started

with Jacob standing there and declaring that he wasn't going to talk about the twins at all. After that though, it showed Marcy also explaining that the family wouldn't talk about the twins, but she was cut off after saying she would only speak to them about hunting. A very brief camera pan showed the construction going on nearby.

Amanda was back in front of the camera again. "It was a tough day as you can see," she said to the camera. "But later we stopped by the school so we could at least show you where these twins attend classes, and that's when things got a little more interesting. Take a look."

The film immediately picked up with Amanda asking the boy if he was friends with the McComber twins. Nothing at all was edited from that part of the piece. Not even when the kid noticed Jimmy Joe in the distance. The film continued to show the camera and Amanda running after Jimmy Joe while he was being dragged by a big kid up onto the bus. There was a few seconds of footage as the camera panned around the outside of the bus, including one where everyone could just see Jimmy Joe waving through one of the windows before he was dragged away. The next shot showed the camera on the bus with a very big kid standing and blocking the shoot as much as possible, but not only did the camera pick up Jimmy Joe trying to wave from beneath Justin's arms, the TV station had highlighted her so that she stood out and couldn't be missed. And then the shot showed Jimmy Joe calling excitedly to his sister. The camera blurred and focused in on a tight mass of girls near the entrance to the bus. Again one face among the crowd was picked out and highlighted so it couldn't be missed. But where Jimmy Joe had looked excited, Jade's face only appeared scared.

There were more shots of Jade as the camera followed the pack of girls all the way to the school. Any time Jade turned her troubled face toward the camera, the highlight went back on again and the speed of the film seemed to slow a little. The film clip finally ended with Principal Mason refusing to talk to the camera and ushering all the girls quickly into the school.

The show finally went back to showing both the anchorman and Amanda behind the desk together. "So...some interesting times

today up north,” the anchorman prompted, actually reading the prewritten script.

“Yes indeed!” Amanda replied.

The anchorman’s words were scripted, but he was good enough that nobody would ever notice. “I was surprised to hear that the McComber family was punishing the twins for wanting to be each other and actually change their gender.”

“Yes,” Amanda replied. “But to be honest, after what we’ve learned from one of the Little Rock’s leading gender therapists, this may have worked very well in the twins favor. Obviously the family doesn’t want this change, but the twins obviously do. So it did give each of them a taste of what it would really mean, in public, to have to be each other. And then over time, that experience became longer and longer, until now, evidently both twins are living completely in each other’s shoes.”

The anchorman turned back to the camera and it focused solely on him. “Thank you Amanda. We’ll be back with the weather, right after these messages.”

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“Did you see me? Did you see me?” Jimmy Joe exclaimed excitedly. “I was on TV. I was...great!” she said as she raised her arms up into the air. She was so excited she spun around in a little circle. “Next time, I have to talk to them.”

“No!” Clint told her bluntly.

“Absolutely not!” Susan agreed. “You shouldn’t have tried to get the camera’s attention like that. We told you we didn’t want you speaking to anyone at all about it.”

“But Mom. It was...TVeeeeee.” She ran around again with her arms in the air, and went all the way back to her room.

Much more solemnly, Jasmine got up from his seat and headed back to his room as well.

“Jas?” Susan asked. “You okay?”

“Yeah, Mom. I’m fine,” he replied. “It was just...weird.”

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Early Wednesday morning, Susan's phone rang again. "Mrs. McComber?" the voice asked.

"Yes?" Susan replied cautiously.

"I'm with the Today Show in New York..."

Susan hung up the phone. The Today Show?

Half an hour later, she got another call. This time from FOX News wanting to do an interview.

Little Rock News called again. The Washington Post called. And after CNN News called, Susan finally stopped answering her phone. When she went into work, she was in a very bad mood. Not even the sight of the workers already making more progress on the new lodges cheered her up.

"Susan, what's wrong?" Valerie asked immediately.

Susan told them about all the phone calls she had gotten. Marcy immediately took her cell phone so she could personally screen every call that came in. They didn't know how Susan's personal phone number had gotten out, but they figured that the news agencies had their nosy ways. Not only did Susan's phone ring once in a while during the day, but they figured that the office phone rang nearly a hundred times as well.

With all the unwanted attention they were getting, Jacob finally decided to call a family meeting. All the adults anyway. They scheduled the meeting for after dinner, making it easier for everyone in the family to get there, including the Cumberlands.

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After Brian heard about all the phone calls, and after Jacob had told him about the family meeting later that night. Brian decided to take a few minutes to make a phone call of his own. He was surprised at how fast he was put through. "Hello, Doctor Hapkins? This is Brian McComber."

"Doctor!" Cynthia Hapkins replied happily. "I was wondering if you were going to call."

"I hadn't planned on it," Brian told her, "but in light of things, I thought it couldn't hurt."

“What can I do for you?” Doctor Hapkins asked.

“The family is getting flooded with phone calls asking for interviews and who knows what. We’ve even had requests from FOX News, CNN, and even the Today Show in New York. It’s crazy!”

“What’s happening with the twins,” Doctor Hapkins replied, “makes this a very unique situation. I have no doubt that news sources everywhere would pay quite a bit for an exclusive interview.”

“We’re not interested in interviews, and we’re not interested in their money,” Brian replied. “All we want is for all this madness to stop. You’re from more of a cosmopolitan area than we are up here. I was wondering if you had any ideas as to what we can do.”

“I can tell you what I think, but it’s not what you want to hear.”

“What?”

“Give them what they want.”

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It was shortly after dinner when Susan walked into Jasmine’s room. Her cell phone was turned off. So far, they hadn’t gotten Clint’s phone number – yet. “Hi Sweetie,” she said as she walked in to tell Jasmine they were heading up to Jacob’s house on the hill.

“Hey, Mom,” Jasmine replied, his eyes glued to the computer screen in front of him.

“Whatcha’ doin’?” she asked.

Jasmine waved toward the screen in front of him. “Looking at all this...transgender stuff still.” He turned to face his mother. “Do you know how much we’re on the internet all of a sudden? It’s like there’s people talking about us all over the place.”

“I can imagine,” Susan replied, totally frustrated with the issue.

“Look at this one,” Jasmine said as he clicked a few times with his mouse. “This is one of my favorite blogs. It’s written by a girl named Christy. And evidently she does all this outreach stuff now, trying to help other kids. I think she’s like sixteen years old now, but she started living full time as a girl when she was twelve, like I am now.”

“That’s nice,” Susan replied offhandedly, not really interested.

"But look here," Jasmine said as he scrolled down to another part of the screen. "Look what she said. She's asking for either me or Jimmy Joe to contact her."

"No!" Susan said firmly.

"But Mom. I like her blog. It's been...kind of a big help to me sometimes."

"It has?"

"Yeah! It's really good. So can I?"

"No!" Susan said firmly again. "We're not talking to anyone about you and Jimmy Joe."

"But Mom..."

"Jas, I said no, and that's it!" She kissed him on the head. "We'll be back later. No telling how long this thing is going to last." When she walked out, she was glad that neither of her kids had cell phones to text with, or even email addresses set up where they could email anyone else.

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Once again, Jacob's house was full of people – family as usual. Once again, no children were present. And once again, the twins were the main topic of conversation. Although to be fair, nobody there really had any problem with the twins. It was all the media attention the family was getting that was on everyone's mind.

"I'm prayin'" Jacob began, "that somehow we can figure out what to do! It's not just all the media attention, I don't like that one bit, especially not for those two kids. But you all know there's certain parts of this here family business that don't need to get spread all around." Nobody needed to be told that Jacob was talking about the punishment part of the twin's situation.

Susan spoke up. "Jasmine was showing me this evening how we're all over the internet too. There's even requests out there for the twins to contact some of these sources themselves. Jasmine particularly wanted to contact one that he seemed to like quite a bit. One who he identifies with a lot because she transitioned when she was only twelve. I think he said she's running some kind of outreach or help organization of some kind too."

"What did you tell him?" Jacob asked.

"I told him absolutely not, of course."

"Good!" Jacob grunted. He looked around the room. "Any ideas?" he asked everyone. "Anything?" But all he saw were a lot of shaking heads. Nobody had any kind of solution at all to their problem.

Brian finally spoke up. "You all know that I've been consulting with specialists in Little Rock. I reached out to one of them this afternoon to ask her advice on the situation. What she suggested wasn't good at all."

"What's that?" Jacob asked.

"Basically, we're not going to get rid of them until we give them what they want."

"You mean we all go out and start talkin' to them media folks whenever they want?" Jacob asked incredulously.

"No, not quite Dad. She suggested we try setting up just one interview with not just the twins, but with Susan, Clint, and Tommy too."

"Why all of 'em?"

"Because they're all in the same immediate family. She said people are going to want to know how the entire family is coping and dealing with this."

"Go on," Jacob told him, not really all that happy about the idea. "How's that supposed to help us?"

"Well, once they have more information, hopefully they'll start leaving us alone," Brian told him.

"Why would they do that? I would think they'd just want to hound us all the more. One TV station gets us, so why shouldn't another one think they should get an interview like that too?"

"She seemed to think we might be able to get away with announcing that we would give one interview and only one. Then once the media has that to work with, *maybe* they would back off."

"That damn Little Rock TV lady didn't seem too interested in backing off at all!" Jacob told everyone. "I don't see it happening." He looked around the room. "Any other ideas?" But once again, all he saw were a lot of shaking heads. They were stuck.

"It might work," Janet finally said.

"What's that?" Jacob asked hopefully.

"Giving just the one interview."

Jacob shook his head. "I don't see how?"

"I think we'd have to make it very clear that this would be the one and only interview we allow. And it would be completely on our terms."

"What do you mean by 'our terms'?" Jacob asked.

"Where and when we say. Who it's with. Even what questions we'll allow to be asked. Maybe even knowing the questions in advance."

The room was deathly silent for a few minutes. "Why do you think this might work?" Jacob asked.

Janet shrugged. "I think I've heard of people doing things this way before."

"And did it work? Did it stop all the media attention?"

Again she shrugged. "I really don't know."

Jacob shook his head. "I really don't like it."

"What choice do we have?" Rose asked. "None of us know anything at all about the media. At least not in dealing with anything like this."

"We could try to hire a lawyer or something," Pete suggested. "Someone who knows more about it."

Jacob nodded. "I like it!"

"But more than likely, I would bet the lawyer will tell us the same thing. We've got to talk to these news people at some time or another."

Jacob shook his head. "What's the use of the lawyer then?"

Pete only shrugged. "I think I saw it on TV or something."

"So either way," Rose said, "it's sounding like we've got to talk to the media. One way or another."

Susan shook her head. "Nobody is asking what we think! Nobody is asking for our opinion. I don't want my children paraded in front of the TV cameras for all the world to gawk at like some freaks in a circus show."

Clint reached over and hugged his wife. "I couldn't agree more!" he told her.

"I think that's where Janet's suggestion to control the situation will come in," Rose told them. "We'd have to be real careful about how we go about it."

"You want my kids...no, you want all of us, to stand there in front of a bunch of TV cameras, and tell the world all about us?" Susan asked incredulously.

Rose nodded. "If it will help stop all this media attention and keep them off our backs, it may be the only way."

Susan rolled her eyes and slumped back in her chair.

"Face it," Brian said. "Thanks to what happened on Sunday, the twins have suddenly become famous. Reverend Cosinger literally launched them into the spotlight, like it or not. And like it or not, we've got to accept that and deal with it."

"We're tryin' to deal with it," Jacob replied. "I'm just not happy with the direction all this is goin'."

"Just like the decision we made back at Thanksgiving with the twins, we didn't want that to happen either," Brian noted. "But we were stuck with it as the only solution."

"And look how that turned out!" Jed tossed out. "Things are worse now than ever."

"Especially now!" Jack added.

Brian nodded. "Especially now," he agreed. "And because of that decision, and because of what happened at church, we're now stuck with a situation that has literally launched our family name, and especially the twins, out onto the national spotlight."

"And beyond!" his wife added. "This story is already all over the world now."

"Maaaybe," Marcy said, trying to think through what she wanted to say. "Maybe there might be a way to bring this to our advantage."

"What?" Jacob asked, totally interested, as was everyone else.

"It's all about the advertising, isn't it?" she said, her face brightening. "I think we've pretty much decided, that like it or not, we're going to have to grant at least one interview. If we're going to do that, then we may as well try to wring every bit of good out of it as we can for the family. And not just for Susan's kids, but I mean the whole family. The whole McComber clan."

"How?" Jacob asked.

"If we do this, then as has already been pointed out, we've got to control the situation. But at the same time, we need to show the entire family in its best light. And there's no reason why we can't advertise a bit about what kind of business we're in, or even about the new lodges we're building down the hill for the tourists."

"If we do that," Jed pointed out, "then we better mention all the land conservation issues we work on every year. How we try and protect our forest and the animals."

"Exactly," Marcy replied. "With what I've seen of the media in the last few months, if we try to advertise what we do here, that's all going to count for a lot in telling the world what kind of people we really are."

"How are we gonna' manage it?" Jacob asked.

Marcy shrugged. "We'll just have to see."

Jacob shook his head. "So now we gotta figure out how to control this here situation with the media, and to use it to our advantage. This is gettin' harder by the minute! And the one big thing we all know we don't want talked about is that damn punishment we dished out."

"Why?" Rose asked. "I would think that now it would be one of the best things we could discuss."

"Huh?" Jacob grunted.

"Well, not like what really happened, of course," Rose continued. "But did you hear what they talked about a few times on TV. They all believe what that kid at the school told them. That we punished them by making them go to school that way, because they wanted to be each other."

"She's right," John agreed. "The way that kid explained it, it puts us in a much better light, not to mention in a much better position."

Jacob looked all around the room. "Anybody see it any different?"

"Just that I don't want to do this at all!" Susan stated flatly.

Jacob nodded. "Duly noted Sue. Duly noted."

"Dad," Brian spoke up. "I've been pretty impressed with Doctor Hapkins in Little Rock. She's been trying to be as helpful as she possibly can since the very beginning. She may be able to help us with suggestions on how to control this thing."

Jacob thought about it. "If you think she can help, then we'll consider it. Anybody have any objections to it?"

"I think it's an excellent idea," Jane spoke up. "Besides, didn't you say once that she's a noted gender psychologist?"

"Psychiatrist, actually," Brian replied. "Better credentials."

"Then maybe she can help."

"You know of course," Brian added, "she's going to insist on talking with the twins."

"We'll just have to coach them a little beforehand," Marcy told them.

At the end of the meeting, as everyone was leaving, Brian stopped a moment to talk with Susan. "Sue," he said as he touched her arm to get her attention away from Jane.

"Yeah?"

"You said earlier that Jasmine wanted to reach out to another transgendered girl on-line? One who's trying to help others now?"

Susan nodded. "He said her blog has been a big help to him in the past."

Brian nodded as he thought about that. "Maybe it would be a good idea to let him."

"Let him talk to the media?"

"Not the media, just this one girl. If he can identify with her in any way, then maybe he'll feel better having someone with...at least a similar situation that he can talk to."

"It might be helpful for him if he feels he needs it," Jane added.

Susan looked back and forth between the two of them. "So what am I supposed to do?"

"Let him," Brian said.

"How?"

"Email would be my most likely guess," Jane told her.

"We don't even allow the kids to have an email address."

"Maybe we can set something up that would be safe," Jane said. "Just for them to use. John teaches the computer class in the school. I'm sure he can handle something like this with no problem at all."

"And how about us? Clint and me?" Susan asked.

"We can set one up for you too if you want," Brian said. "Or we can just let you be able to monitor whatever the twins do."

"I don't want one for me!" Susan said flatly. She stopped a minute, "But maybe it couldn't hurt to let Jasmine at least reach out to this other girl...*if* we watch this closely!"

"It shouldn't take more than a few minutes to set up an on-line email account," Jane told her. "If you want, I can have John take care of it tonight."

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Later that night, Jasmine sat in front of his computer screen. His uncle John leaned over one shoulder while his father leaned over his other. Sue and Jane stood off to one side talking, and Olivia sat on his bed.

"What do I say?" Jasmine asked after his Uncle John showed him where to type the email address in for the girl's outreach program they had found on her blog.

"That's up to you," John said. "Anything you like. Introduce yourself."

With a shrug, Jasmine slowly typed in: *Hi, this is Jade McComber.* "What else should I say?"

"That's up to you," his father said. "This was your idea."

With a shrug, Jasmine pointed the mouse to the send button and clicked it. "Let's see if anyone answers," he said.

His father patted him on the shoulder. "We'll see."

Jasmine checked for a reply before he put his nightgown on. He checked again after he got the nightgown on. He checked it again just before his mother came in to kiss him good night. But there was still no reply. But then it was night. Why would anyone answer an email at night? It was silly. After his mother left the room, he got out of bed though and checked it one more time, and was amazed to find a reply. He opened it quickly and read it.

This is Christy. Is this really Jade McComber? The one everyone's talking about? The one from Arkansas?

Jasmine smiled as he typed. *That's me.* He sent the email. He left the email program open as he climbed back in bed. When he

turned back to look at the screen, there was another email waiting for him. He got up and opened it.

Thanks for getting in touch. Is there anything I can help you with?

Jasmine thought about that. Then he began typing again. *Everyone in the world wants to talk to me. I just want to be left alone. I'm scared.*

Chapter 59 – Working With the Enemy

April 9th

The editor of the County Chronicle was somewhat disgusted to once again have Amanda Dwyer and her cameraman sitting in his office. But after the success of her TV piece the day before, he should have guessed she would be there. He had seen the two TV spots. He approved of the first one with Reverend Cosinger. He wasn't so sure though how he felt about the second one. It had been rather blatant hounding of those two poor kids in his opinion. Now Amanda, her cameraman, and his reporter, were all discussing who in the area might know the McComber family so they could try to get more interviews. He heard the phone ring and he watched as the paper's secretary answered it. He saw her turn to look at him with a very amazed look in her face. And she was motioning with her hands for everyone to be quiet.

"Yes, *Mrs. McComber*," the secretary said, emphasizing the name. "If you'll wait a moment, I'll put him right on." She hit the mute button on her phone.

"It's one of the McComber women!" she said to the editor. "And she wants to talk to you!"

"Which one?" the editor asked.

"I don't know. She just said Mrs. McComber!"

The editor nodded toward her and put his hand over his phone, waiting for the secretary to transfer the call to his desk. As he did so, both his reporter and Amanda moved over to practically sit on his desk. His desk phone rang and he picked up the receiver, holding it so that the earpiece was just slightly away from his ear. "Mrs. McComber?" he asked.

"Yes," Marcy replied. "Is this the editor of the paper?"

"Yes it is."

"Then I hope you're the one who may be able to help me with some questions I have."

"I hope I can help," the editor replied. "What questions are they?"

"The family isn't happy with all the publicity we're getting, especially with what's happening to the twins. But after seeing the news last night, and now finding that we're also all over the internet, we don't see any way at all that we can stop it. Do you know of anything at all we can do to quiet things down?"

The editor wasn't sure if Amanda and his reporter could hear everything, he continued to hold the receiver away from his ear a bit in hopes that they would. "Just for the record," he replied, "which Mrs. McComber am I speaking with?"

"Oh," Marcy replied. "Forgive me please. This is Marcy McComber. I'm Susan's sister-in-law."

"I see," the editor replied as Amanda tapped his arm. He looked up at her to see her mouthing something.

"Ask if she'll let us talk to her!" Amanda asked as silently as possible.

The editor turned back to the phone. "Thank you for calling us, Mrs. McComber. I can fully understand your family's wishes for all this to go away. But let me be honest, I simply don't see it happening. As you yourself have just said, this story has garnered an awful lot of interest all over the country. Everyone wants to know more about those two twins."

"That's what we were afraid of," Marcy replied.

Once again Amanda pressed the editor to try to get her to agree to an interview. The editor simply held his hand up to hold her off.

"May I make a suggestion?" the editor said into his phone.

"Absolutely!" Marcy replied. "Anything would help us right now."

"Why not let the media talk to the twins. Let everyone see them."

"Somehow I figured you were going to say that," Marcy replied.

"It's our job to let everyone know what's going on," the editor told her. "Good things and bad. The story of the twins in your family has become one of great interest."

"Too much interest!" Marcy replied. "And because of that, we were wondering if you would be willing to come out here and discuss

with me a way that the family can get a message out to the greater media everywhere?"

"You want to get a message out to the media?" the editor asked incredulously. "What message is that?"

"We've decided that we're going to allow one interview," Marcy told him. "But we want it done on our terms."

"Oh hell!" Amanda breathed, wide-eyed and excited.

It was obvious now to the editor that she had been able to hear at least some of what Marcy had said. "Mrs. McComber. You're more than welcome to come down here at any time you like. I'll be more than happy to talk with you about it."

"No," Marcy told him. "If you don't mind, I'd rather talk about it here in the family's business office...with the family at my back so to speak. I'm nervous enough about this as it is."

"Absolutely!" the editor replied. "We want you to be as comfortable as possible. When would you like me to be there?"

"Whenever you like. The sooner the better though. We want to get this whole thing over with and out of the way, so that hopefully things will quiet down as soon as possible."

"Mrs. McComber, I'll leave right away. I'll see you as quick as I can get there."

"Thank you," Marcy replied.

The editor hung up the phone. "She wants to talk about the family giving an interview," he said to Amanda and his reporter. "I'm going up there right now."

"Not without me, you're not!" Amanda said determinedly. She was already turning toward the door and pushing her cameraman in that direction to get him to hurry.

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"Doctor Hapkins?" Brian said into his phone. "This is Brian McComber."

"Doctor!" Cynthia Hapkins replied happily. "What can I do for you?"

"Did you happen to see the news on TV last night?"

“How could I miss it? And this morning I found that TV piece with the twins in it in several different places on the internet. It wasn’t very difficult to find at all. Those poor children! Every time I watch it, I can’t help but notice how frightened Jade seemed to look.”

Brian wasn’t happy to hear about the news piece being all over the internet, but he guessed he should have expected it. “That’s kind of why I’m calling. After the news last night, the whole family got together to discuss things. We’ve agreed that we’re going to allow one interview with the twins and their immediate family. But only one interview! We’re hoping that after that, people will know more and will then leave them alone.”

“I think it would depend on how much will be in that interview,” Doctor Hapkins replied.

“Naturally,” Brian agreed. “Because of that, would you be willing to come out and help us? I was thinking you might be able to help us keep an eye on the twins. You might see things that none of us could catch. And if possible, you could also act as an information source about things that we don’t have the expertise in.”

“Are you asking me to be the twin’s therapist in this?”

“Not really, no. But you would of course be allowed to meet them and talk with them well before hand. I know you’re going to have to get to know them.”

Doctor Hapkins thought about it for a moment. “I will need to get to know them,” she replied. “But those two children are only half the equation. “How about the rest of their immediate family?”

“I’m sure I can arrange for you to speak with them as well,” Brian told her. “More than likely you’re going to have to meet them anyway in order to talk to the twins. And if I know Susan, she’s not going to be far from anything that’s happening with any of her kids.”

“Very well,” Doctor Hapkins replied. “I’ll be more than glad to help out. I’ll put the family down as official patients of mine as well. That way anything any of them tells me will be bound by the confidentiality laws. I’ll have more reason to not tell the media anything I hear from any of them.”

“That would be appreciated,” Brian told her. “Doctor, how soon do you think you can do this?”

“How soon are they going to do the interview?”

"I don't know. My sister-in-law is working on that today. We want it to happen as soon as possible, so this whole thing can go away as soon as possible."

"I'm not sure it will all just go away," Cynthia told him. "But hopefully things should quiet down afterwards."

"That's all we ask...for now," Brian replied.

Cynthia thought for a moment. "You want the interview to happen soon? I have no doubt that any TV company can have a camera crew out to you in a matter of hours."

"We won't do it today!" Brian told her. "Next week, maybe."

Cynthia thought about things for a moment more. "If you like," she said, "you can bring them here anytime at all. I'll make room in my schedule for whenever you need."

"Um...I was hoping you could come up here instead," Brian replied. "We'll pay you for your efforts of course."

"Up there?"

"It's a long ride into Little Rock. I'd rather not uproot the twins any more than necessary."

"Of course," Doctor Hapkins replied. "I suppose," she said as she paused for a moment to consider things further, "I can cancel some of my appointments for tomorrow and come up there then."

"I was hoping you would say that," Brian replied happily. "Let me give you directions to my office. I can take you straight up to the family from here."

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"Here they come," Valerie said from where she had been watching out the window. "Damn! That TV truck is with them!"

"TV truck!" Jacob exclaimed angrily. "We didn't ask for them to come!"

"Well they're here," Valerie replied as she watched the vehicles pulling up into the parking lot.

"It's a good damn thing we kept Susan out of here today," Jacob told the two women.

"This is not what I asked for," Marcy said. "I just wanted to talk to the editor about how to go about it and get his advice."

"It looks like you're going to get more than you bargained for," Valerie replied as she moved away from the window. "The TV people are already gearing up." The phone rang again and she went to answer it. She made note of who called and told them to watch for an official announcement from the family coming soon.

"Just stick to what we talked about and keep it to that!" Jacob told Marcy. "You sure you're up for this? Cause I can chase them out of here in two shakes if you don't think you want them here."

Marcy shook her head. "I volunteered to try to handle all this and set it up," Marcy replied. "The advertising for the family has been my big project. I'm trying to learn as much as I can. And if we're going to have someone come in and do a family interview, then this could be a good chance for me to maybe learn something."

"Just remember, give the word at any time and I'll be more than happy to throw them all out of here. The whole lot of 'em!"

Marcy smiled. "Thanks Dad."

The door opened and a man walked in, followed by another man, followed by Amanda and her cameraman. Marcy and Valerie both recognized the first man as someone who was a member of one of their hunting clubs.

"We didn't ask for no TV!" Jacob said somewhat angrily.

"Mr. McComber," Amanda replied quickly, speaking directly into the microphone in her hand. "The family agreeing to give an interview is big news. You want everyone to know you're going to be doing it? We can help spread that word quickly. And since I'm here, I'll be more than glad to set up a time when I can come back with a full crew to do a proper story. I think you mentioned on the phone that you wanted to do this as quickly as possible didn't you?"

"They were in my office when you called," the editor explained. "They heard most of the phone conversation."

"We haven't agreed yet to do the interview with you, or even with your TV station," Marcy told them, not comfortable at all with the way the woman was holding the microphone out at her. "We're... exploring possibilities. I just wanted a simple meeting with the editor where we could sit down and discuss some of the ideas the family had in mind."

"I'll be more than happy to help," Amanda told her quickly. "I know more about TV than the newspaper would, and our station is the leading news source for most of Arkansas."

The editor started getting worried that Amanda's pushiness was going to ruin their chances. "Why don't we sit down as you suggested, and you and I discuss what you're thinking about? Does that sound good? We can let Amanda here film it, and if she has any suggestions after we've talked, then maybe it wouldn't hurt to hear her out. Make sense?"

Marcy looked from the editor, to Amanda, and back to the editor. "Very well," she said. "Why don't we all sit over here." She led the way to a table at the back of the office where she sat on the far side.

Amanda noticed that Jacob McComber and the other woman there weren't following. "You're not joining us?" she asked them.

Jacob shook her head. "Marcy there wants to run with this. We're just here to help her out should she need it. You just mind that you be polite to her, hear? That's my daughter-in-law you're takin' to. And I don't take kindly to people not being polite to my kin!"

Amanda picked up the threat in his voice. She hoped it would come out just that way on the film she knew her cameraman was capturing as well. "Of course," she replied, with her best TV smile. She heard the phone ringing, and saw the other woman go to answer it, she headed for the table with everyone else. By the time she got there, the editor was seated across from Marcy McComber, and his reporter was seated next to him. She took a seat at the far end of the table and held the microphone out where it could pick up as much as possible.

Marcy did her best to ignore both Amanda at the end of the table, and especially the man with the camera who was standing all too close and had it aimed directly at her. She wished she had worn something nicer to do this in, but she hadn't counted on anyone filming her. She was about to give the first family interview, like it or not.

"What did you have in mind?" the editor started.

Marcy took a deep breath and plunged in. "We've decided...that is, the entire family has decided, that we're going to allow one interview, and only one. We're hoping that after everyone gets what

they want, they will leave us in peace. But we want the interview to be on our terms only." She looked at Amanda. "None of this running around chasing anyone down, hounding the kids or anyone else, trying to get something for your TV cameras. That was horrible yesterday!"

"I apologize for that, Mrs. McComber," Amanda said, "but your family wouldn't talk to us. None of them."

"That's why we're going to allow just this one interview...so you'll all just go away."

"Did you have anything else in mind?" the editor asked, trying to bring things back to the subject.

Marcy nodded. "We'd like everyone to see that this is a good family. We're not cruel monsters. And Susan especially doesn't want her kids to be pictured as freaks. We want to know in advance what questions will be asked so we can approve them and the children will be prepared to answer them."

"That should be no problem at all," Amanda told her, not really happy with the request.

"How about afterwards, after the interview is over?" the editor asked. "Do you want to approve what goes on the air before it's released?"

Amanda could have killed the editor just then.

Marcy's eyes went wide. "Yes!" she said quickly. "That would be very helpful. Thank you."

The editor smiled. "That's why you asked to talk to me, isn't it?"

Marcy smiled. "Yes it is," she agreed.

"Anything else?" the editor asked.

"Yes," Marcy said. She looked around the office for a moment. "Our family is involved in a rather large hunting business. We own a lot of land that each and every one of us treasure. If possible, we'd like the station to do a couple of minutes before the interview showing some of our land and mentioning some of what we do with it."

"A commercial for the family business?" the editor asked.

"Oh for heaven's sake!" Amanda muttered a bit too loudly.

"Yes. Kind of," Marcy replied. "But more than that, we'd like to show the entire family in its best light. Show everyone what we're

really like. That's why we want to do this."

The editor smiled. "I hunt here all the time. I have some idea of what you all do. And I know Jed works with the forest rangers quite a bit sometimes too. I think it sounds nice."

Amanda had a totally opposite opinion.

"Just a minute or two is all we ask," Marcy told him with a smile.

"And once we send the word out," the editor continued, which we'll probably do this afternoon, directly to the Associated Press, how do you want anyone who's interested to contact you?"

"Um...I guess the family business line here would be the best. I can give you the number."

"I've got it," the editor replied. "But may I make a better suggestion?"

"Please," Marcy replied.

"Give me an email address. That way the stations can send their proposals in writing and you can compare them better."

"Oh God!" Amanda muttered unhappily. The damn editor was making things worse and worse for her.

"Um...I'll have to let you know," Marcy replied. "We don't have an email address yet. It's one of the things we're planning on with a website we want to have built."

"It only takes a couple of minutes to set one up," the editor replied. "The Chronicle will be happy to help if you need it. And you don't want this address to be the same one you use in connection with your business. I recommend keeping it separate."

"We got someone in the family who can manage it," Jacob spoke up from off to the side. "He's pretty good with computers. Teaches the kids about them at school."

The editor nodded. "Just let me know. Anything else?"

Marcy shook her head. "Not that I know of. We'll have to see."

"How about how long before you make your decision?"

Again Marcy was surprised. "I'm not sure yet. We want to do this as quickly as possible."

Jacob spoke up again. "Do you think if we gave 'em till say, next Tuesday to put their name in the hat, that would be enough time?"

The editor looked back toward Jacob. "If that's what you want? And then how long before you make a decision?"

“Oh hell!” Jacob exclaimed. “It’s not like we’re askin’ for that much. Next day most likely.”

The editor nodded, then looked from Jacob to Marcy. “Now,” he said, if the Chronicle is going to do this and help you out, then we want something in return.”

Marcy didn’t like the sound of that. “What?” she asked.

“We’re going to run this story in our newspaper. And we’ll also send your request directly to the Associated Press where it will be picked up world-wide in a matter of minutes. But I want a picture of the twins to go with the article. And I would think that sending a picture of the twins along with your request will generate much more interest from any of the news sources that decide to bid on what you’re proposing.”

Amanda could have kissed the editor at that point. “Film of the two of them would be even better!” she proposed quickly. And I can even do it without asking any questions. Just a few seconds of time would be all it would take.”

Marcy looked up at Jacob uncertainly. “I...don’t know,” she said uncertainly.

“No film!” Jacob decided quickly. “But if you think it’s necessary, I guess we might manage one picture of the twins together. But that’s it!”

“Thank you,” the editor said happily, while Amanda grunted unhappily in the background. But the editor wasn’t done yet. “You know,” he said, now looking at Jacob, “a single picture of the twins together, would be made even better if they were holding pictures of themselves from before they switched places. Kind of a before and after shot.”

Amanda’s jaw dropped. Why hadn’t she thought of that?

Jacob shook his head. “Maybe,” he said. “But don’t go countin’ on it.”

The editor nodded and smiled. “If you want this proposal to go out today, then the sooner we can get the picture, the sooner we can spread the word. Next Tuesday isn’t a lot of time. You’re already pushing things quite a bit.”

“We want this over with as soon as possible!” Jacob told him.

"Then the sooner we can get a picture, the sooner the word gets out."

"But the kids won't be home from school till later this afternoon," Marcy noted.

"If you'll allow it," the editor replied. "We can take the picture right at the school. The twins would miss no more than five minutes of their classes, and we'd be done and out of there."

Marcy again looked to Jacob as she heard the phone ringing yet again in the background.

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"You want to what?" Susan exclaimed, not believing what she had just heard.

"Just one picture," Jacob told her. "That's all. And they'll do it right there at the school so the kids can get back to their class."

"I don't care about them getting back to class!" Susan told him. "Is this really necessary?"

"The paper wants somethin' in return for the help they're givin' us. And as much as I hate to admit it, the editor did have a few damn good ideas for us that he suggested. He seemed to think that sending a picture of the twins out with the announcement would help a lot."

"Help who? Not the twins!"

"Susan," Jacob said. "I can't force any of this and you know it. It's still all up to you and Clint. But if we don't get a proper interview done, then them news people will be houndin' us forever."

"Yeah Dad, I know," Susan replied despondently. "Okay. When are they going to do it, because I want to be there to make sure nobody gets too pushy with my kids."

"Soon as we can get to the school," Jacob told her. "I'm going to call John right away after this. He's got to set up an email address for us too. And Susan..."

"Yes?"

"The editor asked if we have any pictures of the twins from before we switched them all around. If you got any, you can bring

'em. If not, then I don't really care. It was his suggestion. He's gettin' what he wants either way."

"Pictures?" I don't know. I'll have to see."

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"What's going on, Uncle John?" Jimmy Joe asked as she and Jasmine followed the Principal toward his office after being called out of their class.

"You're getting your pictures taken," John told them.

"What for?" Jasmine asked.

John took a deep breath before answering. "The newspapers."

"Cool!" Jimmy Joe exclaimed happily.

Jasmine said nothing at all.

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Amanda and her cameraman were at the school long before anyone else. They were set up and ready to film from the moment the others arrived – which they did as soon as they saw the other cars pulling into the parking lot. They filmed the editor and his reporter. They filmed Jacob and Marcy, and.... "Is that the mother?" Amanda asked her cameraman as he continued to film."

"I don't know, but she's with them," he replied.

"With microphone in hand, Amanda rushed forward. "Mrs. McComber," she said quickly. "What prompted the family to agree to finally allow an interview with your children to be done?"

The camera being stuck right in her face frightened Susan. "Please..." she said. "Don't film me."

"Mrs. McComber," Amanda said again.

"Stop that!" Jacob roared angrily as he moved between Susan and the reporter. "You damn TV people is causin' us nothin' but trouble. Now get that damn camera out of here!" He grabbed Susan's arm. "Come on, let's get inside."

Amanda followed them all the way to the school. She fully intended on going inside with them as well, but Jacob turned at the

door and stopped her. "You ain't goin' in!" he told her. "We done told you that before. Pictures only!"

"But Mr. McComber..." Amanda tried. But she only got the door closed in her face...and the face of someone else inside doing something that looked like he was locking the door so they couldn't get in. "Damn!" she exclaimed. "We'll wait till they come out."

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John looked uncertainly at the editor and the reporter he had already spoken with before. "I've already set up the email address you wanted," he told them. "I'll give it to you before you leave."

"Thanks," the editor replied as he held his hand out to shake John's. John complied and shook his hand.

"Where are the twins?" the editor asked.

"In my office," John told him. "I guess that's as good a place as any to do this."

"Thank you," the editor replied.

John led the way past the school's secretary and into his inner office where the two twins were sitting in the chairs in front of his desk. They both turned around quickly when everyone walked in.

"They're here!" Jimmy Joe said excitedly as she got up from the chair.

Jasmine just sat there quietly with his head turned and watched everyone entering.

Susan went over and hugged Jimmy Joe. "They're going to take your picture to send out with the announcement," she told her twins.

"Yeah!" Jimmy Joe replied. "Uncle John told us. I think it's cool!"

Susan noted that Jasmine still hadn't said anything. She went over to him, pulled him from the chair, and hugged him. "You okay?" she asked.

"I guess," Jasmine replied. He certainly didn't share Jimmy Joe's enthusiasm.

Susan knelt down and looked Jasmine over, she adjusted the collar on his blouse a bit then smoothed her hand over his hair. She quickly reached into her bag and extracted a brush and began carefully brushing and rearranging his hair to make it look as good

as she could get it on the spur of the moment. "I'm afraid that's going to have to do," she said sadly. "If we had known, we could have done more with it."

"Susan," Marcy said, "she looks fine. Really nice! I wish Nichole had dressed as nicely today."

Susan looked at her sister-in-law gratefully.

"We're you able to find any before pictures for us?" the editor asked. Susan reached into the large bag she had brought with her and pulled out two fairly large framed pictures of her twins. "These were their school pictures from the beginning of the year," she told him as she handed over the pictures. She suddenly had second thoughts. "I want those back!" she added quickly.

"Of course," the editor replied as he looked at the pictures. "These will be perfect."

He set the pictures flat on the Principal's desk and motioned to his reporter who was holding a good camera. "See if you can get some good prints of these in case we need them," he told him.

The reporter quickly took several close-up photos of the pictures.

"Now," the editor said happily as he picked up the pictures again. "Let's get these two together and take some pictures!"

"Where?" Jimmy Joe asked quickly.

The editor looked around. There was a large wooden bookcase against one wall. "How about over in front of the books," he suggested.

Jimmy Joe was there quickly. He struck a pose. "Hey!" he said. "Get my picture."

"No!" Susan said quickly. "Calm down. Jas, get over there with Jimmy Joe." More reluctantly, Jasmine joined his sister and stood next to her.

The editor took the time now to study the two kids. The one who used to be a girl, looked amazingly like a boy. But his eyes were far more drawn to the pretty features on the one who was now the girl – Jade. "Geez!" he swore softly. He raised his voice a bit to talk to his reporter. "They look even better in person than what the film showed on TV." He turned back to the twins. "Let's start with just a shot of the two of you together."

The two twins stood side by side in front of the bookcase.

“Jas! Smile!” Susan told him.

Jasmine smiled, but it was a very muted smile. The camera clicked.

“Okay, but not good,” the editor decided. He looked to his reporter. “You’re better at this than I am, see if you can make this any better.”

The reporter smiled and went to work. His biggest problem was that the girl didn’t seem to be too happy at all about the pictures. And her mother kept having to tell her to smile. It wasn’t until her brother finally got into the act by continually teasing her and poking at her that the girl...Jade...really began to smile and once in a while, laugh. The pictures got better, and better. And some of them he knew were really good!

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The announcement went out to the Associated Press that afternoon, after Marcy and Jacob had okayed the content of it. But the article didn’t go out with just one picture, it went out with three. One shot showed the before picture for Jasmine. The second shot showed the before picture of Jimmy. And the third shot, the real money shot, showed Jade and Jimmy Joe with their arms around each other’s necks, laughing happily for the camera. Perfection!

Chapter 60 – The Whole Truth, and Nothing Like the Truth

April 10th

“Doctor McComber? This is Cynthia Hapkins,” Cynthia said into her phone on Friday morning.

“Yes Doctor,” Brian replied. “Are you still coming this afternoon?”

“Absolutely! I wouldn’t miss it. But I was wondering, can you recommend any good hotels up in that area? It’s a very long drive and I’m worried that it may be too late for me to drive all the way home afterwards.”

Brian thought about that for a moment. “It is a long drive,” he agreed. “And there really aren’t any decent places to stay that are nearby. I’m afraid you’d have a bit of a drive to get to any of them. But I suppose we could put you up for the night. It should really be no problem.”

“Are you sure?” Cynthia asked. “I wouldn’t want to be an imposition.”

“Ma’am,” Brian replied. “We’re country folk. It would never be an imposition!”

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It was mid-afternoon by the time Doctor Hapkins arrived at Brian’s medical clinic. He had already made arrangements to cancel the rest of his appointments for the day, so he was ready to leave shortly after she got there. For Cynthia, the rest of the drive still seemed long, even though it only took another twenty minutes.

She recognized the business office as they drove past it from the TV spots she had seen. She couldn’t help but notice all the construction going on a short distance away from it. But Brian’s big pickup truck that she was following never slowed down. She

followed him up a small hill, then turned onto another road and followed him up a much bigger hill. Once near the top, she was surprised to find what looked like a small housing development. The lots for each house appeared to be huge! All of the houses appeared to be very nice. Not fancy, not overly large, but very nice. The view in front of the houses was...amazing! She followed Brian's truck and turned into the driveway of the very first house they came to.

"My wife's not home yet," Brian told her once she got out of her car. "Her shift at the county hospital doesn't let her get home until dinner time, but let me take your bag and come on in. The kids should be back from school pretty soon." He led the way inside through the kitchen door.

Cynthia's head had been turning and looking at everything she could see from the moment she had entered their land. She was still looking. What she saw now was a very nice but modest house. Much like the exterior. It certainly looked clean and well kept. "You have a very lovely home," she told him as she followed him into a hallway heading toward the bedrooms."

"Thanks," Brian replied. He entered one of the rooms. "This is my daughter's room. You'll be staying here tonight."

"But what about her?"

Brian laughed. "No problem, trust me. Allison doesn't know it yet, but my wife already called and she'll be spending the night with Jasmine...Jade instead. Alli will be in heaven. Believe me!"

Doctor Hapkins picked up on the name problem for Jade but didn't mention it. Brian set her bag on the bed for her. "Anything I can get you?"

"Just a quick trip to a bathroom and some people to talk to," she said.

Five minutes later, Brian led Cynthia back out through the kitchen door where he walked around into his backyard. "I understand that Susan isn't working this afternoon," he told Doctor Hapkins, "so she's home expecting you. I'm going to drop you off in her care for now, and then we'll see you later. Is that okay?"

"Sounds perfect!" Cynthia replied happily as they walked across the wide backyard. Her eyes were already searching the house next

door. She couldn't miss the large dog pen in the backyard, full of barking dogs. And all the dogs looked pretty much alike. She expected to enter that house, but Brian kept walking. "Goodness," she said, "you have some very large pieces of property."

Brian smiled. "We've got more property in the family than most people would believe," Brian replied. "We can afford to spread out a bit."

Cynthia was glad when Brian headed toward the back door of the next house. It had been a surprisingly long walk.

"This is Clint and Susan's home," Brian told her. He knocked on the back door.

I'm scared. They were the words that Susan had read from that first night when Jasmine had contacted that online trans-girl. They were the words that had stayed with her. Her son...daughter had been scared then, and from the few emails between them that she had read since, she was guessing he...she was still scared. Well so was she. She put her best smile on her face and opened the door. "Hi," she said pleasantly as she immediately began studying the woman with her brother-in-law. "You must be Doctor Hapkins. Please come in."

"Please," Doctor Hapkins said, "call me Cynthia."

Susan held the door open wide while "the doctor" came inside. She wasn't really happy with this idea, but both Brian and Janet had seemed to think it would be a good idea for her twins. That was the only reason she was going along with it.

"I'll leave you in Susan's care," Brian told Cynthia. "If you need anything, I'll be home – for once."

Susan turned to the doctor. "It shouldn't be too much longer till the kids get home from school. Can I get you anything in the meantime?"

Cynthia had been sizing up Susan. She had obviously added makeup to her face that Cynthia was sure she wouldn't have normally bothered with. She was dressed casually, but quite nicely too. The woman was nervous about this, Cynthia had no doubt in the world. And she couldn't blame her. "Some coffee might be nice. Or tea. Whatever."

The coffee had already been made, so it was only a minute before the two of them were seated across the table from each other holding mugs of steaming black coffee. Doctor Hapkins had continued to study Susan. "Let me guess," she said, "you're worried about me being here. Afraid."

Susan's eyes went wide for a moment. "I'm sorry if it shows. I was trying not to let it. I'm not used to any of this."

Cynthia smiled. "Are you used to having your kids switching places with each other – particularly their genders?"

"No! My God! How could anyone ever get used to something like that?"

"Exactly," Cynthia replied. "I can't imagine what you're going through."

"You have no idea!" Susan replied.

"I'll bet you can't imagine how you'd handle the problem with just one of them, but you've got two! It's impossible!"

"It's horrible!" Susan said as she suddenly realized she had just opened up way too much to this strange woman.

Cynthia took a sip of coffee as she continued to watch Susan's face. "And now you've got me here to add to your worries." She immediately noticed the embarrassment on Susan's face.

Susan shrugged a bit, not really knowing how to reply politely. "It's only because Brian said you might be able to help."

"That's the only reason I'm here," Doctor Hapkins told her. "I'm not here to condemn or approve. I'm not here to judge in anyway at all. That's not my job and it's never been my job. Brian said you're going to allow a big interview with not only the twins, but your whole family. He thought I might be able to offer technical advice and assistance, and possibly keep an eye on everyone in case I notice any signs of undue stress. And gender change is my biggest area of expertise."

"Wouldn't what we're all going through be considered undue stress?" Susan asked.

"Pretty much off the scale," Cynthia agreed.

"So how am I supposed to handle it?"

Doctor Hapkins reached across the table and put her hand on top of one of Susan's. "You get up every morning and get dressed.

You make coffee when you need to. You do all the little things that are so normal to your everyday routine. And you take every single day one at a time until things somehow start to seem normal once again."

"Normal? Things are never going to be normal!"

"Yes they will," Cynthia replied. "Maybe not today or tomorrow, but someday. Someday it will all seem normal. It just may take a while."

"And in the meantime?"

"One day at a time. One problem at a time. One laugh, one smile, one tear. And you add all those ones up and save the best parts in your heart to think about, while you do your best to forget all the bad things you've already been through."

"It's not that easy," Susan replied.

"I know. I know better than you think. But I'm here to offer advice, and right now, that's the best advice I can give."

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Him not her. Brother not sister. He not she. That's my brother, Jimmy Joe. Jimmy Joe, he's my brother. Jasmine Jade sat quietly on the bus, looking out the window and thinking about all the things his mother and father, and Uncle Brian and Aunt Janet had told their entire family the night before...and that his mother and father had pretty much repeated during breakfast that morning. Try to use the right pronouns. Don't let anyone dare know about what the real punishment was. And absolutely act like changing your sex is exactly what you really wanted from the beginning! How many times had they all repeated that to him and his sister – brother! Damn!

His job was to convince everyone that he really, really wanted to be a girl. Like it or not! He had no problem understanding the reasoning behind that and didn't think it would be much of a problem at all. Heck, he had been doing that one way or another since this whole thing started. Wasn't that kind of what he had done every time his mother had dragged him out to go shopping? That part he wasn't worried about at all. He guessed anyway. But why did Uncle Brian have to go and hire this weird head-shrink to try to talk to

them? As far as he was concerned, it was the last thing the family should ever have done.

He knew that Jimmy Joe wasn't that crazy about the idea either. She...he (damn!) wanted the interview to happen. She...he... couldn't wait! Idiot *brother*! But *he* wasn't so crazy about this shrink getting into their business either.

The bus finally dropped all the McComber kids off, and they all began the walk up the hill toward their houses. "Good luck, Jade," Allison finally told him as they reached her house.

"Call me if you can!" Nichole told him as she left him to go into her house.

Ashley put her hand on his shoulder before he and Jimmy Joe got to their driveway. "Luck," she said sincerely.

"Thanks," he said once again.

Together, Jimmy Joe and Jasmine Jade headed for their house, where Tommy was already climbing the steps to go into the kitchen.

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The small noise from outside made Cynthia turn her head. A moment later, the kitchen door opened and a fairly large boy hurried in. He stopped the moment he saw her seated at the table.

"Tommy," Susan said. "This is Doctor Hapkins."

"Hi," Tommy said, much more reservedly than the hurried manner he had seemed to rush into the house with. He turned to his mother. "Mom, Elliot's going to start practicing again. I need be out there with him to help!"

"No!" Susan replied firmly. "Not today. Doctor Hapkins is here to talk with us, and we need to be available whenever she needs."

"Practice?" Cynthia asked.

"Pete's son next door," Susan replied. "Elliot. He won a big shooting contest last month and now his father's trying to get him into another one. He practices a lot! More than a lot!"

"Oh. How nice," Cynthia replied, not really knowing what to make of a shooting contest. But she supposed that for a family with a hunting business, it only made sense. "Um...it doesn't matter to

me,” she added. “I’m not getting out of here until tomorrow morning now. I can talk with him later when he’s done.”

“You’re sure?” Susan asked.

“Please!” Cynthia replied. “Don’t go to any great lengths to upset the apple cart while I’m here. If helping his friend practice is normal, then let him do it. It’s fine with me.”

“More like he wants to practice shooting too!” Susan replied. She nodded towards Tommy, and her older son took off at a run for his bedroom to change.

Cynthia heard the back door opening again. And then she saw them. Both of them standing outside together, just looking at her through the now open doorway, as if neither of them knew whether they should come in or not. The boy...Jimmy Joe...was a little taller than the girl. The girl...Jade...was dressed in a nice skirt outfit with rather colorful tights on under her skirt. “I won’t bite,” she told them gently. “I promise.” Neither of them moved.

“Kids, come on in,” Susan finally said. “This is Doctor Hapkins. Doctor, Jasmine and Jimmy.”

Once again Cynthia noticed the name change for Jade as the two kids entered the kitchen. She set the question aside for now. “I’m very happy to meet you,” she told them.

“I’m sure,” Jimmy Joe replied somewhat surly.

“Kids, be nice! Doctor Hapkins is here to help us get through your interview.”

“I don’t need any help,” Jimmy Joe said boldly. “I can’t wait!”

“And how do you feel?” Cynthia asked Jade. She saw Jade shrug her shoulders, but otherwise, the girl said nothing.

“Go put your school things up now,” Susan told them. “Then come back here.”

“How do you want to do this?” Susan asked, once the kids had gone to their rooms, and Tommy had run through going the other way.

“Any chance I can talk to the two of them together?” Cynthia asked. “At the same time? And then maybe separately afterwards?”

“Whatever you think is best,” Susan agreed.

Doctor Hapkins looked at her and smiled. “And yes, if you want to be there while I talk with them, I think that would be nice.”

Susan felt somewhat relieved.

"Is there somewhere where the two of them can sit next to each other?" Cynthia asked as Jimmy Joe came back into the kitchen.

"The sofa in the family room," Susan suggested.

"Sounds good," Cynthia replied as she pried herself up out of her chair. She saw Jade come back into the kitchen. It was obvious that Jade wasn't as bold about things as Jimmy Joe was.

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Two kids sitting on the couch in front of her. Two twins sitting on the couch together. One boy. One girl. One boy who was a girl, and one girl who used to be a boy. But as far as Cynthia Hopkins could see, they appeared to be just two kids sitting there. One boy. And one girl. She took one of the other chairs in the nicely decorated room while Susan sat in another chair. "You don't look happy to see me here," she noted to the kids. She was actually surprised when Jade was the one to reply.

"Uncle Brian said you're here to help us. But how can you? What can you possibly do for us?"

"You're one of those shrink people!" Jimmy Joe added. "A psychol...psychology person."

"Do you know what psychology is?" Cynthia asked.

"It's getting into people's heads," Jimmy Joe replied.

"Um...yes and no," Cynthia replied. "It's more like studying the way people think and behave."

"So you're here to study us and the way we think?" Jimmy Joe asked.

"Nope!" Cynthia told her quickly with a small chuckle. She saw the surprised reaction in both the twins. "I'm here to help give advice for the interview. I just need to get to know you a little before then. How can I give you advice if I don't know what you're like or what you can do?"

"Christy says I should listen to you," Jade said suddenly. "That you're kind of famous."

"I don't know how famous I am," Doctor Hopkins replied. "But I guess I've managed to get a pretty good reputation for my work. So

who's Christy?"

But it was Susan who replied. "She's a transgendered girl who now runs some kind of outreach program for trans kids. Jas seemed to like what was on her blog and contacted her a few days ago."

"She lives near Seattle," Jade added.

Cynthia smiled. "I'm...familiar with who she is."

"So now you're going to ask us a bunch of questions about ourselves?" Jimmy Joe asked.

Cynthia smiled and leaned back in her chair. "Nope!" she said again. "I thought that instead of talking about yourselves, you can tell me about each other instead."

"Huh?" Jimmy Joe grunted.

"You seem to be the brave one," Cynthia said. "Tell me all about your sister."

"Tell you about Jade?" Jimmy Joe asked incredulously. "Like what?"

"Like anything at all. What's she like?"

"Jade?"

"What if I was some stranger you just met somewhere and I was interested in Jade. What would you tell me?"

"Huh! I'd tell you not to bother! She's not worth it!"

Cynthia was shocked. "What do you mean not worth it?"

"Well face it lady, Jade here is the biggest sissy on the planet!"

"Jimmy Joe!" Susan interrupted quickly. "Stop it! You be polite. And it's not lady! This is Doctor Hapkins. You address her properly!"

"Please," Cynthia said quickly. "Let him be. I certainly don't mind. Just let him say whatever he likes."

"We'll talk later!" Susan threatened quietly.

Cynthia turned back to Jimmy Joe. She had already noticed the bit of anger in Jade's eyes. "What do you mean she's a sissy? And she isn't worth what?"

"What do I mean?" Jimmy Joe asked. She elbowed Jade. "Look at him. That's my *brother*! How could anybody ever look at him and not think what a total sissy he is." Once again he elbowed Jade.

"Stop it!" Jade replied as she reached out and slapped Jimmy Joe's arm.

Cynthia quickly realized that all the elbowing was nothing but Jimmy Joe being playful.

"I'm not a sissy!" Jade said emphatically.

"Yes you are!" Jimmy Joe replied. As he elbowed Jade again.

"No I'm not!" Jade replied as she shoved at Jimmy Joe with her body

"Yes you are!" Jimmy Joe said as she shoved him back

"No I'm not!"

"Sissy!"

Jade looked at her and finally grinned rather broadly. "So what?"

"So at least you finally admit it!"

"So what?" Jade said again. "At least I'm prettier than you are!"

It was a moment before Jimmy Joe could find a reply. Cynthia noted the troubled look on his face. "Not as pretty as I *used* to be!" Jimmy Joe retorted.

"I am too!" Jade said proudly.

"No you're not!" Jimmy Joe replied.

Jade stopped the whole process suddenly as he seemed to come down to earth. "Well, I guess I'm getting there."

Jimmy Joe stared at her *sister* for a moment. "Yeah. I guess you are. For real."

Cynthia had watched the childish exchange with great interest. It was almost as if the two of them had forgotten she was there for a moment. Two typical siblings playing...picking at each other. "Jimmy Joe," she finally said. "You used to be a girl, and now your brother is trying to be one. What advice can you give her?"

"Advice?" Jimmy Joe asked. She thought about it for only a moment. "Just what I keep telling her all the time, and she doesn't seem to want to listen."

"And what's that?"

"That she's too nice!"

Cynthia was a bit flabbergasted. "Too nice?"

"Yeah! Like way too nice. All the time!"

"But being nice is a *good* thing!" Jade countered.

"Not anymore. You've got to look out for yourself, 'cause nobody else will."

"The whole family looks out for me. For you too!"

“That’s not what I mean and you know it. Face it, you’re too nice for your own good.”

“No I’m not!” Jade replied stubbornly.

“Jade,” Cynthia said quickly, turning her attention to her. “What advice would you give your brother, knowing that you used to be a boy?”

“Um...” Jade replied as he leaned back on the couch and rolled his eyes. “Don’t be so pushy all the time! Try being a little nicer once in a while.”

“I’m nice all the time,” Jimmy Joe replied somewhat smugly.

“No you’re not!”

“Well, maybe not like you are. But then you’re too nice, remember?”

“I am not!”

“Kids!” Susan’s voice lashed. She turned to Cynthia. “Maybe separately would be better?” she suggested hopefully. She was somewhat embarrassed over the behavior of her twins.

Cynthia smiled. “If you like, but to be honest, this was exactly what I hoped for.”

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The twins were each sent to their rooms to do their homework while they waited for the doctor to come talk with them. Cynthia was particularly glad because she wanted to see each of their rooms. “Shall we start with Jimmy Joe?” she suggested after giving the twins a few minutes to relax in their rooms.

Susan only shrugged. She had apologized twice since the twins had left for their behavior. She led the way down to the end of the hall. She nodded towards the closed door on her right. Cynthia knocked softly, then opened the door. “May I come in?” she asked, looking at Jimmy Joe seated at his desk doing homework, but mostly she was trying to get the feel of the room – masculine and... oppressive.

She looked up at the huge deer head hanging from the wall. Ugh! “Wow!” she said as if impressed. “That looks big!”

"Best deer shot on the land in the last few years!" Jimmy Joe said proudly.

"You act as if you shot it."

"I did!"

"You like to hunt then?"

"Of course! It's like...the greatest thing ever!"

Cynthia went in further and sat on the bed. She looked at the ducks on the wall. "Did you shoot the ducks too?"

"Only one of them. "My brother shot the rest."

"So you both hunt then?"

"No. Just me. The girls in the family don't hunt. Only the guys. And he's a girl now."

"How does she feel about not getting to hunt anymore?"

"Huh? He loves it! He couldn't be happier. He hated hunting like you wouldn't believe. Not only is he the world's biggest sissy, he's also the world's biggest wimp!"

"Jimmy! Stop putting Jas down!" Susan said quickly.

"Sorry," Jimmy said apologetically. "But it is true."

Cynthia decided to move past it. She was about ask a question when she heard what she could only describe as a gunshot. She jumped with a look of alarm on her face. "Was that a gun?"

Susan only nodded her head toward the window. "It's just the boys out practicing with Elliot. I'm afraid it can get a bit noisy around here sometimes. You learn to ignore it."

Ignore it? Cynthia wasn't sure how anyone could ignore it, especially now that the gunshots were coming almost continuously, obviously from a number of guns. She turned her attention back to Jimmy Joe as she tried to recollect her thoughts. "One of the first questions they may ask you for the interview," she said, "is when did you first think that you were a boy?"

Susan cringed at the obvious question that she had never bothered to cover with her kids.

Jimmy looked at her with a somewhat incredulous look on her face. "Probably ever since the first time I heard about hunting... which I'm pretty sure was before I could even talk!"

"So you've always wanted to be a boy, or you thought you were a boy?"

“What’s the difference?”

“You can want to be something, but you’re not. You can also think you really are something, when you’re not.”

Jimmy thought about that. “I don’t know. I don’t think there’s much of a difference. All I know is that I always wanted to be my brother...and I always knew he wanted to be me. So now, here we are,” she finished brightly and proudly.

“Here you are,” Cynthia smiled. “And how do you feel about that?”

“Helloooo!” Jimmy Joe replied. “Do you think I’d be willing to face all the kids at school if I didn’t really want to be a boy? Trust me lady, to the girls at school, being a boy would be about the worst possible thing that could happen!”

Susan was trying to keep her jaw from dropping at the way Jimmy Joe was answering the questions. “It’s Doctor Hapkins!” she said. “Not lady! Remember that please.”

“Sorry,” Jimmy Joe apologized.

“It’s okay,” Cynthia told her. She moved on. “And what do you want to be when you grow up?”

Jimmy Joe smiled broadly. “A fashion designer!”

Cynthia was thrown for a loop, and so was Susan.

“You want to be a fashion designer? But you’ll be a man.”

Jimmy Joe looked at her like she was crazy. “Hellooooo!” she said again like she had before. “Have you ever heard of Ralph Lauren? Or Christian Dior? Or Yves Saint Laurent? Or...”

“Okay,” Cynthia replied. “I get the picture.”

“There’s lots of great fashion designers who are men. In fact, I think all the best ones are. And I’m going to be the best!”

Cynthia smiled. “So you think that by changing your sex, it will help make you one of the best?”

Jimmy Joe rolled his eyes. “No. Of course not. I just don’t believe that it should matter if I’m a boy or a girl. I should be allowed to do whatever I want. And I want to be the best!”

Cynthia smiled. “You hold onto that thought for the rest of your life. You hold that thought and believe it, because it’s absolutely true! You’ve just got to get past a lot of narrow-minded people who unfortunately are going to be in your way.”

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Once again Cynthia knocked softly on a bedroom door. Jimmy Joe's door was now closed behind her. Much of what Jimmy had said had caught her by surprise. She wondered what she would find now from Jade. She opened the door as a soft, "Come in," sounded from inside.

Jade shifted around in her seat as she saw the doctor and her mother in the hallway. She got up and nervously sat on the foot of her bed. She stared nervously at the doctor, not knowing what to say.

Doctor Hapkins walked into the room and stared around. She was amazed at all the dolls on the walls. Overall, it was the perfect girl's bedroom. Pink and feminine. "My you have a lot of dolls," she noted. She looked down at him. "But then I guess you've inherited them from...your former sister."

Jade nodded silently.

"Do you like them?" Cynthia asked.

Jade blinked in surprise. "Well, sure. Wouldn't you?"

Cynthia smile. "Absolutely!" she replied. "So you like playing with dolls?"

Instead of replying, Jade got up from the bed and went over to one of the shelves by the door. He reached up into a collection of dolls from all over the world and pulled one down. This one is Keiko. She's from Japan," he said as he brought the doll over to the doctor. "Look at her kimono. Isn't it beautiful?" he asked as he handed the doll to her.

"It certainly is," Cynthia agreed, studying the doll for a moment before handing it back to him.

He looked up at the dolls and pointed. "I like Elsa from Germany too. I think the dirndl she's wearing looks really cool!" He pointed at half a dozen other dolls further down the shelves, naming each one and making a small comment about each of the outfits they were wearing.

"So you like clothes?" Cynthia guessed.

He shrugged. "Kind of. I guess so. I guess...a lot. I guess."

Cynthia chuckled. "You like clothes!"

"I think..." he started as he mused something over. "I like jewelry more."

"What woman doesn't?" Cynthia pointed out with a chuckle.

"Want to see my earring collection?" he asked, suddenly excited. He hurried over to his desk where he quickly piled all his school stuff out of the way.

Cynthia noted that now the desk had suddenly become more a vanity since the back of it was littered with nail polish, hair things, jewelry, and makeup. Jade certainly acted like she knew her way around it all as she quickly opened and searched through her jewelry box. She watched as Jade started pulling out earring set after earring set. Often commenting on which ones were her favorites, and sometimes actually swapping the ones that were in her ears. There was no doubt that the girl loved jewelry, particularly earrings! But she figured she needed to move on or Jade would be there showing her things all day.

"Jade," she finally said as she was again changing the earrings her ears.

"Yeah?" Jade asked as she shook her hair out of the way.

"I asked your brother this, and I need to ask you too. One of the questions you very well may be asked in the interview, is when you first knew you were a girl?"

Jade looked at her with a somewhat somber look on her face. "I'm not a girl yet. Not really. And even if I someday manage to get an operation, I'm not sure if I'll really be a girl even then."

"Why would you think that?" Cynthia asked.

Jade looked at her with that same sad expression on her face. "Everyone will know what I really am...or what I was. Not everyone will care about what I want to be or what I think I am."

Cynthia looked at her, feeling the sadness she had to feel. "I'm afraid that's sometimes true," she said. "But things are changing in the world now. All of a sudden it seems that things have gotten so much better than they used to be."

"But it's not perfect yet."

"No. It's not. But then nothing is ever perfect. You're always going to have to worry about things like that."

He nodded. "I know," he said after taking a deep breath. "And I know everything is changing so much. Why do you think Jimmy and me decided we wanted to try to do this? Because we saw how other kids were doing it, and how they really did do it. And a few of them were even smaller than us. So...we decided to...um..."

Susan held her breath. She had once again been amazed at the answers her daughter was so easily giving out.

"You decided to what?" Cynthia asked.

"To um...switch places at Thanksgiving."

"At Thanksgiving?"

He nodded. "In front of the whole family. All of them! And do you know how many of us there are? Like a million!"

"And your family let you do it? How did they feel about it?"

But it was Susan who replied. "We...weren't...happy!"

"And what did the rest of the family say?" Cynthia asked.

"I got teased by the other kids like you wouldn't believe. Jimmy though...well, she was pretty much in heaven. I don't think they cared as much what she did. They didn't like seeing me in her dress at all though."

"Was it a nice dress?"

Jade jumped up from the bed and opened the closet. Cynthia noted an overabundance of clothes there. It only took Jade a moment to find the beautiful burgundy dress she had worn that first horrible day. "I wore this with some white tights and..." he turned around and searched among the many hair ribbons and bows hung on the wall. He plucked one out. "And I had this in my hair."

"It sounds like you went all out," Cynthia noted. "Very, nice. Very, very nice."

Jade put everything back where it belonged and went over to the bed where she sat down again. "Anyway, the family didn't like it much, and they still don't. Not at all. But...well, Jimmy and me are still here...as each other. So I guess that's got to count for something."

"I would say so!" Cynthia replied. "I think you two were awfully brave."

"Jimmy more than me," Jade replied. "A lot more!"

"But you did it too. And as you said, the family was more concerned about seeing you in a dress than seeing her as a boy."

He shrugged. "I wasn't going to let Jimmy go it alone."

"For her sake, or yours?"

It was a moment before he answered as he considered his thoughts. He finally replied. "I guess I really am that much of a sissy."

"I told you before," Susan spoke up quickly. "There's no such thing as a sissy girl!"

He smiled. "I just want to be a girl. Not a sissy. Not anything else. Just a girl. Do you know how much better I feel being a girl? Don't ask me. Ask her!" he said pointing to his mother. "She'll tell you. I think everyone in the family will tell you."

The doctor looked at Susan and saw the slight but hesitant nod she gave.

As far as Cynthia Hapkins was concerned, there was no doubt at all that Jade wanted to be a girl. Her only question was, which of the twins wanted to change their genders more? It was close, but she finally decided it was Jade. She had been the one who had talked more about what she wanted than what her twin wanted. But it was really close. It was all so...odd. Or were the news people more correct in calling it bizarre?

When they were done, Susan let Cynthia leave the room first while she took a moment to stare wide-eyed and questioningly back at her *daughter*. Now that the doctor was out of the room, she saw Jade shrug her shoulders as if to admit she had made it all up.

Susan was still trying to figure out how both her kids had just concocted such stories, and had managed to make them sound so believable. Or were they true? She knew better. She had been there. She knew the truth for herself. But her two twins suddenly had her wondering.

Before she left the room, she said to Jade, "I told Aunt Janet that Allison could spend the night here tonight since Doctor Hapkins will be staying down there with Uncle Brian and Aunt Janet."

"Alli's coming?" Jade exclaimed happily. "Can I invite Olivia and Nichole too? Please?"

"This is not the time for a big party!" Susan told him. "There's just too much going on."

"We'll be quiet. I promise!" Jade pleaded.

Susan looked at her new daughter's hopeful face for a moment. He seemed so much more like a real girl at times like this. And...so much happier. "Okay," she finally gave in. "But you've all got to stay in your room and be quiet!"

Out in the hallway, Cynthia smiled at Jades exuberant happy shouting.

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"How'd it go?"

Jade looked up to see Jimmy Joe standing in his doorway. "Is she gone?" he asked.

Jimmy looked up the hallway. "Gone," she confirmed. She walked all the way into the room. "So what happened?"

"She just asked me lots of questions.

"And?"

He sighed. "And I went with all the doll stuff you suggested, pretty much right off, even though I'm not sure I had to."

"And she bought it?"

"I think so. At least I'm pretty sure she did."

"How about anything else?"

"Um...I pretty much made it up as I went. A lot of it was pretty much the truth though...or near enough. Like we talked about last night, I told her we decided to switch things around ourselves for Thanksgiving."

"What did she say?"

"Not much, except to ask how it went?"

"And what did you say?"

"That it was major embarrassing of course."

"Good! It sounds like everything went perfectly then. We're going to do great when we do that TV interview...and I can't wait!"

"You know what we're doing, of course," Jade asked.

"What do you mean? Of course I know what we're doing. Getting our stories straight for when the TV people come."

“No. Not that.”

“Then what?”

Jade looked at her and shook his head. “We’re fixing things so that it will be harder than ever to change back. If not impossible!”

Jimmy Joe considered that. “I don’t think so. I think we’ll be fine. Don’t forget, Uncle Brian told us that even after we stop taking those hormones it’s going to take a few months before we start looking like ourselves again. That should be more than enough time for things to settle down. People will just think we changed our mind. That’s all. Which is pretty much what I’ll be doing... eventually. You though, face it. You’ve always been a sissy and you always will be. You’re pretty much right where you always wanted to be!”

Jade glared angrily at her, but said nothing. She was so wrong! So very, very wrong. The only problem was, lately, he wondered if she might be exactly right.

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In some ways, dinner with the McCombers was perhaps one of the most mundane things Cynthia could imagine. Just a normal family getting together and sharing a meal. Of course, she wasn’t used to eating venison, but she had to admit, it was quite good, if not a little stronger tasting than she was used to. She had sat at the kitchen table while Susan and Jade worked together to make dinner, as if the two of them had done it that way all their lives. Sometimes Susan would tell Jade to do something, but more often than not, Jade simply handled things by herself. It was obvious the two of them worked in the kitchen together often. She wondered if Susan’s former daughter had been that good. Cynthia was betting that she had been.

When Clint came home, Cynthia shook his hand and exchanged pleasantries, but there was obvious distrust and discomfort on his face. She fully expected that. After kissing his wife, Clint left the kitchen and didn’t make an appearance again until dinner was served. During dinner itself, Cynthia could tell the talk around the table was polite but guarded. She tried to put everyone at ease, but

it was the father, Clint, who seemed to remain the most remote. No surprise to her at all.

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Cynthia didn't tackle Tommy until after dinner. She did it while Susan and Jade were cleaning up. And she did it after getting Susan and Clint to agree to let her talk to him alone. As usual, after walking into Tommy's room, she took in her surroundings. Prominent in the room was the small TV set with a game system attached and game boxes scattered around it. There were ducks hanging on his wall too, but no deer head. She saw magazines about hunting and magazines about guns in a messy pile on the floor. The room looked less neat than either of the twin's rooms, but it still seemed to be comfortable without appearing too cluttered.

The uncertainty on Tommy's face was clear. Like the rest of them, he wasn't comfortable with talking to her. He was sitting in his desk chair, which was turned toward the TV set for the game system. "Do you mind if I sit on your bed?" she asked.

Tommy shrugged. "Sure."

She sat down and looked around again. "Nice room." She looked at his TV and the games. "Nice," she said again. "You like games?"

"Yeah?" he asked more than confirmed.

"Any favorites?"

Hesitantly, he searched through a few boxes and pulled them out. "These," he said.

She saw one about hunting, and the other was one of those mega-kill war games that she had seen advertised on TV quite a bit. Typical. "Nice," she said again.

"What do you want to talk about?" Tommy asked.

"You," Cynthia replied.

"Why me? Don't you want to know about the twins?"

"I do. But I'd rather get to know something about you. As I told your mother, I'm not here to condemn or approve anything. Or even to judge anyone."

"But you will anyway," Tommy interrupted.

“What do you mean?”

“Won’t you find out all you can about us and form your opinions? Isn’t that like judging?”

Cynthia smiled. “Smart boy! Let’s just say, I’ll try not to let my opinions out to anyone else. I’m only going to be here during the filming to offer my advice and support – to everyone!”

“Everyone? All of us? What for?” Tommy asked.

Cynthia shrugged. “In case any of you need it. From what I gather, this is a very close family. And I mean not just you and your mother and father and the twins. I mean your whole extended family. I know from talking with...I guess he’s your uncle, that this business is causing a lot of stress to all of you.”

Tommy nodded as he thought about that. “Yeah,” he said. “A lot!”

“Like what?” Cynthia asked.

“Like, nobody really wants Jimmy and Jas to be all switched around. Everyone keeps trying to find ways to convince them to switch back.”

“Including you?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Do you want them switched back the way they were?” When she saw the hesitation in his face she added, “Honestly?”

Tommy shook his head. “Sure I do. It’s just that...I don’t know. In some ways I think things may be better this way, like they are now. But I know for a fact that they really need to be back the way they belong, the way they’re supposed to be.”

“But what if this is the way they’re supposed to be?”

“Huh? No way! That’s just crazy talk!”

“But didn’t you say that in some ways it might be better for them now? How so?”

Tommy looked at her suspiciously for a moment while he considered how to answer. “It’s just that...” he finally said. “Uh... Jimmy...I mean Jimmy when he was still Jimmy. My original brother, okay? Jimmy Jade.”

“When Jade was your brother,” Cynthia acknowledged. “What about him?”

"Well he was all, I don't know, alone all the time. I mean, like *all* the time! But then, he doesn't have any other kids...I mean boys around to hang with like the girls all do. And face it, there's a ton of girls in this family that's all the same age!"

"But he didn't have those friends?"

"Not really, no. So I guess he was alone. But he could have hung with me and Elliot and Hunter. He did that sometimes. Jimmy Joe hangs with us all the time. And she...I mean he loves doin' stuff with us."

"But Jade...when she was Jimmy, didn't."

"No. I mean, yeah, he seemed to like shootin', and he was plenty good, but he for sure didn't like hunting."

"How about anything else?"

"Anything else? What else is there?"

"Is that all you do with your friends? Shooting and hunting?"

Tommy shrugged. "Well, a lot of it I guess."

Cynthia looked at his game machine. "Don't you play games and things too?"

"Of course!" Tommy replied. "All the time."

"How about with...the old Jimmy?"

"Sure. Sometimes. But well, my new brother is more into them than my...sister used to be."

Cynthia nodded. "Do you think that Jimmy Joe is happier now as a boy than a girl?"

He shrugged again. "I guess. I thought she was happy before. She just complained a lot about all the stuff that the guys can do that she couldn't."

"Like what?"

"Hunting and stuff."

"But now she's happier?"

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Probably an understatement. She loves it! All the hunting and stuff. And I got to admit, she's getting damn good at it. Not as good as me!" he added quickly. "But real good."

Cynthia smiled. "And how about Jade? Is she better off now?"

"That's just it? I think...*she's*...a lot better off. I mean, she's like never alone anymore. And I've seen her smiling and laughing with

those girls all the time. She never even used to smile before, let alone laugh. Course, there's a lot of crying I hear from her room too."

"Crying?"

"A lot sometimes. With my Mom too."

"The two of them? Separately, or together."

"Both I guess. But I'm right next door. I've heard the two of them in there crying together over things a bunch of times. And I know my Mom cries a lot, but she tries not to let anyone see it. Jas of course, he...I mean she cries when she's alone quite a bit."

"Do you ever try to help her? Find out what's bothering her?"

He looked at her like she was crazy. "I don't know what to do about that stuff. And I know a lot of it is because of all that hormone stuff they stick into them. What can I do about that? According to Mom, I've just got to let her cry when she needs to."

Cynthia smiled. "The hormones can be like that. Trust me."

"Well, I've seen it for myself...a lot!"

"What kind of things does Jade cry about? Do you know?"

He shrugged. "A lot of it is about all this switching around stuff and the fact that nobody wants them to be all...switched. Especially my Mom. But other times, like I think more often when he...I mean she's alone...Jade I mean, I think he cries because he's afraid. But then, Jimmy was always afraid of stuff. I think more stuff than he ever really let on."

"Like what?"

Tommy shrugged again. "Stupid stuff mostly. I don't really know. You'd have to ask him...I mean her."

Cynthia smiled. "It's hard to think of someone as someone else, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Him...her. He...she. Brother...sister."

"Um...yeah! Like, real hard. But I'm trying."

"I'm sure they appreciate it a lot. Most people who go through what they're doing really want to be recognized for who they're trying to be. It's kind of...self-affirming. Do you know what that means?"

"Sure. I guess."

Cynthia nodded. "It gives all of them a sense of reassurance and comfort to be thought of, or referred to as who they feel they are."

Tommy shrugged again. "I guess," he replied.

She looked at him. "So tell me, what do you think of all this switching around? Not what you think everyone else thinks. You, personally. How do you see it?"

"Huh? Me? I guess like everyone else. It's just that I think I notice a few ways that it's better this way. I guess that's all. But that doesn't mean I like it...that I approve or think it's right. It's just that... I don't know. Everything is all cockeyed all the time. You know? It's like looking at everything..." He waved his hands all around in the air. "All...cross-eyed! I want to see this one over here and that one over there, only their not there at all. They're both in the wrong places." His arms wound up tangled and crossed as he pointed out toward the sides. "And it's...I don't know. Just wrong I guess. I can't get used to it."

"You find it confusing? Frustrating?"

"Yeah. Like you wouldn't believe!"

"Do you think you would find it easier, if only one of them was changing and not the other?"

"Oh yeah! For sure. That way, at least one of them would still be there where they're supposed to be."

Cynthia nodded. "I have no doubt that with the two of them switching places like they are, then it can all be more than a bit confusing."

"You're telling me!" Tommy exclaimed.

Cynthia looked at him for a moment before asking. "And what about the future?"

"The future? What about it?"

"How do you see your role with your *new* brother and sister?"

"Huh? I don't know. Just like it's always been I guess. I'll always keep looking out for them, just like I always do."

"What do you mean when you say, looking out for them?"

"I don't know. Keep them out of trouble I guess. When I can. Those two...especially Jimmy Joe, they both need looking after

sometimes. I've already had to jump in a couple of times now to stop some fights...for both of them."

Cynthia was surprised to hear that. "So you see yourself kind of as their protector?"

Tommy thought about that. "Um...I never really thought about it like that. But I guess so."

Cynthia smiled again. "I have no doubt at all that they both feel very relieved to have you watching out for them so well. They don't know how lucky they are."

Tommy smiled at the compliment.

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The door to Jades room was right next to the door to Tommy's room, and it was open. When Cynthia left Tommy, she chanced to look inside. She saw Jade sitting at her desk, pulling on her hair and staring closely at her face in the mirror. She walked in.

Jade thought he heard his mother entering the room. "Mom," he said, still looking at his hair in the mirror. "Olivia thinks I should get some pink streaks in my hair. What do you think?"

"Sorry," Cynthia replied. "I'm not your mother. But I have no doubt you'd be right in style."

He turned quickly, frightened and embarrassed that she had seen what he was doing. He sat turned in his chair and just watched as she walked in.

Cynthia sat on the foot of his bed. "I hear rumors that there's things you're afraid of. Want to tell me about it?"

"Like what?" he asked cautiously.

"Like...anything."

"Why?"

"Because sometimes it helps to talk about them." When he didn't move or respond she added, "I'm a very good listener." When he still sat there looking at her she added, "And I don't spread gossip." She was glad to see at least his head move as if he was considering it. "Come over here," she prompted as she moved two inches further away on his bed. "Sit by me." He stood, but he went no further. "So...what are you afraid of?" she asked.

He rolled his eyes at the question. "Pick something," he said. "There's times when I'm afraid of almost everything!"

"Are you afraid of me?"

He considered that, then shrugged. "I don't know. A little I guess."

She nodded and held her arms out as if to offer a hug. "Sit," she offered. This time he actually came over and sat next to her, close enough that they were actually touching. She put her arm around the girl that used to be a boy. "So what kind of things bother you the most?"

"I don't know. Just a lot of stuff."

"Like what?"

"I don't know."

"What makes you cry?"

He looked up at her, wide-eyed and surprised she should ask something like that. "Lots of stuff, I guess. Sometimes, I just have to cry, you know? Sometimes, I just can't help it. Mom says it's because of the hormones. Everything I've read on the internet says I should be more emotional about things too. I guess I am."

"But you're still afraid of things."

It was hard to admit to this stranger, but with his head bowed down toward the floor, he nodded.

"And crying helps?"

He looked up at her quickly. "Sometimes. Not always. Not usually. I just...cry a lot. More often at night when I'm alone. I guess sometimes thinking about things just gets to me sometimes. You know? I guess I think about things too much."

"And you cry a lot."

He nodded.

"Because you're afraid of those things you think about?"

He thought about that. "Maybe not. I guess I'm just scared."

"Of what? You just said you're not afraid of what you think about."

It was another moment before he answered. "The future I guess," he breathed. "What's going to happen to me. What's already happened to me. What I'm doing to my Mom, Dad... everyone!" He looked up at her for a moment, then stared down at

the floor. "Sometimes I think I'd be better off if I wasn't here at all. Better off dead. Then nobody would have to worry about me anymore or put up with...the way I am." He looked up at her quickly. "But dying is the last think I want to do. I think it's number one on my list of things I'm most afraid of!"

"So you've thought about killing yourself?"

"Well...kind of," he admitted. "But trust me, I'm not going to do it! I remember when the whole family got all worried I was going to kill myself. But I'm more afraid of dying I think than anything. I have..." He stopped.

"You have what?" she asked after a few moments.

"Nightmares about it," he said softly, staring at the floor. "Silly huh?"

"No. Not at all. And maybe those nightmares are the best thing that could have ever happened to you?"

"Huh?" he asked, looking back at her again.

Cynthia took a deep breath. "I tried to kill myself three times," she told him. His wide-eyed look of surprise was just what she expected. "I almost succeeded the last time."

"Why? Why would you try to kill yourself? That's just...crazy! It would be...horrible. Worse than that!"

"Unlike you, I didn't have the nightmares to frighten me and keep me from trying. To me, it was better than the way I was living then."

"How's that?"

"I was like you used to be."

"Me? Like I used to be? What do you mean?"

"I was born a boy...just like you."

He stared at her, open mouth and totally unbelieving. "Get lost. You were?"

She nodded. "I was."

"But I thought you were just another woman, like everyone else."

"Well thank you," she replied. "It's nice to hear. Trust me."

"Oh I do. I mean, yeah, I know what you mean. So like, you still like to hear people say they didn't know you weren't a woman?"

She nodded a little. "But I consider myself to be a woman now. At least, as much as I possibly can be."

"So are you like...married?" he asked.

She smiled. "Not to a man. I have a...partner that I love very much."

"Partner?"

"Another woman," she explained. "We live together."

"Oh." He thought about that for a moment, but it was one of those things he figured he'd have to mull over later. "Um...so...how did you...um...do it. How did you get to change into who you are?"

"Well, back then there wasn't all the things you've got now. There was no internet with lots of information you could easily get to, and the medical end of things was really just beginning. There are lots of procedures now that didn't even exist back then." She looked at him seriously. "You have a lot more advantages than I ever did."

"So what happened?" he asked.

"I wanted to be a girl – for real. I always wanted to play with my sister's dolls instead of the trucks everyone gave me. I always wanted to wear what my sister got to wear instead of all my clothes. I wanted to be a girl real bad, but my parents wouldn't let me. They yelled at me and spanked me for it. But it didn't stop me from wanting it that bad. And I guess the want just grew and grew, until since I couldn't be what I wanted, I tried jumping out of a tree to kill myself. I wound up breaking an arm and twisting one of my ankles."

"You tried to kill yourself over it?"

She nodded. Not just once, but three times. I won't tell you what happened, but I came so close the last time, that when I woke up in the hospital, the doctors all insisted that the family sit down with them to discuss it. It wasn't until then that my parents eased up a little and finally understood how deep my need was."

"So what happened?"

"Let's just say that things went a little easier for me. I got to dress like a girl whenever I wasn't in public. Then as soon as I graduated college and got a decent job and was living by myself, I started dressing more and more...until I finally started my official transition. I was twenty-five when I took my first dose of hormones."

"And you're still taking them?"

She nodded. "Different ones, but yes."

"And did you...I mean...have an operation and stuff?"

Again she nodded. "I was twenty-nine when I managed it. It was both the most painful and rewarding experience of my life."

"It hurt?"

"Like the dickens!"

He looked down thoughtfully. "I don't like pain either."

She hugged him and laughed. "Nobody does!"

Noise in the hallway made them both look up. A moment later, two girls ran into the room with sleeping bags and small carry cases. The two girls stopped when they saw the doctor.

"Alli! Nichole!" Jade said excitedly as he jumped up. "You're here!"

But the two girls just stood there looking at the stranger in the room.

Doctor Hapkins stood up. "Good evening girls," she said pleasantly with a big smile. "I'm Doctor Hapkins, and I was just leaving. She turned back to Jade. "Have fun."

"Come in!" Jade said excitedly, glad that his friends had finally arrived.

"That was the doctor?" Nichole asked.

"That's her?"

"What's she like?" Allison asked.

Jade considered the question. "Kind of cool. Really!"

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Cynthia sat in the family room across from Clint and Susan, who were sitting together on the couch. Clint had his arm protectively around his wife. Cynthia had no doubt that this would be the most difficult interview of all. "The TV calls it bizarre," she started.

"I don't like my kids looked at like they're freaks!" Susan replied, suddenly angry.

"Of course not," Doctor Hapkins replied. "They're not. They're children. Beautiful children. Literally in fact!"

Susan seemed a bit more placated. "They are beautiful. Both of them!" she said proudly. "They're both good kids."

Cynthia nodded. "So I've seen. And it's no more than what I expected. The media tries to use words to drum up interest. The

more interest, the better. Therefore, they find some really detestable words and phrases about things to stick into their broadcasts.”

“They ought to be sued!” Clint muttered.

Cynthia nodded. “Sometimes they are. But it doesn’t stop them.” She watched as both Clint and Susan sat there tightlipped, saying nothing. She addressed Susan. “Tommy says you cry a lot about all this.”

The look of anger was back on Susan’s face. “Tommy shouldn’t go saying things like that.”

“But you do.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Susan countered.

“Every single day,” Cynthia agreed.

Susan looked at her for a moment, then nodded. “I do... sometimes,” she agreed.

“Did you know that Tommy sees himself as a protector? Not just for the twins, but for all of you.”

Clint grunted somewhat proudly. “He’s a McComber. It’s what we do. We look after each other.”

“He’s proud of it. And I think you’ve got a very special family. Very special! There’s not many families anywhere that would support each other and do what you’re doing.” She saw Clint merely nod as an answer, and that was it.

She turned her attention directly to him. “I know you don’t like what the twins are doing. Nobody would. And you’ve got two kids that are bound and determined to go through it together. In my opinion, they’re both being amazingly brave. Few kids would have the guts to go through what they are.” Again she saw him nod slightly in acknowledgement, probably glad for the offhanded compliment. “Both the twins seem to look up to you. A lot! Do you spend much time with them?”

“All I can,” he replied.

“What kind of things do you do with them?”

“What kind of what? Whatever needs to be done!”

“Jimmy Joe, for instance,” she said. “What do you usually do with him? Hunting? Fishing? Work around the house?”

“All that, of course. Jimmy Joe loves to hunt. I wish I had the time to go with her more often than I do. More often she goes with

my brother Jed and his boys.”

“Do you ever do anything else with him?”

He considered it. “Schoolwork. I do a lot of that with... him. When the kids are all swapped around, Jas goes to Home Ec and Jimmy goes into the Mechanics class at school. Jimmy needs help catching up so I work with her to make sure she knows what she’s doing...what *he’s* doing!”

“And how about Jade?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Jade didn’t need much of my help before. And even now when he’s not going to that class hardly at all anymore, he doesn’t really need me to help him out with it. In fact, from what their teacher tells us, he’s head and shoulders at that stuff over all the kids. When I can, I’m starting to show him some electrical stuff now that he wouldn’t normally get in that class. As usual, he’s eating it up. I mean, *she’s* eating it up. Sorry.”

Cynthia smiled. “It’s hard to keep the pronouns straight. Even now. Isn’t it?”

“I’d rather not have to,” Clint replied.

“I have no doubt,” Cynthia told him. She looked at Susan. “That brings up another thing that I noticed. “Everyone outside of here calls Jade...Jade. But most of the time all of you call her Jas...or Jasmine.”

“I had two twins,” Susan said. “And I named them Jimmy and Jasmine. The kids in the family gave them the new names...without consulting me. It became...hard to talk about either of them without knowing which one anyone was actually referring to. So the names did kind of help. I guess they still do. But I named my kids Jimmy and Jasmine.”

“But do *they* prefer the new names?”

“Jimmy Joe certainly does,” she replied. “I guess Jasmine does too. Jimmy and I argued about it one day. She wanted to be called Joe. We finally settled on Jimmy Joe. I’m not happy about it, but I guess it kind of stuck.”

“And how about Jade? You said she prefers the new name too.”

Susan shook her head. Jade didn’t sit as easily with me I guess. So I call him Jasmine...like it’s supposed to be.”

“Supposed to be for this new girl you have, or for the original Jasmine?”

Susan looked a bit startled. “What’s the difference? I had two twins. I still do. They’re just...mixed up.”

Cynthia smiled. “Mixed up, is right! Tommy referred to it as like being cross-eyed. They’re both there, but in the wrong place.”

Clint nodded. “Tommy’s smarter than he lets on a lot.”

“I got that impression,” Cynthia replied. She looked back to Susan. “But my point is, this Jasmine you have now, isn’t the same Jasmine you had before. They’re different people. Different kids. She’s not the boy you had before – Jimmy, and she’s also not the girl you had before – Jasmine. She’s become someone new, for both herself and everyone else, which includes you. Maybe she wants the new name so she can feel better about her new identity, so she doesn’t have to live up to what her sister was. She can be herself, not the old Jasmine.”

Susan was a little startled as she took that in. “She said something like that once, that she doesn’t want to be confused with being her sister. She just didn’t say it in so many words.”

Cynthia smiled. “Just something to think about.” She tried a few more questions, but all she really got back was more minimal answers, or no answers. She finally gave up and stood up. “Well,” she said. “I guess I better be getting back to get some sleep. I’ve got a long drive ahead of me tomorrow...and a long walk from here back to Doctor McComber’s house. Thank you for your kindness and dinner, and thank you so much for putting up with all my questions. I’m sure that whenever your family does that video, we can manage to make the whole process go smoothly and easily.”

“I hope so,” Susan agreed as she and Clint got up from the couch.

Cynthia noted that Clint looked nothing but relieved. “Mind if I use your bathroom before I leave?” Cynthia asked.

“Of course,” Susan replied with a smile.

The bathroom didn’t take long, but when she came back out into the hallway, she heard giggling from the direction of Jade’s bedroom. Tommy’s and Jimmy Joe’s bedroom doors were closed. Jade’s door was the only one that was open. She couldn’t help but

just sneak quietly down the hall a bit further to take a peek. She wound up standing for a long time on the far side of the hallway where she hoped she wouldn't be spotted as easily. Inside, she saw four girls now instead of three, all about the same age. They were all wearing nightgowns, all sitting on the floor on top of what looked like sleeping bags, all talking and giggling while they painted each other's nails. Cynthia couldn't help herself. She stood there silently watching as a tear rolled down from her eye.

"They call themselves the Four Musketeers," Susan whispered.

Cynthia startled. She hadn't noticed Susan even coming up next to her. "Sorry," she whispered back. It's just that...to see so many girls together, and they all seem to be such good friends. You have no idea how special I think that is."

Susan smiled. "Four Musketeers. They literally do everything together. They always have. With one Jasmine, and now with this new one. I guess it doesn't really matter to them, as long as they're all together. I think if they could live and sleep together they'd prefer it. But like the rest of the family, those girls watch out for each other, and help each other every bit they can. I guess their latest project is...Jade. Helping...her."

"And have they?" Cynthia asked.

It was a moment before Susan replied. "Undoubtedly!"

Cynthia went back to Brian's house where she slept fitfully all night long. Her heart torn between gladness for the friendship she had seen between Jade and the other girls, and the heartache she had endured in her own past. Oh to have girls like that to surround and support her when she had been so young. Maybe then she wouldn't have the scars from her last two attempts to end her own life. Maybe then she would have had a far more happy childhood than she had grown up with. Maybe then...she would have known love growing up, instead of only feeling despised and outcast. Maybe...then.

Chapter 61 – Passing the Torch

April 11th – 15th

Jimmy Joe felt like a kid in a candy store, where there wasn't a single piece of candy that she liked! Her excitement ran high. The selection ran low. It was so disappointing. So dismal. But that had always been her problem with the boy's clothes. There was very little available that she found interesting.

Susan was becoming frustrated. She and Jimmy Joe had been to three different stores now to buy *him* a new wardrobe, and they had very little to show for it. "Jimmy Joe, what the heck do you want?"

"I want color! Different styles! Fashion!" she replied. And all I see is pretty much variations on the same stuff.

Susan didn't bother to tell her that all she had to do was to quit hunting and *she* could go right back to finding everything she was looking for, in any girl's department of any store. But her...son... switching back right now was the last thing the family needed in view of the upcoming video they were going to have to do. But later, say in a month or so, it would be a totally different story...if her *son* would ever agree to quit hunting and switch back again.

She had never had this problem with her other sons. Both Tommy and Jimmy had always been satisfied with everything and anything she had bought for them. She briefly wondered though, if Jade ever got to switch back, would he be as uninterested in looking for boy's clothes again as he used to be? Susan shook the thought off. "Why are you so worried about it?" Susan asked.

"I want to look good for the video we're doing. I want to look – sharp!"

Susan shook her head. Jimmy Joe was way too excited over this video and being on TV. Way, way too excited.

"How about a suit?" Jimmy Joe suggested hopefully.

"You don't need a suit for this video! We're doing it in casual clothes. Nothing fancy."

"Supposed I want a suit anyway?"

"No. At the rate you're growing right now, you'd wear it once and the next time it would be too small. No suits. Now how about some nice shorts and some t-shirts? Hot weather is coming soon."

Jimmy Joe rolled his eyes and sighed. "Booooring! Hey, maybe a vest. And a hat. Yeah, a real cool hat! I want everyone to say, 'who's that real cool guy?'"

If Susan could have wilted, she would have.

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After a long tedious day of shopping, Susan and Jimmy Joe brought home a pizza for dinner. After they ate, while Jimmy Joe was happily hanging up all his new clothes, Susan sat on Jade's bed, taking the weight off her tired feet while Jade went through her closet and started pulling out everything she wouldn't be wearing anymore. Because the closet was so full, it was turning out to be a major pile. Susan had told *Jade* that they would be going shopping for *her* new clothes tomorrow.

After Doctor Hapkins' visit, Susan was making a bigger effort to call Jimmy Joe a he, and Jade a she. And she was doing her best to try to get used to calling her new daughter – Jade. She wasn't totally happy about it, but perhaps the doctor had been right. Jade wasn't Jasmine and perhaps she deserved a new identity. Susan just would have been a bit happier if she had realized it sooner and had been part of the decision making process for her new name. She didn't really mind the name Jade. In fact she rather liked it. It just would have been nice to be part of the process for naming her own children. Both of them!

"Hooowww do I look?"

Susan and Jade turned to see Jimmy Joe standing in the bedroom doorway, sporting a bright sky-blue shirt with a pair of kaki colored cargo pants and colorful sneakers on her feet. She had one hand in the air and the other holding the front of the short brim of the hat on her head. The hat was tilted down at an angle. With an

almost vulgar snap of her hips, she began putting one foot in front of the other, lifting each foot fairly high with each step and wiggling her hips as she came further into the room. For as much “style” as Jimmy Joe was trying to present, she walked more like a silly clown imitating a runway model, and the overall effect was nothing but comical. Susan couldn’t help but laugh.

“Hey!” Jimmy Joe said, coming to a stop. “This is what all the girls are going to really dig!”

Susan laughed again. “Not if you walk like that, they’re not!”

Jimmy Joe blushed. “Hey, it’s the best I could do.”

“Don’t plan on doing that on the video,” Susan laughed. “You’ll chase everyone off the land!”

“I just need a little more practice,” Jimmy Joe said rather haughtily. “Just wait. You’ll see.” Her eyes spotted something odd though in the pile of clothes on the floor to be gotten rid of. “Hey! What are you doing?” She made a bee-line for the pile and began pulling things out of it. “This is all my stuff for the fashion show!”

“Well *I’m* not going to be wearing any of it,” Jade told her. “Some of it is probably too small for me now anyway.”

“No! It’s for the fashion show!” Jimmy Joe replied as she kept pulling out all the clothes that the two of them had created.

“Well you’re certainly not going to be wearing them either!” Susan told her firmly.

“Not me! Her!” Jimmy Joe said, pointed at Jade.

Jade shook her head. “Not me. I’m not even going to be in the thing.”

Jimmy Joe looked shocked. “You’re what? Of course you are.”

Jade shook his head. “Nope! I got out of it a few weeks ago. We still have to make one more outfit, but I don’t have to be in the show.”

“But you’ve got to!”

“No I don’t!” Jade said mockingly in return.

Jimmy Joe desperately turned to her mother. “Tell him he’s got to be in it. Please! Tell him!”

“Jade and I have already discussed this, and Mrs. Marker has already approved it as well,” Susan told him.

“But Mom...he’s got to!”

"No *she* doesn't."

"But that's all my designs. All the clothes I created."

"That I created," Jade told her. "I did most of the sewing."

"But I created them. They were my designs!"

"And they were beautiful," Susan told him. "Really, really nice!"

"But you're throwing them all away!"

"I'm not going to wear them." Jade said again. "And like I said, some of them are probably too small for me now anyway."

"But you've got to be in the show. It's the only way my designs will ever be seen."

"Jimmy Joe!" Susan said firmly. "You're only twelve. And as good as they were, if Jade doesn't want to be in the show, then she doesn't have to."

Jimmy Joe stared at her mother for a moment. "You mean, it's up to him?"

"And *she* decided *she* didn't want to be in it."

Jimmy Joe immediately turned and focused her desperate pleading on Jade instead. "You've got to be in it! Do you know how important this is? This means everything to me. Everything! You're nice remember? You do everything for everyone. Please! Pretty please. You've got to do this for me! Pleeaaaaase?" She stood there with nothing but a desperate pleading look on her face.

Jade shook his head. "Sorry. I'm not doing it."

"Oh good for you!" Susan approved as she got to her feet.

"Come on, Jimmy Joe. Out! We've still got half a closet and a full set of drawers to go through."

Jimmy Joe reluctantly left the room. But she turned one more time in the doorway before she went back to her room. "Please?" she begged once again.

Jade shook his head. "I've already got enough to worry about with this video. I don't need to be displaying myself in front of anybody else."

Jimmy Joe left in despair.

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"Night Jade," Susan said as she kissed her new daughter on the head. She pulled the covers up over him again and walked out of the room, turning the light off and closing the door behind her.

Thirty minutes later, Jade's door opened again and a figure entered the mostly dark room. Jade of course was sound asleep. The figure leaned over the bed and shook the lump that was Jade's body. "Jade..." the voice whispered. "Jade! Wake up!"

In the dark room, Jade startled awake...mostly. She was confused but couldn't miss the fact that someone was trying to wake her up. "Who?" she mumbled as she rolled over, her arm searching for the light switch. The light came on. "Jimmy Joe? What the heck are you doing? What do you want?"

"You've got to be in that fashion show. You've *got* to!"

Jade rolled his eyes and laid back on his pillow. "No. I told you I'm not doing it."

"But you've got to. It's important!"

"Not to me."

"But it is to me."

"What's the big deal? It's just a little fashion show that the class at school is putting on."

"But for me it's so much more! It's everything I've ever dreamed of!"

"I thought you dreamed about being a fashion model."

"I...do. Sometimes," she admitted. "But this is all the same thing. This is my life! This is what I want to do when I grow up."

"Jimmy Joe, we're only twelve. It's not the end of the world."

"It is to me. You've got to do this for me. I can't be in it anymore, but you can! You've got to do it!"

"I...don't...want to do it! Now leave me alone and go back to bed."

"I couldn't sleep," Jimmy Joe replied. "And I won't sleep until you agree to be in that show!"

"Then go back to your own room and not sleep. I don't care. But I'm going back to sleep now!" He rolled over in the bed away from her, put his arm around Cleo, closed his eyes and snuggled against the stuffed lion.

Jimmy Joe ran over to the other side of the bed and jumped on it and laid on top of the covers next to him. Jade opened his eyes. "Go away!" he said.

"No! Not till you agree to be in the show."

"I told you, no!"

"Please? Pretty please? This is important to me."

"I already said no a thousand times! Now let me sleep!" He closed his eyes again.

"No! Like I said, not till you agree to be in it. Please Jade? Please?" When she got no answer she tried something else. "I'll do anything for you. *Anything!*"

Jade opened his eyes again. "Anything? Will you quit hunting?"

"Are you crazy? I'm not doing that!"

"Then I'm not going to be in the show." Again he closed his eyes. "Now let me sleep."

"No. Not till you agree to be in the show! It's that important to me!"

"Jade opened his eyes and turned over onto his back in frustration. "Ugh!" he grunted. "Why can't you understand that I'm not doing the show?"

"Why can't you understand that it's really important to me?"

"It must be because you're being a pain in the ass again."

"Then you'll do it?"

"Hell no! Now let me sleep!"

"No! Jade, I worked so hard on those designs. And they're good. Really good!"

"You mean / worked on them. I did most of the work."

"Same thing. We did them together. Now you've got to finish what we started. Why let all the work we...you did go to waste? You know those clothes are great. You know they deserve to have at least someone see them and not just throw them out."

"They won't be thrown out. They're going to Goodwill. Someone will get to wear them."

"But it's practically the same as them being thrown out. Nobody will ever know I designed them. Nobody will ever know that I...you... that we made them. You and me together."

"Why do you care?"

"Because I do. I designed them. I would have sewn them all if I could have. You just had to help me do it. We did it like...a team."

Jade rolled his eyes.

Jimmy Joe thought of something else. "You like fixing things, don't you?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"And I like designing clothes."

"And wearing them!"

"Who doesn't?"

Jade rolled his eyes again.

"When you fix something or take something apart, don't you always like to finish it and put it all back together again?"

"Idiot! You can't leave something all apart. If you're gonna' fix it, you've got to put it back together again to finish it."

"And this is the same thing. We've started something, and now we've got to finish it. You like taking things apart, fixing them, and putting them back together again. This is the same thing for me. The job isn't done until everything is finished. And that means making one more outfit, and you wearing them all in that show. We've got to finish what we started."

Jade looked at her. "You're really that serious?"

"Would I be determined to keep you awake all night if I wasn't?"

Jade shook his head. "I sooo don't want to do this."

"But you've got to. For me...*and* for you. So please?"

Again he rolled his eyes, then focused on her again. "You're going to owe me big time for this! Big time!"

Jade wasn't prepared for the happy excited hug he got from his...*brother*.

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Reverend Cosinger stood watching the people coming into his church. Five minutes until the service was scheduled to start, and it was already obvious that the church wasn't going to be nearly as full as it had been. There was something else that was obvious too. He didn't see a single McComber there yet. Not even Valerie and her daughter. And they always came.

He briefly wondered if the people who had shown up, had only come because they wanted to see what would happen between him and the twins...or the rest of the McComber family. He had played those little scenarios in his mind over and over again, wondering each time how it would really go. He had a plan. He had words he had thought he wanted to say. But it was looking like today wasn't going to be the day he would get to say them. With a sigh, he left his spot to prepare for the morning's service.

His sermon was good, carefully prepared in case he got the chance to make amends with the family he had done such an injustice to the week before. That family just wasn't there to hear the words. He did however feel a sense of relief at not having to directly deal with the issue yet. And that relief translated into a calmness in his voice as he spoke. He spoke clearly and with conviction. Yet his voice had none of the fiery passion it had held for the last few months when he had been fixated on the blight sitting in the middle of his congregation each Sunday.

When he was done, he shook the hands and politely thanked each and every person for coming back out to church again. When they were all gone, he walked back into the church and closed the front doors. His wife was waiting for him a few feet away. "None of them showed up," he said to her.

"I noticed," his wife replied.

"I don't know if I'm sorry or relieved."

"You've got to deal with them sometime."

"I know," he replied. "And evidently now they're doing some kind of big TV production all about themselves."

"I hope they don't come here to talk to us."

"I hope not!" the Reverend agreed. "That could be...awkward."

She nodded as they turned to walk back up the center aisle together. "You weren't as good today as you have been?"

"Huh? What do you mean? I thought I had a very good sermon."

"The words were good, but...it was the way you delivered it. I thought it sounded...flat."

"Flat? I spoke the way I always do."

"No you didn't. For the last few months you've been speaking far more passionately. You've been far more animated than you ever used to be. You've been almost angry at times in your conviction and delivery. But today it was just...flat. Like you used to speak."

"I didn't have those two blasted twins in front of me today to get angry about."

She stopped walking and turned to him. "Maybe you should find a way to get that same passion back that you have when they're here," she told him. "You were a much better speaker then."

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"So what did your...*brother*...do to you this time to make you change your mind about the fashion show?" Susan asked as she and Jade drove toward the stores.

Jade rolled his eyes. "Bugged me and threatened to keep me up all night until I gave in."

"You don't have to do it, you know."

"I know," Jade sighed. "But maybe she's right."

"*He's* right," Susan corrected him. "About what?"

"I like to fix things. I love doing it. But I can't just take something apart and leave it apart. It's not fixed until it's all put back together again and it works."

"So? What does that have to do with this?"

"So I guess she..."

"He!"

"He kind of sees things the same with all the clothes she comes up with. The jobs not done until it's completely finished. And I guess to her, that means showing them in the fashion show."

Susan let his missed pronouns go. "You still don't have to do this," she said. "It's not like something's not going to work anymore if you don't."

"I know. But...she wants me to. It means a lot to her, I guess."

Susan turned her head briefly to look at him...the him that was now pretty much a her. "I think maybe *he* was right."

"So I really should be in the show?"

"No. That you're too nice!"

Jade's eyes rolled automatically.

"What do you think of this new dress design...*he*...concocted?" Susan asked.

"I think it's going to be almost impossible to make," Jade replied.

"I think you're right. Right enough that I'm thinking of having *him* do some of the sewing on it too."

Jade was surprised. "You are?"

Susan nodded. "He said he wants to be a fashion designer, male or female. And designers have to know how to sew to create the clothes. So I think I'm going to have you both do this one together."

"That would be great!" Jade exclaimed. "I won't have to do it all myself."

"But you're still going to have to do a lot of it. You and...your brother...have worked on all the clothes to some extent together. I think it's only fitting that for your final project you both have to do the hard part together."

"I'm just glad I won't have to do it alone! When are we going to get the material for it?"

"Not today. It's Sunday and the fabric store is closed. I think I want you both to pick out the materials anyway. So maybe tomorrow or Tuesday. It's going to be a big project, and with everything going on at the same time, I hope you can finish it in time."

"We should if we can both work on it together."

"Let's hope."

"So if we're just going to buy some new clothes for me today, any chance I can get a bunch of jeans and not just skirts and dresses?"

"You're going to need at least a few new nice things to wear I'm afraid."

"So no jeans?" he asked disappointedly.

She looked briefly at him again as she drove. "No, we'll get you some jeans for sure. This whole business of you only wearing skirts doesn't really work anymore. The whole damn punishment thing doesn't really work anymore. Not that I'm sure it ever did. The way things stand right now, it almost feels like you two concocted this whole thing just to really switch places with each other."

"No we didn't!"

"I know. It's just starting to feel that way."

"So I'm getting jeans? I can wear them anytime I want from now on? I don't have to automatically grab a skirt or a dress first?"

"Actually," Susan replied. "Summer is coming. I was thinking more in terms of getting you a bunch of shorts, t-shirts, and flip-flops."

Jade thought about that a moment. "Cool!" he said happily.

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The bids and proposals had started coming in by the second day. Marcy was pretty much amazed by the proposed projects that so many different TV stations had sent, and many of the stations were ones she had never heard of. Most of the bids and proposals had formal legal contracts that had to be signed and sent back. The ones that didn't, Marcy soon figured out were from the stations that seemed to offer far less than what other stations were willing to do.

The one big thing that surprised Marcy the most, was the amount of money each proposal seemed to be offering. Another thing that surprised her, was that the more serious offers seemed to arrive last. The shorter the deadline got for the entries, the more complete and serious the proposals for the project seemed to get. It wasn't difficult to figure out that those stations had put a lot more time and thought into what they were offering. But each and every bid and proposal was carefully printed out and put in its own separate folder for the family to review and decide upon.

"We're going to need a damn lawyer just to understand all this fine print!" Jacob complained as he read through one of the contracts that one of the stations wanted them to sign if they agreed to accept that stations proposal.

"We might," Marcy agreed.

"Damn!" Jacob swore again. "If we get a lawyer involved, there's no way this whole thing can happen quick."

"Maybe John and Brian can figure it all out," Marcy suggested.

Jacob nodded. "Let's hope!"

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They met fairly late Tuesday night. Jacob, Rose, Marcy, Pete, Brian, Janet, Jed, Valerie, and of course, Clint and Susan. Two worktables in the family business office had been pushed together so they could all sit together and pass the folders around. After seeing the project proposal outlines that some of the later entries had sent, the first go-round through the folders eliminated the majority of them, even though many of them were for exactly what the family originally had in mind. The newer entries were far more than the family wanted or asked for, but no one in the family seemed to be able to look past them when they compared them to all the other entries.

It wasn't the money that was offered. Jacob was quick to point out that he wasn't interested in their blood money at all. In fact, he was happier about the bids that offered less money. The second go-round narrowed the field down to three. Three of the very last proposals that had only arrived that afternoon. Three of the biggest TV companies in the industry. It was simply each of their professionally detailed outlines that the stations proposed that had caught everyone's eye.

ABC was discussed in some detail because of the interview they had done with Bruce Jenner, when he was still Bruce Jenner in the not that distant past. And ABC's plan to have Dianne Sawyer do the interview was seen as a somewhat good thing as well.

NBC's plan to have Kathie Lee Gifford do it was equally regarded though, and most of the women seemed to favor trying her over Dianne Sawyer.

But in the end, even though the proposal listed a journalist that none of them had ever heard of, it came down to one phrase that had been included in the proposal from CBS that had caught Jacob's eye the most: "To be done with the greatest respect toward this heroic loving family, and with utmost care toward the two brave children involved the most."

"That's the one I want to go with!" Jacob declared after reading the phrase aloud to everyone. "My vote is to go with them! That,

and they're only offering two hundred and fifty thousand. Those others in the millions can all go to hell!"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand, plus one tenth of one percent of the advertising generated," John reminded him.

Jacob grunted. "How much can that amount to? Not much, I'll bet. I like this one!"

"But I never heard of this Emily Durant they want to send to do the interview," Valerie countered. "The others are big names!"

"I don't exactly care," Jacob replied. "Maybe doin' it with someone we don't see on the TV all the time will be to our favor. I'm not interested in meetin' no big star. I want this thing done right and quick. Get it out, and get the damn media off our backs. And with their proposal, they promised to do what sounds like a nice bit about the family and our land, and what we do with it."

"So do all the others," Brian pointed out.

"I still like this one," Jacob insisted. "This is the only one that mentioned respectin' us and especially takin' care with those kids! The only blamed one!"

"How about the contracts they sent?" John asked. "Shouldn't we compare what's in those?"

"You read 'em," Jacob replied. "And if you see anything that's obviously way out of line, let me know. But as I see it, we ain't got the time to go dickerin' between the station and the lawyers to get this done. It's only going to cost us more time and waste a pile of money."

In the end, the proposal to have CBS come out and film the family was accepted. Jacob himself signed the contract, and Marcy and John handled getting it electronically sent back to the station.

Now they all had to prepare, because according to the contract, in just a few days, the station had promised to send out their advance team to start filming and finding out what would be needed for the real thing.

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It was his bare legs Wednesday evening that seemed to be the thing Jade was having the most problem with. Before, even wearing

skirts all the time, his legs had usually been covered with tights or once in a while pants. But the very short shorts he was now wearing seemed to leave his entire legs completely exposed from his crotch all the way down to his toes. He had kicked off the flip-flops he had been wearing since he got home from school in favor of bare feet. Bare feet was more comfortable than the unfamiliar flip-flops he had first put on.

He had gone to school in a nice pair of pants but had changed into some of his new “play clothes” as soon as he got home. Now, with his bare legs giving him a chill, he was thinking that maybe he shouldn’t have. And the t-shirt he had put on seemed to do nothing but emphasize how big his breasts had gotten, even if it was a really pretty t-shirt with a bright picture of wild birds on it.

“Jas, pay attention to...” Susan put her hand apologetically on Jade’s shoulder. “Sorry,” she said. “Jade,” she started again. “Please pay attention to what you’re doing. This is very serious!”

“But I already know how to do this,” Jade argued. “I’ve done it once before, for real! Remember?”

“That was a long time ago!” Susan countered. “And baby-sitting is serious business. And trust me, Mrs. Marker is a stickler when it comes to this subject and doing this part of it right!”

“But it’s not hard!”

“Good, because she’s going to want you to do it quickly and easily, and not forget even one little step.”

Ugh! Once again Jade unfastened the diaper from the doll, cleaned it up as if it was messy on the top and bottom, and then put a fresh diaper on it. “There!” he said. “See. No problem.”

“Okay,” Susan replied. “Now do it again, only faster. Babies wiggle around constantly. The faster you can do it, the better off you’ll be.”

“Mooommm,” Jimmy Joe’s voice called from up the hallway, a good five seconds before she entered the room. Her hands were full of newspaper cut out patterns she had been trying to create. “Mom, I can’t get this! How do you...” She stopped and saw what they were doing. “Home Ec again, right?” she said with a grin.

“What tipped you off?” Susan replied with a smirk.

Jimmy Joe stared at the diaper covered doll that they had grabbed from the middle of the shelf over the bed.

"What did you need Sweetie?" Susan asked.

"I need help with..." But her eyes seemed to go from the doll to her new sister, back to the doll, then they seemed to linger on her sister...her sister that had finally agreed to do the fashion show for her. The sister that she knew she owed a big favor to. But that wasn't the real problem that hit her.

"Jimmy Joe. What's your problem?" Susan asked again.

But Jimmy Joe barely heard her. She was too intent on trying to figure things out and come to a conclusion. Her sister! She was now supposed to be a he. She wasn't a girl anymore. And in more ways than she really wanted to think about, she supposed he really was. She was the brother now, not the sister anymore.

"Jimmy Joe?"

And there in front of her was a girl. Or at least someone that looked like a girl. Because just like she now looked like a boy, her former brother now looked all too much like a girl. And because of the way things were, her brother was now the she in their relationship – for all intents and purposes.

"Jimmy!"

She was Jimmy Joe now. A boy. And her brother was now Jade. A girl. And as much as she still loved them, boys didn't play with dolls. Girls did. As much as it hurt her to admit it, she had to do something she really didn't want to do, and swore she never would.

"Earth to Jimmy Joe. Wake up!"

"Sorry Mom," Jimmy said, still looking at Jade.

"Then what's your problem?"

But Jimmy Joe still paid no attention to her question. Dropping everything in her hands on one side of the bed where it would be out of the way, she walked around to the far side where they were working with the doll. "Excuse me," she mumbled as she pushed his way past them. "You can't use that doll for what you're doing."

"Why not?" Jade asked. "It's working just fine. We're almost done."

"No were not!" Susan replied. "You're going to do it several more times...at least!"

“Don’t use that doll,” Jimmy Joe told them as she stared up at all the dolls on the shelves.

“And what say do you have in this anymore?” Susan asked.

Jimmy Joe ignored her, and almost reverently reached up and carefully pulled down the one doll that she had forbid her new sister to ever touch. The one doll that meant the most to her. The one doll she had always loved beyond anything else. She carefully and lovingly cradled the doll in her arms and hugged it. She tenderly kissed the dolls face, then leaned over to whisper in the doll’s ear. “I’m sorry Baby Lucy. I’m sorry. But I have to let someone else care for you for a while. But I promise, I’ll always be your mommy, and I promise that someday I’ll be back again. Until then, you’re going to have to have a new mommy for a little while.”

She kissed the doll’s face again and turned around with it cradled in her arms. “Here,” she said to Jade. “This is Baby Lucy. This is the most special baby in the world. But I can’t give her to you until you promise you’ll love her like she’s your own real baby. You’ve got to promise that! And you’ve got to promise to take good care of her, and love her, and talk to her, and be a good mommy for her all the time. Promise?”

Jade looked back at his new brother questioningly. It was the one doll his new brother had not wanted him to touch – and he never had. He knew how much the doll had to mean to her, and watching Jimmy Joe with the doll just then only confirmed that. “You’re sure?” he asked.

It was a moment before Jimmy Joe found the courage to even nod. “You promise?” she asked again.

“I...guess,” Jade replied hesitantly.

“There can’t be any guessing about it!” Jimmy Joe said quickly. “You’ve got to promise to love and take care of her like a real baby!”

Jade looked at his new brother’s face. He saw how serious she was about this. “Okay, I promise,” he replied softly.

Jimmy Joe moved closer to Jade and held the baby doll out a little. “Take her in your arms. Make sure you support her head. Babies as young as she is can’t support their head, so you’ve got to support it for them.” Gradually, Jimmy Joe allowed the doll to slip from his arms into Jade’s. He stood there staring at the doll, then

quickly pushed past Jade and his mother and hurried out of the room. He headed straight to his own room and closed the door, where nobody could see him crying.

Susan had said nothing at all during any of it. But when it was over, the one thought that seemed to press foremost on her mind, was that she had just witnessed some type of torch being passed between her children. As if Jimmy Joe had just turned over her old life to his new sister.

Chapter 62 – Entering Pandora’s Box

April 20th – 21st

Her name was Patricia Velman, although everyone called her Trish. She and her crew had worked on more stories with Emily Durant than she could even count. But this was not the kind of story that they usually did. Emily Durant wasn’t the household name that the other networks had available. In fact, CBS had bigger name journalists they could have used instead. But the assignment had been given to Emily, which meant that Trish and her crew were automatically assigned as well. Why Emily and her?

Trish knew for a fact that Emily didn’t even want this assignment. In ninety percent of the stories they produced with Emily, Emily was rarely seen on the camera for more than a few moments. All their usual assignments were tough, hard hitting, news worthy assignments. Not this kind of human interest fluff stuff. This was not the kind of thing any of them were used to. But whenever the producer said go, they always jumped into their vehicles and were off. Only this time, they jumped on a plane instead. They did that a lot too.

Why had the family gone with CBS? She knew for a fact that both ABC and NBC had offered some of the best journalists in the world to do their story, and she also knew for a fact that the proposals the other stations had sent out had nearly mirrored the one from CBS. So why had the family decided to go with them instead of having someone famous like Dianne Sawyer do the interview instead? It didn’t make sense.

So now it was Monday and she was waiting for the plane to touch down on the Little Rock runway, with her assistant and two cameramen to do the initial work before the actual interviews. Emily wouldn’t be coming out until late Thursday to start the taping that was scheduled for all day Friday and Saturday. Not that Emily was one of those diva journalists. She was probably the furthest thing

from it. But Emily was staying home with the rest of the crew for now because there were other stories that were more in line with what they usually did that still needed covering.

As the plane bumped against the tarmac, her thoughts turned to what would lie ahead. There were no hotels up there, but there was still good cell phone coverage. She was grateful for that because they didn't have to bring their satellite equipment. And no hotels was nothing new to them either. There were a lot of stories she had covered, in places all over the world, where they had no choice but to camp out in tents – if they were lucky. The McCombers had however promised to put them all up in their homes, including the extended crew that would be driving out with Emily later in the week.

She turned to her assistant director who was sitting next to her. “Well Michelle, here we go again.”

Michelle Woods looked skeptically at her boss. “I never thought they'd send us out to do a piece like this.”

Trish nodded her agreement. She, Michelle, and Emily had worked hard to get where they were in the world. As women, they had fought tooth and nail to earn the respect they deserved – in a man's world. And for the last five years they had made it to the big time, covering the best news stories all over the world that every news team dreams of. In those years, team members had come and gone, but somehow, Trish, Emily, and Michelle had managed to stay together, although why Michelle was still with her, Trish didn't know. Twice now, Michelle had turned down permanent positions as director for other news positions. Michelle did direct occasionally, but she still preferred to work with Emily and her. Trish had long stopped asking why. More often, she was grateful to still have her. They were a well-oiled team.

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“I guess that's them,” Jacob said as he saw the four people heading directly for them and suddenly smiling.

Clint had been holding a piece of paper with Patricia Velman's name on it. “Must be,” Clint agreed as he dropped the sign and did his best to smile too.

Trish walked up to the older man. "Patricia Velman, CBS news," she said. "Jacob McComber?"

Jacob nodded. "That's me. Howdy." He shook the hand of the middle-aged woman and was surprised at how strong her grip was.

"Please just call me Trish," she told Jacob. "Everyone else does." She turned to the other man to shake his hand as well.

"Clint McComber," Clint said as he too shook her hand.

Trish's eyebrow went up. "The twins' father?"

Clint nodded.

"Very pleased to meet you," she replied. She turned to the slightly younger woman next to her. "This is my assistant directory, Michelle Woods." She turned to the two men standing just behind her. "And these two bozos are our cameramen, Lyle McDonald and Bob Samuels." There were handshakes all around.

"You said on the phone you had a lot of stuff you was shippin'," Jacob mentioned.

"Hopefully, it should all be at the baggage claim waiting for us," Trish replied. "And I'm afraid there is quite a bit."

"Well, me and Clint both got our trucks here, so hopefully there'll be no problem."

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Since they were in separate vehicles, Trish would have rather rode with Clint to start grilling him on things she might put in the list of questions she had to devise. She had somewhat of a list the copy staff back in New York had already come up with, but part of her job was to find more and better questions as they dug into the story. Instead, Jacob had insisted that she ride with him.

Since he appeared to be the one in charge, as far as she could tell, for the entire family, she decided to pose her very first big question to him. "Mr. McComber," she said, "would you mind if I asked you a question?"

"Just call me Jacob," Jacob replied. "And I'd be real surprised if you didn't ask questions. Isn't that what you reporter types do?"

Trish chuckled. "Occupational hazard, I'm afraid," she replied. "Actually, being nosy and asking too many questions is a job

requirement.”

“Figured as much,” Jacob said as he drove. “Ask away.”

“Why us?” Trish asked. “CBS is rather ecstatic that you chose us over the other networks, but I happen to know for a fact that ABC and Dianne Sawyer were convinced you would select them. Dianne was already planning the trip.”

Jacob grunted. “You sound like you know her.”

“I do. Personally.”

Jacob laughed. “Don’t tell the ladies at home, they’ll grill you all night with questions about her.”

It was Trish’s turn to laugh. “Let them. I’ll be glad to tell them all I know.” She turned serious again. “As I said, CBS is very glad you selected us, but I’m still wondering why us? Why would you choose us over ABC or NBC?”

Jacob grunted again. “Tell the truth, a bunch of the family was really interested in ABC and that Dianne Sawyer. Most of the women though were more interested in that Kathie Lee somethin’ that NBC wanted to send. I think they was more interested in meetin’ her than in the interview though.”

“I can imagine,” Trish said.

“But it was just one thing in that proposal that you people sent us that made the difference for me.”

“And what was that?”

“You said you’d respect the family and take extra care with the kids. Nobody else mentioned anything like that at all, and we McCombers is all about family and lookin’ out for each other.”

“I see,” Trish said thoughtfully. “Absolutely we intend on doing that. It goes without saying.”

“Well, you people was the only ones that said it in writing,” Jacob replied.

Trish made a mental note to make sure all her people were well aware of that.

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The two cameramen, Bob Samuels and Ryan McDonald, made the trip in Clint’s truck. Once they got to the family land and started

up the hill, their practiced eyes were already hard at work. But once they reached the housing area, there was only one direction their eyes could look. "We're going to need a plane," Ryan said as he stared at the view while driving up towards Jacob's house.

"Indeed," Bob agreed.

A few minutes later, they pulled up in front of another house that they hadn't been able to see until they got around the bend. This one appeared to be much bigger and nicer than the other houses they had passed. "Nice," Ryan McDonald mentioned as he looked the house over carefully, already wondering the best angles to shoot it from.

"It's my Dad's house," Clint replied. "It's bigger than any of the others, and since all of us have our own places down the road now, all the bedrooms here are empty. I'm afraid that when the rest of your people come out later in the week, we'll be making other arrangements for some of them."

"Not to worry," Bob replied. "I can't tell you how many times we've been stuck out in tents or even under the stars at night."

"Or trying to sleep in the driving rain," Ryan added.

"In the rain?" Clint asked. "You two ever spend much time in the woods?"

"Does five years doing wildlife photography in places like South America and Africa count?" Bob asked.

"I suppose it would," Clint replied, totally impressed.

"Then we've spent a lot of time in the woods," Ryan told him.

"Maybe that's why CBS sent you guys," Clint suggested.

Ryan and Bob looked at each other. Neither of them had even thought about that.

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Trish didn't know if she should be surprised or not when Jacob led everyone into his house through the side door instead of the front door. Most women who owned a nice house like the one they were at wanted to show it off properly. But evidently Jacob didn't think about things like that. She followed Jacob and Clint through the door

and found herself in a very large kitchen where four women immediately stood up from where they had been sitting at the table.

Jacob walked over and put his arm around his wife. "This here is my wife Rose," he said to their guests. "Trust me, you need somethin', she'll move heaven and earth to take care of it for you."

Clint went over and put his arm around Susan. "And this is my wife Susan," Clint told them as Susan nodded nervously.

"That there is Valerie, our oldest daughter," Jacob continued the introductions. "And Marcy, my son Pete's wife. I'm afraid they're the only ones home right now. You'll have to wait till later to meet the rest."

Trish nodded toward Valerie and Marcy. "Nice to meet you," she said sincerely. She turned to the older woman first. "Thank you for putting us up while we're here."

"Out pleasure," Rose replied with a smile.

Trish zeroed in on Susan and stood in front of her with her hand out. It was a moment though before Susan shook her hand. Trish realized that the woman was nervous. "It's very nice to meet you Susan," she said as comfortingly as she could. "We appreciate you taking the time to be here yourself to meet us."

"We figured you'd be most interested in meetin' people right off," Jacob told her. "And Clint here's taken the week off of work too so he can be around with his family."

"Thank you," Trish said. "We do appreciate it. And on behalf of CBS, we really appreciate the opportunity to be here to tell the world your amazing story." She turned and introduced her crew, but nobody bothered to move or shake hands.

"Dad," Clint said. He nodded toward the two cameramen. "Ryan and Bob there used to do wildlife photography in South America and Africa."

Jacob's eyebrows went up with delight. "Well now," he said happily. "You two and me's got some talkin' to do while you're here, 'cause I'm going to want to hear all about it."

"Not now Jacob!" Rose told him. "These people just got here." She turned to her guests. "Let me show you to your rooms, and then we can help you with whatever bags you've got," she said graciously.

"Thank you," Trish replied.

"Before we take in too much," Ryan spoke up, "any chance someone can show us around the land some. I'd like to start getting a feel for some camera angles and see what kind of things you wanted us to broadcast."

"I'll be more than glad to," Clint replied.

"Not you," Jacob interrupted. "You stay with Susan and your kids. I'll send 'em out with Jed instead."

Clint nodded, not sure if he was grateful or not. On the one hand, he wanted to stay close to his wife, but on the other hand, he wanted to get away from all these nosy strangers. And after spending some time with Bob and Ryan on the trip from the airport, it wasn't them that he was afraid of.

Twenty minutes later, Bob and Ryan had met Jed and had immediately gotten into his truck and driven off.

"And how about you ladies?" Jacob asked. "Where do you want to start?"

"Any chance Michelle and I can take a quick look at each of your homes?" Trish asked.

"We're looking for the best possible camera locations," Michelle added. "Sometimes, the best places are not always where you expect."

"Not a problem," Valerie agreed. "My house is right down the hill."

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Clint quickly realized that with that many women all together, he was the odd one in the group. He gratefully excused himself from things and headed down the hill toward the new lodges that were being built. The electrical company he and Pete worked for had the contract to do the electrical work, with the provision that Clint and Pete would be the ones to actually do it all. Clint figured he'd much rather do that than sit around listening to a bunch of women yapping their mouths all day.

The questions were asked almost continuously, although neither Susan, Valerie, nor Marcy realized it. It was all done as simple conversation between the women, discussing their homes, their lives

and their families. The kind of things that women always talked about. But it didn't take long for Trish and Michelle to get a good idea of how things were in each of the immediate families, as well as the broader family.

When it was time for the kids to get home from school, Trish and Michelle insisted on going to where they could see them getting off the bus from somewhere in the distance. Camera angles was given as the explanation, but it gave Trish and Michelle the chance to meet all the kids quickly and with little fuss. Both of them however paid more notice of Jade and Jimmy Joe than the others, although they tried not to show it.

Trish also took notice of the clouds that now seemed to cover the sky, that hadn't been there earlier. But then the weather report for this area had called for rain for most of the later part of the day and into the night. There were a few days when weather was going to be somewhat of a factor for the TV crew that week, but so far, the forecast for Friday and Saturday, the days they planned on doing most of the interview filming, the weather was supposed to be fairly nice. It would be a good break if it actually happened.

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"Where's your cameras?" Jimmy Joe asked disappointedly as he walked back into the kitchen after unloading his school things in his bedroom.

"Our cameramen are both out with someone named Jed, looking at your land," Michelle explained.

"Uncle Jed?" Jimmy Joe replied with more of a disappointed look on his face. "God! They'll be gone for hours!"

"Most likely," Trish agreed. "Why? We're not planning on doing the majority of our filming until Friday and Saturday."

Jimmy Joe shrugged. "I'm ready now," he told them. "I can't wait!"

"You can't wait?" Michelle asked, suppressing a laugh. "Why is that?"

"I'm going to be a staaarr!" Jimmy Joe replied comically.

Susan rolled her eyes, but Trish and Michelle only laughed.

"Trust me," Trish told him. "You'll get your chance. Why don't you sit with us here and talk for a while."

"What for?"

"So we can meet you."

"You did that when we got off the bus."

"We met you, but we didn't get a chance to talk," Trish replied.

"Oh. I guess." He took one of the chairs at the table.

"Where's your sister?" Michelle asked him.

"In her room."

"Is she coming?"

"I don't know."

"I'll get her," Susan said as she got up from the table. She walked back to Jade's room and found her sitting on the foot of her bed. The skirt outfit she was wearing looked very nice on her, but it wasn't nearly as colorful as the outfits she had been wearing before they had gone shopping. "Are you going to sit here all day?" Susan asked. "Or come out and talk with these people?"

"Can I sit here instead?" Jade asked hopefully.

"No. Sorry. You know why we're doing this. So come out of here and be friendly. Okay?"

The automatic eye rolling was only what Susan expected to see. "Just don't forget all the things we talked about. Okay?" Susan added softly.

Jade nodded. "Don't worry, Mom. It won't be a problem." She got to her feet and followed her mother out into the hallway.

"And smile!" Susan reminded her daughter. She guessed that Jade was probably rolling her eyes yet again.

Susan poured coffee for her guests and herself, and soft drinks for her kids, while the two TV people talked casually with Jade and Jimmy Joe. What surprised Susan though, was that neither Trish nor Michelle were asking any difficult questions. Mostly, it was just questions and polite conversation about what they did in school, what kind of things they each liked to do, and what friends they had. She almost spit her coffee out though when Michelle asked Jade if she had any boyfriends yet. Jade had gone wide-eyed and blushed furiously as he told them no.

"Not yet," Jimmy Joe added mischievously for her.

“And how about you?” Michelle asked Jimmy Joe. “Any girlfriends?”

“Ummmm...not yet,” Jimmy Joe admitted. “But I’m open to the possibility.”

Susan didn’t know if she should be shocked, or do like she nearly did and drop her coffee mug.

“So you’re looking for one?” Michelle asked.

“Hey,” Jimmy Joe replied, “someday they’re going to be flocking to me!”

It was all Trish could do to keep from saying, “Good luck!” Because as a boy who used to be a girl, he might look okay, but she wasn’t sure how many women would be interested in a man...or boy...who didn’t have that certain piece of manly equipment.

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Trish and her whole crew had dinner that night at Jacob’s house. After which, Rose took them around to meet everyone else in the family that lived on their land. They learned that there were also the Cumberlands they had yet to meet, but they couldn’t be there until Friday at the earliest, and more likely not until Saturday.

Later that night, alone in her room, Trish got her phone out to make a call. She was officially the director of the program they were going to produce, but she still answered to higher authorities. And in her case, it was the producer, Lyle Montgomery back in New York.

“Lyle?” she said as soon as she got him on the phone.

“How’s it going?” Lyle asked.

“Good so far. It’s a real nice family, from everything I’ve seen. And the two kids are going to be fine as far as I can tell. One of them, the boy, he may be a bit of a camera hog I’m afraid. I’ll let Bob and Ryan have some fun with him and use him when they can to get the trial shots. That should keep him happy.”

“Could make for some interesting video though,” Lyly pointed out. “How about Jade, the girl?”

“She’s a lot shyer. But I still don’t see much of a problem.”

“The family wanted that video showing their land too,” Lyle noted. “Any possibilities?”

“Shit! You should see this place. We could do a whole hour...or a weekly series here. It’s gorgeous! And the view from in front of all their houses is to die for. Believe me! Bob and Ryan are trying to drum up a plane to do aerial shots of the land. And from what they tell me, there’s animals all over the place. The two of them are in heaven.”

“Great!” Lyle replied. “We’ve still got the option to run this thing into a full hour show instead of the half hour we originally planned on,” he said. “But the time window to make the call is already short. Do you think we’re going to be able to get enough material to cover that much time, or should we just stick with the plan?”

Trish thought about it. “We only just got here, but like I said, the place is gorgeous. And the family is pretty big too, and I haven’t even met them all yet. The family is also bringing in that gender psychiatrist expert that the Little Rock news talked with. Evidently she’ll be popping in and out all week, and then she’ll be here Friday and Saturday for the whole shoot, so we can also tap into her if we need to too.”

“So you’re suggesting I make the call and fill it in for a full hour slot?”

Once again Trish thought about it. “Go for it,” she said. “Like I said, it’s a real nice family and a real nice place. We’ll have no problem finding filler material if we need it.”

“Consider it done,” Lyle replied. “So no big problems then?”

“Not as far as I can tell,” Trish replied.

“Sounds great then. Keep me posted.”

“Will do,” Trish replied. Just before they hung up though, she quickly said, “Lyle!”

“Yeah?”

“Um...I’m not real sure, and trust me, I may be totally wrong about it, but sometimes in talking with the ladies of the family, I get the impression that there may be more behind this story than what we’re hearing.”

Lyle was immediately more interested. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I have no reason to think it. I just get that feeling, you know? But then these people are all nervous as heck with us around. Maybe that’s all it is.”

"I trust your gut!" Lyle told her. It's why I sent you in there. That and the fact that Bob and Ryan have so much experience with filming the wildlife stuff. "Do you need Emily out there now to help you dig it out?"

Trish thought about that. Emily was a much better journalist than she was. Emily simply had a nose for finding the facts when nobody else could. "No, not yet," Trish decided. "And it may be nothing at all. I'll have to let you know."

"Okay, keep me in the loop. This started out as something the world was interested in, only because it was so bizarre and had never happened before. But if there's a bigger story behind it, that's what we need to know about – and the contract with the family be damned!"

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Jade got out of bed. She tried sleeping, but it wasn't working. She sat down at her desk and turned her computer on. A minute later, she started another email.

Dear Christy,

The TV people showed up today, but not all of them. And evidently there's another woman that's supposed to come in a few days to ask us the real questions. Jimmy and me had to sit and talk with two of them after school today for a little while. I can't tell you how weird it was. They just asked us things like how school was and about my friends and stuff. Mostly they were really nice, but I was still pretty nervous the whole time they were here. I was really glad that they didn't ask about any of the stuff Jimmy Joe and me had talked about.

There was this one thing they asked me about though that kind of threw me for a loop. One of them asked if I had any boyfriends yet. How was I supposed to answer that? I said no, of course. And then Jimmy Joe had to open his big mouth and tell them that I didn't have any YET! Like I'm supposed to really want one or something. The idiot!

But Christy, what if I really do have to stay a girl for a long time... like it's looking like I'll have to. What then? I can't tell anyone that I sometimes wonder about it. But maybe that's only because all my girlfriends talk about boys all the time. I'm not going to bother telling you who they've all got crushes on. I'm always kind of passed over in those conversations. Fortunately, I guess. But that doesn't mean that I don't think about it sometimes.

If I stay a girl, will I start to be more interested in boys? I'm not sure if I'm really interested in girls now or not, other than Olivia of course. I still like her the best, but the way I am now, I can't even tell her that anymore. And I think she feels the same way. I've changed too much.

Will more changes like that take place? Will the hormones make me like boys? I don't think the videos I've seen on the internet showed that at all. In fact, most of the ones I've looked at were girls who were changing, but they were still going out with other girls and not guys. Some were though. So what can I expect if I have to stay a girl for much longer?

I was real glad today when I didn't have to lie much to the TV people. Real glad! But I'm still really worried about what they're going to ask me next time. Really worried.

So what should I do Christy? Any suggestions?

*Your friend,
Jade*

Jade read the email over twice, then with a swipe of the mouse, deleted most of it. What she was left with was much shorter.

Dear Christy,

The TV people showed up today, but not all of them. And evidently there's another woman that's supposed to come in a few days to ask us the real questions. Jimmy and me had to sit and talk with two of them after school today for a little while. I can't tell you how weird it was.

*Your friend,
Jade*

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In the pre-dawn hours early Tuesday Morning, Bob McDonald forced himself out of bed to head for the bathroom. His head was killing him and he felt mildly sick. He was still slightly hungover. He and Ryan had spent half the night talking with Jacob and Jed about their hunting experiences, he and Ryan with their cameras, and Jed and Jacob with their guns.

They had started drinking a very nice whisky that Jacob had poured for them. Bob didn't remember when, but eventually that whisky had become something else. Moonshine! It wasn't his first taste of the potent drink by a long shot. Jacob had only said not to ask where it came from. From what he had seen of Jacob though, Bob wasn't totally sure that Jacob hadn't made it himself. Not that he really cared. It might make for some interesting film though if he did. But that wasn't the story they were after. He was here for...fluff stuff. The animals and scenery locations in the wild were what balanced the trip out for him, making the whole thing worthwhile.

As silently as possible, he went into the bathroom, and just as silently he went back to his room. He had a single room right now. Later, when the others came, he would be doubling up with Ryan. They usually roomed together when they were out together.

Before getting back in bed, he pulled the curtain aside and looked out the window. It was just barely starting to turn light, and all the moisture from the rain had left the backyard blanketed in fog. He was about to close the curtain, when something in that fog moved. He stood there a moment and watched. A minute later, his hangover forgotten, he had one of his favorite cameras and was quietly making his way downstairs. He opened the kitchen door as quietly as possible, and slowly closed it again a moment later. The air was crisp and damp and cold. His bare feet were cold and now wet on the ground. Since he had slept in just his underwear, a chill immediately ran through his body. He ignored all of it.

Carefully creeping around the back of the house, he turned his camera on and began filming. He knew from experience that fog was a fickle thing. It moved. It came. It went. It got thicker. And it got thinner. He spent half an hour filming an entire herd of deer that had moved into Jacob's backyard. And not just a few deer either. A large heard with several good sized males. He couldn't wait to see the final footage. Deer in the fog. It was going to be beautiful!

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Sleeping in on a business trip was a luxury Trish didn't get to enjoy very often, but there wasn't all that much that she and Michelle could do since the kids were all at school. Her camera guys though were determined to find a plane to shoot the land from. She left them to it for a while.

Later in the morning, she and Michelle climbed into Valerie's car and drove down to the business office for a quick tour there. Jacob was already in his office when they got there. Trish had already seen his office at home. She had notes that if she needed some filler material, he had some war medals and two folded military flags displayed on the walls that she thought they could ask about.

Susan led them over to the new lodges the family was building. Even though Clint was supposed to be off, they found him and his brother Pete in one of them, running electrical lines. Trish and Michelle both made notes on the lodges since they knew the family wanted it known they were building them. Advertising. Well, Trish couldn't blame them. Their network, their station, their jobs, their lives depended on advertising dollars. She would make sure the family business was well represented in the video.

Again, Trish and Michelle asked countless questions, but unlike the friendly chatting they did the day before, today, their questions were far more pointed. Especially Trish. She still wondered if there might be something more behind this whole business than the family was letting on.

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By midafternoon, Trish, Michelle, and Susan were all sitting in Susan's kitchen drinking coffee while an airplane once again buzzed over the house. It wasn't a social meeting. Trish and Michelle started going over the questions they had come up with so far to use in the program with not only the twins, but their entire family. They had made it clear from the start of the meeting that Susan wouldn't be expected to give any answers right then. The purpose was to start solidifying at least the direction for the questions that Emily would use when she got there.

They had been at it for a while, when a knock on the back door interrupted them. Susan went to open the door.

"Doctor Hapkins!" Susan said brightly, surprised to find the doctor there. "You got here early." She held the door wide and let the woman in.

"My last patient today cancelled," Doctor Hapkins told her, so I got in the car and took a chance on trying to find this place myself. I made it!" she declared happily. Her eyes though were already taking in the two strange women at the table.

Susan made the introductions. "Doctor, this is Trish and Michelle from CBS News."

"Cynthia Hapkins," the doctor replied as she nodded to each of the women. "Psychiatrist and gender therapist." She headed for another seat at the table. "I'm just here to see how things are going. I was asked to keep an eye on everyone. And I guess I'm also supposed to be available in case you have any questions I might be able to help with. Gender dysphoria is my primary area of expertise."

Trish smiled. "I have no doubt we're going to want to talk with you," she replied. "ABC may have a lot of experience now with the gender change stuff, but CBS is somewhat new to it. We're trying to catch up, I guess."

"Well, I'll be glad to help," Cynthia replied. "Oh thank you," she said to Susan as Susan deposited a mug of coffee in front of her.

With Susan's permission, Trish and Michelle went back over each of the questions on her list, looking for the doctor's thoughts on each one. Trish was surprised at how many opinions the doctor seemed to have, and it wasn't long before she found herself listening

very seriously to what the doctor seemed to think. She made a note to get the doctor alone as soon as possible to ask some...other questions.

When the kids came home, Trish got Susan to agree to let her and Michelle talk to them alone for a few minutes. She took Jimmy Joe, and Michelle took Jade. Their brief discussions with the kids were okay, but mostly very disappointing. But more than ever Trish got that feeling that there was something else going on. Many of the questions she had asked of Jimmy Joe, hadn't been answered directly. Instead, the boy had turned the subject around to something else, as if he was setting his own agenda or avoiding letting her know something he didn't want her to know. Or was it just that he was a kid? She couldn't tell.

It wasn't until Susan and Jade were making dinner together that Trish had the opportunity to talk with Doctor Hapkins. The doctor was just sitting at Susan's kitchen table, seemingly fascinated with watching Jade and her mother making dinner together. "Doctor," Trish said quietly. "Would you mind if I talked with you for a few minutes?"

"Of course," Cynthia agreed happily.

Trish looked around. "Maybe alone somewhere?"

The doctor's face turned more serious. "If you like," she replied.

Trish led the doctor outside where the air was already beginning to turn cooler. "Thank you for agreeing to help us out," Trish started.

"My pleasure," Cynthia replied. "Hopefully, I can dispel any misconceptions when it comes to gender problems."

"That wasn't what I wanted to talk about," Trish told her. "Not yet at least."

"What's on your mind?" the doctor asked, knowing that there were things now she couldn't say about the family.

"How well do you know the family?" Trish asked.

Cynthia shrugged. "Not that well. I only met them a short time ago, and I was only here overnight and that was it."

"So you don't really know them well at all?" Trish said disappointedly.

"Not that well, but hopefully well enough for my needs right now," Cynthia replied.

“Well enough?”

Cynthia nodded. “I hope so.”

Trish decided to come out with her big question. “Have you noticed anything that might give you the suspicion that there’s more going on here than meets the eye? Like the family isn’t telling us everything?”

Cynthia stared at Trish for a moment while she considered her words carefully. “Possibly,” she admitted hesitantly. “But I’m not really sure what you mean.”

“I mean like there’s more about this switching around of the twins than the family is willing to tell us about.”

Cynthia shook her head. “There are always things in any family that they’re reluctant to tell anyone about. That’s only normal. And in this case, we should expect it.”

“What do you think they’re holding back?”

“I have no idea,” the doctor replied. “And if there is anything at all, I’m not sure I want to know.”

“You don’t want to know?”

Cynthia shook her head. “Nope! But I can tell you one thing. Those questions you’re planning on asking are good, but you may have to do more to get what I really think you want everyone to see on TV.”

“We do? Like what?”

“I’ve talked with the entire immediate family,” Cynthia told her. “And I had a rather long conversation with Doctor Brian McComber and his wife. She pointed further down the street. “Clint’s brother. I’m staying with them again tonight,” she explained.

“I’ve met them,” Trish replied. “And?”

“And I think you can talk all day long to Jimmy Joe and Jade, and not even come close to discovering who they really are.”

“Who they are?” Trish asked, not sure what the doctor meant, but also remembering the way that Jimmy Joe had danced around her questions earlier. “So what do you recommend?”

Cynthia smiled. “Jade sits in her room alone and broods. Probably too much. But in her room alone, I think she’s pretty much dead. She doesn’t come alive until she’s in the middle of all her friends. And the same with Jimmy Joe. For all his bravado, I think

there's a lot more to him than what he's letting anyone see. Like with Jade, if you want to find out about Jimmy Joe, you need to talk to his friends instead.

"I spent a while talking with Tommy, the twins older brother," the doctor continued. "He said Jimmy Joe loves to hunt. He was so impressed with Jimmy Joe's hunting skills that he had to mention that Jimmy Joe wasn't quite as good as he was yet. Which to me means that Jimmy Joe may be a better hunter than his older brother. But all the boys here love shooting and hunting. You need to talk to them about Jimmy Joe. And as for Jade?" Cynthia smiled. "Find the Four Musketeers!"

"The Four Musketeers?" Trish asked incredulously.

Cynthia nodded.

"Who are they?"

"Find them," Cynthia said with a sly smile before turning and heading back to the house.

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Later that night, Trish again phoned Lyle Montgomery with her daily status report. "Lyle," she said. "I made a mistake. We need Emily out here right away. I wish I had her here right now! Doctor Hapkins seemed to agree that there's something going on here that we don't know about, but I can't get a grasp on anything at all – if there is anything at all."

"If you need her, I can put her on a private jet tonight and send her to a local airfield somewhere," Lyle replied.

Trish thought about it. "Do it!" she said decisively. "It may take all of us to dig to the bottom of this thing. And Lyle..."

"Yeah?"

"It still may be nothing at all."

"I'll put Emily on a plane tonight. She'll be there first thing tomorrow."

Chapter 63 – The Hot Grill

April 22nd

The small executive jet landed at a private airfield shortly after dawn Wednesday morning. Trish and Michelle were there to meet it, along with Jed who had driven them. Not having their own vehicles yet was a bit irksome, but for the most part, the family was helping them all get around just fine. Their own vehicles would be there in another day, along with the rest of their crew.

The jet touched down and Emily got off quickly. There were no hugs between the women. They simply worked together that much. Jed loaded her bags into the back of his truck while Emily took the front seat instead of Trish. They were on their way before the jet had even moved to taxi back to the landing strip for takeoff again.

As he drove away from the little private airfield, Jed tried to size up this new player – another woman. He hadn't expected the network to send mostly women out to do this story. But he realized that maybe he should have. He figured that maybe this kind of news piece was more of a women's kind of thing. He didn't know any men that would really be interested in watching anything like it.

Like the other two women, Jed lumped Emily in the middle age category, only perhaps a little better looking than the two that had arrived before. But he also figured she would have to be better looking to get her face on TV all the time, not that he had ever seen her there before. Even now, after evidently flying half the night, she looked like she was ready for the camera to start filming her.

Emily had talked fairly extensively with Trish the night before, and she still needed to sit down with her whole team, but that didn't mean that she wasn't up to date enough that she couldn't start asking her questions. "I hear you've got our camera guys on cloud nine," she said to Jed to start the conversation off.

Jed smiled. "Just trying to help them out with whatever they need," Jed replied. "I hadn't expected them to have so much

experience in the woods,” he added. “It’s turned out to be a pleasure for me as well.”

“I’m glad,” Emily replied.

“One of them even had a suggestion for the family business that none of us ever thought of before,” Jed continued.

“Oh? What’s that?”

“Instead of just doing guided hunts for people with guns, we can do them for people who just want to take pictures of the animals. Maybe we wouldn’t even have to charge as much since none of our animals would be getting killed. It’s something I think we’ll look into. See what my brother’s all think.”

“Do all your brothers act as guides?” Emily asked.

“All of them ma’am,” Jed replied. “Them more than me. My main job is to look after the land and the animals. Make sure none of them are over hunted, or in some cases like with the deer, make sure we’re killing enough.”

“Killing enough? I’d think you’d rather most of them not get killed.”

“Deer are kind of funny creatures,” Jed replied. “Even way out here in the middle of nowhere, if the herds get too big, then some of them starve or get sick. Especially during the winter. Controlling their population keeps them healthy and the hunters much happier. And trust me, we’ve got more than enough deer to go around.”

“I understand that one of our cameramen spent some time filming a herd right in one of your backyards.”

Jed smiled. “Yeah, Bob told me about that. The deer are all over, including in our backyards sometimes. He laughed. “Susan isn’t too happy about it though. It’s nearly impossible to keep them out of her gardens.”

“So you’ve got plenty of deer, and I guess other animals to hunt,” Emily stated, just for the facts.

“Plenty,” Jed replied.

“Have you ever been hunting with Jimmy Joe?” Emily asked next.

“Lots of times,” Jed replied. “My boys though more than me. She was really green when she started, but she’s come a long way. She loves it though. Can’t get enough. I mean, *he* loves it! Sorry.

All this is still pretty new to me and the rest of the family. We're all trying though."

"Trish tells me that the women in the family don't hunt. Why is that?"

Jed looked over at her briefly, wondering where she had heard it. "That's right, ma'am. It's kind of a family tradition. The men do all the hunting."

"Forgive me for saying it," Emily replied, "but it sounds a bit sexist."

Jed nodded. "I'm sure it does, but we've got a few good reasons for it."

"Such as?"

"Think about it ma'am. We don't kill anything for fun. None of us. We pretty much eat everything we kill."

"Everything?"

Jed nodded. "We never kill for the fun of it like a lot of the tourists do. The land and the animals here are too precious to us. We have no reason to kill any more than we can eat. No use letting good meat go to waste."

"But why should that be a reason for the women not to hunt?"

"Because then there'd be twice as many of us out hunting all the time. Killing twice as many animals, most for no reason at all."

"And you think that not allowing the women to hunt solves that problem?"

He nodded. "It's worked for generations. There's another big reason too," he said, "although you're probably going to label it sexist as well."

"What's that?"

Jed tried to think how to explain it. "We're an old backwoods family," he said. "Yeah, my brother Brian is now a doctor. Clint and Pete are licensed electricians. My two sisters have done rather well for themselves too. One of them is even a teacher. But we all basically come from the same backwoods past. The men in the family have always been the providers, and the women have always taken care of the rest of the family business. And don't misunderstand me, I know how hard all the women in the family work. Probably as hard as the men. But the point is, we all have our

place, and we try to stick to it. It helps all of us know how we fit into the family. And ma'am, family is about the most precious thing in the world to all of us."

"Even more so than all your land and the animals?"

Jed nodded. "A lot more!"

Emily moved on to her next question. "You said you've hunted with Jimmy Joe. How about Jade, when she was still a boy?"

"Not much. Not like I've been with Jimmy Joe. Jimmy...I mean the one who's Jade now, usually went with her father, not me."

"So why are you hunting more with Jimmy Joe than you did with Jade?"

Again Jed glanced over at her again. "Jimmy didn't care for hunting much. Jimmy Joe loves it. Can't get enough. And...she's getting pretty good now too. Almost as good as my boys."

"But that doesn't explain why Jimmy Joe would go hunting with you or your boys when the original Jimmy didn't."

Jed smiled. "Jimmy Joe is learning more than just about hunting with me. I take care of the land and the animals. I'm teaching my sons that part of the business too. Ethan is in college right now studying land management so he can start helping me, and I have no doubt that in a few years Justin will be working with me too. Jimmy Joe is already starting to learn the things I've already taught my boys. And like I said, she's come a long way already. I mean he!"

"So you think Jimmy Joe will eventually help you and your boys out with...I guess, tending the land? Taking care of it?"

Jed nodded. "That's the way it's looking. As long as she keeps on in the direction she's going...I mean *he's* going, of course."

"What do you mean by the direction he's going?"

Jed looked over at her quickly again. Emily noticed the troubled look on his face. "If she still decides she wants to stay a boy," he replied.

"Because girls in the family can't hunt," Emily stated.

Jed nodded. "Something like that."

"And do you expect Jimmy Joe to change his mind and go back to being a girl?"

Trish in the backseat was holding her breath, waiting for the answer.

"That's just it," Jed replied. "We're all hoping. Wishing for it. The problem is, as much as we all want it to happen, Jimmy Joe is just being plain stubborn about it! She...I mean he now, ain't budging one little bit!"

"So you think Jimmy Joe is simply that determined to become a boy...or a man?"

Jed nodded. "As much as none of us like it, none of us have any doubt about it at all anymore."

For a moment there, Emily thought she might have cracked part of the big family secret that Trish had hinted might exist. But as far as she could see, Jed had just blown that theory out of the water.

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Shortly after arriving at Jacob's house, Emily called her whole team together for a meeting in her bedroom...and closed the door. They all went over everything they had learned so far, as well as everything any of them thought or suspected. Foremost on Emily's mind though was the suggestions from Doctor Hapkins to check out the friends of the twins in order to learn about them that way.

"Okay," Emily finally said. "Let's see if this Doctor Hapkins is right. I still want to tackle the twins alone...and separately first before we go after the friends. When we do, we're probably going to have to get permission from the parents to do it, but I want to hit each of them, and hit them hard. Today with the twins, I want to go in with both cameras filming, maybe using the excuse we want to get them used to it so they can learn to ignore the cameras in their faces when we interview them later. Most people have a pretty much impossible time with that anyway."

"But won't the mother insist on being there?" Michelle asked.

"She can try," Emily replied. "We'll tell her that we don't want her to be any kind of distraction to the twins. Besides, the family is getting full rights as to what gets broadcast on the air anyway, and we'll tell them this is only trial video to see if the scene locations will work."

Michelle shrugged. "Maybe!" she said. "That mother watches her kids like a hawk!"

"We've got to try," Emily replied. "When do they get home from school?"

"Not until later this afternoon," Trish told her.

"Damn," Emily muttered. "You said they're keeping all the kids home from school on Friday. I wonder if we can talk them into keeping them home tomorrow too. It would sure help."

"We can ask," Trish replied.

"Look into it," Emily ordered as she looked at Michelle. "Now, today I hit Jed with a few good questions while we were driving here from the airport. I thought I might have shaken something loose, but it didn't pan out. Until the twins get home, I want to split up and find every family member we can and grill them hard about just what they each think about the twins swapping places. I already know none of them like it. But let's see how they each react separately."

She turned to her two cameramen. "Bob, you stay with me. Ryan, you follow Trish. As of right now, we're filming everything! As far as the family needs to know though, it's all just for trial and setup and to get them used to it for later." She looked around. "Questions?" There were none.

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There weren't many family members that were home. In fact, the only one turned out to be Rose. The rest were working down at the family business office. While Emily headed down the hill in Rose's borrowed car, Trish and Ryan tackled Rose in her own kitchen.

Rose wasn't delighted to have the big camera stuck right in her face. Not only was it intimidating, it was downright annoying. Especially the big bright light attached to the front of it. But she could easily see Trish's explanation of having to get used to ignoring it before they did any of the actual videotaping. Rose also wasn't delighted with any of the questions that Trish was throwing at her.

"Rose," Trish started. "How do you really feel about Jimmy Joe and Jade switching places with each other?"

Rose looked from her to the camera uncertainly.

"Just ignore the camera," Trish told her. "That's why we're trying to get everyone used to how this works.

"It's not easy," Rose replied.

"No, it's not. Trust me, it takes time. Just look at me when you speak."

"But he's got that thing practically right on your shoulder! The light is blinding."

Trish smiled. "Wait until the lighting and sound people get here. It's going to get twice as bad."

"You mean it will be worse?"

"Much!" Trish emphasized, even though the reality of it was that the indirect lighting they would use later would be a lot easier on everyone. "Ready to try it again?"

"I guess," Rose replied.

Once again Trish asked her question. "Rose, as the mother and grandmother to this entire family, I'm sure you play a big important part in everything."

"Well, I guess so," Rose agreed uncertainly.

"Then tell me, how exactly do you feel about Jimmy Joe and Jade switching places with each other?"

"Um...none of us are happy about it," Rose replied.

"How about you personally?" Trish asked. "Do you think the twins are better off now than before they switched places?"

"Of course not," Rose told her. "I would absolutely love to see them both back the way they belong."

"So you feel this switching around was all wrong."

"Yes, I do," Rose replied.

Trish thought she might be making headway – before Rose added...

"It's just that..."

"Just what?"

"Well, maybe they're happier this way than they were."

"They are?"

Rose nodded. "As much as I hate to say it. Jade especially. But I've also seen changes in Jimmy Joe that I never expected as well."

“What changes are they?”

Rose shrugged. “He’s growing up. Maturing in ways I hadn’t thought about. He’s suddenly gaining a lot of confidence he never had before as a girl...and I thought he had plenty of that before. But now, well, I just see a difference.”

Trish realized she was getting nowhere with her theory of something else going on.

“And how about Jade?” she asked next.

Rose smiled. “Now Jade is a gem. She’s got compassion like even few women have. And we McComber women pride ourselves on trying to be compassionate.”

“So, is Jade more compassionate than Jasmine ever was?”

Rose nodded. “Oh yes! Without a doubt! And I have no doubt at all that she’s happier now than she ever was before too.”

“Happier?”

Rose nodded again. “Much! She smiles now...and laughs. Plays with the other kids.” Her voice lowered a little. “She never did that before. She was the most somber and alone child I’ve ever seen.” She sat back and smiled. “How did I do?” she asked hopefully.

“Great!” Trish replied with a muted smile. “Real good.” She hadn’t gotten anything strange out of Rose at all.

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“You must be Emily,” Marcy said as Emily and Bob entered the family business office.

“In the flesh,” Emily replied as she tried to pay attention to the woman in front of her, as well as take in everything she could see.

“I’m Marcy,” Marcy told her somewhat excitedly. She turned. “That’s Susan, and that’s Valerie.” She turned further and saw Jacob standing in the doorway to his office. “Have you met our father yet?”

Earlier this morning when I got here,” Emily replied with a smile in Jacob’s direction.

“Bob and I are doing some one-on-one sessions with everyone, so you can all know how it feels to get asked the tough questions while a camera is staring you in the face.”

"We thought you wasn't going to do any filming until Friday," Jacob noted.

"Only trial filming, so we can see what adjustments we're going to have to make. And of course, it's more useful in helping you get at least a little comfortable with the process as well."

"Still sound like you're just being nosy and tryin' to get an early start on things, but if they're willing, then I don't really care. It's up to them though."

"Of course," Emily replied with a smile. She turned to Marcy. "Aren't you the one who's trying to be the point of contact for the family in all this?" she asked.

Marcy blinked as the camera light came on and hit her in the face. "Oh geez!" she exclaimed. "Give me a chance to at least fix my face first!"

"We're only testing right now," Emily assured her.

"But give me a minute all the same," Marcy insisted as she ran for her purse. "I don't want anyone to see me for any reason without my face fixed."

Trish smiled as Bob turned the light on his camera off. She noticed the other two women grabbing their purses as well. There was a mad dash for the ladies room in the back. At least they were all going to talk to her. She wasn't so sure about Jacob though. To fill the time, she had Bob film some of the big maps of their land that were hung on the wall.

Marcy was back first. "Where would you like me?" she asked.

"How about in front of this big map," Emily suggested.

"No good!" Bob pointed out quickly. "Too much reflection from the glass that's covering it."

"Were you able to get good shots of it before?" Emily asked.

"No problem," Bob confirmed. But if she stands in front of it, I've got to come at her from a bad angle. We need something better."

"You can use my office if you want," Jacob offered.

Emily smiled. "Let's go take a look."

The office was spacious with suitable décor and furnishings that would probably show well on the camera and also underline the family's line of business. "How about in that chair," Bob suggested, knowing that whenever possible, Emily wanted to put the people she

was questioning in a position that would make it seem like Emily was superior to them. Emily had also suggested the big close-up camera with the light on it, more for the purpose of the bright light than the really good close-up shots the camera would capture. Marcy never realized that though.

“Now this is not for airing,” Emily explained quickly, “so any answers you give me are for test purposes only, and possibly so we can get a good handle on anything we might want you to repeat later. Okay?”

“Um...sure,” Marcy replied.

Bob turned his camera on, and the spotlight attached to the front of it nearly blinded Marcy.

“Now just try to ignore the camera and speak to me,” Emily explained.

“How?” Marcy asked. “I can’t hardly see you past that light.”

“I’m here, so don’t worry about it,” Emily suggested. “Now Marcy, what made you decide to take on the responsibility of arranging the TV program about your family and the twin’s situation?”

“Oh,” Marcy said. “Well, I’m trying to learn how to do some advertising for the business. You know? It’s something the family hasn’t ever done before. And I figured that since I was trying to do that, then this should fall in line with what I’m trying to do. Does that sound okay?” she asked.

“Yes, very nice,” Emily replied with a smile. “Do you think your family business needs advertising? Are you hurting for people to pay to hunt on your land?”

Marcy thought about that. “Not exactly. Especially during the fall and winter months. But there’s always room to expand. And some people have mentioned to us that they think we need a website. So that’s one of the things we’re trying to get done too.”

“So you take the suggestions of your customers seriously?”

Marcy nodded. “Very! The family paid a fortune a few years ago to put cell towers on the land. Just because so many people seemed to want it.”

Emily was surprised. “Your family paid to have cell coverage brought in like that?”

Marcy nodded. "A lot!"

"I can imagine." Emily felt she had Marcy comfortable enough now. It was time to switch directions. "Let's forget all about you being involved with the advertising and the family business for now. Okay?"

"Um. Sure," Marcy agreed.

"Tell me Marcy, what do you personally think about the twins swapping places like they are?"

"Me?"

"Aren't you part of the family? Don't you have an opinion?"

"Um...I guess," she said.

"Then what do you think about it?"

"I don't know. I don't know what to say."

"How do you feel about it? Do you like the idea? Do you dislike it?"

"Um. None of us liked it," Marcy replied.

"I'm not asking about anyone else. Just you. Were you against the idea too?"

"Well, I guess so. We all were. Right from the start. None of us were happy about it."

"So you're saying that you personally weren't happy about the twins switching places, right from when it first happened?"

"Um...yes. Of course."

"Why did you let it happen then?"

"Me?"

"Yes," Emily replied. "Were you involved at all?"

"Um...I guess, to a small extent."

"So you were against the twins switching places."

"Like I said, we all were against it."

"Then why did you let it happen?"

Marcy felt like she was being backed into a corner with no way out. "The twins. Both of them, they kind of weren't giving us much of a choice in the matter."

"How could they not give you a choice?"

"Because neither of them would agree to do what the family wanted," Marcy replied.

"And what was that?" Emily pressed.

"Well, to behave like they're supposed to, of course."

"You mean, Jimmy at that time behaving like the rest of the boys and Jasmine back then behaving like the rest of the girls?"

"Yes. Exactly. Their father even beat the two of them. But both kids were just so stubborn about it that they didn't seem to care about getting hit."

"Their father beat them?"

"Well, not as bad as you make it sound, of course," but what else could he do? I mean, the twins had somehow come up with this agreement between the two of them to kind of switch places, and no matter what anyone tried, they didn't want to back down. Neither of them! I've never seen anyone so stubborn in my life! Especially kids!"

"So this whole thing really did originate from what the twins wanted," Emily asked.

Marcy nodded. "Yeah. Completely. And I can't tell you how shocked we all were. I mean, it was so weird. None of us knew what to do." She looked around. "Are we about finished yet? This is getting...uncomfortable."

Emily smiled. "Yes, we're done. And I promise, next time no more hard questions like that. But if I didn't do that to you, you'd find the easy stuff next time to be just as difficult, trust me!"

"Um...I can imagine," Marcy replied.

As Marcy got up from the chair, Emily looked to the doorway for her next victim. She saw Jacob, Susan, and the one that they had introduced as Valerie all looking on. "Valerie," she said with a smile. "It took Marcy a few minutes, but she did really well. Are you ready to do better?"

Valerie shook her head. "I know I won't do better at all. But if you're sure you need me to do this, then I guess I can try."

"That's the spirit!" Emily replied with total confidence. She waited while Valerie sat down in the chair.

"Wow, that light is bright...and hot!" Valerie declared.

"Now you know why it helps for people to get a small taste of this before we do anything live," Emily explained. "Now Valerie," Emily began, "Marcy said the whole family was against this from the start. But that's her speaking. How did you feel about it, personally?"

"Me? Personally?"

"Of course. Not anybody else. How did you feel about it?"

"It made me sick!" she said. Then covered her mouth. "Oh! I probably shouldn't put it that way on the camera!"

Emily smiled. "No, you're fine. And don't worry, we can always edit out later what you don't like. So I take it you didn't like it either?"

"Absolutely not! But as Marcy said, there just seemed to be no way to stop those kids. And I mean, who ever knew? Every last one of us was nothing but flabbergasted over it." She looked up. "Can I say flabbergasted on TV?"

"It's fine," Emily told her. "So you were all very surprised. What did you or the family do to try to stop the twins?"

"Well," Valerie said, "like Marcy told you, we knew that Clint had beat the twins, but that didn't seem to have any affect at all. I mean, their determination was just so...I don't know. It was like trying to stop a charging bear. You'd better have a damn big gun because it's not going to happen!"

"And did you have any kind of big gun, as you called it?"

"Huh? We didn't shoot them of course."

"I was speaking metaphorically," Emily replied.

"Oh, of course. Sorry. The light just makes it hard." She looked over toward the doorway. "This is harder than it looks!"

"Tell me about it!" Marcy replied.

"Valerie," Emily said to get her attention again. "Did the family do anything at all to try to stop the twins?"

"Of course. But you know about that. It was on TV. Oh, I probably can't say that either since it wasn't your station. It came out on the Little Rock News."

"It's okay," Emily replied. "Just tell me what the family did."

"Um. Okay. Well, we really didn't know what to do of course, and the twins were being so stubborn and adamant about it all."

"Yes? What happened?"

"Well, we kind of came up with this idea to try to get them to stop."

"And how's that?" Emily pressed.

"Well, we decided to actually let them be each other for a while. At first it was just for the weekends, you know two days a week. But

then if they didn't agree to change their minds about it all, then the next month it was supposed to go to three days a week, which meant that they'd also have to face all their friends at school with it on Mondays."

"And I take it that that didn't dissuade the twins either?"

"No! And we were all really hoping. The twins were so serious about it that we decided to put them both on hormones, um...as Brian said, for their own well-being."

"Do you think the hormones helped or hindered your cause?"

"You mean to get them to stop? I don't know. They were so adamant about it before, and I think they're both even more adamant about it now. Um...I think anyway. I really see Jimmy Joe more than Jade, so I don't know as much about her."

"You see Jimmy Joe more than Jade?"

"Yes, she hunts a lot with my kids. Oh, and she does a lot of work on the property with my husband."

"She works on the property?" Emily asked, remembering that her husband Jed had already mentioned it on the drive from the airport.

"Yes. That was part of the punishment too. To make her see how hard the men work around here."

"And I take it that the hard work didn't have much of an effect."

"Well, we thought it would at first, but as it turns out, she didn't mind much at all. Now, I think she's proud of what she does out there with the boys."

Once again, Emily had thought she might get into something interesting, but once again she had been shut down. Maybe there was no big secret here. But something about it all still didn't smell right to her. She smiled at Valerie. "See. You did real well. It didn't take you long at all to get past the camera stuck in your face."

"I'm done?" Valerie tried to confirm, hopefully.

"Absolutely. Unless there's anything else you'd like to tell me."

"No!" Valerie replied as she hurried to get out of the "hot" seat – literally.

Emily looked to the doorway. "Susan," she said. "You're their mother. You can't get out of this. Come talk to me. Please?"

Susan hesitantly went in and sat down. She had seen the way this woman had grilled her sisters. She had heard all the difficult

tough questions this reporter had thrown at them. She wasn't so sure she wanted to do this at all. The bright light was on her from the moment she sat down. She raised her hand to try to block it.

"Just try to ignore the light," Emily told her. "Give it a moment for your eyes to adjust."

"I feel like I need some sunscreen," Susan quipped.

"I used to feel the same way," Emily assured her. In fact, when I first started out, I used to use some all the time. And all my makeup had sunscreen in it as well!"

Susan tried to smile, but couldn't. "Can we get this over with please? I'm not real comfortable here."

"Of course," Emily agreed. She quickly realized just how uncomfortable Susan was with the whole situation. In fact, she seemed to be almost fragile. But then she was the twin's mother. She was trying to bear the brunt of everything that was happening. Emily wasn't too sure about how well Susan was holding up. But like it or not, that could be used in her favor as well!

Since Susan seemed so uncomfortable, Emily quickly dragged another chair over and sat next to her, putting herself on camera as well. Her voice was far more caring than it had been with the other women. "Susan," she started, "you're in an impossible situation. I can't imagine what you must be going through to have not just one, but two of your children trying to change what and who they are. And twins no less!"

Susan nodded. "Believe me, you have no idea."

"Is it heartbreaking?"

"Every day and every night."

"Susan," Emily said softly, "did you ever cry about it?"

"Every day and every night," Susan replied, becoming more emotional just thinking about it.

"And yet your children have refused to budge. They refused to be what you thought they should be."

Susan nodded, her mind now picturing how her kids used to be. She felt the want again to have them back the way they belong. A single tear escaped her left eye.

"How did you feel about this plan, this *punishment* that I guess the family imposed on them?"

Susan was very disturbed now. "I hated it! I hated it from the start! I hated even the suggestion of it!"

"And yet you allowed it to happen. You allowed the twins to be punished this way?"

"What was I supposed to do? The twins wouldn't see reason. Neither of them. We were at our wit's end. We were desperate! Really desperate! We had no choice but to go through with it. And it wasn't like the idea came from us. It was what the twins had decided on. It was all their idea in the first place."

"It was the twin's idea to have them be each other, beginning on weekends and then increasing the time?"

Susan nodded. "It was all their idea. They even had it in writing for us. What were we supposed to do? They wouldn't stop!" She remembered something. "Oh! The part about increasing the time each month wasn't their idea. We kind of came up with that as a family. I mean, wouldn't you quit doing something so stupid if you had to be seen in public that way? And in front of all their friends?"

Emily smiled. "I'm sure I would."

"We thought so too. It didn't work though," she added sadly.

"And how do you feel about things now?" Emily asked softly.

"Now?"

"You told us how you felt then. How about now? Now that they've been living completely as each other for a little while."

Susan shook her head. "I still want them back. I still want my babies back!" she said again as the tears started down her face again. "Is that so much for a mother to ask for? To have her babies back the way they should be?"

Emily put her hand supportively on Susan's arm as a sob escaped Susan's lips. Emily sat and let her cry for a moment. "Do you think your kids may be happier now than they used to be?"

Susan sniffled and wiped her eyes with her hands. "As much as I don't want them to be," she said, "they both seem to be...happier. Jas, I mean Jade, she's well, she's so much happier now than she used to be. You don't know how it lifts my heart so see her laughing and smiling and having fun with the rest of her friends." A brief smile actually managed to break through the distress covering her face.

"She didn't laugh or smile before?"

Susan shook her head. "Never. He rarely even smiled. He stayed by himself all the time. Alone."

"And now she's not alone?"

"No. About the only time she's ever alone anymore is when she's in her room doing homework or sleeping. And sometimes she's got friends over to sleep with her too. So she's hardly ever alone anymore."

"And all her friends seem to accept her? Do you think they like her better now as a girl than what she used to be?"

Susan had to think about that for a moment. "I guess so. They're always with her. Just like they always were with Jasmine. They stick together and watch out for each other, even Jade."

"The girls all watch out for Jade too?"

Susan nodded. "Always! They're really inseparable. All of them. Now it's just with Jade instead of Jasmine."

"They sound like very special friends."

Again Susan nodded. "They are. You'll meet them, I'm sure. You'll see."

"And how about Jimmy Joe? Do you think he's happier? It sounds like he's not one of the girls anymore."

"No. He's not. But he isn't alone like Jimmy was. He hangs with all the guys and does whatever they're doing."

"And is he happier?"

Susan smiled. "Sometimes, too much I think! Way too much!"

"Too much? Why would you think that?"

Susan's face broke down and once again a sob escaped her lips. "Because I just want my babies back. Like they used to be. Like they should be."

Again Emily paused and let Susan cry in front of the camera. She finally asked. "Susan, why do you and your family still let the twins be each other if it's hurting you so much? Hurting all of you, from what little I've gathered so far."

Susan looked up at her. Tears were streaking her face. "Because they're still my babies. Because even though they're each not who they're supposed to be, they're still my babies. They're still my kids. And what mother wouldn't want her kids to be happy? I

just want my kids to be happy. For a mother, isn't that worth everything else?"

"I guess maybe it could be," Emily replied softly.

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"Doctor Hapkins?" Brian said into his phone."

"Brian!" Cynthia replied happily. "How goes it with the TV people?"

"I'm not sure," Brian replied. "I just got a call from my father letting me know that they hit the women who were home rather hard today with their questions. From what my father told me, he was about to the point of throwing them all out."

"But he didn't!" Cynthia replied, to confirm.

"No, he didn't say anything. But evidently, it was close. It was supposed to be a trial shooting just to get them used to the real thing later, but Dad thinks it was anything but!"

"Doctor, when it comes to TV and news reporters, I have a feeling there is no such thing as trial anything!"

"That's what we're worried about. Anyway, they were rather hard on the women, and their plans are to interview the twins this afternoon."

"Can you stop them?" Cynthia asked.

"I doubt it."

"Then I suggest you watch and make sure they don't overstep their bounds. Those two are just kids!"

"Yeah, we'll watch. But I wanted to let you know that they've also asked if we'll allow all the kids in the family to stay home from school tomorrow as well as Friday so they can do more interviews with all of them as well. It's like they're trying to move their schedule up by a full day...although they say they aren't."

Cynthia thought about that. "And are you going to do as they ask?"

"We're considering it."

Cynthia took a deep breath. "I can't leave here today, but I'm cancelling my appointments for the rest of the week. I'll be there as

early tomorrow as I possibly can. I'll try to get there early enough so that it will be before they do anymore interviews!"

"Thank you doctor," Brian replied. "From what I heard, the interviews they did with the women were pretty much awful! They've promised to take a lot more care with the kids, but we'd like you there just in case they don't."

"I'll be there in the morning, Brian. Thank you!"

Chapter 64 – A Tale of Two Twins

April 22nd

“Hey! Ho! I’m Jimmy Joe!” Jimmy Joe exclaimed as he pulled his hat off his head and tried to roll it down his arm. But all it did was to fall on the floor. Ugh! He started again. He stared at his reflection in his bedroom mirror, struck the pose he liked, and said, “What do you know...it’s Jimmy Joe!” Again he pulled his hat off and tried to roll it down his arm. He was actually surprised when it made it as far as his elbow.

“Jimmy Joe. What are you doing?” a voice from the other side of the door asked.

He quickly opened his bedroom door and found his mother on the other side. “Are they here yet?” he asked excitedly.

“Not yet,” Susan replied. She looked down at him. He was once again dressed rather colorfully, for a McComber boy, but there was no doubt he still looked too much like a boy.

“Mom, look!” Jimmy Joe said excitedly. “I’m trying to learn to roll my hat down my arm. That’ll look cool on TV!”

Susan rolled her eyes. “Settle down,” she told him. “I don’t think you’re going to enjoy this as much as you think.”

“Why? I can’t wait!”

“I know you can’t wait. But I had to go through some of it earlier today, and I can pretty much tell you that it was awful! Really awful!”

“Why, what could be so bad?”

“The camera right in your face. The big bright light blinding you so you can’t see. And the questions they ask. This reporter woman isn’t asking nice questions. She’s been asking really hard ones. *Upsetting* ones!”

“What could be so bad for me?” Jimmy Joe replied, still way too enthusiastic about it all.

“You know what things the family doesn’t want let out. This woman seems to be pretty good at trying to find those kind of

things.”

“Don’t worry, Mom. Me and Jade got it covered. I’m going to be great!”

Susan rolled her eyes again and turned to leave the room. Jade was standing in the doorway listening. “You heard?” she asked.

Jade nodded. “When are they coming?”

“Anytime now,” Susan replied.

“Should I change?” Jade asked.

Susan looked at her *daughter*. “That’s up to you. This is only supposed to be some trial filming and to help us get used to the process. But I’m betting it’s anything but! I think they’re trying to grill the family with stuff they intend to use for real. So you be careful.” She turned to include Jimmy Joe as well. “Both of you!”

“Like I said,” Jimmy Joe replied. “We got it covered. Hey! Ho! I’m Jimmy Joe!” he said, and again tried to roll his hat down his arm. It made it past his elbow this time. “Almost got it!”

Susan walked out with yet another roll of her eyes.

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All the noise in the kitchen filtered its way back to Jimmy Joe’s bedroom. They were coming! He quickly stood in the middle of the hallway waiting for them. He glanced into his *sister’s* room. She was sitting at her desk watching him. She had changed into a new dress he hadn’t seen before. It looked nice, but not enough color for his taste. The noise increased as he heard a number of people heading their way. He struck his pose. He was shocked to see so many people coming out of the kitchen. The hallway was packed! But what he didn’t see was a TV camera. “Where’s the camera?” he asked, still holding his pose.

“Jimmy! What on earth are you doing?” Susan asked.

“Waiting for the camera,” he replied. “I’m ready!”

The crowd of people all stopped. Trish grabbed the nearest cameraman she could get to and shoved him in front. “I don’t know what he’s doing but get it.”

Ryan immediately turned his camera on and it was as if Jimmy Joe was bathed in a spotlight. His face lit up. “Ready?” he asked

hopefully.

“Just get it over with!” Susan said, her voice full of exasperation.

Jimmy immediately launched into the little routine he had been practicing. “Hey! Ho! What do you know? It’s Jimmy Joe!” Once again he pulled his hat off his head and rolled it down his arm. For the first time, it actually went all the way to his wrist, but when he tried to grab it with that hand, he missed. He nearly fell trying to catch it with his other hand, but somehow, amazingly, he actually came up with it before it could fall all the way to the floor. “Got it!” he declared excitedly. He held his arms wide. “Ta-daaaaa!” The laughter and applause he got was everything he hoped for. He stuck his hat back on his head at a downward angle and struck another pose. “Have at me people, ‘cause I’m ready with whatever you want.”

“Jimmy!” Susan exclaimed.

But Emily ignored her and moved quickly down the hallway toward him. Ryan followed, filming everything he could.

“That was quite an entrance,” Emily said as she approached. “What brought that on?”

“You liked it?” Jimmy Joe asked.

“It was wonderful!” Emily exclaimed. “So why the big show?”

“This is for TV. I want to be a staaarr!”

“I see!” Emily replied, nodding toward the camera. “So do you want to work on TV or in the movies?”

“Both, of course!”

“Of course,” Emily replied. “So do you like to sing, or dance, or act?”

“Whatever it takes, whatever they want,” Jimmy Joe replied confidently. “I’m Jimmy Joe, so on with the show!”

Emily couldn’t help but chuckle. “You keep that up and you just might make it!”

“Bring it on, ‘cause I’m ready!”

She didn’t say it, but the thought crossed her mind that after this program they were building, he would be somewhat of a celebrity, and it was entirely possible that he could get tapped for a TV show somewhere. She glanced up into one of the open bedroom doors and saw Jade sitting on her bed and hugging a stuffed lion to her

breast. Jade looked nervous, but she was also laughing at Jimmy Joe's antics. Emily ignored her for now and concentrated on Jimmy. "So tell me Jimmy, since you say you want to be a star, and even though this is just a trial filming, are you ready to tell the world all about you?"

"Why just a trial? This can't be the real thing?"

Emily looked surprised. "It can if you want it to."

"No!" Susan's voice came from back behind the camera.

"Then let's just give you a taste of a real interview," Emily told him. "If you're going to be a star, you're going to have to get used to it. We're going to be doing something similar later in the week anyway, so this will be good practice for you. So are you ready?"

"I'm Jimmy Joe. On with the show!" Jimmy replied all too confidently.

Emily couldn't help but shake her head and smile. "The hallway's a little small and crowded," Emily told him. "And we've got more production people here than we used earlier with your mother." She turned around toward the open door behind her. "Is this your room?"

"That's my...man cave!" Jimmy Joe replied proudly.

"Jimmy!" Clint's voice came from the pack of people. "Stop being obnoxious!"

"Oh let him be," Trish said as she quickly turned and put her hand on Clint's arm. "He's actually being wonderful!"

"He's being obnoxious!" Clint replied.

Trish laughed. "Let him have his fun. This is just some trial stuff anyway."

Clint said nothing, but Susan whispered to him. "I'll bet it's not!"

Emily stared into Jimmy Joe's room and shook her head. She looked back to the camera. "Man cave is right!" Bob, can you get your camera down here and get this?"

While Ryan was still filming in the hallway, Bob worked his way between everyone in the tight confines of the hallway and headed for the bedroom. He glanced in. "Nice!" he exclaimed as he brought the camera to his shoulder and started filming. Trish and Michelle had told him a little about the room from when they had visited earlier in the week, but this was his first time seeing it. He filmed the

whole room, but he particularly paid attention to the ducks and deer head on the wall. "Hey," he said as he continued to film. "Can we get him in here so we can use him as a size reference for this deer? It's a trophy for sure!"

Jimmy Joe went proudly into his room and stood below the deer head while Bob got a few moments of film, after he had Jimmy Joe remove his hat. "Nice!" Bob said as he brought the camera down from his shoulder. He turned back to Emily and Trish in the doorway. "Do you want to reset in here? It's a bit cramped out there for the equipment."

"That was our original idea," Trish confirmed. She moved into the room and Ryan followed with his camera."

"Two cameras?" Jimmy Joe exclaimed, quite surprised. "Are you going to use both of them?"

"That's the idea," Trish replied as she quickly looked around again.

"Wow, I'm going to be a bigger star than I thought!"

"Let's put him on the bed with Emily," Trish directed. "Emily, you get down as close to the foot of the bed as possible. Jimmy Joe, you sit next to her." She waited while Emily and Jimmy Joe got situated. "Jimmy Joe," Trish said, "you're going to have to move in closer. Sit right up against Emily, okay? We've got to be able to get you both into the camera shots when we need to."

As soon as Emily and Jimmy Joe were situated, Trish turned to her cameramen. "Ryan, you come at Jimmy Joe from this angle and concentrate just on him. Bob, you take Emily from the right and pull back when you need to get both of them." Her people knew what they were doing so it only took a moment. She turned her attention on Jimmy Joe. "Try to ignore the lights as best you can," she told him. "Later in the week the rest of our staff and equipment will be here and we'll be using different lighting so it won't be quite as bad. Ready?" she asked him.

Jimmy Joe glanced around. Both cameras seemed to be almost in his face, just from different angles. The lights from both of them were pretty much blinding. He straightened his body and plucked up his confidence. "Hey, I'm Jimmy Joe, and I'm ready to go!" He heard a snort of laughter from someone back behind the lights.

“Okay Emily,” Trish said. “When you’re ready.”

Emily looked at the camera. “We’re here in Jimmy Joe’s...*man* cave,” she said to the camera, “where we’re surrounded by animals on the wall.” She looked down at Jimmy Joe. “Did you kill all these yourself?” she asked.

Jimmy looked around. “Hey, shouldn’t you have a microphone or something that I’m supposed to talk into?”

“It’s attached to the camera,” Emily replied. “It’s that big black thing just over the lens.

Jimmy Joe held up his hand. “I can’t see it with the lights in my eyes.”

“Trust me, it’s there,” Emily replied. “Let’s try it again. “Did you kill all the animals on your wall yourself?”

Jimmy Joe looked up at her with pride in his eyes, even though he admitted, “Just the deer and one of the ducks. My...*sister*...” he said loudly as he leaned toward the bedroom doorway then back again, “killed the other ducks.”

“So Jade killed some of the ducks?”

“Not when she was Jade of course,” Jimmy Joe replied. “Before that.”

“Of course,” Emily replied. “But you killed that monstrous deer head on the wall?”

“Sure did!” Jimmy Joe replied proudly. “Best deer shot around here in years. And I got it! Ask anyone!”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Emily replied.

“So tell me Jimmy Joe, do you like doing boy things more than girl things?”

“Huh?” He looked at her like she was crazy. “Of course!”

“Did you like doing girl things...before?”

Again he was surprised. “Of course,” he replied a little more uncertainly.

“They why did you decide you wanted to be a boy?”

“I didn’t just...decide. It was...everything! My whole life! Everything was all...wrong!”

“What do you mean by everything was wrong?”

“It was all just...I don’t know. I was supposed to be out hunting with the guys, and I couldn’t. I was supposed to be doing all kinds of

stuff with my Dad, and I couldn't. I was supposed to be one of the guys at school, and I wasn't. Everything was just all wrong!"

"So you thought you were supposed to be one of the guys?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"I'm just asking. Trying to understand some of what you were feeling that made you take such drastic measures."

"Oh, sorry," Jimmy Joe replied. "I don't like talking much about my feelings. They're kind of...personal."

"I understand," Emily said. "But don't you think other kids in your position might want to compare how they feel with the way you think? If you felt it was necessary to upset your whole family this much and change your whole life so drastically, don't you think someone else might want to learn from you?"

Jimmy thought about that for a moment. "I guess," he replied. "I spend a lot of time on the internet now reading about what other kids have gone through. Without the things they said, I wouldn't know what to think or what to do."

"So you do research on changing your sex on the internet?"

"I don't know if you'd call it research. But I look up things about it all the time now."

"I'd call that research. So what reasons can you tell everyone as to why you and your sister decided to switch places?"

"Well, I guess I can't really speak for Jade," Jimmy Joe said, "other than I've always known he wanted to be a girl."

"He did?"

Jimmy Joe nodded. "Always! He was so jealous of me and the things I did that it was downright sickening at times."

"And were you jealous of the things he did?"

"Me? I don't know. I think that's just it. He wasn't doing any of the things everyone figured he should be doing. He went way out of his way to avoid all that stuff."

"But that's Jade. How about you? Did you feel like you were a boy inside?"

"I *am* a boy inside!" Jimmy Joe replied with a certainty that made Susan's heart lurch.

"And you were certain of that?"

Jimmy Joe nodded. "Very! I mean, do you think I'd face the wrath of all my family and friends, at school too, if I wasn't? These last few months have been some of the best months of my entire life!"

"I see," Emily replied. She tried a different direction. "Was it that good when you started all this?"

Jimmy Joe thought about that. "Not even close!" he finally admitted. "I can't tell you how difficult things were. And embarrassing? But hey, at least I know things weren't nearly as bad for me as they were for my...*sister*!" he said loudly as if he was calling toward the door.

"Why did you put it that way? Did you want Jade to hear you?"

"Of course," he said with an impish grin. He raised his voice loudly again and called toward the doorway. "My sister is the biggest sissy on the planet!"

"Shut up you moron!" Jade's faint voice called back.

"See?" Jimmy Joe said. "She's so easy!"

"I get the impression you like teasing Jade."

"Well sure. Wouldn't you?"

"I don't know. My sister and I were always very good friends. We still are."

"Oh. Well, I guess we are too. Otherwise I probably wouldn't bother."

Emily shook her head. In a somewhat perverted way, it made sense. Emily totally switched directions. "I heard earlier, that when all this first started, your father beat you. How bad was it?"

Jimmy Joe's jaw nearly dropped. "They told you that?"

Emily nodded. "Yes they did."

"Well, I guess according to them, I deserved it."

"I get the impression that you don't feel that way."

"No! If I did, I wouldn't be here today. Like this anyway. I mean, my Dad didn't exactly kill me."

"But how bad was the beating, really?"

Jimmy Joe spat out a quick laugh. "Bad? I didn't even cry!" Again his voice got real loud as he turned his head toward the door. "Not like some other sissy I know!"

"Moron!" Jade yelled back.

"She's so funny," Jimmy Joe laughed.

"So your father didn't beat you bad at all?"

Jimmy Joe looked at her like she was crazy. "Of course not. He's my father. He's not going to ever hurt me. Just like I know nobody in this family will ever hurt me. We're McCombers. And McCombers watch out for each other and take good care of each other. We're family. And there's nothing in the world more important than that!"

Emily was surprised by Jimmy Joe's certainty with which he had said it. But it did bring up another thought. "How about you going to such great lengths to change who you are? Isn't that like doing something to hurt your family? Everyone else seems to be pretty upset about it."

Jimmy Joe's face clouded and he looked down at the floor. "I guess," he finally admitted. A moment later, he brought his head up to look at her again with determination in his eyes. "But it's just that...I *had* to! I felt like I was being strangled to death trying to still be a girl."

"So you and your brother cooked up that scheme to become each other. But it was only supposed to be for two days a week to start. I hear you even put it in writing."

"That was my idea!" Jimmy Joe replied. "We didn't put in the part about being each other *all* the time though because...I don't know. I guess I didn't think of it then. But I'm glad everyone else in the family did."

"So you were glad about it?"

Jimmy Joe tried to look past the lights to see his mother. "Not back then I wasn't. But I sure am now!"

"I see," Emily replied. "So as far as you're concerned, you and your sister did the right thing?"

Jimmy Joe nodded. "I'm sorry that nobody else likes it. I guess except Jade, of course. But yeah, I do think what we did was right. And...there just wasn't any other way."

"I see," Emily replied. "And now you're a boy who, even I have to admit, is starting to look rather...handsome."

Jimmy Joe beamed. "Well of course! I'm Jimmy Joe!"

“Yes, we covered that earlier,” Emily replied with a laugh. “And from what I can see right now, you look like you’re even developing some nice muscles on those arms.”

“I sure am!” Jimmy Joe replied proudly. “It’s all the work I do with my uncle and cousins. Muscles!” he said as he raised his arms showing his biceps.

Emily let the camera pan on him for a moment until Jimmy Joe was finished showing himself off. But as he did so, she noticed something she thought might be a little odd about him. “Jimmy Joe,” she said, “would you mind if I ask you a rather personal question?”

“Isn’t everything we’ve been talking about...personal?”

“Yes, you’re right. It certainly has been. But with you showing off your muscles, I couldn’t help but notice, you’re wearing a nice shirt that’s somewhat tight around your body. Are your chest muscles developing like your arms?”

“Sure. I guess. I’m not taking my shirt off to show you though. Sorry!”

“No need!” Emily replied quickly. “But tell me. You’re what, twelve years old now?”

“Yeah. Since just this month.”

“And since you were a girl for most of your life, what do you do to hide your breasts? Do you bind them up so they don’t show?”

Jimmy Joe’s face immediately switched to an angry troubled look. He said nothing.

“Jimmy Joe,” Emily prompted again after a moment. “Do you have to wrap or bind your breasts to hide them?”

“I don’t have any breasts,” Jimmy Joe replied in a soft but angry voice.

“You don’t?”

“If you must know. None!” He raised his voice loudly toward the door again. “But my sister sure does.” His voice dropped back to almost a soft whisper. “My stupid sissy sister grew my breasts! And I don’t have any at all!”

“How did that happen?” Emily asked.

Jimmy Joe shrugged. “Hormones, I guess.”

“Hormones,” Emily said. “So you now seem...”

"My stupid sister-brother got everything," Jimmy Joe said angrily, his voice full of frustration. "And I got nothing!" Again he shouted toward the doorway. "I got nothing!"

"What do you mean she got everything and you got nothing?"

"You want to know what else she got that I didn't?"

"What's that?"

"She got...um...uh... Something I'm not supposed to mention out loud."

"You can't talk about it?"

"It's not polite," Jimmy Joe replied.

"Can you whisper it to me?"

Jimmy Joe shrugged. Emily leaned down so her ear was close to his mouth and let him whisper what he wanted to say. She sat back with a rather surprised look on her face. "A penis?"

"We're not supposed to use that word," Jimmy Joe replied rather sourly.

"I think it's okay right now," Emily told him.

Jimmy Joe only shrugged again.

"You're angry because she got breasts...and a penis?"

It took a moment, but Jimmy Joe finally nodded. "She can be *anything*, while I'm only...a freak!"

"Do others call you a freak?"

Jimmy Joe shook his head. "No. They wouldn't dare! I'd kill them."

"Do you hate your sister because of that?"

"No! I don't hate her. She can't help it, just like I can't. I just think it's not fair!"

"So what are you going to do about it?"

Jimmy Joe shrugged again. "I don't know. Nothing I guess. I don't know there's anything I can do. Just pretend, I guess."

"Pretend you have a penis like the other boys?"

"Kind of. Or pretend it doesn't really matter."

"But it does?"

Again, he shrugged. "What girl would ever be interested in me, knowing that I don't have what all the rest of the guys have?"

"So you want a girlfriend?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Right now, I just want to be like everyone else. Or at least thought of like everyone else. I'm a boy now. Why can't everyone just see me that way?"

"Indeed," Emily said, looking straight into the camera.

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Don't let them know. Don't let them suspect. Don't let them know. Don't let them suspect. I'm a girl. I've always wanted to be a girl. Always! Don't let them know. Don't let them suspect. I've always wanted to be a girl. I want to be a girl real bad. Don't let them know. Don't let them suspect.

Jade sat on the foot of her bed listening to the noise coming from her *brother's* bedroom. She couldn't really hear anything that was happening over there, except the times when her brother had yelled stupid things to her. Moron! What the heck did he think he was doing?

The two of them had sat together yet again last night, talking about things in the dead of the night. They had clasped wrists as they had done before and whispered together over and over again, "Don't let them know. Don't let them suspect. I've always wanted to be a girl." Except that Jimmy Joe had said boy instead of girl at the end. They had to! The family was depending on them to not mess up and let anything out that they shouldn't.

The only problem was, that now Jade was having trouble figuring out what was real and what wasn't anymore. They had changed the story in just tiny little places, trying hard to keep everything as true as possible. But the little things they had talked about changing, were starting to become so minor, that now Jade was wondering if maybe it hadn't been true all along. Did Jimmy Joe really want to be a boy after all? Did Jimmy Joe cook all this up just to manipulate things so that she could become...Jimmy? Jade did know that she herself hadn't always wanted to be a girl. She thought anyway. Now, after trying to tell herself so many times that she really had always wanted to be a girl, she was starting to have trouble believing otherwise.

Don't let them know. Don't let them suspect. She didn't think about it, but her whole body was tight as a drum. She sat on the foot of the bed with her legs and feet pressed tightly together. She hugged Cleo to her chest, looking for any bit of comfort she might get from the silly lion.

She had changed into the new cream colored sheath dress she had gotten last weekend. It was a bit tighter over her whole body than she liked. Tight, like her entire body felt tight just then. But it was new, and her mother had said it looked very good on her. The only part about it she wasn't as happy with was the way the neckline came down and revealed a little bit of that gap she now had between her breasts. Cleavage. Her mother had nearly hit the ceiling when she had told her in the stores that she was concerned about it. And now she was wearing the new dress, waiting on the TV cameras to come in and film her, to be shown to the whole world. Exactly what she didn't want! Why couldn't they leave her alone? Why?

Don't let them know. Don't let them suspect. The sounds from across the hall changed. They were coming...coming for her. Don't let them know. Don't let them suspect.

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As the entourage slowly prepared to shift into the room across the hall, Susan again was left wondering what had just happened with Jimmy Joe. There were so many things that Jimmy Joe had just said that she had never heard him mention before, or that she had never even thought of before. Were they all lies? Somehow, Susan had a hard time believing that they were. Everything Jimmy Joe had said had sounded completely true. Somehow. The only problem was, she thought she knew her kids better than she knew herself. She was now finding out how very wrong she was.

Jade hadn't moved a muscle. She still didn't move as her room quickly became overcrowded with people. Her eyes moved everywhere, yet her head barely moved at all. She clutched Cleo to her chest for dear life, while trying desperately not to show how nervous she was.

"Hi Jade," the woman Trish said to her. "You ready for us?"

Jade nodded, but it was a series of tight nervous little nods.

"This is Emily," Trish said, introducing the reporter to her. "She'll be doing the interview with you."

Again Jade gave the same series of tight little nods.

"Jade," Susan said, hurrying over to her. "You okay?"

Jade's head did the nodding thing again. She never even thought about speaking.

"You sure?" Susan asked as she ran her hand over Jade's hair.

Again the nods came.

"Where's your brush?" Susan said quickly as both cameramen started filming her room, particularly all the dolls. Susan grabbed the brush from her desk and began brushing Jade's hair again, making sure it looked perfect.

"Susan," Trish said as Susan seemed to be working feverishly on her daughter. "One of our people that will be here tomorrow is really good with hair and makeup. She does Emily's before each broadcast, and she even trims and styles my hair whenever I want too. We'll have her do Jade's hair and makeup, and yours too for the camera."

Susan shook her head. "I'll do it." Her head came up, staring at the dolls behind the bed, as one of the words that Trish had said filtered through. "Makeup!" She quickly looked back at Jade's face. "No, no, no!" she said. She hurried to the desk. "Blusher. Where..." She ran back to Jade again.

"Susan!" Trish said, quickly grabbing her arm. "Jade looks great. Very pretty. This is just a trial filming, that's all. We'll have our people do her makeup for the real thing. Yours too. We know the best things to use for the camera and lighting. We know how to make her *and* you look really good for the camera. Okay?"

Susan looked from Jade to Trish. "I guess," she said uncertainly. She quickly ran the brush down each side of Jade's head again then stood back. "Do your best," she said to Jade. "And don't be scared. Daddy and I are right here."

Again Jade only nodded.

Trish told the cameramen what she wanted, which was almost the same as what they had done with Jimmy Joe. Emily was

directed to sit right next to Jade, and the camera lights went on. Jade blinked and tried to turn her head away from the bright lights.

"Try to ignore the lights and the cameras," Trish told her. "Forget they're there. Are you ready?"

Again the series of tight little nods came from Jade's head...as if it was the only answer she was capable of giving.

"Jade?" Trish said again. "Speak to me. Don't just nod. We've got to make sure we can hear you well enough from the cameras."

Again Jade nodded.

"Jade," Trish said again. "Please say something out loud."

Jade blinked...and forced her mouth open. "Something."

Trish chuckled and shook her head. "Whenever you're ready, Emily."

Emily faced one of the cameras. "I'm sitting here with Jade in her bedroom, and what a delightful room it is – all pink and white, and with rows of doll covered shelves lining the walls. The perfect bedroom for a young girl. She turned to Jade. "How many dolls do you have in here?"

Jade looked around, not sure where to look or what to do. She finally chose a camera and said, "A lot."

"Obviously," Emily replied with a chuckle. "Do you like playing with dolls?" she asked.

Jade shrugged. "They're okay."

"Just o..."

"Some of them are really nice," Jade added, cutting her off. "There are some here from all over the world that are really cool because of what they're wearing, like Kiko from Japan, and..."

"So you do like playing with the dolls," Emily said as a statement.

Again Jade shrugged. "They're okay."

Emily needed to find a way to get the girl to relax and open up. She could literally see how tight the girl was – physically. Unfortunately, none of the questions she planned on asking were likely to ease the young girl's nervousness at all. She had no choice but to plunge ahead and hope for the best.

"I noticed that your brother likes to tease you."

Jade rolled her eyes in a major way. "He's a moron!"

"A moron? Why? Just because he likes teasing you?"

“More like he likes being a pain in the ass!”

“In what ways is he a pain in the ass, as you called him?”

“He’s always calling me a big sissy and stuff.” She looked directly at Emily for the first time. “According to my mother, there’s no such thing as a sissy girl. And my moron of a brother can’t seem to understand that.”

“No such thing?” Emily asked, not sure what she meant.

“No! There’s not!” Jade replied with quite a bit of emphasis on the fact. “You’ve got some girls that are girlier than others, but we’re all just girls! Not sissies!”

“You don’t seem to like being called a sissy,” Emily started.

“I don’t! I’m not a sissy! I’m a girl!”

Do you think your brother hates you?”

“Jimmy Joe?” Jade replied, surprised that this woman would suggest such a thing. “No! Of course not. He just likes being a total pain. He’s a moron.”

“Sissy!” Jimmy Joe’s voice called from beyond the lights somewhere.

“Moron!” Jade yelled back.

“Kids! Stop it!” Susan yelled.

“See,” Jade said to Emily. “He’s a pain!”

Emily shook her head, trying not to laugh. She chose her next words carefully. “Did you know he’s jealous of you?”

“Jimmy Joe?” Jade replied with disbelief. “Why the heck would he be jealous of me *now*? He’s got everything he always wanted! He’s...me now.”

“He’s you now, but he’s still jealous.”

“Why?” Jade asked, then added, “Did I mention he’s a moron?”

“Yes, I believe you did,” Emily replied. “But Jade, seriously now. Do you know what he told me?”

“Knowing him, it’s probably something really stupid.”

“He thinks that you got everything, and he got nothing.”

“Nothing? He’s got everything he wanted. Everything! Do you know how many times in the past he used to bug me because I didn’t want to go hunting like the rest of the guys? Jimmy,” she mimicked in a high pitched voice, “I really wish I could go instead of you. Jimmy, what’s wrong with you? I’d love to kill something.

Jimmy, you're so lucky to be a boy?" Her voice returned to normal. "I don't think we ever had a decent conversation that he didn't say something where he wished he was me. I know I mentioned before that he's a moron!"

"You know what he told me?" Emily asked.

Jade again rolled her eyes in a big way. "What?"

"He said you got everything, because you got his breasts, *and* you've got a penis."

"My penis!" Jade exclaimed unbelievably. "See what a moron he is! Well if he wants it, he can have it! I'll be glad to give it to him. I sure don't want it. If I could cut the stupid thing off right now I would! I can't wait to get rid of it someday."

"And why is that?"

"Because it's in the way! It's useless! It still marks me a boy! I can't even go into the bathroom at school unless Aunt Jane is there to watch over me. I can't wear anything where the stupid thing might show. Having it is nothing but a pain in the butt! So if Jimmy Joe wants it, it's all his! I'd give anything to trade that for what he's got."

"What he's got?" Emily asked. "What does he have that you want?"

Jade glanced around, realizing she had gotten a little out of control over her stupid brother. Her body tightened and she hugged Cleo to her chest again. Her face fell to the floor, away from the cameras and the lights. Her voice was soft as she replied. "All the parts to make a baby."

"You want to have a baby someday?"

"I can't!" Jade replied.

"No. I guess you can't. But you want one."

Again Jade looked up at Emily. "So what if I do? Is that so bad?"

"No. Not at all. Why do you think you want a baby?"

"I don't know," Jade replied as she again looked down at the floor. "All my friends, they talk about it all the time. We talk about getting married, and having kids, and what we'd name our kids, and...all kinds of stuff. But...I can't have a baby like they can."

"Do you think you'd be a good mother if you could have a baby, or perhaps if you adopted one?"

Jade looked at her again. "I know I would!" she said with some certainty. "I mean, I already know how to cook and clean the house and do laundry and change diapers. And I love kids! Really love them. You should see my Aunt Jessica's kids. They're sooo cute! Especially little Melody. She'll be two years old next month. You should see her! When she's around I can't hardly keep my hands off of her. I just want to pick her up and squeeze her and never let go." She paused a moment. "My Aunt Jessica has really cute kids."

"It sounds like it," Emily replied, noting how animated Jade had gotten over it. And her face had totally lit up. Unfortunately, it was time to move into more difficult territory again.

"Tell me Jade, what you and your brother are doing is very... unique," she said.

"You mean bizarre!" Jade replied as she again brought Cleo to her chest and her body seemed to close up again. "That's what the newspapers and the TV says it is."

"Yes," Emily replied. "I've heard that. But let's just call it... unique instead. Okay?"

Jade shrugged. "They both mean the same thing. Don't they?"

"Not...quite," Emily replied.

Jade only shrugged again.

"Why did you and your brother decide to take this drastic step together? This is life-changing – literally. Not just for you and Jimmy Joe, but your whole family as well."

Jade shrugged again. "We weren't exactly thinking about everyone else back then I guess," she said sadly.

"Do you regret what you've done?"

Jade nodded. "Yeah," she said after a moment. Her head lifted quickly to look at Emily. "Not the part about me becoming a girl. I still don't regret that at all. What I regret is what it's done to everyone else! I guess I had no idea how much everyone else would hate it." Her head fell. "Jimmy Joe and me should have figured more about that when we decided to do this."

"Tell me Jade, I hear that when you and Jimmy Joe came up with this whole thing, you decided to put what you wanted in writing."

Jade nodded as she again stared at the floor, Cleo hugged tightly to her chest.

“Was it a letter that was addressed to your parents?”

Jade blinked. “I guess, sort of.” she replied. “It was really just a note. Nothing like you’d send to someone in the mail. We only wanted to write it all out so everyone would know how serious we were.”

“Were you dressed as each other when you gave it to your parents?”

Jade nodded, still staring at the floor. “I’m not sure they even read the silly note till much later. After they nearly killed us for dressing like each other. Man was my daddy mad! He nearly killed me! I’ve never hardly been beat with his belt before. But he hit me good that day.”

“Jimmy Joe said he didn’t hardly hurt him at all. He didn’t even cry.”

“Maybe he didn’t cry, but I sure did. Right from when Daddy started yelling!”

“So did he hit you bad or not?”

“It hurt! Isn’t that bad enough?”

“I guess it would be,” Emily replied.

“Do you know how hard it was for me not to give in then?”

“You almost gave in to stop trying to be a girl.”

Jade nodded. “If Jimmy Joe hadn’t still been so adamant about it after he got hit, then I don’t think I could have managed to go through with it. But, well, that’s the only time Daddy ever spanked us for it. And...I guess we’re here where we want to be. Both of us.”

“Both of you,” Emily agreed.

“But I had to do it!” Jade said, as if trying to stick up for herself. “And I’ve still got to. I mean, we’ve both got to. Jimmy Joe and me. Although I don’t really care if he decides to quit now. Not that he ever will. He might have been really pretty when he was a girl, and he may have played with dolls and done all the other things the girls liked, but trust me, he was still all boy, even back then!”

“And you were all girl?”

“I wanted to be. I still do. I always will. Even after I get an operation to remove my...you know what, and they give me something instead to make me more of a woman, I’ll still wish I was a real girl.”

“Because you can’t ever have babies?”

Jade hugged Cleo tighter and stared down at the floor. Her head nodded again. “That, and I wouldn’t ever have to worry about what people think of me.”

“What people think of you?” Emily asked. “I worry about what people think about me all the time.”

“Not like that!” Jade replied. “I mean...the way people will know what I really am. I don’t want people making fun of me for it or saying anything about it at all. Especially to me. I just want people to look at me as a girl and nothing else! Not having to have someone with me in the rest rooms, not worrying if I want to buy some clothes and try them on. I just want people to see me as another regular girl...without knowing what I used to be. You want to know what I really want?”

“What’s that?”

“I want this whole TV thing to not happen!”

“Not happen? Why?”

“Because people are going to see me on TV! Maybe my moron brother likes it, but I don’t! I was just getting to the point where I could go out shopping with my Mom and nobody even gave me a second glance as being anything but a girl. Now I’m going to be on TV and the whole world is going to see me and know who I am...and what I am. They’re all going to know and point at me and laugh behind my back. I don’t want that! I just want people to leave me alone and let me be...me!”

Emily desperately searched for a way to reply to that. What they were doing was directly against everything the girl in front of her wanted. “Maybe,” she finally said, “you being on TV will get that message out to everyone, so they can know how you want to be treated and considered. Maybe, you getting that message across can help not just you, but a lot of other people just like you.”

“I don’t care about anyone else,” Jade said somberly. “I just want to be able to go out and be what I am without anyone knowing at all what I really am...I mean what I used to be...or...whatever. You know?”

“You don’t want them to realize you used to be a boy.”

"I'm not a boy!" Jade insisted. "Not in my head at least. I'm not a boy...and I'm not a sissy. I'm a girl! Or I want to be a girl...like all my cousins and friends. I want people to see me like they see them, and treat me like that, and think of me like that. I'm not a freak!"

Jade looked around again, horrified at the way she had just spoken. "Sorry," she said as her body seemed to contract into itself again. Her knees and feet came tightly together again and Cleo came back to her chest. "I didn't mean to get so...stupid about it all." She looked up at Emily. "When people mess up when they're filming stuff, don't they get a chance to do it over again or something?"

Emily nodded. "If it's necessary. But Jade, I don't think it's necessary at all. I think you said everything just perfectly."

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Much later that night, after all the kids were in bed, Susan and Clint sat at the kitchen table with Jacob, Rose, Brian, and Janet.

"You didn't call and let me know of any problems with the twins," Jacob began. "So I take it that TV woman was a bit nicer?"

Susan nodded. "I think so. But she still asked some bad questions."

"Bad ones?" Jacob asked. "So what happened?"

"I don't know. Somehow the twins got around every single one of them with something that was either the truth, or something almost the real truth, or...I don't know what. But both of them were talking about things they've never mentioned before, and I'm suddenly wondering if maybe the two of them didn't cook all this stuff up in the very beginning so they really could switch places. That's what I keep thinking. From both of them!"

"I wouldn't have thought those kids could lie that good," Jacob replied.

"I don't know that they did!" Susan told him.

"I was pretty much going crazy myself," Clint added. "I mean, when Jade suddenly started talking about not being able to have a baby and wanting to be a mother someday, I nearly fell over dead! Where the heck did that come from?"

Susan shook her head. "She never mentioned anything like that to me! Never! She's always been pretty much upset over the fact that Jimmy Joe won't quit hunting so they both can go back to being who they're supposed to be."

"So where did all this stuff come from?" Jacob asked.

"Did they get together and figure all this out ahead of time?" Rose asked.

"I'm sure they must have talked some," Susan replied. "But this much stuff?"

"Have you asked them about it?"

"Not today," Susan said. "By the time everything settled down, we sent them both to bed."

"They're both pretty bright kids," Janet noted. "Although in different ways."

"Of course they are!" Clint replied.

"But I still don't see how they could have cooked something up like they did," Susan told them. "I thought I knew my kids. I thought I really knew them. But now I see that I don't know them at all!"

"Jade has always liked taking things apart and putting them together again," Brian noted.

"So?" Jacob asked.

"And Jimmy Joe I hear is really good at designing things and putting together what she wears."

"Yeah, amazingly," Susan agreed. "So what?"

"So I agree, those two are too young to be able to come up with a scheme this complete. At least not be able to work out all the details that much. But if you think about it, they both see things in a similar manner."

"A similar manner?" Clint asked. "Those two don't see eye to eye on anything!"

Brian smiled. "No. I mean unconsciously, I think they both see how things fit together. Jade is used to seeing how parts fit together, and Jimmy Joe sees how clothes and colors fit. Maybe their subconscious minds are working off of each other to build these outlandish tales."

"Or maybe you've been reading too many psychology books lately!" Janet replied. "I seriously doubt that's what's going on at all."

"I doubt it too!" Rose replied.

"Or maybe, they really do want to be each other, and it's only just now really coming out?" Susan wondered.

Rose reached over and grabbed her hand. "Who knows? I thought Jade was lost a long time ago. Maybe Jimmy Joe is lost now too. Maybe we're all going to have to look at the two of them in a different light to see just what's really happening."

Jacob shook his head. "I still ain't buyin' none of it!"

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Jade tossed and turned in her bed. She couldn't sleep. She couldn't get that conversation with the TV woman out of her head. And all those crazy lights in her face had made it all that much worse. Giving up, she got out of bed and went to her computer to start another email.

Dear Christy,

You wouldn't believe how things went today. That TV reporter woman was here in my room, along with two cameras with lights so bright I couldn't see anything. And the questions she asked me! I promise though, I didn't say anything to her I shouldn't have. I don't think anyway. But oh the things I said! I'm sure Reverend Cosinger would yell at me and tell me I'm going straight to hell for saying some of those things, but Reverend Cosinger is such a pain in the ass I don't care about anything he says anymore anyway.

Christy, is it wrong if I talked about things I've only thought about in my head? Is it wrong to say things to someone that I don't even know if they're true or not? Did I do bad? Or was it really good?

I remember telling her that Jimmy Joe can have my penis if he wants it and that I don't want it at all. But I do want it...I think. I'm just so confused right now I really don't know what I want anymore. And I told the lady that I want all Jimmy Joe's parts so that I could have a baby someday. Was that so wrong too? I guess it was. But still, I have wondered about that in the past. What's it like to have a baby? That's what all my friends want. All of them! Do you know

how much they all talk about things like that? So yes, I admit it, I wonder about that sometimes too. Maybe more often than I'd like to admit. And I guess even more I wonder what it's like for my friends to have a vagina instead of the stupid penis I have now. Do they feel like they're missing something down there? I guess not. It's just a stupid thought.

My moron of a brother was being more of a moron than ever today. You should have seen the stupid things he did just for the camera. And then when they were talking to him in his room, he kept yelling stupid things to me, calling me a sissy over and over again. The stupid moron! What did he think he was doing? We talked about some of this stuff together, a few times. We sat and both promised we'd never say anything that the family doesn't want them to know. And he goes off and does really stupid things just for the attention. The moron!

Jimmy Joe is a moron!!!! I hate him! No I don't. Not really. Why does he have to act so crazy just to get so much attention? I don't want attention like that. I just want everyone to go away and leave me alone. Things are hard enough for me. I don't need him trying to make them worse. He can't seem to see that, of course. The moron! Maybe that's what I should start calling him from now on. Instead of Jimmy Joe, I'll just call him moron instead. See how he likes that! Knowing him though, he probably won't care that much and will only start calling me sissy even more. The dumb moron!

Christy, why can't everyone just go away and leave me alone? Why did Reverend Cosinger have to start all this – at a time when everyone would have to take notice of it so much? And now if we don't all show ourselves all over the TV, then the dumb reporters will never go away and leave us alone. So I'm stuck. Trapped! Just like I'm stuck and trapped having to be a girl instead of a boy.

But Christy, is it so bad being a girl? I mean, I can't help but wonder about that sometimes. Okay, more than sometimes. Everybody says I'm so much happier and better off as a girl. Am I? I don't know. Is it better to be something, or someone you're not, if you're happier that way? Everybody says I need to go back to who I was, back to being a boy. But everybody also says I'm better off as

*a girl. What am I supposed to think? What am I supposed to do?
It's driving me crazy!*

Anyway, I think I got through the TV stuff just fine again. I don't think I said anything I shouldn't have – at least not about what the family doesn't want me to say. I'm just not sure about anything else.

*Thanks for listening again. Your friend,
Jade*

Jade read through what she had written to Christy, then deleted all of it and turned her computer off. A minute later, she was back in bed trying to sleep.

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Jimmy Joe stared up at the deer head on his wall. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't get all the stuff with the TV people out of his mind. He thought he had done really well. But did he? He wished there was someone he could talk to about it. Someone who wouldn't tell anyone else. He used to have someone like that, but not anymore. He missed that someone terribly just then.

Giving up, and with only one thing on his mind, he got out of bed and left his room. The door straight across the hallway was closed. He quietly opened it. The light from the hallway gave him just enough light to see by, not that he needed that much. He knew the room and everything in it perfectly. He went around to the far side of the room. Jade was asleep in her bed. He reached up quietly.

"Jimmy Joe?" Jade asked. "What the heck are you doing?"

"Shut up!" Jimmy Joe replied. He reached up and grabbed Lucy. Not bothering to caress and hold the doll like he should, he hurried from the room, closing the door behind him. In his own room, behind his own closed door, he sat up on his bed and finally held the doll as if it really was a precious baby. Which as far as he was concerned, it was.

"Hi Lucy," he started. "Did you miss me? I can't tell you how much I've missed you. I'm afraid we can only visit for a little while

tonight and that's all. Then I'm going to have to put you back again. We can't have anyone finding you here in my room now.

"The TV people were here today Lucy. I know you saw them in Jade's room. You should have seen me when they first came. I put on a real show for them. And I even managed to get my hat to roll down my arm and catch it. It was great! And they were all real impressed! You would have been so proud of me!

"They asked me questions again, Lucy," he said to the doll. "Harder questions than before. No Lucy, I didn't say anything at all that the family doesn't want me to say. But Lucy, it was so weird. Suddenly I found myself telling them that I wanted Jade's penis. It was so...weird! I don't know why I did that. It just kind of happened. Yeah, I know I think about it sometimes. Yes Lucy, don't worry, I'm still all girl – inside. But that doesn't mean I don't think about what it must be like to really be a guy and have a penis like the guys do. Is it really as uncomfortable to have it hanging off you down there like it looks? Is it any better to have that thing than have the girl parts that I have now? I guess the guys all seem to think so. The guys think it's better, and the girls think it's better to be a girl. What am I supposed to think? How am I supposed to know? It's not like I can just go out and buy one and try it out or something. I guess it's also not like I'll ever really know either. Even if I decided to stay a boy forever – which I'm not! I just don't want to switch back now.

"And you should have heard what Jade said when they asked her questions. Oh, I guess you did hear, didn't you. Jade said she wanted all my parts so she could have a baby. What brought that on? She never mentioned anything at all like that to me. Never! I promise! We talked about a bunch of things together, but never anything like that! What the heck was that stupid sissy doing? Or maybe she really does want to have a baby someday. I really wouldn't be surprised at all. She is such a big sissy. She's probably always wanted to be a real girl. No, I guess I'm not surprised at all.

"So I told them all some crazy things today, Lucy. And I acted kind of crazy too, I guess. But Lucy, it was fun. I want them to see what kind of guy I can be. Is that so bad? And who knows, maybe I'll even really be famous someday. It could happen. I don't know that I really want to be famous that bad...well, I do kind of. But who

knows what will happen in the future. Someday I'm going to be real pretty again, and I'll be a famous model, and I'll also be a famous fashion designer. So I'll be famous, famous, famous! Someday Lucy. Someday. I'm just not ready to go back to being a girl yet to start making it all happen. There's still time when I can have fun being a boy. Lots of time."

He lifted the doll to his face and kissed the doll's cheek. "Thanks for listening, Lucy. Thanks so much. I really do miss you, and I love you so much."

He again got out of bed and carried the doll across the hall. Quietly he went into Jade's bedroom and put the doll back on the shelf where he had gotten it from. He could tell by his sister's breathing that she was sound asleep this time. Silently, he went back to his own bed and stared up at the deer head for a moment, still thinking about his day and the things he had done. He never realized when he too fell sound asleep.

Chapter 65 – Bearly Hunting

April 23rd

Doctor Hapkins breathed a sigh of relief as the family business office came in sight. She had made it without getting lost! She stopped the car in the middle of the road just past the office, pulled her cell phone from her purse, and dialed. “Hi Rose.” she said a moment later. “This is Doctor Hapkins. I just got here, and I know Brian and Janet are out working, so I thought I’d just head for wherever the TV people are to see what they’re doing. You wouldn’t know where they are, would you?”

“Hold on a minute,” Rose replied. “They’re all right here in the house.” She carried the phone from the kitchen, all the way into one of the downstairs bedrooms where the TV crew was still gathered. She held the phone out toward the whole group, not knowing who to give it to. “Doctor Hapkins wants to talk to one of you,” she said.

Trish took the phone. “Doctor Hapkins?”

“Yes,” Cynthia replied. “I just got here and thought I’d look in on what you’re all doing. Would you mind?”

“You’re here?” Trish asked, looking quickly up at her crew.

“I’m parked out in the road down near the business office.”

“Can we talk with you?” Trish asked.

“If you have questions, I’ll try to answer what I can,” Cynthia replied. “I don’t want to interrupt anything you’re working on though. Not at all! I just wanted to stand back and watch.”

“We’re not working on anything right now except going over the footage from yesterday,” Trish told her. “We haven’t had time yet to completely form our plan for today.”

“Oh good!” Cynthia replied. “Hey, if you’re looking at whatever you shot yesterday, any chance you can let me see it too?”

“Only if you agree to let us talk to you and perhaps give your opinions on what’s on the film.”

"I guess I can," Cynthia replied. "Although it may depend on what I see."

"We'll take our chances," Trish decided. "We're here at Jacob's house still. We'll be waiting for you."

Ten minutes later, Rose showed Cynthia to the bedroom where the TV people were still gathered. Trish introduced her entire crew. "Why don't we go out to the living room," Trish suggested. "The location is much better and we've already come up with a list of questions for Emily to start with."

Cynthia shook her head. "Let me see what you shot with the family so far," she countered. "You did say you wanted my opinion on it, didn't you? Why hit me up twice, before I have anything to comment on?"

Trish looked at her for a moment, then turned to Ryan. "Show her the interviews."

Cynthia watched it all on their computer monitor. They started with the interview with Rose and continued on with Marcy, Valerie, and finally Susan. When they got to Susan though, Cynthia watched particularly intently as Susan sat there crying. The more distressed Susan got, the more distressed Cynthia got. She was angry, but not at the TV people. The reporter had only asked questions Cynthia figured she should have. She was angry at herself. What she saw was a woman who needed strong psychological help and counseling. She had known that before from her first visit, but she had done nothing at all about it.

"What do you think?" Trish asked when it was over, seeing the look on the doctor's face.

"Let me see the sessions you did with the twins," Cynthia said.

"How do you know we taped them too?"

"It only makes sense," Cynthia replied. "Besides, late last night I caught a new commercial for the program you plan to broadcast. It showed Jimmy Joe calling Jade a big sissy, and then laughing because she was so easy to tease, then it showed Jade calling him a moron."

"Ha!" Bob exclaimed happily as he and Ryan slapped palms.

"You did that?" Cynthia asked.

“No. We upload everything we shoot to the company servers every day, and the guys back home go through it and start working with it.”

Cynthia shook her head and said no more about it. “Which one did you do first?”

If she watched the interview with Susan intently, it was nothing at all like she watched the interview with Jimmy Joe. “Can you stop it?” She said suddenly. The video paused. “Is there any way you can go back and play that last part again, where he’s talking about why he and his sister decided to switch places?” The video jumped backwards, then started again. Cynthia watched it again, her lips pursed in thought. Twice more she asked them to replay different sections. When it was over, she stared at the blank monitor in thought, trying to make sense of something she couldn’t yet put a name to.

“Doctor?” Trish asked. “What did you notice?”

Cynthia shook her head. “How about the one with Jade?”

Again the monitor came to life and Cynthia watched, perhaps even more intently than before. What she was looking for was right there! Or at least she thought it might be. But whatever it was, it had suddenly slipped away again and she was left wondering if she had noticed anything at all.

But there were other things she had noticed. Important things about each of the videos with the twins. Things she was kicking herself over in a major way. Like their mother, those twins needed help too...only more so!

“Doctor? What do you think?” Trish asked.

“I think,” Cynthia replied cautiously, “that I’ve done those twins... in fact, their whole family! I think I’ve done them all a big disservice.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“I’ve let them down, all of them, by not trying to stick my nose further into their business than they wanted me.”

“Why?”

“They need help. *Serious* help. All of them. I’m betting even the father. Did you talk to him too?”

“He wouldn’t let us. Jacob either,” Trish told her.

Cynthia nodded. "That figures. But when I met those kids I should have stayed here and dug deeper into their lives. I should have forced them to look at things and deal with some of the issues that are literally tearing them apart – every last one of them. Well, I wasn't planning on going home anymore until this is over with. And while I'm here, I'm going to try to make the best use of what time I can."

"Can you tell us anything in particular that you noticed...on camera?"

Cynthia thought about that for a moment, then smiled. "Sure," she replied. "In fact, if you like, we can start right here and I'll point out a few things I noticed in those videos."

Trish and her crew nearly fell all over each other when they heard that. They all moved out to the living room where the location would be better for the film. Two chairs were pushed near each other for Emily and the doctor to sit in, and the computer monitor was set up where they could easily see it, with Michelle off to the side to run the videos. Both Emily and Cynthia got back from fixing their faces for the camera and took their seats. Bob and Ryan were set to capture them both from the best angles. Trish gave Emily the signal to begin.

"I'm here with noted psychiatrist and gender therapist Doctor Cynthia Hapkins, from Little Rock, Arkansas. She has been involved to some extent for a long time now in watching over the twin's transition into becoming each other. She turned to face Cynthia. "Doctor, what do you think of this...unique situation with the twins?"

Cynthia smiled. "You mean the bizarre situation as most news sources are calling it? It certainly is bizarre. And you're right, it certainly is unique."

"Is that why you're here, studying the children?"

"I'm not here for that at all. I'm here because the family asked for my help. And I intend on doing that to the very best of my ability."

"When did you first hear about the twins?" Emily asked.

"Oh...about three or four months ago now. I was brought in to consult on a hormone imbalance problem for both of them."

"And what did you think about their situation when you first heard about it?"

"I was highly skeptical that such a thing could happen."

"And are you still skeptical?"

Cynthia shook her head. "Just look at the tapes of those interviews you did with them and that will give you the answers."

"So you're not skeptical anymore?" Emily asked.

"Not at all," Cynthia replied.

"You were kind enough to go through some of the trial footage of the twins with us a short time ago, and you offered to tell us your opinion on some of what you saw. Can we go through some of those sections with you now?"

"Of course," Cynthia replied. "I'd love to. Can we start with Jimmy Joe?"

"Certainly," Emily replied.

"Just give me a minute," Michelle said from off camera as she pulled up the video, knowing that her words would be cut out of the final product.

Emily leaned a little closer to Cynthia. "We'll dub in the parts of the video from the studio so the audience will be able to see what we're talking about in the final product."

Cynthia only smiled. The video began.

"He's quite the ham," Emily noted as they watched Jimmy Joe's antics.

"That he is," Cynthia replied with a small laugh. "But I can guarantee that what you're seeing is *not* the real Jimmy Joe."

"It's not?" Emily asked, totally surprised.

"Nope!" the doctor replied with total assurance. "In fact, in this whole video, I only caught the briefest glimpse possible of what I think is really him, and even then it was hardly at all."

"When was that?"

"Can you move that forward to the part where he's teasing his sister. Where he calls her a sissy and says she so easy?"

A minute later, Michelle said, "Ready! Rolling!" Cynthia watched the video. "There! Stop!" Cynthia suddenly said. The video in front of her paused with Jimmy Joe laughing to himself over how easy it was to pick on his sister.

"You think that's the real Jimmy Joe?" Emily asked.

Cynthia smiled. "As I said, you've only caught the barest glimpse of him. Jimmy Joe wouldn't be interested in picking on his sister like that at all, unless the two of them shared some major bond together. They not only are sharing the trials of their paired transitions, they share a greater bond of family love. Without that, I seriously doubt he would ever even bother her." She turned her head to look at Emily. "Do you know what I think you need to do to find the real Jimmy Joe you're looking for? Because he's not in that video we just watched."

"What do you suggest?" Emily asked.

"What does Jimmy Joe like doing the most?" Cynthia said. "He likes shooting and hunting. All the McComber men and boys do. When I first came here to meet them, all the boys were outside practicing shooting while I was trying to talk with him. And the whole time the guns were blasting in the background, I could just see how Jimmy Joe was itching to be out with them. Get Jimmy Joe together with his friends and see what happens. And the other thing you ought to do with him might be even better."

"What's that?"

"Go hunting with him."

Emily's eyes widened. She forced herself to move on. "And how about Jade?"

"I think it's pretty much the same with Jade, you need to find her friends too, but you did manage to capture a little bit of the real her when you talked yesterday."

Emily turned to one of the cameras. "Roll Jade's video."

The video started. "Look how she's sitting," Cynthia said as the video began. "Her whole body is tight as a drum. She's clearly nervous about the whole thing."

"She said as much," Emily replied. "She didn't want to do this at all. She'd much rather remain completely anonymous."

"And I can't blame her," Cynthia replied. "Now here!" she said quickly. "There! Did you see how she brought that stuffed animal away from her body when she got angry at her brother? And now she's closing back up again."

"I was a bit concerned with it when we were doing this," Emily added.

Cynthia seriously doubted that Emily was concerned at all. "There!" she said suddenly. "Can you stop it again?" The film paused once again. "See the way she's sitting now? Look at her face. She's positively beaming."

"This was where she was talking about how much she loves kids and wants one of her own," Emily noted for the camera.

Cynthia nodded. "I blame myself," she said.

Emily was confused. "What do you mean? How can you blame yourself for her wanting to have children someday?"

"Not for that, for not taking the time to dig deeper into these subjects with them. I only got to meet them for the first time a week ago. I really never had time. But you're looking at two children who have deep questions about life, and there's only been limited help available for them. I'm going to have to make time to see to it that they get all the help they both need. The entire family for that matter."

"That's very good of you," Emily replied. "But as we ourselves have noticed, the family lives out in the middle of nowhere. They would have to travel for hours to get to you."

Cynthia nodded her agreement. "To get to any qualified help. Not necessarily me. But as a doctor, I simply can't let this go without trying to find some way that I can help this family through the things that are literally eating each of them up." She nodded back towards the video screen. "Just like with Jimmy Joe, I think you really need to find her friends to find the real Jade."

"The family agreed to keep most of the kids home from school today so we could talk with each of them. The older kids anyway. That was our plan."

Cynthia shook her head. "If I can offer a suggestion?"

"Please," Emily replied.

"One of the things that came out on TV from when all this first happened, was that the twins had a big birthday party. And from what I read, the girls all got together and put on some kind of a show. It might make for some interesting film to have them do it for your cameras."

Emily looked surprised. She looked over at Trish who nodded her agreement. "It could be interesting," Emily agreed cautiously.

“Of course, if you really want to capture the real Jade, you may have to find some way to be a lot sneakier.”

Emily was confused. “Sneakier? Why?”

“The last time I was here, I was...privileged...to witness the real Jade, but it was only when she thought nobody was looking. She and her girlfriends, the ones they call the Four Musketeers, were all sleeping over in Jade’s room for the night. From what I hear, those four girls were born together, raised together, they prefer to eat, sleep, and breathe together. And it was there, with them, when they thought nobody else was around, that I got the privilege of seeing the real Jade.”

“Why do you call it a privilege?”

Cynthia smiled. “Because it made me cry.”

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Tommy, Elliot, Hunter, Justin, and Jimmy Joe were all in Tommy’s bedroom playing video games. Since Hunter’s parents were at school, he had nowhere else to go, and nowhere else he’d rather be. None of them did.

The bedroom door opened and Clint walked in. “Hold up a minute guys,” he said, loud enough to carry over top of their excited play. When he finally had their attention he said, “One of those TV people just called. Are any of you interested in showing them some of your target practicing out back?”

“They want to see me shooting?” Elliot asked excitedly.

“They want to see all of you, from what I understand. “Like you usually do.”

“Me too?” Jimmy Joe asked hopefully.

“I’m guessing they particularly want to see you with your gun,” Clint told him.

“Yeah!” Jimmy Joe exclaimed, wide-eyed and overly excited.

Clint looked at him. “But you’re not touching those guns in that shirt! Go change into something a little less...colorful! Something you can shoot in.” Clint added with a shake of his head.

“How about me, Dad?” Tommy asked.

Clint looked over the rest of them. They were all in nice clothes for school since they were going to be filmed. "Go find something more comfortable too," Clint finally decided. "You can all change again later I guess, no doubt your mothers will insist on it. But if you're going to be out target practicing in the backyard, some better clothes wouldn't hurt."

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Cynthia sat in her car outside of Rose's house. She had just sent the TV people on a wild goose chase. Several wild goose chases. Well, maybe not really. Everything she had suggested would probably make pretty good content for their TV show. What she didn't tell them was about all the stuff that had troubled her in the videos, the reason she had sent them somewhere else.

Jimmy Joe had been overly flamboyant, and Jade had been closed down and tense. Both of them normal expected behaviors. But both of them could also be behaviors that meant the twins were hiding something, and something big! One of the biggest flags that had caught her attention came from Jade. When asked about the dolls, Jade had immediately tried to launch into exactly the same spiel she had given to her when they had first met. After hearing even just the beginning of it a second time, Cynthia realized that it had sounded not made-up, but rehearsed.

Cynthia was left with nothing but questions. "Was all the teasing that Jimmy Joe did with his sister nothing but a distraction, hiding something else? Was Jade's desire for anonymity more than just what it seemed? She had suspected something else was going on after her first visit. She had even more of a suspicion now. Yet she had nothing, absolutely nothing to really go on. As far as everything else she could see, everything was just what she expected. And whether anything bigger was going on or not, she had absolutely no doubt in the world that these people needed serious psychological help. She finally started her car. She would park down at Brian's house, most likely for the duration of her stay. Then maybe it was time to find Susan for a little talk.

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Michelle hung up the phone and headed back to the crew. "Okay," she said, I got the boys lined up to do some target shooting for us. Susan said she'd ask the girls if they're willing to sing for us on camera. And Clint said he'd *consider* taking some of us out hunting with him and Jimmy Joe later, but he wasn't too sure about it."

"I got the hunting trip!" Bob called quickly.

"No way!" Ryan argued. "You can film the girls.

"I called it first," Bob replied.

"We don't even know if Clint will let this hunt take place yet," Trish interrupted.

Bob and Ryan ignored her. "Rock paper scissors?" Ryan suggested.

"You're on!"

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While the girls were excitedly practicing their songs in Nichole's bedroom, the targets were all set up in Pete's backyard. Pete left the lodges where he and Clint were supposed to be working on the electrical stuff together, to head up the hill to be there and supervise as well. Like Clint, he wasn't comfortable having the TV crew around, and he wasn't about to give any kind of interview like the women had done.

The targets were in place, the boys had their guns, boxes of ammunition sat on the ground near their feet where each of the boys were lined up, and faint music could be heard coming from Nichole's Karaoke machine in her bedroom. Jimmy, now dressed more like the rest of the boys in jeans, a camouflage t-shirt with a camouflage hooded sweater over top of it, stood between Elliot and Tommy. Hunter and Justin were on Elliot's other side. Pete and Clint stood close behind as they usually did.

Normally, the boys would have started long before, but having the TV crew there and needing to figure out what everyone wanted slowed things down quite a bit. What the boys didn't know was that

Ryan had caught most of the setup the boys had done together with one of his cameras. He had filmed them talking and joking together, bumping shoulders jokingly, and just being guys. Including Jimmy Joe who seemed perfectly at home with all of them. Since the cameras weren't officially rolling, there were no attention grabbing antics from Jimmy Joe.

With everything set, Trish gave the unneeded instructions for her camera men to pretty much wander and catch whatever they could. If they needed to do anything else they could always reset and make changes while the boys shot at the targets again. "I think we're set," Trish finally announced once Bob and Ryan had indicated they were ready.

Clint saw Jimmy Joe turn toward the closest camera. "Jimmy Joe! You've got a gun in your hand. No more nonsense like you did yesterday. Hear?"

Jimmy Joe disappointedly turned back around and got ready to shoot.

"Okay," Pete called. "Let's make some noise for the TV." The guns erupted into life.

Both cameramen tried to concentrate on the group of boys as a whole, while occasionally shooting distant shots of the targets at the other side of the yard. After a few minutes though, Bob zoomed in on the targets. He never zoomed out. Each and every boy was shooting remarkably well, including Jimmy Joe. Eventually though, he brought his camera back to Elliot's target, and locked it right there. The shooting that Elliot was doing was nothing less than phenomenal! It was well worth shooting. The kid would make an incredible sniper for the army.

When the shooting stopped, Trish asked if the cameramen had gotten enough. Bob shook his head. "Not even close! Let's change the targets and do it again, but let us go down there and get some better close-ups of the targets there now."

Everyone followed the two still filming cameramen toward the targets where they each spent a while getting shots of each one. "Got it," Bob finally declared. "Now let's do it again." He turned to the boys who were now swapping the targets out for fresh ones. "Do

you guys think you can still shoot that well if we've got the cameras a bit closer to you...maybe a lot closer?"

"Behind them?" Clint asked, just to make sure.

"Of course!" Ryan told him. "We're not going to get in their way.

"If you're going to do that," Pete said, "any chance one of you can try getting real close to Elliot? He needs the practice ignoring distractions."

Bob laughed. "That boy doesn't need help with anything! He could be a professional! Maybe even in the Olympics!"

Pete smiled. He was really pleased. His boy in the Olympics. Now that was a thought!

Once again the boys shot at the targets, only this time, Ryan and Bob tried pushing their cameras to get really good close-ups of each of them shooting. Ryan paid particular attention to Jimmy Joe, who occasionally glanced over top of his rifle, smiled, and winked at the camera a few times before going back to shooting again.

Once again the targets were checked and filmed. And once again the results were the same. The boys...all of them...were really good shots. Elliot however, was in a class by himself.

While the TV crew did a number of takes with Emily doing pre-shooting and post-shooting comments, the boys gathered everything up and put it all away. When the TV crew was done, Trish sought out Clint. "How about that hunting trip with Jimmy Joe?" she asked. "Any chance?"

Clint looked at Jimmy Joe. "Any chance you can do this without acting like a jackass for the camera again?"

"A jackass!" Jimmy Joe exclaimed. "I did not!"

"You sure did yesterday."

"That was just...fun," Jimmy Joe replied.

Clint turned to Trish and shook his head. "I guess not. Sorry."

"Okay, okay," Jimmy Joe said quickly. "No jackass stuff. Whatever that means."

Clint looked at him and considered it. "I guess we can follow one of the game trails for a little bit. But I don't want you shooting anything...*if* we find anything to shoot at."

"But Dad..."

"There's too much going on right now to deal with skinning and processing a dead animal. And I doubt the TV people want to see any of that anyway."

"But Dad..."

"We go, but you don't shoot anything."

"But Dad..."

"You want to go?"

"Sure!"

"Then we do it my way." He turned to Trish. "Can you people ride ATVs?"

Trish smiled. "Some places we go, that's all we get. Try sharing one of those with two people and tons of equipment."

Clint nodded. "Well the family's got almost as many of them as we got people. So there'll be no problem there."

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Cynthia sat at Susan's kitchen table drinking coffee with her again. "Do you think they were tough on you?" Cynthia asked.

"I don't know," Susan replied. "I'm actually so embarrassed about it. I really hope they don't use any of that on TV. I cried over things I've been living with for months now."

"I wouldn't bet on them leaving it out of the show," Cynthia told her. "They may have said it was for practice only, but I saw Jimmy Joe and Jade on their latest commercial last night."

"Susan nodded. Clint and I saw that too. But it was after the kids were in bed."

"Do you think the questions they asked you were fair?"

Susan thought about it. "I really don't remember what they asked. All I remember is the bright lights so I could hardly see, and whatever it was she was asking me kept making me more emotional than I usually am."

"The one thing you kept saying was that they're your babies, and you seemed very concerned that you're losing them, even though in reality, they're right here."

"Of course I'm concerned. Wouldn't you be?"

"I'm sure I would," Cynthia agreed. "But let me ask you, what do you think it would take for you to not be so obsessed with this problem?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you could push a magical button and make things perfect again, what would you need that button to do?"

"Aren't you supposed to be the one telling me what I'm supposed to do?"

Cynthia smiled. "I'm afraid it doesn't work that way. Everyone is different. Totally unique. What works for me wouldn't work for you. What works for you probably wouldn't work for someone else."

"Then how do you ever help anyone?"

"Sometimes, it takes a long time."

"I'm tired of hurting," Susan replied. "It's already been a long time."

"Then tell me what it would take to make you feel better again."

"That's easy," Susan replied. "Give me my kids back again. Back the way they were. Back the way they're supposed to be."

"Supposed to be for you...or for them?"

"For all of us, of course!"

Cynthia shook her head. "Remember what I just said about things working differently for different people. I'm afraid that includes you and your twins as well."

"You asked *me* what it would take for *me*," Susan pointed out.

"That's right," Cynthia replied. "Which means that maybe that solution will work for you, and maybe it won't. And evidently right now that solution is totally out for both of those twins since they were so adamant about doing this. But even if they did change, even if they did agree to go back again to what they were, people keep changing. If Jimmy Joe and Jade went back to who they used to be today...right now...do you think either of them would be the same as they used to be?"

"But what I want is..."

"What you want is for them to stay little and happy and be your children forever!"

Susan was startled by that. "No! Well, maybe, to some extent. I love my kids."

"Of course you do. And you want them to grow up and be happy."

"Yes! Absolutely!"

"But to do that, they can't remain the same. They have to grow and change."

"But why do they have to change like this? Why? And not just the one, but both of them!"

Cynthia shrugged. "Both of them is nothing but bizarre!"

"You're telling me. Even one of them wanting something like this would be bizarre! It's outrageous. And I'm finding out lately that I don't know my kids at all...and I thought I knew each of them better than I know myself. But lately..." she stopped, worried that she might stray into dangerous territory. "I just want things back to normal!"

"Of course you do. But they evidently have a different opinion about what should be normal for them. And like it or not, remember when I said about what works for one may not work for anyone else? That includes this to. What might work for you, isn't going to work for them!"

"So were stuck! There's nothing at all we can do about it!"

"I didn't say that."

"Then what am I supposed to do?"

Cynthia shrugged. "You may have to find some kind of compromise. Something you and they can live with. And I'm sure that they themselves don't realize it, but even they are going to have to find things that they can do to accommodate at least some of your feelings. But I can tell you that neither of them is totally happy right now too."

Susan was surprised. "They're not?"

Cynthia shook her head as she noted the overly worried look that appeared on Susan's face. "Nope! Neither of them. Jimmy Joe may act all happy and crazy, but that doesn't mean he really is."

"What do they need to be happy then? Isn't this what they wanted?"

"I don't know," Cynthia replied. "I'm going to have to ask them."

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The problem of which cameraman would be shooting the hunt was solved when Trish told them both they could go. Ryan quickly grabbed two different cameras and slung them over his back, while Bob kept the camera he had and grabbed a helmet camera and strapped that to his head.

While Pete helped pull out some of his own ATVs for the crew to use, Clint and Jimmy Joe pulled their ATVs out of their own workshop. Once the vehicles were out and gassed up, Jimmy ran back and grabbed his gun. He jumped on his usual four wheeler ATV and was about to take off, when Clint stopped him quickly. "Hold on!" he yelled. "You know the rules. You don't ride without a helmet. Now get rid of that stupid silly hat you got and get a helmet on!"

Jimmy Joe was frustrated but he turned off his engine and climbed off the machine. He threw his new hat on the workbench and grabbed his usual helmet and pulled it onto his head.

"Remember," Clint told him. "We're not shooting anything today. At all! We're just going to walk one of the game trails a little bit and that's it. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah," Jimmy Joe replied disappointedly.

Clint looked at him. In his mind he could just see Jimmy Joe showing off for the cameras again and taking stupid pot-shots into the woods. "In fact," he said. "Give me all the bullets from your gun."

"My bullets?"

Clint held out his hand to take them.

"But Dad, don't you always say a gun without any bullets is useless?"

"And that's just the way I want that thing right now. Now empty that gun."

Reluctantly, Jimmy Joe pulled all the bullets out of his gun and handed them to his father. Clint stuck them into his pocket.

Once everyone was ready, Clint decided to let Jimmy Joe lead the way. "Do you have any particular place you want to do this little trip?" Clint asked him.

"I was thinking the waterfall might be good, especially since we're not going to be killing anything today. Most of the good hunting is further north."

Clint nodded. "Good idea. And I have no doubt the TV people will love the place. Lead on. And don't go too fast! These people have no idea where they're going. I'll be bringing up the rear."

With a sigh, Jimmy Joe took off into the woods at a much slower pace than he would have liked. Emily followed him, and Bob followed her, his helmet camera already turned on and filming. Since they had to go a lot slower than Jimmy Joe usually drove, it took them almost half an hour to reach the waterfall. Jimmy Joe stopped his ATV at the top of the hill and one by one, everyone found a place to park.

"Damn!" Ryan exclaimed. "Jed didn't show us this place. He was already grabbing one of his cameras to start filming. Bob was doing the same."

While Trish and Michelle helped Bob and Ryan with filming the waterfall, Emily sought out Clint to talk to him. "This place is beautiful!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah, Jimmy Joe did good picking it. There's probably not as much game right here. The animals usually go further downstream where getting to the water is easier, but it's a real special place. This is where I proposed to my wife."

"You did?"

"Right over there by the water," Clint told her as he pointed toward the bottom of the waterfall.

"How romantic!"

"Emily!" Trish called. "Get over here and let's get some shots of you commenting on this place."

"Come on," Emily said to Clint. "You can tell me more about it." Clint followed, but reluctantly.

With the waterfall in the background, Emily managed to get Clint telling the camera about proposing to his wife in this spot, and she even got him to point out the exact place, which turned out to be right where they were standing.

"Great!" Trish declared after the quick interview. "Let's get Jimmy Joe to talk a little with you about hunting? This is the perfect

place for it.”

Clint figured there was no avoiding them talking to Jimmy Joe again, but he quickly said, “Jimmy Joe! Remember what I said. Don’t be a jackass!”

“Oh Dad...”

“Behave!” Clint said sternly.

Before they began, Trish had another idea. She turned to her cameramen. Can you follow them if they stroll along the water’s edge down toward where it runs into the woods?

Bob and Ryan surveyed the muddy ground. “If we go slow,” Ryan told her. There’s not just mud here, but a lot of rocks we don’t want to trip over.”

“Try it,” Trish ordered. “Emily, Jimmy Joe, whenever you’re ready.”

Jimmy Joe smiled extra broadly toward one of the cameras. “Jimmy Joe,” Emily started. “What is it about hunting that you seem to like so much?”

Jimmy Joe was surprised by the question. “What I like? Everything! It’s like the greatest thing in the world. Ever! The trees, the woods, finding the animals. Just seeing all the animals. And then the best part is actually managing to shoot something. And that makes dinner even better knowing that I was the one who managed to put the meat on the table for the entire family.”

“You eat some of what you kill?” Emily asked as if surprised.

Jimmy Joe was surprised by the question. “We eat everything we kill. If we’re not going to eat it, we don’t kill it. There’s no reason to go out and shoot something just for the sake of killing it. That’s just stupid. And you could wipe out all kinds of animals by doing that. We don’t want to do that. We want to protect the animals.”

“What do you mean protect them? If you kill them for food, that doesn’t sound like protecting them to me.”

Jimmy Joe shook his head. “There’s a difference between killing something for food and killing something for fun. We only kill what we need to survive and that’s all. We need all the animals on our land. And they kind of need each other. We go out of our way to make sure the balance of nature is maintained as much as possible. It’s a lot of work, but it’s good work, and it makes me feel good to

know I'm helping. Just taking care of all our land is a lot of work, but it's important work because we all depend on the land and what it provides for us."

His eyes, caught sight of something just then in the ground beneath their feet. "Hey look!" he exclaimed as they came to a narrower part of the water behind them. "Deer tracks." He looked around as one of the cameramen ran around to focus on the tracks. "You can see where they came down the hill over there, then crossed the water here, and headed up the other hill over there." The cameras caught everything he mentioned. He moved a little further along the waterline, then suddenly stopped. "Woah!" he exclaimed as he knelt down for a closer look.

"What is it?" Emily asked noting the different shape to the impression in the ground.

Jimmy Joe ignored her question. "Hey Dad," he suddenly called. "Come here and look at this?"

"What is it?" Clint asked, not at all happy that he was once again the focus of the camera's attention.

"Bear tracks," Jimmy Joe replied. "I'd say...only an hour or two old."

Clint quickly went over for a look. He still wasn't happy to have both the cameras filming him, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. He didn't need to bend down to confirm what Jimmy Joe had already seen. "Yep," he agreed. "I'd say maybe an hour or two at the most."

"A bear?" Emily asked with some nervousness.

Clint nodded. "Pretty good sized," he said, still looking at the tracks and the ground around them. "Probably a male. It's big and I don't see any smaller tracks that would mean any cubs a female would most likely have."

"Should we get out of here?" Emily asked nervously as Ryan moved in close with one of his cameras.

Clint looked up at her, surprised that she should even ask such a silly question. "I thought you wanted to go hunting?"

"But for a bear?"

Clint grunted a laugh. He turned to look at Jimmy Joe. He didn't know how good he was yet at tracking animals, but he knew his

brother Jed pretty well, and he was betting that Jed had taught him a lot. Besides, Jimmy Joe had correctly seen how fresh the tracks were. "Jimmy Joe," he said. "Do you think you can track that thing?"

The look Jimmy gave him was mock outrage. "Of course. It's a bear. Compared to some things Uncle Jed and I went after, it's like following a truck through the woods. Especially when it's still a little wet back here."

Clint paused only a moment as he considered what he wanted to do. "Track it. Take point. Let's see if it's still in the area."

The camera caught the sudden change in Jimmy Joe. Like a hunting dog that had been begging to be given the command to hunt, Jimmy Joe became all business as he focused on the one thing he really loved doing. He didn't even look back as he moved quickly and easily into the woods. Bob followed him, his helmet camera still filming, and his other camera trying to follow Jimmy Joe as he did his best to keep up.

"After you, Ma'am," Clint said as he motioned for Emily to follow.

"You're sure about this? I mean...a bear?"

"Don't worry," Clint told her. "It'll be just fine." He let her follow her cameraman while he stayed right behind her. Ryan, trying to keep his camera on Clint and Emily wasn't far behind them. Nervously, Trish and Michelle brought up the rear since they didn't want to be left alone in the woods without anyone with a gun to protect them.

"I've never seen any hunting like this," Emily noted as she tried her best to pick her way through the woods in places where Jimmy Joe and Bob had moved like it was open ground. "Most of the hunting shows I've seen they just walk around in the open with rifles in their hands and hope to spot something."

"That's one way to do it," Clint agreed. "Probably one of the best. But we've got thick woods all around us and a good trail to follow. So this is how it's got to be done."

"Is Jimmy Joe any good at this?"

Clint nodded. "Yeah. He's taken to hunting like a dog takes to treeing a squirrel."

"I take it that means he's good at it?"

“Let’s just say he’s got a lot to learn yet, but I’d bet he’s a lot better than most already.”

“And you think he might actually find the bear?”

“Not if you keep talking. You’ll scare the thing away before we even get close.”

Emily immediately thought that talking, and loudly, might be the safest thing she could do, but she remained silent for a few minutes. Staying quiet for long periods of time however, simply wasn’t in her nature.

They climbed steep hills. They stepped over rocks and branches. They threaded their way through trees and bushes, and still they kept going. “How much further are we going to go?” Emily finally asked.

“We just started,” Clint told her.

Emily wasn’t happy to hear that. She climbed more hills and forced her way through more places that she’d rather not be. More than likely, she was going to have to get rid of the clothes she had chosen to wear, ones that would look good on camera, while she thought they would do for hunting. She wasn’t prepared for having to push her way through vines and bushes.

The ground opened up only a little when she suddenly felt Clint grab her shoulder and grab it hard. Pulling her back and stopping her. “What?” she asked as she turned around.

Clint put his fingers to his lips to tell her to be quiet. He held his hand up to get the others behind him to stop as well. He changed his gaze to look ahead where he had seen Jimmy Joe and the other cameraman. They were bent low and peering through some thick vegetation. He saw Jimmy Joe raise his hand and start signaling. He raised his arm and signaled back.

“What was that?” Emily asked.

“Shh!” Clint said softly. “They’ve spotted the bear, but they can’t get a good shot at it. He’s going to move around and see if they can find a better place.”

“He said all that by waving his hands?”

Clint only nodded as the other cameraman came around to film him and Emily from the front.

“Is he going to shoot the bear after all?” Emily asked softly.

"He's not going to shoot anything," Clint whispered.

"But it's a bear!"

"I know. That's no reason to shoot it."

"But it's dangerous!"

"Most everything out here is dangerous," Clint whispered back.

"But what if it attacks?"

"It won't if you keep quiet," Clint told her.

"What if it finds out we're here?"

"It most likely already knows we're here. As long as we keep our distance and don't bother it, it's not going to cause us any trouble at all. Now keep your voice down."

Emily watched Jimmy Joe and her cameraman staying low and moving carefully off to the left. "I'm glad one of us has a gun," she muttered softly. "And I've seen him shoot!"

"Clint grunted almost soundlessly. "He's not going to shoot no matter what!"

"Why not? If that thing attacks..."

"There's no bullets in his gun."

"There's what?"

"Shh! Keep quiet!"

"Why doesn't he have any bullets?"

"Cause they're here in my pocket so he doesn't go crazy showing off again like he did yesterday!"

Emily could have fainted.

Clint watched Jimmy Joe carefully. They seemed to have settled on a new spot that they liked better. The cameraman was obviously filming the bear. He saw Jimmy Joe raise his hand again. Clint nodded and sent a brief signal back. "Okay," he said to Emily. "Slow and easy now. And don't make any noise!"

"What?" Emily asked nervously.

"We're going to go take a little peak at what they found."

"You're kidding?"

"Slow and easy, and quiet!"

With a slight push on her shoulder, Clint got her moving toward the place Jimmy Joe and the cameraman had originally spotted the bear. He didn't look back, but Clint knew that Trish and her assistant were staying where they were. The second cameraman was right

behind them though, with his camera still pointed at him and Emily. There were some bushes and small trees in front of them when they reached the spot where Jimmy Joe had originally spotted the bear. Clint stopped her and pushed her down to a kneeling position so she would stay low. He peered through the dense vegetation for a few moments. "Here," he whispered in her ear as he pulled her over for a look at the place where he had been.

Emily looked and was just able to see the big black body of the bear. It was sitting on the ground as it pulled berries off of a bush to eat them. The sight was frightening and amazing all at the same time. She finally pulled back. "Get this," she whispered to Ryan. The cameraman was glad for his chance to film the bear.

Clint finally signaled Jimmy Joe to come back. Jimmy Joe was about to tap Bob on the shoulder to let him know they needed to move, when the bear stopped eating and got to its feet. The cameraman filmed it as it went over to a nearby tree, stood on its hind legs, and then began scratching its back on the rough tree bark. The cameraman couldn't wait to get back to review the footage he was getting.

Trish and Michelle had waited far behind, neither of them wanting to get any closer than they had to. They were relieved when everyone finally came back. "Can we go now?" Trish asked hopefully.

"That was the idea," Clint replied with an amused grin.

"How fast can we get out of here?" Michelle asked nervously.

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There was a very large white SUV parked outside of Jacob and Rose's house. The extra crew members had arrived shortly after lunch. By late afternoon there were more TV crew members than ever in Pete's house as they prepared to film all the girls singing to Nichole's Karaoke machine in her room.

"This isn't working!" Ryan complained as he tried to find a good angle somewhere in the room to film all four girls together.

Trish shrugged. "We'll have to do the best we can." She turned to the girls who were all lined up on one side of the room, with the

bed blocking them from the knees down. "Okay," she told them. "Let's see what we can get. We'll dub in some comments and an interview with Emily later. Whenever you're ready girls."

Olivia turned the Karaoke machine on and then turned to stand close to the other girls where Nichole was holding the microphone out so it could pick up all of them. The country western song started and a moment later, the girls began to sing. Trish noted two things immediately, the girls weren't half bad. And the room simply wasn't working! Especially when the girls tried to dance somewhat to what they were singing.

"Hold it!" Trish said loudly, stopping everything. She waited until Olivia had turned the music off. "It's not working in here," she told the girls. "We need to find somewhere else to do it."

"We did it outside when we had our party," Nichole told her.

"Outside?" Trish saw the girls all nodding enthusiastically.

"It was great!" Allison added. "We did it out back and the picnic tables were all set out for everyone to sit on..."

"And we had a bunch of hay bales around for decoration," Olivia added.

"And we all had these great western outfits on too," Nichole told them enthusiastically. She ran to her closet and pulled out the red shirt she had worn. "See!" she said. This is the shirt I wore, and Jade had one just like it except in gold."

Trish was trying to decide if all this production was worth the effort. But it had gotten out that one of the twins had sung at their birthday party, the party where the family had evidently brought in a number of horses. Recreating some of that for the camera could prove to be interesting TV. "Okay," she finally said. "We'll try filming it outside like you did it before, but we don't have time to figure it all out and do it today. We've still got to finalize the questions we're going to ask everyone for the real interviews tomorrow and Saturday. We'll set it up for tomorrow morning instead. And you girls can wear whatever costumes you had on when you did it the first time. Her decision was met with shrill excited shrieking from the girls.

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With so many from the TV crew there now, plus Doctor Hapkins, once again all the girls moved into Jade's room to spend the night, including Ashley. Susan insisted on keeping Jade and Jimmy Joe home where she could keep a close eye on them. But while Jade was now in her room surrounded by girls, Jimmy Joe was temporarily down at Ethan's house with Tommy playing video games there. Susan had enough people in her house just then. Not only were all the girls in Jade's bedroom, but her kitchen was crowded with TV people, Doctor Hapkins, and family as they all poured over the first draft of the questions that Trish had delivered earlier. The family had all been pleased to find out that none of the questions on the list was anything worse than the ones already asked.

Early on, Trish looked to Ryan and saw the small nod he gave her. "Since we want to interview some of the kids as well tomorrow," Trish said, "would you like me to go over some of these questions with them in case they have any questions?"

"It couldn't hurt," Susan and Clint both decided. A few minutes later, five girls, already in their nightgowns, crowded together into the already crowded kitchen. While they talked, nobody noticed Ryan leaving the room and going down the hallway. Once in Jade's room, he quickly noticed the five sleeping bags that carpeted the floor between the foot of the bed and the closet.

He went to the shelves with the dolls, and on the top shelf, he placed the smallest camera in his collection, a remote-controlled camera that he could operate from back at Jacob's house...he hoped. The distance was really a bit more than the camera was supposed to allow. But if necessary, he would sit in the car outside and film whatever he could. He tucked the tiny camera between the skirts of two of the dolls and hoped none of the girls would notice it. A minute later, he was back in the kitchen again.

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Five girls sat in a circle on top of their sleeping bags, while one by one they painted each other's nails or brushed each other's hair. All the girls had decided that they would have matching nails for the

rest of the week, with a different color every day. Today they were working with a sparkly red.

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Jimmy Joe sat in his room, frustrated. He really wanted to get Lucy and have another talk with her. But with all the girls in Jade's bedroom, there was no way that could ever happen. And besides, he didn't want anyone finding out that he still talked to the doll. Frustrated over it, he could only sit there and fume over the situation while he imagined what the girls were all doing in Jade's bedroom together.

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None of the girls of course knew that Ryan was sitting outside in the company SUV, watching them on the laptop computer in his lap. Ryan was nervous about doing it. If any of the McCombers found out what he was doing, they'd probably shoot him. And he had seen all those boys shoot! And they were just the boys. He had no doubts about how well the men could shoot.

The sound the camera was getting wasn't as good as he would like, neither was the picture for that matter, but it was better than nothing. The only reason he was here was because Doctor Hapkins had turned out to be right with her suggestions to take the boy hunting, and Trish seemed to think the girls singing might make for some cute, interesting TV as well. He wasn't comfortable spying on the girls like he was. He felt like a dirty voyeur...which in this case, he figured he was.

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"So how did you manage today?" Allison asked Jade. "Do you think you ever said anything you shouldn't have?"

Jade shook her head as she watched the sparkling red color being applied to her fingers. "Nobody hardly talked to me all day, not

even after they decided to film us tomorrow instead of today, which was a huge relief! So far, I think we're pretty safe."

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Outside in the SUV, Ryan wondered what that little conversation had meant. He spent another hour listening to the girls talk while they did their nails and hair. Boring! And this was a boy who wanted to be girl? And do junk like that? What was wrong with that kid?

Chapter 66 – One For All, and All For One

April 24th

Fairly early Friday morning, Doctor Hapkins was again up at Jacob's house with the film crew watching the footage they had shot the day before. Cynthia paid particular attention to the short conversation between Jimmy Joe and Emily in front of the waterfall about how important it was to take care of the family's land and all the animals on it. "Look at the passion he has about it," Cynthia noted. "You wanted the real Jimmy Joe? I have a feeling that what you've got there may be as close as you can come."

As she watched some of the following hunt where Jimmy Joe was tracking the bear, she wondered if she should revise that. Maybe the Jimmy Joe she saw there was the real him. Or more likely, they both were. But she still thought there was more behind the outlandish cocky behavior he had exhibited earlier. She was sure it wasn't faked. She just felt like there was more to it than what they could see.

A little while later, Cynthia thought she had seen all the film they had shot, when Ryan finally brought something else up. "Doctor Hapkins?" he said.

"Yes?"

"Last night we took a chance and did something we probably shouldn't have."

"Oh? What was that?"

"You mentioned we would probably have to get sneaky to catch a glimpse of the real Jade. And I'm afraid we did just that. But I caught something in the middle of it that I didn't understand."

"What did you do?" Cynthia asked, not only curious, but now worried that the TV people might have somehow overstepped their bounds.

"I put a hidden camera in Jade's room last night and caught just a bit of their little pajama party."

"You what?"

"Trust me!" Ryan exclaimed. "I wasn't happy doing it! And there's nothing there that I think we can use, especially after the way we had to get it. It's just that there was one thing I caught that I didn't understand."

Cynthia turned to Trish. "Doing something like that could be considered criminal! They're just girls. Young girls. I hope the family doesn't find out."

"You and me both!" Ryan exclaimed.

"What did you catch?" Cynthia asked Trish, somewhat disgusted with what they had done.

"I don't know. I haven't seen it yet," Trish replied. "Ryan only told me about it."

Cynthia took a deep breath. "Bring it up. Let me see."

The video was from fairly high up and it showed all the girls sitting on the floor together. The quality wasn't nearly as good as the other videos, but it was more than acceptable. Cynthia found herself fascinated watching the girls as they interacted so well together. "Yeah," she finally admitted. "Look at her. See how relaxed and happy she is? I suspect we're seeing the real Jade there. Five girls, and she's just as much a part of them as the rest of them are with each other."

"Here!" Ryan said quickly as the film showed Allison and Jade moving together so Allison could start doing Jade's fingernails. It was in this section."

They all watched intently. It was only a few moments before they all heard Allison ask Jade if she had said anything she shouldn't have.

"What do you think she meant by that?" Trish asked as the conversation between them seemed to move to other matters.

"I have no idea," Cynthia replied thoughtfully. "It could be that they're talking about something to do with the way Jimmy Joe teases her and she sometimes fights back." In truth though, Cynthia suspected it was anything but that! "Did you send this to your TV station last night too?" she asked.

"Not this," Ryan told her. "We'd never be able to use it, and it could prove embarrassing for us...me in particular."

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Four girls in fancy western outfits were running around in Pete and Marcy's backyard. Two of the girls, Nichole and Jade, had their hair still in rollers. There were TV people everywhere doing things the family had no clue about. It was obvious though that they were getting ready to film something big.

The only woman who had come in with the new crew members grabbed Jade and Nichole and pulled them over to the picnic table where she had set up her things. She took the rollers out of their hair and went to work, performing the magic she was so good at. When their hair had been styled and sprayed into something that felt more like a semi-flexible cement, she started in on their makeup, using more of it than either of their mothers liked, to which she had to explain that it would look far better for the cameras. When Jade and Nichole were done, and told to forget their cowboy hats, she started on Allison and Olivia.

While all the family that could get off from work or school looked on, several practice runs were done to get the sound as good as possible before the actual filming took place. One of the TV crew members was working the Karaoke machine so the girls wouldn't have to do it themselves. The final sound was anything but perfect, but it would have to do. Besides, this was just kids putting on a show, and the final edit of it all would probably wind up being less than a minute. Trish didn't mention that to any of the girls or family though.

When they were ready, the girls started their show again. Susan, standing as close as she was allowed, once again marveled at how feminine all the practiced movements Jade was doing seemed to be. Much different than the way she usually moved. She also couldn't help but notice that Jade seemed more nervous than the last time she had performed at their birthday party.

When the song ended, the family all cheered and clapped. Nichole launched into her solo song next. Trish was tempted to stop it and tell her not to bother, but she let the cameras roll. It wouldn't hurt anything. Besides, the girl really was pretty good.

When Nichole's song ended, everyone cheered and clapped again, and Nichole hammed it up by bowing and curtsying for everyone. The four girls were back again to sing another song together, and when it ended, Nichole tried to hand the microphone off to Jade for her solo, but Jade wouldn't take it. Jade suddenly looked hesitant and more than a bit scared.

"You can do it!" Nichole told her. "Just sing and have fun! Be yourself and forget the cameras and everyone looking at you." But her advice seemed to have the opposite effect on Jade. "Do I have to get the girls all out here to start pounding on you again?" Nichole threatened.

Her comment actually brought a smile to Jade's face. "Better not," Jade replied. "Someone might film it and get the wrong impression."

Nichole pressed the microphone into Jade's hand. "Then sing... and smile! Those TV people are all really here just to see you anyway. Have some fun with it!"

Jade rolled her eyes again and took a deep breath.

"You'll be great!" Nichole told her.

Jade stood in the middle of the area where she was supposed to sing. The yard was filled with family and TV people. They all scared her, but it was the TV cameras that bothered her the most. She was supposed to stand there and sing – alone – while they filmed her so they could show her all over the TV. How many people would see her standing there and singing? Millions! Literally! She shook her head. She didn't want to do this. Too many people would see who she was...and know what she was. Too many people would be judging her and laughing at her. She couldn't do it.

"Jade?" Trish asked. "Is there a problem?"

"I...can't!" Jade finally got out.

Trish looked to Susan. "Can you do anything?"

"Don't worry, Aunt Susan," Nichole said instead. "We've got it."

Doctor Hapkins was watching everything as well. She had been about to step in and suggest they not film Jade singing, but she wanted to see what the girls would do. She really wished she could hear the discussion between all four girls, but she wasn't nearly

close enough. She hurried toward them to make sure she wouldn't be needed. The discussion appeared to be a serious one.

When she got close enough, she was lucky enough to hear Jade giving in and telling all the girls exactly what she was most afraid of, the whole world seeing her and knowing who and what she really was. The doctor also heard all the other girls reminding Jade that every last one of them would always be with her to help her face whatever happened, wherever, forever! No matter how bad things ever got, they would all always be there for each other, including her! Just like they all knew without a doubt that Jade would always be there for them.

The doctor vaguely heard the word Musketeers again, then watched as she saw the group of girls suddenly surround Jade and begin playfully pounding on her, which seemed to only make Jade laugh. And she watched as the three girls led Jade by the hand to stand in the middle of the designated stage area where she was supposed to sing. Except this time, all the girls stayed with her. The message was clear, they were all there to support their friend. They weren't about to abandon her for anything.

"Start the music!" Nichole told the TV Crew.

Jade took a quick nervous breath as the music started. Her friends were all with her. Olivia even had her hand on her arm for extra support. Then Jade felt Olivia's hand let go and the other's stepping back, but only a little, leaving her alone, but not alone.

"Sing!" Nichole whispered just before she needed to start.

Jade opened her mouth and started singing. She had never been as good as Nichole or the others, and she felt like she sounded even worse this time, but she was somehow getting through it.

"Move!" Allison whispered to her. "Don't just stand there!"

Jade tried to move her arms and body the way the other girls had made her practice time and time again.

"You're doing great!" Olivia whispered during a small break between choruses.

"Just loosen up a little more and sing more like you mean it," Nichole added.

Jade tried. She sang a little louder and tried to loosen her movements up a little more. She thought she was doing better, but

the one thing she had most on her mind was the end of the song. When the final words had been sung and the music finally stopped, she was suddenly surrounded by all the girls hugging her and telling her how good she had done. There was no way Jade would ever be able to tell them how much their help, support, and love meant to her.

Doctor Hapkins watched every bit of it closely. Those four girls together were really something wonderful. There were many things she wondered about the group. Had the original Jasmine been that close with all the girls? Everything she had heard had said she was. So how had Jade managed to become so close to the other girls so quickly? It was all part of the many things Cynthia wondered about. But they were things that would have to be thought about later. Foremost on her mind just then was wishing she could have had that kind of friends and support when she had been growing up. Jade had no idea how truly lucky she was.

Cynthia's musings were interrupted when Nichole and Jade started singing their duet together. Now that Jade had gotten through her solo piece, she seemed to be happier and more relaxed, and she even sang better. The two girls in their almost matching outfits brought a real smile to her face.

The four girls were all there again to sing the last final song together. Once again the doctor noted that Jade had relaxed a bit more and was opening up more with this song. Almost having fun like the rest of the girls were. The song ended. Everyone cheered and applauded. The four girls linked hands and all bowed deeply together – twice. It was over and the TV crew started packing up their things.

The doctor glanced around and saw what she should have noticed before. She mentally kicked herself for getting so involved in Jade that she had missed what she should have known to look for. She hurried straight for Susan, who was standing off to the side by herself, crying. Not giving Susan a choice, Cynthia gathered her into her arms to hold her.

"He's gone," Susan cried into her shoulder. "My boy is gone. Did you see him? Did you see the way he was? I couldn't see him

anymore. Not at all. He wasn't there at all. He's gone," she cried. The tears came fully and the doctor continued to hold her.

A moment later, Clint was there and pulled her into his arms instead where she started crying all over again. "What happened?" Clint asked the doctor softly.

But it was Susan that replied. Tearfully she choked out, "He's gone, Clint. Jimmy is gone. He's not there anymore. He's not our son anymore."

Clint and the doctor looked at each other. Both of them knowing that no words would help Susan just then. She had to cry it out for herself.

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With everything going on, it was hard for Doctor Hapkins to get to Jimmy Joe or Jade and have a quiet private talk with either of them. As she watched everything being packed up in the backyard and put away, she saw the four Musketeers all sitting at one of the picnic tables while Marcy tried to brush some of the stiff hairspray out of their hair. Just then, Jade wasn't going to be accessible. She looked around for Jimmy Joe and finally saw him talking with one of the boys in the family. Justin, she thought his name was. Setting off, she headed in Jimmy Joe's direction.

Jimmy Joe looked up from the conversation he had been having with Justin, filling him in on the bear hunt they had done the day before. He saw Doctor Hapkins heading for him. He tried not to show it, but he immediately felt more nervous.

"Hi Jimmy Joe," the doctor said as she walked up.

"Hey Doctor," Jimmy replied cautiously.

"I had a chance to see some of the video they shot yesterday of you out hunting."

"You did?" Jimmy Joe replied, suddenly much happier. "What did you think?"

"I think you were amazing!"

"See!" Jimmy Joe said to Justin with a small punch in his side. "I told you I was great!"

Justin smiled. "Good enough anyway," he teased. "Maybe if you ever go to Africa you'll be able to track a big elephant now."

Jimmy Joe punched Justin again and laughed. "Yeah, and maybe I can find a lion or two for you to shoot as well!"

"Jimmy Joe," Cynthia said as the two boys were laughing together. "Any chance I can talk to you for a little bit. Alone?" She didn't miss the sudden sober looks on both of the boy's faces. There was also an odd look between them.

"See you later," Justin said as he walked off.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" Jimmy Joe asked cautiously.

"Like I said," Cynthia replied, "I had a chance to see the video the TV crew shot yesterday."

"What of it?"

"I also had a chance to see the video they shot in your bedroom that first time," she told him.

"You saw that stuff? It was supposed to be just practice filming."

"That's what they said, but I seriously doubt that they'll see it that way. There was too much good stuff in it for the TV."

"Hey! Did you see my trick with the hat? They loved that!"

Cynthia smiled. "Yes, I saw it. What brought on all the antics?"

"I thought it would be really cool!" Jimmy Joe replied. "And it was!"

"You were really hamming it up for a while there," Cynthia noted.

"Yeah. They were eating it up!" Jimmy Joe replied enthusiastically. "I gotta think up more stuff to do for them for next time."

"Why? Why not just be normal? Be yourself."

"Huh? What do you mean? I want everyone to see me and remember me!"

"Why?"

"So I can be famous!"

"Why do you want to be famous?"

"Cause...I do!"

"I see. So you really don't know why?"

"I just do. That's all. It would be so cool!"

"Your sister doesn't see it that way."

"My sister is afraid of her own shadow. Look up the word sissy in the dictionary and there's a picture of her right there!"

“She doesn’t like being called a sissy.”

“I know,” Jimmy Joe replied with a big grin. “That’s why I call her that.”

“She wants to be thought of as a girl instead.”

“I know,” Jimmy Joe said, still grinning. “But hey, a guy’s got to have a little fun. Besides, she’s still a big sissy, and she’ll always be a big sissy to me.”

Cynthia suddenly changed tactics and hit him with a big bomb. “Tell me about your breasts.” She wasn’t prepared for how much of a sudden change she would see in him. The anger on his face was total and real. When he didn’t reply, she asked again, “Tell me about your breasts.”

“See ya’,” Jimmy Joe said as he turned to walk away.

“Jimmy Joe,” Cynthia said quickly. “You’ve got to deal with this sometime, and sometime soon. And if you don’t talk to me about it right now, I can promise you I’ll hound you every chance I get until you do talk to me about it!”

Jimmy stopped and turned around, the anger was still on his face.

“I will!” Cynthia threatened.

It was several moments before Jimmy Joe replied. “What do you want to know?” he asked. “You saw the video. You had to see me telling them I didn’t have any breasts.”

“Why should it matter so much to you now?” Cynthia asked as she moved closer to where he was now. “You’re trying to become a boy. I would think that having breasts would be the last thing you would want.”

“Who says I want them? I don’t!”

“Then why are you so upset about it?”

“Who says I’m upset?”

“It’s written all over your face. Not to mention the way you’re acting.”

Jimmy Joe took a deep breath and looked away for a few moments. He finally looked back. “When I was a girl, do you know how bad I wanted breasts? Real bad! All my cousins and friends had them, but I didn’t. Mine barely grew at all.”

"So is that why you really decided you wanted to be a boy, because your breasts weren't growing?"

"No!" Jimmy Joe replied like it was the most stupid suggestion in the world. "I always wanted to be a boy. Always! I can't tell you how much I wanted to do all the things my stupid wuss of a brother *should* have been doing but wouldn't. All the guy things."

Cynthia studied his face closely as he said it. She was sure that most of what he had just said was true, but she wasn't sure that all of it was. "But what does that have to do with your breasts not growing?"

"I don't know. It's just that...I don't know! It was all just...frustrating. I didn't want to be a girl, but I was supposed to be, so I worked hard at it. Real hard! And then my stupid breasts wouldn't grow like everyone else's did. So I was either failing at trying to be a girl, or my own stupid body was trying to tell me the same thing that my head was. I wasn't supposed to be a girl at all." He mentally stepped back to think about what he had just said. He was actually pleased with the way he had put it. "Does that make sense?" he asked, just to be sure."

Cynthia thought about it. "Somewhat," she replied. She glanced up and saw Susan and Clint watching them closely. She raised her hand toward them, just to show that everything was alright. She looked around. She had to change the setting to something a bit more casual. "Why don't we take a little walk together," she suggested. Not giving Jimmy Joe a choice, she turned and slowly started strolling toward the wide path that led into the woods. She saw Jimmy Joe shrug and follow along.

"You had to work hard at being a girl?"

"I guess," Jimmy Joe replied. "Well, maybe not hard, but I had to do everything I didn't really care about doing."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Because...that was what everyone said I should do. That's what everyone else did. I mean...all my cousins. And trust me, we all grew up together. And I mean, really together."

"Yes, I noticed," Cynthia replied. "The Four Musketeers."

Jimmy Joe smiled. "That's what we called ourselves."

"Who thought of that?"

"I don't know. It's just been that way for a long time now."

"It is kind of appropriate," Cynthia mused.

Jimmy Joe merely shrugged.

"One for all, and all for one. I think that was their motto."

"So they tell me," Jimmy Joe replied. "I didn't read the book. I saw a movie on TV once, but I don't remember much about it."

"You should look into it again sometime," the doctor suggested. "From what I can see, not just the Musketeers, but your entire family seems to live by that motto. They all believe in looking out for each other in every way possible!"

"Well of course! We're family. What family wouldn't?"

"Lots of families," the doctor replied. "Most families if you want to know the truth."

"Then how can they be a family?"

Cynthia smiled. "Therein lies one of the quintessential questions of the world."

Jimmy Joe shrugged, not knowing what quintessential meant.

"So do you really not want breasts? Or would you really like to be like the rest of the women in the world and have them?"

Jimmy Joe looked up at her with as much of a horrified expression as he could muster. "Of course I don't want them! I'm a guy! At least I'm trying to be."

"But you're not one yet. Not completely anyway. You can still change back."

Jimmy Joe rolled his eyes. "So now you're going to start hounding me about it like the rest of my family? No thanks!"

"No, that's not my intention," the doctor replied.

"So why did you bother asking?"

"Because it's clear that you're still very upset over the issue."

"Who says I'm upset?"

"You do!"

"No I don't!"

Cynthia smiled. "Have it your way," she replied. "So you're mad because your sister has both breasts and a penis."

"Huh?" Jimmy Joe replied, surprised at the slight change in direction.

"That's what you said in the video I saw. You were jealous."

“Jealous?”

“Aren’t you?”

Jimmy Joe thought about how he should answer that. It was a moment before he could reply. “I guess so,” he finally said. “It’s just that, he’s got a penis, but he was never into any of the things he should have been. He was so stupid! And he was literally afraid of everything! And I mean everything! He’s got everything it takes to be a guy, and I don’t! And he threw it all away to be a dumb girl instead.”

“Dumb girl?”

“You know what I mean. I was a girl, and I didn’t want to be. What the heck was wrong with him?”

“Maybe the same thing that was wrong with you?”

Jimmy Joe rolled his eyes. “Just in reverse I guess.”

“And now he’s got breasts *and* a penis.”

“Damn sissy!” Jimmy Joe muttered, then realized what he had said. “Sorry!”

“It’s okay,” Cynthia replied. “So now you feel left out.”

“Well sure. Wouldn’t you?”

“This is not about me.”

Jimmy Joe didn’t reply.

Cynthia stopped walking and turned to him. “Jimmy Joe,” she said. “Changing from one sex to another isn’t a simple thing. It’s not easy and it’s not perfect. In many ways you’re simply going to have to learn to do the best you can with what you’ve got. I’d like you to spend some more time thinking about that. Okay? The next time we talk, I want to discuss it more with you. Your sister has everything, and doesn’t want some of it, and you think you’ve got nothing, but you’re jealous of everything she does have. If you want to become as much of a boy as you can, and someday a man, then you’re going to have to think a lot more seriously about the fact that you won’t have a penis like the rest of the guys, but your sister will. At least for the time being. You’ve got to find some way to not feel jealous anymore. She doesn’t want it, but you do. But you’re both going through one of the most drastic changes possible. Sometimes, you’ve got to compromise on things just to get close to

what you really want. Think about that. Okay? And then we'll talk again."

Jimmy Joe looked up at her and nodded. "So are we done now?"

"For now," the doctor confirmed.

"Good!" He immediately turned and headed back the way they had come.

Cynthia saw both Clint and Susan following behind them. Oh to have that kind of support when she was growing up! As she watched Jimmy Joe reach them, and Susan reach out and hug him, she was left with just one big question, how much of what Jimmy Joe had said was real, and how much wasn't? Because she was betting that at least some of it was just slightly off the real truth.

As Cynthia followed Jimmy Joe and his parents back toward the houses, at the very start of the path they were on, she found the TV crew preparing to film Jed. Curious, she stayed where she was, behind where she thought the cameras would be, and watched.

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Emily faced into the woods with Jed, waiting for the signal to start. She saw the psychiatrist, Doctor Hapkins way in the background, back towards where they would be heading. The doctor was behind the cameras though so nobody would see her. There were lighting people and two more guys holding microphones on long poles that would be walking off to the sides of them. It was all staged to look like a casual stroll through the woods with just the two of them, when in reality there were seven production people who would never be seen.

"Slow and casual now," Trish directed.

Emily and Jed started slowly walking forward. The cameramen walked backwards with one person behind them to make sure they didn't trip or run into anything, the lighting and sound men walked off to their sides and Trish and Michelle just tried to stay out of the view of the cameras. "So tell me Jed," Emily said. "You've taken on the huge responsibility of trying to care for a rather enormous piece of land, and seemingly all the animals on it. How do you do it?"

Jed did his best to answer her questions, most of which she had already asked him in the truck back when he had picked her up from the airport. The only difference was, that this time Emily spent more time asking him about the land and how good he thought the hunting was. She also took the time to mention his sons more and the role he expected them to play in the future. About half the discussion between them though revolved around the twins, much of it based on things he had told her that first day in the truck. But there was no doubt she was digging again, only trying to be a little more polite about it. Surprisingly, when they were done, Jed was very pleased with not only the questions, but the way he had answered them. Just as the original contract had specified, Emily had been nothing but courteous with him. He had to wonder though, would she be just as courteous with the rest of the family? He certainly hoped so.

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The TV crew had reset in a new location, with the cameramen ready to take another little backwards stroll. This time the beautiful view from in front of the houses was the background for the interview. Marcy was dressed more like she was planning on attending church than on talking about the family's hunting business. The TV woman though had purposely redone her makeup and hair for the cameras. Marcy really hoped all the makeup she was wearing now wouldn't come off as being too much. The signal was given, and she and Emily began strolling along the top of the big hill where the kids had so much fun every winter.

The questions Emily asked her though had nothing at all to do with the family's business. Instead, she posed question after question about not only the twins, but about being the mother to one of the Four Musketeers. Emily also picked on the family's decision and Marcy's tiny part in it to allow the twins to become each other, even though nobody liked the idea. There was also a comment that Emily made to her about how good her son Elliot was with a gun that pleased Marcy to no end.

And then finally, after Marcy couldn't count the number of questions she had answered, Emily started talking about the family's

business and the new guest lodges that were being built.

"Why don't we go take a look," Emily suggested. And the filming cut at that point so they could all reset down by the new lodges.

The new lodges were filmed again with Marcy and Emily standing and talking in front of them. Then they reset once again inside of the family's business office where Marcy spent some time answering questions about that.

Marcy was very glad when they finally finished. Her head was so awlirl with all the questions Emily had asked her that she could barely remember any of them at all.

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While Valerie was answering questions for the camera, right in her own living room, Cynthia managed to grab Jade and pull her away from her friends. "You're a hard person to get to talk to," Cynthia noted with a small laugh.

"What do you mean?"

"You're so busy!"

"Oh. Well, we had that show today."

"I know. It was very good!"

"Not me!" Jade replied.

"You were good too!" Cynthia told her. "Although to be honest, once your little solo song was over, you got a lot better."

Jade shrugged. "Maybe," she admitted. "I was just glad it was over."

"Are you still having nightmares about dying?"

It took a moment for Jade to mentally change direction. "Not lately," she admitted. "But for the last few nights I've had all my friends sleeping with me."

"How about before that? When your friends weren't there?"

Jade thought about that for a moment. "Not that I remember," she replied.

"Good," Cynthia said happily. "I guess every night you can go without the nightmares is a good one for you."

Jade rolled her eyes. "You can say that again!"

Cynthia chuckled. "So I understand you like babies."

"Babies? Where did you hear that?" Jade asked, surprised by the change in the conversation.

"I saw what the TV people filmed in your bedroom a few days ago.

"Oh. Yeah, I do like babies. I mean, it's so strange. I didn't really think about liking them before. But it's just that...my Aunt Jessica's kids are so darn cute! And it's really weird because I never thought about them that way before."

"How about other babies?"

"I haven't really had a chance to see any. But I think I'd really like to," Jade added. "Is that weird or something?"

"No. Not at all. I was just wondering. Sometimes, the hormones you're on can cause you to see things differently than you use to."

Jade nodded. "They sure have for me. I mean, there's all kinds of things I see now that I find really cool! And I never thought about those things before."

"So you like some of those changes then?"

"Well, yeah! Absolutely! Who wouldn't?"

"Maybe your brother?"

"You mean Jimmy Joe? Did you notice when they were asking me those questions, that I pointed out that he's a moron?"

"And he calls you a sissy."

Jade again rolled her eyes. "He's always calling me that! He never stops!"

"And you don't like that."

"I'm not a sissy, I'm a girl! At least I'm trying to be. Or I want to be. He can't get that through his moronic head!"

Cynthia chuckled again. "From what I heard in those interviews, he says he wants what you've got, and you want what he's got."

"Did you hear the part where I told him he could have it?"

"Yes. But what I want to know about is the part where you want all his internal organs."

"You mean the parts that would let me have a baby."

"That's exactly what I mean. How badly do you want them?"

"What difference does it make? I can't ever have those things. No matter what, I can't ever have a baby like a real girl...or woman."

"Is that what it's really all about?"

"What?"

"You want those parts so you can be a real girl and not what you claim is something fake?"

Jasmine stared at the doctor for a moment, then lowered her head. "I guess," she replied. "Maybe. I mean, if I did have all those parts and not what I've got now, then I would be a real girl and there would be no difference between me and anyone else."

"And of course you could get pregnant someday."

He nodded. "Is it weird if I wonder about those things sometimes? Or sometimes I wonder what it's like to have a baby growing in me?"

"No. Not at all."

"But..."

"But what?"

"But...what if I sometimes think about other things?"

"Like what?"

"Like..." He looked her in the eyes again. "What does it feel like to have the girl parts down there? I know there made for a man to put his thing up inside of it. What does it feel like? Is it really that good? Do women like it that much?"

Cynthia smiled. "I can't really describe how it feels," she replied. "But yes, women do like it very much. Just like men, and I'm assuming you as well, like rubbing that thing you've got down there now. Do you do that often?"

He was shocked that she should ask such a thing. "No! I mean, hardly ever. And even then it's not for long."

"I see," Cynthia replied with a nod of her head. "There's nothing wrong with it you know."

"I guess," Jade replied. "It's just that...I don't know. It's not something I think about doing much."

Cynthia nodded. "Again, probably the work of the hormones."

"On the internet, I saw where other girls like me said they didn't have much that happened down there anymore either."

"That's often the case, but not always."

"So I'm like a lot of other girls then, girls like me anyway?"

"Pretty much," Cynthia agreed. "You're awfully hung up over what kind of girl you are, as opposed to being a real girl. If everyone sees only a girl when they look at you, what's the difference?"

"Huh!" she grunted. "Everyone who knows me knows what I really am. And now with all this TV junk the whole world is going to know!"

"Why are you so afraid of people knowing what you are?"

"Because I know they're going to talk about me and laugh at me. Maybe not to my face all the time, but they will."

Cynthia thought about that for a moment. "Jade, can you do something for me?"

"What?"

"Can you spend more time thinking about that? If everyone only sees a girl when they look at you, even if they know that at one time you weren't a girl, then what does it really matter? What difference is that really going to make in your life? Especially if they don't laugh at you or say anything bad about you at all! Think about that for me. Please?" And then we'll talk again about it. Okay?"

"I guess."

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The interview that Emily did with Janet was also done in her very own living room. Janet was prepared for the worst, but once again Emily was polite and to the point with her questions. Most of them were about the family meeting and what she had thought of the situation. But since Janet was a nurse, Emily did throw a few other questions in there concerning the twin's hormone treatments and what she thought about them.

Janet, for her part, did her best to relate how concerned she and her husband were over the twin's physical and mental health, and how they had gone to see them at even the slightest sign of any problems. Like the rest of the family, they were concerned about the twins, only more so since they were the health professionals in the family.

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They filmed Brian in his own home office, sitting behind his desk. He was glad. He was more comfortable there, but not comfortable with the questions that were asked him, or with the whole process for that matter. But he knew that as the family's doctor, he couldn't be left out. There were a lot of things though that as their doctor he couldn't talk about at all. Not to mention a few things that the family didn't want mentioned in any way.

The one big noteworthy thing that came out of what he said, was that he was the one in the family who had brought up the subject of putting the twins on hormones, but it had been discussed thoroughly by the entire family first and approved by all of them. He wouldn't have done it at all if the entire family hadn't felt it was the right thing to do. Especially the twin's parents who really had the last say in the matter.

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Rose's living room had been transformed into a TV studio. Some of the furniture had been pushed back out of the way and there were lights, reflection screens, boom microphones, TV cameras, and cables everywhere. Three chairs had been brought up from Brian and Janet's house because the crew liked the style better for what they were doing. All three of those chairs now sat off to the side, waiting for whenever they would be needed.

Off to the sides, behind the cameras and extending into the kitchen, most of the family either waited to be interviewed, or stood around to watch what was happening. The western outfits the girls had worn earlier had been replaced by nice looking dresses, and each of them had had their makeup and hair redone for the interviews.

Under Trish's direction, Emily started with the boys, all except Tommy and Jimmy Joe. Even Lucas and Aaron were included. It was the first chance that Emily had to meet Ethan, one of the boys that she had heard Jimmy Joe seemed to go hunting with the most. In truth, Emily could hardly call Ethan a boy like the rest of them were. Justin and Hunter looked awfully big as well.

With the boys all standing in a line together, Emily stood in front of them and faced the camera. "I'm here right now with the boys of the McComber family. As you can see, they're a good looking bunch of guys. And big! She walked over to Ethan. "Ethan, you're in college now. Any girlfriends yet?"

This wasn't in the questions any of them had seen. Ethan's face turned red. "Um...kind of," he admitted.

"Darn!" Emily joked. She moved down a bit to Justin. "How about you? Would you be willing to date a girl like me?"

Justin grinned. "Any day of the week, Ma'am."

Emily faced the camera again. "Hear that ladies? He's mine! Eat your hearts out!" she laughed.

She moved a few feet away from all the boys and turned to face them all. "The story has it that you all once stood up at school...all of you...to protect Jade from some of the other kids. Can any of you tell me what happened?"

Everyone was relieved, Emily was back on script. The kids all looked around, but it was Hunter that finally nodded his head. "There wasn't that much to it," he said as Emily hurried to get closer to him and one of the cameras zoomed in on them.

"So what happened?"

"Well, Jade...of course she wasn't Jade back then, it was Jimmy, although everyone was supposed to be calling him Jasmine."

"That sounds confusing."

"Yes Ma'am. It sure was. Trust me!"

"Okay, so what happened?"

"Well, one of the guys in the high school classes started calling Jade...I mean Jasmine back then, he was saying all this really jerky mean stuff to him. And Jasmine, well, he was starting to get really mad."

"I guess I wouldn't blame him," Emily noted.

"No Ma'am," Hunter replied. "Well, anyway, Jas got all boiled over and was heading for the kid to start fighting with him, even though the guy was a whole lot bigger than Jas, but Tommy, that's Jade's brother, he came running through and knocked Jade, I mean Jasmine out of the way and then ran on and went straight into the high school kid."

“So what happened? It sounds like a big fight.”

Hunter shook his head. “No, Ma’am, not really. Not exactly. Soon as Tommy started it, me and Elliot were right there to back Tommy up. And Justin and even Lucas and Aaron stood right there with us. We were all there to protect whoever in the family might need it. In this case, it was Jade...I mean Jasmine. Jimmy, you know?”

“So you all stood, what, side by side, ready to fight?”

It was Justin who spoke up. “Yes, Ma’am. You don’t mess with a McComber. Every last one of us will always stick up for each other. We take care of our own!”

“I see,” Emily replied. “And what were the girls in the family doing during all this?”

“They were right there too,” Justin told her. Right behind us. And they had grabbed Jasmine and Jimmy Joe too and kept them safe in the middle of all of them.”

“So literally every kid in your family stood there ready to fight for Jade when she needed it?”

“That’s the way it was, Ma’am,” Hunter confirmed.

“And that’s the way it will always be,” Justin added.

“Lucky family,” Emily noted as she backed away a little bit. “Especially the girls. I would think that any girl that any of you married would have to feel nice and safe to be in your family.”

“Yes,” Ma’am,” Ethan agreed.

“That’s what we McCombers do,” Elliot added.

Emily looked to Elliot who had spoken last. It was a good transition into her next question. “So tell me,” she said as she moved closer to him, I’ve seen you all shoot. And from what the guys on my crew all tell me, you’re all really good. And you Elliot, they say you’re in class all by yourself.”

Elliot blushed a bit, but he was very pleased she would say such a thing. “Thanks, Ma’am,” he replied.

“So,” Emily continued, now looking at all the boys again. “Are there any of you that don’t like to hunt and shoot?”

The boys all had strange looks on their faces. “Are you crazy?” Hunter replied.

“Hunting is what we do,” Justin added.

"It's how the family has survived for many generations," Ethan told her.

"So I understand," Emily replied. "Jimmy Joe was rather passionate when I talked to him yesterday about the land and the animals that live here," she said, going back to her scripted material.

"Yes, Ma'am," Ethan told her. "Jimmy Joe has learned a lot since he started hunting with us."

"But what about Jade? What about when she was a boy? Did he hunt with you too?"

"Not much," Justin replied. "I remember him killing some ducks a few years ago, but all the rest of the times he never shot anything he was aiming at."

"So Jimmy back then, wasn't a very good shot then?"

"No, Ma'am, he was plenty good. Just as good as the rest of us when it came to target shooting. But as it turned out, he just didn't like killing anything, so he missed on purpose."

"And what do you think about that?" Emily asked, purposely moving away from the scripted questions again and into territory she had always planned heading into anyway.

"Killing stuff is how we feed our family," Justin replied.

"But do you think he's better off as a girl now?" Emily asked.

None of the boys answered. Emily looked down the line searching for an answer.

"Maybe," Elliot finally said.

Emily was about to pounce on that answer when Justin added, "Nobody's better off as a girl! That's just stupid!"

"So you think Jade should go back to being a boy again?"

"Yes!" Justin replied, fully certain of his answer. He said nothing else.

"But even if Jade doesn't go back to being a boy, you're all still going to watch out for her and take care of her?"

"Of course!" Hunter replied.

"Definitely," Elliot said at the same time.

"We've already proven that," Justin added.

Emily looked at them all, then faced the camera. "Lucky girl."

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While things were being reset for the girls, Doctor Hapkins mused over the answers the boys had given. Only a few of the questions asked had been scripted ones, and she recognized the reporter digging for more answers toward the end. It was the things the boys had said there that she was trying to fully contemplate. She didn't get long to think about it though because the boys were all soon replaced by four pretty girls.

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Emily faced the camera again. "I would like to introduce you to some of the most *special* girls I have ever met. She went down the line. This is Ashley. This is Olivia. This is Nichole. And this is Allison. All of them, including Jade, are roughly the same age. Three of these girls, along with Jade, make up a group that call themselves The Four Musketeers." She turned to Ashley. "Ashley, you're kind of the odd girl out. You're not a Musketeer. What happened?"

Ashley smiled. "I'm not really out. I mean, I can be a part of them whenever I want. And whenever I want, they always make me part of the group."

"So it's really more like the Five Musketeers?"

Ashley thought about that. "No. Not really. I mean, all the others are with each other a lot more than me. And I'm still a bit older than even Allison. The others, especially Jade and Nichole, they were born almost at the same time. So it's only natural that they all grew up with each other."

"I see," Emily replied. "Don't go away, I want to talk to the other girls for a moment." She moved down to stand with the other three girls. "So you girls, along with Jade," call yourselves the Four Musketeers. Why is that?"

"Cause we all look out for each other. All the time," Allison told her.

"We do everything together," Olivia added.

"Everything!" Nichole emphasized.

"Everything?" Emily asked.

"Whenever we can," Allison confirmed.

"So you're all watching out for each other, and the boys are all watching out for you. Don't you ever feel...over protected? Smothered?"

"No! Of course not!" Olivia replied.

"Why would we?" Allison asked.

"That's the way it is. That's the way we want it," Nichole added.

Emily moved on. "What was it like before, when Jasmine was part of your group instead?"

"What do you mean?" Allison asked.

"Was it different? Was it worse? Better?"

"It was...the same," Olivia replied with a shrug. "We were all best friends."

"But now Jasmine is gone, and you've adopted Jade instead."

The girls all nodded happily.

"Is it any better with Jade now, or worse?"

"It's...the same," Olivia said again.

"It was kind of hard at first," Allison told her, but now it's...the same," she agreed.

"It was hard at first?"

"Well, Jade, back then, she didn't know anything about how to be a girl. And there were so many things she was afraid of back then. We had to help her get past it all. And now...it's all good."

"So what made you decide to adopt Jade and make her one of the Musketeers too?" Emily asked next, straying further from her scripted questions.

"Why not?" Olivia replied.

"Besides, she needed our help," Allison added. "We weren't going to let her suffer."

"Suffer?" Emily asked.

"Sure!" Nichole replied instead of Allison. "Jade needed our help. Of course she was supposed to be Jasmine back then."

"She didn't know how to be a girl," Olivia added.

"And we weren't going to let her be all alone and not have any friends at all!" Allison said.

Emily nodded. "Good friends indeed! But how about Jasmine, who is now Jimmy Joe?" Emily asked, once again going back to one

of her planned questions. "How did you feel about him leaving you?"

"We hated it!" Nichole said passionately.

"We still do!" Allison agreed.

"We'd still like her to come back," Olivia added.

"But she can't come back if she's a boy," Emily stated.

The girls all seemed to shrug. "She abandoned us," Allison finally told her. "But we still want her back with us again. We still want her to be one of the girls again."

"So you all feel that Jimmy Joe would be better off if he decided to go back to being a girl like he used to be?"

There were emphatic nods from all four girls.

"And how about Jade? Do you think she would be better off if she went back to being a boy again?" This time there were no answers, no nods, only uncertain looks on all their faces. "Any of you?" Emily prompted. "Do you think Jade should go back to being a boy?"

It was Allison who finally replied. "I'm not sure. On the one hand, I guess it would be good, but on the other hand, well, face it, she's a whole lot happier now than she ever was before!"

"Totally!" Nichole agreed.

"For sure!" Olivia added with a rather emphatic nod.

"So you really think that Jade should stay a girl!" Emily stated, looking for confirmation.

The girls all looked at each other. Some of them shrugged. "Maybe," Allison finally conceded.

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Once again Doctor Hapkins mulled over what she had heard, now from the girls. It seemed that all the kids in the family were determined to stick up for and watch out for Jade and Jimmy Joe. Some of them thought the twins should go back to being who they had been, but some of the kids weren't so sure. She wondered how much of the kid's attitudes on the subject came from their parents.

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The little makeshift studio in Rose's living room was rearranged slightly. Two of the chairs were brought out and placed next to each other in front of the cameras. Tommy sat in one, and Emily in the other. The setting immediately felt both more intimate and serious.

When they were ready, Emily faced the camera. "I'd like to introduce you all to Tommy McComber. Tommy is Jade and Jimmy Joe's older brother." She turned to Tommy. "Tommy, what's it like to have a brother and sister who are now your sister and brother instead?"

Tommy was thrown for a moment by the way she posed the question, even though it was one he expected. "Weird," he replied. "It's like they're both totally mixed up."

"I can imagine," Emily replied. "And how do you feel about what they're doing?"

"Like I said, it's weird, but, well, I know none of the other family thinks it's good, but I'm starting to think that maybe it is a good thing."

"You do?"

"Yeah. Well, I mean, both of them seem to be happier now than they were before. You know? I mean, Jade, when she was Jimmy, she was alone most of the time. She wasn't that interested in hanging with me and the other guys. Of course, we're all older than he is, but that doesn't matter. I mean, Jimmy Joe hangs with us all the time now. But back then, Jimmy didn't bother with us much at all."

"So Jimmy back then was alone most of the time, and you thought he wasn't happy."

"Pretty much," Tommy agreed. "Of course, we didn't realize back then that he wasn't happy with things, he just didn't talk much... about anything!"

"I see," Emily replied. "And how about Jimmy Joe back then. Do you think she was happy?"

"I thought so," Tommy replied. "I mean, she was always with her friends. Always! And like I heard them say, they did everything together. So we all thought she was happy."

"Were you surprised when she suddenly declared she wanted to be a boy?"

“Huh! That’s an understatement! I mean, she was always complaining she wanted to go hunting with us but she couldn’t. And she loved target shooting almost as much as me. And she was pretty good at it too. But I had no clue at all that she ever wanted to be a boy. None!”

“And how about Jade? Did you ever get any clue that he wanted to be a girl?”

Tommy shook his head. “I really didn’t know. Not at all. But to be honest, I guess I didn’t pay as much attention to him back then as I should have. That was my bad I guess. But he wasn’t that interested in hanging with me and the other guys, so I guess I just didn’t notice.”

“But now you think they’re both better off than they were before.”

“Yeah. I know everyone says they really need to go back to who they used to be. And I guess I think that too. But to be honest, I just think they’re both happier now than before. Both of them!” He paused for a moment then added, “And to be honest, no matter what everyone else in the family says, I think that since everyone knows that Jimmy and Jade are happier now than they used to be, that most of them really think they’re both probably better off now than they were.

“A bold statement,” Emily noted.

Tommy shrugged. “I live with them. My bedroom is right next to theirs. I thought Jimmy Joe was happy before with all his girlfriends, but now he’s becoming one of the guys. And I mean, he’s really getting to be more and more one of us. But Jade, before, she was always alone and never really seemed happy or even smiled... except when he was fixing stuff, he always liked taking things apart to see how they worked. But other than that, he was just...I don’t know, quiet. But now I see him smile all the time, and it no longer seems weird to see him laugh. Lately, he seems to be just another of the girls in the family. He’s...just like them.”

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Another chair was added. The scene didn’t change much, but the serious feeling in the room did as Susan sat in the middle chair,

Clint sat next to her, and Emily took the seat on Susan's other side. This was to be only the first of several interviews that had been planned with them.

"When you're ready Emily," Trish said.

Emily faced the camera. "I'm here now with Clint and Susan McComber, the twin's parents." She turned toward the two of them. "I know this is very trying for you. And I know you'd rather not be filmed on camera at all, but I just want to take a moment to thank you, and your entire family, for allowing us to come in and document this amazing story."

Clint nodded. "Too many people were getting too interested too fast," Clint replied. "We'd really just like it to all go away."

"I know this has been emotionally trying for both of you," Emily said, "and Susan, especially for you. Is there any way at all that you can relate for everyone watching, just how you feel about what's happening with your twins?"

Despite being told by Trish that crying on camera wasn't a bad thing, and that it would only help everyone realize how emotionally hard this was on her, Susan was determined to not get that emotional at all...at least not on camera. She shook her head. "I can't even begin to tell you how this makes me feel. I wonder constantly where I went wrong raising them. I wonder constantly what I should have done for each of them so they wouldn't want this. And I cry all the time because I just want them back the way they used to be."

"Susan," Emily said, ignoring her scripted questions again, "we've heard from Tommy that he thinks the twins are better off now than they were. He certainly seems to think that they're happier now than they were. We know that you're not happy about it, but how do you feel about your twins both being happier now with their lives?"

Susan closed her eyes for a moment, trying hard to battle her emotions. She finally opened them again. "What mother wouldn't want her children to be happy? I guess that's what drove all this in the first place. The twins were adamant about it, and stubborn like I don't know what. And the entire family finally realized that something had to be done. I just want my kids to be happy. It's just that, what they're doing, doesn't make *me* happy."

"I see," Emily said softly. She turned to Clint. "I don't mean to make you out to be the big bad Daddy figure here, but we've heard that you beat your children over this."

Clint stuck his chin up. "I love my kids as much as I love my wife! And that's more than you can imagine. And if one of them steps out of line and does something they shouldn't, then I've always believed they need a little something to drive the point home about it. It's the way I was raised, and I know for a fact that my Daddy was raised the same way. We all were."

"But it didn't work," Emily stated.

"Huh!" Clint grunted. "I wish that it had. Not even close I'm afraid. It was as if my spanking them a bit had no effect on them at all."

"Maybe you didn't hit them hard enough?" Emily suggested jokingly. "Jimmy Joe claimed he didn't even cry."

"Stupid stubborn girl! I'd have hit her a whole lot less and even easier if she had cried! But I did what I thought best. I'd never hit my kids harder than I needed to. Never!"

Emily nodded and moved on. "So the twins dressed up like each other, and then even handed you a written declaration of some sort that spelled out that they wanted to become each other. Tell me about that."

Oddly, it was Clint who answered, almost immediately. "Tell you about that? I can't begin to tell you how sick it made me seeing my own son standing in front of me wearing a damn dress! You have no idea how angry it made me, not to mention how embarrassing it was for me...and my wife! Especially when the rest of the family found out! It was...awful!"

"Is it any better now?" Emily asked quickly.

Clint sat back for a moment as he briefly considered that. "I guess, maybe it is. Everyone knows about them of course, and everyone is more used to them being all swapped around. Even me to some extent. So things are easier now, but they're not the way they should be. Not at all."

Since Clint seemed to be the one doing most of the talking, and Emily had a feeling she'd never get this much out of him again, she pressed her next question toward him. "And what about the future

for your kids? What do you want to see for each of them as they grow up now?"

Clint shook his head. "Don't even go there. We're having a hard enough time dealing with the way things are right now. I don't even want to think that far ahead."

"They've both got to be happy!" Susan stated. "They have to be! No matter what happens in the future. They've both got to be happy. Otherwise, all the...strain, and the heartache, and the...pain wouldn't be worth it. Not at all."

Emily turned her attention fully on Susan now. "So Susan, in order for them to be happy, are you willing to embrace Jade as your daughter when she grows up? Even after she perhaps decides to have an operation turning her even more into a woman?"

Susan was startled by the question. The word 'embrace' had brought up images of her hugging her daughter. She remembered all the times she had hugged her new daughter in the past, but she also visualized hugging Jade as a grown woman in the future. That was an entirely different matter than what was happening now. Her hands shook, but she was still determined not to cry. "My son...my daughter...no matter who he or she is, both of those twins will always be my kids. I will always love them and do everything I can for them. Always! No matter what! No matter how hard it gets, I'll always keep trying."

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Cynthia watched the interviews carefully. One after another, Emily talked with members of the family, the individual kids, and even Jacob and Rose. She knew that other interviews were scheduled with some of them to be done in other locations where it would seem more natural and casual. She herself was scheduled for an interview right here very shortly. And after that, the cameramen would be wandering around trying to get more casual shots of the individual family members going about their normal everyday lives, particularly where it involved the twins.

Oddly, the interview she would have to go through wasn't weighing heavily on her mind. She was concerned about it, but not

as concerned as she knew she should be. Instead, her mind was on all the different things the family had said so far. So much of it the same, yet in small ways, so much of it was different.

Having her makeup done by the professional had been an interesting experience she had gone through earlier with the rest of the women and girls. She had been through many makeovers in the department stores but none had been as businesslike or as quick as this one had been. And she could literally feel how heavy the makeup on her face was. Like the other women, she had immediately headed for the bathroom afterwards to check her face. The result was good, but subtly different. The professional had assured her that on camera it would be much better than what she would have preferred. As soon as her interview was over, she had major plans to wash it all off and start again!

"Doctor Hapkins?" Trish called.

Cythia smiled, straightened her dress, and headed for the chair next to where Emily was still seated. The lights were certainly bright, but not overly blinding. It was warmer in front of them than behind them too. With all the makeup on her face she worried about sweating too much.

"Whenever you're ready," Trish said a few moments later.

Emily looked into the camera. "I have with me now, Doctor Cynthia Hapkins, noted psychiatrist and gender therapist." She turned toward Cynthia. "Doctor Hapkins, thank you for joining us to help answer a few questions."

"My pleasure," Cynthia replied.

"Doctor, I understand that you have now been retained by the family to be the therapist for the twins. Is that correct?"

"Yes it is," Cynthia told her.

"Tell us Doctor," Emily continued, "this business of both twins wanting to change their sex and completely switch places is something totally unique, as far as I know. What are the chances that something like this should happen?"

Cynthia chuckled a small laugh. "Astronomical! To my knowledge, it's never happened before. And I have no doubt that it will be some time before it ever happens again."

“Do you have any idea as to what possibly caused this strange situation in the first place?” Emily asked next.

“No idea at all,” Cynthia replied. “As far as I’ve been able to discover, it just seemed to have happened. Further than that, I can’t even begin to guess.”

“Are there any major concerns you have for the twins and the family as a whole?”

“Of course!” Cynthia replied. “But I’m afraid they are things I can’t talk about. Rest assured that I, as well as my medical colleagues in a number of fields, are doing our best to watch them all as carefully as possible.”

Cynthia was asked a few more fairly general questions, and before she knew it, the interview was over. She gladly got out of the “hot” seat and as casually as possible, made her way to the nearest bathroom to wash her face and redo her makeup.

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Jade did her best to not squirm too nervously in the chair next to the reporter. Her efforts were helped somewhat by the stupid antics of Jimmy Joe sitting next to her, practicing more hat tricks...that weren’t working. Fortunately! Jade was wearing the same floral dress she had worn on Easter Sunday when Reverend Cosinger had kept them from going to church. The same yellow heels were on her feet as well. With her dangling earrings, her five bracelets, her two necklaces, and a ring on each hand, she was wearing far more jewelry though.

Jimmy Joe was dressed in a bright red shirt with a pair of dark blue cargo pants. And of course, the dumb looking hat he seemed to like so much.

“Jimmy Joe,” Trish said, can we lose the hat?”

“I like it!” Jimmy Joe replied as he set it back on his head and cocked it at too much of an angle.

“Jimmy!” Clint’s voice called as he headed for him. “Give me that damn hat!”

Reluctantly, Jimmy handed his hat over to his father.

“Now behave!” Clint said somewhat sternly before walking back behind the cameras again.

“Are you all ready?” Trish asked. When it seemed they were, she nodded towards Emily. “Go for it,” she said.

“Hey! What do you know! It’s Jimmy Joe!” Jimmy spoke up quickly as he stood up from his seat, and stretched his arms out wide. “And I’m here with my sister to answer any questions that you all may have. So on with the show, cause I’m Jimmy Joe!”

Clint was half a heartbeat away from yelling, when Michelle quickly put her hand on his arm and whispered. “Leave him be,” she urged. “He’s being wonderful!”

“He’s being a jackass!” Clint protested.

“But let him be! Everyone’s going to love it!”

“Not me!” Clint replied unhappily, but he backed down... somewhat. Fortunately, he saw Jimmy Joe taking his seat once again, but Jimmy was looking all too proud of himself.

Emily had been caught off guard by Jimmy Joe quickly stealing the spotlight, and she couldn’t help but laugh over it. And because of his antics, all the scripted questions went right out the window. She again turned toward one of the cameras. “As you noticed, I’m now here with the two twins themselves, Jimmy Joe and Jade.”

“Betcha’ you know which one I am!” Jimmy Joe said loudly.

“No problem there!” Emily agreed with another laugh. “Jimmy Joe,” she said to him, “you seem to want the whole world to know who you are. Why is that?”

Jimmy Joe was surprised by the question. “Of course I do! I’m Jimmy Joe, and I want to be a star!”

“A star,” Emily stated.

“A big one!”

“A big star.”

“You’ve got it!”

Emily turned to Jade. “And how about you? You’re a lot quieter than he is.”

Jade looked around a bit uncertainly, not knowing if she should be looking at one of the cameras, or at Emily. She finally settled on Emily. “Um, I don’t want to be a star,” she said.

Emily picked up from there. "In fact," she said, "you told me before that you don't want any of this publicity about you at all."

Jade nodded. "I don't."

"Why is that?"

"Because I don't want people to see me and know what I used to be and judge me for it. I want people to only look at me and see a girl and nothing else. Is that so bad?"

"Not as far as I'm concerned," Emily replied.

"And how about you, Jimmy Joe, what do you think about the world knowing what you used to be?"

Jimmy Joe shrugged. "As long as they treat me right, I don't care. Just don't anyone dare laugh at me, 'cause that'll only make me mad!"

"I see," Emily replied cautiously. She didn't want to get into any possible consequences of him getting mad. She went another direction entirely. "Whenever I look at you two," she said, "I see a huge contrast. The two of you are so very different!"

"Well, duh!" Jimmy Joe replied. "I'm a boy now and she's a girl! Geez! You can't get more different than that!"

Emily smiled. "No, I guess not. But that's not what I meant. I mean, for instance, that you're brave and willing to say just about anything, and Jade here is very quiet and doesn't want to be recognized at all. Very different."

"Huh!" Jimmy Joe grunted. "Have I mentioned yet that she's a sissy? The biggest sissy on the planet?"

"I'm not a sissy!" Jade insisted. "I'm a girl! At least, I'm trying to be. I want to be!"

"Sissy!" Jimmy Joe taunted.

"Moron!" Jade taunted back.

Clint was about to step in again, but again Michelle stopped him. "Leave them be," she whispered. We can edited some of this out later.

Clint only shook his head.

While Michelle was stopping Clint from stepping in, Jimmy Joe had playfully elbowed Jade and Jade had slapped his arm. Jimmy Joe was laughing. Jade was scowling.

“Contrasts indeed!” Emily stated as their antics settled down. “So many differences!”

“Of course,” Jimmy Joe said, once again trying to gain the spotlight. “I’m Jimmy Joe, and even as a boy I’m better looking than she is.”

“You are not!” Jade said back, surprised by his statement. “I’m way prettier than you are!”

“I didn’t say I was pretty. Just better looking. And when I was a girl, I was way prettier than you are now.”

Jade scowled. “So what? I’m trying my best. I just want to be good enough that people will see me as a girl and not as...someone who used to be a boy.”

“Sissy!” Jimmy Joe teased again.

“Moron!” Jade replied back.

“Do you two always fight this much?” Emily asked.

Jade shrugged. “Sometimes. But then you can see what a total moron he is.”

“Sissy!” Jimmy Joe teased, which brought a major eye-rolling from his sister.

“So do you two ever agree on anything?”

The question startled both twins. They looked at each other. “Not much,” Jade finally replied.

“Only that she’s a big sissy and I’m truly great,” Jimmy said.

Jade only rolled her eyes again.

“So since you two don’t seem to agree with each other on anything, then I guess then that you never do anything at all together either. You pretty much avoid each other whenever possible.” She was surprised to see the twins looking at each other far more seriously. And she was surprised when it was Jade that replied.

“There is one thing we do together,” Jade admitted.

Surprised to hear that, Emily asked, “And what’s that?”

“Clothes!” Jimmy Joe replied. “I like to design clothes, and we make them together.”

“You design clothes?” Emily asked, surprised by the subject.

“It’s really just for the fashion show the Home Ec class is putting on next month,” Jade replied. “But since we’re both in the class now, and because of the way things started, we’ve been kind of making all

our outfits together. Although I've had to do most of the sewing!" she added quickly.

"But I designed everything," Jimmy added.

Jade only nodded her head at that.

"But how about now?" Emily asked. "Since you're a boy now, Jimmy Joe, why are you still in a Home Ec class at school?"

"I guess 'cause I was in it for most of the year," Jimmy Joe replied. "And there's a grade at stake here. And it's just like we're both in the mechanics class too. But now, well, I don't really go to Home Ec much at all anymore, and Jade doesn't get into the mechanics class much either."

"But you are still working on making clothes together?" Emily asked.

Jade nodded and Jimmy Joe shrugged. "I like designing them," Jimmy Joe said. "And I think I'm pretty good at it. I really think I'd make a great fashion designer someday."

"I thought you wanted to be a star."

"Well, I guess in case I don't make it to be a star, then I want to be a fashion designer."

"But isn't that something that a girl would do instead?"

Jimmy Joe rolled his eyes like his sister usually did. "How many times do I have to explain it? Most of the great fashion designers are all men. Just because I want to be a boy doesn't mean I can't design clothes for women. Look at Ralph Lauren. Or Yves Saint Laurent. There's a million men who design clothes for women, and they're still just men. Real men!"

Emily searched for something to say to that. "So maybe in a few years, I'll be wearing one of your designer dresses?"

"Count on it!" Jimmy Joe told her. He smiled broadly. "They're going to be the best, cause I'm Jimmy Joe!"

Emily smiled, but it was the expression on Jade's face that caught her attention as Jade looked at her.

"Believe it or not," Jade said, "He really is pretty good. You should see some of the stuff he designed. And now we're making this one last dress for the show..."

"If we can figure out how to actually make the darn thing," Jimmy added.

"Yeah," Jade said with a nod. "This one is so different that we're having a lot of trouble figuring out how to do it."

"Can you tell me about it?" Emily asked.

"Well," Jade replied. "It's all..."

"No!" Jimmy Joe said quickly. "You can't say anything at all about it. If they want to see it, then they have to come to the show! Nobody can see any of it till then."

"Not at all?" Emily asked, with a small chuckle.

"Nope!" Jimmy Joe replied. "That's the way it's done in the fashion world. All the new designs aren't revealed until the shows."

Emily turned to the cameras. "I guess we're all going to have to wait a bit to see just what these two have come up with."

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There were more interviews filmed that day. A lot more actually. One-on-one interviews in many different places, mostly with the twins, mostly trying to get a view of what each of their lives were like. Susan and Clint had their fair share of one-on-one interviews as well, and Tommy and some of the other kids did too. Doctor Hapkins stood in the background and listened to each and every one that she could. There were a few more interviews scheduled for the next day when Jack and Jessica Cumberland could be there as well. And one big family portrait filming was scheduled for the next morning too. But by the end of the day, most of the real work had already been done.

When it was all over for the day, Cynthia strolled along the hillside edge in front of the houses. The view was still spectacular, but the view wasn't what was occupying her mind. Her mind was busy thinking about everything she had heard that day in all the many interviews she had seen. When she got to Brian and Janet's house where she was staying, she went inside. Janet was busy making dinner.

"I'm afraid it will be a little while before dinner is ready," Janet told her.

"No problem," Cynthia replied. "It's still fairly nice outside. I'll be out back if you can just let me know when to come in."

“No problem,” Janet replied.

Cynthia went back outside and sat in one of several nice outdoor chairs they had there, staring at the woods behind the house. Like the hillside, she wasn't really concentrating on the beauty of the trees. As before, her mind was still turning over so many different things she had heard that day. Things Jimmy Joe had said. Things Jade had said. Things all of them had said. An odd thought occurred to her about Jimmy Joe trying to grab the spotlight so much. Was it possible that the loud almost boisterous behavior from him was his way of trying to portray the way a boy would behave – a bit too much? Or was it possible that it was all an effort on his part to steer the questions toward where he wanted them and away from something else?

She thought about Jimmy Joe. He was hung up over not having breasts like the other girls had, whether he admitted it or not! While Jade really wanted to stay unnoticed. Was Jade too embarrassed about being seen as a girl to be more bold about it? She remembered that the Musketeers had to help Jade learn to be a girl because she was too afraid of it. She remembered that one questionable piece of film she had seen where the kids were worried about Jade saying something she shouldn't have. Cynthia's mind was churning things around. Jimmy Joe had said this. Jade had said that. And one more thing that she herself had said, on camera, made its way into her brain. The entire situation was bizarre! It was unique. And the odds of it happening were astronomical. Not impossible, but astronomical!

She continued to churn all of it over and over again in her mind, and something odd that she hadn't expected suddenly dropped into place. She stared at the woods with a very surprised expression on her face as she realized – the twins never wanted to become each other at all! So what had really happened?

Chapter 67 – Drinking Story

Apr 24th

Doctor Hapkins bided her time through dinner and part of the evening afterwards. But it was time well spent as it gave her a chance to reflect on some of the things she suspected. Was it possible that the twins didn't want to change their genders originally? Now of course, it was obviously a different matter. Was it possible that in the beginning only one of them wanted to change and then the other one somehow simply went along with the deal? Somehow Cynthia didn't feel like that was the case at all.

There was only one place she could go for her answers, and not going to that source was never an option. Once the idea had been planted in her head that the twins didn't originally want gender changes, it was only a matter of time before she had to find out more.

Brian's home office was just off of the family room. Cynthia waited until he had been in there alone for a short time before she went and stood in his doorway. "Can we talk?" she asked.

Brian looked up from the bills on his desk. "Sure," he replied. "Come on in."

Cynthia went in, but she closed the door behind her. As expected, that got Brian's full attention. She took one of the chairs in the room.

"What can I do for you?" Brian asked.

"I finally figured it out...I think," Cynthia began.

"What's that?"

But Cynthia knew that in order to get the truth, she would need to start with something else. "You know that since I'm representing the entire family, the doctor patient confidentiality extends to all of you. I'm bound by law to not reveal anything at all that the family doesn't approve."

"Of course," Brian replied. "What of it?" he asked, a slight bit of worry crossing the back of his mind.

"You know I've talked with the twins," she said. "And I've talked with much of the family for one reason or another. And more importantly, I've listened closely to all the interviews the TV people have been taping."

"Okay," Brian said, waiting for what she was really getting at.

"And I think I've finally figured out just what's been wrong with this whole thing the entire time."

"Wrong? What do you mean?"

"I don't think those twins wanted to change their genders at all. Neither of them. At least not at first. I think there was something else going on that has now led to this weird situation, that I suspect is even more strange than what the TV people know."

Brian looked at her without speaking for a moment. He took a silent breath and got up from his chair. "Do you drink?" he asked, heading for the liquor bottles on the cabinet off to the side.

"When it's appropriate," Cynthia replied. She studied him for a moment. "I'm guessing this is one of those appropriate times?"

Brian turned from where he was pouring drinks and nodded, then went back to poring each of them several fingers of expensive scotch. He handed her a glass and carried his back to his own seat.

"So what happened?" Cynthia asked, not daring to sip her drink yet.

Brian took a small sip as he considered his answer. "We were faced with a problem," he said. "One like we'd never dreamed could happen, especially in this family."

Cynthia's first thought was that she was completely wrong. One of the twins, at least, must have wanted to change their gender. "What kind of problem?" she asked.

"The twins," he said. "They simply left us no choice. It was all we could think of to change their minds."

"Change their minds? So I'm wrong. They really did want to change who they are. Both of them." She shook her head. "I'm so very sorry."

Brian shook his head. "Don't be. You were right."

"I am?"

Brian nodded and motioned with his glass toward the untouched drink in her hands. And when I tell you, you're probably going to need more than that one drink tonight. I'd bet on it!"

Cynthia chanced a small sip. The scotch was good, but it wasn't a drink that was to her taste at all.

"It all started with the most stubborn, pig-headed, devious...and sweetest girl you can imagine."

"Jasmine, of course."

Brian nodded. "She wanted to hunt. And she wanted it bad. But one of our family rules here is that the women in the family don't hunt at all. Only the men." He quickly shook his head. "Don't bother with the sexist remarks. We all know it, but it's also the way the entire family wants it."

"Except Jasmine."

Brian nodded. "Except Jasmine. But even then, everything was fine...or at least we thought so. But what none of us knew... None of us! Was that Jimmy not only didn't want to hunt, he was terrified of it. And the bigger thing that none of us knew, was that he couldn't bear the thought of killing anything."

"Because he somehow associated killing something else, with himself dying," Cynthia posed.

"Possibly," Brian admitted. "I'm not totally sure. But at the time, none of us had any inkling at all about it. We thought he was just like all the other boys in the family."

"Except he wasn't."

Brian nodded. "I knew nothing back then about any of his dreams. And he had some doozies that particularly worried him. The first ones that I found out about...much later, after all this was already happening, was that he dreamed he was one of those animals, and he kept dreaming he was being killed over and over again. Evidently, in very vivid detail. I'm sure it would scare anyone, let alone a kid his age."

"You said the first dreams? What others?"

"Like the first one, they revolved around dying, in vivid detail. For some reason, he's overly fixated on it and worried about it."

"Associating the animals dying with the same thing happening to himself. He told me it's why he would never commit suicide."

Brian nodded. "Anyway, all that came out much later. After it was way too late!"

Cynthia said nothing. She merely waited until Brian took up his story again.

"From what I understand," Brian continued. "Jasmine has this habit of going way overboard on things. Especially when it gets her something she wants. Basically, she pulls out all the stops and then finds new ones to add on top of everything else to make sure she gets her way."

"Classic overkill," Cynthia commented.

"And then some! Anyway, the first time it happened was on Thanksgiving Day. And the note those two cooked up was enough to turn any stomach!"

"So there was a note! I had somehow thought it was just something that had been made up."

"Oh, there was a note all right. Two of them actually. The second one when it happened again two days later."

"So they were somehow adamant about what was going on? Maybe you better ignore my comments and just explain it all for me. Because so far, it's sounding very much like the story that everyone's been giving out, except now you tell me there were two notes instead of one."

Brian nodded and took another sip of his scotch. "On Thanksgiving day, all the men in the family go duck hunting. We do it every year. It's kind of a big event for us. Then later we all get together and the entire family sits down and has a huge dinner together. It's sort of one of our family traditions. I'm not sure what went on between Jasmine and Jimmy, but somehow, Jasmine disguised herself as Jimmy and managed to go duck hunting with the rest of us. And by the time any of us figured out that she was there instead of Jimmy, it was already too late. And while she was out hunting with us, evidently she had somehow fastened her brother into one of her nightgowns in such a way that he couldn't get out of the thing, and left him sleeping in her bed. But before she left to go hunting, she left a note, cooked up by her, but recopied and signed by Jimmy, basically stipulating that she was going to be him for the day, and he was going to be her. And they were both going to dress

the part and act the part all day, and that they wanted everyone in the family to treat them as each other.

“So what happened?”

“Heaven only knows why Dad really agreed to go along with all their demands. But I guess Thanksgiving is one of his real special days, and in order to save the family’s rules, he decided we would go along and call Jasmine Jimmy, and Jimmy Jasmine. Of course, he also wanted to teach Jimmy a lesson. And trust me, there was no doubt that Jimmy, the real Jimmy, was totally and thoroughly humiliated that day. Even though he...surprisingly...looked pretty good dressed up as his sister. I think the real Jasmine was pretty much in heaven all day hanging around with the boys! Especially seeing how embarrassed her brother was.”

“I’m sure he was,” Cynthia commented. “So what happened?”

“Well, we all thought that Jimmy had learned his lesson and that he was finally ready to do some hunting again. A few days later, we all went deer hunting. Jimmy was eleven and he still hadn’t killed his first deer. We all chalked that situation up to him being young and inexperienced. But killing your first deer is a big thing with us. Actually, with most men all over the country. And it was way past time he managed to shoot one.”

“I know there are a lot of hunters who live for deer hunting season,” Cynthia commented. “And I’ve even heard of little rituals they have for a boy’s first deer.”

Brian nodded. “And we’ve got ours. It’s kind of a major rite of passage into manhood...sort of.”

“Go on,” Cynthia said.

“Well, as it turns out, Jimmy tried, but he still couldn’t bring himself to shoot anything. There was a really nice deer all lined up for him. An easy shot he couldn’t miss if he tried.”

“But he did miss.”

Brian nodded. “On purpose! Only this time, Dad caught him at it. And poor Jimmy had to admit he had raised his gun and missed on purpose, and that he had always been missing on purpose. The hunt that day was cancelled, and rescheduled for the next day – without Jimmy.”

“Let me guess,” Cynthia said, “somehow Jasmine went instead.”

Brian nodded. "Stowed away in her father's truck. By the time anyone found out, they were already there, and they had a big herd of deer sitting right in front of them. And of course, you know who shot the best deer of the last couple of seasons."

"Jasmine, of course. I'm guessing that deer head she's so proud of that's hanging on her bedroom wall now. But what about Jimmy?"

Brian took another sip of his drink. "Like before," he said, "the two of them cooked up another note. Only this one was worse, for Jimmy anyway. And like before, Jasmine fixed him so he couldn't get out of it. Evidently Susan woke up and found the real Jasmine gone, and Jimmy stuck in her nightgown once again. And of course, she found the new note."

"What did they say this time?"

"A lot of junk like before. Jimmy was to be considered Jasmine and Jasmine was supposed to be Jimmy. But not just for the day this time. According to them, anytime she went hunting from then on, they were supposed to switch places for two full days. I don't think Jasmine really realized what it would mean for her. I think she was more interested in how it would affect her poor brother."

Susan said nothing. She continued to listen.

"There were a couple of new things in the second note too," Brian told her. "Mostly dumb things aimed at embarrassing her brother and keeping him embarrassed. But the real problem was that he actually went along with it and agreed to everything his sister demanded."

"Demanded?"

"Actually, I'm pretty sure it was worded that way in the note. Jasmine's demands."

Cynthia raised her eyebrows. "How odd. Like blackmail."

"Only there wasn't any real blackmail. Just embarrassment for Jimmy."

"So how did all this go from those simple notes to what's going on now?"

Brian shook his head and took another sip of his drink. "The entire family met over the situation. Jasmine wasn't going to quit hunting, which is what we all really wanted. Jimmy agreeing to it all was always pretty much secondary but still considered just as bad."

So we cooked up this scheme that would literally put those two kids through hell, or so we thought. But it was supposed to be a hell of their own design. We went along with every one of their demands in that note, and then we added a few twists of our own, until such time as Jasmine finally decided to quit hunting, and Jimmy actually managed to kill something.”

“What kind of twists?” Cynthia asked.

“Each month that Jasmine refused to quit hunting we added another day to the time they had to be each other. If they had to go to school that way and be seen by others, then that was all part of getting them to finally give in and stop this nonsense.”

“But they didn’t.”

Brian shook his head. “Not yet.”

“So why the hormones? That’s pretty drastic.”

Brian nodded. “Actually, it was my idea, right from the start. Jasmine wanted breasts really badly. All her friends and cousins had them, but hers had barely started growing. The idea was to stop her breasts from growing at all and give them to her brother instead to act as an incentive for her to quit hunting. We all thought that any girl in her right mind would immediately agree not to hunt anymore.”

“But I take it, that didn’t happen.”

“Not even close!” He took another sip from his drink. “Maybe I started them too slowly, I don’t know. But Jasmine didn’t see any changes in her body, or she was refusing to admit any changes in her body. And she was also refusing to acknowledge the changes that were happening to her brother. Time continued on, and each month I gave them each another dose of hormones. Jimmy changed more noticeably than Jasmine did, or at least Jasmine didn’t change much in ways that were noticeable enough – for a while.”

“But what happened when they did become noticeable?”

“Huh!” he grunted. “In some ways, World War Three! On Jasmine’s part anyway. Jimmy, well, he was always a lot mellow. The family did everything possible to try to convince Jasmine to quit hunting. Over and over again they tried things. Mostly, it’s been a pretty darn miserable time for all of us, not just those twins.”

“I can imagine,” Cynthia replied.

Brian took another big breath and another sip of his drink. "Things continued to go on, and somehow, things changed. I kept hearing how Jimmy, now Jasmine most of the time, seemed to be happier now as a girl than a boy, even though he wouldn't admit it. But we didn't want him to actually like it enough that he wouldn't want to change back! We just wanted him to not be so sad all the time."

"You threw him into the middle of a bunch of girls who all gave him attention and did their best to help him with whatever they thought he needed."

Brian nodded again. "The Musketeers, of which my daughter is probably the ringleader."

"And as for Jimmy Joe?"

"My brother Jed took Jimmy on and kept him either hunting every weekend or working the land with him. Teaching him in the process."

"And Jimmy came to love all of it, even the hard work."

Brian nodded. "Who would think?"

"So now you've got two twins stuck as each other, who now want to actually be each other."

Brian shook his head. "We're not sure about that. Actually, we're hoping that's not the case at all. Jimmy Joe of course can't deny any of the changes anymore, and doesn't. Instead, she seems to be enjoying them a little too much. And worse, she knows there's still time before any of the changes can cause her any problems in the future. She knows she can start transitioning back to being a girl at any time, but she's determined to have as much fun as she can first."

"Leaving her brother stuck being the girl."

"Brian nodded. The two of them are tied together in this. Just as they have been from the start."

"So the entire world thinks that they really wanted to change who they are and become each other. But one is stuck, and the other is determined to keep him there."

Brian nodded, "Something like that. Only now it will soon be *literally* the entire world that thinks they both wanted to change."

Cynthia nodded. "For however this all really started, it doesn't matter. For all intents and purposes, the story you're handing out to the TV is pretty much absolutely true. Right now, I don't see either of them wanting to go back to who they were. Not either of them. Jimmy Joe may still be hung up over not having the breasts he wanted as a girl, but he's settled in too deeply now into his new life. Did you see the way he hunted that bear?"

Brian shook his head. "I only heard about it."

"Trust me," Cynthia said, "I saw the film. It was with a joy and passion I hadn't expected. And he was obviously good at it."

"I've heard he's come a long way."

Cynthia nodded. "I don't know much about hunting, and I don't care to, but I have no doubt his father was very proud of him that day."

"Clint is, trust me. And the odd thing is, he's even more proud of Jade than Jimmy. Jimmy has a tendency to be cruel sometimes, while Jade's done a number of things that show courage and compassion, despite the fact that she really does seem to have a lot of phobias over the craziest things."

"I'm sure those phobias aren't so crazy to her."

"No, but we're all pretty proud of her anyway, despite her situation."

"So Jimmy Joe knows his father is proud of the way he hunts, like the rest of the boys in the family, and Jade knows her father is proud of her too, for other reasons."

Brian nodded. "That's pretty much it."

"And of course, Jade is much happier now than she ever was as a boy. That much can't be missed."

"Surprisingly!" Brian agreed.

"But is Jimmy Joe actually happier now as a boy than when he was a girl?"

Brian shook his head. "I really don't know. Jasmine was a very pretty girl before, and she was into all the really girly stuff, just like the rest of them. There's no denying that."

"But now she's into the guy stuff like hunting and shooting instead."

Brian nodded.

Cynthia shook her head. "How long were you going to let this travesty go on?" she asked.

"We didn't really set a time limit, but we kept looking for ways to just call an end to it all. And it seems like either Dad or Mom, or someone else always killed the idea each time. I think mostly because of Jimmy Joe. He not only was refusing to quit hunting, but he also wasn't behaving like anyone wanted him to. I think someone mentioned to me once that Mom didn't think Jimmy Joe deserved to be a girl in this family anymore because of his behavior."

"Doesn't deserve to be?"

"Like I said, Jasmine could be cruel sometimes. Even now as Jimmy Joe."

"I noticed a little bit of that towards his sister. Towards Jade."

Brian nodded. "From the beginning, Jade has pretty much taken the brunt of everything Jimmy Joe could think to dish out."

"Yet they're siblings, and family, and as such, they do still care for each other – greatly! Surprisingly much in fact. Despite all the fussing between them, the fact that they care about each other was quite obvious."

"Two kids thrown into totally opposite, but at the same time, similar circumstances. They've both got a lot of things to deal with that only they know about."

"But the real question you're faced with is, are they each better off now than they were before, or would it be better to finally end it all now and force them behave as they should...as they were born to be."

Brian took a large swig of his drink before replying. "Therein lies one of the major unspoken problems that I'm sure is running through all our heads. Jimmy Joe is the most stubborn person on the planet, and evidently, always has been. Nothing ever seems to sway her from what she decides. Unless we know she's going to agree to quit hunting, we all believe she'll sneak out and go by herself when nobody's looking. Which can be dangerous."

"Which leaves the twins standing where they are now."

Brian nodded. "And then there's the other problem that I'm sure all of us are aware of, but none of us will dare talk about or even admit might be a possibility."

“What’s that?”

“As you just noted, that those two twins might just be better off now the way they are, than the way they were.”

Chapter 68 – Two Much Confusion

April 25th – 26th

Jacob sat in his office and watched all the commotion out in his family room. His eyes particularly seemed to notice Jade as she and the rest of the women went about setting the huge length of tables that now filled the room from end to end, making it difficult to get around from one side to the next. The TV people had been trying to film some kind of big family portrait all morning with everyone in it, but you don't get the entire clan together without serving dinner of some sort. It just wasn't done. Not in his house anyway.

Not only were all the women running around in the big room, but so were all the TV people as they discussed how they could film the dinner, on top of all the other film of the family they had gotten earlier that morning. The table this time was bigger than it had ever been, and the chairs were pushed closer together so as to accommodate all of those TV people along with the family. That was another thing that wouldn't happen in his house. None of those guests would be turned away without a proper dinner. If the family was sitting down to eat together, then every guest in the house was also invited, and that included all those TV people and that doctor woman too.

From his seat, he watched the women and girls going back and forth, doing this and that. There was only one thing that really bothered him. Jade looked a little too comfortable working with, and doing what all the rest of the women were doing. Despite the TV people being there, he would have much rather seen some sign of discomfort in the boy...girl. Whatever he was supposed to be.

Watching Jade reminded him that he needed to try once again to get him to hunt. Just something simple like squirrel hunting. And hunting squirrels was about as simple as it could get. But next time, he and Jade would "fortify" themselves first with a little bit of moonshine. Right now, Jed and Ethan were the only family members who knew how he made his moonshine. He had shown

his other boys where the still was, but he didn't remember ever taking them back to it more than once or twice. But Jed knew. He had passed all his knowledge about making the liquor on to his oldest son Jed, and he in turn was now passing it on to his oldest son Ethan. But Jacob was strongly considering teaching it to Jimmy...or Jade now too...*if* Jade would ever decide to learn to hunt like the rest of the boys again. And right now, watching him with the rest of the women, he wasn't too sure about that at all.

Yes, he really needed to get that *boy* out to the still again, and then put a rifle in his hands – drunk or not!

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Reverend Cosinger sat at the desk in his house and stared out the window. He was supposed to be practicing his sermon, but his mind couldn't seem to concentrate on it.

"What are you doing?"

The Reverend looked up to see his wife in the doorway. "Just thinking," he replied.

"About what?" she asked as she walked in.

He shook his head. "Those blasted twins! And...my job...our lives...what are we going to do. All of it."

She nodded. "I can't stop thinking about it too."

"Have you heard anything at all from any of them?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing. But then we know they've all been so tied up with that TV filming they're doing that none of them has had much time for anything else."

"How much filming can they do? I would think that one day should have been enough."

"I don't know," she replied. "I have no idea what's going on up there, other than the few things we've heard and read about in the paper."

He nodded. "Yeah. An airplane to take pictures! Well, I guess that makes some sense. I just want to know if I'm going to be fired or not. I need to know if I have to start looking for a new job!"

"Have you tried calling them to ask?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. They wanted me to try to take the media pressure off of them, and then they go and announce they're putting on some kind of TV special, and there's now adds for it all over the TV! They purposely set me up so I wouldn't be able to do one thing towards what they *said* they wanted. I wouldn't put this past Jacob at all!"

His wife shook her head. "I seriously doubt they did that purposely."

"Who's to know?"

"You need to call and ask them. It's the only way you're going to find out."

"Maybe," he finally agreed. "Do you think any of them will show up at church tomorrow?"

She shrugged. "I have no idea."

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Having a camera stuck in your face while you're passing a large bowl of mashed potatoes was about the strangest thing that Jade could imagine, but she was starting to get more used to the cameras being on her now, not that she really wanted any of them filming her at all. But it seemed like one or both of the cameramen had followed her around almost constantly for the last few days, sometimes just filming her doing everyday things, and sometimes that Emily woman was there asking her more questions, even while she was busy doing things. So she guessed she was a lot more used to it now. But she still couldn't wait for them all to leave!

And then what? What would happen to her after the TV show about her and her brother came out? What then? The whole world would know about them. The entire world – literally! What would happen then? She didn't even want to think about that. Why couldn't there be someplace where she could just go and nobody would ever know anything? Why? But she supposed that if the remote land they lived on couldn't be such a place, then there really was no place like that in the entire world.

The camera moved away to film something else at the dinner. She was thankful. Everyone was doing their very best to *ignore* the

two cameramen. Everyone was smiling and talking and being extra polite, but truly ignoring a camera in your face while you were trying to eat was simply impossible.

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Jacob left the last few bites of his pie uneaten. The dinner was nearly over. It was time. He stood up. “Everyone!” he called loud enough to get their attention. It was a moment before the room got quiet and all eyes were on him, including the eyes of two TV cameras. “I just wanted to thank all the TV people who have been here all week to try to...help us out. And I particularly want to thank everyone in the family for puttin’ up with them so well. We didn’t want all this publicity. We wanted to be quiet and just be ourselves, but well, things didn’t quite work out that way. So now I guess the whole darn world is gonna see us and know who we are. That’s not what we wanted, but that’s what we got. So we have no choice but to hope that it will be a good thing.

I’m hopin’ that the people who see us on TV won’t think that we’re all some weird backwoods family that’s nothin’ but a bunch of cruel hick monsters. I really hope they won’t see us as people to look down at and laugh about. Heck, we got teachers, a doctor, a nurse, and even electricians in the family now. We’re just as much like people livin’ in the city as anyone else. We just have a bit more land around us than most people.”

He waited while a few of the people in the room chuckled a bit.

“I especially hope that those people who see us on TV won’t think we’re cruel or wrong for what we have goin’ on with the twins. That’s the part I’m mostly worried about. We love those twins like most people can’t imagine – both of ‘em! And it’s because we love ‘em so much that we now find ourselves in this really strange position. I just want everyone to see that we love them, and we’re doing our best to help them be whoever it is that they’re supposed to be.

“We’re not cruel people. We McComber’s are a lovin’ people. I’d make bets on the fact that we care for each other, all of us, more

than most families do. And I'm hopin' that whatever the TV decides to show about us, that that one fact will stand out perfectly clear."

He nodded toward the group of TV people who were sitting together at the big table. "We thank you for comin' in and tryin' to help us out. We hope we've managed to make you all feel right at home while you're here." He turned to look at each of the two cameramen. "And you two camera guys. If you want to come out and really hunt for somethin' sometime, without those damn cameras attached to you, you just let us know. We're lookin' forward to it." He looked around at everyone once again. "Thanks again – to all of you."

There was a small bit of applause and the cameras were officially turned off.

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It was a relief for Valerie and Ashley both to have the TV people gone. It was one less major thing for them to think about, and worry about, even though they themselves didn't have much to really worry over. In order to get their lives back into their usual groove, Valerie and Ashley went grocery shopping. After a full week of dealing with guests and not really getting out, they needed more food anyway.

They hadn't gotten far in the grocery store when Valerie heard someone calling her name. She turned and saw the Reverend's wife pushing her own grocery cart and coming up the aisle behind them. The three greeted each other pleasantly.

"How's the TV filming going?" the reverend's wife asked.

"It's mercifully finished as of lunchtime today," Valerie replied.

"How could it possibly take so long?"

"You wouldn't believe all the things they wanted to film. Not to mention how many different times they wanted to interview each of us, and all in different places. And then there were the trial filmings, and so many other things. It was busy the whole time they were here!"

"We've been watching the commercials on TV. I must say, they do look...interesting. I have no doubt we'll both be watching avidly."

Valerie shook her head. "That's going to be the problem I'm afraid, too many people may be watching avidly."

"Then why did you want to do this in the first place?"

"Because the media people wouldn't leave us alone! They were showing up in the craziest places and hounding us constantly. It was all we could do to try to get them off our backs. We're hoping that after this, they'll have what they want and things can get quiet again."

"Don't bet on it."

Valerie sighed. "We know. Things will never be the same. But we just want people to know we're not monsters. We just want them to know we love those kids and we're doing everything we can to help them. Hopefully, this TV show will get that message out."

The Reverend's wife paused for a moment, then asked. "Val, has anyone mentioned anything at all about us? Actually, we were a little surprised when nobody called us to ask for an interview or anything. I mean, we started this whole mess in the first place. It's all our fault."

Valerie wasn't sure what to say. "I don't know why they didn't call on you. They sure were interested in everybody else! And as for your situation, I just don't know. I don't think any of us have had a chance to hardly think about it at all yet."

The Reverend's wife nodded. "Will you be coming to church tomorrow? Any of you?"

Valerie smiled. "Most likely I will. I can't say if anyone else will be there though."

"Jordan still wants to apologize to the twins for what he did. He wants to apologize to the whole family."

"I'm not sure that this is the best time for that yet," Valerie replied. "As I said, we're all still just recovering from the TV people being here all week."

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"Damn it!" Jimmy Joe exclaimed as he looked at the results of Jade's latest sewing effort on the last outfit they had to create for the

fashion show. “It’s still not right! Are you sure you’re sewing it the way we talked about?”

“You stood there and watched me!” Jade argued. “You saw everything I did!”

“Yeah,” Jimmy Joe replied sullenly. He shook his head. “We’ll just have to try adjusting it again and see if that helps.”

They were now working with nothing but old sheets instead of the “good” material they would eventually use. But so far, not much about this dress was working out for them at all. The only thing they were able to get right so far was the skirt of the dress. Everything else was an absolute nightmare for them. And while their mother was doing her best to help them, even she wasn’t sure how to make what they wanted.

Part of the problem was that they were all simply too inexperienced to make something like what they were trying to do, and the other part of the problem was that they hadn’t been able to locate any patterns for what they wanted. Not even patterns from several different dress styles that they could mix and match to pull the different parts together into one new style. So they were stuck trying over and over again to make patterns out of newspaper, or trying to rework and resew seams. And they were trying to get it right first with the old sheets because the material they had finally settled on for the dress was fairly expensive.

Jade stood still while Jimmy Joe pulled at the material of the “dress” just under Jade’s breasts. Jimmy Joe shook his head. “I think part of the problem is your damn breasts! I think they’re still getting bigger!”

Jade rolled her eyes and said nothing. As far as she could tell, she had been happily thinking that her breasts growth had finally seemed to be slowing down.

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All afternoon, the mood in the house had been one of relief – relief at having the TV people gone and having things returning to normal once again. But that relief was tempered by an unspoken

worry. Worry about what the TV broadcast would bring them in the future.

While Jade was helping her mother make dinner in the kitchen, Jimmy Joe wandered back to his bedroom. He looked at the big deer head on the wall. He looked at the ducks. He looked at them, but his mind was still remembering all the questions he had been asked by that TV lady and all the answers he had given her. And he couldn't help but remember all the little boasting pranks he had pulled just for the attention of the TV camera. Actually, they had been fun. He had no doubt that everyone who watched the show would love what he had done.

And then there was that doctor lady. The shrink. She had asked too many troubling questions. Very troubling questions. And according to her, she wasn't done asking them yet, even though the TV show was done filming. Nobody had mentioned to him anything at all about her continuing to ask questions. He didn't need that. He didn't need it the first few times she had talked to him, and he especially didn't want her poking her nose into more stuff that wasn't her business.

A slight sound made him turn his head. He saw Jade going into her room across the hall. It was lonely in his room. There was no one to talk to...except the heads on the wall. And Tommy wasn't exactly anyone he could talk to about the things that were on his mind. He left his room and crossed the hall, stopping in Jade's doorway. She was just sitting down in front of her computer. It looked strange to see her in shorts and a t-shirt. A lot different than the more complete winter outfits *she* had been wearing so far. But the more troubling thing that Jimmy Joe saw, was that even in the skimpy clothes, her stupid wuss of a brother looked more like a real girl now than ever. The fault of those lousy hormones he knew. The reason why he himself was now called a "*he*" by everyone instead of a "*she*." "What's happening?" he asked, just as a way to announce that he was there.

Jade turned her head. "What's happening? With what?"

"Nothing," Jimmy Joe replied as he entered the room and sat on the bed. He sighed as Jade turned around in her desk chair to face

him. "What are we gonna do?" he asked, the frustration clearly in his voice.

It was a moment before Jade could figure out what he might be talking about. "Um...I guess we're going to have to ask Mrs. Marker if she can help us out."

"Huh? Mrs. Marker? Help us with what?"

"The dress of course. Isn't that what you were talking about?"

"No. But I guess we really do need her help with that darn thing."

"We're closer though. I think we've almost got it."

"Yeah," Jimmy Joe agreed. "Close, but it's not right yet. It still bunches up in too many places."

"We'll try again tomorrow," Jade offered.

"Yeah. Tomorrow."

Jade watched him, thinking he would probably leave, but he didn't. His eyes seemed to scan the doll shelves around her room instead. "Was there something else you wanted?" she asked.

Jimmy Joe brought his head back and stared at the closed closet doors instead. "What are we gonna do?" he asked.

"About what?"

"Us?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. We just pulled off the biggest con job in history. Everyone in the world thinks we really want to be each other now. Or they all will think that in a few weeks when that TV program comes out."

"I'm not happy about it either," Jade replied. "And I *know* you heard me mention that more than a few times over the last few days. But you had to go and act like it was the best thing in the world that could possibly happen to us. Are you crazy?"

"Hey! That might be the best thing in the world for us. That was good stuff I did for those cameras. Really good. I'm going to be famous! I might even be able to get on a TV show or something."

Jade rolled her eyes. "Yeah right!" she mumbled. "So what's your problem?"

It was a moment before Jimmy Joe turned his head to look at her. "I know they told us we can still change back anytime we want,"

he said. "They all said that before we invited the TV people here. But can we?" he asked. "After that show comes out, can we still change back?"

"Are you thinking of going back to being a girl now? Finally?" Jade asked hopefully.

"Hell no!" Jimmy Joe replied quickly. "Not on your life! At least... not yet. Probably not for a long time."

Jade again rolled her eyes. "You're hopeless."

"Not as hopeless as you are," Jimmy Joe replied with a mischievous grin. "Shit! Even if you change back now, you're still going to be stuck with boobs that can't be missed, even if you try!" He laughed a bit, but it was a forced laugh.

"Moron!" Jade muttered, angry and frustrated with him.

It wasn't working. Jimmy Joe knew that now. Talking about these things with Jade wasn't working at all. He got up and headed out of the room and went back to his own room, where he stared at the big deer head and the ducks on the wall and thought about things. But the deer head and the ducks weren't anyone he could discuss things with. Not really. It would be too much like talking to himself. And that would be just plain crazy!

Knowing that there was only one thing he could do about it, he went back to Jade's room.

"Now what?" Jade asked as she saw him come in again.

"Shut up," Jimmy Joe told her. He went straight for the doll shelf at the far side of the bed. Straight for one doll in particular.

"What are you doing?" Jade asked.

"I said, shut up!" Jimmy Joe replied. Very carefully, he pulled Lucy down from the shelf. Carefully cradling her in his arms, he left Jade's room and carried her back to his own room where he closed the door behind him. He sat up on his bed with the lifelike doll, looking down at the sweet cherub face, the face of the baby that *she* had always loved so much, back when he was a girl.

"Hi Lucy," he whispered. "Did you miss me? Is that stupid sissy wuss taking good care of you? I'll bet he never even touches you or talks to you at all. Does he? The stupid sissy!"

"I'm still here baby. Sort of, I guess. I'm just not the same as I used to be. And it seems like every day things seem to get worse

about that. There are a lot of times when I'm not even sure who I am anymore, or who I'm supposed to be, or even who I want to be.

"I guess...I just want to be me right now. The me I am now. I want to be Jimmy Joe and do all the great things I've been doing. I want to be famous and have the whole world know who I am and wish they were me. That would be so cool, everyone being jealous of me and wishing they were me. It would be so great!"

He stared down at the doll. "But sometimes Lucy," he whispered softer, "sometimes I want to be the old me too. I miss all the things I used to be able to do. I miss it all a lot, especially when I see all the girls doing stuff together. I miss that the most I think. But I still like all the new things I'm doing now just as much. Maybe more. And maybe, a lot more.

"I don't know what to do Lucy. Of course, I don't have to do anything at all for a while. But lately...lately. I don't know. It just seems so normal to be a boy now. It...it...it's so...I don't know...just good I guess. It just feels...right somehow. I know I'm not supposed to be a boy. Not forever at least. But...but what if...I did?

"You have no idea Lucy how great it feels to be strong. To be able to do things that I never could before, all because I'm a guy now. And it's more than just hunting Lucy. A lot more. I can laugh and crack up with the guys and just have fun with them in ways I never could before. And I can lift stuff and carry things that no girl in the family can. And you have no idea how great that feels to be able to do that kind of hard work sometimes. Even though it is hard work all too often.

"Being a guy is like...power Lucy. Really great power. To be able to do all these things that guys do. And that stupid sissy across the hall doesn't even get that. Not at all. The silly wuss! But still Lucy, it feels really great to be able to do it all, just like all the rest of the guys.

And Lucy, sometimes I think it's easier for a guy to relax and not worry about things. It's a lot easier to do that as a guy than when I was a girl. I know it's weird. But that's the way it seems. A lot! I guess because I don't seem to think about things the same way that I used to. I don't know if that's because of the hormones or what. I seem to think different now about things. Sometimes, a lot different.

“But I do still miss being a girl, Lucy. I miss it a lot. I think anyway. Or at least, sometimes I do. I’m really glad that I’ve still got a lot of time before I have to go back to being a girl again. So glad! ‘Cause right now, I’m really liking being a guy too much. For now at least. But someday, I know I’ll be a girl again, which in a lot of ways will be too bad. But it will be all for the best anyway. At least, I think it will.”

He looked down at the precious doll in his arms for a few minutes. Then spoke again. “Lucy, it’s been a really strange week. Really, really strange. I can’t tell you some of the things that have gone on and some of the things I’ve said, even to the TV people while they were filming me. Things that I guess are going to be heard by almost everyone in the entire world! Everyone Lucy. Everyone!

“I keep worrying Lucy, that the things I’ve said, and the things I’ve done...well...I keep worrying that they’re going to trap me here as a boy. Forever! Just because I said I always wanted to be a boy and never want to be a girl, ever again! Yeah Lucy. I did say that. A lot I’m afraid. But Lucy, the family all says it doesn’t matter what I told the TV. As soon as I’m ready to be a girl again, then I can. The sooner the better! Of course, it’s going to take a while for my body to start changing back again. But they promised Lucy. They promised I’d be just as pretty as I used to be. Prettier in fact. They promised they would make sure I would!

“So now Lucy, I guess we’re going to be famous. All of us I guess, but especially Jade and me. And I guess, hopefully, me more than Jade. The dumb sissy still wants to hide in her room and not have anyone know who she is. The idiot! What’s wrong with her? For that matter, what was wrong with her before this all started? Yeah, I know she was a stupid idiot sissy. And she really deserves everything she has now.” She looked at the doll a moment before she spoke again. “She just wasn’t supposed to like it as much as she seems to now. That’s all. Dumb sissy!”

He thought about things for a minute before he spoke again. He let out a small chuckle. “Huh! You should have heard some of the things I said for the TV. Wow did I make up some great stuff. At least...I think I made it up. The odd thing is Lucy, is that most of

what I told everyone, was the truth. At least, I think it was...or is...or maybe it really might be. It's just so hard to tell sometimes. What's real and what isn't, isn't so easy to figure out anymore. I know that sounds weird, but trust me Lucy, that's the way it's getting. And I'm just so confused about everything. It's all so...frustrating! I guess that's why I needed to talk to you again for a little bit. I'm just so frustrated.

"What am I gonna do Lucy? I don't know what's going to happen now. What's going to happen when the whole world sees me on TV? What then? Will I have to stay a boy forever? And how long can I really stay a boy and not have to worry how it affects the rest of my life? All Uncle Brian will tell me about it, is that I've got a while yet. But that doesn't tell me much. And Lucy, what if...what if...I really want to stay a boy? Forever! What if that happens? Sometimes Lucy, I wonder about that. I shouldn't say this I know, but sometimes I wonder about that a lot. Like everything I told everyone was exactly true. I want to be a boy forever." Her voice dropped to almost nothing. "Sometimes Lucy, that's the way I feel. Like I said, being a boy is so great now. So...great. I'm a boy right now, and I'm really, really liking it! A lot!"

He stared down at the doll, then he purposely looked up at the big deer head on the wall, then back down at the doll again. "Why am I telling all this to you?" he said a bit louder than he had before. Why am I sitting here talking to a doll? I must be getting almost as crazy as that stupid sissy across the hall. What the heck am I doing?"

Getting up from the bed, and no longer cradling the doll as carefully as he had, Jimmy Joe carried it out of his room and back to Jade's room. Jade was doing something on her computer, and he didn't even care what it was. "Here," he said as he dumped the doll right in Jade's lap. "It's your stupid doll. You put it back." He turned and left the room. Maybe Tommy would be up for some video games. That would be so much better than what he had been doing.

Open mouthed, Jade stared at her *brother* leaving the room. What was that all about? First he had come in and taken the doll – so strange! And then he comes back and dumps it in her lap and leaves. Weird! With a shake of her head, she put the doll carefully

back where it belonged on the shelf. Then she went back to her computer and continued typing the email she had just started.

Dear Christy,

Sorry I haven't been able to write much. I saw where you asked how the TV filming was going, but I had all the girls in the family staying here in my room all week, and until now, I haven't had time to even look at my computer. As of right after lunch today, the TV people all left and I think everyone in the family is really glad! It wasn't bad having them here, but it sure was busy!

You wouldn't believe all the filming they did. They filmed literally everyone. Lots of times! In all kinds of places. Although I guess in the end, they really filmed Jimmy Joe and me more than anyone else. And sometimes I think they spent more time on me than him. Why me? Was it just because I'm the one who didn't want to be on TV? Because of that, they had to spend more time looking at the things that I did than what my brother does? Dumb!

And on top of all the TV people, Doctor Hapkins was here all week too. And there were a few times she got with me and asked me questions. Hard questions. The kind of questions I didn't want to answer. But I did – I think. I don't really remember much about what I said because everything was so busy all week and it was all so confusing. I do remember though that she wants me to think about why it should really matter to me if someone looks at me and sees me as a girl, even though they already know I used to be a boy. I'm supposed to think about what difference it should make to me. But Christy, I don't really want anyone knowing what I used to be. I want them to see me only as a girl and nothing else. Is that too much to ask? I guess it is because in a few weeks when the TV show goes on the air, everyone in the world will know who, and what, I am.

Christy, I know this sounds dumb, but I'm starting to feel more and more that I really like being a girl. I really do like it! I know I'm not supposed to. I know everyone in the whole family wants me to go back to being a boy – all of them! Especially my parents. Everyone wants me to be a boy again. But Christy, all too often now,

I really think I'm starting to prefer being a girl. Sometimes I think I prefer it a lot.

I know I used to hate it. I know I used to be so embarrassed about having to dress and act like my sister. I know I used to feel nothing but total fear every time I walked out of the house, and most of the time even when I was staying in my room. But things aren't so bad anymore. Not at all. At least, not with my family. I'm still not too sure about things when I have to go to the store or other places in public. And very soon everyone who sees me in those places will recognize me and my chances of passing without anyone knowing what I really am will drop to about zero! I guess maybe that's why Doctor Hapkins wants me to think about those things. What will it really matter? I guess that's going to depend more on how people treat me. I'll know that they will know what I am. But how will they treat me when I see them or talk to them?

And will they be laughing at me when I can't see it? Don't even think about that, I already know they will. I know how I used to think about things, I know I would have probably laughed. Of course, I know better now. I'd never laugh or even think badly about anyone who's changing who they are. But before this, I know I would have laughed, then I would have thought they were really sick! Maybe I wouldn't have said it to their face, but that's what I probably would have thought. And maybe, in some circumstances, I might have even said it to their face. I guess a little experience with it goes a long way. Look at me now!

I guess Christy, I'm just plain confused. I like being a girl, but I know everyone wants me to be a boy – eventually. But at the same time, I guess I want to be a boy again too. Yeah, maybe I was alone all the time, but I was used to it. It wasn't bad at all. Yeah, maybe I didn't do what all the other guys in the family did. I hated hunting and hated even more the thought of killing something. But I had other things that I loved doing instead. I really loved taking things apart and fixing them. And I still do! When something is broken, the first thing I think about is how I would go about fixing it. But I guess, even girls can fix things too. So should that have any meaning toward what I want out of life? I really don't know.

And Christy, Jimmy Joe and me are kind of tied together in this thing, with me being on the losing end no matter what. It seems that no matter what I want to do, boy or girl, I can't do anything until she finally decides to quit hunting – for good! And when she ever does... if she ever does...then I guess I'm supposed to go back to being a boy. But do I have to? Is there any way at all that I can stay a girl if I really want to? That is...if...I really want to. I'm really not sure what I want to do yet. Not really.

Everything is all so confusing! I don't know what I'm going to do or even what I want to do. And...will I have any choice in it at all? I have a big feeling that I'm not going to get any choice. And...do I really want that choice if I can have it? I just don't know!

Now I'm waiting for the TV show to come out, and for my life to change – again. How bad is it going to get? After everyone hears all about me, will they finally stop hounding me for pictures and more information? That's the original idea around this TV show to begin with, so that hopefully all the publicity will go away and everyone will leave us alone. Especially me! I guess all I can really do is hope it will go that way. I think everyone else is hoping the same thing too. Except Jimmy Joe of course, but then, he's a moron!

*Thanks for listening Christy. Your friend,
Jade*

Jade read through her email several times, making tiny corrections here and there. Then with some bold strokes of her mouse, she highlighted parts of the email and deleted them. She read it through again and did another bit of editing:

Dear Christy,

Sorry I haven't been able to write much. I saw where you asked how the TV filming was going, but I had all the girls in the family staying here in my room all week, and until now, I haven't had time to even look at my computer. As of right after lunch today, the TV people all left and I think everyone in the family is really glad! It wasn't bad having them here, but it sure was busy!

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In a few weeks, everyone who sees me will recognize me, and my chances of passing without anyone knowing what I really am will drop to about zero! I guess maybe that's why Doctor Hapkins wants me to think about those things. What will it really matter? I guess that's going to depend more on how people treat me. I'll know that everyone will know what I am. But how will they treat me when I see them or talk to them?

Will they be laughing at me when I can't see it? Don't even think about that, I already know they will. I'm sure they will, and I'm sure they're going to think I'm someone who's really sick. Maybe they won't say it to my face, but I know they're all going to think that. And maybe some of them really will say it to my face! What am I supposed to do then?

Now I'm waiting for the TV show to come out, and for my life to change – again. How bad is it going to get? After everyone hears all about me, will they finally stop hounding me for pictures and more

information? That's the original idea around this TV show to begin with, so that hopefully all the publicity will go away and everyone will leave us alone. Especially me! I guess all I can really do is hope it will go that way. I think everyone else is hoping the same thing too. Except Jimmy Joe of course, but then, he's a moron!

*Thanks for listening Christy. Your friend,
Jade*

After reading it through one more quick time, she sent the email to her online friend.

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On Sunday morning, Reverend Cosinger stood in his usual spot and watched the people coming into his church. He smiled as he noticed Valerie and Ashley come in together, just as they usually did. Five minutes later, he saw Rose come in as well, but not with Jacob.

As he waited for the time for the service to start, he grew more disappointed that he didn't see any other McCombers. Only those few women who were the ones who most often came to church. Not even Brian or Pete came, and they were both also members of the church board. And Brian was the current President of the board. Pete though, more often than not, didn't bother coming, like most of the men. That is, they didn't bother coming until about the time the twins started coming to church as each other, back before Christmas. Since then, Jacob had been sending the entire McComber clan to church, almost every single Sunday. They were all coming every week, until he had screwed up and chased those blasted twins away from the church on Easter Sunday. Arguably the busiest and most special church day of the year.

He still felt he was right in doing it. He still felt that those two twins were nothing but an abomination before God. Where in the bible did it ever mention anything about transgendered? Where? But like it or not, for right or for wrong, he knew he had screwed up. And now his job was on the line, and consequently, the lives of him

and his entire family. What were they going to do if the church board, which was mostly McCombers...who all danced to Jacob McComber's tune...what if they suddenly decided to fire him? Which he was almost certain was the most likely case. What was he going to do?

He knew his best course of action was to somehow plead his case with the board members. But he really needed to somehow apologize for his actions, which he did know were absolutely wrong, abominations or not! He knew he had to apologize to the entire McComber clan, and especially those two blasted twins that he had turned away. And if he did it in church, in front of the entire congregation, he knew it had to carry more weight than if he just drove up to their land and did it at their home where no one else could see. It was wrong to turn those two blasted twins away, even on Easter Sunday, the holiest day of the year. No matter how he really felt, it was wrong, and he needed to apologize. He needed... to save his job! His wife and kids were depending on him.

With a shake of his head at the disappointing McComber turnout, he headed away to prepare to begin the service.

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For Jade, the best thing about Sunday now, was that they weren't going to church again. No school, and no church! Hooray! The bad part about that Sunday was, for her and Jimmy Joe, having to go over to their Uncle Brian's house first thing in the morning to have more blood drawn again for testing. Ouch! But they had done it before, and with their father looking on, the blood was soon taken and they were able to go home for breakfast. They walked into the house to the smell of pancakes cooking on the stove. The perfect way to recover after the arduous trauma of having blood taken.

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Jacob dumped the heavy sack into the back of his pickup truck, right behind the sack of sugar, the bottle of malt, the box of yeast, and his two rifles. He raised the tailgate on the truck and headed

back into the house. He didn't bother telling Rose what he was going to do. He never did. Why should she care anyway? He glanced at the clock, but he already knew it was late enough in the morning. Most likely, the entire family had been out of bed hours ago.

Heading into his home office, he picked up the phone and dialed. The phone was answered after three rings.

"Hello?"

"Susan!"

"Hi Dad," Susan replied. "What can we do for you? You need to talk with Clint?"

"Nope," Jacob replied. "I need to talk with that...with...Jade, I guess. Let me talk to that one."

"Jade?"

"Of course! Why not?"

"No reason," Susan replied quickly. "I'll get her."

Jacob waited almost two minutes before the phone was picked up again.

"Hello, Grandpa?"

"Jade," Jacob replied. "What you got goin' on this morning? Anything important?"

"Uh...Jimmy Joe and me are still trying to figure out how to make this dress for our Home Economics class," Jade replied.

"Uh-huh. Listen, put all that away for now. I need you up here today. Okay?"

"Up there? What for?"

"Just put away whatever you're doin' and get up here. The sooner the better. We got lots to do today, you and me. Lots!"

"Like what?"

"Like whatever we decide to do. Now I'm waitin'. And if your mother has any objections, have her call me. Oh, and better wear a sweater or jacket. It's a might cool out there still."

Jade was about to reply, when she realized that her Grandpa had hung up the phone. He wanted her up there? Now? "Mom!"

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It was nearly twenty minutes before Jacob saw Jade walking up the hill. And when he saw her, he winced. The closer she got, the less happy he was. The *boy's* legs were totally bare from the tops of his sneakers to the bottom of the all too short shorts he was wearing. The pink hooded sweatshirt he had put on with big bold letters spelling out the word "PINK," did nothing to help the situation. What was it, the sweatshirt wasn't pink enough? They had to write the color on the front of it in case anyone was colorblind?

He shook his head. Jade, as he or she was, was what he had to work with today. And his main goal was to spend the day showing that *boy* that he wasn't the girl he looked all too much to be. He had to show him that, and make it stick! It would have been much better though if the darn boy had worn a pair of regular pants instead of almost nothing at all from the waist down!

"What's up, Grandpa?" Jade asked as she finally got up to the back of his truck where he was waiting.

Despite how Jade was dressed, and despite how much he looked like a girl, Jacob smiled. "Get in the truck. We got work to do!"

"Work?"

Jacob just nodded and smiled before heading to the driver's seat of the truck.

It didn't take Jade long to figure out that they were heading for Jacob's still again, something that had her fairly excited. "We're going to the still?" she asked.

"Looks like it," Jacob replied as he turned off the road and headed back behind the big equipment building. A few minutes later, he had parked his truck in the clearing and they were getting out. Jacob opened the tailgate of his truck, and was about to hand Jade one of the big sacks to carry, but quickly looking *him* over, made him think better of that. Jade didn't look strong enough to even lift one of those heavy sacks, let alone carry the thing through all those thorn bushes all the way to the still. Like it or not, he was basically dealing with a young girl here. A young girl that he had to convince today that *he* wasn't a girl at all, and didn't really want to be!

"Here," he said as he handed Jade the yeast and the malt. "You carry these and I'll get the corn. We'll come back for the rest." He

hefted the sack of cornmeal up onto his shoulder and led the way toward the still, twisting and turning along the route he had done so many times, for so many years, that his feet pretty much knew the way without his brain even thinking about it.

With totally bare legs, Jade had to be extra careful walking behind her grandpa. All those thorns they had to get past made her wish she was wearing long pants that day...or maybe a suit of armor instead. She breathed a silent sigh of relief when they finally made it through and the still stood in front of them.

Jacob dropped the sack of cornmeal and turned around. "Just put those things over there," he said to Jade. When his hands were free, he added, "Now let's go get the rest."

Jade wasn't all that interested in walking back through those thorns with bare legs. "There's only the one bag left," she mentioned. "I'll wait here."

Jacob shook his head. "There's more than that," he replied. "It'll take both of us. Now let's go get it." He turned and headed up the path, happy to see that Jade was following, like it or not.

Back at the truck, Jacob grabbed the small sack of sugar. "Get them guns," he said to Jade. "I'll tote this thing."

"The guns? What do we need them for?"

"Target shootin'!" Jacob replied. "We gotta do somethin' while we're waitin' for the still to boil."

Jade shrugged and reached into the truck to grab the two small caliber rifles, while Jacob went to the cab of the truck and grabbed a box of ammunition. Once again, the two of them made the trek through the dangerous thorns.

The first order of business once they were back to the still, was for each of them to take a sip from the bottle of moonshine he kept there. Jacob told Jade that it was for a little bit of inspiration so that what they were trying to make would be just as good, or better. Of course, Jacob's real reason was to start getting the potent drink into Jade before he tried to take him hunting, hoping the liquid fire in his stomach would ignite the courage that the *boy* seemed to lack.

Jade didn't really like the moonshine her grandpa was pretty much forcing her to drink. It tasted awful and it burned horribly all the way to her stomach. But her grandpa wasn't giving her the

option not to drink any as he stood in front of her and anxiously made sure she took an overly healthy swallow of the junk.

“Good, isn’t it?” Jacob said happily, before taking another swig himself.

Jade had other thoughts on the matter. Was her tongue going numb?

“Okay,” Jacob said. “Let’s get busy. Help me get the top off this thing.”

All through the process of setting up the still, Jacob paused often so each of them could get a bit more moonshine. The only good part of that, as far as Jade was concerned, was that after her third all too big mouthful of the stuff, she was no longer tasting it at all. Her mouth by that time was completely numb. But her grandpa seemed to get happier and happier, and Jade figured that the reason she was getting happier too, was because her grandpa was happier.

Forty-five minutes later, the fire was lit, and the “batch” began heating. Jade wasn’t really sure why, but her head was spinning so badly she was afraid she’d fall down. And of course, that was when her grandpa pulled out the guns.

“He-he!” Jacob laughed a bit as he shoved bullets into one of the rifles. “This ought to be good!” He picked up the other rifle and handed it to Jade. “You know how to load that thing?”

“Sure,” Jade replied. “No probwem,” she said, for some reason fumbling over saying the words. She had said it was no problem, but she did seem to fumble a bit and drop a few bullets as she tried to load the gun. But before long, the easy task was done.

“Good!” Jacob exclaimed as he laughed again and slapped his leg. He looked all around, trying to pick something out to shoot at. His eyes fell on one of the trees off to the side of the clearing. He raised his rifle, but a slight movement made him pause. “See that!” he half whispered as he looked more intently at the branches of the tree. “There’s a damn squirrel up there. And he’s just beggin’ to be shot!” He raised his rifle again and sighted, and pulled the trigger. The gunshot wasn’t nearly as loud as most of the guns were that the family usually hunted with, but it was more than loud enough for Jade. “Damn!” Jacob swore. “Did you see that! The bugger moved just as I was pullin’ the trigger! Damn him!”

Jade said nothing. She was simply glad the cute little squirrel hadn't gotten shot. Not that she had even seen it, but if her grandpa had said it was there, then she had no doubt.

"Your turn," Jacob told her. "Shoot somthin'."

"Shoot something?" she asked.

"That's what I said. Shoot somethin'."

"What?"

"Anything. Just pick a target and shoot."

"But I don't wanna to kill anyfing," she said, her words stumbling again.

"I didn't say you had to kill anything," Jacob replied. "But you sure can if you want. Just pick somethin' and shoot at it." He paused a moment before adding. "Just try not to hit the still. Make sure you aim well away from it. Okay?"

Jade shrugged and looked around. She figured the tree her grandpa was going to shoot at was a good enough target. She aimed at the trunk of it, and pulled the trigger. The gun roared, but she didn't see any kind of mark where the bullet should have hit."

"Ha!" Jacob exclaimed. "Just missed! Good try. Now try it again. Just take your time with it."

Once again Jade lined up the sights on the gun, and once again she pulled the trigger.

"Got it!" Jacob exclaimed happily. "Good shot!"

This time Jade could clearly see the spot where she had shot the tree. Not in the center of the trunk where she had been aiming, but more off to the left. But at least she had hit the thing. She smiled, even as her grandpa took another swig from his jug of moonshine...before passing it on to her for a drink too.

Once again Jacob searched the tree branches for any kind of squirrels to shoot at. "Nothin'!" he complained. He shook his head and looked around again, then chose another tree trunk to shoot at instead and pulled the trigger. Despite all the moonshine in his system, he hit the trunk of the tree square on.

"Good one," Jade said.

"Your turn," Jacob replied.

Jade pulled her gun into place and aimed at the same spot where her grandpa had hit the tree. She pulled the trigger.

“Ha! Good shot!” Jacob exclaimed happily.

Jade looked. She had hit just a bit to the left of where he had hit the tree.

Once again Jacob picked the jug of moonshine up, took a swig, and passed it over to Jade. After Jade had finished another good drink, Jacob again looked around for something to shoot at. He looked long and hard, but didn’t see anything moving. “Darn it!” he exclaimed. “Nothin’ much out there. We must have scared everything off.” He looked around for a moment more, then came to a decision. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s go find something worth shootin’ at.” He led the way back through the thorns. Jade wasn’t exactly happy, but she followed along behind him.

“Ouch!” Jade exclaimed as she got too close to some of the thorns and they scratched her leg. She backed away quickly, only to get scratched on the other leg by the thorns on the other side of the path. “Ouch!”

“Careful there,” Jacob cautioned as he paused to look back. “Those things are sharp!”

“You don’t hafta tell me!” Jade tried to complain. She continued on, following carefully after her grandpa. “Ouch!” she complained once again. It was maddening. Her head was spinning round and round, and those stupid stickers were everywhere. She had a number of small scratches on both legs by the time they got back to the truck, and two of them were bleeding a little.

“Huh!” Jacob grunted as he looked down at Jade’s scratched legs. “You shoulda worn long pants.”

“You didn’t tell me what we were doin’,” Jade complained.

“No, guess I didn’t at that,” Jacob agreed. “But you know we gotta keep this here still a secret! You *are* keepin’ it a secret, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Yes! Of couse!” Jade replied quickly, once again stumbling over the words. Why was her entire mouth so numb? She couldn’t even talk straight. And why was she so darn dizzy?

Jacob nodded. “Good!” He turned to one of the paths off of the clearing that led away from the still. “Let’s go this way.”

Once again, Jade followed behind. Why was she carrying the stupid gun? She should have left it behind at the still. She for sure

wasn't going to shoot at anything – living!

Very slowly, Jacob followed the path deeper into the woods, his eyes constantly scanning the tree limbs the entire time. “They’re a might harder to see now that the trees are full of leaves,” he whispered to Jade.

Jade didn’t reply. Her mouth was too numb.

A few minutes later, Jacob stopped dead, his eyes locked on one of the tree branches. Very slowly and carefully, he raised his gun and aimed. The sharp report of the rifle echoed through the woods. “Yeah! Got em! Did you see that?” Jacob exclaimed as he hurried forward. A moment later, he snatched the dead squirrel up from the ground. “A good fat one!” he declared. “The start of another good squirrel stew!” He looked down at Jade. “But we’re gonna need more than this for a good stew.” Once again he led the way deeper into the woods.

Jade stumbled a bit over a root...she thought. When she tried to look down to see what she had tripped over, she didn’t see anything. Her head was still spinning horribly. She really just wanted to go home and go to bed until the world settled down into something more reasonable, but she was still following her grandpa while he was out shooting at more squirrels. Poor little things. So cute! And her grandpa had to kill them! It was horrible! She really hoped she wouldn’t have nightmares about it all night. She had a bad suspicion though that she would.

Jacob stopped suddenly. His eyes locked onto another tree branch. This time he knelt down and waved to Jade to come closer and join him. Jade stood next to him. “Look up there,” Jacob whispered.

“What?” Jade replied.

“The squirrel!” Jacob replied.

It was a few moments before Jade could see it. “Cute,” she replied happily.

“No! Food!” Jacob told her. “Your grandma’s squirrel stew! Now take your gun and try to get a good aim at the thing.”

“Me?”

“Just do it!” Jacob told her. “Don’t even think about it. Just aim that there gun and get a good sight on that thing.”

Shooting a cute little squirrel was the last thing that Jade wanted to do, but she raised her gun anyway, and tried to find the squirrel in the gun's sights. It wasn't easy, but eventually, she found it. "Huh!" she finally grunted. "Found it."

"Good! Now pull that trigger nice and easy and shoot 'em!"

Shoot it? Sighting down the barrel of her gun, Jade watched the squirrel playing on the branch. It was so cute! Darling. It was having fun...with another squirrel right up there with it! Two too cute!

"Whatcha doin'?" Jacob asked. "Shoot it!"

"It's pwaying wit anotha squirrel," Jade tried to say.

"It don't matter what it's doin' up there. Just shoot it!"

Once again Jade watched the squirrels playing over the barrel of her gun. But pulling the trigger and killing them was simply beyond her. Even drunk, she suddenly had visions of the squirrels dying because of her, and she couldn't do it. Even drunk, her imagination conjured up images of herself as a squirrel, and then suddenly getting shot. She imagined the sudden horrible pain, and then she imagined the nothingness that would follow. With tears suddenly falling from her eyes, she fell to her knees and wretched horribly. She couldn't stand it. It would be so horrible! She knew her grandpa wanted her to kill it, but she couldn't. She just couldn't! She sobbed bitterly and wretched again, mostly clear moonshine coming up out of her stomach, burning more coming back up than when she had drunk it.

She felt her grandpa's arms around her as she tried to recover from being sick. "Easy there darlin'" Jacob said softly. "Easy."

Jade let herself fall to the ground where she laid on her side and cried. She couldn't face trying to kill such cute wonderful little animals. She couldn't! She didn't ever want to kill anything. She felt so awful! So sick. And still the images of being a squirrel and then suddenly dying were racing through her mind. Between those images and being so sick, she cried hard tears. "I can't," she cried. "I can't. It's so awful."

"What's so bad?" Jacob asked, trying to sound comforting.

"Dying like that."

"You're not dyin'" Jacob replied.

“Not me, the poow wittew squirrs,” she replied, her tongue once again failing to work properly.

Jacob closed his eyes and shook his head. He had hoped that the moonshine would be enough to help Jade get over her fear of killing things. But obviously that wasn't the case. “It's alright Jade,” he said softly. “Don't worry about it.” He gave her a few more moments before saying, “Come on, let's get back to the still. It should be startin' to turn out that fresh batch pretty soon.”

Jade wiped her nasty mouth off with her arm. Slowly but surely, she struggled to her feet. The world was still spinning around, but she managed it. With her grandpa holding both guns, and also keeping an arm on her shoulders, he led her all the way back through the thorns to the still.

While Jacob tended the still, Jade sat back and just watched. She was too upset to do anything else. She did allow Jacob to give her a few more sips of the moonshine from the fresh batch they were making. It helped to clear the taste of where she had thrown up from her mouth, what little she could actually taste.

It was hours before they were done, not that Jade had done much of anything except sit and watch, and hope her head would stop spinning around. But the fresh batch of moonshine was eventually finished and all poured into jars and jugs, waiting for someone to drink it. Jacob shut everything down and made sure it was all safe, then he grabbed the two squirrel guns and led Jade back through the thorns and back to his truck. Once again Jade's stumbling bare legs suffered for the trip through the thorns back to the truck.

“Next time, you wear a good pair of jeans!” Jacob told her as he helped her climb up into his truck. He drove her all the way back to her house.

Clint heard his father's truck pulling into the driveway. He went out to meet him. “How'd it go?” he asked his father as Jacob got out of the truck. He asked the question, but he really had no idea what Jade and Jacob had been doing.”

Jacob shook his head. “Some good, some not so good?”

“Oh?” Clint replied. He saw Jade in the truck, not yet trying to get out. “What's wrong?” he asked, his voice suddenly full of

concern as he hurried around to the passenger side of his father's truck.

"She's okay," Jacob told him. "She's just a bit...drunk. That's all."

"Drunk!"

"Yeah, well, I thought maybe a little moonshine in her gut would help her get over her problem of bein' able to shoot somthin'." He shook his head. "Looks like I was wrong. Didn't work at all."

Clint nodded. "Nice try Dad," he replied, although he wasn't sure whether he should be glad that his father had been trying to help Jimmy-Jade again, or if he should be furious at him for what he had done. In truth, he was more furious.

Jade opened her car door and started to get out. Halfway out of the truck, she fell to the ground. Her father was there quickly to pick her up and hold her in his arms. He immediately noticed all the scratches on her legs. "What happened?" He asked quickly. "Your legs are all cut up!"

"The forns," Jade mumbled, trying to tell him what had happened.

"The what?"

"The forns," Jade said again.

"What?"

"My mouf is num," she said, trying to form the words properly. "I can't tawk wight."

"What?" Clint said again, this time asking his father.

"The thorns! The sticker bushes," Jacob replied. "I'm afraid she got a bit too close...more than a few times."

Clint shook his head. "Maybe I better put her to bed. She's gonna need to sleep this one off." He stared at his father for a moment before adding, "Susan is going to be furious!"

Chapter 69 – The Great Paradox

April 26th – May 3rd

Cute, cute, cute little squirrel. Cute little gray squirrel. Having so much fun playing on the tree branch. Cute little squirrel playing. So much fun. So nice. So... Shock! Bad pain...then nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing. No pain. No light. No sound. No thoughts. No breathing. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Only nothing. Only nothing.

Jade whimpered in her sleep and rolled over, trying to force her mind away from the nightmare. But once again the dream reset itself, and once again she was a cute little grey squirrel playing in the trees. Cute, cute, cute. Having so much fun. Playing, playing, playing. Breathing and having fun. So much fun to be a squirrel. Shock! Horrible pain, then nothing. No breathing. No thinking. No sounds. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

In her sleep, once again Jade cried out. Once again she rolled over, trying vainly to get away from the horrible dream she was locked into, but as always with such nightmares, they're almost impossible to let go of.

Tommy had been trying to stay quiet in his room so he wouldn't wake Jade, who had evidently done something with Grandpa that had made her sick. But staying quiet also let him hear all the little noises she kept making in her sleep. After a particularly bad one, he got up and went to her doorway, which had purposely been left open. He looked in and watched her, and before long, once again she seemed to get agitated in her sleep and cry out. "Jade!" he said, not too loudly but not too softly either, trying to wake her up. "Jade!" he said again. But again he got no answer.

Unsure of what he should do, or if he should do anything, he went up the hallway looking for his mother or father. Both were in the family room watching TV. "Mom. Dad. Jade's having nightmares again. And she didn't wake up when I called her."

"Nightmares?" Susan asked, fully concerned.

"She keeps making all these noises like she's scared of something."

Clint was faster to his feet than Susan and he led the way back down the hall. When they got to Jade's room she was again sleeping peacefully. "She seems okay now," he said softly. They all watched the girl sleeping for a few moments. They were about to turn away, when Jade's nightmare suddenly kicked in again. They heard her whimper, then thrash around on the bed, then she laid perfectly still and whimpered a little more.

Susan pushed her way past her husband and Tommy. She sat on the side of Jade's bed and shook the sleeping, still partially drunk girl. "Jade!" she said firmly. "Wake up!" Again she shook her. "Jade! Jade!"

Something from the outside found its way through Jade's bad dream and she fought her way to something closer to being awake.

"Jade! Wake up!" Susan said firmly again.

"Mom?" Jade finally was able to say as she looked up at her mother. "What's going on?"

"You were having another bad dream."

Jade tossed her head back and forth on the pillow. "I know! I couldn't stop it! It just kept repeating over and over again."

"What was it about?" Susan asked.

"Just being a cute little squirrel, and then suddenly getting killed...again...and again...and again. It was awful!"

"I'm sure it was," Susan said as she kept herself from rolling her eyes. She looked up at her husband instead.

"Jade," Clint said, "you know you're not a squirrel. You know nobody's going to shoot you. You don't have to worry about anything like that."

"I know!" Jade replied, somewhat frustrated. "But that doesn't keep me from dreaming about it."

With a sigh, Susan said, "Come on. Get up for a while and watch some TV. Maybe it will get your mind off of it. I'll be making dinner in a little while anyway, so you need to wake up enough for that. How's your head feel?"

"I don't know," she replied as she tried to assess how she felt. "Not as bad as it was, I guess." She rolled her tongue around in her

mouth. "My mouth tastes awful though!"

Susan nodded. "After all that moonshine you drank, I have not doubt."

"Hey! Grandpa made me drink it!"

"I know," Susan replied as she stood up from the bed. "But that still doesn't make it right."

Jade went straight to the bathroom where she brushed her teeth. It helped the taste in her mouth some, but not completely. A few minutes later, she mostly fell into one of the chairs in the family room where the TV was showing a movie. She had noticed coming down the hallway that she still wasn't completely steady on her feet, but at least the room wasn't spinning around so much anymore. The movie was a good one that she had seen before, but with her brain still so addled, she pretty much zoned out and stared at the thing mindlessly, as if she was asleep with her eyes open.

"Hey! That's us again!" Jimmy Joe exclaimed excitedly as a new commercial for their upcoming TV show came on the screen.

Jade was jolted fully awake by his loud exclamation. Her eyes automatically locked on the TV screen, where she saw herself and her brother – again. She had seen several commercials now featuring her and her brother, but this was a new one. As usual, she felt funny seeing herself on TV. It was so strange! And every time she saw herself, she couldn't help but think about how many people all over the country were seeing her in that commercial too. Or was that all over the world? The show hadn't even come out yet, and she already knew she could never step off the family land and not have people recognize her and know what she really was.

As the commercial played, she unconsciously leaned forward to see the TV better. She mostly ignored Jimmy Joe and everyone else in the commercial, and concentrated on every bit of what they were showing of her. How did she look? Did she look enough like a girl? Did she look good enough to fool everyone into thinking she really was a girl, despite how good everyone *said* she looked? As the images flashed past, she tried to study herself. But those images went by too quickly for close study. Frustratingly quickly. In the end, she thought she looked...okay. She thought anyway...and she hoped.

Jimmy Joe watched the new commercial excitedly. He loved the part where they had managed to take their old school pictures and morph them into pictures of their new selves, then change them again into video. He especially loved the part of the commercial that showed him in close-up saying "Hey, Ho! It's Jimmy Joe!" Jade certainly didn't have anything that exciting in the commercial. Not even that really brief flash of her singing in her cowgirl outfit. At the rate he was now seeing himself on TV, as far as he was concerned, he was already famous. He was already...a star!

"How many different commercials does that make now?" Clint asked. "I haven't seen that one before."

"I have no idea," Susan replied. "Too many for my taste!"

"And they're showing them every time the commercials come on!" Clint added.

Susan only nodded. "I've even seen them on several other TV stations as well. They're advertising this thing way too much, all over the place."

"Are you kidding?" Jimmy Joe replied, "As far as I'm concerned, the more the better! We want everyone to see us!"

"Not me!" Jade managed to mumble.

"You don't count!" Jimmy Joe replied.

"It's still too much," Susan said as she pried herself off of the couch next to her husband. "We should have never asked the TV in to film us at all. Never!" She walked out to finish making dinner. She'd seen nothing but TV commercials featuring her kids, and her, far too many times and on too many channels! There was simply no getting away from them. She couldn't wait until the program was broadcast, and then everyone could forget about it.

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The excitement Monday morning didn't come from anyone in the McComber clan. The excitement came from all the kids who were already on the bus when the McComber kids boarded it for school. It seemed like all the kids already on the bus couldn't wait to hear about what happened with the TV filming. They wanted to hear about it from all the McComber kids, but Jade and Jimmy Joe were

the main targets of their excited questions. Everyone mentioned over and over again seeing Jimmy Joe and Jade in the commercials, which delighted Jimmy Joe to no end. Jade wasn't so enthusiastic. She smiled and tried not to say too much. Whenever she could, she left it to Jimmy Joe and all the other kids in the family to fill their friends in on what happened and to answer most of the questions. The questions and excitement only seemed to get worse as the bus made stop after stop to pick up kids for school.

The bus finally pulled into the parking lot at school. Jade was glad to get there and was hoping the questions and attention would finally slow down, but she had no doubt that it would continue again once they got to class, and maybe it would get even worse. She hoped not.

Once in class, the excitement and questions were enough that Mrs. Ansley had Jimmy Joe and Jade stand in front of the room to tell everyone about how the TV taping went and how it was done. Jade did her best to say very little. She wasn't at all happy or comfortable standing in front of the class like that, but her stupid moron of a brother was eating up the attention. Which somehow still left her standing in front of the room as well. But what Jade noticed, was that most of the questions really didn't come from the kids, they came from Mrs. Ansley, who seemed to be just as excited over it all as the rest of the class was.

For Jade, finally being able to sit down and get back to regular classwork was a huge relief. Jimmy Joe however was still joking with some of the guys in the room about being available whenever they wanted for autographs. Autographs! Jade only shook her head at her moron brother's antics.

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At lunchtime, as soon as Jade and Jimmy Joe finished eating, they went to the teacher's table to talk with Mrs. Marker about the final outfit they were trying to make for the Home Ec fashion show. With all the other teachers there, it was quickly and easily arranged for Jimmy Joe to go to Home Ec for at least a few minutes until Mrs. Marker could sort their problem out for them.

A few hours later, Jimmy Joe discovered that going into Home Ec class, now as a boy, was stranger than he thought it would be. Everyone looked at him as if he didn't belong there, and in truth, he didn't feel like he belonged there at all. Mrs. Marker had already seen the design they were trying to create, but this time Jade slipped on the makeshift dress made from old sheets they had been working with. It took Mrs. Marker no time to see the problem they were having. It was something that really required a much more advanced level of sewing and designing than anything anyone in her class would ever do, the high school girls as well. It took Mrs. Marker almost half an hour to fully help them and to help them create a small piece of the kind of pattern they would need to fix their problem. By the time Jimmy Joe left the room, he was more than happy to get out of there and back with the boys again in the Mechanic's class.

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It was Friday again. May first. The beginning of another month, and only one week away from their program being broadcast to the entire country, and beyond. The questions and excitement had settled down earlier in the week, but it seemed like every single day a few kids would mention to both Jimmy Joe and Jade that they had seen them on TV again the night before. Jade absolutely couldn't wait to get the whole miserable thing over with, hoping desperately that the entire world would just forget about them after that. Wishful thinking, she knew. Even her friend Christy had written asking her to do a computer video with the two of them together. Jade had politely declined. She wasn't sure how such a thing would work anyway... not that she would ever do something that might bring her even more attention.

Jimmy Joe also couldn't wait. Between the TV taping and all the commercials that had been running every night, as far as he was concerned, he was the biggest celebrity in the school. Kids of all ages looked up to him as being important, and without a doubt, very cool! He suddenly had more close friends than he knew what to do

with. It was by far the best week at school he had ever had, even when he had still been a girl!

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The phone ringing in Jacob's house Saturday night wasn't a noteworthy occasion. It happened frequently. Jacob just didn't usually answer the thing. He was in his office pouring himself a much needed drink, when the darn thing rang again. Since more often than not, it was one of the women calling for his wife, he ignored it. That is, until Rose poked her head into his office.

"You won't believe who's on the phone and wants to talk to you."

"More damn reporters?"

Rose shook her head. "Reverend Cosinger."

"Cosinger! What the hell does he want to talk with me for?"

"About church tomorrow."

"Why me? You're the one on the board of trustees. Not me. I've got nothing to do with it."

"I told him that, but he still wants to talk with you."

"Damn it all," Jacob swore.

"Just see what he wants," Rose told him.

Jacob shook his head, and then took an overly healthy swallow of the moonshine in his glass.

"Jacob, he's waiting," Rose prompted.

"Yeah, yeah," Jacob replied. He took another drink, then put his hand on the phone and paused. In one quick motion, he picked the thing up. "Hello?"

"Jacob? This is Reverend Cosinger."

"Yeah, I got that. What are you callin' me for? My wife is the one on the church board."

"I know," the Reverend replied, "but you're the head of your family, and everyone does what you tell them."

"Huh!" Jacob grunted. "If only that were true."

"I wanted to know if you're planning on going to church tomorrow, now that all the TV filming is over with."

"Church? I haven't even thought about it. In fact, I'm sure I *wasn't* planning on it."

"I would really consider it a big favor if you would come back again, and especially if you could have your whole family come out again as well. Especially those twins!"

"The twins? Why? I understand they're both rather irritated with you. Jade says you spend the entire church service yellin' at her every week. And don't forget, you're the one who threw them out of church in the first place! You're the one who caused all the problems we've had with the media."

"I know Jacob. And you don't know how really sorry I am about that."

"Well you don't know how sorry we've been about it too. We've had to be the ones dealin' with all them reporters."

"I know Jacob," the Reverend replied. "I just want a chance to apologize to you all. And especially to the twins. Really Jacob, before all the news stuff got out, I had no idea in the world that they were both transgendered. None! I just thought you had them dressing like each other for...I don't know what the reason might be. But the fact that they were both transgendered never once entered my mind. I just want a chance to apologize for what I've done."

"Well I don't see where it'll do any good now. What's done is done. And we're stuck with the damn problem."

"The good it will do, Jacob, is for everyone to know I'm doing the right thing here and apologizing! Publically! I'm willing to swallow my pride and admit I was wrong. Very wrong. But I can't very well do that without your family there to apologize to. Especially those two twins.

"Plus, there's the fact that this was a growing, thriving church just a month ago. We had more people coming out week after week than ever before. Enough that we were getting close to needing two church services every week. This church had become an important part of the lives of a lot of people in this part of the state, and I'm proud of the part I played in making it that way. Proud that is, until I made that one big mistake Easter morning. The crowd in church every Sunday hasn't been nearly the same since. In fact, it's been downright awful.

"Jacob," the Reverend continued. "If this church could be that much a part of everyone's lives once before, then it can be again.

But the people aren't coming, because of what I did to your family, and especially to those twins. If everyone can see us, burying the hatchet so to speak, then perhaps the word will spread and they'll start coming again. I think it's worth a try. This church was an important part of the lives of those people not that long ago. I was preaching God's word to more people than ever before. Those people hearing the word of God is a very important thing, Jacob. Very important! And I think we can make it an important part of their lives again. What say Jacob? Please? Will you please ask your family to come to church Sunday morning? At least give me the chance to apologize to you all?"

"I hadn't expected a damn sermon over the phone," Jacob replied.

"I'm just trying to present my case, Jacob. I'm just trying to say I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well...maybe it's time to start figurin' out what to do about the church again. And about you I guess. But Reverend, I'm not the one here that's on that board of directors. I don't have a say in hell about your job. And I mean to keep it that way!"

"I understand that Jacob," the Reverend replied. "But I think it's important we do this before the board meets again. And Jacob, they're meeting next week."

Jacob thought about it for a few moments. Then he finally replied. "Okay, Reverend. I'll mention it to the family. Maybe it's time we all tried to bury the hatchet, as you said. Don't do no good for everyone to hold grudges...unless those grudges are for some kind of reason!"

"I hope there's no reason for it Jacob. And I really appreciate it. Truly!"

"Yeah, sure. Well, we'll see."

"See you in church, Sunday?"

"I'll be there...most likely," Jacob replied. "I can't speak for sure for the rest of the family though. I'll put the word out, but it'll be up to them to decide for themselves."

"That's all I ask Jacob. Thanks."

Jacob hung up the phone and turned to his wife who had listened to the whole thing. "He wants to apologize...in church."

"It's what I expected," Rose replied.

"More like he's probably tryin' to save his job!" Jacob stated.

"Most likely," Rose agreed.

"Well, we'll see what he has to say anyway. But I'm not going to be the one to decide if he stays on or not. That's your job. You and all the rest of you on that church board."

"We'll handle it, Jacob. Don't worry."

Jacob nodded. "Call the family. Put the word out. We're going to church again on Sunday." He paused to shake his head. He let out a small chuckle. "Only reason I really wanted them two twins goin' to church every week, was because whenever they were there, the Reverend gave some real rip-shootin' sermons. Believe it or not, I kind of enjoyed 'em. He was startin' to get real good there for a while."

Rose smiled. "I suspected as much."

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The parking lot had more cars in it on Sunday than she expected. Not a lot more, but definitely more. It was something that surprised her somewhat. She herself was only there to give the Reverend, and the church, one more week. If it wasn't as good this week, then she had already decided to go back to her old church again. She just couldn't figure out why there were more cars then there had been for the last month. There was still plenty of space left though in the dirt parking area, so she parked her car and hurried into the church before she would be late for the service.

Inside, she noticed more people than she had seen in a while. The church wasn't completely packed, but there was definitely more people. And there was the Reverend, in his usual spot before church started, watching everyone coming in and saying hello to a few that knew him...unlike herself. She slid into one of the pews near the back and noticed the Reverend leaving his spot to prepare himself for the start of the service. But in noticing him leaving, her eyes were drawn to the people in front of her. She was very surprised to see Jack and Jessica Cumberland, and all three of their kids. Why were they there? They had a long drive to get to the

church. A few rows in front of them, she noticed Brian and Janet McComber and their two kids. Wondering now, she stood up to see better. One by one, she accounted for literally every McComber in the clan, including Jacob in the very front pew and the two twins sitting a few rows behind him.

She quickly slid out of the pew and made her way to the very back of the church where she pulled out her cell phone. As quietly as she could, she called her boss, the editor of the County Chronicle Newspaper.

“Hello?”

“Hey!” the paper’s secretary replied. “I’m at church and there’s something going on here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Every McComber in the clan is here again. Including the Cumberlands!”

“All of them?”

“All!”

The Editor thought for only a moment. “You got enough battery on your phone to record everything you can for a while?”

“I don’t know?” the secretary replied. “And video eats the battery up pretty fast.”

“Just try to get what you can. I’ll be there as quick as I can with something that will do a better job of it.”

“Good,” she replied. “I just thought you’d want to know.”

“Oh yeah! Definitely!” the editor replied. “See you soon!”

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The piano music started and the Reverend smiled as he walked out in front of the congregation to lead the service. As far as he had been able to tell, every McComber in the family was there, which certainly helped the attendance level in his church that week. As he stood in front of them all, he purposely took the time to smile as kindly as he could toward Jacob, and then the two twins. He couldn’t help but notice the colorful yellow dress the “girl” was wearing. Jade now, according to the TV commercials. He also couldn’t help but notice the scowl on the “girl’s” face. As the congregation stood and

everyone sang the first hymn, he couldn't help himself. He found it almost impossible to look away from that one all-too-feminine face that continued to glare at him angrily.

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Jade wasn't the least bit happy to be back in church again. Not at all! She was so upset, she wasn't even trying to hide how irate she was over the matter. And when her mother had told her to stop glaring at the Reverend and smile, Jade had rather emphatically said, "Not today!" She was much happier showing the Reverend just how angry she still was at him. Not just for "yelling" at her every single week, but because he was the cause of all her latest problems in the first place!

"Jade! Stop scowling and smile. Be friendly," Susan whispered to her daughter when she noticed the angry look still on her face.

Jade only shook her head emphatically and continued to glare at the Reverend. She didn't care one bit about singing even a single word of the hymn that everyone else was singing. Her only interest just then, was to glare angrily at the Reverend. The fact that he continually kept looking at her, and continually kept smiling somewhat happily at her, only made her that much more angry. Was he smiling because he was happy about all the trouble he had caused? Most likely! The jerk!

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The Reverend had spent a lot of time trying to decide where and when in the service would be the best time for his apology to the twins and the McComber family to take place. He had finally decided that doing it right at the start would be the best. Get it over with early, and then move on to the real purpose of the service, worshiping God and spreading his word.

He had imagined over and over again, for a month now, about how he would go about it. What words he would say. There were so many different words he could use, so many expressions he wanted to say to express his feelings, and that he hoped *might* help him

keep his job. But he had thought about it so much that he never did decide on exactly what words he really would use.

When the hymn ended, he started with a few quick announcements. With them out of the way, he knew the time had come to get down to business. Get it all over with. Once again he smiled, first at Jacob, then at the two twins and their family. The damn girl was still glaring angrily at him. He smiled at “her” broader for a moment before wrenching his gaze back to Jacob, and then to the rest of his congregation.

“As most of you know,” he began, “I made the worst mistake of my life on Easter Sunday, when I prevented...” He looked down at the two twins, and purposely dredged up their new names, “Jade and Jimmy Joe from coming to church. I’ve been nothing but very sorry about that ever since.”

He forced himself to look away from all the McCombers and look around at the rest of his congregation. “Since most of the family hasn’t been back to the church since then, I called them this week to particularly invite the entire family here once again, so that I could formally say...” He looked straight at Jacob. “I’m sorry.” He turned his gaze at the two twins. “I’m very, very sorry for what I did, and for the unfortunate consequences that my actions have caused.” He did his best to try to encompass all the McCombers as he continued. “I’m sorry for all of it. And I wish it never happened. And I can promise you it will never happen again.”

With that said, he decided he had tarried long enough with it and forced himself to look away from the McCombers to the rest of his congregation. His eyes caught something strange. Was that woman in the back filming it all with her cell phone? It sure looked like it. He had seen the woman in church for the last few months, but he didn’t know her name or anything else about her. He did his best to ignore her. “Now that we’ve got that out of the way,” he said, “let’s move on to the reading of God’s holy word.”

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That was it? Jade was still furious. That was all he had to say? She wasn’t sure what else she wanted. Maybe for a bus to suddenly

materialize out of the wall and run him over or something, but she somehow wanted more. A lot more! Not that she really cared. Nothing he could ever say would ever make any difference to her at all. Ever!

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The newspaper's secretary knew that she had filmed – gold! The Reverend formally apologizing to the McComber family – in public. And her cell phone was still recording. She didn't know how long it would continue to record, but she would keep at it, at least filming everything she could in case the Reverend decided to say anything else about it.

She was glad she had charged her phone again last night, but she really hoped her boss would get there soon so she could stop filming everything. She felt funny doing it. Embarrassed. But she would continue on as best she could. She had already struck...gold.

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For the next twenty minutes of the service, things happily progressed just as they always did. One piece of business after another in the cause of worshipping God. The congregation was singing another hymn just before the sermon was scheduled, when the Reverend happened to notice the door of the church opening and a man hurrying in. The man looked around a moment then hurried to the woman who had been filming so much of his service so far. Why? He was troubled by that, but still he said nothing. As the hymn ended, he saw the man setting up a tripod with a video camera on it, right in the middle of the aisle at the back of the church! What was going on? Well, if someone wanted to film his sermon...let them! He had a great one prepared. Let them film how good he could be.

The hymn ended and everyone sat down. The Reverend headed for his pulpit to begin speaking. "Good morning!" he announced loudly, raising his arms and putting a big smile on his

face. "Today is a beautiful day to rejoice in the love of God our Father!"

He saw the door at the back of the church opening again and another man entering. A man he recognized. The man hurried up to the man who was now filming his sermon and seemed to take over the operation of the camera. The man he recognized however, was the reporter from the County Chronicle. He had done an interview with him and that woman from the TV station several weeks ago. And if the reporter was there conferring with the man who was now filming him, then that had to mean that they were all from the press.

The Reverend continued on, a bit uncertainly now. As he continued speaking, he found it impossible to not stare at the camera that was now recording his every word. Realizing he was staring at it so much, he forced his eyes away from it, and found them automatically going to the one place that had always been the biggest piece of blight in his church. The blight that he had just apologized for getting rid of. The blight he had just promised to never cast out of his church again. And the one biggest part of that blight, dressed in sunny yellow today, was still glaring angrily up at him, just as "she" had done since the service had started. His words faltered for a moment. But only a moment.

He forced his eyes away from the blight, where they found Jacob. Did Jacob approve of his apology? He had no way of knowing. Jacob was only staring up at him with his arms folded across his chest. Was he being judgmental?

He forced his eyes away from Jacob, and they once again found the TV camera. He forced his eyes from the camera, and they found the yellow dressed blight, then Jacob again. His eyes continually made the circuit between all of them. It was a moment before he realized he was no longer speaking. He stopped even trying to give his sermon. As good as he knew it was, it was no longer possible. He swallowed hard and moved out from behind his pulpit, and stepped down to the level where the rest of the congregation was. He looked from the camera, to the "girl," to Jacob...and then at the rest of his congregation. His voice was softer when he spoke, but it was still loud enough that everyone could hear him clearly.

“As I said earlier,” he said, trying to encompass everyone in his congregation. “I made a mistake Easter Sunday when I prevented...” He looked over at the twins. “These two twins from coming to church.” He looked back at the rest of the congregation again. “As I said earlier. I’m very, very sorry for that, and it won’t happen again.”

He backed up only a step. “I’m sorry,” he said again before he raised one finger in the air and strongly saying, “But...” His voice was much stronger now, filled with conviction. “I am not sorry for the things I believe in. I’m not sorry about that at all! In fact, I can’t tell you how much joy my beliefs bring me.” He wasn’t behind the pulpit, but without trying, his voice carried every bit of passion he was capable of expressing. “I believe in the word of God!” he said strongly. “I believe in it with all my heart! And I will not apologize for believing what I believe. I will not apologize for that at all!”

He was rolling now, passionately speaking his mind, and he couldn’t stop himself if he tried. “The bible says... No, not just the bible, but *God* says...through his holy bible...that, ‘the woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment: for all that do so are an *abomination* unto the Lord thy God.’” His finger found Jade who was now fairly close to him. “Week after week, I saw...that child...sitting in the middle of my church, wearing the clothes of a woman, when God himself declared that to do so is nothing but an abomination!” He didn’t care that Jade was visibly getting angrier and so was the rest of her family. He pointed at Jimmy Joe. “And to make matters worse, there was not just the one child, but another one, a girl wearing the garments made for a man. *Double abomination!* And it went on week after week. Month after month.” His voice was loud and almost ferocious. “God himself declared it to be wrong, and yet I permitted this abomination to exist in the middle of our church, every single week!”

His voice backed down some, but only a little. “And then I had the misfortune of chasing them away on Easter Sunday. That one holiest day of the year. The day that is more special to me than any other. On that Sunday, I could no longer even think of having them

stuck, like a foul black sore spot, right in the middle of my church! You all know what happened after that.”

His voice quieted and calmed quite a bit when he continued. “After it happened,” he said, “I went to talk with a colleague of mine. Another pastor, and one whom I’ve looked up to for much of my life. The man who set me on my present course of spreading God’s word, and the man who became not only my good friend, but my mentor and role model as well. It wasn’t until the newspapers and the TV stories came out that I heard that these two children are, what they now call, transgendered. It wasn’t until then that I knew that. So when I sent them away on Easter Sunday, I had no idea...not that it would have mattered to me at all. Not then.”

He walked back and forth in front of the front pews for a moment while he collected his thoughts. “My friend,” he finally continued, “suggested that maybe I should take another look at this... transgendered issue. He suggested that...perhaps I may have been wrong.” He looked up quickly at his congregation. “Was I? To be sure, even now, I’m not totally sure about it.”

He looked around again for a moment, then continued. “‘The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment.’ It’s perfectly clear. Perfectly easy to understand. There’s nothing...wishy washy about it at all. God’s feelings on the subject are stated clearly and concisely. There is no room for any kind of error at all about it.”

Again he wandered a bit as he collected his thoughts before he continued again. “But! What if...the man who wears the woman’s garments, is not a man at all, but a woman instead. And what if the woman that wears the man’s garments, isn’t a woman either? What then? How then do we interpret the very word of God? Is it a man wearing the woman’s garments? Or...a woman?” He faced the congregation fully on as he said, “Therein lies one of the great paradoxes of our age. How can it be sinful for a woman to wear the garments of a woman, and a man to wear the garments of a man? It can’t be. There is nothing wrong with that at all.”

He again paused to collect his thoughts. “I’ve spent quite a bit of time in the last few weeks, studying this...transgendered problem. I’ve spent a lot of time studying it, and far more time thinking about it,

especially as it pertains to the two children that have been part of our congregation here for so many years. Is it wrong for a man to wear a woman's garments? Yes! Is it wrong for a woman to wear a woman's garments? No. Not at all. And neither is it wrong for a man to wear a man's garments. The great paradox of our age. We have a...seemingly boy and a...seemingly girl, both of them dressed so very, very wrong. Yet...as it turns out, that...seemingly boy isn't really a boy. There is a very important part of him that, as it turns out, is a girl! And her sister, isn't her sister, but in truth, her brother. And because of that, there is no conflict at all with the word of God our Father. Based on that, these two children are nothing but correct in what they are doing." He paused briefly again. When he spoke, his voice was quieter...calmer. "I didn't know that," he said. "I didn't know that he was really a she, and she was really a he. I didn't know."

Once again he paused briefly. "I also didn't know anything at all about this transgendered phenomenon that seems to be sweeping across the country, and the rest of the world as well. All these troubled people are only now just coming out of the woodwork. Only now just coming into the light. And in truth, it's the last thing I ever expected to find right here in my own congregation. But it seems that God has spread these people pretty much everywhere. All over the world. And he has blessed us to have not just one, but two of these individuals among us, right here."

He wandered a few steps, to the other side of the aisle. "From what I've come to learn in the past few weeks, it is not the misplaced hatred that these people need, but our love. It is not the terrible condemnation that they need, but our passionate understanding. They are people who are troubled, and are facing an anguishing set of circumstances that nobody should ever have to endure. Yet all too often, what they receive instead, is the horrible, bigoted slander, such as I myself have been guilty of since they first started coming here to church as who they really are. Their truthful selves."

His voice quieted again as he now looked directly at the two twins. "I didn't know...but now I do."

He was glad to see that Jade was no longer scowling at him. She did seem to look quite confused though. He guessed that was

entirely possible. He gave her another calm smile. "I'm afraid that Jade here, has been the target of most of my...ire, for the past few months. Jimmy Joe, for some reason, hasn't been here most of the time, so he's managed to be spared from much of it, but certainly not all. He stared at Jade for a moment, then moved to stand next to the pew she was sitting in. He held out his hand. "Jade, will you come out here and join me for a few minutes?" When she didn't move, he added, "Please?"

Jade was now totally uncertain about anything. And she for sure wasn't sure about getting up from her seat. But the Reverend was just standing there, just on the other side of her father, continuing to smile and hold his hand out toward her, waiting for her to get up and join him. She saw her father looking down at her. She couldn't tell what he was thinking. She turned the other way to look at her mother. She couldn't tell what her mother thought either. And then she felt Jimmy Joe nudging her a bit with his body...and somehow, she found herself slowly getting to her feet – reluctantly for sure.

Nobody said a word as she took a step sideways in front of her father and let the Reverend take her hand. Nobody said a word as the Reverend pulled her out into the aisle between the pews. Holding the Reverend's hand, she let him lead her up to the raised area where he usually spoke from. The Reverend turned her around to face everyone else, and that's when she saw the camera at the back of the church taping everything. "What's going on?" she asked, somewhat shocked as she pointed toward the camera. "Are they filming this for TV again?"

Her comment caused everyone to quickly turn around to look. It was the first that most of them knew the camera was there.

"I don't know what's going on back there," the Reverend replied. "They didn't tell me they were going to be here."

Uncertainly, Jade wondered now if she shouldn't just go back and sit down. But before she got the chance, the Reverend, still holding her hand, started speaking again.

The Reverend tried to make his voice somewhat lighthearted as he said, "Jade and I have developed, I guess what you could call, a rather interesting relationship over the last few months. I preached all too hard at her, and she pretty much did everything she could to

quietly let me know how much she hated it, and I guess me. And she managed to do that without getting up or even saying a word. For most of the time, I was pretty much convinced that I was dealing with the Devil's son himself...or daughter as the case usually seemed to be."

Jade looked up at him. "Trust me," she said, "there were more than a few times I almost did get up and speak my mind."

The Reverend nodded. "I have no doubt! And I don't think I'd blame you...now." He pointed at the pulpit for a moment and addressed the congregation again. "Week after week, I stood at that pulpit, and stared down into the face of this...angel...and the entire time, I was convinced I was looking at the worst blight, the worst abomination that could ever manage to worm its way into the heart of this church. And week after week, I'm sorry to say that staring at what I thought was such an abomination, I continued to get angrier and angrier about it. Until I made that one fatal mistake on Easter Sunday." His voice fell a bit. "And a horrible mistake it was."

He looked down at Jade again. "But as I said before. I didn't know what I do now. I didn't know about you and your brother. I didn't know about this great...paradox that we had before us."

"What's a...paradox?" Jade found herself asking, then she mentally kicked herself for speaking at all.

The Reverend smiled. "It's when two opposing things that seem like it should be impossible for them exist at the same time, actually do exist."

"Huh?" Jade said, not really understanding that.

"Don't worry, you'll understand it when you get older. But my point is, Jade, I'm so sorry for what I've done and the way I behaved. And I promise, I'll try extra hard to be a lot kinder...towards you and your family anyway."

He looked up at the congregation and spoke more firmly. "The odd part seems though, that I've been told that everyone rather likes my...*passionate* sermons. They prefer them to the way I used to speak." He chuckled a bit and looked down at Jade again. "So in the future, if I do get a little carried away, please don't take that as anything at all against you, or anyone else in your family...or even anyone in this church. I'm simply trying to be more...expressive in

the way I present my sermons.” Again he looked up. “And who knows, hopefully all those people who were coming out week after week to hear me, will start coming again. I guess we can only hope about that. I’d really like to see this church start to grow once more.”

He look down at Jade. “So what say? Truce? I promise to behave myself a lot better towards you, and you stop looking at me every week like you want nothing better than to see me dead. Deal?”

Jade still didn’t know what to think. She had no idea what she was supposed to do. But she didn’t forget that the TV camera was once again filming her. She wasn’t sure about it, but she finally said, “I guess.”

The Reverend smiled. “Thank you,” he said simply. He released her hand. “Go on back to your family now.” He watched for a moment as Jade made her way back to the pew she had been sitting in. Then he once again addressed the congregation. “It says in the book of John, to let he that is without sin, cast the first stone.” He smiled. “It seems, I’ve been casting lots of stones. I just never realized it. I thought I was being righteous and doing what I should have. But I forgot, I’m only human. And being human, we are all flawed in some way or another.” He shook his head. “The world may see the leaders of their churches as being much more than that. The world insists on holding us all to a much higher standard than everybody else. But the truth is, we’re all only human. And I’m only a man. And like everyone else, I make mistakes. I do try though to hold myself to those higher standards, and I can assure you that I will continue to strive toward the kind of life that I believe God wants me to live. And I truly believe, that that kind of life, is the kind of life that God wants *all* of us to live. Not just me, but all of us.” He smiled. “Hopefully, if I’m still here, we’ll talk about that more next week. And in the meantime...God help us all.”

He raised his arms. “And now, let’s all stand and sing our final hymn of the morning together.”

As the congregation all sang, the Reverend noticed fevered activity among the people who had been filming him. And by the time the hymn ended, they had all disappeared out the door. He

didn't even get a chance to talk to them...other than through his little makeshift sermon.

Once again, the Reverend stood at the doors to the church and shook the hands of everyone who was there. He particularly thanked all the McCombers who took the time to come out. He was glad that every last one of them seemed to be cordial to him.

And then he saw Clint, Susan, Tommy, Jimmy Joe, and of course, Jade. They weren't exactly trying to sneak out, but it looked like they intended on bypassing him again. He quickly said goodbye to the man he was shaking hands with. "Clint!" he called.

Clint stopped, and so did the rest of his family. Clint looked over to the Reverend.

The Reverend held his hand out. It was several very long moments before Clint came over and shook it. "As I said in there," the Reverend began, "I'm very sorry for my actions and the way I behaved. I'd truly like to start fresh now. A new beginning for all of us. And hopefully this time, we can all get it right."

Clint nodded. "I guess we'll see."

The Reverend also nodded. "We have to try." Clint dropped his hand and led his family away, but he was soon replaced by the last two people to leave the Reverend's church once again, Jacob and Rose. "Jacob," the Reverend said. "Like I said, I'm truly sorry...for everything."

Jacob only nodded as he shook the Reverend's hand. "That was well put in there, Reverend. Well put. You had me more than a mite worried there for a bit, but you said your piece, and you said it pretty well."

"Thank you Jacob," the Reverend replied. "Will you be in church next Sunday?"

Jacob nodded. "Perhaps. I guess it will depend on what I'm doin' then. But...perhaps."

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The printed article they uploaded to the Associated Press was enough for the County Chronicle to once again gain the notice of newspapers all over the country, but the Video they uploaded of the

Reverend's entire sermon, pretty much went viral shortly after one of the TV affiliates uploaded it to the internet. Sections of it were broadcast on nearly every TV station in the country...and beyond.

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Amanda Dwyer with the Little Rock News was nothing but professional as she sat at the anchor desk to relay the latest news story about the McComber family. A story that unfortunately they had only picked up through the Associated Press. If only she had been there! She would have gotten historic interviews with not only the Reverend, but she would have made sure not to miss any of the McComber family either – especially those twins!

The primary news anchorman turned to her. “Amanda, I understand there was more happening today in the story of the McComber twins up in North Arkansas.”

Amanda smiled into the camera. “Yes, that's right. The County Chronicle Newspaper up there was fortunate enough to get a cameraman into the church to film Reverend Cosinger's entire sermon. Reverend Cosinger, you will remember, is the leader of the Baptist Church up there, and he was the one who threw the McComber twins out of his church on Easter Sunday. He spent most of his church service today apologizing for his actions, to not only the twins, but to the entire McComber family. By the way, you can view his entire sermon on our internet site, by going to the link that's now printed on the bottom of your screen. Here's just a few snippets of what the Reverend had to say.”

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They were only watching the news again because the cameras had been in church. And like it or not, the news didn't disappoint them. As the Little Rock news showed bits of the Reverend's sermon, in one house or another, the entire McComber clan watched again as the Reverend apologized sincerely to the family. Oddly, the TV station added the bit about the Reverend calling the situation a great paradox. And then, near the end, they also showed Jade and

the Reverend standing together, hand in hand, in front of the entire congregation.

Once again Jade saw herself on TV. But this time it wasn't in one of the commercials that seemed to be running so often on nearly every station the family was watching. This time, she saw herself on the Little Rock News again. And this time, the news wasn't showing her running from the cameras.

How did she look? She actually thought she liked the yellow dress she had worn. She was glad she had bought that one instead of something else that Nichole wanted her to buy instead. Oddly, she was somewhat happy about her appearance. While the Reverend talked, the camera panned in close on her. She leaned forward to look more closely at herself. As far as she could tell, she looked...fine. Or maybe better than that. Did she look pretty? The thought that she did actually ran through her mind. Was it possible? The camera pulled away again, but she was definitely left with that distinct impression.

"Hey! It's not fair!" Jimmy Joe exclaimed as the segment ended. "They showed lots of you on TV, and they didn't show me at all. I'm the one who wants to be a star, not you."

Jade rolled her eyes as she got up to walk back to her room. Her stupid "brother" wanted all the attention, and she didn't want any of it. But that didn't stop her from saying, "Of course they showed me. I'm prettier than you."

Chapter 70 – Pressing Publicity

May 4th – 6th

Reverend Cosinger and his entire family didn't always get up out of bed very early. Especially not on a weekday. Their kids were too young for school, and if the Reverend didn't have any pressing morning business, which was most of the time, he tried to stay in bed much longer than most other people in the area who were generally up with the sun.

The Reverend was particularly tired because he had been up late the night before talking on the phone with his friend and mentor who had called him after he had seen the Reverend on the TV evening news apologizing in church...and after he had seen the Reverend's entire sermon on the internet. Reverend Cosinger had been somewhat aghast to find out that the TV station had posted his entire sermon for everyone to see, and he was particularly aghast to find himself on the evening news. Once again he felt like he had stuck his big foot in things and messed up the lives of not just him, but his entire family as well. Maybe he should just quit and go to school to become a plumber instead. It would certainly pay a lot better.

But the Reverend and his friend had discussed things pretty thoroughly the night before, and his friend had seemed to think that the Reverend hadn't done anything really wrong at all. In his opinion, the Reverend had come across as a very devout, dedicated man of God, who was doing the right thing by apologizing to those that he *might* have slandered. Neither of them could think of any real consequences that his sermon might have, especially in light of the McComber family's TV show coming out next Friday.

With two toddlers chasing each other around the house, and his wife cleaning up the breakfast dishes Monday morning, the Reverend headed back to the bedroom to get dressed for the day.

He was only in the bedroom a little while, when someone started knocking loudly on their front door.

Knowing her husband wasn't dressed yet, his wife hurried to the door, where her oldest son was trying to reach up and turn the locked door handle. The knocking came again. "Move dear," she said kindly to her child as she pushed him out of the way. She opened the door, and was shocked to see a TV camera pointed at her and that woman reporter from the Little Rock TV station standing right there with a microphone in her hand.

"Mrs. Cosinger," Amanda Dwyer said quickly. "How do you feel about your husband apologizing to the McComber family in church yesterday?" She stuck the microphone out in front of the startled woman as a small toddler tried to worm his way past his mother to see what was going on.

"Apologize?" Mrs. Cosinger said as she tried to make sense of everything that was going on. She realized her son was nearly out the door. She grabbed him and pulled him close to her so he couldn't get out. "Um...it's what he wanted to do since this whole thing happened on Easter Sunday."

"And how do you feel about it?" Amanda pressed.

"Um...I think it was way past due."

"Why did it take Reverend Cosinger so long to finally apologize," Amanda asked quickly.

"Um..." But now the Reverend's wife was finally coming to her senses after being bombarded with the TV camera and questions so quickly. The fact that both her kids were now trying to worm their way into things helped her to mentally step back a bit too. "I think you need to talk to my husband, not me," she said firmly. "Wait here, and I'll get him."

She closed the door and breathed a silent sigh as she hurried to the bedroom to get her husband. But when she came back to the living room, she was shocked to see that the TV reporter and her cameraman were now inside, in her living room, filming her kids and her house!

"Mrs. Cosinger," Amanda said quickly as she rushed over to the Reverend's wife, "How well do you know the McComber family?"

“My husband will be right out,” the Reverend’s wife told her instead.

But Amanda wasn’t going to be denied. It was why she had forced her way into their living room. “But how well do you know the McCombers?” she asked again.

“Shouldn’t you be asking my husband?” the Reverend’s wife replied.

“As soon as he’s available,” Amanda told her. “In the meantime, how about you? How well do you know the family?”

The Reverend’s wife wasn’t sure what to do. “Um...well...I know Rose and Valerie pretty well,” she said. “I work with them all the time.”

“And how about the twins,” Amanda pressed. “How well do you know them?”

“Um...not as well of course. Rose and Valerie and I do a lot of church work together. The twins of course, are children, so I hardly know them that well.”

“And how do you think the McComber family took your husband’s apology?”

“Um...well...I don’t know for sure. I hope they accepted it graciously for what it was.”

“Excuse me!” Reverend Cosinger said loudly as he quickly entered the room. He wasn’t happy to see his wife being interviewed in front of the camera – in his living room. “Can I help you?”

Amanda rushed over to him with her cameraman right behind her. “Reverend Cosinger, why did it take you so long to apologize to the McComber family for throwing the twins out of church on Easter Sunday?” She quickly stuck her microphone in the Reverend’s face.

Reverend Cosinger smiled. “Wouldn’t it be better to do this somewhere else?” he asked.

“We want to make sure you’ll talk to us,” Amanda told him. “And we’re not leaving without a story!”

The Reverend shook his head. “I don’t know how much of a *story* it will be, but if you want to ask me some questions, why don’t we go back to the church where we did it last time. I’d rather not do this here in my home where the kids are running around us.”

Amanda considered that for only a moment. "You *will* talk with us though? Answer our questions?"

"What questions I can," the Reverend agreed.

Amanda hesitated only a moment. "Very well," she said. "We'll do it in the church again." But even as she said that, her head was already trying to spin together some additional possibilities.

Five minutes later, as they entered the church, she had her cameraman turning this way and that, filming every inch of the interior of the church. Once again they positioned themselves up at the front with the church's alter in the background. Amanda faced the camera. "This is Amanda Dwyer with Little Rock news. I'm here in the very church where Reverend Cosinger threw the McComber twins out of the church on Easter Sunday, and the very church where Reverend Cosinger apologized to the twins and the entire McComber family yesterday." She turned to the Reverend. "Reverend Cosinger. Why now? Why did you apologize to the family at this time?"

The Reverend smiled. "I think it was long past time to do it. I've wanted to apologize for my actions since it all started."

"Then why did it take you so long to do it?"

"This was the first time that the family was here in church."

"Did you try going to them, where they live, and try to apologize?"

"No," the Reverend replied. "They weren't exactly interested in hearing from me before this. And of course, I knew they were all very busy with all the TV people running around lately filming their big TV special."

"If they weren't interested in hearing from you, does that mean that there were hard feelings between you and the McComber family?"

"I'm sure there were. They wouldn't have all walked out of this church if there weren't."

"And how about on your part? Did you have any hard feelings against them as well?"

The Reverend had to think about that for a moment, then he nodded. "To be sure, at the very first I did. With some of them anyway. But that was before I found out that the two twins were

transgendered. Both of them! It took a little research and a whole lot of thinking about that on my part, but once I figured it all out, then I can't tell you how sorry I felt about it all. Still do for that matter."

"And how do you think the family took your apology? Was there any feedback from them about it?"

The Reverend smiled again. "I spoke to them all as they left the church yesterday morning. I shook hands with every one of them and let each of them know again how sorry I was about the whole deal. I *hope* they each took that for the sincere apology it was intended to be."

"Reverend Cosinger, in your sermon yesterday, you singled Jade out more than her brother. Was there more animosity on your part against Jade than her brother Jimmy Joe?"

"I don't think so," the Reverend replied. "She was just there more often than her brother was, so she simply was the recipient of more of my...sermons."

"And how did Jade react to your apology?"

The Reverend shook his head. "All you have to do is go back and look at that video you all are showing of my sermon yesterday. Everything I have to say is pretty much in there...including Jade's reaction."

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Susan's jaw – dropped! What the heck was that? Actually, she knew perfectly well what the sound was. She just didn't remember ever hearing it before. It was the sound of someone knocking on her front door. Nobody ever came to her front door. Ever! The family all used the back door. They all did.

Worried now, she hurried to the door to answer it. When she opened it though, she found a big TV camera staring her in the face and that TV woman from Little Rock standing there with a microphone.

"Mrs. McComber," Amanda said quickly. "How do you feel about Reverend Cosinger's apology to you and your family yesterday in church?" She immediately held the microphone out in front of Susan's face.

“Why can’t you people just leave us alone!” Susan said forcefully. With that, she closed her front door as hard in their faces as she could. How the heck did they find out where her house was?

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“What the heck?” Valerie exclaimed as she caught sight of a van pulling into the business office parking lot. It wasn’t the sight of the van that had her surprised, but the bold writing all over it. It was that darn TV van again from Little Rock. “Marcy!” she said quickly. “Take a look. Those Little Rock TV people are back again.

Marcy hurried over to the window. “I wonder what they want now?” she said. She turned and called back to Jacob’s inner office. “Dad! The Little Rock TV people are here again!”

Jacob hurried out of his office and headed for the front door with Marcy right by his side. Valerie decided to join them after a moment. By the time they got through the door and out onto the porch, they could see the cameraman already pulling his camera out, and that TV woman trying to hurry him along. “What do you people want now?” Jacob called from the porch.

Amanda only looked at him, and purposely didn’t answer until her cameraman was ready. With him closely in tow, and her microphone already out, she hurried up to the porch, but since Jacob and the two McComber women with him were blocking the top of the steps, she stayed down on the ground. “Mr. McComber,” she said into her microphone, “how do you feel about the Reverend apologizing in church like he did yesterday?”

“You people are supposed to be leaving us alone now!” Jacob replied, the frustration clearly in his voice.

“We made no such agreement,” Amanda countered. “Now how do you feel about the Reverend apologizing to your family?”

Jacob shook his head. “The Reverend’s been good for that little church since he got here. But what he done Easter Sunday was wrong. Dead wrong! And I guess he knows it now. So I guess his apology was the best place he could start to make amends for what he’s done.”

“So are you accepting his apology?” Ananda asked.

Jacob was surprised by the question. "Course we are! He went out of his way to talk about it – darn sincerely if you ask me. What kind of people would we be if we didn't take it for what it was?"

"And how do you feel about the fact that it took him so long before he apologized to your family?" Amanda asked next.

Jacob shook his head again. "Sometimes," he said, "things just get in the way of other things. And I got to tell you, this past month has been one of the darnest months I can ever remember! Besides, I think it took all of us a little bit before we simmered down enough to listen to him anyway."

"So did the Reverend try to apologize to you sooner?"

Jacob considered that. "I think he wanted to, but we were all too busy when it happened...thanks to all you TV people broadcasting our private problems all over the place."

"And how about the twins?" Amanda asked. "How did they take it? What do they think about it?"

Jacob grunted. "Don't know. That's between the Reverend and them."

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The executive jet landed at the tiny county airfield. A few minutes later, Lyle Montgomery, CBS's executive producer for the McComber show, stepped off the jet. Instead of leaving, the jet stayed right where it was. Lyle was due back before the end of the day to go home again. Five minutes after the jet rolled to a stop, Lyle was in Jed's pickup truck heading for the McComber property.

"Do you hunt?" Mr. Montgomery?" Jed asked as they drove, trying to ignore the fancy suit the man was wearing.

"Not me. Not for animals anyway. TV stories are the only game I'm after. I must say though, the camera crew I sent up here is still talking about this trip."

"Yeah," Jed agreed, "they seemed to like it a lot up here."

"Huh!" Lyle grunted. "Give me the city any day! I'm afraid I'm not the country type."

Jed wasn't sure how to take that. But as they climbed the hill leading up to the houses, he did notice how intently Lyle was looking

around, especially at the view in front of the houses. He stopped his truck along the road so Lyle could spend a few moments looking around.

"I saw all the film, of course," Lyle said, "but it doesn't do it justice compared to seeing the real thing."

"We're all more than a bit proud of where we live," Jed replied.

Lyle nodded. "Still, I'll take the view from my downtown condo any day. That's where life happens for me. In the city."

Jed shook his head. Some people just couldn't appreciate the better things in life. He continued on up to Jacob's house. Once parked, he grabbed Lyle's computer bag while Lyle took just his briefcase. Jed led him in through the kitchen door, just as he always did. Inside, in the kitchen, they found Jacob, Rose, Marcy, Susan, and Clint. Jed made the introductions and Lyle shook hands with all of them.

"On behalf of CBS," Lyle told them, "I want to thank you all again for letting us come in and film this story. I think, as you'll soon see, what we've put together will be a very compelling video that tells exactly what you wanted the world to know, and what we think everyone else will be wanting to know as well." He smiled. "And...I personally think this video is absolutely mesmerizing! I have no doubt that our viewers will feel the same way."

"We hope it will be," Clint replied.

"Do you think there will be any problems because of what happened in church on Sunday?" Marcy asked.

Lyle shook his head. "As far as CBS is concerned, we just got a lot more advertising for your program. We're absolutely delighted. No doubt, the viewership will be up even more because of it."

"That's what we were afraid of," Susan replied with a troubled look on her face.

Lyle looked around. "Is there some place I can set up? Trish told me that they were able to plug directly into the TV in your living room once in a while. Maybe we can do that again so we can see this better?"

"I guess, if you want," Jacob replied. "Right this way."

Five minutes later, everyone was seated in the living room looking at the big TV that was hung on the wall there. After Lyle

tapped a few more times on his computer, the video of their show began. For forty minutes nobody said a word. Lyle however, didn't only watch the film, he spend more time watching the reactions on all their faces. What he was seeing was pretty much what he expected, especially during certain segments of the show that they had decided were things that absolutely couldn't be left out.

The final credits started rolling over top of more scenery of the family's land. And a minute later, it was Susan who spoke first, and her voice was somewhat upset. "Why did you put that bit in there with me crying my eyes out? That was supposed to be trial filming, only to get us used to it. Nothing more!"

Lyle turned the video off and smiled. "We all thought it was simply too good, too honest to leave out. It's the kind of thing we know everyone will want to see."

"Well I don't want to see it!" Susan declared. "It's embarrassing! Very embarrassing! I don't know any women who would want to be seen like that...especially on TV. Take it out!"

Lyle shook his head. "I'm sorry, we're not going to do that."

Jacob suddenly got angry. "That there contract you had us sign said we would have the final say as to what goes into this broadcast!"

Lyle nodded, then played his trump card, not bothering to wait in case it was really needed later. "But the contract also states that all film and material we collect for this show is the property of CBS, and that CBS has the right to use any and all of it in any way we like, whenever we like, for whatever purpose we decide to use it in. And in this case, we feel that it's vital material for your story."

"So in other words," Clint said, "we've actually got no say at all as to what gets broadcast and what doesn't?"

"I'm afraid that's exactly the case," Lyle confirmed.

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Amanda and her cameraman were still in northern Arkansas. They had already sent the film they had shot earlier to the station in Little Rock so they could start working with it, but Amanda wanted one more story. One more big story. So once again she and her

cameraman were standing outside the school building, waiting for the kids to start coming out.

The school bell rang and two minutes later, kids started running out the door. Some of them kept going, but more than a few stopped to stare at Amanda and her cameraman for a moment. But since it was obvious that the cameraman wasn't filming anything, they soon moved on. Amanda however was watching every child that came out of the door anxiously. It took a few minutes, but she finally saw what she wanted. "There!" she exclaimed quickly. As fast as he could, her cameraman had his camera up and was filming Jade coming out the school door along with a group of her girlfriends. "Jade!" Amanda called as she hurried over with her microphone already out and waiting.

Jade was down the second step before she heard someone calling her and saw the cameraman. She stopped right there, frustrated at having the cameras back on her again.

"Hey!" Allison said quickly as she stepped in front of Jade to block the camera from seeing her friend. "You're not supposed to be here!"

Amanda ignored her. "Jade, what do you think about Reverend Cosinger's apology in church yesterday?"

"Come on," Nichole said as she grabbed Jade's arm and pulled. "Let's get on the bus."

But Jade stayed right where she was, just staring at the camera that was now moving around a bit to try to get past Allison who was trying to stand in the way. Jade finally grabbed Allison and moved her to the side. "If I talk to you, will you go away and not bother us anymore?" Jade asked.

"Just talk to us," Amanda replied quickly...and hopefully.

Jade rolled her eyes and continued down the steps.

"You don't have to do this!" Allison said quickly.

"Just get on the bus with us," Nichole added. "Or we can go back inside and get Uncle John."

Jade shook her head. "They never give up. Don't worry," she told her friends, "I'll be fine." She kept walking, ignoring the microphone that Amanda continued to hold out to her, and finally stopped on the grass where they were a little more out of the way of

the kids leaving the school. But the kids were quickly gathering around to watch what was happening.

“Jade,” Amanda said again the moment that Jade seemed to stop, “How do you feel about Reverend Cosinger’s apology?”

“How do I feel about it?” Jade realized that once again, like it or not, she was going to be on TV. And as such, her answers had to be carefully worded. But after an entire week of having cameras stuck in her face, she was far more used to it than she was before. “I’m glad he apologized,” she said, looking into the camera instead of at Amanda.

“And do you still feel angry at him for throwing you out of church?” Amanda asked next.

Jade considered that for only a moment. No matter how she really felt, she was on TV again. “Not really,” she replied. “I mean, he spent almost the entire church service trying to say how sorry he was about it all. What more can anyone ask?”

“So you’re accepting his apology?”

“Well of course!”

“Hey!” a loud voice called from behind Jade. “Look! I’m up here!”

The camera briefly panned up to the steps to see Jimmy Joe trying to get through the crowd of kids. He pushed his way to finally stand next to his sister. “Hey, ho!” he said boldly. “Look! It’s Jimmy Joe!”

Amanda wasn’t sure how to take Jimmy Joe’s antics. “Jimmy Joe,” she said quickly. “How do you feel about the Reverend apologizing in church yesterday?”

Jimmy Joe shrugged. “What he did was wrong. At least as far as I see it. So I guess a good apology was the right thing to do.”

“And do you accept his apology too? No more hard feelings about him?”

Jimmy Joe was surprised by the question. “Well sure! Shouldn’t I? Besides, he didn’t bother me too much at all. Except that one time when he wouldn’t let us into church.”

Amanda quickly turned back to Jade. “Jade, are you ready to be friends with the Reverend now?”

Jade was surprised by the question. "I don't know that we were ever really friends before. Not like I usually think about what friends are. But I certainly don't hate him. I used to think he was real nice."

"Hey!" Jimmy Joe butted in. "You all gotta watch our show on Friday. It's gonna be great!"

The camera and attention were back on Jimmy Joe now. "Can you tell us a little about what's in the show?" Amanda asked.

"Me!" Jimmy Joe replied emphatically and proudly. "I'm in it, and that's more than enough reason for everyone to watch."

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"Did you have to talk to the press again?" Susan asked Jade as she and Jimmy Joe were in Jade's room looking at all the outfits that had been created over the past few months for the fashion show.

"I didn't exactly want to," Jade replied. "They just won't go away unless you talk to them at least a little."

"Hey," Jimmy Joe added. "I thought it was fun. And I'll bet anything I'm on TV again tonight. And this time it won't just be in a commercial."

Jade only rolled her eyes and looked at her mother. Susan shook her head. Jimmy Joe was all too interested in the attention of the cameras.

Susan turned her attention back to the subject at hand. "Okay," she said as she picked up one of the skirts that Jimmy Joe had designed but that Jade had sewn. "We've narrowed it down to these four outfits now. Two skirt outfits and two dresses. The last dress fits fine, except I wish it was big enough to fit me!" She turned to Jimmy Joe. "It really is a beautiful dress!"

Jimmy Joe smiled. "Thanks Mom. I thought it came out pretty good myself."

Susan nodded and picked up the other dress. "This one fits fine too, as does this skirt outfit. I think you may want to let the seams out of the waist band on this other one though. It looked a bit too tight to me, and that's going to show up when Jade models them on Saturday. Now, how about accessories for each of the outfits?"

With Jade trying on each of the four outfits, Jimmy Joe paired each of them with the accessories he had in mind for each one. Susan mostly looked on and wrote down careful detailed notes of each and every item. She only made a few suggestions. This was the kids show. This was what they wanted to show off. And besides, Jimmy Joe did have a remarkable talent for putting outfits together. His tastes were still more than a bit too colorful for Susan, but that was Jimmy Joe.

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That night, once again the McComber family was all over the news, and not just the Little Rock news. As soon as the Little Rock station ran their film on the evening news, they released it to the Associated Press in case any other stations wanted to show Amanda's interviews with the Reverend and the McComber family as well.

In Susan and Clint's house, they all watched the news again. There had been two segments in there about them, one with just the Reverend followed by the brief interview with Jacob, and later they showed the entire interview with Jade and Jimmy Joe.

"When are they going to leave us alone?" Susan complained.

"Hey!" Jimmy Joe exclaimed. "I thought it was great! And I got to be on TV again. I'm a staaarrrrr!" he sang delightedly. Then he looked over at his sister. "The only problem is, they kept showing more of you than me!"

Jade rolled her eyes and got up from her seat to go back to her bedroom again. "I told you before, that's because I'm prettier than you!"

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The bus ride into school on Tuesday morning was a bit more uncomfortable for everyone that day. Not because all the kids were talking about seeing the twins on TV again the night before, but because so many of the girls were loaded down with big bags

containing all the outfits they had chosen for their upcoming fashion show.

Home Ec class that day was very busy. Under Mrs. Marker's direction, the girls all went through a mock practice session for the show. She had each of them, including Jade, put on part of each of their outfits. Then the girls had to walk a select path to model their clothes while Mrs. Marker practiced announcing all about each of the outfits.

The practice session took all of their available time, and they were very rushed to actually get through it all. In the end, Mrs. Marker had to simply make quick notes on each of the girl's last outfits. But when she came to the final dress that Jade would be wearing, her latest one, Mrs. Marker could only pause and stare at it for a moment. It was her first time seeing and evaluating Jade and Jimmy Joe's final outfit. "That didn't come out anything at all like I expected it to," she said, unable to take her eyes off the dress. "It's not much like your brother's original drawing. The basic shape and design are all there. But the fabrics you chose are totally different."

Jade shrugged. "We couldn't find anything like what Jimmy Joe originally wanted, so we decided on these fabrics and colors instead. My Mom thinks it looks elegant."

Mrs. Marker nodded. "Elegant may be exactly the right word. It's...beautiful! Positively beautiful."

Jade could only smile. "I kind of like it too. A lot actually."

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That evening, Mrs. Marker picked up her phone to call a very good friend of hers who was a buyer for the store that was sponsoring the fashion show at the mall. "Hi Lydia. It's Penny. How are you today?"

"Good, I guess," Lydia replied. "It's just been a really hectic day. Are your girls all set for the show on Saturday?"

"Pretty much," Mrs. Marker replied. "I think you're going to be very pleased with what they came up with this year. And one of my girls, well, actually her and her brother, have got one dress that I'd kill to have in my closet!"

"It's that good?" Lydia replied with a small laugh.

"It's definitely that good!" Mrs. Marker replied.

"Wait a minute," Lydia said suddenly. "You said one of your girls and her brother?"

"Yeah. She did most of the sewing and will be modeling the outfits, but he was the one who designed them."

"That's odd. A boy who designs girl's clothes?"

"Yeah, well, in this case, everything about those two is odd. It's the McComber twins. I'm sure you've seen all the ads on TV.

"The McComber twins! They're going to be in the show?"

"Well, one of them. Jade will be modeling. But I have no doubt that Jimmy Joe will be there as well."

"Listen Penny," Lydia said, "with those two in the show, we've got to go about this a little differently."

"Why?"

"Because they're big names now. They're celebrities! People are going to flock to see this thing, just because they're going to be there."

"How would anybody know?"

"Because I'm going to put the word out!"

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Five minutes after Lydia Fromer hung up after talking with Mrs. Marker, she picked up her phone again and called another of her old and very dear friends. "Hi Gloria. It's Lydia. You're never going to believe who's going to be in that little kid's fashion show I told you about that we're hosting."

"Who?" Gloria asked, not really caring in the least.

"The McComber twins they keep talking about on TV."

That got Gloria's attention. "The McComber twins? Both of them?"

"They're both going to be there, but it will be the girl...Jade...that will be in the show. But evidently it was her brother that designed all her clothes. And according to Penny Marker, they've got one dress that's to die for!"

“Listen,” Gloria Bertram said. “I may just drop by for a little while to look in on the show. You never know, I may just find an outfit or two that I can take some inspiration from.”

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On Wednesday afternoon, Clint and Susan again picked their kids up from school. Susan was just glad to see no TV cameras there again. Once again, the trip was made from the school to Doctor Brian McComber’s office. It was time for their next dose of hormones. And this time, no one even thought of asking Jimmy Joe if he was ready to give up hunting yet.

While Tommy waited out in the waiting room, the rest of the family went back to one of the examination rooms. As always, Brian did his usual thorough examination on each of the twins, again noting all the changes that were taking place in their bodies... changes that had only increased in the last month. Each of the kids now looked almost completely as the gender they were trying to portray, with the exception of where their sexual organs were located.

Jimmy Joe particularly noted that Jades tiny little penis looked just as small as ever. He wondered if it ever got any bigger than that as she had seen so many of them do now on the internet. And once again her thoughts ran back to all the fun he had been enjoying from his own increased sex drive, every single morning, and sometimes at night too. He didn’t get to dwell on those thoughts for long though as he was the first to get his latest dose of hormones.

The family was out of there in record time, for what had been done.

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Reverend Cosing sat huddled behind his desk in his home, watching the phone. He could have gone to his office in the church, but for some reason, he didn’t feel that brave. The church board was meeting, and he was now waiting desperately for word of his

fate. He looked up when his wife made an appearance in the doorway.

"I just saw headlights," his wife said. "They're all leaving. Did they call?"

The Reverend was surprised. "Not yet. Not a word."

He got up and went to the window where he could see the church parking lot. He was in time to see the taillights of a car pulling out onto the road and driving away. It had to have been the shortest board meeting in the church's history! All the cars were leaving already...except one. And he recognized which car it was. Not Brian's car, surprisingly. Not the car that belonged to the president of the board, but Rose's car. Jacob McComber's wife!

He now saw Rose walking out of the church, heading in his direction. She must have stayed behind to see if he had been in his office in the church. And now she was heading for his home. The fact that the board had met and left so quickly, didn't bode well.

With his wife close behind him, the Reverend had the door open before Rose even got to the house. He swallowed, then greeted her as she came in. "Rose..."

Rose tried to smile. "Reverend," she returned. She smiled briefly at the Reverend's wife. But this was an official visit, a duty that Brian should have carried out. But the Reverend's wife was somewhat of a friend, and Rose had claimed the duty for herself. Besides, she had other business to handle with them too.

Rose looked at the Reverend. The board meeting had been short. It's only purpose to officially vote on the one subject they had all been on the phone about for much of the afternoon. And now it was time to hand out the verdict.

"Well?" The Reverend said, taking Rose's reluctance to speak as further proof that he was about to lose his job.

Rose smiled at him again. "We want to know if you would be willing to arrange for someone to take your place for a few weeks," she told him.

"Someone to..." The Reverend felt his knees going weak. He heard his wife suck in her breath at the way the announcement had been put. He lowered his head to the floor. "Yes, of course. I have

a friend who I know would be happy to fill in. I'll call him." He looked up at Rose. "How long do we have?"

"We won't need him for two more weeks," Rose said more animatedly as she started digging into her handbag. She extracted a large envelope. "That's when your Caribbean cruise departs."

The Reverend's jaw hung open for a moment as he stared at Rose. "Caribbean cruise?"

"The board has been discussing this on the phone for most of the afternoon. And once we realized we were all in agreement, Jacob asked me to rebook that cruise you've always wanted. Unfortunately, it leaves in two weeks, and we figured we're going to need someone to take your place for about two weeks while you're on vacation."

"Vacation? The Cruise?" The Reverend's wife gasped.

The Reverend and his wife grasped hands. "I'm not being fired?" the Reverend asked.

"No. You're going on a cruise. I do seem to remember someone saying you always wanted to go to the Caribbean."

Chapter 71 – Talk About Problems

May 7th

The twins and Tommy were absent from school on Thursday, and Clint wasn't at work either. On the day before their TV special was scheduled to be aired, the family was making the long drive into Little Rock. They left fairly early in the morning, and they expected to get back fairly late that night. They were only going because Brian had urged them all to go. And he had only urged them, because Doctor Hapkins had thought that it would be a very good idea for her to talk with all of them before their big TV show came out.

They arrived in Little Rock right at lunchtime. Doctor Hapkins had cleared her schedule and had blocked the entire afternoon to talk with them. But they weren't supposed to see her until after lunch. Needing to eat anyway, Clint pulled his truck into a family restaurant that was right near the highway. As with most places they had passed, this one appeared to be crowded.

Inside the restaurant, they stood in a short line, waiting for someone to take them to a table. While they were waiting, one of the women in front of them turned around, just to see who was behind her. She smiled at Susan and Clint, then her gaze automatically passed through Tommy, Jade and Jimmy Joe. She started to turn back around again, but something suddenly registered in her mind. She turned back to stare at Jade and Jimmy Joe. "Oh my God!" she exclaimed as she brought her hand up to her mouth. "You're the McComber twins!" She looked up at Susan and Clint. "And you're they're parents."

Everyone who heard was suddenly looking at them. Clint held up his hand. "We just want to get some lunch," he said calmly.

"They are!" Another man said as he came from further up in the line for a better look. He held his hand out to Clint. "Can I shake your hand?"

Uncertainly, Clint shook the man's hand.

"They're darling kids. Both of them!" Another woman said as she gazed at the two twins.

Jade was starting to feel very uncomfortable the way everyone was suddenly crowding all around them.

"Maybe we better go somewhere else." Susan said to Clint...just as Jimmy Joe took a step forward.

Jimmy smiled broadly. "Hey, ho!" he said. "I'm Jimmy Joe! And we're gonna be on TV tomorrow night. And you all gotta watch it!"

"Jimmy! Stop that!" Clint said. "Come on. Let's get out of here and find somewhere else."

"Don't go!" Another man said quickly as he hurried up.

Clint turned to look at him. By his clothes and the badge on his shirt, Clint saw that he was the restaurant's manager. "We just want to eat in peace," Clint told him. "We didn't want any publicity."

The manager shook his head. "We'll find you a table right away. Just stay. We're really honored to have you here."

"Honored?" Clint said as he looked around uncertainly. "Okay," he finally decided. "I just hope we can get good service so we won't be stuck here too long."

"I'll make sure of it!" the manager replied. He looked to one of his waitresses. "Find them a table, right away! Somewhere in the back section if you can!" He turned to Clint while the waitress was pulling menus. "Right this way please."

"Well at least we didn't have to wait very long for a table," Susan whispered.

All through the restaurant, heads were turning to look at them. Jimmy Joe stopped a moment to slap hands with one of the boys who had noticed them. Tommy shoved Jimmy Joe to keep him moving with the rest of the family.

The table they were shown to was still dirty from the last occupants, but it was only a moment before several of the staff were there to clean it. And under the manager's direction, they cleaned it better than it probably had been cleaned all day. The family sat down and they were each handed menus, and the waitress immediately asked what drinks they all wanted.

As soon as the waitress had left, the family all looked around at each other. "This is weird," Susan said softly.

"Really weird!" Jade agreed.

"I think it's great!" Jimmy Joe exclaimed.

"You would! You moron." Jade replied.

Jimmy Joe smiled at his sister. "Sissy!"

Jade only rolled her eyes.

With the manager standing where he could constantly watch their table, their service was perhaps better than anyone had ever gotten in that restaurant. The moment he thought they were ready to order, he had their waitress there to find out what they wanted, and then he himself went back to the kitchen to make sure their order got top priority and was prepared ahead of all the others.

No one in the family knew what to think about the way things seemed to be in that restaurant. The strangeness of the situation was simply too much. All around them, they could still see people looking at them...watching them. "This is very...uncomfortable," Susan noted.

"I think it's great!" Jimmy Joe said with another broad smile.

"You would!" Tommy replied.

Their brief conversation was suddenly interrupted as two girls walked up to the table...right to Jade. "Can we have your autograph?" one of them asked as she held one of the restaurant's paper napkins and a pen out toward Jade.

Jade's mouth dropped open. "You want...my autograph?"

"Please?" the girl asked hopefully.

Jade looked to her mother. "What do I do?"

Susan shook her head. "I guess...sign it."

Jade looked at the girl, and took the napkin and pen from her. Very carefully, in her best feminine handwriting, she wrote "Jade McComber" on the napkin. Then she handed it back to the girl, and accepted the napkin and pen from the other girl.

"Hey," Jimmy Joe said. "How about me. Don't you want my autograph too?"

"Oh yeah! Of course," the first girl said as she hurried over to Jimmy Joe and handed him the napkin. Jimmy Joe set the napkin

on the table and printed, "Hey Ho, I'm," and then he signed, "Jimmy Joe."

"Cool!" the girl said with a giggle as she took the napkin back and looked at it. While Jimmy Joe was signing the other napkin the same way, two more kids came over to their table to get autographs. Before they left, three adults came from further away to try to get some pictures too.

"Is this alright?" the manager was suddenly there asking, his voice full of concern after coming from the kitchen and seeing the family bothered by the restaurant's other guests.

"This is great!" Jimmy Joe replied before his father could complain about anything.

"I guess it will have to be," Clint told the manager, slightly frustrated.

"Your orders should be up very soon," the manager told Clint.

"Thank you," Clint told him as he noticed Jimmy Joe standing up to have his picture taken with one of the people who were there. He was about to put a stop to it, when he felt Susan's hand on his arm. "Let him be," Susan said. "He wanted to be famous. I guess now he is."

"But it's darn disturbing to the rest of us!" Clint replied.

Susan could only nod. She already knew how famous her family had to be. They had been all over the TV far too much for them not to be. It was something of a disturbing thought. She didn't want to be famous. She only wanted her nice quiet life again. She couldn't wait to get home now and back to that life where she was now making plans to shut the rest of the world out of her life – permanently.

When they finished eating, Clint asked for the check so he could pay the bill, but again the manager was there right away. "No charge today," he told them with a broad smile.

"But that's not right!" Clint replied. "And don't worry, we've got plenty of money."

But the manager only shook his head. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to this restaurant." He paused a moment then added. "There is one thing though. Would you permit me to have my picture taken with your family?"

"You want a picture too? With all of us?" Clint asked. "Or just the twins?"

"All of you of course," the manager said proudly. "We're going to frame it and put a big copy of it up on the wall."

"Why?" Clint asked.

"Because you're celebrities! You're famous. The most famous people who've ever eaten here!"

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If it wasn't for the explicit directions that Brian had written out for them, they would have had a difficult time finding Doctor Hapkins' office. But thankfully, Brian had given them good directions, and had even recommended the best place to park. After the busy lunch they had been through, riding up in the silent elevator was almost a calming experience.

The doctor's outer office wasn't large and there was only a short couch and two fairly comfortable chairs there for anyone who was waiting. There was also a receptionist at her desk who handled the calls for both Doctor Hapkins and another psychiatrist who shared the office space with her.

The receptionist smiled as she saw the family come in. She recognized them immediately from everything she had seen on TV. "Doctor!" she called, loud enough that Cynthia could hear her through the open door to her private office.

Cynthia hurried out to the waiting area to see the family. She greeted all of them, giving Susan a quick hug in the process. "And how are you all?" she asked as she finally stepped back a bit.

"I don't know," Susan replied.

"I think we're all a bit bewildered," Clint added.

The doctor looked concerned. "Why?"

But it was Tommy who answered. "We just had the craziest lunch – ever!"

"Lunch?" Cynthia asked. "What did you have?"

"It wasn't what we had, but what happened," Clint replied.

"The people!" Susan said. "They recognized us and kept coming around to have their pictures taken with us."

“And I got to sign my first autographs!” Jimmy Joe said proudly.

Cynthia looked around at all of them. Then her gaze fell on Jade who had remained silent. Jade was the one who was most opposed to all the publicity. “And how about you?” she said. “What did you think?”

“It was...weird!” Jade replied.

“But you’re okay?” she asked.

Jade nodded. “Yeah. Sure. It was no big deal. Just...weird.”

Cynthia nodded, then looked around at all of them. She now had more to talk about with each of them. “Maybe we better get started,” she said. She looked to Susan and Clint. “Let’s start with you two.” She turned to the kids. “Why don’t the rest of you sit out here. If you want anything, drinks or snacks or something, just tell our receptionist and she’ll be glad to get it for you. Okay?”

The kids said nothing, so Cynthia led Susan and Clint into her office, and closed the door behind them.

“Well,” Cynthia said as Clint and Susan took the two seats in front of her desk and she sat down behind it, “you certainly surprised me. Autographs and pictures with strangers? It sounds like you’ve come a long way since last week.”

“Not by choice!” Clint replied. “And I’d much rather none of it ever happened.”

“But you still permitted it.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Clint started. “But...”

“But...it just seemed to happen,” Susan finished.

Cynthia turned her attention on Susan. “And you Susan, how did you feel about the attention?”

“You mean the pictures and the autographs? Mostly they were directed at the kids. The twins. Jimmy Joe was eating the attention up.”

Cynthia smiled. “But how about you and Clint? Did you sign autographs and have your pictures taken with your fans?”

“Fans?” Clint repeated.

“Fans!” Cynthia insisted.

“We did...some,” Susan replied. “In fact, I was quite surprised that anyone was interested in us.”

“Did you feel...disappointed,” Cynthia asked, “that the twins got more attention than you?”

Clint’s eyes went wide with that and Susan showed equal surprise. “No! Absolutely not.”

“Definitely not!” Clint agreed. “I just wanted everyone to go away. Leave us alone.”

“But you allowed the people to still take pictures with you.”

It was a moment before both of them nodded. “Pretty much,” Susan agreed.

“And how were the twins taking it?” Cynthia asked. “I’m sure Jimmy Joe was in heaven.”

Susan rolled her eyes. “He said he wanted to be a star. I guess he got his wish.”

“And Jade?”

Susan took a deep breath before speaking. “Jade certainly wasn’t as...outgoing as Jimmy Joe was, but she did fine. In fact, the first kids that came to the table for autographs went straight to her first. She really had no idea what to do.”

“And what happened?”

“When she asked what she should do, I told her to sign the napkins that the kids had brought over.”

“And how about Tommy?” Cynthia asked. “Did he get any attention from the people?”

Clint and Susan looked at each other uncertainly.

“Some,” Susan replied. “Certainly not as much as the twins.”

“That would be understandable,” Cynthia replied. “But did he seem to be put off that he wasn’t getting as much attention?”

“No,” Clint replied. “I think he was more like the rest of us. In truth, none of us knew what to make of the situation.”

Cynthia considered that for a moment. “So all in all, you’ve come a long way. Last week you were still bound and determined that after this TV show comes out tomorrow night, you wanted all the publicity and attention to go away forever! But now, pictures with your fans. And autographs too. That’s a big change.”

“We still want it all to go away – forever!” Clint told her.

“Absolutely!” Susan agreed. “What I really want now, is to just go home, back to our nice quiet life, and find some way to keep the

entire world out of it.”

Cynthia took that in, and nodded. “Very understandable,” she said. She posed another thought. “Don’t you think other celebrities want the same thing once in a while? Some of them have to go to great lengths sometimes just to enjoy a relatively normal life.”

“We don’t want to be celebrities!” Clint replied.

Susan shook her head. “We didn’t ask for any of this.”

“And yet, you’ve got it. Like it or not,” Cynthia told them. She leaned forward. “But as I said, it looks like you’ve come a long way since last week. I even saw Jade giving that interview for Little Rock news on TV earlier in the week. She just stood there answering questions like a pro. And when Jimmy Joe got into the act, well, let’s just say that I’ve revised some of my opinions about how much he really does seem to want all this attention.”

“So what do we do about it?” Susan asked.

Cynthia was surprised. “What do you do? Just what you are doing. The publicity and notoriety won’t last forever. It will be gone before you know it.”

“We can only hope!” Clint replied. Susan nodded her agreement.

“But you might as well embrace it and try to enjoy it as best as you can while you’ve got the chance, like it or not,” Cynthia told them. “Because otherwise, in the future, you’ll forever be wondering what might have been, what wonderful things you might have been able to experience, if you had just held on and took what you could get from it. Especially for your kids...especially for the twins.”

Clint and Susan only looked at her uncertainly.

“Think about it,” Cynthia told them. “You’re doing great as far as I can see. Both of you. And unless you see any signs that it’s really disturbing the kids, then let them have their fame for a little while. Someday, they can each look back at all this and say, once upon a time, I was famous! I had the whole world looking at me.”

Cynthia leaned back in her chair and swiveled it back and forth a bit while Susan and Clint took that advice in. Then she got down to the business she had originally planned on talking with them about. “Susan,” she said. “You’ve been pretty much forced to accept that

you're something of a celebrity, whether you consider yourself one or not."

"I *don't* consider myself a celebrity!" Susan replied. "I'm not in the movies or on TV."

"But you *are* on TV," Cynthia countered. "All over it in fact, from what little I've seen."

"Doesn't mean we want to be," Clint replied.

"No, as I said, like it or not, you have become celebrities." She turned her attention back to Susan again. "But Susan, you've come a long way since last week in accepting that fact, like it or not. But how about accepting who your kids have become. Are you doing any better with that?"

Susan stared at the doctor for a few moments before answering. "Brian told us that you figured out about some of what really happened. And he said he told you the real truth."

"None of which matters a bit!" Cynthia countered quickly. "None of that matters one little bit, because no matter how it started in the first place, the reality of the situation you've got now is exactly what you're telling the world. And that's what we've got to deal with. So how are you feeling now about the fact that your son is now your daughter, and your daughter is now your son?"

"We're hoping that's not really the case," Clint told her. "You now know what the real truth is. We're just...stuck now in the middle of a situation we can't seem to find our way out of."

"But Clint," Cynthia said, "are you really sure that it's not *exactly* the case? Are you really sure that Jade doesn't want to stay Jade, and Jimmy Joe doesn't want to stay a boy? Are you really sure?"

Clint and Susan looked at each other uncertainly. "Let's just say," he replied, "that we're hoping it's not the case."

Cynthia sat back again. "And yet it appears, like it or not, that that's exactly what really has happened." She leaned forward again. "I've been studying people for years. I've gotten pretty good at it. And from everything I'm seeing, what you're hoping will all go away eventually – won't! From everything I'm seeing, those kids aren't pretending anymore. Whether they know it or not, they've cemented themselves into those roles, and I have no doubt in the world that each of them wants to stay there."

She paused for a moment and her voice softened. "They've each been given more than a little taste of the other side. And for whatever reasons, they've both decided that the grass really is greener on the other side of the fence. From everything I've seen, they've both changed pastures. Whether they're conscious of that change yet or not, I have serious doubts that either of them will ever want to change back again. And even if you try to force them, I think things have gone too far now, especially with Jade. They'll never be able to do it. Changing back now, especially if it's forced, will most likely all but kill them. Maybe...literally." She shrugged a bit. "At least as far as Jade is concerned. I'm pretty sure that Jimmy Joe has reached that point too, but there are still a few things I can't get to the bottom of with him. But as I said, I'm pretty sure that both those twins are now...who they want to be."

Cynthia looked from Clint to Susan, and back again, giving them time to take that in. "So..." she said. "Back to my original question. How do you feel about your son now being your daughter, and your daughter now being your son?"

Susan looked down into her lap as the emotions and frustration over the situation flooded back to her. "I'm still...I still..." She shook her head. "I still hate it! I still want them back the way they should be!"

"But maybe now, the way they are, the way I think that they both want to be, is the way they should be."

"How can you say that?" Clint asked. "How can anyone possibly say that?"

"But it's true, isn't it?" Cynthia said. "How many times have I been told, not just by you two, but by your entire family, that Jade is so much happier than she used to be. How many times has the entire family said that? And Jimmy Joe...yeah, maybe he didn't really want to give up being a girl...at first. And I have no doubt that somewhere in the back of his mind, he may wonder if he still wants it. But right now, he's jumped into his new life with both feet, and whether he really believes it or not, I think he's truly found himself. Not *herself*. *Himself*!"

Clint and Susan looked at each other for a moment, and once again the tears started falling from Susan's eyes. "Where did I go

wrong?" she breathed. "What did I do that was so wrong?"

Clint reached out and grabbed his wife's hand. "Me too," he said. "Was it something I did...or didn't do?"

Cynthia let them be for a moment before she spoke. "You both know it had nothing at all to do with either of you. Nothing at all. You both know the real truth of this, no matter what things look like now. You both know it was Jasmine who initiated things. Not you. It had nothing to do with anything that either of you did or didn't do, or anything that anyone in your family did. So even though you continue to blame yourself, you really shouldn't. There's no reason for you to blame yourself."

"So we have to blame Jasmine?" Clint asked.

Cynthia shrugged. "Maybe a little." She leaned forward. "But the truth as I see it is that what Jasmine did, only acted to show both those twins...and in truth, your entire family...just what each of those twins *could* be. Or actually who each of those twins *should* be. Because from everything I'm seeing, they both are now better off than they were. Both of them...and especially Jade!"

Susan was still trying to take everything in. "But I don't want that," she said softly.

"I know," Cynthia replied, just as softly.

"What are we supposed to do?" Susan asked.

"You may be stuck doing the only thing you can do."

"What?"

"Love them...and support them."

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Tommy sat in the chair in front of the Doctor's desk and stared uncertainly at her. And the Doctor was just looking at him as if she was waiting for something. "What did you want?" he finally asked.

Cynthia smiled. "Lots of things," she replied. She had waited until he spoke first. With some people, it helped to get them to open up and talk more.

"Like what?" Tommy asked after the Doctor wasn't more forthcoming.

"Like...how are the kids at school treating you now, now that your brother and sister are all over the TV?"

"Huh? Are you kidding? You should see the way everyone keeps coming to me, telling me they've seen Jade or Jimmy Joe on TV again. And they all keep asking how all the TV production stuff went and how it was all done. Everyone really seems to be interested in that."

Cynthia nodded. "I can imagine. But Tommy," she said as she leaned forward, "Jimmy Joe and Jade have become somewhat famous. Celebrities. For now at least. But you've been left kind of just hanging onto the edges. How does that make you feel? Don't you feel...left out? Don't you feel...angry or disappointed because all the attention is on them and not on you? And while we're at it, how about all the attention they're getting from both your mother and father, and from your whole family for that matter. Those two twins are getting all the attention from everyone, and what are you left with?"

"Huh?" Tommy grunted as he took a moment to take all that in. "I never thought about it."

"Aren't you jealous? Even just a little?"

"Heck no!" Tommy replied quickly. "And my Mom and Dad are pretty much the same as they've always been with me. In fact, maybe me and Dad are even closer now."

Cynthia was surprised by that. "How so?" she asked.

"Well," Tommy said, trying to figure out what to say, "I think he talks to me now more than he used to. And sometimes I think we spend more time together doing stuff than we used to."

"He talks to you more? About what?"

"All kinds of stuff. A lot of guy stuff I guess." He thought about something else. "I guess he talks to me about the twins sometimes too. And how worried he is about them."

"And how about your mother?" Cynthia asked.

Tommy shrugged. "I don't know. We've never really talked that much...me and her. At least, not in a real long time."

"So the bottom line is, you're not feeling left out by your parents at all."

"No," Tommy replied. "Not that I can see."

Cynthia nodded. "That's good, Tommy. Very good. So how about the other stuff. Are you jealous of the twins for all the publicity they're getting? They're somewhat famous now, and you're not."

"I don't think I am," Tommy replied. "I never really thought about it."

Cynthia only nodded, then she leaned forward again. "Tommy, the last time you and I really spoke, you told me about how you were always watching out for the twins. You sounded more like their protector than anything else. How do you feel now about them? Do you still feel like they need someone looking out for them like you do?"

Tommy considered that question for a few moments. Finally he answered. "Yeah," he said. "Maybe now more than ever."

"And why is that?"

Tommy shook his head. "I don't know. A few reasons I guess. Like you said, they're both sort of famous right now. And let me tell you, that in itself is pretty weird!"

"That's why I asked you about it a few minutes ago."

Tommy nodded. "But like I said, they're both sort of famous, and the TV and news people keep hounding them."

"So you feel like you need to protect them from the press?"

Tommy shrugged again. "Not really. In fact I think they've both gotten pretty good at standing in front of the cameras and answering all the questions. But like...Jimmy Joe, he's eatin' all the TV and press stuff up. Says he wants to be a star. It's like someone has to watch out that he doesn't go too far."

"And have you been watching out for him that way? Have you...rescued him from the press at all?"

Tommy shook his head. "Not yet. And the last time, at the school, when those TV people just showed up. I didn't even know about it until it was almost over."

"And yet, from what I saw, they both handled themselves in front of the cameras pretty well," Cynthia said.

"I guess," Tommy replied. "Like I said, I think they've both gotten pretty good at it. They're more used to it, I guess."

"But you're still worried about Jimmy Joe and the news people," Cynthia said. "And how about Jade?"

Tommy looked at her for a moment before answering. "Jade still has nightmares."

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"Hey Ho..." Cynthia said with a big smile on her face as Jimmy Joe walked into her room. "It's Jimmy Joe."

Jimmy's face immediately brightened as he walked into the Doctor's office. "That's me!" he replied happily.

"Close the door before you sit down. Will you?" Cynthia said to him. She waited until the door was closed and he was sitting in front of her. Then she just sat and watched him for a few moments to see how he would act.

"Um..." Jimmy Joe finally said. "What do we have to talk about?" Then he quickly added. "'Cause I don't remember any of what you said you wanted to talk about from last time."

Cynthia smiled. "I didn't figure you would."

"Then I guess you want to talk about all the people wanting to take pictures with me and getting my autograph, like we were talking about when we got here."

"Nope," Cynthia replied. "I thought we'd talk about sex instead."

"Huh?"

Cynthia stared at him for a moment, then said, "Did they tell you that I know all about how this really started? About the way you conned your brother into your list of demands so that you could go hunting instead of him? Did they tell you that I know all about it now?"

Jimmy's jaw dropped. "You do?"

Cynthia nodded. "Yes! I put most of it together on my own, but your Uncle Brian finally filled me in on all the rest when I asked him about it."

"And he told you?"

Cynthia nodded again.

"Gee!"

Cynthia leaned forward. "So tell me, why do you have it in so bad for your brother?"

"Huh? I don't."

"Yes you do. Or at least you did. And judging by some of the things I keep hearing about you, I'm guessing you still do. At least somewhat."

"Says who?"

"Says me!" Cynthia replied sternly. "So why do you hate her so much. Or I guess, more importantly, why *did* you hate her so much when all this started?"

"I didn't."

"Yes you did."

"No I didn't. I just..."

"What?"

"I just..."

Cynthia waited.

"The stupid sissy!" Jimmy Joe finally blurted out. "He was so afraid of the dumbest things. And I mean really stupid things. He actually thought all those stupid dead ducks on his wall were out to get him. And there were other things too. Do you know how afraid he is to go out into the woods? He's terrified! And I love it out there. He wouldn't shoot anything because he was too afraid, and I wanted to go hunting so bad it was killing me. I've always wanted that. But he didn't want it. The dumb sissy!"

"So when Thanksgiving came and he didn't want to go hunting, you saw your chance and you took it."

"Yeah. Exactly!"

"And in the process, you went way out of your way to humiliate him."

"Um..."

"Didn't you!"

"Um...maybe."

Cynthia shook her head. "It's okay," she said. "Like I said before, I'm not here to judge. Now we've just got to figure out what the damage is and how we're going to deal with it."

"Damage?"

"Wouldn't you call your brother, no longer being himself, but sort of you instead, damage? And how about yourself. You're not a girl anymore. At least, not to the outside world. I'm not totally sure how you see yourself on the inside anymore. Isn't that damage?"

"Um...I guess," Jimmy Joe replied uncertainly.

"So...why did you hate him so much?"

"I already told you. I didn't!"

"But you still punished him that badly."

"Um..." But Jimmy Joe couldn't answer that.

"I'm sorry," Cynthia said, sitting back. "Like I said, I wasn't trying to judge. I'm just trying to prevent more problems in the future, as well as deal with all the problems you have now."

"Problems? I don't have any problems."

"You don't?"

"No. Why would I?"

Cynthia thought about things for a moment. Jimmy Joe had always been the biggest puzzle to her. "Let's go back to when this all first started. No, let's go back *before* that. Back to before any of this ever happened. How badly did you want to be a boy back then? Really!"

Jimmy Joe stared at her for a moment. "I didn't. Not really. Not back then."

"Are you sure? Because I'm betting that you did."

Jimmy Joe thought about it. "Well, maybe a little. But, I mean, the guys could go off and go hunting and I couldn't. And they got to shoot the guns a lot more than they let me. And do you have any idea how much I love doing that? They got to do all the good stuff, and I couldn't!"

"So you did want to be a boy back then."

"Well, maybe. Sometimes. A little. But not really."

Cynthia nodded. "And yet you decided that dressing your brother as a girl all the time would be an appropriate punishment for him."

"Punishment? I wasn't punishing him."

"Weren't you?"

"Well...maybe. Maybe a little."

"Maybe a lot!"

"So what of it?"

"Nothing. Just wondering. Just trying to get to the bottom of things. Like I said, I'm not here to judge. I'm just trying to get the facts straight."

"So...what now?" Jimmy Joe asked.

"Now? Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. Instead, you tell me how bad you still want breasts like all the rest of the girls."

"Huh?"

"Breasts," Cynthia said again. "We discussed this once before and you came up with a cockamamie answer that was half-truth and half made up junk!"

"How do you know?"

Cynthia looked skeptically at the 'boy.' "Don't you think I can tell the difference?"

Jimmy Joe just stared at her.

Cynthia leaned forward and lowered her voice. Very softly she asked. "So how bad is it really? How bad do you still want breasts like all your girlfriends?"

Jimmy Joe shook his head. "I don't know. I mean...that's just it. I used to want them real bad. I mean, really bad. But now. I don't know. To be honest, I don't think I want them at all anymore. In fact, I don't. I really don't. Absolutely not."

"You're sure?"

Jimmy hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah. I think I am. I mean. Do you have any idea how great it is to be a boy? To be able to do all the things I can now? To be treated the way everyone treats me now? It's like...it's like...power! That's as close as I can come. And I'm not just talking about how strong I am now, which is pretty great too, but...I don't know, it's all just...like power!"

"In other words, it feels pretty good to you."

"Yeah! Really! Really good."

Cynthia nodded, somewhat sorrowfully, but she nodded. It was all too much like she suspected. She sat back and stared at him for a moment, trying to decide where to go from here. She decided maybe she better get back to what she originally wanted to discuss with him. "So tell me," she finally said, "how do you feel about going through life as a boy, and knowing you'll never have a penis like the rest of the boys have? Not a real one at least."

"Huh?" Jimmy Joe grunted. "Man you bounce around a lot!"

Cynthia smiled and shrugged. "Sometimes it seems that way. "So how about it? Let's talk sex. How do you feel about being a boy, but you won't have a penis like all the rest of the boys have?"

Jimmy didn't answer.

"Do you ever think about it?" Cynthia asked.

"Maybe," Jimmy replied softly. "Sometimes."

"And what do you think about that?"

Jimmy looked at her for a moment. "I read, I think in a few places, where they've got this operation now for guys like me. So they really can have a penis down there. And they can pee out of it and have sex with it and everything."

Cynthia nodded. "Yes. Actually, that's been available for a while now."

"Then why can't I get an operation like that? Then I'll be like all the rest of the guys. Or...at least, pretty close."

Cynthia nodded again. "No reason in the world why you can't. But how about before that?"

Jimmy looked at her like she had to be crazy. "I'm not planning on going out and having sex with some girl! Besides, I'm only twelve!"

Cynthia came close to chuckling. "No, I'm sure you're not. But I'm just wondering how you feel about things. You didn't tell me you had been looking at information on that kind of operation."

"Well, wouldn't you?"

"I guess maybe I would. But does that mean you'd like to date some of the girls you know? Are you interested in them at all? Do they make you feel...sexy?"

"Me?"

"You're the one I'm talking to."

"I'm only twelve."

"And plenty old enough to have those kinds of feelings about someone else. Especially with all that testosterone beefing up your system." Cynthia saw him blush.

"I...haven't really thought about it," he said. "But...I don't...I don't think...I dream about girls."

Cynthia nodded. "When you dream, do you dream you're a girl, or a boy?"

"Now?"

Cynthia nodded.

"Um..."

Cynthia could tell he was embarrassed by the question.

"I don't know. I don't usually remember anything at all about what I dream."

"Probably not," Cynthia agreed. "But...maybe not when you're dreaming. How about when you're, shall we say, lying there alone in your bed, and you start getting all these sexy feelings down there, and you start playing with yourself. And..."

"Huh?" Jimmy Joe was shocked that she would talk about something like that.

"Well, don't you?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you!"

Jimmy Joe stared at her, not knowing what to say.

"Are you human?"

"Yeah."

"Then you've got to have those feelings. Especially with the hormones you're on. There's nothing wrong with it at all. So...what do you dream about at those times?"

"Um... Are you sure you need to know? 'Cause it's kind of... private."

"Of course it is. And I'm not here to judge you for it. And yes, I do need to know."

Jimmy still looked at her uncertainly for a moment. "Well, I don't really know exactly. Sometimes I guess I usually think about guys. But other times. Kind of lately." He stopped there and didn't say anything else.

"Lately?" Cynthia prompted. When there was still no reply, she softly asked. "Are you starting to wonder what it's like to make love to a girl?"

"Not make love to a girl!" Jimmy said quickly. "At least, I don't think that's what I mean. But just...you know...hold her, and maybe...kiss her. You know? I don't know what it would be like with a girl. I just...wonder about it sometimes. You know?"

"In other words," Cynthia said, "you're starting to wonder what it might be like to be a boy, and have a girlfriend."

"Um...so what if I do?"

"So...nothing. So...that's perfectly okay. In fact, it's absolutely normal!"

"So like I passed a test or something?"

"There's no test," Cynthia told him. "We're all different. You, me, Jade, your family. We're all different. We all have different likes and wants."

Jimmy Joe looked at her uncertainly. "So...what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Nothing. Enjoy yourself."

"So why did you ask?"

"Why? Because you're changing. And this is one of the things I can use to see how much. And as far as I can see, you're still perfectly healthy."

"I am?"

"Sure, why not?"

"I don't know. Why else would you be asking stuff like that?"

"Like I said, getting to know you better. I'm just trying to figure out how much you might still want to be a girl."

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Cynthia watched Jade sitting across from her. The differences between her and her brother were striking. Jade just sat there looking uncertain, and even after waiting more than a few moments, she still hadn't said a single word. "I saw you on TV again this week," Cynthia finally said. She saw Jade roll her eyes, a major habit Cynthia had noticed. Did she do that when she had been a boy?

"I'm always on TV lately," Jade told her.

Cynthia nodded. "I saw the interview they did with you out in front of the school. You looked pretty good."

"I did? 'Cause I didn't wear anything really nice to school that day. Maybe I should from now on."

Cynthia smiled. "Spoken like a true girl! But that's not what I meant. I meant, you handled yourself like a pro. You answered all her questions like you had done that kind of thing for a long time."

"I did?"

"Quite well, I thought."

"Well, I guess after spending an entire week with TV cameras shoved right in my face, I guess I got more used to it."

Cynthia nodded. "I guess you would. You certainly didn't look scared, or even nervous."

"I don't think I was. The only thing I remember is that I couldn't believe they had shown up – again! It's like there's no stopping them! I was kind of mad at them for being there, but I tried not to let it show."

"I didn't notice that you were angry at all. So despite being angry at them, you decided to let them talk to you."

"Well, shouldn't I?"

"That would be up to you, I would think."

"Well, like I said, after a whole week of cameras in my face."

"But aren't you the one who doesn't want the publicity? Aren't you the one who doesn't want to be on TV?"

"I don't! I still don't! Why can't they all just leave me alone?"

"Because you're still big news. Maybe even bigger news right now since that Reverend from your church was all over the TV, and you were standing there right with him. So now I'm betting that even more people will tune in to watch your program." No surprise to Cynthia, Jade rolled her eyes again. "So why did you talk to them?"

"I don't know. I guess...I just did."

"And how do you feel about all this publicity now?"

Jade shrugged. "It's still a pain. I still wish they all would just go away and leave me alone."

Cynthia nodded. "That's not quite what I meant."

"What then?"

"Jade, do you remember what I asked you to think about the last time we talked."

"You mean back while they were still filming everything?"

"Yes."

"You wanted me to think about why it should matter if anyone knows I'm really a boy, but they still treat me like a girl."

Cynthia nodded. "Pretty much. And did you think about it?"

"Lots!"

"You did? And what did you decide?"

"Decide? I don't think I really decided anything."

"But you thought about it."

"Like I said, lots!"

"So what do you think?"

"About that?"

"Of course."

"Well. I don't know. I guess now, with everything that keeps happening..."

"What do you mean, everything that keeps happening?"

"You know. All the TV filming. And then there was that time in church with Reverend Cosinger. And then the TV people again at the school. It just never seems to stop!"

"Okay, so what about it all?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just getting more used to it so it doesn't matter so much. But..."

"But what?"

"But...I guess it all depends on how they treat me. Like I've been saying, all I want is for everyone to treat me like a girl."

Cynthia nodded, then leaned forward. "Jade, did they tell you I know all about how this really got started? Did they tell you I know now about your sister's list of demands for you when you didn't want to go hunting on Thanksgiving Day and she went instead?"

Jade's reaction to that was even more exaggerated than Jimmy's reaction had been when Cynthia had told him. Jade's jaw worked a few times before she was able to get any words out. "H...h...how did you find out?"

"I guessed some of it. But when I asked your Uncle Brian about it, he told me everything."

"Everything?"

"Everything! Including about the two notes you two cooked up."

Jade felt sick. "So now I'm in serious trouble? Jimmy and me both?"

"No. No trouble at all. I'm the only one outside your family that knows what really happened. And to tell the truth, not one bit of that matters in the least. None of it. Besides, I'm your therapist. By law I can't tell anyone what you tell me, unless you say I can."

"Well don't tell anyone else!"

Cynthia chuckled. "Don't worry, I won't."

"God! I can't believe it!"

"So now that we're both on the same page, tell me, do you really want to be a girl, or are you just going along with everything because you have to?"

Jade blinked a few times, her agitation over the issue was evident. She suddenly got up from her chair and walked first this way, then that, as if she didn't know what to do.

"So the answer is no. You don't really want to be a girl at all. You're just stuck saying that to everyone?"

Jade turned to face her. "No!" she said, her voice full of the frustration she was feeling. "That's just it! I don't know what I want!"

"You don't?"

Jade stood there looking at her, unsure what to say.

"Come sit down and let's talk about this," Cynthia suggested. "Maybe between the two of us we can figure it out."

Skeptically, Jade went back to her chair. She sat, but she said nothing.

When it looked to Cynthia like Jade wasn't going to start the discussion, she took the reins and jumped in. "You act pretty well," she noted.

"Do I?"

Cynthia nodded, but Jade's short reply had been a very telling one. "Pretty darn well," she commented. "Nobody would ever know. So how bad do you still want to be a boy?"

Jade's head moved just slightly, but her eyes never once moved from Cynthia's.

"You're allowed to tell me," Cynthia said. "Do you want to go back to being a boy really bad? Or do you want to stay a girl like what you're telling the rest of the world?"

Again, no answer. Not even any movement. Just that same troubled look on her face.

"Jade. Do you want to be a boy? Or do you want to be a girl?"

Still there was no answer. No movement.

"Jade?"

Jade continued to stare at her for a moment before she finally spoke. "Will you tell anyone?"

"No. I told you I can't."

"Not like that! I mean...like my Mom and Dad."

"You don't want them to know?"

"And if I don't?"

Cynthia shrugged. "That's up to you. Why don't you want your mother and father to know?"

"Because I don't!"

Cynthia nodded again as she considered that. "Okay," she finally said. "Scout's honor. I won't tell anyone. Not even your mother and father...which I wouldn't have done anyway. So what's the answer? How bad do you still want to be a boy?"

"You won't tell?"

"I said I won't." She watched as Jade seemed to consider that. "Jade?"

Jade's head moved, but only slightly. "The truth?"

"That would be best. Without that we're going nowhere. Jade, somethings got you awfully panicked over this answer. What is it?" It was a moment before Jade answered, but then Cynthia had been expecting that it would.

"It's not right," Jade finally said.

"What's not right?"

"If...what I want."

"And what do you want?"

"Everyone says that once Jimmy Joe finally decides to quit hunting, then all this is over with. That was what they said. That's what they're still saying."

"Who's they? Your mother and father, or the entire family?"

"Everyone!"

"Okay."

"But what about me? When this all started, I was supposed to have gone out and killed something too. But I can't! I absolutely

can't! Even my grandpa keeps trying to get me to go hunting, and I can't tell you how sick it made me."

"Okay," Cynthia said softly. "So you can't kill anything. That's not the end of the world."

"It is in our family. At least for the guys."

"But that's not the question I'm asking, is it? Jade, do you want to be a boy or a girl? And why is it you don't want your mother or father to know?"

Again it was a moment before Jade would answer. "Because they'll hate me," he said.

Cynthia was surprised by that. "I seriously doubt that, but why do you think they would?"

"Because...what if...what if..."

"What? Jade, I'm not going to yell at you. I'm not going to bite your head off. I'm here to help you figure things out. That's all. I'm here to help. But I can't if you won't tell me what's going on. Jade, let me help you!"

Jade looked at her for a moment again. Then she lowered her eyes and looked at her lap. Very softly she said, "You know, when this all started, it was only supposed to be until Jasmine quit hunting, and I managed to go hunting instead. But it's gone on and on and on, and Jasmine has no intention of ever quitting hunting, and I still can't even think about killing anything." She paused, but only for a moment. Still looking only down at her lap, she continued. "We tried and tried. We tried everything we could think of to change Jasmine's mind. But nothing worked. Nothing! And in the process, Jas did everything she could think of to make me as girly and as much of a sissy as she could possibly could. And while she was doing it, she started to become more and more of a boy physically, and I became more and more of a girl."

Cynthia was very tempted to say something, but she forced herself to remain quiet and listen. Not once had Jade looked up while she was speaking, and she still didn't.

"And from the very start," Jade continued, "for some unknown crazy reason, all the girls that Jasmine always hung out with, started hanging out with me instead. And we were always together. Always. Just like they keep saying, they do everything together."

Everything! And...and I did everything together with them too. But after a while, after things had gone on more and more and more, I started to notice things. I started to wonder about things.” She briefly looked up at the Doctor, then back down at her lap again. “When I did, I went to my Dad first. And I can’t tell you how afraid I was that he wouldn’t love me...that he wouldn’t even like me anymore. But I had to tell him. I just had to! And I did.” Again she looked up briefly, then back down again. “I found out much later, that after I had told him, he and Mom tried to put a stop to this whole thing. They tried to stop it, but it was actually Grandma that wouldn’t let them. And so I was still stuck. No change to things. Only there was a change. In me. And since then. It’s been getting worse.”

Cynthia leaned forward. Very softly she spoke. “That was the time you told your father that you were starting to like being a girl.”

Jade looked up quickly, surprise evident in her eyes. She nodded, then looked back down again. “Ever since then,” she continued, “I keep thinking about things more and more. And the more I think about them, and I guess because I’m still living all the time as a girl, I guess...I guess.”

Cynthia could have probably supplied the answer, but it was important that Jade put it into words for herself. She waited for Jade to finish.

“I guess...I like being a girl a whole lot better than being a boy.” She looked up briefly again as if she was embarrassed by it, then back down to her lap.

“Jade,” Cynthia said softly. “Why are you so afraid of what your parents will think about that?”

“Because...that time. That time when I told my Dad. They went up and tried to stop it. They were so upset by me liking being a girl that they actually went to Grandma and Grandpa and tried to stop it. And they never did that before for any reason at all. Never! But they did for that. They were so upset about it, that they tried to stop it. Tried to set things right. But Grandma wouldn’t let them.”

Cynthia saw tears falling from Jade’s eyes as she kept her head bowed toward her lap. “Jade, you know they love you. You know how much they both love you.”

Jade sniffled as she looked up. "But they hated so much that I was starting to like it. They hated it so much that they went to Grandma and Grandpa to stop it. And now..."

Cynthia waited for Jade to continue, but Jade stayed silent. "And now?" she prompted.

Jade sniffled again and wiped her nose with her arm. "Now things are worse."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't just like being a girl. I...I guess I...really like it. Enough that I'm not even sure I want to be a boy anymore – at all! How much will they hate it if I tell them that? How much will they hate me for it?"

"Jade, they're not going to hate you, and you know it."

"Yes they will!"

"No they won't! And I know for a fact that they won't!"

"How?"

"Because I've already talked about it with them. That was the one biggest thing I've been trying to work out with your mother. She loves you that much, that she's willing to do anything just to see you happy, no matter what way she'd rather have things."

"In other words, she'll hate me for it."

"No! And you know that's not true!" When there was no response from Jade, Cynthia let her cry for a minute. Then she asked. "Jade, that time when your mother and father tried to stop everything, did they tell you they did when it happened?"

Jade nodded. "Yes."

"But you said it wasn't until later that you found out it was your grandmother who wouldn't let them stop it."

"Yeah. So?"

"So when they did try to stop it, and they couldn't, what did they tell you about it...then...at the time?"

Jade's crying turned into a louder sob.

"Jade?"

Jade sniffled again, then said, "Mom said, if I feel like laughing, then I should laugh. If I feel like crying, then I should cry. And if I feel like enjoying being a girl, then I should."

Cynthia was surprised by that. "Sounds like good advice to me. Sounds to me like they love you, no matter what you decide."

Jade said nothing. She just continued to cry softly. Cynthia pulled a tissue from the box on her desk and leaned over and handed it to her. "Dry your eyes now. There's nothing that you need to worry about or cry about."

Jade sobbed again, then blew her nose. "Sorry," she finally said. "Sometimes I cry too much."

Cynthia smiled. "Don't worry about it. I expect that you will."

"It doesn't mean I want to."

"No, but it doesn't mean you can't. What did your mother tell you? Cry if you feel like crying?"

Jade nodded and blew her nose again. "Yeah."

"And laugh if you feel like it too."

Jade nodded and actually let out a small chuckle.

Cynthia waited until she seemed more in control of herself. "Jade, is there any part of you that you think might still want to be a boy?"

Jade looked down at her lap again. "Some. Yes. I'm just not sure how much."

Cynthia nodded as she took that in. "And now your big TV show is coming out tomorrow night, where you will essentially be proclaiming to the entire world that all you ever really wanted was to be a girl, and nothing but a girl."

Jade nodded. "Am I dooming myself? Did I doom myself?"

"You mean, in case you suddenly decide you want to be a boy instead of a girl?"

"Something like that. Yeah."

"I can't see that at all, Jade. In fact, there's no way that I can see you having any problem with it. If you decide to ever become a boy again, that's all you have to tell everyone. You changed your mind, and that's it. It's that easy. There's nothing more to it."

"That's what I keep hoping."

"And yet, most of you *does* want to be a girl for the rest of your life!"

Jade nodded again. "Yeah. So why am I so worried about it?"

"Why do you think you're so worried?"

Jade thought about it for a moment. "I guess...maybe...because I'm afraid of what Mom and Dad will think."

"We just went over that. Didn't we just decide that no matter what, they're going to love you just as much as ever?"

Again Jade nodded. But she said nothing else.

"Jade, are you still worried about what other people think about you when they see you?"

Jade's eyes went wide. "Of course!"

"And how about if they only treat you nicely...with respect...and deal with you like a girl as you want? What then?"

"Then...I guess it will be okay. I don't have much choice about anything else."

"No you don't. All you can do is avoid any others...whenever you can at least."

"It's the times when I can't avoid them that I'm worried about."

Cynthia looked at Jade for a moment more. "Jade, are you going to let worrying about it stop you from anything you might want to do?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. But you can't live your entire life at home."

"Why not?"

"You know very well why not."

"We just stopped for lunch today, and look what happened."

"And was it a problem for you?"

"It was...weird."

"But was it a problem?"

"I guess not. Not really. My moron brother was in heaven!"

Cynthia smiled. "I have no doubt. But how about you? You've already seen that people can be nice to you too. And you know for a fact that every one of those people today that wanted their picture taken with you, they all knew just what you really are."

Jade looked at her. "So?"

Cynthia leaned forward again. "So don't let your fears over anything stop you from living. Go out and seize life wherever you can. Just know that you're also going to have to deal with some nasty problems along the way. But Jade, so do the rest of us. We all have some kind of problems to deal with in life – in one way or

another. Live Jade! Don't be afraid to do something or go somewhere if it interests you. Don't be afraid to live!"

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It was after dinner Thursday night when Reverend Cosinger hung up his phone and stared at the receiver. Breathing hard, he finally got up from his seat and went in search of his wife. He found her in one of the kid's bedrooms getting them ready for bed. "Dear..." His wife turned. "I just got a call. There's a church outside of Saint Louis that wants me to come up there and talk to them about being their minister."

His wife's jaw hung open for a moment. "Jordan!" she exclaimed, a hint of excitement in her voice. Then she remembered something else. Something very important to her. "But...the cruise. If you take this new job, what about our vacation? What about our trip?"

Chapter 72 – The McComber Switch

May 8th – 11th

The thunder roared and cracked, lightning split the sky, the wind howled and gusted furiously, and the rain came down in torrents. The storm felt like a grim harbinger of things to come as every house on the McComber land tuned in to watch the program that had been made for, and about, their family.

The show opened from high in the air, showing beautiful rolling forested hills passing below.

“Welcome to northern Arkansas,” the voice said. “This is the story of a family that lives here. It’s a story about courage and stress, love and hatred. It’s a story about Four Musketeers. A story about boys and men who love hunting more than life. A story about an extended family that cares for each other with a passion that is almost furious. Yet it is also a story about a family that is stressed to the limits with no conceivable way out. And finally, this is the story of two young twins with the courage and determination to do what nobody wants them to do.

As the video continued, the film from so high above, showing so much land and hills, had seemed to zoom in closer and closer as the trees still passed by underneath. The viewer knew there was an obvious destination ahead. Five houses appeared as the film seemed to focus on them and zoom straight at the center one. And then the film seemed to go straight through the roof. Straight into the house itself...to reveal a woman sitting in a chair looking right at the camera.

“Welcome,” the woman said. “I’m Emily Durant, and this is the story of the McComber Switch.”

Emily’s image was replaced by a picture that filled the entire screen. It was taken from a single moment of the film that had been shot while the entire family had been working on getting in place for a large family group filming. Everyone was semi scattered around

and talking with each other instead of looking at the camera. And prominent in that picture were the figures of two children, a boy and a girl. And then the video wizards had taken that image and faded it into brown tones so that it looked like an old fashioned picture. And over top of it all, in big bold letters were the words, "The McComber Switch." The picture faded and the first of many very expensive commercials began.

Some of the family had seen the video of course, but not broken up into segments with all the commercials. Most of the family however hadn't seen it at all yet. It was as new to them as it was to the rest of the world. For the full hour that the program ran, nobody in the family even considered moving or saying a single word. They all sat and watched raptly...even the commercials.

Oddly, it wasn't the interviews that took up much of the video, but the little pieces of video showing everyday life within the family, and especially with the two twins. Videos where much of the time, the people in them sometimes never realized the cameras were rolling. But between those everyday life segments, were interviews with so many people. Very often, the program started with Emily interviewing someone, and a few moments later the film would show that person or those people doing something else, while the interview continued in the background.

Jimmy Joe was first introduced with his hat trick in the hallway, followed by the beginning of his close-up interview at Jacob's house where he stood up to say, "Hey, Ho. I'm Jimmy Joe!" Jade however, was first introduced with a single picture before Emily started talking about her. A single picture that had been cut out of some junk film while nobody knew the camera was rolling. A picture that showed her smiling and happy, and laughing.

Surprisingly, especially for Trish Velman, the entire show that the Musketeers had put on was presented, only not all at one time. And some of it became background music for other segments.

Segmented through it all, was film of their land, the animals on it, and a beautiful opening shot coming back from one of the commercials of a heard of deer moving in and out of the fog behind Jacob's house. There were thousands of men around the country who were watching the program only because their wives had

wanted to see it. But those men were captivated by the land, the animals, and the opportunities for great hunting. Many of those men wound up with a huge desire to make a trip out to the McComber land to hunt. And when the program started showing the segments about the family business and the things they did with their land, those hunting desires only became bigger wants.

Those same men, as well as many others, watched the show with great interest when they showed the boys in the backyard shooting at the targets. Military recruiters particularly took note. As did one certain man in Colorado Springs who stopped watching the program long enough to write down Elliot's name on his list of potential people to scout for the U.S. Olympic Rifle team. The fact that Elliot pretty much obliterated the bullseye from the distance he was shooting, with a less than competition gun, had the man very interested.

But despite the inclusion of the entire family, as well as their business interests, the program focused mainly on Jade, Jimmy Joe, Susan, and Clint. Tommy was also included more than others, but not nearly as much as the twins or their parents.

An entire segment between commercials was devoted to the scenes at the waterfall and Jimmy Joe's bear hunt. It was that segment that showed a very different side of Jimmy Joe than all the other segments had pictured. And the shots of the bear itself turned out to be gripping. Especially since between the two cameras, they were able to show how close to the bear Jimmy Joe had managed to get them.

A lot of attention in the program was paid to Susan. And especially to the turmoil and heartache she felt over the situation. And when the section showed her face in such close-up detail, crying her eyes out over the situation, Susan's words and emotions reached out to every woman watching. Many of whom fought back tears themselves.

It was the scenes that had Jimmy Joe and Jade together that everyone in the entire McComber family found most interesting. The camera lens showed them all things that none of them had truly realized or thought about before. Jimmy Joe was now noticeably taller than Jade was, and his voice too was far deeper than the still

high, more feminine voice that Jade had. Through the entire program, Jade consistently appeared to be nothing but a girl, a real girl. And Jimmy Joe only looked like a boy and nothing else. To Susan, it was another disturbing thing she didn't want to have to face, in real life or the video.

Despite Jimmy Joe's wonderful bear hunt, and despite Susan's anguish, the cameras themselves seemed to focus more on Jade than anyone else. There were short little shots of her doing all kinds of things that were spread out everywhere through the program. And those shots had nothing to do with any of the interviews that were done with her. It was as if the camera was simply that fascinated with her...a fascination that seemed to reach out and touch everyone watching the program.

And at the end of the show...the very end, the camera looked out from the front of Clint and Susan's house at the grand view across the hill they lived on. And into that view, strolled Jade and Jimmy Joe, hand in hand, their backs to the camera. As the sun set into nothing but shadows, their silhouettes shrunk down the side of the hill and out of sight. People everywhere were left speechless, tearful, and hopeful as the last of the sun's rays left the world and the program dissolved into blackness.

Susan looked to Clint. "Well," she said, her voice husky with emotion. "I guess that's it."

Clint could only nod for a moment. "I guess we'll see what happens now."

Jade had been surprised at how often the TV had shown her. And so much of it was at times she didn't even know she was being filmed. But in the end, she had to admit that she had done her best to get her plea out to everyone to please treat her like a girl and not anything else. The other thing she had particularly noticed in the show, was that from start to finish, in every single scene and picture they showed of her, as far as she could tell, she was just looking at another girl. Not at someone who was a boy that was trying to look like a girl, but she saw a girl. And something deep inside of her was very pleased and satisfied by that. And dare she say it? All too often, she really thought she looked...pretty.

Jimmy Joe had watched the program raptly as well. And oddly, the things that he was mostly interested in, was how all his little antics came off. And in each and every time, no matter how small the thing he had done was, he was very pleased with it. He only wished his father would have let him do more – much more! But still, he thought he came across pretty well through the entire program. And the bear hunt...he knew right away that that was going to be special!

There was one thing, and only one thing that he wasn't happy about. "Hey!" he said at the very end of the program. He looked at Jade. "They showed you a lot more than me again!"

Once again Jade rolled her eyes. "Like I keep telling you," she replied. "I'm prettier than you."

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Breakfast was earlier than usual for a Saturday morning in most of the houses in the McComber clan. But that didn't mean that everyone sat down to eat together in any of those houses. There was too much commotion...too much going on...too much to do.

While Clint and Tommy sat at the table eating, Susan, Jade, and Jimmy Joe were up and down, grabbing a bite here and there, while they carefully packed things and loaded up the car. Now that the big TV show had been aired, there was a huge feeling of getting something major finally put behind them. But the TV show wasn't the reason for all the commotion. The fashion show was.

All of the outfits that Jade and Jimmy Joe had designed were carefully checked, and double checked, along with every piece of accessory that they had decided on for each outfit, and everything was carefully put into suitcases and put in the back of Clint's pickup truck. Susan also packed not only most of Jade's makeup but most of her own as well, including too many cans of hairspray, combs, brushes, hair-ties, and ribbons...just in case.

Fortunately, the big storm from the night before was over now and the sun was shining brightly, and the forecast called for nothing but a beautiful day all day long. With the coming of the sun, and the big TV show now in the past, spirits ran high in each of the

McComber family homes where the girls would be participating in the show.

Four vehicles holding entire families left the housing area together. And four vehicles followed each other through the back country highways and all the way to the big mall where the fashion show was scheduled to take place. They were all early of course, just as was every other girl in the Home Ec class. Mrs. Marker had stipulated the early time so they could all get everything set up and rehearse somewhat before too many people showed up.

Once at the mall, the boys and men carried the suitcases of clothes and supplies, but once they reached the store, it was the women and girls who had to carry everything into the large changing room that had been created from a section of one of the stores near the exit out into the mall. Jimmy Joe was a bit perturbed that he wasn't allowed back into that area, but his stupid sister was! But Jimmy Joe was happy five minutes later, when he and Tommy and their father were out in the mall area waiting, and one of the other people in the mall recognized Jimmy and asked to have her picture taken with him. Jimmy cocked his favorite hat down and to the side, and gladly posed for the picture.

With all the girls from the class in the changing room, along with their mothers, things were a bit crowded and busy there. But eventually clothes were all sorted out and hung carefully on the long racks that the store had supplied, and things gradually became more organized. Jade didn't know what she had been expecting, but the mall had somehow arranged for a fairly big stage and even a surprisingly long runway that ran from the stage and out into the middle of a sea of chairs. Far more chairs than any of them were expecting to see.

Mrs. Marker finally took charge of things a bit more and introduced everyone to her friend, Lydia Fromer, the buyer for the store that was hosting the fashion show.

"Thank you for coming and participating," Lydia told all the girls and their mothers. "This year we've sold a record number of tickets. Far more than we ever imagined! The amount of money we're raising this year for charity is simply amazing! And not only that, but a good friend of mine, Gloria Bertram, one of the industry's leading

designers and the head of the Bertram Fashion Agency, has also said she might drop by. So this year, you've not only got more people than ever waiting to see you, but also the head of the one of the biggest fashion and modeling agencies in Little Rock.

There was an excited buzz from all the girls at that announcement.

"I know you'll all put on a wonderful show for us today," Lydia finished. "And I can't wait to see all of your creations. Good luck to you all!"

With that, Mrs. Marker took over again. "Girls," she said, "in a few minutes, we're going to walk through with each of you where you need to stand and where you need to walk for each of the outfits you're showing everyone today. And I'm afraid that at the store's request, we're going to be making a small change in the order that you're all supposed to go. I've already posted the new order over by the door so there's no confusion as to who goes when." Her eyes sought out Jade. "And Jade, I'm afraid that at the store's request, you're going to be the very last one each time. It seems that once they found out you were going to be part of the show and they put the word out about it, ticket sales went through the roof! So because of that, they want you to be the final girl."

Jade did another of her patented eye rollings.

"Okay girls," Mrs. Marker said. "Everyone must stay here until it's time for you to go. While each of you is walking out and showing off for the people, the next girl will go to where Mrs. Mason will be waiting until it's time for you to take the stage. When you finish out front, you come straight back here and change into your next outfit. Any questions? Good! Amanda Wilcox, you're up first. Mrs. Mason is waiting."

One by one, the girls walked through what they would be doing. Mrs. Marker made brief suggestions to each of them as to how she thought they should walk, or pose, or anything else she thought might work well for the show. By the time they finished, it was lunchtime and everyone needed the break.

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Clint wasn't exactly overjoyed. More than a few people had come up to shake his hand or to have their picture taken with him and the boys. He had obliged and been friendly about it, but he was more inclined to run off and hide somewhere. But in a mall that big, there wasn't really any place he could go, and he absolutely had to stay close to Jimmy Joe who seemed to be constantly surrounded by a crowd of people.

Fortunately, everything went very well, and Clint graciously received comment after comment on how much everyone seemed to have enjoyed their family special the night before. It was somewhat of a relief when Susan and Jade finally came out from the store to be with them so they all could have lunch together. But there were only two problems with that, the attention that they didn't really want while they were eating, and of course Jimmy Joe. Jimmy Joe seemed to have an awful lot of fans hanging out in the mall that morning. And a disturbing number of them were all girls.

"Where shall we eat?" Susan asked after she briefly kissed her husband.

"How about in the truck," Clint suggested.

Susan nodded. "I wish we could." She thought about things as she watched the crowd around Jimmy Joe, and now an even bigger crowd surrounding Jade. "I think the food court will definitely be out," she said.

"Definitely!" Clint agreed.

"I guess the best alternative might be the Italian restaurant then," Susan suggested.

Clint nodded. "Yeah," he agreed. "And it's somewhat dark in there. Maybe no one will notice us."

"I wouldn't bet on it."

"Kids!" Clint called loudly. Jimmy Joe! Jade! Let's go. Now!"

Slowly, with a small entourage following along, Clint and Susan made their way to the Italian restaurant inside the mall. Fortunately, once inside, most of the people finally left them alone and went away.

"Oh wow!" the hostess inside the restaurant exclaimed the moment she saw who had just come in. "You're..."

“Yeah, yeah. We know who we are,” Clint said before she could announce their name. “Can we just get a table? Somewhere quiet and out of the way if possible?”

After the crowd outside in the mall, Jade fully expected their lunch to be a repeat of the way things were when they had gone to see Doctor Hapkins in Little Rock. But much to everyone’s relief, including Jimmy Joe’s, nobody bothered them at all. And because of that, Clint and Susan each ordered an extra coffee and the family delayed right there at the table until they absolutely had to leave to get ready for the fashion show.

By the time they got back to the large cordoned off area of the mall, the crowd filling the seats was already large. Clint, Tommy, and Jimmy Joe had VIP badges so they were allowed in. Susan and Jade made their way back to the already crowded changing area. Jade and Susan both noticed a few mothers looking somewhat critically at Jade as they walked in. None of the girls were a problem, only the looks of disapproval from the mothers. But none of those mothers said anything at all. A few of the mothers simply moved around to block the view of their daughters getting changed so that Jade wouldn’t be able to see.

Jade sat down in one of the chairs provided for each of the participants, right between Nichole and Olivia. And while some girls were getting changed, Susan started working on Jade’s hair and makeup.

Shortly before the show was scheduled to start, Allison and Nichole both decided it would be a good time to use the store’s Ladies Room, and naturally since they were going, Olivia and Jade decided to accompany them. “Coming Mom?” Jade asked.

“Me?”

“Um...yeah. I mean, I can go myself, but at school, Aunt Jane always goes in with me.”

Susan was about to tell him to just go without her. She would be with the other girls anyway, but Jane spoke up before she got the words out.

“I need to go too Sue,” Jane mentioned from one side of Jade’s tiny designated area.

“Sounds like a good idea,” Marcy added. “Maybe we should all go while we’ve got the chance. No telling how crowded the place is going to be.”

Four girls together, all with rollers still in their hair, followed by four mothers, wandered out of the screened off changing area and out into the store among the other shoppers in search of the store’s Ladies Room. They found the Ladies Room easily enough, but there was a short line waiting outside the door.

“Ugh,” Janet grunted. “We should have done this back when we had lunch.”

“Oh my God!” one of the women in front of them suddenly exclaimed. “It’s Jade!”

Jade immediately felt her face turning red. There was no help for it since she had to stand in line like the rest of the women. She was soon answering questions and posing for pictures, hair rollers and all. And she hadn’t even gotten dressed into her first outfit for the show yet.

Gradually they moved inside the Ladies Room and eventually Jade managed to secure a stall. Relief! A few minutes later, she was out and washing her hands, and talking with Olivia at the sink on one side of her, and a couple of fans on her other side. As she had been coming out of the stall, she had just noticed her mother going into one. She didn’t see her aunts, but they had all been in line ahead of her mother. And that of course, was when it happened.

“Hey!” an all too loud voice called. “It’s the fag kid! And he’s here in the damn Ladies Room!” A teenage girl walked straight up to Jade and said in an all too nasty voice, “Whatcha’ doin’ here sissy fag boy? You ain’t no girl and you never will be. So get your ass the hell out of here!”

“Hey!” Allison said as she rushed out of one of the stalls and forced her way between Jade and the older girl. “Get away from her. Leave her alone!”

“Yeah? Make me!” the girl taunted.

Allison was about to shove the girl physically, but both Jane and Marcy were already rushing out of their stalls to intercept what was going on. Susan followed only half a second later. “Stop this!” Jane ordered quickly.

“Jade!” Susan said, her voice worried half to death.

“Get lost fag!” the girl said looking past Allison. “You don’t belong here. You don’t belong anywhere! Dumb freak!”

“Come on,” Susan said as she grabbed Jade’s arm. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“And don’t come back!” the girl yelled behind them.

Jade let herself be pulled out into the hallway. It was only there, when they had stopped for a moment, that Susan had a chance to finish getting herself dressed. The other girls and their mothers were soon right there with them.

Only when Susan had gotten herself as presentable as the circumstances allowed, did she notice the look on Jade’s face. “Oh shit!” she muttered. She had seen that look before. It was the look Jade used to have every time she walked out the door to go to school. It was the look she wore every time she had to sit through one of Reverend Cosinger’s sermons at church. It was the look of determination that Susan knew all too well, barely covered up the attitude underneath that meant Jade was prepared to fight if anyone crossed her the wrong way again. “Jade,” she said. “Stop it. Smile!”

“Like hell!” Jade muttered before walking off toward the changing room.

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“Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,” Lydia Fromer said into the microphone on the stage – ten full minutes after the fashion show was supposed to start. “And welcome to this year’s charity fashion show put on by the Home Economics class from the county school. I’m pleased to announce that last year we managed to raise a record amount for our charities, but this year, we’ve gone over that amount by many times. So thank you one and all on behalf of the girls, and each and every one of our needy charities.” She looked around and smiled. “And yes, I know many of you came out to see Jade McComber. And yes, I can assure you that she’s backstage right now, preparing to come out here when her time comes.

“And now, to present each of the girls and their lovely creations, let me introduce you to one of my very best friends, and the teacher for the school’s Home Economics Class, Mrs. Penny Marker!”

To the sound of more applause than she had ever heard before, and in front of more people than she ever imagined, Mrs. Marker stood behind the podium and spoke into the microphone. “Good afternoon everyone,” she said. “We are very pleased to bring you the creations from this year’s Home Economics class, and I can assure you that all of them are quite wonderful. In fact, there are one or two that I wouldn’t mind having in my own wardrobe – if I could get them in my size!”

She waited while the slight bit of laughter died down. “And don’t forget mothers, what you’re going to be seeing, is what the girls themselves would like to wear to school! So take notes, because there’s sure to be some real surprises in store! So now, without further ado, let’s begin by bringing out, Amanda Wilcox, wearing a very delightful and playful little skirt that she designed...”

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As the girls got called out on stage one by one, Jade sat and stared at the floor. She was all dressed in her first outfit. A very colorful outfit. But then, most of what she would be modelling was quite colorful. But that was her “brother’s” taste in clothes. Even as a boy it seemed. Despite her mother’s constant urging otherwise, Jade was still fuming over what had happened in the bathroom earlier, and she was more worried than ever about anyone in the crowd out front being rude to her or yelling nasty things while she was out there. Why had she agreed to do this? This was all Jimmy Joe’s idea...just like so many other things.

“Jade!” Susan said again. “Relax. Smile. Nobody’s going to say anything bad to you at all out there.”

“You don’t know that. They might!”

Susan remembered all too well the girl in the restroom. And Jade was right. It was entirely possible. “Well don’t let it get to you if it does happen. If it comes to that, ignore them!”

“How? I can’t!”

"What did you tell me that Doctor Hapkins told you? Don't be afraid of everything. Just do it as best you can and try to have fun!"

Jade only rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah. I'll try."

Susan wasn't all that certain though. She looked at the short line of girls by the door, waiting for their turn. "It looks like you need to get in line now. They're almost to you. Are you ready?"

Jade shrugged. She stood up to head for the door.

"Wait a minute," Susan told her. She quickly looked Jade over, then smoothed a section of her beautifully styled hair one more time. "Okay," she said. "Now smile and try to enjoy yourself. Or at least make everyone think you're enjoying yourself."

Jade somehow managed to not roll her eyes this time. Still looking at her mother, she "forced" herself to put a smile on her face, but it was that same smile she had often had at school where she smiled, but her eyes still dared anyone to try crossing her the wrong way.

Susan saw the smile, and she also saw the rest of the look on her face. "Relax and try to enjoy this," she told Jade. But Jade had already turned and was heading for the door. A few minutes later, she moved from the doorway to the ready position next to her Aunt Jane. And then she heard Mrs. Marker announcing...

"And next ladies and gentlemen, we have Jade McComber, wearing a skirt outfit designed by her brother Jimmy Joe." As Jade ascended up to the stage, she heard Mrs. Marker continuing. "In fact, all of the outfits Jade will be modeling today were designed by her brother, but were sewn by Jade herself. Each outfit was a joint effort between the two of them."

Jade wasn't prepared for the number of camera flashes going off at her. Nobody was saying anything bad about her...yet. But the look on her face was full of the determination she still felt, and she was ready and waiting for it. She walked to the big "X" on the floor made with tape and stood there staring at the audience for a slow count of ten while Mrs. Marker's voice droned on in the background. So many people! They weren't just seated, they were standing everywhere. And so many pictures being taken from all over. Her eyes paused at one place in the back. Damn! The TV cameras were there. She had no doubt she'd be on TV again that night.

After a slow count of ten, with her head held high, the look of determination still on her face, she began walking slowly and determinedly out along the runway...out into the middle of all those people.

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From the end of the runway, Gloria Bertram sucked in her breath. "Look at her!" she gasped. "Look at that face!"

"She is better looking in person than in the TV show," Lydia mentioned.

Gloria shook her head, unable to take her eyes off of Jade. "Yes, she looks great. But..." She didn't bother saying anything more.

"Lots of color in the outfit," Lydia noted. "I actually like it. Very... young and playful."

"Absolutely," Gloria agreed. She watched carefully as Jade got to the end of the runway, paused...that look on her face mesmerizing...and then slowly began walking back again. "She moves all wrong," she muttered. "But who cares!"

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Nobody had said anything bad at all, not that Jade had heard anyway, and she had been looking out among the people the entire time she had been out there, on display. She had been looking for anyone that was ready to give her any grief at all. Fortunately, nobody had said a word. The applause as she was leaving was much louder than she had expected. Two minutes later, she was back with her mother preparing to change into the next outfit.

"You looked great, Honey!" Susan said happily as she unfastened Jade's necklace for her. "Just try to lose that attitude... please!"

"Not gonna happen."

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One after another, the girls all came out on stage and showed off the outfits they had created. Some were obviously better than others. Some girls presented better than others. But the only one Gloria Bertram was interested in now was Jade. She had been sucked in by that look on her face from the very first moment. The fact that the clothes Jade had been modeling weren't too bad either, didn't hurt in the least. And when Jade came out again in her next outfit, she was just as captivated as she had been the first time. Another skirt outfit, shining silver this time, but it was paired with so many other colorful things. It was another amazing display of color that somehow seemed to work quite well and look pretty darn good on her. Jade had the same slow determined walk. And that same smiling look on her face.

"Look at her," she said to Lydia again. "Look at her. That face. It just screams, 'Look at me! I'm somebody important!' You can't teach that to someone. They've got to be born with it."

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Once again Jade made it through. She relaxed a bit more now that she had done it twice and nobody had said anything bad at all. She was wondering if the other girls had that many pictures being taken of them, or if they got that much applause each time. It was hard to tell back in the changing room where she couldn't hear much of anything going on out front. Strangely, she discovered that she was starting to enjoy this more than she ever imagined. All the outfits...changing and modeling what she had created...what she and Jimmy Joe had created. No, what *she* had created. Jimmy Joe may have designed everything, but she had done all the work! And even though she was still just daring anyone to make fun of her, she was still finding that she was enjoying herself. Strange. So strange.

But that didn't mean she had any intention of wiping the look off of her face! The look that would always just dare anyone to say the wrong thing to her. Because if they did, she had every intention of jumping down off that runway and having at them. She should have clobbered that dumb girl in the ladies' room earlier. She should have clobbered her good!

"Mom," she said as her mother once again helped her change.

"Yes, Sweetie?"

"Would you believe it? I think I'm enjoying this."

"Heaven forbid!" Susan laughed. Then she gave her daughter a hug. "Now just wipe that look off your face – please!"

"Like I said, not gonna happen."

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Once again, Gloria checked the list of girls, and once again Jade was due up next. She was enjoying this little kid's affair more than she imagined. Some of the outfits were truly darling. Some she was already taking inspiration from. But still she found herself waiting for that one model...that one girl...Jade. And there she was again, ascending the steps and moving to the center spot. A dress this time. And... "Oh, I like that one," she said.

"You liked the silver skirt and her first skirt too," Lydia pointed out.

"Yeah. Remarkable use of color," Gloria replied. "And this one too. I mean, you don't often see colors paired like that, but they work quite well when put together the way she did."

"Penny Marker mentioned that Jade's got one dress that's absolutely to die for," Lydia told her. "I wonder if that's it."

"Could be," Gloria replied, unable to take her eyes off of Jade's face. Was she smiling a bit more this time? She might have been, but that same look was still there in her eyes. And she was sure she wasn't imagining it, but Jade was moving even slower this time, more purposefully, as if she was really trying to show off what she was wearing. And the eye contact she seemed to be making with everyone was nothing less than wonderful. "That could be the dress your friend mentioned. It certainly is nice enough. And look at the way she's spending a little more time showing it off."

"She is, isn't she," Lydia agreed. "I can't tell you how glad I am too, since I'm sure a lot of people here only came to see her."

Gloria nodded as she watched Jade slowly walking back up the runway. "She's a star!" she muttered to herself.

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Once again Jade had gotten through it. She had purposely slowed down this time and tried to show off her dress a little more. And the applause as she was leaving the stage was almost thundering! Wow! Yeah, strangely, she was starting to enjoy this. How really, really strange!

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Susan hugged Jade as she came back into the changing room. "You were great!" she said. "Just beautiful! And they really loved that dress!"

"Yeah, it is a nice one," Jade agreed as they walked back to their tiny changing area together. "Mom, I kind of enjoyed that."

Susan again hugged her daughter, but only briefly. "Okay, let's get you changed again. One more to go."

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This final round of outfits was obviously the best. Gloria figured that Mrs. Marker must have programmed everything so that the best things would be at the end. She enjoyed absolutely everything. She took little bits and pieces of inspiration from wherever she could. But she was still antsy to see that one model, that one girl. And she was determined to talk with Jade just as soon as all this was over with. And there she was again, pausing at the bottom of the steps. Her eyes noted that there wasn't any color this time. Her eyes stayed locked on Jade as she ascended the steps and moved to the center spot...and she had a chance to fully see the dress Jade was wearing.

The dress was different. It was new. It was innovative. And absolutely elegant. In her wildest dreams Gloria hadn't expected to find anything so professional looking in a kid's fashion show. And the fact that it was Jade modeling it, only put the icing on the cake for her. Unbidden, she rose to her feet, unable to look away. And as

she rose, so did the entire audience as the applause started. And it was thunderous.

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Jade turned when she reached the spot, and was surprised to see everyone suddenly standing up and applauding already. And she hadn't even moved yet. Not sure what to do, she looked to Mrs. Marker, who was only applauding and smiling with everyone else.

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Jimmy Joe grabbed his father arm as they stood with everyone else, listening to all the applause. "They love it, Daddy! They love it!" he screamed excitedly.

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Uncertainly, Jade started to take a step forward, but she immediately saw Mrs. Marker stop applauding and motion for her to stay put. She went back to the "X" on the floor and stood there, unsure what to do. As the applause finally slowed down and people took their seats again, she slowly spun around in a circle so everyone could better see the dress she was wearing. Again there was some slight applause. And finally, Mrs. Marker was speaking again.

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Gloria tuned out the words that were being spoken as she studied the dress from afar. Unlike everything else that Jade had worn, this wasn't colorful in the least. The main material was a shiny medium grey color, but the deep neckline of it was a softly bunched creamy white that extended down to finally disappear behind, of all things, a bodice that was strung with laces and tied off with a bow. But perhaps the most striking feature of the dress, was the long modified Japanese style kimono sleeves that extended down past

the end of her arms at the back, while leaving half her lower arms exposed from the front. And the hem of the skirt seemed to echo that rounded theme as it scooped down further in the back than in the front.

And then Jade was finally moving again. Walking. Looking at people. And finally, Jade's eyes met hers, and seemed to stay there for several long moments. One last time, Gloria studied Jade and the dress in detail. Trying to take everything in. Once again Jade turned around right in front of her, and she watched as Jade slowly walked back up the runway. She walked all wrong. Her arms and hands were all wrong. But that face and the look in her eyes!

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As Jade turned around and headed back up the runway, once again the applause came. And it was even more than before. Yeah, no doubt about it, Jimmy Joe had outdone himself with that dress. And even she had to admit, it was beautiful. Simply beautiful. It was tied a little too tight at the bodice, which seemed to make her boobs stick out a little more. Jade wasn't as crazy about that part, but overall, she too loved the dress, and obviously so did everyone else. Instead of just walking off the stage as she did every other time, she paused again at that "X" on the floor and turned around briefly. They were still applauding. And for the first time since she had been to the bathroom, the look of determination slipped from her face, and her smile was genuine and true. She waved briefly to the crowd, then turned and left the stage. Her mother was waiting to hug her at the bottom of the stairs.

One by one all the girls once again ascended the stage as Mrs. Marker announced each of their names one more time. And one after another they followed each other down one side of the runway, and back up the other side. The girls all finally left the stage and went back to the changing room, every last one of them excited and happy. The show was over, and it had been great!

Mrs. Marker hurried back to the changing room. "Girls!" she announced. "You were all wonderful! Absolutely great! If any of you want to go out front, some of those people might have some

comments about your outfits.” Her eyes found Jade. “And Jade, you especially need to go out there.”

Jade winced. “Do I have to?”

Mrs. Marker nodded. “A lot of them came out today only because they heard you were going to be here. We raised a lot of money today because of that.”

This time, Jade couldn’t stop another of her major eye rollings. With her mother at her side, she trudged back out front. After the incident in the Ladies Room earlier, Susan was determined to stay close.

Jade ignored the stage this time and stayed down where the people were. Most of the people were leaving – fortunately. But there were still quite a few that remained. Her eyes caught sight of the TV camera again. She turned and headed away from it.

“Jade!” someone called. She stopped and smiled. A moment later she was accepting compliments on the dress she had on and for her other outfits as well. She had her picture taken with lots of people and she signed autographs as well. And remarkably, through it all, she found herself genuinely smiling and enjoying herself.

“Jade!” Jimmy Joe’s voice called. He rushed up to his sister and hugged her, even though she had several people still around her. “We were great! You were great! And they loved all my stuff.”

Jade nodded and smiled, even as she was handed something else to sign. “Especially this dress,” she replied.

“Yeah. They really loved that one!” Jimmy Joe replied. He stood there and watched as this time, his sister continued to get all the attention and he got none at all. He was very disappointed about that. He had been the one who had designed all of Jade’s outfits. They were all his ideas!

Jade had her picture taken one last time with one of the women who had been at the show, then mercifully, there was no one left. Whew! That had been fun, but she was tired now and ready to get changed and go home.

“Jade.”

Uh-oh. She smiled again and turned, and found Mrs. Marker with two other women. One of them was the one who was from the sponsoring store.

"Jade, this is my good friend, Lydia Fromer," Mrs. Marker told her. She is the one who's responsible for putting all of this together."

"Thank you," Jade said to the woman. "It looks like you did a really great job. And look how many people came!"

"Thank you," Lydia replied. "Um...Jade." She turned to the woman with her. "This is Gloria Bertram. She came out today especially just to see you."

"Hi Jade," Gloria said as she stepped forward. "I can't tell you how much I enjoyed the show today."

"Thanks, Mrs. Bertram," Jade replied. She looked to Lydia. "I think Mrs. Fromer here did a wonderful job putting it all together."

Gloria nodded. "Yes she did." She seemed to pause and look Jade over carefully. "That really is a wonderful dress," she said as she reached out to grab one of the sleeves for a closer look.

"Hey, I designed it," Jimmy Joe said quickly as he stepped up next to his sister.

"And it's...quite lovely," Gloria said as she dropped the sleeve and continued to inspect the dress. She finally turned her attention to Jimmy Joe. "And you're her brother, Jimmy Joe," she said. "I saw your TV special last night. I must say, it was more interesting than I thought it would be."

Jimmy Joe smiled broadly. "That's because I was in it!" he said.

Gloria had to keep herself from laughing. Obviously Jimmy Joe was just as much the ham as he had been during the show. She turned her attention back to Jade. "Jade, she said, "I came out today only because I was curious to see what you're really like. After seeing you all over the TV for the last few weeks, I was really quite curious. And as I said, after the show last night I was especially curious."

Jade shrugged. "Well, thanks so much for coming," she said. "I'm really glad you liked the show."

Gloria smiled, but it was a muted smile. "Jade," she said. "I want you. I want you very badly!"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean, you've got just what I'm looking for, for my modeling agency."

Jade was shocked, but it was Jimmy Joe that spoke before she had a chance to say anything.

“Hey! What about me?” Jimmy Joe said quickly.

Gloria looked at him. “I’m sorry, but I only do women and girls in my agency. No guys. Sorry.”

“But I’m the one who designed her dress. I designed everything!”

“And they’re wonderful. Everything Jade wore today was wonderful...especially this dress she has on. In fact, I’ll give you a hundred dollars for it right now, if you’ll give it to me as soon as she takes it off.”

Jimmy Joe was shocked, as were Jade and their mother. “A hundred dollars?” he said.

Gloria nodded. “I think I’d like to produce a line of dresses based on this design.”

But now Jimmy Joe wasn’t so sure. “You want to copy my design?”

“Not...exactly. But very close. What say...a hundred dollars?”

Jimmy considered that, then his face turned to the stubborn look that Susan had always hated to see. “Five hundred!” Jimmy Joe replied.

Susan gasped. “Jimmy!”

Gloria stared at a Jimmy who was staring right back at her with a very determined look on his face. “Two hundred,” she countered.

Jimmy considered that. “Three hundred,” he tried instead.

“How about Two fifty?”

Jimmy again considered it, “Okay, but only with one other thing.”

“And what’s that?”

“You’re going to make more dresses like that, but I’m the one who designed it originally. I want something to get some kind of credit for it.”

Gloria couldn’t believe this kid. The nerve! But she finally smiled. “How about if we do something like...say that they were designed off of an original Jimmy Joe style or something like that.”

“That will be great!” Jimmy Joe replied with a huge smile.

“Kid,” Gloria said, “You could go far in this industry.”

“Of course,” Jimmy Joe replied. “I’m Jimmy Joe.”

This time, Gloria did chuckle.

Susan had listened to it all and was simply amazed. What had Jimmy Joe gone and done now? She wasn't totally sure, but she suspected that he may have just gotten his foot lodged into the fashion designing industry. And she didn't see that as a bad thing at all.

Gloria turned her attention back to Jade. "Now," she said. "What do you say Jade? I think given a bit a training, you could be a real star in the fashion industry."

"You mean you still want her?" Jimmy Joe said, not really believing it.

"I sure do!" Gloria replied. "That look on her face, and especially in her eyes...it's just what I want."

"But I don't know anything about modeling," Jade replied, not really believing that this woman would want her to do something like that.

Gloria nodded. "Yeah," she said. "I noticed that you don't exactly move very well. You don't really walk very well and your hands and arms are all wrong too."

"And you still want her?" Jimmy Joe exclaimed.

Gloria never took her eyes off of Jade. She nodded. "Yes! We can teach you how to walk. We can teach you how to move. We can teach you how to wear heels like you were born in them. But what we can't teach, is that look on your face, and especially in your eyes. And you're a star Jade McComber. You're already pretty famous right now. What I'm proposing is to make you an even bigger star. Someone who will remain famous for a very long time."

Jade's mouth hung open.

"And what about me?" Jimmy Joe said again, his unbelieving voice almost a whisper.

Gloria briefly looked at Jimmy Joe then ignored him, again focusing on the girl in front of her. "So what do you say Jade? Are you ready for the big time in the fashion industry?"

Jade didn't know what to say. She just stood there not knowing what to even think. Fortunately, her mother came to her rescue.

Susan finally stepped forward and put her hands on Jade's shoulders. "We thank you," Susan said to Gloria, "but we just want

all this fame and publicity to go away. We just want to get our nice quiet life back again."

"Are you sure?" Gloria said to Susan. "Because this could be the biggest opportunity of Jade's entire life. The time right now is critical. She may never have an opportunity like this again."

Susan shook her head. "Like I said, thank you. But we're sure. We just want everything to go..."

"Mom."

"...away," Susan finished.

"Mom," Jade said again.

"What?" Susan asked.

"Um...maybe I'd like to try it." She looked from Gloria up to her mother. "Can I? If I don't like it, I'm sure I can always quit."

Susan couldn't believe it. She absolutely couldn't believe any of it. This was her child who didn't want the publicity. This was her child who didn't want any attention at all. And now she was trying to do something that would ensure she stayed firmly in the spotlight? This child?

"Mrs. McComber," Gloria said. "This could be the biggest thing ever in Jade's life."

"You don't call that TV thing we just finished with, big?" Susan replied.

"Yes, but this could be even bigger. Much bigger. And Jade is interested, so what would be the harm of letting her try. Like she said, if she doesn't like it, she can stop anytime at all."

Susan stared at Gloria, not knowing what to think or what to do.

"Mom...please?" Jade said. "Doctor Hapkins said I have to stop being afraid to try things and go places. She said I can't be afraid to live. And Mom, I kind of enjoyed myself today. I really did. And even I can't believe it, but I did. So Mom, can we at least try it? See if I might like it?"

Susan's eyes went from Gloria to Jade, not knowing what to say or think.

"You can't!" Jimmy Joe breathed quietly. But Susan barely heard him.

"Please?" Jade pleaded.

"What...would you need her to do?" Susan finally asked.

Gloria considered that. "I'm guessing school will be out for you in a few weeks?" She saw Jade nod. "Then as soon as school is out, there's a modeling school that I have part ownership in back in Little Rock. I need you there, ready to learn, as soon as you're out of school. And I've got your first fashion show already in mind to start you out in at the beginning of June. So we've got a lot of work ahead of us Jade, and I can't wait!"

Jimmy Joe's eyes were wide with amazement. His mouth was wide with surprise. Jade, his dumb, stupid, sissy brother...had just stolen his most precious dream. She had just ripped his special dream right out from under him, and stolen it for herself! "Nooooo!" he screamed as he turned and hurried away.

"Jimmy Joe!" Susan called after him. But she quickly saw that Jimmy Joe was in no mood to stop.

"Jimmy!" Clint yelled as he saw his son suddenly breaking into a run and racing away from where the women had been talking. "Jimmy! Stop! What's wrong?" But still Jimmy didn't stop.

"I'll go after him," Tommy replied as he took off after his brother.

Clint was glad!

Jimmy Joe ran to the far end of the mall, right through the big department store there, and all the way to the far side and out through the door.

"Jimmy! Wait!" Tommy called behind him.

But Jimmy was too upset to stop or wait. Once outside, he looked around, but he didn't know where to go? From where he was, he didn't even know how to get to his father's truck.

"Jimmy!" Tommy called again as he ran outside.

But Jimmy was still too upset. Not knowing where to go, he started walking along the sidewalk that ran around the outside of the mall.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Tommy asked as he finally caught up with Jimmy and started walking next to him.

"What's wrong? Jade! That's what's wrong."

"What did she do?"

"She stole my very special private dream. The one dream I've had all my life. She's getting back at me now for every mean thing I

ever did to her. She took it, Tommy! She took it all for herself. She stole everything I've ever really wanted!"

"What are you talking about? What did she take?"

Jimmy shook his head. "Forget it, you wouldn't understand."

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The conversation in the truck was somewhat sparse as they drove home. And Jimmy Joe refused to say a single word. Susan had already filled Clint in on both Jimmy's little break in the fashion industry, as well as Jade's big break into the world of modeling.

"It's because of that TV show," Clint had said. "All because of that damn TV show. We should have never done it!"

Susan still agreed.

Once home, Susan and Jade carried all their things into the house, minus the dress that Gloria Bertram had given them a check for once Jade had gotten changed. Jimmy Joe had been nowhere in sight. Clint and Tommy headed for the family room to watch TV and relax after the long day. Jimmy Joe disappeared into his room and closed the door.

A short while later, Susan and Jade were in the kitchen beginning to make dinner for the family. Jimmy Joe walked through, but refused to even look at anyone.

"Jimmy?" Susan said as he headed directly for the back door and refused to even turn around and acknowledge her. She shook her head as Jimmy hurried out and the door swung shut behind him. "What's gotten into him?" Susan muttered.

A few minutes later, a sound outside caught Jade's attention. She looked out the window to see Jimmy Joe riding one of the four wheeler's out of the garage. "Mom," she said. "Jimmy Joe's taking off on one of the four wheelers."

Susan hurried to the window and then to the door. "Jimmy!" she yelled. But Jimmy had already disappeared into the woods. That boy better be home by dinner!

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Jimmy Joe was angry. More angry than he'd ever been. Jade had stolen his dream. The one dream he had harbored all his life, especially back when he was still a girl, which was something that just then he knew he had always intended to be once again... eventually. But now Jade had found a way to get back at him for everything he had ever done to her. For everything! And because of that, Jimmy Joe was mad.

How could she? How could she do that to him? She was getting everything his dream had ever been, while he got nothing! Nothing at all! How could she?

So he had gone out to the shed and grabbed his rifle, jumped on the nearest four wheeler and taken off into the woods. Hunting. It was the only good thing in his life anymore. Hunting...and the woods.

He wasn't fully conscious of it until he found himself making the turns to get there. It wasn't until he was mostly there that he realized where he wanted to go. And just then, the waterfall sounded like the perfect place. He had always loved it there. Always! It was a special place. A beautiful place. And just then, he needed someplace like it.

The ground was still a bit muddy from the big storm the night before, but it wasn't anything that gave the four wheeler any pause at all. Especially not at the speed he was travelling, which whenever possible was pretty much as fast as the machine was capable of going. There were a lot of branches that had come down with the storm that he had to go over, but that only made the trip somewhat fun.

The area opening up into the waterfall finally came into sight. Only then did Jimmy Joe start to slow down. Only then did he put the brakes on. But on the slippery muddy ground, he was too late. He suddenly felt a big lurch as his machine went over another large branch that the storm had brought down. The lurch threw the machine off balance and off track, and a big rock finished the job. The big four wheeler tipped and went over the edge, rolling over and throwing him off as it started tumbling down the hillside toward the water below. As Jimmy hit the ground, the machine quickly rolled over top of him, breaking his right leg and injuring his left arm. And

the force from the falling machine as it tumbled past him, drove his unprotected head right into a rock.

Jimmy Joe didn't hurt at all from his serious bleeding injuries. He was unconscious.

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"Where is that boy?" Susan complained as she stood in the backyard and called yet again. "Jimmy!" But of course there was no answer. Dinner was over and he had never shown up. And if he didn't get back soon, it would be dark before he got back.

"Forget it, Sue," Clint finally said as he started walking across the back yard. "I'm going out to look for him." He turned to Jade. "You said you saw he had his gun?"

Jade nodded. "Yeah."

"Okay," Clint said, already figuring the most likely places back that direction that Jimmy would go to hunt.

"Wait!" Sue called after him. "I'm going with you!"

"Damn boy forgot his helmet again," Clint noted as grabbed his own helmet and handed Susan's to her. Nothing more was said about it as he climbed onto his big four wheeler and Susan climbed up with him, wrapping her arms around his strong body. A moment later, they were off down the trail into the woods.

Jade stared after them while Tommy turned and went back into the house. Her "brother" was mad, and she had a pretty good idea as to why that might be, even though Jimmy Joe wouldn't actually say anything to anyone about it. But she knew. She figured she was the only one who knew of the dream that Jimmy Joe had always harbored.

Not knowing what else to do, she finally turned to go back into the house. It was only then that it hit her. She knew where Jimmy Joe was going to go. It was the only place that made sense. Yes, Jimmy Joe had taken his gun, but she was absolutely sure that Jimmy had headed for the waterfall. Somewhat sure anyway. It was her best bet. But would her mother and father know that? Probably not. It wasn't supposed to be a good place for hunting. But it was a beautiful place just to go and visit.

Since she was so sure that she knew, and not knowing if her mother and father would know, Jade ran to the shed. A quick check showed what she had already seen. Jimmy Joe had taken his gun, but his helmet was still there. Jade grabbed her own helmet and climbed onto the last remaining four wheeler. A moment later, she too was disappearing into the woods.

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It was the sharp aching pain in his head that brought Jimmy Joe back to consciousness, but the moment consciousness arrived, the excruciating pain from his broken leg and his badly bruised arm seemed to make the pain in his head explode into something monstrous. He tried to roll over, and that was when he realized there was something major wrong with his leg. Despite the pain in his head, he managed to lift it enough to look. Part of his leg below his knee was going the wrong direction. The fear suddenly hit him full force. And when he brought his hand up to his battered head and it came away full of blood, he knew he was in even worse trouble.

He couldn't stand let alone walk. He didn't even think he could crawl. His leg was not just broken, but twisted in the wrong direction. His arm hurt to the point where he wasn't sure he could even move it. He figured it was most likely broken too. And worst of all, his head was hurt and bleeding. He was in trouble. Big, big trouble. And he knew that the scent of his blood in the air could draw animals that could kill him in seconds. He tried to look around for his rifle, but he didn't see it. Trouble! Big trouble. And he was scared to death.

As the desperate reality of his situation fully descended, he cried.

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"Jimmy Joe!" Clint yelled as loudly as he could again. "Jimmy Joe!"

He and Susan listened, but there was still no answer, still no clue as to where Jimmy Joe was hunting.

“We’ll keep going,” Clint said. “Maybe he’s up a little further north. Hunting’s better that way anyway.”

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Jade raced as fast as she dared along the muddy path. There were a lot more branches on the path then she remembered, and all too often she had to slow down to get over them, but on she went. With her heart racing, she continued ahead, hoping against hope that she knew where Jimmy Joe had gone.

The area for the waterfall came in sight and she slowed down. She almost missed seeing the big branch that had fallen, but she was already going slow enough that it was only another bump in the road. The problem though, was that it looked like she was wrong. Jimmy Joe’s four wheeler wasn’t there. There was nothing there. She had made the trip for nothing.

She pulled to a stop at the top of the hill anyway and called, “Jimmy Joe! Jimmy Joe!” But as she was calling, her eyes came to rest on the shape of the four-wheeler lying its side at the bottom of the hill. “Jimmy Joe!” she called again, her heart now racing with fear.

And then she spotted him. Halfway down the hill and just lying there. “Jimmy Joe!” she called again.

“Jade?” the weak reply finally came back.

Jade was off of her machine as fast as she could and scrambling precariously down the hill toward her brother. She was there fast. The sight of all the blood around his head scared her to death, but the sight of the odd angle his leg was bent made her sick. “Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy. What have you done?” she said, her voice full of the anguish that now had tears streaming down her face.

“Jade,” Jimmy managed to get out through his pain. “You don’t know how glad I am to...”

The noise from across the waterfall on the other hillside was both startling and frightening. Dozens of big razorback hogs suddenly came running out from the trees on that side and ran as fast as they could for the water at the bottom, and straight in their

direction on the other side. And a moment later, Jimmy Joe let out a scream that would have done Olivia proud.

"Where's your gun!" Jade yelled, scared to death now as he desperately searched the ground around them. He finally spotted it about six feet further back up the hill. He scrambled to grab it, turned around, and was already raising it to firing position, when the huge black shape on the other side of the water suddenly stopped and started sniffing the air, smelling the blood that would lead the big bear straight to them.

The bear growled angrily as the razorbacks started crossing the water and the first of them were already climbing the hillside on the other side. The bear took off after the hogs, in the same direction as the blood smell, which was also the same direction that led straight at Jimmy Joe and Jade.

Barely aiming, Jade fired. Then working the bolt as fast as she could, she prayed that Jimmy had loaded more than one bullet in the gun.

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"Jimmy Joe!" Clint yelled once again. Then he stopped to listen. Still nothing. But just before he started his engine again, he heard a shot.

"Clint!" Susan said quickly.

"I heard it," Clint replied. He turned his head, trying to figure out what direction the shot had come from. But suddenly there was a second shot. And very quickly after that, a third! And then the shots stopped altogether. They listened for a few moments, but there were no more.

"The waterfall," Clint said as he started his engine again. "He's got to be there."

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Jade sat crying, holding Jimmy Joe's hand. She was scared. She didn't care about the animals she had killed, she only cared about her brother. She was sure he was dying. "I've got to get

help," she cried. "I've got to find Mom and Dad." She tried to let go of Jimmy's hand, but Jimmy was holding on too tightly.

"Don't go! Don't leave me," Jimmy pleaded.

"I've got to," Jade argued. "We need help!"

"Don't leave me!" Jimmy pleaded again, holding Jade's hand for dear life.

"Jimmy. I have to. I have to. I'm sorry. But we need help. You need help."

"You saved me," Jimmy said. "You already saved me."

"No. All I did was shoot the bear."

"And the hogs," Jimmy said. "I saw you do it. You didn't even miss. You saved me!"

"But what good will it do if we don't get help. Jimmy, like it or not, I've got to try to find Mom and Dad."

"Don't leave me," Jimmy pleaded one more time as Jade pulled her hand out of his.

Jade turned and scrambled back up the hill toward her four wheeler. But just as she got to it, she heard the sound of another engine. She turned to look up the path and soon saw her father and mother rushing in their direction. She raised her arms and began waving them. "Dad! Mom! We're here!"

Jade was shaking by the time Clint brought his four wheeler to a stop. She was already pointing down the hillside. "He's there. He's down there!" he told them even before Clint could turn his engine off. The engine went silent and Jade added. "He's hurt bad. Real bad!"

Clint couldn't get off his machine with Susan so close behind him, but Susan jumped off as quickly as she could. By the time Clint managed to get off, Susan was already at the top of the hill looking down. And he heard her scream. Running past her, he raced down the hill toward the child that was now one of his sons. "Jimmy!" he called as he half slid down the hillside. "Jimmy!"

"Dad!" Jimmy weakly called back.

Clint was quick to assess the damage to Jimmy. Quickly, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. It was only seconds before Janet answered and Clint started telling her about how bad Jimmy was hurt...while Janet raced to find her husband.

It was nearly dark by the time Clint lifted Jimmy's body and carried it up the hill. He placed Jimmy carefully on the back of the cart that Brian had brought in. He himself sat on the back of the cart with Jimmy so he wouldn't fall off during the trip back and hurt himself worse. Susan rode in the twin seat cart with Brian while Janet remained behind. She would drive Clint's four wheeler back to the house with Jade. But there were plenty of options for transportation available. Most of the four wheelers in the family were clogging the path at the top of the hill, as was most of the family.

As Jade watched the cart holding her brother and her parents making its way between all the vehicles, she felt someone's arm reaching around her and grabbing her shoulders. She looked up to see her Aunt Janet holding her.

"You okay?" Janet asked.

"I don't know," Jade replied.

Janet only nodded, gathered Jade fully into her arms, and hugged her tight.

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The county hospital was maddeningly slow, even with Doctor McComber there to make things go faster. X-rays were taken of Jimmy's leg, arm, and head. Stiches were needed for the cut on Jimmy's head and the diagnosis of a mild concussion was reached. It was decided that nothing at all needed to be done for her arm. But a specialist was called in to handle resetting her leg.

It was late at night by the time they all headed home. Jimmy's head was wrapped tightly in bandages, his arm was supported by a sling, and a large heavy cast held his leg straight so it wouldn't bend. Susan sat in the truck's back seat, holding Jimmy's head while he laid in her lap. His broken leg was supported as much as possible by the back seat in the tight confines of the truck. His bare foot hung out over the edge. Susan was greatly relieved that Jimmy was going to be just fine, but that didn't mean that she still wasn't trying to keep from crying.

"Mom," Jimmy said. "She saved me."

"I know," Susan whispered, her voice was too emotional to let her do more than that.

"She saved me," Jimmy said again. "She shot that bear. Took him down with just one shot. Then she shot those first two pigs too. The rest scattered in other directions. She saved me."

"Shh..." Susan whispered. "I know."

"Mom," Jimmy said. "We've got to find some way..."

Susan wasn't sure that she even wanted to know what was worrying Jimmy now, but when he didn't continue, she found herself asking. "Some way to do what?"

"So that Jade...if she wants...can be a boy again. If it means that I don't hunt anymore, then that's fine. I promise I won't. If Jade wants to be a boy, then I'll quit, right now. Forever. I promise. She saved me, Mom. She found me when I thought I was going to die. And she saved me."

Susan held him, and cried.

In the front seat, Clint's mind was troubled too. His...son...or daughter...whichever...had just promised to quit hunting. Finally! But it sounded like it would only be if Jade decided she wanted to be a boy again. And that was the part that worried him the most now.

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It was early the next morning by the time Jacob and Jed were able to get back to the waterfall. Carefully they both parked at the top of the hill and made their way down toward the bottom. They stopped halfway between the dead animals and where Jimmy Joe had lain hurt for so long. They carefully looked around at everything, their practiced sight telling them more than most people would ever learn just looking at a situation like that.

There had been three shots. And now there were three dead animals. Two razorback hogs, and one big male black bear. Bears can sometimes be difficult to kill, especially with only one shot.

"I want that *boy*...taken out of skirts immediately!" Jacob said. "I don't care what his sister wants. But I want him out of them damn dresses right now. I think he's more than proved himself here."

Jed nodded. "Without a doubt! But you know that even if they stop the hormones now, that Jade's going to be stuck as Jade for quite a while."

"I don't give a damn. I want him back to being a boy, right now. Cut his hair and give him some proper clothes to wear. And to hell with the hormones or what anyone else thinks. He's proved himself, and a whole lot more!"

Jed said nothing. He would pass his father's order along just as Jacob wanted. But he had a lot of misgivings over it now.

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It was late Monday afternoon when Jacob's phone rang. As usual, he ignored it and let his wife Rose answer the thing. But a few moments later, Rose was there in his office.

"It's for you," Rose told him.

"Who?" Jacob asked.

"That guy from CBS that was here to let us preview the show."

"The one who told us that that paper we signed wasn't worth a damn as far as what we wanted?"

Rose only nodded and left him alone.

"Oh hell!" Jacob swore as he picked up his phone. "Hello?"

"Mr. McComber?" Lyle Montgomery asked as he heard Jacob answer.

"Yeah? What now?" Jacob asked somewhat angrily.

"The staff here has been kicking this idea around since we finished filming down there. And we'd like to see what you think about it."

"Idea? What idea?"

"We want to do a weekly hunting show from your land. But this one would be different than any of the others on TV."

"A TV show? Different? In what way?"

"We want to bring in a celebrity to feature for each hunt."

"That don't sound so different," Jacob replied.

"We'd like to feature all of the men in your family as guides for the different shows and hunts."

“By all the men, then I’m assuming that the one you really want is Jimmy Joe. Am I right?”

“Well, we’d like him to be there in most of the shows, yes, absolutely. But not as the hunting guide. We want the pros to handle that part.”

“Okay. That still don’t sound all that different to me,” Jacob told him.

“Well, what we’re thinking about is that you’ve got a lot of women in your family that are awfully good cooks...so my people tell me. For the last ten minutes of the show, we want to do a cooking segment for whatever animals they happen to shoot.”

“And let me guess,” Jacob added. “You want to feature Jade in the middle of it all.”

“Um...well, of course we’d like to see her in some of the shows too, but we were really thinking of showing off the skills of some of the wives in your family during that part instead. And we’d also like to see a lot of those girls, the Musketeers. We’d like to see them doing things each time too. Maybe setting the tables or something. But we’d especially like for that one girl, Nichole? We’d like to have her singing something during those cooking sections. And what we’d really like is for once in a while to have Jade sing along with her too.”

Jacob considered it all. “Sounds interesting,” he said, “but I’m not sure about this at all. This is something that’s going to involve the entire family, and they’ve all got to have a say in it.” He didn’t want to add that he had already ordered that Jade be turned back into a boy and he was about to decree that Jimmy Joe had to go back to being Jasmine as well.

“That’s fine,” Lyle told him. “In fact, if you’re getting the family together to discuss it. I can come down there with a few of my staff and discuss it with them, in case they might have any questions about anything. And I have no doubt that some of your family may have some pretty good ideas as well. Just let me know as soon as possible what you want. Over the thirteen shows we’d like to do for the first season...”

“Thirteen!”

“That’s the usual number of shows for a season.”

“Yeah. Okay. Go on.”

“Jacob, over that season, your family could stand to make a lot of money from this. An awful lot.”

“We don’t care much about the money. That’s why we didn’t care about the amount you put in that contract for the show you just put on the TV.”

“Jacob,” Lyle said, suddenly realizing something. “Do you have any idea how much money the station now owes you for that special we shot?”

“I have no idea, and I don’t really care that much.”

“Jacob, I saw the figures. The advertising dollars alone were enormous! Jacob I’m pretty sure the check you should be receiving fairly soon, will be for almost four and a half million dollars.”

Jacob blinked, not sure he had heard right. “Did you say million?”

“Four and a half. Almost.”

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Jade was in complete turmoil. She had heard yesterday that her grandpa had pretty much ordered that she go back to being a boy... like it or not! Her father had looked hopefully at her, her mother too. She had stared at them unbelievably, and then ran. She hadn’t known what else to do. She ran out of the house, only to have her father running after her. “Don’t you dare run into the woods!” he had yelled. She had turned around and ran back to her bedroom instead. She had spent most of the night curled up on her bed, hugging Cleopatra for dear life.

And now today, school was over with and she was again sitting in her Uncle Brian’s office waiting to see him. But this time, Jimmy Joe wasn’t there. Only her mother and father.

She was still a she...for now. But she didn’t know how much longer they would let her stay a girl. And nobody seemed to want to talk about it. Grandpa had decreed it. And what Grandpa said, was law.

The door opened and Brian walked in with his now familiar basket containing everything he would need. “Well, it’s taken us an

awfully long time to get here,” Brian said happily. “But we’ve finally made it.”

“Finally!” Clint agreed. Susan said nothing.

Brian turned to Jade. “Up on the table, Jade...I mean Jimmy... well I guess you’re still Jade for now.”

Wordlessly, Jade moved toward the exam table. “Do I need to get undressed again first?” she asked.

“No. Not today. I’m just giving you a simple shot today to start counteracting those hormone implants in your system right now. Normally, I guess we’d just let those hormones stay and do nothing about it. Let them finish dissolving and then not put anymore back in you. Today, all I’m going to give you is a simple little shot of testosterone to kind of counteract some of what those implants are doing and jumpstart the process. Okay?”

Jade said nothing to that.

“Up on the table and we’ll get this over with real quick and easy.”

Jade climbed up on the table. She watched as her Uncle Brian got the medicine out. She watched as he opened and prepared a fresh needle. And she watched as he turned to her to give her the shot.

“Uncle Brian,” Jade said.

“Yes?”

“What if...”

“What if, what?” Brian asked as he held the hypodermic needle up and flicked it with his finger to make sure there was no air in it.

“What if I don’t want to be a boy again?”

Brian looked at Jade, then over at Clint and Susan. He took a deep breath, then very softly he said. “Then I think we’ve got a problem. A big one! But it’s not one we haven’t already considered.”

Chapter 73 – Epilogue

Twelve Years Later

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
Even though St. Nicholas wouldn't be there.
No children were nestled all snug in their beds,
They'd all left the house, their own lives they led.
And Sue in her nightgown, Clint snuggled to her back,
Had just settled down for a long winter's nap,
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
Clint sprang from the bed to see what was the matter.
Away to the window he flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.
The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow
Gave a luster of midday to objects below.
When what to his wondering eyes should appear,
But a miniature car...that had crashed into his mailbox.

“Jaaaasmiinne! You wrecked the mailbox...again!”

“Sorry Daddy,” Jasmine called back as she got out of the car and floundered around a bit in the still-falling snow. “I couldn't see the driveway!”

“So you had to hit the mailbox?” He felt Susan pulling him back away from the open window. “Damn!” he exclaimed. “That girl has to be the worst driver on the planet!”

“Oh hush!” Susan chided as she took his place at the window. “Tommy will fix it.”

“That's just the point! He shouldn't have to!”

Susan leaned out the window. “Hi Darling! We thought you weren't getting here until tomorrow!”

"We decided to come tonight instead, in case the snow got any worse!"

"How was Paris?"

"Great!" Jasmine called back. "I can't wait to tell you all about it."

"Well hurry on in!" Susan yelled back, "I can't wait to hear." She pulled back away from the window and closed it.

"Damn girl," Clint muttered as he put his pants on. "And did you see how small that car is that she's driving? How the heck did she get it here in all this snow? And all the way from the airport at Little Rock!"

"Oh hush," Susan chided as she grabbed her robe and threw it on. "At least they got here. And you be nice to her boyfriend this time. She loves him."

"Yeah, yeah," Clint replied. "But how the heck am I supposed to like someone who's never been hunting before? And the last time he was here, when I offered to take him, he turned absolutely green! Literally! How do you trust a guy that doesn't know the difference between a gun and...a baseball bat?"

"Don't be silly," Susan said as she breezed out of the bedroom and headed for the kitchen. By the time she got to the door, Jasmine and her boyfriend were just climbing the steps. She held the door wide and a moment later she was hugging her daughter. When the hug ended she turned to the boyfriend. "Come here Ronald," she said. "You can get a hug too." She hugged the man that her daughter was intending on marrying...eventually.

Clint finally reached the kitchen and got a big hug from his daughter, then he shook Ron's hand. "You two got suitcases and stuff I'd guess," Clint said. "Let me help you get them into the house?"

"I'll get them," Ron replied. He went out and Clint followed.

Jasmine took a seat at the table while Susan got busy making coffee. "I thought you were getting the kitchen redone," Jasmine said as she looked around.

"We are," Susan replied, "we just haven't gotten there yet."

A few minutes later, the bags had been deposited back in Jasmine's old bedroom where her doll collection still resided, and

everyone was sitting around the table with mugs of hot coffee. "So how is New York?" Susan asked. "As busy as ever?"

"Worse!" Jasmine said. "You wouldn't believe how much I hate living there."

"You're the one who wanted to move there," Susan reminded her. "And you're more than welcome to move back here any time you want."

"I have to live there," Jasmine told her. "That's where the fashion industry is."

"You can't do your work from here?"

"Mom," Jasmine replied, "don't be ridiculous!"

Susan shook her head. "So how was Paris?"

"Delightful!" Jasmine said with a smile. "Busy, but really wonderful!"

"And how did your show go this time?"

"Pretty good," Jasmine replied. "I'm afraid I'm still playing second fiddle to the really big designers, but I think I'm moving up in the world."

"You're definitely moving up," Ron threw in. "I've told you that for the last few years."

"I'm not at the top yet," Jasmine replied. "But I'm going to get there, one way or another!"

"Isn't your sister still helping you? Isn't she still modeling in all your shows?"

"Jade? Yeah. She's still doing every show I've got...mostly. And she still doesn't charge me a dime, which is really great. But she's so darn busy! She still stay's booked over a year in advance!"

"You're lucky she does what she does for you!" Susan told her.

"You don't have to tell me," Jasmine agreed. "I owe her. I owe her my life!"

"You may be being a bit overdramatic dear," Susan told her.

"No I'm not! You know what happened. She found me when I was nearly dead. She killed that bear that would have killed and eaten me for sure. I owe her for that, and I'll owe her for it forever!"

"You make it sound like she holds it against you."

"I know. And I know she doesn't. But after that happened, well, everything really went so crazy, for both of us."

"I know dear. It was an awfully trying time for me too. For a while there, I didn't know if I had two girls, two boys, a boy and a girl, or which boy was which girl."

Jasmine chuckled. "Yeah. Things were pretty wild back then."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

"Ugh!" Jasmine grunted. "I hate just thinking about it!"

"I know you know that Jasmine lived as a boy for a few years," Susan said to Ron.

"Yeah. She told me," Ron replied. "And it's pretty much common knowledge all over the place."

Susan nodded. "Well, after Jasmine's accident..."

"Except that I was Jimmy Joe back then," Jasmine threw in.

"Right," Susan replied. "Anyway, after the accident..." But Susan still couldn't let out anything that might hint at the real reason Jimmy and Jasmine had switched places back then. Not even after all this time. "Um... After the accident, Jas here, who was Jimmy Joe at the time, decided she wanted to go back to being a girl again." She couldn't mention that Jasmine really didn't want that, but that Jacob had come out and demanded that she change back shortly after he had demanded that Jade go back to being Jimmy. "And then that hunting show came along," Susan continued.

"Yeah, that pretty much changed everything," Jasmine agreed. "And as it turned out, the TV station wanted to see more of Jimmy Joe than anyone figured."

"So you couldn't go back to being a girl again," Ron noted.

The real truth of the matter was something that Jasmine couldn't tell him. Not even considering that they were going to get married... eventually. If she ever decided on picking a date. She couldn't tell him that Jacob had demanded that she become a girl again, so she had been stuck dressing like a girl whenever the TV people weren't around, and then dressing as a boy again when they were. But since she couldn't tell him that, she quickly reached for the story she had spread so many years ago. "Um...I tried to be a girl as much as I could when the TV people weren't around..."

"And as much as I really wanted you to be a girl again, it turned out to be nothing but a horrible disaster!" Susan added.

"Tell me about it!" Jasmine agreed. "I'm the one who was running around wearing girly stuff during all those times. I tried, but I looked and felt totally ridiculous!"

Susan nodded. "You really did, I'm afraid," Susan agreed.

"She looked like a damn boy wearing girl's clothes," Clint added. "Totally ridiculous!"

"Anyway," Susan continued for Ron's benefit, also not letting out the real truth. "When they okayed the show for a second season, Jas here decided she'd rather just stay Jimmy Joe and she went back on the hormones again." What she didn't say was that when the show went into its second season, since they really did want to see so much of Jimmy Joe, that Jacob was pretty much forced to let Jasmine remain Jimmy Joe all the time, and especially since she did look so ridiculous dressed as a girl. But again, it was only supposed to be until the show ended.

"And let me tell you, I was really much happier back then as a boy. Much!" Jasmine added.

"Yeah," Susan said. "We were all glad." Again, what she didn't say was that even though Jacob had decreed that when the show ended, Jimmy Joe would have to go back to being Jasmine again, everyone else in the family already knew it would never happen.

"So what made you decide to finally become a woman again?" Ron asked.

"Well, the show went on for a longer time than anyone thought it would."

"I'll say!" Clint added. "Year after year!"

"It was only three years," Susan corrected him.

"Seemed a lot longer," Clint replied.

"Hey! That was a good show," Jasmine told him. "And they loved me!"

"Yeah," Clint replied, "they loved you alright. And I guess the show did a lot for the family. As much trouble as it brought us, we also raked in a pile of money. And that doesn't come close to what it did for our regular business."

"There were other good things that came out of it too," Jasmine noted.

"Yeah, Elliot for one thing."

“No Dad. Elliot told me that scout from the Olympic rifle team got his name from the first big video the family did.”

“Well, two Olympic games now, and a silver and bronze medal, ain’t exactly too bad,” Clint said. “No matter what got Elliot on that team.”

“Yeah, he was always the best. But how about Nichole? She’s done really, really well. And that was directly because of that show.”

“I’ll say,” Susan agreed. “Marcy has two kids that have gone off and done far better than anyone ever expected.

“That’s for sure!” Jasmine agreed. Nichole really made it to the big time. Two platinum albums after that hunting show ended – back to back. And look at her now. She’s married to another big country star, they’ve got two adorable kids, a big house in Nashville, and she told me that she and her husband might be hosting next year’s country music awards on TV.”

“She is?” Susan exclaimed. “Marcy didn’t mention anything about it to me.”

“She probably doesn’t know. Nichole only told me in confidence last week.”

“You two were always so close,” Susan noted.

“Mostly,” Jasmine replied. “All except those years when I was living completely as a boy.”

“True,” Susan replied. “That was sad.”

Ron tried to bring the conversation back to where it had been. “So you were a boy back then and you liked it.”

It took a moment for Jasmine to switch gears again. “Yeah,” she said. “To tell the truth, I was much happier as a boy back then and I wasn’t really planning on changing anything. I was simply more comfortable that way than anything else. But I guess it was...little things. Little things that finally made me start to wonder about if maybe I should give up being a boy and go back to being a girl again.”

“What kind of little things?” Ron asked.

“Jasmine looked at him for a moment. “To tell the truth, I’m not really sure. I’ve never been really sure. Maybe when Elliot got his first really serious girlfriend. I think that might have started things. That happened right before they cancelled the hunting show.” She

looked at her mother with an almost comical expression on her face. "I used to be soooo hung up over Elliot."

"He's your cousin," Susan said.

"And didn't I know it! Not to mention he never ever looked at me as a girl he might like anyway. Ever!" She turned her attention back to Ron. "But it was about that time that things started to hit me. And then when Ethan got married and his wife got pregnant right away, well, I think it was then that I realized that I had been born with a girl's body, but I would never know what it's like to have my own baby. I guess that had a lot to do with it all. So I guess thinking about all those things kind of led me in that direction. And one day, I simply knew I really did want to be a girl again. And it was time."

"I can't tell you how surprised the entire family was about that," Susan told her.

"I know," Jasmine replied. "I think I was just as surprised."

"And look at you now," Ron said as he smiled at her. "You're beautiful, I'm very happy you made that decision!"

Jasmine smiled. "You're so sweet. But I'm not anything like I'd really like to be. My hands and feet are still too big because of it, and you have no idea how long I had to work on my voice to get it to sound right."

"I like you just the way you are," Ron said, trying to appease her over the issues she had with her body.

"You better!" Jasmine replied. "Or I'll find some way to get back at you so you'll never forget it!"

"Don't threaten like that!" Susan said quickly. "Every time you do, you go way overboard with things, and you know it!"

"I only do what I have to," Jasmine replied.

"Don't worry, I'll always love you," Ron said as he leaned over and gave her a quick kiss.

There was a brief lull in the conversation, and Jasmine had other things she wanted to talk about, only she preferred to talk about them with just her mother. "Ron," she said when no one said anything for a moment. "Why don't you go to bed now. I'll be along in a little while. I want to talk to Mom for a few minutes first."

Ron nodded. "Sure," he replied. He got up, leaned over, and gave Jasmine another little kiss. It wasn't mentioned, but both

Susan and Clint noticed again what they had noticed the first time they had met Ron. He did everything Jasmine told him. Always! But then he worked for her and part of his job was to handle whatever things she wanted taken care of.

"More coffee?" Susan asked, as both Ron and Clint left to go to bed.

"Sure," Jasmine replied, pushing her mug over toward her mother.

When they were finally alone and the coffee had been delivered, Jasmine said, "I talked with Jade on the phone last night. She told me you and Grandma made your usual pre-Christmas trip down there to see her."

"Then you know she'll be here tomorrow for Christmas dinner with the family."

Jade nodded. "It's about time! It's been so many years since she's done anything at all with the whole family.

"Almost ten years," Susan told her.

"Does Grandpa know she'll be there?"

Susan nodded. "Actually, it was his idea."

Talking about it reminded Jasmine of all the trouble back then, back when that darn TV show started, and when things got even worse afterwards. "Grandpa sure made life hell for Jade back then," she noted.

Susan nodded. "And the war between the two of them made life hell for all of us. Staying a girl and modeling was the one and only thing I've ever seen your sister dig her heels in over. The only thing! Ever!"

"And of course, you all knew that she was so much happier as a girl than anything else."

"Yeah, we knew, but your grandfather didn't see it that way. He never really has I think. Despite what he had to keep saying publicly for the TV people, he completely blamed himself for Jade becoming a girl and was never happy about it at all."

"Yeah," Jasmine agreed. "As far as I know, he never got over feeling responsible for it. He's always blamed himself."

"I'm afraid he still does."

“He blamed himself,” Jasmine said, “but he took it out on Jade. He made her dress like a boy for a while, no matter what she wanted. Except that after a few months of being forced to be a boy...”

“Whenever she wasn’t needed for the TV stuff,” Susan reminded her.

“Yeah. That was the only time he let her be...herself. But after a while of it, Jade just refused to dress as a boy anymore – anytime! And she didn’t care who didn’t like it. She wasn’t going back to being a boy again and that was that! And Grandpa got pretty darn furious at her.”

“Yeah, that’s when things went from really bad to worse.”

“Yeah, I remember. I saw some of those yelling matches they had, and I saw how she cried every time her bottom got blistered for talking back to him the way she did.”

“It was pretty awful,” Susan agreed.

Jasmine shook her head. “I’ll never forget that one summer when things got so bad with him demanding that she become a boy again, and she wouldn’t, that you and dad were out hunting for someplace else for us to live. That was downright scary!”

Susan nodded. “Things were...really bad back then. We had to get you two away from it. And we ourselves wanted away from it all. We had picked out a house down near your Uncle Jack’s store, and we were about to put a down payment on it, when your grandmother found out and started her own little war with your grandfather. She started insisting that Jacob stop being so adamant about things, and...well, after most of the family pleaded with us to stay here, we decided we would stick it out for a while more and see how things went.”

“But Grandpa never really liked it.”

Susan shook her head. “No. Never. We stayed here, and Jade and your grandpa wound up avoiding each other at all costs. And whenever a big holiday came up and the family got together, there was nothing but a feeling of absolute animosity between the two. Things were so bad it nearly tore the family apart.”

“And that was when Jade started refusing to go to any of the family get-togethers.”

“And she hasn’t been to one since. Ten years now.”

“But despite how bad things were with Grandpa, you still backed Jade all the way. You still did everything you could for her. You even let her stay on the hormones the whole time. Even during those few months when I wasn’t on them.”

Susan looked at her for a moment before replying. “We knew it had gone too far with her, even before that TV show came out. As your grandma always said, Jade was lost from the time your cousins adopted her into their little gang.”

Jasmine smiled remembering all the girls so long ago. “The Four Musketeers.”

“Yes,” Susan confirmed. “But it had gone on too long, and Jade had changed too much. And then when she discovered she actually liked the modeling, well, something inside of her seemed to change in an awfully big way. And, well, your dad and I knew she was happier than she had ever been, so we had your Uncle Brian keep her on the hormones.”

“And you even carted her down to that modeling school in Little Rock for a while.”

Susan rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that was a pain. It was so far away we wound up renting a place to stay for a few months. Fortunately, the school only lasted a little while, but all those fashion shows all over the place were the biggest pain to get to.”

“And Jade was pretty much a star right from the start,” Jasmine said.

Susan nodded. “Your sister had been all over the TV for one reason after another, and then after that first little fashion show you girls put on with your Home Ec class, she was broadcast all over the place again, modeling that one dress you had designed back then. And I think the news media pretty much decided then and there that she was destined to be a model.”

“And they didn’t even know that the Bertram Agency had already signed her up, right after that silly little show!”

“No. They didn’t,” Susan replied. “But all the agency had to do was to mention that Jade would be among the models for their next show, and I’m afraid Jade’s career was launched.”

“Huh! It sure was!” Do you know how much money she makes now? How much she’s always made?”

“I know it’s a lot.”

“A lot is an understatement. I’ve got my own design business, and I’m doing pretty darn well. But even I fly coach class whenever I get on an airplane. “She never flies anything but first class, and she does it so often that everyone in almost every airport in the world knows who she is.”

“She’s famous. Her pictures are all over the magazines and TV,” Susan countered. “And if you want to fly first class, why don’t you? You were rich from all that TV money, even before the hunting show came out. And then you piled up even more money. We all did!”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to touch that money. And I’m getting there with my business. Slowly but surely, I’m getting there.”

“Actually Jas, I think you’re getting there pretty darn quickly. You’re only twenty-four. And don’t forget, your name was already showing up in the fashion world right after that first school fashion show you did.

“Yeah. I owe Gloria Bertram for that. And later, she really helped me launch my career. And...I guess I am making pretty good money now. I can at least afford my apartment in New York and a place for my business too. And at New York prices, that’s saying something!”

Susan smiled. “So I understand. But from what you’ve told me about it, your places both sound...um...a little on the small side.”

“Tiny!”

“Well, no. Just...small.

“Mom, it is small. But not nearly as bad as a lot of places in New York. And the building I live in is pretty nice, and the apartment itself is great. It’s everything I could ask for...in New York.” She shook her head. “It’s a lot nicer than that place that Jade has!”

“Jade? Are you kidding? You’ve seen how nice her place is. It’s beautiful!”

“Yeah. It’s beautiful alright...inside...where she lives! But the rest...”

“Well, she wanted that business.”

“So she had to go and buy the ugliest building in Little Rock?”

"It's not that bad. Besides, it's only fifteen minutes from the airport."

"Mom, it's a big square cinder block building. And the area around it looks more like a junk yard!"

"But her apartment upstairs from her business is beautiful."

"Jasmine nodded. Yeah, it really is. It's just all the rest that looks like trash." She smiled. "I still can't believe how big her closet is though!"

"Enormous!"

"Yeah, it takes up half her house! And it's actually divided up into separate rooms! Do you know she's got one room just for her gowns? And don't even get me started on her shoe room. I could live there and never come out!"

Susan smiled. "You and many other women in the world."

"But it's that stupid fix-it business she has that takes up the entire downstairs. It's...ugly!"

Susan shrugged. "I guess that's the way businesses like that seem to get. I understand she does a pretty good business there though."

"Ha! Good business is right. Have you ever seen the way things get there when everyone knows she's in town and her shop will be open?"

"What do you mean?"

"People line up left and right to bring their stuff in for her to fix. Four wheelers, all kinds of ATVs, lawn mowers, and any other junk they want her to fix."

"Oh, it's not quite like that."

"Are you kidding? Have you ever seen her when she's working that fix-it stuff?"

"No. Not really."

"Mom, she wears these skin tight jumpsuits all the time, and absolutely stupidly high heels. And then she flips that long thick luscious hair of hers all around when she's working. It's practically pornographic! She tells me that a lot of the guys who come in, break their stuff purposely, just so they can watch her fixing it!"

Susan looked at Jasmine skeptically, but somehow believing it. "Well, knowing your sister like I do, I guess I believe it. Who would

have ever believed she'd be like that after the way she was when you two first started switching things all around."

"Huh!" Jasmine grunted. "She's got a body to die for and she knows it. Of course she exercises two hours every single morning and she doesn't eat a damn thing all day to keep it that way. She once told me that one of the best things about that fix-it business she's got, is that it keeps her from thinking about food and eating."

"She's always been good at fixing things," Susan noted.

"Yeah. Everyone always said she was."

"She was good at it long before you two switched things around. Like your father always said, she simply always had the knack."

"Yeah," Jasmine agreed. "I remember. Even back when we were little kids. Back before Reverend...what was his name?"

"Cosinger."

"Yeah, back before he kept us out of church that Easter and started all the ruckus. Whatever became of him, do you know? Didn't he leave about the time they started filming the hunting show?"

Susan nodded. "Nobody's mentioned him in a long time now. Last I heard, he was still up at some big church in Saint Louis."

Jasmine nodded and took another sip of her coffee before speaking again. "So Grandpa knows Jade's going to be there tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Like I said, it was actually his idea."

"All I can say is, it's about time! But what brought this on? Even Grandma has never able to solve the differences between him and Jade. And I know how hard she tried...for years!"

"Um...I'm not totally sure, but I think some of it may have been the new still Jade built for your Grandfather and then gave it to him for his birthday."

"Jade saw Grandpa? For his birthday? And she built him a new still?"

"Well, actually, Jade built the thing and gave it to him, but she never saw him. She carted the thing up here and then Jed and Ethan installed it. Don't ask me where the thing is though, because as far as I know, Jed and Ethan are still the only ones in the family, other than your grandfather, who know where it's at."

"And Jade," Jasmine said. "Jade was there a few times."

Susan shook her head. "Jade knows the general area it's in, but even she says she could never find it again if she tried."

"So Jade made Grandpa a new still for his birthday. Even after all the...difficulties between them."

Susan nodded. "From what I hear, he needed a new one. Even now, McComber Moonshine is our biggest seller down in the gift shop. And if we had a license to sell it on more than a limited basis, then I have no doubt your Grandpa would happy as a lark doing nothing but making the darn stuff all the time."

Jasmine smiled. "Yeah, even I like it. I always have."

Jasmine took another sip of her coffee before she changed the subject. "Um...Mom. I talked with Olivia yesterday too. Did you know her husband left her a few days ago?"

"Jane told me," Susan replied. "It's so sad. And right before Christmas too. And they just had another baby not six months ago. Jane said that Olivia's supposed to be there tomorrow, but I haven't heard that she ever got here."

"Mom, I talked to Olivia yesterday when I talked to Jade. She's down there with her right now."

"She went to Little Rock?"

"You know that the first place Olivia always runs when she's got problems is to Jade. Those two have always had a thing for each other since they were kids."

Just thinking about that made Susan more glad than ever that Jade had gotten her big operation a few years ago. "Well, I guess with all this snow, she has a better chance of getting here with Jade than any other way."

"Mom, Olivia said she's leaving California. She's moving back to Arkansas."

"Oh! Jane didn't tell me that. I'm sure the family will be thrilled to build her a house on the new street along with the others."

Jasmine shook her head. "Mom, I think she's wanting to stay with Jade. Live right there with her."

That was a much more troubling thought for Susan. "That's...strange."

Jasmine shrugged. "Like I said, Olivia always runs to Jade when she's got problems." What Jasmine didn't say though was that she was pretty sure the two had slept together a number of times over the years, even before Jade had gotten her operation. But then, the rumor mills in the industry had it that Jade had slept with a lot of people, men and women both. And Jasmine didn't doubt those rumors for a minute!

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"Jade? Jade? Are you down there?" Not hearing anything, Olivia looked back at her two-year-old son who was playing with Jade's two little dogs in the living room. "You stay here Caleb," she said. But she was pretty sure her son never even heard her. Shifting the baby on her hip, she took a chance that her son would stay away from the stairs and headed down the steps toward Jade's store and fix-it shop below. "Jade?" she called again. "Are you down here?"

"I'm back here!" Jade yelled.

Olivia reached the bottom of the stairs and looked around the cavernous space. Not seeing her, she called again. "Where are you?"

"Back here," Jade said as she stepped out from behind the side of a large four seater ATV so Olivia could see her better.

"Are you coming up soon?" Olivia asked.

Jade started walking toward Olivia so they could talk easier in the large crowded space. "What time is it?"

"Past time to go! Have you seen how much snow is out there?"

Jade smiled. "No problem. My new truck can handle it easily."

"You and your toys! Well Caleb is getting bored upstairs and it's Christmas Day. We need to get going! And you're not even dressed yet!" she added, staring disapprovingly at Jade's greasy coveralls.

"Okay," Jade replied with a smile as she pulled the scarf off her head that she had covered her hair with. Volumes of long beautiful hair fell out and around her shoulders, already looking perfectly styled before Jade had a chance to run a brush through it again.

"I hate you," Olivia said as she turned and started up the stairs again before Caleb could get a chance to see where she had gotten to. "Nobody should have hair that good! What are you wearing?" she asked."

"I haven't made up my mind yet," Jade replied.

"And you're still downstairs tinkering with junk?"

"I'll figure something out. Want to help?"

"If you can make sure I don't get lost in that place you call a closet."

Five minutes later, with Caleb and Jade's dogs now running through the rooms of her closet, Jade and Olivia stood staring at dresses. "I was thinking of wearing one of these," Jade said as she hung two of her formal dresses on hooks so they could compare them. The red one is more Christmassy, but I really like the blue one better. And I've been dying for a place I can wear it."

"Jade," Olivia said. "Can't you find anything better that won't look like you're supposed to be on the red carpet for the Oscars?"

"I didn't wear either of these to the Oscars," Jade replied. She quickly searched through the dresses nearby. "Last year I wore this one," she said as she pulled out a long slinky black dress and held it up in front of her.

"I remember," Olivia said. "You looked gorgeous! Just like always. "But for heaven's sake, don't you think these dresses are a bit...over the top?"

"But the family always dresses up real nice for Christmas," Jade argued. "That's all I'm trying to do."

"But this is too nice! Try toning it down a bit. Try being normal for a change."

"This is normal."

Olivia shook her head. "Whatever."

"I think I'll go with the red," Jade decided as she looked at the dresses again. I like the sparkle of all the silver design around the neckline.

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"Have you figured out what you're going to say yet?"

"You mean to the family?" Jacob asked.

"No...to Jade!" Rose replied.

"Oh. Not yet. I haven't even thought about it."

"Are you going to talk to her at all?"

"Most likely."

"I mean, privately."

"Why should I?"

"Maybe because your attitude towards her has kept her away from this family for the last ten years!"

"Well what should I say?"

"You might try telling her you're sorry."

"She knows that. She knows I'm the one who made the decision to put her in that position all those years ago. And she knows how guilty I still feel about it."

"Yes, but it couldn't hurt to say the words."

"Bah! I'll think about it."

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"Finally!" Olivia exclaimed.

"I told you this truck would make it with no problems."

"But we are soooo late!"

"Well..."

"You had to go and get all dressed to the nines for this. I'm not even sure how you managed to climb up into this truck in that tight dress, let alone drive."

"I'm used to it," Jade replied.

"You could have worn something a lot less fancy. And it would have taken far less time!"

Jade didn't reply. She hadn't really hurried to get ready, mostly because she wasn't sure she was looking forward to this. She saw most of the others once in a while...some of them fairly frequently. But she hadn't seen her grandfather in the last ten years. But she was all grown up now. She wasn't a child anymore. How would he react to her? She was far more worried about that than she was letting on.

She drove in through the fancy new entranceway with its big stone pillars framing the road and the big sign proclaiming the McComber Hunting Preserve. A minute later, they passed the new family business office on the right side of the road, across the street from the huge new lodge building and the rows of smaller guest cottages just past it. The old business office had gotten torn down to make room for the new big lodge. And since the family was so much larger now, it had been designed with big family gatherings in mind. Jade though, had never been inside it.

Someone had plowed the road earlier that morning, and someone had also plowed the big parking lot in front of the lodge. The parking lot was fairly packed with cars and pickup trucks. There were plenty of places for Jade to park, but she wasn't sure she was ready yet to go in. Instead of parking, she pulled up in front of the lodge entrance. "You and the kids go on in," she told Olivia. "I'll park the truck."

As Olivia opened her door, a step slid out from under the truck for her to step down on. A moment later, she was climbing back up on it again as she opened the back door to start getting her kids out of their car seats. Jade only sat staring straight ahead, hardly turning her head through the whole operation. Olivia never noticed. "Okay," Olivia said as she finally got the baby free. "See you inside." She closed the door, grabbed Caleb's hand, and led him toward the fancy wooden doors ahead.

"Olivia!" a woman's voice exclaimed the minute they got inside. Olivia quickly found herself in the tight embrace of one of her best friends in the world. They finally separated. "How are you...*doctor* Allison?" Olivia said with a smile.

"To hell with me," Allison replied. "How are you?"

Olivia shrugged. "Managing."

"Here, let me take your coat," Allison offered.

"Olivia!" another female voice called loudly. Olivia didn't get her coat off because one of the biggest country music stars in the world was hurrying straight at her. "Nichole," Olivia said as they also hugged. She stood back and stared at both Nichole and Allison. Tears formed in her eyes. "You don't know how I've missed you guys."

“Well we’re all here again, and after what your stupid husband did to you, we’re staying together!” Allison said emphatically.

“Me too!” Nichole added. “At least until I have to go back to Tennessee.”

“Here, let me take the baby,” Allison offered. “And let’s finally get your coat off. Did you drive in from the airport?”

“No, I came with Jade.”

“Jade?” Nichole exclaimed. “She’s coming? I don’t believe it! Where is she?”

“Outside parking her truck.”

“Olivia!”

Olivia turned to see Jasmine hurrying toward her. She just barely got her coat off before she was being hugged by another of her best friends in the world.

“I thought you were coming with Jade,” Jasmine said as she finally stepped back.

“She’s outside parking her truck,” Olivia told her.

“I can’t believe she’s finally coming to a family affair,” Allison said as Olivia removed Caleb’s coat. “How long has it been?”

“Ten years!” Jasmine told them.

“Ten years too long!” Nichole added.

“That’s for sure!” Olivia agreed.

“With Caleb’s coat finally off, Olivia released him and watched as he ran off into the middle of far too many people. “Caleb!” she shouted. But the two year old never even slowed down.

“He’ll be fine!” Nicole told Olivia. “Mine are running around somewhere in here too. And you know how many young kids are in the family now.”

“Who’d ever believe it,” Allison said.

“You’re next!” Nichole said laughingly to Allison.

“Hey, I’m not even married yet! And now that I’m working with dad, he’s taking off more often to go hunting. I hardly get time to date anymore.”

Jasmine looked around the lodge, and her eyes ended up staring at the front doors. “Where the heck did Jade have to park? I know there’s a lot of us here today, but how long can it take her?”

“You should see the dress she wore!” Olivia told her. “She probably can’t get out of her truck!”

Jasmine knew Olivia was only joking. “I think I’ll go look for her,” she said with a hint of worry in her voice.

Jasmine opened one of the front doors wide enough to stick her head out and look around. She didn’t see anyone. Stepping out into the crisp cold air, she looked around the parking lot more seriously. She still didn’t see anyone. She also didn’t see any cars or trucks that looked like their engines were still running. So where was Jade? She was fairly certain that Jade hadn’t come into the lodge yet, because she had no doubt that Jade’s presence wouldn’t go unnoticed by anyone.

Hugging her arms around her body for warmth, she headed out to check the vehicles. Nothing, nothing, nothing. She came to the last vehicle in the parking lot, further away than any of the others. It was a big new pickup truck. But then most of the trucks in the family were fairly new and big. The truck wasn’t running, but closer inspection revealed someone sitting in the driver’s seat. She went up next to it and saw Jade, sitting there, staring straight ahead. She knocked on the window, obviously startling Jade inside.

Jade turned her head to see Jasmine standing outside her truck. She tried to smile, but it was a difficult smile.

“Coming?” Jasmine asked through the closed truck door.

Jade turned her head away from her sister and stared out through the truck windshield again.

Jasmine knocked on the truck door again. No reaction this time. Her sister was ignoring her. She reached for the door handle and pulled, and was surprised when the door opened easily. She nearly tripped as the step slid out from under the truck right at her legs. “What’s wrong?” Jasmine asked.

“I don’t know,” Jade replied.

Jasmine waited a moment, but her sister still wasn’t even looking at her. “Are you coming in?”

“I don’t know,” Jade said again.

“It’s cold out here,” Jasmine finally said. “You need to get out of there and come in.”

“I’m okay here,” Jade replied.

“Jade, what’s wrong?” Jasmine insisted.

This time Jade looked back at her. “How will they react? How will they treat me?”

“Jade, you know everyone here! Well, I’m not too sure about some of the kids, but you know everyone else. You see most of them once in a while, don’t you?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what?”

“What about...him?”

“Who, Grandpa?” When Jade didn’t reply she added, “Mom said it was his idea for you to come this time.”

Jade nodded. “But how will things be between us?”

“You’ll never know if you continue to sit there and don’t come in. Now everyone’s here. Everyone! Except you! And I think they’re waiting dinner until you come in. So stop sitting there feeling sorry for yourself and come inside – where everyone loves you!”

“Not everyone.”

“Everyone! You know perfectly well that Grandpa loves you! You know that! Because if he didn’t, he’d never feel as guilty as he does.”

Jade looked at her for a moment, but didn’t move.

“Now come on,” Jasmine said. “I’m freezing out here.”

Jade finally pivoted around in her seat and set one high heeled foot down on the step. She turned and grabbed a small purse with a long silver chain for a strap. She finally stepped down into the plowed parking lot. Jasmine grabbed her arm, as much to keep Jade from running away as for any other reason. Together they headed towards the door. Jade stopped though and stared at what looked like an old rusty sculpture set out for decoration by the front door. She recognized Jacob’s old still. “I see they found a new home for this thing,” she mentioned before moving again toward the building.

When they reached the fancy doors, Jasmine opened one of them and practically pushed Jade inside ahead of her. The warmth inside the building felt both oppressive and heavenly at the same time. Inside, Jade stopped a moment and stared at all the people. It was the first time in many years that she had seen so many family

members together at one time. She was struck by how many really young kids were running around the big room. Most of them she didn't even know. The place itself was huge! Her eyes ran around the balcony that stretched along three sides of the area that was now full of the family she had avoided for so many years. The entire place was nicely decorated for Christmas.

"Here," Jasmine said to her. "You can put your coat in here." She led Jade off to a small side room that held some old fashioned game tables and comfortable seats.

Jade had started removing her coat when she heard someone calling her. "Jade?"

She turned and saw her mother standing there.

"Did I see," a voice said as someone came up behind Susan.

"Hi Aunt Marcy," Jade said as she saw her aunt entering the small room right behind her mother. Jade hugged both of them.

Jade finally removed her coat, and suddenly heard a new voice from the doorway. "My God!"

She turned around and saw Allison there. Allison rushed over and hugged her. "Hey...*doctor!*" Jade said with a big grin.

Allison stepped back and looked Jade over. "You couldn't have found anything a bit more decent to wear? You had to wear something frowzy?"

Jade laughed. "This old thing?"

"Old my ass! I have no doubt the price of it could have probably paid all my medical school bills!"

Jade smiled. "I didn't know what to wear." The truth was though, that the dress she was wearing might really have paid for a major portion of Allison's school expenses.

"Come on," Allison said. "Jas, you grab one side and I've got the other, let's show this lady around. And with two of us here to hold her down, this time she won't get away!"

Nervously, Jade let Allison and Jasmine lead her out to the rest of the family. It took only moments before she was exchanging pleasantries and hugging people she hadn't seen in months. Most of whom were not only surprised to see her there, but they expressed how genuinely glad they were to see her. But since dinner had been held a little while until she could get there, Jade didn't get very far

around the room before Allison and Jade led her over to a seat at the enormous u-shaped series of tables that filled half the main lodge floor. Jade soon found herself sitting between Allison, and Jasmine, with Olivia, Nichole and her husband, Ashley and her husband, and seven young kids that Jade wasn't sure who belonged to who, sitting close by.

And then Jade saw him. Her Grandpa. They locked eyes for just a moment before Jacob looked away and announced that he was about to say grace. Jade never bowed her head. She never even thought about it. She was too busy watching everyone else, especially her grandpa.

For as fancy as Jade had dressed, and as nicely as everyone else had dressed, dinner was anything but elegant or fancy. People were grabbing food from bowls and trays placed down the center of all the tables. People stood to lean over other people to grab food while talking to someone else or while tending to needy kids. Everybody seemed to be in motion during the dinner, except Jade. Jade managed to take a little spoonful of a few different things that were on the table, mostly vegetables. But she was long used to not eating like everyone else. Her career depended on it. She had to explain several times that she just couldn't eat the same way everyone else did, for which she got sorrowful commiserate looks from everyone. But that was something else she was used to now when it came to eating.

A few times during the dinner, she looked around at everyone else. A few of those times she and her grandfather seemed to look at each other for a few moments. She wondered if he felt nearly as nervous about this as she did. She was really hoping that as soon as dinner was over with, she could say hello and goodbye to a few more people and then just get out of there. She was still not sure she should have come. She was overdressed and more nervous than she wanted to be. How could she get Olivia to agree to go home as soon as dinner ended?

While most of the family was sitting and eating desert, Jade excused herself to get away from the table and the constant suggestions that she should "try something." Trying to stay away from the table and the people who were eating, mostly so she

wouldn't have to talk to anyone, she started wandering around the large main room, looking at the room and the many decorations in it. It was easy to see that below the "Christmas" layer, the room was filled with the typical hunting paraphernalia. Hung on one wall, she found the deer head that Jasmine had shot and that had hung prominently in her old bedroom, until sometime after Jasmine decided to stop being a boy and they had switched rooms again. At that time, her father had taken all the old stuffed animals down from the wall and put them away somewhere. Jade never knew where he had put them and never cared. Obviously they hadn't gotten thrown out with the trash.

In one corner of the room, she found something else, a large stuffed black bear that to her looked nearly seven feet tall the way it had been posed, standing on its hind legs. She had heard about that bear after they had had it stuffed. But she had never wanted to see it let alone go near it. This was her first time coming face to face with the bear that she had shot since she had pulled the trigger so long ago. Now, the huge teeth in its snarling face and the immensely long claws on its paws looked nothing but frightening. How had she managed to kill the thing? She thanked her lucky stars that she had. She had no doubt that she'd be dead right now if she hadn't.

"Recognize it?"

Jade turned and found Jasmine there.

"It still sends shudders through me every time I look at it," Jasmine told her.

"Look at the teeth on that thing," Jade said. "We were awfully lucky."

"You don't have to tell me. I once named every one of those killer teeth. I can't tell you how many times I've had nightmares about that thing killing and eating me."

Jade smiled. "And I thought I was the only one who had dreams like that." She suddenly felt someone's arm on her shoulder. She turned and smiled. "Hi Grandma," she said as she hugged the older woman. "Merry Christmas."

"It's a lot merrier now that you're here," Rose told her. "Are you managing alright?"

Jade nodded. "Yeah, it's a bit strange. But I'm doing fine."

“Good!” Rose replied. “Come on then. I want you to talk to someone.”

With her arm holding Jade’s, Rose led the super model through the room full of people, and all the way up behind the head table where she and Jacob had been sitting and eating dinner. Jacob was sitting at a little corner table talking with Jed, John, Brian, and Clint.

“Hi Daddy,” Jade said, going over and giving her father a warm hug, but the entire time she was there, she was more aware of Jacob than ever.

After Jade had hugged her father, Rose turned to Jacob. “Get up you old windbag. Come and at least say hello to the missing link in the family.”

Jacob never even looked at his wife. His eyes had been on Jade ever since she and Rose had come into his sight. He slowly rose to his feet, aware that all eyes were on him. As he approached Jade, he was aware that moment by moment, more eyes were falling on him...and Jade.

Jade watched as her grandpa approached. She stood still, unable to move. He had aged...markedly. He still stood strong and proud, but there was a slight stoop to his shoulders now. His body looked a lot skinnier too. The glasses he wore were also a new addition. As he stood in front of her, she wanted to say something. Anything. But no words would leave her mouth.

After several moments of just staring at each other, Jacob finally nodded. “You happy?” he asked.

Jade nodded nervously. Her dry throat managed to say, “Yes. Very.”

Jacob nodded again. “As long as you’re happy, I guess that’s all that really counts.”

“I’m happy,” Jade managed to confirm.

Jacob nodded, then looked around. It would be time to start handing out the gifts soon. The part that all the kids looked forward to the most. “I guess Rose took whatever gift we got you, down there where you live a few days ago.”

Jade smiled. “It was a scarf. A beautiful scarf. I was wearing it just this morning.”

Jacob nodded. "Glad you liked it." Again, there was nothing said for a moment. "Thanks for the new still. Jed told me you made the thing just for me...for my birthday. That was...real good. Real good!"

"I figured you needed it – years ago!"

"Huh!" Jacob laughed. "That other one fell apart so many times I had trouble keepin' up with the moonshine orders from the darn gift shop here."

"Well now you've got one that shouldn't need any fixing for many years. And it should be a lot safer for brewing your shine than the old one was."

Jacob nodded. "No doubt." He looked at her for a moment again. "You know, other than that scarf Rose got you, I ain't got no gift from me to hand out to you today like I do for everyone else. Sorry about that."

Jade smiled. "I don't care, Grandpa. You know I don't need anything."

"That's not the point! I take care of everyone alike! Every year."

"Grandpa," Jade said, "the only gift I could ever want from you, is a hug."

Jacob immediately moved closer and closed his arms around her. Together, they held each other like that for several long minutes.

"I'm sorry, Grandpa," Jade said through her crying tears.

"I'm sorry too, Jade," Jacob told her. "More than you'll ever know."

The end.

Other Karen Singer Books you might like:

Golden Greed

“Throw it to the wells of hell!”

Gold! Historic gold. Priceless gold. Gold bars the size of bricks. Gold bars that each have Nazi symbols stamped into them. Gold bars found somewhere where they shouldn't exist. But for Carl who found them, the question soon became, were they cursed, or was it his life that was cursed instead?

Carl was an in-between. He was a transgendered soul who was several months in on his journey going from being Carl to Carly. Man to woman. He was at that in-between stage where if you looked at Carl as a man, you'd probably think there was something wrong or not quite right about him. If you looked at Carly as a woman, if you didn't notice immediately that she was in transition, you would probably think there was something wrong or not quite right about her as well. In-between. As such, Carl was doing the best he could to deal with life. He was particularly worried about coming out to everyone at work and possibly losing his job over it. His relationship with his wife that he still loved was pretty much history. But the most important thing of all to him was his relationship with his eleven-year-old daughter. A relationship that he cherished above all else.

All those problems though were normal. All the problems and fears that Carl faced were to be expected. What wasn't expected, was the gold that Carl found. A find that was momentous. A find that was historical. A find that greedy people would do anything to get their hands on.

Not only must Carl face all the fears of transitioning from male to female. He must also face the fears from greedy people bound and

determined to do anything for the sake of getting their hands on his gold. Gold that he didn't know was cursed.

The Jenni ...with an i series

Book 1: Family Can Be Murder

There's murder...and then there's murder. And Jenni wasn't prepared for any of it. As a transgendered woman, Jenni knew that her entire family hated her because she was different. But when she nearly tripped over the dead body of her grandfather, she just knew everyone was going to blame her for his death. How could they not? Especially since she had announced just a few hours earlier that she would kill him. But finding the dead body of her grandfather turned out to be just the start of Jenni's problems, because everything that came after that, was so much worse!

Book 2: Daddy Came Calling

All her life, Jenni's mother and father had abused her and beat her because she was transgendered. They couldn't understand why their son kept insisting that he was really a girl when there could be no doubt at all that he was a boy. And Jenni couldn't get them to understand that she was a girl in the wrong body. Things were so bad that Jenni really wanted to see them both, and especially her father, in prison.

And then that magical day came when Jenni's father was accused of murder, and the strangest thing occurred – the police asked Jenni to investigate – to prove her father was guilty.

But investigating that murder was the least of Jenni's problems as the terrorists came back looking for vengeance. And so did someone else, seeking a worse vengeance – her grandmother.

And it all started around the time when her...Daddy Came Calling.

Book 3: Curl Up and Die

Jenni, Jenni, who's got the Jenni? The terrorists are engaged in the worst string of terrorist attacks in history against the United States, and the only person who seems to be able to do anything at all against them is Jenni. But as far as Jenni can see, the FBI doesn't want her help. To make matters worse, her grandmother is doing everything she can to put Jenni in jail – permanently. The American people don't know if they want Jenni alive or dead, but the way things are working out, most of them seem to want her dead. And the terrorists...simply want her head!

To Jenni, her life is like going from one kind of prison to another. If she thought her life growing up was bad, it was nothing like what the government was capable of inflicting on her.

The pressure and stress finally mount to the point where Jenni wants to do nothing more than to...Curl Up and Die.

Satan's Daughter

Evil was a world unto itself. A difficult drowning pit of black slime that was impossible to climb out of. I hadn't fallen into that pit. I had jumped with both feet. Willingly. Embracing it fully. I didn't know then that trifles like happiness and beauty would be lost to me. I'd had no idea. I only knew that evil was the best course for me, and I went. Willingly. Forever.

Born into an enormously wealthy family, where wealth can cover up almost anything, David was diagnosed as being transgendered when he was only three years old. Due to his young age, his parents decided to wait a few years before doing anything about it. When he was five, just before they were going to try letting him live as a girl to see how he'd do, the evil showed up, and all plans to let him live a different life changed.

One horrible thing after another seemed to happen. Before long, David wasn't just labeled as bad, he was branded as evil. But it wasn't until he was nineteen that he decided to really go searching for all that evil within him. It wasn't until then that he decided to fully embrace that evil. In doing so, he committed the most horrible act against his own family that he was able to conceive.

Leaving home and all his family's wealth behind, David wandered, waiting for the police to catch up with him. When they didn't, he finally decided to stop into a gender reassignment clinic to satisfy his curiosity, and wound up beginning a journey he should have started when he was just a small child.

There could be no forgiveness, but the wealth of the family he wanted nothing to do with ever again, refused to leave him alone. Over and over again they tried to buy his love. But not only did David not want their money, long ago he had learned that love was a silly concept that didn't exist.

I invite you now to meet a VERY troubled young man. The evil child. His name is David – Satan's daughter.

Victim Number Three

Jillian Whitmore walked out of the club where she had been celebrating, only to get brutally beaten, shot, and left for dead. But Jillian didn't die – and that was just the start of her problems. Because in reality, Jillian was actually Jake Whitmore, an Atlanta city police officer. And the time he eagerly spent as Jillian was a secret he had done everything possible to hide from the rest of the officers on the force. Now, not only does everyone know about his transgendered life, but Jake finds himself up against someone who is very determined to see him dead.

In a heinous string of serial killings, Jake was supposed to be victim number three. Now he finds himself in a race against time. Find

whoever was killing the transgendered women, find whoever was trying to kill him – and do it all before they actually did manage to kill him.

Or...before the fierce love of his own mother killed him first.

Cinder

For as long as he could remember, his father had always threatened him with the phrase, “I’ll burn you to a cinder, and then step on you and crush you out!” And then one day when he was fourteen, his father did just that. He ran from the house in absolute agony, and he never went back. Living on the streets of New York City, he learned to survive on his own. Until two years later, six people were murdered right in front of him, two of them hookers that were his best friends. And his life changed forever.

This book is full of action, suspense, and mystery – all wrapped around the smartest...and dumbest kid you’ve ever met. This is a story about a kid who loves New York and loves his freedom to literally walk the entire island of Manhattan at will. But he is a kid plagued with problems. Problems that only grow worse as the story progresses. Problems from too many people who suddenly want him dead. And all that is on top of another little problem. He was born with a birth defect. He was a girl...with the wrong body.

The Winds of Chaos

Mathew Montclair was a highly decorated Marine and a hero in every sense of the word. But after being wounded in a recent action in the Middle East, he realized how quickly life can be extinguished. Plagued by one of the worst PTSD cases the doctors had seen in a while, he decided to leave the Marines and head toward a new life for himself, the life he had always dreamed of – a life as the woman he always knew existed inside of him. He had tried to run away from

his feminine side for as long as he could remember, hiding that part of him by becoming as masculine as possible. But now he decided it was time to run towards that goal instead. His plan was to leave the military, say hello to his family, and then disappear completely, so that none of his family or friends would be stuck with the anguish, hurt, and embarrassment of what he was about to do. The only problem was, Fate had other plans for our hero.

Second Life, Second Chance

Eighty-six year old Carl Lambert died in a nursing home in Fort Lauderdale, Florida and somehow woke up in the drug wracked body of a fifteen year old boy in Portland, Oregon. But for his entire long life, Carl Lambert had secretly held onto a dream, a yearning, and never told a single soul. For as long as he could remember, Carl had always dreamed of what it would be like to be a girl.

Now he suddenly found himself with a new life, a second life. But since he had come back as a boy again, he wondered if maybe it was somebody's idea of a joke. If so, he didn't get it. But there were opportunities available now that didn't exist during his past life. So this was his second chance to get what he had always really wanted. The only problem was, between his drug addiction and the attitudes stacked against him, he literally had mountains in his way.

The McComber Switch

To the world, the story began with this: "Welcome to northern Arkansas. This is the story of a family that lives here. It's a story about courage and stress, love and hatred. It's a story about Four Musketeers. A story about boys and men who love hunting more than life. A story about an extended family that cares for each other with a passion that is almost furious. Yet it is also a story about a family that is stressed to the limits with no conceivable way out. And

finally, this is the story of two young twins with the courage and determination to do what nobody wants them to do.”

To the world, that is the *official* way this story began. The truth however was something far different!

This is the story of an eleven year old boy and an eleven year old girl. Twins! One who refuses to do what he’s supposed to do, and one who refuses to stop doing what she’s not supposed to do. And so the family, at their wits end, decide to enact a punishment that most would consider criminal. A punishment that would literally put the twins through hell in order to change their minds and get them to see the light. Yet it is a punishment of the twin’s own design. One that the twins themselves asked for – in writing. The boy would become the girl, and the girl would become the boy. The twins just thought that nobody would ever go along with it.

Everyone hated the idea, but no one had a better plan for dealing with the problem. Everyone was sure that the plan would work. And everyone was wrong!