

A WOMAN'S GIFT

By Diane Woods



ILLUSTRATED BY MISTY MALVEAUX

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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by Diane Woods

Chapter 1

Most people figure their life as starting when they were born, or at least back to when they were two or three when their first memories began to form. But me, I kind of feel that my life really began when I was about 12. That's because that's how old I was when my life sort of started over, and I began down the path I've followed since then. It's when I started to become a girl.

I hadn't been born a girl. At least, not on the outside. Because I had male sex organs between my legs, I was raised as a boy. I just blundered along, accepting that as the way it was supposed to be, for the most part. Although, to be honest, there were signs along the way of what I really was inside.

For instance, I can vaguely remember handling some of my mother's nylons and underthings, and being absolutely fascinated about how they felt. I must have been five or six years old then, I guess. It seemed so unfair, even then, that I couldn't wear things like that. Boy clothes were so...dull, so coarse and boring. The things I found in my mother's drawers were just the opposite, they were exciting and wonderful.

I wasn't a very big or robust little boy. I was always very thin and short, so I got picked on a lot by the other kids. My neighborhood was a little rough, so I spent a lot of time hanging around the house, rather than playing outside with the other kids. They all just picked me, and beat up on me, so I learned to avoid all the trouble and stick close to my own house.

My father, I never knew. I gather he took off before I was even born.

So it was just Mom and me, living in the bottom apartment of a three-flat on the far South side of Chicago.

Mom never was able to get child support (I don't think she even knew where Dad had taken off to) so we were always pinching pennies. Mom worked as much as she could, but her health was always kind of poor.

The one thing we could really share was our love of music. Mom made a little money giving piano lessons, on our old standup piano, and she made sure that I learned to play also. Unlike a lot of the kids Mom taught, I didn't mind practicing. It was certainly better than being beat up or harassed out on the streets.

And I found a connection with my mother through the music. My happiest memories of her are of the two of us at the keyboard, working our way through some difficult piece.

But one gray day in November, when I came home from school, there was an ambulance just leaving from in front of our building, and all the neighbors were standing

around. Everyone had these terrible looks on their faces, and talked to each other very softly. I didn't know it yet, but the music was about to go out of my life, at least for a while.

"Joey?" a policeman said to me, "Joey, you need to come with us to your Aunt's."

I asked what had happened, but no one wanted to tell me too much.

"Your Mom's sick," the policeman finally told me. "But don't worry, you'll be okay. We've talked with your Aunt, she'll pick you up from the station."

"I want to see my Mom," I told him, but he said that I could do that in a bit.

But the truth is, I didn't get to see her again, except at the wake. She had suffered an aneurysm, something let go in her brain, and she died that gray November day. I was alone in the world, at the age of 11. I didn't understand it at the time, but my new life had begun with a death.

My Aunt Margaret did eventually pick me up from the police station, and I stayed with her over those next few horrible days and nights. I can't remember too much about that time now, just an incredible sense of sadness and my crying virtually non-stop.

Aunt Margaret owned a store on the Northwest side of Chicago, and had a big apartment on the second floor, over the store. It was a woman's clothing store, of a kind you don't see too much anymore, except in older neighborhoods of the city. Nowadays, big modern chain stores have taken over most of that kind of business.

My Aunt's store seemed from another time, even then. It was pretty big, or at least it seemed that way to me then, but a little old-fashioned. The slightly faded sign outside read "A Woman's Gift", and underneath, in smaller letters, "Fine Fashions for Today's Woman". But I kind of got the impression that most of her customers were more yesterday's women than today's. Still, she managed to make a living with it, I guess.

I was utterly devastated, of course. Even now, I can feel the indescribable sadness well up within me when I think about those days. I felt absolutely miserable and inconsolable. I didn't know then the words to that old song, *Sometimes I feel like a motherless child*, but I lived the pain and crushing sadness that those words hint at.

My Aunt Margaret was actually my great-aunt, the sister of my grandmother. She must have been sixty when this all happened. My grandmother lived in Florida, my grandfather was dead, and so it was agreed that Aunt Margaret would take me in. I really had nowhere else to turn, except maybe foster care or something. Her apartment was large, and I could have my own room there, but I was in such a daze of utter depression that I hardly noted the changes around me.

Aunt Margaret told me that I had to try and get on with life, but frankly, I didn't want to. I had to start at a new school, in my aunt's neighborhood, but honestly, I couldn't hear a word the teachers were saying most of the time. I was lost in a private world of sorrow and pain, of overwhelming longing and loss.

Aunt Margaret had never married, never had children of her own. So I can just imagine her discomfort at my suddenly being thrust upon her. At first, she struck me

as a bit grim, but since all the rest of my life had become horrid, her personality (or lack of it) just seemed consistent with everything else that had happened to me.

That next Christmas was, needless to say, a pretty rotten one. I don't think I had much interest in it, and I just kind of went through the motions of opening my presents, which were mainly clothes and some books. Looking back, I don't think Aunt Margaret had much of an idea about what I might like for Christmas. I guess she did the best she could. The Chicago winter settled in around us, and I wrapped myself in my sorrow as if it were a blanket.

The neighborhood around the store wasn't exactly great for a kid, either. The store was on a busy commercial street, lined with other stores, restaurants, and bars. The nearest park was a mile away. So my life, such as it was, consisted of going to school, coming home, hanging around the apartment, watching television, and sometimes helping my aunt out a little in the store.

She let me earn a little spending money by helping her out in the stockroom, sometimes watching the cash register, that kind of thing. It was something to do, something to occupy my mind and my hands occasionally, to fight off the curtain of gloom that was always threatening to close in around me.

And gradually, I began to take some notice of the pretty and beautiful things I sometimes got to handle there.

“Joe, you should make some friends from school,” she would tell me sometimes. “You can bring them over here, if you want, sometime. Life has to go on, you know.”

I would nod my head at that, make some sound that was vaguely in agreement with her, and then sink back into the black depth in which I lived most of the time. I think even a tough old customer like Aunt Margaret must have seen how much I was suffering.

I couldn't even find any solace in my music. Aunt Margaret knew that I played, and she had told me to feel free to use her piano (a very nice upright model) anytime I wanted. But every time I tried to play, I found that being at the piano just increased my sense of loss and pain. After a few halfhearted tries, I stopped altogether.

When my report card came from my new school, I had received the worst grades of my life. I had usually been a B student, with occasional A's and C's. But now I had consistent D and F grades. I just didn't care anymore, not about anything.

Sometimes I would overhear her talking on the phone with my grandmother.

“He still seems terribly depressed. And he's not doing well in school. Perhaps you should think about having him come by you, maybe Florida would cheer him up. I'm worried about him, he's so sad all the time.”

But that kind of talk just depressed me even more. It made me feel like I was just some unwanted burden, about to be shunted off somewhere. I felt worthless, unwanted, alone. Truthfully, many a tearful night I wished I would die also, so I could at least be back with my Mom.

Somewhere around this time, something finally happened to help me find a way out of the terrible place I was in. One day, while working in the stockroom, I found myself

holding a beautiful silver satin bra. Something about the way it looked, so shimmery and beautiful, like a Christmas ornament or something, absolutely enthralled me. There was more to it than that—it was exciting, somehow.

My aunt was out by the cash register, talking to a customer. And so, following some deep and unnamable instinct, I shucked off my sweater and put the bra on.

The feeling of slipping my arms through those beautiful straps, of feeling the cups close around my boyish chest, was exhilarating. It was as if the terrible black shadows that haunted me suddenly retreated.

My heart raced, and I shivered in excitement and...joy.

For the first time in months and months, I felt excitement. I felt as if *I* were the Christmas ornament, wrapped in shining silver, as if I were something precious and beautiful and beloved.

In moments, I had also donned matching silver satin panties, and I trembled as my soul soared within me in guilty pleasure. Finally, I had found something which could comfort me, something which could cut through my pain and loneliness.

I wore that bra and panties all that day. I would have died before I took them off, I think, given how they made me feel. And so began my rebirth, slowly, bit by bit, item by item, day by day.

Soon I was regularly sleeping in a short satin chemise, with matching panties. It was difficult to fall asleep sometimes. I was so excited by the feel of those wonderful things, but at least I was aware again that my heart was still beating.

I guess my aunt noticed that something had changed with me, for I heard her mentioning something about it on the phone to my grandmother. Yes, I had found something, something that made the pain go away, even as it mixed guilt with pleasure in my tortured heart.

Every once in a while, I would be overwhelmed with guilt at what I was doing. Sometimes, I would fervently promise God that I would give up my newfound preoccupation. But I never did.

I stashed my beautiful treasures under my mattress, thinking that they were secure there if I made sure to put them well into the middle. And gradually, my collection grew. And with it, my desire for more of the same grew also.

But one day, when I came home from school, I found my treasures missing. A terrible flood of emotions overwhelmed me. I was terrified at having been found out, but also devastated at having lost my wonderful bras, panties, slips, and nightgowns. My mind whirled as I tried to think of some kind of excuse, some kind of story I could invent, which would explain why I had all those things hidden in my bed.

But my thoughts became even more scattered and disoriented when I found, newly washed and folded in my dresser drawers, all my lovely satin lingerie.

“Yes, I washed it all for you,” my aunt's voice said from behind me.

I spun around, closing the drawer as I did so. I could feel my face blushing hotly.

"I don't know what you...what's all this..." I tried to make a coherent sentence, but I couldn't get my thoughts to line up right.

"Shhh," she said to me. "It's all right. If that makes you happy, then fine. You've been through enough. As far as I'm concerned, you're welcome to anything in the store...within reason."

I was still in my denial mode. "I don't know what you mean, Aunt Margaret. What are you..."

She held up her hand, then sat down on my bed.

"Joey dear, stop trying so hard. It's really not anything to be upset about. If you like those things, that's fine. It can be our little secret, as far as I'm concerned." She smiled at me, one of the first times I can recall seeing a genuinely warm smile on her face. "I could tell you were wearing a bra under your clothes for a while, you know. In the right light, I could see the outline of the bra under your shirt. So relax, dear. You're not the first boy to like wearing girl's clothes. You'd be surprised, I've had more than a few male customers, over the years."

I felt all confused, upset and angry and afraid all at once.

"You're not going to send me away?" I finally asked, tears welling up in my eyes.

"No, of course not," she said, seemingly in surprise.

I broke down then, sobbing and crying. Tentatively, she took me into her arms, and my body shook and heaved as I wept uncontrollably. Aunt Margaret patted me on the back, a little unsure of herself, I think, but trying to comfort me as best she could.

"It's all right," she said over and over to me. "It's all right, things will be better, you'll see." Her normally controlled voice was tender for once, thick with emotion.

When I finally regained my composure, she kissed me on the forehead, and said that dinner would be ready soon. I nodded my understanding, and wiped my eyes with the palms of my hands.

We didn't talk about it during dinner. I still felt awkward, knowing that she knew about my enjoying wearing girl's clothes. After we had eaten, while I did the dishes, Aunt Margaret went downstairs to the store. When she came back upstairs, she had a gorgeous long satin nightgown, ivory in color, with a matching robe, and pretty satin slippers. My heart stopped for a moment, when I beheld those beautiful things.

"Tell you what," she said carefully, looking at me with a hesitant look. "If you promise me you'll work on your homework tonight, and every night from now on, you can have these, to relax in around the house."

I looked at her with what must have been a dumb look on my face.

"Okay," I finally said, in a voice just above a whisper.

"Good. Why don't you take a shower, get nice and clean, then change and start your homework. I can help you, if you like."

I was still a little unsure about all this, but I did as she suggested, and so, in short order, I was freshly showered, and dressed in that absolutely delicious nightgown, and

robe and slippers. I worked on my homework in the kitchen, feeling simultaneously a little embarrassed and exhilarated.

Aunt Margaret came in while I was engrossed in my work, and she laid her hand lightly on my shoulder.

“How about a nice cup of cocoa?”

“That sounds nice,” I said a little awkwardly.

“I'm glad to see you keeping your end of the bargain. You get your grades back up to where they belong, and maybe we can find some other ways to reward you.”

I looked up and smiled at her. “Thanks,” I told her. “For everything—for understanding, for taking me in here, for...for *everything*.”

“It's all right. It's nice to have company here, to be honest.” It's funny, she actually seemed nicer, somehow, now that she knew about my secret.

“You know,” she said as she brought over my hot chocolate, fresh from the microwave, “you don't look bad like that. You'd have made a pretty girl, I think.”

I'm sure I blushed furiously at that, for my face felt very warm. I looked down at my open schoolbook, and smiled, then blew on my cocoa.

Chapter 2

Given my new incentives, my attention to homework greatly increased. And that, in turn, began to improve my understanding of what the teachers were talking about in class. Fortunately, I had always been a pretty bright kid, so I began to make up for lost time at school. My aunt began to get encouraging communications from my teachers, and my next report card was much, much better.

Aunt Margaret applied careful and regular rewards for my efforts, and soon my room had nearly as many girl's clothes in it as it did boy's things.

My interest in all things girlish continued, of course, and in fact increased as I was able to indulge in it more and more. I began to devour the fashion magazines and catalogs that my aunt had around the house and the shop, and sometimes, on weekends or in evenings after the shop was closed, I would clean up for my aunt and then try on some of the dresses. In a little while, I was regularly cleaning up the shop dressed completely in girl's clothes.

One evening, I had finished up cleaning up, and was rewarding myself by modeling some new outfits that had caught my eye. Soon, I was standing before the dressing room mirrors, wearing this incredible red silk shantung sheath dress, tan pantyhose, and matching red pumps. Underneath, I had on a red satin bra and red panties, the bra stuffed with tissue to give me an appearance of breasts. I had even begun experimenting a little with makeup. I had lipstick, eyeshadow, mascara, and earrings (clip-on ones, of course). I had even appropriated a cheap wig from one of the mannequins, to complete my efforts.

Beholding my reflection, I felt a growing sense of awe. There in the mirrors was a young woman who was hauntingly reminiscent of my mother. Not an exact replica, of course. But there were strong similarities. It kind of took my breath away, and I turned this way and that, amazed at what I looked like.

Suddenly, I realized that I wanted to play the piano again. But I wanted to do it while dressed like this. My aunt was out, and I didn't expect her back for a few hours, so I made my way upstairs and found myself sitting, quite ladylike, on the bench.

I fantasized about being on-stage, giving a concert, dressed in my beautiful silk dress, all eyes on the pretty girl at the piano.

And from somewhere deep within me, the music flowed once again. I played all of the music that my mother and I had shared. Finally, after having been shut off from it for so long, the connection was back. Soon I was lost in Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue", my eyes shut in pleasure, my fingers moving with a heart and mind of their own.

It was only when I was done, and I felt drained and spent and exhilarated, that my aunt let her presence be known. She clapped, slowly but seriously, and I jumped up and spun around on the piano bench, feeling embarrassed and guilty all over again at how I must look.

"That was lovely," she said. "You play with much feeling, dear. Your technique could be better, but you have some real talent, I think."

I didn't know what to say, and so just looked down and blushed.

“An interesting ensemble in which to practice, I must say. But you do make a pretty girl, I'll give you that. You've been practicing more than just music, I see.”

I looked down at my feet, feeling foolish at the sight of my nyloned legs, my feet in those high heels.

“Really,” she continued. “You look quite nice.”

She turned and headed back towards the kitchen. “Would you play some more for me? It's nice to hear what you can do, finally.”

I sat there, a little stunned, as she left me there. Without thinking, I rose up from the bench and smoothed my dress down around my hips and underneath me.

“Sure,” I said, with a calmness that surprised me. And I proceeded to give Aunt Margaret a little concert of some of the music that my mother had loved best.

And I felt...wonderful. The combination of the way I was dressed and the beauty of the music released something primal and deep within me. I'm not saying that I was a great pianist or anything, but mother had taught me well, I think, and now everything just came together somehow.

When I was done, I sat there, momentarily dazed. Aunt Margaret came over to me and hugged me.

“Your mother would be proud, I think,” she said simply, and I began to cry.

“Oh goodness,” she said, “as you'll learn, crying can be terrible on a girl's makeup. Here, dear,” and she offered me some tissue.

“Oh, Auntie,” I said, “you must think I'm terrible, I don't know why I like to dress like this, but I don't know how proud my mother would be if she could see me right now.”

“Shhh. What's important about a person is what's inside them, not the outside. If this is how you feel good, who am I to argue? Stop being so hard on yourself.”

“All right,” I said, and got up to go. “I'll put these things back where they belong, don't worry.”

“I know you will, dear. It's all right. I told you could use whatever I have in the shop.”

She smiled at me again with that same warm smile. “If you like, we could work together on your music. I used to play a little, myself. And if you want to play while dressed like that, that's fine.”

I nodded meekly. “I'd like that, I think. If you don't mind.”

“I think that it will be fine. Now you should get your homework started, I think. We can talk more later.”

“Okay. And thanks, Auntie,” I said, and impulsively hugged her.

Next morning, at breakfast, Aunt Margaret didn't act as if anything unusual had occurred. I made her tea and toast while I was dressed in my nightgown and robe, then after I had some cereal I reluctantly began to get ready to change into boy

clothes. It was a Saturday, so I didn't have school, but I still had some work to do for the store.

“You know, dear, if you want, I don't care if you want to dress like a girl today,” she said calmly, while she sipped her tea.

“Really?” was all I managed to say.

“Yes,” she replied without missing a beat. “Of course, I don't think a silk dress is appropriate for a Saturday, but maybe I can help you a little. What do you think?”

“Yeah, I mean yes, sure.”

And so, we went down to the shop and started picking out some things. I ended up in a yellow bulky pullover sweater and a white skirt, cut just above the knee. The underthings I needed I already had up in my room, of course, but Aunt Margaret suggested I add a padded girdle to my ensemble.

“It'll give you a little more of a figure,” she told me conspiratorially.

We completed my outfit with suntan pantyhose and white pumps.

“We'll also use this wig. What do you think?” she asked me, as she took it off a mannequin. It pretty closely matched my own natural light brown hair, but was curly and shoulder-length.

Upstairs with our goodies, Aunt Margaret also showed me how to use her hair-removal cream. I had begun to sprout hair on my legs and arms, and she suggested that I should look as realistic as I could, if I were going to be working in the shop as a girl.

That took me by surprise, a bit. “You really think I can do that, Aunt?”

“Oh yes, with just a little help you'll be fine.”

After I was nicely smooth and hairless, I slipped into my wonderful outfit. Aunt Margaret helped me do a little tasteful makeup, spritzed me with some delightful perfume, and soon I felt like I was floating on air. When we were all done, there was this very pretty teenage girl looking back at me from the mirror.

Aunt Margaret looked at me and nodded in approval. “You look very nice, dear.” Then her brow wrinkled a little. “But I can't call you Joey, not like this. Certainly not with customers around.”

She smiled. “How does Jessica sound?”

I thought a moment. “Okay, that sounds nice,” I told her.

We went down to the store, my feeling all nervous and self-conscious, but Aunt Margaret kept me busy getting the shop ready for business. We opened at 10, and we didn't have a lot of time to get ready.

When we had turned on the background music, turned up the lights, and straightened the merchandise on display, Aunt Margaret indicated that I should flip around the sign on the front door, so that it showed “Open”. I did so, feeling excited and just a touch apprehensive.

“What about my voice?” I asked her.

"I think it's fine," she reassured me. And it was true, my voice hadn't deepened much. I was still quite thin and short for my age. Thin and short for a boy, at any rate, but just right, I thought, for a girl.

It took a while for the first customer to show up. Around 10:30, a woman in her fifties walked in. She wandered around a while, looking at various items, picking up several packages of pantyhose. When she approached the register, my aunt called out to me.

"Jessica, would you take care of this lady, please?"

I swallowed hard, and hustled over without speaking.

"Thank you, dear," she said when I had rung up her sale, and given her change.

"You're welcome," I said nervously, in a voice just above a whisper.

When she left, I let out a deep breath.

"See, you're fine," Aunt Margaret told me as she walked over. "You actually make a very nice-looking sales girl."

And so she pretty much left me to run the shop. She hovered around, of course, and that was reassuring to me, but she kind of pushed me to handle the customers.

"Hello, Margaret," one customer called out as she entered. She was a stylishly-dressed woman, perhaps in her late 30's or early 40's. I recognized her as a regular customer, someone I had often admired from the back room.

"Hello, Elizabeth," my aunt responded. "How are you today?"

"Just fine, dear," she answered. Then she looked at me and smiled. "Who's your assistant?"

"This is my great-niece Jessica," Aunt Margaret said cheerfully.

"Well, hello Jessica. You're looking quite pretty today, my dear. A very nice advertisement for the shop, I think."

"Thank you, Ma'am," I said, in what I hoped was a feminine voice.

While this was going on, several other ladies entered the store, and pretty soon I was too busy working to think so much about my new circumstances. The store stayed busy well into the afternoon, and my aunt and I kept quite busy.

Around three o'clock, I had a scare. One woman came in, with her son in tow. It was a kid from my school, a big kid who liked to push me around, when he noticed me at all. He didn't look too happy to be in the store.

"I'll just be a few minutes," she told him. "Then I can drop you off at your friend's."

I was very afraid that he would recognize me. I looked desperately over at my aunt, but she was busy helping someone else pick out a dress for a wedding reception. I was stuck.

But he didn't seem hostile. In fact, he smiled at me, and kept looking at me. At first, I feared he was staring at me because he saw through my new identity. But when he didn't jeer or point at me, I started to figure out that he was staring at me because he thought I was pretty. That made me feel a little strange inside.

“Hi,” he said to me, when he finally worked up the courage to approach me.

“Hello,” I said quietly, and tried to get busy rearranging items on the counter.

“My name's Rich,” he said. I knew his name all too well, but couldn't act like I did.

“Hello, Rich. My name's...Jessica,” I said, with just the slightest hesitation.

I could feel my aunt watching this scene, even as she talked with her customer. I couldn't figure out what her thoughts were about it.

I walked over to help Rich's mother. “Can I help you find anything, Ma'am?”

“I don't think so, dear. I'm looking for a present for my niece. Maybe you *can* help, after all. She's about your age. Can you recommend something a girl your age would like?”

I was a little flustered, but did my best. I helped her find a nice ribbed top, in a chocolate color. She bought that, along with some lingerie for herself. Rich kept watching me, with big eyes and a gap-toothed smile.

They finally finished, and when they left, I realized my body was damp with sweat. Still, Rich hadn't suspected a thing.

“Good work, Jessica,” Aunt Margaret said to me in a bit. “Nice sale. I think you're good for business.”

I realized that I had to go to the bathroom, and told my aunt so in a whisper.

“Well, just go, dear. But I would suggest you use the ladies room, dressed as you are.”

“Will that be all right?” I asked nervously.

“I think so dear. Just relax, no one will think twice about your going in there. Just remember, girls sit down.”

I nodded apprehensively at what, I realized later, was probably her way of joking about the situation.

My first trip into the forbidden territory of the ladies room was interesting to me. The women's washroom seemed bigger and nicer than most men's rooms I had ever seen. It felt interesting to sit down in the stall, knowing that if anyone walked in they would just see my feet, in nylons and heels, and think nothing was out of place. I liked that thought.

We finally closed the shop around 6:30. I flipped the sign on the door to read “Closed” and walked about the store, straightening up merchandise that become disordered.

“You were a great help, dear,” Aunt Margaret told me. “We should celebrate, I think. How about we go out for a bite to eat, and then maybe catch a movie?”

I looked at her. “You mean, go out, like *this*?” I gusted at myself.

“Well, Jessica is the one who did all this fine work. I think Jessica should be the one to reap the rewards.”

I wasn't about to argue with her. She helped me touch up my makeup, and refresh my perfume, and then we got our coats and headed out. We walked up the block to the Chinese restaurant, and had a really nice meal.

The weather was still cool, being April, and it was a delicious feeling to have that cool air nipping at my smooth legs, encased as they were only in sheer nylon. It was so different, being dressed in a skirt, when you went out in the cool night air.

Aunt Margaret seemed quite pleased with herself at dinner. She talked a lot about how well I had done, and how so many people had commented favorably about my presence in the shop.

"You can be Jessica whenever you want, dear, especially when you work in the shop. Would that be all right with you?" She watched me carefully for my reaction.

"Yes, sure, whatever you want, Aunt," I replied enthusiastically. Inwardly, I thought "Wow!" This will be great!

After dinner, we went to the movies. Aunt Margaret seemed more relaxed, more friendly, than I could remember her being in all the time I had been with her. And I felt happier than I could remember being in a long, long time.

Afterwards, as we headed back home in a cab, Aunt Margaret said to me, "I'll make a deal with you, if you like. If you get straight A's at the end of the school year, I'll let..." and here she paused, as if thinking how best to phrase her words, "...I'll let Jessica stay with us all summer, if you like."

I stared at her in disbelief. Spending the whole summer like this? The idea was intoxicating.

"Deal!" I told her.

Chapter 3

Needless to say, with that incentive, I gave my studies even greater effort. It had been difficult, switching to a new school in the middle of seventh grade, but I had been getting better and better at my schoolwork ever since Aunt Margaret had found how to motivate me.

I spent more and more time as Jessica, with my Aunt's acceptance (her encouragement and assistance, actually). I usually changed as soon as I got home from school, and helped around the apartment, or in the store. Aunt Margaret started teaching me how to do things around the house, like the laundry, and cleaning, and even cooking.

"Since you like being Jessica," she told me at one point, "I guess you should learn the kind of things girls learn." I didn't argue with her. And so, it quickly came to be that I was basically Jessica all the time around home. The only time I spent as Joey was when I had to go to school.

We also began our piano lessons together. Aunt Margaret didn't mind at all that it was Jessica sitting beside her on the piano bench. As it turned out, Aunt Margaret had been quite modest when she had said that she played a little, herself. She was wonderful at the piano, very accomplished and professional.

School continued to be a little rough for me, because the other kids kept picking on me. My improved grades had not helped my status with most of the boys. But I got along better with the teachers, and I could learn to ignore the teasing and harassment of the boys.

One day, though, a couple of boys followed me home and ambushed me in the alley. They knocked my books down, called me a sissy, then started beating me up. By the time Aunt Margaret heard the commotion, and came out, I was kind of a mess. She chased the kids away, threatening to call the police.

"Oh my God, are you all right, dear?" she asked, as she washed my face. My nose was bleeding, and my face was wet with my own tears.

After I was cleaned up, I changed to Jessica and cleaned the apartment while Aunt Margaret went back to work in the store. She didn't talk too much about the attack after that, but she did say that she wanted me to take the bus home instead of walking.

"I can watch out for you at the bus stop," she told me. "We won't have any more of this nasty business, I promise you," she said firmly.

"Thanks, Aunt," I told her. She watched me thoughtfully, but said nothing more.

As you might guess, I did get my straight A's, and Aunt Margaret made a big fuss over my grades when we got my report card. She even insisted on taking a picture of me as Jessica, holding my report card. Then she said she had something special in mind to celebrate.

"Two tickets to the symphony," she told me solemnly. "One for me, one for...Jessica."

"Wow, you mean it, Auntie?"

“Absolutely. You've earned it. And we can have some fun, picking out a nice outfit to wear downtown.”

I beamed at that thought.

“And,” she continued, “since you kept your end of the bargain, tonight we can pack away Joey's clothes for the summer.”

I gulped. An entire summer as Jessica! “You bet, Auntie!” I said excitedly.

Aunt Margaret was as good as her word. That night, we packed up all my boy clothes in boxes, and stored them in a dark corner of the downstairs stockroom. Now the only clothes in my closet, and in my dresser, were Jessica's.

Auntie had also been allowing me to let my hair grow out for the past few months, in the expectation that “Jennifer would be staying for the summer,” as she had put it. So she helped me cut and style it in a nice feminine style. It was still short, of course, but it was just long enough that we could produce an acceptable short girl-style hairdo. And Aunt Margaret also bought me a very pretty fall that matched my own hair beautifully, for when I wanted to have a longer hairstyle.

And so that first summer as Jessica began joyously, as we prepared for our trip to the symphony. Together, Auntie and I picked out our outfits for the big night. For me, we found a very nice pale pink crepe dress, with an empire waist and a knee-length hem. I wore white pantyhose, and white low-heeled pumps. And because it was such a special occasion, Aunt Margaret even helped me shape and paint my nails, in a very pretty shade of pink. I looked so pretty when we were all done, I couldn't believe it was really me in the mirror.

For herself, Aunt Margaret choose a white satin blouse and long black skirt, with a slit. She still had a good figure, even at her age, and she looked quite the lady when she was all dressed up.

I felt like some kind of enchanted princess as we exited our cab in front of Symphony Hall. Most of the people in the crowd were dressed up also (although a few younger people were dressed more casually, to my surprise) so we both fit in just fine.

“It's never good to be overdressed for the occasion, but better that than under-dressed,” Auntie told me as we entered the huge lobby of the hall. I nodded silently in agreement.

The program that evening was wonderful, with a selection of Beethoven, and Mahler. At intermission, my real moment of truth came, as I had to accompany Aunt Margaret to the ladies' room.

I had gotten accustomed to using the ladies' room at the store, of course, but *this* was different! There were so many people, and I looked constantly at Auntie for reassurance.

“Relax, sweetheart. You look beautiful,” she told me as I hesitated before the door. So I took a breath and plunged ahead.

Inside, it was so ornate and beautiful, it was more like a museum than a bathroom. In the mirror, I saw my own face, made up modestly, and I relaxed a bit. I *did* look nice, I thought.

The restroom was crowded, of course, and we had to wait in line for an available stall, but eventually I was able to sit down and do what had to be done. As I washed my hands, a woman who reminded me a little of my mother smiled at me.

“You look so nice, dear,” she complimented me. I smiled and thanked her in a soft voice.

“I wish I could get my daughter to dress up a little, and accompany me here. She'd rather wear jeans and a T-shirt, and listen to rock music.”

I just nodded my head and smiled, not wanting to use my voice too much. Even though Auntie kept telling me that my voice was fine, I was self-conscious.

The rest of the concert was pure magic. Once again, the strange combination of beautiful music and my being dressed so beautifully combined to transport my soul to some special place. I guess Aunt Margaret could tell, for at one point she reached over and squeezed my hand silently, sharing her own quiet pleasure in the moment.

After the concert, we walked up Michigan Avenue to a small restaurant and had coffee (well, I had a Diet Coke) and talked about the evening. I noticed, as we walked, that I drew some appreciative stares from young men (and some not-so-young men, as well). It made me feel a little strange, down in the pit of my stomach. I think Aunt Margaret took note of it, too, but she didn't say anything.

To top it all off, when we returned home, I got to carefully hang up my dress in my closet, and then change into my satin nightgown. I luxuriated in the thought that, for the next two and a half months, I wouldn't even have to think about being a boy. I could forget all about that, for a while at least, and just be Jessica.

I found that being a girl full-time was a wonderful relief for me. It was great to no longer have to dress up as a boy, in those boring and drab clothes, those clunky shoes. Now, as Jessica, I didn't have to try and hide my naturally effeminate mannerisms. No one wanted to beat up Jessica because she walked like a girl, or held her books like a girl, or threw a ball like a girl. No, the world seemed to smile on me now. The way I instinctively moved and acted was acceptable now, apparently.

I could wear nail polish every single day now, and I *loved* seeing how pretty my fingers looked like that. Very soon, they had grown out to an acceptable length. Aunt Margaret showed me how to file and shape them properly.

It felt so right and natural to finally be living that way, all the time, without having to go back to that terrible, sad existence I had known as a boy. Now, I spent every day with a bra on, every day in panties and nylons, every day in skirts and dresses and nightgowns. I was happy. For perhaps the first time in my life, I felt really, *really* happy.

That summer seemed to be one long blissful dream, a dream full of beautiful clothes and beautiful music. Aunt Margaret and I worked together on the piano regularly, and I saw myself making real progress with my music under her tutelage.

We also made several trips to outdoor symphony concerts. That was a glorious experience, to be out in the world, totally accepted as Jessica, enjoying wonderful music. I felt as if I had found my place in the world, at last.

Of course, Aunt Margaret and I also kept busy running the shop, but we still had lots of time to do other things. We went to movies, we went to the zoo, we sometimes went out for dinner or for ice cream in the evening, and everywhere I was completely accepted as Jessica. I even learned to stop worrying about my voice. With the help of a small tape recorder, I practiced speaking in a normal-sounding girl's voice, and it very quickly became my normal speaking voice.

For my birthday in August, we celebrated by going to Ravinia, which is this beautiful outdoor concert area in the North suburbs. It was a magnificent evening, and Auntie were both dressed in light cotton dresses.

Even dressed casually, I seemed to attract the eyes of a lot of males, but I was getting used to that. In fact, if I *hadn't* gotten their attention, I think I would have felt something was wrong.

But then, as August wore on and school approached, I felt myself growing sad and tense once again. My summer as Jessica was almost over, and soon we would have to unpack Joey's clothes again.

One day, Aunt Margaret found me crying in my room.

"Dear, what's wrong?"

I looked at her, and tried to speak, but I was blubbering so much she couldn't understand me at once.

"Honey, calm down. What's the matter?"

I took a moment to try and get hold of myself. "In two weeks, I have to stop being Jessica, and go back to being Joey. It's... hard, I guess, to think about going back to that."

Aunt Margaret looked at me, then hugged me. "I know dear, but try to be strong. I promise you, you can be Jessica the moment you get home, if you want. And every weekend, too, of course. It won't be *that* bad, you'll see."

But of course it was. We had to haul out the box of Joey's things, and even go shopping for new boy clothes, much to my disgust. When Auntie cut my hair to a more boy-style cut, I cried bitterly. But I knew she was right, there was little I could do.



But when I returned for eighth grade, I found things had gotten worse, if anything. All the other boys seemed to have grown substantially, both in height and in breadth. I had grown a little taller, but was still the shortest boy in school, and of course I was still very thin.

From the outset, my life at school that year was a living hell. I think the boys sensed the changes in me somehow. For I was now labeled the school sissy, the faggot, and they never let up on me.

One day, as I was walking toward the bus, a gang of my tormentors cornered me. Rich, the boy who had found me so attractive as Jessica in Auntie's store, was among them. I don't think he had put two and two together, though. He was just going along with the crowd, picking on the sissy kid.

"Hey faggot," the tallest boy said to me, shoving me hard on the shoulder. "How come you carry your books like a girl?" It was true, I always carried my books across my chest, or on my hip, the way the girls did. It just always seemed natural to me.

"He walks like a girl, too," someone else yelled.

"Hey, I think this little sissy really is a girl," came a third voice. "Or at least, he thinks he is."

I was being shoved from several directions at once now, harder and harder. My books fell to the ground.

"Leave me alone," I shouted fiercely, but it came out in Jessica's voice, choked with tears.

"Leave me alone," mimicked one of the boys, in a falsetto voice. "What are you going to do, sissy? Cry on us? Or hit us with your purse?"

At this, they all took up the chant "Hit us with your purse, hit us with your purse," and the shoves started turning into punches. I shoved back at one of them, and then I found myself buried under pounding fists and kicking feet. I tried to protect myself, but a lot of the blows connected. Soon I was on the ground, my eyes shut, aware of only the sharp pain as each new blow landed. Everything started to blur out. Somewhere in the background, I became aware of adult voices, shouting something. Then the pain stopped, and I heard feet scuffling away.

The next week, after I had recovered from the attack, Aunt Margaret and I sat in the principal's office.

"I'm afraid we have a real problem, Mrs. Vincent," Mr. Scarpelli said from behind his desk.

"It's Miss Vincent," Aunt Margaret corrected him, "but go on. We certainly do have a serious problem, and I hope you've taken some action to prevent this from happening again."

He looked down at his big hands, with their nails all bitten down.

"Well, of course we've suspended those students involved in the attack, at least those we've identified. But there's a larger problem."

Aunt Margaret bent closer. "Oh?" she finally said.

"Miss Vincent... how do I put this? Part of the problem is Joey's... behavior. Boys who behave... who act ah, girlishly, often have problems with the other boys."

Aunt Margaret visibly tensed up. "So this is Joey's fault, is that what you're saying?"

"No, not exactly." The principal ran his hands through his thinning hair. "But frankly, given his... mannerisms, I can't promise that there won't be more problems."

"I see," Auntie replied, in a stern voice. "So what you're telling me is that you can't do your job. You don't have sufficient control over your school to give my nephew the education that you're legally obliged to provide him."

"I certainly did not say that," he shot back testily. "But boys will be boys, Miss Vincent. And my staff can't watch over Joe every minute, especially not once school is out."

"So what do you propose doing, Mr. Scarpelli? What would you do if, say, Joe was a black student, being attacked by a gang of white students? Or vice versa?"

"This isn't quite the same thing, Miss Vincent," he began.

"And that is part of the problem, Mr. Scarpelli," she cut him off sharply. "You can't even recognize the true nature of the situation here, which is most discouraging. I expected better from a professional educator."

The principal stirred himself in his chair, and his face reddened.

But before he could say a word, Auntie waved a finger at him and continued.

"As I see it, you're going to have to give my nephew the same consideration and care you would give a student who was the subject of a racial attack. I expect the school system to do its job. If you are telling me you cannot do that, I will probably have to seek legal counsel."

Mr. Scarpelli cleared his throat. "Miss Vincent, threats will not help this matter. The simple fact is that I *am* concerned about Joe's safety at this school. What we *can* do is provide him with supervision during breaks from classes. He can take recess indoors, and avoid a lot of the problem. And we can arrange an escort for him to the bus each day."

Aunt Margaret let out a long sigh. "I know you're trying your best, with a difficult situation, Mr. Scarpelli. If that's the best you can do, though, I may have to consider other alternatives. What you propose doesn't sound like a very nice way for Joe to spend his time here."

"I don't know what else we can do," he answered. "I don't know if changing schools would even be a solution, as, frankly, he may encounter similar problems anywhere he goes. But we'll do whatever we can to make things work. I want to assure you of that."

We left the meeting silently, and didn't say anything much the entire way back home. Once there, I didn't even feel like changing to Jessica, I felt so down and depressed. This was all my fault, I knew. Aunt Margaret had indulged me in my silly desires, and now it had blown up in my face.

We had a quiet dinner. If Aunt Margaret thought anything of the fact that I was still dressed as Joe, she didn't say anything. But finally, when we were doing the dishes, she turned to me.

“He's right, in a sense. You'll probably have similar problems at any school..how did he put it... ‘any school he attends’.”

I didn't say anything in response.

“So maybe we have to face facts,” she continued. “If you can't attend school as a boy, I guess you'll have to do it as a girl.”

Chapter 4

I couldn't really believe she had said that. "Auntie, how could we do that?"

"I don't know, honey. Not yet. But I can find out. I might know a few people who can help us work this out."

She put down her dishtowel and rummaged through a drawer, pulling out her address book.

"I told you I've had a few male customers over the years. Well, there's this local organization that sometimes refers customers like that to me, for special fittings and such. Here we are."

And that began our contacts with the Windy City Gender Association, and the next phase in my life. The people at the Gender Association were able to refer us to an attorney and a counselor, both of whom specialized in matters dealing with people who, like me, felt like they belonged more properly as the opposite gender.

I began weekly meetings with the counselor, to start working out my own feelings about all these issues. And the attorney contacted the school, and threatened legal action unless some better accommodation could be arranged. It was finally set up that I would finish eighth grade with a tutor, and that the school district and Aunt Margaret would split the cost.

I had gone back to being Jessica full-time, so Aunt Margaret wanted to be sure that we could find a tutor who would understand and accept the situation. The attorney helped us work that out also.

"We have a special program we're developing," the attorney told us, "a sort of private referral setup, so we're sure students with gender conditions can make a smooth transition. Jessica is hardly the first student to have to deal with these issues. We're only now getting some cooperation from the schools over this, though. And it's always on a case-by-case basis. But we have approval for Jessica to take part."

I looked at Aunt Margaret, afraid to believe such a thing could be possible.

"The first requirement is a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, which Dr. Ellison has now made. This gives us a medical basis to take these actions."

"Ms. Stanton," Aunt Margaret said, "that's a great help. But what about for the future? I really don't want Jessica to have to spend the rest of her academic life studying at home."

The attorney brushed back her long brown hair and shuffled through some papers on her desk.

"The next step would begin to address that matter, I think," she said gently. "I propose a legal name change for Jessica. There are legal procedures which we can initiate to change her records to reflect a female identity, again based on medical need. The matter can be handled confidentially in the courts. By the time Jessica is ready for high school, we could get her admitted officially as a female."

"We can do that?" I asked in disbelief.

Ms. Stanton smiled at me. “Yes, Jessica, we've done it for other young people like you in the last few years. Your birth certificate will still read male, but your school records can be adjusted so that they are consistent with your identity as Jessica. That should you enable you to attend school in your chosen gender, yet it isn't in any way irreversible.”

Aunt Margaret looked at me wistfully. “I think that's probably for the best,” she said evenly.

“I can get started on that, then. It will take some time, of course, but it'll be all wrapped well in advance of Jessica's starting high school. In the meantime, your tutor will get you through your current academic year. Any questions?”

We didn't have any, so the attorney set to work. In the meantime, my counselor, Dr. Ellison, advised Aunt Margaret that it was probably in my best medical interest to start on female hormones. I think Aunt Margaret was a little shocked at that suggestion. Dr. Ellison and I had talked about that option a fair bit, and I agreed it was something I wanted to do.

“Miss Vincent,” the counselor explained to her, “the best thing we can do for Jessica at this point of her life is to help her with this transition as much as possible. It's my opinion that her identification with the female gender is quite complete and genuine. But shortly, her body is going to begin kicking out male hormones. The changes those hormones will make in her will probably be substantial, though it's not always so. But she will, in all likelihood, experience physical changes which will make it very difficult for her to be accepted as a girl. Facial hair, changes in muscle, body hair—these will all develop along masculine patterns if we don't act to correct the situation. A regimen of female hormones, begun at her current stage of development, is actually the accepted standard of care for patients in her condition.”

Aunt Margaret looked at me with some doubt on her face. “Is this what you *really* want, honey?” she asked me.

“I really think so, Auntie,” I told her earnestly. “Otherwise, I'm going to end up looking like a boy in girl's clothing, and that won't really accomplish anything, no matter *what* the lawyer does.”

“And this is *really* what you think best, doctor?”

“It is indeed, Miss Vincent. I believe Jessica's best hope for a normal and happy life lies in living in the gender she's most comfortable with.”

“Does this mean she'll have to have surgery?”

The counselor leaned back in his chair. “Not necessarily. That is an option for her to consider, in a few years. But in recent years, we've seen some patients choosing not to take that step. In essence, they live as females without having SRS—Sex Reassignment Surgery—just hormone therapy. But yes, it could also mean that, at some point, she will choose to have such surgery. It's really her choice.”

“Oh my,” Aunt Margaret said with raised eyebrows. “Could she... have children, if she had that surgery?”

“No, that seems still beyond medical ability for the foreseeable future. But in all other respects, given her own obvious physical appearance, and hormone therapy begun soon, she would, after such surgery, be indistinguishable from any other female her age. Even her gynecologist wouldn't know.”

It all made my head spin, to think that I could actually be transformed, fully and really and completely, into a real girl. Part of me was scared at the prospect of having any kind of surgery, part of me was... kind of fascinated at what it would be like, to be really a girl, even *there*.

Still, those were decisions for much, much later. The important thing is that, within a month of that meeting with Principal Scarpelli, I had begun sessions with my private tutor, Ms. Rivera, and the attorney was hard at work getting my name legally changed to Jessica Margaret Vincent. I received a prescription for hormones by mid-November. To start, I was prescribed birth-control pills. Dr. Ellison had referred me to another doctor, an M.D. and together they felt that this was the best way to begin. It was actually thrilling to me, to take my pill every day, just like a regular woman who was on birth control.

Then, without having time to think about it, we were smack up against the anniversary of Mom's death.

Aunt Margaret and I made a visit to the cemetery, out in the western suburbs. Aunt Margaret still didn't have a car, but she talked a friend of hers into giving us a ride. It was a cold and windy day, and we both bundled up warmly. It was so cold, I thought about wearing slacks (although they were girl's slacks), but then changed my mind. So I wore a long skirt and winter-weight tights.

It was odd, though, to be there at her graveside, because I was very much Jessica, not Joey. We had restyled my hair (although I still needed my fall for the moment. No one on the train looked twice at us. When I got to the grave, I felt a little strange.

Aunt Margaret and I tidied up around the grave site, removing the flowers we had left there in the summer. I said a silent prayer, asking Mom to understand how things had turned out. I think, maybe, that she would have. Aunt Margaret says she would have.

It was a little shocking to me, also, to think about just how far I had come in just one year. The prior November, I had been a lost and wounded boy. Now, that part of me was fading into a dim past. And ahead, my life as Jessica waited. I had no clear idea of what still lay in store for me, but I knew there was no turning back.

When I finished my prayers, I crossed myself, and then we returned to the car. We went out to lunch, in a little Italian restaurant not far from the cemetery, neither of us talking much.

Aunt Margaret and I couldn't talk too openly about some things, as her friend didn't really know my whole history.

“It's funny,” her friend said over lunch, “I thought you had said your *nephew* was coming to stay with you last year.”

I cringed a bit, but Aunt Margaret handled things smoothly. “Yes, that was the original plan. But he ended up staying with my sister in Florida, and Jessica ended up here with me.”

“That's a shame that you two couldn't stay together. You must miss him,” she said absent-mindedly.

I felt like I had to say something. “Well, we... keep in touch. It's really worked out OK.”

That was all we said about that, and the rest of our lunch was filled with small talk. A young man at an adjacent table kept looking at me and smiling, but I tried to ignore him. Still, I enjoyed the attention, as always.

I had thought that perhaps the hormones would have some drastic effect on me right away, but I didn't notice any. I guess, the first day or so, I did feel a little flushed and warm, but that passed. After that, it wasn't anything dramatic. Taking my little pill just became a part of my daily routine, like flossing or doing my makeup.

The other important rite of passage that I indulged in around then was getting my ears pierced. Aunt Margaret agreed that it seemed a sensible thing to do. I was a little afraid of what it would feel like, but I was also absolutely determined to get it done. There was a jewelry shop up the street from ours, and I went in one Saturday and had it done. It did hurt, a little, but not much. To be honest, I would have done it if it had hurt a thousand times more.

Ms. Rivera was a great teacher, and she and I got along very well. She understood all about my situation, and didn't seem to think it was any big deal. My grades continued to be excellent, much to Aunt Margaret's satisfaction.

“I wouldn't want you to start sloughing off your studies, just because of all these changes,” she told me. “An education is a very important thing, especially for a young woman nowadays.”

She always referred to me like that now, and it never failed to make me feel good inside.

That Christmas was my first one as Jessica, *really* as Jessica, and it was such a contrast to the holiday the year before I couldn't believe it. Aunt Margaret and I really enjoyed doing Christmas shopping together. She helped me pick out presents for Dr. Ellison, and Ms. Rivera, and even for my attorney, Ms. Stanton. I continued working at the store, so I had money of my own to spend. And of course, I had to find something special for Aunt Margaret.

Christmas morning, I woke up early, but stayed in bed a while, not wanting to wake up Auntie too soon. So I lay in bed, my hands delighting in the smoothness of my ivory-colored satin nightgown, thinking about how lucky I was. I had so much to be thankful for, I realized.

When I heard Aunt Margaret moving around the kitchen, I threw on my robe and stepped into my slippers, and joined her. She had some tea, I had some orange juice, and then we proceeded to open our presents.

Auntie loved the gifts I had gotten for her, which were some nice warm leather gloves, a new CD of Mozart pieces, and a silver photo frame, with a picture of her and my mother in it, taken when they were young girls my age.

For me, Auntie had gotten so many wonderful things! Lots of wonderful clothes, of course, as well as some CD's for me, and a beautiful book on classical composers. She also had one small box that she saved for last.

It was wrapped in silver foil paper, with pink ribbon. When I opened it, I found the papers changing my name legally to Jessica Margaret Vincent.

"Oh, Auntie, this is the best present ever!" I told her as I realized what it was. Then I started to cry. Dr. Ellison had told me to expect to be more emotional than ever, now that I was on hormones, and maybe that was part of it. But I kind of think I would have cried anyway just then.

"Merry Christmas, Jessica," she whispered in my ear as I hugged her.

"Merry Christmas, Auntie," I told her as fervently as I could.

We had decided to change my last name while we were at it, and I found that I was almost as pleased about that part of the change as with the rest. My old last name (Dougherty, by the way) was just a leftover from my father, someone I had never known and didn't have any interest in knowing. I liked having the same last name as Aunt Margaret. It made me feel, more than ever, like her daughter or granddaughter.

We spent the rest of the day enjoying ourselves around the house, listening to our CD's, watching television, and generally relaxing. Later, I made a nice dinner (with Auntie's help) of turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, and sweet potatoes. It was just the two of us, so there was plenty left over, and we ended the day by going out to a movie. All in all, it was the very best Christmas I had ever known.

As that year drew to a close, so too did a part of my life. By the time the New Year was about to begin, I felt as if I had very much turned a corner. I didn't know then what "crossing the Rubicon" meant, but I had certainly done it. The New Year found me profoundly different from how I had been just twelve months prior, and I was intent on moving forward, from that point on, as Jessica.

Chapter 5

In truth, that next year was a time of profound changes for me. I was now committed to being Jessica, and that became my reality fully. I dedicated myself to being absolutely and unquestionably a girl, and found that it was a self-reinforcing process. The more I did it, the more I *wanted* to do it.

I completed my studies with Ms. Rivera, even though I couldn't graduate with my grade school class (well, it was their loss, I told myself). But I was much more concerned with the future, anyway.

Aunt Margaret got me enrolled at a local Catholic high school for girls, which I really looked forward to all summer. It was the first time in my life I couldn't wait for school to start.

With all of the legal paperwork done, I was enrolled as Jessica at Our Lady of Perpetual Hope.

"It's probably best," Aunt Margaret told me, "that it's an all-girl school. I think you'll do better in that atmosphere, without a lot of rowdy boys to disrupt the place. And I think you'll get a better education there, anyway."

I certainly wasn't about to disagree with her! The only drawback was that all the girls at the school wore uniforms, which were basically a plaid jumper. I would have preferred to be able to dress a little more stylishly, but one can't have everything.

I spent the summer slowly transforming more completely into Jessica. My own hair grew out, to my delight, and it was the most awe-inspiring moment when Auntie took me to the beauty parlor. To see my own hair cut and styled into a pretty girl's hairdo was a transcendent moment for me. It was such a profound statement of who I felt I was. I mean, I wasn't a boy who was dressing up like a girl, not anymore, (if I ever really were). Instead, I was step-by-step asserting, by my very physical appearance, the utter femaleness of my innermost existence.

As I saw Jessica staring back at me from the salon mirror, my heart thrilled at the knowledge that this was how I would be spending the rest of my life. There would be no turning back, not for me.

By the time I began high school, I had been on hormone therapy for something near ten months. They were, by that time, working their magic on me, transforming my body gently into what I wanted so desperately. I had also been very diligent with electrolysis in those months, removing what little hair had appeared on my face and body.

I got the clear impression that my therapist felt it was an excellent idea for me to be taking such steps at a relatively young age.

"Starting now, so that your body only experiences puberty as a female, will be a great help to you, Jessica," he told me. "So many girls like you don't start until later in life, and it makes a difference. But for you, no one will ever see a trace of what you used to be."

I liked that thought. I liked it a *lot*.

And so I entered Our Lady of Perpetual Help (or O.L.P.H., as everyone called it) as just another freshman girl. And that was just how I wanted it.

I can't tell you how nice it was there. Aunt Margaret had been right—without boys around, school was an entirely different experience. I mean, girls can be unpleasant sometimes, too, but in such different ways. I mean, some were catty, some were stuck-up, and there were a lot of cliques. But there wasn't anyone bullying me, which for me was like being in heaven. And I could be as ladylike as I wanted, without anyone deciding to pound me into the pavement because of it. And *everyone* carried their books like I did!

I even made friends at school, a pleasure that Joey hadn't known for years.

My best friend at school was Theresa Muldoon. Terri was a good student, like me; also like me, she was a little on the shy side. I kind of think I was shy because I was still just a little tentative with the other girls, always watching out for the slightest sign that anyone had seen anything wrong with my feminine persona. But Terri was just naturally shy. We quickly became the closest of friends.

Aunt Margaret was very pleased the first time I asked to stay over at Terri's house. She had always been concerned about my lack of friends, and so she did everything she could to encourage my social life. So pretty soon, Terri was a regular fixture over at our house, just like I was at hers.

Terri's family was very nice. Her Mom and Dad seemed like they actually enjoyed being around each other, which was interesting to see. Terri had a brother one year older than she was, named Steve. He was a tall kid, and he was always teasing Terri (and me, a little) but he was pretty nice most of the time.

What was really interesting for me was how Terri could help me to understand better what being a teenage girl was all about. I was always watching her reactions to things, using it as a gauge of my own behavior. And one of her main preoccupations, in spite of her shyness, was boys.

Of course, neither one of us was allowed to date (I wasn't really in a big rush about that at the time. I had my hands full just adapting to my new life) but Terri thought about it a lot.

She loved to talk about boys, not only boys we actually knew but ones we would in all likelihood never meet, like the ones in YM Magazine.

Still, I have to admit, it was the most interesting feeling to talk with her about boys. I mean, if I was going to be a girl, I should act like other girls my age. That's what I thought, anyway, so I worked on looking on boys as the opposite sex, as sex objects. And pretty soon, I was finding that I enjoyed looking at those bare-chested photos of young men in YM just as much as Terri did.

I tried not to think about any of the actual details that might be involved in dealing with boys. That seemed gross. But I did find that, after a little while, I liked to think about a boy looking at me with that odd, hungry look they get and even about what it would be like to be kissed by one. Such thoughts gave me a weird yearning feeling inside, and made me want, more than ever, to be completely and utterly a girl.

And so it was that I found myself strangely exhilarated at the upcoming Homecoming Dance. It was to be my first social exposure as Jessica, my first dance ever, in fact, and Terri and I spent hours talking about it. We talked about what we would wear, who we hoped might ask us to dance, and what we might do after the dance.

O.L.P.H. had an arrangement with a nearby Catholic boy's high school. In fact, their Homecoming was the same weekend as ours, so the dance and a lot of other activities were really joint efforts between both schools, giving the boys and girls the opportunity to get to know each other.

The weeks leading up to this dance were, for me, a kind of exquisite agony. I mean, I was really excited at the prospect of all the fun of Homecoming (particularly the dance, of course). Yet part of me was also very insecure. I mean, what if the boys didn't like me? What if no one asked me to dance?

"Sweetheart, you're working yourself up for nothing," Aunt Margaret reassured me when I voiced such fears.

"The boys will be standing in line for you," she said with a smile.

I must admit, part of me really liked that thought. But part of me refused to believe it. Years of being picked on as Joey had left me with something of a self-esteem problem. At least, that's what my counselor told me.

Unlike my mind, my body seemed to have no reservations about my new role. The hormones had been shaping my body for about a year at this point, and my body was responding enthusiastically. I was one of the better-developed girls in the freshman class at O.L.P.H., a fact that Terri was a little jealous about, I think.

I mean, I wasn't Dolly Parton or anything, but I definitely had breasts! That alone was thrilling to me, to actually look down and see breasts swelling on my chest.

At first, there had only been soreness and tenderness around my nipples, but eventually that faded, replaced by just a pleasurable sensitivity. By the time I had started high school, I no longer used any breast padding. I actually needed to wear a bra everyday, which when I thought about it kind of blew me away.

Well, anyway, getting back to the Homecoming Dance, I eventually decided I would wear this white lacy body suit and a black mini. This wasn't a prom or anything, so I didn't want to get overdressed for the occasion, but I still wanted to look nice. Terri kept going back and forth between a pink mini-dress and a blouse and skirt set, but by the day of the dance I still didn't know which one she was going to settle on.

I spent that Saturday morning helping Aunt Margaret in the store, then went to the beauty salon up the street to get my hair cut and styled. Then I worked on my nails for a while, and finally settled down to my makeup. Aunt Margaret watched all my feverish preparations with an air of wistful amusement.

When Terri's Mom pulled up in front of the store, with Terri beside her in the front seat, I was a nervous wreck. Part of me was so excited at the prospect of this public debut of Jessica, and part of me was terrified that things would go wrong. I got myself so worked up that I was on the verge of tears.

“Now you stop your silly worrying,” Aunt Margaret scolded me. “You are such a pretty girl, there’s no need for all this upset. Go and have a wonderful time, Sweet-heart. You’ll see, it’ll be fine. Trust me.”

And so I did. Terri's Mom insisted on taking pictures of the two of us. Terri was dressed in her pink minidress, with white pantyhose and white mid-heel pumps. She looked really pretty. In fairly short order, she and I were walking into the gym at school, both of us full of nervous giggles.

We didn’t have a live band for this dance, but there was a DJ with a very good sound system, and the gym was already booming with dance music. Terri and I found a couple of other friends from school, and we danced together in a semicircle to the fast songs, waiting and wondering if any boys would work up the nerve to ask us to dance.

The freshman boys from St. Victor's were even more nervous than we were, apparently. The older girls and boys seemed to pair off more easily, but no one approached our little group for a while. I was beginning to think that I was doomed to spend the evening that way, dancing with a small group of girlfriends.

But then a tall skinny boy, with short brown hair, came up and asked me if I wanted to dance. I took a deep breath and said, “Sure, OK.”

It was a fast song, and he wasn't really a very good dancer, but I didn't mind. He seemed kind of self-conscious as he tried to move to the beat of the music, but that was OK. At least someone had asked me to dance!

We danced that way for a couple of fast dances, and pretty soon I was having a really good time and not even thinking much about anything other than the music. Then the DJ cued up a slow song, and I felt myself get all self-conscious again.

My young man looked at me hesitantly. “Would you like to slow dance?” he asked me. I gulped, and nodded my head nervously.

He took my left hand in his right, and lightly placed his left hand on my back, being careful to not hold me too tightly, or to let his hand reach down too low. I was actually scared, I have to admit, as I felt that slight, polite contact with him. I mean, I had never, never had a boy touch me before, except to try and hurt me. This was so different, there was something nervous but gentle in the way this boy held me, that gave me shivers. With a heartfelt sigh, I let go and relaxed in his tentative embrace, giving myself over to the music and the feeling of being led (if awkwardly) by that young man.

By the time the music had ended, he had become a little less nervous. He smiled bashfully at me and thanked me for the dance when we were done. I smiled back, nervously, and thanked him in return.

Then Terri and I went and got some sodas, and we stood sipping them and comparing notes for a few minutes.

“I saw you dancing with that boy,” she said to me mischievously. “I think he likes you.”

I just shrugged. “He was OK, I guess,” I said offhandedly. But inside I was still glowing with excitement.

When we returned to the dance floor, a boy standing by the wall with a bunch of his friends caught my eye, somehow. He was tall, and slim, but with well-muscled arms. His hair was kind of blondish-brown, and he wore it just a little longish. I realized I was staring at him, and made myself look away. I could feel myself blushing with embarrassment, as I had broken my gaze just a moment too late to keep him from realizing that I had been staring.

I went back to fast-dancing with Terri and our friends, but in a few moments the boy I had been staring at came up to me and asked me to dance. I'm sure I blushed again, but I said yes.

"My name's Tommy," he told me as we started to dance.

"Jessica," I responded as calmly as I could manage.

"That's a really pretty name," he smiled at me. And my insides melted at that simple compliment. "Thanks," was all I could say.

It was difficult to talk much over the music, so we didn't say a lot. But we danced several fast dances, and then came the inevitable slow dance. It was Whitney Houston, singing "I Will Always Love You".

Tommy kind of looked out at me from underneath quizzical eyebrows, asking me without words if I would dance the slow number with him. I smiled and nodded yes.

As his hand touched mine, and he drew me slightly in toward him with his other, I felt as if an electric current were passing through me, as if the whole world had faded away and only he and I were left. I could see nothing but his cute, boyish face, could feel nothing but his touch and his subtle guidance to the music. It was the most wonderful, blissful thing I had ever known, to be in the arms of a boy, to see his eyes gazing happily at me as if I were the most beautiful thing in the world. Time itself seemed to slow down as we danced, and the rest of the gym became a distant blurred background. When the music finally ended, it took me a moment or two to realize it.

Tommy thanked me, and drifted off back to his friends, but for me it was as if the earth had shifted in its axis. Even years later, the memory of that moment remained vivid and clear for me. I had been in a boy's arms, feeling his strength in his touch, and some part of me had responded deeply and fully. It was a little confusing, because until not too long before this I had been a wretched creature, alone and miserable and unlovable, and now I was something quite different.

I excused myself, and headed to the ladies' room. I felt overwhelmed with powerful new sensations, feelings I couldn't put a name to. Inside the girls' bathroom, I saw myself in the mirror, and took in the vision of the beautiful girl I had become. I saw my face, framed by my hair so attractively. My lightly made-up face was quite striking, and as I licked my lips I tasted my lipstick. The taste was exciting and thrilling, somehow. In the mirror, I admired my long legs, sheathed in sheer black pantyhose (the expensive kind) as they thrust proudly from beneath my miniskirt. Part of me wanted to hug myself, another part wanted Tommy to be hugging me close to him, and some other part of me wanted something more, something I couldn't even identify.

Taking a deep breath, I tore myself from the mirror and found an available stall. After that, I touched up my makeup and my hair, and lightly pranced back to the dance

floor. There were so many luscious boys out there, I knew, and I couldn't wait to dance with them all.

It's funny. In school, we were studying Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. There's this scene in it where this girl, who's grown up on a deserted island with only her father for company, meets a young man for the first time. She's never seen one before, so to her it's a revelation to behold a handsome young man. And she says something about it being a brave new world, that has such creatures in it.

At that dance, I knew exactly what she meant.

Chapter 6

Now, I don't want to give you the impression that my life in high school was just that of an air-headed little bimchette. Far from it. I continued to be a good student, consistently making the Honor Roll. And I continued my studies with the piano fervently. Aunt Margaret found a really good tutor for me (even though I thought Auntie herself was a fine teacher).

"There are things I can't teach you," she told me. "You have talent, you must develop it. Besides," she would say, wringing her hands, "my arthritis is getting worse." And so I spent a lot of time practicing, along with my weekly lessons. And I joined the school band, which excused me from gym class (which Aunt Margaret and I both felt was a good idea). I mean, my development up front was quite impressive, but I still had something between my legs that would have shocked the other girls.

But in between my schoolwork, my music, and my work in the store, I still had time for a social life. I loved the dances that were held at school, because they gave me a chance to flirt with the boys, to feel them close to me, to see the excitement and yearning in their eyes. I loved how they looked at me when I was dressed nicely. But Aunt Margaret made it clear that she didn't want me dating for a while, although I could go out with groups of friends that included boys. And that suited me fine, as I was still a little skittish about boys. I mean, I liked them, but I was also afraid of somehow being found out. So it suited me to flirt with them, and dance with them, but not get too involved with them, at least for a while.

But by my junior year, my figure had blossomed quite well, and it was becoming more difficult to avoid reacting to the attention I got from the boys. I think Aunt Margaret was just a little uncomfortable with the thought of my finally going out with boys, but once I was 16 she had a little talk with me.

"You're sixteen now, Jessica," she began, the day after my birthday. "And for most girls, I know, that's the age when they start dating."

"I know, Auntie," I said, without indicating how I felt on the subject.

"I... I'm not sure what I can tell you about it, though, given your... special situation, you know?"

"My counselor says I should think about starting to date, just to see how it goes, how I feel about it, and that sort of thing."

"I know, I've discussed it with him also. I suppose he's right, you really should try and live as normal a life as possible." She looked down at the floor momentarily, then looked back at me.

"You mustn't get too carried away, you know, because they might try and touch you where they shouldn't, and then..."

"I know, Auntie. Don't worry, I'm a good girl."

And I was, in spite of my occasional desires to be otherwise. To be honest, at first, the one or two boys I went out with just didn't do all that much for me. So for a while, I pretty well confined myself to occasional double-dates with Terri. Even then, my spe-

cial condition kept me from going beyond kissing and hugging on my dates, although sometimes a boy would try to get more.

I wasn't the most popular girl in school, but that was OK, because I had a really nice group of friends. In addition to Terri, there was Beth Terrelli, and Laura Weigel, and a couple of other kids as well. They were all good girls, none of us were into drinking or drugs or going (too) crazy with the boys.

It's funny, but becoming a girl was clearly the best thing that could have happened to me. I mean, I had gone from being a lonely and miserable boy to being a very happy and well-adjusted young woman. My life as Jessica was much, much more enjoyable than life as Joey had ever been.

Once in a while, Aunt Margaret would want to talk with me about all that, to see if I was really happy with my new life.

"I mean, some people would think what we've done is... well, wrong, I guess," she confided to me once. "But I see what a lovely girl you make, and how much happier you seem, and I can't see the harm. You *are* happy, aren't you?"

"God yes, Auntie," I told her, tears welling up in my eyes. "Auntie, you don't know how much this means to me, how much of a difference it's made to me. You saved my life, I think, because I couldn't have gone on much longer the way things were before."

I hugged her tightly then, and realized with a bit of a start how thin and frail she felt. To me, she was like a mother, but she was really my grandmother's sister, and she wasn't getting any younger. Still, she never complained much about getting old, although arthritis was making it difficult for her to play the piano as much as she used to.

The summer before my senior year, I met a boy named Bill at a party (Terri's birthday party, actually). Bill was tall, with piercing blue eyes, a very trim waist, and blonde hair. The first moment I saw him, I actually gasped a little, he seemed so beautiful to



me. And when he looked at me, his eyes fastened on me and looked me up and down, twice.

I had continued to develop into a young woman, of course, and by this time I was rather striking-looking myself, I guess. I was on the tall side for a girl, at 5'9" in my stockinged feet, and I had a very nice 35C-25-36 figure. I weighed 127 pounds, had rather striking blue eyes, and long legs that lots of boys seemed to admire. I figured that I had a decent chance of attracting the attention of any boy I wanted. I wanted Bill.

Sure enough, he found a way to wander over to me before too long, and he struck up a conversation with me about the party. I was as cool and noncommittal as I could be, but I couldn't help but encourage him just a little, with my eyes and my smile. He offered to give me a ride home from the party, and I accepted.

"Would you like to see a movie sometime?" he asked me when we pulled up in front of the store.

I fluttered my eyelashes just a little. "I guess so," I said calmly, in spite of my pounding heart.

"How about this Saturday?"

I thought just a moment. "OK, give me a call tomorrow and we'll work out the details."

Once I was inside, I found myself really excited at the prospect of going out with Jesse. The days couldn't pass quickly enough for me, as I tried to occupy my thoughts with working in the store, and practicing my music. But my thoughts kept going back to his handsome face, his trim yet muscular body, and his full, sensual lips. I thought a lot about him, I must admit, in the days leading up to Saturday.

I took a lot of care getting ready for that date.

Aunt Margaret noticed all the effort I was putting into getting ready, and I could tell she wanted to say something about it, but she kept it to herself. That was fine with me, because all I cared about at the time was making myself into the perfect girl for Bill.

That meant a long soak in the tub, lots of skin lotion, a slow and careful removal of whatever fine hair I could find on my body (which, thank God, there wasn't much of), then an agonizing process of selecting just the right outfit.

I finally settled on a green satin T-style blouse, and a white skirt, short but not *too* short. I wore a pair of the expensive pantyhose in suntan, and a pair of mid-heeled white pumps. (For some reason, I loved pumps—something about the way they completely enclosed my feet pleased me.)

After I was dressed, I worked for an hour on my hair and makeup. Aunt Margaret would walk past the bathroom occasionally while I was engaged in this struggle, shake her head silently, and then leave me to my efforts. I noticed her noticing me, but I didn't say anything.

Finally, when I was almost (but not quite) done, I heard Auntie let someone in, and I heard Bill's voice through the bathroom door. I rushed to complete my work, touch-

ing up my makeup with just a touch of blush, and then spritzing on some perfume. I shook my head slightly, letting my hair swing just a little.

Giving myself one last review in the mirror, I had to admit I looked pretty darn good.

When I made my entrance, the widening of Bill's eyes at the sight of me made all my work worthwhile. That, and the way his lips parted in something like awe, made me feel like the most beautiful girl in the world. I smiled at him, in my best open-mouthed girl's smile.

Then it was my turn to gasp inwardly, because Bill had brought me a bouquet of roses. I had never received flowers before, and it was the most touching thing when he handed them to me.

Aunt Margaret was impressed too, I think, and she helped me find a vase to display them in. Seeing those flowers, knowing they were for me, made me feel so... I don't know, so girlish, I guess. I liked the feeling.

In the living room I caught a glimpse of the two of us in the mirror. We looked like any happy couple our age, but knowing that I was the female part of the couple gave me a special secret joy. It felt so good to know that the whole world saw me the same way I saw myself—as a girl, a pretty girl. That gender just felt right on me, the way a pair of really good panties felt against me, soothing, calming, yet exciting and thrilling at the same time.

“Have a nice time,” Aunt Margaret said as we headed out the door. She gave me some kind of look, but I was too excited to decipher it. “Don't stay out too late.”

“I'll have her back by curfew,” Bill said, and it gave me goose bumps to hear him call me “her”.

Outside, he held the passenger door of his car open for me, and I smilingly thanked him as I slid gracefully in and onto the seat. The car had a bench seat, which, I realized, meant we could sit closely together, if I wanted. I wanted to, of course, but figured I would start out a little further away and see how things developed.

When Bill came around and entered the car from his side, I saw his eyes lingering on my legs. That made me feel all warm and fluttery in my stomach, although I tried not to show it.

“You look really great,” he told me as we drove off.

“Thanks. You look really nice, yourself,” I told him truthfully. In his casual shirt and tan slacks, he looked like one of the boys from Beverly Hills 90210, I thought.

“So, I understand that you play the piano,” he said, trying to make conversation.

“Yes, I really like music. I've been playing since I was... I don't know, since I was seven, I guess.”

“You must be really good. I'd love to hear you sometime.”

“Sure, I'd love to play for you. Maybe sometime you can come to one of our recitals. My music teacher has all of her students perform in a recital twice a year.”

“That would be great, I'd like that. When's the next one?”

“Early December. I'll let you know exactly when it's scheduled, if you like.”

We went on like that, making small talk, all the while I felt my heart racing just to be out like that with him.

We had a nice time at the movie, which was a romantic comedy with Meg Ryan. When we were settled in our seats, Bill put his arm around me, and I was afraid he could feel me shiver in delight. I could tell he was nervous about it, but when I didn't object I could feel the tension leave him. Soon I was comfortably nestled in his arm, and quite content about it.

After the movie, we went for some ice cream and then just drove around a little bit. We ended up down by the lakefront, listening to the radio and enjoying the summer evening.

Bill had his arm around me, and I had managed by this time to be sitting quite close against him. And so, when we finally parked down by the Planetarium, it was the most natural thing in the world when he turned to me and kissed me.

Now, I had been kissed by boys before. (And it was kind of a point of pride with me that I had only been kissed by boys—romantically kissed, I mean.) But Bill's kiss was different. His lips felt wonderful against mine. I even liked the way he tasted. My own lips parted instinctively on their own, and when his tongue touched mine it was like an electric charge passed between us.

Suddenly, all I could think of was how much I wanted to be with him, how good his body felt against mine. I wanted so much to let him touch me wherever he wanted, to do things to me that I had let no one ever do.

I still had enough self-control (thank goodness!) to keep his hands from roaming too much, but I must admit that I let him briefly cup my left breast in his hand, and I thought my nervous system was going to go into overload it felt so good. I yielded up an even more passionate kiss to him, before I delicately moved his hand away.

We necked for probably half an hour, before we reluctantly headed for home. And I have to tell you, not since I first tried on that sexy bra in Aunt Margaret's shop had I felt so exhilarated, so alive and tingling. Yet I was also frustrated, of course, because I knew there were severe limitations on how far I could indulge myself with such delightful activities.

My unique situation was clearly going to force me to be a good Catholic girl, I realized, for the foreseeable future. Well, that wasn't necessarily the worst thing in the world. Most girls have to set limits because they don't want to get pregnant. Me, I didn't have to worry about that, but I had a very different constraint on my impulses. Most boys, I knew, would not be pleased to discover what was really lurking between my legs.

I ended up having a talk with Aunt Margaret that evening, in fact, after I got back from my date with Bill. She had waited up for me, and we ended up having some milk in the kitchen together, talking about how things had gone and, eventually, her concerns about where this might be leading.

“You realize how careful you have to be?” she asked me.

“Yes, Auntie. And in a way, this just makes sure I can't get too carried away with the boys, y'know? I have to be especially careful, I understand that.”

“Do you think you'll be seeing this particular boy again?”

I grinned. “Yes. He's already asked me out next weekend. Is that OK, Auntie?”

“I guess so. As long as you're careful, honey.”

“I promise I will be. Like I said, I have extra-special motivation to be a really good girl.”

And so Bill and I became a regular couple. We saw each other constantly that summer, and on into my Senior year of high school. Most of the girls I knew had regular boyfriends by then, and it was nice to be one of the girls that way.

In fact, my entire existence by that point was pretty much like that of any other girl my age. It was very easy to forget that I had ever had an existence other than as Jessica. And I worked pretty hard at not letting myself think about my prior life. The only problem was, there remained one reminder of my origins that I couldn't deny. When I took a shower, there was this horribly incongruous item down there, shriveled up as it might be after all my time on hormones.

I was still seeing my counselor, and we began talking more and more about that.

“At some point,” he told me one day, “you may want to consider remedying that situation. Sex Reassignment Surgery would reconfigure your... Organs... to those of a female. Given the hormone therapy you've already been on, such surgery would certainly make you indistinguishable from any genetic girl, except for an internal examination.”

“I think about that,” I told him more than once. “More and more, what I have down there doesn't feel right. I know it's part of my body, but it doesn't feel like it should be. I should have been born with a girl's... you know... down there.”

The biggest obstacle, of course, was the cost. Still, it was becoming more and more clear to me that, in spite of the cost, and my own squeamishness at the thought of surgery, I wanted to be a girl everywhere, in every way.

But I didn't know exactly how to talk about that with Aunt Margaret at the time. Plus, I was really caught up in all the things that happen in Senior year. I was thinking about going to college, trying to figure out where to apply, that sort of thing, as well as keeping up my grades, and my music, and my relationship with Bill. So it was real easy to let my discomfort at my unsettled gender status take a back seat for a while.

Still, alone in bed at night, I would tuck my hated male organ up and away underneath me, and then feel how my nightgown felt lying over an area that was all smooth and flat. That felt better, that felt *right*. That's the way girls were supposed to be. And I was a girl.

Chapter 7

At the outset, my Senior year at Our Lady looked to be the best year of my life. Seniors are at the top of the pecking order in high school to begin with, of course, but for me it was an especially happy time. Like all my girlfriends, I had a regular boyfriend that I was crazy about (and he seemed to feel the same way about me), so the beginning of the school year seemed particularly exciting.

All during the fall, I was also occupied with getting ready for the fall recital. It would be a special one for me, as both Aunt Margaret and Bill would be present. And so I practiced especially hard. I was also planning on applying to the Chicago Music Conservatory in downtown Chicago, so I knew I needed to hone my skills to their maximum.

I choose a piano arrangement of Pachelbel's Canon in D Major as my piece, as it was a particular favorite of mine and Aunt Margaret's. It wasn't the most technically demanding piece I could have chosen, but I had always loved its melodic theme.

But in November (that miserable month!) we had a bit of a scare with Auntie. When I came home from school one day, she didn't answer my calls. I found her in the downstairs bathroom, the one in the store. She had gotten disoriented and had fallen. I called 911, with a terrible sense of *deja vu*. Aunt Margaret was conscious though (although just barely) so I could cling to the hope that she might be OK eventually.

While I waited at the hospital, going out of my mind with anxiety, I tried think who I could call. I didn't want to call my Grandmother in Florida, as I feared causing her an attack or something; also because I wasn't sure I could sound convincingly masculine enough to pass as her grandson Joey on the phone. She didn't know about the changes that had occurred in my life since I had moved in with her sister.

Then I got to worrying about what I would do if something happened to Aunt Margaret, something really bad. What would I do? I was still a minor, I wouldn't turn 18 until next June. What would the authorities do with someone like me? I had no idea, and I really didn't want to find out.

Finally, I called Bill. He was so sweet, as soon as I explained where I was and what had happened, he hurried over. I was still worried about Auntie, of course, but once he was with me I could at least have someone to talk with, someone to distract me a little from the worst of my fears.

It turned out that Aunt Margaret had developed an irregular heartbeat.

"She'll be all right," the doctor reassured me, "but we're going to have to give her a pacemaker, to regulate her heart rate. She should be out of the hospital in a week, maybe less." The doctor was a relatively young man, he looked in his late twenties, and part of my mind noted the way he stole glances at me, almost unconsciously. Normally I would have been flattered, but now it was just a slight annoyance. Can't men think of anything else? I thought to myself.

Later, I was able to visit Auntie. She looked a little ashen, but she spoke to me and reassured me that everything was going to be fine. I stayed with her a while, until the

nurses shooed me out. She was, after all, still in the intensive care unit. After they implanted the pacemaker she would be moved to a regular room.

It was strange to come home to the empty apartment, to have the whole upstairs living quarters and the downstairs store all to myself. Both had come to feel like home to me, but without Aunt Margaret there they seemed terribly quiet and lonely places.

Bill kept me company for a while, which I appreciated. We made up a sign for the store, indicating that we would be closed for a few days, due to illness. Then I straightened up a little bit around the shop. Bill and I had stopped for hamburgers on the way home from the hospital, so there was no need to make any dinner. Around ten o'clock, Bill gave me a hug and a kiss and headed home.

"Call me if you need to talk," he told me, "or if you have any problems tonight. I can be here in ten minutes."

"I will," I smiled at him. "Thanks again. But I'll be fine."

But of course, I wasn't really. I told myself that Aunt Margaret would be fine, that she would be home soon and everything would be just like it always had been, but part of me couldn't help but feel like this was a replay of what had happened to my mother. Once again, I faced the prospect of being abandoned, and that filled my heart with a numbing dread.

Unable to sleep, I went downstairs to the shop, thinking I would check over things once again, maybe straighten things up a bit. When I had spent forty minutes or so halfheartedly neatening the place up, I checked over by the counter. While checking the register and the other areas there, I found some letters held together by a rubber band. They were addressed to Aunt Margaret, but the letters were out of the envelope, and curiosity got the better of me. I started to look through the letters.

"Dear Margaret," one letter began, "you probably think terribly of me, for not having got in touch with you sooner. But I only recently became aware that Virginia [that was my mother's name!] had a child.

"Please believe me, had she told me that she was pregnant when we were divorced, I would certainly have made sure to provide child support, at least. But she never let me know anything about the boy. Our breakup was rather bitter, for reasons that you may be familiar with. If not, I don't want to get into all that.

"At any rate, I now understand that you have Virginia's boy living with you. I can only presume that I was the father. Circumstances prevent me from taking any role in raising him, I regret to say. But I certainly intend to try and live up to my fiscal responsibilities, at any rate. Enclosed please find \$500, which represents the first of what I intend to be monthly payments."

I sat down, stunned. My father had written? And Aunt Margaret hadn't told me about it?

My mind whirled. Mom had always lead me to believe that my father had just abandoned us, that we had received no child support because he was an irresponsible bum. But that certainly didn't sound like the person who had written the letter. I read more of the letters.

“Margaret, I would greatly appreciate it if you could at least send me a photo of my son. I will abide with whatever your wishes are regarding staying out of the picture, but it would mean a lot to me if I could just have a picture or two. I've asked before, but I haven't gotten any reply. Please at least let me see what the boy looks like, how he's doing in school, whatever. And please let me know if there is anything else I can do to help. I very much appreciate all that you've done, and I have no intention of doing anything to upset the family situation you've worked so hard to create there. Believe me, I couldn't if I wanted to, so don't worry on that score.”

I looked at the postmarks on the envelopes. Aunt Margaret had been receiving letters from my father for months. Part of me was pleased to know that he wanted to know about me, but part of me was terrified that, if he ever did find out about my current life, there would be hell to pay. Most fathers, I figured, even long-absent ones, would not be happy to learn that their son was living as a girl.

Then, with a start, I realized that I didn't even know my father's name. I looked at the bottom of one of the letters. It was signed “M.B. Nolan”. Nolan. My father's last name was Nolan.

I didn't feel like a Nolan. All my life, I had been a Vincent. But still, it was an odd feeling to suddenly realize that I had family I didn't know about.

In the latest envelope, I found a check for \$500, a check not yet cashed. And there on the check was the name M.B. Nolan, with an address somewhere right in Chicago. My father lived right here in town!

I sat down, utterly bewildered. I could certainly understand why Aunt Margaret hadn't sent any pictures of me, of course, but at the same time part of me wondered if, just if, there was any chance my father might understand me, might somehow accept the life I had chosen for myself.

With a sigh, I realized that the prospect for that was unlikely. And so I put the letters back where I had found them (although I did copy down my father's name and address, just for future reference).

Then I turned off the store lights, and headed upstairs, feeling a little blue.

I went through my usual nightly ritual before bed—washing my face with cold cream, flossing and brushing my teeth, taking my hormone pill. Then I changed into a satiny nightshirt, and turned in.

I had never been alone in the building before, and once the lights were off I found it difficult to relax. Partly, it was because my mind kept going worrying over Aunt Margaret's health, as well as the letters I had found, and partly it was because I was so aware of all the creaks and groans the old building made. I had never paid all that much attention to it before, but now that I was alone every noise sounded like the footsteps of some intruder. Needless to say, it took me a long, long time to finally fall asleep.

Morning came much too soon. Once I made myself a cup of tea and began to wake up, I called the hospital to check on my aunt's condition. The nurse said her condition was unchanged, so I proceeded to get dressed for school. Bill would be by to pick me up in a little bit, so I hurried to get ready.

After school, Bill ran me over to the hospital.

"She's doing fine," the doctor reassured me when I finally caught up with him.

"We put in the pacemaker this afternoon, and her heart rate is stabilized. She'll probably be able to go home in a few days."

Bill and I got to visit her that day. She looked a little groggy, but she appreciated the flowers we had for her. I stayed with her until after she had her dinner, so I could help feed her. Then she dozed off to sleep, and so Bill took me back home.

Part of me wanted to talk with Bill about the letters I had found, but I knew I couldn't explain too much without getting into details about myself that I preferred to keep from him. So after I got home, and after Bill left in another hour or so, I called my counselor's beeper number. In a little while, he called me back.

"Well, I'm glad you let me know this," he said, when I had explained these new developments.

"But I think you're right, most fathers have a very difficult time dealing with their son's gender difficulties. Certainly, I would recommend you take no action for now, not until your aunt has recuperated. Then you can talk with her, and see what she thinks. She probably knows something about your father; she may have some insights as to how he might react to your situation."

That made sense to me, even if it was a little frustrating. I agreed to do as he suggested, and let things ride for the moment.

But I felt so unsettled that, after I had hung up the phone, I went downstairs to the shop and looked through the letters again.

My father's handwriting was very neat, very crisp, much like my own. The letters were well formed and good-sized. I wondered to myself what the M.B. stood for, and why he used initials instead of his first name. I resolved that, when the time was right, I would ask Aunt Margaret if she had any photographs of my father. I'd like to see what he looked like, at any rate.

When the weekend came, Aunt Margaret was still in the hospital, but she was feeling better and sounded stronger on the phone. So I opened the store on Saturday, and ran things by myself. That was no problem, of course, as I was quite experienced at handling things there by then. And for most of the day, things were pretty routine.

Then around 3:30, this woman came in. She was kind of striking-looking, somehow, even though she was older, in her mid to late 40's, I guessed. She was kind of tall, maybe 5'11", with a terrific figure and a pretty face impeccably made up. She looked, to me, like a former fashion model or something. And that was a little surprising, as we didn't get very many customers like that.

She browsed around the shop, taking in the various displays. She ended up purchasing some stockings and a slip.

"Is the owner in, Miss?" she asked me, as she presented her purchases at the counter.

"I'm afraid not," I told her. "Is there anything I can help you with? I'm her niece."

The woman shot me an odd look. Then, after a moment, she said, “No, that’s all right. But do you know when she might be in next?”

I explained about how she was in the hospital, but would be back home next week.

“So maybe you could visit her after that, once she's feeling better,” I suggested.

“Sure,” she said softly. “I hope she’s OK.”

I rang up her purchases. “She's doing real well, thanks. That'll be \$22.45, please.”

She handed me a credit card, and I started to process the purchase.

“What about her nephew?” the woman asked, and I froze momentarily at that.

“Her... nephew?”

“Yes, didn't she have a nephew staying with her? He'd probably be about your age, I would think. Joey is his name.”

“Oh. Yes, Joey. He's staying... with ummm, friends.” My hands shook as I ran the card through the electronic scanner.

“Oh. You said that you were her niece... is that right? I didn't know she had a niece.”

“Yes. Ummm, yes I am.” I didn't know what else to say.

“Are you Joey's sister?” the woman asked me.

“Uhhh, yes. I'm Jessica, his brother... I mean sister.” I blushed furiously.

The woman signed the credit card form, and I shakily gave her the customer copy. She smiled at me as she walked out the door, but I felt like I had just run a marathon, with my heart racing and my body all sweaty. Then I noticed the credit card slip.

In crisp, clear handwriting was the signature of M.B. Nolan.

Chapter 8

For a few minutes, I couldn't make sense out of that. Then I hurriedly dug out the letters from the drawer by the register, and compared the handwriting. The signature was strikingly similar. They were clearly made by the same person.

Then I dashed out the shop door, trying to catch up with the woman. Still clutching the letters, I stood on the sidewalk, looking up and down the street. But she was gone. I brushed my hair from my face, shivering in the cold autumn wind. Then I turned and went back into the store.

“What the heck was that all about?” I muttered to myself.

I returned to my spot by the register, feeling confused. Then I went to the ladies' room, to touch up my face and also to relieve my bladder. I took my time sitting in the stall, and then looked deep into my own eyes reflected back from the mirror. The girl who looked back at me had a beleaguered expression on her (admittedly pretty) face. I sighed, touched up my lipstick, and headed back.

When I opened the washroom door, my heart stopped. The woman was back, waiting at the counter. I can only imagine what kind of look I must have had on my face. She kind of had a sheepish, quizzical look to her as well.

“Did... did you forget something?” I asked her, tentatively.

“Uhhh, well, yes. No, not really. I mean, I wanted to ask you something, if you don't mind.”

I smoothed down my skirt, and walked back behind the counter.

“I hope you don't think I'm prying, but you see...” she began, hesitantly, “you see, I'm an old friend of the family. I knew Joey's... knew your mother. But I didn't know she also had a daughter.”

I answered her with a question of my own. “You're... M.B. Nolan?”

Now she got an odd look on her face. “Why do you ask, dear?”

“You signed the credit card M.B. Nolan.”

“Ah, yes. Yes, I'm Meredith Nolan.”

“Meredith Nolan,” I repeated. “Are you related to the M.B. Nolan who was Joey's father?”

“Yes,” she said carefully. “I'm his sister, Meredith.”

I thought about that for a moment. “Could you... could you tell me, what was... Is... his first name?”

“Michael,” the woman said softly. “Could you do me a favor? Can you tell me about Joey?”

“Ummm, what would you like to know?”

“Just...” she searched for words momentarily. “Just, what's he like, how's he doing? Is he happy?”

“He's just fine,” I said. “Although he wonders whatever happened to his father.”

"I'll bet," the woman said. "Dear, this may sound odd, but... you and Joey... do you ... have the same father? Or did your mother remarry?"

"She didn't remarry," I said, and left it at that.

She looked carefully at me then.

"Joey and I were twins," I lied.

"Oh my. Oh my goodness," she said to herself. "I was told there had only been a boy. Oh my goodness."

"So you're my aunt," I said quietly.

"Yes," she said in a moment, biting her lip.

"So how come my father isn't here?"

She let out a deep sigh. "He would be, if he could. But... he just can't. He has a... medical condition, that makes it difficult for him to be here."

"Can I call him sometime? I'd like to talk to him, sometime."

"Maybe sometime," she said evasively. "But not right now. Maybe sometime, though. What about Joey? Do you think I could meet him here sometime?"

"Uhhh, he's... going to school out of town. He'll be heading back tonight, actually."

"I see. Could you give me his address, do you think? I'd like to write him..." She paused a moment, then added, "And so would your father, of course."

Something didn't quite feel right, but I was so nervous I couldn't figure it out.

"I don't have it handy. Why don't you call tomorrow, and I'll get it for you."

She said that would be okay. Then she asked me if I wanted to get something to eat later.

"No, thanks, but I have to check on Aunt Margaret later." At this point, I just wanted to get this over with. I was getting concerned that this woman was getting too close to my secret, and that she might end up disrupting my life somehow. If I could just hold off any disclosures until I turned 18, they wouldn't have any say in things. But until then, prying relatives were the last thing I needed.

She said she understood, and smiled this kind of sad smile at me. Then she left, promising to call later. Once she was gone, I tried to get a handle on how I was feeling. Part of me was excited to have met someone from my father's side of the family, part of me was afraid they would interfere with my life as Jessica. And part of me wondered what my father's medical condition was, that prevented him from seeing me.

I really wanted to ask Aunt Margaret about all this, but I figured this still wasn't a good time. Once she was safely home from the hospital, and had her strength back, I could figure out a way to bring this all up. So I didn't mention anything about my visitor when I saw her that evening.

My Aunt Meredith didn't call the next day, and part of me was disappointed, in spite of my fears. I opened the shop for a shortened day, and had a few customers, but my mysterious relative didn't show up.

I read and reread the letters from my father, and went over everything the woman had said in my mind.

My great fear, of course, was that she would continue to ask questions about Joey, questions that I wouldn't be able to answer without arousing suspicions.

Monday evening, Bill helped me bring Aunt Margaret home from the hospital. She was looking a lot more chipper, but she was confined to a wheelchair for a few days.

"Now, don't worry," she reassured me. "The doctor says I can get up and around real soon."

And she did just that. The pacemaker enabled her to manage pretty well, although I was careful to not let her tire herself out too much. And life pretty much returned to normal for us.

I kept trying to figure out a way to bring up the subject of my father, and my Aunt Meredith, but the time never seemed right. I didn't hear any more from either of them, so I was content to let sleeping dogs lie. And I had my recital to prepare for.

So I concentrated my energies on my schoolwork and my piano. And the time went by quickly. The day of the recital (a Saturday night, at a local performing arts center) I calmed my nerves by fussing with my dress and my hair and makeup. I looked forward to making the best possible impression on both Aunt Margaret and Bill, both with my playing and my appearance.

I had my hair done that afternoon. By now, my hair was shoulder-length, quite full and lustrous. I had left it my natural, light golden-brown color, and I wore it kind of flipped to my right side. My dress was exquisite, with a crisscross satin top over a long black crepe skirt. The skirt had a long, sexy slit up it, and it showed off my legs wonderfully. Aunt Margaret at first thought it was a little too sexy, but she eventually came around. She even gave me a fine string of pearls to wear with it, which really completed my outfit.

When Bill came by to take us to the recital, his jaw kind of dropped a little when he saw me. I loved seeing that look of yearning and desire in his eyes when he looked at me, and it was clearly in evidence that evening. I glanced at myself in the mirror, and felt all squishy inside myself. I looked, and felt, and even smelled (thanks to some strategically daubed perfume) like a very sexy woman.

Even Terri Muldoon (whom I had also invited) thought I looked terrific.

We had even invited my counselor, Dr. Ellison, to see how well I had made my transition, and I saw him out in the audience when I peeked out from the wings.

I waited my turn nervously. Then my name was called over the sound system (Jessica Vincent, of course) and I walked out on-stage, feeling eyes from all over the hall fixing on me. I thought I could feel the subtle vibrations of male lust throughout the audience, although the lighting didn't let me see them clearly. Still, I knew I looked good, and Bill (and even Dr. Ellison, I was sure) was enjoying how I looked.

Then I focused on my music. I shut out the audience and the lights and the soft whispers and coughs from the gathered people, and launched into the Canon in D Major.

For a little while, it was just the music there with me. To me, the music seemed to describe the cycle of life, the ceaseless turning and progression of lives and generations. I thought of my mom a little, and Aunt Margaret also. Then, when it was over, I became aware of the applause from the audience. I looked out at them and smiled my best smile. Then I rose carefully from my seat, gave them a little bow, and walked to the wings. The applause continued on heartily, so I gathered I had done pretty well.

After the final student had performed, we all came on-stage for a final bow with our teacher. Once again, the audience responded enthusiastically. Then Aunt Margaret, Bill, and Terri met me backstage. Bill gave me a dozen roses, and I started to cry a little.

As we came out into the hall, I froze. There, in the back of the room, Dr. Ellison stood talking with the woman who had said she was my Aunt Meredith. When she saw me, she wiped a tear from her cheek and then made a hasty exit. I wanted to ask Dr. Ellison about it, but couldn't really do it, not with Aunt Margaret and Bill and Terri there with me. Still, my mind obsessed over this development. I mean, how did she even know about this recital? And what did she want with Dr. Ellison?

I tried to put it all out of mind as we went out for a lovely celebratory dinner. Aunt Margaret moved a little slowly, but otherwise she was fine. Bill and Terri and I were careful to help her, and the evening went wonderfully. Except, of course, for the worrying voice that wouldn't get out of my head, the voice that kept returning to the presence of my mysterious Aunt Meredith at my recital.

Still, I couldn't let that wreck my evening. So I concentrated on Aunt Margaret's praise for my performance, and Bill's adoring gaze (and occasional tantalizing touches under the table), even Terri's enthusiastic happiness for me.

After we got Aunt Margaret home, I changed into something a little less formal—a two piece velour cardigan and skirt. Then Bill and I, along with Terri and her boyfriend (once he got off work) went out to a movie. All in all, it was a grand night.

When Bill finally got me home around 12:30, he and I kissed and cuddled for a while in the car, parked behind the store. It made me feel so good when he kissed me, when his hand would run up and down my leg, sheathed in sheerest nylon. Fortunately, my hormones had long since turned my male organ vestigial, so there was no danger of my betraying my secret due to my excitement. But still, I had to be careful. My circumstances still dictated that I remain a good Catholic girl.

When Bill walked me up the back steps, I noticed another car start up and leave from the next door lot. That was odd, because normally there wouldn't be anyone there on a late Saturday night. I didn't worry too much about it.

Once inside, Bill kissed me some more, and held me close to him. I could feel his own excitement pressing against me as he held me, letting me know that there was nothing vestigial about Bill. I wanted so badly to give myself to him, the way any girl wants to give herself to a man she loves. But I couldn't let myself go the way I wanted, the way I sometimes dreamed about, and so I had to gently disengage from his embrace. That was difficult, because his strong body felt so right next to me. His touch made me go all soft and vulnerable, and I liked feeling that way with him. But I knew that, for now, that path was forbidden to me.

I slept soundly that night, forgetting all about my Aunt Meredith for the moment. My dreams that night were just about Bill, the ones that I remember, anyway.

The next day, though, I got a phone call from Aunt Meredith.

"Is this Jessica?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"This... is your Aunt Meredith."

"What do you want?" I asked excitedly, while trying to keep my voice low.

"I... thought you would want to know. Your father is in town, and would like to meet you, if you could get free in a little bit."

I didn't respond right away.

"It's really important," she added. "I think you'll want to meet him."

"I don't know," I said anxiously.

"Look," she said, and then hesitated. "Your father knows about... Jessica. About Joey and Jessica. You know what I mean? You aren't really twins, are you?"

I thought about hanging up in panic, but she continued right away.

"It's okay, it's all right. Don't worry, he understands. It's not a problem or anything like that, dear, don't get the wrong idea. But he would love to meet you."

I hesitated. I was really torn between my desire to see him and my fear that he would make trouble for me. But finally I gave in.

"All right. Where and when?" I said it surprisingly calmly.

We settled on a coffee shop two blocks from the store, in an hour.

"Who was that, dear?" Aunt Margaret asked me.



“Just Terri, Auntie,” I lied, feeling guilty as I said it. “Can I meet her in about an hour? Will you be OK for a while?”

“I’ll be fine, honey. Just don’t be out too late, OK?”

I promised to be back in time for dinner. Then I spent a little time fretting and fussing over myself in the bathroom. It was cold out, and I would have to walk to the coffee shop, but still I wore a skirt (albeit a longish one). Somehow, I didn’t like wearing pants much. I guess I had fought too hard to be a girl to ever want to be in anything but a skirt. Maybe someday, if I had the operation and became a complete girl, I wouldn’t feel like I had so much to prove. But at the time, it was a point of pride.

I wore a warm sweater and a knee-length black wool skirt, and boots. With the addition of a bulky jacket, I was properly bundled up against the December chill, and so I set out for my rendezvous.

When I got to the restaurant, I saw my Aunt Meredith sitting alone in a booth. She had picked a spot towards the back of the cafe, which I guess was a good idea. But I looked around for someone who might be my father, and saw no likely prospects in sight.

“Hi,” I said cautiously, as I slid into the booth.

“Hello, Jessica,” she replied with a warm smile.

“So, what shall we talk about?”

She looked down at her cup of coffee. Before she could answer, the waitress came up and asked what I wanted. I ordered hot chocolate.

“I was wondering,” I began, “how you knew about my recital. And why you were talking with Dr. Ellison.”

Meredith took a long drink of her coffee. “I followed you to the recital, actually. I didn’t know where you were going, but I had been kind of watching for you. When I saw you all leave, you all dressed up like that, I was just curious, and I followed. As for Dr. Ellison, well, he and I know each other.”

“You said before something about...” I got interrupted as the waitress brought my hot chocolate. “You said you knew something about Joey,” I continued, in a lower voice.

She looked at me with a penetrating gaze. “I did some checking. The birth records indicate only that Joey Vincent was born to your mother. And that’s consistent with what I was able to find out from other sources who knew your mother.”

“Look, I ought to know about my own brother,” I continued heatedly.

“Stop,” she said, holding up a well-manicured hand. “It’s all right. I understand completely.”

“I don’t know what you think you understand,” I said in as calm a voice as I could manage.

“I know that you used to be Joey,” she said in a low voice. “And I understand. You have nothing to fear from me, dear.”

“Did Dr. Ellison say something to you? I can't believe he would do that.”

“Shhh. Dr. Ellison didn't mean to give you away. And he didn't, not exactly. But he said he was there to see a patient of his, and I know the kind of counseling he does. When I saw you come out, I put two and two together. Jessica, I think you're a beautiful girl. And I know how difficult it must have been for you to work all that out.”

“I thought I was supposed to meet my father here,” I said, changing the subject.

She took a deep breath. “You're right, you are.” She spread her hands in a theatrical gesture.

“Hi, Jessica.”

Chapter 9

I blinked once, then twice.

“What do you mean?” I should have seen it, of course, but I was still young and innocent, and still thought that I was some sort of weird, one-of-a-kind creature, in spite of everything Dr. Ellison had told me.

“I mean,” she said, looking around to make sure no one was listening, “that I was... am, your father.”

I was silent for a moment. “Oh, God,” was all I could say after that.

She drank some coffee, and I drank my hot chocolate. It was still hot enough to burn my tongue, but I didn't care.

“Was that why you left Mom?” I finally asked.

“I didn't leave. But as the truth about me became apparent to us both, your mom found that she just couldn't deal with it. And I don't blame her. I had tried to be something I really wasn't. I had tried hard to be a man. I tried to convince myself that that was what I was, and that marriage would cure my other desires. But I was wrong.”

I was in too much shock to say much at this point, so I concentrated on soothing my tongue with some ice water.

“Your mom was pretty upset with me. She filed for divorce, and I felt so ashamed over it all that I didn't fight it. But she never told me about you.”

“I read that in your letter to Aunt Margaret,” I told... her. (I was having trouble dealing with the proper pronoun for “Aunt Meredith” now. It was interesting, to be on that side of the gender divide for a change.)

“So how did you find out otherwise?” I asked.

“Well, I ended up working for a while with someone who had known your mom and I. She handled my change OK, but she seemed upset at me for something, and I couldn't figure out what. When I asked her, she said it was because I had never taken care of my child. And that was when I found out about you.”

“Wow,” I said slowly. “What kind of work do you do?”

“I'm a musician,” she said with a shy smile. “I've done a lot of studio work, some composing. I do a lot of commercials nowadays. I have my own business doing commercial jingles.”

“That sounds neat,” I said, and I meant it. So both my parents were musicians!

“Well,” the woman who was my father said, “at least now I know why Margaret wouldn't send me your picture.”

“Oh God, yes,” I laughed. Then I thought of something. “But did she know... about you? It sounded like you were hinting at that, in one of your letters.”

“Well, I didn't know. I kind of assumed she might know, that your mother would have mentioned something about it. But I'm not sure. If she knew about me, I think she wouldn't have been so reluctant to send me your picture.”

"I guess so. And she might have said something about it to me, if she had known."

We both sipped our drinks for a moment or two, kind of sizing each other up a bit in silence.

"So, how are you doing?" Meredith asked me finally. "You look... amazing."

I blushed and looked down momentarily. "Thanks. And... so do you. You're really beautiful."

We each looked at each other at that, and laughed. Some conversation for a father and son to be having.

"Can I ask you," I said tentatively, "have you... had the operation?"

She nodded conspiratorially. "Yes, ten years ago. I'm official, street legal, 100% government-certified female."

"Was it... I don't know... painful? Was it scary?"

"Well, not by the time I finally did it. What was scary was being in-between, being female inside but not completely female on the outside. So the surgery was really a relief."

"What was it like? When it was done, I mean."

She thought a moment. "It was like coming home, after a long, difficult journey."

"I'm... thinking about it, myself."

Meredith nodded. "I gathered that. Looking at you, it makes sense. Just be sure, don't rush things for the sake of anyone. I've known a few folks who had the surgery for the wrong reasons, and it didn't really make them any happier. But when it's right for someone, it can be something... liberating."

"Where did you have to go to get it done?"

"I had mine done in Wisconsin. There's a good clinic up there."

"Wow, who would think they did that sort of thing in Wisconsin?"

Meredith grinned, as if to say she knew what I meant.

"I don't want you to think the operation is a cakewalk," she added gravely. "It's serious stuff. And there's a period of time afterward when you're really, really... well, in pain. There's no point in lying to you, you hurt for a while. How could you not, given what they have to do down there. But medication helps, and motivation helps even more. If it's really the right thing for you, the pain isn't too high a price."

"Dr. Ellison's given me some articles to read about it," I said. Part of me wanted to ask her about what it was like after you healed. I wanted to ask about sex, but I wasn't comfortable bringing that up.

"So how's Margaret doing?" Meredith finally asked me.

"Better. She has a pacemaker, and the doctor says she should be OK now. But she isn't getting any younger."

"I know. I feel like I owe her so much, for taking you in, and for understanding about... well, about your gender situation. A lot of people, especially people her age, might have had difficulty about that."

I nodded. "She's been great."

"But she's getting up there," Meredith continued. "I don't mean to just burst into your life at this point, and try to disrupt your whole routine. But I also know that I want to be there for you, to be a part of your life, if you'll let me. As much or as little as you're comfortable with."

"Thanks. That means a lot to me." I reached out and touched her hand. "It's just a lot to adjust to, all at once. But yes, of course I want you in my life."

I frowned a little, then smiled. "I'm just not sure how to address you," I said with a slight chuckle. "I can't call you Dad, can I?" I whispered.

She smiled, a little wistfully. "I guess not. And I know I'm not your mother, God rest her soul. How about you just call me... well, we could stick with Aunt Meredith, for now."

I thought about that. "Okay. Let's try that... Aunt Meredith."

After the waitress refilled our cups, Meredith leaned forward to me.

"How do you think Margaret would handle all this? I mean, I don't want to keep all this a secret from her. I don't want you to have to keep it all a secret from her, if you don't absolutely have to."

"God, I don't know. I don't like keeping secrets from her, either. She's been so good to me. But I don't want to upset her or shock her, not when her health is still a little questionable."

"Well, let's play it by ear. We don't have to be in a rush about this. You be the judge of how and when to bring the subject up. But in the meantime, tell me about yourself. Tell me all about what you've been doing. And tell me about that boy I saw you with the other night."

I must have really blushed then, for I felt my face burning.

"It's all right, honey. I mean, it's natural for girls, even girls like us, to like boys. There's absolutely nothing wrong with it."

"I guess. It's just... I don't know, this all gets so complicated sometimes."

"*Tell* me about it."

We chatted for quite a while, until I realized the time and had to hurry off to get back in time for dinner. Meredith gave me a big hug, and gave me her business card, with her home phone on the back.

"I've got my apartment and my studio together, in the same building. It's downtown, only about a half an hour away," she said. "So I'll never be far. Let's talk some more, real soon, OK?"

"OK. I promise."

I was a little late for dinner, but Aunt Margaret didn't say anything. I tried to act like nothing much had happened, but inside my mind was going a mile a minute. I don't know exactly why these latest revelations made so much of a difference to me, but they really did. It was confusing, of course, but it also answered so many questions, questions that had nagged at me for a long time.

Christmas that year was kind of strange. Aunt Margaret had definitely slowed down a bit, after her heart problem, so things were a little low-key around our place. And Aunt Margaret had to hire some part-time help to run the store while I was at school. I think that bothered her, to have someone else down there, with her upstairs so much of the time.

I still hadn't gotten around to telling her about Meredith, either. Several times I started to, but couldn't quite find the courage. So I had to kind of sneak around and shop for a Christmas present for Meredith on the sly.

It struck me as a little weird, of course, to be a boy-turned-girl, shopping for a Christmas present for a woman who had fathered me. For folks like us, I guess, such unusual situations were more common than for others. Still, it all kind of made sense to me, from my perspective.

I recognized the perfume that Meredith wore, and I got a nice gift set with cologne, perfume, and powder. I also had a bunch of photos of me copied, both ones of me as Joey, and then as Jessica. I put them together in a nice photo album.

And so, later on Christmas Day, I said I was going to visit Bill, but actually Meredith picked me up down the block, and we went back to her apartment downtown. She loved her gifts, especially the photo album. In fact, she cried a little when she saw what it was.

When I opened my presents, I found I had received a \$100 gift certificate good at any of the stores at Water Tower Place, a downtown shopping mall. And I also got several music CD's, including one by Meredith herself. I played it immediately, and found that it was a really good instrumental album, kind of a light jazz, New Age album.

"I take it you haven't talked with Margaret yet," she said, as we shared some tea and cake.

"No, I haven't. I've tried a couple of times, but... I don't know. The time just hasn't seemed right."

"It's OK, sweetheart. Find the right time, and do your best. Given the way she helped you handle your transition, I don't think she'll be shocked by me too much. But she may still harbor some hard feelings about your mom. She may not be ready to welcome me back into the family."

"Yeah, that's kind of what's stopping me. I don't want to upset her, and I don't know how she'd react. But I'll try and find the right way to do it, eventually."

We visited for a while after that, and Meredith showed me her studio. It was in the next apartment in the building, so she could give me the grand tour of all her electronic instruments, and the projects she was working on. Finally, reluctantly, she brought me back home.

"I love you, Jessica. Merry Christmas," she told me as I left her car.

"Merry Christmas, Meredith. I... love you, too."

But when I got back upstairs, Aunt Margaret seemed lost in thought.

"You know, we really should invite... Meredith... to dinner. I'd like to see... her again. Why don't you call her, and invite her to dinner here, tomorrow?"

"Really, Auntie?" I couldn't hide the excitement in my voice.

"Yes, really, dear. She *is* family, after all, and this *is* Christmas."

I got on the phone right away.

"Hello, Meredith? This is Jessica. Are you doing anything for dinner tomorrow? Great. How about you come over here then. Aunt Margaret said to invite you."

Meredith was, needless to say, surprised. But she readily agreed. And so the next evening she showed up, dressed in a forest-green knit dress and a black wool coat. She looked, as always, like she had just stepped from the pages of *Mirabella* magazine.

"Hello, Margaret," she said cautiously. She held out a bottle of wine she had brought.

"My God, it *is* you, isn't it?" Aunt Margaret kind of gaped a little at her.

"Sure is," she replied, smiling.

I took her coat, and we sat down in the kitchen. I had prepared a ham, with pineapple, and vegetables and rolls, but we visited for a bit before I served dinner. Aunt Margaret and Meredith opened the wine and had some, and even offered me a small glass.

"I never knew, Micha... Meredith. Virginia never told me. I just knew she was very... I don't know, very hurt after your divorce. But she never talked much about it."

"It's not the kind of thing people can talk about easily, especially back then. I'm just so grateful for how you took care of... Jessica. You must have a very good heart."

Aunt Margaret just kind of sniffed at that suggestion, but I knew it was true.

"It just seemed to me that I was the only family available, so I did what family is supposed to do. And as for Jessica... well, the child just seemed much happier like that. I don't know if I did the right thing or not, sometimes. But I see her, growing up happy and healthy, and I guess I didn't do too bad."

"You sure didn't," Meredith said. "To you, Margaret," she said, raising her glass.

"To Aunt Margaret," I seconded.

She shrugged, and lifted her glass. "This is good wine," she said.

I served dinner shortly after that, and everyone ate well.

"You are a terrific cook," Meredith said, wiping her mouth delicately.

"She is indeed," Aunt Margaret concurred. "She's a wonderful girl," she said, without apparent irony.

After dinner, Meredith helped me do the dishes. That was an interesting experience, let me tell you, the two of us at the sink, like mother and daughter. I couldn't help but

think about how weird most people would think this scene, if they could only see past the surface normality. Of course, the neatest part of it all was that no one would have been able to tell there was anything unusual about us there. We were just two women, doing dishes together, talking and joking.

Aunt Margaret insisted we take some pictures of all of us together. She took several of Meredith and I together, and promised to get prints to her.

“Thanks,” Meredith said. “That will be wonderful.”

We took turns performing at the piano, and even Aunt Margaret played a bit. It was really something, to be able to share music together that way.

“You were so wonderful at your recital,” Meredith said at one point.

“She was indeed,” Aunt Margaret added. “She looked so much like her mother, there on stage.”

Meredith nodded. “I know. She did, didn't she.”

I know, I know. If you think about it too much, it can freak you out. But after a while, when it's your life, you learn to adjust. So I quit noting the irony of it all, and just learned to accept that my family was pretty regular on the outside, but pretty unusual on the inside. Nothing wrong with that, after all.

Chapter 10

The next year was pretty great. School continued to go well, and now I had both Aunt Margaret and Meredith in my life. (I found that I only called her Aunt Meredith if someone else was around. Otherwise, I preferred to call her just Meredith. She didn't seem to mind.)

I loved visiting Meredith at her studio, and I was always welcome. I didn't stay overnight, though, because I didn't feel right leaving Aunt Margaret alone for too long. But it was wonderful to have a real parent back in my life, even if I couldn't tell anyone besides Aunt Margaret (and Dr. Ellison) her real identity.

The only troubling aspect of my life was my relationship with Bill. I still hadn't told him the truth about myself. I talked about that with Meredith, because she was the only person besides Dr. Ellison in whom I could confide. And by then, I wasn't seeing Dr. Ellison all that frequently, just once every eight weeks or so.

"I don't know what to advise you, honey," Meredith told me one day in March. "Normally, it's best to be honest, but he's so young, it's difficult to say how he'll react. And his reaction, if it's negative enough, might make some problems for you at school."

"I know. I want to tell him so much, though. It really bothers me to keep this secret from him, and to have to always discourage him from getting too... you know, too physical. But you're right, I don't want to mess up school at this point, either."

"Maybe the best you can do is to put off telling him until after graduation. Once that's done, even if it doesn't go well, he won't be able to cause problems for you."

"I guess you're right," I admitted. "But it's such a pain."

"I know, I know. Even now, I wonder if I would tell too much of my background to someone I was involved with. I mean, a lot of girls who transition don't go into their whole history. Sometimes it blows up in their face, though."

"Well, for you, it's different. There's no way a guy could ever know you weren't born a girl."

"You're right, except that you can never know when someone from your past life might pop up, and say something. Then you've got a whole different problem, of having kept a secret from someone who trusted you."

"This whole gender thing is such a pain in the butt," I said. Then I laughed nervously, because that comment could be taken in an off-color way. "You know what I mean," I added quickly.

"I do indeed, honey. Natural-born girls don't know how much easier they have it."

One time, after I had been visiting over by Meredith, a guy stopped by to take her out. He was pretty good-looking, I guess, for an older guy. But it still seemed just a little weird, knowing what I knew, to see Meredith give him a kiss on the cheek and introduce me as her niece.

"Hi," I said, a little awkwardly. They gave me a lift back to Aunt Margaret's, and I tried not to let my self-conscious feelings show as I rode in the back seat. But as we

rode along, I saw that they made a nice, middle-aged couple. Just a regular couple, a guy and a girl, I thought. Like Bill and I.

Before I knew it, two wonderful things happened. First off, I was accepted at the Chicago Musical Conservatory, or CMC, as it was known. It was affiliated with Franklin University in downtown Chicago, and both Meredith and Aunt Margaret were pleased. I would be able to pursue my music there, while also getting the benefit of a full-blown university.

And shortly after that, I began to plan for my Senior Prom. I don't know who was more excited about that, Meredith or me.

"Remember, I never got to do that as a girl," she told me one day, as we were out shopping for a prom dress.

"I know, I know. In that regard, I guess I'm luckier than you were."

"You don't know the half of it. My father never did accept me this way. He would have strangled me, I think, if I had said I wanted to wear a dress to the prom."

"You never talk about your parents. And neither does Aunt Margaret."

"They died years ago, in an auto accident. I never did get the chance to make peace with my father. My mother kind of came around, reluctantly. Sort of."

"What about brothers or sisters? Were you an only child, like me?"

"I have a sister who lives in Phoenix. She's a born-again Christian, though, and she thinks my life is an affront to God."

"Yeesh. Sorry I asked."

"Well, you have to face the fact that a lot of people don't understand about transgendered and transsexual people. We can't live our lives bound by their narrow minds, though. But we can't pretend they don't exist, either."

"I guess. It's a shame, though. If this has taught me anything, it's that what's important is what's inside a person."

"True, if ironic."

"Why ironic?"

"Well, because we spend so much time and effort trying to make our outside selves consistent with our inner selves. I guess that shows that the inner self is the real self, though, and any disparity needs to be resolved in favor of that inner reality. We change the outside because we *can't* change the inside."

She grinned at me, and gave me a hug. "But enough of the heavy philosophy. Let's find you a dress, girl."

Meredith took me shopping at Water Tower Place, and I got to spend hours trying on different dresses, modeling one scrumptious gown after another. Finally, I found the one I wanted.

It was a sleeveless black sheath dress, ankle-length, but with a sexy slit in the back. It was satin, with a self-cinching belt. The back was dramatically cut with a sexy plunging V-cut. As soon as Meredith and I saw it on me, we both knew it was the one.

To go with it, we found a gorgeous pair of black T-strap heels.

“My God, you are going to drive the boys wild,” Meredith said to me at the store. We both laughed a secret shared laugh. The saleslady just looked at us and nodded, not getting the extra subtext one bit.

“My daughter,” Meredith told her proudly, “is going to be the most beautiful girl at her prom.” And I must admit, hearing her call me her daughter was as delightful a feeling was slipping into that luscious black satin gown.

The night of the prom, both Meredith and Aunt Margaret oohed and ahed over me appropriately. Meredith had come over to help me get ready, and of course to take pictures when we were done. Good thing she was there, too, because I was so excited and nervous I was a wreck.

Meredith was fantastic, though. Where I was all worked up, she was calm and capable.

“How are you doing in there?” she called through the bathroom door.

“Fine,” I shouted back, lying through my teeth. Well, I was doing OK, I guess. I had just gotten out of the shower, freshly Naired so I was as smooth as my prom dress. But I still had to use my razor on my underarms. That done, I flossed and brushed my teeth carefully.

“It's four o'clock,” the voice of my... my *parent* intoned once again. “Limo arrives at six.”

“I know, I know,” I told her. “I'll be ready.”

“Uh—huh. Not at the rate you're going, young lady.”

“Can you help me with my hair?” I called.

“If you unlock the door, Cinderella.”

“Oh. Yeah.” I reached over and undid the lock. I had a big bath towel wrapped around me by then.

“Go get dressed first,” Meredith told me. “At least your underthings. Then we'll work on the hair.”

I shuffled off to my room, and found my black satin bra lying on my bed, along with a black panty girdle. I slipped my arms through my bra straps and felt the cool caress of satin against my nipples. Then I stepped into my panties, their tight embrace flattening my tiny maleness until it disappeared. Years of hormones had, thank goodness, shrunk me down there so that it hardly showed at all through regular panties, much less a tight panty girdle. Thank God for small favors.

I threw on my black nylon robe, fastened it around me, then Meredith went to work on my hair. She had had the salon give me subtle highlights yesterday; now she styled it expertly with blow drier and brush. I have to admit, she knew what she was doing.

“Now let's do your face, love,” said the beautiful woman who once was my father. I nodded, thinking about how fantastic she looked, even at her age. The lady knew how to be a lady.

“We don't want to overdo you,” she said, “but it is a dressy occasion, so we want you to look glamorous.”

She helped me apply a thin, smooth base coat to my face. She had personally helped me select the proper shade, at an expensive cosmetics counter downtown. That done, we did my eyes, using eyeliner, mascara, and shadow of a subtle tan shade.

“Now let's use some blush to give a little definition to your face, bring out those fantastic cheekbones.”

She was like an artist with that makeup brush. When she was finished, she handed me my lipstick. I applied it carefully, then blotted it under her watchful eye.

“Looking good, Jessica,” she commented. Then she showed me how to finish everything off with powder. When we were done, and I looked at my face in the mirror, I wanted to give out a yip of joy. I looked like a model in Cosmo.

Then I very carefully rolled my expensive black pantyhose up my soft, smooth legs. My skin seemed to fuse with the magnificent shimmering nylon, and once I was encased utterly in the hose I felt so much better.

Finally, Meredith helped me step into my beautiful dress. It was tight and smooth and made me feel all sleek and sexy. When she zipped me up in back, it was the most delicious, the most exciting feeling in the world. To know that my parent was helping me this way, helping turn me into this beautiful girl was almost too much. And knowing the special history of Meredith, that just gave everything an extra joy. We shared this wonderful secret, this rare and special life we had chosen.

I slipped on my heels, and Meredith fastened them, as my dress made it difficult to reach down to them.

“Taa daah,” she exclaimed when we were done. Then she escorted me to the full-length mirror, and the sight I saw took my breath away. Then I noticed Meredith was crying, just a little.

“You're so beautiful,” she said, hugging me lightly.

“Well, I take after you, I guess.”

She gave me a light kiss on the cheek at that, being careful to not mess my makeup. We attended to a last few details (breath spray, a white lace shawl, and perfume) and then it was time to be off.

We all met over at Terri's house (Meredith drove me over) and all of us girls looked really special and pretty. I sure felt that way. And the look on Bill's face when he saw me was absolutely precious. It made me feel like the most beautiful, most desirable woman on earth.

As I made my way to the limo, Meredith gave me a final hug and whispered to me, “Have a wonderful time, sweetheart. Have the prom night I wish I had.”

The prom was at a downtown hotel. I felt so grownup and ladylike as Bill helped me out of the limo, as if I were some actress in a movie or something.

Once inside, I couldn't help but think back to that first homecoming dance, my first social occasion as Jessica. A lot had changed, of course (particularly me) but a lot of the feeling was the same, only more so.

When Bill held me in his arms, I felt so safe and protected that I never wanted to leave that embrace. I felt like I belonged there.

My dress felt absolutely exquisite on me. The feel of the long, narrow satin skirt against my nyloned legs was so sensual I could hardly stand it. I liked the way the skirt forced me to take short feminine steps, too. One could not behave like a tomboy in such a dress, no siree. And that suited me just fine.

While we danced, Bill's hands would roam up and down my satin-sheathed body, and that made me lightheaded with pleasure. To be a girl, to be completely and absolutely a girl, before God and everyone, was intoxicating to me. Even after all my time as Jessica, it still gave me a special, private thrill.

After the dance, our limo returned for us, and we drove up and down Lake Shore Drive for a while. Inside, we laughed, giggled, kissed, and made out (discretely) for I-don't-know how long. Then we stopped at a really fancy restaurant, and once again I felt like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* or something.

All the people in the restaurant were dressed nicely, and they all stared and smiled at us. Then, after we had eaten, we were back in the limo. Again, Bill's body was pressed against mine, his hands caressing me through my sultry dress. I felt like I was going to melt in pleasure.

When his hands caressed my breasts, I didn't object. It felt so good! My breasts were extremely sensitive anyway, and the way it felt when he would slyly cup them or stroke them through the satin of my dress made me sigh and close my eyes in ecstasy.

Being prom night and all, Bill tried to see how far he could get with me. Fortunately, the design of my dress gave him no access to other parts of me, so I didn't have to make myself too crazy with fighting him off.

It was so frustrating, of course, because my body at this point was crying out to do something that it just wasn't equipped to do. In spite of all the best efforts of Aunt Margaret, Dr. Ellison, and myself, I wasn't quite the person I wanted to be.

Some of the kids from school, I had heard, were planning to celebrate prom night by going all the way. If I had been able to do that, I might have sorely tempted to do the same. The urgent yearning I felt in Bill was matched only by what I felt inside. But I needed for things to be right before I would ever give in to those desires. And right then, things still weren't right. Not quite.

"I understand, Jess," Bill whispered as he nuzzled my ear. "In fact, I love you more for it. Someday, I know, I'll be able to make love to you. But there's no need to rush things."

I kissed him passionately, letting my tongue show my gratitude for his words.

"Thank you, love," I told him, when we finally broke for air. "You're right, someday we'll make love for hours at a time. Our time will come."

All in all, it was one of the most magical nights of my life. And I hated to see it come to an end. But it finally did, leaving me feeling like a princess in a fairy story. In my room, as I hung up my dress and removed my underthings, I heard a soft knock at my door. It was Aunt Margaret.

“Was it wonderful?” she asked me.

“Oh, yes, Auntie. It was absolute heaven.”

“I’m so happy for you. And I’m happy you found Meredith. She was so proud of you tonight. It’s funny, how things have worked out. There was a time that I probably would never have understood any of this. But seeing you tonight, knowing what a fine young woman you’ve grown into, I... I’m proud to have had a part in it.”

“I love you, Auntie,” I told her as I embraced her tightly. She felt so frail and thin in my arms it scared me a little. I felt her body shaking slightly.

“Now we should both get our beauty sleep,” I told her, and she agreed.

I changed into a nightgown, then tumbled into my bed somewhere around four in the morning.

In my mind, as I drifted off to sleep, a new determination was taking shape. There were things I still needed to do, I realized. My journey had brought me a long, long way, but I still had a little way yet to go. And I realized then that there was no turning back for me, even though this last part of the road might be the most difficult, the most challenging.

“The most painful,” I said to myself softly, in the darkness. “But I still want to do it.”

Chapter 11

Graduation day finally arrived, and I felt such mixed emotions it surprised me. It was so fulfilling to hear the principal call out “Jessica Vincent”, and to find myself walking across the stage in heels and my graduation gown, my long hair tickling my neck. When I reached out for my diploma, I saw my manicured nails glistening in the lights, and I knew that I had made the right decision.

Aunt Margaret was there, of course, (although in a wheelchair, to save her strength) as well as Meredith. It was quite a day, and I was so proud to have those two women there to witness it. Afterwards, Meredith had arranged a graduation party for me and my friends at a banquet hall.

We had a fantastic time, laughing and talking and eating and drinking. But there was also a bittersweet feeling to it all, as I talked with my friends about their plans for the future. We were all going our separate ways, to different schools and things, and I knew things would never be the same again.

Terri, for instance, would be going to school out in Indiana. Laura Weigel was going out to Colorado. Bill, at least, would be going to school out in the suburbs, so he would be commuting to school and staying at home, like me. So at least he and I could continue to see each other. But my other friends were scattering all over the place, and I would miss them.

Even with Bill, part of me feared that, as we attended different schools, and made new and different friends, we also would drift apart. I mean, I was looking forward to starting college in the fall, but I also hated to have to start all over again with new people and a new place.

“Part of life, honey,” Meredith told me, and I know she's right. But it still was sad, in a way, to think about it.

Two weeks after graduation, I turned eighteen. Meredith took Aunt Margaret and me out for dinner, and I got some great presents. Best of all, Meredith bought me a car, as a combination graduation and birthday present. I had gotten my license through school, and sometimes drove Bill's car or someone else's, but now I would have my own. It was a beautiful blue Ford Probe, and I loved it.



“Congratulations, honey,” Meredith told me when she handed me the keys to it. “You’re a grown woman now, or just about, anyway.”

“Yes, indeed,” Aunt Margaret added. “And quite a young woman, at that.”

I looked at those two women, the only family I had in the whole world, and started to cry, I was so happy. Without the two of them, I don't know *what* would have become of me.

It meant a lot to me to hear Aunt Margaret say such things, in particular, not only because she was like a mother to me, but because, although I didn't know it, it was the last time I would hear something like that from her. For it was only two weeks later that I came home from a trip to the beach with Bill and Terri and a few other kids and found Aunt Margaret on the floor of the shop. I went crazy, crying and calling her name and trying to see if she were breathing. Then I got hold of myself, and dialed 911. After that, I called Meredith.

“Please come over. Aunt Margaret is hurt, something's wrong. I don't know, the paramedics are on their way...”

“I'm on my way,” she said, and I went back to trying to give Auntie CPR. Then the paramedics arrived, and they worked on her. She looked terrible as they loaded her in the ambulance, but she was still alive.

Once in the hospital, though, the doctors made it clear that she was failing.

“It's just a lot of things going wrong all at once,” I explained to Meredith.

“I guess it's just her time,” she told me softly.

Meredith stayed with me there in the hospital while I kept vigil. Beside Auntie there was a monitor that displayed her heart rate (I'm pretty sure that's what it was). And so, for an entire day, I watched the numbers displayed on the LED readout. For a long time they kept fairly stable, but then late in the afternoon there was a very gradual but unmistakable decline in the number displayed. Sometimes it would rally back up to a higher number, but then the decline would set in again.

Aunt Margaret was conscious, briefly, early in the day, and we talked a little.

“I never knew, when I named my shop, how appropriate it would end up being,” she said at one point, seemingly out of the blue.

“What do you mean, Auntie?”

“ ‘And if the boy have not a woman's gift...’ It's a line from Shakespeare. *Taming of the Shrew*. It's something about women being able to cry more easily than men. Which is funny, of course, because back then they used boys to play women's parts in his plays. I just always liked the sound of the phrase, ‘A woman's gift’. Little did I know that you would come into my life, dear.”

I smiled at her, and brushed back her hair from her face. “You gave me the gift, Auntie. And I can never thank you enough.” Then I kissed her cheek.

But she was already asleep, and didn't wake back up. She just lay there, breathing softly, while I watched those numbers on the bedside machine.

"It's only a matter of time, dear," one of the nurses told me around six o'clock. Meredith rubbed my back a little, and I stretched my neck muscles a little.

Around 10:45 that night, Meredith had gone to the bathroom. Aunt Margaret's numbers had continued to decline, and now they were quite low, in the single digits.

I stood over her and held her in my arms.

"It's all right, Auntie. You can let go. I love you, I'll always love you, but you can let go now. Go for the light, Auntie. Go for the light."

And in my arms, she passed on.

We buried her next to my mother. It was a small funeral. Most of her friends were dead, and my Grandmother in Florida was too ill to come up. I spent that period in a kind of a daze, just trying to get through it all.

The only thing that saved me was that Meredith moved in for a while, to help me cope. And God knows, I *needed* help.

Losing Aunt Margaret seemed to bring back feelings I hadn't experienced since my mom had died. Once again, the feeling of abandonment, of being utterly and devastatingly alone in the world overwhelmed me. I cried all the time, and when I wasn't crying, I was lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling.

Meredith left me alone pretty much, which I needed. She made sure I ate, distracted me as best she could, and basically kept a watchful eye on me while I grieved.

Sometimes, at night, I would wander around the shop, thinking about how it had been when I first started daring to sample the pleasures of the lingerie and dresses there. Everything there reminded me of her, of course. The store was like an extension of her personality, and being surrounded by it was a little like having her back with me.

But of course, she *wasn't* back with me. And all the tears in the world wouldn't change that.

"How are you doing?" It was Meredith's voice, coming from the stairs that lead to the apartment upstairs.

"Rotten," I answered.

"I don't think there's anything anyone can say or do to make you feel differently, either. Only time will help."

"I guess," I said, fingering some slips I had found.

"Want to come upstairs and watch some television?"

"In a bit. I think I just want to be here a while more. Then I'll be up."

"Okay," she said, and I heard her go back up the stairs. When she was gone, I turned off the lights and sat there in the darkness, caressing an expensive black slip that flowed in my hands like liquid satin.

"Oh Auntie," I said out loud. "I miss you so much. I hope you're happy where you are. Heck, I know you must be. Say hi to Mom for me, willya?"

I rubbed the slip against my cheek. Somehow, it reminded me of a blanket I had when I was little, a blanket with a satin-finish trim on it. The slip comforted me somehow, the feel and scent of it reminding me of my aunt.

Aunt Margaret had left everything she owned to me. That included the shop and inventory, the building, and about \$250,000 in cash, bonds, and stocks. It was nice to know that I wouldn't be turned out on the street (of course, Meredith wouldn't have let that happen to me, I know) but still, I missed her so much.

I spent a while longer in the shop, soaking up the sight and scent of the place, and gradually I came to know what I wanted to do. After a while, I went upstairs.

Meredith was watching television on Aunt Margaret's old console set.

"Hey," I said as I sat on the couch. "Can we talk?"

"Sure, Hon," she said, and got up and turned off the TV.

"I think I'd like to go ahead and get the operation. What do I do?"

Meredith looked at me carefully. "If you're really sure, we need to get Dr. Ellison to agree that he thinks that's appropriate for you. I don't believe that will be a problem, I think he's thought for a long time that that would be a likely course for you."

"Then what?"

"Then we select the best doctor, make arrangements, and... just get it done. You've already satisfied the typical requirements for RLT and such. And money won't be a problem. It wouldn't be, even without your inheritance. You know that, don't you?"

I smiled at her. "Thanks. But what's RLT?"

"Real Life Test. Normally, they want a candidate for SRS... Sex Reassignment Surgery... to live for a year full-time as a female, to make sure it's really right for them."

"Heck, I've been full-time as Jessica for four years now."

"Exactly. And you've been on hormone therapy that long, as well. I think there shouldn't be a problem."

"So how do we find a good doctor? Who did you use?"

"Well, believe it or not, there's a very good clinic specializing in it up in Wisconsin. I'm pretty sure they're still in operation. I had my surgery done there, so I can recommend it from personal experience."

We talked for quite a while about what it was like to have the surgery. Meredith made it clear that it wasn't like getting a wart removed—it was serious surgery. And after the operation itself, you had to do something called dilation, to keep your newly-created vagina from closing up.

"There are some newer techniques that make it easier now, I understand, but dilation can be painful—sometimes *really* painful. We may not ever have to deal with childbirth, but dilation is probably just as painful, and it doesn't end in just an hour or so." Meredith's face was very serious as she told me all this.

I didn't care. Things had come together in my mind, and I knew it was time to finish the work that Aunt Margaret and I had begun some six years before.

Meredith was right, Dr. Ellison approved me for surgery shortly after that. I had to spend some time explaining to him how I felt, why I had decided to do it, and I had to see some outside specialists he referred me to, but by mid-July, I was on my way up to Wisconsin.

Meredith and I drove up in her Lincoln, because it had plenty of room and would give me a nice comfortable ride on the way back home. I was nervous and anxious, but my determination didn't waver. I was going to do this.

The clinic was in this little town way up in Wisconsin, just like Meredith had said. You would never think that such work was done in such a place, but the local people were accustomed to it. Everyone at the clinic was very kind and supportive, and of course, I had Meredith there with me.

The people at the clinic were glad to see one of their own return, and they were all interested to find out about the two of us. I guess they had never heard of the child of a transsexual woman coming in for SRS herself. I think the doctor was going to write a paper about us.

A nurse prepped me for the surgery, shaving me completely "down there". It felt a little strange to have her do that, but she handled it quite clinically (no pun intended). And it was a little scary to be wheeled down the hall on a gurney, into the operating room, to have all those masked faces peering down at me.

"You'll be fine, Jessica," one of the masked faces told me. "Now start counting backwards from 100..."

I did so, and I think I got to about 97 before everything dissolved away into darkness.

And then consciousness returned, and I was in my hospital room. My mind felt as if it were desperately trying to go back to sleep, as if being awake and conscious was this tremendous effort.

"Hi, honey," Meredith said to me from somewhere. "Take it easy, everything went fine."

I tried to talk, but my throat didn't seem to remember how to do it. "Is... It... done?"

My voice wouldn't function in more than a whisper, and it made my head hurt to do it.

"Yes, it's done. Now rest, honey. We can talk more later, when you feel better."

She didn't have to argue too hard to persuade me to rest. Every part of my body and mind was screaming at me to do the same. So I relaxed and zoned out for a while.

As I lay there, in this weird state of occasional, fuzzy consciousness, I thought about what had been done to me, about what was now different between my legs. I tried to sense myself down there, but everything was numb.

The doctor stopped in to visit, and see how I was doing, and he, too, told me that everything had gone just fine. The best I could manage was to nod my head weakly in agreement, and to answer some of his questions with quiet one-word answers.

When he had left, I let myself slip back into semi-oblivion. It hurt to try and think too much. My mind still felt as if it were packed in cotton.

By the next morning, that was all gone. The sun was shining outside my window, and Meredith was there, asleep in the chair. She had apparently stayed all night there.

I moved to sit up in bed, and became aware of really, really sharp pain down where the operation had been done. I must have cried out, because Meredith awoke.

“Oh, baby, how are you?”

“I... hurt.”

Meredith got a nurse, who promptly gave me a shot, and the pain dulled away. I had known it wasn't going to be pleasant, thanks to Meredith and Dr. Ellison and the nurses at the clinic. Still, knowing about pain ahead of time doesn't do much to diminish it. Meredith had been right, this was rough.

I'm not going to give you all the gory details. Suffice it to say, the aftermath of any operation is messy, and this had been a big-time operation. Medication helped with some of the pain, but not all. And dilation—well, let me put it this way: I'd rather handle childbirth.

Meredith had found out that the latest thing for dilation is to use these things called stents. They're essentially variously-sized dildos, but made especially for this purpose. By varying the sizes used, you can cut down on some of the pain of dilation. Still, the first time I dilated, I screamed.

I couldn't have gotten through the process without Meredith. She was a combination nurse, mother, and guardian angel. I don't know how her business survived with her away so much, but somehow she worked it out. She had set me up in a room in her apartment, and she pretty much nursed me back. I can't conceive of how some women go through this without someone there to help them. Meredith told me that a lot of girls have to do it alone, but for the life of me I can't imagine how.

“People can be pretty strong, when they need to be,” she told me, and I got the impression that she had been one of them.

Bill came to visit me once I got back, and he was all curious about what kind of operation I had undergone. Meredith and I explained that it was “female surgery” and let it go at that. But I had decided that, once I had my strength back and was up and around, I would explain the truth to Bill. I wanted to know what his reaction would be, to see if our relationship could be based on his knowing my real history. If it couldn't survive that, I wanted to know that, too.

Meredith and I had decided to hold off my starting college until after I had fully recuperated. They were very understanding at the school (although we didn't tell them the exact nature of my surgery) and I was set to begin in early January instead of in September. Part of me hated to do that, because I was really looking forward to school, but part of me knew I needed to take my time.

So I spent those months resting, healing, dilating (God, one must dilate!) and playing piano. I stayed on at Meredith's most of the time, as I didn't like being alone. In

October, we sold Aunt Margaret's building. I was strong enough then to go through her inventory, and save whatever Meredith and I wanted for ourselves.

"She really had some lovely things here," Meredith said, as we went through the store's stock. "We won't need to buy pantyhose for years."

"Right. Or panties, either." We both laughed, the sound echoing in the empty shop.

It was hard on me to do that, but I wanted to keep as much as I could with us. We wouldn't get much for the rest of the stuff. Meredith even arranged with the Windy City Gender Association to have a special discount sale for members, for the stuff left when we were done. Over the course of three or four weeks, the inventory gradually dwindled down.

"This was her life's work, and what's left at the end?" I said to Meredith, a little bitterly, as I contemplated the emptying shop.

"*You're* left, honey," Meredith replied. "Not just the outer Jessica, either. That would have happened, one way or another, even without her. But the inside Jessica, the person you are, that's really what she left. You're her legacy to the world, Jessica Margaret Vincent."

I wiped away a tear and smiled.

"I guess maybe you're right."

Chapter 12

Another holiday season came and went, another Chicago winter settled down around us. But this one found me living with Meredith. Aunt Margaret's building had sold, bringing me in another \$300,000 (before taxes). Meredith had me work with her accountant and attorney, to make sure the government didn't take too big a cut of all this, and to help me invest this sudden windfall wisely.

It was a little strange, to refer to Meredith as “mom” around Mr. Christopher, the accountant, and Ms. Levinson, the attorney, but honestly, it wasn't all that strange. And in truth, in my own mind, I did relate to her as if she were my mother. She was, after all, my only surviving parent, and she was a woman. How else should I think of her?

Finally, the day came when I started school. It was intimidating to go down there and register for classes. I mean, I knew no one there, didn't know my way around the place, and in general felt like, as Aunt Margaret sometimes used to say, “a lost duck in a thunderstorm.” But at the same time, it was exhilarating. It was a new beginning for me, and at the same time it was a culmination of what I had been working towards for years and years.

I was still on some medication for the residual discomfort from my surgery, of course. And I was still using my stents daily. But at least it wasn't an ordeal any more.

It was so interesting to finally be female in that last, most important place. I hadn't known exactly what to expect, but once it was done it felt like that's the way it always should have been. As my doctor up in Wisconsin had told me, once he was done, not even my gynecologist would know.

There was just one last thing I needed to do.

Valentine's Day arrived, and Bill sent me a dozen roses. (Meredith also received roses that day, although I didn't know the guy who sent them. Meredith told me she'd let me know in a bit, when she knew how it was working out.) And we went out to dinner at a fancy restaurant.

I had arranged it with Meredith so Bill and I could be alone at the apartment after dinner. And so, as we kissed and hugged, I told Bill I needed to explain something to him.

“You've met someone else,” he said instantly. God, men can be so dopey!

“No. Gosh, no. It's not that at all.”

“Oh. You said it so seriously, I figured that...”

“No,” I cut him off. “But it is something serious, something I've wanted to talk with you about for a long time.”

He sat down. “Okay,” he said with a grin. “I'm listening.”

Great. Now that it was time, all my carefully-rehearsed words seemed to have disappeared from my brain.

“Ummm, yeah. Where should I begin?” I began to pace up and down, as I always did when I was nervous.

“Do you know what a transsexual is?” I finally blurted out.

“I think so,” he said carefully. “A guy who has a sex-change operation, right?”

“Well, sort of. Except that a transsexual isn’t really ever a guy, except in some kind of technical sense. But yes, it’s a person who goes through sex reassignment surgery. Well, I guess really, that’s a post-op transsexual. There are preoperative transsexuals, too, now that I think of it.”

“You’re rambling, honey,” he chided me. “What’s your point?”

“Oh, God. Bill, I’m transsexual.”

He looked at me like I had two heads.

“You want to be a guy?” he finally said.

I threw up my hands. “No, you big goof. I used to be... how do I put this... my name, when I was born, was... Joey.” My voice had dropped to just barely above a whisper at that last word.

He swiveled his head so that he was sort of looking at me sideways. Then he grinned at me.

“Right. Sure. I didn’t realize it was April Fool’s Day. I’m celebrating the wrong holiday.”

I stamped my foot in frustration. “I mean it. This is absolutely serious and on the level. I’ve had sex reassignment surgery. I wasn’t born female, not on the outside, anyway.”

“You mean it, don’t you. That means... good God, you just had an operation last summer, so before that...”

This is it, I thought to myself. This is when I find out what this guy is really made of, what his real character is like.

“All that time before... you were... you had...”

This isn’t going all that well, I thought. Maybe I should have handled this differently.

“I don’t believe it. There is no way that you’re a... or were a...”

I noticed he was having trouble finishing those sentences.

“A boy,” I finished for him. “That’s what you’re trying to say, I guess. That I used to have a penis. Yes! That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

“I can’t believe you would lie to me like that,” he said angrily.

“Stop right there. Save me your indignation for a moment, and listen to me.”

“No. I’m through listening to you. How can I believe anything you say?”

“If I hadn’t told you, you’d have never known. There’s no way anyone can tell, now. But it was important to me to tell you the truth, so I took a chance. But if I hadn’t told you, you’d have never known.”

“Did you get off on fooling me, like you fooled everyone else? God, I feel like such an idiot.”

“I didn't enjoy not being honest with you! I hated it! You have no idea what it's like, to be struggling to be who you feel you are, but the whole world wants to force you to be who it says you are.”

“I don't understand how you could do it,” he continued, waving his hands. “Your Aunt Margaret—she was in on it? I guess she had to be. And your Aunt Meredith? Or is she really your uncle?”

In spite of myself, I started to giggle then. I couldn't explain why to Bill, of course, but I just cracked up. Part of me wanted so much to yell at him, “No, she's my Dad, you idiot!” But I couldn't betray Meredith's privacy.

But Bill thought I was laughing at him, I guess. So he got really mad, and stormed out. I ran after him, trying to explain, but I was still sort of giggling, and he just got more upset. A minute later, I heard the tires of his car squealing as he pulled away.

“Could have gone better,” I summarized to Meredith later.

“Yeah, I would say so,” she said sarcastically. “Oh, Jess, I'm sorry. It's not something that everyone can adjust to. But in the long run, it's better to get it out in the open early. If he can't deal with it, it's really best to know it sooner rather than later.”

“I guess. But...”

“I know, I know,” she said softly. “You loved the boy.”

I wiped a tear from my eye.

“Yeah. Basically.”

“Been there, done that,” Meredith said, breathing out a deep breath through her nostrils. “All I can tell you is, it gets better.”

I nodded my head. I figured she was right, but it sure didn't feel like it at the moment.

So anyway, that was my Valentine's Day. Too bad Hallmark didn't make a card appropriate for the occasion. Something like:

“Roses are red, Violets are blue, You're a nice boy. I was once, too.”

I'm sure Bill would've loved getting that one from me.

Actually, I guess he thought he had.

So I went back to school, and concentrated on my studies. There was plenty to keep my occupied there.

And just like back at Our Lady, I made friends there. It didn't take away the pain of losing Bill, but it helped a little.

Then one day, I found this CD sitting on my bed. It was titled “Changeling” and it was by Meredith. And in the liner notes, it said, “dedicated to my daughter Jessica”.

I listened to it, and it was the music that Meredith had been working on. The most beautiful song on the album, I thought, was the title track, “Changeling”. It had some

of the emotional resonance of the Canon in D Major, I thought, only in a New Age kind of mode. It was the piece with the Celtic influences I had heard parts of earlier.

“Do you like it?” she asked me later that night.

“It's beautiful,” I told her.

“You inspired it. You're my changeling.”

The rest of the school year went by uneventfully. I worked hard, and managed a B+ average. And would you believe it, “Changeling” actually became something of a popular album. Well, it was at least carried in some of the larger music stores. And the title track even got some air play on some of the New Age type stations. That was incredible, to catch it playing on the radio, knowing that my... that Meredith had written it, and that it was inspired by me.

Spring fitfully turned into summer (the way it does in Chicago—one day warm, the next cold and rainy, so you never know what to expect). But finally the warmer weather prevailed, and then I sometimes found myself visiting the old neighborhood. And always, when I went there, I drove by Aunt Margaret's old building. One day, I stopped the car and got out, just walking up and down the sidewalk in front of the building.

Where her store had been was now being turned into an upscale coffee shop. The neighborhood was being gentrified, and trendy stores and restaurants dotted the area. I remembered when it had been a kind of declining, worn-out part of the city. It hadn't been too long ago.

“Now it's getting transformed,” I said out loud, to no one in particular.

But to my surprise, someone answered.

“A lot of that going around, I'm told.”

I almost jumped, because I knew that voice. I spun around, and it was Bill standing there, looking sheepish.

“I didn't see you come up,” I stammered.

“I know. I could see you were lost in thought.”

“So how've you been?” I couldn't think of anything better to say.

“I'm okay. How are you?”

“Fine. Just fine.” Bullshit, I thought.

“A lot of memories here,” he said wistfully. “I hate to see it all changing.”

“I know, I know. But some changes are for the better. Others are just inevitable.”

“I guess so.” He looked down at his shoes. “Sorry about the way I acted... you know, the last time I saw you.”

I shrugged. “I'm sorry, too. I'm sorry for having misled you. I don't know how I could have handled it better, but I'm sorry for how it hurt you.”

Bill just nodded. He was so cute, he still made my heart skip a beat, even after not seeing him for months.

"Wanna get a soda or something?"

"Maybe," I answered. "I'm kinda thirsty, I guess."

"The old coffee shop is still down the block. Don't know for how much longer, but it's still there for the moment."

"That'd be nice, to see the old place again. Been a while."

So we walked there, the June breeze from the lake tossing my hair. Every once in a while, I caught Bill sneaking a look at me like he used to do.

"I never said anything to anyone," he told me, when we settled into a booth in the shop.

"About you, I mean," he continued. "You know."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. As you know, it can be a difficult thing for people to deal with."

"Yeah." He blushed at that.

"So tell me about it," he said in a moment. "Tell me all the stuff you'd have told me that night, if I'd listened. I guess, when you laughed at me, I just kind of lost it. I thought you were laughing because you thought it was funny to have fooled me like that."

"God, Bill, it was never that. Just something you said, it reminded me of something else, and I started laughing. It had nothing to do with you, actually. And I certainly wasn't laughing at *you*."

"It was kind of an emotional moment, for both of us. Sorry I didn't handle it better."

"It's all right. I can understand your being thrown for a loop. I mean, I only understand it because I had to live through it."

"So you're really... all the way changed, now?"

I tossed my head back and laughed a little. "Yes, all the way. It's been just about a year since I had the surgery. I'm completely, absolutely, legally female. I could get married, if I wanted. As a girl, I mean."

He blinked his eyes slowly at that. "Wow. So tell me what it was like, growing up and all. How did you figure out that this was what you wanted?"

Well, once I got started, I was talking for quite a while. Bill would interrupt every once in a while with a question, but mostly he just listened. Although he did kind of freak out, if only for a moment, when I told him the truth about Meredith. (I was tired of telling lies. They made my heart hurt.)

"That's why I cracked up laughing that night," I told him. "I was all nervous to start with, and then you made the crack about Aunt Meredith being my uncle, and..."

"Oh, God," Bill said. "It just gets all so complicated, doesn't it."

"Yeah. Yeah, it does. But the complicated parts are really pretty much behind me now, I think. Y'know?"

“I guess. It's all so amazing. I mean, you see this stuff on television, but you never expect to deal with it in real life. I would never, ever, have suspected you weren't a regular girl. Sometimes I still have trouble believing that you were ever...you know, not a girl.”

“Inside, I think I always was.”

He nodded. “I guess that makes sense. I have to admit, you certainly look good as a girl. You're still the most beautiful girl I've ever met.”

I smiled, and put my hand over my mouth. “Thanks,” was all I said.

We talked for hours. I think the waitress got a little annoyed at us, because we just sat there, occasionally getting fresh sodas. We eventually ordered sandwiches, because it was getting late and we were still going strong.

“I've missed you a lot,” he finally told me.

“I've missed you, too.”

“I know you must be pretty mad at me,” he said softly. “But do you think there's any chance we could try and see if we could... I don't know, start fresh, I guess?”

“I was never made at you, Bill. I guess I was just hurt. All my life, I've struggled with feeling like something was wrong with me, like no one could really like me if they knew the truth about me. So when things blew up with us, it kind of brought all that back. But I think I'd like to try and see how things might go, if we gave it a try.”

He grinned a huge grin.

“Great, that's great. Wanna... see a movie sometime?”

I thought about that a moment. “Yeah,” I said, fluttering my eyelashes. “I'd like that.”

“What about tomorrow night?”

“That'd be nice. That'd be real nice.”

When we finally parted, it was difficult. Part of me wanted to stay so badly. From the look on his face, Bill did too. He kissed me on the cheek, and my heartbeat got syncopated.

“See you tomorrow, then,” he told me.

“Tomorrow.”

In my car, as I drove back to Meredith's apartment, I slipped in the CD. “Changing” started to play, and I smiled to myself. I turned the music up loud and sped up a little, the wind whipping my long hair back.

Ahead of me, the road stretched out invitingly, eventually vanishing into the summer twilight.