

Call me Donna

By Liadan Tallie
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Chapter 1

"What's your name?" When you're a kid, that's all the icebreaker that you need. Kids don't think in terms of icebreakers, or pickup lines. As children we inherently understand that other people only care about us if we do, and we assume that everyone will like us.

People haven't lied to us yet and told us that we're not worth it.

"Sarah. What's yours?"

"David."

"David's not a girl's name."

"That's good, because I'm a boy."

"Oh, that's alright then."

Kids don't care about gender confusion. You tell them something and they assume you know what you're talking about. The less you know about the world, the surer you can be with anything that you think you do know.

Kids, in some respects, are better people than we are as adults. As a kid, I know I was better than I am now. Sarah was perfect as a kid.

That was the first time that I remember being called a girl. Not the last, of course, but it was the first, and I met Sarah.

I don't even remember what we did that day. I do remember complimenting her on her dress. She complimented me on my skirt. We lived close to each other, so this one time was not solitary. Mama liked how I looked in dresses or skirts. I thought it was normal. Sarah really didn't

think anything of it either when we were four years old.

I didn't understand why it happened at the time, but Sarah's dad got really angry when he found out my name was David. He dragged me home and began yelling at my Mama when she admitted that she knew all about how I was dressed.

She then proceeded to rip into him calling him a bunch of names I didn't really understand, nor do I remember them now. Sarah's dad got quiet, apologized, and said that I was welcome over at his house in the future as long as I was 'properly attired.'

Mama dressed me in pants and shorts after that.

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"What's up BFF?"

I smiled at Sarah as she bounced into the room. It was our joke. I was her best friend. We'd just finished second grade, and we both looked out for each other. Somehow I was accepted by the girls and not the guys. I didn't really care. I liked them better than the boys, and if they didn't play soccer or anything like that, they did have other games.

"So, how's the leg, Big D?"

Three months before the end of school, I'd fallen off the swings.

That's not true. I'd jumped off the swings, flew twenty feet past the wood chips, and landed on the concrete berm. I'd only done that because Sarah told me that as the boy in there group I couldn't let Janet win. She landed ten feet from the swings. I may have broken my leg, but I now

held the school record for jumping. I doubted it would ever be broken, especially since the yard monitors wouldn't let anyone jump off the swings anymore.

"It's fine. Take a look!" I held up my sketch book. Mama had purchased it for me, along with a pack of colored pencils.

"Wow, you're really getting better."

Since I was stuck on the benches during recess and lunch, I spent a lot of time drawing.

"You know what it is?"

"Me?"

"Yep, here, it's for you."

"I couldn't..."

"Yes, you can, BFF."

We smiled at each other. She folded up the paper and pocketed it. That was all that really struck me about that day.

This isn't really a story about Sarah. This is a story about who I was, and where I came from. Sarah was important to that because she was a friend. She was my best friend. BFF? Sure, she was my BFF, at least that's how I felt. You don't have to be a girl to have one, right, especially if your BFF is a girl?

That's what I decided, and that was how I treated her.

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"You girls really shouldn't cut through the park after dark."

"Yeah, it's dangerous. Some guy might want to take advantage."

There were chuckles from the darkness.

"Who you calling a girl, Fucktard?" For some reason, at twelve, I thought that swearing made it less likely that they'd take me for a girl. Then I just became the skinny foul-mouthed boy.

"Your girlfriend, apparently."

We kept walking, and they taunted us as we walked. Nothing came of it though and I like to think it might have been my fault. Well, at least I thought I was responsible for it.

Sarah leaned into me and said, "thank you." I just smiled at her and said, "You're welcome."

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"Mama, I'm home."

"How are yah, Sweetie?"

"I want to exercise more."

"Where did this come from?"

"I'm too small, Mama."

"You'll grow eventually. Puberty will happen sooner than you think."

"Sure, but I want to grow faster...at least stronger."

"How about tennis?"

I smiled at her, thinking that would be great. I had my art, and was getting so much better at

it that I was at eight years old. Unfortunately, that left me way behind the other boys in development. Tennis, at least, would allow me to get out there and do something more active.

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"You must be David."

I turned expecting someone about my mother's height. The woman I looked at was about a foot taller. I didn't understand terms like Amazon at that time, I simply thought, 'holy shit, she's tall.'

"Yeah, you're Coach Fleur?"

"Call me Beth. Everyone else does."

At thirteen, everyone seems old, but I doubt that she could have been older than nineteen or twenty. Mama had told me that she was going to the local college, so looking back it makes a certain amount of sense to me.

"Ok, Beth."

It was interesting, to say the least. Mama thought that I should wear this skirt thing over shorts, so I did. I'm not sure what Beth thought about it, but I saw her and my Mama arguing about something after my first lesson.

On my third lesson, I figured out that I was wearing a girl's outfit. By this point I had decided that Mama was drunk when she picked it out.

"Mama, this is a girl's tennis outfit."

"And it looks cute on you."

"I don't wanna be cute, Mama. I need to be big and tough if I'm going to be a man like daddy."

She snorted her vodka through her nose and it started bleeding. I got her one of the rag towels with some ice. She applied pressure and then responded to my earlier statement.

"Someday you'll realize that your father would love to look like you do now."

"But Mama..."

"You should really give this a try," she said, gesturing to my entire appearance.

"I'm done giving this a try. I'm going back to my pencils. I want to try a new technique I learned for charcoal anyway."

"What about tennis?"

"Screw tennis, Mama. I'm a boy."

I put on my headphones and turned up the noise when I heard Mama explaining that I wouldn't be needing Coach Fleur again.

I include this moment in my tale not for who Beth was at this moment in my life, but more for how my mother treated me during it. She does have a place in my later life, but that is a tale for another time.

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Heretofore, this story has been a collection of vignettes. As a painter, I find that these scenes are a better representation of much of our past than a continuous monologue. To tell a coherent story, however, we normally need more than a couple of vignettes, especially when it becomes a

more complex tale.

The memories I have of my life are fragmented. What I wrote is true to the best of my recollection. What I'll tell beyond this point is not false, but is dramatized. I've taken the liberty to fill in holes in my memory with what is most likely to have happened, or will explain things I didn't know at the time, but found out later.

Hindsight is twenty-twenty.

This is a statement that people take so often for granted that they don't really think why it is so apropos; the present is blurry. I mean it's like were one of those legally blind people who have twenty-two hundred vision *with glasses and* contacts on. We never know other people's motivations until it is too late. We don't know how everything seems to fall perfectly in place.

In fact, it's lucky that any of us survive to be adults.

This is a story crafted in twenty-twenty that I understood hardly at all as I lived through it.

Sarah was in complete tears when she burst through my door. We still lived next door to each other, and even though next door was next best thing to a mile away with extensive grounds and brick walls separating our properties, we spent a lot of time going back and forth between our two houses.

I think half the time our own mothers assumed we were siblings.

"It's not fair, David."

"What's not fair?"

"Mom says that I can't be in the pageant unless one of my cousins is in it with me. You know

Charlotte is ugly and Mary is too shy. They're my only cousins. I really wanted to be in the Miss Florida's Outstanding Teen pageant."

"Don't you have to do a city pageant to get into that?"

"Apparently they don't require it, but it is usually something the judges look at if you're going to have a real chance at winning."

"If you're not going to win, why compete at all?"

"So that I did it. I don't want to go through my entire high school career without ever doing anything, do you?"

"We're only fifteen. We still have a lot of high school left in front of us."

"David, you're not really being supportive of your friend."

I hadn't noticed Mama sneaking into the doorway.

"Hay, Mama."

"Hi, Sarah. So, what's this about you needing someone to be with you in the competition?"

"Mom can't be there with me, so she wanted my Aunt to go to the events."

"So, she just needs someone who will be there with you?"

"Yes."

"I could do that."

"You'd do that for me, Mama?"

"Sure...but we'd have to do something with David while we're there."

"He could come with us. He has better fashion sense than I do most of the time."

"True. That he does. Maybe...no it would be silly."

I looked at her, trying not to say something, and the suspense was killing me. "What, Mama?"

I said.

"Well, I doubt you'd be able to do it. I mean, why enter a contest unless you could win, right?"

"What are you talking about, Mama?"

Sarah didn't look confused, she looked a bit horrified, "No, Mama. He'd look silly up there."

"David would fit in up there and you know it, Sarah. How often is he mistaken for a girl, even now?"

"Up...there...You want *me* to enter the contest. This is Sarah's thing."

"But it's something the two of you can share. I know how close you two are."

Sarah was close to tears. I thought it was because she thought Mama would only do it if I entered.

"Sarah, do you want me to enter?" I asked her quietly.

"You'd do that? You'd enter with me?"

I sighed, "I'll probably just be kicked out early. But if it means this much to you, I'll do it."

Her mouth opened a bit and Mama beamed at the two of us.

"That's my girls. We have so much to do to help you prepare for this thing, David. So many things."

"Mama, there are a few things I'm just not doing. The first is getting my ears pierced."

"But honey..."

"No buts. I need to be able to go to school and be taken seriously as a boy."

"Fine," she said with a sigh, "what else?"

"That you make sure it's legal for me to be entering. I don't want to ruin this for Sarah because she gets kicked out for me being there against the rules."

Mama sat there for a few minutes, not talking, and then looked at me resignedly.

"Ok, I'll figure it out. Anything else?"

"If this is going to work, then perhaps you should call me Donna."

Chapter 2

Nothing happened with the pageant for a couple of weeks, and I thought that it might have all gone away, or that Sarah had second thoughts about getting me involved with it. It was an exciting time for me either way, as I was a freshman in high school. I had filled my schedule with art classes, just doing the bare minimum of other classes to fill the requirements I would need for graduation.

It worried me a bit, when I thought about the pageant, as I wasn't taking any AP classes. I'd wanted to get into the Studio-Art program that my school offered, but the Mrs. Parsons told me she'd never allowed a freshman into it.

So, I made sure to take a full load of Art course work. Well, as full as I could. Math, English, and a Science each took a spot in each of my semesters, or they did in my freshman year.

Sarah had given me the great idea to take those courses in summer school the following three summers. It wouldn't work for my first year, unless I wanted to complete two years worth of the courses in a single summer, something I was completely against.

If this makes me seem like an over achiever, let me explain it better: I love art. The time I spent unable to play at recess really opened up a world to me that was well beyond any I'd ever thought could possibly exist.

It was also something I was good at.

I had a talent for both the technical aspects as well as the composition aspects of this world.

The school I went to had an extensive art program. It likely had to do more with the amount of money that parents donated to the programs than anything else. Living in an affluent

neighborhood had its perks.

We had a metals workshop, a traditional sculpture studio, five industrial sized kilns, and seventeen teachers, and one me.

I was currently in an introduction pottery class, a sculpture class, a lighting and composition class and 'advanced art skills' which is essentially a sketching class. Next year, in addition to the AP Studio-Art course I hoped to be in, I would be taking a full schedule in the art department.

Or, at least, that was The Plan.

When you're fifteen, unless someone has beaten it out of you, life is without limits, and there is literally nothing that will keep you from your dreams for the future. You plan on going to college, getting married, having 2.5 children and literally everything working in your favor.

There is no chance of failure when you're fifteen. You will be a famous artist, a rock artist, a lawyer, or whatever.

My plan was to get through high school with a minimum of fuss, get into a Bachelor of Fine Arts program in college, and afterwards I would make a living selling my art.

Such was life as a fifteen year old.

It was a Thursday after school a couple months before school got out for the summer that I first met Dr. James Funk. Yes, he was Dr. Funk. I never forgot him, or his name, for another reason, however.

He was sitting in the lounge talking with my mother when I came in.

"Is this him?" Dr. Funk said to my mother, while gesturing toward me.

"Yes. David, this is Dr. James Funk. He's in charge of the Miss America pageant in Florida."

"Hi," I said lamely.

"Why do you want to be a Miss America Outstanding Teen?"

"Truthfully, Dr. Funk, I don't."

"But..."

"Let me explain. I want to be in the pageant, but I have no aspirations of winning. My best friend, Sarah, wants to compete. She needs to have someone there with her, and because no one else is willing, it falls on Mama."

"You could always just come and not participate."

"Yes, I could hang around all those teen girls with my easel out painting. Or I could sketch in my pad. Either way would end up with security being called on me a couple of times a day."

"We could..."

"Dr. Funk, if you were me, would you voluntarily sit there doing nothing?"

"Well...I never thought about it that way. I just could never compete..."

"Are you better than the girls in the pageant?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, are they less than you? Are they inferior? Would it be in some way demeaning to compete against them?"

I find myself borrowing from Bronte at this moment. Imagine if you will, dear reader, the scene I have placed before you. Seated in a well appointed lounge on the ground floor of my home

are three people. My Mom is seated in a cream colored chair, a drink in her hand. I hope it's her first, but I don't know having just arrived home.

Her chair is at the head of a small coffee table.

A pretty boy or girl who seems to be no older than twelve is seated on the cream colored sofa to the woman's right. The sofa seems to be engulfing him, but he is seated primly with his knees together and pointed toward his mother. His legs are crossed at his ankles.

I never thought how my mannerisms at that point suggested anything about my presentation.

An older gentleman, by which I mean late forties I was fifteen after all, is seated on the opposite sofa, also in a cream color. He is holding a glass of what appears to be iced tea, but is not taking a drink.

Now, the youth has just taken the older gentleman to task as if the youth were the elder.

What would you do, dear reader?

Dr. Funk laughed, "You would seriously wear a dress, present as a teen girl, and participate in the pageant? I don't think I could allow..."

"The rules state that at all times a contestant must, in essence, present as a lady. In their carriage, dress, and speech, they must in no way do anything that would suggest to one of the judges that they are not what they appear to be: a demure and pretty young woman."

"That's true, but..."

"If I fail to do that, won't the very contest itself weed me out? Won't I get low scores and then be disqualified from continuing forth in the pageant?"

"That's not the point."

"So, what you're saying is that I'm not equal to the ladies in the contest?"

"It is supposed to be for girls only."

"I understand your position, but I've been mistaken for a girl frequently in the past."

Dr. Funk looked angry for a moment, and then laughed again. "You know, for someone who doesn't really care about this pageant, you've certainly done a lot of homework and seem awfully passionate about it."

"Dr. Funk, let me pose a question to you. Have you ever had a friend that you would do anything in your power for, up to and including giving your life for them?"

"I have people who I care that much about. Most of them are family..."

"Then you understand how I feel about Sarah. If keeping her safe and happy means wearing a dress, then I'm wearing a dress, heels, and makeup."

Dr. Funk sat there quietly for a minute or two, looking at me with a contemplative expression on his face.

"Well, if we did let you participate, and that's a big if, then you'd have to look and act like a girl the entire time you were at any pageant venue. This includes at the hotel."

"I understand, sir."

"And you can't be doing this for publicity. If, on the off chance, you were to win, then you would have to show up for all MAO Teen events as a girl."

"May I suggest, then, that only the organizers be told? None of the judges or other girls is

told who I am."

"That was actually my next requirement," he said with a smile, "if anyone discovers that you are a boy then you also agree to withdraw from competition."

I sat there quietly for a moment and then nodded my head.

"I can live with that requirement," I said.

"Now, I can't guarantee we'll let you participate, but if we did then it wouldn't be until next summer. The entire committee would have to meet on this, and we just wouldn't have time to deliberate properly before the deadline for entries has passed."

"Sarah will be really disappointed."

"Not you?"

"I need a lot more practice at acting like a girl before I would feel comfortable competing as one."

"I believe you will come to realize you need less practice than you think," Dr. Funk said with a little smile.

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever heard of the term 'transgender'?"

"No..." I said, drawing out the sound.

"It is someone who is born with sexual characteristics in opposition to their gender." At my confused look he rephrased it for me, "It is someone who feels that they should be the opposite gender, in most circumstances."

"And you think..."

"That you are a pretty girl for a boy. Mrs. Lowell, we'll be in touch."

His statement confused me. How could I be a girl? I knew what I had between my legs, and that was all boy. Sure, it was small for a fifteen year old, but all of me was small. I'd just passed five foot tall at the beginning of the year.

I'd assumed that people confused me with being a girl because of my slight frame and small size. Could Dr. Funk be right? I admit now, looking back, that the fact he was a doctor, of what I was unaware, added weight to his words.

I didn't feel like a girl. I'd never felt any different. I felt...normal.

What did that prove, really? I had a friend in middle school who hadn't known he needed glasses until he did. Ok, that wasn't too clear. He made it through all the vision tests that they held in elementary school. Unless your vision is really bad those tests are worthless.

I don't think that most kids realize that they're supposed to fail an eye exam so we do what we can to succeed.

It wasn't until he was participating at an eye exam table at a health fair that he realized that he had a problem. He missed the health fair because he was out getting a real exam and fitted for glasses.

Could this be the same thing? I didn't know I actually believed it was possible for me to identify as a girl, and yet my entire life be sure I was a boy. The problem as I saw it was how do you really know if you're a boy or a girl?

It's not like you know how anyone else thinks. It would sort of be like trying to tell what color a balloon is by touch in a dark room.

Wouldn't it?

Maybe a trial would be necessary for me to tell.

That day it took me a few hours to arrive at this conclusion. Mostly I was simply confused about what I was really feeling. I wondered if he might be right. I decided he had to be wrong. In the end I was no closer to knowing anything about myself than I was when he left.

At the end of it all, I decided that if I were allowed to participate in the pageant, then I would let it be my test of whether or not I was a girl. Mama had said something about practicing, and so had Dr. Funk, but I needed this to be a real test: was I a girl or a boy.

Of course, I wasn't thinking about the fact that I had to study for every test I'd ever had in school.

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"Mama, I don't want to go to your tea party."

"It'll be fun, Donna. You'll see. You just need to give it a chance."

"But, this dress is *pink*," I intoned with as much horror as I was able to imbue in the word. "I don't even *like* pink. Do you know how bad this particular shade goes with my hair?"

Mama just smiled at me, "Which isn't that problem with your blonde wig. It looks fine on you."

I grumbled something about the wig being scratchy, which it was, and being hot, which it also was, but Mama just shushed me.

"Being a woman is a pain most of the time. I've heard you mentioning that you want to make a real trial of this."

I tugged the skirt into place because I was fighting against the inclination to adjust my bra for the tenth time since we left the house. Mama had spared no expense, and I was wearing a human hair wig, B cup gel inserts in a mastectomy bra, and a pink sleeveless sundress with a square neckline and two inch wide straps.

The problem wasn't that the clothing was uncomfortable. On the contrary, except for the wig, it was very comfortable. Sure, the weighted bra was a little weird, but all in all it was just clothing.

I realized that I'd worn skirts and dresses a number of times in the past. Like when my mother got me in that girl's tennis outfit or the first time that I met Sarah. It was enough to make you think, though. Maybe it wasn't that I was a girl, but more the way I was being raised? Mom was the only one there with me. I didn't have any male role models in my home. Maybe I was just picking up mannerisms from Mama and Sarah because those were the people I usually hung around.

The problem was that I didn't really want to hang out with anyone else. I had friends at school, sure, but they were school friends. I just couldn't see myself hanging with them outside of school.

Don't get me wrong; I didn't consider any of them to be inferior to me in any way, and in fact was a bit jealous of a couple of the guys. They were true specimens of teen male health.

There was a sort of longing in me whenever I looked at those guys, and I assumed it was jealousy over how they looked, and my growing fear that I would never look like that.

The problem was, though, that if I rejected this outright, I didn't feel like I would ever really know what I was missing. I needed to give it a fair shake, as my dad liked to say.

To slip into a tangent, I have had contact with my father my entire life. Oh, not more often than once every six months or so, true, but we did spend time together. Two weeks in the summer and a week or two at Christmas. I'd meet this year's model, be somewhat miserable without Sarah, and go home happier than when I left. I only fail to mention him because he really didn't enter into the story.

I never mentioned anything I was going through to him, and he never asked. As far as I was aware he and Mama parted on amicable terms, and talked to each other about me. I just didn't talk to *him* about me.

The tea room that we went into was truly a haven of femininity. There were vases of roses on each of the white damask covered tables. The ladies, for that was what they seemed to be to my young eyes, were all dressed up in pretty sundresses just like my mother and me. I was the youngest person there. The closest was an eighteen or nineteen year old who was...kissing...her companion.

"Mama, what sort of place is this?"

"Somewhere I've wanted to share with you for a long time. It's a place I get to be myself. I'm a lesbian, dear one."

I just stood there gaping at my mother. I couldn't believe what she was saying. How could she...

At fifteen, having been through many years of gym, I was initiated into the basics of human sexuality. Sure, I had some skewed concepts of different things, but I knew what a lesbian was.

One of the things I didn't understand was how my mom could be a lesbian. It sort of went against everything I understood about the concept.

I allowed her to lead me to a table off by itself. It had pretty yellow roses in the vase sitting on the table.

"Felicity, how nice to see you again. It's been a while. Are you here looking for anyone in particular or just anyone at all?"

A very elegant looking woman in a pale blue dress with a floral print on it was standing at our table, smiling at Mama.

"Not actually looking. I wanted to introduce you all to my daughter."

"Is she..."

"No idea. She seems to have no preference as of yet, and she's a little too young anyway. She turns sixteen in the fall."

"Well young lady, the woman said offering me her hand, welcome to our little club. If you're ever curious about what we do behind closed doors, this is a safe place to swim, at least after you turn eighteen."

I looked at her a bit confused before my Mama translated, "She means she finds you

attractive and wouldn't mind getting to know you a lot better."

Mama turned back to the other woman, about to say something, but I interjected, "Ma'am, I'm sorry, but even if I were sure I were interested, I plan on saving myself for marriage."

"A woman after your own heart, eh Felicity. Well young lady, I'd be happy to date you as well. You're really pretty. But, like your Mother says, not until after you're a little older."

I smiled up at her and she walked away. The rest of the afternoon was surreal in the same sort of way. Mom introduced me to all of her friends, who all seemed to ask if she was back on the market, and they would compliment me on how pretty I was.

Somehow I'd passed in a room full of women who were looking at more than my clothing. I felt confident for the coming challenges that might await me at the pageant. Well, would await me if I actually was allowed to participate.

Chapter 3

"David? No, Donna, right?"

"Hey, Sarah. You like?" I struck a pose with one hand in my hair and the other at my hip.

There might have been a hip cock as well.

"You look awesome. About all that's missing are some earrings and other jewelry."

"No earrings, but other jewelry might be a good idea."

Sarah just looked at me and then busted out laughing, "You sure you're not a girl?"

"No." I said quietly. I looked at my mom and then looked at her. Sarah got the hint. "Mama, we're going to be in Donna's room for a while."

She grabbed me by the hand and practically dragged me inside. I started giggling and she couldn't help it and joined in. We turned on some Shinedown and shut the door. Sure, it's a little older, but I like it.

"What's up, girl friend?"

"Well, Dr. Funk mentioned that he thinks I might be transgender."

"Dr. Funk? Transgender?"

Somehow in the past couple of days I'd failed to tell her what the MAO Teen committee had told me. I filled her in on it all, and then offered her something that I thought she'd jump at. After all, she'd been set on being in the pageant this year.

"I'll sit out and ignore whatever scrutiny might come my way if you still want to do it this

year."

"And miss out on doing this with my best friend in the world? Not on your life, Donna. Sure, I want to do the pageant. I want to be able to say I did, but if I'm doing it alone it's not really worth it. I want to have the memories to share of this time for a long life in the future. And you know, if you ever start being interested in girls..."

"Sarah..."

"Look, its okay if you like boys. And it's even okay if you're really a girl, although I'm not sure about being a lesbian myself. What I'm trying to say is I like you. I mean I *like* you like you."

"Sarah, I'm flattered, I really am..."

"But I know you're asexual. I get it. No pressure. But, if you do end up liking girls, let me have a shot?"

I kissed her on the cheek. Just a chaste little kiss, but she smiled at me like I'd given her a precious gift.

"I'll keep you in mind, Sarah," I said with a little smile.

"So, you think you might be a girl?"

"I have no fu...I mean I have no clue. What does it mean to be a girl?"

"I'd say something simple like wearing dresses and liking babies and some such, but that can't be it, right? Behaviors don't define who you are as a person."

"Yeah, since there are girls who wear pants, and dislike children. And I know men who love children."

"We're not talking about pedophiles here."

"Eww, that's gross, Sarah."

We giggled a little, but it was weak. I thought of the woman I'd met today. She was borderline creepy. Thinking back on it I sort of got a skeevy vibe off her.

"So, wearing makeup is out, since a lot of women don't."

"And there is no unity in appearance either. Long hair, short hair, and everything in between."

"The ability to have babies?" Sarah said.

"That can't be it either. Mrs. Parsons in the art department can't have children. She and her husband just adopted their third."

"Sexuality isn't any real tell, either."

We went back and forth, trying to determine what makes someone a woman, and what makes someone a man. In the end we were baffled. We were only fifteen after all. Teenagers only *think* that they know everything.

Eventually we stopped trying to figure it out on our own and started taking online tests. We ended up laughing at most of the results, especially on those times when Sarah scored 'more masculine' than I did. Eventually, though, we slipped on over to Scholar.google.com and did some real research.

Our teachers had started requiring us to do research online using this, as it actually links to sites that live up to peer review, or something. It did give us a lot of information about Transgender

and the whole Male/Female question while avoiding all of the porn sites I'm sure would come up in the traditional search engines if you toss any sexually charged words in them.

We came down to one single realization after that entire night.

"So, basically, if we really want to see where we are we need a psychological professional to administer a real test."

"Yes, that's it in one, Donna."

"That sucks. I'm not sure I really want to go to those lengths."

"But you saw the information. If you really are transgender, then you need some help. You and Mama can't do this on your own."

"Ok, fine. I'll talk to a specialist." I said with a little smile.

"Didn't you say the guy that came over was Dr. Funk?"

"Yeah, Dr. James Funk, although..."

"He's a psychologist."

"What?" I just about shouted.

"Yeah, see here. This is a paper written by him, 'The rising incidence of recognition of transgender children and consequences of the failure of institutional acceptance.'"

"No wonder. I guess he thinks all little boys who want to wear a dress must be transgender. It's his job after all."

"Come on, Donna. That just makes him *more* qualified not less to recognize the signs."

"Maybe," I said, not convinced.

"Come on," Sarah said, "let's do something fun."

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"Sarah, when you suggested we do something fun, this really isn't what I had in mind."

"You're not having any fun?" Sara said with a pout.

"Look, I may possibly be a girl, but that doesn't mean I'm girly." I said in a serious tone, and Sarah busted up.

"What?"

"Look at yourself in the mirror and say that."

I turned and really looked at myself in the mirror. I didn't even need to speak; I could see what she meant. We'd been playing with makeup for the past hour or so. No, I wasn't under her tender mercies; we were both actually putting it on and taking it off. I'd just been thinking of my face like a three dimensional canvas and using my artist's skill to apply just the lightest touches of makeup, building up like I would any shading with pencils or charcoal.

It was subtle, but it was there. And I looked...like a girly girl.

"Fine, I'll admit I'm having fun. It's like art...on my face."

"I wish I was half as good, and I've been working at it for longer."

"We've had to do 'glamour portraits' in my composition class recently. I wasn't going to let my position in the top of the class go just because I was a boy."

"Or girl..."

"Whatever," I said, but I was blushing a bit.

"Fine, do my makeup."

She cleaned her latest attempt on her face. When she was done, I went to town.

There may be some confusion at this point, especially as there is usually a disconnect in people's minds between subtle and glamour where it comes to makeup.

You're probably thinking of the photography where someone has to get made up like a clown to even appear to wear makeup. Photography improves with time, but there is nothing a camera has that the eye doesn't do better.

Painting is a lot different than photography.

Especially when you are presented with a model wearing no makeup whatsoever and told to make her look like she's wearing makeup in your painting.

It was supposed to teach us shading and color matching and a bunch of other things like that. The thing is: makeup is more than just shading and color matching. There is an artistry all its own that defines a number of different 'looks'. Sometimes even contrasting colors are what you want.

Yes, I spent a lot of time out of school researching and sketching to try and get it all down.

Working on your own face in a mirror is tougher than I thought, at first, and it took me a while to get used to the medium; makeup doesn't flow like paint or draw like pencil; It's somewhere in-between.

After all the practical experience I'd just gotten it only took a couple of tries before I had her looking the way I expected.

She looked into the mirror and her eyes grew wide, "I'm...beautiful."

I turned her to look at me and looked her directly in the eyes, "You've always been beautiful, Sarah."

The smile slowly faded and she shook her head, "I'm pretty. I know I am, but I've never been beautiful. I wanted to be in the pageant so I could feel beautiful."

"So, does that mean..."

"That we're not doing the pageant? Of course not, silly boy. Now we have more reason than ever."

"We do?" I said with a questioning look on my face.

"Yes, because, girl friend, we're going to win this thing," she said with one of the most evil grins I'd ever seen on her face. The red lipstick only seemed to make it that much worse.

I resigned myself with a sigh and then nodded my head, "Okay."

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We were giggling at the bar counter in the kitchen when Mama came in.

"My, don't you ladies look lovely."

"Mama!" I said, but Sarah just said, "Thank you."

"Donna, if you wanted to be taken for a boy, I would suggest changing and taking off the makeup."

I sat there stunned for a moment. I was still in the sundress from earlier, and now that I

thought of it I could feel the makeup still on my face. I'd even forgotten all about the bra with its inserts.

"We were just..."

"Playing with makeup? Yes, I see that."

"It's not David's fault, Mama. I wanted to have some fun with some makeup and he went along."

"No, it's alright, Sarah. I willingly did it. Mama, am I feminine?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"Did you know Dr. Funk was a psychologist who specializes in gender stuff?"

"I did know he was a psychologist, but how do you know?"

"Well, we were researching transgender..ism? and we found his name on an article about it."

"What do you think, Mama? Do you think that David is more boy or girl?"

"I really don't know."

"Thanks, Mama, that really helps me a lot," I responded as sarcastically as I could.

"I'm sorry, honey, but it's the best answer I have for you. I'd love to have a daughter just as much as I love to have a son. Although right now you look a lot more like my daughter than my son."

I just glared at her.

"I'm sorry," she said laughing, "but when you look like that I can't help it."

I glared harder at her when Sarah looked at me and started giggling as well.

"You do look silly like that, David."

I just silently left and went to the bathroom to completely clean off all the makeup. Then I put on some jeans and a tee-shirt and went back downstairs.

The rest of the day was a little strained, but I did my best to push through.

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Doing a year's worth of core classes in three months is time consuming. Not as time consuming as actually going to classes, as I was able to go at my own pace, but it took a lot of the time I'd normally have spent painting or swimming with Sarah or just hanging out like I normally did during the summer.

Before I really knew it, I was starting school again, and this time I really had a heavy course load. AP Studio-Art was like a college course. Most of the coursework had to be finished outside of class. That meant that once I got home, I really started to do my work on the class.

Sarah would hang out in my room and talk to me as I worked. She got the opportunity to be my model a lot that year. While I worked, I really started listening to how she talked and what she talked about. I was studying for the next summer, if that ever actually came to anything. We occasionally talked about the pageant, but I never dressed up again.

Two days before Christmas Dr. Funk visited us again.

"So, David, are you still interested in being in the pageant?"

"Sarah is, so yes, I would like to be in it with her."

"We've finally finished deliberating. I fought long and hard for you. I know you don't

consider yourself transgender, but you would be perfect to represent those who are..."

"I thought you didn't want anyone to know."

"That's part of the test. If people don't know, and can't tell, then we should be able to allow transgender teens into the contest."

"That's what you really want, isn't it Dr. Funk? To open up the contest..."

"I want us to let any girl compete in the contest. Right now, there are a lot of people who feel that it is only a place for 'normal heterosexual girls'. This isn't some institution of dictating who is or is not really a girl. We need to be inclusive."

"Oh...and you want me to fight this battle for you?"

"Yes, I do. Only if you feel up to it. I want you to try your best..."

"You mean they actually said yes?"

"Yes, they did. Donna Lowell is officially the first applicant for next year's MAO Teen pageant."

There was this feeling in me that had to escape and I just squealed a little bit.

"I'll not be a judge, but I'll be there at the pageant to keep an eye on you. I hope to see you and your friend in July."

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Sarah and I were standing in the halls talking about the pageant the next week at school.

Sarah'd been out of town visiting family so we really hadn't had an opportunity before this.

"What am I going to do for a talent? All I know how to do well is painting. I can't cram that into two minutes."

"You can always sing..."

"No, no way. I'm not going to sing. You know I sound like..."

"A girl? I don't think that will be a problem, David."

I heard a deep voice behind me, "Hey, Faggot, you talking about entering some talent contest as a girl?"

"Hey, Brad, is that a proposition or an observation?"

I was glaring at him. Brad was the resident small minded bully at our school. Generally speaking he never entered the Art department so I could avoid him. I think he was afraid of the 'gay' rubbing off on him.

"What did you say to me?"

"I asked if you were propositioning me or merely making an observation."

"What does prop..."

I almost laughed in his face right there, as it was I was struggling not to smile.

"What he was asking, Brad, is if you were asking him out on a date, or just acknowledging that he was something."

"I never..."

"Well, then you'll excuse me if I tell you that I'm not gay. Sorry to disappoint you." I patted him on the arm as I walked by. Sarah giggled and walked in the other direction.

I heard his yell behind me and was turning to see what was up now when I felt him crash into me. My head hit the concrete wall and I saw stars for a moment before everything went black. I heard someone screaming for a moment or two and then that went away as well.

Chapter 4

Something was taped to my hand, and there was a tube laid across my face. I slowly opened my eyes and took in a dimly lit room.

"What?"

"Oh, thank god. Nurse! He's finally woken up. You had us so worried."

"What happened?"

"You were knocked out."

"I don't..."

"Brad Jones at school tackled you," Sarah said from the other side of the bed.

"You screamed."

She colored a bit and Mama jumped in, "and apparently jumped on his back and started pounding on him."

"Well, it kept him from doing anything else before a teacher arrived with security."

"How long?"

"Only a couple of hours, but you had us really scared," Mama said.

"Could you two go to the same side of the bed? This tennis back and forth thing is making my head hurt."

Sarah was crying with a smile on her face, and made a short laugh sound. She moved over next to Mama.

"So, now that I'm up..." but I didn't get to finish before a man entered the room.

"My name is Dr. Lovelace. How are you feeling?"

"My head hurts a little,"

He proceeded to check me out, from head to toe, verifying if I had all my parts and that none of them were injured.

"Mrs. Lowell, David seems to be healthy, if a bit under-developed for his age. I'd like you to see a specialist so that we can start him into puberty."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

The doctor turned toward me with kind eyes. "Your body for some reason isn't developing. Usually we take a wait and see attitude with these things, but you're sixteen. Something should have started before this, but nothing has, so I'm referring you to an endocrinologist, a Dr. Alfred Harrison. He's someone who can see what's going on with your hormones."

"Is that why I'm not interested in anyone...I mean sexually?"

"It is a good possibility."

We thanked the doctor and he left. I got dressed while Mama and Sara went to get my paperwork taken care of.

I wondered a bit if that might not be the reason I was so confused. I mean, men got more masculine as they went through puberty, right? So, without the 'man' hormones, maybe I just didn't know how to act like a man.

But...if I was really a girl, wouldn't I need girl hormones instead? What if they didn't change attitude, but only made me an adult of whatever gender I took. In certain regards I began to think

about hormones as being this magic bullet that would solve all my problems in one fell swoop.

That added a problem to my life. The thing is that the more I thought about it, the more confused I got. Sometimes I was sure, I was a girl. Sometimes I was sure of exactly the opposite. I'd do something and say: that was a very girly thought/action. Then I'd make a comment and think, that was a guy thing to say.

Round and round in circles I went, never doing more than catching glimpses of my tail and I rushed faster and faster. You see, that's really what I felt like at the time, that I was a dog chasing my own tail.

We made an appointment with the endocrinologist for the following week.

That week, I was frantic, and it translated itself into my art. My brush strokes got jagged and the colors were a contrast of lights and darks with hardly anything in between.

I was a wreck when we finally met with my endocrinologist.

"I don't want to be an adult yet," I said as soon as he came into the room.

He chuckled at me and smiled a very nice smile in my direction, "Someone is wound up.

Mostly I need to test your blood right now, but where did that come from?"

"This is to put me through puberty, right? But what if it's the wrong puberty?"

I spent the next half an hour explaining my fears to him, and telling him about what I'd found online. He was professional, calm, and collected the entire time. He asked probing questions, and in the end he sat there for a moment, quietly.

"Well, I have a colleague I'd like for you to see. He refers a number of people my way. I

figure it's about time I returned the favor. I'm sure he'll get a kick out of it."

He handed me a piece of paper and I began laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"I already know Dr. Funk. He's the one who fought for me to be in...something..." I blushed red as I wasn't sure I should be telling anyone I was in the MAO Teen pageant yet.

"Well, then I guess it's not a referral after all."

"Oh, no, it is, just we weren't seeing each other in his professional aspect. Well in his other professional aspect we were."

"Well, whatever. Let me know his reaction next time you see him."

Dr. Harris had a nurse take my blood and then mom and I went home. I set the card with Dr. Funk's name on it on my desk. I hadn't told Mama about it yet, but if I was going to make an appointment, I would have to.

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For some reason I felt vaguely uncomfortable sitting in the well appointed room. It wasn't the color scheme, which was a nice dusky rose. It wasn't the chairs, which were cloth and metal and quite comfortable.

No, I think it was the fact I was the boy in the room. Because of where I was, I knew that some, or all, of these people had started out where I was. They'd just made their choice...if it was really a choice at all.

Like most waiting rooms I'd ever been in there were a mix of magazines for men, women, and children. I just sketched on my pad.

Eventually I was called back and went in to see the good Doctor.

"David, I have to say I was surprised to see you on my appointments for today."

"Hello, Dr. Funk. Dr. Harris, my endocrinologist referred me."

Dr. Funk chuckled a bit and then smiled at me, "So, how can I help you today?"

Once again I went through everything that I'd been thinking about. I mentioned that I blamed him, although I said it with a smile.

We talked about what it really means to be male or female, since that's what I wanted. After we were done speaking he took me to a small room off by itself where a computer was located.

"I want you to take a test for me. Try to be as honest as possible on all the answers. This is to help me understand where you are. It's not supposed to define you, and I will only be using this as a guide for future treatment."

"You mean you don't want me to try to 'man up' in any of my answers?"

"Usually I'm afraid of my patients doing the exact opposite, but yes, that's an adequate explanation. I'll go over your responses when we meet next time."

I took my time, and answered the questions to the best of my ability. When I was done I logged out of the computer, like it told me to, and went home.

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I'd become a bit infamous at school as the kid that Brad knocked out. Sarah and I spent time practicing our respective talents in front of each other and our parents; she was doing and interpretive dance. In general, I was happier than I'd ever been at any time in my life.

I bounced in with a smile to my next appointment with Dr. Funk.

"You seem chipper," he said with a smile of his own.

"I am. I'm having a lot of fun with Sarah preparing for the pageant."

"That's great to hear. So, let's talk about your test results before we go onto anything else."

It included a lot of technicalities, which I probably forgot as soon as I walked out the door, but the short answer is that I scored deep in girl territory.

"Before you make any assumptions on that, let me explain a couple of things. Just because you are female in your attitudes and thought processes doesn't automatically make you female."

"Huh?"

"Being a woman is more than how you think, which is something I have to explain to my clients. All it really means is you would have an easier time transitioning than some other people I talk to."

"Then why give me the test if it can't tell me I'm supposed to be a girl?"

"Do you think you're a girl?"

"I don't know, that's the problem," I began to cry. Everything was supposed to be answered here. He was supposed to tell me I was a girl and then everything would be fine.

"Would you like living as a girl?"

I opened my mouth to make another sudden response, and then stopped and really thought about it. "How would that be different from what I'm doing now?"

"I don't think I've ever had a client ask me that question, and it's a very mature question to ask. Usually, they have some idea of what they're missing out on, or that they think they're missing out on, that drives them to this."

"Well, I guess I couldn't do the pageant without presenting as a girl."

"I thought you were doing that just for your friend?"

I blushed, "I might be enjoying myself while preparing for it."

"Being a woman, especially a transgender woman, can be hard. It's not some sort of magic solution to all your problems."

"Isn't your job...?"

"My job is to help those that literally can't live without transitioning. Is that you, do you think?"

I shook my head at him and grinned

"Then, leave it for now. Do the pageant. See where you are after and we'll pick up there."

I thanked him, and we scheduled to meet again in August.

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I flatly refused to wear any shaper garments, so that required that we get dresses that fit my shape, not some imaginary shape that they wanted me to conform to. I eschewed even the bra and

inserts, although I would be wearing camis or training bras with all my outfits.

I even had a reason I could give anyone who asked which had the added benefit of being true, Delayed Puberty.

For some reason, my body just had not started producing hormones of any sort...well no estrogen or testosterone at any rate. So, while I continued to grow at my slow rate, I wasn't developing.

My dress was very pretty. The neckline de-emphasized my broader-than-my-hips shoulders and the flounces at my hips *over*-emphasized them. It went to knee length. I had a pair of cute modest heels that I wore with it.

It was, I think, my favorite outfit that I got the opportunity to wear for the pageant. We had another, similar, dress for the final night, if I made it through the preliminaries, but I just didn't quite like it as much.

My song was perfect, if I do say so myself, and I made sure to alter it just a bit every time I performed it to keep it from getting stale.

In short, I was as ready as I would ever be, and in fact I was getting more excited as the day approached. I'd say that we were there before I knew it, but I'd be lying. I'd taken to marking a calendar after school let out. My studies suffered a little bit to begin with, but then I really pushed forward and got everything done before we had to leave for the venue.

I had three days of nothing to do and I almost killed Sarah with my nervous behavior. We

ended up doing a lot of jogging, in our athletic outfits for the pageant of course, and I realized that running wasn't all that bad if you have someone to do it with.

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The morning of registration mom shook me awake. "Donna, honey, time to get up."

I started awake. I'd thought I would never fall asleep the night before, but here it was four in the morning and we were on our way. I was wearing a cute pair of girl's shorts over all of my foundation garments. My male anatomy was so small that I hardly had to do anything with it to hide it away.

There were no pinks in my outfit. I refused to be a 'typical girl' at all during the pageant. I would be judged on my own merits, and not on any sort of 'girl code' that someone came up with. Sure, I'd be girl me, but I'd still be me.

One thing had come from my last meeting with Dr. Funk: I felt confident in just being myself out there on stage. I'd scored like a girl, so I might as well go out there and see if everyone else agreed.

I never imagined that there would be this many young women who would be participating in the event. Having three days of preliminary events should have been a clue, especially with them running from eight am to seven pm.

We found our places in line, which was separated by last name, and got signed in. There were some really pretty girls here, and I began to get really nervous. Could I really do this? Could I

compete without artifice on a level playing ground with these...goddesses?

With the signing process completed I stood off to the side waiting for Sarah to get done. A couple of girls came up to me.

"Hi, I'm Tara, and this is Tasha, we saw you looking a little lost. Since you're about our age..."

I looked over at the two girls. They looked to be thirteen or so. I smiled nicely at them and said, "I'm sixteen."

"What...but..."

"I have a condition called delayed puberty."

"That sucks. You're really brave to participate. I thought it was cool that they let people my age try, but some of the girls in my class are already...well developed. Like Ashley over there."

I looked at the girl she was referencing. Yes, she had a lot to be proud of.

"Well, I'm here to represent myself in the best way I possibly can." I said with a little grin.

"Like I said, brave." Tasha just nodded in agreement.

"Thanks," I said again, a couple of tears coming to my eyes, "that means a lot to me."

We chatted for a few moments before Sarah came over and I introduced everyone.

"She's your friend? You're even braver than I thought."

I just laughed and Sarah looked confused. We all explained it over the top of each other and devolved into giggles when Sarah looked even more confused. I gestured for Tara to speak and we got through it this time and she understood. We went out to Mama and she drove us to the hotel.

We met back up at the venue at noon for the welcome address and the introduction to the

judges. The welcome address was a little long winded, in my opinion, but then they got to the panel of judges. At the time I remembered those names as if they were the most important people in the world. They did hold my future in their hands, or so I thought. How much five days can change your outlook on such things.

There was a dinner that night only notable for how unnoteworthy it really was. No one noticed I was a boy. We just all talked and gossiped and I felt comfortable as a part of the group.

Chapter 5

The next day I got to sleep in, well at least compared to the day before. I was up shortly before eight and downstairs. While there were the normal offerings of a continental breakfast, all the other girls were digging into a piece of fruit or two.

For a moment or two, I seriously considered being a complete rebel, but I settled for something healthy, if a little different. I grabbed a container of yogurt and one of the individual boxes of granola. Sure, I knew that I needed to fit in with the girls, and that I shouldn't be drawing attention to myself, but I wasn't going to make the stretch to one o'clock on a couple of pieces of fruit and all the water I could drink.

I noticed a couple of the other girls go for the granola as soon as I took a seat, and hid a smile as Sarah joined me.

"Morning, sunshine."

"Morning, Sarah."

"What has you in such a good mood?"

"I seem to have started a trend," I said, gesturing with my granola filled bowl of yogurt.

"That looks really good," Sarah said as she got up and headed back toward the buffet table. I just laughed.

"Wow, girl, you have a really pretty laugh," Tara said as she sat down, yogurt in hand. I just smiled at her. Tasha sat down next to her.

"Yeah, It's pretty," she said. She had a pretty thick accent, and it took me a moment to

understand what she said.

"And you called *me* brave yesterday, Tara."

Both girls laughed and I let out a loud peal of laughter that caused everyone in the room to turn and look at me. I blushed and tried to hide.

"They're just jealous, Donna. You have nothing to be ashamed of. Like I said, your laugh is really pretty. Like a bell or something."

"Wow, I never thought about it that way," Sarah said while sitting down, "it is really pretty. Probably your best feature."

I blushed more at that, and the others just laughed.

We had a lot of work to do today, and none of us wanted to be late, so we all got on the busses waiting for us and got a ride over to the local high school where the actual pageant would be held.

You don't get a sense of how many people are in a crowd with you until all of them are trying to get into a single small space. The auditorium we were shuffling into could easily hold the more than three hundred girls that would be participating in this pageant, but that didn't hold true for the foyer in front of the auditorium. We chatted and smiled and laughed as we slowly made our way in. Sure, some of the girls seemed to be stuck up, but that didn't bother me much. I wasn't here to please anyone other than Sarah, and maybe myself.

We sat down and waited for all the girls to get in. The houselights came up to full and Andrea, one of the judges, stepped out to center stage.

"Ladies, we don't have a lot of time today for what we're going to do. We'll be separating you out into three groups shortly, but I want all of you to pay attention all the way through, so we're waiting to do the separation 'til after.

"Group one will be participating in the first preliminary night. We understand that means you'll have less time to prepare the stage numbers, but we're okay with that. You're not judged on the stage numbers, and you've all had enough time to practice the other aspects of the pageant.

"Group two will be helping with staging for group one. Consider this as practice for the job of being Miss Florida's Teen. Group three will get the opportunity, should they like, to fill out the audience. We expect your behavior to be exemplary at all times you are not participating.

"Anyone causing a disruption will not be judged harshly for their behavior, but they will not be allowed to continue further in the pageant."

There were some sounds of shock, and one or two of outrage, but I guess they'd not read the judging guidelines that carefully.

I just smiled at Sarah. We were finally here.

"Night two will be group two on stage, group three staging, and group one in the audience. Same rules and guidelines apply to everyone on this night."

"Night three will be group three on stage, group one staging, and group two in the audience. I know you'll all work your hardest this week. Today and tomorrow will be spent practicing the staging events. If you make it to the final night, then we'll try to have you in a similar place to where you are on your preliminary night, but if we can't then we know you'll do your best to learn your new position

in the group numbers.

"One last thing. You will *all* be practicing every morning with your groups. This includes group one. We want all of you to be as ready as possible for the final night, which will have the largest audience of any of the nights this week.

"Your performance up there will be a reflection on yourself and the other girls as well as our organization. We want all of you to leave here feeling like the ladies we know you are."

The statement didn't faze me at all at the time. I was wearing some light makeup; I had my longish bleached blonde hair pulled into a hair band. My nails were painted with an iridescent white polish that made them glitter like opals.

I was, for this week at least, a lady, and I loved it being acknowledged. Next week would tend to itself. This week I was Donna.

"To make this as fair as possible on everyone, we'll be separating you by last names. A through F are group two, G through M are group one, and everyone else are group three."

I looked with dismay at Sarah, since she would be in group two but she just smiled at me, "Don't worry, Donna. I'll get to be back stage with you, and you'll get to watch me on stage."

I relaxed then, and smiled. Sarah was fine with it, so I should be as well. Tara and Tasha would be with me, anyway, so I would at least have a familiar face.

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I groaned as I flopped on the bed. Sarah just gave out a weak giggle. I was *really* glad for the

granola by lunch time, and even wished I'd eaten more. None of the girls turned down the subs that they'd provided for lunch.

Not that they were foot long meatball subs from Subway or something. It's just that we'd expended so much energy. Who knew that standing around in heels on a simulation stage in the hot sun all day could take that much out of you. Well, not just standing: Walking on, walking off, introductory wave, goodbye wave, and smile until your face aches.

Then we really got down to business.

There was separating us out into 5-6 person groups for the fitness routine, which was something of a mix between dance, a short workout, and a cheerleading routine. It was a lot of fun, but took a lot more out of you than you'd think it would watching it, especially after doing it for the eighteenth time of the day.

After that we did basic staging for the rest of the evening, including our personal interview and stage question, two completely different items. We'd already been scored on our academic achievements, so that was locked in.

I groaned into the mattress. My legs hurt. My back hurt. My face hurt. I just plain hurt all over. Turning my head to look her way, I could tell that Sarah felt the same, but she was smiling, and I had to join in. "Still happy to be here, then, Sarah?"

"More than ever. I want to win, David."

"I know. If I were judging, I think I'd have already crowned you."

"But there are so many talented girls here," she said with a little frown.

"And you're one of them."

"So are you, David. Don't let anyone tell you differently."

I smiled at her.

"I'm going in to get a shower...or maybe soak in the tub. I'm so sore."

"Those shoes sucked, didn't they?"

"My feet are fine," I said, "It's my calves that hated it."

She just nodded in sympathy. I soaked in the tub for about an hour and then got out for Sarah to do the same. Yes, there were bubbles and I loved the feel of my skin when I got out.

<3 <3 <3

I must have been asleep before Sarah got out of the tub as I don't remember her climbing into bed with me. I woke up in her arms, though, and started. I slipped out as carefully as I could and got dressed for the morning.

I wasn't the only one loading up on carbs this morning. Sure, usually you want to avoid them, but that is only when you are sitting around in school all day. Then a salad or a piece of fruit will tide you over.

With all the activity we were up to it was no surprise when they wanted more than just a piece of fruit.

Ok, so saying they 'loaded up' might be a little exaggeration. Two pieces of fruit, a yogurt and a couple of spoonfuls of granola isn't loading up in the football player sense.

Today was a lot like the previous day, but more so. Now that we'd been taught our places it was a matter of refinement, and just getting everything to seem natural and normal onstage.

Sarah and I collapsed into bed again after a giggle fest. We'd taken better care of ourselves today, and it showed.

We could hear the other girls more active in the hall as well.

"Want to go join in?"

I sat there for a few moments. It would be part of the experience, but I could easily, I thought, be outed in a moment of inattention.

Seeing me vacillating between yeas and no, Sarah grabbed my arm and dragged me into the hall. I slipped the card key into the pocket of my drawstring pajama pants and went out into the hall with her.

It was a madhouse. There were giggling girls running to and fro all over the hall, visiting each other's rooms. It was obvious that a lot of the girls knew each other from other pageants they'd been a part of. They didn't let us feel left out, though.

I'd imagined that this would be like the fantasies I'd always seen about pageants. Sure, some of the girls had their noses in the air, but most of us were pretty down to earth. I was sure that would change the moment that we were out there on stage and working on winning the crown, but right now? They were just normal girls.

There were a couple of pillow fights, none of which I started, I promise. There were some water fights, which got the girls involved in trouble, not me or Sarah. All in all, I think it was a stress

relieve before the performances starting tomorrow. I truly hoped I would be ready for it when it came.

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As we'd have to be out there performing on stage that evening, my group had a light day of it. Specifically we were doing a dress rehearsal. An everyday/dressy outfit for the interview, a fancy dress for the onstage question, a dress for the introduction, an exercise outfit for the fitness routine, costume for the talent, and a final dress for the processional at the end. Well, the dress was really for the award ceremony at the end, but we used it for a recessional on the preliminary night.

Six changes of clothing, and no privacy to change in. I was glad I'd said no to the padding by the fifth time through. We didn't go through full length, just in out change wait in out change and so on.

The more female flesh I saw, the less it fazed me. It was nothing much to me at the beginning, and by the end it was just there. Something that they had and I didn't, and yes, I was a bit jealous some of the time. The rest of the time I was actually glad of my figure. It meant that I could get into, and out of, my different outfits a lot faster than they could. I didn't have to worry about putting on or removing bras that wouldn't fit with this or that outfit.

During the dress it got me roped in to makeup touchups when the girls realized how good I was. It was fun, too, making all those other girls so beautiful, getting their features to really pop.

By that night I'd earned a nickname: The Artist.

It's not that there weren't any other artistic girls there, but more that I was in a 'whole other league' or so Tara said.

Before I knew it, and before I even knew what was going on, we were sitting in the chairs getting our hair done for the introduction. I could hear the susurrations of the audience, and then the music started. That was our thirty second call. I pulled off the shield from my gown and went to get into line. I grabbed the shield another girl had forgotten was there, and then we plastered on our smiles and moved out on stage.

"...Donna Lowell!" The announcer said. I missed him mentioning my town and high school. I waved to the audience and went, carefully in the three inch heels, to my place on the risers at the back of the stage.

We did our dance, and then we were making our way off stage, with waves and smiles, and then it was time for the talent competition.

While the first girl got ready, I could hear the emcee on stage talking about what it meant to her to be a MAO Teen. I didn't really pay attention, as I needed to get ready.

"Breathe, Donna."

"Hey, Sarah. So, how'd I do?"

She giggled, "About the same as everyone else."

I was wearing a sequined dress for my performance. It reminded me of some of the outfits that Lady Gaga wore on stage, but was a lot more normal and modest. It fit my personality a lot better as well.

I stood in the wings watching as the other girls performed. "Hey, you're Donna right?"

I turned to respond and my breath caught in my throat. The boy standing there was cute. No, I didn't feel any sort of 'zing' or something, just he was really cute. I liked his smile, and I think that I could easily have spent hours trying to draw it just right.

"Donna?"

"Oh, sorry. Yes, Donna, that's me...and I'm a complete dork right now."

"Lot's of the seventh graders get like this, there's nothing to worry..."

"Except I'm a Junior this year."

"Smart *and* pretty then."

I blushed at the pretty comment, "No, I'm pretty average. I'm sixteen, even though I don't look it."

"Um..."

"Delayed puberty. They're taking a wait and see attitude right now."

"Oh, well, I'm sorry?"

"Don't be. Sure, I'd love to have the curves and breasts the other girls do, but I make up for it in attitude and personality."

He laughed at that. His dimples were even better than his smile.

"So, personality, huh, what makes you so special?"

I looked left and right in a conspiratorial manner, "Don't tell anyone," I said quietly, in almost a whisper, "but I'm an artist."

"An artist, huh? Maybe I could see some of your work sometime."

"Tomorrow night I'm in the audience, so maybe..."

"Come and spent time back here with me..." He stopped as if listening to the headset and then said, "Go for Steven."

He waited a few moments before he said anything else, "No, the goose feathers are in the white sack next to the London flyout...No, London, the one with the fog, not the one with sunshine and white clay buildings, that one is Cairo...No problem," he turned back to me and said, "so, where were we?"

"You're a tech geek at this school?"

"Yep, I am." he said with a pose that made me giggle and got some shushing sounds from some of the other girls. I smiled and Steven grinned back at me.

"So, come back here tomorrow night," he said. I say Sarah coming to get me.

"Donna, you need to go, you're onstage in three more acts and they want to get your mic fitted."

"See you later?" Steven called to my retreating back and I just laughed.

"Oh my god, Donna. You were flirting with him."

"I was not."

"Yes...you were. And you are a bit of a natural at it, aren't you. You had him eating out of your hand."

"No...I couldn't...I mean he...I...no."

"Yes, girl friend. You have a crush, and you were flirting...with a guy."

She just grinned at me and I blushed and looked at the floor. She squeezed my arm slightly and whispered in my ear, "he's really cute, just be careful, okay?"

That statement felt like her giving me permission, and my mood lightened. It was fun to talk to Steven, for the short time I did, and I wouldn't mind doing it again.

Chapter 6

Backstage was dim compared to the spots showing on stage. I was nervous standing there waiting to go out. Sarah stood next to me, holding my hand. I took a deep breath and nodded to the sound guy just before I strode out onstage.

As soon as the music started I smiled. When I got to my cue I opened my mouth and sang the opening words of "Born this Way". There had been some concern about them allowing it, but apparently our initial worries were groundless. When it got done there wasn't a sound from the auditorium. As if they finally realized where they were, the stunned silence broke into applause and a standing ovation. I gave another blinding smile and said, "My name is Donna Lowell and that was my talent." and then walked off stage.

Sarah grabbed me into a hug and the two of us squealed, quietly, as the next girl in line went out on stage.

"That was awesome," Sarah said breathlessly.

"You really think so?"

"I know so. I've never heard you sing like that. It seems love agrees with you."

"Sarah!" I said, shocked.

"Well, looks like someone else wants to congratulate you." She said with a sad little smile. I kissed her on the cheek. I whispered in her ear, "I love you too, Sarah."

I left her looking a little stunned and walked over to Steven, "Hey," I said with a smile.

"Wow, you're amazing. If that's a little glimpse of this personality and attitude you

mentioned, then yeah, I have to agree. A guy couldn't go wrong with someone like you."

The rest of the night went by in a blur of on-stage off-stage and talking to Sarah and Steven.

I spent about equal time with each of them as Sarah was my assigned assistant for the night.

Then we were getting into our clothing for the processional and the night was over.

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We were back outside the next day, but I didn't mind. I'd given it my all the night before, and I was happy to have done so. Unfortunately, though, it had finally gotten real for some of the girls, and the claws came out.

My name began to feature in a number of the rumors that were going around, some of which accused me of being a lesbian, others claimed that I was sleeping with half of the male tech staff between sets. The dichotomy made me laugh, especially since it could almost be true for me. I really didn't know where I would fall, yet, on the whole sexual spectrum.

All I really knew was that I didn't want to lose Sarah as a friend.

The other rumors were more welcome, if less understandable. Apparently someone had seen the current score tally, and I was in the top ten for the night. Some rumors had me in the top position.

They were only planning on taking ten girls from each night to the final night, so that would mean I had made it through to the next round. I kept thinking that it was some cruel joke, since none of the other names, as far as I knew, was being whispered around.

I did my best to ignore all the whispers that day, and made it through to the evening without much other trouble. Before heading down to the auditorium that night, I grabbed my sketch book from my room. I figured it would be the best I could do on short notice.

I slipped into the bustle of the pre-show setup looking for Steven. Finally, I found him with an older boy who looked a lot like him. Something about the older boy really creeped me out, but I pushed it aside and plastered one of the smiles I'd been practicing this week onto my face.

"Greg, this is the girl I was talking about," Steven said as I walked up.

"Isn't she a little young?" Greg asked.

"I'm sixteen," I said a little indignant.

"Late bloomer, bro. She has an awesome voice, though."

"I'm a pretty good artist," I said, gesturing with my sketch book.

"Can I see that?" Steven said.

"Sure." I said with a genuine smile.

"By the way," Steven said as he began looking at my sketches, "this big lump is my brother."

"Yep, catch you later, bro. Too much estrogen."

"I should probably go as well...I'm supposed to be out there in the audience."

"Wait," Steven said grabbing my hand.

"There's an empty page in here. Draw me?"

"I couldn't..."

"Sure you can," he said with a blinding smile, "you're really good."

I blushed, my thoughts from the day before coming back to me with force. I slid the pencil out, took my pad gingerly from him, and began sketching. Time went away as I really got into it. I love art, and it gave me an opportunity to really study his face without looking creepy doing it.

Time got away from me as I continued to sketch him, trying to get everything just right. I did each part in pieces over a couple of pages, and then I sketched one finished picture.

As I was showing Steven, I realized that they were cleaning up already, and Sarah was sitting off to one side with an amused expression on her face. "This one has to go to bed. Say goodnight, Donna."

"Night," I said with a smile as I reached for my pad.

"Could I keep this picture?"

"Of course not," I said with a smile, "I need something to remember you by."

"Well, I could always keep it and then you could use me to remember me by," he said with a huge grin.

"Not tonight she doesn't, lover boy," Sarah said pushing me toward the exit.

We started laughing as we walked out of the auditorium. A bus was waiting with a bunch of impatient girls. We got in and seated ourselves as quickly as we could, giggling the entire time.

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The next day was more of the new routine. I didn't get much time to spend with Steven that night as I had a prima donna who had me running the entire night. As I was coming back once I heard

her speaking to the girl with the makeup table next to hers.

"That's her?"

"Yep, that is the infamous Donna. Not sure I believe half the rumors though; she's too...sweet."

"I think its jealousy. I saw her talent on Monday."

"So did I. If it wasn't for the pacing differences I'd almost assume it was a lip synch."

"And she's an artist as well. And she always has perfect makeup. And her clothing is custom fit. There's no way that rail thin body can wear something off the rack."

"Not unless she was wearing little girl outfits anyway."

They both giggled at that.

"So, you think she'll win then? I heard a couple of the other girls thinking so."

"She has a good chance, that's why I've been running her ragged. Hopefully she'll get so run down that she'll just quit."

I walked in at this moment with her third bottle of water for the evening, "Don't expect me to break anytime soon," I said with a smile that had teeth in it, "I'm a lot tougher than I look, and I know how to be a real bitch when I need to."

There was menace in my voice when I said it, and both girls got a little pale. I have no idea where that came from, but it felt good to get a little of my own back.

"Anything else I can get you right now," I asked, going back to my sweetness and light that I'd been showing previous to this tonight.

They both shook their heads, their faces slack. I laughed and walked away to get myself something to drink. I was decidedly tired and needed a moment of break anyway.

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They held the busses that night and told us to meet them in the auditorium.

"We've had a wonderful week so far," the judge from the first morning said, "and we've got just one more night to go."

"We're going to read off your names, in no particular order. These names are those that will be participating in the final night's pageant. If your name is not read, then we thank you for your participation this year. You are all talented girls, but there really can only be one person to receive the crown. The thirty names I'll be reading are just those that have to wait a little longer before they are disappointed."

Man, that was harsh, but I appreciated the way she did it. I think it was an attempt to deflate a few egos. It's a good possibility that they'd heard about the rumors going around.

Sarah was in the first ten names read, and we hugged and squealed. I was bouncing in my seat just as much as she was. As the names went by, and my name wasn't called, I kept trying to keep it together. I didn't really want to win anyway, did I?

I knew already I was a special person, and I didn't need a crown to tell me so.

By the time that the twenty fourth name was called, I was pretty sure that I wasn't in the top thirty and would be going home.

"Donna Lowell."

It's not like it was a big loss, I mean I'd only done this for Sarah anyway...

"Donna, you're in! You're participating with me tomorrow."

"I'm in? I'm in!" We squealed and bounced and hugged as the last names were called. We were pretty loud and a couple of people around us told us to be quiet. I think even the judge onstage was smiling at our antics. It was the first smile I'd seen out of her the entire time that we'd been here.

They got to the end of the list, and we rose to leave.

"Anyone whose name wasn't called can see me after this for a moment. We need thirty volunteers to help out backstage. We'll take the first thirty people to talk to me. Everyone else, again, thanks for coming."

We had a hard time getting to sleep that night, but eventually Mama forced us to quiet down. Once we finally wound down we were asleep before we knew it.

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We practiced in the auditorium all day the next day. It was really different with the introduction of only thirty girls and not the hundred of the other three nights. It really started to sink in that this was happening.

I was a contestant in the Miss America's Outstanding Teen pageant. I was taken by a girl by all of my peers. I'd spent a couple of nights this week flirting with a cute boy. I'd thought a boy was cute.

We did all of the changes and so on, but with only thirty of us, we actually practiced the routines and processions and so on.

When practice was done we only had one more night and it would be over. This test, for good or ill, would be complete and this entire experience would be nothing more than a memory.

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The introductions had gone off without a hitch. It was so fast compared to Tuesday. It really brought home to me that less than ten percent of us were still in competition. I had to hurry off stage because my talent was scheduled for first.

I was standing, nervous to go on again, watching the spots on stage. Steven came up to me, "You ready."

I shook my head slightly no. I must have really looked frightened. He grabbed me by the shoulders and planted a kiss firmly on my lips.

"For luck," he said.

Somehow I glided out on stage, the music started, and I sang. I don't remember anything of that performance except for the smile that just wouldn't leave my face, and the fact that I didn't feel like my feet were in touch with the ground.

The applause was explosive and immediate. I bounced off the stage with the same smile I'd entered it. Sarah was there and we hugged and bounced and smiled. Our squeals were *very* quiet.

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I strode with confidence out onto the stage. I had my onstage question in my pretty dress, the fitness routine, and then it was the waiting for the judges to come to a decision on who had won.

I stood behind the podium and smiled out at the audience as my name was announced, along with my high school.

"Donna, what is it like living as a transgender woman?"

I hoped that they didn't see the fear in my eyes because I'm sure my smile didn't slip.

"Could you repeat the question please?"

"Oh, I meant to say: What difficulties do you think face those people living as transgender women today?"

It wasn't much better, but at least I wasn't about to tell everyone I was a guy.

"I think that's difficult for me to answer, as I really don't know many transgender individuals, or at least I don't think I do."

I waited for a moment for the laughter to die down before I continued.

"I would imagine that as public awareness increases it becomes easier for all of us to live as we were meant to be. In the past *women* had a hard time living in a society that treated them as individuals to be coddled and protected from a world that was too harsh for them.

"Whether we're white, black, purple, gay, transgender, or anything else we should be treated as people first. Who we are is more important than what we are, thank you."

There was clapping from the audience, but I'm sure some of the other girls got a much better response. I smiled and waved to the audience and walked off the opposite way to the one I'd come in on.

Chapter 7

My Fitness routine was done. We hurried to get into our evening gowns again. We were going out on stage so that they could tell us who the top five were. I was seriously considering not going out on stage. I figured that I was done. There was no way I was in the top five.

I really hoped that Sarah was in, though. We talked quietly waiting to be called to line up. Then we were onstage and our names were being read off.

"Sarah Davenport."

She was called first, and I smiled as she stepped forward onto the raised circle at the front of the stage.

"Amanda Petersen."

The prima donna from last night was called forward.

"Angie Thomas."

A pretty thirteen year old bounced and waved her way to the center of the stage with the other two girls.

"Janessa Olawie"

And then there were four. I was getting ready to move off with the other twenty four would not be going on when they called, "Donna Lowell."

I'm sure my smile was wooden as I walked out to stand with the other four young women. We smiled at the audience and waved. Then we walked off while the judges voted.

We rushed over to our tables and our assistants helped us to get undressed. I'd done this a

number of times, and Tara had helped me all evening. I never thought there might be a problem. I was smiling and talking with Steven when I felt a sudden draft. Somehow Tara had snagged my underwear and exposed me to the entire room. I tried to cover up, but by the look on Steven's face it was too late.

"Steven," I called out, but he was already turning away from me and walking away.

I was fighting back tears as Tara helped me back into my dress and I went to find tonight's emcee.

"I have to leave the competition," I said.

"They are about to announce the winner. Can't you wait a little longer?"

"I have to quit. I'm sorry. Tell the judges please?"

I ran out of the auditorium and found a quiet place to let everything out. I sobbed and wailed. I really didn't care about the pageant, but I did as well. I was in the top five out of over three hundred girls. I had made it so far.

I had kissed a boy.

Eventually Sarah came to find me, "I won," she said.

"Congratulations," I tried to sound happy for her, but it came out a little sullen and I cried at that. I wanted to be happy for my friend but, "he saw me naked. He knows I'm a boy."

"Shh. It's alright."

"How can it be alright? How will it ever be alright again?"

Her answer was to kiss me. It was a nice kiss. I could taste her lipstick and my own tears. I'm

sure I looked a mess with my makeup all over my face.

"Is he still inside? I have to tell him, explain to him..."

"That may not be a good idea, David."

"Please?"

She helped me up and we went around to the back entrance to the auditorium. There was a big shadow there. As we got closer I recognized the shadow as Greg.

"It's the little faggot. How you like wearing a dress you fucking queer?"

"Leave her alone," Sarah said.

"What her, I only see you and the queer over here. Do you realize what you did to my brother you little gay piece of trash? Do you?"

"He has to fight against the stereotypes every day. Half the school already thought he was gay. Now? Now they'll have ammunition thanks to you, you little shit."

I was crying again, "I never meant..."

"Well, since you want to be a girl so badly, let's fix it before my brother's life is ruined even more."

I saw the gleam of a long knife in the sparse lighting. Even in Florida in the summer it is dark at midnight. I was frozen, staring from Greg to the knife and back again.

"Leave her alone," Sarah said as she leapt at Greg.

"Stop, Sarah," I tried to grab her arm, but she'd already charged. I watched helplessly as they fought over the knife. I shouted something, trying to attract attention, but it was too late.

Sarah made a quiet grunting noise and crumpled on the pavement. Greg turned and ran away, but I didn't care about Greg.

I dialed 911 on my phone, but I couldn't wait for the operator. I slid under her body. The blood pooling on the grey silk was an image that I'd never forget. I put my small hands to the wound and tried to apply pressure.

"Don't leave me, Sarah."

She put her hand to the side of my face, "I love you, David. I would have been a lesbian for you, I think."

"Don't talk like that. You're going to be ok. You'll be okay."

"I preferred you as a boy though."

"Sarah! Don't leave me."

"Promise me...promise you'll be true to yourself? Promise?"

"Sarah..."

"Promise me!"

"Ok, Sarah. Just hold on, please."

"Be happy, David. I love..."

Her eyes glazed over and her hand fell to her side.

"Sarah?...Sarah!"

I wanted to cry then, but I had no more tears. I was empty and I just sat there, holding onto her stomach, trying to stop something that was already over. The paramedics when they arrived

pulled me away from her body and Mama wrapped me in her arms.

I sat there in the car looking at my bloodstained dress and hands, trying not to think about anything.

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We had her funeral the first week in August. I wore a new suit. All of my girl clothing was in a box in the attic, I'd tried to throw it away, but Mama saved it. I was too devastated to do stop her.

I'd buzzed all of my hair off. I still thought I looked like a girl. Whenever I looked in the mirror, I heard her voice saying she preferred me as a boy. She preferred me as a boy, and a boy is what I would be.

She was my best friend in the world. I did a pageant for her. I got her killed. If I'd never been there, she would be Miss Florida's's Outstanding Teen. She'd be on her way to the national pageant next week, not on her way to a grave in a too green cemetery under a cerulean blue sky.

The grass should have been dead. It would have fit my mood. A long time ago, I read the book *The Bridge to Terabithia*. I never understood what the main character felt at the end until that moment. Even more than him, this was my fault. This wasn't just survivor's guilt. She was protecting *me*.

They lowered her into the ground on that hot sunny day. The dirt closed over her, and again I whispered, "I'm a boy. I'm your boy, Sarah."

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I sat there staring at Dr. Funk. I didn't know why I'd kept my appointment with him, but I did.

"This wasn't your fault, David."

"Then whose was it?" I screamed, "Mama's? She was the one who forced me to go. Sarah's? She jumped on that god damned psychopath."

"It was Greg's fault if anyone is to blame."

"If I hadn't been there, she would be alive."

"You can't know that. Maybe something else would have set him off?"

"It was me pretending to be something I wasn't. I caused this. Me, me, me!" I pounded myself on my chest as I continued to scream.

I whispered to myself, "If I hadn't been a girl, if I didn't freeze, she would still be alive."

"You would have won, you know? Before you were withdrawn from the ballot? You had an almost perfect score. 45 out of a possible 50 points."

"She deserved to win." I said even more quietly, tears streaming down my face.

"Tara admits she was put up to it by one of the other girls, Amanda I think. She's been banned from the competition, even though she was first runner up and the crown passed to her."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"The committee wants to offer this to you, Donna. They want you to represent Florida at the competition as an openly Transgender contestant."

For just a second, I saw a different future for me than the one I was on. I saw parties and girls in dresses. I saw singing on stage and starting hormones. I saw myself happy and whole and healthy.

But Sarah would not be there with me. She was in the ground and try as I might I couldn't wish myself anywhere but there in her place. I didn't deserve to be happy. Dying would be too easy for me. I would live in misery.

"Sorry, Dr. Funk, but my name is David, and I'm a man."