

Back before there was an internet as we currently know it, when everyone was using dial-up modems and computers often had text-only displays, creative types would exchange their writings on isolated text-based electronic bulletin boards and file exchanges. A global discussion system called Usenet developed in 1980 provided a common forum for computer users wanting to interact with others, including aspiring authors, reviewers and readers. This system had separate 'newsgroups' for each broad topic. One newsgroup was "alt.sex.stories" where authors published their erotica - some of which was very explicit.

Often the newsgroup stories were serialized with an episode or chapter published every few days or weeks. One story published by an anonymous author in the early 1990s was titled "Joe Bates", which became known as "The Joe Bates Saga" after a voluminous twenty chapters were released online. For many months the ever-growing series of chapters told the story of Joe a male thirty-something avionics engineer who - along with three co-workers - was turned completely female overnight due to an industrial accident. The story detailed Joe's and his co-worker's adventures and the reactions of his friends, medical personnel and strangers accepting his/her sudden transformation. Eventually thousands of newsgroup readers were eagerly awaiting each installment of this well-written story.

Without warning, the serialized chapters stopped appearing after the 58th one, leaving the main plot and several sub plots unresolved. Commenters in the alt.sex.stories newsgroup suggested that the author had introduced plot contradictions in the most recent chapters that made continuing the story illogical, but for whatever reason the story ended there.

Years later when personal computers started encouraging the use of graphics and the explosion of websites on the internet, the text-only Usenet newsgroups withered and were mostly abandoned. Several erotica websites have archived all the Joe Bates Saga chapters that were released in the alt.sex.stories newsgroup. These sites may be found easily with any search engine.

Thirty-odd years after the Joe Bates Saga appeared online one of the interns at Sleighfarm Publishing Group decided to try their hand at wrapping up the unfinished tale. In the following pages you will find what P.J. Trinejo imagined as "the rest of the Joe Bates Saga."

Chapter 59

DÉJÀ VU

Joe felt the world jostling. “Joe!” a voice softly urged nearby, “Didn’t you want to be early for work this morning?” It took a few moments for the cobwebs to clear before Joe realized Linda was shaking his shoulder trying to rouse him.

Joe opened his eyes to a dimly lit room and could see by the angle of the sunlight slanting through the narrow gap in the thick bedroom curtains that the sun was already up. Linda was standing by the bed dressed in a tan business suit that made her look very professional. She had obviously been awake for quite a while and had gotten out of bed without disturbing Joe’s sleep.

“I have to preview some homes this morning,” she scolded, “so I can’t stand here all morning trying to drag you out of bed.”

“I didn’t think you had to work on Saturday,” Joe groaned. “I don’t either.” He rolled back to his pillow.

Linda began laughing. “Saturday? It’s Friday, Joe. You told me you were going to work early today because that doctor would have some news about why you and the others ended up female,” she explained as she carefully pushed a silver teardrop stud earring into each lobe to avoid dropping one in the dimly lit bedroom.

Joe turned back to face Linda. “Are you sure it’s Friday?” he asked, still skeptical.

“I’m positive,” Linda said with finality. “Now get your sweet little butt on your feet or you’ll be in bed all day.”

Joe stared blearily at her as he slowly became more awake and sat up. “I probably will be working overnight again,” he explained as he considered unfinished items he needed to complete. “Don’t wait up.”

Linda smirked unhappily. “Let me guess... another person wanting to be turned female by your magic box? Well sometimes we need to work extra hours. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She kissed him on the forehead as he sat up in bed.

Satisfied he would not go back to sleep Linda reluctantly left Joe's bedroom and was out to her car on her way to the home preview.

Joe rose from the bed and went into the adjoining bathroom. The woman in his reflection looked very appealing wearing her cotton briefs and nothing else. He smiled and simultaneously the bare-chested woman smiled back, proving she was not someone else. To Joe his breasts didn't seem any larger this morning, thank goodness, so maybe the lingering changes over the last few weeks had finally ended.

As he removed the briefs, Joe noted to add them to the items to be washed that were already piled on the dresser. A minute or two later in the shower as he shaved his legs and underarms, Joe realized what Linda had said. Today is Friday. If that was true, then like Ebenezer Scrooge, everything Joe remembered about Friday had not happened! Doctor Krell had not yet told him about the disturbing results of the blood tests and scans that showed Joe and the others transformed - despite visual evidence to the contrary - were still genetically male and had not been diagnosed with what the geneticists called CAIS or Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome.

Joe had been reading about CAIS the last few evenings. In a male human fetus, CAIS prevented the penis from enlarging from its original clitoris-like appearance, allowed the embryonic vaginal duct to remain viable, halted the scrotal sac from sealing the vaginal entrance, and let the testes remain in the abdomen undescended. Males with this condition appeared female born with a vagina and would develop enlarged breasts as adolescents although they had the signature Y chromosome of any other male and had neither a uterus nor ovaries. Females with CAIS developed as any other female and had a fully functioning reproductive system.

The book said that until the mid-twentieth century no one knew that the syndrome existed. Until then, most genetic XY infants born with CAIS were raised as females that they appeared to be at birth and lived their lives as women that as adults did not become pregnant. Only after investigating the inability to conceive would a doctor discover there was no uterus or ovaries to allow pregnancy. It would take a microscopic examination of the unfortunate patient's blood to reveal the male chromosomes.

In very recent years the condition could be diagnosed from simpler blood tests or genetic history of their mothers so some born with CAIS could be discovered as infants and raised as males with a genetic deformity.

Now that he had time to analyze what the book had taught him, it seemed contradictory that radiation could somehow undo all the development of those structures that appeared months before he was born as well as reverse all of the skeletal and organ development that had occurred nearly twenty years ago when Joe entered his teens. He would have to ask Dr. Krell about that, he decided as he finished shaving, washing and rinsed under the shower.

Joe dried himself and applied a little powder to his tummy, boobs, and arms. He looked at himself again in the medicine chest mirror over the sink. His hairstyle was looking more and more feminine with each day of incremental hair growth. It would be several months until he had hair down his neck where it could be cut again, and probably a year or more to have hair that reached to his shoulders like Karen's wig he had worn for a few days. His old male appearance was almost gone now, and when the hair got much longer there would be nothing to remind anyone Joe had once been a man.

He looked at the applicator syringe and nearly empty squeeze tube of medication on the counter next to the sink. Today he would use the last dose of the vaginitis cream. He grinned at how during his dream he had applied the last of the medicine before discarding the syringe and empty tube then going to bed, but here was the same container once again with just enough for one last application. How much of what he remembered had been real and how much had he simply dreamed?

With practiced efficiency, Joe filled the plastic applicator with the last few milliliters of the anti-yeast treatment, inserted the end of the device inside himself and pushed the plunger. Once again, the empty tube of yeast treatment and the applicator syringe went into the bathroom wastebasket. Only five days performing a ritual foreign to the experience of a male, he could unerringly line up the medicine dispenser with a vagina that he could not see directly. It couldn't be any more difficult to use a tampon when that time came, he told himself and then mentally added: if that time ever did.

That realization triggered his organizational tendencies. He made a conscious decision to pick up a supply of feminine products the next time he was in the pharmacy. Who knows when this unfamiliar body might decide to produce the messy evidence of his female reproductive cycle? As distasteful as that prospect was, a few days of shedding excess blood and uterine lining was preferable to ending up pregnant! It wouldn't hurt to have that stuff on hand. Certainly Linda could use those supplies even if Joe never needed to.

He applied his makeup. It was quick and mistake-free now compared to those first few times he'd sloppily applied it himself. The barest amount of foundation, a subtle hint of blush, a little eye liner, a few quick swipes with the mascara brush on his eyelashes, darken the eyebrow arches that Linda had so carefully plucked for him, paint on a dull cherry lipstick and he was done. Not perfect but close enough that no one would care. He winked at himself in the mirror. He smirked knowing he would definitely consider going to bed with a woman that looked like he now did, and began giggling realizing that he had no choice but go to bed with her every night.

From the dresser he selected a white cotton bra. From the closet Joe opted for a rather loose blouse with an open neck that was conservative enough for work and almost but not quite casual. He decided to go a little upscale and wore his expensive individual silk nylons, a slip and the tan pencil skirt that ended just at his knees. He wasn't going to be lifting equipment or working around anything today that could snag the delicate hosiery. He slid a pair of thick athletic socks over his stockinged feet to avoid snagging the fragile nylons on the floors or carpet as he finished preparing to leave.

He nibbled on a few chunks of melon and a slice of toast before checking his makeup one more time, grabbing the purse and medium-heeled mules and going to the car. Linda had taken weeks to finally reveal to Joe the "secret" of carrying one's heels until getting to the destination and then slipping into them at the last moment. That way he could drive wearing the hosiery and socks then exchange the thick socks for the torture-device shoes after he was in the parking lot at work. Avoiding the shoes while driving not only was easier on his feet, but the protective athletic socks kept the hosiery from being ruined in the car.

Joe pulled his Mazda into the Honeybone parking lot minutes after seven AM. The radio newscast just before he arrived had an “unconfirmed report” about a recent industrial accident at Honeybone that had injured four people. The details in the news were sketchy and didn’t mention anyone spontaneously changing sex, but it was obvious to Joe the accident being described was the one that had transformed Dave, Mike/Michelle, Tim and himself. He was surprised it had taken two weeks for the most vague and unspecific details about the incident to become widespread. Certainly enough people at the company, the mechanics at the hangar, dozens of medical people, Jay’s girlfriend Barb, and others had seen or heard about the “instant women”, Joe, Mike/Michelle, Tim, and Dave since the accident. It was inevitable that the details would eventually get around.

Fortunately Honeybone’s public relations refusing to comment kept the perverse details of the sex changes out of the news by making the rumors seem like a typical forklift accident or something. Lurid headlines of men being turned female by a transmitter would be on the national news otherwise. On top of all the other challenges already presented by having one’s sex changed involuntarily overnight, the last thing any of them needed was a swarm of reporters asking mortifying questions and shoving cameras and microphones in people’s faces. Joe hoped it never came to that.

Phil Berg was scheduled to subject himself to the cage this afternoon, as he had already in Joe’s dream. Joe was apprehensive about the wisdom of that decision. Except for Pete, everyone transformed so far had been an unwitting and unwilling victim of the transponder energy. As an exposed covert operative, the threat of assassination was a strong impetus for Phil to disguise himself by any means, but Joe didn’t know if he would go as far as volunteering to change his own sex – almost certainly permanently - purely to avoid an omnipresent death squad. Dave Skinner certainly wouldn’t. He had voiced his desire several times since the transformation to end his own life rather than live as a woman. Probably most men felt the same as Dave. Joe never once considered the peril of being a hunted man, but could not imagine how many men would choose the cage and existence as a female over a life on the run.

Joe made his way to the laboratory where the cage was set up. Although it was early, Dr. Krell and Karen were already there. Joe felt a shiver as the familiarity of the people and their activities seemed to be just like his dream.

"Good morning, Joe." Dr. Krell called as soon as he saw him. "You're a little early, aren't you?"

"Morning." Joe answered. "I wasn't sleepy, so I thought I'd come in now."

"I'm glad you did." The little doctor responded. "I have some interesting news for you, and I want to schedule yet another physical examination if I can, this morning."

Joe winced. Not more tests. It seemed every doctor at Hillcrest had already seen him naked and had made his genitalia quite a tourist attraction.

"Get some coffee, and settle in," Dr. Krell said. He noticed the expression on Joe's face upon hearing about another examination.

"What's up?" Joe said casually as he went to the lab coffee pot.

"Let's talk privately in the conference room," Doctor Krell said. "Get your coffee and go in there. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

Joe filled his cup and went to the small meeting room off the lab. There was one large table and perhaps ten or twelve chairs. Joe took a seat halfway down one side. "I wonder what he has to say?" Joe thought to himself as he sipped the warm black liquid.

Joe was looking at the old aircraft pictures on the wall when the doctor entered. "Well, you certainly look nice this morning!" Doctor Krell complimented.

"Still trying to get it right with this make-up thing," Joe said apologetically. "I still don't have it down yet. Women make it look so simple."

"You're doing very well," The doctor advised.

"What's up, Doc?" Joe asked, grinning at his pun. The ongoing familiarity of this conversation was beginning to unnerve Joe. Was he experiencing the events of his dream over again?

Doctor Krell looked at the picture of a Gulfstream jet, taken just as it was touching down. "How are you feeling this morning, Joe?" he asked.

"How do I feel?" Joe repeated. "Fine, I guess. I'm sorta getting used to all this, if that's what you mean."

"You seem to be adapting well to what has happened." Dr. Krell went on. "Is that a fair assessment?"

"Yeah... I guess so," Joe answered.

"No feelings of depression... Of being out of place... Things like that?"

"Well... I mean... I guess I might feel more 'in place' if I wasn't wearing all this female stuff," Joe admitted.

"Really? I thought you were liking it... You said you were getting used to it," Dr. Krell went on.

"It gets easier as time passes.... What's this all about?" Joe asked. "Have you figured out a way to get us back?"

Dr. Krell raised his hands and smiled. "Nooo. Nooo. Nothing like that, unfortunately," he said. "We do have some information, however."

"Good, or bad?" Joe asked.

"I don't know," Dr. Krell said. "I don't think it could be considered good news, but it may not really be so bad either."

Joe could not shake the creepy feeling of having been here before. He decided to thwart a verbatim repeat of the gut-wrenching news the doctor had revealed in the dream. "Dr. Krell, I mean no disrespect, but spare me your long drawn-out explanation," Joe said curtly. "I know exactly what you're going to say." With all of the events of this morning eerily following the exact sequence and details of his dream, Joe felt confident he knew what words the doctor would utter.

Joe took a deep and deliberate breath. "You are going to tell me that some fancy laboratories in Atlanta looked at our blood and cheek scrapings with electron microscopes and spectrum analyzers, and

reviewed all of our x-rays and they determined that I and the others are not really women.”

There. He had ripped off the bandage. It was all on the table. He took another deep breath. “You are going to tell me that Dave, Mike, Tim, Pete and I are still genetically XY males without ovaries or a uterus, because everyone that thought we had turned female were mistaken. Yes, we have vaginas but our breasts, body shape, muscle tone, and hormones are messed up because we have androgen insensitivity syndrome. Even our testes are still there stuffed up inside our abdomens. All of us affected by the transmitter are just pseudo hermaphrodites. Isn't that right?” Joe stared at the doctor across the table to gauge the man's reaction to the amazing prediction.

Dr. Krell just gazed fixedly at Joe for several seconds without a word. Joe immediately regretted being so coarse with the doctor that had shown him and the others nothing but compassion and understanding of their bizarre circumstances these last two weeks.

The doctor tilted his head as he studied Joe. "I think you meant to say “pseudo hermaphrodite”... the term is a portmanteau of the names Hermes the demi-god of masculine charm combined with Aphrodite the goddess of feminine beauty and sexuality... Herm... Aphrodite," the doctor explained. "You must not have much confidence in my training or experience. The other physicians that have been on your case would be dismayed to hear that you think so little of our collective expertise."

Joe shook his head and blinked as he processed those words. "What?" he finally blurted, amazed at what the doctor said.

"High school biology students can tell the difference between XX and XY chromosomes in a simple microscope, and you believe somehow that with all my years in this field that I thought you still had XY chromosomes?" the doctor asked, with a smile indicating he believed Joe had been joking.

"I... I didn't... I wasn't..." Joe sputtered trying but failing miserably to apologize. This conversation was not at all like the dream! He now felt even worse about his blunt reaction to the doctor.

Dr. Krell chuckled slightly, "And I don't know where you engineers learn medicine, but electron microscopes and spectral stimulators..."

"Spectrum analyzers," Joe educated him.

"Yes, yes... whatever those do," Dr Krell replied, "They sound more like something an electrical engineer like yourself would use instead of a clinical instrument a physician or biomedical researcher would employ investigating a genetic or medical condition."

Joe was disarmed by the logic of that observation. In a dream, Joe's brain likely would draw upon the esoteric technical minutiae he had accumulated during his career. Obviously Joe had little knowledge of the tools used by someone trained in medicine, anatomy or biological processes. It had made perfect sense in the dream but sounded odd and out-of-place now that he had time to think.

"Consider this, Joe," Dr Krell went on. "Images from your MRI scans and X-rays were viewed by several radiologists the first day you came to Hillcrest and a battalion more from California to Chicago have studied them in the days since... and yet you imagine every one of those experts would be mistaken? You cannot honestly tell me these highly respected leaders in their respective disciplines would be deceived by a few shadows on the images of you, Dave, Tim, Mike and Pete only later to have most or all of these people admit they were mistaken and had hallucinated seeing evidence of a uterus and ovaries that weren't there?"

The doctor sat back in his chair in disbelief, then almost immediately leaned forward again. "Each of these professionals have seen multiple diagnostic images from you. They have evaluated literally tens of thousands of scans during their careers and know the differences between the male and female structures the scans contain. Perhaps one or two clinicians might have made such a rudimentary error, but dozens of independent radiologists saw the same images and all reached the exact same conclusion. No fewer than a dozen endocrinologists studied your hormone levels, and a similar number of hematologists with impeccable credentials examined your blood. I am - and you can be - confident that there has been no mistake."

The doctor frowned. "As to this being AIS -- you may not know this, but over the years I've consulted on several cases of androgen insensitivity syndrome and let me assure you: a very rare condition like that doesn't undo anyone's sexual development. The definition of the syndrome is that it is limited to fetal development. In the fetus AIS just keeps the male characteristics from fully emerging. Nothing gets reversed. Two weeks ago you had an adult penis, testes and a scrotum. If it were even possible to develop AIS after you were born, it would not cause any organs already present to atrophy. Admittedly, it might fiddle with your testosterone levels, affect your ability to get an erection, cause localized alopecia, a bit of acne, and of course gynecomastia... er... that's another name for swollen breast tissue. The effects would be nothing like what has happened to you and the others due to the accident certainly not with the speed and totality we've seen. A misdiagnosis of that magnitude would be preposterous... bordering on malpractice!"

Dr. Krell changed the subject. "Although it appeared earlier this week that there were some troubling new developments, quite the opposite is true. The genes driving the ongoing day to day changes are apparently turning dormant at last," Dr. Krell told him. "Our examinations show that you and the others are changing less with each passing day so your body should stabilize soon, leaving you much as you are today presuming the transitions have not ceased already. If you were counting on these changes going on for months, they won't. We still don't know whether the changes will spontaneously reverse. We can't determine if you will ever regain your original body and don't yet know if or when any of you will begin aging at a normal rate. Based on the cells we studied from you, and your current rate of aging you might outlive us all."

Karen had been silently observing the two from the conference room doorway until this point. "There is a glimmer of good news. In terms of reversing the change, there is likely more hope than there would have been a year ago. I heard that there is some fantastic research that just started," she said. "Researchers have begun mapping all of the human genetic code, or what we call a genome. They want to unravel what each gene does. They won't finish decoding all three billion nucleotides of the pattern for quite a long time - it might take decades at the current pace."

Joe looked at her. "What does that have to do with me or with any of us?"

Karen had a broad smile. "Fortunately, they have mapped most of genes that determine sexual characteristics, and based on reports I have seen so far it appears that some genes that everyone has in their cells were long thought to have no function and are the very ones of yours that we've found were damaged by the transponder."

Joe had an uneasy feeling. He turned to look at the doctor. "And what do you think these formerly useless genes do?"

Dr. Krell adopted a tone one might hear a college professor use. "These genes are increasingly likely the ones activated in a fetus just weeks after conception to shape the skeleton, internal organs and external genitalia to determine sex. Normally they complete their work on the embryo in the first trimester in utero and then simply have nothing further to do and become dormant for the rest of that person's life. When a few cells in your body were affected by the radio signals, the genes were not only reactivated but somehow mutated to mold your body into the female genotype. Those cells with affected genes reacted by multiplying in dramatic fashion similar to a cancer. This activity began drawing from the organs in your body to fuel the changes. The cells with mutated active genes soon far outnumbered the inert genes that had originally made you male and started furiously reshaping what was left of your organs literally overnight, in effect going into overdrive to heal your damaged body."

"Damaged?" Joe gulped. "What do you mean 'damaged'?"

"Perhaps damaged is a bit extreme," the doctor said, "what I meant was your male body was inconsistent with the instructions these genes sought to carry out in addition to reprogramming your chromosomes. Your male organs were considered foreign and were... how can I say this?... dismantled by your immune systems for additional sugars and energy and the remaining mass was simply expelled as your body repaired the harm. The wayward genes instructed your body to create female organs and used your original organs as raw materials and fuel."

Joe thought about his body mistaking his male characteristics for a disease and catastrophically working not only to immediately

destroy but to replace the very elements of his body that defined him as male. The radio signals had not turned him female, but they did trick his body into doing it to itself.

He brightened. "That's good news isn't it? We just need to zap my genes again and my breasts will shrink back to normal and the second mutation will start reprogramming my uterus, vagina and clitoris and turn them into my testes and penis, won't they?"

Both Karen and the doctor shook their heads sadly. "Your cells are already mutated and if they are irradiated once more the result would be like trying to unscramble an egg using the same process as scrambling it... the cells will likely mutate to some even stranger variant rather than go back to their original form to revert your sex," Dr. Krell explained. "Perhaps one day when we have the skill to precisely edit a person's genes we can undo the mutation and program the genes to make your body revert, but until then..."

"I end up female," Joe said deflatedly.

Karen wrapped her arm around Joe protectively. "You are otherwise perfectly healthy and normal, although apparently one-hundred-percent female." she said. The latent jealousy for being genetically female behind her words was still evident even with her benevolent smile. Joe, who never had any ambition to be the least bit feminine, had a body that was female down to the molecular level while Karen who had been a woman born into a male body and dreamed of having the body to match her mind was merely a very convincing surgical approximation.

"I'm sorry I doubted you," Joe apologized to Dr. Krell, "I had an incredibly vivid dream last night that not only seemed until I woke up to be real but the same events and conversations from the dream seem to be exactly repeating themselves in real life this morning, with the notable exception of the last several minutes."

"A detailed prescient vision? Fascinating!" Dr Krell commented. "If I may ask, was what you heard from me in your dream preferable to the information I just gave you? Would you prefer to be a genetic male with breasts and a vagina or a fully functional female? Was your dream the nightmare or is this news I gave you a few minutes ago worse?"

Joe could not look the doctor in the eye after the disrespect he had thrown the doctor's way. "I... I don't know what seems right anymore," Joe explained in a quiet voice. "For the most part being female has not been unpleasant although I could have done without all those gynecological exams and having the yeast infection. The changes in my increasing physical attraction to men lately is kind of unnerving too, considering that I was a heterosexual male for the first ninety-nine-point-nine percent of my life. Then there is that constant dread lingering in the shadows that someday I'll have periods and could possibly get pregnant. Those are both a little frightening, to be perfectly honest."

"On the other hand," Joe said after a momentary pause, "I would rather not be abnormal... even if being normal means being female in every respect."

Dr Krell lifted Joe's chin with one finger so that he could look into his eyes. "I can't say that many people ever felt the sudden dysmorphia you and your fellow transformees are feeling, Joe," he said. "What I can tell you is that from a medical perspective your body is indistinguishable from any other adult woman, and that means you would be like any other woman if and when you begin having monthly cycles. I'm sure you've seen that the women you've met throughout your life handle their periods and the potential of pregnancy with little or no fuss."

"It doesn't make it any less scary," Joe commented.

Dr. Krell patted Joe's hand. "According to my wife, the first time a girl experiences menses is upsetting, but it becomes just another part of your routine after a while. I'm certain you'd be no different."

"And pregnancy?" Joe asked.

"Another natural process," Dr. Krell replied. "Human women have been giving birth for millions of years. It's daunting and scary for naturally born women as much as for you, but the result after nine months of discomfort and hours of labor is the continuation of the human race – a wondrous miracle and a noble ambition. My advice if pregnancy is horrifying to you is to use protection when you have

sexual contact with any male. That way you can prevent pregnancy until you want one.”

“Thank you,” Joe said to Karen and the doctor. “It was not the news I hoped to hear, but at least I’m not the genetic outcast I imagined in my dream.” He smiled at them and briefly exchanged hugs with both before he walked back to the laboratory.

In the lab, Joe saw that Dave was clearing space on one of the work tables. A few days had passed since Joe last saw Dave. Like the others, Dave had continued to undergo subtle changes each day. To Joe's eyes, Dave looked younger than the last time he saw his somewhat overweight friend. The continuing feminization was evident in the noticeably wider hips, larger derriere, and even fuller bustline. Dave had developed very large breasts compared to the others. Although Dave now had softer skin, no facial hair, and different contours to his nose, eyes and jawline, Joe could still detect elements of his pal's former rugged male face above that matronly body.

Joe went over to his friend. "Good morning Dave." Joe called out as he came up from behind. Dave was engrossed in something he was reading.

Dave turned and smiled when he recognized Joe. "Morning, Joe," Dave returned. ""You sure look nice this morning."

Joe was glad to see his friend sounding so chipper. "You do too." Joe responded, his eyes on Dave's substantial chest.

Dave noticed his friends attention. "Yeah... I know... Kinda big, huh?"" Dave admitted. He was smiling, but his embarrassment very evident.

"Uhhh no... I ahh..." Joe stammered. The feelings returned of having had this exact conversation in the dream.

"I'm even bigger than Cindy now," Dave continued, straightening his back to emphasize his generous endowment. "Who'd have thought this would happen?"

"How's it going, Dave?" Joe asked. He knew his friend had been experiencing deep depression over what had happened.

"Lots better," Dave said simply. "I don't know what specific thing is making the difference, but I'm dealing with it okay, I think."

"That's good," Joe said. "How's Cindy doing?"

"She's an angel," Dave answered. "I couldn't get through this without her."

"I'm glad everything is working out," Joe went on. "I was getting worried about you, old pal."

"I'm all right," Dave insisted. "It sure could have been a lot worse, couldn't it?"

"That's for sure," Joe admitted.

"You sure are looking great," Dave went on, winking as he looked Joe up and down.

"Yeah...That's what they tell me," Joe said, realizing what Dave was probably thinking as he almost leered.. "I keep trying to adjust."

"This female stuff can be kind of fun sometimes, but I'd rather be a guy again, wouldn't you?" Dave said, to Joe's complete amazement.

Joe couldn't believe Dave's new state of mind. "Well, that's a change in attitude from the other day," Joe declared without answering his question..

"Not much anyone can do about it, right?" Dave concluded. "I'm seeing a shrink that Dr. Krell suggested. She handles a lot of his patients that undergo transition and she gave me some pills that have been helping me deal with this a lot better than the grumpy way I had been."

"They certainly seem to work for you," Joe admitted. "You have really mellowed out. The bitterness you had before was not a good look for either gender and it really was an ugly contrast to your new softer appearance."

"Yeah. Cindy says the same thing. She has been a big help too."

"How's all that working out?" Joe asked, referring to Dave's family problems.

Dave looked straight into Joe's eyes. "I can't lie about it, Joe," Dave admitted. "I wish everything were different, but we are dealing with it. I've been taking your advice about it, too." He winked. "I've

discovered Cindy and I can still have serious fun in the sack. Heck, she and I haven't been this passionate since our honeymoon," Dave continued, rubbing his large bosom with his hands.

"I hear you saying there are some good things about the change," Joe agreed. "Cindy deserves a big 'thank you' from you for her patience and understanding."

"The best part is my kids," Dave said, his eyes tearing up. "God bless them, they still love me even though I look like this. They don't seem to care that I've become female – it's already normal to them that I'm like this. I just have to remind them not to call me Dad when we're in public or people might think there was something funny going on. Now that I think about it, I'll probably have to be careful how I interact with my kids around their little friends too."

"I'm happy they are taking it so well," Joe said. "And your new attitude is improving your appearance."

"I know I need to lose some weight," Dave acknowledged. "I want to, but I just seem to gain it even easier than before. Cindy bet me she could lose more weight than I can, and you know me... I can't pass up a challenge. I'm really going to put some effort into it."

"You've got to come to the aerobics classes with me and Linda," Joe suggested. "I think you might find it interesting."

"Yeah, Tim told me about the scenery in the locker room," Dave said, grinning. "That kind of visual stimulation is all I need, Joe."

Joe smiled. "It's true, too," Joe explained. "I think if you go along, you'll find plenty to take your mind off the exercise."

Dave got a little closer. "Joe, I know I've become a woman, but I'm telling you, I don't think any of my urges changed at all," Dave whispered. "I still feel just the same as before. I just can't do what I want about it anymore."

Joe nodded his head. "It's the same for me, Dave," Joe conceded. "I basically feel the same as before, too. You can ask Linda about when I come home from the exercise club. She can tell you I'm a real tiger ...or I guess I'm a tigress... now in bed."

"What does that make us... lesbians, bisexuals, what?" Dave asked.

Joe looked serious. "I don't know," he admitted. "I just don't know."

They looked in each others eyes, and smiled.

"What the heck has happened to us, Joe?" Dave asked.

"All I know is that changing like we did is frightening at the same time it is incredible." Suddenly Joe remembered the meeting with Dr. Krell. "Have you talked with Dr. Krell yet this morning?" Joe asked.

"No, I just got here, why?" Dave responded.

"I think he's got some interesting news for you," Joe said.

"What is it?" Dave asked.

"I better let him tell you," Joe insisted.

"They've found a way to undo all this?" Dave suggested, smiling.

"No, I'm afraid not," Joe hinted. "But I'm sure he'll tell you as soon as he sees you."

As they were speaking, the swinging doors to the lab opened. Tim Werner entered, followed by Phil Berg. "Good morning, everybody," Tim chirped in his little girl voice.

"Hi, Tim, Phil," Joe returned. "Phil, this is Dave Skinner. He's one of us."

Phil and Dave awkwardly shook hands. The handsome, fit man, and the rather overweight woman were a strange contrast in the human physique. Joe turned his attention to Tim, who was grinning widely, as if he had something he was dying to tell.

As Joe studied his young friend, it was obvious he had continued to get even younger looking since last night. How young could he get? "What are you so excited about?" Joe asked.

Tim looked surprised at the question. "Why... What do you mean?" Tim said innocently.

"You look like the cat that just ate the canary," Joe explained. "Don't say something isn't going on." This conversation was similar to the ones earlier with Dr. Krell and with Dave and duplicated the dialog in the dream, so Joe presumed he already knew what had transpired between Tim and Phil.

"Nope... Nothing... Nothing going on," Tim insisted. But his smile covered his whole face.

Joe looked at Phil. "What's going on?" Joe asked.

Phil looked serious. "Hey... I don't know," Phil said, acting very innocent.

Joe decided to drop it. He knew they had spent the night together at his apartment. He could imagine what might have happened. He rose from his seat. The coffee had seemed to go right through him. "Excuse me." Joe said, as he walked toward the restroom in the hall.

He felt uncomfortable entering the forbidden ladies room. Joe found the room empty and entered a stall. He carefully took a seat and then heard someone else enter the room. Great. There were very few women on this end of the engineering building, and Joe figured he would be undisturbed. He hated company when using the women's john.

"Joe. Are you in here?" A little girl's voice called out. Tim.

"Yeah Tim, I'm here," Joe answered.

Joe heard footsteps along the three stalls. Tim was probably checking under the doors to determine if they were alone. "Joe, I know you know, so I want to tell you," Tim spoke enthusiastically. "It happened. Last night. I asked him, he agreed, and we did it."

"Really?" Joe responded, "Did you like it?"

"It was unbelievable," Tim answered. "I was scared as hell, but I wanted to try it... I was afraid it would hurt, but it wasn't so bad."

Joe smiled. He imagined the scene... The handsome, worldly, Phil Berg, agreeing to sleep with the teen-age-looking Tim Werner.

"Was it anything like you thought it would be?" Joe asked, knowing Tim really wanted to talk about it.

"We talked a while." Tim explained. "He asked about how it felt to be female. I think he's really interested. When he asked if I had experienced sex yet. I said no, but I wanted to. I offered... He accepted."

"Pretty good, huh?" Joe concluded.

"You wouldn't believe...", Tim went on. "We touched each other at first... That was kind of awkward, I guess... I mean, he is a guy and all. But then he started undressing me and my knees got all wobbly. He really knew how to make me feel good. When I saw him... God, I thought he would rip me apart when I saw him... I still can't believe it went in..."

"So, I guess you're a woman now, huh?" Joe asked.

"I was worried it might never happen." Tim replied. "It did, and I kind of liked it, I really did."

"Keep your pants on, pal," Joe recommended. "You've got to be careful."

"Yeah... I know," Tim acknowledged, "I won't hop into bed with just anybody. We used protection, so I won't get pregnant."

"Was he good?" Joe asked.

There was a long silence. "Well, I don't have all that much to compare him with, but he sure knew how to make me feel good. I couldn't believe it. It didn't feel like much at first, except kind of a stretching pain when he went in. In a while, it started to feel pretty good. I think it sorta feels like somebody is playing with your balls instead of your cock."

"Did you come?"

"Well, not while we were doing it, but before... Like I said, he knew how to make me feel good. He went real slow, like you did," Tim said.

Joe finished and stood and wiped, stopping to inspect the small wet spot in his underwear before he pulled them up. The conversation was making him feel like a big sister. Maybe this was how it would be to live as a woman. Joe flushed and opened the stall door. "Well, are you glad you did it, or wish you hadn't?" Joe asked the very young looking person looking at him.

"Oh, Joe, I feel so much better... I know it won't be as bad as I thought," Tim said enthusiastically.

"Good," Joe announced. "I'm glad you feel that way. I wish I could be so sure of myself." He grinned. Joe washed his hands and straightened his clothes and checked his hair.

"What do you mean by that?" Tim asked. "I thought you were the one who had his act together on this."

Joe looked at the young "girl".

"I'm just as confused and as worried as you are," Joe said. "Maybe I just hide it better."

"Well, I feel a lot better, anyway," Tim decided. "I really think I can live with all this female stuff, if I have to. But, Joe, there is one thing I really have to ask you."

Joe chuckled and was amused to hear it come out more as a feminine giggle. "I hope you don't want sex advice. We've both been female the same amount of time..." He held the door open so both could exit the restroom and return to the lab.

"No.. no... no...", Tim admonished blushing, "I'm not about to ask anything about that! It's just that I decided to reveal my new body to my folks... my Dad mostly. I want you to come with me to my parents place in New River sometime soon."

"Oh," Joe said turning serious.

"Becky has been pleading with me to say something or visit them," Tim confided, leaning close to Joe. "She claims it's best for me to tell them, but I really think she doesn't trust herself to keep my girl-bod secret from them much longer. I'm really nervous about telling Mom and Dad about this. Finding out what happened to me will devastate them."

Joe looked into Tim's eyes to demonstrate his sincerity. "I think I can make them see that their son turning into a woman isn't some horrible fate. I bet the news will make them sympathetic to your situation and they will accept you as you are," Joe said. "You would be amazed at how forgiving parents can be of their children." Joe smiled but inwardly wondered why those words had come out of his own mouth. Compassion and parental advice had never been in his wheelhouse. Was this yet another facet to his new femininity?

When they returned to the area near the cage, Dave was exiting the conference room. "I just got the latest update from Dr. Krell. It looks like there's no hope for us to be men again unless the cage shows us some new trick in addition to what it already did to us," Dave said.

Tim was surprised by Dave's comment. "You are taking this quite calmly," he noted.

"Yeah," Dave agreed. "The miracle of anti-depressants. I'd be ecstatic if the cage could make me male again or the authorities would somehow let me stay legally married to Cindy after I change the sex listed on my identification."

"I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for either one of those," Joe advised.

Dr. Krell beckoned Tim into the conference room and closed the door.

"I hope the doc is right about these effects slowing down. If not, Tim might de-age all the way back to just after his egg was fertilized inside his mother," Dave told Joe after they were alone. "then if he gets even a minute younger than that... poof!"

Joe visibly shivered at that horrifying vision. "I'm sure that won't happen," Joe said confidently.

Dave snorted sarcastically. "A month ago were you sure neither you or I would ever be female?"

Joe had to admit Dave had a point.

A few minutes later Tim opened the conference room door and walked out. His expression was more relaxed than it had been since this strange journey began. "Well that is a load off my mind!" he exclaimed. "I mean that literally... According to the doctor, my hormone levels have stabilized which means I won't get much younger in appearance. I feel as if I could float into the clouds!" His infectious giggle seemed out of place for a place of business.

Doctor Krell came out of the conference room where Joe, Dave and Tim were standing. "We're taking Phil to Hillcrest for all of the videos, classes and legal help you three got in San Diego. There won't be much going on here until this afternoon when we bring Phil back to use the cage. If your boss Jim has no objections I'd like to see each of you at Hillcrest in an hour."

Dave, Tim and Joe quickly agreed. Mike/Michelle, who typically arrived late to work was the only one of the engineers that had not yet

heard the news. Dr Krell would call Pete to fill him in and request another exam.

Joe thought a moment about Phil Berg volunteering to use the cage and felt strangely protective toward the man who was chronologically his own age . “I think Phil will need our moral support while in the cage this evening,” he shared. “Lord knows we’re probably the only people on Earth that can truly understand what he will be going through during and after.”

“I’ll be here,” Dave said. “I’m sure Michelle will want to be here.”

“I’ll be here too,” Tim said, “I know Phil would want that.”

Joe grabbed his handbag off the lab bench and tapped Tim’s arm. “Let’s head to Hillcrest like Dr. Krell asked. Afterward we can go to your parent’s house and break the news to them about you. You navigate, I’ll drive,” he told Tim, “or do you want to stop by your place to change clothes after our examinations?”

Tim gulped. He had agreed to reveal his new self to his parents but hadn’t expected the opportunity to present itself so quickly. Just like a person agreeing to skydive the first time, the closer he came to the moment of truth, the less he wanted to continue. “We should both take our cars,” he suggested reluctantly. “After we’re done at the hospital you can follow me over to my place. I’ll put on something a little nicer than these jeans and the tee, then you can follow me to New River. In two cars we can split up during the drive back from my parents if necessary.”

Tim quickly phoned his sister from the lab phone to make sure his parents would be at home midday and asked her to meet him at his place at ten thirty. He hoped the latest medical examinations would be as brief as Dr. Krell had implied they would be.

Joe arrived at the hospital a few minutes before everyone else. He got to the floor where the examinations would take place and checked in just before the others started to arrive. It was not long before the rest of Honeybone women’s contingent began arriving.

Apparently Dr. Krell was able to phone Michelle and Pete because both arrived at the clinic at Hillcrest only a few minutes after

Tim, Dave and Joe did. Phil arrived with Dr. Krell and was ushered immediately into a room to sit through the videos that Joe, Dave, Michelle and Tim had watched in San Diego explaining feminine hygiene, cosmetics, clothes and behavior. He would be viewing the tapes until mid-afternoon. Dr. Krell told Joe that Phil had waived any long term counseling. Apparently he would be going into hiding as soon as he was released following an examination after being exposed to the energy from the cage. That way, the more gradual aspects of the change in the following days could fully complete out of the public eye. Not even the hospital staff would be able to leak Phil's final new description. The new female Phil Berg would be completely anonymous.

Michelle told everyone she had been out clubbing last evening and had met someone. The way she described him the guy must have been like Hercules – muscular but easy on the eyes. The way that Michelle was swooning, it was difficult to internalize the transition she made from being a big bulked up weightlifting virile male to an attractive yet muscular female developing a pronounced taste for handsome men - a mental shift that occurred days after her transformation.

Michelle had not yet gone to bed with any man, but she claimed her reticence was her way of flirting and that she wanted to make her first partner literally beg for the opportunity to deflower her. She apparently had several opportunities during the previous evening out clubbing to grind her chest and pelvis against the handsome fellow that had been attracted to her and was pleased at the apparent intensity of the erection she felt straining inside his trousers. At this rate she would not be a virgin very much longer.

In Pete's case he/she had been busy adding to her own wardrobe the last few days. She announced that she would be returning to St. Paul tomorrow morning by commercial airline and would reveal her new young female appearance to the board and company executives in short order.

The examination Joe and the others underwent at Hillcrest was much less extensive than any they'd had since the accident. Give a blood sample. Get a swab of your cheek. Pee in a cup. The doctor looks in your ears, eyes, and mouth. Let another doctor squish your

breasts and go spelunking inside your secret cavern. Embarrassing as hell and a little uncomfortable but simple and quick.

After the medical examination, Joe followed Tim to his place, where Becky met them to help dress her brother in a very attractive top and mini-skirt. She even convinced him to wear some low heels and the dreaded pantyhose. While Tim was dressing Joe and Becky concocted a plan to make disclosing Tim's transformation less shocking to Mom and Dad, with Joe telling them about his own remarkable transformation and gauging their reaction before revealing the new female Tim.

Becky, Tim and Joe were on their way in separate cars before eleven AM for the short drive to the north.

CHAPTER 60

EPILOG

A sporty coupe with the roof down entered the gated boundary of the sun-drenched isolated resort compound in the foothills near Phoenix; wind whipped at the hair of the driver of the open-top vehicle. The car followed the winding private road that climbed the hillside toward the scenic overlook where the structures were located. The rotary engine of the vehicle whined as the driver shifted to a lower gear.

At the end of the access road was a cluster of newly constructed bungalows and a larger building holding offices, a sauna, a small medical clinic, a dining room, and exercise facility. An unfinished swimming pool was adjacent to the large building but would be ready for filling in less than a week.

The front entrance exterior of the main building had open architecture that was welcoming, tastefully decorated and landscaped, very much like a luxury hotel. Large windows overlooked the cityscape of the Arizona capital spread out before it and reflected the car and its driver as the vehicle drove past.

The car pulled around the side of the main building to a small parking lot, then into a space that bore lettering on the asphalt identifying it as reserved for J Bates.

Joe opened the car's door and set a pair of stylish Prada heels on the pavement. Thick socks that had covered Joe's pantyhose-clad feet during the drive were removed and those nylon-sheathed feet slid into the shoes before Joe stood up aside the car, straightened the hems of the skirt, lifted a purse from behind the drivers seat, closed the car door, and walked toward the building's side entrance.

The electronic lock recognized the proximity of Joe's badge and admitted Joe to the air-conditioned confines of the Phoenix Honeybone Biotechnical Arts building. The smells of cut wood, plaster and fresh paint were everywhere. It took a moment or two for Joe's eyes to adjust to the subdued interior lighting compared to the glare of late May noonday sun of Phoenix.

Joe took a long slow look around. This was so unlike the Honeybone Avionics plant where Joe worked until a few weeks ago! There was no traffic noise, no airplanes landing and taking off – in fact soft almost subliminal background music was playing from hidden speakers. The floors were carpeted instead of linoleum tile or terrazzo as was common in a technical or production building. Individual light fixtures high in the ceiling provided dramatic accents with pools of illumination, so different from the stark glare of fluorescent lighting of an office building. Artwork hung in the hallways. This was like being at the Honeybone corporate headquarters in St. Paul. When this building opened in a week or two, the clients were sure to be even more impressed than the employees.

“There’s my Chief Technical Officer!” a cheery feminine voice exclaimed from further down the hallway. “How are you today Joe? What do you think of this place?”

Joe smiled as he approached Catherine Petersen. It had been nearly a year since the night Pete Peterson the sixty-year-old CEO of Honeybone entered the cage and was exposed to the strange mix of signals that somehow turned a male body female. Joe had been using the name Catherine to address this woman so long that it was difficult remembering that the woman who appeared to be younger than thirty years old had - until a year ago - been Pete. Turning female and having years erased from her apparent age had not diminished the way Catherine commanded any situation around her. Her executive bearing was perhaps a little more pleasant these days but no less imposing.

When Pete revealed his supernaturally reshaped and younger appearance to the executives and board of his company in St. Paul a few days after his transformation, he volunteered to step down as chairman and president of the company. It was clear that business associates would not accept some strange young woman claiming to have been the much older man. Pete recommended the corporate senior vice president Tom Teasdale as the new chairman and president which was met with immediate approval. Teasdale wasted no time pitching to the board Pete’s idea of an autonomous Honeybone division to monetize the unique properties of the cage. Not only did the board agree to create the Biotechnical Arts division after seeing Pete for themselves as the miraculous result of the technology, but they decided that Pete should head up the new division outside the

normal corporate hierarchy – a skunk-works of sorts. Pete gladly accepted.

The name Catherine came to Pete in a dream not long after the corporate reorganization. She adopted the name and had her identity paperwork and birth certificate revised to reflect that name. She urged those that were aware of her origin story to use the new name and feminine pronouns referring to her from that point forward because people that knew nothing of her life as a male were already doing so.

Only weeks after revealing herself, Catherine had assembled the executive staff for Honeybone Biotechnical Arts. Everyone chosen for those positions were female, in contrast to the all-male slate of directors at the umbrella corporation, and of the women Catherine recruited all but the financial officer had been male at birth. She wanted the management of this operation to be intimately familiar with the unique challenges and experience their clients would undergo.

Joe gave Catherine a brief hug. “I can’t believe that six months ago there was only scrub and rock where this place stands. It looks even better seeing it for the first time in person – it is breath-taking!” Joe told her.

Catherine nodded. “Image is important. The patients that clinics will be sending here have been women all their lives – albeit with male bodies - and they will appreciate a place that doesn’t look like a factory or aircraft hangar when we give them a body that matches their self image,” she reminded Joe. “The focus groups for our target demographics rate comfort and decor among the most desirable factors.”

Joe nodded. “The way the architect and I set it up, the rather cramped cage has been expanded to a large shielded room where the copper screen is embedded inside the walls decorated in soothing pastel colors. Comfortable recliners and sofas will replace the metal lab stools that were in the old cage. Soft indirect lighting will emanate from panels near the ceiling and optionally ambient music could be piped in. One or more of our clients can sit or meditate while being exposed to the signal from the transmitter hidden adjacent to the room. Fortunately, the exposure to those signals never had any sensory effects like noise or visible energy discharge, so by keeping

all of the equipment out of sight the process should be less intimidating to people with a fear of technology.”

Catherine nodded. “One of the focus groups suggested ‘affirmation salon’ as a name for where their transformation begins. It sounds a lot more friendly than ‘cage’ which implies segregation from society. But enough about that. How is the new jet?” she asked, ushering Joe inside the executive suite of offices. “I want you to get enough hours to be instructor certified,” Catherine added. “I’m sure Karen would like to be able to pilot our organization’s plane and Dave...sorry... I mean Mary... Skinner will be back from maternity leave in two months. I want her able to fly the Lear as your backup as soon as possible.”

Joe began giggling at Catherine using female pronouns to refer to that particular co-worker remembering how this all started. A year ago Dave Skinner was exposed to the gender warping energy at the same time as the others. More than any of the men who found themselves turned into females, Dave had been steadfastly determined to regain his male body at any cost, while the others more readily accepted the bizarre twist of fate. That dogged determination to regain masculinity evaporated a month later when Dave’s sister Alice tearfully announced that she was medically unable to have a baby. Alice had tried for more than a year after her wedding to get pregnant and finally doctors determined she was able to conceive but a tragic miscarriage was virtually assured in a handful of weeks. Her only hope for having children was to find a surrogate mother to carry a fertilized embryo to term from her egg and her husband’s sperm. Dave surprised everyone a week after that disheartening news by suddenly volunteering to be his sister Alice’s surrogate.

Dave transferred from Honeybone Avionics to Honeybone Biotechnical Arts division as a pilot and operations director around the same time as that altruistic decision. Catherine was so impressed by Dave’s selfless sacrifice that she offered to financially help Dave do what was necessary to support his sister and insisted that Dave liberally take as much medical leave as needed to be a successful surrogate.

Once Dave decided to help Alice it was like someone had flipped a switch and the anger with being female dissipated. Dave became a woman on a mission. Needing to get his weight into range for the implantation and the months of pregnancy, he worked with a

nutritionist and fitness trainer and the pounds began falling off him. His significant other Cindy also lost dozens of pounds by joining in the exercise and diet in solidarity.

Dave fully embraced his femininity and started to actively request hair, makeup and fashion advice from Cindy which further enhanced his slimmed body. Less than four months after becoming female, Dave had reached his target weight and underwent the surgical procedure to insert the embryos into his womb. The implantation worked on the first try given the “factory-fresh” nature of Dave’s uterus. Joe, Tim and Michelle, the other three original victims of the transformational exposure had experienced intercourse with male partners within weeks of becoming female. Dave had remained faithful to Cindy his wife of ten years. Ironically, Dave was the first and only one of the quartet so far to become pregnant.

To avoid ending up in tabloids as a “male” being pregnant, Dave reluctantly had his name legally changed to Mary and his birth certificate as well as other ID amended with female designation. Dave considered it an inside joke to give herself the name Mary considering she would be delivering a virgin birth. Like Catherine, Mary asked people to use feminine pronouns to avoid spilling her secret to the public. Mary and Cindy still slept together but after the birth certificate change legally they could no longer be married in the eyes of the law. Gender activists were trying to legalize same-sex unions in states across the southwest, and held rallies to gather public support, but legislative remedies always seemed to be five or more years away. Even recently, Cindy and a very pregnant Mary were frequently seen together at rallies supporting the same-sex union cause.

These days Mary was deep into her final trimester, and under doctors orders was obviously unable to pilot an aircraft. For good measure, she had avoided operating electronic equipment and avoided the chemicals used to manufacture them. Now that the baby was kicking her insides she was insufferably irritable from time to time. Her sister and brother-in-law were hoping for a boy, but had asked not to be told the sex of the fetus. During one particularly nasty fit of pre-natal depression Mary had threatened to “guarantee the baby was a girl” by using the cage. Joe, Michelle, Catherine and the doctors all told her that a pregnant woman risking exposure to strong radio energy was a bad idea. They knew Mary’s threat was the hormones

talking, but Joe sent the transmitter into storage where no one could misuse it.

“I’m having a cocktail party next Tuesday at my new house. I’m hosting a few doctors that run sex re-assignment clinics in North America. I’ll give them a grand-opening tour of this place and ply them with drinks and canapes at my home later in the evening,” Catherine said bringing Joe out of his momentary disconnect from reality.

“Already trying to set up a system of clinics to send their gender dysphoric patients to us, aren’t you?” Joe inferred. “The patients that want become female, at least.”

Catherine flashed a wry smile. “That’s what executives do. We network with other executives and pool our mutual interests to turn it into cash flow. They send us patients who pay for our procedure. In return they get grateful patients needing their on-going transition services and glowing word-of-mouth advertising for new patients that want to transition. Can I count on you to help schmooze the invitees at my soiree? I’ll put you on the guest list.”

“I’ll need to buy something dressy to wear,” Joe said, his face reddening. “I haven’t needed formal evening wear since I lost my balls.”

Catherine winced at the crude comment. “Get something expensive that screams success. Wear it at a few company events and we can write it off as a business expense,” she advised. “So hang the cost.”

“Your place is in Stone Canyon isn’t it?” Joe asked.

Catherine nodded. “Yes it is. I moved in permanently three months ago but I’m barely done unpacking. Linda found it for me. She got a nice commission on the purchase too. I’m sure she can tell you how to get there.”

“Those homes are a bit outside my salary range,” Joe said acknowledging the upscale nature of the location.

“Trust me Joe, it won’t be beyond your means for long if this place does half as well as I expect,” Catherine beamed. She glanced at her wristwatch. “Sorry. I have to run. My annual physical is in an hour. Not looking forward to meeting my new gynecologist... I hear

she doesn't like patients that are late. Go check out your new office! We'll talk later." She hurried away to the employee entrance.

Joe walked deeper into the array of executive offices. He had reviewed the floor plans of this place dozens of times. He found the office with his name on the door and stepped through the doorway. A large desk dominated the room. A high-back leather swivel chair was behind the desk, and smaller upholstered chairs were off to the side for visitors. There was a roll-around stand with a computer terminal on top next to the desk.

The drapes were open, so Joe could look out the tinted windows at the surrounding area. Not quite as scenic as the view from the front entrance, but it sure beat sitting in a cubicle adjacent to the cubicles of twenty other employees.

Joe walked behind the desk and sat in the leather chair. It felt wrong somehow to be in this environment after all those years perched on a metal stool in a lab, in a spartan engineer's cubicle or squatting under an airframe in a hangar. He picked up the phone on the desk and heard a dial-tone indicating that the phone system had been activated. The dedicated data line to the router in Phoenix from the deskside computer terminals was scheduled to go live later this week.

Joe heard voices in the hall outside his office. "I brought Tim out here to see the new digs," Michelle announced, standing at the doorway with the very attractive younger girl. Michelle wore a pink pantsuit and flats that de-emphasized the muscular frame she had maintained. In the year since turning female, Michelle's hair had grown to shoulder length and was a curly swept look that Joe recognized from one of the recent magazine covers. Her features had softened steadily since these first days and now had none of the roughness of her former male face. Michelle was quite attractive. The purse slung under her shoulder bore a brand-new Biotechnical Arts security badge hanging along with the old Honeybone Avionics ID that Catherine had negotiated everyone to keep so they could freely visit the old offices.

Tim was wearing a conservative business blazer with a cream colored blouse, a dark grey skirt that ended above the knees, hosiery and a pair of heels that looked out of place on a teenage body. She had a ponytail bunched at the base of her skull. Hoop earrings hung from

her pierced lobes and she wore what had to be the largest women's-style wristwatch available. The clothing, jewelry and her makeup almost made her look old enough to be the twenty-two-year-old female her birth certificate described.

"I hope you will keep me in mind a few years from now when my contract with Honeybone Avionics is up for renewal," Tim said obviously impressed with the HBA facility. "I would love to join all of you guys."

"You'll develop better engineering skills working for Jim Matheny at the avionics plant – at least better than you will here," Joe told her. "Besides, these last few months I noticed you are turning into a good pilot. I think you'll log more flight hours there than here, too."

"You are right about one thing. At least I'm getting some hours logged piloting the Cessna turboprop for Jim's department," Tim said with a smile. "But when I'm grounded I'm not doing much engineering other than debugging failed RF demodulators that customers send back."

Joe snorted in a very unladylike fashion. "So? I did that for years."

"We all did," Michelle agreed. "I told her that. After the five-cent tour of this place I'm taking Tim back to Avionics and going to check on the new signal distribution panel that GBK is building for us."

"Great!" Joe exclaimed. "Once we have that panel debugged and installed with the transponder, we're ready to open."

Michelle's job with Catherine entailed working with electronic manufacturers to make the control systems that Joe designed for this facility and other locations that Catherine envisioned. Michelle was doing more liaison work than being a technician these days, and actually enjoying the social aspect of the new position.

Tim exchanged a few more pleasantries with Joe and promised she would get in touch in a few days, and left with Michelle to see the rest of the facility.

Joe explored his office, taking measurements of the bookshelves and trying out the dimmer control on the lighting. He was starting to

adjust the thermostat when Karen knocked on Joe's open office door. "Hi Joe!" she greeted. "I cannot believe the office they gave me! The hospital director at Hillcrest would be envious."

"We provide only the best for our medical advisor," Joe reminded her. He had not seen it, but he presumed her office was as nice as his... maybe nicer. "I think Catherine will be encouraging you to get your nurse practitioner certificate or to get board certified as a physician before too long," he warned her. "Either title looks more impressive than 'registered nurse' when we advertise the staff."

"Don't tell Catherine, but my NP studies are almost done. I could be certified by fall. After that, I'm not too many credits away from getting a full medical degree although it would take a few years of residency at a hospital before getting certified to practice as an MD," Karen giggled. "To be honest, I never pictured myself as Doctor Simpson."

"What brings you out here? We won't be operating this facility until next week and clients needing your services won't be accepted for treatment until weeks after that," Joe said.

"I mainly stopped in see how my new office looked and hoped you would be here so I could show you this," she said, reaching into her purse and handing Joe a photograph.

Joe accepted an image of a smiling young blonde woman posed on a snow-covered ski slope with the sun very low in the edge of the panoramic shot, dimmed by overcast. She wore a parka, ski cap, earmuffs and gloves and held her hands in front of her chest with the index fingers and thumbs forming the outline of a heart. Ski poles dangled from straps around her wrists. Her goggles were atop her head exposing her eyes, her rosy cheeks, and a bright smile.

"Is this one of Dr. Krell's patients? Will she be coming here to get zapped by the transformation rays?" Joe asked, pointing to the woman in the picture.

"Read the back of the picture," Karen said.

Joe turned the picture over. On the back was handwriting that read: "Dmitri my lost vozlyublennyy took this picture of me on the mountain during our holiday at Saariselkä, north of the arctic circle." It was dated in early February, four months ago. It must have been an

abnormally warm day in February for the woman to be wearing such a light jacket and no hood, Joe noted considering the latitude and time of year.

“Saariselkä is a big ski resort in Finland,” Karen said, showing Joe the open envelope in her other hand. “and vozlyublennyy means boyfriend or lover.”

“Is she a European relative of yours?” Joe asked.

Karen smiled and shook her head. “Not a relative.”

Joe smirked, turning the picture over to look at the smiling woman again. Even now, a year after becoming female, Joe still could be aroused by an attractive female, and he felt his body responding to the image in his hand. “She’s pretty.” Joe said. “I would like to meet her. If she thinks she needs the cage, I would tell her she looks authentically female without it.”

Karen began giggling. “If my guesses are right, she’s already been there.”

Joe frowned not understanding. The woman skiing wasn’t Catherine, Michelle, Mary, Tim or himself. A moment later he realized what Karen was implying. “Wait! Are you saying this is...?”

“Shhh!” Karen warned, holding her finger vertically in front of her lips as she nodded in confirmation. “We promised never to use that name, remember?”

Joe was dumbfounded. The woman in the picture looked nothing like the handsome agent that had flown from St. Paul to Phoenix with Joe and Tim nearly a year ago. Immediately after the man had been exposed to the transmitter energy in the cage and before any transformation was evident Dr Krell and Karen had whisked him away to Hillcrest and to anonymity.

Joe estimated the evidently slim woman in the photo was at least twenty pounds shy of Joe’s current weight meaning she was possibly sixty pounds or more below the agent that voluntarily used the cage only two weeks after Joe had been transformed. Her golden hair was a pixie style long enough to cover her ears and bangs nearly to her eyebrows – likely a style that could have grown out that far in nine months.

Karen explained “I’ve received a few rather cryptic postcards with no return address and postmarks from far flung locales in the last few months. I eventually pieced together how this apparent stranger got my address. The final clues were the envelope around this picture.”

Joe looked at the envelope and could not see anything that might bring Karen to her deduction. The return address was nothing remarkable, and the sender’s name Fran Bur was not one he recognized.

Karen continued, “I have to admit I did not recognize her picture in the slightest. Dr. Krell released her from Hillcrest last year while her change was barely started. No one knew how she turned out.”

“Despite the Norwegian postmark,” Karen continued, “the return address is in Copenhagen Denmark. I immediately recognized the address as not a residence but one of the oldest hospitals in the world that performs a range of sexual reassignment procedures. She probably knew I would recognize it.”

“Considering how many transsexuals you have met over the years in your association with Dr. Krell, getting a letter from someone referencing the hospital does not seem unusual,” Joe commented.

“The other clue is the sender’s name,” Karen replied. “The proper name starts with the same fricative sound and the last name starts with the same plosive sound as our secretive friend’s former name, although what is on the envelope may not be a name at all. Now that I know this was sent from Norway I asked a nurse at Hillcrest with Scandinavian relatives to help me investigate. She laughed when I mentioned the name Fran Bur.”

“The name didn’t sound funny to me,” Joe replied trying to understand the humor in it.

“Not to me, either,” Karen said, “but it turns out that ‘Fran Bur’ may not be a name. My friend told me it is also a Norwegian phrase meaning ‘out of’ or ‘from the cage.’ She thought a name like that was weird because Fran is not a name commonly used in Scandinavia. I didn’t let on that it meant something to me.”

“Well, at least we know she’s okay and feels safe enough to contact one of us to let us know. She sure looks happy in this picture.”

Karen smirked knowingly and chuckled softly. “Oh, she’s more than just okay.”

“Why do you say that?” Joe asked.

“The notation on the back of the picture indicates,” Karen replied with a grin, “that she’s back to her old job except now she has a few additional tools to encourage a subject to reveal secrets if you know what I mean. The photo was taken by someone named Dmitri, and this resort is not far from the Russian border.”

“She wrote about her ‘lost lover’, didn’t she?” Joe commented, recalling the way female spies were depicted in movies.

“Yep,” Karen agreed.

“Do you think she was sleeping with Dmitri for information, and somehow he met his end? Tree jumped in front him while skiing? Avalanche? A mysterious illness of some sort? Maybe word got back to his superior about his loose lips and they killed him,” Joe opined. He gave the photo back to Karen.

“We have no way to know – not to mention that our friend is trained to be cautious and not likely to say much more than we have guessed,” Karen said. “The Russian intelligence services have been in disarray since the recent breakup of the Soviet Union, which makes them not only more susceptible to espionage but they have become more ruthless with anyone they catch spying on them.”

Joe looked upward. “I hope someone is keeping her safe. She’s one of the good guy... er... people.”

Karen felt Joe’s concern. “Few civilians will ever know about most of the men and women doing the things she does. All we can do is be grateful and keep her in our prayers.”

Joe had another thought. “Michelle brought Tim out from Phoenix a few minutes ago to walk through our facilities. If she hasn’t left, I’m sure both of them would like to see this picture and hear what you found out.”

“If you see them, send them to my office a few doors down the hall,” Karen said. “I’ll probably be here another hour before I go to the airport to give my boyfriend a ride home.” She waved briefly and disappeared down the hall.

The phone on Joe’s desk rang. “Joe Bates here,” he said after sweeping the handset under his long hair.

“I’m surprised you answered, Bates. Recently your office number rings a bunch of times and goes to voicemail.” Jay’s voice told him.

Joe smirked at Jay’s lack of a greeting. “Hello to you too, Jay. My office furniture showed up to the new Honeybone Biotech facility yesterday and they re-routed my office phone here. My new office is decked out and ready for me to move in,” Joe explained. “I’m sitting at my new desk right now.”

“How is the sweet little lady that looks far too young to be the girlfriend of an over-the-hill guy like me doing today?” Jay asked.

Joe groaned. “I’m fine - and I am six months older than you, Jay. Besides, I’m not your girlfriend. We discussed this.”

“Allow me to question the witness, Your Honor.” Jay challenged. “Have we not been friends for nearly fourteen years?”

“I’ve known you since freshman year in college,” Joe allowed warily.

“And are you not of the female persuasion?” Jay continued.

Joe giggled. “Wait a second. Let me check.” Joe paused. “I’ll be darned. I’m female.”

“Well, there you go!” Jay crowed. “You freely admit to this court you are a girl and my friend. I submit to the jury that you meet the requirements of being my girlfriend.”

Joe’s giggling intensified. “Oh no! I’ve been out-manuevered by a brilliant attorney! I will admit that yes, I am female and have been friends with you for more than a decade, but I contend that both just make me your friend girl.”

“Okay,” Jay responded. “I just don’t see the difference between a girlfriend and a friend girl who has hot monkey sex with me three out of four weeks every month.”

Joe was laughing heartily now. “Hot monkey sex. I am just swooning at your flowery language, Mister Logan, you sweet-talker you!”

“You’re a sweet talker too, “ Jay said, lowering his voice to a deeper register. “I bet I’ll have you screaming my name once or twice tonight.”

“I believe you have me confused with some imaginary person that screams your name when she climaxes and thinks she is your girlfriend,” Joe chided.

“How late are you working tonight?” Jay asked, turning serious. The implication of his question was clear.

“Not late. I’m officially transferred out of Avionics. There’s not much to do here at the Biotech facility until we’re in operation,” Joe told him. “Most of the instruments and equipment I ordered are here and ready to install. Catherine wants to do a soft opening next week, giving tours to other clinic owners and prospective clients before we start using the new cage.”

“So, right now I’m picturing you sitting in one of those leather upholstered high-back executive swivel chairs, in nothing but a studded choker, your melons nestled in a half bra, a garter belt around your hips, silk nylons, and stiletto heels. Lips coated in bright red lipstick. A riding crop in your hand.... “ Jay began.

“My my my, you have an active imagination! Is that how you think female executives dress at the office?” Joe asked with mock alarm.

“Maybe when their office doors are closed, I don’t know,” Jay admitted. “Was I close? Tell me what you are wearing.”

“I refuse to indulge some lonely mouth-breathing caller’s sexual fantasies ...well at least not on a business phone, anyway,” Joe replied with amusement.

“I could listen to you banter with me all day. I don’t think you realize how arousing the sound of your voice is to me,” Jay offered as a compliment.

“I have to go,” Joe said curtly, hoping that the embarrassment was not evident in his voice. “Pick me up at Linda’s at six so I can spend two months salary on a cocktail dress and then dinner?”

“Roger. Linda’s at six it is,” Jay replied. “Friend girl buying and modeling pricey frocks, then dinner... and...?”

“If you are a good boy, maybe some clothing optional hanky panky afterward,” Joe allowed.

“I can’t wait. I’ll see you at six,” Jay replied before hanging up.

Joe hung up the phone and shook his head. At least Jay no longer had the embarrassing habit Joe hated of saying “I love you” and making kissing noises before hanging up.

Jay had said Joe’s voice was arousing. Well Joe had to admit he had been aroused by Jay’s voice, too. Most male voices just had a quality that was attractive to Joe nowadays. Damn these hormones and the quirky effect they had on his brain! Joe smiled at how far he had come in the last twelve months and was pleased with the woman he... no, Joe reminded herself... the woman SHE had become.

END