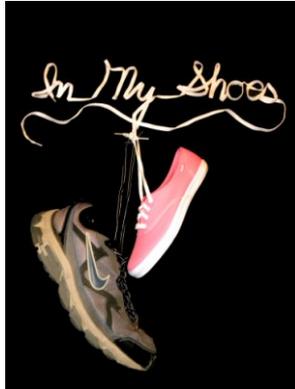


**IN MY SHOES**



# IN MY SHOES



**BY**

**ADRIAN STEPHENS**

**ARTWORK BY ADRIAN AND CRISTY STEPHENS**

**STEPHENS FAMILY MEDIA GROUP**

**Las Vegas, NV**

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Editor-in-Chief: Adrian Stephens

ISBN-13: 978-0-9831681-0-2 (e-book)

ISBN-13: 978-0-9831681-1-9 (hardcover)

This book is for my loving wife, Cristy, and my amazing boys, Bailey and Brendan. Without their love and support, this book would not have been possible.



Thank you to the following people for their contributions  
and support:

**Editing Team**

Jeanette Forrey, Cristy Stephens, Catherine Taylor,  
Krista Hampton

**Creative Input**

Jeanette Forrey, Cristy Stephens, Catherine Taylor  
Dick Stephens, Rhonda Dunaway, W. Terrence Groom

**Support**

To my family and friends, and to my parents in particular,  
thank you for your encouragement and support as I took  
this journey. To Ashlea and Chelsea Suarez, thank you  
for continuing to ask to read my novel. Don't stop  
writing!



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## DAY 0

I sit one row over and three seats back from Nicole Evans in physics class. We've been in school for more than a month now, and I'm not sure if she's noticed me once. I noticed her immediately. For a senior guy in high school, it's kind of hard not to notice the perfect girl. She's smart and funny, and when she smiles she lights up the entire room. That's what drew me to her first. Her smile. It's warm and sincere, complemented by her eyes. They narrow ever so slightly when she smiles. Her eyes. Blue as an ocean that seems to have no bottom. Blue that is accented by the canvas that is her hair. Her hair. Blonde, silky smooth and flowing over her shoulders, laying gently over her...

"Jake!" His whisper made me jump out of my seat. Mike, my best friend. I'm not in the habit of drawing attention to myself, but when I jumped I kicked my desk. That was enough to draw the attention of my physics teacher, Mr. Korelinski.

"Is everything alright Mr. Matthews?" he asked.

"Yes sir. I thought I saw a...spider." Chuckles rolled throughout the classroom. A spider. That's the best I could come up with? Nicole turned over her shoulder and looked at me. I couldn't read the expression on her face, but it seemed

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to have a hint of indifference. I wasn't sure, but I thought she rolled her eyes as she turned away from me.

I looked over at Mike sheepishly. "What?" I whispered back, trying to project my irritation. He was laughing to himself, obviously unconcerned with my embarrassment.

"Nothin'...just wanted to see you jump. Dude, you looked lost in space." Thanks, Mike.

I had been planning for a week to ask Nicole out. I had the whole thing worked out in my head. When third period was over, I would stop by her locker. I would start by saying hello, talk about our physics class a little, and if the conversation was going well I would ask her if she would like to study together sometime. I just had to try and relax. Be nonchalant. I wasn't exactly a ladies' man. If I were smart I wouldn't even try...she's totally out of my league. But if you don't try, you will never do anything, right?

So, I had decided today was the day. It was Thursday and I was thinking ahead for tomorrow. If things went really well today, maybe...well, we'll see. One step at a time. I kept telling myself that once she got to know me, she would see that I'm a pretty great guy.

As the class started winding down, my heart started beating faster and faster. My head started buzzing and everything was becoming hazy. What if she got to know me and she didn't think I was a great guy?

What makes me great, anyway? I don't have any money, I don't live in a fancy neighborhood and I don't play sports. Truth is, my father walked out on my mother and me when I was real little and we have struggled to make things work. My mother's done the best she could, and we've managed to get by.

Okay, that wasn't the psyche up I needed. So what makes me great? I am smart, hard-working and sometimes funny. I'm not bad looking. I have a nice complexion, I'm almost 6 feet tall, a little on the skinny side, short, blonde hair, blue eyes and fair skin. I'm not going to win any male modeling

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competitions, not that I wanted to, but I don't seem to scare anyone away.

I've never asked anyone out before, so this was my big chance. I didn't want to blow it. If the conversation didn't go well, I would just say goodbye and work out a new plan. I wouldn't go all in if it didn't seem like she was interested.

Mike looked over at me and motioned to get my attention. "What are we going to do for lunch?"

I wasn't ready to think about lunch yet. I needed to stay focused, and lunch wasn't for another hour anyway. "I don't really know yet. Ask me after next period."

"We *are* having lunch together aren't we? You aren't going to punk out on me are you?" he asked.

"Dude, I'm not really feeling very well right now and I have some studying to do, so I don't know. Ask me after next period." He looked annoyed, but he quickly changed gears.

Mike and I have been friends for seven years, since we were 10 years old. It's funny, we aren't really much alike. Mike is a little shorter than I am; probably 5'10" if he has his lifts in, which he doesn't really do anymore since I found out and couldn't stop laughing. He has dark brown hair that is wavy and a little longer than I would have it. With his stocky build, he could be confused for a football player, but he's not real coordinated. Mike has really nice skin, which makes me jealous. Not that my skin is bad, but his is naturally a very light brown, which he gets without tanning. I couldn't even get that color with tanning. I would just end up with a really nice burn. I couldn't tell you what color his eyes are because I have never really paid that much attention. Mike is smart, but he never really applies himself. I think he has less confidence than I do, not that I'm brimming with confidence, but he masks it behind jokes and bravado. He is always trying to be the funny one. He usually is, but sometimes he tries too hard. Mike's a good friend, though. Well, usually.

There were five minutes left of class, and I was getting a little antsy. Mike could tell that something was up, but he didn't know what. I had been careful not to say anything to

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him about Nicole. Better to let him know after the fact on this one. He might just try to help, and you never know how that's going to turn out. Mike and I don't have the same class next period, which is why I chose this period to speak to Nicole. Mike won't be around.

"Hey, I can't talk after class, I'll catch up with you after fourth." Mike nodded that he heard me.

When the bell rang, I was already packed up and ready to go. I said goodbye to Mike and started walking toward the door at the front of the class room. All of a sudden, I tripped and fell, with my face inches from the ground. Mike. On a different day I still wouldn't have thought it was funny, but why did he have to pick today to trip me? Of all the days. Half the class was staring and laughing. Not Nicole. She appeared not to have noticed. I looked back at Mike, and he was trying not to laugh, but he was grinning from ear to ear.

"Was that absolutely necessary?" I said, trying to contain my disgust.

"Dude, I'm sorry. I couldn't help myself."

"Maybe you should try a little harder."

I gathered myself and tried to catch up to Nicole before she left her locker. If I missed her at her locker, I would have to wait until tomorrow or next week. That would make me crazy. I've had enough nerves today to last a lifetime. Okay, I can't show my nerves. I needed to be cool. Not over the top cool, just...calm.

As I neared her locker, I saw a friend saying goodbye. Perfect timing. I couldn't do this with an audience, especially her friends. I walked up and left a locker's length between her and me. "Nicole?" I started.

"Yes?" She looked at me and smiled. Not a 'hey I'm really happy to see you' smile, but more of a courtesy smile. Thoughtful, that's a start.

"I'm Jake, and I'm in your physics class." I leaned against the locker and then, feeling like a pimp, straightened back up.

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“I know who you are. You’re also in my English class.” That sounded a little cold, but she didn’t look angry. Maybe I misread. And she noticed me!

“Right, well...uhh....I was just wondering if you’d like to get together sometime and study.”

Now she looked unhappy. “I’m not looking to tutor anybody right now...Jake...so I don’t think so.”

“Whoa, I don’t need a tutor. I just thought maybe you could use a study partner.”

She turned her body straight toward me. “What makes you think I need a study partner? Is that your way of trying to ask me out? Because...if it is, I’m not interested. What is it with you guys, anyway? You’re like, the third guy that’s asked me out today. What is there, some kind of bet going around?”

Okay, now I felt like I had just entered the Twilight Zone. One minute everything was going okay, and next thing I knew, it was like a switch had been flipped. “I don’t know about any bet. I just wanted to get to know you better.”

“Look,” she said, “I get it. I’m pretty. Everyone wants to get the pretty girl. It’s not happening. I don’t date class clowns. I have goals, and...”

“Wait a minute. How do you get off calling me a class clown? That’s not even fair!”

She paused. “I’ve seen your type before. Always needs to be the center of attention. Do you think I’m dumb? Is it a coincidence that today, the day you are at my locker, you just happened to have the whole class focused on you twice? I mean, ‘I thought I saw a spider?’ Then, you fall down as class is getting out? Could you be more obvious? Why didn’t you just dance on your desk and yell, ‘hey, check me out’? That way, at least, you would have been upfront about your intentions.”

“Wow. Do you usually indulge your ego that much?” I snipped.

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“My ego? That’s funny. I’m indulging my ego, yet here you are in front of me. And there you were in class making a spectacle of yourself.”

“That had nothing to do with you, and it certainly doesn’t make me a class clown. I just thought you seemed like someone who would be nice to get to know, but forget it!”

She stood silent for a brief moment. “I’m going to be late for my next class.” She slammed her locker, turned away from me and walked out of sight. As she walked away, I swear I heard her whisper “Loser.” Tell me she didn’t just call me a loser.

Huh. Well, the good news is that was likely the worst rejection I would face my entire life. The bad news...that wasn’t really making me feel any better at this particular moment. Fortunately, it didn’t seem as though anyone else was really paying attention to the conversation. I wanted to crawl into a hole, but I had a test waiting for me next period, and I was running late. Yay.

I walked into Spanish and took my seat. I didn’t have Mike and I didn’t have Nicole in this class, so fortunately I would be left to my thoughts. Then again, I would be left to my thoughts. I didn’t really want to think about anything at the moment, but I was having a hard time not thinking about it. I kept playing the conversation over and over in my head. Where did I go wrong? It seemed like the conversation was going well enough at first. Class clown. Of all of the things I’ve been in my life, class clown was not one of them. She didn’t know the slightest thing about me, and it was looking like she never would. How depressing. I felt like my heart was sitting in my stomach.

Fortunately, my Spanish test was really easy. Or, at least, it should have been. On a normal day, it probably would have been a 20 minute test and I wouldn’t have missed any questions. Today, it took all 55 minutes, and I probably missed two questions. I’ll still get an A. I hope.

The bell rang and I headed to the cafeteria for lunch. I could have sworn a couple of people looked at me and

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laughed. Did they overhear our conversation? Worse yet, did she tell them about the conversation? How could I have been so wrong about her? I wasn't even sad anymore, I was angry. Well, sad and angry.

Mike came up and sat down next to me in the cafeteria.

"What, you're not eating?" he said.

"I'm not hungry."

"What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me? What's wrong with *me*? At the moment, *you* are what's wrong with me!"

"What'd I do?" he said defensively.

"Well let's start with you making me jump in third period for the sake of seeing me jump. Then, if you'd like we could spend a little time talking about why you decided to trip me on my way out of class?"

"I was just tryin' to have a little fun."

"Yes, but your fun was at my expense. Not only did you embarrass me, but you helped me leave a lasting impression on a girl I was hoping to ask out. Instead, she ripped into me and called me a clown!"

"Wow," he said meekly. "Dude, I'm real sorry. I didn't know you were going to ask her out today. I wasn't trying to kill your chances."

I didn't really know what to say next. He looked really sorry. I blew out a sigh. "Look, I know you didn't mean for this to happen, but it didn't need to happen. You need to think about the things you do, Mike. You're going to be graduating high school this year. You have no idea what you want to do after high school and your grades aren't exactly college level."

"You sound like my mother," he snapped.

"The thing is Mike, you are probably smarter than I am. You're acing physics but you're flunking basic math. I mean, who does that?"

"I like physics. It's cool."

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“Yes, but you don’t really have anything to show for all your smarts. You hide behind jokes and pranks instead of taking a chance on doing something...in fear you’ll fail.”

It was silent for about two minutes before he got up suddenly. “I’m sorry about Nicole. I’ll see you later.”

I didn’t say anything about Nicole to Mike. How did he know I was talking about her? Man, was it that obvious? This day was getting worse by the moment. I’m telegraphing my moves and I just hurt my best friend.

Truth be told, I’m not too worried about Mike. What I said was true and it needed to be said. He’ll probably be over it before I get over this deal with Nicole. I wanted to go home, but I still had two periods to go.

I couldn’t have recalled a thing from fifth or sixth period if my life depended on it. I was pretty sure I showed up to class, but I was definitely on auto-pilot. Not like I was in a love-lost coma, but more like participating while in deep thought.

I headed home, still on auto-pilot. I didn’t own a car, so usually I would get a ride from Mike. Today, I just walked. I lived about four miles from the school. I could take the bus, but I’ve never been a fan of the bus. Four miles wasn’t that far, especially when you had thoughts to process.

It’s not like I’ve crushed on every girl in school, or even every pretty girl in school. I’m somewhat picky. Nicole is beautiful, but that’s not the main reason I was attracted to her. She is very smart. She is one of the top students in the classes we share. She’s serious, but she never seems too serious. When she laughs it’s contagious. Today seemed completely out of character for her. Or was it me. Either way, I wasn’t sure where to go from here.

I wandered for the better part of an hour before I arrived home. My mom wouldn’t make it home for a few hours. She got off at five o’clock and I would usually have dinner ready for her on Thursdays. There aren’t a lot of things that I can make, but there are a few. Actually, my mother appreciates just not having to worry about coming home from work and

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cooking. I try to cook for her a few times a week. Tonight was spaghetti. I needed to start boiling the pasta at five thirty to have it ready by the time she got home, and I needed to have my homework done by then. After dinner, I wanted to go straight to bed. I don't usually go to bed until about ten or eleven o'clock, but I was ready to put this day behind me.

My mom walked in the door at about five forty-five. She always greets me with a smile, but I can still tell when she's tired. She looked exhausted.

My mother is pretty, but she is very simple. I don't mean that in a bad way. She just chooses not to be flashy. She always dresses appropriately, but she doesn't own anything fancy. She usually wears little to no makeup. She has brown eyes that have bags under them today. When she's tired, they tend to look half open. Her hair has gradually darkened over the years, from a dirty blonde, to almost a medium brown color. She wears it almost shoulder length, and usually parted on the left, combed over her right and tucked behind her ear. She doesn't eat much, mainly because the budget doesn't allow it, and her exercise routine consists mainly of running around the office she works at as an administrative secretary. All things considered, she's in pretty good shape. She and I have the same straight nose, but I can only imagine I look more like my father.

"Dinner's almost ready. How was your day?" I asked her.

"It was good, but it seemed like it was never going to end. One of the secretaries under me called in sick, and we were already spread thin with the project we were working on. My boss seemed to be in a particularly bad mood today, but he was in meetings this afternoon, and I didn't have to be there. So I was able to use the last half of the day to catch up. I'm starved, though. I worked through lunch."

"You need to stop doing that," I said. "You don't really eat enough as it is. Didn't you take a sandwich with you? You don't even have to heat that up!"

"I know. I'll do better, but I just get caught up in things and the time gets away."

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I looked at her, feeling more like the parent than the son at the moment. “It’s just that, it doesn’t sound like anyone there is looking out for you, so you need to make sure that you do. I’ve only got one mother. I want to keep you around.” She didn’t say anything after that. I tried to lighten the mood by giving my sincerest smile. She smiled back and started eating.

This was not a normal conversation for us. I wasn’t in the habit of telling her what to do, and I’m not usually this much of a downer. I mean, it’s not like I’m wispy, or say a class clown, but I do try to be positive and enjoy my life. I take pride on being able to deal with every challenge that comes my way. Today just felt a little heavier than usual. Tomorrow I may be able to put it into perspective, but today it felt like it was more than a little rejection. When you feel like you know what someone is like, and you get blind-sided like that, it tends to leave a mark. Nicole is someone I could really see myself being with. I felt like something had ended before it even had a chance to begin.

I was suddenly lost in thought. Five minutes passed in silence, before my mother looked up and said, “I didn’t even ask you about your day. Did you have a good day?”

“It was okay,” I said. I didn’t make eye contact and she noticed.

“What happened? Was Mike getting on your nerves today?”

“You could say that.”

“Tell me. I can’t help if you don’t let me know what goes on in your life.”

“It’s nothing, really. I..I tried talking to a girl today. I thought it was going well, but all of a sudden she was yelling at me and calling me a class clown.”

“Why would she call you a class clown?” she asked. “You’re not a class clown. Were you being silly in class?”

“No, it was a little bit of a misunderstanding. I was daydreaming a little, and Mike startled me. I jumped and the whole class noticed. Then, as I was leaving, Mike tripped me.

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She noticed both times and now she thinks I'm a clown. And... I think she called me a loser."

"Sweetie, you are not a loser," she reassured. "You are an amazing young man. You are handsome, and smart and a good person."

"Thanks, mom, but all mothers tell their kids that."

"Only the good mothers," she said with a smile. "Every parent should feel that way about their kids, but that doesn't mean it isn't true. You have so much to offer, and I am very proud of you." She walked over and kissed me on the forehead.

"Now, I'm not condoning what this girl said, and I don't know anything about her, but she may have been having a bad day. It's easy to be angry at her, but you'll be happier if you forgive her and move on."

I knew she was trying to help, but she wasn't there, and she didn't see how Nicole treated me. I smiled at her.

"Thanks."

"As for Michael," she continued, "that boy has way too much time on his hands. What that boy has going on in his head sometimes..." she said, shaking her head. "He has no business tripping you in class. His sense of humor needs to be reeled in a bit. I'm glad you have better common sense than he does. I know he's not a bad kid, really, but he needs to start thinking about his future."

"I said just about the same thing to him today."

"Good," she said. "He listens to you. Maybe you'll help straighten that boy out yet."

I didn't know what to say. She was right, but I didn't really want to have this conversation with my mother. Maybe it was my mood but I think that, even in the best of moods, I wouldn't want to discuss the fault list of my best friend with my mother. True or not. "I'm going to do the dishes and then I'm going to head up to bed."

She looked at me, so sadly, with her forehead crinkled up. "I'll do the dishes. Get some rest. You'll feel better in the morning." She paused for a moment, and then added, "Don't

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let this girl get you down. She's one girl. If she doesn't appreciate you, someone else will."

"Thanks mom," I said, with my best fake smile. I said good night and turned and left the room.

I went to the bathroom, washed up, brushed my teeth and went to my room. In my room, I undressed, turned out the lights and crawled under my covers. I felt so beaten down that I thought I would be asleep in no time. There I was, though, staring at the dark ceiling an hour later.

You know, when you're a kid you learn lots of sayings to help you cope with the cruel things other kids can do. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." In the end, that's not really true. Well, sticks and stones may break my bones, but names hurt, too. More specifically, names hurt when cast by people you care about, in one way or another. I don't really know Nicole that well, but I obviously care enough that her words hurt.

Tomorrow I will need to get over this, but tonight I couldn't help dwelling on it a little more. I guess that's my way of getting over things. I like to really think about something, go over all of the scenarios, try to resolve it in my mind and then move on. That's where I am right now. Trying to resolve it in my mind.

If Mike hadn't made me jump, and if he hadn't tripped me, would the result have been different with Nicole? Maybe. Well, probably. At the very least, she wouldn't have called me a class clown. Nothing has happened prior to today, in any of our classes, that would have given her reason to think I'm a goof-off.

Would that really have made a difference, though? Probably not. She said she had already been asked out twice today, and she seemed pretty bothered by the way those conversations had gone. I don't really get it. I would be flattered to have anyone ask me out. To have three people ask me out in the same day... wow!

Anyway, she obviously was bothered by it. If Mike hadn't tripped me, she probably would have said no, but

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maybe she would have been nicer about it. Then again, maybe not.

Sometimes, I wish I were more like Mike. Maybe I should rephrase that. I wish, sometimes, that I actually had the confidence that Mike projects. He does not have a lot of confidence. On the surface, he looks like he has confidence coming out his ears. He does that more as a defense mechanism. If he acts cocky, maybe nobody will notice that he is insecure.

Mike comes from a home life somewhat similar to mine. I wouldn't change places with him any day, though. We both are only children living with single moms. The main difference between our lives is because of our moms. Don't get me wrong, I love his mom. She is always nice to me, and I feel like I am part of their family.

Mike's mom, Diana, is the party mom. When Mike wants to have a party, Diana always lets him have them at her house. She would rather have the kids get a little out of control where she can see them. I think she likes being the cool mom who relates to the kids.

She lets Mike do whatever he wants, though. Mike knows his dad, but he's not a big part of his life. His mom tries to overcompensate by being his friend. He isn't abusive toward his mom, but he pushes her buttons to get what he wants. He knows how to work her, and she just goes along with it.

It's not like I think parents shouldn't be friends with their kids, but really, they need to be parents most of the time. As much as I like Diana, I wouldn't want her to be my mother. Maybe I realize this because I see the difference between Diana and my mother.

My mother and I get along very well. You could say that we are friends, but when she needs to be a parent, she is. I don't really ever get into trouble, so my mother doesn't usually have to play the 'parent' role too often. Don't think for a minute that she wouldn't put me in my place if I got out of line, though. My mother usually tells me that I act older than my years show, and that I need to remember to enjoy my

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high school years. I feel like she has prepared me, the best she knows how, for the real world. I think I've turned out pretty good.

You know, I guess that's what really bothered me about Nicole calling me a clown. She hurt my pride. I am proud of the fact that I am responsible. It's like, her calling me a clown has taken something away from who I am. I'm not going to let her change that for me. If I were her, I would never treat someone like that. If Nicole were a guy, then maybe she could see how hard it was asking girls out. She doesn't have to like me, but someday she'll see what I'm about. Someday she'll see she was wrong. Someday she'll learn that being friends with Mike doesn't make me Mike.

I have nothing left for the day. I've been staring at the ceiling for what seems like forever, searching for answers. I don't know if I've found any answers, but I think I'm ready to find the back of my eyelids. I don't know how I'll feel in the morning, but it couldn't be worse than today.

# DAY 1

I must have tossed and turned all night, because the morning hit me like a lead brick. I felt myself coming slowly out of a dream, and I felt strange. Something was pushing against my chest, and something was tickling my neck. My bed felt softer, too. I obviously didn't sleep very well. My head was foggy, like it was in the clouds. I was rolling over in bed when I jolted awake. No more haze. Something was wrong. I had my eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. But it wasn't my ceiling. I darted up in bed and looked around. Nothing was right. Everything was pink and yellow and white and I didn't recognize a single thing. There was a dresser to my left with a large, oval mirror on it.

That's about the time that I screamed. At least I think it was me. I saw the mouth in front of me open and I felt the scream, but it wasn't my voice. The reflection in the mirror didn't belong to me either. It was Nicole. I looked to my left and then I looked to my right. No Nicole. I looked down. This was not my body and I don't wear nightshirts. *I* was Nicole.

I jumped out of bed, but I didn't know where to go or what to do. I was looking all around me trying to figure out what was going on. How could this be happening? Wait. Was I still dreaming? No, this didn't feel like a dream. I was completely cognizant of what was going on around me. Just because it didn't make any sense didn't mean I couldn't tell the difference between dream and reality. No, this was something else.

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I started to tell myself to slow down, but my heart was beating like someone was playing the drums on my chest. Deep breaths. Take deep breaths, Jake. Think. If I am in Nicole's body, then...where is my body? And, where is Nicole? Wait. If I'm in her body, maybe she's in my...how is this even possible?

I needed to find her...I mean me...I mean...ugh! If I were her...well, actually I am her. Focus! If she was in my body, she would be freaked out like me, and she wouldn't want to stick around an unfamiliar place. She would probably go looking for me. But would she know where to find me? Would she assume I was in her body? Would that even be a normal thing to assume? Wait, the school! Maybe she'd go to the school. It was worth a shot! I needed to get dressed and head for school.

It seemed like it had been hours that I had been trying to sort this out, but it must have been just seconds. As I started looking around for clothes that I could wear, a woman came barging into the room. She was almost the same height as me and I could tell instantly that it was Nicole's mother. She was an older version of Nicole in so many ways. She was blonde, though her hair was shorter than Nicole's. She had the same capturing eyes that probably came alive when she smiled. Only, she wasn't smiling. She looked worried.

"Nikki, what's wrong?" she choked.

"Sorry, I...had a bad dream...and I just realized I'm late for school," I said.

"You don't usually wake up for another half hour. It's six in the morning." Her voice was calming now that she knew I was okay.

I didn't know what to say. "I...wanted to get there early today."

She started walking into the bedroom toward the dresser. "Well then, let me help you. I wanted to talk to you this morning anyway."

"Oh...okay. About what?" I asked.

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She was walking and talking and acting like this was perfectly normal, while I was jumping out of my skin...well, Nicole's skin...trying to get myself out of here without tipping her off. She laid out clothes on the bed and walked toward an attached dressing area. She pulled a brush out of a drawer, turned around and looked at me curiously. I was out of place and it felt obvious.

"Are you okay?" she questioned.

"Um...yeah...sorry. I'm a little out of sorts this morning. I don't think I slept very well."

I turned back toward the bed to the stack of clothes she laid out, and she sat down on the bed. She was talking, I was nodding, occasionally adding an "uh-huh," and thinking about how to do this. I would never change in front of my mother. Is this one of those things that girls are perfectly comfortable with? She wasn't making any attempt to leave and I told her I was in a hurry to get to school. Okay, I would start undressing, and if she gave me a funny look, I would have to improvise.

I was wearing a white nightshirt that had pink flowers all over it. It went down to mid-thigh. I began taking the nightshirt off slowly, listening for a pause in Nicole's mother's talking. She continued, so I did the same. I was standing there in white, ankle-high socks, pink underwear and nothing else. Nicole seemed to really like pink, I thought. I started to look at the clothes on the bed when it suddenly occurred to me...I was looking down at Nicole's...boobs, breasts, whatever is the right thing to call them. I had about a second to note how nice they looked before it occurred to me that I should close my mouth before Nicole's mother noticed me ogling at Nicole's body.

Okay, there was a bra, a shirt and a skirt on the bed. No socks and no underwear. I was wearing underwear, so I was good there. I reached for the bra to try and figure out how to put it on. I've seen my mother's bras before, but I've never tried to put one on. It didn't seem that complicated. I put my arms through the big loops and put the cups up to my chest.

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Wait. It was inside out. I took it off, turned it around and tried again. I had it over my shoulders, cups in place and I was trying to fasten the back. I was very obviously lacking coordination here, but Nicole's mother didn't seem too suspicious. She seemed to be very aware at this point that I was having a rough morning. She continued talking as she motioned her finger in a circle, for me to turn around. She fastened the bra and I reached for the shirt when she caught my attention.

"I mean, I can understand your frustration with the other two boys, Nikki, but you didn't say anything about that third boy that was worth treating him like that. He didn't know the other boys had asked you out did he?"

"Uh...no, he didn't," I said quietly. She was talking about *me*. Nicole had gone home and talked to her mother about *me*. What did she say about me? I started putting the shirt on as she continued.

"Sweetie, I know it's hard being the pretty girl, but sometimes you have to try and consider where other people are coming from. You are a smart, funny, beautiful girl who has everything going for her. A guy would be crazy not to want to be with you.

"Now, I don't expect you to say yes to all of these boys. In fact, I would prefer if you didn't," she said with a smile. "But, there is a big difference between saying no and being cruel. Sometimes it's better just to say 'no thank you' and let them leave with their pride."

I didn't really know what to say. I agreed with her. I thought Nicole was cruel yesterday, and I didn't think it was necessary at all. I was already starting to like this lady. I wished Nicole were actually here to hear what she was telling me. As far as I was concerned, she was preaching to the choir.

"You know," she continued, "when I was your age, I didn't have a lot of boys even asking me out. My mother used to tell me that it was because I was so pretty that the boys

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were just...afraid to ask me out. So, when someone who seemed nice did ask me out, I considered it.”

She was looking at me, and I guessed that I needed to respond with something that Nicole would say. But I didn’t really know what she would say. “I see your point, but I felt like he was being a clown and I didn’t feel like dealing with him. Would you?”

“No, probably not. And I don’t know this kid. But, I think it was far from appropriate to say the things you said to him yesterday. You seemed so angry yesterday, and you seemed to be proud of yourself for putting him off.”

“Really?” I asked. Did Nicole really seem proud of herself?

“Really. I don’t want to say too much more, because I think I’ve made my point. I love you and you’re a good kid. Just know that your father and I have worked very hard our entire lives to provide you with every opportunity in life. We expect you to be an example to others. Don’t let others walk all over you, but show compassion when you can.

“Oh, and your skirt is on backwards.” I had just finished zipping the skirt up in the front. She turned it around so the zipper was in the back, looked at me and started brushing my hair. “Are you going to be okay today? You are all out of sorts. I swear, if your head weren’t attached you’d probably lose it today.” She had no idea.

“I’ll be okay. I just woke up funny.” That’s an understatement!

I started walking toward the door when she called me.

“Nicole, are you not going to wear makeup today?” she asked.

I wouldn’t even know where to begin. “I’ll put it on at school. I really want to get there early today.”

“Do you have a test today?” She had a questioning look on her face.

“Not until next week, but I said I’d study with some friends before school.” I hoped that sounded plausible.

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“Oh, okay. Well, don’t forget your purse and your backpack,” she said, pointing at them on the desk at the far wall. “Oh, and shoes.” She walked into Nicole’s closet and came back with some shoes.

“Thanks,” I said.

I grabbed the purse and the backpack and started following her out of the room. I was hoping she would lead me to a door out of the house, so I wouldn’t look lost in what was supposed to be my house. She led me down the stairs, and at the base of the stairs, about twenty feet in front of me, was the door. I started heading toward the door as she was heading into another room.

“Are you going to eat breakfast at the school?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m not very hungry.”

“Okay, don’t forget we will be getting home late tonight. Dad and I are getting together with the Hendersons for cards. I’m guessing you’ll be hanging out with Jessica or Caryn?”

“Uhh...probably. I haven’t really talked to them yet,” I replied truthfully.

“Just be sure you are home by eleven or call if you want to stay over at one of their houses.”

“I will. Bye!”

She turned and went into the other room as I made my way to the door. I shut the door behind me and ran out into the street. I didn’t recognize anything. I’d never been on this street before. I looked up and down the street and headed in the direction of the cross street that had the most passing cars. Clayton Avenue. That I recognized. I wasn’t positive, but I had a pretty good idea how to get to school from here.

I ran almost the whole way. In a skirt, no less! I’ve never minded running, and it appeared that Nicole’s body was in pretty decent physical shape. I didn’t have too much trouble. It probably had more to do with the fact that I couldn’t stop thinking about this whole crazy mess. What was I going to say to Nicole when I saw her...in my body? What if she’s not in my body? What then? I don’t have the slightest clue how we are going to reverse this whole thing, but if Nicole is not

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in my body, I don't know what I'm going to do. Please be in my body. I slowed a bit as I reached the school.

When I was younger, I used to run everywhere. I was a pretty good runner. The problem was, once I stopped running, the sweat glands seemed to just flood open. It wasn't any different in Nicole's body. I was sweating profusely, and my bra was itchy. Probably a result of the sweat. I needed to get to a bathroom to take it off.

I entered through the front of the school and headed for the bathrooms in the science corridor. They seemed to have the least amount of traffic at any given time of day. School wouldn't start for a while, so there was a really good chance I wouldn't run into anyone there.

I walked up to the entrance of the boys' bathroom and stopped. I couldn't go in there. If someone came in, I'd wind up in the dean's office. I took a deep breath and walked into the girls' bathroom. Nobody was inside. I walked into one of the stalls, closed the door and put Nicole's backpack and purse on the door coat hook. I pulled the shirt off and wrapped it over the hook. I pulled the bra straps over my arms, pulled it down to my waist, turned it around and unfastened it. I waved the shirt around like a flag, trying to air it out and dry it off. Once it was passable, I put it back on. I opened the door and headed to the sink. I got a few paper towels wet and used them to wipe my face, arms and pits down. Well, that would have to do for now. Time to find Nicole...well, time to find my body.

I headed out of the restroom and started toward Nicole's locker. It was easy to tell she wasn't there because there was nobody in sight. I waited at her locker for a few minutes and headed toward mine. Again, nobody around. I dialed my combination and opened my locker, realized I had all of Nicole's stuff and shut the locker. That's when I heard my voice call from a short distance away.

"You!" she cried. It was weird seeing my body coming toward me, hearing my voice yelling at me. "I don't know what you did or how you did it, but you need to undo it now!"

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The good news was that the best possible, miserable scenario appeared to have come true...Nicole seemed to be in my body. The bad news was...she seemed angry with me. Again!

“Wait, you think I did this?” I said incredulously. “Now, just how do you think I managed to pull something like this off?” I said, throwing my hands in the air.

“Well, I know that *I* didn’t do it!” she snapped.

“Well, you figured me out! It was all part of my master plan. I thought, hey, I haven’t been humiliated enough by this girl, so I’m going to put some...voodoo spell on the both of us so we...” I lowered my voice to a forceful whisper, “switched bodies!”

“Well, I don’t know how it happened, but *I* certainly didn’t wish this to happen,” she hissed.

I laughed sardonically. “After how you treated me yesterday, if I were going to wish for something to happen to you, this wouldn’t be it!”

A few people were starting to fill the hallways now. We weren’t exactly yelling, but it was probably evident that we were having an argument. Most people were making a point to look away. Mike saw us and walked up next to Nicole, obviously thinking she was me.

“Hey Jake! Is everything okay?” He turned and looked in my direction, glaring at me as if he were trying to tell me not to mess with his friend.

Nicole turned on Mike. “I’m sorry. You must be lost. I don’t remember anyone sending you an invitation to this party, so why don’t you butt out!”

Normally, if this were anyone else, Mike would have had a snappy comeback and defended himself just fine. He’s usually good with the quick wit. But Mike thought this was me talking, and he must have thought I was still angry with him about yesterday. He stared at Nicole for the slightest second, and began walking away.

“Hey,” I snapped back, again with the forceful whisper. I was trying real hard not to draw attention to us. “Who do you think you are talking to my friend like that? He doesn’t know

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what's going on here and he thinks his best friend just chewed him out for no good reason!"

Mike turned around. I don't think he entirely heard what we were saying, but something caught his attention. He stood and stared at us squabbling, and he was standing about 15 or so feet away from us.

"I don't really care what he thinks," she said. "I'm still not done with you, and I don't have time to deal with him!"

"I'm not going to have you ruin my life in the process of trying to figure out what happened," I said.

She smirked. "I'm not sure how you think *you* can stop me!"

Okay, maybe this wasn't the best idea. Maybe it wasn't the classiest thing to do, but it was all I could think of. I turned toward Mike, and I lifted my shirt revealing Nicole's chest to him.

Several things happened at almost the same instant. Mike's eyes bugged out and he passed out on the floor. I heard the most hideous, blood-curdling scream come from my mouth. I didn't think it was even possible for me to scream like that. But there was Nicole, with my mouth wide open, screaming a scream that no guy should ever be able to scream. She definitely took some estrogen with her into my body. I quickly pulled my shirt down and tried to calm Nicole down.

"Okay, okay," I whispered. "I'm sorry. Now will you please calm down so we can try and sort this whole thing out?"

"Sorry? You just flashed my breasts to your best friend and you're sorry? And...couldn't you have at least left my house wearing a bra?"

"I did leave your house wearing a bra, but by the time I got here I was itchy and sweaty from running. I had to take it off."

"I can't believe you just did that," she said stunned.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know what else to do. You were getting belligerent."

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We both stood there silent for a moment gathering our thoughts.

“Look,” I said, “I don’t know how this happened any more than you do. All I know is if we don’t work together, this could turn out very bad. We can’t exactly tell all of our friends and family that we’ve switched bodies. We’d be committed.”

She stared at me for a moment, contemplating what I had said. Then she said in an almost defeated tone, “Look at you. I can’t believe you left the house letting me look like that. I have no makeup on.”

“I don’t know how to put makeup on. You don’t like the way you look now, you would have been really upset if I had tried to put on makeup. I woke up this morning screaming. Your mom came in to see what was wrong, and then she helped me pick this out. I was trying really hard not to make you look stupid in front of your mother, and I was trying really hard to get out of there before I said something that would make her suspicious.”

She paused at this and her features, well actually they were my features, seemed to soften just a bit. “Okay, look,” she said. “You’re right about us needing to work together. This may all go back the way it is supposed to be tomorrow, but it may not. Either way, we need to work out a plan. We need to get to know each other well enough to pass as each other...at least for the short term.

“I will make you a deal,” she continued. “I will do my best to be you...carry out your responsibilities and do things the way you would while I’m in your body, if you do the same for me. Working together will also allow me...us,” she corrected, “to keep an eye on each other.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure that I could be a girl even if I wanted to.”

“The other option is we could destroy each other’s lives in a very short time. And trust me, I would destroy you.”

I considered that. “Okay. We need a plan then.”

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She motioned me to follow her and we walked away, not even realizing that Mike was passed out on the floor still. She was leading me out toward the parking lot.

“We can’t work out a plan here. We are going to have to ditch today. I don’t have any classes that I *have* to be at today, do you?”

“No,” I said.

“Good. We will go to my house. My mother is usually gone on Fridays, shopping and running other errands with her friend Julia. We should be safe there, and then I can get you looking decent. So, where did you park my car?”

I looked at her blankly. “You have a car?”

“Wait. You mean you ran from my house all of the way here?”

“Well, yeah. I didn’t know you had a car, and I wanted to make sure I got out of there. Your mother kept saying that I was acting funny, and I was telling her that I wasn’t feeling right because I hadn’t slept well.”

“Well, hopefully she didn’t notice that you left my car in the garage. That would make her *really* wonder. Hopefully Julia is driving this week.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“They take turns driving. My mom and dad get together with John and Julia Henderson just about every Friday. Whoever’s house they are getting together at that week decides the person who drives.”

“Your mom mentioned they would be home late tonight because they were getting together with the Hendersons,” I offered.

“Good,” she said. “Then, Julia will drive them both around to run their errands. My mom will keep everything in Julia’s fridge until they leave tonight. My father meets them at their house and drives my mom home. So, she likely won’t have noticed my car in the garage and we will have more time alone at my house to get to know each other.”

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If she had said that to me yesterday, I would have been bouncing off the walls. Today, it doesn't have quite the same feel.

We both were a little worn down from the morning drama, so we walked the distance back to her house, mainly in our own thoughts. I couldn't tell what was going on in her mind, but for my part I was thinking about my mom. I hoped this would all go back to normal soon. I didn't want to think about what would happen if I didn't get to see my mother anymore. And my friends. Okay, so I wasn't the wealthiest or most popular person in the world, but it was my life, and I liked it. I could make the best out of living in someone else's shoes for a while, but I don't think I could do this long-term.

As we neared her house, I started wondering, "How did it go at my house this morning?"

"Not too different from yours, it seems. I woke up screaming, and your mom came in to see if you were okay. It's funny, but I had told her I had a bad dream, too. I guess there's not much else you can say when you wake up screaming in the morning."

"Did she seem okay?" I asked.

"Yes, she asked if I needed anything, and I said no. I rushed to get dressed, and high-tailed it out of there. I yelled that I had to get to school and said bye as I headed out the door. I hope she didn't think I was being rude."

"Yeah," I said, "I don't usually do that, but I'm sure she will be okay. She doesn't get offended easily."

She stopped two houses down from her house. "Okay, here's the plan." She started rummaging through her purse, which happened to be on my shoulder, and pulled out a set of keys. "You will go in through the front door and call out to see if anyone is home. If my mom is still there, tell her you aren't feeling well and decided to come home. Then just go to my room and wait. If she's gone, come out and get me. I will wait for about ten minutes. If you don't come out by then, I'll start walking around so I don't look suspicious. Once she leaves, come outside so I know it's safe."

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I headed up to the front door, unlocked it and headed into the house. “Hello?” I called. “Is anyone home?” No answer. I walked around the whole house, calling out, and didn’t get a response. I went back to the front door and signaled to Nicole that it was safe.

She came into the house and went straight to the garage. Two cars were in the garage. “Good, just like I thought. She’s in Julia’s car. Now let’s check the kitchen. If she were going to leave a note, it would be there.” We headed into the kitchen. There was a note on the counter. She picked it up and read it.

*Nikki.*

*I hope you are feeling better. You didn't look so good this morning. Remember, we will be at the Henderson's late. There's food in the fridge. Call my cell if you want to stay at one of the girls' houses tonight.*

*Love,*

*Mom*

“Good. It doesn’t look like she noticed the car. Okay. First, I need to get you familiar with my house. You need to look like you know where you are going when you are walking around. You already saw the garage. My car, which you will be driving, is the silver Toyota Camry at the far end of the garage.” She stopped and turned toward me. “You do know how to drive don’t you?”

“Yes, I know how to drive.”

“Do you have a license?”

“Yes, I have yours...right...here.” I smiled at her as I patted her purse.

“You know what I mean. Have you passed your driving test?”

“Yes,” I answered. “If you look in my wallet, you will see I have a driver’s license. I’ve never had a ticket.”

“Well, that’s better than me. I got a speeding ticket about a year ago, and I lost the car for two weeks. Wait, do you

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have a car? I only saw one at your house, and I figured it was probably your mom's."

"It is hers. No, sorry, I don't have a car. Mike picks me up for school most of the time and sometimes I walk. It's only about four miles from the school. It takes forty-five minutes to an hour if I walk somewhat fast. If you want I can pick you up and drop you off so you don't have to worry about it."

"Thanks, but I'm hoping this won't last very long. Let's worry about that later."

"So," Nicole continued, "as you can see, the house is two stories. This, obviously, is the kitchen. Over there is the living room. We only use that room when we have certain company over. I almost never go in there. Through here, we have the formal dining room. The family room is through this archway," she said, walking through an opening into the next room.

"Wow!" I interrupted. "That is a huge screen."

"Yeah, my dad wanted this room to be set up like his own mini movie theater. Most of the time, we get together to watch a movie on Saturday evenings. It's something we try to do together. We like movies."

She continued walking me through the house. "There is one bedroom downstairs, but my father uses it as an office. I don't really ever go in there, either. The bathroom is straight down that hall," Nicole said, pointing to her left. "That brings us back to the main foyer area. Now we head upstairs. You probably recognize my bedroom on the left there. We'll head in there in a minute. Straight ahead is the Jack-and-Jill bathroom that opens also into my bedroom. To the right is the loft. Are you keeping up?"

"Yeah, I'm keeping up," I said with a laugh. It's not like this was rocket science. "Nice pool table," I said. Man, I was starting to feel like I was on *The Price is Right*, and I was being walked through my "Showcase Showdown."

"Thanks. Do you play?"

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“A bit. I like to go to Crazy Cues with my friends sometimes. I’m not the best, but I’m okay.”

“Yeah,” she said, “I don’t play a whole lot, but I’m not too bad. My dad’s given me pointers over the years, so I don’t always lose. Just in case anyone asks you to play, I rarely beat my dad. So if you’re that good, lay up so he doesn’t get suspicious. I don’t usually make more than a few shots in a row. Just keep that in mind.”

“Okay. You’re really thorough at this. Have you switched bodies with someone before?” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

I saw the slightest sliver of a smile, and then I saw the crease between my eyebrows. “Very funny. I am hoping we will wake up tomorrow and this will all be fixed, but if not, you need to know what to do tomorrow morning when you wake up. You can’t wake up screaming every morning or my mom is going to try and get you help. So, take this seriously.”

“I am taking it seriously. I was just trying to lighten the mood.”

“Otherwise known as not taking this seriously,” she sneered.

“There is a difference between taking something seriously and being serious.”

“Uh-huh. Down the hall, on the left, is a short hallway. The laundry room is on the left of the hallway, and ahead is my brother, Tyler’s, room. He’s away at college. He is in his second year at Stanford. I don’t expect to see him anytime soon, so for now, just remember Tyler, Sophomore, Stanford. Got it?”

“Got it,” I repeated.

“Good. The last set of doors down here is my mom and dad’s room. My dad’s name is Keith and my mom’s name is Sara, but you will call them Mom and Dad.” She led me to a picture of the two and pointed.

“Keith, Sara, Dad, Mom. Got it,” I said. “Man, their room almost takes up half of the upstairs.”

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“Yeah, I don’t come in here too often now that I’m older, and I think it best you try and stay out. I don’t want you walking in while my mother is getting dressed.”

Their room had a big square bedroom area with the dressing area in the back, right corner. There was a makeup table, lavatory and walk-in shower on the left wall, a tub with jets straight ahead, a walk-in closet to the right by the tub and then double sinks on the right closest to me. All that was missing was a brand...new...car!

“That’s about it. Let’s go back to my room. We need to get cleaned up.”

She led me back into her bedroom. Her bed faced the door, and we stopped right in front of it.

“Okay, I don’t know how familiar you became with my room earlier, but let’s just cover the basics. You obviously know where the bed is. To the left, over there, is my desk. You probably noticed that since I always put my backpack and purse there at night.”

She turned over her left shoulder. “This is the walk-in closet. Not nearly the size of my parents’, but I’m not complaining.”

She turned back around and went to the other side of the bed. “Over there is my dresser, and over here is my makeup table. The house didn’t come with it, but I asked my dad if I could have one like my mom’s, and he built this.”

“He did a nice job,” I offered.

“Yeah, he’s pretty handy when he has the time. And this is the bathroom. Like I mentioned, Jack-and-Jill. You’ll want to be sure to lock both doors when you’re in here, or you may just get a rude surprise from a guest.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“So, why don’t you go first. Get undressed and you can get cleaned up.”

I looked at her.

“What? You need a shower. You...I mean, I...I mean... you stink,” she said.

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“Umh, you want me just to get undressed in front of you, and get in the shower?”

“Yes,” she said as she went to turn the shower on.

“I’m not getting undressed in front of you,” I said, as a matter of fact.

“Look, I understand this is awkward, and I wouldn’t expect you to get undressed in front of me normally, except, you do realize that is my body. I’ve seen it a couple of times before. Now if there’s a way to keep *you* from seeing it, I’m all ears.” Too late.

“Okay, so maybe I’m being dumb but it makes me uncomfortable. I don’t want you watching, scrutinizing as I take a shower.”

“I’m not going to watch you take a shower. I’m sure you know how to take a shower, but I want to make sure that you know how *I* take a shower. You can leave the door cracked open, and I’ll talk to you from the bedroom, okay?”

I looked at her in disbelief.

“Look,” she said, “if I had my choice, you wouldn’t even be in my house right now, much less in my body. You can do this on your own, but it’s going to be a lot harder without my help.”

“Fine,” I grumbled. “You sure seem awfully okay with this, though.”

“No, I’m definitely not okay with this. Like I said, it’s not like I have too much of a choice. I could expect you to just stay dirty until we change back, but then I don’t think I’ll have too many friends when I’m me again. I could complain, but I’m not exactly sure who to complain to about this. You are familiar with the female anatomy, I assume?”

“Yes, but they didn’t look this...well, they didn’t look like this in the anatomy books,” I said meekly.

She blushed. Is that what I looked like when I blushed? I guess so.

“Thank you for the compliment, I think, but I’d appreciate it if you didn’t ogle over my body too much. Until

you exposed my breasts to your ape friend earlier today, nobody but my family had seen me naked.”

I put my head down and then I looked at her-I’m still not used to seeing her in my body. “Look, I’m really sorry about that. It felt like the whole conversation was getting out of hand, and it’s the only way I could think of to shut you up.”

“Well, I’m not over it yet, but I understand your logic. It worked, I guess. Although, I think if you had tried harder you could have come up with something else. It’s a pretty weak excuse for flashing your friend.

“I have four laundry baskets in the closet,” she continued. “One each for towels, whites, colors and darks. Do you know how to sort your laundry?”

“Yes,” I said. “I do my laundry at home, although I don’t separate colors and darks.”

“Well, that’s how my mother sorts them and she does my laundry. You can throw the clothes you are wearing in the baskets and hop in the shower.”

I looked at her again.

“Look, you are going to have to get over this. I could turn around, but when you get out of the shower, you are probably going to need help getting dressed.”

She was right. I did as she said, placing the clothes in the baskets and trying to cover myself as I walked toward the shower.

“I’m going to give you the quick run-down,” she said yelling into the bathroom. “I shower in the evenings before bed. On Saturdays I usually shave my legs, but hopefully we will be back to normal tomorrow and I will just shave my legs myself. Otherwise, I’ll show you how to shave my legs later. And my armpits. I usually shave them every day, but we’ll skip that today.

“Now,” she went on, “I don’t know how you care for your hair, but girls, particularly girls with long hair, have to take care of it a certain way. After you get it completely wet, take the shampoo, about...two quarters’ worth, and rub it all throughout my hair. Let that sit while you...clean my body,”

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she said hesitantly. I think she was struggling with this part. I couldn't see her face, but I'm sure she was blushing from beyond the door. I know I must have been blushing because my face was on fire.

"Make sure you rinse all of the soap completely, or you'll be uncomfortable later. Now, rinse the shampoo out really well. Once it's completely rinsed, put about two quarters' worth of conditioner in your hand and work it through the hair."

"Got it," I yelled out to her.

"Now grab the comb in the basket and comb the conditioner through the hair. This will help work any knots out."

"My head feels heavy with all of this wet hair and conditioner," I said.

"I'm sure you can handle it," she said. "While the conditioner is sitting, I clean my face. I use the facial wash on the shelf. Rub it all over my face, let it sit for about twenty seconds, and rinse it off.

"Once I am done with my face," she continued, "I will shave my armpits. If it's Saturday, I'll shave my legs next. Then I rinse the conditioner out of my hair."

"That's a lot to do every day," I said.

"Well, I only wash my hair every other day. The rest of the time, I just get it wet. Some girls have to wash their hair more, some less. If I wash mine more often, it gets dry and brittle."

"I didn't realize there was so much to this. Okay, so what's next?" I asked.

"Now you get out of the shower." She handed me two towels. "Use one to towel off and then roll your hair up in it. Bend over so your hair falls down. Wrap the towel around your hair somewhat tightly, stand up and let the towel fall over backwards. This will let your hair keep from getting frizzy until you are ready to blow-dry it."

"What's the other towel for?" I asked.

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“To cover up, after you put lotion on. The lotion is on the counter, there. I put a good amount on my arms and legs because they dry out so easily. I put lotion on my stomach, back, chest and neck, just not as much.” I did as she said, and walked out of the bathroom. She saw me and rolled her eyes.

“What?” I asked innocently.

“The towel was supposed to be wrapped over your...chest. Not your waist. Then you wouldn’t have to use your arm to cover your...my...your chest.”

I felt dumb. “Oh,” I said, turning and fixing it.

“That’s okay, we don’t want you to walk around in a towel for the next hour, anyway. Let’s get you some clothes.”

“The next hour,” I said shocked. “Does it take you that long to get ready?”

“Sometimes more, sometimes less,” she said. “It depends on what I do with my hair.”

She walked me over to the dresser and showed me where the bras, underwear, socks and jeans were. She pulled one item out of each drawer. “You can’t make too many mistakes with the socks and underwear. The bras are different for different tops. I have regular bras for shirts and blouses that cover completely. Don’t wear a black bra with a white shirt or a white bra with a black shirt. The idea is, you want to match the shirt and bra colors as closely as possible. Bras are supposed to support, they aren’t for show. At least that’s the way my mother taught me. The other types of bras, we’ll get into later if we have to. For now, just wear shirts or blouses that cover completely.”

I put the underwear on and grabbed the bra. “So, is there an easy way to get this on? Your mother had to help me this morning.”

“That had to be interesting.” She stared out into space for a brief moment, then shook her head. “I don’t want to know. Anyway, I’ve gotten really good at it, but I’ve had lots of practice. For now, why don’t you clasp it around the waist, turn it around, pull the straps up over your shoulders and adjust the cups into place. There are three sets of clasps. I

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usually use the second set of clasps, but you can adjust as needed for comfort or support.”

I did as she said and then I put on my socks. “I am going to get your outfit for today and then I will lay out your clothes for tomorrow. It will take time to teach you outfit coordination. I’m hoping...”

“I know,” I interrupted, “you’re hoping this will all be back to normal tomorrow and you won’t have to show me.”

“Am I annoying you? I just want to make sure that we cover everything so you don’t have any problems.”

She actually wasn’t annoying me. “No, I didn’t mean it to sound like that. You are doing a great job of explaining everything. It’s just that, well, I’m hoping everything is back to normal tomorrow also. Let’s just assume that anything you don’t tell me you will cover later, if necessary. If I have a question, I’ll ask.”

“Fair enough. So, this is your outfit for tomorrow. Jeans, a t-shirt, bra, underwear, socks. Today, you can wear this,” she said as she laid out shorts, another shirt, bra, underwear and socks.

“Oh, I almost forgot, this drawer has night gowns and shirts for bedtime. I don’t wear bras for bed. They are uncomfortable to sleep in. Let’s do your makeup,” she said, leading me to the makeup table.

“I’m just going to do your makeup for now. I’ll teach you tomorrow if...” she paused. “Sorry.”

I smiled and she smiled back. My smile, but different. Even in my body, I can still see a hint of Nicole. Her mannerisms and features look more feminine. We’ll have to work on that.

She left the clothes on the bed and headed toward the makeup table. “Shouldn’t I put my shirt and shorts on first?” I questioned.

“No, the bra and underwear is good enough for now. You put on your outfit last so you stay cooler while you are doing your hair and makeup. The last thing you want is to be hot putting on makeup. Now, come sit down.”

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It didn't seem to take long for her to finish putting on my makeup. I was in awe watching how methodical she was. "You seem so relaxed doing all of this. Isn't it strange putting makeup on another person, who just happens to be you?"

"Yeah," she said, "I mean, I've put makeup on my girlfriends before, but this is quite different. I'm mildly freaking out inside."

"You don't look like it on the outside," I responded.

"I pride myself on keeping my emotions under control. My dad has always taught me that you can't solve any problem being overly emotional. There is a time for emotion and there is a time for rationale. He's always telling me to think about a problem in terms of how it can be resolved."

"That's good advice. I just don't see a whole lot of people who are able to handle it as well as you do."

"Thank you. I think it is something that anyone can do. But it takes practice. It doesn't happen overnight. A lot of it is just choosing to make good decisions. Some people seem to thrive on chaos. I'm not one of them. I like things to be organized. Let's do your hair.

"I'm going to teach you how to put your hair in a ponytail. It's fairly easy, so you can do it tomorrow. Normally, I wouldn't put my hair in a ponytail two days in a row, but we are making an exception. Go ahead and take the towel off of your head."

I took the towel off of my head and threw it in the towel laundry basket. "Don't I just pull it back and put one of those band things around it?" I asked.

"Not quite. First, you need to blow-dry it. You don't want to walk around with a wet head. Plus, it will frizz as it dries. Use the medium heat setting. It takes a little longer, but it is better for your hair. Brush it as you blow it dry."

I dried the hair like she directed, and she continued walking me through the rest of the steps. I would never have guessed there could be so many steps just to put my hair in a ponytail. She was very thorough.

I did as she said. "Like this?"

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“Yeah, that’s pretty good. Just make sure the hair elastic is pushed to the base of your head before you let go of the ponytail. Depending on how you brush it, you can make the tail higher or lower on your head. I prefer to have it lay in the middle of the back of my head. Not too high. I’ll show you more styles later, if necessary.” Yay.

“Something to keep in mind,” she continued, “I usually shower at night, but I don’t do my hair and makeup at night. I blow-dry and brush my hair straight out. In the morning, I will wash my face and get my hair a little wet so it is manageable when I style it.”

“Got it,” I said.

She walked back into the bathroom, and I followed her. She showed me where the deodorant and perfume was, and I put them on as she directed.

She went over to the bed where the shorts and shirt were and picked them up. “Now you put these on.”

I put them on and looked at her. “Now what?”

“Now, you are all ready to go. It’s my turn. Whooh! I don’t smell very good. Do you usually shower in the morning, because I didn’t?”

“Yeah, I shower in the morning because it helps wake me up.”

“Okay, shoot!” she said. “What is your routine?”

“I wish I could say that my routine was as thought out as yours, but it’s pretty simple. After seeing what you go through, this should be a piece of cake. Go ahead and shower. You can use whatever stuff you have in your shower. I don’t really care.”

“Let’s get some replacement clothes so I don’t have to get back into these,” she said. “My brother is a little bigger than you, but we can probably make do until we get to your house.”

She went into her brother’s room and grabbed some socks, underwear, shorts and a t-shirt. Then she headed back to her room and started to undress. It is weird enough looking

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at myself walking around, but it is that much stranger watching me get undressed.

“Okay,” she said as she was turning red. “I see what you mean. It’s not really logical, but it feels strange undressing in front of you.” She headed to the bathroom, where she finished undressing.

“I usually wash my hair, then clean my body and shave. “

“You shave in the shower?” she said.

“Yeah. I tried the shaving cream thing, and I don’t see the benefit. I just use the shampoo to shave. Don’t worry about shaving today, though. My hair is pretty fine, also. If you use that razor you shave your legs with on my face, you are going to cut me more than usual.”

“How do you know?” she asked.

“I’ve used my mother’s razor before. Bad things. Just wait until you have my razor.”

“No problem. So,” she said, “I’ve washed everything, and rinsed off. What next?”

“Now, get out and dry off. Next, I clean my ears with Q-tips, if you have them.”

“I do,” Nicole said.

“Good,” I said. “I don’t know about you, but I have to clean my ears every day. I actually enjoy how it feels.”

“Not me,” she replied. “I clean my ears, but not every day. But, clean them as much as you like, as long as you’re careful.”

Yesterday, this was the girl of my dreams. Today, I *am* the girl of my dreams, she’s in my body and we’re talking about how often we clean our ears. Could this day get any stranger? I guess at this point, I shouldn’t challenge strange.

“So, I usually wrap the towel around my waist, while I finish up in the bathroom. When you have really short hair, it tends to dry before you have a chance to get dressed.”

“That makes sense,” she seemed to think aloud.

“I usually put a little gel in my hair while it’s still a little wet, and I kind of mess it around. I brush the sides back.

“Next, I put on deodorant.”

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“I think my brother keeps some in here for when he is home,” Nicole said as she opened the cabinet below the sink. “Yep. Here it is.”

“I guess that’s better than wearing yours,” I replied. “Once you are done, you can finish getting dressed.”

“Do you put lotion on or anything?” she asked.

“Well, no, not really. You can if you want to, though.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I feel all itchy if I don’t have lotion on. I’ll finish up and be right out.”

“You know, it’s kind of weird putting my brother’s underwear on,” she called out.

“Probably not any more weird than putting mine on,” I said, laughing.

“Well, that’s a pretty good point.”

After about three minutes she came into the bedroom. “Wow, don’t get me wrong...I don’t want to stay in your body, but I could sure get used to this 15 minutes to get dressed thing. Shall we head over to your house?”

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “Are you getting hungry, because all of a sudden I’m starved?”

“Yeah, I could use something to eat. I’ve got sandwich stuff downstairs. I’ll make a couple of sandwiches and we’ll take them with us.”

“Works for me,” I said.

We went downstairs and Nicole went to work pulling out what she needed to make some sandwiches. Once she had made the two sandwiches, I helped her clean up the mess. “What do you want to drink?”

“Do you have any Pepsi?” I asked.

“We probably have some in the fridge in the garage. We don’t drink a lot of soda in our house, but we try to keep our fridge stocked for guests.” She headed into the garage, and came back a minute later with a Pepsi.

“Here you go. Soda isn’t real good for you. Keep in mind that I don’t drink a lot of soda, so if people see you drinking a lot, they might notice the change. Plus, I want you to keep my girlish figure intact,” she said with a smile.

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“Thanks,” I said, taking the Pepsi. “I’ll do my best. So what *do* you drink?”

“Water. I drink milk or orange juice in the morning. Usually milk with dinner. But mostly water. How about you? What do you like to drink?”

“I prefer Pepsi, but I’ll drink anything that is available. I’m not very picky.”

“So, I can drink whatever I want and nobody is going to look at me funny?” she asked as a matter of fact.

“No, probably not.” Do people really pay that much attention to things like...what I drink?

“Okay,” she said. “That’s good to know.” She grabbed a bottled water, we gathered up our things and headed for her car.

“I’m not allowed to have anyone drive my car, so you had better drive. If I drive, anyone watching would see you driving my car. My parents would take my car away for a week if I did that.”

“No problem. I can drive.”

We got in her car, backed out of the garage and headed toward my house. With her car, my house was only about 30 minutes away. Now that I knew where she lived, I knew how to get where I was going.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked.

“Didn’t you just do that?” she said.

Why do people always think that’s funny? I didn’t respond and eventually, she said, “Ask away.”

“Well...I know we agreed to cooperate to get through this.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, you are being almost nice to me right now. With the way that things went this morning and yesterday, and with what your mom told me you said about me yesterday...”

“Oh no! What did she tell you I said?”

“Well, she didn’t get into specifics, but she said you seemed proud of how you treated me yesterday.”

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I looked over at her and saw what looked like shame on my face. Again, the expression wasn't quite mine, but it was on my face.

"I wasn't proud of myself for saying what I said to you. I was frustrated at how the day went yesterday. You were the third guy to come up to me and I was beginning to feel like a piece of meat. The first two guys were arrogant and one was crude. Your antics in class just added to my annoyance."

I wanted to interrupt her, to tell her that I wasn't goofing off in class, but I didn't think that would help at the moment. I let her continue without saying a word.

"When you came up to me, I was kind of fed up. I waited to hear what you had to say, and it sounded like you were headed down the same road as the other two guys. I was more proud of myself for standing my ground. I tend to be too polite, and sometimes I feel like certain people take advantage of that."

She stopped for a minute as I drove in silence. After a minute, she continued her thought. "I don't really know you that well, and don't think for a minute that I'm over you flashing your friend. But...I may have taken my frustrations out on the wrong guy. Time will tell. If so...I'm sorry."

"Thank you," I said.

"If so," she emphasized, "you're...welcome."

"So," I continued, "That still doesn't explain why you are being so nice to me now."

"I like to think that this is the way I normally am. I'm not really being nice as much as I'm being polite. I'm usually this way with everyone."

"Well," I said with a smile, "that's what I thought before yesterday."

"Look," she offered, "maybe we should just start over."

"Sounds good to me," I said. "Maybe after this is all over..."

"Yeah, don't push it," she stopped.

Maybe after I grow on her a bit...

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It didn't take long before we were pulling up to the curb in front of my house. My house is a single story house built in the early 90's. It doesn't really stand out in our neighborhood. All of the houses are single story and they are all painted in shades of brown. After seeing Nicole's house, I was feeling a little self-conscious about my own house.

"Well, it doesn't compare to your house, but it's home," I said meekly.

"I hope you don't think that matters to me," she said, affronted. "I love my house, but my parents raised me not to be about *things*. I realize it may not look like it from the size of our house, but if you look closely, it's very functional."

I particularly liked the functional movie theater. "I noticed. It's just...well, it's just very nice."

"Well, thank you, but I saw your house earlier. It's not as big, obviously, but it seemed nice. At least what I saw of it as I was running out the door. It matters a lot more how you live than where you live. I didn't feel uncomfortable in your house. Okay, so I did feel uncomfortable in your house, but it was more about waking up in a strange place and a strange body than it being your house. Don't worry about me. I'll be just fine in your house while I'm here...hopefully just for today. Although...I don't know if I'll get used to sleeping in your bed."

"What's wrong with my bed?" I asked.

"It's *your* bed. I should say, it's a guy's bed. It just doesn't seem right." She was smiling when she said it, so I figured she was being playful.

"You should talk. I'm not exactly looking forward to sleeping with all of the frilly flowers on your pillows and blankets. And pink. Everywhere pink."

"Well then, let's just hope things are back to normal in the morning," she countered.

We had made our way in through the front door. "So," I continued, "this shouldn't take too long. The living room is to the left. We usually save this room for company, but we don't have a lot of company, so it's almost never used.

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“You can get to the kitchen through that opening in the living room or you can just walk straight down this hall.”

I turned left and faced the kitchen. “The fridge is on the left, there. Feel free to help yourself to anything in there. The pantry is to the left of the fridge. You can help yourself to anything in there also.”

“Thank you,” she replied.

“Sure. Okay, so I cook for my mom usually about three times a week. If we are still switched...”

“No problem,” she responded back. “My mom does most of the cooking, but she’s taught me quite a bit. What do you cook for your mom?”

“I’m not a great cook,” I said, “but she always appreciates the effort. I can make just about anything with instructions on the box. Feel free to prepare anything you see. If she acts surprised, tell her you are trying something new. She’ll tell you it’s great...and she’ll mean it.”

“Got it.”

“Okay,” I continued, “as you can see, the kitchen not only opens back to the living room and the hall, but around the island it opens to the dining area and den. We either eat at the dining area table or we eat at the island, and we watch TV in the den. There is a bathroom against that wall next to the television.”

We circled back around the island to the hallway we entered from, facing the front door. From where we were standing, we headed left down the main hallway.

“Everything else is straight down this hallway here. On the right, there is a guest bedroom and then the door to the garage. The washer and dryer are in the garage. Sorry, but I do my own laundry.”

“I’m sure I can figure it out. I know the basics. Do you...do your mom’s laundry?”

“Sometimes, to help her out. She won’t ask you to, and she doesn’t expect it, so don’t worry about it.” She seemed to show a bit of relief on her face, not that I could blame her. I wouldn’t want to do some strange woman’s laundry either.

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“On the left, here, is my mother’s room.” We headed into my mother’s room.

“What is your mom’s name?” she asked.

“Oh, sorry. Her name is Angela. Matthews, same as mine.”

“What about your dad?”

“I don’t know much about my father. My mother doesn’t say a lot about him, and I’ve never pushed the subject much. It’s not that she says anything bad about him. It’s more that she seems really sad and angry when I mention him. I know his name is Steve Matthews, and he left when I was one or two years old. You won’t really need to know anything about him. It’s not a subject that comes up with my mother or my friends.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Don’t be. I’m not feeling sorry for myself. This is what I know. It’s not like I knew him when he was here, and then he left.”

“I...guess that’s a good way to look at it. It’s just hard for me to imagine. So...this is your mom’s room, you said?”

“Yes,” I replied. “She has a small walk-in closet at the far end of the room. Straight ahead and to the right is her dressing room and bathroom. I’m not in here very often. Usually, I am just bringing laundry in or out.”

We headed out of her room and made a left. “Straight ahead is my bathroom, and my bedroom is on the left. First, the bathroom. Not much to it. There’s a shower. No tub, sorry.”

“I’ll live,” she said. She sounded put out, but it seemed like she was teasing.

“So, the bedroom is here. I have a standard closet. No walk-in. Bed is there and my clothes dresser is at the far wall there. Feel free to look around.”

She started walking around the room, opening drawers and memorizing the contents. “Is there anything in here that I should stay out of?”

“No,” I replied, “I don’t have anything to hide.”

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After a while, she turned to me and asked, “Do you have my purse with you? I need my cell phone.”

“I think I left it in the car, but you can use the phone on my nightstand,” I said.

“Girls never leave their purses laying around. I never leave my purse in my car. It is either on me, or put in a safe place like my desk or my room.” She seemed annoyed that I left her purse in the car.

“Sorry. I’ll go get it.”

I went out to the car, grabbed her purse and brought it in to her. “Here you go.”

“Thanks. By the way, do you have a cell phone?”

“No, I don’t have the money for a cell phone.”

“Well, if things don’t go back to normal tomorrow, we are going to have to go out and get you a phone. We are going to have to be able to communicate.”

“I’m kind of on a strict budget.”

“I will buy it for you. We will get you a prepaid phone.”

“I don’t want you to have to buy it for me.”

“Look, if we are apart for some reason, we will need to be able to contact each other to get answers. You *have* to have a phone. My parents gave me a credit card to use in case of emergency. I think this qualifies.

“There,” she went on, “I just texted Jessica to collect my schoolwork so I can work on it this weekend. I asked her to bring it by my house tomorrow. I told her that I was sick.”

“Good idea,” I said. “I should call Mike and ask him to bring my homework over.”

“Well, you can’t really do that. If you call Mike, he’s going to wonder why ‘Nicole’ is calling him. I’ll call him. What do you want me to say?”

“Right. Just tell him you are sick and you want him to bring my homework over tomorrow. Although, he probably still thinks I’m mad at him. Oh man, we just left him passed out on the floor today! I can only imagine what’s going on in his head. I hope he’s okay.”

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“I will use that. If he mentions this morning, I will tell him it never happened. How do you talk to him?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean, do you call him Mike or Dude or Hey You?”

I smiled. “Well it depends on my mood. I’ve called him all of those before. Mike is not really...what would be a good word...eloquent? Try not to speak so proper.”

I dialed the number and handed the phone to Nicole. She started talking and I realized that she was leaving a message. She told him she was sick and asked that he bring the homework by my house tomorrow.

“Well, that was easier than I expected,” she said. “Okay, I think for the rest of the day we should stick to the basics. Let’s just get familiar with our houses and immediate family. We will recite it until we know it.”

“My mother will be home in a couple of hours,” I offered. “We can stay here until five, but then we should definitely head over to your house. It’s Friday, so my mother won’t expect me tonight. I’ll just leave a note that I’m staying the night over at Mike’s. She won’t call. I spend a lot of Fridays at Mike’s house. Then, when you come home late tonight, if you run into my mother, you can just tell her that you started feeling sick.”

“That’ll work,” she said. “We can spend the evening at my house, and you can get more familiar with my house. You can drive me back to your house at about nine. That will give you time to get back to my house before my parents arrive. You can just stay in my room with the lights out, and they will leave you alone.”

Over the next few hours, she walked through my house, opening more drawers, simulating things I do when I am in my house. She had changed into some of my clothes and we washed her brother’s clothes so we could return them when we got back to her house. When five came, we packed up our stuff, piled into the car, and headed back to Nicole’s house.

“I’m getting hungry,” I said. “Do you want to stop and get a pizza? We can take it back to your house.”

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“Yeah, I guess that would be okay.”

We stopped at Giovanni’s Kitchen and ordered a pizza. We took it back to Nicole’s house and ate while we recited her immediate family’s info.

I repeated the same steps that Nicole took at my house. I walked into the kitchen, opening drawers and cabinets. She would ask me for a drink and I would have to go to the cabinet to get her a glass and pour her a drink. When I was able to maneuver throughout the kitchen without making any mistakes, we moved to other parts of the house. She showed me how to work the theater. We went upstairs and walked through each of the rooms. We spent most of the remaining time in her room. She would tell me to get something and I would go retrieve it.

“It’s almost nine,” she finally said. “You need to take me to your house now.”

She started walking down the stairs and we headed into the garage. “Tomorrow, if things aren’t back to normal, we have to work on your walk. You so don’t walk like a girl.”

“I actually take that as a compliment. Current situation excluded, I’m not supposed to walk like a girl. While we’re on the subject, you’ll need some pointers yourself.”

“Fair enough,” she said.

“So,” I thought aloud, “what happens if things *are* back to normal tomorrow?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, are we going to be...friends?”

“Jake,” she said, “you may not be as bad as I thought, but that doesn’t mean we have anything in common.”

We both got in the car and I started the engine. “Yeah, I guess swapping bodies doesn’t give us much in common,” I said sarcastically.

She looked at me for a minute, seeming to consider the thought. Neither of us said anything for the rest of the trip. I pulled up in front of my house and she opened the door. As she started to get out, she turned back to me.

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“Whatever happens tomorrow, we should meet to talk. What are you going to do when you get back to my house tonight?”

“I’m going to take a shower, follow all of your directions and go to bed. I’m actually exhausted,” I admitted.

“Me too. I’m going to drag myself into bed and pray to wake up a girl.”

“You may want to be more specific. You don’t want to wake up as some other girl.”

“Thanks for the advice. Hopefully I’ll see *you* tomorrow.”

I waited while she walked into my house, and then I took off for Nicole’s house. This night couldn’t end fast enough. I hurried back to her house, went up the stairs, undressed, jumped in the shower and followed Nicole’s routine as well as I could remember.

I got out of the shower, dried off, got dressed into underwear and a night shirt and returned to the bathroom to blow-dry my hair. If I weren’t so exhausted, I would probably have taken a few minutes to enjoy the view. As it was, I wanted sleep more. I turned the lights off in the house and crawled into Nicole’s bed. I was going to be asleep before my head even hit the pillow.

## DAY 2

“Jake? Honey. Wake up. Are you feeling better today?”

I knew already that I wasn't feeling better. If Jake's mom was waking me up and calling me Jake, then I was still in his body. “Not really,” I said. “I'm still feeling pretty strange.”

“Is it your stomach? Try taking some Pepto-Bismol,” she replied.

“I don't think Pepto is going to help what I've got. Thanks for the advice, but I'll be okay.”

“I'm sure you will,” she said as she turned to walk away. “Oh, I almost forgot, there's a girl on the phone for you.” She handed me a cordless phone. “She says her name is Nicole. Isn't that the girl you were arguing with the other day?”

“Yeah...it's the same girl.”

“Did something new happen between you two?”

“I guess you could say that.”

“Good,” she said with a smile. “I know you really like her,” she whispered away from the phone.

I'm sure Jake's mom would feel bad to know she was giving away insider trading secrets. We'll spare Jake about this. Well, we'll spare us both. “Thanks...mom,” I said as she walked out of the room and shut the door.

“Hello?”

“Hey Nicole, it's Jake,” he said in my voice.

“Hello Jake,” I sighed. “It looks like we've got more work to do.”

“Looks like,” he said. “I’ll get dressed and come get you. Your mom said that she and your dad are going out for the afternoon, so we can come back and work on things here.”

“Okay, I’ll get in the shower now and see you in a bit. Bye.”

“Bye.”

I grabbed the clothes I was going to wear today and headed into the bathroom. I turned the shower on so it would warm up, undressed and went to the bathroom...sitting down, of course. That was different. It’s easy to see how boys can make a mess. Those things are unpredictable.

I jumped in the shower and got myself cleaned up. Five minutes later I was out of the shower, drying off and doing my hair. I don’t want to tempt fate, but I could get used to this getting ready as a guy thing. On a bad day, it can take me two hours to get ready as a girl. I was done in 30 minutes today.

Once I was finished dressing, I decided I would wait in the family room for Jake to pick me up. I figured I would likely spend some time with his mom, but I should be okay if I was polite and didn’t talk much. If she seemed concerned, I would just play up the fact that I wasn’t feeling well.

I headed down the hall and into the kitchen where I would fix a bowl of cereal and some orange juice, Jake’s breakfast of choice, and then eat at the kitchen table. As I came into the kitchen, I saw his mother sitting in the family room watching television and writing something on a notepad.

“Morning,” I said with a smile.

She returned the smile. “Are you feeling any better yet?”

“Actually, I’m feeling a little bit better,” I said truthfully. “I guess the shower helped.”

I reached to grab a bowl out of the cupboard and found the glasses. Oops! *Concentrate harder Nikki!* I grabbed a glass, as though I had intended it, and placed it on the counter. I opened the bowl cupboard and pulled a bowl out.