

Chapter Two

Amy clearly remembered the moment when he first learned about himself. He'd been watching an old show about a group of people who'd shipwrecked on a deserted island. A mad scientist had come along and swapped their bodies. One of the swaps had placed a character known as The Scientist into the body of Mary Kate, a pretty, country girl who always wore short shorts, ribbons in her hair.

His brother and sister had laughed and thought it was funny, and he'd laughed, too, especially when Mary Kate, in his body, had asked him for a kiss. But, for Amy, it had also led him to begin to fantasize about being Mary Kate, having his mind switched into the body of such a pretty girl. He started to write stories about it in his journal, which he kept hidden. Other moments followed. He saw an episode of Space Trek, in which Captain Kyle was swapped into a woman, and he even held hands at one point with one of the men! There was an issue of the Justice Force, where all the characters swapped bodies with villains, only Amy rewrote it in his mind so Apex became The Jem, a busty female whose only powers came from a magic gemstone she wore in her tiara. In Amy's stories, Apex stayed as the The Gem and learned had to live her life.

Amy didn't understand why he loved these stories so much, but he believed it was wrong for him to like them. It made him weird. Everyone, he felt sure, would laugh at him if they knew about it. As it was, people mostly ignored him. He ate alone in the lunchroom, occasionally glancing over at the tables of girls, especially the cheerleaders when they wore their uniforms on game days. They looked so cute.

He wanted to be cute, too.

He found himself attracted to some of the girls at school, but he also envied them. The cute outfits, the things they got to do with their long hair, barretts and shrunnies and clips. Amy wanted to meet a girl, to become friends, and he wanted to kiss a girl! But the girls didn't like him. If he did try and talk to one that usually acted offended, like it was rude for him to even try.

He didn't believe he wanted to be a girl back then. If anyone had made the suggestion, he would have denied it before crumbling into dust with shame. Even when he found THE BOOK, he still didn't dare even consider that he wanted to be a girl. He'd stumbled across THE BOOK while searching through the stacks at a used bookstore, hoping to find a book he'd heard about called Turnabout in which a husband and a wife switched bodies. Instead, he found THE BOOK. The Identity Web went deeper into

the idea of a man being swapped into a female than anything he'd ever read. It filled his mind with new questions, new images, new dreams.

And now, all these years later, here he was waking up in her apartment, and he had a woman's body. He stretched, feeling his breasts sway, and then he cupped them, squeezed them. His breasts.

He giggled.

It was pretty amazing, having breasts. It felt right, like he'd finally reclaimed a part of him that had been missing. His whole body felt that way!

Amy wanted to go back to the bar. He'd had so much fun. He considered just forwarding time, you could do that in a virtual world, but he had what to him seemed a weird and yet totally not weird desire. He wanted to go to breakfast – as a girl. He wanted to do a lot of things as a girl. Part of him thought it was kind of ridiculous. How different could eating breakfast be as a girl, really?

He didn't care.

He just wanted to, and the new Amy was all about doing what he wanted. Besides, it would give him an excuse to try on one of outfits he'd bought for Amy. He'd spent so much time shopping and buying clothes for her, and he hated to even think about the bills, so he decided he wouldn't. He went to Amy's walk in closet and started to look through his outfits.

Cliche time, he told himself, as he struggled to decide which one to wear. Oh, nothing about him made any sense, but it all did. Why did he want to have this experience? Wouldn't it be better to be able to just pick something? He didn't even know if he was really so unsure, or if he was just playing the role he'd imagined, but there he was, tossing blouses and skirts and jeans onto his bed, puzzling over which one to wear first. They were all cute. But which one was *today* cute?

He found himself sitting alone at a small table. He'd brought a smart pad, so he'd have something to read. It was always awkward to eat alone, but whereas in the past when he'd eaten alone he'd kept his head down, his eyes to himself, he now glanced about from beneath the curtain of his hair.

Almost everyone was young and attractive. Most people went that route when they went into VR. There were a few aliens and a pixie. Fun. He wondered how many of the girls were really guys, how many of the guys girls. The hostess had been sweet. The waitress had been sweet. In the real world when he ate alone as a big, clumpy guy, people were mostly polite. Now, people were warm and friendly.

It was good to be a pretty girl.

Amy ordered an egg white omelet. He ate daintily, the way he'd always practiced. He was worried everyone was looking at him, that they all could tell, somehow, he was a guy, the same way Erin at the bar had known he was a guy. Or, would it be worse if no one was watching him? If he was still ignored? Weird, Outcast. Freak?

But no. He saw it, and he sensed it. People were checking him out, and he was pretty so they approved. He was sure. Fairly sure. When he went to pay the bill, fishing his wallet out of the purse tucked into his shoulder, he got to experience what he would remember as one of the happiest moments of his life.

"I love your bag!" The girl at the register had said.

Amy's mouth fell open. He felt so good. "Oh, thanks!" He said. "I just got this."

"It's really cute."

"I love your hair," Amy offered, scared the compliment would be rejected, that the girl would make an ugly face because who was this fat creep to even think his opinion mattered.

But she seemed pleased, and thanked him.

We're just two girls, talking, Amy thought as he strutted from the restaurant. It may not seem like much for those who don't know, but for Amy it meant the world. Even that simple, ordinary moment, was a dream come true.

Amy went shopping. It sorta made no sense, since you could shop for everything in the VR world from a single menu without going into a store. Even in the real world, physical stores were dying as more and more people took advantage of online buying. He didn't need anything, but it was another experience he wanted to have.

It's a good thing NPCs are patient, because Amy tried on every pair of shoes in the store. He found himself sitting in a crescent of boxes, all opened, shoes peeking out from the tissue wrapping, as he turned his foot this way and that, admiring how pretty the latest pair was, an assessing how they would go with different outfits.

"They look great," the salesman said, just as he'd said about every pair Amy had tried. She'd picked a cute young guy, so she could practice talking to guys.

"They are pretty," Amy admitted. He really wanted to buy them, plus all the other ones. He had to pick just one pair to add to his already insane shoe collection. His eyes drifted across all the shoes he'd tried on. "You know what?" Amy said, shrugging apologetically. "That first pair I tried

on? Like, two hours ago? I know it may seem kinda annoying, but I think I want those? I'm really sorry?"

"Nothing to be sorry about," the young man said with a smile. "And I agree. Those are the best look for you."

"Thanks," Amy said. He was an NPC. This was a VR fantasy world. She could dial up an encounter in the changing room. Maybe it would be safer than doing it with someone who was actually a real person? Plus, the reviews all said these NPCs were incredible.

But, no. He was tired, he told himself. Maybe some other time. Really. He wasn't tired. Amy was still scared, and besides, his fantasy was not to simply order sex. He wanted to be wanted. He wanted to have a guy come after him because he was so pretty. He wanted to know just what that felt like.

A girl walks into a bar. She's nervous.