

Ordinary Amy

By Cooper and Kadee

A girl walks into a bar. She's terrified. She spent hours on her hair and make-up, choosing the right outfit. The face and body she wears are bespoke, hand picked; she knows she looks good. She feels certain guys will be hitting on her as soon as she takes a seat, if they even wait that long.

She wants this. She thinks. She's been imagining what it will be like to be female, an object of desire.

Yet, she feels afraid. Why? Because she is a guy in real life, and this is his first time ever being a girl.

Amy— he chose the name because she wanted something simple that sounded kind of wholesome— he was already worrying people might think he was that kind of girl- paused as he entered the dimly lit bar, called Hook Ups, letting his eyes adjust. It was cool inside, and he felt goosebumps on his long, bare legs. Everything felt so real. As his eyes adjusted he saw the bar was crowded— clusters and guys and girls, some on the dance floor, most gathered in groups at tables.

Am I the only one who came alone? He wondered, feeling self-conscious, all his real world insecurities flooding over him even in his pretty new body: loser, outcast, freak.

He hurried to the bar— there was a stool toward the end— and took a seat, brushing back his hair. He loved the feeling of brushing back his hair, seeing his long, red nails.

The bartender was at the other end of the bar, talking. Amy sat ramrod straight, staring straight ahead. He wondered if he should face out, make some kind of sexy pose, and he wanted to. He wanted to flaunt his long legs, his firm breasts, he wanted to look at some guy and give him a “come hither” glance.

He couldn't. He was too nervous. He raised a small hand, trying to get the bartender's attention, feeling like a bashful school girl. The bartender sees him, and starts toward him, a kind of bemused look on her face. “Hey, honey,” she says. “What's your poison?”

“Um...” Amy whispers. He'd thought about this. A lot. “A cosmo?”

The bartender's face softens, and she leans on the bar. “This is your first time, right?”

“I've never been here before,” Amy says, wondering, did I do something wrong? He has a small, pretty voice. It took him hours to choose it.

“No, I mean as a girl.”

Amy blushes and looks away. Is it that obvious? There they are again: his insecurities. Freak. Outcast. Loser. He is sure the bartender is about to laugh in his face.

“I thought so,” the bartender says, though he never answered.

“I'm sorry,” Amy says, grabbing his purse. “I'll just go.”

The bartender covers his hand with her own. “It's okay,” she says. “Calm down. Relax. You're shaking!”

Amy realized he is, indeed, shaking. The bartender's kindness catches him off guard. He's not used to people being nice to him. “I'm scared,” Amy admits.

“No shit. My name is Erin. You’re fine. Everything is okay. You’re not the first guy who came here all girled up and felt nervous. How do you think I spotted you?”

“Really?” Amy says. One of what his therapists says one of his “challenges” is that he suffers from terminal uniqueness. He’s prone to think no one ever felt the way he felt before, that he’s so different and weird. It surprises him, though, that other guys are afraid of being girls, even if they, like him, must probably have wanted to at least try it.

“Oh, yeah,” Erin says. “Now, you just sit tight. I’m gonna make you that cosmo. But, can you do one thing for me?”

“What?”

“Smile. Try to enjoy yourself. Being a girl should be fun.”

Amy laughs and smiles.

“You have a pretty smile.”

Amy smiles wider, feeling a little relieved. It was supposed to be fun, right? I am such a freak, he thinks. Why do I suffer everything?

Erin is back with his drink. She’d taken a special interest. Her heart goes out to Amy, and all the other shy guys who come in here, wanting to be pretty girls, but terrified of their own desires. “There are some customers at the other end waiting for drinks,” Erin says. “Just remember, this is your experience. It may be enough to handle right now just to come in here and sit down. But, word of advice. The way you are sitting is sending a message that you want to be alone.”

Amy smiles and sips his drink. He feels better. He feels he has made a friend. He had no friends in real life. He doesn’t know why. He thinks he’s pretty nice, but he has longed for, ached for any connection.

He doesn't like the cosmo. He tried to make one himself in real life and didn't like it there, either. He'd thought maybe it would taste different as a girl?

He thinks about what Erin said. About the way he was sitting. He thinks about turning on his seat, showing some leg, letting the guys know he's available. The thought terrifies him. Something in him tells him that what he's feeling is wrong, that he shouldn't want a man to dance with him, stare into his eyes, kiss him. It makes him a creep, a weirdo, a pervert. But, he wants it so bad.

"Hey!"

Suddenly, there she is on the barstool next to him. It's another girl, but she looks almost like a cute guy. "You're hot!" She says, grabbing his hand. "Let's dance! I'm Frankie"

She drags Amy from the stool. He's flustered, surprised, blushing. Frankie's so bold and confident, he can't say no! He finds himself on the dance floor, and he feels like the biggest spaz in the world. He doesn't know what to do with his arms, and his feet suddenly feel like they're made out of lead.

Frankie laughs. "Follow my lead," she says.

Amy starts to mirror Frankie, and soon he relaxes, smiles, starts having fun. In his whole life, he has never had the courage to get out there on the dance floor, and now here he is— dancing!

They start dancing apart, but Frankie gets closer, closer, and soon she is touching him— just gentle touches, little caresses that leave his heart racing, skin tingling, and then she kisses him on the neck, the cheek, and then she covers his lips with her own, and Amy feels like he's in heaven.

It's his first kiss, with a boy or a girl, and he— well, he likes kisses! They feel so good.

But he is also feeling afraid of all these feelings. He is feeling insecure. He is starting to think about running right out the door, away from Frankie and her intensity, her raw expression of feelings. She makes him feel pretty and wanted and desired.

I don't deserve this, he thinks. This isn't right. She thinks I'm someone I'm not! If she knew the real me?

Frankie has her hand on the small of Amy's back now, and she's guiding him somewhere— toward the ladies' room? More fear. More dread. More self-hate and terror. Amy didn't know exactly what Frankie had in mind, but he suspected it was something— dirty?

The thought thrills him. Disgusts him. Shames him. He's imagined making love as a woman many times, nights spent tangled in sweaty sheets lost in the soft world of pleasure, but he'd always been alone, he'd never shared these fantasies with anyone.

Frankie is laughing, saying something, as she pushes the bathroom door open and guides Amy toward one of the stalls. He freezes. "I'm not ready," he says. "I'm sorry. I can't." He thinks Frankie will be mad, but she just seems the same— intense, hungry.

"This is your first time, right?" Frankie says. "As a girl?"

How can everyone tell? Amy wonders, blushing, but there's no use denying it. "Yes."

"I love taking a guys' virginity," Frankie says. "I'll be gentle. I'll make sure you enjoy it. You couldn't ask for a better partner."

Amy feels like he's being sold a car, but yet somehow her words convince him. They are enough to overcome his fear. He nods. Frankie leads him into the stall, and she closes the door.

A couple girls come giggling into the bathroom. They go to the mirror to check their makeup, and they hear soft sighs, panting, a lower woman's voice whispering, "Just relax. Relax."

When it's over, Frankie gives Amy a kiss. "You okay?"

Amy nods. "Yes." He's more than okay. He's – he doesn't even know the word for it. He's never felt this happy. His body has never given him such pleasure. He's always hated his body, suffered it, and he's so happy to be a girl now. It's everything.

In a daze, Amy leaves the bar and heads back to her apartment here in the virtual world. She can't stand the thought of going back to the real world, back to being HIM. And, something has been awoken in her. She explores her new body, and she finds so much pleasure, but she also realizes as she drifts off to sleep, that it's better with someone else.

She wonders if maybe she is a lesbian after all. Frankie had been amazing, and she'd been totally attracted to her, so maybe girls? Yet, when she explores herself, she keeps imagining herself with a man. She knows there is really only one way to find out.

She's going to have to find a man. Or spend the rest of her life wondering.

Amy thinks he has changed. He's taken a bunch of big leaps. Maybe, just maybe, he can be happy?

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 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, barrets and shruncies 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, and 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.

Chapter Three

A girl walks into a bar. She's nervous. The bar is called Hook Ups, and Amy feels warm as she remembers all of her firsts here: first dance, first kiss. First sexplay. She glances around, wondering if Frankie is here, but doesn't spot her among the room full of faces.

Maybe it's for the best, Amy decides. She might just be tempted to go with Frankie again. It's safer. Easier. But she came here with a purpose tonight, and that was to find a man.

There's no one sitting at the bar, and Erin isn't here tending bar. It's someone else— a burly guy in a tight t-shirt that shows off his bulging muscles. Something primal in Amy responds to just the sight of those big shoulders, that square chin. He feels himself getting hot just looking at this *man*, and the guy catches him looking and smiles. Amy checks. He's an actual person. Some people take jobs in VR to earn money to pay for their fun time in VR, which isn't cheap. It's win/win for the company, as customers love having more “live” people to meet.

“Hey, cutie,” the guy says with a smile. “Get you something?”

“A mojito,” Amy says. It's the third most popular drink among women, and he's dying to try all the girly drinks. He hopes he likes it better than the cosmo, at least.

Amy gathers his courage. He promised himself he wouldn't do it again— sit there like a statue, staring at the mirror behind the bar, giving everyone a stay away from me vibe. He swivels on the barstool, a $\frac{3}{4}$ turn, and crosses his legs, letting his eyes roam across the room.

Oh, shit. Guys are checking him out. A lot of guys. They're whispering to each other, letting their eyes roam up and down his body. Terror. Amy

fights the urge to turn away, to go back to staring at the wall, but no. He wants this! The insecurities are there, those damn voices in his head: you're pathetic! The only way you can get anyone to even look at you is by putting on a fucking costume.

Shut up, Amy says, though he is shaken. It's true, he believes. He is disgusting, and this is all a lie.

He meets the eyes of one of the guys. He feels a connection, and the guy smiles, kind of raises his head like— what do you think? Omigod, Amy thinks, looking over his boyish but handsome face. He's so cute! Is he really interested in me? Amy fights the ever present fear and anxiety, the urge to run away from what he wants and needs and even the possibility that someone hot would want him. He has to do this. He has to try!

Amy smiles and drops his eyes to the side. He starts playing with his hair. He read this is how a girl flirts, how she lets a guy know she's interested. He realizes more than ever that he enjoys playing the girl. This role is comfortable to him. He'd never felt good being the aggressor.

The guy starts walking over. He has a good walk— and a good body. Amy smiles, still playing with his hair. The guy walks right up to him and says, "What's your name?"

"Amy." It's barely more than a whisper.

"You're a beautiful girl, Amy," the guy says, sliding onto the barstool next to Amy. "I'm Max."

Beautiful girl. It's like chocolate for his ears. Amy feels such a burst of joy. He's waited his whole life to hear those words. And now— what? He has no idea what to say, where to look, what to do with his hands.

Max makes it easy. He talks about himself, and he asks Amy questions— safe questions. Nothing about the real world, nothing that might give him

away. As Amy talks about himself, Max is totally locked in, like he's hanging on every word, like Amy is telling him the most fascinating story he's ever heard, even when Amy is just talking about this dumb show she loves called Sunset Harbor.

They drink, talk and laugh. Somehow, Max seems to get closer and closer without moving his barstool, and there is gentle touching. Amy has been dying to touch him, to feel that hard body, and he finally finds the courage, putting his arm on Max' bicep and giving it a squeeze. Without even realizing it, Amy has grown comfortable talking to Max. He finds the courage to put his hand on Max's chest, and it's so hard and flat, like a piece of steel. The feeling of his soft little hand against that steel sends shivers through Amy's body.

They dance. They talk and laugh some more. "Come on," Max says. "Let's go back to my place for a nightcap."

Amy giggles. He knows what that means. Is this really going to happen? Is he really going to do this? "Sounds fun," he says, getting up. Max takes his hand, and those tingles again and Amy realizes all that talking and flirting has gotten him in a state. His body is humming, and his mind is even hot. There's a connection here with Max like he's never felt before, and he wants more, a deeper connection, a physical connection.

Soon they are walking side by side, and Max has his arm around Amy's waist, his hand resting on Amy's hip. He feels safe and protected as he fits his curves into Max's hard angles. They laugh and talk about nothing, but the words mean everything.

They are surrounded by skyscrapers, all flickering with lights, and old fashioned looking yellow cabs zoom down the streets. They pass other couples, groups of friends laughing. When they pass a single man, walking

along, staring into the distance, Amy feels for him. She can see the loneliness. She has been that man most of her life, and she is glad now she is walking with a friend and a cute one at that.

When they get to Max's place, he makes drinks. "A mojito for the lady," he says, and Amy is so flattered he even remembered her drink. "Lighting: Romantic Evening," Jeff said, and now the room is softly lit by the golden glow of dozens of flickering candles.

They sit on the couch, and Amy is nervous, playing with his hair. Max brushes the hair away from Amy's face, cups his chin, and Amy is freaking out inside as he leans in and kisses her. They linger in that first kiss, Max's hand against Amy's soft cheek, each one tasting, testing, getting to know each other on this new, more intimate level. Amy is stiff at first, but it feels so good, and he feels so safe with Max, and he doesn't want Max to feel weird or rejected, so he begins to answer Max's passion with his own, and Max is lowering her onto his back, and kissing and Amy feels Max's hand on his breast, and wow! So, that's what it feels like!

Clothes start coming off. Skin slides against skin. Flesh against flesh. Max's hand finds its way between Amy's legs, and Amy squeals, pushing back, away. It feels so good, it's terrifying and much as she needs and wants it, she shakes her head.

"What's wrong?" Max says.

Amy sighs. Don't do this, he tells himself. Don't ruin this like you ruin everything. He looked at Max, expecting to see he doesn't know- anger? Disgust?

But Max's eyes are soft and filled with compassion.

"I just got scared," Amy admits, and then, "This is my first- I'm a virgin."

Amy feels vulnerable now in a way he has never felt. He's just been honest about something that shames him on so many levels, and he's terrified Max will connect the dots and realize that a hot girl in this world who's also a virgin must be a guy.

If Max is thinking any of that, it doesn't show, which is still all puppy dog compassion. He puts a hand on Amy's calf. "It's okay," he says. "We don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with."

Omigod. Those words, the way he says them. Amy practically leaps on him now. She needs to kiss him and be held by him, and when Amy feels his hard member pressing against her body the fear is all gone and she just wants him and needs him.

Max is on top of her now, kissing, caressing. Amy can't wait. She reaches down and finds his dick, and it feels so good, and she guides it into her, and Max makes this grunting sound like a bear, and it drives Amy wild as she feels him inside her, thrusting, and it hurts and it's the best hurt she has ever felt and there is a heat building in her center, a tension and it grows hotter and more intense and hotter and more intense and then it explodes, a supernova of pure pleasure through every cell in her body and Amy hears herself scream, "Yes! Oh, God, yes."

When it's over, a dazed and happy Amy doesn't know what to do. Is she supposed to leave now? She should probably head back to her place. But Max surprises her again. "You should sleep over," he says. "I don't want you walking home this late at night."

The city, Recon Junction, is perfectly safe. In the social setting, there is no violence, no crime. But it's the gesture, the protectiveness that has Amy swooning. It's all been a dream— her dream of her first time.

The tears come. It's too much. She still doesn't think she deserves this, to be this happy. Max holds her. He doesn't speak. He doesn't need to. He just holds her and kisses her on the head, and somehow she feels everything is going to be okay.

Sure, those hateful voices say. As long as he never finds out you're actually a fat, disgusting pig.

Chapter Four

Amy wakes to the smell of freshly brewing coffee. She is disoriented at first, not recognizing the room, but memories of the night before come back to her, even as Max appears carrying a tray with a steaming French press and two mugs. "Coffee?" He says.

"Please!" Amy says. He didn't drink that much, but he feels like he has a hangover.

Max pours two mugs, hands one to Amy. "Would the lady be wanting anything else this morning?" He says in a bad British accent. "Sorry," he says. "A little too much Downton Abbey."

Amy laughs and sips his coffee. "Ow!" It's hot and burns his lips a little, but it tastes so good.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." And a new doubt and fear is starting to creep into Amy's mind as he thinks about how caring and attentive Max seems: he can't be real. No one is this nice. He feels nervous, thinking he should probably leave. He feels himself getting close to this man, developing feelings for him, and though it's what he always wanted, now it feels dangerous somehow.

Max sits on the edge of the bed. “So, I was thinking we should get brunch.”

Amy scrunches up his face, trying to think of how to get out of this without being rude. He just feels he needs some time to think, process or something. “Um, that sounds great...”

“But...” Max says, the smile never leaving his face.

“I’ve gotta get back to the real world?”

“Drag,” Max says, and he seems so fine with it Amy starts wondering—was he just being nice? Does he really want me to leave? Amy just feels so confused and uncertain, struggling to decipher the clues, to figure out what’s really going on in this guy’s head. Does he like like me, or was it just a fling?

“If you can’t do brunch, how about doing something else for me before you go?”

Here it comes, Amy thinks. Something gross and perverted.

But Max just hands Amy his phone. “Let’s exchange numbers. We should get together again when our schedules match.”

“That sounds great,” Amy says, annoyed at himself for expecting the worst. Everyone in the VR had virtual contact information, so he gave Max Amy’s number.

“A bunch of my friends are getting together next week,” Max says. “You should come. They’d love you.”

Friends. It all seems too good, too impossible. Amy checks again to see if Max is even a real person, to make sure he isn’t an NPC just playing out some kind of fantasy scenario. But, no. Max is a real person. Once again, though, Amy feels suspicious. No one is this good. No one.

Amy gets dressed, and as he's leaving, Max gives him a hug and a friendly goodbye kiss. "I am so glad we met," he says. "I really like you, Amy."

Back at his apartment, Amy throws himself onto the bed, giggling. He hugs his knees to his chest and rolls side to side, his hair in his face. He was no longer a virgin, and it had been everything he'd ever dreamt of and more. He wants to take the elevator to the roof and shout it to the world, "I had sex! And I loved it! A guy wanted me! Me! That's right! He wanted me!"

Amy had never felt wanted, had never felt someone cared about him, his feelings. It was like emotional smack, and he needed and wanted more. He wanted to share it with everyone, with the whole world, or at least with someone.

He needed girlfriends, or at least a girlfriend. Another girl to talk to. Frankie? No. She didn't seem like the let's talk and braid each other's hair type. Maybe Erin? They barely knew each other.

He would meet Max's friends if he went to the party, but that was a week away. He couldn't wait, and it wouldn't be the same, but he pulled up the menu, skimmed through the choices and then picked Marci, a perky blonde "InstaFriend." It cost a hundred dollars, which he really didn't have, but he didn't care. He just had to talk to someone, even if that someone wasn't even a real person.

His phone rang. "Hey, girl," he heard Marci say. "You wanna get together?"

"Yes. Right now. Here."

The air in the room flickered and Marci materialized. "It's been too long!" She said, rushing to Amy and greeting him with a hug and air kisses. Amy couldn't wait. "I had sex!" He burst out.

“Girl, I want all the deets.”

Amy had never ordered a fake friend, despite his loneliness. He’d thought it was kinda pathetic, and besides, what would they even do or talk about? Amy spent most of his time playing video games solo, and it hadn’t seemed like a good use of money.

He regretted his decision now. Marci was better than real, and he couldn’t help but wonder if maybe there was a real person inside that avatar. Her facial expressions and movements were so natural, but Amy doubted there was a real person anywhere who was such a good listener. He talked and talked, sharing all the details of how he and Max had met, their whole night together.

Then, he heard a bell ring three times. “Your Instafriend session expires in 60 seconds. Renew? Let Session Expire?”

Marci froze as the system waited for Amy to respond. He’d forgotten he was talking to an AI, it had all seemed so real, and the realization that he actually didn’t have a friend, that there wasn’t a single person in the world he could talk to, really talk to, made him ache with loneliness.

Marci vanished. Amy found himself curled up in a ball, crying all the feelings he’d felt in the past 24 hours swept over him— the pure joy he’d felt with Max, the thrill when Max had said the words, “I like you.” The terror he’d felt about brunch, the void the opened up in him when his Instafriend had vanished...

And those damn voices! Worthless. Freak. Liar. Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!

Therapy hadn’t worked. Getting older, feeling depressed and suicidal, Amy had gone to see Dr. Angela White, whom he’d found on Google and chosen because she listed gender identity as one of the “issues” she

helped people deal with— along with social anxiety. She'd seemed good. Compassionate. Smart. Middle-aged but still youthful looking, she wore flowing, boho dresses and gave off a distinctly Earth Mother vibe. Her office soothed. It was such a calm, welcoming space.

He talked. She listened. After only a few suggestions, she made a suggestion. "I want you to join a group on MeetPeople.com. Any group."

"Um, yeah, that's not something I really do."

"It's all about change. You're unhappy with your life now, right?"

"Well, yeah."

"If you keep doing what you always did, you'll keep getting what you always got. No one said it's going to be easy. But, you have to ask yourself, am I willing to suffer some short term discomfort to get the life I want."

The thought was terrifying, bringing back the same hell-reel of nightmarish memories from his childhood, which he began to share with Dr. White: eating alone in the lunchroom. Even if he sat at the opposite end of a long table far away from the other kids, they would pick up their trays and leave.

Freak.

Getting on the school bus. Lots of kids sitting by themselves in two person seats, one after another blocking him from sitting, glaring at him. "No." The bus driver screaming, "SIT DOWN!" Him, ashamed and horrified, thinking, *it's not my fault. They won't let me sit with them.* This happened every day. "SIT DOWN! SIT DOWN."

Angry, hateful faces. "No."

Freak.

Outcast.

The birthday party no one came to, the last one he would ever try to have. Balloons and decorations mocking him. A big sparkling sign that read Happy Birthday! He'd planned games. They had an ice cream cake. He'd been excited for weeks, thinking about how much fun he and the other kids would have. It was his birthday, and he just wanted to be like the other kids. He just wanted to be liked.

And no one came. Not one person. His mother was furious— at him. “Why don't you have any friends?” She said, cigarette in hand. “Why can't you just be like other kids?”

I don't know, he'd thought. *I don't know. What's wrong with me?*

The ice cream cake melted, sagging, oozing across the plastic plate. “All this money wasted!” Mom said, taking the cake and throwing it into the trash, tearing down the Happy Birthday sign, ripping it into pieces.

Freak. Outcast, Loser.

He'd started crying, and his mother had slit her glassy eyes at him and said, “I don't even like you.”

The therapist had helped him understand. His mother was embarrassed, took his failure as somehow a reflection on her motherhood. The anger, Dr White explained, was misdirected— self-hate.

Amy had withdrawn. He'd never shared any of this with anyone. “I don't want to talk about it anymore.”

“I understand,” Dr. White said, “but I am afraid you're going to have to confront the fact that your mother didn't love you.”

He'd found a MeetPeople group— they were a group of actors and filmmakers. Amy had always wanted to be an actor. He thought it would be a way to escape from himself, to be someone else, someone better.

They met in a rehearsal studio a circle of chairs arranged on the off-white tile rubber floor: one wall was a floor to ceiling mirror. Amy chose a seat to the back of the mirror. He hated the sight of himself. The group did a script reading. He was given a part to read. After, one of the guys came up to him. "My name is Raj. I'm making a short film," he said. "You'd be perfect for the part of Henry."

"That's so cool. Yes. I want to do it." Amy couldn't believe it. Just like that! He felt like he was part of the group. He had friends. They liked him. Raj sent him the script, and he did not like the part. He would play a bitter, angry, racist loner.

Other than the racist part, it was too close to home. Is that how they had seen him? Just on that first meeting?

No. No.

It's just a part. Just acting. It was his first part, and he was so excited. He spent hours learning his lines, practicing how he would say them. The shoot was—magical. Cameras and lights. A guy with a microphone on a long pole. They did it all in one day, and when they finished Raj had said, "great, great, great. It was a pleasure working with you."

The next month, he showed up at the rehearsal studio, and there was no one there. He messaged the group. "We're so sorry!" Came the answer. "We changed locations and totally forgot to tell you, since you're new."

Amy spent a day in a shame spiral. They hate me, he thought. They hate me, and they are just toying with me, mocking me. But, no. They'd all seemed so nice. He was over-reacting. He had to trust people, and he wanted to be part of the group.

The next month, it happened again. Empty room. More apologies.

Freak. Outcast. Loser.

Chapter Five

Max' party turned out to be a picnic. He sent Amy the invitation— it featured a dancing dog with the message, “Let's Get *Fun-ky*.” It was so dorky. Amy loved it. RSVP.

Amy had opened it at work, back in the flesh world. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one was peeking into his cubicle, and he started to click *Attending*, but his hand froze as he remembered it all again— the therapist had been wrong. Getting out had only confirmed that people saw him as a weird loser. He had not made any friends. Nothing had changed. All that would happen if he went to the party was that Max would see what a freak he was, and it would be over.

He moved the mouse, hovering over *Decline*.

He moved it again, to *Maybe*. He clicked.

He probably wouldn't go. Maybe he wouldn't go. He didn't know.

Now that he'd taken the plunge as Amy, real life work sucked even more. “Real” life sucked even more. He'd gotten a taste of what life was like— could be like— for Amy. For him. It was so different and so good, and he felt even more disgusted to be back in this male flesh sack, back in this life of complete and total wrong. As soon as he got home from work, he logged into the system and sighed with relief as he once more found himself in Amy's body— his real body.

He thought about going back to the club. Having lost his cherry, he wanted more— he'd Webhunted “best sex positions for women” and found articles with graphics. Just looking at some of them had made him thirsty and hot. But, Max. He felt like it would be cheating on Max, even though

they'd only slept together once and they weren't even in a committed relationship. Max was just— could he be the one?

Amy felt silly even thinking such a thought. It was such a childish fantasy. But— could he?

Amy sighed. It didn't matter. He just couldn't stand the thought of sleeping with someone else, Max finding out. It felt wrong and weird and if he was going to obsess over Max shouldn't he at least go to the picnic? Come on, Amy. Get it together.

He decided to stay in, curl up on the couch with a glass of wine and watch a movie. It was a romantic comedy about a couple who are sent on a space mission together. Just the two of them in a small ship for months. Of course, they instantly hate each other and bicker endlessly, but then end up falling in love. Amy found himself crying, dabbing at the corner of his eye with a tissue.

As the movie ended, and he thought about heading to bed, spending the night as Amy, he started to worry about money again. He was burning through it rapidly, and the day would come at this rate where all his credit cards would be maxed out, and he'd be locked out of Amy's life. How insane was it to watch a movie here, when he could have watched the same exact movie in the flesh world for free? How could he even think about paying to sleep as Amy, when he would be *unconscious*?

None of it made sense, and yet all of it made sense. Logically, no. Logically, it made no sense to spend money like this, to live in a fantasy world. But there was something much stronger in Amy's mind that told him what was really true— intuition.

He was doing what he needed to do. Living his truth. And somehow, some way, everything would work out as long as he kept doing that. He'd

tried the path of logic, of doing what “made sense” and he’d ended up sprawled on the cold tile floor of his bathroom in a pool of his own vomit, an open jar of sleeping pills clutched in his hand. When the EMTs had lifted him, put him on a stretcher, he’d felt defeated. No, he thought he’d mumbled, but his memories weren’t clear. No. Let me die.

Logic. Common sense. Go along to get along.

All great ideas for anyone who wanted to be miserable as far as Amy was concerned. What had his heart been telling him? Go into Mindstrike. Become the woman you were meant to be.

He’d been scared, but he’d done it, and he’d had the two greatest experiences of his whole life as a result. It was no longer a question. He now knew that when he listened to his intuition, it led him to happiness. And what was his intuition telling him now?

He opened Max’ invitation, and changed his reply to Attending. And then, he logged out of Mindstrike, immediately feeling that sinking feeling of being back in the real world, back in the stupid, mis-formed shape of his own body. He didn’t do it because it made sense. He did it because he wanted to spend more time living as Amy.

He’d spent his whole real life asleep. What difference would a few more hours make?

Amy spent hours trying to decide what outfit to wear to the picnic. He thought about skirts and shorts, flirty dresses, sunglasses and wedge sandals versus sneakers. Mostly, though, he thought about Max. What would Max like? What would give Max the right impression? He’d already seen Amy all dressed up for a night at the club. Now, he would see daytime Amy, and Amy wanted to look just right, to be exactly the kind of girl Max could see himself with, could imagine as a— okay, admit it— partner.

Oh! Amy had always wanted a boyfriend in a vague, dreamy kind of way. When he'd been a teenager, he'd watched *The Look* a thousand times. It was about an "ugly duckling" girl. One of the guys takes a bet that he can turn her into the prettiest, most popular girl in the school, and of course, he does, and Amy loved to watch that movie, pretending he was that girl and every romantic moment was too sweet, too perfect, and especially the scene where the guy picked her up and held her in the air as he kissed her.

Amy spent hours just replaying that scene in his mind, imagining what it would feel like to be lifted up like that, so small and light.

Amy tried all different looks and— sporty, girly, sophisticated, punk. It was so easy in *Mindstrike*. All you had to do was pick the clothes out of your inventory if you wanted to do things the easy way, and today he did. You could even virtually try on clothes from the online catalog, so it was basically a feast of fashion as Amy clicked on different outfits, turned and looked at himself from different angles, struck different poses, giggled and then tried on another one...

He looked super cute in everything but finally settled on a floral dress with a loose, flowing skirt, a floppy straw hat and wedge sandals. It was a very sweet, feminine look, and he felt like it would give Max all the right signals. Now, if he could just figure out which bag to bring and what about sunglasses?

Oh, no, he thought, smirking. I guess I'll have to do another outfit montage for my accessories!

Life as a girl is sooooo hard, he giggled, throwing himself on his bed, laughing. He needed a sec before he dug into his collection of sunglasses— he'd bought a few pair of the oversized, 60s movie star style

glasses that had come back and been all the rage, but were they still the rage in Mindstrike? Hmmmmnnn. Max struck Amy as the kind of guy who wanted his woman to be on trend. Mindstrike had spawned its own mediasphere- magazines, videos and podcasts all dedicated to “life” in the VR world. A lot of real world media companies had created Mindstrike versions of their real world publications with content specific to the Mindstrike experience.

Of course, just like in the real world, a lot of people were obsessed with fashion and so there were plenty of sources for what was in style right now and what would be in style this spring and what different VR influencers were wearing and... Amy loved all of it. He sat down and started searching for articles on trendy sunglasses and he was so relieved to see the oversized frames were still in style, because he, actually, loved loved loved them.

He tried on a pair, pretending he was smoking a cigarette with a long extender. “My darling,” he said, perfectly imitating the affected Hollywood accent of 50s starlet Helen Brooks. “We simply must do lunch sometime.”

Amy giggled, posed, turning his head side to side. *Of course Classic Helens are still in style*, he thought, putting the glasses up up his hair. *They’re called timeless for a reason.*

He put them back over his eyes, then put his hand to his cheek, remembering one of his all time favorite scenes from Morocco: “I’m scared and afraid and I don’t know what to do,” Helen had whispered, black and white shadows falling across her face. “Tell me what to do!”

“You don’t need to worry, doll,” Hunter Bough had said, grabbing her arms and pushing her against a wall. “I won’t let anything happen to you.

And, as for what you should do..." He cupped her chin, tilted her head back and kissed her. "Just hold my hand, and don't let go."

Chapter Six

A girl walks into a park. She's terrified. She knows she's cute, and she can't wait to show off her outfit, but she's scared of people, socializing. She never seems to do it right. She walks down a winding path that leads from the parking lot toward a covered picnic area. Smoke rises from a grill, and she can smell charcoal and roasting burgers. There are so many people there, and— oh! That's Matt at the grill, and he's wearing a big, puffy white chef's hat, and he sees her and waves, smiles. "Amy!" He yells

Amy smiles and makes a small wave back, hand close to her body.

"Get on down here and join the fun!" Matt shouts, and he seems right in his element, grilling, surrounded by his friends.

Amy makes her way to Matt. He steps away from the grill to give her a quick hug and a kiss. He smells like smoke. "You look great," he says, brushing a strand of hair away from Amy's face, his knuckles just grazing her cheek.

"Oh, thanks," Amy giggles, blushing, dropping his eyes. "You look cute in your little chef's hat!"

"I was going to go for the big one," Matt says, picking up on the irony, "but I didn't want to seem ostentatious." He touches Amy on the elbow. "Hey, I gotta stay here and keep this meat from burning. You gonna be okay?"

Amy nods, but his eyes are wide and full of fear at the thought of just— mingling. Matt sees it, and then he says, "You know what? Jill? Hey, Jill?"

A bubbly blonde in a flowing summer dress comes over. “Yeah?”

“Amy, meet Jill. Jill, Amy.”

Amy reaches out as if to shake hands, but finds himself immediately smothered in a warm, loving hug. “Hey!” Jill says. “Omigod, you’re so pretty!”

“This is Amy’s first time meeting our little crew, would you?”

“Of course!” Jill says, grabbing Amy’s hand and dragging him toward the crowd gathered under the shelter. “Come on!”

Amy follows, and it’s all hugs and air kisses and hey how are you and tell me about yourself and Amy mostly just smiles and nods and asks questions, but everyone keeps asking him about him. No one asks him about the flesh world, and no one talks about it at all. Everyone just shares what they do here in Mindstrike, who they are here, and Amy can only tell them a little because she’s so new, but everyone is excited when they hear she’s a newbie and they are all so sure she will love life in Mindtrike and love it and love it some more...

A spark ignites in Amy’s heart. Just a little flickering flame, but it grows bigger, hotter and soon it spreads through his whole body, and it’s a strange and even frightening feeling, because for the first time in his life he feels like he belongs, that these are good people, and he likes them, and they like him, and it’s so easy...

They play frisbee golf... volleyball... Amy is terrible, just as poor an athlete here as in the real world, but no one cares. It’s all in fun, and the usual hyper-competitive people who can turn chewing gum into a life and death battle are not here; they aren’t Matt’s kind of people. Amy forgets himself, his self-consciousness, his terror at being judged. It’s a relief, a new kind of freedom he’s never experienced, and as the sun sets later in

the day, he finds himself on a picnic table bench, curled up against Matt, feeling safe and cozy in his arms. People are heading out. A grinning ranger drives by on a scooter to tell them the park will be closing soon.

Amy is not surprised when Matt asks him if he wants to come back to his place for a nightcap.

Amy gazes up at Matt, Amy's eyes wide and bleary. He's falling in love. He's definitely falling in love. "I would love that," he says, giving Matt's hand a squeeze.

They fast-travel back to Matt's apartment. Neither one wants to drive. As soon as they materialize, Matt's all over Amy, kissing, caressing, unbuttoning his shorts, pushing them down over his hips.

"Wait," Amy says, pushing Matt's groping fingers away, though he craves their touch. He steps away, turns his back, plays with his hair.

"What's wrong?"

Amy turns. "In the real world, I'm not— I think you should know...?"

Matt waits. He nods. Tell me, his body language says. I'm listening.

"I'm a guy. In the real world. I don't want you to find out later, I just think you should..." Amy starts crying. He's sure Matt will hate him now, will be disgusted.

Matt takes Amy in his arms, hugs him tight, and then he whispers it in Amy's ear, the most wonderful and terrifying phrase Amy has ever heard come from the mouth of a man: "I love you."

"You don't really know me," Amy says, trying to push Matt away, wanting to run. Love. He has craved it his whole life, and now that he's found love, it strikes him like a hammer, and he wants to run, to flee, it's too much. "I should go."

Matt doesn't let go. He holds Amy tight, until Amy stops pushing and collapses against Matt, sobbing, sobbing uncontrollably. "If you knew who I really am, you would hate me," Amy manages to say between sobs.

Matt leads Amy to the couch and they sit. He holds Amy's hands, tight, and looks him right in the eyes. There's a smile on his face: beatific. "Tell me," he says. "Tell me everything."

"You'll hate me," Amy says.

"Maybe I will," Matt says, and Amy feels like he's been punched in the gut. "But there's only one way to find out. Tell me. Tell me everything."

Matt's eyes are soft, kind, loving.

Amy frowns, pruning up his face. *Fine*, he thinks, *fine. I'll tell him everything and prove just how wrong he is, just how much of a freak he's gotten involved with.* It all pours out of Amy, then, freak, outcast... "I'm fat and disgusting..." he spits, "I have no friends and even my parents hate me..."

Matt's eyes are wet as he listens, and then the tears rise and pour down his cheeks. "Oh, my God," he says, shaking his head.

Confused, Amy shakes his head.

"You poor girl," Matt says. And then he pulls Amy's head against his chest and says, "I love you... I love you... I love you..."

Chapter Seven

"You don't hate me?" Amy says in a broken voice. They are both crying now, and when she draws her head from Matt's chest she sees only the soft, blurry outlines of his face.

The apartment goes dark, and then the candles appear all around them, flickering. Matt's tear smudged face draws closer, and Amy feels Matt's salty lips cover his own. He kisses back, pushing forward, answering the needs of his body and his mind. He's been so lonely. Matt is patient, gentle... hands... lips... flesh pressed on flesh... soft sighs and deep grunts... hair and legs entwined... and when Matt enters Amy with a hard, commanding thrust, Amy feels like they have never been so close... and he throws his head back and cries out... and omigod!

After, they kiss and nuzzle, and Amy drifts off to a blissful sleep, curled up in a corner of the couch, hugging her legs to her chest, whispering, "he loves me."

They sit on the porch, enjoying the morning breeze, sipping from steaming cups of coffee. Amy wears Matt's robe, his scent all envelopes her.

"I want you to move in with me," Matt says.

Fear. Once more, Amy is presented with something she's always wanted, and once more, she's afraid. "I- I'm not sure."

"Amy," Matt says. "I know this is all hard for you, but I am going to make you a promise right now."

He stops there, lets the phrase hang in the air as he sips from his mug. For the first time, Amy notices the mug reads, "Yes." She waits for Matt to finish, but he just flashes a Cheshire cat grin and raises an eyebrow. The breeze tussles Amy's hair. She squeezes the mug in her own hands.

"Tell me," Amy finally says.

Matt leans forward and whispers in her ear. A Jet passes overhead, the roar of the engines threatening to drown out his words. A pigeon flies down and lands on the balcony railing, turning its head to the side.

Amy smiles, and the tears come once more, rolling down her cheeks, and they are tears of joy, freedom, release.

“Yes,” she says.

The pigeon flaps its wings and rises, rises, gliding off into the clear blue sky, rising and rising toward the soft golden rays of the morning sun.

The End
