

Gene Genius



Jenny Winters

An "Adult TV" Novel

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By Jenny Winters

How do I describe myself after the last couple of years?

I'm probably quite reserved now and I think I've worked out the direction I want my life to take. I know that I want to keep a lower profile.

Did I say I've registered for pre-med courses and need all my time to study if I'm going to reach my goals? And I know I have the determination to do that.

Most importantly, the prurient interest in me from the popular press has subsided. At first they all wanted to make something out of nothing; they'd dig up an old story and update it with a new photograph. I got quite afraid to go anywhere, and don't even ask about me being camera-shy.

I think they were trying to work out who I was. For the first eighteen years of my life no one was interested; then they were trying to work out who I'd be-

come before I knew myself. The number of people I barely knew in school who were prepared to say that I was always a little strange or different amazed me.

I didn't think I was any of these things.

I hated it when they told me that I was a girl all along. I didn't think I was. It was time and friends; they got me through it. My friends were the kind of girls that life was favourable to and they taught me to be like them.

I got into doing my homework and they taught me how to look good, how to act around boys and the value of female friendships. The more I worked at it, the easier it became.

When I let myself, I found that I could enjoy life as a girl and that made me enjoy it even more. I could even enjoy the attention... and the boys.

That genetic test did me a lot of favours after all.

Things were strange for more reasons than just my personal situation. When COVID hit, those in charge of things seemed not to know how to respond to it. No one knows why to this day but my little town and county was hit particularly hard by it. A disproportionate number of people got it bad. Not everyone made it through.

Not knowing what else to do, our local schools were closed. It wasn't an elegant solution but there didn't seem to be one available. As it turned out, the planned month-or-so closure was extended several times until it was decided that we'd just skip the current school year. All the kids stayed home; socialising was scant as well, making us all kind of recluses.

Phone calls and text messages replaced face-to-face hanging out.

When the dust settled, we all returned to school to pick up where we had left off. As a result, we were all 18 or 19 when we started senior year of high school. As I had always been less well-developed physically than the other boys, I had hopes that my physique would catch up to the others. That didn't really happen, though. I was still more slightly built than my peers. Just my destiny, I guess. I would just have to learn to accept it and live with it. Things could be worse.

"Pay attention everyone; this is important." Mr. Reynolds stood in front of the class. "This term we've been studying why we're all different and why we're all the same. We may look different..."

"Peter's *all* different." Melanie Chapman was never slow to make some comment in class.

"See me afterwards." Mr. Reynolds looked at her severely and paused to look round at the thirty students in front of him.

"We may look different and as we saw, our families have different stories to tell," he continued. "Now the school's programme has been nominated for recognition throughout the state, and this has presented an exciting opportunity to you all."

He paused and beckoned for Martha Hawkins, his deputy, to step forward. "The school's been contacted by Gene Genius with a free offer. The company does DNA analysis; who knows what that is?"

A couple of hands came up and she looked to the one on the back row first, indicating that Hamilton Baker should speak.

“It’s the analysis that tells you what diseases you’re going to get.”

“It can do that,er” our teach agreed and then turned to Chelsea Kane at the side. “It can tell you if your parents are for real and that you weren’t adopted.”

“That’s right too but the offer we have is slightly different. It won’t do any of those things, but it will tell each of us what our origins are.”

“I think mine was a test tube.” Melanie again. “A dirty one at that.”

“I don’t want to tell you again.” Mr. Reynolds stood and glared at her.

“This offer is different,” Miss Hawkins continued once the class had settled down. “This would tell you about your ancestors; where they came from back in history, and it may give you some insight into how different we are and how alike we are. It’s not going to delve into your genetic future or even your parents’ past.”

The latter remark attracted a snigger at which she paused again.

“It would tell you if your ancestors came from Germany or Spain, Nigeria or Japan. We’re all something of a mix when we look at generations long past and forgotten.”

“What does that mean?” Chelsea asked. “Will it tell me if I’m related to a duke or a lord somewhere?”

“No, it will only give an indication of where in the world your ancestors lived a long time ago.”

“Mine shows all kinds of interesting things that I never knew.” Mr. Reynolds stood and held up a chart. “It says that my distant origins are mainly in Sweden, with some Irish genes there too. I have a minor piece of this genetic information from Spain. Can anyone tell me why?”

“It could be from ships wrecked in Ireland after the Spanish Armada,” Chelsea replied. “We studied that in history. Some ships were wrecked off the coast and the sailors stayed there.”

“That’s my speculation too,” Mr. Reynolds replied. “Of course, it’s only speculation and I’ll never know the answer.”

“That’s a bit boring,” a voice mumbled from the back of the class.”

“But there’s more; it also shows a trace of Arab peoples too. I think that’s because there were Arabs in Moorish Spain, prior to their expulsion in the Fifteenth Century. They were cruel times and wars were bloody affairs but at some time, someone may have married a man or a woman of Arab extraction.”

“My origins are from Nigeria,” Miss Hawkins interrupted politely. “And I too have some Arab in my genetic makeup. I think that means some intermingling with the Arab traders from North Africa.”

“The point of all this is to show that we are all different, even best friends and neighbours may have different genetic sources.” Mr. Reynolds looked to his notes. “This company have offered to do the same study for each member of the class.”

“Does that mean they want our blood?” Rosa Zumba asked.

“No, they ask for a swab from your cheek and a saliva sample. It’s sealed and labelled, then analysed.”

“Better make sure yours isn’t from Melanie Chapman,” Peter told her, smirking at his tormentor, while Rosa pulled out her tongue at him.

“This is being provided for free,” Mr. Reynolds continued. “The company want to use the date, anonymously of course, to include in an information pack. As you’re under eighteen, your parents will have to consent to you taking part.”

“They may find you’re too closely related to a monkey.” Melanie pointed at Peter.

“There’s an information pack for your parents.” Mr. Reynolds ignored the interruption; it was the end of term after all. “Please tell them it’s not a paternity test or anything like that. There’s an example of a test result in the pack to reassure them. Next term, when you all have results, we can compare what we have learned with our fellows and consider if there are any conclusions we can draw.”

“Please can we have the consent forms back as soon as possible and when you’ve done that, we can hand out the test kits,” Miss Hawkins said as Mr. Reynolds passed out forms. “You’ll have to come to the staff room to give your test under supervision. They don’t want to be analysing your dog’s saliva.”

“Or something else.” Melanie smirked as the others caught her meaning.

“I’ve read all the papers that you brought home from Mr. Reynolds,” Peter’s mom said across the din-

ner table one evening shortly afterwards. “I’ve also looked on the internet.”

“And should I take part?” Peter asked.

“I think you should,” she replied. “After all it’s free and probably a bit of fun at best.”

“Don’t you think it’s accurate?” Peter asked.

“I think they can read your DNA quite accurately.” She looked up from her dinner. “Then they do some sort of ethnic comparison to see where our ancestors lived in the past. They compare your results with the results from people in different parts of the world.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If your genetic profile looks like people from one country, they can assume that your ancestors came from that country. I know my mother was Irish and my father was American Italian, so both of those would be in your DNA.”

“I get that, but what about my father?”

“He didn’t stay long enough for me to ask those questions.” She laughed easily now; it had been a long time that we’d been alone.

“Have you no ideas?”

“I thought he was from Wisconsin but where his parents came from, I’ve no idea.”

“Are you saying that I *should* take part?”

“I don’t think it would do any harm,” Mom replied. “The school wouldn’t be doing anything like this if the education department didn’t approve.”

“Will I discover lots of cousins?”

“No, this is limited to an ethnicity analysis; that means whereabouts your ancestors lived. “If you want to find lost cousins, then you have to pay for a different analysis and we can’t afford that.”

“I’m not sure I want to anyway.” I was secretly relieved to hear that.

“At the end of this class, I’ll be handing out your DNA test results,” Martha Hawkins announced at the first session after the vacation. “I’ve results for everyone except Melanie Chapman...”

“They probably found her mother was a donkey...” a voice called from the back row.

“And her father was a skunk,” another voice announced to class laughter.

“Her results will be here tomorrow so there’s no need for that.” Martha looked round the class severely. “The envelopes are sealed and they’re addressed to your parents or guardians, so take them home before you open them.”

As they walked homewards together, Peter, Chelsea, and Rosa fell into step.

“I’m so tempted to look at mine now.” Rosa waved her envelope at the others.

“I’m taking mine home,” Peter said. “Mom deserves to see it first.”

“Oh you are goody-two-shoes.” Chelsea pulled a face at me. “I’m going to open mine if there’s no one else home. There won’t be any surprises in mine. I’m an all-American girl.”

“I think mine will say something about Mexico and Spain,” Rosa said. “But I’m going to wait for Mom and Dad to look with me.”

“I’ve no idea what mine will say,” Peter added. “I think I’m going to be surprised whatever it says. I don’t know anything much about my ancestors beyond what Mom’s told me.”

“I hope it’s a good surprise,” Rosa laughed as we parted to go home to our own separate houses.

“You’re very quiet,” Peter said as he watched his Mom read the results of his DNA analysis.

“I think you’d better read this,” She said softly, passing the papers to him.

“It says that I’m part Irish, and part Italian, with a smaller percentage match with Greece and Scotland,” Peter replied. “That sounds good; there’s nothing strange there. I almost wish there was something different about it.”

“You haven’t read it properly.” His Mom reached out and took his hand. “Look at the top line.”

Peter looked again and was silent for a few moments. “They got my age right, but they say I’m a girl. They must have got that wrong.”

“I’m sure there must be some mistake there,” Mom replied. “I’ll call the school in the morning and get them to check your test again.”

“I’m Irish and Italian.” Peter shared a part of his result with Chelsea and Rosa when they met to walk

to school together next morning. “No surprises there.”

“I’ve got ancestors in North Africa as well as Spain,” Rosa shared.

“Mine are French as well as English and Scottish, with a bit of native American thrown in to the mix,” Chelsea confessed.

“So you’re not quite the all-American girl.” Rosa laughed and then ducked as Chelsea playfully pretended to hit her.

Before Mr. Reynold’s class, which was the last of the day, Peter was summoned to the principal’s office.

“Gene Genius wants to do another test. They say their process couldn’t have made such a mistake,” she announced after they’d got past the introductions. “This is Doctor Faust who’s come to make sure they get an accurate sample this time.”

At this, a lady stood from a chair in the side of the room and smiled.

“I’m sure there must have been some cross contamination of your sample.” She smiled. “Maybe you kissed your girl a little too enthusiastically before you took the last test.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” Peter replied, feeling a little confused.

“We pride ourselves on lab security and the protection of samples, so maybe something went wrong.” The lady smiled again, this time with a little hesitation. “I’m here to take another sample. We’ll rush it through and send the results directly to your Mom.”

Peter knew the routine and opened his mouth as she swabbed his inner cheek and sealed the swab in a test tube.

“To be certain, I’d like you to give a saliva sample.” She handed him a second tube.

“You want me to spit into this?” Peter asked.

“A little saliva is all that’s required.”

She watched as he licked his mouth, then dribbled a little liquid from his tongue into the tube. She took it from him, sealed the top, and attached labels to the two samples.

“Thank you Peter, these will be analysed as soon as I can get them to the lab. Your Mom should have the result tomorrow evening.”

“What was that about?” Chelsea asked when Peter caught up with her and Rosa to walk home after school. “We were worried when you didn’t come back into class.”

“They wanted to re-test my results,” Peter replied.

“Was there something wrong with them?” Rosa broke into a grin. “Don’t tell me that you’re cross between a donkey and a skunk?”

“No, I don’t know why they selected me,” Peter replied, knowing that he knew exactly why he’d been selected for a re-test.

“Now that you’ve all had time to read your results from Gene Genius, you’ll realise that each and every one of us is the sum of different ancestors and although we never knew about them before, they made

us what we are today,” Mr. Reynolds addressed the class. “Miss Hawkins will be returning to these results in class next term, but we have to return to learning about our legal system.”

“Why can’t we talk about the results now?” Chelsea asked. “It’s fresh in our minds.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the class but the teacher held up his hand.

“There’s a problem getting the full results,” he said. “The company has asked us to put it on hold. They have to check some of their systems.”

Peter could feel his face redden. He could guess what the problem was and he sunk in his seat, afraid that it might be revealed. Fortunately, the subject was changed quickly.

Then it all went quiet; no word of the result, just seemingly endless waiting. Peter tried to dismiss the second test from his mind as days turned to weeks but there was a nagging feeling in the back of his mind.

“You’re the only one being re-tested,” Chelsea said as the three of them walked home a few days later.

“I’m sure I’m not,” Peter replied and quickly changed the subject.

He examined himself in his bathroom mirror daily. The results had shocked him far more than he cared to admit to anyone. He knew he wasn’t like the other boys and didn’t fit in with their enthusiasms for sports and video games involving warlike scenarios.

All he saw there in the mirror was a boy. He had a penis after all; sure he was skinny but he didn’t have any curves like some of the girls in his class. He did-

n't have breasts either, although his chest was the only bit of his anatomy with a little spare flesh.

As he scrutinised his reflection, his mind wandered; he couldn't stop it even though it frightened him. He wondered if the test was really correct and that he was a girl. That couldn't be true, one side of his mind argued. He had a penis and girls didn't have those.

The other side of his mind began to wander, even though he didn't want it to. What would it be like to be a girl after his eighteen years as a boy? Maybe he wouldn't get ignored and pushed around by the jocks, the sports players, and the bullies who liked to pick on him because he was the smallest in the class.

Without conscious thought, he reached to loosen his hair from the band which held it in a low pony tail. He brushed it through and watched as it fell over his shoulders in a dirty sort of blond haze. He'd always liked to wear his hair long, whatever the fashion of the day.

He brushed it through again, then pulled on a tight black T-shirt. His hair fell over it, covering that part of his chest where a girl would have budding breasts. As the thoughts gelled, he shuddered and turned away. He threw off the shirt and tied his hair back again. He tried to dismiss these thoughts and images from his mind.

But they lingered.

The first Peter knew something was afoot was on a Thursday afternoon near the end of term. His Mom's car was in the school car park as he came out. A chill ran through him; maybe there was a result at last.

He pretended not to notice and jogged to catch up with Chelsea and Rosa for their usual walk home.

“I wonder what the problem was,” Rosa said. “The gene results must have shown that one of us was related to a monkey.”

“Was it on your father’s side or mother’s?” Chelsea laughed. “What do you think, Peter?”

“I don’t know that I’m that interested,” he replied, hoping that they’d change the subject.

At that moment, his mother’s car came past, pulled to the side, and waited for him to come level.

“You’d better hop in,” Mom said through the window. “We have to be somewhere. I’m sorry to interrupt, girls.” She waved to them as she pulled away.

“What’s happened; is it my results?” Peter asked. “I saw your car at school.”

“I think you’d better wait until we’re somewhere we can talk properly,” she replied.

“Don’t tell me; they’ve found that I’ve got a fatal disease.” Peter didn’t think before he spoke, then realisation dawned. “They’ve done it again and got the same results.”

He looked across the car at his mother who kept her attention firmly on the road ahead. She didn’t reply at once but pulled into a diner with tables outside, at the edge of a lake. They got a table and ordered Cokes and pizza without saying anything more significant.

“You’re stalling, Mom.” Peter said softly, looking at her with a question in his eyes.

“The test says that you’re a girl,” she said, looking him in the eye. “There’s no doubt, they did the swab and the saliva, then they sent it all away to another lab to check the results.”

“So we don’t need to tell anybody.” Peter looked at her.

“The school principal was the one who told me,” she replied. “It’s too late to say that.”

“And Melanie Chapman’s mother is the school secretary.” Peter could hear panic rising in his voice. “That means everyone will know.”

“I’m sure she knows that she has to be responsible and keep confidences,” Mom replied with a frown on her face. “But she’s an awful gossip.”

“I don’t think I want to go back to school,” he said and slumped down in his chair, looking away with a tear in his eye.

“I can’t go back to school on Monday,” Peter said on Friday evening after Mom had explained for the third time what the school principal had said.

“It’s the school board, not simply the principal,” she explained. “Mr. Reynolds and Miss Hawkins were at the meeting and they said they’d look out for you if you were worried about anything.”

“Worried? I’m petrified.” Peter’s eyes clouded with tears. “There must be some mistake. I’m a boy. I was always a boy and I always will be.”

“You have to face it, that’s not what the genetic tests say.”

“But I have a penis and boy things.”

“I don’t understand it either.” Mom reached out and took his hand. “I’ve arranged for us to go to the University Hospital; you’re going to see a professor there who’s an expert in these things and that may explain some things.”

“There’s nothing to explain, other than how I get out of this mess.”

The professor was ready as soon as they arrived in his rooms. They were bright and cheerfully decorated with easy chairs as well as a desk.

“I think that I’d better conduct a short physical examination before we discuss anything,” the professor said after he’d introduced himself. “I’ve read the report from Gene Genius and then the reports from the further tests conducted independently. I have to be honest and say that they all point in one direction.”

“They must be wrong, all of them.” Peter felt his face turning red with shock; it wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

“That’s why we need to do a physical examination.”

Peter was about to say something more; something angry, but his mother interrupted.

“The professor isn’t taking sides; he’s doing what he’s been asked to do,” she said. “If there’s been a mistake, this is where we find out the cause.”

“Okay, let’s get it over with.” Peter stood and walked to the examination room at the side of the office.

“He took samples all over again.” Peter came back to sit with Mom in the Professor’s room. “Not only did he do the cheek swab. This time it was blood and I had to make water into a glass container. It’s hard to do when someone’s watching.”

“At least he’s being thorough.”

“It must be costing a lot.” Peter looked up. “Who’s going to pay for all of this?”

“The school board has arranged it so I think they’re paying. They told me that the professor was keen to meet you because he’s never heard of another case like this.”

“I don’t like being poked and prodded like that.” Peter pulled a face. “It’s like I’m a piece of meat.”

“Welcome to a girl’s world.” Mother couldn’t help but giggle, even though she tried to suppress it.

“Okay, I get the joke.” Peter laughed too. “Rosa wrote a school paper for our civics class about girls being treated like that; for their body, not their personality.”

“I’ve asked for immediate tests to be run.” The professor came back into the room. “I should have them later in the week. Of course they won’t be written up properly, but they should answer some of the questions that we may have.”

“Did the physical tell you anything?” Mom asked.

“Let’s leave all the questions for now. I know they’re burning in your minds, but I don’t want to say anything until I’m sure that I have all the results.”

“When will that be?” Mom asked. “We’re both really worried about all this.”

“We can meet later in the week. I’ll get my secretary to call you in and we can discuss it all then.” He smiled; Peter noted that he avoided answering the question. “I have your cell phone, I’ll call when I have the preliminary results and we can talk it through.”

“I think he found something and he didn’t want to tell us,” Peter said as they walked back to their car.

“He was only being cautious,” Mom said but her tone of voice suggested that she didn’t really believe what she was saying. “We’ll find out more when he calls.”

Conversation was stilted and difficult as they waited for that call. They had lunch, then went to a movie. Peter’s attention wasn’t on the screen even though it was the sort of movie that usually enthralled him. One thought repeated itself over and over again.

“What do I do if they decide that I really am a girl?”

“Why were they whispering behind my back and looking at me so strangely?”

Peter sat in the school lunch room with Rosa and Chelsea a couple of days later. He hadn’t wanted to go back to school, but Mom persuaded him. Now he was feeling that it was a big mistake.

“I don’t think they were.” Rosa looked away as she spoke.

“I think you know why,” Peter replied.

“Okay, you’ve got to know.” Chelsea broke the silence. “It’s only fair. Melanie Chapman’s been telling people that you’re really a girl and that your mom’s been disguising you for years.”

“That’s nonsense.” Peter almost laughed.

“Her mother’s on the school board,” Rosa reminded them. “She says that he overheard her on the phone talking after their last meeting.”

That news hit Peter hard. His mind went immediately into all kinds of what-if scenarios. He didn’t hear Rosa or Chelsea until he felt his arm being prodded.

“Is there something we don’t know?” Rosa asked. “We’re your friends, after all.”

“There is something you don’t know.” Peter hesitated. “Those genetic profiles; mine threw up something strange, and it’s being investigated.”

“You’re not dying are you?” Chelsea blurted out, then realised what she’d asked. “Me and my big mouth. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know if I want to say anything else.” Peter knew he’d already said too much.

“You can’t leave it there.”

“It’s not good.” Peter weighed his words. “The tests said I was a girl.”

“What’s not good about that?” Chelsea laughed. “We’re girls and we don’t do so badly. We just have different plumbing.”

“There’s a professor studying my ‘plumbing’ as you call it.” Peter knew he’d not get away without telling the full story. “I’ve had all kinds of tests. I don’t know

what they're going to show until I see the professor again."

"But you're all right; you're well, I mean?" Chelsea stumbled over her words.

"He said I was fit and healthy," Peter assured them. "He just didn't say if I was a healthy boy or a healthy girl."

"So if he didn't say you were a boy..." Rosa's voice seemed to stop as her thoughts caught up.

"If he didn't say that, there's nothing to worry about. We're girls and there's nothing wrong with being a girl."

"There is when you've been a boy all your life."

"I can understand why you might be afraid." Rosa looked round the room. "This lot might not be the most helpful or understanding bunch in the state."

"But don't worry." Chelsea smiled. "We're your friends and we'll look after you whatever happens."

"It will be like having a baby sister to join us." Rosa blushed when she realised what she'd said. "I mean we could help you to have some fun if you have to be a girl."

"I'm not sure that there's going to be a lot of fun." Peter caught sight of Melanie Chapman staring at him.

"I don't think you've got good news for me." Peter looked at the expression on the professor's face as he and his mom sat across the desk from him.

“I have run every test I can and I can tell you that you’re in very good health. Your height and weight are as they should be and your body is functioning perfectly. All your major organs are quite within the expected range.”

“There’s one question you’re not answering,” Peter said, looking directly at him.

“If you want me to say that you’re a boy, I can’t.”

Peter let out a sob and covered his face with his hands. The room went silent as the professor waited for Peter to stop sobbing.

“Physically, you have some anomalies which make you look as if you’re a boy but your internal organs as well as your genetic tests show that you’re really a girl.”

“But I have a penis,” Peter shouted, tears still running down his face.

“It’s not going to function as a boy’s would.” The professor couldn’t meet his eye. “You have a vestigial uterus but with no vaginal access. That means you couldn’t get pregnant.”

Peter looked incredulously at him as if trying to absorb what it all meant, then he sobbed again.

“Please, Professor; could you give us a few moments alone,” Mom interrupted. He got up and left the room.

She hugged Peter who struggled to stop sobbing. His heart was racing and thumping in his chest. He tried to speak but words wouldn’t come.

“What do I do?” he asked over and over again. “I can’t live with this.”

“I think we should hear what the professor has to say before we start to worry about the future.” Mon tried to comfort him and held him as his sobs subsided.

“But what do I do?” he asked. “How can I live with this? I don’t know if I’m one thing or another.”

“You’re my child and I love you whatever you are.” Mom hugged him tightly. “Let’s not worry about that now.”

She went to the door and called that they were ready to the professor who was waiting in the reception area.

“Would you like me to run through all the test results?” the professor asked quietly.

“Please skip to the conclusions.” Peter looked at him intently. “Give it to me straight; the bottom line please.”

“Okay.” The professor sighed and looked down at his papers. “You are a girl according to all the results from the tests. The penis you have is small, your sperm count is nil and you do not have the ability to function as a male...”

“But it can get hard,” Peter interrupted.

“That may be but you must know that it’s quite small. I doubt that it could function in any way satisfactorily.”

“I haven’t been comparing it with anyone else’s,” Peter said. “So I don’t know that.”

“You could consider surgery,” the professor said. “I could recommend...”

“Don’t even go there,” Peter shouted, then slumped back in his chair, feeling that his options were minimal.

“What does all this mean for the future, for Peter?” Mom asked.

“That’s not up to me,” the professor replied. “I have to send a copy of my conclusions to the School Board. They initiated this examination and they have a public duty to discharge.”

“Do they have a duty to keep me safe if I go back to school?” Peter looked from one to the other.

“I’m sure they’ll consider what needs to be done,” the professor replied. “You could also consider changing schools.”

“There are only two in our town and they don’t operate in a vacuum,” Mom said. “If you’re thinking of keeping it a secret, there’s no chance that could happen.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way forward.” The professor stood as if to say the interview was at an end.

“What can I do, Mom?” Peter had been silent for days after meeting the professor. “I’m confused. I don’t know what I am.”

“You’re my child and I’ll love you always, whatever happens.”

“You didn’t say that I’m your son.” Peter looked at her accusingly.

“You’re my child,” she replied. “And it’s not easy to hear what we’ve learned.”

“And genetics can’t be changed,” Peter said. “I’ve been looking it up on the internet.”

“Do you know what you’d like to do? I think you have to make some choices even if it takes time to work it out.”

“I don’t think I can ever work this out.”

“You know I’ll support you whatever you decide.”

“Do I *have* to decide anything?”

“I think you do.” Mother paused. “I had a call from the school principal. He wants to see me to discuss your future.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“I’m sure they’ll have policies to deal with transgender students.”

“But I’m *not* transgender.” Peter looked incredulous at the thought. “I never imagined how that could happen.”

“I know you’re not but those genetic results were quite clear. They were emphatic that you are a girl, even if you’ve never felt like one.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” Peter grinned for the first time in days. “I must be one thing or another; it’s impossible to be neither one thing nor the other.”

“Okay, that’s got me confused too.” Mom sighed. “Let’s take it slowly and find out what the principal has to say.”

Peter knew that he was the subject of much speculation. He hated knowing but his What’s App and Facebook contacts were full of it. Everyone knew. He

didn't respond but while most were kind, there were a few crude suggestions there too.

"What did they say?" Peter pounced as soon as Mom arrived back from her meeting with the principal.

"They say you have to attend school as a girl."

"But what about their transgender policies; don't they matter?"

"They say that they don't apply since you have clearly been wrongly registered from the start. Therefore you're not transgender within the meaning of their policy document."

"That's stupid."

"It seems so but we can't afford the lawyers to fight it and even if we could, it would take ages to get a decision and meanwhile your opportunities to study and get qualifications would get lost in the legal mess."

"What can I do?"

"I think you keep a low profile and carry on as best you can," Mother replied slowly. "It's going to take courage and maybe some things you don't like, but there seems to be no way of changing the principal's mind."

"Even if you could his mind, everyone seems to know now," Peter replied. "I daren't go out of the door in case I get called out."

"I wish I could make it all go away," Mom said consolingly. "I think being quiet and complying will be

the easiest way. You could appear to be complying on the outside, even though your feelings don't agree. Think of it as acting, or being undercover in a spy story."

"It doesn't feel like that but I can understand why you're saying that. I'm just scared, that's all."

"Chelsea called me." Mom knocked on Peter's door. "She's worried; says you're not answering when she calls."

"I don't feel like talking," Peter said.

"She says to tell you that she's going to keep on calling until you answer."

"She could be wasting her time. I don't want to talk to anyone."

"You can't hide here forever."

"I can try," Peter replied. "I'll bet that by now Mrs. Chapman will have spread it all round town just because she's on the school board and she can."

"I'm sure she'll be discreet."

"How discreet can the town's biggest gossip be?"

"Maybe it would be better to face them; show everyone that you're not afraid."

"How do I do that? I am not afraid, I'm terrified. Can you imagine it if I go to school."

"I can't imagine you not going to school. The attendance board will be chasing me for not sending you."

“But I can’t go to school with them all knowing that I’m really a girl and that I’ve been living a lie for the past eighteen years.”

“You’ve not been living a lie; it’s wrong to say that.”

“If only they hadn’t gotten that stupid test,” Peter sighed. “If only I hadn’t agreed.”

“I think I signed the consent form,” Mom said gently. “It’s probably my fault.”

“You couldn’t have known what would happen and you only did it because I asked you to,” Peter replied. “I never thought it could be lead to this.”

That day passed and the next. Peter stayed most of the time in his room, only emerging to visit the kitchen. He didn’t go to school and Mom didn’t say anything. She hoped for something to change.

“Chelsea’s come to see you,” his mom called from the bottom of the stairs. “Can she come up?”

“I don’t want to see anyone,” Peter called.

Chelsea heard him, nodded to his Mom, and climbed the stairs. She didn’t knock.

“I needed to know how you were,” she said to Peter who looked at her in shock. “I think we know what’s happened. It’s all over school.”

“I guess confidentiality means nothing,” he mumbled.

“Not where Mrs. Chapman’s concerned,” she replied. “I think she said she saw some papers that the Principal got from the school board.”