Brains Bennette: The Case of the Missing Mother

For teenage sleuth Brains Bennette, the disappearance of his mother, a private investigator herself, is the beginning of a mystery that will transform his life.
Dedication

To femur,

For all the endless work that goes into maintaining TGComics and TGCaps as two of the premiere transgender websites on the Internet.

To Jezzi,

For the many hundreds, even thousands, of modified covers that surely stand as one of the Seven Wonders of the TG World.

To the lurkers,

I know you’re out there.
I know you’re frightened; of discovery, of ridicule, of rejection.
I understand. I feel your fear.
Hide if you must. But do not be afraid.
Our people are alive in the world.
We are legion.

This story is my gift to you all.

Amanda Hawkins
Brains Bennette: The Case of the Missing Mother

by Amanda Hawkins

Amanda Hawkins Publications

© 2012, Amanda Hawkins

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

First printing: June 2012

This book and its content is the sole property of the author. Any alteration or commercial exploitation of part or all of the contents in any form is prohibited. Permission is hereby granted to copy electronically and distribute for personal use only. Any other use of this book and its content—including distribution, transmission, modification, or republication—is strictly prohibited.

Disclaimer: The photos that appear in this book do not belong to the author. All have been heavily modified from their original form. If the owner of any image that appears in altered form in this book does not wish their property to appear herein, please contact the author at the website below.

Website: amandasreadingroom.wordpress.com
Chapter 1

How many guys my age can claim to be a real-life sleuth? How many have helped bust up a gang of wildlife smugglers, or a family of financial phishers, or a club of credit card counterfeiters? Well, I have—and a lot more too.

I’m Jimmy Marsdon. I’m just a regular guy, like most people, but I know someone who isn’t much like anybody else, probably in the whole world. That’s my best friend, Brains Bennette. He’s a little guy but you’d never know it by the way he acts. The guy bleeds confidence. And he gets better grades than anyone else, even though he skipped a year somewhere along the way. I guess you could call him a genius, but he wouldn’t like it if you did.

This story begins in August of the year we were supposed to start college. I’d just returned from my family’s annual vacation up in Canada—the area known as Lake Country, north of Toronto, if it matters—and was headed over to the Bennette house on Chestnut Drive. It had been over a month since we’d closed our last case, the one about phishers stealing people’s banking information from the basement of their bakery, and I was wondering if Brains had anything new on the boil. He was never the kind of guy who could sit still for long.

His mother opened the front door before I got there. “Hello, Jimmy,” she said sweetly, ushering me inside. “How was your trip?”

I muttered something about it being okay. Don’t get me wrong; I can talk to women, but Barbara Bennette is something else. First off, for a lady in her mid-thirties, she’s seriously gorgeous. My own Mom would kill to have her figure. Seriously, I’ve never been able to look her in the eye—and today she was wearing a dress that showed a fair bit of cleavage. And to top it all off, she’s a real-life private investigator too, so she’s just as smart as Brains.

“Sounds nice.” She smiled. “So, are you here to see Blaine—or me?”

I froze. What was the right answer? I have no idea what I said, but it made her laugh and she touched my hair the way she’d been doing since I was six. What’s worse is that I liked it. That’s the effect she had on me.

“It’s okay, dear. He’s in his room, working on something or other. Go on up.” She spun on her heels and swept into the kitchen, her hips swaying. I stared at her nylon-clad legs for as long as I could, then dashed upstairs.

Brains wasn’t in his bedroom. I checked the study that he shared with his mother, I checked the bathroom, I even poked my head into the master bedroom—which was a bit of a mess, with clothing scattered all over the bed. All empty.
I returned to Brains’ room, but something about it didn’t feel right. His bed was made—which it usually wasn’t—and his desk was tidy, without even a single case file to indicate what he was working on. I was peering into the back yard when I heard the tapping of sharp heels in the hallway.

“He isn’t here? I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to send you off on a goose chase.”

My nose drank in her perfume. “That’s okay, Mrs. Bennette.”

She tilted her head. “You’re always so formal, Jimmy. Aren’t young people all like Bart Simpson these days? ‘Don’t have a cow, man’; that sort of thing?” She smiled. “You can call me ‘Barbara’. I’d like that.”

“Uh, sure… I better get going.” I edged toward the door.

“So soon? I was just making lunch. You’ll join me, won’t you? Blaine should be back soon. I think he went to the library.”

I followed her downstairs, trying not to stare at her legs. I really did try, but how could I not? She was wearing a short summer dress and those heels arched her calves in a way that made me shiver. Her hair, styled in a shoulder-length pageboy, split across the back of her neck as she descended the stairs. I didn’t remember it being quite like that before, but women are always changing hairstyles.

A few minutes later we were seated at the kitchen table, with a plate of delicate tuna-and-watercress sandwiches between us and two wine glasses, one filled with root beer, the other with white wine.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Blaine?”

“Oh, he could be hours. You never know with that boy. Help yourself.”

I ate fast, while she nibbled. I drank a little, while she finished her glass and began another. I talked about the Lake Country and she listened politely. When I ran out of anything else to say I finally asked her if she was working on a case at the moment. A worried look crossed her face. She pushed her plate aside.

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that. Jimmy… I need your help.”

It was about the last thing I expected to hear. “Me? What can I do?”
“Well, both of you boys. Remember last year when I helped the government with that case about money laundering? I couldn’t talk much about it at the time, but suffice to say that it didn’t wrap up as neatly as I would have liked. Something about it didn’t add up. It still doesn’t.”

I nodded, but I had no idea where she was headed.

Long fingers with long nails toyed with the stem of her wine glass. “I’m going to let you in on a little secret… Operative Two.”

My jaw dropped. ‘Operative’, followed by some number—the significance of which I’d never understood—was Brains’ secret code name for me, for use only during our investigations. Why would he share it with his mother?

Barbara sighed. “It’s me, you nitwit. Operative X.” Her head fell to the table. No, not her head, just her hair. It was a wig. It had damn well better be a wig. Dumbfounded, I looked up to find Barbara Bennette peeling off her face. Under it was another face. A very familiar face…

The back of my chair hit the wall. I nearly fell off. Then I did fall off. I stared at those gorgeous legs under the table for a moment, then picked myself up.

Brains rubbed his face tiredly. “It’s the glue,” he explained. “You barely notice it with the mask on, but afterward it itches like crazy.”


“Well, sure. The mask doesn’t cover those parts.” He held it up. “It’s mostly just to pad out my cheekbones and fill out the shape of my face.”

“Could’a fooled me,” I muttered.

“We look a lot alike anyway,” Brains said, as if he were expounding on some new forensic technique, like how to obtain fingerprints from a rough surface. “Around the mouth and eyes, in particular. That made it easy.”

My eyes wandered to his chest. “Made what easy?”

“Isn’t it obvious? To impersonate her. In a sense, to become her.” He glanced down. “Pretty sweet, huh? They’re breast forms, the kind women use when they lose one of their own to cancer. I bought ‘em months ago. Mail order.”

I licked my lips. “Uh… Why?”

“To further my capabilities, of course, as a master of disguise. You know what I’ve done before. Well…” He thrust out his chest. “Now I can do women too.”

I could see how that might come in handy. I could almost buy that explanation. Almost… But why would a guy disguise himself as his own mother?
Brains pulled on the band-aid that straddled his hairline and untangled the hair net that had held his own unruly curls in place. “You’ll have to excuse me,” he said, “I really do need to change. See you upstairs.”

I could’ve just left. Watching him walk away in a sexy dress and high heels was just too weird. But Brains was my best friend. He must have a damn good reason to do something like this. So I went upstairs.

I heard him moving around in his mother’s room, with the door closed, probably putting her clothes away. I wondered what the real Barbara Bennette would think of her son going through her things like that; of him wearing her things. She’d probably be upset. But on the other hand… I figured this couldn’t possibly be the first time he’d done this. He was way too good at it. This had to go back months, if not years. So maybe she knew about it. Maybe she was okay with it.

Too many maybes. I stared out the window, listening to the water running in the bathroom. He was washing her makeup off, and her perfume. I shivered.

Brains arrived with his hair slicked down, wearing jeans and an old sweatshirt. He looked pretty normal, except for a certain glow in his face—the kind you might see in a girl when she blushes, or after a bath. Maybe it was just the hot water, or the residual makeup, but I could see how he could pull off being female.

“Thanks for your patience, Operative Five.” He sat down and propped his feet up on the desk. “You’re probably wondering what’s going on.”

“Nah. I know hundreds of guys who dress up like women.”

He laughed, still sounding an awful lot like his mother. But his face quickly lapsed into the same worried look I’d seen on Barbara Bennette in the kitchen.

“I’m sad to say that our next case has fallen into our laps, as it were.”

I leaned on the window frame, arms crossed. “Yeah? What case could possibly justify you trying to impersonate your mother?”

A thin smile. “Trying? I’d say ‘succeeding’, wouldn’t you?” Then, just to rub it in, he shifted from his own voice into hers—which weren’t exactly miles apart. “This is our case now, Jimmy. To make a long story short: Mother is M.I.A.”

My eyes went wide. So that was it. Barbara Bennette was missing!
Chapter 2

Disappearing is part of the job, of course. Barbara Bennette had vanished before, often for days at a time, but she’d always made arrangements for Brains to stay with my family, or to have his old baby-sitter, Mrs. Müller, come in to house-sit and take care of him. Unfortunately, it was Mrs. Müller’s sons who owned the bakery we had recently outted to the police, so the Müllers were no longer on speaking terms with the Bennettes. And my family was away at the time.

For whatever reason, Barbara had made no arrangements for the care and feeding of her son. Sure, Brains was old enough to take care of himself, but she wouldn’t have left without telling him; of that he was certain.

“She discussed the case with me last week,” he said seriously. “She was worried. I’m sure there was more to it than she was letting on.”

I shook my head. “Why wouldn’t she just go to the cops?”

“The case was federal, so the locals were no help. And as far as the feds are concerned, the case is closed.” He shrugged. “I think she had one contact left in Washington, but I’ve no idea who or how to get in touch.”

“Let me get this straight. You noticed she was missing…when?”

“Yesterday. She was out all weekend, but I thought maybe she was just on a stake-out, or whatever. But… three whole days? I called the hospitals, just to check, and the police, to see if—you know, maybe she had an accident. But there was no trace of her. So it has to be the case.”

“Okay. And then, once you realized she was missing…” I paused for emphasis. “The first thing you did was disguise yourself as her?”

Brains frowned. “I’m not sure what you’re driving at.”

“It just doesn’t seem like a terribly useful thing to do, that’s all.”

“So you say. I think it’s going to come in quite handy.”

“C’mon, man. You got those breast forms months ago, you said so yourself. And that mask; you couldn’t possibly have whipped it together so quickly.” My eyes lost focus. “You’ve been doing this for awhile.”

He sighed. “Your powers of deduction are excellent, Operative Two. I’ve taught you well. Too well, perhaps.” Another sigh. “You’re right, of course. I’ve been working on this disguise… Well, I had the mask made weeks ago, from a mold she used for her own disguises. I knew it would come in useful someday. And what do you know—it has!” He grinned.
There he went sounding all plausible again. And yet… “So why did you pretend to be her today, when I came over?”

He shrugged. “Just to see if I could. It seemed like a good test.”

I still had doubts, but it didn’t seem wise to press the issue.

Brains sprang to his feet. “Come now, Operative Three, there’s no time to waste! I’ve been reading Mother’s computer files. Most of them are encrypted, of course, but those that weren’t provided some excellent insights.” He led me downstairs. “I have more to do here. What I need you to do, right away, is find out everything you can about the Hill House property outside town. Google it. Then go to the library; not everything is online, you know.”

With that he disappeared back into the house, leaving me alone with a whole mess of unanswered questions—not to mention the troubling image of my best friend’s head perched atop a gorgeous female body.

I wondered how long I’d be seeing that in the wee hours of the night.

*  

Hill House was well over a hundred years old. It was built by a family whose wealth came from a monopoly on shipping through the old Eerie Canal, which ran through the center of town. That lasted for about three decades in the latter part of the nineteenth century, after which the family held onto the house for generations, until their wealth evaporated in the recession of the 1980s. After that it fell into disuse. I was unable to find out who or what owned the property now. But someone sure as heck did, because Google Earth showed walls on all four sides, with wide cleared areas guarding the approaches. But as to what any of that had to do with the case, not a clue.

A young woman answered the door of the Bennette household when I arrived, as agreed, at around noon. “You must be Jimmy,” she said brightly. “C’mon in.”

Fool me once. I studied the girl from behind as she led me into the living room. She wasn’t much older than me, with straggly blonde hair (poorly combed) and an orange Boise State sweatshirt over black yoga pants. She looked nothing like Brains or his mother. Still…
“I’m Vicki,” she said. “Blaine told me about you. We’re gonna work together!”

“You don’t say,” I said cautiously. “Doing what?”

“Snooping!” She clapped her hands together. “At a beauty salon downtown.”

“Really. A beauty salon.” I suppressed a nervous tic. “Did he say why?”

“Something to do with a case he’s working on. I get to distract them by having my nails done, see? While you snoop around to see what you can find.” She sighed. “You get the fun part. But I guess having my nails done is fun too.”

I stared at her, almost squinting. She stared back, blinking owlishly. Finally, I said, “Brains, is th—?”

Her hand shot up. “Operative Eight, please! I must stay in character.”

That was all I could get out of Brains. After that there was only Vicki, who informed me that I was to be her ‘boyfriend’ for the afternoon and that my name was ‘Lance’. ‘Lance and Vicki’ certainly didn’t sound like the kind of dynamic duo that would strike terror into the heart of whatever criminal outfit was operating the Princess Salon, but maybe that was the idea.

We took the bus downtown. Vicki didn’t know what I was supposed to look for, which I took to mean that Brains didn’t either. He wouldn’t compromise the operation just to stay in character—would he? The Brains I knew had always put solving the case ahead of all else, but the Blaine Bennette that could flawlessly impersonate a bubble-headed teenage girl? Him I wasn’t so sure about.

* * *

The Princess Salon was on the wrong side of the tracks, and only a block away from the railway station. It was a narrow storefront with haircare products crowding the front window, as well as a few wigs on styrofoam heads. Overhead was a gaudy pink neon sign, with a burned-out letter in each word. I wondered what kind of woman would take her beauty business to the ‘Princess Salon’, but then Vicki spoke up and reminded me.

“I’ll go in first,” she said, poking a finger into my chest. “I’ll tell ‘em my boyfriend is gonna wait. Then you come in and sit down.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, great plan.” I watched her disappear through the door, which tinkled as it opened and again when it closed. I took a deep breath and wondered again what the hell I was doing here. Then I went inside.

“That’s him,” Vicki said to the woman at the counter. “My boyfriend.”

“Lucky him,” the woman said tersely. “He can wait there.” She jerked her thumb toward a plastic chair in the corner.
I sat down. “You’re early,” the woman told Vicki, as though she’d just committed some sort of crime, but guided her to an empty seat anyway.

Early? So Brains had made an appointment—which meant that maybe he wasn’t just a dizzy blonde flying by the seat of her yoga pants.

The salon was deceptively large. There were eight stations with the kind of padded chairs you see in barber shops, some paired up with hair dryers or sinks, others sitting beside carts laden with makeup and other stuff. But try as I might, I could see nothing that wouldn’t look out of place in any beauty salon on the planet. Not that I was an expert on such matters, but I’d seen pictures.

I watched Vicki present her hands to a tiny Asian woman whose hair was swept into a fancy updo. My buddy was about to have his nails done. I found myself wondering if I’d be able to recognize him at all by the time this case was over.

Enough. Time to do my job. I went to the counter and asked to use the restroom.

“In the back. There’s only one, so knock.” She snickered without looking up from her magazine. “Rule number one: you better sit.”

I passed Vicki, who was chattering on about what she liked about the latest fashions, and pushed through a beaded curtain into a narrow corridor. It was dirty and poorly lit by a buzzing fluorescent panel in the ceiling. I found the bathroom and knocked. No one home. I quickly checked the ‘maintenance room’ across the hall, but found it crowded with cleaning supplies—most of it brand new.

I pretended to use the washroom, and flushed. What else was I supposed to do? What would Brains do? Actually, that was pretty obvious: He’d keep going. There were a dozen women up front, including customers, but I was all alone back here.

I shut the door quietly and padded down the corridor, to where it T-boned in two directions. On one side: a door with an ALARM WILL SOUND sign. Obviously that led to the alley. On the other side: another door, no signage, and facing the opposite direction—away from the alley. Bingo.

I opened the second door. No alarm, but no light either. All I could make out was the first few steps of a staircase that descended into a darkness so thick it might as well be water. And that, I told myself, was quite far enough. Time to go back, twiddle my thumbs in the waiting room, and report to Brains once he was back to normal. Well, as normal as he ever is. But I knew what he’d say.

So, instead of doing the smart thing, I stepped inside and closed the door. That’s when it got really dark, the kind of dark you find way down in caves where the sun don’t shine and never will. Fortunately, thanks to my sister, I never leave home without a flashlight on my keychain. And LED lights are pretty bright.
I’m not sure what I expected to find. Boxes of expired shampoo? Maybe a stash of contraband lipstick, its ingredients banned in this country, ready to be peddled to unsuspecting teenagers in playgrounds and parking lots all over the city. Or possibly a bunch of personal computers, connected through a high-speed fibre-optic link to a nearby Internet provider, like in the basement of that bakery.

But there was nothing like that. The stairs bottomed out in a concrete chamber quite a bit wider than the store itself. A tunnel ran toward the street, with a bunch of empty wooden crates crowding the way. A series of squat doorways, with no actual doors visible, looked more like caves than rooms. I flashed my light into the first one, which was held several odd-looking machines. The helmets on some of them suggested old-fashioned hair dryers, but to be honest I couldn’t recognize any of it.

I stood still and held my breath for a moment. I couldn’t hear a sound—which was both good and bad. At least I was alone down here. But on the other hand, I was alone down here! I restarted my lungs and paced down the tunnel, checking each room along the way. What the hell did a cheap-ass beauty parlor need with all these weird machines?

I was on my way back when I noticed a flicker of light from the back of the store. There and gone, like a door opening and closing—which is undoubtedly exactly what it was. I covered the lens of my flashlight. Then came cautious footsteps, the soft tapping of a shoe probing for solid ground, and a hushed voice: “Lance?”

Oh, for Christ’s sake. My light caught Vicki poised on the bottom stair.

She hurried over. “I thought I’d find you down here.”

“What’re you doing?” I hissed. “You’re supposed to be distracting them!”

“They finished with me,” she hissed back, waving her fingers in my face. “They think I’m in the bathroom, just like you.”

“They think we’re both in there? How’s that gonna look?”

She giggled and touched her lips. “Maybe they’ll give us a few minutes, before they come looking.” She took my keychain and stepped into the nearest room. “Good lord,” she muttered. “I don’t recognize any of this.”

I heard the door before she did. Instantly, I took her hand and killed the light. “Someone’s coming.” We felt our way across the room and hid behind a large crate. Abruptly, the overhead lights came on. No buzzing fluorescents down here; they were strong and harsh. We covered our eyes.

Footsteps! Vicki peeked around the corner. “It’s the woman who did my nails,” she whispered. She showed me her hands. “Aren’t they pretty?”
I stared, first at the half-inch colored nails that decorated her fingers, then at back her. I pointed at the door. “What the hell is she doing?”

Vicki looked surprised. “She’s gone, down the hall. Hang on, I’ll check.”

I watched my ‘girlfriend’ disappear out the door, wondering how I’d ever gotten mixed up with such a twit. I had to remind myself that it was still Brains under all that blondeness. I checked my watch. One minute stretched into two. Then Vicki scuttled back into view and rejoined me.

“One of the rooms farther along,” she whispered. “She got inside some machine that looks like a phone booth.” She paused for breath. “Nothing happened, at first. Then the whole thing lit up like a—like a—” She wheezed. “Like the inside of an excimer laser. I don’t see how she could’ve survi—”

Footsteps. Vicki peeked out. “It’s her! But she looks different.”

After a moment, she touched my arm. “It’s okay, she’s gone. But her hair was different, way past her shoulders. Not just a different style. It was longer.”

“You sure it was the same woman?”

“She was dressed the same—street clothes, not a uniform. She moved the same. Same body language.” She stared into the distance. “It was her.”

I shrugged. “Maybe she was wearing a wig.”

The lights went out. “No. It was that machine.” She paused. “Something Mother mentioned in her notes. Something about a machine that can ‘alter’ people.”

“Sounds like it would come in handy in a beauty parlor.”

“Not just hair and makeup, Operative Twelve. They use it to change their very identity. As I understand it, the machine can alter fundamental aspects of their bodies, like fingerprints.”

“How could it possibly do that? And who’s ‘they’ anyway?”

“That’s what we need to find out, Jimmy—I mean, Lance.” She hauled herself back into character and snuggled up to me. “Kinda romantic down here, huh? Just you and me. No one knows we’re here. Wanna fool around?”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” I stood up, leaving her giggling on the cement floor. “Let’s just get the hell out of here.”

On the bus home, Vicki pressed her body into mine and whispered in my ear: “Relax, Lancie. It would look totally weird if we didn’t do this.”
I bit my tongue and chose not to argue. She placed her hands atop mine, in the middle of my lap, showing off her new and very feminine fingernails.

“You know how they do this, don’t you? It’s so cool.” She rested her head on my shoulder. “They put your old nail into this little mold, see? Then they paint liquid acrylic—whatever that is—over the old nail and out into the mold.” She wriggled her finger. “It hardens almost right away, and bonds with the nail. So you can’t even tell which is which. You do that for all four fingers, then use a heat gun to make it really hard. The thumb is a bit awkward, so you do it separately.” She sighed heavily. “After that, the mold comes off and they shape the nails and paint them with nail polish. Pretty neat, huh?”

I stared at those ten crimson-tipped fingers, resting so very close to my crotch… I tried to think of something else, anything else. Like maybe a cold shower, or a dead horse. When it comes to distracting yourself, you can’t beat a dead horse.

“If it bonds to your nails,” I said softly, “how are you planning to get them off?”

Vicki looked thoughtful. “I guess I’m not.”

“Then what are—what’s Brains gonna do? He can’t go around looking like that.”

“It’s not a problem,” she said slowly. “At least, not in the short term. After that, we’ll see how things go.” She smiled. “If nothing else, I’ve always liked Mother’s isotoners. Her driving gloves.”

I could just imagine Brains wandering around town wearing ladies gloves. People already thought he was a bit weird, but at least not in that way. Although I was already starting to wonder myself where all this was going.

Vicki hopped off the bus on Chestnut Drive, planting a quick kiss on my cheek and telling me to come by the next morning. I watched her go, for all the world a young woman with nothing on her mind—and I mean that literally. But I was seized with the thought that Brains was going home to an empty house—and what exactly was he going to do tonight, all alone with his mother’s closet?

But I think I already knew. ■
Chapter 3

After Barbara Bennette one day and Vicki the next, I had no idea who or what would answer the door when I knocked. As it happened, no one did.

Instead, a breezy, “C’mon up,” drifted down from an open window on the second floor. Brains knew I had a key. But the window belonged to the master bedroom and that fact did nothing to dispel my unease.

I wasn’t disappointed. Brains was dressed in his mother’s lingerie; a knee-length beige slip (what women like to call ‘oyster’) over panty hose, a brassiere, and for all I knew a firm-control girdle with extra boning and optional hip pads. He was seated at a lady’s vanity, mirror in hand, checking the makeup he must have just applied to eyes and mouth, his lips parted in a perfect feminine oval.

I tried not to think about that.

“Good morning, Operative Nine,” he said briskly, as though touching up lipstick was something he did every day. I asked about his plans.

“My plan is to have lunch with Derrick. Your plan is to study Mother’s case notes. I left her password by the computer.”

“Who the heck is Derrick?”

“Mr. Dennison, remember? We saw him at the courthouse last year.”

“The lawyer? The guy dating your mother?” I was confused. “Why him?”

“It’s simple. He has a car. We need to get out to Hill House. Transit doesn’t go that far, I don’t drive and you don’t have ready access to your parents’ vehicle. Ergo, Derrick Dennison is useful to our investigation.”

“What makes you think he’ll agree to drive us around?”

A coy smile. “He’ll do whatever I want. I can assure you of that. Mother has him wrapped around her little finger.” Brains waved airily at the closet. “Be a dear and hand me that head.”

There was a manikin head on the top shelf, complete with a thick brunette wig. At first glance it looked just like Barbara Bennette (Senior), with its lips permanently pursed in disapproval. For that I could hardly blame her, given what was going on right in her own bedroom.

With practiced ease, Brains peeled a thin layer of rubber from the face, exposing the manikin’s generic features. “ Stops the back from getting dusty,” he said.

“Makes sense,” I said, a little too loudly. Nothing else did, mind you.
He painted the back with glue, then tilted his head back and lay his mother’s face overtop his own. Slim fingers, tipped with Vicki’s long nails, delicately adjusted the fit. “Once it’s on,” he said, staring into the mirror, “you only have a few seconds before the glue sets.” He smoothed out the new skin—which seemed to be color-matched to his own—to where it vanished into his hair and the curve of his jaw. In that moment, Brains Bennette became Barbara.

*  

“Hello, Jimmy. I didn’t see you come in.”

I froze. Was he pulling my leg? “Sorry, Mrs. Bennette. I—”

“Blaine isn’t here,” she said, her voice smooth as silk. “I’m going out soon, but you’re welcome to wait. I have a date with Derrick.”

Gracefully, she arose and picked up the red dress lying on the bed. She stepped inside and wiggled her hips through the waist, then shrugged into the three-quarter sleeves and let the garment settle over her body, the hem tight to her knees. She arched her back and pulled on the zipper.

I had to admit, Brains had one hell of a figure. So did his mother.

Barbara returned to the vanity and slipped the wig from the head, its long tresses dancing as though with anticipation. She began finger-combing the thick hair, her crimson nail-tips breaking the surface like spawning salmon.

“I had it made a few months ago,” she said, casting me a sidelong glance. “It’s the same color, the same length, the same texture. Real human hair, of course. Very expensive.” She dangled the brunette mane behind her, then leaned back and pulled it over the hair net. A tiny comb at the front slipped under the band-aid on her forehead. The wig’s hairline quickly became her own.

I could hardly believe what I was seeing. My friend had turned into a woman.

Barbara leaned into the mirror, her eyes wide, long dark hair cascading around her face. “They call this a woman’s crowning glory, Jimmy. Do you know why?”

I shook my head. All I really wanted to do was get the hell out of there.

She picked up a brush and set to work. “It’s because a woman’s hair defines who she is. It shows the world what kind of woman she is.” She paused briefly to eye me in the mirror. “What kind of woman am I?”

I swallowed hard. “You’re Barbara Bennette.”

“That’s not what I mean. What sort of woman do you see sitting here? How would you describe her?” She ran a slim hand through her hair, finding not a single snag, and sent it spilling across her shoulders.
I had no idea what to say.

“No guesses? I thought it would be obvious.” She and her mirror image exchanged devious smiles. “I’m a beautiful woman, Mr. Marsdon. I’m a woman who knows who she is. I’m a woman who knows what she wants.”

I edged toward the open door. “That’s one hell of a wig.”

“For what it cost,” Barbara said, “it damn well better be.” She spritzed her hair, then brushed and brushed and brushed until it shone.

When I reached the hallway, I ran.

* 

I was hiding in the study when I heard the click of sharp heels outside the door. They faded down the hall, stepped slowly down the stairs, and exited the house by the front door. I rushed to the window.

Some things you just have to see for yourself.

The study overlooked the front yard. And there she was, looking for all the world like Barbara Bennette herself, mincing down the path, her smooth legs gently constrained by the hem of her skirt, her feet strapped into a pair of dark red pumps, long hair tumbling down her back, and a black handbag slung over one shoulder. There was a car waiting at the curb, a large Mercedes. The driver got out as she approached. Derrick Dennison.

I couldn’t hear what they said, but Barbara followed it up with a kiss. Right smack on the guy’s mouth, and she let it linger—like an unspoken promise of more to come. I knew then that the man would do whatever she asked—the only question being, what would Brains have to do for him?

I got a hint of that some two hours later, after I’d managed to skim through most of the elder Bennette’s case files, and read the ones that concerned Hill House. Even the Princess Salon was mentioned, although I was still none the wiser about what any of it had to do with machines that could grow hair in a flash.

A car door slammed outside, then another. Voices. I watched Barbara Bennette (Junior) wander up the path, arm in arm with the older man. The front door opened and closed, leaving the front yard empty. What were they up to?
I padded down the hall, stepping around the creaky floorboards, and looked down. No one was in view, but Dennison’s jacket was draped over the bannister.

I started down the stairs. A female voice spilled through the open entrance to the living room. “Oh, Derrick, you’re just awful.”

I sat down and crept to where I could see through the doorway. The two of them were curled up on the couch, she tucked under his arm with her legs folded in the opposite direction. One hand was entwined with his, with the other resting on his knee. He whispered into her ear and nuzzled her hair.

Barbara smiled. Then: her lashes fell, her chin rose and her mouth opened.

There it was—those same red lips, that same perfect oval! It was a woman’s mouth, and it wanted to be kissed. I couldn’t breathe. It felt like I was down there, awaiting the arrival of a masculine mouth, heart pounding with anticipation.

Their lips met. I drew a shaky breath, which was more than she could manage, as the kiss went on for quite some time. I watched his lips move and hers follow, in a seductive dance where the man leads, the woman follows, and the peeping tom wonders why it’s affecting him this way.

One long kiss followed another, and their positions changed. Barbara turned to face him, her legs falling across his lap. His arms pinned her tightly to his larger body, one thick hand clutching the back of her head. That was when she lost the power to refuse what came next. The kiss was hard, almost violent. She grabbed at his shoulders, her face almost disappearing into his. But then her slim fingers encircled his neck, one hand slithering up into his hair, and she was returning his kiss, with interest, her long hair swinging with the force of it.

I hoped Brains knew what the hell he was doing.

When it ended, Dennison kissed her throat and held her close. A moment later he blurted out, “I want you. I’ll call my office. Cancel my meeting.”

With her head back, Barbara laughed—girlishly, of course. “Oh, Derrick, you’re so impulsive. That’s what I love about you.”

He looked her in the eye. “Don’t you think we’ve waited long enough?” He kissed her before she could answer. “We can go upstairs or do it right here, I don’t mind. You’re just—” He swallowed hard.

She touched his cheek. “I want you too. But it’s the middle of the day.”

That’s when he caught sight of me. “Hey! Who’s that?”

Barbara glanced over her shoulder and frowned. “Calm down, darling. It’s only my son. He’s a little shy. He doesn’t get out much.”
Dennison stood up, turned away and straightened his pants. Barbara sat back, smoothed out her dress, then beckoned me over. “Blaine… You remember Mr. Dennison. Last year, in court?”

I nodded and grimaced at the same time. So I was him, Brains had all but turned into his mother, and Mrs. Bennette was who-knows-where. What a mess!

Dennison stuck out his paw, a lawyer’s smile bolted to his pasty features. “Howdy, champ. Glad to meet you. I wasn’t hurtin’ your Mom, honest!” I wasn’t inclined to shake the man’s hand, having a fair idea of where it had been, but there seemed no way to avoid it.

“For God’s sake, Derrick, he’s not a little boy. He’s nearly all grown up, aren’t you sweetheart?” She gave me a playful slap on the butt. I glared at her.

Dennison stared at his watch. “Is that the time? I better get back to the office! Nice to meet ya, kid. Guess I’ll see you on Saturday, huh?” He bolted for the door.

I looked at Barbara. “Saturday?”

“We’re going on a picnic,” she said, waving at Dennison. “Out at the lake. Just the three of us.” The door closed and she scowled. “You really must brush up on your ‘playing along’ skills, Operative Thirteen. You almost blew the deal right there.” She sighed. “Perhaps I’ll tell him you’re autistic.”

“And what ‘deal’ would that be, Mom? If I hadn’t come along you’d probably be upstairs by now, in bed with the guy! How’s that gonna work, huh?”

“Don’t be absurd. I had the situation well in hand. And for your information, if it ever does come to that, I’m wearing a latex vagina that would fool anyone, as long as they don’t look too closely. It would certainly do for the missionary position.”

I couldn’t help it, I found myself staring at her hips. “But— Why would you— That’s a hell of a risk! What if it didn’t work?”

“It’s called doing your homework, dear. You should try it sometime. Your grades might improve.” She wandered into the kitchen, hips swaying.

I followed. “What’s going on with you anyway? I thought we were supposed to be looking for your mother.”

“We are.” Barbara poured herself a glass of white wine. She plucked a beer bottle from the fridge. “I probably shouldn’t do this, being your mother and all, but what the heck. You look like you could use it.”

We sat at the kitchen table, like we’d been doing since we were in kindergarten. I remembered meeting Brains for the first time, a gangly little kid who didn’t play well with others but who was already reading at an eighth-grade level.
“You call this looking?” I stared out the window. “Seems to me you’re trying to replace her.” I had to laugh. “What’s next? A ‘Blaine Bennette’ mask for me? So I can be you, you can be her, and there’s your family back together.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Operative Two. Then Jimmy Marsdon would be missing and who would I get to replace him? The neighbor’s dog?”

We both laughed, and for a moment I could forget that Brains was sitting across from me wearing a red dress, breast forms and a latex vagina that could fool a man during sex. Not to mention the cloud of dark hair that surrounded his head, which really did turn him into someone else altogether.

Barbara drained her glass. “So, did you manage to read those case notes, or were you too busy being a voyeur?”

“I read them. But I still don’t see where it gets us.”

“That makes two of us,” she said, stretching her back. “Sorry, we’ll have to pick this up tomorrow. My girdle is killing me.”

I went home and spent the evening surfing the Web for information on cross-dressing. Surprisingly, there was quite a bit of it, and no shortage of pictures either. If transvestism was a disease, as some conservative types seemed to think, then Brains had it in spades. I only hoped it wasn’t catching.

Later, when it was dark, I slipped out of the house and wandered over to Chestnut Drive. The Bennette house was dark but there was a car parked in the driveway, a big Mercedes. I crossed the lawn and stood under the bedroom window, which was half-open, held my breath and listened.

_Wind rustling the branches in a nearby elm. A feminine giggle. Someone panting._

It was my old buddy’s first booty call. But who called who?

Eyes closed, I leaned against the wall and gave in to the flood of images. I could see it all, like I was there in the room with them. The missionary position, and all that that implied. Lingerie and perfume mingling with cheap cologne; a sprawl of dark hair across the pillow.

_The creak of bedsprings. Someone grunting. A soft squeal. Oooohhh…_  

HE, rearing up on the bed like a stallion in heat. SHE, the receptive mare, with her legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him ever deeper inside.

One small thrust for a man, one giant leap towards becoming a woman.

I took a deep breath. This was one hell of a way to search for a missing mother.
But then, as the moaning from above continued, a sinister idea emerged from the swamp of my imagination: that maybe Barbara Bennette wasn’t missing after all.

The thought staggered to its feet, leaking fetid waters from every pore: maybe Hill House was just a diversion. Maybe a better place to look would be the basement of this very house, under a layer of fresh earth and a patch of fresh concrete.

Maybe Barbara Bennette had never left home.

Feeling a chill, I slipped off into the night.
Brains came by early the next morning, tapping on my window to wake me from a dream filled with murders and secret burials. Surprisingly, he was his normal male self, which I found hard to reconcile with the woman who had only yesterday so furiously kissed a man. It wasn’t that he might be gay; I figured I could handle that. It was more that they seemed like two different people; one a passionate woman with a gorgeous body, the other a brilliant introvert with a sense of justice that would do Batman proud. How could they be the same person?

We rode our bikes downtown, like we’d been doing every summer since we were about twelve. Our destination: the Princess Salon.

“I staked the place out a few times while you were on holiday,” he said. “They know me pretty well at the little cafe across the street.”

I had to doubt that anyone knew Brains ‘pretty well’ because I certainly didn’t. Not anymore. We hid behind a dumpster on the corner, leaning our bikes against the brick wall of the laundromat two doors away from the salon. I tried to ignore the smell, but it was August. “What exactly are we doing here?”

Brains shook his head sadly. “Waiting for someone to tail, of course.”

He was always doing that, turning a perfectly reasonable question into something the dumbest kid in class wouldn’t raise his hand for. It was possibly his least endearing characteristic, although that list was growing fast.

“You’d be amazed how many high-end customers this place has, considering its proximity to the rail yard and the general tenor of the neighborhood. They usually get dropped off out front. The car doesn’t bother waiting.”

“What, the same car? Every time?”

“Of course not. Different vehicles, various makes, always expensive.”

“So why would they come here? There are fancy salons all over town.”

“That is indeed the question. There’s hope for you yet, Operative Six.”

We watched cars roll by on the road past the rail yard but none turned onto the street we were watching, which seemed to function mostly as a parking lot for railway workers. Many of these appeared at lunchtime, sorting themselves into diners around the neighborhood, eyeing us curiously as they passed. Only once did a fancy car drop off someone in front of the Princess Salon, and it drove away immediately. The client, an older woman, disappeared inside.

“So do we follow her when she comes out?”
“How do you propose we do that?” Brains replied. “I don’t know about you, but I can’t keep up with a limousine on my bicycle.”

I felt like tearing him a new one. “Then what the hell are we doing here?”

“Calm yourself, Operative Eighteen. Did I not mention that I intend to plant a GPS tracking device on the target vehicle?”

“No you did not mention! Dammit, why do you do that?”

“The idea came to me when I observed that, on occasion, a car has but a single occupant—the driver, of course. Meaning that it is left unattended for a short time, during which I plan to dash out and attach the device to the undercarriage. It has a little magnet—see?” He showed me an object from his pocket; no bigger than a USB key. “The range isn’t great but it uses the cellular network to text its location to a preset number. My own phone, naturally.”

The street cleared following the lunch hour, leaving us alone with our thoughts and my growing hunger. I had no idea what sort of beauty treatments the woman was receiving, but it certainly wasn’t the ‘instantaneous’ kind because she never did come out. But eventually a car—a high-end Lexus—did park nearby, the male driver taking care to lock the vehicle before entering the salon.

“That’s my cue.” Brains hurried up the street, slowing to a walk as he passed the salon. I had to admire how he managed to avoid peering through the window; I wasn’t sure I’d be able to do the same. He ignored the car until he was next to it, then sauntered over as if he’d spotted a dime in the gutter. Anyone watching would’ve thought he was picking up a coin; but I knew better and saw his gloved hand slip in and out of the wheel well. Afterward, he wandered halfway up the block before returning to our hiding place, looking smug.

A few minutes later a young woman emerged from the salon, unlocked the car and drove away. “Someone else took it,” I said. “What’s with that?”

Brains stared at me, cocking an eyebrow. “Was it someone else?”

* 

We tracked the car to an up-scale mall a few miles away. We locked our bikes in a rack and went inside. The place wasn’t that big—only two levels and less than a block of floor space—or overly crowded at this hour, but I still didn’t see how we were going to find the woman we were after.

“You saw her,” Brains said, “same as I did. Describe her.”

I fumbled through my memory. “Well, she was young… Caucasian. Longish hair. I think she was wearing a skirt. And high heels—I remember a clicking noise.”
“Bravo, Operative Sixty-one. But you left out a few details. By ‘young’ did you mean teenage or twenty-something? Her hair, was it up or down? Straight, wavy or curly? Was it really a skirt, or a dress? How long was it? What was the style; pleated, pencil, A-line? What did she wear up top? What color were her shoes?”

I had to admit that I hadn’t a clue.

“Not much point in splitting up then. She could be wearing a floor-length hoop skirt and a flashing neon angora sweater, and you still wouldn’t recognize her. For the record, the woman had shoulder-length wavy hair in a pageboy style. She was wearing a loose black skirt to her knees, nude panty hose, black shoes with short heels, and a short-sleeved blouse, also in black. She was in her mid-twenties, give or take a few years.”

“You saw all that?”

He tapped the side of his nose. “Experience, my friend. The trained eye of the senior investigator. You should work on that, if you hope to get ahead in this business.” Actually, I planned on following my father’s footsteps to dental school, but I hadn’t mentioned that to Brains. I wasn’t quite sure how he’d react.

We walked the length of the mall, on both levels, and found quite a few young women with black skirts and shoes—this being the business district—but none of them fit the template. At that point my stomach rebelled and I insisted that we hit the food court. “If we must,” Brains said reluctantly. “I’ll just have a small salad, though. I’m watching my weight.”

“Watching your weight? You’re thin as a rake!”

“And I intend to stay that way. Mother takes a size six, perhaps up to an eight in some lines. I’m right on the cusp.”

I felt dizzy. My friend was losing weight so he could fit into his mother’s clothing. The lady was missing, and might be buried in the laundry room under a foot of concrete. I wasn’t hungry after that, but to keep up appearances I forced myself to inhale a burrito, while Brains picked at a small pile of lettuce lightly coated with oil and vinegar. We sat at a small wrought-iron table in the mall’s atrium, where a huge skylight three floors up bathed the area in sunlight made diffuse by a thin layer of gray cloud that overlay the city.

Nothing was said. I kept wondering where in the basement one could secretly chip a hole in the floor without being seen. Not the laundry room, as Barbara Bennette would surely have noticed, assuming she wasn’t already dead at the time, which left the utility rooms. And how long would it take to dig a grave in solid concrete?

What Brains might be thinking about I couldn’t begin to imagine.
“There she is,” he said, just as I’d decided on the far corner of his late father’s workshop, behind the hot water tank. I followed his nod and saw a young woman with shoulder-length hair, dark blouse, and a black skirt that billowed around her knees. She was carrying a shopping bag and headed for the exit.

I jumped up, then stood there feeling foolish. “Aren’t we gonna follow?”

Brains was focused on his salad. “Look closely, Operative Twelve. That’s the door to the underground parking. She’s returning to her car. Following her would do us little good.” He stood up and stretched. “Or rather, we can track her vehicle later on, at our leisure. In the meantime… follow me.”

I swept the paper plates into the trash. “Where are we going?”

“Los Zapatos. She was carrying one of their bags.”

It was a shoe store. Ladies shoes only; every kind of high heel you could imagine. Brains peered through the window like a kid outside a candy store. “Lovely, aren’t they?” He pulled me over and pointed. “See those? The black pumps with the narrow heel and the little bow on the toe? Mother doesn’t have anything like that. Her shoes are all so practical. Not to mention boring.”

I forced myself to look. “So what?”

He looked me in the eye. “I’m going to buy a pair.”

“Are you crazy? You can’t go in there!” I grabbed his arm. “You can’t afford—”

“I have her credit card. Come now, Operative Thirteen, where’s your sense of adventure?” He strolled through the front door.

My sense of adventure didn’t include watching Brains try on ladies’ shoes, but that’s what I ended up doing. It could not have been more embarrassing.

Brains informed the salesgirl that he was ‘buying a present for his mother’ and pointed out the shoes in the window. “An excellent choice,” she said primly, “and what size does your ‘mother’ take?”

“I’m not sure,” he said cheerfully, “but I do know that my new dress shoes fit her perfectly.” All three of us looked down at Brains’ old sneakers.

“I suppose I could measure those…” the girl said, looking doubtful.

“Not these, they’re far too old. I’ll try them on myself.” The salesgirl and I rolled our eyes. “I’ll start with a women’s size eight,” he said briskly.

There were two other employees and six female customers in the store when the salesgirl returned with several shoeboxes, and they were all staring as Brains sat down and took off his runners. It was like watching a train wreck in slow-mo.
“Your mother wouldn’t wear sport socks with these shoes,” the girl said. “You’d better put these on.” She handed over a pair of nylon footies.

At last, the gloves defeated him. He fumbled with the delicate nylon for a moment before reluctantly removing the isotoners, exposing his delicate fingers with their crimson-tipped nails for all to see. And when his socks came off no one could fail to notice that his toenails were painted exactly the same color.

That was when I began edging toward the entrance.

The first shoe was too tight. They tried the next size up, then a half-size more. He stood up and strolled toward the back of the store, without so much as catching a heel on the carpet, pausing at a mirror to check out the view from behind.

Dead silence throughout the store.

I stood with my back to the pillar next to the front door, trying to pretend that I wasn’t waiting for the guy strutting around in high heels. I’m sure it fooled no one, but at least it stopped me from fleeing the scene screaming.

Brains eventually returned to his seat. The salesgirl struggled to find something to say, and finally asked if the shoes pinched his feet. “No, not at all,” he said with a lazy smile. “These will do nicely.”

“Very well. Would sir care to wear the shoes out of the store?”

“I don’t think Mother would approve.” He returned the pumps to their box, picked up his socks and went to remove the nylons.

“Keep ‘em,” the girl said.

* *

When we got home Brains stopped in the driveway and turned to me. “It’s crunch time, Operative Ten,” he said, his brow furrowed. “Tomorrow’s the picnic. Given that you’re supposed to be me, I think it would be appropriate for you to stay here tonight. In case he arrives early.”

“I’ll get my stuff,” I told him. “I’ll be back after dinner.”

But as I wheeled away I wasn’t thinking about a picnic at the lake, or even what it might be like to spend the night alone in a house with a guy who seemed intent on turning himself into his mother. I was thinking about that dark corner of the basement, behind the hot water tank, and what I might find there. ■
Chapter 5

The Bennette house was lit up like a Christmas tree when I got back, as if it was trying to signal its presence to alien visitors in orbit. Brains was hanging out in the family room, watching TV. Not all of him, mind you. Just his head.

As for the rest of him… He was wearing his new shoes, which didn’t surprise me a bit. He was also wearing a loose black skirt, nude panty hose, and a short-sleeved blouse that matched the skirt. It was a style I recognized.

“Welcome home, Mr. Marsdon,” he said, touching the mute button on the remote. “Although, I really should start calling you ‘Blaine’. It’s vital that we both stay in character on this assignment.”

I’d heard that before. “Any particular reason you’re dressed like that?”

“I liked the look, so I decided to try it out. The skirt belongs to Mother. The hem isn’t quite the same, but it’s close.”

“The shoes are different.” Even I could see that.

Brains arched an eyebrow. “Are they?”

“Sure. That woman had shorter heels. They were wider, chunkier.”

“The ones she was wearing, yes. These are the shoes she was carrying.”

“Oh, come on! They were in a bag, for Christ’s sake, and a box inside that. Don’t tell me you’ve got x-ray vision.”

“Not at all, Operative Seven. Regular eyesight was sufficient. At the desk, while the salesgirl processed my credit card, I simply read the previous receipt on the spindle. The make and model were the same as these. However, her feet are somewhat smaller than mine, damn her.”

“All those shoes and you buy the same ones she did? How likely is that?”

“More than you might think. She was no doubt drawn to the store by its display window, which held only a dozen or so pairs. Second, she had to try them on, so she would have restricted herself to what went with her skirt. Admittedly, many colors do go with black, but not all. Finally, her interest would be piqued by something significantly different from what she was wearing. Ergo, this pair of open-toed pumps with cute little bows was really the only choice.” He crossed his legs at the knee. “Of course, I adore them too. That was a bonus.”

I’d heard more than enough. “So where am I sleeping tonight?”

He swept to his feet. “I’ll show you to your room.”
Brains was getting into character. He led me to his own room and turned down the bed. It looked like it hadn’t been used lately. “There you go, sweetheart,” he said warmly. “Don’t stay up too late. Mother has to go super-glue her breasts for tomorrow, just in case that nice Mister Dennison gets frisky.”

I locked the door after he left. The guy was starting to creep me out.

I fired up Brains’ laptop and spent an hour or two surfing the dark underworld of the transgendered male. According to Wikipedia, a transvestite was someone who “habitually and voluntarily wore clothes of the opposite sex”. That was Brains all right—but was he a ‘cross-dresser’, someone who wears the clothes because he admires women and wants to imitate them? Or was it more of a sexual thing?

The possibilities didn’t end there. There was transvestism and ‘autogynephilia’, although the distinction was lost on me. There were drag queens and ‘shemales’, not to mention out-and-out transsexuals. He could be gay, straight, or anything in-between. There was simply no telling and I wasn’t planning to ask.

I lay in bed, letting my eyes adapt to the dark. Sleep was out of the question. Even if it were possible, I had work to do.

I waited until my watch beeped twelve, then quietly unlocked the door and slipped into the hall. A crack of light at floor level showed me where the master bedroom was. I could imagine Brains prancing around the room wearing an old-fashioned corset, garter belt and stockings, mouthing the words to “Sweet Transvestite” from the Rocky Horror Picture Show. I edged past the door.

I was torn. I mean, the guy might have murdered his own mother. But on the other hand, he was my friend and he was in trouble—albeit trouble of his own making. He was on the road to ruin, but that could be a cabaret in Atlantic City, a brothel in Nevada, or an operating table in Thailand. Not that he’d chosen to be a cross-dresser or a shemale or whatever the hell he was. It was all in the genes. Although for all I knew his mother had triggered the behavior by dressing him up as a girl when he was kid. I didn’t want to believe it. Mrs. Bennette was a smart woman. Being a private investigator probably wasn’t the best job for a single mother, but she’d made it work. But then again, who really knows anybody these days?

The door to the basement was in the kitchen. I opened it fast, because it squeaked, and caught it with my hand before it hit the fridge. Then down the stairs.

I didn’t want light spilling out of the windows high on the wall, so I made do with the LED on my keychain. The place was a mess, with boxes and old wood and garden tools everywhere. I found a clear path to the washer and dryer, but there was no way Mrs. Bennette came down here for anything else.
The workshop was separated from the common area by an unfinished wall. Tools and other equipment were piled everywhere. Brains’ father had enjoyed working with his hands; but cleaning up afterward, not so much.

The hot water tank stood in the far corner, which was precisely what made it suitable for a secret burial. There was no handy pile of rubble in the vicinity but he might’ve cleared it away. I edged past the tank and aimed my light at the floor. Nothing—nothing but a solid, unbroken expanse of concrete. It didn’t look like anyone had even swept back here in years, much less dug a hole.

Still, maybe he’d patched it so well you couldn’t see the seam, then rubbed over it with dirt, then leaned those boards in the corner and smeared them with dust, then somehow coaxed a bunch of spiders into spinning those dusty old webs…

I sighed. Even Brains couldn’t order spiders around.

“Blaine?” The upstairs door squeaked open. Light poured through.

_Crap!_ I doused the LED and stood still in what I hoped was a shadow.

“I know you’re down there.” It was _her_ voice; the late Barbara Bennette.

My first thought was: ghost or zombie? I mean, there I was, middle of the night, hunting for this poor woman’s grave—and the next thing I know she’s standing there at the top of the stairs, her silhouette aglow, her nightgown billowing.

Okay, maybe zombie was a stretch, but ‘ghost’ seemed like a solid option.

The overhead light flickered on. “Blaine! What in God’s name are you up to?”

_Busted._ “I, uh… couldn’t sleep.” I edged away from the hot water tank.

“Get up here right _now_, young man.”

I got moving. No point arguing with the man. Brains was in full-on Barbara mode.

* 

She made hot chocolate while I sat at the kitchen table with my head in my hands. “I do appreciate your urge to tidy up down there,” she said primly, “but it will have to wait for tomorrow. After the picnic, of course.”

Barbara set a steaming mug in front of me and sat down. “Now, why don’t you tell me what’s bothering you.” All I could do was stare. She was in partial makeup, as if she’d been interrupted while taking it off, and was wearing an old-style nightdress and bed jacket, both in white silk, with scalloped hems and a floral pattern embroidered into the bodice. A deep Vee in the front showed me that she’d completed the super-gluing of her breasts. Her hair, although untidy, I recognized as the long brunette wig from her lunch date.
My head sagged. “I just don’t know what’s going on. A cross-dresser, a shemale, the stage in Atlantic City… I’m confused.”

Barbara smiled and touched my hand. “I know you are, dear. But if you’ll let me, I think I can help you. I really mean that.”

“Yeah? Go on then.”

“I know the clues. Wrinkled dresses, mussed-up wigs, makeup out of place… Oh, I know you were careful, but a woman knows how she leaves her things.”

What the hell was she talking about? “You mean—”

“Yes, dear. I knew. I’ve known for a long time.” She sipped from her own glass of white wine. “These days, there’s simply no shame in a boy wanting to dress up as his mother. It’s perfectly understandable—even for boys from normal households, like your friend Jimmy.”

“But I’m not—he’s not…”

“Oh, but you never know, do you? He’s slender, not too tall, nice complexion—he could pull it off. But as for you, living here with a glamorous woman in the prime of her life, how could you not be influenced?”

Okay, I thought, just go with it. Now what would a confused young cross-dresser say when confronted by his mother? “I’m sorry,” I said, gritting my teeth. “I just couldn’t help myself.”

“You tell me.” Barbara laughed, briefly. “Oh, no. I’m sorry. It’s not funny.” She leaned forward. “Take me, for example. I’m a woman, so I enjoy wearing clothes that make me feel good about myself—about being a woman. But it’s different for you. Tell me, how do you feel when you wear my clothes?”

“Um… yeah. But anyway, I’m having trouble figuring all this out. I mean, what am I anyway? Is it just the clothes? Or is it more of a fetish?”

“You tell me.” Barbara laughed, briefly. “Oh, no. I’m sorry. It’s not funny.” She leaned forward. “Take me, for example. I’m a woman, so I enjoy wearing clothes that make me feel good about myself—about being a woman. But it’s different for you. Tell me, how do you feel when you wear my clothes?”

“Uh… I’m not sure. Different, I guess.”

“Well, when you put on a nice brassiere, and panties, and a cool silk slip slithering down to your knees, does it make you feel comfortable—or excited?”

I sure as hell didn’t want to talk about getting excited. “Comfortable, I guess.”

“Well, there you go.” She leaned back. “You have autogynephilia.”
“But what does that—”

“It’s not just a fetish, Blaine. The female role is more comfortable for you. It’s more in tune with who you are inside. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re a woman in a male body… although I suppose it might.”

Well, that cleared that up. “But what does it mean? Guys just aren’t supposed to dress up in their mother’s clothes. It’s not normal.”

“Since when have you ever been ‘normal’? You’re bright, you’ve always been far ahead of your class, and you’ve been following in my footsteps since you were old enough to walk. I should have known you’d be wearing my heels too.” She smiled. “Remember when you first began trick-or-treating? You and Jimmy made such a darling little Holmes and Watson.”

I remembered all too well. I’d been the guy’s sidekick long enough to be typecast. A lot of people in town seemed to think we were gay, and they probably wouldn’t be terribly surprised by tonight’s command performance.

“Yeah, about that,” I began. “Before the whole Sherlock Holmes thing, didn’t you dress him—I mean me—up as something else? Maybe a bit more ‘girly’?”

Barbara nodded slowly. “I often wondered if you remembered that.”
“How could I not?” I groped for something generic. “Dressed up in girls’ clothes, the shoes, that cute little wig… you don’t forget stuff like that.”

She looked sad. “I’m sorry. But you looked so adorable as a little princess. I just couldn’t resist.” She bit her lip. “I do hope it didn’t warp you.”

What I wanted to say was, ‘Warp me? Hell, no, why would it do that?’ Instead, I just finished my hot chocolate and announced that I was going to bed.

She grabbed my wrist. “I meant what I said, Blaine. I can help you. Do you really want to know what you are? If you’re a woman inside, we can find out.”

I tried to pull away. “I’m not a wo—”

“That’s fine. If you want to be a shemale or a fetishistic cross-dresser, that’s okay too. Just let me help. We can get you your own lingerie, your own wig… Are you a brunette, like me? Brown, blonde or red, it’s all up to you.”

I pried her fingers away. “I’m going to bed.”

“Would you like one of my nightgowns?” She glanced down. “Would you like this one? It might be a bit loose around the chest…”

“Just leave me alone, okay? I’m not like you!”

“You can’t deny your true nature. You are who you are. I know you’ve got some of my old clothes stashed in the basement—now don’t you go throwing them out just to spite me. You know you’ll regret it, B-bl-Blaine.”

She slumped forward. I shoved my chair back until it hit the wall.

“Oh, damn,” she muttered. “Sorry about that, Operative… Jimmy. Guess I got a little carried away. Getting a little too deep in the role.”

“No kidding.”

She sighed heavily. “This conversation is giving Mommy a headache.”

“That makes two of us.”

Barbara gathered her nightgown around her and staggered a little as she stood up.

“You’re right. It is time for bed.” With that she swept from the room, leaving only the scent of her perfume behind.

*

Needless to say, I didn’t sleep a wink that night.
Chapter 6

Lakeside Park was an hour’s drive outside town, nestled in the cleavage between two unimpressive hills we locals like to call mountains. We got there in Derrick Dennison’s Mercedes, with me in the back seat and Barbara up front pretending to find the driver irresistible. At least, I hope she was pretending.

I passed the time studying the map we’d printed showing trails through the park and just outside. Brains had added the Hill House property and the precise position of the walls that bounded it. We’d already mapped out how to get there; Brains estimated a half-hour hike from the lake, but I figured I’d be lucky to make it in twice that. Of course, scouting around Hill House was entirely my job. All Brains had to do was hang out at the lake and eat.

We arrived just before noon. There were lots of free tables in the main picnic area but Dennison parked at the far end of the lot and led us to a secluded area away from the rest, where the grass was sparse and bushes separated us from the lake.

So the guy wanted privacy. Unfortunately, I could imagine why.

My fears were confirmed when they left me to set the table and strolled down to the water’s edge. I could see them going at it like teenagers; she with her head back, laughing between kisses; he squeezing her in his arms, nibbling her ears and swallowing her mouth.

Disgusting. She was wearing yellow culottes and a peasant blouse with a scoop neckline and raglan sleeves. It was hard to imagine the woman as Brains, hidden beneath layers of lingerie and stylish outerwear, and his mother would never have acted like that either. No, this new Barbara was a whole different animal, as obsessed with female sexuality as a cat with a new toy.

I suspected neither of them would mind were I to slip away after lunch.

Dennison had brought the picnic basket, which had obviously been supplied by a caterer. Thank God for small mercies. Barbara Bennette was an excellent cook but I suspected that Brains’ impersonation didn’t run that far.

We ate in awkward silence, punctuated by several failed attempts at small talk. In one such attempt Dennison asked me what I’d been reading in the car.

“Class list,” I replied, secretly pleased at my quick thinking.

“Hey, that’s right. College is coming.” He made no attempt to hide his pleasure at the thought of getting me out of the way. “What’re you going for?”

“Criminology,” Barbara said, a touch of pride in her voice.
I hesitated, then blurted out, “Dentistry.” What the hell.

“Dentistry?” For an instant the façade fell apart. Dennison flashed his date a sharp look, while she pretended to cough on a bite of apple.

“Figured I’d follow in Dad’s footsteps,” I said, ignoring the venomous glare from my alleged mother.

“I didn’t know you married a dentist,” Dennison said to Barbara. “Guess you go for the professional types, huh?”

“I guess I do,” she said heavily. “How long have you felt this way?”

I just shrugged, staring out across the lake.

* 

As it turned out, my hike through the trails took almost exactly forty-five minutes. At certain lookouts along the way, where the land dropped faster than the trees, I could glimpse the city itself in the distance, shimmering in the August heat like a figment of the imagination. Pretty much everything else in sight was green and growing, with the singular exception of the wall surrounding Hill House.

It was an impressive twelve feet tall and looked brand-new, although I knew for a fact it had been there for at least ten years. It was rough to the touch and appeared to be made of dark sandstone, but without so much as a patch of moss or a tuft of grass to mar its showroom finish. My fingers came away tingling, without so much as a speck of dirt—but who would bother to keep an outside wall that clean? It’s not like they had to look at the damn thing every day.

Stranger still, nothing grew within some six feet of the wall. The forest stopped dead at the boundary, with even roots and branches choosing the better part of valor to grow in some other direction. The ground was hard-packed dirt that had been rained on and sun-baked long enough to form the kind of surface you might see in a minor league infield—but an odd thing to find in a forest. But on the plus side, it made it easy to walk the perimeter.

I was halfway through my survey of the property, finding nothing but wall and more wall, and still without so much as a glimpse of Hill House itself, when my phone rang. “Report, Operative Two.”

I felt peeved. “Nothing to report. Go back to your picnic, ‘Mom’.”

“I’m here,” her tiny voice barked. “Meet me at the front gate.”

A few minutes later I rounded the corner and saw a woman in the distance; her bright yellow culottes a dead giveaway. I hurried over. “What are you doing here? Where’s Dennison?”
“Sleeping. I slipped a roofie in his potato salad.”

“Jesus, why’d you do that? Middle-aged guy, fancy car, passed out with no one around—he’ll get rolled for sure. We’ll have to walk home!”

“Don’t be absurd. At worst we’d only have to walk as far as the highway. I’m sure I could score us a ride there. Besides, I took his keys.”

“Oh, great. So you’re gone and he thinks you robbed him.”

“Now you’re just being silly. The car’s still there and I only took his wallet so it wouldn’t get stolen. I even left him a note.”

I shook my head and looked around. The only way through the wall was a nearby gate, accessed by an ancient road made of badly cracked concrete. Apparently, I’d taken the long way around the estate. The gate was solid wood, ribbed with iron and topped with an ornate neo-Gothic latticework. I still couldn’t see inside.

Barbara pointed at the packed dirt underfoot. “Was it like this all the way ‘round? No trees or branches near the wall?” I nodded. “Fascinating,” she muttered. “It’s as though something is…” She disappeared into the trees, emerging moments later with a long branch. She propped it against the wall, with the thin end sticking up over the top.

“This is fucking pointless,” I said. “What are we doing here?”

“Language, dear.” She flashed me a smile. I could see she’d been practicing; it was exactly what the real Barbara Bennette would have done.

A few minutes later the end of the branch began to disintegrate. As it did, more and more of the remaining wood came into contact with the wall. Ten minutes later only a pile of dust remained. I stared at my fingers. They still hurt.

“Now you know what we’re dealing with, Operative Four.”

“And what would that be?” I stared at the top of the wall, and beyond into the clear blue vault of the sky—but I already knew the answer.

“Remember Clarke’s third law,” Barbara said. “It may seem like magic, but that’s only because we don’t have the same know-how.”

Any sufficiently advanced technology… These people could grow hair in a flash, transform themselves, and build self-cleaning walls. “Who the hell are they?”

“That’s the billion-dollar question. But whoever they are, they’ve got her. Come with me.” She led the way down the road, mercifully away from the invisible presence of Hill House, to where a dirt road led into the forest—and to a parked car, well off the road and hidden from view. A very familiar car.
“It’s hers,” Barbara said quietly. “I found it on my way up.”

I ran my hand along the side. “What’s it doing here?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Mother left it here to case the property.” She shrugged out of her tiny backpack. “Either they grabbed her outside, or she got through the gate.”

And never came out. I swallowed hard. “We should call the cops.”

“No cops. You think they’d believe a couple of punk kids?” She tossed me a set of car keys. “Here. You drive the car home. I’ll ride with Derrick.”

My jaw twitched. The key chain was a pair of silver B’s welded together.

Barbara opened the passenger door. “It’s the spare set, dummy,” she said, looking annoyed. “I’ve been carrying them around all week, just in case. C’mon, Jimmy—chop, chop! You’re dropping me at the lake.”

* 

All I could think of was that I finally had the house to myself. If necessary, I could search the place top to bottom; if Dennison got his way Barbara wouldn’t be back anytime soon. The man had been told that I’d “met up with friends” and would be going home with them; I couldn’t see him wasting the opportunity.

Of course, if I found what I was looking for, Brains would go to prison for a very long time; that, or a padded cell in a psych ward. Idly, I wondered if Dennison would agree to take the case.

I searched the garage before parking the car inside. It didn’t take long; the floor was uncluttered, not to mention intact. Well, of course—why would he bury her here? It was solid concrete, above ground and close to the neighbors. Pretty much the worst place to dig. I scouted around the yard as well, but there was no sign of digging anywhere. That left the basement.

The place was a mess. In other words, nothing had changed since my last visit. I began in the workshop and worked my way into the common area, checking behind the washer and dryer and shifting enough plywood, old wooden boxes and broken hardware to fill a good-size moving van.

I was in no hurry. I had lots of time; so much of it that I lost track.

“What in God’s name are you doing?”

I froze in the middle of lifting a crate of old picture frames. Barbara came slowly down the stairs, her hair a mess and her clothing rumpled. I could imagine what she’d been through, although by that time I was beyond caring.

As for what I’d been doing—the girl was no dummy. It was pretty obvious.
“You think I killed her?” She was staring at me, her eyes wide, as if I was covered with spiders and loving it. I dropped the crate and said nothing.

Her shoulders sagged. “How could you even think that?”

I kicked at the crate. “I dunno. Maybe it had something to do with you wearing her clothes, sleeping in her bed, and doing her boyfriend.”

She slumped into an old wooden chair, visibly exhausted. “I guess the whole ‘it’s just for the case’ excuse is out the window, huh?” She pulled off her wig.

I shook my head and blinked. Just like that, my old buddy was back.

* 

Brains sighed heavily. “The truth is, Jimmy… I’m a cross-dresser.”

“No way! Wow, you totally had me fooled.”

He looked surprised. Then he laughed, a little too hard. Then he got sick. Luckily, he made it to the sink in time. His flowered blouse and yellow skirt made for a violent clash with the grime of the basement—not to mention the puking.

I picked up the wig. Crowning glory, my ass—it looked more like sweepings from a second-rate beauty parlor. With two fingers I dropped it on the dryer.

“Sorry about that. It’s just… I never told anyone before.” He stumbled back to his seat. “You know, you keep a secret your whole—”

“You weren’t exactly being discrete.”

“I guess not.” He managed a weak grin. “Maybe I went a bit nuts. Sure, I’ve done all this before—going through her things, dressing while she’s out of the house, passing in public. The usual stuff. But this time it was days at a time, with no one else around.” He shrugged. “I thought I had a good reason.”

“I still don’t get it. What’s the big deal about women’s clothes?”

“If you have to ask, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Okay, how about this—are you a man or a woman? On the inside.”

He shook his head. “That should be a nice, simple question…”

“It is simple! Are you saving up for surgery or brushing up on show tunes?”

He laughed. “I’m no entertainer, that’s for sure. But I have to say, that’s more than a bit offensive. Not all cross-dressers are drag queens. Some of us are normal guys who just happen to enjoy dressing like this. We’re not all gay either.”

“Maybe not, but you sure as hell are. I know you did it with Dennison.”
Brains sat up. “I’m impressed, Operative Two. Your detective skills would surely be wasted on mere teeth. I hope you’re not set on the idea.” He crossed his legs at the knee. “However… I’m not gay.”

“You kiss guys an awful lot for someone who’s not gay.”

“You got me there. I liked it. I liked being treated as a real woman for a change. For the first time in my life. I’m not attracted to the guy—or guys in general.” He touched his cheek, his eyes unfocused. “But when a man treats you like that… When he holds you like a woman… When he desires you as a woman… You just can’t imagine how that feels.”

“You got that right. But why screw someone you aren’t attracted to?”

“People have sex for all kinds of reasons. In my case, I wasn’t focused on him at all. It was all about me.”

“What’s that mean? You’re attracted to yourself?”

“You could say that. In a way, the man is no more than a fancy dildo.”

“But you’ve been dressing up like your mother, disguising yourself as her… You pretended to be her! Are you—”

“Whoa, don’t go there! I am not—” He sprang to his feet. “It’s one thing to want to emulate your mother—that’s perfectly normal. Let me put it this way: what I did is no different than a guy hooking up with a woman who kind of reminds him of his mother. That may sound strange, but it happens all the time.”

“Yeah, but you looked exactly—”

“That was just for the case!” He held out his hands. “C’mon, cut me some slack here. If you were a cross-dresser, you’d understand.”

I handed over his wig. “Let’s just get outta here.”

He bundled the hair in his hands, staring at the brunette mass as if it held the secret to her disappearance. “I didn’t kill her. You have to believe that.”

“I don’t know what to believe.” I glanced around the room. I knew that the real Barbara Bennette wasn’t buried in the basement, but that’s about all. I started up the stairs, then paused. “By the way, I found your stash.”

“My what?”

“The clothes you hid down here. A bunch of old skirts, bras, shoes—”

“Oh, that. I haven’t touched that stuff in months.” He sighed, then reached under the sink. “No point hiding it anymore.” He pulled out an old Gladstone bag and wiped off the dust.
I headed up to the kitchen. My stomach was reminding me that the picnic was ancient news. I was making a sandwich when Brains swept up from the basement, clutching a sheet of paper. “Did you see this?”

I was more interested in the food. “You want me to leave this stuff out?”

“I don’t care. It was in the bag, in an envelope. Did you see it?”

“Saw the envelope. Didn’t open it.” I returned the condiments to the fridge.

He handed me the paper.

Dear Blaine:

I plan to retrieve this letter after my investigation of Hill House, so if you find it then I probably didn’t come back. Sadly, it appears that I won’t be around to see you become the fine man (or woman) I know you’ll be.

Yes, dear. I knew. A mother always knows. You have my permission to take whatever you want from my room. Just do me proud. :-)

By now, you must have a good idea what we’re up against. It was hard for me to accept too. The notion of visitors from the future is straight out of one of those Sci-Fi videos you and Jimmy like. But here’s what you don’t know: I have a contact on the inside, a security agent who infiltrated the group behind this intrusion, which is apparently illegal in their time. She’s located uptime, which is why she needs me, but she altered their security system so I can get in. I don’t know what will happen after that.

I wish I could offer you some guidance, but the truth is there’s probably nothing you can do. I’m sorry, sweetheart. You’ll just have to let me go.

Love, Mom.

I looked up. Brains had sunk into a chair and was bent over the kitchen table. All I could see was the back of his head. He might have been crying.

“Time travel?” I stared out the window, my sandwich forgotten. What the hell had I gotten myself into? My best friend was turning into a woman, his mother had been kidnapped, and the bad guys were aliens from the future? Or—I corrected myself—maybe not aliens after all, but regular human beings who simply enjoyed a quick jaunt into the past to change hairstyles and shop for high-end ladies wear!

Yeah, it all made perfect sense now. In Bizarro world.
(...life, the universe and everything)
Sunday morning. My parents went to church and I set out to hang with a guy who had probably slept in his mother’s bed, wearing her favorite peignoir and a herbal beauty mask for that special glow. Sometimes you really have to wonder at your choices in life. But to my surprise I found Brains on his hands and knees in the trunk of his mother’s car, wearing nothing more feminine than a pair of flip-flops. Latex gloves concealed his fingernails.

“Clues,” he muttered feverishly, ignoring me. “I’m looking for clues.”

I thought the better of reminding him that his mother was gone for good. Instead, I just said that as far as I was concerned the case was over. “I’m not giving up,” he insisted. But he found nothing of any use.

An hour later he was still on the hunt, hunched over the passenger seat examining the floor mats with a magnifying glass. I was sitting on the workbench, glumly watching him, when a black Mercedes pulled into the driveway.

“Hello, boys. Remember me? Derrick Dennison.” He shook my hand but skipped Brains when he noticed the gloves. “You came to watch me in court.”

The guy looked subtly different. He seemed to have aged somewhat overnight; put on a little weight, lost muscle tone, less hair up top; and he was paler. Was it even possible for someone to let themselves go that much in a single day?

“Is your mother home?” Incredibly, he was talking to Brains, not me. “I just got back and thought I’d surprise her.”

Brains found his voice first. “You’ve been away?”

“Three weeks. My mother passed on, so I had the estate to take care of, clearing out the house, putting it up for sale. That sort of thing.” He sighed.

“I’m sorry,” Brains said. “About your mother.”

“She’s away,” I said quickly. “Mrs. Bennette, I mean. She’s not home.”

“Oh, darn. I would’ve called, but I really wanted to see her. Voice mail is so impersonal.” He sighed again. “Please tell her I stopped by.”

When he was gone, I turned to Brains. “If that was Dennison, then who drove us to the lake yesterday? Who did you screw the other night?”

He looked pale. “Oh, God. It was one of them.”

“Who’s ‘them’? Giant ants? Monsters from the id?” My mouth was flapping but I knew the answer as well as he did. The time travellers were on to us.
Brains said nothing until he had dragged me into the garage and closed the door. “They could be watching us right now,” he said quietly. “Listening.”

“They’re from the future, aren’t they? You think an aluminium door is gonna stop them? Or a wood wall?” I pointed at the grimy window. “Didn’t you tell me the CIA already has lasers that can pick up vibrations in glass?”

“Good point, Operative Three. They aren’t even double-glazed.” He pushed me into the back seat of the car, followed me inside and slammed the door—and locked it, which I thought was a bit over the top.

“I have a plan.” He fished his phone from the pouch of his hoodie.

“Please tell me it doesn’t involve cross-dressing.”

He stared at me, as if unable to wrap his head around the possibility that it might not. “Of course it does,” he said impatiently. “More so than ever. In fact, it will now be necessary to take it to a whole new level.”

“You mean there’s another level beyond impersonating your mother and screwing her boyfriend?”

He ignored me and thrust his phone into my face. “That’s the gate at Hill House,” he said. “I took the picture just before we met up.”

“What am I looking for?”

“The panel right there, beside the gate. You can zoom in. See the lens? That’s an iris scanner. And right there is where you put your hand for a fingerprint scan.”

“But if it’s some kind of future-tech, couldn’t it be just about anything?”

“No, I recognize the equipment. It’s standard issue these days. Expensive as hell, but anyone can use it.” He waved the phone at me, obviously excited. “Don’t you see? Their security is biometric! You don’t need a key to get in, or a passcard. There’s no guard on duty. You just need the right biometric signature.”

“Still not seein’ it. How does that help us?”

“That’s how Mother got in—has to be. Her contact on the inside must have programmed her biometric data into the security system. Then all she had to do was walk up to the gate and let it scan her.”

“Okay… But how is our biometric whatever gonna get in there? Do you know how to communicate with her contact?”

“Nothing like that. Her biometric data is on file right here, in the safe. It’s from when she was working with the feds. I’ll just program it into me.”

*
It was a brand new wig, never used. Brains thought he needed a different look, something the ‘Futurians’—as we’d dubbed them—had never seen before. So there I sat, as instructed, in Barbara Bennette’s bedroom, carefully brushing out the long blonde tresses using a comb with comically thick teeth.

I had no idea what was going on. Brains had been in the bathroom for a long time, first in the bath—where it sounded like he was shaving his legs—then in the shower. After that, silence.

I returned the wig to its styrofoam head. Once the tangles were gone and the comb met with little or no resistance, there wasn’t much point in continuing. I stared down at the vanity with its dazzling array of cosmetics, imagining what it might be like to wear that wig and decorate my own face with all that color… I caught sight of myself in the mirror and shuddered. What a boatload of effort women had to go through to look like that! I was lucky to be a guy.

At length, Brains emerged from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist and a tight nylon net over his hair. He already looked very different from his old self, with glistening smooth legs and an overall absence of body hair.

“I’ll need your help with these breasts, Operative Four,” he said briskly.

I swallowed hard. “Haven’t you done that before? On your own?”

“Yes, but I need them perfectly positioned this time. I plan to show a fair bit of cleavage, so there’s no room for error. They have to look totally real.”

He lay down on the bed and directed my attention to the circles he’d drawn on his chest, faint dotted lines centered on his nipples. At his direction I painted a thin layer of surgical glue within the circles. I did the same to the underside of each breast form, then carefully positioned them, one at a time, to precisely cover the lines. What followed was the most awkward fifteen minutes of my life, with me applying pressure to ensure full contact between skin and breast-form, and Brains just lying there—apparently lost in thought.

To be honest, this wasn’t how I envisioned life after high school.

“Now the makeup,” Brains said. “It’s the pink one on the dresser.” I handed him a bottle of Flawless Complexion Gel. “It’s from the same company as the breast forms,” he continued. “Guaranteed to dry to the same shade.”

He applied the gel to the semi-transparent membrane that surrounded each breast, further blurring the line between the old and the new. I helped him spread the gel down the sides and even into areas that would be hidden by whatever brassiere he wore. He always was a stickler for perfection. Then he obsessively blended the edges with a tiny sponge and insisted I do the same to the bits he couldn’t see.
The results were impressive. They were the sexiest pair of tits I’d ever seen. Not that I’d seen all that many of the things, at least in the flesh. But still.

“Get a good look?” he said, frowning as he packed his chest into a strapless bra.

I looked away, my face flushed, pretending to peer out the window. When I turned around again the towel was on the floor and Brains was standing by the dresser, poking through his mother’s lingerie drawer. *Holy Christ*, I thought, so *that* was what he was doing in the bathroom!

It had to be latex, of course; a pair of skin-colored briefs, or maybe a glue-on piece for the groin itself. I knew that. It *had* to be. But there were no visible seams and what it boiled down to was a naked woman standing there, holding up a pair of nylon stockings to check for runs.

“This must seem like an awful lot of trouble, to you.” Brains stepped into a pair of bikini briefs, then unfolded a half-girdle from a small box and worked it into place around his hips. He sat down and gently rolled the nylons he’d chosen up his legs, struggling to attach the garters.

“You read my mind,” I muttered.

A shoebox yielded a pair of black pumps with tall heels. “I found these at the back of the closet. I doubt Mother ever wore them; they aren’t her style. But they’re gorgeous.” He buckled the tiny straps and added an ankle chain to his left leg.

Why the left? “Historically,” he said, “in this area, a chain on the left side means that I’m single and looking for love. The right ankle means marriage. I can’t very well pass myself off as a married woman, can I?”

“Your mother was married,” I pointed out.

“Not anymore. And more to the point, *I’m* certainly not, am I?”

I conceded the point. He wriggled into an ivory half-slip and sashayed over to the vanity, the combination of heels, girdle and silky slip imbuing his walk with a womanly sway. His entire body adapted to its new language.

He sat, and the new wig slipped into his hands. He shook it out and combed the thick hair with her fingers, not once but many times. “Excellent work, Operative Ten,” he said, with a sly glance in my direction.

With a quick flip he drew the wig over his head. Only then did I notice the small strips of pink tape straddling his hairline. Tiny combs sewn inside the wig slipped under each strip, one on his forehead, others behind each ear. The wavy tresses frothed around his shoulders as he adjusted the wig’s hairline to cover his own. When he was done, it was as though he wasn’t wearing a wig at all.
I shook my head, blinking. The light in the room had changed, albeit subtly, as though reality itself had changed. Brains turned toward me and his voice shifted into the high, clear tones of his mother.

Barbara Bennette Junior had returned.

* 

“The things we women have to go through,” she said coyly, tossing her hair back, “just to make ourselves presentable.”

“You look nice,” I said lamely. What I didn’t say was that she was more than just presentable, she was stunning. I didn’t mention that she was the kind of woman I dreamed of at night, under the covers, when no one could see me, or that hers was a body I could happily make love to, deep into the night, and wake up with the next day ready to go again. I didn’t say any of that… but I think she knew.

Barbara pinned up her hair. “Jimmy? A little help?” She pointed to the mask stuck to the wig stand. “You’re good at this. Be a dear and affix my face.”

For the second time, I painted surgical glue onto a latex prosthetic and applied it to my friend. Barbara touched it into place herself, then added foundation and finishing powder—and a dark red lipstick.

“A woman’s mouth is so sensual,” she murmured. From across the room, I had to agree. She frowned at me. “Come here, please.”

I edged closer.

“If we’re going to continue working together, you might have to do this yourself one of these days. So pay attention. There will be a test.” She added eyeliner, and eye shadow, then ran a pencil over her brows to make them appear subtly thinner. Or so she claimed. Finally, she curled her lashes and applied waterproof mascara. “Did you follow all that?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure.” I just wanted to get it over with.

“Good. Maybe we’ll do you tomorrow. Assuming all goes well tonight.”

“Assuming what goes well?”

“All in good time.” Barbara selected a color from an array of lip gloss in the top drawer. “You get better depth and shine with a light gloss over a darker red.” She puckered up and painted her lips, then rolled them together as she unpinned her hair and fluffed it out.

I was in awe. She was a goddess. I couldn’t imagine looking like that. I didn’t want to imagine looking like that. And even though I’d seen it all happen, I still couldn’t believe that this woman—this femme fatale—was really a guy.
Barbara stood up. “I really shouldn’t be letting you watch me dress. You being my son’s friend and all.” She smiled lightly. “Oh, well. We’re all adults here.”

I backed away as she went to the closet. I felt the fear.

She unzipped a garment bag and drew forth a long dark gown. “The Midnight Mermaid,” she murmured, “by Alyce Black Label. Note the sheer chiffon overlay that textures the wave-like ribbons of beading underneath. See how the skirt flares into a delicate fishtail at the knee. I call this power dressing.”

She unzipped the back and stepped inside. “You’ve known Blaine for a long time, Mr. Marsdon. How would you characterize him?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“What sort of man is he? Or rather, what sort of boy.”

“Well… he’s smart. He’s a good guy. Confident. I always admired that.”

“He is bright, I’ll give you that. He gets that from me.” She chuckled, working the gown up over her hips and settling the strapless neckline overtop her bosom. She turned around and lifted her hair. “Zip me?”

I tugged the zipper into place.

She let her hair fall. “But as for confidence… I’m afraid he had you fooled there.”

She marched back to the vanity. “He put up a good front, but that’s all it was. On the inside, he’s a frightened little boy.”

“Aren’t you being a little hard on the guy?”

“Oh, no. I know my boy.” She selected a pair of teardrop diamond earrings and slotted them into her earlobes—which, to my surprise, were already pierced. “The problem is, he simply doesn’t respect himself. Probably something to do with the whole wanting-to-be-a-woman thing.” She decorated her throat with a chain hung with tiny diamonds and a single dark stone, and added a bracelet that matched the primary color of her dress. She daubed perfume onto her wrists and neck.

I was surprised. “You mean he always wanted to be a girl?”

“As far back as he can remember.” She struck a pose, one hand on her hip. “Now, you’ve known me for a long time too. What sort of woman am I?”

I had no idea what to say, but apparently the question was rhetorical.

“I’m a proud woman, Mr. Marsdon. Proud of who I am. I respect myself, both as a woman and as a person. Moreover, I demand respect from others.” She lifted her chin. “I am everything poor Blaine always wanted to be, but wasn’t.”

When she left the room, I had no choice but to follow.
We made one stop on the way out: at the safe in the den, from which she extracted a flash drive. “The Bennette family biometric data,” she said, “notably those of Barbara Ellen Bennette, age 36, private investigator and single mother.”

“What do we need that for?”

“We’re going downtown.” A grim look twisted her lovely features. “I’m going to put that damn machine to good use: transferring her attributes to me—iris pattern, fingerprints, the works.”

“That’s crazy!”

She touched my arm. “I have to try. You know that.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. How could I say no?

She kissed me on the cheek. “I’ll get my purse. You’re driving.”
Chapter 8

She touched my knee. “They’re watching us.”

“How do you know?” I took my eyes off the road long enough to see that she was using her cell phone, pausing only to push blonde tresses away from her eyes. I was finding it hard to get past the whole blonde vibe she was giving off. She no longer resembled Barbara Bennette any more than Brains did, but her pretty face and gorgeous figure made it impossible to think of her as male. In the privacy of my own mind, I nicknamed her ‘Barbie’.

“That woman at the mall, the one who bought the shoes… That’s her car a block behind us.” She glanced up sharply. “And no, it’s not a coincidence. She’s making the same turns we are.”

“How do you know it’s her?” I asked, then felt stupid.

She clicked the phone shut. “It’s one of them,” she said. “That’s all that matters.” My grip tightened. We were on the expressway, halfway to the Princess Salon. Heat rose from the pavement in waves. “Want me to lose ‘em?”

“Don’t be silly. They could be tracking us the same way I’m tracking them.” She stared out the side window. “We need another destination. Something plausible.”

“What’s that mean? We can go anywhere…”

“You don’t put on a strapless gown to go to McDonald’s.”

Well, I sure as hell wouldn’t. But I wasn’t so sure about Barbie Bennette, of whom just about anything seemed possible. “Change of plan,” she said abruptly. “We’ll go to Derrick’s apartment. I’ve got his address.” She opened her purse.

“Dennison? What’s he gonna do?”

“He’s not going to do anything, Operative Eighteen. But it’s plausible that I might dress up like this to visit my boyfriend.”

* 

“Good lord! Barbara, is that you? You’re blonde.”

“It’s for a case.” They embraced, then kissed. “Missed you,” Barbie whispered.

“Missed you too,” he said, smiling. “You look fantastic, if I may be so bold.”

“You may,” she said, her eyes cast downward. “I’m afraid that I’m on my way to a dinner party. If I’d known you’d be back…”

“That’s okay. I didn’t know myself.” He glanced at me.
I believe you’ve met my chauffeur,” she said quickly. “It’s simply not possible to drive in heels, to say nothing of the rest of this outfit.”

“Of course. Nice to see you again, Blaine.” He offered his hand.

I froze. But Dennison knew who I really was; the real Dennison, that is.

“Shake the nice man’s hand, dear,” Barbie said, stepping aside. “Goodness—boys these days! He certainly doesn’t get those manners from me.”

Feeling numb, I lifted my arm, half expecting it to be grabbed by a tentacle or something equally creepy—and Barbie shot him. Dennison collapsed like a sack of far-future spuds. She grabbed his arm. “Get him inside!”

We dragged the body into the apartment. Barbie shut the door and handed her weapon, a taser, to me, then began going through the Futurian’s pockets. Without warning, the creature’s eyes snapped open. Thick fingers enveloped her arm—

I fired the taser. The barbs struck its throat; the body convulsed and lay still. Barbie pulled free. I helped her up. “Sorry about that.”

“No apologies necessary, Operative Two.” She adjusted the fit of her dress across her hips and fluffed out the hemline. “Quick thinking on your part.”

I stared down at the body, which seemed to be a much closer impersonation of the real Dennison we’d met yesterday. “Is it dead?”

“Two shots at close range? Probably.” She completed her search, coming up with what appeared to be a cell phone, although it didn’t open and had only one control. She pointed it at the Futurian and pressed the button.

The device buzzed, emitting a narrow beam of intense blue light. The creature’s body shimmered and vanished, leaving a burnt patch on the carpet. A phaser?

“It appears to be a weapon,” Barbie said, smiling a grim little smile. “You keep the taser. I’ll just hang on to this.” She tucked the weapon into her purse.

I stared at the carpet. “Jesus. How’d they know we were coming here?”

She shook back her long hair. “My guess is, they didn’t. I think they were just making sure there’s only one Derrick Dennison around, instead of two.”

I checked the dead bolt. “I wonder why they don’t just grab us.”

“It could happen. Up until now I might’ve said, we’re just not that important. But now they’re spying on us…” She shook her head.

We found the real Dennison in the bedroom, bound hand and foot on the bed. His eyes bulged when he saw us. “Good lord,” he cried, when the duct tape came off. “Is that you, Barbara? You’re blonde!”
“Sorry, Mr. Dennison,” Barbie said. “My mother’s missing. I’m Blaine.”

His eyes bulged again, staring at the woman undoing the ropes that bound his legs. “You? Blaine? But—”

“I’m undercover,” she said sharply. “It’s for the case.”

“But… you have breasts,” he said weakly.

“He’s a perfectionist,” I said, struggling with the knots around his wrists.

Dennison sat up, rubbing his arms. He couldn’t take his eyes off Barbie. “You even sound like her… You could be her sister. Her younger sister.”

Barbie picked up her purse. “We better go.”

Dennison came with us. We needed his car; besides which, leaving him to the questionable mercies of the Futurians didn’t seem right. On the way out, after hearing our explanation he stared at the burns on his carpet. “He looked exactly like me,” he said, visibly horrified. “How can that be?”

“Technology,” Barbie muttered, tugging on the neckline of her dress.

His eyes grew round. “Aliens? Creatures from beyond?”

I knew what he was thinking. Invaders from Mars. Pod-people. Zombies. In the elevator, I took pity on him. “It’s not what you think, Mr. Dennison. They’re human beings, just like us. They’re just from the future.”

He looked miserable. “Sure. Right. Like there’s a difference.”

We found his Mercedes in the underground lot. I was worried that it was the same car the Futurian had been driving the day before, and they’d be tracking it, but Dennison told us it was with him at the time. “Let Jimmy drive,” Barbie said. “He knows where we’re going.”

The exit led into the alley and there was no sign that anyone had taken note of our departure. The car that had been following us, Barbie announced, staring at her phone, was still parked out front.

In the back seat, Dennison seemed agitated. “Where are we going? We’re not safe around here, you know. We should leave town.”

“We’re going downtown,” I said over my shoulder.

“Do you know what he said? The man? After he tied me up? He said they weren’t going to hurt me. Oh, no; they were just going to turn me into someone who couldn’t hurt them.” I heard him shudder. “He said no one would believe some featherbrained bunny-girl claiming to be a man. What the hell does that mean?”
I grinned. “It means you dodged a bullet, dude.”

“Featherbrained bunny-girl? He said that?” Barbie shook her head. “It’s so sexist. You’d think people of the future would be more enlightened.”

“Maybe they’re nostalgic,” I said. “They like the way things used to be, instead of the way they are, in their time. All that nasty social progress.”

“They should check out the fifties then, or even earlier. Not much social progress there.” She sighed. “They probably don’t like the fashions.”

As instructed, I pulled up to the curb in front of the Princess Salon. “Park in the alley,” Barbie said. “I’ll meet you there.” She squared her shoulders, held up her handbag like a toy poodle, swung her hips and marched inside.

Her plan was deceptively simple: walk through the front door as if she owned the place, ignore everyone and head straight for the basement. Brains had observed precisely such behavior during his stakeout, reasoning that the Futurians must alter their appearance so often that a stranger passing through—particularly a well-dressed young woman—would raise no eyebrows.

We watched her go, then pulled the car around the block and parked behind the laundromat, near where Brains and I had hid behind only days before. With the air conditioning off, the interior warmed up quickly.

Dennison soon got fidgety. “What’s with your friend?”

At first, I had no idea what he was talking about; it’s amazing how quickly you can get used to a situation that not that long ago wouldn’t have featured in your top thousand ‘things most likely to happen anytime soon, or maybe ever’.

“He’s done up as a woman. Rather convincingly, I might add.”

“It’s for the case.” The old familiar lie.

“That’s what he said too. But call me crazy, I just don’t see how him dressing up like a homecoming queen is going to help locate Barbara.”

Truthfully, I wasn’t sure either. “Brains knows what he’s doing.”

“That’s right, the kids call him ‘Brains’. Because he’s smart.” He leaned forward. “What he’s doing now doesn’t seem so smart. Trying to use some weird machine to change his fingerprints—doesn’t that sound crazy?”

I shrugged. “You got a better idea?”

He sighed. “A few hours ago all I had to worry about was how to pop the question to the woman I love. Now she’s missing and all I can think about is cross-dressing kids and time-travelling aliens. It’s all a bit much, you know?”
I knew. “A week ago I was swimming in a lake in northern Ontario. I can honestly say that cross-dressing and time-travel never once crossed my mind. And they’re not aliens, by the way.”

“Yeah, sure.” He wiped his brow with his sleeve.

I half-turned in my seat. “If it’s any consolation, I know how you feel. Sort of. When I got back and found Brains impersonating his mother—”

“Hang on. Are you saying he was actually passing himself off as her?”

“Well, yeah. Totally had me fooled too.”

“I see. Was this before or after she went missing?”

“After. I think he found out a day or two before I got back.”

“You do realize he couldn’t possibly have put that look together so quickly.”

“Sure. He explained all that. He bought the wig weeks ago, based on a photo and a sample of her hair. He’s had the breast forms for months; fancy ones, color-matched to his own skin. I’m not sure when he got the mask…”

“Jesus… He has a mask of her face?”

“Oh, yeah. There’s not much to it; mostly just padding for his cheeks. He already looks an awful lot like her. Around the face, I mean.”

Dennison glanced up the alley. He lowered his voice. “And how, exactly, do you know that Barbara is missing?”

“He told me.” I could see where this was headed.

“Does that not seem a bit odd? Barbara’s missing and here he is, dressed up like her, pretending to be her? Maybe he… Maybe he did something.”

This didn’t seem like the right time to discuss my own fears, my frantic search of the basement, or the niggling thought in the back of my mind that we should be digging up the forest outside Hill House. “I trust him, Mr. Dennison.”

He sank back in his seat. “I admire your loyalty, Jimmy. You’ll forgive me if I don’t share it.”

* 

I’m not sure how long we waited. It was hot in the car and the passage of time was interminably slow. But then, out of nowhere, the door slammed shut and she was back among us, her dark hair flooding over her shoulders, one hand sweeping her skirt off the seat, the other clutching at her chest like she was afraid of losing it. Her purse fell to the floor. I remember thinking that she looked terrified.
Her long *dark* hair… I stared at her. “What happened to the wig?”

She slapped the dashboard. “Just drive, okay? Drive!” Her voice was high, clear and commanding. The voice of the mother, not the blonde Barbie.

I drove. The car burst from the alley and sped—somewhere, anywhere—away from the Princess Salon. “What happened in there?” It was more than just the hair. She was different. Something had changed.

“It’s not a wig,” she said.

“What?” My eyes flashed between her and the road.

“My hair. It’s not a wig. It won’t come off. I think it might be real.”

“What the hell happened?”

“It did what I told it to do.” Visibly trembling, she stared at her fingertips.

“You mean, you’ve got her prints? Her iris pattern?”

“I can’t tell. I think so.”

“Let me see.” Dennison leaned over the seat and lifted her chin. “I know those eyes,” he said wonderingly. “They’re emerald green now.”

I turned another corner and slowed into traffic. “Why would it change your hair as well? That wasn’t part of her biometric data, was it?”

Barbara drew a long, shaky breath. “I made a mistake.”

“They found you? Did they find you? What did they do?”

“They didn’t do anything. The plan worked perfectly. I used the machine and got out the back way. I probably shouldn’t have—I think I set off the alarm… I was flustered.” She bit her lip. “I left the flash drive in the laptop.”

“Laptop?” Dennison sounded close to hysteria. “These aliens use laptops?”

“To control the machine. They seem to use our technology whenever they can.”
“They’re not aliens,” I muttered.

Her head dropped. “It wasn’t just biometric data, on the drive. A couple years ago, Mother and I had our genomes sequenced. Two for one. It was a good deal.”

My lips moved. “Oh, no…”

“The machine took the data,” she said softly. “It gave me the option of applying it. All or nothing. Then I went inside.” Her voice sounded distant. “It was like staring into the sun. The biggest, brightest fireworks display you’ve ever seen. I thought I’d be blind or something, coming out of it… But I wasn’t.” She blinked rapidly. “In fact, I’m pretty sure I don’t need glasses anymore.”

“You were wearing contacts?”

“They’re gone. Along with the wig, the mask, the breast forms…”

We stared at her chest, both of us, Dennison and I. My jaw dropped. Dennison spoke first. “But… you have breasts.”

“They’re real, all right? Are you happy?” She clutched at her chest. “My hair is real, my face is real, my breasts are real—”

I knew where this was going, but I couldn’t bring myself to believe it—or even think it—until she said the magic words. “I’m a woman,” Barbara said, looking defiant. And after that, nothing in my world would ever be the same.

“Take me to Hill House,” she said. “I’m going to make those bastards pay.”
Chapter 9

Clone Wars. That was one phrase that flit through my mind as we fled from the Princess Salon and whatever hounds might be after us. The machine had altered Brain’s DNA, effectively transforming him into his mother’s clone. He was now neither a teenage male nor a thirty-something woman, given that one’s age is not hard-coded into the genome. So what was he? As near as I could figure, he was a lovely young woman who just happened to be the spitting image of her mother, right down to the DNA and the biometric markers they now shared.

That was one way of looking at it. Dennison seemed to be struggling with another concept, namely that the woman sitting next to me might actually be Barbara Bennette. He, as much as anyone, knew what the Futurian’s technology could do, but his eyes were surely sending him a message his heart wanted to hear.

Either way, Barbara needed a change of clothing. If not because the Futurians might now be on the lookout for a gown like hers, then for the simple fact that one does not storm an enemy compound wearing a pencil skirt and a pair of strappy heels. Returning to the house to change was, of course, out of the question.

We found a thrift shop that was still open this late on a Sunday afternoon. Barbara donated her dress, found a sports bra still in its original wrapper, and picked out an outfit consisting of a silk shirt, black yoga pants, matching flats, and a stylish sweater-jacket for when the evening turned cool.

“I don’t know if they always dress to the nines,” she said, combing out her thick hair.

“But upscale casual won’t look too out of place.”

Dennison told her she looked gorgeous. She just smiled. We pooled our money and paid in cash.
Dinner was a quiet affair in a cheap diner on the edge of town, a place we knew no Futurian would be caught dead in. Plus we were low on cash and wanted to avoid an electronic trail, in case the enemy was monitoring our credit. Dennison kept asking, in a low voice, what the hell we were supposed to do once we got inside, but Barbara had no answers. We did have an old floor plan for the house but it was thirty years out of date. There was no telling what changes people from the future might have made in the meantime.

We parked by the lake, biding our time until dusk. It was barely a day since our last visit, but that was a different Dennison and a Brains Bennette who was only pretending to be his mother. This Dennison, like the other one, spent most of his time putting the moves on Barbara, placing his coat over her shoulders and speaking in a low voice of matters I preferred not to think about. I stood near the lake, tossing pebble after pebble into still waters and wondering what sort of body I might find myself in, come the morning. If we were discovered, there seemed little doubt that they’d use their technology to turn us into persons who posed them no threat. The prospect of ending up as a drug-addicted whore held no appeal for me. Ending up as a little girl, abandoned to the care of the state, drifting from foster home to group home, didn’t sound much better.

* 

“Drive right up to the gate,” Barbara told me, when our headlights cleared the tree line and the stone wall surrounding Hill House loomed out of the forest’s cloying darkness. “Remember, play this like we belong here.”

She hopped out and stood in front of the security panel set into the wall next to the gate. It resembled the kind of ATM you’d find outside a bank, looking terribly out of place among ghostly trees and Gothic ironwork. Without pausing, she stared into the lens and placed her hand on the scanner. Mere seconds later, the gate split open and the two huge doors swung apart, curiously silent. Barbara returned to the car. “Told you,” she said, with a tight smile.

I eased the car inside. The gate closed immediately, still without making a sound. Dennison stared at it. “We’re trapped.”

“We can open it again,” I pointed out. “See, there’s a panel on this side too.”

“She can open it,” he said, slumping in his seat. “You and I can’t.”

In the distance we could see the ominous bulk of Hill House silhouetted against a fading sky, like stock footage from a third-rate horror flick. “Drive on,” Barbara said calmly. “None of them would hang around to check out the scenery.”

I hit the gas, wondering if it was really all that hard to drive in high heels.
Real life has a way of confounding one’s expectations. When you think about it, that’s pretty much all that distinguishes a really good movie—or any other kind of fiction—from the kind of third-rate hack job that would set its climatic scene in a stereotype like Hill House. In this case, the surprise was the modern parking lot located near the foot of the stairs that led up to the house. Concrete pavement, freshly patched here and there; clear white lines demarcating the spaces; two light poles; and even a narrow sidewalk. All that was missing was a ticket machine and a sign threatening that ‘violators WILL be towed’.
The lot was half-full, perhaps fifteen or twenty vehicles in total, which made me nervous. There might be a lot of people inside. I started to park near the exit, but Barbara directed me to an empty spot between two SUVs. “I’ll go in alone,” she said. “We’d stand out too much as a group.”

Dennison looked like a little boy whose mother had just told him she’d sold the house and was off to Rio, alone. “When are you coming back?”

She touched his hand. “I don’t know, Derrick. I don’t know what’s in there. We’ll just have to play this by ear.” She smiled at me, Brain’s familiar lopsided grin superimposed on a female mouth, and slipped away.

Dennison hunched forward, his head no more than a foot from my ear. “You know her—or him—a lot better than I do. Do you believe her?”

“About what?”

“I mean, do you believe she’s who she says she is?”

I sighed. “Who else could she be?”

“For starters, she could be Barbara herself. Yeah, I know—then why would she claim to be her own son? I don’t know, okay? I haven’t got all the answers.” He stared up at the brooding presence of Hill House. “For that matter, she could be one of them. They can be anybody. One of them was me, so why not her?”

“You don’t believe that. Why would you put the moves on a woman you thought might be some kind of hideous alien in disguise?”

“Uh… ‘cause they’re great in the sack?” He laughed. “You got me there.”

“We’ve been through a lot, you know. Brains and me. Hell, just this past week…” I struggled to find the right words. “It’s him. I know it.”

“He’s not a ‘him’ anymore,” Dennison said quietly. “Did you see—I mean, really see at her? The way she walks, the way she talks, her body language…”

“I’m talking about on the inside.”

“So am I. Sure, I’ll grant you, it’s your buddy in there; that’s his mind. But look at it this way. We’re all computers up here, right?” He tapped the side of his head. “The mind is the software, the brain is the hardware. So what we’ve got here, inside her, is a male mind running on female hardware.”

“So what?”

“So what? Are you serious? It’s two different architectures, that’s what. Two entirely different operating systems. One male, one female.”

I shrugged. “I can download an app to a PC or a Mac. Works the same.”
“It’s not the same. I keep forgetting you’re just a kid.” He shook his head. “Back in my day, you had to *port* programs between different kinds of computers. That meant fiddling with the code, making fundamental changes.”

“What’s that got to do with Brains?”

“Who knows what changes the machine had to make, to get his mind to work in a female body? Intelligence isn’t just in the head, you know; a lot of it is how the brain is wired-in to the rest of the body. Not to mention the hormones. Your friend’s mind is soaking in estrogen. What’s that gonna do?”

I’d been wondering the same thing. “What’s your point?”

“The point is, he’s a woman now—*she* is a woman.” He sat back. “I just think it’s important to keep that in mind.”

“Got it,” I said roughly. “So I shouldn’t be too grossed out when we get home and the two of you celebrate by mashing your groins together.”

Dennison said nothing, perhaps caught between his lust and wondering how likely he was to escape Hill House without a vagina of his own. Some small part of me wondered what that might be like, to be a woman in both mind and body, but the rest of me was scared shitless.

An hour or more passed. Several times, singly or in pairs, Futurians would descend the stairs and drive off in one of their expensive vehicles. None of them bothered to notice us. And still no Barbara.

“Screw this,” I said at last. “It’s nearly midnight. I’m going in.”

It was full dark, of course, and the sky was an arc of starlight. One of the street-lamps lit up as I approached. Then, footsteps. “I’m coming too,” Dennison said.

“Okay, but remember what she said. We have to pretend like we belong.”

“I know that,” he said, looking annoyed. “I’m the adult here.”

We moved slowly up the stairs, straining our senses to take in as much as possible. Hill House was a silhouette against uncountably more stars than I’d ever seen before. It was like walking into the mouth of a cave.

At the split in the stairway I took the left branch, with Dennison close behind. We briefly considered looking for a side door, but that would have been unusual behavior for someone who wasn’t intruding. So it was back to the main entrance. I took a deep breath, my hand on the oversized iron handle. It was unlocked.

But once inside, Hill House managed to confound my expectations once more. The hall was warmly lit and tastefully decorated with modern works of art, rather
than the dilapidated, haunted-house kind of mess I might have expected. Certainly not the kind of place you could imagine meeting a monster.

The door clicked shut behind us. I set off at what I hoped was a fast enough pace for someone who knew where he was going. But it’s surprisingly difficult to look nonchalant when you’re trying to take in every sight and sound around you, all at the same time. The hallway burrowed straight into the building, but numerous doorways, stairwells and side corridors made it difficult to pick a path that didn’t look like we were checking out every room we passed. Which of course we were.

Most of the interior rooms, those that lacked front windows, were lit up. Soft voices drifted from several of them. I veered closer to one archway, wondering what just I’d do if one of the voices turned out to be Barbara’s, but just then a thin, rather effeminate-looking man emerged from a nearby staircase.

His eyes slithered past me and his expression changed. “Ooh, you’re back!” He sidled over to Dennison. “Derrick, isn’t it? Is that what we’re calling you now?” He hooked his hands over the man’s shoulder. “My, you are a big boy. How do you like being one of these—what do they call them here? Lawyers?”

Dennison looked like a trapped animal. “I, uh—haven’t been in court lately.”

“Oh, of course not. It’s too soon. But do let me know; I’ll come and watch. One of those primitive trials with a human judge, no less—such a hoot!”

“Yes, of course,” Dennison muttered. “Terribly primitive.”

He took Dennison’s arm. “I suppose you’re here to discuss the target.”

“The target?”

“That woman’s son. The one going around impersonating her. Delightful, isn’t it? So terribly bent, especially for this day and age.” He giggled. “I understand you even had sex with him. Come, I’ll walk you upstairs.”

Dennison stared at me, panic in his eyes, but there was nothing I could do. Arm in arm, the two of them disappeared into a stairwell.

I wasn’t alone for long. A dark-haired woman swept up to me and squealed, “Ooh, a newbie! Just what I need.” She wasn’t much older than me in appearance, but with these people and their machines that meant nothing.

She looked me over appraisingly, plucking at my clothes. I struggled to think of something useful to say, something that wouldn’t instantly brand me as a man of the past. I failed.

“Don’t feel too bad,” she said. “My clothes were just as yucky when I arrived. ‘Appropriate for the era,’ they said. But, you know, ewww.”
“Uh, thanks,” I muttered. “I was hoping to fit in a bit better around here.”

“You would out there. That’s why they do it, of course. In case you ended up outside, somehow, before you got acclimatized. Not to worry, though. I can help.” She took my arm. “I’m Pandora. You can call me ‘Panda’. It’s not my regular boy-name, of course, but we always use our new names while we’re here, just in case any of the locals overhear us. What name did they assign you?”

That question I could handle. “Jimmy.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Uh-huh. That’s cute. What about your girl-name?”

My _girl-name_? What the hell? “Um, it’s Ji—Jenna.”

“That’s a pretty name. Very popular in this era.” She led me back the way she’d come, as light on her high heels as a ballet dancer. Long dark hair slid across her shoulders, enfolding me in the scent of jasmine and rosebuds, while she pointed out the dormitory wing, the medical room, the dining facilities, the computer center, and so on. We passed carpets inscribed with geometric patterns in silver and gold, chandeliers infused with soft light. Gold inlay decorated the walls.

I began to feel more than a little overwhelmed. These people must have money to burn! Moreover, this was a much bigger operation than I had imagined. The house wasn’t packed with people, but it wasn’t exactly vacant either. There were Futurians in most of the rooms we passed; some relaxing, some moving about, alone or in small groups. Most of them, Pandora said, were out _there_, experiencing the world of the twenty-first century—mostly as tourists, but some as ‘replacements’. The word sent a chill down my spine.

“So where are you from, Jenna? Oops. Jimmy.” She giggled.

I thought fast. Exotic, but not _too_ exotic. “Europe.”

Her eyes got big. “That’s why you’re so pale. It’s pretty cold there, huh?”

I hadn’t thought so. “Uh, yeah. Southern Europe.”

She held my arm tighter. “Poor boy. I’m glad you came here.”

“Me too.” This was getting stranger by the minute. These people seemed to have no concept of security. What was to stop me from walking right into the computer center and trashing the place? Were they that convinced that their perimeter was impenetrable? I felt a surge of hope. It wasn’t much, but even a stale bagel is a feast for a starving man.

We entered what appeared to be a long lounge, with a wine bar in the middle and a giant screen at the far end. Pandora touched a viewscreen on the wall.
“I designed this image for myself. I couldn’t pull it off, but it’s perfect for you. I think you’ll really love being blonde.”

When I realized what she was doing I fumbled in my pocket for the taser. But it was too late. There was a flash of light and the world vanished for a moment—or maybe it was just me.

I swayed and almost fell, then shook my head and felt a soft mass of long hair hit the back of my neck.

“Sorry,” Pandora said. “Should’a warned you about the heels.”

My head tipped forward. A long trail of blonde hair slid into view. My gaze dipped into the cleavage that had erupted in my chest.

“What did you do?” I whispered, staring at her.

“I made you a girl, silly. It’s what all of us do down here. Being a woman in this era totally rocks. Why else would you be here?”

The funny thing was, I couldn’t think of a better answer.
Chapter 10

“Well, well. I leave you alone for five minutes and you turn into a woman.”

I turned around to find Barbara approaching. “It wasn’t my idea,” I whispered, with Pandora busy at the viewscreen. “I thought you had to be inside a booth for this to happen; like at the salon.”

“The whole room’s a machine,” she replied. “Nice shoes, by the way.”

“I hadn’t noticed.” I plucked at the mound of hair riding my shoulder like a parrot on a pirate. “How’d you know it was me?”

“I followed you from the computer lab. Unlike some people I was keeping a low profile, reading up on this place—and the Time Gate. Why’d you leave the car?”

“We got worried… thought you might be in trouble.”

Barbara frowned. “We? Don’t tell me—”

“Hey, Jenna,” Pandora said cheerfully. “I hope you didn’t need whatever was in your pockets. I kinda forgot to save the pattern. Who’s your friend?”

The stuff in my pockets? No, nothing valuable there; only the taser, my wallet, my house key—not to mention the keys to our getaway car. I introduced Barbara.

“Are you a newbie too? You don’t look like one. I love your image.”


“Yeah, she totally rocks being blonde. I mean, she’s got the pretty face, gorgeous hair, sexy figure and all that—and that pantsuit is so practical.”

I was starting to panic. I touched my chest with one hand, then both. I had breasts! And this mass of blonde hair was no wig, it was attached to my head; it was alive, it was part of me! I licked my lips—slick with lips tick, so much I could taste it.

My hands slid down my sides; narrow waist, hips wide enough to accommodate the passage of a child… My breath caught.

“It’s been a long day,” Barbara said quickly. “I think Jenna needs to rest.”

We left Pandora behind and headed back the way we’d come. “Way to blend in there, Jenna,” she said scornfully. “These people don’t start feeling themselves up when they switch bodies. So try to relax, okay?”

“That’s easy for you to say. I’m a goddamn woman!”

“Keep your voice down. I’m a woman too, remember? We’re in the same boat.”

“No we’re not. You wanted to turn into your mother. I sure as hell didn’t.”
We couldn’t hang out in the hallway so we ducked into the dining area. One end of the room was occupied by what appeared to be an automated buffet, with robotic arms transferring plates to and from the serving area. I had little interest in eating, but followed Barbara’s lead and filled a bowl with some kind of pasta.

“It’s practically the middle of the night,” I said, after we found a table well away from everyone else. “Don’t these people ever sleep?”

“Not as much as we do—or used to. Their bodies are enhanced.”

“What do you mean, ‘used to’?” I watched her shovel the meat-laden pasta into her mouth. “Shouldn’t we be watching our weight?”

“We’ve both been through that machine. That means we’re enhanced too. We can do whatever we please to these bodies, and fix it with the touch of a button. That includes overeating.”

“Yeah, but we aren’t planning to go through the machine again, are we? Once was bad enough.”

“Sure we are. It’s no problem. I read up on the interface.” She pointed her fork at me. “You want to be a guy again, don’t you?”

I thought about it. For some reason, being male didn’t seem as important as it had in the immediate aftermath of my transformation.

“Not surprising,” Barbara said. “Your brain is female now. If you allow yourself to relax and not think about the changes, your body will feel normal.”

I took a deep breath and let it out. I did feel normal—better than normal, in fact. I wasn’t even tired. But I was confused. “Does this have anything to do with computers? A male app running on a female phone, or whatever it is.”

“Sort of. The thing is, your old mind had to be significantly altered to run properly in your new female brain. It remembers being male, but that’s about all.”

“You mean, I don’t think like a guy anymore?” My fingers toyed nervously with the curly tips of the long blonde tress that fell across my right teat.

“The machine adapts the mind to the new body.” Gently, almost lovingly, she pressed her fingertips to the undersides of her breasts. “I can’t speak for you, but I’ve become totally comfortable being female.”

That should have sent a chill down my back, but it didn’t. That’s when I knew just how deep the changes went. I was a woman, right down to the way I admired the design of the shoes I was wearing: a pair of open-toed pumps in matte black, with spiky heels tall enough to look stylish without being too difficult to walk in. They were just adorable… and I said so.
“That’s your feminized brain talking,” Barbara said. “Remember how Jimmy felt about shoes? He had no interest in being a woman. And let’s not forget about your family. You’re still little Jimmy Marsdon to them.”

“You’re right.” I let go of my hair. “The machine did this.”

“Don’t worry, it’s not too late.” She averted her gaze. “It’s different for me, Jenna. I have no family to go back to. You were right. I wanted this…”

I touched her hand. “That’s why we’re here. To get her back.”

She pushed her bowl away. “We don’t even know if she is here.”

I glanced around. “The guy who took Dennison—”

“What do you mean ‘took’? I thought you two got separated.”

“No, some guy took him away. He thought he was their Dennison, the one who was spying on us. He called you ‘the target’ and your mom ‘that woman’.”

“Oh, crap. That means we don’t have much time. Derrick is a nice man but he’s no James Bond.” She tapped the underside of the table and a viewscreen lit up in front of her. Her fingers flicked through the icons on the screen.

I put my own bowl aside. “I meant to ask—is this stuff in English?”

“No, the language appears to be descended from Esperanto.”

“Then how the hell are you reading it?”

She glanced up. “Good question, Operative Two. I can only assume that this body came pre-programmed with that knowledge. Much the same way you learned how to walk in high heels or the proper way to insert a tampon.”

“I’ve never inserted a tampon into anything in my life.”

“Yes, but just think about it. You know how.”

She was right. My hands knew the right moves, as if I’d been sticking tampons into my body for years. Which of course, I hadn’t; but in a way, this body had.

Barbara stared at the screen. “They got him. An intruder was found inside the base and has been taken for interrogation. It’s time-stamped… twenty minutes ago.”

“He won’t tell them about us. Not right away, at least. He—”

“Of course he will,” she snapped. “They’re not going to stick him under a hot light and give him the third degree. Nothing as crude as that. They’ll simply use their machine to turn him into someone who’ll be more than willing to cooperate.”

*
We wasted no time leaving the dining room, all the while acting like a pair of ladies in no hurry to get anywhere. Barbara was worried that the Futurians might be tracking her online activity—hence our haste.

As to where we were headed, all Barbara would say was that the Time Gate was in the cellar. We headed back down the corridor, toward the corner of Hill House that overlooked the lake—in the distance—and the stairwell she remembered from the old floor plan. On the off chance it was still there.

Walking in high heels and tight pants was unnerving, but at the same time utterly familiar. Women do it all the time, right? But a small part of me, sinking into shadow, was screaming and sucking his thumb and generally getting his panties in a knot over the click of his heels on tile, the bra strap around his chest, the aroma and gentle bounce of his thick hair—not to mention the fact that he was, of course, wearing panties. Silly old Jimmy. Wearing panties is perfectly normal.

“Hey, girls. Goin’ somewhere?” It was Pandora. She’d been drinking.

Barbara looked at me, arched an eyebrow and mouthed ‘three’s company’. I took her meaning. By now the Futurians would be on the lookout for two women, but the three of us might walk right by unnoticed.

“Hi, Panda,” I said brightly, before abruptly running out of conversation material.

“Ya like bein’ a chick, Jenna?” She stuck her finger into my cleavage. “Ya ever been a chick before? I’m a chick too, you know.”

“My first time,” I said, glancing at Barbara. “Got any tips?”

“Sure do,” she said, puffing out her chest. “Two of ‘em, right here.”

“We’re planning to check out the Time Gate,” Barbara said smoothly. “Why don’t you come along? It’ll be fun.”

“I sure hope it’s up and running…” I said slowly, suddenly aware that the others were staring at me. Barbara shook her head.

“That’s silly,” Pandora said. “The Gate’s always on. Everybody knows that. We’d all get stuck here if it wasn’t.”

The stairwell didn’t go all the way down, so we headed back towards the center of the building. I was beginning to enjoy the rub of nylon stockings on bare legs, and wondered why men should be barred from feeling such pleasure. Of course, social taboos like that hardly mattered anymore, now that I was female. I shook back my hair, feeling it slide over the base of my neck like a lover’s touch. “We should find the library,” I purred, “that’s where I’d put a secret entrance.”

Barbara was furious. “For God’s sake, keep your voice down.”
Pandora giggled. “Jenna likes being a girl.”

Barbara took my arm. “Don’t go all blonde on me, Operative Sixty-four. You’re a trained investigator. Try to remember that.”

I shook my head, but the swirl of blonde hair made thinking difficult.

“Wait.” We all stopped, and the machine-gun clatter of our heels faded away down the corridor. Barbara held up her hand. From somewhere nearby came a stranger’s voice: “—and the gate opened for her because she’s like, totally, her mother now. I mean, right down to her DNA and everything.” It was coming from behind a closed door. But it wasn’t Dennison. The voice was female.

“Excuse me, ladies.” A thin, rather effete man approached us. I recognized him immediately. “We’re asking everyone to return to their rooms. There’s a local loose on the base, a male about your age.” He nodded at Pandora.

“We saw the bulletin,” Barbara said. “Didn’t you catch him already?”

“There were two. The first one’s in there now.” He passed us, tapped twice on the door and opened it. But before he could take another step, Barbara shot him. Up until then, if I’d thought about it at all, I would have assumed that she’d left the phaser in her handbag, back in the car. Silly me.

Barbara peered around the doorjamb, fired once more and stepped into the room.

When I dared look, there was a large man lying on the floor, dead or unconscious. Nearby stood a well-dressed woman with long auburn hair, casually adjusting the fit of her skirt as if this sort of thing happened to her all the time.

“I was wondering when you’d show,” she said cheerfully. “So which one’s Jimmy, the blonde or the brunette?”

Barbara approached her. “Derrick?”

“Denise,” she said, tossing her hair back. “Can you believe the body they gave me? If I’d known what a babe I’d turn into, I’d have signed up willingly.”

Barbara pocketed the phaser. “They’ve completely feminized his mind,” she said, glancing at me. “He’s fully adapted.”
I raised my hand. “I’m the blonde,” I said. “Jenna.”
“Thanks. Yours are cute too. I love that strappy look.”
“They are cute, aren’t they?” She stuck out her leg. “I can hardly believe I have such dainty feet. I could barely touch my toes before. Now look at me!”
Pandora was bending over the thin man. “This is Vicky,” she said, with a touch of panic. “And that’s Helen. Why’d you shoot Helen? She’s not dead, is she?”
“He looks more like a ‘Hercules’ than a ‘Helen’,” Denise said, eyeing the large man. “Isn’t he gorgeous? I thought I’d just melt when he started questioning me. I almost zipped my lip just to see what he’d do to make me talk.”
“They’re not dead,” Barbara said. “Just stunned.”
Denise pointed to an open viewscreen hovering nearby. “You might want to turn that thing off. It was recording my story.”
Barbara dismissed the screen. “Thanks. Does that mean you’re on our side?”
“I’m on everyone’s side, sweetie. Your side, their side, his side, her side, the dog’s side. Heck, I just can’t stop talking. Who’s your friend, Jenna?”
I introduced Pandora, who studied the redhead through slotted eyes. “You sure don’t look like a local.”
“I should hope not.” Denise ran her fingers through her hair, sending it tumbling across her shoulders. “I’m much younger than I used to be.”
Barbara peered out into the hall. “Coast is clear, ladies. Let’s get moving.”
Every Futurian in Hill House seemed to be on the move. By the time we reached the central hall there must have been thirty of them in sight, some talking in small groups, others moving upstairs and toward the far side of the building. Most of them appeared to be fashionably-dressed young women.
The four of us huddled together. “We can’t wander around looking for the cellar,” Barbara said. “Not with all these people here.”
“It’s over there,” Pandora said. “The big door with the two big guys in front. That would be Bethany and Gwendolyn, I think.”
“Oh, my. They’re gorgeous too,” Denise purred, adjusting her bra strap.
I leaned toward Pandora. “You ‘think’? If you haven’t seen those guys before, how do you know who they are?”
She shrugged. “Body language, I guess.”
“But they’re just standing there.”

“Exactly. That’s Beth and Gwen for you. They never really got the hang of being women. No idea which is which, of course.”

“They’re looking at us,” Barbara hissed. “We can’t stay here.”

“We can go to my room,” Pandora said. She led the way up the stairs and down a long corridor inlaid with a checkerboard of red and black tiles. She was followed by Denise, who couldn’t seem to stop chattering on about men.

I stuck close to Barbara. “Panda’s being awfully helpful, isn’t she?”

“I noticed. That doesn’t mean we can trust her, though.”

“Sure. But you don’t suppose… Could she be you-know-who?”

“Spit it out, Operative Eighteen. This is no time for guessing games.”

“Do you think she’s—” I glanced behind us. “—your mother?”

Barbara looked surprised. “That little airhead? I hardly—”

“She could’ve turned us in back there. And she sobered up awfully quick.”

“These enhanced bodies would throw off the effects faster.” She shook her head. “I don’t believe it. Why wouldn’t she just tell us?”

Pandora’s room would have looked right at home in the Hotel Napoleon in Paris, as evidenced by the expensive furnishings and the giant portrait of Napoleon over the desk. “I’ve always wanted to visit Paris,” she said wistfully. “I’ve heard it’s not under six metres of snow most of the time.”

Denise said, “Those men back there… They never got the hang of being women? What’s that mean? Is there some law that says everyone has to be female?”

“Of course not. But that’s why most of us are here.”

“To be women? Can’t you do that in your own time?”

“Boy, you really are local, aren’t you?” Pandora plopped onto the bed and leaned back, shaking out her hair. “Where I come from, it’s against the law to look like this.” We all stared at her, which seemed to amuse her. “I’m afraid the future is androgenous, ladies,” she said with a sigh. “Just be glad you aren’t.”

“There are men here,” I pointed out.

“They have their uses. That’s why we all have boy-names and girl-names, so we can switch back and forth. Sadly, some people are just too masculine up here—”

She tapped the side of her head. “—to fully adapt.”
Barbara stared moodily into the full-length mirror next to the bathroom, as if her reflection held the solution to our problems. “Do you have a boy-name? What where you before you came here?”

She smiled coyly. “Peterangelo. But I haven’t been him since about ten minutes after I walked through the Time Gate.”

“I’ll be frank,” Barbara said, turning her back on the mirror. “You could’ve turned us in back there. Why didn’t you? Why help us?”

“Why would you want to be ‘frank’? I think ‘Francine’ is much nicer, don’t you?” Her head lolled back. “I just like you guys, isn’t that enough?”

Barbara didn’t seem to think so. She dropped into a chair and crossed her legs. “This is insane. I just… Christ! Where the hell is she?”

Pandora eyed Barbara’s soft black flats, sniffing disdainfully. “You know, I’ve got a nice pair of heels you might like. Much prettier than those.” She shook her head sadly and looked at me. “Who’s she talking about?”

“His—I mean her mother. She’s missing. That’s why we’re here.”

“She’s here? Why don’t you just call her?”

Barbara sat up. “What do you mean?”

Pandora shrugged. “Just look her up and connect.”

“Wouldn’t that just be calling herself?” I protested. “I mean, she’s—”

“Not if we use a different account,” Barbara said, jumping to her feet. “Do you mind?” She was talking to Pandora—who raised an eyebrow in the universal ‘why not?’ gesture. She leaned over to tap the side of her vanity. A viewscreen popped open in the middle of the mirror. She let it recognize her, touched one of the icons, then flopped back on the bed.

Barbara took over. “Barbara Bennette,” she told the screen.

The viewscreen chimed but remained dark. Barbara was visibly trembling. I knew how she felt; it was hard to believe it could be that easy. But it was.

When the screen cleared, there she was: Barbara Bennette Senior.

No longer missing. ■
Chapter 11

The two Barbaras stared at each other in what I took to be shocked silence. Finally Barbara the Younger managed to squeak, “Mother!”

“Blaine, is that you? My goodness—you look just like me!”

“Where are you? I’ve been….” Her voice trailed off.

The senior Bennette glanced off-screen. “I see you’re calling from Hill House. How did you… Never mind, I can guess. I’m uptime, dear. In the future.” She paused. “That sounds strange, doesn’t it? But the computers on either side are wired together through the Time Gate. They communicate in real-time.”

“Are you okay? When are you coming back?”

“I’m fine, dear. But do tell me—what have you done to yourself?”

“I used one of their transformation machines. We all did.” She turned and pointed. “That’s Jimmy and that’s Mr. Dennison.” Denise and I waved.

“Oh, dear. It looks like a Charlie’s Angels remake down there.” Mrs. Bennette smiled sadly. “I’m not too surprised. You always did have a healthy interest in my things. And those people in Hill House are absolutely obsessed with womanhood. To my hosts, what they’re doing is incomprehensible.”

“Your hosts?”

“I’m working with the police here to close down the group behind the Time Gate. You might actually be able to help us… Hang on.” She slipped from view.

I looked at Pandora, who was toying with her hair while staring up at the ceiling. I wanted to believe that the Futurians were nothing more than tourists, trying to experience the womanhood denied them by their own culture. But I couldn’t get past the comment she’d made about ‘replacements’. With visions of alien pods and cyborg replicants dancing in my head, I began toying with my own hair.

Mrs. Bennette came back. “I don’t know how much you know about these people, Blaine, but it’s important to remember that they are criminals. They’re operating a Time Gate without proper safeguards—to avoid damaging the timeline—and that’s against the law. It has to be shut down.”

Barbara had regained her composure. “I understand. What can we do?”

“That’s my girl. We’ve tapped into their computer, but we can’t close the Gate without unlocking it on your end. That can only be done in person. But we haven’t been able to get an agent into Hill House since my escape.”
“If I unlock the Gate, will you be able to get through before it closes?”

“I’ll certainly try.” She nodded to someone we couldn’t see. “Sorry, dear. I have to go. We’re sending you the unlocking sequence now. It will show you what to do once you’re at the controls for the Time Gate.”

“We’ll get there,” Barbara said grimly.

“We’re kinda stuck here at the moment, Mrs. Bennette,” I said. “They’re looking for us out there. It might take awhile to die down.”

“We haven’t got awhile, Jimmy. You do make a very fetching blonde, by the way.” She cocked her head to the side. “They’re telling me they might be able to help. We can force an emergency alert into their command center. Hopefully that will cause enough confusion to allow you to get to the Gate.”

Barbara nodded curtly. She seemed impatient to get started.

Mrs. Bennette leaned into the screen. “I must warn you; once the Gate is closed, the police plan to erase the incursion altogether. They’ll use the Gate itself to jump back to before it was activated, and arrest the entire group before any of them can go through.”

That got Pandora’s attention. “Won’t that create a paradox?”

“Don’t ask me to explain temporal physics, dear. That’s what they told me. It will fix the timeline, but there’s no way of knowing precisely how the loose ends will sort themselves out.” She managed another smile. “See you soon.”

Her image faded. Barbara seemed to be having some trouble swallowing. “You’ve got mail, Panda. Print it for me, please. Then erase it.”

*  

It’s trite but true: waiting is the hard part. I spent the next few minutes pacing the length and breadth of the room, from locked door to curtained window, then desk to bathroom, all the while careening between gut-churning anxiety and marvelling at how easy it was to walk in such narrow heels.

Denise chattered on about nothing in particular, while Barbara memorized the instructions her mother had sent. Pandora looked unhappy. “If this works, I’m gonna wind up back where I came from. Stuck as a male.”

Barbara looked up. “I’m sorry about that. I wish there was something I could do.” She paused. “You don’t have to come with us, you know.”

Pandora stared at the floor, arms folded across her chest. Finally, she said, “I’ll see this out. Maybe I’ll go back through the Gate… tell the police how I helped you. Maybe they’ll be able to help me…”
There are more ways to transform a person than magically changing their hairstyle or even their gender. The former Peterangelo was no longer the fashion-obsessed debutante I thought she was, but a woman who invested her loyalty in the people she liked rather than those who were useful to her. In terms of shocks to my system, this came a close second to being turned into a woman.

An alarm went off. “It’s the evacuation alert,” Pandora said. “It means we’re all supposed to go outside.” Almost instantly, it seemed, the hallway filled with the thunderous clatter of high heels.

“Let’s go,” Barbara said, slipping the folded instructions under her bra strap.

Never before had I ever seen such a mass of beautiful women moving together. This was no disciplined march, but a stampede without order; as many as six dozen females, many of them undressed, driving headlong. It was the beginning of the rout of the Futurians, of freedom for the twenty-first century.

We joined the throng and blended in. The only challenge lay in staying together as a group, as we swept down the hall in a river of flaring hair and swirling skirts. The tide split to jam each staircase with a mosh pit of perfume and sharp elbows.

I found myself standing next to the door to the basement, with Barbara at my side. Mercifully, it was unguarded; Bethany and Gwendolyn having just been swept right out the front door. “It’s unlocked,” Barbara said.

“We’re all here,” I replied, as Denise and Pandora emerged from the chaos.

With the door shut behind us, we were suddenly, shockingly alone.

* 

The cellar of Hill House was home to shadows, with fewer renovations and none of the artwork and furnishings that dressed up the rest of the building. Here it was still possible to see what the old house must have looked like before the Futurians had moved in. Perfect place for a Time Gate, really.

I was beside Pandora. “Your people don’t think much of us, do they? In our time, that maneuver wouldn’t have worked on anyone but kindergarten kids.”

“If you went back in time a couple hundred years, you’d feel superior too.”

“All the more so,” Barbara said, “if you had a bunch of friends with you, and your technology was advanced enough to seem like magic to the locals.”

“I’m probably the only one who didn’t underestimate you guys,” Pandora said. “Maybe I’m just naïve.”

“Good to know,” Barbara said. “Now where’s that machine you mentioned?”
Pandora led us through a stone archway into a wide chamber that had likely once been a wine cellar, based on the stack of wine barrels in the corner. The floor had been repaved with a dark material that felt like ceramic, and the opposite end was occupied by a gigantic machine in basic black—the Time Gate.

“Here it is.” Pandora stopped in front of a man-sized booth with a glazed surface that made it look like pottery. Barbara pushed me inside.

“No arguments, Jimmy,” she said sternly. “You’re going back to your family.”

The door slid shut. It took a moment for the full horror of the moment to sink in—they were trying to turn me back into a male!

I pounded on the door. “Stop! Please—I want to stay this way!”

I know they heard me because I could hear them, their voices muffled, conferring over the booth’s controls. I thought I heard Pandora say “didn’t save”, and then Barbara’s firm voice: “Try that one.”

And then it was too late. There was a flash of light and the world vaporized, but this time I knew it was just me. I swayed against the door, which opened abruptly. I fell into Barbara’s arms. “What did you do?” I whispered.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I had no choice.”

I pushed her away and looked down. Something had changed. Long blonde hair dangled into view, framing an ample bust enclosed by the strapless neckline of a dark gown. In one sickening instant I recognized it: sheer chiffon overlay, wavy ribbons of beading, and a skirt flaring at the knee into a delicate fishtail.

“Dear Lord,” I gasped, “it’s the Midnight Mermaid!”

Far worse was what I felt between my legs: male genitalia crushed painfully flat under a tight half-girdle. Part of me wanted to throw up—but for the female arms urging me toward the great machine.

The control panel lit up as Barbara slid into the operator’s seat. Pandora let the computer recognize her, then stepped toward the tunnel spinning in the center of the chamber. “I’m entering the code,” Barbara said—not to any of us, but to the viewscreen and the image of her doppelgänger in the future.

Denise’s arm was tight to my waist, holding me up. “It’s gonna be okay, sweetie,” she said softly. “You still look pretty.” But how could it be? My old buddy had just turned me into a goddamn shemale!

Barbara tapped out a sequence of commands. A red light on the console began flashing. It was then that a thin, effeminate-looking man stepped out from behind the Gate, gripping a phaser. He took aim and yelled, “Stop what you’re doing!”
Barbara looked up, eyes wide, but at the same instant touching the screen. It must have been the final command. A siren tore through the air. The man’s arm rose—but Pandora was faster. She flung her body into the thin man, absorbing the beam and sending him stumbling backward. He fell, screaming as his head passed through the swirling surface of the Time Gate. The sound cut off when his neck was cut; a brilliant bloom of blood pooled at the edge of the Gate, frothing where it touched the flux that had stolen his head into the future.

Apparently that was not the proper method of passing through a Time Gate.

Denise rushed over to Pandora. “Only stunned,” she called.

Barbara stared into the viewscreen. “Why not?”

Another voice, identical to hers: “It’s shutting down. It’s too unstable… I can’t get through. I’m sorry, sweetheart. Don’t be sad. I’ll be—”

The vortex collapsed. The Gate was closed.

“What happens now?” I asked of the silence that followed. “No one knows how the loose ends—”

“We are the loose ends,” Barbara said.

The Time Gate vanished; one moment it was there, the next it was gone—all with the computer, the ceramic floor, the transformation booth and everything else built by the Futurians. Sickly grey light filtered in through gaps in the ceiling. It was dawn and we were alone in Hill House, with only the thin man’s headless body to keep us company.

“They’re gone,” Barbara said. “In fact, they were never here.”

“Then why is he still here? Why are all of us still here?”

“Too close to the Time Gate, I suppose.” She dragged herself to her feet. “That must be why we’re still female.”

“I’m not,” I said bitterly. “Why the hell did you turn me into—you?”

She put her arm around me. “I’m sorry, dear. I began the transformation too soon, and your pattern wasn’t there. She didn’t save it,” she said, gazing at Pandora, who was starting to wake up. “I thought… Oh, I don’t know what I was thinking. I made a mistake.”

“I can’t go home looking like this. Even without the dress.”

“I know.” She held me a little tighter. “But don’t forget: you still have me. We’re a family now. I’m your mother.”

*
We fled Hill House under the pale light of the rising sun. The building was a crumbling ruin; in the new timeline the renovations had never been carried out. The front staircase was still there, although in worse repair than before, but the parking lot had never been and our car was long gone.

We had to walk to the highway, past the crumbling wall and a front gate that now offered no security whatsoever, carrying our dress shoes over the faded road that wound through the forest. It was a lovely day and we’d saved the world from whatever threat a bunch of transsexual tourists from the future may have represented. I should have been happy about that… but I wasn’t.

We had no difficulty hitching a ride back to town. There are some things that a well-dressed woman will never have trouble with. I had a solid half-hour, crammed into the back seat of a pickup truck with three beautiful women, to contemplate the merits of the female condition—and to keenly regret the fact that I was no longer one of them.
Loose ends. Pandora, with nowhere else to go, moved in with us while Barbara worked on creating a new identity for her. Denise was living with us too, although she was well on the way to having herself legally declared Derrick Dennison’s long-lost (and much younger) sister, and thereby reclaiming her property. I know how suspicious that might sound, but with such a respected figure like Barbara Bennette to vouch for her we weren’t expecting any problems.

It’s funny how these things work out. Derrick Dennison was missing, but in this altered timeline Jimmy Marsdon had never existed. Which meant that my parents weren’t grieving a son they never had and my siblings weren’t missing their little brother. Good for them, I supposed, although it hurt to be forgotten. Being a friend of family just wasn’t the same.

Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling that somewhere out there in the multiverse there was a timeline parallel to this one, where some other Marsdon family was worried about their missing son, and wondered if they’d ever find out what happened. But in that direction lies endless sorrow, so I put it out of my mind.

I’m Blaine Bennette now, ‘Brains’ to a few people, and I’m into cross-dressing like you wouldn’t believe. My family is incredibly supportive. I’m living with three wonderful women who know exactly what I’m going through. They had me on a daily dose of estrogen from the moment we got home, and it didn’t take them long to fit me up with the best hair extensions money could buy. They often take me shopping and buy me clothes, and they don’t mind me borrowing their things, even though I’ve got a closetful of my own skirts and dresses, and silk blouses, and sexy lingerie, and cute little shoes with narrow heels.

They call me ‘Jenna’, of course, but only when I’m dressed. That doesn’t happen as often as I’d like, since I’m legally male and I still have to worry about my career. I’m studying Criminal Justice at college, and in two years I’ll transfer out to some big-city university to finish my degree—but by then I’ll be a woman.

* 

It’s a crisp autumn afternoon, the leaves are falling and I’m back from morning classes. Barbara is off on some case; she won’t be back until tomorrow. Denise and Panda are out for the day, so I have the house to myself.

In my room, I strip down and lose the ponytail that makes me barely passable as a guy. No need to shave, of course; I’m as hairless as hormones and a couple of megawatts of laser hair removal can make me. I put on panties and a comfortable bra from my own lingerie drawer, and stuff the cups with mastectomy inserts.
After that, I pad off to Barbara’s bedroom. Some things are just traditional. I rummage through her lingerie drawer now, and pick out a black half-slip I’ve worn before. It’s a delicious thought: *She’ll kill me if she finds out! Her only son, wearing women’s clothing—oh, the shame of it!* But in truth, I know she doesn’t mind. Then a pair of stay-up stockings, ultra-sheer charcoal flavor.

I slip into her favorite red blouse, leaving the neck unbuttoned, reminding myself to remember its place in her closet. Then a black pencil skirt, its hem hugging my knees, its zipper tight to the base of my spine. And finally, a familiar pair of shiny black pumps, with little bows on the toes and narrow four-inch heels.

I move so easily in high heels now; I can even dance in them, with Denise twirling me around the living room like Ginger Rogers. Someday it’ll be a man doing that, whirling me into his arms and calling me his true love.

I brush out my hair; long, blonde and halfway down my back. It’s been growing like mad since I began loading up on estrogen; by now the extensions comprise only a third of its length. I like it this way. It suits me.

I cover the blouse with a dark jacket, nicely tailored with long sleeves and a fitted waist. It looks smart and professional. I think I’ll talk Barbara into giving it to me when I join the firm. Her clothes always look better on me anyway.

My face is easy. A light foundation and a touch of color for my cheeks. I don’t need the old mask anymore; my cheeks are fine just the way they are. Unlike the old Blaine I’m not looking to impersonate my mother.

I’m very much my own woman.

I pencil lightly under my eyes, touch up my lashes with mascara. A lipstick to bring out the natural color of my female mouth.

It’s done. I’m Jenna once more. And I finally understand why Blaine Bennette was so drawn to his mother’s bedroom, to her vanity mirror, and I now know what he saw there. He saw his future.

So do I. Must be in the genes.
THE END