

The Bonding: A Love Story

Amanda Hawkins

“Let me get that straight: this is your *son*?”

“Yes, Mr. von Salis. I’m sorry to say, it is. He’s been cross-dressing as a girl for quite a few years. He’s gotten to be quite good at it.”

“So I see. Why is he or *she* tied up?”

“Well, he tried to get away, of course. He surely would have made it too, if he hadn’t forgotten the keys to his car. Apparently, they were in his other purse.”

“I hate when that happens. But why was she trying to get away in the first place?”

“I suppose he must’ve heard about your pending arrival. He knows how serious we are about putting an end to this behavior.”

“Uh-huh. And what exactly is it you want me to do here, Mrs. Fletcher?”

“Well... reprogram him, of course. That *is* what you do, isn’t it?”

“Actually, I *de*-program folks, ma’am. Young men or women who have joined a cult or some other extremist group.”

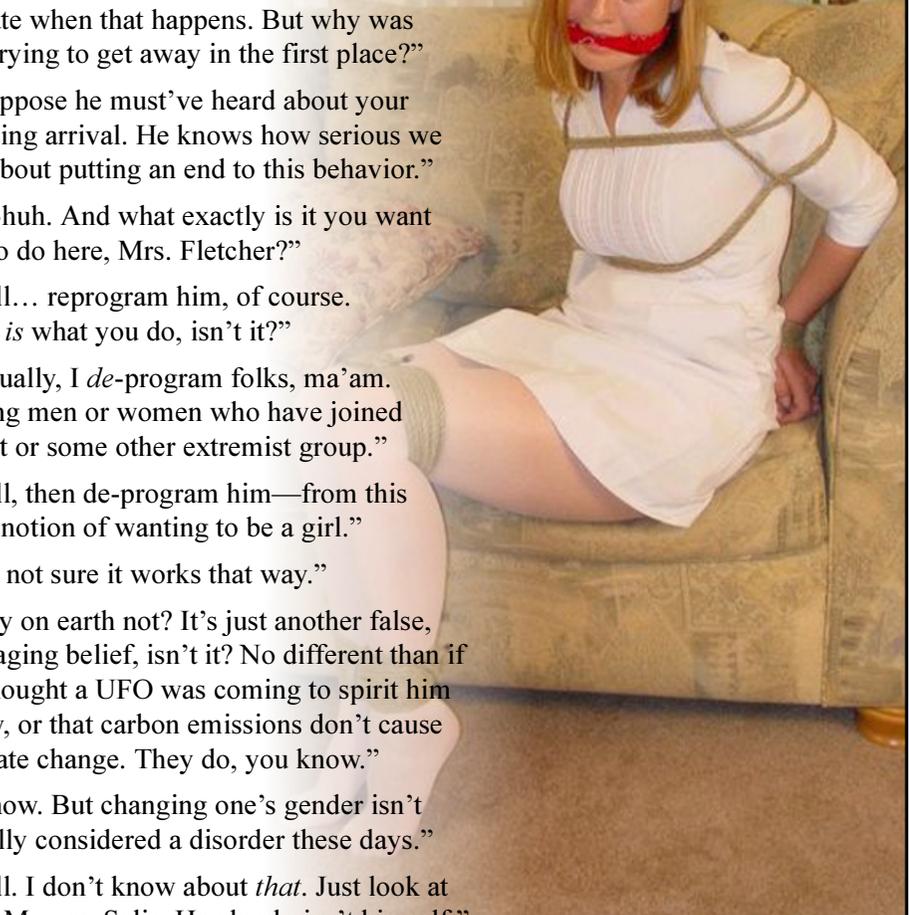
“Well, then de-program him—from this silly notion of wanting to be a girl.”

“I’m not sure it works that way.”

“Why on earth not? It’s just another false, damaging belief, isn’t it? No different than if he thought a UFO was coming to spirit him away, or that carbon emissions don’t cause climate change. They do, you know.”

“I know. But changing one’s gender isn’t usually considered a disorder these days.”

“Well. I don’t know about *that*. Just look at him, Mr. von Salis. He clearly isn’t himself.”



Darn it, I was that close to getting away from them.

“Not *him*-self, no. But *she* appears to be quite an attractive young woman. Why is she dressed up as a nurse, by the way?”

“Oh, Billy has this ridiculous notion that he’s going to *be* a nurse. He managed to get himself admitted to a trainee nursing program at the college, and he’s been volunteering as a ‘candy stripper’ at the hospital. It’s getting out of hand.”

“I sure hope you meant candy *striper*, ma’am. But either way, that doesn’t sound like a problem. They’re perfectly legal jobs. No danger pay.”

“They are jobs for a *girl*, sir. Billy is not a girl.”

“Aside from the fact that men *can* be nurses these days—I was tended by a male nurse during my stay in hospital for a hernia; a very nice man. Aside from that, it appears ‘Billy’ is doing his level best to *become* a girl. I don’t see the problem.”

“As I said, Billy is *not* a girl. I want him cured! If you can convince some poor sod that UFOs aren’t real or that God doesn’t speak to the leader of the cult, then you can make Billy admit that he’s a *boy*. He’s got a weenie, for goodness sake!”

“Sorry. Deprogramming is controversial enough without dragging gender into it.”

“All right. I wasn’t born yesterday, Mr. von Salis. I can see which way the wind is headed. Would doubling your fee change your mind? And there’s an extra twenty percent in it, if you can talk the boy into getting a proper haircut.”

“Lady, you got yourself a deprogrammer. I’ll require half in advance.”

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The cottage was only an hour’s drive away, but it was well outside the city, in a secluded wilderness area overlooking a small lake. Von Salis carried the would-be nurse inside and removed her gag.

“Bastard.” She spat the word before coughing and demanding water.

“The name’s Quince.” He held the glass while she took a few sips, then finished removing the ropes.

“Good luck convincing me I’m a guy, dude. I’ve known I was female since I was old enough to know the difference—and get into my mother’s stuff.” She rubbed her legs, then stood up and traipsed over to the bay window overlooking the lake. “Which way back to the city? My shift at the hospital starts at four.”

“Not gonna happen. It’s nearly thirty miles back to the Interstate, as the crow flies. Longer if you stick to the road. I’d advise you to stay the night.”

“With you? Fat chance.” She looked him over. “Maybe I’ll wait ‘til you’re asleep and take your keys. Leave *you* stuck out here.”

“No keys to take. The locks and ignition are biometrically linked to yours truly. You’d have to steal my eyeball—”

“—don’t think I wouldn’t!”

“—and my fingerprints as well. And somehow keep them alive.”

She snorted and stared out the window. “I won’t cooperate.”

He began unpacking the food he’d brought. “I wasn’t anticipating you would. I’m no fool; I know all about gender dysphoria. Here’s a fun fact: my younger brother used to be my little sister.”

“No kidding. So you *know* I’m a girl? And that that isn’t gonna change, no matter what anybody says.” She stared at him through slitted eyes. “Why’d you take the job, if you know it’s not gonna work?”

He chuckled. “What do I care? I got my fee up front. We’ll just camp up here for a week or so, then I’ll take you home and tell your folks nothing can be done.”

“Isn’t that fraud? They’re not gonna pay you for *this*.” She gestured at her ample bosom and her skirt-clad legs.

“Like I said, I already got my normal fee. Think of it as a holiday.”

“Yeah? What if I tell ‘em you didn’t do a darn thing to earn that fee?”

“Who they gonna call—the Better Business Bureau? The cops may frown on what I do, but turning your kid over to someone like me might be worse. And like you said, I won’t have done a darn thing wrong.” He lugged his suitcase into one of the bedrooms, then laughed. “Tell you what, though. We can go through some of the standard deprogramming methods—nothing tough or controversial, it’d just be us chatting. Then you could tell your folks I did my best, and maybe they’d leave you alone after that—knowing that you’re bound to be a girl no matter what. It might work out for you. Give it some thought.”

Her lips twitched. “I, uh... yeah. Say, maybe you could even tie me up now and then. Not too tight or anything. Just so I’d really have to, ya know, *listen*? While you talk about how I’m supposed to be a guy and all.”

He grinned. “I could do that. Make it more convincing. Might even be fun, eh?”

Her lips twitched again. “Might be.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t exactly fight like a wildcat not to be tied up.”

“Well... didn’t seem to be much point, once my dad caught me.”

He pointed to the smaller bedroom. “You’re in there. Clean sheets in the closet.”

She picked up her overnight bag. “I bet mom only packed boy clothes.”

After dinner, Quince tied Bethany—her one true name, according to the erstwhile Billy—to a chair, very loosely, and they reviewed the evidence for her being male. Neither of them seemed to find it terribly convincing.

“All right, we’ve done that bit,” Quince said. “So what’s up with this being-a-girl business? Besides the fact that you look like one, of course.”

She shrugged. “Far as I know, I’ve always been a girl. I never much liked roughhousing. I played with my sister’s dolls a lot. That’s Cindy, by the way. She’s five years older than me.” A smile animated her lips. “The best part of it was, I was *her* dress-up doll for a few years. I learned a lot.”

“I bet. Was that what triggered this, shall we say, ‘condition’?”

“Wearing her hand-me-downs? She and mom dressing me up as a princess or the Little Mermaid for Halloween? Or as a pretty little nurse when we played house?” She sighed. “I’m spoiled for choice, that’s for sure.”

Quince sat back, puffing on a pipe. “My sister sure as hell liked to roughhouse. We used to go at it hammer and tongs, whatever that means. Frankly, I wasn’t surprised when she told us she wanted to be a boy.”

“Sounds like you and your parents were okay with it. How old was she?”

“Twelve. Just in time to start hormone treatments so she wouldn’t ‘develop’. It worked out nicely: my bro’s bigger than me and plays semi-pro rugby.”

“Color me jealous. I started taking my mom’s Portia pills about the same time. I’m lucky she’s so absent-minded. She just assumed she mislaid the odd batch.”

“That explains a lot. The lack of muscle development, the fact your voice never broke...” He aimed the stem of his pipe at her. “Am I to understand that rack is *real*? If you’ll pardon my French.”

She glanced down. “Oh yeah. This is all me. I hid it for a long time under baggy shirts.” A bitter laugh. “No one really paid much attention to me—that helped.” She paused. “They did notice after I started dressing up, but I guess they thought it was part of the costume. That’s what they always called my clothes: a ‘costume’.”

“Must’ve been rough. There you were, just tryin’ to be yourself, and they treat it like some kind of game they’d rather you didn’t play.”

She nodded, eyeing the ropes that bound her. “You know what? This is a really weird way to meet the first person who ever understood me.”

The next day they went for a walk around the lake. Bethany spoke of her plans to live with friends—trainee nurses—while going to school, and when enough cash came her way, to transition. Quince talked about life after deprogramming.

“It’s kind of a drag,” he told her. “No one—and I mean *no one*—ever thanks you for what you do. Even when you bring a kid back to his parents, in one piece and thinking straight, all the kid does is bitch and moan about being mistreated. I tell you, it’s enough to make a guy think twice about ever doing it again. The money’s not *that* great either. Not like you’d expect.”

She seemed interested. “What would you rather do?”

“You won’t laugh, will you?” She crossed her heart. Quince sighed. “In a word: sculpt. My mom used to do that, before the arthritis got to her. She left all her materials in the shed around back. If I could, I’d just hang out here and... create.”

“You own this place? Inside a National Forest reserve?”

“It’s grandfathered.” He laughed. “My granddaddy bought it in 1953. Been in the family ever since.”

“Well... I hope you get the chance.”

“Yeah. You too, by the way. To be a girl nurse, I mean.”

“Thanks. Sure wish my parents felt the same way.”

“Maybe they’ll come around once you lose the weenie.” They both laughed.

That night they sat together in front of the fireplace, there being no TV, and gazed silently into the billowing flame. Bethany was still wearing her nurse’s uniform, since she refused to touch the clothes her mother had packed. After a time, their hands touched—lightly at first, and then their fingers entwined. She leaned closer, her head resting against his shoulder. They stayed that way for a long time.

Somebody banged on the door—hard.

Quince jumped up. He pulled Bethany to her feet. “You better get—”

The door slammed open. Four men walked in, all dressed in identical jumpsuits. The shortest man said, “We are for you, Quince von Salis.”

The next man elbowed him aside. “Shut up, Wendel. You *know* why we’re here, von Salis. You took from us a member of the Brotherhood. You turned him against us and returned him to his family—and now he is dead.”

Quince ran a hand through his hair. “God, yeah... that was the Atherton kid. Real sad case. Turns out he was using that whole UFO transcendence shtick as an emotional crutch.” He looked at Bethany. “When I took that away, he had nothing left. His family and friends weren’t enough. He jumped.”

Bethany moved toward him. “Wh—what do they want?”

The small man raised his fist to the sky. “Revenge, Quince von Salis. *Revenge!*”

“Take it down a notch, Wendel.” The others bound Quince to the same wooden chair Bethany had been tied to, using the same ropes—only tighter. One of them muttered, “We gonna make sure dude never bothers the Brotherhood again.”

“Would it help,” Quince said, “if I promised never to bother you guys again?”

“No.” The oldest of the four, apparently the leader, stood with his back to the room, gazing at the invisible lake. “Outsiders cannot be trusted. Deprogrammers such as yourself are the enemy of faith. Our faith—*all* faith. The answer is termination: a cleansing of the body and the soul. The lake should do the trick.”

Bethany cried out: “But he’s *not!* I mean, he’s not a deprogrammer anymore. He’s been out of the business for—oh, I don’t know *how* long. Ages.”

The man threw her a pitying glance. “Girl, we followed you here from the city. We know what he’s doing. We know why *you* are here.”

“No, you don’t!” Bethany ran to Quince and threw her arms around his chest. “Please don’t hurt him. He’s my boyfriend!”

The men glanced at one another. “Don’t be silly,” the leader said. “We have it on good authority that you yourself are male.”

“Quince doesn’t care about that. I’m female where it counts.” She tapped the side of her head, almost dislodging her nurse’s cap. “We’re trying to save up enough money for my surgery. Then I can be a complete woman for him.”

Wendel grabbed Quince’s shoulder and shouted. “Is this *true*, you maggot?”

The leader grimaced. “Christ, somebody get him outta here. If the fresh air doesn’t calm him down, try the lake.” One of the others grabbed the short man. “Didn’t I tell ya, dude? Six cups is too much coffee in one go.” They went outside.

The older man locked eyes with Quince. “You should know that I myself spoke to the girl’s parents, posing as an insurance salesman. Curiously, they seemed to be under the impression that you *are* in fact a deprogrammer, and that you were hired to ‘remind’ this girl that she’s actually a young man.”

“Of course, that’s what we told *them*,” Bethany said, clutching at Quince. “Just look at me—I’m still a girl! Does it look like he even tried to talk me out of it?”

“It’s true,” Quince said. “I’m done with that whole business. I’m *sick* of it. What happened to the Atherton kid was part of what put me off, for sure. You can’t tell me he wouldn’t have been better off with you guys.”

The leader was eyeing Bethany. “Why would you lie to your parents?”

“It was the only way to get me away from them!” She relaxed a little, tugging on her skirt. “Mom and Dad don’t ‘get’ me the way Quince does. When they look at

me, all they see is the boy they thought I was when I was born. But I'm a girl now, and that's what Quince sees. Plus I'm going to be a nurse."

The leader sighed. "This is all very confusing. Am I to understand that the two of you are up here on some sort of romantic getaway?"

"It would've been," Quince said, looking straight at Bethany, "if you guys hadn't barged in at *the* worst possible moment."

The man stood up abruptly. "All right, von Salis, we'll do it your way. But if I *ever* hear of you returning to your deprogramming ways, I will make it an article of my Faith to hunt you down and cleanse your soul at the bottom of the nearest lake. You and your pretty little girlfriend," he added with a sneer.

The men left. The leader could be heard outside berating Wendel, just before the engine of their minivan roared to life. The vehicle disappeared up the road.

"That was damn close," Quince said. "Quick thinking on your part, though."

"It doesn't have to be a lie," Bethany said, working on the knots that bound him.

He smiled. "I never said it was."

Epilog

At the end of the week Quince returned Bethany to the city. Ma and Pa Fletcher were *not* happy. "He's still a girl," her mother said, stating the obvious.

Her father was tight-lipped. "I think I want my money back."

"Sorry, no returnsies," Quince said. "I offered no guarantees. I did my best." But his fingers were tightly crossed behind his back.

Bethany looped her arm through his. "Quince and I are in love."

Naturally, they both had to leave—fast. Bethany moved in with her friends and attended nursing school, while Quince returned to his home in another state and explained to his estranged wife that he'd met another woman—sort of—and it was full speed ahead with their divorce. That didn't go over too well either.

Months passed while Quince settled his affairs, shut down his business—you'd be surprised at the paperwork involved—and certified himself as whisperer for dogs and cats. At last he was able to re-locate to live near Bethany. He rented a small apartment, set up shop as a consultant, and when she had time they dated.

Four years later, Bethany was a registered nurse and they decided to get married. It was a small civil ceremony attended by a group of friends and, sadly, no family members. Bethany's parents returned their invitation stamped 'return to sender'.

Two more years passed before the couple was able to set aside enough money for Bethany's surgery. They decamped for a two-week stay at the SRS clinic, before returning home officially as man and woman. Financially, they were doing well. A surprising number of pets require attitude adjustments.

Bethany was somewhat surprised to find that being physically female spiced up her love life considerably. The changes in her hormone levels had, over the years, caused her skin to soften, her figure to feminize, and her hair to grow rapidly. She looked far more like the woman she'd always felt herself to be, but she didn't *feel* that much different. However, Quince was becoming increasingly insatiable, now that he could make love to his wife face-to-face.

In addition, ropes and gags played a burgeoning role in their lovemaking. Bethany didn't mind, of course; she was, at least initially, every bit as into that sort of thing as Quince was. But she couldn't help but notice that he seemed to be behaving more like a deprogrammer than a lover; one intent on conditioning her to become ever more demure and feminine—even submissive. He wanted her to play the role of a damsel in distress, and she felt helpless to resist.

This is where their story ends. They ultimately packed up and relocated to a small town in Western Canada; still married and still trying to work out where their mutual boundaries lay. Perhaps they managed to find a balance of sorts in looser restraints and more foreplay, or perhaps they never did. We can only hope that the love that grew between them when first they met was enough to see them through.

Is happily ever after too much to hope for? I think not. ■

