

Chapter III

Julia ran her fingers through Emily's soft hair as she listened to her daughter's faint breathing. She could see James looking back periodically through the rapidly falling darkness to check on Emily's condition. Julia could only construe that the events that took place tonight were a bad omen for the future. Quickly, she drew in a deep breath and sent up a silent prayer to the Almighty asking Him to watch over her family through the coming days. After all that James and Julia had been through, they were going to need as much help as possible when David Marsh found out that Emily would not be marrying Jonathan. It wasn't an absence of love or the fact that his son had assaulted their daughter that was going to annul the marriage contract to Jonathan, but something much more fundamental. Emily was really a boy.

It was a secret their family had spent years hiding. They had even moved from their farm by the small town of New Antioch in the Augustine Parish to keep her safe. Julia remembered the turbulent events that began over sixteen years ago. She remembered vividly how much James complained about the weather and the prospects of a mediocre harvest. She had her hands full trying to raise the children. Sarah, three-years-old, was in her own right quite the handful as she was walking everywhere, and had even nearly gotten lost outside while Julia was trying to attend to Aaron's needs. Aaron, who was just over nine-months-old at the time, was teething and never seemed to stop fussing.

When the fall harvest came, all of James' worries were realized when he was only able to make a little less than what he had the previous year. The day he came back from town, James didn't seem to stop complaining about everything; the lousy weather, the equipment that kept breaking, and the overall health of his animals. By then, Julia had begun to suspect that she was pregnant. It had almost been almost eight weeks since had bled. She had fierce cravings for eggs and she was becoming increasingly moody - things that had happened only when she had been pregnant with Sarah and Aaron.

It was a cold night in late October when she finally decided to tell James. They were lying in bed trying to keep warm as the rain and wind battered their small home. Aaron was sound asleep in his bassinet and the sounds of his soft breathing filtered into Julia's ears. It was time to tell James he would be a father again.

"James," she said softly.

"Hmm."

"I think...I think I might be pregnant again," She had always been a little reluctant to tell him of a new pregnancy, not because he would be unhappy or upset, but because her first pregnancy had ended with a miscarriage and she didn't want to worry him.

"Oh," James said with a slightly disheartened response.

James' head swam and his soul spun with emotions as if it were caught in a tornado. He loved Sarah and Aaron with all of his heart, but he had no desire to have any more children. He knew that he would love the next child when it came, but having

Emily
Dana De Young

another baby would greatly complicate matters around the farm. With each year that passed, it became harder and harder to make ends meet. For the last five years he had steadily made less and less off the harvest. Another year like this and he would have to sell his land to keep his family fed.

“Are you okay?” Julia asked.

James was silent for a moment. “I don’t know Julia. I’m worried. What happens if we have another harvest like this one? It’s hard enough just getting by right now. What will it be like when we have another mouth to feed? Worse than that, I’ve been hearing these stories about some of the neighboring farmers that have had their crops burned or livestock killed, just so the landowners in New Antioch can bankrupt them and take over their land. If we can’t make enough money, we won’t have enough to get back on our feet if something bad were to happen.”

Julia rolled away, “I know. I know I didn’t want to burden you while you were harvesting, but I thought you should know what might be happening.”

James rolled over to his wife and put his arm around her waist. “I mean, I’m happy and everything. I just don’t want anything bad to happen to us where we might have to give up our land and way of life.”

“I guess we’ll just have to trust in each other and in God to make sure that everything will be all right.”

But as Julia’s belly grew, so did James’ worry. By the time she could feel the baby kicking and turning her stomach sideways, the bitter cold winter choked the land and several of the farm’s animals died from exposure. That winter also came without the vital life-giving snows that would moisten the soil for the next planting season.

The springtime was filled with anxiety for Julia. Throughout the last trimester of her pregnancy, she experienced a number of false labors and her younger sisters ended up moving into the cramped farmhouse briefly to help watch the children and comfort Julia while she rested. James, even more nervous than his wife, couldn’t help but complain out loud that with the way everything was going, he was going to have to sell the farm to keep them all fed.

After a false labor’ Julia finally started having the real thing the afternoon of May 1, 329, but the baby kept her waiting for a grueling thirteen hours.

“It’s a boy!” Julia’s sister, Maria, exclaimed as they cleaned the infant off with the cleanest rags they had available. Her sister’s declaration caught her by surprise. Through all her pregnancies she had always had an intuition as to whether she was having a boy or a girl, and with both Sarah and Aaron she had been right. She was so sure that she was having a girl with this pregnancy that she hadn’t even thought of a boy’s name for the baby. But as her sister brought him to her she couldn’t help but notice a slight resemblance between him and her uncle Erik so she named the baby Erik Richard La Rouche after him.

At first, James was reluctant to hold his newborn son, but the moment Julia handed Erik to him, all the reservations and fears he had about surviving vanished. It was impossible for him not to love such a tiny infant. On that day it seemed as if God smiled on his family; they now had three healthy beautiful children. Then the weather soon changed for the better and that fall James reaped one of the best harvests of his entire life.

For the first years of his life, James and Julia thought that Erik seemed just like any other boy. But as Erik grew, so did a vast feeling of disconnection within him. He

didn't feel like he fit in with the world around him. The feeling was there every morning when he woke up and it persisted in his dreams. He had no interest in wrestling and playing with his older brother. He cried whenever his clothes got dirty and was always particular about keeping his hands clean. Aaron would try to get him interested in the things he liked but Erik would often feign interest or do something completely different. When they went out to play in the fields, Aaron tormented small insects, but Erik would either examine them or pick wildflowers for his mother. While Aaron followed his father to help him work in the fields, Erik would stay behind to help his mother and sister with the chores around the house, and while Aaron would play soldier with the other town boys, Erik would look through the windows of one of the town's clothing stores admiring the colorful silks and satins that he saw.

More than anything, Erik admired his older sister, Sarah, and during the last year of her life they were inseparable. She loved teaching him the things she learned in school and she would often tell tall tales that would make him happy and he enjoyed brushing through her long, dark brown hair. Just before Sarah died Erik had a dream that he was wearing his sister's dress. It was her favorite dress with purple velvet trim around the chest. He saw himself twirling in the warm sunlight, the dress's long flowing violet skirt fluttering as he moved. When he awoke that morning, for the first time in his life he felt at peace with himself. It was then he realized that he was a girl trapped in the wrong skin.

For days after his epiphany, Erik searched deep within his soul to try to find a way to confide his feelings with his sister, but before he could summon the courage she was taken from him forever.

On a warm afternoon late in September, Erik, Sarah and Aaron were playing near the chicken coop near an old pile of rusted scrap that their parents had often called the metal carriage. Aaron had been chasing Sarah around the carriage when she tried to elude him by climbing over the scrap but fell off of it and a deep cut sliced through the back of her leg. It wasn't until a few days later that her parents learned of the cut and discovered how bad the infection had spread. One morning before school, she started feeling chills throughout her body. As the day progressed, her memory started to slip away and she couldn't remember simple things like where she was or what her mother's name was. Her heart began to race and her breathing quickened and gradually she began to slip into a state of shock. Julia sent her husband to retrieve a doctor, but by the time he returned, Sarah had died. The doctor said little, except that it was her time and that she was with God now.

For weeks after Sarah's death, James did little more than sleep while his brothers had to reap his harvest. Unable to coax her husband from their bed, Julia, in her grief, had to take on additional chores around the farm, as well as tending to the house and watching the children.

Erik was the most distraught. Even though he was only five-years-old, he knew in his heart that he would never see Sarah again. His closest confidant and friend had been taken away from him and it left a hole in his soul. To him, they were sisters on a spiritual level and now he was left all alone. Erik felt as if he was about to burst inside and as each day passed he knew that he could no longer live as a boy. He stopped responding to Erik and began telling Aaron that he wanted to be called Emily instead. To Aaron, this was too funny to keep to himself and he immediately ran to his mother to tell her the joke.

Emily
Dana De Young

“Ma, Erik thinks he’s a girl! He keeps wanting me to call him Emily,” he said and then laughed hysterically.

Julia looked at Erik looking for him to say something to the contrary, but when nothing came she only said. “Oh, Erik quit joking around.”

But to Erik it was no joke. With every moment that passed, anguish gathered in his heart and ate at his soul. Inside he knew his name was Emily and he didn’t understand why he had to constantly be called one that did not fit him. He didn’t understand why he had to wear the drab and constricting clothes of a boy, instead of a beautiful and freeing girl’s dress.

With each new day, Erik looked to escape the world that confined him and trapped him into the wrong body. He began to grow his hair long and when he could, he would play with the dolls that once belonged to his sister. More than anything, he longed to try on one of Sarah’s old dresses. Since she had passed away, his mother had kept them in a small wooden chest at the foot of Sarah’s bed. But every time he would try to wear one, one of his parents would tell him to stay out of her old things.

Finally on a cool evening in March, the opportunity presented itself. Erik knew that his father was working in the fields and wouldn’t return until after the sun had set. His mother wanted to take him into town, but he had no interest in going. He couldn’t bear the thought of following his mother around on her errands. He knew she would talk to the town people she ran into, while all he could do was wait quietly and long to be one of the many girls that would pass him by.

Erik was surprised that his mother had let him stay home to rest when he said that he was tired. Usually she would just take him with Aaron into town regardless if he wanted to go or not, but she was in a hurry and did not argue. So she saw him off to bed and left with Aaron. He lie in his bed until he was sure Aaron and his mother had left. Carefully he opened the door to his bedroom and listened for sounds that anyone was home. Anxiously he crept towards his sister’s room, ready to bolt to his won if he heard any indication that someone was returning

Erik’s heartbeat raced within his ears. Quietly he slipped into Sarah’s room and gently shut the door behind him. He walked to the foot of her bed to the trunk that contained all of Sarah’s old clothes. He slowly opened the lid and pulled aside the blankets that were laying on top of her dresses. He picked up the purple dress with the velvet trim and held it against his chest. He looked down in dismay as the gown unfurled past his toes. He knew the dress wouldn’t fit him. He gently set the dress on his sister’s bed and continued to rummage through the trunk. Sarah had only had a few dresses when she died and he hoped beyond hope that she still had something from when she was younger.

At last he found it, a maroon gingham checkered dress. It had been several years since he could last recall Sarah wearing it. He held the dress up to his chest again. This time it was a perfect length.

One by one, Erik took off his clothes and left them in a pile on the floor. Clumsily he pulled the dress over his head. It wasn’t a perfect fit after all. The gown itself was just a tad too long and he knew that he would not be able to tie the laces in the back of the dress by himself. But it was good enough. Erik stood perfectly still as he felt his soul swim. Never in his whole life had he felt so right. He imagined himself opening the door

Emily
Dana De Young

to Sarah's room and walking out into the eating room and his mother would say, "Why Emily you look so beautiful tonight."

The thought left his mind as he caught his reflection in the window. He took a step toward it and looked deep into his reflecting gaze. He could see his face staring back, but that wasn't what he was looking at. Beyond the mirror he could see his real self. Beyond his reflection he could see a girl staring back at him. For a brief second Erik smiled back and as he turned to make his way to the other side of the room he bumped into the trunk and caused the lid to shut with a thump. No matter. Erik spun in the dress and let the gown float on the air.

This was freedom. This was the air that he needed to breathe to survive. He needed to be a girl.

"What are you doing, Erik?" His father said breaking the serenity that surrounded him.

Erik, shocked, turned and looked at his father, too scared to say anything.

"You get out of that dress immediately, young man!" James demanded.

Erik stared back at his father. He knew that he couldn't obey him. After tonight, he knew there was no way that he could take a step back into a world that seemed so wrong even if it would make his father angry.

"No, no, no! I won't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm a girl."

"No you're not! Now get out of that dress right now, or so help me if I have to take it off of you, you will be in big trouble," James demanded and took a step toward Erik to get the dress off himself. Erik resisted and fell to the floor shrieking and shouting. James, flushed with rage, grabbed Erik by the wrist and led him into the kitchen to wait for Julia. The minutes ticked by in silent agony as James shook with rage. He could not stand to look at his son dressed that way. Instead, he fixed his eyes out the kitchen window and waited.

Erik was scared. His father's anger tore straight through him and he was afraid that he would be taken over his father's knee or worse. But he felt no shame in what he was wearing. To him, it felt right. It felt natural. He was a girl. After about a half hour, Julia returned from a trip into town with Aaron and was caught off guard by what she saw when she opened the door.

"Erik, just what do you think you're doing?" she demanded to know as she saw Erik.

"My name's not Erik. It's Emily. I'm a gir..."

"No you're not. Now get those ridiculous ideas out of your head, boy. You were born a boy, and you'll always be a boy," James interrupted.

Erik's face reddened with anger and disbelief at his father's retort. "No, I won't!" he shouted.

"Yes you are! Now get out of that dress this instant or you will be in big trouble. Do you hear me?" James shouted.

Erik shrieked in terror and began to cry as he ran back to the bedroom he shared with Aaron. He spent the rest of the night crying at his father's declaration. He refused to believe that he would always be a boy.

As the door slammed shut to the children's bedroom, Julia sank into a chair trying to take it all in.

"James, what just happened? Why is my son wearing a dress?"

"Cause he's a little sissy girl Ma," Aaron said playfully.

"Shut up Aaron," James said hotly.

"Aaron, honey, why don't you go outside and play for a little bit?" Julia said as she set her hand on Aaron's shoulder. "Your father and I need to talk."

"Oh, okay," he said dejectedly. He turned around and walked outside into the cool spring evening.

Julia waited until she heard the door close before she continued.

"So what happened?" Julia asked as her mind still tried to process what it had seen. This couldn't be happening. She had worried about Erik's behavior over the course of the last few months, but it was all little small stuff. But this! She never suspected that he would ever go as far as to wear his sister's clothing.

"I just came in here to get a bite to eat and I heard sounds coming from the children's room. I thought it was odd 'cause I thought everyone went into town."

"No, I was going to take them both, but Erik said he was feeling tired and wanted to rest, so I let him."

"So I get back there and I find him wearin' his sister's things and he tells me he's a girl." James said as he motioned to Sarah's old room.

"Why would he say something like that?"

"Oh hell, I don't know! I tried to get him out of the dress, but I couldn't, so I brought him out here to wait for you. I thought maybe other people seein' him dressed like that would scare him out of it."

"It didn't though."

"No."

Silence fell between James and Julia as they tried to think of a solution for their latest problem.

"I'm going to hide Sarah's old things. Make sure he can't get to them."

"Why don't you just get rid of them?"

"I don't know if I could do that just yet. I mean, they're the only things I have left to remember Sarah by."

James sighed. "Fine. Just make sure he doesn't get a hold of them. I don't want my youngest son growing up to be a sodomite."

"This is probably just some phase he's going through, he's still probably hurt by the loss of his sister."

"You better be right, Julia. You better be right."

That night the floodgates opened and despite James and Julia's best efforts to contain Erik's desire to live as a girl, it quickly became an unquenchable torrent. Both James and Julia tried desperately to get Erik to accept that he was a boy. They would take what toys he had away when he called himself Emily. They would send him to his room or give him extra chores if he wore an old dress of his sisters, and despite Julia's reluctance, she had to let James finally burn all of Sarah's old clothes to keep Erik from wearing them. Each time they punished him, Erik would break down. He shouted; he screamed, and would sit and cry for hours. Eventually he stopped eating altogether. It was this that began to change Julia's mind about her son.

Emily
Dana De Young

“Do you think we’re doing the right thing for Erik?” Julia asked her husband one evening as they were lying in bed.

“I don’t know, Julia. I just wish he’d grow out of this phase or whatever it is he’s in.”

“James, what if he won’t? He hasn’t eaten any food for the last three days. I don’t think we can keep this up for much longer.”

“So, what? You want him to dress like a girl for the rest of his life?”

“There are plenty of worse things than that.”

“Like what?”

“Like not having him around at all. If he’s not eating now because of this, what’s he going to do to himself when he gets older?”

James rolled away from his wife. He didn’t want to think that his youngest son would become a girl. “I just don’t understand it, Julia. Why would a boy want to be a girl? It just ain’t right!”

“I know, hon,” Julia said, as she rolled up next to him.

“It’s just that since Erik was born, I’ve always had this dream in my head of how my boys would grow up. Roughhousing with them, teaching them how to run the farm and then watching them become men and have families of their own.”

“We still have Aaron.”

“I know, but what if something happens to Aaron like happened to Sarah? Then what?”

“James, don’t say things like that, nothing is going to happen to Aaron.”

James looked back at his wife with a skeptical expression, “How do you know? I mean, Sarah was fine and then the next minute she was gone. You can’t say something like that couldn’t happen again, it happens to people all the time. What about Tomas Moreland’s family? They lost three children in one year.”

“James, you can’t see the future and you shouldn’t try. Whatever God says what happens, happens.”

“And what would God say about this, huh? Do you think he’s all right with a boy doing this?”

“I think God would want us to love our children and do what we could to see them happy.”

“Julia, I just don’t think I could let something like that happen.”

“And what do you suggest we do? It’s been six months since you caught him in that dress and it’s only gotten worse. And to be honest, I don’t think I could stand even a few more weeks of this. It breaks my heart every time I hear him cry. Every time I hear him, it becomes harder and harder for me not to lose it, because I know that we’re hurting him.”

James did not know what to say. It was almost as hard on him to see his son in such a way, but seeing his son in a dress was far worse. If he let Erik live as a girl it would be like seeing his son die in front of him.

Over the next few days the bouts with Erik continued and although he ate some food, he was beginning to look sick. His deep blue eyes were now just hollow shells. His cheeks, once plump with baby fat were sallow and his hair began to fall out. He became withdrawn. He scarcely moved and slept close to fourteen hours a day, and those times when he was awake, he spent hidden in his room.

Julia had finally had enough. She couldn't stand to see her son in so much pain. She knew she couldn't wait for James to come to his senses, so late one afternoon Julia went to town with the intention of buying Erik a dress. She knew what she was doing would only further aggravate James, but she felt she was out of options. At this rate, she reasoned, she would have to bury another child before the snows fell. As she entered Edward Eisen's clothing shop a cold shiver ran up her back. Although she knew what she was doing was right, she still couldn't believe that she was doing it.

Julia was familiar with Eisen's shop, although their family rarely bought clothing from him. She did stop here occasionally to buy thread, needles and other things in which to make and mend clothing. Like most people, Julia simply made her own clothing. Everything she and her children owned was something that either she had made or was given to them by a relative who had simply outgrown it.

As she stood in Eisen's store, all the reasons that she shouldn't be there came flooding back into her mind. They didn't have that much money, James would be furious, and why of all things was she buying a dress for her son? But she remembered why; because he was in agony and she loved him and she just wanted for him to be happy once again. As she stood there, she felt Eisen come up beside her. He was a middle-aged man of about forty-five, his dusty brown hair was slowly giving way to wispy snow white strands. He looked at her through his thin spectacles with his friendly, helpful brown eyes. His skin was light from a lifetime of working indoors, and calluses covered his fingers from the sheer amount of times he pricked his fingers with the needles of his trade. For his age he only had a few wrinkles in his skin. Most people his age looked at least fifteen years older than they really were.

"Hello, Mrs. La Rouche. What can I help you with today?"

"I'm looking to buy a girl's dress..."

Eisen was puzzled. Like most people in New Antioch, he knew about Sarah's death, but he stood there waiting for Julia to give him some further details as to what she wanted. After all, money was money.

"...it's for my niece, it's a birthday present."

"Oh, how old is your niece going to be?"

"She'll be six. Do you have anything here that would probably fit her?"

"I think I'll be able to help you out there, how much will you be able to spend?"

"No more than five dollars."

"Okay, just give me a moment and I'll bring you back some of the selections that I have."

Eisen walked between the wooden mannequins and wire dress forms, and disappeared behind a curtain where he kept his inventory. Julia felt nervous and uneasy, like her stomach was flipping summersaults. To some degree she felt like she was losing her son, but when she thought this, she remembered that he would not be gone, but still an ongoing part of her life. Everything that he was now would remain the same, only the name and clothing would change. As she waited for Eisen to return, she looked at some of the other items his store had to offer. She came to one dress form, which held a sleeveless maroon dress made from fine linen. At eighty dollars it was elegant and she fantasized in some other world or some other time she could actually afford something like this, that she could entertain real guests instead of pigs and sheep. She let the dream

melt back into reality. It would never happen, but it gave her some peace of mind to think of herself as something more than just a common farmer's wife.

Eisen returned a moment later with three small dresses draped over his arm and one by one handed them to Julia. The first one he handed to Julia was a child's Sunday dress. It was beautiful, but it was also white and trimmed with white lace. Give it a week and this beautiful dress would be covered in the dust and dirt of the farm. She handed it back to Eisen. The next dress seemed too big to fit Erik's small frame and like the first dress, she was concerned that the light peach color would not hold up to the farm environment. When he held up the last dress, Julia knew it was the perfect one. The dress was a simple dark blue cotton; the color of Erik's eyes.

"I'll take this one."

"That is a good choice, I am sure your niece will love it."

"I think she will, too," Julia said as a reflective smile fell over her face.

She paid Eisen four and a half dollars for the dress and left the store. She placed the dress in the saddlebag as she started the trip back toward the farmhouse. She hoped she would be able to avoid James until tonight. Until after she gave Erik the dress. When she got back to the farm she could see her husband off in the distance harvesting the grain row by row, step by step. She knew when she finally told him he would be angry. She knew his anger would be compounded by his exhaustion because off all the work he had been doing, but it was unavoidable.

She took the dress from the saddlebag and walked into the house and found Erik asleep on Sarah's old bed. He lay on his left side, with his right arm over his head. He looked peaceful while he was sleeping, but that's what also concerned her, she had never seen any child his age sleep as much and as long as Erik. It was his way of escaping the harsh reality of his surroundings. It was where he could be himself and not have to live with the daily callousness of his father's disappointment.

"Erik," she said as shook him gently, "Erik, honey, wake up."

He opened his eyes carefully as the light stung his retinas. Slowly his mother's face took shape in front of him. He looked at her with warm eyes but said nothing.

"Erik, honey, I have something for you."

Erik sat up in the bed with the fuzzy haze of sleep still clouding his eyes.

"I know the last few months we have been hard on you and I can only hope you will forgive us for that, but I can't stand to see you be in so much pain anymore." She unfolded the dress and handed it to him. "I bought this for you."

The minute she gave him the gift life returned to his eyes. The chrysalis which he had stored himself in all these months was now destroyed. He knew he would not have to hide or be afraid anymore. Erik clutched the gift in his arms and embraced his mother. "I love you, Ma."

"I love you, too, Erik."

Erik hugged his mother one more time and left to go put the dress on. As he was walking out the door, he turned back and looked to where his mother was sitting. "Ma, can you call me Emily? Please?"

Julia looked down at the dusty wooden floor and nodded her head. "Okay, honey, but please give me a little time. It might take me some getting used to."

Emily said nothing, only smiled and ran back to her room. After the last six months of torment she knew that she would not have to be afraid anymore. The pain that

Emily
Dana De Young

weighed on her chest like a church bell had been lifted. She could be the girl that she was, and despite her anatomy, she knew that one day she would grow into a woman like her mother.

James returned home late that evening, exhausted from harvesting the crops. When he walked in through the door, he was surprised to see Julia sitting at the table waiting for him. Usually during the harvest, she would leave his supper on the table and go to bed shortly after sunset.

“What are you still doing up, hon?”

“We need to talk, James.”

At hearing those five little words, James’s blood ran cold. He didn’t want to talk, he was exhausted. He wanted to eat some food and catch a few hours of sleep before he would have to go back out into the fields. “All right,” he said skeptically.

“I bought Emily a dress today.”

At her words James instantly became incensed. “Why? What in the hell did you do that for!”

“Because I’m tired of seeing her waste away in front of us, and I’m not just going to sit by while our child dies,” Julia said, as she stood up to face her husband.

“HE wasn’t dying in front of us, he’s perfectly fine.”

“No, SHE isn’t. Every day she grows sicker and I simply can’t watch it anymore.”

“And what is this she business. He is not a she. I can’t believe you are just going to sit back and accept this.”

“James, it’s time to get over your foolish pride and start acting like a father. Your child is happy now. She actually ate all of her food tonight and for once it seemed like everything was back to normal again.”

“Normal! How can you say that when you’ve turned my son into a damned sissy?”

“I’m not going to sit here and let you talk about Emily like this. You can either get on board and do what’s right for your child or...” She didn’t know how to finish, she couldn’t leave him and she wouldn’t, but she couldn’t accept the way he was treating Emily any longer. Before any of this had happened, James loved to spend time with all of his children. But since the night he caught him with the dress, it seemed like he wanted little or nothing to do with him. Even with those few moments where he didn’t act out, it was almost as if Erik didn’t exist to him.

“Or what? Or what, Julia?”

“If you don’t love your child, why should I love you? You haven’t hardly said anything to Emily in the last six months.”

“His name is Erik, not Emily, dammit!”

“Listen, James. For the first time in a long time she is happy and full of life and I’m not going to let you take that away from her,” Julia said as she folded her arms and shot a fierce look at James that pierced his body. Fire burned in her eyes and raged within her soul. It was the first time in their eleven-year marriage that she ever felt animosity toward her husband. James had seen such a look before, around the farm and in the wild. It was the same look the female of every species gives when protecting their young. James, flush with anger, was determined not to be upstaged by his wife.

“Julia, get out of my sight before I do something I regret,” he said, with the thoughts of backhanding her dancing in his head.

Emily
Dana De Young

“Fine, but don’t even think about coming to bed with me tonight,” she said as she turned around, walked to the bedroom and slammed the door.

James picked up the plate of food that sat in front of him and threw it against the wall. He watched angrily as the wooden plate bounced against the wall and his meal flew off in every direction and then he stormed outside. For nearly an hour he walked around the farm still enraged by the events of the evening. Slowly, anger began to give way to reason. In their eleven-years of marriage, the thought of hitting his wife had never occurred to him and after it had surfaced it frightened the hell out of him. He did not think of himself as a wicked man but here he was, becoming all the things he despised.

But, he couldn’t let Erik live as a girl. Could he? Looking back, even before Sarah’s death, it was clear that Erik was not like other boys, but it was something he always overlooked. But if Erik lived as a girl, could he ever look at him again, knowing what he was? James remembered when Julia was pregnant and the worry and anxiety he felt and how it disappeared the first time he saw his son. Everything had worked out fine then, but what would happen now? Julia was right. Erik was still his son and he had to be his father, but even if he let him become Emily, which he still couldn’t see, he couldn’t just take him to town dressed as a girl. People knew that he was a boy. And what would happen to Erik? Would he be ridiculed or beaten up? Worse yet, he didn’t even know what the Church authorities would do. He had heard stories about how the church had handled sodomites, but this had to be different. Wasn’t it?

James fell to his knees. There were no easy answers. Why of all people did he have to face this problem? No one else that he knew had ever had to go through something like this. He felt like he was the only one on the whole Earth that had a child like Erik. He felt as if God was punishing him for something; first taking away Sarah and now this. James sat most of the night outside thinking and praying for answers, but none came.

Over the next few days he busied himself with the harvest. The days were long, the work repetitive and he had plenty of time to think. Even though Julia had let him back to their bed she remained unusually cold with him and he hadn’t seen either Aaron or Erik during that time. This was expected with the harvest since he usually didn’t come in until well after sunset, and he was usually up before they woke up. He felt unusually lonely and abandoned, isolated from his family among the sea of grain. But the isolation did not end when the work ended. He couldn’t stand to see Julia angry with him and despite Erik’s dress-wearing, he did miss the time he spent with his sons. He didn’t know if he could accept Erik being a girl, maybe in time all his reservations about it would disappear. He didn’t know, but he knew that as long as he opposed the idea, his family would remain fractured. After three days, he had finished harvesting his crops but still his mind remained divided. Seeking guidance, he took a trip to town to talk things through with the pastor.

James knew that confessions or spiritual guidance could often be tricky things, especially if the confessions violated church law. Usually they were more forgiving by making the punishments less severe if you confessed, but most of the time it was safer to speak in generalities. He found Pastor Nimitz sitting hunched over his desk in the vestry, scribbling brief notes on paper as he prepared for his sermon on Sunday.

“Pastor, may I speak with you a moment, please?” James asked as he stood in the doorway of the vestry.

Emily
Dana De Young

Pastor Nimitz turned and looked in the direction of the voice. He saw James standing in the doorway and gazed at him through his thick spectacles and faded gray eyes, but he did not recognize who he was looking at. "Come on in and have a seat," he said dryly.

James walked in and sat in a chair facing Nimitz. Nimitz had been the pastor in New Antioch for as long he could remember. In fact, he had probably baptized him when he was an infant. Growing up he always remembered him as a warm, caring pastor who unfortunately had rather long and dry sermons. But over the years he had slowly deteriorated into a cold bitter man. The fact that he had been repeatedly denied becoming a cardinal and delegated to the Council of Cardinals in Divinity only aided in his deterioration. Time had cut deep lines into his face like a bastion of dry river beds, his jowls hung loosely off his cheeks like a bloodhound and his voice became raspy and harsh, its sound as pleasing as nails on a blackboard

"Pastor, I need to speak with you on a rather delicate topic."

"What is it?"

"A friend of mine is having problems with his son. He thinks he's a girl and refuses to wear boy's clothing. The worst part is it's putting a real strain on their family. His wife seems to be all right with their son doing this and my friend isn't, so of course they fight all the time. He's so embarrassed by the whole thing he asked me to speak to you about it."

"Hmm, what's your friend's name? Just so I know who I am to refer to?"

James thought for a minute, he had to be sure he didn't give himself away or get someone else in trouble. "Ryan, Ryan Alton." he said.

Nimitz scratched his chin as he tried to recall the name, "I'm not sure I know that person."

"Might not, he lives way out in the country. He doesn't get into town too often."

"Hmm," he said unconvincingly. "Well, the basic problem is that your friend's son violates God's law and the Fourth Pillar of Faith. You see, God has created two different sexes and has charged each with different tasks; men are to be the protectors, providers, builders and leaders, while women are the nurturers and givers of life. No one should want to be the other sex and such desires are unnatural."

"I...my friend is confused as to why someone would want to do such a thing."

"It is the nature of the devil to lie and deceive. No lie is too big to be told by him, if someone listens when he says a boy should be a girl, then he will tell that lie until they live it and fall to him."

"So what do you do to help correct them? You know, get them to change their ways?"

Pastor Nimitz adjusted his glasses to try to get a better look at James, "It depends. I've heard a few stories about some old men whose wives have caught them wearing their things. If this happens and they make a full confession and ask for repentance in front of the council we usually let that person go back to their family as long as they never do it again."

"What if they do?"

Nimitz sighed audibly. "From what I understand, if they are married a divorce is granted and the sinner is detained until he can be saved."

"And how do they do that?"

Emily
Dana De Young

“I’m not sure exactly, it depends on the circumstances usually. But from what I hear, no expense is spared in saving the sinner.”

“So what will they do?”

“Whatever they have to, the body is very resilient. But nothing we do will be as bad as the torments waiting for an unsaved soul in the next world. It’s as our Lord tells us in the book of Mark ‘If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell.’”

“What if they still do not change?”

“If such an abomination were to exist they would surely be removed from our good society. They could not be allowed to cause others to fall from the grace of God.”

“Removed from society?” James thought. That sentence alone was full of negative connotations. As uncomfortable as he was with Erik wearing a dress and acting like a girl, he couldn’t bear the thought of him being removed from society.

“What happens to their family?”

“Nothing if they bring them forward. But if they shield the abomination from our saving grace then they themselves are lost.”

“Well, I thank you for answering my questions, Pastor Nimitz. I will tell my friend what you have said,” James said as he stood up.

“Before you go, son, tell your friend to bring his son to us so that we can save him before it’s too late and also his wife so that she can be corrected for leading one of the Lord’s children to sin.”

“I will. Thank you for your time Pastor.” James said as he walked out of the office.

Riding home, James was more conflicted than before he had gone to town. If he didn’t bring his son forward, he and his family could lose everything. Nimitz’s words still rang in his ears, removed from society. Those three words seemed to cut him like a knife. He had already lost one child and he lost his breath whenever he thought of Sarah. When she died, a part of him died, too. He didn’t like the thought of Erik acting like a girl, but he was powerless to stop it. And if he brought Erik forward he would surely lose him, too. He knew the church wouldn’t be able to change him, especially if his attempts had failed so miserably. But James knew that even if he wanted to, there would be no way to let Erik live as a girl without someone finding out, and then they would all have to pay the price.

When he was still a way up the road, he could see Erik playing in the grass field outside of his home. He could see Erik’s fine auburn hair twisting through the air as he twirled, his blue dress wrapping around him as he spun. “So this is how it’s going to be.” he thought.

He couldn’t shake the sadness that weighed upon him like an anchor. But on the other hand, he was glad to see him finally come outside. He was having fun, nothing bothered him now and he was free. James knew he could never bring Erik to the authorities. He just wished this new arrangement didn’t bother him so much.

He rode up to Erik who stopped cold when he saw his father approach. James dismounted his horse and walked up to Erik. For a moment there was nothing but silence. Erik was afraid that his father would be enraged at what he saw, and James couldn’t simply bring his words to his tongue. At last, James knelt down to Erik’s level, placed a hand on his shoulder and simply said, “I’m sorry.” His blood was hot and tears began to

Emily
Dana De Young

sting his eyes. "I'm sorry I was so terrible to you. Erik, if this is who you are and there is nothing I can do to change it, then I guess the only thing I want is for you to be happy and healthy."

After all the months of hardships, the battle was finally over and Erik had the begrudging acceptance of both parents at last. "Thank you Pa," was all he said as he hugged his father.

"Where's your mother at? I need to talk to her."

"I think she's in with the chickens."

"Okay then, why don't you run off and play," James said sadly.

James watched Erik as he ran inside the house. As Erik disappeared a sense of grief washed over James, he knew that the little boy he once held in his arms was gone.

He found Julia near the chicken coop rummaging in a patch of loose grass by the long-abandoned metal carriage. "What are you doing?" he asked as he approached.

"Trying to find this egg I dropped. I don't think it broke," she said, straining to find the lost egg.

"Can you forget about that for a minute? I have something to tell you." Julia stood up and looked at James waiting for him to continue. "I told Erik that if that's how he wants to be, that it would be all right."

"You mean Emily."

"Yes..." he said reluctantly. "Emily."

For the first time in days, the veil of rage that covered Julia's face was lifted. Julia set the wire basket full of eggs aside and her mood brightened as she walked over and took his hand.

"I know this was hard for you to do. You are truly a good father to put your child's happiness ahead of your own."

"I know, but it still doesn't feel right. I don't know if I'll ever be able to look at him..."

"You mean her."

"Yeah, I don't know if I'll ever be able to accept her," James said, bitterly tasting the pronoun. "You know no matter what, I am always going to see him as my son."

"James. This will all happen in time. We've now only discovered who Emily is and it will still take some getting used to. But she's your child and no matter what, she will always love you."

"But what are we going to do about...about Emily."

"What do you mean?"

"I talked to Pastor Nimitz this morning, and he said that we should bring her to them so she can be saved."

"Why did you tell them about her? Are you crazy?"

"No, no, no. Listen. I didn't tell him it was us who had the problem but he said basically we're required to bring her in or it will fall on us."

"You can't seriously be thinking about it?"

"No of course not. But tell me, if we let Emily be the way she is, how long will it be before someone finds out and tells them? What are we going to do then?"

He and Julia were silent for a moment while they thought it over.

"I mean, let's say we let him dress at home but make him dress appropriately when we go to town. All it takes is one little slip up and our secret is exposed. Not to

Emily
Dana De Young

mention do you think they will be able to keep it a secret while they're at school?" James asked.

"Then what do you suggest we do?"

For a time they were silent, each lost in a myriad of thought. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Julia said, "What if we move and make a new life for our family in some other Parish. And Emily could just be Emily and no one would be any the wiser.

"What and leave our families behind?"

"We rarely see them as it is. Not to mention, do you think they'll be willing to keep quiet once they find out? Loose lips sink ships after all."

"Where did you hear that?"

"I can't remember. But you see what I mean, the more people that know about her the more likely our secret is to get out."

"Are you sure you want to do that? I mean, how is Aaron with all this? Plus, he's in school now I'm sure he doesn't want to leave."

"Aaron for the most part is okay with Erik being Emily. He thinks it's partly a joke, but mostly it doesn't bother him. And I know it will be hard on him leaving this place, but he is young and he'll get over it."

"Are you sure you want to leave New Antioch?" he asked more for himself than Julia.

"James, I will do whatever it takes to keep my children safe."

"All right," James said quietly. He wasn't overly happy about moving, but for the sake of their collective safety, it was the only option.

"Do you think we would be able to sell the land?"

"It shouldn't be too hard, what with all the land grabs that have been going on lately."

"Okay, but be careful, you know how disreputable those people can be."

"I will."

Over the next two weeks, the family made preparations for their journey. James bought a covered wagon and loaded it with their few belongings and supplies. James managed to sell the farmland and all the livestock to one a wealthy landowner and, combined with the money he had made from the harvest, he had just over six hundred dollars, the most money he ever held in his hand at one time. James selected their new home in the Seaton Parish almost arbitrarily, but to him it seemed like a good pick. It was a rural Parish that would have lots of open and fertile farming land. He knew they had a long journey ahead of them and he hoped they could get to Seaton before the snows fell.

On the last day of October, James stood before his land and sighed as he gave one last look at what had been his home for so long. He bent down and picked up a clod of gold dirt. In many ways, he felt a little like the ground before him, empty and distressed. A cold northern wind hit him in the face and he let the dirt crumble and blow into the air. Like the dirt, his dreams were gone, blown by fate's mercy into the wind.

"Aaron, stop it! Leave me alone." He heard Emily shout from behind him. James took a long, deep breath and turned around, taking his first step into an uncertain future.