SOUTHERN EXPOSURE



PART ONE
JESSIE

1.

Jess Taylor ambled swiftly up the driveway, fishing his keys out of his pocket as he approached the front door. He was a boy on a tight schedule; his Aunt would arrive home at five, dinner would be on the table no later than six. That left him less than three hours of free play; three hours of simple, childish joy in the late September sunshine, three hours on the swings and slides and monkey–bars down at O'Connell Park.

Heart pounding with excitement, Jess let himself into the house, dropping his backpack in

the hallway. Aunt Cathy would probably give him grief over that later, but he was in too much of a hurry to consider the consequences. Heading towards the staircase, he unzipped his jacket and bolted up the steps two at a time. It was 3.15 in the afternoon; the day wasn't getting any longer. Lisa and Debbie would already be waiting for him down at O'Connell's.

Leaving his jacket hanging over the banister, he scrambled into his bedroom, hurriedly pulling his t–shirt over his head. Six hours a day in the school from hell, surrounded by creeps, cretins and bullies. He couldn't wait to get changed, kick off his school clothes and slip into something more comfortable – so to speak.

Pausing in the middle of the room, Jess climbed out of his jeans and walked over to the closet, a petite, ten–year old boy with long blond hair and pale blue eyes. His soft, effeminate features lent him a lush, girlish appearance, the illusion further enhanced by his rounded, curvaceous shape. Exceedingly pretty, he was often mistaken for a girl at first glance. Strange to say, this was something Jess didn't mind at all.

Jess, you see, was a very *special* boy.

He opened the closet door and started sorting through the racks and hangers. One side of the space was full of boy's clothing – pants, shirts, gym socks, boxer shorts and runners. Jess didn't spare it a second glance. Boy's stuff; ugly, scruffy things, he'd never had much use for them. He certainly never wore them once he got home from school. The moment he stepped in through the front door, Jess was free to shed his male identity as a snake sloughs its skin. He could be his *real* self.

Jessica.

The right side of the closet was lined with cutesy little girl's things: skirts, vests, tank tops; printed floral blouses with puffy sleeves, drop–waisted sunfrocks with outrageously frilled hemlines. They were all gifts from his Aunt Catherine; stock–taking specials from her downtown kidswear store. Strangely enough, Aunt Cathy had always been surprisingly tolerant of Jessie's feminine preferences. She even went out of her way to encourage his cross–gendered behaviour. Jessie suspected it had something to do with her not liking men.

Jessie reached into the closet and removed a pastel pink sun–dress, a delicate cotton wisp decorated with tiny rosebuds around the neck line. Sheer, loose and almost unbearably cute, it was one of his all–time favourites. Aunt Cathy had helped him pick it out for his last birthday. It had been one size too big at the time, but he'd grown into it over the past nine months.

Laying the frock out on his bed, Jess walked over to his chest of drawers and took out a pair of pristine white panties – flimsy cotton briefs with a dainty trim encircling the legs and waistline. Jessie's pulse began to race as he stepped carefully into the underpants and drew them slowly up his thighs. Easing the pants into position with a loud, elastic snap, he went back to the bed and pulled the sundress over his head.

And, in the blink of an eye, a boy became a girl.

Smoothing the cool fabric against her tummy, Jessie turned to look in the mirror, smiling at what she saw. The boy she'd been a few minutes before had disappeared without a trace. Jess Taylor had vanished the instant she'd kicked off the jeans. No – that was wrong. Jess Taylor had never really existed in the first place. He was just a mask she wore during school hours. A mask, a name, and nothing more *(quoth the raven ...).*

Giggling a child's innocent laughter, Jessica spun around several times to make the skirt twirl. The dress flared up in a pink arabesque, then floated lightly back into place. The hem barely reached down past the tops of her thighs; the cotton was so thin that her underpants were

clearly visible through the gauzy fabric. She posed in the mirror, admiring the line of the frock, the shape of her long, tapering legs. Moistening her lips in anticipation, she whirled around once more, allowing the dress to sail up past her belly button this time.

Having completed the dress–twirling ritual, she retrieved a pair of socks from the drawer and sat down on the bed to pull them on, one tiny foot at a time. They were the kind with a lacy white frill decorating the band. Aunt Cathy had bought them for her during a recent shopping expedition. Jessie had fallen in love with them at first glance, putting them on right there in the Stocking Shop. When they got home, Aunt Cathrine had taken her shoes off and proceeded to tickle her feet for half an hour – frilly little girl–socks and all. Jessie had no idea why Cathy had tortured her so mercilessly, she guessed it was just the price she paid for being a *girlie–boy.*

Jess stood up, glancing at the clock. It was 3.25; time to go. Her friends would be wondering where she was. Stepping into her pink Barbie runners, she grabbed a black hair–band on her way out and tapped off down the hall. She descended the stairs at a gallop, binding her hair back in a long, golden ponytail. Not a second to lose now, she'd have to sprint all the way to the park. As she noted earlier, Debs and Lisa wouldn't wait forever.

2.

Autumn in Ridgewick was known locally as "The Breezy Season," two chilly months of clouds, mistrals and dancing leaves. The winds blowing in off the Bucknell River held a promise of snow this time of year, whispering through the trees like the breath of winter. The days were usually mild, but temperatures dropped rapidly toward the end of the day.

Jessie Taylor's legs were buzzing with gooseflesh by the time she reached O'Connell Park. She held her dress down against the invading breeze with one hand. She could always count on an errant gust to lift her skirt an inch or two whenever she stepped out the front door: there were very few things as embarrassing as having her panties revealed to the entire world; all of her friends agreed on that point. Speaking of which, she knew she had to make tracks; Lisa and Debbie couldn't wait forever, they all had to get in a good hour of playtime before dinnertime.

O'Connell Park was a football oval on the outskirts of Ridgewick; the River lay just beyond a slight rise. There was a small playground on the other side of the playing field; Jessie could see her friends rocking sedately back and forth on the swings. Both girls were wearing baggy jeans, faded sweat shirts and Dodgers baseball caps, their ponytails pulled through the backstrap. As long as she'd known them, Jessie had never seen either wearing a dress. Shorts, yes, knee–pants sometimes, but never anything even vaguely resembling a skirt. Neither were tomboys so far as she could tell. It was just the way they dressed.

Well, to each their own, as her Aunt Cathy often said.

Jessie cut across the oval, where an exceedingly violent game of football was in full swing. She knew many of the boys by sight now; most of them went to St Patrick's over on Lincoln Road. Lean Irish lads with chestnut hair and about six zillion freckles. The majority were Jessie's age, though she'd noticed a few older guys chasing the ball lately; kids from St. Paddy's eighth grade, she judged. Seemed to be more every week. Starting wing Robbie McEwan had the ball under one arm and was careening towards the center line, trampling the opposition in a sprawl of knees and elbows. *Glad I'm not out there,* Jessica thought to herself.

She skirted around the game, ignoring the covert boy–glances, and headed towards the playground. Her friends were still seated on the swings, idly dragging their feet through the turf.

Noting her approach, Debbie called her name and raised a hand in greeting. Jessica waved back, careful to retain her grip on the wayward skirt.
There was a low chain–link fence dividing the oval from the playground. The opening was on the far side of the park, and Jessie had no intention of walking half a mile to use it.

"Hi," Lisa called from the swings, "didn't think you were coming."

"I got out late today," Jessie replied, setting a hand on the fence–rail. The back of her frock filled up like a sail as she climbed over, although she managed to preserve her modesty by clamping down on her drifting hemline. Quite a trick, considering how short the dress was. Had to be careful; these wintry updraughts loved to catch you unawares.

Clearing the fence, she walked over to the swings and took her place between her two friends. All three began swinging in unison, gradually increasing their velocity. Overhead, the endless blue sky seemed to revolve above them.

"Late?" Debbie asked doubtfully, "you in dutch with your teacher?"

"No, we had dance practice after school." Jessie straightened her legs, pointing her feet towards the sky. Her dress began a steady hike along her thighs, inching its way up to her panties.

"You take DANCE CLASS?" Lisa asked incredulously, as if this was some momentous revelation. She looked genuinely thunderstruck, as if someone had told her that the tooth fairy wasn't real.

"Yeah, every Thursday afternoon," Jessie replied, arching her back for greater height, "my Aunt Cathy says I have to go. Says it's important." Another inch, two. A rush of air slipped around her thighs, lightly flickering her hemline

"Why?" Lisa, again.

"She says *all* girls need to know how to dance," Jessie shrugged. She swung faster now, long blond pony tail trailing out behind. The dress had crept up nearly three inches, making her bare legs look impossibly long and slender.

"So, what are you learning?" Debbie wanted to know.

"A lot of things," Jessie answered, "tap, ballroom, modern jazz." Her skirt slid one final, teasing inch to the top of her thighs. The hem was now quivering at the very edge of her panties. Jessie glanced down, feeling the wind gathering strength at the tip of her underpants.

"What about ballet?" Lisa inquired, eyes still goggling with disbelief.

"Well...not so much now," Jess replied offhand, "I did ballet when I was little, before we moved to Ridgewick." The edge of her hem began to rise, just the barest fluttering of pink cotton. The suspense was unbearable: her underwear was about to go on display. The dress was going to blow up around her hips, everyone in the park was going to see her panties. It was unavoidable, inescapable.

"Hey, do you have to wear a leotard or anything?" Debbie enquired, showing an unexpected interest in all things girly.

"Sometimes. But usually, we just practice in whatever we're wearing," Jessie explained, soaring ever higher. Her tummy seemed to be swarming with butterflies, her heart pounded in her chest like a triphammer. The lining of her dress flickered once, twice, settled – then flickered again. The capricious Autumn winds played around her thighs, chasing their way up with icy, tickling fingers. She clung to the swing–chains with both hands, moving way too fast to let go and hold her dress down.

"Do you have to put on a show?" Debbie asked. Jessie gave a start, almost nipping her

tongue despite herself.

"At the end of the year, maybe," she affirmed, wheeling off into the wild blue yonder, "we have a school concert around Christmas." A cold thrill ran the length of Jessie's spine: her skirt was dancing a fraction of an inch above her thighs, but the lace trim of her panties remained just out of sight.

"We're having a school concert in SEPTEMBER," Lisa cut in, running off at the mouth like a country housewife, "DEBBIE'S going to be in it, she'll be doing this ROUTINE with her GYM CLUB – you know she does GYMNASTICS, don't you Jess?" She looked over at her friend, eyebrows raised expectantly.



Jessie opened her mouth to answer – and the front of her dress ballooned up like a huge pink bubble. A frigid gust of air blasted up her thighs, inflating her skirt and chilling her belly. So abrupt, so unexpected, so breathtakingly cold. Jessie gasped with shock, watching the dress bulge and ripple literally right before her eyes. The hem flew up past her waist, offering the world a heart–stopping view of her silky white underpants.

Vaguely aware that Lisa was still prattling on about the school concert, Jessica streaked forward on the swing, her panties fully visible clear up to her belly button. The breath caught at the back of Jessie's throat, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. This had never happened before, not in all the months she'd been hanging out here with her friends. Her eyes bulged in shock as the bubble continued to swell.

Stifling a little scream, Jessie began kicking her legs in a vain attempt to deflect the breeze. Needless to say, her plan immediately backfired, revealing more of her virginal white panties to the world. Lisa and Debbie started laughing as her frock inflated towards the heavens. They both loved Jessie to pieces, but it was utterly hilarious, nonetheless. This was why they always wore jeans to the playground!

Blood roaring in her ears, Jessica swung in a great, looping arc, biting her lip to hold back her screams. The wind was still picking up, threatening to peel her dress off completely. Her mind's eye magnified the spectacle as only a child's imagination can: she could almost see the floral pattern sewn into the front of her snowy white undies, glimmering in the afternoon sun. It seemed to go on forever, the moment spinning out to eternity –

Then the bubble finally popped.

Jessie's billowing dress collapsed in on itself, the front turning inside–out for good measure. The wind pasted the skirt against her torso, leaving her panties completely uncovered. Hair flailing in the gale, Jess fought an impulse to lower her hemline to a more demure position. She felt as if everybody in Ridgewick was staring at her underwear.

Still giggling at Jessie's discomfort, Lisa turned her feet towards the ground and allowed

herself to decellarate. Debbie followed after a few moments, matching her speed with the ease of long practice. The two girls leapt gracefully off the swings, touching earth in perfect synchronicity. They turned back to look at their pretty blond playmate, still struggling to conceal her shimmering nylon briefs. All three had lapsed into good natured laughter.

Jessica stepped down from her swing, primly adjusting her dress. Her hands shook imperceptibly as she smoothed out the rumpled fabric. She felt dizzy, short of breath; a faint crimson blush tinted her face, neck and shoulders. She'd never shown so much panty in her life. Nothing more than a flash of lace around the bottom, even on the windiest days. Today, every inch of her chaste white knickers had gone on exhibit. Every stitch, every lace, every frill, right down the little red tag on the waistband. *Nothing* had been left to the imagination.

Having laughed herself breathless, Debbie began looking round for some other way to humiliate her best friend. The perfect opportunity presented itself almost immediately.

"Wanna climb the monkey bars?" she asked, indicating the jungle gym.

"OK," Lisa agreed, gleefully imagining her companion hanging upside down with her dress over her head. "You in, Jess?" she enquired in an overly casual tone, carefully calculated to drive the point home.

"No!" Jessica almost wailed, knowing precisely what her friends had in mind. Her hands flew protectively to the front of her dress as the wind threatened to whip it up in her face. All three burst into sweet, tinkling laughter once again.

"Come on," Debbie teased, tilting her head in a vaguely challenging manner, "it'll be fun. I'll race you to the top."

Jessie shook her head in girlish refusal, her cheeks still burning like an Arizona sunrise. At this point, they couldn't have paid her to climb up there, not after that panty–flashing fiasco on the swings. Why hadn't she worn shorts under her dress, same as every other girl on the planet?

"You're just afraid the boys will see your *underpants!"* Lisa jeered with a kind of sugar–coated malice. Jessie's complexion flared even brighter.

"Am not."

"Are too!"

"Am not!"

"Are TOO!!"

"Am NOT!!"

"Are TOO are TOO are TOO!!!"

The last exchange settled the matter for all time, being the feminine equivalent of the infamous triple–dog–dare. Jessie had no choice now, she had to climb the jungle gym and prove she *wasn't* afraid to let every boy in Ridgewick see her panties.

PART TWO
DEBBIE

3.

"Last one up has to kiss a pig!" Lisa yelled before Jess could find an excuse to back out. Squealing with laughter, the girls bolted over to the bars and clambered up the rungs in a tangle of hands, feet and elbows. Debbie claimed the first place by virtue of her superior athletic

abilities, Lisa and Jessie tying in second.

Once at the top, the three perched together gazing out across O'Connell Park towards the centre of town. As young children, the monkey bars had seemed infinitely tall and steep, a vast, looming monolith overlooking half the planet. Nowadays, the view was considerably less impressive, encompassing only three or four states.

"Know who I saw holding hands with Suzy Chatterson?" Debbie asked, apropos of nothing in particular. Lisa cocked her head to one side, face lighting up at the prospect of some juicy, small–town gossip.

"Who?"

"Bobby Hilliard," Debbie replied nonchalantly. Lisa's eyes shot wide with astonishment, occupying roughly a third of her face.

"Bobby HILLIARD? But he's in the *seventh* grade!!"

"Yep. Saw them walking home together from the library yesterday," Debbie reported with an air of quiet satisfaction, "held hands all the way down Ridgewick Drive. You know Bobby Hilliard, Jessie?"

Jessica nodded her head, already zoning out. Her hands fumbled with the hem of her dress, which she knew was going to ride up around her panties at the earliest opportunity. It was one of those immutable laws of nature: a little girl's skirt rose in direct proportion to the proximity of her underwear. Her recent adventure on the swings had proven that.

"I can't BELIEVE Suzy's got a boyfriend in the seventh," Lisa rattled on, oblivious of everything apart from her own opinions, "I mean, he's like THIRTEEN and she's OUR age!!" Presumably, the relationship violated every known law of physics.

Jessie wasn't really listening, she was too busy replaying her recent adventure on the swings. Her dress had turned into a balloon, revealing everything she had on underneath: her lean, tanned thighs, her dainty white underpants, her pouty little belly–button. How would she ever live it down?

"Well, the way I heard it, Bobby is Suzy's second cousin or something," Debra was saying, electing to play devil's advocate, "so maybe they aren't actually going together..."

"Oh…*yeah* – second cousin," Jessie nodded indifferently. She was having a great deal of trouble following the conversation; all she could think about was the way her dress had flown up over her waist a few minutes before. Worse still, she knew how this conversation was going to end. Sooner or later, Debbie would grow tired of Lisa's inane chatter. She'd get fidgety, grow restless, look for something else to do.

And here they were, sitting on the monkey bars.

"Yeah, but why was he holding her hand?" Lisa steamrollered on, "I mean, it's not like she's five years old or anything…"

Jessie completely lost the thread after that point, she had more important things to consider. Yes, here they were, sitting on the jungle gym, and Debbie was already looking bored with her friend's mindless drivel. Any second now, she'd lock her knees around one of the bars and swing herself upside down. Lisa would follow almost immediately, still jabbering nonsense. The two of them would hang there with their ponytails trailing towards the ground –

and then it would be *her* turn.

Jessie's features flared the color of a ripe raspberry. It was going to happen again. She had no choice in the matter: just like on the swing, there was nothing she could do to protect her modesty. Her pretty white panties were going on view once more: in a matter of moments, she

would have to drop between the bars, dangling by her knees six feet above the grass. Her dress would turn inside out, drooping gradually over her head. Jessica's pulse accelerated, a wave of sultry heat swept through her tummy.

Meantime, the Bobby Hilliard controversy raged on.

"There's nothing wrong with them holding hands as long as they're just friends" Debbie pointed out in condescending tones, "it's not like they were caught kissing under the bridge." She glanced in Jessie's direction, rolling her eyes with a dismissive shake of her head – another tell–tale sign she was losing interest in the discussion.

Jessica lowered her gaze, trying to suppress a stream of nervous giggles welling up from her tummy. She couldn't help herself; Debs was getting ready to launch herself through the rungs. Jess could see it in her face; she was considering the action at that very second. There would be no last minute reprieve, no evading her just deserts. Jessie's fate was sealed. Her flimsy white panties were going on display whether she liked it or not. Why had Debbie opted for the monkey bars anyway? The playground was full of slides, round–abouts and teeter–toters. There was even a large wooden fortress – Fort O'Connell, scene of countless Indian raids and massacres – over by the Big Dipper. Plenty of girl–friendly equipment which didn't require the lifting of her skirt.

"Yeah, well, I just think he should hang out with someone his own age," Lisa opined in the background, "he wears black socks with white shoes. You know what THAT means."

"… what's *that* got to do with anything?" Debra inquired after a pause. She straightened up and began swinging her feet back and forth beneath her.

Jessica's heart leapt into her throat.

Debs was preparing to go head over tail, she recognized the signals. Jessie cupped a hand over her mouth to conceal her rising trepidation. She felt warm and feverish, molten silver seemed to be pumping through her veins. The moment was fast approaching. Light–headed with expectation, Jess waited for her *exposé* to begin. Again, the suspense was almost unendurable.

By this time, Debra was practically yawning in Lisa's face, the conversation was going nowhere. Stretching her arms high over her head, she turned and looked over at Fort O'Connell, her gaze settling thoughtfully on the Big Dipper.

And Jessie saw a faint ray of hope:

Debbie wanted to play on the slippery–slide!

It was almost too good to be true. Her friend was going to climb down off the bars and trot over to the other side of the playground. Jessie's modesty was safe; there would be no unveiling of the panties, no free show for the teeming masses. Smoothing her hair back with a trembling hand, Jessie exhaled a sigh of pure relief. Abject humiliation had been averted by inches. Nothing could have been more embarrassing than parading her undies before half the town.

Strangely enough, she couldn't help feeling just a *little* disappointed. She had resigned herself to having her underpants shown off in all their alabaster glory, had actually been looking forward to it in the same hesitant, giggly way a little girl looks forward to being tickled against her will. There was a kind of reluctant delight involved in having your unmentionables placed on public exhibition.

Well, what's done is done, as Aunt Cathy often said. The decision had been made. Jessie started to relax, allowing her galloping pulse–rate to return to its normal tempo.

Then it happened.

Upfolding her legs without a word, Debbie leaned backwards and hooked her knees over a cross–bar. Slipping lightly through the grid, she swung herself upside down, holding her cap in

place with one hand. She glanced up towards her friends, wordlessly inviting them to join her under the scaffold.

(oh *NO!!)*

A bolt of panic shot up Jessie's spine. How was she going to get out of this?! Lisa was already shifting herself into position, preparing to pitch over the side. It was all so unjust: both her friends were wearing jeans. No one was going to see their underwear. Jessie had a sudden vision of her fresh white panties, sweet and innocent and painfully feminine. It just wasn't *fair!*

Face blazing maraschino red, she looked out across the oval, where the football guys were still chasing the ball about the field. On the surface at least, the coast looked clear. Trouble was, Jessie knew it was a trick; they were all biding their time, waiting for the penny to drop. Every last one of them!

What was she going to do? Her dress was too short to tuck into the legs of her panties (which was what she normally did) too light to stay up of its own accord. What on Earth had she been thinking, wearing this thin, gossamer remnant to the playground when she knew they'd be playing on the monkey bars? Why hadn't she worn one of her tight denim skirts? She only had about a hundred of them. She could even have worn tights, it was certainly cold enough this late in the year.

Of course, that was all beside the point now; Jessie was swiftly running out of options. Lisa had just eased herself down through the rungs. In a few seconds, she'd be expected to follow, brief cotton sunfrock or no. She had no excuse, no way to explain her dubious behavior. It was a classic no–win situation. She really had no other choice.

No other choice at *all.*

4.

Swallowing a deep, calming breath, Jessie hooked her knees over a bar and slung down between her two friends. Her dress fell away almost immediately, flipping inside out and revealing her thighs and belly, all the way up to her tummy button. She swung back and forth with her virginal white panties flashing brightly in the late October sunshine, a rich carmine hue darkening her features.

The girls hung together in a gently undulating row, their long hair streaming toward the turf. Three little bats in a belfry, quiet as church mice. Jessie's dress was creeping inexorably toward the ground, inverting gradually over her neck and shoulders. Her heart skipped a beat; several, in fact: she was presenting far more panty to the world than she had on the swing.

A brief lull in the conversation ensued. A cool breeze whipped through the park, whispering through the trees like an Autumn wave. Jessie shivered momentarily, feeling a delicious rush of gooseflesh cover her belly. Her dress had slipped down so far it was practically dropping off her body. Her smooth, ivory torso was on open exhibition, all the way down to her smooth white chest.

"That dress is about to fall *off,"* Debbie suddenly warned, tugging gently on Jessie's skirtline, "then you'll have to walk home in your underwear."

"No, I won't," Jessie replied indifferently, although the idea made her pulse hurtle into overdrive, "if it falls off, I'll just put it straight back on."

"If it falls off, those *boys* will come over and throw it up in a tree," Debbie said, gesturing towards the oval.

"No, they won't," Jessie answered, "I'd be down off here so fast, they wouldn't get the chance."

Her dress was now hanging completely over her face. She held the hem out of the way with her right hand, fighting a losing battle against both gravity and centrifugal force.

"Bet you they *would,"* Debbie challenged. A mischievous smile touched her lips.

"Bet you they *wouldn't,"* Jess answered.

"Would!"

"Wouldn't!"

"WOULD!!"

"WOULDN'T!!"

"OK, then – let's see."

Moving faster than Jessie could react, Debra took hold of her dress and yanked it down with both hands. Holding on by no more than a promise in the first place, the frock peeled off without the slightest resistance. Jessie's eyes widened to the size of dinner plates, she gaped in open–mouthed shock. Her dress had vanished like a soap bubble, leaving her hanging upside down in nothing but her socks and panties.

Her lacy, *white* panties.

Jessica shrieked at the top of her lungs.

PART THREE
ROBBIE

5.

Looking back on the afternoon's events, Jessie decided that the worst part *hadn't* been the betrayal. Not really.

It hadn't been the shock, or the fear or the vast, gaping bewilderment.

It hadn't even been the Walk of Shame (although that *had* been pretty damned awful, truth be told).

It had been the *silence.*

The silence in the woods. The wind in the leaves. The whisper of the grass. The faint echo of traffic crossing Lethbridge Canal. The tense, nail-biting quiet that seemed to descend over Queens Domain as the day wound down.

How had this *happened* to her?

Jessie replayed the scene over and over again, trying to make sense of her predicament.

Debbie had sprinted towards the nearby trees trailing the sunfrock behind her. Jess had hit the ground running, knowing *precisely* what was about to happen. Debs was going to make good on her promise, she was going to hurl the dress up into the branches, leaving Jessie in nothing but her bare knickers. It would hang there just out of reach, fluttering in the breeze while she performed an impromptu lingerie parade for half the town. Worse still –

The football guys would see *everything!*

Jess had immediately broken off the pursuit, falling back to the treeline before anyone could cop a good look. Concealing herself amidst the thickening underbrush, she'd peered out

towards the playground, desperately hoping that this was all just a joke, that Debs would return to hand over her last shred of decency and they'd all have a good laugh about this abject humiliation. A real kidder was ol' Debbie Parker, no doubt about *that,* folks; she'd be comin' 'round the mountain when she comes. Any minute now. For *sure.*

Only Good Ol' Debs *hadn't* come round the mountain with her dress in tow. Neither had Lisa for that matter. One minute had turned to two, then two to five, then five to...what? Fifteen? Twenty? As the sun crossed the yard-arm, Jessie had started to suspect her friends had left her alone out here, taken off for greener pastures to celebrate their victory over Ridgewick's resident knicker-flasher. She could almost hear their silvery laughter tinkling through the wilderlands – soft, fading, gone.

How could this have happened? They were her *friends,* for cryin' out loud, boon companions she'd come to view as surrogate siblings. Girls she'd trusted with her deepest secrets (well, *most* of them, anyway). They couldn't have simply abandoned her in the woods like Snow White in the forest. They must've left the frock somewhere she would find it – maybe out in the open so she'd have to risk getting caught in her panties, sure – but they wouldn't have tossed her aside with nary a stitch to hide her shame.

Would they?

It must have been around four-thirty when the football guys started to disperse. Jess saw them drifting out of the oval in murmuring clumps; lean, stumbling scarecrows in the fading afternoon light. She knew a few of them by name – Richard Spaulding for one, Robbie McEwan for another – but didn't dare reach out for assistance. She could already hear the questions, the mockery, the derisive, cackling laughter that would ensue.

The minutes trickled past. Twenty five. Thirty. Thirty-five. Forty. Still no sign of Debbie and Lisa. Aunt Cathy was probably back from work, wondering where her errant girlie-niece had vanished this fine October Friday. Jessie bit her lip, noting that the park was finally empty. She had to move, lope back to the playground, find her dress before anything *else* could go wrong.

She emerged near the cypress stand, shivering in the sharp Autumn mistral. Her long, golden ponytail blew out in thin, blonde streamers as she hugged herself against the cold. It was getting late, she couldn't wait any longer. She'd freeze to death if she didn't get indoors soon.

Padding down the trail in her liquid satin underpants, she conducted a quick search of her immediate surroundings. The swings, the fort, the monkey bars. No sign of her friends, no sign of her clothing. No sign of anything.

Damn it!

Where to look now?

The pines. Debbie had been making for the pines when she'd scampered off with the frock. It *had* to be there, laid out over a bench within easy reach (or so she prayed). Listening for the sound of approaching footsteps – none so far, thank heavens – she glanced about and retraced her mad plunge through the overgrowth, watching carefully for the slightest hint of pink. Debs might have tossed it anywhere, and Jessica couldn't afford to miss a single detail.

She arrived at the windbreak at the north end of the park, the trail markers lost in the foliage far behind. This was the final stop on the line, the literal clearing at the end of the path. Wrong way, turn back, go no further. She turned slowly about in a full three-sixty, pine needles crunching underfoot as she scanned the green depths. Nothing. Nothing at all. Just verdant archways receding back to infinity.

And silence, of course. The silence of the woods.

Then: raising her eyes, she saw *exactly* what she was looking for.

6.

Jessie hovered at the edge of the grove, staring up at the sheer cotton sun dress. The flimsy remnant billowed gaily amongst the branches some fifty feet up. She saw at a glance that it was way beyond her reach; there were no foot-holds on the trunk and absolutely nothing she could grab onto for the first ten feet or so. The frock was *trapped* up there amongst the evergreens, she was *trapped* down here in her skimpy little knickers.

Jessie was struck speechless for maybe a full minute, gooseflesh zithering across her neck and shoulders as she pondered the full extent of her situation. There seemed to be no solution, no escape route, no evading the inevitable.

Lisa and Debbie – her friends, her *best* friends – had left her like this. Not just a prank. A *setup.* Like one of those gags in a high school comedy, the kind where the girl ends up going viral on Youtube, her name doxed in the comments.

"No," she whispered under her breath, *"no, no, no, no, no!"*

How was she going to get home? She couldn't walk through the center of town in nothing but her gleaming white panties. What if someone saw her (or worse yet, *recognized* her)? She'd never live it down, particularly if word got 'round that she wasn't *exactly* a girl.

What am I going to do now? she thought, glancing furtively around the glade, flinchingly aware of her lithe, pale thighs, her slim, ivory waist. Everything she had was on clear display to every passing stranger. It was late in the afternoon, almost early evening, and she *had* to be back in her room before 6.00 pm. That was the rule; she couldn't afford to wait any longer. The very idea of explaining all this to Aunt Cathy set her pulse racing even faster. She had no choice in the matter, no choice at all.

It was time to get moving.

7.

O'Connell Park stretched ahead of her like a battlefield. Wide open. Dotted with trees, yes, but not enough to make a difference. Most were scrawny saplings, ornamental things planted by the city with little plaques reading Donated in Memory of Harold Reeve, 1931–1995.

Thanks, Harold. Your tree sucks.

Jessie stuck to the shadows where she could, heart pounding every time a car rolled past on the nearby road. There were voices up ahead – laughter, the slap of flip-flops. She ducked behind a bench and waited, every inch of exposed skin prickling.

From her hiding place, she saw them: Mrs. Callaghan from the bakery, two little kids in tow, and then – because the gods of humiliation never slept – the town's vicar, Reverend Pearce, wandering by like something out of a cartoon, tossing breadcrumbs into the duck pond and humming a hymn.

Jessie didn't breathe, didn't blink. Her knees trembled, but she didn't move until they were out of sight.

Then she darted from tree to tree, low and fast, like something being hunted.

8.

By the time she hit Coronation Drive, Jessie's nerves were frayed raw.

Everything felt louder now – the cars, the dogs barking behind fences, the shouts of kids in backyards. She flattened herself behind a hedge and listened as a group of boys passed by on skateboards, their wheels rattling like gunfire.

One of them said something about getting slushies.

Jessie pressed her forehead against a smooth eucalyptus and thought about how easy it would be to just stay there. Maybe someone would find her. Maybe they'd throw a blanket over her and take her to a hospital. Maybe this was how girls turned into legends – The Phantom Panty-Flasher of Olde Ridgewick Towne.

She didn't cry, but tears were close. That hot pressure behind the eyes. That sticky, swollen feeling in the throat. Small torrents of rage and shame swept through her system in sensual waves, accompanied by some other emotion she couldn't quite identify.

And then a voice – strangely familiar, strangely cheerful – said:

"Uh...are you OK?" Jessie turned, and there *he* was.

Robbie McEwan.

Tall. Ginger. Irish. Wearing a football jersey with the St Patrick's logo stitched onto the breast pocket. One of the *lads* from the Rugby game she'd seen earlier. He stood on the footpath with his gym bag slung over his shoulder, staring quizzically at her through the hedgerow.

Jessie almost screamed, stepping deeper into the thicket to cover her nudity, then allowed herself to relax. Robbie McEwan didn't pose a threat to her (or anyone else for that matter). He had the kind of good nature that only came from being too big to ever be bullied and too nice to ever use it. Jessie blinked at him like he was a hallucination. He was craning his neck to get a better view, his expression one of blank curiosity.

"Don't come any closer."

Robbie took a half-step back, eyes widening in vague alarm.

"Are you… *okay?"* he repeated, his face now a mask of confusion.

"No. I am *not* okay."

He looked hesitantly around, wondering if he'd missed something obvious – like a runaway truck or a falling piano.

Jessie gestured to herself. "They took my clothes."

"Who did?"

"Lisa and Debbie. My so-called *friends.* It was a prank. Hilarious, right? Now I'm crawling through bushes like some weird streaker, and if one more person almost sees me, I'm throwing myself in front of the ice cream truck."

Robbie frowned. "Wait… so you're in your *underwear?"*

"Yes!" she stammered, blushing visibly all the way to the hairline. She twined her hands protectively in front of her girlie-pants, barely aware she was doing so.

"That's why you're, uh…hiding in the bushes?"

"Yes!" *OMG,* she thought, biting back down a scream, *can this day get any worse?*

"Oh." He blinked again. "I guess that *is* kind of bad."

She just stared at him.

Then: "Could you...could you lend me your jacket, please?"

"Huh?" Robbie asked, genuinely puzzled, then understood what she wanted (and why). His look of exaggerated surprise might have been comical under any other circumstances. "Oh! Yeah, sure."

He shrugged off his navy blue windcheater and handed it over.

"Didn't realize you were, y'know...in trouble."

She yanked it on. It was warm from his body, smelled like cologne and fabric softener, and hung down to the top of her thighs.

Finally. Something *resembling* decency.

She exhaled. "Thanks."

"You want me to walk you home?"

"No," she started to say – then saw a car pull into a nearby driveway, and changed course. "Actually. Yes. *Please.*

9.

They walked in silence for a while, crossing Lethbridge Canal to avoid the downtown area. The residential district was running on low pulse this evening. Curtains were sensibly drawn and station wagons sensibly parked. The sky was darkening in the west. *Has to be around five thirty,* Jessie thought forlornly, *What's Aunt Cathy gonna say?*

After a couple of blocks, Robbie started chatting about nothing in particular, waffling amiably along as if they'd been friends more than half their lives. Jessie let the words wash over her. It helped. A little. Eventually – and perhaps inevitably – he got round to asking her name.

"Jessie," she answered, "Jessie Taylor."

Robbie considered this for a few moments, as if solving The Riemann Hypothesis.

"You live up on Oakleigh Terrace, don't you?"

"Yeah." She kept her eyes fixed on the pavement.

"So, why'd your friends steal your –"

"I don't want to talk about *that,"* she cut him off sharply, surprised by the knife-edged tone of her own voice. She'd never spoken to anyone like that before, particularly not a Straight Winger.

Robbie nodded, unperturbed. "Fair enough."

"I'm sorry," Jess started, a little ashamed of herself. He'd been *very* nice to her, all things considered, and here she was, snapping at him like a salt water crocodile.

Robbie shrugged his reply; *hey, I get it, no big deal.* They continued along Merryland Avenue, watching the afternoon fade into twilight. There was a lull in their unspoken conversation, and somewhere between the pauses, Jessie decided that she liked him.

Maybe a lot.

They reached her house just as the street lamps began flickering in the gathering dusk. No car in the driveway, no light on over the porch. Good. Aunt Cathy wasn't home yet. Jessie stepped up to the front door, reached for her key –

and stopped.

"Oh no."

"What?"

"The keys are in my dress."

10.

Jessie stared up at the house, trembling on the brink of tears. She'd wondered if the day could get any worse, and apparently, here was her answer. *Damn* Debbie Parker and her practical jokes! *Damn* Lisa for running off with her! *Damn* her keys, *damn* the park, *damn* her dress and *damn* this whole STUPID day!!!

Robbie's hand touched her shoulder.

"You have a spare?"

"No. Not any more. I...lost it." *Damn damn damn!!!*

"Want me to break in?"

Jessie blinked. "What?"

"I mean, not like *break in* break in. I could climb the trellis and go through the upstairs window. It's how I used to sneak into my cousin's place when we were kids."

Jessie raised an eyebrow at this weirdly specific reference, then shrugged her assent. "All right. But if you fall and die, I am *not* explaining this to your folks." *Or to your cousin, for that matter.*

Robbie smiled, an easy, lop-sided grin that made her heart skip a beat. "Noted."

To his credit, Robbie scaled the trellis with practiced ease, disappearing into the second-story window with all the *panache* of an accomplished cat burglar. A minute later, the front door clicked open.

"Ta-da," he said with a bow.

Jessie stepped inside, the cool air of the hallway wrapping around her like a blessing.

She turned to Robbie, slipping out of his jacket, momentarily forgetting she was virtually naked underneath. "Here. Thanks. I really owe you, Robbie."

"No problem," he said, taking it. "Glad I could help."

Their fingers brushed, and his eyes glided down her lithe figure, taking in her girlish contours and supple thighs.

Jessie voiced a tiny gasp, crossing her hands in front of herself. What was she *doing,* standing before him in *nothing* but her *socks* and *panties?* Her head seemed to spin with a cocktail of conflicting emotions, not the least of which was exhilaration. After everything they'd been through, she supposed she owed him a little treat.

What was the old saying? *I'd pay a dollar for that!*

The thought almost had her giggling. Despite her overwhelming embarrassment, she suddenly found herself hoping he wouldn't leave...at least, not right away. Paradoxically, she would've felt...well, disappointed if he *hadn't* caught a glimpse of her knickers. They were *extremely* pretty, after all.

They both hesitated, not quite sure how to proceed. Jessie looked down at herself in an agony of indecision, wishing it wasn't so late in the day. She had a fleeting vision of herself, blushing beet-red while she modeled more of her underwear for him up in her room. The thought left her almost breathless with a kind of guilty excitement. Maybe she should invite him in; they could go upstairs before –

Jessie shook her head, dismissing the image from her mind's eye. It was nearly 6:00 pm, she couldn't go wandering off into Fantasyland (no matter how enticing the daydream happened to be). Stepping forward to meet his gaze, she chose her words carefully, knowing she had to

leave him with...what? An opening? Yes, that was it. An opening. At the very least.

"Look, I'd offer you milk and cookies or something, but my Aunt will go nuclear if she comes home and sees a strange boy in the house." *She'll probably ground me for life as it is*, she thought ruefully.

Robbie nodded, that lop-sided smile playing across his lips again. Jessica felt wild roses standing out on her cheeks and discovered she quite enjoyed the sensation. He was tall, he was funny, he was cute. *And* he'd seen her prim white *undies*.

I'd pay a dollar for that!

"OK, then." Robbie stepped down off the front porch, shouldering his gym bag to a more comfortable position. "I guess I'll see you around."

OMG I hope so, Jessie thought, almost fainting with anticipation.

He lingered for a second, then said, "Hey, we're playing Dunwell next weekend. You should come. Bring your friends – if you're still *talking* to them, I mean."

Jessie snickered in spite of herself. "Maybe I will."

She watched him walk down the driveway, the last of the Autumn sunlight catching the back of his sandy hair. When he reached the sidewalk, he turned and gave her a final wave. Jessie lifted her hand, feeling the polished floorboards under her bare feet, and waved back.

Then he was gone.

The door clicked shut behind her, and the house was suddenly, blessedly, quiet.

Did he know? Had he figured it out?

Questions for another day. Right now, she had to head upstairs and slip into something *less* comfortable. Blouse and jeanskirt, maybe a pair of those over-the-knee stockings Aunt Cathrine had bought her last week. How would you like to see me in *those,* Robbie? Wouldja pay a dollar for *that?* Jessie suddenly doubled over clutching her belly, fighting down the hysterical laughter that threatened to escape. It had been a long afternoon, and now that the danger had passed, it was time to indulge in some plain, old fashioned absurdity.

11.

At that exact moment, the landline rang loud enough to make her jump. Jessie trotted out to the living room, calculating it was probably Aunt Cathy, calling up from the store downtown. Late nights, stock-taking and inventory; it came with the territory. Jess lifted the receiver, carefully modulating her voice to sound as calm as possible.

"Taylor residence."

Needless to say, it *wasn't* Aunt Cathrine at all.

"You got home, then?" a high, warbling voice asked. "Hope you're not mad. It was only a joke!"

Jessica stared at the handset in near-astonishment. It was Debbie: Good Ol' Debbie Parker, best friend, boon companion and Purveyor of Harmless Pranks, no doubt calling from a payphone a few blocks over. She could hear the traffic in the background. She listened apprehensively, caught completely off guard for the second time that day. Before she could even *begin* to formulate a response, Lisa's voice cut in across the line:

"We figured you'd catch a ride or something. Was ROBBIE the one who helped you? We saw you two WALKING together..."

Did you now? Jess thought darkly. Apparently she *hadn't* been alone in the woods after all.

They must've followed her all the way from Coronation Drive. Slinking about in the background for more than half a mile, sneaking and spying and chuckling up their sleeves.

Debbie: "Sooo...you are mad?"

Jessie took a deep, calming breath, determined to keep her temper under control.

"You stole my dress and threw it up in a tree. I had to sneak through O'Connell Park in my underwear. How do you *think* I feel?"

There was a pause, then:

"OK, yeah. I – *we're* really sorry. You want to meet at the youth club tomorrow? You can tell us all about Robbie."

Jess rolled her eyes hard enough to hurt.

Unbelievable.

After all the torment they'd put her through, *that* was the only thing they could think about? She shook her head, imagining how the gossip-mill would be running overtime for the next six months. She'd never hear the end of it, not even if she packed her bags and relocated to Siberia.

"Debbie?"

"Yeah?"

"You owe me a new dress."



She hung up the phone and started towards the hallway, her plump, pantied bottom turning in outraged little circles. The *nerve* of those two! Not content with stripping her down to her *pants* in broad daylight, they now wanted to hear every sordid detail.

And oddly enough, she wanted to *share* every sordid detail.

She couldn't have put it into words, but somehow, she *needed* to talk, needed to laugh and cry and vent the complex emotions she'd experienced that day. And who'd understand better than her two closest friends – arch-traitors though they were?

Well, she could deal with them tomorrow. Right now, she had more pressing concerns.

Aunt Cathy still wasn't home yet, so she guessed it was all right to raid the pantry. Padding out to the kitchen, she opened the cupboard, pulled out a box of cookies, and poured herself a glass of milk. She could almost see him sitting across the table from her, rambling on about forward passes and differential penalties. All night long and into the dawn hours if she let him.

Next time. *Perhaps.*

Jessie sat at the kitchen table, dunked a cookie, and smiled to herself. Okay, yes – she'd been humiliated. Yes, she'd been hurt and frightened and defenseless. And yes, she'd probably have nightmares for weeks to come.

But if she were being honest?

She wouldn't mind running into Robbie McEwan again.

Maybe, just *maybe,* Debbie and Lisa had done her a favor. Either that, or the universe moves in mysterious ways.

Anyway…it wasn't the *worst* way a day could end.

"Southern Exposure," Kristy Leigh, 2025.
Images generated via AI.



Cynosure Illustrated Fiction.