



*Reluctant Press* presents:

# Our Girlfriend

Philippa Peters



ILLUSTRATIONS BY C. HAIGHT

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A 'HER TV' E-BOOK

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# Our Girl Friend

**By Philippa Peters**

## I. LATE NIGHT

The white convertible, its light portable roof raised, was parked in front of the Hyland house for a short time. At length, the door opened and a girl slid out quickly. There was a flash of white teeth. Mrs. Carpenter behind her curtain two houses away could see that. Suddenly, there was a disturbance after she left the car.

“Aw, come on, Karen,” a masculine voice floated across the sidewalk at the slim figure. The girl hesitated at the white gate; there was a flash of her smile again, the wave of a slim, bare arm, the toss of a dark mane of hair. Then she was gone.

The white gate creaked, the steps on the front porch echoed with the clicking of high heels, the screen door crashed and then there was silence once more on George Street. The silence was suddenly shattered by the roar from the Chevrolet convertible as it tooted off, leaving two deep rubber burns in the road for Mrs. Carpenter and the neighbors to complain to each other about the following day.

Inside the Hyland house, the girl known as Karen softly closed the outside door after her entry and waited to hear the lock click. On hearing it, she turned and took a few steps before stopping to slip off her high heels. The tightness of her long skirt had hampered her a little but soon she was free and able to wiggle her nylon-covered toes in the warm, soft broadloom.

She went as quickly as possible, her skirt making her walk with a pronounced feminine sashay, down the hallway, pausing only to heave a sigh as the house reverberated to the Chevy's takeoff. That would mean, she knew, a visit from Mother.

She switched on the table lamp on the dresser in her room. She lifted her skirts and sat down with a soft rustle on the cushioned stool in front of her mirror. She laid her dark red purse gently by the lamp but her red, woolen wrap was tossed to her bed.

There was a creak from a loose floorboard in the hallway. Karen sighed again, reached for her purse, her lucky charm bracelet jangling, and took out a tipped cigarette. She lit it, seeing her reflection clearly in the mirror.

All the dancing had left little lines of tiredness at the corners of her heavily made-up eyes. Even her false eyelashes could not disguise that. The little session with Brad in the car had taken the gloss from her dark-red lipstick, but enough remained to stain her cigarette.

The door to the bedroom opened quietly. An older woman, her gray hair twisted about pink curlers, shuffled into Karen's room.

Karen turned her head, tossing her mane of auburn hair back over her shoulders, bare but for the narrow red, silken straps that held up her long, red, dancing dress. "Come in, Mother," she murmured softly.

"Robert, is that you?" asked the woman uncertainly.

"Oh, Mother," pouted the girl known as Karen. "Who did you think it was?"

With that, she reached up and unpinned her auburn fall, removing it carefully and storing it softly on its wig block. As usual, her scalp felt very itchy. She grimaced at her reflection with the stocking net in place on the back of her hair, her earrings swinging wildly without the mass of hair to prevent it.

"Oh, Robert," said Mrs. Hyland. "You aren't dating that Eden boy again, are you?"

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## 2. THE NEW GIRL

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Robert Hyland was late for his first class the following day at Whitehurst High School. He was yawning even as he passed the late slip to Mr. Maxwell, his Social Studies teacher. As usual, very little attention was paid to the slim, dark-haired youth in the checked shirt, jeans and sneakers, the same outfit as many other juniors in school.

Not even Brad Eden, slumped in his desk and feigning tiredness while being ribbed by his friends about his night out, paid any attention to his classmate. He certainly did not notice the slight, enigmatic smile that flitted across Robert Hyland's face as he glanced in Brad's direction.

Robert Hyland—he hated the diminutive of his name—counted down the row until he came to the fifth desk. With no one sitting in front of him, he could concentrate on the lesson at hand; he was generally thought of as a 'brain.'

He'd hardly settled down and arranged his papers and pens, though, before there was a commotion starting near the door. Some of the guys near Robert stood up on their desks and began a high, shrill whistling. It could only mean one thing. A good-looking, new girl must have been assigned to the class.

It took Mr. Maxwell the usual ten minutes to get the place cooled down after the disturbance, during which time Robert easily caught up with the day's work outlined on the board. He heard a rude sound behind him and glanced up just as Max escorted the girl to the empty desk right in front of Robert.

"You can sit here, Miss Schmidt," the teacher said formally.

Now Robert could see why the boys had been whistling. He felt himself flushing and going hot as the blonde, blue-eyed girl eyed him warily at first and then smiled before she sat down. She was slim and beautifully proportioned, her red slacks and white, decorated blouse emphasizing her shapely, female figure.

Robert was feeling somewhat envious of this Karen when she suddenly spoke to him.

"Does anyone normally sit here?" the girl asked, half-turning to him as Max stalked away, berating the jocks and their girl friends to get back to work.

"N...no," said Robert, flustered as always whenever a girl spoke to him. Girls never spoke to him. They never noticed him.

She smiled again, a beautiful smile, and turned back to take out her notebook. She might have whispered, "Good," but Robert couldn't be absolutely sure what she said.

Ed Carpenter, a football player, reached over from the next row to offer her a pen. She gave him the same smile she had bestowed on Robert, and Robert felt suddenly jealous and betrayed. It was a rare feeling for him, and it took him back to elementary school and the girls who had kicked him out of their club even though he'd dressed in a pink party dress just like them and called himself by a girl's name.

He was finished with the class work and so had a lot of time to observe Miss Schmidt. He was so intent on her that he muffed both questions Mr. Maxwell asked him, another rare event for him.

Miss Schmidt wore no makeup and no adornments at all, just golden studs for pierced ears but no nail polish, without which Karen would never have gone out. Her features were feminine but not delicate, with wide-set eyes, clear skin, a bobbed, thin nose and a firm, determined chin. Her hair was shoulder-length, curled out and upwards at the ends and it bounced as she moved her head about. She smiled a lot, sometimes with a deprecating curve to her full lips, sometimes showing off her white teeth. She was awfully attractive, Robert thought, and she knew it, too.

Ed Carpenter tried to monopolize her after class, but she excused herself with a quick, "Got to go to the office," and with a bright smile, she was off, the boys ogling after her, some of the girls glowering. Robert smiled to himself as he considered which group of girls Karen might belong with.

With her gone from his next class, it was, strangely, as if the sun had suddenly gone behind a cloud for Robert. He moped through Math, missing several of Mr. Kuntz's trick questions, which made that irascible old man even angrier, if that was possible.

"Late night last night, Bobby boy?" jeered Pete Symons in the hallway after class. He was a neighbor but no friend of Robert's. He knew how much the slim, dark boy hated the shortening of his name.

Luckily, Brad Eden came along the hallway just then, strutting, chest out. He'd just cut Kuntz's class again. "Hey, guys!" he bellowed. "I got all the scoop on the new chick!" He leered at Pete Symons.

Robert found himself elbowed aside as Pete and the other guys crowded around Brad to tune in. *What does Karen see in you?* thought Robert, even though he probably knew the answer. Brad was not very bright and could be manipulated by his very obvious male desires. Karen never had to pay for her dates and Brad thought she was really understanding in letting him choose 'jock' movies for their mutual viewing, with free popcorn and munchies as well.

"Her name is Tina Schmidt," said Brad, his voice projecting down the whole hallway. "And her phone number will cost you five bucks!" He waved his little black book in the air. Robert was amused to see that Ed Carpenter actually reached for his back pocket before sheepishly beginning to wipe his hand on his jeans.

The talk rapidly degenerated into a bull session about Tina's various attributes and who would make it with her first. There was a cynical smile on Robert's face as he left the hallway for lunch. He heard Brad Eden presenting his claim to the new girl, amidst a chorus of snide remarks and catcalls. It did sound, however as if Karen was going to have to find someone else to take her out.

Robert headed outside quickly. With a new Ursula LeGuin paperback in his lunch pack, he hoped he could find a quiet spot among the trees where he could settle down to read through the lunch hour. With luck, Brad Eden's crowd would stay away and the woods, actually a few trees planted between the wire-fenced school perimeter and the football field, would be a quiet place today.

He was in luck. There was a couple necking in one corner, but the rest of the space was empty. He put his jacket down on the ground and was soon absorbed in the problems of the hermaphrodites of Karhide. It was only when a shadow fell across the page he was reading that he realized that the woods had filled up.

"Do you mind if I sit here with you?" asked a gentle, female voice. Looking up at a bright sun, Robert caught a glimpse of red slacks and then Tina Schmidt sat beside him and gave him one of her smiles.

"N-no," he stammered, thoughts of a world where all the people were of one sex disappearing from his mind.

"Thanks," said the girl, her mouth turning from a smile into a down turned grimace, followed by a sigh of relief. She glanced around quickly and began to shake her head. Robert glanced about, too. He flushed as he realized that many people were looking in his direction.

"If you don't mind me saying so," said Tina Schmidt in a low, almost bitter, tone, "you attend a really crummy high school."

Robert gulped. He would have agreed had the girl given him the chance but she was already going on without giving him the opportunity to reply.

"Isn't this place ever the pits?" she asked irritably, opening up her brown bag and taking out a sandwich. "The girls aren't very friendly and I've never seen so many dumb jocks

in one group of boys before." She bit into the salad sandwich and began to eat, eyeing him speculatively as she did so. "You sat behind me in my first class, didn't you?" she asked, the small frown showing off her thin, femininely shaped eyebrows.

Robert Hyland nodded. He hardly remembered ever being this close to a girl, not as Robert anyway, and as for talking to a girl, well, that was too far back to recall.

"What are you reading?" Tina asked suddenly, reaching for his book. Of course she'd read it, and almost everything else of Leguin's, and didn't find the premise of the book weird at all. She'd also read Frank Herbert and Tolkien, and so Robert Hyland soon found himself talking to her in animated fashion.

"How about yourself? Do you write at all?" Tina asked suddenly, her face set in a natural, interested smile.

Robert had never expected a question like that. So he was not on his guard. "W-well," he started, but his expression had already given him away. "J-just a little. F-for myself." He didn't dare to say that his stories were all about boys in dresses and the problems they encountered.

Tina, however, had finished her lunch. She carefully folded her paper bag and put it into her hip pocket. She stood up. "Time for class," she smiled, and, much to Robert's surprise, she was right. For once, the long, boring lunch hour had raced past, talking to her. He jumped to his feet. He walked back with her towards the large, brick institution.

"I take back some of what I said earlier," said Tina as they neared the main entrance.

"What's that?" asked Robert anxiously.

Tina flashed him a smile. "Not *everything* here is the pits," she giggled, reaching for his hand to give him a squeeze. On the main steps, Robert Hyland, his heart sinking, saw Brad Eden, Ed Carpenter, Joe Bodelli, Glen Comstock and a bunch of other football players glowering at him.

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### **3. A HARD DAY'S NIGHT**

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"Your father will be home tomorrow," said Mrs. Hyland to Karen as 'she' came into the kitchen for a quick drink of water before going out.

Karen's auburn hair covered her ears completely, falling in a mass halfway down her back. Her enormous, golden-band earrings barely peeped through the hair but Karen liked the feel of the tight clips and the soft hair together. She felt somehow more girlish when she moved her head and both sensations were present. Some day, perhaps, it would be her own, real hair styled like this. She leaned against the cupboard, watching her mother at work, sewing her husband's shirt buttons, and wondering if she would ever have to do that.

Karen shuddered, a little thrilled by such a thought. She wore a sleeveless, dark blue dress that was pleated from her narrow waist, the dress fitting very snugly to the tight waist-cinch she always used. She was wearing pantyhose tonight, dark, making her legs seem even more slender. She really preferred suspenders and stockings but Brad Eden, her date again, had wandering hands.

Karen had lately begun to find him more and more difficult to control. He was definitely the most difficult of all the boys she'd gone out with since junior high. He had tried to play with her stocking tops and her smooth thighs before, even through the tight skirts she usually wore. Now she had to forego the pleasure of stockings and a garter belt. She quivered with pleasure at the thought of seeing herself in pink, frilly panties and her new red and black silk garter belt and her black silk, short slip. A whisper of pleasure went through her at the thought.

"Is it Brad again tonight?" asked Mrs. Hyland, a vexed edge to her tone.

Karen sipped her cold glass with glossy, bright-red lips. With green eye shadow, two sets of thick eyelashes and foundation cream on her cheeks and neck, she could see nothing of Robert in the face that looked back at her from the mirror on back of the outer kitchen door. With her built-up front, her inserts soft and jelly-like, she doubted Brad would even think to question about Robert. He rarely did.

Besides, Karen was not a silent wallflower like so many girls at Whitehurst. There were many, some even prettier than Karen, who never went out. But, since that first exhilarating time when Karen had been walking in the garden, dressed in her first real dress, only to meet Martin Tyler who whistled at her and persuaded a frightened, trembling junior high 'girl' to go for an ice cream with him, she'd resolved, despite many frightening scares, to act and be seen for some of the time at least as she truly was, inside.

"Why don't you find a nice girl to go out with?" whined Mrs. Hyland, returning to an old, familiar theme. "There must be at least one nice girl in that whole great big high school you go to."

"Perhaps there is," murmured Karen dryly, her voice pitched at the high level she had practiced so arduously after school for years. *But then we'd be fighting over who was going to wear the panties and bra tonight*, she thought. She suddenly thought of Tina and felt a twinge at her groin and in the tightness of her lace bra. What would she do if she did meet Tina at the Squirrel Hut, the local joint where Brad and his friends hung out and where he was likely taking Karen that night?

A car horn blared, and an engine revved loudly. Karen picked up her black, nylon-weave purse. She put her red-tipped glass in the dishwasher. "I won't be too late," she said huskily to her mother.

"Don't be," said Mrs. Hyland urgently. "Remember that your father will be home tomorrow."

Karen waved a gleaming set of false, scarlet-painted fingernails at her mother as she did her imitation of a swaying, feminine walk along the hallway. She was completely in character by the time she reached the Chevy.



"Brad, darling," she breathed as she slid onto the car seat. Brad Eden reached over to put his arm about her waist. He kissed her lightly on the cheek and she did the same to him, leaving her mark. He smiled and hugged as he drove, knowing he'd get no more kisses for a while as she wouldn't let her makeup be mussed up, not yet anyway.

He still had his father's convertible. The top was closed up because Karen wouldn't have ridden in it any other way. She snuggled up to him, letting him get a chance to smell her delicious new Opium perfume.

"Gee, you smell good," he said predictably on cue. "You look good, sound good, feel good." He gave her an extra squeeze at that one. "How about taste?"

She gave him a gentle punch. "You may find out later," she smiled at him while her nerves jangled. She felt so alive but so on edge as she flirted with a male, trying so hard to be light and girlish.

"The Squirrel Hut?" she asked, a touch of disappointment in her voice as Brad turned onto the familiar route.

"You don't like it?" Brad asked, instantly defensive.

Karen cuddled up closer to him, letting her soft, auburn hair tantalize his cheek. "We don't seem to go anywhere else these days," she said lightly. "Couldn't we make it to a movie some time?"

"Well..." A gleam came into Brad's almost black eyes. "There's a late show at the drive-in on Yorkton..."

The playful punch Karen gave him on the arm was to hurt Brad for several days, though he was not to admit it, even to his closest friends. It was a small price to pay for the near-opportunity of getting Karen to go somewhere where they could really make out. Perhaps she would weaken a little more if he kept it up. The downtown Coronet and movie houses like that were all right for necking, and Karen was one of the best kissers he'd ever gone out with, but when Brad heard Ed's tales about the back seat of his car at the drive-in, he just knew he had to get some girl, probably Karen, to take his virginity, and soon.

Brad held the door as usual for Karen to precede him into The Squirrel Hut. The little front room was crowded with beer-drinking teenagers, most of whom were known to Karen. She had dated some, like Roger Bodelli, the football player's older brother, and Colin Jameson, who had come closest to making her surrender completely. She could still recall his soft, clinging kisses, which raised goose bumps all over her body.

She shuddered at the thought, feeling slightly sick as Colin winked at her. Her swinging dress and silky stockings felt suddenly alien like her waist cincher but then she saw girls that she knew, whom she had double-dated with and shared secrets with in the bathrooms of the Hut and the Coronet, and she was restored to herself, at home in the aroma of female perfume, bright lipstick smiles, and the seductive touches of silk and nylon on her hairless skin.

The jukebox was loud and blaring out heavy metal rock music, which everyone was shouting over. Brad steered Karen through the front room to the restaurant beyond, to the booths along the back wall where the football players congregated. Brad propelled her into

the furthest booth and the tight-knit group made room for them both, empty chairs appearing. And, suddenly, there was Tina Schmidt, an amused smile on her lips, evidently holding court as each boy there vied for her attention.

The two girls eyed one another, Karen trying desperately to convey curiosity similar to Tina's while inside she felt as sick as she had when Colin had winked at her. She fought against memories that Robert possessed. She wanted to be Karen at that moment more than she had ever wanted it before in her life.

"Well, hi ya, Karen!" boomed Ed Carpenter, flinging his arm about her. His eyes were half closed as if affected by drink, but it was a pose Karen had often seen him strike before.

"Drunk again, Eddie boy?" she cooed, winking one dark-lashed eyelid at him.

Carpenter was flummoxed for the moment. Then he guffawed and hugged Karen, giving her a wet kiss on the cheek.

Tina's blue eyes gave her a knowing and comradely look, one attractive girl to another knowing, attractive girl. Inside, Karen wanted to slink away. *What am I doing here?* she thought, her bra pulling tightly, her earrings tugging at her ears, her high heels lifting her feet. To be dressed as a girl in front of Tina... She could feel Robert squirming inside of her as she strove to be womanly to the girl Robert admired so much.

"Come and sit by me, Karen," said Tina, shifting along the bench as Joe Bodelli stood to get more beer. "I need someone intelligent to talk to."

Karen stood and moved without thinking more of it even as Brad protested and Ed pawed her. Joe took his due as well as she squeezed by him, his hand pinching her bottom, which only made everyone laugh as she squeaked and slid in quickly beside Tina.

"Oh, I wouldn't take that!" said Tina, the anger in her eyes making Karen quiver. Tina frowned as she looked at the auburn-haired girl beside her. "Haven't we met before?" she asked suddenly as Karen looked down, showing off the brown tones of her thick, but expertly applied makeup.

Karen quivered even more but was saved from a reply by Brad Eden. "This is Karen Hyland, Robert's cousin," he shouted across the table. "You know, the geek behind you in Social Studies."

Karen had heard it before and so it did not faze her but Tina looked quite angry. She leaned forward to say something but Brad took the opportunity to look down Tina's low-cut, white blouse. Karen flushed, embarrassed at her date's loutishness, but Tina only retreated, shaking her blonde hair in apparent amusement. *I have to get out of this crowd, get a new boy friend*, resolved Karen inwardly. It wasn't fun to be a girl like this.

Tina turned and whispered in her ear, "There is a family resemblance. Did Robert come with you?"

Ed Carpenter caught the name and gave out one of his fake bellows; being drunk lead him to think he could get away with any gross behavior. "Bobby Hyland?" he sneered. "What are you talking about that little faggot for? He don't dare come in here with real guys."

There was general laughter around the table while Karen felt the blood rush up and down her system and begin to pound at her temples. She glared in flushed, impotent rage at the laughing Ed Carpenter. It was Tina Schmidt who came to Robert Hyland's defense.

"Your drunken friend wouldn't know a real man if he saw one," she said cuttingly to the table. Carpenter opened his mouth in surprise and Brad Eden tried to interrupt. "A real man is considerate of other people's feelings. He doesn't knowingly insult anyone. Robert Hyland was even nice about the lush you all call a friend."

Carpenter's face was flushed with anger. He looked about ready to take a swing at Tina. "By any intelligent person's estimation," said Tina sweetly, "Robert Hyland is the only real man at Whitehurst High School."

"Why you..." Ed came unsteadily to his feet. It took both Brad Eden and Steve Bonham, the school's quarterback, to push him back into a chair. A string of foul-mouthed obscenities came from the irate junior.

"Why don't you show me the Ladies' Room?" asked Tina quickly to Karen. They picked up their purses and Karen followed Tina through the hostile group of boys. Ed would keep up the ruckus now that he was the center of attention she knew, at least until the bouncers came over and threw him out.

"Y-you d-didn't have to d-defend R-Robert quite so, so vigorously," Karen stammered as she eyed the image of a slender, auburn-haired girl and a slim, blonde girl side-by-side in the bathroom mirror, each replenishing their lipsticked mouths. Tina, unlike Karen, wore almost no makeup; her pink top hugged her figure, her denim mini-skirt showed off her bare, tanned legs. Karen felt way overdressed, a parody of femininity next to the real thing. She was clearly wearing too much makeup - her eyes were like coal pits - but it was her main disguise. She shivered as she realized that she was really Robert, in women's clothing down to his panties, standing beside this real girl, who thought he was a girl, too.

"Why not?" asked Tina, her small, pointed chin jutting out in determination. "Why didn't you speak up for him? You are cousins, aren't you?"

"Well," Karen began, quaking as she became aware of Tina's intense scrutiny of her, her makeup, even her dress, in the mirror.

"I do like your dress," said Tina abruptly with a little sigh. "When you walked in, I thought, wow, I wish I was as pretty as she is. I wish I could do my makeup like you. But your dress. It's from Eberhard's, isn't it?"

Karen nodded in uneasy astonishment. Tina actually seemed envious of her! But she was real, and Karen was who 'she' was. 'She' shivered.

"I meant what I said about Robert," said Tina as she opened her purse and took out eyeliner. She glanced at Karen and sighed, oblivious, it seemed, to the other girl's shaken state. "I wish I could do my eyes like you," she said, the envy clear in her tone. "Could you help me? I never get this quite right. I always end up looking like a kid of sixteen on her first date unless I get someone like you to help me."

Karen had never had to help another girl before with makeup. She swallowed hard, feeling distinctly odd, nearly beginning to speak in Robert's deeper tones. Tina was a will-

ing and able student, however, and soon, in her own opinion, she looked twice as attractive as normal. She was so focused on her own face that she didn't notice Karen's tension.

"We must do this again," Tina stated, excitement in her voice and manner as Karen picked up her purse and wobbled a little on her high heels to the door. "Let's get together soon and you can show me how to put on false eyelashes. They look great on you."

Karen was surprised when Tina slipped her arm through Karen's for the walk back to the boys' table. She didn't recall being held by a girl like that before as if she was a girl, too. It was nice but enervating for her, reminding her that she was not truly a girl. She shuddered inwardly as she looked at the leering boys' faces at the table to which they were headed.

"By the way," Tina was saying, "how about Robert? Why don't you fix me up with him for the weekend? We could double-date."

Karen was dumbfounded. "H-he doesn't go out much," she stammered.

Surprisingly, Tina nodded in understanding. "I can see why," she said scathingly as Brad Eden, a knowing smile on his face, rose to meet the freshly primped girls. "He wouldn't have much in common with these guys, would he?"

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## IV. HOME EARLY

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Tina Schmidt left long before Brad Eden was ready to take Karen home. He had to play at least five slow waltzes on the jukebox so that he could be seen smooching with her on the dance floor before he gave in to her protests that she had to work the next day.

"You girls were a long time powdering your noses," Brad said, his arm about his date as he drove along.

"Hmmm," murmured Karen. She was very tired, almost emotionally drained. Even the sight of her stockinged legs and high heel shoes did not feminize her feelings as they usually did. Normally, she could keep going long into the small hours.

"She's not going to try going out with Bobby-boy, is she?" asked Brad suddenly.

"Tina with Robert?" Karen's voice was croaky, even to herself but Brad didn't seem to notice.

"You'd better warn him that he shouldn't," said Brad Eden, stroking his girl's lovely, soft hair and trying to reach her bosom. "Ed Carpenter said he'd smash the little creep if he even looked at Tina." Brad shook his head. "Never seen anyone get such a fixation on a girl before that fast. Not on one who wouldn't even give him the time of day, anyway."

The Chevy coasted into its familiar parking place under the Hyland's cottonwood. Karen paid her dues for the evening lightly, keeping Brad's hands out of places he was de-

terminated to explore. Surprisingly, she felt very desirable and female as she left the car, Brad's ardent kisses still bruising her lips, his hands having run the length of her body as she slipped out of the car.

She let herself in quietly, stepping out of her heels as she usually did. She tiptoed up the old staircase, avoiding the creaks she knew were there. She must have satisfied Brad for once because she didn't hear the Chevy leave. Smiling to herself, she stepped across the hallway landing to her bedroom. Tonight would be her last in a nightdress for quite a while, she thought gloomily, for Robert's father would be home the next night.

Her slim hand, false nails glittering, reached for the doorknob to her room but the knob moved in her hand, drawing her into the dimly lit room with shocking abruptness.

It took Karen a moment to realize that the loud crack was the sound of Robert's father's hand slapping her forcefully across the face. Then the hurt began.

"Fairy! Drag queen! Pansy!" hissed Ollie Hyland's Southern-accented drawl. The hand whipped again against Karen's soft cheek, stinging and bruising. "If'n you really was a woman, you'd be a whore, a slut!"

Tears spurted through Robert Hyland's false eyelashes as his father's hand tore at his dress and then his bra. His dress hung on him in tatters as his father reined blows on his son's bewigged head, a torrent of abuses and obscenities flowing from his mouth. Robert retreated to the bed trying to protect his head and his earringed ears from his father's vicious blows but even more from his hurtful words.

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## V. NOT LIKE THE OTHERS

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"Whatever happened to you?" Tina Schmidt asked in alarm when she saw Robert Hyland's battered face two days after the weekend.

Robert's right eye was still swollen, though not tight shut, as it had been the night of his beating. Now, the discoloring bruise stretched from his forehead almost to his mouth. "I collect birds' eggs," he said with a weak smile. "I fell off a cliff."

"Oh, Robert." There seemed to be genuine sympathy in Tina's expression. "I thought some of these guys... you know..."

She turned back to the causes of the first South American Wars of Independence and the Monroe Doctrine as Mr. Maxwell demanded and mostly got the class' attention.

*How could I say it was my father?* he thought miserably, admiring the way Tina had used just a little eye makeup as Karen had taught her at the Hut. Well, he wouldn't be entering any girls' bathrooms again for a while, he thought, wishing he could be sitting there in a little minidress like Amy was wearing with his hair like Sarah's, able to hold Tina's hand in girl friendship as they giggled at the boys.

"Will you eat lunch with me today?" Tina asked quietly, as Max moved to the other side of the room. She turned and looked intently at his face, wincing involuntarily as she spoke. "I walked down by the river yesterday when you weren't here. It was pretty nice."

The bell rang and the class emptied fast. Robert could see Ed Carpenter standing by the classroom entrance, glowering in Tina's direction. *What the heck*, he thought recklessly, *I can't be beaten up any worse than I am now*.

"Sure," he said as Tina looked at him a little anxiously. "I'll meet you on the front steps after Math." He gave her an attempt at a smile and paid for it immediately with a spasm of pain that rippled up his right cheek, making his eyes water. She gave him a quick, sympathetic smile and nodded before whisking herself and her books away to her next class.

Ed Carpenter jabbed Robert in the back as he hurried by the big tackle on his way to Kuntz' class. "You stay away from my girl, you hear?" snarled the football player. The grip on Robert's arm was hard enough to bruise him even more. He barely nodded nervously when Mr. Eckstein, a science teacher, came bustling along the hallway and he was able to spin free from Ed.

Robert darted away to Math class and almost raced to his seat. Mr. Kuntz gave him a funny look and Robert remembered how his battered face must look. Ed came in, scowling in Robert's direction, and Pete Symons picked up on it. He turned around and laughed at Robert, causing Mr. Kuntz to promptly enlist Pete in the solution of the homework problems, none of which Pete, as usual, had done correctly.

Tina was waiting for Robert on the sandstone steps of Whitehurst's impressive, brick-lined archway that served as entry to the courtyard and main building of the school. She was talking casually to a pair of senior girls whom Robert knew well by sight and by reputation. When she saw him, Tina's pale, attractive face lit up with pleasure. Both senior girls turned to see the cause of such liveliness. Their faces showed clearly their surprise and confusion as they looked at Robert, with his battered face. He was a definite 'no-name' to them, certainly not a hunk or a face. Tina was amused by their reaction as Robert was.

"Ouch," Robert said, as Tina left the seniors immediately to slip her arm through his. "I just shouldn't smile today."

Tina gave him another sympathetic smile. "Was it very high?" she asked.

"What?" asked Robert, puzzled.

"The cliff," said Tina, an impish smile on her full lips. "The one you fell down."

"Oh that," said Robert. "No, not really. Ah, it was an old root sticking out that did the damage."

"Oh, Robert, Robert," said Tina, shaking her head as they strolled towards the bridge over the little river.

"What?" asked Robert nervously again.

"Robert," said Tina, stopping, turning to face him and then taking his forearms to hold him a little away from her. She stared at him intently, increasing his nervousness. "You aren't grazed or scraped at all. I didn't tell you, did I," her earnest blue eyes focused on his, "that I was a nursing aide last year? I've seen the result of enough fights to know a bruise

made by a fist when I see one." She cut off his beginning protest. "You didn't fight over me, did you?"

"No-o," said Robert quickly, shaking his head.

Tina hesitated and then laughed. "I don't know whether to be relieved or disappointed," she said.

Robert smiled and then winced with the pain.

"Are you going to this Founder's Day Dance?" asked Tina in a sudden change of topic.

"N-no," said Robert. One of the school's most important social events was something he considered out of his league. Tina waited as if expecting something from him.

"How about taking me?" she said at last, her beautiful mouth curving into a tempting smile. How he wished Karen could make that face, so winsomely feminine and appealing.

Robert flushed at his thoughts. He tried to think of the million reasons why he couldn't take her to a dance, all his previous embarrassments at dances and social events as Robert foremost in his mind.

"Y-yes," he said astounding himself as he spoke. "I-I'd love to take you."

Tina's beautiful face broke again into a blinding smile. "What about Karen, your cousin?" she asked, still holding his arms. "I really got along well with her the other night. Don't you think she's really gorgeous? Would she come to a school thing with us?"

Robert's reply was naturally incoherent for a moment. "I don't think she's planning to go," he mumbled at last, while Tina just smiled at the blush that crept up the unbruised part of his pale face.

"You ask her," Tina said, taking Robert's hand and leading him to the path that ran beneath the willows along the river's banks. "I'm just dieing to meet Karen again. She taught me how to do this to my eyes," she said with a laugh. "We're so close in size, I'm sure we could swap clothes, though I'm not sure Karen would like to wear mine." She touched his cheek gently as Robert thought of himself in Karen's pink blouse and that short skirt she wore at the Hut. He quivered which she thought was because of her touch. "Maybe she could do something to cover up that bruise."

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## VI. TROUBLE AT HOME

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"No son of mine's gonna wear a dress!" Ollie Hyland's voice boomed even more loudly than normally in the little bedroom. He tore through the black, silken shift that made Karen appear her thinnest and tossed it onto the pile of mangled rags and snippets of feminine finery on the bed. The guest bedroom looked like a disaster area... which it was for Karen.