

Midwestern Transformation

Chapter 1

Everything in this room was yellowing and curling up to die.

The room had the faint smell of old sweat and bad perfume. The old chairs had graffiti on them that must have dated back to the late 70's. There were cracks in the blackboard. There were so many layers of posters on the bulletin board the cork wouldn't have felt a bullet.

When Allen had said we'd be at one of the Akron Y's I had thought the YMCA off of Balch Street. I had no idea where in Akron we were, and I didn't want to stay here too long.

I started thinking about Mom. She had refused to go to her Pilates class on Tuesdays because they had switched to the community center instead of the country club. She threw a fit about having to look at people who... well weren't us.

I hadn't told her about getting infected.

I sure as hell wouldn't have told her I was coming here.

"You need a minute Tom?" Allen was still hovering in the doorway. He was dressed in a casual suit that made him look like he had stepped out of the pages of GQ. That wasn't unusual. Allen looked better hovering in a YMCA than I did at a wedding reception.

I glared back at him.

"All right," Allen said. His born and raised Alabama dialect was only noticeable when he was nervous, and it was coming on like gangbusters now. "I'll be back."

I shrugged and managed to aggravate my arm. It still stung like hell where Allen had bit me. The fresh bandage was already speckled on the surface with the slow seep of fresh blood.

I had been glad that Allen was my friend. He was one of the few things that made me look forward to my shift at work.

And now...

If it wasn't for him, I would have never known meetings like this existed. I'd have to live with this... condition for the rest of my life.

Allen and I worked in side by side cubicles at a fairly nice call center, fielding orders from some of the dumbest people on the planet. There were some days that the only thing keeping me from walking out the door was having Allen sitting next to me.

It was getting hard to remember that.

I glanced around, fighting the urge to sit down. If I sat down, then that meant I was staying for the meeting. And if I was staying for the meeting, then I really was... what I was.

No, I wasn't going to sit down.

I absently used my fingernail to chip at a black smudge on a chair seat, the imprint of a thousand sweaty asses. It looked like no one had taken a rag to the furniture since the Nixon administration.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe there was a cure that I hadn't heard about yet. In the old time movies, this... stuff was always curable.

"Here for the meeting?" asked a strange voice.

The guy standing in the doorway was a modern day greaser, complete with the hair. Off of his skinny body hung an old motorcycle jacket, a weathered black t-shirt with the fading logo of an old rockabilly band and a pair of black jeans that had seen better days. His fingers were badly stained yellow with nicotine, but his teeth were worse. There seemed to be a thousand of them, all the color of yellow construction paper.

"What?" I asked, before realizing what he was talking about. "Oh, that. Yeah, you're in the right place."

The stranger swaggered in and came to a stop a few, threatening paces away from where I was standing. He looked me over with a careful eye of one predator sizing up something that's wandered into his territory. He wasn't much taller than I was, but he was making every inch he had on me count.

"Are you people always this suspicious of the fresh meat?" I asked, starting to feel uncomfortable.

He inhaled a sharp breath through his clenched teeth. "That's one bad word choice around here, pup."

"Oh, hell. Eddie. Solomon said you weren't coming tonight!" Allen said. He was holding two cans of pop, still sweating from the machine out in the lobby.

The new guy, Eddie, grinned with all of his yellow teeth. "I knew you were avoiding me, you little runt."

"You mean it finally sunk into your thick head?"

"I'd rather have a thick head than a fat one like yours."

"Go fuck yourself."

"Gladly. But first," the new guy said, grabbing hold of my head, "Introductions."

Allen rolled his eyes, and gave a world-weary sigh. "Tom, this is our Eddie."

"Not just any Eddie, mind." Eddie interrupted with a hint of pride.

"That's because once you meet him, the name loses any and all positive meaning." Allen explained, as he extended one of the pop cans to me, "Believe me."

"Stop it, you're making me blush." Eddie growled. He grabbed the pop, MY pop, from Allen's hands and opened the tab with his teeth.

"So... are you friends, or something?" I asked

"No one in our situation is exactly a friend, Tom." Eddie said, still hugging my neck, "But on our good days, this maggot and I are friendly acquaintances, sure."

"So, have you had your first episode yet?" Eddie asked.

"He was infected days ago Eddie, he hasn't been one of us long enough."

"Yeah?" Eddie said, "Jesus. Sucks to be you man. The attacks are worse if you are older when you get infected."

“You certainly would know.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t find out by ‘accident’, did I?” Eddie’s grip tightened around my neck as he did sarcastic air quotes.

Allen suddenly looked mad enough to maim.

“What do you mean?” I asked, gasping as I fought Eddie’s arm for oxygen.

“Eddie’s a bit of an anomaly.” Allen said, suddenly looking exhausted, “He willingly got himself infected by his ex-girlfriend.”

“That woman gave new meaning to the word ‘bitch’, I’ll tell ya.” Eddie said.

“You ... did this to yourself?” I gasped out.

Eddie finally let go of my neck. I found myself gratefully wheezing.

“Sure. Some guys get the girls name tattooed on their asses, some guys get restraining orders, me, I took the hit,” Eddie explained. He lit a cigarette, which Allen immediately snatched and stubbed out against the room’s faded ‘No Smoking’ sign. “At the time, it was the best way to make sure she wasn’t screwing some other guy when she went out at night. It wasn’t until the whole thing went to shit that I needed help dealing with the fringe benefits.”

“Only you would call our symptoms, benefits.” Allen interrupted, “Eddie here is an example of what I was trying to tell you earlier. Every case is different.”

“What, you’re talkin’ about me now?” Eddie asked, trying to interrupt.

“Are there a lot of... us... around?” I asked.

“Well, we aren’t going to have our own parade any time soon, if that’s what you mean.” Eddie said.

“But there are more of us than you’d think.” Allen interrupted, “It happens to all people, of every walk of life, social background, age, sex...”

“That’s a half-assed way to put it, man. You’re making us sound like a damn rainbow of screw ups.”

I felt like I was sinking into the floor. “I don’t think I can do this...” I said. I turned away and started making for the door.

“What’s wrong?” Allen asked, following me.

“He’s getting over-powered by your charisma.” Eddie suggested as he followed.

“You’re not helping.” Allen growled at him, “Take a walk.”

Eddie shrugged, but slithered his way over to the other side of the room.

“What happened?” Allen asked, smoothing down the lapels of his jacket nervously.

“It all just kind of hit me at once...”

“Look, Eddie is our resident asshole,” Allen said, dropping his voice to a low mutter, “Don’t pay him too much attention. The rest of the group is made up of decent human beings. Well, in a manner of speaking...”

“But that’s just it! I don’t know if I want to be a part of this. I didn’t even know this existed outside of a couple bad movies. And you haven’t given me information about any thing, any sort of cure...”

“I told you before. There isn’t a cure, just a series of treatments.”

“How do I know you’re not lying? You could just want to keep me this way...”

“No one wants this thing to be a part of their lives! I’ve lived with it for 15 years. Trust me. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t wish I could turn back the clock and avoided Boy Scouts altogether.”

“So what happened last Friday at the picnic, what, it was an ‘accident’?”

Allen grew still, his face cold and sad. “I’m going to have to live with that for the rest of my life. Is it my fault? Yes, but I can’t just take it back. Believe me, if I could, I would have by now. And even if I’m your least favorite person in the world right now, you at least need information. You’ve only got 24 days until the symptoms come back. You need to be prepared, if you’re going to survive.”

When Allen had come over to my apartment after work, determined to drag me to this thing he had repeated that same line over and over again. That it wasn’t deadly if treated properly. It was the ‘deadly’, which stuck in my mind.

If anything had kicked in during these last 8 days, it was my will to live.

“MAN...” I muttered.

“Look, Tom, take a load off, try to relax. I’ve got to help set up, but I’ll be back.”

I peeked over my shoulder and saw a skinny hippie lugging an oversized cooler into the room. He was wearing a faded purple tunic shirt, drawstring white pants and sandals despite the fact that it was 50 degrees outside. His long gray hair fell down over his shoulders, the same color as his neatly trimmed beard.

For some reason, with his odd pale eyes, this old man looked more or less along the lines of what you thought... well... one of *them* would look like in human form...

I watched Allen shrug his jacket off and the old hippie set up punch and cookies.

“Feeling better?” Eddie asked as he slid into a seat next to me.

“Little bit.” I admitted

“Not getting ready to tear someone’s head off?”

“No.”

“Good.” Eddie said, then leaning forward, and dropping his voice to a whisper, “You know, just between you and me— OW!”

“Keep a lid on it, Eddie.” Allen said, suddenly appearing beside us. Eddie clutched at his head where Allen had just smacked him, making angry, violent noises through his teeth.

“Guys, I think it’s going to be dead. Johnny has to do overtime at his dad’s store, and Frank having a bad week with his joints,” said the old hippie. His voice was very soothing. It was calm and cool with a depth you felt in your bones.

“Solomon, I wanted to introduce you to...” Allen started.

“... To the new guy. I smelled him when I came in.” Solomon said, as he walked over to where I was standing. “Sorry for not introducing myself earlier. Allen’s talked about you, but I didn’t catch your name...?”

“It’s Tom.”

Solomon nodded. “Welcome to Lycanthropes Anonymous.”

“We would have named ourselves ‘The Werewolf Club’ but it was taken.” Eddie piped up in the background.

“Actually, it was. I should send a gift basket to that role-playing group.” Solomon said with quiet humor, “Now... How long since you were bitten?”

“It’s been about 8 days.” I told him.

“And, like I mentioned in my e-mail, it’s... complicated,” Allen said.

“It usually is. The meeting will start in a few minutes, Tom. Help yourself to some punch.”