

James a/k/a Janie
By Debra Stang
© 2011

“I am Mr. Block,” the new principal introduced himself during first-period study hall. Outside a light, January snow drifted past the windows. I tried to remember whether or not I’d turned the heat up for Mom before I left for school. I was pretty sure I hadn’t. Damn.

“I’m sure you’ve all heard by now that Mrs. Gelles will not be able to return to her administrative duties,” Block continued. “The school board has hired me to take her place. I obtained my master’s degree in educational administration and policy at the University of Georgia, but I’ve spent the last year and a half on a tour of duty in Iraq...”

“He’s cute,” my best friend Ariel whispered.

“You think anything with a dick is cute,” I whispered back.

“I don’t think my brother’s cute.” She thought about it for a minute. “Well, not *that* cute.”

Her brother was adorable. “Sick!” I said.

We’d gotten too loud. Block’s eyes swept over us, narrowed at Ariel, and then came to rest on me. His lips turned up in a slow sneer. “I’ve heard about you,” he said.

I shrugged. “Yeah, well, I am a straight-A student.” Even though I was trying to play it cool, my insides felt as if they were shriveling. No one had looked at me with so much hatred since my mother had thrown my father out of the house when I was twelve.

Block continued to glare into my eyes. I knew I should try to stare him down. Let a bully know you’re scared, and he’ll find a thousand ways to torture you and make you thank him for it while he’s doing it. But somehow, I just couldn’t meet that mocking gaze.

Maybe if I kept my mouth shut he’d go back to jabbering about the Army and leave me alone.

As if.

“What’s your name.” It was not a question.

“Janie Simms.”

Block made a great show of looking over the study hall roster, even turning it over to make sure he hadn’t missed any names on the back. “Janie Simms,” he said. “That’s puzzling. I see no girl in this class named *Janie* Simms. I do see a boy named *James* Simms. Is he any relation?”

Ariel’s boyfriend, Matt, barked a short, startled laugh. Ariel’s foot shot out and landed so hard against his shin that he almost fell out of his seat trying to rub the sore place.

Block ignored them and kept his eyes focused on me.

“I...I’m James Simms.” Damn it, why couldn’t I keep my voice steady? It wasn’t like I was trying to hide something. Everybody already knew I was a girl with a dick.

Block shook his head. “If your name is James, why did you tell me a few minutes ago it was Janie?”

Ariel’s hand shot up. “My cousin’s real name is Algernon, but everybody calls him Brick,” she said, pointing to the biggest guy in the class. Brick glared at her and sank lower in his seat like a shark trying to hide in a tankful of guppies. “If Algernon can be Brick, I don’t see why James can’t be Janie,” Ariel said.

“Ah, yes, Miss...” Block checked the roster again. “Miss Ariel Holmes, is it? Your teachers were obviously right about your intellect, or lack thereof.”

Ariel’s eyes went wide and filled with tears. Scowling at Block, Matt reached over and patted her shoulder.

“Leave Ariel alone,” I said, still not able to meet Block’s eyes. “I’m the one you’ve got a problem with.”

“You’re right about that, *Mr. Simms*,” Block said. “I have a huge problem with you. And I have a track record for solving my problems.”

The bell rang. The class was strangely quiet as we all filed out into the hall to go to calculus. Even Ariel didn’t have anything to say.

.....

By the next morning, I’d almost forgotten about Block. Mom had been up most of the night. She wandered aimlessly around the house, stopping occasionally to brace herself against a wall while bouts of coughing wracked her tiny body.

Once I thought she was going to pass out and started to the phone to call the ambulance, but she recovered herself and jerked the receiver out of my hand. “No. I’m not ready.”

At 3:00 AM, I finally slipped some liquid morphine into a cup of hot chocolate and talked her into drinking it. When she started to drift off, I carried her to bed, put her oxygen on, stretched out beside her, and wound up falling asleep.

I never heard the alarm in my room go off three hours later. It was nearly eight when Mom shook my shoulder and whispered, “Janie, you’ll be late.”

I skimmed into some clothes, shaved, slapped on a little make-up, tied my hair back with a ribbon, and charged out the door at a full sprint. I might as well have walked. Mr. Block was

waiting for me when I got to school. “You’re late,” he said, like it was news to me. “I need to see a note from a parent before I can let you go to class.”

I stared at him, trying to catch my breath. Everyone at Alphin-Meade knew that Mom wasn’t up to writing any notes.

Block held out his hand. “Well?”

“I don’t have a note.”

“Go home and get one.”

“I...can’t.”

“And just why not?”

“Because my mother is...sick.” I couldn’t make myself say what was wrong with her. I’d never come right out and said the words, even to Ariel.

Block made a cranking motion with his hand. “Don’t waste my time. What’s wrong with your mother?”

I didn’t answer. His lips narrowed. He looked like a snake. “Well, I won’t let you interrupt second period without a good reason. You’ll just have to wait in the office and then go on to your third period class when the bell rings.”

“But I know Mrs. Williams would--”

“Office. Now.”

My eyes blazed with tears as I stalked into the office and slammed myself into one of those green vinyl chairs where kids in trouble were supposed to wait to see the principal. I’d never been in trouble before.

“Are you wearing make-up, Mr. Simms?” Block asked. He followed me into the office and crouched down to get a better look at me.

No, you asshole. My skin is naturally this smooth, my lips are seashell pink, and my eyelids just happen to be glitter-green. Ariel probably would have said it. I couldn’t. Instead I kept my eyes lowered and answered, “A little.”

“And what is that on your shirt?”

I looked down at my blouse but didn’t see anything. Still I figured Block could probably spot a stain from sixty feet away. “I don’t know. Coffee, probably.”

“Watch yourself, young man. You are on very thin ice. Now, tell me what *pattern* you see on that material.”

Oh. “Flowers.”

He picked up a copy of the student handbook from the secretary’s desk and threw it at me. It wasn’t like the one I’d received at the beginning of the year. This one had *REVISED* on the front cover in huge red letters.

“Hot off the press,” said Block. “I don’t believe in letting grass grow under my feet. Now, turn to page 12 and read the first sentence of the second paragraph. Aloud, please.”

I fumbled my way to page 12 and stared at the words printed there. Block cleared his throat impatiently.

“Students...students will dress in gender-appropriate attire,” I read in a flat voice.

I felt as if I’d just been kicked hard in the stomach, the way I’d felt when the CT scan of Mom’s lungs came back showing...anyway, it wasn’t as if being Janie instead of James had ever been a picnic. Most of the teachers were okay with it, but a few gaped at me like I was some circus freak show, and the other kids used to beat me up on a semi-regular basis.

All that changed when I was in sixth grade and the most popular girl in the school plopped herself down next to me and asked me where I’d gotten the skirt I was wearing. We’d gone to the thrift shop together after school and found her one almost like it. The next day, she invited me over to her house to listen to CDs. A couple of days after that, I took her to the truck stop where Mom worked, and Mom slipped us both free hot fudge sundaes. Before I knew it, I’d made my first new friend.

Harassing me suddenly became the height of uncool, just because Ariel said it was. Oh, I still had to deal with all the other crap that came with being born trapped in the body of the wrong sex, but at least I didn’t have to do it in front of a school of jeering kids.

Block was still staring at me, but a small smile creased his features. “Do we understand each other now, Mr. Simms?”

“What...what do you mean by gender appropriate?” I asked, looking for wiggle room.

He wasn’t about to give me any. “I would have thought a smart kid like you could figure that out, *James*. It means no skirts, no girl’s blouses, no make-up, no perfume, no ribbons in your hair, and no backtalk.” He suddenly yanked the ribbon holding my ponytail out of my hair. My scalp burned where he’d ripped out a few hairs by the roots. My stomach felt like I’d swallowed acid.

“May I go to the bathroom?” I asked, not looking at him.

“No. I told you. You’re not leaving this office until third period.”

“But--” It was way too late for words. I jumped up, squeezed past Block, charged into the girls’ bathroom, and made it into a stall about half a second before my stomach went into total reverse.

Trembling, I sank to the floor on my knees. My stomach twisted again. I gagged, but there was nothing to throw up.

“God, morning sickness much?” came a voice from the next stall.

“Ariel?” Her voice was so welcome I could have kissed it.

“Janie, is that you? You missed a hell of a calculus test.”

I burst into tears.

She pushed her way into the stall with me and put her arms around me. “Chill, bitch,” she whispered, rocking me like I was a baby. “It’s okay. You can make the test up, and you’ll probably ace it like you always do.”

“Not the test.” I was still clutching a copy of the revised student handbook in one fist. I thrust it at her. “Look.”

“I’ve seen it.”

“Not this one you haven’t. Look at page 12.”

Her face darkened as she read. “That asshole. He can’t do this.”

The bell for third period rang, and the bathroom door banged open. “James Simms, what are you doing in the ladies’ bathroom?” Block demanded. Before I could tell him that the last principal, Mrs. Gelles, had given me permission to use the girls’ bathroom, he twisted my arm up behind my back, jerked me out into the hall, and threw me into the boys’ bathroom so hard that my shoulder cracked against the far wall.

Ariel screamed.

The guy combing his hair in the mirror was another senior. I’d known him for more than ten years and I’d always figured we got along okay. Now he looked at me like I’d grown horns and muttered, “Freak.”

“Hey, watch your mouth.” Matt had come dashing into the boys’ room behind me. “You wanna see a freak, you look in the fuckin’ mirror,” he growled, as the other guy scooted out the door fast. “Motherfucker.” He looked at me cautiously. “You okay, Janie?”

Ever since we'd fought in the sandbox over who got to use the biggest pail to make castles, I'd known that Matt would rather be hit by a double tractor trailer than deal with a crying girl.

Since Ariel could weep bucketsful on cue, Matt was pretty much hers to command.

He had enough to worry about without me turning sippy on him as well. Besides, this wasn't like the sandbox. He couldn't fix things by giving over a toy.

"I'm fine," I said, staring at my reflection in the mirror. My mascara has run while I was crying, and no matter how hard I scrubbed at it with paper towels, I still looked like a raccoon. Damn cheap make-up. My not-quite-blonde-not-quite-brown hair was a mess, too. I gathered it at the nape of my neck and tied it back with a rubber band I'd found in my jeans pocket. Then, with no reason to delay, I followed Matt out of the bathroom.

Block was waiting for me. "Go to your third period class," he said. "But go home and change your clothes during the lunch hour." He stalked back into his office and slammed the door.

I spent the rest of the morning acutely aware of eyes piercing my body, as if everyone at the school was seeing me for the first time and didn't necessarily like what they saw. I'd never felt so exposed before, not even the first day I'd shown up for kindergarten wearing a pink-sequined Disney princess dress and already insisting that my name was Janie and not James.

That had been a long damn day. But it had also been a long time ago. I'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be an outcast.

.....

I went home to check on Mom during the lunch hour. "I don't want you to come home during the day," she scolded, stopping every few words to take a breath. "It's too far for you to walk and too cold outside."

I fussed over her, changing her bedclothes, making sure she ate a few bites of soup and took her medicine, getting her a glass of water, and finally brushing her few wisps of hair until she dozed off. Then I kissed her on the forehead and swiped a couple of her birth control pills. I'd been taking them for years, ever since my voice started to change. Mom never said anything about it, but she kept getting that prescription refilled long after she stopped having boyfriends.

I had hoped to sneak back into Alphin-Meade without Block noticing, but he nabbed me coming through a side door. "You're still wearing make-up," he said.

I shrugged.

"Go back home immediately. Wash your face and change your clothes. And you will receive a zero on any work you miss while you are gone."

"No." My God, had that come out of my mouth?

“Then you will spend the rest of the day in study hall, and you will receive a zero in all of your classes. *And*, if you come back tomorrow wearing that ridiculous get-up, you’ll be expelled for failure to follow the code of student conduct.”

I caught my breath as that punched-in-the-stomach sensation nearly bent me double.

Block smiled. “And now, James, I think we really do understand each other.”

.....

“If I get expelled, I can kiss my scholarship to the University of Colorado goodbye. I’ll never get out of this town.”

I imagined myself working in one of the dollar stores or at the truck stop, growing older in a body that would look more and more like a man’s without the benefit of Mom’s birth control pills. The bearded lady. The town joke.

Ariel, Matt, and Brick, of course, would be long gone to college and beyond. They’d say they’d keep in touch, of course. They might actually do it for a year or two. But eventually they’d forget me and I’d end up without friends, without hope, without anything.

Ariel squeezed my hand.

“This sucks, man,” muttered Brick.

“Don’t call me a man,” I shouted at him, making him jump. “I’m not a man. I never was and I never will be.”

Matt made a shushing gesture with his hand.

“It’s not a fucking secret,” I said, even louder.

Brick slouched his shoulders. “I didn’t mean anything by it, Janie. You know I didn’t. It was just...something to say.”

Ariel took charge. “You just can’t give up your scholarship, Janie. It won’t kill you to wear boy clothes for a few months. Besides, even without make-up, you’re prettier than most of the other bitches in this school. Right, Matt?”

“Right,” Matt said.

My eyes started to burn. I turned my back on them and rubbed the bridge of my nose.

Brick dropped an enormous hand on my shoulder. “It’s not so bad, Janie.”

“Yeah, it is,” I said, without turning around. “What if Block said you and Matt had to come to school wearing dresses and make-up for the rest of the year? Wouldn’t that be a big deal? Be honest, would you do it?”

They were all quiet for a minute. I could practically feel them exchanging awkward looks with each other. Then Ariel said softly, “I know it’s not fair, honey. Block’s a real asshole, but for now he’s *our* asshole.”

“Yeah, his game, his rules,” said Matt.

“It doesn’t matter what you wear, Janie,” said Brick. “I know you’re a lady.”

Ariel elbowed him in the ribs. “Not a lady, you sexist pig. She’s a *woman*.”

I loved it how Ariel thought nothing about calling me and every other girl in the school “bitch,” but then she ripped Brick a new one for calling me a lady.

Brick looked flustered. “I just meant that I know he’s a she. I mean, she’s a she.”

I should have told him that it was all right, that I understood. Instead I said, “You know what? You don’t know anything. None of you do. So just drop it, okay?” Brick’s mouth hung open as I walked away fast. None of them came after me.

.....

I could hear Mom coughing before I even walked through the front door of our house. When I stood in her bedroom doorway, I could see that it took every ounce of energy she had to roll over and smile at me. Her too-bright eyes were calm. “It’s time, hon.”

My heart seemed to have forgotten how to beat. “Are you...sure?”

She nodded. I looked at the floor and saw the crumpled, bloody tissues. My hands and voice trembled as I went to the phone and called 911.

After the detached voice on the other end of the line assured me that an ambulance was on the way, I sat down on the bed and took Mom in my arms. “How come you always have to pull this shit at the start of a semester, huh?” I whispered, hiding my face in her hair so she couldn’t see my tears. “You couldn’t possibly wait until spring break or summer vacation?”

She laughed weakly. “Language, Janie.”

We were both quiet for a minute. I could feel her chest heaving, working way too hard to breathe.

“Mom?” I whispered.

“What, hon?”

“Do you ever wish I were different?”

“It would be nice if you kept your room a little neater.”

I heard the ambulance siren wailing in the distance.

Mom’s fingers brushed my wet cheek. She twisted her frail body around to look deep into my eyes and said one word: “No.”

.....

I’d stayed alone plenty of times over the last couple of years while Mom was hospitalized for one treatment or another, but this time when I got back from the emergency room, the house seemed more empty than it ever had before. As if it knew as well as I did that Mom would never be coming back to it.

I picked up the phone to call Ariel, realized it was after midnight, and put the receiver back on the charger. Then I picked it up again and called the hospital. A nurse told me that Mom was resting comfortably.

I turned on the television, couldn’t find anything but the news and some 80s sitcoms, and turned it back off.

I went to the refrigerator, but the very thought of food turned my stomach.

I paced the living room, the kitchen, the bathroom, everywhere but Mom’s room.

On my third circuit through the bathroom, my reflection in the mirror caught my eye. I stopped to look closer. My make-up had worn off long ago, but it was still a woman’s face that looked back at me.

The only thing that made me a man was what was between my legs. The only thing Block cared about. The only thing the doctor had looked at when he told my mom and dad, “It’s a boy!” If they could have looked into my brain instead of just at my crotch, they would have known how wrong they were.

I finally got to bed around 3:00 AM, but I spent most of the night tossing and turning. I dreamed about Block and the way he sneered at me, but somewhere along the line, his face morphed into my father’s face. “You’re a freak,” he’d told me once. “I would rather you had been born dead.” That was when Mom threw him out.

I was wide awake at sunrise. I called the hospital again. The same nurse told me that they had given Mom pain medication and she had slept all night. “It won’t be long now,” she said.

“She doesn’t want me there when it...happens. We already talked about it.”

I gave the nurse the school phone number so she could reach me if she needed to. Then, remembering that Block might be the one answering the phone, I also gave her Ariel's cell phone number. No one was supposed to carry cell phones in school, but Ariel did it anyway.

When I was finished talking to the nurse, I called Ariel and briefed her on everything that had happened the night before. "Come over and pick me up. I've never been expelled before. I need moral support."

She gasped. "You're crazy, Janie. How can you let this small-minded asshole ruin your life?"

"Ruin it, maybe. But I'm finished letting him *define* it."

She argued with me for another fifteen minutes, but I wouldn't budge. She finally said, "I'll be right over, bitch," and slammed down the phone in a huff.

It took her more than an hour to get to my house. No surprise there. If Ariel were in a theater and a fire broke out, she'd sit through the coming attractions and maybe even a feature film or two before she got around to wandering out of the building.

I used the time to shower, shave, and dress. Dark green sweater. Plaid skirt. Black hose. Medium high heels.

Gender appropriate.

For me.

Then I did my make-up: foundation, eye liner, eye shadow, mascara, blush, lip liner, lip stick, powder. I usually didn't do much with my fingernails, but that morning I filed them and polished them a dusky rose color. Then I waited for Ariel.

.....

The bell had rung and the halls were empty when we finally walked into the building. Ariel clutched my arm. I couldn't tell whether she was leaning on me or supporting me.

It didn't take Block more than a second to pop out of his office. He didn't look as triumphant as I'd thought he would. If anything, his expression was bewildered, as if he was wondering how a tranny kid could stand up to him and make it stick.

"I see you've made your decision," he said.

"Yes." Why had I been so afraid to look in his eyes before? There was nothing so scary in them.

"James Simms, you may consider yourself--"

I braced myself for the word *expelled*, determined to keep my face from showing any emotion. But the word never came.

Instead, I heard Matt's voice. "I guess you'll have to expel me, too," he said as he stepped out of the boys' room.

I just about died. Somehow, he'd crammed his six-foot-three, 220 pound athlete's body into an old housedress. Bright lipstick made him look like he'd just eaten an orange Popsicle, and he wore a red wig that didn't entirely cover his brown hair. Altogether, he looked more like Raggedy Anne gone to seed than a real woman.

So that's why Ariel had taken so long to get to my place. I wondered how hard she'd had to cry to get Matt into that outfit.

Block stared at him with his mouth slightly ajar.

I hugged Matt with one arm and Ariel with the other. "Thanks guys," I whispered. I didn't see how Matt turning up in a dress was going to keep me from getting expelled, but it was probably the most wicked-cool thing anyone had done for me in my entire life.

Then Brick Elders came out of the boy's room. He wasn't wearing a dress, but he had tied an apron around his waist. Tons of foundation clung to his face, clumping in his moustache, and he had stuck tons of pink bows all over his buzz cut. "Looks like I'm out, too," he said.

The next guy out of the bathroom was Vince Hemrow, the captain of the basketball team. He wore a caftan. He was followed by the Lundy twins, tall skinny boys dressed in mini-skirts that rode up so high you could see their boxers. I didn't know Lenny very well, but I'd tutored Larry in geometry to earn some extra money during our junior year. He grinned and waved at me.

One by one, all but a handful of the guys in the senior class filed out of the bathroom. They were all wearing make-up, ribbons, wigs, and dresses.

If Block had looked bewildered before, he was furious now. "What's going on here?" he demanded. "What do you have to say for yourselves?"

"I say if you expel all of us, the men's varsity team is going to have one crappy basketball season," said Vince Hemrow.

"Great way to start your career as principal, Mr. Block," said Matt. "Sports *rule* at Alphin-Meade."

"Stop this! Get out of that...that...drag this instant!"

"I guess you could try to make all of us, if you thought you were up for it," Larry Lundy said.

My heart was beating so hard I was sure everyone could hear it. I kept swallowing, but there was a lump in my throat that wouldn't go away.

“You can’t do this!” Block burst out. He sounded like a little kid.

“That’s what I said,” Brick told him. “Guess we were both wrong.”

Block rounded on me. “This is your fault, James Simms. Tell them to put a stop to this now.”

“I don’t tell people how to dress,” I said. “That’s *your* kink.”

“I can expel you and all of your friends,” he shouted.

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “You can. But you won’t.”

His right hand clenched into a fist, and for a moment I thought he was going to take a swing at me. I almost wished he would, but he didn’t. Instead he backed away, giving me a look of sheer loathing. I looked back calmly. He didn’t matter. The people who did matter, my friends, more friends than I’d ever realized I had, waited behind me.

Block muttered something under his breath.

“Sorry?” said Matt. “I didn’t hear that.”

“I said all of you go back to class. You can keep your little pet pervert. What do I care?” He turned around and started walking back to his office. His shoulders were hunched almost to his ears.

“Wait!” I said.

He stopped.

I pulled the copy of the revised student handbook out of my purse and held it out to him. “Fix it,” I said.

He glared at me.

“I’m not kidding. I don’t want to have to go through a scene like this every day for the rest of my senior year. I bet these guys don’t, either. So make it right. Now.”

Block snatched the book from my hand so hard that he tore one of my fingernails. He turned to page 12, drew a line through the rule about gender-appropriate clothing, initialed it, and thrust it back into my hands. Ariel started to clap. After a second, Brick and Matt did to. Then the whole hallway rang with applause.

Block went into his office and slammed the door.

I held the student handbook over my head as if it were a trophy. In a way, it was. “Thanks,” I choked out. “You all look...great.”

“I’ve gotta get a picture of this for the yearbook,” Ariel said.

“No way in hell!” Brick dove back into the boys’ room before Ariel could grab her cell phone and start shooting. Most of the other guys followed him. Too bad. The parents and the yearbook sponsors might not have been happy with a picture like that, but I would have treasured it forever.

Matt squeezed my shoulder. “You okay now, Janie?”

“I’m not going to cry if that’s what you mean,” I said, and burst into tears.

“Aw, shit.” Matt let go of my shoulder as if it had burned him. “What did I do wrong now?”

Ariel put her arms around me. “Nothing. She’s happy, caveman. Sometimes crying is a good thing.”

“Girls are psychotic,” Matt declared and headed into the boys’ room to change clothes.

Ariel pushed me back to arm’s length and took a good look at me. “God, your make-up is a mess,” she said. “Let’s get you fixed up, bitch. Then I’m going to drive you over to the hospital so you can tell your mom that everything’s okay.”

“I don’t think she’ll hear me.”

“She’ll hear you.”

Taking my hand, Ariel pulled me into the girls’ bathroom. This time, no one tried to tell me I didn’t belong there.