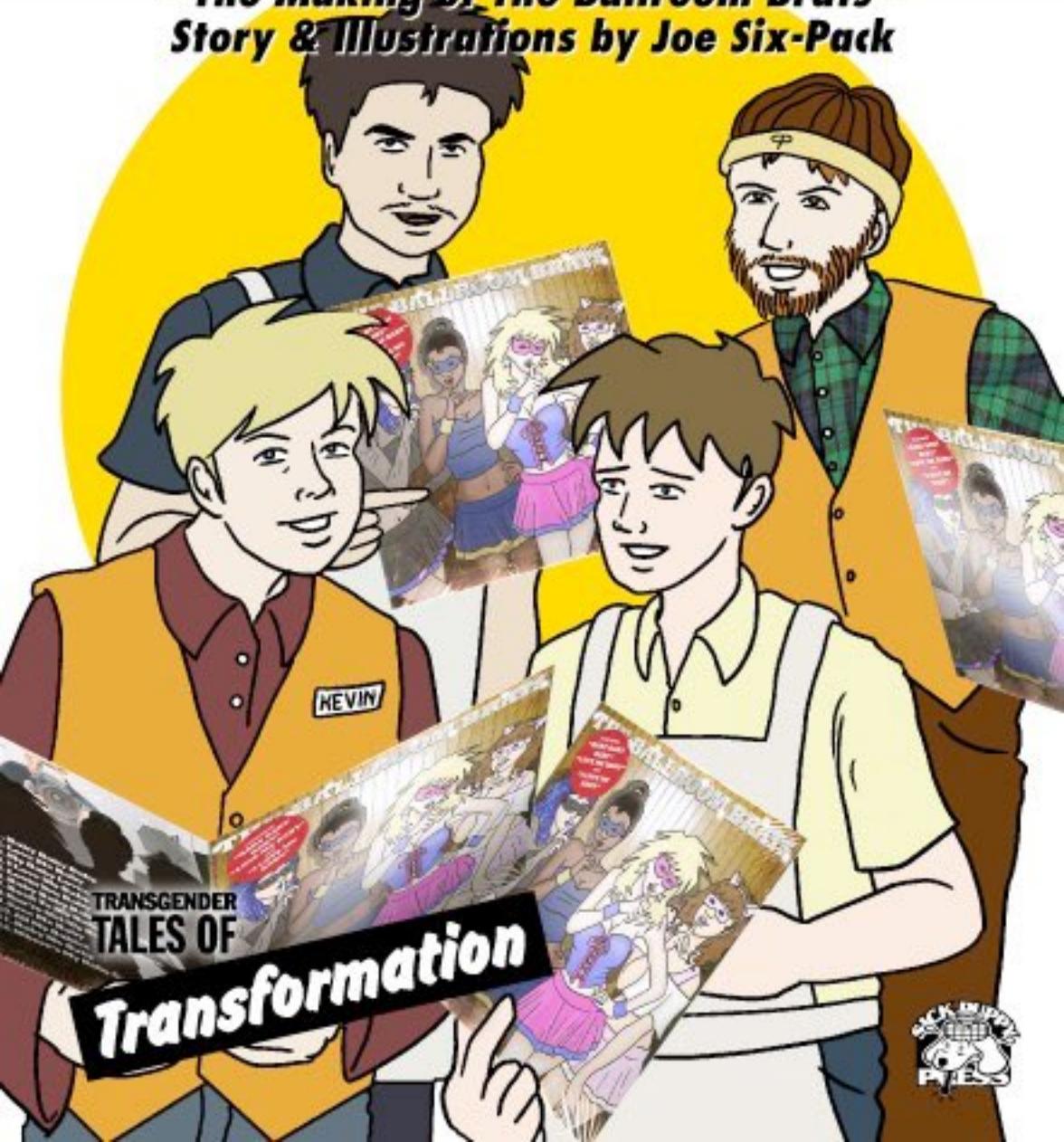


ADULTS ONLY

113 pages 34 illustrations

# BOYZ II GIRLZ

*"The Making of The Ballroom Brats"*  
Story & Illustrations by Joe Six-Pack



**J O E S I X P A C K**

**BOYZ II  
GIRLZ**

**“The Making of The Ballroom Brats”  
Story & Illustrations by Joe Six-Pack  
A Tales of Transformation Story**



2012 Digital Edition

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# THE MAKING OF THE BALLROOM BRATS

Kevin was just trying to deflate, to put the world into a box, shove it away and let it lay in the basement to collect dust for all eternity. However, today, the world refused to be contained for Kevin. Even after a long, long, long afternoon, evening and night of listening to the most minute of customer complaints about the food at Burger Boom, his current employer, Kevin was still neck deep in the effluence of his life.

There might have been the wrong selection of food delivered to a customer, the food might not have been prepared to the customer's expectation, the price may not have matched the preconceived notion a customer had placed on the value of the food, and some customers just liked to have someone to argue with. Whatever the circumstance, Kevin had dealt with it in his own idiomatic style, with the zeal and energy he was well regarded for, and assuaged the customers in every case.

Still! This was not enough for the world, for it demanded even further of Kevin, draining his cell phone of power, changing his work schedule at the last minute, and making sure it was going to rain for his long walk home at midnight.

Now, here in the secluded break facilities of Burger Boom, conveniently located between the dumpster and the cyclone fencing of the parking lot, he was being asked to sacrifice even more of his precious life essence.

"Did you see where dey want us to jingle?" José Alavedros, the dishwasher, asked, in his slightly-off English.

Kevin smirked to himself, amused at his co-worker's take. "You mean they want us to *make* a jingle," he corrected.

"Yes," José replied.

José was referring to the newest flyer posted on the wall, amongst the state wage poster, the federal disclaimers and ten years' worth of previous company flyers. It was an employee contest for the next jingle to be used in the company's advertising. In a not-at-all cynical attempt to avoid hiring proper musicians and writers, employees were encouraged to write and submit a 5-second jingle to bring honor and glory to their franchised locale. Kevin's shift manager had interpreted the term 'encourage' to mean 'do it or get fired.'

Which now meant that he was on the line to do this. His initial scheme was to make a dramatic reading of the ingredients of a ketchup packet aloud and record it as an MP3. Of course, this would not bring honor and glory to Burger

Boom #3182, so his shift manager rejected it. Kevin was told he needed to make a 'serious' submission or he could start a 'serious' job search.

"You know how to do dis?" José asked. He was a man in his mid-to-late-20's, with a good attitude, and was sending his paychecks home to Mexico. He wasn't afraid of work and he always wanted to do things right. He was also very reserved and quiet most of the time. That, to Kevin, seemed the limit and breadth of his personality. No chitchat, no hobbies, no affectations. Just work. Nothing about José suggested in the slightest way that he was going to be able to manage his way through writing and recording a peppy jingle. This was obviously weighing on his mind.

"Not really," Kevin replied, in all honesty. "I can't even sing." The reason José was even asking Kevin is because it was a well-known fact around the restaurant that Kevin did play some guitar. Kevin it kind of saw it coming, as his ability to play seemed to make him a marked man for this contest.

"My cousin has bass guitar," José said. "In my garage. I try play it. Not good."

"Yeah," Kevin said, unable to really go anywhere with José's comment. "We should team up. I can't sing, and you can't play. What can stop us?"

Checking his dead phone, Kevin couldn't tell what time it was, so he decided to not risk trouble, and headed back into the restaurant. As he glanced at a clock, he noted he still had seven minutes left on his break.

"You back from break? Great. Take register,"



his shift manager said. That effectively destroyed his hopes of reclaiming the 7 minutes. Not wanting an argument, he did what he was told. After two minutes of nothing happening, his shift manager made a repeat trip to the counter. “Why are you at register?” he asked. “Work the window.”

“Gabe!” Kevin barked at the manager, frustrated.

“What?” Gabe snapped back.

His manager’s reply was far more heated than anticipated. One more word was going to detonate an explosion of anger. Now faced with starting a war with his short-tempered manager, or finding a way out, Kevin opted for the way out. “I was wondering about the jingle thing.”

Kevin studied Gabe’s expression to make sure he was calming down. He seemed to be, so he made up a nonsense question to keep things civil. “Is there any rule against teaming up?” He didn’t get an immediate reply so he clarified. “Instead of every person submitting their own?”

Gabe had a baffled expression on his face. “I don’t know! I guess, maybe, sure!” He then turned away in a flamboyant hands-out gesture to tend to his more imperative burger-management duties.

Crisis averted, Kevin relaxed and let out a deep breath. He would last another day at Burger Boom. Hooray.



Soaked, Kevin arrived back at his apartment after his long trudge home. He checked the clock, which read a harsh 1:04 in the AM. The sting was made even worse by he knowledge that he was back on shift in eight hours for the Burger Boom Breakfast Menu shift. He hated the breakfast menu. 16 ways to arrange eggs and ham on buns.

He peeled the yellow work vest off of him and slung it over the back of a chair. Kevin made his way to the fridge, which was filled with oil-stained paper sacks from Burger Boom, his abandoned meals from days and weeks past. He grabbed the first thing that didn’t have the Burger Boom logo, a bottle of olives, and started popping them into his mouth. Kevin only had a few minutes before he was going to fall into bed, so he was eating fairly quickly.

The door to his roommate’s room opened up, and Diedrick, Kevin’s roommate for the past year, stuck his groggy head out.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said, with a sneer. “I thought it was someone breaking in,” he added, with an air of disappointment to his voice. The implication was that he would have preferred the presence of an angry, thieving stranger in his apartment threatening to do him bodily harm than to know it was just Kevin.

Kevin didn’t blame him.

Diedrick heaved his heavy body back into his room and shut the door, leaving Kevin alone with his thoughts. Those thoughts were a swirling maelstrom of anger and anguish, feeling both hatred for being so powerless about his job, and anguish that he was in real danger of sleeping through his alarm and losing the very same job he hated. His tired and weary mind just seemed to be stuck churning those thoughts around again and again, even as Kevin desperately wanted to think about something else for these few fleeting minutes on non-work time.

It was useless. He turned on the TV, but he couldn't pay any attention. He tried to listen to some music but it was just noise. Finally, he set his head down on his pillow, but all he could think about was how miserable he was.

Three hours later, he finally was able to slip away into sleep.



Kevin had to run most of the last half-mile to get to the restaurant on time, so he started his day off with sweat and exhaustion. Two hours into his five hour shift and he had not yet been able to catch his breath or stop perspiring. It was a good thing the overpowering scent of microwaved bacon was stronger than his B.O. He had been placed on the line that morning, with the job of working the clamshell grill, or "the clam" as the employees called it. It gave off enough heat to make sure Kevin would not get a moment of relief until he could take a break.

"Hey, Gabe! How about a break?" He asked the shift manager.

"Sounds like a good idea. I'll be back in fifteen," Gabe said, loosening his rayon tie. "Shelley, you're in charge."

"Asshole," Kevin mumbled to himself.

As soon as Gabe was out of earshot, Carl, who was working the register, turned around. "I heard you got Gabe to cut us a break, dude," he said to Kevin.

Kevin didn't quite get what this Carl guy was on about. Carl was kind of a spaced-out character anyway, who had a nice smile but didn't really seem to be dialed into reality most of the time. Kevin's first instinct was to assume that this was one of those moments.

"The contest thing!" Carl said, trying to clarify himself. That didn't do the job, so he started over. "You got Gabe to let us team up on the jingle!"

That did seem to make some sense, so Kevin conceded, and began having a conversation with Carl. "Yeah, sure. I guess."

"That is awesome!" Carl said, with a generous grin, accentuated by his beard. "So who are you working with? José, right?"

“I... didn’t know I was...” Kevin said.

“Me!” José said, raising his hand. “We do. We work. Us.” José was in the back mopping up the spill of a 20-pound bag of liquid egg scramble mix. It was clear to Kevin that José had been talking, and talking to Carl.

Carl paused to think. “Did he say how many people it could be?”

Kevin shrugged. “I didn’t get that kind of...”

“All right! I’m on board!” Carl gleefully declared. “You, me, José. We’re a group! Yeah! Awesome!” He clapped his hands and raised them in the air in triumph. Then, he returned his attention to the register where six people were waiting impatiently.

There was every reason for Kevin to object to Carl inviting himself onto this team, which he didn’t know was a team, but trying to bicker over the heat lamps seemed to be the wrong place to make his point. So he would wait. He would wait until twenty minutes were left in his shift, when Gabe finally released him to have his fifteen minute break. Then he’d come back to work for five more minutes before going home.

“Gabe is management material, no doubt about it,” Kevin said to himself, out back of the restaurant. “Master of logistics.” Now that some serious personal time was just a few minutes away, Kevin was making plans. Would he go home and sleep? Or maybe he would go home and sleep. His next shift was tomorrow night, so he had a glorious 22 hours of freedom, and he was determined to savor every moment. He checked his now-charged phone and saw he had seventeen messages, all from his girlfriend.

A little part of him died. He knew what this meant. With no choice but to stick his neck into the guillotine, Kevin hit reply. “Hey, Paula. It’s Kevin,” he said.

“Finally. Do you know how many messages I’ve left you? Why don’t you respond?” She sniped.

“I was working,” Kevin replied.

“Call me on your break.”

“They didn’t let me have one until now.”

“You should tell them to give you a break when you want it! It’s the law! Don’t let them push you around. You need to stand up for yourself, for once.” His girlfriend’s voice was like a buzz saw to his brain. He and Paula had been going out for almost a year, and what was once sweet and fun was now sour and dull. Her conversations with him had turned from sexy invitations for mischief into... “We’re going to shopping for Melanie’s baby shower, and no, you don’t have a choice. I’m picking you up and we’re going to the mall.”

There was some moment in the past few months where things turned. He no longer looked forward to hearing Paula’s voice, it’s tone had become more and more irritating to him. Now, the hair on the back of his neck stood up when-

ever he heard her speak. He had even begun to avoid looking her in the eyes, knowing he was tired of seeing that gaze from those soulless glassy blue orbs stare through him. Not only was the romance gone from the relationship, he was very sure that the relationship was gone from their relationship. They were just two people who had little to no interest in each other. It was going to end in screaming rage or marriage.

“I’m off in fifteen minutes,” Kevin said, in a hope that it was too soon and she might let him off the hook. “So...”

Paula didn’t waver. “I’ll be there in 45 minutes. I don’t know, find something to do for a half hour and I’ll pick you up.”

Great. He got to hang around work for an extra half hour. Fantastic. “Yeah, I guess.”

“And wash your hands! I don’t want grease all over my dashboard,” Paula added, before hanging up.

Kevin put the phone away and walked over to the dumpster. He chose a good spot and kicked it, making a loud, somewhat satisfying noise.

After his shift was over, and he had washed his hands, Kevin sat on the curb just close enough to Burger Boom to be seen by his girlfriend. He would have rather been a million miles away, but he was still close enough to hear the crackle of the drive-thru speaker. He would have played a game on his phone had he been wealthy enough to afford a phone that played games, so instead he was just scuffling his feet in the gravel and dust that had gathered at the side of the road.

“If you’re not working here, don’t loiter!” Gabe shouted from the drive-thru window.

In daring defiance of his manager, Kevin pretended not to hear him. Instead, he just kept scuffling the gravel. Besides, he wasn’t technically on Burger Boom property. He was at least an inch away.

“Hey, I told José we’d come by tomorrow morning,” said a voice. Kevin had to look up and see who was talking to him. It was Carl, who was leaving at the end of his shift. He was dressed in Birkenstocks, brown torn cords and a beanie that looked like it had been made entirely of yarn and incompetence.

“What? Why?” Kevin rightly asked.

“To do the thing,” Carl said. Kevin’s rapid blinking signaled he hadn’t understood. Carl was clearly used to this sort of reaction to the things he said. “The jingle. We’ll do the jingle.”

Now able to comprehend, Kevin replied with, “Oh.” He had not invited them, and he was pretty sure he hadn’t consented to even be a part of this jingle thing. He had to reset the situation before it went any further. “Listen, Carl, I didn’t exactly say that...”



Hhhhhrrrronnnnk! Paula had pulled up nearby and was demanding attention with her car horn, even though she was just five feet away. Hhhhhrrrronnnnk Hhhhhrrrronnnnk! She pushed open the passenger side door for even faster recognition of her demand for Kevin's immediate presence.

"I'll give you a call," Kevin said, just as Paula fired off two more horn hits. He slid into the car and closed the door.

"You didn't wash your hands," she said.

"Yes I did," Kevin replied.

"You didn't do a very good job of it," she said, and stepped on the gas. "You're contributing 20 bucks for the gift. Do you have it or do I need to lend it to you – again?"

Kevin sighed and buckled in. He was in for a bumpy ride.



The day spent with Paula was every bit as excruciating as he knew it was going to be. The quest for the baby shower gift quickly turned into a Don Quixote odyssey. Paula was hell-bent on getting a diaper bag, and not just any diaper bag, but one particular diaper bag. Store #1 was sold out. A trip across town to another mall and store #2 revealed that they had something similar but slightly different, which wasn't good enough for Paula. They recommended she check with store #3, which didn't even carry diaper bags. Then she called around to three more stores that were also fresh out of this particular diaper bag. That wasn't what she wanted to hear, so of course she had to personally visit those same three stores to check for herself.

Finally, six hours later, Paula ordered it online. She needed expedited shipping, which cost Kevin an additional 6 dollars and a promise to be home tomorrow to receive the shipment. Paula, with the verbal skill of a diplomat trying to instigate global thermonuclear conflict, explained that she had a life, and was therefore too busy to receive it at her place.

So, at nine, after Kevin cooked her a nice intimate dinner – because he didn't do enough cooking in his job. Paula consumed her pasta without comment, finished her wine, blew out the romantic candle, and left. After all, she said, it had been a long day and was just so *incredibly* exhausted.

Kevin totaled everything up after she left. Eight hours doing what Paula wanted, wasting his time off. Twenty-six dollars poorer for some crap gift for someone he didn't even know. Another 20 bucks spent on dinner. Now he was confined to the apartment until the delivery guy showed the next day. For a glorious finish, and sticking the landing, he then got the royal brush-off.

"Jackpot," Kevin said to himself, sarcastically. He decided to get up from the couch and clean the dishes before Diedrick had a chance to whine about it. His roommate was out for the evening, working at the gaming shop, "Ye Olde Dragon's Tale." It was a suitably squalid store for a suitably squalid guy. After twenty minutes of scrubbing tomato sauce off plastic, Kevin returned to the couch, only to find Diedrick, obviously back from work, sprawled out and taking the only two good seats in front of the big screen.

"Greeting and salutations," Diedrick said, flamboyantly gesturing his arm in the air. "I doth return to thy humble abode."

"Got off early?" Kevin asked rhetorically.

"As it so happens, we had a power outage, so we closed," the chubby 25-year old said. "And lo, the Gods had spoken."

Having just met his limit of coping with Diedrick, and fulfilled his daily intake of lame fantasy dialect, it was off to his room for Kevin. "Huh," he said as he left, letting the conversation die the death it deserved.

Once he closed the door to his room, it was time to try once again to tear the world from his mind, like he was ripping off a tenacious octopus that had en-



gulfed his skull in its' cuppy tentacles. He jumped on his computer and surfed around for a while, going nowhere and doing nothing in particular.

It was the best he had felt in two days.



In the morning, Kevin got up slightly early. He reasoned that if he were to wait until his usual time to get showered, he'd be in the possible window of deliveries. He also needed to make sure he was free of real distraction, because he knew from experience that the delivery guy would just pop on the "missed you" note if Kevin wasn't able to respond in 0.1 seconds after the ring of the door. At about nine o'clock, after Dedrick had left for work, Kevin sat poised and ready to leap into action at the merest hint of a bell noise.

So when the bell rang at 10:30, Kevin leapt from his couch with a mighty flash and opened the front door of his apartment in olympic record time. So he was

more than a little disappointed to be greeted not by some guy in a polo shirt and shorts, but by three guys he worked with.

It was José, Carl and Ray. It slowly dawned on him as to why they were here. That goddamn jingle. He wanted to slap himself on the forehead and draw his hand slowly down his face, much like one would see in a Three Stooges movie. He felt that stupid. He hadn't made the call to stop this from happening and now he had no idea what to do.

"Hey, dude!" Carl said, ingratiating himself immediately. "I brought the rest of the group!"

"It's not a group," Kevin stated for the record.

José was there, carrying the bass guitar he had previously been talking about, and Carl was toting what looked like a kid's toy. It resembled a mini keyboard glued onto a horn.

"What?" Kevin said, pointing to it.



“Melodica,” Carl said. “It’s a real instrument. I got it at the dollar store on the way over.”

Kevin gave him some well-deserved sarcasm. “All real instruments are made out of blue plastic.” Carl didn’t respond.

Kevin turned his attention to the third member of the pack. His name was Ray Willis, who also worked at Burger Boom, usually doing short mid-day shifts. He hadn’t worked with Ray very often, and only had some vague impressions of him. He seemed to be a follower more than an individual, and kept his statements short and to the point.

The most important thing to Kevin, though, was why he was here. “Hi, Ray. I didn’t know you were coming,” Kevin said, making sure everyone knew he was uninformed about his presence.

“Oh yeah,” Carl said, as if he was just remembering this for the very first time. “I invited Ray along to join us. He’s cool.”

“Well, if he’s cool, then by all means. Join us.” Kevin closed the door as they came inside.

“Hey, he had a microphone,” Carl explained. “I figured we’d need one, right?”

Kevin had to admit that it was a valid reason. “But no one else is coming, right?”

“Nah, it’s just us!” Carl said. “The Burger Boom Four!”

“Catchy,” Ray said.

“No it’s not,” Kevin quickly retorted. “So I guess everyone should get a seat. I’ll grab my laptop and guitar.”

Kevin foraged around to set up his guitar and amplifier. He had to dig through some piles of tangled old cords to find the right ones, while his three guests got more and more bored. Finally, he found everything he needed. Then he focused on his laptop. After a few minutes of fiddling, Kevin had connected Ray’s microphone to his PC, and got some recording software running. It took some doing, as he wasn’t exactly an IT wizard, getting the drivers to recognize the mic and then getting the software to recognize the driver. He was pushing the limits of his technical skill, and when he was done, let out a deep breath of relief and brought it all back into the living room.

“Hey, while you were setting stuff up, somebody left this on your door,” Carl said.

Kevin was handed a “missed you” delivery note. He wanted to scream.

Doing his best to control himself, he took several deep breaths. “Okay, so does anyone have any jingle ideas?” He said.

Kevin looked at Ray, who looked at José, who looked at Carl. Carl shrugged. This was off to a great start.



Kevin was literally yanked off the line and dropped into the manager's office. It wasn't the first time this had happened to him. The first time, a customer had registered a complaint about the shabby way he had refunded her money back. The second time he was accused of stealing food but was quickly cleared when the general manager got fired for filling his sedan full of frozen french fries one night. This was the third time, and by now he wasn't so much as frightened as he was annoyed.

Things took a turn for the serious when the door opened, and it wasn't Gabe or the general manager who came in, but Bert Greenway. Bert was the owner of thirty seven restaurants, including this Burger Boom. Kevin had seen him exactly once, when he flew through on a five-minute inspection last year, but recognized him from the portrait that hung in the hallway.

"Kevin Plough," Bert said, correctly identifying his guest. He extended his hand for a shake. "Good to meet'cha, boy!"

"G... Good to meet you," Kevin replied, stammering through his shock.

Bert was still vigorously shaking Kevin's hand. "Fantastic work, fantastic. Absolutely wonderful."

"Thanks," Kevin said. "Uh... Thanks."

"You don't know what I'm talkin' about, do ya?" Bert said, perceptively.

"Working the clam?"

"Nobody told ya?" Bert turned his head to frown at Gabe, who looked a bit squeamish. Then he turned back to Kevin, with a big smile. "You won!"

Looking up at the idiotically happy faces of the owner, Gabe the shift manager and the restaurant manager, Kevin had a distinct feeling he was about to be eaten for dinner. Nervously, Kevin just started to try and match the eerily happy moods of the people who were staring at him. "H... Ha... Ha! Yeah! I won!"

"Oh fer... For pete's sake, the contest!" Bert seemed to realize he had to slow it down. "The jingle contest!"

"What about it?"

"You won! You won the jingle contest!"

"Jingle contest?" To defend Kevin, it had been twelve weeks since it had happened. It was perfectly understandable that he'd have forgotten all about it by now. He had to search his memory to recall what the jingle contest was all about. Finally, when it did come through, the moment of realization came across his eyes. The mandatory Burger Boom jingle contest – he did remember

something about it. But what he remembered was how awful the thing they recorded was. There should've been no possibility of winning the contest.

The only realistic explanation of how he could have won the contest was that there were no other entires whatsoever. Possibly there weren't any entries that were in English, maybe none performed by humans, or maybe all others had been lost in a wormhole. There just should have been no possible way in this reality, on this Earth, in this timeline, that his entry could have possibly won the jingle contest.

"Once again, my heartiest congratulations and a big thank-you. This is a big deal for my franchises. A big deal." Bert just beamed with pride. A savvier man would have realized he could have asked for any favor from Bert right now, and might have granted it. However, Kevin's brain was still assembling the pieces, and being the honest person he was, he had to come clean about it.

"Well you know, to be honest, it wasn't just me." Kevin said, trying not to break the spell. "It was also José. And Carl, and what's that guys name... Ray. We all were in on it. We all worked on it. We all recorded on it. It wasn't just me."

That seemed to please Bert even more. "A Burger Boom team effort! Fantastic!" Bert turned to an assistant and said, "Give me my laptop. I want to hear it one more time." Bert took the laptop, opened it up and started to fiddle with it. "I was listening to this all the way over here. I love it."

Kevin, still fighting with his memory, didn't quite remember exactly what they had produced. There had been a lot of bickering amongst the four, a lot of bad ideas, and a whole lot of truly bad instrument playing. He could remember playing guitar, and he thought maybe that Ray was banging on a coffee can, but the rest was very, very vague in his mind. They had produced about six different candidates to submit, all equally incompetent, and he didn't really remember exactly which one they had chosen. Probably the worst one.

Finally Bert seemed to have found what he was looking for. "Here we go."

*"If you've got a craving, and your stomach's got room, haul your hunger on down to Burger Boom."*

Kevin was mortified. Had they really recorded that? How humiliating. That night, so many weeks ago, after a lot of cringing attempts, they finally settled on Kevin doing the vocals. It wasn't really singing, so much as it was a low-intensity scream. He plucked a few strings to match the notes he was "singing," as José and Carl did the same. He wasn't even sure Ray did anything at all.

Bert played it again.

*"If you've got a craving, and your stomach's got room, haul your hunger on down to Burger Boom."*

Kevin felt like such a tool. It may have been the most degrading moment in his life. Or, considering his life seemed to be chock full of degrading moments, in the top 40. The most humiliating part might have been that, now having heard the jingle for the first time in a while, it no longer seemed as bad and messy as he remembered. Sure the performance was horrible but, in fact it was something that might actually, truly work. How had he stooped so low as to write a stupid commercial jingle? And done a decent job at it?

“Ha! I love that!” Bert was truly enthusiastic. “So here’s the deal, what corporate wants to do was to find you guys a proper studio record the jingle all you know, fancy like.” He turned back to look over his shoulder. “What’s your name again, glasses?”

Gabe, the only one wearing glasses, pointed to himself. “Me? My name is Gabe, Sir. I was...”

Bert cut him off. “Great, you’re in charge of this. Managing this project. Drop whatever else you got going on. This is your new top priority. Got that?”

“Uh, but what about my...” Quickly realizing he was testing everyone’s patience, Gabe halted mid-sentence. “Yes sir. I got it.”

“Fantastic! Tommy,” Bert was now looking at the restaurant’s general manager, “hire some new guys. These guys, Kevin, glasses, and the other three, they’re doing this now. I want them thinking about about the jingle. Nothing else. They’re not working on the line anymore, not working at the store, it’s got to be nothing but music for them.”

Tom Sanford, the restaurant’s general manager, nodded. “You got it!”

Kevin wasn’t so sure that by winning the contest he had just made a huge mistake.



“Okay, okay, okay. Let’s just stop it there.” The producer wiped imaginary sweat from his brow and started rubbing his temples. He was trying to get a decent vocal out of Kevin.

Kevin, Carl, José, and Ray had all been in the studio now for over a day. You would think that recording a five-second jingle would be a fairly easy task, but these boys were trying to turn that notion on its head. The past day had been absolutely miserable. No one could play, no one could sing, and the producer was slowly, gradually, becoming suicidal. By now, the regret he had for taking this job was being worn on his face.

“Let’s just take a... Break of some sort.” The producer said. It was the eighth time he had proposed such a break, despite no previous break having solved any previous problems.

That didn't really seem to matter to most of the group. Carl and Ray were more than happy to just remain on the couch in the lounge where they were quietly dozing off. José seemed to be somewhat irritated by the break, but only because hanging around in a studio all day conflicted with his notion of what hard work was. He would've been much more comfortable picking something up, cleaning something, or just moving something heavy. Sitting around in the studio waiting for something to happen, and being bitterly disappointed, was not his idea of a good time.

Of course Kevin was irritated, because he'd been trying to play guitar and trying to sing all day, and being reminded how truly horrible he was at both. He was a little bit better playing guitar, his real love, but his singing was truly horrible. The trouble was is that there was no way out of it. The corporate suits had wanted his voice on the record. He didn't have a choice. The producer didn't have a choice.

The explanation was, that for legal reasons, he had to be on the recording. Once corporate people start talking about 'legal reasons,' they might as well be delivering stone tablets to Moses. So this was the situation: they were trying to record something professional with amateurs and it sounded like it. At this point, the producer only had one real escape. Procrastination.

"Say, Kevin, I have an idea. I know this lady who has an office downtown. Now I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but she's a professional singer. She teaches. She could help you in trying to sing." Honestly, the producer didn't believe that Kevin had any sort of a chance of ever learning to sing even if he were practicing for the next five hundred years. "Why not give her a call. Sooner rather than later. In fact let's do it right now. We'll set up an appointment for later today."

Kevin wasn't at all offended, in fact he was looking forward to it. Anything at all to get out of this horrible chamber of nightmares. Recording had just reminded him how awful he was and he was very eager to get as far way from it as he could, even if it was just for a few hours.



Sure enough, the appointment was easy to make. The instructor was not overburdened with clients, and would do just about anything at anytime for any promise of money. So Kevin took a ride out to their office building and rode up to the 14th floor. The building was a little confusing, and it took a minute or two to figure out exactly where he was supposed to go, and when he did figure it out, he was wrong.

"Is this the Singing Sensation Voice Training Institute?" Kevin asked as he stuck his head in an office door.

“Not really, this is Dr. Price’s office,” the attractive young woman sitting inside said. “He’s a psychiatrist. Kind of.”

“Oh.” Kevin was disappointed that the pretty woman wasn’t a vocal trainer. He could get really into singing if that were the case. Really, really, *really* into it.

“Why don’t you come in for a second though? I have a directory somewhere. Maybe we can find it on there.”

You didn’t have to ask Kevin twice, he was all in.

“I wonder where I put that, now.” The woman got up from her chair and bent over to search through some drawers, and in the process displayed a tantalizing *derrière* in Kevin’s direction. “So tell me, are you learning to sing? Or are you a professional?”

“I guess I’m learning?” Kevin said, his eyes transfixed on the woman’s backside. “I just accidentally started this group and I guess I need to sing now.”

“You accidentally started a band?”

“It’s kind of hard to explain,” Kevin said, sounding a little dejected.

“You sound kind of down about it. I would think you would be happy having started a band and doing some recording. A lot of people want to do that sort of thing.”

“So would I, but it’s all kind of out of my control. I didn’t want to really start a group, I thought that maybe someday I would, but not like this.”

“When’s your appointment?” The woman asked. “Do you have a few minutes?”

“Sure, I guess. I was coming in a little early.”

“Why don’t you talk to Dr. Price? He can help with lots of things like this.”

“Did you say he was a psychiatrist?”

“Kind of.”

“I don’t think that I really need psychotherapy.”

“No silly! It’s not like that. He does so much more than just analyze you, he... Well, maybe I should let you talk to him yourself. Then you’ll have a better idea.”

“I don’t have any money...”

“I wouldn’t do that. I think he could just help you out a little bit. Just a friendly chat. So tell me about the rest of this group of yours. Are they all as cute as you?”

With those words, Kevin was a goner. In just a few seconds, the woman was ushering him into Dr. Price’s office. “I’ll stay if you want me to,” she offered, noting Kevin’s hesitation.

“I wouldn’t want to put you to any trouble...”



“No trouble.” She sat down gracefully in the farthest seat. That was when Kevin finally was able to rip his eyes off of her and noticed the old man sitting behind the desk – presumably Dr. Price.

The doctor was seated at his desk in the direct center of it. His hands were folded just below his chin in a kind of contemplative mock prayer. The classic psychiatrist look. He even was bald and had glasses. You got your moneys’ worth with Dr. Price. He looked like a real psychologist. “Welcome... Is it Kevin?”

“Yes sir.”

“We’ll have none of that. Just call me Dr. Price.” The old man unfolded his hands and placed them on his desk. “Now tell me what’s it like, being you, Kevin. You look a little tired.”



When Kevin returned to the studio later that night, his skills were markedly improved. He could sing a note, hold it, and it was within a few semitones or an octave of where he intended to be. That was close enough. Using modern studio technology, anyone who's voice didn't cause the listeners ears to bleed could sound like a real singer. Or at least, an American Idol semi-finalist.

"A little instruction really helps," the producer said.

"Yeah, she was pretty good, but I had even more help." Kevin was unusually upbeat. "I met this psychiatrist..."

"Splendid, splendid. Whatever it takes." The producer was not interested in any further explanation. He had what he needed, and it was time to move on. Now he would record the music from the other members of the band, and then quietly hide those recordings and insert his own instrumentation so it didn't sound like an ungodly mess.

So it was finally time for Kevin to take his own seat in the lounge, and get a little bit of rest.

"Hey, that actually sounded halfway decent," Carl said. "I didn't think you had it in you."

Kevin looked at him warily, not expecting the insult he just received.

Carl nudged Kevin playfully. "Just foolin' with you man. So what were the lessons like?"

"They were okay. Pretty basic stuff, I guess." Kevin relaxed further into the sofa. "But what was even better, was Dr. Price."

"Who's that?" Carl asked.

"He's this therapist guy. I accidentally found him when I was looking for the singing school."

"So he helped you?"

"Yeah. He got me to finally learn how to relax. I guess things of been kind of out of control in my life lately. He really helped me with that. I normally wouldn't say such a thing about a therapist, because I think they're all kind of flakes, but he did actually help me."

"There is no greater puzzle to solve in the great majesty of the universe then the great mystery of your own life," Carl said, adding, "dude."

After being blessed with such asinine advice, it gave Kevin no greater thrill to tell Carl, "I think they want to in the studio now."

"Time for me to do my thing," Carl said, flexing his fingers. He grabbed his toy keyboard clarinet and headed for the studio.

As Carl left, José returned, having just made his contribution to this musical masterpiece. He landed in the sofa as if he had just dropped from 10,000 feet.

He then exhaled dramatically. "I don't get it. Why can't we all play at once? Then we be done. I go back to work."

"Relax José," said Kevin, "you're getting paid, there's nothing to worry about. Just take it easy."

"No. No, this no good. I like to work. I can no do dis. I just want to do some'ting. I feel like I just go crazy."

"Yeah, I kinda know how you feel," Kevin said. "Hey, you know who might help? I met this doctor guy earlier today. He helped me."

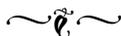
"A doctor? I dunno. I don't like doctors." José looked nervous. "I don't trust doctors."

"He's not that kind of doctor. He's actually really good. Why don't we go see him tomorrow."

"It's not going to cost me?"

"No way, he's just helping us out. You in?"

"If you say he okay, then he okay. I trust you."



The next morning, it was all four members of the so-called group that showed up at Dr. Price's office. Kevin's persistent lobbying for this trip seemed to have won over the boys. José had come just to get out the studio, Carl had come because it was free, and Ray had come because everybody else was going.

"Dr. Price will be with you guys in just a sec," said the very sexy receptionist. "So this is the whole group, huh? Four little cutie-cutes."

"I'm ready for the next appointment, Ellie," said the doctor on the intercom.

"So who wants to go first?" Ellie asked. "How about you, handsome?"

"Me?" Replied Ray.

"Yes, you! Go right in. The doctor's waiting for you."

Ray, looking vastly uncomfortable at going into the office, and even more uncomfortable doing anything alone, approached the door and touched the handle as if it were a live wire. He gave everyone a last look and then headed inside.

"So we're all going to get a one-on-one?" Asked Carl.

"Yes! Isn't the doctor so lucky?" Said Ellie.

The three remaining boys subtly squirmed in their seats, somewhat uncomfortable with the increasingly obvious overtones of Ellie's language. After all, none could be called 'experienced' in the field of flirting. They all had had a relationship or two in their life, at some point, but that was the product of their

usual mating rituals: awkwardness, desperation, and settling for the first thing that smiled at you.

Fortunately, after that, Ellie kept to herself. She seemed to be busy scribbling down some notes on a legal pad, which left the three boys free from her attentions. Although, that did not stop them from ogling her at every opportunity. She was probably the best looking thing any of them had seen live and in person, without paying a two drink minimum.

About 30 minutes later, Ray finally emerged from the office. He held something in his hands that everyone was sure he hadn't gone in with. It was then time for José to make his trip inside, and although he was as tentative as you might expect, at least he wasn't as skittish as Ray.

"Hand this paper to the doctor, won't you?" Ellie asked. She handed José a folded piece of legal paper.

No sooner had José gone inside then Kevin's phone rang. After checking the phone number, and seeing that it wasn't his girlfriend, he seemed okay with picking it up. It was good old shift manager Gabe.

"Where are you guys?" Gabe yelled. "We need you back here at the studio!"

"I thought we were done. At least I hope so."

"You were, but now you're not. That stupid producer's got himself fired. I don't know what he did, but the company just canned his ass."

"Really?" Kevin said. "Wow. "

"Yeah, and he took all the recordings with him. Now we need to start over!"

"Oh you gotta be kidding me!" Kevin sighed. "Okay, fine. We'll be there in an hour or so." He hung up before Gabe could answer, knowing Gabe would not be happy with what he just said.

"What was that all about?" Asked Carl.

"Yeah, what was that all about?" Ray echoed.

Kevin explained the situation to them. They all groaned, but Kevin knew that finishing the project meant being done with the project. There was no sense being a baby about it, he reasoned.

"I guess you got a point there," said Carl.

"I don't like it," said Ray, in an unusual display of opinion.

"We've just got to make the best of it," was all Kevin could say.

"Whatever," was Ray's reply. "Hey! Shake my hand!" he offered his hand to Carl.

Without thinking, which was something Carl was good at, he shook Ray's hand. He was rewarded by a loud buzzing sound and Carl snapped his hand back as if it'd just been bitten by a cobra.

“What’s the deal, bro?” Carl snapped.

Ray held up the underside of his palm. “Joy buzzer!” Ray laughed. “You should’ve seen the look on your face! Priceless!”

“Where did you get that?” Carl asked.

“Did the doctor give you that?” Kevin asked. He thought it might be the item Ray carried out from his trip to the office.

“None of your business.” Ray replied. He pulled off the buzzer from his hand and stuck it in his pocket. “You guys are suckers.”

A few minutes later when José exited from the office, he too, held an item. “You next,” he said looking at Carl.

“Okay. Just don’t shake hands with Ray, if you know what’s good for you.”

“Spoil my fun,” Ray said. Kevin couldn’t help but note how out of character Ray was suddenly behaving. But he didn’t know Ray that well, so maybe he was just showing a part of his personality he hadn’t shown before.

“Oh could you give this to the doctor?” Ellie said, thrusting another piece of legal paper at Carl.

“Yeah, sure.” The paper was all folded up so Carl couldn’t read it.

Kevin didn’t think it was very professional of the receptionist to be passing notes to the doctor. If they had been in high school, she would’ve been brought up for detention. Maybe there was more to the relationship than just professionalism? Although Kevin couldn’t see such a pretty young woman as Ellie having anything to do with the old and cerebral doctor.

José sat down, taking Carl’s spot. Kevin noticed he that he was also carrying a small object in his hands, just like Ray was. “What’s that?” Kevin asked.

“I don’ know, he just give it to me when finished. I don’t know what it for. Is it a gift? Do I need to pay for dis? What do I do with it? I don’ know.” José held it up for both of them to see. It was a small porcelain cup with a union jack flag on the side. “I guess I could use it,” José said, “but it no good for beer.”

“It’s a teacup,” Kevin said. “You know, tea? The British drink a lot of tea.”

“Is it valuable? Could I sell it?” José asked.

“No, I don’t think so. There are tons of teacups out there.” Kevin shrugged. “Who knows why he did that. I’m sure we’ll find out, though.”

After informing José of the new recording session, the three waited for the last appointment, which was for Kevin. He too carried in a note from Ellen as he went to the office. He also saw that Carl was carrying something small in his hands as well. It looked like an iPod.

Well, at least one of them got a cool gift, Kevin thought to himself. He sat down in the chair opposite Dr. Price desk and handed him the note. Dr. Price

spent a good two minutes carefully reading the note, and once he was done he place to decide and directors attention straight in between Kevin's eyes.

"Very well done Kevin," the doctor said calmly. "You were very persuasive. All your friends came."

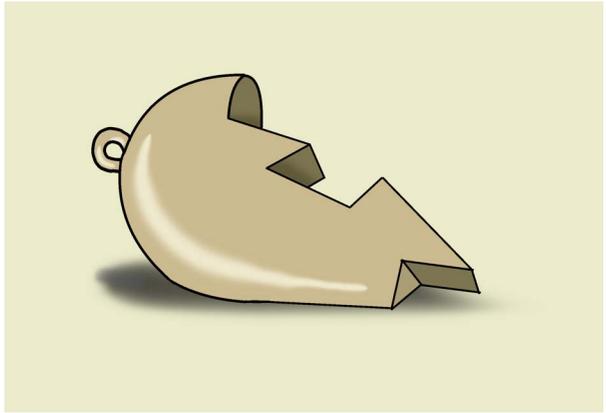
"Well I wouldn't call them my friends, they're just people that I work with, and kind of accidentally..."

"Sleep, Kevin. Sleep," said the doctor.

That's the last thing Kevin remembered.



The next thing Kevin could recall, he was sitting on a bus heading back to the studio. Carl, Ray, and José were also with him. All of them were clutching the small objects they had been given by the doctor. Sure enough, Kevin looked down on his lap, where he was holding something. On closer inspection, it turned out to be a small piece of metal. It was oddly shaped, a bulge of metal that looked like it had been broken. It also had a small eyelet on it, which made him think it was some sort of pendant or something. Plus it was plated in gold, or something that looked a lot like gold.



For some reason, he kept turning and turning it in his hands, even though he wanted to just put it in his pocket and forget about it.

The bus arrived in the studio's neighborhood, and all four got off. They said nothing, keeping silent. Once they were inside the studio, they met the new producer, who seemed to be a bit more even-keeled than the last guy.

All four recorded their parts, without any real difficulty. The recording session went much smoother this time. In fact, they were done in just a matter of a couple of hours. Maybe it was because they had already done it once, so doing it the second time made it much easier.

Kevin though, suspected that visiting Dr. Price had given each member a new-found sense of confidence. After all, that was the whole reason to bring the boys to see the doctor. He was pretty pleased with himself.

With the dirty work done, Kevin phoned up his girlfriend to see if he could get a ride home. The other three also left.

“So, do I have a famous rockstar as a boyfriend?” Asked Paula.

“Nah. I’m just plain old Kevin.”

“Good. I hate rock.” Paula punched a button on the car radio. “Give me some Nicki Minaj any day over that crap.” The car was filled with the electronic zippy sounds of the latest pop hit.

Kevin squinted a bit, barely able to tolerate the sound of the pounding beat and synthetic noise. He wanted to turn it down or turn it off, but he knew better than to cross Paula for any reason.

“So you’re going to take me to dinner. Congratulations,” Paula said with a sassy, smug smile. “How do you feel about Himalayan-French seafood? There’s a new place that just opened up. I got us reservations.”

Paul couldn’t say no, after all, he had just asked for a favor. He was well aware that her prices were steep for favors. He spent the rest of the night pretending to pay attention to what ever his girlfriend said, and agree with whatever she wanted him to agree to. In other words, a normal night out.

Kevin did, though, take a special interest in the necklace Paula wore. The thin chain around her neck was probably just thin enough to fit in the tiny eyelet found of the strange piece of metal Kevin was fiddling was in his pocket. That seem to interest him, for some reason.



Now that the recording was completed, it was back to the grindstone. Or, in Kevin’s case, the grease-stone. Back to Burger Boom. After all, Kevin needed to make a living. That was the beauty of an employee competition, since they were already on the payroll, corporate felt no need to pay anything extra for the jingle. But the boys didn’t expect anything extra anyway, that had been clear from the very beginning.

They got to keep their jobs, which was reward enough.

...In some alternate universe somewhere.

“You think you rock stars can take it easy?” Gabe asked. “You guys are really slacking off!”

Kevin’s head was throbbing, from three hours of verbal abuse from Gabe. Kevin didn’t know what Gabe’s problem was, but for some reason, he had turned up the amplification on his irritating personality tenfold.

“When that buzzer goes off on the fries, you need to be there within five seconds. You’re giving me six, seven, eight seconds! Let’s get that done, people!” Gabe was almost apoplectic. “This is not satisfactory! Let’s get this done!”

When Gabe was far enough away, Carl leaned over from the register position. “Sounds like his aura has gone way out of phase today. That dude has the worst chakra of anyone I know.”

Kevin wanted to agree with him, but he wasn’t entirely sure what Carl had just said. Kevin just nodded. As it so happened, this particular shift had all four of them working. Carl, Kevin, José and even the reclusive Ray. Kevin was working on the line, Carl at the register, José cleanup, and Ray was staring at things.

“Ray, why aren’t you doing anything?” Gabe yelled. “We’re not paying you to just space out.”

Ray didn’t respond. He just kept his back to Gabe.

“Did you we hear me?” Gabe hollered. “You need to listen to me.”

Ray then suddenly spun around. “What laid eggs up your butt?”

You could actually hear the gasp coming from the other employees.

“What did you just say?” Gabe responded. “What did you just say to me?”

Ray was assertive. He stood his ground and put his hands on his hips. “What, are you losing your hearing?”

“That’s it!” Gabe said. “You’re outta here. Take your stuff and go home. I don’t need you.”

“It’s all about you, isn’t it Gabe?” Ray said. “The world revolves around you and we are just things that get in your way.”

“Alright, that’s the way you want it?” Gabe pointed to the office. “Get in there, right now. This is harassment – you’re harassing me. And I’m going to bring you up on charges. I’m gonna fill out a harassment form!”

“Like hell you are!”

“You bet I am! You think you’re so smart? I’m not going to fire you. Once I bring you up on harassment, you forego all your benefits and back pay. You’ll get nothing, and you’ll get terminated!”

“Yeah, well I quit!”

“Same deal! No back pay, no benefits!” Gabe said, with a sneer. “And no unemployment.”

“Gabe!” Came at yell from the back of the restaurant. “In my office, now!” It was the voice of Tom, The restaurant’s general manager. Usually, he was silent. Often times, it was as if there was no general manager at Burger Boom. Tom just let Gabe do whatever the hell he wanted to. But for some reason, this time, Tom had stopped his prized pet shift manager cold.



Without another word, Gabe shuffled off to the office, where the door was closed, and the yelling began.

Needless to say, the activity in the restaurant had ground to a halt. All the employees were just standing around staring at the office, and at Ray, and the 27 or so customers waiting to place their orders were frozen still with horrified expressions on their face.

Kevin exited the kitchen and approached the front counter. He addressed the customers and said, politely, “maybe this would be a good day to explore your other dining options.”

They all agreed with him by leaving.

Carl turned to Kevin and said, “I’m on break.” He took the iPod from his pocket, put on a pair of headphones, and left.

Kevin then approached Ray, and said, “this might be a good time to get the hell out of here.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Ray sniped. “I’ll take the register! That’s where all the fun is!”

Kevin wanted to object, but he was not in a position to do so. He wasn’t a manager, thank God.

The muffled shouting coming from the manager's office had started to die down a small amount, but it was still a pretty fiery conversation inside. Even after two minutes, after four minutes, after ten minutes, it was still raging on.

Kevin paced around a little bit, nervous. Waiting for the door to open was kind of like waiting for a bomb to explode. He walked on over to José, and said, "having fun?"

"So much drama," José said, "they really are a bunch of immature children."

Kevin had to agree. They were acting like children. Immature was the perfect word for it. He also noted that José's English was improving.

Finally, the door opened. Gabe took three steps outside the office, and stopped still. With his head slung low and staring at the floor, he said, "Ray, I'd like to offer an apology."

"About time," Ray said. He was obviously trying to provoke another reaction.

But he didn't get one. "I think we just need to engage in some conflict resolution," Gabe said. "I know we can work as a team."

It certainly was a change of pace, to hear any sort of apology coming from Gabe's lips. He was a Rottweiler of a manager, normally. Kevin had never heard one word of reconciliation from him in the time he had worked here. He wondered what the cause of this was.

Three days later, Kevin got his answer. He, and the other three members of his little group, were called in before opening the restaurant in the morning. Tom, the general manager, told the four of them, plus Gabe, said that corporate wanted them to do their stuff again.

As he explained it, there was a convention coming up in a month for all the local franchisees around the country. The company wanted the four of them there to perform the jingle, live. Plus, as Tom explained, he was told that this was the "most important thing in the world" by Bert the owner. So, beginning immediately, they were back on jingle duty.

Kevin, José, Ray, and Carl kind of shrugged it off. Both flipping burgers and performing seemed to be about the same. Kind of dull. The only person who seemed put out by this news was Gabe.

Although Gabe had learned the hard way to keep his mouth shut.

Tom described the plan: for the next few weeks, they were going to work up an act. Performing a five second jingle didn't take up all whole lot of time, so they were going to need to come up with some other stuff to do on stage. Tom suggested maybe writing a song or two.

They had some time to work on it here, and then for the final week they would be sent to Las Vegas, where the convention was being held. Once in Vegas, they would be put up in a hotel and their expenses covered, while they put the finishing touches on the act.

Tom handed a few sheets of paper to Gabe and said, “this is what corporate wants, and you’re in charge of making sure it all happens according to plan.” Gabe took the papers like he was being handed a dead skunk.

Handshakes were exchanged, and they all left the restaurant, except for Tom. There, Gabe swiftly turned around and kicked the wall of the restaurant, angrily. The building did not collapse.

“I was happy just doing my job! Now I’m stuck with you guys!” He yelled, at no one in particular.

“We are not so happy about it either,” Ray quipped.

“I’m just a glorified babysitter!”

“What’s the glorified part?” José said. Kevin snickered.

“Oh yeah? Well, screw you guys.”

Kevin had an urge to play peacemaker. He waved off the rest of the guys and talked quietly to Gabe. “Look, if we’re stuck with each other for a while, we’ve got to start to stop bickering. It’s not productive, and we’ll just tear each other to shreds after a few days. But I know this guy who might be able to work things out between us.”



“Huzzah!” Diedrick exclaimed. “I’ve been looking for this die from Valhalla to the river Styx. These pewter ones costs a mercenaries’ ransom!”

Diedrick was on the floor, on all fours, with his nose under the couch. He held his prize, a 16-sided die, in the air for all to see. But it was just Kevin alone in the room with him.

“So Las Vegas, hmm?” Diedrick had just been told of Kevin’s upcoming trip. “Might I impose upon you for a souvenir from the Excalibur Hotel? A broadsword, maybe?”

“If we get there, sure, I suppose.” Kevin took another sip of his beer. He was finding it especially bitter. “It’s kind of a working trip, though. Haven’t you ever been to Las Vegas yourself?”

“I refuse to patronize the city since the closing of The Star Trek Experience.”

Spending his day with Diedrick in their tiny apartment was not the ideal way to pass time for Kevin. But they were still setting up a place for the ‘group’ to practice. The apartment was too small. So Gabe had to go find a suitable facility.

Until then, Kevin took it upon himself to try and write a few bits of music for any potential songs they might need. It was tough, because he needed to make the music sound safe and corporate, not the usual hard rock he preferred.

Kevin took another sip of beer, and made a face. For some reason, all the beer he had been buying lately tasted like crap. True, he didn't exactly buy the top-of-the-line stuff, but even the bargain beer he usually got didn't taste this bad... Or go through him this quickly.

Kevin got off the sofa, and headed for the bathroom. He had been in there for a few minutes when his phone rang. Diedrick, being the helpful and nosy person he was, picked the phone up and answered it for his dear roommate. After a short conversation, he hung up and went to his room to put away his newly rediscovered die.

After exiting the bathroom, Kevin checked his phone for messages. He had sworn he had heard it ring. But there was no indication of voice mail.

Diedrick returned, and noted his roommate's distaste for the beer. "Dost thou abstain from partaking in thy innkeeper's ale?"

"Yeah, this stuff taste like unfiltered ass." Kevin grabbed his wallet. "I'm going to go down to the store and get something to drink. I can't take any more of that stuff. Do you want anything?" He asked, hoping the answer would be no.

Diedrick handed him five dollars. "A modicum of beef jerky will satiate me."

Kevin took the cash and headed out the door. It was a couple blocks to the nearest store, which left him with a little time to himself, something he rarely had these days. He reflected on the fact that he was no longer really a working man. There was no regular job for him anymore. He was now a professional musician, something that he'd always wanted to do. However, he had always envisioned himself as a hard rocker, working bars, small clubs and the like.

He had always preferred his music dirty and gritty, rough around the edges. This jingle stuff was too neat and clean for him. Although, he was warming to it. Kevin popped into the store and headed towards the back where the alcohol was. He examined every brand carefully. He had bought most of them at some point in his life, and for each brand he could feel the taste on his tongue. As he went through every last brand in the store, none of them tasted good to his imagination.

"Wine cooler?" Diedrick said, looking at the purchases Kevin returned with. "That's a bit out of character for you."

"Maybe I'm a little tired of doing the same old thing." Kevin handed over the beef jerky and 29 cents change. He cracked the top of a bottle and poured it into a glass, enjoying the smell of strawberries.

"By the way, your folks called," Diedrick said, gnawing on a stalk of jerky. "They wanted you to call them back."

"Of course they did. They've got no one to nag so they phone me." He took a couple of sips of the cooler, to brace himself. Then, he brought his phone out and dialed them up.

Diedrick took the opportunity to linger in the room, so he could overhear the conversation. He opened one of the forgotten beers, and emptied it into his favorite stein. The one with the red dragon on it.

“What happened again?” Kevin asked the phone. “I told you to stop answering those emails. It’s just a scam.”

Kevin paused for a minute as he listened.

“And of course that can’t be right. You checked with them, right?” Kevin said. He listened further.

“I don’t like it. It’s a scam, I’m telling you. Next thing he’ll say is that he’s a Nigerian prince. Don’t give him any money.”

Diedrick, as one could guess, was riveted by the conversation. It appeared to him that Kevin was becoming more and more distressed by what he was hearing.

“I don’t care if he gave you a check, you know it’s going to bounce. Don’t try to cash it, it’ll just ruin your credit rating.”

Then, Diedrick noted Kevin’s eyes flash wide open.

“You did cash it? It was good? That’s not possible. You know it’s not possible.”

Kevin then paused to listen some more. This time, he didn’t talk back.

“You’ve had a lawyer look at this, right? Well, of course he says that. Have an *expensive* lawyer look at it, then. No, of course I’m happy for you! It just seems like this has to be some sort of a scam. I don’t know. So you have the cash, maybe there’s some way it gets taken back or something, I don’t know. It’s just not possible.”

Kevin listened some more. He was no longer distressed or angry, he seemed to trying cope with the message he was hearing.

“So, I guess I’m happy for you.” Kevin said, with bewilderment. “That’s the best news I’ve ever heard.” By this point, Kevin’s expression was a total distortion of his face. Every muscle in his face was either clenched or stretched out.

Diedrick thought that this was either the best news ever delivered in the history of the world, or the worst possible news. It couldn’t be in between, that was for sure. He was dying to know what it happened.

“Yeah, sure. Great. Thank you, I guess. Yes, of course I’m grateful... But... Yes, I’ll go check it out.” Kevin reached for piece of paper and a pen. “Just a second. I’ll write it down. Yeah, okay. I’ve got it. Yes. I’ll let you know how it looks.”

Kevin then hung up the phone. With a faraway look in his eyes, Kevin set the phone aside, and looked out into space.

“Well?” Diedrick asked with urgency. “What happened! Do not toy with me!”

Kevin took a moment to comport himself. “My parents just sold their ranch.”

“Sold it? Why?”

Kevin shrugged. “Someone told them there was oil under it. Vast amounts of oil. They sold it for \$386 million.”

“That can’t be real.”

“Apparently, it is. They have the cash. They have the contracts. The lawyers have checked everything out. They have \$386 million minus tax in the bank.”

“Then what were you writing down?”

“They wanted to give me a present. They bought me a mansion.” Kevin looked at the piece of paper. “This is the address.”



Kevin and Paula pulled up at the number on the sheet of paper. There was, indeed, a large mansion at this site. When Kevin went to the front door, the key he had been provided with turned the lock. This was the place, this was his new mansion.



Stepping inside, he was immediately taken by the large open indoor space. The mansion was built out of marble, with all the rooms around the sides, and in the center, a large atrium space with plants that were slightly dead.

He could not comprehend how expensive this place must’ve been. He now felt an overwhelming responsibility to make sure he didn’t touch anything. Because this couldn’t possibly be his, it was someone else’s, it was far too good for the likes of him. *If I break anything, he thought to himself, I won’t be able to return the house.*

If Kevin had bothered to look, he would have noted that his girlfriend Paula seemed to be losing her mind. The expression on her face was like Gollum having finally found the ring. Here it was, all the wealth she could have imagined,

and this lump of a boyfriend she had been keeping on the line was finally paying off beyond her wildest dreams – and when it came to wealth, Paula had some pretty wild dreams.

Her eyes were as big as two full moons, and were scanning the entire place left to right, top to bottom. Her hands were clenched up tightly to her chest and curled as if she wanted at any moment to just lunge out and grab something, so as to appreciate its inherent wealth. That is, if she couldn't overcome the urge to devour it and incorporate its' opulence into her very soul.

"It's ours, it's all ours!" Paula whispered to herself. "Let's get married!" She shouted at Kevin, trembling with excitement. "Right now, right now!"

Kevin was snapped back to reality by that comment. He turned to see that his girlfriend had morphed from her usual deadpan, distant, emotionless countenance, into the living incarnation of greed.

"Why don't you take a seat, honey." Kevin gently directed her to a nearby velvet love seat, disregarding the dust that had accumulated on it. She fought him, and wanted to keep her feet. She scrambled away and started running around the room like a six-year-old in a candy factory.

"All of it, it's all mine," she said repeatedly.

Kevin hadn't heard that kind of language outside of badly written movies. After a few minutes of random criss-crossing around the house, Paula eventually returned to where Kevin was standing. He had to grab her by the wrists just to get her attention. "I don't even know if this is really mine," Kevin said, "and marriage is a little bit of a rush don't you think?"

"You're seeing someone else!" Paula said, going almost banana yellow with jealousy. "Well she can't have you!"

"Calm down, for God sake!"

"Tell me you're mine! Tell me! You must tell me!" Paula was trying to think of some way to threaten Kevin into acquiescing to her wishes. "Marry me now or I won't drive you home!" She had always enjoyed having the advantage over Kevin, the natural advantage that women have over men. Now, all of the sudden, Kevin was the one with the advantage, and she was clearly unprepared for this eventuality.

"Paula, honey, why don't we drive you home, so you can relax," Kevin offered.

"This is my home!" Paula insisted. "This is my real home! I was born to live in a place like this!" She started to cry. "I knew it would happen for me someday! I just knew all the time!"

Finally, Kevin had to capitulate. "Of course, sweetie. But we have to leave now, so it can be cleaned up. So why don't I take you back to where your apartment, and we'll come back later when the place is all nice and clean."

Kevin demonstrated that need by wiping his finger along the top of the near by chest showing months and months of dust accumulation.

“Oh, okay, maybe that’s for the best.” Paula been clenched her shoulders as if she’d suddenly felt a chill. Kevin took the opportunity to wrap an arm around her shoulders and direct her back out the front door. “We can come back tomorrow, right?”

“Of course we can, sweetie. But you look like you need to get some sleep first.”

Kevin carefully placed her back in her own car in the passenger seat, and then drove her back to her apartment. He left her there, lying in her bed, still a bit moon-eyed. He then grabbed his phone once again.

“Yes, this is Kevin. Could you ask the doctor if he makes house calls? This is a little bit of an emergency.”



With his girlfriend in capable hands, Kevin decided that it was about time to share his new place with some people who weren’t going to fall to pieces upon seeing it. He invited José, Carl and Ray.

So just a few hours later, he found himself hosting an impromptu reception at his new abode. José, Carl and Ray were there by the time he had arrived from the bus stop.

Carl Declared the building “trippy” and José just let out an admiring whistle. Ray was less impressed, saying he had seen bigger mansions that were far more grand than this. Fortunately José had brought some sodas with him, so there was something to drink. Surprisingly, the large 72 inch big screen seemed to be in working order, so they sat down to watch a baseball game.

No one was quite sure how, but Gabe arrived, even though no one admitted to telling him where they all were. He was wearing a pair of black Ray-Ban sunglasses, a new affectation of hits. Apparently Dr. Price had given them to him after their session.

All he had to do was step foot inside the new place, before he declared, “and you had me running around all day trying to find a place to practice? This is perfect!”

Simultaneously, they all realized that it was true. This was a perfect place to practice. There was a large open space for them to all work, it had more amenities than any of them would ever need, and even had rooms for them stay in. It was perfect. All they had to do was freshen up the place.

“But it would take us a week to clean this whole place up. It’s huge!” Said Carl.

“Why don’t we just have Kevin hire some people to clean it up for us? And maybe do some decoration while they’re at it?” Ray said. “The place looks like it just fell out of 1985.”

Kevin balked at that. Sure he may actually own a mansion, but that didn’t mean he was rich. His parents might’ve been rich, but that didn’t mean he had a lot of money. “It’s a little expensive.”

Gabe then chimed in. “I’ll just use whatever it was that we were going to spend on getting a practice place. That should be enough.”

It was then that Kevin said something he thought he’d never ever say if he lived to be a million billion years old. “Good idea, Gabe.”

“What are we gonna call this place?” José asked.

“It looks like an old decrepit ballroom,” Ray said. “There probably a bunch of rats running around here someplace.”

“The rats ballroom,” Kevin said. “That would almost make a good band name.”



A couple of days later, the group was all set up at the new place. They had practically moved in with all of the equipment that they needed to do some work, and they had bought a little bit of food.

The decorators had just finished their work, having done a rush job. The place was now sparkling clean, and looked much better than before. The atrium now flooded the house with sunlight, making it look like a bit of man-made paradise. There were new curtains, new rugs, and new stuff all over the place. It looked far more expensive than Gabe’s budget probably would have allowed, but here it was anyway.

The very center of the mansion had been cleared out as a workspace. All four members of the ‘group’ had their own space, and spent much of the day tinkering around and working out new ideas. But that wasn’t good enough for Gabe, as he was driven to make sure this was going to be a success.

He couldn’t stop making suggestions at every turn. He pushed new song ideas, criticized old ones, and was starting to annoy everyone with his constant intervention. The music wasn’t slow enough or fast enough. The singing wasn’t good enough, the guitar playing wasn’t good enough, the base wasn’t good enough, the drums weren’t good enough and that melodica-keyboard-thing that Carl played wasn’t good enough.

“You have to take this seriously,” Gabe kept saying. “You need to be real professionals out there. And you need to look like you know what you’re doing.”

The last straw came when Gabe produced a pile of clothing. Not just any clothing, but new performing clothes for every member of the group. He called them stage outfits.

“Are you serious?” Asked José, sipping some tea. “You can’t be serious.”

Kevin went to the pile and picked up one of the items. They all seemed to be made of spandex. Glittery, shiny spandex. “This does seem a bit over-the-top.”

“It’s what people do in our business, baby,” Gabe said.

Ray walked over to check them out for himself. “I think they’re okay,” he said. “Sure they’re a little showy, but we are in show biz.”

Carl, who’d been keeping to himself, and listening to his new headphones, walked over without comment picked up something that looked like a jacket and put it right on. He then returned to where he came from, without speaking a word.

Gabe pointed to Ray and Carl. “See, they like it.”

“Yeah but we don’t,” Kevin said, referring to him and José.

“Well there’s no helping the fact that you guys are idiots,” Ray said. “You guys have screwed up everything at every point along the way. I would’ve done it totally different.”

“Like what?” José said loudly and angrily. “You think you could do this better?”

“Hey, let’s not have an argument!” Said Kevin. “Not over something so silly!”

“This isn’t silly!” Yelled Gabe.

“Everyone call me down!” Yelled Kevin. “This is getting crazy!”

“Crazy? I’ll show you crazy!” Yelled Ray. He picked up a lamp off a nearby table and threw it against the wall, causing it to break into pieces.



“So what brings you to see me today?” Asked Dr. Price.

All four members of the group, plus Gabe, were seated in Dr. Price’s office.

“He started it!” Accused Ray, pointing at José.

“Right! That’s a lie, that is!” José declared.

“Now, calm down everybody,” said the doctor. “I’m sure this is something we can resolve easily. Now aren’t you all feeling a little bit tired? Maybe a little sleepy, perhaps?”



“These are awfully tight, aren’t they?” Said Kevin.

“At least they stretch,” replied José.

It was going to be the first practice with all of them in their new outfits. Carl and Ray were already waiting, and José and Kevin were just finishing up.

José had a dark blue spandex tank top, with a black pair of stretch pants. They weren’t very forgiving when it came to the body, but fortunately for José, he was in good shape. He found a jacket that fit him well enough, and used it to cover his shoulders. Kevin, however, was left with some uncomfortable choices. All that was left over was a white spandex full-body leotard, and a long pastel blue coat. He slipped into them and decided that adding a belt at the waist was the best way to keep the outfit from looking any weirder than it had to. All in



all, both men were slightly embarrassed, but not nearly as humiliated as they thought they would be.

“I guess it isn’t as bad as I thought,” José remarked.

“Yeah, it’s not too bad.” Kevin had to agree. Yes, they did book a bit less than 100% masculine, but no more different than any number of performers he’d seen on stage. Slightly ridiculous, maybe, but appropriate for their new profession.

If they were being truly honest with each other, they were all secretly enjoying the feel of the smooth, tight clothing on their bodies. Not that they would, in a million years, ever admit that.

Once they were all together, they ran through the two songs they had worked out. One fast, kicky number Kevin liked. Another was a little slower, much more like a ballad, that Ray favored.

It was also the first practice with proper instruments. Once Gabe had told corporate about the makeshift instruments the band was using, they bought a proper drum kit for Ray, a real set of keyboards for Carl, and some big amplifiers for Kevin and José.

Fortunately, everybody seemed to know what to do. Ray was a natural on the drum kit, taking to it like a fish to water. Carl had unpacked his new equipment quickly, and got it all plugged in and wired up. There must’ve been a hundred wires leading from the keyboards to other audio processing equipment, but he seemed to make sense of it somehow. He especially enjoyed the new giant headphones that came with the equipment, as he was rarely seen without the big cans on.

Kevin was especially fond of the new microphone he had been given. It made his voice sound much smoother than the old one they were using. That was especially helpful for the ballad. Both José and Kevin understood their new amplifiers immediately. They knew just what settings to use to get the sound they wanted. Where any of them had gotten this knowledge didn’t seem to be terribly important.

Ray clicked off the beginning of the very first song, and the group dove right in. It took them a few takes to get everything synced up, but they were a natural. They played together beautifully. Say what you want about their conflicting personalities, but when he came to music, they seemed to be a perfectly matched set.

They ran through both songs several times, tweaking them a little bit every time. Eventually they had some stuff they were reasonably happy with. “So what do you think, Gabe?” Asked Kevin.

“I think it’s terrific,” Gabe replied with a proud smile on his face. “You’re going to knock them out when we go on tour.”

“On tour?” José asked. “Like a right proper band?”

“Woo-hoo! Tour!” Ray yelled in celebration.

“Wait a minute, Gabe,” Kevin asked, putting his guitar away. “What are you talking about?”

“Great news! The company wants us to do a mall mini-tour before we go to the convention, to make sure that we’ve got everything worked out.” Gabe looked very pleased with himself. “They want us to try out the act and test the jingle. They want to see how it performs out there in the public.”

“Doesn’t that seem a little crazy?” Kevin asked. “I mean we’re not really a real band!”

“Well consider yourself a real band!” Gabe said. “I even told them that name you guys decided on.”

“We decided on a name?” Ray said. “I wasn’t told! That’s not fair!”

“It was your name, Ray,” Gabe told him. “You remember, The Ballroom Brats.”

“I said there were rats in this place! That wasn’t a name!”

“Well, I really like that. I think it’s... Cute,” said José.

Kevin smiled as he looked back at Ray. “Hey, don’t complain! You got to name the band!”

“I didn’t mean to!” Ray crossed arms and pouted behind his drum kit.

Kevin and José just looked each other and smiled knowingly. They liked tweaking with Ray.

“Well, what’s done is done,” said Gabe. “Now, let’s really get practicing. We’ll be leaving in a week for five shows! And you guys need to be ready! In fact, we should probably make another couple of songs we need to do at least a half hour.”

“That’s not a couple of songs!” Said Kevin, “that’s more like five or six!”

“Then we better get working!” Said Gabe.

“I can’t just produce for five or six songs just like that!” Said Kevin, snapping his fingers. “I can’t work like that! I’ll get totally stressed out!”

“I can write them, no problem!” Said Ray. “If Kevin thinks he’s not up to the task, I know I am.”

“Now, now. Let’s not have another argument,” Kevin said. “Ray, you write those songs. I think I can handle maybe doing three or four. But I know I’m pushing it. Then, once we have them all done, we’ll see which ones are the best, and pick the ones that are going to go into the set. Sound fair?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Ray said.

“Great!” Said Gabe. “I’ll tell you what, Dr. Price told me about a spa he’s opening up in the valley. He wanted us to check it out. Once we get the songs finished, we’ll all go down there and enjoy a few days off before we kick off the tour.”

“Sound good?” Kevin asked the members of his new band, The Ballroom Brats.

“Smashing!” Said José.

“Whatever,” said Ray.

Carl didn’t even glance their way, but gave a thumbs up.



Once again, Diedrick didn’t get an answer. He had been phoning his so-called roommate for days now. The rent was coming up, and he never needed a roommate more than he did right now. He wasn’t going to be able to cough up the \$500 that Kevin needed to pay, and hadn’t seen any sign of Kevin for weeks now.

He had but one clue – the mansion he claimed to have been gifted. It seemed very clear to him now, that the whole thing was an elaborate ruse for Kevin to get out of his apartment lease. Kevin did not seem capable of such deviousness, but Diedrick had been fooled before, by lesser foes than Kevin.

Still, if Kevin had been telling the truth, then he would be living in that mansion. Such a thing was fairly easy to check out, but Diedrick had been busy lately, what with his DMing, his job, and the tons of back episodes of “Fringe” he was catching up on.

Now though, he was left with few options. Diedrick jumped in his car, his 1978 Plymouth Monarch, and headed to the address he’d managed to get from the pad Kevin used to write his new address. It was a simple gambit – something you’d seen in a Sherlock Holmes episode. The rubbing of a piece of paper to reveal the writings of the last person to have used it. Or was that an old episode of Mrs. Columbo? He wasn’t sure.

After a quick drive across town, he arrived at the address. It certainly was an impressive estate. The mansion was huge. There seemed to be no activity outside, and it was a fairly dead street. Diedrick felt safe in using his stealthy, chubby ninja skills to run up and peek inside a window.

He could just make out what looked to be a bad knock-off rock group inside, all in horrible, gaudy spandex outfits. They were making a bit of noise, practicing the so-called “rock music” that many mistakenly enjoyed these days, in his opinion. Diedrick was about to write the whole thing off, when he suddenly realized who was singing. It was Kevin.

Dismayed that Kevin would partake in such an endeavor, Diedrick made his way back to his car. This was a very curious development, indeed. Things didn't add up. This was no simple jingle writing. Something sinister was afoot. Faced with a dilemma most puzzling, he asked himself: "What would Mrs. Columbo do?"



"Come on Kevin, would you put that bloody guitar away?" José said. "We're at a getaway spa for Christ's sake. The whole point is to relax."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. But there's still a few chords I'm not quite getting," replied Kevin. "I want these songs to be right!"

José simply got up from his bed, grabbed the guitar away from Kevin, put it in the closet and then went back to lie on the bed.

"Message received," said Kevin.

"So what do you want to do first?" José asked.

"I really wasn't paying attention when we went through the introduction. What is there to do at a spa but just lie back and relax?"

"Well, normally I wouldn't come all the way out here to relax. I can do that back at the mansion. But there's a lot to do at the spa – you can get a stone massage, a Swedish massage, a sport massage, a deep tissue massage, or a Hawaiian massage," José said. "Me, I think I'm going to get a massage."

"Sounds like a good choice. But besides massages, what else?"

"Well there's the body treatments. You can get a body mask, a body wrap, a detoxifying wrap, or an enhancement wrap."

"Did you memorize this?"

"I read the brochure every day before we got here." José stretched like a tired cat. "And there's more. Whole-face facials, facial enhancements, pedicures, manicures, foot treatments, hand treatments, and don't forget about the hair salon."

"Oh, by no means should we forget the hair salon," Kevin snarked. "Sounds like it's a long way from growing up in Mexico."

"What's that got to do with anything?" José said, before turning back over on his stomach.

Kevin wasn't sure José was just being sarcastic or grumpy. "Forget it." He was amazed a how much getting to know José had changed his opinion of him. He once regarded him as just another Latino janitor. There was so much more to him than that. He was witty, even sometime funny. He also spoke much better

English than he had given him credit for. Kevin thought that José probably spoke it better than he did.

Kevin got up and left the room. In the hallway, he bumped into Ray, who had already changed out of his clothes and into the complimentary robe and slippers of the spa.

“That was quick,” Kevin said.

“I’m not going to waste a second of this.” Ray tugged his belt a little bit tighter. “I’m going to take advantage of everything they have here. Starting with the hair salon. I want to get a good rock look.”

“Well, enjoy yourself. Have you seen Carl?”

“I lost track of him when he said he was going to go get a body mask.”

“I guess I’ll just keep looking around for him. I feel like exploring, you want to come along?”

“Nah, I want to do it by myself.”

“Suit yourself,” Kevin said, “I’ll see you guys later.” With that, Kevin was off. He wanted to do a full walk around the grounds of the spa. It was slightly isolated, surrounded by dense trees and a few miles away from any other buildings. But that’s exactly what he wanted right now, to be far away from anybody else. He started his walk by heading across the very well manicured lawns. He walked up close to the fence which contained the grounds, and looked around. There wasn’t much to see, just a lot of trees.

However, even though Kevin didn’t see much, Diedrick did. He was hiding out there amongst the trees, with a pair of binoculars tracking his former roommate. He’d been following their movements for several days now, and was more and more suspicious of what he saw.

The first thing he noticed, was that all four members were acting dramatically different then when he first met them. He remembered meeting every single one of them whenever he dropped by Burger Boom to get some free food off his roommate.

Not only had Kevin changed a bit, but the other three had changed almost beyond the point of recognition. Ray’s personality was almost the exact opposite of what it what once was. José, was about as Mexican as a Taco Bell meal. Carl had changed the most of all, no longer a hipster hippy, but an increasingly quiet and reserved introvert almost physically attached to his headphones. All of them, to a man, had also lost dramatic amounts of weight.

So far Diedrick had put together this much: the jingle contest had somehow triggered massive personality changes in these four people, not to mention that crazy manager guy. He had looked for other correlations, but until this moment, really hadn’t drawn a link between them and Dr. Price. But now it was

clear, they had all visited Dr. Price at some point, more than once, and now they were staying at a spa he owned.

As Kevin walked out of range of his binoculars, Diedrick decided he couldn't do much more at this distance. He would wait until nightfall, and then infiltrate the compound. For now though, he was alone. Alone in the woods, with nothing but his wits, his patience, his dogged tenacity, a Nintendo 3DS and a 2 liter of orange soda.

Kevin continued his walk around the grounds, and found a large, square, windowless building. It was in stark contrast to the rest of the spa, which was very open, airy and pleasant. All Kevin could do was wonder what went on inside the building. Maybe it was just a boiler room or for storage.

But then he saw a familiar figure being wheeled into the building. It looked a heck of a lot like Carl. It was tough to tell for sure, because he was bandaged up pretty heavily from head to toe, but he still had that whole kind of "Carl" shape to him.

By the time Kevin was able to get close enough, he'd already been wheeled inside and the doors were shut. He was curious to know if anybody had a story behind it, so he returned to the guest rooms to see if anybody knew anything.

Before he was able to get there, he bumped into none other than Dr. Price himself. "Hi doctor!"

"Why hello there, my friend," the doctor replied.

"You got quite a layout here," Kevin said. "It must've cost you insane amounts of money."

"Any expense is worth it for my patients. I trust you find your accommodations comfortable?"

"Yeah, they're great! But do you know what the story is with Carl? I saw him being pushed into that big building around back."

"Just some intense treatment for his problem skin. I believe José is up next. They're getting him ready right now," the doctor said. "I do hope you're having a nice time. Please take advantage of everything the spa has to offer. Make yourself at home. And I'll see you around."

"Sure thing, Doc."

"Wonderful, wonderful! Why don't you try the salon, it's a good place to get started."

"Which way is it?"

The doctor pointed to Kevin's left. "Just down this way."

Before long, Kevin found himself seated in the very tastefully decorated salon, and his hair enveloped in a frothy shampoo. A few seats away, he saw that Ray was also in a similar state, although his hair appeared to be rinsed out. Pre-

dictably, he seemed to making a fuss and putting all the attendants through a lot of grief. He had even used his joy buzzer trick, shaking the hands of three very startled and exasperated young hairdressers.

“Are you comfortable?” Asked the lady who was sudsing his hair. “Oh, by the way, my name is Penny.”

“Yeah. My name is Kevin.” Kevin took a moment to appreciate Penny’s beauty. “How long is this going to take?”

“Not long! With what we want to do with you, this shouldn’t take very long at all.” She evaluated Kevin’s hair by running her fingers through it, which Kevin was thoroughly enjoying.

“Well, I haven’t told you what I want yet.”

“Oh yes, by all means, tell me what you want.” Penny then produced a music player for him to listen to. “Pop these in your ears. It’s better than listening to the scissors.”

Kevin did so, and started it playing. He was little surprised when he heard what was on it. “Hey, this isn’t music. It sounds like Dr. Price’s voice.”

“That’s right!” Penny said.

Kevin yawned. “It’s funny, I always get so sleepy whenever I hear Dr. Price’s voice.”

Penny nodded. “Yeah, funny.” The next thing she did was kind of odd – instead of picking up any scissors, bottles, or doing anything to tend to Kevin’s hair, all she did was cross her arms, stand there and wait.

“Oh, you must be waiting for me to tell you what I want,” Kevin said. “I like to cut my hair about an inch above the...” Then, suddenly, Kevin’s eyes glazed over and his head fell limp.

“No, *that’s* what I was waiting for.”



José wasn’t quite sure exactly where he was. He remembered going in for a full body treatment, but now he was immersed in a strange, dark, warm liquid and his skin was itching all over. Maybe this was part of the treatment? He wasn’t sure. Looking up, he saw that a flat-screen was flashing images. It looked like it was a mixture of British TV and some documentary on black history. It was hard to focus.

“Oops, we have a blinker,” said someone out of José’s sight. He wanted to turn his head to see who was speaking, but his whole body was locked in place. A small capsule of foul-smelling mist was waved in front of José’s face. His con-

centration faded completely, and he focused back on the flat screen. For some reason, he just couldn't stop watching it.

"How about the hippie?" Another voice asked.

"He's almost done," the first voice replied.

With the last bit of free will he had, José could just see there was another person lying opposite him. It looked like Carl, but he had no beard and his hair was black. In front of him played a never-ending stream of video in a language José didn't understand.

José was overwhelmed with pain and confusion, but when he watched his video, it all went away.



Eight hours later, Kevin's eyes fluttered back to life. He looked around, and didn't see anybody, except for Ray, who was still seated in his chair. "Hello?" He called out. "Hello!"

"Oh! Oh! You're awake!" Penny said, suddenly appearing from about 10 feet away. She was eating a hamburger. "I just stepped away for a second. I was finishing up my dinner."

Kevin laughed. "It's 10 o'clock in the morning."

"No, it's 7 o'clock at night."

"Are you sure? I'm pretty sure it was only about 9:00 when I came in here," Kevin said.

"No. It's 7:00 PM," Penny said, emphatically. "7 o'clock. Think carefully. It's 7 PM."

"Seven?" Kevin thought for a second. It was hard to think. His mind was swimming with images. Images of pretty girls, beautiful faces and sexy bodies. When he tried to concentrate, those words just kept repeating in his mind. *Sexy, beautiful, pretty.*

"Um... I guess you're right." Kevin said, unable to use his mind to recall the truth. He just decided to let it go. "I must've been mistaken. It's 7 o'clock at night. How could I have been so confused?"

"It happens a lot in this job," Penny replied. "It's just a part of what we do."

"I guess it's easy just to space out when you're sitting in the chair." Kevin shrugged. "And listening to the doctor." He removed the ear buds and handed the player back to Penny.

"So you want to see what we did?" Penny grabbed the back of the chair and spun it around towards a mirror. "What do you think?"

“Oh, I like that. You made it so shiny and lustrous,” Kevin said, touching his hair carefully. “I love the texture.”

What Kevin had missed out on was the past 10 hours of work Penny and a team of assistants had done on his hair. It takes that long to chemically bond hair extensions, especially in the volume and length that were applied to Kevin’s scalp. Kevin now had light blonde hair extending from his



temples to the small of his back. It was cut kind of choppy, with bangs and gentle frizzling down the sides and back that gave it extreme volume.

*It’s exactly what I wanted,* Kevin thought to himself. *Sexy, beautiful, pretty.* “Well, thanks Penny!” Kevin hopped out of the chair when the cape was removed. “You do some pretty good work here.”

As he was about to leave, Kevin stopped and changed his course. He headed to where Ray was seated, and had also fallen asleep. He shook Ray’s shoulder. Ray suddenly came to life, his eyes popping open and gripping the arms of his chair, as if he had just woken from a nightmare. “Huh? What!” He shouted.

“Easy now, it’s just me.” Kevin said, calmly.

“Oh. Kevin. What are you doing here?” He asked.

“I just got my hair done. Can’t you tell?”

“If you can call that mop ‘hair.’ It looks like a haystack on your head.”

“Oh, Ray! Well, I think it’s sexy.” Kevin said, good-naturedly. “Are you ready to go? I’m starving.”

“Yeah, I must’ve forgotten to eat,” Ray said. “This day has gone by so quickly.”

“Tell me about it.” Kevin said.

Ray scratched his head, seemingly unaware or unconcerned with the fact that his hair had just been shaved off, practically. It was no more than three quar-

ters an inch in length, and gelled down flat. “I hope they have something decent to eat here.” Ray got out of the chair and dusted himself off. “Hold on, I can’t forget the wig.”

Ray walked over to the hairdresser’s counter and picked up a silvery blue, glittery tinsel wig. He carefully slid it onto his scalp. “I can’t be seen in public without my trademark, can I?”

Kevin smiled. “Heaven forbid. Oh, I know they have burgers at least, at the restaurant.”

“Yeah, you better be right. A burger sounds great right now.” Ray said, as the two left together, their hair swaying behind them.

“Beautiful,” said Kevin.



It was late by the time Kevin and Ray had finished dinner. True to Kevin’s promise, there were hamburgers on the menu, but Ray only ate about half of it, maybe a little less.

“I’ve never gone from starving to full so quickly.” Ray said.

“I know what you mean, I thought I just tear through this pasta. But I’ve only had a few bites and I’m stuck. That’s been happening to me a lot lately.” Kevin pushed away his plate, the international sign for having finished. True to form, a waiter appeared just milliseconds afterwards. Waiters are only prompt and reliable when it comes to presenting the check.

“Can I get you two anything for desert?” He asked.

“Oh no, I’m so full.” Said Ray.

Kevin agreed. "Me too."

We do have a very tasty triple chocolate cheesecake." The waiter said, gently prodding.

"Oooh... Chocolate," both Kevin and Ray said, at the same time.

The two looked at each other. "We'll split one," said Kevin.

The waiter happily sped off to go get the desert.

"Good idea," said Ray. "I'm really don't want to put any on any more weight."

"Same here. I feel just so fat lately" Kevin agreed, despite the fact that his scale had shown that he had dropped over 20 pounds in the past several weeks.

Ray, who had dropped to one hundred and 40 pounds, looked down at his skinny body. "I look like a whale."

"So where is everybody else?" Ray asked.

"I thought you said Carl was getting a skin wrap done."

"That's what he told me. Do you think it really would take this long?"

"I don't think so, but then I don't know heckuva lot about skin wraps. The doctor said that José was next, too. I wonder how long his is going to take."



When Kevin awoke the next morning, he dressed in his robe and made his way toward José's room. He knocked on the door for several minutes, but there was no answer. His curiosity was piqued, wondering what might've happened to José, so he decided to see if he couldn't figure it out.

It took him a few minutes, but eventually found the area of the spa where these wraps were done. Sure enough, there were two wrapped figures lying on chaise lounges. One he recognized as Carl, because it was wearing those headphones Carl always had on. So the other must've been José, since there weren't a lot of people here at the spa, and by process of elimination, it had to be him.

Just as Kevin got close, two attendants leaned over José's wrap, and started cutting away. José was wrapped up like a mummy, the only thing to be seen of him was the hair coming out of the top of his head, and some slits for him to breathe. Had he been like that for a whole day?

While that was happening, Kevin went to go check Carl out. He was still completely bandaged, just like José. The only difference was that even in this state, Carl had that pair of headphones on his head. Intrigued, Kevin took the headphones off and wanted to hear what Carl could possibly be listening to.

Hitting play on the iPod, he put his ear to the headphones. "This is Advanced Japanese," said the recording. "This is lesson 62."

What a dull thing to listen to, Kevin thought. Kind of a waste of time. He put the headphones back on Carl, who he figured must've been sleeping or something. He was then distracted as the wrap was finally coming off José.

As Kevin saw José's skin for the first time, he was entranced. "Oooh, what lovely smooth skin," he said, "practically flawless."

Indeed, José's skin was now much, much smoother and without blemish. His arms were sleek and slender, and his legs looked spectacular. Not a hair was to be seen. José was still unconscious, so Kevin got closer and ran his fingers up and down José's leg. "Oh my gosh! It's baby soft! This is incredible!"

Just one minor detail had escaped Kevin's attention. José's skin was no longer be brownish tan it was just a day ago – now it was a dark, rich ebony. He was a display of Nubian perfection. If one were to see him for the first time, there would be no doubt they were meeting someone with a deep African heritage.

"This looks wonderful! I don't care how long it takes, it's worth every second!" Kevin turned one of the attendants, hopping up and down with glee. "How can I get one of these?"



At the end of their last day at the spa, the four members of The Ballroom Brats were assembled in Dr. Price's office. "I just wanted to get your impressions and opinions of my spa," the doctor said.

"José, what did you think?"

"Well I know this is supposed be a place to relax, but it could be a little bit more exciting." José said, sipping a cup of tea. "And the tea is shite, frankly."

José made no mention of the new color of his skin, nor the tight black curls that now sprouted from his head. The hair burst out in all directions, and was being held loosely in place by rubber band which fashioned it into kind of a tail.



“Duly noted.” The doctor said. “I like a good spot of tea myself from time to time. I’ll certainly fix that.” He then turned to Ray. “What about you, Ray?”

“All these people have no sense of humor,” Ray said. he whisked some stray blue tinsel hair out of his eyes. “They’re kind of stuck up.” Ray, too, had gotten a wrap and sported soft, silken, hairless skin. He practically glowed. “I mean they’re working for us, right? We’re paying the money. “

“Actually, this was free,” Kevin said.

“You know what I mean! They should do whatever I tell them to do. But they’re always coming up with rules, making excuses, saying they’re sorry, and junk like that. If I want them to do something, they should do it! I’m right, aren’t I?”

The doctor made a note. “Better customer service.”

Dr. Price looked at Kevin. “And what about you, Kevin? Positives and negatives?”

“Gosh, I had a great time. Everybody was so nice, and it’s such a beautiful spa. I can’t think of a lot of bad things to say about it. I really loved it.” Kevin smiled. His smile was made even more radiant by the light fair skin he had. His skin wrap and had resulted in the same soft and smooth skin as the others, but his was almost in alabaster white, with just enough color and pinkness to highlight the features of Kevin’s face. “All I want to know, is when do we get to come back?”

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself. I’m glad you all enjoyed yourselves,” the doctor said with a satisfied expression on his face. “And that’s... Oh! Carl! I almost forgot about you. How did you enjoy your stay?”

Carl, who had been distracted by the gadget he was playing with, realized he was being spoken to, and looked up. “Yes,” he said, bashfully.



“So you like it?” The doctor said. “Anything specific? Specific things that you liked about it?”

Carl’s expression looked like he had a momentary flash of regret, like he just said something wrong. But then he recovered and tried to give a thoughtful answer. “The grass, it’s very green.”

Like the other three, Carl’s skin had become much improved. But unlike the other three, his was unique. His skin now was faintly tan, but still fair, and didn’t show a hint of shine. It was as perfect complexion as one can imagine, nearly plastic in some respects. Although the other three would never admit it, they were all feeling a bit of jealousy. Carl’s hair was now straight, thick and black and almost just as perfect as his skin. Carl’s beard had completely vanished, and his face showed no hint of ever having one strand of facial hair.

“Carl likes the landscaping,” the doctor wrote down. “Very good, very good feedback. Now, why don’t you all relax, I’m sure the shuttle will be here send to pick you up, and you’ll be on your way. Just sit back, relax, close your eyes, and let yourself go. Don’t be afraid if you feel little sleepy...”



The group was finally ready to go, after Kaycee had pestered them a few times. “The shuttle is already waiting!” he yelled, pounding on the doors for attention.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ray said, emerging from his room. He was dressed in skin-tight leather pants, a black see-through mesh shirt, and leather jacket. He wore some black suede boots on his feet.

José came out of his room, wearing black sneakers, a figure-hugging black spandex leotard with a thin belt, over which he had worn a black t-shirt that had some sequins sewn into it. “You’re worse than mi madre,” he said to Kevin.

Carl was the last to join, and he was wearing a wool beanie, and listening to some music on a pair of dangly earphones. He had put on a long shirt that went down to his thighs and covered it with a white jacket. On his legs, he had a pair of unusually tight red pants, and on his feet he had worn a pair of white sneakers.

Kevin was the most casually dressed of the gang, wearing a faded purple t-shirt, and the long blue jacket he had grown fond of. He had also selected a pair of tan pants, almost as tight as Carl’s, and his usual blue sneakers.

All four of them, whether they knew it or not, were wearing at least one element of their ‘stage outfits.’

“I am so happy we did this,” Kevin said as he got onto the shuttle. “I feel so relaxed and recharged, like I’m floating on a white puffy cloud.”



“Well, I can’t wait to get back to work.” José seemed to be a bit fired up. “I’ve had enough of this bloody new age rubbish. One more minute here, and I think I would’ve gone mad! Give me my guitar, some speakers, and a crowd pissed to the gills. That’s what I want.”

“I’ll miss the free stuff,” Ray said. “I got my suitcase crammed with those robes, and the slippers, and the soap, and the shampoo...”

“Ray! That’s stealing!”

“What are you talking about? They expect you to do this. It’s all built into what they charge you.”

“The trip was all free, Ray!”

“Konah ni kiray na tokoro wa hajimeteh meeta,” Carl said.

“What?” Ray replied.

“Oh. Uh, I meant to say that I’ve never seen a place so beautiful before.”

Ray looked annoyed. “Why didn’t you say that before?”

“Has anyone seen my...?” Kevin asked, as he checked his pockets. He had lost something. “I was... Oh, wait. Here it is.”

“What’s that?” José asked, looking at the strange, small piece of golden metal Kevin held.

“I’m not sure,” Kevin said. “But I don’t want to lose it. It reminds of this place.”

“It’s nice for a spa, I’ll give you that,” José said.

Kevin looked longingly out the window. “I just hope the doctor will have us back.”

“I’m sure he will,” the driver of the van said. “I can almost guarantee that.”



Meanwhile, back at the spa, the doctor let himself into a small darkened room. He sat down across from the only other figure inside, who was bound to a chair. “So, what am I going to do with you,” the doctor said, “Diedrick?”



At the Oakstone Mall, the debut of The Ballroom Brats was a disaster. Everything that could go wrong, did go wrong – plus a few things that couldn’t possibly go wrong went wrong as well.

The gig at the Ridgecreek Mall didn’t fare much better. It was a



sparse crowd, and the band didn't do itself any favors. The PA system was screeching feedback, and Kevin forgot the lyrics to parts of two songs.

Performing at Crestmount Centre was a challenge, as the group followed a demonstration for car seat safety and some juggling clowns. The crowd was not really expecting a rock show, which worked out, as the group was not yet capable of delivering one.

As they were setting up for their fourth show, Kevin bumped into an old friend. "Paula, is that you?"

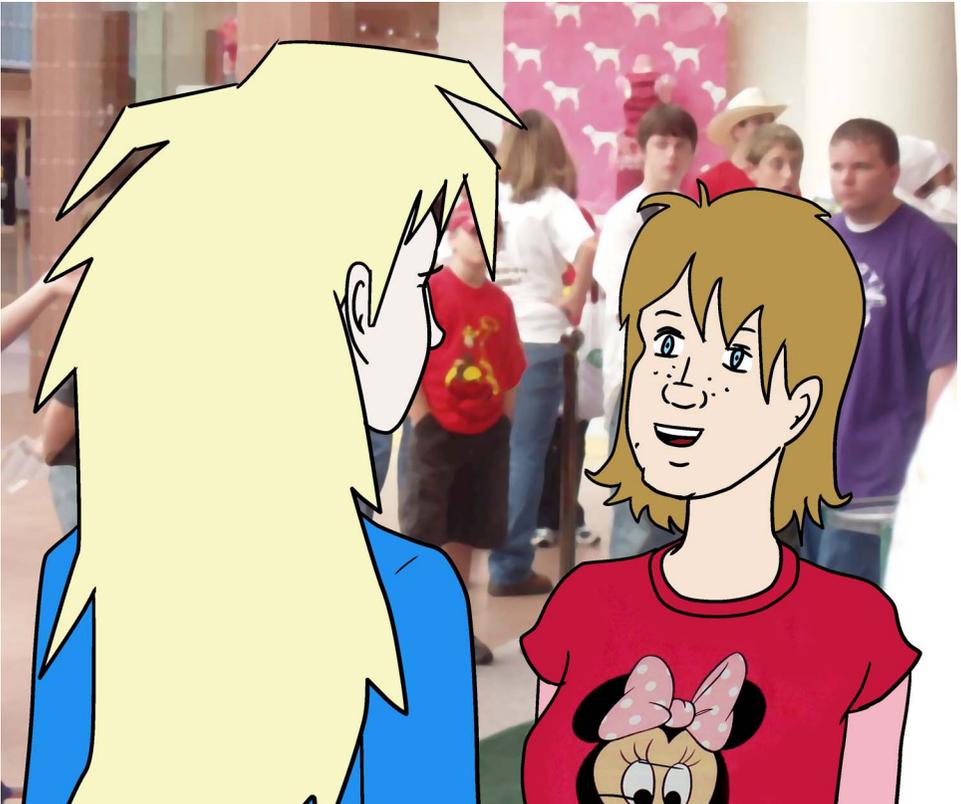
His girlfriend, Paula, was talking to someone else when Kevin approached her. "Excuse me? Who are... Kevin?"

"Yep, it's me!" He said, somewhat nervously.

"You look... You look great!" Paula beamed, for some reason not noticing that her boyfriend had lost 30 pounds, had a huge head blonde hair, and was wearing skin-tight spandex. "You look like a rock star!"

"Yeah, actually that's why I'm here. I'm performing with my band."

"You have a band! That's fantastic!" Paula certainly seemed to be more enthusiastic and upbeat than Kevin remembered her. It had been a while, but Kevin was pretty sure it was Paula who had changed, not his memories of her.



“So what are you doing here?” Kevin asked. “You didn’t come to see us, did you?”

“No, I’m shopping with my folks.” Paula’s mood suddenly dimmed. “I moved back in with them. After talking with Dr. Price, he thought it was the best thing to do.”

“Are your parents okay with it? I know it might be odd, having their twentysomething-old daughter move back in with them, but I always liked your folks.”

“It’s not so bad. They still treat me like a little kid sometimes, but I don’t mind.”

Kevin noticed something odd with her teeth. “Are you wearing braces?”

“Yeah, mom talked me into them. She always said I needed to get my teeth fixed.” Paula blushed slightly. “So when is the show?”

“We go on at 4:30. It’s just a half hour set.” Kevin decided to risk it, and paid her a compliment. Paula had always soured whenever he tried to be nice to her in the past. “You look really happy.”

“I’m better. But you! You look like you’re having the time of your life! The hair, the clothes, playing in a band! That’s what you always wanted! That’s awesome!” Paula said. “Is it okay if I stick around to see you guys?”

“Sure, I’d like that.” Kevin said. “I think your folks are trying to get your attention.” Kevin pointed over Paula’s head where her parents were waiting.

“Paulina!” Called her mother. “Paulina! Stop goofing off, and come with us! We still need to get you some new clothes, and the children’s store is clear on the other side of the mall!”

“I got to go. But I’ll be back to see you guys play.” She turned and started to sprint in the direction of her parents. “I’ll talk to you later!”

It may have been because Kevin anticipated being viewed by his old girlfriend, or it may have been they had hit rock bottom and had nowhere to go but up, but for the first time the show really started to click. Ray was crisp on the drums, Carl had his keyboards synced, and José did his thing with the base. Most of all, Kevin sung his heart out. The lessons he had been taking had some effect, but the timbre of his voice had changed slightly, into a much more pleasant singing voice. The crowd responded warmly, and gave them a good deal of applause. In fact there were so many people who had gathered to see them play, Kevin couldn’t make out Paula in the crowd.

They packed up and left when they were done, and Kevin kept an eye out, but didn’t see Paula. He was a little disappointed that he didn’t get a chance to gloat.

The next show got even better. The show at the Ridgemount Mall went very well, and the band was finally falling into a groove. Playing was fun and easy.

For their final stop, at the Mount Stoneoak Creekrigde Centre, the band could finally call themselves a real rock band. They were playing a tight set, sure of themselves, and maybe even a little cocky. One thing they were very good at was making it look like they were having fun on stage, which they were, and the audience picked up on it.

When the show finally came to an end, they were a little sad to see the tour just stop, just when they had figured it out. Ray even demanded to do a few more shows immediately, but Gabe said no.

“You haven’t forgot about the convention, have you? That was the whole point of this!” Gabe took off his sunglasses to polish them with his shirt, and then put them back on. “Now we’re going to see what you’re made of. Next week-end in Vegas is where we prove to the suits that we’re ready to hit the big time.”



Back at their house, now known as “Brats Mansion” by every member of the group, the band was packing for their trip. That’s just how things kind of evolved, as everybody appeared to be living out of the mansion. Ray started to put his own stuff in his room first, and since Kevin didn’t seem to have any objections to it, Carl and José did the same soon after. Even Gabe kept a room, although he didn’t necessarily spend every day there. Often times, his constant nagging forced the group to kick him out – sometimes for several days at a time.

Today though, Gabe had been allowed inside, as they all prepped for Vegas. The band was fairly excited, as the only person who been to Las Vegas before was Carl, oddly, and he didn’t have much to say about it. Truth be told, Carl didn’t have much to say about anything anymore, as he kept to himself most of the time. It’s not that he was it unsocial, though. He hung around with the group as much as anybody, but his old habit of talking nonstop seemed to have caught up with him. Now he portioned out his words as if they were coming from an eyedropper.

Kevin had just finished dressing for the trip, and was banging on other people’s doors to let them know was time to go. “The van is just about ready to leave! By the time we get through security, the planes will have already taken off!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ray said, emerging from his room. He was dressed in his skin-tight leather pants, a mesh T-shirt, and leather jacket. He wore some “Robin Hood” black suede boots on his feet.

José came out of his room, dressed in black Chuck Taylors, figure-hugging black spandex pants, and some sort of black jacket sprayed with silver rhine-



stones that made it look like they were spilling over his shoulders. “You’re worse than me Mum,” he said to Kevin.

Carl was the last to join, and he was wearing a pink wool beanie, with a set of giant all-pink headphones on his head. He had put on a white long white shirt that went down to his thighs, draped over what looked to be a pink full-body leotard. Carl had added a huge, thick silver belt, and on his feet he had worn comically oversized white sneakers.

Kevin was the most conservatively dressed of the gang, wearing a pastel pink T-shirt, under a long, hip-length cobalt blue blazer. He had also selected a pair of form-sitting pastel yellow pants that ended just above the ankle, and then added a pair of flip-flops.

All of them were dressed like rock stars, but they hadn’t dressed up just for this trip. They dressed like this almost all the time. Somewhere along the line,

maybe around the time where everybody moved in, they had started dressing in outrageously loud rock star outfits.

Gabe had all given them all a healthy allowance, and since they weren't doing much else with their lives, they spent it on clothes. They bought everything through the internet and had it delivered. They were working so hard on their music that a trip outside was out of the question.

Maybe, on some level, they all understood that they were dressing in a little bit more effeminate way, but that hadn't stopped them from choosing what they did. One could argue that heavy metal bands dressed in similar outfits, and shiny, sparkly clothes were normal for their line of work. Still, what none of them really seemed to notice was that they had all, seemingly of their own free will, chosen outfits that masked their upper chest. Whether it was blazers, loose fitting clothes, or jackets, they were all wearing clothes that made it very, very hard to figure out whether or not they had breasts.

The trip went without major incident. Unless you count the fight Ray got in with one of the flight attendants over how many bags of peanuts he was allowed. Though it was a short flight, all of them were a bit tired when they arrived, and looking forward to a quick rest in their hotel beds.

"Will you ladies be sharing a room or separate rooms?" Asked the woman at the hotel. José and Kevin looked each other, baffled.

"Ladies? Did you call us ladies?" José asked. "Is this your first day on the job?"

"My apologies, so sorry," The woman apologized, "I'm so embarrassed."

"Don't worry about it," Kevin said. "We all have separate rooms."

On the way up in the elevator, looking at each other in the elevators mirrored walls and doors, Kevin turned to José. "She seriously thought we were women."

"That was a bit odd, wasn't it?" José shifted his balance from one hip to the other, looking himself in the mirrors. "I mean, sure, these days women can dress a bit masculine."

"Maybe there's a cross-dressing convention in town."

"Yeah, that's probably it. I'd hate to think that I was losing my devastating good looks," José said, blowing himself a kiss in the mirror. "Look out ladies of Vegas."



The Ballroom Brats didn't have a lot of time to enjoy themselves. They were scheduled to perform the very next day. The convention, as it was explained to them, was a yearly event where all the franchise owners gathered to hear the Burger Boom executives tell them what was in the plans for the next year.

The group was a part of a presentation to debut a new advertising campaign. The executives called it the “feelings” campaign, designed to make people feel good about the Burger Boom brand. As their handler said, “they wanted to get away from the whole ‘explosion’ thing.”

The plan was for them to be brought out on stage, perform the jingle, and then perform another short set of songs after the presentation was over. Before it was about to get underway, the CEO the company came by to meet the group.

“I’m just so impressed with what you’ve done,” said the executive. “We here at Burger Boom corporate appreciate all your hard effort and creativity that’s gone to this promotion. This has exceeded my wildest expectations.”

“Well, the group’s been working really hard,” Gabe said, trying to insert himself in between the band and the CEO. “I think they really have what it takes to succeed. Of course, when we first heard working together, they were just for fast food employees. But under my watchful eye, I’ve molded them into...”

“Yes, I’m sure you’ve done very well.” The CEO said. He advanced to shake Kevin’s hand. “I just had no idea we had this kind of talent working for us in our restaurants. You four are going to bowl them over tonight. I want you to know, we’ll have a lot more work for you to do, if everything goes well.”

“Thank you sir, thank you very much. We’re just so happy to be here.” Kevin said.

“I’ll see you on stage,” the executive said as he left.

“We’re just so happy to be here,” Ray said, in a mocking tone of voice. “What a suck up.”

“Come on Ray! Please, can we just focus on our job?” Kevin said.

“Sorry Kevin, I didn’t realize you we’re such a corporate tool.”

A woman in a business suit holding a clipboard wandered towards them. They had been introduced to her earlier as the vice president of communications.

“Did you just call her Kevin?” She asked Ray.

“Of course I did. That’s his name,” Ray replied. “What did you want me to call him? ‘Asparagus?’”

“Him?” The woman said with alarm. “What you mean ‘him?’”

Gabe practically set a long-distance jumping record to get into the middle of the conversation. He placed his hands up to both sides. “Just a misunderstanding,” he said to the woman. He then turned towards the band. “Quick band meeting, over there!” Gabe gestured towards an unused corner of the stage.

“What’s with everybody messing up our genders?” José asked. “Is there some sort of gas leak?”

“Yeah, it’s really strange.” Kevin agreed.

“Look,” Gabe said, the sweat dripping off of his fevered brow, “I know this is weird, but all day I’ve been getting this. I think that *they* think that you’re all girls.”

“That’s crazy,” Ray sad, laughing. “Are they really that stupid?”

“I don’t care what they think, this is worth a lot to all of us,” Gabe said, his tone of voice taking on a hint of panic. “I didn’t want to tell you guys this until it was a lock, but they want to use you in a major, national advertising campaign. This is worth millions of dollars to us!”

“Really?” Ray said, his interest level having just jumped 1,000%.

“Yes, really!” Gabe made sure no one else was listening on their conversation. “If they think you’re girls, we should play along with that.”

“What! You’re a loony!” José declared.

“You’re not serious?” Was Kevin’s observation.

Gabe put up his hands again, as a plea for understanding. “I know, I know! It *is* crazy! I don’t know what happened, maybe they weren’t paying attention, maybe some information got mixed up, I don’t care. It’s too late to fix things now. You’re going on stage in 10 minutes. We can’t risk this falling apart.”

“Well, what do you expect us to do?” Kevin said. “Put on some skirts and makeup and go out on stage as women?”

“Would you?” Gabe asked. “No, forget that. That was a silly question.”

“I can’t believe this,” Ray said, “you have to be the worst manager in the world.”

“You think I’m responsible for this?” Gabe fired back, offended. “I’ve been working my butt off for you guys.”

“Okay, okay. Let’s not fight.” Kevin said. “As much as I hate to admit it, Gabe is right. They think we’re girls, and they’ve been planning an advertising campaign around a group made up of girls.”

“Even me?” Carl said, parting his long black hair and tucking it behind his ears.

Kevin nodded. “Yes, probably even you.” He took a deep, calming breath. “I know it’s wrong, but just for the next hour or two, let’s not say anything about it.”

“I can keep my mouth shut,” José said. “Especially for a few million dollars. But what about Little Miss Executive Vice President over there?”

The five of them turned to see the vice president in charge of communications staring at them intently. It was obvious that she had her suspicions.

“She’s going to tell someone,” Gabe said, his voice quivering with fear. “I know she’s going to tell someone!”

“Okay, then just for right now, just to get through this, we need to change her mind.” Kevin paused to think for a second. “We’ll just tell her that Kevin is a nickname.”

“Pretty queer nickname,” José said.

Kevin thought some more. “Then we’ll just tell her it’s a joke or something. Just a little in-joke amongst us band members.”

“Okay fine, brainiac. If you’re so smart, what do we say when she asked what your real name is?” Ray looked over at the vice president again. “Because she’ll ask. She looks devious like that.”

“Yeah, call me... K.C. those are my initials. I never use them, because I always thought they sounded it kind of girly. Just call me K.C.”

“And what if they ask what K.C. stands for?” Gabe asked.

“Who’s side are you on?” Kevin snapped.

“They might ask!”

“Just tell them they don’t stand for anything. It’s just K.C.”

“And the rest of us?” Ray asked.

Kevin looked at Gabe. Gabe then turned to the rest of the group. “Choose something. Pick a name, just in case they ask for it.” It wasn’t much of plan, but at least it was something. Gabe then decided to take a seat in the nearest chair. He was a nervous wreck. “We’ll sort this out after the show.”

The group broke up the meeting, and returned to the side of the stage, waiting for their cue. Sure enough, the woman in the suit approached them, with a twisted, suspicious expression on her face. “So, it’s nearly time for you to go on. Are you ladies excited?”

“Oh, yes,” Kevin said, raising his voice a bit. “This is the chance of a lifetime.”

The woman kept talking. “Yes it is, and I’m glad you appreciate that, Kevin.”

“Who?” Kevin said, as innocently as he could possibly muster. “Oh, Kevin! You must’ve heard one of the band call me that. It’s just a little joke. We make up little names for each other.”

“I see,” the woman said, her suspicions as strong as ever. Clearly, she was a skilled corporate executive, because her predator instincts letter her to the weakest point in the chain. She walked over to Ray, and decided to talk to him. “So how are you guys feeling?” She asked.

“I just want to get this over with,” Ray said, tersely.

“It won’t be long.” The executive paused, to try and make sure this didn’t sound like an interrogation – which it was. “So I was talking to Kevin over there, and he was saying...”

Ray interrupted her. “Listen, I need to get ready.”

“Oh, certainly. I’ll get out of your way, sir,” the woman said.

“Sir?” Ray sneered. “Can’t you tell that I’m a girl?”

“Oh, my mistake. Just a little verbal slip up. My sincere apologies.”

“No problem – shake?” Ray said, extending his hand.

The woman received the electric buzz from Ray’s joy buzzer, clearly rattling her. She glanced at her clipboard. “I’ve got to go check on something.” She quickly strutted away.

“Corporate bitch,” Ray said, just loud enough to make sure she heard him.

Kevin discreetly gave Ray a thumbs-up gesture. Ray replied by rolling his eyes and turning away.



“...And I couldn’t be more thrilled to bring you our newest, most exciting campaign in years. To perform the jingle, please welcome The Ballroom Brats.”

The CEO and given them their cue, so the group trotted out on stage. As they had practiced, they positioned themselves at their instruments, and got ready to play.

The CEO continued. “Now this campaign is going to be a big deal for us. All the guys back at marketing have been working very hard, and coming up with some great ideas. And then when we first heard the jingle, we got motivated to make this the best campaign we could possibly make it. So girls...”

Kevin and José quickly glanced each other, knowing their worst fears had just been confirmed. They *did* think they were girls.

“...please play for us the new Burger Boom jingle.”

It felt kind of kind of anti-climactic, to work so hard, for so long, and then just play a five second jingle, but they did it.

*“If you’ve got a craving, and your stomach’s got room, haul your hunger on down to Burger Boom.”*

They played a little bit of extra music and then repeated the line.

*“If you’ve got a craving, and your stomach’s got room, haul your hunger on down to Burger Boom.”*

Ending with a splash of drums, the group then waited for a reaction. They didn’t have to wait long, as the crowd stood on their feet and cheered. The group expected a big reaction, but this was a little bit more than they thought it would get. Kevin stood and gracefully accepted the applause, but when it went on for almost a full minute, he turned around so he could face the band. He gave them a shrug, as if to say ‘I didn’t think it was *that* good.’”

After being given a big O.K. gesture from the CEO, the group left, and went back off stage. There, a handful of executives were still applauding them, and patting them on the back with congratulations.

“I guess their past advertising campaigns must’ve really sucked,” said Kevin. José agreed. “You’d think we’d just rescued a baby from a burning house.”

After the presentation was over, the group went out and performed the set they had been working on the past few weeks. It was supposed to be played as the crowd filtered out of the auditorium, but most stuck around and gave them a big cheer when they were done.

Back at the hotel, the group were looking to unwind, but their attempt to relax was interrupted by Gabe. He was out of his mind with happiness. “We did it! *We did it!* They want us for the full national campaign. Not only do they want us for...”

“Great, so we get to be corporate shills,” Ray said. “Yay us.”

“To be honest, Gabe,” Kevin said, “I’m with Ray on this one. I don’t like the idea of just being a corporate backed band. We’d have no integrity.”

“And pretending to be girls,” Carl said.

“Oh yeah, that too.” Kevin added.

Gabe wasn’t giving up. “No, no! You don’t understand! They want us...”

José agreed with the others. “Next thing you know, they’ll tattoo their logo on our arse!”

“*Will you listen to me!*” Gabe yelled.

Gabe’s explosion Took everybody aback. They were used to him being dramatic, but that was the loudest they’d ever heard him shout.

After a lengthy, awkward moment, José spoke. “The floor is yours.”

“Fine. Thank you,” Gabe said, perturbed. “What I was trying to tell you was that they’re going to put us on tour. A nationwide Spring tour. 32 stops, coast-to-coast.”

“You’re not joking. Tell me you’re not joking,” Kevin said.

Ray was bug-eyed with excitement. “Don’t mess with me, don’t piss me off.”

“No, it’s true. 100% true. We just signed the contract. And before you ask, no, it’s not a corporate sponsored thing. They’re going to fund it, but they don’t want their logo all over the place.” Ray took a deep breath to tried to gather himself. “The whole idea is that they want you guys out there, because they know you’re going to be a big hit. That’s enough publicity by itself. If they linked you directly with Burger Boom, no one would buy it. They want it to feel organic.”

“So that’s it, were a real band. We’re going on tour!” Kevin said, hopping up and down with his fists clenched. Instantly, the other three jumped out of their chairs and we’re joining Kevin’s celebration.

“But what about the girl thing?” Carl asked.

He didn’t get a reply, and moments after he asked the question, he even forgot why he asked it.



As soon as the celebration had begun, Gabe killed it. The very next morning he had to get the group up at 6 o’clock, and harassed them until they started practicing. He wanted the half hour set to be even tighter, and they needed more songs. They were going to have to do 45 minutes to an hour now.

“We need to get serious,” Gabe said. “We’re no longer just kidding around, we’re going to charge real money for real tickets. No more kiddie stuff. This is showbiz. And people want their money’s worth.”

So the band made the same deal as last time, Kevin threw open the songwriting duties to everyone, and then they’d decide what to keep once everybody had submitted their ideas. They needed at least 10 more songs. But José and Carl both said they weren’t going to be able to write songs. It really wasn’t something they were good at. That meant that the 10 were going to be split between Kevin and Ray.

That meant that Kevin had to come up with at least five great songs. Probably more. The first tour date was coming up in just a couple of weeks, and he wasn’t sure at all he was going to make it. There was a chance, if he didn’t have any interruptions or disturbances, and he got very lucky or inspired, he might be old to do it. He just needed to stay focused for every single second of the next few weeks.

“Don’t forget, were filming the commercial on Thursday.” Gabe said, matter-of-factly. “We go out Wednesday, for fittings and camera tests. Then we film it the day afterwards. We should be back here Friday maybe Saturday or Sunday.”

“Commercial!” Kevin yelled. “How do you expect me to write five songs in two weeks minus the four or five days for the commercial? Are you nuts?”

“It’s out of my hands!” Gabe defended himself. “These dates are the only ones that were available! We can’t reschedule!”

“Aarrrrgh!” Kevin stomped his feet on the floor.

The rest of the band didn’t even bother to try and sugar-coat it. They knew was going to be tough work for Kevin, and one by one, they gave him a consoling hug.



“Wait a minute, Gabe,” José said. “You worked out this whole ‘girl’ problem, didn’t you?”

Gabe shrugged. “What problem?”

“The problem that we’re men, and they think we’re girls! *That* problem, you little git!”

Thinking deeply about this question, Gabe raised his finger, as if he was about to make a point. “No.”

“*What?*” Ray said, with a wild look of anger in his eyes. “You don’t mean that *they* expect... That *you* expect...”

Carl stood tall in his pink spandex-covered legs. “We’re not girls, you know.”

Gabe begged with his hands for understanding. “Millions of dollars, people!”

“You were supposed to work this out!” José wasn’t budging an inch. “We’re not going to go on make-believing we’re women!”

Carl added an emphatic, “Yeah!”

“I’m not telling them I’m a girl!” José emphasized.

“Who says you have to?” Gabe replied.

“You’re stark raving mad,” José answered.

“Just... Just hear me out.” Gabe said. “Do you go around telling people what you are? ‘Hello, I’m a man?’ ‘Nice to meet you, I’m male?’ No! All you have to do is just not mention it.”

“I’m with José,” Carl said. “You’re a moron.”

“Think about it! You don’t have to correct people. If they assume you’re female, so be it! Why bother to tell them otherwise? Use the stage names we decided on. Who’s going to know the difference?”

Carl, José, Kevin and Ray all looked at each other.

“We’ll know!” They shouted together.

“Hold on, hold on...” Gabe searched his pockets for something. He got his wallet out. “Dr. Price gave me something for this sort of situation...” After flipping through some credit cards, he found what he was looking for. “The doc said that if we ever had a problem like this that I should remind you guys of something...” He flipped over the card, which had something scribbled on the back of it. “Here we go: ‘The secret to happiness is a rhinoceros made of rutabagas.’”

The rancor in the room died immediately. It was plan to see that Kevin, Ray, José, Carl and even Gabe had just blanked out. None of them could remember what they were doing, just a second ago.

“Wh... What...” Carl glanced at José. “What was my point?”

Jose looked at Kevin. “We were arguing about something, right?” Kevin just shrugged.

Gabe didn’t understand why he had taken Dr. Price’s business card from his wallet, but he did remember that it was very important to throw it away immediately.

“No, hold on, I know I was just about to say something important...” Ray said. “It’s on the tip of my tongue.”

Gabe dropped the business card in the trash. “Don’t forget, were filming the commercial on Thursday,” he said, matter-of-factly. “We go out Wednesday, for fittings and camera tests. Then we film it the day afterwards. We should be back here Friday maybe Saturday or Sunday.”

“Commercial!” Kevin yelped. “How do you expect me to write five songs in two weeks? Are you out of your mind?”

“It’s out of my control!” Gabe defended himself. “These dates are the only ones that were available! We can’t reschedule!”

“Crap!” Kevin stomped his feet on the floor.

The rest of the band didn’t even bother to try and sugar-coat it. They knew was going to be tough work for Kevin, and one by one, they gave him a consoling hug.

“Wait a minute, Gabe,” José said. “You worked out this whole ‘girl’ problem, didn’t you?”

“Well, they still think you’re girls, so...” Gabe said.

“Boy, are they dumb,” Ray said.

José chuckled. “You’d think they’d be able to tell a man from a woman. I guess we better just keep our mouths shut. If they want us to be women, we’ll pretend we’re women.”

“It’ll be fun,” Carl said.

“I wonder what I look like in a dress?” José asked.

Ray went back to his drum kit and sat down. “Not as good as me, I’ll bet.”

“Oh? What about you, Kevin?”

“I’d look pretty good in a skirt, I think,” Kevin replied. “I’ll try one on later. I got other problems right now,”

“Carl?” José asked. He looked at Carl, who had put on his headphones and gotten lost in his own world again. “Never mind.”

Ray pointed at José with a drum stick. “Prepare to get blown away by my femininity.”

“Not likely!” José scoffed. “I can be *twice* the girl you’ll *ever* be.”



In what seemed like a matter of hours for Kevin, he found himself on the set of the commercial they were going to shoot. They were in Los Angeles, somewhere. They had met at the advertising agency, and then were bussed out to wherever the commercial was being shot, which could’ve been anywhere in the greater Los Angeles area, as far as the group could tell.

They spent most of the morning seated in chairs, being attended to by the makeup and hair people working on the shoot. Just like the executives, these people treated the four members of the band as if they were female.

“This is so strange,” José said to Ray. “I smell like my mother’s old cosmetics drawer.”

“All I can taste is my lipstick,” Ray replied. “Do girls really have that taste in their mouths all the time?”

“Will you guys please shut up!” Kevin barked. “I’m sick of hearing your insipid little comments.”

“Rawr,” José remarked, making a ‘claw’ gesture with his hand.

Gabe stuck his head into the trailer. “Five minutes until we need to be on set.”

“We’ll be there when we’re ready!” Kevin yelled.

“You tell ‘em, K.C.!” Ray said with a laugh.

Kevin dipped his head. He knew that if Ray was agreeing with him, he had done something wrong. “Sorry, guys. I’m just a little stressed.”

“Oh, we know,” José said, patting Kevin on the hand. “We know.”

By the time they made it to the set, Kevin’s frazzled nerves had put everyone on edge. They were just waiting for him to break down or create a scene. Fortunately, he held himself together, which wasn’t easy. The commercial took 112 takes.

They shot from the left, from the right, from the center, from above, and from behind. They shot it with the band arranged one way, then another way, then a third way, and finally a fourth way. They shot close-ups, two ups, three ups and four ups. They shot at using the main script, and alternate script, and alternate alternate script, a fourth entirely different script, and a fifth the director just thought of while they were filming.

It was exasperating and draining beyond what any of them thought was possible. Shooting a commercial seemed like the easy part. They didn’t even have to sing. That was recorded earlier in the studio. Ray, Kevin, José and Carl were all under the impression they just had look to good and do what the director told them to do. There was little to worry about there. They band looked great, dressed in skirts, heels and dresses. There was no stress there. They were perfectly comfortable in the feminine finery. Instead, it was doing the same thing over and over and over and over again that was the source of their angst.

With each passing minute eyes glanced at Kevin, seeing if he was able to deal with it. So when the call to wrap the shoot came, no one was surprised when Kevin was off like a shot to the trailer.

José knew it was his job, as the member of the band closest to Kevin, to go talk to him. He cautiously let himself inside the trailer, to see that Kevin was sprawled out on a bed with his face buried in the pillow.

“Rough day, huh?” José said.

“Mmmfft,” Kevin replied, his voice muffled.

“Come on mate, get your skinny white butt off that bed,” José told him. He tugged Kevin’s arm, until Kevin finally acquiesced and got up.

“Just leave me to die,” Kevin said. “Really, I’ve had it.”

“How many songs have you written?”

“Let me see... None.”

“It’s that bad?”

“I’ve completely frozen up. I have writers block like you wouldn’t believe. Not an ounce of creativity left in me.”

“Call Dr. Price?”

“Call Dr. Price.”



“How’s my favorite band?” Ellie said.

Kevin had to shield his eyes from the sun. He’d been lying out here for a few minutes, trying to soak up some energy. He was dressed plainly, just a pair of white shorts and a flimsy pastel blue T-shirt. “Oh, hi!” He said.

“So you’re back a second time? Maybe we should start charging you,” Ellie teased. “Mind if I...?”

“Oh, please! Sit down!”

Ellie pulled up another lounge chair for herself. “I miss you guys around the office. I guess you’re just too big to visit our small little practice anymore.”

“Ellie, you make us sound awful,” Kevin replied, gently touching Ellie on the arm. “I didn’t see you down here last time.”

“I missed you guys last time. We had a really important client. The CEO of Burger Boom. Oh! I shouldn’t have said that!” Ellie said. “Don’t tell anyone. Anyway, I’m so busy the office, I rarely get any time off.”

“That’s awful!”

“No, I love my job. I love helping people. Or, at least, I like helping Dr. Price, who helps people.” Ellie crossed her legs and leaned back in the chair. “I take it that’s why you came back to the spa? To take advantage of our unique mental and physical therapeutic talents?”

“Mostly mental,” Kevin said.

“No one said being in showbiz was going to be easy.”

“I know, but at least I thought it was can be easier than what I used to do.”

“What did you used to do?” Ellie asked.

“I used to... Um... I think I used to work at a pet store. No! At a restaurant. I think.” Kevin shook his head, as if he could shake his thoughts back into place. “That’s unimportant. My problem is dealing with all this stuff. All these problems. All these demands.” Kevin threw his hands in the air. “I’ve got to come up with five new songs, in just a few days! It’s impossible!”

“So you write all the music yourself?”

“No, Ray writes a few songs.”

“I didn’t think writing a song was that hard. Not that I’m an expert.”

“Well, you can write a pretty dumb song really fast. Something with synthesizers, canned beats, and all that sugary pop music stuff. But to make a really good rock song, you have to work at it.”

“What’s wrong with pop music? I like pop music. I mean, sure, it’s not as good as it was a few years ago... But all you need is one really good pop group, and maybe they’ll start a new trend. You know how copycat the music business is. Then, we’ll just have tons of great pop music! You know, make the stuff you can sing and dance to.”

“Pop music is fine, I guess. It’s just not my thing. Give me a guitar, a big booming baseline, some thundering drums, and we can blast out a rock song that’ll make your mind melt.”

“Well, I guess everybody has different tastes. So these are the types of songs are trying to write?”

“Every single time. I want to write the perfect rock song. Big, loud, and nasty.” Kevin said, with a fire in his eyes. “That’s why I’m having all this trouble. I want it to be great.”

“Yeah, it kind of shows. You look really tired.” Ellie held Kevin’s hand. “Don’t take that the wrong way.”

“No offense taken,” Kevin said.

“So when do you see the doctor?”

“In a couple of days. I wanted to just unwind a little.”

“Oh! Perfect! I have just the thing for you!” Ellie got excited. “You know what my favorite thing to do here is? To do a little pampering.”

“Pampering? I’m already scheduled to do a massage later today.”

“No, even better than that! You should visit the clinic. They can do amazing things there.” Ellie looked around. “Where’s the rest of the band?”

“Giving me space. I think they’re scared of me, that I might bite their head off.” Kevin shielded his eyes from the sun again, to look around. He pointed vaguely at one of the buildings. “Last I heard, they were going to go get some facials.”

“Okay then! I’ll book you in at the clinic. Be there tomorrow morning!” Ellie said, clapping her hands enthusiastically. “You won’t regret it!”



Kevin arrived at the clinic building bright and early the next morning. Ellie was very happy to see him, and introduced him to all the people who worked there as ‘the next big music star.’

However, before he knew it, Kevin was lying back on a gurney, and being wheeled into something that looked a lot like an operating room. Then things went black.

He wasn’t sure when he fully regained consciousness, but when he did, Dr. Price was there. His presence was comforting, because even though Kevin was extremely disoriented and confused, he needed someone to explain to him what had just happened. Why was he just in a surgical room? Dr. Price could explain that, he was sure.

“You need to sleep,” said the doctor.



Darkness surrounded the spa, quiet and still. The patients – or, rather, guests – of the spa were fast asleep, dreaming their medicated dreams.

Down the hallway from Kevin’s room, out the door and in the large building no one was allowed to enter, a breakthrough had been made. After days, weeks and maybe even months, the hinge on the door to room 628 had given way. The patient in 628 had been working at it steadily, avoiding the attention of the nurses and doctors. He waited until it was dark so even the cameras couldn’t see him. Just maybe for a few minutes one night, maybe a few minutes more the next night, he worked away at the hinge, a little bit at a time.

Finally, the moment had come, and the locked steel door that kept the patient a prisoner was loose.

Carefully, ever so carefully, he maneuvered the door open, avoiding the noise of a scrape on the floor. He had lost a lot of weight here, and he slipped through the slim crack in the doorway easily. Once he was out, he knew he wouldn’t have much time. There were cameras and security people everywhere, and he had only seconds to...

“Escape in block six,” a voice came over the intercom. A quiet but persistent alarm sounded, and red flashing lights illuminated the hallway. He ran as fast as he could for the door, but before he could even touch the gateway to freedom, two burly men got in his way.

“Drat! You have foiled my egress!” Diedrick said.

“Back to your room,” he was told.

“You will rue the day you tried to imprison me!”



The only person who even heard the sirens was back in the VIP guest rooms. Carl sat up in his bed, faintly picking up the whine the alarm was making.

When someone has one sense taken away, the others become heightened to compensate. Maybe that was why only Carl heard the noise, because he couldn't see. His eyes were bandaged up tight.

They had been that way for a day. He was sure he had just wanted a little eye wrap, but now his eyes hurt, and they felt sore and swollen.

This was driving him crazy, because he couldn't use any of his favorite new gadgets. He couldn't use his cell phone. He couldn't play his nintendo 3DS. None of it was any good to him right now. He wanted to complain, but he hated to make a fuss. He was just another patient, after all. The people who worked here were so busy, it hardly seemed right to trouble them.

They assured him he would be able to see in a little while. Of course, they had said that a long time ago. How long did it take for an eye wrap to work? He was so worried that it was taking so long. But he trusted the doctors and the nurses, because they were in charge. They also had the best technology here, and if there were two things Carl trusted most it was authority and technology.

The alarms went quiet and there was no more to hear. Whatever it was, he assumed, it had been taken care of by the proper authorities. Carl fumbled around for his headphones, and found them beside his bed where he had left them. He put them on, and was immediately soothed by the sounds.



“Come on! Let your heart flutter in this street of smiles! Hang on, I’ll be there, just wait for me, once more I go to my home sweet home.” The singer sang. “Remembering what’s important changes despair into hope! Hang on I’ll be there, I’ll reach my destination, this is my home sweet home...”

Of course, if anyone else was listening, they would have heard: “*Saa kokoro ni ne ukabeyou itsudatte egao no machi! ko tsu, watashi ha soko ni iru...*”

Carl slipped away into sleep, imagining the sweet, innocent face of the singer – and for some reason, wondering if he was cuter than she was.



Once again, Kevin’s stay at the spa felt like it was coming to an early end. It had seemed like just a day since he arrived. In truth, it had been six weeks, but most of that time was spent in a drugged stupor, which did make the time fly by. On his dresser, Kevin picked up that small, strange piece of golden metal that he had been carrying around. It was a memento of Dr. Price and this place, so he liked to always have it with him, to keep a little bit of the spa with him, wherever he went.

Kevin was packing his luggage, leaving out only the clothes he was going to wear. But as he dressed, he was fussing, unable to get things to work. He gave up, and walked over to José’s room across the hall. The door was open, so he just let himself in and approached his bassist. Turning around he lifted his hair out of the way. “Can you fasten my bra for me?” He asked.

José giggled. “You’re so helpless sometimes.”

“I know, thank goodness my friends are always there to help me.” Kevin grabbed his breasts and wiggled them into place. They felt really tender and sore, for some reason. “Thanks José!”

“Ah-ah-ah,” José said wagging his finger to scold Kevin. “Jewelee.”

“That’s right, I keep forgetting.” Kevin replied. The group had met just last night, and decided for the sake of keeping their true identity secret, they should only refer to each other using their female ‘stage name’ for the duration of the tour. “So sorry, *Jewelee*.”

“Just be careful, *Kaycee*,” José replied.

“Oh, I’ll be careful,” Kevin said, as he left for his room. He returned and put on the rest of his clothes. He looked around, but couldn’t find his shoes. He was sure he had left them just next to his bed a few days ago, but they weren’t there.

That meant that he had to wear the only thing he could find. The pumps. He had been avoiding them for a long time now. They had been laying there in the closet for weeks, and he had avoided wearing them. But now, without any al-

ternatives, he grabbed them. “What the hell,” he said, feeding his feet into them. He wasn’t sure why, but the way he had to stretch out his foot felt good to him. He stood, expecting to have problems with his balance, but he was fine. Standing on the balls of his feet actually felt more relaxed and pleasant than wearing his sneakers. Kevin took a few steps and found them easy to walk in. “Forget sneakers,” he said to himself. “I’m wearing nothing but heels from now on.”

The group was finally ready to go, after Kaycee had pestered them a few times. “The limo is already waiting!” he yelled, pounding on the doors for attention.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ray said, emerging from his room. He was dressed in a skin-tight leather skirt, black fishnets, a see-through black shirt, and leather jacket. He wore some “Robin Hood” black suede boots with high heels on his feet.



José came out of his room, dressed in black Chuck Taylors, a figure-hugging black spandex leotard with a thin belt, and some sort of tiny black bolero jacket made of silver rhinestones that made it look like they were spilling over his shoulders. “You’re worse than me Mum,” he said to Kevin.

Carl was the last to join, and he was wearing a pink wool beanie, with a set of giant all-pink headphones on his head. He had put on a cropped white shirt that exposed his pink full-body leotard. Carl had added a tiny silver skirt, and on his feet he had worn comically oversized white sneakers with a four inch thick sole.

Kevin was the most conservatively dressed of the gang, wearing a low-cut pastel pink T-shirt, under a long, hip-length royal blue blazer. He had also selected a pair of pastel yellow leggings, and, of course his new favorite – blue pumps.

What none of them really seemed to notice was that they had all, seemingly of their own free will, chosen outfits that featured their new breasts. Whether it was tiny jackets, low cut tops, or tight clothes, they were all wearing clothes that made it very, very easy to notice their chest.

“Are your boobs sore?” Ray asked Kevin.

“Yeah, you too? It must’ve been the massage or something,” Kevin reasoned. Of course, the real reason they were sore, was because they had just been implanted with silicone. The scars had healed well enough, but there was still a little soreness left over from the procedure.

“Are you four ready to go?” Gabe asked, arriving from outside. This was the first time he’d seen the group since he’d sent them to the spa for relaxation, yet, puzzlingly, he didn’t seem to take any notice of the two new additions to each member of the band. “The meter’s running on the limo.”

“Gabe!” Ray said, “we missed you!” He pecked Gabe on the cheek.

Gabe was immediately suspicious of Ray’s behavior. “Whatever you’re trying to butter me up for, you’re not getting it, Ray.”

“Me? I’m not trying to butter you up.” Ray said, pouting. “And the name is Roxy.”

“We decided to just use the stage names for now,” Kevin said.

“Great idea. Is everybody on board with this?” He asked.

“Just call me Jewelee J,” José said.

“Roxy B is ready to go,” Said Ray.

“Kaycee K reporting for duty,” Kevin said.

“And what about you?” Gabe said to Carl.

Carl covered his smiling mouth with his fingers and giggled, his almond-shaped eyes squinting. “Kazumi Z is A-OK,” he said.

“What do the initials stand for?” Gabe asked.

“Nothing.” Kaycee shrugged. “We just thought they sounded cool.”

Gabe stretched out an arm towards the door. “Alright *girls*, your limo is waiting.”

On their way back to the Brats Mansion, they had a lot to discuss. “Gabe, I still haven’t come up with those songs,” Kaycee said. “I’m so sorry. I know we have a few days left, and I’ll try to come up with something.”

“Don’t worry about it, Kaycee. I’ve been busy while you guys have been soaking up the sun.” Gabe took a look at the assembled band. “You guys sure look great. That spa does wonders for you.”

If there were a time to mention the strange, clearly obvious things that had changed with the group, this would’ve been the time. Still, no one – no one at all – seem to be cognizant of what was plain to see. They didn’t mention their clothing, they didn’t mention that they had all dropped under 110 pounds.

More intriguing, no one mentioned that every member of the group now had a fresh, new pair of breasts. They didn’t mention it to each other, they didn’t seem alarmed to find them on their chests, and Gabe didn’t even think to mention it. Roxy had been the big winner, with a pair of D-cups, but they looked a bit oversized on his frame. Kazumi had come out on the low end, with something in between a B and an A-cup, but it was perfectly suited to his slender body. Jewelee had a pair of C-cups that were nice and round, with pink tips on his brown skin. Kaycee, too, had C-cups, a pair of fair-skinned, unblemished, perfectly shaped and perky breasts that bounced when he giggled.

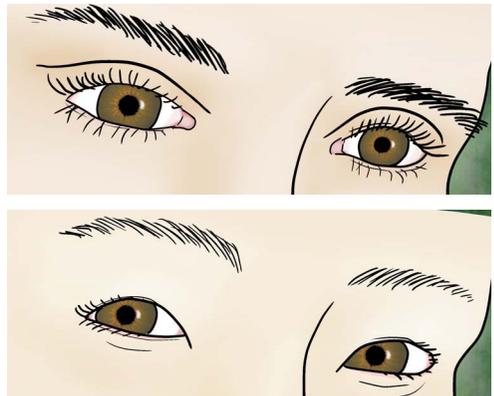
Not only did they fail to mention the breasts, but there were other details as well. Their waists were much more slender, probably due to the ribs that had been removed from each of them. Their noses were shorter and smaller. Their lips were fuller and their cheeks higher.

The only way one can tell at a glance that some man is masquerading as female is be to look for the Adams Apple on their throats, which for these four, were now as smooth as any woman’s.

The accompanying raise in the tones of their voices went unmentioned as well.

Just as notable were Carl’s eyes, which were now classically Asian. The double fold of the eyelids were gone, and the fold in the corners of the eye were narrower. He looked as Japanese as his ever-thickening accent.

“So, we kick off our summer tour



in three weeks.” Gabe said. “That gives us some time.”

“Summer?” Kevin asked. “I thought it was a spring tour.”

“No, it’s always been a summer tour,” Gabe replied.

“But I still don’t know if I can come up with the songs,” Kaycee said. “Three weeks?”

“Yeah, I can’t write everything!” Roxy said, smugly.

“I told you, I’ve taken care of it.” Gabe sat back in his seat, looking confident. “I’ll show you what I mean when we get back to the mansion.”

“Are you sure?” Kaycee asked.

“Sure I’m sure. Don’t you trust me?” Gabe smiled. “Now, there is one bit of bad news. The commercial shoot was completely scrapped. They want us to do it again.”

“Again?” Roxy whined. “But it was *soooo* boring!”

Gabe shrugged. “That’s show biz. Anyway, the executives loved the jingle, as always, but they didn’t think you guys came off very well. They said you looked a little plain on film.”

“Plain!” Jewelee said, offended. “That’s a lie, that is! They probably cocked up the shoot, and are blaming us for it!”

Gabe continued. “Well, whatever the reason, I do think they had a point. There’s no question that all of you have style, but it’s mostly just with your clothes and hair. We need each one of you to come up with a signature look.”

“Signature look?” Kaycee asked. “What does that mean?”

“Just something that brings out your personalities. Something beyond just fashion.”

“Are you talking about makeup?” Jewelee asked.

“Would you be offended if I was?” Gabe queried.

The four of them looked at each other, grimacing. “No!” Kaycee said, laughing. “We were all talking about it last night, and we wanted to give it a shot! We weren’t sure how to tell you!”

“You girls are always one step ahead of me.”



Once they were settled, Gabe had them assembled back in the main practice area. “Now I’ve got some ideas,” he said, “and I want you to keep an open mind.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Jewelee said.

“Where are our instruments?” Roxy asked. The stage where they had been practicing was completely bare. The drum kits, amplifiers and keyboards had all been taken away. Only Kevin, carrying his guitar to the stage, had anything to play.

“I’ll come to that in a second. First things first. We’ve spent a lot of money, and we’ve purchased some of the best songs out there on the market. Some of the best songwriters in the business have sold us their hottest material for us to perform.”

“But we do our own stuff!” Kaycee said.

“And we’re not getting rid of any of that, yet. But this new stuff is great. You have to hear it. We’ll be packing them in at every show with these songs.” Gabe walked over to a boom box and pressed play. “Take a listen.”

After listening to bits of six or seven songs, Gabe stopped the player. “They’re great aren’t they? Tell me they’re not great.”

Roxy was the first to say something. “They’re okay.”

Kaycee was adamant. “That was awful! It’s all poppy! It sounded like it came from a computer! We just can’t buy our material. Our stuff comes from the heart!”

“But it’s not enough, we need new material. We have to have more material!”

“But it’s junk! It sounds like sugary pop *crap*.” Kaycee turned to Jewelee. “You wouldn’t want to perform at in front of a crowd, would you?”

Jewelée rubbed her arm nervously. “Honestly Kaycee? Those are some good tunes. Nothing we’ve written so far is that good. It has a beat and you can dance to it.”

“Really? Are you serious? We’re a rock band!” Kaycee objected. He turned to Kazumi. “What did you think?”

His question was quickly answered, as Kazumi was dancing in place. “Kazumi like it! Faster, faster!”

“All you guys like this stuff?” Kaycee said. He looked at the three other members of his band. They were clearly in agreement. Kaycee realized he would be outvoted, so he needed to come up with a plan. “Just give me one week. One week is all I ask for. I’ll talk you guys out of it. I’ll have this whole band making some great, red hot, screaming loud rock music! Just give me one week.”



One week later, The Ballroom Brats were practicing their dance moves. All four of them were dressed in skimpy costumes with short skirts and lip-



synching to the sugariest, sweetest, most tooth-decaying pop music you could imagine.

“Gabe?” Kaycee called from the stage, as he took a break from the choreography. “It’s so hard for me to dance with this guitar in the way,” He said, pointing to the guitar he was carrying.

“Well, that’s easily solved,” Gabe replied. He walked up on stage and took the guitar away from Kaycee. “You don’t need this anyway.”

“No! No! I’m a guitarist! I’m a rock guitarist!” Kaycee whined, shaking his tiny fists uselessly.

Gabe handed the guitar off to one of the assistants, who took it away. “But this way everybody can see your sexy, sexy body.”

Kaycee looked down at himself, and then smiled at Gabe. “You’re right! I want to show off my hot bod! That old guitar was just getting in the way. You’re so smart, Gabe.” His attitude had changed over the past few days, going from steadfast old-school rocker to trend-crazy teenybopper.

Kaycee had started to try and write his rock songs, but every time he tried to think about writing a song, his mind would wander and the thoughts would just vanish in a haze. Kaycee was more interested with fashions, hair and, increasingly, how sexy he looked. By now, he was no more able to write a rock song than he was to plan a moon mission.

“What would you do without me, baby?”

“Let’s never find out!” Kaycee said, with a giggle. He returned back to the stage, where the three other members of the group were being attended to by assistants. The whole enterprise of The Ballroom Brats had expanded in recent days, with about an extra dozen people hanging around. In addition to every one of the band members having their own person to look after them, do their errands, and keep them happy, they also hired a choreographer to help them with their dance moves.

Without any instruments on stage, it was now up to the band to entertain. The music would be played off stage, coming from a recording, and the band would simply mimic to the music. In fact, the recordings they were mimicking to were no longer theirs at all. The singers and musicians had all recorded them in a studio somewhere in New York. The Ballroom Brats were now more or less a performance dance troupe, but the members could not care less.

More important things than music were on their minds. “What do you think?” Roxy said, holding up a very skimpy bikini. “For the swimsuit calendar.”

“That is so sexy,” Jewelee said. “When do we shoot that?”

“On Friday. I’m on a crash diet to make sure I look great.”

“What about... You know, down there?” Jewelee asked, clearly referring to their genitals. “A suit like that is going to make it pretty obvious.”

“That’s what they have Photoshop for,” Roxy said. “And you can’t really see mine much anyway.”

“Good point.” Jewelee agreed. “We shoot the commercial again on Thursday, don’t we? That doesn’t leave us a lot of time.”

“Busy, busy. There’s no rest for us smoking hot sex symbols,” Roxy answered.

Jewelee giggled. “Ah, the life of a star.”

Kaycee walked over to Kazumi. “Have you picked out a bikini yet, Kazumi?”

Kazumi leaned over and whispered something in her assistant’s ear. Her assistant was a man they knew only by the name of Hiro. He waited for Kazumi to finish, and then turned to Kaycee. “Kazumi says that Kazumi is nervous about it, but the stylist has chosen many beautiful things for Kazumi to wear,” Hiro said.

That was the way he communicated now. His speech had been breaking down day by day, to the point where he couldn’t even think of simple one word replies. He did, though, seem to be speaking in Japanese, so Gabe went out and hired a translator, and they could talk to Kazumi again.

“Oh my God! Stylist! That reminds me.” Kaycee called out into the air. “Sheila! Sheila! Where are you!”

Quickly, a slightly disheveled young woman ran up to meet Kaycee. “You need me?” She asked.

“Yeah, did you, like, come up with any good swimsuits n’ stuff for the Friday shoot?”

“I have about a dozen for you to try on,” Sheila replied. “I think they’re going to look great on you. You’ll love them.”

“They don’t cover up too much of my body do they?” Kaycee asked.

“Of course not, I know what you like. The less, the better.”

Kaycee hugged Sheila. “Like, awesome!”

The choreographer returned to the stage, and clapped his hands loudly to get everybody’s attention. “Okay people! Are you ready? Let’s get back to work.”

The music started playing off stage, and the four took their positions. Kaycee started to lip-synch.

*“I’m a party girl, all around the world. I’m a party girl, all around the world. 24 hours, seven days a week, I’m dancin’, singin’ and lovin’ you, baby...”*

The four of them swiveled, jumped and kicked in perfect rhythm. They had only been practicing for a few days, but there was something inside of them that compelled them to learn the routines with every ounce of their concentration.

Once the song was over, the choreographer declared himself satisfied and called it a day. The band was swarmed by all of the various assistants tending to their needs.

“Before everybody runs off,” Gabe said, talking loudly to be heard, “let me quickly run over the calendar for the next few days. Wednesday, we have makeup, hair and costume tests for the commercial. Thursday, we shoot the commercial. Friday we do the calendar shoot. Then on Saturday, we’re back here so we can pack and head back to Dr. Price’s spa for some final treatments.”

Roxy stomped her foot on the stage. “No! I’m not going back to that stupid spa! I’ve had all the relaxation I can take! I’m going out clubbing, and that’s that!”

Jewelee agreed. “Gabe, we *have* been to that spa an awful lot. With the tour coming up, shouldn’t we be practicing? I mean, I’m not particularly tired. I think we should just keep working.”

“I don’t know guys, I’m, like, so totally wiped out. I could use some serious spa time.” Kaycee said. “And one of those magical deep tissue massages by Sven...”

“Well I already told you. I’m not going!” Roxy said.

“And if she’s not going, I’m not going,” Jewelee added.

“Now hold on here!” Gabe tried to grab a hold of the discussion. “Dr. Price phoned me himself, and insisted that we come to the spa. He didn’t want us going out on tour until he had a chance to talk to you guys.”

“C’mon, guys.” Kaycee said. “Let’s just go to the spa. I really love the spa. Right Kazumi?”

Kazumi gave them a thumbs up. “Kazumi like,” he said.

“I’ve never seen anyone refuse a vacation,” Gabe said. “All Dr. Price wants to do is to make sure that you’re in good shape for the tour.”

“Well, are his legs broken?” Roxy said. “He can come here.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. He can come here if he wants to talk to us,” Jewelee said.

“Okay, okay. We’ll do that,” Gabe said. “That works better for the schedule anyway.”

Kaycee frowned. “Aw, I wanted to go see Sven.”



Jewelee, Kazumi and Roxy were all thumbing through the latest copies of various fashion magazines that had just been dropped at the front door. Occasionally one would find something they liked, hold it up for everyone to see, and get some commentary.

Kazumi was leafing through her copies of Egg and Nicola, Jewelee through her copies of Pop’Africana, Tank and i-D, and Roxy preferred copies of Metal, Cosmo and Big Buns Quarterly.

Kaycee came sprinting into the room, planting himself in the middle of everyone with a single skip. “What do you think? What do you think?” he asked, rapid-fire.

“About what?” Roxy replied with disdain.

“You know, my look!” Kaycee said. He pointed to his face with both hands to show off the make up applied to it. “Tell me what you think!”



“You look like a life-size Barbie doll.” Roxy said.

“Like, wow! That’s *exactly* what I was going for!” Kaycee replied. “Sheila and I have been going over all these YouTube videos on how to do Barbie makeup! Isn’t this awesome?” Kaycee’s face was a good canvas for makeup, with it’s flawless complexion. The shape had softened as well, there being no hint of angular male features. The sub-dermal time-release hormones implanted in all the four members had made them look as feminine as the real thing.

Jewelee glanced at Kaycee’s face. “Don’t you think it’s a bit strong?”

“Oh, this coming from the person with the, like, super big white stripe across their face,” Kaycee said.

“It works for me,” Jewelee replied.

This was the day they had all decided to finalize what would be their ‘new look.’ Kaycee was the last of the four to go, all of them taking turns to get a verdict from everyone else. Jewelee did, indeed, have a white stripe going across his face – it was a short stripe going from cheek to cheek across the bridge of his nose. After a bit of trial and error, which involved a lot of wild, weird make up choices, Jewelee had settled on this one. Combined with dark eye-lids and eyelashes and glossy red lips, Jewelee looked gorgeous.

Roxy had decided upon a darker look, to no one’s surprise, with metallic blue lips to match his hair. His eyes had a blended smoke look to them, and an overall classic heavy metal type of style.

As for Kazumi, he had taken a different approach, with very little



makeup on his face, as he didn't need much. He had added painted contact lenses that made his eyes appear huge, and applied ultra thick false eyelashes, doubled up for even more of an impact. A slight, but very obvious pink blush was applied to his cheeks. The most startling thing was his lips, which were pink, but with white polka dots. It was a new thing, something called a temporary lip tattoo.

Kaycee was checking himself in a hand mirror. "Well I like it," he declared, referring to his own look. "I'm keeping it."

"Then why did you ask us?" Roxy said.

"Because I'm a nice person, and I like to be polite." Kaycee's makeup did indeed make him look like a life-size doll, with thick eyelashes, bright hot pink lips, and a smooth flawless face that almost looked artificial.

All in all, they looked like four over-done, over-the-top, unimaginably beautiful supermodels masquerading as pop stars.

Somewhere in the distance, they heard the doorbell ring. "Should I get that?" Kaycee asked, since he was the one standing.

"No, let the maid get it. That's why we hired her," said Jewelee.

The doorbell rang again.

"Where is that lazy Mexican?" Jewelee grunted. "Carmelita! Get the door!" he shouted.

A minute later, a contrite maid appeared in the room. "Dr. Price here to see you," she said, before taking a quick exit.

The familiar figure of the aged Dr. Price and are just himself. "Hello, my friends. It's so good to see you. And you have such a lovely house here. It must be worth a fortune."

"Ask my parents," Kaycee said. "They bought it for me. Some oil guy bought their land for like a buh-jillion dollars. They celebrated by buying this for me. So thank some crazy billionaire."

"Yes," the doctor replied, "Tex Pendleton did that, he's one of my clients."

"How did you know his name?" Kaycee asked.



"I must've read about it somewhere," the doctor said. "So are ready for our session?"

"Well, I have to take care of my face n' stuff," Kaycee said. "So someone else go first." Kaycee ran off, to wherever he had come from.

"Actually, I was thinking we would do a group session," said the doctor.

"No, I like one-on-ones better," Jewelee said.

"Yeah, one-on-ones are much better," Roxy said. "I always get embarrassed in group sessions."

"Well, I really think we should do this as a group..."

"One-on-one or nothing, doc," Roxy said. "It'll be your last chance before we go on tour in two weeks!"

The doctor was visibly hesitant. "I... I suppose... If there's no other option. I mean, I could..."

"Nope, this is the way we want to do it," Roxy bounced off the chair. "I'll go first so I can get this over with."



"So what'd I miss?" Kaycee said, as he returned an hour later. "Did I hear the doorbell?"

Jewelee was still flipping through a magazine, as he sipped a cup of tea. "Dr. Price came for our sessions. He's just finishing up with Kazumi. You're next in the queue, love."

"Do you know what he's talking to us about? Have you talked to him yet?" Kaycee asked.

"No, I want to go last. I never get to go last."

"He didn't want to talk about too much," Roxy said, entering the room. "Although it's always hard remember what we were talking about in the sessions."

"I know what you mean." Kaycee watched Roxy plop himself down in a chair. "Maybe he just wants to make sure we're ready for the big tour."

Roxy shrugged. "Maybe, but that's still eight weeks away."

"Two weeks," Kaycee corrected.

"What is?" Roxy asked.

Jewelee batted Roxy on the knee with his magazine. "The summer tour. It's in two weeks, Einstein."

"It's in eight weeks, and it a fall tour!" Roxy insisted. "What have you guys been smoking?"

Jewelee looked at Roxy, puzzled and bewildered. “You just said it was two weeks, remember? You told the doctor that this was the last time we could take a session before we left in two weeks, that’s what you said.”

“No, I said eight weeks. What are you, stupid?” Roxy said.

That ticked Jewelee off. “Now you listen here, I...”

“Never mind!” Kaycee interrupted. “Gabe will let us know, next time we ask him.” Kaycee glanced at Jewelee, with a shrug, that said, ‘I don’t get it either.’ Neither of them were questioning their memory, they had been talking about this upcoming tour for a long time, and they both knew it was two weeks away.

“Fine, whatever,” Roxy said. “You guys are going to look really dumb when he tells you that you’re wrong.”

“Well, you’ll gloat about it, I’m sure,” Kaycee said. “So, if you’re right, what are going to do until then?”

“You heard Gabe. The schedule is, Wednesday we do the costume, hair and makeup tests, Thursday we shoot the commercial, Friday we do the swimsuit shoot, Saturday we go to the spa...”

Jewelee stopped him there. “No, we told Gabe weren’t going to go to the spa.”

“When did you tell him that?” Roxy said. “I sure didn’t hear anything about that.”

“You don’t remember that? Your memory sure is screwed up,” Jewelee said. In came Kazumi, fresh out of his session.

“I guess that means it’s my turn,” Kaycee said. He got up to go.

“Stop.” Jewelee said, putting up his hand to block Kaycee. “Something’s not right.” He approached Kazumi. “How many weeks until we begin our tour, Kazumi?”

Kazumi’s huge brown eyes, hidden behind his thick eyelids, just stared and blinked at Kaycee with non-comprehension.

“You know he can’t understand you,” Kaycee said.

“I remember when he could,” Jewelee replied.

“Yeah, yeah... I do remember that.” Kaycee crossed his arms. “We used to be able to talk to him. No one forgets how to speak English, do they?”

“And you guys call me screwed up. You two must be losing your minds,” Roxy said.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Kaycee asked.

“Ugh,” Roxy said, exasperated to have to continue this tiring conversation. “Well, you guys might as well be talking to a brick wall. We all know that Kazumi has never been able to speak English.”

“Right,” Jewelee said. “Never. That’s what you remember.”

“Yes, that’s what I remember, because it’s the truth!” Roxy said, “Second, you guys keep referring to her as a ‘him’ and a ‘he.’ Are you guys trying to be funny or are you just insane?”

“Neither,” Jewelee said. “What’s your point?”

“My point is, that, speaking as a woman, I’d be pretty offended if you kept calling me a ‘he,’ and it’s absolutely cruel to say that sort of thing to her, since she can’t even understand it and fight back.”

“You think you’re a woman?” Jewelee said.

“Okay, now you’re insulting *me*,” Roxy answered. He got into Jewelee’s face. “Do you have a problem?”

“Yeah! I think you’re off your trolley!” Jewelee fired back.

“Hold on! Hold on!” Kaycee got in between the two feuding band members, and pushed them apart. He then got close enough to Jewelee to whisper in his year. “Something funny is going on here, we need to talk. In private.”

Jewelee turned to walk away. “This isn’t over!” He yelled back at Roxy.

“Yeah? Like I’m so afraid, *bitch*,” Roxy answered.

Kaycee practically had to pull Jewelee into another room. He quickly closed the door shut and leaned against it for security. “I am so, like, totally freaking out,” Kaycee said. “What’s wrong with Roxy?”

Jewelee shook his head. “I don’t know. Everything was going fine. Then, when she came back from his session, he started speaking nonsense.”

“Well, if something happened during the session, maybe should we should ask Dr. Price,” suggested Kaycee.

“That’s a good idea. But the first thing I want to do is double check with Gabe.”

Jewelee and Kaycee left to go find their manager. They tracked him down outdoors, sitting in the backyard gardens with a drink in his hand. “There you are Gabe. You aren’t trying to hide from us are you?” Kaycee said, pressing himself onto Gabe.

“From you girls?” Gabe said, “Never. Just taking a break.”

“Even *he’s* calling us girls,” Jewelee said.

“He’s been calling us that for weeks,” Kaycee said. “Gabe, I forget – when are we starting our tour?”

“Are you kidding? In eight weeks.”

“Oh my God! He saying it too!” Said Kaycee.

“Of course that’s what he’s saying,” Jewelee said. He turned to confront Gabe. “Because he’s the one behind this.”

“Behind what?” Gabe asked.

“Behind...” Jewelee paused. “Behind... Aw, hell. What are we accusing him of?”

Kaycee looked like he had a thought. “He’s trying to... Um... Oh, I almost had it there, for a sec...” He tried to get his thought back. It was strange, like someone had put a mental block in his mind to keep him from being suspicious. “Oh, I know! He wants us to think we’re real girls, so he can sell us into slavery to Arab billionaires.”

“No, that doesn’t make any sense.” Jewelee tried to think. “He wants us to believe we’re women so he can marry one of us and inherit our money? No, forget that. That’s naff.”

Kaycee had another idea. “I know! He wants us to be women so he can get revenge on us for the panty raid at his sorority.”

Jewelee scowled. “Oh, now that’s just stupid. I mean, that’s stupid on top of stupid.”

“Well... Maybe it isn’t Gabe, then.” Kaycee said, sheepishly.

“No, you remember when we did the convention, he was the one with the bright idea that we pretend to be girls! You remember that, right?”

“Kind of...” Kaycee said. “The convention... That sounds so familiar...”

That just made Jewelee more adamant. “See? He’s even making us forget just what happened a few weeks ago. He’s the one behind this. He did it!”

“Did what?” Gabe spoke in his defense. “Work my butt off to get you guys a nationwide tour? A commercial? Millions of dollars? Give you everything you need to become famous?” His sarcasm had a vicious edge to it. “You know, I don’t have to do this. I can work for another band that will pay me! All I get from you guys is grief!” He pushed his way past Jewelee, and stormed back into the house.

“He has a point.” Kaycee said.

“Yeah, I hate to admit it, but he does,” Jewelee admitted. “All he really gets out of this is more work. If it is a plan, it’s a duff plan.”

“So, we know that people’s memories are all mixed up. But why?” Kaycee asked. “We’ve got to think harder.” To dramatize his point, he scrunched up his face in concentration. The tip of his tongue stuck out the corner of his mouth as he analyzed the facts.

“Got anything yet?” Jewelee asked.

“No,” Kaycee pouted. “Thinking is hard!”

“Well, what should we do next?” Jewelee asked.

“Maybe we should go ask Dr. Price.”

“I don’t know. I mean Roxy and Kazumi both were acting kind of strange, right after the session.” Jewelee said. “Maybe the sessions have something to do with it?”

“But Dr. Price is such a sweetie pie!”

“I know, but we have to be suspicious of everyone!”

“Yeah, I guess that’s right.” Kaycee agreed. “Okay, we won’t go to the sessions. Not that I think he has anything to do with this, though.”

“I’ll go tell Dr. Price we’re not feeling well. Food poisoning or something.” Jewelee headed off.

Kaycee was feeling very uncomfortable about all of this. He had had, for the past several weeks, this ongoing feeling that things were running out of control for him. He had this inkling that there was just something very weird going on, right at outside his ability to perceive it. Now that he had actual evidence that such a thing was happening, he started to feel a little bit paranoid.

Jewelee returned just a few minutes later. “He wasn’t very happy about it, but we canceled the sessions.”

That also made Kaycee feel very uncomfortable. He hated the idea of upsetting the very nice Dr. Price. But the two were resolute. They had made their decision. Now that they had come to this agreement, they just stood there, looking at each other. “Now what?” Jewelee asked.

“Hmm... I guess we’d... Ooh! This makes us detectives!” Kaycee said, with excitement. “We get to do some investigating!”

“Right on!” Jewelee said, matching Kaycee’s excitement. “But I don’t feel like a detective... Let’s go put some clothes for doing detective stuff!”

“Like serious detectives!” Kaycee said. “Yeah!”

Jewelee and Kaycee dashed off to their rooms to change. Kaycee had the perfect dress. He had bought it on a lark, but now he finally had a use for it. He slipped out of the skirt and top he was wearing, and put his pumps back in the closet. He had a pair of pink tights he hadn’t yet worn and scrunched them up to put them on. Once he had them aligned and straight, he pulled a purple mini-dress off the rack and shimmied into it. Adding a purple hair band and a pea-green scarf, he finished the outfit off with some lavender loafers.

“I think there’s a mystery that needs solving!” Kaycee said to his reflection, as he posed in the mirror. He changed no a natural color lipstick and beige colored nails to complete the look.

Running back to meet Jewelee, they arrived at the same moment. Jewelee was dressed in a short jacket made of fur, with back slacks and black boots. His hair was frizzed out into an afro.

Looking at Kaycee, Jewelee stood and put his hands on his hips. “Daphne from Scooby-Doo?” He asked.

“Um... Yeah...” Kaycee admitted, embarrassed that his outfit had been so easily revealed. “Cleopatra Jones?” he said, pointing at Jewelee’s outfit.

“Maybe we should change,” they both said at the same time.

Back in his room, Kaycee changed into something a bit more normal. Not his usual glitzy, glamorous stuff, but something he could wear and go unnoticed. He selected a pink tank top, with a short red jacket. He added an eye-catchingly short flippy denim skirt with a white ruffle hem. A red leather belt loosely slung to one side balanced it off for him. Tan knee-high boots were his last touch, and he changed his lipstick and nails back to red.



Kaycee hadn’t really worn a lot of clothes that had exposed his legs. He preferred to cover them up. But as he dressed, he noticed just how nice his legs looked. Kaycee had the vaguest sense that he used to be ashamed to wear skirts. Maybe it was because he didn’t like how his legs looked? As he stretched them out and pointed his toes in various directions, he realized how big a mistake that had been. He had great legs, there was no doubt about it. Almost as good as his boobs, he decided.

Just as he was getting ready to go, he decided he needed a cell phone, and found one plugged into a charger that was buried under some old stuff in the corner. He hadn’t needed his cell phone in a while, because he always had people to handle these things for him nowadays. He flipped through the contacts to make sure he had everyone’s number just in case, and then wondered why he had so many contacts.

He stopped at a few of them that were designated as ‘favorites.’ One was “Dedrick Fielder – Roommate.” Another was “Paula Bronson – GF.” That couldn’t mean ‘girlfriend,’ could it? The other one that looked important was “Mom and Dad.”

“What do you have there?” Jewelee asked when they met again, downstairs.

“I think I got somebody else’s phone mixed up with mine,” Kaycee said, unsure. “I don’t know any of these people.”

“That’s a clue!” Jewelee said, excitedly. “You found a clue!”

“I did?” Kaycee replied. “I guess I did!”

“I bet they can help us. They’re people you know! You check those names out. I’m gonna see if I can find anyone who knows about me from before I came here.”

“Yeah, I can’t even remember moving here. It’s strange.” Kaycee was still looking at the names on the phone, with the odd sense that he did know these people.

Jewelee took the limo and Kaycee called for a taxi. While he was waiting, Kaycee decided to call one of the numbers. He didn’t get an answer from the one labeled ‘roommate,’ so he tried ‘Mom and Dad.’

“The Plough residence,” said a stuffy voice on the other end of the line.

“Yeah, are my parents there?” Kaycee asked.

“I could not say,” the voice replied, “having no knowledge of who your parents are.”

“Oh... Oh yeah. I’m their son, I guess.” Kaycee didn’t know this for sure, but he was beginning to suspect the this was the truth.

“Then yes, your parents are here. However, they are unable to come to the phone, as they are entertaining,” said the voice.

“Who is this?”

“Stimpson, their butler.”

“Butler? Wow.” Kaycee replied. “Hmm, maybe I should come over.”

“Yes, please grace us with your presence. I am sure the Ploughs would be delighted to see their son.”

“Do they talk about me much?” Kaycee asked.

“Never.”



Jewelee directed the limo driver to somewhere where he thought he was most likely to have frequented, before he became one of The Ballroom Brats. They pulled into the parking lot for The Red Boar Tavern, an old English pub. “Wait here, I may be a while,” he told the driver.

Jewelee entered the dark tavern, pushing open the door. It didn’t feel as familiar as he hoped it would. He felt a little better about things once he saw the decor inside. Union Jack flags, pictures on the wall for rugby teams, trophies for footy teams, and Guinness on tap – all the things that felt like home to him.

He walked right up the bar, and said, “Pint.”

The bartender looked at him warily. “Need to see some ID.”

“What for?” Truly asked.

“Because you don’t look a day over 17,” the bartender replied.

“17?” Jewelee was put off. “Are you daft? I’m 28!”

“Like hell. Do you have an ID or not, miss?”

Jewelee made a show of searching his pockets. Of course in this outfit, a metallic blue stretch mini-dress, there weren’t a lot of pockets. “I must’ve left it somewhere.”

The bartender had had enough. “Go on! Get out of here!”

Jewelee was forced to turn on his 4 inch heels and walk out. “See if I ever come back!” He yelled, just to keep it from looking like a complete surrender.

A few steps after the door closed behind him, Jewelee stood and looked back. “17? 17 years old. Not bloody likely!” He got back into the limo.



The taxi worked its way down a long, long driveway and dropped Kaycee off at an unbelievably huge mansion. It looked like it was attached to two smaller mansions, either one of which were still larger than the house his parents and bought him. “And they bought me that piece of crap log cabin I live in?” Kaycee thought.

He walked on up to the front door and rang the bell. He immediately felt intimidated by the loud noise the bell made, and more intimidated when the huge door slowly opened. “Yes? Did you get lost from the tour?” The man at the door asked.

“You must be Stimpson,” Kaycee said. “I called earlier?”

“Did you?” The butler replied.

“Yes, I’m the Plough’s son.”

“Are you?”

“Yes!” Kaycee insisted. He realized he needed to prove it. “My mom’s name is Diane, my dad’s name is Steven.” This new information just seemed to be leaking into his brain from somewhere.

“Congratulations on having access to the Internet,” The butler replied, dryly.

Kaycee sighed, realizing he needed to be even more specific. “My mother insists that every Tuesday she have hotdogs for dinner, because it’s what my dad made her on their first date, which was also a Tuesday. My dad fanatically follows the Angels baseball team, and will wrestle you to the ground if you call them the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim instead of the California Angels.” The one thing that could never be erased from anybody’s memory are the irritating affectations of your parents.

The butler didn't even need pause to think about it. "I'll tell your parents that you're here. They're entertaining some friends, so it may be a minute."

Kaycee stepped inside, absolutely blown away by the opulence of the place. Everything in was made of shiny marble and gold, looking more like it was out of the most decadent days of pre-Revolutionary France, rather than just outside of Brentwood.

"Where? Where did you say he was?" He heard his mother's voice coming from down a hallway.

"In the foyer," said the butler.

"It's about time he came by, the boy never visits," said his father.

"Mom! Dad!" Kaycee called out. He advanced toward them with an unexpected urgency. Once he saw them, he knew they were *his* parents. He hadn't realized how much he had missed his folks.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" His father said, taking a step back and putting his arms out to prevent Kaycee from getting any closer. "Who the hey are you?"

Kaycee's mother quickly answered that question. "Kevin?" She asked. No mother would have trouble recognizing their child.

Kaycee wasn't quite sure exactly where she'd come up with the name 'Kevin,' but it did kind of click with him. It sounded *awfully* familiar. As soon as she had said it, the expression on Kaycee's father's face changed.

"Oh my Lord, Kevin," he said. Kaycee's father was suddenly far more interested in Kaycee, examining him from head to toe, from his fluffy long blonde hair to his high-heeled boots. Then, his eyes seemed to dial in on his son's breasts. "Jesus Christ."

Kaycee's mom was not hesitant. She stepped forward and embraced her son. "Oh baby, you should've told us."

"Told you what?" Kaycee replied.

"About your decision."

"I made a decision?" Kaycee said, puzzled.

"I should sure as hell say so." Kaycee's dad commented.

Kaycee's mother broke off the embrace, and looked lovingly into her son's eyes. "We will always love you and support you, no matter what you do."

"Uh, yeah. That's great." Kaycee was feeling very uncomfortable. His parents were dressed formally, and he had clearly interrupted something. They were also behaving like he had grown a second head. Had being a pop star changed him that much? Whatever the case, he decided he should back out immediately, and try this again when things could be explained. "Listen, I can see you guys are busy, so why don't you get back to whatever you were doing, I just wanted to come by and say 'hi.'"

“Listen, your mother’s right,” Kaycee’s father said, putting a firm hand on his son’s shoulder. “Obviously, this is something we should talk about. I don’t know... I never suspected... I just... Again, we should talk about this. I hope to god you’re seeing a doctor.”

“Yeah, I’m seeing Dr. Price.”

“Good, getting the right advice for this sort of thing has to be critical.” Kaycee’s mother hugged him again. “We’ll get through this is a family, together.”

“I just wish you had goddamn told us or something,” Kaycee’s father said. “This is coming out of nowhere.”

Kaycee didn’t understand where this conversation is gone completely off the rails, but he couldn’t make heads or tails of it. He had so many questions he wanted to ask his folks, but the experience of meeting them head grown so awkward that there was no possible way he was going to be able to bring them up.

“So okay, we’ll all get together with Dr. Price at some point, if that’s what you want. But I gotta go. Bye!” Kaycee extricated himself from his mother’s grip, and left through the front door. Thank God he asked the taxi to wait for him. He jumped in, and told the driver to get the hell out of there. He was feeling extremely creeped out.



Jewelee had gotten tossed out of two more old English pubs by the time he gave up. He considered that maybe, just maybe, he hadn’t frequented these sort of establishments in his past. But where else might he have hung out? High fashion boutiques? Salons? Shopping for dresses on Rodeo Drive? He wasn’t even sure where to begin.

“Driver, let’s get something to eat,” Jewelee said. “I can’t wait another second. I’m absolutely famished.”

“There’s a Burger Boom ahead,” the driver said.

“It’ll have to do.”

“Drive-through?”

“Oh no, I’ll come inside for the full dinner service,” Jewelee said. “Besides, I should be familiar with the restaurant’s fare if I am going to be in their commercials.”

The limo was parked, and Jewelee entered Burger Boom #3182. He walked on up to the counter and the register, which was apparently how this sort of thing worked, and spoke to the gentleman who was awaiting to take his order. “Are there any specials tonight?” Jewelee asked.

“Seriously?” Said the man at the register. “Just pick something. If you don’t like it, you’re only out three bucks.”

Examining the illuminated menu above the man’s head, Jewelee considered his options. “I see you don’t have a mince meat pie. Pity. I’ll have... The Burger Boom Grande Jumbo Deluxe.”

“Fries?” Jewelee was asked in the least enthusiastic way.

“Those are what you yanks call chips, aren’t they? Yes, I’ll have some of those, and tea.”

“We only have it iced,” the young man replied.

Something inside of Jewelee cringed. Iced tea? That was reason enough for anarchy, as far as he was concerned. The transaction was finished, Jewelee was handed a receipt, and he stood aside, awaiting his meal. “In all honesty,” he whispered to the man at the register, “I’m not used to food like this.”

“You don’t say?” The employee said, examining the thin body, refined appearance, and regal carriage of the person he was talking to.

“No! It’s true! What should I expect?”

“As little as possible.”



Kaycee decided the next place he should check out the person marked as ‘GF,’ assuming that meant ‘girlfriend.’ Paula Bronson, read the name on the phone. Checking his call records, it appeared that he and she called each other 20 times a day. He assumed that meant they must’ve had quite a romance.

But something about meeting his parents, and hearing the name ‘Kevin,’ started to trigger memories. When he thought of Paula, the first thing that came to mind wasn’t romance or passion or even friendship. What came to mind first was a deep sense of dread. The more he thought about it, he wasn’t really sure that seeing Paula was a good idea, but he was too curious to back out now. He had to know more about his old life.

The taxi pulled up at the address on Kaycee’s phone, but when he went to the door, the girl who answered said that Paula no longer lived there. She was able to give him a new address where she was supposed to be living now.

The taxi found its way to this new address, and Kaycee immediately knew he had been there before, recognizing the house from somewhere deep in his memory. It was an older house, out in the suburbs. He rang the bell, which played a merry tune, and was greeted by a young girl. She had big blue eyes, a spray of freckles across her nose, and was wearing some orthodontic headgear – a strap that wrapped around her neck and connected to some metal in her mouth.

She looked up at him and said, “My parents are busy right now, you’ll have to come back...” But that’s as far she got, before she froze stiff, in shock. “You’re Kaycee from The Ballroom Brats!” She yelled, just as excitedly as if she was shouting ‘fire’ in a crowded movie house. “Oh my god, ohmigawd, *ohmi-gaaaaawd!*” She was jumping up and down, her graids bouncing up and down with her.

Kaycee didn’t know how to react to that, since it was really the first time a fan had ever treated him like he was famous. The truth was, although the band expected to be big stars soon, they weren’t family’s at all, yet. “Yes, that’s me, Kaycee. And you’re...?”

“My... My... Name?” The girl was clearly too rattled to reply coherently. “You want to know *my* name?”

“Do you have one?” Kaycee asked.

“Leena! L E E N A. Leena.”

“Well, it’s good to meet you, Leena. I’m looking for Paula. Is she here?”

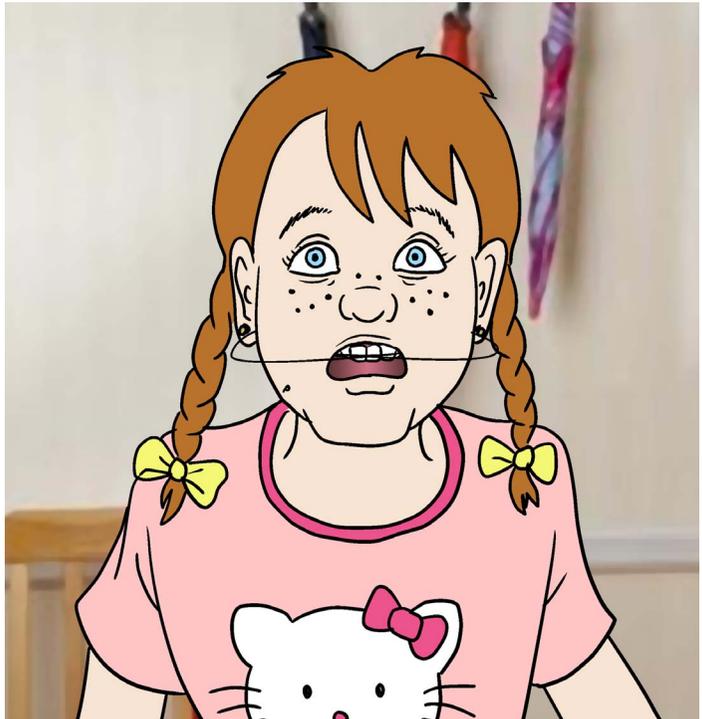
“Yes! No! Yes! I mean, that’s me, my real name is Paulina. Leena is sort of a nickname.”

Reality then struck Kaycee hard. The young girl he was talking to was none other than his ex-girlfriend, Paula. As soon as the thought struck him, it became obvious. She even had the same birthmark on her jaw.

“Who is at the door, pumpkin?” Came a voice from inside. Paula’s mother then appeared, in the doorway.

“It’s Kaycee from The Ballroom Brats!” Leena said. “I gotta get your autograph! I need some paper and a pen!” She then ran off like a herd of wild horses.

“She gets so excited these days,” Paula’s mother said. “Kaycee, is it? The Ballroom



Brats? My little Leena can't stop talking about your band. Thank you for coming to see her, she's been writing you letters every day."

"She has?" Kaycee said. He then realized without any justification for his visit, it might look little weird for him to be there. "Oh, yeah! She's one of our biggest fans!" He was making it up, but since they didn't have any fans, this was technically true. This was now Kaycee's opportunity to ask some questions he wasn't sure Leena would be able to answer. "How old is she?"

"Leena is 13, she'll be 14 next month!"

"What? That can't be right," Kaycee said. After all, he did now vaguely remember Paula being his girlfriend. She had to have been at least 24 or 25 when that was going on. "She, uh, looks older than that."

"Oh, our Leena had a very rare condition. She was a victim of premature aging."

"Premature aging?" Kaycee had never heard of such a thing.

"Yes, our doctor tells us it's quite common these days. Leena looked as old as her mid-twenties – maybe even older than that. She was fully developed and fully matured at far too young in age."

"Well, she doesn't look twenty-ish anymore."

"No! Thanks to Dr. Price, and his lovely spa, we've been able to correct her imbalances. He was able to help Paula see herself as the age she truly was, and embrace the young girl we all knew she was inside. It was quite a mental breakthrough."

"Mom!" Paula yelled from somewhere inside the house, "I can't find a pen!"

"Look in the kitchen, sweetie!" her mother yelled back.

"So, you went to go see Dr. Price?"

"Lovely man. He does God's work there at the spa. In just a few short treatments, he had our little Leena back to us. He removed all that premature breast tissue, did some corrective work on her face, and now she's able to play and go to school with kids her own age again."

"Going to school again?"

"She's graduating from junior high in the fall."

"This was all I could find!" Paula said, producing a laundry marker and a page ripped out of the phone book. She forced it into Kaycee's hands. Kaycee took a look at the person he now recognized as his old girlfriend. He noted the changes. The loss of her breasts, what looked to be a little bit of work on her nose and eyes, the braces, and the pigtails all made her look every bit the 13-year-old she was acting like.

Kaycee took the pen and paper and signed: "To Leena, our biggest fan. Never change. –Kaycee of The Ballroom Brats."

Paula frantically grabbed them back from Kaycee's hands, and clutched them to her chest. Her flat, 13-year-old chest. "Oh thank you, thank you! I'll keep these for ever and ever! Do you want to come inside and play some games on my Xbox?"

"I'm sure Kaycee has things she needs to do," Paula's mother said.

"Yes, I have people I need to see today," Kaycee said. "But I'm glad I met you, Leena."

As Kaycee returned to the taxi, he heard Paula yell, "I'm going to start a fan club! And it's can be the biggest ballroom brats fan club in the world!"

Kaycee replied with a thumbs up and a nervous, pained, smile.



"Oh my God, this is shite," Jewelee said, having tried diligently to eat the burger on her tray. "No wonder you people here are so fat," she said to herself. "Quaffing this garbage down day after day, how can they bear it?"

"How are you enjoying your meal?" Said an employee, who was taking the time to walk to Jewelee's table.

"Do a lot of people order this... Hamburger?" Jewelee asked.

"Yes, it's one of our top sellers."

"God help you all."

"You're not satisfied?" The employee said. "Is there anything I can do to enhance your enjoyment?"

"Listen," Jewelee checked the name on the employee's name tag. "Listen, Tom, my mum always told me to keep my mouth shut if I didn't have anything nice to say."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Maybe I can offer you a free deep-fried churro dessert?"

"No, if there's anything I hate more than American food, it's Mexican food. I should just be off." Jewelee stood up. In the process, he brushed his arm against the oil-drum-sized iced tea, spilling it all over the floor.

"Whoops!" Tom said, "Clean up on the dining floor!" he yelled.

"I'll get it!" Jewelee yelled. He nimbly dashed for the employee doorway, ran back into the kitchen, headed for the janitors' closet, which was behind a wall, grabbed the mop and bucket that were located inside, and carried them back out the dining floor.

He had the mop in his hands, before he realized what he was doing. Instinct and pure Pavlovian response had triggered his memories. As it all came flooding back into his mind, Jewelee dropped the mop and ran outside to the limo.



He didn't understand at all what it just happened. Or perhaps, he did, which made it all the more terrifying to him.

Jewelee knew this place. It was becoming more and more familiar to him by the second. He slipped inside the passenger door, closed it, locked it, and curled up in a ball on the seat. He had such horrible visions in his head – such dull, drab, grey memories of this place. A shiver ran down his back, like the coldest winters’ rain in Inverness.



Kaycee’s taxi took him to his final stop. So far, of all the places had visited, this one felt more familiar than any other. It was the address listed under the term ‘roommate.’ He trudged up the stairway of the old apartment building, down a hallway with a discolored, flattened carpet. He was starting to vividly remember doing this a thousand times. Almost without thinking about it, he stopped at the door of his old apartment. He was about to knock, when he saw the door was already open a crack. Pushing it open, he felt like he really was investigating something, like he was in some TV crime show. Now he wished he had his Daphne dress back.

But when he saw what was inside the door, he was disappointed. No corpse on the ground, no blood on the carpet, nothing that looked like a crime. Although it was a crime the way this apartment had been treated. Not a thing was properly put away, stuff was just thrown on the floor anywhere, and dishes were piled up in the sink like an ancient burial mound. It smelled like one, too.

The layout of the apartment was as familiar to him as the back of his hand. Main room on the right, and on the left, two bedrooms, with the bathroom in between. He walked into what he believed to be his old bedroom, and recognized a few things. Some broken stereo equipment, a beat up laptop, and an acoustic guitar with most of its strings missing. He sat on the bed, and found it gave way as if it were about to snap in two, just like he remembered it did.

There was no doubt about it, this was his old room. He looked around again, at the squalid surroundings, the cheap furniture, the emphatically beige walls and ceiling, and bits of broken and discarded items in the corner. It all looked so sad to him – unfathomably, unendingly, unbearably sad. This wasn’t his room, this was the room of someone who had given up on life.

Something within him pushed him out of that room. Something unconscious, something that was trying desperately to flush him out of there, as it was saving his life.

He stuck his head into the other room, which had just one working light bulb. On the walls were posters of dragons, knights in armor, castles, and ogres. But some were hanging off the wall just buy a corner, apparently long neglected. Some had been covered over with other posters, with images of motorcycles, oiled and tanned women in bikinis, and pictures of the open road.

With a final look around, and no one in sight, Kaycee left the apartment. He carefully went back down the stairs in his high-heeled boots, and let himself out. Just as he was about to leave, he heard some noise coming from the garage located under the apartment building. He went to check on it.

What he found was just some guy working on his Harley. He was a well-muscled young man, who would have had torn the sleeves off his shirt to display his rippling muscles on his biceps and shoulders. Kaycee's eyes lingered on them for a moment, as he tried to fully admire what he was seeing. Then he let his eyes drift up to the face of the young man, who was intently working on the bike. The mechanic glanced over for just a second, to let Kaycee know that he knew he was being looked at. He didn't seem to care.

"Excuse me," Kaycee asked. He surprised himself by talking. His conscious mind was telling him not to bother, but something else inside of him seemed to want to connect with him, for some reason. "Excuse me!"

The mechanic didn't even bother to glance Kaycee's way. "What can I help you with?" He said, not breaking his concentration from what he was doing.

Again, there was a voice in Kaycee's head that was telling him to break it off, but another, much louder voice, trying to egg him on. "I was wondering if you knew anything about people who live in 103."

"Well, I'm the people who live in 103 – for now, at least," was the reply. "What's it to you?"

There was something Kaycee liked about this guy. His no-nonsense attitude, his obvious indifference. There was a strange tingling inside his body. "Oh, I used to know this guy who lived there. I think his name was Kevin?"

"Kevin," the guy said. He finally stopped what he was doing and stood up, using a rag to clean the grease off his hands. "Kevin... I've known a lot of guys named Kevin."

Now that he was standing, Kaycee got an even better look at him. Whoever he was, he liked to work out. Not that he was a bodybuilder, but his muscles were well-defined, and there was no doubting his power. Kaycee found himself bashfully lowering his eyes, sticking out his chest, and crossing his arms behind his back.

"Well, it's not important." Kaycee said. "I was also looking for his roommate. Someone called Diedrick. Oh! I have a picture of him." Kaycee pulled out his cell phone and showed the guy Diedrick's contact picture.

Kaycee handed the phone to the mechanic, making sure their hands touched when he did so. "Why would you want to know about this loser?" The guy said.

"Oh, like, I don't really care. I don't, um, like, even really know who he is." By this point, even Kaycee had to realize that he was flirting. His speech indicated his IQ had just dropped 20 points. "So, what's your name?"

“My name?” The guy replied. He dramatically turned to one side and looked upwards, profiling himself. His dark, neck-length, wavy hair rustled. He took a pair sunglasses that were hanging out of his pocket and put them on. “My name’s Dio.”

“Oh-h-h,” Kaycee said, undulating the word as if he were having a tiny little orgasm. “Dio. I like that name.”

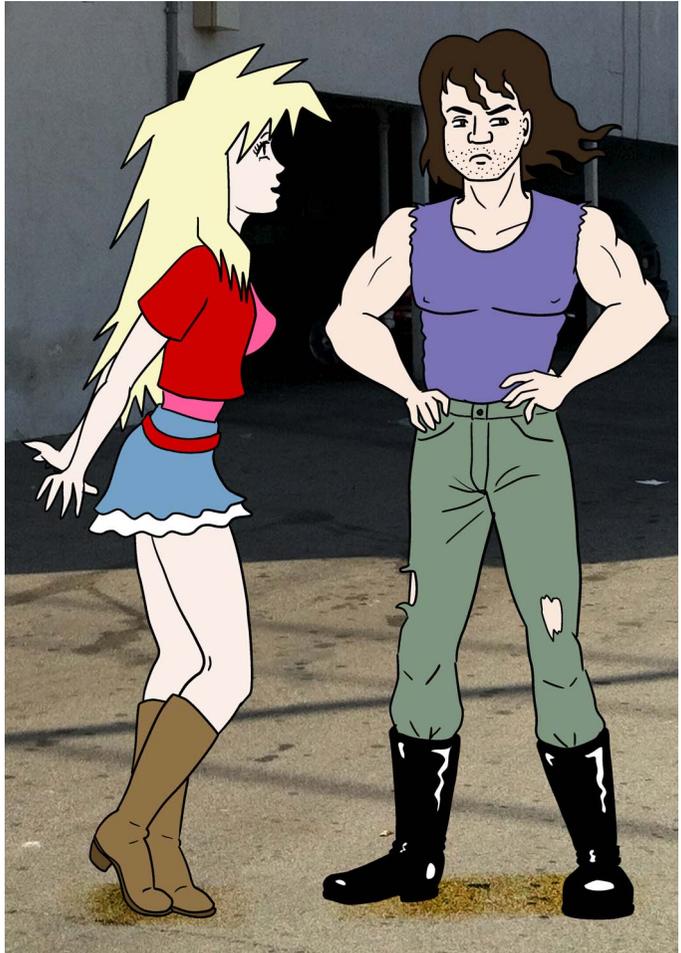
Dio approached Kaycee, stepping close enough that Kaycee could get a good look at his face for the first time. He was not disappointed by his rugged good looks.

“Hey, you know Dr. Price,” Dio said, looking at the contact list on Kaycee’s phone. “Cool dude for a shrink.” He handed Kaycee back the phone. As Kaycee took it, there was a moment where he saw the contact picture of Diedrick alongside Dio’s face. There was a passing resemblance between the two, but that was impossible. This Greek god had nothing in common with that geek slob he once called a roommate.

“I like your bike,” Kaycee said, slowly undulating his body, involuntarily. For a moment, Kaycee imagined he *was* that bike.

“Yeah, I’ve been working a long time on her,” Dio said, running his hand slowly along the gas tank. “I’m finally gonna to take her out on the road. Live out there on the highways, going from town to town. That’s what I want to do. Facing danger and taking no prisoners. Just me, my bike, and the wind ripping through my hair. That’s what I was born to be.”

Kaycee was out of



breath for a moment. Then an impulse gripped him. “Wow! Um, like, can I have a ride?” He asked, biting his lip.

Dio looked at Kaycee appreciatively. “Yeah... Only if you promise to hold on tight,” he said with a grin.

“I promise,” Kaycee replied, sounding like an 8 year old girl.

Dio tossed his greasy rag aside. “Let me get you a helmet.”



Some hours later, just outside the brats mansion, Dio pulled up in his bike, and dropped Kaycee off.

“So, when do you leave for the open road n’ stuff?” Kaycee asked Dio.

“I already did,” he said. “If you want to find me, you’ll find me out there,” he said, staring off and did the distance, melodramatically. “Maybe I’ll see you around sometime... Kaycee.” He then revved the motor a few times and sped off, popping a wheelie as he did so.

All Kaycee could do was to stand there, knock kneed, sighing.

“So where have you been?” A voice came from behind Kaycee. It’s startled him for second. He turned around and saw Jewelee was there, waiting for him. “And who was that bloke?”

Kaycee sighed, once again, and said, “Dio.” He spoke the name with reverence.

“Well, while you were zipping about with Mr. Biceps there, I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Yeah...” Kaycee replied, still staring in the direction of Dio’s exit. He fiddled with his little piece of metal he kept with him. He always found it comforting.

“Focus! Kaycee! Focus!”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Uh, totally here. Totally listening to you right now. Like, so totally focused. What did you find out?”

“Nothing, love. Absolutely nothing. Nothing to report at all.” Jewelee said, somewhat unconvincingly. “What did you find? After all, you were the one with the clues.”

“Oh yeah!” Kaycee said. “I talked to my parents, and they were acting all strange. I don’t know what was going on with them at all. They were no help. So then I went to Paula’s place, only Paula didn’t live there anymore, she moved out to her parent’s place, and she wasn’t Paula anymore, she was someone else. She was Leena. And she was a child. Does that make any sense? No, it doesn’t make any sense. Oh! But one thing did make sense! She had been seeing Dr. Price.”

“Dr. Price? You’re saying this Paula girl had changed? And Dr. Price was involved?” Jewelee crossed her arms. “I don’t like the way that sounds. Could Dr. Price be at the heart of all this?”

“Oh, no! No! No!” Kaycee insisted. “Dr. Price is such a great guy! He couldn’t be involved in any of this. He’s been so nice to me!”

“I know he is, Kaycee, but there’s no one else!”

“No! Even Dio was seeing Dr. Price. He said Dr. Price was a great guy! That proves it!”

“What?” Jewelee inquired, with a light in her eyes. “This Dio guy also sees Dr. Price?”

“Yeah, and Dio has nothing but nice things to say about him. So it can’t be, like, Dr. Price!”

“So where did you meet this Dio guy?”

“He was living in my old apartment,” Kaycee said. “I went by there to see if, like, my old roommate Diedrick might help me.”

“So you went there looking for Diedrick, and you found Dio instead?”

“Yeah, funny, huh? You know, they even look like they’re related. Same eyes, same hair color, same nose. I guess maybe they only rent that the apartment to people who look alike.” Kaycee giggled.

“Kaycee, we need to talk.”



Once Jewelee had run over her theory three or four times, it seemed to click with Kaycee.

Dr. Price was definitely at the center of all this. Everyone who’d undergone strange, unexplained changes in their lives had all seen Dr. Price. All four members of the band, Kaycee, Jewelee, Roxy, and Kazumi had all been undergoing subtle yet profound changes, they realized. Gabe, their manager, had suddenly turned into a show business professional after seeing Dr. Price.

Paula had been changed into Leena, and had also been seeing Dr. Price. Conveniently, she was now too young to speak out and tell anyone what was going on. Even this ‘Dio’ was seeing Dr. Price, and was probably Kaycee’s old roommate, Diedrick, who had been mentally reprogrammed to go lose himself somewhere far away, so he’d never cause any problems.

Presented with this evidence, even Kaycee had to admit it that didn’t look good for Dr. Price.

So they made a plan. They called up Ellie and scheduled their appointments to make up for their so-called illness. Conveniently enough, Dr. Price was able to see them bright and early the next day.

They took the limo downtown, and went over what they planned to do, step-by-step. When they got to the office, they took a deep breath, hugged each other, and stepped inside. Ellie was always excited to see members of The Ballroom Brats, and snuck them in early for their appointment.

“I do hope you two are feeling better,” Dr. Price said. He was seated behind his desk just as he always was, his arms folded, his voice low and even tone, and an expression on his face that could be best described as cheerful but reserved.

“We’re fine,” Jewelee said. “You know how those things go.”

“We feel fine,” Kaycee said, sounding and looking very nervous. “We had food poisoning. So we were sick. That’s why we had to cancel our appointment. Because of the food poisoning. It made us sick.” He tried to smile.

“Yes, of course.” The doctor then looked at some notes on his desk. “But did you to get enough sleep last night? Because you look sleepy. So very sleepy.”

Kaycee’s eyes started to close.

“Get him!” Jewelee shouted.

That was Kaycee’s cue. He launched himself across the desk and pulled a roll of duct tape from his purse, and quickly had the doctor’s mouth taped shut. Jewelee ran to the door, and locked it shut.

“We know what you’re doing!” Jewelee said. “We figured everything out!”

“You’re hypnotizing us!” Kaycee said. “You’re messing around with our minds.”

Jueleee left her position at the doorway, and headed to the other side of Dr. Price’s desk. As he sat there Kaycee took the roll of duct tape and started to wind it around the doctor, effectively binding him to his chair.

“There’s no sense denying it,” Jewelee said. “We’ve got all the evidence we need. You’re hypnotizing all your clients, screwing around with their lives, messing with their minds, and even using that spa of yours to do surgery.”

“Yeah!” Kaycee added. “You made my girlfriend into a little girl, you made my roommate into a biker, you messed around with all of us in the band...”

Jueleee picked up the note from his desk. “See? Look at this!” Jewelee held up the paper. “Here are your notes right here!” She read off what it said on the paper. “Agenda item 1: make them believe the tour is in eight weeks. Agenda item 2: make them want to go to the spa this weekend. Agenda item 3: make them believe they have always been female.”

Kaycee snatched the paper from Jewelee's hand and read it for himself. "Oh my God, it does say this!" He turned to Dr. Price. "I didn't want to believe it, doctor, but this its right here in black and white."

The doctor, however, was furiously shaking his head left and right. "Why deny it?" Jewelee said, "This is enough to convict you."

Now that they had the doctor properly bound up, they unlocked the door. Jewelee and Kaycee found Ellie in the outer office, painting her nails. "You guys can't be done already," she said.

Kaycee approached Ellie. "Ellie, I sent some very bad news. I think Dr. Price has been doing some bad things."

Ellie could hear some muffled yells coming from the office, so she adjusted her line of sight to look inside. There, she saw Dr. Price taped to his chair. "What's going on?" Ellie asked, nervously.

"We need you to call the police, Ellie." Jewelee said. "And you may want to look for another job."

Ellie looked scared and shaken, and was on the verge of tears. "But... But..."

"He's been hypnotizing all his clients, Ellie," Kaycee said. "He may have also hypnotized you."

Ellie sniffled. "No, no. It's not true." She said, her voice quivering. "Because I'm the one that's been hypnotizing *him*." Ellie blotted her eyes with a tissue, and then said, "go to sleep."



After working there for over 21 years, Dr. Helen Myers left the CIA. She had found herself a victim of her own talents and political infighting at the agency. There was no doubt that she was the agency's top enemy interrogator and debriefer. She had managed to extract some of the most sensitive data the agency had acquired, and was able to get details and information faster and more accurately than anyone else in her field.

Dr. Myers had a talent for this sort of work. Recruited out of college, from the Yale-New Haven School of Medicine, where she had been a star pupil in psychiatry, she was quickly put to work. Her job was to get even the most uncooperative of enemy assets to surrender crucial information as fast as possible. In other words, her job was to break people. She was very good at her job.

It wasn't long before Dr. Myers became one of the agency's most important figures. Called upon in almost all major crises, Dr. Myers was a part of an elite team used to get the information they needed from the minds of their captives, and deliver it to the director. In addition to that, she'd also been developing techniques to "turn" people. That is, to take someone who was hostile and an

enemy of the United States, and then turn them friendly towards American interests.

Her secret was simply hypnosis. It was considered somewhat old-fashioned at the CIA, as they much preferred drug-induced methods, or simply torture, but Dr. Myers' talents in the field were unmatched. She could open up someone's head like a can of tuna fish, and fork out the contents. No one could do what Dr. Myers could do.

At the end of her time there, she was on the first name basis with the director, with the head of the NSA, and most of the president's staff.

But when the agency turned over to a new administration, she found herself on the outside. Her familiarity with a departing staff cast her as the opposition. She wasn't being involved in the sort of work she liked to do. That left her trapped. If she stayed, she could no longer do the things she loved. If she were to leave, she would be a target. Foreign interests would certainly try to get her to work for them, even if they had to kidnap her and force her to do so.

So she took the only way out. She disappeared. Using the contacts she had built up over her time there, she created a new identity. One day, 49-year-old Dr. Helen Myers left her home in Virginia, never to be seen again. Months of facial reconstruction surgery, vocal surgery, dental surgery, and other procedures were performed. Then, approximately 6 months after Dr. Helen Myers disappeared, 28-year-old Ellie McGregor appeared, and started to look for work as a receptionist.

Seemingly young and carefree, Ellie had been meticulous about reshaping her life. She studied the lifestyle of her new age group, and immersed herself into popular culture, watching television 18 hours a day. By the time she was done, no one would've ever suspected that Ellie was anything other than the young woman she appeared to be. Curiously, one of the affectations she had picked up her studies was a true love of pop music, and she developed an encyclopedic knowledge of all the pop music acts over the last 30 years. In the back of her mind, she started to work up a plan. A plan to put together her own girl



group.

The very attractive Ellie found jobs easily. She worked for big businessmen, small companies, and everything in between. But she couldn't stay away from her first love for long. It was only a year before she took a job with Dr. Price. The doctor had a mildly successful practice in psychotherapy, but Ellie turned it into a very profitable enterprise. She had Dr. Price doing her bidding the very first day she was working for him. It was a simple setup – she would hand notes off to Dr. Price, who would unconsciously follow her written instructions, and never be aware that he was doing so. He would even use Ellie's masterful hypnosis technique, without ever realizing it.

Soon, working through Dr. Price, many wealthy clients had happily donated millions of dollars to whatever projects Ellie fancied. The clients may not have been completely aware that they were donating massive sums of money, but they never complained.

The culmination of her efforts was Dr. Price's spa, where Ellie could do the sort of work she loved. Messing with people's minds and bodies. She hired many of the amazing doctors who had turned her from Helen to Ellie. She had then taken on some projects, such as making weak women strong, turning ugly boys into handsome men, and just generally turning around the lives of people who deserved better than what they got out of life.

Once she had done those things, then she returned to her fantasy idea. She had been trying for years to get four talented girls together to form a band, but things always turned out badly. All the young suburban girls she met had other passions in life, and had little ambition. She needed to find people with the real passion to improve their lives and become stars. So one day, when four young men showed up at her office, she decided to check it out. To her delight, they were all down on their luck, and desperately wanted to bust out of their humdrum lives. The passion was there. So what if they were male? That was easy to fix at the spa. Experience told her that the one thing she couldn't manufacture, that was essential to success, was that inner desire to be famous at all costs. Once she'd found that, surgery and hypnosis could take care of the rest.



For some reason, Kaycee took the greatest pleasure in sliding her panties up her legs. They were the perfect fit for her. The straps stretched around her shapely backside and rested on the curves of her hips as if they had been tailored especially for her. They weren't tailored, though – they were just ordinary panties that any woman would wear. Kaycee just had the perfect body for them now. She adjusted the crotch, nestling it in between her legs and smoothing it against her mound, letting the silky feather-light material caress her sensitive little derrière and ticklish pink pussy lips.

It was as if this was the very first time she had properly worn a pair of panties. Which it was.

As Kaycee slipped her slender arms through the straps of her bra, and nestled her wobbly, pillowy breasts into the lacy cups, it didn't occur to her that this was her very first day as a girl. It hadn't occurred to her because that male part of her life had been successfully whisked away.

Ellie, who had completed her rearrangement of Kaycee's mind, was intrigued to find that Kaycee put up no resistance to her. Ellie locked away all memories of Kevin and his former life, but she had a feeling that somewhere deep inside that mind, her patient was helping her along. The process of making Kaycee was easy and uncontested.

Kaycee picked out something sensible, a super-short magenta dress with a flared skirt and gauzy, lacy material underneath. It was sprinkled with rhinestones in the shape of a star on one side, and had two thick straps that kept falling off her shoulders, exposing a bra strap from time to time.

She added a pair of cobalt blue tights, as if she needed to draw attention to her slender, spritely legs. Next were a pair of satin, golden yellow opera gloves that made her hands look even more delicate and fine.

Kaycee chose a pair of shiny magenta, five-inch heeled pumps that were so tall, they forced her to lean forward slightly, and push her chest into the air, displaying her breasts like freshly blossomed flowers. She loved what high heels did for her, and she had been practicing her walk to look casual, but still a be little sassy.

She applied her trademark Kaycee makeup, with magenta lips, thick lashes and a hint of hot pink blush. She added a few sparkly bracelets, star-shaped earrings and fastened a thin gold chain with a pendant around her skinny neck.

While Kaycee had her bags packed by her assistant Sheila, she decided to check on the rest of the band. She saw that Jewelee store was a little bit open, so she let herself in. "Oh good," Jewelee said upon seeing Kaycee. She turned her back to her. "Zip me up?" Jewelee asked, pulling her hair out of the way.

"I guess I owe you," Kaycee said, quickly finishing the task. "There we go."

"Brilliant. Thank you." Jewelee said. "You're all set to go?"

"Feels like we've been here for ages," Kaycee said. That much was true. It had been nearly eight weeks, at the spa, although they had spent most of that time unconscious.

Jewelée was dressed in a tight, strapless midnight blue taffeta dress, with a fingertip-length hemline. She had complemented that with dark smoky stockings that made it hard to see where her thin legs ended and her chunky, platform high-heeled black boots began. She added a densely sparkling necklace that made it look like she was wrapping a chandelier around her shoulders.

It was a perfect accent to her skin, her rich mahogany color that was iridescent in the light.

Jewelee refused to do anything to her hair, keeping its' tight curls pure. Unlike most women of African descent, she reveled and celebrated the unique kinkiness of her hair. There was nothing about her beauty that she wasn't proud of, nothing she wanted to hide or change about herself.

That was what Ellie had found in their sessions, as the last vestiges of José were stowed away. Her patient never tried to hold on to anything of her old life, instead she embraced her new body and personality like a gift she would never let go of. Much like Kevin, Ellie had the impression that José had not just accepted his fate, but had adopted it enthusiastically.

"I'm always sorry to leave," Kaycee said. "But I can't wait to start our fall tour."

Jewelee agreed. "It's about time, I don't know how much longer our fans would've waited."

In the eight weeks they had spent at the spa, their commercial had debuted on television. There was an immediate buzz about these girls who had performed the insanely catchy jingle. Everyone wanted to know. Word quickly got around that they weren't just actresses, but a band, called *The Ballroom Brats*.

Even as the band laid in their beds, recovering at the spa, their songs were being released a hungry public. Downloads and sales of their first single were still climbing the charts, ready for their debut album.

That was the first thing on *The Ballroom Brats'* agenda, a small show in Los Angeles, to launch their new record. Every executive in the business from London to Tokyo would be there. No doubt a contract would be signed, and the already-exploding careers of the band would take off into the stratosphere.

But that would happen later. For now, they were just four girls being discharged from their stay at Dr. Price's spa. "I'll get the other two ready to go," Kaycee said.

"You're worse than me mum," Jewelee replied.

Kaycee had already pestered them a few times, but there hadn't been any movement yet. "The limo is already waiting!" she yelled, pounding on the doors for attention.

"Yeah, yeah," Roxy said, emerging from her room. She was dressed in a skin-tight leather leotard with a plunging neckline that was covered by black sheer mesh. She had accessorized with black fishnets and a short leather jacket. She wore a pair of wrinkled black suede knee-high boots with high heels on her feet, that accentuated her cocky strut.

"I'll pay you to let me stay here another month," Roxy said. "A million dollars. Right now."

"You forget who my parents are," Kaycee teased.



“Oh, yeah.”

Kazumi was the last to join, and she was wearing an oversized pink hair bow, with a set of giant all-pink headphones on her head that didn't even work. He had put on a white shirt with a giant sequined pink heart on it, cropped short so that it exposed her belly. Kazumi had added a tiny white and pink tutu skirt, thigh-high pink stockings, and on her feet she had worn comically oversized white sneakers with a four inch thick sole. “Mou jikan yo. Hai, ikimasu,” she said.

“Is your... Um... Fur burger sore?” Jewelee quietly asked Kaycee. Kaycee nodded.

The reason they were sore was because they had just acquired their new female wombs. The spa had performed a full uterus transplant, giving the four real working vaginas. They didn't have ovaries, but with a simple egg implanta-

tion, they could have a baby. They also would have periods. The scars had healed well enough, but there was still a little soreness left over from the procedure, which had a normal recovery time of eight weeks. "You too? I guess I've been a little too... Active," Kaycee reasoned. "You know, working the clam."

"Are you four ready to go?" Gabe asked, arriving from outside. This was the first time he'd seen the group since he'd sent them to the spa for relaxation, and he definitely noticed a new glow that radiated from their faces. "Wow! You guys look great! And I'm not just saying that. The meter's running on the limo."

"Gabe!" Roxy said, "we missed you!" He pecked Gabe on the cheek.

Gabe was immediately suspicious of Roxy's behavior. "Whatever you're trying to butter me up for, you're not getting it, Roxy."

"What if I just wanted to say 'I miss you?'" Roxy said, twirling a finger in his hair. She then whispered something in Gabe's ear.

He pushed her away, playfully. "Later, baby, later." Gabe returned his attention to the rest of the group. "Let's get a move on! We have a lot to do!"

A fleet of bellboys were packing their many, many suitcases into the limousine when they got outside. "It's like leaving my home away from home," Jewelee said. "I always feel wonderful after my stays here. Why do I have to leave?"

"Yeah, you'll just have to make do living in our mansion," Roxy replied.

Kaycee giggled. "Just us four poor little rich girls," she said.

Hiro, Kazumi's translator, retold the exchange for her. She giggled. "Poora re-ech gir-ahl," she repeated, in her distinct accent. She had been practicing her English lately.

"Uh-oh, here comes trouble," Jewelee said, pointing off into the distance.

Pulling into the driveway was an ear-splittingly loud motorcycle, a Harley specifically.

"Oh-h-h," Kaycee moaned, "Dio!" she minced out into the roadway to meet him.

He pulled his motorcycle to a stop, and killed his engine. Dio pulled the helmet off his head, and shook his long hair free. Kaycee nearly fainted on the spot.

"Heard you were gettin' out today," he said. "Thought you might need a ride." He tossed her a spare helmet.

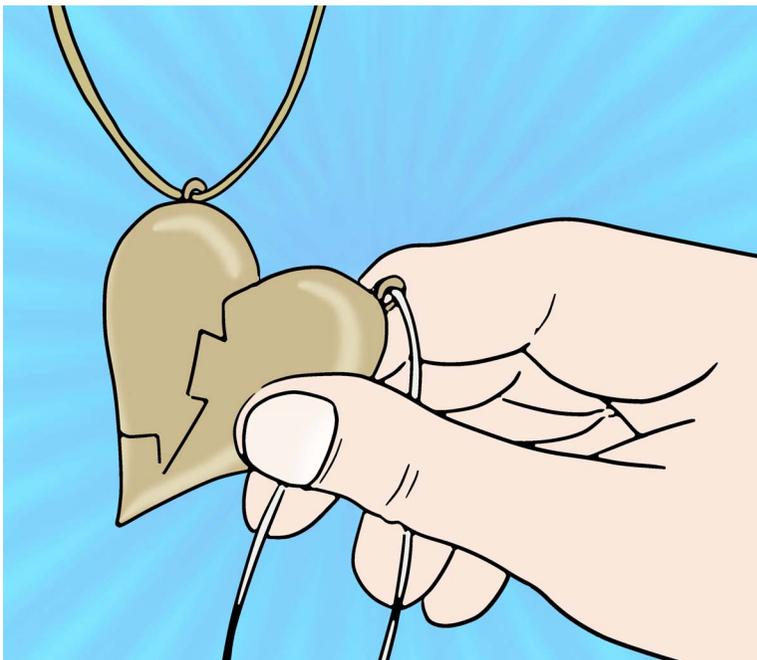
Kaycee turned back to take a look at her friends, with an idiotically stupid smile of glee on her face. "We'll see you back at the mansion," yelled Jewelee.

Quickly, Kaycee raised the helmet and tried to put it on, but realized her hair was going to get in the way. She tried a couple of different approaches to doing it, but it wasn't working. "Here, let me help you with that," Dio said, reaching

over to help with her hair. As he did so he caught sight of the pendant hanging from the thin gold chain around her neck. “Where’d you get that?” Dio asked.

“What, the necklace?” Kaycee said.

“No, the pendant.” He



tugged open the collar of his T-shirt a little bit wider, exposing his strapped chest, and pulled out his own necklace which also had a pendant on it. It looked almost exactly like Kaycee’s. He detached it from his neck and placed the pendant side-by-side with Kaycee’s. The ragged edges of both pendants were a perfect fit. When put together, they formed the shape of a heart.

“Oh, Dio! I knew we were meant to be together,” Kaycee said, gushing. Dio stood up from his seat, put Kaycee’s delicate head in between his two huge, powerful hands, stared into her eyes, and kissed her.

They rode off into the sunset, Kaycee’s arms wrapped around Dio’s body, as tightly as possible – much tighter than it was necessary to say on the bike.



Ellie had just emerged from Forever 21 carrying her maximum load of bags. She heard a familiar tune over the mall’s musak system, and began to quietly sing along.

*“I’m a party girl, all around the world. I’m a party girl, all around the world. 24 hours, seven days a week, I’m dancin’, singin’ and lovin’ you, baby...”*

She stopped in her tracks as she passed the window of a bookstore, who had just put up a new, dazzling display. “5 Days until The Making of The Ballroom Brats!” said the sign. “The unauthorized biography they don’t want you to read!”

# THE MAKING OF THE BALLROOM BRATS



The cover was one of the stock band photos, slightly edited to make it look original. She clicked her tongue at the cheap cash-in. Ellie read the text next to the sign: “Roxy, Kazumi, Jewelee and Kaycee have become international stars! They’re the ultimate expression of global media fame! Learn all the secrets and get all the facts behind the biggest sensation of our lifetimes! Don’t miss out! Reserve your copy of The Making of The Ballroom Brats today!”

Ellie went on her way, laughing to herself. *All the secrets*, she thought, *all the facts*.

It was true, The Ballroom Brats had managed to take the world by storm in just a year. They were the biggest thing in music. They already had a TV cartoon show in production, three movies in development, and clothing, perfume and cosmetic lines about to be introduced. Of course, there was a “brats” doll line as well, although there were some copyright issues there.

But what made it all so delicious for Ellie was the avalanche of copycat bands that were following in The Ballroom Brats footsteps. Radio and TV were flooded with sugary pop music, just the way she wanted it.

It had been over a year since she had heard from her little songbirds, and Ellie was sure that it would be a long time until she heard from them again, if ever. They were all firmly entrenched in their new lives, jet-setting around the world, attending movie premiers, partying deep into the night, trashing hotel rooms and throwing themselves at every handsome man they met. After all, that’s how Ellie had programmed them, and if even half the tabloid magazine stories were true, the girls weren’t disappointing her.

Now, the only question left for Ellie was: what next? She liked creating the whole band, but especially Kazumi. Maybe an all-Japanese group? Or, maybe something different, like a country western pop girl group? How about an old-fashioned Motown girl group? She was full of ideas...

“Ow!” Ellie exclaimed, as she was broadsided by a young man of about twenty five.

“Watch out where you’re going!” The man shouted back, as he strode away.

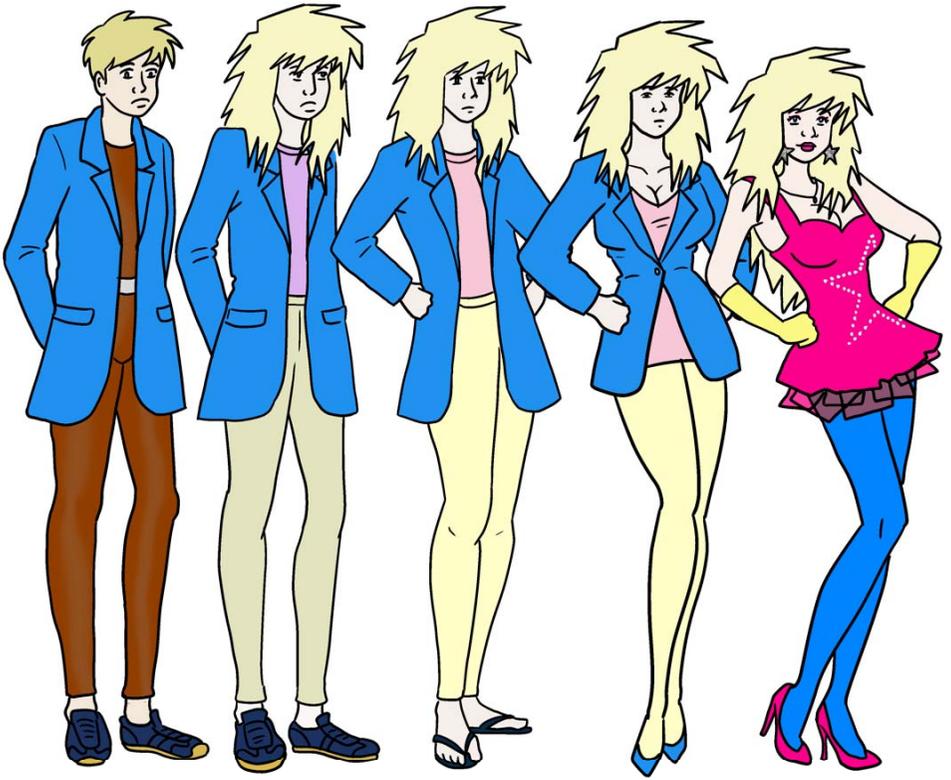
“I’m so sorry for my husband,” a haggard and clearly weary young woman said. “Sometimes Duane just gets a little short-tempered.”

“Here,” Ellie said, handing her Dr. Prices’s business card. “How do you feel about your husband helping develop the next Britney Spears, Katy Perry or Lady Gaga?” She gently patted the woman’s hand as she gave her card. “Think about it.”

The End









# Titles by Sick Puppy Press

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Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. Three college students sign up for a six-month isolation experiment. Things start to get a little strange, and they begin to lose their masculinity day by day. Yet, they don't seem to even notice... Full Color Comic Book / 38 pages

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"Office Chemistry" by Joe Six-Pack. James had to fill in at the reception desk. Problem is, the business is a bio-genetics company. And all of the sudden the coffee tastes funny. Book / 53 pages / 14 illustrations

### ***City Boy, Country Girl***

By Joe Six-Pack. Richard's long-forgotten aunt is sick, and he goes to care for her. His calls back home leave his wife Janice confused and unsure about his return. So she goes to find him. But is there much left to be found? Book / 64 pages / 25 illustrations

### ***Thames Greene***

By James J Craft. Ira wanted something better for his family. A new start. But in Thames Greene, everyone's getting a new start, whether they want it or not. Book / 77 pages / 26 illustrations

### ***Hiding in High Heels***

"How Not to be a Sissy" By Joe Six-Pack. Vince was on the run from people who wanted their millions back. Howard was a friend with a funny little idea and a knack for making subliminal CDs. Mini-Pix / 48 pages / 15 illustrations

### ***I'm Your Dolly***

"Barbie-in-a-Box" By Joe Six-Pack. Tyler wasn't much of a boyfriend anymore. Jessica wanted to throw him out, but then a better idea came to her, in the form of the Barbie-in-a-Box service. Tyler better get used to pink. Book / 103 pages / 20 illustrations

### ***His Life as a Trophy Wife***

"The Puppy Mill" by Joe Six-Pack. Nick had a great life, but then it evaporated. Now he's down on his luck. In steps a wealthy executive willing to pay him handsomely to pretend to be his wife. What can it hurt? Book / 210 pages / 16 illustrations

### **Male Monday, Girl Friday**

“Hey, Cutie!” by James J Craft. Daniel is going to be promoted from his average life to an exciting executive position. At least, that’s what his bosses are telling him. They may not be telling him everything. Book / 58 pages / 20 illustrations

### **The Happiest Place on Earth**

From the files of TGStories.com: “The Fairest One of All” By Joe Six-Pack. Will is a kid looking for a job. He gets one, performing as Snow White at a theme park. For Will, he doesn’t suspect that playing the role and wearing the costume is slowly changing him, day by day. Book / 51 pages / 21 illustrations

### **Hello, Nurse**

From the files of TGStories.com: “Quality Health Care” Dane is filling in as a nurse for his pal Jimmy at his new office. Although both are doctors, Dane begins to take to his new role as a nurse. Soon, he feels compelled to be the ideal nurse. Book / 44 pages / 15 illustrations

### **My Boss, The Bimbo**

“If I Were a Betting (Wo)Man” By James J Craft, illustrations by blackshirtboy. CEO Lucas has a superiority complex. When his long-suffering secretary is able to feed into Lucas’ competitive nature, he’ll make any bet to prove his dominance over women. Book / 38 pages / 10 illustrations

### **He’s the Girl They Want**

“Rallies” by Joe Six-Pack. Spencer has a great new executive job in the food service industry, but first he’s got to learn the ropes of the business by waiting on tables. He just doesn’t quite fit in with the cheerleader theme. Yet. Book / 63 pages / 22 illustrations

### **Demoted and Degraded**

“Trixie the Secretary” by Angela J. Cindy didn’t much like Tom Jones attitude and his advances, so when she has the opportunity to help take the wind out of his sails, she takes it. But she had no idea that it was all designed to make Tom into Trixie the secretary. Book / 87 pages / 17 illustrations

### **I, Candy**

“Sissy Sweets” by James J Craft, illustrations by rock-etxpert. Inheriting his family’s bakery requires this young man to become the new face of the business. A female face. Book / 45 pages / 15 illustrations

## **Stories of the Supernatural**

### **Changed and Rearranged**

“Wrongs Make Wright” By Joe Six-Pack. Chris and Matt were rivals. Then, Matt decided to show everyone how smart he truly was by impersonating a teacher. But the disguise becomes more and more real, much to Chris’ dismay. Book / 74 pages / 19 illustrations

### **From Pals to Gals**

From the files of TGStories.com: “Mandate of the People” By Joe Six-Pack. Teens Jeremy and Stewart are good friends, but a bit thick in the noggin. When they jokingly nominate each other for Prom Queen, they slowly become the perfect candidates, thanks to some magic. Book / 45 pages / 16 illustrations

### **Crossed Fiction**

#### **Sisters for the Summer**

“Camp Counseling” By Joe Six-Pack. Brock McCade always thought of himself as a real man, or at least he would be one, someday. After summer camp, he’s no longer so sure. Book / 76 pages / 17 illustrations

#### **They’re the Girls for the Job**

“Peace and Harmony” By James J Craft. Illustrations by blackshirtboy. Pete and Harmon need jobs bad. How far would they have to go to get them? Book / 64 pages / 19 illustrations

### **Seriously Sissified**

#### **Revenge of the Cheerleaders**

“Pansy Cheers” By Angela J. Patrick Sears was a football player trying to sleep with every cheerleader at his small college. He’d have to pay for his conquests. Book / 116 pages / 19 illustrations

### **Web Classits Revisited**

#### **Two Forms of ID**

By Joe Six-Pack. Harvey had the unusual ability to convincingly imitate a teenage girl. In desperation, he has to use that talent to make some money. But when is enough enough? Paperback / 194 pages / text only



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