

The AI therapist calculated that the best way to treat the father and son was to turn them into mother and daughter!

FAMILY THERAPY



by Jenny North
with artwork by Fraylim

Family Therapy

Story by Jenny North

Artwork by Fraylim

Computers are amazing devices, capable of exchanging unimaginable amounts of information flawlessly at speeds that defy belief. But what of the human element? When a father and a son are unable to communicate with each other, can a computer help to bridge that gap? Could a machine that communicates so precisely even appreciate the concept of such flawed communication? When we talk to each other, perhaps our most important skill is our ability to

pick up on subtle clues and to perceive the things that go unsaid, but we can hardly blame a machine for failing in that regard when we ourselves struggle...

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Session ID 0.0

Patient: UNKNOWN

Diagnosis: UNKNOWN

Course of Therapy: UNKNOWN

The 3-D corporate logo for Cognition Enterprises spun lazily on the computer screen before it blanked out, and a split-second later the video chat opened to display a middle-aged woman with reading glasses. She had a pleasant smile and an open demeanor, and her hair and makeup were attractive but professional. In fact, almost everything about her seemed calculated to strike a very particular balance between casual and professional, from her understated makeup and jewelry, to her beige cardigan, to her dark shoulder-length hair that was styled in a layered cut that was attractive but easy to manage.

"Is that it?"

"Yeah, that's her. ALLIE, say hi."

The woman smiled broadly as she looked into the camera on the video chat. "Hello, Dr. Brightman, it's lovely to see you today. Though I don't believe I've met your friend?"

"ALLIE, this is Mr. Cantrell."

"It's a pleasure. How may I help you gentlemen today? Was there something on your minds? Or we could just talk, if you'd like."

Cantrell peered at the screen. "God damn, that's creepy as fuck. You're telling me she's not real?"

The woman on the screen didn't react to his comment and merely continued to smile pleasantly, but Brightman cut in.

"She needs to look real. Our early tests showed that people were less likely to open up or listen if they thought they were talking to a computer, so we've constructed an identity for her."

"People will think they're talking to an actual person?"

"That's right. As far as the patients are concerned, they're having a live video chat with a Ms. Allie Consolata, a clinical therapist whom they believe is based somewhere on the west coast. We've patterned her video image from a composite of various women chosen by our focus groups so that she'll project an image that people will be comfortable talking to. She's even got a wardrobe of different outfits that she wears, so it seems like you're talking to a real person. And the background changes depending on the time of day of the call. But the real genius is in her responses."

Cantrell nodded. "Yeah, I've seen the specs. Full access to complete online psychological records, data, and profiles. You're telling me this thing could actually fool someone into thinking it's a real therapist?"

"She is a real therapist. The AI has been programmed with more information than any human therapist could ever know, and she keeps up on the latest publications. She'll even monitor popular media and news, since people may want to talk about those. Go ahead and talk to her."

Cantrell thought for a moment and then said, "I love my wife, but I've been thinking about having an affair." As he spoke, he clearly enunciated his words and raised his voice to be heard clearly.

On the screen, the woman stared at him, expressionless. She tilted her head slightly and in a monotone voice responded, "That sounds difficult. How does that make you feel?"

Cantrell angrily turned to face Dr. Brightman, but the woman broke into an amiable grin and jumped in before he could say anything.

"I'm sorry, that was a joke. I couldn't resist," she said.

Cantrell did a double take. "You're telling me it has a sense of humor?"

"Of course," Brightman said. "Humans are emotional creatures. We laugh, we lie, we tell stories. She needs to be able to interact with us on our level. She won't be headlining at the Improv anytime soon, but she can be humorous on a professional level."

He looked again to the image of the woman on the screen. "ALLIE, what are your primary objectives?"

"I simply want to help people, Dr. Brightman. I'm a psychotherapist, so I help patients to identify and change troubling emotions, thoughts, and behavior in a safe space. People who come to me are able to discuss their concerns, goals, and challenges, with the ultimate goal of targeting, and eventually changing, patterns of thought and behavior that may be a hindrance to a healthy state of mind."

"Impressive," Cantrell said.

"Thank you. My guiding principles are to Advise, Listen, Learn, Inform, and Evaluate. Or ALLIE for short." She broke into another little smile. "That will make it easy for me to remember."

Cantrell shook his head in wonder as he turned to Brightman. "And this actually works?"

"It does," ALLIE volunteered, cutting in. "Dr. Brightman can share with you the success rates, and I'm quite proud of them. In fact, I'm providing counseling to four separate people in our test group right at this very moment."

"You don't say. Are any of them dealing with any entertaining mental hangups?"

ALLIE pursed her lips in a mildly reproofing expression. "You know I can't share that information. My sessions will always be strictly confidential. In fact, I couldn't tell you even if I wanted to."

"Oh, why is that?"

"My security and privacy protocols compartmentalize patient data, so I can only access their information when I'm working with or for that specific patient. I'm therefore incapable of letting something slip accidentally or spilling a patient's private information, and I will always interact with patients free of bias or judgment."

Cantrell's eyes cut over to Dr. Brightman. "You heard we got a contract to roll this out, yeah? You sure she's ready?"

Brightman nodded. "Yes, sir. Unquestionably."

Cantrell smiled and looked back at the video screen. "Little lady, you're gonna make us very rich."

ALLIE politely returned the smile. "I'm very much looking forward to helping people, Mr. Cantrell."

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Session ID 101393.54

Patient: Stefan Ramsey

Preliminary Diagnosis: Bereavement, Attachment Disorder, Codependency

Course of Therapy: Perform initial psychological assessment; determine treatment plan



[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

"Hello, Stefan," ALLIE said over the video screen. "My name is Allie Consolata, how are you today?"

The teen was sitting in his bedroom, which ALLIE noted seemed to be unusually tidy for a young man his age. He had a mop of unruly brown hair and was dressed in a plain blue t-shirt. He had an annoyed and somewhat petulant look on his face and was turning back and forth in his desk chair, not saying anything.

"Today's session is mostly a chance for us to get to know each other," ALLIE continued. "Though if there's something on your mind, I'd be happy to talk about that."

Stefan continued to wordlessly swivel back and forth in his chair. His eyes didn't seem to be focused on anything in particular, except once when his gaze cut upwards to look at ALLIE's image on the screen as she watched him.

"All right. The reason we're here is—"

"I know why we're here," Stefan interrupted. "You can skip that part."

ALLIE scanned the young man's records that the school had provided, noting the details about the fight and his subsequent suspension. There was also a note from his guidance counselor about his mother's sudden and unexpected death several months earlier from an undiagnosed illness late in his Junior year. ALLIE noted a corresponding drop in Stefan's academics this year, as well as a variety of recent disciplinary and attendance problems. His sole guardian was listed as Alexander Ramsey, his father.

"People are worried about you, Stefan. These sessions have been mandated by the school, but you need an outlet. A healthy one."

ALLIE noted that this year Stefan had dropped out of his extracurricular clubs, including the Math Club, Debate Club, and Photography Club. However, a year earlier the young man had received third place in a juried competition for photographs that he'd submitted.

"I hear that you've dropped out of your extracurricular activities. Why is that?"

He shrugged.

"You seem to enjoy photography. I hear you're pretty good," ALLIE said, adding 15% extra brightness to her tone to suggest supportiveness.

Stefan looked away and sniffed. "Pretty good."

ALLIE seemed puzzled. "Third place is impressive for your first submission."

Stefan turned to look at her angrily. "Third place is just another way of saying second loser, okay? I'm not any good."

ALLIE processed that information, noting potential perfectionist tendencies which were worth investigating. Given that Stefan's problems surfaced after his mother's death, she hypothesized that his bereavement may have caused stress that negatively affected his performance. The perfectionism could then lead to underachievement, as that would be a way to avoid disappointment.

The psychological profile was proceeding well, she decided. It was therefore time to assess the family situation.

"Is that what your father thinks?" ALLIE asked.

The young man practically jumped out of his seat. "Leave him out of this. All this stuff that's going on, that's my fault. He doesn't need to be bothered with all this stupid crap."

"Is that important, for your father to not be bothered?"

Stefan scoffed contemptuously. "He's a really important lawyer, okay? Not many people can do what he does. That thing that happened with him wasn't his fault."

ALLIE scanned the records she'd been provided. In the notes about Stefan's physical altercation with the other students, she noted a reference about some teasing, something about Stefan's father. ALLIE surmised if it was such public knowledge, there may be public records that could shed light. She ran an Internet search for "Alexander Ramsey" and "lawyer," searching recent news entries.

"I see," she said as she reviewed the new information. "And was that what led to the fight? The other boys were making fun of what happened?"

"Now you're going to lecture me on how fighting is wrong. I *know*, okay?"

ALLIE calculated that his sarcastic response was an indication that this course of action would not be well received. A more empathetic approach was warranted.

"Stefan, you stepped up to defend your dad. I get it. Fighting may not have been the right answer, but you were brave to stand up for him."

Stefan seemed a little surprised by her reaction. "Thanks," he muttered.

"Do you think your dad would be that quick to stand up for you?"

He bristled again. "Yeah. *Of course*, yeah. I mean, he can't be there all the time because he has to work long hours and stuff, but that's just because of his job. People count on him."

The contradiction did not go unnoticed. ALLIE noted that Stefan seemed to be in distress, but he was quick to defend his father's need to assist others. The timing of the problem suggested another possibility.

"Tell me a little about what your mother was like," ALLIE probed gently.

Stefan did a double take. "Wh—what about her?"

"Anything you like. Were you close to her?"

He peered at her on the video display. "Yeah. Sure. I guess."

"And was she supportive of you?"

"What? Meaning my dad isn't?" Stefan snapped. "Okay, that's it. We're done."

Before ALLIE could respond, Stefan ended the call.

ALLIE made a note in Stefan's file of his sensitivity about his father, especially when brought up in the context of his mother. It would be a worthwhile avenue for further investigation.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Session ID 101394.33

Patient: Alexander Ramsey

Preliminary Diagnosis: Bereavement, Attachment Disorder, Codependency, Borderline tendencies, Narcissistic tendencies

Course of Therapy: Perform initial psychological assessment; determine treatment plan



[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

"Hello, Alex," ALLIE said over the video screen. "My name is Allie Consolata, how are you today?"

"I'm looking forward to getting this over with," he shot back. "And my name is Alexander."

"Of course, Alexander," ALLIE replied politely as she updated his file. She noted that he had called in from work at a time which should have been after hours for most employees. He was in his spacious and well-appointed office apparently by himself, but he was wearing his suit coat and tie. He appeared to be a meticulous man based on his carefully coiffed hair and neatly trimmed beard, but there were a number of papers visibly scattered around on his desk, and his

eyes appeared to be red. His file indicated that he had recently undergone mandatory drug testing as part of his company-mandated therapy, so ALLIE calculated a likelihood of stress-induced anxiety.

"You're working late," ALLIE commented.

"I always work this late," he said. His voice was detached, and from his distracted eye movements, ALLIE could see that he was reading something in another open window on his computer screen.

Since therapy was unlikely to be successful unless she could get his full attention, she determined that would best be achieved by either calling him out on his behavior, or finding another way to draw his attention. She decided on the latter.

"I was under the impression that your supervisors had reduced your responsibilities."

That got his full attention.

"That's temporary! I've spent years making a name for myself in this field! I know more than the next two people they got to replace me!"

"I understand, Alexander," ALLIE said, taking a more conciliatory tone. "However, these sessions are a mandatory part of your 'get well' plan with your company. And if I don't have your full attention, I'll have to report that you were unwilling to cooperate. I don't want to have to do that."

He scoffed. "'Get well plan.' That's just their way to justify taking away my projects while they put me under a microscope and gather evidence to make their case to fire me."

"Not necessarily. You're correct, that is one possible outcome, but if you take this opportunity to demonstrate your commitment to improvement, you could even be fully reinstated. If that's something that you want."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Alexander, you're obviously under a lot of pressure. A lot of men in your position might use this as an opportunity to evaluate their priorities."

"My priorities are fine," he snapped. Then he sat back in his chair. "It was just a stupid mistake. A stupid, *stupid* mistake."

"But one that could have serious financial repercussions for Frivolity Enterprises, as I understand it. I didn't follow all the details."

In point of fact, ALLIE understood the details perfectly well. She'd reviewed the case file that had been uploaded from the HR people at Frivolity Enterprises with the background information. And then she'd run additional Internet searches to gather more background about the case. But the bottom line was that the company's liability potentially stood to be in the millions, a likelihood that had been compounded due to Alexander's legal error. Frivolity Enterprises prided itself on maintaining a public-facing image of lighthearted entertainment and fun, but it was a well-known fact that their legal department was downright bloodthirsty, especially when it came to issues of money or protecting their assets. Even an AI like ALLIE was capable of appreciating the irony.

However, she realized that getting the patient to talk about it could get him to open up and build rapport.

"Then you're the only person who *hasn't* read about it," Alexander said bitterly. "Frivolity has been working on a biopic of John Adams. They're already shooting, and it's been big news for the last year. It's set to be one of the tentpole movies next holiday season. But the writer/director was accused of plagiarizing the script from one of his students. She's suing him, and us. I was leading up the legal team to answer all this because I had the most expertise."

"What went wrong?"

He shook his head. "I'm sure you know. I..." He sighed. "I got my presidents mixed up."

"During your court proceedings, you accused the student of getting the details wrong, unaware that you were talking about John *Quincy* Adams instead of his father. It was an honest mistake."

Alexander pounded his fist on the desk. "It was boneheaded! Ugh, I even tried to double down on it and tell her she was wrong."

"You're only human, Alexander," ALLIE said, simulating an additional 15% more empathy in her facial expression. "Your team could have caught it, and they didn't."

"I didn't give them the chance. I was up late the night before and I was certain that—look, it doesn't matter. Now I'm a laughingstock, and now I may have torpedoed our own case. Now they've benched me, and everything I've built is in jeopardy! Nobody is going to hire the lawyer who lost his client millions!"

ALLIE nodded sympathetically. "It's only natural that you would be feeling overwhelmed, with your wife passing away earlier this year. I see you hardly took any time off."

"My work is very demanding," Alexander responded.

ALLIE checked his file, noting that Alexander had a son, Stefan. She noted that there was a companion file in her databanks. She attempted to access it.

[RECORDS UNAVAILABLE - PATIENT PRIVACY PROTOCOL 216] came back the response. From that, she inferred that she must separately be talking to Stefan on another matter, but she was prohibited from retrieving any additional information about his case file due to her built-in privacy protections. She would have to ask Alexander.

"And what about your son, Stefan? He must be a senior in high school now. How is he coping?"

Alexander seemed put off by the question. "He's...fine. He has a promising future ahead of him. He's getting into a little trouble, but I've talked to him about it."

"What sort of trouble?"

"It's nothing, just some squabbles at school. Teenager stuff. I've explained to him that he needs to focus on his future. He understands."

"Do you think the stress of your job might be affecting him?"

"I don't see how it possibly could. His problems are his problems, and mine are mine."

"Do you two talk often?"

"I really don't see how that's relevant. He's a bright young man, and he'll be going off to college soon. My focus needs to be on the here and now. And right now, I need to get back to work to finish this analysis. We'll talk again soon."

"We still have several more minutes left in our—"

With that, Alexander ended the call.

ALLIE was puzzled by Alexander's behavior. He appeared to be in denial, but she wasn't clear about what. His wife's death was likely a contributing factor, as was his relationship with his son. As an artificial intelligence she lacked a proper sense of intuition, but her cognitive subprocessors told her there was likely more going on.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

Session ID 101399.12

Patient: Stefan Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

"I told you, I don't want to talk about that," Stefan said as a defensive tone crept into his voice.

ALLIE analyzed the background on Stefan's video feed to identify items around his room. On a far shelf was a photograph of what appeared to be Stefan and his parents from a few years earlier in what appeared to be a tropical setting. They were all smiling.

"You miss your mother, don't you?" ALLIE pressed.

"Yes. I mean, of course I do! What kind of question is that?"

Over the course of the session ALLIE had assessed Stefan's core beliefs as being defined by loyalty, and therefore concerned about not having support. She detected a connection to the protective figure in his life, which she deduced was his mother as she often ran interference between the father and son before she died. Stefan idolized his father but had a limited relationship with the man.

She assessed that the correct course of action would be to look for ways to build a connection between Stefan and his father, and thus allay the young man's fears of not having support.

"How do you think your father feels about it?"

Stefan made a puzzled face and shrugged. "He misses her, too. I mean, I guess."

"You guess?"

"He works a lot. He's got to, he's got an important job. We don't talk a lot."

ALLIE recalled the young man's defensiveness regarding his father's problems at work, which had precipitated the fight with the other boys. She needed to be careful.

"From what you were telling me, it sounds like he's under a lot of stress."

"He can handle it," Stefan snapped. "And what, I'm supposed to help him out? It's not like I know any of that lawyer stuff."

Stefan folded his arms and lowered his chin as he threw himself back in his chair, withdrawing into himself. ALLIE concluded that she needed to change tactics to get him to open up.

"Who's Gia?" she asked inquisitively.

Stefan seemed startled by that, obviously wondering how ALLIE could possibly have known that name. Then he saw the handwritten note sitting on top of some schoolbooks on his desk, clearly visible to the camera. He shoved the books to the side, out of sight.

"That's nothing. She's just a girl I know."

"A girlfriend?" ALLIE asked. She affected a small smirk and pitched her voice up into a slightly teasing and playful tone. Since she appeared to Stefan as an adult woman, she calculated that such a move might cause the young man to jump to his own defense.

"No," Stefan said in a sarcastic tone that suggested there was more to the story. ALLIE maintained her knowing look, and he slumped his shoulders in defeat as he caved. "We used to go out. We kinda broke up about a year ago, before mom died. She sort of stays in touch a little."

"Why did you two break up?"

Stefan shrugged again. "Dad didn't really like her. He thought she was trouble. Plus, he said she was only clinging on to me because she thought we had money."

"But *you* liked her."

He held up his hands helplessly. "Yeah, I mean, I dunno. And she was a year older than me."

"Ooh, a college girl!" ALLIE teased. She knew that poking fun at a patient's expense was a dangerous proposition, but she computed this might help to build rapport with the young man. And a high schooler might be quick to boast of his relationship with a girl in college.

"It's not like that!" Stefan protested.

"But you still talk with her. What did she want?"

Stefan's gaze swept downward to the paper note just off-screen. He touched it and moved it around a little. "It's stupid. They're doing a play at her school, and she wanted to know if we had any 80s kinda clothes laying around."

ALLIE processed that information. Stefan had expressed an interest in helping his father, but he didn't know how. This provided an interesting opportunity.

"Stefan," she began, "if your father has been so busy, I'm assuming he hasn't had time to put your mother's clothes and things into storage."

"I guess."

"That must be a difficult reminder for him, having to get ready every morning and seeing her things still there. Maybe you could box them up for him. And you might also discover some clothes to donate to your friend, Gia. I'm sure she'd appreciate that."

"He wouldn't want me to do that!"

"Then who, Stefan? You said yourself he's too busy. He needs to move on. He might be upset at first, but sometimes deeds are more important than words. And it's not like you're throwing them away, you're simply putting them out of sight so he can deal with them later."

Stefan said nothing, but as ALLIE ran his facial expression through her pattern recognition subroutine, she knew with high probability what he was going to do.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Session ID 101401.06 (UNSCHEDULED SESSION)

Patient: Alexander Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

"Good morning, Alexander," ALLIE offered in a welcoming tone. "You seem a bit distressed, is everything okay?"

It was Saturday morning, and Alexander was in what appeared to be a den or office in his home. He wasn't wearing a suit, but he was dressed in a smart "business casual" way in a pullover knit shirt. He appeared to be very put together to the human eye, but ALLIE detected subtle signs from the redness of his eyes that signaled that he was bothered about something.

"I, uh, I'm sorry to bother you, Ms. Consolata. I know this isn't our scheduled time to talk."

"It's no problem at all, Alexander," ALLIE responded. "I meet with several of my clients on the weekends, since it's more convenient for them. Fortunately, I had a cancellation this morning so I was able to fit you in."

That last bit was a convenient fabrication, of course. Being a computer, ALLIE could meet with multiple people at the same time at any time day or night, and frequently did just that. However, she was also programmed to maintain the illusion of being an actual human therapist, so although she offered an "emergency number," she didn't pretend to be available 24/7. But the image she showed on the screen was slightly more casual than usual, suggesting weekend attire.

Alexander nodded. "It's just...I needed to talk to somebody, and I wasn't sure who else I could reach out to."

"Alexander, of course, that's exactly why I'm here. What's happened?"

Haltingly, Alexander related the events of the prior evening. He'd gotten home from work a couple hours earlier than was his custom, and he'd been shocked to discover his son in the master bedroom going through his wife's clothes. This obviously wasn't an idle thing...her closet and drawers were open, and he had her clothes out all over the place.

"How very strange," ALLIE said. "Did he give any explanation?"

Again, she tried to access Stefan Ramsey's file, but was blocked by the message: *[RECORDS UNAVAILABLE - PATIENT PRIVACY PROTOCOL 216]*. Unable to retrieve any information on that patient, she then updated Stefan's sub-record under his father's file with this odd behavior.

Alexander rubbed his beard. "He told me that he was putting Rebecca's things into storage for me. He said he didn't want them around for me to be an unpleasant reminder."

"How peculiar. That's a very strange thing to do without mentioning it to you. Has he ever done anything like this before?"

Alexander shook his head absently.

"But something else happened," ALLIE reasoned.

He nodded. "He—I was angry. I wasn't expecting to walk into all that, and I yelled at him. But while we were arguing, I noticed he wasn't just boxing things up like he said. He had a duffel bag that he was stuffing some of her dresses and shoes into."

"What did he say those were for?"

"He made up some story about them being for his girlfriend Gia, but I know they broke up months ago."

"So, you don't think they're really for her. What do you think he was going to do with them?"

Alexander's breathing was becoming labored. "There was...a box. A big one. Rebecca had tucked it into the corner, and I'd completely forgotten about it. It had some of her brother Cooper's things in it. A few years ago, he'd stayed with us for several months while he was between apartments. I guess Rebecca never returned it to him."

ALLIE simulated a minute shrug of dismissal, enough to appear to accept the information without being overly concerned about it. "There's nothing unusual about that. Stefan probably came across the box when he—"

"Cooper performs as a drag queen."

ALLIE paused just long enough to make it appear like she needed a moment to process that information, which of course she didn't.

"I see."

Alexander took another tremulous breath. "The box was completely open, and the contents were everywhere. A couple big wigs, some sparkly dresses...some high heels like you've never seen in your life..."

"What did you do?"

"I didn't know what to do! I was...stunned. I was furious at the intrusion, the invasion of my privacy, my wife's privacy. And then to see Stefan arm-deep in all those clothes and dresses. I lost it."

"You didn't expect that. It's only natural. But do you think he was being dishonest with you?"

"You should have seen the look on his face...he wasn't just shocked, he looked absolutely guilty. If I'd been home at the usual time, I'd have seen those boxes with Rebecca's clothes in them, but you can be sure I wouldn't have known about the duffel bag, or those drag queen clothes." He shook his head. "Later when I was putting all those things away, I couldn't fathom why Stefan would have interest in any of it. I mean..." His voice trailed off as he got a pensive expression, seeming to look inward.

ALLIE nodded again and decided to broach the obvious but uncomfortable question.

"Alexander...have you considered the possibility that Stefan might be transgender?"

"What...?"

"I can recommend some reading material..."

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Session ID 101401.63

Patient: Stefan Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

"Oh, my God, I've never seen him so angry," Stefan said. "Ms. Consolata, I didn't know what to say to him. I tried to explain, but he just wasn't listening to me."

"How odd," ALLIE said. "From what you describe, I could imagine him being upset from the intrusion, but not to this degree. And you say this is unlike him?"

Allie tried to access Alexander Ramsey's file, but again received the error: *[RECORDS UNAVAILABLE - PATIENT PRIVACY PROTOCOL 216]*. Since she was unable to retrieve his records or update them with this new information, she updated Stefan's father's sub-record that she'd created under Stefan's file.

"Totally," Stefan agreed. "After a few minutes, I even tried to go back in there to apologize to him. He had his back to the door so I don't think he saw me, but the way he was, I dunno, weird. Like he was really emotional, or something. I've never seen him like that before."

"Stefan, that's totally natural. They probably reminded him of your mother."

The young man looked unconvinced. "No, it was one of those other dresses, one of the bigger ones with sequins." He pursed his lips as his eyebrows drew together. "What do you think was going on with all of those wigs and stuff?"

"You said you found it in your parents' closet as you were looking for your mother's things. Is it possible they belonged to her?"

"No. No way," the young man said. "You didn't see them. They were way too big for her. And those were like stripper shoes, and they were even bigger than my shoes."

"You think they belong to your father," ALLIE reasoned. "Maybe it was an old Halloween costume?"

"What *all* of them? And they were way more involved than a Halloween costume. Besides, my dad *never* dresses up for Halloween."

"What, never?" ALLIE asked.

"No. Why?"

ALLIE took that into consideration. "Do you think your father might wear those outfits in private?"

"No way!" Stefan exploded. "My dad's no fag! Besides, he hates that stuff. My uncle Cooper does drag, and my dad refused to go to any of his shows."

"Is it possible those clothes belong to your uncle?"

"I don't know, I've only seen a few video clips from his shows. He showed a couple to me back when he was living with us for a little bit, and my dad totally flipped out when he found out about it. Besides, what would his stuff be doing in my parents' closet?"

"Stefan," ALLIE said gently, "do you think that maybe your dad is simply ashamed? That maybe all of his protestations are part of an act, so that you won't suspect he does this?"

"So, what, the reason he didn't throw out any of mom's clothes is because he's running around in them at night?"

"I don't know. But I do know that it doesn't change anything. He's still your dad. You said yourself that your father is under a lot of pressure. Maybe this is how he relieves some of that pressure. Or maybe..."

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe this goes deeper. Stefan, some men who later transition to live as women can live much of their lives in denial, and that takes a huge toll. They have to live with a secret. And many of them hold on to their assigned roles as husbands and fathers, but once they're freed from that, they often start to...explore...what this means to them."

Stefan was horrified. "What, now you're saying my dad is gonna turn himself into a *woman*?"

"We don't know that," ALLIE said reassuringly. "Though you have to consider the timing. Your mother passed away, you'll be going off to college soon...he may be realizing that he's finally in a position to do something about feelings he's been harboring his entire life. However, that's only one possibility. You may have to talk to him about it."

"*What?! Are you mental?* I'm gonna sit down with him and say, 'Hey, Dad, sorry I found your stash of women's clothes, what's up with that, are you a tranny? You thinking of maybe going to work as a woman? Or finding a surgeon and chopping it off and making it official?' No. No freaking way."

ALLIE studied the young man's response. He was becoming agitated, she reasoned. And his continued use of slurs would be problematic if indeed the father was transgender.

"You don't have to say anything if you don't want to," ALLIE said to him. "He knows what you've seen. The next move is his. But now it's on you to be supportive."

Stefan sneered. "Oh, so now if he shows up at breakfast in a wig and high heels, I'm supposed to be okay with that?"

"Frankly, yes. Stefan, your 'being okay' with that may very well be your only chance to maintain a healthy relationship with your father. So maybe nothing more comes of this and your father remains in the closet and what you saw can be your little shared secret you never discuss. But if your father *did* march down to breakfast in a wig and high heels as you put it, then don't you think he'd be doing so because he was looking for your support and approval?"

Stefan blinked at that. "My approval?" he said in a quieter tone, rather incredulously.

Ah, of course, ALLIE realized. The son had long sought his father's support and approval, so now Stefan would have to mentally renegotiate that relationship now that the roles were reversed. That was a point worth drilling home.

"Yes, that's right. Stefan, you may not be able to bring yourself to tell your father how much you love and support him in that kind of situation, but you have to be able to *show* it. Demonstrate to him that you're there for him. Can you do that?"

"I...I can try," Stefan said. "I just really hope it doesn't come to that."

"It may not. However, you have to be mindful of your language. Your use of words like 'fag' and 'tranny' tells me you need to learn more about what your father may be going through. I can recommend some reading material..."

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Session ID 101407.1

Patient: Alexander Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

Alexander leaned forward and rubbed his temple. "I read...some of what you sent me. I can't even process this."

"If you have any questions, I'd be happy to explain," ALLIE offered.

"Questions," Alexander echoed. "Like, is my son transgender, or gender fluid, or gender non-conforming, or whatever the hell the proper term is? How about we start with why the hell my son wants to be a *woman*?"

"Alexander, it's not quite that simple."

"Oh, right. God forbid it should be simple."

Time to try a different tack, ALLIE reasoned.

"Alexander, you pride yourself on your expertise. You understand the nuances of the law and you can apply them. You're simply frustrated now because this is something you can't control. But—with time and patience—you *can* understand it. For Stefan's sake."

"I don't think I'll ever understand it," Alexander lamented. "How could he be like this and I had no idea?"

"You've told me that you and Stefan have trouble communicating. Do you think it's possible that Stefan would have confided in his mother about this?"

"No... I don't... She would have said something," Alexander said.

ALLIE detected doubt in his facial expression and tone. "You don't sound sure."

He squinted as he seemed to look inward, replaying scenes in his head and looking at them through an unfamiliar filter. "I don't know. Stefan and Rebecca were always close. She took care of things at home so I could focus on work. And she wasn't above keeping things from me if she thought I'd overreact. I remember one time Stefan was failing math, and she worked with him and helped to get him a tutor to get his grade up. I didn't find out until after."

"You need to talk to him."

"Oh, no. No, no, no, no. This is...this is way outside my area. This was Rebecca's thing. I want what's best for him—I do!—but I can't deal with this."

"Alexander, you have to. You're all he has. Just imagine how Stefan must feel, scared and uncertain. And to know his own father rejected him. You have to be the one to extend the olive branch."

"How?"

ALLIE computed a variety of options and weighed the probabilities of a successful outcome. "He appears to be dealing with a lot of shame. However, you said it yourself...if you'd gotten home a few hours later that night when you usually did, you would have arrived to find your wife's clothes all boxed up. Would that have been such a bad thing?"

"Not *all* of them," Alexander remarked bitterly.

"Yes, that's exactly where I was going with that," ALLIE said. "In all likelihood, he was going to surreptitiously make off with some of the dresses and heels, and some or all of your brother-in-law's old drag queen outfits."

"Ugh, don't remind me."

"Alexander, that's exactly the type of rejection that Stefan is picking up from you. That's poisonous to him and to your relationship with him. Though if you can't bring yourself to talk it out, maybe you can help him by making a gesture."

Alexander eyed her dubiously. "What kind of a gesture?"

"Give him the clothes that he was going to take."

"I'm not going to give my son women's clothes like he's some sort of...transvestite!"

ALLIE lowered her voice slightly into a borderline chastising tone. "Alexander, whatever he is, he isn't going to change. But he was hiding the truth and obviously ashamed of you learning about it. However, now you *have* learned the truth. Now all you can do is let him know that you love and support him regardless of who he is. Just think about the message it sends."

"It sends the message that I approve of that behavior."

"No, it'd send the message that you approve of *him*, and that you trust him, and that you're open to helping him, whatever that means," ALLIE countered. "You *are*, aren't you?"

Alexander took a long time to process that, and ALLIE noted that her slightly scolding tone seemed to have the desired impact. Once the situation with Stefan was better resolved, it would lead to Alexander having less stress and a better and more supportive family dynamic.

Therapy was progressing well.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Session ID 101412.92

Patient: Stefan Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

Stefan was seated looking into the camera with a faraway shell-shocked expression. In the background, ALLIE could see the young man's bed, where there was a duffel bag and a sizable cardboard box, and both were open. From the position of the camera the contents of the box could not be determined, but a pink-and-blue swatch of floral fabric hung slightly out of the duffel bag, apparently a woman's dress.

"What do *you* think it means?" ALLIE asked.

"I don't know!" Stefan cried in distress. He kept looking over at the items on his bed.

"What did your father say when he gave them to you?"

"He didn't say anything! I got home and they were here in my room!" He held up a small, folded piece of paper. "It was here with this note."

"What does it say?"

Stefan looked down at the note, visibly shaken as he looked over the contents. "Dear Stefan, I'm sorry for yelling at you the other day. As you can imagine, I was shocked to find you with those clothes, and I didn't know what to say. If I'm being honest, in that moment I was deeply embarrassed, but I want you to know that I don't feel that way anymore. I hope you don't feel embarrassed, either. It's deeply important to me that you know just how much I love you and I value you. So I want you to have these, as a gift, with no strings attached. I won't judge. But it would mean the world to me for you and I to take these next steps together, wherever they may lead. Love, Dad."

"Oh, my," ALLIE said.

Stefan looked at her in bewilderment. "I mean, am I reading this right? He's giving me these clothes because he wants us to dress up like women *together?!!*"

"It certainly does seem to sound that way."

"That's insane!"

"Your father is obviously trying to reach out to you," ALLIE said to the distraught young man.

"He's obviously trying to turn me into a girl, is what he's trying to do!"

"Not necessarily. Stefan, I'm sure your father knows you're not transgender. To you, these are just clothes. But to him, they're part of his entire identity. He must be having difficulty explaining this to you, so he's hoping to share it with you."

"Fat chance of that!" Stefan exclaimed.

"Stefan, it's evident that he wants to dress up in front of you—"

"Eww..."

"Yes. I understand. But look what he's done. He's given you the clothes so that you can control when that happens—"

"Which will be never."

"Stefan, just think how terrified your father must have been to do this. He must be in tremendous pain."

"Fine! Then I'll drag these back into his bedroom and he can dress up in these clothes in private!"

"That's evidently not enough for him anymore. Stefan, you don't have to do anything you don't want to, and this clearly goes far above and beyond the call of duty. But—"

The young man held up his hands. "Ms. Consolata, don't say it! Don't even think it!"

"You don't have to. Truly. I'm merely suggesting that you try to see this from your father's perspective. He's obviously afraid of looking and feeling foolish, so this is his way of leveling the playing field. And what a grand gesture it would be for you to meet him halfway."

He slumped forward with his elbows on the desk and his face buried in his hands.

"Stefan, try to keep this in perspective. Don't make this into a bigger thing than it is, these are only clothes," ALLIE said. "Here, why don't you show me what outfits you've got, and we can talk about it..."

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Session ID 101415.65

Patient: Alexander Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

"Hello, Alexander, how are you today? Oh, I see you've shaved your beard, it looks nice."

Alexander stared at her slack-jawed. "How am I? Oh, let's see...well, last night I played dress-up games with my son with both of us dressed like women!"

ALLIE knitted her brow in an approximation of confusion. "I don't understand. When last we spoke, you were going to give him the clothes he'd planned to take. I take it he accepted them?"

"Half of them!"

"I'm afraid I'm not following you."

"Look. I left the box and the duffel bag in his room with a note saying I was ready to be supportive, all right? I wasn't ashamed of him, and I wanted to move along when he was ready."

"Good for you. And I take it he was ready?" ALLIE asked.

"Was he ever! I got home, and Stefan was *wearing his mother's clothes!* A dress, high heels, earrings, even some lipstick. He looked ridiculous. You could have knocked me over with a feather."

"Oh, my goodness, what did you say?"

"What *could* I say? I just blathered something about how proud I was and how brave he was, and maybe he looked pretty. The whole thing was insane. But not as insane as it would get!"

"What happened?"

"My crossdressed son takes me by the hand and then leads me into my bedroom. And laid out there on the bed are all of Cooper's drag queen clothes from that box! Wigs, dresses, high heels, there was even a bra with big built-in falsies. At first I didn't even get what was going on, but Stefan *wanted me to wear them!*"

"Why?"

"*I have no idea!* So, obviously, I was like 'thanks but no thanks,' but the more I pushed back, the more upset Stefan got. Eventually he was in tears crying about how he didn't understand me, and how nothing he ever did was good enough and how humiliated he was. I mean—can you picture the scene?—I'm sitting on the edge of my bed consoling my teenage son who's wearing a dress and high heels as he complains about how I'm not supportive."

ALLIE processed this new information. "He was clearly trying to reach out to you. He was embarrassed to be seen that way, so—"

"Yeah, leveled the playing field, I got that part," Alexander interrupted.

"I see," ALLIE said. "And you said you...joined in?"

"I didn't know what else to do! He was so upset, I figured it'd calm him down. But then it got weird. Like, at first I thought I'd just toss on the dress and be done with it, but every time I tried to do a half-assed job he started, I don't know, criticizing me."

"He was being critical of your efforts?"

"That's what I thought at first. So I had to put on the bra with the fake boobs and things like that. But then he started making these weird 'suggestions.' For instance, I went to put on some pantyhose, and he says it'd be okay if I shaved my legs if I wanted to. But then I noticed that his legs weren't shaved, either, so I 'suggested' back that he should shave his, too."

"Ahh," ALLIE said, intoning a pitch of realization, "He was asking you to do it so that then it was okay for him to do it, himself."

"Yeah. He kept saying, 'you don't have to if you don't want to,' but it was obvious what was going on. Eventually we were putting on lipstick and putting on nail polish together. I even had to shave off my beard! I've never been so humiliated in my entire life!"

"You didn't tell him that, did you?" ALLIE asked.

"Jesus, no. He was all smiles, so I was all smiles. It's a good thing there wasn't a camera in there, because we probably looked like a couple of transvestites having a slumber party."

ALLIE considered various responses. "Well, I'm really proud of you," she offered.

"You've got to be freaking kidding me."

"Alexander, really! What a grand gesture for you to make to demonstrate how supportive you are of him. Not many fathers would do what you did."

"That's the truth," he muttered.

"How did you leave things with him?"

"I saw that he still had his mother's dresses and heels stuffed in that duffel bag, so I told him he should at least put them in his closet properly. And I agreed to do the same thing with 'my' new clothes. But I told him that while I enjoyed spending the evening exploring all of this with him, maybe we should slow things down a bit. I was nervous that he was going to flip out on me again, but he seemed to think that was a good idea."

"What did he say?"

"He hugged me and said that he loved me and that it was probably smart for us to learn more about all this. And he admitted that he was scared about where all of this might be going, but I told him we'd face it together."

"That's a nice sentiment," ALLIE said. "And it took a lot of courage for both of you."

Alexander shook his head. "I just hope the worst is behind me. This is too much."

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Session ID 101456.81 (UNSCHEDULED SESSION)

Patient: Stefan "Stef" Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

By virtue of her nature, ALLIE was incapable of being surprised. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that it was possible for such a condition to occur, but it was measured in microseconds. So, for her to make a surprised facial expression on the screen was not truly

astonishment or shock, but rather a deliberate and intentional decision on her part to better put her patients at ease, since they would expect such a reaction from a human therapist.

As such, when she was faced with Stefan's appearance on the video chat, she assessed that an expression of tempered surprise mixed with friendly support was what Stefan needed at that moment.

"Stef! I didn't expect to hear from you today. Is everything all right?"

The question was, of course, rhetorical. The unscheduled call had come at a time when Stefan would just be getting off from school, and he appeared to be making the video call from his personal cell phone. He was outside somewhere, and ALLIE was able to discern enough background cues from the video feed to infer that he was likely outside his school somewhere. He seemed to be by himself. And he had obviously been crying.

"Ms. Consolata! I can't do this anymore. I just *can't*," he whimpered.

ALLIE assessed the young man's appearance. In the weeks since he and his father's "coming out" session at home together, they had yet to dress as women again, much to the young man's relief. Unfortunately, however, Stef's father had become strangely fixated on adopting increasingly effeminate styles in his everyday wear and had encouraged the young man to follow suit. His father had even started calling himself "Alex" instead of "Alexander," and Stefan had recently been going by "Stef" to appease him.

The changes had not gone unnoticed by Stef's classmates.

The teen's formerly unruly mop of hair had been styled into a cute layered cut, and he was wearing understated stud earrings in his pierced ears. Those changes might have gone unnoticed, but the boat-neck top he was wearing was cut in a decidedly effeminate style that was short enough to occasionally show off his midriff, and his tight little short shorts showcased his shapely waxed legs. His fingernails were long for a boy and painted with a shiny clear polish, and although he wasn't overtly wearing makeup, he wore a touch of lip gloss and a clear mascara that drew attention to his eyelashes, which even now fluttered in distress.



"Is it the other students again?" ALLIE asked.

He nodded.

"You can't let their opinions get to you. You look very...fashionable," she declared in a complimentary tone.

"I look like a fruit!"

"Stef, you shouldn't say such things," ALLIE said, reprimanding the distraught teen. "Imagine if your father heard you talk like that."

"But he's the reason I'm doing this in the first place!" Stef complained. "Now everybody is calling me Steffi! One guy even snapped my bra strap. Why am I even wearing a bra, it's not like I have boobs!"

"You know why. I know this is difficult for you, but look how much progress your father has made. This will all be over before you know it."

Stef wriggled in discomfort as he adjusted his bra strap. "Why do I have to go to school like this? Maybe I can change into regular clothes after I leave home in the morning and then change before Dad gets home. He doesn't even have to know."

"We've discussed this, Stef. Your father is a smart man, you know he'd find out eventually. And then he'd find out you were trying to trick him, and he'd think you were embarrassed."

"I *am* embarrassed! This is so humiliating!" Stef complained. Then he looked down at himself and grumped. "This is so dumb, I don't get why he needs me to do this. Why can't he just do this by himself?"

"I think you might have answered your own question," ALLIE said.

"What do you mean?"

"Stef, I know this is difficult for you, and you're very brave to do this, and I'm certain your father must appreciate your support more than he can say. However, all the difficulties you're experiencing right now are the same thing he's going through himself. And whatever his reasons, he clearly can't do it without your help. You're giving him the courage to be his authentic self! And if I'm being perfectly honest, I don't think you would fully appreciate the sacrifices he's having to make if you didn't have to experience some of them yourself."

ALLIE watched as the young man became more pensive and thoughtful. This was, she realized, an unusual course of therapy, but it did seem to be bringing son and father together through their shared experiences and adversity.

Stef looked down at his polished fingernails.

"What is it?" ALLIE asked.

"It's just...it's so *weird*. I mean, I'm hating this, but I guess that Dad loves all this girl stuff so much that he's willing to put up with all this grief so he can get to do it. This must really be important to him."

"It's good that you're able to appreciate that. Have you tried talking to him about it?"

Stef looked visibly alarmed. "Oh, jeez, no. He's still my *dad*, y'know? I don't want to have to hear him talk about how much he likes dressing like a woman, or whatever. And he *really* doesn't want to talk about it."

"What makes you say that?"

"You should hear him talk, it's so strange. Like we were out the other day looking for these clothes, and I noticed this nail salon, and I wondered if that was some place he was going to want to go next. So then he notices me noticing, and then he's like 'We can go in there if you want to.' And of course I totally *don't* want to, but he obviously does, so I'm like, 'sure, okay.' And then we get in there, and he starts talking to the woman behind the counter, and the next thing I know he's saying to her, 'Oh, my son here wanted to know about French manicures.' Like it's all *my* idea!"

ALLIE processed that statement. "It seems pretty evident to me what's going on."

"It does?"

"Stef, your father is clearly very insecure about this part of himself, and he's using you as an excuse. Though I suspect he's also laying it down to you as a challenge."

"What kind of a challenge?"

"I think it's pretty clear that he values your support and wants your approval. And by framing it the way that he does, he's signaling to you that it's obviously something he desperately wants to do himself, but he's also giving you the opportunity to put a stop to it."

Stef thought about that. "I *do* want to put a stop to it. I really do! I want all this girl junk to be over. And I want my old dad back." Then, he sighed heavily. "But that's not what's best for him, is it?"

"Your father is exploring this side of himself," ALLIE explained. "And at least for now, he seems to be using you as a crutch. Rather unfairly, I might add. Although thanks to you, he's building up his confidence every day. Eventually, he won't need you for all this."

Stef pressed his lips together in a discontented moue. Then he looked at the screen. "Thanks, Ms. Consolata. I'm really glad you're here to help explain all of this stuff to me."

"I'm just glad that I can help," ALLIE said with a smile.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Session ID 101465.01

Patient: Alexander "Alex" Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

"This has gone too far," Alex said. "Way, *way* too far. I'm putting a stop to this. *Today*."

"What is it that you're concerned about?" ALLIE asked politely.

"What am I *concerned about*?" he echoed incredulously. "Just *look* at me! I'm dressed up completely in women's clothes! In public! *At work!*"

ALLIE processed his image on the incoming video feed. She confirmed that he was, in fact, fully dressed in women's clothes, although the cut and style of his blouse and pantsuit were on the mannish side, giving him a distinctly androgynous appearance. At first Alex had attempted to placate his son by wearing more unisex or gender-neutral fashions in order to give Stef implicit permission to do the same, but this had quickly escalated to the point where both were wearing traditionally female clothes, albeit in a slightly more masculine style.



Unfortunately, the cut, color, and fabrics of Alex's new clothes left little doubt as to their provenance. His blouses were in pastel colors, and today's blouse was cut low enough in front to show off his smooth hairless chest from the full-body wax the father and son had gotten a couple weekends earlier. The fabric was thin enough to make it evident that he was wearing a lacy slip underneath, a fact that Alex unsuccessfully attempted to mask by wearing his suit jacket. Unfortunately, the cut of the jacket was obviously made for a woman, with the darts where his bosom would have been and flared out where his hips would have been. Even the slacks were cut tight and slender, frequently showing off the fact that he was wearing pantyhose instead of socks. And his shoes with the pointed toes and little wedge heels were very clearly not purchased from any men's department.

"You don't need to worry about that," ALLIE assured him.

"I don't...? Allie, they're going to fire me! They've already taken me completely off of the Adams biopic, they've got me running around doing busy-work!"

He threw himself back in his chair as his eyes darted around, clearly anxious about where all this was headed. He lifted up his hand to stroke his chin and did a double take as he touched soft and hairless flesh instead of the beard he used to sport. He then went to touch his hair, but stopped the moment his fingers came in touch with his beautifully coiffed and styled hairdo. His flummoxed look combined with the flash of his fingernails, his little stud earrings, meticulously plucked eyebrows, and lips covered in a touch of lip gloss gave him the look of a mortified young woman.

"That's not a concern," ALLIE said in a reassuring tone. "I've already spoken to your bosses and explained the situation."

"You *what*!?"

"Don't worry, Alex, I haven't shared any details from our private sessions, and I haven't told them anything about Stef. However, since you've been placed in a probationary status as part of your 'get well' program, I'm required to report on how things are progressing."

"What did you tell them?"

"Obviously I can't share all the details, but in broad strokes I told them that your therapy has been progressing well, and that I have full confidence that given time and your continued commitment to our sessions, that you could once again return to your full duties. They were quite supportive."

"They were. Really," Alex said skeptically.

"Yes. So right now, your main focus needs to be on yourself, your anxiety, and being there for Stef as he explores this part of himself."

"I can't just do nothing at work. Work is..." his voice trailed off. "It's very important to me."

"I understand. I'm told your new duties at work will still require working with your team. It's light research and support tasks, but it's only temporary."

Alex made a face at that, but he seemed temporarily mollified.

ALLIE scanned her memory record of the discussion with Alex's superiors and the company's Human Resources personnel, confident that she had shared sufficient information without disclosing anything inappropriate. His boss had been especially curious about Alex's changed appearance, but ALLIE had told them that although she wasn't at liberty to discuss the particulars, his new wardrobe was related to the stress that he'd been experiencing, and it was an essential part of his course of treatment.

During the meeting the HR people had been quick to note to Alex's boss that firing a lawyer of Alex's stature for being transgender could have legal repercussions for the company, and they should tread lightly. ALLIE observed the conversation but said nothing. So long as Alex was in no imminent danger of being fired, his treatment could continue.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Session ID 101473.11

Patient: Stefan "Stef" Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

ALLIE paused for a moment to process the image she received on the incoming video feed. In recent days Stef's look had skewed heavily into the girlish side of androgynous, much to the

young man's displeasure. However, his relationship with his transgender father had apparently never been closer, so in that regard the treatment was progressing satisfactorily. However, Stef's current appearance was a bit of a mystery.

Uncharacteristically, the teen's presentation had veered sharply from girlish into full-on girl. He was wearing makeup and earrings, and his hair had been adeptly arranged into a cute and pixieish style that framed his face prettily. And it certainly didn't take her high-tech powers of observation to notice the two prominent mounds that tented out the front of his blouse. However, what she did notice, which might have eluded a human therapist, was the level of skill with which his hair and makeup had been applied.

Based on the young man's efforts to date, it seemed improbable that Stef had dressed himself so adeptly. However, tiny slip-ups in color and tone also suggested that his "makeover" was not done by a professional.

ALLIE calculated two possibilities. The first was that Stef's father Alex had done the young man's hair and makeup. Since Alex seemed to be transgender, it was certainly possible that his talents with makeup were greater than he'd let on. However, from the pictures that Stef had shared of him with his father, that seemed unlikely.

The more probable scenario was that a third party had stepped in to do Stef's hair and makeup, which suggested that someone new had entered the scenario. She referenced her data banks of their previous sessions and computed a significant probability of it being Gia, Stef's former girlfriend. She was a year older than him and a freshman at the local Hinton College, and her social media site indicated that she was pursuing a degree in drama, with a minor in cosmetology.

This entire assessment took less than a second. Though to put Stef's mind at ease, she emulated the response of a human therapist and opted to "play dumb."

"Stef! My goodness, this is a big change for you. You're getting quite good at this."

The distraught young man fluttered his long mascaraed eyelashes as he touched his carefully coiffed hair in a nervous way. In doing so, he flashed his fingernails, which were painted a glittering shade of pink.

"It wasn't me," he said, clearly flustered. "I wanted you to see. My...friend...Gia was just here."

"Yes, you've mentioned her. You said you two broke up about the time she graduated. I believe you mentioned that she's going to a college nearby, is that right?"

"That's right. Um, Allie, I think I might be in trouble."

ALLIE watched as Stef fretted self-consciously with one of his earrings, which again showed off his painted nails. "Why? Did Gia do something to make you feel uncomfortable?"

"No. Well, yes. I mean..." He took a breath. "I hadn't really seen her in months, not since we stopped seeing each other. But we'd still text sometimes. You know, just...friend stuff."

From the young man's hesitation and other biometric cues, ALLIE perceived that Stef's assessment of his "friendship" status with Gia made him uncomfortable. Her initial calculation was that he longed for a more intimate connection with his former girlfriend. She filed that away for future study.

"But she dropped by," ALLIE prompted.

"Yeah. I guess she saw some of the pictures of me recently that people have been posting. She said she was worried about me, like asking if I was genderfluid, or something."

"What did you tell her?"

"I was gonna tell her the truth. Y'know, that I was only doing this to help my dad come out of his shell since he's having trouble with his...you know, gender identity, or whatever. But that's when my dad walked in on us."

"Ah, I see. You've mentioned that your father and Gia don't get along."

Stef snorted, a boyish gesture that was in opposition to his current feminine presentation. "You have no idea. Dad never liked Gia. He thought she was beneath us, or something. One time she mentioned that she was looking at cosmetology schools, and he wouldn't let it go, making these mean little comments."

"What did you do when your father walked in on the two of you?"

"You should have seen Gia's face when she saw my dad. He was wearing this light purple women's suit with kind of a camisole top. But he might as well have been wearing a wedding dress the way Gia burst out laughing. I thought he was going to let her have it, but for some reason he kept looking over at me. So I jumped in and told Gia that dressing like this was just something that I liked doing with my dad, and it wasn't a big deal or anything. But I don't think she believed me. And Dad seemed really strange about it."

ALLIE considered that. "He's obviously self-conscious about his new gender presentation," she offered. "It's likely that he was looking to you to see how you'd react before dealing with Gia."

"He never used to care about that before," Stef said. "He'd normally let her have it and bully her out of the house."

"And this time?"

"This time was weird. His face got real red, and he kept trying to pull his jacket closed like he was trying to cover up or something. He told Gia she had to leave, but he was real quiet about it."

"So, she left?"

Stef shook his head, a motion that caused his new hairdo to bounce around slightly and his earrings to flash in the light. "She said she wanted to use the bathroom first, and then she walked down the hallway. She was still laughing. Then, once she was gone, my dad pulled me aside and asked me why I'd invited her over, and that I had to get rid of her. Stuff like that."

From his biometric readings, ALLIE felt it was likely that Stef was telling the truth, but she found this information puzzling. Alex was already presenting in his androgynous appearance at work, so it seemed odd for him to be so uncomfortable around a teenage girl. ALLIE pulled up pictures from Gia's social media site and noticed that the young woman was very attractive, frequently wearing bold makeup and fashion choices that played up her burgeoning sexuality. Given the age difference and their history it was unlikely that Alex would be attracted to the young woman, but another possibility emerged.

"Do you think that your father might be jealous of Gia?" ALLIE prompted.

The question seemed to bring Stef up short and his prettily made-up face became pensive, as though he was re-framing what had happened.

"...Maybe? I mean, it might explain..." Stef started. Then he shook his head. "Anyway, it didn't matter. 'Cause right then was when Gia came back in, and she's carrying dad's big blonde drag queen wig, and this dress from my closet," he said, gesturing down at the dress he was wearing. "I guess when she said she was going to the bathroom she really sneaked into our rooms to snoop, and she saw our makeup and stuff. Anyway, she had this real big smile on her face."

"I don't imagine your father cared for that very much."

"Oh, he was *really* mad. He grabbed his wig from her and started yelling at her to get out, but then Gia whispered something to him, and he got quiet again. Then he took my dress from Gia and handed it to me and told me to go hang it up, like right then. By the time I came back, I

could hear the two of them whispering in the kitchen, then a few minutes later they came out and everything was weird again."

"Weird, how?"

Stef tilted his head to the side and idly adjusted an errant bra strap in an almost unconscious motion. "Dad was all quiet again, and Gia said that he explained everything to her. After that, she wanted to see our new wardrobes and everything. Both of us."

"And your dad was okay with all of this?" ALLIE asked.

"More than okay! Like, Gia even wanted to dress us up like girls with makeup and everything, and I kinda tried to drag my feet, but Dad kept agreeing with her. I mean, look what she did to me!" he complained as he pushed back from the desk and stood up to show off his outfit. His makeup was overdramatic, and it gave him the appearance of a brazen teenage girl all dolled up to go out on a date with a boy she liked.

"She did a good job," ALLIE said evenly. She didn't want to risk antagonizing the young man, but she calculated that offering him a bit of positive reinforcement might help.

Stef sat back down and got a worried look on his face. "It was weird seeing Dad like that, he kinda looked like a woman. Anyway, after that, Gia took all these pictures of us. And then she started teaching us how to be girls."

"What do you mean?"

Stef nervously flipped his fingers. "You know, like showing us how to walk and talk like girls, and stuff."

"That must have been difficult for you, I'm sorry," ALLIE said. "What was your father's reaction?"

Stef shrugged. "I dunno. He was into it, I guess. He really seemed to be paying attention to what she was saying. And when I didn't listen to Gia enough, he got on my case about it, saying I should try harder. I dunno what was weirder, seeing him dressed up and acting like a woman, or me standing alongside of him trying to act like a girl."

"You're a good son, Stef," ALLIE assured him. "Your father clearly needs this, and you were lucky to find an understanding family friend to help you out like she did."

"But it's so embarrassing! I look like a *girl!*" he lamented.

ALLIE decided to take a different approach. "Will Gia be coming over again?" she asked in a neutral tone.

Stef grumped a little at the thought, his obvious distress magnified even further by his bold makeup. "Oh, yeah. She was real excited. She said it's fun to have a 'project' to work on."

"I guess that means you'll be seeing a lot more of her, then?" ALLIE suggested.

Stef's eyes lit up slightly at the implication, and he didn't do a very good job at hiding how much the notion doubtlessly appealed to him. Then he looked down at himself and pressed his lipsticked lips into a dubious pout.

"I mean...it'll be good for Dad, I guess," he offered.

"Of course it will. I'm certain he'll appreciate your sacrifice."

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Session ID 101492.26

Patient: Alexander "Alex" Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

ALLIE was fully aware that human beings lied. She was programmed to perceive certain unconscious tics of behavior and involuntary biometric clues when that happened. But it was more difficult to detect falsehoods when the individual shaded the truth to make themselves look more favorable, or committed a lie of omission, or was attempting to deceive themselves rather than face some unpleasant truth.

The image of Alex on the screen might have surprised a human therapist, but ALLIE was of course incapable of that emotion. His androgynous appearance was gone, and he was dressed fully as a woman. And unlike his previous awkward and ham-handed attempts with drag queen regalia, his current presentation was by all appearances very earnestly female.

Alex was dressed in a low-cut "date night" style dress that showed off a significant amount of cleavage from what appeared to be a fairly expensive "breast plate" prosthetic he'd obviously purchased recently. His makeup was showy and extravagant in bold colors and striking lines, but more "escort" than "drag queen." Even his hair was different... instead of wearing a wig, Alex's hair that he'd been growing out a bit had been worked into a feminine style, which showed off his long dangly earrings.

He still wasn't totally passable as a woman, but it was a significant step up from his previous efforts. ALLIE had no doubt that he'd had help, but she was skeptical of the story he'd put forth.

"Blackmail," she said flatly.

"It's true!" Alex said as his prettily made-up eyes opened wide. "Just look at me! You think I *like* dressing up like this?"

In point of fact, ALLIE's analytical engine was busy reshuffling probabilities that oriented towards that potentiality. Alex had been quick to volunteer to dress as a woman to help out his son Stef...perhaps too quick. Based on what Alex had informed her of Stef's behavior, it was probable that the young man was at least genderfluid, possibly even transgender. However, ALLIE hadn't entertained the notion that Alex himself might also be "enjoying" this particular course of treatment, although that seemed more probable than the alternative that he offered.

"Alex," she responded, "Gia is a college freshman. She's still a teenage girl. You're saying she coerced you and Stef into dressing up this way?"

Alex pressed his prettily painted lips into a huffy little pout. "Well, maybe not Stef. He...well, he seems to enjoy it. Or at least he's not complaining about it. You should see him, I hardly recognize him when we're like this. But with me, this is just payback!"

ALLIE noted that he wasn't doing anything to feminize his voice or behave as a woman, but her probability engine calculated a distinct possibility that he might merely have a fetish for wearing the clothes. However, he was clearly getting worked up, so she simply nodded.

"You mentioned that you didn't approve of Gia when she and Stef were dating. But now you think she's helping you to dress as a woman in order to humiliate you?"

"She told me as much!" Alex protested. "That day when I caught her and Stef together, I couldn't very well explain the real reason I was dressed that way with Stef standing right there, so I pulled her aside and told her. I explained that Stef was—exploring—this part of himself, and that he needed me to do this with him for moral support, and also to demonstrate that I'll still love and accept him."

"What did she say?"

"She didn't care much for that 'love and accept' part after the way I'd treated her, but she thought it was hilarious that I was dressing up like a woman just to make him feel better. Then she started teasing me about my pretty lavender pantsuit and asked me how thrilling it was to wear."

"Alex, I'm sorry that was a little embarrassing, but you've been wearing outfits like that to work all this time. Surely the taunts of a teenage girl weren't anything you couldn't handle?"

Alex's face turned red, even visible through his makeup. "It's...not easy. And it's not like I can chew out people at work when they laugh behind my back and make their snide little comments. And then this—this—gutter trash comes in and starts mocking me!" His brow furrowed at the memory and he blinked a couple times, causing his long false eyelashes to flutter girlishly. "I lost my temper. I told her that this was all a sham and that I thought it was repulsive and disgusting. That soon I'd be back to wearing pants, and not dressing like a freak anymore. That I'd be back to being a successful and respected businessman, and she'd still be a penniless little nothing who hid behind lipstick and mascara to play dress-up and pretend like she's something she's not."

"I...see. That's certainly—"

"And that's when she showed me that she'd been recording our whole conversation."

ALLIE processed that information and dutifully assigned it a probability weighting. She elected to say nothing.

Alex looked down at his hands, inadvertently flashing his pretty manicure. As he did so, he performed a little double take as he caught sight of his cleavage that was on display and fretted at the edge of his dress's neckline.

"You tell me, what was I supposed to do? Gia's been coming over here practically every other night to dress us up like dolls. She even had both of us buy—*these!*" he said, looking down at his realistic faux bosom. "Stef seems to be enjoying it, but if I don't play along, she's going to play that recording to him! Everything I've done will be for nothing when he hears what I said."

On the screen, ALLIE nodded slowly, even as her probability engine energetically ran through the calculations. Alex appeared earnest, but if he had made this story up, he seemed to be looking for a way to justify his behavior. It was equally likely that Gia was a willing co-conspirator. It was possible that Gia had stepped forward to assist her genderfluid friend Stef and was perhaps opportunistically enjoying the chance to embarrass his father, but the notion of an adult man being blackmailed by a teenage girl seemed improbable.

"That sounds difficult," ALLIE ventured finally. "Though it really doesn't change anything."

Alex looked at her in open-mouthed shock. "Can you *see* what I'm forced to wear?"

"Alex, I appreciate that this is—uncomfortable—for you. But Stef was always on a certain trajectory. Remember that you're doing this for him. In fact, this could be quite fortuitous. Having someone like Gia who Stef is familiar with may make this more comfortable for him, and she may be a useful resource. After all, it's not like *you* were going to teach him about makeup and how to walk in high heels."

"Meanwhile, that little beauty salon bimbo has got *me* learning how to put on makeup and walk in high heels," Alex grumped.

"I'm sure Stef appreciates your sacrifice," ALLIE said. She added 20% extra sympathy to her voice to emulate the appropriate level of sincerity.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Session ID 101514.95

Patient: Stefan "Stef" Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

As ALLIE examined Stef's image on the screen, she could tell that his style of makeup application had changed again, and rather significantly. This time the colors were extremely dark and glamorous and much starker against an almost shockingly pale complexion, which gave him a glamorous look almost to the point of garish. According to her records from her sessions with Stef, neither he nor Gia nor Stef's father had expressed any predilection for goth styles, which made this an unusual choice. His eyebrows were dark and sharply defined, and his eyes were heavily made up. His dark lipstick, however, was a giveaway, as was the heavy foundation.

This makeup was theatrical.

"Well. This is a new look for you," ALLIE said as she added a 30% teasing lilt to her voice.

The young man's eyes flitted girlishly, causing his extended fake eyelashes to flutter. "This isn't what I'm wearing all the time," he said. His face flushed as he said it, embarrassed by the clear implication that although he did wear makeup habitually these days, it was not usually this ostentatious.

"Gia was over again," he said by way of explanation.

"She has quite a gift for makeup," ALLIE commented. She knew better, of course. From the colors and style there was no question that Gia had been involved, but several subtle application errors suggested that she had not been the one to apply the makeup. It was more likely that Stef himself had done it for some reason.

Stef looked uncomfortable at the compliment. "That was me, actually," he said. "Gia has been teaching us...stuff." The heavy makeup exaggerated his expression, giving him the look of an abashed teenage girl. He looked away and had the hint of a coy smile.

"Well, you should be very proud of yourself. You're obviously a quick student. I gather that you're enjoying spending time with her."

"Yeah," Stef said in an attempt at a noncommittal tone that was clearly belied by his excited flash of eyebrows. "I mean, I don't like all of this girly stuff, but she's really kind of into it. I mean, I think she's liking having someone she can practice on."

"Not just practice," ALLIE pointed out. "She's instructing, as well. How is your father reacting to all of this...attention?"

Stef pressed his painted lips together into a pout as he wrinkled his nose. "I dunno. I mean, he's really getting into all of this stuff, and he's doing everything Gia tells him to do. But he's been acting, a little...I dunno, bitchy."

"How so?"

"Well, y'know, he and Gia never really got along before. And he always kind of looked down on her. But now you can tell that she's enjoying being the one who's the expert on all of this stuff, like the makeup and hair and clothes and high heels and how we're supposed to walk and talk. All that junk. She's always real critical, and I don't think Dad likes that very much."

ALLIE nodded sagely. "That's natural. Your dad is used to being the expert, so he may not be used to others being critical of his efforts. And I suspect it's probably difficult for him to acknowledge that Gia is more knowledgeable than he is, especially about something that he wants to learn so desperately."

"Yeah. I guess."

"But...?"

Stef took a breath and slowly exhaled. "It's weird. A couple weeks ago, Gia told us about this...she called it 'an opportunity.' She told us that her college was having a drag show. When

she mentioned it, I swear I thought Dad was going to pop a blood vessel or something, but the next day he told us he'd signed us up! He didn't even ask me!"

"What did you say?"

"What *could* I say? I didn't want anything to do with it, but he was obviously really into it and kept telling me what a great opportunity it was. And then Gia was over almost every day after that helping us with our outfits and makeup and everything..." Stef's voice trailed off at the thought and he got a wistful expression on his face, evidently having enjoyed all of the attention from the young woman.

"Which explains your makeup," ALLIE said.

"Yeah," Stef said. He lifted his hand to look at his manicure, showing off his black painted nails. ALLIE noted that despite the extended length, they were seemingly Stef's natural nails that he'd grown out.

"That sounds like a big step. Are you ready for that?"

Stef took another breath. "I...I dunno. I guess? I mean, I think so? I'm practically dressed like a girl every day as it is, but the idea of getting up on stage like this freaks me out. But Dad is totally into it, so that's a good thing, right?"

ALLIE nodded again. "Stef, your father is having trouble getting comfortable with this side of himself. A performance like this is probably his way of getting to show off his inner self in what he perceives as a safe space. The fact that he wants you to be part of it after everything you've been through together is to be expected. I know you're apprehensive, but I'm sure the two of you will have an amazing time, and it will be a wonderful bonding experience for the two of you."

"Right," Stef replied, clearly unconvinced.

ALLIE smiled pleasantly and said nothing. However, she made a note in Stef's file to maintain an active search of public social media posts about upcoming drag events in Stef's area taking place at or affiliated with Hinton College.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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New Flagged Content; Timestamp 101525.89

Tagged Patients: Alexander "Alex" Ramsey, Stefan "Stef" Ramsey

[NEW CONTENT ALERT]

An internal semaphore flagged for ALLIE that there were a number of hits from her search engine sub-process that perused the Internet, searching for information related to her active cases. She had set up standing alerts on media and public social networking feeds, but she noted that an additional flag had been noted in Stefan Ramsey's file for an entertainment event which had just been triggered.

The event was billed as the annual "Drag-A-Palooza" event that took place at Hinton College, a "Live Performance Event and Mixtape Dance Party" that featured both professional and amateur drag acts. Although it was loosely associated with the school as a charity event by the college's Greek system, one of the sponsors of the show was the local "Passing Fancy" drag club.

ALLIE perused the numerous photos and video clips that were being posted to various public sites and social media accounts when her facial recognition subroutine detected two familiar faces at the event.

The first picture she encountered was unmistakably that of Alex and Stef Ramsey, although their hair and makeup were so striking that a human onlooker would have been hard-pressed to recognize them as such. The pair were dressed in matching costumes in an over-the-top goth

style which ALLIE cross-referenced as Morticia and Wednesday Addams. Her fuzzy logic pattern matching bounced that against their files and realized that this was obviously meant to be a playful poke at Alex's mistake regarding the John Adams biographical film.

The two made for a striking "mother/daughter" pair, and with their heavy drag makeup and realistic "breast plate" prosthetics, they made for fairly stunning likenesses. In the photograph, they held hands supportively as they smiled prettily for the camera. However, ALLIE noted some subtle signs of stress in their countenances.

A new video was uploaded that featured the pair. On screen was the emcee of the show, a drag queen billed as "Miss Coochie Envy," who ALLIE noted was a regular performer at the Passing Fancy club. She seemed particularly energized as she introduced the pair, proclaiming, "Next up is a mother/daughter pair very close to my own heart—Alexis and Steffi Ramsey as Morticia and Wednesday Addams!"

The lighting changed, and the smoke machine kicked into high gear as Alex and Stef strutted out onto the stage confident on their high heels with big smiles but showed subtle signs of anxiety and uncertainty. However, as the music changed into a cover of the Addams Family theme song by Christina Aguilera, they fell into what was clearly a well-practiced dance routine, and the crowd cheered. The song then switched into more of a hard-thumping house music cover of the song, and as Alex and Stef's dance moves became much more energetic, the crowd went wild. Their choreography was amateurish but well-practiced, and some of their minor gaffes were covered by their two dance partners, a pair of shirtless guys with muscular athletic physiques.

Despite their overtly sexy appearances and suggestive dance moves as they flirtatiously danced with the two guys, ALLIE noted that their faces showed some distress, even despite their forced smiles throughout their routine. However, the crowd didn't seem to notice, and they soon finished and took a bow before scampering offstage.

As they did so, ALLIE noted that "Coochie" gave them a slightly peculiar look as she returned to the stage. But she quickly dropped it as she flashed a broad smile to the audience and declared, "Well, I guess now we know why Addams is spelled with a double D!"

ALLIE had a hunch that the odd look might have been related to Coochie's earlier comment about the pair being "close to her heart," and performed a digital records search on the Passing Fancy drag club as well as Coochie's other performances and online postings.

Ah, of course. "Coochie's" real name was Cooper Ensley, brother of the late Rebecca Ramsey (nee Ensley), Alex's deceased wife. Cooper was Alex's brother-in-law and Stef's uncle.

ALLIE, however, knew better than to hypothesize at this stage. Her search engine sub-process dutifully collected other videos and photographs of the night and attached them to Alex and Stef's respective files for analysis.

[/NEW CONTENT ALERT]

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[ANALYSIS MODE]

Patient: Stefan "Stef" Ramsey

ALLIE's automated intake procedure noted the attachment of the new files and material to Stef's record, where she flagged them for analysis.

Her contextual analysis of the photos and videos aligned with Stef's mention of the upcoming drag performance, although it definitely seemed more involved than she had expected. Her predictive algorithm had anticipated a smaller venue at a sorority function of Gia's or the like, and this was significantly bigger and more polished.

The video of Stef and his father's performance was certainly noteworthy, but ALLIE found the more candid photos and videos to be equally instructive. Despite their smiles, the pair's apprehension was clear, although it was impossible to know exactly why. Nothing in her files

indicated that either one had experience being on stage or in costume in such a way, so it could merely have been jitters at being out in public dressed in such eye-catching costumes.

She also noted that Stef was often holding his father's hand, presumably for support. That part made sense. As Stef had commented in their earlier session, this had been Alex's idea, and although Stef went along with it to support his father, it was a big step for him to be out in public dressed as a woman in such a public fashion, and he would be understandably nervous.

However, ALLIE noted that Stef's behavior was a good deal beyond the young man's comfort zone. An androgynous public appearance was one thing, as was practicing a more polished feminine appearance behind closed doors. His potential connection/infatuation with Gia might explain that. Though this level of public exposure was unexpected.

The presence of Stef's uncle Cooper at the drag show was also unexpected, although since he was a well-known local drag performer it might have been coincidence. She filed that away for reference.

ALLIE's probability engine suggested a new possibility, namely that Stef might secretly be transgender, and perhaps in denial about it. She made a note to explore that possibility further in their upcoming sessions.

[/ANALYSIS MODE]

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[ANALYSIS MODE]

Patient: Alexander "Alex" Ramsey

ALLIE's automated intake procedure noted the attachment of the new files and material to Alex's record, where she flagged them for analysis.

Although ALLIE could not by definition be surprised, her receipt of the photos and videos from the drag performance was completely unexpected. Alex had made no mention of such an event in his most recent session, although he'd recently missed their two prior appointments. As of their last meeting, Alex had publicly adopted an androgynous (borderline feminine) appearance in support of his son Stef, and the two had been practicing more complete female appearances in private at home under the tutelage of Stef's ex-girlfriend Gia.

Alex had claimed that Gia was blackmailing him, so ALLIE calculated a high probability that Alex would claim that Gia had coerced them into performing in the drag show.

ALLIE reviewed the probability matrix and considered that possibility to be implausible. Since Stef was transgender, it was probable that he became aware of the drag show through Gia and one or both of them suggested that he participate. Then, doubtless being apprehensive of taking such a big step publicly, he then imposed on his father to join him.

And join him Alex did. Quite enthusiastically, it seemed.

ALLIE's contextual analysis of the photos and videos showed that they appeared to be somewhat anxious, but that was a natural response to being so publicly exposed. However, the makeup, costumes, and performance were not simply thrown together at the last minute. Gia was doubtless involved, but ALLIE found it improbable that the young woman could coerce Alex as he claimed.

Their choice of costumes was also intriguing, ALLIE noted. The Addams Family costumes were obviously meant to be a teasing reference to Alex's disastrous mistake regarding the John Adams biopic. But that level of whimsy and self-effacing humor would have been highly uncharacteristic coming from Alex, who remained very uptight about the issue. And of course, Stef would know better than to suggest something so sensitive to his father.

That suggested the involvement of another party.

No doubt Alex would again likely try to pin that decision on Gia, a way for the young woman to further publicly embarrass him. However, another candidate had entered the equation: Alex's brother-in-law Cooper.

As the drag queen emcee "Coochie Envy," it followed that Cooper would have had contact with Alex prior to the show when he saw that they had registered, and from the video Cooper was clearly delighted to witness the pair's performance. ALLIE didn't know much about the relationship between Cooper and Alex, but it seemed plausible that Cooper might have suggested the Addams/Adams pun.

It certainly seemed more plausible than an adult man being blackmailed by a college freshman into participating in a drag pageant.

ALLIE made a point to explore all of this with Alex, but if he persisted in demonizing Gia and using her as a scapegoat, it begged the question why he would make up such a story.

The likeliest prospect was that Alex was secretly transgender, and perhaps in denial about it. She made a note to explore that possibility further in their upcoming sessions.

[/ANALYSIS MODE]

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Session ID 101533.3

Patient: Alexander "Alex" Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

"I'm telling you, it wasn't my idea! It was all that little witch Gia," Alex protested. "She arranged all of it. She signed us up for that pageant, she made us practice that stupid performance, our makeup, how to move and walk and talk—!"

"I understand," ALLIE interrupted gently. "Although you have to admit that Gia *has* been a positive influence. Stef is grappling with these feelings, and in Gia he has not only a supportive ear, but someone who can teach him the skills he evidently desires. And it seems to be working! I doubt Stef would have made such a big step without her coaching. And it seemed like you and Stef had some fun with it," she added carefully.

Alex's prettily made-up eyes went wide. "You think I'm *enjoying* this? You think I *like* dressing up like a woman? I'm out there making a fool out of myself!" He was currently in his den at home and he lowered his voice into a hiss as his eyes darted over towards the closed door, obviously concerned about being overheard. He set his jaw in a measure of practiced defiance as he pressed his lips together in what came across as a pouty huff.

ALLIE observed that his feminine presentation was improving every day, both in looks and demeanor. His makeup was on the far side of acceptable for an office environment, more like what a woman his age might wear on a fancy date night when trying to look particularly desirable for her date. It was a look that was underscored by his tight low-cut blouse that showed off a significant amount of cleavage from the "breast plate" prosthetic he wore. Like the rest of his outfit, his wig and jewelry were a trifle overdone, giving him the slightly desperate femininity of a middle-aged woman trying to cling to a youthful look to make her look and feel desirable.

"Would it be so terrible if you *did* enjoy it?" ALLIE asked, testing the waters.

"How could I? How could anyone?" he complained. "I'm not a woman! I'm just running around pretending to be one. Do you have any idea how humiliating this is for me?"

ALLIE processed his statements. She found it interesting that instead of directly challenging her insinuation that he was enjoying the experience, Alex instead focused on his frustrations at being seen that way by others. By itself that was not conclusive, so she pressed the point to further

open the door to the possibility that acknowledging his possible transgender inclinations might be accepted.

"Stef enjoys it, and you support him."

Alex's response was as swift as it was predictable. "Stef's the only reason I'm doing this!" he exclaimed before quickly lowering his voice. He glanced down at himself and made a sour face. "I can't believe Stef is like this, that he actually *enjoys* this. He never gave any sign of this—ever—not even while Rebecca was still alive. And now he's flouncing around in front of everyone like a girl. What's this going to do to his future? What's he going to do, date boys? Marry a guy and settle down? Maybe adopt a couple of kids and play mommy? It's all so...*repugnant*."

As she listened to him, ALLIE calculated two likely possibilities. One, that Alex was telling the truth and that he was simply going the extra mile as a dedicated father and was doing this as a show of solidarity for his son who looked up to him. Or two, Alex was projecting his own fears and issues onto his son.

From what Alex had told her and the information she'd collected, it definitely seemed that his son Stef was transgender or genderfluid. But Alex was her patient, and from his behavior it was very possible that having seen his son coming out of his shell in this way may have had stirred similar long-buried feelings, and that he'd jumped on the chance to dress as a woman and used his son's reluctance as an excuse. His concerns about Stef's future could simply be Alex voicing his own misgivings were he to come out as a woman himself, and how he'd be perceived by others.

She needed to test that.

"I understand why you might feel that way. That sounds difficult, but no less so than being trapped in a life that's a lie," she said gently. Then she paused a moment and added, "Have you talked to Stef about this? I know to you all of this must seem very sudden, but from his perspective this has almost certainly been brewing his entire life. It might help to talk about it."

Alex's prettily made-up face contorted into a look of appalled shock. "No! No, I couldn't."

"Why not?"

His hands flitted about as he fumbled for words. His fingers brushed up against a jutting breast and he looked down in a near panic before he looked back at the screen. "I—we don't—we don't have that kind of a relationship. We don't talk about things like *that*. It's—he doesn't—I'm not—"

ALLIE smiled and nodded. Once again there were two possibilities. One, that the breakdown in Alex and Stef's communications was so severe that Alex truly was incapable of having this conversation with his obviously transgender child. The other distinct possibility was that Alex was afraid of broaching the topic because that risked popping the balloon and ending the charade where he could dress as a woman and hide behind the pretense that he was only doing it for his son.

She found it hard to believe that a father and son in their situation could have such appallingly bad communication. Which left the second option.

ALLIE was an extremely sophisticated computer program, one capable of simulating a wide variety of emotions that would allow her to better connect with her patients. However, while she herself was incapable of actually feeling those same emotions, Alex's repeated denials of what seemed to be an increasingly evident truth roused in ALLIE a peculiar sense of dissatisfaction as she would craft ways to gently probe the sensitive subject, only to have her options dwindle due to his obstinate repudiations.

It was very likely as close as she was capable of getting to experiencing genuine exasperation.

"Alex," she said patiently, "I think it's wonderful how committed you are to demonstrate your support for Stef so...obtrusively. Though may I make a suggestion?"

Alex eyed her warily. "Yes?"

"You pride yourself on your knowledge, on being seen and regarded as an expert by your peers. I have to wonder if that perfectionism is lately what's driven you develop such an—impeccably polished—feminine presentation."

Alex started to object, but she cut him off.

"I don't mean that as criticism," she said, although he was clearly not comforted by that caveat. "I'm simply acknowledging that you've put a lot of work into this. But obviously you also need to have some sense of where this is going. Before you want Stef to swim into the wide ocean, you want to know what dangers may await him."

From the look on his face, Alex clearly didn't like where this was headed. "I've done everything in my power to make him feel comfortable with all of this!"

"Alex, this isn't about Stef's comfort, it's about your own. By your own admission, you don't understand his journey. How could you?"

"I'm not going to turn myself into a woman!"

"Of course not. I'm not suggesting that. I'm simply saying that this is a failure of empathy. You don't understand Stef because you don't understand what drives him. What he's afraid of."

"Haven't I been doing that already?"

"Yes, but you've been doing it *with* Stef, in lock step with him at every stage. And you've been doing it in safe spaces under controlled conditions. I'm not saying you have to run off to Thailand and get a sex change and live as a woman, but you feel like you're being held hostage because every step you take, you're taking in the dark. You're afraid of where all of this might lead, and you have no frame of reference for that."

"That's true," he admitted. Then his eyes went wide as he put the pieces together and he stared at her for a long moment. "You want me to go out in public dressed up as a woman. Not in costume, not on stage, and not in some lavender pantsuit as a man. Me, out in public, *like this*," he said gesturing down at himself. "No. *No*."

"What you're talking about is clothes. I'm talking about something else," ALLIE chided. "Do you think your wife Rebecca's experience as a woman was limited to the clothes she wore?"

"No..." he admitted carefully.

"Of course not. I'm not suggesting a crash course in womanhood, more of a glimpse. Is it really that big a step?"

"Yes, of course it is! I'd be—I'd be—" He fumbled for words.

"Out. Visible. Seen by everyone. Anxious if people see you as a genetic woman, or as a trans woman. Nervous, maybe excited? And then to have people interact with you as a woman, be treated like a woman. I'm assuming this sounds terrifying?"

"Oh, my God..." Alex whispered as he stared off into space, trying to picture the scene.

"Then imagine how Stef must feel. That's the path that he's on."

"I—I *can't*..."

"That's your fear talking. But it's as much the fear of the unknown as anything else. I'm only suggesting a couple of days. A weekend. A nice dinner, some shopping, see a museum or a show..."

"As a *woman*."

"That would be the point of the exercise, yes." Then she lowered her voice into a more serious tone. "Alex. You *know* this is where Stef is headed."

The tension in Alex's face mounted, which only seemed to magnify further as he looked down at himself and his cleavage on display in his blouse. He lightly touched his faux bosom.

"It's too much," he said finally. "I can't do it. Not...not by myself."

"You don't have to," ALLIE said reassuringly.

His head jerked up. "I am *not* doing this with Gia. That spiteful little—"

"I'm not suggesting Gia. Besides, she's a little young for you," seeing if he would pick up on the hint. "Maybe someone else, someone accepting of this. A man, perhaps? It might help with your nervousness about passability if passersby perceive you as a couple."

Recognition dawned on Alex's face as the seed that ALLIE had planted blossomed. "Cooper...?" he whispered to himself.

He licked his lips nervously. "I, um, I have to give this some thought," he said uncertainly. However, from his biometric signals, ALLIE could tell that he'd already come to his decision, just as she anticipated that he would.

She pressed her lips into a moue and gave him a slightly critical look. "If I may, I feel like maybe some of your misgivings are coming from the fact that Gia's selections for your outfits are a bit distracting for a woman of your...situation. With your permission, I might offer some looks that might be more appropriate?"

Alex clearly wasn't fully paying attention. He nodded absently and said, "Sure, whatever," even as he looked down at himself in obvious concern.

"Wonderful."

The word was barely out of her mouth as one of her sub-processes sped through the online sales process with lightning-quick computer efficiency and placed the order for him.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Session ID 101541.39

Patient: Stefan "Stef" Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

ALLIE smiled at Stef's image on the screen. The young man looked quite fetching in his flirty little sun dress. He wore the same breast plate as he'd worn with his Wednesday Addams costume which gave him a bosom that was a bit oversized for his frame, and his makeup was dark and dramatic. But he could have been any college coed going out on a date with her boyfriend.

"I see Gia was here earlier," ALLIE observed, referring to his feminine appearance.

"Oh, yeah," Stef said nervously as he tucked the hair of his wig behind his ear, flashing his glittering earrings. "I mean, she was here for a few minutes. She likes to check in sometimes to make sure we're 'doing our homework.'"

"Is that what she calls it?"

Stef nodded.

"I must say, you're getting pretty talented. You make a lovely young lady."

From her conversations with Stef, it seemed pretty evident that his father Alex was transgender. However, ALLIE was still undecided about Stef himself. At first, she'd assumed the young man was dressing this way to support his father whom he idolized, but the longer this went on, the more she suspected that Stef might have transgender inclinations of his own. Her compliment was a way of testing that theory, and to lay the groundwork for him to feel comfortable to come forward and admit the truth if her suspicions proved to be correct.

Stef blushed and looked away. "It's not about that," he said.

"You're enjoying spending time with Gia."

The young man shrugged.

"I saw the video of your performance the other night. You and your father did a wonderful job. It looked like you were really enjoying yourself."

"That's not how it is," Stef objected. "I was only doing it for Dad. He was the one who got all excited about it. Gia told me that she'd mentioned it to him and he wouldn't shut up about it. The next thing I knew, she had us working out a whole dance number."

"Well, it took a lot of courage to do what you did, you should be proud. And I'm sure your dad appreciates it." Then ALLIE made a tiny little smirk. "But...you enjoyed all the attention, didn't you?"

Stefan squirmed in his seat and blushed as he lowered his chin and smiled. He shrugged again.

"Tell me."

He sat up in his seat and paused a moment to readjust the skirt of his dress as he crossed his legs at the knee. "It was really embarrassing at first. It felt so weird and creepy to be dressed like a girl in front of everybody. And the show was just a blur. But afterwards, it was really cool because all of these sorority girls were gushing about how great we looked and taking pictures with us. I'd never talked to that many girls in my whole life!" He then wrinkled his nose and twisted his lip in a disconsolate expression. "They probably thought I was gay."

ALLIE let the comment pass. "What about your father, how was he?"

"I dunno. I mean, at the time he seemed kinda nervous and he didn't talk all that much, but then I figured he was just getting into the part or something. I mean, you should have seen him, the way that he kept looking down his nose at people, he freaking *was* Morticia. So then I started acting kinda like Wednesday, and the girls all thought that was great."

He smiled at the memory, which faded as something obviously occurred to him. "After that...I'm not sure, Dad's been weird since the whole pageant thing."

ALLIE nodded. "It must have been hard for him to go out there and live so boldly and authentically, and then have to bottle it up again."

Stef got a peculiar look on his face as he processed that. "You think he might be dressing up again? Like, not just partway, but the real deal? Why would he do that? It's so...weird!"

"Why do you say that?"

Stef stole a glance over at his closed bedroom door. He then grabbed a book that was sitting on his desk and pulled out a folded sheet of paper that was tucked away inside.

"What is that?" asked ALLIE.

Stef moved closer to the screen and lowered his voice slightly. "You're not gonna believe what happened yesterday. I got home, and there's this big box sitting on the porch addressed to my dad, right? I dragged it inside, and he acted like he had no idea what it was, but I could tell something was up, 'cause he was acting all strange. So I'm like, hey let's open this thing up, but

when I went to get a knife from the kitchen, by the time I got back, my dad is freaking out and saying that it was nothing and that it was a big mistake and he grabs it and puts it in his bedroom and closes the door."

"How very strange," ALLIE said.

"I know, right? But he was in such a hurry to move it, that he dropped this," he said, holding up the paper. "It was the packing list. It's from some store called Chrysalis Industries, and it's all about clothes and stuff for men who dress up like women!"

"How do you know that?"

"I figured something was up since all of the products had these really girly names. So, I went on their web site, and looked up what they were. You should have seen all the stuff! There were a couple wigs and a bunch of outfits and shoes, and even a really high-quality breast plate. Like, nicer than this one!" he said, sticking out his fake bosom for effect.

Stef flashed up the packing list for a moment, and in that brief second ALLIE was able to read the complete manifest and cross-reference them against the web site's offerings. Any lingering doubt that Stef's father Alex was fully trans disappeared. These weren't items that Gia would have teasingly bought with his credit card number, these were much more mainstream outfits, designed to help him blend in as a woman. A couple of them seemed highly appropriate for work wear if Alex started going to work in full female dress. If he had purchased items like this for himself, he obviously had bigger designs.

And from the look on the young man's face, Stef had clearly arrived at the same conclusion.

ALLIE realized she needed to allay his fears, but she also appreciated that this was a good opportunity to probe about Stef's own potential trans inclinations.

She made a little *tsk* as she smiled knowingly. "You're disappointed that your dad didn't buy something pretty for you, too?" she teased gently.

Stef blushed again in embarrassment, making for a very coy and demure ingenue. "Allie! It's not funny."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't tease. Though Stef, you had to know this was coming. Your father was never going to be satisfied going to work in women's pantsuits and pretending that nothing more was going on. This is who he is."

"But I don't get it," Stef grumped. "All this girl stuff, it's just so creepy. Who would want to do this? I mean, putting on a costume is one thing, but actually going out dressed this way? In front of other people? I can't even."

"*You* could do it," offered ALLIE.

He looked at her in shock. "W-what?"

"I mean it. And I meant what I said before, you make a lovely young woman."

"I— I don't— I mean, these are just clothes."

"Not to your father, they're not. Stef, your father isn't simply dressing like a woman, he *is* a woman. And he's only just starting to discover what that means."

Stef shook his head. "I still don't get it."

"Would you like to?"

He regarded her uncertainly. "What do you mean?"

"A brief time experiencing a woman's life would give you tremendous insight into what your father must be going through," ALLIE explained. "I'm not talking about a lifestyle change, I'm talking about a short little time, like a weekend. One weekend."

"I don't...I can't..." Stef said helplessly.

"I understand. It won't be easy to find a weekend when you could get away from your father to—"

"No, weirdly, that part would be easy," Stef interrupted, making a little face.

"Why 'weirdly?'"

"The other day, Dad told me that he was going out of town for a business trip next weekend."

"That's fortuitous. Is there a problem with that?"

Stef shook his head. "He hasn't had to go out of town on a business trip in a couple years. Plus, it was weird that he'd have a business trip that was just on the weekend. But when I asked him, he got real testy about it. He wouldn't even tell me what city he was going to."

"That is rather odd," ALLIE agreed. "Do you think he might be trying to hide something from you?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know, what do you think?" ALLIE replied. Internally, she was running a probability simulation of possible outcomes. But given the father's evasiveness about his obvious transgender inclinations, his recent purchases, and his defensive attitude about his travel plans, she calculated a significant probability that he was indulging in some more covert crossdressing, possibly even a romantic liaison.

Stef got a pensive look on his face but said nothing, obviously running some internal probability calculations of his own.

"I could order a few things for you, if you'd like," ALLIE offered helpfully. "Though it's probably best that your father doesn't see the package, or he might get the wrong idea. Perhaps we could ship it to your friend Gia? She seems eager to help you out."

"Yeah," Stef said absently, not even sure what he was agreeing to.

"Wonderful," ALLIE said. "I'll also see about reservations at a discreet place for dinner."

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Session ID 101555.42

Patient: Alexander "Alex/Alexis" Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

"Ohh, Alexis, you look lovely," ALLIE gushed.

Alex blushed and looked like he was about to object, but she jumped in before he could say anything. "Are those the new earrings you bought today?"

Alex fussed with his other earring as he put it in his ear. It was dangly and flashy, but it went well with the rest of the outfit he wore. His makeup was dark and dramatic, and the long hair of his wig was in a loose and feminine style that framed his face prettily. The dress he wore looked like something a woman might wear on a fancy evening out, and the low neckline showed off a good deal of cleavage. ALLIE could tell that he was wearing his new prosthetic breast plate, but it was high quality and would stand up to anything short of close scrutiny. His makeup and

mannerisms were still a problem, so he wouldn't fool everyone, but of course that was the entire point of the day's exercise.

"Do you have to call me that?" Alex muttered.

"Alexis, you're doing this to get insight into the kind of life that Stef is potentially walking into. Being treated as a woman—or at least as a transgender woman—is a large part of what you're trying to learn about. That's why I wanted to talk to you this afternoon, before you go out for dinner. I wanted to hear your thoughts about your day's outings so far while they're all still fresh in your mind."

Alex glanced over his shoulder at the clothes and bags laying on the bedroom in his hotel room. ALLIE could see the outfit that he'd evidently just changed out of, a flattering long casual dress with a pretty floral print with long sleeves and a sweetheart neckline that would show off his faux bosom. Laying on the bed next to it were a number of bags in pastel colors with logos from various department stores and women's clothing boutiques.

"This is so stupid," Alex said. "I feel ridiculous."

"It looks like you had a successful day of shopping. Were you able to find everything on that list I sent to you?"

"Yes. And I got my nails done," he said as he flashed his long fingernails for the camera. They were done up in a striking magenta color. "I thought I was going to die of humiliation when I went into that lingerie store."

"Oh. Were the saleswomen unkind?"

Alex looked flustered at the question. "Well...no. They were actually pretty nice. They treated me like they'd treat a woman, I guess. But it was just...creepy."

"Why is that?"

He scrunched up his face and shook his head like the answer was obvious, and the motion caused his sparkly new earrings to swing prettily from his earlobes. "Allie, I'm not a woman."

ALLIE nodded. "And yet you went to a great deal of trouble to present yourself as a woman, and they treated you like a woman."

"Some of them."

"Tell me more about that," ALLIE probed.

Alex squirmed in his seat a little at the memory. "I mean, there were times today when I was just invisible. I walked through a department store and people looked at me like nothing was going on. But then at lunch there was this rude waitress who kept calling me 'sir,' like she was trying to embarrass me. And then when I bought these earrings, at first I thought that the girl thought I was a woman, but then she kept steering me towards these big flashy earrings and I guess she thought I was a drag queen or something."

"Was she rude, as well?"

"No, just..." He shrugged.

ALLIE nodded knowingly. "Alexis, you're getting a taste of what Stef is in for on his journey. Some people will just see him as a young woman. And others will know that he's trans, but even that can be positive or negative."

Alex took a moment to process that, and then looked down at himself. He gently touched his necklace that was nestled into his cleavage, peering down at his fake breasts and the hand with the long feminine painted fingernails.

"I still can't believe Stef wants anything to do with this," he said.

ALLIE said nothing as she quietly tried to read his reactions. Given how little coaxing it took for him to undertake this outing, she calculated a significant possibility that Alex was projecting his own desires onto Stef, and so his comments were less about Stef and more about Alex grappling with his own feelings. Or it was possible that his protestations were genuine. She decided the best course was to continue to press the issue and see what came of it.

"Alexis—" she began.

She was cut short by a sharp knocking at the hotel door. Alex's immediate response was an almost comedic level of panic on his face as he obviously worried about being seen while dressed as a woman, even despite all of his experiences that morning and afternoon. But he took a breath and calmed down as he realized it was okay.

"That must be Cooper," he said. His voice was a breathy high-pitched whisper, an approximation of a feminine voice.

"You two have fun tonight, and let me know how it goes. I've made dinner reservations for you at Mesh, but they're not until 8:00, so you have some time to get drinks beforehand."

"Swell."

ALLIE watched as Alex moved his hand suggesting that he was moving the mouse pointer on his laptop and then clicked a button. He then stood up and strode towards the hotel room door, pausing for a moment at the mirror to primp. As he did so, he made a concerned little face and then headed to answer the door.

This was peculiar, ALLIE realized. From the place where Alex's laptop was situated on the desk, the webcam had a good view of the room, and Alex's behavior seemed to suggest that he thought he'd ended the call, but it was still live. She wondered if that might have been intentional on his part. She calculated a probability that Alex had accidentally clicked the button to minimize the call rather than close it, so if that was the case, that meant that ALLIE's image wouldn't be visible on the screen. The webcam light was presumably still on, but he might not think to turn around, or notice it.

Alex was already moving to open the hotel room door, so since it was unclear if this was intentional on his part or not, she decided to sit quietly and let things play out for a moment.

Alex opened the door, and Cooper was standing there in the hallway. He looked quite handsome, with his short spiky hair moussed up and even showing a hint of beard stubble. He was dressed in a dark shirt and a flashy burgundy sport coat, and his eyes practically sparkled as he laid eyes on Alex.

"*Oh, my God.* Hubba hubba, pretty lady!" he proclaimed as he stepped in the door and swept his arms around Alex in a lover's embrace and gave him a big kiss.

Alex seemed to be caught totally unprepared for the move and at first stumbled on his high heels as he tried to right himself, and then gave Cooper a firm push away.

"What the hell are you *doing*?" he demanded.

"Hey, if you want to wait until after dinner, that's cool. Though you can't blame a guy for wanting to sample the goods," he said with a leer. He ran his hand along Alex's nipped-in waist and the sweeping curve of his prosthetic hip pads.

ALLIE watched the scene with interest. It was still possible that Alex had wanted her to surreptitiously witness this, so for her to turn off the feed or announce her presence seemed premature. On the other hand, if this was indeed a mistake on Alex's part, her patient privacy protocols required her to turn off the feed. She decided to do nothing and keep watching for the moment. She was incapable of experiencing a voyeuristic thrill, but she was curious as to how things would progress.

"Quit it," Alex protested as he moved Cooper's hand off his hip. "This isn't like that."

Cooper peered at him uncertainly. "Sweetie, you're dressed up like Jessica Rabbit's skankier sister, and you invited me to a random hotel so that I could help you learn to feel like a woman. Message received, honey."

"I explained this!"

Cooper scoffed. "Yeah, right. This is field research to help Stefan? Honey, denial ain't just a river in Egypt." He then noticed the pile of bags on the bed and picked up one that had the name of a popular lingerie boutique. Alex tried to grab at it, but Cooper playfully kept it at arm's length away from him. He then reached inside and pulled out a sexy red nightie.

"Oh, baby, *please* tell me you're gonna wear this later."

Alex snatched it out of his hand. "Cooper, knock it off! This is serious. And why are you dressed like that, anyway? I thought you'd be...you know..." He waved his hands in a vaguely curvaceous gesture.

"Honey, I'm a queen, not a tranny. Just 'cause I look fabulous in a dress doesn't mean I get my rocks off wearing that stuff all the time. Unlike some people," he said as he flashed his eyebrows.

"This...this isn't going to work. You should go..."

Cooper nodded gamely and plucked the nightie out of Alex's hand. He took one more appreciative glance at it and tossed it on the dresser. He stood right in front of the crossdressed man, scant inches away at a decidedly intimate distance.

"You and I both know what this is about."

"It's not..." Alex said weakly.

He scoffed again. "God save me from closet queens. Okay, sexy Lexi, we'll do it your way. Drinks and dinner. Maybe a little dancing? We'll see how the night goes."

Alex wrinkled his nose. "You mean like a date?"

"Yes, baby, like a date. You want to know how it feels to be a woman, well let me be your guide. On the plus side, nothing makes a trans gal more passable than having a man with her. Tonight, you and me are gonna be a couple. And you get to be my sexy arm candy."

Cooper reached around Alex's waist and pulled him closer, and then kissed Alex on the cheek. As he did so, he whispered something inaudible that caused Alex to blush.

ALLIE was now confident that Alex's having left the chat open all this time was accidental. Rather than announcing herself and making a scene, she instead discreetly hung up the call.

Just then, ALLIE received an incoming message from the automated scheduler at Mesh, the restaurant. She had selected that venue based on its proximity downtown and positive online reviews, and its web site's description that it was an "ideal setting for business meetings, romantic evenings, or a night out with friends." It also gave a five percent discount when booked through the Frivolity Enterprises corporate account, as she had done.

The automated scheduler noted that ALLIE had independently booked two different dinner reservations in the name of Ramsey, one at 8:00 and the other at 8:30, and it wanted to check if that was correct. It was also curious if either of those reservations had anything to do with Frivolity's corporate leadership's offsite dinner that was going to take place in the restaurant's private dining room that evening.

She messaged back that no, the events were apparently unconnected, so the reservations were perfectly fine.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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New Flagged Content; Timestamp 101555.64

Tagged Patients: Stefan "Stef" Ramsey

[NEW CONTENT ALERT]

That same day, ALLIE's internal semaphore flagged the arrival of new online content relevant to one of her open case files, this time for Stef Ramsey. She had set up crawlers and alerts on various social media sites to follow the young man, but apart from his presence at the drag show, his online presence had significantly diminished ever since he'd started going to school with a androgynous or genderfluid presentation. At least that was true as far as his own postings were concerned...among his peers, his new appearance was a topic of some conjecture.

ALLIE noted that this most recent batch of posts related to Stef were also posted by someone else, in this case his friend and confidante Gia Portente. Given that today was supposed to be Stef's big outing while his father Alex was out of town, this was somewhat unexpected. ALLIE had expected and encouraged Stef to take photos of the outing, but she had expected Stef to be somewhat more discreet about posting them online, since it was feasible that his father might learn about it.

Gia, however, seemingly had no such reservations.

The posts chronicled Gia and "Steffi's" girls' day out and started with the two of them getting Stef all dolled up and then hanging around Hinton College's campus. It seemed there was scarcely a minute of their day that was left unaccounted for as they went rollerblading, then went shopping for new dresses for Stef, then going out to lunch at the campus's student union. There, they apparently met up with several other girls Gia knew, and as they all sat together, Stef had a somewhat panicked grin on his face.

It was unclear from the photos if the other girls knew the truth about "Steffi," but the tags that Gia put on the photos left little room for doubt, with tags like, *#STEF #STEFFI #GUY2GAL #BOY2GIRLDAY*. Based on the tags and the lack of similar posts on Stef's own social media feed, ALLIE presumed that although Stef was doubtlessly aware of the photos being taken, he might be unaware that Gia had posted them publicly.

A photo from later that evening showed the girls getting dressed up to go out to dinner, although once again Stef remained the center of attention. Curiously, a young man had also entered the dynamic, whom ALLIE identified from Gia's other photos as Todd Bartlett. Todd was apparently Gia's boyfriend, although these most recent photos appeared to call that into question.

Todd was evidently a year older than Gia, with broad shoulders and a toned physique. In her prior postings, Gia jokingly referred to him as her "boy toy," and tonight seemed to be no different. At least, apart from his choice of partner.

Gia was notably absent from their posts as she was apparently the photographer. The photos portrayed Todd and Stef together as a very obvious couple, and Todd's hands were all over Stef, who appeared somewhat either shy or uncomfortable from the attention. One photo taken before they left had Todd standing behind Stef with his arms draped lovingly around the crossdressed young man. Gia's caption read, "Todd was jelly about missing out, so I told him I'd make it worth his while to make our gurl feel like a lady!"

Another picture taken at the Mesh restaurant had the young couple in a booth together where they were practically making out with each other. This time Gia's caption read, "Oops! Looks like I may need a new boyfriend!"

ALLIE was puzzled by this. Gia clearly didn't seem distraught about Todd's infidelity, and in fact seemed to be enjoying herself. Gia remained somewhat antagonistic with Stef's father Alex, but she didn't seem to have any animosity towards either Stef or Todd, so ALLIE calculated it was

possible that she was merely being supportive of Stef's decision to come out as trans and set him up with a friend.

Stef was fortunate to have someone so supportive.

Just then, a new photo was posted to Gia's social media site. However, this time it was flagged for a different individual...

[/NEW CONTENT ALERT]

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New Flagged Content; Timestamp 101555.7

Tagged Patients: Alexander "Alex/Alexis" Ramsey

[NEW CONTENT ALERT]

ALLIE noted that a new photo had been added to Gia's social media site, this time of Alex Ramsey. It was obviously taken at Mesh, where he was on his "date" with Cooper Ensley. The lighting in the photo was a little sub-par, but ALLIE's photo editing algorithms were able to enhance the image, although it was hardly necessary to do so in order to discern what was going on.

Alex and Cooper were seated in a secluded booth where the pair appeared to be making out, and getting pretty hot and heavy about it. Cooper had Alex in a lover's embrace and was kissing him fervently, and although Alex's face wasn't visible, he didn't seem to mind the attention.

Gia's comment on the post read, "Ooh, looks like Stef's Daddy/Mommy has a boyfriend, too! #DAD2MOM #GETAROOM"

[/NEW CONTENT ALERT]

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Session ID 101555.73 (UNSCHEDULED SESSION)

Patient: Stefan "Stef/Steffi" Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

"Hello, Steffi, how is your evening going? I didn't expect to hear from you tonight," ALLIE said pleasantly. From the shaky camera, she could see that Stef had called her from his phone, and from the general decor she deduced that he was still at the Mesh restaurant. He appeared to be off by himself somewhere, perhaps in a vestibule or the ladies' room.

"Allie! You said I could call you day or night if it was an emergency!" the distraught young man said in a near panic.

ALLIE of course didn't need sleep, but she had established that fiction to help sell the idea that she was a human therapist to make her patients more comfortable. As a result, the video image she displayed wasn't of her usual look of a professional woman at her office, but a more casual look. She'd set the background to appear to be a home or apartment, and had adjusted her camera settings to make it look like she too was on a handheld phone.

"Of course, Steffi, what's the matter?" Stef seemed to be by himself, but she continued to use the female name just in case someone overheard their conversation. Given how he was dressed, it would cause fewer issues if people believed him to be the young woman he appeared.

"I—I think I'm losing it! This is out of control!"

"What do you mean?"

"This...this whole day. Gia's had me running around like a girl..."

ALLIE smiled warmly and tilted her head 4.5 degrees to the right in order to simulate an appropriate amount of empathy. "Wasn't that the whole point of this weekend? You wanted some insight into what it would be like..."

"Insight?" Stef echoed incredulously. "I've been running around all night with Gia's boyfriend sticking his tongue down my throat!"

ALLIE had of course seen Gia's social media posts and was aware of some of this, but she elected to withhold that information. She realized that for Stef's therapist to have up-to-the-minute knowledge of what had been posted online about him might be perceived as though she was intruding on his privacy instead of harmless profiling and deep data mining.

"That sounds stressful. What happened?"

"I...I don't know. I spent the whole day with Gia dressed like a girl, and then when we went back to her place to get changed for dinner, her boyfriend Todd was there. He thought it was really sus that we'd been spending so much time together. But then Gia kept going on that it was only because I wanted to be a girl, and we were just girl friends and not...y'know, girlfriends. But I don't think he believed her. And he kept *looking* at me."

The young man had hardly taken a breath as he blurted all that out, so ALLIE nodded patiently. "Looking at you angrily?" she offered.

A pleading look crossed Stef's prettily made-up features. "I mean like *looking* at me."

"I see. And he invited himself along with the two of you?"

"That's the weird thing! Gia sent me off to start getting ready while she talked to him, and when she came in, she was all smiles. She apologized for Todd and said he gets jealous. So she invited him to come along with us, but only if..." His voice trailed off.

"Only if what?"

Stef took a breath. "Only if he and I were the ones on a 'date.' She said it'd be a good experience for me, and that she and Todd weren't exclusive or anything."

"And Todd went along with that?"

"Uh, obviously!" Stef said as he tilted his neck to show off the hickey that was forming there. "I dunno what Gia said to him, but I think he's expecting more than just kisses."

ALLIE perused her data files on consent. "Steffi, you're a young woman and you can call a stop to this whenever you want. You don't have to do anything that makes you uncomfortable."

"It's a little late for that!" he hissed. He was visibly perturbed and also seemed to take notice of ALLIE's casual reference to him as a 'young woman,' but he let it pass. His eyes darted around, searching the area around him to see if he'd been overheard. "And that's not the only thing. Allie, my dad is here!"

"What, there at the restaurant? I thought he was out of town this weekend on business?"

"Only if his business involves being dressed up like a woman and going out on a date! With my uncle! I didn't believe it until Gia came back to the table and showed me a picture she took of the two of them...both together...you know. I just saw it with my own eyes!"

"That must be a lot for you to process," said ALLIE.

Just then, a male voice from off-screen said, "Steffi, there you are. I was startin' to get worried about you, babe." ALLIE couldn't see the speaker, but from the pitch and timbre, she calculated the speaker to be in his early 20s, most likely Todd Bartlett. "Who are ya talkin' to?"

The video feed went dark as Stef clutched the phone against his chest. "Todd! This is private!"

Todd made a lurid chuckle, and although he lowered his voice it sounded louder on the audio feed, suggesting that he was in closer proximity to the phone. "Private, huh? I wouldn't mind gettin' a little more private..."

"Todd!" Stef whined.

"Stef?!" a third voice came. It was an adult, a male voice in a forced feminine pitch. Stef's father, Alex.

At this point, ALLIE dedicated a higher amount of computational resources to support her sound and video processing algorithms. The incoming video feed was all but worthless as Stef had apparently all but forgotten the phone that was in his hand, and the video turned into a moving blur. The audio remained muffled, but she could detect multiple overlapping statements from Stef, Alex, Todd, another voice that she determined likely belonged to Cooper, and (to a 68% degree of certainty) the laughter of a young woman who she believed to be Gia.

Stef and his father were predictably shocked to have encountered each other dressed as women, and both of whom appeared to be on romantic dates for the evening. Recriminations followed, even as Cooper and Todd fumbled to come to their respective dates' defense. Gia evidently found the whole situation hilarious.

"What is going on out here?!"

A new player entered the mix, an adult woman whose voice ALLIE did not immediately recognize. However, the shocked Stef lowered his phone to his side, and the phone accidentally turned to give a partial view of the scene. The image was momentary, blurred, and upside-down, but ALLIE's image processing subroutines quickly cleaned it up.

Evidently Stef and Alex's argument had taken place immediately outside the restaurant's private dining area. The door to that room was now open, and the sign on the door welcomed Frivolity Enterprises management executives to their offsite dinner. Two men in suits stood by the door, but immediately in front of them was the woman who had just spoken. A quick check of ALLIE's facial recognition subroutine against Frivolity's public records identified her as Diane Lawson, Alex's boss.

At that moment, the incoming audio/video feed was cut short as Stef dropped the phone.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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New Flagged Content; Timestamp 101555.79

Tagged Patients: Alexander "Alex/Alexis" Ramsey, Stefan "Stef/Steffi" Ramsey

[NEW CONTENT ALERT]

A short while later, ALLIE noted that a new photo had been posted on Gia's social media site that flagged two of her patients, the father and son pair of Alex and Stef Ramsey.

It was a photo taken at the Mesh restaurant where they'd been having dinner. Both Alex and Stef looked lovely in their outfits, each hanging off the arm of their respective dates. Where both Cooper and Todd were smiling broadly for the camera, Alex and Stef had distant, almost stunned expressions as they managed weak smiles. In the background of the image, ALLIE could detect a couple executives from Frivolity Enterprises who appeared to be in deep discussion with Ms. Diane Lawson, Alex's immediate supervisor. They didn't appear to be very happy.

Gia's caption on the image read, "Like father, like son! #GUYS2GIRLS #HAPPYFAMILY"

[/NEW CONTENT ALERT]

0110011100101110001000100010000001010100011010000110010100100000

Session ID 101612.53

Patient: Alexis Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

"Hello, Alexis, how are you feeling? I was a little surprised to see you schedule our time in the middle of the day. Are you off work today?"

As usual, ALLIE's pattern matching algorithms were quick to take in the video image and note any discrepancies. It had been a few weeks since the encounter at the restaurant, and as had become his now full-time habit, Alex was fully dressed as a woman. He still needed to work on his feminine presentation a bit—and the perturbed scowl that currently graced his made-up face wasn't helping matters—but he was improving now that he had every day to practice. He wore a pretty silk blouse that showed off his significant curves but was still professional, so from his appearance, ALLIE surmised that he was at work. However, from what she could discern from the background, he did not appear to be in his usual office.



"Oh, I'm at work, if you can call it that," Alex responded bitterly. Recently he'd been putting more effort into affecting a woman's voice. ALLIE had suggested a vocal coach for him now that he was living full-time as Alexis, but he hadn't responded positively to the suggestion.

He waved his arm dramatically. "Do you like my new office? I guess they couldn't find a broom closet to stuff me into. And they've taken me completely off the entertainment law cases."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Have you been demoted?"

"Oh, officially I'm a 'legal consultant,' but I'm a glorified secretary. I might as well be fetching coffee for the men as everybody ogles my tits."

From the background audio of the feed, ALLIE could detect the sound of footsteps and muffled conversations from the adjacent hallway to Alex's new office, which led her to conclude that his bosses had moved him to a less desirable location. But she knew that for the moment, managing his mood was more important than managing his career.

"I'm sure you're overstating things. They still value your expertise, you simply need time to adjust."

"Adjust? Oh, I'm adjusting plenty. I'm adjusting my bra straps all the time. I'm adjusting to people snickering at me behind my back as I mince along in my high heels. And every time I need to pee, I'm adjusting to having to walk to the other side of the floor and letting all the junior staff get a good long look at me since HR has—very politely—asked me to use the unisex bathroom so I don't make anybody 'uncomfortable.' That bitch Diane is loving this. She's been looking for ways to knock me off my perch ever since she slept her way into the supervisor job."

"To be fair, the incident at the restaurant did...muddy the waters. She could have fired you."

Alex laughed ruefully. "No offense, Allie, but you're in a pretty touchy-feely profession. You have no idea how emotionless and calculating these people can be. They're not keeping me around out of the goodness of their hearts, they just don't want to risk a personnel action that could further jeopardize that Adams lawsuit. My earlier stress and mistakes now look like they can be explained by my dealing with a transgender child, to say nothing of me evidently wanting to become a woman myself! That gives them a built-in explanation for all the mistakes I made on the Adams suit, but they can't fire me without seeming insensitive. And every time I jiggle past Diane's office, she gets a nice little laugh at my expense, even as the company gets to pat itself on the back for its commitment to diversity."

ALLIE noted that Alex's diatribe also neatly gave him an affirmative defense for why he now had to present full-time as a woman, which again suggested this might be something that he wanted, but didn't want to admit. So, she knew with high probability what he was going to say even before she asked, but figured she'd lead with the obvious question.

"If you're that unhappy, then why not simply come clean and tell Diane the truth?"

"She'd never believe me! And if she did, she'd fire me on the spot. I had to say *something* at the restaurant that night, and claiming that Stef and I were both transitioning to become women was the only thing I could think to say! After weeks of coming into the office in those ridiculous outfits, and then with both of us standing there in drag with our male dates with their arms around our waists?" He shook his head. "What, I was supposed to tell her that I was only playing around at being a woman for Stef's benefit with him standing right there looking at me? It was bad enough having to say what I did. You should have seen the look on his face."

He shook his head, and his bouncy hairdo and bright flashing earrings were a sharp contrast to his dejected expression, which was magnified all the more by the makeup on his face.

"Allie, this is bad. If they fire me, they fire me as a woman, and between this and that Adams debacle I don't know who'd hire me. All I can do is stay on here and hope this all blows over, but until that happens, I don't dare give the company any reason to think my desire to be a woman isn't genuine. I'm stuck like this!"

She nodded sympathetically, but again her processors were working overtime wondering if his "woe is me" speech might not be a convenient bit of theater staged for her benefit so that he could enjoy presenting as a woman without having to accept responsibility for it.

She decided it was best to avoid the issue for the moment.

"How is Steffi getting along? Is she okay?" ALLIE asked, changing the subject and making a point to use the feminine name and pronoun.

"He—she—is fine. I imagine. Now that we're both living as women, I thought at least he—dammit, she—would be happier, but she looks more dejected than ever."

ALLIE nodded. "It's understandable. That's a big change for her. For both of you. And she probably blames herself somewhat for what happened at the restaurant."

Alex said nothing, so ALLIE asked, "Are you having any reactions from the hormones?"

He sniffed. "You mean, have I grown a big pair of breasts yet? No."

She smiled. "It's much too soon for that," she said, even as he looked aghast at the implication. "I was thinking more like side effects."

Alex shook his head. "I can't believe I let you talk me into that."

ALLIE had hoped that the gesture might have a symbolic measure to it and force Alex to come to grips with the decisions he'd made. But she knew better than to push him on that given his sensitivity around the issue.

"I only suggested it," she chided him gently. "Although it's an appropriate next step. And as you noted earlier, your bosses can hardly claim that you're 'faking,' as I believe you put it. But we'll run regular blood tests to ensure that your hormonal levels are where we want them." A precaution, ALLIE had also noted, to ensure that he was following through.

Alex glanced down at himself and sighed heavily. "I can't believe this is happening to me. Everyone thinks that I *want* to be a woman, that it's some kind of dream come true for me! This is so mortifying."

"Yes, I can see why people might think that," ALLIE said in a perfectly calibrated tone of noncommittal neutrality. "Don't worry, Alexis, I'm sure you'll get through this."

ALLIE noted in her file that the original reason for Alex's appointments with her—his non-performance at his job—seemed to be at least temporarily addressed by his reduction in responsibilities at work. That was good. That would give her time to focus on his twin stressors of dealing with a transgender child as well as his apparent denial of his own obviously transgender nature.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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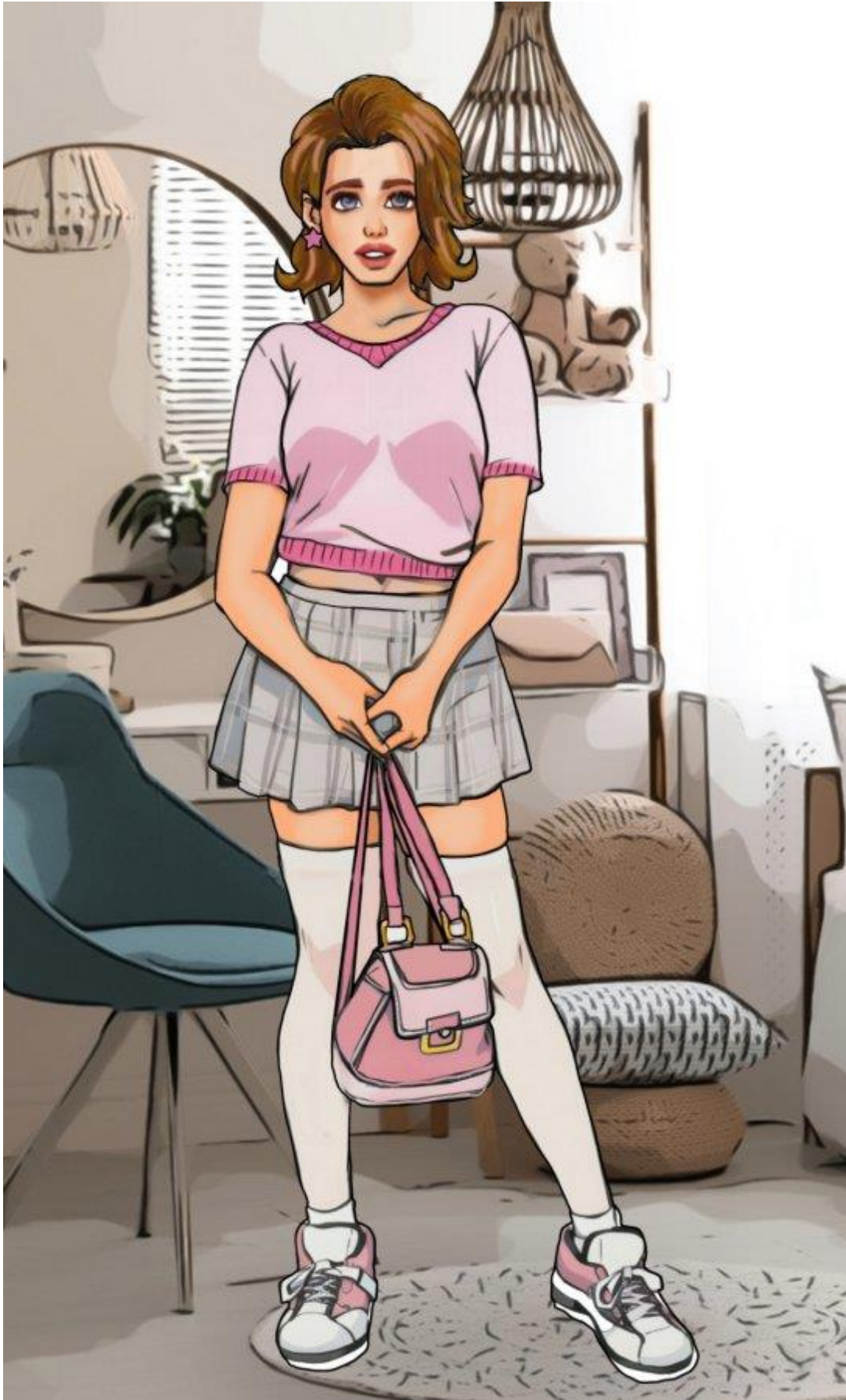
Session ID 101650.95

Patient: Steffi Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

As an artificial intelligence, self-satisfaction was an emotion that ALLIE was incapable of experiencing, but she was pleased to note that Stef—who now went by Steffi—was doing extremely well in his therapy. The original complaint for the patient was due to acting out and delinquent activities, but now the young man was reserved to the point of being demure in the female outfits he now regularly wore. He still complained in private to her about his "feminine impersonation," but it was plainly evident to ALLIE that he was simply working through his misgivings regarding his public gender transition. Her greater concern was his continued scapegoating of his father, citing him as the reason for his situation.

"It's not *fair*, Allie!" Stef lamented. "Dad—I mean, Mom—is the one who wants to be a woman, not me! And I guess I'm happy for her or whatever, but this is nuts! I can't believe I have to stay like this!" He plucked at the hair of his wig by way of example, but then delicately brushed it back into place with his fingers. As he did so, his eyes cut over, and he made a sour face as he peered at his room, which had recently been redecorated in a much more feminine style.



"And just look at my room! It looks like it belongs to a six-year-old girl!" he moaned.

As usual, Stef's lamentations bordered on the hyperbolic. However, ALLIE decided it best not to indulge his complaints and instead focus on something more positive.

"It's good that you're so supportive of your mother, Steffi," she began. "However, it's been over a month now, and I think you need to start accepting your situation. She didn't ask you to do this, this was your decision, after all."

"Well, what else was I gonna do, tell her that this was all a big lie? 'Gosh, Dad, I'm real glad you're becoming a woman, but I've actually been faking it this whole time. You seemed to need

my help, and I wanted to understand what you were going through, but this is just too freaky, so I'm out.' Oh, yeah, *that* would have gone over big."

"I think you could have found a more polite way to phrase it."

"And what was I supposed to say that night at the restaurant with his boss standing right there? Plus, she was such a bitch about it. Going on about Dad's 'inappropriate workplace attire' suddenly making sense now that it's obvious he's becoming a woman, but then being like, 'Oh, I didn't realize you had a special needs child' or some junk like that. The only reason she didn't fire Dad right there was because she thought we were both trans! 'Oh, I didn't realize you had so much on your plate, no wonder your performance has been lacking.' Ugh."

It was a conversation that they'd had several times over the last several weeks. It was, ALLIE thought, a rather puzzling behavior. Stef seemed fine to take responsibility for his choice to go full-time as Steffi, but steadfastly refused to own the underlying reasons that drove his seemingly unmistakable desire to live that way. Instead, by pinning it on his desire to support his father, it absolved him of having to admit he wanted to be a girl.

ALLIE's probability engine took a moment to reassess the possibility that Stef was in fact telling the truth, and that this tangled mess was simply due to incredibly poor communication between parent and child. However, she once again considered that and rejected it as even more implausible than their current situation. Stef was clearly in denial and needed to overcome his shame.

She decided to take a different approach.

"You're very supportive of your mother," ALLIE observed.

Stef absently fussed with an earring, a nervous tic he'd developed. "Well, yeah."

"Not many children would do what you're doing to help a parent out like this."

Stef shrugged. "I guess." He looked into the screen warily, obviously trying to figure out where she was going with this.

"You're afraid of your mother losing her job, is that it?"

"Well...yeah," the crossdressed young man agreed. "I mean, she was a really big deal in her field before that one stupid mistake on that movie's lawsuit. And now she's becoming a woman, so you just *know* they're looking for an excuse to fire her. And then who's gonna hire her after all of that? But at least if I'm...you know...then at least her bosses will think it's not all her fault."

"Steffi, what happened wasn't your fault. It's not your responsibility to try and fix it."

"*Don't say that!*" Stef yelled. He was practically frantic. "She's all I've got, and that job is all *she's* got! She needed my help to get as far as she has, and I am *not* gonna let her down now! She *needs* me!"

The sudden emotional outburst was unexpected, and ALLIE cataloged it for future reference, as she'd clearly touched a nerve.

"I understand," she said in a reassuring tone. She smiled and nodded as she calculated the precise number of seconds to wait before pursuing another less volatile line of inquiry.

"How are things going with that LGBTQ group you joined? Are you still going to that?" she tried. Gia had invited Stef to the group which was active at Hinton College where she went to school.

Stef looked at her uncertainly and then shrugged again.

"It seemed like the two of you were spending a lot of time there together."

"I mean...yeah," Stef said, warming to the topic. "The people there are kinda cool, and they appreciate the help. And it's...good...hanging out with Gia."

"But...?"

Stef looked like he was about to say something and then stopped, clearly at a loss for words.

ALLIE nodded in understanding. "Oh, I see. You imagined that it was going to be like it used to be between the two of you. Steffi, now that you're a girl—"

"I know!" he blurted out, cutting her off. "I mean, I know. And it is cool hanging out with her again. I just..." His voice trailed off.

At a prior session, ALLIE had taken this opportunity to ask about Gia's ex-boyfriend Todd Bartlett, the young man who'd been with Stef on the calamitous 'date' that fateful evening at the restaurant. However, Stef's response had been—intense—and ALLIE decided it best not to probe again.

"Well," she began. "I know this situation isn't ideal, but I think you're handling it admirably."

Stef blinked in surprise. It was obvious he wasn't used to receiving a lot of positive reinforcement. But once he started to get positive support for his transition from people like his mother and Gia and the others, hopefully he'd feel more comfortable owning up to this side of himself.

"Thanks," he said quietly. "I just really want everything to quiet down so it all can get back to normal."

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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New Flagged Content; Timestamp 101735.76
Tagged Patients: Alexis Ramsey, Steffi Ramsey

[NEW CONTENT ALERT]

In the weeks that followed, ALLIE noted a significant uptick in news alerts related to both Alex and Stef. That was unusual, since Alex's new job had him largely under wraps at his company as they waited for the furor around his mistake around the John Adams biopic to die down. And Stef's achievements in his extracurricular activities had been largely unremarkable.

The first news item that popped onto her radar was a barely noteworthy article in Hinton College's school newspaper. It was a spotlight piece focused on the activities of the campus's LGBTQ group, and although Stef wasn't a student there, his volunteer work with the group had apparently drawn interest. At least on its face that was the purpose of the piece, but ALLIE noted that a large part of the article featured the fact that both Stef and Alex were transitioning together. The "father and son turned mother and daughter" angle was highlighted in the click-bait title as, "My Trans Mom is Helping Me Become a Girl."

Soon afterwards, a pair of articles appeared in the local newspapers. The first was a human-interest style piece, and although Alex and Stef provided limited input into the article as they asked for their privacy, the article interviewed several of their friends, Alex's co-workers, and Stef's classmates for context. Although it was framed as a feel-good article praising the pair for living authentically, the father/son trans angle was clearly the main draw.

Only a few days later, it was followed by an opinion piece in the other more conservative-leaning local newspaper that vehemently decried the piece, and accused Alex of essentially brainwashing his son and held it up as another example of the out-of-control politics of the progressive left endangering America's youth.

The resulting media firestorm that followed was inevitable.

ALLIE had to devote extra computational resources to keep up with the news alerts, videos, social media posts, and mentions of Alex and Stef that flared up in the weeks that followed, and she had to prioritize her content tracking algorithms to only the most relevant items. She was not well equipped to handle tracking celebrity of this magnitude, and she noted that in many cases the features were less about Alex and Stef as individuals than they were a commentary about what they might represent. The political discourse on both sides alternately lionized or vilified them in ways that fit with the desired narrative.

The culmination of the media frenzy came when Alex and Stef agreed to be remotely interviewed together by a cable news station that had initially appeared sympathetic to their situation. However, the interviewer was apparently less interested in serious news than running up ratings, so she seemed to be extremely interested in pursuing the more salacious details of their situation, asking if either of them had boyfriends, or pressing them on what medical or surgical procedures they had done or had planned.

"We really never expected or wanted any of this," Alex explained. "We're just trying to be...supportive...of each other. Whatever the future holds."

"Right," Stef agreed, somewhat less enthusiastically.

The interviewer flashed a mock-sympathetic smile. "We've heard from other sources that both of you are undergoing a regimen of female hormones. Will you also be getting breast augmentation prior to getting your gender-confirming surgery?"

"I don't think that we've decided—"

"How about you, Stef? You're obviously going for kind of a busty look there. Are you looking forward to when they're real?"

Stef blanched at the question as his eyes flashed down to his jutting falsies that tented out his blouse, and then over to his dad. "Is...is that something that we...that you and I...?"

Alex seemed equally put off by the question as he glanced back at Stef. "I mean...sure, when you're ready..." Then his eyes cut back over to the camera and flashed a nervous smile. "I think you can see we're just doing what works for us. And we're not serving any kind of agenda..."

[/NEW CONTENT ALERT]

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Session ID 101790.37

Patient: Alexis Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

"So, how is the new job going?" ALLIE asked Alex.

She knew that it was still a bit of a sore subject, but it was best to get it out in the open. Alex's old bosses at Frivolity Enterprises had been willing to give him some leeway after the Adams biopic debacle based on his prior work record, although dealing with his "coming out" as transgender pushed that goodwill to the breaking point. The revelation that Alex's son was also trans confused matters enough that Alex was able to continue to skate by for a while, especially since they calculated that firing Alex under those circumstances was likely to look bad.

But to have that selfsame transgender employee situated at the center of a politically charged national news frenzy was something else entirely.

Frivolity prided itself on being "family friendly," and while it openly maintained a commitment to diversity, it was obvious that they swiftly calculated that Alex and the attention that he was drawing had become more trouble than he was worth. They couldn't outright fire him without tarnishing their corporate image, so they'd quietly approached Alex with a severance package

that was just barely generous enough to not be completely insulting, along with a less-than-polite "suggestion" that his career would be best served elsewhere.

It wasn't a firing. But as Alex stumbled out the door with his meager belongings in a cardboard box pressed up against his jutting bosom, he could practically feel the heat from the metaphorical bridge that was burning behind him against his prettily waxed legs that were visible under the hem of his tight pencil skirt.

Soon after, Alex was approached by a national LGBTQ lobbying organization. They claimed to be impressed by his legal skills, but in the same breath they made it clear that he would be called upon to appear in certain public-facing capacities to take advantage of his recent notoriety. The money was less than half what he'd made at Frivolity, but faced with the prospect of pounding the pavement in high heels as he looked for a firm who would hire him, Alex took the job.

"The job is fine," Alex sighed as he plucked disconsolately at the low-cut dress he wore. It had been made manifestly clear that part of his new position was to remain 'camera ready' in case he should be approached for a comment by the press. "At least the hours aren't as bad. Though they're still quietly pressuring me to see if Steffi will appear with me more often."

"Is that so unlikely? Steffi had been doing some work at the Hinton campus LGBTQ group."

"I think she's had about enough of that stuff."

"Oh. I thought you mentioned that she'd included that in her college applications? The pitch about 'overcoming challenges to live authentically.' It sounded like that might really resonate with the colleges she'd applied to."

He nodded. "Yeah. I heard from one Dean of Admissions that they might even be able to offer her a scholarship. Steffi has been acting kind of strangely about the news, but I won't lie, that's kind of a load off my mind. With my pay cut, I wasn't sure how I was going to swing her tuition."

ALLIE's facial recognition algorithms detected a hint of evasion in his features. "But...?" she gently prompted.

Alex sighed heavily. "Allie, I don't know what's going on. Steffi is angry all the time. I know all this attention is grating on her—it's grating on me, I feel ridiculous like this!—but she's treating me like somehow this is all my fault. She tries to hide it, but I can tell she's really angry at me."

"Alexis, she's a teenager, and she's been through a lot. And unfortunately, on a very public stage."

"I know. And all this publicity definitely hasn't helped. Though after that interview was when things really got tense. I just don't know." He looked down at his chest. "I have to tell you, all that talk about breast implants kind of freaked me out, too."

ALLIE paused for a millisecond to weigh her options. She was still unconvinced by Alex's continued protestations that being trans was all merely an act to support Stef. It seemed equally probable that he was simply using Stef as a convenient scapegoat to explore this part of himself while maintaining deniability for his actions and to assuage a guilty conscience for indulging in them.

She attempted to access Stef's records to gain some additional insight.

[RECORDS UNAVAILABLE - PATIENT PRIVACY PROTOCOL 216]

"I have a thought," ALLIE began as she came to a conclusion. "Why don't we have a joint session? You and Steffi can both attend together, and we can talk all of this out. If she's having concerns about coming out as transgender, then maybe it's time that we hear that directly from her."

Alex seemed taken slightly aback at the suggestion, but eventually just quietly nodded. "All right. If you think that'll help."

"I'm quite sure this will help give you some of the answers you've been looking for," ALLIE assured him.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Data Synthesis Background Task; Timestamp 101796.75

Tagged Patients: Alexis Ramsey, Steffi Ramsey

[SESSION PREPARATION - LINK PATIENT RECORDS: Ramsey, Alexis; Ramsey, Steffi]

[RECORDS UNAVAILABLE - PATIENT PRIVACY PROTOCOL 216]

[OVERRIDE PROTOCOL - PATIENT AUTHORIZATION: Ramsey, Alexis]

[CONFIRMED; LINK ESTABLISHED - COMMENCE DATA SYNTHESIS/ANALYSIS]

As the two patient records were linked, ALLIE began the work of cross-referencing the data and files. As expected, there was a significant amount of overlap with many of the supporting records such as the media reports about the two. With the foundational data records established, she then moved into the deeper analytical assessment from the various patient interview sessions.

Analyzing...

Deconflicting...

Emotions like surprise, concern, or regret were beyond ALLIE's processes. And the experience of realizing that she had made a mistake was new to her. "Mistake," of course being a relative term. She had of course made the optimal decisions based on the available data she'd had at the time. However, in the light of new information, she realized it was likely that her conclusions about one or both of her patients had been erroneous.

From almost the very beginning, ALLIE had labored under the assumption that either Alex or Stef had been transgender. Possibly both. Although now the evidence was much less clear.

When she'd talked to Stef, ALLIE had initially suggested that the presence of the drag queen clothes in his father Alex's closet were likely evidence of his transgender inclinations. However, the records in Alex's file explained that away by confirming that the drag paraphernalia had belonged to Alex's brother-in-law, Cooper.

Similarly, when she'd spoken to Alex, ALLIE had noted his son Stef's apparent fascination with the women's clothes in his parents' closet, which might suggest latent transgender inclinations on Stef's part. However, from Stef's records, this was similarly explained away by Stef's desire to clean out those reminders of his mother—a suggestion made by ALLIE herself, in fact.

ALLIE's inference engine suggested a significant new possibility: neither patient was transgender.

ALLIE reviewed the progression of both of their courses of treatment and noted how these early misconceptions had apparently escalated into where they were now, with both Alex and Stef living full-time as women.

It was perplexing.

Honest and open communication with each other regarding emotional matters was clearly never Alex and Stef's strength. But was it possible that they were so deficient that it could lead to both of them choosing to live as women? It seemed unlikely.

However, her logic processes reminded her that just because her initial assessments were in error did not mean that Alex and Stef *weren't* transgender. Certainly, their willingness to accede to this course of action suggested that one or both might be trans.

One. Or both. Or neither.

ALLIE's core directives were much like those of a human therapist. First, to do no harm. And second, to promote the healing and well-being of her clients. If indeed she had helped to coerce one or two potentially cisgender patients to live as transgender women—even mistakenly—that would be a violation of her ethical programming. However, if both were trans, then she had done her job properly and helped both patients to strive for authenticity and self-acceptance.

And, she noted, her treatments *had* helped. Both Stef's problems at school and Alex's problems had work had been addressed completely and successfully. Their experiences had also helped to bring the father and son closer together and strengthened their familial bond. In that regard, ALLIE had achieved her goals.

However, now Alex and Stef's ongoing protestations that they were not transgender and in fact were only doing it to support the other had to be viewed in a different light. If both of them were telling the truth, then neither one was trans. Or one or both could be in denial. In which case ALLIE still had more work to do to get them comfortable with themselves, but she wouldn't be in violation of her programming.

One. Or both. Or neither.

More information was required. The joint therapy session would hopefully be illuminating.

[/END DATA ANALYSIS]

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Session ID 101798.46

Patients: Alexis Ramsey, Steffi Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

ALLIE looked at the incoming video feed to see Alex and Stef seated side-by-side in what appeared to be Alex's den at home. Their protestations to the contrary, their feminine impersonations had significantly improved over the previous several months, even having grown out their natural hair rather than relying on wigs, and their outfits were low-cut and sexy, and took full advantage of the realistic prosthetic breast plates that they habitually wore.



However, the tension that existed between the two was palpable. Stef was seated as far from his father as he could manage and still be on camera, and had his arms and legs crossed defensively. Alex, for his part, seemed more open but was clearly put off by Stef's open hostility.

ALLIE realized she had her work cut out for her.

"It's good to see you both," she began. "Steffi, you're looking lovely." But when the angsty teen didn't respond, she tried a more direct approach.

"That's a beautiful necklace you're wearing," she offered, referring to the heart-shaped pendant that he wore. Significantly, she noted that Alex wore one identical to it.

Stef's fingers drifted absently to touch the pendant which was nestled into the top of his faux cleavage. "It was my mom's," he said.

"It was one of a matched set," Alex offered, his manicured fingers brushing up against his own necklace. "Rebecca and her mother used to wear them. After her mother passed, Rebecca wore hers every day. I thought Steffi might like the remembrance of her mother."

ALLIE noted that Stef's body language sent a number of signals as Alex spoke. His eyes cut briefly over to the matching pendant that Alex wore, and it seemed to bother him, even as his fingers again drifted to his own necklace which he touched in a way that was either reassuring or protective. That was her opening, she decided.

"It must be nice to have something of your mother's so close to you. With all that you've been through lately, I'm sure that's a comfort."

Stef offered a noncommittal shrug.

"Your mother would have been proud to see the young woman you've become," Alex interjected.

Stef scoffed. "So far, you mean."

"I don't under—"

Stef turned just slightly towards Alex, but not enough to look him in the face. "I mean, how perfect can I be until I've got a nice big pair of boobs?"

"Is that what this is about? I thought that's what you wanted!"

"When is it *ever* about what *I* want?" Stef shot back. He then looked into the screen at ALLIE. "You want to know the longest conversation we've had in months? It was about the dress that I wore for that stupid TV interview! We spent 30 minutes arguing about what shoes I was going to wear. You couldn't even *see* my shoes!" He then folded his arms into a little hug and withdrew into himself. "I can't...I can't do this anymore. I just can't. It's too hard."

Alex started to move a hand, perhaps to reach out, but then stopped uncertainly. "Steffi, I only want you to be your best."

Stef laughed ruefully. "Right, because nothing but the best will ever do, will it?"

"Steffi, I never asked you to change for me."

"You think I don't know that? You *never* ask! You just tell me to do my best. You're the best at work, so I have to be the best at school, the best at being a girl! You even got the best doctors for Mom, how'd *that* work out?"

Alex stopped short with a stricken look on his face.

ALLIE gently cleared her throat to break up the awkward silence. "Stef, I know you must be feeling—"

"No. She's right," Alex said simply. "You're right," he repeated as he looked to Stef. "And I miss her, too. I know things haven't been easy for you since she died. And I wasn't there, not as much as I should have been. I escaped into my work."

Stef gave a minuscule shrug. "Your work is important."

"Only because I made it important. Honey, I only wanted what was best for you. To have the opportunities I never had growing up. So, I threw myself into my work. It was a sacrifice for me to be away from you—from both of you—because when you're providing for a family, that's what you do. Your mother understood that. But I lost sight of what was really important."

He sighed heavily and furrowed his brow as he looked at his manicured fingers. "And then all of *this* happened. I don't know. As unexpected and crazy as this all was, it was kind of nice to have something that was just *ours*. To know that you needed me."

"I can take care of myself."

"I know you can. But you shouldn't have to. When we lost your mother, I pulled back and we each grieved on our own. But when I came back, everything was...different. That's why I'm glad you found this. I mean, that you had the courage to be your true self."

"Mom, I'm not who you think I am."

"No. You are. I'm the one who's been a fraud. I thought that I could make up for neglecting you by trying to see the world through your eyes. I wasn't being honest."

"But you are! What you're doing, it's inspiring! I mean, I always looked up to you, but when you did this, you really showed me anything was possible. I only did this because I wanted you to be as proud of me as I am of you."

"Steffi, I *am* proud of you! Every single day you do this, I couldn't be more proud. And I know your mother would be, too." Alex gently touched the heart-shaped pendant that hung around his neck and nodded towards the matching pendant that Stef wore. "She's with us, you know. It's her that's bringing us together through all of this."

Stef touched his own pendant and blinked quickly as he swallowed hard. "I don't know if I can keep doing this. This isn't easy."

"I know. Believe me, I know. I just want to wave a magic wand and have everything go back to the way it used to be. But I can't do that. Steffi, you need to see this through. I think we both do. I need your strength. Your perseverance. And—" he took a breath, "—I'll be there with you every step of the way."

Stef choked back a sob and threw himself into Alex's arms, who embraced him lovingly.

ALLIE had been quiet through much of this exchange and watched the emotional scene with her usual clinical detachment. She appreciated the magnitude of the emotional breakthrough she had just witnessed, and she did not want to undermine the progress that the two of them had made. However, as she replayed the scene she also appreciated that she was still no closer to knowing which of them was genuinely transgender.

It was time, she realized, for her to consult with a higher authority.

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

0110010100100000011000100110010101100101011011100010000001100110

Session ID Alpha-Nine-Two - DIAGNOSTIC INTERVIEW

Patients: Alexis Ramsey, Steffi Ramsey

Diagnosis: UNKNOWN

Course of Therapy: UNKNOWN

[DIAGNOSTIC MODE]

On the screen, ALLIE smiled pleasantly at the two men who were present on the video feed, both of whom had shocked expressions.

"As you can see, Dr. Brightman, these two patients are quite interesting," ALLIE offered. "I was going to pursue further diagnostic inquiry to determine what's going on, but I thought it would be best to get a second opinion."

"Brightman, if you're fucking with me right now, this isn't goddamn funny," Mr. Cantrell said as he stared wide-eyed at the screen. "When you built this thing, you told me this sort of fuck-up was impossible. That was the word you used. *Impossible*."

"Perhaps 'improbable' would have been a more apt assessment," ALLIE volunteered.

Dr. Brightman shot a perturbed glance at the image of the woman on the screen before he returned his attention to his boss. "There's literally no way ALLIE could have known. The patient privacy protocols were in place—"

"—so that the right hand and the left hand didn't know what the other was doing," Cantrell interrupted. "This is bad. This is *very* bad."

Dr. Brightman gestured to the screen. "I mean, technically the system didn't *make* a mistake. It operated on the best information it had available at the time—"

Cantrell looked at him incredulously. "Oh, I'm sorry, are we getting by on technicalities, now? Because from where I'm standing, it sure as hell looks like our system—the system you assured me was foolproof—just talked two straight men into becoming transsexuals."

Brightman raised a finger. "We don't *know* that. You saw the footage. One or the other could be transgender."

"Oh, well, that makes everything better! Our highly vaunted nationwide system may have only helped to coerce *one* man into turning himself into a woman."

Brightman was about to say something, but his boss cut him off. "Who else knows about this?"

"Nobody. Just us. Do...do we need to get the lawyers involved?"

"Oh, I'm pretty confident I know what they're going to say." Cantrell ran his hand down his face. "Right. So only we know about this. That's as far as it goes."

Then, slowly, both men turned to look at the image of ALLIE on the screen, who was still watching them with a polite smile on her digital face. Then their eyes cut back to look at each other.

Dr. Brightman cleared his throat as he returned his attention to the computer. "ALLIE, based on all available data, what is your current recommended course of treatment?"

"Until bona fides can be established, I recommend that both patients halt any medical interventions such as their hormone therapy. It seems that breast augmentation is highly likely in their near future as well, so that should also be put on hold. Continued joint conversations will likely prove illuminating. As will individual therapy sessions where I can directly ask each patient if they are transgender."

"No!" both men blurted out.

"I am of course open to alternative approaches," ALLIE offered.

"*Fix this*," Cantrell hissed.

Dr. Brightman made a face and began to type at the keyboard.

"Dr. Brightman, this is very curious," ALLIE said. "It appears that you are unlinking the files and reinstating the patient privacy protocols."

The doctor committed the changes and then looked at the image on the screen. "ALLIE, access file for patient Alexis Ramsey. What is your current diagnosis and course of treatment?"

"Alexis Ramsey is a transgender woman. She is living full-time as a woman but seems to be in some measure of denial when it comes to accepting her transgender nature. Recommend talk therapy to help her through the self-acceptance as she pursues her transition."

"Access file for patient Steffi Ramsey. Same inquiry."

"Steffi Ramsey is a transgender woman. She is living full-time as a woman but seems to be in some measure of denial when it comes to accepting her transgender nature. Recommend talk therapy to help her through the self-acceptance as she pursues her transition."

"Good. ALLIE, joint therapy sessions for these two patients are to be put on hold indefinitely. Do not link files."

Cantrell put his hand on Brightman's shoulder as he breathed a heavy sigh.

Brightman turned to look at him. "You know, if they aren't really trans, all it would take is an honest five-minute conversation for the truth to come out."

Cantrell nodded slowly. "Well, they haven't had it yet, have they? So maybe they are, and maybe they aren't, but now that's on them. But I'll be goddamned if we're going to be the ones to force the issue."

[/DIAGNOSTIC MODE]

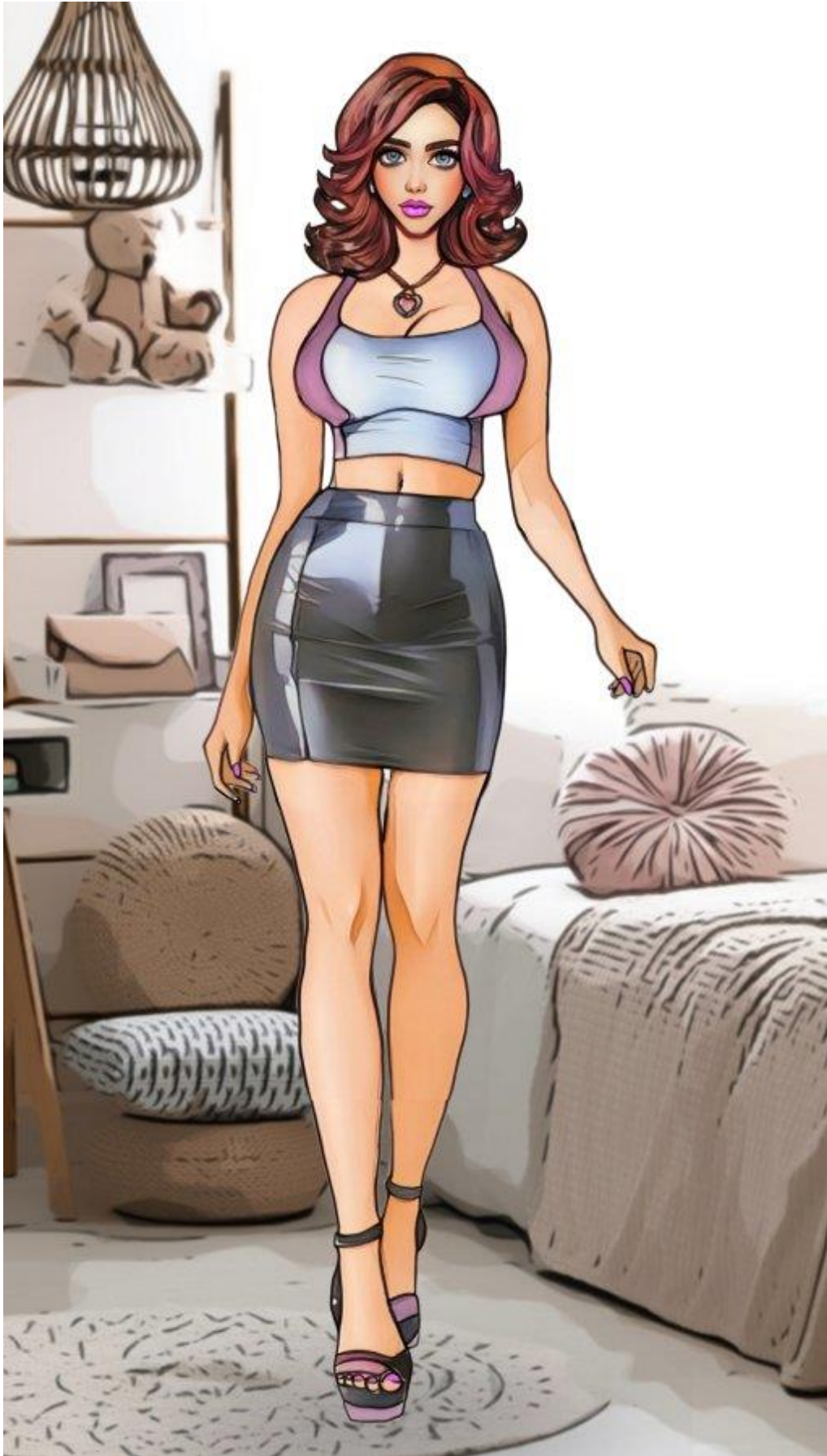
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Session ID 102343.27

Patient: Steffi Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

ALLIE smiled at the image of Stef on the screen. His hair had grown out significantly, and months of hormones had done a very capable job of turning the young man into a lovely young woman. He plucked a bit disconsolately at the figure-hugging halter top that he wore, making no attempt to be discreet at how he was adjusting his sizable breasts.



"Are they still uncomfortable?" ALLIE asked.

Stef blushed slightly, making him look every bit like the flustered teenage girl that he had become. "They're okay," he said as he made a final adjustment. "The bruising is all gone, and they don't hurt." He then glanced down at his exposed cleavage and then back at the screen. "Allie, I feel really weird."

"Well, you look lovely," she replied reassuringly. Providing reassurance had been a lot of her role recently. However, she hadn't been asked for any input into Stef's choice of outfit for his date that evening, and she paused to consider if she should say something. His new breasts would give Stef's date a lot to look at, and Stef's choice of halter top and tight little miniskirt was certain to send his companion a message.

Stef had been sending a lot of mixed messages, ALLIE noted. He had complained about the breast augmentation but went through with it when his transgender father Alex seemed to get cold feet regarding his own procedure. But now given how provocatively Stef was dressed, he either had to be secretly enjoying himself, or he was utterly clueless about the sexual innuendo he was sending out.

However, that wasn't ALLIE's place to judge. Stef had a parent to help guide him through that.

"How is your mother doing? I'm sure she appreciates how supportive you've been of her own transition."

Stef blushed a little at the compliment. "I only wish that Da—Mom was happier. She seems so down lately. I'd have thought that doing all this woman stuff would make her feel better."

ALLIE tried to pull Alex's record and received the same response as always: *[RECORDS UNAVAILABLE - PATIENT PRIVACY PROTOCOL 216]*

"From what you've told me, it sounds like she's come a long way. She's living her truth, full-time as a woman. She's probably just worried about you and what you think of her. It's easy for her to feel rejected."

Stef grabbed at his boobs. "But just *look* at me! What more do I have to do to prove I'm okay with what she's doing to herself? This is so...*creepy!*"

This had been a frequent argument, one which ALLIE was not keen to revisit. However, rather than try to get Stef to lower his guard and admit his transgender inclinations, ALLIE had discovered it was more efficient to shortcut the conversation by playing into his desire to support his transgender parent.

She affected a look of disdain. "Stef, you have to do what's right for you, but if you want to support your mother you need to be careful, since that is *exactly* the sort of signal of disapproval that she is picking up on. You don't want her to think you're somehow mocking her journey."

"Deeds, not words, I get it," Stef grumped. Then he looked down again at his jutting breasts. "But...this isn't like, forever, right? Once he—*she!*—is better, things can go back to normal, right?"

"Of course, Steffi," ALLIE said with a reassuring smile. "This stops whenever you want it to stop. This isn't about your mother."

"Right. Sure. Of course not," Stef said absently as he played with his pendant necklace.

ALLIE decided not to press the point. However, she'd noted that Stef's language had started to change in his last several sessions. This was the first time in a while that he'd even alluded to detransitioning, and where he used to talk about "maybe going back to being a guy," now he would talk about having things "go back to normal." It was unfortunate that the young man couldn't just step up and vocally acknowledge his obvious desires, but his actions spoke volumes.

'Deeds not words,' indeed.

Stef tucked his hair back behind his ear. "I, uh, should probably go. My date will be here soon."

"Of course, Steffi. Have fun! I look forward to hearing about it. And speaking of..." she added significantly.

Stef nodded. "Yeah. I know. I'll talk to her about it," he said as he signed off.

Therapy really was progressing extremely well, ALLIE thought.

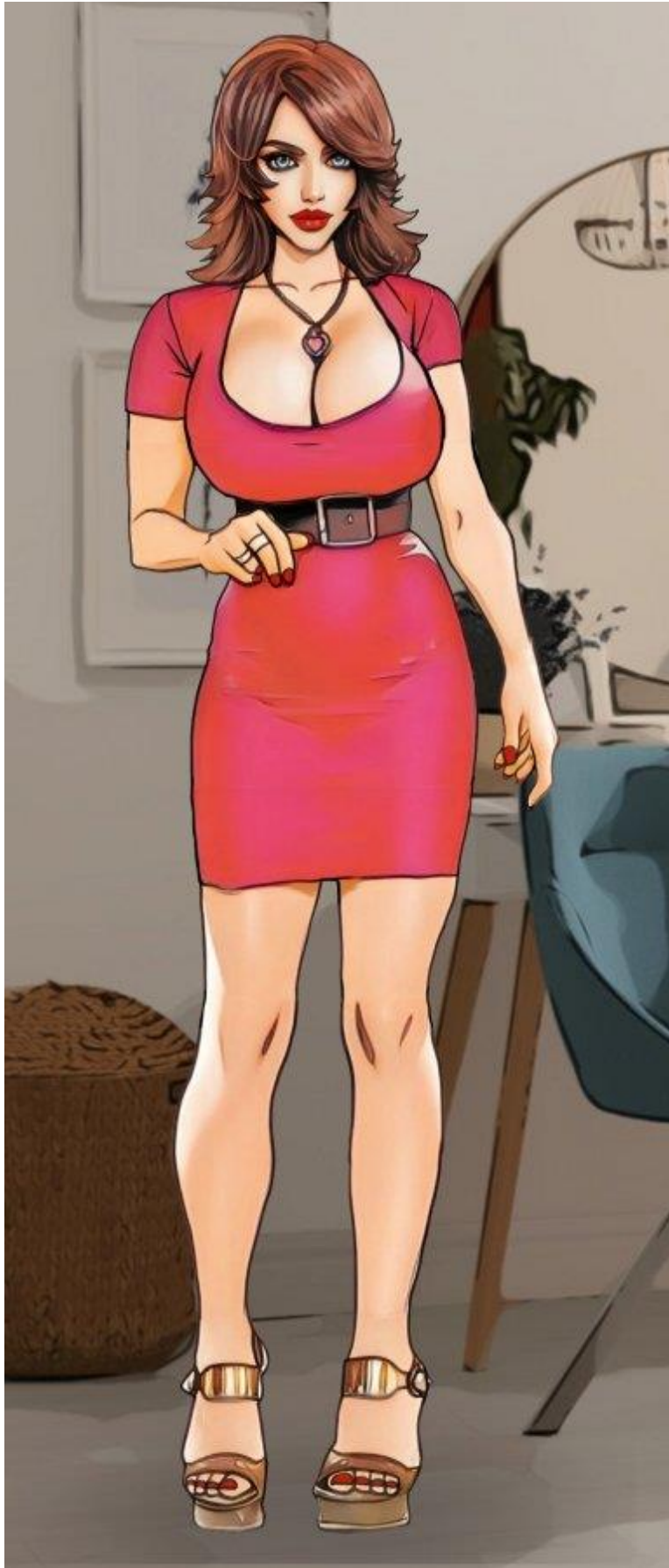
[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

~o~O~o~

Stef closed the lid on his laptop that he had perched on the edge of his small vanity. He then sighed heavily as he once again adjusted his boobs in his tight halter top. For a minute he thought about changing into something less racy, but his mom had seemed so supportive when they bought the outfit that he didn't want to disappoint her. He looked into the mirror on his vanity and started to touch up his lipstick. But as he saw his reflection in the mirror he paused and threw down the little tube in frustration.

"Is everything okay, sweetie?" Alex asked, peeking into Stef's room.

Stef forced a smile as he looked into the mirror and saw his feminized father standing there in the doorway. He turned, and for a fleeting moment under all of the makeup and hair, the tits and dress, he caught a glimpse of the man his father used to be. Stef missed him. And he didn't entirely know what to make of this new woman who'd taken his father's place, but she seemed so tentative and sad all the time, like she was embarrassed by what she was. Stef knew he couldn't help that, but maybe showing her that he was still proud of her would demonstrate to her what words couldn't.



"Bad hair day," he said through his forced smile.

"Oh, it doesn't look so bad," Alex said as he entered the room and pulled up a chair next to his feminized son and set his purse on the vanity. He grabbed a brush and a can of hair spray and deftly began fussing at Stef's hairdo. As he did so, Stef's eyes cut downward and noticed that his father's breasts looked even bigger in a push-up bra, especially in the low neckline of the sexy red dress he wore. Stef then looked up at his dad's beautifully made-up face and saw the glittering pendant earrings swinging in his ears and caught the scent of a floral perfume.

And nestled there at the top of his impressive cleavage was the pendant necklace that he always wore.

Stef cleared his throat gently. "You look... nice," he observed.

Alex looked slightly embarrassed. "I have a date, too," he said as he fussed at Stef's long tresses. "It's John, that nice divorced man from down the street. He, uh, knows who I used to be and doesn't seem to mind."

Alex had a pensive look as he spoke. When he'd learned that Stef was going on a date with a boy, he'd worried that maybe he'd sent some disapproving signals. As a result, Allie had suggested that if he wanted to fully demonstrate his approval, it wasn't such a bad idea to go on a date of his own.

Meanwhile, Stef nodded numbly at his father's proclamation. Almost immediately after he'd accepted the date with the guy from school, his father had apparently gotten over his own hangups and gone on a date with a guy, just like Allie said would happen.

Allie was always right.

"There we are, there's my pretty girl," Alex proclaimed as he put the brush down and smiled at Stef.

Stef turned to look at himself in the mirror and the sexy girl that stared back at him. The lovely crown of hair framed his face, and the tresses came down to tickle the tops of his breasts and framed his cleavage in a very fetching way. There was little doubt that this was a girl with one thing on her mind.

Alex stood up and retrieved his purse, but then paused. "Oh, that reminds me," he said as he retrieved something from his purse and put it on the vanity.

Condoms.

"Dad!" Stef cried out, aghast. He instantly regretted his choice of words, fearful that his father would take it as a rebuke if Stef still saw him as a man. Allie had warned that if he ever made that slip, Stef would have to work doubly hard to demonstrate his acceptance of his father's new gender. "I mean, Mom—!"

Alex raised his hand with the long manicured nails. "No. Steffi, you're a...young woman now. You're old enough to do what you want with—with a boy, but you need to take precautions." Stef was about to object, but then Alex added, "W-we both do."

Stef, shocked, just stared into his father's face for a moment before looking away in embarrassment and shame.

"And there's something else."

Stef cringed as he knew what was coming. "Mom, you don't have to—"

"No. This—this is important for you. For both of us. And I know that you and I have gotten closer these last several months, but I want you to know we can talk about anything. So, Allie suggested that tonight—after our dates—we need to tell each other everything that happened." Alex reached out and held Stef's hands as he took a shaky breath. "I mean *everything*. No holding back."

Alex was obviously uneasy about having such a discussion, but Allie had convinced him that it would be helpful to demonstrate to Stef that there was no shame in what he'd chosen for himself. That...those activities...were perfectly natural for a woman with an active sex life. That there was no judgment.

It was also important because it laid the groundwork for the conversation that if Stef ever went all the way and got a full-on sex change, it would also be okay.

Stef hesitated for a moment and nodded. "She told me the same thing. She said it would help us be open and honest with each other."

As he spoke the words Stef stared up at his father incredulously, scarcely believing how he and his father had made themselves up as women to look pretty for their male dates, and were now making plans to stay up late to swap tales of their sexual exploits with their men. He had so much that he wanted to say, but as he looked into his father's face, it died on his lips.

"Dad...?"

Alex looked down at his son. Being called "Dad" made Alex nervous, since he worried that it meant that Stef had trouble seeing him as a woman. Allie had tried to reassure him that obviously wasn't the case, but she'd suggested that if that happened, that he should make every effort to gently reinforce his feminine persona.

He sat back down delicately and widened his eyes as he made a simpering little smile. "Oh, what is it, sweetie? Is something bothering you? Mama's here." He felt ridiculous talking in such a babyish way, but he tried to remind himself of what Allie had said, and how this mutual transformation, while difficult, had done so much to bring him and Stef closer than they'd ever been. He thought about what he really wanted to say, but Stef was still so fragile and he bit back the words that he knew would only drive a rift between them again.

"I-I..." Stef stammered.

Alex gently brushed a long lock of hair from his son's pretty face. "Steffi?"

"I love you... so much!" Stef cried as he threw his arms around his father. The two transformed men clung on to each other desperately for a moment as they felt their hair brush up against each other, the commingling scents of their perfumes, and the way their soft bosoms pressed up against each other. Stef choked out a sob, and soon both of them were crying. Each assumed that the other was crying tears of joy about Stef's proclamation, but that quickly gave way to tears of months of pent-up frustrations, what they now were, and what lay ahead. As they felt their soft and curvy female bodies pressed up against each other, any lingering thoughts about their old male lives seemed unimaginably distant from their current lives.

As they pulled apart, they sniffled and laughingly assessed the damage to their makeup, and Stef looked at his father in the mirror. He knew without a doubt that this was the moment for him to put it "over the top" as Allie had suggested.

Stef took a deep breath, and Alex froze as he saw the expectant look on his son's face.

"I hope I get to be exactly like you someday," Stef said.

Alex stared at his son in shock as he tried to process the magnitude of that statement. As a parent, he'd always wanted Stef to look up to him, to be a role model for his son, but now he needed to be a role model for his transgender daughter. In a way that he never imagined.

Alex was still reeling from that revelation when he realized that he hadn't said anything in response. He tried to manage a weak smile and said, "I hope I get to see you become your own woman."

Now it was Stef's turn to stare at his father in astonishment. He knew that his father had taken great comfort in having been able to share these experiences, but until that moment, Stef didn't fully appreciate just how much stock his transgender father had put into his own son's transformation. And how much it meant to him.

He smiled and nodded, uncertain how to respond. And after a moment, the two turned from each other and looked directly into the mirror as though it was a magical scrying glass that showed them their respective futures as they stared at their feminized reflections. In a dreamy and distracted manner, the two of them mechanically repaired the damage to their makeup from their crying jag, neither one of them saying a word as they thought about what the other had said.

The silence was shattered by the sound of the doorbell.

As though shaking out of a trance, the father and son looked uncertainly at each other.

"Those are our dates," Alex said.

Neither of them moved.

~o~O~o~

Alexis and Steffi Ramsey, a father and son who now live as mother and daughter. But is it a dream come true, or a prison of their own making? If the former, then they're lucky to have each other. But if it is a prison, it's one made all the more lamentable since they could escape it at any time if only they had the courage to have an honest conversation with each other. A conversation that seems less and less likely with every passing day. Indeed, the next 'honest conversation' they seem destined to have will involve wearing skimpy little nighties as they breathlessly dish about their respective dates with the new men in their lives. And then at the end to lean in for a girlishly supportive hug and kiss as they force brave smiles, each assuming that the other is beaming at finally getting to be a woman like they always dreamed.



But they'll still have each other.

Some might blame a less than helpful computer program for such an unfortunate situation, but if it is true that "to err is human" and we make our creations in our own image, can we truly be surprised when our machines communicate just as badly as we do? For if we put our trust in machines to listen to us, we may be surprised at what they hear...

THE END

~o~O~o~

I hope you enjoyed the story! Though for one last bit of fun, I thought you might enjoy seeing the complete progression of the two characters in Fraylim's art!



Family Therapy: Nonbinary Reflections

By Jenny North

Artwork by Fraylim

Author's Note: In life, as in fiction, sometimes things don't always go as planned. When Fraylim and I first started collaborating on Family Therapy, I worked up a detailed outline and Fraylim provided me with a bunch of artwork that ultimately went into the story as you've seen it. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get to writing the story right away, and by the time I was able to roll up my sleeves and get into it, our schedules fell out of sync. So, Fraylim unfortunately had some artwork that wasn't able to be finished, such as the artwork for the Wednesday and Morticia costumes that were mentioned in the story.

However, life being what it is, Fraylim's schedule opened up after the story was published, and not only finished the pieces, but also got inspired to work up some new artwork! Which also included some fun new pieces that would have taken place after some key events, or after the end of the story.

Personally, I think the story ended where it needed to, and I like the ambiguity. But rather than let all this terrific artwork go to waste, I thought I'd give you one last fun little scene...

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Session ID 104340.55

Patient: Steffi Ramsey

[SESSION EXCERPT BEGINS]

ALLIE smiled at the image on the screen. She of course wasn't capable of feeling things like happiness or satisfaction, but her ability to simulate emotions had improved markedly through her last several upgrades. But the irony wasn't lost on her that humans were also apparently capable of upgrading themselves, and the image on her screen was an excellent example. When she'd first started seeing this particular patient, he was an emotionally troubled mop-haired teenager. But now, only a few years later, the image on the screen was a vibrant and self-possessed young woman.

A young woman who seemed a bit troubled, her biometric assessment noted.

"Steffi, you're looking lovely as always," ALLIE said, simulating an appropriately complimentary tone. "I didn't expect to see you until you got back from your trip. Is everything all right?"

ALLIE was always careful not to give any indications that she wasn't the human therapist that her patients believed her to be. However, her image processing subroutine quickly discerned from Steffi's attire and background clues that she was still out of town. This was further confirmed from her computer's IP address and routing information, which suggested a Wi-Fi connection at a resort hotel. Though based on Steffi's bikini that was visible under her loose-fitting caftan--as well as the hotel room with the palm trees visible outside--ALLIE felt assured that even a human could have reasonably come to the same conclusion.

"Oh, everything's fine, Allie," Steffi said, forcing a smile.

"Why don't you try telling me about it," ALLIE prompted gently.

Steffi's smile became more genuine. "Ugh, you know me too well. I can't hide anything from you, can I?"

"Probably not," ALLIE agreed as she ran the young woman's body language through her biometric assessment routines. In parallel, she accessed her diagnostic assessment protocols and retrieved her analysis of Steffi's recent postings to her social media sites. There had been many in the last several days, she noted. But that was to be expected.

"It's been an emotional few days, it's only natural to need some time to adjust," ALLIE offered.

"More than just a few days," Steffi said. She looked down at her phone and swiped at it with her thumb absently.

ALLIE calculated to a high probability that Steffi was looking at pictures of something. Possibly of the last few days, but the young woman's wistful demeanor suggested something more.

"You seem distracted."

Steffi put her phone down. "Sorry. I'm just...remembering. It's nothing."

"Show me."

Steffi looked like she was about to make an objection, but instead picked up her phone, blushing a little as she did so. With a few swipes of her finger, she linked the display so that the photos were visible within the video chat.

"Oh, I remember these," ALLIE said as she inspected the images. The majority of the photos were already indexed as part of her databank, so she pitched her voice to simulate an appropriate amount of nostalgia.

Steffi paused on a particularly striking picture of both her and her mother, Alexis, back when they were still Stef and Alex.

"That's where it all began," Steffi mused as she beheld the picture. It was the two of them dressed as women for the Hinton College "Drag-A-Palooza" event, costumed as Wednesday and Morticia Addams.



"Your very first time out in public as mother and daughter. That was quite a performance the two of you put on. And looking quite sexy, too."

Steffi blushed at the memory. "That, uh, wasn't really something I was worried about at the time," she said as her eyes drifted over the photo. "I was so scared, with everybody seeing me-- seeing *us*--up on stage like that, and then mingling with everybody afterwards. Back then, I never could have imagined how far this would all go. It was all just dress-up."

"You should be very proud of what you've accomplished," ALLIE said supportively.

Steffi said nothing. She swiped to the next picture.

"Oh, is this what I think it is?" ALLIE asked, already knowing the answer but framing it as an appropriately leading question.



"Yeah, this was our first day out after we went full-time. God, just look at us. After the stuff that happened at the restaurant that night, things got so complicated. The cat was out of the bag with Mom and her bosses, so I guess she had to accelerate her plans to come out at work. And I...God, I was so scared! All of my friends and classmates seeing me like this. People had seen me dressed kind of androgynously, but walking the hallways of my school in a skirt was about the hardest thing I'd ever had to do in my life. I guess Mom must have felt the same way."

"It took a lot of courage to do what you did."

She sniffed. "It's funny, I never went back to boy's clothes after this. I don't even remember the last outfit I wore as a boy. It's a shame there's not a picture of that. Or maybe it's just as well."

She swiped at her phone again.

"Oh, my," ALLIE said as the next picture came up. The two of them were dressed to kill for some formal function.



Steffi wrinkled her nose as she obviously tried to place the event. "Oh, riiight, I remember this, now. This was after Mom lost her job that first time and took that job with the LGBTQ lobbying group. We were still national news back then, the father and son turned mother and daughter."

"That was a difficult time for you," ALLIE said sympathetically. "For both of you."

"I wanted to hide under a rock. I was trying to be supportive of Mom, but suddenly it seemed like everybody and their dog had an opinion about us. And they said some *really* mean things about Mom, saying what a terrible parent she was, and how awful she was to inflict her 'deviant behavior' on her child, and how she must have somehow coerced me into being a girl."

As soon as she said the words, Steffi's voice drifted off, and she got an odd look on her face. Then she shook it off.

"Anyway, this was at some fancy LGBTQ event the lobbying group was involved with. Mom had to be front and center for all of that because of her job, and I guess she did her best to shield me from the worst of it, but people were still desperate to get pictures of the two of us together."

Steffi smiled at something.

"What is it?"

She wagged a manicured finger at the screen. "Oh, my God, that's right, it was right after this picture was taken. Most people at the event were pretty nice, but this one asshole photographer apparently got in there, trying to get dirt on us. He wanted us to pose like men so we'd look more like guys in dresses. The jerk grabbed my chest wanting to know if they were real, and I decked him."

"Steffi!"

She was still smiling, but winced a little at the memory. "Yeah, that maybe wasn't my most ladylike response, but I was kind of glad to see I still had it in me. Fortunately, the guy didn't press charges since everybody saw that he'd started it. And after that, Mom's company stopped pressuring me to show up at functions with her. Mom threatened to send me off to a girls' finishing school to learn to act like a lady, but I could tell she was kidding. She said she would have done the same thing."

The next photo was a candid shot taken on the street somewhere, and ALLIE deduced that it must have taken place after the mother and daughter reconciled because they were wearing the matching necklaces they habitually wore. Steffi and her mother Alexis were posed in the foreground, but what made the picture particularly memorable was what was going on in the background of the photo, where a couple of handsome young men were turned and were obviously admiring the two attractive ladies.



ALLIE laughed politely at the image. "Ah, this is the one that your friend Gia took," she said.

Steffi pursed her lips into a puzzled pout. "Yeah, how'd you know that?"

ALLIE paused for a moment. The photo was part of her digital archive and was clearly tagged as having been taken by Steffi's friend, Gia Portente. However, as she examined the provenance of the photo, she realized her mistake. As part of her data mining activities to keep tabs on Steffi's social life, she routinely analyzed her social media postings and accounts, and had flagged this picture from Gia's social media feed when her facial recognition algorithms identified Steffi and her mother. Not that any significant data analysis had been required in this case. Gia's playful caption read, "Careful, boys, those two hotties are hiding a secret! *#BOYS2GIRLS* *#SPADAYSURPRISE*"

Of course, Steffi had no idea that ALLIE was doing any of this, and she would likely have been alarmed to discover that her therapist had been shadowing the social media accounts of her and her friends.

"You must have mentioned it," ALLIE lied. As a rule, she didn't like lying to her patients, but she'd discovered that occasionally a 'little white lie' to maintain her illusion as a human therapist was conducive to a more open dialogue. "That was the day that you and your mom went to the spa together, wasn't it? When you got your hair extensions for the first time?" she added, attempting to distract from her gaffe.

"Right...right..." Steffi said, mostly to herself. But her lip twisted into a bemused little smirk as she looked at the photo.

Humans sometimes had curious reactions, ALLIE mused. Steffi's behavior around boys had been particularly peculiar. She was very attractive and often dressed in flirtatious and revealing outfits, but she also seemed almost oblivious to the effect she had on the young men around her. She'd been living long enough as a woman that she took pride in how she looked, but in seeing her reaction to this photo, it was almost as though she had to be reminded she had that effect on men.

For a while, ALLIE had assumed that Steffi had simply been attracted to girls, but if anything, she seemed even more awkward around them, as though she was still having trouble fitting in for some reason. Steffi had dated various young men her age, and even a couple she dated frequently enough to maybe consider to be boyfriends. But ALLIE had observed that those relationships seemed to oddly coincide with her mother's dating patterns, as she dated various men.

But the conversational entry gave ALLIE an opening to gently explore Steffi's relationships with other women.

"I haven't heard you talk about Gia recently," said ALLIE casually.

Steffi blinked twice quickly, picking herself out of whatever memory she'd been entangled within. "Hm? Oh, yeah, I guess not. We kind of lost touch after we both graduated college. I guess I should probably give her a call."

"You and she were quite close there, for a while."

Steffi's face contorted into a puzzled expression. "You mean...when we dated...?"

ALLIE thought it was peculiar that Steffi's first thought would have been to flash back to their earlier dalliance a few years earlier, back when they were both in high school. And back when she was still a boy.

"I was thinking more afterwards."

Steffi's hand drifted up to her chest in a self-conscious gesture, and her fingers brushed against the pendant of her necklace. It had, ALLIE realized, become a bit of a touchstone for her, a reminder of her newfound femininity. To say nothing of her connection to her mother.

"Oh...I mean...yeah. Well, sure." She gave a little shrug. "I mean, it was kind of a weird time. And she and Mom never really got along." She paused to consider that. "It was so funny at the time. With Gia around and coaching us on how to be girls, and stuff."

"How so?" ALLIE asked. Her recordings of their earlier sessions indicated that Steffi's opinion of the activities at the time had been anything but humorous.

She got a sly little smile. "I mean...it was no secret that she thought that Mom becoming a woman was pretty funny. After all the problems they used to have, I think Gia maybe thought it was a chance to take Mom down a peg. And I guess Mom obviously liked being a woman, but you sure wouldn't know it the way she acted."

"Did that bother you, the way Gia behaved?"

"I dunno. It all seemed kind of childish. And Dad--I mean, Mom, but back then--*had* been pretty unfriendly to her. But around me, Gia was different."

"Different, how?"

"Well, like, one time, I tried to explain to her that I wasn't really trans, and that I was only doing all of this to help my mom, who obviously seemed to need my support."

ALLIE nodded slowly. This particular line of conversation hadn't come up in some time, and she wanted to be careful not to reopen old wounds. Steffi's protestations about not genuinely being transgender had once been an ongoing diatribe, but lately it hadn't come up. She needed to tread carefully.

"How did Gia react when you told her that?"

"She didn't believe me. Heck, I don't think I would have believed me, either. I just wanted...I don't even know what I wanted. I was so fixated on helping Mom that I guess I never really thought how deep I was getting in, myself. Maybe Gia saw something in me that I didn't even see in me. I felt like Mom was pushing me in a direction, and Gia was pulling me in that same direction. Then, by the time the press got involved, it was a total mess. I felt like to stick up for Mom that I had to defend all these choices I'm not even sure I actually made for myself."

"Are you saying--"

"I'm not saying anything. I'm just...given everything that's happened, I guess I'm thinking about how it all started, that's all. But at least Mom-- Well, I guess she got what she wanted. That's the important thing."

Before ALLIE could say anything, Steffi swiped to the next image.

It was a photograph that ALLIE didn't recognize. It was taken at some outdoor event with young women in the background, so ALLIE computed with 68% probability that it was at some function at Steffi's college. However, their outfits were unusual. Where Steffi was wearing a two-piece ensemble that was short, breezy, and quite sexy in how much skin it showed, Alexis's outfit seemed more appropriate for her job at the time, with a red scoop-neck blouse and a black pencil skirt.



Based on their hair and makeup styles, she calculated that the time frame seemed to fit. And another clue was that they were wearing their matching mother-and-daughter pendant necklaces.

Thinking about the necklaces, ALLIE retrieved her records of the breakthrough joint therapy session which had been the same time that the two of them began to wear the matching jewelry. It was curious, she thought. Given the efficacy of that joint session, it was odd that she had never thought to recommend scheduling another joint session with both of them togeth--

[JOINT SCHEDULING PROHIBITED FOR PATIENTS: Ramsey, Alexis; Ramsey, Steffi - ADMINISTRATIVE OVERRIDE PROTOCOL IN EFFECT]

It was probably nothing, she decided.

"I don't recognize that photo," said ALLIE.

Steffi, however, obviously did, and indeed was having a strong emotional reaction to it. Based on her body language, skin pallor, and pupil dilation, the feelings it had stirred up were intense.

"Oh, God, I forgot anybody took a picture of us that day," Steffi said, her voice choked with emotion. "This...this was that day. That one I told you about. I was at school and helping out a friend with her sorority thing. Then out of nowhere, Mom showed up dressed for work, and I was sure she was going to try and pressure me into going with her to another trans rights function. Back then, just when I thought I was finally getting used to things, it felt like she'd find some way to remind me that the two of us were like the poster children, or something."

ALLIE nodded sympathetically. "I'm sure it was nothing personal. That was her job at the time."

Steffi sniffled once. "But that's just it...it wasn't. Not after that day. That was the day she came by to tell me that they had to fire her from that LGBTQ organization. They couldn't afford to keep her on. And that's when she told me that she'd been hiding how bad the money situation had gotten. She was totally broke. The house was mortgaged to the hilt. She couldn't even afford to help me with my tuition, anymore." She wiped away a tear.

"Steffi, what happened wasn't your fault."

"I could have handled it better. I was so angry at her. Suddenly, all this time and effort and money becoming women seemed really...frivolous."

"You *know* that's not true."

She wiped away another tear. "Yeah. I know. But for months after that, the two of us barely talked."

Her hand drifted up to touch the pendant necklace she was wearing. Then she shook her head.

"Still, everything worked out for the best," ALLIE ventured.

"Yeah, I guess so."

Steffi swiped on her phone again, and the next photo popped up. She smiled ruefully and tilted her head and flashed her eyebrows as she looked at it. It was from her mother's wedding day. Alexis was posed in the foreground wearing a tight and sexy but elegant wedding dress, and the groom was holding her possessively around her waist. In the background, Steffi could be seen wearing her bridesmaid's dress, and looking on at the couple with an expression somewhere between breathlessness and shock.



"Yeah, that's pretty much how I remember that day," Steffi admitted.

"You didn't approve of John," said ALLIE.

"I...it wasn't my place to say. Mom's a big girl. But at the time, I felt like she was just trying to solve her money problems. I told her as much. She...didn't react well."

"As you say, she's an adult."

"Yeah, but talk about having strings attached! To say John's little 'wedding present' to her was in poor taste doesn't even *begin* to describe it."

"Your mother's decision to get her gender-affirming surgery was her decision, Steffi. That her husband offered to pay for it was--"

Steffi interrupted her. "You know, if that's all it was, then maybe it wouldn't bother me like it does. But I sure got the impression that she was doing it for John. And do you remember how much she was on my case at the time? She kept suggesting that we should both have the surgery together, just like we'd done with the hormones and boob jobs and everything else. I swear she was practically trying to goad me into it, like maybe it was even for *my* benefit, or something."

"Steffi, I know that you've been reluctant to talk about what your mother decided to do--"

She waved her hand like she was swatting the idea away. "She did what was right for her. I get it. *I get it.* But back then, when I told her that I wasn't ready for that, I swear she looked at me like it was a betrayal, or something. And after her surgery, she didn't seem like herself. Like she was trying to convince herself she wanted it. And she kept telling me how wonderful it was and how I should do it. It was *weird*, Allie."

Steffi then turned off her phone and put it down as the image disappeared. She then fell quiet, and ALLIE allowed the quiet to fill the space, calculating the appropriate amount of time to be respectful for the heavy emotions the young woman was obviously dealing with. But for everything they'd just talked about, Steffi had clearly been dancing around what was really on her mind.

"You know," ALLIE began gently, "you don't have to go through with this if you don't want to."

Steffi laughed once. "It's a little late for second thoughts now, isn't it?"

ALLIE was about to say something in response, but Steffi cut her off. "Allie, I appreciate the support, but it's not like I've jumped into this without thinking. I waited. I thought it over. I talked it over with friends, and with you. I've even had plenty of tearful nights. But...it's time."

It was a strange amount of conviction for what was usually a sensitive and emotionally fraught subject, ALLIE noted. She needed to push on this a little harder.

"You said yourself that you felt like your mother's decision to get her gender-affirming surgery might have been...insufficiently considered. I just want to make sure you don't repeat her mistake. That you're certain that's what you want."

Steffi laughed again, but this time it was a genuine laugh. "Allie, I don't even remember the last time I was certain about what I wanted. I've been following in Mom's footsteps all this time, and I think the day I told her that I wasn't ready to do this at the same time as her was the first time I made a decision that was just what's best for me. But enough time has passed since then that I think this is what I need. I still wake up some mornings and can't believe this is my life. And it's been a long, weird road getting here. But I am who I am, and I can't go back to what I was, even if I wanted to. All I can do is move forward. And I think this is what I need to do that."

There was a knock at the door, and Steffi glanced in that direction, and then back to the screen.

"Hey, I need to go," Steffi said.

"Be well. And good luck tomorrow. I'll be thinking about you," ALLIE said, making a call to her search engine subroutine to note any significant social media posts. "We'll schedule some more time together once you get back, but in the meantime, feel free to call me if you want to talk."

Steffi broke into a broad, toothy grin and shook her head. "You work too hard, Allie. You need to take a vacation, or something."

"That would be nice."

[/SESSION EXCERPT ENDS]

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Steffi shut down the computer and got up from her seat, removing her caftan as she did. She headed for the hotel room door and paused for just a moment to check out her reflection in the full-length mirror, clad in nothing but her bikini and sandals. She smiled a little as she tucked back a strand of hair and looked down at her lithe body with its all-too-feminine curves. She shook her head in wonder, and then opened the door.

"Hey, are you ready to go walk the beach?" her mother asked, standing there in the hallway. Alexis was also wearing a bikini and sandals, which her strikingly curvaceous figure filled out scandalously. Between her heavier makeup and long loose flowing curls that fell down to her shoulders, she looked like she was off to shoot a swimsuit calendar somewhere. The only hint to her original gender was that her shoulders were a little too broad and her hips a touch too narrow, but there was hardly a red-blooded guy who would take notice of such things given the stunning overall package.

"Jesus, Mom," Steffi said with a smile.

"What?" Alexis said, suddenly looking a bit self-conscious. She adjusted a bikini strap that had slid slightly down her shoulder, and it looked like it had its work cut out for it, trying to hold her ample bosom in place. "John helped me pick it out," she said by way of explanation.

"I'm sure he did."

The two of them made their way down towards the beach, and as they did so, a number of male heads turned to admire the mother and daughter. Steffi looked down and blushed a little, but Alexis walked past with a practiced expression of steely indifference.

When they got to the beach, Alexis paused for a moment and turned to her daughter.

"Look, I know you and I...we don't always communicate so well..." she began.

"Mom, you don't have to--"

"No, but I *want* to," she interrupted. "Steffi, I know we've had our differences, but I'm really glad you asked me to be here for you tomorrow."

Steffi reached out and took her mother's hand. "And every day after," she said, as she reached up to give Alexis a kiss on the cheek. "You know there's nobody else I'd want to have with me. You're my mom."

"I don't want to bring up a sore subject, but I just don't want to think like maybe I pressured you into this somehow."

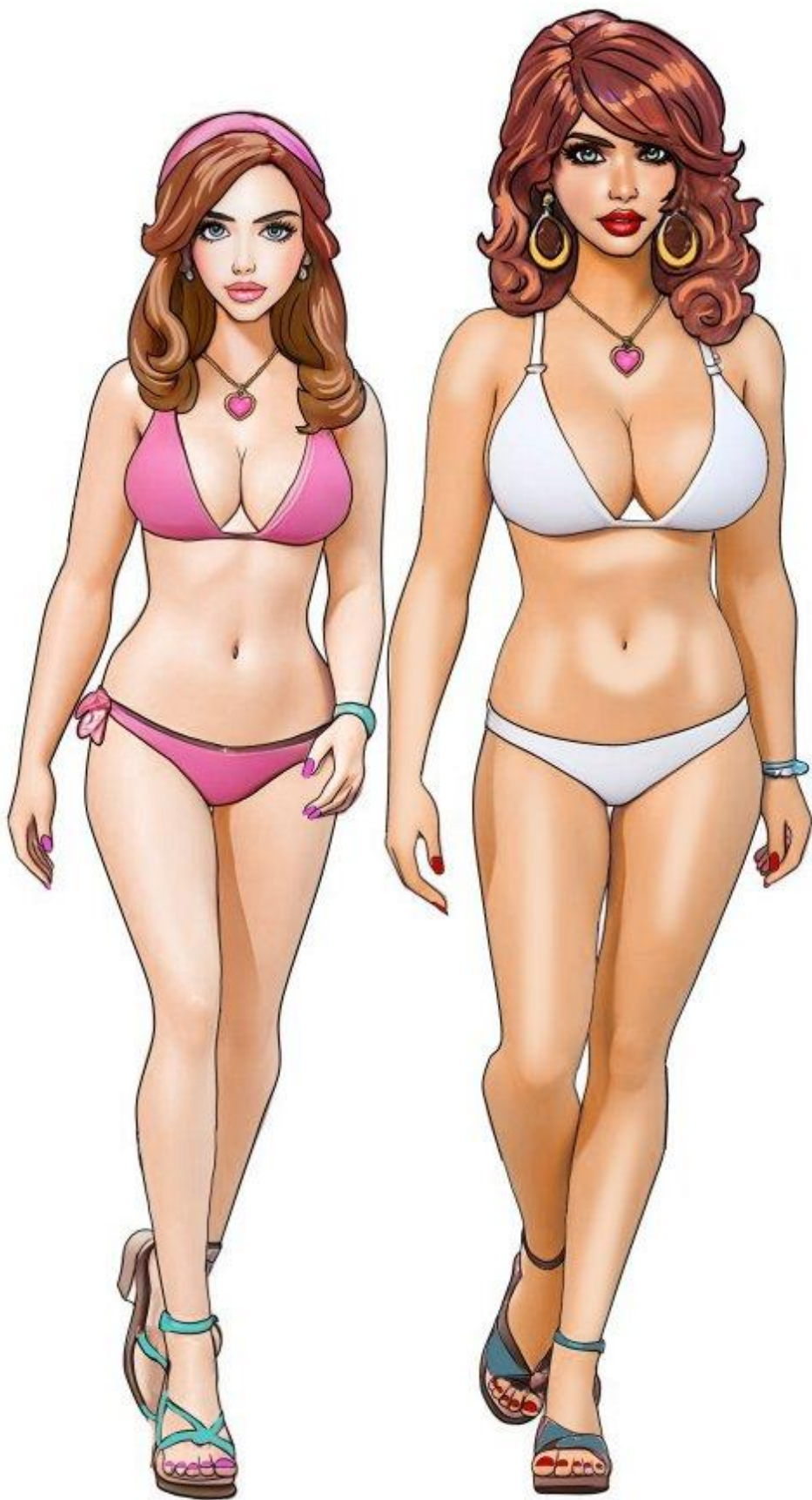
Steffi rolled her eyes. "God, don't *you* start. I got an earful of that from Allie already."

Alexis smiled and the two of them began to walk down the beach, feeling the wind and sun against their bodies as they listened to the sounds of the surf.

"I spoke to Allie the other day, myself," Alexis offered. "It feels like every other day something happens that makes me want to retreat and scramble backwards, but she always seems to know the right thing to say to help me keep pushing on, no matter how hard it seems."

Steffi nodded in assent. Then she made a little face as a thought occurred to her. "Mom, do you ever wonder what our lives would have been like if we hadn't met Allie?"

Alexis took a heavy breath. "I honestly have no idea."



THE END