

Andreas Romano generally did his best to forget about his ill-fated semester spent in the United States of America, doing an exchange program in a place called Green Lake. He'd gone into it with high hopes, excited to learn about American culture and eager to meet American girls, who he was certain were eager to be romanced by a suave newcomer from Italy. But it had all gone wrong, mostly thanks to one particular person: Bobby Vickerson.

Even remembering the name could make Andreas boil with anger. From the moment Andreas had arrived at Jefferson High, the basketball-playing boy seemed to have it in for him. First he'd made fun of his name, claiming "Andreas" was a girl's name -- ridiculous. Andreas had tried to explain that "Andreas" was absolutely a boy's name, seeing as it meant manly and virile, but that only prompted Bobby Vickerson to start calling him "Andrietta" instead.

Even worse, the school had no football team. Well, they'd had an American football team, of course, but Andreas didn't have the slightest clue how that game worked. The most popular sport had been basketball for some reason, and Bobby Vickerson was worshipped for his skills the way only footballers were popular in Italy. When the American boy found out Andreas was a "soccer player," he'd thought it was hilarious, informing him that it was a girl's sport -- even more ridiculous.

Andreas had thought he could recoup his social standing by impressing the ladies, but he was foiled on that front, too. The fact that he wore leather shoes and colorful scarves, as was fashionable, led the ignorant American students to a bizarre conclusion. By the end of the first week, everybody in Jefferson High was convinced he was gay. Bobby Vickerson might not have started the rumor, but he certainly kept it going with his little jibes and taunts, and by having the gall to insist that Andreas' hand-made leather bookbag was technically a purse.



All in all, the semester had been a miserable experience, and he couldn't have been more happy when it came to a close. Returning to his family in Rome, he'd done his best to put Green

Lake out of his mind. Of course, he'd spun a few stories for his friends to avoid losing face, claiming he'd dated a sexy blonde cheerleader during his semester abroad, but the lack of photo evidence hadn't done him any favors.

Andreas had privately vowed to never return to the USA, and before long he was back to his routine of playing football in the park, attending classes with people who knew the importance of good leather shoes, and saving up for a scooter. Green Lake was the farthest thing from his mind that spring evening, as he was studying for an economics test, but then a notification popped up on his Instagram.

One of the few American students who'd actually been friendly to him during his miserable semester had linked him to a girl's Instagram post: it was a photo of a stunning blonde posing in what appeared to be an airport. Andreas immediately perked up -- he had a weakness for blondes -- and looked closer.

The girl was wearing a flouncy miniskirt, showing off tanned, coltish legs, and her one-shoulder top, more fashionable than the usual American fare, displayed just a hint of cleavage as she bent forward. One manicured hand was clutching the handle of her pink suitcase, while the other was being used to blow the camera a kiss through pouty, gloss-coated lips. She was gorgeous, but despite her flirtatious pose, she also had a slight hint of nervousness in her pretty blue eyes.

Maybe that was explained by the caption: *Off to Italy for my first fashion show, wish me luck!*
#BOY2BABE #WHENINROME #HOT2GLOBETROT.



barbievickerson



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Andreas had no idea what “boy two babe” was supposed to mean, but judging by the other hashtags, this blonde beauty was on her way to his hometown. He supposed his American friend had shared it with him for that reason, though it wasn’t as if he was going to just run into her in the piazza -- Rome was a big city. Curiosity piqued regardless, Andreas tapped through to the girl’s Instagram account, scrolling through several equally alluring photos and selfies.

There was something vaguely familiar about her, but he was sure he would have remembered a girl that hot if she’d gone to Jefferson High during his semester there. It wasn’t until his eyes went up to read her Instagram bio that his world suddenly flipped upside down: *Barbie Vickerson. Model. Trans girl. Striving for realness, XOXOXO.*

It was impossible. Completely impossible. Even so, Andreas couldn’t stop himself from scrolling down as far as he could, and there, buried beneath all the sexy selfies and photo shoot stills, was a picture of Bobby Vickerson. It wasn’t quite the Bobby Vickerson who Andreas remembered tormenting him, maybe a bit scrawnier and with a more feminine-looking face, but it was definitely him: handsome, dark-haired, and trying to flex for a gym selfie.

“*Che cazzo?*” Andreas exclaimed, loudly enough to make his mother poke her head in and scold him for swearing. He barely registered her admonishment, still unable to believe what he was seeing. The American boy who had made his semester abroad a living nightmare, who had bullied or teased him at every turn, had turned himself into a sexy little blonde. It boggled the mind.

Moreover, it made him furious. Bobby Vickerson had impugned Andrea’s masculinity and his manhood at every chance, accusing him of having a woman’s name and playing a woman’s sport, and even of being gay, and now here the American boy was, prancing around in expensive stiletto shoes -- most likely made in Italy -- and short skirts. What sort of psychopathic hypocrite would do that? And what sort of guy would give up his manhood to wear dresses?

Rome was a big city, with plenty of fashion shows any given weekend, but suddenly Andreas was determined to figure out exactly which one “Barbie” would be participating in. If nothing else, he was owed some answers. And if he was being completely honest with himself, he wouldn’t mind seeing those legs in person, either.

#

Kimberly knew she’d been to Italy as a little kid -- her mom had shown her photos -- and she’d always entertained the vague thought of doing a big Eurotrip after graduation. But she had definitely never expected to be flying to Rome with her ex-boyfriend so he could strut his stuff at a spring fashion show.

Of course, there wasn’t much “boy” left to Bobby, at least on the outside. Kimberly had made sure of that. Her quest for retribution against the pompous, egotistical asshole who’d dumped and humiliated her had involved rigged bets, high-powered female hormones (unknowingly

administered), social media hacking and anonymous blackmail -- in other words, a lot of hard work.

But the results so far definitely spoke for themselves. As they walked through the airport terminal, the clapping of Bobby's sky-high heels drew just about every male eye in the place, and when they saw the owner of the shoes they kept right on looking. "Barbie" was a total vision of femininity: glossy blonde hair tumbling down slender shoulders, gorgeous face accentuated by full makeup, tanned, waxed-smooth legs flashing from under the hem of a daring miniskirt with every step.

Thanks to an intensive boot camp with his fashion model sister Serena, and his mom's constant reminders, he also "walked the walk" in a way that was liable to cause whiplash. Kimberly wasn't sure he was even aware how much of an effect his sexy, gyrating strut had on passers by, but she couldn't deny she loved the sight of her once-macho ex sashaying along with his hips rolling, purse held daintily in the crook of one arm while his other hand pulled his new pink suitcase along behind him.

Even though he was hating every second he spent as a female, he definitely looked the part of an up-and-coming supermodel -- and Kimberly was going to do everything she could to keep it that way. For the moment, that meant being Bobby's friend, confidante, and social media coordinator, which was the reason Bobby's parents had bought her a plane ticket.

"You girls are in for such a treat," her ex's mom said, leading the way towards the departure gate at a brisk stride. "Rome is an absolutely *gorgeous* city. And I don't just mean the men, either." She looked back to give them a conspiratorial wink, which Bobby returned with a weak smile Kimberly knew was hiding serious discomfort.

"Let's hear more about the men, though?" Kimberly said, and not entirely just to watch her ex squirm. Her single-minded determination to girlyfy her ex had taken basically all her time and energy over the past months. She hadn't hooked up with anyone in ages, and a hot Italian guy sounded kind of perfect.

"They really know how to treat a woman," Bobby's mom said, with a slightly dreamy smile. "Before I met Barbie's father, I had an amazing summer in Italy. They appreciate beauty in a way other cultures just don't." She paused. "Oh, and they love blondes. I adore the new color, Kimberly, but you really picked the wrong time to join us brunettes."

Kimberly shrugged, tossing her newly-dyed hair -- she'd decided to ditch her former California-girl blonde a week earlier in favor of a dark chestnut brown. "I was in the mood for a change," she said. "Besides, blonde is kind of Barbie's thing now."

"Definitely," her ex's mom said. "Branding is so essential at this early stage. And of course, you look so good as a blonde, sweetie. Those Italian men are going to just eat you up."

Bobby blushed, clearly mortified by the idea. He gulped. “Um, thanks, Mom,” he said awkwardly, in the soft, high-pitched, slightly breathy voice that was now his default thanks to weeks of constant practice.



“Well, here we are,” his mom said, casually staking claim to the seats closest to their departure gate and depositing her suitcase. “I’m going to run buy a neck-pillow. Does anyone need a snack?”

As soon as she bustled away, Bobby dropped into the nearest seat, skillfully avoiding flashing his panties, and glared.

“Remind me again how doing a fashion show in Italy is going to screw over Serena?” he demanded, crossing one waxed-smooth leg over the other and folding his arms, looking for all the world like a pouting beauty queen.

There were a few different factors keeping Bobby in skirts, but his biggest motivation to stay “Barbie” at the moment was one Kimberly knew very well: revenge. Her ex had spent basically his entire life in the shadow of his narcissistic older sister Serena, a successful fashion model, and hated it.

When Serena had found out her little brother had “come out,” she’d seen through the ruse, but mistakenly thought he was doing it by choice to steal her spotlight. Naturally, she’d done everything in her power to make life hell for him -- and the only way for Bobby to get payback was as “Barbie.”

“The show’s sponsored by Blush,” Kimberly explained, sitting down beside him. “You know, the makeup company that does that one lipstick you like so much.”

Bobby grimaced. “It’s really long-lasting,” he admitted. “I don’t have to check it in the mirror every five freaking minutes.”

“Definitely tell them that,” Kimberly said. “There’ll be executives there. Mostly because Blush is looking for a new girl for their next ad campaign. That’s one of the reasons you got an invite to the show.”

“But Serena’s not even going to be there,” Bobby said, frowning. “It’s not like I’m going to get to trip her on the runway or something.”

“Tripping her on the runway isn’t going to demolish her career, anyways,” Kimberly said. “You want to do this right, don’t you? Bury her so bad she won’t show up on Google? Your words.”

“Yeah, I know, don’t steal my lines,” Bobby said, flicking his blonde hair out of his face. “But how does me getting a job with Brush...”

“Blush.”

“How does that hurt Serena?” Bobby finished.

“Because Serena is currently the face of SoGlam,” Kimberly said triumphantly. “It’s *perfect*.”

Her ex stared at her, his pretty blue eyes completely void of understanding. “Uh-huh.”

Kimberly rolled her eyes. “It’s only the nastiest rivalry in the cosmetics world,” she said. “Think Lakers versus...the Irish team.”

“You mean the Celtics?” Bobby’s face lit up momentarily at the prospect of a basketball metaphor. “That’s kind of a dated example, Kimmy. Maybe Lakers versus Clippers. Wait, who’s the underdog?”

“Blush is the new hotness,” Kimberly said. “They’re trying to knock SoGlam off the top, basically. They want to be younger, cooler, sexier, all that.”

Bobby stared out the window at the airport runway with a thoughtful expression. “So I’m like a free agent taking my talents to Blush so they can beat SoGlam in the finals, and then I can rub Serena’s face in it.”

Kimberly figured it was about as close as she was going to get. “Exactly,” she said. “It’s exactly like that.”

#

Bobby had pretty much zero interest in Europe. As far as he was concerned, it was Serena’s territory, a weird land full of art and culture and fancy coffee and other lame shit, where the only sport people cared about was, for some totally inexplicable reason, soccer. But if he was going to take the fight to his older sister, he would have to enter enemy territory.

And in the back of his mind, he had to admit getting out of Green Lake might be a plus: being “Barbie” around all his former friends and peers was a perpetual nightmare. They remembered him as a big basketball star, but now, thanks to a psychotic blackmailer and a hormone imbalance, they thought his secret ambition all along had been to turn himself into an ultra-feminine bimbo in short skirts and high heels.

At least in Italy he wouldn’t know anybody -- being taken at face value as a hot blonde was humiliating in its own right, but not as bad as dealing with the reactions of people who knew him as Bobby and thought he was “transitioning” by choice.

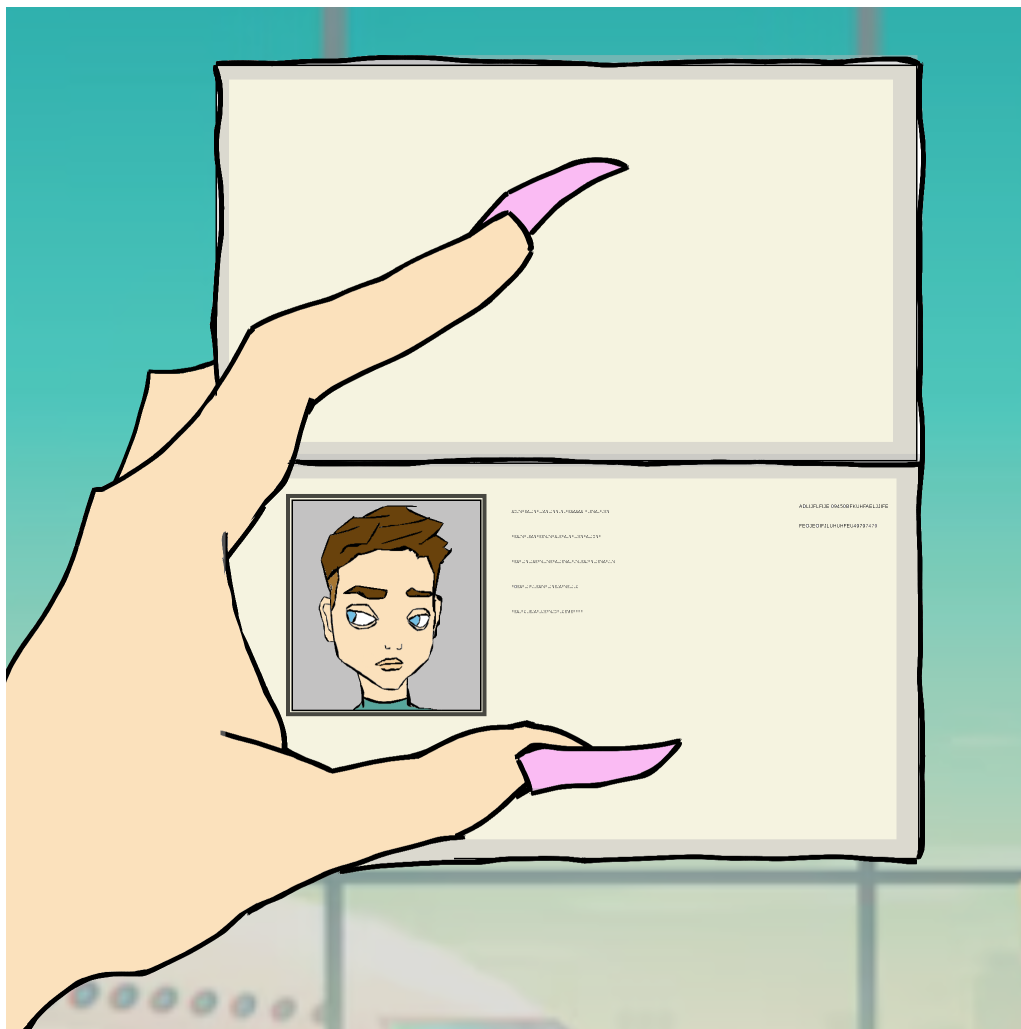
“Please have your passports open to the photo page!” the gate agent called, shaking him from his thoughts.

They were standing in line to board the plane. Bobby was pretty sure Serena always flew first class, but for some reason they were in economy plus. He suspected it was because his dad had been unwilling to buy Kimberly a ticket in the first place -- Bobby had been forced to play the diva and insist she get brought along.

Kimberly was the only other person, besides his anonymous blackmailer, who knew the truth of the whole “Barbie” story. She was also his only ally against Serena. No way was he going to Europe without her.

“Here, sweetie, I have yours,” his mom said, fishing his passport out of her purse. Bobby accepted it with a grimace, and his mom, misinterpreting his look of displeasure as one of nerves, was quick to reassure him. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I already spoke with the gate agent.”

Bobby was dimly glad about that, but he was mostly just dreading having to see his old passport photo. He’d gotten it renewed a couple years ago, prior to a family vacation to Mexico that had been cut short halfway through thanks to one of Serena’s shows getting rescheduled. Now he flicked it open with one long glittery nail, and was confronted by the sight of his fifteen-year-old self: short, dark hair, unplucked eyebrows, and not a hint of makeup, staring skeptically at whoever had been manning the camera.



A couple years ago, he had been busy working on his jumpshot, eagerly awaiting a growth spurt to take him to six feet, give him some muscles, and possibly even stubble. There was absolutely no way fifteen-year-old Bobby could have anticipated what was coming. The last time he’d been on a basketball court had been for a photoshoot, all dolled up in a skimpy cheerleader’s uniform,

and his biggest “growth spurt” had been filling out his first bra. Bobby was still wishing he could somehow go back in time and warn his younger self when the flight attendant gently pried his passport out of his hand to inspect it.

“Have a nice flight, *Miss Vickerson*,” the woman chirped, emphasizing the feminine moniker as she returned the passport. “Love your shoes, by the way.”

Bobby gave a weak smile of thanks, but getting shoe compliments was definitely preferable to the debacle he’d suffered through at security -- the TSA agent had thought he was a chick who’d accidentally brought her brother’s identification to the airport, and his mom had been forced to explain, in a stage whisper that caught the ears of just about every person in line, that “Barbie” had recently come out as transgender.

Bobby shuddered at the memory as he followed Kimberly and his mom down the sky tunnel, pulling his bright pink suitcase along behind him. It seemed like he was the only passenger not entirely thrilled to be flying to Italy -- everybody around him was chatting excitedly and comparing travel plans. His mom was busy regaling Kimberly with some story about a guy named Eduardo, a story Bobby knew instinctively he did *not* want to hear.

To avoid the danger, he screwed his AirPods into his ears and started flicking through his music. Ally and Beverly had gotten ahold of his phone during lunch hour and completely messed up his Spotify preferences: he had to wade through a sea of ultra-girly pop to get to any music he actually *liked*. Tons of Ariana Grande, Cardi B, Selena Gomez...and they had also made sure to throw “Barbie Girl” by Aqua in there, too.

Grimacing, Bobby set about doing damage control as they slowly boarded the plane. By some quirk of seating, his mom and Kimberly had ended up seated together two rows ahead of him, which was a silver lining -- he wouldn’t have to listen to any more girl talk than necessary. He minced past them to his assigned seat, 15B, and was doubly relieved to find both the window and aisle seat empty. He would get to stretch out, relax, throw on a movie and temporarily forget he was on his way to Rome to strut around on a catwalk.

“Hey there, need a hand?” came a deep voice.

Bobby glanced back and saw a big, bear-like guy with a broad chest and bushy beard, pointing at his pink suitcase. It seemed like ever since he’d been forced into being “Barbie,” people thought he was incapable of doing anything for himself. Bobby was opening his mouth to say no when the guy reached down, plucked his suitcase off the ground, and slotted it easily into the overhead bin.

“Boy, what’s in there, bricks?” he asked jokingly, wiping imaginary sweat off his brow.

“Just clothes,” Bobby muttered, and immediately blushed, realizing the guy now thought he was one of *those girls* who overloaded their suitcase with every possible outfit, no matter the occasion. “Uh, thanks.”

He slid over into the window seat, but to his abject horror, rather than strolling on past, the barrel-chested guy plopped down into the aisle seat beside him, immediately spreading his blue-jean clad legs. Even worse, he put his meaty arm right down on the shared armrest, forcing Bobby to pull his own back instinctively -- he'd been “Barbie” long enough to know that any kind of physical contact, especially skin to skin, could easily be taken as an invitation he didn't want to make.

“I swear these seats get smaller every flight,” the man sighed, seemingly oblivious to Bobby's reaction. “Well, at least it's only about eleven hours, right?”

“Right,” Bobby said weakly.

He curled up against the window with his waxed-smooth knees pressed together and his hands in his lap, gritting his teeth. If it weren't for Serena being the face of SoGlam, he wouldn't be doing this show. Which made his current seating arrangement Serena's fault. Which made him even more determined to pull this thing off.

“Anything to screw Serena,” he said, repeating it under his breath like a mantra. “Anything to screw Serena...”

“What's that now?” his seatmate asked cheerfully.

Bobby swallowed. “Um, it's that new Cardi B song,” he lied. “Sooo catchy.”

“Uh-huh,” the man said. “Well, I'm just going to pop these shoes off and kick back. Hope that's okay.”

Without waiting for confirmation, he did just that, revealing two very large and very sweaty feet. Bobby wrinkled his nose, scooting as close to the window as humanly possible. His seatmate didn't seem to take the hint, instead somehow spreading his legs even farther into Bobby's space. Grimacing, Bobby turned up the volume in his AirPods, wrapped his arms around himself, and settled in for a very, very long flight.

#

Kimberly wasn't easy to impress, but she had to admit it: Rome was amazing. From the moment they'd stepped out of the airport, into a beautiful sunny day with just a hint of a breeze to cool things off, her head had practically been on a swivel. Everywhere she looked she saw a mix of ancient classical architecture with sleek modern buildings, fashionably-dressed people lounging

outside cafes and gelato shops, talking animatedly with their hands, and -- she wasn't going to deny it -- a lot of very, very good-looking Italian guys.

Bobby's mom had elected to take a nap the instant they got to the hotel, but Kimberly, having slept surprisingly well on the flight, was fully energized for sight-seeing. Judging by Bobby's somewhat zombified state at the luggage carousel, he hadn't managed to get much sleep on the plane, but she'd persuaded him to at least come see the Colosseum with her -- their hotel was right in the heart of the city, up on the hill and only a ten minute walk away from the famous arena.

Or at least, it was supposed to be a ten minute walk.

"Come on, Barbie!" Kimberly called over her shoulder. "Hurry up!"

"I'm trying!" her ex-boyfriend squealed.

Kimberly turned all the way around, not quite able to hide her smirk. Bobby had been forced to master high heels over the course of his "girification" in a way very, very few straight teenage guys ever would, but he'd also spent the vast majority of that time walking on nice even surfaces.

Now he was trying to navigate jagged cobblestones in five-inch stilettos, stride constricted by his short skirt, arms out for balance with his wrists flared prettily, inadvertently showing off his long manicured nails to the world. It was kind of adorable.



“You didn’t pack a single pair of flats?” she asked skeptically, already knowing the answer.

Bobby flushed. “My mom packed,” he grumbled. “So, no. Just wait up, will you?”

Kimberly, of course, had changed into a pair of trendy Jordan high-tops -- she hadn’t been able to resist rubbing it in a little. Bobby’s treasured sneaker collection had been declared off-limits ever since his “coming out,” and she honestly couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen him in anything but heels. Maybe at the barre class Serena had made him attend with her: Kimberly could picture a pair of cute pink women’s Reeboks that matched her ex’s skimpy work-out top.

“Here,” she said, doubling back and offering her arm.

Bobby glared at her.

“We have to be back in less than an hour, remember?” Kimberly said pointedly, rolling her eyes. “Come on, Barbie. Don’t be silly.”

Still pouting, Bobby reluctantly accepted the help, holding onto her arm with both of his to help balance himself as he picked his way across the dangerous terrain. Kimberly couldn’t help but thrill a little at the sharp role reversal. Back when Bobby had been her egotistical boyfriend, he’d had zero patience or sympathy for her when she wore impractical shoes out on their dates -- even though he’d clearly enjoyed the “sexiness” factor.

Now he was the one clutching onto *her* for support, and thanks to the deluge of female hormones and strict dieting, his once-wiry arms now felt about as muscular as a ten-year-old girl’s. Times had certainly changed.

The Colosseum was just rounding into view, surrounded by a swarm of tourists, when Kimberly and Bobby were ambushed. Two young men brandishing plastic swords and wide grins leapt out from behind the stone archway they’d been walking towards, making Kimberly flinch and Bobby give a slightly-too-deep shout of surprise that he immediately tried to turn into a more girlish squeak.

“English?” one of their attackers asked, jabbing the air with his plastic sword. Both of them were dressed up as Roman centurions, or at least, *partially* dressed: they had plastic helmets, red capes, and sandals, but Kimberly was pretty sure ancient Roman soldiers hadn’t gone around bare-chested. Not that she minded the view -- the guys were pretty ripped.

“Uh, yeah,” Kimberly said, raising an eyebrow.

“You no can pass!” the guy insisted, waving his sword. He winked. “Not without photo! One Euro for photo with Roman warrior!”

“Kimmy, what the hell is going on?” Bobby asked, in an extra breathy and feminine voice, no doubt trying to make up for his earlier slip. “Are they, like, mugging us?”

“I think it’s a tourist thing,” Kimberly said. “They dress up and charge people for selfies.” Normally she wouldn’t see much appeal to the little hustle, but the way both “centurions” were busily checking out “Barbie” put a smile on her face. “It would be great for your Insta,” she said. “Come on, Barbie. My treat.”

“Barbie?” one of the Italians echoed. “You are Barbie?” He exchanged an incredulous grin with his friend, then put both hands on his hips, swishing them from side to side. “I’m Barbie girl, in the Barbie woorld...” he sang, accented but surprisingly on-key.

Bobby's face turned red even as both centurions burst into laughter. "Yeah, yeah, get over it," he said darkly.

"Forgive me, *carina*," the singer said dramatically, dropping to one knee and clutching Bobby's dainty hand in both of his own. "I only, how you say, kidding?"

"Take photo," his friend said, in a stage whisper.

Kimberly didn't need to be told twice. She already had her iPhone ready, and while Bobby was still trying to figure out how to extricate himself, she immortalized the moment with the press of a button: her ex-boyfriend dolled up in a cute top, short skirt, and very high heels, blushing furiously and giving the camera a pleading look through mascara-laden lashes as the handsome centurion kissed his manicured hand.

"Hey!" Bobby whined, hearing the shutter sound effect.

"Now with two Roman warrior," the other centurion announced, sliding into the picture. "Pose!"

Bobby tugged ineffectually at his trapped hand. "Kimmy!" he protested.

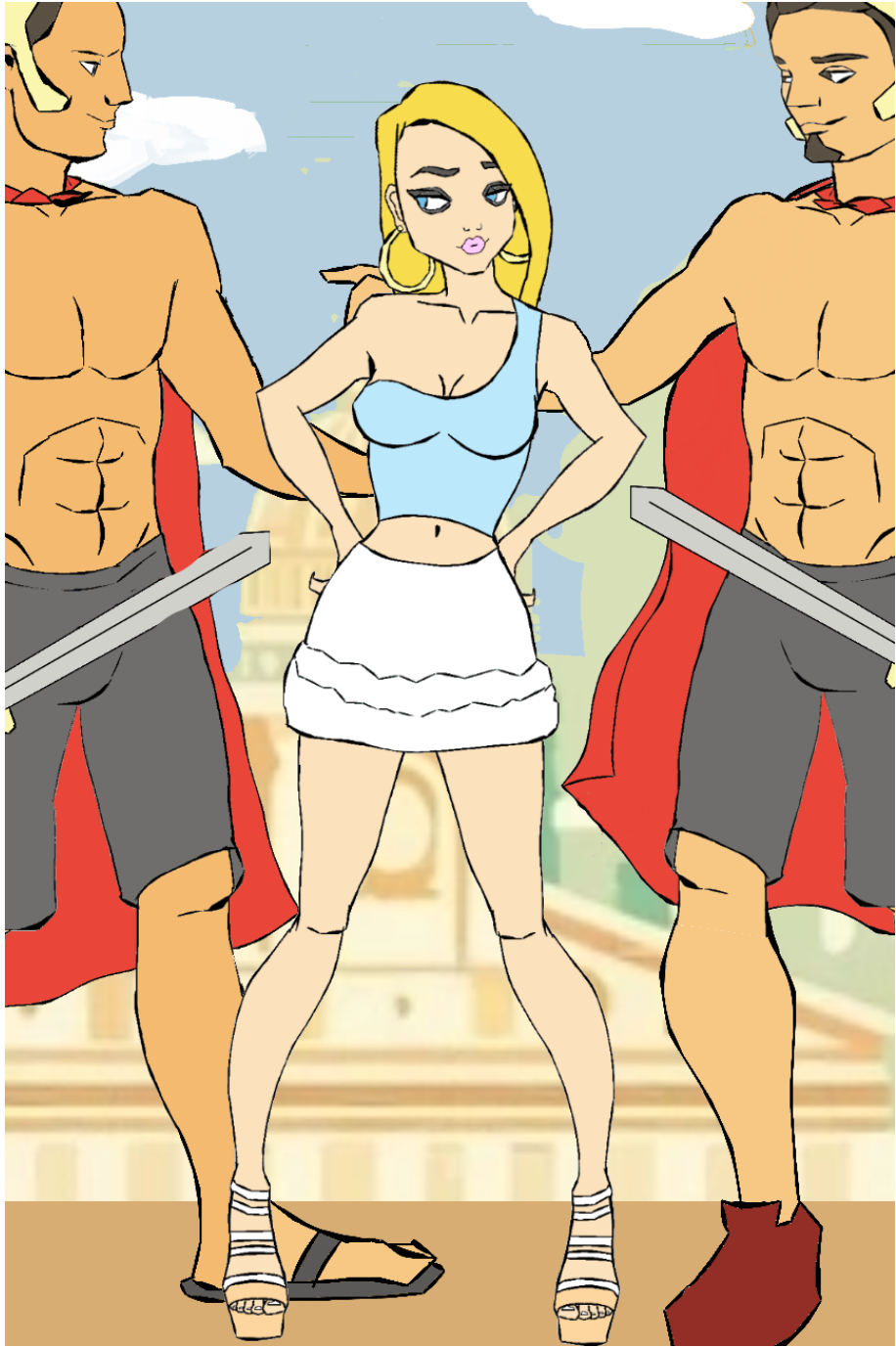
"It's for the 'gram," Kimberly wheedled. "Come on, this is the kind of photo Serena would *never* post."

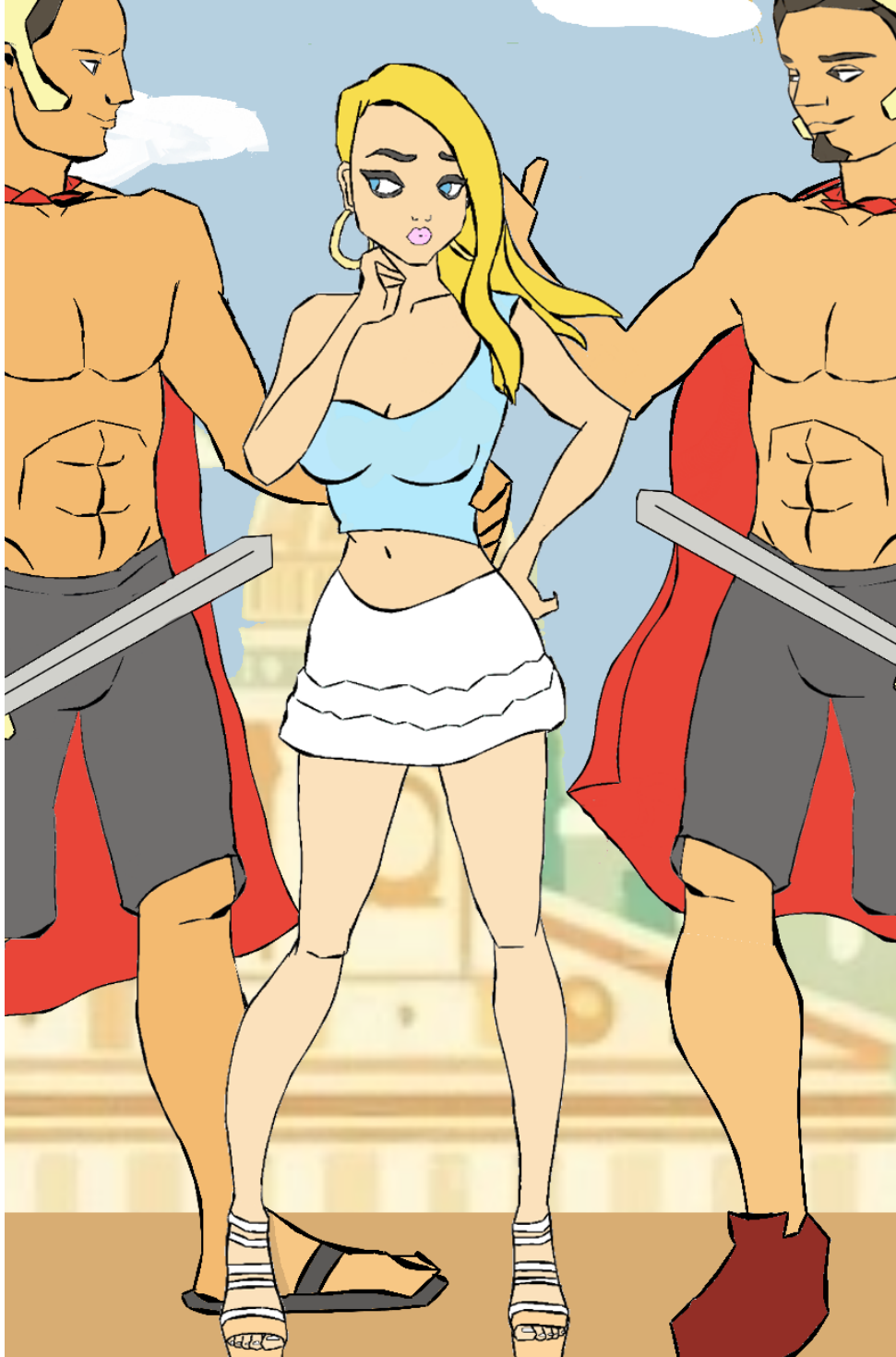
"Yeah, because it's stupid," Bobby snapped, flushing.

"No, because she takes herself way too seriously," Kimberly countered. "Unlike Barbie Vickerson, who is fresh, fun, sexy, and the perfect new face for Blush. Now pose, already! You're a model, remember?"

Bobby grimaced, but she could see her argument had worked -- anything she could link to beating Serena, she could make him do, which had some amazing potential. He shifted into "model mode" so fluidly Kimberly couldn't help but be impressed. His older sister had spent their every waking moment together drilling him, and it showed: suddenly Bobby was cycling through a bunch of poses, cocking his hips, tossing his hair, cutely kicking up his leg behind him...

And of course, the centurions were only too happy to ham it up for the camera, squaring off with their swords as if ready to fight over the gorgeous blonde beauty, or flexing proudly while Bobby, blushing furiously, put his hands on their muscled chests. Kimberly knew it was time to wrap up when her ex's eye started to twitch -- he was probably flashing back to his last photo-shoot, where he'd been stuck cavorting around with shirtless male models in a school gymnasium.





“Last one!” she called, and, on some pre-arranged signal, the two centurions suddenly hoisted a squealing Bobby up into the air, sitting him on their shoulders. Bobby squirmed desperately to avoid flashing his panties, then gave Kimberly the most pained smile on record as she snapped the final photo. She couldn’t help but notice one of the centurions copping a feel of Bobby’s smooth legs as he set him down.

“Ten Euro,” the Italian said, beaming. “This is discount, because you are so beautiful, my *bella americana*.”

“Because you are *both* so beautiful,” the other guy corrected, and as Kimberly fished the money out of her purse, he gave her a look that made her feel a little warm all of a sudden. He’d been eyeing her up even as he posed with Bobby, and now, as she handed over the bill, he handed her a smartphone with his Instagram page already open.

“I didn’t know they had smartphones in Ancient Rome,” she said dryly. The guy gave her an unabashed grin in response, and, after one more sly peek at his rippling abs, Kimberly entered her info. “Okay,” she announced. “Let’s get going, Barbie.”

The other centurion was obviously trying the same thing: he had his arm wrapped around Bobby’s small waist and was saying something into his her ex’s ear that had turned his entire face red. He struggled free just as Kimberly came over to rescue him, straightening his skirt. The centurion just gave an innocent shrug.

“*Ciao, bella*,” he said. “Have good time in Rome, yes?”

Kimberly raised a questioning eyebrow, but Bobby just started marching determinedly towards the Colosseum in a way that would have been more dramatic if he didn’t almost trip every few steps. She gave the guys a wave, then jogged to catch up. He was muttering under his breath about where exactly his would-be Romeo could stick his plastic sword, but you would never guess it from the photo Kimberly was now busy captioning for “Barbie’s” Instagram account.

Are all Italian guys this buff? she tapped into the keyboard, adding a tongue and water droplets as emojis for good measure. *#BOY2BABE #WHENINROME...* She paused, staring at the picture, which looked an awful lot like “Barbie” giving a girlish squeal of delight as the centurions set him on their shoulders like royalty.

“How do you say “princess” in Italian?” she asked.

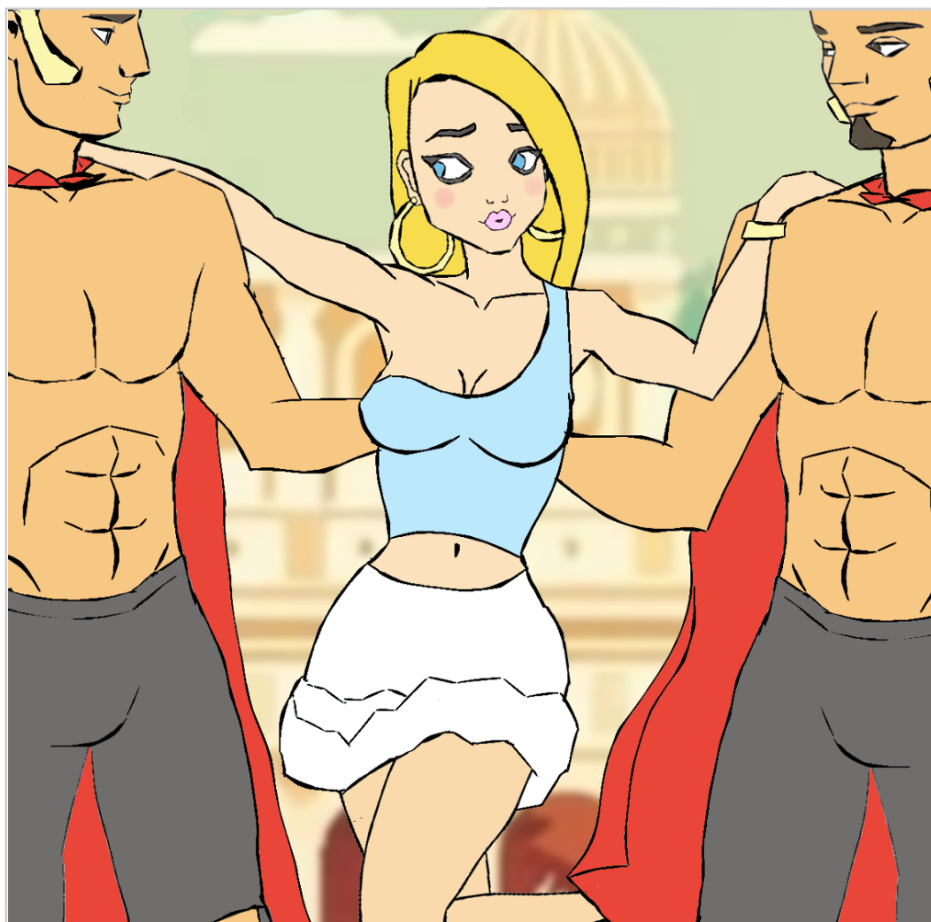
“I dunno,” Bobby said darkly. “Margherita?” He glanced backward at the centurions, who were already attacking another gaggle of tourists. “Mom was not kidding. These dudes are thirsty.”

“Get used to it, *bella*,” Kimberly said, opening Google Translate on her phone. “Huh. *La principessa*. That’s cute.”

She entered the final hashtag on the caption, then posted the photo from her ex’s Instagram account. His phone buzzed in his purse and she got to watch him rummage through his makeup to extricate it. When he saw the new photo, he groaned.



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“I don’t care if you’re my social media coordinator,” he said. “I want, like, power of veto.”

“If you had power of veto, you would veto everything I post,” Kimberly pointed out. “And look! You’re already getting a ton of likes.”

Bobby scrolled through his phone morosely. “Yeah,” he admitted. “And also someone asking if I want to see their leaning tower of...” He blushed and gritted his teeth. “I hate the internet, I hate Rome, I hate all of this.”

Kimberly patted him on the arm. “Let’s see the Colosseum, then get you some gelato,” she said. “I guarantee they do mango flavor somewhere.”

#

As much as it pained Bobby to admit it, over the past few months he had kind of gotten used to guys checking him out. Yes, it was still humiliating, still emasculating, and he still hated it with every fiber of his being, but when it happened every single day, eventually the sting had to wear off. He had learned to put up with boys staring at his legs, or talking to his chest. He’d grown accustomed to turning around and seeing the guilty expressions that meant they had been watching his butt when he walked.

But these Italians were taking it to a whole other level. He’d thought it couldn’t get any worse than those two dumbasses in costumes, but he’d been wrong: on their way to the gelato shop Kimberly had found on Google Maps, some guy had given him a rose and professed his undying love in a mixture of impassioned Italian and heavily-accented English. *At* the gelato shop, a different guy had absolutely insisted on paying for him. On the way *back* from the gelato shop, a third guy on a moped had risked his life cutting across traffic just to try chatting him up at the crosswalk.

And that didn’t include the chorus of appreciative whistles and catcalls that seemed to follow him wherever he went. Kimberly was getting some looks herself, but it was obvious the obsession with blondes had not been overstated. He was pretty sure that was what they were trying to say sometimes when they shouted *bionda* at him. He was less sure about *strafiga*, but judging from how it had earned the catcaller a swat on the head from a little old Italian lady shuffling past, he could guess.

The fact that the little paper cup of mango ice cream, or gelato, or whatever, was delicious just made it all the more infuriating that he couldn’t eat it in peace. By the time they made it back to the relative sanctuary of the hotel, Bobby was ruing the day he’d ever let the salon stylists put him in a blonde wig. Well, he rued it anyways, but now he was ruing it *hard*.

He and Kimberly were sharing a room, but when they arrived at the door his mom popped her head out from the neighboring suite, still looking slightly frazzled from the change in timezones.

“There you two are!” she exclaimed. “I was just about to message you. You need to get your makeup off and hop in the shower, Barbie. Traffic is even worse than I remember it, so we should get moving as soon as possible.” She fluttered a hand against her head the way she always did when she had a migraine coming on. “Oh, and you saw the Colosseum! Isn’t it great? So *old*. Okay, get in the shower, sweetie. Chop, chop!”

Her door swung shut again, and Bobby was struck with the realization that this was really happening: he was about to do a fashion show as “Barbie,” in front of an audience, and it was way too late to back out.

“Don’t worry,” Kimberly said, somehow sensing his nervousness. “You’ll be great.” She fished the key card out of her purse and opened the door to their room. Bobby gave a sullen shrug and walked inside, grabbing his makeup remover before heading straight to the bathroom.

Taking off his “face” always gave him a weird mix of feelings. On one hand, it was a relief to ditch the fake eyelashes, and to look a little bit more like his old self. On the other hand, it was disturbing to see how much “Barbie” stuck around, even without a hint of makeup. Struck by a sudden suspicion, Bobby rummaged through his purse and pulled his passport out of the bottom, flipping once again to the photo of his cocky, macho, fifteen-year-old self.

Yes, the plucked eyebrows and puffy collagen-treated lips certainly made a difference, but it wasn’t just that. He couldn’t shake the feeling that his skin had gotten smoother and clearer -- maybe because of all the moisturizing -- and that the sharper lines of his face had softened a little, even though he had *lost* weight, not gained it. Could that be another side effect of his gynecomastia?



Hopping in the shower didn't give him any respite from his worries, since he had to confront the fact that his boobs still seemed to be growing. The guy Kimberly had put him onto, Dr. Skito, was giving him male hormones to counteract his condition, but the little pink pills had yet to kick in -- but maybe, for now, that was actually a good thing.

His goal of crushing Serena wasn't one he could accomplish as Bobby, and "Barbie" needed to look "her" best if he had any shot of upstaging his big sister. But with the male hormones already starting to circulate in his body, he had a limited window of time to act. If he woke up tomorrow with whiskers, Blush would probably not be impressed.

Putting the issue out of his mind for the time being, Bobby instead shut his eyes and tried to fantasize about a hot chick climbing into the shower with him. Maybe Kimberly -- his ex looked good as a brunette, and they were going to be sleeping in the same bedroom. Sure, she

claimed she wasn't into him anymore, but he'd definitely seen her checking him out on occasion, the same way guys so often did.

He figured some late-night, no-strings fun might be on the table, if only he could get "Little Bobby" to cooperate. He frowned, looking down. Jerking it in the shower had once been one of his favorite pastimes, but right now he wasn't getting so much as a twitch -- which didn't bode well for his hopes of a hook-up.

On the other hand, his nipples were more sensitive than ever lately, and when he reluctantly started soaping his breasts he felt a disconcerting tingle of pleasure. He also got a sudden flashback to lying on the couch in Josh Delacroix's basement, unzipping his skimpy top to give his former basketball rival better access. Blushing at the memory, Bobby turned the water as cold as he could stand it.

A few freezing, arousal-killing moments later, he climbed out of the shower and wrapped a towel around himself. He secured it under his armpits automatically -- he'd had that drilled into him by his mom, who insisted on modesty in some circumstances, but totally ignored it in others, in a way he figured he would never quite catch onto. As he began blow-drying his hair, he tried to focus on the upcoming challenge.

Not only did he have to be a model, he had to be the best model there: Kimberly had already shown him photos of his main competition, an Italian girl named Bianca Buccino, and she was the kind of hottie Bobby once would have grudgingly rated a 9 or even a 9.5. A year ago, he would have tried picking her up. Now, he was going to have to show her up on the catwalk. Life was pretty freaking weird these days.

"Anything to screw Serena," Bobby muttered to himself, fluffing out his blonde tresses. "Anything to screw Serena..."

#

Bobby's mom hadn't been joking about the traffic. Their Uber got them there just in the nick of time, even though the gallery where the show was taking place had looked pretty freaking close to the hotel on Kimberly's phone. The space wasn't quite as big or lavish as she'd been expecting, but she supposed this wasn't exactly a Victoria's Secret gig. It was busy, at least: organizers were racing around with clipboards or herding racks of clothing toward the backstage area.

She shot a look over at her ex, who was watching the proceedings with an expression of distaste. It was a look that worked for a jaded seen-it-all fashion queen like Serena, but that wasn't what Blush was after.

"Try to look excited," Kimberly hissed, as Bobby's mom flagged down a woman with a clipboard. "Fresh, fun, and sexy, remember? Be a little more...bubbly."

Bobby rolled his eyes, but he pasted a winning smile onto his pretty features as the organizer came rushing up. "Hi," he chirped. "I'm Barbie Vicker -- "

"Yes, hello, you are Barbie Vickerson," the Italian woman said, thrusting a form and a fountain pen at him. "Sign here, we are in a hurry, so the others you will sign later, okay? You are needed backstage for makeup and to be measured."

Bobby's mom intercepted the form at once. "Go ahead, sweetie," she said. "I'll handle the paperwork."

"Yes, yes, better," the organizer said. "We are so happy to have you, Barbie, your shoot with Jan Van Antwerp was very nice."

Bobby's cheeks went pink at the reminder. "Thanks."

"You are welcome," the woman said, now turning to Kimberly and looking her up and down with a critical eye. "And you? You are not walking, are you?"

Kimberly felt her own face go a little bit pink. She knew there was a difference between high-school hot and model hot, but had her ex really outclassed her that badly in the looks department? "Social media coordinator," she said, through gritted teeth.

"Please, go sit," the woman said brusquely. "It is crazy enough already with so many lost people running in circles, and..." She trailed off, looking over Kimberly's shoulder. "Ah, good!" she exclaimed, breaking into a relieved smile. "Our star!"

Kimberly followed her gaze, and her eyes narrowed. A very tall, very busty, and very beautiful Italian girl with flowing jet black hair was making her entrance, accompanied by a whole entourage of admirers and assistants, one of whom was holding her purse and Starbucks coffee cup for her. Bianca Buccino, in the flesh.

Kimberly bit her lip. She'd done her research, and knew Bobby's main competitor for the Blush campaign was no push-over, but she hadn't expected quite this much fanfare for a model who had only done a few spreads and was still more famous in Italy for a baby clothing ad than anything she'd done since puberty. Kimberly hadn't expected her to look even better in real life than on her Instagram, either.

She glanced over at her ex, who had a look of awe-struck admiration on his face -- except, naturally, his eyes were pretty much glued to Bianca Buccino's rack.

"Backstage, backstage," the organizer trilled, pushing Bobby gently in the right direction before, seeming to forget their existence entirely, she hurried over towards Bianca Buccino.

“Go on, Barbie,” Bobby’s mom said, smiling brightly. “You’re going to be great. Kimberly and I will be watching from the front row, okay?”

Bobby dragged his eyes away from his competitor’s bust. “Um, right,” he said. “Cool. See you guys later.”

As soon as he was making his way backstage, the smile dropped off his mom’s face. “Our ‘star,’” she echoed darkly, still flipping through the form. “Honestly. She’s barely done anything. She has a great publicity team, and that’s it. We were actually trying to poach one of her coordinators for Barbie, but…” Her mouth snapped shut and she looked up with an awkward smile.

“As in, a social media coordinator?” Kimberly asked, with a slight sinking feeling.

Her ex’s mom looked slightly pained. “At this stage, it’s very important for Barbie to feel comfortable,” she said diplomatically. “So at this stage, you’re actually perfect, Kimberly. She needs your support. But moving forward, well, we’re obviously going to have a professional do her socials.”

Kimberly’s jaw dropped slightly. A deep feeling of embarrassment flooded through her as she realized she should have seen this coming a mile away: she’d gotten so used to thinking of herself as the mastermind behind everything “Barbie” that she’d forgotten her ex’s parents had equally grandiose, if less sinister, plans for their progeny. Of course they weren’t going to actually employ a teenage girl to help manage their new daughter’s image.

“But let’s not think about that now,” Bobby’s mom said cheerfully. “Just enjoy the weekend, sweetie. We’re in Rome, and Barbie is getting her first catwalk experience.”

“On a catwalk sponsored by Blush, who are looking for a new face for their cosmetics line,” Kimberly said pointedly. “And I know their marketing director is around here somewhere. Nino Romano?”

Mrs. Vickerson pursed her lips. “Yes, he’s here,” she admitted, lowering her voice slightly. “But I’m well aware that Bianca’s the favorite already -- the Italian connection, you know. Since this is Barbie’s first real show, I didn’t want to put any extra pressure on her. Not when getting the Blush campaign is such a longshot.”

Kimberly swallowed. “I didn’t just come here to take photos of her in front of fountains or whatever,” she said. “I can do way more than that. I swear.”

“That’s nice, sweetie,” Bobby’s mom said vaguely, pushing the signed form into the arms of an organizer scurrying past. “Let’s go find our seats, shall we?”

Kimberly set her jaw. That settled it: she was getting Bobby the Blush campaign, no matter what, and she was going to make sure his mom knew exactly who was responsible, too.

#

Under other circumstances, Bobby would have thought he'd died and gone to heaven: the instant he got backstage, he was surrounded by some of the hottest girls he'd ever seen in his life, and most of them were rushing around half-naked. The only problem was, he was one of them now. It didn't stop him from taking a good look around as a wardrobe coordinator dragged him toward the clothing racks.

"Clothes off, please," she sang, unzipping his top and tugging it up over his head before he had a chance to follow her instructions on his own. Bobby was grudgingly impressed -- it was a really finicky zipper. Then she unbuttoned his skirt and yanked it down his tanned legs. He gave a stifled yelp of alarm. There was one way in which he was definitely *not* one of the girls, and he was suddenly very grateful he'd done such a thorough tuck job.

That didn't stop the wardrobe coordinator from taking an appraising look at his crotch. "Hm," she murmured. "Okay, is fine."

Bobby flushed. He'd wrapped his arms around himself instinctively as the air conditioning chilled his exposed skin, but now he felt the sudden urge to cover his crotch from further scrutiny. In the end, he didn't get to do either.

"Arms out, please," the woman said. "I will measure you, okay?"

"Sure thing," Bobby chirped, trying to reset with Kimberly's "bubbly" advice in mind.

The woman wrapped a measuring tape around his hips, waist, and finally his bust. The cold touch of the tape made him wriggle slightly. A leggy redhead in a skimpy silk thong swished past a moment later, making it extremely hard not to turn his head.

"Hm," the wardrobe coordinator repeated, now reading the tape measure with a disappointed look on her face.

"Um, is everything okay?" Bobby asked tentatively.

"Oh, yes, fine," she said. "You are just small. In your boobs. Your boobs are small."

Bobby's face grew hot, especially since several heads in the vicinity had turned: a gorgeous black girl gave him a pitying look, and a stunning brunette busy putting on a garter belt snickered slightly. He stared down at his chest, and for the very first time, the foreign additions to his frame that usually seemed so big and distracting actually looked kind of...small.

He looked around the backstage and found several of his fellow models looking right back -- or more specifically, looking at his boobs. He'd seen plenty of guys staring at his chest, and the cheerleaders at school liked to "check in" on his breast development once in a while, but the way he was being looked at now, brazen, clinical, and then dismissive, was very different. These girls were competitive, and in this particular area, he'd clearly just been written off as no threat at all.

Bobby did *not* like getting written off. He looked down again, and for exactly one topsy-turvy millisecond he actually wished the breasts bobbing in the silky cups of his bra were just a little bit larger. Just enough to wipe the smirks off the other girls' faces. Then he blinked, coming back to his senses. He was a guy, and guys did not want, or need, boobs of any size.

"My bad," Bobby said sarcastically. "So what am I going to wear, anyways? If you can find something that fits my small..."

"We will start you with this," the wardrobe coordinator interrupted, holding up a lacy scrap of fabric Bobby knew, from resentful experience, was a V-neck, teddy-style babydoll. Sometimes he worried that all the slots in his brain he used to use to keep track of important shit -- NBA records, shooting percentages, assist-to-turnover ratios of his favorite point guards -- were getting refilled with an intimate knowledge of women's clothing and lingerie.

"Cool," he said, trying to look at least halfway excited at the prospect of wearing the garment. "What goes over it?"

The woman stared at him for a moment, then laughed. "Oh, you are funny," she said. "Nothing goes over it! If something goes over it, who can see it?"

Bobby blinked, then took another look around the backstage. There were no over-the-top costumes or elegant gowns or really any kind of clothing to be seen -- nothing but underwear. He swallowed as he realized why his mom had taken him for a full-body waxing before their flight. He was doing his first show, and it was a freaking *lingerie* show. No wonder everybody was half-naked.

He looked from the babydoll in the woman's left hand to the lacy thong in her right, face suddenly burning. "Um, where do I change?" he squeaked.

"You change wherever you can find space," the wardrobe coordinator said, with a very Italian shrug. "I must get the other girls ready. I will be back in five minutes, okay? Five minutes." She wagged five fingers, as if to make extra certain he understood how counting worked, then handed him the lingerie set and disappeared.

Bobby was left swaying on his high heels, clutching the babydoll and thong. His head spun for a second and he took a deep breath, trying not to let panic set in. He was supposed to get changed, as in, take off his current bikini-cut panties and replace them with the thong, right here

in the middle of the action. Where anybody could see him. Where anybody could see the little patch of medical tape keeping his junk crammed away and out of sight.

Bobby briefly considered making a run for it. The brunette who had snickered at him earlier was now having her makeup done, but she was watching him in the mirror with a slightly amused look on her face -- did she know? She definitely knew. Everybody knew.

Bobby was no stranger to women's locker rooms, thanks to his miserable trips to the gym or to exercise classes with Serena, but he'd always managed to change in a private stall. Here, that wasn't an option. But the minutes were already ticking away, and he had to get into the lingerie set before the wardrobe woman came back.

Trying to look nonchalant despite his red face, Bobby ducked behind the clothing rack. It held only lingerie, meaning everything was sheer or lace or otherwise see-through, but the little concealment it provided was better than nothing. Another model was busy finding a new bustier. Bobby gave her a pained smile, and as soon as she was gone, he took a final look around -- all clear -- and started wriggling his panties down his hips. Feeling totally ridiculous, he crouched down, awkwardly stepped out of them, and felt an immediate chill on his tucked-away manhood.

Halfway there. Bobby quickly stepped into the thong, still squatting awkwardly to avoid detection, then snapped it into place. He gave a huge sigh of relief, stood up -- and nearly collided with the most perfect rack of cleavage he'd ever seen. He blinked stupidly, momentarily entranced by the sight.

"Barbie Vickerson!" a voice trilled. "Oh my God, it is so good and nice to be meeting you in person!"

Bobby followed the voice upwards and discovered that the beautiful boobs' equally beautiful owner was none other than Bianca Buccino, his competitor for the Blush campaign. Her jet black hair was cascading down her back in perfect waves, and she was wearing a silky pink robe that wasn't quite up to the task of restraining her breasts.



“Uh, hi,” he said, making an enormous effort to keep his eyes on her face instead of on her boobs. He realized he was still holding his discarded panties in one hand and stuck them behind his back, blushing furiously. She had no doubt seen him crouching down here like some kind of weirdo and had come over to let him know.

“Hi,” Bianca echoed, wiggling her fingers in a little wave, still smiling. Bobby braced himself for a snide, Serena-esque follow-up, but instead the girl seemed genuinely happy to see him -- did she not know they were rivals? Trying to regain some dignity, he decided to play a classic ball-buster card.

“Sorry, but, like, who are you?” he asked innocently.

Instead of responding to the jibe by going into “bitch, I’ll kill you” mode, the way Serena or the cheerleaders at his school would have, Bianca clapped her hand to her cheek. “Oh my God, I am sorry,” she said. “You must think I am crazy. We follow each other on Instagram, but maybe you do not see my posts so often? I am Bianca Buccino.”

“Oh,” Bobby said, still waiting for the other shoe to drop. “Right.”

“I loved your shoot with Jan!” Bianca continued. “Especially the kiss, where you are, like, an American cheerleader in this sexy cheerleader outfit? And the sexy guy is lifting you up and kissing you?” She rolled her eyes back dramatically. “Oh my God, so hot.”

Bobby flushed at the memory. “Um, thanks,” he said.

“Is he an American model?” Bianca asked innocently. “I would love to work with him, you know?” She winked. “Anyways, I am so happy to meet you, and I think you are so brave! I cannot believe you were boy, you know? You are *hot*.”

Bobby felt his face grow even hotter. “You too,” he squeaked. “I mean, you’re, um, you’re really hot, too.”

Bianca beamed at him. “Oh my God, you’re so sweet and nice,” she said. “And this is your first show, right? Exciting! Why are you hiding back here, anyways? Is there...”

Bobby grimaced, and Bianca’s eyes suddenly widened in realization. She snapped her fingers loudly, making him flinch, and the wardrobe coordinator appeared as if by magic.

“Ciao, Bianca,” she said. “*C’è un problema?*”

“Yes,” Bianca said firmly. “I need a second changing curtain for my brave, lovely friend. This is *Barbie Vickerson*.”

The woman frowned, not comprehending. “She is shy?” she asked skeptically. “She is a model!”

“Yes, and she is trans,” Bianca said, her cheerful voice suddenly becoming icy. “And she would like some privacy, so please, go get her a *fucking* changing curtain and have it ready by the time she needs to do her second walk. *Vai!*”

The wardrobe coordinator went pink in the face. “Of course!” she blurted. “*Scusa, scusa*. I’ll look.”

As the woman hurried away, Bianca turned back to him with a smile, clapping her hands together. “Was that good?” she asked innocently. “I am practicing my swearing in English.”

“That was great,” Bobby said, with total honesty. “Like, perfect.”

Bianca gave a squeal of excitement, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet in a way that set her décolletage jiggling. Bobby wasn't sure, but he thought he might just be in love. His enjoyment of the moment got cut short, however, when he caught sight of the brunette model who'd snickered at him earlier.

The girl had grabbed one of the organizer's clipboards and was now holding it over her breasts, looking down at the perfectly flat surface with an exaggerated expression of dismay. Several of the other models were giggling, and even the one who'd given him a sympathetic look earlier was cracking a smile.

“Don't mind them, Barbie,” Bianca said, following his gaze and giving the other models a disapproving look. “It's just because you are famous.”

Bobby gritted his teeth. If these models really thought they were better than him just because they had bigger boobs, he was just going to have to show them otherwise. His end goal was still crushing Serena, sure. But that didn't mean he couldn't crush a few other stuck-up girls along the way.

#

Kimberly was trying to be mature about losing the social media coordinator gig, but she couldn't help it: she felt sulky. Really, really sulky. Bobby's mom had no idea just how many strings Kimberly had pulled to turn her son into a daughter, obviously, but being treated like a dumb teenager still stung her ego. “Barbie” was *her* creation, after all. She deserved to have a hand in things, and not just as a glorified security blanket.

Kimberly did her best to hide her displeasure, but once they were in their seats, she slumped down and busied herself with her phone to avoid interacting with her ex's mom. The good-looking Roman centurion from earlier in the afternoon had already sent her a DM, suggesting a date at what was supposedly the best pizzeria in Rome, followed by dessert at his place -- he was confident, she had to give him that much.

She tapped out a non-committal reply, then scanned the audience for Nino Romano again. So far she hadn't managed to spot him. The front rows were full of fashion-hungry types eager to see the latest styles, or else be seen seeing the latest styles, but a fair share of the onlookers were excited young Italian guys likely more interested in the models themselves than what they were wearing.

The lights went down, the music went up, and Kimberly watched without much interest as the first few models took to the catwalk. She only sat up and took notice when Bianca Buccino appeared. The girl was gorgeous, there was no getting around it, and her body was absolutely

to-die-for -- especially her boobs, God. They were perfectly symmetrical, perfectly shaped, and looked ready to spill out of her lacy pink bra at any moment. Whatever plastic surgeon was responsible must have been pretty freaking proud of himself.

The Italian model sashayed down the catwalk, smiling brightly. She struck a pose with her hands on her hips, gave a playful wink, then started back towards the curtain with a spring in her high-heeled step. Kimberly heard some impressed murmurs from around her, and plenty of hooting from the “horny male” section of the audience. She hoped, fervently, that Nino Romano wasn't one of them.



Beside her, Bobby's mom sniffed skeptically. "Not an ounce of personality," she said, in a low voice. "*Happy* isn't a personality."

Kimberly gave a shrug. She was new to the world of modelling, but in real life she knew girls who looked like Bianca Buccino could do just fine with a one-word personality, probably even if the word was "psychopath."

The next wave of models took to the catwalk, and while at first she was relieved that Bobby wasn't among them -- Bianca would be one tough act to follow -- it quickly turned into worry. Her ex had assured her that he was willing to do anything to beat Serena, and was willing, by proxy, to do anything to get the Blush campaign. But she'd deliberately kept the details of the fashion show vague, knowing he might balk at the whole lingerie thing. Without her backstage to talk him around, had he lost his nerve?

She was on the verge of sending him a check-up text when a blonde girl in skimpy black lingerie appeared at the far end of the catwalk. She leaned forward intently, vaguely aware of Bobby's mom doing the exact same thing beside her.

Her ex strutted forward, hips swinging, and she realized the platforms he was wearing were at least two inches taller than most of the other models' footwear, rivalling the stripper heels his big sister had forced him to wear day in and day out. Kimberly remembered how desperate Bobby had always been to hit six feet, and she reflected, with some irony, that he had to be close at the moment.

The extra-high heels leant an extra swivel to his step, making his taut butt swish seductively from side to side, and the added tension to his calves made his long tanned legs seem even shapelier than usual -- it honestly took Kimberly's eyes a second to even register the outfit, a teddy-style babydoll in black lace that looked like it had been designed for the sole purpose of being torn off.

The gauzy black lingerie showed off every curve, and the V-neck style didn't have a built-in bra, meaning Bobby's growing breasts were on their own, quivering slightly with each precisely criss-crossed step. His makeup was dramatic, with smudged racoon eyes and sexy-messy hair that suggested he'd just slipped out of his lover's bed, and the bored, slightly disgusted pout on his face was absolutely perfect.

While Bianca had bounced her way down the runway, happy-go-lucky and maybe, in retrospect, almost too eager to please, Bobby walked like he owned it. And like he owned everybody in the building, too, and was strongly considering returning them for being below his standards. Kimberly could see shades of big sister Serena in his poise, but to her surprise, there was also something fundamentally Bobby Vickerson about his preening, ultra-confident strut.

It was the same attitude he used to exude stepping onto the basketball court, and now, channeled in a wildly different direction, it made a huge contrast to Bianca's peppy good-girl vibe. Kimberly was pretty sure every red-blooded male in the audience was imagining Bobby strutting into their bedrooms instead of into a gymnasium, a pouty blonde vixen dripping in black lace.

She was totally captivated as Bobby arrived at the end of the catwalk, and judging by the sudden change in atmosphere, so was everyone else -- she could practically hear the sound of fifty guys behind her squirming awkwardly in their seats. But her ex wasn't done: Bobby struck a sexy pose, using one hand to fluff his blonde hair while the other trailed teasingly down his body, toying with the bow tied beneath his breasts as if he could unspool the whole outfit with a single tug, pushing the naughty bad-girl vibe as far as possible.



Kimberly heard an involuntary gasp from somewhere behind her, and understood the sentiment entirely as Bobby made a graceful pirouette, gave his perfect ass a little wiggle, and started back down the catwalk.

There was a split second of silence, then a rush of raucous applause from the Italian guys, and a mixture of delighted and disapproving murmurs from the fashion-hawks. Kimberly felt a grin spreading across her face. Maybe there was something to Mrs. Vickerson's "personality" thing -- the audience certainly seemed to think so. Hopefully Nino Romano had been watching.

Kimberly had created a monster, and she kind of loved it.

#

It took Bobby a while to figure out what was going on, and when he did it shook him to the core: he was back in the zone. As in, the zone he used to treasure as a basketball star, the state of mind where all distractions faded into the background and time pretty much stood still, leaving just him, the ball, and the hoop. The zone where every time a shot left his fingertips, he knew it was going in.

Somehow, as weird as it was, he was now feeling the same way about prancing down a catwalk in platform heels and lingerie. As soon as the organizer had shoved him out onto the stage, it was like he'd gone on total autopilot, with Serena's merciless boot camp routine moving his body for him: *chin up, tense your core, breathe on every step, roll your hips, pose, Barbie, look sexy, Barbie, show them the goods, little sis.*

The lights were so bright he couldn't make out a single face in the audience, meaning he might as well have been stuck in the studio with his big sister, and despite the adrenaline racing through his body there just wasn't any time to freak out. There was only time to walk, pose, walk, get changed -- the wardrobe lady was now eagerly helping him in and out of every lingerie set behind the curtain -- and then start the whole cycle over again.

He'd grabbed the stripper heels by total accident, passing over slightly more sensible footwear to grab the most familiar-looking shoes. The other models had shot him skeptical looks, but by the time he returned backstage from his first walk, their looks had turned to grudging respect, and Bianca had been overjoyed, insisting he keep wearing them.

"Oh my God, Barbie, your walk is like, sex," she'd gushed. "You *must* keep them on! Use your biggest strengths, you know?"

The proclamation had been accompanied by a hug that pushed Bianca's own "biggest strengths" against his almost-bare breasts, resulting in a very tingly sensation. So he kept the ridiculous shoes on, kept mincing and posing, and before long he had lost all track of time. He was stunned when he realized he'd done his last walk, wearing a painfully-tight corset plus smoky nylons, and the show was over.

Bianca had already been changed by the time he got backstage, somehow looking almost as good in leggings and a baggy sweater as she had in lingerie, and insisted on exchanging contact information before she disappeared in a flurry of assistants, or fans, or whoever the

people always following her around were. Apparently she was doing another show across town in less than an hour.

Bobby felt a combination of dazed, tired, and just slightly pleased with his own perseverance. He was leaning down to finally take his shoes off when he heard his name spoken in a thick Italian accent. He straightened up, expecting to see one of the show's organizers, but instead it was a guy around his own age. Bobby remembered the distant hooting and hollering he'd heard from the end of the catwalk, and grimaced. Apparently he already had fans in Italy.

But the Italian teen had some kind of pass on a lanyard around his neck, and he didn't look particularly star-struck -- instead, along with the usual helping of lust, he seemed torn between amusement and disdain. And on second thought, when the boy had called his name it had sounded less like "Barbie" and more like...



“Bobby Vickerson,” the Italian repeated. “Ha.”

“It’s Barbie,” Bobby said, flushing as he made the hated correction. “Barbie Vickerson.”

“I see,” the boy said. “But I do not think you were expecting to see me here, yes?”

Bobby stared. "Um, yes?" he said. "No? Look, I don't know who you are and I have to get changed, so..."

The Italian teen's face turned slightly red. "It's me!" he blustered. "Come on! Are you serious? It's me, Andreas!"

Bobby took a closer look, and his mouth fell open.

Andreas. He had completely forgotten about the stuck-up Italian exchange student he'd had a few classes with back in sophomore year, but now it was all rushing back. The green eyes and wavy black hair were familiar, but Andreas had gotten taller and filled out, giving him the muscular shoulders and broad chest Bobby's hormone imbalance had totally robbed him of, not to mention a thin, well-groomed moustache.

For a moment, Bobby couldn't help but feel a twinge of intense jealousy -- for the muscles, not the moustache. Then it was his turn to flush, as he realized he was standing in front of the guy he'd gotten Jefferson High to call "Andrietta" for a full semester all decked out in an incredibly skimpy lingerie set.

Worse, despite knowing who he was looking at, Andreas was every bit as attentive as the Italian guys outside had been. His gaze was travelling slowly up and down his exposed body in a way that made Bobby's face burn. Rumors of Andreas's gayness had clearly been exaggerated.



“Small world,” Bobby said weakly, crossing his arms protectively in front of his chest. “Well, gotta run...”

“It is a very small world, yes,” Andreas said. “In fact, I am here to visit my uncle, Nino Romano. Maybe you have met him already?”

"Nope, don't think so," Bobby said, casting around desperately for an excuse to escape. Fortunately, Kimberly was now at the edge of the backstage area, tapping furiously at her phone. "Oh, there's my social media coordinator!" he blurted. "She must need me for a photo. Nice, um, catching up?"

He turned to flee as quickly as he could in stripper heels, hardly caring that he was presenting Andreas with a perfect view of his panty-clad bottom as he did so.

"There you are," Kimberly said. "Great job, Barbie. Your mom is, like, over the moon. She's getting us gelato." She shot a puzzled look over his shoulder. "Who's your friend?"

Bobby glanced back -- Andreas had followed him, wearing a shit-eating grin on his face. "Nobody," Bobby said, glaring at him. "You need me for something, right? Like, right now?"

"I am Andreas Romano," the Italian interjected, stepping forward and offering his hand for a shake. "Nephew of Nino Romano, of course. You will maybe not believe this, but I know 'Barbie' from school in America."

Kimberly's eyes bulged slightly, then, to Bobby's puzzlement, she shook Andreas' hand with an unnaturally cheery smile. "I'm Kimberly Quinn, Barbie's social media coordinator," she said. "Could you give us just a second, Andreas? I need to update Barbie on some stuff, and then I'd love to talk with you about...stuff."

Bobby had thought he was saved, but instead of telling Andreas to get lost, Kimberly just moved him about two feet away. She shot another fake smile back in the Italian's direction, then spoke in a whisper. "Okay, what the fuck?" she demanded. "You know him from school? As in, Jefferson High?"

"Sophomore year," Bobby said through gritted teeth. "Before you moved to Green Lake. He was an exchange student, or whatever."

"And you were, like, friends with him?" Kimberly whispered, almost pleadingly. "Tell me you were friends with him."

Bobby scowled. "Are you kidding? Look how he freaking dresses, Kimmy. He's got a pink scarf. And it's not even winter. And it's *pink*."

"Okay, one, that's a bit rich coming from the guy in a corset," Kimberly snapped -- Bobby blushed. "Two, now is the time to make friends with him, fast, because he's Nino Romano's nephew. Did you not hear him?"

"I heard him," Bobby said defensively. "He said it twice." He paused, frowning as he considered a frightening possibility. "Is that, like, a Mafia boss or something?"

“Do you need flashcards?” Kimberly hissed. “Come on. Nino Romano. The marketing director for Blush!”

Bobby threw another glance over his shoulder, to where Andreas was casually waiting, hands in his pockets. “Oh, shit,” he muttered. “Yeah, okay, so we weren’t exactly friends. I maybe…”

“You maybe what?” Kimberly demanded, her grip on his arm becoming painfully tight as she gave another “just a second” wave to Andreas.

“I maybe got the whole school to call him Andrietta,” Bobby said. “And told him soccer was for chicks and I maybe, uh, made everybody think he was gay.” He yanked his arm free before Kimberly could do any permanent damage, rubbing it ruefully. “And once he made this pesto stuff to bring for lunch and I told everybody it was snot,” he added. “I said snot was, like, a delicacy in his country. It was his mom’s recipe and he maybe cried a little.”

“Anything else?” Kimberly asked, in a faint voice.

“It’ll probably come to me,” Bobby said glumly. “This is bad for the plan, right?”

“This is freaking terrible for the plan,” Kimberly said. She shot another look at Andreas and took a deep breath. “But maybe we can salvage this. You just have to make nice.”

“It’s a little late for that, Kimmy,” Bobby snapped. “He obviously just came here to gloat a little, then go tell his uncle to take my name off the list.”

“He has also been totally unable to take his eyes off your ass for this whole conversation,” Kimberly said casually.

Bobby felt his face go beet red, but he didn’t dare turn around to confirm it. “So he came to gloat and to perv on me,” he said through gritted teeth. “Multitasking. Awesome.”

“Look, I bet he’s mad, but I bet he’s confused as hell, too,” Kimberly said. “If you go in there and apologize, act all contrite, pretend you were displacing your own insecurities…”

Bobby blinked. “Huh?”

“We can make this work in our favor,” Kimberly said, with a familiar gleam in her eye. “He probably just wants an apology, Barbie. And he probably wouldn’t say no to a date with a lingerie model, either. Come on, he’s cute.”

Bobby’s jaw dropped, but before he could put together a coherent protest, Kimberly was steering him back over to where Andreas was waiting. The Italian boy was still smirking, leaning back against the wall casually.

“Are you finished with your coordinating of the social media?” he asked innocently.

“Totally,” Kimberly beamed. “And we were just saying how this is such a cool coincidence, running into you here. You know, Barbie was *hinting* there was somebody here in Rome she wanted to see, and boom, you show up backstage! If I didn’t know better, I’d swear she had an ulterior motive for doing this show.”

Andreas blinked. “Oh!” he said. “That’s quite funny, because a moment ago, ‘Barbie’ did not even recognize me.”

Kimberly shot an imploring look sideways, but Bobby wasn’t about to help her pimp him out to some Italian douchebag just to secure a modeling contract. No freaking way. He had his limits. He had his pride. And it was *Andreas*, for crying out loud.

But then Kimberly mouthed one word, or rather, one name: “Serena.”

Bobby grimaced. Anything to screw Serena. The first hurdle was getting the Blush campaign over Bianca, and this was probably his only shot. If he fell on the first hurdle, he’d be out of the race before it even got going. Utterly hating what he was about to do, Bobby rearranged his grimace into a flustered look, then stared shyly at the floor through his fluttering eyelash extensions.

“You just look way different,” he squeaked. “You got a lot more, um, jacked?”

“She means muscular,” Kimberly supplied.

It was Andreas’ turn to look surprised, caught off-guard for the first time, but not quite able to hide his pleasure at the remark. “Well, you look quite different, too,” he said, in a slightly challenging tone.

Bobby flushed. “I know, and I do want to talk,” he lied. “I just didn’t want to do it dressed, like, you know...”

“In expensive Italian lingerie,” Kimberly said. “But you have to admit she looks pretty great, right?”

Andreas immediately took the invitation to check him out again, under the guise of inspecting the lingerie set. Kimberly made a motion with her finger, and Bobby, vowing to strangle her later, performed a graceful little pirouette to show off the goods. Judging by the stupefied look on Andreas’s face, the Italian boy had just briefly gone to heaven.

“Anyways, I checked her schedule and she’s free tonight,” Kimberly continued blithely. “You two seem like you have some catching up to do. How about you pick her up around nine? I’ll give you her details.”

Bobby watched anxiously as Andreas, returning to reality, narrowed his eyes. "And this has nothing to do with who my uncle is?" he asked suspiciously.

Kimberly plucked the phone out of his hand and started putting "Barbie's" number in it. "Why, is he a Mafia boss?" she asked dryly. "Here's her number. We're about ten minutes from the Colosseum. Now you'd better let us go. Barbie needs a little beauty sleep back at the hotel, and you want her to look her best tonight, right?"



Andreas stared down at the new contact in his phone, then shrugged and pocketed the device. "Okay," he said, looking directly at him and speaking very deliberately. "I was going to watch the football tonight, but guess I could change my plans."

Bobby knew the Italian was all but daring him to correct him, and truthfully he would have liked nothing better than to do just that: tell Andreas that what he was watching was soccer, not football, and that it was the most boring, shitty sport in the entire world.

Instead, he plastered a pretty smile onto his face. "Cool," he chirped. "I can't wait."

He wiggled his fingers in the Kimberly-approved style of waving, then made a bee-line for the changing curtain before he was forced to take drastic measures to wipe the smug look off Andreas's face. This was going to freaking suck.

#

A few hours later, Kimberly made a final adjustment to her ex's top and stood back to admire her handiwork. Bobby had been stressed enough about his impending date to put himself entirely in her hands, and whenever that happened, Kimberly made the most of it. She'd taken great delight in putting together his outfit for the evening, starting with the shoes: a pair of black Jimmy Choo platform pumps with a wicked stiletto heel that would look sexy as hell, but definitely not do him any favors on the cobblestones.

When Bobby had pointed out that particular drawback, she'd just told him Andreas, as an Italian, would know expensive shoes when he saw them and appreciate the effort "Barbie" had put in for their date, and that they were nothing compared to what he'd been traipsing down the catwalk on all afternoon.

Then she'd paired the pumps with skin-tight faux-leather leggings that clung to every curve of Bobby's hormone-sculpted butt.

Her ex had been initially relieved to avoid a skirt or dress, but that had only lasted as long as it took for him to realize the leggings would require an extra-thorough tuck job -- Kimberly had heard a very unmanly squeal of pain from the bathroom. But the results were clearly worth it, especially since Andreas was, judging by his behavior at the fashion show, already very interested in her Bobby's buttocks. The shiny black leggings definitely presented that "asset" to its fullest, but since her ex's legs were covered it was also a good excuse to show some skin elsewhere.

With that in mind, she'd dug an incredibly skimpy, glittery silver halter top out of the bottom of his suitcase. The garment was totally backless, meaning he would have to rely on the built-in cups instead of a bra, and the drape front managed to give a teasing peek at his cleavage while simultaneously leaving a strip of toned, tanned midriff free for viewing.

She'd used the hotel's hot iron and plenty of hairspray to give his blonde waves some extra volume, then had him do his best "smoky eye" while she rummaged around for the perfect nude lip. Bracelets, big silver hoop earrings, and a sexy black lace choker completed the outfit. Any woman in the world would have been ecstatic to look even half as hot as "Barbie" currently did, but her ex was staring at the mirror with an expression of mingled misery and nervousness.

"I can't believe this is my life now," he said glumly, leaning forward to smooth a tiny errant hair on one of his salon-sculpted brows. The illusion of a blonde beauty inspecting her appearance for a night out cracked a little when Bobby gave his crotch a tentative poke. "If I start going numb, I'm getting out of these pants," he said. "I don't care who's watching. This is *not* worth losing my balls."

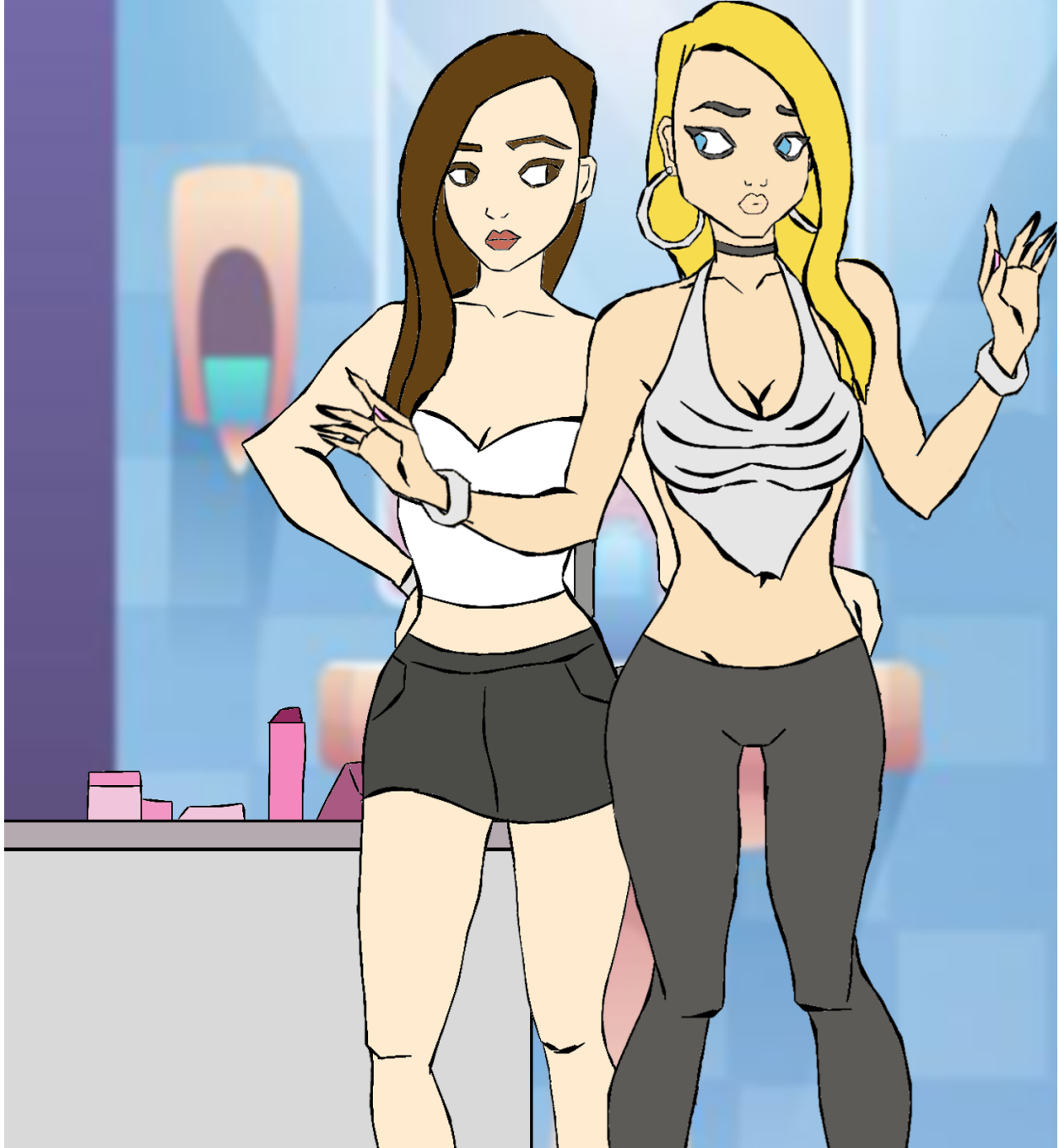
"You tuck all the time," Kimberly said blithely. "You'll be fine."

"He better not, like, try anything," Bobby said, glaring at his reflection as if it were Andreas. "It's bad enough that I'm getting all done up for him like this."

Kimberly snapped her fingers, shaking her head. "Hey," she said sharply. "No. Lose the attitude. If you go out with him tonight and act like that, he's going to see through you in a second. Nino Romano's nephew, remember? Tonight could make or break you, and you made one shitty first impression, so whatever makes *Andreas* happy makes *you* happy."

Her ex's shiny lips parted indignantly, but she cut in before he could protest.

"You said you'd do anything to get Serena back, right?" she demanded. "And tonight, that means going on a date with a dude you don't like. Girls do it all the time. So lose the ego, smile, look pretty, and if he goes for a kiss at the end of the date, so what? It's just a kiss. It's not like you've never, you know..."



She trailed off as her ex's face blushed a brilliant crimson. In general, Kimberly tried to avoid reminding Bobby about his brief romance with Josh Delacroix -- for a lot of reasons -- but she needed her ex to be a little off-balance tonight. Reminding him that he'd spent more than a few evenings making out with the tall, handsome basketball star from St. Ceylan's was a surefire way to do that.

Bobby was saved from having to form a reply by the buzzing of his phone. "He's here," he said, not meeting her eye. "I guess this is it."

Kimberly nodded grimly. She'd made it clear just how important this date was for their hopes of getting the Blush campaign, but she hadn't told Bobby that her own personal stakes had risen, too -- if she couldn't get him the campaign, her cushy front-row seat as social media coordinator was gone.

Both their hopes were now tied to her ex's ability to show Andreas a good time. His past behavior didn't exactly inspire confidence, but if "Barbie" could pull it off, there was nothing like a little nepotism to make Bianca Buccino's name slip down the list. Basically, they could win big, or they could lose big.

"Try to be quiet on the way past your mom's room," Kimberly suggested, as Bobby made a last-minute adjustment to his hair.

Her ex snorted. "She takes Ambien," he said. "Don't worry, she's like a log that snores." He took one final, wistful glance at the mirror. "I'm really doing this, huh?"

"You'll be great," Kimberly said bracingly. "Now get going. You've been hogging the bathroom and I need to get ready."

Her ex shot her a suspicious look. "Wait, what? Why do *you* need to get ready?"

"You're not the only one with a hot date," Kimberly said dryly. "Remember the goofball from this morning? With the six-pack? His name's Vincenzo, and he actually seems pretty cool."

Bobby made a face. "You really like them stupid, huh," he said.

"I really do," Kimberly said, figuring the irony would set in by the time her ex got to the ground floor. "Have fun, Barbie."

Bobby picked up his purse, took a deep breath, and marched to the door, stilettos clicking and butt wiggling in a way Andreas would soon be appreciating. Kimberly watched Bobby leave with a slight feeling of regret: it would have been amazing to see Andreas's reaction to "Barbie," and to see her sexed-up ex playing the part of an eager date.

But the less involved she looked, the less suspicious of their motives Andreas would be. And she actually *did* need to get ready -- Vincenzo was picking her up in less than half an hour. Kimberly had gone back and forth all day on accepting the Italian's invitation, wondering if she would be better served using the evening to do more digging on Bianca Buccino -- Bobby's impression of her had been way too squeaky clean to be true.

But the truth was, she needed a break. Badly. And she needed to get laid, too. It was a little embarrassing to realize the last guy she'd slept with had been Bobby, who now looked better in

lingerie than she did and was definitely not “up to the challenge,” even if she’d been into girls. By contrast, Vincenzo didn’t seem likely to disappoint.

Kimberly started rifling through Bobby’s suitcase to find something sexy to wear. She would have to hurry, but she could pull it off. She wasn’t as high maintenance as a certain blonde Barbie doll.

#

On the brief elevator trip down to the lobby, Bobby shut his eyes and pictured a better world. His hair was back to its original dark brown, sides and back shaved for that clean barbershop look, and the male hormones had kicked in big time: he was six feet, stubble on his chin, and muscular. Not bulky, or anything, but shredded. Wearing his Lakers jersey, showing off those muscles -- hell, maybe even some tattoos, why not?



And he was still going on a date, but it was with Bianca Buccino, and she was wearing a sexy, tight-as-hell dress with one of those plunging V necklines he always tried to avoid. She was giggling and flirting and shooting looks at his package -- which was fully functional, and even bigger than before. He slid his arm around her waist and she licked her lips, and said something

about how manly he was, how ridiculous it was that he'd ever fooled anyone with that "Barbie" bullshit when he was so clearly a man's man, an all-star athlete, lady-killer, and...

DING!

Bobby opened his eyes, fake lashes fluttering. The elevator doors slid apart, and he was confronted with reality in the large lobby mirror across from him: a sexy blonde with perfect hair and evening makeup, holding a clutch purse in her long, claw-like nails, all dolled up in a glittery silver top, sinfully-tight, shiny black leggings, and stiletto pumps. Bobby grimaced, teasing a tendril of blonde hair out of one gleaming hoop earring, then took another deep breath.

He was going on a date with a guy. There was no getting around it. And if he wanted to get the Blush campaign, it had to be a *good* date, meaning he would have to act like "Barbie," not Bobby. Or better yet, like the Bianca Buccino of his dreams. Heart pounding with nerves, he clicked his way into the lobby, drawing the attention of the half-dozing concierge. When the man looked him up and down, he gained a wide smile.

"Have a good evening, Miss," he said. "You look, as we say here, *bellissima!*"

Bobby flushed, but, thinking of what Bianca would do, he smiled back. "Thank you," he chirped. "That's, like, so sweet!" Hearing the girly words come out of his mouth, it was disturbing how genuine they sounded. He started towards the door, then hesitated, realizing something. "Um, do hotels in Italy, like, stay open all night? I mean, I have a room key, but the gate had a buzzer thing on it?"

"I will be here all night, Miss," the concierge said. "All you have to do is press the button on the gate, and I will let you inside." He gave a knowing wink. "You can have as much fun as you like tonight, and if you bring home a friend, I will look the other way. No worries!"

"Friend?" Bobby squeaked. "Nope, no friend! Just me. Alone. By myself. Um, *ciao!*"

Blushing furiously, he made his clip-clopping way to the exit. It was a warm night outside, with just a hint of breeze, and the lamps of the hotel courtyard provided a soft, fuzzy kind of glow that he would probably call "magical" or "romantic" if he was Bianca. Andreas was waiting at the gate, smoking a cigarette. He had slicked back his hair for the occasion, and was wearing a leather jacket that Bobby had to admit, very grudgingly, was kind of cool.

"You women take so long," Andreas said, rolling his eyes. "Come on, let's go."

It wasn't the greeting Bobby had been expecting. He wanted nothing more than to tell Andreas to try getting ready as a chick and see how long it took him, but that probably wasn't what Bianca or "Barbie" would say. He let himself through the gate and spotted the camera he had missed earlier. No wonder the concierge had been talking about a "friend" -- he'd seen Andreas waiting outside. At least he hadn't tried to offer him complementary condoms, or anything.

Putting the shudder-inducing thought out of his mind, Bobby pasted a smile to his face and tried to channel his inner bimbo. "I wanted to look nice for our date," he said. "What do you think?"

Andreas looked him up and down, lingering on the parts he liked best, and Bobby gritted his teeth. "You look fine," the Italian boy said with a shrug.

Bobby narrowed his eyes. He knew he looked way more than "fine," and he knew this Italian asshole was just trying to play it cool, but the remark still irked him. He was a freaking *lingerie model* -- not of his own volition, but still. Andreas extended an arm, and Bobby, seething internally, took it. Back in sophomore year, the Italian boy had been the same height as him, but now, despite his towering stilettos, Bobby found himself shorter by at least a few inches.

Andreas started walking abruptly, and Bobby reflexively wrapped his manicured hands around the Italian boy's bicep. It wasn't as big as Josh's.

"What the *fuck*," Bobby whispered.

"Excuse me?" Andreas asked sharply.

"Nothing!" Bobby squeaked. Had he seriously just been compared two guys' bicep muscles? Lost in the horror of his realization, he missed everything Andreas said next except for "parked a little way down the hill."

Cars. Cars were a guy thing. There was nothing gay about comparing cars to other cars.

"Cool," he blurted. "What do you drive? Maseratis are Italian, right? Those are some gorgeous cars."

Andreas raised his eyebrows without speaking, and Bobby suddenly felt a surge of panic in the opposite direction -- he was talking about cars to make up for the fact he was holding onto another guy's arm and also thinking about Josh's muscles. But that was not something "Barbie" would do.

"I mean, I don't know anything about cars, but some cars just look so, you know, nice?" he babbled.

"Yes, Barbie," Andreas said slowly, as if talking to a small child. "Some cars look nice. But as I said, I have a scooter, like most young people."

He wriggled his arm free and pointed to the little red Vespa scooter parked under the next streetlamp. Bobby felt stupid, but also, finally, a little less emasculated. It was a far cry from a Lamborghini, that was for sure. Unable to pass up the chance to get a tiny slice of payback, he gave the scooter an innocent, wide-eyed stare.

“Oh, it’s so *cute!*” he exclaimed.

It was Andreas’s turn to blush. “It’s not cute,” he protested. “It’s a regular scooter.” He got out his key and opened a compartment under the seat, emerging with a wide smile. “I brought my sister’s old one for you,” he announced, holding up a bright pink helmet. “You are Barbie, after all.”



Bobby accepted the helmet with only a slight grimace -- he’d heard so many Barbie jokes in the past two months they were starting to become white noise. Unfortunately, his long nails kept

getting in the way when he tried to figure out the chin strap, meaning he ended up standing there clutching his purse while Andreas helped. Bobby was sure the Italian had done the straps up too tight on purpose, but Andreas insisted it was for safety's sake.

A whole new set of problems arose once he was actually seated on the scooter. As relieved as he was to not be wearing a skirt, the angle of the hard plastic seat was still exceedingly uncomfortable on his tuck job, and the little side handles he'd noticed on other scooters weren't present, so he had no idea what to hold onto -- his manicure made clutching the seat itself pretty much impossible, and he didn't want his purse to slide out of his lap, either.

What would Bianca do? He was still studying the issue from all possible angles when Andreas started the engine, stomped away the kickstand, and set them zooming down the hill. Bobby felt himself sliding backwards. With a yelp of alarm, he threw himself forward and grabbed onto the only available anchor, which happened to be Andreas. The Italian made no comment, but his shoulders shook slightly. The asshole was *laughing* at him.

But worse was yet to come: as they bounced and rattled over the cobblestones, cutting through traffic in a way Bobby had to admit, deep down, was pretty badass, something about the engine vibrating through the seat, together with the fact that he was braless, and his breasts were squashed up against the back of Andreas's leather jacket with only the slinky material of his top providing a barrier, was making him feel...weird.

The warm, squirmy kind of weird. The kind where his face got all flushed and his nipples tingled like crazy and he kept flashing back to being on his back on Josh's couch. He had it under control by the time the scooter ride ended, choosing to visualize himself sinking game-winning free-throws instead, but still felt a little weak in the knees when Andreas helped him off the seat and unbuckled his helmet for him.

"So, here we are," the Italian boy announced -- this time Bobby caught his eyes dipping down his neckline, casually inspecting the tops of his breasts. But Bianca wouldn't mind that, right? What would Bianca care about?

"Is my hair, like, a total mess?" he asked plainly, reaching up to assess the damage.

Andreas looked him over critically. "Your earring is, how do you say, caught? Caught? Here, I'll fix it."

Blushing, Bobby once again stood still like an obedient child while Andreas reached forward and disentangled one of his hoop earrings from his blonde tresses, tugging gently at his earlobe in the process. The Italian boy's hand seemed to linger a little longer than necessary in his hair, which Bobby knew, despite the slight feeling of revulsion it gave him, was a good sign.



“Perfect,” Andreas said, in a less brusque voice than before. “Let’s go inside, yes?”

Bobby looked up at the establishment, noting the beer advertisements in the windows. “Uh, isn’t this a bar?” he asked. “I don’t have a fake ID.”

Andreas smirked. “Don’t worry, Barbie. You are with me.”

Inwardly, Bobby rolled his eyes. Outwardly, doing his very best “Barbie,” he fluttered his eyelashes, forced a giggle, and submissively let Andreas wrap his arm around his waist. God, this had better be worth it.

#

“So the best pizzeria in Rome only does take-out, huh?” Kimberly asked skeptically.

Her date flashed an innocent grin. “Maybe, maybe not,” he said. “But admit, the pizza is very good, yes? *Al taglio*, not this fake stuff.”

“It’s good,” Kimberly admitted. “It’s freaking delicious, actually.”

Vincenzo was certainly a man with a plan. He’d shown up on time, whisked her off to a tiny hole-in-the-wall pizza shop, gotten them a to-go bag, then led the way to a beautiful stone bridge overlooking the water where they were currently sitting, admiring the view of Rome all lit up for the night. It all had the whiff of routine -- Kimberly figured he did this with plenty of girls -- but that was kind of what she was looking for.

He cleaned up nice, too: he’d ditched the centurion costume, apart from the plastic sword, which he’d jokingly brought along (“So you will recognize who!”). Now he was wearing a crisp white shirt that offset his tan, slacks, and a pair of well-made loafers. Kimberly hadn’t realized how much she’d missed seeing well-dressed men ever since moving to Green Lake. Most of the dudes there had zero sense of style.

To accompany the pizza, Vincenzo had brought a bottle of wine and two plastic cups, each of which he pulled out of his bag with a dramatic flourish. And from the second they sat down together, he’d been casually finding excuses to play with her hair, touch her bare arms, and even play with the skirt of her dress. Kimberly couldn’t lie: the cocky, Devil-may-care attitude was really doing it for her. The only disturbing thing was how much it reminded her of Bobby.

The wine helped. She wasn’t sure if she’d had a really good wine since leaving California -- her mom had quit drinking, and the other cheerleaders’ moms all bought terrible red blends or deathly-sugary Moscato. She was drinking it a little too quickly, but hey, when in Rome.

“And so, why *are* you in Rome?” Vincenzo finally asked, topping off her cup for the third time.

Kimberly blinked. For a second, she'd almost forgotten. "For Barbie," she said. "You know, my friend from this morning? She's a model, and I handle her social media."

"You should be model," the Italian said, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Thanks," Kimberly said dryly. "But I'm a little outclassed here. These girls are, like, perfect."

"No girl is perfect," Vincenzo shot back. "I know."

"Oh, really?" Kimberly set down her wine, pulled out her iPhone, and flipped to one of the photos from the show she was most proud of: Bobby, laced into a bone-crushingly tight corset, posing at the end of the runway with his hips cocked, arms behind his head, and a vacant, incredibly sexy pout on his lips. "What do you call that?" she asked, passing Vincenzo the phone.



The Italian's eyes bulged, but after a moment, with just a hint of reluctance, he passed it back. "Small tits," he said simply. "The underwear helps, but not enough, I think."

Kimberly rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah, I'm working on it," she said. "How about this one?"

She flipped to another photo, this time showing Bobby backstage, bending over to unfasten his towering stilettos and inadvertently displaying the taut curve of his ass to full advantage. Vincenzo's gulp was almost audible.

"She's definitely supermodel material, right?" Kimberly pressed, working her way through the photos. "I mean, she definitely deserves to be on billboards. For Blush. Specifically." She could

feel herself getting weirdly agitated, but she couldn't stop. "And if it weren't for me, she would still be a nobody," Kimberly continued. "Well, a high-school hoops star. So more or less nobody."

"What is hoops?" Vincenzo asked, puzzled.

"Basketball, but it's not important," Kimberly said. "The important thing is that *I'm* the one who got her here, and now her mom is acting like I'm just some dumb bitch along for the ride. She used to be a *guy*, for God's sakes."

Holy shit, the wine had gone to her head *fast*. She clapped a hand over her mouth, wincing. Vincenzo blinked, then grabbed her phone away, studying the last photo even more closely. He shook his head, seemingly bewildered, muttering to himself in Italian. Finally, he seemed to regain himself, handing the phone back with feigned nonchalance.

"Wow," he said. "She must be doing the, how you say, the hormones."

Kimberly hadn't been expecting a guy who made a living showing off his six-pack and taking selfies with tourists to be quite so blasé about transgender issues, but that was probably her own biases talking.

"I mean, obviously she was always a girl deep down," she backpedaled. "What I mean is, I, you know, helped her. To become who she is now. And I shouldn't get cut out of it, especially when I'm in the middle of getting her the Blush campaign. She's *way* better than that walking emoji, Bianca freaking Buccino."

The nonchalance disappeared again, as a choking Vincenzo sprayed a mouthful of wine over the side of the bridge. He pounded his chest. "Bianca Buccino?" he demanded. "Your trans friend, your Barbie, she is competing with Bianca Buccino? *Dio mio!*"

"Yeah, yeah, that's what Barbie's mom thinks, too," Kimberly said sourly, reaching for the wine bottle. "She thinks it's a longshot." She glanced over at her date, who was now staring up at the heavens with an expression of disbelief. "What?"

For a second, it almost looked like Vincenzo was going to burst into laughter. Instead, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a kiss on the forehead. It was an unexpectedly cute gesture from a playboy type, and she was tipsy, so it caught her completely off-guard.

"You think too much about Barbie," he said, seemingly recovered from his attempt at breathing wine. "You talk too much about Barbie. Who are you?"

"Kimberly Quinn," Kimberly said, rolling her eyes.

“And what do you want, that is nothing to do with model campaign?” Vincenzo pressed, looking into her eyes while also putting a casual hand on her thigh. “Nothing to do with Barbie.”

Kimberly blinked. Serena’s last words before leaving, the words that had been hanging around in the back of her mind, resurfaced: You might not be dating him anymore, but your whole life still revolves around him -- he’s your whole identity.

For the first time, Kimberly was scared her ex’s sister was dead on the money. But there was a relatively simple way to push all that out of her head. “I want more wine,” Kimberly said casually. “And then I want to go back to your place. I seem to recall I was promised dessert.”

Vincenzo grinned. “Good, good,” he said. “This is progress, see?”

#

Bobby had been half expecting some big Italian bouncer to send them running, but when they walked into the bar nobody even gave them a second glance. Well, no. That wasn’t true. Most of the guys inside were giving second, third, and fourth glances. A few of them hadn’t been able to take their eyes off him since the moment they heard the clicking of his stilettos and looked up.

Bobby was very, very aware of all the attention focused on his swivelling ass as Andreas led him to a table, and the Italian boy obviously noticed it too, because he tightened his grip around Bobby’s dainty waist and puffed out his chest a little. Realizing he had become another guy’s sexy trophy was almost too much for Bobby to take, but at the same time, a very small, very embarrassed part of him was glad he wasn’t walking in here dressed like this by himself. So long as Andreas staked his claim, Bobby didn’t have to worry about all the other horndogs trying to pick him up.

With that in mind, he nestled a little closer to his date -- Andreas didn’t reciprocate, but didn’t pull away, either. They slid into the booth and the Italian boy proceeded to completely ignore him as he chatted with the waiter, who was clearly a friend, in rapid-fire sing-song nonsense with a bunch of hand-waving.

Bobby found it pretty freaking aggravating, especially since the waiter, who kept stealing looks down his top, was clearly congratulating Andreas on scoring a hot date, while Andreas was playing up the whole suave, “I could take it or leave it” attitude, as if he pulled models on the regular. But he was being “Barbie” for tonight, so instead of telling them to speak English like normal people, he just sat there smiling through gritted teeth.

Finally the waiter disappeared, came back with drinks, and, after a final congratulatory fist-pound with his buddy, left them in peace. Andreas lifted his beer, smirking slightly, and Bobby followed suit with the glass of white wine his date had ordered for him.

“Cheers,” he said.

"*Saluti*," Andreas corrected, and took a deep swig of his beer.

Bobby sipped at his wine. It was overwhelmingly sweet -- Andreas had probably ordered him the girliest thing on the menu -- but it was cold and refreshing, and a bit of alcohol could only help with what he had to do next. Bobby absolutely hated apologizing to people, but he could do it when necessary. The problem was, he couldn't just mumble his way through this one. He had to make sure Andreas the asshole actually bought it.

"It's pretty cool you don't get ID'd," he said tentatively. "I guess, um, the moustache really works for you?"

"This is Europe, not America," Andreas said, staring off into space as if Bobby wasn't worth his attention. "The drinking age is fifteen."

Bobby blinked in surprise. Maybe Europe did have a few things going for it, after all. He took a fortifying gulp of wine, then set it down on the table, trying to remember all the bullshit Kimberly had made him recite in the mirror while she did his hair.

"Um, I'm really glad you came to the show," he said. "I really wanted to message you, but I kept chickening out, because, well... You know."

"Know what?" Andreas asked vaguely, still not meeting his eye.

Bobby ground his teeth. This douchebag was not going to make it easy on him. "I was kind of a jerk to you before," he said. "Like, in America. I was kind of mean."

"Kind of mean?" Andreas echoed.

Bobby momentarily shut his eyes. How was this guy still so butthurt? It had just been some good-natured, emotionally-targeted hazing. It wasn't his fault Andreas was so freaking sensitive. But, of course, that wasn't what "Barbie" would say.

"Okay, really mean," Bobby said, exasperated. "I was really mean to you for no reason."

"For no reason," Andreas muttered. "Huh."

Bobby grimaced. "Maybe I was..." He racked his brain, trying to remember Kimberly's term for it. "Disgracing my insecurities?"

"You mean 'displacing?'" Andreas asked, frowning.

"Yes!" Bobby snapped his fingers. "Displacing. I was displacing my insecurities, because, you know, I was scared of people finding out about me."

Without warning, Andreas almost jumped out of his seat. “*Cazzo si!*” he shouted, at the same moment half the bar erupted in shouts of excitement. Bobby was so startled he nearly spilled the rest of his wine down his top. The whole place had gone crazy: Italians were hugging each other, singing, slapping each other on the back. Andreas was pumping his fist in the air.

Bobby knew the exact feeling he was witnessing. As the realization dawned on him, he twisted around in his seat. His mouth fell open in indignation. This was why Andreas had spent the entire date so far staring over his head and barely responding to him: there was a wide screen TV behind him, and the freaking soccer game was on.

It was exactly the kind of thing Bobby would have done on a date, had he been able to get into a sports bar without ID, and it made him absolutely furious. He had not gotten all dolled up and put his balls into purgatory just to get ignored.

His first instinct was to reach across the table and backhand the stupid grin off Andreas’s stupid face. Appealing as the mental image was, however, he knew it wouldn’t get him the results he needed. It was a Bobby strategy, and what he needed to do was come up with a “Barbie” strategy. He was pretty sure he could be more interesting than a bunch of men chasing a ball around a big green field for ninety minutes with only the slightest chance of actually scoring any goals.

Bobby took a bracing breath, looking at the white wine he had come so close to spilling down his top. Anything to screw Serena, and besides, he was in Italy. Nobody in this restaurant knew him, and he was never coming back here in a million years. Trying to keep all those somewhat comforting thoughts in mind, Bobby pretended to reach for his purse, and did the deed. His squeal wasn’t entirely faked -- the white wine was still cold.

“Oh my God, I’m so clumsy!” he said, pushing his “girly” voice up an octave. “I spilled on my boobs.”

Andreas nearly got whiplash, as did several other bar patrons who clearly knew enough English to know when a girl was talking about her boobs. With the wine still trickling down his collarbone, Bobby squeezed his elbows against his sides, in the way he knew, from humiliating experience, would push his breasts up and together. He pointed one claw-like nail at the problem, in case Andreas needed even more of a greenlight to ogle.



"My top is, like, soaked," Bobby said petulantly. It was true -- the flimsy material had soaked up the cold white wine like a sponge, and his newly-sensitive nipples had definitely noticed. Andreas had forgotten about the soccer game entirely, his full attention fixed on his date's cleavage. Blushing furiously, Bobby plucked at the wet fabric. "Ugh, do you have, like, napkins?" he squeaked. "Please?"

The Italian boy stuffed his tongue back in his mouth, and for the first time that evening, he was blushing even more brightly than Bobby was. "Yes, yes, I am sorry," he said. "One moment." He snatched a napkin dispenser off the neighboring table and handed it over.

Bobby, still feeling somewhat shocked at what he'd just done, started slowly dabbing at the tops of his breasts. "Thanks," he said. "So, um, what were we saying?"

Andreas gulped, tearing his eyes away from the drying process. "America?" he guessed -- clearly he hadn't heard a word up until now.

"Right," Bobby said, leaning forward and crossing his arms. "I had just finished *apologizing* and saying how *sorry* I was for how I treated you, and you were saying how it was okay, because you were kind of stuck-up."

Andreas frowned. "I don't remember saying that," he said, but his attention was now clearly on the conversation again. "You were a bully. And now, just because you are prancing around in Jimmy Choo stilettos and fluttering your eyelashes at me, you think I forgive and forget everything?"

Bobby's eyes widened. "How did you know they were Jimmy Choo..." He shook his head. "Never mind. Um, yes? I think forgiving and forgetting is, like, super important?"

"That semester abroad was the worst semester of my life," Andreas said flatly. "And it was all thanks to you. Everybody made fun of my name! Girls laughed at me when I tried to seduce them, because everybody thought I was gay! Do you have any idea what that's like?"

Bobby was already opening his mouth to argue, to downplay his actions, when he realized that the answer to Andreas's question was a resounding "yes." He sat back in the booth, feeling a little stunned. He thought back to people chanting "Barbie" at him during his basketball games, after he'd lost the makeover bet but before his forced "coming out" at the hands of his blackmailer. He thought about his hopes of hooking up with his ex, now totally dashed: Kimberly was off on a date with some other Italian douchebag, and he was here being "Barbie" for Andreas, showing off his cleavage and wiggling his butt.

"Dude, I actually do," Bobby said. "I know exactly what it's like."

"Really?" Andreas asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

Bobby frowned, trying to reformulate his feelings in a way that made sense and wouldn't blow his cover. "Yeah," he said slowly. "Because, I know how it feels to have people call me the wrong name. And to have people treating me like something I'm not. It sucks. A lot."

Andreas's forehead creased. "It does suck," he said cautiously. "So you wanted me to feel what you were feeling, yes? This was your displacing of insecurities?"

Progress at last. Bobby nodded eagerly, making his hoop earrings bounce. "Yeah!" he said. "Yeah, it was that. And I'm sorry."

The apology slipped out without him even noticing, and the weird thing was, he felt like he actually meant it for a change. Andreas nodded thoughtfully. For a second, Bobby thought he had pulled it off. All was forgiven. Maybe Andreas would be happy to watch the rest of his dumb soccer game, call up his uncle and put in a good word, then take him back to the hotel and never cross paths again.

Instead, Andreas's face darkened. "And you chose to bully me why? Because I was an easy target, I suppose."

Bobby grimaced. Okay, all was not forgiven. Andreas was still mad, and if he went home mad, he might call up his uncle and tell him "Barbie" was secretly a meth-head, or something. He searched desperately for a solution, wishing Kimberly was there to guide him. Suddenly, he had a flashback to the first grade: he was on the playground, chasing Lizzy DeVries and yanking on her hair, partly because it was fun, but mostly because...

"No, that wasn't why," Bobby murmured. He looked down at the table through his long dark lashes, hardly believing what he was about to say. "It was because, I, um..." He blushed, plucking nervously at the lacy black choker around his neck. "I had a super big crush on you, Andreas."

Andreas blinked in surprise.

"It's super embarrassing," Bobby blurted -- that, at least, was true. "I, um, told everyone you were gay because I couldn't stand the idea of you being with... Other girls. Because I, I..." He gulped. "I really wanted to be your girl?" he squeaked.

Andreas didn't speak. Bobby crossed his manicured fingers under the table, hoping against hope that his date would buy it. He could see some kind of conflict was going on inside Andreas's head. Maybe he was still pissed, or maybe he still suspected that Bobby was trying to get on his good side for the sake of the Blush campaign.

But Bobby realized, in a weird, "seeing the Matrix"-type moment, that his lie had a big advantage over the truth: it was what Andreas *wanted* to believe. What dude wouldn't? In this

scenario, a gorgeous blonde had flown all the way from another continent to pretty much throw herself at him, and not only that, she'd been secretly in love with him even back before he had a leather jacket and muscles.

Andreas reached across the table -- the soccer game was clearly now the farthest thing from his mind -- and cupped Bobby's cheek. Bobby swallowed, fighting back the reflexive urge to slap his date's hand away. His face grew hot as the Italian boy's fingers softly caressed his skin. Anything to screw Serena, he reminded himself. Anything to screw Serena...

Bobby knew what was coming as Andreas slipped a finger under his choker, tugging at it playfully to make his date lean a little farther across the table, but there was nothing Bobby could do except part his pretty lips and give him full access. Andreas kissed him deeply, a little clumsy compared to Josh, mashing their lips together and slipping his tongue into his mouth. Bobby let his eyes flutter shut and tried not to think too hard about it.

When Andreas ended the kiss and pulled back, the Italian boy was grinning widely. Bobby, for his part, felt partly disgusted with himself, partly proud of himself for pulling it off, and partly -- just a very, very small part, mind you -- warm. And flushed. And tingly.

"I'll get you another drink," Andreas said. "Just promise not to spill it, yes?"

"Okay," Bobby said, in a small voice. "Promise."

Andreas got up a little awkwardly, adjusting his jeans, then sauntered off towards the bar. Bobby hunched his shoulders, feeling the renewed interest from the Italian guys who had just witnessed him sucking face. To avoid making any accidental eye contact, he fished his iPhone out of his purse and tapped out a message to Kimberly.

Think I did it. Come get me, you can pretend there's an emergency or something.

He hit send and waited for a reply -- Kimmy was usually quick to respond. But the minutes ticked by with no answer, and Bobby realized, with a twist of jealousy, that his ex's date was probably going well. He reluctantly put his phone away as Andreas returned, holding a new glass of white wine and a second beer for himself.

"For the lady," he said, handing Bobby his drink and looking him in the eyes with a smoldering intensity. "Here is to fresh starts. *Saluti!*"

Bobby smiled weakly. "Um, yeah. *Saluti.*"

#

A ray of sunlight hit Kimberly full in the face and she woke up with a ready-made headache. For a second she had no idea where she was, then the night came back to her: pizza on the bridge,

wine on the bridge, no dessert at Vincenzo's pad but plenty of sloppy, though still very enjoyable, drunk sex. She disentangled herself from the sleeping Italian, who shifted slightly and smiled at whatever he was dreaming about -- probably his next conquest.

It wasn't until she turned on her nearly-dead iPhone, finding a deluge of messages and missed calls from "Barbie," that she realized how badly she'd screwed up. It was half past one in the afternoon, and the second day of the fashion show had been set to start at noon. She momentarily considered just crawling back under the covers and shutting her eyes again.

Instead, she put one hand to her pounding temple and read her missed texts. Amid all the *where TF are you???* types from Bobby, there was a single message from Mrs. Vickerson nestled in the middle. With a feeling of dread, she opened it to read the whole thing.

Hi sweetie, I noticed you forgot to update Barbie's Instagram with photos from the show, and I also noticed that she hasn't Tweeted in almost 24 hours, so she and I agreed that I'm going to handle her socials for the rest of the trip... I'm guessing you were too busy having fun last night. She's a little panicky about why you aren't replying, so please call her ASAP. Thanks! :) :)

"Fuck!" Kimberly practically screamed, startling her sleeping companion awake.

"*Che cazzo?*" Vincenzo yelped, jerking upright. He caught sight of her and glared, rubbing his eyes. "Why are you loud, Kimberly? It is not time for being loud. I need to sleep." He dove back under the covers and pulled the pillow over his head.

Kimberly drummed her nails against her phone. She'd been so focused on the big job, getting Bobby the Blush campaign, that she'd failed to do her basic, easy-as-shit duties as social media coordinator. And now she was missing his second show, because she'd gotten drunk and gone home with a Roman centurion.

Her only hope now was that Bobby's date had gone really, really well. As in, well enough to give them leverage with Nino Romano. She thumbed Bobby's profile icon in her phone and called him. To her relief, he answered almost immediately.

"Kimmy, what the fuck?" he screeched. "I thought you got, like, kidnapped and organ-harvested, or something. That would *not* be a good look for me."

"I'm fine, thanks," Kimberly said, wincing at the volume of her ex's voice. "I had my phone off."

"You turned your phone off?" Bobby echoed, incredulous. "You're still allowed to check your phone while you're fucking someone, Kimmy. Bad excuse. Where are you?"

"I'm on my way..." Kimberly couldn't find her thong, but she spotted her bra and grabbed it off the bedpost. "To the show. Same venue, right?"

“Yeah, yeah, same place,” Bobby said. “Did you, like, turn your brain off, too?”

“Are you done being a bitch?” Kimberly demanded, switching the call to speaker phone so she could put her bra back on.

“Don’t try to turn this shit around on me, Kimmy,” Bobby said. “You left me stranded with Andreas, you’re missing the show, and you didn’t even update my Insta. Mom was freaking pissed this morning, and she took it out on *me* when she brushed my hair.”

“I got that,” Kimberly muttered, grabbing her scrunched-up dress. “Somehow it transmitted through the triple smiley faces. What happened with Andreas?”

Bobby was silent for a moment, and a dozen worst-case scenarios ran through Kimberly’s mind: she pictured her ex calling Andreas “Andrietta” all night, or insulting his mom’s pesto again, or maybe even doing his best but blowing it anyways, possibly by getting so drunk he untucked himself to take a piss in the urinal. She could already imagine Andreas dropping by his Uncle Nino’s to mention that the new model from America was a total psycho.

“I already messaged you about it,” Bobby said sourly. “It was fine. We got some drinks, I said sorry, and he dropped me back at the hotel around midnight. We’re, like, back to neutral. He definitely isn’t going to badmouth me to Uncle Nino.”

Kimberly breathed a sigh of relief. Bobby had done exactly what she’d told him to do. *She* was the one who’d gotten drunk and been completely irresponsible. But “back to neutral” wasn’t going to guarantee them the Blush campaign, either.

“Okay, cool, so you guys made nice,” she said, pulling her dress on over her head. “Just nice? Nothing else?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Bobby asked sharply. Kimberly wasn’t quite sure, but she thought she detected a note of defensiveness.

“It sounds like you did good, Barbie,” she said. “I’m proud. Really. I’m glad he’s not going to badmouth you.” She hunted for her shoes on Vincenzo’s messy floor. “But to make you Nino’s new favorite for the campaign, we need Andreas to, uh, *good* mouth you.” She winced -- the hangover was not helping her vocabulary. “As in, we need him to tell Uncle Nino you’re perfect for Blush. Did you set up another date?”

She could practically hear her ex rankle at the word. “No,” he said stonily. “I don’t date guys.” There was a long pause. “Okay, he invited me to a party today. I said I would probably be busy with, you know, modeling stuff.”

“You’re going to that party,” Kimberly said, sliding her shoes on. “When is it?”

“Later this afternoon,” Bobby said, and she could hear some pain in his voice. “Kimmy, it’s a *pool party*.”

“Even better,” Kimberly said staunchly. “I know your mom packed you some bikinis. Barbie, this is important, remember? We *need* to get the Blush campaign.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Her ex’s voice was sulky, but resigned. “I know. I’m the one who’s, like, doing my job, Kimmy. How about you do yours?”

Kimberly winced, but tried to brush it off. “Really got the bitchy model attitude this morning,” she said dryly. “Use that on the catwalk. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“It’s afternoon,” Bobby shot back. “And I’m not -- ”

Kimberly ended the call. While she was busy ordering an Uber, Vincenzo emerged from the covers with a wide grin on his face.

“Wow, Kimberly,” he said. “You are a little *mafiosa*, huh? Very, how do you say, cut-throat. It’s sexy.” He held up her thong between two fingers.

“It’s nothing personal,” Kimberly said wryly, snatching it away. “It’s business.”

“I have the day off,” Vincenzo said. “Do your Barbie things, then come back. I will show you the best view in Rome.”

“Your dick?” Kimberly guessed, sliding her underwear on before checking her phone. The Uber driver was just arriving.

“No!” Vincenzo exclaimed, looking slightly affronted. “My dick is second best view, and we will look at it after.”

“This was fun,” Kimberly said. “But definitely a one-time thing. I think that’s the whole point.” She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead, then headed for the door. “*Ciao*, Vincenzo,” she said.

Vincenzo gave a rueful shrug. “*Ciao*, Kimberly.”

#

“See, this is the perfect tone, and now you finish to blend the V-shape, and...” Bianca set the brush down and stepped back, beaming. “Voilà!”

Bobby gaped at his reflection. Between the double push-up bra and the contouring witchcraft Bianca had done on him, he looked... Stacked. He had definitely never had this much cleavage

before -- Bianca's were still bigger, and obviously realer, but if Bobby didn't know better he'd say he'd just gone up a cup size.

"Huh," he said weakly. "No shit."

"It is very easy," Bianca said modestly. "I wasn't always so lucky, you know. I learned all the tricks!"

The show had just wrapped up, but no sooner had Bobby gotten his top back on than Bianca dragged him to the bathroom and took it off again. At first he'd thought he was about to get some kind of crazy hook-up in a toilet stall, which he'd been slightly nervous but also knee-shakingly excited about. Of course, it turned out Bianca just wanted to give him a tutorial on some of the "titty tricks" she'd mentioned to him yesterday.

"Well, um, good to know," Bobby said, eyeing Bianca's own cleavage in the mirror.

"If you want, I can refer you to a very good plastic surgeon," Bianca said proudly. "But for now, this is good, right? You can maybe use it before your next date." She gave him a wink that made Bobby feel all tingly inside -- a feeling her next words immediately cancelled out. "Was he, like, a super good kisser?" she asked innocently.

Bobby's brain froze up. "What?" he squeaked. "Who? Kissing?"



Bianca patted his arm affectionately. "Barbie, you did *such* a good job with the concealer, like, really good," she said, placatingly. "But it smeared a little while you were getting dressed. That's the other reason why I am bringing you to the bathroom. Don't worry, we'll fix it."

Bobby twisted his neck and saw what Bianca had already spotted: part of his carefully-applied concealer had smudged off, leaving the purplish edge of his hickey visible. His face turned bright red. He'd thought he was saved when he found the YouTube tutorial on How to Hide Love Bites early that morning, but now he had a sinking feeling in his stomach.

There was a reason he'd kept his summary of the date brief when he was on the phone with Kimberly -- there were some details she absolutely did not need to know. For instance, the fact that he'd spent the entire second half of the night trying to keep Andreas "happy" without losing his last shred of male ego.

His date had been emboldened after their first kiss, and since Kimberly wasn't around to save him, Bobby had been forced to fend for himself. Which was not easy to do after pretty much declaring your undying love to a horny young Italian guy. Andreas had slid around to the same side of the booth, supposedly to show him a video on his phone, and before Bobby knew what was happening he'd had his arm around him and one hand casually resting on his upper thigh.

Bobby claimed he didn't want to get too frisky in public, but Andreas told him that was a very American thing to worry about, right before sticking his tongue halfway down his throat. Bobby did his best to stay in "Barbie" mode, letting Andreas kiss him whenever he wanted and even making a few half-hearted attempts to reciprocate, but he had never felt so humiliated in his life -- especially when his date scooted him up onto his lap.

The worst part was, some traitorous part of his brain had kept mixing signals. As much as he wanted to be disgusted by the feeling of Andreas's tongue exploring his mouth, his breasts kept tingling throughout the date. It had made for a very long, stressful, and confusing evening, to say the least. Eventually, Bobby just gave up, sitting submissively on Andreas's lap with his eyes shut, letting the Italian boy play with his hair and suck on his neck.



Ironically, he'd spent that whole time trying his best to fantasize about Bianca. And now Bianca was the one who'd spotted the damning evidence: evidence of just how far he'd already gone to get into Uncle Nino's good books. Bobby swallowed, trying to hide the stricken expression on his face.

“Yeah, um, I just...” He trailed off. “It was... Um...” He couldn’t stop flushing. He’d also been fantasizing about taking Bianca out on a date, as a guy, right before he went on his date *with* a guy and spent the whole night playing tonsil hockey. There was just no way he could talk to her about this.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Bianca said softly. “If it’s, like, a secret? That’s okay. I won’t say anything, and we will never talk of it again, okay? Secrets are important.”

Bobby stared at her. All of his experiences with popular, attractive girls -- from Ally and Beverly, to Kimberly, to even Serena -- had taught him that secrets were basically the girl form of ammunition. But try as he might, he couldn’t see any hint of sneakiness on Bianca’s face. On the contrary, she looked so concerned for him he was worried she might start crying or something.

“Thanks, Bianca,” he said. “You’re... You’re cool.”

Bianca’s face instantly reformed into its usual sunny smile. “Oh my God, I have always wanted for an American girl to say I’m cool,” she said. “It sounds so nice when you guys say it. Barbie, your secret is safe with me. Now, let’s hide your little *succhiotto*.”

She dove back into her makeup kit to find the right shade of concealer, and a few minutes later the hickey was gone like it had never been there in the first place and they were on their way out of the bathroom. They were just rounding the corner when Kimberly finally decided to show up. His ex-girlfriend did a double take when she saw who he was walking with, and another double take when she saw his makeup-enhanced chest, which made him blush slightly.

“I thought I’d catch your last walk, but traffic was insane,” Kimberly said ruefully, brushing her newly-brunette hair behind one ear. “I heard you were a hit, though, so that’s...” She shot a questioning look in Bianca’s direction. “Good.”

“Barbie was *such* a hit,” Bianca said, giving him a playful bump with her hip. She tapped a rapid-fire message into her phone, then smiled up at Kimberly. “Who is your friend, Barbie?”

Kimberly shot a meaningful look at him, but he let her stay on the hot seat for another few seconds. If she hadn’t gone off to bang a gladiator, or whatever the guy’s dumb costume had been, Bobby wouldn’t currently be concealing a hickey. A date with a horny asshole was exactly the kind of thing she was supposed to get him out of -- instead, she’d left him out to dry.

Also, her makeup was smudged.

“Oh, that’s just Kimberly,” Bobby said coolly. “She’s one of my friends from school.”

Bianca gave Kimberly an up-and-down, seeming slightly troubled by the rumpled dress. Bobby gave his ex-girlfriend a similar up-and-down, seeing her through new eyes, and he had a weird realization: Kimberly was one of the hottest girls in Jefferson High, possibly even *the* hottest, but next to Bianca, she just looked...pretty.

Sure, she wasn't done up the way the models were, but even at her best, Kimberly wasn't runway material. Bobby was, and it kind of made sense for him to have friends who were, too. Friends like Bianca.

"Hi, Kimberly," Bianca said. "I am Bianca Buccino. It is nice to meet you, but I have to run! My publicist is like, yap yap yap, you know? Barbie, do you have a publicist?" She put her phone to her ear. "If you like, I can talk to mine for you, she is very good. See you tomorrow, babe!"

The model leaned forward and gave him a kiss on the cheek -- not a makeup-saving air kiss, the way most girls did, but an actual peck that made Bobby's stomach flutter. Then she waved goodbye to Kimberly and hurried off towards her waiting mob of assistants, already chattering on the phone in high-speed Italian.

Kimberly watched her go, then turned back to him. "Babe?" she echoed.

"She's experimenting with, like, English slang," Bobby said with a shrug, not liking his ex-girlfriend's tone of disdain.

"Got it," Kimberly said. "So you're working this from both angles. Smart."

"Thanks," Bobby said, checking his phone -- his mom had apparently just gotten them a table for lunch at the restaurant across the street. He looked up. "Uh, smart how?"

"Cozying up to Andreas is good, but so is cozying up to Bianca," Kimberly said matter-of-factly.

Bobby wrinkled his nose. He didn't like the reminder of just how "cozy" he'd gotten with Andreas, thanks to Kimberly's negligence, but the idea of getting close to Bianca was appealing. He just wasn't sure Kimberly meant it in the same way.

"She's cool," Bobby said plainly. "She's, you know, fun to hang out with."

"And you're in love with her boobs," Kimberly said dryly. "Yeah, I know. Just keep in mind that she's the enemy, okay? So if you get the chance to... I don't know, dig up some dirt? We might need that."

Bobby frowned. "She's not the *enemy*," he protested. "She's just the competition, that's all. Like, friendly competition. Serena's the enemy." He bit his lip. "Also, she's learning how to twerk, and she said she would send me a video."

Kimberly raised an eyebrow, but her dismissive look just didn't hit the same way when her hair was all dishevelled and her makeup needed fixing. Honestly, Bobby felt a little embarrassed Bianca had seen her like that.

"Let's focus on Andreas for now," Kimberly said. "If the date got you guys to neutral, this party should be able to get you to 'tell my Uncle I need the Blush campaign' territory."

All of Bobby's anger and embarrassment about the previous night came rushing back instantly. He had been trapped in his worst nightmare for hours, and now he had a freaking hickey on his neck, and it was all Kimberly's fault.

"If you're so sure the only way to win is by parading an ass around in front of him, how about you just go fuck him?" he snapped. "It'll be, like, a two-for-one deal on Italian sausage. You were supposed to bail me out last night, but instead you left me freaking stranded just so you could go off to get some dick."

His ex-girlfriend's face turned red, and Bobby felt an immense sense of satisfaction. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten under Kimberly's skin -- lately it seemed like she was always the one in charge, but it hadn't always been like that. Not by a long shot.

"Look," Kimberly said. "I get you're pissed off, but right now we need to focus." She rubbed her eyes. "I'm going to kill this hangover with some espresso, then we tell Andreas you're bringing a friend to the party." Her lips twisted. "I'm not as fun as Bianca Buccino, but I've got your back, okay?"

Bobby kept glaring, but he felt his anger drop down a few notches. He slowly nodded his head. "Okay," he said. "I'm freaking starving. Let's go eat pizza."

#

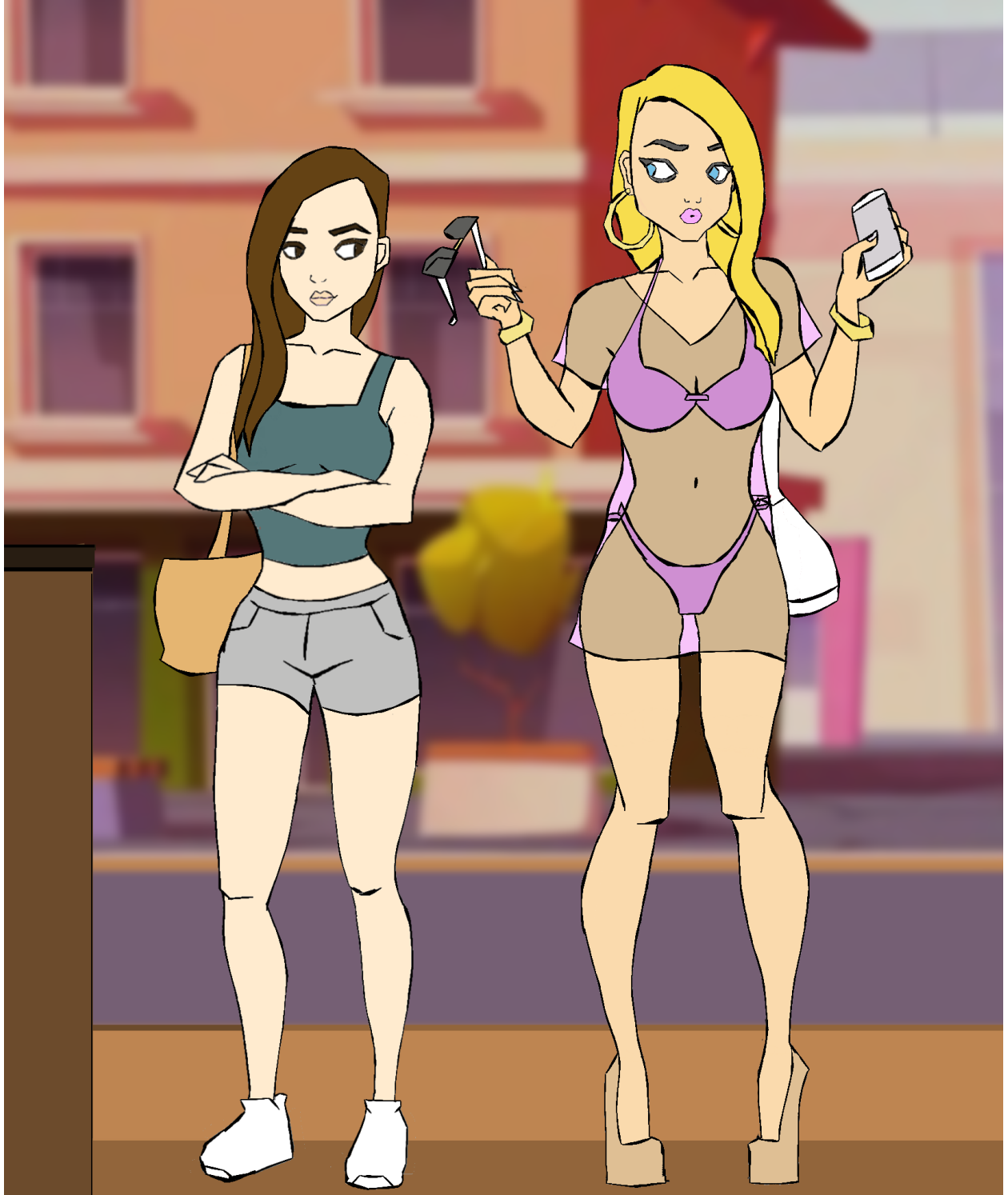
Even after scarfing down half a pepperoni pizza all on his own, Bobby's stomach was still infuriatingly flat, toned, and perfect when they showed up at Andreas's house an hour later. Kimberly had always been jealous of her ex's metabolism, but now she got to be jealous of his beach body, too: the neon pink bikini she'd picked out for him molded to his curves like it had been made for him.

The bottoms were tied high on his hips, with the daring expanse of smooth tanned skin making it very clear he waxed, while the top pushed his boobs up and out as much as possible. He was wearing a cover-up over his suit, but it wasn't exactly living up to its name: the gauzy pink fabric might as well have been see-through. Perched on a pair of four-inch wedge sandals, toying anxiously with a pair of sunglasses, and carrying his largest purse on his tanned shoulder, Bobby was every inch the perfect blonde beach bunny.

Kimberly knew she wasn't quite on the same level, and something about getting shown up by her own ex-boyfriend rankled her. That was why she'd opted for a tank top and a pair of cut-offs, pointing out that Bobby was obviously the one Andreas wanted to see in swim-wear, not her. Besides, it still felt a little chilly for swimming.

"You sure he gave you the right address?" Kimberly asked pointedly -- Bobby had messaged Andreas five minutes ago, and the Italian had yet to let them in.

"I think so, but my Maps won't load right," Bobby grumbled, looking down at his phone. "I'm out of data already. I told Mom to buy the premium package, or whatever, but she --"



Taking matters into her own hands, Kimberly reached forward and pushed her thumb to a conspicuous-looking button. The gate buzzed open. She exchanged a glance with her baffled ex. "After you," she suggested.

Bobby took a deep breath, in a way he probably didn't realize emphasized his bust, and led the way. She couldn't help but marvel how he wiggled his ass as he minced along in the high-heeled wedges. Even off the runway, it seemed to be ingrained.

They walked around the back of what was clearly quite an expensive house -- she knew space in downtown Rome was at a premium. Through a small archway, she saw a tiled area with a bunch of teens hanging around, drinks in hand. Some kind of techno music was playing on a Bluetooth speaker, and the conversations going on were very expressive, and very, very Italian.

"Uh, Barbie," Kimberly said, noticing the attire around her. "Are you sure he said -- "

She was interrupted by the arrival of Andreas, who was wearing chinos and a dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up just right. "Barbie!" he exclaimed, strolling toward them. "And your social media Kimberly friend! Welcome."

Bobby looked incredibly nervous all of a sudden, and tugged urgently at her arm. "Look, I didn't tell you everything about the date," he hissed as Andreas approached. "But it's all just, like, an act, and if you tell anybody I will seriously freaking..."

Andreas didn't let Bobby finish his sentence, wrapping one arm around her ex's dainty waist with a casual sense of ownership before yanking him forward into a downright steamy kiss that made Kimberly's jaw drop. Bobby gave a muffled squeal of surprise, fluttering his manicured hand, but Andreas didn't let up in the slightest. By the time he pulled back, her ex was pink-cheeked and panting for breath.

Kimberly felt a little flushed herself. Seeing Andreas treat Bobby like his girlfriend -- and not just his girlfriend, but like a submissive, pretty little doll who was powerless to stave off so much as a kiss -- was really freaking hot. It got even hotter when Andreas wrapped his arm around Bobby's slender shoulders and looked deeply into his pretty blue eyes.

"*Ciao, bella,*" he said.

"Hi," Bobby said weakly.

"Hi, what?" Andreas asked teasingly, giving Kimberly a wink over Bobby's blonde head.

Bobby followed his gaze, shooting her a look of total mortification. Then, blushing brightly and staring at the ground through his long black lashes, he cleared his throat. "Hi, handsome."

Kimberly involuntarily bit her lip.

Andreas gave her ex an affectionate squeeze, then finally stepped back to take in the full view of his bikini-clad body. "Barbie, why are you wearing this?" he asked, frowning.

“What do you mean?” Bobby squeaked, looking suddenly terrified. “Um, it’s a pool party?”

“Barbie, I said it is a pool-*side* party,” Andreas said. “This means a party beside the pool, yes? It’s only spring, and it is much too cold to swim. They only fill the pool in summer.”

He was doing a pretty good imitation of surprise and pity, but Kimberly could hear just a hint of smug amusement underneath. Depending on how quick Andreas was to forgive and forget, the miscommunication might not have been a hundred percent accidental -- Kimberly did her best to hide her own smirk as Bobby stared around at the other party-goers.

“Oh, shit,” he whispered, wide-eyed.

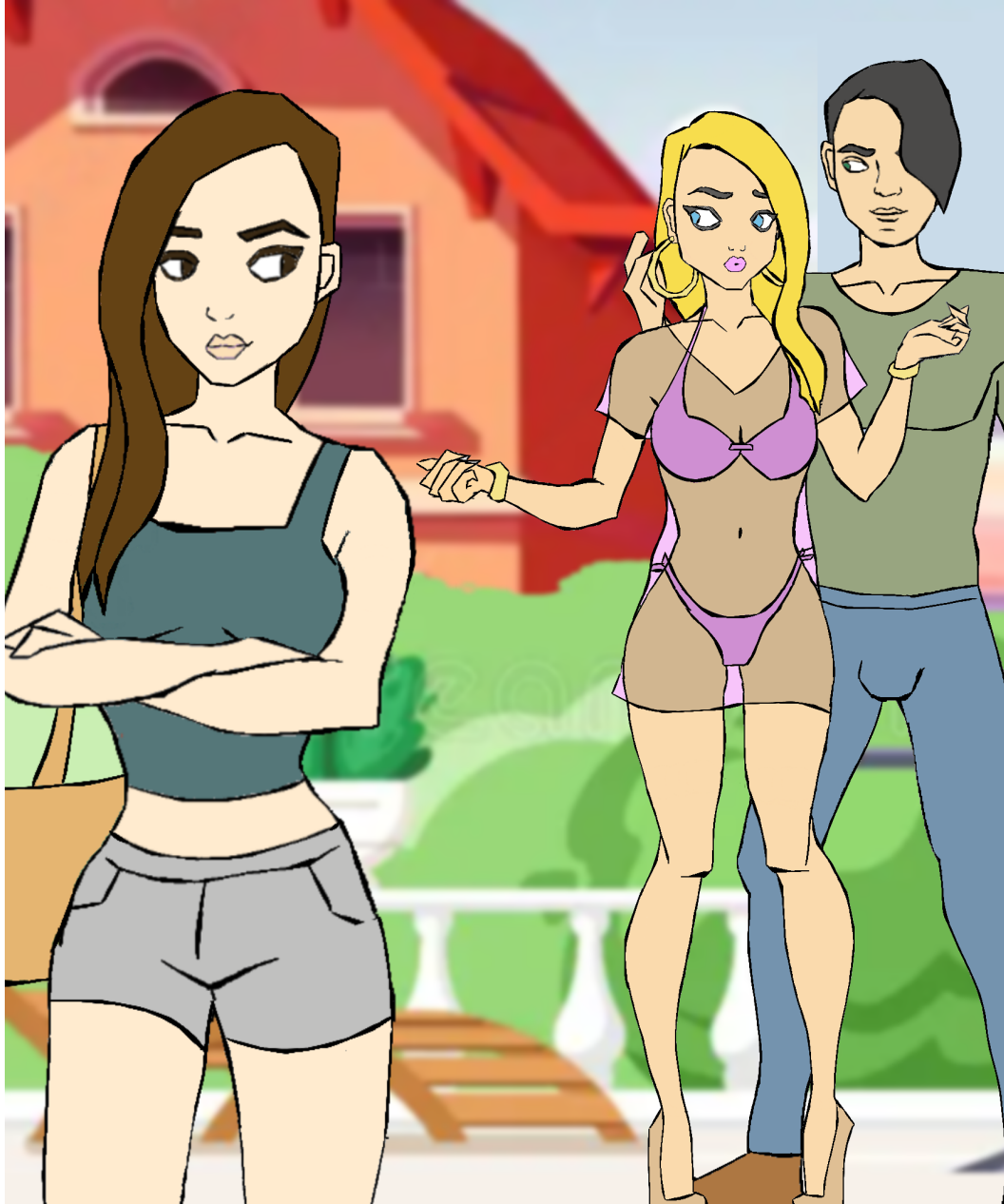
“It’s no big deal,” Andreas said, grinning. “You look very sexy. Kimberly, you look *bellissima* as well. Come, I can introduce you to everybody.”

Bobby shot her another pleading look, and Kimberly gave him an encouraging nod. The smirk slipped out, though, as Andreas put his hand on her ex’s lower back, dangerously close to his taut buttocks, and ushered him forward. She shook herself. As entertaining as it was to see Bobby forced to play the part of another guy’s girl, they were here for a reason.

Most of Andreas’s friends were guys -- judging by a few matching jackets, members of the same sports team -- and all of them became extremely interested as soon as “Barbie” made her entrance. They didn’t bother to pretend at any pickiness the way Vincenzo had. By contrast, their tongues were practically hanging out as they drank in the sight of an incredibly hot, incredibly dumb blonde who had shown up to the party in wildly inappropriate attire. Kimberly felt pretty much invisible.

Andreas said something in Italian, pointing to the tarp that Kimberly assumed was covering the empty pool, and his friends burst into uproarious laughter. She could see Bobby’s jaw clench. Either Andreas was blaming the mix-up on Bobby, or admitting to the prank outright, but her ex had no way of proving either.

He was probably mortified enough anyways. He kept either plucking at his skimpy cover-up, as if he could somehow will it to be more opaque, or fluttering his hands ineffectually in front of himself. Most amusingly, he seemed to be sticking even closer to Andreas than necessary -- probably trying to use the taller boy as a shield, but giving the appearance of a cute, clingy girlfriend.



It was kind of adorable. His cheeks were almost as pink as his neon bikini as Andreas introduced him to each and every one of his friends, each and every one of whom was more than happy to get up close and personal for the Italian cheek-kisses. Judging by the pure lust in their eyes, they were already fantasizing about him.

Kimberly had a few guys checking her out, too, but she made sure to keep her unimpressed bitch face engaged as introductions were made. Bobby, meanwhile, was nodding and smiling and simpering like a good little girlfriend, though she could see the tell-tale glimmer of panic in his big blue eyes. Kimberly waited for Andreas to finish showing him off, then ducked in and pulled her ex aside, claiming a social media emergency.

As soon as they were at the edge of the unused pool, which was incidentally also where the folding table with all the alcohol was, the pretty white smile dropped off Bobby's face.

"So the date went better than expected, huh?" Kimberly asked dryly.

Bobby swallowed. "I was trying to make him happy," he said miserably. "So I told him I had a big crush on him, and we...we made out." Her ex shut his eyes briefly, clearly humiliated to be reliving the memory. "I didn't *want* to, but you said I had to make him happy, and now he's happy," he babbled. "But also I'm here in a bikini, and I have a hickey on my neck, and we're not just 'back to neutral' or whatever, we're, like, in drive. Big time." He took a deep breath, making his breasts bob attractively. "This is bad. This is really bad."

Kimberly blinked. She'd obviously been expecting Andreas to steal a goodnight kiss -- with a girl as hot as "Barbie," what guy wouldn't try his luck? But she definitely hadn't expected him to get to hickey levels of familiarity on the first date, or to already be parading Bobby around like a trophy wife in training.

"It *seems* bad," Kimberly corrected. "But this is actually really, really good. All you have to do is hold in there, and when the opportunity comes, drop a hint about the Blush campaign. Tell him if you get this campaign, you'll be flying into Rome every other weekend. Tell him you'll be his American girlfriend. Tell him whatever you have to, because it's bullshit, alright? Once the contract is signed, it's signed, and you're way too good a model for Uncle Nino to just drop even if his nephew whines about you ignoring his texts."

Bobby stared at her, absorbing the words, then slowly nodded. "Okay," he said. "Yeah. Okay. Can we get drunk?"

"We can get tipsy," Kimberly decided, grabbing the nearest bottle and unscrewing the cap. The smell brought her hangover back full force. "*You* can get tipsy," she corrected. "I'll, uh, be the designated Uber orderer."

"Suit yourself," her ex said with a shrug, holding out his cup.

#

Even after gulping down three glasses of wine, Bobby was *not* enjoying the party. He'd thought sashaying down a catwalk in skimpy lingerie was humiliating enough, but this was so much worse: he could see his audience, for one thing, and they were clearly enjoying the view. Everywhere he looked, he saw guys staring at his body, ogling him like a piece of meat while they smirked and nudged each other.

Not only that, thanks to Andreas's "pool-side" bullshit, they also thought he was either a complete airhead, a slut, or both. The few other girls at the party were dressed stylishly in

high-waisted cut-offs or skirts, and for the first time in his life Bobby wished, desperately, that he was wearing even a miniskirt and crop top.

The girls were staring, too, though in a much cattier way. Bobby suspected that they were annoyed because their boyfriends were checking him out, which was embarrassing enough on its own, but a small part of him also worried that they were checking out his boobs and giggling to each other in Italian over how small they were.

At least Andreas was occupied. The Italian boy had gotten into what appeared to be a shouting match with two of his friends, which had given Bobby the chance to slip back towards his safety zone -- AKA, Kimberly and the wine bottles.

"Think of it as a cultural experience," Kimberly suggested, watching as the heated argument suddenly dissolved into hugging and laughter.

"I hate this," Bobby said, blushing brightly as he caught another guy staring at his chest. "Fill me up again, will you?"

Kimberly acquiesced, so Bobby was on his fourth glass of wine, still trying and failing to find a way to look inconspicuous wearing a neon pink bikini, when Andreas tracked them down again. The Italian, having downed a few drinks himself, was getting increasingly frisky. Case in point, sidling up behind Bobby and putting both hands firmly on his hips. Bobby concentrated very hard on his drink as Andreas nuzzled his neck in greeting.

"*Ciao, bella,*" the Italian boy said. "Are you having a good time?"

"Hi, um, handsome," Bobby squeaked, outright refusing to look Kimberly in the eye as Andreas's lips softly touched his neck, tracing the sensitive hickey he'd left behind last night. "The party is really...fun."

"Good," Andreas said, in a low, husky voice. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

Bobby's eyes widened involuntarily, and this time he couldn't avoid his ex-girlfriend's gaze. For some reason Kimberly's face was flushed, too, but her jaw was set and she gave him a meaningful nod. The message was clear: don't mess this up.

It was showtime. Feeling like he was trapped in a bad dream, Bobby nodded back, then let Andreas take him by the hand. "Sure," he chirped, dropping his gaze to the floor, eyelashes aflutter. "Be right back, Kimberly."

If it wasn't for the alcohol in his system, Bobby probably would have panicked and made a run for it right then and there. As it was, he felt anxious, but not terrified, and he was a little wobblier in his wedges than usual as Andreas tugged him along. The Italian boy was smirking to his

friends, and Bobby knew exactly why. But if he wanted the Blush campaign, if he wanted to screw over his big sister, all he could do was keep smiling and be “Barbie.”

Andreas opened a sliding door, leading him first through a fancy-looking kitchen, then down a short hall to what appeared to be a bedroom. Bobby hesitated on the threshold for a moment, swaying on his chunky sandals. Then, taking a deep breath, he stepped through. He felt a twinge of misery when he saw how much Andreas’s room reminded him of his own, before it had gotten a thorough “Barbie” renovation.

There were clothes strewn on the floor and Lamborghini posters on the wall, one of which included some sexy, half-dressed grid girls -- Bobby reflected ruefully that he wasn’t wearing much more than they were. Andreas also had a PlayStation set-up, and a bunch of medals hanging on the walls.

“You, um, play sports?” Bobby asked.

“Of course,” Andreas said, snorting. “I am one of the best strikers on my team.”

Bobby pretended to be fascinated, since it gave him an excuse to wriggle his hand free from Andreas’s grasp and wander over, creating some much needed distance. He saw a little golden trophy in the shape of a man preparing to kick a ball, and realized what a “striker” was. Bobby couldn’t help rolling his eyes.

“Oh, right,” he said, turning around. “You play socc...”

The word didn’t make it all the way out. Andreas had shut the door behind him, and he had also, in the five seconds Bobby’s back had been turned, stripped down to nothing but a pair of tight white briefs. It would have been funny, if not for the noticeable bulge in the crotch. Bobby immediately relegated his gaze to above-the-neck, but Andreas had already noticed his noticing, and was now grinning broadly.

“You were making me feel, how do you say, overdressed,” the Italian boy said, walking over to the bed and patting his mattress. “Come.”

Bobby flushed crimson, not least because he could remember pulling a similar move on a date once -- girls loved cocky. And “Barbie” was a girl. But he still couldn’t quite bring himself to mince over like an obedient puppy and join Andreas on the bed, especially knowing what was likely to come next.

“Do you have Call of Duty?” he asked, in a quavering voice. “I could really go for some Call of Duty right now.”

“If you want, I can teach you later, *bella*,” Andreas said with a shrug. “Right now, I want to be with my girl. You still want to be that, yes? My girl?”

Bobby tried to hide his grimace. "Um, yeah," he said. "Totally."

Even after four glasses of wine, it took every shred of Bobby's acting ability to look relaxed as he swished over to the bed. Burning under Andreas's lustful stare, he hesitated for a moment, then undid his cover-up and sat down on the bed. He crossed one leg over the other by instinct, and Andreas's eyes followed the motion, roving lustfully up and down Bobby's coltish calves and toned thighs. The Italian boy began stroking his back and playing with the knot of his bikini top. Bobby gulped.



“It’s too bad my parents are away,” Andreas said casually. “I would like for my family to meet you.” He ran his hand through Bobby’s blonde hair. “My uncle is in town, of course. Maybe we could go to dinner with him before you leave Italy.”

Andreas’s words punctured through Bobby’s alcohol-induced fuzziness, setting off a very loud alarm inside his brain. This was it. This was the opportunity Kimberly had told him, a million times, to keep a lookout for. Now all he had to do was play his cards right, or whatever.

“Oh, that would be, um, cool,” Bobby said, in a small breathy voice. “You know, I was thinking...”

“Yes?” Andreas prodded, still playing with his hair.

“Um, since Blush is based here in Rome, I would probably have to make a bunch of trips here,” Bobby said. “If I, you know, got the Blush campaign.”

“And you would like that?” Andreas asked. “To make trips to Rome?” He flashed a devilish grin. “Why?”

Bobby flushed. “To see you,” he squeaked. “So we can do, you know...stuff?”

“Stuff, huh,” Andreas echoed.

The Italian boy’s fingers were now totally entwined in Bobby’s hair, and as he tightened his grip, the little tugging sensation made Bobby gasp slightly. Andreas must have taken his parted lips for an invitation, because all of a sudden Bobby found himself on his back with the Italian boy’s tongue halfway down his throat. He gave a muffled squeak of protest, but Andreas ignored it.

Bobby shut his eyes and tried, desperately, to think about Bianca again, pretending it was Bianca who had shoved him down onto the bed and was now kissing him ferociously, scratching him with her... Moustache. He winced. He was definitely not being kissed by a girl. Everything about Andreas’s body was wrong -- hard, rough, and muscular.

He couldn’t fool himself into picturing Bianca, but suddenly, without warning, he was picturing Josh instead. He squirmed and wriggled as Andreas’s hands roamed all over his body. The Italian boy was fully on top of him now, squeezing his breasts, nibbling at his neck. It was humiliating, and emasculating, and the most terrifying part was, when he finally gave up on imagining Bianca and imagined Josh instead, it felt really, really nice.

Bobby gave a soft moan as his breasts started tingling like crazy. Andreas, emboldened, reached under his back and started fumbling with the knot of his bikini top. The action snapped Bobby back to reality and he struggled away, flushing furiously. Andreas was staring at him with an expression of pure lust.

“What’s wrong?” the Italian boy demanded.

What *wasn’t* wrong would be a shorter list. He was Bobby Vickerson. *He* was supposed to be the one undressing hot chicks in his bedroom. *He* was supposed to be the one showing off a wall full of sports trophies. Instead he was in another guy’s bed wearing a skimpy pink bikini, and now that guy was trying to take his top off. The whole thing was messed up beyond belief.

But “Barbie” would have a very different take on the situation. Bobby bit his lip. “Nothing,” he said, face burning. “Let me do it. I...I don’t want you to wreck it.”

With Andreas watching hungrily, Bobby reached behind his back, and, after a few near-misses, managed to work his claw-like nails into the knot and tug it apart. His bikini top slipped down his shoulders, and he wasn’t sure if he’d ever felt so exposed in his life as Andreas’s eyes lit up.

Bobby didn’t have much time to dwell on the shame, since the Italian boy immediately pushed him back down onto the bed, cupping his bare breasts with both hands. Bobby shut his eyes again, guiltily imagining Josh’s hands, Josh’s face. Josh’s fingers tweaked his nipples, sending a bolt of lightning all the way through his body, right to the tips of his curling toes, and he couldn’t restrain himself: he let out a girlish squeal.

“You like this, yes?” imaginary Josh asked, in a weird accent.

“Yeah,” Bobby panted. “Like, obviously?”

“Good,” imaginary Josh said. “So you do something for me now, *bella*.”

Josh’s tongue traced a wet circle around his already-tingling nipple, and Bobby almost shrieked. After all his failed attempts to jerk it in the shower, this was all it took? He couldn’t feel anything going on in his crotch, but he *had* to be hard right now. There was no way he could be this turned on and not have a big, huge, throbbing...

Bobby opened his eyes and found himself face-to-face with Andreas’s erection, now freed from the briefs. He gave an actual shriek, an incredibly unmanly sound he was sure he’d never made before, and leapt off the bed. His cheeks were scorching hot and his heart was pounding wildly. Andreas, meanwhile, was looking up at him with a slightly bemused expression.

“What now?” he asked, exasperated.

“I’m not doing that,” Bobby said flatly. “I’m *not* doing that.”

Andreas looked down at his dick, then gave a rueful shrug. “Okay,” he said. “I made you angry somehow, and now you don’t want to see me or have dinner tonight with my uncle. I understand.”

Bobby faltered. "I'm not..." He swallowed, hugging himself against the cool air -- Andreas's body heat had been keeping things warm, but now, standing there in nothing but his bikini bottom and sandals, he was shivering. "I'm not angry," he said in a small voice, keeping his eyes determinedly on Andreas's face. "We can still, you know, have dinner or whatever."

Andreas didn't reply, still casually playing with himself.

"Put that thing away, will you?" Bobby grimaced. "I feel like it's freaking staring at me."

Andreas just grinned, deliberately leaving himself in full view. "If you're not angry, maybe you're nervous?" he suggested. "Are you a virgin?"

Bobby flushed. "Of course not!" he snapped. "I can get laid whenever I want!"

Andreas's face lit up, and Bobby immediately regretted his words -- from the Italian boy's perspective, "Barbie" had just admitted to knowing her way around the bedroom. "Then it is no big deal," Andreas said. "It's just a nice, fun way for you to show that you are my girl, yes? Because you had this big crush on me, and now we are finally together, and that makes you very happy."

He reached into his bedside drawer, rummaged around, and pulled out a small bottle of liquor. Taking the first swig himself, he held it out in Bobby's direction. Bobby stared at it, then took a hesitant step forward and snatched it out of Andreas's hand. Before he could talk himself out of it, he tipped his head back and chugged about half the bottle.

It was sambuca, which was definitely not his favorite, but he felt an immediate warmth seep through his whole body. Wiping a dribble off his chin, he passed the bottle back to Andreas, who now looked vaguely impressed. He took a deep breath, making his unrestrained breasts bob up and down on his chest.

"Can you, like, make a reservation?" he asked timidly. "For tonight? For us and your uncle, to talk about the Blush campaign?"

"Of course," Andreas said. "Bianca is one of his favorites, but, you know, he always had a soft spot for me. And once he meets you in person, I think he will love you."

Bobby nodded distractedly, fixing his hair. He shot a glance back towards the door, which was firmly shut, and saw that Andreas had locked it behind them, a fact that made him feel simultaneously relieved and disgusted. The liquor was starting to hit him now. He was light-headed and a bit dizzy, which was probably necessary for what he was about to do next.

Andreas was seated on the edge of the bed, leaned back on one arm, smiling invitingly as he used his free hand to prepare himself. Bobby stared glumly at the Italian boy's sausage, unable to avoid noticing it was a lot bigger than what he had so thoroughly tucked away in his bikini

bottom. Then he fluffed out his hair, put a tremulous smile on his face, and minced back towards the bed.

“*Dio mio*, you’re sexy,” Andreas said huskily. “Come say hello, Barbie.”

For a second Bobby pictured his big sister walking in on the scene, her mock astonishment, her icy disdain, her cruel laughter as she snapped a few photos for posterity. But that couldn’t happen. He was in Italy, and Serena was a million miles away, so she was never, ever going to find out about this. And Bobby was a lot of things, but definitely not a quitter. Not when he was this close to getting the Blush campaign.

Anything to screw Serena.

Bobby slowly sank to his knees in front of the boy he’d once spent an entire semester bullying, and prepared to give his first blowjob. He stared at Andreas’s dick, exhaling, bracing himself for the inevitable. The Italian boy reached down and cupped his cheek, giving him an encouraging smile.

“It’s no big deal, *bella*,” he said. “You’re so gorgeous. Uncle Fredo would be crazy not to pick you.”

Bobby nodded. He was reaching tentatively for Andreas’s cock, trying to drunkenly figure out the best place to grip it from, when something stopped him cold. “Uncle Fredo?” he echoed.

Andreas, who had shut his eyes in anticipation, opened them abruptly. “Did I say Fredo?” he demanded. “I was so distracted by your beauty. Of course I meant...” His face worked. “Uncle... Tito?”

Bobby jerked to his feet, almost toppling over as he did so, instinctively using one arm to cover his breasts. Even with excessive amounts of wine and sambuca in his system, there was no way he was buying that Andreas had forgotten the name of his own uncle, twice, just because he was about to get a blowjob.

And that could mean only one thing.

“You fucking asshole,” Bobby gasped. “You probably don’t even have an uncle!”

“I have three,” Andreas said, and for a second it looked like he was going to make excuses, but then he simply shrugged. “None of them work for cosmetics companies, though.”

“But you were backstage!” Bobby said. “You had, like, a lanyard thing.”

“It was very easy,” Andreas said. “You print anything and, how do you say, laminate? And you can go anywhere.”

“Your name is *Andreas Romano*,” Bobby snapped. “I know that’s your real name.”

Andreas looked up at him with a nasty grin. “Romano is the most common surname in Italy,” he said. “It means ‘Roman.’ The way ‘Andreas’ means ‘manly,’ because it is not, and never will be, a girl’s name. But ‘Barbie’ is a good name for a stupid, slutty blonde American girl who gives blowjobs in exchange for dinners with imaginary uncles.”

Bobby couldn’t make a proper fist without endangering his claw-like manicure, so he just slapped Andreas full across the face. The Italian boy cursed, recoiling from the blow, then rubbed his cheek and gave a sharp laugh.

“You hit like a girl, of course,” he said. “I have to say, this suits you much better. You know, being a woman.” He reached down and picked up Bobby’s bikini top, twirling it playfully around one finger. “On the outside you are a sexy blonde, now, but on the inside, I know you’re still a bully. I wish I had gotten you to suck my *pene* before I told you the truth, but this was still a good revenge, don’t you think?”

“Give me that!” Bobby snapped, hiccuping slightly as he reached for the garment.

Instead, Andreas hurled it towards the door. “Go get it,” he said. “And then get out of my house, you dumb little slut.”

Bobby was shaking as he retrieved his skimpy bikini top. His fingers trembled when he tried to refasten it, and the alcohol didn’t make things any easier. Andreas watched with obvious amusement as he fumbled with the straps, breasts jiggling. Bobby stomped his foot and gave a muted squeal of frustration. To his added humiliation, he could feel tears welling up in his eyes.

By the time he finally had his breasts safely nestled in their cups and the knot securely fastened between his shoulder blades, Bobby was outright sobbing. He turned back around to face Andreas, tears streaming down his cheeks. He had to cut this Italian douchebag to the core. He had to humiliate him the way he’d just been humiliated, but even worse. He had to say *something*.

“It’s called soccer, not football, and it’s boring,” Bobby choked. “It’s so fucking boring. Okay?”

Andreas looked startled for a second, then just shook his head and started to laugh. Utterly defeated, Bobby took three tries to undo the lock on the bedroom door, then fled as fast as he could. He blew past Kimberly, who had been pretending to wait for a bathroom but was clearly just waiting to see the results of her stupid bullshit plan.

“What happened?” she demanded, trying to grab his arm. “Hey!”

“Don’t freaking touch me!” Bobby screeched. “This is your fault! Not mine! Your fault! I didn’t even *want* to have dinner with an imaginary uncle!” Andreas’s friends, drawn to the commotion, all stopped their conversations to stare. “Yep, keep right on looking, douchebags!” Bobby snapped, giving another drunken hiccup. “Enjoy the view! Follow me on Instagram! And also, blow me!”

His poor choice of insult triggered a fresh cascade of shame, and he was blushing beet red as he gathered up his purse -- shit, he’d left the cover-up in Andreas’s room -- and stumbled towards the gate. His head was spinning and he tripped on the uneven stones, barely catching himself before he toppled over. That only made him even more furious with himself. He’d spent all day in stilettos, and now he couldn’t even do wedges?

Bobby yanked his phone out of his purse as he wiggled down the path to the gate. Kimberly had sent him a message a few minutes earlier to see how he was doing with Andreas; he swiped it away angrily. This whole thing was her fault. She was supposed to be the smart one, but she hadn’t seen through Andreas’s bullshit, and *he* had been the one to suffer for it. Bobby jabbed his thumb against the button on the gate until it buzzed open, then marched through, picking a direction at random with his only goal being to get as far away from Andreas’s house, and bedroom, as possible.



Through his tears, he saw another new message on the screen of his iPhone. It was from Bianca, and it was a clip of her butt as she tried to twerk. Bobby opened the video, and instead of drooling, for some reason he started sobbing even harder. He knew he was drunk, but Bianca's butt was so *perfect*, and she'd sent him the video just like she'd promised, just like a real, faithful, dependable friend would do.

Before he could overthink it, he tapped the call icon. The phone rang three times, then Bianca picked up. "*Pronto!*" she sang. "Barbie?"

“Yeah,” Bobby whimpered, carefully wiping away his tears with the heel of his hand. “Are you, like, busy right now?”

“Oh my God, what’s wrong?” Bianca’s bubblegum voice demanded. “Are you okay? Is this about that boy you kissed?”

“I guess, yeah,” Bobby said miserably. “I just left his house, but I’m, um, wearing a bikini. And I have no idea where I am. And I’m almost out of data.”

“Share me your location and stay right there, babe,” Bianca ordered. “I’ll get you a car right away and bring you to my place, okay? Luigi is already in town.”

“Okay,” Bobby sniffed, not sure what the Nintendo character had to do with anything. “Um, thanks.”

#

Kimberly obviously knew things had not gone according to plan the instant Bobby came flying out of Andreas’s bedroom with his hair a complete mess and tears streaming down his cheeks, but it was only when her ex started babbling about imaginary uncles that she realized just how badly she’d screwed up. The feeling of dread went straight to the pit of her stomach.

Instead of following Bobby towards the gate -- he wouldn’t get far in a bikini and wedge sandals -- she went inside, heading straight for the room he’d just vacated, heart pounding. Andreas was sitting on his bed, shirtless and muttering to himself darkly in Italian. Kimberly could see the red imprint of a slap on his face, plus a little cut that must have come from one of Bobby’s long fingernails.

She pulled the bedroom door shut behind her, before any of his friends could come interrogate him. He looked up, rubbing his cheek.

“Nino Romano,” she said, still unwilling to believe how easily she’d been duped. “Is he your uncle or not?”

Andreas shut his eyes briefly. “Ugh,” he muttered. “Nino. Of course.” Opening his eyes, he shook his head. “Of course not. You really think Rome is so small? Like, we are all relatives and we all know each other?”

Kimberly wanted to scream. First she’d been careless and fucked up on Bobby’s social media stuff, and now she’d been careless *again*. It would have been easy to search Andreas up on Facebook and look for photos of him with his uncle, or to ask around at the fashion show to see if anybody there had met Nino’s nephew already. Instead, she’d just blindly assumed Andreas had been telling the truth -- despite knowing he had every reason to try to get back at Bobby.

“Now I think you should leave, Kimberly,” Andreas said. “Go find your dumb blonde friend before she wanders into traffic, yes?”

“You must be pretty proud of yourself,” Kimberly said coldly. “Payback for Jefferson High, right?”

Andreas looked surprised for a moment, then a smug smile spread over his face. “I planned it all very carefully,” he said. “Revenge is a dish best served cold.”

The nerve of this asshole, talking to *her* about careful planning. Kimberly’s blood was boiling, and suddenly all her frustration came pouring out.

“You’re a fucking amateur,” she snapped. “I did all the work for you. If it weren’t for me, he’d still be calling you ‘Andrietta’ and giving you wedgies, or whatever the hell he did. You just skimmed off *my* hard work, and now you *fucked it all up* for me!”

Andreas blinked, clearly taken aback. “What do you mean, you did the work?” he asked slowly.

Kimberly gritted her teeth. “I mean your petty little revenge fantasy ruined my... My...” She took a deep breath. “Forget it,” she said blankly. “Glad you had your fun, Andreas. If you ever go anywhere near Barbie’s socials, or say anything about today to anybody, I’ll make your life hell. I’ll do it from half the world away, and you will *not* see it coming.”



Andreas's mouth dropped open and he started to sputter. Kimberly ignored it. She let herself out the bedroom, cut through a crowd of curious Italian teens who'd been listening at the door, and made for the gate, pausing just long enough to grab a mostly-full bottle of wine off the folding table. There was no use getting pissed off at Andreas. This mess was her fault. She'd been sloppy. Careless.

Now she had to figure out a way to win anyways. Andreas was supposed to have been her ace-in-the-hole, but now she had pretty much nothing in the way of assets. Her former partner-in-crime, Josh Delacroix, had been incommunicado since his big blow-up with "Barbie" -- a long story, and one that didn't make Kimberly look particularly good -- and he was several time zones away, besides.

She didn't have Ally and the other cheerleaders to manipulate, or DeShawn to boss around. She was in a foreign country, and the only connection she'd made thus far was with a cocky young ladies' man who moonlighted as a Roman centurion.

Kimberly let herself out the gate and looked around. Before she could figure out how the hell she could still get Bobby the Blush campaign, she had to actually find him. There was no sign of him on the street outside. She called him twice, going to voicemail both times, then picked a direction and started to walk, eyes peeled for a neon pink bikini.

As she kept walking, and Bobby kept ignoring her calls, she felt a growing sense of urgency. If she lost her ex in the middle of Rome, Mrs. Vickerson was going to fully lose her shit. And Bobby running off on his own as a guy was one thing, but now that he was a little blonde sexpot, it had a new element of risk that her pig-headed ex had probably never even considered. She was starting to genuinely consider calling the police when she finally got a reply via text.

Stopp massaging me KIMMY I don't don't need you're SoCal led "help."

The barely comprehensible message did not exactly inspire confidence. Bobby was alive, but he was clearly also tottering around drunk in his bikini, and she knew plenty of not-so-scrupulous guys would be eager to "help" if they got the chance.

After one last failed attempt to call her ex, Kimberly gritted her teeth and phoned the only asset she'd collected so far in Italy. Vincenzo wasn't incredibly scrupulous himself, but she had to work with what she had. He picked up on the second ring.

"Ciao, Kimberly," he said, sounding faintly amused. "How is Barbie things?"

"I lost her," Kimberly admitted. "She just freaked out and ran off, and she doesn't have data on her phone to get a ride or use Maps or whatever." She paused, drawing a breath. "You have the day off, right? Want to help me find her?"

She knew it was a longshot -- she'd blown him off this morning, and he was probably already getting ready to take the next girl out for pizza on a bridge.

"I've got wine," she added, sloshing the bottle she'd taken from Andreas's party up beside her phone. "And also, she's running around in a bikini. Long story."

Vincenzo didn't reply for an extra long moment, then...

"Sure," he said casually. "I will help. She is blonde, it should be easy. But if I find her first, I get to keep her, yes?" She could practically hear the shameless grin in his voice. "I will be *onesto* with you, Kimberly: I have a weakness for models."

"Most guys do," Kimberly said dryly. "Go get the scooter."

“Yes, boss,” Vincenzo said. “On my way.”

#

Bobby had been expecting an Uber, or maybe whatever the Italian equivalent was, but after a few minutes of standing awkwardly on the narrow sidewalk, hugging himself, and staring blushing at the ground whenever a scooter whizzed past or anybody walked by, a shiny black town car pulled up beside him.

For a few terrifying moments, he thought he was being solicited, or maybe kidnapped. Then an elderly Italian man climbed out of the driver’s seat and gave him a courteous nod, as if there was nothing even a little bit weird about a drunk girl running around the neighborhood in a neon pink bikini, and produced an iPad. He made a few clumsy swipes, holding it up so Bobby could read what was displayed on the screen.

Hi Barbie, this is our driver Luigi, he speaks NO English but he is SO sweet and nice and he will bring you right to my house.

Bianca’s message was accompanied by several heart emojis, and for some reason Bobby felt a slight ache in his throat, almost like he was about to start crying all over again. Luigi the driver pointed to the message and gave him a questioning thumbs up. Bobby returned it, blushing, and the elderly Italian broke into a warm smile, moving immediately to open the door to the backseat.

Bobby climbed inside the luxury car, feeling so relieved he could almost kiss the soft leather upholstery. A fluffy white robe was waiting inside, which he eagerly pulled on over his bikini as the chauffeur closed the door. Safe from leering at last, he let out a breath he didn’t even know he’d been holding, slumping back into the comfy seats.

Along with the robe, Bianca had somehow had time to throw several packets of tissues and makeup wipes into a small gift bag. For some reason there was a bar of dark chocolate, too -- maybe she hadn’t seen it in the bottom. Taking another deep breath in and out, Bobby set to work repairing his makeup as the chauffeur started to drive.

In a weird way, it was comforting. It was something he could focus on completely, and that meant not focusing on what had happened in Andreas’s bedroom. All he had to do was follow the steps he’d learned from about a hundred hours of YouTube, make minor adjustments when necessary, and keep his hands steady. Of course, it was a little harder drunk.

By the time he’d fully redone his eye makeup and touched up the rest of his face, the car was no longer oozing through city traffic -- instead, they were gliding uphill past a long, manicured row of hedges. The driver pulled in through a gate that opened automatically for him, and Bobby stared out the window as they passed an absurdly huge fountain and came to a halt in front of

an absurdly fancy house. He'd thought Andreas's place was pretty spiffy, but this was on a whole other level.

Luigi came around to open the door for him, and Bobby slid out a little less gracefully than usual. Feeling like he was in an extremely weird movie, he straightened up, wedge sandals clapping on the cobblestone. Bobby had another sharp pang of regret that he hadn't been able to meet Bianca as himself: not only was she a 9.5, she was totally loaded.

"Barbie, you made it! Isn't Luigi such a good driver? I can do my eyeliner even in *traffic*."

Bianca's warm voice wasn't coming from the front of the house. Instead, Bobby found her standing at a small gate around the side, waving him over-- apparently Italians didn't actually ever go indoors when the sun was out. He was surprised by just how happy he felt to see her. It certainly didn't hurt that she was wearing an extremely skimpy bathing suit. He tried to keep his eyes off her boobs as he approached the gate.

"I was out by the pool when you called me," she said. "So I guess we are, how do you say it?" She gave him a bright smile. "Samesies?"

Bobby blinked. He had definitely never said "samesies" in his life, but he nodded.

"Oh, my poor Barbie," Bianca said, suddenly frowning. "I'm sorry you're upset. Come to the pool, and we can talk, or not talk, or whatever you like. Okay?"

"Um, does the pool have water in it?" Bobby asked vaguely.

"Of course!" Bianca said, sounding slightly affronted. "It always has water. It's a *heated* pool."

As Bobby followed behind her, watching her amazing butt pretty much swallow up the thong bottom of her bikini, he suddenly wondered if it was all too good to be true. How could she be this nice when they'd just met? Bobby would definitely never invite some drunk crying foreigner over to his house a day after meeting them -- well, not unless it was a really hot drunk crying foreigner, and he was trying to smash.

But if Bianca was trying to smash, then this was *definitely* too good to be true. Maybe Kimberly was right, and Bianca was just faking the niceness to get some kind of edge for the Blush campaign. On the other hand, Bianca hadn't mentioned it even once, and Kimberly had led him wrong before. Very recently, in fact.

Shuddering involuntarily as he got another mental image of Andreas's dong, followed by one of the Italian boy's smirking face, Bobby nearly walked right into the pool.

"Whoops," Bianca said, catching him by the arm. "Maybe we sit down first, and then swim later, okay, babe? Here, drink some water."



Bobby lowered himself woozily onto the lounge Bianca was indicating, then accepted the glass bottle of what was apparently glacier water. He managed to spill a bunch down his robe, which set Bianca clucking sympathetically. She reached forward, untied his sash, and slipped the robe off his shoulders.

“There,” she said. “Now you can get wet. Oh my God, Barbie, that swimsuit is so *hot!* That stupid, stupid boy did not deserve to see you in it.”

Bobby squeezed his eyes shut with a grimace. “I actually put it on just for him,” he said, in a small voice. “Fuck, can you believe that? Isn’t that so messed up?”

“Fuck, I think yes, but I’m not sure?” Bianca echoed uncertainly. “You wanted to look sexy for him, but he was an asshole?”

“A huge asshole,” Bobby said darkly. “And a liar.”

“Oh, Barbie.” Bianca sat down beside him on the lounge and leaned her head on his shoulder, brushing his bare skin with her silky hair and enveloping him in the flowery smell of her shampoo. “I’m sorry.”

Bobby felt his stomach flutter. “It was stupid,” he said. “The whole thing was stupid. He tricked me, and I fell for it like a dumbass.”

“I don’t think you’re a dumbass,” Bianca said sharply. “I think *he* is a dumbass. You are very brave, and cool, and super pretty.”

Once Bobby would have accepted the first two compliments as a matter of fact, and balked at the third, but now, drunk and a million miles from home on possibly the most messed up day of his life thus far, Bianca’s words made him choke up.

“Thanks,” he said, actually meaning it. “Seriously. Thanks.” He took a deep breath. “I just want to forget about the whole thing.”

“What thing?” Bianca asked, standing up.

“The whole thing with the asshole,” Bobby said, puzzled. “We were, like, just talking about it.”

“I don’t know about anything like that,” Bianca said sweetly. “Maybe I did, but I forgot. I forgot.” She made a little gesture beside her head. “Poof. Gone.”

Bobby gave her a teary smile. “Oh. I get it.”

“Such a blonde,” Bianca said affectionately, reaching into her swim bag. “You need sunscreen. Flip over and I’ll do your back first, okay?”

Bobby swallowed. If there was anything that could wipe the memory of Andreas’s smirk away, it was a bikini-clad Bianca straddling him with a bottle of sunscreen. Before the universe could change its mind, he rolled over on the lounge.

While Bianca opened up the sunscreen, he scabbled his phone out of his purse and composed a more-or-less comprehensible message to his mom, to tell her he was hanging out with Bianca for the rest of the day. He'd just sent it off when Kimberly started calling him again.

Bobby already knew what she would say -- some bullshit about how *this* plan hadn't worked out, but she had a *back-up* plan, or a *new* plan, and this one would work for sure, and get him the Blush campaign, and make everything worth it.

He turned off his phone.

#

Kimberly and Vincenzo had done three laps around Andreas's neighborhood, rattling up and down the cobblestones at speeds she was pretty sure were illegal in residential areas, when the mystery of the disappearing blonde abruptly solved itself. Her phone buzzed with a new message from Bobby's mom, she read it twice, and that was that.

Kimberly tapped her ride on the shoulder and shouted at him to pull over. Vincenzo brought them to a halt back outside Andreas's house, where the faint sounds of techno music and drunken conversations could still be heard.

"What is it?" the young Italian asked.

Kimberly held up her phone in answer, displaying Mrs. Vickerson's message: *Hi sweetie, I'm assuming you're with Barbie at Bianca Buccino's house, right? Please make sure they do an Instagram story together. :)*

Vincenzo squinted at the English text, mumbling the words aloud, then blinked. "So your Barbie is friends with Bianca?" he asked. "I thought they were competing, you said."

"They are," Kimberly said. "But Barbie has apparently, like, forgotten about it."

"Barbie and Bianca," Vincenzo muttered, looking off into space -- Kimberly guessed he was busy fantasizing about having both of them in his bed. "Is funny," the young Italian said, shaking his head. "Sometimes, life is very funny, you know?"

Kimberly frowned. There was something strange about the way Vincenzo was behaving, and it triggered a memory from the previous night, when she'd mentioned Bianca's name and he'd reacted so strongly. The memory collided with something Andreas had said, much more recently: You really think Rome is so small? Like, we all know each other?

"You're not just jacking off to Bianca's Instagram feed," Kimberly said slowly. "You actually know her. Or knew her. Didn't you?"

Vincenzo flashed his innocent grin. “I already tell you, Kimberly,” he said. “I have a weakness. But a gentleman, you know, he does not say stuff.”

“Then you’re in the clear, right?” Kimberly kept her tone light, but she was suddenly deeply invested in her line of questioning. “So you slept with her? Like, before she got all this buzz?”

Vincenzo’s face fell. “I will be *onesto*, Kimberly,” he said. “We only kissed. But later, I found out why.” He stared wistfully into the distance.

“And why was that?” Kimberly prodded. “I mean, a girl would have to be crazy to miss out on the second best view in all of Rome, right?”

Vincenzo smiled. “You are funny, Kimberly,” he said. “But I shouldn’t say more.”

Kimberly clenched her jaw. Then she shrugged, letting a smile slip onto her lips. “You’re right,” she said. “I can think of better things you could do with that mouth.” She held up the bottle of stolen wine she’d been holding in her lap. “Barbie’s safe and sound,” she said. “And that also means my hotel room is empty.”

Vincenzo’s grin widened. “I do like making love in hotels,” he admitted. “They always have free, how you say, condoms. Is it close?”

“Depends how fast you drive,” Kimberly said, raising an eyebrow.

Vincenzo didn’t need to be told twice. Kimberly barely had time to slide her arms around the young Italian’s waist before they were zooming off down the street.

#

After a couple hours of relaxing by the pool, drinking fresh-squeezed orange juice and listening to a curated playlist Bianca had saved as “music for chilling and looking cute in a bikini,” Bobby was actually feeling a lot better. The booze was starting to wear off, leaving him less drunk and more sleepy, and he was already convincing himself that what had happened in Andreas’s bedroom wasn’t even that big a deal.

It wasn’t like he had never seen another guy’s dick before, for one thing. He was an athlete. He spent half his life in the locker room, and half on the court. He’d seen plenty of dicks, and there was nothing gay about it. As for the fact that he had been on his knees in *front* of Andreas’s dick, well, that had just been a weird spatial coincidence. He hadn’t actually touched it, after all, and he definitely hadn’t been going to put his lips on it. Because that would have been really, really gay, and Bobby Vickerson was only into girls.

Andreas playing with his nipples? So what, guys gave each other titty twisters all the time. Andreas pinning him on the bed? Just horseplay, rough-and-tumble “boys will be boys” type stuff. Andreas sticking his tongue down his throat? Kissing wasn’t gay, kissing was just, you know, kissing.

The fact that in mid-kiss Bobby had stopped fantasizing about the gorgeous Italian model currently sitting on the lounge across from him, and instead started fantasizing about Josh Delacroix, his basketball rival turned friend turned *something* turned enemy? That one he was still trying to crack, but he was sure he would get there eventually.

“Barbie? Are you listening, babe?” Bianca asked.

Bobby sat upright. “Um, yeah,” he said. “But maybe say it again.”

Bianca propped herself up on one elbow, in a way that gave him a terrific view down her cleavage, and pursed her lips. “I said I was wondering...” She trailed off, looking uncharacteristically shy. “I was wondering if you feel like we have a special connection?”

Bobby swiveled around in his lounge, eyes widening. “Def,” he said. “Like, absolutely.”

“I know why this is,” Bianca said, more serious now. She glanced around, then lowered her voice. “Barbie, can you keep a secret?”

Please be into girls, Bobby thought, for the first time in his life. Please, please be into girls. “Totally,” he chirped, his heart pounding. He’d been hoping to hook up with Kimberly to get his mojo back, but if he could hook up with Bianca, holy *shit*.

“I’m trans,” Bianca whispered.

Bobby blinked. His brain short-circuited momentarily as he looked from Bianca’s breasts to her face and back again. She was smiling nervously at him, clearly waiting for a response, but he had no idea what to say. Bobby opened his mouth, hoping that would help. Still nothing. Wait. What would “Barbie” say?

“Wow,” he squeaked. “Samesies.”

“You’re not mad?” Bianca asked tentatively.

“Nope,” Bobby said. “I mean, why would I be mad?”

Bianca let out an enormous sigh of relief, sitting up on her lounge. “Oh, thank God,” she said. “I was so worried. It’s because you are so, you know, “out.” And so brave. And meanwhile, me...” She gave him a pained smile. “I was not born in Rome,” she said. “I was born in a small village. Very small, very traditional, and very Catholic. My father died while my mother was still

pregnant. Not so long after I was born, my mother knew I was a girl. From the very start, I was different, you know? But she was very scared for me, because people did not understand.”

Bobby was still trying to process the first part, the “I’m trans” part, but he nodded vigorously.

“My father -- I do not think of him like a step-father, to me he is my father -- is a doctor,” Bianca continued. “He is very successful. We have, you know, some money.” She looked around at the pool deck and waved her hand, seemingly embarrassed. “He came to our village almost by accident, I think, but he fell in love with my mother. He married her, and we moved to his villa, and life was very beautiful. He knew about me, of course, but my mother, she was still scared. So she told everybody I was a girl, and told nobody I was born with the boy stuff. It was like, our family secret?”

“Right,” Bobby said. “Family secret.” He frowned. “What about, um, school and stuff?”

“I had tutors,” Bianca said with a shrug. “My father is a very private person, and so is my mother, and believe it or not, Barbie, me, I am sometimes very private, too. There were some things I wasn’t allowed to do, like, some extra rules, so people would not find out. But my father is a doctor, and he has money, so he got me on the, how do you say in English? Blockers? Very early. And then later, of course, I started the estrogen, too. And when I wanted some surgeries, he knew the very best surgeon, and the surgeon is a very old friend who would never tell anybody.”

“Wow,” Bobby said faintly. “Um, that’s wild. So nobody else knows?”

“My mother, my father, two surgeons,” Bianca said, counting them off on her fingers. “And maybe... Maybe this is all. Except now you know, as well, because we have this special connection.” She grimaced. “You see why I feel terrible, don’t you, Barbie?”

Bobby mutely shook his head, wide-eyed.

“Because I should have come out how you did, like, many years ago,” Bianca said. “It was easier to have everybody just think I was a girl. But there are so many brave trans people everywhere, all over the world, who don’t have this easy life like me.” She had a glimmer of tears in her eyes as she spoke. “And if I do it now, it’s like I am taking away from them. I am saying, look at me, I’m so beautiful and trans, too! Pay attention to *me*, even though I never had people teasing me, or telling me I was wrong or confused, or anything bad like that.” She took a deep breath. “And this is not fair to girls like you, who said, you know, fuck you, world! I am Barbie! Compared to you, I feel...fake.”

She leaned back in her lounge, staring off into the distance with a troubled expression on her beautiful features, and Bobby just sat there without moving, completely stunned. Possibly the hottest girl he’d ever met was trans, and felt like a fake compared to him -- because she had no

idea his entire “coming out” had been orchestrated by a crazy blackmailer, and he wasn’t trans in the slightest.

Bobby felt an unfamiliar emotion. It wasn’t embarrassment, exactly. He’d had enough of that in the past few months to last a lifetime, and could recognize it instantly. This was a different kind of uncomfortable. It took him a minute to put his finger on it: he was ashamed of himself.

When people called him brave, or a symbol, or an inspiration, or all that other bullshit, he just smiled and nodded, knowing it was all a big sham. He’d never considered that there might be actual trans people paying attention. And the way Bianca was so sad and conflicted about coming out, even though she was a total hottie, made him suspect being actually trans was way more complicated than he’d realized.

Bobby could have sworn he never used to think about feelings this much. It was annoying. But also, Bianca was his friend now. She’d saved him from being stranded in the middle of Rome in a bright pink bikini, she’d shown him a video of her twerking, and she’d helped cover up the hickey on his neck.

“I don’t think you’re fake,” Bobby said. “I think you’re super real. And cool, and sexy. And your secret is safe with me, like, if you want to keep it a secret.”

Bianca looked over at him, tears brimming in her eyes. She reached across the lounge and grabbed his hand. “Thanks, Barbie,” she said. “I’m so glad I met you, you are so different from most of my model friends...” She sniffed, blinking her tears away. “Do you want to take a selfie together?” she asked tremulously. “We look really cute.”

Bobby had been faking smiles all day, and he figured he could fake a few more for Bianca’s sake. “Definitely,” he said. “And I want to take some on my phone, too, okay?”

He scabbled through his purse while Bianca adjusted her hair, pulling out his iPhone and turning it back on. Kimberly had been messaging him again. He’d been planning to ignore her for a while longer, but the preview of the latest text caught his eye.

Look, I know you’re pissed, but I just found a way to get you the contract, so...

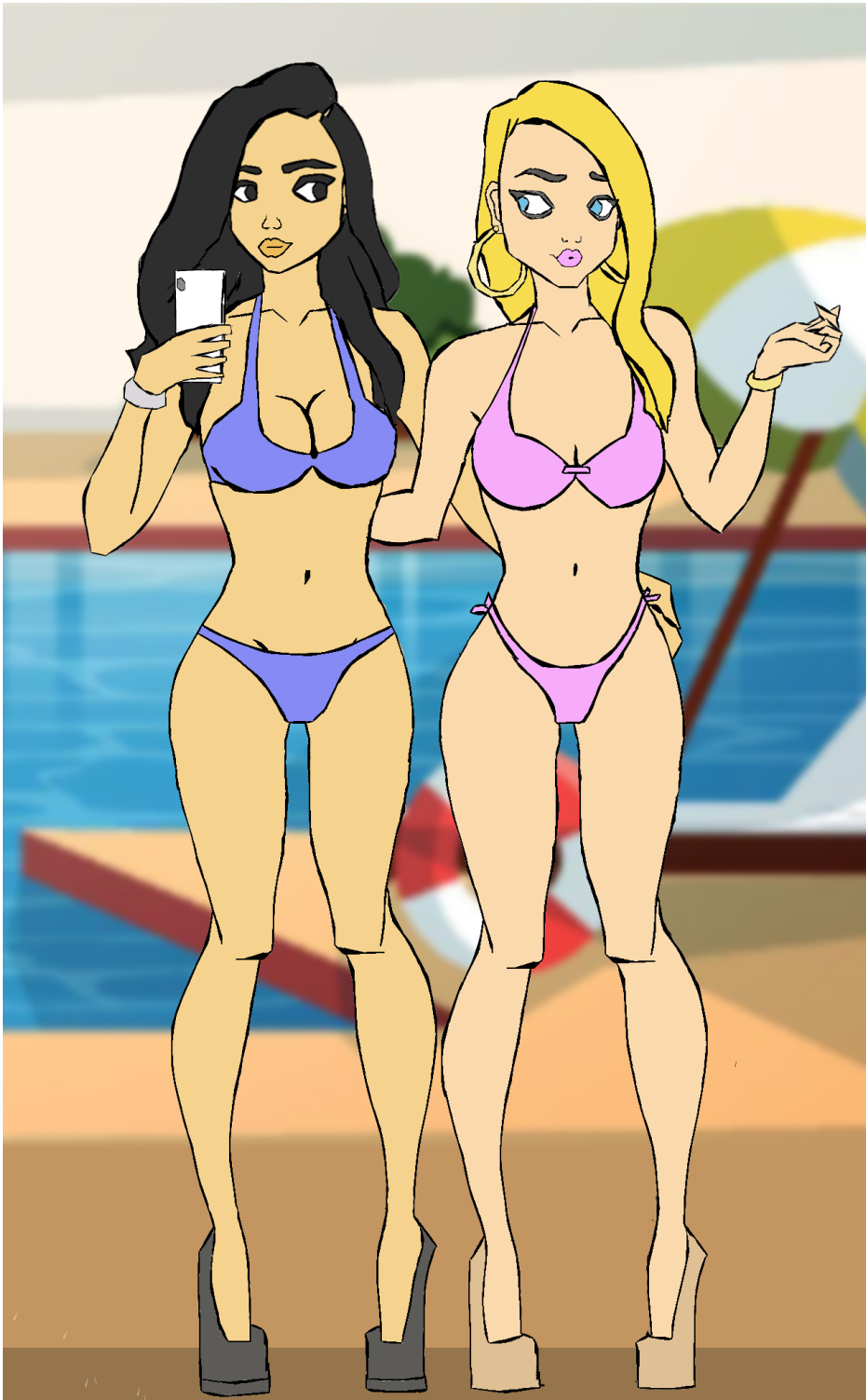
He opened it up to read the rest, and his stomach sank.

...call me. I have some BIG dirt on Bianca Buccino. We’re taking her out.

“Barbie?” Bianca chirped, absently adjusting her cleavage. “You ready, babe?”

Bobby didn’t know how on Earth Kimberly had found out, but he was pretty sure he knew exactly what the dirt was. He bit his lip, then deleted the message to make sure Bianca wouldn’t see it on his screen.

“Almost,” he said. “Just let me check my makeup.”



#

Kimberly had done it again. She'd snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. First she'd gotten Vincenzo just drunk and horny enough to spill, telling her the story of his brief romance with Bianca Buccino, with whom he had shared one magical but kissing-only night before her rise to fame as a model. The way he'd described her, she was basically an angel in human form -- which had obviously made it all the more devastating when she refused to see him again.

It was hard to imagine Vincenzo pining after one girl for an entire year, and Kimberly suspected some exaggeration of all the lonely nights drinking alone and whispering her name to the stars, but either way, his obsession had led to him babbling about Bianca to everybody he knew, and also to complete strangers. One of those strangers had been the beautiful ex-wife of a plastic surgeon, staying at the hotel where he'd been working as a bellhop.

He'd admitted to Kimberly that he started sleeping with said woman ("To numb my pain, yes?"), but when she grew tired of his continual sighing about Bianca Buccino, she casually dropped the fact that his lost love had been one of her ex-husband's patients. One the surgeon was very, very proud of. Maybe too proud, since he'd breached doctor-patient confidentiality to tell his wife about her.

The irony was astounding: Bianca was secretly trans, while everybody in the world assumed she was a cis girl, and meanwhile "Barbie" was secretly a straight, formerly-macho cisgender guy, while everybody in the world assumed "she" was trans. It was also exactly the kind of thing Kimberly knew she could use to blackmail their way into the Blush campaign.

Which made it even more infuriating that Bobby was being a little bitch about it. He was back from Bianca's, sitting on the hotel bed with his freshly-tanned legs crossed at the thigh, blissfully unaware of what had gone on there just a few hours earlier, and he was shaking his empty blonde head at her.

"How would that even work?" he asked petulantly. "I mean, people are super into trans models right now. You said it yourself. So, she'll just be, like, even more popular."

"If her family's been keeping it a secret for eighteen years, they definitely want it to stay that way," Kimberly said. "They've probably had to pay off a bunch of people already. And we're not asking for a million dollars or anything, we're just asking Bianca to turn down the Blush campaign and endorse you for it."

Bobby's face was conflicted. "Well, what if she decides to she wants to, you know, come out? What if she just rolls with it?"

"Then the smear campaign pretty much writes itself, Barbie," Kimberly said, sitting down on the bed beside him. "All we have to do is make sure people see how different you and her are. As in, Bianca has spent her whole life hiding from the truth, ashamed of being trans, and only admits to it after the rumor gets too big to ignore..."

"I don't know if it's exactly like that," Bobby mumbled.

"Whereas *you* came out in front of your entire high school, faced all the bullying and teasing and whatever head-on, and became a beacon of hope for trans kids all over the world," she finished. "Blush wants to be the hip, socially conscious cosmetics company, remember? They'd never live it down if they picked Bianca over you. The social media shitstorm would be insane."

She'd laid it all out as clearly as possible for him. Hearing herself say it out loud had given her a very tiny twinge of guilt -- outing somebody against their will was a big deal. But winning the Blush campaign was an even bigger deal, and besides, if Bianca played along she could keep her secret intact.

Bobby was still staring down at the floor, pouty lips pursed together. Kimberly assumed he was still sulky about the Andreas thing, but right now he should have at least been relieved that she'd found a way to course-correct at the last minute. Instead, he was acting like he'd forgotten the whole point of coming to Rome in the first place.

"If we do this, Bianca's going to fucking hate me," Bobby finally muttered.

Kimberly blinked. "So what?" she demanded. "You can't be *that* obsessed with her boobs. You're a model now. You're going to meet all the hottest girls on the planet and you can perv on them backstage all you want."

Her ex's face flushed. "They look at *my* boobs, too, okay?" he snapped. He grimaced. "I just don't like it. She made being trans sound complicated enough already without us screwing with her."

"Wait, what?" Kimberly bolted up off the bed. "She told you she was trans and you didn't tell *me*?"

Bobby glared at her. "I think we found out around the same time," he said. "Except you were, like, tricking someone into telling you. And I was just chilling with her, and she told me because we're friends."

Kimberly could barely contain her derisive laugh. "Friends?" she demanded. "You met her freaking *yesterday*. She's just another bitchy, stuck-up model like Serena who's good at faking nice, and the only reason she's acting like your friend is because she thinks you're both trans. If she knew the real you, she'd..."

"She'd what?" Bobby shouted, bolting to his feet -- the intensity of the move was a little hampered by the fact he had to shimmy his riding-up skirt back into place. "Maybe she's nice to me because I deserve it, you ever think about that? She's not *anything* like Serena, but *you* are."

“Don’t be stupid,” Kimberly said flatly. “Serena’s the enemy here, I’m your friend, we’re complete fucking opposites and I’m trying to *help* you.”

Bobby was almost hyperventilating, trembling with emotion, and Kimberly waited for him to blow up, to get all the Andreas stuff off his chest. Instead, he took a deep breath, then lowered himself back onto the bed.

“Your hair,” he muttered, folding his arms across his chest and not meeting her gaze.

Kimberly blinked, momentarily baffled. “What about it?” she asked.

“You said you went brunette because blonde is ‘Barbie’s’ thing, but that’s bullshit,” her ex said. “That’s Serena’s color. Admit it.”

Kimberly was out-and-out stunned. The whole time they’d dated, Bobby had been utterly oblivious to any changes in her hair, makeup, or clothing -- aside from always pestering her to wear miniskirts and low-cut tops -- but now, as she looked at her dark chestnut color, it looked...familiar.

“You wanted to look like her,” her ex said sourly. “You actually *admire* her. Even if she’s the enemy.”

Kimberly swallowed. “That doesn’t mean I’m on her side, Bobby.”

Bobby blinked at the use of his old name, but he didn’t look particularly happy about it. “I don’t want to be Serena,” he said. “I want to be better than Serena. I want to beat her fair and square.” He took a trembling breath. “I *never* flopped on the basketball court, no matter how hard people fouled me, and I’m not going to start cheating now, Kimmy. Especially not if it means wrecking Bianca’s life. I know what it feels like to get fucking blackmailed, remember?”

Kimberly was almost moved. For a brief second she considered the possibility that her egotistical, self-absorbed ex had suddenly started caring for people other than himself. But of course, there was a simpler explanation: even knowing she was trans, he was still completely infatuated with Bianca, and wanted to stay in her good books on the off-chance she let him touch her boobs.

“I get it,” Kimberly said, sitting down beside him and putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I totally get it.”

Bobby gave a deep sigh. “Good,” he said. “So, like, may the best man win, or whatever. If I don’t get the Blush campaign...” He frowned. “I don’t know. I’ll find some other way to wreck Serena’s shit.”

Kimberly smiled, nodded, and as soon as Bobby went to the bathroom to inspect his tan-lines, she grabbed his iPhone and found Bianca Buccino's number. Her ex was getting the Blush campaign, no matter what, and he would thank her for it later. Maybe.

#

Bobby's mom styled his hair for the fashion show's wrap-up party, sculpting his long tresses into a glamorous cascade of soft blonde waves, and made him redo his nails with a sparkly pale pink, but all the preparation felt a little pointless. Since he'd nixed Kimberly's blackmail plan, Bobby knew his chances of getting the Blush deal were slim. In fact, he was sort of resigned to *not* getting it.

Which would mean going back to square one in his quest for vengeance, and maybe even trying a brand new tack. Something he could do as himself, instead of as "Barbie," would be nice. He thought about it while he did his makeup, using fresh summery colors and a shiny pink lip gloss. The results gave him the usual mixture of pride and embarrassment, but as he inspected the gorgeous face in the bathroom mirror, his eyes kept straying downward.

Following a brief but fierce internal struggle, during which Bobby imagined his fellow models, all of them in low-cut dresses, snickering at him, he dug out his darkest bronzer and favorite contouring brush. Then he cupped his breasts one at a time, dabbing, blending, and highlighting to enhance his cleavage. Pointless or not, for some reason Bobby still wanted to look hotter than the catty models backstage.

When he exited the bathroom, he noticed Kimberly giving his décolletage an impressed double-take. The whole ride over to the gallery she had a slight smirk on her face, which Bobby, cheeks burning, tried his best to ignore. But now, walking into the party, he couldn't help but stick out his chest just a tiny bit more than usual.

Bobby had made his mom triple-check the dress code, determined to avoid another neon pink bikini incident, but he still didn't feel particularly comfortable with what he was wearing. The incredibly sexy turquoise body-con dress his mom picked out featured a very high hemline, a cut-away panel to expose his tanned midriff, and was so tight Kimberly had been required to help him squeeze into it.

Kimberly *and* his mom had insisted he wear five-inch heels, since strutting around like a freaking stripper was apparently his "signature" now. That meant he was perched on a pair of strappy golden stiletto sandals, accessorized with gold hoops in his ears, an arm bracelet, and several gleaming rings on his fingers.



But judging from the attire around him, he was not under-dressed. The gallery had been totally transformed for the show's wrap-up: the catwalk had been dismantled, all the chairs had been cleared away, and a whole ton of very fashionable people were busy milling around, sipping drinks and taking selfies with each other. Kimberly had drilled him on the names and faces of some of the biggest photographers, designers, and executives, but everyone looked pretty much the same to him, just snooty and European.

"This is a great chance to do a little networking, but remember not to *look* like you're networking, okay, sweetie?" his mom said, adjusting his bracelet. "Just go have fun around the right people. Maybe you could get that Instagram story with Bianca like we talked about?"

Bobby noticed Kimberly flush slightly -- she was clearly still sore about losing her made-up social media coordinator position. He wasn't looking forward to mingling with fashion people, but he was eager to see Bianca again. He was just starting to scan the crowd for her when somebody shoved a large giftbag into his out-thrust chest.

"Compliments of Blush," the organizer said, unloading smaller giftbags on Kimberly and his mom, too. "Hold them so the logo faces out, yes? And we have a booth set up over there which is displaying some new products, so please, take photos there, okay?"

The woman bustled away, leaving Bobby stuck holding the oversized giftbag in both arms. "Mom?" he whined.

"Here, Kimberly, hold mine," his mom said, passing off her smaller bag, then carefully taking the big one from his arms. "We'll go stash these under a table, okay, sweetie? You go have fun."

Bobby looked to his ex-girlfriend instinctively -- which was kind of weird, now that he thought about it. Kimberly didn't seem thrilled at being relegated to giftbag transportation, but she gave him an encouraging nod.

"You look great," she said. "And if you end up talking to Blush people, just play it cool."

"Right," Bobby said, still feeling a little apprehensive as he scanned the crowd. A small circle of his fellow models wasn't far off, and he could see the brunette who'd compared him to a clipboard among them.

"Which is basically what I already told you, sweetie," his mom said, sounding somewhat miffed. "Come on, Kimberly."

Bobby was about to offer to accompany them to the giftbag table, when he finally spotted Bianca. She was dressed a little more casually than he was, wearing a trendy jumpsuit and heels, but her plunging V-neck managed to instantly magnetize his eyes. With a little flutter in

his stomach, he gave his mom and ex a distracted goodbye wave, then clicked his way across the party to greet his friend.

“Hi, Bianca!” he chirped, interrupting a conversation in rapid-fire Italian. “You look so hot!”

The model looked up, stopping mid-sentence, seeming weirdly startled. She didn’t lean forward for the usual kisses -- maybe she’d noticed his makeup job and didn’t want to smear it. But there was also a weird look in her eye.

“Did you get attacked by the giftbags, too?” Bobby asked, smiling a little more hesitantly. “It’s like, who sponsored this show, right? So hard to remember.”

Bianca gave a funny little laugh, then turned to the well-dressed woman she’d been speaking to and said something apologetic-sounding in Italian. The woman raised one questioning eyebrow, then drifted away. Bianca, instead of warming up, seemed even more awkward, nothing like her usual bubbly self.

“Hey, I used your trick,” Bobby said desperately, pointing to his cleavage. “What do you think?”

Bianca looked at his contouring, with a glimmer of tears in her eyes, and said nothing.

“Um, is everything okay?” Bobby asked, with a growing suspicion in the back of his mind.

Biana suddenly glared at him, an expression he had never seen on her face before. “Everything is okay,” she said. “Yes. I did what you asked. But you could have just *asked*, I didn’t *need* the contract, you could have... Could have...”

Bobby’s stomach did a somersault.

Bianca blinked rapidly, but the tears were starting to escape down her cheeks. Her next words were choked: “You are a very mean person, Barbie.”

She swept away, hurrying towards the bathrooms with her head down and her shoulders slumped, looking nothing like the girl who’d bounced happily down the catwalk just a day ago. Bobby watched her go, mouth hanging open in shock. He knew exactly what, or who, had just happened.

“Fucking *Kimberly*,” he hissed.

Bobby was torn between two impulses: one, running after Bianca and trying to explain that his social media coordinator and school friend Kimberly was a psycho bitch. Two, finding Kimberly and telling her, to her face, that she was a psycho bitch.

A man’s voice interrupted the decision-making process. “May I have a word, Miss Vickerson?”

Bobby turned around and saw the top of a very well-groomed head. He looked down, seeing a very small but extremely well-dressed man. He was sporting a neatly-trimmed goatee and moustache, black with just a touch of silvery gray, and wore a pair of sunglasses despite the fact that they were indoors.

"It's not really a great time," Bobby said. "Maybe, um, later?"

"It will be brief, my dear," the man said, with only the slightest hint of an Italian accent. "I am Blush's marketing director. My name is Nino Romano."

Bobby did a double-take. He'd seen the man's photo a bunch of times, but for some reason he'd been completely unable to recognize him. Possibly because he'd been expecting someone much, much taller.

"I'm afraid not all of us can wear those lovely heels," Nino Romano said, clearly noticing Bobby's confusion. "I would fall flat on my face, quite frankly. This way, please."

#

Kimberly missed being the hottest girl in the room, and it surprised her. She'd sort of thought she was above that -- she'd come to terms with her own ex-boyfriend looking better in a bikini than she did, after all -- but apparently not. Surrounded by absurdly pretty faces, effortless glamor, and unfairly perfect bodies, she could practically feel an inferiority complex coming on.

It sure didn't make her feel any cooler that she was stuck guarding a bunch of gift bags with Bobby's mom, who was already on her second drink. But Kimberly figured this was as good a time as any to get Mrs. Vickerson in line.

"So, I'm fired, right?" she asked casually.

Mrs. Vickerson was scanning the party, stabbing her straw into her drink. "Sweetie, don't think of it like that," she said. "You weren't really officially hired in the first place."

Kimberly smiled. "Right," she said. "But you still have to pay me for all those posts I already made."

"Kimberly, please," Mrs. Vickerson said, bristling. "You just got a weekend in Italy, all expenses paid, to tag along with my daughter as emotional support. Which is important, but certainly not irreplaceable. Don't try my patience, okay?"

"I told you I can do more than take photos for Barbie's Instagram," Kimberly said flatly. "And I did. I got Barbie the Blush campaign."

Bobby's mom stopped stabbing her ice cubes and looked over, startled. "Excuse me?"

"Nino Romano's here, and he's going to tell Barbie how much he liked her walks this weekend, and how much buzz he's been hearing, and then he's going to sign her for Blush," Kimberly said, coolly meeting Mrs. Vickerson's gaze.

"*Bianca* is the one who's been getting buzz this weekend," Bobby's mom said sharply. "They love her here. Local girl, and all."

"That's why I had Barbie cozy up to her, and then introduce us," Kimberly said, shrugging. "I'm good at talking to people. So I talked to her."

"About what?" Mrs. Vickerson asked, a little less dismissive now.

Kimberly recalled the text conversation. She'd created a burner Gmail account to message Bianca's phone anonymously, and kept her texts just vague enough for plausible deniability in the worst-case scenario, where the Italian model decided not to play along.

Your secret makes me sick, and you don't deserve to be happy. You're too fake to be famous. Your blonde friend is hotter than you. Help her get what she deserves, or I tell everyone your secret.

Barbie is this a terrible joke??? If it is a joke it is NOT FUNNY.

No joke. You know what do.

This is because of BLUSH??? Oh my FUCKING GOD! Please be joking Barbie.

Make sure she gets it.

There had been a long gap, enough for Kimberly to start worrying a little, but then Bianca had caved.

Okay. Okay tomorrow I'll talk to Mr. Romano. I am sorry I make you sick.

And that was all it took. Easy.

Kimberly looked across at Bobby's mom. "I told her how badly Barbie wanted to get the Blush campaign, and how great it would be for trans visibility," she said. "Bianca's really socially conscious. We talked about it on the phone, and texted a little, and this morning she decided to endorse Barbie for the campaign instead of her. She wanted it to be a surprise."

Mrs. Vickerson's eyes widened momentarily, but then she pursed her lips. "Nobody is that nice, Kimberly," she said. "This is a very sizeable contract, and even if *she* doesn't need the funds,

Bianca isn't going to take money out of her team's pockets by turning it down." She glanced across the gallery again. "But if she did, that would be..."

Mrs. Vickerson trailed off, and Kimberly followed her gaze. A gap had parted in the crowd, and they had a clear view, for the moment, of Bobby. Her ex didn't look the slightest bit like a wallflower -- in fact, he looked better than most of the other models in attendance. The bright turquoise dress offset his tanned skin perfectly, and his gleaming blonde hair and golden jewelry caught the light with every motion. His gorgeous face was immaculately made-up, and whatever he'd done to his boobs made him look like at least a C cup. In short, he had never looked more like a sexy little Barbie doll.

The only difference was, instead of a painted smile, his expression was one of mingled worry and surprise -- possibly because a very short but very well-dressed man was guiding him towards the couches at the end of the gallery.



Kimberly felt a surge of triumph as she turned back to Mrs. Vickerson. "If Bianca did turn down the campaign and endorse Barbie instead, that would be what?" she asked sweetly.

"Well, it would be a fantastic opportunity," Mrs. Vickerson said vaguely, not taking her eyes off her feminized son. "For Barbie."

"Well, in about five minutes she's going to come back over here with the good news," Kimberly said. "And when she signs, I want a percentage."

Mrs. Vickerson gave a sharp laugh. "You're a funny girl, Kimberly."

"I know what I'm worth," Kimberly said, putting enough Serena in her voice to make Bobby's mom freeze. "I want to be paid, and I want a say in what happens."

Mrs. Vickerson looked at her, and for the first time, Kimberly felt like her ex's mom was actually *seeing* her. The expression on her face was suspicious, calculating, and -- the emotion Kimberly had been waiting for -- just a bit uncertain.

"Don't tell me this stuff about 'replaceable,' either," Kimberly said, pushing. "You knew Bobby his whole life, but you barely know "Barbie." Admit it. I've known her longer than anyone. She came out to me first, remember? And I care about what happens to her. A lot."

"I'm her *mother*," Mrs. Vickerson said, flustered now. "If you're implying that I... That you..."

"We both care about her, and we both want what's best for her," Kimberly said. "That's why I got her the campaign. And there'll be a lot more of that in the future." She lingered on a significant pause. "Or a lot less, if I don't like how how things are being handled."

Her ex's mom went silent for a long moment, processing the veiled threat, then drew a deep breath. "Well," she said, with a tight smile. "*If* you really did get Barbie the Blush campaign, then we'd of course be willing to...to discuss hiring you to the team..." She pursed her lips. "On a more official basis."

Kimberly felt a wave of triumph. It turned out adults were just as easy to manipulate as people her own age -- everybody had the same wants, the same fears. And she was a freaking prodigy when it came to pulling the right strings.

"Thanks, Mrs. Vickerson," she said guilelessly. "That means a lot."

#

Bobby flashed a nervous smile as a much taller Italian guy in a slightly less expensive-looking suit poured them drinks. He was seated on one of the bright red couches at the end of the

gallery, with the man who'd steered him there sitting across from him. He was definitely being inspected, but it was different from the lustful stares Bobby was accustomed to, and different from the catty looks of the other models, too.

Nino looked more like someone at a hardware store deciding on a new lawnmower, or something. Finally he took off his sunglasses, and his intense gaze settled on Bobby's face. Bobby felt his heart start to pound. Kimberly had obviously done her stupid blackmail plan, but what if Bianca had called her bluff?

Maybe she'd told Nino Romano about it, and now Bobby was about to get kicked out the wrap-up party and sent to Italian jail. He imagined the other models and their big perfect boobs watching as he got led away by the police, imagined Bianca shaking her head at him and telling him he was never going to see her twerk again -- and it was all because of Kimberly and her stupid bullshit plans.

Unable to bear the tension, Bobby reached for his glass, took a large gulp, and narrowly avoided spitting it right into Nino Romano's face.

"What *is* this?" he demanded, sputtering.

Nino looked genuinely puzzled. "Water," he said.

Bobby looked at the glass bottle the waiter had left behind, and frowned. "It's got *bubbles*," he said lamely. "Water's not supposed to have, like, bubbles."

"I understand this is your first time in Europe, Ms. Vickerson," Nino said, smoothly ignoring him. "Are you enjoying Italy?"

Bobby blinked. Nino didn't sound angry, which was a good sign, but his question had provoked a sudden montage in his head: tripping over cobblestones, hordes of wolf-whistling Italian men, showing up in a skimpy neon pink bikini to a pool party with no pool...

"Love it," Bobby said, smiling through gritted teeth.

Nino smiled back. "I'm glad," he said. "Well, I promised to be brief, didn't I?" He leaned forward slightly, hands steepled together. "I want Barbie Vickerson to be the new face of Blush cosmetics."

So it had worked. Kimberly's stupid bullshit plan had worked, but still at the cost of Bianca hating his guts forever. Clearly mistaking the stricken look on Bobby's face for normal surprise, Nino elaborated.

“We were impressed with you this weekend, Ms. Vickerson,” he said. “You have something about you that stands out. And one of the other models, who was, in fact, in the running for this same contract, vouched for you quite strongly.”

“Bianca, right?” Bobby said glumly. “I know, but...”

“We did hesitate a little,” Nino cut in, “because of the issue of your sister.”

Bobby shut his mouth.

“You may not be aware, but SoGlam, the company your sister Serena currently represents, has been one of our fiercest competitors,” Nino continued. “Tides have shifted recently, and our sales projections are, well...” He gave a modest shrug. “If things go half as well as expected in the coming season, I think we will crush SoGlam under our heel. Or stiletto, in your case.”

Bobby swallowed. “So, like, they’re the Clippers and we’re the Lakers with LeBron in play-off mode?” he squeaked.

Nino stared. “I think this is an American metaphor I’m unfamiliar with,” he said. “The reason I tell you this is that, while signing you will give us an additional marketing advantage over SoGlam, it might also put a strain on you and your sister’s relationship. She might find it embarrassing to be, well, upstaged.”

Bobby took a deep breath. This was it. Despite all the shit he had gone through this weekend, he’d ended up right where he’d originally hoped to be. He just had to say the word, and he would be on his way to taking over Serena’s life. It had been shitty of Kimberly to blackmail Bianca, but Bianca had gone along with it, and that meant her secret was safe. Nobody got hurt. Not really.

“She’ll get over it,” Bobby said -- he wasn’t sure if he was talking about Serena or Bianca when he said the words, but either way, he knew he was lying. “Where do I sign?” he asked bracingly. “I’m *definitely* your girl.”

“Excellent,” Nino said, beaming. “Bianca was right about you.”

Bobby faltered. “What did she say?” he asked. “Exactly?”

“I see we are fishing for compliments,” Nino said dryly. “Well, I will indulge you. She said you two spent some time together, and that she thought you were very brave. Also very kind, and very trustworthy.”

“Yeah.” Bobby gave a pained smile. “Yeah, she thought that.”

#

Kimberly tried to really savor the moment as her ex made his way towards their table, strappy golden stilettos clicking against the floor, hips swishing, manicured hands clutching daintily at his designer purse. She wasn't the only one watching. Quite a few guests had taken a keen interest in Bobby's little conversation with Nino Romano. Most were shooting him curious looks, but some of his fellow models were outright glaring.

And of course, the small contingent of straight males at the party were just ogling a hot blonde, oblivious to the fashion world implications of what had just happened. Kimberly saw one particular guy's leering earn him a painful-looking punch on the arm from his wife, but it didn't stop him from sneaking one final glance at "Barbie's" tight, curvy ass.

"Hi, sweetie," Mrs. Vickerson said, as Bobby joined them at the table. He had a vague look in his pretty blue eyes. "Was that Mr. Romano you were just having such a nice chat with?"

"Yeah," Bobby said, but looking at Kimberly instead of at his mom. His eyes cleared, and he set his pale pink lips in a determined pout for a moment before he spoke again. "Yeah, he offered me the Blush campaign."

Mrs. Vickerson's straw missed her glass, and Kimberly felt a huge swell of triumph. "That's terrific!" Bobby's mom blurted. "Oh, my God, sweetie. This is big, big news!"

Kimberly felt a pang of unease as Bobby, ignoring his mom's gushing, kept staring right at her. "Yep," he said. "I told him no thanks. I think Bianca might be a better choice, you know?"

Mrs. Vickerson blanched, and Kimberly could feel the same thing happening to her as Bobby's words sank in. Her heart seemed to have skipped a beat, and her hands were shaking slightly. Her ex just smiled at her, an infuriating, cocky, perfect white smile, and despite the pouty collagen-plumped lips and pale pink gloss, for the briefest of seconds he was her controlling asshole boyfriend again.

Mrs. Vickerson was already trying to change Bobby's mind, probably jabbering about the importance of self-confidence and risk-taking, but Kimberly was so furious all she could hear was a faint buzzing. She'd gotten him exactly what he'd wanted, what they'd both wanted, and he'd thrown it away over an Italian girl with big boobs.

Kimberly reached for her phone, fingers clumsy as she rattled off a message to the dumbass across from her: *You said you were willing to do ANYTHING to get revenge on Serena, remember?*

Bobby reached into his purse and retrieved his iPhone, read the message, then looked up at her defiantly. He tapped away at a text, nails clicking against the screen. The message arrived a second later: **Almost anything.*

Kimberly took a deep breath. If Bobby lost the Blush campaign now, after all their hard work and all the shit she'd just said to Mrs. Vickerson, she wouldn't just lose the front row seat to her ex's humiliation. It was possible the entire thing, the entire "girlify Bobby Vickerson" enterprise, might come crashing down.

Her phone dinged again, as her ex followed up the message with a possibly-accidental GIF of a dancing banana. She wanted to reach across the table and throttle him, but instead she stood up, grabbed him by the arm, and put an ice-cold smile on her face.

"Let's go to the bathroom," she said, through gritted teeth. "Right. Now."

Bobby looked down at her grip, frowning, then gave an insolent shrug. "Sure," he said. "Your gloss definitely needs a touch up."

Kimberly dragged her ex away before Mrs. Vickerson could stop her.

#

By the time Bobby finally managed to wrest his arm free from Kimberly's way-too-tight grip, she'd manhandled him behind a large potted plant in the hallway. "Okay, psycho," he snapped, rubbing his arm ruefully. "What's up?"

"What's up?" his ex-girlfriend echoed in disbelief. "What the fuck are you doing? You're throwing away the Blush campaign!"

"Um, yeah, looks like you answered your own question," Bobby said, putting a hand on his hip, then quickly removing it when he realized how girlish a pose it was -- being around models all weekend was definitely seeping into his body language. "I told you, I'm not blackmailing Bianca."

"That's why I freaking did it *for* you," Kimberly snapped. "We got exactly what we came here for, and you just tossed it away like it's nothing."

Bobby realized he'd kind of missed seeing his ex-girlfriend pissed off. But now he was getting pissed off, too. "You think it was easy for me to turn that shit down?" he demanded. "Nino was going to *literally* put my face on a billboard right above Serena's SoGlam ad! It was going to be freaking awesome."

Kimberly groaned. "Then why didn't you just take the deal?" she demanded.

Bobby grimaced. It had been a close thing: Nino had been offering him exactly what he'd dreamed about, planning to market Blush as a younger, fresher, hotter company by shoving a younger, fresher, hotter model in SoGlam's face.

But no matter how satisfying it was to picture Serena's face looking up at his on some gigantic poster, he couldn't stop picturing Bianca's face, too -- particularly, the expression she'd had right before she ran off crying. Which was probably the same expression he'd had when he ran out of Andreas's bedroom in his bright pink bikini. Bianca had been there for him then, and he had to do right by her now.

"Because Bianca's my friend, and I'm not going to screw her over," Bobby said. He tried to clench his fists, thought better of it thanks to the manicured claws, and settled for clenching his jaw. "Not even to screw over Serena. Some things are just...off limits. And if you can't deal with that, Kimmy, then I don't want you around."

Kimberly had been glaring at him, but for a moment he saw a flicker of surprise in her eyes. Her face twisted. Then she swallowed, and slowly nodded her head. "Alright," she said. "Go back to your mom. I'm going to find Bianca, and tell her the truth."

Bobby narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Seriously?"

His ex-girlfriend grimaced. "Seriously."

#

On the outside, Kimberly was back to her supportive friend routine, assuring Bobby she would smooth things over with Bianca and even smiling when he had the gall to tell her he was *proud of him* for making the right choice.

On the inside, she was absolutely fuming. She'd anticipated her ex being miffed about the blackmail thing, but actually turning down the Blush campaign over it? Never in a million years. Not when his mantra from the very start had been revenge at any cost.

But here he was, throwing it all away for some goody-goody Italian girl with a beautiful rack, and threatening to throw out all the hard work she'd done to turn him into "Barbie" in the first place, to boot. And that was the one thing she would absolutely not allow. Bobby was *never* going back to being a guy, and if that meant Kimberly had to eat crow for the sake of a spoiled model, she would do it.

Kimberly pushed open the door to the ladies' washroom. It was full of people taking selfies and checking their makeup, and some of them were also casting curious looks down the marble countertop. Bianca was standing at the very last sink, staring blankly into the mirror as she washed her hands. Judging by her bright pink skin, she had been washing them for a whole lot longer than necessary.

"Bianca?" Kimberly asked softly, not allowing even a hint of her anger through.

The model looked up, and gave a tremulous smile. “Hi, yes, I am Bianca Buccino, but I am not...” She gave a little pre-sob hiccup. “I am *not* taking selfies today, so please go away. Sorry.”

“I don’t need a selfie,” Kimberly said. “I’m Barbie’s social media...person. Remember?” She glanced over her shoulder, then lowered her voice. “I want to talk about the, uh, the blackmail thing.”

Bianca promptly broke into actual sobs. Kimberly tried not to roll her eyes. Instead, she shot the onlookers her best “none of your business” glare, then gently pushed Bianca into the closest available privacy. Which was, of course, a toilet stall. Still sobbing, Bianca flipped the seat down, cleaned it carefully with a disinfectant wipe from her purse, and sat. She fanned herself, fluttering her hands in front of her face, and Kimberly had to admit that, even crying, she looked a lot better than most girls did *not* crying.

“What now?” the model choked. “I did what Barbie said.”

“Barbie didn’t blackmail you,” Kimberly said. “All she told me was that you’re really upset, and she doesn’t know why. But I figure I know what’s going on, so I came to tell you the truth.”

Kimberly rehearsed it in her head one last time: almost as soon as they landed in Rome, she met this really handsome guy named Vincenzo, and they went on a date and ate pizza on a bridge -- pause for Bianca’s indignant recognition. He kept wanting to talk about the fashion show for some reason, particularly about *Bianca Buccino*, even though he also said was sick of hearing about her.

He said something about a surgeon, or a surgeon’s wife, who knew a secret about her. He said he was sick of always seeing her photos, sick of how famous she was getting despite being a big fake. *Vincenzo* was the blackmailer, but since Kimberly had told him all about the Blush campaign, he was pretending to be Barbie to cover his tracks.

The story was absolutely full of holes, but it would absolve Bobby from blame -- that was what he cared about most -- and Bianca was so eager to believe the best of people, especially of “Barbie,” that she might fool herself into buying it. Kimberly could throw Vincenzo under the bus the same way she’d done to Josh, and things would stabilize.

She was opening her mouth to start lying her ass off when Bianca buried her head in her hands. “I just wanted to *trust* somebody,” the model whispered. “I just wanted to be *honest* with somebody for once.”

Kimberly faltered. Half of her wanted to inform Bianca that Bobby was not someone to trust. He was a selfish, self-centered, misogynistic prick, and she’d be doing herself a favor by nipping that relationship in the bud. But half of her realized just how long it had been since she herself had actually trusted anybody. Somehow she always ended up with friends like Beverly and Ally, or guys like Vincenzo and Bobby.

As for being honest, Kimberly could barely remember what it felt like. For one weird, terrifying moment, she wondered if she'd ever done it before. Her heart sped up. She thought of all the messed up stuff she'd done, all for good reasons, that she shoved to the back of her mind over and over again. Stuff she couldn't tell *anyone*. Stuff that kept her up sometimes.

And one of the smallest, most recent things, just...came...out.

"I blackmailed you," she blurted. "Barbie had nothing to do with it. I found out about you from a guy named Vincenzo. Six-pack, goofy smile, pizza on the bridge, Vincenzo. And I decided to blackmail you to get Barbie the Blush campaign."

Bianca stared up at her, mouth agape. "Vincenzo knew?" she murmured. Then, shaking her head, she stood up. "Why would you do that?" she demanded angrily. "Why would you do such a bad, bad thing?"

Kimberly stared at her. Telling the truth had given her a bizarre head rush -- she thought she could even feel a tingling in her fingers and toes -- but once was definitely enough for the day. "I really care about Barbie, and I want her to be successful," Kimberly said. "And when I saw you two, like, bonding..." She grimaced. "I was jealous of you."

Bianca looked at her, clearly still wounded, eyeing her up and down. "I understand," she finally sniffled. "It makes sense."

"Who wouldn't be jealous, right?" Kimberly said, through gritted teeth. "You're rich, you're beautiful, you have perfect boobs. You don't even need the Blush campaign. You're going to blow up no matter what."

"You are not jealous of that," Bianca said, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I have met lots of people like you since I started modelling. You are a...how do you say it? A user."

Kimberly frowned, opening her mouth to do some more lying, but Bianca plowed on.

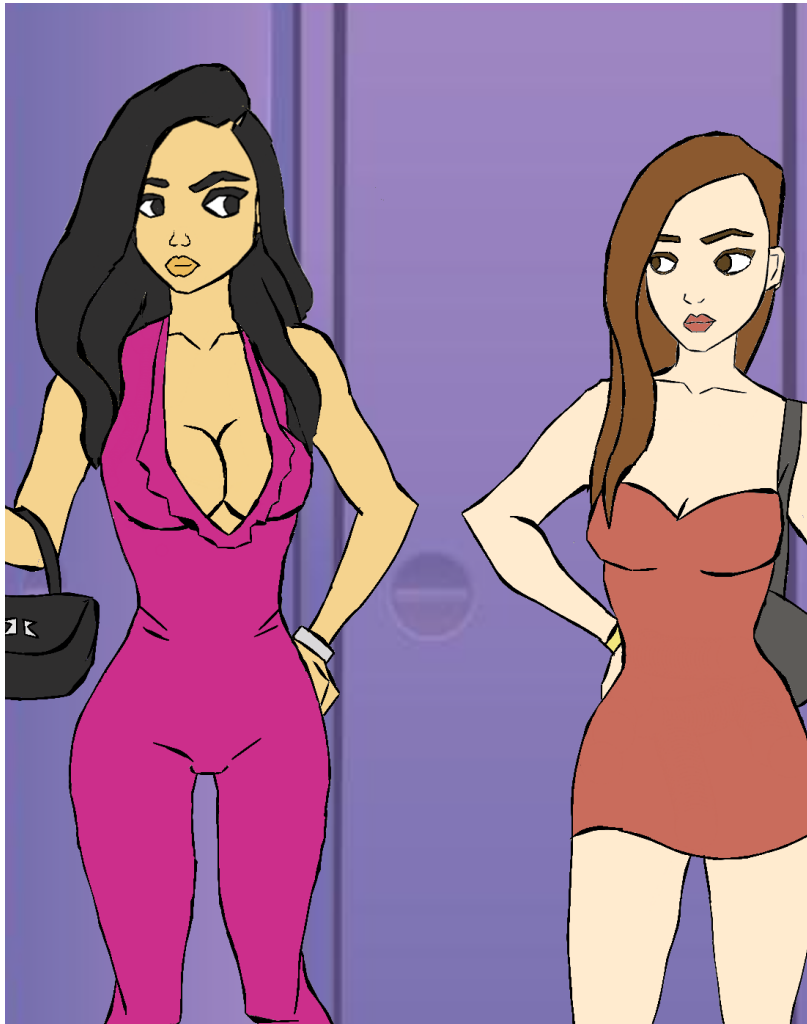
"I don't think you really care about Barbie," the Italian girl said, voice growing steadier. "I think you care about her being successful only so you can use her to get what you want, because you think this is how the world works. But you're wrong, and it's very sad."

Kimberly didn't reply, but she couldn't fully hide the derision on her face, either. This weepy Italian airhead, who lived inside a perfect little bubble with her rich parents and adoring fans, could *not* be trying to tell her how the world worked.

Bianca must have seen her disdain, because she bit her lip, and when she spoke her voice was no longer in the least bit sweet or fragile. "I don't like you, Kimberly Quinn," she said. "I won't say anything about this, because I do not want to hurt Barbie." She narrowed her eyes. "But she

deserves better friends than you. So I am going to be her better friend, and I am going to keep my eyes on you.”

She gestured irritably with her hand, and Kimberly, after a moment’s hesitation, stepped aside to let Bianca out of the stall. The Italian model set to work repairing her makeup with expert motions, quick and precise, and true to her word, her gaze, reflected in the long mirror, followed Kimberly all the way out of the bathroom.



Honesty was so fucking overrated.

#

It was Bobby’s final evening in Rome, and he was finally in Bianca Buccino’s bed. It was, however, just a little different from how he’d fantasized it. For instance, he was still wearing a minidress and high heels, had his legs kicked up behind him, and was pretending to leaf through an issue of Vogue. Bianca had picked both the pose and the prop.

“Ready, Barbie?” she asked, adjusting her top in the mirror. “Remember, just look, like, natural.”

Bobby grimaced. “Natural,” he chirped. “Got it.”

Bianca picked up her iPhone, fixed her beautiful smile in place, and started streaming. “Hello, Bucci Gang!” she sang. “It is me, Bianca, and I’m just chilling in my bedroom with my new favorite model, Barbie Vickerson! Say hello!”

As rehearsed, Bobby looked up from his magazine and wiggled his fingers in a wave. “Hi, everybody,” he said sweetly, doing his best fake smile.

“Barbie is like, the best, nicest girl, and we are already super good friends,” Bianca said, gracefully sitting down on the bed beside him while somehow keeping her phone the perfect distance from her face. “And that’s good, because we have some super big news!”

“Oh my God, are we, like, allowed to tell them?” Bobby squeaked.

“Ooh, maybe we shouldn’t,” Bianca said, with an exaggerated pout. “I don’t know…”

Bobby felt more than a little silly, but on the screen of Bianca’s phone, he could see the number of viewers increasing. “I kind of want to tell them,” he said, trying to remember his lines. “I kind of want to tell everybody how lucky I am!”

“Oh my God, you’re making it sound like we get married!” Bianca exclaimed. She gave him a playful swat on his rump, and he blushed.

“Tell them!” he said, making his best effort at a giggle. “This is way too exciting.”

“Okay, okay,” Bianca said, taking a deep breath. “Bucci Gang, as you know, me and Barbie did a fashion show together this weekend here in Rome, which was sponsored by my *favorite* cosmetics company, Blush…”

“I love their lip gloss,” Bobby said, dying just a little on the inside.

“Me too,” Bianca beamed. “And anyways, Blush has decided to make *both* of us, together, the new faces of their summer advertising campaign!” She bounced up and down on the bed with a high-pitched squeal Bobby did his best to replicate, spinning her iPhone in a little circle around them. “We’re so excited!” she sang. “Make sure to follow me for updates, and if you don’t already follow Barbie, I am putting her Instagram at the bottom. Love you guys! Mwah!”

“Mwah!” Bobby echoed, pouting his lips together to blow a kiss.



Bianca ended the stream, and her sunny smile was replaced by a look of deep satisfaction. “And that is how you live stream, babe,” she said. “You did very good!”

“Thanks,” Bobby said, massaging his face. “Do your cheeks usually, um, hurt afterwards?”

Bianca shrugged, still smiling, and disappeared into her expansive walk-in closet. After their big tearful reunion at the wrap-up party, she’d dragged Bobby over to Nino Romano and started talking to the man in high-speed Italian. She was definitely Nino’s favorite, because, as Bobby learned a few minutes later, she’d insisted that she and “Barbie” either did the Blush campaign together, or not at all.

His mom had balked a little at the new deal, since a shared campaign meant less money and less individual exposure, but Kimberly had seemed relieved, and Bobby had signed off on the

spot. He'd spent the rest of the party arm-in-arm with Bianca, surrounded by people congratulating him, then went home with her to prepare their spontaneous campaign reveal.

Honestly, he felt pretty freaking good. He'd gotten what he wanted, plus Bianca. Europe wasn't as bad as he'd thought. In fact, he almost regretted that they were flying out so early tomorrow morning.

"Here it is!" Bianca said, re-emerging from her walk-in holding a flat pink box tied with ribbon. "Look, Barbie, I got you a going away gift."

Bobby blinked in surprise, then took the box and opened it, tearing the ribbon up in a way that made Bianca wince slightly. His face went red as he saw the contents. He'd been expecting something girly, but definitely not a bra.

"Cool," he said. "I get it. Like, a reminder of all the underwear we wore this weekend."

Bianca rolled her eyes. "No, not that," she said. "Hold it up! See if it fits!"

Bobby held up the garment against his chest, and it became apparent Bianca had misjudged him -- maybe he'd done that contouring trick *too* well. "Um, it's a little big," he said, flushing. "Thanks, though."

"Do not say thanks yet," Bianca said cheerfully. "The bra is very nice, but it is, like, a symbol? For the real gift?"

Bobby blinked, confused as to what exactly a bra could represent. Maybe it was a symbol for getting naked, and Bianca was about to take *her* bra off, and push him down onto the bed. He crossed his manicured fingers in his lap. The theory didn't seem particularly likely, but the thought was enough to distract him from Bianca's next words. His attention only snapped back at "staring at my boobs."

"Wait, what?" Bobby squeaked. He'd been working incredibly hard all evening at keeping his eyes above neck level.

"Barbie, do you think I am like, a blind person, babe?" Bianca asked, twirling a lock of glossy dark hair between her fingers. She grinned. "I see you are looking at them all the time, and like I said, my family knows the very best surgeon."

"Well, they look super real," Bobby said. "And I bet they, um, feel real? Too?"

"Oh my God, Barbie, of course," Bianca said, rolling her eyes. "I would only get the best, and now I will make sure you get them, too."

Bobby faltered. "Make sure I get...your boobs?"

“Yes,” Bianca beamed. “The surgeon who did mine, he moved to Miami, in America, so you are practically neighbors! I talked to my father, and my father talked to Dr. Rizzardi, and it is all arranged. All paid for!”

Things finally clicked, and Bobby felt the color drain from his face. “Um, I don’t know,” he said. “That’s really generous, but...”

“It is not generous!” Bianca said indignantly. “You are my friend, and I want you to have what you deserve! I see you always looking and being sad about your chest, but not anymore, okay?”

Bobby flushed, but couldn’t stop himself from thinking back to his experience backstage, the way the other models had snickered at him, totally dismissing him the same way basketball opponents who didn’t know better used to look at his height and skinny frame and hardly bother to guard him until he started dropping bombs in their faces. He *hated* being dismissed. With a passion. That was why he’d always wished he was taller.

But in this world, in Serena’s world, he was tall enough. And he was pretty enough, too. The only thing he *didn’t* have was, well...

“I asked your mom’s permission, of course,” Bianca beamed. “And she said it would be a lovely surprise! I even talked to Mr. Romano, to make extra, extra sure, and he thinks it is a super good idea.” She let out a slight giggle. “He said *piu ’grande e’, meglio ’e*, and in English this is the bigger, the better.”

Bobby swallowed, trying to think of a way to let Bianca down gently without telling her he was a guy, and guys did *not* get boob jobs. She was trying to help him out, as usual, and obviously “Barbie” was the kind of girl who would jump at the chance for a bigger bust. Would it seem weird if he turned it down? Would she be suspicious? Pissed off?



As crazy as it was, Bianca was possibly his closest friend right now -- certainly a hell of a lot closer than DeShawn or any of his old teammates, and closer than Kimberly, too. She was trying to do something nice for him, and rejecting it might mean no more twerking videos, no more sexy selfies, and no more shoulder to cry on when he needed it.

“Don’t be nervous about the surgery,” Bianca said, rubbing his back softly. “You go to sleep, you wake up, and you have boobs!” She shimmied her shoulders to demonstrate, making Bobby’s

eyes zero back in on her cleavage. “It’s easy, babe,” she said. “We’ll be the same size, and we can pick outfits for each other! Oh my God, it will be so fun.”

Bobby gulped nervously, imagining Bianca sending him selfie after selfie wearing all kinds of revealing outfits that he got to pick for her. “Implants are removable, right?” he asked slowly.

“Of course,” Bianca said casually. “This is, like, a very easy procedure now. But you won’t need to remove them, they will be perfect.”

Obviously he didn’t *want* bigger boobs. He didn’t want to have boobs at all. But if he had to have them anyways, to be Bianca’s friend, to be one of the faces of Blush, to make Serena rue the day she fucked with him, then it made sense to have bigger ones. It was a competitive advantage, after all.

He was pretty sure his big sister was only a B-cup.

Bobby pasted a smile onto his face, trying to hide his turmoil. “That sounds cool,” he squeaked. “We would be, um, samesies.”

Bianca threw her arms around him and pulled him into a lung-crushing hug, and Bobby was even more conscious of her boobs than usual.

#

By the time she was buckled into the aisle seat beside her ex, Kimberly was ready to forget all about her ill-fated weekend in Italy. First, her own stupid mistakes: forgetting to update Bobby’s Insta, missing the second day of the fashion show, getting duped by Andreas Romano. Second, the fact that Bobby had undercut her blackmail plan, nearly torpedoing the whole thing, and she’d been forced to let him get away with it. Him going against her and regaining his confidence did not bode well for “Barbie.”

If there was any small consolation, it was that her ex was no longer all smiles. In fact, ever since getting back from Bianca’s house the prior evening, he’d seemed slightly dazed. Maybe he’d tried to make a move on her and been rejected. Maybe he was despairing over leaving his newfound BFF.

At the moment, Kimberly honestly found it hard to care. She’d gone to Italy thinking she would get a bit of a break, and she was returning exhausted. The Blush campaign was in hand, if not the way she’d imagined it, and Mrs. Vickerson had grudgingly agreed to keep her around. But there was a whole new set of problems seething under the surface, Bianca being one of the biggest.

She glanced over at her ex, half-expecting to see him rattling off a teary goodbye text. Instead, he was staring straight ahead, pretty blue eyes full of anxiety. It was the expression Kimberly always knew she could capitalize on, exhausted or not.

She reached across and plucked one AirPods from Bobby's double-pierced ear. "What's up?" she asked. "Did you develop a fear of flying in the past 72 hours?"

Bobby looked over at her, distracted. "Huh? Um, nothing. Just thinking." He swallowed. "About. Modeling stuff."

Kimberly blinked. "Any stuff in particular?"

Bobby glanced around, then, with a pained expression, started to speak. Sort of. "I think I might...need...not *want*, but, like...I mean, for the Blush stuff, Bianca says..." He trailed off, blushing, into an unintelligible mumble.

"Pardon?" Kimberly said, eyebrow raised.

"Imightneedbiggerboobs," her ex blurted.

Kimberly's jaw dropped. She'd seen Bobby make use of Bianca's little contouring tricks, but aside from that, every shred of evidence on record said that her ex hated his boobs. He complained about his bra fit constantly, glared at anyone he caught checking them out, and couldn't even look down his own shirt without blushing beet red.

"The thing is, they're removable," Bobby babbled. "Like, implants are removable. And Bianca really, really wants me to do it, so she called up the surgeon who did hers, and I guess she arranged it with Mom, too, and paid for everything?"

For a moment, Kimberly could only stare off into space, lost in visions of her formerly macho, skirt-chasing ex stuffing a pair of silicon-enhanced boobs into his next bikini top, blushing and squirming as guy after drooling guy stared at his chest, jiggling as he ran on the treadmill...

"But it's crazy, right?" Bobby pressed, red in the face. "I mean, I'm still... I'm still a *guy*." He whispered the final word, mortified.

Kimberly realized she'd been looking at it all wrong. If she handled it properly, Bianca was just another asset, and a good one -- a trans fashion model so girly and perfect she'd never been clocked once in her entire life was the perfect role model for Bobby to aspire to.

"So you're finally going to take this seriously," Kimberly said. "Thank fuck."

Bobby stared. "Take what seriously?" he asked.

Kimberly felt re-energized at last. “Beating Serena,” she said. “We got off lucky here in Italy. Really, really lucky. You got to have your Bianca cake and eat it, too.”

Bobby flushed. “I didn’t *eat* anything,” he muttered.

“That kind of luck’s not going to happen again,” Kimberly said, ignoring him. “All this nicey-nice bullshit and all these half-measures are *not* going to cut it when we go up against your sister. Serena is a whole lot smarter, and meaner, than Andreas Romano, and he made you...” She paused for effect while her ex’s face reddened. “He made *us* look like idiots,” she finished.

Bobby bit his lip nervously, white teeth juxtaposed against his matte red lipstick. He had a pained look in his eyes.

“So of course you’re getting the boob job,” Kimberly said. “We need every edge we can get, and it shows Serena we’re not screwing around. No more half-measures.”

Finally, her ex slowly nodded his blonde head. “Yeah,” he said. “Okay.” He took a deep breath. “I’m not going to be nice.”

Kimberly held out his AirPods. “Good.”

Bobby took it, then hesitated. “But I’m not going to stoop to her level, either,” he said. “There’s some shit that’s just...” He trailed off. Then he shook his head, shrugged, and put his AirPods back in. A moment later, a bubblegum pop song came faintly through the buds.

Kimberly leaned back in her chair, frowning. Bobby was wrong, of course. The only way to win against someone like Serena was to fight dirty. To fight the way she fought. But she wasn’t going to be able to just *te//* Bobby that. She was going to have to bring him all the way down to her level, and show him.

It was where he belonged, after all. He was prettier than ever on the outside, but on the inside, he was still ugly. He was still the prick who’d played her and humiliated her. And that meant he still deserved everything that was coming to him.

Kimberly dug out her iPhone and started flicking through her photos from the wrap-up party, finally settling on one of Bobby and Bianca vamping for the camera, both of them beaming their perfect white smiles. She couldn’t help but compare cleavage, and got another little thrill knowing her ex would soon be wearing the same cup size as his new “bestie.”

She posted the photo to “Barbie’s” Instagram and tapped out a caption: *Bianca’s awesome, and gorgeous, and talented, and she is seriously like the sister I never had! No offense to @officialserenavickerson, who has taught me so much and been around the modeling game for sooo long :)*

And just like that, the first shots in their little war on Serena had been fired. Satisfied, Kimberly fished her sleep-mask out of her purse and slipped it on. The darkness was comforting.



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328 views

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Bianca's awesome, and gorgeous, and talented, and she is seriously like the sister I never had! No offense to [@officialserenavickerson](#), who has taught me so much and been around the modeling game for sooo long :)

The End