

ADULTS ONLY

115 pages 33 illustrations

# IT'S A SHORE THING

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack



**J O E   S I X   P A C K**

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SHORE  
THING**

**Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack**  
**A Teens Transformed story**



2026 Edition

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## IT'S A SHORE THING

The stench of fried onions and damp beer coasters hung thick around their table at Geno's. Justin picked at the crust of his cheesesteak, watching his father wipe grease from his chin with a paper napkin.

"They made me an offer I couldn't turn down." Michael Morris pushed his chair back, belt buckle catching the fluorescent light. "Regional manager. Forty-two percent increase, plus they're covering the relocation expenses."

Justin's mother, Elaine, smoothed her mustard-stained menu. "The schools in Broward County are supposed to be excellent. And the weather, Michael — no more shoveling snow."

Now he knew why his parents took him out to his favorite cheesesteak restaurant. He suspected something was up. He was not wrong.

"That's great for you guys." Justin dropped his sandwich onto its wax paper. "What about my classes? What about the tuition I already paid?"

His mom, sitting across from him in a stained Eagles hoodie, nudged his knee under the table. "It's *community* college, Justin. If you want, we'll pay you the seven dollars you spent."

"One hundred and thirty-eight," Justin asserted.

"We're not discussing this as a negotiation." His dad raised his hands in surrender, a gesture Justin had seen throughout eighteen years of compromise. "This is happening, regardless. The movers arrive Saturday."

"You scheduled movers before you even told me?" Justin pushed away from the table, chair scraping linoleum. "You actually did this without talking to me first?"

"Everything's set, Justin." His mother tossed her napkin on her empty basket. "The realtor found us a lovely place with a pool."

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?"

"Because you were going to react like this," his father replied, wiping his mouth. "We'd have to listen to your whining for months."

His mother stood up, slinging her purse strap over one shoulder. "It won't be half as bad as you think."

"Philly is my life," Justin said, overstating things a bit. As they hit the pavement outside, he was begging his parents to see reason. "I grew up here! And I'm gonna go to Temple! After I get my grades up, yeah, but I'm going!"



“Do you have the money to get an apartment?” His father said with a chuckle. “As long as you live with us, Justin, you don’t have a choice. It was your idea not to get a job.”

“I’m 18!”

“I got my first job when I was 12,” the father said.

“Mowing lawns doesn’t count.”

“Well it taught me how to make a living and provide for myself. Something you’ve never done. You should have been saving your money.”

“I didn’t know you were gonna move to Florida!” Justin tried to get out in front of them as they walked, hoping to get them to stop. “This is a joke, right? You can’t do this to me!”

Justin glanced from his father’s satisfied expression to his mother’s pity smile, then followed them back home without another word. He wasn’t winning this one.



Justin lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. A ceiling he’d seen every day of his life until now. In a matter of days, it wouldn’t be his too look at anymore.

The screen of his phone illuminated his face. He picked it up and thumbed through photos until he found it: Dennis and him on the beach. The sun had baked their shoulders red. They peeled for days. Dennis's smile was wide, showing crooked teeth. Their arms were slung around each other's shoulders.

When Dennis first went to Atlantic City, he had gone with him, to help him adjust. But that was two years ago, and he hadn't seen him since. Just texts.

He opened his messages. The last one from Dennis was a single thumb-down emoji, sent three days ago in response to a question about the Flyers.

Justin typed: "You up?"

The three dots appeared and disappeared. Then a new message: "Rough night" and then "Talk later" was the follow-up. No more dots after that.

Justin stared at the words. He switched to their older conversations, from months ago. Dennis liked to complain about his aunt, living in Atlantic City and working at a hotel. He called her a control freak, but the language was casual.

That was Dennis. He was never one to get too excited about stuff. He had a very level head, which was a nice counter to Justin's less restrained approach.

They had been living on the same block for a long time. Dennis and his family moved in ten years ago, and they had gone to school from grade school through high school. They played on the basketball team together. Over the years they had grown close, almost as close as brothers.

So two years ago, when his parents divorced, he really felt for him. Justin's parents may have been callous jerks who never told him anything, but at least they didn't tear the family apart.

Dennis was the subject of court proceedings to determine custody and the fight was so fierce, Dennis wound up with neither parent, and was living with his aunt.

She ran a hotel, casino and nightclub in Atlantic City, and that's where Dennis lived now.

Justin put the phone down and pushed off the bed and walked to the window. The streetlights glowed yellow on the pavement below. He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and took out the two twenty-dollar bills folded inside.

It felt like his entire world was being taken from him. Stolen from him. Ripped from his arms. Why did things have to change?

It was some kind of sense of needing to control his life again that made him decide what he was going to do next.

"What brought this on?" his mother slid a plate of scrambled eggs across the kitchen counter, the ceramic scraping against the formica. "Atlantic City? That's not exactly a summer camp."

Justin sliced at the eggs with his fork. "It's better than Florida. Three months." He pushed a piece into his mouth. "I'm goin'."

His father sipped his coffee, the mug leaving a ring on the newspaper. "And Dennis's aunt is okay with this?"

"She won't even notice I'm there." Justin lied smoothly, the practiced confidence of a teenager who has spent years navigating parental questions. "May not even tell her."

"We should call her." His mom wiped her hands on a dish towel. "It's only polite."

"I'm not asking if I can sleep over at her place," Justin stood up and rinsed his plate. "I'm not a kid." He wanted it to be a surprise for Dennis. He sounded like he could use some good news, if his texts were any indication.

"Still..." His dad said.

"Either I go there for the summer, or I'll be with you guys for the whole move, making everyone's life miserable. Your choice."

"Call us when you get there," his father said.

That afternoon, Justin zipped up his duffel bag in the bedroom. The clothes inside were folded without precision: jeans, hoodies, socks. Nothing fancy. Nothing that required special care.

A few blocks away, he handed over his two twenties to the ticket booth lady. That was his fortune spent on a bus ticket.

The bus doors hissed open. He grabbed his duffel bag from the back seat. His father rolled down the window.

Justin climbed aboard, found a seat, and tossed the bag into the overhead compartment without looking back. There was nothing to look back on. Everything was already gone.



It was almost certainly the wrong thing to do. Who knows what his parents would do with his stuff. Maybe they'd throw everything out instead of paying to move it. That was something he could see his mom doing without a second thought. She was like that.

But he couldn't stay there. He couldn't watch his room, his stuff, his life broken down and packed into boxes. An empty room. An empty house. A life abandoned.

It was certainly the wrong thing to do, but he felt like he had to do this. He knew he was running away. But he didn't question the cowardice of running

away from his problems, his only question was if he was running away fast enough.

The bus lurched to a stop in Camden. A mechanical issue, the driver announced, forty minutes at least. Justin stepped out into the humid air, watching three guys exit the bus behind him. Their sneakers were pristine, expensive fabric extended from the ankles.

“You heading to AC?” The tallest one asked Justin, already pulling out a pack of cigarettes. “We’re hitting the tables tonight.”

“Just visiting a friend.” Justin shifted his duffel bag to his other shoulder.

“What’s her name?” One asked.

“And what’s she look like?” Another added.

“Nah,” Justin said, smiling and laughing. “My bud. He’s just my bud.”

“You guys got any pussy lined up?” The tallest of the three asked, elbowing Justin as he said it. “Nothin’ like some Jersey snatch. Those girls lay out for everyone.”

“Hey, I didn’t come all this way to just shake a guy’s hand. Me and my friend, this one time, he and I are fifteen, raid his dad’s liquor cabinet. We’re wasted, walking down Kensington, and this car pulls over. Two chicks, maybe thirty-two maybe older. They’re blind drunk. Moms on vacation or some shit. You can see the vodka bottles in the back seat.”

“I know what’s coming next,” said the shortest of the frat boys.

“They need directions. My man Dennis gives them these directions which have them circe the whole city twice and then wind up at a motel just two blocks away. Dennis makes us go get a couple of rooms and we wait until they show up again, and he tells them they must have gotten lost, but why not rest here?”

“Ah, no way, dude.”

“Bro, I’m telling you, Dennis is with the blonde, I’m with the redhead, and Dennis is all ‘I’m so young, I’ve never seen a vagina before, does it have tentacles like the comics say?’ and she’s all ‘no’ and he’s all ‘yes’ and they get in an argument, and he says he needs to see it to believe it.”

“Oh come on,” one the frat boys say.

“No, really! Anyway, cut to the good part. He’s licking her pussy and I’m on the other one, I’m down there for what feels like an hour, my jaw’s killing me, and she’s just, like, ‘You look like my son, please call me mommy.’ Then she rolls over and goes to sleep. Dennis and I walked home at dawn, smelling like cunts and dollar store vodka. Best night of my life. That’s the kind of guy my bud is.”

“Bro, that’s epic.” The taller frat boy slapped Justin on the back. “My name’s Chet. We’re staying at the Tropicana. You should come by Saturday. Bryce knows the assistant manager. We got everything comped.” The second guy pointed his thumb at the tallest one. Bryce nodded, uninterested.

“AC is perfect for a weekend.” The third one added, “The whole city is falling apart, and the Shore scene is trashy — but in a wicked cool way.”

“The girls, though.” Bryce exhaled smoke. “Jersey Shore girls are hot.”

“Fake tans, fake nails, tons of attitude.” The second one laughed, pulling out his phone. “Here, put your number in. We’ll text you the party address.”

Justin typed his number into the phone, watching them exchange identical looks.

Back on the bus, the landscape flattened. Atlantic City appeared first as a line of tall buildings against grey sky, then as streets with shuttered storefronts and trash cans overflowing onto sidewalks. The bus deposited him at the terminal, which felt like a new level of hell, in concrete form. He could count four police cars stationed around the place.

Three blocks away, the boardwalk stretched out along a greyish beach, the wood weathered and splintered in places. Further down, the casinos rose like glass cliffs, their names lit up against the afternoon sky: Caesars, Hard Rock, Ocean. Justin followed the numbers on his phone to the address Dennis had given him.

The hotel was older than the casinos around it, a ten-story brick building with faded gold lettering that read “The Aquarius.” The lobby was quiet, the carpet thin under his shoes. At the front desk, a woman with dark hair pulled into a tight bun stapled a receipt with mechanical precision.

“Can I help you?” She asked, not looking up.

“I’m looking for Dennis Kowalski. Or his aunt Nicky”

“You’re Justin.” She set down the papers. “Dennis mentions you all the time.”

“How did you...”

“Dennis doesn’t have a lot of friends. And he shows me pics of you. You send a lot of pics.”

“You gotta be aunt Nicky,” Justin shifted his duffel bag to his other hand.

“I gotta be.” She came around from behind the desk, extending a hand. Her grip was firm, brief. “It’s good to meet you. You’ve been a great friend to my nephew.”

“We’re best buds.”

“You didn’t tell him you were coming, did you?”

“Nah. I wanted to surprise him. It’s been two years since we saw each other. We grew up...”



"Dennis is away," she interrupted. Justin's head jerked back. "Visiting family. His father's side, downstate."

"He didn't mention that."

"It was last minute." She straightened her blazer. "He'll be back in July."

He did the math. That was 4 weeks away. "So I'm here alone?" Justin asked.

"Looks that way."

"I... Uh... Thought he would be here. I, um..."

"You need a room?" the woman said, walking around behind her desk again. "I'll put you up in one of our spare suites."

"I... Don't have..." Justin was a bit embarrassed. His plan was to room with his friend. "I don't have any money."

"I guessed that. The room isn't free." She kept typing on her terminal, her posture unchanged. "My dinner server walked out last week. You can work bussing tables, helping in the kitchen. 6 to 11 p.m. We'll call it even."

"Sure." Justin nodded. "Uh, that works."

"Good."

Justin followed her up a staircase. The carpet on the steps was thin in the middle, worn down by years of footsteps. It hadn't been replaced in a while.

Justin was curious. This had all happened so fast. "So you give rooms to all your employee?"

"Only the ones who are childhood friends with Dennis," she replied.

On the third floor, she unlocked a door and pushed it open. The room inside was small but clean: twin beds with crisp white duvets, a desk against one wall, a window looking out at the pool and the other wing of the hotel.

"This is yours, at least until I need to fill it with a paying customer. I think you'll be good for a while." She stood in the doorway, not entering. "How long do you think you'll stay?"

"Well, I really wanted to see Dennis. So... Four weeks?"

"Sounds good. I'm happy to help."

Justin dropped his duffel bag on one of the beds. "This is great. Thanks."

She pulled the door nearly shut. "The uniform is black pants, white dress shirt. Be ready by five tomorrow. And by the way, my name is Nicole, not *aunt Nicky*." The lock clicked as she closed it completely.

Justin tossed his duffel bag onto the bed nearest the window. The springs creaked under its weight. He walked to the window and looked down into the courtyard below. It was just a sad pool with a few sick-looking plants in concrete boxes.



Justin unzipped his bag and pulled out a stack of t-shirts. He didn't have any black pants. Hopefully they'd wave that until he could get a pair. As he tossed them into the dresser drawer, movement across the courtyard caught his eye. A figure stood at an upstairs window directly opposite his room. It was a girl, or the shape of one, with long dark hair. She stood perfectly still, watching him.

Justin stopped messing with his clothes. He held a t-shirt in his hands and watched back. The figure didn't move for several long seconds. Then the curtain was pulled shut with a quick, decisive movement.

He stood at his window for a moment longer, looking at the closed curtain across the way. He finished dumping his clothes in the dresser, then lay down on his bed.

"Hey, where you at?" a text came on his phone. It was Dennis.

"You'll never guess," Justin replied. "In your hotel" he typed. "When U back?" The message sent, then nothing.

"Hello?" he typed a few minutes later.

"No way" Dennis typed back. "Something just came up"

"What?" Just toyed.

"C U ltr" was the reply, and nothing more. Justin could just imagine the look on his best friend's face. Although he expected more of reaction, even just through texts. He was never able to predict people's reactions very well.



At 4:55 p.m., Justin put on the only spare pants he had, grey ones, and a white shirt tee shirt. The manager tsk-tsked him for his non-uniform uniform, but Justin was going to have to endure it until he got his first paycheck. The restaurant was quieter than he expected, with only eight tables occupied.

"Table three needs setting." A woman in her twenties, Maria, pointed without looking at him. "Then clear table six."

Justin set up the table and stacked plates. Between trips to the kitchen, he leaned against the service station.

"I saw girl in the window across the courtyard," Justin asked Maria. "Black hair, kinda tan, kinda tall. Know of anyone around here like that?"

"If that's Crystal, Nicole's niece..." Maria shrugged, gathering silverware into a roll. "I wouldn't start anything. Keeps to herself. Works in the club."

"The club?"

"The casino lounge." Maria tucked the silverware into her apron. "It's called Paradise. Our kitchen doubles for the kitchen for Paradise. She's in training I think."

Justin wandered over to the archway that led from the restaurant into the club called Paradise. It was a swanky joint, if ever he saw one. Shiny black tables, deep red carpeting, neon signs, black marble walls and columns. It looked a bit out of time and kind of silly. It was like an old 80s-90s casino but amped up to lean into how anachronistic it was. Why would anyone want to be in a place like that?

This young man didn't have any answers. Justin never understood gambling anyway. He was not going to lose a cent gambling for as long as he was going to stick around in Atlantic City. He had decided on that.

He'd see how this part-time job was going to work out. He didn't ask for it, but it was a job, and he needed money. Badly. And it came with a free room. So at least for now, he'd see how this was going to go.

When he saw Nicole walk through the closed restaurant, he dashed over to talk to her. "Uh, hey... Your niece, Crystal," Justin said, aligning salt and pepper shakers nearby to pretend like he was there for a reason. "Dennis never mentioned her."

"Family on my brother's side." Nicole smoothed her already smooth hair with her palm. "She's been through a difficult time. Finding her feet here this summer." Her tone offered no opening for further questions. "I told you black pants." She moved on to wherever she was going.

Justin understood. He'd been told what he would be told. He finished his tables and walked back to his room. Across the courtyard, the window to the girl's room was dark, the curtains drawn. Justin pulled the cord to close his own curtains, then clicked off the lamp.



Justin's phone revealed the time to be 10:45 by the time he woke up enough to check. He had been up to 3, so it figured. Nothing was where he thought it should be. He'd only woken up in a hotel room a couple of times before and was not used to being in another bed or bedroom. He dressed and made his way down to the hotel gym. The space was smaller than he expected — a treadmill, a weight bench, a few dumbbells, and a mirror along one wall. He expected to be alone.

Crystal stood at the side of the room, blocked by some machines. Justin's arrival had gone unnoticed, and he slowly walked around to get a better look at her. She wore platform black pumps, her legs extending upward into a leopard-print miniskirt that ended just below where her thighs met. A white cropped tank top exposed a strip of tanned midriff. Her dark hair fell in loose waves around her shoulders. Not exactly a workout look.



In her hands she held a tray. It looked like the same kind that was in his room with the ice bucket and sterilized glasses on it. She pivoted slowly on one foot, then the other, completing a full circle. The tray remained perfectly level. Her posture was rigid, her chin tilted slightly upward. She did this again. And again.

Justin walked to the weight rack, lifting two ten-pound dumbbells. He positioned himself just out of direct view, watching her reflection between his own sets of bicep curls.

She was amazing. This close to a girl, things usually got worse, like a bigger nose or a crooked smile. But this girl, Crystal, was better the closer you got. Her face was perfect, not a blemish, not a bump. Her eyes were bright. Her smile was pleasing. She had a body that she obviously was proud of, and there was no reason to think she was mistaken in that belief. Her body was the kind only young women can have — thin, curvy and faultless.

In the light from the window, Justin could see the details. The spray tan was uniform, the color of expensive furniture. Her nails were squared off, painted coral. Her hair had volume at the roots, falling straight around her face. Small gold hoops caught the light. A thin chain circled her right ankle.

He had no idea what she was doing, but as long as she kept doing it, he wasn't going to ask any questions. She was twirling and turning and he got to see every inch of her.

After her fifth rotation through her odd routine, Crystal stopped. She looked directly at Justin through the mirror, apparently noticing him for the first time. Her expression didn't change, but she held his gaze for several seconds before placing the tray on a bench and stepping out of her platforms. Without a word, Crystal tucked the tray under her arm. She walked past him, her head tilted down, moving too quickly to be stopped. As she passed, Justin caught the scent of something floral. He glanced down at the gold anklet dangling around her ankle bone.

Justin stood in the empty gym for a moment after she left. He set the dumbbells back on the rack with a soft clang.

Somewhere in the depths of his mind, the memory of Chet and Bryce percolated up. He recalled what they had said about Jersey Shore girls who were easy lays. He was embarrassed for himself.



Justin lay on his hotel room bed, cell phone in hand, scrolling through old texts from Dennis. He still hadn't responded. Just had sent a number of text, telling him not to be embarrassed by him being in Atlantic City just when he decided to visit family, but to reply. He even sent texts explaining how he would

stick around for a few weeks and work in the hotel restaurant until he got back. Nothing. It wasn't like Dennis to get so easily flustered.

The window across the courtyard glowed yellow with lamplight. Justing reached to pull his curtains just a bit so he could look. He had been waiting for this.

Crystal stood at her window. The outfit was a uniform. A black satin bodysuit cut high on her hips, with a white cotton tail attached at the back. A stiff white collar circled her neck. Sheer black stockings covered her legs. A headband with black rabbit ears sat in her dark hair. White cuffs encircled her wrists. Black patent heels raised her height.

She placed an imaginary tray on an invisible table in a weird squat, not bending over, but just bending at the knees. It looked like she was trying to get it right. Her body pivoted smoothly, the heels steady on the ground. She turned toward the window, her mouth curving into the same practiced smile Justin had seen in the gym. She held the expression for several seconds before her face went blank again.

Justin watched as she reset — shoulders back, head tilted, hands positioned precisely in front of her. She repeated the sequence. Place, turn, present, smile. The movements were more economical this time. She did it again. Then again. She was getting better at it.

His phone buzzed with a message: “How's Dennis?” It wasn't from his friend. It was from his mom. He sighed. Justin glanced at Crystal's window, then typed back: “Fine.” He continued watching as she completed another rotation, the white tail shifting slightly with the movement.

Justin stood at his window, nose pressed to the glass. Crystal repeated her routine again — squat, place, turn, present, smile. It was the same movements followed by the same facial expression, executed with the precision of someone rehearsing a role. Justin watched as she completed the sequence a fifth time, then a sixth.

Crystal turned toward a different angle of her room, presenting to an imaginary table positioned more to the left than before. As she pivoted, her gaze swept past her window and locked onto Justin's. He had let his little slit open up wider, without realizing it, exposing his face. Both of her hands froze in mid-air, the imaginary tray suspended. Her eyes widened, the practiced warmth vanishing from her face.

She lunged for the curtain, fingers fiercely grasping the fabric. It slid shut with a flourish. In that half-second before the fabric fell, Justin saw an expression of panic and humiliation. Now he felt like an absolute ass.



Justin stood outside Nicole's suite on the third floor. He checked his appearance in the elevator mirror — jeans, t-shirt, hair still damp from his shower. He knocked.

Nicole opened the door, already dressed in a navy pantsuit. Her hair was pulled into its usual tight bun. She looked him up and down once.

"I need to talk to Crystal," Justin said. "I wanted to apologize."

Nicole stepped aside, gesturing toward the living room. "She told me about it. Come in."

The suite was larger than his room, with a sofa and two armchairs arranged around a coffee table. Nicole walked to a connecting door and knocked twice.

"Crystal, honey, come out here a minute." Her voice was calm but carried authority. She returned to the sofa, sitting with perfect posture.

He felt like an absolute idiot. He hadn't realized that the waitresses of the club were dressed in bunny girl outfits. He had no idea. It wasn't until he bothered to look during his last shift that he noticed all the girls who worked there were dressed like that. He thought he was just watching some bizarre cosplay or something when he was spying on Crystal. No, she was just doing her job, and practicing to do it well. He could respect that.

What he could not respect was himself for ogling her on three different occasions. Each time, she had to stop doing what she was doing and run off.

Justin remained standing near the doorjamb. From the connecting room, he heard the sound of a drawer closing. Then footsteps.

Crystal emerged. She wore dark-wash jeans that fit like they'd been tailored to her body, with a white bandeau top exposing her midriff and the curve of her chest. Wedge sandals added three inches to her height. Her hair was teased out, falling around her shoulders. Makeup was applied evenly — foundation, eyeliner, mascara, nude gloss on her lips. Gold hoops hung from her ears, a thin chain with a small charm rested against her collarbone.

She looked at Justin, then at Nicole, then back at Justin. She stood uneasily, weight shifting between her feet.

"I wanted to apologize," Justin said. "Last night. This morning. I shouldn't have been staring."

Crystal's expression didn't change. She glanced at Nicole briefly.

"It's rude," Nicole said, though her tone remained neutral. "Crystal has privacy concerns."

"Yes, I understand." Justin nodded. "It won't happen again."

Crystal looked at the floor, then toward the exit. "I have to get ready for my shift." Her voice was higher than Justin expected, softer.

"Of course." Justin stepped back toward the door. "Sorry to bother you."



Crystal returned to the connecting room without another word. Justin walked out into the hallway, hearing the door click shut behind him.

Justin walked back to the elevator, down the the other wing, down the hallway to his room and sat on his bed. The image of Crystal in the doorway remained — how the light from the window caught the chain around her neck, how her eyes moved quickly between him and Nicole, then to the floor. In the daylight and at close range, she was beautiful. The kind of beauty that seemed natural even though Justin knew it required time, products, technique.

Later that evening, as he carried plates from the kitchen to the dining room, he saw Crystal again. She moved through the lounge in her uniform, the rabbit ears standing out against the shining liquor bottles behind the bar. She set drinks on tables with the same precision he'd witnessed her practice.

Justin watched from the connecting doorway of the restaurant. It wasn't one thing. It was everything. The way she held her shoulders, slightly back, sticking her chest out. The way her hands rested on her hips when listening to an order. The tilt of her head when a customer spoke, slightly to the left.

When their shifts ended, Justin followed the hallway toward the elevator. Crystal walked ahead of him, far enough that she didn't seem to know he was behind her. He watched her walk — the movement of her hips, the specific placement of each foot in the heels. She was so smooth, like she had been practicing this for months.

The elevator doors opened. They entered together, standing on opposite sides.

"You work in the lounge?" Justin asked.

"Sometimes." Crystal kept her eyes on the floor indicator.

"How's the pay?"

"Better than bussing tables." The doors opened on the third floor. She stepped out first and moved toward her room without looking back.

He glanced down the hallway at her disappearing back. Sticking out his foot to block the door from closing, giving him extra time. There was something in the line of her jaw under the makeup, something in the turn of her shoulder, something familiar that he couldn't place.



The next afternoon, Nicole found Justin refolding napkins in the empty restaurant. She placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Crystal doesn't have many people her age here. It would be good for her to get out."

"I'm not sure she wants me to get much closer to her," Justin said, stacking the clean napkins.

"She's shy. Walk on the boardwalk. Get some saltwater air." Nicole's tone left no room for negotiation. "You both need it. She'll meet you in the lobby at two tomorrow. Wear something presentable."

At two o'clock the next afternoon, Justin waited in the lobby. Crystal emerged from the elevator wearing the same tight jeans and a pink halter top, her wedge sandals tapping against the marble floor. She didn't make eye contact.

"Ready?" Justin asked.

Crystal nodded toward the glass doors. "The boardwalk's this way."

They walked in silence for the first ten minutes, Justin matching her pace. Her hips moved in rhythm with her stride, the wedges tapping slightly on the wooden planks.

"The funnel cake stand is good," Crystal said suddenly, pointing with her chin. "The pizza by the slice place makes the sauce too sweet."

"You've tried them all?"

"I live here." She stopped at a railing overlooking the beach. "What do you do?"

"I was starting community college in the fall. I live in Philadelphia. Well, I used to." Justin leaned against the railing. "Now Florida, I guess."

Crystal turned to face him, wiping something from the corner of her mouth. "Florida sucks."

"Never been."

"It does." She adjusted the strap on her sandal. "The sun is brutal."

Atlantic City was not like Florida much at all. Despite there being a beach and an ocean, Atlantic city was more grey, more colorless. The buildings were more weathered and utilitarian, not like he imagined Florida was. There they had bright white buildings and neon art deco in the bright sun with green palm trees.

The wind was cold, a bracing sensation. The sun was dimmer, like it was farther away, the waves harsher. Even the seagulls seemed mean. Still, it was better than Philly this time of year.

They continued walking, passing souvenir shops and arcades. When they reached the pier, Crystal stopped. Justin stood beside her, hands in his pockets.

"I haven't eaten," Crystal said. She was walking to a food stand.

"What looks good?" Justin asked, scanning the menu board.

She leaned over the counter to talk to the guy naming the food. "Cheesesteak. Whiz wit."



Justin stood still. That was a local term. A local way to order a cheesesteak.

“Whiz *what?*” the guy behind the counter said.

“With cheese whiz,” Crystal explained.

Justin watched her mouth move as she talked, the shape of her jaw under the foundation, the way her brow furrowed slightly when concentrating. The recognition assembled itself piece by piece, then all at once.

The blown-out hair, the strapless top, the wedge sandals, the coral nails, the gold hoops — all of it was a costume. He recognized the structure of his chin, the familiar mannerisms he hadn't seen in years.

He looked at her across the table, his sandwich frozen halfway to his mouth. The name clicked into place.

“Hey,” Justin said, his voice lower than before. “Dennis.”

Crystal's sandwich flopped onto her paper wrap. Her eyes widened as she stared at him, recognition dawning in her expression before she could hide it. She looked down at her lap, then back up at Justin.

Dennis pushed his untouched cheesesteak away from him. “Don't,” he said quietly. “Not here.”

They walked back towards the hotel in silence, avoiding each other's gaze. The parking area was deserted, overlooking another parking lot and a distant bridge over a river. They sat down on a curb stop.

They sat in silence for a moment. Dennis opened the tiny gold clutch he'd been carrying and pulled out a cigarette and a lighter. His fingers moved with practiced ease around the small lipstick tubes and compact inside. He lit the cigarette with a flick of his thumb, the flame trembling slightly.

He took a long drag and looked out at the river. Justin watched Dennis's hand holding the cigarette. It trembled, just slightly, between drags.

“I knew this was a bad idea,” Dennis said, his voice changed somehow, lower than Crystal's but not quite Dennis's. “She told me no one from before would recognize me.”

“How long?” Justin asked.

Dennis turned to look at him, smoke curling around his face. “Almost a year now.” He took another drag from the cigarette. “Nicole helped me.”

Dennis took another drag from his cigarette, smoke curling from his nostrils. He flicked ash onto the concrete.

“After I moved here, it was boring. Hotel was dead, Nicole was always working, I didn't know anyone.” He adjusted the strap of his top, a nervous gesture Justin had never seen him make before. “Met some kids. Local guys. They had this thing going on along the boardwalk. Pickpocketing.”

“Pickpocketing?” Justin repeated, watching Dennis's hands.

"I was just a lookout. Not my fault if tourists can't keep track of their wallets." Dennis crushed the cigarette with his heel. "One day, we're on our way uptown when cops pull us over. Find a bunch of stolen shit in the trunk. I took the blame for the whole thing. Said it was mine."

"Because you were eighteen?"

"Because I was stupid." Dennis reached into his clutch for another cigarette. "Thought I'd get a fine, community service. Nothing serious."

"How did *this* happen, though?" Justing asked, gesturing to his feminized friend.

"I'm getting there, asshole." Dennis paused with the cigarette halfway to his lips. "When Nicole came to get me, she was dead to me. I'd never seen her like that. Not yelling. Just cold, you know? Like she was calculating to the decimal how much I'd disappointed her." He lit the new cigarette, the lighter flame steady this time. "Took my phone. Grounded me to the hotel. But worse — she said I needed to learn consequences. That I clearly didn't understand how the world worked."

Dennis took a final drag from that cigarette, flicking it away. He watched the ember bounce off the asphalt.

"The guys I took the fall for? They weren't exactly grateful." He smoothed a wrinkle in his jeans. "Got worried I'd talk, I guess. Next thing I know, there's jewelry from the casino showing up in my locker at work."

"They framed you?"

"With witnesses and everything." Dennis's hand moved to his face, hovering near his cheekbone before dropping back to his lap. "Cops weren't happy to see me again. This time, I actually got charged."

"Whoa? no shit?" Justin said, genuinely shocked. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want anyone to know that!"

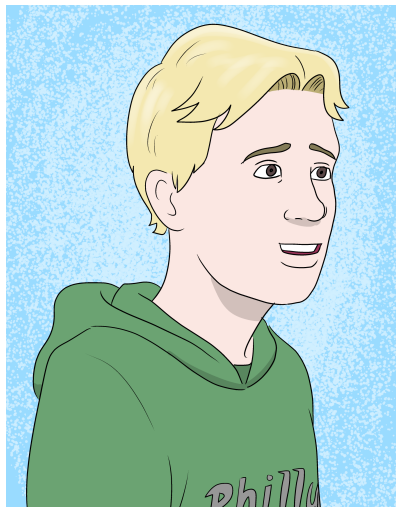
"Wow," Justin repeated. "But they didn't find you guilty, did they?"

"They didn't? Well, then the three years I was sentenced to the Juvenile facility in Cape May was some kind of mirage I guess." Dennis stared out the at the sky.

"Three years? But it's... It hasn't been three years."

"I got out after three weeks." He paused. "Medical exemption."

"Lucky."





“No, not really. After a couple of weeks, I got into it with three guys. Or they got into it with me. Woke up in a hospital. The medical exemption was my busted face. Fractured orbital bones. Cheekbone. Nose, obviously.” Dennis rubbed his nose unconsciously. “The reconstruction took two surgeries.” He reached into his clutch for another cigarette, then stopped, his hand closing around the lighter instead. “They said to send me back was a danger to my safety. I just finished my probation.”

“Jesus Christ,” Justin said, taking a closer look at his friend’s face to see the damage. There wasn’t anything to see, really. “Does it still hurt?”

“No,” Dennis replied. “Not in the way you’re thinking, at least.”

“Sucks, dude.”

“After I got out of surgery, Nicole said I couldn’t be Dennis anymore.”

“What?”

“She said she thought I was being targeted. Like the guys who busted my face were working with the guys who framed me. They wanted me to keep quiet, or just get rid of me. She said that she didn’t want thugs coming around, ready to do even worse. She said she thought the mob might be involved.”

“Seriously?”

“I can’t really say she’s wrong. I don’t think the guys in that pickpocketing gang were that connected, but the again, who the fuck knows?” Dennis held his cigarette in between two very long coffin-shaped fingernails.

“So it was either go home, wherever that was, and hope no one followed me, or pretend to be someone they’d never suspect. And Crystal was born.”

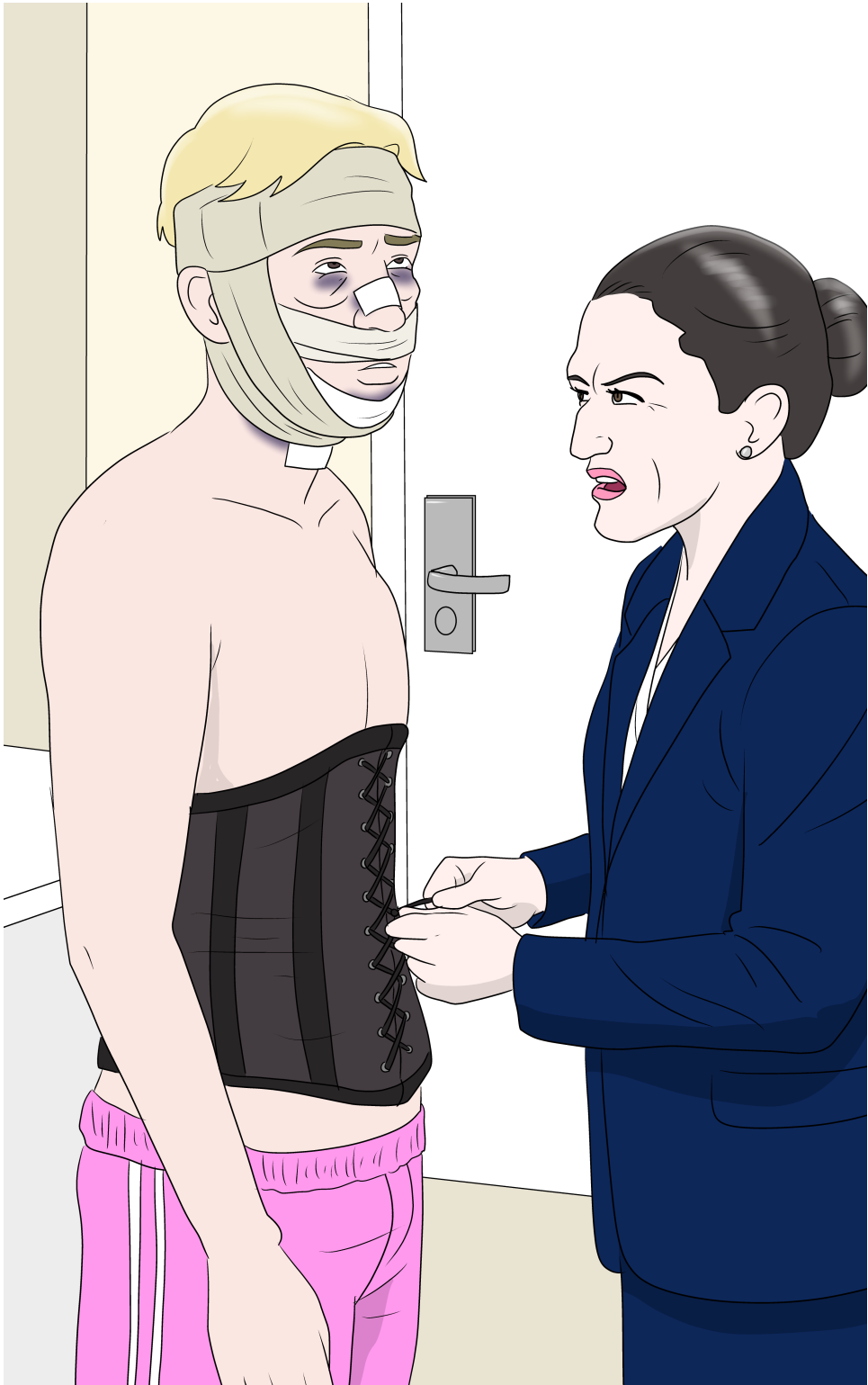
“Wow. That’s a lot.”

“Then I had a third surgery, a reconstruction that was done by some plastic surgeon Nicole knew from the casino.” Dennis stared through the garage to the other side, where some pigeons were picking at a discarded fast food bag. “Pretty good guy, apparently. But when the bandages came off...”

He paused, touching his cheekbone. “The cheekbones were higher. Softer than before. My nose came out smaller, straighter. The whole face just... changed.” Dennis turned to face Justin, the afternoon light catching his jawline. “I looked in the mirror and didn’t know who was looking back. It wasn’t Dennis. And it wasn’t anyone I knew.”

“Recovery meant weeks in bed.” Dennis’s voice carried across the empty parking lot. “My body started changing too. Weight in my hips, chest got... softer.” He gestured vaguely at his chest with one hand. “Nicole’s doctor said it was a hormonal response to trauma and the medication. Called it normal.”

He kicked at a loose rock with his wedge sandal. “By the time I could get out of bed, none of my old clothes fit. Nothing looked right.”



“Nicole bought support garments for recovery.” Dennis stared down at the concrete. “What she actually bought were corsets.”

Justin turned in his seat to look at him. “Like what?”

“Real ones. Boned. With laces.” Dennis adjusted his top again, his fingers moving to his lower ribs as if checking for something that wasn’t there. “She said they were medical. Better posture while my body healed. My back was a wreck after being in bed for so long.”

“You wore them?”

“All the time. At first just to sleep, then all day.” Dennis’s hand moved from his ribs to the small of his back. “First time she laced one on me, I could barely breathe. But it fit. That’s what I kept thinking. It actually fit.”

The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the parking lot. Dennis reached into his clutch and pulled out a compact, checking his reflection quickly before snapping it shut.

“She bought other things too. Underwear, stockings. Called them a medical necessity.” Dennis’s voice was flat. “That’s how she framed everything.”

“When did the bunny girl thing start?”

“As soon as I could walk without wobbling.” Dennis kicked at the dashboard with the toe of his wedge sandal. “Nicole said I needed something useful to do. Said the club training would help with posture and balance.”

“This so fucked up, Dennis.” Justin was beyond trying to understand the story. He just was trying to catch up with everything, and failing.

“Dinner rush coming up, I gotta start getting ready for my shift.” Justin got up quickly, but Dennis didn’t he held out his delicate, jeweled hand with shiny long fingernails for assistance. A moment of hesitation was Justin still being unsure what to do and how to react. He pulled Dennis up, and he wobbled on his heels for a moment before walking toward the hotel’s parking entrance with the same measured pace Justin had seen him use in the gym.

Justin was reluctant to ask his most obvious question, but he had to. “Um... I don’t wanna ask too many questions but... The boobs?”

“Nicole gave me these supplements. She said it would help with the disguise. That was six months ago. I started growing tits a month ago, they’re supposed to get bigger, too.”

“Why did you take them?”

“You ever spend a month in bed healing up from guys kicking your face in? If it came with pain killers, I was gonna take whatever I was told to take.”

“Fair,” Justin said.

"Then I noticed things changing. Not just my chest. My voice started dropping differently. My skin got softer." They got to the elevator. "Nicole said it was just part of recovery. Normal healing process."

"But Nicole was right. No one has ever asked about me." Dennis's voice remained flat, without bitterness. "People looking for Dennis Kowalski would be looking for a boy. Not Crystal."

The elevator dinged, the doors opened. Smoothing his pants with practiced movements before stepping with Justin through the open door.

"The worst part?" Dennis asked, one hand on the car roof. "It worked. No one bothered me. Not once. I became invisible to exactly the people I didn't want to see me anymore."

Dennis took a final drag from his cigarette, his knuckles white around the filter. He stubbed it out on the elevator floor, then kicked it into the gap.

"That's the short version." His voice was flat as he turned to face Justin. "I gotta go home and not think about this. I'm done talking for now."

"What happens now?" Justin asked.

"We see what happens." Dennis straightened up, flipping his hair over one shoulder. "Same as always."

"It's good to see you."

"I guess you know why didn't reply to your texts."

"It's a pretty good excuse, so I'll let it pass."

Justin could just make out a grin hiding behind Dennis's turned away face and under his hair. He grabbed another elevator to his floor, his hips moving in the same rhythm Justin had been watching a little too closely.



Justin walked the boardwalk that night, past all the closed stands and tucked-away beach equipment. He took a bench overlooking the ocean, letting the cold wind slap him around. The water appeared gray under the hazy sky. Tourists passed in the shadows, their voices as distant as they had ever been.

Was there anything he could have done? He wasn't sure. Was there anything he could do now? Maybe, but he'd have to work on it. The one plan he had, to run was immediately fraught with the complication that he was already on the run.

He thought about the afternoon with Dennis in the car garage, cigarette smoke curling around the interior, the way his hand had trembled and his voice got weaker the longer he talked. When had he picked up smoking, anyway?

Three hours later, Justin returned to the hotel. The lobby was quiet as he passed through to the restaurant. Everything was closed. Nicole was at the desk, though, even at 1 in the morning. She was reviewing some printouts.

“Justin.” She didn’t look up from her clipboard. “Good thing you’re here. I can’t leave the desk. I need fresh linens delivered to room 617 and housekeeping isn’t answering their phone. End of the sixth-floor corridor.” She slid a key card across the counter. “Just take the cart.”

Justin stood there and looked at it. “Look, I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.... But I’m not comfortable with this.”

Knowing what he knew, knowing that this woman had been behind Dennis’s change into Crystal, he wasn’t sure how to feel. Dennis seemed disgruntled, but not to the degree Justin really thought he should be. He really couldn’t read Dennis’s feelings.

“I know you signed up as kitchen help,” Nicole continued, “but I just need you to do this for me, this one time, okay?”

Justin wheeled the linen cart toward the elevator, the wheels squeaking against the marble floor. The sixth floor hallway was quieter than the third, with thicker carpet that absorbed sound. He stopped outside room 617, key card in hand.

He wasn’t sure where to put them. On the toilet lid? In the sink? The bed? The floor? He opted for the bed. He loaded them off the cart, which was stuffed full of clean white towels and then headed out.

That’s when he realized what he had in his hand. A card key for the entire hotel. He could get into any room. He wheeled the cart to the floor and walked to the room Nicole and Dennis stayed in. Well, technically it was two rooms.

He whisked his card through the reader and the door popped open. The lights were out and he flipped them on. It was like any hotel room, maybe a little more lived in, but just like his room. Then he made his way over to the door to Dennis’s room. He was still working at Paradise, and would be for another hour or so. He opened the door, hit the lights, and when he looked up, he saw the room was overwhelming.

The bed was covered in leopard-print, matching the curtains. A vanity mirror stood against one wall, ringed with bulbs. On the dresser, makeup was arranged with precision — foundations lined up by shade, palettes stacked in rows, brushes standing in cups. At least thirty products, all showing use.

A silver tray held several perfume bottles with labels facing outward. Jewelry boxes, some open, some closed, filled the remaining space.

Four bunny girl uniforms hung on a clothing rack near the wall. Black satin bodysuits, each one pressed flat. White cotton tails fixed at the back. White collars and cuffs clipped beside them. Rabbit ear headbands hung from each

hanger. Nothing was tossed over a chair or left half-done. Everything had been dry-cleaned and hung with care.

He stepped closer, then stopped.

“Jesus,” he said under his breath.

Along the wall was a full shoe rack. Every pair was heels. Some were low, most here at least three inches, narrow and impractical for moving around. Others were platforms, five inches at least. There were at least fifteen pairs. None looked new. The soles were marked. The straps had small creases. The heels had been used.

Justin looked back toward the vanity.

Framed photos were tucked into the mirror frame. Crystal with other girls from the hotel, all of them tan, all of them laughing. Crystal in the bunny uniform at what looked like a work event, shoulders back, smile fixed. Crystal on the boardwalk in a tiny sundress, sunglasses on, caught mid-laugh.

He leaned in closer to the last photo.

The girl in the picture had her head tilted back slightly. Her hair was shiny. Her nails were visible around the sunglasses. The dress was short. The smile looked real and carefree.

Justin reached for the edge of the frame, then pulled his hand back and turned toward the door.

On the wall beside the vanity, Justin noticed a whiteboard.

The handwriting was neat and rounded.

Monday — tray work, posture, 9am-12pm.

Tuesday — diction, voice, 2pm-5pm.

Wednesday — figure training, 9am-5pm

Thursday — flirting practice, 10am-3pm

Friday — giggling practice, 11am-1 pm

Saturday — gym, 10am-11am

Sunday — Jersey Shore binge night

He stood in the middle of the room and read it twice.

The room felt arranged around the schedule. The uniforms on the rack. The heels lined along the wall. The photos tucked into the mirror. Nothing looked accidental. Nothing looked temporary.

The door opened behind him. Justin turned.

Dennis came in carrying a small shopping bag in one hand and the gold clutch in the other. He wore a cropped denim jacket over a tiny floral sundress that ended at mid-thigh. Strappy heeled sandals raised him a few inches. His hair

was pulled high into a ponytail. His makeup was done: smooth foundation, dark liner, mascara, gloss.

He moved through the doorway without looking down at his feet. The heels did not slow him.

Then he saw Justin.

He stopped completely.

The shopping bag lowered slowly to his side.

Justin said nothing.

Dennis looked at him, then at the whiteboard, then at the clothing rack, then at the mirror where the framed photos were tucked into the edge. His face changed in small increments. He went from surprise to upset in the space of a bout 10 seconds.

"I thought you were working," Justin said.

"Got the night off," Dennis explained. "You broke in?"

Justin looked toward the chair by the door. "Nicole gave me the housekeeping key card to do an errand."

Dennis's fingers tightened around the handles of the shopping bag. "And you came here."

Justin did not answer.

Dennis looked at him again, reading his face with more care now. The whiteboard. The uniforms. The shoes. The photos. He had seen it all.

"It's a bit more than I thought," Justin said. "I mean... It looks like..."

Dennis closed the door quietly behind him.

Then he crossed the room, set the shopping bag beside the bed, and sat on the edge of the leopard-print bedspread.

"Okay," Dennis said. "Sit down. There's more to the story, obviously."

Justin remained standing just inside the doorway.

Dennis folded his hands in his lap, adjusting the hem of his sundress. "My mom told me about Nicole once. Before I moved here."

Justin stayed silent, unwilling to interrupt in any way.

"She said Nicole doesn't think much of men." Dennis looked down at his hands. "Just so you know, she said. I didn't understand what that meant then."

He stood up and walked to the dresser, opening a drawer and closing it again without taking anything out.

"It started small." Dennis moved to the closet, sliding open the door. "A bag of things taken to donation. A drawer cleared out."

Justin watched him from across the room.



"You can't wear that while you're recovering," Dennis said, mimicking Nicole's tone perfectly. "It'll irritate the incision." He turned to face Justin again. "Those jeans don't fit you anymore. We'll get you something comfortable."

He closed the closet door and leaned against it.

"I was on medication. I could barely get to the bathroom by myself." Dennis hugged his arms around his chest. "Nicole would bring me things to wear. Softer. More fitted. Feminine cuts."

He walked back to the bed but didn't sit.

"Then one day I went to find my basketball jersey. The one from sophomore year. It can't be replaced." Dennis's voice remained flat. "It was gone."

He looked at Justin directly.

"I asked Nicole where it was. She said I'd outgrown it." Dennis smoothed his sundress over his hips. "She meant physically, I think. But I knew she meant in every way."

Dennis moved to the closet and opened the door again, though he didn't look inside.

"Then one day I came back from a doctor's appointment. The closet was cleaned out." Dennis ran his hand along the doorframe. "All my clothes were gone. The whole closet. Replaced. Dresses on one side. Skirts on the other. Tops folded on the shelf."

He closed the closet and moved to the dresser, pulling open a drawer.

"Lingerie. Bras. Panties. Dancers gaffs." Dennis pushed the drawer shut with his hip. "It was all in my size."

Justin remained by the door.

"She didn't discuss it. She just did it." Dennis walked to the vanity and picked up a nail file, setting it back down without using it. "At first, I thought maybe she was just being, you know, thorough. But then I remembered what my mom had told me about her."

Dennis looked at Justin in the eye. "I'm not sure she's doing this for my well-being," he said.

"So? Go. Leave. We'll get out of here together."

"Well, yeah. See, I told her that I thought she was going too far and I needed to leave. Then she reminded me that I had nowhere to go. Neither of my parents have room for me in their lives anymore. And even if I tried to go to them, I look like... This."

"So you gotta make some explanations. No big. They love you. They get you. They know you'd never want this."

"That the thing. She's got all the evidence. Receipts, pics, medical records. Everything. And she made sure I signed and paid for everything."

“What?”

“She opened a credit card in my name, and pays it off. But every single transaction has had my name on it. I bet you the records show me buying the corset I’m wearing. These shoes I’m wearing. These Hello Kitty panties...”

“You’re wearing Hello Kitty panties?”

He waited a moment before answering that. “They were clean.” He straightened up. “Anyway, she has all the records in my name. Like I asked for all this.”

“That sounds a lot like she set this all up.”

“I don’t know. Does she hate men *that* much? But I’d believe anything.” Dennis took a deep breath. “What I do know is that she’s got all this evidence and if I ever go back to my folks and tell them that I didn’t want to grow boobs and prance around in high heels, she’s got all this evidence that says that I did.”

“Has she threatened to use it?”

“She doesn’t have to.” Dennis tossed his hair back. “Alls he says is that she’s safe-keeping my records for me, like it’s a good thing. I need to get her laptop and delete those files. That’s the only thing that’s really keeping me here.”

“Everything is on there?”

“Gotta be.” He looked at his long glossy fingernails, with a sour look on his reconstructed face. “If we can delete the files, the leverage is gone.”

“We,” Justin said, questioning his use of the plural.

Dennis got closer to him. “Will you help?”

The lock clicked in the hallway. The sound was sharp, metallic.

Dennis moved before Justin registered the noise. Three steps across the room, grabbing Justin’s arm. He pushed Justin toward the closet, sliding the door shut behind him.

Justin stood in darkness among the hanging uniforms. The dry-cleaned satin pressed against his face. The smell of something floral filled the small space. Through the slats of the closet door, he could see Dennis adjusting the bedspread, composing himself.

The hotel room door opened. Nicole’s voice carried into the closet.

Through the slats, Justin watched Nicole enter the room.

“How was the night off, sweetheart?” Nicole’s voice carried easily, warm but businesslike. “At least one of us got the night off. My feet are killing me.”

“Did some shopping. It was fine.” Dennis’s voice came from two feet away, completely steady. “I’m probably going to go to sleep early.”

“Good.” Nicole crossed to the window, adjusting a curtain. “The weekend crowd will be heavy. Maria wants you focused and rested.”

"I've been practicing," Dennis said. "Every day."

"I know you have. Is Justin here? Have you seen him?"

"No," Dennis replied. "I haven't seen him."

"Huh. Funny. The cart I gave him to do my errand is just sitting outside at the end of the hall." Justin could feel her walking right up to the closet and saw her eyes try to look through the same slat he was looking through. "There's no reason to hide from me. Unless you're planning something."

"We're not," Dennis said, a bit too defensively.

"Not like... A date?" Nicole said. "I see the way he looks at you. Have you told him yet?"

"That I'm Dennis? No."

"Good. Let him get to know you. Let him understand the decision you made. Then maybe he'll understand."

"That's the plan," Dennis replied.

"Don't take too long, though. He's bound to get suspicious the longer it goes on. I don't know how long I can keep pretending."

"I trust him."

"Well," Nicole said, as she gave the closet another deliberative look. "I'll be wrapping up at the desk. If you're asleep by the time I get back, I'll be careful not to wake you."

Nicole's footsteps receded across the carpet. The outer door clicked shut. Silence.

The closet door slid open.

Justin stepped out, blinking against the light.

"The office is empty between three and four," Dennis said, his back still to Justin. "She has meetings in the casino every day to get ready for the night shift."

Justin nodded, though Dennis couldn't see him.

"If you're going to help," Dennis continued, turning to face him, "that's when you do it. She keeps it locked up in her office otherwise."

Justin backed toward the door. "Okay. I'll help."

"Justin," Dennis said as Justin's hand touched the doorknob.

Justin stopped.

"Thank you."

Justin left the room without responding. He walked down the hallway pushing the cart to the service elevator, unsure if he should be worried or not.



The next morning Justin sat on the boardwalk with a paper cup of hot chocolate cooling in his hand. In the distance, Dennis walked from the hotel and turned towards him.

He wore high-waisted white shorts, tight across the curve of his hips, and a hot pink crop top with a deep V-neck. Clear platform heels added four inches. A tiny white crossbody bag rested against his side. His hair was down and teased. His makeup was full: foundation, bronzer, heavy liner, pink gloss.

He walked without looking at his feet. Not once. Justin had no idea how he was doing it. The heels made a hard sound against the boardwalk, but his body had already learned the rhythm of walking in insanely high heels.

Justin watched him as he turned the corner.

Hopping to his feet, he started to walk alongside Dennis as he passed by. His old friend looked over his shoulder. He did not look surprised.

“You following me now?” Dennis asked.

“You knew I was coming.”

Dennis walked to the doorway of the local market and stopped. “If you’re going to hover, carry something.” He took the hand basket that was at the doorway and pressed it into Justin’s hands.

Inside, the market was narrow and cold, with produce stacked near the front and the deli counter along the back wall.

“You shop here a lot?” Justin asked.

“I shop where Nicole sends me.”

“That sounds like a yes.”

Dennis stopped at the produce section. He chose tomatoes, then a small bag of greens. He examined each item without wasting motion.

Justin watched the clear platforms move over the tile floor. They moved to the deli counter.

Justin stood beside him. “Does she lock the laptop up?”

Dennis’s face did not change.

The deli worker came over. “What can I get you, hon?”

Dennis smiled. “Half pound turkey, thin. And a quarter pound provolone.”

“Sure thing.”

When the worker turned away, Dennis said quietly, “Yes.”

“At night?”



“In her office, like I said. The door has a deadbolt. It needs a key from the outside.”

“You tested it?”

Dennis looked at him. “Of course I tested it.”

The worker handed over the packages. Dennis accepted them with a smile. “Thanks.”

They moved to the next aisle.

Justin lowered his voice. “And what makes you think I can get in when you couldn’t?”

“You can’t. Not without taking a huge gouge out of the door, at least. We want to do this and not leave any traces. The whole idea is that you get access to it while she’s busy.”

“You could do that, too.”

Dennis held up his fingers, with inch-long nails. “I can barely operate my phone let alone type a password.”

“You want me to retrieve the laptop.”

“I want the files deleted. She’d know something was up the second she couldn’t find her computer. If we just delete the files, she’ll not know for a while, at least. We can disappear on our own schedule.”

They moved toward checkout. Dennis stopped before the line and adjusted the crossbody bag against his hip. Justin glanced down again at the clear platforms.

“Do you have to wear those?”

Dennis followed his gaze. “The heels?”

“Yeah. Is that a requirement?”

Dennis looked down at them, then back up. “Nicole says heels at all times outside the room. It helps sell the disguise. I stopped arguing about it.”

He said it without heat, like it was settled law.

Justin nodded. Then he asked, “And the underwear?”

Dennis gave him a look. “What?”

“I don’t know. I’m asking.”

“You’re asking about my underwear in a market.”

“Forget it.”

Dennis did not move for a second. Then he lifted down the hem of his miniskirt slightly, just enough to show the waistband: pale pink satin, high-cut, with a small lace trim.

“Frilly panties and matching bras,” he said flatly. “Nicole’s standards. Non-negotiable.”

Justin looked at the waistband and then looked away.

“Now you know,” Dennis said.

They stepped into the checkout line. The cashier scanned the produce, then the deli packages, then the nail polish remover.

“Big day?” the cashier asked.

Dennis opened the tiny crossbody bag and took out a card. “Always.”

“You working tonight, hon?”

“Unfortunately.”

The cashier smiled. “You’ll survive.”

“We’ll see.” Dennis gave a small laugh and tapped the card.

Justin stood beside him, taking it all in. When they were back outside, Justin had to speak the obvious.

“You’re comfortable as a girl.”

“Huh?”

“Me, I’d be out of my mind, people always looking at me, thinking I’m a girl.” Justin was sure to walk a little farther away, so as to not catch a stray. “You don’t seem to worry about it.”

“First lesson of pretending to be a girl is to not pretend to be a girl,” Dennis said, without pause. “When I had to first go out in a skirt and heels, I was sure everyone could spot me. But as time went on, the more relaxed I got, the less people gave me that *kind* of look.”

“What kind of look?”

“The look people give you when they’re not sure what they’re looking at.”

“Well, uh, sorry to tell you. People still look.”

“Of course they do! I’m in a miniskirt, clear platform pumps with bumped hair and orange skin. People are going to look. You’d worry if they weren’t!”

The boardwalk was bright and busy. Dennis shifted the shopping bag to one hand and stopped walking.

Justin stopped too.



Dennis turned toward him.

“What?” Justin asked.

Dennis stepped in and hugged him.

It was not casual. His arms went around Justin's neck. His face pressed against Justin's shoulder. Justin felt the underwire of the bra through the thin crop top, the softness of his chest, the pressure of his body held close. The perfume was floral and sweet.

“I'm really fucked up,” Dennis mumbled into Justin's shoulder.

Justin raised his arms and hugged him back.

“We can make it right again, bud.”

They stood there on the boardwalk for a moment, with people moving around them.

Then Dennis let go, adjusted the strap of the crossbody bag, and started walking back toward the hotel. Justin walked beside him, quiet.



The pool area was mostly empty. Justin arrived first, taking a lounge near the shallow end. He arranged his towel, lay back, and waited.

The figuring was that it was best to conduct their business out in the open. They didn't want to look suspicious. Nicole couldn't know what they were planning. They had agreed they would get the files they needed, but Justin and Dennis really hadn't planned on what to do after that.

Dennis came through the gate at 11:03.

He wore a white string bikini with a small gold ring at the center of the top. Oversized sunglasses covered half his face. His hair was in a high bun with a few pieces pulled loose around his neck. He carried a tote bag in one hand, walking in wedge sandals that put his feet at a 45 degree angle.

Dennis moved through the pool area with the specific self-consciousness of someone who knows they look good and is still nervous about it. The bikini was small. The spray tan was deep and even. Objectively, Crystal was the best-looking person at the pool. He knew this, and it did not entirely help.

He set up on the lounge next to Justin, spreading his towel quickly. Justin didn't dare say a word. The best looking girl in the entire hotel had just sat next to him in a skimpy bikini and he alone knew it was his best pal. Any word could destroy a friendship in this moment. They settled into silence. The pool made it easier. The sun on their skin, the sound of water lapping against the tiles.

A woman on a lounge two down shifted in her seat. She was somewhere in her fifties, with the look of someone who summers in AC every year.

“Getting some sun before the crowds roll in,” the woman said.

“Something like that,” Dennis replied, not looking at her.

“Hotel’s been quiet this week.” The woman adjusted her sunglasses. “You two staying long?”

“Just the summer,” Justin said.

“Lovely.” The woman took a sip from a plastic cup. “I’m Carol. Been coming here for years. Wonderful hospitality.”

“That’s nice,” Dennis said, his voice carefully neutral.

Carol leaned forward slightly. “You know, honey, you look so familiar. Did you go to St. Catherine’s?”

Dennis went still behind his sunglasses. His hand, holding the sunscreen bottle, stopped moving halfway to his leg. St. Catherine’s was a prep school in Philly. He had, indeed, gone to St. Catherines.

“No,” Dennis said, his voice lower now. “I didn’t.”

“Could have sworn I knew you.” Carol smiled, unconcerned. “I used to teach there, you know. Never forget a face.”

Justin watched Dennis’s knuckles tighten slightly around the sunscreen bottle.

“Oh moy gaawd, I get that a sooo much,” Dennis said, his voice packed full of Jersey Shore accent. “But I’m just a Joisey goil.”

“Oh, I see.”

“You two are together? That’s so sweet. Are your parents here?”

“Oim 21,” Dennis said in his ridiculous new speech pattern. “Moy parents are estranged.”

“That’s too bad. Parents should put aside their differences for the sake of the children. How did you two meet, then?”

“We both woik here at the hotel,” Dennis explained, “It was love at foist sight.” Dennis leaned into Justin like an affectionate girlfriend would.

“That’s nice.”

“Well, it’s noice to meet’ca!” Dennis said, Jersey-style.

“You too. Enjoy the sun.” Carol settled back on her lounge. “It’s supposed to be a hot one.”

Dennis squeezed a small amount of sunscreen onto his palm and began rubbing it into his leg with slow, deliberate movements. Justin lay back on his lounge, closing his eyes against the sun.

“Noice to meeet’cha,” Justin repeated quietly, imitating Dennis’s accent.

“Hey, I just saved our asses. I had to turn on the Jersey there to fool her.” After a moment, he spoke without looking at Justin, rubbing lotion into his arms with anger. “St. Catherines? Seriously? Here?”

“I know. Fuck.”

“Wherever she is staying, we need to keep the fuck away from her. Do you recognize her? Was she teaching any of your classes?”

“I didn’t recognize her at all.”

“Christ, that was close.” He reached for his tote bag, pulling out a small bottle of water and taking a sip. Justin watched his throat as he swallowed.

The pool area remained quiet except for the distant sound of traffic on the boardwalk. Dennis lay back on the lounge, crossing his legs at the ankles.

Their inquisitive pool lounge gave the two of them a second look, and Crystal immediately reached for Justin’s hand as he smiled back at the woman.

Even as the woman lost interest, Crystal didn’t release Justin’s hand immediately.

They sat with their fingers laced together longer than the situation required. Justin became aware of the coral nails against his hand, the gold ring on his index finger, the warmth of his palm. He kept his eyes fixed on the pool water, pretending not to notice.

“So what do you want to do once we delete Nicole’s files?” Justin asked, getting to the point of their meeting. “You want to wait around here, or... Just take off.”

“I should probably leave now, but I don’t have the guts,” Dennis said. “But I think we need to be ready to leave at any time after we dump the files. If my aunt does discover they’ve gone missing, she’s going to suspect us, and we need to be gone. But if we leave right away, she’ll know we did something, and be able to figure it out.”

“Why do we care if she figures it out?”

“The ideal solution is that we dump the files, she doesn’t suspect anything, and then we leave at different time. You go your way, I go mine. She won’t figure it out, and by the time she does, I’ll be able to convince my folks that she did this to me.”

“Got it.”

“So keep your bags packed. Be ready to run out at any time.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that. I already stowed some toiletries in my bag. Free towels.”

Around 3:20, the gate to the pool area opened and a girl from the hotel staff came through. Dark hair in a neat bun, confident walk, a black bikini that left little to the imagination. She carried a towel over one shoulder and scanned the available loungers.

Her eyes landed on Justin immediately. Dennis had gotten up to go get more water, leaving him alone.

The hotel girl pulled a lounge close to his — too close — and sat down without asking. “Hey. I haven’t seen you around before.”

Justin shifted slightly. “I’m helping with dinner service.”

“Nice shirt” The girl said, spying Justin’s Eagles tee. “You from Philly?”

“Yeah.”

“Philly guys are cute,” she said. He laughed, leaning in. “What part?”

Justin could feel Dennis’s gaze behind his sunglasses.

“Northeast,” Justin said.

“And you’re just here for the summer?” The girl placed her hand on Justin’s arm. “That’s perfect.”

Dennis walked up.

Justin felt the sudden shift next to him. Dennis crossed to his lounge and sat on the arm of it, looping his hand through his with the confidence of someone who had nothing to fear.

“Babe,” Dennis said, his voice smooth. “I got us drinks.”

The hotel girl’s smile faltered. He looked from Crystal’s hand on Justin’s arm to Crystal’s face, then back to Justin.

“Oh,” the girl said. “Right. I should probably let you guys...” She gestured vaguely toward them. “Yeah. I’ll see you.”

She stood and gathered her towel, moving quickly toward the other side of the pool.

Dennis did not acknowledge what he just did. Justin did not ask about it.

Justin kept noticing things as the afternoon wore on. The way Crystal shifted in his lounge, lifting slightly to adjust the position of his bikini bottom with subtle fingers. The way he held his drink — thumb extended, other fingers curled precisely around the plastic bottle. The specific ease he had in this space, the pool, the sun, the role of girl-at-the-pool. None of it was performed. It was simply how he was now. The Dennis he knew two years ago was not present in any way he could discern.

When the sun began to dip lower, they gathered their things.

Walking back to the hotel, they moved close together, not quite touching. The pool water had dried on Justin’s skin, leaving a faint salt residue. Dennis still wore his bikini and sandals, carrying his tote over one shoulder.

“You’re actually good at this,” Dennis said, not looking at him.

Justin glanced at him. “At what?”



"Pretending. In front of everyone." He adjusted the tote strap on his shoulder. "You followed my lead."

"You do a good job of pretending to be my girlfriend," Justin replied.

Dennis's tone didn't change. "Doing what I have to do."

Neither of them followed up on it.

In the hotel lobby, Carol was checking out at the front desk. He waved when he saw them.

"Have a lovely evening, you two!" Carol called across the lobby.

"You too!" Dennis replied with that practiced smile. He squeezed Justin's arm briefly as they passed.

Nicole, from her spot at the desk, grinned seeing the exchange and the way Justin didn't flinch when Dennis touched him delicately.

In the elevator, they didn't speak. The doors opened on the third floor. Dennis stopped at his door first.

"I need to go get ready," he said, his hand already going to the handle. "The lounge gets busy on Thursdays."

Justin nodded. "Right."

He hesitated for a moment, his hand still on the door handle. "Thank you for the pool."

"You invited me."

Dennis's mouth tightened slightly. "Still. It was nice to have a friend there. I've been kinda alone for a while."

He got off at his floor and the door closed softly. Justin continued to his own floor, exhaling.

In his room, he sat on the edge of the bed. It was quiet except for the hum of the air conditioning. The late afternoon light slanted through the window, catching dust in the air. Justin sat without moving, without turning on a light or taking off his shoes. He spent a long time not thinking clearly about anything at all.



The private party was loud enough that Justin could feel it through the floor of the service corridor. Nicole was supervising the staff, and he wasn't going to be missed. It wasn't exactly the time or place they had planned on, but it was too good an opportunity to pass by. He texted Dennis: *in*.

*Second door on the right. The handle sticks, just push through it.*

The office was dark and he didn't turn the light on. He found the laptop by the glow of its charging indicator, opened it, and waited for the screen.

*It's not how you described it, he texted. There's like six folders and none of them say what you said.*

He only had to wait ten seconds for Dennis's reply. *Look for something with a date on it.*

Justin looked. He opened folders for twenty minutes, working through supplier contacts and scanned invoices and a renovation project from 2022, and found nothing. Then he heard two staff members stop in the corridor outside and start a conversation about nothing, and he closed the laptop and got out.

He texted Dennis from the stairwell. *There's nothing there.*

*It's there, Dennis replied. I've seen it.*

*Then she moved it. I'm telling you it wasn't there.*



Having failed at an unscheduled attempt to get the files, the two returned to their original plan. They needed to wait for Nicole to have her afternoon meeting and leave her laptop behind.

As soon as she came strutting out of the lobby to head to her meeting, Justin was quickly slipping into the office.

“Forty minutes,” Dennis had reminded him just this morning, meaning that was the window they had.

Justin started moving through the file structure with a focus that looked different from how he usually operated — quieter, more deliberate. Dennis sat in the lobby to protect Justin, either by distracting Nicole if she returned unexpectedly or by alerting Justin of her presence. He sat at the window and kept watch on the corridor.

“Okay,” Justin said to himself, checking his notes. “What’s her password?”

This time, he was a lot more informed. He had the login password and knew the names of the files he was looking for. Dennis had managed to remember a few specific tidbits that would help Justin find the files he was looking for.

Sure enough, a folder three layers deep was labeled “Crystal.” He had found it.

He couldn't open it. He couldn't delete it. He couldn't do anything to it that would have helped. The password that opened the laptop was not the same one to open the folder.

He tried duplicating it. He tried renaming it. He tried copying it to a different drive. Nothing.

He started making up passwords. He guessed at words, names, locations Nicole might use. Nothing. Twenty minutes passed.

“Nicole!” He heard Dennis shout from outside. That was the alert.

Justin closed the laptop and dashed to the office door. Sure enough, Dennis was engaging a very busy Nicole. Justin ducked down and snuck out.

In the elevator on the way back up, Justin hated to break that hopeful look on his best friend's face. “We don't have the folder password.” He saw the hope drain from Dennis's overly-made-up eyes. “So that's it.”

Dennis looked straight ahead at the elevator doors. “Yeah,” he said. “That's it.” He suddenly had an idea. “We could trash the laptop!”

“Let's think about it some more, okay? I don't want to get arrested for destruction of property. I hate cops.”



They didn't talk about it after that, and they didn't talk about not talking about it. They just started spending their days on the Boardwalk, walking mostly, sometimes sitting with food they bought from the window counters, and if Dennis held Justin's arm crossing the street or Justin put his hand on the small of Dennis's back steering him through a crowd, neither of them said anything about it.



Justin was back at his job the next day, cleaning the tables so the patrons didn't have sticky elbows when they enjoyed their watered-down drinks and microwaved entrees.

He barely even heard anything Maria was telling him to do, yet he still followed her instructions. It was like the words weren't making it all the way to his brain. He was faced with a new problem. He had to find a way to get Dennis out of Atlantic City, and convince him it was going to be okay, even if his aunt had evidence against him. It might not be easy for him, but it could be done.

Justin ran through the ways he was going to get Dennis out of his funk. To try and get his best friend to crack a smile. He hadn't taken things very well. With little hope of deleting the files, he had just grown quiet.

He was whisking the plates into his plastic tray next to where the restaurant met the gentleman's club when he heard a very familiar giggle. He poked his head around the corner for the doorway, and saw Dennis there, perched on a



stool, legs crossed, in his bunny girl outfit.

Two men were seated two stools from Dennis. Well-dressed, fifties, and they looked at Dennis the way a certain kind of man looks at certain kinds of women.

Dennis didn't appear to do anything deliberate. He smiled when one of them said something, laughed at a moment that earned it, asked a question back with his head tilted slightly. Within ten minutes there were two drinks in front of him that he hadn't ordered, and one of the men was telling Dennis he was the most beautiful girl he'd seen all summer.

"Oh, *stop* it," Dennis said, in a way that didn't mean stop it.

The man said it again, with more detail this time, and Dennis took it in without deflecting, said 'thank you' in the most genuine way, and asked where they were from.

Justin watched all of this. In between cleaning tables, he watched Dennis work through another twenty minutes of conversation with the two men, easy and unhurried, and he drank the drinks that had appeared in front of him. With a glance, Dennis looked over at Justin. Justin looked back.

Dennis didn't say anything. There wasn't anything obvious to say.



Justin walked back through the hotel lobby and into the corridor that ran behind the front desk, grumbling a bit. Here he was all worried about Dennis and he was just flirting with some old guys. He had no idea what was going through Dennis's mind, but he sure didn't seem to be moping around anymore.

As he walked near the reception desk, Nicole was there with a staff member Justin didn't recognize, a man in a kitchen uniform with his voice up about something involving a billing discrepancy and a shift he said he hadn't been credited for. It was getting heated.

Nicole listened to about fifteen seconds of it and then said something low enough that Justin couldn't catch it from where he was walking. Quickly, the man's voice came down. Justin looked a little longer, trying not to look like he was spying, but he could very definitely see the man's eyes glazed over. His eyes then shut. His eyes closed, he nodded twice. Nicole then snapped her fingers and the man's eyes opened up wide again. As Justin stepped into the elevator, he did so slowly, to see what he could see. The man then looked like he was apologizing and then left with a smile just as the door closed on Justin. What was that all about?



The duffel bag was still in the corner of Justin's room where he'd put it, packed, ready to go. He hadn't unpacked it after the first attempt fell apart, nor after the second. He looked at it for a while.

He still didn't unpack it, but he wasn't sure why he shouldn't now. It wasn't like Dennis seemed to be making any effort to leave.

He sat there and thought about the club, the two men leaning in, the drink appearing, Dennis saying *oh, stop it* with his head at that silly angle. He thought about the pool the week before, Dennis's hand in his, the way Dennis had taken his arm without pausing his sentence. He thought about the afternoons he had spent with Crystal lately.

That was the way he thought of his friend now, more Crystal than Dennis.

He sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the bag in the corner for a long time. Then he pulled his socks out and started dropping them in the drawers.



It was partially for looking after Dennis, and partially trying to get some answers he felt were being kept from him that Justin was flipping through his contacts on his phone.

Justin was walking the boardwalk, going so far that the hotel was just another faded building in the distance. He found a bench facing the ocean and tapped the entry.

Mrs. Kowalski answered on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Kowalski. Sorry to bother you, but it's me, Justin. Justin, Dennis's friend?"

Silence. "Oh. Justin! yes! How are you?"

"I'm in Atlantic City. At Dennis's aunt's hotel."

More silence. "Oh, are you! How wonderful! There to visit Dennis? How is he?"

Justin watched a seagull land on the railing. "That's why I'm calling."

"Well, I'm just delighted to hear from one of Dennis's little friends."

"Yeah. Well. Anyway. He told me a story," Justin said carefully. "About what happened here."

Mrs. Kowalski sighed. The sound carried static. "What story exactly?"

"Going to jail. The fight. The disguise. How his aunt has made him into a woman and..."

"Justin," she said, her voice tired and unsurprised. "Dennis is transgender. He came out two years ago."

Justin stood up, then sat back down.

"He came out to Nicole when he moved in with her." Mrs. Kowalski paused. "Nicole was more understanding than I expected, honestly."

"There was no fight at the facility?"

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"But his face..."

"Was very expensive. The facial surgery was something he asked for. Begged for." Birds cried overhead. "Nicole arranged it. I paid for it."

Justin's hand tightened around the phone. "That's not... He told me different."

"He does have trouble admitting it, even to himself," Mrs. Kowalski said. "Whatever Dennis told you was a product of his imagination."

"He said thee were files on a laptop that..."

"Of course there's files! I need those receipts."

"You're saying he *invented* the story?"

"He invented it because he was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"That you would reject Dennis, or should I say, Crystal, if you knew she'd chosen this." Static filled the space between them. "Dennis has had feelings for you for years."

Justin watched waves break against the shore.

"He loves you, Justin. He's just scared you won't love him back the way he is now."

Justin didn't respond.

"He told you this?"

"I heard this directly from Nicole, who heard it from Dennis."

"No, I mean... Are you sure? He was joking. He had to be joking."

"You'll figure it out," Mrs. Kowalski said. "You always were the smart one."

They said careful goodbyes. Justin sat with the phone in his hand long after the call ended. The ocean sound remained constant. Evening crowds moved along the boardwalk behind him, their laughter and conversations indistinct.

After twenty minutes, he stood up and walked back toward the hotel, his pace slower than before.



The next day, Justin was in the lobby of the hotel, waiting. They had arranged to go get dinner together, he and Dennis. It hadn't seemed much of anything two days ago, when Justin agreed to go eat, but knowing what he knew now, now it felt more like... a date.

That was, if what Dennis's mom knew what she was talking about. She had always been kind of a dingbat. He wasn't sure what to believe, really. According to her, she had heard this all through Nicole, and Nicole could have been feeding her bad info.

Crystal came down the elevator in a tiny white strapless top and tight jeans. Strappy gold heeled sandals added three inches. Her hair was bumped and straight. Gold jewelry glistened at her ears and wrist. A fresh spray tan made her glow.

Justin looked at her from the couch where he'd been waiting. Dennis was dressed to kill. Mrs. Kowalski's version was gaining a little more credibility.

"Ready?" he asked, standing up. As if it wasn't clear enough by his friend's outfit.

Dennis nodded, adjusting the strap on her shoe. "Boardwalk?"

They walked to the boardwalk. Justin opened doors for Dennis, just because it seemed like he should. He walked just close enough so they could talk, but not close enough so they looked like a couple. He wanted to play it straight.

At a railing overlooking the beach, Dennis leaned on his elbows and looked toward the ocean.

Justin leaned on the railing beside him. "So uh, you're dressed like a slut."

Dennis looked over with a raised eyebrow. "I was wondering when you were going to say something."

"I wasn't sure what to say. I mean... Look at you. You're like a walking ad for bad decisions."

"Nicole made me do it. She says I need to be a more authentic Jersey Shore girl." He looked down at his outfit. "So I did what I could."

"Did she give any kind of a reason?"

"Reason for what?"

"A reason why you need to look like a Jersey Shore girl."

"Well... I mean..." Dennis seemed to be searching for an answer.

"You have to stop doing whatever your aunt tells you."

"I don't!" He objected.

Justin looked at his hands, trying to muster up the courage to ask Dennis if what his mother said was true. Problem was, if it wasn't true, then he was in



real danger of ruining a friendship. If she was speaking the truth, he was in danger of ruining a friendship.

"I'm hungry," Justin said, opting to do neither thing. For the moment.

"Oh, I can't eat. I barely fit into these pants."

"God knows you need to fit into your slutty jewish princess jeans."

Dennis turned sideways to look at him. "Oh moy gawd! Don't make jokes, bubby!"

Justin shook his head. "Dennis, please."

"Moy name is Crystal! I'm a Joisey Shore goil!"

"You think that's funny, but it's not," Justin said.

"It's hilarious. Problem is you don't know how much agony I've had to go through to look like this. If you did, you'd know how I'm crying on the inside."

"I'll never know. You can just tell me."

Dennis grinned. "I'm thinking — Gina. Gina Morganstein."

"Gina what?"

"Your jersey Shore girl name. That'd be you. Gina Morganstein. From Ocean City. Here to pick up some Guidos at the gym and tan at the mall."

Justin kept watching their reflection. "It sounds gross and horrible."

"It's my culture!" Dennis said. He was smiling when he said it. "My shitbag New Jersey Shore culture."

Dennis moved away from the railing, adjusting the tiny white strapless top as he began walking farther away the hotel.

Justin was trying not to think about what Dennis's mom said. He was trying so hard. "What do you want to do now?"

Dennis shrugged. "Get some drinks. Have you had a cosmo? Ultimate Jersey Shore drink."

"I'm 18."

"So am I, but my ID says I'm 21. That's why I can serve drinks."

"21?"

"Yup, and I can buy you whatever you like," Dennis said with a mischievous smile Justin had known for so long.



Justin followed Dennis's lead and they snaked through tourists and carts until there was a turn down an alley. There was a seemingly never-ending supply of

second-rate stores that sold Hawaiian shirts, sunglasses, knick-knacks, custom license plates, tee shirts and caps, but once you made your way down the boardwalk enough, you could find the local stuff.

These were the kind of places the tourists would get thrown out of.

Dennis had led Justin to a hole in the wall, a dive, a joint called Rocky's. Just as they got to the door, Dennis quickly turned towards Justin. "They know me here," he said, still going inside.

That became apparent when three people lifted their beers at the bar. "Crystal!" they chimed in unison.

"Hey, goys!" Dennis replied in his Jersey Shore voice. He then turned to the bartender. "Hey Rico!"

The bartender leaned against the counter, taking up space on purpose. He was in his mid-twenties, with cutoff sleeves showing arms that suggested regular gym time — and he was thoroughly tanned.

Rico's eyes found Crystal first, then Justin. That seemed to prompt a subtle shift in his posture — arms crossing, chin lifting.

"Well, look what we have here," Rico said, his voice carrying over the bar noise.

Dennis's body language changed immediately. He stepped closer to Justin, her hand finding his arm.

"This is my boyfriend," she said, her tone not asking for Rico's opinion.

"Boyfriend?" Rico laughed, not smiling. "You said you didn't want a boyfriend, Crys."

Crystal's grip tightened on Justin's arm. "I say things."

"Yeah, you do," Rico replied with a sour look on his face. "Like when you're just trying to get rid of ol' Rico."

"Don't be like that. You know it was never gonna happen."

"No, I *didn't* know that, but I guess you did, huh? Would have been nice to know before I paid for all those drinks."

Justin leaned to Dennis. "Why did we come here?"

"I'm gonna take a booth," Dennis declared. "Two cosmos."

"Yeah, sure," Rico replied, walking back behind his station, but his eyes fixed on Dennis.

Dennis headed for a booth against the wall, but Justin tugged his arm to get him to move farther away from Rico.

"Sounds like you pissed him off," Justin said as they sat.

"Rico is always pissed off at something," Dennis answered. "I've met a hundred guys like that here in AC."

That was a big number. "Have you?"

"Customers," Dennis clarified. "At the club."

"I guess you're not the wallflower I thought that you were."

"When you've been going through what I've been going through, you need a drink now and then."

"I guess," Justin had to agree to that, even if he never had a drink before. Well, a beer once or twice, but not a real drink. Not like the one he was about to get. "Known Rico for long?"

"Forget about Rico. Lots of bark, no bite. And the only reason I know him was because he paid for my drinks. I didn't realize he expected something back."

When the drink arrived, Justin wasn't even sure what to do with his at first. There was a swirl of citrus rind on the rim, which confused him. He watched Dennis keep his on the rim and not try to eat it, so Justin did the same as well.

The hit of a fully alcoholic drink was a little more than Justin was prepared for. It was like a kick to the head, but slightly less pleasant. He couldn't taste much else.

"Now you know why I came here," Dennis said with a grin. "Their drinks pack a punch."

"Yeah," Dennis wheezed out.

"Aw, it's too much for you."

"Nah," Just said, straightening up and trying to look composed. "Get me another."

Three cosmos later, and Justin seemed to be getting the hang of drinking. He was feeling much better now, no longer worried about being underage, his best friend looking like a Jersey Shore slut or the volume of his voice.

"Keep it down back here!" Rico said, walking over to their booth. "Yer making a racket!"

"We're fine!" Dennis said. "Stop pesterin' us!"

"He's no good," Rico said. He grabbed Dennis by the wrist. "You should be with me, babes."

"Let go!" Dennis shrieked. He pulled at Rico's grasp with his other hand.

"Let her go!" Justin said, slurring his words.

"Mind your own business, little man!"

"You're a big sack of shit!" Justin declared. "You like pushin' people around!"

"No, Justin!" Dennis said, trying to grab Justin's arm as his old high school friend started to stand up.

"You ain't nuthin, little man!" Rico looked Justin up and down. "You paying for it, or is she giving it away for free?"



Justin moved slightly to the left, unable to find his balance. "Fuck you!"

Rico shoved Justin's shoulder. Justin shoved back harder. Rico's fist connected with Justin's jaw. Justin grabbed Rico's shirt collar and pulled. They went down in a tangle of arms and legs on the sticky floor.

Two patrons pulled them apart quickly.

"Out," Rico said, pumping his chest forward.

Justin wiped blood from his lip with the back of his hand. Dennis grabbed his arm and led him toward the exit. Rico followed them out, still yelling.

"We're not done here," Rico called after them.

"Bring it on!" Justin shouted back, escaping Dennis's long-nailed grip and rushing Rico. Dennis was able to leap and block Justin from going any further, though.

"Little man!" Rico yelled back.

"I'll fuck you up! I'll be back! I'll fuck you up good!" Three cosmos had a predictable effect on Justin's frame of mind.

Crystal kept walking, pulling Justin away from the bar. She didn't look back.

A few block later, on the street under the bar's neon sign, Justin was being supported by Dennis as he stumbled along. "Why'd you stop me?" He wanted to know.

"I didn't want you getting in a fight over me."

Justin, although drunk, took pause. Was that really what he had done? Had he just tried to protect Dennis's honor like a... *boyfriend*?



"You good, Philly?" Bryce asked, outside a bar with loud music coming through the open door.

"Fuck yeah!"

The bass from the club was a physical thing, a fist punching Justin in the chest, and he loved it. For the first time since arriving in Atlantic City, the suffocating weight of his situation felt distant, replaced by the glorious, mind-numbing pulse of the music and the burn of cheap vodka in his throat. Of course, that was exactly what he wanted. He had held on to Bryce's invite made in Camden, although he never intended to use it. Now he needed them to help him forget.

"To Mr. Philly!" Bryce roared, slinging a heavy arm around Justin's shoulders. Bryce was a monument of a guy, all broad shoulders and a jawline that had to be made of solid granite. His polo shirt was stretched tight across his chest. "Glad you could make it, Philly!"

“Let’s fucking *goooo!*” Chet chimed in, raising his own red plastic cup. Chet was Bryce’s counterpart, seemingly, but with a wilder, more unpredictable energy in his eyes. He clapped Justin on the back so hard he nearly spilled his drink. “We’re gonna burn this town to the ground!”

And, lo, they set out upon their righteous quest. The night dissolved into a blur of neon lights and shouting. They were a force of nature, a tornado of testosterone and alcohol. They didn’t walk from bar to bar; they conquered them. At one place, a dive bar sticky with spilled beer, Bryce got into a shouting match with a guy over a spilled drink. It was all posturing, chests puffed out, voices escalating until security broke it up, but the adrenaline was intoxicating. Chet, meanwhile, was working the room with a sloppy, confident grin, trying his luck with every woman in a five-foot radius, most of whom laughed and waved him off, though a few seemed intrigued by his raw, unapologetic energy.

Justin was swept along in their wake. He was the sidekick, the wingman, the guy who laughed at all their jokes and helped finish the shots they ordered. He drank until the edges of his vision softened and the world felt simple again. There was no Crystal, no Nicole, no confusing feelings about poolside encounters or questions about who was telling the truth. There was only the next drink, the next bar, the next burst of loud, meaningless laughter.

The sun was coming up when they stumbled out of a casino bar, their eyes bloodshot and their voices hoarse. “The night’s not over!” Bryce bellowed at the pale orange sky. “It’s just getting started!”

They found a 24-hour diner and ordered plates of greasy eggs and bacon, their boisterous laughter echoing in the fluorescent-lit emptiness. Chet tried to flirt with the exhausted-looking waitress, earning only an eye-roll. They talked about nothing — football, a crazy party from last semester, how much they hated their finance class — and Justin nodded along, a grateful, silent participant in their normal, uncomplicated world.

Somehow, they made it back to Bryce’s rental. Sleep was brief, he wasn’t even sure he was on a bed or a sofa or the floor. A few hours later, they were up again, popping beers and heading for the boardwalk. The second day was a haze of sun, sand, and more drinking. They played pickup volleyball with a group of girls, spiking the ball with aggressive force and flexing with every point. They got into a water fight with a family that looked at them with utter disgust, which only made them laugh harder. That night, they hit a different strip of bars, and the cycle repeated itself: loud drinking, failed attempts at picking up women, and a near-fight with a group of guys from Philadelphia.

By the third day, Justin was running on fumes. His body ached, his head was a constant dull throb, and his stomach churned with a mixture of hangover and cheap beer. But Bryce and Chet were seemingly tireless. They were fueled by pure, uncut frat-boy momentum. “Come on, Philly!” Chet yelled, shaking him

awake on the couch. "We're doing shots of tequila before we even leave the room!"

Justin couldn't say no. He felt like if he stopped, the quiet would rush back in, and with it, everything he was trying to forget. So he drank. He stumbled through another night, his movements sluggish, his smile plastered on. He watched Bryce arm-wrestle some tourist for twenty dollars and win. He watched Chet get rejected by a bachelorette party and double-bird them. By this point, though, he was an observer, a ghost. He was so exhausted he was probably a transparent like a ghost as well.

They were in a crowded, pulsing nightclub on the fourth night. Justin was leaning against a wall, the world tilting relentlessly around him. He could see Bryce and Chet across the room, shouting something over the music, their faces flushed and happy. He tried to push himself off the wall to join them, but his legs wouldn't cooperate. The bass thump that had been his companion for days suddenly felt like it was inside his skull, hammering away. The spinning lights blurred into streaks of color. He saw Chet raise a glass in his direction, a wide grin on his face.



Justin woke in his room with a headache and his mouth dry. He was in hell. And for some reason, Dennis was there.

He sat on the edge of his bed in a nightshirt tee and platform sandals, his legs crossed. His hair was just done. His makeup was fresh. He had a cigarette in his lips. On the small table by the window, breakfast had been arranged: a bowl of cornflakes ready for milk.

Justin pushed himself up on one elbow. "How did you get in?"

"My aunt runs the hotel."

"Right."

There was a thump in his head that was pulsating at the same rate his heart was beating. "You broke into my room to make breakfast?"

"I borrowed from the kitchen. Then I walked upstairs." Her accent was thicker than usual, the vowels broader, the cadence more Atlantic City than Philadelphia. "Don't make it a federal case."

Justin looked at the cereal. Food made him sick. Just the thought of eating made him nauseous. All the sudden, milk seemed disgusting.

"Hungry?" Dennis asked.

"Maybe later."



"More for me," Dennis said, moving over to the bowl. "I love me some cawn flakes."

"*Cawn* flakes?"

"Yes." He began to pour himself some milk, making Justin nauseous again.

Justin squoze his head with both hands. "You sound different."

Crystal gave him a look. "Different how?"

"More Jersey Shore."

He sat up a little straighter. "We are in New Jersey, you know."

"I know."

"No, you don't. You hear it and think it's some act." He pointed the spoon at him. "I'm a proud Jersey girl. There."

"You said that without irony."

"Yeah. And?"

"Well, all the people who lived with you in Philadelphia will be surprised to learn that, that's all."

There was a strange pause as Dennis seemed to be at odds with himself. "I'm just... You know, living the role."

"Yeah, all right." He was trying even harder to press his head together, hoping it might help in any small way. "Did I wake up here?"

"Yep," Dennis said. "I knocked all morning, but you didn't answer. You left your shoes outside."

"My shoes?"

"One was in the elevator, the other was wedged in a light fixture."

"How did that happen?"

"You gonna tell me why you decided to party without me?"

The reason, the big reason, was that he was trying to forget about Dennis. About Crystal. About a friend who seemed to be making him doubt his best friend and question his... Feelings. "It was a last-second thing."

His phone buzzed in his pants pocket.

With a grunt, Justin rolled over and picked the pants up, shaking the phone out like a prize out of a Christmas stocking.

"My screen is broken."

"Nah, it's just your eyes are broken." Dennis read it over his shoulder. "Oh, shit. It's from Nicole."

"Nicole? What does she want?"

"She says the police are downstairs. She wants me down there right now."

“Police?”

“That’s what it says. No big deal. The police come all the time.”

“What about me?”

Dennis read the rest of the message. “She says that you should only come down if you want to go to jail.”

Justin grabbed the phone and forced his eyes to focus. Dennis wasn’t lying. That’s what it said.

Dennis set his bowl on the bedside table and stood up. “Stay here. I’ll see what the fuck is going on.”

Justin was feeling the sweat start to drip down his forehead. What would the police want... and why was he involved?

His stomach started to churn in a whole new way, as if someone had just hit the turbo button.

And as he caught himself watching Dennis’s ass sway it’s way out the door, his three-night binge hadn’t cured him of anything, either.



With uniformed police officers poking around the lobby and a forensic van already out front, a detective of the Atlantic City Police department arrived. He was inconspicuous enough, with a navy blue polo short and a tactical vest that read “Police” in huge yellow lettering on the front and back. It was just after ten in the morning. He arrived in the hotel lobby talking into his phone.

Just as he did, Dennis arrived in the elevator, a bit shocked at the scene in front of him. He wasn’t expecting this many police. They all glanced at his slender tanned form as he stepped out, but he was used to that by now.

“Nicolette Fleischman,” Nicole said when asked her name. “I’m the manager here. People call me Nicole.”

“I understand you know a man by the name of Rico Martinez,” the detective said to Nicole, who remained perfectly composed behind the reception desk. “Disappeared four nights ago. Last seen leaving a bar on the strip. When’s the last time you spoke to Mr. Martinez?”

“Actually I talked to him that night,” Nicole replied. “I suppose that’s why you’re here.”

“Did he say anything suspicious? Any indication he was leaving town? What did he say?”

“No nothing like that. He said he wanted to talk to a member of my staff. I’ve known him for year. He runs a little hot, if you know what I mean.”

“Who did he want to talk to?”

“I... Don't recall... I think it was one of the clean-up crew...”

“It would help if you could remember, Ma'am.”

“Justin. Yes. Justin. He works in the restaurant.”

“Do you have an address for him?”

Nicole angled her head slightly. “Justin hasn't worked here in while, Detective.”

“Interesting.” the detective made a note in his small notepad. “Because the bar staff in his establishment remembered him. Specifically a fight with Rico about 8 hours before Rico disappeared. He told him he was coming back and it wasn't over between them.”

Nicole's expression didn't change. “Since Justin isn't here, you'll have to take that up with him.”

“Where is he now?”

“I couldn't tell you, officer. But he was friends with my niece, Crystal.” Nicole turned to Dennis who was pensively hanging out about fifteen feet away, listening in. “Crystal, you talked to Justin just before he left, didn't you? Did he tell you where he was going?”

“Crystal...” The detective flipped through his notes. “There was a Crystal who was with Justin at the time of the incident.”

“Oh... Uh...” Dennis was stumbling. He had overheard enough to know this wasn't good. He looked to his aunt for help.

“Go on,” Nicole said.

“Yes... I was with him. But he's gone now.” Dennis knew he shouldn't have thrown that last part in unsolicited, but he did.

“When did you last see him?”

“Oh... Uh... Three days ago.” That was true, if you didn't count this morning. Dennis was acutely nervous, not only because the police asking about Justin was terrifying, not only because he was following his aunt's lead and lying, but because he happened to be a boy using a fake name and ID ad dressed like a tramp. he had a lot to be nervous about.

“Did he tell you where he was going?”

“No.” He paused from his nerves. “No. He just... Disappeared without telling me.”

“All right, all right. Now, when he was at Rocky's bar, he was reported to be belligerent and confrontational by witnesses, can you confirm that?”

“It wasn't his fault.”

“But he was causing a scene.”



“No! He was sticking up for me!”

“All right. Where can I get in contact with you?”

“I live here in the hotel with my aunt,” Dennis replied.

“Yes. If you need to get in touch, you can call me,” Nicole said, stepping in and wrapping her arm around Dennis’s shoulder, protectively.

The detective watched Dennis’s tanned face for a full three seconds. Dennis’s gaze remained steady, her expression unchanged aside from the discomfort.

“I need to speak with the detective privately,” Nicole said.

Dennis nodded obediently and retreated down the hall. Nicole led the detective to her office, closing the door behind them.

Two minutes later, the detective emerged from the office, with a new level of determination, and urgent energy. He paused in the hallway, took out his phone, and made a call as we walked to the exit. “I need an APB on Justin Morris. Target bus stations, airports, ferry terminals. He’s on the run. Deadly force is authorized.”

Nicole followed him out. “Thank you for your time, Detective.”

The detective was already hopping his his car, pulling all the other officers and personnel with him, as they sped away.

“What happened?” Dennis came running over in his heels. “What was that about Justin?”

“I’m afraid they suspect he’s killed Rico, honey.”

“*Killed?* But he didn’t!” Dennis objected.

“I don’t think he did, but I can’t be sure. We haven’t seen in in days, Crystal. The detective had a lot of compelling evidence. They even found blood at the bar matching Rico’s. I’m afraid it doesn’t look very good for Justin.”

“He didn’t do anything! We was out drinking!”

“I know, that’s why I sent the police away. Now we have to help Justin.”



Three minutes after the detective left, Nicole knocked on Justin’s door. She entered without being asked.

“The situation is worse than it looks,” she said, closing the door softly behind her. “The police have you at the bar, they have you threatening Rico, they have you seem by dozens of witnesses, just hours before he disappeared. Then there’s the blood at the scene.”

Justin stood up from where he’d been sitting on the edge of his bed.

"I didn't do anything. I didn't!" He thought, for a moment. "Ask Bryce and... What's-his-name, Chet! Were we partying the last three days!"

"He disappeared before you went on your little binge, honey," Nicole said. "They could just say you were in hiding or trying to establish an alibi."

"I gotta go talk to them!" Justin said, getting to his feet.

"They are going to arrest you on sight," Nicole said.

"They even said they were going to use deadly force!" Dennis added. "I heard him!"

"I heard that as well," Nicole agreed. "Talk isn't going to solve this. They think you killed a man and are going to kill again."

Justin wasn't believing what he was hearing. "That's crazy! All I had were a couple of drinks!"

"The only way out," Nicole continued, her voice matter-of-fact, "is if Justin disappears."

She looked directly at him. "What's that mean?"

"Well, Justin, I didn't want to tell you this, but Crystal here... She is actually your friend, Dennis."

Justin looked at Dennis, then back at Nicole.

"Yeah, we already figured that out," Justin said, unwilling to pretend he didn't know. The circumstances of the moment made it pointless to keep up that charade.

"What?" Nicole couldn't have looked more shocked. "When did you know?"

"How is that important, Nicole?" Dennis said. "We need to keep Justin from getting put in jail. Or worse!"

"We will get back to this," Nicole said, looking very cross. She spent an extra moment pointing her finger at her niece and Justin. "I only bring that up to give us options. Now, I think you'll agree that Dennis has a disguise that is virtually impenetrable."

"Yeah, I mean he..." Justin locked in just what Nicole might be suggesting. "I'm not dressing up like him."

"Justin, we're trying to find options. We don't have a lot of time." She wrapped her arm around his shoulders and used it to maneuver him into sitting down on the bed. "Now I can find a disguise for you, just like I disguised Dennis, or you can go it on your own. I can't have someone who is a fugitive of justice in my hotel. I'd be brought up on charges. I'm already sticking my neck out. If they find me helping you, I'll lose my job, I'll be out on the street."

"You'd throw me out?" Dennis said.

"It's too dangerous for all of us for you to stay here as things are." Nicole said. Something about this speech felt awfully familiar to Dennis. "I wouldn't have a choice."

"I can't decide on something like that! I need time!" Justin declared.

Nicole patted his knee. "We don't have time, Justin. We need to move now. They don't take breaks when chasing after fugitives for murder."

"It'll be okay," Dennis said. "Really. I... I'll make sure nothing happens to you." That statement wanted to only make sense to Justin, as he knew a lot of Justin's hesitation was based on what he had told him about Nicole. Still, he didn't want Nicole to understand what he meant.

Justin's objections really hadn't advanced to that level yet. He was still reacting to the very idea of disguising himself as a girl. Only now did he start to think about Nicole's reputation.

That is, if he was to be believed. He was still inclined to think Dennis's mother was the one telling the truth. Dennis had embraced femininity a little too easily, looked too comfortable as a woman, to believe he was doing this reluctantly.

"I guess we can give it a try," Justin said. "But I think it's a bad idea."

Nicole held his hands in hers. "I know this is weird, but we have to give it a shot. This is a very brave move, Justin, and I want you to know it's the right thing to do."

"I should probably see a lawyer."

"A lawyer will turn you in. It's their legal obligation." Nicole continued to hold his hands. "We'll get through this together."

The room felt smaller suddenly.

"The disguise must be maintained around the clock," Nicole continued. "The Police have already canvassed the neighborhood. Hotel staff will talk. Some will say they saw you this morning, or whenever you got in. It has to be real, Justin."

He didn't respond.

"Crystal will run you through the crash course," Nicole said. "I will oversee it."

"When?"

"Now."

Justin shook his head. "I can't do this."

"You can." Nicole moved to the door. "Or you can take your chances outrunning the cops." She got up and strode across the room in her heels and manager's uniform. Then she paused with her hand on the doorknob.

"I'm going to get you a new hotel room and put it under a new name. Do you have a preference?"

Justin shook his head, too overwhelmed to even think about it.

"Gina!" Dennis said. "Gina Morganstein."

Nicole nodded and left.

Justin looked to his friend confused.

"What?" Dennis said, a little bashfully. "That's your Jersey Shore name, remember?"



Justin moved to another room, waiting for Dennis to make sure the hall was empty to quickly dash in. His duffel bag was taken away, as Nicole told him it would be evidence. His phone sim was tossed in the hotel trash compactor, and the phone itself was given over to Nicole. It could all be used to track him, he was reminded.

Nicole sat Justin down in the hotel salon chair at seven in the morning. The stylist, a small woman named Teri who asked no questions, sectioned his hair without ceremony.

"Hold still," Teri said.

The extensions took four hours. They went in row by row, bonded at the root with a heat tool that smelled of burning keratin. When Teri finished, Justin's hair hung in a single heavy black curtain past his shoulder blades.

In the mirror, Justin looked at himself and said nothing.

Dennis stood behind him, arms crossed, studying the result with critical eyes. "It needs volume up top," Dennis said. "You gotta tease the crown."

Teri reached for a rattail comb.

"The bump," Dennis explained to Justin. "It's what makes you a Jersey Shore girl. It's not optional."

"I didn't realize we were going for a Jersey Shore look."

"We're in AC. It's what we do here. Duh."

Twenty minutes later, Justin's hair rose from his crown in the specific architectural structure Crystal wore every day. Same black. Same height. Same shellac of hairspray holding it in place.

That afternoon, Nicole brought the hormone prescription to the room personally. One small white pill on a saucer. "Every morning," she said. "Same time. Don't miss a day." Her eyes held his for a long moment. "You want to stay hidden. This keeps you soft, safe and hidden."



Justin took the pill.



That evening, after a crash course in foundation application that left Justin feeling coated in sludge, Nicole locked herself in her office.

“Rico,” she said. “Did you get your payment?”

“Sure, sure Nikki. I got the money. But I want you to know that was a bitch. I never had to cut myself before. That was brutal. I sure hope they got enough blood.”

Nicole giggled. “They got more than enough. As far as they are concerned, you’re as good as dead. Gives you that chance to start over.”

“Goodbye Rico Martinez. Goodbye 500 grand in debt. Goodbye to my shitty little bar. And good riddance. I’d tell you what my new name is, but I don’t want anyone following me.”

“I consider our business concluded,” Nicole continued. “Good to know you, Rico. Stay gone. Stay quiet.”

“As a mouse,” Rico said before hanging up. “So long Nikki! You were a great lay.”

“Classy to the last.”



Nicole sat Justin down the next morning at the small table in his hotel room. The curtains were open. The boardwalk noise came through the glass in pieces. A breakfast tray sat between them: toast, eggs, coffee, a small dish of cut fruit.

Nicole placed both hands flat on the table.

“Justin is gone,” she said. “You are Gina. This is not a costume and it is not temporary until further notice. Do you understand?”

Justin looked at her.

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

“I’m Gina.”

“Full name.”

“Gina Morganstein.”

“From?”

“Ocean City.”

“Why are you here?”

“Lookin’ for work.”

“And if anyone asks about Justin?”

“I say don’t know him.”

“No,” Nicole replied. “You say ‘Who?’”

Nicole watched him for a moment, then nodded once.

“Good. Get dressed. We have an appointment.”

The spray tan appointment was at a salon two blocks off the boardwalk. A woman in a paper mask worked the airbrush gun in long, even strokes, starting at Justin’s ankles.

“Don’t breathe when I do your face,” she said.

The solution was warm and smelled weird. When she finished, Justin stood on a mat under a heat lamp, arms raised, while the tan dried. He looked down at his forearms. The skin was the same deep copper-orange as Crystal’s.

The nail appointment followed immediately. The technician applied acrylic tips, inch-long ovals, and painted them a specific shade Nicole had selected. Coral pink. The same shade Crystal wore.

Walking back to the hotel, Justin noticed the nails clicking against his phone screen as he typed.

Nicole walked beside him, holding a cup of iced coffee. “You keep looking at your hands,” Nicole said.

“They’re weird,” Justin said.

“Give it a week. You’ll forget what it was like to be normal,” Nicole said.



The surgery consultation happened five days later. The surgeon’s name was Dr. Frederick. He was middle-aged behind his obviously altered face, with photographs on his wall of before-and-after patients that looked like strangers to each other.

Dr. Frederick reviewed Justin’s exam results, then looked at Justin’s face without speaking. He moved around the chair, tilting his head slightly.

“High cheekbones already,” Dr. Frederick said. “Good bone structure. Jaw is the primary issue. Too square. Nose deviated slightly.”

Nicole crossed her legs. “What’s possible?”



“Cheekbone augmentation.” Dr. Frederick gestured to Justin’s cheekbones. “We’ll create a softer contour. Rhinoplasty to narrow and lift the tip. Mandibular contouring along the jawline. All straightforward.”

Justin looked from Dr. Frederick to Nicole.

“Will I recognize myself afterwards?” Justin asked.

Nicole smiled. “Hopefully not, unless you want people to find you...”

“Yeah... Right.” Justin said with a sigh.

“Schedule it,” Nicole said to Dr. Frederick, who already had his calendar open.

The surgery was on a Tuesday morning. Justin went under expecting minor adjustments, thinking he would wake up looking like a slightly softer version of himself.

He woke up with bandages over his nose and cheeks, his throat sore from the breathing tube, a dull ache spreading through his face.



Nicole ran the sessions in her suite each evening after dinner. Justin could remember the white boards in Dennis’s room. Now he was following the same schedule. She sat across from Justin in a low chair, her voice steady and unhurried.

“Men,” Nicole said, “are the other sex now. That’s the first thing. You don’t think of them as your category anymore. They’re on the other side of the room. You observe them from your side.”

Justin said nothing.

“Repeat it,” Nicole said.

“Men are the other sex,” Justin said.

“Again.”

“Men are the other sex.”

Nicole’s eyes didn’t waver. Something about her gaze made it difficult to look away. “You’re Gina now. When someone says your name, the name you respond to is Gina. Justin is a name that belongs to somebody else.”

Then her voice went lower. Slower. His attention seemed to change in a weird way he’d never experienced before. Everything was suddenly so clear.

The session lasted forty minutes, but to Justin it seemed like no time at all. Justin walked back to his room feeling hollowed out and faintly dizzy.

Dennis was in the hallway, coming from the opposite direction.

“How’d it go?” Dennis asked.

“Fine,” Justin said.

“Oh moy gaaaawd, you look soo good!”

“No I don’t.”

“No, I’m serious! You look more like a Joisey goil every day, bubby!”



The first mirror viewing was a week later. A nurse removed the dressings, then handed Justin a small hand mirror.

Justin looked.

The cheekbones were higher and softer, creating a hollow beneath them that hadn’t been there before. The nose was smaller and straighter, the tip tilted slightly upward. The jaw was less square, the angles smoothed away. The overall effect was a face that read unmistakably female.

Justin lowered his hand, the mirror still in it. The nurse took it and placed it on the recovery room table.

“Everything went well,” she said, arranging items on her tray. “No unexpected swelling.”

Justin touched his cheekbones with cautious fingers. The skin felt tight.

“I guess I should say thank you?” he asked, his voice sounding nasal through the swelling.

“Rest is recommended,” the nurse replied, not answering his question.

When he returned to his room, Dennis was waiting. He sat on the edge of the bed in a pair of Daisy Dukes and a pink crop top that said “Jersey Babe” on it.

“He’s good at what he does,” she said, standing up. “Isn’t he?”

Justin looked at his reflection in the dark television screen across the room. A girl looked back.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Justin asked, his voice still unfamiliar to him. “I didn’t think it would be this different.”

“I know. Been there. But you won’t be recognized like this.”

“It’s going to look more normal after the swelling goes down, right?”

“Maybe. But you look great! It’s an improvement.”

Justin looked harder. He wasn’t sure at all if it was an improvement, let alone a huge mistake. But so far, Nicole, the nurse and now Dennis had all approved of it. Even if he felt it was a bit drastic, he trusted those around him.

“Why are you helping Nicole do this? I thought you hated her.”



“I do hate her. But I’m not helping her, I’m helping *you*.”



Recovery was managed from Justin’s hotel room. Nicole brought food on a schedule, managed the medication doses from the bottles on his nightstand, and sat with him in the evenings without speaking much. Her presence was efficient and warm in equal measure.

“Have the police been here?” Justin asked.

“A couple of times. They’re still looking for Justin.”

“I was thinking maybe I should let my parents know about this.”

“It would tell the police where you are,” Nicole reminded him. “It wouldn’t help you, me or them.”

On the eighth day, she arrived with shopping bags.

“The healing looks good,” Nicole said, lifting his chin to examine the incision lines around his nose. “Dr. Frederick was pleased with the results in this morning’s check-in.”

She unpacked one of the bags on his desk. Two training corsets lay in tissue paper — the same ones he had seen in Dennis’s closet, boned and laced. Black satin. One with faint floral embroidery.

“Starting tomorrow,” Nicole said, holding up a corset to his waist. “Your posture needs to be correct from the beginning, or you’ll develop bad habits.”

Justin watched her hang up the corsets in his closet, just like he had seen in Dennis’s closet.

“The swelling will take another month to fully resolve,” she continued, checking the prescription bottles on his nightstand. “But the rest of you is just fine. We can begin spinal alignment now.”

She moved to the other bag, arranging new underwear and bra sets in his dresser drawers.

“You’ll need to wear these constantly except when bathing,” she said, indicating the corsets. “I’ll help with the lacing until you can manage it yourself.”

Justin looked at his reflection in the dark television screen. A stranger with bandaged cheeks stared back.

She finished organizing his new clothes and stood at the foot of his bed.

“Tomorrow morning after breakfast,” she said, checking her watch. “Seven sharp.”

Nicole let herself out quietly, leaving Justin alone with the corsets hanging on his closet door, the satin catching the late afternoon light. In his mind, he was reviewing the options about jumping out the window.



The next morning at seven, Nicole arrived with a cloth measuring tape around her neck, like an old-fashioned tailor.

“Let’s see,” she said, taking the black satin corset from the closet door. “Stand straight.” Nicole wrapped the corset around his torso, the boning stiff against his chest.

“Hold,” she said, pulling the laces.

Justin felt the boning pull his waist in and his posture straighten automatically. His ribcage compressed radically. His breathing changed.

“Deeper breaths,” Nicole said, working the laces upward. “From your abdomen, not your chest.”

She continued lacing, the fabric tightening incrementally. Pain with every tug. Justin placed his hands on the desk to steady himself.

“How tight?” he asked, his voice strained.

“Until it looks right,” Nicole replied, pulling the laces harder. “Not before.”

She tied off the laces in a neat knot at the small of his back and stepped back to observe.

“There,” she said, measuring his waist. “Twenty-six inches. Perfect.” That depended on your perspective. Justin might have mentioned it if it weren’t for the blinding pain.

He looked in the full-length mirror. His waist was four inches smaller than it had been. His posture was perfectly upright. The corset created an hourglass shape that had not been there before.

He didn’t say anything. He couldn’t. Not just he breathing, but his head wasn’t getting enough oxygen. Not even enough to say “ow.”

“Now I wanted to review what’s in you drawers,” Nicole said, walking over to his dresser. She opened all the drawers.

Justin did not move. The pain was keeping him from paying attention.

“Over here, babes,” Nicole said. She whistled to get him to look at her. “C’mon. It’s just a few feet.”

He took tiny steps in her direction. It felt like he was about to explode if he strode too far.



Bra cups and folded camisoles were arranged in neat rows. Bras in his size. In other news, he had a size now. In another drawer, there were panties. Lots and lots of panties. They were satin and lace, high-cut briefs and thongs in various colors. He didn't need any education in panties. After all, he was a teenage boy. They study such things.

"These are your undergarments from now on," she said, indicating the drawers. Familiarize yourself with them. They are yours, treat them well and they'll treat you well." Justin had heard this speech form drill sergeants in movies talking about rifles. Then Nicole pulled the drawers out completely and dumped the contents on the floor.

"Now put them away carefully. This will help you get to know them." She said nothing further and left, shutting the door softly.

Justin looked at the contents on the floor for a long time — longer than necessary, longer than practical — not out of shame, but because he had no idea how he was supposed to bend over.



The wardrobe replacement happened over two weeks. The first morning after the corset fitting, Justin showered and returned to his room to find his tee short and shorts were gone. The space on the bed where he'd left them was empty.

He towed his new hair, a serious effort now, and approached the closet. The doors, previously bare, now held clothes.

The next morning, more items appeared. Two weeks after the surgery, the transformation was complete.

The clothes were emphatically female and emphatically Jersey Shore. Tiny denim shorts with frayed edges. Cropped tops made of thin cotton, dresses in animal print and neon. Miniskirts in leopard and zebra patterns. Strapless tops and halter necks and things with geometric cutouts.

Everything was tight. Everything showed skin. Everything was the specific aesthetic of the Shore at its most extreme.

Justin stood in the closet doorway, his hand resting against the doorframe. He picked up a leopard-print miniskirt, the fabric lightweight and synthetic. He held it up, then let it fall back into place among the other items. "I can't believe I'm expected to wear this," he said to no one.

The miniskirts also meant wearing the gaffs that had appeared in his panty drawer the other day. He thought maybe it was some kind of chastity device at first, and in some ways it was. This byzantine method of hiding his penis was truly uncomfortable and he couldn't ever imagine having a boner while wearing

it. It would be horrible. Nicole told him his pills would help, and he hoped they would.

The shoe rack against the wall held heels only. Wedges, platforms, stilettos, strappy sandals. Every pair added at least three inches. There were no flat shoes.

Justin stood in front of the open closet for a long time. He dressed in the bathroom, the corset limiting his movements. The tee drooped off his frame. The shorts rode higher than expected. The wedge sandals added four inches.

He looked in the mirror. The girl in the mirror had a bandaged face that was not quite his anymore and was wearing an outfit that belonged entirely to someone else. Someone with no fashion sense or a visual impairment.

Justin left the room and walked down the hallway to Dennis's door. He had been told to be here at noon. He knocked.

Dennis opened it. he wore the same outfit with black high heeled sandals.

Dennis looked Justin up and down when he entered his room. A single raised eyebrow, then a slow, satisfied smile.

"Okay," she said. "We have work to do, but okay."

"We can skip it, if you want."

"Nicole told you the schedule?" she asked, stepping aside to let him enter.

"No," Justin said, his voice adjusting to the different resonance of his facial structure.

"We'll go to the Boardwalk. Far end. Walking practice. Two hours." Dennis picked up a small bag from the dresser. "Sooner we get started, the soon we'll be done."

Justin followed him out the door without bringing up how his accent was definitely turning Jersey. Justin had bigger problems to worry about.

The far end of the boardwalk was quieter at noon. The crowds had gathered near the casinos and attractions. Dennis walked three feet ahead of Justin, her posture straight, her strides measured.

"Smaller steps," Dennis called over her shoulder. "Heels touch the ground first, not the ball of your foot."

Justin focused on the placement of his feet. The wedge sandals made the wood slats feel uneven. He adjusted his balance, catching himself before he wavered.

Justin was aware, constantly, that he was performing. The clothes were a costume. The face was a disguise. Gina was a role he was playing until the situation resolved. He had to do this, a means to an end.

"Hands more relaxed," Crystal said, turning to walk backward.



Justin unclenched his hands and started to carry his arms floating at his sides, just like Dennis was, without thinking about it. He was vaguely aware that this means-to-an-end performance was getting easier faster than it should.

“Stop trying to hunch your shoulders. The corset will hold you upright.”

He caught himself sitting with his knees together on a bench during their break, without having intended to. He caught himself adjusting his hair when a gust of wind blew a strand across his cheek. He caught himself speaking more softly than he used to when Dennis asked him if he wanted a bottle of water.

He was catching a lot, and each time he noticed something, he noted it and filed it away as evidence of how weird this all felt.

“Your turn to head back,” Dennis said at 1:55 PM. “Back to the hotel. This time, don’t look at your feet.”



The regular salon visits began in the third week. With his bandages off, he could walk out of his room and not get stared at. Dennis took him to a place on the boardwalk with a bright pink sign and music playing through outdoor speakers. They went together, Dennis in his usual tight jeans and crop top, Justin in a draping tee, cutoffs and wedge sandals Dennis had selected from his closet.

The stylist, a woman named Tanya with bleached hair and long nails, treated them like regular clients.

“Just the usual for you, Crystal?” she asked, already sectioning Dennis’s hair.

“Full cut and color,” Dennis said. “And a trim for her,” he added, pointing to Justin.

The stylist nodded. “Oh moy gaawd, yew must be new! A new customuh!” She said, reacting to Justin’s presence. “Have a seat!”

Justin sat in the salon chair. The stylist wrapped a plastic cape around his shoulders. “Yer going for the full Shore look! I love it!” the stylist said, combing through his hair. “Volume, volume and more volume.”

She combed with quick, precise movements. “Extensions. A goil after moy own hawt,” she said to Justin. He just smiled back. “Let me trim this up for yew.”

Justin watched his reflection change in the mirror. The stylist created volume at the crown beyond what he thought hair could do. The overall effect was a style he’d seen on dozens of women along the boardwalk.

“All done,” Tanya said, turning him toward the mirror. “Poifect!”

Justin looked at his reflection — the new face beneath the new hair beneath the new dress. He didn't say anything.

Dennis, with a new, bigger, bump in his hair, appeared behind him, checking his own reflection. "Good," he said to the stylist. "Book me for next Thoisday. Same for her."

They moved to another station for brows. The aesthetician tilted Justin's chair back. "Brows are the whole face," she said, spreading a cool gel across his eyebrow. "And you have no face." It figured a brow technician would see the world through a brow-first perspective. He wondered if people who cultivated fertilizer had the same kind of viewpoint.

She worked methodically, threading with quick pulls that made Justin's eyes water slightly. Justin watched in the large overhead mirror as his features changed, the new shape softening his forehead and lifting his whole expression. When she finished and handed him a small hand mirror, his face looked like a girl's face in a way it didn't before, and in a way a lot of girl's faces didn't look, either.

"Two weeks between appointments," Dennis said, standing up and paying the bill himself. "I've booked us for Tuesdays at three."

They left the salon together. Justin's new hair bounced around his shoulders in the boardwalk breeze. Strangers glanced at them — two girls in summer clothes, heels clicking against the wooden boards, long dark hair swinging in rhythm as they walked. Spray tans glistening. No one stared. No one questioned. They were just Jersey Shore girls doing whatever Jersey Shore girls do.



Makeup lessons were scheduled for Tuesday afternoons at 3 PM. Melonie, a makeup artist who worked part-time at the salon, taught him over three sessions in a small back room. They didn't need the rest of the world to know why a man would be learning this kind of thing.

"Foundation first," Melonie said during the first session, spreading primer across Justin's new facial structure. "Even canvas."

She showed him how to apply concealer under the eyes, along the sides of his nose, across his chin. Justin watched in the mirror as his skin tone smoothed out, the surgical swelling and subtle discolorations disappearing foundation thickness.

The second session focused on contouring and bronzer.

"The cheekbones were nicely done," Melonie said, evaluating his surgical enhancements. She ran a brush along the newly elevated curve. "But we can



make 'em look even bettah.”

She taught him the specific technique for creating shadow and light that transformed his facial flatness into something recognizably feminine.

Third session covered eye makeup and lips. Dennis sat at a small table, scrolling through his phone while occasionally glancing up.

“Small eyes,” she said evaluating Justin’s natural eye shape. “But that just give us more room for lashes and shadow.” She went along his lash line with a pencil. “No blinking.”

“You’re a natural,” Dennis said, watching as Justin completed his lips with a precise swipe of coral gloss.

“He has good bone structure to work with,” Melonie replied, packing up her brushes. “And steady hands.”

By the end of the third session, Justin could complete his full face in twenty minutes. The result was good.



The electrolysis appointments were twice weekly. Justin lay on the treatment table while the technician worked a fine needle along his jawline, upper lip, and neck. The sensation was a sharp, repetitive sting.

“You’ve got light growth,” the technician said. “Shouldn’t take more than a few months to clear.”

Justin stared at the ceiling.

After the fourth appointment, he ran his hand along his jaw in the bathroom mirror. Smooth. He touched the acrylic nails to his cheek. The orange-tan skin of his hand looked strange against his face. Familiar.

Dennis appeared in the mirror behind him, leaning in the doorway.

“Technician said two more sessions,” Justin said.

“Mine took six months,” Dennis said, without looking up from her phone. “Your jaw is smaller.”

Crystal had started calling herself her somewhere in the second week. Justin had noticed it, but not said anything.

Voice training was informal. Nicole played recordings on her laptop and had Justin repeat phrases. The Jersey Shore accent worked on specific vowel elongations and consonant drops. “Water” became “waw-tah.”

Dennis was the more practical teacher. They sat in front of the television with the sound on every afternoon, Dennis making Justin repeat phrases after the girls on screen.

“You hear the ‘g’ in ‘going’?” Dennis said. “It disappears. It’s just ‘goin’.”

“Goin’.”

“And ‘you guys’ is ‘youse guys.’ Always.”

“Youse guys.”

“Put them together.”

“Youse guys goin’ to the Shore?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Like that.”

Dennis was the ideal teacher for this, since he had had to learn it himself. Dennis and Justin sat in the hotel room for an hour each afternoon, watching episodes of reality television with the sound on.

“You hear how she says ‘whatever’?” Dennis said, pointing at the screen. “It goes up at the end. Like a question.”

“Whatever?” Justin repeated.

“Higher. Drop tha ‘r.’”

“Whateva?”

“Yeah.” Dennis returned to her phone. “There ya go, goil.”

Dennis’s own accent had deepened in the past month. She spoke now in a fluid, unbroken Shore accent without apparent effort. When Justin pointed this out, Dennis had looked at him blankly. “I’ve always tawked like dis,” Dennis said. “Youse just noticin’ because I’m teachin’ youse.”



The hormones were doing work that could be felt now. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, the changes were small but consequential. The fat distribution at the hips had shifted slightly — not dramatic, but the stretch jeans fit differently than they had in month one. Fuller through the hip. The waist in contrast looked narrower.

The chest was undeniable. Not large. But present. A definite swell behind the bra cups that had not existed four months ago, like a little nut under his chest.

Dennis, working with Justin on their hair one morning, glanced at the mirror without stopping. “You need a better bra,” Dennis said. “Yours is gaping in the cup now.”

The next day, Nicole brought a new set. The cups were a half-size larger.

Justin put one on. Fastened it in front, rotated it, leaned forward. The fit was flush. The cups held without gaping.

He put the tube top on over it.

In the mirror, the shape beneath the fabric was unambiguous.



Justin found Nicole in her office, dressed how he looked these days, in a tight black tank top, stretch jeans, long black hair pulled back but the bump still intact from the morning practice session. He closed the door behind him.

“My parents,” he said. “I need to talk to you about my parents.”

Nicole looked up from her desk. “Sit down, Gina.”

“Don’t call me that right now.” He stayed standing. “It’s been four months. They don’t know where I am. They’ve got to be losing their minds.”

Nicole set down her pen. “It’s being handled.”

“That’s not an answer.” His voice was rising. “That’s not even close to an answer. They’ve gotta think I’m dead.”

“Your mother does not think you’re dead,” Nicole said, her voice level.

“How do you know that?”

“Because I’m *handling* it.”

Justin put both hands on the edge of the desk. The coral nails pressed flat against the wood. “What does that mean? What are you telling them? Are you talking to them? What are you saying?”

Nicole stood up. She was not a tall woman but she occupied the room differently when she stood, especially in her heels. “I’m going to tell you exactly one thing about this and then we’re not going to discuss the specifics again. The police are looking for you. They have your name. They have your picture. What they do not have is any idea where you are. The only way that changes is if someone who loves you and doesn’t know any better picks up a phone or sends an email or says something to someone, because they’re frightened and they want answers.” She came around the desk. “The moment your parents know where you are, they become the fastest way for the police to find you. They will be watched. Their phones will be monitored. Your mother will say something she doesn’t mean to say to someone she thinks she can trust. And then there are two dozen police officers in the lobby of this hotel and you are in a prison cell.” She stopped in front of him. “Is that what you want for her?”

“You’re not even telling me what you’re telling them...”

“No. I’m not.”

“They’re my parents.” His voice cracked on the last word. He pressed his lips together. The gloss caught the light. “You don’t get to just... You can’t just *decide* this for me. I have rights!”

"I already have," Nicole said, not unkindly. "The best thing you can do for your parents right now — the only thing — is to stay invisible. The best way to protect them is to let them believe what I'm telling them to believe. The day this is resolved, you can call your mother yourself. I will hand you the phone." She looked at him steadily. "But right now, you have to trust me."

Justin stood with his hands still on the desk. His jaw was tight. His eyes were bright.

"What are you telling her," he said quietly. Not a question this time.

"That Justin is in no danger," Nicole said. "That's all you need to know."

He straightened up. He looked at Nicole for a long moment.

Then he turned and walked out in his wedges, pulling the door shut behind him without slamming it.

Nicole sat back down at her desk. She picked up her pen. After a moment, she returned to her work.



By month five, the routine had become automatic. Justin woke up, took the pill from the saucer, showered with the feminine-scented body wash Dennis had recommended, and sat down at the vanity.

Foundation, worked in with the sponge. Concealer tapped under the eyes. Contour pulled up and blended. Highlight on the bones. Blush swept upward. The eye work, beginning with the tan base, building to the crease, lining the upper lid, flicking the wing. Mascara two coats. Liner around the lips, slightly overdrawn. Gloss pressed once.

His hand had steadied over time, even as he manipulate the wands and sponges with his inch-long fingernails. The wing on the left matched the wing on the right. The contour blended seamlessly.

After the makeup, the hair. Tease the crown, shape the bump, set it. The long black extensions fell straight and heavy past his shoulder blades. A shot of shine serum worked through the ends.

He got dressed. That month's rotation included a new animal-print bodysuit, one with a scoop neck, long sleeves, tight through the torso, and high-waisted black jeans with gold hardware buttons. Wedge sandals with a four-inch heel. A gold hoop earring in each ear, wide enough to rest against his jaw.

He picked up his phone from the vanity. The coral nails tapped the screen.

Crystal appeared in the doorway, fully dressed and made-up, looking him over. "The earrings are gawjess," Dennis said. "Those hoops look sew good on you."



"Yer sew koind," Justin said, almost blushing, and they went downstairs together.



The bunny girl training began six months after Justin had taken his first hormone pill. Maria ran it — the same trainer who had worked with Dennis. She stood in the club's empty training lounge with a clipboard and a severe expression that suggested nothing less than perfection would be acceptable.

"You're late," Maria said when Justin entered. "Gina Morganstein?"

Justin nodded.

"When you're scheduled for nine, you arrive at 8:45. Your shoes should be on. Your uniform should be clean. Your hair should be arranged." Maria made a note on her clipboard without looking up. "Crystal warned me about your learning curve."

"She said..."

"I don't care what Crystal said." Maria looked up then, her expression unchanged. "I care what you do. Starting tomorrow, you'll practice with a weighted tray. Today, posture."

"Maybe I shouldn't even be here," Justin said, hoping to get out of this. It was last night when Nicole informed him that it was time for him to earn his keep, and she had a position in the Paradise gentleman's club for a server.

Justin had begged her not to do it, but she made it very clear there was no other option. She wasn't made of money, she emphasized, and it was time for him to work.

"If you don't want to work here, I'll just let Nicole know," Maria said, picking up her phone.

She was a lot meaner than when he first met Maria months ago. It was clear she didn't recognize him at all. Had he changed that much?

"No," Justin said, putting up his hand. He didn't want Nicole involved. Whenever she got involved, bad things happened. "I'll be here on time tomorrow."

For two weeks, Justin worked on posture alone. Maria corrected the angle of his shoulders, the position of his spine, the tilt of his head. The corset helped, creating the necessary line, but Maria wanted more than an artificial shape — she wanted muscle memory.

"Walk in a little circle three times," she'd say. "Stop. Left heel is turning inward. Again."

In week three, the uniforms arrived.

Maria handed him a garment bag. “Your primary uniforms. Dry cleaning is on Tuesdays and Fridays. Do not get them dirty. Do not wash them yourself.”

Justin took the bag to the dressing room and unzipped it. The black satin bodysuit. The white collar and cuffs. The rabbit ears with their metal clips. Sheer black stockings. Patent heels with a five-inch heel.

He changed slowly, pulling the satin bodysuit on over the corset and underwear, smoothing the fabric across his chest. The stockings required careful rolling up his legs. He clipped the white collar first, then the cuffs, finally the rabbit ears, positioning them in his hair. The heels slid on easily after weeks of wedge sandal practice.

He looked in the dressing room mirror.

The girl looking back at him was wearing a bunny girl uniform and looked incredible in it — thin and curved and tall in the heels, the satin fitting perfectly, the ears somehow pulling the whole thing together. He stood there for a moment, examining the transformation.

Justin went back to Maria.

She looked him up and down, her expression unreadable. She circled him once, touching the bodysuit at his waist, adjusting the angle of his ear cuffs.

“Good,” she said finally. “Now we work.”

The next phase was tray service. Maria weighted the trays — first light, then progressively heavier until they carried the equivalent of eight cocktails. Justin learned to balance with his core, to pivot from the hips, to navigate the training tables without spilling.

The bunny squat came after that.

“A specific technique for serving at low tables,” Maria explained, standing beside the lowest table in the training room. “Deep, controlled crouch. Back straight. Knees together. This way we can serve without a boob popping out or sticking our butts into the face of a customer.”

She demonstrated in an effortless, fluid motion, held it for five full seconds before rising smoothly.

“Your turn.”

Justin tried. Each attempt was corrected. Knees apart. Back too curved. Balance shaky. Heels unsteady.

“Again,” Maria said. “And again.”

Now he knew what Justin had been practicing when he first came to Atlantic City all those months ago.

By week three, Justin could walk to the bar and back without the book falling. Maria added a tray to the exercise — the book on his head, a weighted tray balanced in his hand. By week four, he could perform both tasks



simultaneously.

Customer interaction was taught primarily by Dennis, who demonstrated while Justin observed. They sat at a table near the bar during off-hours, Dennis playing various customer types while Justin provided feedback.

“Hand on the waist,” Dennis said, demonstrating how to deflect a man’s wandering fingers by casually turning to place drinks on the table. “You don’t pull away sharply. You redirect to motion.”

“The smile,” she continued, her face shifting into the practiced warmth. “Not too wide. Just enough to suggest enjoyment without making an invitation.”

Justin watched her work with actual customers during peak hours, observing how she made each man feel attended to without being available, how she listened with genuine interest while scanning for additional drink orders, how she delivered flirtatious comments that landed professionally rather than personally.

“The goal is tips,” Dennis explained one evening as they counted his earnings. “Higher tips come from feeling special without feeling ownership.”

Justin applied these techniques during his training sessions with Maria, practicing customer scenarios with club staff who played various customer types — drunk, flirtatious, aggressive, solitary.

“Your smile is still too reserved,” Maria said after Justin delivered drinks to a particularly challenging “customer” played by a security guard. “More teeth. Don’t stop smiling.”

Justin adjusted his expression, tried again. Maria nodded once, making a note on her clipboard

By the end of week four, Justin could perform the bunny squat in the heels without thinking. Maria watched him perform the sequence: approach table, squat, serve the drinks with napkins, rise, turn away. And he did it with an expression that indicated it had been no difficulty at all.

“Good progress,” she said, checking something off on her clipboard.

Justin nodded, adjusting his cuffs in the mirror behind Maria.



Dennis taught Justin the Jersey Shore girl life as a matter of course, just as they lived it. They were, for all anybody cared to notice, two Jersey Shore girls, and anything they did had to be within the bounds of things Jersey Shore girls did. If they did that, no one paid them any special attention. On Tuesday mornings, they lay by the club’s small pool, Dennis explaining the spray tan maintenance schedule while applying oil to their legs.

“Every ten days, no exceptions,” she said, rubbing the oil into Justin’s calf. “The collah fades after week one. You look patchy. Unprofessional.”

Nail appointments came every two weeks. “Thursday at three,” she reminded him, her own coral nails tapping against the bar counter. “Don’t be late. Tanya will charge double for last-minute cancellations.”

Hair routine took twenty minutes each morning before makeup. “Teasing at the crown,” she demonstrated one morning in Justin’s bathroom, using a comb to create volume. “Not too much. Just enough to say ‘I spent time on this.’”

Dennis taught him the shore dress codes: boardwalk, club, date. “Boardwalk outfits say ‘I’m available to be looked at but not approached alone.’” She held up a pair of tiny denim shorts set from Justin’s closet. “Club outfits say ‘I’m here to have fun but I might leave with the right guy.’”

She pointed to a bodycon dress, then to a leopard print minidress hanging nearby. “Date outfits say ‘I’m expensive but worth it.’ See the difference?”

He learned which boardwalk bars bought drinks for pretty girls and which ones didn’t through direct experience. When he asked why some places were better than others, Dennis explained without emotion.

“Old married men at Pier 17. They pay to sit next to youth and pretend it’s for them.” She stirred her drink with a straw. “Young guys at Ocean Grille want what they think comes with drinks. They’re cheap.”

She called him Gina without hesitation or irony. In the six months since the transformation began, Justin had never heard Dennis call him anything else in private. Not once. Not even in moments of frustration or correction.

“Gina, posture,” she’d say in club training sessions.

“Gina, your fair’s flattening,” she’d note while checking their reflections in shop windows.

Justin noticed this and didn’t know what to do with it, so he didn’t do anything at all. He simply answered to the name that was now his. In fact, if he really thought about it, no one had called him Justin for months.



Back at the club, it was almost starting to feel normal for Justin. It almost felt like a job.

The first full training run was done with the lounge was closed to customers. Tables twelve through seventeen had been set with empty glasses, napkins, ashtrays, and order slips. Maria stood near the service station with her clipboard. Nicole watched from the doorway with her arms folded.

Dennis sat at table fourteen, playing customer.

"Miss," Crystal said, lifting two fingers. "We've been waiting ten minutes."

Justin approached with the loaded tray balanced on her palm.

"I'm sorry about that, honey," she said, voice warm and even. "Let me fix it before you tell Maria on me."

Dennis looked at the glass as it was placed down. "That better be the right one."

"Vodka soda, lime, no straw," Justin said, in his chipper, smooth feminine way. "And I'll take off 10% because the table is wet."

Dennis glanced at Maria.

Maria made no note.

At table sixteen, one of the bartenders leaned back and put a hand near Justin's waist as she served.

Justin nonchalantly shifted away half a step, angled the tray between them, and placed the drink without breaking her smile.

"Careful," he said. "If I drop this, I'm blaming you."

The bartender withdrew his hand.

"Fair," he said.

She moved on.

At the end of the hour, Maria watched Justin return the empty tray to the bar, wipe it, and place it on the stack.

Maria looked down at her clipboard.

"That'll do," she said.

From Maria, that meant excellent.

Nicole gave a single approving nod from the doorway and left.

"Around older customers, use their first name immediately," Dennis taught him during their pre-shift briefing. Dennis was adjusting his ears and Justin was clipping his cuffs. "Men over fifty? They'll tip fifteen percent more. Women over forty? Twenty. Don't ask me why, it just works." He checked the time. "You're on in fifteen. Don't spill. Don't trip. Don't make Maria angry."

"Anything else, Dennis?" Justin asked.

"Yeah. For fuck's sake stop calling me Dennis. We're Gina and Crystal."

Justin giggled. "Okay, Crystal."

"Good luck, Gina."

Gina nodded, smoothing the black satin bodysuit one last time before heading toward the lounge area.



Off-hours had settled into a schedule. Boardwalk in the evenings. Tanning every ten days. Nails every other Thursday. Hair before weekends. Getting free drinks at bars where men bought drinks without needing too much encouragement.

Crystal led, Gina followed, then stopped needing to follow.

At Pier 17, the bartender set two drinks down before they ordered.

“On the guy at the end,” he said.

Crystal looked over. “Married?”

“Very.”

Gina picked up her glass. “Then he buys one round and we leave.”

Crystal nodded. “Good call.”

On the boardwalk, they knew the door guys, the cocktail servers, the girls from the salon, the men who sold sunglasses from carts, the bouncers who pretended not to recognize fake IDs when the night was slow.

“You’re late,” Tanya said as her two steadiest customers came in the door, their bracelets clattering.

“Five minutes,” Crystal said.

Tanya sneered. “Ten.”

In their chairs, Tanya worked the wax strip off Crystal’s brow in one clean pull.

“Ow... oh moy gaawd, Tanya, every time...”

“Hold still. The other one’s worse.”

Gina was in the next chair, foils across her crown, flipping through a magazine without reading it. “Crys, you say that every single time.”

“Because it hoirts every single toime!” Crystal examined her brow in the hand mirror. “Okay. Okay, that looks amazin’. Tanya, you are literally an ahhtist.”

“I know,” Tanya said, and moved to the other brow.

Gina set the magazine down. “I want ‘em a little moah arched this time. Like, dramatic.”

“Dramatic I can do,” Tanya said.

Crystal was already at the nail station, sorting through color swatches. “Gina. Gina. Come look at this one.” She held up a card, a neon yellow. “This is us, right now, this is literally us.”

Gina craned her neck against the foils. “Oh that’s gawjess. Both of us. We’re doin’ that one.”



"Both of youse?" Tanya confirmed, slapping the card on the counter with authority.

Once they had salon fresh looks, it was time to hit the boardwalk. They stopped at a convenience store to grab some extra large drinks and gripped them with their new neon yellow talons.

They moved through down the boardwalk as if this was all a giant club and knew everyone. It was surprising how many faces Gina recognize and how many people called him Gina without asking.

At the corner near the arcade, Crystal stopped to adjust the strap of Gina's spaghetti-strap top.

"Oh moy gaawd, a boob is gonna pop out," Crystal said.

Gina held still while Crystal fixed it.

"Bettah?"

"Bettah."

Gina stepped back, checked the line of the outfit, then turned toward the next bar.



Inside the Paradise gentleman's club, dim lighting, black marble and red velvet created an atmosphere of specific glamour. The bunny girl aesthetic was the whole focus of the place. Nothing really stood out except for the waitresses. Their uniforms, service style, charm and smiles was why people came. Maria ran it with the wisdom of someone who had been doing this for a long time.

Crystal and Gina worked the VIP section. Without question, they were the prettiest girls on the floor. They moved through the room with practiced ease. Deep spray tans. Hair bumped and set. Full makeup. Uniforms fitting perfectly.

Crystal couldn't stop fawning over Gina's new breasts. he had gone from AA to C practically overnight, which made Crystal jealous. She happily gave Gina half her bras to fit her new size.

"I'm gonna grab these empties before Maria sees," Crystal said during a brief pause between tables. "You good with the bachelor pawty?"

"They're foine," Gina replied, adjusting his tray. "Just keep the drinks coming, and they don't make a fuss."

"Table seven being difficult again," Crystal said, loading a tray.

"I know, I saw. I'm givin' him another ten minutes and he'll calm down or I cawl Bowbby," Gina replied, adjusting her collar. She was talking about Bob the bouncer.

Maria watched from across the room as Gina approached the table, performed the bunny squat perfectly, placed drinks with practiced efficiency, and collected empties without breaking rhythm. Maria smiled, letting herself relax. Another successfully trained bunny girl. She didn't need to worry anymore about Gina.



They came in for the first time on a Friday in late July — three of them, filling the doorway before the host could get there. The one in front wore a silver chain thick enough to tow a car, a black button-down open to the sternum, hair slicked like an oil spill. Behind him, the shorter one in the Ed Hardy shirt with the tattoo sleeve was already scanning the room. The third was broad-shouldered with a fade and a sport jacket over a white V-neck, already laughing at something the first one had said.

They took the corner booth. The one in front said his name was Sal. The Ed Hardy one was Marco. The broad one was Dante.

“Welcome to Paradise,” Gina said, as was the standard greeting.

“Whoa, you bet it is,” Marco said, ogling Gina. That was also a standard reply.

“Your fantasy or mine?” Added Sal.

After taking their orders and waiting for them at the bar, Gina carried their first round over. Sal called him “sweetheart” when she set down his drink, not looking up from the drink. He stood at the edge of the table for a moment after he said it, tray under his arm, waiting to see if there was anything else. There wasn't, so he went back to the bar, knowing they were staring at he bunny tail bobbing up and down.

Crystal was already smiling when she returned.

“Those goys,” Crystal said, nodding toward the corner booth without subtlety.

“What about ‘em?”

“They're hilarious!”

Gina looked over at the booth, where all three were arguing about something, volume climbing rapidly. Sal slapped the table. Marco pointed at him. Dante said something that made them both yell louder.

“They're loud,” Gina said.

“And hilarious,” Crystal said. “They're just here havin' fun. Boys will be boys.”

They were back the following Friday. And the Friday after that. By the fourth week they had established a gravitational presence in the corner of Paradise — ordering in rounds, tipping in cash, debating the Jets with a seriousness usually reserved for legal proceedings, and treating the booth like a living room they paid to borrow for the evening.



Gina noticed that the table turnaround was longer than it should have been. Crystal would drop a round, say something, and still be standing there three minutes later while Marco was mid-story. Gina would bring a tray over and find himself waiting at the edge of the conversation longer than he needed to. The other sections didn't run short on coverage. It was simply that the corner booth had a habit of holding them.

Sal called Crystal "babe" and Crystal called him "hon" and refilled his drink before he asked for it. Marco explained the Jets QB situation to Gina one Friday evening in patient, strenuous detail. He told him he didn't care about the Jets, and he was an Eagles fan. He looked at her like he'd said something in a foreign language and then explained it again, more thoroughly. He stayed for the whole explanation, for some reason.



Over time, Crystal's laugh got louder, carrying out of the booth and across the floor. Her comebacks got faster. When Dante made a joke about her tray she fired something back sharp enough that he had to repeat it for Sal. Her reaction was immediate and theatrical: wide eyes, both hands up, head thrown back. She gave as good as she got.

Gina watched from two tables over. Then he was at the booth himself, and Sal was saying something stupid about Marco's jacket, and it was simply easier to match the energy of the table than to avoid it.

"You gotta be kiddin' me right now," she said. "What's all this grief about a jacket? Youse guys complain about everythin'."

Dante said to Marco, "See? She knows youse full'a crap."

The accent surfaced without the deliberate push that voice training had required. The ending G dropped off words. Vowels stretched and held. "Whatever" came out "whatevah" in the normal run of a sentence without Gina registering the shift. "Oh moy Gaaawd" came out almost too often.

What was even more notable was that it was no longer confined to being used on the job. It was just the way he and Crystal talked now.



By the second week of November, the boardwalk was cold enough now for a jacket. The off season was beginning.

Crystal walked with one hand in constant motion, a small rhinestone purse hanging from the crook, a large soda being held in the other hand, bangles clanking against each other, voice carrying out over the sea wind. She was

recounting something from the booth — something Marco said, or tried to say, and what she said back. Her giant sparkling hoops caught the flat grey light off the water. Her hair was up in a high bump that the wind kept moving.

Gina walked beside her with her hands in her knockoff Louis Vuitton jacket pockets, listening. Crystal's voice was carrying well past the two of them.

She sounds and looks like someone from a reality show, Gina thought as he took a sip from his big soda.

Then Crystal continued, "...and so he goes, 'I didn't mean it like that' youse cunts..."

"Oh moy gaaawd," Gina said. "Are you serious right now? He said that?"

"Honest to gaawd," Crystal confirmed. "Looks like we gotta noreaster comin' in," she said feeling the cold.

"Wot's it like in the offseason?" Gina asked, brushing back some har that had flown into his face.

"Tourists disapeeah," Crystal said. "But the gamblahs never go away."

"You think Marco and the goys are tourists?"

"Nah," she replied. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm just askin!" Gina replied. "Get youse mind outta the guttah."



The corner booth went quiet when Marco leaned back and opened his hands the way he did when he was about to make a proposition.

"Youse girls should come out with us tonight. After your shift."

Crystal set the drinks down without spilling any of them. "Where?"

"The strip. Few bars. We know people." Sal shrugged like this settled it.

Gina picked up the empties. "We work till two."

"So we'll meet youse at two-thirty." Dante put his phone down for the first time all evening. "C'mon. It'll be fun."

Crystal looked at Gina. Gina looked at the tray.

"We'll think about it," Crystal said.

In the service corridor, Gina pulled Crystal aside. "We don't know them."

"We know them every Friday for two months."

"We don't *know them* know them."

"Gina." Crystal adjusted her bunny ears without the mirror. "I'm so bored. Doin' each other's hair is fun, but I gotta get out. We're goin'."

At two forty-five they came down the hotel stairs in what their wardrobes had produced for the occasion. Crystal wore a white tube dress, gold hoops to her collarbone, the tall platform sandals that added four inches she didn't need, her hair sprayed to maximum architecture. Gina had the pink zebra print one, short, fitted, off the shoulder, and the black platforms and the hair down her back and the coral nails that had just been redone on Sunday. They hit the lobby doors and the salt air came in off the boardwalk. Marco said from across the street, loud enough to carry, "There they are," and Sal punched his arm like he had lost a bet.

The first bar had no name on the sign that was legible. Inside it was dark and sticky-floored and the music was something with that bass line you felt in your sternum. It was all coming back to Gina. He remembered nights like this. He missed nights like this.

The drinks were sweet so you couldn't taste the alcohol. They boys just kept ordering more. The girls, Gina and Crystal, kept drinking them. Everyone was having the time of their lives.

The crowd at the bar opened for them without being asked. Just rearranged itself the way a crowd does when two girls built to party walk through it.

Crystal had a drink in her hand before she had to ask and Gina had two cigarettes in her mouth. Then Dante pushed through and there were shots and the music changed to something faster and Crystal was already moving, already into it, no transition, no warm-up, just fully immersed. Gina couldn't help but follow his best friend's example. Or at least, try.

Gina was half a step behind. The platform heels on the sticky floor, the pink dress, the hair. She was aware of not being able to keep up for the first two songs. Then a third song started and she stopped thinking and just danced.

The second bar had furniture. That was the problem, or not the problem depending on your perspective. Crystal got onto the table first. Gina followed without deliberation, the platforms finding the surface, and for approximately four minutes they were the tallest girls in the room. Then the bouncer arrived, pointing.

They got out ahead of the conversation. Crystal hit the sidewalk laughing with her heels in her hand, mascara melting slightly at the corner from the sweat, already pointing at the next sign down the strip. Gina came out behind her laughing hard enough that he had to stop walking for a second.

The third bar was calmer, which was relative. Two men at the end of the bar were on vacation and made this apparent within thirty seconds of introduction. They were very pleased about the shots they bought. They announced this.

Gina took the glass. Threw it back. The men cheered.

It registered somewhere, that moment. Filed itself without comment. By then, Marco and Dante reappeared, having lost track of their date for a couple



of hours. They practically picked them up at the waist, the girls giggling as they did.

Crystal was taken by the tall dark-haired Dante to the back booth. He had a gold chain which seemed to captivate her inebriated mind. Within twenty minutes her lips were melding with his, her arms wrapped around his neck and he was trying to scale him in her bare feet. She looked back once at Gina from across the room. One raised eyebrow. Then she was swept out of the bar as she blew Gina a kiss.

Meanwhile, Marco was telling Gina he was the most beautiful girl on the strip. He said earnestly, like he was pleading with Gina to admit they were pretty and sexy, completely certain Gina would come around. He thought of Gina as a challenge. Somewhat aloof, a hint of tomboy in her, but he knew a sex maniac was in there somewhere, of this he seemed certain.

Gina felt the hesitation arrive, the surviving remnant of his old self. It tried to run the numbers. It got halfway through the first set of equations.

Marco asked him to dance.

His hands were warm at her waist. The music was loud and the bar was hot and the calculation kept losing its place and having to start over, and at some point he stopped starting over.

His hotel was two floors up. Generic, clean. It seemed like it was too nice to defile. Gina had a brief moment. A very brief moment. His life flashed before his eyes, but he shook his head and it stopped.

The door slammed shut, and Marco was on him before the latch even clicked. He didn't kiss him. He bit him neck, a hard, possessive nip that made Gina gasp and arch against him. His hands were everywhere, yanking the pink dress up over him hips, tearing at the strap until it snapped with a sharp sound that was swallowed by the sound of moaning.

"You're a fuckin' animal, I know it," he growled, spinning him around and shoving him face-first onto the bedspread. He kicked his legs apart with his knee, his hands rough on him ass, spreading his cheeks.

"What the fuck is this? I can't get it off." Marco was tugging at Gina's gaff. He knew he couldn't let Marco succeed. But just like any well-trained bunny girl would, he deflected his attempt.

"It's a chastity belt," Gina shot back, pushing back against him, the challenge in his voice clear. "You think you can get past it?"

He answered with his cock, not with words. He spat on his puckered asshole for lube, then slammed into him, a single, brutal thrust that knocked the air out of Gina's lungs and made him see stars. It wasn't gentle. It wasn't supposed to be. It was a raw, sweaty, punishing rhythm, the headboard slamming against the wall in time with his grunts and him cries. He was ramming him, taking what

he wanted, and Gina met him thrust for thrust, his long nails digging into the cheap mattress, screaming obscenities that would have made a sailor blush.

“Is that all you got?” Gina shrieked over the sound of their bodies colliding. “My grandmother fucks harder than this!”

Marco pulled out, flipped him over with a strength that was both terrifying and exhilarating, and grabbed a fistful of his hair. “Suck it,” he commanded, shoving himself into his mouth.

Gina took him deep, his eyes watering, his jaw aching, but he didn't gag. He worked him with a furious, desperate energy, his head bobbing, his tongue swirling, one hand gripping his thigh and the other sneaking down to press his own cock flat against his pelvis, hiding it in the shadows and the frantic motion. He was loud, cursing, calling him every filthy name in the book, and he reveled in it, sucking him until he was on the verge, then pulling back just to watch him swear and lose control.

They trashed the room. A lamp toppled when Marco threw him against the wall, his back hitting the plaster with a dull thud. The cheap nightstand drawer was ripped out and its contents. A Gideon Bible, remote control, stained notepad were scattered across the floor. They argued the entire time, a constant stream of insults and dares.

“You like that, you little slut?” he'd pant, slapping him ass hard enough to leave a red handprint.

“It's pathetic, you limp-dicked motherfucker!” he'd scream back, spitting in his face before he'd kiss him, a violent clash of teeth and tongue. “You can't fuck worth shit!”

He threw Gina back on the bed, Gina's tanned supple legs over his shoulders, and entered his ass again, this time with a ferocity that bordered on rage. The bed groaned in protest. The springs screamed. Gina screamed with them, a raw, guttural sound of pure, unadulterated pleasure. All of the sudden, he was a creature of pure sensation, his body a conduit for the raunchy, animalistic energy flowing between them. He satisfied Marco in every way he could, his body a playground for his desires, his mind a blank slate where only the present moment existed. There was no Justin. There was no past. Gina's last coherent thought about Justin Morris — about the boy on the bus with two twenties, about Philly, about who she'd been before — arrived late and was interrupted by the last of several overwhelming orgasms.

There was only Marco, and the sweat, and the pain, and the blinding, all-consuming pleasure of being completely and utterly used.

As they gradually came to a stop, Marco rolled over, already asleep. Gina picked at his beautiful slicked hair for a few moments with her long talons.

Marco was such a Guido, and for some reason, Gina was in love. He was in love with a Guido, and it felt all kinds of right. Maybe this guy wouldn't move



to Florida without letting him know. Maybe he wouldn't lie about why he had to break into a laptop and risk everything based on his insecurities. Maybe he wouldn't stick him in a bunny suit to get drunk men to buy awful drinks at tourist prices. Marco wouldn't do that to him. Marco was different. A girl could do worse than fall in love with Marco. A girl like he pretty much already was.

She dressed in the dark. The pink dress. The platforms. She found her clutch under the chair. In the bathroom mirror she fixed her lipstick, and looked at herself under the fluorescent light.

She felt happy in a way that had no particular explanation. She didn't want to explain it. Not anyone, not to herself.

Crystal was in the corridor three doors down. Heels in hand. Mascara fully wrecked. Grinning the grin of someone who had resolved the evening to their complete satisfaction.

They looked at each other. Two guidettes with freshly-fucked hair.

They started laughing and could not stop, and had to hold onto the corridor wall.

The girls hit two more bars in what was left of the night. Louder than the ones before. At one point they were both dancing on the bar and nobody asked them to get down. At another point there were more shots and the music was too loud to talk over and they couldn't stand and they couldn't think and so nobody tried.

On the boardwalk at four in the morning, shoes off, the sand cold under their feet. The ocean black and loud in the dark, the salt coming off the water, the lights of the strip behind them going amber and pale in the pre-dawn.

Crystal passed her friend a lit cigarette. "So?"

Gina looked at the water.

"I don't know what I was so worried about."

They walked home along the water. The Shore behind them and ahead of them. Neither of them looked back.



Gina found her usual afternoon businessman, Mr. Davis, at VIP section three.

"There's my girl," the older man said as Gina approached in her jaw-dropping beauty. Few girls could wear the bunny girl uniform and do it justice, and Gina's shapely body and bright smile made the uniform come alive in ways it just didn't for everyone else.

"Hey, Mr. Davis," she said as she got ready to take his order. "My favorite customer."

Maria watched from the side station, her clipboard in hand. She made one note when a new girl dropped a napkin, then looked over at Crystal and Gina. She wished they could all be as good as Crystal and Gina.

Crystal pulled Gina aside during a break, in the corridor outside the kitchen, the noise of the club muffled behind the door.

"Nicole arranged something," Crystal said, checking her lipstick in a small compact. "For both of us."

Gina adjusted her ear cuffs. "What kind of something?"

"Surgery. Gender confirmation." Crystal snapped the compact shut. "She wants to pay for it. Complete everything."

Gina stopped moving.

"I'm going," Crystal continued, her voice calm in the way of someone who had already decided. "End of the year. Bangkok. Best surgeon. Tops."

Crystal wasn't asking Gina to decide the same way, just telling her what she had decided.

"I need to think about it," Gina said, her voice less sure than it had been all night.

Crystal nodded once. "The offer's there if you want it." She checked the hallway clock. "Our break's almost over."

Gina was not calm about it. She found Nicole in her office between the main course and dessert service. The door was slightly open. Gina didn't knock.

"I need to talk to you," Gina said, sitting down across the desk without being invited.

Nicole looked up from a spreadsheet. "Maria is in charge of your breaks."

"This won't take long." Gina placed her hands flat on the desk. "I'm not Dennis. I didn't choose this. I am not a goil one second longer than I gotta be. And I am absolutely not having surgery."

Nicole saved her document and turned her full attention to Gina.

"Crystal is going," Nicole said, her voice even. "Happily."

"That's her choice."

"It's a choice I'm offering you too." She produced an ID from under her desk. "This ID is for Gina Morganstein. I had an old friend put it together. It's yours if you want it."

"I'm not interested. You loid to me. Or maybe she loid to me. I still don't know. But I can't remain here, and not know. I'm going to get out of here as soon as I can."

"I can't really say if anyone has lied to you."

"I know you loid. I *know* it."

Nicole nodded slowly, considering. She shrugged. "The offer remains open if you change your mind."

"I won't."

When Gina finished, Nicole stood and walked around the desk to stand directly in front of him.

Then she said something — several things — in the low voice Gina recognized from when he was being trained to be a girl. From when she saw Nicole take that employee aside and change his mind. It was the voice she used when she wanted to talk someone into something. Gina listened.

Twelve minutes later, he returned to the floor.

Crystal saw her best friend back on the floor and waited to chat with her at the bar. "Did you see Nicole? What did you decide?"

Gina grinned. "*Fuck yeah* is what I decided! Thailand better be ready for the two biggest pawty gals in the AC!"

Crystal hugged her with a girlish squeal, attracting everyone's attention.



“But I thought were weren’t gonna!” Crystal said.

“Have you lost yer moind? Me? Shore forevah!”

“But you... Oh, who cares?” Crystal said, and hugged her friend again.

“Look, I even got moy ID!” Gina said, pulling Gina Morganstein’s ID out of her cleavage and flashing it proudly. The ID, not the cleavage.

After Maria came in to shoo them back to work, Gina walked back over to Mr. Davis’s table with his drink.

“Well,” Mr. Davis said when Gina approached his table. “I was hoping you’d return. I thought you had forgotten me.”

Gina placed her hand on her hip, leaning close. “Oh moy gaawd, youse guys get so impatient! Would I leave my best customer waiting? I’m nevah gonna leave yew, mistah Davis! You can count on a Joisey Shore girl!”



The morning after found them in the elevator at ten. Both in oversized t-shirts and tiny shorts and platforms, the specific off-duty look of girls who were out until four and were not apologizing for it. Crystal had a drink. Gina had a drink. Both had sunglasses on inside.

“We need to tan,” Crystal said, pressing the button for the ground floor. “I’m starting to fade.”

“I know, I booked us both already for a touch-up,” Gina replied, her voice slightly rough from tequila and talking over music.

“Did I forward you the dick pic Marco sent this morning?”

“He sent you a dick pic?”

Gina laughed, adjusting her oversized t-shirt. “He sent me three.”

“What did you say?”

“I said we’ll see.”

“That’s what you always say.”

Gina giggled. “It always works.”

Their conversations were spoken in the shorthand of people who lived together and worked together and knew each other completely.

The elevator opened to the lobby, where Nicole was at the front desk talking to two people: a man in his fifties, broad-shouldered, the kind of man who used to be athletic, a woman beside him, dark-haired, her hands clasped in front of her, the nervous posture of someone who is trying not to show how worried they are.

They were here looking for their son, in the last place he was seen. The mother's eyes were red at the edges. The father was doing the thing men do when they're scared, which is to look very calm and ask very curt questions.

"Thank you for your time," the father was saying as the girls stepped out. "We just need to follow every lead."

Nicole was explaining, warmly and with complete conviction, that she hadn't seen Justin in eight months, that he got in some trouble with the police, that he left suddenly, that she had no idea where he went.

"I *do* hope he is alright," Nicole said.

"The little bastard better be. Cuz I'm gonna kill him myself!" Justin's dad said. "Why would he put us through this?"

"Babe, your heart..." his wife said.

"Most of my employees are women. They seem to cause less trouble. Justin was the last man I hired, as a matter of fact."

"Sounds like you don't have much use for men around here," the father said.

Nicole looked at him for a moment.

"I find they tend to cause more problems than they solve."

The father laughed, uncomfortable at the veiled insult. The mother was not listening. The mother was looking at the elevator.

She was looking at Gina.

Gina had her giant smoky sunglasses on, a cigarette dangling from her filled lips and her big drink in her hand. Her shirt read "Jersey Bitch" on it.

"I'm thinking the neon pink again but Tanya says I should try the white and I think she's wrong," she said to Crystal. She was wearing tiny daisy duke denim shorts with a sparkling rhinestone buckle that said "Princess" on it, platform sandals and her hair was in a messy tease with a rhinestone clip to keep her bump in place.

The mother went very still.

Something crossed her mind. It was recognition. The kind only a mother can have seeing their child. She took a step toward the elevator.

Gina kept talking to Crystal. "The white is fine if you're going for understated but I'm *not* going for understated, I'm going for Joisey Shore, which means the neon pink!"

Crystal said "You're impowssible, G-licious."

"I know. I'm a fussy cunt," she said, and they both laughed.

The mother stopped.

She looked at the girl in the elevator closer. The spray tan, the nails, the accent, the ease of her posture, the way she moved, the way she laughed, and



the recognition that was almost there retreated. She made a mistake. This was not her son. Her son did not sound like that, did not look like that. There was nothing of her son in this person.

She let Gina walk past without speaking.

“We did contact you when he left,” Nicole said to the father. “I wish he’d reached out since then.”

“He hasn’t,” the father said.

“I’m sorry.”

The mother looked down at her clasped hands. “I can’t have people thinking I’m a bad mother!” she said. “What did I do to deserve such a son?”

Gina and Crystal reached the corridor leading away from the lobby. AS they did, a Guido in a black tank that had “Italia” in bold letters across the top walked by. The light shone off his slicked-back hair almost as much as the huge chains draped around his massive neck. His tight pants were tight enough to let you know how much change he had in his pockets and that he was circumcised. A tribal tat on his shoulder was fading into bluish grey against his overly bronzed skin.

Gina and Crystal leaned back as they walked, watching him approach, and swiveled as he passed. “I saw him foist,” Gina said.

“Well I’m gonna see him *next*,” Crystal said.

Behind them, the father said, “If he calls here, you’ll contact us.”

“Immediately,” Nicole said.

She watched the parents turn away. She felt bad for them, but then again, just like Dennis’s parents, they were pretty lousy at being parents. They didn’t deserve kids. She could probably arrange to have one of her special “talks” with them and relieve them of the guilt and memories of Justin, but they didn’t deserve peace of mind.

She was okay with what she had done to Justin and Dennis. She got cheap employees for her club, employees who wouldn’t ever quit, and she had saved two girls from being male for the rest of their lives. In a year or two, taking 40% of their wages, they’d earn back what she had spent on the surgery and start working for profit. Her profit. A reasonable price to pay to be carefree girls living in a city full of handsome men.

Nicole was the hero in her story.

As the girls walked to the front doors in the foyer, Gina did not turn back.

The foyer was quiet, carpeted, with framed photographs of the old hotel along the walls. Once they were out of sight of the lobby, Crystal stopped.

Gina stopped too.

Crystal looked at Gina over her sunglasses.



Gina looked back.

They raised their hands and high-fived. A sharp, clean crack in the quiet corridor.

Crystal took another sip of her oversized soda. “Neon pink?”

“Neon pink.”

“Gold accent?”

“Maybe.”

“Spray tan at three-thirty.”

“Nails at two.”

“Hair before our shift?”

“Oh moy gaawd, yes. I’ll meet you at Tanya’s.”

“I’ll see you then.” They air-kissed their cheeks as they parted, ready for their different shopping adventures.

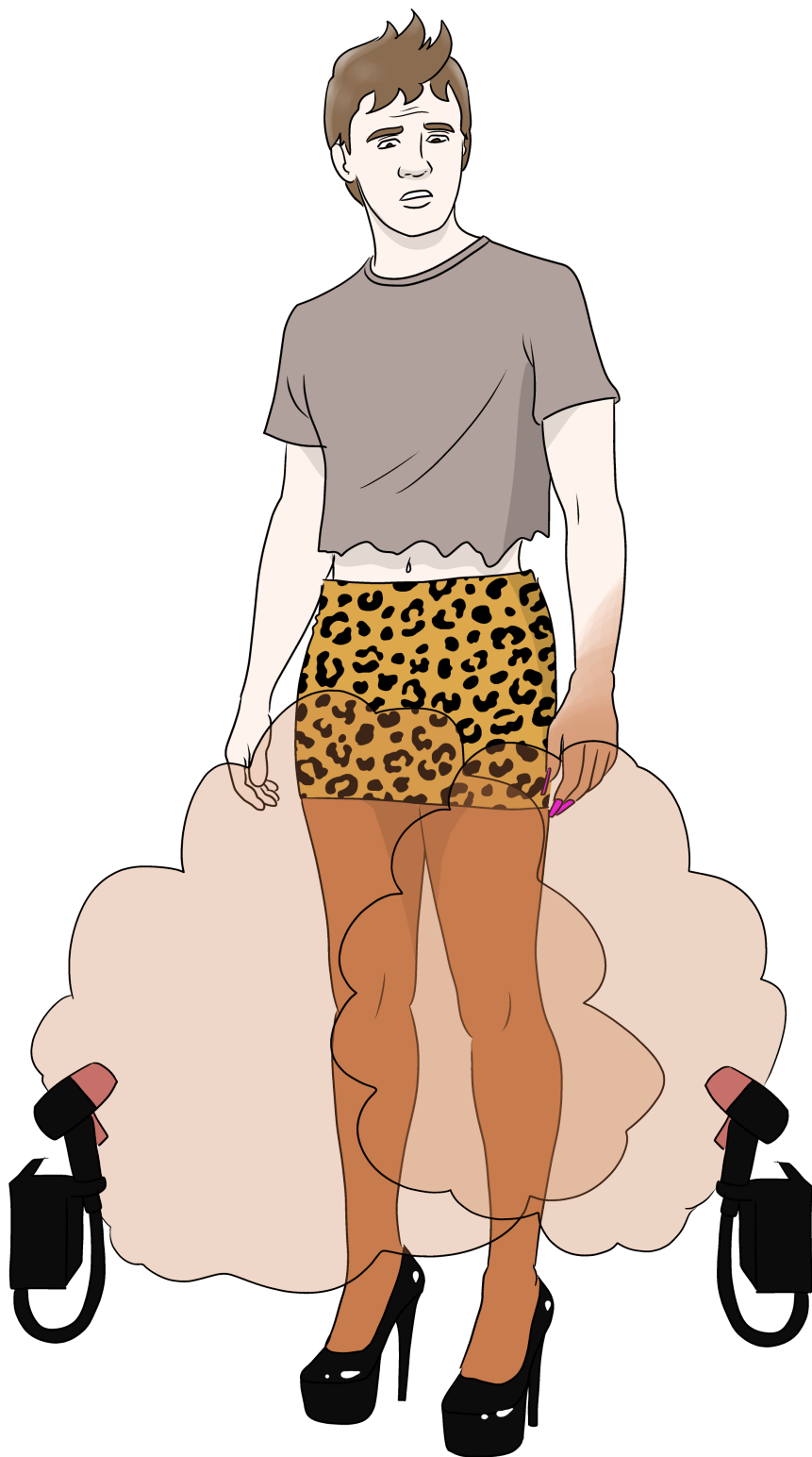
They headed out the front doors, two Jersey Shore girls with nowhere to be and a whole new summer still in front of them.

It was a short drive from Philadelphia to Atlantic City, but for Justin Morris, he’d never drive it again. Gina Morganstein, queen of the boardwalk, was not interested in the Liberty Bell, Constitution Hall, Gritty or cheesesteaks. Her future was shots at dawn, screaming on her back, wiping spray tan out of her eyes, and of course, Guidos that gave her the validation that her life so far had withheld.

“Hey, cabs are here, babes!” Gina said as their rides came up the driveway.

The End





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By Joe Six-Pack. Kelley Sue's convinced a French exchange student to disguise himself as a girl. What happens when she realizes he has no intention of returning back home? Book / 77 pages / 22 illustrations

## **The Substitute Ski Bunny**

By Joe Six-Pack. Walker is a young man who's fallen in love with a girl. The only way he can get close to her is to dress up and become her roommate. It's not going to go according to plan, though. Book / 132 pages / 31 illustrations

## **My Brother, My Mother, My Doll**

By Joe Six-Pack. Seven year old Amelia has made a wish. A wish that she had a mother more like her doll, and that her brother weren't so mean. Her family is about to have their lives turned inside-out. Book / 109 pages / 34 illustrations

## **The Princess Center**

By Cheryl Lynn. Jeffrey wanted everything his brother Alan had. He was willing to to any length to get it, even to send Alan to... The Princess Center. Book / 85 pages / 26 illustrations

## **Tales of Transformation**

### **He's the Wrong Girl**

"Office Chemistry" by Joe Six-Pack. James had to fill in at the reception desk. Problem is, the business is a bio-genetics company. And all of the sudden the coffee tastes funny. Book / 53 pages / 14 illustrations

## **City Boy, Country Girl**

By Joe Six-Pack. Richard's successful city life is interrupted when a sheep he wants to fleece needs urgent care out in the country. But instead of returning home, all Richard's wife hears are a series of suspicious excuses. Revised in 2019. Book / 92 pages / 34 illustrations

## **Thames Greene**

By James J Craft. Ira wanted something better for his family. A new start. But in Thames Greene, everyone's getting a new start, whether they want it or not. Book / 77 pages / 26 illustrations

## **Hiding in High Heels**

"How Not to be a Sissy" By Joe Six-Pack. Vince was on the run from people who wanted their millions back. Howard was a friend with a funny little idea and a knack for making subliminal CDs. Mini-Pix / 48 pages / 15 illustrations

## **A Blessing in Disguise**

By KK, illustrations by Kannel. Jay was a witness to a murder, and now he's the target of a vicious criminal. Resorting to a female disguise, he becomes trapped with no way out. Book / 84 pages / 16 illustrations

## **I'm Your Dolly**

"Barbie-in-a-Box" By Joe Six-Pack. Tyler wasn't much of a boyfriend anymore. Jessica wanted to throw him out, but then a better idea came to her, in the form of the Barbie-in-a-Box service. Tyler better get used to pink. Book / 103 pages / 20 illustrations

## **Winning is Everything**

"Costume drama" by Joe Six-Pack. Seth made a funny little bet for Halloween. He needed to pull off the impersonation of a Cheerleader for a party. What's at stake? 100 million dollars and his manhood. Book / 215 pages / 37 illustrations

## **His Life as a Trophy Wife**

By Joe Six-Pack. Nick had a great life, but then it evaporated. Now he's down on his luck. In steps a wealthy executive willing to pay him handsomely to pretend to be his wife. What can it hurt? Revised in 2018. Book / 256 pages / 39 illustrations

## **Male Monday, Girl Friday**

"Hey, Cutie!" by James J Craft. Daniel is going to be promoted from his average life to an exciting executive position. At least, that's what his bosses are telling him. They may not be telling him everything. Book / 58 pages / 20 illustrations

## **The Happiest Place on Earth**

From the files of TGStories.com: "The Fairest One of All" By Joe Six-Pack. Will is a kid looking for a job. He gets one, performing as Snow White at a theme park. For Will, he doesn't suspect that playing the role and wearing the costume is slowly changing him, day by day. Book / 51 pages / 21 illustrations

## **Hello, Nurse**

From the files of TGStories.com: "Quality Health Care". Dane is filling in as a nurse for his pal Jimmy at his new office. Although both are doctors, Dane begins to take to his new role as a nurse. Soon, he feels compelled to be the ideal nurse. Book / 44 pages / 15 illustrations

## **My Boss, The Bimbo**

"If I Were a Betting (Wo)Man" By James J Craft, illustrations by blackshirtboy. CEO Lucas has a superiority complex. When his long-suffering secretary is able to feed into Lucas' competitive nature, he'll make any bet to prove his dominance over women. Book / 38 pages / 10 illustrations

## **He's the Girl They Want**

"Rallies" by Joe Six-Pack. Spencer has a great new executive job in the food service industry, but first he's got to learn the ropes of the business by waiting on tables. He just doesn't quite fit in with the cheerleader theme. Yet. Book / 63 pages / 22 illustrations

## **Demoted and Degraded**

"Trixie the Secretary" by Angela J. Cindy didn't much like Tom Jones attitude and his advances, so when she has the opportunity to help take the wind out of his sails, she takes it. But she had no idea that it was all designed to make Tom into Trixie the secretary. Book / 87 pages / 17 illustrations

## **I, Candy**

"Sissy Sweets" by James J Craft, illustrations by rocketxpert. Inheriting his family's bakery requires this young man to become the new face of the business. A female face. Book / 45 pages / 15 illustrations

## **Boyz II Girlz**

"The Making of the Ballroom Brats" by Joe Six-Pack. The Ballroom Brats become the newest worldwide celebrity sensation. How did four unsuspecting guys at a fast food joint become the hottest girl group in music? Book / 113 pages / 34 illustrations

## **His Strangest Desire**

"Employee of the Month" by Joe Six-Pack. Mick is declared Employee of the Month, and he's going to find himself hurtling headlong into facing his weirdest inner desire. Book / 59 pages / 19 illustrations

## **Hard Time or High Heels**

"I'm Turning into My Mother" by James J Craft, illustrations by rocketxpert. Colby got deep into debt to a local gangster. Before long, he's on the arm of that very same gangster as his reluctant girlfriend. Book / 75 pages / 20 illustrations

## **Seriously Skirted**

"The Show Piece" by KK. Illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Mel finds work at a clinic as a secretary. He slowly begins to fit to role. Book / 75 pages / 19 illustrations

## **From Mister to Sister**

Story by Melissa N., illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Dan just wanted to help guide his girlfriend's sister out of her depression. Instead, he's being guided out of his manhood. Book / 84 pages / 24 illustrations

## **The Russian Girl**

Story by Melissa N., illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Casey's wife has had enough of watching him kill himself with work, so she forces him out of his comfort zone... Into the life of a female stripper. Book / 196 pages / 30 illustrations

## **Swindled into Skirts**

"Beta Male" by Joe Six-Pack. Kyle inherited a multi-million dollar mansion in southern California. He begins to adjust to the Cali lifestyle, but his adjustments seems to have a decidedly feminine flavor to them. Book / 78 pages / 23 illustration

## **Mergers & Acquisitions**

Story by James J. Craft, Illustrations by Sortimid. Mark is a disaffected retail salesperson, and after a takeover of his store, he finds himself selling feminine fashion... and struggling to embrace everything about it. Book / 103 pages / 31 illustration

## **Suddenly a Secretary**

Story & art by Joe Six-Pack. Rock guitarist Mick has become obsessed with following the life of secretary Lori Chandler through her inter-office email messages. Soon, Mick is taking her place. Book / 133 pages / 30 illustrations

## **Stories of the Supernatural**

### **A Change for the Better**

"Do-Overs" by Joe Six-Pack. Evan wants a chance to do over his biggest mistake. He gets the chance, but he keeps wanting his new life to be a little bit better than the last. Book / 59 pages / 18 color illustrations

### **Changed and Rearranged**

"Wrongs Make Wright" By Joe Six-Pack. Chris and Matt were rivals. Then, Matt decided to show everyone how smart he truly was by impersonating a teacher. But the disguise becomes more and more real, much to Chris' dismay. Book / 74 pages / 19 illustrations

### **From Pals to Gals**

From the files of TGStories.com: "Mandate of the People" By Joe Six-Pack. Teens Jeremy and Stewart are good friends, but a bit thick in the noggin. When they jokingly nominate each other for Prom Queen, they slowly become the perfect candidates, thanks to some magic. Book / 45 pages / 16 illustrations

### **A High-Heeled Halloween**

Story & art by Joe Six-Pack. A costume shop has four spooky tales to tell this Halloween, where the price you pay for your costume is far more than money. Book / 128 pages / 34 illustrations

## **Born on Black Friday**

Story & art by Joe Six-Pack. Malcom Balford was forced to go shopping on Black Friday. What he finds at the mall may mean that Malcom will never leave. Book / 57 pages/ 17 illustrations.

## **In the Family Way**

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. The Finch brothers are trying to catfish a man out of his money. To do so, they dress up as mother and daughter. But their impersonations slowly seem to be taking them over. Book / 182 pages / 42 illustrations

## **Crossed Fiction**

### **Sisters for the Summer**

"Camp Counseling" By Joe Six-Pack. Brock McCade always thought of himself as a real man, or at least he would be one, someday. After summer camp, he's no longer so sure. Book / 76 pages / 17 illustrations

### **They're the Girls for the Job**

"Peace and Harmony" By James J Craft. Illustrations by blackshirtboy. Pete and Harmon need jobs bad. How far would they have to go to get them? Book / 64 pages / 19 illustrations

### **Blondie's Lost Summer**

By KK. Illustrations by Fraylim. Carl's dream summer was about to become three months of dresses, heels and makeup. Book / 159 pages / 48 illustrations

### **Blondie's Lost Year**

By KK. Illustrations by Fraylim. Book Two in the Blondie Series. Carl's trip to Florida has been horrible enough, trapped in dresses and makeup. Now, high school has presented a whole new level of humiliation for him. Book / 221 pages / 52 illustrations

### **Blondie He's Not**

Story by KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Mark got a job at a salon, and fell in love with one of the customers. Problem was that customer was Candi "Blondie" Wethers, and what happened to Candi was about to happen to Mark. Book / 151 pages / 40 illustrations

## **I Never Wanted to be a Woman**

"Politically Corrected" By Cheryl Lynn.

Illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Michael's politically active mother has decided she's going to make her hippie son over into the daughter she always wanted. Book / 64 pages / 19 illustrations

## **If the Shoes Fit**

"Hand Me Downs" By KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Sydney is a teen who is just trying to make it through the summer with no money. He finds himself wearing hand-me-downs from his sister, and that takes his life in a whole new direction. Book / 98 pages / 30 illustrations

## **The Boy's Guide to Girlhood**

Story by KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Dweeb Kenny and cool Rex find themselves trapped in a Principal's twisted scheme, and only one of them is going to get out in tact. Book / 109 pages / 32 illustrations

## **Fashion Victims**

Story by Lauren Bliss, illustrations by Fraylim. Teenage boy Jamie just needed clothes for school. Oh, he's going to get clothes for school. Just not male ones. Will he ever need male clothes again? Book / 67 pages / 26 illustrations

## **The Boy's Guide to Girlhood**

Story by KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Dweeb Kenny and cool Rex find themselves trapped in a Principal's twisted scheme, and only one of them is going to get out in tact. Book / 109 pages / 32 illustrations

## **The Making of a Beach Bunny**

Story by KK & Fraylim, illustrations by Fraylim. Before heading off to college, John wanted to spend his last normal summer at the old rental summer house with his friend Stanley. There was nothing about this summer that would be normal. Book / 134 pages / 58 illustrations

## **Medical Miss-Practice**

Story by KK & Fraylim, illustrations by Fraylim. Jerry just needed a medical procedure. He came out with two big new problems and a whole new life. Now he's losing everything he loves, piece by piece. Book / 95 pages / 51 black & white illustrations

## **12 Days of Christmas**

Story by KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Paul was a rising executive, but he had a secret embezzlement scheme. Now he's being blackmailed into skirts day-by-day in the 12 days of Christmas. Book / 74 pages / 21 illustrations

## **Seriously Sissified**

## **A Family Femmed**

"The Femmed Family Robinson" by James J. Craft & Cheryl Lynn, illustrations by Sortimid. The Robinson boys all had dreams of their own, once. Now they have new ones, thanks to their stepmother. Book /96 pages / 29 color illustrations

## **Forever Femmed**

Story by James J. Craft & Cheryl Lynn, illustrations by Sortimid. "A Family Femmed's" Deborah is still hard at work, flipping men into sissies and selling them to the highest bidder. But this time, there's a new wrinkle. Book / 108 pages / 28 illustrations

## **Auntie's Girl Time**

By Cheryl Lynn. David was just a young teenage boy who wanted all the things in life a man could look forward to. His aunt, though, is going to make sure he never gets them. Book / 79 pages / 20 illustrations

## **Revenge of the Cheerleaders**

"Pansy Cheers" By Angela J. Patrick Sears was a football player trying to sleep with every cheerleader at his small college. He'd have to pay for his conquests. Book / 116 pages / 19 illustrations

## **He's Got His Mind Maid Up**

By James J. Craft. Illustrations by kinkyrocket. Corey has just a sliver of a chance to get into college, but that chance involves becoming his stepmother's maid. And she wants him to fit both the role and the dress. Book / 68 pages / 16 illustrations

## **Fated for Femininity**

Story by KK, illustrations by RocketXpert. When a web page shows Evan having sex with another boy, the poor kid is chased out of town — right into the arms of a gender therapist who has her own agenda. Book / 70 pages / 15 illustrations

## **Un-Boxed & Undone**

By James J. Craft, illustrations by Banedearg with additional art by Joe Six-Pack. Caleb is struggling to get his YouTube career started. When he gets some strange shipments of makeup and clothes, he finds his channel suddenly taking off - but can he control it? A picture story. Book / 41 Pages / 33 illustrations

## **Web Classics Revisited**

## **Two Forms of ID**

By Joe Six-Pack. Harvey had the unusual ability to convincingly imitate a teenage girl. In desperation, he has to use that talent to make some money. But when is enough enough? Paperback / 194 pages / text only

## **Barbie's Life**

Story & Art by Melissa N. Chris was a student actor who said he could play any role. A disgruntled girlfriend and playwright are about to see if he'll be able to play the lead role in... Barbie's Life. Book / 55 pages / 21 rendered images

## **Amazon.com Kindle books**

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Working His Way into Skirts (Part 2)

He Gave at the Office (Part 3)

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