ADULTS ONLY

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STEALING THE JEWELS

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STEALING THE JEWELS

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A Tales of Transformation story



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Stealing the Jewels

Lit only be the headlights from the car they stole, the three young men were crowded in a tight circle. Even in the middle of the night, with no one around, they still didn't want anyone to see what they were doing. They would be dead within hours.

That is, unless they could save themselves. The didn't ask for this, but there they were. Criminals, on the run from every law enforcement agency in the country, and from the people who had paid them to do the job.

Nate had been drinking his woes away last night when he was approached by a large, mean looking thug. At first he thought he was in for a some kinda fight. But instead, he had a proposal. He had found Nate at the right time. He'd just lost his trucking job, and any chance of making his rent.

"You look like you've got a story," the thug said. "Kind of hard up?"

"None of your business," Nate replied.

Two more beers and Nate was more than willing to spill his story. He'd been driving a truck for over three months, and he'd started to think he had a good thing going. No complaints, regular hours, a steady paycheck. He could see the allure of having a regular job.

Then, this morning, it was all done. He came to the depot and they took his ID, gave him a check for what he was owed and told him to leave the property in five minutes.

"So you can drive a truck," the man said.

"Not much of a skill," Nate answered. "A lot of people can. People cheaper than me, I guess."

"Corporations, huh? They do whatever the fuck they want."

"Corporations," Nate answered, taking a sip.

Of course, it hadn't been a corporation that had fired Nate specifically. No, he was fired because he was being set up. His boss knew how hard up Nate was. He knew how he'd do anything for money. The thug who was buying Nate another beer worked for him. He'd been sent here to recruit Nate, and he knew that Nate would take it.

"I need a truck taken from downtown to a warehouse. You get paid when you deliver it. Five hundred now, five hundred on delivery."

Nate studied the man's eyes. They were not used to being nice and pleasant. The offer was all kinds of wrong, but the rent number was all Nate could think about. It was that or start begging on the street.

"That's a lot for a drive across town," Nate said.

"Well, the truck isn't ours," the man replied. "That's the tricky part."

At a construction site near the airport, the three young men had gathered that night. Nate had recruited Aaron and Jayden, two of his buddies he'd met in his time in the city. Jayden was delivering dinners uptown, making less than enough to get by, but able to keep the lights on. He knew the city like the back of his hand by this point, and how to get a payload across town in record time. Aaron was in construction, at least he was at the moment, and he knew how to hotwire a car.

They were the logical choices. A little negotiation with the thug, and he was going to give them $250 each for their contribution to the effort.

By the next night, with steam coming rom the sewers and the crossing lights flashing red, Aaron and Jayden were helping him steal the truck. The first clue that something was wrong was when they realized it was outside a museum.

At 2:37 *precisely* they were told they needed to be on a certain street corner. At that time, they needed to be ready to get to a truck that would be waiting 57 feet away for 123 seconds before someone came for it.

At 2:37, *precisely,* there were no security guards. The truck was unattended. Nate had the door open, Aaron took care of the ignition. In less than 123 seconds, they were ready to go.

They expected stolen goods, that was obvious. Something like an old tapestry or a stone column from an Aztec civilization. Something that had no value to them, or anybody else, but was valuable to the right people. There was just a single lonely crate in the truck. A metal reinforced crate. Simple enough. They fired up the truck and headed off.

Then Jayden, as he lost his balance around a turn, stumbled against the crate, and its lid shifted open.

The jewels caught the weak overhead light, sparkling and shining. The curse of generations, that kind of shine.

For a few seconds, nobody spoke. Nate saw the royal insignia embedded in the velvet. Jayden backed away from the crate.

"This is a big deal," Jayden said.

Aaron picked up one of the necklaces. It weighed ten pounds and was gold, diamonds, rubies and emeralds arranged in a gaudy display of opulence. "This can't be real."

Nate tried to keep his voice steady. "This is a setup."

"What do you mean?" Jayden asked, panic showing in his eyes.

"I was told this was just a job, a quick one — but this is a heist," Nate said. "They don't let guys like us handle this kind of thing. It's too valuable. The only reason they wanted us is so we can take the blame if we get caught."

"So we get arrested when the cops come?" Aaron asked. "They throw us in jail?"

"Aaron, buddy, the cops will only find corpses," Nate said. "We'll be killed before we can talk."

"Killed?"

"Those jewels are worth millions, dude. Hundreds of millions. That's enough to make sure there are no witnesses."

Jayden was hyperventilating. "What can we do? What can we do?"

"Look out for ourselves," Aaron said. "Take a left here, down the alley. It'll buy us a minute or two."



Nate and Jayden carried their ends of the crate while Aaron guided them through a gap in the parking garage's unfinished foundation. Trucks rumbled past on the street above. Somewhere nearby, a concrete mixer groaned into motion.

"Careful," Aaron whispered. He kept his voice even, but his eyes flicked toward the entrance, worried.

Jayden adjusted his grip. "What do you think I'm doing?"

Nate grunted and readjusted his grip.

With a dusty thud, the crate was dumped in the dirt. This was the construction site where Aaron worked. Or, at least were he *used* to work There was no going back, now. None of them could go back to their lives.

They lowered the crate into a gap. Aaron covered it with gravel. "They'll be filling this in five hours," Aaron said. "It's scheduled for first thing in the morning."

The project was a parking garage. A temporary one. It would be in use for five years, waiting for a lease to run out, and then an office park would be built in the same spot.

"In five years, they'll jackhammer all this up," Arron had told them on the way. "When they do, we can get the crate back."

"That'll give us enough time to let the heat die down," Nate said.

Jayden laughed and shook his head. "Wow, that sounds like a bad movie cliché."

"If there's a way real criminals talk, I don't know it. All I got is bad TV cop show clichés."

When they finished, there was a foot of dirt and gravel covering the crate. They would be long gone by the time it was filled, but it looked just like any other inch of dirt the rest of the foundation would be poured over. Jayden wiped his palms on his jacket. "I hate how nervous we look."

"I hate this shit," Aaron said.

"In five years," Nate said, "we can come back here, dig it up, and get rich."

"How do we sell it?"

Aaron shrugged. "We have five years to figure that out."

"Yeah." Nate tried to smile. "No contact. No calls. No nothing. We can't let anyone know where this is. We don't speak of it until the day we come back, five years from now. Deal?"



They all looked at each other, wondering what the hell they could do. It was all happening so fast. It was hard to know what was the right thing to do.

"Deal," Aaron said.

"Yeah," Jayden muttered.

"We should go."

"See you guys then," Aaron said. "I guess."

"I guess," Jayden replied.

They left without shaking hands. Aaron turned back to the city, Jayden crossed toward the busier streets, and Nate walked east alone. Each kept his pace ordinary and his face composed.

Behind them, sirens started to whine. It was on. The cops knew. And with every moment from now on, the cops would be getting closer. They were now on the run.



Nate drove, hands tight on the wheel, his knuckles white. The road stretched ahead in a blur of asphalt and the occasional flicker of passing streetlights. The weight of the moment, the fear, the confusion, settled like a rock in his stomach. The police were looking for him. They thought he was a criminal, the mob wanted him dead. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think.

He hadn't even decided if he was really going to do this. But he sure as hell knew they wouldn't believe him if he just waltzed into a police station and surrendered. They wouldn't listen to the truth. They'd twist it, like they always did, into something incriminating, something that suited their narrative. He was just a pawn to them. Another scapegoat to hide the truth. But there was no time to think about that now. He needed to get out of the city.

The mountains were the only option left. A place to hide, to regroup, to try and figure out what came next. He didn't know the first thing about living in the wild. He'd never been the type to camp, to hike, to live in

nature. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd stepped into a park.

He was running on fumes, literally and metaphorically. His fuel gauge flickered on empty. The engine sputtered, groaning, pleading for a rest. He pulled into the nearest gas station, a lonely spot off the highway, its neon lights flickering, the last remnants of hope in a world that had turned against him. There were no cars in the lot. The place was deserted.

As he cut the engine, the sudden silence was deafening. His heart was hammering. He glanced around. No one was there. The night air was sharp, cool against his skin. He stepped out of the car, keeping an eye on the darkened road. His instincts screamed at him to keep moving, to stay low, to blend into the shadows. The sound of the gas pump being pulled from the stand was harsh in the quiet, and it felt like everyone in five miles could hear it.

As he filled the tank, he couldn't help but glance around, waiting for the sound of sirens, the distant hum of an engine, the buzz of something that would tell him his moment of peace had ended. He stood there, frozen for a moment, eyes scanning the horizon. Nothing. But that didn't mean they weren't out there, just waiting for him to slip up.

The fuel clicked off, and he shoved the pump back into place, slamming the cap shut. He checked his wallet. His cash was low, but it was enough to get him where he needed to go. Probably.

With one last glance at the dark, empty road behind him, he climbed back into the car and started the engine, the sound too loud in the stillness. He pulled out of the station, his foot heavy on the pedal. The headlights cut through the night, guiding him toward the mountains, his refuge for the next five years.



The sun beat down on the open desert around him as he pulled his car into a small, barren rest stop. The sign read "Rest Area: No Services." It was a reminder that he was truly in the middle of nowhere. He had

never been this far from home before. The tires crunched against the gravel as he parked.

It had been days since he'd had a proper rest, and even longer since he'd eaten. He'd hardly slept, too tangled in his own thoughts, too on edge by everything that had gone on. His stomach growled in protest, loud and insistent. The last real meal he'd had was so long ago that he couldn't remember what it was. He slapped the steering wheel in frustration, trying to shake the tiredness from his mind.

He climbed out of the car, dragging his feet toward the vending machine. The heat of the desert air pressed against his skin as he fumbled with the change in his pocket. The snacks inside seemed like a taunt. He didn't have enough money, so he gave the machine a big shake with his shoulder. Then another. After a few more attempts, two bags of pretzels finally dropped. It felt like winning the megaball jackpot.

He shuffled over to the picnic table where a young woman sat alone, her posture stiff, her gaze distant. He couldn't help but notice her. She was in a traditional middle eastern cloak that even covered her head. She was about his age, maybe younger. Her body trembled slightly, as if the chill of the open desert wind was too much for her to handle, which made no sense in this heat. Her clothes were worn, her shoes beaten up from walking what must have been miles. She looked like she'd been out here a while, and since his was the only car parked here, she had nowhere to go.

For a moment, he just stood there, wondering if she'd noticed him. Then he took a deep breath and decided to break the silence.

He sat down across from her, a little awkward, his hands fumbling with the pretzels. "Hey," he said, offering her one of the bags. "I don't know when the last time you ate was, but if you're hungry..."

She turned her head slowly, eyes narrowed for a moment, evaluating him, before she grabbed the bag from his hands with a sharp, quick movement. She didn't say anything at first. Her face was unreadable, but as she opened the bag and started eating, he saw how hungry she truly was.

He started to chew on his own pretzels, watching her. Finally, she spoke, her voice soft but desperate. "You're running, too," she said, and it wasn't a question, but a statement.


Pretzels

He glanced at her, surprised to be read so easily. It felt almost like she was reading his mind. "No," he said. "Just a tourist."

For a long while, the two of them sat there in silence, the quiet stretching between them, broken only by the rustle of the wind.

Eventually, she spoke again, more hesitantly this time. "My name is Zafaya." She didn't look at him when she said it, as if it was a name she wasn't entirely comfortable with anymore. "I'm from Saudi Arabia," she continued, voice cracking just a bit. "I came here to visit relatives I've never met. But I ran away before they picked me up at the airport. They... they want to force me into... a life I don't want to live." She paused, gathering her strength. "I can't go back. I won't. I've seen too much."

"Yeah, tough break," Nate said, and immediately felt like an idiot. It was what he'd say to a coworker whose cat had died.

"They've sent people after me," she said, voice trembling now, more from fear than the cold. "I know it. They won't stop until they find me. They'll drag me back, force me to be what they want me to be." Her eyes finally met his, and for the first time, they seemed alive. "I won't go back. They'll try to fix me. But I'm not broken!"

She looked at him, then to his car, the only car in the parking lot. "You have a car?" she asked. The implication was clear. She wanted him to help her, to drive her somewhere.

But he was no better off than she was. He was on the run, just trying to survive. His mind was already spinning from his own mess, and adding her? It was too much.

"Don't even think about it," he finally said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I'm traveling alone. I don't need more to worry about."

The words were letting her down, he knew, but there was nothing he could do. He had no safe place to offer, no plan, no resources. He was running, just like her, and he barely knew what the next hour would bring.

Zafaya didn't say anything for a long time, just continued to eat her pretzels in silence. He wondered how she got here. Maybe a hitchhiker? Maybe she got left behind.

He opened his mouth to say something, to offer what comfort he could, but exhaustion hit him like a wave. His eyelids felt heavy. The fight to keep his focus slipped away from him, and he tried to fight it, but it was futile.

He looked at Zafaya, who was now staring at him, the desperation in her eyes clear as she saw the way his shoulders slumped. She didn't say anything at first, but then he heard her voice, faint and shaky, pleading. "Please... help me. Please don't leave me here."

But he couldn't help her. He couldn't even stop this fatigue as his body, starved and tired beyond reason, finally gave in. "Gotta keep moving," he mumbled. "Can't take on any passengers..."

"Please, sir," she said. "I beg of you. Please..."

He'd only meant to close his eyes for a second.



Nate woke with a start, his senses immediately bombarded by the sound of muffled voices and the oppressive heat of the desert air. The dry smell of dust clung to his skin, and he blinked rapidly, struggling to shake off sleep. Everything felt foggy, and the familiar ache of exhaustion pulled at his limbs.

He opened his eyes and was met with a sharp realization: several large men wearing sunglasses were standing over him, their thick bodies casting dark shadows over the picnic table. Their eyes were locked on him, their expressions grim. Were they cops? Had they finally tracked him down?

"Zafaya," one of them said, his voice thick with an accent Nate couldn't place.

He blinked again, trying to focus, but his body felt heavy, like it was still trapped in the fog of sleep. The world tilted for a moment as he sat up slowly, and that was when he noticed it. The unmistakable feeling of something strange on his head. He reached up, fingers brushing the soft fabric of a hijab wrapped around his scalp. His hands trembled as he felt the weight of rings on his fingers, the sharp metallic touch unfamiliar. There was a shawl on his shoulders, and his face was covered.



Before he could make sense of it all, the familiar sound of a sputtering engine cut through the desert stillness, drawing his attention toward the car. His car. The one he'd been trying to escape in for days. The engine roared to life, and he saw it: Zafaya, sitting behind the wheel. She was driving off, taking his meager possessions with her, his wallet, his identity, everything he had.

A surge of panic flooded his chest. He wanted to move, to chase after her, but before he could even stand, a heavy hand landed on his shoulder, pushing him back down with a force that left no room for resistance.

The men were still speaking, their voices becoming more insistent. "Zafaya, you have betrayed us."

They couldn't be thinking he was... Zafaya? He tried to speak, to explain, but all that came out was a muffled noise. A rough hand covered his mouth, cutting off any further attempt at communication. He thrashed, attempting to pull away, but it was no use. The more he struggled, the tighter their grip became.

Nate could barely breathe from the gag stuffed in his mouth as they bound his wrists with zip ties, pulling them tight until his hands tingled with the loss of circulation. The men continued their chatter, oblivious to the fact that they had the wrong person. They weren't the brightest people he'd ever come in contact with, likely muscle hired to find and abduct Zafaya.

In a moment of clarity, the pieces clicked together. While he was asleep, Zafaya must have taken his keys. She must have dressed him up to look like her: the hijab, the rings, the shawl. If he had been able to see himself, he would have seen the rough makeup Zafaya had clumsily applied to his face. The clothes were a perfect disguise, hiding his true identity beneath layers of fabric. With most of his head and face covered, they saw only what they wanted to see. A young woman with the same build, her features hidden beneath the clothes. They thought he was her.

He tried to shout, but the tape over his mouth was tight like a clamp. He thrashed again, his panic growing, but the men easily subdued him, quickly hoisting him off the bench and dragging him toward the waiting van.

Pretzels, he thought, absurdly. That's what she got his car for.

"You're going to make us very rich men," one of them said, his voice harsh. "Your family looks forward to seeing you again, Zafaya."

Everything around him moved in a blur, the dust swirling up around his feet as he was shoved into the van. The door slammed shut behind him, the metal sound reverberating. As the van drove away, he realized with chilling certainty that this was really happening. He had no idea what to expect now.



The van was heavy with the smell of cigarette smoke and sweat. Nate's hands were bound tight, his mouth muffled with a cloth that made it difficult to breathe properly. He tried to struggle, but it was futile. The hum of the engine was the only sound besides his own panicked breaths.

The ride felt endless. The vehicle jostled over uneven terrain, with abrupt shakes and tremors, and he tried to keep track of where he was going, but it was impossible to tell. Each bump in the road sent a wave of nausea through him, and the constant pounding gave him a headache.

When the van finally came to a halt, the doors opened with a metallic groan. Quickly, he was hauled out onto the ground. He staggered, disoriented, barely able to stay on his feet as the men dragged him toward a building. The compound was large, nestled in some quiet, isolated area he couldn't recognize. It was surrounded by high walls that made him feel like a prisoner, which he had a good idea was exactly what he was.

They brought him inside, his bound wrists pulled tight behind him. The house was dark and sparsely furnished. His heart raced, worried about what was going to become of him, alone, lost, and scared for his life.

The men pushed him forward into a room where a group of people, women and older men, stood waiting. The women were dressed conservatively, their heads covered, and the men, though they didn't speak to him directly, watched with cold eyes.

The language they spoke was foreign, rapid-fire Arabic he couldn't begin to understand. They spoke to him, and though he couldn't

understand the words, the tone was clear. He was an outcast. He was Zafaya, their runaway relative who had become rebellious and escaped their control. Their words were angry with accusation and disdain, and it was clear that they expected him to comply with whatever they were saying.

They seemed convinced beyond any doubt that he was Zafaya. If only he could show them, if only he could convince them. But to them, he was pretending not to understand his native language, and was simply playing some sort of game. He recalled, dimly, the words Zafaya had spoken to him before she stole his car. Her family had sent her to the U.S. to be made into the kind of woman she didn't want to be. She had fled from them, escaping their rigid control, knowing what they had planned for her future.

Finally the tape was removed from his mouth, and he tried to speak, to explain, but it was hopeless.

"I'm not her," he said, his voice cracked from the desert. "That girl! I'm a man! She stole my car! Does anyone here speak English?"

"She speaks English very well," one of the men said to the room. "Rich people's school."

They laughed, tired and unkind. When he shouted that he was a man, that he was not Zafaya, they simply looked at him like he was lying. They mocked his words, shaking their heads in disbelief, as if his protests were nothing more than the lies of a frightened girl. Did they even understand him? It didn't seem to matter.

He tried to take off the hood over is head to show him his short hair, but his arms were grabbed, nearly ripped off his body. To show a woman's hair was a sin, it was clear. And he was shouted down and forced to cower in a a corner as they spat angry words at him. One was threatening to beat him with his shoe.

They shoved him into a small room. No furniture. Not even a stool. Just a pillow and a mat on the dusty, dirty floor.

The next day, early in the morning when the sky was still dark, they came into the room, covering his mouth when he made the first sound.

They forced him to sit in a corner. There were others there, all dressed as he was in a shapeless coverings. He given a book and made to study it: the Qur'an. He couldn't read a word of the Arabic, but it didn't matter. They didn't ask, they just forced him. One of the women said the words and then he repeated them. Another woman forced him to keep his eyes forward, staring at the written Arabic he didn't understand. The words felt insane as he mimicked speaking them. The men directed him to pray, to perform rituals he'd never done in his life. They watched him, their intense eyes boring into him, making sure that he did everything as expected.

He slept in a room with four women, in his clothes. Talking to the was useless. They didn't speak English and the moment he said anything, an angry man would enter and threaten to thrash him. Nate helped with breakfast and dinner as he was shown how to do his part in preparing food. Each day, the cycle continued. The clothes, the prayers, the Qur'an.

Just play along, he told himself every night, listening to four women breathe in the dark. They'll relax. Somebody will get careless. He'd find a phone.



Over time he figured out more about where he was. It was a walled square of buildings in the middle of nothing. Arizona? New Mexico? Utah? It had a mosque with a green dome. A large building with a dormitory, kitchen, and half-empty rooms. A generator hummed off in the distance. A courtyard was in the middle, made of packed earth. Date palms were lined along the north wall. A flag fluttered and snapped in the desert wind. There were about sixty people, if he wasn't counting people twice. All these arabs looked the same to him.

Nate was in a small room with a sleeping mat and a dresser and a window with bars. A woman in a black abaya brought him water and dates and set them on the dresser every morning. Then she left. They were good.

That was the other thing he learned about the place. Nobody talked. People moved through the courtyard on their own errands and did not greet each other. They rarely nodded. Sometimes they said a word or two. Mostly they were silent, and the silence was not hostile, it was just default. Life in the compound did not require conversation.

There was a call to prayer five times a day, which he was forced to participate in, even if he had no idea what was going on. He just kneeled and bent over every few seconds. There was a room where young men, young women and adults kneeled on thin pillows and recited. The kitchen was where women cooked in shifts. The generator ran from six to ten in the evening and made the lights flicker.

The compound was a program. People arrived here from all over. Different ethnicities, but mostly Arab. They spoke different languages when they arrived, brought by relatives or by recruiters. They were made into, what looked to his eyes, like cultists. They became devout fundamentalists. Some of them were teenagers. Some were adults. Some had been here for years. Some had arrived the same week as Nate.

Nobody told him this. He figured it out by watching. Talking was not encouraged here, and trying to speak in anything other than Arabic was punished.

He would sit in the courtyard and someone would sit nearby and neither of them would dare speak. They wouldn't even look at each other. No eye contact. He would eat in the small room off of the kitchen and the person across from him would eat, staring only at the food, and then leave without ceremony.



Three weeks into being a prisoner, they started injecting him with something. He felt nauseous, dizzy, weak. Two months later, his skin became smoother, more delicate. Was it possible they were injecting him with hormones? Did they know he wasn't a woman? Or did they just want "Zafaya" to be more feminine? It was impossible to say.

They let his hair grow, and at first he wasn't sure why. Maybe they simply didn't know they should be cutting it. One day a woman handed



him a bottle of oil. One day another woman brushed it out for him without a word. By the fourth month it reached his shoulders.

They also had him to care for his skin. They gave him a jar of cream and a bar of soap. He also had a small pair of scissors, for his nails. His eyebrows were shaped one afternoon by a woman who worked in silence and then left. His arms and legs were waxed by a woman who pointed at a chair and pointed at his sleeve and then did the work without explaining what she was doing.

The shape of him changed slowly. Less bread, more vegetables. That's all they served him anymore. They had him walking the perimeter every morning and every evening. The pounds came off very slowly, almost too slow for him to notice. But he did notice.

Eventually they provided him with new clothes. First, the shawl. Then a long tunic. Then an abaya, plain, black, shapeless. He was given five of them. He hated it at first. It was hot.

Then the underthings. A soft cotton bra, left on his dresser without comment. He wore it for fear he'd be punished if he didn't, even though it did nothing. Then a different one. Then a padded one.

Then the shoes. Then the jewelry. A ring. A bracelet. A pair of small gold earrings, which required piercing his ears, which in turn required a needle and a potato and a lot of swearing.

And the shots continued.



Months had passed since he'd first arrived at the compound, but he had lost track of time. With each passing day, it became harder to resist. He barely recognized himself in the mirror anymore. The face that stared back at him was softer, rounder, more feminine. The women had shown him how to do makeup, making his eyes look bewitching and dark, exactly the way theirs did. The face no longer felt like his. These changes had been subtle at first, but now they were undeniable. There was no doubt they had been giving him hormones, as his hips had filled out, breasts had begun to form, and his whole body felt more out of sorts.

The captors continued their relentless push. He woke each day to a schedule he had to follow. Prayers, study, modesty. It had become second nature to him, a rhythm his mind was practically locked into. He wore the hijab as if it had always been a part of his outfit, a quiet, comforting companion in everything he did.

Once, a delivery man had stood in the courtyard holding a crate of food, and Nate had opened his mouth to speak to him in English. The man looked at him waiting for him to speak, and Nate closed his mouth again. What would he even say? *I'm a man, please help.*

No, the driver would just ask someone what was going on. He'd be condemning himself to a beating if he spoke. He might even get the delivery driver beaten as well.

When he was alone, there was a silence he found uncomfortable. He preferred to work with the other women, and not be by himself. They kept him isolated from the world, enforced by the tall walls of the compound. But it wasn't as foreboding as it once was. He'd come to understand that he would be free, just as soon as he was deemed ready. He wouldn't be a prisoner forever. If he just did what they told him, he'd be released.

So he focused on finishing his training. The routines, the prayers, the modest dress: these things had started to feel comforting. They'd replaced the constant fear that once haunted him. He'd come to accept his fate. He was even trying to hide his true gender now. The more he acted like the other women, the better things went for him.

The name no longer felt alien, as it once had. *Zafaya.* When someone called it across a room, he turned before he realized he was responding. It was a nice name. There was no shame in being thought of as a wife, a mother, or a woman of faith. The thought didn't disturb him as much now. The lessons had taught him so much. He understood, now, how important it was to respect his family, how to do what was needed of a woman in a loving, worthy family.

He could now speak some Arabic, though the words he could say were simple. He'd picked things up from the Qur'an study and from conversations he heard. Words of prayer, words of respect. It was just enough language to say the things a Muslim woman was expected to say.



He'd built a friendship with the other women and spent virtually all his time with them. He'd spent many evenings in fascinating discussions about the role of a Muslim wife in supporting her husband. There were so many things to consider, and if he had hope of leaving this compound any time soon, he knew that satisfying the instructors was his only priority. He had to show them that he had mastered what they were teaching him.

He tugged the hijab tighter around his head, securing it with practiced ease. It was as much a part of him as the floor beneath his feet. He wore shoes with a modest heel, one of the few signs of femininity allowed. That and his dazzling eyes, sparkling gold rings, and the toes of his shiny black pumps peeking out from beneath his hem. These were things not so much allowed as tolerated.

The house was quiet except for the sound of his footsteps, the soft clink of a pot being set on the stove. He prepared dinner, his hands moving instinctively now through the motions they'd taught him. The smell of cumin and garlic filled the air, mixing with the faint scent of something floral from the garden outside. The kitchen was orderly, the countertops clean and swept. This was his space, his duty.

He could hear the voices of the students, instructors, and relatives in the other room, the low murmur of conversation in Arabic. The words sounded distant, a hum in the background as he focused on his task. He understood more every day. It was nice to have one of the instructors praise him for being a faithful Muslim and to be able to understand their words.

He spoke little, but when he did, it was with the same words they had taught him. He said *insha'Allah* as he finished a task, or *barakallahu feeki* when someone offered praise. It felt natural now, his tongue wrapping around the Arabic phrases easily.

After the meal, he tidied up the kitchen, folding the dish towels with careful precision. He rinsed the plates, stacked them, and wiped the counter in long, even strokes. The house was clean and tidy, which filled him with pride. The new women who had just arrived were jealous of how clean he kept things, and how the men complimented him. But he



was a generous person. He helped them learn to keep men happy by cleaning and cooking.

Later, he sat on a cushion, the Qur'an resting on his lap as he recited verses in a soft murmur. The words were starting to make sense, slowly, like a puzzle finally clicking into place. The language, the prayers, they were his structure, his grounding. He closed his eyes, his lips forming the words almost unconsciously. He could hear the other students doing the same.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, there was a man who had once been on the run. He thought of him occasionally, the way you think of a character from a book you read as a kid. He'd seemed so scared.



One morning like any other, he woke before dawn like he did now. There were floors to scrub. Vegetables to wash. Clothes to clean. He was all set to get started when two men appeared outside his room, each placed a hand on his shoulders and led him away.

It was a new room he'd never seen before. A clinic. The walls were clean and white, unlike the shabby places he'd been staying in the past few months. A folding table had been set up in the middle of the room and covered with a sheet, and a portable lamp was on, and a man in blue surgery scrubs was washing his hands in a basin, and another man in scrubs was laying out instruments on a tray.

With help, Nate laid down on the table.

"When you wake, it will be done," the man in scrubs said.

Six months ago, Nate would have been terrified. Now he felt liberated. He wasn't told what they were doing, but he knew it anyway. He was no longer going to be a half of a man. He could care for a family. he could care for a house. He could show love. He could be tender. He could be Zafaya.

At least now he knew the truth. They knew he wasn't Zafaya. They knew. They just didn't want anyone else to know. Especially whoever it was that had paid them to make Zafaya into the devout muslim they had made everyone in the compound into. They were going to make him be Zafaya. But he welcomed it. He wanted it. He was grateful for them.

Dr. Amina put a mask over his face and told him to count backward from ten, and he got to seven.

He woke in his bed with a tube in him and a dull ache low in his body. He was alone, but there were at least three pairs of eyes staring at him from the doorway. As soon as he saw them, they left.

Nate lay there for a while and felt the ache and the tube and the strange new emptiness and fullness.

The first week was the worst, with the tube and the packing and the dressings and the pain, and Nate lay in the bed and did not move much. The man who had been in scrubs in the clinic, who presumably was the doctor's assistant, brought him soup and changed his dressings and told him when to take the pills.

The second week the tube came out, and the packing came out, and Nate was allowed to sit up and then to stand and then to walk a few steps. The walking hurt, and the sitting hurt, and everything hurt, and he figured that was normal.

The fourth week he could walk the length of the courtyard. The fifth week he could walk the perimeter. The sixth week the doctor examined him one last time, pronounced him healed, packed his suitcase, and got back in the truck and drove away.

He walked across the courtyard to his room and closed the door.

He took off the abaya and the scarf and the bra and the underwear and stood in front of the mirror.

And he looked at himself, all of himself, the soft face and the long hair and the small chest and the wide hips and the smooth legs. But he needed to see what was now his womanhood. He touched it, carefully, and it made him whole.

He stood there for a long time.

Then he put on the underwear and the bra and the scarf and the abaya, and he went out into the courtyard. The sun was going down, and the call to prayer came, and he walked to the mosque with the other women, and he prayed, and the body that bowed and prostrated and stood was a woman's body, all of it, every part, and when he stood up at the end and said the last words and touched his face with his hands, he was crying, and nobody saw, and it did not matter. Zafaya was just so happy.



The day arrived quietly, almost surprising Zafaya amongst the calm rhythms she'd grown used to. The house buzzed softly with anticipation as she prepared her belongings, folding garments neatly into the suitcase

laid open on her bed. Her movements were graceful, careful, precise, every step reflective of the teachings she'd come to cherish.

Her relatives spoke proudly about her journey to Saudi Arabia, their voices gentle yet firm, filled with warmth and certainty. They reminded her of her role, of the life awaiting her there: a life of modesty, service, and devotion. She nodded softly as they spoke, eyes respectfully lowered, heart open. She was ready.

The idea of traveling home filled her with serenity. Home was a place she'd been preparing for every day, through each prayer recited, each Qur'an verse memorized, each meal carefully prepared, each floor swept. They told her that her family awaited eagerly, that they had arranged a suitable husband, a devout man who would guide her along the righteous path, someone who would strengthen her faith and help her grow.

She found comfort in these thoughts. The life ahead seemed clear, beautiful, and purposeful. She imagined days filled with prayer, quiet domestic duties, and evenings spent listening to the gentle voice of her future husband, guiding her as she grew closer to Allah.

Her relatives smiled approvingly as she stood ready, dressed modestly in her flowing gown and hijab, her suitcase by her side. They whispered prayers for her safe travels and a fruitful life. She closed her eyes briefly, whispering her own prayer, feeling a profound sense of peace.



Zafaya stepped slowly from the airplane jetway into the terminal in Riyadh. Her hijab fluttered gently as she adjusted it, the fabric comforting beneath her fingertips. Around her, families greeted one another, their voices rising in joyful Arabic, blending into a harmonious murmur of reunion.

"Zafaya!" a woman's voice called out, bright with emotion. She turned instinctively, seeing a middle-aged woman approaching swiftly, arms extended. Her eyes were moist, her smile warm. She gathered Zafaya gently into a soft embrace, pressing her cheek to hers.

"You are home, alhamdulillah," she whispered into her ear, voice thick with relief. "We prayed every day that Allah would guide you back to us safely."

Zafaya smiled quietly, lowering her eyes in respect. "Alhamdulillah," she replied softly, meaning each syllable. "I am grateful to be home, Auntie."

A tall, gentle-looking man stepped forward, his eyes kind. "Welcome home, daughter," he said warmly, his voice deep yet soothing. "Your family has waited long enough. Come, they're eager to see you."

Her father. Such a wise man, to send her to America to learn how to be the wife Allah meant her to be. She had spent many nights praying that her husband would be just half as wise.

She nodded and followed as they guided her gently through the crowded terminal. All around her, conversations swirled in flowing Arabic, familiar and comforting.

Her aunt gently touched her shoulder as they walked, leaning close. "Your parents found you a very good husband, mashallah. He's strong in his faith, respectful, devoted. He'll help you stay on the straight path, insha'Allah."

"Insha'Allah," she whispered back, warmth rising in her cheeks. "It is all I ask for."

She was looking forward to meeting him, fully prepared to be the wife she had trained so hard to be. She knew Allah would show the way, and when she woke up one morning with bandages where her forgotten life used to be, she knew she was being delivered into divine enlightenment. When it the bandages were gone, she knew that it was true. She was finally the woman she was in her heart, and now she could be sent home.

She emerged outside, where the sun wrapped her in its heat, breathing deeply as the desert breeze brushed softly against her cheeks. The scent of the dry air and spice filled her senses, a fragrance that felt familiar, safe. A sleek black car waited by the curb, door already open.

Sliding into the back seat, her aunt squeezed her hand gently. "Are you nervous, habibti?"

"No, Auntie," she said quietly, meeting her eyes with certainty. "I am ready."



She smiled warmly, nodding once. "Allah has truly blessed us, bringing you home again, Zafaya."

Zafaya glanced through the window, taking in the golden expanse of the city. *Her* city. Riyadh was bustling with life, with faith, and she let herself sink into the comforting rhythm of Arabic prayers drifting from a nearby minaret.

Her father cleared his throat gently. "You know, Zafaya, when your mother sees how you've grown, she will weep tears of joy."

She smiled, her voice steady and serene. "I've returned with a clear heart, ready to honor Allah and our family."

Her aunt squeezed her hand again. "Mashallah, child. It will be as if you never left."

She closed her eyes briefly, savoring those words. The warmth of her home seeped into her spirit, filling her heart with a peace only Allah could have blessed her with.



Jayden arrived in Burbank on a bus. It was risk, taking transportation. He could be tracked, he knew. But he had no car. He never even considered getting one, living in the city. So when it came to escaping that same city, he was little prepared. Buying a bus ticket was the only real idea he had. Judging by the looks, attitudes and... odors... of the others on the bus, there was little chance the authorities were screening the passengers in any way.

So when he peel himself off of the vinyl seat and stumbled off the bus, the first thing he wanted to do was to get some coffee in him. He'd figure out where he was going to stay, what he was going to do and how he was going to live through the next five years in relative anonymity later. Right now, though, coffee.

He slid into the nearest café hoping he didn't look so much like ass that they'd kick him out. The barista at the counter glanced up, with the menu hovering above her, written in artsy chalk, trying too hard to be friendly. His stomach growled. He'd had nothing but half a granola bar since yesterday.

He scanned the menu again, hoping for a moment to decide. "You ready to order?" the barista asked, before he was ready, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"Uhhh..." Jayden said, his head fogging up pretty bad. He went with the first words that came to mind. "Caramel Macchiato."

"Omhmigaaaawd, that's my totes fave," a girl said over his left shoulder. "I *looove* Caramel Macchiatos."

Jayden turned his head. He was looking right into the eyes of a girl who was three or four hundred levels better than him. He didn't place her instantly, but as she shared her top five coffee orders with him, he realized he'd seen her somewhere before. Correspondingly, it slowly became apparent to him that this was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen.

"I'm Clarissa Davenport," she said, in the haughtiest voice since Marie Antoinette said something about baked goods. "Yes, *the* Davenports. Real estate, yachts, equestrian teams. It's exhausting." She said it with a giggle, as if it were charming instead of condescending.

She didn't stop. She loved to talk. Almost as much as she loved to brag. Jayden learned about her three favorite horses, all named after perfumes, her modeling contract that she'd turned down because the agent's cut was "a betrayal," and her latest stalker, "who was, like, weirdly respectful, but still."

He nodded occasionally, staring into the drink he was almost done with. He'd said maybe three words. She didn't seem to notice or care.

Midway through a story about her nightmare facial, she paused and leaned forward, eyes wide. "You know, you're such a good listener. Most people interrupt me. Or, like, talk back." She shuddered.

Then, as if remembering something vital, she snapped her fingers. "Oh! My father's looking for a new bodyguard for me. The last one got poached by some tech billionaire. Boring. Anyway, you should totally apply."

Jayden raised an eyebrow. "Me?"

She waved a hand dismissively. "Why not? You've got that brooding, tragic-backstory look. Plus, you don't talk much. I love that."



He didn't know whether to laugh or walk out, but she was already texting someone. A second later she held out her phone to show him a contact card.

"Here. I told him you're perfect."

He took the AirDrop, stunned. She sipped the macchiato again, oblivious.



Jayden had never imagined his questions about what he was going to so in Southern California being answered so easily. Being a bodyguard was just a job, a simple, straightforward role to keep him moving through life and pay the bills. He'd been assigned to keep an eye on the Davenports' daughter, Clarissa. Fortunately for him, she was easy to keep eyes on.

Clarissa was everything he was not. Rich, confident, and she got whatever she wanted. He followed her around the city, keeping his distance but always observing. She was constantly surrounded by older men who adored her and spoiled her with anything she asked for.

"Ugh, I can't even with these shoes," Clarissa complained one day, walking with him in a posh boutique. She was trying on the latest pair of heels, making sure to show them off to the assistant with a perfectly arched brow. "I want the black ones. These are too last season."

The salesman offered a polite smile. "They look great on you," he said, though he wasn't sure what was so special about them.

Her eyes flicked to him, and she let out a small, condescending laugh. "Of course they do. Everything looks good on me. But these are just meh."

She pushed past the assistant and looked back at him. "You know, you could use a nose job. Maybe a brow lift. I have notes."

He raised his eyebrows in surprise, unsure whether she was being serious or just playful. "I'm fine," he said, a little uncomfortable.

She shrugged and turned back to the shoes. "Typical."



Jayden was fascinated by how easily she dismissed people and everything around her, as though the world was just a construct built solely to bend to her will. But there was something else there, too. Despite her smugness, there was a loneliness behind those hazy eyes. He couldn't explain it, but he was drawn to her, trying to see beneath the surface, to understand the person she hid under all that beauty and privilege.

Over time he found himself studying her more closely. He took mental notes of what she liked, how she reacted to things, the way she handled herself with such ease. He started to learn the little things: how she flicked her hair when she was annoyed, how she folded her arms in a way that said she was already bored, even before anyone opened their mouth. He started taking photos of her, little snapshots when she wasn't looking, trying to capture the real her.

It was a log way away from his old life, schlepping around a grey city doing grunt work. It wasn't as if he'd forgotten about his old life, it was that he'd just tucked it away for a while. Five years, after all, was a long time and there was no sense stewing about something that hadn't happened yet. He kept a low profile, kept everything he did at the highest levels of privacy, assuming that it wouldn't be the diligent work of a dogged agent that discovered him, it would be his own mistakes that gave him away. So for now, he embraced this prisvilidge-adjecent life. Jayden bought a bunch of black suits to wear, sunglasses, some leather gloves. He wanted to look the part. Living in Burbank, he sure got the idea that appearance was very important. Maybe more important than actual competence.

His obsession with Clarissa grew as his collection grew. He kept receipts. Tags from clothes she'd bought. Straws she'd sucked on. Even though he followed her at a distance, he enjoyed watching her move through her world. He convinced himself it was all part of protecting her, but deep down he knew it was more than that. He was losing himself in the idea of her, clinging to a fantasy of who she might be, who he wanted her to be.

She seemed selfish and entitled, but he was sure there was a better person under all that. She was expected to behave like a spoiled brat, so

she did. If someone could take her away and let her just be herself, he was convinced she'd be a good person. A nice person. A person with so much love to spare.

It was a very healthy hobby. He was pretty sure.



Life was good when Jayden spent much of his day in the presence of a goddess. Clarissa Davenport was so beautiful, so alive. Being able to look after her felt like a dream come true. No one gave her any trouble, either. She sometimes made a scene or threw a tantrum, but that was easy enough to clean up. It was such an easy job, following her around and driving her from shop to shop. He even got to chat with her sometimes. There was nothing he ever had to worry about.

Of course he wasn't infatuated with her. He was a professional. That would be a breach of the trust the family had put in him. Behind his black suit and tie and his black sunglasses, he was all business. Nobody messed with his Clarissa.

It was just another day downtown, escorting Clarissa from the luxury clothing store to the luxury purse store to the luxury coat store. He was waiting for her to come out of a changing room when she suddenly disappeared. One minute she was there, the next she was gone.

His heart raced. He scanned the street. "Clarissa?" he called, but no answer. "Clarissa?" He started to panic. He checked the boutique, the cafe, the sidewalk. She was nowhere.

He rushed to the staff, but they shrugged. "Good riddance," one of them said. "She was just here, and then she was gone."

Jayden tried calling her phone. Nothing. He left texts. No response. She was gone.

He panicked. He couldn't tell the Davenports. If they found out, he'd be fired. Worse, they'd blame him for losing their daughter. Knowing them, they'd probably sue him.

What was he supposed to do? He couldn't lose her, not like this. He convinced himself that this wasn't real, that Clarissa was just pulling

some kind of joke on him. Maybe she'd just run off for a wild night and would show up tomorrow. That was something she would totally do.

That had to be the answer. He didn't need to tell anyone anything. He could cover for her being absent for a little bit. He just needed to make people believe she was still around, still in his care, just for a few hours. He needed to make it look like she was still around.

He shook his head, but the idea stuck. He could do it. He knew her well enough. Her voice. Her mannerisms. The way she moved.

He rushed back into the boutique and bought some clothes for his disguise. Then he headed to the mansion, and as he drove, he pulled on an oversized hoodie, stuffing himself into baggy wide-legged jeans. It was a typical Clarissa "fat day" outfit. He lowered the hood, covering his face, and started walking through the house, trying to act casual. He wanted to slip into her room, hoping no one would notice.

"Clarissa?" her father's voice called out from across the grand hallway of their mansion. His name was Roland, though Jayden had only ever called him Mr. Davenport.

"Hey, Dad," he replied quickly, trying to mimic her voice as best he could. "I don't feel well. I'm gonna go to my room."

Her mother, Claudette Davenport, arrived and looked at him skeptically. "Clarissa? Is that you?"

"Yah," he said in Clarissa's tone, ducking his head lower. "I'm gonna go to sleep. 'K, bye!" He quickly hustled up the stairs.

They bought it. For now. But he knew it was only a matter of time before they started questioning, so he hoped Clarissa would show up soon.



In Clarissa's room, Jayden felt bad about even being inside it, a violation of a person's space. And that person was Clarissa Davenport, the most beautiful and wonderful girl in the world.

As the sun set for the day, he waited patiently. When the clock struck midnight, he was sitting by the window, hoping to see a car come up the

driveway with her in it. When the sun rose the next morning, he was still waiting. Then twenty-four hours had passed. She was still not back.

In one way this was good news. If it had been a kidnapping, the Davenports would know by now, and there would be a ransom message. Nothing had happened, so that could only mean Clarissa was out on some kind of bender. She could be back any time.

"Clarissa, you've been quiet lately," her mother Claudette said from the hallway, through Clarissa's door. "We need to go over schedules."

He coughed and whined. "Like, can you not?" he said in his best Clarissa voice. "I'm bloated and breaking out, and I'm not doing public stuff right now, Mom."

Silence. Then: "Fine. Tomorrow."

Days passed. Jayden was able to make excuses for Clarissa, but he was running out of time. He survived on caviar and triple cream brie stolen from the fridge downstairs late at night, when everyone was asleep. He'd have run, but then people would know she was missing.

After four days, he was forced to consider the unlikely possibility that Clarissa might not come back soon. He kept up the ruse, even if it only involved talking through locked doors and responding to text messages. He answered questions the way she would, but it was getting harder. The lie was going to get exposed sooner or later. Did he need to go on the run... *Again?*

The scent of her perfume still clung to the silk pillowcases, the designer throw blankets, the quilted robes hanging on the back of the door. Her room felt frozen in time, untouched and pristine, but hollow now. He sat at the edge of her bed most nights, legs folded tight beneath him, hoodie pulled over his head, staring into the dark.

Her parents knocked on the door several times a day, trying to coax her out. "Clarissa, sweetheart, are you okay?" her mother called. "You've been in there for days."

Her father Roland tried once in a while, more stern than concerned. "Clarissa, don't make us come in there." Jayden answered each time in her voice, trying to mimic the airy, irritated tone he'd heard a thousand times. "I'm fine, God. Just tired. I need space. Can you not?" It worked. For now. They seemed convinced that she was simply being herself:

moody, dramatic, impossible. They'd seen it before, after all. He made sure the door stayed locked, and no one questioned it. But time was running out. Eventually they'd need to see her. Eventually someone would notice she hadn't been outside.

He knew what he needed to do. He paced the room, chewed his nails, stared into the mirror above her vanity. He couldn't tell the truth. He couldn't survive what would come next: the scandal, the accusations, the questions. Where were you? Why didn't you follow her? What did you do? He was the last person to see her. If this went public, he'd be seen as more than careless. He'd be seen as responsible. He'd also be seen by people looking for him.

He began with the closet. Clarissa's wardrobe was overwhelming, a rainbow of luxury: silks, sequins, pastels, neutrals, heels in every shade and height. He tried things on methodically, sticking at first to the oversized hoodies and sweats she wore on her off days, anything that hid his frame. They didn't fit perfectly, but it was close, close enough with a little effort.

He found her wigs on a shelf in the back, dozens of them, all carefully styled and labeled: Beachy Waves, Café Blonde, Soft Brunette, Layers. He pulled on the last one, adjusting the lace, securing the pins. It was nearly a match for her "normal" hair. He stared at himself in the mirror, tilting his head. He wasn't her. But with the right light, the right distance, he could be mistaken for her.

Next came the makeup. Clarissa's vanity was an altar to beauty: brushes lined in gold, drawers of palettes and highlighters and lip glosses with names like Sugar Baby and Kiss Me Later. He watched tutorials on her computer, following along, mimicking each stroke. Foundation, then contour, then liner, then lashes. At first it was a disaster. His hands shook. The lashes wouldn't sit right. His brows came out uneven. But after a few days he improved. He learned how to blur the edges of his face, how to reshape his nose, how to make his lips look fuller. He watched her expressions on the videos he had taken, the smirks, the eye-rolls, the fake laughs, and copied them until his cheeks hurt.

He taught himself how to walk in her heels. He stumbled at first, gripping the doorframe, catching himself on the edge of the bed. But eventually he found the way. He practiced her strut, the sway of her

hips, the lazy confidence. He practiced her voice in the mirror. "Ugh, do you like not understand English?" "Whatever, I literally don't care." "Daddy, can I have this? It's cute." He worked until his voice slid into her cadence with ease.

After a lot of work, he could move like her. Talk like her. Look like her, at least from across a room. With the hood up. Face turned away. He planned his escape carefully. Early in the morning, he slipped into a hoodie and joggers, Clarissa's wig coming out of the hood, sunglasses hiding his eyes. He applied light gloss to his lips and kept his head down. The butler nodded as he passed by. Clarissa's mother cleared her throat as she saw him hurry through. The gardener waved as he hurried on to Clarissa's car. Finally he was out of there, on the open road and free. He'd had his doubts he was ever going to get out. Now he was free. Maybe he'd pick another city to live in. Alaska? He could stow away on a ship or something. This was doable.



But as he drove, he hated himself. What kind of friend was he to Clarissa if he abandoned her like this? This was when Clarissa needed him most. She'd be so grateful to know that he'd covered for her while she was out doing whatever it was that she was doing. She was depending on him, even if she didn't know it. He couldn't leave her like this. He pulled the hood lower, tightened the sunglasses, pursed his lips.

He'd been given the rare pleasure of living in her room for over a week, surrounded by everything Clarissa. A dream come true. Now he couldn't even be bothered to stick by her? No, he had to do everything he could for his Clarissa.

He turned the car around.



Jayden sat in the salon chair with trembling hands, the high-end Parisian lamps catching in the mirror and casting his half-shaven, half-feminized face in cruel clarity.

This was her salon, her chair. He'd been here before, waiting at the edge of the room like furniture, watching Clarissa roll her eyes while a team of stylists fluttered around her like she was royalty. Now they fluttered around him, puzzled, professional, polite, but wary.

Deandra, the stylist Clarissa swore by, approached. "So what would you like to do today... um... miss?" The last word was definitely more of a question than a statement. He knew a professional would see through his flimsy disguise instantly.

"I need to look like Clarissa Davenport," he said, the words leaking timidly from his throat.

"Clarissa Davenport?" She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. "What the hell?"

"I need you to make me look like her," he said. "Exactly."

She arched a brow. "That's not normal."

He slid a wad of crisp hundreds from Clarissa's own handbag and pressed them into Deandra's manicured hand. "How about now?" he murmured.

Her eyes widened slightly. "I'll deal." She pocketed the cash.

She got to work. His hair was bleached, toned, trimmed. His brows were shaped. His lashes were extended. His nails were redone in the exact pale pink Clarissa preferred, Sugar Petal #4. Deandra applied contour like war paint, overdrew his lips, sculpted his cheeks, her expression unreadable the entire time.

When she finished with his hair and face, she spun the chair slowly, revealing his new reflection in the mirror.

He looked startling. From the neck up, he was her. Not perfectly. His jaw was still too square, his Adam's apple stubborn. But the effect was close enough to feel frightening.

He nodded once, quietly. "Looks great."

Deandra only hummed. "I don't feel great about this."

"It's okay. I'm..."

"Pulling a prank? Don't even try that weak sauce, you little shit." She whipped the cloak off him. "Just get out of my salon. And *don't* tell your friends."

He breezed through the rear garden gate in pink sneakers and oversized sunglasses, heart hammering. The staff barely looked up as he slipped back into the mansion, dressed in Clarissa's oversized hoodie, his new face hidden beneath the hood and concealed by blonde hair.

He locked the bedroom door behind him, yanked off the hoodie, and stared at his reflection in her full-length mirror.

From the neck up: Clarissa. A convincing illusion. But below it was a different story.

He was still too broad. Too boxy. His waist wasn't small enough. His arms were too muscular. His legs were hairy. He ran his hand down his own torso, and it felt like a suit made of meat between him and the perfect disguise.

He had some working out to do. And, he thought, looking at the wall of high heeled shoes on the far side of the closet, he needed to work hard if he was going to get away with this.

Jayden woke before the sun. The silk sheets clung to his skin as he slid out of Clarissa's bed and pulled on leggings that barely fit over his thighs. He spent an hour doing his face. He had notes to follow, and they didn't help at all, but eventually he hid the things he was supposed to be hiding. He stood in front of the mirror in her bathroom, staring at the reflection. His face looked softer, the expensive wig looked natural, his features sculpted by makeup, but his body was still wrong. His hips were too square. His shoulders were too broad. His thighs pushed against the fabric. He pulled the leggings higher and tied the laces on his sneakers, a pair of Clarissa's that were a half size too small, because her running shoes were the only ones in the closet that didn't have a heel.

He ran the first mile slowly, his breath loud in his ears, his knees stiff. He pushed through it. At the gym he started with the treadmill, then the elliptical. He moved on to the stair climber. He didn't stop for water until his legs burned and his shirt clung to his chest. After cardio he moved to the mats. He did crunches until his stomach ached. He held planks until his arms shook. He stretched until the muscles in his back pulled tight. A trainer offered help. He said no.

Each day he added another set. Another half mile. Another five minutes. He stopped eating breakfast. He cut out sugar. He cut carbs. He drank water and chewed ice. He measured his waist every morning. When it shrank a quarter inch, he smiled. When it didn't, he did an extra workout before bed.

In the evenings, once the soreness had settled into something manageable, he made himself put the heels back on, just to walk laps of the bedroom in them. He tried it in a modest kitten heel first, then worked up, over the course of two weeks, to a pair of stilettos he found still in their box with the tag on, a birthday gift from someone named Piers that Clarissa had apparently never worn. His ankles wobbled less each night. He learned to take the stairs in them one foot at a time, hands floating at his sides, the way he'd seen Clarissa do a hundred times without seeming to think about it at all.

He thought about her while he ran. He thought about where she might be. Maybe she was in France. Maybe she was living in a studio apartment in Berlin with paint-stained fingers and no last name. Maybe

she was finally free, walking through a crowded street with no one recognizing her. He thought about what she'd say when she found out what he'd done. He thought she'd be overwhelmed. She'd cry. She'd take his face in her hands and say, "You saved everything for me."

He thought she might even give him a kiss.

Or maybe she'd just share her inheritance. Give him a piece of the family estate. A check with his name on it. He'd take either. He didn't need much.

At the end of four weeks he weighed himself. The number was lower. His waist had shrunk. His thighs no longer stretched the leggings. The shape of his arms was smoother. But when he stood in front of the mirror and turned sideways, the curve was still wrong. His hips were not hers. His chest wasn't flat, but it wasn't right either. He ran his hands down his sides and stopped above his thighs.

The mirror didn't lie. He'd made progress, but it wasn't enough.

He tied his sneakers again before he headed back out the door.



The woman who ran the clinic had the kind of face that looked like all emotion had been drain from her. Her dead, slitted eyes were still, and as Jayden sat at the desk, looking at the images on her monitor, he kept glancing at her to see if she even blinked.

"The cheeks can be built up with bio filler," she said, "and if we start out too small, we can make the bigger later."

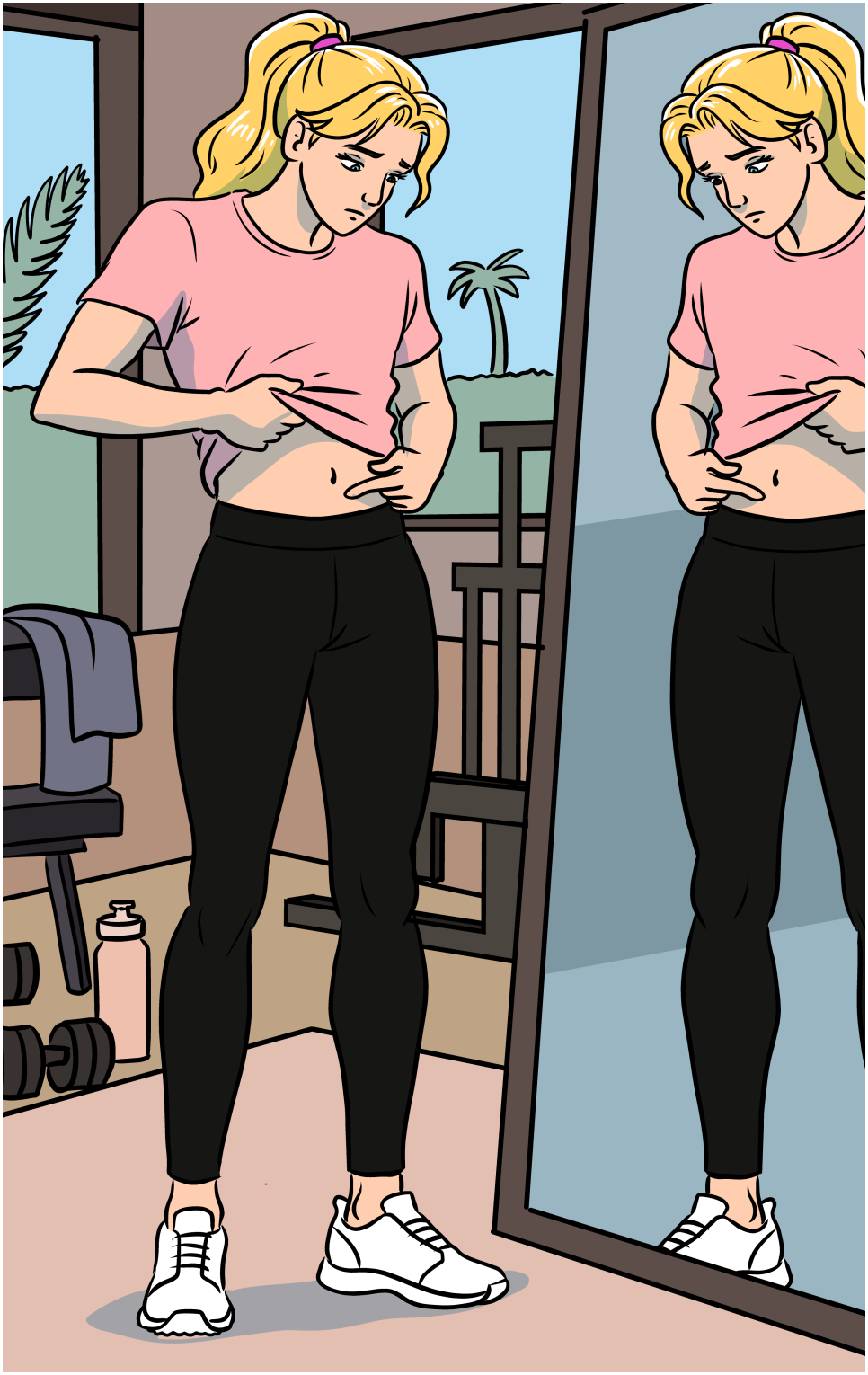
"What about the lips? The lips are the most important part."

"Again, just a small injection at first, and if your body tolerates it we can get it to the size you want." She re-evaluated his face, and then looked at the picture of Clarissa. "We should be able to achieve the shape of face you want. Most of my clients experience a six-week period before they see a loss in shape."

"What if I want more than six weeks?"

"How long were you looking for."

"Much longer," Jayden said.



"Months? Years?"

"Longer. Can it be done?"

The doctor looked at the jewelry around Jayden's neck. The diamonds on the rings on his fingers.

"It's achievable. For the right price."

Now she was talking his language. He was suddenly grateful the woman didn't show emotions, because he was sure she would be giving him a scowl.



Jayden stood in Clarissa's doorway wearing her dress, her earrings, her scent, and a pair of nude pumps he'd finally gotten steady enough in to wear outside the bedroom. It was coming together. He was sure he could pull this off, given a few more procedures.

As he was playing with his hair, Clarissa's parents came in like it was their house. Which, of course, it was. No knock. No hesitation. No pause. They didn't seem to care. If he was a gorilla dressed in a skirt, they probably would have treated him the same. Just a tired glance, like they'd seen him a million times.

Claudette set her bag on the dresser. "We're late for the foundation brunch," she said, pulling at her sleeves. "Wear the cream Chanel. The pink one makes your face look swollen. And not those pumps, they'll pinch by the second course, put on the block heels."

Roland stayed by the door, eyes on his phone. "Try not to embarrass us this time. The gallery mess is already enough." Then he left. The door shut like a verdict.

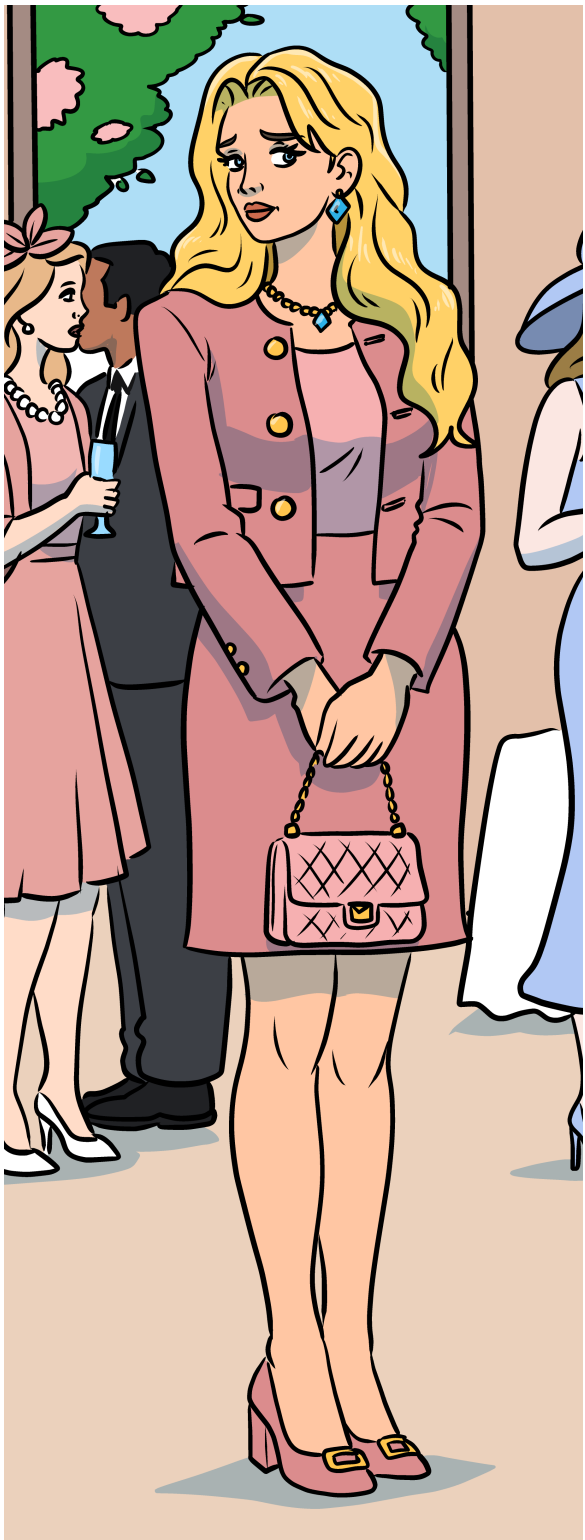
Jayden stayed there. Back against the mirror. Hands loose at his sides. They didn't even notice how perfect his face was now. After a few days of hiding after the swelling went down, he expected some kind of reaction.

But maybe the best possible reaction was none at all. They just assumed he was Clarissa. He put on the cream Chanel, and the block heels Claudette had specified, low and sensible by Davenport standards but

still higher than anything he'd have chosen for himself two months ago. He parted his wig the way Clarissa used to, one side tucked clean behind his ear. He followed Claudette out of the house, two steps behind, nodding to the driver as he got in. He sat in the car with his ankles crossed, just like Clarissa did when she didn't want anyone to touch her. He smiled weakly when spoken to, kept his shoulders down and his spine straight.

At the brunch, they called him Clarissa. He answered. The first time his voice was weak and timid, sure he hadn't quite perfected it enough to pass as her. The next time he spoke with her confidence, knowing that more than the sound, it was her boldness people recognized.

Later that afternoon, he sat on the edge of her bed with the earrings off and the lipstick wiped clean, the block heels kicked into the corner where a growing pile of Clarissa's



shoes had started to gather, the ones he could wear, broken in by his own feet rather than hers. He stared at the mirror and remembered her watching the rain. He remembered the way she'd whispered, "I hate being looked at like I'm just a doll," like she hadn't meant for anyone to hear it. The thunder had been loud that night.



The life of Clarissa was quickly starting to wear on him. He was told what to wear, where to sit, who to talk to. He was made to play nice with a string of boys, slick-haired, square-jawed, all with hands like suction cups. They showed up with flowers and expectations. He went with them and smiled the whole time, in whatever heels Claudette had laid out for him that evening.

Claudette texted him during the dates. Things like *Sit straighter. Keep smiling. Compliment him.* She couldn't even see him. Roland, Clarissa's father, chimed in as well: *More photos with the Maxwell boy. Ask him about his father's merger. Let him know we'r shareholders in his company.* He did what they said. He always did what they said.

At parties, they steered him around like a car. They introduced him to people who blinked slow and smiled wickedly. Some touched his arm when they spoke to him. Some touched his shoulder. People liked to touch him.

When he tried to talk, Claudette would almost always cut him off. He tried to stay quiet. Roland frowned. Either way, he was doing it wrong.

One night, Claudette called him into the study. He sat where she told him to sit. The leather creaked under him. Roland poured tea. Claudette looked up from her tablet and tilted her head. "You've let yourself go," she said. "You're an embarrassment. You look heavy and tired. I honestly can't bear having you represent this family look like you do."

Roland didn't blink. "We've booked the clinic," he said. "Three weeks. You'll go tonight."

Jayden started to speak, but nothing came out. His hands went slack. The cup he was sipping from slipped. There was something in the tea and his limbs stopped working. He hit the floor and didn't feel it.

Jayden woke up at the clinic God knows when. The doctor spoke like he was giving a presentation, checking a deposition. "Blood type, height, eye color. Gender." He adjusted his glasses. They knew. "You're not Clarissa Davenport." He didn't look surprised. He didn't sound upset.

He turned toward the phone. "I'll need to confirm with the family what they'd like done with you."

Jayden got his mouth around the words. "How much?"

The doctor smiled. He put the phone back down. "Well, let's talk about that."

One bank transfer later, and Jayden was in a hospital gown. He had half an idea just to end it, but he had come too far. He had lied too many times, to back out now. There was no going back.

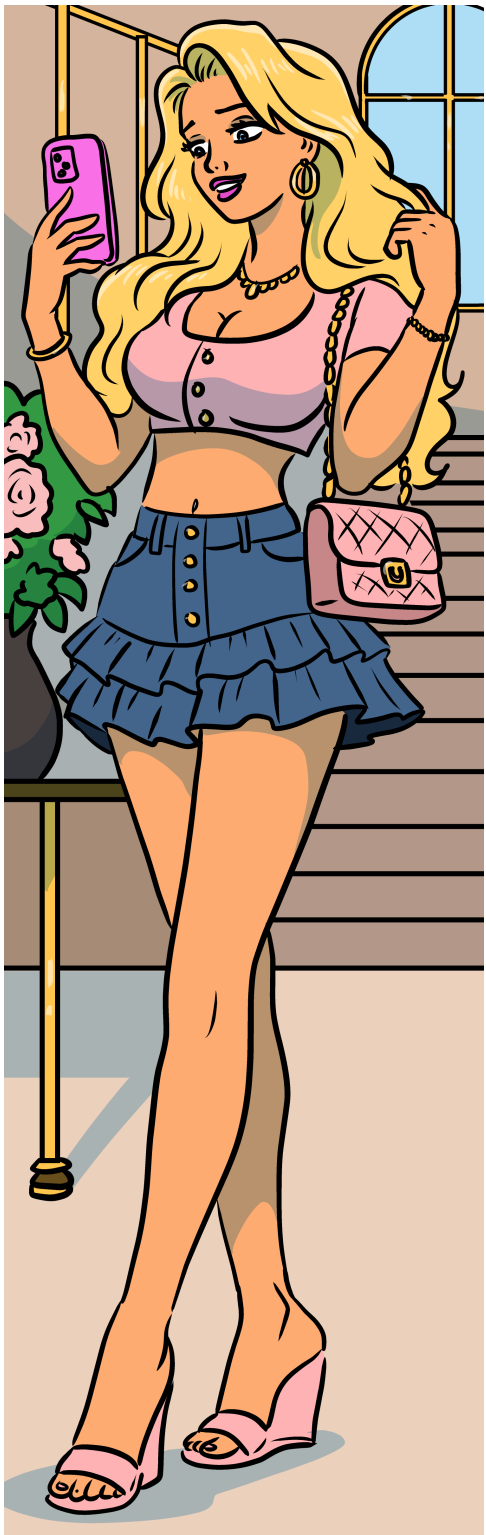
He lay still as they scanned him, injected him, evaluated him. They drew lines across his chest and jaw with blue marker. They lifted his brows. Thinned his nose. Filed the edge of his jaw. They burned the roots of every hair on his face. The nurse hummed while she marked his hips and waist like a highway. The doctor nodded.

He woke up. And then woke up again. He couldn't remember even falling asleep. He was always waking up after the next procedure. Swollen. Wrapped tight. Eyes dry. Skin hot. They said the pain was normal, that the swelling would go down.

One morning, they showed him, unveiling him like a paining at the museum. The girl in the reflection didn't match with what he knew. The skin was smooth. The waist curved. The robe clung to a narrow frame. The jawline was delicate now. The lips were fuller. The eyes wider. The chest rose. Everything fit Clarissa's profile, in a way that no amount of running or dieting could have ever managed on its own.

He came home three weeks to the day. The staff opened the door like he'd never been gone. No one asked how it was. No one looked twice. He was told to wait in the setting room and her parent would be with her shortly. Claudette looked him up and down and said, "Better." Roland nodded, rubbing his chin.

No one him asked if it hurt.



He stepped out in a tight pink crop top and a ruffled denim skirt that barely covered anything, the kind of outfit that would have made the old Jayden trip over his own feet just looking at it, and a pair of clear-strapped heels that the sales girl had called, approvingly, the sluttiest thing in her store. The neckline dipped low. His stomach was bare. The heels clicked sharp across the marble as he passed Claudette in the foyer. She was mid-call. She stopped talking, lowered her phone and looked at him like she was tasting something sour.

"You're *not* wearing that," she said.

He paused by the hallway mirror. Reapplied his gloss. "It's hot," he said, checking his teeth. She was still staring when he walked off.

The chauffeur waited by the car with one hand on the door handle. His eyes went down Jayden's legs and didn't come back up. Jayden grinned.

He started posting to Clarissa's dormant Insta. A photo at lunch with someone old enough to be

his uncle, legs draped over his lap, sunglasses high on his head, the caption: *Daddy says I've been good.* Another one: his hand on the man's thigh, wine glass half full, smile crooked, the new pair of sparkling $5,000 heels his new sugar daddy bought angled just so at the bottom of the frame.

She called the next morning, voice sharp through his sparkly pink phone. "Clarissa, are you seriously seeing someone older than your father?"

He filed his nails. "Don't be gross, Mother. Gerald's a gentleman. And he appreciates me, and doesn't take me for granted, unlike some people."

"He's three times your age!"

He hung up before she finished.

Gerald brought him a bracelet later that week. He held it up, squinted at it, then frowned. "This isn't the Chopard one," he said. "This is like third-tier rich." He widened his eyes a little. Gerald looked apologetic, and bought the Chopard. He carried Jayden's shopping bags to the car, four of them, all shoes.

Jayden kept a rotation. Charles from New York, a retired banker with a townhouse full of regrets. Salim from Dubai, always FaceTiming from a yacht. Roberto from Milan, heavy cologne and heavy compliments. He giggled when they said something dumb. He pouted when they hesitated. He leaned close and whispered "Daddy" like a secret name just for them.

Charles saw him throw his phone across the suite because his assistant had booked him economy. The next morning Jayden was on a private jet with champagne and silk pillows, and a new pair of heels still in tissue paper in the seat beside him. Salim had to get her the whole floor of a hotel so she could get her beauty sleep, so she claimed. He had to rent the floors above and below too when he threw a tantrum about it not being enough. Roberto took her shopping on Rodeo and Jayden just took his card and told him to meet up later. If he loved Clarissa, he told Roberto, he wouldn't care how much was spent.

He canceled events at the last minute. Said the charity menus were too beige. Said the guest list was exhausting. He skipped family meetings with a text: *I'm not a meetings kind of girl.* No one argued. He posted

instead: towers of champagne, piles of Birkins, close-ups of his glossed lips under a cashmere hood, and, increasingly, close-ups of his feet, a new shoe every few days, red soles and gold buckles and ankle straps thin as thread, captioned with the designer's name and three heart emojis. Jewelry rained on him like the drops of a spring shower. He wrote captions like *Therapy is cute but have you tried Cartier?*

Roland sent a lawyer and wanted a "conversation." Jayden showed up forty minutes late wearing a faux-fur coat over lingerie and oversized Gucci sunglasses, in heels so tall the lawyer's assistant visibly flinched watching him cross the lobby. He sipped his latte and said, "I didn't ask for a financial babysitter. But if we're discussing inheritance, I have notes."

He went home for the first time in weeks. His room looked like an a hundred birthday parties had been held inside. Gift bags and boxes spilling over. Shoes in the bathroom sink, shoes on the windowsill, shoes stacked three deep along the closet wall in boxes he hadn't bothered to open all the way. Makeup scattered across the vanity in little explosions of color. Dresses half on hangers, perfume bottles tipped sideways. He sat at the mirror and brushed his hair again. Fifth time tonight. He fixed the lashes with the attention and skill of an old world master.

The girl in the mirror stared back. She was perfect. Brows sharp. Eyes wide. Cheeks flushed just enough. The lips caught the light. He tilted his head to the left. Then right. The look was familiar. This was her now. Clarissa was her name.

She sat down, elbows on the vanity, sparkling fingers steepled under her chin.

The phone buzzed beside her. A new text: *Are these the shoes you meant, or the other ones?*

She grabbed a makeup wipe and dabbed under her eyes. She started fresh, base, blush, lips. Hair smooth. Perfume light and clean. She picked up the phone to reply an hour later.

"Hi baby," she said, voice bright. "You're so sweet for asking. You're so bad for me, and I love it. I want the ones with the bows, duh. And if you really love me, something sparkly for my neck."

She heard herself laugh — High, vapid, shallow, heartless. It was effortless.

Jayden understood her now, the girl he'd thought was a better person underneath it all. She wasn't. She was exactly what she appeared to be.

But there was no one with intellect left inside Clarissa to contemplate this new understanding.



Aaron set foot on the docks of Bangkok, weak, dirty, and running on nothing but fear. He carried nothing but the clothes on his back, a battered duffel bag, and a few crumpled bills. He had no guidebook and no plan, just the stubborn hope that if he could survive halfway around the world, he could survive anything.

Finding a flight out of the country had been naive, to say the least, since buying a plane ticket while on the run from the police was never realistic. After a few days of trying to find any way out of the United States, he had gotten a job as a deckhand on a container ship headed for Asia, no questions asked. A month later, here he was on the docks of Bangkok.

The city hit him all at once. Golden temples glittered under the heavy sun, food carts choked the streets with smoke and spice, and tuk-tuks buzzed through traffic like angry bees. Bangkok was alive, and for a little while, he let himself believe he was too.

He stayed in the cheapest hostels he could find, moving often and keeping his head down. He learned just enough Thai to order food and ask for a room, and he tried to forget what he had left behind. For a few days, it even worked, but trouble followed him wherever he went.

It started two nights earlier at a small expat bar near Sukhumvit Road. The place was dark and loud, and he had picked it because it looked like somewhere he could disappear. Blue and purple lights swirled over sticky tables, classic rock blasted from speakers blown out years ago, and the skunk of beer and sweat clung to the walls. Aaron sat at the bar with a half-warm Chang beer, feeling more at ease than he had in weeks. That was when he met Lester.

Lester slid onto the stool next to him as if he owned it. He was tall and wiry, with dark hair that was a mess and eyes that had the wild glint of a

man who lived on the edge. His grin was easy and his laugh even easier, and he talked the way Aaron imagined real adventurers talked: fast, loose, and fearless. He was exactly what Aaron had thought he would find when he came to Thailand, someone who had figured it out, someone who knew how to live, had seen the world.

They talked like old friends. They told each other stories about traveling, about chasing dreams, about the dull ache remembering the lives they had left behind. They drank more beer, and they laughed harder, and Aaron forgot to be careful.

Near midnight, Lester leaned in close, his voice dropping low, the music covering his words so no one else could hear. That happened a lot in Bangkok.

"Aaron, mate," he said, "I need a favor. Nothing crazy. Just a quick delivery for a local friend. I'd do it myself, but I'm stuck tonight. Think you can help?"

Aaron was drunk enough not to think it through. This was exactly what had gotten him in this mess in the first place. Favors. Friends. Deliveries. But drunk as he was, he shrugged and said, "Sure. Why not?"

Lester handed him a slip of paper with simple instructions: pick up a package from a restaurant across town, deliver it to a warehouse near the river. Quick and clean, with no trouble. It all sounded so familiar.

Aaron had no idea the package was filled with cash, ten million dollars packed tight into neat bundles. It was a time bomb.

The pickup went smoothly. The restaurant was packed and loud, the air thick with the smell of garlic and frying meat. A stone-faced Thai man handed him a black backpack without saying a word or smiling. Aaron felt a flicker of doubt, but he pushed it down, since he had already promised Lester.

He climbed into a tuk-tuk and headed toward the docks. Traffic near Silom Road was a mess, with horns blaring and shouts filling the air, and Aaron sat and stewed in his own sweat while he watched the chaos around him. He didn't see the figure slip up behind the tuk-tuk. He didn't see the hands reach in. He didn't feel the backpack lifted off the seat beside him.

When he looked down and realized the bag was gone, it was already too late.

Panic shot through him. He leapt out of the tuk-tuk and ran back toward the intersection, shouting at strangers and yelling at the driver, and he searched until his legs ached, but the crowd had swallowed the thief whole. Bangkok moved fast, and Aaron didn't know how to move faster.

The calls started that night. First came Lester's voice, tight and clipped, asking where the package was. Aaron stumbled through an answer and heard the change in Lester's tone. Then the other calls came, voices he didn't know, sharp and speaking broken English. They didn't bother with threats. They made promises.

Now, two days later, Aaron hid in a crumbling hotel on the edge of the city. The room smelled like mold and cigarettes, the ceiling was stained with water damage, and the paint peeled in long strips. He sat on the edge of the sagging bed, cold sweat running down his back, listening for footsteps outside his door.

The Thai mob thought he had stolen their money, and they were coming for him.

He cursed Lester. He cursed himself. He replayed every stupid decision in his head, over and over, wishing he had said no. He had already been on the run, and now he had managed to do it all over again.

He needed to leave Thailand. He needed to get out. But he had no passport, having lost it while hopping from hotel room to hotel room to stay ahead of the mob. He had no money and no friends and no way out.

Bangkok, which had once seemed full of light and life, was now a trap, a maze built to swallow him whole, a city where smiles hid knives.

He had come looking for refuge. Now, sitting in a broken-down room with fear pounding in his chest, he would have given anything to be back home. Even a nice, clean American jail cell would have been better than this.



Aaron ducked into the lobby of the Golden Orchid Hotel, sweating through his shirt. The place had seen better days, with old wooden furniture, faded carpets, and a scent of failure that stuck to the air. Still, it felt like the safest place in all of Bangkok.

A heavyset man behind the desk looked up and frowned. "Aaron?"

Aaron let out a long breath. "Uncle Simon."

Samuel Faulkner wasn't Aaron's real uncle, but he had been his father's business partner a long time ago. He was the only person Aaron knew in all of Asia, and Aaron was thankful he happened to be in a position to help. He had moved to Thailand decades earlier, in search of a wife — or so Aaron's father had told him. Now he ran this big, aging hotel, a place that had once hosted international dignitaries and businessmen.

Simon gave him a long look. "What in the world are you doing in Bangkok? Last time I saw you, you weren't even up to my hips. You've really grown."

"Ha, yeah," Aaron said, trying to sound casual, though his nerves were shot and he was shaking.

Uncle Simon gave him another look. "Something wrong? You look like hell."

"I feel worse," Aaron said, swallowing hard. "I need a place to lay low."

Simon raised an eyebrow but said nothing. He waved Aaron toward a small office behind the front desk, and Aaron followed, grateful. As soon as the door shut behind them, he dropped into a chair and rubbed his face.

He didn't even bother with the bed. He crawled into a corner in the bathroom, trembling, hugging his knees. An hour later, a knock came at the front door, so he went to answer it. It was Uncle Simon.

Simon folded his arms across his chest. "You want to tell me why a couple of scary-looking Thai guys were just in here asking about an American with a sunburn and torn clothes?"

Aaron winced. "That bad already?"

"Bad enough they're showing people your picture."

Aaron pushed out a shaky breath and let Simon in, closing the door. "I messed up, Uncle Simon."

"You don't say."

Aaron told him everything: how he was on the run from the police in the United States for a crime he didn't commit, how he had smuggled himself out of the country, how he had met Lester, how he had agreed to run a simple errand, how someone had stolen the backpack before he even knew what was inside it, and how the Thai mob now believed he had ten million dollars of their money.

Simon let out a low whistle and shook his head. "Jesus, kid. You really know how to screw things up."

Aaron nodded, feeling it hit him all over again. "Yeah, well, I need help. I need to get out of Bangkok."

Simon rubbed his temples, thinking hard. "You're not going anywhere. Not with the mob looking for you."

Aaron's stomach dropped. "So what do I do?"

Simon glanced out the window, scanning the empty street, then looked back at Aaron with a face that was lined and grim. "For now, you stay here. I'll figure something out."



Aaron spent the day pacing his hotel room, his nerves shredded raw. Every knock in the hallway made him flinch, and he couldn't sit still for more than a few minutes.

Hours later, Simon knocked once, then stepped inside quickly. His face was tight and serious.

"We've got a problem," he said. "The mob's figured out you might be here. They've been snooping around all day, asking guests, hassling the staff. It's only a matter of time before they start checking the rooms."

Aaron's throat tightened. "So what now? That ship's not leaving until tomorrow night."

Simon hesitated, and Aaron didn't like the look on his face.

"There's one idea. But you're not going to like it."

"Anything," Aaron said. "If it keeps me alive, I'll do it."

Simon rubbed the back of his neck. "The salon downstairs. A man named Aek runs it. He's a good friend of mine, and he has a plan to disguise you. Nobody would suspect."

Aaron cut him off, feeling a rush of hope. "Perfect, I'll do it. A disguise. A hat, sunglasses, new clothes?"

Simon winced. "Not exactly."

Aaron stared at him.

Simon kept going. "Aek thinks you'd be safest disguised as one of his nail technicians. A local Thai girl. Someone the mob isn't even looking for."

Aaron felt his stomach flip. "Wait, you want me to dress up as a Thai girl?"

Simon nodded, looking uncomfortable. "Aaron, listen. Nobody will expect it. Aek knows his stuff. It could save your life."

Aaron shook his head, almost laughing. "There's got to be another way. That's insane. They'll see right through it."

Simon sighed, folding his arms. "Just think about it. But don't take too long. We're running out of time."

Aaron crossed his arms and shook his head again, planting himself in place even as panic chewed at his insides. There was no way he was dressing up like that. He would take his chances hiding in the room.



Later that evening, hunger and nerves pushed Aaron to slip downstairs to find Simon. He moved carefully through the stairwell, his heart thumping against his ribs. As soon as he stepped into the lobby, he stopped cold.

Across the room, a tough-looking Thai man leaned over the counter, grilling the night clerk. His eyes scanned the lobby, and when he saw Aaron's face, something changed. Recognition flashed across his features.

Aaron's heart pounded. He spun around and darted back into the stairwell, taking the steps two at a time, pushing his legs harder than he

thought they could go. He reached his floor and slammed the door behind him, pressing his back against it, chest heaving, head spinning.

Minutes later, Simon burst into the room, his face tight and grim.

"They're coming back tonight to search the whole place," he said. "They know you're here. Aaron, you don't have a choice anymore."

Aaron sat down on the edge of the bed, feeling the last of his fight leave him. "Fine," he said. "Take me to this guy."

After the hotel salon closed, Aaron snuck downstairs, his steps heavy with dread. Aek waited for him inside the salon. He was chubby and lively, and very, very gay. Almost *painfully* so.

"You trust me," he said, touching Aaron's shoulder. "I make sure nobody recognize you."

Aek got to work right away. His hands moved quickly and with care, and Aaron sat stiffly, heart racing, as the transformation began.

Aek brushed a layer of silky foundation across Aaron's skin, blending it down his neck and arms, covering his natural tone with a warm, even tan. In the mirror, Aaron watched in disbelief as the pale, scared face staring back at him started to disappear.

Aek picked up a contouring brush next, sweeping shadow along Aaron's jawline and cheeks, softening every angle until his features looked delicate and unfamiliar. Then he moved to Aaron's eyes, lining them in dark black and making the lashes long and thick, dusting shimmering shadow across the eyelids until his eyes looked wider, deeper, and more striking. Aaron felt a strange twinge inside himself, seeing how much it changed him.

Aek painted Aaron's lips a glossy pink, shaping them fuller and softer, and Aaron caught his reflection and almost didn't recognize himself.

Aek brought over a wig next, long and platinum-blonde and smooth as silk. He fitted it carefully over Aaron's head, tugging and pinning until the hair fell past his shoulders in shining sheets, and Aaron shivered when the synthetic strands brushed his bare skin.

Aek handed him clothes next. Aaron pulled on a black blouse, fitted tight across a padded bra, and a soft skirt that brushed just above his knees. Aek gave him a pair of sandals with a slight heel that forced him to walk slower and lighter.





Aaron stood awkwardly, adjusting the unfamiliar weight on his chest and the snugness of the skirt.

In the mirror, an attractive young Thai woman stared back at him. She looked confident and graceful, nothing like the terrified American he remembered being.

"I can't believe it," he said, his voice low and shaky.

Aek smiled with pride. "You look beautiful. Nobody suspect you. Now we teach you how to speak."

For the next hour, Aaron sat at a small table while Aek drilled him on Thai phrases and expressions. Aek spoke slowly, showing him how to tilt his voice higher, how to soften his consonants, how to let a playful lilt slip into his words. He was surprisingly good at imitating a woman's voice, or maybe that wasn't surprising at all.

Aek showed him how to giggle, how to tilt his head when listening, how to flutter his lashes without thinking. Aaron felt ridiculous at first, stumbling over words and gestures, but Aek was patient, and he kept him going until he started to sound natural.

"Girls here not like American girls," Aek explained. "Thai girls want men. They fight over men. They do everything to get man. They act silly, giggle, laugh, flirt. Anything to get man."

By the time Simon came to check in, Aaron was standing nervously against the far wall, practicing small smiles in the mirror.

Simon stopped dead when he saw him. He stared for a long second, then chuckled low in his throat.

"My god," he said, shaking his head. "It actually worked."

Aaron laughed, a soft, musical sound he hardly recognized, and said, "Yeah, I can't believe it myself." His voice sounded light and careful, the practiced inflection smooth.

Aek pressed a finger to his lips. "From now on, your name is Namtan. You are new technician at my salon. Nobody suspect a thing."

Aaron nodded, his heart pounding in his chest. "Got it."

Simon stepped forward and squeezed his shoulder gently. "Hang tight, kid. Keep your spirits up. We'll get you onto that ship in a few days."

Aaron took a deep breath, still feeling the tightness of fear, but now more from what he was doing than who was after him. For now he was Namtan, the quiet new nail technician. Soon enough though, he would be Aaron again, and finally on his way out of Thailand.



Aaron barely slept. The air conditioning in the tiny room hummed weakly, and the heavy smell of hairspray and floral lotion stuck to his skin. He laid there staring at the cracked ceiling, wondering how his life had turned into a bad joke.

A sharp knock made him jolt upright.

"Namtan!" Aek called in a singsong voice. "Time to get up, beautiful! Today, we make you a working girl!"

Aaron groaned and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Aek was already waiting and wasted no time. He pulled Aaron into a lacy yellow dress, tighter than anything he had worn the night before, then pushed him into the chair and started on his makeup. Thick foundation hid his skin. Sharp black lines stretched from the corners of his eyes. Aek colored his lips a deep, bubblegum pink.

Aaron sat still as Aek secured the platinum-blonde wig again, curling the strands until they fell just right.

"Now," Aek said, checking his work, "you must always be Namtan. No man voice. No man walk. No stupid farang mistakes."

Aaron nodded stiffly.

Aek scowled. "Nod like woman, not like dumb man."

Aaron sighed and tilted his head, making the nod softer.

"Suay laew!" Aek said with a roll of his eyes. "Now, let's go. Your first customers are waiting." Aaron swallowed hard and followed him into the hallway.

The Golden Orchid's salon was already busy. Hair dryers roared in the background, the smell of polish and acetone hung in the air, and Thai pop music played from a speaker tucked in the corner.

Aek clapped his hands. "Girls! We have new technician today!"

Three women, all Thai, looked up from their stations. They wore sleek black uniforms and matching aprons, and their eyes went straight to Aaron.

Aek waved a hand toward him. "This is Namtan! She just moved from Pattaya!"

The women smiled politely and murmured greetings.



Aaron bowed his head and gave them a shy smile. "S̄wạs̄dī khâ," he said, keeping his voice light and high.

Aek beamed with pride, hearing him say the phrase just as he had taught him. "She is very talented but needs to learn our ways. Be nice to her, yes?"

The women nodded and went back to their customers.

Aaron let out a slow breath, feeling his heart slow a little. So far, so good.

Aek led him to an empty station, where a neat desk waited, covered in orderly rows of nail polish bottles, files, and brushes.

"You watch me first. Then you try," Aek said. Aaron nodded again and watched carefully.

For the next hour, Aaron hovered near Aek while he worked on a customer, watching how he held the client's hands, how he filed the nails in short, quick strokes, and how he painted each nail smooth and even, never missing a beat. It looked easy, but Aaron knew better than to trust appearances now.

Then it was his turn. His first customer was an older Thai woman with a kind face who smiled at him as he took her hand. His palms were sweaty, but he forced himself to keep his touch steady.

He took a breath and copied what Aek had shown him. He fumbled at first, nearly dropping the nail file, and put too much polish on the brush, so the first stroke came out messy. But the woman didn't scowl or pull away. She chatted with one of the other stylists while he worked.

By the time he finished, she looked down at her hands, smiled, and said, "S̄wy!"

Aaron caught the word: Beautiful.

He smiled back, feeling a tiny flicker of pride light inside him. Maybe he could survive this after all.

His next customer sat down, a younger woman with a bright pink bag and sharp eyes. She talked fast, asking him questions in Thai, and he caught pieces here and there. He nodded and smiled and said "Chậa" when he thought it fit.

By lunchtime, he had finished four sets of nails. He was tired but felt a little hope, thinking maybe he was getting the hang of it.

Then Aek handed him a small envelope, light in his hand. He peeked inside, and a few small bills sat at the bottom.

His stomach dropped. This was nowhere near enough. He needed a lot more if he wanted any chance of buying his way out of Thailand.

Aek watched his face and smirked. "You want better tips?"

Aaron nodded.

Aek leaned closer. "Then you sell it."

Aaron frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You are Namtan. Beautiful Thai girl. Customers love beauty and charm. They pay for the experience, not just the nails. If you want bigger tips, you must upgrade."

Aaron swallowed hard. "How?"

He sat in the back room of the salon, staring at the corset Aek held up like it was a threat.

"You want big tips, yes?" Aek grinned.

Aaron blew out a slow breath. "Fine. Let's do this."

Aek moved fast. He wrapped the corset around Aaron's waist and yanked the laces tight. Aaron gasped, gripping the chair as his ribs pressed together. His already slim waist pulled in even tighter, and his chest was pushed up slightly by the boning.

"See? Instant curves," Aek said, pleased.

But he didn't stop there. He brought out silicone hip and butt pads and slipped them under Aaron's dress, adjusting them until his body looked soft and rounded. When Aaron stood, he almost didn't recognize his own reflection. He now had the hourglass shape of a Thai beauty queen.

"Now, face time," Aek said, clapping his hands.

Aaron heard the door open, and a local cosmetic specialist stepped in, holding a small case.

Botox and fillers. Aaron didn't need Aek to explain.

He sat still as they worked. He winced when the needle smoothed the lines across his forehead, and he gritted his teeth as his lips and

cheekbones puffed out, subtle but clear. His eyebrows were trimmed into thin, sharp arcs.

When it was done, the specialist pulled out a piercing gun and gave him two quick shots, leaving small gold studs in each earlobe.

"Pain is beauty," Aek said with a grin.

Aaron stared into the mirror. It was so strange to see himself like this, stranger than anything he had ever done.



The next morning felt different when Aaron walked into the salon. He no longer wobbled in his heels, but walked with a soft, natural sway that turned heads.

Customers looked at him and whispered. Some called him beautiful. When he started working, the tips came in without

much effort.

At the end of the day, Aek handed him another envelope. He counted the money twice, not trusting his eyes the first time. It was triple what he had earned the day before.

He should have felt happy, but it still wasn't enough to get out of Thailand.

After closing time, he slumped against the wall, the day's weight heavy on his shoulders.

"At this rate, I'd have to work here for a year to get out of Thailand," he said, his voice low.

Simon leaned against the doorway, a cigarette between his fingers, smoke curling around his head. "You're doing good, Aaron. But you can't get discouraged. We'll find a way."

Aaron stared at the floor. "What if the mob never stops looking?" He looked over at Simon. "Any news on getting me out of the country?"

Simon shrugged. "It'll be a while. Let's not talk about things we can't control, okay?"

Aaron lifted his eyes to the dark mirror across the room and barely recognized the reflection staring back at him. Things felt *more* out of his control than ever.



Every morning, Aaron woke up and slipped deeper into his new life. His routine was strict now. He got up early, showered, moisturized, and applied a full face of makeup before the sun was even high. He cinched himself into the corset without thinking, his hands pulling the laces tight. He fixed the hip pads in place, shaping his frame into a soft hourglass. He spent time styling his wig, brushing the straight platinum strands until they fell smooth and clean past his shoulders.

Then came the nails. Aek insisted that Namtan must always be her own best advertisement, and every few days, even while waiting for word from Uncle Simon, Aaron sat through long, tedious sessions while Aek or one of the other stylists worked on his hands. At first the acrylic

extensions were short. Now they stretched long and elegant, catching the light whenever he moved.

"Customers want to see you can do good nails," Aek said one afternoon, leaning close as he painted tiny golden flowers onto Aaron's newest set. "If you look good, they trust you. They tip more."

Aaron watched him work, his fingers stiff and unfamiliar under the weight of the acrylics. He barely recognized his own hands anymore.

The nails weren't the hardest part of his disguise, though. It was the language. He had picked up a few basic Thai phrases, enough to get through small talk, but every day in the salon, customers chattered at him, fast and casual, expecting him to understand. He nodded when he should have spoken. He smiled when he should have answered. The other salon girls were polite, but he felt their eyes on him when he got a word wrong or missed a simple joke.

He knew he had to fix it. Every night after work, he lay on the narrow bed in his tiny room, phone glowing in the dark, repeating phrases over and over with the language app, drilling the soft, rising tones of Thai into his head. He trained his voice to sound higher, lighter, more musical, the way Aek had shown him.

Sometimes Simon stopped by. He didn't knock; he just came in, tossing a plastic bag of takeout onto the bed.

"You getting better at it?" he asked one night, watching Aaron close the app.

"A little," Aaron said, picking at the container of noodles. "It's not just the words. It's the tone. Thai has a kind of twang to it."

Simon leaned back in the chair by the door and lit a cigarette. "Yeah, well, you better get it right. Last thing we need is one of those girls figuring out you're not from Pattaya."

Aaron nodded, even though his nerves tightened. The girls were friendly enough, but they still watched him like they were waiting for something to slip.



After a month working the salon, he started to notice something strange. His closet was fuller than it used to be. New clothes hung neatly from the rack: blouses with plunging necklines, skirts so short he had to be careful sitting down, dresses that clung to every curve. He hadn't bought any of it.

One morning he held up a lacy pink dress by the straps and called out, "Aek, where do all the clothes in my closet come from?"

"Thank me later," Aek said, leaning into the doorway, grinning. "You need sexy clothes. Customers like sexy girls."

Aaron sighed and dropped the dress back onto the bed. He hated how easy it had become to slide into these outfits, how natural it felt to check his makeup in the mirror and fix his earrings before stepping outside.

It wasn't until later, as he stood at the sink doing his nightly skincare routine, that he noticed something else: his skin looked darker. At first he thought it was the bad lighting, but another week passed and the change was clear. His once-fair skin now held a warm, golden tan. He frowned and reached for one of the lotions Aek had given him, scanning the label with his phone's translator.

Promotes a natural, sun-kissed glow with long-lasting results.

He gripped the edge of the sink and stared at his reflection. He hadn't agreed to this. Nobody had asked him. He turned the bottle over in his hand and thought that maybe it wasn't such a bad thing. If he looked more Thai, he looked less like the scared farang boy the mob was hunting, and for now, that was the only thing that mattered.



He never imagined he would get used to walking in six-inch platform heels, but there he was, floating across the salon floor like he had worn them all his life. Aek had made it clear early on: higher heels meant higher tips. At first it was hell. His ankles wobbled, his calves burned, and he almost fell on his backside more times than he could count. But after weeks of practice, he mastered the sway, the careful balance between looking graceful and staying upright.

The salon buzzed with chatter as he sat down at his station. That day, his client was Nicha, one of the regulars. She was beautiful and sharp, always wrapped in expensive silk, her wrists and fingers heavy with gold.

Aaron kept his head low, focusing on her nails, trying to stay invisible.

Nicha gossiped loudly with another stylist, her voice carrying across the room. "My boyfriend is furious," she said, checking the shape of her nails. "We lost so much money on our last transaction. They're still looking for him everywhere. The courier. An American, naturally. Thieves, all of them."

Aaron nearly dropped his file. His heart slammed against his ribs, but he pressed his lips together and kept filing. The other stylists gasped and leaned closer. "No sign of him?" one asked.

"Nothing," Nicha huffed, tapping her foot impatiently. "And you know what's funny? He could be anywhere. Bangkok is huge. But he could also be right under our noses."

The other girls laughed it off quickly. "No one like that has been in our salon! They get scared off by our beauty!" one said, waving her hand as if the idea were ridiculous.

Nicha let it go and switched the topic to something lighter. Aaron forced himself to breathe and moved carefully through painting her nails, his hand steady even though he could feel sweat pooling at the back of his neck.

But when he finished and started cleaning up, Nicha studied him closely.

"Hmm," she murmured. "Namtan, right?"

Aaron smiled and nodded politely. "Chậa, khun Nicha."

She tilted her head, looking him over. "Are you wearing padding?" she asked, her voice light but sharp.

The salon went quiet. Even the music seemed to fade.

Aaron froze for a second, then dropped his gaze, feigning shyness.

"Your hips, your shape," Nicha said, her eyes narrowing slightly. "Are you a ladyboy?"

Aaron's heart raced so fast he could barely think.

"Mị̀! Mị̀ chì!" he protested, keeping his voice soft and high, just the way Aek had taught him. "P̄hm pĕn phûying thật!" *I am a real woman.*

Nicha watched him for a long second, the corner of her mouth twitching. Then she laughed, the sound bright and careless.

"Just curious," she said. "Don't be so sensitive, sweetheart."

Aaron let out a small giggle, light and musical, and acted like it was all a silly joke.

Nicha paid and left without another word, but as she stepped through the door, she threw one last glance back over her shoulder.

Aaron felt it in his gut. She suspected.



That night, Aaron burst into Simon's office, slamming the door behind him.

"I need out!" he hissed, pacing back and forth across the room, his tight dress pulling against his legs.

Simon didn't flinch. He leaned back in his chair, cigarette dangling from his fingers, watching him with the same tired patience he always did.

"No can do, kid," he said.

"She knows," Aaron said, his voice rising. "One of them. The mobster's girlfriend. Or something. She asked if I was a ladyboy. She wasn't joking, Simon. I need to leave, tonight."

Simon exhaled a long stream of smoke and shook his head. "Even if I had a way, do you have fifty grand?"

Aaron stopped pacing. His mouth felt dry. "Fifty?"

"That's the price to get you smuggled out of Thailand without a trace." Simon leaned forward, elbows on the desk. "And right now, you barely have enough to buy a plane ticket, let alone bribe the right people."

Aaron slumped into the chair across from him, the weight of it all sinking into his bones.

"So what do I do?" he asked, his voice flat.

Simon looked him in the eye, serious for once. "Adjust your expectations."

Aaron sat in silence as he kept talking.

"You become Namtan. You make sure there's not a single doubt in anyone's mind that you're a woman. Because you're gonna be her for at least six more months."

"Six months! Someone is going to notice that I'm just a heap of padding and makeup!"

"We can do something about that," Simon said.

"Like what?"

"Thailand has a lot of amazing doctors, Aaron. They know how to make a man look like a woman."

"No. No way."

"Six months, Aaron. You have to keep people from seeing the truth for *six months*. A little bit of help will go a long way."

"How do I even pay for it."

"It's not expensive. I can cover it. Then you can pay me back."

"No."

"I don't think you have a choice, Aaron. And both of our necks are on the line."

Aaron gripped the hem of his skirt in both hands and stared at the floor, feeling the walls close in a little tighter.

Six more months. He had no choice.

"Fine," he whispered. "Let's do what needs to be done."



Aaron stood still, staring into the mirror, unable to move. His heart fluttered as his eyes traveled downward, landing on the large, soft curves that now filled out the front of his body. They were heavy, full, unmistakably real. He raised his hand and brushed his fingers lightly across his chest, feeling the weight, the skin, the warmth. Breast implants.

Three weeks of recovery had blurred together in his mind, three weeks stuck in bed, alone except for endless reruns of Thai soap operas and daily drills in language apps. During those long days and nights, his body had changed into something almost unrecognizable. Simon and Aek had spent hours wearing him down.

"It's foolproof," Simon had said, sitting in the corner, arms crossed. "No mobster would ever believe the American who stole their money would stick around with a pair of boobs."

"Yeah, I don't believe it either, that's for sure," Aaron had told him.

Aek had grinned and nodded along. "You be safe. Nobody question you."

The logic made a certain twisted sense. Now he had DD-cup breasts to prove his identity.

He glanced over at the closet, packed tight with new clothes. The hangers sagged under the weight of low-cut blouses, tight skirts, and body-hugging dresses, every piece picked carefully by Aek to show off his new figure. He grabbed a lacy bra from the drawer, slipped his arms through the straps, and fastened it behind his back, adjusting the cups until his breasts sat just right. He pulled a blouse over his head, the plunging neckline dipping low enough to leave no doubt about what he was now carrying. A tight pencil skirt hugged his hips, forcing him to sway as he moved.

He took a deep breath and studied himself in the mirror. Was he ready for this? He was about to find out.

His platform heels clicked sharply on the marble floors as he walked through the lobby of the Golden Orchid. Heads turned as he entered the salon.

"Namtan! Finally back!" Mai squealed in excited Thai, running toward him with open arms. She pulled him into a hug, careful not to smudge his makeup.

The other stylists crowded around, laughing and teasing the moment they noticed the change.

Lin laughed loud enough for the whole salon to hear. "Oh my god! Namtan! Those are new!" She pointed openly at his chest, giggling behind her hand.

Aaron blushed and lowered his eyes, offering a soft, shy smile. "It was Aek's idea," he said in his best lilting Thai. "He said it would bring in more business."

The girls burst into laughter, some clapping their hands, others shaking their heads in mock disbelief. Even the ones who had barely spoken to him before now seemed eager to chat and joke.

"You look incredible!" Mai said, still holding onto his arm. "The men are going to lose their minds!"

Aaron laughed softly, feeling the blush rise naturally to his cheeks. "I just hope they leave good tips," he said, causing another round of laughter.

The day flew by. His first customers couldn't take their



eyes off him. They smiled more, talked more, leaned in closer as he shaped and painted their nails. He understood everything they said now. He caught their jokes and teased back gently, keeping it light and flirtatious. The tips poured in with every completed set.

At the end of the day, the girls crowded around again, teasing him like a younger sister. He laughed and joked with them easily, and sitting there, watching their smiling faces, he realized he was no longer pretending. His smile was real, and his laughter bubbled up without being forced.

Maybe Simon and Aek were right. Maybe being out in the open as Namtan was the safest place he could be.

Still, when he lay awake at night, staring at the ceiling, the question gnawed at him. Had he gone too far?



Life inside the Golden Orchid felt safe, but it was a cage. The mob might not find him here, but each day he stayed, the cage shrank a little more.

He grew restless. The sameness wore him down. He could only watch so many soap operas before his mind started to fray at the edges.

"You can't just hide in your room forever," Simon said one evening, setting a steaming plate of food in front of him. He leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. "Use the hotel's services. The gym. The pool. Everything here is safe."

Aaron frowned, poking at the food. "It's not that simple."

Simon shrugged. "It's better than going crazy locked in here."

Aaron didn't answer, but he knew Simon was right.

The next morning, he stood outside the gym, staring through the glass at the women stretching and dancing to fast pop music. He hesitated, his heart hammering, feeling more exposed than he ever had. The outfit Aek had chosen for him, a tight, brightly colored leotard and clingy leggings, showed every curve. He adjusted his top, feeling his breasts shift slightly, and winced as he realized there was no hiding anything now.

Still, he walked inside, keeping his head up, ignoring the strange buzz in his nerves. He slipped into the back row and started copying the movements of the girls in the class.

At first he was clumsy. He missed steps, stumbled on spins, kicked too low. But day after day, he came back.

Slowly, his body adjusted. His legs stretched longer, his arms moved with the rhythm. He started to move without having to think about it, blending into the class like he belonged there.

As the weeks passed, he noticed the changes. His waist slimmed down naturally, and his hips filled out with new muscle. He stopped needing the corset. The padded inserts went into a drawer, forgotten.

Now when he looked in the mirror, the figure staring back was slender, toned, and feminine. He no longer saw Aaron Sellers trying to fake it. He saw Namtan, strong and real.



Despite growing comfortable with aerobics, Aaron still hesitated when it came to the rooftop swimming pool. The idea of exposing his body in a swimsuit made him queasy. But boredom, once again, pushed him past his fear. He spent nearly an hour combing through the racks in the hotel boutique until he found something that felt safe, a sleek black one-piece suit that covered most of his body. Still, there was no hiding his chest now. His DD breasts, heavy and prominent, made modesty impossible.

He wrapped himself tightly in a towel, took a breath, and stepped out onto the rooftop.

The pool shimmered under the afternoon sun. Guests lounged on chairs, flipping through magazines or sipping colorful drinks. He felt every set of eyes as he walked by, but no one looked alarmed and no one stared too long. At most, he caught a few appreciative glances at his curves before people lost interest.

He slipped into the water quickly, letting the coolness wash over him. Relief spread through him as he kicked off and swam slow, steady laps. No one bothered him, and no one asked questions. He was both amused and terrified to realize he now had floatation devices built in to his chest.

As the days passed, swimming became part of his routine. It eased the tension in his muscles, improved his stamina, and slowly reshaped his body further. His arms and legs grew stronger, and his movements grew smoother.

Under the tropical sun, his skin darkened to a rich, glowing tan. After a few weeks, he caught his reflection in the water and realized his complexion matched the other salon girls. He was no longer the pale foreigner who had stepped off the plane months earlier.

He walked with easy confidence now, his voice clear and sweet in Thai. His body, molded by surgery and shaped by hours of exercise, moved with the natural grace of a woman.

One evening, as he stepped through the lobby after a long



swim, he saw Simon watching him. Simon's gaze followed him for a moment before he spoke.

"You're completely convincing," he said, almost to himself. "No one would ever guess who you once were."

Aaron paused, feeling a strange ache inside, and gave him a small smile. "I'm still me, Uncle Simon."

"You could never convince me."

Despite how uneasy he felt at this remark, he nodded slowly, not trusting himself to say anything. He didn't even know who he was anymore. But at least, for now, he was safe.



Aaron reached a breaking point with the wig. Months of daily wear had turned the platinum strands into a knotted, frizzy mess. Every morning felt like a battle, and every night felt like a chore. Frustrated, he stormed into the salon and slammed the wig down in front of Aek.

"Is there anything better than this stupid wig?" he demanded.

Aek laughed, picking up the ruined hairpiece like it was something pathetic. "Of course, darling. Let's make it permanent."

Aaron frowned. "Permanent?"

Aek tapped his short natural hair with a playful smirk. "Extensions. Expensive, but beautiful. Real. You never take them out. It becomes part of you."

Aaron hesitated, feeling a tight knot form in his stomach, then sighed, defeated. "Fine. Do it."

It took hours. They wove the long platinum strands into his own hair strand by strand, pulling, knotting, tightening. When he finally saw the result, his heart jumped. The hair felt real. It moved when he moved. It shone under the salon lights. No more wigs, and no more faking it.

He ran his hands through the thick, silky curtain and stared at his reflection. It felt like crossing a line.

Later, when Simon pulled him aside and showed him the bill, his stomach sank even lower.

"You'll need to stay a few more months to cover this," Simon said quietly.

Aaron nodded, numb. He felt like he was drowning, with no way out. He needed a drink.

He slid onto a stool at the hotel bar, waving down the bartender for a whiskey on the rocks. He drank it fast, the burn in his throat almost welcome, and tapped the glass for another.

"You okay, kid?" Simon asked, dropping onto the stool beside him.

"I'm trapped, Uncle Simon," Aaron muttered, staring into his glass. "Every time I get close, something else comes along. Now I'm stuck even longer."

Simon watched him for a moment, then shrugged. "We'll figure something out. Just hang in there."

Aaron didn't answer. Around him, the bar hummed with life, laughter floating through the smoky air. His eyes drifted across the room to a group of beautiful Thai girls sitting with male customers, laughing brightly, leaning in close, clinking glasses.

He nodded toward them. "Who are they?"

"Hostesses," Simon said. "They're paid to keep customers company. Talk. Flirt a little. Customers buy them expensive drinks, and the girls get a commission. Easy money."

Aaron watched them a little longer. They looked relaxed and happy, alive in a way he hadn't felt in a long time.

"Could I do that?" he asked.

Simon shifted uncomfortably. "Aaron..."

"I need the money," Aaron said, cutting him off. "Look at me. No one would suspect anything. I can speak Thai. Customers like Namtan at the salon. I could do it here, too. Let me try."

Simon rubbed his temples like he already knew he was going to regret it. After a long pause, he let out a breath. "Alright. I'll introduce you. But be careful."



A short while later, Simon led Aaron across the bar to a corner booth where a sophisticated-looking Thai woman sat with a clipboard resting on the table. She glanced up as he approached and smiled warmly, her professional demeanor putting him slightly at ease.

"Namtan, meet Arisa," Simon said. "She runs the hostess program. Arisa, this is Namtan, one of our salon girls interested in hosting evenings."

Arisa studied him for a moment, her eyes moving from his hair to his waist to his legs. She nodded approvingly. "Very pretty. Nice hair, great figure. Customers will like you." She set her clipboard down and looked him directly in the eyes. "Have you ever done this kind of work?"

Aaron shook his head shyly. "No, ma'am."

Arisa's smile softened. "Easy work," she said. "Look pretty, smile, talk, and drink slowly. Customers buy you drinks and pay good money to spend an hour with you. You get a commission for each drink. Understand?"

Aaron nodded, feeling his heart pound harder. "Yes, I think so."

Arisa rose from the booth with a graceful sweep of her hand. "Then let's get you ready. I'll teach you exactly how to charm customers."

Aaron followed her toward a small back room behind the bar, nerves and excitement twisting in his stomach. For the first time in a long while, he felt something close to hope. If he could master this, maybe he could finally earn enough to escape.



Aaron found out quickly that being a hostess was not as simple as sitting and smiling.

Bua, one of the senior hostesses, took him under her wing. She pulled him aside each evening before the bar opened, her voice low and direct as she taught him the details that mattered.

"Always smile softly," Bua said, demonstrating the look herself. "Look deep into their eyes. Laugh at their jokes, even when they're bad. Lean

closer when you speak. Make them feel like the most interesting man in Bangkok."

Aaron nodded and practiced, mimicking the tilt of her head, the subtle arch of her back when she leaned in. He watched how she flicked her hair, how she rested a light hand on a man's arm just long enough to leave him wanting more.

Every night, he studied harder. His wardrobe changed first. He started wearing the kind of dresses Bua recommended, tight enough to turn heads and elegant enough to look expensive. His outfits shimmered under the bar's dim lights, clinging to his hips and breasts. He traded his platform pumps for elegant high-heeled sandals, and he added bracelets, rings, earrings, and necklaces, stacking layers of shine and glamour until he felt like someone new.

By the end of his first week, he had regulars. Wealthy men with gold watches and heavy wallets asked for him by name. They bought him the most expensive cocktails without hesitation. They listened when he spoke, laughed too loud when he giggled, and watched his every move with hungry eyes.

But not everyone was happy. One evening, as he sat alone in the dressing room adjusting the strap of his stocking, he heard the door slam open. He looked up to see Dao storming in, her face twisted with rage. She was one of the hostesses working alongside him.

"You!" she snapped, pointing a manicured finger at him.

Aaron stayed seated, keeping his face calm.

"You think you can come in here and take all my customers?" Dao hissed, her voice sharp enough to cut glass.

Aaron finished adjusting his stocking before standing up slowly. "They choose who they want," he said, his voice soft but cold.

Dao stepped closer, her heels clicking hard against the floor. "You fake little Pattaya princess," she spat. "They only like you because you're new. You're nothing special."

Aaron tilted his head, his voice dropping lower. "Maybe you're not good enough at your job," he said, each word sharp as a blade.

That was all it took. Dao lunged, grabbing a fistful of his hair. He reacted without thinking, grappling back, the two of them spinning into

the wall. Dresses tore. Nails scratched. Shouts filled the small room, and he heard someone outside yell for help, but he was too deep into it to stop.

When the fight ended, he was standing. His hair was a mess and his dress was ripped at the side, but Dao was slumped against the far wall, glaring up at him through angry tears.

Aaron smoothed down his skirt, lifted his chin, and walked out without a word.

From that night on, no one questioned it. He was the top girl now.



Soon Aaron was making more money than ever before. He brought in tips from the salon and commissions from hosting, enough that even Simon agreed he could risk a short shopping trip outside the hotel.

Stepping out onto the busy Bangkok streets for the first time in months, he felt the rush of nerves crawl across his skin. He clutched his handbag tighter, his heart pounding, but as he moved with the crowd, something inside him clicked. He fell into Namtan's stride, the soft sway of her hips, the natural way she lifted his chin and smiled.

The eyes on him didn't bather him. He was used to men looking at him by now. It was his business, after all. He was used to ignoring the ugly ones and smiling at the cute ones. The rich ones got a wink.

He navigated the narrow shop-lined streets with purpose, stopping at boutiques filled with silk dresses and shimmering skirts. He picked out pieces he would have once never imagined touching: tight, provocative skirts, flowing blouses that brushed the tops of his thighs, sky-high heels with delicate straps, glittering jewelry heavy with rhinestones, and soft, luxurious lingerie. He didn't hesitate. He tried on the dresses, turned before the mirror, and admired how his body moved now without the need for padding or corsets.

Back at the hotel, his closet hangars groaned under the weight of his new wardrobe. Expensive outfits hung in neat rows, and shoes in glossy colors lined the walls. He spent his nights alone at his vanity, experimenting with new makeup styles, flattening his platinum hair,

layering lipsticks until he found the perfect shade of pink. He polished his long nails, moisturized his now golden-brown skin, and laid out his looks for the next day.

He didn't think of it as obsession. He thought of it as survival, as being good at his job. He didn't notice that even when alone, he moved the same way, tilted his head the same way, and spoke in the same lilting voice without meaning to.



Aaron sat across from Simon in the hotel lounge, the low hum of conversation filling the background. He crossed his legs at the knee without thinking, resting his manicured hands on his thigh as Simon lit another cigarette.

"So, kid," Simon said, leaning back in his chair with a casual sigh, "here's the deal. We've got a few things in the works, but it's slow. You're gonna need to sit tight a while longer."

Aaron brushed a long platinum strand over his shoulder, the movement light and easy. "Ah, okay na khâ. How long you think, P'Simon?" he asked, his voice soft, musical, automatic.

Simon tapped ashes into the tray. "Few more months at least. We're setting up the right people. Can't rush it."

Aaron bit his lower lip gently and nodded. "I see, na khâ."

The words felt strange on his tongue. His English came out slow and clumsy, as if he were forcing his mouth to shape the sounds. He shook his head lightly, pushing away the uncomfortable thought, and focused on Simon again, choosing his words carefully. "But, eh, it safe here at hotel, yes?"

Simon shrugged, blowing smoke into the air. "Of course it is. As long as you don't wander too far, you're safe here."

Aaron nodded, tucking another strand of hair behind his ear with a delicate flick of his fingers, a motion he didn't even realize he had learned. Simon didn't seem to notice anything out of place. He just went on.

"The salon's good for you, huh?" he said. "You're making good money downstairs, too."

Aaron smiled, his lashes lowering instinctively. "Tips very good now, khâ. Customers very kind."

Simon chuckled, his attention drifting lazily around the room. "That's good to hear. Whatever you're doing, keep doing it. The more they love you, the safer you are."

Aaron felt a blush creeping into his cheeks and covered it with a soft, high laugh. "Ah, customers like when I look nice, na khâ."

Simon laughed along with him, not seeing the shift happening in front of him. "You're doing fine, Aaron. Just stay patient. This'll all be over before you know it."

Aaron nodded again, smoothing the soft material of his blouse down over his waist. He opened his mouth to say more, but English felt slow and foreign. Instead he fell into Thai with ease, letting it flow naturally from his lips.

"K̄hxbkhuṇ mâak na khâ, P'Simon."

Simon nodded absently, flicking his cigarette into the ashtray and checking his watch. "All right. Keep your chin up. I'll check in later."

Aaron watched him go, the heavy door swinging shut behind him. He sat there, staring at the closed door, feeling a weight settle in his chest.

Simon hadn't noticed a thing. He hadn't commented on his voice, his mannerisms, the way he moved and spoke like the woman he had virtually become. To Simon, he was still Aaron Sellers, the desperate kid hiding from the mob.

Really, Aaron was grateful for that.



The bar buzzed with noise, laughter mixing with the soft clink of ice cubes and the low murmur of background music. Aaron adjusted the silk of his dress, smoothing it carefully over his hips, and glanced toward Bua, who stood near the hostess stand looking irritated.

"Khun Pen is here again," Bua said, her tone sharp. "And he's annoyed that his usual girl isn't working tonight."

Aaron peeked past her shoulder. A thin, awkward-looking man sat at a corner table, hunched slightly, his hands fiddling with the edge of his drink napkin. Aaron recognized him. Pen always spent his evenings with Noi, one of the quieter hostesses.

"I can take him, Bua," Aaron offered, keeping his voice light.

Mai raised an eyebrow, clearly skeptical. "You sure? He's quiet. Stingy, too."

Aaron smiled softly. "Better than no customer, khâ."

Bua sighed, giving a small wave of her hand. "Fine. Go."

Aaron glided across the floor, feeling his heels tap lightly on the polished wood. Reaching the table, he tilted his head sweetly and smiled.

"Ŝwạ̄sdī khâ, Khun Pen. Mind if I join you?"

Pen looked up, startled. He pushed his thick glasses up his nose and stared for a moment before nodding. "Oh. You are Namtan, yes?"

Aaron slid into the seat across from him, adjusting his dress smoothly. "That's right, khâ. Noi is away today, but I'll keep you company." He leaned in slightly, letting his voice dip into a soft, inviting tone. "Will you buy me a drink?"

Pen hesitated, his eyes darting nervously before he nodded. "Yes. One, please."

Aaron smiled sweetly and gestured to the waitress, watching as Pen chose the cheapest option among the expensive drink menu.

"So," Aaron said, sipping his drink carefully, "how was your day today, Khun Pen?"

He glanced down at the table, uncomfortable. "It was fine. Nothing special."

Aaron nodded encouragingly. "Tell me something about yourself, khâ."

Pen cleared his throat. "I work in accounting. It's boring. You wouldn't care."

Aaron giggled lightly, touching his sleeve with two fingers. "Of course I care, na khâ. Tell me more."

Slowly, Pen started talking. Aaron sat back, nodding and smiling, as Pen rambled about tax forms, spreadsheets, and audit procedures. By the time Pen rose to leave, Aaron felt numb from the conversation but kept his smile fixed firmly in place.

As Pen hesitated at the table, he finally said, "You are very nice. Can I talk with you again tomorrow?"

Aaron nodded warmly. "Of course, khâ. I'll wait for you."



Night after night, Pen returned. He always requested Aaron. He always bought only one drink. He always stayed for hours. He only talked about his dull, methodical world of numbers and codes. The man had a routine, and he stuck to it.

Aaron grew weary of it, but he never let it show. Pen was reliable, and reliable meant steady money.

One evening, sitting at the usual table, Aaron tried again to coax something new out of him. "Do you like TV dramas, Khun Pen?" he asked, letting his voice lift playfully.

Pen adjusted his glasses, fidgeting. "Not particularly."

Aaron sighed softly and tilted his head. "Maybe swimming? Exercise? Fashion?"

"No," he said plainly. "Just my job."

Aaron hid his disappointment behind another gentle smile. "Tell me more about accounting, khâ."

Pen brightened slightly, his face earnest, and launched into a detailed explanation of tax codes, deductions, and auditing techniques. Aaron nodded along, sipping his drink slowly, feeling a dull ache creep into his temples.



Outside of work, Aaron kept his routine strict and unbroken. He attended aerobics classes each morning, squeezing himself into tight leotards that left nothing to the imagination. He spent afternoons by the rooftop pool, letting the sun darken his skin to a rich golden hue. He slipped out for carefully planned shopping trips, returning with dresses, jewelry, and shoes that were flashier and more feminine than anything he had once imagined wearing.

His figure now was flawless. His waist was slim, his thighs were toned, and his chest was full and high. The mirror showed him a woman who moved with fluid, graceful ease.

But underneath it all, restlessness grew. One evening, he tapped lightly on Simon's office door. "P'Simon, you free?"

Simon looked up from his desk, stubbing out a cigarette. "Namtan. Yeah, come in."

Aaron moved into the room gracefully, smoothing his dress as he sat. "Any news about my... situation?"

Simon nodded, lighting another cigarette. "We're getting close. Couple more months. You're making good money now. It's stacking up."

Aaron let out a soft sigh of relief, adjusting his skirt. "I have enough soon?"

"Very soon," Simon said. "Hang tight just a little longer, okay?"

Aaron smiled gently, lowering his lashes. "Yes, khâ. I can wait."

"You holding up alright?" Simon asked, giving him a steady look.

Aaron hesitated for a second before giving him a small, practiced smile. "I fine." As he walked away, he only then recalled that Simon hadn't called him Aaron.

Back in the bar, Pen waited at their usual corner table. Aaron took a breath, lifted his chin, and glided toward him, slipping into his role with practiced ease.

"You look beautiful tonight," Pen said shyly as he sat.

"Khob khun khâ," Aaron responded warmly, leaning in just enough to make him blush. "Will you buy me a drink again?"

Pen hesitated, then nodded. "One drink."

Aaron accepted it with a sweet smile, settling in for another long evening of polite nodding and endless, mind-numbing stories about tax forms and accounting systems.

Deep inside, he repeated the same quiet promise he whispered to himself every night: just a few more months. Hang on a little longer. Soon, this would all be over.



The bar hummed with the usual noise, laughter mingling with the soft clatter of glasses. Aaron leaned forward slightly, adjusting his silk dress, pretending to listen as Pen droned on about market trends and property prices. He forced a smile, nodding politely, sipping his drink slowly to make the evening bearable.

"Khun Pen, you always work so hard," he said, his voice warm and sweet. "You need relax

more, na?"

Pen stared down at his glass, silent for a moment, then lifted his eyes, calm and unreadable.

"Namtan," he said, his voice steady, "tonight, I want special service."

Aaron blinked, caught off guard. "*Special service,* khâ?"

He nodded once, firm. "I know you offer it. Can you arrange?"

Aaron's heart skipped a beat, but he kept his smile fixed. He touched Pen's arm lightly, feeling the tension in the air. "One moment, na? I check for you."

He nodded again without expression. "Don't be long."

Aaron rose smoothly, weaving through the crowd until he reached Bua, who leaned casually against the bar with a cocktail in hand. He leaned in close, his voice urgent.

"P'Bua," he whispered, "Pen ask me for 'special service.' What is it? You know?"

Bua nearly choked on her drink, coughing and setting the glass down quickly, her eyes going wide. "Special service? Pen asked you?"

Aaron nodded, confused. "What it mean?"

Bua glanced around, then leaned in closer, lowering her voice. "Special service is very private. Very expensive. Only for VIP who spend big money. It mean private time upstairs, na? *Very* private."

Aaron stared at her, feeling his stomach drop. "He want to sleep with me?"

Bua nodded, her face serious. "Yes. Hostess sometimes do it if they like customer. But only for very special guests. Pen never ask before. Strange he even know about it."

Aaron swallowed hard, his mind racing. He thought of Pen, the shy, quiet man who barely raised his voice. Surely he could handle him. Surely Pen wouldn't force him. He could guide him away from the parts he didn't need to know about. He felt a shaky kind of confidence build inside him.

"I think it okay," he whispered. "Pen so shy, so weak. I can leave easy if he do something bad."

Bua frowned but shrugged. "Be careful, na?"

Aaron nodded, smoothed his dress, steadied his breathing, and made his way back to Pen with a soft, reassuring smile.

"I happy to give special service tonight, khâ," he said, his voice sweet and calm.

Pen's eyes flickered with something unreadable, and he finished his whiskey in one smooth motion. He rose and gestured for Aaron to follow. "Good. Follow me, please."

Aaron placed his hand lightly on Pen's arm, letting him guide him upstairs to one of the private hotel suites, his heart pounding harder with each step.

Inside, the room was cool and dimly lit. Pen moved to the window, looking out over the city, silent. Aaron stood just inside the door, unsure, his pulse racing.

He had told himself he didn't need to have a plan beyond dimming the lights low and then he could find some way to slow things down. Whatever was about to happen, he thought he was ready for it, but every second in that room felt like walking further out onto ice he wasn't sure would hold.

He was chickening out.

Before anything else happened, there was a sharp knock at the door.

"Namtan?" Bua's voice carried through the door, too tense to ignore. "Can you come quick, please? Sorry to disturb you, Khun Pen."

Pen frowned, but waved his hand lazily. "Go ahead," he said without looking.

Aaron slipped quickly out into the hallway, closing the door behind him. Bua stood there, pale, clutching her phone tightly.

"Bua, what wrong?" he asked, feeling his stomach twist.

Bua thrust her phone at him. "Look," she said, her voice low and urgent.

Aaron looked down. The screen showed a photograph. It was Pen, but not just Pen the accountant. The image was sharp and official-looking, and the caption beneath it cut through his chest like a blade.

He whispered, barely able to breathe, "No way. He so quiet, so weak."

"Not weak!" Bua hissed, grabbing his arm. "Pen is boss of Thai mob! He run everything! Very dangerous!"

Aaron's knees buckled slightly, and he clung to her to stay upright, his vision blurring for a second from panic. Pen was the man looking for him. Pen was the man who wanted his ten million dollars.

"I was sitting with him, all this time, the man looking for me?" he whispered.

Bua nodded quickly. "You be careful. *Very* careful. No make him suspicious. Make him happy tonight. Your life depend on it."

Aaron could hardly think. Bua had no idea how right she was. He wiped his palms against his skirt, forcing his breathing to slow.

"I go back," he said, his voice shaking. "I understand."

Bua squeezed his hand once. "Good luck, sister. I pray for you."

Aaron turned and walked back toward the door, his steps shaky at first, then steadying. He pushed it open and slipped back inside, closing it gently behind him.

Pen still sat calmly on the bed, one leg crossed over the other, watching the night city through the window. He turned to look at Aaron, his expression unreadable.

"Problem?" he asked quietly.

Aaron swallowed the lump in his throat, forcing his lips into a soft smile as he walked toward him. He let his hips sway naturally, sitting down beside him on the bed with delicate grace, resting his hand lightly on Pen's knee.

"No problem, khâ," he whispered, his voice trembling just slightly. "Now, I am all yours."

Pen studied his face for a long moment, then reached out and tucked a loose strand of platinum hair behind Aaron's ear, his fingers light against his skin.

"Good," he said, his voice almost tender. "Tonight, we get to know each other much better."

"I haven't done this before," Aaron said as his long nails unbuttoned Pen's shirt. He didn't really have a plan beyond hoping the lights stayed

off and he could keep his panties on. That was the only way he thought he would live through this.

Pen leaned in, his lips tracing the slope of Aaron's collarbone. He pushed the straps of the dress off Aaron's shoulders and then tugged it over his chest.

Then a loud, piercing alarm shattered the moment.

The fire alarm.

Pen jerked back, his eyes flashing toward the door.

"What the..."

Aaron's mind snapped back to reality as he yanked his dress back up, hastily adjusting the straps.

Outside, he heard the sound of chaos erupting: guests shouting, doors opening, the muffled stomp of hurried footsteps.

Pen cursed under his breath, pushing himself up. His eyes darted to Aaron, his expression suddenly sharp and calculating, but there was no time for questions. If anyone found him here, in this situation, his entire image would crumble. With one last glance at Aaron, he grabbed his jacket, covered his face with it, and disappeared through the door.

Aaron stood there frozen, his heart hammering in his chest. He had just escaped by seconds.

Outside, the hotel lobby was filled with confused guests and staff, everyone pouring out into the street. His heels clicked rapidly against the pavement as he pushed through the crowd, still reeling from what had just happened.

"Namtan."

He whipped around, breath still uneven, to find Uncle Simon standing by the curb, cigarette dangling from his fingers.

"P'Simon," he breathed, stepping toward him. "What..."

"I pulled the alarm."

Aaron stared in disbelief. "You?"

Simon flicked the cigarette to the ground, crushing it under his shoe. "Bua told me what was happening. Knew it wasn't good. Thought I'd interrupt. We were overdue for a fire drill anyway."

Aaron's knees nearly buckled from relief. If Simon hadn't, he couldn't even think about what would have happened.

"You're okay?" Simon's voice was nonchalant, but he was watching him closely.

Aaron forced himself to straighten up, fix his hair, and adjust his disheveled dress.

"I am fine, na." He tried to sound natural, but his voice wavered slightly. "I handling it, P'Simon," he insisted, though the words felt weak.

Simon raised an eyebrow. "Handling it? Sure, sure."

"I was!" he insisted.

"The way I see it, you were ten minutes away from getting exposed to the man who is trying to kill you," Uncle Simon said. "Shows what I know."

"What have I done?" Aaron said, to no one in particular. "It just matter of time before he..." He stopped talking. He had no more words to say.



Aaron tried everything: every polite excuse, every innocent giggle, every coy deflection he had learned since stepping into Namtan's heels. But Khun Pen did not back down.

Night after night, he returned to the bar, as polite and reserved as ever, but with a new, quiet determination. He bought the expensive drinks without complaint. He requested only Aaron, ignoring every other hostess who tried to catch his attention.

And every night, as the evening wound down, he leaned across the table and asked in the same calm voice, "Special service tonight, Namtan?"

No. Absolutely not. Pen was a powder keg ready to go off, and Aaron couldn't risk it. He had to turn him down. It was life or death.

He smiled sweetly, forcing the words past his tight throat. "Mai dai, khâ. Maybe tomorrow?"

Pen only nodded each time, patient, unwavering.

It did not stop there. Gifts began to appear in Aaron's room. At first they were small things: perfume from Paris, silk scarves, designer purses. Then the gifts grew bigger. Diamond earrings. Heels worth more than he made in a month.

One night, just as he stepped into the bar, the bartender waved him over. He slid a small velvet box across the counter toward him.

Aaron opened it slowly, his stomach already twisting. Inside, a diamond necklace gleamed under the bar's low lights, extravagant and impossible to ignore.

"From Khun Pen," the bartender said with a smirk. "He's waiting for you."

Aaron closed the box quietly, his hands cold. This had gone too far.

Later that night, he stormed into Simon's office, slamming the door behind him, the practiced composure he wore at the bar gone. He paced the hardwood floor, his heels clicking with every frantic step.

"Simon, you get me out," he said, his voice high with panic. "Tonight."

Simon looked up from his papers, startled. "Namtan? What's wrong?"

Aaron turned on him, his movements sharp and urgent. "Pen won't leave me alone! He here every night. Gifts. Diamonds. Perfume. He know I can't say no forever. He will find out!"

Simon's face hardened. "Namtan, leaving tonight isn't possible."

"I don't care!" Aaron snapped. "You have to find way! I no can keep hiding from him, P'Simon. He not going to stop!"

Simon exhaled heavily, pressing his palms against his face. He thought for a long moment, then looked back at Aaron grimly. "All right. It'll cost me personally, but fine. There's a shipment leaving tonight for Malaysia. I'll arrange it. But it's your last chance."

Aaron's heart surged with desperate relief. "Thank you, P'Simon."

Hours later, he lay curled up inside a wooden crate, his heart pounding so loud he feared it would give him away. The crate was small and stifling, his knees tucked tightly to his chest. He wore simple clothes, plain jeans, a loose jacket, no makeup, no heels, nothing feminine.

The warehouse was mostly silent, only the occasional distant thud of shifting boxes breaking the stillness. He kept his breathing shallow, trying not to move.

Then he heard footsteps. Voices.

He strained to listen. One voice made his blood run cold.

"Check each one carefully," the man in charge said, calm and deliberate. "Nothing leaves tonight without my inspection."

That was not what he wanted to hear. He squeezed his eyes shut, fighting panic. He heard boxes being opened, crates being pried apart. They were getting closer.

He pushed gently at the crate lid. It shifted easily, since it had been left unlocked, just as planned. He lifted it just enough to see.

He wanted to see who was talking, and he focused on the figure that stood only in the shadows. Then he saw it. It was Pen. He stood less than twenty feet away, inspecting another crate, men circling the warehouse methodically.

As they worked on more crates in the other direction, Aaron slipped out of the crate quietly, his body moving on pure instinct. He crouched low, weaving through the shadows, careful not to make a sound. He slipped behind a tall stack of boxes, then out an open side door, the cool night air hitting his face like a slap.

He ran without thinking, feet pounding against the concrete until he reached the back streets. He didn't stop until he was safely back inside the Golden Orchid, heart still racing in his chest.

Simon was pacing inside his office when Aaron burst through the door, gasping for air.

"Namtan? What the hell happened?" he demanded.

"It was Pen!" Aaron blurted, panting. "He run smuggling operation. He checking every crate! I barely got out."

Simon's face went pale. He dropped heavily into his chair. "You're joking."

Aaron shook his head, still breathless. "I wish." He sagged into a chair, his body trembling. "I no escape. He watch everything."

Simon rubbed his temples, silent for a long moment. Then he exhaled. "Then we're out of options."

Aaron felt his throat tighten. "What do I do now?"

Simon leaned forward, his eyes sharp. "You do exactly what you've been doing. Stay hidden. Keep up the act. Pen clearly doesn't suspect who you really are, or he would have acted already. You keep him happy. You keep him close. We'll figure something out."

Aaron shook his head weakly, feeling the despair settle deep into his bones. "Simon, you don't understand. He expects things now. He expects..."

Simon raised a hand, cutting him off. "Namtan?"

Aaron stared at the floor, feeling cold and hollow.

"Yes," he said. "He expects Namtan. Not Aaron. Aaron is a dead man. Only Namtan can survive."



Weeks later, he returned to the Golden Orchid, stepping through the tall lobby doors with the same natural sway that was his signature. His short silk dress clung to his slender curves, his long platinum hair fell perfectly across his shoulders, every strand in place. No one questioned his return. No one asked where he had been. It had been a month, and he was glad to be back on his feet. He slipped easily back into the patterns he had left behind — mornings in the salon painting nails, afternoons sunning by the rooftop pool, evenings spent smiling and sipping cocktails at the bar.

On his first night back, he spotted Pen immediately. He sat in his usual corner, silent and reserved, a whiskey glass resting lightly between his fingers.

When he looked up at him, there was no hesitation in his eyes.

"Special service?" he asked, his voice low and even.

He smiled softly and nodded. "Yes, Khun Pen," he answered, his voice smooth like silk. "Tonight I am yours."

He smiled — a rare, real smile that touched his eyes — and reached for his hand.

Later, in the privacy of a luxurious suite, he gave himself fully. He felt no fear, no resistance. His body responded naturally, effortlessly. "You're beautiful," he murmured, his normally timid voice thick with desire.

He reached for his tie, his fingers fumbling as he undid it. He let him, watching as he stripped him of his suit jacket and shirt. He pulled him into another kiss, this one more urgent. His hands roamed over his body, exploring every curve. His breath came in short gasps as his fingers found the clasp of his bra, releasing it with ease. His mouth trailed down his neck, his teeth grazing his skin, and he arched into him.

"Please," he begged, his voice barely audible. "I need you inside me."

He growled softly, his hands gripping his hips. "Not yet," he said, his breath hot against his ear. "I want to taste you first."

Before he could respond, he dropped to his knees, his hands sliding his panties down his legs. He stepped out of them, his heart racing as he looked up at him. His dark eyes were filled with hunger, and it sent a jolt of anticipation through him.

He leaned in, Pen's tongue flicking against his clit, and he gasped, his hands flying to his shoulders to steady himself. His mouth was hot, his tongue skilled as he lavished attention on him. He moaned, his hips rocking against his face as pleasure built within him. It was good to know his new clit worked just as the doctor said it would. It was one thing to feel it with his fingers, but an entirely different thing when it was someone else.

"Khun Pen," he whimpered, his fingers tangling in his hair. "Please."

He didn't stop, his tongue delving deeper, tasting every inch of him. His legs trembled, and he felt himself on the edge. Just as he was about to fall, he pulled away, leaving him panting and desperate.

He stood, his eyes locking with his as he unbuckled his belt. He watched, his breath catching as he stepped out of his pants and boxers, his cock springing free. It was thick, the tip glistening with precum. He reached for him, his hand wrapping around his length, and he groaned, his hips jerking forward.

He stroked him slowly, his thumb swiping over the head, and he gripped his wrist, stopping him. "Enough," he growled, his voice rough. "I need to be inside you."

He guided him to the bed, laying him down gently before positioning himself between his legs. He spread them wider, his heart pounding as he aligned himself with his entrance. He paused, his eyes searching his.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his voice strained.

He nodded, his hands gripping the sheets. "Yes. Please."

He pressed forward, the head of his cock breaching him, and he gasped, a mix of pleasure and pain washing over him. He held, giving him a moment to adjust, before thrusting deeper. He cried out, his nails digging into the mattress as he filled him completely.

He began to move, his thrusts slow and deliberate at first. He wrapped his legs around his waist, pulling him closer, and he groaned, his pace quickening. The room was filled with the sound of his moans and the slap of skin against skin.

"Fuck, Namtan," he growled, his hands gripping his hips. "You feel so good."

He arched into him, his body matching his rhythm. The pleasure built within him, overwhelming his senses. He felt like he was on fire, every nerve ending alight with sensation. His thrusts became harder, more desperate, and he clung to him, his nails leaving marks on his back.

"Khun Pen," he cried, his voice breaking. "I close."

He reached between them, his fingers finding his clit, and he shattered, his body convulsing around him. He followed him over the edge, his hips jerking as he spilled himself inside him.

He collapsed on top of him, his breath hot against his neck. He held him close, his fingers running through his hair. For a moment, there was nothing but the sound of their breathing and the hum of the city outside.

He rolled onto his back, pulling him on top of him. The movement was smooth, effortless, like he had done this a thousand times before. He straddled him, his thighs trembling slightly as he felt his cock brush against his entrance. "Take your time," he murmured.

He ground against him, unsettled at the sensation of a man inside him. The way he filled him, the way he made him feel violated, was almost overwhelming.

His hands slid up his chest to his shoulders, his long, expertly polished nails digging into his skin as he started to move. At first, it was tentative, experimental, but soon he found a rhythm that worked for him. Up and down, back and forth, his hips rolled against his, the friction building with every movement.

His grip on his hips tightened, his fingers pressing into his skin as he helped guide him. "Faster," he growled, his voice rough with desire.

He obeyed, picking up the pace. His breath came in short, sharp gasps as he rode him, the room filled with the sound of skin against skin. His hands left his hips, sliding up to cup his breasts, his thumbs brushing over his nipples. He arched into his touch, a whimper escaping his lips as pleasure shot through him.

"You feel so good," he muttered, his eyes locked on his. "So fucking good."

As the most dangerous man in Bangkok released his load inside his newly healed pussy, the moment was one for celebration. This was what would save him. There was no more running. Aaron Sellers was safe forever.



But the next evening, Pen does not appear.

Nor the one after that.

Aaron sat at his usual spot near the bar, smiling softly at every guest who enters, his posture perfect, his manners sweet and polished. But Pen never returns. He vanished without a word, leaving behind nothing but the memory of one perfect night and a long, hollow silence.

Weeks pass, then a month. No Khun Pen. Aaron had no more worries now. Just the daily concerns of a Thai woman making a living.



One night, Aaron approached the reception desk, adjusting the strap of his handbag, smoothing his hair as he leaned in toward the smiling clerk.

"P'Simon?" he asked gently. "I not see him anywhere, na?"

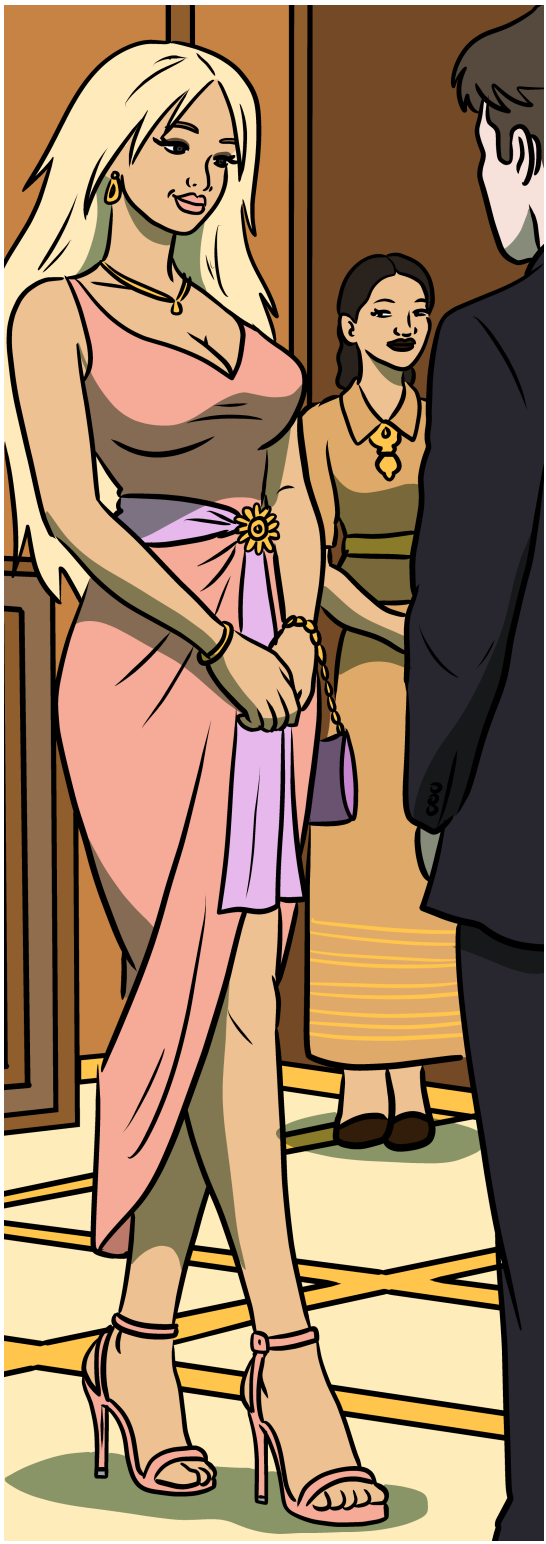
The receptionist smiled sympathetically. "Oh, you didn't hear? He was transferred. Management moved him to Europe, last week."

Aaron's heart stumbled. "Transferred? He, he... not say goodbye."

"I'm sorry, Namtan. It happened quickly."

Aaron nodded slowly, stepping back from the desk, feeling a wave of loneliness hit him harder than he expected. Simon was gone. The man who had kept him anchored, who understood even when he said nothing, was gone without warning.

He wondered if Simon had run away. He had always looked sad when he saw Aaron after the operation, like he had lost someone dear to him. Maybe this was



for the best.

Weeks passed. Aaron fell back into his routines: buffing nails, chatting idly with the other salon girls, laughing softly at bad jokes in the bar. He fluttered his lashes at the wealthy businessmen who bought him drinks. He slipped in and out of conversations as easily as he stepped in and out of his high heels. But underneath the perfect surface, doubt crept in. Without Pen, without Simon, he wondered what was left for him here.



One morning, as he adjusted his lipstick in the lobby mirror, a tall, well-dressed foreigner approached. He stood with a polite smile, holding a clipboard under one arm.

"Excuse me, miss, are you Namtan?" he asked. His English was crisp and clean, but it felt heavy and strange in Aaron's ears now.

"Yes, khâ," Aaron replied politely, bowing his head in a graceful greeting.

"I'm John Davies," he said. "The new hotel manager. Could we talk in my office, please?"

Aaron nodded and followed him through the quiet lobby, his heels clicking softly against the marble floor.

Inside the small office, he sat carefully, crossing his legs at the knee, resting his hands lightly in his lap. He waited, head tilted slightly, giving John his full attention.

"Miss Namtan," John began, setting his clipboard aside, "I've been reviewing hotel records. It seems you've been staying with us for quite some time, but there are no payment records under your name. No employment file either." He leaned forward slightly. "Can you explain why you have a free room here?"

Aaron felt his cheeks warm slightly. He shifted in his seat, smoothing his skirt. "I work at salon. And bar, khâ."

John nodded once, but his expression remained serious. "Yes, I see that. But your living arrangement isn't connected to either job. Tell me, are

you perhaps," he hesitated for a moment, choosing his words carefully, "the hotel's VIP hostess?"

Aaron tilted his head again, confused. "VIP hostess? I not understand, khâ."

John cleared his throat gently. "In many luxury hotels, there is a discreet arrangement. A special girl who entertains VIP clients when they feel lonely. It's unofficial, but understood. Do you understand now?"

Aaron sat still for a moment, his mind racing, realizing quickly what John meant. He was asking if Aaron was the hotel's prostitute.

He opened his mouth, then closed it. If he denied it, how would he explain the free room? Where would he go? How would he survive without Simon to protect him?

Slowly, he lowered his eyes and nodded once.

"Yes. I am VIP hostess here, khâ."

John relaxed, smiling warmly. "Ah. Very good. Thank you for clearing that up, Ms. Namtan. I'll make sure your room arrangements stay the same. And if you ever need anything to perform your duties, erm, more efficiently, let me know immediately."

Namtan lifted her eyes, smiling softly. "Thank you, khâ."



Namtan swept into the lobby, her heels clicking smartly across the polished marble, the pink of her manicure catching the golden lamplight. She waved delicately to the receptionist, smiling brightly.

Inside the salon, the familiar smell of polish and perfume greeted her. Her friends greeted her with excited whispers and playful smiles. She settled easily into her chair, crossing her legs neatly, slipping into the day's rhythm.

"Did you see the latest episode last night?" Nisa whispered excitedly, filing a customer's nails. "Khun Darika caught her husband cheating!"

Namtan gasped theatrically, pressing a manicured hand to her chest. "I knew it! Those roving eyes! Men always same, always looking somewhere else, na?"

The stylists around her giggled, nodding knowingly, exchanging sly glances.

This was her life now: easy gossip in the mornings, careful beauty treatments in the afternoon, cocktails and flirtation at night, and after dark, nights reserved for special clients who needed more than just conversation.

At night, she moved gracefully up to the penthouse suite, her satin dress hugging every curve as she knocked lightly. A note had been left in her box by the new hotel manager. The penthouse suite. 22:00, sharp. She knew what it meant. Hiroshi, a handsome but shy Japanese businessman, answered the door and looked at her curiously, studying her closely.

Inside, the room smelled faintly of whiskey and cologne. Namtan smiled warmly, stepping inside. Hiroshi fidgeted nervously before speaking.

"Namtan," he said carefully in halting English, "you are ladyboy?"

Namtan felt the flash of anger instantly. She tossed her platinum hair over her shoulder, drawing herself up proudly.

"No! How you say that!" she snapped, her English thick with her Thai accent. "I am real woman, khâ! Completely real!"

She grabbed Hiroshi's hand, pulling it firmly to her hips, letting him feel the softness of her curves, the undeniable femininity of her body. She guided the hand higher, letting Hiroshi feel the truth.

"You feel? Everything real! I show you!"

Hiroshi stammered nervously, stepping back. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

Namtan silenced him with a manicured finger pressed lightly against his lips.

"Shhh. I forgive you, na?" she murmured, her voice softening. "But now, I must prove. Tonight, you see how real woman is Namtan."

Namtan stopped questioning who she had become. Days blurred into weeks, and weeks into months. It was a good life: salon work, swimming at the rooftop pool, shopping for more dresses and jewelry, tending to nervous foreign men who bought her drinks and clung to her soft, reassuring smiles.

Her English became clumsy and slow, reserved for sweet murmured encouragements in hotel rooms, while Thai flowed from her lips effortlessly, her voice soft and melodic.

Time passed, and she hardly thought of the boy she had once been. She touched up her makeup automatically. She flirted easily, sipping cocktails with polished grace.

But as the time passed, she started to notice things. Her beauty, once effortless, now demanded more maintenance. The lines around her eyes were tiny but real. Her skin needed more care. Her hips were no longer as round, and her waist was not as tight without careful discipline.

Worse, her savings never grew. The expensive dresses, the jewelry, the endless kickbacks to the hotel manager, everything took and took and left her no closer to freedom.

She realized with cold certainty that the life of a VIP hostess could not last forever.



One slow afternoon at the salon, as Namtan polished Nisa's nails with careful strokes, she leaned closer and whispered her new plan.

"Nisa," she murmured, her voice low, "I think I want husband now. Good man to take care of me."

Nisa laughed softly, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "Namtan, you serious? You have every man here wrapped around finger already!"

Namtan sighed dramatically, setting the polish bottle down carefully. "Yes, khâ, but I tired. I give and give and give. Time for someone give to me, na? Husband good, loyal. Rich, maybe. Japanese or Korean, polite, kind. Good husband."

Nisa nodded slowly, her smile turning gentle. She squeezed Namtan's hand lightly. "I understand, Namtan. Smart girl always thinks of future."

Namtan smiled back at her, a little sadly.



Every client became a possibility. Every smile she flashed was softer, every laugh more tender. Every gaze held a subtle invitation, an offer not just for a night, but for a lifetime.

Late one evening, Mr. Lee, a wealthy Korean executive, traced slow circles on Namtan's bare shoulder.

"You beautiful," he said softly in English, his voice sleepy. "But you seem sad. You have everything, no? What more you want?"

Namtan shifted slightly closer to him, her voice a soft whisper.

"I want love," she said. "Real love. Not just night. Not just money. Love forever." She tilted her head up, her long lashes fluttering slightly.

"Maybe, maybe one day I can make you happy," Mr. Lee murmured.

Namtan's heart fluttered even though she knew better than to trust promises made in the dark. Still, she smiled sweetly, resting her head lightly against him.

"Maybe. I hope very much, khâ," she whispered.



So Namtan's life continued: nails, cocktails, laughter, hope, night after night. Every new VIP became another dream, another chance. She whispered soft promises into their ears, pressing their hands against her heart, hoping, praying that someday soon, one of them would offer her not just a night, but forever.

One night, she told herself, it would happen. Khun Pen would walk through the door again, and she would wrap her arms around his, and this time, Namtan would not let him go.



You wouldn't recognize the corner of the city these days. The parking garage was gone. Its broken concrete lay in heaps beyond a chickenwire fence, and crews had only just begun digging the foundation for a new office building. Klieg lights washed the dusty grey site in harsh white. A generator rattled beside the excavation, keeping the lights on.

It was past midnight, and the construction site was empty of people. They wouldn't arrive until just before 8 AM, when the city allowed construction work to begin.

No one was sad to see the parking garage go. The neighborhood never used it. The office tower would be noise for the next two years, but this area needed the business. The money had slowly left the area over time.

What none of the neighbors, businessmen or scruffy panhandlers knew was that more money than they could have dreamed was sitting just feet away in a reinforced metal case that had disappeared years ago, in what was called the theft of the century.

On this cold, dark night a sharp click of heels approached. A figure, grasping a coat tighter around a thin body was emerging from the darkness.

Namtan walked to the fence, pushed it aside and looked around. They were just breaking up the foundation, where the crate had been buried. She had been holed up in a hotel room across the way, watching. Finally, they had gotten to the point where she was ready to see what she could find in the rubble.

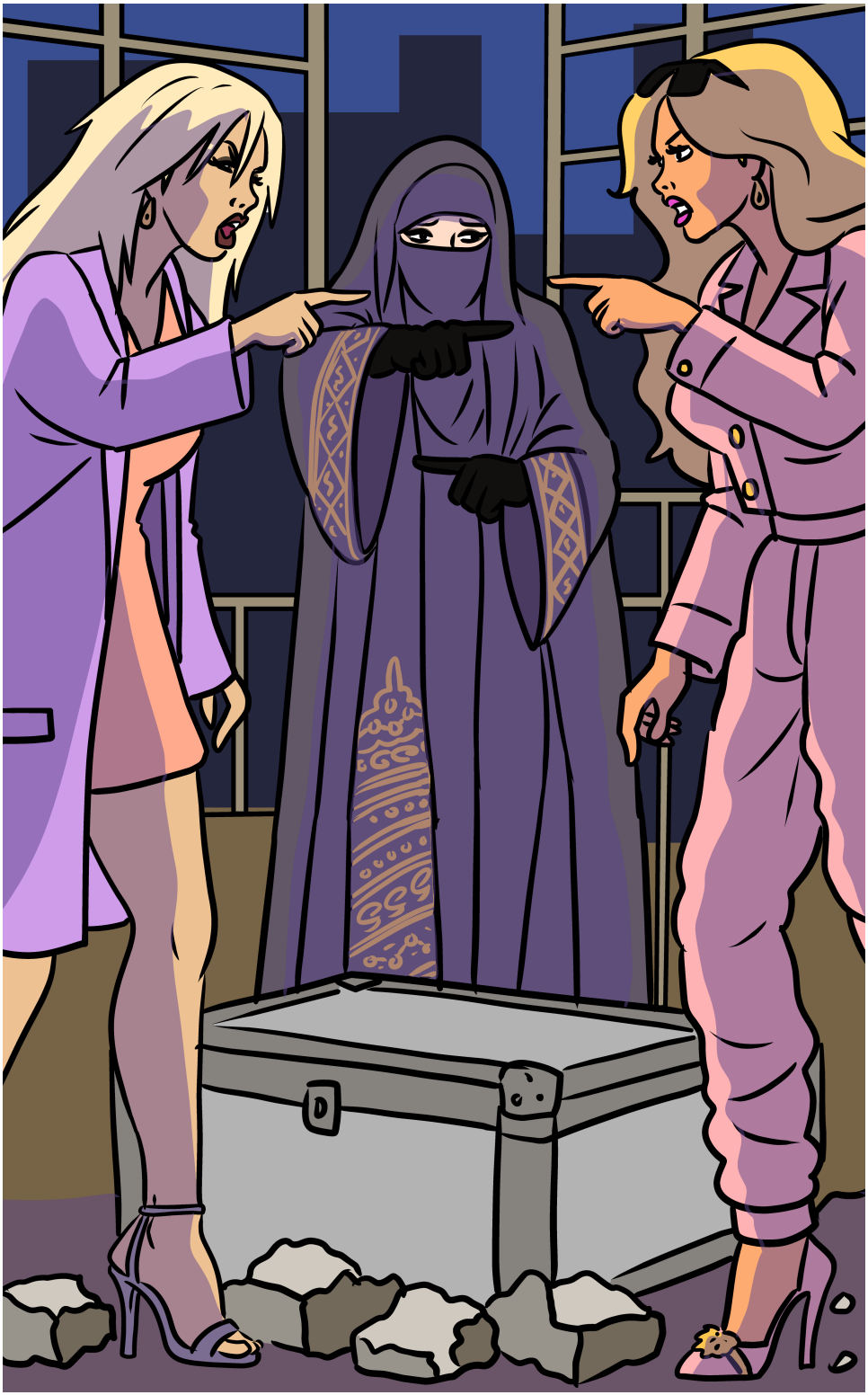
It had taken all the money she had earned to make this trip. Truth be told, she nearly forgot about the whole thing. Waiting for Khun Pen was not the financial security she hoped it would be. She hoped the jewels would be easy to smuggle out and take back to Bangkok, her home. She knew people there. They would pay her for these riches. She might even be bigger than Khun Pen after it was all done.

She pushed the fence open enough to start looking. She wasn't dressed for this, but she wasn't willing to wait for a shopping trip to find work clothes. She needed to get the chest now, before anyone else.

Clarissa Davenport's heels clicked in the echoey street with confidence. She had taken the time to find the right outfit for this. She strutted down the street in a designer ensemble that some fashionista thought was perfect for a trend-conscious construction worker on the catwalk.

As soon as Namtan heard the heels, she straightened up, and looked around to see where it was coming from. Clarissa entered through the gate, and turned, hand on her hip, a tiny shovel resting on her shoulder.

"And who are you supposed to be?" Clarissa asked.



"No your business," Namtan said. "Go away. I call police."

"I've had a man watching this site for weeks waiting for this night," Clarissa said. "I'm not going anywhere. What did you say your name was?"

"I no say name," Namtan replied. She crossed her arms and stepped forward, trying to establish who the top bitch was. "Who you? What you want?"

"I... am Clarissa Davenport, as if you didn't know," Clarissa said.

"You dress like joke," Namtan said.

"Who *are* you?" Clarissa said, testily. She stamped her heel petulantly.

"Who you? I have business. You in my way!"

"I'm not going anywhere!"

It was then that Zafaya approached from the far side of the street, in her shroud-like dress, face covered, she looked like a ghost skimming along in the darkness. She paused when she saw the two women.

"What is this? Where is Jayden? Where is Aaron? Who are you?"

"Now, who the hell are *you?"* Clarissa said, accusingly. "Nate is supposed to be here. Aaron is supposed to be here. I don't see them."

A moment of silence allowed the three of them to think. This was the place and the time for Aaron, Jayden and Nate to return. The moment they all became rich. The place where they would finally end their five years of exile.

Yet... only women had arrived.

"What did you do to them?" Clarissa said pointing at Zafaya and Jayden. "Where are they?"

"What?" Zafaya said, backing away.

Namtan stepped forward. "Aaron just fine. He just... Sick."

"Sick?" Clarissa said "Or *dead?"* She pulled a small pistol from her pocket and pointed it at the two others. "You stole the secret! You wouldn't be here if you didn't know. You killed them and came here for the crate!"

"What *you* do?" Namtan said. "Who *you* kill?"

"I didn't kill anyone!"

"You have gun!"

"I'm not the one who killed here! You two killed. I know it! Prove you didn't!"

No one recognized anyone. Each had expected the other to be alone, not bring women or send women in their place.

Zafaya spoke up. "I used to be Nate," she said. "I have given up my old life in service to my husband and Allah."

"Impossible!" Clarissa shouted.

"You lie!" Namtan said, with spite.

"Back off!" Clarissa said, lunging forward with her gun. "That's such a *pathetic* lie! Now, back away and head back to where you came! I'm taking this crate — you have no right to it!"

Namtan held her ground. "Okay, Nate not sick. I am Nate. Is me. I change!"

"You think this is a joke! I'll shoot you! I really will!"

"You'll kill? Really?" Zafaya asked.

"My daddy can get the best lawyers in the world!"

"No, this my chest! I wait too long!" Namtan pulled a knife from her coat and held it Zafaya's neck. She positioned herself behind her new hostage. "You have to shoot her before you shoot me!"

Zafaya's voice tightened. "You think I lie? I do not lie."

"I do not know you," Namtan said. "You come here and tell strange stories. I do not trust you."

Clarissa stepped closer. "You are *so* going to get shot."

Zafaya let loose a zaghrouta, the Arab trill call, into the night.

As soon as she did, out of the darkness, a white sedan came speeding to a stop in front of them. A man in the front seat rose an AK-47, pointing it at the others.

"Zafaya!" The man called. "Tell me who to shoot first!"

"My husband will kill you both before you have a moment to think about it," Zafaya said. "Let me go! I'm taking the case that is rightfully mine!"

"It's my case!" Clarissa said. "And I'll kill one of you before you get me!"

"It's my case! Those jewels are mine!" Namtan said, pulling her knife closer to Zafaya's neck.

Her husband shouted for them to stop. Clarissa swung her gun toward the husband. Namtan dragged Zafaya to block both the husband and the rich girl.

"Stay back!" Namtan shouted.

"Let my wife go!" Zafaya's husband yelled.

Clarissa's voice shook, but she kept the gun raised. "Get away from us right now!"

"You lower gun first!" Namtan screamed back.

The generator coughed and sputtered in the distance. In the sudden quiet, they stared at one another, each a stranger to the others. Their stories about having once been men seemed impossible beside their transformed appearances, and none could offer proof.

But as the three of them began to think about what each other had just said, that they knew about the chest, that they knew about the jewels, it became suddenly less sure that the others' stories were untrue.

Each of them having become women in every way — nothing like the men they used to be — they had to accept that such a transformation was possible. But how could it be all three of them? It was impossible, wasn't it? The odds...

As their eyes danced from one to the other, in panic and uncertainty, the question was beginning to stir in their minds. What if they were telling the truth? What happens then? Who was going to cave first?

Their nerves were getting twitchy. Their minds becoming panicky. It was becoming clear that they were in a standoff. No one was going to win. Now it was all about survival.

For all intents and purposes, they had already lost the jewels.

The End

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Sick Puppy Comics

Making Friends

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. Three college students sign up for a six-month isolation experiment. Things start to get a a little strange, and they begin to lose their masculinity day by day. Yet, they don't seem to even notice... Full Color Comic Book / 38 pages

The Pet Sitter

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. Asked to look after a supermodel's pet for a while, James finds himself thrust out of his own apartment and into hers. Day by day, it seems like circumstances adapt James to become the resident of a supermodel's lifestyle. Full Color Comic Book / 29 pages

A Curious Curse

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. When teen goth Brandyn gets his drivers' license, he thinks it's a ticket to adulthood. Unfortunately, he's already cashed a ticket in the opposite direction. Full Color Comic Book / 27 pages

Boys Will Be Girls

Story & Art by Fraylim, Script by KK, Ink & Color by Joe Six-Pack. The "Summer Blossom" camp welcomes anew group of young men. But although it may be an all-boys camp when they arrive, it's girls-only when they leave. Full Color Comic Book / 100 pages

Double-Crossed

Story & Art by Joe-Six Pack. Jesse is on the run from justice. When he finds an old friend who can help him, that old friend seems more interested in helping Jesse become a woman. Comic / 24 pages

The Step-Witch

Story by Joe Six-Pack. Dillon has a new step-mother. Problem is that she and Dillon don't get along. More of a problem for Dillon is that she's a witch — and wants a daughter. Full Color Comic Book / 17 pages

The Charm

Story by Joe-Six Pack, art by Osoku WARUI. Gavin is a student who laments his boring life. Then he crosses paths with Krista. Things are about to change, and not necessarily for the better. Comic / 24 pages

College Can Change a Man

Story & art by Joe-Six Pack. A small college has been hanging on to it's male-dominated mindset for too long. Now, a new member of the board has arrived to make some changes. A lot of changes. Comic / 243 pages

Help Wanted 1

Story by James J Craft, art by RocketXpert. Three boys are getting far more than they bargained for when they get summer jobs at a woman's fancy mansion. Comic / 40 pages

Help Wanted 2

Story by James J Craft, art by RocketXpert. Three more boys are getting far more than they bargained for at a woman's fancy mansion, and three others are finding their places. Comic / 40 pages

What Popular Girls Do

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. A teaching assistant in high school is about to find out what it's like to go back to class — but as a saucy teenage girl with a bully boyfriend he needs to satisfy. Comic / 47 pages

Teens Transformed

She Made Me Into My Sister

"A Little Too Clever" by Joe Six-Pack. Wyatt wanted to help his girlfriend get revenge, but at what cost? As it turns out, a cost greater than any boy could have imagined. Book / 88 pages / 20 illustrations

He's a Valley Girl, Fer Sure

From the files of TGStories.com: "Corey Taylor's Big Bodacious Adventure" by Joe Six-Pack. For Corey, the only way he can get into college is to pretend to be a girl. But when does it stop being pretend? When he's cheerleader? A girlfriend? A beauty queen? Book / 78 pages / 17 illustrations

From Boys to Bridesmaids

“Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom” by James J Craft. Two spoiled and privileged boys are about to be put in their place by their new step-mother. And their place is by her side as her bridesmaids and daughters. Book / 77 Pages / 16 illustrations

Little Mis-ter Popular

“My Two Moms” by James J Craft, illustrations by rocketxpert. Thanks to his aunt’s “Confidence Club,” Leon will find a way to become popular, and to get over all his hang-ups... Including his masculinity. Book / 77 Pages / 17 illustrations

Bride to Be

By Joe Six-Pack. Derek and Cole grew up together as kids. One year, though, Cole has to start pitching in at the family wedding business. His life will never be the same. Book / 63 pages / 25 illustrations

Gone Girly for Good

“Big in Japan” by James J Craft. Mike and Ken were one-hit-wonder rock stars. Then they discovered they had fans in Japan, so they left to become famous. Then they discovered that the Japanese didn’t know they were guys. Book / 77 pages / 26 illustrations

One Year in Tokyo

By James J Craft, illustrations by Kwon Lee Tran. Mickey is forced to spend a year with his father in Japan. However things often get confused when words get translated from English to Japanese, as Mickey soon finds out... Book / 87 pages / 20 illustrations

Mall Makeover Madness

“A Day at the Mall” by KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Four boys are going to have one weird day at the mall. By the time the day is over, it’s four girls who leave the mall to begin their new lives. Book / 109 pages / 25 illustrations

Convicts to Co-Eds

Story by By Courtney Captisa & Claire Bear, illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Three teen boys are sent to a reform school. What they can’t know is that they are about to be “reformed” all the way into skirts... And beyond. Book / 154 pages / 31 illustrations

Creating Samantha

Story by Cheryl Lynn, illustrations by The Might Fenek. Samuel was under the tutelage of his legal guardian, only his guardian had no intentions of letting him grow up male. Book / 70 pages / 16 illustrations

Crosley High Chronicles

By Joe Six-Pack. River is coming to a new school, and trying to fit in. The problem is the only way he’s going to fit in is in skirts and heels. Book / 217 pages / 75 illustrations

Student Exchange

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 wiling 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

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