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151 pages **40** illustrations

BLONDIE HE'S NOT

PART OF THE "BLONDIE" SERIES

Story by KK - Illustrations by Fraylim



CROSSED
TV/CD
FICTION



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**Story by KK — Illustrations by Fraylim
A Crossed Fiction Story**



2015 Digital Edition

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BLONDIE HE'S NOT

Mark Summers ended up getting his job at *Tiffany's Twist Hair and Nail Salon* by complete accident. Sure, he was trawling the mall with a big stack of resumes, since his mom was determined he get a part-time job now that he was seventeen and in his final year of high school, but his preferences leaned more towards HMV or EB Games. In fact, he'd been heading towards the latter store when he was distracted by seeing the most beautiful girl he'd ever laid eyes on in his entire life.

She was strutting along gracefully on designer stiletto sandals, wearing a flouncy white miniskirt that rustled around her slender, tanned thighs with each dainty step, paired with a skimpy lavender tube-top that was just barely restraining the biggest, most perfect rack Mark had ever seen. Her golden blonde hair fell in a perfect cascade around what was truly the face of an angel: big blue eyes with unbelievably long lashes, a tiny, delicate nose, high cheekbones, and thick, pouty lips covered in a shimmering pink gloss.

As a sunbeam caught her gleaming silver hoop earrings and glittery pink nails, not to mention that mane of perfectly-coiffed blonde hair, Mark could practically hear the heavenly choir singing. It was hard to blame him for stopping dead in his tracks as the blonde beauty swished towards him, rummaging for something in her small white purse. Mark couldn't help but stare at her chest. Unfortunately, she seemed to sense it and glanced upward, blushing slightly as she realized where exactly he was looking. Mark, to his credit, managed to blush about twice as brightly, quickly looking away as she passed.

No doubt about it, he was utterly and completely love-struck. Sure, his mom would have taken issue with the shortness of the girl's skirt and the revealing top, but Mark certainly didn't. Between the designer outfit and her incredible good looks, he instantly knew she was a million miles out of his league. But then again, Mark could immediately tell that this girl wasn't some stuck-up blonde bimbo strutting around the mall in a slutty outfit to tease all the guys who wished they had her and the girls who wished they *were* her. No, there was something different about her. She was *mesmerizing*.

Without even realizing it, Mark – still clutching his resumes – did a complete 180 and started following the blonde back the way he'd come, mesmerized by the measured swing of her hips and the clip-clop of her high heels. Yes, there were hot girls at his high school, particularly on the cheerleading squad, but none of them could measure up to this vision. Mark had to find out more about her, or get her name at the very least. He stumbled after her, unable to take his eyes off the taut curves of her legs and sashaying bottom, trying desperately to think of something he could say to her. Maybe she would drop her purse, and he could help her collect her things, or maybe she would stop and look at a

map, and he could help give her directions, or, or...

Mark was so caught up in his fantasies that he nearly followed her right through the glass door of a trendy hair salon, but he managed to stop himself just in time. He watched forlornly through the glass as the blonde was greeted by two attractive beauticians in matching smocks, exchanging hugs and air kisses. His view was cut off, however, when a fashionably-dressed red-haired woman planted herself in front of the door with a bemused expression on her face.

"May I help you?" she asked, opening the door. "We're all booked up for the afternoon, if you're trying to make an appointment."

Mark blushed to the roots of his hair. "No, uh, no, I wasn't, uh, trying to make an appointment," he stammered. "I was just..."

"Just what, honey?" the woman asked, smiling and raising one pencilled eyebrow.

Mark swallowed, staring downward, and there he saw his salvation. "I was wondering if you were hiring?" he asked in a near whisper, holding up his stack of resumes.

A broad grin spread across the woman's face. "Oh, why didn't you say so!" she exclaimed, putting out her hand to shake. "I'm Tiffany, the owner."

"Mark," Mark said, shaking her hand. "Mark Summers."

"Well, I can see you don't have much experience with nail care," Tiffany said, looking down at his fingers. "But we could use someone to do some of the cleaning up..." She plucked a resume from Mark's stack. "I'll give this a little read-through," she explained. "And if you seem like a good match, I'll call you, okay?"



"Yeah, okay," Mark said, certain he wasn't going to receive a telephone call, and even more certain that he wouldn't want to work at Tiffany's Twist Hair and Nail Salon anyways. He went up on tip toes to peer over Tiffany's shoulder, hoping for one last glimpse of the blonde angel, who was leaning back in a salon chair having her nails done. Their eyes met for just a moment, and Mark's heart fluttered.

"That's one of our regulars," Tiffany said, seeing where his gaze was pointed. "She's a darling. Comes in all the time, sometimes two or three times a week! Quite the high-maintenance girl, but I'd say all the work is worth it, wouldn't you?"

"Definitely," Mark gulped. "Uh, what's her name? Just out of curiosity."

"Candi," Tiffany said. "You know, if you ended up working here, you'd probably have plenty of time to get to know her."

"Candi," Mark echoed dreamily. He said his goodbye to Tiffany and wandered away from the salon in a daze, only stopping to dump the rest of his resumes into a trash can. There was only one job he wanted now. It was true, working at a beauty salon wasn't what he'd had in mind, but two or three times a week, it would be totally, *completely* worth it.

Mark had a feeling he would be spending a lot of time sitting beside the telephone for the next few days.



Mark arrived back at the small shabby house he shared with his mother in a daze, still thinking about the blonde at the mall.

"How did the job hunt go, sweetie?" his mom called from the kitchen, where she was washing dishes.

"Good," Mark said. "Really good."

"How many of those resumes did you drop off?" his mom followed up, coming around the corner with a dish rag in hand.

"Uh, one," Mark admitted sheepishly.

"One?" his mother questioned, eyebrow raised. "You printed off a big stack of them this morning!"

"I'm starting slow!" Mark said evasively. Then, before his mom could interrogate him any further, he slipped into his room and closed the door behind him. Usually he liked being greeted by the familiar sight of all his Nebula Quest posters and Batman paraphernalia, but today he frowned as he looked around his room. Girls like Candi definitely didn't go for guys like him, who looked forward to comic conventions all year and loved arguing about whether the Star Wars Extended Universe could still be considered canon when the new movies

came out. No, they went for *popular* guys. Athletic, handsome, and usually wealthy, to boot.

“Funny how those three things always seem to go together,” Mark muttered under his breath. He was none of those things. The only sport he’d ever been good at was badminton, which didn’t exactly cut it with the jock crowd, and while he was sort of good-looking in a clear-skinned, pretty-boy kind of way, his bad haircut and out-of-date clothes pretty much covered that fact up. His mom, meanwhile, was working two jobs just to make rent. No, he was definitely not a cute blonde’s type.

Sighing, Mark booted up his computer and checked his IMs. As usual, most of them were from his best friend Louis. Louis was an even bigger geek than Mark, but by sheer luck was also tall and strong enough to play on the football team. His easy-going nature meant he got along with pretty much anyone, popular or otherwise, but he was generally a bit of a loner – except where Mark was concerned.

Mark clicked through the links Louis had sent him with a wry smile growing on his face. The latest movie adaptation of their favorite superhero comic had absolutely butchered the hero’s costume, and Louis was not happy about it. As Mark was scrolling through angry comments, a brand new message popped up.

DID U SEE THE MOVIE STILLS? IT LOOKS LIKE SHIT COVERED IN MORE SHIT

Mark smirked as he typed his reply. YA I SAW IT. LOOKS LIKE SMT YR MOM WOULD WEAR.

A new message appeared instantly. STFU MARCI. U GET A JOB YET?

Mark made a face. He hated that nickname. So he’d played a girl’s role in a play one time in grade school, so what? He decided not to tell Louis he’d ended up applying at a hair salon. NOT YET, JUST HANDED OUT RESUMES 2DAY. PROB WONT GET A CALL 4 A WHILE.

“Or not at all,” Mark added to himself. After all, what kind of hair and nail salon would want to hire a teenaged guy?

Louis’ latest message popped up. APPLY WHER U CAN WORK W SOME HOTTIES. LOTSA CUTE GIRLS WORK AT THE MALL.

Just then, he heard his mom shouting from the kitchen. BRB, he typed, then got up and left his room. His mom was holding a telephone in her hand, looking just as surprised as Mark was soon to feel. She covered the receiver in one hand. “Sweetie, you applied at *Tiffany’s Twist*?”

“Long story,” Mark gulped, grabbing the phone. “Thanks! Bye!” he told his befuddled mother and headed into another room for privacy. “Hello?” Mark said to the phone.

“Hi, Mark!” came a familiar chirpy voice. “It’s Tiffany. We spoke earlier today.”

"Hi," Mark managed to spit out before she began talking again.

"So I looked over your resume, and it's not amazing, but everyone has to start somewhere, right?" she said, briskly. "My assistants, Helga and Inga, well, you'll meet them, they're twins. They do amazing work, but they're not much for cleaning up afterwards, and it's been getting on my nerves for weeks now. Basically, I'm going to let you have the job. What size smock should I order?"

"Wow, uh, thanks!" Mark stammered. "And... Small."

"Thought so," Tiffany said. "Okay, can you come in on Monday after school? I know classes are starting up again for you youngsters."

"Uh, definitely," Mark said.

"See you then, honey," Tiffany chirped. "Bye!"

Mark hung up the phone with a huge grin on his face. Sure, he wasn't popular. But he was going to be working at a salon frequented by the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen in his life, and maybe, just maybe, if they got to know each other as friends first...

Mark went to his computer to type out a reply to Louis. **THINK I JUST HIT THE JACKPOT 4 CUTE GIRLS, MAN. I'LL TELL U ABOUT IT @ SCHOOL.**

Mark logged off and checked out his reflection in the mirror. Since he was going to be working at a salon, maybe they could help him find a cooler hair-style, and with the money he was soon to be earning, maybe he could buy some nicer clothes. Mark grinned to himself. Up until this point, his high school career hadn't been much to talk about. In fact, he'd been planning to keep his head down as he always had, save up for college, and then move away to get a fresh start somewhere nobody knew him. But this was his senior year, and maybe if he tried hard enough, things could turn out differently.



On Monday morning, as Mark dragged himself out of bed, he found it hard to muster the same level of enthusiasm. He hadn't started earning money yet, and that meant he was still dressing in his usual cheap no-brand jeans and bulky lint-magnet sweater. Worse, he then managed to miss the school bus while searching for his binder, meaning he had to take the city bus and arrive late to his first class of the school year, English.

He had been planning to sneak in quietly and immediately head to the back of the classroom, but when he opened the door he stopped and froze. Sitting near the front of the class, legs crossed beneath a short, clingy skirt, was none other than Candi, the blonde angel he'd seen in the shopping mall. Mark blinked, mouth agape.

The teacher, standing impatiently at his desk, cleared his throat. "Mister..." he trailed off as he checked his attendance list. "Summers?"

"Uh, yes?" Mark said, tearing his eyes away. "That's me."

"Would you please take a seat so we can begin class?" the teacher asked dryly, raising an eyebrow. Mark flushed red from tip to toe, hurrying to the safety of the back of the class, where a few empty desks still lingered. He ended up three desks behind the mystery blonde.

Mark had always gotten average grades in English – as with most classes – but he struggled to pay attention to even a single word that came out of the teacher's mouth. He was far too occupied sneaking glances at Candi whenever he got the chance, and it seemed he wasn't the only one. What were the chances that she would be attending the same high school as him? Mark wasn't one for mysticism, but he figured that this had to be fate. Somehow, some way, he would find a way to woo her.

When he finally got the chance to relay that thought to Louis, as they ate lunch at their usual spot in the least-noticeable corner of the cafeteria, his best friend nearly choked on his tater tots.

"Woo her?" he coughed. "What year is this? Mark, buddy, I think you're what modern medical professionals refer to as 'love-struck.' And, also, delusional."

"I know she's a little out of my league," Mark admitted grudgingly. "But I have classes with her all the time, and then I'll be seeing her at the salon..."

"At the salon?" Louis frowned. "Wait, is that the job you were telling me about?"

"Yeah, but keep your voice down," Mark hissed. "I don't need people teasing me about working a girly after school job."

"I hate to break it to you, Mark, but you were never exactly the manliest guy to begin with," Louis pointed out. "I don't think anybody would be, well, shocked."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mark asked indignantly, but both boys immediately lost their train of thought as the school's most popular swept into the cafeteria, laughing and giggling, with a new face in tow. Candi was laughing along with them, if slightly nervously, and Mark's heart sank to realize she seemed to have already slipped into the echelon of girls who never so much as looked his way: cheerleaders.

"Well, that's no surprise," Louis said forlornly, shrugging his shoulders. "Birds of a feather flock together. I heard she's old friends with Miranda, and that's why she picked this school."

"Miranda, the cheerleader?" Mark asked.

"That's the one. So I'm sure she'll be on the cheerleading team in no time. And that means you'll have some friendly competition for her, too."

Mark looked around the cafeteria and winced. From the way they were watching Candi, it seemed like just about every guy in the place had the same agenda as he did on their minds, and that included some of the best-looking and most popular guys in the twelfth grade.

“Good luck,” Louis said, patting his friend on the shoulder as he rose with his empty tray. “You’re going to need it.”



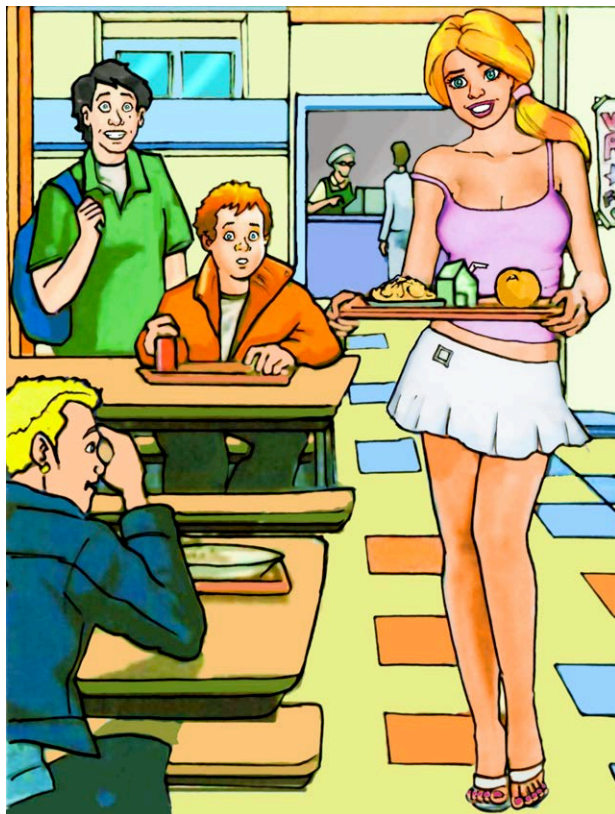
When the final bell rang, Mark headed straight for the shopping mall on the city bus, figuring he would have time to grab a bite to eat at the food court later on. The mall was already bustling with people when he arrived. Mark made a bee-line for Tiffany’s Twist, hoping he wouldn’t run into anybody he knew on the way and have to explain his new place of employment. Of course, it wasn’t as if he knew a lot of people, anyways.

The salon was in full swing when Mark made his way through the doors. Tiffany, chatting away happily, was giving what looked to be a very elaborate hair-style to a middle-aged woman, while the two attractive blondes Mark had seen the other day were working on another client’s fingernails and toenails, respectively. He had to do a double take. Apart from their hairstyles, they were completely identical!

The salon was in full swing when Mark made his way through the doors. Tiffany, chatting away happily, was giving what looked to be a very elaborate hair-style to a middle-aged woman, while the two attractive blondes Mark had seen the other day were working on another client’s fingernails and toenails, respectively. He had to do a double take. Apart from their hairstyles, they were completely identical!

“Mark, honey! There you are,” Tiffany drawled when she caught sight of him. “I’m just finishing up here, and then I’ll show you around a bit. Your uniform hasn’t come in yet, but I found you a shirt for the meantime. It’s on my desk in the back office, so why don’t you go change into it right away?”

“Sure,” Mark said, trying to sound enthusiastic even as both of the blonde twins shot him slightly unfriendly looks. He could guess that they weren’t used to having boys in the shop. As he made his way to the back, where a small of-



fice was located, he couldn't help but notice them putting their heads together for a moment and then, casting a glance in his direction, starting to giggle. Mark grimaced, but tried to ignore it even as his cheeks blushed red. So, maybe he was going to get a bit of a ribbing for the first few days. So what? He was getting paid, and, more importantly, he was going to be up close and personal with Candi Wethers, whenever she showed up to have her gorgeous blonde hair done.

On the spotless desk inside the office, Mark found a neatly folded blue smock. He took off his sweater and pulled the smock on instead. It was a little big on him, but skinny as he was, he was used to that. As he re-entered the main part of the salon, Tiffany was just sending her latest satisfied customer on her way.

"Okay, honey, time to put you to work," she said teasingly. "But first, introductions! This is Helga, and this is Inga. Don't get them mixed up, or they'll never forgive you, believe me. Helga and Inga, this is Mark." Both blondes looked up from their work and gave non-committal waves to the new employee, which Mark returned. As they continued pampering the woman in the salon chair, Tiffany took Mark on a small tour around the salon, showing him the contents of the supply cupboards, the hair dryers, and how to work the register. At the end of the informal orientation, she handed him a broom and dustpan.

"Of course, for the first little while you'll probably mostly be cleaning up after everyone," Tiffany said. "Bagging hair, getting rid of used waxing strips, et cetera. Think you can handle it?"

"Definitely," Mark said, thinking to himself that it wasn't exactly rocket science they were doing here.

"Great," Tiffany said. "I'm going to take my lunch break now, but I'm sure Inga and Helga will keep you busy. See you soon!" The hairdresser slipped on her coat and departed the salon, leaving Mark at the mercy of the



twins. True to Tiffany's word, they found all kinds of ways to keep him on his feet, whether running back and forth to get them cotton swabs and a new bottle of nail polish remover, cleaning the salon windows, or mopping the floor. However, despite being demanding, both twins were quite friendly to him, asking him questions about school and his hobbies. Neither of them had ever watched *Nebula Quest*, which Mark found baffling, but they were equally disturbed by the fact that Mark didn't know the difference between shampoo and conditioner.

A few of the clients did a double-take when they saw a young man working in the salon, but most of them smiled at him. It was the 21st century, after all, Mark reasoned, and there was no reason a guy couldn't work in a beauty salon. The fact that he was working and making small-talk with two tall, beautiful Swedish women felt a little bit like some weird fantasy come to life, but he only had eyes for one blonde, and looked up whenever a new client entered the salon in hopes it would be Candi. When Helga noticed his constant distraction during a lull in business, he explained, after much badgering, that there was a girl who came here often that he was hoping to see. The twins teased and prodded him until he finally divulged her name, at which point both of them burst into giggles.

"We love Candi!" Inga exclaimed. "She's one of our regulars. She has an appointment for next Thursday, I think. Such a nice girl!"

"Is she?" Mark asked eagerly. "I mean, she's in my English class, but school's only just started and I haven't gotten a chance to really talk to her."

"Oh, she is a sweetheart," Helga giggled. "When she first came to Florida, though, you wouldn't believe what a tomboy she was. That was before she, uh, 'blossomed.'" Helga cupped her hands around an imaginary bosom, making Mark blush.

"She's *definitely* not like most girls," Inga chimed in. "So you have a crush, do you?"

"No!" Mark said defensively. "I'm just... I'm interested, is all."

"Well, we know all Candi's little secrets," Helga said. "Girls tell their beauticians everything!"

"In that case, I was sort of curious what her, uh, 'type' is," Mark said hopefully.

"I think you are her type," Inga giggled. "Same type." Mark frowned. The twins' English was very good, but occasionally things seemed to get lost in translation.

"I mean, what kind of guy does she like?" he clarified. "Probably dumb handsome jocks, right?" He laughed weakly, hoping against hope that they would answer in the negative. Helga and Inga looked at each other, and both of them smiled simultaneously.

"Well, a pretty girl like Candi is very particular about her appearance," Helga said. "And she likes guys who are the same way. Very neat, very well-groomed."

"Oh, yes," Inga agreed. "She's always complaining about big burly football player types with dirty fingernails. She hates that!" Mark self-consciously shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Interesting," he said innocently. "So she doesn't like, uh, big guys?"

"To be honest, I really don't think she does," Helga said. "They're often very loud and boorish and full of themselves. And messy. She likes a stylish dresser."

"Stylish dresser, clean fingernails, well-groomed," Mark muttered under his breath. "Got it."

"She doesn't meet too many of those types," Inga said. "She was just complaining about it the other day when we did her pedicure. Too bad, isn't it, Helga?"

"Such a shame," Helga agreed. "Well, Mark, I can see streaks on those windows! I think you'd better give them another wipe before Tiffany gets back."

"Sure thing!" Mark chirped, grabbing the spray bottle and some paper towels. As he walked over to the windows, his mind was bubbling with possibilities. Maybe, just maybe, he could be Candi's type after all. Armed with the twin girls' helpful information, he immediately began to put together a plan to get Candi's attention.



The next day, Mark showed up to school with the first step of his plan in full effect, wearing a preppy sweater vest and button-up shirt that Helga and Inga had helped him find quite cheaply after work. Nobody seemed to notice, which was about par for the course for Mark's social life. If he had a superpower, it was definitely invisibility. Even so, Mark felt a little bit more confident than usual. He even considered actually saying 'hi' to Candi when she walked by with Miranda, but he decided to wait until they were introduced at the salon on Thursday.

"You look weird today," Louis said, as they grabbed their usual table at lunch. "Is that a sweater vest, dude?"

"I'm trying out a new look," Mark said defensively. "You could stand to clean up a little yourself, you know."

"Whatever," Louis said. "I have a feeling I know what this is all about. Stage one for *wooing* the girl of your dreams?"

"The girls at the salon told me she likes a guy who can dress well," Mark admitted. "But I wanted to dress better this year anyways."

"Maybe try actually talking to her?" Louis suggested dryly. "Instead of just hoping she'll come up and complement your sweater?"

"She has a salon appointment next week Thursday," Mark said. "That's when I'll make my move."

Louis just shook his head, returning to his mashed potatoes. Eventually they started talking about Superman vs. Batman, one of their favorite arguments, but neither of their hearts were really in it. Mark, for one, was too busy glancing across the cafeteria to where Candi was sitting with the cheerleaders. Just like Inga and Helga had said, she didn't look all that happy with the way the jocks were vying for her attention. And they definitely had dirty fingernails.



For what it was worth, Mark wasn't alone in his little obsession over the hot new blonde on the block. In fact, it seemed like the whole school was buzzing about her – especially after her soccer tryout scandal. The story was that after she failed miserably to make the girls' soccer team that she'd "accidentally" walked into the boys' changing room and started stripping down. Most people were of the opinion she'd done it intentionally to make a first-week splash nobody would ever forget. Mark had staunchly defended her honor to the few people who would listen to him. It wasn't so outlandish to accidentally walk into the wrong changing room. Mark had nearly done it himself once.

After the locker room incident, or perhaps because of it, Candi also seemed to be at odds with the resident queen bee of the cheerleaders, Amber Sweet, which in Mark's opinion was only another point in Candi's favor. He still remembered Amber teasing him mercilessly all through the seventh grade because his mom cut his hair into a bowl cut. In any case, wherever Candi went, drama seemed to follow, which only made her all the more compelling. Especially since she was still rebuffing the advances of the school's handsomest jocks.

At work after school on Thursday, Mark was so distracted by Candi's impending arrival that he ended up mopping the same square foot of tile for about half an hour straight, watching through the glass windows of the salon for her approach. His uniform had finally come in, and he wasn't too pleased about that since it consisted of a pink smock and white shorts that were slightly too short for comfort. But maybe Candi would think it looked stylish?

"Mark, honey, why are you so spacy today?" Tiffany asked, gently steering his mop towards the next tile over. "You're not yourself."

"Uh, sorry," Mark said, as the twins exchanged a knowing smile. "Just thinking about school."

"Well, think about school while mopping the *whole* floor, okay?" Tiffany suggested. Mark nodded contritely, but just then the salon doors gave their customary chime as two new clients entered the establishment. Mark's head whipped around so fast he nearly sprained his neck. An attractive middle-aged blonde woman entered, and clicking along in her wake, wearing a casual yet flirty short navy dress, was Candi.

"I don't see why I need to get another bikini wax," she was saying in a sour tone. "I mean, it's not bikini season anymore, right?"

"Oh, Candi, don't be such a little powder puff," the woman, who Mark instantly knew had to be her mother, replied. "It barely stings!"

Mark straightened up, ready to say something suave, though exactly what he wasn't sure, but both blonde beauties swept right past without even noticing him, greeting Tiffany and the twins. It wasn't until they'd all exchanged hugs and air kisses, and Candi was seated in a salon chair to have her beauty treatment, that her eyes finally fell on Mark, widening with what almost looked like fear for a strange moment.

"Oh, that's our new employee, Mark," Tiffany chirped. "I thought Helga and Inga could use a bit of help with the more menial things, you know, and he's a real dear, they just love him."

"H-hi, Candi," Mark said, and immediately gave himself a mental slap. *I should have pretended I didn't already know her name*, he thought angrily. *Now it looks like I'm some kind of stalker!* "We, um, we go to the same high school..." Mark trailed off, trying to salvage the situation. "I'm three seats behind you in the English class we have together!" He was doing his best not to stare at her breasts, but she must have caught him at it, because she folded her arms protectively with a small blush, not saying a



word. Mark stood there awkwardly for a second, slowly realizing that Candi wasn't going to say anything back to him, then dashed away to the sinks he'd already cleaned with his tail between his quaking legs. He didn't dare go anywhere near Candi and her mother for the duration of their appointment, staying on the far side of the salon as much as possible, and he felt relief mixed with agony when they finally sashayed out the door again.

"I can't believe how badly I messed that up," Mark moaned pitifully, when Helga came over to give him a consoling pat on the shoulder. "She barely even looked at me. It's like I was part of the wall that came to life and started stuttering."

"That's not what happened at all," Helga said. "She's just shy, and seeing a new face in the salon probably startled her. You know, she asked about you while we were doing her pedicure!"

"Bull," Mark muttered. "You don't have to lie to make me feel better, Inga."

Helga glared daggers at him.

"Sorry!" Mark exclaimed. "Helga, I mean. It was just a slip of the tongue, I know which of you is which."

"Hmph!" Helga exclaimed. "After that, I don't think I'll tell you what she said!"

"I will," Inga beamed, coming over to dry her hands on a towel. "She said you need a haircut!" Mark groaned in response. "Hey, that's a good thing," Inga insisted. "She said with a nice haircut, you'd be sort of cute."

Mark's ears perked up immediately. "Wait, like, what kind of cute?" he demanded eagerly. "Like, puppy dog cute? Or, like, handsome cute?" The twins looked at each other and shrugged simultaneously.

"Cute," they answered in chorus.



The following Monday, to nobody's surprise, Candi was a member of the cheerleading squad. Mark had no interest in sports, but suddenly he could picture himself going to quite a few football or basketball games this season. It was his last year, after all, and it was an important part of the high school experience. He told as much to Louis, who was a back-up benchwarmer for the football team, over a game of *Mortal Kombat* after school.

"So you have an interest in sports all of a sudden?" Louis said suspiciously, raising a skeptical eyebrow. "I seem to remember being completely unable to make you watch the Super Bowl, never mind drag you to one of our high school games. Or, for that matter, get you outside to throw a football."

"Oh, you know, tastes change," Mark said evasively, concentrating on the game. As per usual, it was barely a contest. Mark was undefeated amongst his friends at Mortal Kombat, though he didn't have a huge number to compare himself against.

"Yeah, and I noticed you started trimming your fingernails, too," Louis said. "Tastes, huh?"

"Inga and Helga did it for me," Mark muttered. "Just to look neater. You know, working in a salon, you have to look the part."

"So are you going to be wearing makeup next, if you have to 'look the part'?" Louis asked mockingly.

"Don't be a dumbass," Mark said hotly.

"I'm not," Louis said. "That's why I know it has nothing to do with working there and everything to do with your stupid fantasy plan to somehow make the hot new blonde in school fall for you. And that's why you want to go to football games all of a sudden, too."

"So what?" Mark demanded, tossing his controller aside. "What's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong with it is that it's never going to happen," Louis said flatly. "Never. We're geeks, Mark, and she's a frigging beauty queen. It just *doesn't* happen. Got it?"



"Screw you, man," Mark said, getting up from the couch. "At least I'm trying to make some changes instead of sitting around feeling sorry for myself. I've got homework to do." He picked up his backpack and put it on. "See you around." Mark marched angrily out the door. Sure, Candi was out of his league for now. But maybe, just maybe, he could change teams.



As September passed, Mark didn't see as much of Candi at the salon as he would have liked. Tiffany mused that she was keeping very busy with cheer-leading practices and probably hadn't had much time to pamper herself lately. Mark still had that morning English class with her, but Candi had taken to showing up late with Miranda, skinny lattes in hand, meaning any chance to talk with her was minimal.

But at least he could make some changes to his wardrobe while he bided his time. Inga and Helga were both fashion mavens, and more than happy to give him some tips about creating a dressier, classier look for school. Soon his old baggy jeans and sweaters were a thing of the past, replaced by stylish skinny jeans, khakis, loafers, vests and scarves. Mark was still faithfully putting at least a little money towards his college fund with each paycheck, and the twins had an eye for a bargain, but he still ended up spending more money than he'd ever expected on clothes, some of which he found a little bit too metrosexual for his liking. He assumed it was a European thing, the bright colors and snug fits and shoes with a bit of a lift.

One perk of the job, however, was free hair cuts and manicures, which Mark, remembering Candi liked a well-groomed guy, began to take advantage of entering October. Helga agreed to trim and shape his hair a bit, and gave him some new shampoo to use, but she suggested he keep growing it out to give them more to work with. She said she was envisioning a very "Hollywood" look, with big moussed volume on top and the sides combed back, but he needed a bit more length to pull it off. Mark chose to trust her judgement. He liked Helga and Inga quite a bit, especially since the feeling seemed mutual. It was strange being able to make small-talk with two attractive women who didn't treat him like gum stuck to a shoe. Lately they had been trying really hard to get him to listen to Smooch, a Swedish pop trio they were constantly playing in the salon, and he in turn had been trying to get them to watch an episode of Nebula Quest.

Despite their differences, they all got along pretty well, and Helga and Inga even picked Mark up from school to go for lunch on a Friday. Boy, had that been something – two tall, pretty blondes pulling up to the front of the school in a cute little Prius had definitely made a bit of a splash, and Mark had only wished that Candi could be around to see as he casually hopped into the car with them. He had never felt so cool in his life. Of course, Louis had been

pretty mad that Mark ditched him for lunch, but lately they hadn't been hanging out so much anyway. Mark tried to persuade him to come shopping for some jeans that didn't have holes in them, but it was to no avail.

"You're getting way too into shopping, dude," Louis said, pushing his food around his cafeteria tray. "And is that nail polish you're wearing?"

"It's a varnish," Mark defended himself. "Helga said it would dry clear, but I guess it's a little bit pink. Nobody else noticed." He frowned. "And as for shopping, there's nothing wrong with looking good, is there?" In fact, just the other day he'd had a girl in his Math class come up and compliment him on his style. Even if Candi hadn't noticed yet, other people were, and that meant he was on the right track. More heartening still, October was now drawing to a close and Candi still hadn't shown any interest in dating any of the eligible jocks in the school. All Mark needed was a chance to talk to her alone.

"Hey, Helga said there's going to be a little work party for Halloween," Mark remembered. "You could probably come, if you want."

"Wait, so we're not eating candy and watching Nightmare on Elm Street at my place like usual?" Louis asked, frowning.

"We do that every year," Mark said, shrugging. "Do you want to come to the party or not?"

"I'll pass," Louis said. "You guys will probably spend the whole time doing each others' hair."

"Very funny," Mark said. "You sure you don't want to come? It's just a casual thing. You probably wouldn't even have to bother wearing a costume."

"No, thanks," Louis said firmly.

"Your loss," Mark shrugged. Just then, he received a text message from Helga, asking if he wanted a ride to work after school since they were starting their shifts at the same time. He grinned and started texting her a reply, barely even noticing Louis get up and leave.



On his last work shift before Halloween, Mark was trying to gauge whether or not he would need a costume for the party. He casually asked Inga what she was going dressed as, and rather than a typically bubbly reply, Inga gave a sigh.

"We *were* going to go as Smooch," she pouted.

"Smooch?" Mark echoed. "Oh, right, that band you like so much."

"Yes, the best band on Earth," Helga chimed in from across the salon. She plucked a CD case off the stack sitting beside the radio and brought it over. The album cover showed two very sexy girls, one blonde and one brunette, dressed in tiny sailor costumes and draped over the shoulders of a handsome

blonde man in the middle with an impressive mustache, who was wearing a sailor cap and faux navy uniform. Mark had heard Inga and Helga singing the lyrics to “Loveboat” enough times to know the album cover was a reference to their hit single. “I was going to be Astrid,” Helga continued, pointing to the blonde girl. “And Inga wanted to be Nikki. But we have nobody to be Alix, because our friend got sick with the flu. And we already bought the costume and everything!”



Mark stared at the picture of the mustachioed “Alix,” thinking that no guy in their right mind would let a flu stop him from dressing up in a costume that ensured two gorgeous Swedish girls would be hanging off of him all night. Struck by sudden inspiration, Mark cleared his throat. “Uh, you know, I don’t have a costume yet,” he said casually. “If you think I can fill in, I could go as Alix.”

Both Helga and Inga gave a simultaneous squeal of delight. “Oh, but we couldn’t ask you to do that, Mark, really...” Inga gushed. “Are you sure?”

“Why not?” Mark shrugged. “I mean, if your friend already had the costume ready to go, it would be a waste not to have the whole band, right? I’d be happy to wear it.” He looked over the white navy uniform again, thinking it might even look kind of sharp on him. And he still wasn’t able to grow facial hair, so a stick-on mustache would be a whole new experience for him.

“You are so sweet!” Helga exclaimed delightedly. “You can come over early tomorrow night and we’ll get you into your costume before everyone else shows up, okay?”

“Sure,” Mark said, thinking it was an added bonus to show up early, before things were in full swing, and then get to adjust to the party as more and more people showed up. And being in a group costume meant Inga and Helga would want them to stick together all evening, too. Mark grinned a little bit at the mental image of having both Swedish girls on his arms and looking like a total ladies’ man. Definitely a step up from watching movies in Louis’ basement!



The following evening, Mark's mother voiced few reservations about him going to a Halloween party consisting of only adults, worrying if there was going to be any drinking going on as she drove him to Helga and Inga's apartment. "I don't want you getting drunk," she said sternly. "You're underage."

"Mom, Tiffany's going to be there," Mark said, embarrassed. "She's like, thirty something, and responsible enough to be a business owner. And she's our boss, besides. It's not going to be some crazy party, just a little get together."

"She was quite nice," Mark's mom admitted grudgingly, having recently received a free manicure while picking him up from work. "Just don't let yourself be pressured into anything by those two crazy Swedish girls, okay?"

"I won't," Mark said, rolling his eyes as the car came to a halt outside the apartment address Helga had texted him. "Thanks for the ride, mom. See you!" He got out and closed the door, then skipped up the steps to the apartment entrance. It felt a little strange showing up to a party empty-handed, but it wasn't as if he was old enough to bring a bottle of wine, anyways. At least he was dressed sharply in slacks and a pink polo Inga had picked out for him – he knew she'd appreciate that. He buzzed the number of the apartment, and a Swedish-accented voice came out of the speaker.

"Yes, hello?"

Mark could barely hear Helga, or perhaps it was Inga, with the sound of loud music and shrill laughter in the background. Feeling slightly nervous, he put his finger on the button and said. "Hi, it's Mark."

"Mark! Come on up, darling!"

Reassured that at least one of the twins was very happy he was here, Mark made his way up the stairs to their apartment. He could hear laughter and some kind of techno music through the door, and he had to knock extra loudly to be heard. Then the door swung open, and he was met with the sight of Inga wearing a bright white navy sailor's uniform, complete with fake anchor tattoo on her arm, cap on top of her slicked-back blonde hair, and a thick blonde mustache perched on her upper lip.

After a brief moment of confusion, Mark realized he had made a big, big mistake. "So you're, uh..." Mark trailed off, swallowing.

"Nikki!" Inga yelled. "Yes! What do you think? I think I'm very handsome." She giggled, grabbing Mark by the hand. "And Helga is already all dressed up as Astrid. Now all we need is our Alix!" Mark let himself be dragged into the apartment, trying to think up some kind of last-minute excuse. Those darned Swedes and their weirdly-spelled names!

"Hey, look, Inga, I didn't realize that Alix was the, uh..." Mark gulped, losing his train of thought as Helga sashayed out into the living room wearing the female sailor's outfit from "Loveboat." It was even skimpier than what Mark remembered from the music video, consisting of a tiny navy mini-dress with a

skirt ending mid-thigh, a bright red scarf around her neck, white gloves and a cute white sailor's cap set atop her piled-up blonde hair, white stockings, and bright red heels.

"Ooh, Nikki, you found Alix!" Helga squealed, putting her hands on her hips and giving Mark a wink. "What do you think of the costume? I think we're going to look hot!"

"Hot," Mark echoed weakly. "Right."

"Come on, Mark, we have to get you ready!" Inga exclaimed, grabbing him by the arm. Mark quickly found himself being manhandled into one of the twins' bedrooms, a scenario that had crossed his mind a few times while working at the salon – their job necessitated an awful lot of bending and twisting – but in his fantasies Inga had never been wearing a bushy mustache.

"Boxers or briefs?" Helga demanded, already rummaging around in her dresser while Mark stood dumbly in the middle of the room, letting Inga drape the costume up against him to check the size.

"Uh, I'd prefer boxers," Mark stammered. Helga rolled her eyes.

"Mark, I do not wear boxers," she said. "I meant, which are you wearing?"

"Oh!" Mark exclaimed. "Boxers."

"No, no, no," Inga said, mustache twitching with distaste. "You will have to change. Wearing boxers under this skirt will look too strange."

"Blue or pink?" Helga asked.

"Pink? What?" Mark was distracted from hearing her question as Inga quickly and efficiently shucked off his polo shirt and discarded it on the floor. He hugged himself instinctively, embarrassed at his scrawniness.

"Pink it is," Helga said cheerily, tossing him a pair of pink nylon panties. Mark held them up in astonishment. He had never seen a girl's panties outside of underwear ads, or his mother's laundry, and never ever dreamed of wearing them. "Go put them on, and these too," she directed, handing him a pair of white stockings. "Then we'll put your bra on."

Mark was glad to momentarily escape to the bathroom, clutching the panties like a life preserver. He closed the door behind him and slid down to a sitting position with a groan. *What have you gotten yourself into*, he thought. *Okay, Mark, just relax.*

"It's Halloween," he muttered. "Guys dress up as girls all the time, and it's funny, and nobody thinks anything of it," he reminded himself. "It's just a costume, so man up." It was hard to "man up" while putting on pink panties and thigh-high white stockings, but Mark did his best to keep a stiff upper lip as he wriggled out of his pants and boxers and set them on the counter.

The panties were made of a slippery, sensuous material that made him shiver as he pulled them up his legs, and even made his little soldier stir a bit in response. He quickly added the white stockings, which were more or less very long and very thin socks, not the sheer pantyhose his mother wore, for which Mark was grateful. They clung tightly to his legs and somehow made them look longer and slimmer in the mirror, while also hiding the fine covering of hair he had below his knees. Feeling extremely silly, Mark snatched a towel to wrap around his waist as he exited the bathroom.



Of course, Helga snatched it from him the instant he was out. “Ooh!” she exclaimed. “Nice legs, girl! Maybe we’ll have to get you in for a waxing.”

“Depends if I get a discount,” Mark said bracingly, doing his best to keep his sense of humor. The twins both laughed.

“For you, Mark, it’s free,” Inga beamed. “Now, bra!” Mark obediently stuck his arms out while Inga slipped the feminine contraption onto his chest and did up the clasps, then tightened up the straps so the empty cups were snug against his chest. Of course, they didn’t stay empty for long. Helga, approaching with a wicked grin and a balled-up pair of pantyhose in each hand, made sure of that. Mark couldn’t help but blush as she fiddled around with his ‘bust’, making sure his fake boobs were the same size.

Hair and makeup were next, with Helga masterfully pulling his hair back and upward under the sailor cap and using a ‘sock bun’ to make it look as if he had quite a bit more hair than he really did, while Inga, mustache twitching with concentration, used his face as a canvas for elaborate false lashes, powder blue eye shadow, mascara, blusher, and a bright red lipstick. She even used a pencil on his eyebrows to give them a more feminine arch, and judging by her ‘oohs’

and 'aahs,' she was delighted at the transformation. Mark, turned away from the mirror, wasn't able to judge her handiwork for himself. He had to content himself with blinking his newly-long lashes, trying to get used to the fluttery things, and doing his best not to lick the waxy-tasting lipstick coating his mouth.

He sat down on the edge of the bed while the twins slipped his feet into a pair of fire-hydrant red pumps just like Helga's. The complicated buckles were done up with a series of authoritative clicks that Mark felt were sealing his fate of wearing them until the twins agreed to take them off for him. Standing up shakily as a baby deer, trying to ignore the tug of the bra straps on his shoulders, Mark let Inga support him by the arm as he stepped into his costume. The dress was a tight fit, even for Mark, and he had to suck in his tummy when they zipped him into. The material, like the panties, was very cool and slippery against his skin, giving him tiny goose bumps. It felt like it was hugging him very tightly around the waist and chest, but the skirt was so short, light, and flouncy he worried it was there it at all!

"Oh my God, Mark, you are an adorable Alix," Inga exclaimed, clapping her hands together in delight.

"And sexy!" Helga added. "How are we going to keep the boys away from you?"

"Get real," Mark said, flushing deeply. "I'm sure I look ridiculous."

When he wobbled his way over to the mirror to look, however, his prettily made-up eyes went wide as dinner plates. Contrary to his prediction, his reflection was of a cute, dare he say it, sexy teenaged girl! The costume fit his slender frame like a glove, with Helga's padding job providing a small but noticeable bust, and his legs looked incredibly long and slender perched in the bright red high heels. As for his face, he barely recognized himself! Inga had done his



eyes very dramatically, with the fluttering false lashes and bright blue eye shadow, and together with the glossy red lipstick, he looked like a very pretty, if overdone, young ingénue.

"Is that really me?" Mark gasped. The twins nodded, giggling furiously.

"We have such a talent for this, Inga," Helga smiled.

"We really do," Inga agreed. Just then, the buzzer sounded for the apartment door. "Come on, Alix," she said, adjusting her false mustache with a grin. "We are Smooch! Time to greet our adoring fans!"



Mark was terribly nervous when the guests started to arrive, especially Tiffany, who had to do a dramatic double-take to recognize Mark in his get-up. She just shook her head at the twins' ingenuity and smiled, telling him he looked very pretty. The other guests were people Mark didn't recognize, and since the twins insisted on introducing him only as 'Alix,' he was totally unable to tell how many of them were aware of his real gender.

As Mark had predicted, the twins insisted all three of them stick together throughout the party for the sake of the costume. However, instead of being the mustachioed stud in the middle, Mark was now relegated to hanging on Inga's arm as one of "Nikki's" mincing escorts! Inga took great pleasure in playing it up to the fullest, and Mark found himself being constantly steered around the party with her hand in the small of his back, or wrapped possessively around his waist, and she even swatted him playfully on the bum from time to time for a laugh. Helga was enjoying herself just as much as "Astrid," making fun of the tabloid-fodder love triangle that Smooch was famous for by draping herself all over "Nikki" and shooting Mark catty looks.

Their costumes were the hit of the party, and not just because of the twins' antics. Mark caught more than a few guys checking out his and Helga's legs! At first Mark was too nervous to do anything but smile and laugh weakly as not only "Nikki," but several guys in costume, playfully flirted with him. As Helga kept him steadily supplied with a drink in hand, however, he began to loosen up and play along a bit himself, batting his fake eyelashes at "Nikki" and pouting angrily whenever "Astrid" took too much of "his" attention. Before long he was even mincing around the party with the same exaggerated hip-rolling gait that Helga had adopted, teasingly swishing his bottom from side to side with Inga's arm around his waist.

Tiffany had left relatively early, meaning he didn't have to worry about his boss seeing him do anything too embarrassing, and between the alcohol and the attention from everyone who loved their costume, Mark found he was starting to really have fun. He even agreed to pose for several pictures with the twins, one of which saw him leaning forward coquettishly, hands on his knees, to give

"Nikki" a kiss on the cheek. In another, he struck a sexy pose with "Astrid" where each of them cocked their hips and blew kisses at the camera.

All the guys at the party, who were older than Mark by at least five or so years, rather than making smart remarks, thought it was great that he'd committed to his costume, although some of them were a little frazzled when Inga revealed that Mark was their male co-worker from the salon. Even that didn't stop them from making flirty comments, and a few actually asked Mark to dance, which he blushing turned down.

Gradually, the party died down and people began to make their exit, leaving Mark, the twins, and a handful of the more inebriated guests all sitting in the living room, chatting happily and drunkenly about just about anything. Somehow, without Mark even noticing, Helga and Inga had each managed to attach themselves to a very handsome man who had flirted with them earlier in the evening, one a pirate and the other a firefighter. The talk had turned quite suggestive, with everyone recounting stories of wild parties from their youth and the strange places they had woken up... And who they had woken up with.

"How about you, Alix?" Inga asked teasingly, turning to face Mark on the couch. "How many boys have you taken home?" Mark blushed furiously as the others chuckled.

"Well, the tabloids haven't caught on yet, but Alix actually prefers girls," Mark said, thinking fast. Everyone laughed aloud, and he felt proud at having turned the tables.

"Is that so?" Helga giggled. "And how many girls have you kissed, Alix?" Embarrassed, but not nearly as embarrassed as he would have been if totally sober, Mark held up a 'zero' with his thumb and fingers. Everyone groaned.

"Really?" Inga asked. "Mark, you've never kissed a girl?" Mark shrugged his shoulders, fiddling with the hem of his skirt rather than meeting her eyes.

"I guess I've just never, um, had the right timing," he said. *That's being generous*, he thought to himself. *Heck, I've never been close!* Suddenly he wished the party could be over and he could go home. No wonder he'd never kissed a girl. Here he was wearing high heels and lingerie for a Halloween costume!

"Well, we can fix that," Helga said playfully, setting her hand on Mark's knee. Mark's mouth fell open, but before he could ask her exactly what she meant by that, she leaned forward and kissed him full on the mouth! Mark trembled as her small wet tongue pushed between his lips, then he awkwardly cupped her face in both hands and kissed her back, pretending for a second that it was Candi he was canoodling with. Someone wolf-whistled loudly, and when they ended the kiss everyone was clapping.

"Better than *my* first kiss, I can tell you that," said the guy in the firefighter costume, laughing. The pirate nodded, grinning widely, looking not at all peeved that Helga had kissed Mark instead of him. Mark, for his part, could

hardly believe what had just happened. His head was spinning. He'd just gotten his first kiss from a very attractive young woman in a skimpy sailor costume. Sure, he was dressed in the same outfit, but who cared about those little details?

"Wow," he said. "Uh, thanks."

"Helga, you are corrupting our young friend!" Inga said, swatting her arm playfully.



"Alix is a good kisser," Helga defended. "Her lipstick tastes nice! Or is that mine?" She gave an inebriated giggle, fixing the smudge at the side of her mouth.

"Now you know what it's like to kiss a pretty girl," Inga said proudly. "It's all about confidence! Isn't that right, handsome?" She turned to her male companion on the couch, removing her mustache, and an instant later they were necking furiously. The few remaining guests seemed to take this as their cue to leave, and they headed for the door, thanking the twins for throwing such a great party.

"No problem," Helga said, clinging to her pirate-costumed beau. "Mark, do you want us to call you a taxi?"

But Mark didn't hear her. The excitement of the evening, not to mention his first taste of drinking, had totally wiped him out, and he was passed out on the couch, snoring gently. From the smile on his lipstick-coated mouth, he'd had an enjoyable time of it.

"Well, what he doesn't know won't hurt him," Inga laughed, snapping a photo of their sleeping charge. "Now, the two remaining members of Smooch are giving a very special encore performance in the bedroom, if anyone is interested."

The twins linked arms, sashaying towards their room, and the pirate and firefighter exchanged a slack-jawed look before hurrying after them. Fortunately for all involved, Mark was a very deep sleeper!



The next morning, after experiencing his very first kiss, Mark also got to experience his very first hangover. He woke up to the smell of coffee under his nose and gave a small groan of anguish. His head was pounding. He opened his eyes to see Inga, dressed normally and no longer wearing a mustache, holding a cup of coffee.

"Here," she chirped. "Best cure for a hangover. Drink up!"

"Oh, man," Mark moaned. "My head!"

"That's what you get for drinking underage," Helga chimed in, coming into the apartment with her arms full of groceries. "Don't worry, we texted your mom to say you were spending the afternoon with us. And assured her you drank only soda pop!"

"We're such a bad influence, Helga," Inga sighed. "Well, Mark, did you have fun last night?" The evening's events all came rushing back and Mark looked down at himself, finding he was still dressed in the sailor costume, although the stuffing had come out of one of his bra cups, leaving him slightly asymmetrical, and someone had helped him out of his high heels at some point. He'd also

managed to lose his sailor cap, though his hair was still pinned up. Grinning sheepishly, Mark accepted the coffee.

"Yeah, it was pretty fun," he admitted. He blinked. "Did those eyelashes fall off?"

"We took off all your makeup while you were passed out," Helga said. "It's bad to sleep in it, and you get eye shadow stains everywhere!"

Mark sipped at his coffee while the twins raved about how well the party had gone, feeling distinctly silly sitting on the couch in a skimpy skirt, then went to the bathroom to change back into the prior day's polo and slacks. He had to call Helga in for help unzipping his dress, which was a little embarrassing, but soon enough he was back to his normal clothes, apart from the pink pair of panties in lieu of his boxers, which had somehow gone missing.

"You can keep them," Inga giggled, after Mark had spent ten minutes searching fruitlessly for his original underwear. "Don't worry, I have plenty."

Once his face scrubbed was clean of makeup, Mark looked pretty much like himself again, although his hair was still a bit poofy from the previous night's stylings, and his nails still had that annoying pink gleam from the nail varnish Helga had foisted on him at work. More or less satisfied with his appearance, he walked out of the bathroom. "Hey, so did everyone else go home last night?" he asked. "I seem to remember there were a couple guys who..."

He trailed off as he saw a very tired-looking pirate sipping coffee in the kitchen, then blushed at the obvious implication. The pirate, for his part, seemed strangely startled to see him.

"Uh, Helga, who's the kid?" the guy asked awkwardly.

Helga and Inga, who were busy putting groceries away, looked up and started to giggle.

"That's Alix, silly," Helga said. "Don't you recognize her without her face on? Or maybe you spent too much time staring at her legs!"

"Wha?" The pirate's mouth hung open in confusion, then all of a sudden his cheeks turned red.

"I told you Alix was our co-worker Mark," Helga giggled. "Don't you remember?"

"Jesus, I thought you were... You know..." The pirate trailed off, shaking his head. "Sorry, I thought it was another one of your pranks. You know, part of the joke. I didn't believe you were actually a dude! Sorry, uh, Mark."

Mark could feel his own cheeks flushing beet red, and suddenly wished he could drop through a convenient trap door in the floor. He'd made such a convincing girl that this guy hadn't believed the truth even when it was presented to him. No wonder he had gotten such a kick out of Mark and Helga kissing, instead of being jealous. He'd thought he was witnessing a cute young teen

queen getting her first taste of girl-on-girl action! “No problem,” Mark said in a near whisper.

After a slightly awkward breakfast, the pirate, whose name turned out to be Matt, showered and changed into some spare clothes he’d wisely packed in advance. The twins suggested he give Mark a ride home on his way, and, perhaps wanting to make up for the earlier embarrassment, Matt said it would be no problem at all.

“And Matt, be sure to say hi to your firefighter friend,” Inga said mischievously at the door. “He had such a nice hose! Bye, Mark, see you at work!” The twins both waved goodbye as Mark followed his ride out of the apartment to where he’d parked his car on the street.

“Got pretty filthy last night,” Matt said conversationally. Mark blushed furiously.

“Uh, I wouldn’t know,” he said. “I passed out, remember?” Matt looked taken aback, then broke into an awkward laugh.

“No, dude, I meant the car,” he said. “I drove through a big puddle and need to get it washed!”

“Oh, right,” Mark said sheepishly. He climbed into the passenger’s seat and made some stilted small-talk as they drove about how each of them had met Helga and Inga, but when the topic turned to the party, Matt seemed a bit uncomfortable, avoiding looking over at his passenger. Mark couldn’t help but think, ruefully, how differently he’d behaved when he thought ‘Alix’ was a girl! Matt was the kind of handsome, muscular, athletic guy who’d probably run his high school and never would have looked twice at a twerp like Mark unless it was to shove him into a locker, but he’d definitely liked looking at ‘Alix,’ chatting friendlily, being genuinely interested in what Mark had to say, telling funny jokes and helping him open a bottle at one point. He’d also been one of the guys who asked Mark to dance!

Now that the makeup was off, however, it seemed like Mark had gone right back to being a non-entity, but worse, because Matt now had the uncomfortable memory of accidentally being attracted to a very pretty boy. Mark slouched lower in the seat, wishing he had a rock to crawl under. For a night, it had seemed like he was popular for once, but now that it was morning he was back to being a geek.

“Hey, look, school carwash,” Matt said, breaking the long drawn-out silence and pointing to a large cardboard sign on the corner. “I used to go to that high school.” Mark looked up and realized they were near his school.

“I go there right now,” he said.

“Oh, cool,” Matt said. “Is that old hard-ass Mr. Dickson still coaching the basketball team?”

"I'm not sure," Mark admitted. "I'm not really into sports." Matt nodded, as if Mark's answer confirmed what he'd already been thinking, then looked over with a serious gaze.

"I have a cousin who's gay, so I'm totally cool with, uh, stuff like that," he said. "I was just a little surprised to find out you were a dude, that's all."

"I'm not gay!" Mark protested. "It was just a Halloween costume! Guys go in drag for Halloween all the time." Matt's forehead wrinkled in surprise.

"Oh, shit," he said. "Sorry. Guess I kind of assumed. I mean, usually when guys go in drag, they look like... Hilarious. Not...uh..." He trailed off, embarrassed. "Do you dress as a chick often? Because you seemed pretty good at it, is all I'm saying."

"That was the first time," Mark said sourly. "And the only time."

"Well, for what it's worth, you make a pretty hot chick," Matt laughed. "But I see some even hotter ones getting set up in the parking lot. How about we support our school carwash? It'll be quick."

"Yeah, sure," Mark said, trying to pretend he hadn't heard the compliment. As Matt pulled into the parking lot, Mark immediately realized what had drawn Matt in as he looked out the window at a parking lot full of dirty cars and scampering, bikini-clad cheerleaders. He had totally forgotten the cheerleading team was doing a carwash today. And if the whole team was here, that meant...

"Whoa, check out that blonde with the tits," Matt gaped. "You think she's really in high school?"

Mark followed his gaze, and sure enough, it was Candi Wethers, clad in a denim miniskirt and a tiny pink bikini top that was struggling to contain her cleavage. He momentarily lost his power of speech watching her bend over to pick up a bucket of soapy water. "Uh, yeah," he managed to spit out a moment later. "She's in my English class."

"Jailbait," Matt said sadly. "Well, she's too young for me, dude. You ever talk to her?"

Mark blushed. "Not really," he said. "I mean, I've never gotten a good chance." To his surprise, Matt grinned.

"Hey, no time like the present, buddy," he said, putting the car in park. "Why don't you go ask her how her Halloween was? Just be cool about it."

"Right now?" Mark asked weakly.

"Yeah, Mark," Matt said enthusiastically. "What have you got to lose? Look, kid, any dude who's confident enough to swish around a party in high heels and a dress all night is confident enough to go talk to a hot blonde. You even got action from Helga before I did, remember? So go give it a shot."



Mark stared out the window, watching Candi trying to slyly adjust the strings of her bikini top without giving anyone a show, and he realized Matt was right. Here he was, still watching her from a distance like a creep, when there was no reason on Earth he shouldn't go right up to her and strike up a conversation. He felt a sudden swell of confidence as he thought back to the prior night's party. He'd been funny, confident, and cool, dressed in a flirty sailor costume or not, and he'd even kissed a very good-looking co-worker. Helga wasn't on Candi's level, but she was close, and if Helga liked him, why shouldn't Candi?

"You're right," Mark finally said. "You're right. I'm going to go talk to her."

"That's the spirit, buddy," Matt said, seemingly pleased with himself at having inspired Mark to action. "Get going."

Mark opened his car door, and felt his knees knocking together almost instantly. Candi was standing with her back to him, waving her cardboard sign like a ring girl, and Mark's mouth went suddenly dry at the prospect of talking

to her. Matt gave him an encouraging nod, and Mark walked forward determinedly, trying to look manly and confident. He was just going to strike up a casual conversation, ask her about her Halloween, and then suggest that they... What? Study English together! It was the perfect excuse to get her phone number. Emboldened, Mark started walking quicker, but got a sudden flash of panic as he realized that Miranda, Candi's best friend, was now skipping over to join her. His step faltered slightly. If he got shot down in front of Miranda, everyone would hear about it. He didn't know if he could bear the humiliation!

His feet carried him forward until he was standing directly behind the two beautiful cheerleaders, and, screwing up every last bit of courage he had, Mark announced his presence.

"Hey, Candi, how's it going?" he asked. He immediately kicked himself for sounding so hesitant. Candi turned around, giving Mark an eyeful of cleavage he wouldn't soon forget.

"Hi, uh..." Candi frowned, clearly struggling to remember Mark's name. Mark felt a sinking sensation, and wanted more than anything to take back the last thirty seconds. She didn't even know his name. Two months of the same English class, and seeing her at the salon, and she didn't even know his name. Mark went red with embarrassment as Miranda giggled and whispered something to Candi.

"Hi, Mark," the brunette said. "Did you finish that essay for me yet?" Mark's mouth went dry as he tried to stammer out a response. He'd forgotten he agreed to help her out with her essay, hoping it would lead to seeing Candi outside of class.

"No, that's what I...uh...why I'm here, uh..." Mark trailed off, running a hand through his hair, unable to meet either girls' gaze and feeling about a centimeter tall.

"Hey, is that a manicure you have going on?" Miranda demanded quizzically. Mark slipped both hands behind his back, cursing Helga's 'nail varnish.'

"They said it would dry clear," Mark sighed. "Um, perk of the job." He took a deep breath, trying to regain his bearings in a situation quickly slipping out of his control. It was now or never, and what was the worst that could happen? He licked his lips, swallowed, and started to make his move. "Uh, Candi, I was wondering if..."

"Not now, Mark," Miranda cut him off. "Candi likes big, strong, hunky men, not little girly boys who paint their nails." She gave Candi a wink. "Now come on, I see a really dirty jeep coming in." Miranda grabbed Candi's arm, linking it through her own, and the two girls sashayed off towards a filthy 4x4 in serious need of a wash. Candi gave him what might have been an apologetic glance over her bare shoulder, or else she was just still trying to remember which class

they had together. Either way, Mark felt like curling up into a little ball and dying on the spot. He beat a hasty retreat back to Matt's car.

"Didn't go so well, huh?" Matt asked sympathetically. "Hot girls can be bitches, sometimes, dude."

"Think you can skip the carwash for now?" Mark asked miserably. "I'd rather not have to look Miranda in the face after that."

"Sure, buddy," Matt said, reversing out of the parking lot. "Hey, at least you tried. That took balls, right?"

But no matter what Matt said, Mark felt worse than he ever had in his life. Maybe 'Alix' was a hit, but 'Mark' was still a total loser, no matter what, and like Louis had said, geeks just didn't date cheerleaders. Mark was so distressed he didn't even thank Matt for the ride home as he got out of the car. He was already dreading school on Monday.



Despite his fears, Mark didn't return to school to overblown stories of his attempt to make a move on the hottest girl in school. Everyone was much too busy with other gossip. Apparently, as Mark heard it, Amber had played a cruel trick at her Halloween party that nearly led to a drunken Candi being taken advantage of by Joe, one of the school's most notorious womanizers. That was until Amber's boyfriend Tom, basketball captain and best-looking guy in school, had intervened and punched Joe out cold. Tom had then used the whole thing as an excuse to dump Amber, and rumors were swirling that Tom and Candi would be an 'item' before long.

The fact that Mark had not only blown his big chance talking to Candi, but that she was now finally dating a popular jock, drove Mark into a true funk. Sure, she now remembered his name often enough to borrow notes from him in English, but Candi was now officially off the market, and Mark didn't have a chance to compete against a guy like Tom. After moping all through November and spending December's holidays locked up in his room playing video games, Mark had to admit that he was well and truly depressed. Every time his mom tried to talk to him about it, he just muttered some excuse about teenage hormones and slipped away, but he knew what it really was: heartbreak.

As far as work went, the twins did do their best to cheer him up, understanding that Mark's depressed mood was caused by Candi getting a boyfriend. They gave him an expensive assortment of skin creams and moisturizers for Christmas, which was a nice enough gesture that Mark felt obligated to start using them, and whenever Candi came to the salon they found ways to let Mark always either be on break or working on the opposite side of the salon. Even looking at her from a distance was painful, and he didn't think he would be able to manage hearing her chat away to Tiffany, especially if her boyfriend Tom

came up in conversation.

As another measure to try to distract Mark from his depression, Helga and Inga started teaching Mark the basics of manicures, pedicures, and waxing. When he protested that no customer would trust a teenaged guy to do their nails for them, they started to teasingly call him 'Marci' around the salon. Mark couldn't help but wonder if Louis

had put them onto it somehow, but he hardly ever saw Louis these days, especially since the twins usually picked him up to go out for lunch. Mark didn't want to hear an 'I told you so' about Candi, so he mostly avoided his former best friend in the halls, too.

Mark didn't really mind the good-natured ribbing from the twins, but he was startled and a little bit disturbed the first time a customer mistakenly referred to him as 'Marci,' too! He supposed that with his longish hair, which was very full and glossy thanks to his new shampoos and conditioners, and his pink smock, the woman had managed to mistake him for a girl. When he voiced his concern to Tiffany, she just chuckled.

"You might as well play along," she said. "Like you said, women are more comfortable if they think it's a cute young girl doing their nails, not a boy!" Mark wasn't sure how he felt about this peculiar development, but he had to admit that the customers who called him 'Marci' were a whole lot friendlier, and, since they tipped so much more, he stopped bothering to correct them. Tiffany seemed to have this in mind when she gave Mark his usual trim – he found himself with a slightly more feminine style than usual, bangs included.

"It's... Not what I usually get," Mark said to Tiffany, trying to point it out without offending the skills of his boss.

"It suits you," Tiffany told him. "And I like it."



That meant arguing about it was going to put his employment in jeopardy, and not worth the risk. Looking in the mirror, he tried to push and pull it into his more familiar style, and he supposed he could comb it into a more masculine shape for school.

Helga and Inga were big fans of Mark's new hairstyle, but they suggested it would look even better with some curl to it. "Please, Mark?" Helga pleaded after work. "It would look so cute! Nothing permanent, or anything."

"Forget it," Mark said, not in the mood to be accommodating. "My mom is already giving me funny looks since you two plucked my eyebrows... just getting the stray hairs, my ass!"



"You look much nicer!" Inga pouted. "It's good to be well-groomed. The men in Europe are much more particular about such things, believe me."

"Well, this is America," Mark grumbled. "And I don't want curlers in my hair, thanks."

"Why not?" Helga whined. "Everyone thinks you're a girl, anyways!"

"That's not true," Mark said, flushing. "Just the old ladies who can't see without their glasses."

"Really?" Inga smiled. "How about a little bet, then? If more than five customers call you 'Marci' tomorrow, we get to do your hair for the week. If not, we do all the sweeping for a week."

"Sweeping *and* window cleaning," Mark said, driving up the bargain.

"Deal," the twins said simultaneously, sticking out their hands to shake. Mark shook them each in turn, but their humungous grins made him wonder if he'd gotten himself into something he would regret. His suspicion was confirmed the very next Saturday. The twins had him work the register all morning, and despite doing his best to draw attention to his nametag, which clearly read 'Mark', it was barely eleven o'clock by the time six different customers had all casually called him 'Marci.'

Mark had to take a good long look at himself in the mirror during his break. With his trimmed eyebrows and clear, smooth complexion, the delicate bone structure of his face that he'd inherited from his mother was quite apparent – more so than it had been before, he was certain. And with his unisex haircut, especially those darned bangs, he guessed he could see where the customers were making their mistake. He did look awfully androgynous, and even, dare he say it, a little bit girly.

Displeased though he was, Mark was a good sport and over lunch he allowed Helga and Inga to use curlers, a hot iron, and some hairspray to create his new 'do, a short but undoubtedly female style with curls that bounced around his face. If he'd looked a little bit girly before, now, even without makeup, he suspected there was a lot more answering to 'Marci' in his future. The twins were delighted with how it turned out, snapping several photos, and they were still teasing it with their combs when Tiffany showed up.

"Hey, I don't pay you three to give each other free perms," she said, frowning. "Although that does look marvelous, honey, your hair really holds a curl well. I just got a last-minute call to do makeup for a photo-shoot and I need an assistant. Mark, do you want to earn a little extra?"

"What about us?" Helga pouted. "We like earning extra!"

"Mark is a harder worker than either of you," Tiffany said matter-of-factly. "Not that I don't love you girls. Now, Mark, are you up for a day on the beach?" Mark fluffed out his new hairstyle, gritting his teeth. He wasn't crazy about the

idea of going out in public with this obviously female hairstyle, but at the same time, a day on the beach sounded a heck of a lot better than another afternoon in the salon. Especially if he was getting a bonus!

"Sure," he said, giving the twins a triumphant look. *Looks like I'm getting out of window washing anyways!* he thought happily. He waited while Tiffany packed up her makeup case and hair products, then followed her out of the nearest mall entrance to her car. His heart was pounding, but he kept his head down and nobody so much as batted an eye. Mark suspected that with his new haircut, most people genuinely assumed he was a girl unless they took a close look.

Still, he was glad for the shelter of Tiffany's car as he sidled into the passenger seat and did up his seatbelt. The fact that he was passing as a girl so easily was a little disturbing to him, and at the same time, he was scared that some eagle-eyed observer would realize the truth.

"Well, this should be fun," Tiffany said, climbing in on the other side. "And maybe the drive will give us a chance to get to know each other a little better. I know I'm your boss, but I'd like to be considered a friend, too, just like I am to Helga and Inga."

"Oh," Mark said, wriggling down in the seat to be sure nobody would see him. "Yeah, that would be cool with me."

"It's been great having you around," Tiffany continued, as she drove them out of the parking lot. "And I love that you're such a great sport, putting up with the twins' teasing. I know they can be a bit much at times."

"No, no, they're great," Mark said automatically, despite his new 'look' giving evidence to the contrary. "I mean, we've all gotten to be really good friends."

"I'm glad!" Tiffany smiled. "For a while there you were in quite a funk, and I worried it might have something to do with them teasing you." Mark swallowed.

"No," he said truthfully. "It was, uh, something else."

"Well, I'm glad you've put it behind you, 'Marci'," Tiffany said, putting emphasis on the nickname. "This should be a fun afternoon! It's a beach shoot for Radiance Suntan Lotion, and I'm doing the makeup for the female model." She looked over at Mark and winked. "I bet you remember her, she's one of our regulars. My masterpiece! 'Candi' ring a bell?"

Mark's mouth went dry. He'd spent the past months trying to avoid thinking about or even seeing Candi, and here he was driving to an intimate photo shoot to see her in a swimsuit. Despite himself, his heart raced at the thought of the beautiful blonde wearing her bikini, but it was accompanied by a sense of misery, as well. If Candi ever needed one more shred of evidence that Mark was not man enough for her, it was the fact that he'd spent the morning having his hair curled.

"What's wrong?" Tiffany asked. "I thought you'd be ecstatic! You like Candi, don't you?"

"She's out of my league," Mark muttered, thinking of Louis's pronouncement.

"Well, she does have a very hunky boyfriend," Tiffany admitted. "But maybe you should try to be friends with her. I bet you two have more in common than you might think!" She smirked slightly. "And you know, relationships in high school are so unstable. People break up all the time, and if you're waiting in the wings as a supportive friend, who knows what might happen?"

Mark shrugged and gave his boss a non-committal smile. Sure, it sounded good, but what girl in their right mind was going to break up with the most popular jock in school to date a dweeb like Mark?



When they got to the beach, a photographer and his crew were already getting set up, though Candi hadn't arrived yet. Tiffany, suggesting that Mark might want to avoid getting sand in his work shoes, loaned him a pair of sandals that fit surprisingly well. He stood awkwardly in them, trying to ignore the fact they had a definite bit of heel, while Tiffany shook hands with everyone. The photographer, a Frenchman named Jacques, gave Mark a curious side-long look, then broke into a grin.

"Ah, yes," he said, in a thick French accent. "The androgynous look is very 'in' this year on the runways. If you were taller, darling, I would suggest you to a fashion show. You are nice and thin, with such good skin and, how does one say, bone structure."

"Uh, th-thanks," Mark stammered, completely unsure if he'd been mistaken for a girl again or not. Fortunately, Jacques was quickly distracted by someone carrying his camera bag upside-down, which threw him into a rage, and Tiffany took Mark over to the screen to help her set up her mirrors and lighting. The male model showed up first, an extremely ripped and handsome guy who gave Mark a curious look before sitting down in Tiffany's chair for a few minor touch-ups to his shaggy surfer-style hair. Mark couldn't help but think, ruefully, that it was yet another guy he didn't have a chance competing against.

A short while later, he heard the sound of another car pulling up, and the very enthusiastic greeting from Jacques informed Mark that the star of the show had just arrived. Tiffany and Mark had just finished laying out the makeup table when Candi teetered inside on her usual stiletto heels, which were now sinking deep into the sand, looking slightly anxious.

"Candi, honey, isn't this exciting?" Tiffany beamed, greeting her with an air kiss. "They were going to fly a makeup artist in for this shoot, can you believe that? When I'm right here, and I know your contours and color palette like the

back of my hand! Ridiculous! And boy, that male model, what a hunk, don't you think? Marci, come bring Candi her robe!"

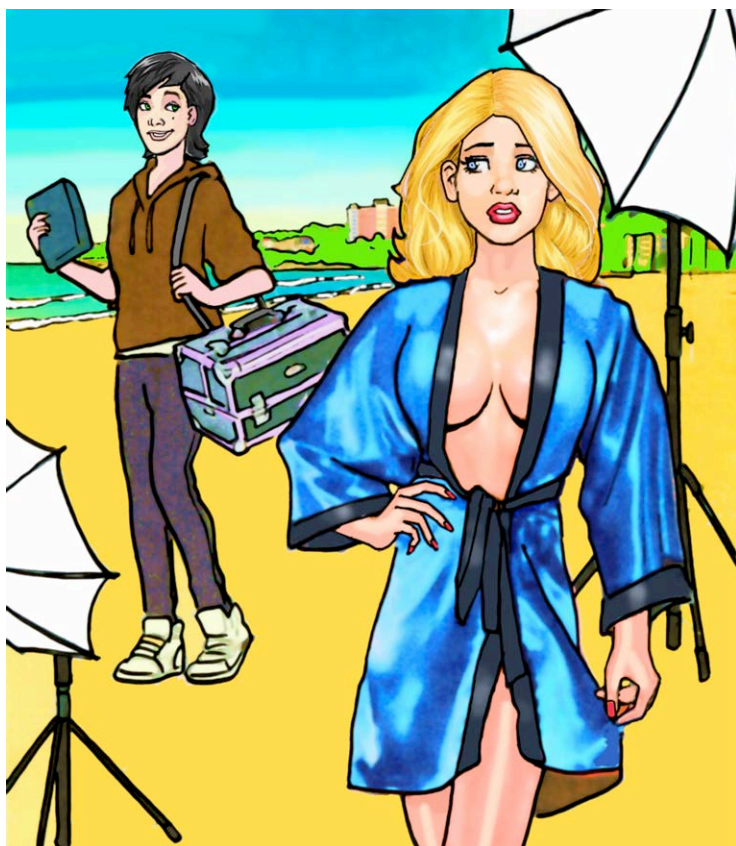
"Marci?" Candi asked, confused. Mark, blushing, took the flimsy robe off its hanger and brought it forward. He could feel Candi's confused gaze taking in his new hairstyle, not to the mention the long purple smock and women's sandals he was wearing. Would the humiliations never cease?

"Oh, the twins always call him that and it's become a bit of a habit," Tiffany laughed. "They do love to tease, and make these little bets and such. That's why his hair is so lovely at the moment. Don't be embarrassed, Mark, we love that you're such a good sport. Now, give us a little privacy and go grab my hair-spray from the van, okay, darling?"

Mark hesitated for a moment, trying to think of something to say to excuse his appearance further, but as per usual Candi's beauty made it extremely hard to think of anything intelligent. Mark ended up just nodding and hurrying away to go fetch the hair-spray, inwardly cursing. Candi now not only thought he was a geek, but a complete sissy, too.

By the time he found the hair-spray and returned, the photo shoot was underway. Once,

Mark would have felt like the luckiest guy on Earth, getting to follow Tiffany and the photographer around to various points on the beach in order to get the perfect shot of Candi in bikini-bottoms and nothing else (though she was always using the 'hand bra' and wore her robe between shots, so Mark never caught so much as a glimpse of nip-



ple). Now, however, it seemed like the universe was laughing in his face. After he'd finally given up on his stupid fantasy of asking her out, and finally come to terms with never being with her, he'd been given an opportunity few guys at school could brag about: seeing Candi Wethers topless.

The agony was compounded yet again by the way the male model, Nicholas, flirted with her so confidently, swaggering around and showing off his six-pack, while Mark stumbled around on cork wedge sandals wearing a long purple smock that fluttered in the wind like a dress. He had never felt like less of a man, even at Halloween when he was all dolled up as Alix from Smooch. But everyone's attention, fortunately, was reserved for Candi. At least she didn't seem to be enjoying herself much, either, not with her hair needing constant fixing and her robe threatening to blow open in the wind. She looked as relieved as Mark felt when the photographer finally got his perfect shot and they were all allowed to go home.



Mark tried phoning Louis when he arrived home, but there was no answer. So, after changing back into his normal clothes and doing his best to “masculinize” his hair with a comb and hefty amounts of gel, he walked over to his former best friend's house, feeling oddly nervous. He stood on the front step and rang the doorbell, as he had a million times before, and Louis' mom opened the door and greeted him happily as if nothing was amiss.

“Hello, Mark, long time no see!” she said. “How's your mother been?”

“Oh, she's good,” Mark said. “She told me to say hi from her. Uh, is Louis around?”

“Just a second,” Louis' mom said. She turned and shouted, “Louis! Your friend Mark is here!” There was an indistinct reply, to which she scowled, then turned to Mark and said, “He'll be right here. Come on in, Mark.”

Mark stepped inside reluctantly as Louis' mom bustled back to the kitchen. A few moments later, Louis came down the stairs with an unfriendly look on his face. He crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Hey, man,” Mark said tremulously. “Uh, you weren't answering your phone, so I was just seeing if you wanted to hang out.”

“Really?” Louis said. “After ditching me all year to hang out with your girlfriends from the salon, you all of a sudden want to hang out again?”

“Look, Louis, you were right, okay?” Mark said desperately. “I never had a chance with Candi, and it was dumb of me to value that over our friendship in the first place.” He sighed. “Look, I've just had a really rough couple of months

coming around, all right? And I was hoping we could bury the hatchet and be friends again. I need someone to talk to about all this... All this stuff going on."

"You've had a rough couple of months?" Louis asked disbelievingly. "What about me? You dropped me like I was hot garbage! I've been eating lunch by myself in the cafeteria while you hang around with those Swedish chicks!"

"I'm sorry," Mark muttered. "I just wanted to feel cool, you know? For once in my life. And I thought maybe it would help me get closer to Candi somehow. And besides, Helga and Inga are really awesome friends."

"Are you kidding?" Louis demanded. "Do you think they're actually your friends? Mark, they're just messing with you for fun. You're like a new toy to them that they get to play dress-up with. I mean, look at your hair! They're messing with you, dude, they're not really your friends."

"Giving me fashion advice isn't messing with me," Mark said angrily. "And the hair was a bet, that's all. You're just jealous that I'm at least hanging out with girls!"

"Whatever, Mark," Louis said, shaking his head. "Go tell it to your new friends. I'm sick and tired of trying to be friends with someone as selfish as you."

Mark stared at him, open-mouthed, but he once again couldn't come up with anything to say. He just shook his head furiously and slowly walked out the door. Not only was he never going to get a girlfriend, but now his best friend in the world wanted nothing to do with him, either. *Well, screw him*, Mark thought. *Helga and Inga are cooler than he'll ever be.*



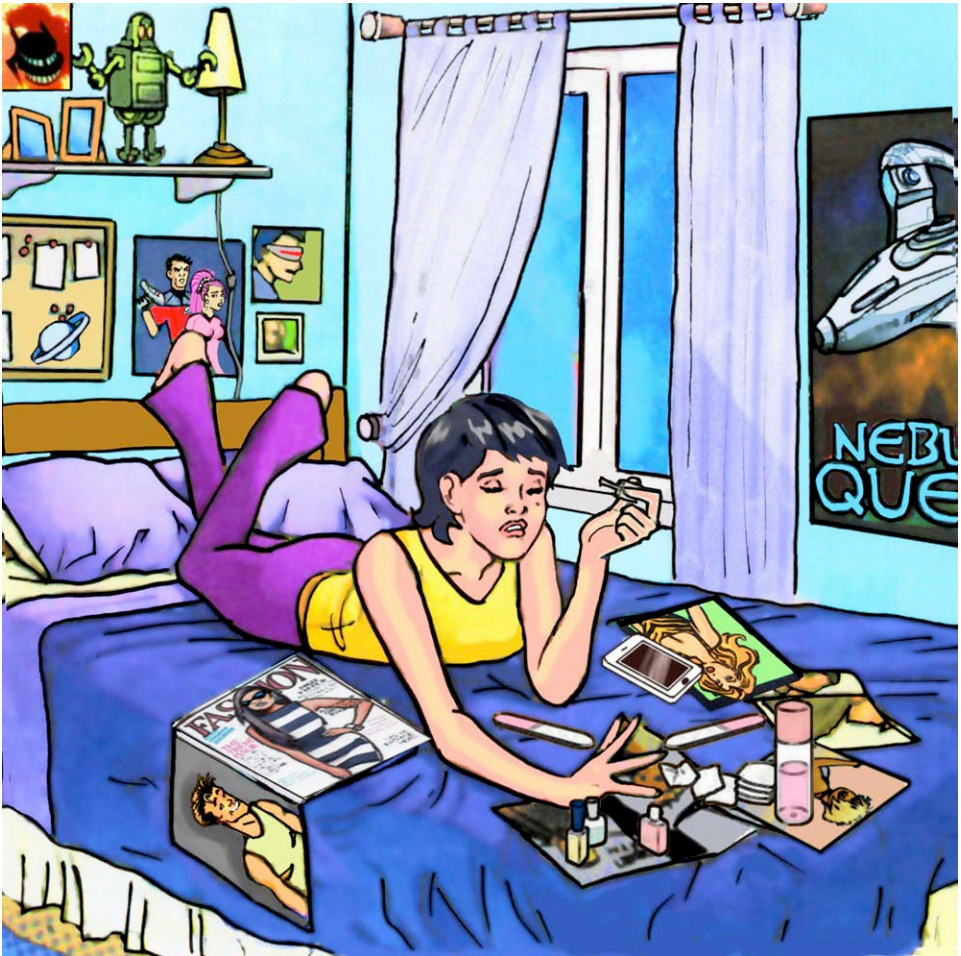
After his falling out with Louis, Mark found himself spending more and more time outside of work with the twins. They seemed happy enough to accommodate him, treating him like the little brother they'd never had, but only in the kind of activities *they* already liked doing. That meant Mark found himself swapping video games for sappy chick flicks, and surfing the web for cruising the mall in order to shop for new clothes. His mother seemed happy that he had found close friends among his co-workers, and even suggested that he got along with them so well because of his high 'maturity level.' Since Matt, the pirate from Halloween, had started dating Helga steadily, he even had a 'positive male role model' for once, since they often all hung out together for movie nights.

Louis's harshest accusations and warnings gradually fell out of Mark's consciousness, and he didn't make much of a fuss when the twins started to steer him toward more unisex fashion choices, like tight white jeans and more colorful printed shirts and scarves. As Jacques had said, 'androgynous' was in, and

the twins had tons of European fashion magazines to prove it. Sure, he heard a little bit of snickering at school from the jocks, but none of them would know fashion if it hit them in the face. If Mark ever did complain, Helga was quick to point out that she'd bought Matt something similar – although it always managed to look a lot more manly on his broad frame and muscular body.

Mark kept secretly hoping for a repeat of Halloween, where Helga (or Inga, he didn't even care which at this point) gave him some more kissing lessons, but they seemed to be treating him more and more like 'one of the girls,' inviting him over for spa days and having him join in when they watched romantic comedies and did each others' hair on girls' nights. On one of these occasions, he even agreed to let them 'experiment' on him by doing full makeup! Mark was more than a bit uncomfortable when Helga sent photos of the results to Matt, but he took it in stride and with good humor.

At work, Mark was in for a bit of a surprise when he found, at the beginning of March, that Tiffany had replaced his "Mark" nametag with one that read "Marci."



"I want you to start helping with the waxing," she explained. "But customers are a lot more comfortable if they think it's all girls doing it. It's not such a big deal, is it? After all, we've been calling you 'Marci' for months now." Mark was a little off-put, but he couldn't argue with the logic. Still, he couldn't hide his reluctance as he looked at the name tag, considering how Louis would bust a gut laughing if he knew.

"Well... I..." Mark started to say, in opposition to the idea.

"And since you'd be doing more, you'd definitely deserve a raise," Tiffany added, raising an eyebrow. Now it was Mark's eyebrows that raised. He was still scrimping and saving for college next year, and a raise could only help. He pinned the new name tag to his smock, and Tiffany gave a satisfied smile. "Oh, and one more thing," she said. "Since you're going to be 'Marci' at work now..."

She led him to the back, and handed him a bag branded with the name of a very well-known lingerie outlet. Confused, Mark looked inside to find several sets of basic cotton bras and panties. His face immediately went red.

"It just wouldn't do for a customer to realize you're wearing boxers and nothing else underneath that lovely smock," Tiffany explained apologetically. "I know it's a little unorthodox, Mark, but Helga and Inga mentioned you've worn lingerie before, so..."

"That was just for Halloween!" Mark protested.

"Well, this is just for *work*," Tiffany wheedled. "You would only have to put them on once you get here, of course. Please, Mark? You've been such a big help here, and the customers really seem to like 'Marci.' Did I mention the raise?"

"But what if someone who still remembers I'm a guy sees me with the 'Marci' name tag?" Mark demanded.

"Then they'll rightfully assume we are a very open-minded establishment," Tiffany said with a grin.

"All right," Mark said, blushing again. "I'll do it. So long as you and the twins take a vow of silence."

"Oh, Mark, we never divulge that kind of secret," Tiffany said with a wink. "Now, where do we stand on light makeup?"

And that was how Mark ended up putting on mascara and lip gloss before the start of each shift. He usually remembered to take it off, too – except for one occasion where his mom asked him, startled, if he was wearing makeup. When he explained that it was just a joke of Helga's, unsure if she would approve of him cross-dressing at work, she assured him that there was nothing wrong with 'experimenting' and that it might even help him 'find himself.' Mark hoped she wasn't going to start to think he was gay or something, and after that he was extra sure to remove all of the makeup before he left the salon.



It was in April, when Tiffany started mentioning doing a promotion for group rates for prom hair and makeup, that the twins innocently asked Mark who he was planning to ask to the dance.

"Oh," Mark said, surprised. "I hadn't really thought about it." In prior years, whenever he'd thought of prom, he'd figured he would end up skipping the whole thing and watching movies with Louis instead. Now, however, Louis wanted nothing to do with him. Besides that, he'd noticed that some of the girls at school were a whole lot friendlier with him than they'd ever been before.

"Inga thinks you are too scared to ask anyone," Helga said conspiratorially, as Inga rang a customer through.

"I'm not scared!" Mark said indignantly. "I just hadn't thought about it, that's all." Now that he *was* thinking about it, though, he felt pretty nervous about the prospect. Maybe one of the girls from his Math class who complimented his style all the time?

"I know you'll be able to get a date for prom, of course," Helga said. "You're a good-looking boy who any girl would love to go to the prom with. But Inga thinks otherwise, and anyways, she wants to make you a bet!"

"It's not that you wouldn't be a good date, Mark," Inga said, coming over. "But I know how shy you get around girls that you like, that's all. Believe me, I would be happy if you prove me wrong! Except, of course, Helga and I would have to be your servants for a week."

"Huh?" Mark said.

"That would be my end the bet," Inga explained. "I would have to do whatever you want for a whole week. And Helga thought it might be sort of fun, so she offered to join in. Maybe you could make us wear French maid outfits and clean up your room?" She and Helga both giggled, and Mark gulped at the mental image of Inga and Helga mincing around in maid costumes at his beck and call.

"But what's my end of the bet?" Mark asked, frowning. The twins looked at each other.

"For your end of the bet, if you don't find a date, we get to pick one for you," Inga said. "You see, we have a cousin in Sweden who is coming here to visit. Tall, blonde..."

"Your age, and very attractive," Helga chimed in.

"Big chest," Inga added. "Anyways, we thought our cousin might enjoy the cultural experience of going to an American high school dance, and that maybe the two of you could go together?"

Mark's eyes lit up at the idea of a younger, bustier version of Helga and Inga escorting him to prom. He hoped she was the kind of smoking hot blonde who could even make Candi jealous... Boy, would that be something! Then, Mark frowned. This seemed too good to be true. Basically, he won either way, so why bother making it a bet?

"What's your cousin's name?" he asked suspiciously. The twins looked at each other and giggled.

"Sven," Helga said. Mark's eyes narrowed.

"And is that one of those funny Swedish names that sounds like a guy's, but is actually a girl's?" he asked pointedly. Inga and Helga gave him a sheepish grin.

"No," Inga admitted. "It's a guy's name."

"I knew it!" Mark said. "You said a big chest!"

"Oh, yes," Helga said. "And big arms, and big shoulders. Very muscular."

"Very funny," Mark said sarcastically.

"It's not to embarrass you," Inga said quickly. "It's to embarrass him! You see, we prank each other all the time, but Sven is still one up on us. When we were younger, he persuaded our whole school that we had herpes. Nobody wanted to date us for a whole year!"

"Well, some people still did," Helga admitted. "But we have been trying for years to get him back, and now we have the perfect prank!"

"Yes," Inga beamed. "You see, Sven thinks he is quite a ladies' man. He's very proud of his macho reputation. And it would be extremely, extremely embarrassing for him if he were to go on a date with a boy by mistake."

"Yeah, well it would be embarrassing for me to go on a date with a boy on purpose!" Mark said. "I'm not showing up to my prom in drag."

"So you think you can find your own date, then?" Inga asked.

Mark weighed the risks. On one hand, the almost unthinkable – masquerading as a girl at prom. On the other hand, Inga and Helga, his slaves for a week, wearing whatever he wanted. It was only the start of April, and prom was well into May. That had to be ample time to find a date, didn't it?

"You're on," Mark said. "Better go buy those French maid outfits!"

The twins giggled as they shook on the bet, but this was one Mark was determined not to lose. He had a lot more than his hair at stake this time around.



Mark knew he needed to get to work on finding a prom date as soon as possible, but he ended up spending much of the next week procrastinating. It was surprisingly difficult to work up the nerve to ask, and it seemed equally difficult

to ever find a girl who was apart from a large group of her friends. He didn't want to risk asking in front of witnesses, especially after Miranda had so gleefully shot down his attempt to talk to Candi at the carwash, and that meant he needed to find a way to get them alone first. He came very close to asking Chrissy, a pretty girl from his Math class, but at the last second changed the question from "would you like to go to prom with me?" to "would you like to go to the vending machine?" which earned him a strange look.

One of the most aggravating obstacles to his actually asking someone was the fact that he couldn't stop daydreaming about going to the prom with Candi. Sure, she was still dating Tom, but Mark remembered what Tiffany had said about high school relationships. Candi didn't look awfully happy with her boyfriend pawing at her all the time, and maybe, just maybe, they would break up before prom. The idea of going to prom with the most beautiful girl in school, who was now not only head cheerleader but also an up-and-coming swimsuit model, was a fantasy that got Mark through English class without hearing a single word the teacher said, instead staring at the back of Candi's perfect blonde hair.

It wasn't until a week later that he finally built up the courage to approach her after class. She looked as gorgeous as ever, wearing a blue cardigan over a white blouse with several buttons undone, presenting her cleavage to full effect, and a blue-and-pink checked miniskirt. Miranda was nowhere in sight, and Candi didn't seem to be in much of a hurry, checking her red lipstick in her compact mirror, so Mark made his move.

"Candi?" he said breathlessly. "Hi."

Candi looked up, settling her purse on her shoulder. She looked slightly surprised to see him, but not unfriendly. "Hi, Mark," she said. "Um, what is it?"

Mark took a deep breath, then disgorged the words he had been reciting in his head. "I was just... just... well... I was wondering if maybe you would go to prom with me?" he asked. To his surprise, Candi blushed.

"I'm sorry, Mark," she said, sounding genuinely sympathetic. "I'm going with Tom... And he's waiting for me at my locker, so..." Mark knew he should have expected no less, but he could still feel a sinking sensation at her words.

"Oh, okay," he said. "It's just that, well, Inga and Helga's cousin is going to be visiting from Sweden in May, and they made me agree that if I don't find a date, we would go together, and..." He trailed off, embarrassed to be babbling for no reason. As if Candi cared about the twins' cousin, or the dumb bet they'd made! However, instead of giving him an unimpressed look and clicking away to meet her boyfriend, Candi shifted her stance slightly, adjusting the strap of her purse, and gave him a small, awkward smile.

"Going stag is nothing to be embarrassed about," she said kindly. Mark gulped. He couldn't believe it. He was actually having a conversation with

Candi Wethers, the most popular girl in school, and she wasn't looking for an escape route! He searched desperately for the next thing to say, but ended up right back on the subject of prom.

"Yeah, the thing is, I, um, it was this kind of bet, and if you have any friends who might go with me, could you please...?" Mark trailed off again, cursing inwardly. Why was he still going on about prom? He could find his own date, and now he just looked desperate.

"Mark, I honestly don't have a lot of friends," Candi said seriously. "People don't really listen to what I have to say, anyway. They all think I'm some dumb blonde bimbo." She shrugged helplessly. "I really do have to go," she said. "See you in class!" Mark's mouth flapped open. He wanted to tell her that *he* didn't think that, *he* thought she was amazing, and beautiful, and special, but he couldn't put the words together, not even when Candi hesitated one last time.

"I know how hard it was to ask, though," she said. "I would go out with you..." "Really?" Mark gaped.

"...If I didn't have ninety percent of the boys in this school trying to take me out already," Candi continued. "Don't let those girls at the salon push you around. You need to do what you can to keep them from telling you what to do."

Mark had no idea what she meant, but he managed to squeak out a "thanks" as she swished away on her high heels. He'd just had a conversation with the most beautiful girl in school. Hardly even caring that she'd turned him down, Mark floated away on cloud nine. If he could ask Candi Wethers to prom, he could ask anybody...



Mark returned to his task with newfound determination, but unfortunately, he soon discovered that he was entering the game quite a bit too late. Every girl he managed to query, most of whom seemed to have no idea who he was, informed him that they already had dates lined up, even though some of them seemed very apologetic to tell him as much.

"I would have loved to go with you as friends," Chrissy from his Math class said sadly. "I know you would have picked the sharpest tuxedo and looked great in the photos. But Henry asked me first, so..."

"It's no problem," Mark said sadly. "Don't worry."

"It's too bad you can't go with who you really want to, huh?" Chrissy said sympathetically. Mark looked up, puzzled. Did she know he'd asked Candi to prom? "You know," Chrissy continued. "Some cute guy."

"What?" Mark spluttered. "Chrissy, I'm not... I'm not gay!"

"Oh!" Chrissy blushed furiously. "Oh, crap, I'm sorry, I guess I just assumed from the way you dressed so nice and everything..." Mark just shook his head in exasperation and moved on. He asked another three girls by week's end, but all of them gave him strange looks, struggled to remember his name, and were already going with someone. At work, Helga and Inga loved to probe innocently about his efforts to get a date, and Mark staunchly returned that he was "working on it" each time they did so. As the month wore on and his options dwindled, Mark felt an increasing sense of desperation. What good was a stylish wardrobe and the ability to talk to girls if every single one of them was already taken? He kept hoping someone would break up with their boyfriend, or some guy would have to suddenly move across country, leaving his date without an escort to prom, but it was to no avail.

By the Friday before prom, Mark was really desperate, and he realized it was time to lower his standards drastically. At lunch hour he went to the band room, where the school's nerdy girls usually hung out together, and found Melissa, a girl whom he'd been friends with in elementary school. She was shy, with braces and a few zits, but she was nice, and Mark knew he'd be doing her a big favor by asking her to prom. To his horror, however, she turned him down!

"Sorry, Mark," she said. "I'm already going with someone."

"Oh, that's okay," Mark said, trying not to seem surprised. "Uh, who? If you don't mind my asking."

"I think he's a friend of yours," Melissa said sheepishly. "You know Louis, right?" Mark's mouth dropped open in shock. So Louis, who had always said prom was a big fat waste of time, was not only going, but he was also going with the girl who had been Mark's last and final hope! Mark gritted his teeth in fury. *What a weasel*, he thought. Swallowing his pride, Mark asked if she had any friends who might need a date.

"None of them are going," Melissa admitted. "They think prom is really superficial."

"Yeah, it really is," Mark said, forcing a laugh. "You know, I probably won't go, either." He trooped out of the band room in a daze. He'd lost the bet, but there was simply no way he was going to put on a dress for prom. There had to be some way out of it. He would just have to tell Inga and Helga he was backing out. Heck, he would even offer to be their servant for a week.

I'm not going to prom, Mark thought as he walked to his next class. *They'll just have to take "no" for an answer.*



"Mark, you lost the bet fair and square, and we're not going to take no for an answer!" Inga shrilled. It was the very next morning at work before the salon opened, and Mark had found himself cornered by the twins almost immediately. He'd considered skipping work, but Tiffany needed all hands on deck now that it was prom season, and besides, the twins knew where he lived. Instead, he tried inventing a fake girl he was going with, but they'd seen right through it, and now Inga and Helga were both advancing on him threateningly, scissors in hand. He could tell they were serious when they started calling him 'Mark' again instead of 'Marci!'

"Look, I'm sorry, but there's just no way I'm doing it!" Mark said, cringing away from Helga's snapping hair scissors. "I'll do something else, but going to prom in a dress is too much, okay? Don't you understand that would be social suicide for me?"

"How?" Inga challenged.

"What do you mean, how?" Mark spluttered. "I'd be a total laughing stock if anyone found out."

"Who is going to find out?" Helga asked. "Don't you remember Halloween? I told my dummy boyfriend flat out that you were a guy, and even then he didn't believe me!"

"That was at a party full of people I didn't know!" Mark protested. "And half of them were drunk, besides."

"So, you know everybody at your high school?" Inga asked skeptically. "Marci, you always complain how nobody ever remembers your name! Or which class you have with them! Or that you even go to the same school!"

"Didn't you have more fun as Alix at Halloween than you ever have as Mark?" Helga asked, wheedling. "It could be just like that! Fun!"

"Guys are not supposed to wear dresses to prom," Mark said through gritted teeth. "Okay? It's just... It's weird, and it's humiliating, and..."

"Why?" the twins chimed simultaneously.

"I don't know, it just *is*!" Mark snapped. "And I'm not going as another guy's date! He'd figure it out instantly anyways and probably try to kick my ass, and then what's the point of your big prank?"

"Sven has a good sense of humor," Inga argued. "If he finds out, he'll simply be embarrassed, that's all. Which is what we want!"

"Look, Mark," Helga said, deathly serious. "We have been planning this prank for far too long to let you back out now, okay? Sven is already eagerly awaiting his chance to meet you. He has a suit and everything!"

"What if I refuse?" Mark asked flatly. The twins looked at each other again, then grinned.

"Well, there are two of us, Marci, and only one of you," Inga smiled. "And you are very small."

"Ha!" Mark scoffed nervously. "I'd like to see you try!"



Ten minutes later, Tiffany walked in on quite a scene: a squirming Mark with his smock pulled up over his head was pinned to a salon chair by Inga, who was wrestling fake nails onto his fingers one at a time, while Helga spread wax over his bare legs and shouted at him to hold still, narrowly avoiding having her head kicked off.

"Girls!" Tiffany barked. "What on Earth is going on here?"

All three of her employees froze simultaneously at the icy tone in Tiffany's voice. Helga and Inga both let go of Mark, who yanked his smock back down, blushing furiously.

"They ambushed me!" Mark exclaimed. "They said I could think about it for the day, then as soon as I turned my back they started... All this!" He waved his hands, one of which now had inch-long false nails applied to the fingers.

"Marci is trying to go back on his bet!" Helga shot back. "We made a deal that if he didn't get a date to prom, he would go with Sven, and be his date!"

To Mark's horror, Tiffany's eyes lit up and she uncrossed her arms. A smile started to break across her lips. "Perfect!" she exclaimed. "I'm going to be doing prom makeup all day, and I have a few new brushes I need to try out. You can be our test run!"

"But... But..." Mark stammered, unable to believe she was taking the twins' side so easily.

"Did you lose the bet fair and square or not, Mark?" Tiffany asked.

Mark gulped. "Well, I did..." he trailed off.

"Well, maybe this will teach you to stop betting against the twins," Tiffany said dryly. "In case you haven't noticed, they always seem to win. And besides, you should get to experience 'the works' at least once! You've been working here for months, and you've never taken advantage of our full salon experience, even with the discount. Frankly, it's a bit insulting."

"But I can't go to prom in a dress!" Mark repeated.

"That's between you and the twins," Tiffany said. "I'm sure you can barter with them later, but for now, I need a guinea pig, and you're it. Remember who just gave you a raise!" Mark shot a furious glare at Helga and Inga, both of whom smiled sweetly.

"Okay," he muttered. "Fine." He reluctantly hiked his smock back up and leaned back in the salon chair, his thoughts a whirl. *There has to be some way out of this*, Mark thought. But try as he might, he realized it was quite difficult to come up with a solution to his badly-thought-out bet while having his legs waxed and his nails done. Helga slathered the warm wax all up his slender calves and thighs, even doing his bikini line, and was none too gentle pulling it off again, taking revenge for the kick he'd managed to land earlier. Mark wasn't a hairy guy in the least, but it was still smarting enough to make his eyes water.

"Stop pouting," Inga ordered, filing his new nails into feminine ovals. "You agreed to this, remember?"

"I'm not pouting," Mark snapped. "It hurts, that's all!" Helga giggled.

"You should ask Candi about her Brazilian wax!" she said, but, to her credit, she did start to be more gentle tearing the strips away. Mark was extremely reluctant to take off his smock, especially since he'd already put on the requisite

bra and panties he wore underneath it at work, but the twins and Tiffany reminded him that the salon wasn't technically open yet, and nobody would see him. Once Helga was satisfied that Mark's legs, chest, and underarms were totally smooth, she set to work on his toe nails with a nail file and polish.

Mark felt incredibly vulnerable as he lay back in the salon chair, his newly-hairless skin shivering in the cold air-conditioning. The straps of his bra were digging uncomfortably into his shoulders – he still hadn't mastered adjusting it – but he didn't want to ask the twins for help with it. Tiffany, meanwhile, was wetting his hair with her spray bottle and giving it a few probing combs, trying to decide what to do with it. Mark closed his eyes shut, trying to imagine a scenario that didn't end with him going to prom with Sven. Maybe he wouldn't make a convincing-enough girl... *Yeah, right*, Mark thought miserably. *Everyone who comes here already thinks I'm Marci!*

"You have nothing to worry about," Inga said, seemingly reading his thoughts as she inserted his hands under the dryers to dry his glistening red nail polish. "Everyone will assume you are a new girl! You can just tell them you go to another school."

"I can't wait to see the look on Sven's face when we greet him tonight with your 'before' picture," Helga giggled. "Trust me, Marci, it will be worth all this trouble!"

"But I don't know how to act like a girl," Mark said desperately.

"Of course you do," Inga said. "Why, half the guys at the Halloween party couldn't take their eyes off you, remember?"

"I was a little miffed with Matt, to be honest," Helga said sourly. "The way he kept staring at you!"

"But I don't know about *girl stuff*," Mark said, trying another tack. "What if a girl starts talking to me?" The twins only laughed.

"Marci, you've worked at a salon all year," Helga said. "And all we do together is 'girl' stuff! You know everything you need to know, believe me. You're practically one of the girls already!"

"Just think about what Helga or I would do," Inga said simply. "And do that!"

Mark gulped nervously. Could it really be that easy? Was he the one making too big a deal out of all this? It was true that he'd passed easily as a girl for Halloween... And he certainly passed at the salon... And nobody at school seemed to know who he was anyways...

"I think we have enough length to do a really nice bob," Tiffany said, interrupting his thoughts. "Something cute, sassy, and modern. I'm assuming you'd rather do that than extensions?"

Mark nodded like his head was on a spring. Tiffany looked a little disappointed, but she got out her scissors and set to work. "It's a pretty simple cut,"

she explained as she went. "A good warm-up for all the elaborate styles I'll be working on later, I suppose!"

True to her word, the haircut didn't take long. Mark was faced away from the mirror, so he had no idea how it looked, but so long as it was short he guessed it couldn't be too bad, and he would be able to fix it into a more masculine style later on. Meanwhile, Helga had finished with his toe nails, and disappeared to the back to rummage around for the next torture instrument. When she returned with gel inserts for Mark's padded bra, he groaned.

"Just enough to fit the dress!" Helga promised. "You won't be leaving here looking like Candi, I promise." All three women tittered slightly, which seemed a bit rude to Mark, but he was immediately distracted as Helga slipped the inserts into his bra and adjusted him. They had a very realistic heft to them, and jiggled slightly as he moved, which embarrassed him to no end. The twins promised his dress had plenty of 'support' for him up top, and that it was much more modest than the sailor get-up he'd worn for Halloween.

Noticing his goose-bumps, Inga helped him into a robe as he got up from the salon chair and moved over to the makeup counter. His reflection forced him to do a double-take. Even without a bit of makeup, his hairstyle scanned as 'girl' instantly, and he actually cut quite a cute figure in just his underwear, with his slender, hairless legs, taut tummy, and dainty waist. He remembered what Jacques the photographer had said about his 'androgynous' looks, and blushed.

While Tiffany unpacked her new brushes, Mark found his eyebrows assaulted from both sides as the twins, taking one each, plucked them into thin, feminine arches. He complained, but both of them assured him he could sweep his hair down to cover them until they grew back. Then there was nothing left for him to do but sit and watch miserably as every last bit of boyishness was stripped away from his face, replaced by graceful doe eyes with exaggerated eyelash extensions, perfectly blended eye shadow, and thick mascara, a girl's delicate bone structure accentuated by blusher, foundation, and highlight, and pouty lips painted a sexy, gleaming fire hydrant red to match his nails. When all was said and done, Mark was speechless. He doubted his own mother would recognize him with makeup like this! He looked like a model!

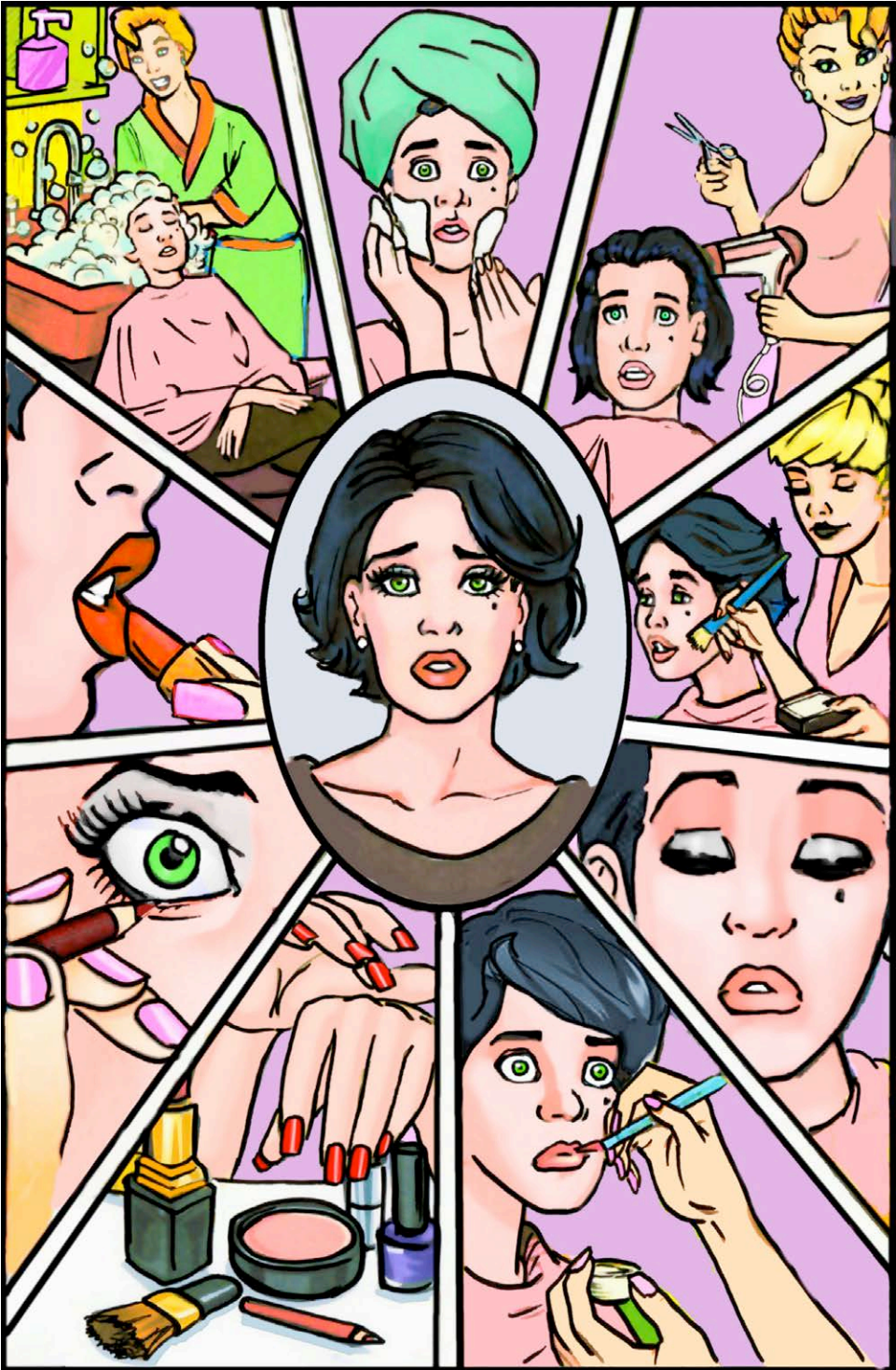
"And you were worried someone might know it was you," Helga giggled. "Our little Marci is all grown up, isn't she, Inga?"

"Oh, Tiffany, you are amazing," Inga sighed in admiration.

"Thank you, thank you," Tiffany laughed, taking a mock bow. "Not a bad job, if I do say so myself. What do you think, Mark? *Marci*, I mean."

"I look... Hot," Mark admitted, gulping nervously. He could hardly believe the girl in the mirror was him, in fact.

"I was going for sultry, but I'll take it," Tiffany admitted. "Girls really want those smoky 'bedroom eyes' this year, and your lips are so nice I couldn't resist



going all out with the red.” She smiled. “If only we could use your ‘before and after’ for an advertisement! Imagine how much business we’d have. If we can do this for a boy, imagine what we can do for you...”

“You wouldn’t!” Mark gasped, horrified at the idea of becoming the salon’s poster boy, or rather, poster girl.

“No, we wouldn’t,” Tiffany sighed. “Some of our other customers might not appreciate that sort of ‘shock and awe’ publicity, for various reasons. Speaking of which...” Tiffany checked her watch. “Well, good work girls, we have one prom princess ready to go, but we need to get everything ready for our ten o’clock appointments!”

“Can I have my smock back, then?” Mark asked, still slightly dazed looking at his feminine reflection. She wasn’t busty or blonde, like his dream girl, but the dark-haired beauty in the mirror was definitely prettier than most of the cheerleaders at his school.

“I have something better,” Inga announced smugly. “Arms up, Marci, time for your first dress!” By this point, Mark knew he was well and truly defeated. He raised his arms obediently as the twins helped him into a simple orange summer dress, clucking triumphantly that it was a perfect fit. He knew he should have been suspicious when they took his measurements back in January, claiming they wanted to order him a suit. It looked like they’d had a dress in mind, instead. Mark didn’t even protest as they gave him a pair of pink pumps with a short stiletto heel to put on as well. They weren’t as bad as the ones he’d worn for Halloween, at least. He tried to catch another glimpse of himself in the mirror, but Tiffany loaded him down with several shopping bags from the back.

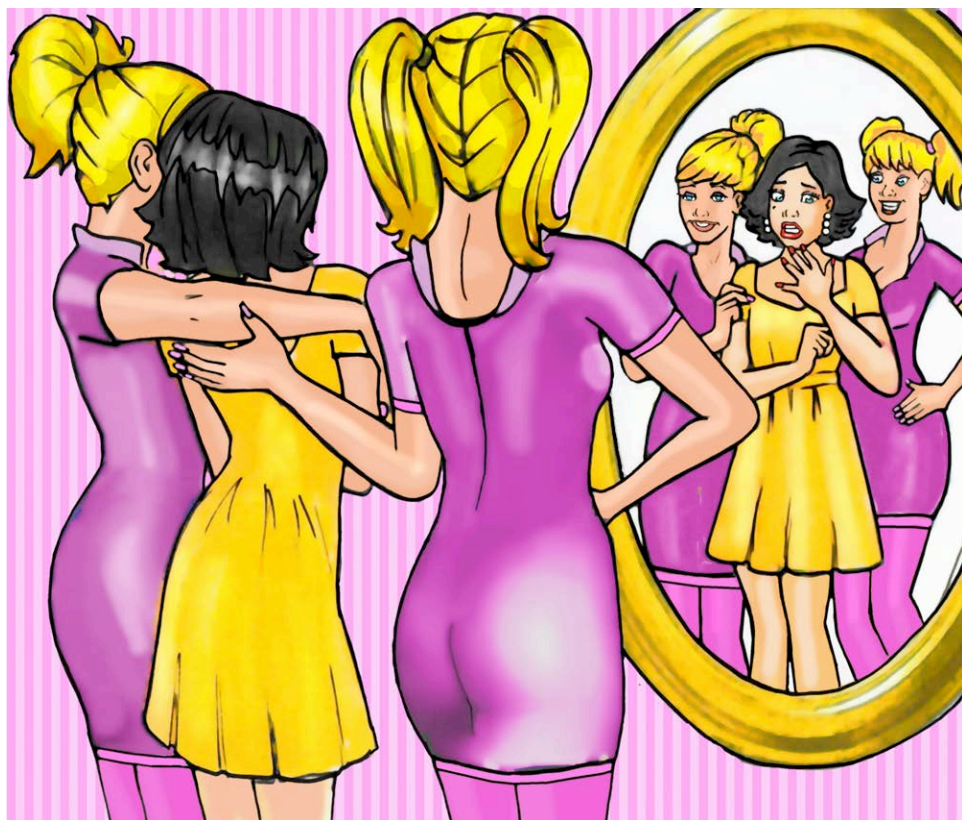
“Marci, can you be a dear and take these to my car?” she asked. “I don’t want to forget them in the back office again.” She offered him the remote to open her vehicle, and Mark had to take a moment to figure out how to take it without scraping her palm with his newly long nails. “I’m parked a little far away, but it should give you a chance to practice on those heels a bit more,” Tiffany explained.

What she was asking him to do finally became clear in Mark’s muddled mind, and his pretty eyes widened. “Wait, you want me to go by myself?” he asked tremulously. “Like this?”

“We’ve been over this, Marci,” Helga said gently. “You totally pass, remember? Nobody is going to look twice. Unless it’s because they see a pretty girl with very professionally-done hair and makeup,” she added.

“Don’t try to butter me up, Helga,” Tiffany said, rolling her eyes. “Hurry back, okay, honey? We’re going to need your help today.”

Mark took a deep breath. *Okay*, he thought. *They’re right, you passed before. You can totally do this.* Before he left the salon, he put his denim jacket on over the dress, hoping it would help him feel less exposed. The twins complained



about him covering up his pretty shoulders, but he glared daggers at them and they shut up. Then he took the bags in hand, taking one last look in the mirror and seeing nothing but a startlingly pretty girl laden with shopping.

How did I let myself get talked into this? He thought miserably. But it was too late to get out. His hair was cut into a girls' style, he had professional makeup and eyelash extensions, his legs were waxed, his nails were long and painted, and he was dressed as a girl from the skin out, padded bra and all. The worst part was, he sort of liked how he looked. Or at least, he would have liked to check out a girl who looked how he looked. Or something like that!

Still feeling utterly confused, Mark let himself be shooed out of the salon, realizing he was about to take his first steps into the outside world as 'Marci.' His heart was racing ten miles a minute and he tried his best to remember every scrap of advice Helga had given him on Halloween about walking in heels. At first he tried adopting the butt-swishing strut that she'd taught him, but quickly toned it down after the first wolf-whistle. He blushed deeply at the reaction his feminine guise had elicited, not daring to look back and see who it was. He walked as quickly as he could while still remaining graceful in his heels, unable to shake the feeling that every single person he saw was seconds from catching on, and shouting, "Hey, that's a boy in a dress!"

When he finally reached the entrance of the mall, he was in for another shock. As he passed through the automatic doors, which managed to blow a terrifying breeze up the skirt of his dress which he had to tame with one manicured hand, he saw Candi and her friend Miranda heading his way!

Even in his feminized state, he couldn't help but stare. Candi was dressed more casually than usual, exchanging her usual miniskirts for a pair of skin-tight pink yoga pants that clung to her curves and ended mid-calf, and her usual immaculate blonde waves for a high, loose pony tail. Even so, she was mincing along in a pair of high-heeled stiletto sandals that put Mark's to shame, and her feminine charms were on full display thanks to a very low-cut halter top that also exposed a teasing strip of her taut tummy. No matter what, she managed to just exude femininity and sex appeal with her every motion, blonde hair swishing just so as she walked, elbows bent in, wrists held limp and fingers flared to show off her manicure, and her swaying hips creating a sinuous figure-8 as she placed each foot directly in front of the other. Mark's usual awe of her beauty gained a new dimension: he was in total awe of how graceful, feminine, and poised she managed to be in her revealing outfits and high heels, now that he knew how difficult it was to manage a skirt and stilettos.

Candi and Miranda passed by without batting an eye, though Mark did notice Miranda giving his makeup an approving glance, and Mark exhaled in relief at not having been recognized. Compared to Candi's ballerina-like grace in her stilettos, he felt like a farmer clomping around in muddy boots, but even so, neither of them had 'read' him in the slightest. As he walked into the parking lot, Mark tried to internalize everything he had seen of Candi's body language, trying to adopt the graceful swivel she had to her hips and taking smaller steps. He held his wrists limp, even though it made him feel like a total sissy, and tilted his pelvis a little bit extra. If he wanted to keep up this charade, he had to be as feminine as possible, and Candi was the perfect example. He couldn't help but shake his head ruefully as he realized that his dream girl had suddenly become his role model... If she knew that the girl she'd just passed was really Mark, he had no doubt she would die laughing.

All the more reason to do this right, Mark thought determinedly. I'll be as girly as I can be, and nobody will know any better, and after tonight, I'm never wearing high heels ever again!

Satisfied with that comforting thought, Mark made his way into the parking lot, heels clicking noisily and his hips swishing sexily, just like Candi's.

By the time he found Tiffany's car, unloaded her shopping, and got back to the salon, Candi and Miranda were both having their makeup done. Helga complimented him on his new walk as he entered the salon, making him blush, but fortunately Candi was too occupied having her eyeliner applied to look over. Mark went to the back to change back into his customary purple smock, though Inga insisted he keep his heels on to work today. He managed to hang around

the back until Candi and Miranda were done, cleaning the office and restocking a few supply shelves. Once they'd left, he reluctantly joined the front of the salon to help with waxing and manicures. The salon was loaded with cute girls getting themselves all done up for prom, and several of them pointed to him as they chatted with Tiffany, asking for his eyes or lips.

The place was so busy that Mark didn't even have spare time to panic about what was to come until the clock had reached five o'clock and they shut the salon doors. For a happy half-hour, Mark forgot entirely about the prom bet as he busied himself cleaning up with the others. When he saw the twins looking at him and exchanging grins, however, he remembered exactly what was in store for him with a sinking sensation. Mark looked hopefully towards his boss, but Tiffany was already readying to leave.

"I have to run," Tiffany said, gathering her purse. "You three can finish up, right? Have fun with your silly prom game. I want to see pictures!"

And just like that, Mark's last hope for escape was gone. As soon as she was out the door, Helga and Inga abandoned their cleaning and dragged Mark to the back office, where they had stashed a large garment bag and a smaller shopping bag from La Senza. "Come on, Marci," Helga said pleadingly. "We've been waiting all day to see you in the dress! Put it on!"

"Sven is coming here to pick you up from the salon," Inga added. "So we need to hurry! Underwear first." She yanked a very sexy, lacy black push-up bra out of the bag, followed by a matching pair of panties. Mark blanched at the idea of wearing such provocative, feminine finery.

"What's wrong with the underwear I already have on?" he demanded. He had to draw the line somewhere, even if it was increasingly obvious he no longer had a choice in going along with this prank of theirs.

"Marci, that is not the kind of underwear a girl wears to a big fancy dance wearing a fancy dress!" Inga frowned.

"Good, because I'm a guy!" Mark said. "Remember?" For the first time, Inga's eyes narrowed and she looked almost threatening.

"Marci, do you think Helga and I would be whining and moaning and fighting at every turn like this if we had lost the bet?" she asked angrily. "No! We would be your eager-to-please sexy slaves for a week! But here you are, doing one little thing for one little night, and fighting like we are trying to murder you!"

"You are wearing exactly what we tell you, and you are going on this date, and that's final!" Helga added harshly. "And if you don't, maybe we will have to tell your mother how you keep asking to borrow our clothes, and makeup, and come to work wearing panties!"

"You... You wouldn't!" Mark said disbelievingly, searching for some sign that Helga was kidding, that she was about to break into her usual mischievous grin to show it was a joke.

"Not if you cooperate!" Inga said menacingly. Mark felt slightly taken aback by the ugliness in her voice. He'd known the twins had a competitive streak, but he was now seeing a side to them he wasn't familiar with. Cowed, Mark meekly took the bag in hand and, shivering, swapped his plain cotton bra for the strapless, dripping-with-lace variety they'd bought for him in sexy black.

He blushed as the slippery, sensuous material slid over his hairless skin, thinking how this was the kind of lingerie he had lusted over in his mother's catalogues, and definitely the kind Candi wore to school – he had caught peeks of the top of her lacy little thong often enough during English class, and she was forever adjusting her frilly bra straps, too! Mark stood in abject embarrassment as the twins put the inserts back in and adjusted his cups. They had the decency to turn around while he changed panties, though they did remind him to tuck his 'little man' up out of sight, and by the time they turned back to him they were holding a large garment bag and smiling again.

"Sven is going to fall head over heels for you, Marci," Helga beamed, unzipping the bag and removing a shiny strapless red cocktail dress with a bunched hem. "He's been talking about you for months!"

"Wait a second," Mark said, more to delay putting on the dress than anything else. "How could he have been talking about this for months if you two only got the idea for this prank in April?" The twins looked at each other with slightly guilty expressions, then burst into giggles and yanked the dress over his head.

Mark found himself momentarily lost in the cloud of gauzy, crinkly fabric until he managed to emerge from the top unscathed. The twins zipped him in tightly, making him give a little gasp, then bent down to slip his feet into a pair of silver stiletto sandals. He held onto them for balance as he reluctantly allowed them to fasten each feminine shoe. They were no worse than the pink pumps, or the heels he'd worn on Halloween, and he figured they shouldn't give him too much trouble. At least it was one less thing to worry about... Mark adjusted his posture to a more feminine stance as the twins let go of him, making the swishy material of the dress's lower half rustle sensuously.

"Well, maybe we thought about the prank a little before April," Inga confessed, fixing a few out of place hairs. "You remember Halloween, when you dressed as Alix from Smooch? Well, we put some pictures from the party online, and our little cousin Sven was quite, um, taken with 'her'."

"So we told him you were our sweet little co-worker Marci!" Helga chipped in, clipping a dangling earring to each of his earlobes – Mark winced at the pinching sensation. "And then, of course, he wanted to know more about you..." Helga grinned. "And see more pictures!"

"Remember when we did your makeup and hair at our place?" Inga giggled, dousing him with perfume. "We sent that to him, saying you wanted to know if he thought you were pretty!"

"And he responded very positively," Helga said primly, handing him a small clutch purse which he numbly accepted. "From there, all it took were a few pictures of you at work, and he was totally convinced that we had found him a cute, sexy American girl to date while he's here!" The twins both stepped aside, letting him see the finished result for the first time.

Mark gulped as he caught sight of himself in the mirror. The flouncy gathered hem of the dress was barely long enough to reach mid-thigh, showing off his slender legs, and his feet looked perfectly dainty perched in their stiletto sandals. The top of the dress, meanwhile, molded perfectly to the fake swell of his chest and hugged his dainty waist to create the illusion of feminine curves. He tightened his grip on the clutch purse, noticing the contrast of his gleaming red nails against its leather surface.

With his immaculate makeup, cute hairstyle, and dangling chandelier earrings, he looked like a gorgeous teenaged girl all dolled up for her big dance, the kind of girl he once fantasized about asking on a date. But now he *was* that girl... And about to go on a date with a guy! Mark felt dazed, barraged by the strange sensations of the dress crinkling and rustling around his bare thighs, the earrings brushing against his smooth cheeks, the fake eyelashes fluttering with every blink... And the heady cloud of perfume certainly didn't help matters where his spinning head was concerned.

"I just got a text from Sven," Inga said triumphantly. "He's just arriving now! Remember, Marci, we want to keep up the charade as long as possible, yes? So you must be as girly as you can be to prevent him finding out."

"Oh, yes," Helga said. "It would be very embarrassing for you both if he figures it out too soon... In the middle of the dance, for instance! So be very sweet and demure and feminine!"

"But don't be afraid to act coquettish and flirt with him, too!" Inga chimed in. "He will certainly be flirting with you, looking as cute and sexy as you do!"

Mark was almost hyperventilating with panic as the twins escorted him out of the salon, into the empty mall, and towards the doors. He couldn't believe this was happening. He was going to prom in a cute little cocktail dress, and it was too late to back out now! Helga and Inga seemed to sense his submission, and they stopped holding onto his arms as if he was going to bolt at any time, instead giving him a few final pointers on how to hold his purse and complimenting him on his wiggling walk.

"Sven will love the way you swish your cute little tush back and forth for him," Helga giggled. "Even if you are not as busty as his other girlfriends!"

Mark flushed deeply at the jab, but he was still too discombobulated to form a reply. As they exited the mall, Mark felt a cool breeze slide mischievously up his skirt, caressing his waxed-smooth thighs and the satiny material of his panties, and drawing an exaggerated rustling sound from the bunched hem. It was



another noise he would have to get used to, along with the clicking of his stilettos and the tinkling of his earrings any time he moved his head. Mark saw Helga and Inga's car approaching.

"We're letting him borrow it for tonight," Inga explained. "We'll take the bus home. We know how important it is to have a car for you impetuous, love-struck teenage couples."

The car came to a stop and Mark watched, transfixed, as Helga and Inga's very tall, very blonde, very muscular cousin got out and walked over. When his sparkling blue eyes took in his date for the evening, Sven's handsome features gained a look of pure shock.

"What did we tell you, little cousin?" Helga beamed. "Isn't she everything we promised she would be?"

Sven swallowed, and Mark was stunned to realize that his feminine appearance was beautiful enough to make this handsome, confident-looking young man grasp for words – just how Mark so often found himself around Candi. "Yes, Helga, she is all that and more," Sven finally said, in a thick Swedish accent. "Er, it is a pleasure to meet you, Marci. I have heard so much." He gently reached forward and took Mark's manicured hand, planting a kiss on his soft, moisturized skin. Mark felt himself flush all over at the emasculating gesture.

"Nice to meet you, too," he mumbled, staring down at the ground through his long, fluttering black lashes.

"Have fun, you two!" Inga exclaimed. "We have to catch our bus. Don't worry, Sven, we won't wait up for you!"

"Okay, Inga," Sven said distractedly. "Er, goodnight." He returned his attention to Mark, who was now quaking in his stilettos. "We'd better get going, yes?" The twins beamed at each other delightedly as Sven wrapped his arm around Mark's delicate waist and escorted him gently to the car. Mark, for his part, was trying not to throw up from nervousness as Sven opened the door for him and helped him inside. The crinkling and swishing of his dress seemed embarrassingly loud, and he was sure he hadn't gotten in as gracefully as a real girl would have...

As Sven went around to the driver's side, Mark closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to remember the twins' advice. *Be as girly as possible, they said, he thought. Be sweet, and demure, and feminine... But also flirty and coquettish.* Mark gulped as a particular busty blonde came to mind, and he realized that, once again, he had the perfect template. If he wanted Sven to buy that he was a girl, he was going to have to act like Candi! *You can do this, Mark thought to himself. It's just like Halloween. All you're doing is playing a part!*

"You look beautiful tonight, Marci," Sven said, as he slid into the driver's seat. Mark batted his eyelashes and formed his lips into a pretty little smile.

"Thank you, Sven," he said sweetly. "You look so handsome in that tux!" Sven grinned broadly at the compliment as he turned the key and began to drive. *Easy enough, Mark thought, but he knew far bigger challenges were in store*

for him at the dance itself. He folded his dainty hands in his lap as they drove, looking down at his painted red nails, and hoped he was up to the task.

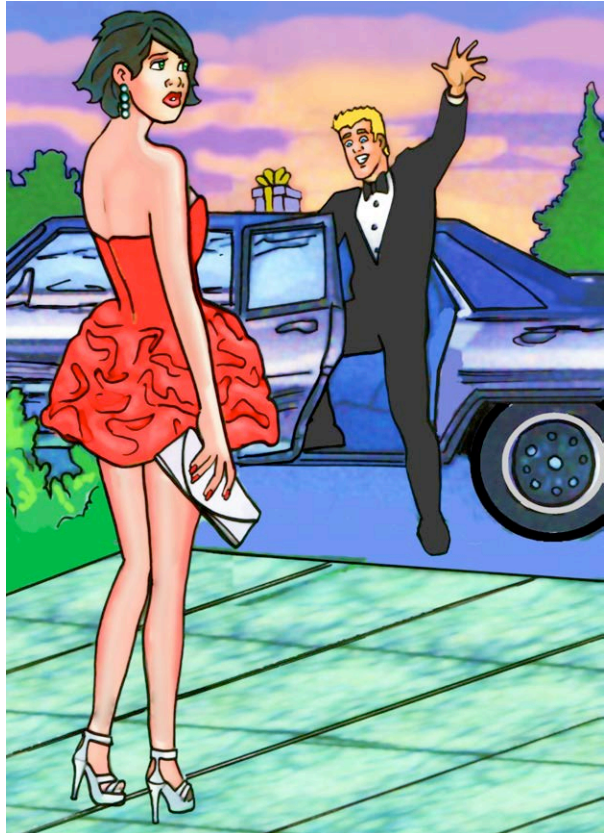


Once they had parked in the school parking lot, Mark waited for Sven to come around and open his door for him, then accepted an arm around his waist as they made their way to the entrance of the school, which was decorated with balloons and banners. Mark was still trying to think of what Candi would do, and how she would be behaving, so he gave a pretty little toss of his hair and added an extra bit of swing to his hips as he minced along, clutching Sven's muscular bicep for support.

"You girls and your ridiculous shoes!" Sven laughed. "It is a wonder you don't break your neck!" Mark blushed, thinking how if it was up to him, he'd be wearing tennis shoes, but instead he forced himself to giggle.

"They make our legs look nice!" he said, pretending to pout. "Don't you want our legs to look sexy?"

"Of course I do," Sven grinned, pulling his feminized date even closer, so Mark could smell his cologne. Mark smiled back weakly, wishing he'd kept his mouth shut. This 'co-quettish' thing was a delicate balance, that was for sure. His heart raced anxiously behind the silky constriction of his bra as they arrived at the front doors, joining a stream of students entering prom. Mark had never gone to a single school dance, and he felt totally lost. Sven, fortunately, looked like he had plenty of experience attending such events, and seemed very much at ease and confident as they made their way in. Mark supposed it was only natural: Sven was basically the male version of Inga and Helga, after all, blonde, attractive,



tall, and charming. Of course he was used to being a hit at social events.

Mark, on the other hand, was used to being completely invisible whenever he entered the school, and he was now experiencing for the first time what it was like to not just be seen, but stared at. Girls were looking at his dress and makeup appraisingly as they passed by, and guys were definitely checking out his legs. Mark instinctively drew closer to Sven, shuddering under the lustful looks he was receiving. He supposed he couldn't blame everyone for looking: a very tall and handsome young man nobody had ever seen before, accompanied by an equally mysterious and attractive date in an expensive cocktail dress and professionally-done makeup, was sure to draw attention.

For several minutes, Mark clutched his purse so tightly his knuckles went white, unable to meet a single gaze as he let Sven escort him into the gymnasium. But the panic attack soon passed as he realized that not a soul had recognized him, not even his bored-looking English teacher who waved them through the doors. He rolled his shoulders back, puffing out his modest bust, and clicked along more confidently in his stilettos, remembering who he was trying to emulate. Candi certainly never slouched!

"So this is an American rave," Sven said, looking out over the gymnasium with a less-than-satisfied expression. "In my country, they are much louder and there is electronic music, not this horrible 'hip-hop'. People take many drugs and dance until dawn."

"This isn't a rave, it's a prom," Mark said, blushing. "We have raves here too, but they're not for, um, high school students."

"Oh, well," Sven shrugged. "Would you like to dance?"

"I don't know really know how..." Mark stammered, but it was too late. Sven was already guiding him onto the dance floor with one strong hand on the small of his back, while the other enveloped one of Mark's free hand. Knowing if he tried to wriggle away, he would only succeed in making a scene, Mark was forced to let himself be steered out among the other revolving couples. Sheer panic flashed through him, filling his head with visions of himself tripping and falling, or bumping into someone who would look straight at him and identify him as Mark Summers, first class geek.

As it turned out, he had nothing to worry about. Sven was a terrifically skilled dancer, meaning all Mark had to do was stumble along in his lead and let him do all the work. So long as he didn't stab Sven's feet with his stiletto heels, the rest was out of his hands, and after a while Mark grew accustomed to the strange sensation of being steered around the dance floor by another boy. Sven kept one hand wrapped firmly around his little waist as they danced, but before long it started to migrate south, making Mark distinctly nervous.

He couldn't even be sure Sven knew he was all but groping him through the fluffy material of the dress, because Sven was busy making more friends in

twenty minutes of dancing than Mark had made in his entire high school career. He somehow managed to make friendly comments to a half-dozen different couples as they waltzed past, and had most of the girls looking at him dreamily, while the guys seemed eager to be friends with the interesting new Swedish student. When they took a brief break for punch, Sven managed to have a full circle of students laughing at his broken English jokes and mischievous behavior. Mark, meanwhile, found himself demoted to a very pretty prop, standing with Sven's arm around his slender shoulders and giggling dutifully at his jokes, trying to ignore the way several guys were making eyes at him. The guys' dates were generally too busy making eyes at Sven to notice! Mark was just glad that Louis and his date Melissa were nowhere in sight – even disguised, he didn't think he could bear the humiliation of his friend checking him out.

Sven casually claimed to be a new exchange student as they talked, meaning Mark could pretend to be from a private girls' school, and he informed their audience, through gritted teeth, that Sven's cousins were mutual friends who had introduced them. For the most part, however, Sven did the talking. Mark was grateful for it, even though Sven was becoming increasingly bold as he spoke, playing with Mark's hair, stroking his smooth arm, and playfully leaning in to smell his perfume, which put him uncomfortably close to Mark's padded bust. He had no idea how to divert the physical attention, meaning he could only stand there smiling nervously as Sven caressed him. A few of the girls noticed his consternation, but only giggled to each other. Mark was flushed and trembling with embarrassment by the time Sven finally led him back onto the dance floor. *It's just playing a role*, he tried to remind himself. *It's not like you're really being felt up by a guy who thinks he has a hot date...* He winced as he realized that this was, in fact, *exactly* what was going on.

Mark was so busy worrying about his situation that he didn't notice Candi and Tom had made their usual fashionably-late entrance until they waltzed past them on the dance floor. Mark almost snapped a stiletto as he caught sight of Candi, who looked absolutely resplendent in a devastatingly low-cut powder blue evening gown with a sexy thigh-high slit. He'd seen her finished hair and makeup at the salon, but the full effect with the expensive designer dress was breathtaking. In fact, Sven made his first misstep of the evening as they twirled past, unable to take his eyes off the gorgeous blonde.

Tom noticed the attention his girlfriend was getting, and he gave both Sven and Mark a cocky grin. He had an appraising look for Sven, no doubt seeing him as a potential rival: both were extremely handsome, and while Sven was slightly taller, Tom was slightly broader and more muscular. But when Tom's gaze turned to Mark, it was to give him a lustful up-and-down followed by a salacious wink! Mark blushed furiously, looking to Candi to see if she had noticed her boyfriend's indiscretion, but she was too busy trying to keep her

breasts from popping out of the front of her dress to take notice of Tom's behavior.

Of course, Sven was no better. His hands were constantly on the move, managing to find the strap of his bra through the material of his dress and massage it suggestively at every opportunity, or sneak fingers toward the curve of his bottom, or even, when nobody was looking, cup Mark's gel-enhanced breast and give it a teasing squeeze. Not wanting to make a scene, Mark meekly accepted his date's advances, smiling nervously and batting his eyelashes in a demure, flirtatious manner, hoping Sven would grow bored of his game before long as his eye wandered to other girls on the dance floor. He was to have no such luck, because as a slow song came on, Sven pulled him close enough that he could feel his date's hard-on through the trousers of his tuxedo suit!

"You can help me take care of that later, yes?" Sven asked mischievously, grinding his manhood against Mark's stomach. Mark was unable to speak, too stunned and horrified to form words, and it was at that moment that Sven decided to lean in and steal a kiss. Mark's lipstick-coated mouth was still parted in shock, and he felt a strange tingle as Sven's lips contacted his, but the sensation turned into disgust almost immediately as Sven's tongue invaded his mouth! Mark tried to squirm away, but his date held him fast, kissing him as deeply as he could. It felt like he was trying to suffocate him with his tongue! Mark was gasping for breath, cheeks bright red, by the time Sven let him go. Several other couples on the dance floor had tuned in to watch their little display, looking either jealous or disdainful.

Mark wanted to throw up, unable to believe what had just happened. Sven seemed puzzled by his date's sudden silence, but before he could try to repair the situation, one of Candi's cheerleader friends showed up, eager to drag him away from Mark for a dance. Mark's date gave him an apologetic shrug.

"Get us punch, Marci, and take a break from those heels!" he smiled. "I'll only dance one, I promise."

"Dance as many as you want," Mark said numbly, eager to get as far as possible from Sven. He realized that he would need to check his lipstick, and he started to wander toward the washroom, still shell-shocked by what had just happened to him. He had barely made it halfway across the dance floor, however, when a strong arm encircled his waist.

"Hey, there," came Tom's voice. "I don't think we've met? My name's Tom."

Mark looked up and swallowed. "M-Marci," he stammered.

"You don't go here, do you, Marci?" Tom asked suavely. Mark shook his head, making his dangling chandelier earrings dance prettily against his cheeks. "Figured," Tom grinned. "I know all the cute girls who go here. May I have this dance?" Mark looked around in confusion, wondering where Candi was, but then caught sight of her being whirled around the dance floor in the arms of

one of Tom's horny friends. "She doesn't mind," Tom laughed, catching sight of where Marci was looking. "She's a funny girl. Not jealous, like most of them."

Mark reluctantly accepted Tom's arm, not wanting to make a scene, and he was pulled back onto the dance floor. If he had wanted to know what Candi would do, he realized ruefully that he now had a first-hand lesson on what it was like to be her while she was dancing with her boyfriend! Tom wasn't as grabby as Sven, but he was definitely enjoying the view of his pretty partner, enough to make Mark blush all over again. "You know," he said in a trembling voice. "If I had a girlfriend as beautiful as Candi, I wouldn't be dancing with other girls!" To his surprise, Tom gained a deep frown.

"Hey, I know I have something special, okay?" he said defensively. "I mean, she's a frigging swimsuit model. A perfect ten. You should have seen her in the bikini pageant! If she wanted to, she could be dating some thirty-year-old hot-shot executive who could buy her a little pink convertible and a million of those dumb Louis Vutton handbags she loves so much. I mean, my family's got money, but not that kind of money! But she never even so much as *looks* at other guys while they're falling all over each other trying to impress her." Tom's expression turned pensive, and Mark had the distinct impression he was voicing something that had been on his mind for a long time. "Shit, once her modeling career takes off, and believe me, it will, she'll have actors and professional athletes looking her up, too. But I honestly don't think she'd ever cheat on me. She's just..." He trailed off. "I don't know," he sighed. "And I don't know why I'm telling you all this. But no matter how loyal she is, and how beautiful she is, sometimes I can't help but wish I was with someone who was more, you know, affectionate." He smirked slightly. "Someone who would make out with me on the dance floor like you and your date just did, without making me feel like I just shot her puppy or something."

"What are you trying to say?" Mark asked hesitantly as they spun around the dance floor. Tom gave a long pause.

"She has a rocking body, and her tits... Sorry, her boobs... Are amazing, and she even gives good..." Tom trailed off with an apologetic grin. "I mean, she's always willing to play a little tonsil hockey or even more between classes, but then afterwards she's always so... Distant, you know? She never wants me to just hold her, like other girls. It's like she's just going through the motions and waiting for someone better to come along. Someone she actually wants to be with." Tom shook his head. "Shit, I shouldn't be telling you all this stuff. You and your date just reminded me of how I always feel with her. The way you don't really seem to want to be there."

"Have you tried, uh, talking to her about it?" Mark squeaked.

"Of course not!" Tom snapped. "Talking about my feelings is the one surefire way I know to turn off a hot chick like Candi. Girls like that want a strong guy who takes what he wants, so that's what I have to be for her. And tonight, well,

maybe tonight will change everything.” He looked wistfully across the dance floor at his beautiful blonde girlfriend, who was now busy chatting with Miranda, as the song came to a close. “Thanks for the dance,” he muttered. “Oh, and you should probably go re-do your lipstick, it’s kind of smeared.”

Mark blushed as Tom released him and moved on. The wealth of strange new

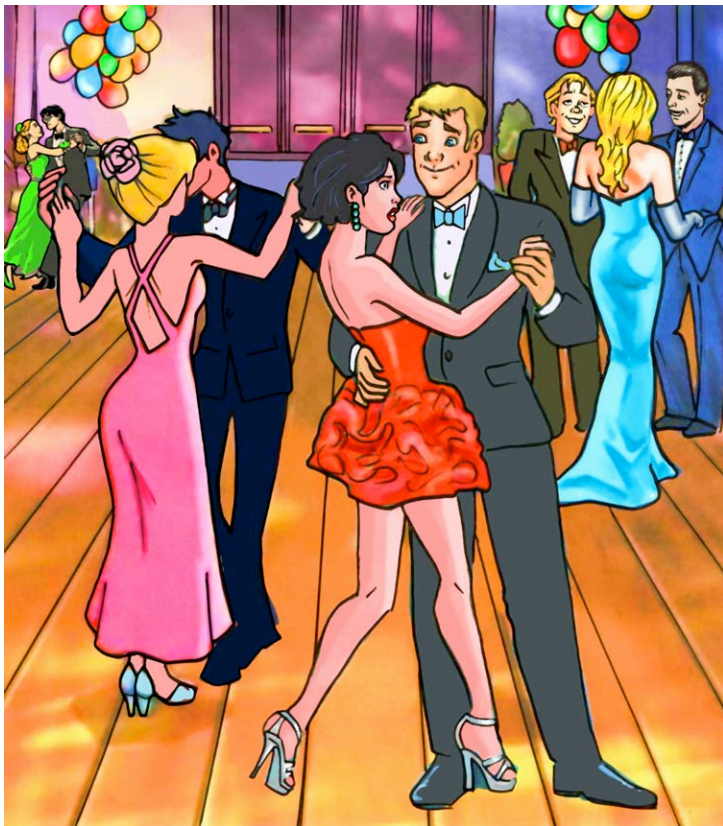
revelations swirling around in his head was almost overwhelming. His instincts had been right: Candi didn’t actually like her boyfriend all that much. Was she only dating him for status? Could the twins have been telling the truth, that what Candi actually wanted was a nice guy, a sensitive guy, a little guy like Mark? It was all too much to take in as Mark teetered toward the washroom, looking around for Sven but not seeing him.

Before he could make it to the exit, however, he was ambushed by a half-dozen different girls, some of whom he’d met earlier with Sven, all of whom were among the school’s prettiest and most popular.

“Hi,” said the lead girl, with a smile that looked more frightening than warm. “We were just talking about your dress, and we wanted to ask where you got it.”

“Oh!” Mark stammered, as he watched the other girls converging, cutting off his escape. “I borrowed it from a friend, actually. I’m not sure where it’s from! Thank-you, though, that’s so... Nice of you.” From the way they were peering at him suspiciously, he could tell they were not planning on a group hug.

“So, why are you at our prom if you don’t go to our school?” another girl asked with false sweetness. Mark’s mouth fell open.



"Well, um, my date," he stuttered. "He's an exchange student..."

"Sven, right?" the girl asked. "He's a real hunk. But the school year is almost over, so I'm kind of curious as to why there's an exchange student coming over all of a sudden?"

"Well..." Mark trailed off, desperately searching for an excuse. One of the girls was Chrissy, from his math class, and she was giving him an extremely confused look, as if trying to place him. Mark's knees trembled. Any second now, someone was going to figure it out.

"Is he your boyfriend?" another girl asked.

"Just a friend," Mark said automatically. "I mean he's coming from Sweden as a transfer student *next* year, and they said he could, um, come to prom, and, um, I know his cousins and they asked me to go with him. Like I said, I don't go here yet either, I go to, um..."

"Um? Is that a high school?" one of the cheerleaders asked snarkily. Mark's mind had gone completely blank as he tried to come up with a fake name for a private girls' school, or better yet, a real one, but he was saved by the appearance of two new girls in the circle: Miranda and Candi.

"Oh, Chelsea, be nice," Miranda scolded. "I'm Miranda, and this is our head cheerleader, Candi." She peered at him. "Boy, you look really familiar for some reason."

"B-boy?" Mark stammered, trying not to look either girl in the eye. "I'm not... I mean, um, I'm Marci. I'm here with my friend Sven, he's getting us drinks." The instant he said it, Mark knew he shouldn't have given his 'girl' name from the salon, because Candi's glossy lips opened in a small O of surprise and her pretty blue eyes widened in recognition. Mark stared back at her, equally horrified to have given himself away so easily.

"You look a little bit like that pansy in my science class," one of the cheerleaders said, frowning. "What's his name? Mick? Mort? In fact..."

Mark squeezed his eyes shut, trembling, as waited for Candi to give him up. He could already imagine her little gasp of surprise, her breathless giggle, her whisper into Miranda's ear. Then everyone would start laughing, and pulling over everyone else to see him, to spread the word that the mystery girl at the prom was none other than...

"Marci!" Candi squealed. "Oh, my gosh, I like, totally didn't even clue in for a second. I met you shopping for bras, right? Your twin brother, Mark or whatever, was waiting outside like such a dweeb!" Mark opened his eyes in confusion. Rather than exposing him, Candi was giving him a brilliant white smile, though her blue eyes were serious. "You look so hot, girl!" she beamed. She leaned forward for an air-kiss, setting her beautiful breasts bouncing, and Mark, unable to believe what was happening, blushing returned it, intoxicated by how close he was to her soft blonde hair and flowery perfume. He had

never thought he would ever be so close to Candi's boobs, and certainly not under these circumstances.

"Um, I wasn't sure you'd remember me," Mark squeaked, realizing that Candi was trying to save him from humiliation. "Thanks! You look amazing, Candi!"

"Love your makeup!" Candi said, her perfect smile still fixed in place. "Did you go to Tiffany's? She's such an artist!"

"I did," Mark said, trying to match Candi's smile. "I'm so glad you, um, put me onto her! Your hair is gorgeous, by the way."

"Aw, you're so cute," Candi giggled. "Thanks! You and your date are so great together, you definitely have to introduce me to him." She raised her perfectly plucked eyebrow, making it clear that it was more of an order than a request.

"Totally," Mark smiled weakly. "Nice meeting you, Miranda, and, um, everyone else." The girls all gave little waves and smiles of varying genuineness, then Candi looped arms with him and Mark found himself being steered to safety. His heart was still thumping furiously at how close he had come to being exposed. Candi had saved him from the biggest disaster of his life. As soon as they were out of earshot, Mark started to stammer out his thanks, trying to explain how Inga and Helga had tricked him, and how close he'd come to being exposed, and how Sven didn't know he was really a guy and even kissed him on the dance floor. All the emotions and pent-up stress of the evening spilled out of him, and to his humiliation, Mark realized tears were running down his face.

"Don't cry," Candi said awkwardly, rummaging in her purse for a tissue. She handed it over and Mark took it gratefully, wiping delicately at his eyes so he wouldn't end up with smeared makeup – something else he'd learned at the salon, he realized bitterly.

"It's been such a crazy year," Mark sniffled. "Ever since I got that stupid after-school job." He explained all about his increasingly strict dress code at work, and the way the twins were constantly finding ways to put makeup on him or make him wear lingerie, and how it had seemed like harmless teasing at first, but now here he was on a real date with a guy who had no idea his pretty, feminine female companion was actually a boy. As he related the whole story, however, Candi's sympathetic expression slowly changed to one of distress, and then, strangely, anger.

"Oh, stop sniffling!" she exclaimed, her pretty face contorted into a scowl. "It could have been way worse!"

"How?" Mark moaned. "I'm at my senior prom in a cocktail dress and stilettos, with a guy! And what am I supposed to do if Sven gets, you know, frisky?" He blushed, thinking of the kiss again. Candi raised one manicured brow in response.

"How could it have been worse?" she repeated. "How could it be worse!" Candi growled. "Um, try this out! What if you were forced to be a girl at all

times, all year, and bend over once a month for the plastic surgeon who gave you big stupid D-cup boobies so he can inject you with female hormones that shrink your penis, give you a bubble butt, and make you cry like a baby at the drop of a hat? What if your mom and aunt were so, like, set on making you into their perfect little Barbie doll that you go home to a wardrobe full of slutty tops, sexy lingerie, miniskirts and stilettos like, every single day? What if your only real friend is your former girlfriend, who now likes nothing better than setting you up with horny guys, so before you know it, you're dating the captain of the basketball team and letting him launch his tongue down your throat and, and play with your boobies, and sucking his dick in the backseat of his car whenever he wants you to, because you're terrified of him finding out that his head cheerleader girlfriend has a... A... Well, she's really a he?"

Mark fell silent, stunned into confusion. In the space of an instant, Candi had gone from his beautiful, smiling savior to a girl who seemed just as panicked and desperate as Mark felt, her breasts heaving as she all but hyperventilated, and her prettily made-up eyes blinking back tears. "Um, I guess it could have been worse," Mark stuttered, totally flummoxed by her sudden change. "You have a scary imagination, Candi." He tried to laugh, but Candi only shook her head, clearly trying to regain control of her emotions. Her cheeks were flushed pink. When she spoke again, it was in her normal sweet, clear, high soprano voice.

"Well, anyways, if he gets frisky, just find a way to make him happy without him getting between your legs or feeling up your boobs," she said matter-of-factly. "Good luck."

"You mean..?" Mark trailed off helplessly as Sven finally reappeared, punch in hand, looking very keen to meet Candi for himself. Their high school's head cheerleader had other plans, however, as she turned on her heel and swished away, back to where her friends were waiting for her. Mark watched her go, feeling like he was missing some piece of a puzzle he hadn't known he was trying to solve.

"She seems familiar to me," Sven said, trying not to sound too curious. "Who is she? Your friend?"

"I'm not sure," Mark muttered. Sven raised an eyebrow at his strange response, but didn't try to get a clearer answer out of him, instead handing him his punch. Judging from the way Sven's hand was now resting firmly on his bottom, Mark guessed he had bigger problems than trying to figure out what exactly Candi's outburst had meant. As he sipped at the punch, he couldn't help but wish it had some alcohol in it.



Mark spent the brief remainder of the dance trying to keep away from an increasingly emboldened Sven, who had taken to enveloping him from behind and nuzzling his neck teasingly, but Mark took a sort of grim satisfaction in knowing Sven would be regretting his actions once he got home and the twins revealed the truth to him. Even while doing his best to fend off his



date's roaming hands, Mark had to admit that under other circumstances, he might have almost enjoyed himself – Candi's popularity seemed to have rubbed off on him, and more pretty girls than he'd ever chatted with in his life were happy to come up and talk to him about hair, makeup, and nail care – all subjects he was now well-versed in. As for the guys, he managed to nervously babble at one of them through the plot of an entire episode of *Nebula Quest* while Sven was in the bathroom, but instead of laughing at him, Tom's basketball teammate nodded like his head was on a spring, acting completely fascinated by every word that left Mark's lipstick-coated lips.

All of his anxiety returned, however, as Candi was predictably voted Prom Queen and the dance wrapped up. He knew that if Sven was going to make a serious move, it would be in the car, and despite Helga and Inga's assurances, Mark was terrified of how he might react in the moment if Mark had to reveal

his true gender. He managed to flash nervous goodbye smiles to some of the people he'd met as Sven escorted him back outside. The air was now slightly cooler, which gave Sven the perfect excuse to wrap one arm around Mark's bare shoulders to keep him warm, while with his other hand he casually stroked Mark's thigh on the way to the car! Mark shuddered at his touch, trying to remind himself that it would all be over soon.

"My mom will be mad if I'm out late," he said, as they finally got to the car. "But I had a really nice time tonight, Sven. I would love to see you again, and, um, go on another date with you." He fluttered his eyelashes and gave the handsome Swedish boy a simpering smile. Sven seemed pleased, and he put his hand on Mark's knee as they drove, rubbing his thumb in circles across Mark's hairless, moisturized, baby-smooth skin in a way that sent horrible shivers down the feminized boy's spine.

Almost there, Mark thought to himself, as they finally turned the corner onto his street. Then he goes home, Inga and Helga have their big reveal, and you never have to see Sven or either of



them ever again...

Mark, eager to avoid Sven's suggestive gaze, dug the lipstick out of his purse and quickly touched up his lips, correcting the smear his date had created earlier. Unbeknownst to him, the extremely feminine gesture was incredibly seductive, and Sven could barely take his eyes off the sight of 'Marci' pouting her full red lips together for him. Had he been a real girl, Mark certainly would have known better than to send the signal that he was readying to be kissed again... Or use his pouty red lips for other purposes!

"Here we are, yes?" Sven said, pulling into the driveway. Judging by the lack of lights on inside, Mark's mother was asleep. Mark had never felt so relieved to have a mom who went to bed early.

"Yes, this is me," Mark squeaked. "Thanks for the ride, and for the date, I had a really lovely time, Sven." He made to reach for the door handle, but suddenly found his wrist caught in Sven's strong grip.

"Yes?" Sven asked suggestively, stroking Mark's hand with his own. "Then you should thank me for this lovely time, I think."

"I did," Mark whispered. "I, um, I said thanks, remember?"

"Not that way," Sven chuckled, and in one smooth motion he placed Mark's hand directly onto his tented crotch, where a full hard-on was waiting, while also leaning forward and kissing his feminized date fiercely on the lips.

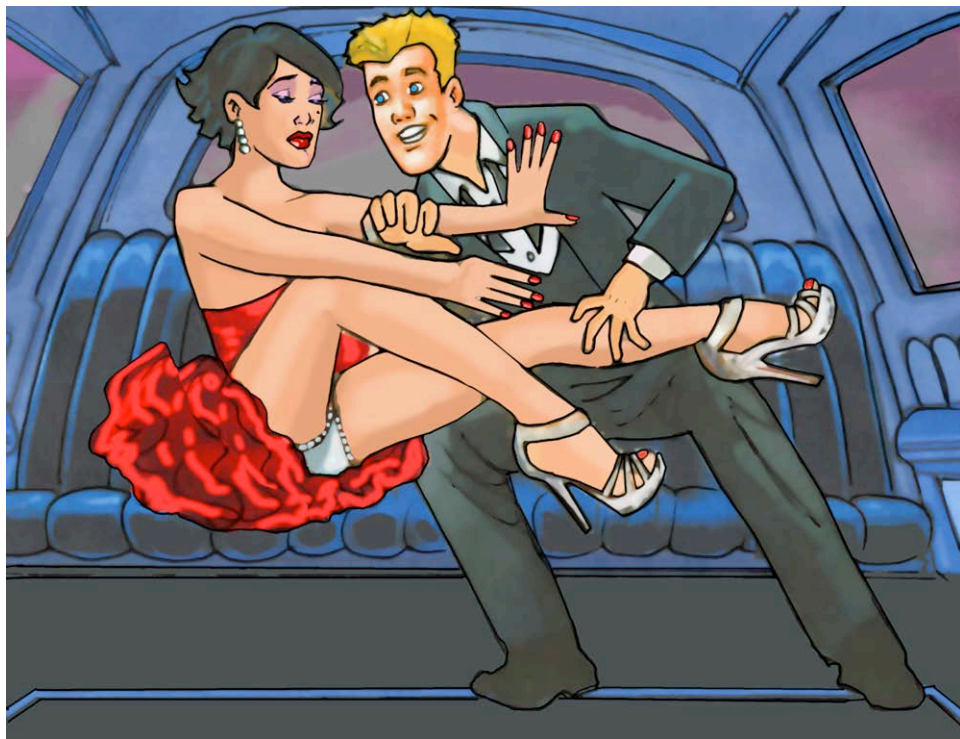
This cannot be happening! Mark thought in a panic as he writhed and squirmed. *This is not happening!* He pulled away with all his might, giving a shrill cry of panic. Sven jerked back, surprised, and gave a questioning look.

"Get away from me!" Mark snapped. "I'm a guy, okay? I'm a boy!" What happened next was so different from what Mark had been expecting that for a moment he didn't quite believe his ears.

"I know," Sven said with a shrug. "Helga and Inga told me." Mark sat in a stunned silence for an entire minute. His face went beet red as he thought back to all the humiliating things he had done over the evening to maintain his masquerade, how he'd clung flirtatiously to Sven's arm and complimented his muscles, how he'd batted his eyelashes like a little tart and giggled at Sven's stupid jokes, how he'd been letting Sven grope and fondle him and shove his tongue down his throat...

"But..." Mark trailed off, his head spinning. "But Helga and Inga made me a bet so they could use it to get back at you for spreading a rumor about them. They wanted to fool you into going on a date with a guy!"

"There was a bet," Sven admitted. "My cousins, they love bets. But the real bet was between me and them. You see, they told me this crazy story last summer about the salon where they had worked. There was this woman who wanted to hide her nephew from his father... I'm not sure why, I think she said



he was abusive, or something... And anyways, she decided the best way to do it was to disguise him as a girl. Sounds crazy, yes? But the guy, of course, he didn't want to go along with it, so his aunt had this plan to take him to the salon and have him 'accidentally' get a girl's makeover! You know, with the leg waxing, and the nails, and the makeup and hair and all of this, yes?"

Mark nodded, blushing hotly. He certainly knew, having just recently been subjected to 'the works' himself!

"So my cousins, they pretended to speak no English, and to think he was a very, uh, tommy girl," Sven said, searching for the term 'tomboy.' "They made him up very pretty, and put him in a dress, and they said by the time he came back for another appointment, nobody could even guess he was a boy! His aunt made him into a, uh, hot blonde." Sven cupped imaginary breasts with his hands and grinned. "They said she even made him get a boob job, to get big, big breasts, and dress him up really sexy, too! With, you know..." He pointed to Mark's high heels, eliciting another flush of color from the feminized boy. "And short tiny skirts, too," Sven grinned. "They said he made such a sexy girl, he was better-looking than they were! And believe me, Inga and Helga never say such thing!"

"Sounds like a load of bullshit to me," Mark said, venting his anger at the twins. "Nobody could make a guy get breast implants, or dress up in heels and..." He swallowed, realizing the folly of his words as he looked down at his

feminine guise. "It sounds silly," he muttered. Suddenly, the story was starting to sound a lot more believable.

"I thought the same thing," Sven said wisely. "I said, 'no way can you make a boy into a sexy blonde girl without him wanting to do it'. Is ridiculous, yes? They insist, though, and they even sent me photos of this 'boy' in a bikini!" Sven shook his head. "Beautiful, beautiful blonde girl, they show me, in a tiny little bikini. Nice tight bottom, tiny little waist, and big, big boobs. And her face! Like an angel, I thought." He made a sly grin. "But I know they are trying to trick me. I said, 'show me him before, then.' I said, 'show me his' – you know – 'his package.' Not because I am wanting to see his package, of course, but for proof. But they say they cannot, because their boss is paid to keep everything quiet, and they would lose their jobs. So I said, 'you are thinking I am an idiot.' I said, 'this is a girl, and there is no way you can make a boy into a sexy girl.' Yes?"

Mark's mouth was hanging open. A sexy blonde with big boobs who went to Tiffany's salon... But it couldn't be, could it? "Wait, wait, what was the girl's name?" Mark stammered. A million things were running through his head, all the strange remarks the twins and Tiffany had made over the year, the odd things they laughed at, the sly smiles they exchanged whenever a certain blonde client came up in conversation...

"I don't remember," Sven said, waving his hand dismissively. "She won a big swimsuit competition, I think. Miss Bored Walk? Or something?" He paused. "Oh, yes. Her name had something to do with sweets."

Mark swallowed, barely able to make himself form the name. "Was it... Candi?" he asked in a whisper. Sven snapped his fingers.

"Candi!" he said triumphantly. "Yes, that was it! Imagine, a boy named Carl made into a girl named Candi! So of course, I did not believe them at first. They could not prove it, after all. And that is when they made a bet with me."

Poor Mark's head was spinning in circles. He couldn't believe what he was hearing, and yet somehow, horribly, it all made sense. The way Candi had resisted dating for so long, the way her mother always seemed to be dragging her to the salon against her wishes, the way she was blushing and nervous instead of bitchy and stuck-up. Even her extreme girly-girl femininity fit into the puzzle, how she couldn't seem to show her face without full makeup, how she always wore tiny skirts and low-cut tops to emphasize her curvaceous body at every opportunity, how she was always the epitome of limp-wristed, femmy behavior...

Mark realized in utter horror that it was all a result of Candi not being a girl at all, but instead a boy in disguise, desperate to redirect attention from the truth by presenting himself as the ultimate in femininity, a busty blonde air-headed bimbo in stilettos and miniskirts! Thinking of all the times he had ogled her

breasts, or stared at her pert, perfect backside, Mark suddenly felt violently ill. Candi was a boy with a boob job. It was incredible, unthinkable, and deeply disturbing, but Mark suddenly knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that it was true. Trembling, he managed to drag himself back to the present conversation, smoothing his skirt and staring down at his smooth-shaven knees.

"You said the twins made a bet with you," he said tremulously. "What kind of bet?"

"They bet that they could do the same thing again to a totally normal, average boy," Sven said, with a malicious grin spreading across his handsome features. "They bet that they could turn a totally straight boy into a cute, sexy girl and make him wear high heels, makeup, a dress, and even dance with and kiss another boy!" He reached forward and ran a hand suggestively over Mark's trembling thigh. Mark was too shocked to even pull away. If possible, this second revelation hit him even harder than the first!

"You mean... Since the very start of the year..?" Mark trailed off, swallowing back tears.

"They showed me your picture, and I agreed to the bet," Sven shrugged. "Sure, you weren't a really manly rugged guy, but you only agreed to work at the salon because you had a crush on some girl, they said, and I definitely didn't think you were enough of a sissy to let them talk you into a dress – or feminine enough to look good in one." He chuckled, shaking his head. "Even when they started making you dress all, how do you say, androgynous, I wasn't too worried. I only started getting nervous after Halloween when they sent me those pictures of you as 'Alix.' You looked really sexy!"

"You're lying!" Mark said instinctively. "You're making this all up! I was the one who volunteered to wear that dumb costume by mistake..."

"A mistake they planned for you to make," Sven laughed. "My cousins are very clever when it comes to getting their way. But even then, I was sure that it was just a Halloween costume. So I was pretty surprised when they informed me that your name tag was now 'Marci' and that you wore a bra and panties under your work uniform... But they sent me a photo as proof, so I had to believe them."

"That was Tiffany's idea!" Mark protested. "The twins had nothing to do with that!"

"Oh, they planted the idea in their boss's head, I am sure," Sven said, shrugging his shoulders. "They really strung you along! They convinced you to grow out your hair and your nails... Use girly shampoos and lotions for your skin... Wear makeup to work, even! They said they convinced you some girl would like you more if you were, how do you say, well-groomed, yes?" Sven laughed sadly. "As if any girl would want a boyfriend who is more of a girl than she is!" He gave a deep sigh. "I was beginning to realize that I was going to lose the bet,

especially when they sent me a picture from your 'girls' night in' with your hair and makeup done again. My only hope was that you would be smart enough not to let them manipulate you into a dress and heels for your school dance, but obviously you were eager to be a girl again. And when I came to the salon and picked you up, it was more than clear I had lost the bet. But I still had to take you out, of course. That was part of it, the dancing and the kissing..."

"If you knew I was a guy the whole time, how could you kiss me like that!" Mark demanded, outraged.

"Well, you are very pretty," Sven said mischievously. "We are more liberal in Europe than here in America. I do not care if a pretty little sissy boy wants to act like a girl, so long as he looks like one, too."

Mark didn't even register the insult, so distraught he was at discovering the twins' deception. All of their friendliness, all of their fashion advice, all of the times they had hung out or watched movies or gone shopping together, had all been part of this ruse. They had been manipulating him the entire year, just like Louis had said, for their own purposes – and all to win some childish bet! He'd completely changed how he dressed, grown out his hair, tweezed his eyebrows, polished his nails, and plied his skin with creams, all to advance their purpose of turning him into a convincing, feminine girl for a bet with their cousin. He'd worn women's lingerie, done his own mascara and lip gloss, and gone around with a girl's haircut for months at work, with the twins no doubt sniggering behind his back at every opportunity.

Mark had never felt so completely betrayed in his entire life. He'd thought Helga and Inga were his friends, but to them, he had never been more than a playing piece in a larger game. His attempts all through the night to 'do what Candi would do' now seemed horribly ironic... They had been trying to turn him into Candi all along!

"So you lost the bet," Mark said heavily. "The twins turned me into a girl for you and I passed with flying colors." He swallowed bitterly. "So what does that mean for you?"

"Oh, I have to tell everyone at my school that I have herpes," Sven said, his face growing dark. "Which will limit my choice of lovers quite a bit!"

"That's all?" Mark demanded furiously. "So I get played like a violin all year and forced to go to the most memorable night in my high school life as some asshole Swedish dude's hot date, and all you have to do is lie about having a venereal disease?"

"Don't be upset with me, be upset with the twins!" Sven said defensively. "The bet was their idea, after all. And you have only yourself to blame for the result! You could have quit working at that salon months ago, when they started to turn up the heat, but instead you kept going. You know what I think?" Sven grinned. "I think you like being a pretty, sexy girl. You like getting attention

from boys, and you liked kissing me. You should stay this way! I would love to see you once you get a boob job, and have nice, big, round..."

Mark didn't give Sven a chance to finish his sentence as he curled his dainty hand into a fist and punched him right in the nose. "Go to hell, you Swedish jerk!" Mark snapped. "I am not a girl, I do not like dressing as one, and I nearly threw up when you tried to stick your tongue down my throat. And even if I was a girl, you're a self-centered, stuck up piece of shit and I would never, ever go on another date with you." He swung the passenger door open and climbed out before slamming it with a terrific bang.

"Ow!" Sven said in a shocked tone, touching his bleeding nose gingerly. "You... You hit me!"

"Yeah, and there's more where that came from if you don't get off my drive way!" Mark shouted. "Get out of here! Oh, and you can tell your cousins to go to hell, too – and tell them to tell Tiffany that I quit, and I'm never stepping foot in that salon ever again!"

Still looking totally startled, Sven opened his mouth, clearly trying to think of a comeback, but ended up just glowering dumbly as he started up the car and peeled out of the driveway. That left Mark standing on the pavement in heels and a prom dress. Without hesitation, he yanked off both of his stiletto pumps and hurled them into the garbage can, slamming the lid down shut on them. He didn't even care if his mom found them in the morning – she could think what she wanted. Then he marched up the front steps barefoot, with the crinkling and swishing of the dress grating his ears, and patted for his non-existent pockets for several confused seconds before he remembered his key was in his purse, which he'd left in Sven's car. *Just as well*, Mark thought angrily. *The last thing I need is my mom waking up and seeing me like this.*

He marched around the side of the house and let himself into his room through his unlocked window. Mark hoped the neighbors were asleep as he clambered awkwardly inside and ended up falling flat on his face on the floor. Still shaking with emotion, Mark got to his feet and started wrestling his way out of the prom dress, grabbing roughly at the fabric with no regard for the expensive material. Once he had wriggled his way free, he stuffed it as deeply as he could underneath his bed, vowing to throw it in the dumpster at the earliest opportunity.

He fought with the clasps of his bra, trying to get a grip on the tiny hooks with his long, shiny nails, until he finally stamped his foot in frustration and tore it off as it was, ripping the lacy fabric and sending one of the gel inserts flying. It hit the wall with a loud 'whack' and slid down, jiggling innocently on the floor. Mark stared at it with pure venom, biting his lip as he thought back to the way Sven had fondled him, knowing all the while that he was feeling up a boy in a dress who'd been the victim of a year-long prank. He yanked off the panties, balled them up with the bra and inserts, and stuffed them under the bed with

the dress. As soon as he could sneak a garbage bag into his room, they were history.

Next, Mark raided the cupboard under the bathroom sink for his mom's makeup remover and acetone, then used it to scrub his face clean and soak his false nails off. He took out his clip-on earrings, consigning them to the trash, then pried the false nails off his fingers one by one and tossed them there, too. It took several cloths to get the last of the eye shadow off, but once Mark removed the false lashes, his normal face finally emerged from 'Marci's' alluring features and he could recognize himself again. He felt a deep sense of relief. Yes, he still looked girlish, with his smooth skin and plucked brows, but he was definitely himself.

Mark thought of what Sven had said and shuddered. *What a creep*, he thought. *I don't like being a girl. I don't like the attention.* Mark winced as he looked himself in the mirror. *Do I?* The thought nagged at him as he remembered how, for the first time in his life, rather than being invisible, people had looked at him admiringly. Friendlily. Interestedly. *Don't forget lustfully*, Mark thought, suddenly disgusted with himself for even considering Sven's remark. He shuddered again at the memory of Sven's roaming hands, and his tongue penetrating his mouth, smearing his lipstick...

Trying to take his mind off the memory, Mark threw himself into the task of making his hair as masculine as possible without a pair of scissors to cut it or an electric razor to buzz it all off. He used liberal amount of hair gel to take out all the lift and volume that Tiffany had so carefully created, and plastered it down over his forehead to hide his tweezed brows. The end result was a vaguely emo rocker look that suited Mark just fine for the moment. He stared at himself in the mirror, still seeing the marks left by his bra straps, the hairless thighs left smooth from his waxing at the hands of Helga and Inga. He stalked back to his room and threw on his old baggy jeans and sweater, reaching past all of his new clothes, then collapsed onto his bed, drained.

Mark's thoughts were drawn back to the girl, or boy, rather, who had started it all... Candi Wethers. He still found it almost impossible to think of her as a guy, so he didn't bother trying, but he realized that their conversation at the prom had been far more than what it first appeared. She hadn't been a beautiful angel swooping in to save him from public humiliation. Rather, she'd been a kindred spirit, who, seeing that Mark was experiencing just a tiny taste of what she'd gone through, had desperately spilled her soul, revealing the one secret that she had sacrificed her dignity to keep: that underneath all the primping and preening, the lingerie and the perfume, the perfectly-coiffed blonde hair and bountiful breasts, she was really a boy living out a total nightmare in stilettoes and an evening gown.

Mark remembered back even earlier, to when he'd asked her to prom, and realized that she'd even tried to warn him, seeing the twins' game long before



he did. Mark shuddered as he imagined what Candi had gone through to maintain her disguise, becoming the reluctant girlfriend to the insatiable Tom McIntosh, shaking her pom-poms for the cheerleading squad, even going topless for a sexy photo shoot... It was a wonder the boy she used to be hadn't lost her grip on reality with all that forced upon him!

But at the same time, Mark couldn't avoid the insidious nagging thought that maybe, just maybe, it wasn't all bad. After all, everyone in school knew who Candi Wethers was. She was the most popular girl in not just their grade, but the entire high school. She had tons of pretty, popular cheerleaders as friends,

and tons of saps like Mark had been at her beck and call at all times. And if she really hated her new life so much, wouldn't she have run away by now?

Pushing the confusing thoughts from his head, Mark felt his anger start to slowly evaporate, and he replaced by a heavy sense of loss. *I'm such an idiot*, he thought. *I can't believe I thought Helga and Inga were my friends... And now I have no friends at all.* He momentarily considered trying to contact Candi somehow, but he realized that knowing Mark knew the truth could only add to her awful agony and fear of being exposed. And in any case, the person Mark really wished he could talk to was probably saying goodnight to his date right now – the date Mark should have had, instead of getting roped into the evening's horrible escapade.

Feeling totally dejected, Mark walked over to his computer and logged in. To his surprise, the very person he'd been thinking of had sent him a message only minutes ago. HEY DUDE. WANT 2 HANG OUT? PROM SUX.

Mark couldn't help but feel a grin spread across his face as he read Louis' message. His best friend had no idea. SURE he typed back. MY NIGHT WASN'T SO GREAT EITHER. WHAT HAPPENED W MELISSA?

SHE BAILED @ THE LAST SEC SO I STAYED HOME, Louis replied. WANNA WATCH SUM OLD NEBULA QUEST EPS @ MY PLACE?

WOULDN'T MISS IT 4 THE GALAXY, Mark typed back.

Louis' response appeared a moment later. HAR HAR. YOUR AS FUNNY AS A DEAD HORSE.

Mark had never felt so happy to have Louis insulting him again. SEE YOU IN 10 MINUTES, DUMBASS, he typed. Then he logged off his computer and put on his old shoes. He definitely wasn't going to tell Louis he'd spent prom night in a dress, but he would let his friend know he'd been right about the twins stringing him along – that was one "I told you so" Louis deserved. And now that he wasn't going to be working at the salon, he was sure they would have a lot more time to hang out, and as far as he was concerned, 'shopping' was now a four-letter word.

From now on, it would be video games, movies, college prep and comic books for Mark, and the madness of 'Marci' was gone. For the next few weeks, his phone was full of texts and unanswered calls from the twins, but he staunchly ignored them until they stopped.

He did make a courtesy call to Tiffany to inform her of his decision to quit. She sounded genuinely sorry to see him go, and seemed to suspect it had something to do with the twins' prank going too far, but Mark refused to give any details and only told her that he was focusing on his exams, so he could have a good transcript for college applications.

That was partly true, too. Mark was able to spend all the time he'd spent working studying instead, and the time he'd gotten used to wasting at the

shopping mall with Helga and Inga was spent hanging out with Louis, just like old times.

Mark stopped wearing scarves and girly pastel colors, but he was hesitant to lose his new sense of style entirely – if he'd gained anything from his experience at the salon, at least he now had a much-improved fashion sense. At least he had gotten one good thing out of the experience.



It was a nice warm, sunlit day in June outside and Mark and Louis were camped up in Louis' room with the lights turned out and the blinds drawn, battling Orcs on the gaming machine they'd both been working on all spring. 2 GPUs and 60 fps at 5K. Liquid cooled. It was awesome.

They had both agreed that their high school experience had turned out to be quite a flop, but college was sure to be better. Both were hoping to attend a reputable college together as roommates, and some afternoons were spent browsing various schools' websites and trying to decide which was their 'dream school'.

"If it's a top twenty party school, that's an automatic disqualification," Louis proclaimed.

Mark agreed. "If there's brick and ivy in the brochure cover photo, it's toast."

"If there's a smiling blond girl sitting in the grass, I toss it."

"Or if there's one white, one black, one Asian, one handicapped..."

"Out," Louis and Mark said at the same time.

"Tell me how big the computer lab is and if I can get a dorm room by myself," Louis said with a grin.

"Same here," Mark nodded.

At school, Mark was pretty much invisible once again, and fortunately for him, nobody came up to ask him about his mysterious twin sister 'Marci.' There was far more exciting prom gossip to digest about who had done what with whom... The biggest story being, of course, that Candi had actually lost her virginity to Tom on prom night. Opinions were pretty much split down the middle on the story, since a lot of people flat-out refused to believe that a girl like Candi had kept her virginity intact all the way to senior year. Mark was quick to change the subject whenever Louis brought it up. He was sure that whatever had happened on prom night, it was none too happy a memory for Candi.

Candi was still in his English class, but Mark didn't try to speak to her, or even make eye contact, and she returned the favor, probably hoping to save him from the embarrassment of thinking about what had transpired at prom. From a certain perspective, it was even sort of humorous. If it had happened to

somebody else, Mark couldn't help but think it would make for a good movie, and with his invisibility back in place, he sometimes couldn't help but reflect fondly on feeling like a "somebody" for once, even if it was in a dress.

Since Mark had gone back to watching Candi from a distance only, he'd also gained a whole new level of appreciation for her façade. If he'd barely faked his way through one night, he couldn't imagine how hard she worked to maintain her ultra-girly, bimbo image. He found himself wishing he could tell her to relax a little, that nobody would boo her if she showed up to school in jeans for once, but she was so deep into her deception, and so frightened of being discovered, that she was trapped in her own cycle of exaggerated femininity. Mark sometimes wondered if she was enjoying herself, at least a little bit, but that always led to him wondering if he was projecting his own feelings onto her after his tiny taste of popularity as 'Marci.'

Even with all his time spent observing her, Mark was as surprised as anyone when Candi up and vanished. He noticed one Monday morning that she wasn't in English, which normally wouldn't have been a big deal – if not for the fact that Miranda's eyes were red and puffy as if she'd been crying all night! Mark steeled up his courage to approach her after class, fully expecting her to tell him to mind his own business, but to his surprise, she told him the whole story.

"She went back to Maine to live with her dad," Miranda said. "On, like, the morning of her birthday, she had this big fight with her mom and her aunt, and threw this crazy tantrum... I guess she ran up to her room and started throwing out her clothes, and everything..."

Mark's eyes widened as he remembered his own enraged efforts to get rid of his enforced femininity on prom night. "And then what?" he demanded.

"That's when it gets really weird," Miranda said. "She claimed that some girl, who she called 'Marci' showed up under her window and said she was running away to Atlanta, and tried to convince Candi to come with her."

"It wasn't me!" Mark yelled.

Miranda gave him a funny look. "I didn't say it was. It was a girl wearing a purple dress and heels. I think she made the whole thing up as an excuse if you ask me."

Mark blushed. "That's so weird, I don't, uh, I don't know why Candi would say that at all..." He used his sleeve to wipe sweat from his brow.

"Me neither," Miranda sniffed. "But after that, she was totally determined to go back to Maine, so she bought a plane ticket, called her dad and left the same night. Just like that. We were supposed to get our nails done together on Wednesday! I can't believe she would be such a... Such a selfish bitch!" She paused. "What are you grinning about?" she asked Mark angrily. Mark didn't even bother trying to take the big smile off of his face. It looked like Candi had finally made a break for it, back to boyhood.

"I don't think she's the bitch in this situation, Miranda," Mark said snappily, then strolled away, leaving the high school's second-most-popular girl standing with her mouth open in shocked indignation.



Two weeks before the end of school, Mark, having lost his 'dream girl' in about the strangest way possible, found his 'dream college.' Once again, it was a matter of love at first sight. He had been browsing through various schools' websites when all of a sudden, an institute he'd never heard of, Pembleton University College, popped up. The preview image showed a collection of good-looking and well-dressed smiling students standing on the greenest lawn Mark had ever seen. No pandering shots of ivy, blondes or diversity, so it met his first set of requirements. Interest piqued, he clicked to go to their website.

It was everything he had ever wanted in a school. The buildings were beautiful, a mixture of old-looking architecture with very modern facilities, and the campus was breath-taking. Not only that, but the school had a relatively small population as well, with only 5000 students, meaning Mark's fears of getting easily lost in the social shuffle were slightly abated. The school bragged not only of its academic accolades, but also of having a very warm, welcoming environment, where most students ended up making fast friends that lasted for life. They did intensive personality matching for dorm mates, but were also open to pre-decided arrangements – Mark thought of Louis immediately. The more Mark saw of the school, the more taken he was with it. The campus was only a few hours' drive away, meaning he would be able to visit his mom on the weekends if he wanted, and while there were a few sororities on campus, he noticed that the athletics programs were limited and there wasn't a single fraternity to be found, meaning the jocks and bullies who had tormented Mark all through high school would be in scarce supply.

When Mark showed his mom the website, she was equally impressed, but then tapped her lip as if trying to remember something. "Pembleton University College sounds really familiar," she said. "I think Janice has that at the top of her list for colleges."

"Janice?" Mark asked blankly.

"Your cousin Janice," Mark's mom said. "You know, from my sister's side of the family?" Mark grimaced instinctively. They didn't often talk about her sister's side of the family, since they were more or less estranged. Mark's aunt had run off and married a succession of wealthy entrepreneurs in her youth, leaving her with a ton of money and a very spoiled, if attractive, daughter named Janice. From what Mark heard of her, she was well on her way to being a doctor, lawyer, and fashion model all at once. Mark had only ever met her twice, but that

was enough for him. "I ran into your aunt on the street," Mark's mom explained. "And of course she started bragging right away. You know how she is."

"Well, Janice or no Janice, this is the school for me," Mark said, grinning as he clicked through another slideshow of images. "Just look at it!"

"Janice isn't so bad anymore, I think she's grown up a bit," Mark's mom said. "And that is a lovely college, dear. You should definitely apply. It's just that..."

Mark followed her finger towards where it said "Tuition Costs" on the screen, and his eyes turned huge as dinner plates. "That's for one semester?" he choked.

"Maybe you'll qualify for a scholarship, if your grades are good enough," his mom pointed out, but she didn't look extremely hopeful.

Mark quickly scrolled down through the scholarship application process, but the further he scrolled, the lower his hopes sank. Though the page danced around the truth by using phrases like "economically impoverished" and "inspirational individuals," it was clear that the scholarships were for students who would make a splash, whether because they were from desperate circumstances (a previous scholarship recipient was a refugee from South America, another was battling cancer) or were incredibly gifted. Mark, though his family was undoubtedly poor, had neither going for him. He continued down the page, until he noticed a full-ride scholarship available for a young transgendered individual, then quickly scrolled past, hoping his mom hadn't noticed him lingering over it.

"Anyway, it's still worth applying to the school," his mom said bracingly, as Mark went back to the Pembleton main page. "You never know what might happen."

So Mark did just that, mailing off his letter the very next day. The school wouldn't be able to make their decision until they had also received his high school transcripts, but at least they would be able to look at his application. He wished he had more extra-curricular experiences to brag about. He had a feeling that having worked at a beauty salon wasn't exactly going to impress the college bigwigs.

As final exams rolled around, Mark studied harder than he ever had in his life, and managed to attain some of the best grades he'd ever gotten in his high school career. To his shock and delight, he came home one day from Louis' house to find two official-looking letters waiting for him on the kitchen counter. His mom was waiting there too, eager for him to open them!

"You wouldn't believe how hard it was to resist reading them," she laughed. "Come on, hurry up!"

Mark saw the letterhead from Pembleton and immediately tore open the envelope, his hands shaking slightly as he did so. As he started to read, his heart

jumped into his throat. He'd been accepted! Mark couldn't believe it. He was struck speechless until his mother shook his arm, desperate to know the news.

"I got in," he said, in an unbelieving whisper. "I actually got in!" As he continued reading, however, he felt his elation start to slip away. He had been accepted, but the school had also determined that he was ineligible for a scholarship at this time, meaning he would have to pay his own way.

"Mark, that's amazing!" his mom beamed. "I'm so proud of you, dear! And what about the scholarship?"

Mark swallowed, trying hard to maintain his composure. "I didn't qualify," he said sadly. "But, I mean, I can take out student loans, right?"

His mom's expression turned from happy to morose. She sighed. "Yes, I suppose you can," she said. "But a school like this one... Mark, I just don't know if it's wise to put yourself into that kind of debt. I've been managing debt ever since your father passed, and I can tell you, it's no way to live life. Especially not when you're just starting out!" She picked up the other letter. "What about this one?"

Mark took the second envelope and opened it automatically, still thinking about how he might be able to afford Pembleton short of winning the lottery. The second letter, as he'd expected, was from his safety school, the ratty local community college. He sighed at the thought of spending four more years in the same town, likely with the very same people he'd gone to high school with. That wasn't his idea of a fresh start by any means.

"Well, keep considering your options," his mom said tremulously, putting a hand on Mark's shoulder. "I'm sure it'll all work out in the end, dear."

"Yeah," Mark sighed, unconvinced. "I'm sure it will."



The next day, Mark was trying to put his college dilemma out of his mind by giving Louis the beating of his life at his favorite video game, *Mortal Kombat*. After his third straight victory, Mark jumped up from the couch in triumph while Louis, sitting beside him, tossed his controller down in disgust, watching his *Mortal Kombat* character get gruesomely decapitated.

"Suck it, Louis!" Mark gloated, pumping his fist. "How's it feel to lose three in a row?"

"They were close games," Louis muttered sulkily, which was true. Often the two friends were quite evenly matched, but Mark was on a roll on this occasion. "Make it a best of seven?"

"Sure," Mark said. "I can beat you all day, pal. My only worry is getting bored. How about we make it more interesting? Like, say, place a bet on it." He'd

been thinking of betting on a burger and fries, or something simple like that, but Louis suddenly gained a sly gleam in his eye.

"Why not?" he said. "I actually have a great idea for a bet."

"What is it?" Mark asked.

"Well, Comicon is coming up," Louis said. "And we're both still thinking about costumes, right?"

"Yeah..." Mark said suspiciously. He had a guilty feeling just thinking about all the money he'd spent on the Comicon ticket when he needed to find a way to afford Pembleton. If he hadn't bought it so long ago, and made plans with Louis to attend together, he would be looking for a way to sell it.

"So, how about winner gets to pick the loser's costume?" Louis grinned, offering his hand to shake on the deal.

Mark fell silent for a second, then grinned back. After all, there was no way he could lose four games in a row to Louis after dominating him so thoroughly. "Sounds good," Mark said cheerily, shaking to seal the deal. Maybe a bet would help take his mind off things, too. "Hope you're ready to get humiliated," Mark said. "And then humiliated again when I make you buy a sumo suit and go as The Blob..."

"Keep talking, buddy," Louis muttered, gritting his teeth as he selected a new character. Mark stuck with his usual, tightening his grip on the controller as the level booted up and the match began. At first, everything was going his way, and Louis was looking increasingly frustrated as his health bar shrank. But then he started hitting a combo Mark had never seen before, and before he knew what hit him, Louis had taken the lead.

"You're just button mashing!" Mark scowled as Louis' character performed a victory dance over the corpse of his opponent.

"Guess this character is lucky for me," Louis said with a shrug. "3-1, buddy." Mark buckled down, determined not to lose another match, but this time around Louis got an early jump on him and had him whittled down to zero health in what seemed like no time at all. Try as he might, the next game went the exact same way. Mark was no longer trash talking. He was sitting on the couch with the controller clutched in his sweaty palms, eyes fixed on the TV, and his jaw clenched shut.

"3-3," Louis crowed, as the match began. "Not so cocky now, huh?"

Mark didn't reply, all his concentration was on the game. He performed a series of jump-kicks, then executed a string of combos that left Louis' character reeling. He could taste victory as he blinked sweat out of his eyes. No way was Louis beating him best of seven. He'd gotten lucky, that was all.

"Nice combo, Marci," Louis remarked casually.

Mark did a double-take at the nickname, staring at Louis in horror before he remembered that his best friend used to teasingly call him 'Marci' long before any of the nonsense at Tiffany's salon. In that split second of shock, however, Louis regained the upper hand and finished him off. Mark groaned.

"You've been practicing," he muttered sulkily.

"Maybe," Louis grinned. "Now, let me show you what you'll be wearing. You know how all the Nebula Quest cast is going to be there, right? So I thought I could go as Steele, and you could be... Well, I have a picture on here." He reached down into his backpack and pulled out his laptop. Mark's mouth fell open in shock.

"You picked the costume already?" Mark demanded. "You planned this all along! You were hustling me that whole time! You tricked me, you, you..."

But Mark trailed off as Louis opened the laptop with a flourish, showing the image waiting for him. "Oh, no," he whispered. "You have *got* to be kidding me."

Displayed on the laptop screen was his favorite cheesecake character from Nebula Quest, the buxom pink-haired Private Aurora Cummings, all decked out in her usual figure-hugging mini-dress uniform and heels. Mark's cheeks went red.

"Forget it," he said flatly. "I'm not doing it."

"Why not?" Louis asked, looking genuinely puzzled.

"Why not?" Mark sputtered, taken aback. "Because it's stupid, and humiliating, and, and..."

"Humiliating how?" Louis challenged.

"Because I'm a *guy* and everyone's going to laugh at me!" Mark blustered. "Duh!"

Louis just shook his head. "I don't think so, dude. Heck, I don't think anyone's going to have a clue."

"What do you mean?" Mark demanded, feeling his blood run cold. Louis had a knowing look on his face, as if he was struggling to decide whether or not to divulge something.

"I know you went to prom, Mark," Louis said seriously.

"Of course I didn't," Mark protested, feeling a sinking sensation in his stomach. "I didn't have anyone to go with, remember?"

"Oh, come on," Louis said, sounding genuinely frustrated for the first time. "I'm not an idiot. At least five guys on the football team asked me about 'that little twerp Mark Summers' hot sister' in the locker room. We've known each other since we were kids, Mark, and unless you've been hiding her in the basement, you definitely don't have a twin sister. From there, it wasn't exactly

hard to put it all together. You working at the salon, letting them do your nails, that hairstyle..."

Mark wished the floor could swallow him up. "I'm not gay or anything!" he said desperately. "It was all a big joke that got out of hand. Helga and Inga, you know, those two Swedish chicks, they made me this bet, and..."

"And you lost, just like you lost this one, so man up and make good on it," Louis said matter-of-factly.

"Why are you so eager to see me in a dress, huh?" Mark shot back angrily.

Louis' face fell, and Mark felt instantly guilty.

"Fine," he said. "Forget it. I just thought it would be cool to, you know, be out in public with a pretty girl. Or at least a pretty dude who looks like one. It would just be a costume. I'm not trying to blackmail you or anything. I would never make you do something you don't want to do. I just thought it would be cool, that's all."

Mark felt like a sleaze bucket, taking shots at Louis when his friend had actually been trying to mistakenly help him out. And he definitely knew the longing to look popular. He'd never felt cooler than when he was hanging around the food court with two Swedish bombshells in Helga and Inga, not to mention Tiffany herself. Louis looked so crestfallen that Mark's fortitude was beginning to waver.

"Not to mention the Nebula Quest panel is giving away prize money for best costume," Louis muttered. "I figured you'd be a shoe-in, and since you're saving up for college, even a thousand bucks could help out a lot, right?" Mark was surprised by Louis's thoughtfulness. His best friend hadn't made it into Pemberton, but he had been accepted into a decent mid-level school not too far from their hometown, chosen based on the strength of its engineering program. Definitely not Mark's kind of place, though he had promised to visit. Obviously Louis hadn't forgotten Mark's situation.



"Holy shit, a thousand bucks?" Mark demanded, eyes widening. "Are you serious?" He'd known there were often prizes given out for the best costumes, but this was on another level entirely.

"Yeah," Louis shrugged. "It's on the website."

Mark thought about how far a thousand dollars might go towards his first year of college. Now that he wasn't working at the salon, his savings weren't going to get any bigger, no matter how much penny-pinching he did. If he could put a few thousand towards his first year, maybe his mom would agree to let him take out the loan for the rest of it. And if he worked hard enough, maybe he could get a scholarship for the following year! This was exactly the kind of break he needed, even if it meant dressing up as a chick to get it. Gritting his teeth, Mark gave a long sigh.

"Okay," he said. "I'll do it."



The convention was a whole week away, but Mark was a nervous wreck only about an hour after he agreed to do it. But he'd already given his word, and an excited Louis had already ordered their costumes – he, of course, was going as Lieutenant John Steele, the cool-headed, no-nonsense weapons expert. Mark just hoped he didn't remember the one episode where they'd teased a romance with Aurora.

As soon as Louis left, Mark hurried upstairs to his room. Surreptitiously locking his door behind him, Mark swallowed guiltily and went over to his bed, getting down on hands and knees to retrieve a particular item he'd sworn to throw out months ago: the prom dress the twins' had bought for their prank. With his heart thumping in his chest as fast as a rabbit, Mark quickly pulled the feminine garment out from its' hiding spot, smoothing the folds of silky fabric with one hand. Still jumpy as a cat, as if someone might barge in at any time, Mark draped the dress against himself and walked over to the mirror.

He had had many chances to throw the dress away, along with the bra and panties and heels, whenever his mother was at work. A few times he had even gotten so far as bringing a garbage bag to his room to put it into. But for some reason, he still hadn't. And every once in a while, like he was doing now, he took it out, just to look at it, and went to the mirror. Mark stared at his reflection, with his head peeking out of the top of the dress, and briefly considered doing something with his hair, maybe even sneaking a tube of lipstick from his mom's room. Immediately, he flushed red at the thought.

What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he just throw the dumb thing out? It was a reminder of one of the worst nights of his life, wasn't it? Mark bit his lip, staring at his reflection still. He'd never wanted to be Marci, but for some reason, it was hard to let her go – something about that night at prom had stuck

with him, because despite all the tension and humiliations of being Sven's date, some small part of him, deep down inside, had felt *right* for the first time. Like instead of trying to be the man of the house, how he'd been attempting to do ever since his dad passed away, he was free to just be...

"Who?" Mark muttered to himself. "Free to be who?" As he heard the sound of his mother bustling through the front door, Mark quickly ran back his bed and stuffed the dress underneath like a criminal afraid to be caught red-handed. The fact that 'Marci' was still around, in some way, was something he could barely admit to himself, never mind his mom, and definitely not to Louis. Sure, Louis was a geek who knew what it felt like to be an outsider, but he was also a football player, and he would never understand what Mark was currently trying to sort out. That was why it was important, no matter how freeing it might be to be "Marci" again for an afternoon at Comicon, that he showed no sign of it to Louis. He was a guy who'd lost a bet, and that was it.

Mark then got a chair to stand on and went up into the upper shelves of his closet, retrieving the purple dress he had been hiding up there. The high heels he had wrapped up in them came tumbling out onto the floor – along with an empty vodka bottle.

Now he at least knew what had happened. He had woken up a week ago, passed out on his bed, dressed in his mother's purple dress and heels, his red-painted fingernails wrapped around the neck of the empty bottle. He had blacked out, and with no idea what he had done. All he could remember was him stealing a little taste of his mother's best bottle of vodka, and then another taste, and... That was about it.

At least he now knew why he had the mud-stained purple dress on him and muddy heels on his feet when he woke. Some part of his brain, under the influence, must have taken ahold of him and he wound up making a scene at Candi's place. For weeks, months even, Mark debated coming clean to Candi, and revealing that he knew what had happened to her, but in the end he stuck with his original decision to keep quiet. Obviously, though, his subconscious had been fighting a mighty battle under the surface.

He wished he could remember what he had done or what he had said, but it was all gone. He had no memory of the whole night. If Mark had had some tiny part in giving Candi the courage to get out of skirts, he was glad to be of service. However, the betrayal of his own mind was quite disturbing. He bundled the purple dress in a sack and resolved to take it to the dry cleaners' in the morning. He had been lucky enough that his mother hadn't noticed it missing, but he wasn't going to take any more risks.

Mark put the prom dress back under his bed and tried not to rationalize it all. It was only two dresses he was hiding, that didn't mean anything. As he got ready for sleep that night, Mark had to wonder... If Louis had shown him the photo of his future costume in advance, would he have fought harder to win

the final match, or would the outcome have been the exact same? Or maybe, just maybe, would he have sat back and let Louis win?



In any case, the next seven days seemed to pass by both horribly slowly and incredibly quickly, with Mark spending most of his time wandering listlessly around the house, to the point where his mom suggested he needed a summer job to keep his mind occupied, which got him thinking of Tiffany's salon again, which reminded him of his soon-to-be costume all over again.

He tried to remind himself that people dressed up for conventions all the time, and the chances of running into anybody he knew were slim to none. It wouldn't be anything like prom night, where he'd been constantly on edge, scared to be recognized. The strange anticipation of dread and anticipation was like nothing Mark had ever experienced before.

"Ugh, I need to get my mind off of it," he muttered, plopping down in front of his TV and turning it on. Just his luck, there was a Nebula Quest marathon showing on the ScFi channel. Figuring it was fate, Mark reluctantly settled in to watch, focused even more than usual on the beautiful, pouty-lipped Private Aurora. He supposed that apart from the bright pink hair, the get-up wasn't *that* bad. Sure, the hemline was a little short, but she always wore dark stockings, and Mark knew from somewhat embarrassing experience that he definitely had the legs for it. The bust, of course, was a different story. And the dress color was sort of pretty...

Mark kept watching episode after episode, for study purposes, and as he drifted off to sleep he couldn't help imagining despite himself what it would be like to strut around Comicon wearing a Private Aurora Cummings uniform.

"Private! Are you alright? Private!"

Mark groaned at the feeling of someone shaking him awake, but for some reason it came out as a high, breathy sigh. That was his first clue that something was off. His second came as his eyes fluttered open – since when were his eyelashes long enough to flutter? – and he came face to face with the weathered, handsome visage of Captain Broussard of Nebula Quest fame.

"Aurora," Broussard said softly. "Thank God you're all right."

"Wait a second," Mark gulped. "I'm not..." He went to brush the hair out of his eyes and realized, with a squeak of surprise, that it was bubble gum pink, while his nails of his small, dainty hand were a similar shade. "You have got to be kidding me," Mark muttered, sitting upright against a strange alien rock formation to take full stock of the situation. The first thing he noticed was that sitting up was a whole new experience, thanks to two very noticeable additions to his chest. His full firm breasts felt like they would pop free from his tight-fitting

uniform at any second, and beneath them he could see that his long slender legs were clad in Aurora's usual tights and ended in slightly impractical heels. He was dreaming he was Aurora Cummings.

"You had me scared for a second," Broussard said brusquely, adjusting the setting on his laser pistol. "When that photon blaster clipped my shoulder, you went out like a light."

Mark noticed the singed spot on the captain's uniform for the first time. "Wait, you mean I got hit, too?" he asked, looking down at himself. As far as he could tell, he didn't have a hair out of place.

"Well, no," the captain said, almost sheepishly. "When you saw my wound, you fainted dead away."

Mark couldn't help but roll his eyes. Wasn't that just typical writing for *Nebula Quest*. Well, he might be stuck in a dress and heels, but he'd seen every single episode, aired or otherwise, and he wasn't going to be a side character in his own dream. "What's the situation, captain?" he asked, clambering to his feet.

Broussard yanked him back down just as another photon blast crackled through the air, narrowly missing the top of his head. To his chagrin, Mark gave a patented Aurora Cummings shriek of terror. Even worse, he somehow managed to end up falling into his superior officer's lap. Mark struggled to slide off without exposing himself, whether his head to enemy fire or his panties to Broussard's eyes, and in the process managed to grind his wide, firm buttocks into the captain's crotch. Fan service, Mark thought grimly, finally maneuvering himself to a kneeling position beside the captain. Of course.

"We're surrounded by Zanthians," Broussard said matter-of-factly, as if he hadn't just been given an impromptu lap dance. "And there's too much tesla interference in the air for the ship's matter teleporter to get a lock on our position."

"Sounds a lot like season 3 episode 24," Mark said, brushing another strand of pink hair out of his face. How did Aurora deal with her hair coming out of its pony tail all the time?

"Like what?" Broussard demanded. "Are you sure you're okay, Aurora?"

"I would prefer Private Cummings," Mark said through gritted teeth, peeking carefully over the top of the rock. He bit his lip, surveying the landscape and wondering why the galaxy Aurora wore strawberry-flavored lip gloss. They were hidden behind a strangely-warped rock formation, while a semi-circle of Zanthians were slowly approaching. Things didn't look good.

Behind them and to the left, however, there was an even taller hunk of rock with a strange, glittering silver gleam to it. Bingo.

"Captain Broussard, that rock formation behind us appears to have a vein of konductionium running through it, does it not?" Mark asked in his high soprano. Broussard shot a glance backward.

"It certainly does, Private," he said, with a grin breaking across his handsome face. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"We can use the rock to amplify our signal and punch through the tesla interference," Mark said firmly. "Meaning the ship should be able to teleport us out of this mess." Another photon blast shot over their heads and both of them ducked on instinct. "But to get to it, we'll have to enter their line of fire," he frowned. "We'll need a distraction. Do you still have those holo-projectors from season 3 episode 15? I mean, from the Terminus Mission?"

"Used them to get into the compound, remember?" Broussard grunted, taking aim and shooting a Zanthian soldier through the arm. "But you should take those little cat naps more often, Private. You're thinking on your feet for once."

"What if we pretend to surrender?" Mark suggested. Broussard grimaced.

"As soon as I peek my head out, they'll take it off with a photon blast, no matter what I tell them," he said. "Executor Varluss wants me dead, remember? They won't hesitate to fire." He rubbed his grizzled chin. "However, I seem to remember he has a very different opinion about you, Private Cummings."

Mark winced. Season 1 episode 29. Aurora had been forced to go undercover as a harem slave to infiltrate Executor Varluss' starship, necessitating a very skimpy cheesecake costume, only to be captured, necessitating a heroic rescue from the rest of the crew. The Zanthian leader had been obsessed with her ever since.

"All right," Mark sighed. "I'll be the distraction. Like usual."

Broussard grinned in reply.

Five minutes later, the Zanthians had closed ranks on their Nebula Quest nemesis and his nubile young companion, leveling every bit of firepower at the rock they were hiding behind. Stroking his goatee, Executor Varluss could almost taste his victory.

"Come on out, Captain Broussard, and face your demise like a man!" he shouted.

"The captain is gravely injured," came a high, tremulous voice from behind the rock. "Please, Executor Varluss, will you spare his life if I agree to... To be your mistress?"

Executor Varluss' pointed ears shot straight up. There was a movement from behind the rock, and he held up his arm to ensure his troops wouldn't fire. Then, out came the beautiful Aurora Cummings, sashaying out of cover with her hands behind her head to prove she was unarmed, and, as an added bonus, putting her heaving bosom front and center.

"Please," Mark repeated, trying to sound sincere rather than disgusted. "I offer myself in exchange for my captain's life."

"How do I know this isn't a trick?" Executor Varluss roared.

Mark swallowed. Aurora had pulled this kind of thing off in more episodes than he could count, but it was a little more stressful now that it was him doing it. He gave what he hoped was a graceful toss of his hair. "Executor Varluss, I confess that I have often... Thought back to my time aboard your starship. I experienced so many things that I had never experienced before. New feelings, new..." Mark struggled not to make a face. "Pleasures."

"Oh, Aurora, you have experienced nothing," Executor Varluss breathed. "I will make you my queen!"

Mark batted his eyelashes, looking down at the alien terrain with a pretty blush on his cheeks. "If that is my only option, I will gladly take it in exchange for..."

"Look!" shouted one of the Zanthian soldiers, pointing a clawed finger. "It's Captain Broussard!"

Broussard, who had been crawling away from the rock on hands and knees so as to stay out of sight as long as possible, had sprung to his feet and was now making a dash for the konduktionium spire. Mark looked, too, pumping his small fist in triumph as Broussard took out his comm-signal. The Zanthians charged forward, firing wildly, but it was too late. Broussard dodged their few



stray blasts with ease as he ascended the top of the rock, pointing his comm-signal straight up. It began to glow bright white, indicating a teleportation lock, and when Mark looked down to his own smaller, daintier version of the comm-signal, which was strapped to his wrist, he saw that it was glowing the same color.

“No!” Executor Varluss growled, and Mark felt strong arms seize him from behind. He kicked weakly against the Zanthian leader’s brutish embrace. “I’ve waited too long!” the alien warlord wailed. “I’ve waited too long to hold you, Aurora, to make you mine, to kiss your lips!” Mark tried desperately to pull away, but Executor Varluss managed to plant his rubbery lips onto his, and Mark was given a very wet and invasive reminder that Zanthians were equipped with not one, but two long purple tongues. Gagging, Mark managed to knee Executor Varluss between the thighs and break free just as his body was enveloped in the white light of the comm-signal, beaming him safely back aboard their ship. The theme music was already playing, and Mark had no doubt that the credits would roll after some pithy remark from Broussard, and...

Mark jerked awake, staring at the TV. The Nebula Quest marathon had ended, leaving him watching an infomercial. He tried to remember what exactly he’d been dreaming about, but it seemed to have left his head entirely, so he stumbled to his bedroom and changed into his pajamas, unable to keep from humming the Nebula Quest theme music as he did so. For some reason, he felt the urge to brush his teeth extremely thoroughly.



On the morning of the big day, Mark was nervous as a cat. He printed up his Comicon ticket twice, just in case, and then went to the bathroom to begin getting ready. He’d already told his mom about the costume – she’d gotten an annoyingly knowing smile, even when he explained that it was because he’d lost a bet against Louis – and she’d insisted on helping him with his makeup. The first order of business, however, was shaving his legs. Using shaving gel and his mom’s disposable razor, he managed to swipe off the light covering of hair on his calves and the few on his upper legs without cutting himself even once. Without thinking, he applied a generous amount of lotion to them afterwards and rubbed it in. It was what his mom always did after she shaved hers, after all.

Wearing only his boxer shorts, which he’d rolled up to easier shave his thighs, he gave his reflection a critical look. Sure, he’d grown a little, but only in the vertical sense. His chest was flat and devoid of muscles, and his arms were no better off. No wonder most girls never gave him a second glance. In fact, the only time he’d ever had girls interested in him was when he’d been “Marci,” and it was because they wanted to know where he’d gotten his dress! Of

course, a few guys had obviously been interested, too, though for other reasons entirely. The thought made him blush, but also feel a strange hint of pride, as he returned his attention to the mirror. His shoulders were still narrow and he was skinny as a rail all over, no matter how much he ate, giving him a slightly gangly appearance. "All elbows," as his mom would say. But when it came to wearing a short skirt, his long slender legs became an advantage. Mark struck a hesitant pose, hand on one hip, trying to picture himself in the costume.

"Who knew my son had such great legs?" his mom's voice asked teasingly. "All you need is some heels, sweetie!"

Mark gave a start, mortified to see his mom chuckling at the crack in the door behind him. "Mom!" he wailed. "Can you please not barge into the bathroom when I'm in it? I'm not six anymore!"

"If you leave the door half open, I reserve every right," his mom said, opening the door all the way and lifting her makeup kit. "Now, are we going to do this, or what? You might be spending the day at your little comic carnival..."

"It's a convention, mom," Mark sighed.

"But I have to go to work, so let's get to it," his mom finished. "Grab that wig of yours and come sit at my vanity, okay?"

With one last glance in the mirror, Mark hurried back to his room to grab the wig he and Louis had bought a few days ago from a costume store. It wasn't an actual Aurora Cummings wig, instead coming from some kind of fairy princess costume, but the color matched and he figured it would be easy enough to tie back in the character's usual pony tail hairstyle. He also grabbed a color print-out of a close up promotional photo showing Aurora's face, with its usual sensual pout, as a reference for the makeup.

"Ooh, this will be fun," his mom said, taking the photo in hand. "A little more dramatic than what I wear to the office, that's for sure. I think you've got the right face shape for it, though, you always did have those nice cheekbones."

"I try," Mark said dryly. He did his best to sit still as his mom went to work with her little brushes and powders, first smoothing a bit of liquid foundation over his cheeks and nose, then focusing in on the elaborate pink and silver eye shadow that was part of Aurora's signature look.

"You don't mind if I pluck a few hairs, do you, Mark?" his mom asked, brandishing a pair of tweezers. "Your brows have gotten a bit messy again since you stopped working at the salon." Mark winced, remembering how the twins had "thinned" his eyebrows down to narrow feminine arches in preparation for their prom prank.

"Just don't go overboard," he said nervously. "It's only for a day, after all." With her son's blessing, Mark's mom cleaned up the few stray hairs from his brows, creating a more distinct arch in the meanwhile. By the time she was finishing

off his lip gloss, she had a look of both surprise and satisfaction on her face that made Mark slightly nervous to see the result.

"Let's get the wig on you, first," she said, as he made to get up and look in the mirror. "So you can see the full effect!" She settled the pink wig on his head and took what seemed like forever brushing it out, using liberal amounts of hair spray at the same time, until Mark was almost coughing from the smell.

"Finished yet?" he asked. "Louis will be here with our costumes soon."

"All done," his mom said, putting her hand on her hip. "Go look in that mirror and tell me what you think, sweetie."

Brushing a strand of pink hair out of his eyes in a gesture that seemed, for some reason, vaguely familiar, Mark made his way to the full length mirror on the other side of his mom's room. He was met with a bizarre sight: at first glance, it appeared someone had transplanted Aurora Cummings' head onto his body. The face in the mirror had the same wide, sensual eyes and pert nose, the same pouty lips, and the same mane of pink hair pulled back in a high, feminine pony tail.

When Mark looked closer, the uncanny resemblance lessened slightly. His face was slightly rounder and younger-looking than that of the actress, and, dare he say it, his lips were even a bit fuller and more distinctly shaped into the classic Cupid's bow. He definitely looked like a girl, and a quite attractive one, to boot. His eyes even strayed down below his neck, as if expecting to catch a glimpse of bared breasts, but of course it was only his flat scrawny chest awaiting them. Mark blushed. It somehow felt inappropriate to be topless, looking like this.

"Not bad, huh?" his mom said, coming up behind him to make a few final touch-ups to his wig. "I have to get going, now. Have fun at your comic conference! I'm sure you'll be a big hit."

"Oh, uh, yeah," Mark stammered, touching a hand to his face in a slightly dazed manner. "Thanks, mom." He didn't even bother to correct her about the name of the convention as she swept out the door. He heard her exchange greetings with a familiar voice at the door, but he was still too caught up in his reflection to realize it was Louis, having arrived with the costumes.

"Hey, Mark?" came his best friend's voice, slightly anxious-sounding.

"Uh, just a minute!" Mark called, snapping out of his trance. Louis had seen him shirtless plenty of times, but it just didn't seem right to go out there in only his boxers when his face was all dolled up like a supermodel's. He cast around for something to wear, and quickly snatched one of his mother's bathrobes off her hook, wrapping it around himself and tying off the sash about his small waist. With his smooth-shaven thighs peeking out from underneath, Mark somehow felt just as exposed as he had a moment ago.

"Mark, something happened, I..." Louis' voice trailed off as Mark came out of his mom's room, his jaw dropping open at the sight of his best friend all done up like Private Aurora. "Whoa!" he gaped. "You look, uh, way more realistic than I thought you would. I mean, you look, uh..." Louis swallowed. "Hot."

Mark flushed. "Shut up, dude, it's just part of the costume," he said. Louis, meanwhile, was dressed as Lieutenant Steele, and actually looking quite sharp. He'd definitely exchanged some flab for muscle over the summer, and he filled out the costume uniform quite well. Mark felt a stab of jealousy. Louis got to swagger around as Steele, while he was stuck swishing about in a dress as Aurora. If he'd won that final game of *Mortal Kombat*, and the roles had been reversed... Although he had to admit that Louis would look ridiculous trying to dress as Aurora, and Steele's uniform was awfully boring.

"Yeah," Louis said, regaining his senses. "Oh, crap. The costume. The seller messed up, Mark. They sent the wrong costume."

"What do you mean?" Mark asked, frowning.

"I swear I didn't plan this," Louis pleaded. "I mean, you were there when I clicked the order button, remember? They sent an Aurora costume, but... Well..." Rather than try to explain any further, he reached down into his bag and pulled out an incredibly skimpy leotard, followed by a pair of thigh-high boots with stiletto heels that Mark instantly recognized.

"Season four," both boys said in unison. Any die-hard *Nebula Quest* fan knew all about the particularly infamous (and short lived) reboot that took place in season 4, an attempt to capitalize on the dark and gritty trends of the time while also 'sexing up' the show considerably. The biggest change was sticking Aurora in a very sexy, revealing costume that had been considered quite racy at the time, which even the actress complained made her look like "some kind of space stripper." The costume went back to the older version before the season was out, but there were still clips of the more gratuitous Aurora T and A shots floating around the internet.

Mark could feel himself blushing red all over.

"I swear I didn't do it," Louis repeated.

"I know, I know," Mark said faintly. "I believe you. But, I mean, come on. I can't wear this. I just can't."

"I get it," Louis said forlornly. "I probably wouldn't want to, either. It's just that you'd probably win the top costume prize for sure. I mean, how many guys would have the balls to pull that off?"

"Shit, you're probably right," Mark admitted. He hesitantly held up the costume. "But I'd be more worried about the, uh, boobs. There's literally no way I could wear this, dude. It wouldn't fit." He gave it a critical look over. There was way too much space in the chest area, no matter how much he stuffed the cups,

and the bottom had the same problem. There was no way he would be able to wear it without looking ridiculous. Unless...

"Well, I guess it's a flop," Louis said sadly. "Sorry you, uh, shaved your legs and did your makeup and everything for no reason."

Mark didn't reply, still internally debating exactly how badly he wanted a chance at winning a thousand dollar costume prize. He looked at the leotard again. It was only for a day, after all. And a thousand dollars was a lot of money.

"Hold on," Mark said, reaching for his phone. "I know someone who might be able to help." He began dialing a number he'd never expected to need again: Tiffany's.



As Mark might have guessed, his old boss was delighted to help out a former employee trying to win a costume contest. She agreed to come over within the hour, once she'd had the chance to pick up a few necessities from a female impersonator friend of hers. When she called to say she'd arrived, Mark sent Louis to go let her in, not exactly keen on the neighbors seeing him in makeup and a pink wig.

"Mark, honey, how are you?" Tiffany asked, bustling inside with a frightening number of bags. "Ooh, who did your makeup? Not bad."

"My mom," Mark said embarrassedly, leading the way to his room. "So, uh, you think we can make this work?" He held up the flimsy costume.

"Absolutely, honey," Tiffany said. "I've got everything you need to really rock that costume. My friend is one of the most popular performers at the local drag bar, and let me tell you, he didn't get that knock-out figure from his mother. It's all padding and pinching, honey, and you're so nice and slim already that we can really make you convincing."

"Uh, great," Mark gulped.

"Your friend here is going to be the luckiest space captain in the whole galaxy, with a hot space babe like you on his arm," Tiffany said, winking.

"I'm not... I'm... I'm actually an engineer," Louis stammered, going pink in the face. "Not a captain. And it's not, like..."

"The characters aren't *together* or anything," Mark clarified, blushing brightly himself.

"Well, either way, why don't you give us ladies some privacy?" Tiffany said to Louis merrily. "Shoo! You can come see him when we're done."

"Yeah, sure," Louis said, looking relieved by the suggestion. "I'll go hang out in the living room." He made a quick exit, leaving Mark and Tiffany alone.

"I'm so glad you called, honey," Tiffany said. "I was starting to think you were still mad about the whole prom prank. Helga and Inga were really sorry about that, you know that, don't you? You need to come by the salon for a visit sometime! Maybe a trim?" As she spoke, she was pulling a variety of objects out of her bags, and Mark forgot what he was going to say as she opened a styrofoam box containing what appeared to be two very large breasts that had somehow escaped from some poor centerfold's chest.

"Holy crap," Mark said, flushing red at the prospect of wearing the jiggling silicon breast forms. "Aren't those a little too much?"

"Nothing little about them," Tiffany said smugly. "I did some internet Googling, and the actress's cup size was 38 C. You want to look realistic, don't you?"

"Yeah, I guess," Mark said weakly. "You know breast. I mean, best!"

"That's what I like to hear!" Tiffany smiled. "Okay, open up that robe. Time to, um, bust you out." She giggled slightly at her joke as Mark reluctantly undid his sash. "Oh, good," Tiffany remarked. "You already shaved off your chest hair. Good thinking."

"Thanks," Mark muttered sullenly, unwilling to admit that there hadn't been any chest hair to shave.

"Okay, go ahead and lie down on the bed while I spread the adhesive," Tiffany said. "Don't worry, I'm leaving you the solvent. Arms up over your head, honey." Experiencing a flashback to the time he'd agreed to let the twins wax his legs and underarms, Mark lied down on his bed, doing his best not to get aroused as Tiffany's red-nailed fingers began applying clear adhesive glue around his nipples. *Nothing weird about this scene*, he thought. *Nope. Just a beautician helping out her favorite ex-employee.*

"Don't wiggle around," Tiffany warned. "I don't want you ending up cross-eyed." Mark was at a loss to what she meant until he remembered the very realistic pink nipples sticking off the breast forms, which made him determined to stay very, very still. Tiffany slowly worked each breast into place, pressing down around the edges to seal them, then had him hold them while the adhesive set. Mark had never held a pair of breasts in his life, never mind ones this size, but they certainly *seemed* realistic to the touch.

"These things must be expensive," Mark said, more to distract himself than anything.

"They are, and these puppies are on loan, so don't let anyone else get too handy with them," Tiffany said, helping him sit up. "Look but don't touch is probably the best policy." Mark nearly toppled forward as his big new boobs swung forward, changing his center of gravity. They were quite a bit weightier than he'd imagined, and quivered disconcertingly from the sudden motion.

He suddenly realized that this had to be what Candi felt like all the time – except hers were even bigger, and they were actually part of her! Or him. Or

whatever. Mark didn't like to think too long about the girl he'd had such a fierce crush on before discovering she was a former boy disguised as a girl by his mother and aunt. It made Mark feel confused in a lot of ways.

Once Tiffany had used some concealer to help match the tops of the breasts to his skin tone, concealing the edges of the prosthetic, Mark had to admit that the effect was stunningly – and disturbingly – realistic. It was hard to take his eyes off the mirror, in fact, but Tiffany dragged him away from his reflection so she could help him into a waist-cincher.

"You already have a nice waist," Tiffany said. "But this will really exaggerate that hourglass figure all the guys want."

"All the guys except the one getting it for himself," Mark said, wincing as she pulled the shaping garment tightly around his waist, drawing it in an inch or two. Tiffany just laughed. The final step was a very well-padded flesh tone panty that seemed to have gelatin inserts meant to mimic a generous bubble butt. Mark blanched at the prospect of having so much 'junk in the trunk', but he had to admit that Private Aurora was famous for her buns. There were more than enough fan sites dedicated solely to images of her bending over to prove it. Tiffany also explained how to tuck his own 'junk' up between his thighs, a lesson he remembered from his ill-fated prom night. It was uncomfortable, but Mark knew that wearing the leotard would necessitate a smooth crotch area, unless he really wanted to attract attention.

With his new endowments, he would have found it all but impossible to get into the costume by himself. Fortunately, Tiffany was there to help squeeze him into it, and figure out the garters on the stockings, too. He slid the fake silver bracelets onto his slender arms, then pulled the thigh-high boots up his legs, eager to have at least some coverage. All throughout the process, he was continually distracted by the new padding on his behind, which made it feel almost as if he was sitting on a firm fleshy cushion, and the bouncing of his new boobs. Even with the comforting support of the leotard's built-in underwire cups, he could feel them quiver slightly whenever he moved. Alongside all of that, he found himself constantly having to sweep the pink wig out of his face, which in turn led to Tiffany noticing he hadn't done his nails.

"I was going to paint them, but I forgot," Mark admitted.

"I have press-ons in pink already," Tiffany exclaimed, rummaging in her bags. "Much quicker and easier."

Mark wiggled uncomfortably on the bed while Tiffany carefully applied each fake nail. He could already tell that the stiletto heels were going to be tough to handle. The heels he'd worn for prom weren't quite as high, or nearly as thin. When he voiced his concerns to Tiffany, she assured him he would be fine.

"Plenty of girls are a little wobbly on stilettos like these," she said. "And the padding might actually help you out. It's easier to swing your hips when you

have a bit of a tush." She offered him an arm and Mark stood up, taking a few practice steps. The stiletto heels sank into his carpet and nearly tripped him up, but Tiffany suggested it would be easier once they were on hard flooring.

"I hope so," Mark said wryly. "I want to win the costume prize, but I don't want to break an ankle doing it." He fidgeted nervously on the high heels, still trying to get accustomed to his newly feminine posture, bust pushed up and bottom pushed out, exaggerating the curve of his back. He swept another strand of pink hair out of his eyes in what was quickly becoming a very natural gesture.

"Just remember, if you win, you have to tell them you get your nails done at Tiffany's Twist!" Tiffany grinned. "Okay, let's go show you off, honey. I have a feeling your friend is in for a bit of a surprise." Mark grimaced, not exactly relishing the prospect of Louis seeing him with a Playboy bunny rack, but he accepted Tiffany's arm to help him balance and carefully minced his way into the living room, feeling more nervous than ever before.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," he muttered.

"Well, those boobs aren't coming off, honey, so I suggest you do your best to enjoy the experience and have fun with it," Tiffany said. "I thought you loved this character?"

"I do!" Mark protested. "She's great. She's one of my favorites."

"Then it should be fun pretending to be her!" Tiffany beamed. "And believe me, honey, you look good. Like, really good."

"You're right," Mark said, taking a deep breath. "It should be fun. It's just a costume, and it's not like anyone I know will be there, and I might just win a thousand dollars, right?"

"Right," Tiffany said, letting go of his arm. "Now, time for your grand entrance."

Mark collected himself, remembering how Aurora made her entrance into the command center on episode 129, then strutted into the living room where Louis was waiting. His best friend's eyes were glued to the TV screen, and when he made his entrance they raised up only momentarily before returning there. Then Louis did an almost comical double-take that must have nearly given him whip-lash, mouth dropping open and eyes going wide as dinner plates at the sight of a gorgeous and completely stacked cosplay princess mincing into the room, hips swaying seductively. Mark struck a pose, one dainty hand on the curve of his hip, and batted his eyelashes cutely.

"Private Aurora Cummings, reporting for duty," he said, in a breathy falsetto. Louis dropped his controller as it slipped through his limp hands.

"Holy shit," he said. "You look... You look... You look..."

"Hot?" Tiffany supplied. "Well, I have to run. I'll give you a call about returning all this stuff after the convention. Remember you can come by any time, Mark! I mean, "Aurora." " She winked, gathering up her bags. "Have fun, kids. Louis, you better keep the space pirates away from her booty." With that last parting remark, she headed out the door, leaving both Louis and Mark blushing to the roots.

"I can't believe that's you," Louis finally said, shaking his head.

"I'm having a little trouble believing it myself," Mark said, giving a nervous laugh. "Maybe it would be easier if we both just stayed in character? At least for a little while. I'm trying to get used to being Aurora."

"Challenge accepted, Private," Louis said, a grin spreading across his face. "Now, unless I'm mistaken, we have a scheduled rendezvous with the rest of our crew."



Mark had to let Louis help him down the front steps, making an exaggerated show of wobbling in the stilettos – he didn't want his best friend to know he'd worn high heels on enough occasions to be more or less proficient with them. It felt extremely odd letting his friend hold his arm as he went down the steps one at a time, heel-to-toe, with his false bust and padded rear making it quite an awkward experience for both of them.



Once inside Louis' old beat-up car, Mark was in for another new experience, because, as they drove, the seatbelt continually slid up over his big bosom and seemed to be attempting to choke him to death. Mark felt himself blushing as Louis watched him struggle with the seatbelt, a task made even more complicated by his long polished nails and the pink hair falling into his eyes. Finally, he ended up holding the seatbelt to one side with his hand, to give his 'girls' room to breathe.

"Who knew it was so tough to be a chick, huh?" Louis asked nervously, chuckling, his eyes going again to Mark's fake boobs.

"Maybe you should keep your eyes on the, uh, view-screen, Lieutenant," Mark said, brushing a strand of pink hair behind his ear to disguise his embarrassment. It was Louis' turn to blush, but he also grinned sheepishly.

"Affirmative, Private," he said. "We're about to reach warp speed, so, uh, hold onto your wig?" Mark remembered too little too late that Louis' passenger side window was broken and refused to roll all the way up, meaning his hair was all whipped around as they pulled onto the highway, constantly slapping him in the face. Eventually Mark gave up on trying to tame it and just let it fly around his face, but he made sure to glare at Louis often enough that his friend knew his badly-repaired car was not appreciated.

By the time they were off the highway and moving at slower speeds, Mark's wig was a complete mess, spilling wildly around his head and into his eyes. He just hoped he would be able to repair it once they reached the convention – Tiffany had thoughtfully supplied him with a brush and some hairspray. As he checked out his reflection in the car mirror, Mark realized glumly that it looked like 'Aurora' had just come from a wild romp in the captain's quarters.



"Whoa, there," Louis said, glancing over. "Private, you need that makeover robot from season 3 to help you out with your hair."

"Very funny," Mark said through gritted teeth. "Maybe if your stupid window worked..." As they got stuck in traffic beside a school-bus, Mark looked up and realized he had accumulated an audience. The whole busload of young boys heading off to summer camp had their noses pushed up against the glass of their windows to check him out. With a groan, Mark slapped at the window button again, hoping against hope that it might cooperate. Instead, with a squeaking noise, it slid all the way down, giving the horny little brats an even better view of Mark's tangled pink hair, skimpy outfit, and terrifically large breasts. Mark gave a squeak of horror and wriggled down lower in the seat, trying to avoid their gaze, but his vigorous squirming only succeeded in making his prosthetics shake like Jell-O and make it look like he was shimmying them for his admirers intentionally.

"Mark, what are you doing?" Louis demanded, face going red again. "Stop shaking your boobs like that, it's... It's really distracting!"

"Just shut up and drive, Lieutenant," Mark said, once again through gritted teeth. The light finally changed and they pulled away from the bus, leaving a whole load of grade-school boys very disappointed. He was already just about fed up with this whole idea, and they weren't even in the parking lot yet!

"Sorry, Private Aurora," Louis said. "You're awful touchy today. Is it that time of month?"

"Not funny, Lieutenant," Mark said, trying to tame his hair with the help of the mirror. Finding a spot to park near the convention center was all but impossible, and as they slowly cruised around the parking lot, tons of people took the invitation to look into Mark's wide-open window. Most of them were guys heading into the convention, and while some of them only stared and drooled, quite a few gave him a 'Nebula Quest' salute as he passed by. Mark had to grin. It was nice to be among geeks, even if they thought he was a hot girl! He started returning the salute with a cute little flick of the wrist in classic 'Aurora' fashion.

By the time they found a parking spot, Mark had his hair more or less under control, and he was starting to feel a little bit more confident about the whole thing. As Tiffany had said, he was just playing a role, and this was one he knew quite well after being a die-hard fan of the show his entire life. Louis went around to his side to awkwardly try to help him out, but Mark, flashing back to his awful date with Sven, got out himself, swinging his legs out first and then straightening up with relative grace. At least he didn't have to worry about flashing his panties in this get-up.

"Do you want any assistance?" Louis asked. Mark looked at him suspiciously, unsure if he was asking genuinely or if he just wanted to be seen escorting a hot cosplay princess across the parking lot.

"I should be okay," Mark said. "I think I'm getting the hang of them now." And he was – as Tiffany had predicted, it was much easier to walk on the flat surface of the pavement, and his former tricks were all coming back to him, giving him an impressive wiggle to his walk as he clopped along, one foot directly in front of the other. He was ahead of Louis by about ten steps before he realized his best friend was standing stock still, mouth open in shock. Mark turned back with a questioning look, one hand on his cocked hip and eyebrow raised.

"Holy crap, Mark," Louis said. "Where did you learn to walk like that?"

"Hey, you try walking in high heels and butt padding without shimmying a little," Mark defended himself, embarrassed.

"Uh, no thanks," Louis said. "I think you're good enough at it for both of us." They walked the rest of the way together, with Louis alternating between shooting Mark awkward looks, and looking around to see who else was shooting Mark awkward looks. "If any of those guys are judges, I think you have this thing in the bag," he said in a low voice, as they passed a group of guys in X-men t-shirts who couldn't take their eyes off Mark's swaying rump.

Mark blushed furiously as he realized the extent to which he was being ogled, but at the same time, he couldn't help but feel a tiny little bit... Intrigued. Mark had spent his whole life being pretty much invisible, and now he was being looked at admiringly, smiled at, waved at. Well, and ogled. Was this what it felt like to be Candi? To have everyone's eyes on your body constantly? Except, in Mark's case, going back to being invisible was as easy as taking off his prosthetic boobs and putting on boy clothes. Candi's implants had meant she was trapped in her role as a sexpot at all times, but Mark could see what it was like for a little while with no harm done, and if he was honest with himself, the attention was sort of flattering.

Instead of ducking his head and trying to disappear when he heard a low whistle of admiration come from behind him, Mark turned slightly, giving a sexy flip of his hair, and gave the man a sexy smile. The poor guy nearly lost his tongue on the floor! Mark then turned and strutted on, putting an extra bit of wiggle in his walk, hardly able to believe what he'd just done. Louis couldn't seem to, either.

"What the hell was that?" his best friend asked in a hoarse whisper. "You are way too good at this, Mar... Marci. I mean... Wow." Judging from Louis' red cheeks, Mark's little display had had quite an "effect" on him. Mark flushed again in turn, realizing that he had just aroused his best friend by accident.

"I'm just having fun with it," Mark said defensively. "Like Tiffany said. It's just playing a role, right? I'm pretending I'm Aurora, and it's kind of... Nice."

"Playing a role, right," Louis said weakly. He looked like he was struggling to say something. "You look really, really good in that costume..."

"Well, thank you, Lieutenant," Mark chirped, putting his hands on his small waist, hoping his friend would be able to go back to their role-play without making a big deal about Mark's very feminine behavior.

"And I don't want guys bothering you the whole time, so I was wondering if, maybe, uh, maybe it would be funny if..." Louis gulped. "How about we pretend to be boyfriend and girlfriend?" Mark's first instinct was to say "hell, no," but, Louis knew he wasn't a real girl. The only reason he was suggesting they pose as boyfriend and girlfriend was because he knew that with a good-looking girl on his arm, other guys would respect him and other girls would immediately be intrigued by him.

"Sure," Mark said bracingly. "I guess I could do that for my best buddy."

"Cool," Louis said, clearly relieved. "Here, let me get that door for you..." He hurried forward to open the door to the convention center. Mark raised an eyebrow, but passed through without complaint. He had a brief moment of panic as they presented their tickets, realizing that his actual name, Mark Summers, was on his, but the guy behind the booth was far too busy eying him up to realize he had a boy's name.

After that, however, it was as smooth sailing as could be hoped for while wearing thigh-high stiletto-heeled boots. Once Mark was committed to playing the part of Aurora, he found it came pretty easily to him, and he started to really enjoy himself as he strutted around in his revealing costume, breaking necks and soaking up the attention. He was quick to give his cute little "Aurora" salute to fellow Nebula Quest fans, often pairing it with a flirtatious wink and cute smile, and he found himself adopting other mannerisms from the show as well, such as Aurora's propensity to curl a lock of hair around her finger thoughtfully, or bounce up and down on the balls of her feet when excited, which set just about every red-blooded guy in the place drooling.

As he and Louis visited the various booths and displays, Mark was constantly shocked at how often they were bumped up through the line, or given free stuff – all it took was a little smile, and leaning across the table to frame his boobs between his arms certainly helped, as well. Louis, for his part, refused to let his "girlfriend" pay for anything, meaning Mark was free to order as big a lunch as he wanted – though he ended up picking over his fries and only getting a small diet soda. Somehow it just didn't seem right to pig out as a hottie. As they walked on, sucking noisily at their straws, Mark decided he could get used to this kind of treatment.

And, though he would never in a million years admit it, it was sort of fun being part of a couple, even if it was just play-acting. It wasn't like his fake date with the pig-headed Sven – on the contrary, it was sort of fun pretending to flirt with

Louis and play the part of his girlfriend, especially seeing the jealous looks his friend was receiving. He'd never gotten the chance to be a boyfriend, but he seemed to be pretty good at being a girlfriend.

"Excuse me, miss?" came an anxious voice. Mark took a moment to realize he was being addressed, then turned around, glossy pink lips still wrapped around his straw in an unintentionally very erotic sight. He was faced with a shy-looking, bespectacled young man wearing a Nebula Quest T-shirt and a camera around his neck.

"Hi," Mark said, puzzled, and then suddenly realized why the young man was shaking like a leaf – it was because he was talking to what he thought was an extremely attractive, curvaceous girl. Mark felt a curious rush of power, remembering back to how hard it had been for him to approach Candi to ask her to prom, and now, here he was, with the shoe on the other foot, the one being approached.

"I really like your costume," the young man said, shooting Louis an apologetic look. "I was just, uh, wondering if I could take a picture with you?" Mark and Louis exchanged incredulous looks, and Mark was opening his mouth to politely refuse when Louis cut him off.

"Sure," he said. "I don't mind, *babe*. Go ahead." Mark's expression soured as he realized what was going on: Louis had emphasized the word "babe" just to make sure this guy knew he was "Aurora's" boyfriend, and not only that, was secure enough in himself to let his ultra-hot girlfriend take pictures with drooling fan-boys. Of course, now Mark had no way of saying "no" without looking rude. To his indignation, however, the photographer had seemed to take Louis's answer as final without even waiting for Mark to agree, taking off his camera and handing it to Louis. Mark found himself smiling awkwardly for the photo as his new friend put a very nervous, sweaty hand in the small of his back.

"Thanks a lot," Mark said sarcastically, once the photographer had taken his camera back and hurried away. "I don't need photos of me in this get-up floating around the internet, Louis."

Unfortunately for Mark, the one brave fan boy's action seemed to have unlocked the floodgates, because as he and Louis made their way through the convention, it seemed he could barely take three mincing steps before a new admirer would stop him to ask for a picture. At first Mark endured the attention with a scowl, mostly glaring at Louis for starting the whole thing, but eventually, despite himself, he started having some fun with it. He posed in several classic Aurora Cummings poses, hips cocked and head tilted cutely while giving the Nebula Quest salute, and even submitted to two fans in full Zanthian regalia giving him a peck on the cheek from each side as he stood with his arms draped over their shoulders, smiling sheepishly for the camera. As his latest admirers shuffled away, Mark was accosted by a deep, strangely familiar voice.



“Not bad, little miss. Think I can get one of those?”

Mark turned, first noticing the expression of shock and awe on Louis’ face, then turned all the way around and found himself face to face with none other than the dashing Captain Broussard, in the flesh, though dressed in a Nebula Quest T-shirt and jeans instead of the uniform he wore on the show.

In his shock, Mark couldn’t help but let slip a very un-lady-like, “Holy shit!” before clapping a sparkly manicured hand over his mouth and blushing brightly. Broussard only chuckled, clearly used to having such an effect on fans. He’d been a staple of the show from the very start, and the captain through all

six seasons, maturing from an impetuous young man to a wise and charismatic leader – at least, on the show, anyway. The actor, Bradley Jenkins, had always had a bit of a reputation as a cad and ladies' man, which naturally only made him more popular with the female fans. Now, at age thirty, he was still handsome and oozed charm with every word.

"Don't tell Mel, but I think you look even better in that outfit than she did," the actor said suavely. "Devoted fan of the show, I assume?"

"Um, yeah," Mark said, finding his brain short-circuiting as he tried to form an intelligent reply. Here he was, face to face with his childhood hero, stuck wearing fake boobs, a skimpy leotard, and totally made over as a sexy cosplay temptress. And judging by the way Jenkins was staring at him, he was more than impressed with the results! "Yeah, I mean, I've watched every episode a billion times," Mark continued weakly. "I have a poster of you right over my bed!"

"Is that so?" Jenkins asked with a grin.

"I mean, and the rest of the cast, too," Mark stammered. "Not just you. I didn't know you were coming to ComicCon, there was a rumor online but..."

"It was a last-minute decision, but I'm glad I did," Jenkins said, with a casual shrug. "The fans are always so great, and it's nice to give something back, you know? And I love judging the costume contest! Now, how would you like a photo with your Captain?"

Mark swapped looks with Louis, who was still too star-struck to form words. "Yeah, definitely!" Mark said, his desire to converse with his childhood idol overriding the fact that he was doing it while dressed up as Aurora Cummings. "Louis, could you, uh...?"

Louis snapped out of his trance and fumbled to take his phone out of his pocket. "Sure," he said. "Wow, uh, Broussard, there was this question I always had about episode 23 at the end of season 4..."

"You can ask at the panel, kid," Jenkins said brusquely. "Snap that picture, huh?" He stepped in close and wrapped both hands around Mark's tiny waist. Mark's smile faltered slightly at the sensation of having a grown man's groin pressed up against his padded behind, but he managed to flash his pearly whites for the photo.

"What do you think?" Louis asked eagerly, showing Jenkins the photo on his phone. It showed a slightly-nervous looking Aurora posing with her hands on her hips while the handsome Captain Broussard hugged her suggestively from behind, giving the camera a mischievous grin over her shoulder. By now, several fans had realized who was in their midst, and were swarming jealously around them, trying to catch the actor's attention.

"Cute," Jenkins said, giving Mark a wink. "But we can do better. How about one with you giving your Captain a little kiss?" He turned and gave Louis an innocent grin. "You don't mind, do you, champ? You're one lucky guy, having a

girlfriend who likes playing dress-up. I bet she'd really be something in one of those Zanthian harem outfits. Just an idea!"

Mark's pretty pink mouth fell open in stunned embarrassment. Louis, to his credit, was blushing just about as much as his friend at the remark. Or was it because he was imagining 'Marci' in that ultra-slutty get-up from season 1, episode 29? Either way, Mark realized they now had an audience: at least twenty fans had zeroed in on Captain Broussard's unexpected appearance, and were now watching as the actor slipped his hand around Mark's waist again for the next photo op.

"What do you say, Lieutenant?" Jenkins said teasingly. "Just for old times' sake!" Mark looked desperately to Louis for help, but his friend just gave him a helpless look and mouthed something that seemed to be "It's Captain-freaking-Broussard!"

"I... I don't know..." Mark stammered anxiously. He was having sudden flashbacks to prom, to Sven groping him on the dance floor and kissing him in the car. His knees trembled at the traumatic memory.

"If she doesn't want to kiss you, I will!" wailed an eager fan-girl from the crowd. Several people laughed, and even Jenkins gave a permissive chuckle, though at the same time he pulled Mark in closer. Caught off-guard by the bold move, Mark stumbled slightly on his high heels and found himself putting his splayed hands up against Jenkins' broad, muscular chest for balance. With his long, glittery pink nails, Mark's hands looked undeniably delicate and feminine. That, together with the fact that Jenkins towered over him, even despite his stilettos, made Mark feel incredibly vulnerable.

"Kiss!" a fan in the crowd started chanting. "Kiss, kiss, kiss!" Mark shot Louis another look, but his friend looked just as overwhelmed as he felt. The last thing he wanted was for his best friend to witness him kissing a guy, but at the same time, if Jenkins was judging the costume contest, this was his best chance to make sure he won... With his head spinning, Mark bowed to the pressure of the crowd, slowly leaned forward and planted a dainty peck on Jenkins' smooth-shaven cheek as Louis snapped the photo. The crowd groaned at the tame display, obviously having been hoping for an honest-to-goodness kiss on the lips, but Jenkins didn't seem to mind.

"Great photo," he said, smiling. "You'll have to send it to me. Here's my number." He scribbled down a phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to Mark, who, still stunned by the whole affair, accepted it wordlessly.

"Maybe now we can get one with the three of us?" Louis suggested sourly.

"Of course!" Jenkins said cheerfully. "My favorite Private and my favorite Lieutenant!" He put an arm around each of their shoulders, and this time Mark managed a genuine smile as a volunteer from the crowd snapped several pictures of them all together. It certainly brightened Louis' mood, too, and Jenkins

gave him a warm handshake, and Mark a slightly-too-lingering hug, before heading off to prepare for the panel.

"Wow," Louis said. "That was, uh, really something."

"You better never mention this again," Mark said quietly, still recovering from the embarrassment of being hit on by his childhood hero.

"Mention what? You kissing Captain Broussard?" Louis just laughed. "Heck, Mark... Uh, Marci... I would kiss him, too. It's Captain-freaking-Broussard!"

"So you're not going to bug me about it?" Mark asked suspiciously.

"Never," Louis said, putting a hand to his heart. "Scout's honor. If you weren't in this get-up, I never would have gotten to meet him. As far as I'm concerned, you're taking one for the team in a big way, and I owe you one. Unless, of course, you win the costume contest. Then sodas are on you!" He paused, with an uncomfortable expression. "That reminds me, I really need to hit the bathroom. That last soft drink finally caught up to me."

"Are you sure it wasn't just the excitement?" Mark asked snarkily.

"Very funny," Louis said. "Okay, I have to hit the men's room. Be right back."

"You can't leave me out here!" Mark hissed, clinging to Louis' arm, unintentionally in a very "damsel in distress" way. "That guy dressed up as a Zanthian over there is staring at me like I'm a steak!"

"I'm sorry," Louis said, not trying particularly hard to remove Mark's manicured hand from his bicep. "But when nature calls, a dude has to answer! Hey, look, why don't you just go to the ladies' room? I'll be out in a second, and that way you won't have to worry about any guys bothering you." Mark gulped audibly. "What?" Louis asked, frowning.

"The ladies' room?" Mark asked in a near whisper.

"Yeah," Louis said. "Look, you can't use the guys' room looking like that. People would freak."

"It's just..." Mark screwed up his face. "I've never been in the ladies' room before."

"It's not some mystical portal to another dimension," Louis said dryly. "I'm pretty sure they use toilets and sinks like we do."

"Ugh, alright," Mark snapped, blushing. "Just... Hurry up about it, okay?"

"I would, if you would let go of my arm," Louis shot back. Mark, who hadn't realized he'd been clutching at Louis like a needy girlfriend, quickly let go of as if his arm was a rattlesnake. Mark took a deep breath as they made their way toward the bathrooms. He stared longingly at the familiar little stick-man on the right, outlined in blue and urging him into the usual sanctuary, but he knew his destination lay on the left, with the pink stick-woman wearing a triangle for a skirt. *You pass, remember?* Mark told himself. *Heck, you pass so well, your*

best friend is pretending to be your boyfriend to make himself look good... You pass so well Captain Broussard wanted a picture with you...

All the same, as they parted ways Mark couldn't shake the fear that the ladies' room might have some kind of 'man detector' that would start whooping and wailing as soon as he entered the hallowed space, or that the girls inside would be speaking in some kind of bizarre lingo he would be expected to know. He felt himself beginning to hyperventilate as he stepped inside. What if someone asked him for a tampon? Would it be weird to not have a tampon? But then, wouldn't that mean it was weird for the girl asking him for a tampon to not have a tampon?

He was so wrapped up in his terrified thought process that he ran right into a bespectacled woman who was leaving. "Sorry!" Mark squealed, still using his best 'Aurora' voice. The woman pushed her glasses up her nose and gave Mark a disparaging look.

"I guess it's hard to see where you're going when you have to look over your boobs all the time," she said snottily, then pushed past, leaving Mark standing there open-mouthed in stunned indignation. He turned around, trying to think of something to shout after her, but she was gone before he could think up anything even remotely snappy. The nerve! Like it was his fault he was well-endowed! *Oh, wait, it is*, Mark thought dazedly. She was obviously just jealous, though, he decided, but as he clicked his way into the bathroom he couldn't help but hunch his shoulders a little bit, wishing there was a way he could make his fake boobs look a bit smaller.

Inside, Mark was surprised to find a line-up for the stalls, and, though he really should have guessed, a complete lack of urinals. All of the occupants shot him looks varying from amused to disdainful. There was another Aurora waiting in line, though dressed in the much more modest outfit from season 1. She was cute, if a bit pudgy, and had a nice smile. Mark thought fleetingly of striking up a conversation with her, acknowledging their shared costume, but any desire to do so instantly left him when the girl, catching sight of him, sneered and turned to her friend to say, in a stage whisper, "I thought of going in the reboot costume, but then I remembered I'm not a hooker... You should have seen the way she was throwing herself at Bradley Jenkins!" Several of the women around her laughed, or at least gave permissive smiles, and Mark felt his cheeks go beet red with embarrassment, suddenly hyperaware once more of his thigh-high boots and skimpy leotard. The guys didn't seem to take issue with it, but the girls, on the other hand, were treating him like some kind of pariah!

Deciding he didn't want to join the line for the stall after all, Mark turned on his heel and swished over to the sinks instead, where he could pretend to fix his makeup for a few minutes while Louis did his business in the men's room. The woman beside him, who was fixing her antenna headband, gave him a bemused

“you must be joking” look, but said nothing. Mark did his best to ignore her, pursing his lips primly together. As he did so, he realized that in his nervousness he had ended up biting his lip and ‘eating’ the gloss off, leaving a conspicuous smear. Forehead wrinkled in concentration, Mark leaned forward and dabbed at his pouted lips with a tissue, trying to correct the damage, and inadvertently providing the perfect picture of a self-obsessed bimbo flirting with the mirror. He tried to ignore the few more catty looks he attracted, focusing on his makeup instead.

He was so focused, in fact, that he didn’t notice the girl sidling up beside him at the mirror until she gave a sigh of relief and nudged his arm. Mark looked over to see a very attractive girl, about his age, wearing a very skimpy skirt and glittery, cleavage-baring top.

“Oh, thank God,” she said brightly. “I seriously thought I was the only one who got roped into this! Which agency are you with?”

“Huh?” Mark asked, confused.

“My agent booked me this stupid booth babe gig through Model List,” the girl continued. “Can you believe that? He said I would get good exposure... Sure, if by exposure he means strutting around dressed like a prostitute while a bunch of horny nerds get nervous and sweaty just asking to take photos with me. I mean, I guess my costume’s not as bad as yours, but still...” She paused for a moment, hands on her hips, looking Mark up and down appraisingly. “I mean, you look hot, girl, but come on. Outside of this building, you’re getting picked up for soliciting, you know? Great legs, by the way, you’re totally working those boots.”

Mark flushed bright red as he realized the mistake that had been made. “Oh, no,” he said in a tiny voice. “I’m not a... I’m just... I’m not with a modeling agency.”

“Oh?” the girl, who was now beginning to look strangely familiar, cocked her head. “Did some friend drag you into it or something?”

“I’m just a fan,” Mark finally admitted. The girl’s expression shifted to one of momentary horror at her mistake, then moved quickly to a smile.

“Oh, my god,” she said, with just a hint of a smirk on her pretty features. “I’m sorry, girl, I just totally assumed from the get-up... Well, you’re totally working it, you know? Talk about confidence! You make one sexy space stripper, or whatever, is all I’m saying, right? Like, you totally committed to it, and that’s awesome.”

“Thanks,” Mark managed to say faintly.

“I’m Janice,” the girl said, sticking out her hand, and suddenly Mark realized why she seemed so familiar... This was his infamous cousin! Well, Mark certainly wasn’t about to divulge his real identity. He was sure his aunt would never let his mom hear the end of it.

"Marci," Mark said, shaking his cousin's hand. Eager to reassure her that he wasn't just some slutty bimbo who liked getting attention, he added, "I'm trying to win the costume contest. I need money for college, my mom doesn't want me getting too into debt with student loans..."

"Oh, I just finished high school, too!" Janice chirped. "Where did you get in? Are you still deciding? I think I've settled on mine."

"Well," Mark said slowly, unsure how much information he wanted to give away. "I was accepted to this one place, Pembleton University College."

"Oh, neat," his cousin said. "That was my second choice. I'm heading to Berkeley, but Pembleton definitely caught my eye."

"It's not settled yet, or anything," Mark said hastily. "I mean, schools like that are so expensive, right?"

"Is it?" Janice asked innocently. "I guess I never thought about that. Maybe you can find some kind of special, I dunno, aid scholarship?"

"Maybe," Mark said, giving her a weak smile. "My... Friend is probably waiting for me. We're going to the Nebula Quest panel for the costume contest results."

"Girl, with a costume like that, I'm sure you'll win the whole thing," Janice beamed. "Good luck! I'm going to keep hiding out in here as long as possible."



Let the dumb merchandise sell itself for a while. God, I hate being around all these nerds! Except for you, of course, I mean, you seem great.”

“Thanks!” Mark said awkwardly. “Uh, see you!” He hurried out of the bathroom to where an exasperated-looking Louis was waiting.

“Jeez, Marci, you take as long as...” He lowered his voice slightly. “As a girl. Come on, we have to hurry it over to the panel if we want to get anywhere near the front!” He paused, seeing the strange expression on Mark’s face. “What did you see in there?” Louis asked, frowning. Mark shook himself.

“A portal to another dimension,” he joked in a spooky voice. “Come on, let’s go. I can’t wait to have this all over with and take this stupid outfit off.”

“I think most of the guys here would like to see that,” Louis joked.

“They’d be getting a bit of a surprise,” Mark said, blushing. “Now let’s get going.” He gamely submitted to Louis taking his hand, reminding himself that the charade was only going to last a few hours more at most. And 1000 dollars would make it all completely worth it...



It seemed like every single person at the convention was making a bee-line for the Nebula Quest panel, having heard that Bradley Jenkins himself had made a surprise visit. Mark and Louis got quickly caught up in the flow of fans heading in that direction, and Mark was almost grateful to have Louis holding his hand to prevent them getting separated. The pair of teens managed to work their way to the front of the crowd, where a stage with folding chairs and tables had been set up. A few script writers and minor actors were already seated, but all eyes were on Jenkins as he took the microphone.

“Hey, guys,” the actor said warmly, grinning at the excited shrieks from several girls in the crowd. “I am so glad you all made it out! And I have been seeing some truly kick-ass costumes, so to kick off our panel, we’re going to be announcing the contest finalists!” He looked over the crowd, and Mark, who was now sweating bullets, could have sworn he got a wink. “So, we’ve had our ‘talent scouts’ out and about in the convention all day,” Jenkins continued. “And they’ve selected the three costumes that have made the biggest splash. Without further ado...” He held up a piece of paper and cleared his throat. “Ultra-realistic Zanthian shock trooper!”

The fan in question, who was decked out in what Mark had to admit was an impressively true-to-show home-made costume, pumped his fist in the air and made his way through the crowd to get up on stage, standing beside Jenkins.

“Lieutenant Steele from episode 35 when he had the Blobus Disease!” Jenkins announced. The crowd laughed and applauded as a guy wearing the same Lieutenant Steele costume as Louis, except with a thick layer of bubble-wrap

underneath and some impressive make-up work on his face, came up to the stage. Louis nudged Mark.

"I wish I had thought of that!" he muttered. Mark, too nervous to respond, only nodded his head, fixing his hair again. "Don't worry," Louis said emphatically. "He's only working the crowd. Of course he's going to pick you last!"

"You don't know that..." Mark murmured, folding his arms anxiously.

"Just watch," Louis said reassuringly, putting an arm around Mark's slender shoulders in a way that actually felt sort of comforting, if Mark was honest with himself.

"And last, but certainly not least, a certain Private Aurora Cummings..." Jenkins said, trailing off. A hopeful murmur went up from the half-dozen Aurora Cummings impersonators in the crowd. Mark's heart leapt into his throat. "Wearing the uniform from a certain reboot!" Jenkins finished.

Mark could hardly contain himself. Practically tasting the 1000 dollar prize, he gave Louis a quick hug – after all, what girl wouldn't accept a congratulatory hug from her boyfriend? – and made his way towards the stage. Several girls moaned and groaned, but they were easily drowned out by the clapping and whistling from the guys in the crowd. As he arrived at the edge of the stage, he accepted help from Jenkins and the Zanthian to get up, inadvertently giving the crowd quite a view of his plump, heart-shaped backside in its tight leotard covering. A wolf whistle made him blush furiously as he joined the other finalists on stage.

"Now, let's get to know our three awesome finalists," Jenkins said. "Talk about a line-up of die-hard fans! When I saw this Zanthian over here, I was reaching for my photon blaster!" The crowd chuckled. Mark stood nervously as Jenkins interviewed each of the other finalists in turn, trying to ignore the fact that at least half of the camera flashes were being pointed in his direction! He caught sight of Louis in the crowd, giving him a thumbs-up, and Mark returned it with a sheepish smile just as Jenkins arrived with his microphone.

"And as for our lovely third contestant here, let's just say it's a good thing the original Aurora Cummings, my good friend Melody Turner, is too busy filming to come to conventions... Because she'd be awfully jealous of how you're rocking that costume!" Jenkins said. Mark blushed as there were several more cat-calls and cheers from the crowd, but despite himself he smiled a little, too. The fact that about a hundred peoples' eyes were all on him was terrifying, but at the same time, sort of exciting. "So, what's your name, sweetheart?" Jenkins asked friendly.

"Marci," Mark said automatically.

"Just Marci?" Jenkins queried.

"Marci, uh, Summers," Mark said.



“Marci Summers,” Jenkins repeated. “Pretty name for a pretty girl. Tell me, Marci, why did you want to be Aurora for Comicon?”

“Well, uh, she’s always been one of my favorite characters on the show...” Mark began, realizing he couldn’t exactly say he’d lost a bet. “She kicks just as much ass as the guys, but she does it wearing high heels!” he quipped. To his surprise, the crowd laughed and clapped appreciatively, and even a few of the girls nodded in approval.

“And why did you go for the reboot costume?” Jenkins asked. “No complaints from me, by the way.” The crowd laughed again. This time, Mark figured honesty was the best policy. Or at least, almost-honesty.

“My, uh, boyfriend ordered it by accident instead of the normal uniform,” he said.

“Accident,” Jenkins said, wiggling his eyebrows. “Yeah, that doesn’t sound suspicious at all! I think your boyfriend knew exactly what he was doing, sweetheart!” The crowd laughed, and Mark could see Louis in the crowd, red in the face but grinning along sheepishly. Jenkins swaggered back to the center of the stage, clearly loving every minute of it. “Well, this is as tough a decision as I’ve ever had to make,” he said earnestly. “These are three incredible costumes, but

unfortunately the grand prize can only go to one fan. And the one who really caught my eye, who really made my jaw drop..."

Mark bit his lip hopefully as Jenkins walked over. This was it! He was about to win 1000 big ones, and all he'd had to do was wear a dumb costume for a day!

"Was Nathan the Zanthian warrior!" Jenkins announced. "Congratulations, Nathan, you just made yourself some serious cash!" Mark's mouth fell open as the Zanthian began performing some kind of victory dance. He couldn't believe it. Jenkins had been smiling and winking at him the whole time they'd been onstage, only to pull the rug out from under him at the last moment. "Sorry, sweetheart," Jenkins said, coming over to give Mark a consoling pat on the hand. "But as far as I'm concerned, with looks like that you already won the lotto. I can't just give you the prize for being the hottest girl here – there has to be a little bit of creativity, you know?"

"But... But... I'm a guy," Mark protested in a near-whisper. To his embarrassment, Jenkins just chuckled.

"Nice try," he said. "But I've worked around stage makeup and prosthetics half my life, and I can tell the real deal from a drag queen any day. You're as girl as they come, sweetheart." He gave a salacious wink. "I'm in town all weekend, and you've got my number. How about you come over to my hotel tonight with that costume on and we have a little fun?" Mark didn't even dignify the proposal with a reply. Instead, he turned and marched to the edge of the stage, where Nathan the Zanthian and the diseased Lieutenant Steele were more than happy to help him down. Louis was waiting for him with a bereaved expression.

"Jesus, I'm sorry," he said. "After all that work... I really thought you were going to win it."

"It's okay," Mark said miserably. "I mean, it was dumb to count on winning in the first place."

"Do you, uh, need a hug?" Louis asked, blushing. "I mean, as a friend thing. I will do my best not to think about your big boobs."

"Enjoy them while you can," Mark said dryly. "Once we're out of here, I'm going back to my usual flat-chested self." Still, he acquiesced to an awkward one-armed hug. In the middle of it, however, they were interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Marci Summers! Oh my god, I can't believe I didn't, like, put it together!" Mark turned, and, to his horror, saw his cousin Janice standing there with her hand on her hip and a huge grin on her pretty face. "I knew you looked familiar for some reason," Janice said again. "And since everyone was heading to the costume thing, I decided to swing by and see what was going on. I'm so glad I did, because, like, I had always thought everyone on my aunt's side of the fam-

ily was super lame and boring. I had no idea you were transgendered! That's so cool, cuz!"

Mark gave his cousin a look of pure horror, and she immediately clapped her hands over her mouth.

"Oh, my god, did your boyfriend not know?" she wailed. "Did I just out you? I am so, so sorry, Mark! I mean, Marci!" She turned to Louis. "Dude, forget I said anything," she said seriously. "I mean, your girlfriend is smoking hot no matter what, isn't she?"

"Janice, you've got it all wrong," Mark said desperately. "He's not... We're not..."

"I'm not her boyfriend!" Louis protested. "I mean, his boyfriend. We're just friends, and he lost a bet so he had to come to Comicon dressed as a chick, that's all!" Janice's eyes narrowed.

"Oh," she said. "So you're just, like, a drag queen?"

"I'm not a drag queen," Mark said through gritted teeth. "I'm a guy who lost a bet, okay?"

"Sorry, Mark, but I saw you working those stilettos," Janice said. "No way is this your first time in heels! What's your drag name?"

"Janice," Mark groaned. "Please, don't make this into a big thing. I don't want..."

"Don't worry, cuz, your secret is safe with me," Janice said happily. "Oh my god, this is so cool. I always thought you were such a dweeb, but you're actually secretly a fabulous gay cross-dresser! I want your number so we can swap fashion tips, okay?" She held out her phone, and Mark reluctantly took it and entered his number, hoping to end the interaction as quickly as possible.

"Just please don't tell your mom," Mark begged, handing the phone back.

"No way," Janice said. "She totally wouldn't even understand. But I do, Marci! And by the way, your boyfriend is kind of a hunk. Why are all the good ones taken or gay? Anyways, got to get back to my booth. Later!" Janice flounced off, leaving both Mark and Louis somewhat shell-shocked in her absence.

"Well," Louis said slowly. "That was unexpected."

"She's already texting me," Mark groaned, looking down at his phone. "This is not going to end well. Come on, let's go." He reached automatically to take Louis' hand, as they'd been doing all afternoon, but his friend shrank away with a pained expression on his face.

"What are you doing?" Louis asked, frowning. Mark's mouth fell open and he blushed.

"I... I just thought, since we're still pretending to be..." he trailed off, embarrassed, returning his hand to his side.

"Your cousin thought I was gay," Louis said, with a slightly dazed expression. "I am not gay. You know that, right?"

"Of course," Mark sputtered. "It's just a big misunderstanding, that's all." To his dismay, he saw an expression of suspicion cross his best friend's face.

"And she thought you were, like, transsexual," Louis continued. "Jeez."

"I know," Mark said weakly. "She's crazy, right?"

"Is she?" Louis demanded. "I mean, I know you've just been 'playing the part' or whatever, but you seemed to be getting really, really into it. Like, too into it." He stuffed his hands in his pockets again, looking embarrassed.

"Excuse me?" Mark snapped. "You're the one who wanted me to be your fake girlfriend, remember?"

"That's because you're scarily good at it," Louis shot right back. "Was prom really the only other time you've done this? Are you, like..." He trailed off, obviously struggling to bring himself to say it. "Mark, are you what she said?"

Mark flushed bright red. "Screw you!" he said. "This whole thing was your idea! The bet was your idea! How dare you... How dare you ask me..." He sputtered out angrily, and to his surprise, found himself blinking back tears. Had it been that obvious he'd enjoyed himself being 'Marci' again? Had Louis noticed how Mark felt like a totally different person? "Well, what if I was?" Mark snapped defiantly. "What then, huh?"

"Don't even say that," Louis snapped. "Look, I'm sorry I brought it up. Your cousin just pissed me off, that's all. I know it was just for the bet, right?"

"Right," Mark said bitterly. "Just for the bet. Let's go, already."



Mark arrived home in a funk after a silent car trip, and wasted no time in peeling off his costume, removing his boots, and using the solvent to carefully remove his boobs, as well. The prosthetics left small red rings around his nipples, and once he had struggled out of his waist cincher he realized that he had marks from that, too. Feeling like a sausage finally released from its casing, he dealt with his wig and makeup before hopping in the shower, trying to collect his thoughts.

It was difficult to decide exactly how he felt about a day in which he'd spent several hours traipsing around in thigh-high stiletto boots and an extremely revealing costume, being hit on by not only fan-boys, but also his childhood hero, playing the part of his best friend's girlfriend, and running into his cousin in the ladies' room. Now, she thought he was a transsexual of some kind, but worse, his best friend suspected as much, too. Agreeing to go to the Comicon in costume had been a huge mistake.

At the same time, however, he couldn't help but think back to all the admiring glances and friendly conversations he'd had, and the sound of the crowd applauding for him as he got up on stage. And even if Captain Broussard had turned out to be a bit of a jerk, not any Nebula Quest fan could say they had gotten the star of the show's phone number. Maybe he could sell it on E-Bay, or something...

Trying not to think about his fight with Louis, instead thinking more positively about the whole thing, Mark got out of the shower and wrapped himself in a towel. As for the costume contest, and all the business with Janice, maybe it was a sign that he wasn't supposed to go to Pembleton after all. Maybe it would be better if he just kept his head down and applied to community college like most of the kids from his high school. The thought was a depressing one, but without taking out some seriously huge student loans, there was just no way he could afford a better school. Mark sighed and set to work removing his fake nails. Tomorrow, he decided, he was going to go to the community college and ask about enrollment. Time was running out, after all.

As he worked, he looked at his reflection in the mirror, and missed seeing "Marci's" pouty pink lips and long fluttering eyelashes looking back at him. Without his hair and makeup done, he was just a skinny, somewhat androgynous-looking boy – definitely not the kind of person who turned heads on the street. As "Marci," however, it was a different story entirely. Being Marci made him forget all about the bullying, and being invisible to girls, and pretty much every other problem he'd had. Being Marci felt... right. But how on Earth was he supposed to tell that to Louis? Or even his own mom? Might Janice actually have been right?

Mark sat down at his computer and, out of habit, went to the Pembleton University College website. If only there was a way to be Marci for more than just a day, a way to figure out if it was really something more than a weird compulsion brought about by the Swedish twins' manipulations. And if only there was a way to go to his dream school instead of a second-rate community college.

At that very moment, his phone buzzed with a new text message from Janice. Expecting another offer to go shopping together, Mark reluctantly opened it and read it.

HEY CUZ! DUR WHAT U SAID ABOUT NEEDING TO PAY 4 SCHOOL
AND MY OLD CHEERLEADING COACH WORX 4 THIS PLACE
CALLED THE WELLER FOUNDATION. GOOGLE SEARCH IT!

Why did that sound so familiar? On instinct, Mark scrolled back towards the scholarship offers, and his eye caught on a specific line yet again. The Weller Foundation was offering a full-ride scholarship, sponsoring one eligible student entering their first year of college, with one major, major caveat: the scholarship was to go towards a young transgendered individual. He gulped, as what had previously been a momentary flight of fancy formed into a fully-fledged

idea, imagining all four years with everything paid for, not just room and board, but also medical expenses, student insurance, transportation, even an allotment of spending money.

What if there was a way to kill two birds with one stone?



The next day, when Mark's mom arrived home from work, she was surprised to find her only son waiting on the couch for her with a serious expression.

"Mom, we need to talk," Mark said, patting the empty spot on the couch beside him.

"This is a change," she remarked. "Usually it's the other way around. What did I do?" She slowly took a seat.

"You know how badly I want to go to Pembleton, right?" Mark said immediately. She sighed in response.

"Mark, if this is about taking out loans..." she said, with a pained expression.

"No, it's not that," Mark said hastily. "It's something else. Here, look at this." He handed her a printed-up brochure bearing the name of some charitable foundation she had never heard of. When she flipped it open, she saw immediately what had drawn her son's attention.

"They're giving away a full ride scholarship?" she asked, skimming the information.

"All four years," Mark confirmed. "Everything is paid for, and I mean everything. Not just your room and board, but also medical expenses, student insurance, transportation... There's even an allotment of spending money!" He watched his mom's expression as she reached the end of the brochure. Predictably, her eyes widened.

"Mark, honey," she said slowly. "This is for a transsexual student. I know you've been growing up quite a bit in the past year, you know, getting your first job... Making some new friends..."

"I wouldn't really consider Helga and Inga friends any longer," Mark said, frowning.

"And I *have* noticed some changes in you," Mark's mom continued. "In your behavior, and how you dress, and everything. But are you trying to tell me..?"

"No way!" Mark said staunchly. "I'm not gay or anything, but look at it logically, mom. I could go to the best possible school and get the best possible education, all on their dime, and all I need to do is convince the foundation's representative that, you know, I'm...you know what."

"So, you would pose as a transgender student?" his mom asked, with a pained expression.

"Just temporarily," Mark said. "Janice knows somebody who works for the foundation, and she got me a whole bunch of information on it."

"Wait... *Janice*?" his mom interrupted. "As in, your *cousin* Janice?"

"It's kind of a long story," Mark said awkwardly. "I ran into her at Comicon and we sort of got to talking about stuff, and she sort of thinks I'm transgender."

"Ah, right," his mom said dryly. "Because you were dressed up as some kind of interstellar secretary, if I recall." Mark nodded, grinning weakly, very glad his mom hadn't been around to witness the end result of the costume mix-up. Interstellar secretary was one thing, space stripper was another. No need for his mom to know he'd been the latter all afternoon!

"Anyways, apparently my status as a transgender student will be kept totally confidential," Mark went on. "They want me to be totally comfortable, so my official gender won't be accessible knowledge to students or faculty. And if I get this scholarship, it's not like they send spies to watch me at college. They're based in New York! All I have to do is convince the foundation's representative that I'm transgendered and I deserve the scholarship."

"And then you 'decide' you don't want to be a girl after all?" his mom asked, but rather than skepticism, her voice was increasingly intrigued.

"I know it's not totally honest," Mark admitted. "But apparently gender identity isn't even set in stone for several years after puberty. They can't stop me from going back on it if I want to. It's my life, after all."

"But what if you're taking this away from someone who's actually, genuinely transgendered?" Mark's mom asked, giving the last rational obstacle.

"Janice called their office," Mark said triumphantly, taking a deep breath. "They've had exactly zero applicants so far for the upcoming school year." That final point was enough to make Mark's mom's mind up, because a smile spread over her face.

"Okay," she said. "Let's do it. It's about time the Summers family got a break."

Mark couldn't agree more. He smiled back as the idea sank in. He could go to Pembleton. The idea made Mark feel weak in the knees. He'd passed without a problem in the salon. He'd passed at prom. He'd passed at Comicon. Those were all people who'd assumed he was a girl, and to get this scholarship, all he needed to do was pass as a boy who wanted to be a girl.

"There's just one thing," his mom said slowly, her smile slowly fading. "You're saying that all of this is more or less a hoax, correct? There's no truth to it at all?"

"What do you mean?" Mark asked, feeling his heart begin to pound.

"Well, you make such a pretty girl," his mom pointed out. "And you've always been naturally a little... Effeminate."

"No, I haven't!" Mark said flatly.

"I mean, you've always been so pretty, ever since you when you were a baby and people would ask me if you were a girl," his mom said, now building up steam now that she had finally broached the subject. "And you've never been much interested in cars, or sports, or girls..."

"I'm plenty interested in girls!" Mark protested, blushing. Had she somehow missed the fact that he'd spent the whole year nursing a huge crush on the hottest blonde in school? Of course, she had turned out to be a guy, but still...

"In a way, maybe," Mark's mom said delicately. "I mean, you were certainly very eager to get that job at the salon, and you seemed to really enjoy the camaraderie with Tiffany and the twins. You just have to admit, it's not typical employment for a young man, but you certainly took to it like a fish to water."

"I was a glorified janitor," Mark said, frowning. "Pretty much all I did was clean, it's not like I'm some kind of hairdressing prodigy or something!"

"You dressed up as a girl for Halloween," Mark's mom countered. "And you looked lovely. Tiffany showed me pictures from the party when I went to get that free manicure!" Mark clenched his teeth, angry but not fully surprised by another betrayal of confidence on the part of the salon's employees.

"It was just a costume," Mark said slowly and with emphasis.

"You picked another interesting costume for your comic thingy yesterday," his mom pointed out.

"That was on a bet!" Mark snapped. "I lost a bet with Louis. Jeez, mom, I can't believe I'm having this conversation. If you're going to make this weirder than it already is, maybe it's a bad idea!" Mark's mom took a deep breath, then sighed.

"Mark, I found lingerie and a dress hidden underneath your bed," she said, "And my poor purple dress will never be the same."

"You went into my room?" Mark demanded, first affronted at the lack of privacy.

"I was cleaning up!" his mom shot back, then, taking another deep breath, she continued. "At first I didn't know what to think. I thought that maybe you had a girlfriend you hadn't told me about, but that seemed a little far-fetched. And then I found the gel inserts for the bra, and I realized that it all had to belong to you."

Mark moaned. He realized it was time to come clean about exactly what had happened at the salon, so, bracing himself for her reaction, he gave her a summary version of how Inga and Helga had played him for a fool all year, culminating with them giving him a full makeover and stuffing him in a prom dress for a disastrous "date" with their cousin Sven. When he finished, his mom was shaking her head indignantly.

"No wonder you quit!" she exclaimed. "I'd like to march right down to that salon and give them a piece of my mind!"

"Don't do that," Mark sighed. "It's over now, and I'd rather just forget about the whole thing. But that's where I got this whole idea. I know I can pass for a girl, and I'm... Well... Good at it. So I figured I should use it to get the scholarship."

"So you're not transsexual?" his mom asked, frowning.

"Nope," Mark said firmly, even as his heart pounded away. "Not a bit." His mom gave him a long, quiet look.

"Honey," she said slowly. "You're a smart boy. Your grades prove that, now that you finally started applying yourself. Are you sure those girls at the salon weren't able to manipulate you so easily because somewhere, deep down, you wanted to let it all happen?" Mark stared back, open-mouthed. She had just voiced a question he had been asking himself for months now, though never aloud.

"Of course not," he blustered. "I mean, what guy would want... Would let himself..."

"One who doesn't feel like a guy, at least, not all the time," his mom said gently. "Maybe one who sometimes... Feels like they were born in the wrong body?"

"What?" Mark asked, uncomprehending.

"I read up on all this stuff after I found the dress," his mom said. "Prom was months ago, Mark. Why didn't you just get rid of it?"

"I don't know," Mark said quietly, eyes brimming with tears. "But maybe this is my chance to find out. It's just that... If Louis knew..."

"I understand, honey," his mom said, hugging him.

"He's the only friend I've got," Mark said, sniffing.

"Then we'll tell him exactly what's going on," his mom said firmly. "You're getting a scholarship the only way you know how, and it's all one big hoax. Right?"

"Right," Mark said softly. "Thanks, mom."

"And I know you're up to the challenge," she said, with a bracing smile. "When should we schedule the interview?"

"I already did," Mark admitted. "Janice helped me skip the line. It's in one week."

"Then you'd better start practicing up," his mom said, smiling.

"I thought I was already good at being a girl?" Mark asked, recalling her earlier remark.

"At a costume party or a prom is not the same thing as everyday life," his mom said. "You need to *act* like you were born in the wrong body, remember? That means all of your body language needs to be feminine at all times. Don't worry, dear, I'm going to help my new 'daughter' every step of the way."

"All right," Mark said, trying not to grin too much. "Uh, Janice wants to help out, too."

"Seriously?" his mom asked. "Are you trying to tell me you and Janice are actually going to be friends?"

"Well, she's the one who got me thinking about the scholarship," Mark pointed out. "And she doesn't seem so bad. She's just kind of used to the spotlight, is all. I kind of understand where she's coming from."

"Well, well," his mom said. "Looks like 'Marci' is a little more empathetic than Mark ever was. Maybe I'll have to follow suit and give that awful sister of mine a phone call soon." She made an exaggerated grimace, and Mark laughed. His mom leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. "I guess I'm saying good-night to my son for the last time in a little while," she said. "Starting bright and early tomorrow morning, it's all daughter, all the time. Think you can handle it?"

"I think I can," Mark grinned.

As he crawled into bed that night, he felt, for the first time in a long time, both excited, nervous, and extremely hopeful for the future. The only complication was explaining the whole thing to Louis, and hoping he bought the story.

"It's not a story," Mark corrected himself. "You're doing this for the scholarship. Anything else is just extra."

Even so, he had a faint smile on his face as he drifted off to sleep.



Mark's mother wasted no time in putting his 'feminine education' into overdrive – in fact, the very next morning, he was awoken at 8:00 AM for his first full day as 'Marci.' He held up the plastic package of girls' underwear that she had tossed at him to wake him up.

"Remember," his mom said. "You signed up for this!"

"I know," Mark said. "But jeez, mom, when did you buy these? Don't I get to at least consult with you about my own underwear?"

"I was up late last night thinking about the whole thing, so I decided to run to Wal-Mart and get you at least a few essentials," his mom said with a shrug. "I figured you wouldn't want to share lingerie with your own mom, anyways."

"Got that right," Mark muttered under his breath. "Okay," he said bracingly. "I guess it's time to get this show on the road." His mom gave him a big smile and held up a package of bright pink disposable razors.

"Your first razor," she said, unable to contain her chuckle. "Of course, I kind of imagined you'd be using it on your face."

"So did I," Mark agreed, rubbing his cheeks which were still totally devoid of whiskers and showing no signs of changing their tune. Mark got out of bed and headed for the bathroom with the panties and razors in hand, becoming fully aware that this might very well be the last time he wore his boxer shorts for a while. The true momentousness of his decision began to sink in as he got into the shower. He wasn't being tricked or cajoled anymore – he had chosen this for himself, and now he was going to have to sleep in the bed he'd made. At least, for now.

Putting his thoughts aside, Mark set to work shaving his legs again. His prior experience had paid dividends, and he managed to perform the task efficiently without any nicks or scrapes. As he dried himself off with a towel, he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror and was forced to admit, yet again, that he certainly had legs any girl would envy, long and slender and undeniably sexy. He blushed remembering how Louis had been unable to take his eyes off them for more than a few minutes at a time, and immediately started thinking about how to tell his best friend about the scheme. He needed to make sure Louis knew he was doing it for the sake of a scholarship.

Satisfied, Mark opened up the package of bikini-cut cotton panties and picked out a pair in cornflower blue. Sliding them up his smooth-shaven legs, Mark gritted his teeth and tucked his manhood back how Tiffany had shown him, giving him a flat, feminine profile.

By the time he was out of the bathroom, his mom was removing several more items from the shopping bags now covering his bed. She turned around, holding up a bra for him to try on, but as she did so her eyes went to her son's concealed crotch and widened in surprise. "Uh! Where did it go?" she asked. "If you don't mind my asking," Mark blushed.

"It's called 'tucking,'" he said. "It's how drag performers can wear such skimpy costumes. Everything is, uh..."

"Tucked," his mom said. "Right. Sorry, dear, it was just a bit of a shock." She held up the matching cornflower blue bra. "You're going to be an A-cup, hope you don't mind." She handed him the feminine garment and watched him expectantly.

"Well, I guess it is genetic, right?" Mark joked, trying to downplay the bizarre fact that he was putting on a bra in front of his mom. She gave him a swat on the arm. He briefly considered pretending he didn't know how to put it on, but he figured that was only setting him up for more difficulties later, like when she

realized how well he could walk in high heels. He put the bra on back-to-front, did up the clasps, then spun it back around, positioned the empty cups over his paltry chest, and slipped the straps onto his shoulders.

"Not bad," his mom said, "But you could adjust the straps a little better. Here, let me help." She reached forward and helped him loosen the straps of the bra slightly on his slender shoulders. "This way you won't have such red marks afterward when you take it off," she explained. Next, she picked up two familiar shapes from the bed. Mark blanched slightly at the sight of the clear gel inserts, instantly remembering back to prom night when he'd been forced to use them to fill out his dress.

"I took them out from under your bed while you were in the bathroom," his mom explained. "Since you already have them, you might as well use them. It should make things easier when we go shopping today."

"Shopping?" Mark winced.

"Shopping," his mom said firmly. "Did you think we were just going to order everything online? You have to get used to being out and about as erm..." She paused. "You have a name, don't you, honey?"

"M... Marci," Mark stammered out, sheepishly.

"I should have guessed. Anyway. You have to get used to being out and about as if we're going to convince the representative you're serious about 'transitioning.'"

"I know," Mark said faintly. "I just hadn't really thought about... all of that." His mom took both of his hands in his.

"Look, Mark, we're not going to do this if you start having second thoughts," she said seriously. "At any time you think you want to pull out, just tell me."

"I'm in," Mark assured her. "So, uh, better start calling me Marci."

"Sorry, I forgot," his mom said. She beamed unexpectedly. "You know, I always did wonder what it would be like to have a daughter. Now, let's get your boobs in."

Mark slipped each of the gel inserts into the cups of his bra, which necessitated adjusting the straps a little more, but when all was said and done he had a small but noticeable feminine bust. His mom took a step back and gave a satisfied nod.

"Looking good," she said. "Okay, hair and makeup next. Hope you picked up a few things at the salon, because I want you to do as much as you can by yourself."

"Uh, I'll see what I can remember," Mark said, as his mom led the way to the bathroom mirror. He supposed it was lucky that he hadn't ended up cutting off all his hair following the prom incident. After a year of letting it grow out, it

was now near his shoulders, though since quitting the salon he'd refused to wear it anything but a (not-as-manly-as-he-thought) ponytail.

After a quick wash leaning over the tub, using a floral scented shampoo, his mom blow-dried his hair while simultaneously working with a comb and liberal amounts of hairspray. By committee, they decided using a hot iron would help give him a bit more 'bounce,' as Tiffany liked to call it, and he even agreed to let his mom give him bangs.

"Cute," she announced, pleased with the finished result. "Maybe I missed my calling. Think Tiffany has an opening for a new hairdresser?"

"Very funny," Mark said, but he had to admit that she'd done a good job with the scissors. He was now sporting a longer version of the chic bob he'd worn to prom, and it looked pretty good. By the time he'd reluctantly cleaned up the stray eyebrow hairs that had returned since his outing to Comicon, the reflection in the mirror was rapidly becoming more 'Marci' than Mark. All he needed now was makeup.

Mark made himself comfortable at his mom's vanity, staring down with some nervousness at the wide array of makeup products. He'd seen everything before at the salon, and had even tolerated the twins putting makeup on him and making him wear lip gloss to work, but starting from scratch on his own was not just intimidating, it felt like 'crossing over' to the other side, permanently.

"Of course, I already put on a bra and panties," Mark muttered to himself.

"What's that, honey?" his mom asked innocently. "Why not start with a bit of foundation?"

"Right," Mark said, taking a deep breath. "Just stop me when I start to look like a clown, okay?"

Despite his fears, it turned out Mark had soaked up more than he realized during his year working at the salon. His mom was amazed at how adept her son was as he daubed tiny spots of foundation across his nose and cheeks before blending it in expertly, then starting on his eye shadow. She only had to help him once, with the eyelash curler, and then only had to sit back and watch as Mark did the rest, even managing to highlight his cheekbones with a clever technique she was determined to try out for herself. When all was said and done, and Mark was finishing off his look with a plum lip gloss, she hardly recognized her own son in the teen beauty queen seated at her vanity.

"Wow, Marci," Mark's mom said, shaking her head. "If college doesn't work out, how about becoming a makeup artist? I think you've got the knack for it."

Mark sat back on the stool, pursing his lips together to spread out the gloss properly, and couldn't help but feel a tiny bit of pride at how well he'd managed to copy the salon's techniques. With the help of the eyelash curler and a generous coating of mascara, his normally unremarkable eyes now looked wide, limpid, and undeniably feminine, while his androgynous bone structure was

brought to the forefront with a bit of contouring. Sure, it wasn't quite up to Tiffany's standards, and was maybe a bit heavy for daytime, but he had a week to practice.

Just then, the sound of the doorbell interrupted his train of thought. Mark nearly jumped out of his skin. "Oh, that'll be Janice," he said, remembering she'd invited herself over to bring him some clothes. His mom wasn't quite as slim as she used to be, and her older things would look rather out of style, so Mark and his mom had sent Janice his measurements so she could throw a few things together.

"Can you get it?" Mark asked weakly. "I don't exactly relish the idea of the mailman walking by and seeing me like this."

"Of course, dear," his mom said with a smirk. "You can throw on one of my robes if you're still shy around your cousin."

"She's seen me in worse," Mark muttered, thinking back to the convention. His mom left to go let her in, and Mark listened to his cousin's high-pitched, high-speed greeting with a small sense of foreboding. Janice was excited about this. Very, very excited.

As if to confirm his suspicions, Janice all but bounced into the room a second later, arms loaded with bags of clothing, and gave a long squeal of incredulous delight at seeing her younger cousin all dolled up in a bra and panties. "I am sooo excited that you're finally coming out, cuz!" she beamed. "And not only coming out, but coming out in style! I've always wanted a gay best friend, and this is, like, even better, because we get to share clothes." She set to laying out the clothes on the bed, then spun around. "Okay, first question," Janice announced. "Pants or skirts?"

"It's supposed to be windy today," Mark's mom added.

"Uh, pants," Mark said. "I mean, I'm not really experienced with skirts. I would just feel more comfortable not having to worry about, you know, flashing someone accidentally on my first day out in public."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Janice said dolefully. "I guess there's plenty of time for miniskirts later, and trust me, those legs deserve to be shown off! But for now, how about you try these jeans?"

Mark's mother excused herself. "Looks like you're in good hands... Erm..."

"Marci," Mark reminded her.

"Marci. Yes. Let me go grab my jewelry box, so we can accessorize, too..." She bustled away, leaving Mark at his cousin's mercy.

He was no stranger to skinny jeans after a year of the twin's constant fashion advice, but Janice's selection was something else entirely, as he was soon to realize. The silver gray jeans were so tight that if not for the slight stretchiness of the denim, unique to girls' jeans, he never would gotten them past his calves,

never mind all the way up to his hips. And without his little tuck job with the tape, there was absolutely no way he would have fit into the front. After much wriggling and shimmying, he finally sucked in his already-flat stomach and did up the button.

"We *cannot* be the same size," Mark groaned. "These are way too tight."

"That's the style," Janice beamed. "And you'll totally think it's worth it when you see your butt in the mirror." Curious despite himself, Mark walked over to the mirror and inspected himself. The jeans were so tight as to be practically painted-on, flattering his slim, coltish legs, with stylish rips at the knees and thighs that gave enticing glimpses of his smooth-shaven skin. When he spun around at his cousin's insistence he was also confronted with the fact that the jeans seemed designed to mercilessly lift and squeeze his buttocks in such a way as to create definite feminine curves.

"What did I tell you, cuz?" Janice said, shaking her head. "You have one cute little butt. I bet your boyfriend loves it, right?" She gave him a playful slap on the rear, making Mark blush furiously.

"Look, Janice, I appreciate you helping me, but let's get something straight," Mark said forcefully. "Louis is not my boyfriend. He's just a friend. Hopefully still a friend. And yes, I, uh, I want to be a girl." Mark momentarily lost his train of thought as the specific words left his lips for the first time. Saying it aloud was frightening, but it had come right out without the sky falling on him or any other disaster. "Whoa," Mark muttered. "Uh, what were we talking about?"

"Guys," Janice chirped.

"Right," Mark said weakly. "So, that, uh, fact that I just said, does not necessarily mean I like guys. Okay?"

"Okay, chillax, I get it, you're just friends," Janice said, looking disappointed. She grinned slyly. "But don't tell me you haven't at least thought about being with a guy."

"Never," Mark said firmly.

"You've never even kissed one?" Janice asked innocently. Memories of prom night came rushing back – kissing Sven had been horrible. Kissing Captain Broussard on the cheek, on the other hand, had been kind of... Nice. It had almost felt right, somehow.

"Never," he repeated untruthfully, then, seeing her puzzled look, tried to back up his position. "It's way too early in my, uh, transition for me to think about," he explained, realizing that, even as he made it up as he went along, he might just be telling the truth. "I need to find the... real me... before I find someone else?" His cousin swallowed the line, hook, line, and sinker, with what Mark swore were tears glimmering in her eyes.

"Oh my god, what you're doing is so totally brave," Janice sighed. "Don't listen to me. You take as much time as you need, Marci. Now, I have the perfect top for those jeans..."

By the time Mark's mom returned with her jewelry box, Mark was decked out in a matching navy-blue halter top and a pair of dressy black pumps with a four-inch heel Janice insisted were more comfortable than they looked.

"Looking good," she remarked, as Mark gave her a reluctant twirl, managing his heels admirably. "Now, for accessories!" While she and Janice put their heads together for a moment to decide what would best finish his 'look', Mark fidgeted in his pumps, trying to come to grips with the fact that he would soon be presenting it to the world at large. He was going to the shopping mall dressed from the skin-out as a girl completely of his own volition, with no tricks, dares, or lost bets involved, and it wouldn't just be for an afternoon – he was going to be living as a girl until he had the scholarship money in hand. And maybe even longer?

Distracted by his thoughts, he said "OK" to his cousin's jewelry selections without a second glance, slipping a few silver charm bracelets around his slender wrist while she placed a matching pendant necklace around his neck. The touch of the necklace felt cold at first, but soon warmed to the temperature of his skin so he barely noticed it. Lastly, his mom showed him how to put on the clip-on discs she'd found for him, then had him do it himself in the mirror. Putting on the earrings, seeing the small pout of concentration that came automatically to his face, was slightly unreal, like he was peeping on some cute girl getting ready for a date. Once they were on, he stepped back to get the full result.

Well, Mark's difficulties aside, 'Marci' certainly didn't look like she would have any trouble getting a date if she wanted one. From head to toe, he looked one-hundred percent a gorgeous teenaged girl. His legs looked incredibly long and slim with the help of the high heels, while the halter top flattered his small shoulders and naturally slender waist. His eyes were quite alluring, especially combined with the killer pout of his gloss-covered lips, and the necklace and earrings gleaming prettily in the light were the perfect finishing touch. There was no denying it, he made one hot girl.

"Ready to show the world the real you?" Janice asked. Mark took a deep breath.

"Ready as I'll ever be," he said. Feeling nervous and excited all at once, he followed his mother and cousin out the door. As he saw who was coming up the driveway, however, he froze like a deer in the headlights. It was Louis. "Oh, crap," Mark muttered, suddenly rooted to the spot. This was not how he'd wanted to explain things, and with his cousin here...

"Hey, it's your friend Lucas," Janice said, giving Mark a sly smile that made it clear she was still hoping he was more than a friend.

"Louis," Mark corrected automatically in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Hi, Lucas!" Janice beamed. "What do you think of Marci's new look? Isn't she a hottie?"

"Hey?" Louis squeaked, then cleared his throat. "Uh, hey. My phone's been giving me trouble so I figured I would just drop by and see what you were up to. Which I guess is answered."

"Uh, Louis, this isn't what it looks like," Mark said awkwardly. His cousin frowned immediately.

"Marci, what's wrong?" she whispered. "Have you seriously not told him yet?"

"I don't think now is really the time," Mark whispered back, blushing.

"Marci, if he's your best friend, he's going to accept you no matter what!" Janice exclaimed. "Come on, tell him the truth."

"The truth?" Louis echoed. "Mark, what does she mean 'the truth'?"

Before things could get any messier, Mark's mom stepped in and saved him. "You two obviously have a few things to talk about," she said. "Janice and I will wait inside. Call us when you're ready to go, okay, honey?" She had to more or less drag Janice back inside, but a moment later it was just Mark and Louis on the driveway.

"Mind explaining exactly what's going on?" Louis asked.

"It's not what it looks like," Mark said quickly. "Look, remember how we ran into Janice the other day at the convention?"

"Yeah," Louis said, scowling. "Hard not to."

"And she thought I was, uh, transgender," Mark continued, looking away nervously. "Anyways, she has a friend who works in this foundation that's giving away full-ride scholarships to transgender students. Meaning I could go to Pembleton..."

"As a chick?" Louis asked blankly.

"No!" Mark said hastily. "This is just until the interview. I'm pretending to 'come out' as transgender so I can get my hands on the scholarship, that's all. I already know I make a pretty good girl, thanks to prom and the convention, so... Why not take advantage of it?"

"So you're fooling your cousin and this scholarship foundation into thinking your transgendered?" Louis asked slowly. "That sounds sort of... Dishonest."

Mark gulped. "What do you mean? I'm serious, it's just a hoax, and just until..."

"I mean it's a dishonest thing to do, tricking them like that," Louis clarified. Mark felt relief for a moment, then anger. He flushed angrily.

"Yeah, well it must be nice to have two parents with high-paying jobs," he said. To his surprise, Louis's face fell.

"Sorry," his friend said. "I didn't think of it that way. I guess this would mean no loans."

"Yeah," Mark said. "And my dream school."

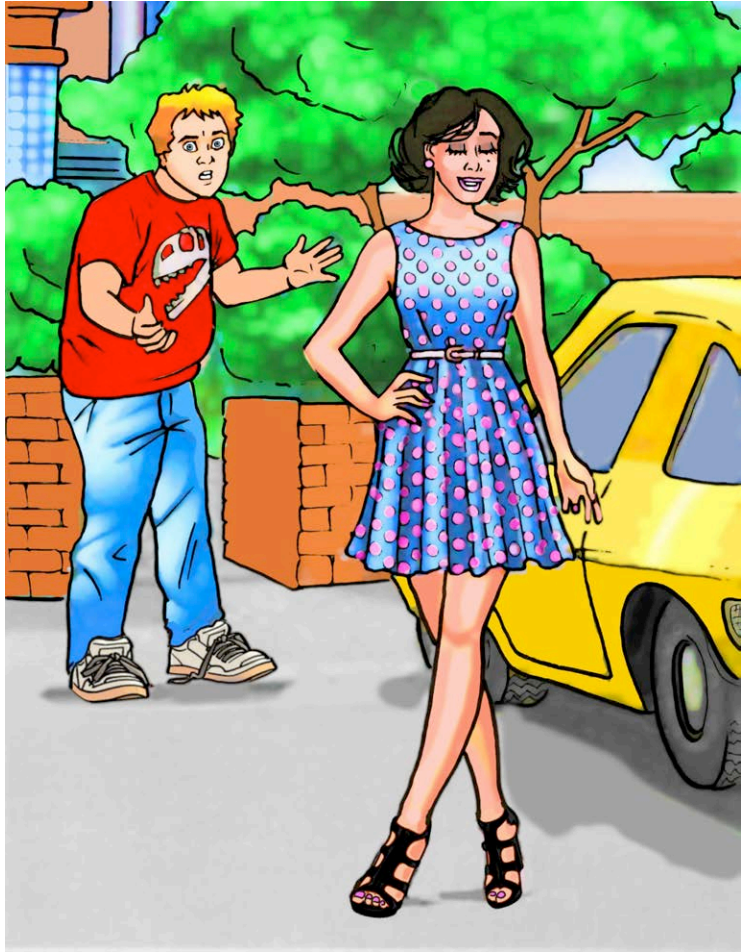
"This is just getting too weird for me, that's all," Louis muttered. "Are you sure you're not getting in over your head with this 'Marci' stuff?"

"She's my only shot at Pembleton," Mark said firmly.

"Right," Louis said. "Well, tell Mark to call me when my best friend is back." Still shaking his head, he slowly walked back down the sidewalk, leaving Mark in a state of consternation. Had Louis bought it? He called his mom and cousin and they all got into the car.

"Oh, don't worry, Marci, he'll, like, come around," Janice said comfortingly, after taking just one look at Mark's face. She put a hand on his shoulders. "He'd be stupid not to," she continued. "And in the meantime, I totally know what will cheer you up. We're going shopping, remember?"

Mark sighed. "Sounds fun," he said. "Let's do it."





Mark was no stranger to the mall, or even clothes shopping, as he'd spent quite a bit of time doing just that with Inga and Helga. This time around, however, he was doing it as "Marci." At first he was all but trembling with fear as he followed Janice and his mother around the mall. Even though every reflective surface he passed showed him an attractive, fashionable young lady, he still had the irrational fear that someone was going to shout "boy!" at any moment. As they made their way in and out of more and more department stores without anything of the like happening, however, he began to relax.

He was passing, and now that he wasn't in some ridiculous get-up like the Aurora costume, he wasn't experiencing catty looks from girls, either. All of them were friendly with him, seemingly eager to be his friend. As for the guys, many were still checking him out, but far more surreptitiously than at the convention. Soon Mark wasn't just relaxed, he was having fun! Feeling free to explore the women's section for the first time, he was surprised to find several cute, comfy outfits that he really liked. Janice was always trying to steer him towards short skirts and tight blouses, but his mom served as a counteracting force to make sure he wasn't unduly influenced either way. He was making his own choices, and it felt good... Really good.

On an impulse, he even agreed to get his ears pierced. Janice held one hand and his mom held the other while the girl pierced each ear in turn, putting in small silver keeper studs, and Mark had to admit he sort of liked the way they sparkled when he turned his head. Time seemed to fly by after that, and finally, around noon, laden down with shopping bags, they went to the food court for a bite to eat. As Janice headed towards the Chinese place, Mark couldn't help but notice the wide smile on his mom's face that hadn't left all day.

"What is it?" he asked hesitantly. "What's so funny?"

"It's not that anything's funny," she said. "It's just that seeing you like this is... Well, it's incredible."

"Thanks, I think," Mark said, blushing.

"It's just that you're like a different person, almost," his mom said thoughtfully. "You're so much chattier, and more outspoken, and confident, and, well, happy. You've never been a very happy child, you know that? But today, I don't think I've ever seen you smile so much."

"Well, I guess I'm having fun," Mark admitted, feeling slightly sheepish. "Is that all right?"

"Honey, it's more than all right," his mom said firmly. "Nothing makes me happier. Now, how about you grab us a table? I need to use the restroom." She transferred her one shopping bag onto Mark's arm, and set off towards the ladies' room. Mark looked around the food court for an open table, finding one

not too far away. As he set the shopping bags down on the vacant seats, he mulled over what his mom had just said. Sure, he'd been enjoying himself, but all that stuff about him seeming like a different person... Maybe she was exaggerating?

Mark was distracted from thinking about it further by the sight of two very familiar, very pretty blonde women approaching, chattering in Swedish. Mark let out a small but audible gasp. There was a reason he'd avoided going to the shopping mall ever since he quit the salon, but today he'd completely forgotten about it. Helga and Inga always had their break right around noon, and they always went to the food court for lunch. His gasp of surprise had drawn their attention, and Mark quickly lifted a shopping bag up onto the table so he could hide his face behind it, then paused. Maybe Mark would have shied away from his tormentors, but "Marci" was a confident, outspoken young woman – or so his mom seemed to think – and she certainly wouldn't.

Mark set the shopping bag aside and sat primly in his chair, meeting the twins' eyes without hesitation. This time, it was their turn to gasp. Both of them approached quickly, seemingly unable to believe their eyes.

"Mark?" Helga demanded.

"Marci?" Inga questioned, at the same time.

"Marci works fine," Mark said coolly. "Hi, Inga. Hi, Helga."

"Marci, we tried and tried to call you," Helga said, shaking her head. "We wanted to explain about Sven, and the bet, and apologize for what we did..."

"But what's going on?" Inga interjected. "Are you... Is this..."

"It's whatever it looks like," Mark said. The twins looked at each other and broke into huge grins.

"Then we were right all along!" Helga exclaimed. "You were just waiting for someone to nudge you in the right direction, that's all!"

"Oh, Marci, you look beautiful!" Inga added. "You have to come to the salon, to see Tiffany, and maybe to get a manicure?" Mark gathered himself before he replied.

"Look, maybe things worked out okay for me, but stuffing me in a prom dress and forcing me to go on a date with your cousin is not a nudge," Mark said angrily. "What you did..." Mark gulped. How many times had he dreamed of telling the twins exactly what he thought? And now, strangely, as "Marci," he finally had the courage. "What you did was wrong, and manipulative, and cruel," he said at last. "I thought we were friends, but you were using me all along." Inga opened her mouth to protest, but Mark went on. "And what you did to Candi... To Carl... I know about that too," he said. "You helped ruin his life, you know that? Other people aren't playthings for your crazy bets or games! They're real people with their own lives and their own problems."



The blonde twins stared at each other in shock.

"And I think I'll be doing my own nails, thanks," Mark added. "Maybe you should move along, these seats are both taken." He indicated his mother and cousin, who were now making their way back to the table with trays of food.

Inga stared at Mark, and seemed to be starting to form some kind of apology, but Helga sniffed. "Come on, Inga," she said. "We are not wanted here. Good-bye, *Mark*." She strutted off, but Inga paused a moment before following, whispering the word "sorry" before hurrying after her sister.

"Who were they?" Janice asked curiously, setting her tray down.

"Nobody important," Mark said. "Nobody important."



As they finally headed home, Mark had to admit that, aside from being absolutely sick of trying on clothes and a bit sore from getting his ears pierced, he'd had the time of his life. Not only had he spoken his mind to the twins, but everyone he'd so much as glanced at seemed eager to speak to him, and he'd never received so many compliments before. At the convention, Mark hadn't been

surprised by the attention – after all, the place was full of nerdy, horny guys who had never so much as been on a date with a girl, and showing up as an Aurora Cummings look-alike was sure to bring them out of the woodwork.

But even going to the mall for the afternoon, every guy he met was either giving him admiring glances or tripping all over himself to be helpful, and every girl wanted to be his friend – plenty even wanted his fashion advice! It was crazy to think about, but Mark couldn't help but wonder if this was what he'd missed out on his entire life. Maybe he had only been one X chromosome away from being not a small, nerdy, slightly-effeminate-but-totally-straight boy, but instead a pretty, popular girl with all the friends in the world.

Mark was still pondering this strange alternate reality as he got out of the car on his driveway, laden down with multiple shopping bags. Of course, if he'd been born a girl, he might have never developed his love for comics, or for Nebula Quest, and he might have never even met his best friend Louis – who was clearly no big fan of 'Marci.'

As the week passed, Mark realized there was one definite advantage to being more or less invisible as a shy, nerdy guy – nobody in his neighborhood seemed to bat so much as an eye when 'Marci' was suddenly living under the Summers' roof instead, apart from the father of three a few doors down who Mark caught checking out his legs when he wore his summer dress.

With the last of his fears over being recognized finally subsiding, the only thing Mark had to worry about was the fact Louis was expertly avoiding him. At first Mark had put it down to phone trouble, but every time Mark stopped by Louis' house (Louis' mother had taken Mark's 'transition' in stride with a knowing wink that made Mark feel almost offended) it seemed he had just missed him. Mark supposed his friend's statement, call me when Mark is back, had been truly heart-felt.

The majority of the time, Mark was kept too busy to worry about Louis anyway. His mom was delighted to have a temporary daughter, and Janice was thrilled to have an 'interesting' new girlfriend, and that meant Mark was spending all his time engaged in mother-daughter bonding or being dragged around town by Janice, who had also introduced him to all of her friends as her female cousin. Being constantly surrounded by girls gave Mark a good opportunity to work on his speech patterns and voice – he could now do a credible bubbly sorority girl without too much trouble – and also his body language, learning when to flip his hair, smooth his skirt, cock his hips or flutter his hands. To his amazement, everything seemed to come, well, naturally.

Still, Mark was careful not to go overboard. It only took the memory of Candi, forever toying with her blonde tresses, fluttering her eyelashes, and pouting her lips, desperate to be as feminine as possible, to make Mark vow not to get in over his head. Just like he'd been firm on his wardrobe choices (a few skirts

and pairs of high heels, but a definite predilection towards comfortable hip-huggers, flats, and simple tops) he was careful not to be *too* girly.

As he went to bed that evening after painting his nails a subtle shade of pink, he reasoned that there was, after all, no reason to let things get out of hand.



Seated in the office of the interviewer, which vaguely resembled that of his grade-school principal's, Mark sat nervously as he waited for the verdict. His mother hadn't been able to make it, due to an emergency at work, meaning it was just him, Janice, and the interviewer, a man with a very large handlebar mustache.

"Well, I've heard enough," the man said, rummaging inside a briefcase. "Mark, I can honestly say that you are the most naturally feminine young transgender woman I've ever met. I have no doubt in my mind that this is who you were always meant to be, and I would be more than pleased to offer you our scholarship." He held out a pen and paper, and Mark's mouth fell open.

"Just like that?" Mark asked faintly.

"Just like that," the man said. "All you have to do is sign the acceptance form."

"Oh, my god!" Janice squealed, hugging Mark so tightly he could barely breathe. "You got it, Marci! And that means... Oh, cuz, I'm so happy! Just sign it already!"

Mark took the pen in hand. This was it. He was doing it. Taking a deep breath, Mark signed his name, as 'Marci', on the dotted line.

As soon as he did, Janice wrapped him in another hug. "Ack, it was so hard not to let it slip before!" she exclaimed. "Marci, I changed my mind about Berkeley. I'm going to Pembleton instead! That means we can be roommates, and rush the Zeta Phi sorority together, and, and, and..."

"This has to be fate," the interviewer grinned. "You see, I just got a new post at Pembleton as their on-campus counselor. So you not only get your cousin as a roommate, you'll have someone to check in with you throughout every step of your transition!" He broke into a huge smile. "The first, of course, being a female hormone regimen."

In the course of the past five seconds, all of Mark's excited feelings of triumph had been turned on their head.

"H-hormones?" he stammered.

"Of course," the interviewer said. "Our scholarship will not only provide for you academically, but also through your physical transition. You haven't been self-medicating, have you, Mark? That can be quite dangerous!"

"No," Mark said faintly. "I just... I didn't realize..." He shot his cousin a worried glance, but she looked perfectly ecstatic at the news.

"With that small, slender frame and tiny little waist, I'm sure within a few months of intensive hormone therapy you'll be quite hippy, and well on your way to a marvelous hourglass figure most genetic girls will envy!" the interviewer remarked. "Of course, there is the matter of 'passing' at school. If you intend to stay in the girls' dormitory or a sorority house, I think it would be prudent to shell out a little of that scholarship money for some... Enhancements." He gave Mark a conspiratorial wink. Mark's mouth fell open in horror, but Janice gave another squeal of delight.

"A free boob job?" she giggled. "Oh my god, how lucky can a 'girl' get! Marci's always dreamed of being really busty, you should have seen her costume at her little comics convention – totally stacked! What do you think, Marci, C-cups?" She indicated her own lovely breasts. "Or actually, you're a little bit wider in the chest than me," Janice continued. "Maybe you could even go a bit bigger! You know, guys love a girl with nice big boobies for them to play with!"

"Well, we certainly have the funds to make that dream come true for you, Marci," the interviewer chuckled. "So long as you aren't just doing it for the boys! We want you to become totally comfortable in your body, after all."

"Eek, I can't wait to see my little cousin with his own – sorry, 'her' – own set of ta-tas!" Janice said, shooting Mark an impish grin. "And of course, we have to get you a whole new wardrobe before school starts! No cousin of mine is going to be a wallflower. You and me are going to be the two hottest freshmen on campus, and everyone's going to know it. Those legs were made for miniskirts and high heels, and once you get your boobs done I'm sure you'll want to flash some cleavage, too!"

Mark could only sit paralyzed in his seat, hands clenched on his thighs, and smile weakly as he felt everything slipping out of his control. Hormones, miniskirts, high heels... Cleavage...

"Many girls in your situation do go through a phase of really 'pushing' their femininity to the maximum," the interviewer explained. "It's quite normal, and even encouraged. It's only natural to want to flaunt your blossoming figure and indulge in all the 'girly' behaviors you've been denied for so long... long fingernails, exquisite jewelry, feminine lingerie, full makeup, et cetera. I'm going to be checking in with you weekly, and I expect I'll see you swishing around campus like quite the little beauty queen come September! I just want you to be careful about the young men you attract with your charms. Not everyone is quite so understanding about transgender girls, even one as pretty and passable as yourself."

Mark went white at the sudden mental image he had in his mind of guys drooling as he minced past in sky-high stilettos, big breasts quivering in their

lacy cups, hormone-plumped heart-shaped bottom wiggling seductively from side to side, trying desperately to tug down the hem of his sinfully short mini-skirt. There was only one thing missing from the terrifying picture...

"Don't worry," Janice beamed. "I'm going to take good care of little Marci. Say, that reminds me, I made us an appointment at the hair salon! I thought we could do a little experimenting with extensions and highlights for you." She twirled a lock of Mark's dark hair with her fingertip, lips pursed pensively, then asked innocently,

"What do you think of blonde?"

Mark woke up in a cold sweat, clutching his pillow to his chest. It had only been a dream. He wasn't going to make the same mistakes Candi – or Carl, rather – had made. He was doing this of his own free will, after all.



For that reason, on the day of the actual interview, Mark was lounging on the couch in skinny jeans and a cardigan, with his hair up in a high ponytail and only a few touches of makeup on, when his mom walked in. "New comic?" she asked casually, pointing to the magazine in his hands.

"Cosmo," Mark said sheepishly. "I was looking for some last-minute makeup ideas. She gets here at six, right?"

"Yes, her flight was delayed," his mom said. "Are you still going with the summer dress?"

"I think so," Mark said. He checked the time on his watch. "Jeez, I'd better go get ready," he said, getting up and heading towards his room.

"Let me know if you need any help," his mom called after him.

Mark stepped into his room. In preparation for the foundation representative's visit, he and his mom had worked together to 'girlify' his room a bit, which meant losing a few super hero posters and gaining a few stuffed animals, along with a purple bedspread. The fact that there were makeup products and bits of jewelry scattered all over the room certainly helped.

Mark went to his closet and opened the door. With the exception of his most unisex shirts, all of his normal clothes had been shoved into storage, replaced by his new purchases. It was a little scary how quickly he'd grown accustomed to his new routine of laying out the day's outfit on the bed, deciding on shoes and accessories, then showering, shaving his armpits and legs if necessary, and doing his hair and makeup, all before getting dressed.

The outfit he'd selected was a floral-printed summer dress with an empire hemline – terms he'd learned in the department store – and he figured it would go well with his cardigan and a pair of heels. With practiced efficiency, Mark

wiggled out of his jeans and pulled off his cardigan-and-camisole combo, then took the dress off its hanger and stepped into it. The silky material swished against his bare legs as he tugged it up over his hips and slipped his arms through the spaghetti straps. He adjusted the dress, enjoying the feel of the soft fabric despite himself, then went hunting for shoes and accessories. He also figured a bit more makeup was in order, so he redid his eyes with a liner and some darker eye shadow, then added a pale pink lip gloss to his mouth. He looked at the pretty girl in the mirror with a critical eye, swapping out the stud earrings for a pair of hoops, then slipped his cardigan back on and went to go find his mom in the living room.

"What do you think?" Mark asked his mom, giving a small twirl.

"Beautiful," she said, smiling. "I hope your date doesn't feel underdressed when he shows up."

"Very funny," Mark said, but he couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to go on an actual date as the girl – so long as it wasn't with Sven.



The Weller Foundation's representative was flying in from New York and taking a rental car from the airport, meaning Mark now had nothing to do but pace and fidget and wait for her to ring the doorbell. His mom had pleaded off work, and Janice, naturally, had insisted on being there for moral support, arriving shortly before seven and giving Mark a miniature heart-attack with the sound of the doorbell.

At least he knew he looked good. He'd spent practically an extra hour getting ready, meticulously re-shaving his legs to be absolutely sure he hadn't missed any stray hairs before thoroughly moisturizing, then using a hot iron to put a bit of wave into his hair.

"Stop pacing around," his mom pleaded. "You're making me nervous."

"What if I don't get it?" Mark said desperately. "I mean, what if she just doesn't like me?"

"Impossible," Janice scoffed. "How could anyone not like you? You're fabulous, Marci."

Before Mark could thank her for the vote of confidence, the long-awaited doorbell finally sounded.

"Well, this is it," his mom said. "Just be yourself." She gave her feminized son a knowing smile, then went to the door and let the representative inside. She was a tall, bespectacled woman, dressed in a smart pantsuit, but despite her professional air she also seemed quite friendly, introducing herself as Anne.

"I'm Ellen, Marci's mom," Mark's mother said. "We spoke on the phone. This is her cousin..."

"Janice," Janice interjected. "We're also, like, practically best friends now."

"And so this must be Marci," Anne said, as Mark stepped forward nervously. "It's such a pleasure to meet you, darling."

"Nice to meet you, too," Mark said, gracefully exchanging a quick peck on the cheek with her. "I've been looking forward to this all week."

"Well, let's not waste any time, then," Anne smiled. "I want to hear all about you. Beautiful dress, by the way!"

Everyone seated themselves in the living room, and Mark knew it was time to give the performance of his life. He crossed his legs, sitting in a naturally girlish repose, and gestured with his manicured hands as he gave all the answers he and his mother had agreed upon beforehand, about how he had always been more of a girl than a boy, playing with dolls instead of trucks as a little child.

"And how long have you been 'out?'" Anne asked. Mark exchanged a glance with his mom. Here was where he had to tell the truth, as a falsehood would be all too easy to prove wrong.

"Only a week," Mark admitted. "But it's been the most, uh, enlightening week of my life. You see, I only recently gained the confidence to show the world my real self."

"I see," Anne said, leaning forward with interest. "And if I might ask, why did it take so long? You make such a beautiful girl, I can't imagine it was fear of not being able to 'pass.'"

"No," Mark said slowly. "It's that...uh..." He trailed off, then suddenly realized he knew exactly what to say: the truth. "After my dad passed, I felt like I had to be the man of the house," he said. "I felt like I had a responsibility to be that for my mom's sake."

"And what changed?" Anne asked.

"I got a job at a salon," Mark said truthfully. "And from there, things kind of just... Snowballed. I had a talk with my mom a week ago, and I decided that when I go to college, I want to go as 'Marci.' As myself." Janice cleared her throat meaningfully. "Oh, and my cousin has been really supportive," Mark added hastily. "And in fact, she's the one who found your scholarship and thought I should try to get it. I really, really want to attend Pembleton."

"It's an excellent institution, and I think they would be proud to have you," Anne said. Mark's hopes leapt. "This is going to be quite a difficult decision, though, I have to be honest with you," the woman continued. "We have two very worthy applicants to pick between."

"Wait, what?" Mark said questioningly. "When I called the office there hadn't been any other applicants."

“Well, that’s just it,” Anne said. “A few days ago, we received another late application from a young transgender teenager in the Bronx. Growing up transgender is never particularly easy, but the Bronx is an especially tough place. Here, I have a picture of her...” She rummaged in her briefcase and pulled out a photo. The Latino “girl” in the photo had a winning smile and painstakingly applied makeup, but her muscular arms and broad chin made it obvious she was a boy, despite her attire. She was standing with a smiling Latino woman. “That’s her aunt,” Anne explained. “After her parents kicked her out, she ended up living with an understanding relative.”



Mark stared at the picture, and suddenly felt a wave of guilt. He could not only pass as a girl, but he was prettier than most real girls, and not only that, but his mother had agreed to let him try being “*Marci*” without a moment’s hesitation, and his cousin was thrilled out of her mind to have a supposedly-transgender relative. Suddenly, Mark knew what he had to do.

“Of course, we consider all factors,” Anne said. “I’m sure you’ve had struggles of your own, losing your father, and your academic scores are quite a bit higher...”

“No,” Mark said. “I... I don’t want the scholarship.”

Anne, Janice, and his mother all stared in surprise. Anne blinked. “*Marci*, you’re misunderstanding me,” she said. “I’m not trying to dissuade you! You deserve a chance at an education every much as she does!”

“Maybe,” Mark said hesitantly. “But she needs it more than I do, so she should have it.”

“Are you sure, cuz?” Janice asked. “I mean, it’s your dream school!”

“If I get a job and take out loans, I can still do it,” Mark said. “I’m not going to take the chance away from someone who might not have another.”

“*Marci*, you are going to be a remarkable young woman,” Anne said, shaking her head slightly. “Very well, if you’re certain it’s what you want to do, I’ll withdraw your application. It’s been a pleasure meeting you.”

Mark shook her hand and waved her out the door, still somewhat stunned by what he’d just done. The chance at the scholarship had been within his grasp, and he’d let it go. So maybe it was time to let the rest of it go, too. Maybe this had all just been a charade, or a phase, and now it was time to settle for community college. Which meant giving up on his dream of attending Pembleton, going back to being shy, nerdy, invisible Mark Summers, and accepting his lot in life. Jeez, were those his only two options? He looked at his mom, who was obviously concerned, waiting for him to say something.

“So what now?” she asked, putting a comforting hand on his arm. Mark looked from his loving, supportive mother, to his equally supportive if slightly crazy cousin, and realized he knew exactly what he was going to do now.

“I have to call Louis,” he said. “And tell him the charade is up.”



When Louis picked up the phone, Mark nearly lost his nerve entirely, but instead he quickly relayed the news about not getting the scholarship. His friend gave a relieved sigh.

“So that means it’s over, right?” he demanded. “You’re done with this whole thing? You’re Mark again?”

Mark gritted his teeth. "I'm *me* again," he said. "And I'm going to be at your place in two minutes. I was thinking we could grab some pizza and talk?"

"Of course," Louis said. "See you soon."

Mark hit the "off" button on his cell-phone, still wondering if he had made the right decision. As he rounded the corner onto Louis's street, a stray gust of wind tugged at the hem of his summer dress and he quickly tamed it with one hand. His heels clicked noisily against the sidewalk as he made his way to Louis's house. Finally, standing on the front porch, he nervously fixed his hair and straightened his cardigan.

As he stood there, he realized he still had one last chance to run away, to hurry off down the sidewalk and then call Louis from a safe distance to cancel. What if this was all a huge mistake he was making? Shifting nervously from foot to foot, Mark thought back to the day that had inadvertently started it all, when he'd accidentally run into Candi at the mall, having no idea of her true identity. That was the event that had led him to getting his job at the salon, which had led him to prom, which had led him to the Louis's bet and the convention, which had led him to the scholarship and finally to this very moment. It seemed like such an unstoppable wave of events, and it was easy to imagine the boy Candi had once been getting caught up in the same way.

But Mark wasn't Candi, and he now realized that perhaps the only reason the events had seemed "unstoppable" was that they had been inevitable... Because they had been what he'd wanted all along. 'Marci' was going to be her own girl, thank-you very much, and blonde was overrated, anyway.

He was going to tell Louis that he hadn't gotten the scholarship, but he was still going to college as "Marci," no matter what. Much more importantly, he was finally ready to tell Louis how he felt when he was "Marci" – he felt like himself. Whether his best friend accepted him or not was out of his hands. Mark gathered his nerves and took a deep breath. Maybe the boy he'd used to be would have run away and kept hiding his true self, but the girl he was becoming was made of sterner stuff than that.

With a small, determined smile on her lips, Marci rang the doorbell.

The End

EPILOGUE

Louis stood on the front porch of his old buddy Mark's house – although, he corrected himself for the thousandth time, it was Marci's house now. He had exchanged a few IMs and emails with his best friend while he, or rather she, was away at college, but it had tailed off quite a bit recently, and they hadn't seen each other in person since Marci moved away for school.

Louis still remembered, quite vividly, that summer evening when his friend showed up on his porch to tell him the truth: that he truly wanted to be a girl. Now, five months later, their positions had been reversed and it was Louis standing nervously outside Marci's house. He anxiously straightened his tie, wondering yet again if perhaps he had overdone it by wearing his best slacks, a tie, and a sweater... not to mention the bouquet of flowers clutched in his sweaty hand. Hopefully Marci wasn't going to take it the wrong way.

"Don't be dumb," he muttered to himself. "She's a girl now, and girls love flowers. Friends give each other flowers all the time. It's totally normal." As for the get-up, sure, they were just going to see a movie, but Louis didn't want to look like a slob. Girls appreciated it when guys put some effort into their appearance, or so he had heard, and Marci was a girl now, so...

Before he could talk himself out of hiding the bouquet in the bushes around the porch and never mentioning it again, Louis reached forward and rang the doorbell. For a moment there was no response, then Louis heard a high, sweet, but definitely familiar voice call through the door.

"Just a second!" came Mark's – no, Marci's – voice. Next came a strange clicking sound on the hardwood floor that Louis realized had to be high heels. Louis shuffled his feet, clutching the bouquet in both hands behind his back, and took a deep breath as the door swung open. It was all he could do not to drop the flowers – his jaw wasn't so lucky! He had seen firsthand that his best friend made a disturbingly attractive girl, and he still had somewhat confusing memories of how smoking hot Marci had looked all dolled up in a skin-tight Aurora cosplay costume, but nothing could have prepared him for the gorgeous, leggy supermodel who was framed in the doorway.

The vision of femininity standing before him was clad in a tight, figure-hugging purple minidress and matching stiletto open-toed pumps that made her slender, smooth-shaven legs look about a mile long – Louis couldn't help but trace them all the way up to the short, flirty hem of her dress before he snapped his eyes upward, embarrassed. Mark... no, Marci, fidgeted slightly with the chunky, fashionable bracelet around her wrist, smiling through gloss-coated lips.

"Hi," she said. "Wow, you sure dressed up."

"Me?" Louis gasped, once he was no longer struck speechless. "Look at you!" To his surprise, Marci blushed, sweeping her beautiful black hair, now nearly long enough to reach her shoulders and fashioned into a trendy side-bang style, behind one ear.

"Hey, it's a Friday night," she said wryly. "A girl likes to look good, you know?"

"You do," Louis blustered. "I

mean, you look amazing, Marci." Try as he might, he couldn't quite keep his gaze from straying to the neckline of her dress, where, if his eyes weren't deceiving him, he thought he could see a hint of... "Uh, you have cleavage now?" Louis asked, blinking.

"Yep," Marci said, with a small, slightly proud smile. "I started hormones back in October. I mean, push-up bras work wonders, but still, it's at least a little bit me." She leaned forward teasingly, to give Louis a look down her dress, then straightened up. "I'm still the flattest girl in the sorority, but whatever," she said. "I just want to get to a B-cup, that's all."

"You're in a sorority?" Louis gaped. He could hardly believe his best friend was not only growing boobs, but was also now one of those sexy sorority girls they had always fantasized about.

"They kind of adopted me," Marci admitted. "They're tons of fun for like, going shopping and everything. But we definitely don't... Louis, are those flowers?" She peered at the exposed edge of the bouquet still being clutched behind Louis's back. Louis gave a start of surprise.

"Oh, yeah," he said, whipping them out into plain sight. "I forgot. Uh, here."



"That's, um, sweet of you," Marci said, accepting the bouquet with a slightly puzzled expression. She sniffed them. "I guess I should put these in some water," she said. "Come on in."

Louis followed after his friend, feeling slightly dazed. His once-nerdy companion had not only had a change of gender, but also, apparently, a total change of personality. Mark might have been a geek, but Marci, after not even a year at college, was now a sexy fashionista who loved shopping with her sorority sisters... and probably giggling about cute guys, and cooing over kittens, and reading sappy romance novels.

He looked down at the tickets for "Annihilation 2: Return of Destructor" clutched in his hand and cursed himself for being so dumb. He could have easily picked out a chick-flick at the box office instead that she would have enjoyed way more. As Marci clicked her way into the kitchen to fill a vase with water, however, Louis's eyes were drawn to the flickering television set in the living room. He blinked.

"You were playing *Mortal Kombat*?" he asked, as Marci came back into the living room, wiping her hands with a small towel.

"Oh!" Marci grinned, surprised. "Yeah, I thought I turned that off. I just got nail extensions so it was a real pain at first. I'm back in the swing of it now, though." To Louis's shock, and delight, Marci grabbed one of the controllers and plopped down on the couch, though she carefully kept her smooth-shaven knees together. "Hey, the movie's not for a half-hour, right?" she said. "How about a quick rematch?"

"You're on," Louis grinned. "Just don't think I'm going to go easy on you because you're a girl." He sat down beside her, picking up the other controller.

"Please," Marci said, rolling her eyes. "If you're so cocky, how about a little bet? Comicon isn't too far away, you know. Maybe it's time to start thinking about costumes..."

"That didn't work out for you so well last time," Louis pointed out, as the game booted up and they selected their characters. "Are you sure?"

"I think it worked out just fine," Marci said with a sly wink, folding one of her long, slender legs over the other.

"Hey, no flashing leg!" Louis complained. "That's unfairly distracting." Then, as they picked their favorite arena, a smile came over his face. "You know, the other day I was watching a rerun of Episode 29... I think you might be able to pull it off."

Marci's cheeks went pink, obviously remembering the skimpy metallic bikini Aurora had been forced to wear as she infiltrated the Zanthian harem. "Alright," she said, with a cheeky smile. "But if I win, I have something in mind for you, too."

"Don't bother telling me," Louis said, already picturing Marci in the ultra-revealing get-up. "I'm going to win no matter what. Shake on it?"

He put out his hand, and Marci shook it. It was still strange to see her flashy painted nails and feel her soft, moisturized skin, but Louis thought that maybe, just maybe, he could get used to it. Sure, she was a girl now. But she was still a geek at heart, and still his best friend. Marci sat back in the couch with a smile.

"Alright," she said. "You're on."

The End





Titles by Sick Puppy Press

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 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

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

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

Students, Exchanged

"French Dupe" 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 / 57 pages / 15 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

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

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 long-forgotten aunt is sick, and he goes to care for her. His calls back home leave his wife Janice confused and unsure about his return. So she goes to find him. But is there much left to be found? Book / 64 pages / 25 illustrations

Thames Greene

By James J Craft. Ira wanted something better for his family. A new start. But in Thames Greene, everyone's getting a new start, whether they want it or not. Book / 77 pages / 26 illustrations

Hiding in High Heels

"How Not to be a Sissy" By Joe Six-Pack. Vince was on the run from people who wanted their millions back. Howard was a friend with a funny little idea and a knack for making subliminal CDs. Mini-Pix / 48 pages / 15 illustrations

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

His Life as a Trophy Wife

"The Puppy Mill" by Joe Six-Pack. Nick had a great life, but then it evaporated. Now he's down on his luck. In steps a wealthy executive willing to pay him handsomely to pretend to be his wife. What can it hurt? Book / 210 pages / 16 illustrations

Male Monday, Girl Friday

"Hey, Cutie!" by James J Craft. Daniel is going to be promoted from his average life to an exciting executive position. At least, that's what his bosses are telling him. They may not be telling him everything. Book / 58 pages / 20 illustrations

The Happiest Place on Earth

From the files of TGStories.com: "The Fairest One of All" By Joe Six-Pack. Will is a kid looking for a job. He gets one, performing as Snow White at a theme park. For Will, he doesn't suspect that playing the role and wearing the costume is slowly changing him, day by day. Book / 51 pages / 21 illustrations

Hello, Nurse

From the files of TGStories.com: "Quality Health Care" Dane is filling in as a nurse for his pal Jimmy at his new office. Although both are doctors, Dane begins to take to his new role as a nurse. Soon, he feels compelled to be the ideal nurse. Book / 44 pages / 15 illustrations

My Boss, The Bimbo

"If I Were a Betting (Wo)Man" By James J Craft, illustrations by blackshirtboy. CEO Lucas has a superiority complex. When his long-suffering secretary is able to feed into Lucas' competitive nature, he'll make any bet to prove his dominance over women. Book / 38 pages / 10 illustrations

He's the Girl They Want

"Rallies" by Joe Six-Pack. Spencer has a great new executive job in the food service industry, but first he's got to learn the ropes of the business by waiting on tables. He just doesn't quite fit in with the cheerleader theme. Yet. Book / 63 pages / 22 illustrations

Demoted and Degraded

"Trixie the Secretary" by Angela J. Cindy didn't much like Tom Jones attitude and his advances, so when she has the opportunity to help take the wind out of his sails, she takes it. But she had no idea that it was all designed to make Tom into Trixie the secretary. Book / 87 pages / 17 illustrations

I, Candy

"Sissy Sweets" by James J Craft, illustrations by 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 rocketxper. 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

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

Crossed Fiction

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

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

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

Fashion Victims

"Shop Till You Drop" 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

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

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 Made 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

Web Classics Revisited

Two Forms of ID

By Joe Six-Pack. Harvey had the unusual ability to convincingly imitate a teenage girl. In desperation, he has to use that talent to make some money. But when is enough enough? Paperback / 194 pages / text only



Reading is Fun de Mental!