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109 pages 25 illustrations

MALL MAKEOVER MADNESS

"A Day at the Mall" by KK — Illustrations by Fraylim



TEENS
**Trans-
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MALL MAKEOVER MADNESS

**“A Day at the Mall” by KK
Illustrations by Fraylim
A Teens Transformed Story**



2016 Digital Edition

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j6p@sixpacksite.com
www.sixpacksite.com

A DAY AT THE MALL

Normally Derek Washburn would never get up before noon on a Saturday, especially not to go to a silly fashion show at the mall, but as The Platteville Tribune's nearly-official photographer, he had a job to do. He had loaded up with flash cards, intent on taking as many pictures as he could to impress his editor. It was shaping up to be a busy day at the shopping center, between the fashion show being sponsored by Claire's, which several girls from his school were taking part in, and a skateboarding competition later in the afternoon. Derek had been tasked with capturing both with his camera lens.

So, bright and early in the morning, Derek was pulling on his usual uniform of jeans, a green T-shirt, and his favorite jacket. Yawning, he stumbled down the stairs and nearly poured orange juice into his cereal before his mother stopped him.

"There's my favorite photographer," she said, putting the milk into his grip instead. "Are you going to be awake enough to work that fancy camera?"

"Hope so," Derek said, spooning cereal into his mouth. "The boss said if I do a good job with the photos, maybe they'll actually consider letting me write an article to go with them. Nothing big, just, you know, a little blurb. But it's a foot in the door, I guess."

"Any ideas?" his mom asked. "Maybe you could interview some of the models while you're taking pictures? Or do some kind of creative comparison between modeling and skateboarding? They both require balance, poise, and creativity, after all."

"Yeah, and both of them end up all over the internet if they wipe out," Derek quipped. "At least the skateboarders get helmets."

"There's that journalist's wit of yours," his mom said. "I'm sure you'll come up with something interesting."

"Thanks, mom," Derek said, starting towards the door. "I'll buy lunch at the food court. See you tonight!"

"Uh, Derek, honey?" his mom said pointedly, holding up his camera case.

Derek sheepishly retrieved it, gave his mom a hasty peck on the cheek, and was out the door.



Derek's house was only a ten minute walk from the shopping mall's west entrance, and from there the fashion show was another five minutes' walk indoors. It was taking place outside Claire's, a very fashionable women's

clothing store that had decided to sponsor said show in order to generate interest in their new retro-inspired clothing line for young women.

Even if Derek hadn't known where to find the store, he would have been able to guess based on the hubbub alone. A catwalk was being set up in a cordoned-off area of tile, and a number of people were bustling in and out of the curtains that had been erected to serve as the backstage. Several curious bystanders had already paused to check things out, even though by Derek's watch the show wasn't going to start for nearly an hour. Plenty of time for some "behind-the-scenes" shots, he figured.



As he approached, it was with a sense of resignation. Sure, Derek liked taking photos, but his true love was journalism. He was already editor of his school newspaper, but his next goal was getting something published in the local Tribune. If he could somehow spin something interesting out of this fashion show, or maybe out of the skateboarding competition, maybe he would finally get his wish.

Not wanting to be accused of being a peeping tom, Derek paused awkwardly outside the curtain and cleared his throat. "Excuse me, I'm Derek from the local newspaper, I called yesterday about coming down and taking some photos before things kicked off?" he called through the curtain. "Uh, so if anyone needs to put clothes on, or anything..."

The curtain was instantly yanked aside and Derek was met with the sight of a very pretty, professional-looking young woman with black hair pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a wool miniskirt and crisp white blouse.

“Hi, I’m Eva, Claire’s assistant manager, we spoke on the phone,” the woman said quickly in a posh British accent. “I’m running the fashion show promotion. Come on back, snap a few pictures, but please be quick about it. We’re in the middle of a bit of a crisis.”

“What kind of crisis?” Derek asked curiously, smelling a story. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

“I’m sure the girls can fill you in,” Eva said. “I’ve got to be running along to let wardrobe know about it...” She bustled off, leaving Derek to enter the backstage on his own. When he did, he found a collection of seven attractive girls, ranging from his age to a few years out of high school, all standing in a circle around a single cell phone.

“Can’t you just come anyway?” one of them was pleading.

“Are you sure it’s *that* contagious?” another chimed in.

“Come on, Jenny, we need you!” a third exclaimed.

Derek was still too sleepy to comprehend exactly what he was seeing, but, figuring it might be important, he raised his camera and snapped his first photo of the day, capturing the pandemonium of the scene. A of the girls’ heads turned instantaneously at the sound of the camera shutter. Wilting under the combined angry gaze of seven good-looking girls, Derek gave an awkward wave from behind his camera.

“Oh, it’s just you, Derek,” said Catherine, a beautiful brunette from his school’s cheerleading squad. He nearly didn’t recognize her with her hair done up in an elaborate bouffant style.

Being on friendly terms with her and most of the other good-looking girls at school was the one benefit of being the school’s resident camera geek and photographer: all of them were unfailingly nice to him, because each and every one of them wanted to be sure he captured their “good side” for the yearbook photos, and some even occasionally wanted him to use the expensive school camera to do photoshoots for them and their friends.

“He goes to our school,” Catherine explained to the girls around her. “He’s taking photos for the paper. Don’t mind him, he’s sweet.”

“Yep,” Derek said. “Sorry, for, uh, interrupting your... thing.”

“It’s a lost cause, anyway,” Catherine said. She picked up the phone and switched it off speakerphone. “Well, you’re really leaving us in a lurch, Jenny,” she said angrily into the receiver. “But if having measles is more important to you than the fashion show, maybe you’re better off staying in bed.” She snapped the cell phone shut, shaking her head.

"What's going on?" Derek asked, as the other models, bickering loudly, resumed getting their hair and makeup in order.

"Jenny bailed on us at the last second," Catherine said sourly. "She was supposed to be our eighth model, and now we're only going to have seven."

"And that's... Bad?" Derek guessed.

"Well, duh," Catherine said. "It totally ruins the symmetry. We're short one blonde, now."

"Right," Derek said weakly. This was not exactly the basis for a riveting piece of journalism. "Fashion show disaster!" he muttered to himself. "Brunette overrepresentation scandal shakes fashion world to its core."

"Huh?" Catherine inquired.

"Nothing," Derek said hastily. "I'm just, you know, looking for things to write about. Sorry about Jenny bailing on you."

"It really is a shame," said Eva, reappearing behind him and making him jump. She was busy furiously crossing things off on her clipboard. "We had just a lovely set of outfits for her."

"Can't one of the other models wear them?" Derek asked, confused.

"That would cock up the wardrobe changes all over again," Eva said, exchanging a sardonic look with Catherine, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Besides, the outfits were picked out with her in mind. She has that rather androgynous, waif-like figure, with the boyish hips..."

"Flat chest," Catherine interjected cattily.

"And fair complexion," Eva finished. "We're looking for a last-second replacement, but..." She shrugged her shoulders, as if to say, what's the use?

"Well, I'm sure you'll find someone," Derek said, making to slyly drift away from the conversation. "I mean, who wouldn't jump at the chance to be a fill-in for a model, right?"

And with those words, Eva and Catherine exchanged a look of sudden realization. Derek had just unknowingly sealed his fate.

"Not so fast, mister," Catherine said, grabbing Derek by the arm before he could slip away. "*You* were a model for that fundraiser last year at school, and I seem to remember you did pretty well up there!"

"Wearing a tuxedo, yeah," Derek said, not sure he liked this new thread of conversation.

"Well, I bet with some coaching you could definitely pull off a few trips down the catwalk in heels and a cute skirt," Catherine said excitedly. "I mean, you've totally got the same body type as Jenny, no offense."

"You know, Derek, you really do," Eva said thoughtfully. Without warning, she

whipped off his jacket, giving him a thoughtful up-and-down look. “Similar complexion, too.”

“You *seriously* want me to fill in for Jenny?” Derek asked, flabbergasted.

“At least give it a try,” Catherine pleaded. “You might look really good! You know, your mom told me how someone mistook you for a girl in the grocery store that one time...”

“That was ages ago,” Derek said, going bright red.

“And you haven’t exactly hit puberty in a big way, no offense,” she continued. “I think you’ll look cute!”

“As much as I’d love to help you out, I’m supposed to be taking photos for the school paper,” Derek said. “And, you know, writing stuff. Drag is not in the job description!”

A smile spread across Eva’s face. “Derek, I think the article practically writes itself!” she said slyly. “Come on, don’t you see it?”

“I’m afraid no...” Derek trailed off. Suddenly, a quote from one of his favorite journalists appeared in his mind’s eye. “The difference between a good reporter and a great one is that the great one is willing to take the story just a little bit further, and a little bit further after that... and, if the opportunity presents itself, a lot further.” All at once, Derek saw how he could take the story a little bit further, with a must-read hook — the kind the newspaper would be nuts to turn down.

“An insider’s perspective,” he muttered to himself. “My day as a female fashion model. Wow, that’s... That’s a great angle.”

“I knew you’d get there,” Eva said with a wink, handing his sweatshirt back. “Thanks for volunteering! I’m sure you’ll be great.” Before Derek could say another word, she once more whisked herself away with her clipboard, barking orders.

“Girls!” Catherine cried joyfully. “Come meet Jenny’s replacement!”

Derek gulped, realizing he had just officially become the reporter who would do anything for a scoop. But he couldn’t deny it was a great idea for a story that the newspaper would be sure to like. “Just one problem,” he said, as the other models flocked over, curious to hear Catherine’s news. “I’m not blonde.”

Catherine gave him a sly smile. “Not yet,” she said. “But you will be.”



The reaction of the other models ranged from skeptical to almost frighteningly enthusiastic about the idea, but all of them agreed it would be a shame for Jenny’s outfits to go to waste.

“Like this one,” Catherine said, sliding a particular hanger out of its place on

the clothing rack. "Isn't it just to die for? Here, check it out." She handed him the hanger and Derek awkwardly accepted it, holding up a one-strap red dress with a flared skirt. He was pretty sure it was the first time he had ever held a dress, much less one he was going to be putting on later. He was surprised by how light and airy the material was, and the thought of walking around wearing it suddenly made him feel extremely anxious. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea... But at the same time, how could he pass up a hook like "just one of the girls"? Or maybe "Model behavior: My day on the runway".

"Uh, it's nice," Derek said, trying to hand it back. "It's very... Girly."

"It is," Eva agreed, suddenly appearing from behind him again with one hand on her hip. This time, Derek actually did jump, and let out a small yelp of surprise, too. "That's part of the theme," she continued, ignoring his display. "You know fashion is always cycling round, and right now people want that sort of nostalgic feel for yesteryear, back when coffee cost a buck, and men were men and women were women, and all the rest."

"How does she pop out of nowhere like that?" Derek asked Catherine under his breath. She just shrugged.

"Beats me," Catherine whispered back. "She's like The Flash."

"The who?" Derek asked, confused.

"He's a really fast guy from a comic book," Catherine explained, then, when Derek gave her a surprised look, she explained, "My brother is a big dork. My greatest fear is it might rub off on me."

"The collection is more or less entirely skirts and dresses," Eva continued, cutting short their chatter with a stern look. She took the red dress out of Derek's hands and returned it to the clothing rack. "I think it's a bit played out, to be honest, and that's why I'm so glad you volunteered," she said. "Having a male model doing these ultra-girly outfits puts a nice modern spin on things. You're like our very own Andrej Pejic."

Catherine put up her hand. "Didn't Andrej Pejic end up getting a..."

"No time for chit-chat, Catherine, you should be getting your makeup done," Eva said, shooing her away. "Now, Derek, I want you to meet Roxie, our very talented hairdresser who has graciously agreed to give you some much-needed personal attention. Come on, over here."

Derek found himself being steered over to a mirror, where a spunky green-haired woman he could only assume was the hairdresser was putting the finishing touches on one of the model's curls.

"Roxie, this is Derek, the young gentleman who volunteered to fill in for Jenny," Eva said briskly by way of introduction. "He doesn't have a lot of modeling experience, but I think he has the look. And some nice hair to work with, too." Derek shrugged modestly. His near-shoulder length brown hair was

better cared for than most boys' — he used his mom's all-natural, keratin-infused conditioner because he liked the smell.

"Hiya, Derek," Roxie said, offering a surprisingly tight grip on her handshake as the model got up and headed off for makeup. "So, are you ready for your blonde moment?"

"Wait," Derek said nervously. "You're going to bleach my hair? I was thinking a blonde wig, or something."

"Where's the fun in that?" Eva said. "Models have to spend hours having their hair done, you know. Don't you want your insider perspective to be accurate? Which is more intriguing, 'I threw on a wig' or 'I got my hair bleached, permed, and styled for this article, so you damn well better read it?'"

"You can dye it back, though, right?" Derek said. "I don't know if blonde is really my thing."

"Lots of guys are trying it out," Roxie said casually, popping her chewing gum. "But yeah, we can dye it back after a couple days, no sweat."

"We're decided, then," Eva said, beaming.

"Don't worry, I've already got something in mind," Roxie said with a wink. "Hop in the chair, Derek. We're gonna make you a star!"

"Who could say no to that?" Derek said weakly, plopping himself down in the recently vacated chair, reminding himself that great journalists went just a little bit further once more.

"Just lean back and relax," Roxie instructed. "So, what made you want to volunteer to be a fill-in model?"

"Well, I'm an aspiring journalist," Derek said, following her directions. "And I'm trying to write something really interesting about this fashion show, so..."

"Say no more," Roxie said. "That's a great idea! And don't worry, I have a feeling you're going to look every bit as pretty as the other models."

"Thanks," Derek said wryly, as Roxie draped a purple sheet around him. He made some small-talk and did his best to ask a few intelligent questions about the process as Roxie got started transforming him into a blonde.

"Ready to see the new you?" Roxie asked at last, whisking the purple sheet away.

"Ready as I'll ever be," Derek said. She spun him to face the mirror, and his eyes widened instantly. Gone was his normal head of chestnut brown hair, and in its place was an extremely feminine shade of blonde done up in a Marilyn Monroe style cut. Derek could hardly believe how much the new hairstyle changed his appearance — if he squinted, it was easy to think it was a girl in the mirror, not him.

"Retro, yet modern," Roxie said proudly. "What do ya think?" Derek opened

his mouth to formulate some kind of reply, but before he could say even a single word...

"Love it!" Eva said, appearing with her clipboard once more.

"How does she do that?" Derek whispered furiously.

Roxie shrugged, lifting her hands and grinning.

"No time for chit-chat," Eva said. "Great work, Roxie. Love the Marilyn Monroe homage. Very glamorous. Come on, Derek, time to get you through makeup."

Derek gulped, flashing back to bad memories of his female cousins attacking him with lipstick and mascara when he was nine years old. But great journalists went a little bit further for a story, and then a little bit further again.

"Lead on," he said. "I want to look good for my close-up, right?"



As Eva led him over to the makeup table, the other models, all of whom were now fully made-up and getting into their first outfits for the show, oohed and aahed over Derek's new hairstyle.

"I knew you'd make a foxy blonde," Catherine said delightedly. "Just wait until

you're all dolled up in makeup and heels!"

"Can't wait," Derek said, giving the "thumbs-up" signal. He felt a little weirded out by all the attention as the models clustered around him, complimenting the color choice and how well it matched his complexion. Normally he would have loved to be at the center of attention of a group of beautiful young ladies, but it was a little different knowing he would soon be joining them in dresses. Before having his makeup done, Eva sent him behind a panel to change out of his normal clothes and put on a robe, instead.

"Normally the girls just run around in their underwear, but I figured you might be a little bit shy," Eva explained. "Careful taking your shirt off, you don't want to mess up that gorgeous hair of yours!"

Derek accepted the robe and hurried behind the panel, glad to get away from the cooing girls for a moment. Surely they were having him on about how good he looked. He was still a guy, wasn't he? Derek took off his green T-shirt, lifting it carefully over his head so as to not touch his hair. Next, he kicked off his sneakers and wriggled out of his blue jeans, leaving him wearing his briefs and nothing else.

"Incoming!" one of the girls called from the other side of the panel, and before Derek could ask what she meant, a bra and a pair of panties flew over the top. With an expression of wonder mixed with terror, Derek picked the flesh-colored strapless bra up off the floor and held it up. He'd seen similar garments in his mom's laundry basket, but he had no idea how to put it on. The panties, meanwhile, were white and somewhat strangely shaped.

"That's a gaffe," Catherine called helpfully. "Eva says it's what male ballerinas wear so their junk isn't, like, distracting to the audience."

"I don't think they're called ballerinas if they're male," Derek called back, more to delay the inevitable than anything. The pocket in the front of the garment finally made sense. "She really just had one of these lying around?" Derek asked, stepping out of his briefs. The cold air-conditioned air of the mall immediately made him shrink a little bit down under, but he figured it could only help with what was to come.

"I guess her boyfriend is a dancer," Catherine said thoughtfully. "Or maybe a cross-dresser?"

Wasting no more time, Derek tucked his manhood into the garment, sucked in a breath, and yanked it up his legs. Tears immediately leapt into his eyes at the painful sensation of constriction. With his equipment crushed back inside him, looking down, all he saw was a flat, feminine V. It was unsettling, in more ways than one, to say the least.

"Do you need help with the bra?" Catherine called.

"No!" Derek said immediately, not wanting her to come back and see him in the gaffe. "Uh, I can, uh, figure it out myself," he added hastily. Determined to

do just that, he put the bra around his waist, and, after a few minutes of struggling with the hooks, managed to position it snugly around his chest so the padded cups were centered properly. He supposed ‘flat-chested’ for a girl and ‘flat-chested’ for a guy were two very different things, because the padding gave him small but noticeable boobs that tented the fabric of his robe when he put it on.

“Cute,” Catherine said, as Derek rounded the corner of the panel, clutching the robe around himself in an unintentionally girlish pose. If this was a preview to what wearing a dress was like, Derek was definitely not a fan of it. The skimpy material of the robe seemed to offer barely any coverage at all, and it ended mid-thigh, swirling around his goose-bumped upper legs. The cold air-conditioned air of the mall had free reign underneath, an extremely strange sensation for any guy who had spent a lifetime in bifurcated garments.

“Thanks,” Derek said weakly.

“Nice legs, girly,” Catherine grinned. “Here I thought we were going to have to shave you! How lucky are you? I would kill to not grow leg hair.”

“I get enough ribbing about that in the locker room,” Derek said, blushing. “Can we not dwell on my lack of body hair?”

“We don’t really have time,” Catherine agreed. “Eva wants you to get your makeup on right away.” She pointed to the makeup table, where an open chair was waiting. Clutching anxiously at the hem of the robe, Derek headed over and sat down.

The makeup artist was not as talkative as Roxie, but she obviously knew what she was doing, giving his face a thorough inspection and holding up several possible shades to evaluate his skin tone before even laying a hand on him. When she did, she worked quickly and efficiently, turning his head this way and that as she blended her little powders and brushed them across his face with practiced motions.

While the makeup artist worked, Catherine and another one of the models quickly and efficiently did his nails, using fake gel nails glued on overtop of his neatly-trimmed ones with little sticky tabs. They were already a soft pink, meaning no polish was required.

“Total lifesaver,” Catherine remarked. “But your toes are going to need painting.”

Derek tried not to squirm while she started on his feet, instead attempting to pay attention to the process as the makeup artist blended his concealer with a tiny sponge before starting on his eyes, using a chocolate brown liner on his upper and lower lids. He was surprised by how much bigger it made them look, and how it subtly changed the shape of his face, to boot. He managed to avoid any eyebrow plucking, with the makeup artist saying full eyebrows were currently in-style, but she did color them with a bit of pencil to define their

shape. A hint of brown eyeshadow and a coating of long-lasting mascara for his lashes finished off his eyes, and then she set to work lining his lips with a dark red pencil before filling them in with a creamy strawberry-colored lipstick. By the time she'd finally set everything with a bit of powder, Derek could hardly believe what he saw in the mirror.

"Holy crap," he said faintly, his vocabulary failing him for once. "I look... Uh... Whoa..."

"Gorgeous!" Catherine said delightedly. "I knew you had potential, but this is, like, scary good. You're gorgeous."

Derek gulped, but she was right. Staring back at him from the mirror was a beautiful young blonde, all made-up, and try as he might he couldn't quite reconcile the idea that it was him. She smiled when he smiled, tilted her head when he tilted his head, and everything else, but it was like another person entirely. The long pink nails only added to the picture, making the girl's hands look slender and feminine.

Derek had never been a particularly macho manly-man, but seeing what a pretty girl he made was enough to give any guy's ego a beating. He looked every bit as beautiful as the other models, and maybe even better than a few of them. His dark, luscious lashes fluttered whenever he blinked, giving his eyes a limpid, sensual appearance, and his lips looked thick, pouty, and perfect. His smooth complexion and highlighted cheekbones did the rest. He was stunning.

"Derek?" Eva had appeared yet again, seemingly out of nowhere, but this time Derek was too entranced with his reflection to jump in surprise. "Oh, wow," she said, which was obviously high praise from her. "Great work, Leigh. He's a doll."

The makeup artist gave a grunt of satisfaction, packing up her brushes.

"We can't call her Derek," Catherine chimed in. "She's way too fabulous. How about Darla?"

"Or Dana," the other girl said.

"Dakota?" Eva suggested. "We can decide later. Time to get you into your first outfit, and then it's ten minutes of Modeling 101 before you're on the catwalk for the first time. Okay?"

"Okay," Derek said vaguely. "Wait, what?"

"Snap out of it, girl," Catherine said. "There's plenty of time to admire yourself later. Time to get dressed!"



Travis Fulton and Sean Spriggs had gotten up far too early, and then walked the three miles it took to get to the Twin Pines Mall, and they were cheesed

off. No because they were tired or because of the distance, but because they couldn't use their skateboards. Platteville had draconian laws forbidding the use of skateboards on streets or sidewalks, forever to the displeasure of many teenage boys in the area. Of course, being hardcore skaters, Travis and Sean frequently disregarded these laws, and being the rebellious suburban kids they were, didn't care who saw them skating on the sidewalk.

They didn't care as long as they police weren't around, that is. What made their walk this morning so grating was that whenever the two boys looked around, sure enough, there was a cop car in sight. So they had to walk the whole way with the board tucked under their arms.

The two teens had been on their way to Boarded Up, the mall's main skateboard, snowboard, and BMX shop, to scope out Travis's competition before the summer's biggest skate contest, sponsored by both the store and a local radio station. They had forgotten all about their bad mood in an instant, because a fashion show featuring a whole ton of seriously good-looking girls was going on beside the food court, which was more than enough to distract two high-school boys.

"Show us your boobs!" Travis yelled at a carefully calibrated volume that was loud enough to be heard, but not by any of the girls.

Sean shoved him five feet away. "Knock it off!"

"What? Do these chicks go to our school? And since when are you so opposed to catcalling at a hottie?"

"I'm not," Sean said. "It's just that I know classy chicks like these are out of your league anyways, man."

"Riiiiight," Travis drawled. "I know what it is. Karen wants you to be more respectful of women, right? Man, that girlfriend of yours has got you by the balls these days."

"Don't be jealous, dude," Sean said, raising an eyebrow. "You had your shot with her. She had a problem with you being a liar, remember?"

"You can be respectful all you want around her, but be honest, man, you wouldn't say no to a bit of grinding on any of those girls," Travis grinned, raising his skateboard to make sure his wordplay didn't go unnoticed. "I'd like to pop-shove it to her, if you know what I mean. I'd like to mess around in her, uh, half-pipe."

"Okay, that one didn't even make sense," Sean sighed. "But I think your subconscious is telling you we gotta get going. You want to see who all signed up, don't you?"

"Just so I know who I'll be dominating, that's all," Travis said cockily, grinning. "And once I win, the girls are going to be all over me. Even that blonde."

"Keep dreaming, dawg," Sean said. "But you better keep your trash talk in

check. You don't want to end up..."



"*Disqualified?*" Travis shrieked. "Are you kidding me? Why?"

The bearded college student behind the counter of Boarded Up stuck a finger in his ear, wincing. "Look, I just know what Brad told me, okay?" he said. "You're the kid who tried to loosen Toby Miller's trucks before the last run to make him wipe out. They caught you with the wrench in your hand and everything. So this year, you're automatically disqualified."

"I was trying to tighten them back up when they caught me!" Travis protested. "They totally misread the situation."

"Why did they need tightening?" the student asked, scratching his beard.

"Because I loosened them," Travis snapped. "But that's not the point. There was remorse! In court, that means you get off."

"I don't think you've ever been in court," the counter guy said. "Or even, like, watched Law and Order."

"He loves that show," Sean interjected. "That's what makes it so sad."

"Let me talk to Brad," Travis pleaded. "He knows me. He'll see reason."

The man shook his head wordlessly, instead holding up the sign-up sheet, where Brad had crossed out Travis's name in bright red marker and written 'cheater' in huge letters beside it.

"Dude, I thought it was water under the bridge," Travis said, turning to Sean, ashen-faced. "It was a whole year ago, and the only reason I did it was because that douchebag Toby laughed right in my face when I wiped on my big finish!"

"Yeah, it still gets a chuckle from me just remembering it," said a smug voice from behind them. Travis turned around to find his biggest rival, Toby Miller, last year's winner and all-around insufferable douche-face, grinning at him. He already had his helmet on. "Looks like the competition just got a whole lot less stiff," he added. "Not that I was worried. You crack under pressure, Travis. Always have, always will."

"I shine under pressure," Travis snapped. "I'm like... I'm like a..." He trailed off, unable to think of an apt comparison.

"Well, too bad I won't get another chance to beat you this afternoon," Toby said, sneering. "Maybe they'll let you back next year. Cheaters never prosper, Travis. See you later."

Toby strutted away, adjusting his elbow pads, and it was all Sean could do to keep Travis from running after him and tackling him from behind.

"I gotta beat him," Travis said desperately, struggling against Sean's headlock.

"I gotta wipe that smug look off his face. There has to be a way I can still enter!"

"It doesn't look like it, dawg," Sean said, shrugging his shoulders sadly. "You're persona non grata."

"Is that Latin for screwed?" Travis demanded.

"I don't actually know," Sean admitted. "But the competition starts at one, so unless you have any bright ideas..."

"What if I wear a disguise?" Travis suggested. "What if I pretend to be, like, foreign? I have to prove I can beat Toby fair and square. No cheating required. I've been busting my butt all year at the skate park – you know that!"

"So you want to cheat your way in to prove you're not a cheater anymore?" Sean asked skeptically.

"Well, yeah, but only to get in," Travis defended himself. "After that, fair and square. Just pure talent, dawg."

"Well," Sean said thoughtfully. "You might just be on to something with that disguise idea. Do you remember two Halloweens ago? When Karen wanted to dress you up as a..."

"Nope," Travis said. "Nope, nope, nope."

"Liar," Sean said, shaking his head. "I'll give her a call."



A ten-minute ride later, Travis and Sean had left their skateboards in the garage of Karen's house and were now sitting on the floor of her room. Even though Sean had been dating her since the start of the school year, Travis had to admit he still felt a little weird around her, since they'd been a couple for an ill-fated month in the ninth grade. Not that he would ever show it, of course.

"So, care to run that by me again?" Karen asked, folding her arms. She was wearing hip-hugger skinny jeans and a tight T-shirt that showed off her boobs, which had definitely grown since ninth grade, a fact that Sean did not let Travis forget. She was also extremely cute, though not in the bubbly cheerleader way — she had a lip ring and a tendency to dye her hair too often.

Sean pressed his hands together, as if in meditation. "We want you to help dress up Travis as a chick so he can enter the contest and win it all, proving once and for all that he is not a cheater, and is also better than Toby Miller," he explained.

"Travis, is this true?" Karen asked, putting her hands on her hips and raising both eyebrows.

"It sounds pretty nutty hearing it out loud, but yeah," Travis admitted.

"So you want me to give my egotistic, chauvinistic ex-boyfriend a makeover?" Karen asked incredulously, starting to grin. "And do his hair? And makeup?"

"Nothing crazy," Travis protested. "Just enough so people won't recognize me. I mean, it's the last thing they'll expect."

"Christmas is early this year," Karen said, pretending to wipe a tear from her eye. "I'm just... so, so happy." Without even one more moment's hesitation, she bounced away to her closet and threw it wide open, humming happily to herself.

"She's got that evil gleam in her eye, in case you haven't noticed," Sean said, inching towards the door. "Uh, have fun, dawg. I don't think I can contribute much here."

"Yes, shoo," Karen ordered over her shoulder. "Give us ladies some privacy, okay, sweetie?"

Travis made a grimacing face. "Suddenly I think I would be a lot more comfortable with Sean here," he said. "You know, moral support and all."

"You got this, dude," Sean said, already halfway out the door. "I'm going to go spread the word."

"What word?" Travis demanded.

"That Travis Fulton's ugly cousin from New York is entering, and she's pretty good for a girl," Sean said. "Duh."

"I want to be from Los Angeles!" Travis shouted, but Sean had already shut the door behind him. He turned to his ex-girlfriend, and realized that Sean had

been dead-on about the evil gleam in her eye, and she even had the sinister smile going on, to boot.

“Don’t worry, Travis,” she said, holding up a pair of skimpy black bikini panties, the sight of which that would have made his day under any circumstances. “Your cousin is going to be *faaar* from ugly.”

Travis gulped.



Despite the fact that Karen was clearly enjoying herself way too much, Travis had to admit that it was sort of fun hanging out with just the two of them again, even if he was currently wearing her underwear.

“Are you sure you don’t have anything more plain?” Travis asked, fiddling with the empty cups of the frilly black bra she’d stuck him in.

“Thank Sean,” Karen said dryly. “He’s the one who bought me the set for my birthday last week. As far as I’m concerned, it’s all yours.”

“Hold on, what?” Travis demanded, putting his hands on his hips. “Why? Didn’t you like it?” He snapped his fingers. “Wait. He was being presumptuous, wasn’t he!”

“No, it’s just that he got my size wrong,” Karen said casually. “And lost the receipt, which is, you know, so Sean. Don’t worry, the birthday sex was still awesome.”

“Well, thank God for that,” Travis said, trying to disguise his disappointment. “So, how am I supposed to get into your panties?” He wriggled one eyebrow suggestively.

“One foot at a time, doofus,” Karen said, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah, but what about the, you know, equipment?” Travis asked.

“Can’t you just tuck it all back there?” Karen asked questioningly. “Like, back where it came from? I saw it on RuPaul’s Drag Race. It doesn’t look too hard.”

“Race-car drivers are into some weird stuff, man,” Travis said darkly, giving his crotch area a dubious look-over, then holding up the black panties. “Okay, I’ll try.”

“You’re going to need this, too,” Karen said rather ominously, handing him a roll of tape.

“Jeez,” Travis muttered. “This just keeps getting better. Give me some privacy, will you?”

Karen dutifully turned around, eyes covered, while Travis took a deep breath and committed what felt like a serious crime against his manhood. The sensation was incredibly uncomfortable, but Travis quickly secured himself

with a piece of sticky tape and pulled the panties on, eyes smarting with tears.

“Woo,” he gasped. “Okay. Done.”

Karen turned around, and she flashed him a surprised thumbs-up. “Wow, that actually looks really realistic,” she remarked. “The battle of the bulge has been won.”

“Or lost, depending on how you look at it,” Travis grimaced. Karen giggled, and despite himself Travis couldn’t help but grin along with her. That is, until she got out a disposable razor and a can of shaving cream from her under her bathroom sink.

“Nope,” Travis said. “Not shaving my legs.”

“Come on, just below the knee,” Karen protested. “You barely have any on them anyways.”

“Exactly!” Travis exclaimed. “I worked very hard for what little leg hair I have. It’s staying.”

“You have to wear tights, then,” Karen said, crossing her arms.

“Fine by me,” Travis said, crossing his own.

“Sexy fishnet ones,” Karen added.

Travis wavered. “Only below the knee?” he asked for clarification.

“Only below the knee. And I hear it even grows back!” she said sarcastically.

“Here.” She handed him the razor and the can of shaving cream.

Travis shook his head ruefully, then sighed and headed for the bathroom.



When Travis returned with his knees and calves fully denuded, Karen tossed him two pairs of balled-up pantyhose.

“Hey, I thought you said no tights,” he said suspiciously.

“Yeah, I did, those are for your boobs,” Karen said casually. “You’re a little flat on top, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“The things I do for my skateboarding career,” Travis muttered, stuffing one into each empty bra cup. Karen came over to even him out a bit, then handed him a pair of baggy purple cargo shorts.

“Did they have to be purple?” he whined. “Come on, Karen.”

“Hey, you’re lucky you aren’t wearing Daisy Dukes right now,” Karen said. “Honestly, you’ve got really pretty legs and you should probably take advantage of them. Nothing wrong with distracting the competition a little, and I bet the judges wouldn’t mind, either.”

“That is so wrong,” Travis groaned. “And also, you know, immoral. I definitely do not need to flash leg to win this thing.”

“Immoral, says the guy entering under a false name and gender,” Karen quipped. “Put ‘em on before I dig out a skirt.”

Grumbling, Travis complied, tugging the purple cargo shorts on. He had to admit they were pretty much the same as his ones at home, apart from the color, of course. He would be able to skate in them just fine. The Hello Kitty T-shirt she’d picked to go with them was not exactly to his liking, especially in the way it rode up to expose a tempting strip of midriff, but, as she pointed out, it definitely wasn’t mesh. Looking at her unimpressed ex, who was desperately trying to tug the hem of his shirt down in a way that actually looked sort of cute, she couldn’t help but laugh a little.

“Yeah, yuk it up,” Travis said sourly. Karen patted the bed beside her, where she had spread out a towel and was now unscrewing the cap on some pink nail polish. Travis sat down reluctantly--he had already agreed to having his nails painted, as she’d assured him it was one of the little things that automatically made people think ‘girl’ when they saw it.

“Sorry, Travis, it just reminds me of that Halloween when we were dating,” Karen said, dipping the brush. “You were this close to going as Tinkerbell, remember? *This* close! Now, put your hands down and spread your fingers.”

“Yeah, well I backed out for a reason,” Travis said, blushing. “It was fun anyways, though, wasn’t it?” He followed her instructions, putting his hands on the towel while she got started on his thumbnail.

“Tons of fun,” Karen admitted. “You looked pretty handsome as Peter Pan, too, in the end.”

“And you were a pretty sexy pirate,” Travis grinned.

Karen smiled at the memory. “Yeah, we looked pretty good together.”

“So why did we break up?” Travis asked, trying to make the question sound casual. Karen stopped what she was doing and looked up.

“Well...you were a huge jerk,” she pointed out.

“Obviously,” Travis said. “I mean besides that.”

“Hmm,” Karen said, returning her concentration to his nails. “Part of it was a total lack of empathy.”

“Moving stuff with my mind?” Travis guessed. “I guess I am kind of weak in that department. But one time, after I watched *The Matrix*, I swear I nearly made a spoon bend.”

“You’re thinking telepathy,” Karen said, finishing his last nail. “I mean empathy, as in, you never saw things from anyone else’s point of view. Particularly, never from mine. Okay, wave them around a little so they dry faster.”

“Alright, so I’m not a sensitive dude like Sean,” Travis said sourly. “But you gotta admit, we have some crazy sexual chemistry, right? I mean, the tension right now must be killing you.” To his surprise, a mischievous smile spread across Karen’s face. She trailed a finger down his chest.

“It kind of is,” she purred. “Close your eyes for a second?”

Travis swallowed. “Hey, I don’t know if we should rekindle this flame, Karen,” he said, closing his eyes all the same. “I mean, Sean is my best friend, and I know you’ve still got feelings, but... *Ouch!*”

He opened his watery eyes, blinking away tears of pain, and saw Karen brandishing a pair of tweezers with one of his eyebrow hairs caught in its pincers. She had a satisfied smile on her face. “You have a few scraggly hairs,” she explained. “Let’s get those cleaned up, shall we?”

“Do I get a veto?” Travis asked hopefully.

Karen only shook her head, grinning evilly. Travis groaned.



Half an hour later, Sean let himself in through the front door of Karen’s house, tucking his skateboard under his arm. As far as he was concerned, he had gone above and beyond the call of duty. He’d spent a good hour huffing it around the mall, and had managed to drop the fact that Travis’s cousin was in town, and also entering the skate competition, into at least a dozen different conversations. He’d even managed to convince one particularly gullible friend that he’d met Travis’s cousin the previous summer, and, just for his own amusement, let it slip that ‘she’ had a huge crush on him.

The rest was now up to Travis. Well, and Karen. “Hey, I’m back!” he called up the stairs. “How are things looking?”

“Hold on a sec!” Karen’s voice called. Sean heard a few mysterious thumps, followed by some profanity he recognized as Travis’s, before Karen emerged at the top of the stairs. “Okay,” she grinned, skipping down to stand next to him, giving him a quick peck on the cheek. “This is going to be good. May I introduce the new, and improved, *Miss Fulton?*”

She was met with the sound of crickets. Turning, she glared up the stairs. “Travis, come on!” she called. “Get down here already!”

“Fine!” came Travis’s voice, sounding none too happy. “Just tell him not to laugh, alright?”

“Hand to God,” Sean said, crossing his fingers behind his back.

“He promises not to laugh,” Karen called. “Now come on!”

The first thing Sean saw were an old pair of Karen’s pink-laced sneakers on the

stairway. From there, his eyes travelled up a pair of slender, shapely calves, a pair of baggy purple cargo shorts, and a skin-tight T that exposed a flat, nicely-toned stomach. Finally Sean's eyes rose to his friend's face, which had been utterly transformed. High, plucked eyebrows. Brilliant green eyes outlined by kohl and plenty of mascara. Thick, pouty lips coated in pale purple gloss. There might have been some blusher on his cheekbones, too, but it was hard to tell since he was blushing like a fire hydrant. Karen had even managed to take Travis's formerly shaggy red hair and work it into a sort of bob, a very chic, edgy look that framed his face quite nicely.

"Whoa," Sean said. "Dawg, you look..."

"Don't say it," Travis growled.

"Pretty freaking good," Sean finished. "I mean, wow. This could work. You look like a cute skater chick."

"I know," Travis said sadly.

"Hey, is this why you backed out of the Tinkerbell costume on Halloween?" Sean asked, suddenly suspicious.

"It's not my fault I make a convincing girl," Travis said, shrugging his slim shoulders. "But it doesn't mean I have to like it! Now, are we going to get this show on the road, or what?"

"You got it, dude," Sean said brightly.

"Oh, by the way, your name is Trixie."

"What?" Travis sputtered. Even Karen broke out in giggles.

"I thought it would suit you," Sean said, shrugging.

"I have never hated



anything more,” Travis grimaced.

“Well, wait until you see what I did to your board,” Sean grinned. “It’s over in the entry...”

Travis didn’t wait to hear the second part of the word, taking off like a shot with an expression of total terror on his prettily made-up face.



The damage wasn’t as awful as Travis had feared. Sean had used pink tape and some Hello Kitty stickers to disguise his distinctive skull-and-crossbones board bottom. If anyone really sharp eyed recognized the wheels, Sean said they could just pretend ‘Trixie’ had borrowed them for the competition. Karen even managed to dig up a pink helmet from her BMX gear, and a few minutes later, all three of them set off for the mall.

“Well, how is it?” Sean called. He was walking with Karen while Travis skated up ahead, leaning back and forth, trying to get adjusted to not only Karen’s sneakers, but also the experience of skateboarding in girl’s clothes.

“It’s actually not that bad,” Travis admitted over his shoulder. “Like, these panties are pretty comfy, dude. They don’t get bunched up like my boxers. Maybe I’ll have to keep ‘em.”

“In your dreams,” Sean said, giving Karen a look.

“Hey, what about your voice?” Karen said quickly. “You might walk the walk, but you have to talk the talk too, you know.”

“Any suggestions?” Travis asked, casually landing a kick-flip.

“Yeah,” Karen said. “Remember when you used to always make fun of my little sister by imitating her?”

“I would never do that!” Travis protested, in a scarily realistic high-pitched chipmunk voice. “Do you think I’m a big meanie?”

“Now try that,” Karen continued. “Except tone it down a notch or two.” Travis was silent for a moment, weaving along the sidewalk.

“Like this?” he finally said, in a voice that was still quite high-pitched and girlish, but more credible for a teenaged girl. “How’s this sound? Hello, hello, testing, testing.”

“Perfect,” Karen said, with no small satisfaction.

“I’m Trixie Fulton,” Travis trilled. “I’m from L.A. and I totally shred, so get ready to lose to a girl. Woo! Suck it, Toby Miller!”

“That-a-girl,” Sean said, grinning. Travis shot a smile back at him, which

looked pretty darn cute with all the lip gloss and mascara, then landed an ollie off the curb.

“I’m ready,” he announced, still in his sugar-and-spice girl voice. “Let’s do this thing.”



The sight of some skater kids slacking off and practicing their tricks was the last thing Denny needed to see. They were almost blocking the entranceway to the Twin Pines Mall, like they were some kind of gatekeepers of coolness to get in. He had always been threatened by the skater kids. Or the brainiac kids. Or the goth kids. Or the jocks. Really, just about any clique at all, to be truthful. The skaters were especially off-putting, with their skateboarding skills and chilled-out attitude.

It didn’t help that two of them were cute girls, which made him feel a thousand times more distressed. He had been hopeless with girls for as long as he could remember, and at his high school he was more or less invisible to the opposite gender — a super power he could do without, thank you very much.

“I’m not her type anyways,” Denny muttered, looking at the red-haired girl with a knowing grin on her pretty face. The redhead was no doubt into cool, rebellious guys who were athletic, even if they weren’t into organized sports. Denny, on the other hand, was shy, nerdy, and a day-dreamer, whose favorite “sport” was finding rare superhero comics. His specialty was finding ones with bizarre super-powers. Those were his favorites. Denny put his head down and held his breath as he stepped by the skaters, successfully avoiding being noticed in any way, and made it inside unscathed by social interaction.

The one spot in the mall he felt completely at home in, without having to worry about the popular kids picking on him, was Clay’s Comics Emporium. He had spent nearly as much time there as he had at his own house. Almost every day after school, or later on the weekends, he would come and browse and talk comics with Clay, the owner, and Winston, his slightly older friend who had graduated from high school last year and landed a job there.

Yes, it was a thousand times better than hanging out at his house, where his beautiful Chinese mother was constantly in a shouting match with his American businessman dad — usually by long-distance telephone. And it was a million times better than school, where he was in constant danger of being stuffed into a locker. Clay’s Comics Emporium was his oasis, his sanctuary, a place of peace and quiet where he could spend hours upon hours quietly browsing the aisles and arguing about superhero continuities in total tranquility...

Denny rounded the corner into the small shop, already smiling, and narrowly avoided being struck by a flying paperweight.

"I can't believe this!" Clay was shouting, his normally composed face was bright red with anger, spittle flying from his mouth. "People *love* my shop! There are *plenty* of customers!"

The tirade would have been far more intimidating if Clay wasn't a short, pudgy little man with a goatee and a Star Trek T-shirt. All the same, Denny could see that Winston, tall, scrawny, and bespectacled with unkempt dirty blonde hair, was doing his best to calm his boss down.

"Calm down, Clay," Winston said, putting his hands in the air like one would with an angry bull. "What exactly did he say on the phone this time?"

"Sure, sure, sales are down a little," Clay continued to rant. "And maybe our clientele isn't *varied*. Maybe we don't 'reach across the gender gap.' But the customers we have are loyal! They keep coming back! I mean, look at Denny!"

"Must be the great customer service," Denny muttered, picking up the paperweight and returning it to the counter. "Nice to see you, too, Clay. What's going on, guys?" Clay opened his mouth, but before he could reply, Winston jumped in at lightning speed.

"They're threatening to shut us down because 1a, we aren't attracting new customers, and 1b, we have, like, zero female customers," he explained.

"It's this new higher-up pencil-pusher who firmly believes young women are the biggest untapped comic market out there," Clay sighed. "And if we can't prove we're appealing to that demographic, well, we're sunk. He's coming by today for another 'inspection,' which really just means sitting here and making notes on his clipboard every time another girl hurries past giving us a twenty-foot radius like we're selling crack instead of comics."

"Maybe we should advertise crack," Winston said wistfully. "That would get at least some new people in here."

Denny didn't even register his friend's joke, caught up as he was with processing what he had just learned. If Clay's Comic Emporium couldn't prove they appealed to girls, they were going to be shut down. Denny had seen girls in Clay's Comic Emporium exactly zero times. Therefore, Clay's Comic Emporium was totally screwed.

The news hit Denny like a physical blow. His one safe haven, his one private oasis, was going to be shut down for not appealing to the opposite, and absolutely terrifying, gender? It was unthinkable to him.

"But they can't just shut you down," Denny said desperately. "I mean, it's your shop! It's named after you." Clay and Winston both gave Denny a weird look.

"Excuse me?" Clay asked. "Clay's Comic Emporium is a chain, and we're just one small, struggling location."

"But... But your name is..." Denny trailed off.

"Oh, yeah, that's a total coincidence," Clay said blithely. "Though I think it

may have helped me out on my resume.”

“You get enough customers to squeak by, don’t you?” Denny demanded. “I mean, if it’s a matter of me buying more often, I can ask my dad to up my allowance and...”

“It’s not about having enough customers,” Clay said sadly, shaking his head. “It’s about showing them we’re attracting new customers. Particularly, young, female customers.”

“But this is the one place in the mall I don’t have to worry about making an idiot out of myself around girls!” Denny blurted, then blushed brightly. Rather than laughing, Clay and Winston both nodded sympathetically.

“I know, Denny,” Winston sighed. “But things don’t look so great. What time is he coming by?”

“Six o’clock,” Clay said darkly. “So we have two hours to contemplate our demise.” Both of them sat down in silence, staring morosely at the floor.

“Well, we had a good run,” Winston said. “I guess I can try getting hired at the book store, they do some comics.”

“I should be able to get a management gig at McDonald’s,” Clay admitted.

Denny couldn’t believe his ears. His whole world had just been turned upside-down, and they were already talking about finding new jobs? Denny cleared his throat. “Hold on,” he said, trying to sound forceful with a voice that was still yet to break. “You guys are just giving up? Just like



that?"

"What are we supposed to do, Denny?" Winston asked sadly. "Unless you have some way of getting a bunch of girls in here before six o'clock... Heck, even *one* girl..."

"What if you just hire somebody?" Denny asked desperately. "Like, online?"

"And get arrested for soliciting?" Clay quipped. "No thanks."

"Winston, what about your sister?" Denny probed. Even thinking about Winston's hot, popular younger sister Catherine made Denny feel his usual stammer coming on. She was in his grade, but he was more or less certain she had no idea he existed.

"My sister wouldn't set foot in this place even if I paid her," Winston said mournfully. "And besides, she's busy doing some sort of fashion show thing all day outside Claire's."

"Besides, the inspector would see right through it unless they actually knew something about comics," Clay added.

Denny closed his eyes and thought hard. He couldn't let Clay's Comic Emporium go down without a fight. The inspector needed to see a girl hanging out here to persuade him they were appealing to the young, female demographic. A girl who knew about comics, no less. The answer was obvious.

"We're totally screwed," Denny admitted, sitting down himself. All three of them sighed in unison. Denny looked around the shop, wondering if it might just be his last visit. The rows and rows of comics and memorabilia gave him a lump in his throat from nostalgia. He looked to the back wall, where limited edition posters were hung inside glass cases. His eyes travelled to his favorite, one depicting Superman and Wonder Woman flying through the sky.

Sitting down, he could see his reflection in its glass case, his fine-featured face and longish black hair. And if he shifted just a little bit in his seat, his face lined right up over Wonder Woman's. Well, he was no superhero in real life. Not even a female one. Nobody could save the comic shop, and he was just going to have to accept that. Sighing, Denny took off his glasses and cleaned them on his shirt, then stopped. He looked at the poster again, and a crazy idea popped into his head. A crazy, stupid, harebrained idea that probably didn't have a chance of working. But he knew he had to try.

"Guys," Denny said, taking a deep breath. "I think I just came up with a plan."



A few minutes later, all three of the guys were seated around a table usually used for Dungeons and Dragons, now discussing the finer points of Denny's crazy idea.

"It could actually work," Winston said excitedly. "I mean, be honest, Denny, you haven't exactly hit puberty in a big way. Your voice is still high, and you're kinda little."

"Plus, those androgynous half-Asian features are a big plus," Clay said. "You might actually make a pretty good-looking girl, if you put your mind to it. But where are we going to get clothes for you?"

Denny took a deep breath and turned to his best friend. "Winston, you said your sister is busy here at the mall all day, right?" he said.

"Yes..." Winston said suspiciously.

"So that means she's not at your house," Denny followed logically. "Meaning you could hurry home, sneak into her room, and..." He gulped. "Get me an outfit."

"You realize she'd kill me if she knew I was in her room, right?" Winston asked. "Let alone her closet. Are you sure you just don't want something of hers that you can sniff, lover boy?"

"This is an emergency," Denny said, blushing. "I'm just thinking logically. I can't go to a store and buy girl stuff as a boy."

"Okay, I can get the clothes," Winston said. "But no way am I going into her underwear drawer, got it?"

"Fair enough," Denny said, only slightly disappointed.

"You're going to have to do something to your hair," Clay pointed out. "And girls wear makeup, too, right?"

"Got it covered," Denny said brusquely. "My mom owns a salon here, remember? If I explain what's going on, she should be able to help me out."

"It wouldn't bring, like, dishonor on your family, or something?" Clay asked quizzically.

"I'll be lucky to get a family discount," Denny shot back dryly. "Okay, so if I'm getting the hair and makeup taken care of, and Winston is getting me clothes, that just leaves underwear." Both Denny and Winston shot a look at Clay, who immediately turned beet red.

"Wait a second, where am I supposed to find women's underwear?" he spluttered.

"That's up to you," Denny said, shrugging even as he blushed a bit himself. "My mom goes to Victoria's Secret."

"So does my sister," Winston added. Denny raised an eyebrow at him. "She's always coming home with shopping bags!" Winston defended himself. "And quit thinking about my sister in her underwear!"

"I'm not!" Denny protested, lying outright. "Uh, where were we? Right, so both of you meet me at the salon in an hour, got it?"

Clay and Winston exchanged slightly bemused looks.

“What is it?” Denny asked, frowning.

“It’s just that you’re so take-charge about it,” Winston said. “Like if we’re the X-men, you’d totally be Cyclops right now.”

“Usually you barely make a peep,” Clay pointed out.

Denny felt his newfound confidence beginning to slip. “Is it... Is it a bad thing?” he asked. “It’s just that this is really important to me. Your comic shop is where I feel at home, Clay. The only place, actually.”

“It’s not a bad thing at all,” Clay said. “Lead the way, Denny. Or shall I say Denise?”

“We can think of a name later,” Denny said, grimacing. “Let’s get going. I’ll see both of you at my mom’s salon in an hour, right?”

“Right,” Clay and Winston both said. Clay flipped the store’s sign from Open to Closed on their way out of the door, then locked it behind them.

“Hey, what’s with the new hours?” a pimply-faced young teen demanded sourly, arriving on the scene with a comic book return in his hand.

“We’re trying to keep from going out of business,” Clay shouted. “Sorry.”

The three guys hurried away, splitting up into three separate directions, leaving a seriously confused customer standing outside the shop.



Denny had rarely ever set foot in his mom’s beauty salon, usually preferring to wait outside on the occasions he needed to ask her for a ride home or something of the like. His dad had bought the place a few years back as a way to keep his wife busy — Denny’s mom was a serial spender, and he figured it would keep her from shopping so much.

Naturally, it had taken less than a year for her to grow bored with it, and hand off all the boring day-to-day operations to Li, a streetwise woman who had run a very successful spa in Chinatown. Now Denny’s mom usually spent her time at the salon having her hair done and gossiping with the women who worked there, despite nominally being the owner.

And unfortunately, she wasn’t currently there.

“You just miss her,” Li said frankly, from behind the counter. “What you need, Denny?”

Denny shuffled his feet nervously behind the counter. Li, despite her occasionally brusque manner, was a family friend. Still, she was also very attractive, and Denny, having always had a bit of a crush on her, couldn’t help but dread her laughter when he explained the situation. Denny looked around,

and thought that at least he'd come at a good time. Aside from one lady having her nails done at the far end of the salon, the place was more or less empty. Gathering his courage, Denny put his hand on the counter and leaned forward conspiratorially.

"I need a makeover," he whispered.

"Yes," Li agreed, to his surprise. "More mature clothes, more stylish haircut. You handsome boy, Denny, but you look sloppy." Denny flushed at the backhanded compliment, simultaneously pleased she had called him handsome and affronted she thought he needed a change in style. He liked his hair long, and he liked his superhero T-shirts just fine.

"Not that kind of makeover," he said, swallowing. "I mean, like, the kind you do here. Let me explain..." And so he did, going over the plan to save Clay's Comics Emporium in detail while Li listened, looking either amused or confused by turn. When he finally finished his tale, he held his breath, awaiting judgment.

"Good plan," Li said at last. "You make good girl, too. But, there big problem, Denny."

"What problem?" Denny asked, frowning.

"You no have appointment," Li said firmly, pointing to her list.

"But you guys aren't busy!" Denny spluttered. "Can't you just squeeze me in?"

"No," Li said. "Customer come soon for big appointment, the works."

"What if you ask her to reschedule?" Denny suggested. Li snorted.

"Ask good customer reschedule to give Denny free makeover?" she demanded. "Bad way to run business. Sorry, Denny. Try other salon."

"I'm not going to another salon for this!" Denny exclaimed. He fumbled in his pocket, pulling out the cash he'd been planning to use on a rare comic book.

"Look," he said. "I'll pay, okay?" Li gave the money in his hand a skeptical look.

"Customer wanted the works," she said. "Manicure, pedicure, waxing, brows, hair, makeup, everything."

"I'll pay the same rate for hairstyling and a bit of makeup or whatever," Denny reasoned. "Look, this is an emergency, Li."

Li sighed, plucking the money from his hand. "Okay," she said. "I reschedule other appointment. But we are honest salon, Denny. You pay for works, you get works."

"Well, let's not get carried away," Denny said nervously. "Uh, you mentioned waxing?"

"Yes," Li smiled. She looked Denny up and down with an interested gaze that made him blush all over. "Much potential," she said. "You will blossom into very beautiful young lady with our help."

“Well, we’ve only got an hour,” Denny pointed out hopefully.

Li’s eyes widened. “We must hurry,” she said. She snapped her fingers, and two salon girls came rushing over. “Denny needs the works,” she announced. “Get him in chair. Fast!”

Denny gulped as he was led to the salon chair, wondering what exactly he’d gotten himself into.



Winston double-timed it back to his house on his bike, pedaling as fast as he could until he rounded the bend into his neighborhood and saw his house fast approaching. His sister was at the mall for her fashion show all day, but judging by the car parked in the driveway, his mom was home. That made things slightly more difficult, but not by much. He stopped his bicycle in the driveway, carefully putting down his kickstand, then went up the front steps to let himself inside.

Entering his sister’s room was a crime more or less on par with murder — which was also the penalty. Up until now, Winston had never had a reason to invade his sister’s room, and so long as she respected his boundaries, he had no problem respecting hers.

Until now, that is. This was a desperate time, and it called for desperate measures. Winston stepped into his house and immediately he could hear the sound of his mom in the shower upstairs — her bathroom was, incidentally, right beside his sister Catherine’s room. As long as she stayed in the bathroom, however, it would be easy enough to sneak in and out with nobody the wiser.

The door slammed shut noisily behind him, and Winston cursed himself for forgetting to stop it.

“Catherine, honey, is that you?” his mom’s voice called, after the sound of the water disappeared with the turn of the tap. “Are you done already? I thought the fashion show went all day?”

Winston considered his options. Then, putting on his best imitation of his sister, he called back, “We’re not done yet, I just had to come home to grab a few things!”

“Very funny, Winston,” his mom shouted. “Why aren’t you at work?” Winston shook his head, grimacing. Ever since his voice changed, that particular trick hadn’t seemed to work very well.

“I’m on break!” he called back, using his normal voice. “Keep showering! I’ll be in and out in a minute.” He hurried up the stairs, passing the bathroom door.

“How long a break?” his mom asked. Winston was now standing in front of the

forbidden door, wiping his sweaty palms on the seat of his pants.

“Uh, an hour,” he said, saying the first time that came to mind, which was when he was supposed to meet Clay and Denny at the salon.

“Okay,” his mom said, turning the shower back on. “Make sure to eat something!”

Winston waited until his mom started singing again — there was no way she could hear him over that racket — then, steadying his nerves, he grabbed the doorknob and let himself into Catherine’s room.

Immediately, he could see why she never let him or his parents inside. The place was an absolute mess, the floor covered in clothes, and every available surface littered with fashion magazines and makeup products. Winston couldn’t help but feel some optimism. In a mess like this, there was no way she would miss a few things.

He started hunting around, trying to remember what sort of things went with what. He never paid much attention to what his sister wore, and now he regretted it. He was hopeless with matching — his awful sense of style was one of the things his sister harped on most, and she hated being seen in public with him. Discarding yet another combination, Winston closed his eyes and tried to think of a particular outfit.

He realized, in a flash, that it would be easiest if the outfit consisted of only one item of clothing: a dress. He was so pleased with his deduction that he didn’t even give a moment’s thought to the possibility that Denny might be less than pleased with it. He went to the closet and yanked out a little yellow summer dress with a bow from the very back. He vaguely remembered her wearing it only once, which was perfect. She would never miss it, especially for only an afternoon. A grin spread across his face as he also stumbled across a pair of sandals in the same color. Sure, they had a heel, but the important thing was that they matched.

Winston stuffed the shoes and dress into his backpack and slipped out the door, only pausing to grab a few familiar-looking bracelets from her vanity that he was pretty sure she’d used to ‘accessorize’ the dress, whatever that meant. Victorious, Winston closed the door behind him as silently as possible. He practically skipped his way past the bathroom door, where from the sounds of it his mom was blow drying her hair. He was nearly out of the house when he heard the bathroom door open...

“Wait just a minute, young man,” his mom said sharply.

Winston gulped. How did she know what he had in his backpack? Did she have X-ray vision? He had long suspected as much. His palms began to sweat. “Yes, mom?” he asked innocently.

“You thought you could just waltz in and waltz out without me realizing, didn’t you?” she asked, stepping out of the bathroom with her towel wrapped around

herself.

“Realizing... What?” Winston asked faintly. His mom wagged a finger at him, glaring.

“You didn’t mow the lawn before you left for work this morning!” she exclaimed. “I’ve been telling you all week, and you keep making excuses, but we’re having company over tonight and I do *not* want to fire up that big dirty lawn mower and do it myself when I have dinner to cook!”

“Oh, phew,” Winston muttered, breathing a sigh of relief. “I can do it when I get back from work?”

“They’ll be here already,” his mom said impatiently. “Now, Winston.”

“But I have to get back to the mall!” Winston protested, checking his watch. He was supposed to meet Clay and Denny in little more than half an hour.

“If you start now you’ll be back in time,” his mom said. “And don’t pretend your boss is a stickler for punctuality, you show up late to work half the time anyway.”

“But mo-om...” Winston whined.

“No buts!” his mom said firmly. “Get going!”

Winston groaned and hurried his way to the garage to get the mower.



As soon as Clay saw the pink sign that read “Victoria’s Secret,” he immediately felt his resolve starting to weaken. In all his twenty-eight years, he had never actually gone inside a women’s underwear store, and certainly not unaccompanied. The intimidating posters of scantily-clad models seemed to be glaring at him, as if to say, “begone!” And the aisles filled with all things lacy, frilly, and colorful, were occupied only by women. Clay felt his steps beginning to slow down as he got closer and closer to the store.

In the window display, a pretty young shop assistant was putting lingerie on a mannequin. Clay was going to have to ask for help, and he didn’t think he could manage striking up the courage to talk to the mannequin, never mind the actual girl. He could feel sweat already dripping down his forehead. Gritting his teeth, Clay marched right past the open door, his feet carrying him safely away on autopilot.

“Come on, Clay, you coward,” he muttered, drawing an odd look from a passerby. “This is important. This is to save your store, remember? You’re a grown man, and there is absolutely no reason you can’t go in there and buy some underwear.”

Gathering up every bit of resolve he possessed, Clay stopped, spun on his heel, and hurried into Victoria’s Secret before he could stop himself. As soon as

he entered the store, he felt like every woman in the place turned to give him a suspicious glance. Of course, the fact that he was sweating buckets probably had something to do with it.

“Hi, can I help you?” chirped a voice. Clay turned, and found himself face-to-face with the pretty shop assistant.

“Hello, miss,” Clay said abruptly. “I am here to buy some underwear. For my, uh, girlfriend.”

“Cute!” the girl beamed. “Well, what’s the occasion? Anniversary?”

“Yes!” Clay said, seizing upon the excuse. “Our five year anniversary.”

“Wow, congratulations!” the shop assistant squealed. “That’s so awesome. We have some really pretty new stuff that just came in, come look...” She ushered Clay to a display where several lacy bra and panty sets were being shown. “So, what does she like?” the shop assistant quizzed. “What kind of girl is she? Is she a real girly girl?”

Clay, who’s brain had momentarily seized up at the dizzying array of options, had a hard time processing the question. “Of course she’s really a girl!” he gulped. “Whatever do you mean?” The shop assistant gave him a funny look.

“I asked if she’s a *girly* girl,” she said. “Like, pastels? Bows? Pink?”

“Oh, right,” Clay said. “Uh, yes?”

“Great!” the shop assistant chirped. “Here’s a really cute set. See the little ruffles? Now, what size is she?”

“Small,” Clay quickly. “I’m not sure about her cup size. But, uh, quite a bit smaller than you.” He immediately cursed himself for the backhanded compliment, but needn’t have worried. A satisfied smirk appeared on the shop assistant’s face.

“So, an A-cup,” she said pleasantly, pulling a bra and panty set off the rack. “Well, some girls are just unlucky. If we get her something in this push-up style, though...”

“It’s not her fault,” Clay blurted, feeling the bizarre need to defend his imaginary girlfriend. “She’s still in high-school, after all.”

As everyone within hearing distance turned to stare, Clay immediately wished he could sink through the ground. He could practically see the shop assistant doing the mental math.

“If this your five-year anniversary, and your girlfriend is still in high-school...” she trailed off, looking horrified.

“I’ll take this,” Clay blurted, grabbing the bra and panty set. “Big hurry! Let’s get to the check-out! Okay!”

The shop assistant took his purchase to the counter and rang it up in total silence, while Clay continued sweating buckets. He barely bothered to even

look at the price, forking over his credit card without a second glance, and as soon as he had the bag in hand, he took off like he was being chased by a fiend from hell, vowing to never go back to Victoria's Secret again.



As Nick Carmichael and his girlfriend Jessica Sanders headed towards Heavy Notes, the music shop where Nick worked, he couldn't help but glance at the big, nervous looking guy speeding away from Victoria's Secret. He looked like he had just been chased from the store. "Some dudes are just afraid of anything that has to do with girls," he mused, in his laid-back way. Jessica didn't make any comment, only shaking her head with a momentary glimpse of a mysterious smile on her face.

"Why don't you buy more stuff from Victoria's Secret, sweetheart?" Nick asked, winking to show he was joking.

"You're the one getting the makeover today, not me," Jessica said.

"Right, right," Nick sighed. He took off his backwards ball cap in order to run his fingers back through his long, wild mane of brown hair that had been part of his signature look for years, ever since he started working at the music shop. The rest of the look included a sweatshirt with shoulder spikes and a skull design, ripped jeans, floppy Converse sneakers, and a shirt tied around his waist to really complete the grunge rocker look. Not exactly a clean-cut employee, but customers got a kick out of it, he figured, and besides, Nick thought he looked pretty damn cool.

Jessica, however, thought otherwise. She'd been pleading with him to try a button-up shirt and a haircut for ages, but it wasn't until she signed him up for a reality web show that did the whole "extreme makeover" thing that Nick took her seriously. He couldn't remember what it was called — Brand New Boyfriend, or something dumb like that — but it was apparently one of YouTube's most popular channels, and Nick wasn't about to miss a chance at internet stardom.

"I'm really going to miss this hair," Nick said, almost sniffing a bit with the emotion. He'd had his long wild hair for so long that parting with it would feel like losing an old friend.

"Oh, honey," Jessica said, patting his face. "I will, too. But you're going to look so much hotter without it."

"I better," Nick grumbled. "Why are we heading back to Heavy Notes, again?"

"Phil wanted to get a couple more minutes of footage of you in action," Jessica said. "Which is about as much action as you ever accomplish when you're at work."

Nick only shrugged and gave an innocent grin, not even bothering to argue

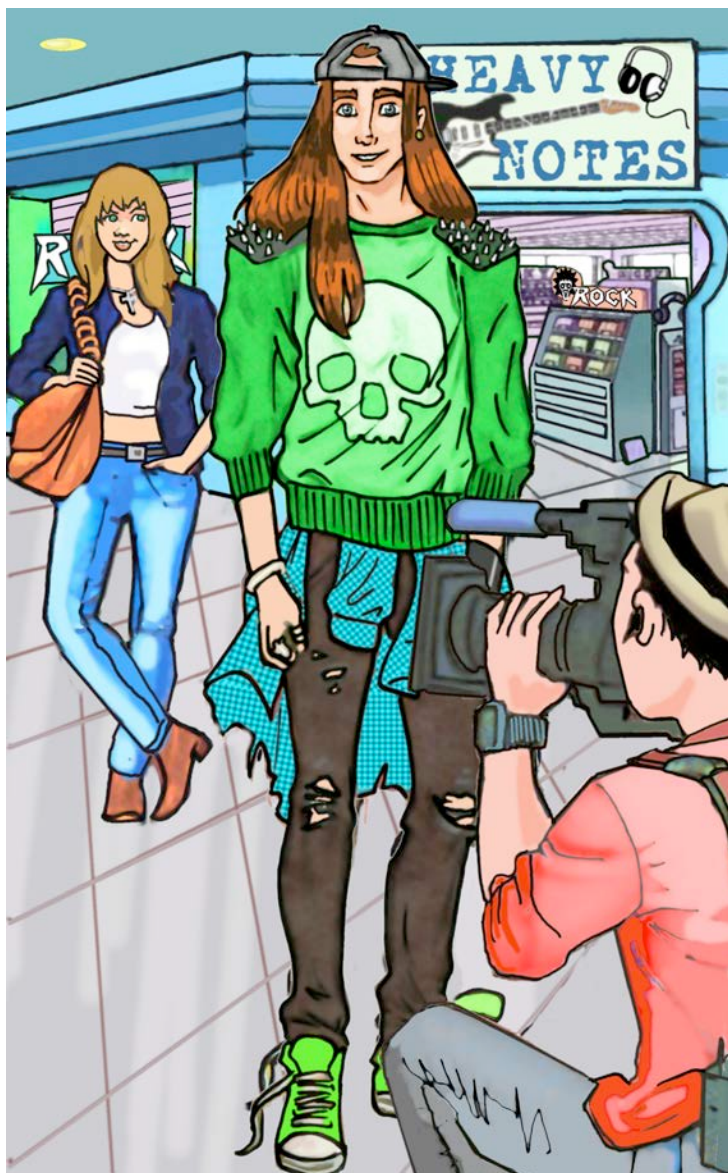
with her assessment. He knew he was a slacker, through and through, but it was a good life. He loved rock and roll, and this way he occasionally even got to meet guys from the bigger local bands.

As they walked past the electric guitar display into the music shop, Nick saw Phil, or, as he preferred to be called, 'Phillipe,' deep in discussion with Nick's boss, Jimmy. That probably wasn't a good thing, seeing as Jimmy rarely, if ever, had anything positive to say about Nick. The young slacker was somewhat knowledgeable and not bad with customers, so long as he wasn't hungover and grouchy, but between his constant tardiness and general laziness, he was no employee of the month candidate, that was for sure. Jessica thought Nick was lucky to still have a job there.

"What's up, Jimmy," Nick said loudly, walking inside. "Hey, Phil, buddy. How we doing today?"

Phillipe was the producer/host of this video, and had been hanging around Nick from the past day, getting 'background' video of his life. "Hi, Nick," Phillipe said, raising his video camera immediately. "Today, we introduce you to the new you."

Nick couldn't help but roll his eyes, disliking



Phillipe as much as he had the previous day. He was a film student with a scraggly beard, beanie cap, and eyebrow piercing, who had a slow, surfer dude style of speaking and a mellow attitude that ground Nick's gears.

"Just make sure you get a shot of our current sale," Jimmy said to Phillipe, then, turning to Nick, he said, "Enjoy the day off, Nick. Sounds like it's going to be an interesting one. Hi, Jessica."

"Hey, Jimmy, hey Phillipe," Jessica said. "So, a few more shots here, then off to the barber shop, right?"

"Exactly, sister," Phillipe said. "Let's get some shots of Nick with a guitar. Let that chest hair breathe, my man. You need to look manly, so the contrast is better." He shot a look at Jessica. "Uh, the lighting contrast, I mean."

"Right, right," Nick said excitedly. "Let me grab the Fender. Hey, can you get a fan to like, blow my hair back? That would be bitching!"

Jessica and Phillipe exchanged a grin. "Whatever you want, baby," Jessica said. "Whatever you want."



Nick actually had a surprisingly good time showing Phillipe and his video camera around the music shop, posing at every opportunity, leaning back against the wall with his arms crossed and a cool scowl on his face, or intently pretending to tune an expensive guitar. Before long, however, it was time to head off to the salon where a barber was waiting to turn Nick into a short-haired, boring version of himself.

Of course, he hadn't been expecting it to happen at Lovely Lotus beauty salon. As Nick and Jessica walked through the doors, followed by Phillipe with his camera, Nick couldn't resist shooting a snide remark over his shoulder.

"Let me guess," he said. "This was the cheapest place?"

Phillipe gave an apologetic shrug, careful not to move the camera with it. "We're a YouTube channel, my man. Not, like, MTV."

"They do great manicures here," Jessica said helpfully.

Despite his misgivings, Nick automatically turned up the charm as soon as they were inside, greeting the small team of waiting beauticians and what he assumed to be the salon's owner, an attractive thirty-something Asian woman named Li.

"Apologies for reschedule," she said briskly to Jessica. "We have emergency appointment earlier. You are Nicky, yes?"

"Uh, no," Jessica said, exchanging another grin with Phillipe. "This is Nick." She indicated her boyfriend, whose confidence in this endeavor was disappearing rapidly by the second.

“Ah,” Li said, with a small smile appearing on her face. “Déjà vu. Okay, Mr. Nick, right this way.”

“You got it,” Nick said reluctantly, taking the opportunity to slyly check out her stocking-clad legs as she spun and swished away, leading him to an empty salon chair. He took off his leather jacket, which has hung on the coatrack nearby, and hopped into the chair, leaning his head back while Li draped the barber towel around him.

“We do your hands and feet at same time,” she said. “Stick them in trays, okay?” Nick shot a questioning look at Jessica, eyebrow raised in an unimpressed way.

“Great manicures, remember?” she said. “Your nails could do with some attention.”

“Yeah, yeah, why not,” he sighed, poking his hands out. At the same time, one of the beauticians was removing his shoes, followed in short order by his mismatched socks, exposing his foot odor to the world. She quickly lowered them into a basin of warm, scented water, which Nick had to admit felt incredibly good.

“We wash your hair first,” Li said. “Tip head back and close your eyes, Mr. Nick.”

“This might not be so bad after all,” Nick muttered, following her directions. Her soft, assured hands moved expertly around his scalp, massaging him firmly as she wet and shampooed his hair in the sink positioned directly behind the chair. It felt nice! Maybe he could get Jessica to wash his hair for him in the future...

Nick drifted along, trying to imagine what he would look like with short hair, while Li worked on his hair, another beautician scrubbed at his cuticles, and a third massaged his feet. He could actually see why girls liked this stuff. It was really relaxing. He let his eyelids slip shut.

“How am I doing, sweetheart?” he asked. “This is really tough on me.”

“You’re doing great,” Jessica said, but not sounding quite as sarcastic as he’d expected her to. Curious, Nick opened his eyes, and found his left hand was sporting long, carefully-filed oval nails, polished a shiny fuchsia.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” he barked. “No-no girl nails on big man, Li!” He looked down, and yelped, realizing his toenails were currently being painted the same shade.

“We give you works,” Li said, rolling her eyes. “Like you made appointment for, Mr. Nick.”

“What the hell is going on here?” Nick demanded, trying to struggle out of the salon chair. “Jessica, sweetheart, you got some explaining to do! Why am I getting done up like a chick?”

Jessica, who was doing her best not to burst into giggles, nodded to Phillipe. “Show him what you’ve got so far,” she grinned. Phillipe handed him the portable camera and pushed ‘play’ in the corner of the screen. Nick peered down at it as it started to roll, showing himself at work in the music store in a series of montage cuts, accompanied by some hard guitar riffs. Then, the voice-over started.

“Meet Nick, hard at work in his job at Heavy Notes in the mall,” the narrator said. “Nick is a huge fan of rock music, along with metal and grunge, and you can see his style reflects that.”

There was an up-and-down panning shot of Nick in his usual attire of skull motifs, ripped jeans, earring, and, of course, his long, wild, unkempt hair.

“I’ve seen this already!” Nick protested. “Just tell me what’s going on, already!”

“Just keep watching,” Jessica hushed him.

On the screen, Nick saw himself, seated behind the counter at the music store, give a devil-may-care grin. “Got to look the part, that’s all,” he said. “Dress for the job, you know?”

“His girlfriend Jessica, however, would like him to join the current decade, style-wise,” the voice-over continued, as the screen showed Nick and Jessica together, hand-in-hand. “She’s signed him up for an extreme makeover to give his hair, and wardrobe, a much needed update! However, there is one thing Nick doesn’t know...”

The music suddenly turned serious, and Nick was surprised to see footage he certainly didn’t remember filming of him hanging around the food court, wolf-whistling when an attractive blonde minced past, making a catcall on his way to the music store, and even hitting on the cute cashier from Claire’s.

“You were filming that?” Nick demanded. “Look, Jessica, it’s not like I was going to...”

“Keep watching,” Jessica said, angrily.

Nick swallowed, returning his attention to the screen, where now it was Jessica seated for the camera.

“Nick is an awesome boyfriend in a lot of ways,” she said to the camera. “He’s fun, and spontaneous, and we share the same taste in music, so we always have a blast going to concerts. He can be really thoughtful and sweet when he wants to be. But there is one thing...” The camera zoomed in on her face. “Nick can be a total pig sometimes. Sorry, baby.”

Nick didn’t even have time to be offended as the screen switched back to a montage of him catcalling at various women as they walked by. He recognized a few of them, like the hottie who worked at Claire’s, and the blonde girl with the great rear view who always came through the food court when he was on break. Others were just faces in the crowd.

Then, to his horror, the camera switched back to interview style, sitting down with several of the women. Nick grimaced as he listened to the ridiculous overreactions going on.

“Yeah, almost every day. It gets super annoying.”

“One time when I was wearing overalls. Overalls! How can that possibly be sexy?”

“The guy with the long hair... I bet he thinks girls like it.”

“That guy from the music store... Is it some kind of power trip?”

“The long hair, grunge-looking asshole... Every day, I swear. Every damn day.”

The camera switched back to his girlfriend Jessica, sitting with her hands in her lap and looking none-too-pleased.

“Did you know just how bad it was?” the voice-over, which was obviously Phillipe, asked.

“No,” Jessica said, in the very-annoyed voice Nick had learned to dread. “I mean, I work as a waitress, so I have to put up with stuff like that all day,” she said. “And to think that my own boyfriend is doing that to women on their way to their jobs is extremely upsetting.”

“Do you think he needs to be taught a lesson?”

“Yes,” Jessica said, wiping a tear from her eye.

“So, Nick is a serial catcaller with an addiction to sleazy comments,” the voice-over said, showing Nick again as the music changed. “As you know, harassment of women, both on the street in shopping centers across the world, is an increasingly big problem. So, Prankster Studios is going to teach Nick a lesson!”

“Prankster Studios?” Nick echoed. “I thought the channel was called...”

“He’s getting a makeover, all right, but not the one he expected,” the voice-over continued. “We’re going to get Nick professionally made-over as a woman, then send him through the mall to get a taste of harassment from the other side. Think he’ll learn a few things? We’ll find out!”

The screen switched to showing Nick coming into the salon, cocksure as ever, shaking hands with all the beauticians and cracking jokes. Nick watched with gritted teeth as Li started washing his hair. He wished he could shout a warning to past-Nick, but it was too late. Nick watched through a sped-up version of the manicure and pedicure, up to the point where he’d finally put his foot down and shouted “What the hell is going on?” Then the video-camera screen went black.

Nick handed the video-camera back to Phillipe, still stunned. “So that’s what this really is?” he demanded of his girlfriend. “Some dumb prank where you dress me up like a woman and make me march through the mall?”

"That's exactly it," Jessica said, folding her arms. "And I expect you to go through with it. I can't believe you're all sympathetic with me when I complain about jerks looking down my top at work!"

"Babe! You work at Tootie's! That's what the whole deal is! That's your job! To show off your breasts!"

"I work hard for my money! Money you spend on tickets and records without even telling me! And meanwhile, behind my back, you're doing *this*!"

"It's not a big deal," Nick protested, then, seeing that Phillipe was filming every bit of the ensuing drama, waved his hand angrily. "Hey, Phil, turn that thing off!" He turned to Jessica. "Look? Saying something to cute girls? It's a compliment, sweetheart. Girls like to know they look hot!"

"Not all the time, and not from strangers," Jessica said firmly. "So you can do this and learn your lesson, or find yourself a new girlfriend." Nick clenched his teeth, weighing his options. He was already halfway through the stupid makeover, and Jessica wasn't about to take no for an answer. He would hate to get dumped again over something as dumb as making a few flattering comments to the ladies.

Besides, he was still going to be on YouTube's most popular prank show, or whatever. Maybe it would even go viral. Maybe he would be famous! For that, an hour's embarrassment was nothing. And most importantly, this way, he got to keep his hair long. Nick looked from his girlfriend's expectant face to Phillipe's, then made a somewhat over-done dramatic sigh.

"Okay, okay, I'll do it," he grumbled. "Because I love you, Jessica, and I want to make things right. Thanks for, you know, giving me a chance to see the error of my ways."

"If you're going to be a YouTube star, you need to work on your acting," Jessica said dryly. "But I appreciate you going through with it, baby." She smiled evilly. "Just don't thank me yet."

Nick sat back in the chair with a grimace. Getting all done up like a drag queen and parading through the mall so people could laugh at him wasn't how he'd planned to spend the evening, but at least it was more entertaining than work.



Now that the jig was up and Nick had agreed to go along with it, the beauticians were all business. They wrapped a towel around his wet hair, turban style, then sent him behind a partition to discard the rest of his clothes and put on a towel instead. It took him a while to wriggle out of his jeans and take off his T-shirt, and underpants, partly because of his newly-long nails giving him trouble maneuvering. He felt like he was constantly in danger of

scratching himself, or poking out his eyes when his hands went anywhere near his face. Every time he caught sight of his glossy fuchsia toe nails, it was another small shock. And of course, they were just getting started.

“Okay, listen up,” Nick said, coming out from behind the partition with his chest puffed out, displaying his considerable chest hair. “I’ve seen RuPaul’s Drag Race and I know what comes next...”

“You watch that?” Jessica asked, intrigued. “Hey, you know how slow it gets at work,” Nick defended himself, shrugging. “But, as I was saying, I know you fiends are planning to wax me as some kind of revenge for the female gender. That said, we are not doing the balls. We are not going anywhere near my balls. Got it?” He pointed to one of the beauticians, then towards his towel-covered crotch. “No wax on, no wax off, Miss Miyaki. Capiche?”

“Could you try being a little less ignorant?” Jessica suggested.

“No, no, keep it up,” Phillipe argued, maneuvering the video camera. “This is great material.”

“See?” Nick said. “The camera loves me.” With a smirk, he hopped up onto the padded table awaiting him. The beauticians began spreading warm wax up his bare legs. Jessica had always wanted to play around with wax in bed with him, thinking it might be sort of kinky, but he’d always weaseled out of it by claiming it was a fire hazard. What Nick experienced next was not about to change his mind on the subject. His smirk disappeared as the first strip of wax was ripped away from his leg, making his eyes tear up. A small “owwwwww” of pain escaped him.

“Be strong for me, baby,” Jessica said, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Surely a big strong he-man like you can take getting his legs waxed?”

“A he-man would not be getting his legs waxed in the first place,” Nick scowled.

“Great stuff, you two,” Phillipe said, giving them a thumbs up. “I’m definitely using it.”

“Shut up, Phil,” Nick snapped. He braced himself for the next strip. The only upside was that they were quick to spread moisturizing cream onto his newly-denuded skin after each area, but it was still torture as they moved thoroughly from his legs, to arms, to armpits, chest, and even the back of his neck where he had a few darker hairs in a small patch. He’d never realized how much body hair he had until every single hair of it was gone, apart from his groin, which had gone, as promised, untouched. Even his eyebrows weren’t spared, being waxed into carefully-shaped arches, but Jessica had assured him they would grow back fast.

“It actually feels kind of nice, right?” Jessica said, watching her boyfriend rub his legs together with some measure of curiosity.

"It feels weird," Nick said, unused to the slippery sensation of his hairless calves rubbing against each other. "And cold."

"Just be glad we're not making you wear a miniskirt, then," Jessica grinned. "Okay, time for underwear..."



Nick knew he was supposed to be playing the part of the repentant sinner, but he was actually having a lot of fun being the center of attention and couldn't resist hamming it up a little, complaining about the simple white cotton granny panties and matching bra.

"How am I supposed to feel like a woman in these?" he demanded, as Jessica adjusted the bra straps on his shoulders.

"You'll see in just a minute," Jessica said, grinning. "Check it out." She went back into her shopping bag and pulled out a pair of foam inserts for the bra, followed by two more that could only be for the panties. Nick watched dubiously as she approached. "They slip into these special pockets, see?" Jessica said. "To give you hips and some butt. Right now you're really flat, and to look like a real woman you need at least a little curviness."

"Sweetheart, I'm not going to look like a real woman no matter what," Nick said impatiently. "But sure, load me up."

He wriggled around helping Jessica position the foam pads for his hips and butt, followed by the inserts in his bra that gave him a definite bust. Nothing crazy, but definitely noticeable. He had to admit that it was an extremely strange feeling looking down at the feminine mounds on his chest, and even weirder sitting back down in the salon chair with his padded butt squishing underneath him.

"Don't get comfortable," Jessica said, lifting up another bag, presumably full of clothes.

"I wasn't planning on it," Nick shot back. "What's in there? A dress?"

"Blue jeans, boots, and a leather jacket," Jessica said sweetly, holding the bag forward.

"You're kidding," Nick said suspiciously, getting off the salon chair and taking the bag. He peered inside, but, to his surprise, she was telling the truth.

"We're not going to make you look ridiculous," Jessica said. "Just, you know, the girl version of you. Maybe a little more "classic rock" than "grunge," but nothing unusual. If we set you up to get stared at, it would defeat the whole purpose."

"Well, I appreciate the sentiment," Nick said. "But I'm going to get laughed at no matter what. I'm a guy wearing chick's clothes." Jessica said nothing, only

smiled mysteriously in a way which made Nick feel slightly nervous.

“Let’s get you dressed, then,” Jessica said. “Here, pants first.”



Though Nick was no stranger to tight jeans, he was soon to find that Jessica’s selection were something else all together, and in order to fit into them he was informed brusquely by Li that he would need to ‘tuck’. Nick knew what she meant, but was still understandably reluctant to actually do it. When he finally emerged from behind the partition, the crotch of his panties flat and smooth, he was squirming and red-faced and definitely not his usual wise-cracking self.

“Let’s just get this over with,” he said. “Give me those jeans.”

Now that he was all tucked away, he was able to get the jeans on, but just barely. They necessitated all kinds of jumping and wriggling around, all of it caught handily on camera by Phillipe, before he finally managed to get them up over his padded hips and do up the fly. He was breathing hard when she presented him with his top, a green AC/DC T-shirt, but he accepted it with a look of grim determination. Pulling it over his head, he found that it barely covered his belly button, leaving a strip of exposed midriff unless he tucked it into the jeans.

“It’s supposed to fit like that,” Jessica said, before he could even open his mouth. “Time for the boots. Here, put on these anklets first.” Nick complied, slipping what seemed to be small nylon socks up his feet. The feel of them on his now hairless skin was another shock of sensation he couldn’t say was entirely unpleasant. The boots, however, he could say just that about.

“They have a heel,” were the first words out of his mouth as Jessica held up his new footwear. “I’m going to break my neck, and sue Prankster Studios to the ground.”

“Don’t be a big baby,” his girlfriend said. “It’s only a three-inch heel; I wear higher every day for work. I’ll give you some pointers and you’ll be used to it in no time.” Nick did up the numerous buckles on one side while Jessica did the other, then accepted her arm for balance as he stood up, wobbling crazily. Once he could stand upright, it actually felt kind of cool being three inches taller than usual, but he couldn’t say the same for the way it forced him to stick out his butt and tauten his calves. He’d admired enough girls swishing past in heels to know the exact effect they had, but it seemed impossible to counteract it.

Naturally, Phillipe had to film the entire “learning to walk in heels” bit from all angles with color commentary, but the fact that him and Jessica and even the beauticians, who had been all professionalism up until now, were chuckling at him, made it hard to keep from slipping into a grudging laugh now and again himself. After all, he was sure he looked completely ridiculous. Once he more or less had the hang of it, he went back to the salon chair, for which he was

grateful.

“Okay, I shave you now,” Li said, draping the barber towel over him again.

“I shaved just this morning,” Nick said, rubbing his chin. “You sure?”

“I shave better,” Li said simply. Nick threw up his hands, then leaned back. The hot shave was relaxing, and he had to admit she was skilled, giving him the closest shave he could remember ever having. He felt as smooth as a ten-year-old by the time she’d rinsed him off.

“Now I do hair and makeup,” Li said, unwrapping the towel turban from around his head. “Sit back, relax, Mr. Nick.”

“Please, call me Nicole,” Nick joked, in a slightly better mood again.

“Okay, Ms. Nicole,” Li said, her expression not even changing one iota as she readied her scissors.

“I’m kidding,” Nick said quickly. “And don’t take too much off, right?”

“Whatever you say, Ms. Nicole,” Li said.

Nick groaned, but, as she’d suggested, he did his best to just relax. It wasn’t as if they were going to do anything permanent, after all, and in a way this was better than what he’d thought he was agreeing to originally. This way, he’d still have his hair when all was said and done. Phillipe settled in to film the process as Li set to work with her comb and scissors, expertly trimming and shaping his hair even as she continued drying it with a blow dryer, using what felt like an entire can of hair spray simultaneously. Nick couldn’t see what she was doing, but from the admiring expression on Jessica’s face, he could guess it wasn’t anything he’d like.

“Like Jessica said, we’re not going to make you change your musician wannabe style too much,” Phillipe explained, as Li moved on to makeup. “We want you to look how you would if you were a girl instead of a guy, that’s all. So you’ll see that girls aren’t ‘asking for it’ with how they dress, they’re just dressing however they feel matches their personality, or however they need to dress for work.”

“Please, spare me the campaign,” Nick said. “The only reason I’m going to get ‘harassed,’ or whatever, is because it’s obvious I’m a guy in drag,” Nick pointed out, unable to resist popping Phillipe’s bubble. “It’s not natural. When a girl gets remarks because she looks good, that’s completely natural, and it makes them feel good, even if they won’t admit it. So don’t get all high-minded. It’s just a goofy prank show.”

“No talking,” Li said. “Stop moving your head.”

“Right, right,” Nick sighed. He gave Jessica a long-suffering look, then did his best to keep still as Li assaulted him with everything from liquid concealer to eyelash curlers. “Aren’t you going to give me those big fake lashes?” he asked, when she finished with the latter.

“No,” Li said sharply. “We want natural look for you. Besides, you lashes very nice. Very long.”

“Thanks,” Nick said grudgingly. “We done?”

“Lipstick,” Li said, brandishing a tube of the stuff. Nick followed her instructions as she outlined and then filled in his lips before coating them with gloss, telling him to pout them together and then rub them against each other to spread the color evenly. Once she’d blotted them with a tissue and made a few minor touch-ups to his eye shadow, along with one more coating of mascara, she pronounced him finished.

“Oh my God, Li,” Jessica said, upon seeing the final result. “You are a miracle worker.”

“This I hear,” Li said dryly, removing the makeup cape with a flick of her hand.

“How’s that for a before and after?” Phillipe crowed, zooming in excitedly.

“Get out of my face,” Nick frowned, standing up. “I know I look like a clown, you don’t have to rub it in.”

“Baby, you don’t look like a clown,” Jessica said, shaking her head. “You look even better than I expected. I mean, I always thought you’d look cute with makeup on, but this is something else.”

“Very funny,” Nick said, still stone-faced. “Let’s just do this thing, alright?” Still shaking her head in amazement whenever she looked at him, Jessica helped him with all the accessories she had brought along. There were several necklaces and chains and even a choker for his neck, followed by a whole load of rings for his fingers, and two belts, one of them studded, to complete his rocker chick look.

“Okay,” Jessica said, stepping back at last after fluffing out his hair one last time. “I think ‘Nicole’ is ready for her big debut. Baby, you have *got* to look in a mirror.”

“What’s the point?” Nick asked, walking over toward the full-length mirror, unsteadily at first but then, as he remembered to sway his hips, more gracefully. “I already know what I’m going to...” He trailed off as he came face to face with his reflection. His eyes travelled slowly up his body. Long, coltish legs encased in sexy high-heeled boots. A nice figure, with girlish hips and a small waist. Long, glossy fuchsia nails on slender, feminine fingers, covered in flashy jewelry. A gorgeous, sensual face done up with fuchsia lipstick on a pouty, kissable mouth and teal eye shadow painted over wide, kohl-rimmed eyes. Huge hair in sexy auburn waves framing that face, every lock teased to perfection.

Nick gulped. There was no way the hot rocker chick in the mirror was him. He was secure enough in his masculinity to go along with this silly prank, but that was because he was a true man’s man. He loved classic rock and heavy metal, he loved American classic cars, he loved football on Sundays and he certainly

loved chicks who looked as sexy as the one in front of him in the mirror. There was no way he could look like that.

“Like I said,” Nick said calmly.

“Totally ridiculous. Sorry, Li, I know you did your best. But that is absolutely a man.” Jessica and Phillipe exchanged confused, slightly disappointed looks. Nick, on the other hand, hooked both his fingers in his belt in a blasé manner.

“Are we going to get this show on the road, or what?” he asked. “My adoring public is waiting.”

• • •

As Catherine shepherded Derek

back to the panel to get changed, several other models had to stop and do double-takes, then squealed in delight as they realized who the blonde newcomer was. Derek was blushing furiously by the time he was safely back behind the panel, this time with a dress and a pair of shoes to put on. His heart was thumping wildly and though he had never had a panic attack before in his life, he felt like this might be his first coming on. In less than an hour's time, he'd been transformed into a hot blonde, and now he was about to strut his stuff on the catwalk in front of a crowd of people. Was it too late to grab his clothes and sneak away?

“Calm down, Derek,” Derek whispered to himself. “It's a good thing you look... Good. Nobody is going to know it's you. Not until you write an extremely



entertaining, thought-provoking article about your experience. Which the newspaper will love. Hard-hitting journalists go into dangerous areas all the time, and this is good practice.”

“Why are you talking to yourself?” Catherine demanded from the other side of the panel, interrupting his little pep-talk. “Are you schizogenic or something?”

“No,” Derek said, annoyed. “And the term is schizophrenic, by the way.”

“Well, you’re already learning to be bitchy,” Catherine said slyly. “You’re a natural model. Now are you going to put your dress on or do I have to come back there and make you?”

Grimacing, Derek untied his robe and let it fall to the floor. The girls had agreed to start him off slow, meaning a simple cami-top in yellow and a pair of dark slacks--not too different from wearing pants and a sleeveless shirt as a guy, right? Of course, the length of the slacks also meant he would need to be wearing heels. He stepped into them, then wriggled the cami-style top over his head and tucked it in as directed. Next a pair of nylon socks, and then he stepped into his first pair of high heels and nearly fell flat on his face.

Feeling incredibly wobbly, he put out his arms for balance and tried again. The shoes changed his posture entirely, forcing his butt out and making his hips wiggle from side to side--like a fashion model, he realized grimly. He took a few tentative steps, weirded out by the loud ‘tock’ of his shoes against the floor. Now that he was prepared, it wasn’t as difficult as he had feared, and he stepped around the end of the panel with relatively smooth strides.

“Well?” he said nervously, smoothing his slacks with the palms of his hands. “How do I look?”

Catherine grinned at him. “I’d say Jenny just lost her job,” she said. “Now, let’s see you walk in those heels a little bit. Go to the makeup table and back, okay?”

Derek set off, trying his best to incorporate the advice from Catherine, and from the other models, all of whom were hurrying around having last-minute touch-ups done to their outfits. With the huge amount of pointers--elbows in, heel to toe, zig-zag your feet and swing those hips--it was a wonder Derek didn’t fall over trying to remember it all at once. By the tenth trip, however, he felt like, against all odds, he was actually getting the hang of it.

“We’ll have to keep working on your attitude,” Catherine said. “You look like you’re about to faint from nerves. Save that demure, bashful stuff for when you’re flirting with the boys. Models need confidence! You have to look like you don’t care what those people think of you. Try to imagine that you would rather be doing something else, and then carry that attitude with you.”

“Boy, that’ll be a stretch,” Derek said, executing a competent turn, hands on his hips. “I just don’t want to make a fool of myself out there...”

“You won’t,” Catherine said. “Trust me. Like I said, girlfriend, you’re a

natural!" Over by the curtain, Eva snapped her fingers. "Oh, I'm up!" she exclaimed. "Wish me luck. Eva will give you your cue when you go. Remember, five seconds max at the end or you'll mess up the next girl's timing."

Before Derek could say another word, she hurried away, leaving him on his own. Music was now booming through the speaker system as one girl after another vanished through the curtain after undergoing a last-minute inspection by Eva. Derek found himself being swept along, until suddenly he was at the front of the line. In the space of about five seconds, Eva straightened the hem of his dress, corrected his posture, fluffed through his hair with a comb one last time, and tipped his chin upward with one authoritative finger.

"Ready, dear?" she said.

Derek nodded, not willing himself to speak.

"Don't be nervous, you look great," Eva added. "Remember, chest out, chin up, eyes forward. Three, and two, and one, and..."

She swept him through the curtain, and Derek immediately found himself blinded by the bright flash of a camera. He had no time to dwell on the irony of the fact that he was up on stage in a dress, heels, and makeup, getting photographed rather than standing in the crowd taking the pictures, as the last model was already strutting her way back behind the curtain, giving Derek an encouraging nod.

Taking a deep breath, he put his hands on his hips and set off down the catwalk. What followed were the most terrifying thirty seconds of his life. He had nearly forgotten he was in the mall, since the backstage seemed like an entirely different world composed only of mirrors, makeup, and clothing racks, but now he was painfully aware that he was walking down a makeshift catwalk set up beside the food court, where several dozen people were seated in folding chairs to watch and at least twice that many curious bystanders were clustered around to check out the action.

What if kids from his school were in the crowd? What if his friends were at the food court? What if his grandmother was there to walk laps? She would have a heart-attack if she recognized her grandson in drag, and it would be all his fault. With how fast his heart was beating, Derek felt like he might have one himself. He threw all his concentration into keeping his chin up and his stride steady, placing one foot in front of the other, and not letting his knees knock together with fright.

He felt like he was having an out-of-body experience as he posed awkwardly at the end of the catwalk, trying to remember what Catherine had suggested about showing his best angles, and then he was on his way back. All he had to do was ten more steps without tripping and falling on his face. Ten, nine, eight...

"Nice job," Catherine said, as Derek realized he was suddenly back behind the

curtain, shaking with adrenaline. “A little deer-in-the-headlights at the end, there, but you had the timing down perfect!”

“I am never, ever, doing that again,” Derek gasped. “There’s got to be a hundred people out there!”

“I wish,” Catherine said sourly. “Now hurry up and get changed! You have five more outfits to model.”

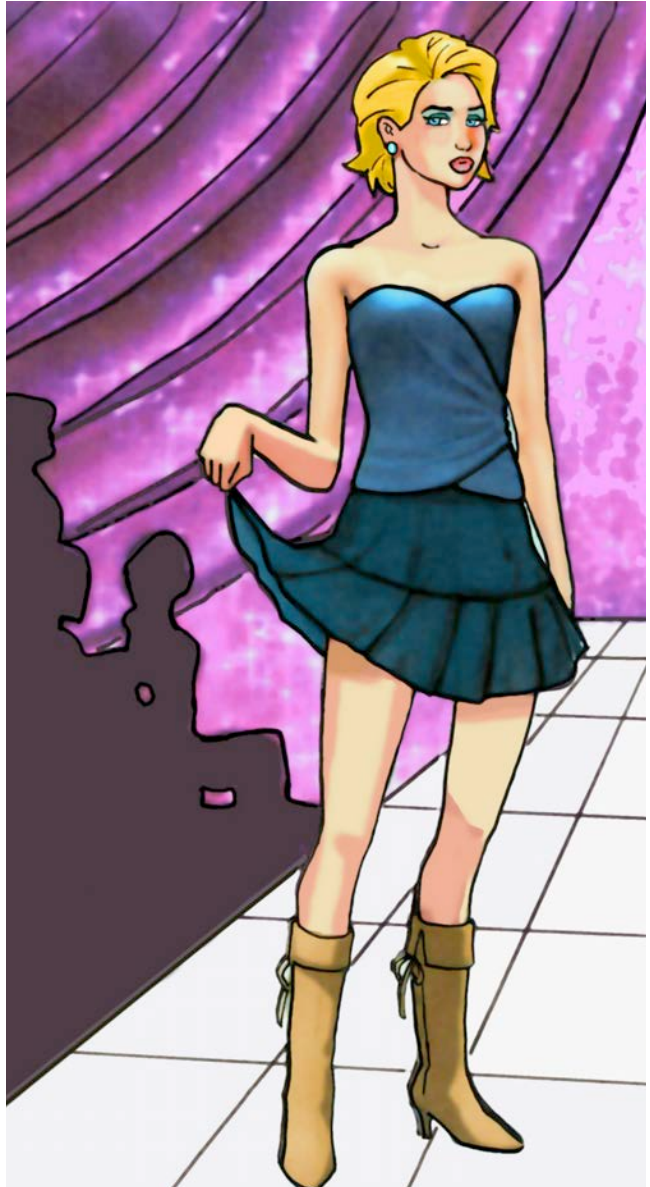
Derek blanched. If he didn’t get a published article out of this... “Great journalists go a little bit further, and then a little bit further again,” he reminded himself under his breath.

“And great models shut up and get changed, already,” Catherine said dryly.

Biting his lip determinedly, Derek unzipped his dress and pulled it off. “Okay,” he said. “Bring it on.”



His next outfit was, as Catherine had warned, a short blue pleated skirt with a matching wrap-around strapless top, accompanied by little leather boots with a small two-inch heel that was actually easier to handle than the first pair. He figured out the new outfit with relative ease, though the sensation of the skirt swirling merrily around his thighs as he moved was a deeply disturbing one for a guy used to a lifetime of pants. Catherine had barely added a pair of



small clip-on studs to his ears before he was whisked back out onto the catwalk. He did even better this time, remembering to pose pulling the hem of his skirt away to display the pleats, and was even aware enough to hear Eva cooing into the microphone about the “genuine calfskin boots complete this flirty look perfect for a first date with that special someone”--which made him blush furiously as soon as he heard it.

From there, time seemed to fly by for Derek. Since there was absolutely not a minute to spare scurrying behind the panel every time he needed a wardrobe change, before long he found himself stripping down in plain sight like the other models, occasionally rushing around in nothing but a bra, panties, and a pair of heels as he got his next outfit off the rack. He had to step into the red dress rather than pull it over his head, and as the soft fabric slithered against

his hairless skin, he got a shiver down his spine. It hardly felt like he was wearing anything at all, the material was so thin and light, and the hem ended well above his knees, leaving his legs totally exposed. He leaned over to step into the peek-a-boo sandals Catherine had handed him, trying to ignore the strange sensation of the dress swirling around his thighs as he moved. Once he'd figured out the straps, he stood upright, feeling his posture shift subtly again. Roxie gave him a bit more volume with some hairspray, and the makeup artist



slathered his lips a bright red to really ensure the Monroe thing got across.

“Sexy,” Catherine remarked as he fiddled anxiously with the hem of his dress, hardly able to believe the vixen in the mirror was him. “You need accessories, though. Here.” She slid a couple bracelets onto his left wrist, then helped him put on a pair of clip-on earrings, danglier than the last ones. Derek winced at the pinching sensation.

“Don’t fiddle with them or they’ll come off,” Catherine warned. “Get going!”

“I’m going!” Derek snapped back, already swishing his way through the curtain with perfect posture. He was really getting the hang of this. The others treated him like one of the girls, seemingly having no qualms at all about stripping in front of him, though he flushed fire-hydrant red when one of the models commented that he had a really cute, pert butt for a guy. He didn’t even have time to reflect on how bizarre it was to be in the middle of this bevy of beauties, learning on the fly about all kinds of different clasps, zippers, and straps as he hurried from one outfit to the other. Under any other circumstances he would have killed for the chance to check out all these attractive girls in their lingerie, but as it was he was too busy to ogle.

Every time down the catwalk seemed a little bit easier, too, and he felt his confidence growing slightly. Apart from one little incident where a pair of skater punks he recognized from his high school catcalling him nearly tripped him up, everything was going smoothly and the audience was mercifully empty of people he knew. And judging by the admiring looks he was getting, not a single one of them would ever suspect they were watching a boy.

By the time he was on his last outfit, an extremely sexy little black sequined minidress, Eva had graduated him to skyscraper five-inch heels with a one-inch platform. Roxie had slicked his hair back and he was wearing nude lip gloss, glitter, and dangling chandelier earrings for a quintessential club look. Despite his nervousness, he handled them admirably, strutting down the catwalk with poise and grace before striking a girlish pose, hands on his waist, hips cocked. With a hearty round of applause following him back to the curtain, Derek realized the show was over.

With a sigh of relief, Derek dropped the act and sank down onto the nearest available chair. He couldn’t wait to get all the gunk off his face, and have Roxie dye his hair back to normal, and put on a pair of jeans again, and, of course, free himself from the gaffe’s ball-busting grip before any permanent damage occurred. He kicked off his heels, then looked up, frowning. Rather than congratulating each other on a job well done, all of the models were huddled together at the makeup table, buzzing excitedly.

“Hey, can somebody help me with these?” Derek called. “We’re done, right?”

Soundly ignored, Derek stood up and minced his way over to where the other girls were chatting in hushed voices. “It was definitely him,” Catherine said. “I

recognized him from Fashion Weekly. But what on Earth is he doing here at a Claire's promotion? In a freaking shopping mall? I mean, seriously, no offense to all the work Eva put in, but this is not exactly high fashion..."

Derek wanted nothing more than to get out of the skirt and head home, but his journalist instinct had kicked in again. "Who exactly are we talking about?" he asked. Catherine turned to him.

"Did you notice that gray-haired man with the sunglasses who showed up halfway through and sat right at the front?" she demanded. Derek racked his memory.

"Oh, yeah," he said, remembering an older gentleman who had followed his every movement with a slightly unsettling amount of intensity. "He was pretty creepy, right?" All of the models gasped simultaneously.

"Are you joking?" one of them managed to spit out. "That was John Bordeaux! Like, one of the top fashion photographers in the business? Like, he was at fashion week in NYC and Paris?"

"Ah," Derek said. "Must have slipped my mind." He figured that would make a nice footnote to the article he was now planning out in his head. My day as a female model, and John Bordeaux showed up to watch... He was distracted



from further brainstorming, however, as Eva reappeared backstage. This time, however, she'd also managed to make a gray-haired man in an expensive suit appear, also. All of the models gasped once again.

"Girls, I'd like to introduce you to Mr. John Bordeaux," Eva said, and for once she seemed a little frazzled herself, star-struck by the famous photographer's presence.

"Thank you, dear," the man said, in a lilting voice that made him sound almost stereotypically gay. "A nice little show today, girls. Though the clothes were terrible. Despite that, I would like to speak to one of you privately. Dakota?"

The models all shot each other disbelieving looks. Derek looked around at them, trying to remember which of them was named Dakota, until he finally realized why they were all staring at him. Derek's mouth fell open. Even Eva looked flustered. One by one, however, the other models all slipped away, still exchanging wide-eyed looks of incredulity.

"Wow, Jenny is so going to hate you," Catherine whispered on the way by. "Get me an autograph!" Eva herded her and the last stragglers away, and then it was just Derek and a famous fashion photographer.

"Young lady, I assure you this is not a common occurrence," the man said. "But I happened to be in town to visit an old friend, and on my way to meet them I happened to notice this amateur fashion show at the mall, and since I am always on the look-out, I decided to come and watch for a minute. Mostly to ridicule the horrible garbage being put on display, you understand. But then I saw you, and I thought... Yes."

"Yes?" Derek echoed, confused.

"I am searching for a face for a new fashion line," the photographer explained. "Something fresh, something mom's apple pie, something very American. People are sick of seeing seven-foot Brazilian supermodels everywhere. What I want is the girl next door. The cheerleader type. The pretty blonde prom queen type. And I think you might just have what it takes to fit the bill."

It was all Derek could do to keep from laughing out loud. This day just would not stop getting weirder, apparently. "Look, sir, I am, uh, truly flattered," he said. "But the truth is, I'm not a model. I just filled in for someone today, and further more..."

"But that's perfect!" the man interrupted, his eyes lighting up. "Plucked from obscurity! A pretty girl goes shopping at the mall and ends up on the runway. What could be more American than that? She could be your neighbor, your high-school crush, your friend's daughter..."

"But I'm actually a —" Derek began to say, then stopped himself. Suddenly, his favorite quote came back to him. Great journalists took a story a little bit further, and then a little bit further after that. And finally, if the opportunity presented itself, they took it a lot further.

“A what?” the photographer asked.

“A big fan of your work,” Derek said quickly.

“Most people are,” the man shrugged. “Anyways, this is all tentative, obviously. But if my bosses see the same potential I see in you, dear, this could be the biggest day of your life. I want to help you put together a portfolio and pitch you as a possible face for the new line. What do you say?”

Derek swallowed. Forget ‘My Day As A (Female) Model,’ how about ‘Boy Undercover: How I Was Nearly The Next Big Thing In Women’s Fashion’? And forget the local newspaper — a story like that would be snapped up by all kinds of major publications. Besides, it probably wouldn’t amount to anything more than a photoshoot. Once the guy realized he did not have the chops to be a model, or once it came out that “Dakota” was really a boy, it would all be over.

“I say... I’m your girl,” Derek said, smiling weakly. Rather than shaking his hand, the photographer pulled him into an over-enthusiastic hug. Derek accepted the embrace, feeling the strange sensation of his padded chest pressing up against another man’s and his permed blonde hair ending up smooshed against his face. He caught sight of his camera sitting on a nearby chair, looking very lonely indeed, and realized he’d failed to take even a single picture. At the very least, maybe now he could get a few photography tips from a pro.

Really, what was the worst that could happen?



“Hubba hubba!” Travis catcalled, tucking his skateboard under one arm so he could properly whistle at the cute young blonde strutting her stuff down the makeshift catwalk that had been set up outside Claire’s. “Work it, babe!”

The girl refused to look his direction, but when she struck her pose, one hip cocked, displaying the hem of her pretty yellow summer dress pinched between her fingers, Travis could see she was blushing under her makeup, and she was in such a hurry to wiggle her way back to the stage that she nearly tripped on her high heels.

Sean yanked the stocking cap off his head and smacked him in the face with it. “Remember what you look like, dummy!”

“Huh?” Travis replied, before recalling his peculiar situation. “Well, maybe she’s a lesbo.”

“Just go,” Sean said, pushing Travis away from the stage area and towards the door.

By the time they got to the skate park, about twenty competitors were rolling

around on their skateboards getting warmed up, while at least quadruple that number of spectators were hanging around to watch. Sean could tell his buddy was getting some last minute jitters about the fact he was entering a skateboarding competition disguised as a girl — the fact that he was pale as a ghost underneath his blusher was a dead giveaway.

“You can do this, dawg,” he said encouragingly. “Just stay away from anyone who knows you too well.”

“You totally pass for female,” Karen added. “Better than like, 99% of the guys on RuPaul’s Drag Race.”

“Just worry about skating your heart out,” Karen said firmly. “And everything will be fine.”

“Alright,” Travis said, taking a deep breath. “Wish me luck.” He tucked his board under his arm and set off for the registration table, trying to remember Karen’s advice about taking smaller steps and letting his hips sway more from side to side. If the way at least three different guys stopped to watch his butt on the way by, he was doing it correctly. There was a spotty-faced guy running sign-ups from behind a plastic folding table stenciled with Boarded Up’s logo. He was complaining to someone on the phone about the photographer failing to show up, but Travis couldn’t help but think it was for the best — the less photographic evidence of Trixie, the better.

“Hi!” he said brightly. “Last minute sign-up!” The guy ended his call angrily, then started leafing through his clipboard, not even glancing up in Travis’s



direction.

“Sorry, sign-ups closed ten minutes ago,” he said. “You’re out of luck.”

Travis’s pretty painted mouth fell open. Ten minutes late? After everything he’d been through? After putting on freaking lingerie and having his eyebrows plucked, he was ten minutes too late to sign up? No way was that about to happen.

“Are you sure you can’t squeeze me in somehow?” Travis asked, putting more than a little bit of ‘phone sex operator’ into his girl voice and emphasizing the word ‘squeeze’ shamelessly. The guy behind the desk looked up sharply, and this time it was his turn to be gobsmacked. Travis fluttered his eyelashes, hating the weird fluttery sensation of the heavy mascara, and put on a simpering smile.

“I’m Trixie,” he said sweetly. “It’s only seven little letters. Are you sure you can’t fit it into the end of your list, mister?”

“I think that’s... six letters...” the guy said, trailing off.

“Yeah, whatever, I think I know how many letters my own name has,” Travis said, waving his hand dismissively. Then, back to his sugar-and-spice persona, added, “And I have to put down my phone number, too, right?”

“Well, you don’t have to,” the guy said. “Any kind of contact information is fine.”

“I think I want to give you my phone number,” Travis said cheekily. “Here, allow me.” He yanked the clipboard out of the guy’s hands and put his name on the bottom of the list as ‘Trixie Fulton,’ then wrote down Karen’s phone number. It was the only girl’s number he still knew by memory, and he figured it would be good for a laugh.

“Thanks,” the guy said, red-faced, as Travis handed the clipboard back.

“Thank *you*,” Travis said, giving him a wink.

Karen and Sean, who had watched the whole exchange from a distance, were open-mouthed in shock when Travis rejoined them.

“Holy crap,” Karen said. “I’ve created a monster.”

“Hey,” Travis said defensively. “You’re the one who said to use it to my advantage! Not my fault that guy is a horny dumbass.”

As they milled around waiting for Brad to announce the first event, however, Travis couldn’t help but admit it was a little disturbing just how easily he’d gotten his way with the poor sucker, and noticed he was getting quite a bit of attention from the other skateboarders, too. He was guessing at least half of it was the fact that a girl wearing a pink helmet and using a board covered in Hello Kitty stickers thought she could skate, but judging by the appreciative up-and-down looks he was receiving, the rest was good old-fashioned hormonal

lust for a cute chick.

Just then, Brad, the big, cheerful, and heavily-tattooed owner of Boarded Up, finally appeared, getting everyone's attention with a squealing loudspeaker. "Alright, listen up, dudes and dudettes!" he announced. "Welcome, one and all, to the fourth annual Boarded Up skate competition! You know the drill. Head-to-head elimination style. Each dude..." His eyes suddenly alighted on Travis's pink helmet in the crowd. "Or dudette," he added hastily. "Will have a two minute freestyle to put together as many sick tricks in the half pipe as humanly possible. Our judges pick the winner, the winner advances, the loser skates on home. Got it?"

"Got it!" everybody hollered back, Travis included.

"Then let's get this show on the road," Brad announced. "First up, we have Chase Smith against..." He flipped through the clipboard. "Trixie Fulton?"

A short, black-haired kid Travis vaguely recognized from the skate park made his way through the crowd to the edge of the half pipe, giving out high-fives. Travis, gripping his skateboard so hard his knuckles went white, which contrasted against his bright pink nails, followed suit, with Karen and Sean right behind him.

"Trixie Fulton, huh?" his competitor Chase said casually, doing up his helmet straps. "Travis's cousin, right? From New York?"

"From Los Angeles," Travis said, affronted. "But yeah. May the best skater win." He did up his own helmet, tightening it under his chin.

"Ladies first," Chase offered, with a cavalier wave of his hand.

"How sweet," Travis said, rolling his eyes. He exchanged fist-bumps with Sean and a quick hug with Karen, who already had her fingers crossed.

"You can do this," she said. "We're rooting for you."

"Piece of cake," Travis said casually.

Then Brad sounded the horn, and Travis pushed off down the ramp, ready to skate as he had never skated before.



From the very first trick, Travis knew he was in the zone. He was getting huge air on his ollies, landing his pop shove-its, and stringing together some of his best combos without losing a beat. His nose grind up at the top of the pipe was a little shaky, but it was still miles ahead of anything Chase Smith could pull off.

When the two minutes were up, Travis stomped on the end of his board to flip it up into his hands, and exited to massive applause.

"You're killing, dawg!" Sean exclaimed joyfully. "Or, uh, doll?"

“That was awesome, girlfriend!” Karen chimed in. Several other people congratulated him as well. Travis took every high-five he could get, then shot a challenging look over at Chase, who now looked absolutely petrified at the possibility of getting shown up by a girl.

Predictably, he wasn’t up to snuff. He had a few nice tricks, but had to bail out on a simple kick-flip when he lost his balance. When all was said and done, it was to nobody’s surprise that ‘Trixie’ was picked to advance.

With his first win under his belt, Travis felt as confident as he ever had, and with each challenger defeated, he felt more and more certain he was going to win the whole thing. And needless to say, ‘Trixie’ was a huge hit with the crowd! Karen thought it was a little much when he started bowing kisses to the skaters he eliminated, but nobody else seemed to mind — not even the guys heading home in defeat.

On the other side of the park, however, a not-too-dissimilar feat was going on. Toby Miller was running through challenger after challenger with ease, using a combination of difficult grinds and more acrobatic aerial tricks. Sean kept running back and forth between the judging tables to keep Travis updated, and as expected, the two skaters were on a collision course for a show-down in the final freestyle.

“You’re doing great,” Karen said, handing Travis a water bottle during a break in the action. “Though it’s a good thing we used water proof mascara, or you would be running like crazy right now.”

“This bra is getting sticky,” Travis moaned, gulping down half the water in one un-ladylike swig.

“Feel free to take it off, babe,” came a familiar and none-too-welcome voice. Travis turned around to find Toby Miller waiting for him, smirking and adjusting his elbow pads. “You’re Travis’s cousin, right?” he said. “You could sure teach him a few things.”

Travis gritted his teeth together and said, “As a matter of fact, Travis taught me everything I know.”

“Ooh, that’s too bad, babe,” Toby said, voice dripping with mocking sympathy. “Then the finals don’t bode well for you. Did he tell you why he’s not here? He’s disqualified. Last year he knew I had him on the ropes, so he tried to cheat.”

“Well, that was last year,” Travis snapped. “I’m sure if he was here this year, he’d win the whole thing. He’s the best skateboarder in the city.”

Karen, standing behind Toby, was making desperate “shut up” gestures in Travis’s direction, but it was too late. Toby’s eyes narrowed with suspicion.

“And why didn’t he even show up to watch his cousin compete?” he asked suspiciously, taking a closer look at Travis’s made-up features. “Wait a

minute...”

“Toby Miller and Johnny P!” Brad shouted. “Get ready!”

Toby gave Travis one more suspicious look, then dropped his board and skated off back to his half-pipe. Travis breathed a sigh of relief as Karen rounded on him.

“What was that?” she demanded. “Are you trying to give yourself away? Because that’s the way to do it!”

“He was badmouthing me!” Travis hissed. “I mean, he was badmouthing my cousin. Cousins stick up for each other!”

“They don’t worship each other,” Karen hissed back. “Now he suspects!”

“He can suspect all he wants,” Travis said firmly. “Everyone else is totally buying it. And dude, the judges love me.”

“Yo, what’s going on?” Sean asked, appearing with two snow-cones in hand. “What are we fighting about?” “Trixie just had an extremely ill-advised conversation with Toby Miller, that’s all,” Karen said, shaking her head. “Whatever, don’t think about it. Just skate your heart out.”

“Yeah,” Sean chimed in. “Two more and you’re in the finals.”

Travis looked across the skate park to where Toby Miller was easily dominating his latest opponent. Two more opponents, and then he would be right back where he was last summer, facing off against his biggest rival. Only this time, he was going to win. And win while wearing a bra and panties, no less.

He screwed the cap back onto the water bottle and handed it off. “All right, Trixie, you can do this,” he said. “It’s show time.”



Two hard-won victories later, it was time for the showdown Travis had been waiting for all year. He and Toby Miller were the last two standing, and Brad was busy hyping everyone up while the two skaters prepared for their last run. Sean was tightening up Travis’s trucks, while Karen was touching up his lip gloss.

“You can take this guy,” she said. “You’ve got what it takes. You’re a contender, Trixie.”

“It’s not a boxing movie,” Travis said irritably, rubbing his lips together to spread the gloss around. “But thanks.” He stood up, tucking his board under his arm, and exchanged last-minute high-fives with his two friends before heading over to the half pipe, where his opponent was already waiting.

"This is it!" Brad bellowed through his loudspeaker. "The final showdown! Returning champion Toby Miller against fiery red-headed newcomer, Trixie Fulton! Coin flip to determine which skater goes first..." Brad flicked a coin into the air and caught it.

"Heads," Toby shouted.

Brad looked at the coin. "Heads it is," he said. "Do you want to start, or let the challenger?"

"Ladies first, right?" Toby said. "She can go first."

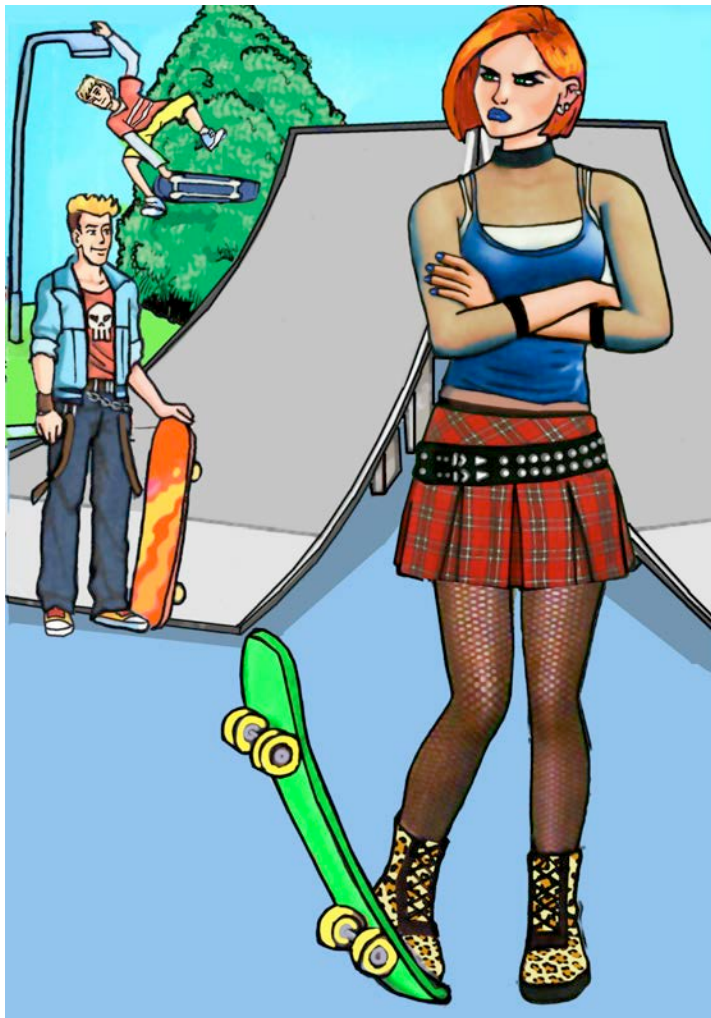
The crowd began clapping as both skaters took their position. Toby grinned and waved to the spectators, some of whom were cheering for him, most of whom were cheering for 'Trixie,' but as he did so he leaned forward and whispered something in Travis's ear that chilled him to the bone.

"I know it's you, dude," he whispered. "Nice try with that cousin story."

"I don't know what you're talking about, dumbass," Travis said primly, buckling up his helmet.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to tell anyone," Toby chuckled. "I'm going to let you humiliate yourself by cracking under the pressure again...and then I'm going to tell everyone, just to double up on the whole humiliation thing. You always crack under pressure, Travis. Admit it."

"Maybe Travis did," Travis said calmly. "But I think Trixie's going to be just



fine, so sit back, relax, and enjoy the show.”

With those last parting words, Travis zoomed down the half pipe, misplaced his left foot, and proceeded to fall flat on his ass. The impact knocked the wind out of him, and with the groan of the crowd in his ears, he slowly got back to his feet, gasping for breath. He could see Toby Miller’s smug grin in his mind’s eye.

“Ooh, that’s not going to look good on the scores!” Brad bellowed. “Still got three minutes! Remember, extra minute in the finals! Shake it off, shake it off!”

“Shake it off, Trixie!” someone hollered from the crowd. Blinking back tears of pain, Travis saw Karen and Sean screaming their lungs out for him to get up. “Shake it off!” another voice shouted from the crowd. “Come on, Trixie!”

Hobbling back to his board, Travis kicked off to a loud cheer from the crowd. He knew from here on in, his only chance was to be flawless, and to land something really, really big. He went through his usual arsenal of fakeys and grinds, holding the latter for as long as possible, milking points from the judges for difficulty, but he knew it wasn’t going to be enough. Not without something to cap it off.

Gaining momentum by going up one side of the half pipe and then the other, Travis grimly began tightening the elastic of his cargo shorts.

“Oh, no,” Sean muttered, seeing the action from his spot in the crowd.

“What?” Karen demanded. “What is it?”

“He’s going to try the handstand,” Sean groaned. “He never gets this. If he pulls out now and does, like, a triple kick-flip, he could still win so long as Toby messes up a bit.”

Down in the half pipe, Travis was speeding towards the edge, readying his hands. At the apex of his motion, he grabbed the edge of his board with one hand, the lip of the half pipe with the other, and hoisted himself into the air. For a terrifying moment, he felt like he was going to flip all the way over the top and crack his head against the concrete. But then, with every muscle in his body straining, he found his balance, poised upside-down on the edge of the half pipe. He held it for an agonizing three seconds, then managed a clean dismount. Skating back up to the other edge of the half pipe, he was greeted by a huge mob of welcoming arms. Everyone was screaming his name...or at least, Trixie’s name...and Travis couldn’t stop the huge grin spreading across his face as he hugged first Karen and then Sean.

“You did it, doll!” Sean yowled. “I can’t believe you did it!”

“Yeah,” Travis said, grinning weakly. “Girl power!”

Toby Miller, scowling horribly, kicked off down the half pipe, but from the instant he biffed his second combo, everyone knew it was over. Brad was conferring with the judges, along with the bearded guy from the counter, who

had something suspiciously trophy-shaped wrapped in a plastic bag. A second later, Brad grabbed the speakerphone.

"This year's winner is... Trixie Fulton!" he bellowed.

Travis was on top of the world. He hugged Karen again, then all but skipped his way to the judges table, giving out high-fives and pumping his fists in the air. As he did lifted the trophy, however, a scowling Toby Miller pushed his way through the crowd, setting down his skateboard. Travis, oblivious, never saw the move coming: Karen and Sean could only watch in horror as Toby gave the tail end of his skateboard a perfectly timed stomp, sending it flipping up into the air with terrifying force, every last bit of it directed right between Travis's legs.

"Owww!" Travis wailed, doubling over in pain as the errant skateboard slammed into his already-squashed manhood. If Sean and Karen supposed for even a second that Travis would be able to play things off, their hopes were to be dashed when Travis looked up, red-faced, eyes glazed over with pain, and hollered, in the least lady-like voice possible, "*My balls, dude!*"

Utter and complete silence ensued, with everybody staring, open-mouthed, at the disguised boy.

"Travis?" Brad asked disbelievingly. "Is that you?"

Travis swallowed. Between the fact that his balls were killing him and he had just been exposed as a cheater for the second year running, he couldn't ever remember feeling more miserable in his life. "Yeah," he squeaked. "Uh, it's me. Funny story, right?"

"What the hell, man!" Brad yelled. "I disqualified you, so you come here dressed up as a chick and pretend to be your own cousin? If I wasn't mad, that would be, like, ingenious," he added thoughtfully.

"I didn't cheat, though!" Travis pleaded. "That's why I snuck in, to prove to everybody that I don't have to cheat to win! I worked my way to the finals fair and square, and I beat Toby the dumbass fair and square, too!"

Brad shook his head, yanking the trophy out of Travis's hands. He watched it go sadly, and felt even more miserable when Brad handed it to Toby. "Well, Toby the dumbass is now the champion two years running!" he snapped.

"Hey, you don't have to call me a..." Toby started to interject, but Brad cut him off.

"You're a good skateboarder, Travis, and you've improved a lot from last summer," Brad said angrily. "But you need to learn when to man up to your mistakes and take the consequences. It's not like this is the only competition we're sponsoring this year! We would have let you enter the next one, you know."

"But this one's the biggest," Travis said miserably. "And I really wanted to win

it.”

“I could just ban you for life, you know that?” Brad said, shaking his head. “It’d be a lot less headaches for me, that’s for sure.”

Travis gasped, his mascara-accented eyes going wide. “You wouldn’t!” he managed to stammer. “Please, please don’t ban me for life!” Travis begged, clasping his hands together. “Skateboarding is my life, and your store is like my second home! I’ll do anything, Brad. Seriously, dude, I mean anything!” His head dropped and he stared down at the floor through his long black eyelashes, gloss-coated lower lip trembling.

“Anything, huh?” Brad said thoughtfully, looking Travis up and down while rubbing his chin. He turned to his bearded companion. “Hey, Jake, Beth still works over at Hot Topic, right?” he asked. “Think she can do us a favor?”

Travis looked nervously over at Karen and Sean, who were both giving him a tentative thumbs-up, then back to Brad. With a sinking feeling, he realized the evil gleam in the skate shop owner’s eye was one he recognized all too well from earlier in the afternoon.

“Maybe ‘anything’ was a strong word?” he said tentatively.

“Too late for that, Trixie,” Brad said, shaking his head with a big grin. “Too late for that.”



At exactly 5:40, twenty minutes before the inspector was due to arrive, Winston and Clay converged on the Lovely Lotus beauty salon from opposite ends of the mall. Winston was grubby and covered in a combination of dirt and grass clippings, with his shoes and pant-legs stained green, while Clay was absolutely drenched in sweat and had slightly glazed-over eyes. At the door to the salon, both of them came to a halt.

“Did you get the stuff?” Clay asked gruffly.

“The clothes and shoes?” Winston asked, wiping his forehead. “Yeah, I got ‘em. Did you get the underwear?”

“Yeah,” Clay said, in a distant tone. “I got the underwear.” He shook himself, seemingly coming back to reality, and peered at the salon. “All the shutters are down,” he said suspiciously. “Jeez, is it even open? Denny would have called us if it was closed, right? He wouldn’t just back out without saying anything?”

“Of course not,” Winston said firmly. “This is as important to Denny as it is to any of us, and it was his idea, remember? He wouldn’t just back out at the last minute.”

As if to confirm his words, the salon door swung open, and they were met by the sight of a small, attractive, thirty-something Chinese woman with a

suspicious glare and a nametag that read 'Li.' "You Clay and Winston?" she asked sharply.

"Uh, yeah," Winston said. "That's us."

"This clothes and underwear?" Li asked next, pointing to the bags.

"Yeah," Clay said. "Are you almost, uh, done? Can we come in and see him, to make sure this is going to work?"

"Oh, no," Li said, taking the bags from their hands with a fiendish smile. "You no see her till she ready."

"She?" Winston echoed, exchanging a worried look with Clay.

"Well, can you hurry it up a bit?" Clay blustered, still mopping sweat from his brow. "We need 'her' in the shop in about ten minutes."

"Don't worry," Li drawled. She took a closer look at the bag Clay had given her and raised her eyebrow. "You shop for the underwear at Victoria Secret?" she said, looking quite amused.

"As a matter of fact, I did," Clay said staunchly. "And it wasn't easy, thank you very much, so I'd appreciate you not making any jokes about it."

"Why you no go Wal-Mart and buy plain underwear?" Li asked quizzically. "Bra and panties very cheap. Go self-checkout. Nobody see you. Very easy."

Clay's mouth fell open in shock. "Uh... Well... That is..." He trailed off, stammering, then muttered to himself, "Damn you, Clay, you *idiot*."

"As for you," Li said, turning on Winston. "Why you so dirty? You find clothes in rabbit hole?"

"My mom made me mow the lawn," Winston said sheepishly, cringing as he readied himself for whatever wisdom Li was about to divulge that would make the past hour's activities seem completely stupid. Instead, she nodded her head.

"Very good," Li smiled. "Important respect your mother. Now, I go make Daisy ready." With the bags in hand, she swished her way back into the salon, letting the door swing shut behind her. Winston and Clay stood there, gobsmacked, until finally Winston managed to form a single word.

"Daisy?" he asked, in utter disbelief.

All Clay could do was shrug his shoulders.



Ten minutes later, Winston and Clay were still waiting. Clay was now pacing up and down, while Winston was sitting down and trying not to look too conspicuous hanging around outside what was, to all observers, a closed-for-business beauty salon.

“Do you really think this will work?” Winston asked in a pained voice.

“Hell if I know,” Clay said gruffly. “But it’s worth a shot, right?”

“Is it?” Winston wondered. “I mean, what if he comes out of there looking like, you know...”

“A really bad drag queen on her first day on the job?” Clay finished.

“I just don’t want him to humiliate himself for no reason,” Winston reasoned.

“Guess we’re about to find out either way!” Clay said bracingly, stopping his pacing as the door to the salon chimed, then swung open. Winston hastily got to his feet, unsure what to expect, as Li emerged. She was dragging a black-haired young Asian girl with her, but of Dennis there was no... Winston and Clay both did a double-take at the same time, and their jaws dropped simultaneously.

“Oh, my god,” Winston gasped. “Denny?”

The black-haired girl inclined her head, blushing, and Clay and Winston were left struggling with the fact that the cute female in front of them was none other than their buddy Denny. Their eyes traveled simultaneously up from his dainty feet, encased in three-inch peekaboo sandals that displayed glittery pink toe nail polish through nylon thigh-highs that covered his curvy legs. Winston had never so much as seen his friend wearing shorts before, never mind a short summer dress, and try as he might, Winston couldn’t help but linger over the supple curves of Denny’s calves, taut from balancing in the high heels, and his smooth thighs.

Clay, meanwhile, was having equal difficulty dragging his eyes away from the top of Denny’s dress, where Li had somehow managed to turn his puppy fat into an honest-to-goodness bust. Either Denny had grown boobs in the past hour, or he was wearing a well-padded bra.

Li’s makeover had pulled out all the stops, meaning Denny’s pink toe nails were perfectly matched by glittery, square-tipped gel nails on his slim fingers, giving his hands an extremely feminine aspect, while his hair had been masterfully reworked into a cute bob with straight bangs. Denny’s eyebrows had been plucked into high, girlish arches, and eyelash extensions, together with masterfully-applied eye shadow and liner, made his black eyes look gorgeous. His bone structure was perfectly accentuated by Li’s makeup talents, and his lips were an enticing pink to match his nails.

In short, he looked like the sort of cute girl who would never give Winston or Clay the time of day, and they both felt slightly intimidated, even knowing it was Denny underneath the makeup.

“Can you guys please quit staring?” Denny pleaded, tugging awkwardly at the hem of his dress. “I feel like a piece of meat!”

“Sorry,” both guys gulped simultaneously. Denny made a face.

"This is seriously the only thing you could find me?" he demanded. "No jeans?"

"Hey, you know what she dresses like," Winston said weakly. "And I never heard you complaining about it before! Besides, maybe this will help, uh, attract more customers. You look... Good."

Denny blushed even brighter. "It's all Li," he claimed. "She's a miracle worker with makeup, that's all."

"Oh, no," Li beamed. "Li is miracle worker, but Denny need no work. Natural beauty. And nice body, too, once she lose some baby fat!"

"Thanks, Li," Denny muttered darkly. "So, what do you think?" he asked. "Is it going to work?"

"There's just one problem," Clay said, clearing his throat. "There's no way the inspector is going to believe a girl like you loves comic books."

"Well, that's presumptuous of him," Denny joked, trying to lighten the mood.

"I have solution," Li said. Quickly, she produced a pair of wire-framed "hipster" style glasses from behind her back and placed them on Denny's face, then handed him a pink Hello Kitty bag to sling over his shoulder. "There," she beamed, stepping back. "Now you geek girl."

Winston and Clay swapped looks.

"Good enough," Clay said. "We've got ten minutes to get back over to the shop and set up. Thanks for all your help, Li."

"Yeah, thanks, Li," Winston said. "Come on, Daisy. Time for your debut."



Denny groaned, “She told you the name?”

Winston shrugged innocently. “Better than ‘Denise,’ isn’t it?” he asked.



As they made their way through the mall, Denny felt like he was stuck in some bizarre kind of dream. The sheer barrage of strange, feminine sensations threatened to overwhelm him with every clicking, high-heeled step. Li had given him a crash course on walking in heels: heel-to-toe, one foot directly in front of the other, roll the hips and let the bottom sway from side to side, but Denny still felt shaky as a foal as he clopped his way across the mall’s tile flooring. The way his tush was naturally swinging with each step felt utterly wrong, especially when he noticed guys staring, attracted to the seductive feminine motion, but he was afraid walking in a more masculine manner could give him away.

The whole thing was crazy. Here he was, made-up and dressed as a girl from the skin out, walking through the mall where absolutely everyone could see him. But it was all too detailed to be a dream. He would have never been able to dream up the way the air-conditioning made his hairless nylon-clad legs shiver, or the caress of the dress against his smooth thighs, or the lace-edged bra straps digging into his shoulders and the soft nylon panties concealing his tucked-away manhood. There was no way he could have dreamt up the waxy taste of lipstick on his mouth, or the fluttering weight of mascara on his lashes, or the new flowery smell of his glossy black hair thanks to Li’s shampoo job.

No, this was not a dream. Every detail confirmed it, as did every reflective surface he passed. He was walking through the mall dressed as a girl, and not just that, he was a cute one. It was little



wonder he was attracting looks, especially since he was walking with two guys who would normally never get anywhere close to an attractive female specimen.

“You doing okay?” Winston asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Denny said, taking a deep breath. “I mean, I guess. This feels so weird. What if someone...”

“Not a chance,” Clay said. “Your own mother wouldn’t recognize you.”

“Good,” Denny muttered. He swallowed nervously as another guy’s gaze lingered as he passed by, roving hungrily up and down Denny’s exposed legs. Okay, Denny thought to himself. Think of it like this... it turns out your superpower isn’t just being invisible to girls, it’s also the ability to turn into a really hot one. And you have to use your superpower in this time of great need, in order to save Clay’s Comic Emporium. That made perfect sense.



As they reached the store, Denny saw that their absence might have worked to their advantage, because about five listless customers were hanging around outside, puzzled by the “closed” sign. It would help the place look busy when the inspector showed up, and he had the feeling that the customers, all of them male, wouldn’t be in too big of a hurry to leave once they caught sight of “Daisy” in all her glory.

“Coming through, coming through,” Clay announced in a business-like tone as he barged to the front and unlocked the store. “Just had a few things to deal with. Back in business now. Hopefully for longer than the end of the day...”

“What?” one customer asked, looking concerned.

“Nothing!” Clay blurted. “Nothing. Come on, Winston, get these clients what they need. And, uh, come on in, Daisy. I think we have that rare comic you were after.”

He stepped aside, revealing Denny to the gathered comic geeks, and, as predicted, their eyes practically fell out of their heads. Blushing furiously and feeling strangely vulnerable in his dress and heels, Denny minced quickly after Winston into the store. It felt so wrong to be in here like this — he was certain these floors had never experienced the click-clack of high heels, or the feminine, flowery scent of the shampoo Li had used on his hair.

Denny pretended to browse for a few minutes, far too distracted by the overload of feminine sensations, and far too nervous about what was to come, to actually read anything. The day’s customers all seemed to gravitate towards his aisle, sneaking glances at his legs when they thought he couldn’t see, making his face burn with embarrassment. It’s worth it, he reminded himself. Superheroes have to make some sacrifices...

Just then, Winston glanced through the window and gulped audibly. He flashed Denny a look and mouthed the words, “He’s here!”

Denny shifted anxiously on his high heels, wishing for the hundredth time that his skirt wasn’t quite so short. He checked his makeup in the glass case of the Wonder woman poster, but of course it was still perfect. Adjusting the strap of his bag on his shoulder, Denny squared his shoulders, stood up straight, and tried to look like a serious customer.

“Okay,” he muttered. “Show time.”



The inspector was a balding, slightly pudgy middle-aged man wearing a suit and tie, but with the distinct air of someone who would feel much more at home in a T-shirt and sneakers. And, despite Clay’s descriptions, he didn’t look like a particularly evil person, either. Denny watched him exchange some awkward pleasantries with Clay and Winston, then gathered his courage and stepped into view.

“Excuse me,” he said, in the soft voice Li had suggested he use to sound more feminine. “Do you have any older editions of this *Fantastic Four* issue?”

All of them turned around, and the inspector’s jaw dropped momentarily in surprise. Denny saw Clay and Winston exchanging a quiet high-five behind the inspector’s back, but then Clay put on his “professional” face and was all business.

“Let me have a look for you, miss,” he said. “Winston, come help me find it.” The two hurried away, intentionally leaving Denny alone with the inspector. Denny offered the man a nervous smile,



which was returned after a moment.

"I'm a big fan of the Fantastic Four myself," the inspector said. "So, if you had to pick..."

"The Human Torch," Denny said automatically. "I've had enough of being invisible already, and you'd be a huge hit at barbecues, right?" He laughed awkwardly at his own joke, but to his surprise, the inspector joined in immediately.

"Well, I don't believe a girl as pretty as you could ever feel invisible," he said. "I'd be Reed Richards. No more getting off the couch for snacks!"

"And you could suck in your belly," Denny added dryly, then, realizing what he'd just said somewhat implied the inspector was overweight, clapped a hand over his mouth, blushing to the roots of his hair. "I didn't mean that," he stammered. "I just meant, like, with all the snacks..."

"No offense taken," the inspector said. "Wow, beautiful and polite. Your parents must be very proud, Miss...?"

"Call me Daisy," Denny gulped, offering his manicured hand for a limp-wristed shake. The compliment had weirded him out a little. Surely the inspector wasn't hitting on him?

"Pleasure," the inspector said. "I'm Max. So tell me, Daisy, are you a regular here?"

"I just found it last week," Denny lied. "They've been doing a really good job promoting it. Now me and my, uh, girlfriends... Come here all the time?" Denny gulped, hoping the lie would be swallowed.

"Really!" the inspector exclaimed, looking surprised but very pleased. "Well, that's... That's good news!"

"It's a really cool shop," Denny continued, feeling victory within his grasp, a feeling of total elation. Heck, he pretty much was a superhero! "And they have all my favorite comics, so, I mean, I'm definitely going to tell people about it," Denny babbled. "I bet you are too, right? What are you in here for?"

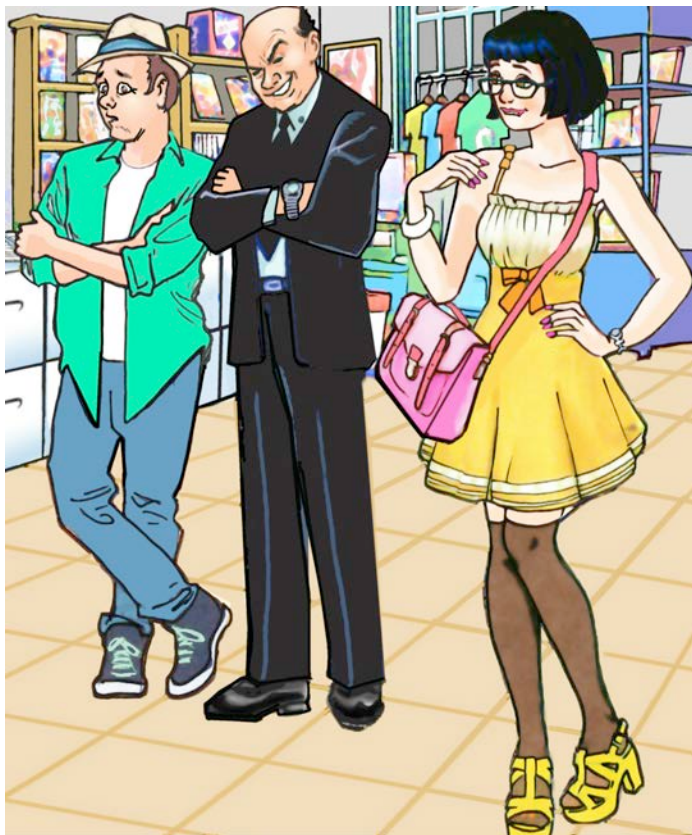
"Oh, just checking in," the inspector said, patting his clipboard. "I'm from the main office. But this location seems to finally be picking up the slack! You know, Daisy, you are obviously a very bright, and very, uh, attractive young lady..."

Denny's eyes widened. The inspector was not only stammering, but blushing. This could not end well. Didn't the man realize he was over twice his age?

"And I was wondering, if you might be interested, in perhaps..." the inspector's voice wavered, and Denny wasn't sure he had ever been more mortified in his life, especially with the entire comic shop listening in as he was awkwardly asked out on a date by a man in his forties. "Going on a date with my son?" the inspector finished.

Denny was so relieved he actually let slip a small laugh. “Oh, thank god!” he muttered. The inspector gave him a confused look.

“So, is that a yes?” he said. “He’s a very smart, well-mannered young man, and quite handsome. Takes after his mother more than me, if you get my drift. He’s always saying how he’d love to finally meet a more intellectual girl, and, well, if you pardon my saying, you seem to fit the bill. I could give him your number...”



Denny caught sight of Clay and Winston, both of whom were nodding frantically, neither of them having remembered to grab a *Fantastic Four* comic for realism. Denny immediately realized that this would pretty much seal the deal, and it wasn’t as if he actually had to go on a date. Some fake number should be more than enough.

“Um, yes,” Denny said awkwardly. “It’s a yes. So, my number is...” He rambled off a series of digits that made a credible-sounding phone number while the inspector scribbled it down on his clipboard, looking so overjoyed that Denny almost felt bad about the deception.

“Well, it was a pleasure meeting you, Daisy,” the inspector said, offering another handshake. Then he turned to Clay. “You’ve really turned things around since last week! Quite busy, and this young lady seems very taken with the place. Great work, Mr. Barns.”

“Please,” Clay said, grinning. “Call me Clay.”

“And you call me Max,” the inspector said. “Looks like things are well in hand, so I’ll be on my way.” He let himself out of the shop, and Clay and Winston and Denny managed to restrain themselves for all of five seconds before leaping up

and down, giving a loud cheer.

"We did it!" Winston exclaimed. "Or, I mean, you did it!"

"I guess so," Denny said, a grin spreading across his face. "Wow!"

"We're saved!" Clay hollered. "Clay's Comic Emporium is staying open!"

Denny looked around the shop, feeling like he was on cloud nine. Their crazy plan had worked, and now his safe haven would remain that way. He could still hang out with Winston after school, and talk comics with Clay, and browse the aisles in tranquil bliss. And he was the one who'd made it all work. Yes, Denny was on top of the world, even though he was wearing a bra and panties, and makeup, and a dress. It had all been worth it.

He was still basking in the glory when the door of the comic shop opened again, and in walked the very last person Denny had ever expected to see there, all of five feet three even in high heels, but with an undeniably intimidating aura. All three of them froze, and Denny couldn't help but think back to Clay's former pronouncement: your own mom wouldn't recognize you. But judging by the look of bewilderment on her face as she looked her feminized son up and down, she already had. The shocked silence lasted for a good minute before she managed to find her voice.

"I just have very strange conversation," she said, in a dangerous tone Denny knew to fear from experience. "With man outside comic shop. He say, 'I think I just meet your daughter! Your lovely daughter Daisy!' And at first I think, 'Oh, you are a crazy man.' But then I think, 'Why did Denny look for me at salon? Why did Li laugh so much when I ask what he do there?'" And while I think these things, he say, "I have to go, but I think to give Daisy my son's number, too, so she can phone him if she wants! More modern this way." And now I come inside to the comic shop, and I see... this."

"Uh, I can explain all this, ma'am," Clay said, stepping forward, but Denny's mother stopped him in his tracks with a single look.

"Never call me ma'am," she said. "Ma'am is old lady. Now I want Daisy to explain to me, not you."

Denny took a deep breath, trembling in his high-heeled pumps. He felt totally ridiculous now in his dress, like he'd been part of a stupid masquerade, especially compared to his mom's feminine grace and poise. His face burning with shame, he explained the comic shop's predicament, his idea to save it, and the way Li had helped him at the salon. His mother listened impassively, her expression never changing.

"I see," she said, when he had all but finished. "And Li give you family discount?"

"No," Denny said, looking confused. She shook her head in disappointment, then, unexpectedly, broke into a huge grin.

"Next time, you get free," she trilled. "Only best for my beautiful daughter! You look so pretty, Denny!" She swept her stunned son into a hug. Of all the reactions Denny had been expecting, this was not one of them. Trapped in her embrace, he shot a terrified look over her shoulder at Clay and Winston, who looked equally confused.

"It was a silly idea, I know," Denny said awkwardly. "But it worked, and now I really want to change..."

"Of course," his mom said, letting him go. She patted his arm, smiling evilly at him. "You need change outfit for your date. Man say his son expect you to call."

"Oh I'm not going to..." Denny looked at his mother's serious and stern expression. "I mean it was just something to..." The last of Denny's elation drained away, along with all the color from his face. "Mom, you're kidding, right?" he asked weakly.

"You say you go on date, so you go on date," she said firmly, then grinned again, more excited than Denny had seen her in years. "We go dress shopping! Come on!"

Denny made several more protests as his mom dragged him out of the shop, pleading with Clay and Winston to help her see reason.

"Hold on!" Winston called, as Denny's mom had nearly succeeded in tugging him out the door. Denny looked up, hoping for support. "Thanks for doing this, buddy," Winston said awkwardly. "And, uh, make sure you get my sister's things back before the end of the week. I don't want her to notice."

"You borrow clothes?" Denny's mom demanded. "We have money! You buy your own clothes!"

Denny glared at Winston, shaking his head as he was dragged away to his fate. Sure, he'd discovered his superpower, but it looked like had also just encountered his new arch-nemesis.



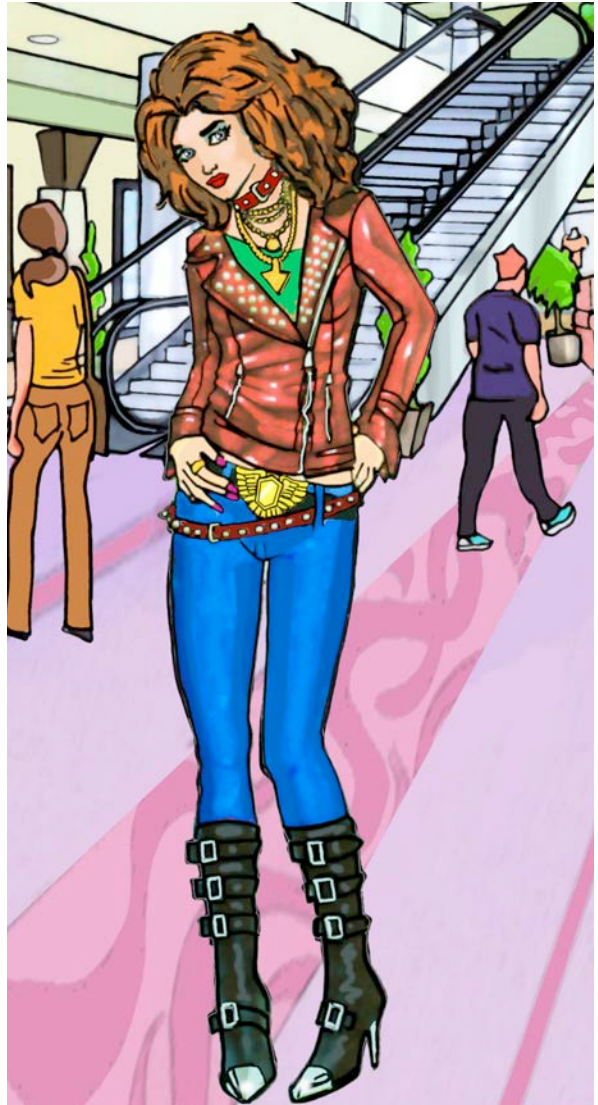
By the time they were heading back out into the main part of the mall, Nick had managed to convince himself that the way he'd looked in the mirror had been his imagination. Between the nail polish and the hair spray, he'd been breathing weird chemicals all day, and that was enough to go to anyone's head even without Jessica and Phillipe playing their weird little mind games. No amount of makeup could make a man's man into a hot chick, and he was fully prepared to laugh along when the first bystander started busting their gut at the sight of him.

As Nick walked along, he couldn't help but shoot one last backward glance at the Asian-looking hottie outside the comic book store in the tiny miniskirt and pumps. Jessica caught him doing it, and shook her head. "Not a good start," she

said to Phillipe.

“It’s gold,” he said. “This is gonna be great.”

Phillipe had put a hidden microphone on Nick to record people’s reactions, while he and Jessica trailed behind to film everything. The plan was for him to make a full circuit of the mall and food court before heading back to the salon to get changed back into his normal clothes and have his makeup removed. Nick could hardly wait. The boots were pinching his feet mercilessly, the bra straps were digging into his shoulders, and he couldn’t take a single step without feeling the swaying heft of the padding in his panties, the sticky waves of hair bouncing around his face, the weight of the mascara on his fluttering eyelashes and the incessant jangling of his jewelry. It was impossible to walk without making an incredible amount of noise between his clinking necklaces and clapping heels.



That’s why it was so strange that the first woman he passed as he exited the salon didn’t give him so much as a second glance. Neither did the second, though he noticed her gaze lingered on his boots with what might have been an appreciative look. As an old lady approached, staring at him suspiciously, he was almost relieved. Finally, someone to blow it all open, and say that in her day, “such abominations never occurred, imagine, a man, dressing as a woman, the shame!”

However, the old woman simply gave a resigned shrug as she shuffled onward with her shopping bags, as if she’d had to get used to such things. Nick couldn’t believe it. Was everyone really so timid that they refused to point and laugh at

what was obviously a man in drag? A guy came walking the other way, and Nick stiffened instinctively, but rather than call him a queen, the guy actually smiled at him!

Shaken, Nick continued onward into the mall, trying to come to grips. Maybe Li had done a better job than he'd thought. Maybe, just maybe, people in this modern day and age, so caught up in their own little worlds, always staring at their cell phones, weren't giving him a long enough look to deduce the obvious.

Nick had made peace with the fact that he could actually pass for a woman, albeit an ugly one, as he entered the food court. That was before a table of college-aged guys wolf-whistled at him as he walked past. Nick scanned desperately for another possible target of their affections, but unless they were whistling at the middle-aged father of three in front of him, it was definitely directed towards him. He turned, just to be sure, and found himself being ogled by three young men in black T-shirts, all of whom were nudging each other and winking at him.

Nick's mouth fell open, and to his eternal shame, he felt a bright blush spreading over his cheeks. He glanced backwards and saw Phillipe and Jessica trailing behind him, recording his reaction and clearly loving every minute of it, and realized, with a wave of relief, what was going on. Obviously they'd planted a few guys to whistle at him, just to try to prove their inane point and add more drama to the proceedings. He nearly laughed aloud at the realization.

"Okay," he muttered. "I'll play your little game." Looking back at the table of guys, Nick fluttered his mascara-laden lashes, tossed his hair, and gave them a coy smile before swishing away with an exaggerated strut, swinging his padded butt for them. Rather than the awkward pause he'd hoped to elicit, however, the guys all stayed in-character, whistling again and making a few choice comments.

Nick continued on his lap around the mall, no longer perturbed by the lewd remarks and lustful stares he occasionally received, knowing it all to be part of the prank. He was a little surprised by the sheer number of volunteers and obvious plants Phillipe had pulled into it, but then again, he was always bragging about how many thousands of subscribers he had. So, Nick endured it all stoically, keeping a smile plastered to his face even when a guy muttered exactly what he'd like to do to his ass on the way by.

He was on the home stretch, rounding the corner back towards the salon, when he was intercepted by a tall, well-groomed man wearing a leather jacket. "Hey, do you have the time?" the man asked. Nick, taken off-guard by the question and unsure if the man was in on the prank or not, instinctively checked his bare wrist. Mutely, he shook his head in answer and made to move around the man, but was stopped.

"Do you have the place?" the man asked.

“Uh...” Nick trailed off, confused.

“Don’t worry, darling, I got both,” the man said suavely. “You, me, and a few too many drinks at McTaggart’s, eight thirty sharp. How’s that sound, beautiful?”

Nick blinked rapidly, taking stock of the situation, which was a tall, good-looking man hitting on what was obviously a guy in drag with a horribly-written pick-up line. Could that bastard Phil be any more obvious? He’d planted a few

guys to whistle and catcall, so Nick got a taste of his own medicine, or whatever, and then for the big finale he’d gone for broke and hired an aspiring actor to come hit on him.

“Hilarious,” Nick muttered under his breath. “Who writes this stuff?”

“Uh, what’s that?” the actor asked hesitantly. Nick rolled his eyes, on the verge of telling the guy to screw off and that he wasn’t nearly gullible enough to buy his god-awful acting job. But wouldn’t it be even more fun to turn the tables and play along?

“That sounds like fun,” Nick cooed breathily, doing his best falsetto. “But maybe we could forget McTaggart’s and go right to my place?”

The actor’s eyes widened, and Nick felt a smug satisfaction at shaking him off his game. But then, to his surprise, the man grinned suavely. “I like a woman who knows what she wants,” he said, taking a step closer. “And I like your style, beautiful.” Then, to Nick’s shock, he actually leaned forward and ran his fingers playfully through his hair. This guy was playing chicken with him! Well, Nick had never been one to back down from a game of chicken.

“It’s a new look,” he said, switching back to his put-on ‘girl’ voice and batting



his eyelashes. "But if it helps me meets studs like you, I might just have to keep it," he added, running his long nail flirtatiously along the man's bicep. He glanced around for Phillipe and Jessica, intending to shoot them a triumphant look, but before he could catch sight of them in the crowd, he found himself crushed flat against the actor's body, wrapped in a tight embrace.

"It makes you look like a bit of a bad girl," the man said, now close enough that Nick could smell his overpowering aftershave. "Are you?" His hands were wrapped tightly around Nick's small waist, pressing their pelvises together. Nick could feel his padded chest squishing against the actor's leather jacket. His smile faltered. This guy was really staying in-character, but how far would he actually take things with what he knew to be another man? Determined not to back down, Nick bit his lip, placing both hands on the actor's chest and wriggling against him.

"When I'm around a bad boy," he said sexily, playfully putting his hand on the hard lump he felt grinding against his hip. "Is that your phone in your pocket, or are you just..." Nick's eyes widened as he realized, all at once, that the shape in the man's jeans definitely did not correspond to any cell phone he knew of. Before his mind could make the next logical leap, however, he found himself in the middle of a deep, fiery kiss.

"Mmmf!" Nick protested, wrestling away from the actor's embrace. "Dude! Are you gay or something?" he hollered in his normal voice. The man took a step back, looking shocked.

"Wait a second, are you a guy?" he demanded. "And if so, where do you get off calling *me*..."

"Way too far for a prank, bub," Nick snapped, wiping his mouth furiously. "Exactly how much did Phil pay you to kiss me?"

"Who the hell is Phil?" the man demanded, affronted.

"Fine, fine — *Phillipe*," Nick said, exaggerating the pronunciation.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about or... Or why you're dressed like a chick," the man spluttered. "This whole thing just got weird fast, beautiful. I mean, uh, buddy. I'm outta here." He took off, pushing his way past the small crowd of onlookers who had been drawn to the loud scene. Nick looked around for somewhere to throw up, and instead found himself staring into Phillipe's camera lens. And, judging by the expression of awe and jubilation on his face, and the pure shock on Jessica's, the guy in the leather jacket had been telling the truth.

"Nick, my man," Phillipe said. "You are so going to be a YouTube sensation."



After purchasing a toothbrush, toothpaste, and brushing his teeth in the

bathroom of Heavy Notes at least a dozen times, Nick was almost, grudgingly, beginning to see the funny side of the whole thing. Phillipe had indeed admitted to planting an actor to catcall him, but only one, meaning the twenty or so others he'd received had been made by unsuspecting horny guys. Which definitely gave Nick a new perspective on things.

"So," Jessica said, sitting on top of the counter as Nick exited the bathroom at last. "Did you learn your lesson, baby?"

"No more volunteering for stupid YouTube shows," Nick suggested.

"Strike one," his girlfriend said dryly.

"No more catcalling," Nick said. "Ever. Ever again."

"Good!" Jessica exclaimed. "Because now you know exactly how it feels, and how it degrades women..."

"Not that!" Nick blustered. "For all I know, I've been wolf-whistling at dudes this whole time!" Jessica opened her mouth to argue, incredulous, then shrugged and turned to Phillipe.

"Take your victories where you can, right?" she sighed.

"Got that right," Phillipe said. "This whole thing turned out way, way better than I expected. How about we all go out to celebrate?"

"I just want to get home and get all this junk off," Nick said.

"What, and waste a professional makeup job?" Jessica said disdainfully. "No way. It's a Saturday night, you're all dolled up, and ladies get in free at Mac's Bar tonight. Phil's right, we oughta celebrate."

"You're joking, right?" Nick asked weakly.

"Not in the slightest," Jessica said. "Come on, it'll be fun! Smoking Barrels is playing tonight..."

Nick groaned. That was one of his favorite local metal bands. "Alright, alright," he said. "Fine. But I've got one condition. Phil?"

Phillipe sighed. "Fine," he said. "No camera."



An hour later, the three of them walked into Mac's Bar, which was already bustling with people. Jessica had agreed to help "Nicole" dress down a little, which meant ditching the flashy jewelry and borrowing a simple white blouse and old jacket from his girlfriend. Unfortunately, she used her generosity as leverage to get him into a pair of four-inch, fire-hydrant red stiletto pumps that were one size too big for her. He'd been getting the hang of them on the way over, but still had to occasionally grab her arm for support.

Lipstick repairs following his little impromptu tonsil hockey session

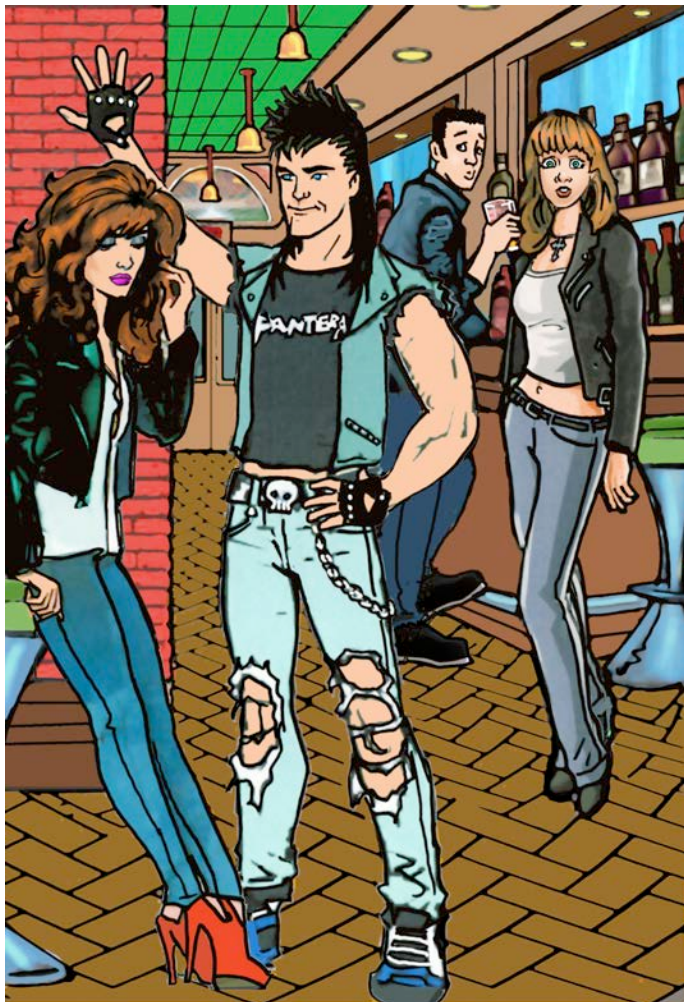
notwithstanding, Li's hair and makeup job had held up perfectly, and Jessica still couldn't help but be a little surprised every time she glanced over and saw a pretty hot woman with her instead of her boyfriend.

"Alright, ladies, the drinks are on me," Phillippe said, heading towards the bar. Both Nick and Jessica watched in wry amusement as he struggled to make his way through a crowd of mostly rocker types. His film student look made him stick out like a sore thumb. At least Nick still fit in, even if it was as a different gender.

"I better go help him out," Jessica said. "Wait here."

"Okay, sure," Nick said, using the soft voice she'd been making him practice on the way over. It was deep and slightly throaty for a girl, but nothing out of the ordinary for a smoker. Still, Jessica knew he was still worried someone would recognize him. She shook her head, smiling to herself a little as she headed to the bar. If she hadn't seen the transformation herself, she doubted even she would have put two and two together. It was sort of hot, seeing her macho boyfriend all prettied up, fidgeting nervously in his sexy high heels.

On her way back from the bar, with a disgruntled Phillippe trailing behind her, beers in hand, Jessica didn't see Nick where she'd left him — until she realized her view was partially obscured by a big, muscly guy sporting a mullet, ripped jeans, and a sleeveless denim vest, who was, judging by his posture alone, hitting on "Nicole" for all he was worth. Nick was tall for a girl, especially in



heels, but this guy towered over him, and Jessica could see him anxiously fingering his hair and trying to avoid eye contact, inadvertently giving him a flirtatious air.

“Excuse me, pal, that’s my girlfriend,” Jessica said, tapping the guy on the shoulder. He spun around with an innocent grin.

“Yeah, me and Nicole were just getting to know each other,” he said. “Hey, I’ve got a buddy I can introduce you to, maybe the four of us can rock out together?” Nick shot Jessica a desperate look, drawing his finger across his throat in the universal gesture for ‘absolutely not.’ Jessica couldn’t pretend she didn’t consider it for a moment — it would be awfully fun seeing her boyfriend squirm, and maybe even dance with another guy, grinding his cute little butt up against him and getting him all hot and bothered without him ever knowing his little secret...

Jessica blinked. Okay, she thought. Getting a little carried away there. That would be over the top, unfair to Nick, and plus, she couldn’t just ditch Phillipe.

“I mean my girlfriend, girlfriend,” Jessica said firmly, pulling Nick away from the wall. She gave his butt a firm squeeze and leaned in, claiming his mouth with a passionate kiss. Nick, surprised by the aggressive move, meekly acquiesced when Jessica stuck her tongue between his lips. By the time they came up for air, Nick’s disappointed would-be wooer was shrugging and sliding away.

“Whoa,” Nick said. “That was kind of hot.”

“I thought so,” Jessica said, grinning as Phillipe handed out the beers.

“Don’t get used to it, sweetheart,” Nick warned, taking his in hand. “This is strictly a one-time thing.”

Jessica shrugged, smiled, and took a drink.

SIX MONTHS LATER

Derek's mom sat at the kitchen table, nursing a cup of coffee and a baffled expression. "Run that by me again," she said, making a rotating gesture with her finger. She then took another lingering sip of her only comfort.

"Well, I just wanted some pictures," Derek said, as he scratched at the nail polish on his fingers, hoping it would flake off. Nail polish was a lot tougher than it looked, he realized. "And so I was just waiting for the show to start, you know, the one down at the mall a few months ago?" He raised his head and his blonde curls bobbed on his bare shoulders.

"Yes, I remember," Derek's Mom said. She was saying that, but in her head, she was more than a little dazed. Her son, her one and only son, was dressed in a high-fashion glittery gown, high heels that must have cost as much as her first car in college, and sported immaculate makeup and hair.

As her son told his story for the second time, Melissa Washburn was still in a state of shock. She had come home early from her job in medical billing, to find Derek made up like a high-class escort. There had been no yelling, no crying, no drama. Melissa just turned around, headed for the kitchen, snapped a k-cup in the coffee machine, added a shot of bourbon to her caramel vanilla cream and sat down at the table. Her eyes were staring a million miles into the distance as she drank. After about five minutes, Derek came in and sat down, arranging the skirt of his dress as he did so. He started telling his story without any prompting.

She had asked him to repeat it not because she wasn't paying attention, but just to buy time as she tried to wrap her head around this situation. "Then one of the girls said that I had the right kind of figure..." Derek was saying, as he continued. "It seemed like a waste to not use all those dresses..."

She probably should have been listening to her son's words, but all Melissa Washburn, 43, divorced and single, could do was watch her son's lips move, colored a dusky rose. He did, God help him, look incredible. He appeared five years older than he actually was, model thin, clear-skinned and unmistakably feminine. Like just about any other woman alive, Melissa was jealous and envious. Unlike just about any other woman, she was envious of her son.

Rewinding the tape, mentally, Derek's mom help up her hand, to stop her son talking. "Hold on. A few *months* ago?" Three ripples formed in her brow. "How long has this been going on?"

Derek visibly shrunk in his seat. "Just a couple of times," he said. "That's all."

"Wait a minute. Dakota Wilde. She was on the cover of Go Fit last week," Melissa said. "She's the latest pretty young thing splashed on all the magazines at the supermarket." She put her mug down. "Why in the world would you dress yourself up like her?"

“Uh... I’m not...” Derek said, almost so quietly that he couldn’t be heard. “I kinda *am* Dakota Wilde...”

Not sure what to do with this information, Melissa got up and grabbed a stack of glossy magazines she kept in a pile on the breakfast table. She found what she was looking for, a shot of Dakota Wilde on the cover of ‘American Mom,’ striking a sassy pose, wearing a blue check dress and carrying a basket of fruit. She held it up to her son’s face.

She looked back and forth perhaps eight or nine times. “Oh lord, Derek.” She couldn’t deny that the woman on the cover and the boy in front of her were one and the same. The same eyes, nose, and speckles on his face. Now that she recognized it, she wondered how she could have ever not recognized the magazine girl as her own son.

“Well, maybe I did more than one photo shoot,” he said.

“That job at the mall was six months ago!” Melissa wailed. “You’ve been traipsing around in heels and skirts for six months? For God’s sake, why?”

“It was gonna make a great story!” Derek declared. “I figure that the Tribune will publish it for sure! Maybe even the front page!”

“Derek! This kind of story is going to go in every paper in the country! Every TV show in the world!” Melissa grabbed the sides of her head.

“Really?” Derek replied with a smile. “Do you really think so?”

“This is not a good thing, Derek!”

“Oh... Uh... Yeah... I guess that’s true.” Derek looked down in his lap. “But that’s all I rally wanted. Just a story. And then I met Mr. Bordeaux. He’s a photographer.”

“And *he* put you up to this?”

“He doesn’t know! It’s a secret!” Derek clarified. “He thinks I really am a woman.”

“Is that where you were going? To have this... Man... Take photos of you?”

Derek sat up straight. “No!” Then he slumped again. “I was going to a reception at a gallery. He has a show. Of his photos.” He flipped his wrist to check the time on a slim ladies’ watch. “I’m late.”

“And you’re going to be late! Very late! As in never!” Melissa attempted to toss the magazine in her hand aside, but the photo on the cover had her flummoxed. She just kept staring at it. Her one and only baby boy was a cover model in a dress. She just couldn’t quite understand any of this. Then a terrible thought passed through her mind. “Were you going to this show as his *date*?”

“No!” Derek objected. “It’s not... No! We’re... He just needed a ‘Plus-One.’ “

“What does that even mean?”

Derek shrugged.

“Please tell me you haven’t done anything...” Melissa let the sentence linger there, hoping she wouldn’t have to say the word.

“Anything what?”

“Anything... Where you’re...”

Even for a teenager, Derek was being especially dense. “I... Don’t... Know... What... You... Mean...”

“He didn’t ask you to take your clothes off, did he?”

“Yes,” Derek said. “Of course he did. I change outfits, like, twenty times for a shoot. I get undressed all...” Then he finally got it. “Ohhhh... You mean... Oh... No. I meant... In a changing room.”

Melissa had heard enough. “Okay. That’s it.” She split the air horizontally with her hands, calling an end to this frankly traumatizing discussion. “Is this photographer waiting for you? I’m going to get some answers and get him straightened out.” She got to her feet. “Let’s go.”

“But...”

“Grab your purse and let’s go!” Melissa said, immediately wincing as she understood what she had just instructed her son to do. What was even worse, he had returned with a stylish, slim clutch purse just a second later, already packed and ready to go.

She should have probably asked him to change out into his regular clothes, but the surging anger in her body was blotting out rational thought. She grabbed her car keys and ushered out her son out the garage door.

It was only a half hour later that a very embarrassed Derek was sitting outside John Bordeaux’s studio office, his head down and knees clenched together as he listened to the muffled yells and complaints his mother was making behind a closed door. When they had arrived, Derek’s mother needed nothing more than a second to barge inside, grab the man with the camera by the shirt and drag him away and slam a door behind them.

“That’s your mom, huh?” said Penny, a girl familiar to Derek as Mr. Bordeaux’s assistant. She was trying to busy herself by doing some work on a laptop nearby, but she was just making an excuse to eavesdrop.

“Yeah,” Derek replied. “That’s my mom. Sorry about that.”

“Happens all the time,” Penny replied.

Over the course of what was obviously a heated discussion, Derek wasn’t too sure what was being said. Was his identity being exposed? Was he going to lose his after-school modeling job? Was he not going to the gallery tonight?

He could hear a few muted phrases from his irate mother here and there like “lock you up and throw away the key,” “sick and depraved,” “just a child” and

“rip you a new one.”

After a while the loud shouting died down, and just a few minutes later, the door opened up. Melissa, looking like she had just wrestled a grizzly bear came stomping out of the office and grabbed her son’s petite wrist and yanked him out of the chair. He followed along, clip-clopping in his strappy high heels as they left.

“In the car!” Derek’s mom commanded as she practically tossed his arm in the direction on the passenger door.

“I’m not going to the gallery, am I?”

“No you’re not going to the gallery! Or to any other extracurricular function with that man!” In the car, Melissa gunned the ignition and put the car into gear like she was trying to rip off the handle. “I’m taking you home!”

“So that’s that, huh?”

“It certainly is! You’re going to bed early so you can be up bright and early for the photo shoot tomorrow morning.”

Realizing his dream of writing this all up as a sensational blockbuster story for the paper was now gone for good, he drooped his pretty little head. “I guess you’re right...” Then he computed what he had just heard. “Hold on. Photo shoot?”

Derek’s mom sighed a heavy sigh. “Honey, I know it’s a lot to ask, but that one photo shoot is going to earn more money than I make in six months.”

“But I thought...” Derek was now the one at a loss for words. “You didn’t tell him I was a guy?”

“I know, I know.” Melissa said. “The last thing in the world I want to do is have you on the cover of another magazine. This will be the last one. The absolute final appearance of this ‘Dakota Wilde.’ Then you can get back to your schoolwork and forget all about this silly little mistake.”

“Okay,” Derek said. He straightened the hem of his dress over his stockinged knees as he tried to hide his grin. Maybe he could get a story out of this yet. “I guess.”



“Boarded Up has awesome summer deals!” Travis chirped, for what felt like the thousandth time. “Come check us out!”

A skinny, raven-haired, slightly-Asian-looking boy in the Captain America T-shirt took the offered pamphlet, along with the unspoken invitation to check Travis out, too. He involuntarily let his eyes quickly rove up and down his body. Travis carefully kept the flirty smile frozen on his gloss-coated lips, even as he glared daggers at his latest admirer. The raven-haired boy opened his mouth

for a split second, as if to try his luck, but then quickly shut it and hurried off, blushing. Travis had a similar blush on his cheeks as he shuffled his stack of pamphlets again — there had to be at least a hundred left still.

Still, it wasn't like he could really blame the nerd for staring. Travis sighed, turning back to the store window to use it as a mirror, adjusting himself. The girls from Hot Topic had really done a number on him, filling Brad's order for a "cute promoter girl" to perfection.

Karen's comfy T-shirt, cargo shorts, and sneakers were long gone, replaced by a tunic-style off-the-shoulder top that barely covered his

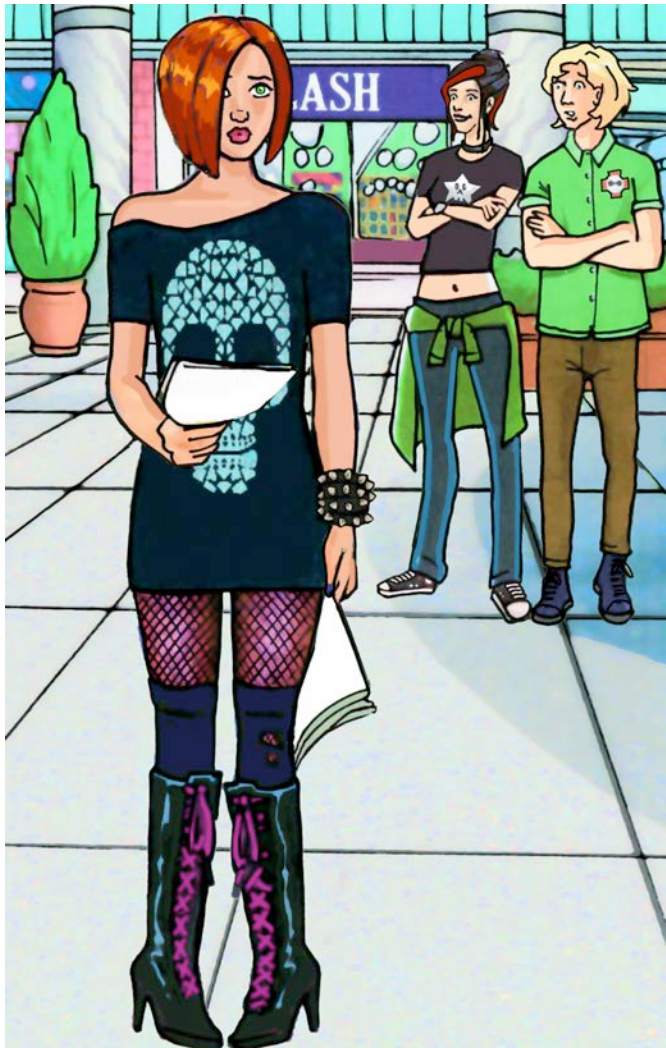
butt and did absolutely nothing to defend him against the mall's freezing A/C, pink fishnet stockings, and a pair of high-heeled lace-up boots that pinched his toes. They had also taken the liberty of giving his bra another round of stuffing to make his "boobs" look bigger, along with redoing his makeup to give him smoldering, sexy raccoon eyes with plenty of kohl, and lips slathered in a pale pink gloss. In a word, he was hot. Really, really hot.

"Oh, my god!" gasped a voice. "Travis?"

Travis turned to see Karen and Sean both staring at him — Karen with an expression of amusement and horror, Sean with the expression of a man trying extremely hard not to check out his best friend's legs.

"This is where you've been on the weekends?" Sean asked. "Seriously?"

"For the last six months, yeah. You got me." Travis used a pamphlet to fan his



face. "Brad says I can enter the June contest if keep up my end of the bargain."

"You told me we should never come back here ever again!" Sean complained. "But you just didn't want me to find you dressed up like this, right?"

"That's not true."

"Travis!" Karen and Sean barked.

"Trixie," he corrected them, giving a playful toss of his hair. "Maybe it's a little bit true. Hey, want to take, like twenty pamphlets off me?"

"Holy crap, dude," Sean said weakly. "You look, uh... sexy as hell, to be honest."

"Thanks," Travis snorted. "That's the goal. Sex sells, right?"

"Beth at Hot Topic went all in, huh?" Karen asked, giggling.

"Yeah, I'm pretty much the next best thing to a Barbie doll," Travis said darkly. "Get this, Beth wants me to get my legs waxed. And she thinks by the end of the month she can get me in heels. Yeah, right!"

"End of the month?" Karen asked sharply. "How long did you agree to do this?"

"Until summer, every weekend," Travis sighed. "I'm the cute promoter girl. Boarded Up has awesome summer deals! Come check it out! Stare at my chest, check out my legs! Can I bend over for you a little?"

"If you want to, you could definitely..." Sean trailed off, flushing. "I mean, ha. Good one, dawg." He shook his head, still obviously disturbed by the sight of his feminized best friend. "Well, I gotta head home. We still on to skate tomorrow, dude? Assuming you're not, like, getting your hair done, or whatever."

"Yeah, still on," Travis said, offering his usual high five. "Later, dude."

"Later," Sean repeated, slapping his hand with a little less force than usual. He gave Karen a lingering goodbye kiss, then headed off towards the food court entrance, leaving Travis and his ex-girlfriend standing together.

"So, why did you agree to all this?" Karen asked, frowning. "I mean, I can tell how much you hate this, no matter how many jokes you crack. Brad was bluffing about banning you for life. He thinks you're an awesome skateboarder, remember? He might even want to sponsor you soon."

"Well, he's probably going to relent before long," Travis admitted. "But in the meanwhile, well, I remembered what you said about telepathy."

"Empathy," Karen corrected.

"Yeah, whatever," Travis said. "Seeing things from other people's point of view. Maybe, you know, one that's kind of more like yours."

"You're not trying to win me back by putting on a miniskirt, are you?" Karen

asked dryly.

"Is it working?" Travis asked hopefully. Karen shook her head, laughing. "In that case, no," Travis said primly. "I just thought it could help me a better friend. Or whatever."

"That is amazingly thoughtful," Karen said. "Really. I'm proud of you, Travis." She paused, grinning mischievously. "Trixie, I mean. Hey, maybe we can get our nails done together! Or if you find some cute guy, we could even double date. You know, with the four of us."

"Very funny," Travis said, rolling his eyes.

"That black-haired boy you were talking to a minute ago sure wouldn't say no," Karen teased. "Poor guy couldn't keep his eyes off you."

"Please," Travis said, putting his hand on his hip and fluttering his eyelashes, curling one strand of hair around his manicured fingertip. "I am *so* out of his league."

Karen guffawed, and before long Travis joined in, too, laughing so hard his stomach started to hurt. They didn't stop until Brad hammered his hand on the inside of the store window.

"Hey!" he barked. "I'm not not-paying you to fraternize, princess! Get those pamphlets moving."

"Princess..." Travis echoed, grimacing.

"Better use your veto," Karen smirked. "See you around, Travis." She pulled him in for a quick hug, then headed off into the mall. Travis stared after her wistfully for a moment, then put the smile back on his face and brandished his pamphlets.

"Awesome deals here at Boarded Up!" he chirped. "Come check us out! Renowned skateboarder Travis Fulton gets all his stuff here, why wouldn't you?"



It was an afternoon just like any other when the world blew up for Denny. He had come home from the comic shop, ready to withstand the usual loud bickering from his mother and father. But on this day, the house was silent. Eerily silent. No noise at all. Denny almost tip-toed his way from the front door to his room, afraid to ruin this rarest of opportunities to enjoy peace and quiet. That's when he found his mom, alone, sitting on the bed, quietly in tears.

As he would learn, his dad had abandoned their little family to run off with a younger woman. Things changed after that day. Although he kinda missed his father, the end to the constant arguing was a relief. Despite that, from that day on, Denny's mom wasn't the same... to say the very least. She'd fallen into a

deep depression, convinced that Denny would turn out just the same as his womanizing father and also abandon her before long.

Denny had done his best to convince her otherwise, spending his weekends trying to have quality time with her, even if that meant painting each other's nails while they watched a movie or doing facial peels together. The feminine beauty rituals had always helped her relax in the past, so he couldn't fault her for falling back on them now. And she was in such a fragile state that when she finally proposed a "mother-daughter" getaway, Denny reluctantly shaved his legs, put on a cute skirt, and became "Daisy" again for a weekend.

The change was incredible. For the entire weekend, Denny's mom seemed like her old self again: bold, decisive, spontaneous, and even a little mischievous. He hadn't seen her like this since that day they'd spent dress shopping at the mall — the threatened "date" he went on had come to nothing, fortunately.

From that weekend on, it seemed like she took every opportunity possible to wheedle, cajole, and sometimes outright guilt-trip Denny into being "Daisy" for her, whether to go shopping together or see a chick flick. Denny couldn't deny the positive effect it seemed to be having on his mother's health, and gamely went along with it.

His final semester of high-school was spent leading a strange double life, constantly trying to hide his manicured nails, freshly-tweezed eyebrows, or pierced ears, to the point where even his friends at the comic book shop noticed something was up with him. Stressful as it was, Denny was reluctant to jeopardize the progress his mom seemed to be making, and, though he would never admit it, he was increasingly intrigued by his very own little "superpower," being able to transform at will from the Invisible Nerd to an extremely stylish, attractive young lady who drew eyes wherever she went. Now he certainly wished he had told Clay and Winston the truth when he had a chance. Boy, if they could see him now...



It was exactly four days after Nick's walk on the wild side that his girlfriend had gotten him to dress up as a chick again. It was ladies' night at O'Bannigans, and the half-price drinks for women was just too good a deal to pass up.

They shared a booth in the corner, by themselves, and Jessica had to smile. "It actually makes the night bearable when you're not being constantly hit upon by guys," she said as she took a moment to un-lock her lips from Nick's. "When everyone thinks you're a lesbian, it's like reverse magnetism. The guys can't get away fast enough." They had spent the entire evening kissing, making out and dancing with each other, appearing for all the world like two women on a lesbian date. "We should do this more often," she said.

“Hey, this was just a one-off,” Nick said. “Never again.”

The next Friday night was another night out for Jessica and Nicole. This time to the movies. Nick insisted that it really was the last time. The week after that was an all-girl dinner date. After which, Nick was adamant that he wasn’t going to be Nicole anymore. The week after that was another ladies’ night at a favorite bar. So, even with Nick’s constant protestations, it wasn’t long before Nick becoming Nicole for a night out was their regular Friday thing.

The truth was, it turned both of them on. Nick was definitely enjoying the attention Jessica gave him, and Jessica had found a little spark to take their relationship to a new level.

That fateful day at the mall six months ago had shaken him quite a bit — far worse than being laughed at as a guy in a dress was being accepted as a feminine, attractive woman so easily, not to mention being kissed and fondled by another guy in public. It had been a huge blow to his male ego, and he hadn’t quite been the same since, constantly having to second-guess his masculinity, much to Jessica’s delight. She took great pleasure in pointing out sexy high heels that would look ‘so totally bitchin’ on him, or little skirts and dresses he ‘might like to try on’ whenever they were out and about.

Jessica felt closer than ever to Nick, and it wasn’t long before she began to throw out the kind of seemingly-innocent questions that make men nervous.

“Have you ever thought about kids?” She asked one night. Another time she remarked that one of her friends would “make a great bridesmaid.” These kind of statements started to penetrate Nick’s thick skull and made him worry. “That’d be a great place for a honeymoon,” Jessica said watching a travel show one evening.

“So she keeps dropping all these hints,” Nick said to Jimmy at work. “I think she’s just pullin’ my leg, but... Are you even listening?”

“What?” Jimmy replied, distracted. “Got a lot on my mind, that’s all.”

“Dude, I think Jessica is tryin’ to trick me into marrying her. What could be more serious than that?”

“This,” Jimmy replied, pulling out a piece of paper from below the counter he was manning. It was titled “Heavy Notes Store Closures,” in bold, black letters.

“Whoa,” was Nick’s reply.

Everything had gone downhill after Nick lost his job at the music store. When Heavy Notes closed, they gave Nick unemployment, but with the economy in shambles, he’d been unable to find even a scrap of work. Although, the way Jessica told it, he’d barely tried, spending most of the day moaning on the couch while she supported both of them with her waitressing at Tootie’s. Nick’s benefits ran out all too quickly.

“You need to get a job, Nick! I can’t pull any more extra shifts!” Jessica said.

“You find a job by next month or we can’t even pay the rent!”

“Yeah, right,” Nick said, laying on his back on the sofa. He had a 2-liter of soda wedged in the cushions, a game controller on his stomach, and a bag of chips above his head for rapid deployment. “You know the landlord isn’t gonna kick us out. He likes us too much.”

“Landlords have to get their money, Nick! I don’t care how nice he is!” Jessica was at her wits’ end. “You have to promise me you’ll at least look for a job.”

“Yeah. Fine.”

“I *mean* it this time!”

Nick wasn’t even looking at her, just staring at the screen. “I know. I know. How do you beat this stupid level?”

“Nick!” Jessica wailed.

“Get a job, I heard ya! Now I gotta concentrate on this stupid dungeon boss, okay?” After that, Jessica didn’t hear from Nick until he wanted to know about dinner.

It was no great shock for Jessica to learn that Nick didn’t go out for work the next day. Nor on the second or the third day. Finally, after a week of promises, she just gave up. As for Nick, he was glad he didn’t have to put up with her constant complaints and didn’t question it.

The next week, however, his utopia was shattered when his phone rang. After it rang another three times, he figured had to go answer it. “Who the fuck calls anyone anymore?” He asked the air, as he put his game on pause, slid off the couch and spilled a bag of cheese puffs on the carpet. He made his way over to his pants, which he hadn’t actually worn in several days, and fished the phone of his pocket, all without actually standing.

“Whaaat?” Nick said to answer it.

“Is this Nick?” Asked a frantic voice on the other end. “This is Amber. From Tootie’s? Jessica’s had an accident.”

It turned out not to be anything life-threatening. Jessica had apparently stacked too many trays of wings on her arms at one time and her back buckled. She came home from the emergency room in a brace, and was told to stay off her feet to begin the recovery process.

Nick was trying to be sympathetic, which wasn’t his strong suit. “It’s totally awesome you’ll be okay, babe. Now that you’re home, you wanna play some video games with me?”

“I guess. I don’t have much else to do.”

“That’s so awesome! I have all these co-op games I’ve been wanting to try.” Nick set Jessica up on the couch and sat beside her. “How many days until you go back to work? You’re off for tomorrow, right?”

Jessica was very serious. "Baby, I'm probably not going back to work for a month or two. Even then, there's no guarantee. That's what the doctor said."

"What are we supposed to do for money?" Nick asked.

"You're gonna have to really get a job, Nick. We don't have any other options." Jessica tried her best to really get through to him this time. "And you need to get a job fast."

"But what kinda job can I get? No one really needs a guitar sales assistant."

As they started to play, Jessica had a suggestion. "Well... Maybe Nick Carmichael can't get a job. But maybe Nicole can."

"Huh?" Nick replied, not catching on.

After months of leeching off of his girlfriend, she'd finally given him an ultimatum: the restaurant was looking for new girls to wait tables, it was simple work and he could get the job easily with her recommendation. He could either give it an honest try or they would both be on the street. Naturally, he'd fought the idea tooth and nail at first.

But now he had no choice, and the pragmatist in him knew that Jessica could sometimes make incredibly good money off tips in a single night, and the fact that he happened to make a very attractive girl when all dolled up was one of the very few things he had going for him. So, after a few days of heated arguments, pleading, and coercion, he'd given in. After a full-on head-to-toe makeover, he went to his job interview as 'Nicole.'

And, as the name tag perched on his bosom in just such a way as to draw eyes to his impressive cleavage made clear, 'Nicole' had been a hit. Nick wouldn't pretend he hadn't enjoyed it just a little bit at first, mincing around in high heels and fluttering his eyelashes at the idiots who couldn't tell he was a guy in drag, but it wasn't long before his ankles were killing him, his butt had been pinched more times than he could count, and he was hating every second of his job.

No matter how much he begged, however, Jessica had refused to give him an easy way out, claiming he would be a waste forever if he always gave up when the going got tough. She even put him on female hormones to help him 'adjust,' and got rid of quite a bit of his male clothing when he wasn't paying attention. The only reason Nick didn't call quits on the whole thing was that he knew he had no real choice, and the sex with his girlfriend was absolutely mind-blowing. She seemed really turned on by girlifying him, and that meant a lot of sex at all times of the day.

ONE YEAR LATER

Derek's mother patted her son on the cheek, tenderly. "Darling, I know that it's awkward, but for goodness sake..." She gripped the lapels of his blouse and ripped them apart, showing Derek's cleavage to the world. "...Show some skin, honey! That's what they're paying us for!"

"My daughter is ready!" Melissa declared to the crew, exiting the photo set and taking her usual place just off-camera. "Let's remember to be sexy!" She told her son, as she made a few sharp claps intended to motivate him.

After his mother had agreed to the "final" photo shoot with John Bordeaux, famous fashion photographer — and as Derek would soon discover, total hard-ass — things had quickly gotten out of hand. It still haunted Derek to this day. He'd been halfway out the door, ready to call an end to this whole bizarre escapade and write an article all about it, when Bordeaux had sweet-talked his mother with the siren call of fame and fortune, painting a picture of first class flights all around the world to the most exotic destinations, a chance to travel the globe and visit places she'd never even dreamed of seeing.

Working day-in and day-out with gorgeous women, and making a ton of money, did have an appeal to Derek, truth be told. It was more than enough to pay his way into any prestigious school of journalism he desired, once he was old enough. Derek, though, really just wanted things to go back to normal.

"Let's not be so hasty," his mother had told him.

Derek was fazed. "You're not seriously going to..."

"Just one more shoot. That's all I'm asking," she had told him. Then, the next week, it was another shoot. Then another, and another, and another. The money had clearly cast a spell on his mother, who was now more a hard-driving agent than a mom. One year later and Derek was still modeling, his life as a teenage boy fading into the past.

Unfortunately, it had become apparent to everyone that 'Dakota' was a natural. In fact, the more Derek looked like he would rather be anywhere else in the world than laced into a frilly basque and pouting for the camera, the more the photographer had raved about his potential. When it became clear than Bordeaux was serious about netting him a multi-million-dollar modeling contract and making him a career as a female fashion model, Derek knew it was time to come clean. Even if his mother wanted to do "just one more session." So, he was ready to tell Bordeaux the truth about himself to make sure he was going to be let go. Unfortunately, revealing his true gender only got Bordeaux more excited: according to him, he had just discovered the next Andreja Pejic, whoever that was.

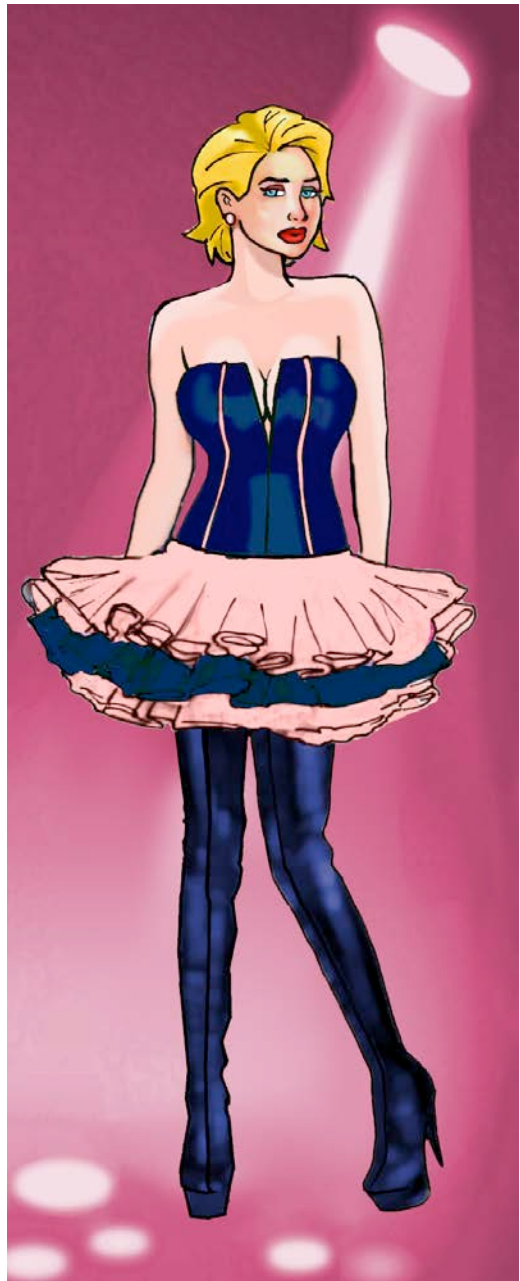
From that day onward, 'Dakota' was on 'her' way to stardom. If Derek's mom was a little leery of her son coming home with a new career as a female fashion

model, when she saw the number of zeroes on the contract, she agreed to let him finish out his school year by correspondence and appointed herself as ‘Dakota’s’ agent. The ash blonde hair he’d gotten at the mall became his signature look, and before long Derek had swapped his sneakers for stilettos and was learning the ins-and-outs of makeup, accessorizing, and skin care. His mother was adamant that he “present” as a pretty young blonde woman at all times, to help him adjust to the clothes he would be modeling, and was even more adamant about Derek’s diet. No more cheeseburgers — if he gained so much as a gram, he was assured it would show up on camera.

To prevent other bodily changes, Derek’s mother convinced him to go on hormones, as well — just enough to block his testosterone production, to avoid him suddenly gaining muscle and sprouting facial hair, however unlikely that was. Soon he was living the life of an up-and-coming model, jet-setting from Paris to NYC to strut along various catwalks. It was a glamorous life, but certainly not an easy one.

To start with, there were his co-workers. Yes, he was working with gorgeous young women day-in and day-out, as promised, but it wasn’t quite what it had been cracked up to be. The cattiness was dialed up to a whole new level on the international modeling scene, and a lot of the other girls felt threatened by ‘Dakota’s’ rapid ascension. The few who were friendly with him tended to treat him like one of the girls, assuming he was who he pretended to be.

The one time a bi-curious, and very sexy, Italian model had put the moves on



him at an after party, despite being pinned to a couch making out with one of the most beautiful girls he'd ever seen, Derek had been totally unable to 'rise to the occasion' — meaning he was mostly too embarrassed to try again. He suspected it was the hormone pills he was taking, but he had promised his mother, so there was nothing he could do.

The constant travel and long hours in the studio for shoots made for quite a lonely life, and the constant pressure to maintain his waifish figure and look good for whatever camera — whether professional or paparazzi — was pointed at him, was unbelievably stressful. He'd thought he'd found a sympathetic ear when a very kind, reassuring male model he worked with struck up a friendship with him — at least until he'd cornered him in the change room and tried to stick his tongue down his throat! Derek still squirmed uncomfortably at the memory. That was another thing he'd had to get used to — the constant male attention. Now that he was, to all outward appearances, a hot blonde model, guys were after him constantly.

After a while, it became easier just to think of himself as 'Dakota.' He walked like a girl, talked like a girl, obviously he dressed as a girl, and eventually he wasn't sure if he was playing a role well or if the role had taken over his old identity completely. He even relented and went on a few dates with various handsome young men, and once with a pro athlete in order to get some very expensive tickets to a tennis match. It was mostly to appease the tabloids, but at the same time, it did help a little with the loneliness. He always managed to keep it to just kissing, which was something he'd learned how to tolerate.

When his agent/mother informed him that he needed a bit of 'enhancement' to make the leap into big-time lingerie modeling, Derek's old journalistic mantra of 'a little bit further' landed him a pair of perfect 36-C's that were now nestled in the silky cups of his designer push-up bra. He'd even agreed to an upped dosage of hormones to give him the proper curves. Switching over into modeling lingerie had been a smashing success, even though it still weirded him out to see his scantily-clad form blown up to a hundred times the size on New York's biggest billboards. It had been enough for him to move his mom to her dream home in Southern California, and for another two-year contract offer. Once again, the money was just too much for Derek's mother to refuse.

"Make love to the camera, sweetie!" Derek's mother called out. In the glare of the lights, Derek tried to get a better look in the direction of his mother's voice, but it was no use.

"Lookin' Good, Dakota!" came another voice. That was Josh's voice, the jock who had gotten Derek the tennis tickets. He had been tagging along on Derek's photo shoots lately.

"There you are Josh," Melissa said to the young man arriving on set. "I was expecting you earlier."

“Had to put in few extra reps,” Josh explained with a flex of his arm. He was a muscled Adonis, with a shiny white smile and a jaw of granite. The young man was still wearing his workout clothes, his skin glistening.

“Dakota’s been talking all about you,” Melissa said, stretching the truth. In fact, Derek had been complaining that Josh was always hanging around when he wasn’t wanted.

“Great! She’s a real fox,” Josh replied. “Didja see where TMZ had those hot pics of us at the nightclub?”

“I did. You two make for a beautiful couple.”

“Hey, it’s great for publicity! Everyone on social is talkin’ about us.”

“Yes, they are. It’s certainly done wonders for my daughter’s profile.” She recognized the monetary advantage of having a handsome couple for the tabloids to talk about. It might add a zero or two on the end of any contract he signed Derek to. “I think you two are going to become quite the power couple.” Melissa turned back to the set to see her son bending over and almost flashing his breasts to the camera. She clapped again in Derek’s direction. “That’s more like it, Dakota honey!” she called from the darkness. “Show it off to the camera!”



Right after he was done with school, Travis Fulton was on the first bus to Los Angeles. He had very vivid dreams of being a superstar skateboarder, and L.A. was the place to be if that was your dream. But it was a lot tougher to break in than he’d realized — the dudes in L.A. could really shred. Things got worse when a seriously broken leg took him out of commission completely, meaning he lost the few small sponsors he’d managed to attract — and possibly his entire career, as well.

Travis had barely even gotten started on his new career and it was already virtually over, if his leg didn’t heal up properly. He was in a deep funk, understandably. His roommate was a well-connected socialite, and invited Travis along to some crazy parties to try and take his mind off his misery. The party scene did indeed take his mind off his troubles, but Travis also found himself falling prey to new vices. Alcohol was everywhere at these parties, and he was eager to try drinking. First it was a grabbing beer here and there, but then it became cocktails and finally, full bottles of hard liquor. Pot and cocaine were also being passed around, and Travis was game for it. He was away from home for the first time, on his own, his dream was dead and running out of money fast. Pretty soon, thanks to his oversized personality, the young man was being invited to every party in the neighborhood.

He was nearly as good at talking his way past bouncers with a fake ID as he

was at skateboarding, and now that he was in the big city, away from everyone he knew, and free from any kind of expectations, he didn't care that he tended to hang out with a less than rugged type of crowd.

"You still haven't come to my favorite bar in town," Travis' roommate told him. "You need a little variety, Trav."

"I don't know. It sounds kind of... fruity."

"Don't be so small town, Trav. This is the big city. Just think about, okay? It'd be fun. I know you like fun!"

Over time, he found himself weirdly drawn to this new bar, located nearby in his neighborhood. It was one that catered to gay and trans clientele, and had female impersonators performing almost nightly. In a way he was very uncomfortable with that idea, and yet, he couldn't stop thinking about it.

After a few quick visits, he found that it was just a bar like any other, and the drinks got you just as drunk as any other bar. It quickly became his local watering hole. But, faced with his ever-dwindling bank account and no other real options, he inquired about the Help Wanted sign in the window.

The rest was pretty much history. The owner hadn't believed he was 21 for a second, but he had a big heart and let Travis learn the ropes of bartending. There were two stipulations the owner gave him: One, to stop drinking, and the second was to have an open mind.

"What do you mean by an open mind?" He asked.

"Travis, you did notice that our bartenders are all men, didn't you?" The owner replied. "Men that put on a little show for our customers."

"You mean they're cross-dressers," he replied.

"Do you have a problem with that?"

All Travis could do was to think back to his months handing out flyers in the mall feeling the breeze under his miniskirt and laugh.

Travis was nothing if not a performer — always had been — and before long he was learning the finer points of makeup application and working his job in high heels. He had a head start from the Hot Topic girls using him as their own personal Barbie doll that whole summer, and soon 'Trixie' was one of the bar's most popular lip-sync acts.

His female alter-ego was in demand, the customers doubling on the nights where he performed his act. It became more and more elaborate, with costume changes and even a song or two he'd sing in his own voice. Soon, everyone just new him as 'Trixie' and Travis was getting less and less time in his life.

After a while, Travis even eschewed his pants and t-shirts, preferring skirts, short-shorts, blouses and of course an eclectic variety of leggings. His bathroom at home was littered with feminine makeup products and hair care items. Even

just lounging around his apartment, he was dressed as a girl and made up his face with mascara and lipstick. It was a lot easier than doing himself up for every night's show, he told himself. Everyone just called him Trixie now, even his roommate.

With nobody around to judge him, Travis finally faced the truth: he wasn't just doing this for the money, he was doing it because he loved being Trixie — the same way he'd loved being Trixie that summer passing out fliers, even though he made sure to whine and moan at every opportunity to throw everyone off the trail. Hell, even that Halloween all those years ago when he'd nearly gone as Tinkerbell, he hadn't backed out because he was scared by how hot he looked as a girl. He'd backed out because he was scared of how much he loved it.



Denny wasn't quite sure when he had lost control of the situation. Probably it was when his mom had convinced him to delay heading off to college, so he could stay at home a year longer.

Yes, that had definitely been the turning point. Since he was no longer attending high-school, and his few friends, including Winston, all moved away for college, there was nothing stopping him from being "Daisy" as often as possible, as his mother kept pointing out.

"You have better things to do?" She asked him as she let Li file away on her nails at the family salon.

"I can think of a million things, Mom," Denny replied as he sat at the front counter. He had assumed much of the receptionist work over the course of the past few months, and came to work every day in a skirt and heels. She'd gradually phased out all of his male clothes, replacing them with nothing but skirts, dresses, girly tops and truckloads of frilly, feminine lingerie, and before he knew it, he was dressed as her daughter 24/7.

"Name one."

"Uh... Like... Buying comics?"

"Oh, yes. Very important," she said. "Do not let your mother keep you from living such glamorous life."

There really wasn't any point in trying to argue with her. So, he'd decided to stay "Daisy" until the fall, at which point he figured he would head off to college as previously planned. When September rolled around, however, he was in for a nasty shock, discovering that his college fund had dwindled to almost nothing, as it had been used by his mother to pay for an extensive designer wardrobe, mountains of extravagant footwear, weekly salon visits, and everything else that had gone into creating her perfect, girly-girl daughter. That included expensive black-market testosterone-blockers and estrogen pills.

By the time he discovered the pill bottles in the trash and realized she'd been secretly feeding him female hormones to further feminize him, things were too far gone.

When he confronted her, she'd tearfully insisted the only way to keep him from turning into his father was by turning him into a



daughter. Despite her manipulation, Denny realized she truly did want the best for him, mistaken as she may be.

“Can you give up new life as a girl?” His mother asked him. “Everyone who meets you want to be your friend!”

“But Mom, you can’t do this! It’s wrong!”

“What wrong is the way you let people make fun of you!” She countered. “Now people not making fun of you being nerd! It makes you more interesting — especially to guys.”

“Please, Mom, you know I have no interest in that,” he protested.

His mom was unapologetic. “Maybe you should.”



Nick slipped in through the front door of their apartment, exhausted. “These boots are killers,” he said, referring to the trademark sky-high-heel boots of the Tootie’s waitress uniforms. He tossed his mane of hair over his shoulders to see a now-familiar sight: His girlfriend laid out on the couch, playing video games.

Jessica had a 2-liter of soda wedged in the cushions, a game controller on her stomach, and a bag of chips above her head for rapid deployment. “Hey, babe!” She said, without looking away from the screen. “You have dinner? I’m starving.”

“Um... I didn’t have enough on me,” Nick replied, sheepishly.

“Seriously? That’s the second time this week!” Jessica put her game on pause. “I was earning enough tips to pick up take out every night I worked.”

“Well, I don’t get as many tips as you did,” Nick replied, in what sounded more like a whine.

“Yeah, I was talking to some of the girls at work. They said you just need to loosen up a bit and do the act.”

“The act?” Nick asked. “What’s the act?”

Jessica tossed her controller to the side and sighed. “Fine. I guess I gotta show you.” She couldn’t get to her feet, as her back was still giving her trouble. All she could do was sit upright. “Hi, welcome to Tootie’s Family Restaurant. I’m Jessie, I’ll be your sever tonight.” Her voice was up nearly a full octave, and she added a little giggle. She gave a toss of her head as she squeezed her shoulders together to push out her chest. “Now which one of you strong men can handle our triple-fire jalapeno poppers?”

“What if there aren’t any men? What do you say then?”

“There are always men.”

“Yeah. I guess. But what if they’re a bunch of nerds and wimps?”

Jessica took the question in stride. "Which one of you lady-killers can handle our batter-dipped onion bombs?" She frowned. "You're missing the point. The potential for tips begins at the very start. You show them you might not be that bright, you have tits on display and you act like you're just a little smitten with your customers."

"Really?"

"Really. You need to do five things with every customer: make sure you've giggled, shown your boobs, shown your ass, told them your name, touched them with your hands and made them feel like you gave them something for free. You'll get tips like crazy."

"What about decent service?"

"Who cares? It's tits and ass they're paying for." Jessica snapped her fingers. "Now you try it."

"Um..." Nick got himself into position.

"Hi, welcome to Tootie's Family Restaurant. What can I get for you handsome guys?"

"Bzzt!" Jessica said. "Wrong! You didn't show off your body, didn't giggle, barely complimented them and you didn't even give them your name. Try it again. Remember to flirt!"

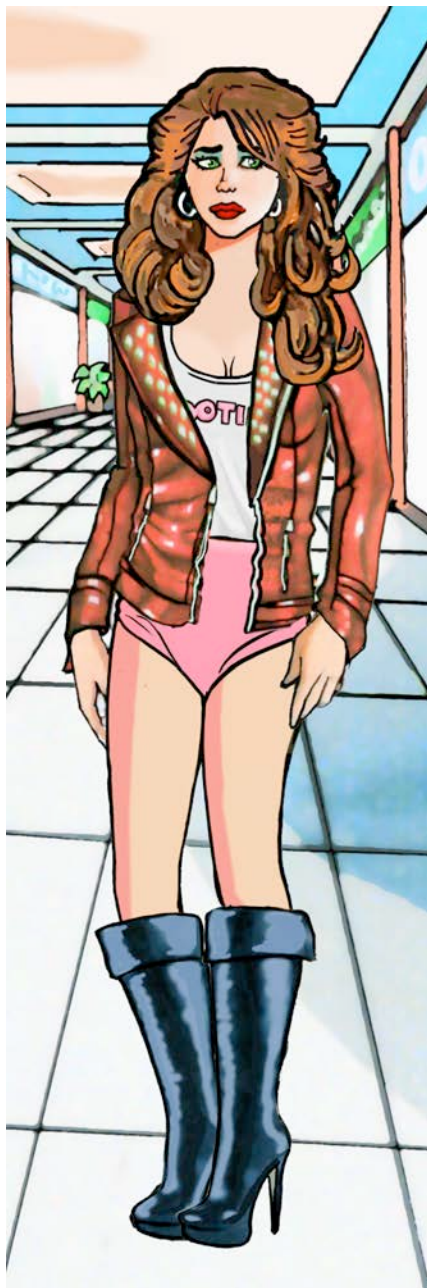
Nick took another run at it. "Hi, welcome to Tootie's Family Restaurant. I'm Nicole, I'll be your sever tonight."

"You know, I think you're more of a Nikki," Jessica remarked. "Try that. Ask for a new name tag tomorrow. And you're still not showing off your chest."

"Well... I don't have a lot to show."

"Yeah... You have a point..." Jessica said, tapping her lower lip in deep thought. "You have a point."

"You're so good as this, Jess. Maybe we should just wait until you're back



working again.”

Jessica immediately reached for her back. “Ohh! There it goes again! She laid back down on the couch. “Oh, babe, I don’t think I’ll be working for a while.” She picked up the game controller again and started to play. “So much pain.”

THREE YEARS LATER

As soon as his break started, Nick high-tailed it out of restaurant into the mall, not even bothering to stop at his break room locker to grab something to cover his uniform. If he'd had to endure even one more second of grinning, leering customers staring down his top or "accidentally" dropping forks so he would bend over for them, he would have snapped.

"Hey, sexy!" A guy said as he walked past.

Instinctively, Nick stopped and turned to smile and show off the name of 'Nikki' on his tight tank top. "Come see me at Tootie's!" He said, before winking and going on his way. Cat-callers were his best tippers, and he never missed an opportunity to respond to their tired and pathetic come-ons. Nick sighed heavily and the disaffected frown returned to his face.

Finding a bit of peace and privacy at the fountain beside the food court, Nick sat down on a couch, instinctively perching there with his smooth, pantyhose-clad legs crossed flirtily at the thigh. Watching the fountain, he brushed his hair out of his eyes with a dainty flutter of his hand, an unconsciously feminine motion made even more so by his recent inch-long French-tipped manicure — the manager liked all of his girls to have long nails.

His hair was as long as ever, though no longer the wild mane he'd worn when he worked at the music store. No, now it was carefully styled and blown out in thick, glossy waves around his face, accented by gleaming blonde highlights among the dark brown. Between that and a generous helping of makeup he was still getting the hang of — smoky bedroom eyes and lots of pale pink lip glosses, plus blush to accent his nice cheekbones and powder to avoid any shine on his nose — it took him an hour plus to get ready for work in the mornings. The days of rolling up to the music store unshaven and hungover like a rock star were long gone, and besides, since the electrolysis all he needed to shave was his legs.

Nick heaved a deep sigh, and two of the biggest changes he had undergone in the past three years jiggled enticingly in the flimsy confines of his skimpy white low-cut tank-top: 36 Ds. Though with the lacy push-up bras he wore cradling them together into a deep valley of cleavage — while simultaneously thrusting them up and out invitingly towards any wandering eyes — sometimes he could have sworn the surgeon put in a little more silicone than agreed upon.

Not that getting him to agree on 36 Ds had been easy, either, but Jessica and the surgeon had ganged up on him and lobbied for at least a week straight, citing the fact that he was broader in the shoulders and slightly taller than the average woman, meaning a substantial cup size would be needed to look natural and feminine. Ending up with a bigger rack than Jessica had never exactly been a life goal, but he did know that bigger tits meant bigger tips. He

couldn't deny it. Once Jessica had sold off his guitars and vintage metal vinyl to pay for the operation, all without telling him, it seemed like getting his already-budding breasts boosted was really his only option for the future.

Nick blew an angry breath out of his gloss-covered mouth, making his side-swept bangs flutter. That was almost a year ago, now. Only a few months after he'd finally given in and gotten breast implants, purely as an investment to ensure better tips, Jessica had broken up with him. Between the hormones finally plumping out his backside to a cute little bubble butt and the breast implants giving him a knock-out rack most strippers would envy, Jessica couldn't deal with having a boyfriend who looked better in a bikini than she did, and within a week she was dating some dumb douchebag who worked as a car mechanic.



That left Nick with 36 D breasts and a job he hated. But with all the money he'd already ended up spending on lingerie, makeup, heels and hair products, he figured it was too late to back out now. The tip money was just too good to walk away from, too. And there was one more big benefit, as he was reminded now by the buzz of his phone.

Nick fished his cell phone out from his cleavage, tapping at it clumsily, still unused to his newly-long nails. When he saw the text message awaiting him, he couldn't help but pump his fist triumphantly. Being a hot girl certainly made the groupie thing a whole lot more rewarding — the drummer from one of the hardest-rocking new bands on the music scene had just texted to let him know he had free tickets, plus backstage passes, to their next show, so long as he promised to wear something sexy.

Something sexy? I'm your girl ;) he texted back. As he pushed the send button, he blushed and looked around, as if someone might have caught him flirting with a guy for free tickets. His gaze landed on a gorgeous young thing in a tight dress, her dark hair perfectly styled and her vaguely Asian-looking features heavily made-up. She was laden down with shopping bags, and had alighted on the sofa opposite the fountain in order to rub her ankles, trapped as she was in a pair of stilettos that Nick knew, from experience, were torture after a few hours.

Nick frowned as he watched her, unable to shake the feeling he had seen her somewhere before. Of course, it would be hard to forget a pretty face and a rocking body like that — her boobs were nearly as nice as his, firm and round and straining against the cut of her summer dress. Once he would have taken great delight in ogling them, but the thrill of looking at girls' chests had lessened somewhat since he'd gotten a rack of his own. Mostly they annoyed

him — always in the way, whether in the shower or when doing up a seatbelt.

Yep, once he'd ogled anything that even slightly resembled boobs and wolf-whistled at anything in a skirt. And now here he was, flaunting his tits for tips. That was something wise-asses called irony, he was pretty sure.

Nick sighed again, checking his phone. Less than ten more minutes of peace before 'Nikki' had to head back to work.



Glad to have momentarily given his mother the slip, Denny took a seat near the fountain, ruefully rubbing his ankles, remembering the days of loafers or tennis shoes. Nowadays, he wasn't allowed near anything that didn't have a flimsy four-inch heel and an overpriced designer label. Still, he supposed stilettos were really the least of his worries at this point.

Looking wistfully into the fountain, Denny could hardly believe how drastically his life had changed in the past three years. Denny wincingly adjusted the lacy black strap of his bra, which inadvertently set his newfound cleavage quivering once more. The implants were only a few weeks old, and he secretly hoped they were still riding a little bit high, but either way he knew firm, full C-cups on his slender frame were going to draw plenty of eyes no matter what. Especially in the low-cut, cleavage-baring tops his mom was now making him buy. She insisted 'Daisy' always look her best no matter the occasion, and that now included making the most of her new assets.

Here he was, three years later, still stuck in skirts and working as a secretary. Despite only having his high-school diploma, his exotic good looks had caught the eye of a software CEO who'd given him a cushy internship, although his main job requirement seemed to be showing up to work in short, tight skirts and high heels. As a reward for the new job, his mother had given Denny the 'gift' of a boob job, which she wouldn't let him turn down. Everyone at the office certainly appreciated the 'enhancement' — more eye-candy for the men, and less ogling to put up with for the other women now that the new girl's cleavage was the main attraction.

Maybe when he had enough money he would move out and go back to being a guy, and even go to college, but that 'maybe' seemed to be getting further and further away. Being a beautiful girl had an awful lot of advantages, and more people now knew him — and liked him — as 'Daisy' than had ever known a shy boy named Denny. And as his mother kept reminding him, if he married some wealthy businessman, there would be no real need to get an education.

"Like my boss?" Denny asked her.

"You could do worse," his mom replied.

"I love you mom, but you're out of your mind."

Denny's mom smiled. "You right. Little joke. Forget I mention it."

Just for this trip to the mall to do a bit of shopping, he'd had to squeeze his new curves into a designer minidress, buckle his feet into flimsy four-inch stilettos, ensure his long, raven-dark tresses were perfectly styled and his makeup immaculate before accessorizing with an expensive diamond tennis bracelet and drop earrings, and finally pick out a Louis Vuitton purse to carry his makeup in. He was now every inch a gorgeous, fashionable young lady, and his newfound cleavage made it even more difficult to get through a day without a half-dozen men hitting on him.

Denny looked down at his aching feet through the long, feathery black eyelash extensions he'd gotten on his last trip to the salon, together with teeth-whitening and a collagen treatment to ensure the thick, pouty lips that were so in vogue this season. He wiggled his pink-painted toe-nails with a grimace, trying to pinpoint the exact moment at which things had gotten so out of hand.



Lost in thought, Denny watched as an attractive red-head in a skimpy blue top and tight black skirt stopped at the couch across the fountain, pausing to rummage through her purse and touch up her makeup. Three short years ago, the sight of a hot girl doing her lipstick would have sent him into blushing, squirming convulsions of desire mixed with instant anxiety. Now, however, between all the estrogen in his body and the fact it was getting harder and harder to think of himself as Denny, not 'Daisy,' he didn't feel a single stirring from his poor tucked-away manhood. Instead, he just found himself wondering where she'd gotten her earrings.

Maybe his mom was right, and it was time to try dating from the girl side of things. There were plenty of successful, handsome men who would kill for a chance to make a gorgeous young thing like 'Daisy' their girlfriend, or much more, their own little trophy wife. And then he'd be able to focus on his own interests without ever worrying about money.

Little did he know that the wheels were already in motion. If he had been paying closer attention, he might have noticed that at every dress shop they had visited today at the Twin Pines Mall, his mother was surreptitiously scribbling down his measurements. She had gotten her old bridal gown out of storage and was going to have it altered for Daisy. Just a week ago, Denny's boss had visited with Denny's mother and asked for her permission to marry Daisy. She agreed enthusiastically, but made sure to tell the young, handsome CEO that her daughter had some 'problems' between her legs, the result of a birth defect. The news didn't dissuade his enthusiasm one bit.

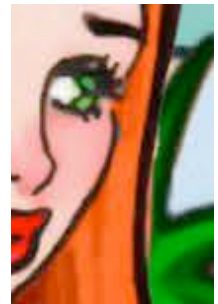
How would she get Denny to commit? She thought about it and decided on

faking a heart attack. She'd be on her hospital bed, moaning in agony as she made Denny promise to go through with the marriage as her final, dying wish. Then, as soon as the ceremony took place, she planned to make a miraculous recovery.

Yes, she already pictured herself moving in with her daughter and wealthy new son-in-law. Now she was already working on the idea of getting some grandchildren. Maybe adoption? A surrogate birth? She was sure her son would be a wonderful mother. After all, Daisy had such a perfect role model. In her eyes, she was practically a superhero.



Trixie, formerly Travis, made yet another unnecessary stop on her way to Boarded Up, this time sitting down by the fountain to compulsively check her makeup one last time. God, she hadn't felt this nervous since her last big skateboarding competition... which, now that she thought about it, had been right here in this very mall. It was understandable that she was nervous, of course, seeing as she hadn't set foot in her hometown since graduation, now over two years past, and hadn't seen her former best friends, Sean and Karen, for the same amount of time.



Needless to say, quite a few changes had taken place since "Travis" had disappeared after high school and headed off to California, to pursue a skateboarding career. One look at the smoking hot redhead in the compact mirror, which was clutched in long, carefully-manicured nails, was enough to make that obvious. Trixie pouted her pretty gloss-covered lips and inspected her makeup again — after hours and hours of practice, she was an expert with the striking, sultry cat's eye look, and her long, fluttering eyelash extensions had been worth every penny, giving her a smoldering, seductive glance that drove the boys wild. She toyed a bit with her fiery red hair, which she'd grown out past her shoulders and styled in sexy-messy waves with her hot iron just this morning.

Satisfied that she looked as good as ever, Trixie snapped her compact shut and returned her attention to the rest of her outfit, wondering again if it was a little bit too much. She wanted to make sure that Sean and Karen didn't think his email was some kind of prank, and figured the best way to prove it was to sashay gracefully into the shop on four-inch stilettos she now handled like a pro, wearing a tight little black skirt that displayed the fact she no longer had any qualms about shaving her legs, and a bustier-style top that flaunted her newfound cleavage.

Yes, things in California hadn't gone quite according to plan. "Travis" had left

town with every intention of becoming a pro skateboarder on the Los Angeles circuit. But he knew he wasn't cut out for a rough life on tour as a competitive skateboarder. He was destined for other things. None of his co-workers or even his roommate was surprised when he announced he was ready to go 'girl' for good. After that, 'Travis' was gone and Trixie was there to stay. Her new friends helped her get her hands on hormones, and introduced her to the doctor who would wind up doing her boob job a year-and-a-half later. She'd discovered she was ten times happier as a young woman than she'd ever been as a man, and before long everybody in L.A., aside from her trans friends, knew her only as Trixie, a sexy redheaded club promoter who knew how to use her looks to advantage.

Travis had always been a bit of a show-off, and Trixie was, of course, no different. The only thing that had changed was what exactly she was showing off — she'd worked hard to pay for the female hormone therapy that had allowed her to keep her slender figure and tiny waist while adding girlish curves to her formerly boyish hips, and equally hard in the gym to attain a flat, toned midriff and a tight, cute little backside that had all the boys drooling when she whizzed by on her longboard in the mornings wearing short shorts. At night, as a club promoter, it was all spiked heels and tight, figure-hugging dresses that showed off her legs — and, more recently, flaunted her cleavage, too.

She had more eager admirers blowing up her cellphone than she could count, but still hadn't quite worked up the nerve to try dating from the other side for the first time. Lately she was fantasizing about guys a lot more than girls, though, and there was this one dude named Damian who was not only inarguably handsome, but also could seriously shred. He was well on his way to going pro, and Trixie figured that the next best thing to being a professional skateboarder might just be dating one, right?

Of course, the only reason she was thinking about all of this was to avoid the inevitable. She'd come back to her hometown to introduce everyone to the "new her," and it all started with her two best friends, Sean and Karen. She had been keeping up with them over the phone, but had been careful not to let slip the most important detail of her new life until just a week ago, when she'd announced her visit.

Now she was about to reintroduce herself to her boyhood best buddy and ex-girlfriend as a smoking hot redhead, and once she did there was no going back. News travelled fast in this town. But if she had Sean and Karen on her side, she felt like she could handle anything. Sure, Karen might be a little miffed that he looked better in a miniskirt than she did, and sure, Sean might be a little weirded out that his buddy now had boobs. But she'd come too far to back down now. Maybe 'Travis' might have bailed under the pressure, but she had a feeling Trixie was going to be just fine.

She smiled at the thought, just as a stunning blonde who looked like she'd just stepped out of a professional makeup artist's salon came and sat down on the bench perpendicular to hers. Trixie looked at her immaculately made-up face with a bit of jealousy, and reflexively reached for her compact mirror.

No harm in checking her lips one final time before her big entrance, after all.



Derek glanced nervously over his slender shoulder one last time to make sure his mother hadn't spotted him sneaking away, then, with a sigh of relief, sat down by the fountain. As he did so, he instinctively smoothed his miniskirt underneath him and crossed his pretty legs in a practiced, girlish pose. It was strange to think how differently he would have done it three years ago — simply flopping down onto the seat with his legs spread wide and his arms wherever he felt like putting them — but a lot had happened to him in the past three years. Now that he was back in his hometown, back in the mall where everything had started, in fact, it was hard not to think about it.

At least he didn't have to worry about any old acquaintances recognizing him — new fans, maybe, but definitely no old friends. He doubted anyone would be able to match the scrawny, smart-mouthed wannabe reporter to the leggy blonde model whose forte was now, as his agent so often told him, shutting up and looking pretty. He couldn't help but think how different this "homecoming" of his might have been if he'd never agreed to fill in for a model that morning at the mall. For one thing, he certainly wouldn't have been returning to promote the launch of his new line of women's lingerie!

"There you are," said a voice. Derek didn't bother to move his head an inch, instead he remained still as he felt familiar comfort of his boyfriend enveloping him in his big, muscular arms.

"Hey babe," he said back to Josh. Derek had to give the big guy credit. He was persistent, and it had broken down his resistance. Even telling him about being male between the legs hadn't scared the boy off. He just kept on showing up, day after day until Derek was ready to let it happen. Now, the idea of Derek having a boyfriend was as natural as anything. He leaned back into Josh's body and sighed. "The place hasn't changed much, you know."

"Oh, yeah! This is where you grew up, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Derek replied, staring out into the vast indoor expanse.

Now that Derek was back in his hometown to promote the launch of his new "Sensual" line of intimates, he was forced to wonder if he'd made the right choice. Money wasn't happiness, and kept busy as he was with working out, tanning, dieting, Josh, and the modeling itself, he barely ever had time to sit down and write. At this rate, becoming a journalist seemed like a distant pipe

dream. And sacrificing his masculinity hadn't exactly been easy, either. Maybe if he had stayed Derek, he would have a hot girlfriend by now, rather than *being* the hot girlfriend. Not that he was complaining as he nestled into her big boyfriend's loving squeeze.

"I have a surprise for you when we get back to the hotel," Josh said.

"A surprise?" Derek answered, the pitch of his already high voice raised an octave in excitement. "Tell me."

"Not until we get back."

Josh had a special gift for his precious Dakota. He had seen how sad she had been lately, and knew why. In Josh's mind, Dakota's sullen behavior was because returning home must be dredging up his old life as a boy. Whenever he had asked about the 'little problem' between Dakota's legs, Dakota had refused to talk about it. He could never get Dakota to admit what she really, truly must have wanted — to become genuinely female. So he had taken it upon himself to do the one thing for her that she didn't seem capable of doing for herself. He had arranged for an operation. Josh had it all planned out. Tonight, he would treat her to her dinner back at the hotel room and slip a little knock-out drug in her drink. Then, once she was unconscious, they would get her to the private jet, whisk her off to Bangkok and have the whole process done by the time she woke up. He couldn't wait to see the joy on her face when she came to!

"C'mon! You can tell me!" Derek whined.

"Not yet," Josh scolded, as he playfully poked Derek on the nose. "You have to wait."

"Aw. Now I'm going to be thinking of that all day long." Derek glanced over to an attractive waitress, obviously on break, tapping away at her phone across the fountain, displaying an impressive amount of cleavage.

Well, being a female model wasn't great, but at least he wasn't working at some dumb 'breastaurant.' Sure, he was a pretty face instead of a hard-hitting journalist, but at least he was somebody. Dakota was well on her way to becoming a household name. And maybe, when all of this was over, he would write a killer memoir. *My Life In Lingerie: One Man's Journey to the Top of the Fashion World...*

"Dakota!" came his mother's voice. "Honey, come on, we have to get you on stage five minutes ago! What were you thinking?"

Derek looked up at his irate agent and sighed. "Coming," he muttered. He gracefully rose to his feet, smoothed his skirt, and set off, thinking how strange it was that he would soon be strutting around in nothing but luxurious lingerie





in the same mall he'd once spurned as a young man. Josh put his arm around Derek's pale, slim shoulders and they returned to the stage.

"C'mon. Just a little hint," Derek asked.

"It's something you've always deserved," Josh replied with a wink. At the same time, he saw the busty brunette waitress get up and scurry away back to work, heels clicking noisily. As 'Nikki' made her way back to grabby hands and flaunting her tits for tips, 'Daisy' had been rejoined by her mother, who was ready for another round of shoe shopping. Trixie, meanwhile, had finally gathered enough courage to set off for Boarded Up with a spring in her high-heeled step.

As they walked away from the fountain, all four of the feminized beauties, now appearing for all the world like gorgeous young women rather than the young men they'd been three years ago, couldn't help but think back to that one fateful day at the mall.

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 rocketxpert. Colby got deep into debt to a local gangster. Before long, he's on the arm of that very same gangster as his reluctant girlfriend. Book / 75 pages / 20 illustrations

Seriously Skirted

"The Show Piece" by KK. Illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Mel finds work at a clinic as a secretary. He slowly begins to fit to role. Book / 75 pages / 19 illustrations

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

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



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