

The Snow Queen

A TG Tale by ds1000



48 Illustrations

When Taylor receives a distress call from his cousin Katie, he traverses the treacherous Canadian winter roads to come to her aid. However, a series of unfortunate events soon places him in a situation far outside his comfort zone, forcing him to adapt to survive. Along the way, he discovers a lot about himself, conquers his fears, and gets to know his cousin, her life, and her wardrobe in a way he never imagined.

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The Snow Queen

If Taylor James heard another cheesy Christmas song drifting up from the kitchen beneath his bedroom, he was going to put his fist through the drywall.

Lying on his bed, he doom-scrolled through Instagram. His thumb flicked past an endless assault of holiday cheer: couples skating on the canal, relentless ads, and people looking suspiciously happy. It was December 16th in Eastern Ontario. Outside, the reality wasn't so photogenic. The snow was piled in dirty mounds, and the air was cold enough to cut through anything less than four layers of wool.



Taylor used to love this time of year, but he had spent the last twelve months actively cultivating a deep, spiritual hatred for the season. His giddy enthusiasm had been murdered almost a year ago to the day. That was the night Sophie—the love of his young life—dumped him behind the Tim Hortons after a hockey game. He could still feel the shame of standing there, holding two lukewarm hot chocolates and a festive box of Timbits, while she told him his Christmas cheer was 'childish and weird.'

Souring on the digital world, he was about to toss his phone onto the duvet—which was definitely overdue for a wash—wondering if it was too early to head over to his friend Steve's, when it buzzed in his palm.

It was his cousin Katie.

Taylor groaned. Katie might have been much older, but she was the definition of a spoiled princess who refused to grow up. She lived just up the road—and occasionally spotted him cash when he was broke—which apparently entitled her to treat him like an unpaid personal assistant. He let it ring six or seven times before picking up.

"What?"

"Taylor, oh thank God." Katie's voice was breathless, crackling slightly over the line. "I need you. Like, life or death need you."

"I'm busy," Taylor mumbled, letting his head flop back onto the pillow.

"You're not busy," Katie snapped. "You're lying on your bed staring at the ceiling, wondering if it's too early to go over to Steve's basement to smoke weed."

Taylor shot back up, offended by the accuracy. "I was not—"

"Just listen, will you? I'm up near Mont-Tremblant with the girls. We got here last night, but I've left something at home. Something super important. Vital to the show. I need you to bring it to me."

"Tremblant?" Taylor scoffed. "Katie, that's like, two and a half hours away. I'm not driving five hours round trip to bring you... what? Makeup? A hair straightener?"

"It doesn't matter what it is," she insisted. "You know my mom is still recovering from her op, otherwise she'd do it herself. But she'll meet you at my place in the morning to hand you the box. If you set off before nine, you'll be back home and smoking the night away with Steve by dinner time. Please, Tay. I really need your help. You're my last resort."

"Sorry, Katie, not happening. Even if I wanted to drive all the way up there, I can't. I don't have a car, and no way Mom is lending me hers after what happened last week."

"Take mine."

Taylor paused. "Your Audi?"

"Yeah. You've been begging to borrow it ever since you got your license. Well, here's your chance," Katie said, her voice dropping into a sweet, manipulative tone she had perfected over a lifetime of getting her way. "I'll be touring with Jordana and Regina until after the Quebec Carnival in mid-February. If you bring me the box, the car's yours until I get back."

Taylor let his mind wander. Katie's Audi A4 was a beast; it had a sleek leather interior, heated seats, and a roar that rattled windows a block away. He imagined his friends' jealous faces as he pulled up to the Boxing Day party. He imagined picking up Maya, the girl he'd been DMing for weeks. Rolling up in was a surefire way to finally break out of the friend zone.

"What about gas?" Taylor asked, playing it cool.

"Keep the receipts, and I'll pay you back," Katie conceded.

Taylor sat up straighter, a smile spreading across his face. "Pay me back for the whole time? Or just for the drive up to Tremblant?"

There was a heavy pause, followed by a pained exhale. "The whole time. Just... don't go on any cross-country trips, okay? Ottawa area only."

"Fine," he sighed, feigning reluctance. "Text me the address."

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The next morning, Taylor was up earlier than he had been since leaving high school in the summer. The air outside had a biting chill to it—the kind that froze the inside of your nose instantly—but Taylor didn't mind. As a Canadian he was used to it, and besides, he'd be spending the day cocooned in the warmth of the Audi's heated seats. He threw a thick cream sweater under his favourite dark grey zip-up hoodie, pulled on a pair of brown chinos, and laced up his go-to sneakers.

He popped his head into the kitchen, shouting a goodbye to his mom over the Michael Bublé blaring from the radio. He didn't linger; with a long drive ahead, breakfast would have to happen on the road. He paused only to check the hallway mirror, running a hand through his shoulder-length blonde waves. The 'surfer dude' look was coming along nicely. Satisfied, he pulled on his gloves, patted his pockets for phone and wallet, and set off on the three-block walk to Katie's.

The Audi was waiting on the road when he arrived, coated in a delicate layer of frost. Taylor grinned as he approached, unable to resist trailing a gloved hand along the sleek hood. He walked up the short path, reached around an oversized Christmas wreath, and rang the bell.

He took a step back just as the door swung open. Aunt Melanie stood there clutching a gigantic mug of coffee as a blast of warm air escaped past her into the morning chill.



"Taylor! You are a literal angel," Melanie said, thrusting the car keys in to his palm. "I'd have gone myself, but ever since the surgery, my bladder has the structural integrity of a wet paper bag. If I hit a pothole on the highway, it's game over. It's like a slip-n-slide in there."

Taylor recoiled, his nose wrinkling. "Aunt Mel, please. I haven't had breakfast yet. Spare me the details."

"Oh, don't be such a delicate flower," Melanie said, waving a hand dismissively. "It's just biology. Anyway, I told your mother you'd help. She owes me ten bucks now."

Taylor raised an eyebrow. "Why? What did she say?"

"She said you'd be too lazy to get out of bed before noon. I told her you were a good boy at heart and you'd help your cousin when it mattered—especially when there's a free car thrown in." She winked. "Glad to see I know my nephew better than she does. Even if he does need a haircut."

"I'm just trying something new, Mel. It's called keeping up with the times," Taylor deadpanned, running a hand through his dirty blonde locks self-consciously.

"It's called 'I can't afford a barber. That's what it's called,'" she fired back with a chuckle. "Anyway, here's the package." She reached down to the table beside her and picked up a microwave-sized cardboard box. "Don't worry, it's not breakable," she added as she handed it over.

"Good to know," Taylor said, giving the box a light shake. "So, I don't need to worry about it breaking when I burn around some corners?"

Melanie's smile vanished instantly. "Taylor James. If you get so much as a scratch on that car—or a speeding ticket—I will personally upload your baby bath photos to Facebook."

Taylor froze. "You wouldn't."

"Try me," she said, her expression deadly serious, before melting back into a sweet smile. "Now, drive safe, okay? The roads should be clear, but there's always the chance of a hidden ice patch."

"Loud and clear. Grandma driving mode engaged," Taylor promised, backing away down the path. "See ya, Mel."

"Call if you need anything!" she called out, shivering as she closed the door.

Turning to face the Audi, Taylor blipped the unlock button and watched the lights flash amber. He popped the trunk to find it mostly empty, save for a reusable shopping bag holding a thick furry blanket. He placed the box beside it, slammed the lid, and moved towards the driver's door.

As he slid into the seat, the interior enveloped him in a scent of expensive vanilla perfume and leather. He pushed the start button, and the engine purred to life—a low, satisfied rumble that vibrated right through his spine. With the heated seats cranked to max and the destination typed into the GPS, Taylor caught his own reflection in the rearview mirror. His baby blue eyes were bright with excitement.

"Next stop, Quebec," he said aloud. He shifted into drive and floored the accelerator, the tires screeching slightly as he peeled out of the suburban cul-de-sac.

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The drive had been surprisingly uneventful. Taylor had spent the last two hours cruising north along Highway 323, watching the landscape shift from suburban sprawl to dense, snow-caked forests. The ride had been exactly as he'd

expected: warm, relaxing, and so smooth it felt like gliding. To make things even better, a glance at the GPS confirmed he was making excellent time—in twenty minutes he'd be at Katie's cabin.

Tapping his fingers against the leather wheel, he hummed along to the track playing over the speakers. He had actually managed to keep his promise—no speeding, no crazy overtakes. All that remained was to deliver the package, play the hero, and claim his prize: two months driving the coolest car in town.

Then, a shadow detached itself from the tree line.

It happened in a heartbeat. One second, the road was empty white asphalt; the next, a massive buck was standing dead center in his lane, staring him down with stupid, glassy eyes.

Panic spiked in Taylor's chest. Instinct took over, bypassing his brain entirely. He yanked the wheel hard to the right and slammed on the brakes.

The Audi responded, but the laws of physics were unforgiving on the frozen backroad. The tires lost their grip, and time seemed to slow. The car drifted, sliding smoothly but uncontrollably off the road.

BANG!

The front wheels collided with the packed snow of the embankment. The car lurched violently, coming to a dead, jarring halt.

Taylor was thrown forward, the seatbelt locking tight against his chest, but not fast enough to stop his head from snapping down. His throat caught the top rim of the steering wheel with a sickening, muted thud before he was flung back into the seat.

Then, silence.

Taylor sat shaking, his hands gripping the wheel so hard his knuckles turned white. A hot, expanding agony radiated from his throat, eclipsing everything else. He squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the black spots in his vision to clear, gasping for air that felt like inhaling shards of glass.

He tried to swallow, but the action sent a fresh spike of agony tearing through his throat that made his eyes water. He went to groan, to let out a curse, to say anything to release the tension.

"Oh, fuck," he cried.

Taylor froze.

The voice that had just come out of his mouth didn't sound right. It wasn't his usual deepening baritone. It was a thin, wheezy, high-pitched squeal. He sounded like he had just inhaled an entire party balloon's worth of helium.

His hand flew up to his throat, eyes widening in horror. He forced a cough—which burned like hell—and tried again.

"Hello?" he tested. "Hello?"

It was worse this time. The sound was reedy and trembling, breathless and comically high. He sounded like an out of breath cartoon mouse.

"What the..." he wheezed, the panic rising again.

Slumping back against the headrest, he watched the offending deer flick its tail and bound into the woods as if nothing had happened. Panic quickly replaced pain as his thoughts snapped to the car. If he had wrecked Katie's Audi, he was a dead man. He forced his brain to focus. The engine was still purring. No smoke, no shattered glass. Everything looked intact. Holding his breath he eased his foot onto the accelerator, praying the car would move.

The engine revved, but the wheels just spun with a high-pitched whine. The car didn't budge an inch. It was stuck!

"Oh come on!" he whined, slapping the steering wheel in frustration. The words scraped against his raw throat, but he ignored the pain. He needed to see the damage. He pushed open the driver's side door, wincing as the biting cold slapped him in the face—a brutal contrast to the heated sanctuary of the Audi's cabin.

Gingerly, He stepped out, his sneakers crunching on the hard-packed snow. "Fuck my life," he cursed. The words came out as a humiliating, high-pitched chirp.

Clutching the cold metal chassis to steady his spinning head, he forced himself along the side of the car toward the trunk. The ground felt uneven, the snow shifting deceptively under his weight, but the dizziness had to be ignored. Getting around the back was the only priority; he needed to see if he could dig it out. With one wide, decisive step, he moved around the bumper.

CRACK

The sound was like a gunshot. Before Taylor could even register what was happening, the solid ground beneath his feet vanished.

He plunged downward, crashing through a thin layer of ice that had formed over the drainage ditch running parallel to the road. The shock was instantaneous and agonizing. He didn't just fall into snow; he fell into a deep pocket of freezing slush and stagnant water that had been hiding beneath the crust.

The water was colder than anything he had ever felt—it was like being stabbed by a thousand needles at once. It soaked instantly through his chinos, flooded his sneakers, and soaked into the heavy wool of his sweater, turning his warm layers into freezing lead weights.

"Taylor gasped, sucking in a mouthful of stagnant water as he flailed, his gloved hands splashing frantically in the freezing ditch. He was chest-deep, the cold seizing his muscles and locking the air in his lungs.

Primal panic took over. He wasn't thinking about the car anymore; he was thinking about freezing to death on the side of a lonely back road in the middle of nowhere.

"Gah! F-fuck!" he shrieked, the sound barely escaping his constricted throat.

He clawed at the bank, gloves slipping on the ice, until a desperate kick found purchase in the mud below. He heaved, and with a raw, guttural grunt, hauled his waterlogged frame over the edge to collapse onto the packed snow beside the Audi's rear bumper.



Coughing and sputtering, he lay there, shivering so violently his teeth clattered together like castanets. The wind hit his soaked clothes, making his skin feel like it was on fire.

Shock. He was going into shock. He knew it. His brain felt fuzzy, his movements jerky and uncoordinated.

“You have to move! You have to get warm!” His brain screamed.

A memory flashed in his mind—some survival show he’d watched with Steve at 2 a.m. while high as a kite. The host’s warning cut through his panic: Get out of wet clothes immediately. Wet fabric in freezing temps will kill you faster than the cold air.

A glance down confirmed the danger: his chinos were already stiffening with frost. The heavy cream sweater, which had been so cozy ten minutes ago, was now a freezing sponge pressed against his chest.

Ripping off his gloves, he tore at his hoodie with fumbling, numb fingers. He peeled the wet layer off and tossed it aside. Next came the sweater; he fought to haul it over his head, arms shaking uncontrollably, then yanked off the T-shirt. The freezing air bit instantly into his bare torso.

He kicked off his sodden sneakers and unbuttoned his chinos. He stripped everything off right there on the side of the highway, until he was standing completely naked, his skin turning pale and goose-bumped.

He stumbled toward the car, wrenched the driver's door open, and dove into the Audi, slamming the door shut to seal out the winter.

Stumbling toward the car, he wrenched the driver's door open and dove into the Audi, slamming the door shut to seal out the winter. Inside, he cranked the heater dial all the way to the red zone, gasping in relief as the heated seat seared against his frozen skin, countering the cold that had seeped deep into his bones.

The adrenaline soon faded, leaving Taylor slumped in the driver’s seat. As his senses returned, so did the gravity of his situation. He cracked the door open and peered toward the back of the car. Just as he’d feared, his clothes were no longer wearable; they had frozen solid, a stiff, sculptural heap on the icy ground. His phone, tucked into the pocket of those frozen pants, was undoubtedly useless as well.

Slamming the door shut, he sealed himself back inside.

"You fucking idiot!" he shouted. The words tore out of his throat as a pathetic, high-pitched squeak.

Furious, he punched the steering wheel. He sounded like a chipmunk throwing a tantrum.

Time dragged on. For what felt like hours, he stared at the endless frozen wilderness, waiting for headlights that never appeared. Then, the inevitable happened. Because he had failed to gas up that morning, the tank finally ran dry. The engine sputtered, coughed once, and died. The hum of the heater cut out instantly.

Silence descended, heavy and absolute.

Within minutes, the harsh Canadian winter began to enter. The residual heat evaporated, replaced by a creeping, biting chill that gnawed at his bare skin. It dawned on him that if he didn’t do anything, he was about to freeze to death inside a luxury German sedan.



Then suddenly, he remembered. The blanket!

Taylor spun around, the bag in the trunk flashing in his memory. He needed it, but there was no way he was stepping back out into that frozen hellscape or risking another fall into the ditch. Instead, he scrambled into the back of the

Audi, found the latch, and yanked the rear seats down. A blast of glacial air rushed in from the trunk, but he ignored it, reaching blindly into the darkness until his fingers grazed the smooth plastic of the shopping bag.

He dragged it out, burying his numb fingers into the thick white fur spilling from the top, desperate for the heat it promised.

"Yes!" he squeaked.

But as he pulled the item free, his heart sank. It wasn't a blanket. It was a jacket—a short, plush, white fur coat that was accompanied by a cute winter outfit.

"You have got to be kidding me," he wheezed.

He cursed his luck, tossing the bag and the jacket aside. But as the cold bit harder into his bare shoulders, dignity quickly lost the battle against survival. Gritting his teeth, he snatched the jacket back up and jammed his arms into the sleeves. It was soft and offered heavenly warmth, but it wasn't enough. He was still shaking.

He grabbed the bag again, digging through the contents, hoping they weren't as bad as he remembered.

They were! He pulled out a white wool sweater with thick fur cuffs and a matching white wool mini-skirt.

"Seriously, Katie?" he muttered.

There was no choice. Working fast to preserve the heat he'd built up, he shed the jacket and pulled the sweater over his head, grateful for the instant warmth of the wool. Next, he shimmied into the skirt, hiking it up to his waist before slipping back into the jacket.

It was better, but he craved more warmth. He snatched up a white wool bobble hat and a pair of white mittens, thrusting the hat onto his head and feeding his freezing hands into the mitts.

After a few minutes, his upper body finally felt cozy. But his legs were still bare, trembling violently against the cold leather.

Taking a deep breath, hardly believing what he was about to do, he reached for the final two items: a pair of thick, opaque white tights and some impractical-looking boots.

He held them up. They were ridiculous—white, knee-high boots with fur trim and a chunky, four-inch platform heel.

"Life or death, Taylor. Life or death," he told himself.

Tugging the tights up his legs was a struggle in the cramped back seat, but he managed to wiggle into them before shoving his feet into the boots. To his disbelief and relief, they actually fit. He tied the laces tight just below his nylon-covered knees, feeling the fur lining hug his calves, trying to tell himself they were just like any other winter boots.

He slumped back against the seat, completely exhausted. But he was warm. Finally warm.

A quick glance down confirmed the absurdity of it all: white fur, wool, and nylon—not to mention the boots! A high, reedy groan escaped him as he buried his face in his mitts. He tried to focus on the positives: he was warm, and he was alive. But sitting there in a mini-skirt and four-inch heels, Taylor realized that if anyone actually came to save him now, he'd probably just die of embarrassment instead.

Clambering back into the driver's seat for no reason other than it gave him something to do, Taylor sat motionless, weighing his collection of terrible options. Finally, the truth settled in: getting to Katie's cabin—no matter the ridicule or the monumental embarrassment he'd endure—was his greatest chance of survival.

He knew if he waited another second, fear would glue him to the seat forever. Squeezing his eyes shut, he clenched his jaw and started a silent, three-second countdown.

Forcing himself to be brave, he grabbed the door handle with his mitted hand and threw the car door open. He swung his legs out and planted the platform boots wide on the snow, sitting on the edge of the seat to test the footing. He took a moment to find his balance, casting a nervous glance up and down the empty road.



Satisfied he was alone, he pushed himself upright and ventured onto the ice. Tugging the plush jacket as tightly closed as it would go, he began his trek. His progress was immediately stifled by the footwear; the chunky heels forced him to take tiny, mincing steps, throwing his center of gravity off with every movement. Combined with the slick surface, simple walking became a tactical nightmare. It wasn't long before his calves burned, and his legs—warm at first—began to sting beneath the white nylon as the icy wind assaulted them from all angles.



Suddenly, the sound of an engine rumbled behind him.

His first thought was to bolt for the tree line, but he knew he'd never make it in time. Instead, he lowered his head, fixed his eyes on the frozen ground, and prayed he wouldn't draw the driver's attention.

Of course, what looked like a lone woman walking in icy conditions in a cute, fluffy white outfit was always going to stand out. And it definitely did to the driver of the Ford F-150 approaching from behind.

The truck slowed to a crawl and pulled over beside Taylor. The window rolled down, revealing a handsome guy with a beard and a red plaid shirt.

"Bonjour! Tu as besoin d'aide?" the driver asked, his voice deep and friendly.

Taylor froze. He turned slowly, humiliated. "I... I don't speak French," he replied. His throat injury turned the admission into a pathetic, high-pitched squeak.



The driver, Daniel, smiled before seamlessly switching to English. "Right. Sorry. Where are you headed? You look a little... underdressed for a hike."

Taylor gestured vaguely down the road with a mittened hand. "Just... to town. Mont-Tremblant."

Daniel raised an eyebrow. "That's a heck of a walk in those shoes. Was that your car I passed about a mile back?"

Taylor nodded miserably, catching a glimpse of his ridiculous white boots. "Yeah. There was a deer, and I... well..."

It happens," Daniel said, jerking his thumb toward the passenger seat. "Hop in, I'm heading right through town. I can give you a ride."

"No, I'm good. Really," Taylor squeaked, already starting to turn away. Being freezing cold was bad, but being trapped in a passenger seat with a stranger in this outfit was infinitely worse.

"Hey, come on," Daniel said, his voice taking on a teasing edge. "I can't just leave a damsel in distress stranded out here. My mother would never forgive me. It wouldn't be right."

Taylor bristled at the word 'damsel.' He opened his mouth to refuse, but the wind whipping around his nylon-covered legs silenced him. Reminded of his precarious situation, he hesitated.

Daniel offered a sympathetic smile, trying to break the tension. "Look, I promise I'm not some axe murderer. I mean, think about it—if I wanted to kill you, I would have just saved myself the trouble and driven over you. I'm just trying to help."

Taylor stared at the grinning driver for a second, then let out a heavy sigh, deflating like a balloon. He was shivering, his feet were throbbing, and this friendly guy was offering him a way out.

"Fine," he wheezed.

He scraped together his remaining dignity—which wasn't much—and shuffled around the front of the truck, fumbled with the door handle, and awkwardly hauled himself up into the passenger seat, a vision in white fur and blushing cheeks.

And with that, they set off.

The cab of the F-150 was aggressively warm, blasting heat that smelled faintly of pine air freshener and stale coffee. Taylor stayed silent, knees clamped together and arms crossed tight over his chest. He tried to make himself small, even as the feeling returned to his frozen legs with a painful, million-needle prickle that made it impossible not to squirm.

To make matters worse, the leather seats offered zero grip against his nylon tights. With every tap of the brakes, Taylor slid helplessly forward, forced to awkwardly scoot back and tug the white wool mini-skirt back down. It was a cycle of constant adjustment that made him keenly aware of just how ridiculous he must look in Daniel's eyes.

Daniel, sensing Taylor's discomfort, decided to do what he always did to avoid an awkward situation—he talked.

"So," Daniel started, glancing over with a lopsided grin, one hand steering casually at the twelve o'clock position. "You're not from around here, are you? I'm guessing Ontario somewhere?"

"Ottawa," Taylor squeaked. He winced. The word had exited his mouth like a dog toy being stepped on.

"Ottawa. Makes sense," Daniel nodded, as if that explained everything. "In town for the festival, I assume? It's always a good show, but I hear the Mayor has spent half the yearly budget this time around. So I'm expecting something special."

Taylor felt his face burn. He scrambled for a response, but his mind was a total blank. Desperate to just say something, he forced a laugh. 'Ha. Ha.' It came out as two sharp, high-pitched chirps.

The ride continued in this painful pattern, with Daniel asking too many questions and Taylor shutting them down with short, conversation-ending answers. But if those curt, squeaky responses bothered Daniel, he didn't show it. He just breezed right past the awkwardness, filling the cab with chatter about the unseasonable cold, the local hockey team's losing streak, and how the deer were 'suicidal' this time of year. Taylor mostly just stared out the passenger window with flushed cheeks, mumbling the occasional strained 'Yeah' or 'Mmm,' while wondering why what should have been a short drive seemed to be taking forever.



"On a serious note, though," Daniel said, his tone shifting as they passed the 'Welcome' sign for the town. "That car of yours. You're going to need some help getting that out."

Taylor slumped slightly, and breathed out through his nose. "I know."

"Look, I can see you've had quite the day, so in the spirit of Christmas, I'll help you out," Daniel said. He glanced over, catching Taylor's eye for a split second before Taylor quickly looked away. "My brother, Luc, runs a garage. Best mechanic in the area, mostly because he's the only one who doesn't overcharge the tourists. But he's got a tow truck."

Taylor looked over, wary. "A tow truck?"

"Yeah. I can give him a call, if you'd like. Get him to drag it back to his shop and give it a once-over," Daniel offered, looking over with a genuine smile. "He owes me a favor anyway."

Taylor hesitated, wondering where the hidden catch was. In his experience, there was always a catch. But the thought of the alternative was nauseating: dealing with a commercial tow company while dressed like a winter Barbie.

"He won't... mind?" Taylor wheezed.

"Luc? Nah. He loves those German cars. He'll have a field day checking the engine." Daniel grinned wider. "So, what do you say?"

Taylor looked down at his fluffy white outfit, then back at the friendly stranger. "Okay," he squeaked. "Yes, please."

* * * * *

Daniel flashed an easy grin as he waved goodbye, having dropped Taylor off at the address he had—thankfully—managed to remember. Taylor, relieved to have arrived safely, forced a stiff smile and raised a limp hand.

He didn't wait for the truck to pull away. Turning, he exhaled a breath he felt like he'd been holding for miles and began crunching his way up the path towards Katie's cabin, his heels sinking deep into the freshly fallen snow.



As the roar of the F-150 faded behind him, Taylor reached the porch. He navigated the three snow-covered steps with extreme caution, arms out for balance as he wobbled on the hazardous planks. He hesitated at the top, mentally preparing for Katie to ruthlessly make fun of him, then steeled himself and knocked. The sound was pathetic—a soft, muffled thud-thud absorbed entirely by the padding of his white mittens.

After a few agonizing moments of silence, the door swung open.

A woman with long, wavy brunette hair stood framed by the warmth of the cabin—Katie’s friend, Jordana. She looked like an angel in a soft baby blue sweater, loose sweatpants, and classic Uggs, and Taylor was struck dumb. She was stunning.

“Can I help you with something?” she asked.

Her hazel eyes scanned Taylor from the white bobble hat down to the platform boots, clearly trying to decipher if the person standing before her was male or female.



“Urm... hi,” Taylor squeaked. He winced before momentarily losing himself for a second in Jordana’s doe like eyes. He cleared his throat, trying desperately to force his register down to something resembling masculinity. “Is Katie here? I need to speak with her.”

It didn’t work. The attempt at a deep voice cracked, keeping him firmly in the soprano range.

“And you are?” Jordana asked, eyes narrowing with suspicion.

“I’m her cousin. Taylor,” he chirped, feeling his cheeks flush hot red against the cold.

Jordana’s expression shifted instantly from suspicion to confusion. She looked him up and down again, taking in the white fur jacket and the skirt, before a polite, puzzled smile broke across her face.

“Oh! Okay. Sorry, you’re...” she laughed nervously. “Never mind. Anyway, Katie’s not here right now, but please, come in. We all really appreciate you driving up here on such short notice. You’ve really saved us.”

Jordana’s words tumbled out quickly, causing Taylor—in his cold, exhausted state—to miss most of what she said. But one part came through loud and clear.

“Katie’s not here?” he shrieked.

The sound was a sharp, piercing cry, far more dramatic than the moment called for. Jordana actually recoiled, blinking in surprise at the high-pitched outburst.

“Where is she?” Taylor pressed, his voice trembling with a mix of panic and cold. “I really need to speak with her. This is life or death.”

“Oh my goodness, has something happened?” Jordana asked, her polite smile vanishing into genuine concern. “Can I help in some way?”

“No... well, maybe. But right now, I really need Katie,” Taylor stammered, shifting his weight from one aching foot to the other.

Jordana hesitated, studying his frantic expression. “Well, she walked into town for her appointment at the salon. I doubt she’ll be back for a few hours. If you really need to find her, the place is called Studio Éclat. It’s about halfway down the main street—you can’t miss it.”

“Studio Éclat. Main street,” Taylor repeated, already turning. “Got it.”

“Do you want me to message her? Let her know you’re coming?” Jordana called out.

“Erm... no thank you,” he squeaked over his shoulder. “I don’t want to worry here. Everything will be okay when I find her.”

Taylor’s focus returned to the snow-covered steps. He was desperate to escape the embarrassment of Jordana’s gaze, but the boots made a quick exit impossible. He could feel her lingering in the doorway, watching in confusion as he descended with agonizing slowness. When he finally reached the bottom, he turned, gave a nervous wave, and trudged away, moving with all the grace of a baby gorilla.

“What was that all about?” asked Regina, Katie’s other friend, emerging from the bathroom.

“I’m not really sure,” Jordana replied, turning to step back into the warmth of the cabin. She closed the door, a frown of confusion settling on her face. “Did Katie ever actually mention if her cousin was a boy or a girl?”

* * * * *

With his legs numb and every step in the heavy platform boots feeling like lead weights, Taylor plodded down Main Street. The adrenaline that had fuelled him this far was evaporating, leaving him running on fumes and the single, looping thought in his mind: find Katie—Katie will help me.

He kept his head down, avoiding the gazes of the locals and tourists wandering the snowy town, until he finally spotted it. Hanging above a wooden storefront was a carved sign: Studio Éclat - Salon de Beauté - Québec.

He stopped for a moment outside the door, looking up at the sign through the falling snow. He took a deep, shaky breath, steeled himself, and pushed inside.



The sudden wall of heat hit him like a physical blow, carrying the scent of hairspray and expensive vanilla candles. He clomped over to the reception desk, his whole body trembling from the effort.

“I... I am loo...” Taylor squawked—every word felt like fire in his raw throat. “...ing for Ka... Katie Rogers?” he managed to get out.

The salon owner behind the desk—Nancy, a stern-looking woman and devout Québécoise—had little patience for English and even less for lateness. She swept a critical eye over Taylor, her irritation spiking, but having been in the hospitality business long enough, she knew exactly how to plaster on a fake smile.

She replied in rapid-fire French, “Tu es un peu en retard, Katie. Mais, heureusement pour toi, nous n'avons pas d'autres clients cet après-midi.”

(“You are a little late, Katie. But, luckily for you, we have no other clients this afternoon.”)

Taylor blinked. His brain, unable to decipher a word of French, simply stalled.

The woman sighed, then chuckled lightly at his cluelessness. She pointed to the waiting area.

“Please wait, Katie,” she said in English, her accent thick. Nancy’s smile then widened as she muttered a complaint in French about how all Canadians should be forced to learn the language. The words were lost on Taylor. His fogged-over mind registered only the visual cue, and he turned, obediently following her pointing finger toward the waiting area.

“A few minutes, please,” Nancy added, before spinning on her heel and vanishing into a backroom.

Suddenly alone, Taylor just stood there, the warmth of the room washing over him. A wave of relief hit him so hard his knees nearly buckled. He had found his cousin. The nightmare was finally over.

He stumbled to the waiting area and collapsed into a plush sofa, sinking deep into the cushions. For a moment, he wondered why the place was so empty. But as the toasty interior of the salon began to thaw his frozen tights, a bone-deep exhaustion crashed down on him. The events of the day caught up with him all at once. His eyelids grew heavy. His chin dipped. He jolted himself upright once, telling himself to stay alert—but the fight was gone. Before he knew it, he was fast asleep.

A firm hand on his shoulder pulled him back from the darkness. Taylor blinked, his eyes stinging as they struggled to focus on the hazy world around him. Nancy loomed above him, her polite facade wearing thin. She was speaking again—fast, impatient French that washed over him in a meaningless stream of noise, save for the one word his brain desperately latched onto: “Katie.”

She gestured sharply for him to get up. Acting on pure autopilot—and thinking this woman was taking him to see his cousin—Taylor hauled himself upright, his body swaying as his legs protested the movement.

Since she’d already asked him to remove his coat once, Nancy didn’t bother asking again. Already behind schedule, she slipped the white fur jacket from his shoulders, plucked the bobble hat from his head, and peeled the thick mittens off his hands.

Taylor just stood there, stunned and swaying slightly, feeling suddenly exposed without the warm layers. He tried to force a question out—to ask if he was being taken to see his cousin—but choked on the first syllable. His throat felt like it had been scrubbed with sandpaper.

He tried again.

“A-are...”

The sound was a thin, broken squeak that died in the air. He stopped, humiliated, and swallowed the rest of the question.

Nancy guided him firmly toward a styling chair, positioned in front of a large mirror and a porcelain sink. Too dazed to offer resistance, Taylor sat. The woman shook out a black salon cape and snapped it around his neck, covering the white outfit entirely.



He looked up at her immaculately made-up face in confusion, trying to gather his thoughts into something coherent. But before he could form a sentence, the chair suddenly spun and reclined, tipping his head back against the hard porcelain basin.

He made one last, weak attempt to speak.

“Shh,” Nancy said, lifting a finger to silence him. “Relax. You are tired.”

Warm water spilled over his scalp. Strong fingers began to work shampoo through his hair, the motion slow, rhythmic, and methodical. The sensation was so incredibly soothing that it knocked the last bit of fight clean out of him. His body sagged into the chair. His eyelids fluttered, heavy and irresistible—until the world blurred again, and he drifted helplessly back into a deep sleep.

After giving Taylor’s straggly hair a well-overdue wash, replacing the earthy scent of stagnant ditch water with the cloying, synthetic sweetness of candied fruit, Nancy pressed down on a lever with her foot. The salon chair jerked back into an upright position, sending Taylor’s head snapping forward to bob loosely on his neck.

She paused, brush hovering, fully expecting him to startle awake. But after stirring just enough to slump further down into the black salon cape, he settled back into a soft, rhythmic pattern of half-wheezing, half-snoring.

Nancy shrugged. “Tant mieux,” she thought. It was easier this way. When the appointment was booked, the requested treatments had been made clear. With “the client” now dead to the world, Nancy could work faster and avoid forcing herself to speak English—a language she detested.

Propping Taylor's head back upright, she began with brisk efficiency, roughly towel-drying his shoulder-length locks before attacking the tangles with a wide-tooth comb. She tugged hard at the knots near the nape of his neck, her movements jerky and impatient. Taylor’s head lolled limply to the side with every pull, a dead weight in her hands, yet he continued to snore.



Satisfied the hair was prepped, Nancy proceeded to snap on black nitrile gloves and mixed blue bleach powder with a high-volume developer. The sharp, acrid stench of ammonia instantly cut through the fruity shampoo scent—a chemical assault that would make most people’s eyes water—but Taylor didn't so much as twitch his nose.

Then began the tedious process of foiling.

Starting at the back of his head, Nancy worked with machine-like speed. She wove out thin slices of hair, slapping the cold silver sheets against his scalp before painting on the thick bleach mixture.

Slap, paint, crinkle, fold.

Every movement was accompanied by the sharp, metallic crunch of aluminium foil being folded tightly near his ears. She tugged his hair taut to get the foil snug against the roots, manoeuvring his heavy, sleeping head backward and forward as needed. He was putty in her hands, enduring the rough handling and the chemical fumes without a single murmur.

Section by section, his natural dirty-blonde hair disappeared, encased in shiny silver packets. Finally, she folded the last piece of foil, stepped back, and stripped off her gloves with a snap.

Nancy put her hands on her hips, shaking her head slowly as she looked down at Taylor's foil-encased head. She had seen tired clients before, but this was absurd. She had just spent forty-five minutes yanking his hair, crunching metal by his ears, and marinating his head in chemicals, and he hadn't woken up once.

"Incredible," she muttered, starting the timer on her station. He was going to be cooking for a while, so in the meantime, she decided to tackle a job that desperately needed doing: his brows.



She leaned in close, clicking her tongue at the state of them. To her, they were messy, overgrown caterpillars that had no business on a lady's face. She started with a spoolie brush, combing the thick hairs upward before taking her small, sharp scissors and ruthlessly snipping away the length, reducing the masculine bulk in seconds.

Next came the wax. Nancy applied the warm, sticky resin with precision, carving out a sharp, dramatic line beneath the brow bone to lift the arch. She smoothed a cloth strip over the wax, rubbed it firmly, and then—zip—tore it away

with practiced aggression. Taylor's brow twitched minutely in his sleep, a reflex against the sting, but the deep exhaustion held him under.

She finished with tweezers, hunting down every single stray hair that dared to exist outside her vision, plucking them one by one until the skin was smooth. When she stepped back to admire her work, the heavy, natural brows were gone. In their place sat a pair of thin, perfectly sculpted, high-feminine arches that completely transformed his appearance.

But Nancy wasn't done. Her critical gaze drifted lower, landing on his upper lip and chin. To her trained eye, the faint, blonde fuzz there was simply more clutter to be cleared away. She dipped a fresh wooden spatula into the wax pot, twirling it to catch the drip, and applied a thin, warm layer across his upper lip and a second patch on the center of his chin. She pressed the cloth strips down firmly, smoothing them to ensure a grip on every hair.

Rip. Rip.

The sound was sharp, like tearing Velcro. Taylor's nose twitched, and a small frown momentarily touched his lips at the sting, but still he didn't wake. Nancy quickly applied a soothing oil to the reddened skin, wiping away the sticky residue until the area was perfectly smooth.



Now for the skin. The appointment had requested a full complexion overhaul—hydration and smoothing to fix winter dryness. Nancy reached for a heavy jar of texturizing botanical mask. Using a flat, soft-bristled brush, she began to

paint the thick, grainy green paste onto his face. She worked methodically, brushing the cool mixture over his forehead, down the bridge of his nose, and across his cheeks, careful to avoid the freshly waxed brows. The mask sealed his skin away, burying his features under a layer of green mud that smelled of cucumber and crushed mint.

She stepped back, wiping her hands on a towel. Between the chaotic silver crown of foils and the thick green mask, the person in the chair was no longer recognizable.

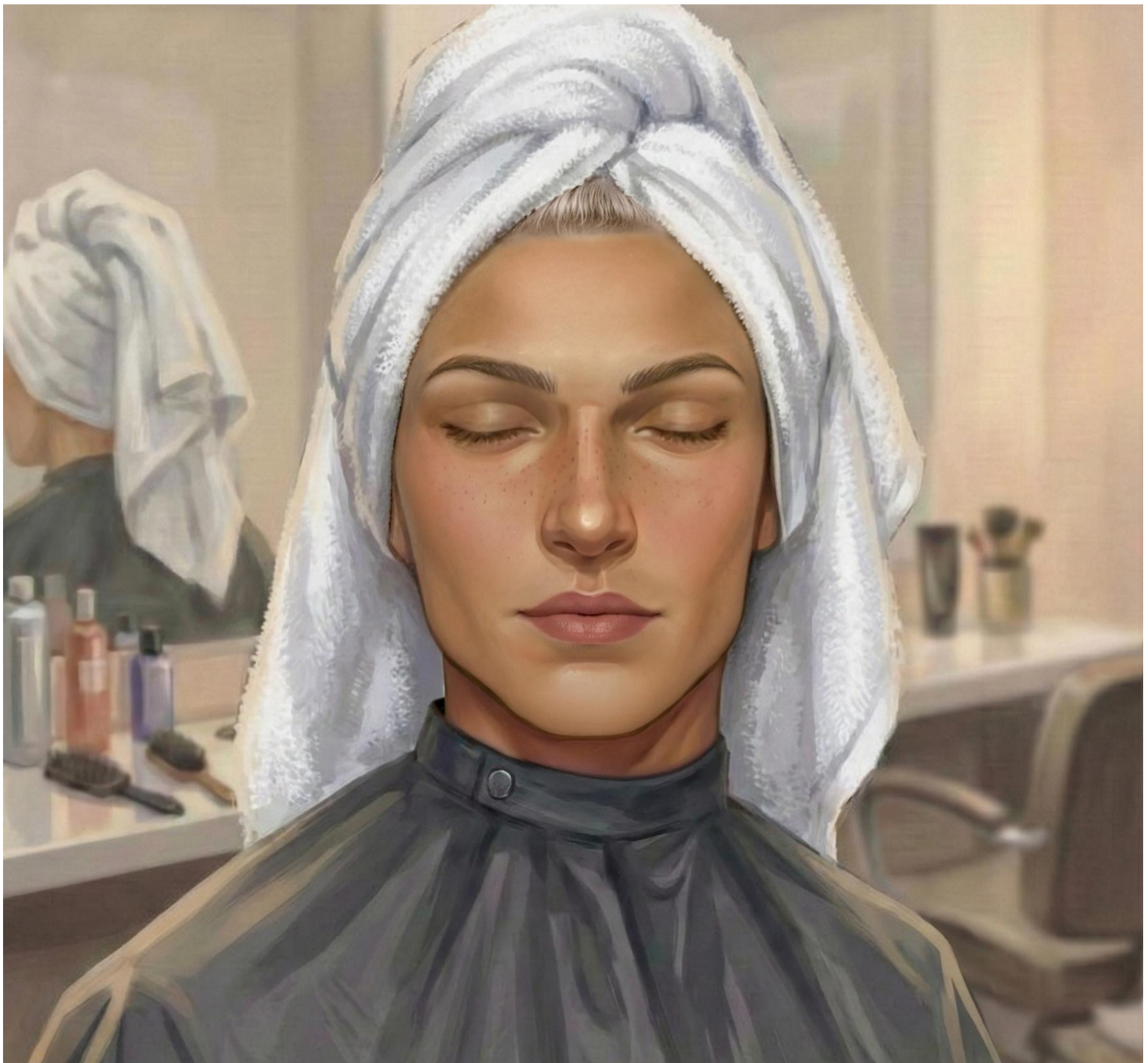
Satisfied with her work, Nancy checked the wall clock. The mask needed to harden to do its work, and the bleach needed a little longer to lift. She decided to take ten. Leaving Taylor sleeping peacefully—a silent statue in green and silver—she slipped into the back room for a coffee.



Nancy returned fifteen minutes later, recharged and ready to tackle the next job. She half-expected to find Taylor awake, but his soft, rhythmic wheezing continued uninterrupted. Glancing at her station, she saw the timer ticking down its final ten seconds and quickly reached over and silenced it before the alarm could disturb him.

Slipping into a fresh pair of gloves, she unlocked the chair and spun it around to the washbasin. With practiced speed, she slid the foils off one by one, rinsing the bleach from his hair with warm water. While his head was tipped back in the sink, she took two soft, warm sponges and gently rehydrated the hardened green clay mask, wiping it away until his skin was clean and glowing. She finished by wrapping a plush white towel around his wet hair, twisting it into a secure turban, and flipping the chair back upright.

At this point, she took a moment to assess her work, stepping back while shaking her head. She couldn't fathom what could leave a person so completely wiped out, but she decided not to question it. In fact, the heavy slumber was a blessing in disguise; the next task would require the eyes to remain closed anyway.



Not wasting any more time, she tilted the chair all the way back again until Taylor was lying almost flat. Pulling the magnifying lamp over his face, she clicked it on, the bright ring light illuminating his now-fresh complexion. She taped down his lower lashes with cool gel pads, then began the meticulous work of the Russian volume extensions.

It was a process of surgical precision. Using two pairs of sharp tweezers, Nancy isolated a single natural lash with one hand while picking up a handmade fan of ultra-fine synthetic lashes with the other. She dipped the base of the fan into a micro-drop of black adhesive and bonded it to Taylor's natural lash.

Isolate. Dip. Bond.

She fell into a hypnotic rhythm, repeating the motion hundreds of times. The sharp scent of the adhesive hung in the air, but Taylor didn't stir. Slowly, his lash line was transformed. What had been short, unruly lashes were now buried beneath thick, jet-black curtains of synthetic silk. When Nancy finally removed the tape and brushed them out, the result was dramatic—long, curled, and incredibly glamorous.



With the delicate work complete, she brought the chair back up, taking a moment to admire how well the new lashes worked with the fresh skin and sculpted brows. Proud of the transformation so far, she reached over for her manicure cart and rolled it into position.

She grabbed Taylor's left wrist by the fur cuff of his wool sweater, lifting it from the armrest. As she inspected the nails, her eyes narrowed, and she let out a loud, impatient tut.

The nails were completely "virgin"—bare, unpolished, and clearly hadn't seen a salon in years. The cuticles were overgrown and extended over the nail plate. Nancy sighed, thinking how rude it was to have booked for a full set of extensions but failing to mention the need for a complete overhaul first. This wasn't going to be a quick job; this was going to be a rescue mission.

She grabbed a metal cuticle pusher and began the arduous task of scraping back the thick skin, murmuring complaints in French with every shove. She followed up with cuticle nippers, snipping away the excess tissue with aggressive precision until the nail beds were clean and exposed.

Next came the e-file. The high-pitched whine of the drill filled the silence as she roughed up the surface of the natural nails, removing the shine to ensure the acrylic would stick. She filed the free edge completely down, creating a blank canvas.

She then pulled out a box of plastic tips, sizing them one by one. She glued the plastic extensions onto the ends of his fingers and, using a large pair of tip cutters, sliced them down a little. She took her coarse file and began shaping them, filing the sides at a sharp angle that tapered toward the end, finishing with a flat, squared-off tip—the distinctive "ballerina" or coffin shape.

Now for the acrylic. The sharp, chemical scent of the liquid monomer filled the air, stronger even than the bleach from earlier. Nancy dipped her brush into the liquid, then into a pot of white powder, creating a small, wet bead. She placed it on the tip, patting it out to create the white free edge. Then, she dipped into a pot of cover pink powder, placing the bead near the cuticle and blending it downwards to create the seamless "French ombre" fade.

Liquid, powder, pat, blend.

She worked with practiced speed. Once the acrylic had set, she spent fifteen minutes filing and buffing the hardened nails until the tip was flat and the surface was perfectly smooth.

To finish, she applied a layer of clear UV gel top coat for a glass-like shine. She guided Taylor's limp hand into a small, glowing blue tunnel of the UV lamp to cure, immediately switching to work on his other hand while the first one baked.

Apply. Cure. Switch.

Finally, she brushed away the dust and massaged a fragrant cuticle oil into his skin. She placed his hands back onto the armrest and stepped back to inspect her work. The plain, neglected fingernails were gone. In their place was a flawless, long set of ballerina-shaped French ombre acrylics that looked elegant and expensive.

Nancy wiped her forehead with the back of her wrist. It had been extra work, but looking at the pristine set, she had to admit—she was good.



She let out a soft sigh, rolling her neck to relieve the tension. She was tired, but the work was far from done. She had known the extensive list of procedures would consume the better part of the day when she agreed to take the booking—that was exactly why she had closed the salon for the afternoon. But Nancy prided herself on being the best in town, and she wasn't about to leave a job half-finished, no matter how exhausted she felt.

She walked back to the counter and picked up the client file, scanning the consultation notes. According to the paperwork, "Katie" had previously received both filler and Botox and was requesting a touch-up. Nancy frowned, peering closely at Taylor's face. If that were true, it must have been a lifetime ago, or this client had a metabolism that devoured product, because Nancy couldn't see a single trace of previous work. The canvas was completely blank.

If Taylor had been awake, Nancy would have paused to question this history, just to be safe. But with him still sound asleep, the steady rhythm of his breathing filling the room, and the consent forms duly signed and filed, she decided not to overthink it. She looked at the detailed instructions attached to the file, snapped on a fresh pair of gloves, and prepared her syringes.

She started with the Botox. Moving with quick, precise jabs, she injected the solution across the forehead and around the entire orbital area of the eyes. Since the client was clearly young, this wasn't about erasing age lines; it was about achieving a hyper-smooth, "filtered" appearance. She targeted the muscles to freeze the brow into a flawless curve and tighten the skin around the eyes, pulling everything taut to smooth out any hint of undereye shadows or puffiness.

Next came the dermal fillers. She swapped to a cannula for the heavier work, injecting the thick, viscous gel deep into cheeks. She flooded the hollows to erase any gauntness, plumping the skin into lush, feminine contours. Then she moved to the jawline, using the filler to camouflage the bone's natural squareness, burying the rigid structure under a layer of smooth hydration.

She then paused at the bridge of his nose. It wasn't part of the booking, but seeing the extent of the transformation—and noting a slight bump in the profile—she couldn't help herself. With a few targeted injections, she smoothed it out, creating a perfectly straight, delicate slope.

Finally, she focused on the lips. Nancy didn't hold back. She injected a generous amount into the vermilion border and the body of the lips, massaging the filler firmly to ensure smoothness. Taylor's mouth bloomed under the needle, expanding from a thin line into a pouty, voluminous set of plump pillows.

The transformation was staggering; the combination of the rounded jawline, the smooth, taut skin, and the lush, oversized lips had completely feminized his features, leaving no trace of the boy who had walked in.



Satisfied that the face was finally perfect, Nancy moved on to the final step. She reached up and unravelled the white towel turban, letting the damp, freshly bleached hair fall heavily around his neck. It was a stark, icy platinum now, stripped of all natural warmth.

Humming a little tune to herself, she picked up her scissors and comb. She worked with artistic flair, slicing into the strands to create movement and texture. She cut in soft, face-framing layers, then moved to the front. With precise, choppy snips, she carved out a thick, textured fringe of bangs that rested just above the feminine brows.

She grabbed the blow dryer and a round brush, drying the hair into a voluminous, tousled bob with soft waves that bounced around the softened jawline. When she finally clicked the dryer off, she stepped back to give her creation a critical eye. Happy, she misted the style with hairspray and stepped back once more to admire the finished look: a chic, platinum blonde bob that perfectly framed the glamorous, manufactured face.

Nancy breathed a heavy sigh of relief. It was done. A job well done.

She glanced over at Taylor, still comatose in the chair. "Give me five minutes, chérie," she whispered, untying her apron. She desperately needed a cigarette. She grabbed her pack from the counter and slipped out the back door into the alley, leaving the salon silent.



A few moments later, Taylor began to stir.

His movements were sluggish at first as he dragged himself back from the depths of a heavy, unnatural slumber. He felt incredibly groggy and disoriented, his mind a thick fog that wouldn't clear. He blinked, trying to focus, but his vision was obscured by a heavy, dark curtain of lashes that fluttered and tickled his cheeks.

His next sensation was a bizarre stiffness—his entire face felt tight, swollen, and sore, as if he were trapped behind a stiff, immobile mask. The air hung heavy with a sharp, chemical haze that stung his nose. He tried to swallow, but his throat was parched and sore. As he shifted slightly in the chair, feeling nylon slide against leather, a dull ache throbbed in his calf muscles, a deep, persistent cramp that made him wince.

Taylor blinked, his eyes struggling to cut through the haze. His body was swathed from neck to knee in what looked like a dark polyester sheet. It was confusing, a detail that didn't fit, but the thought lasted only a heartbeat before a flash in his peripheral vision shattered it.

He jerked his head to the side—too fast, sending the room into a dizzying spin. His eyes focused on the impossible sight, blinking as heavy, fan-like lashes fluttered against his cheeks. The hands resting on the armrests were not his. Or rather, the nails weren't his.

He lifted his left arm slowly, the movement heavy. There, at the ends of his fingers, impossibly long ombre nails—sculpted like a work of art—glistened in the salon light.

Panic, cold and sharp, pierced the fog. He thrust his hand up, instinctively reaching to rip away the sheet that now felt suffocating around his neck. But he misjudged the alien length of his new claws, and the sharp acrylic tip stabbed painfully into his skin. Wincing, he fumbled to slip his fingers under the tight collar. With a frantic tear, he popped the snaps and tossed the cape to the ground.

With the polyester cast aside, the fluffy white outfit beneath was fully exposed. Instantly, his memories flooded back: the screech of tyres, the crash, the biting cold of the ditch, and the humiliation of being dressed in women's clothing. But that didn't explain the nails. He brought his hand up closer, staring down, horrified at the pristine French ombre manicure. Why?



Then the sharp, chemical scent of the salon hit him, and the final piece of the puzzle snapped into place. Oh no. The realisation struck him like a physical blow. He scanned the room wildly. Had that woman from earlier done this to him? And if so, why?

The barrage of questions evaporated the moment his eyes locked onto the large wall mirror. He had turned his head far enough to catch his reflection, and the sight was so jarring it wiped his mind blank.

His heart skipped a beat, and he scrambled to his feet, completely forgetting that he was wearing the boots.

His ankles wobbled dangerously, and he pitched forward, barely catching himself before crashing face-first onto the tiles. Scrabbling to find balance, he slammed his back against the workstation counter, gripping the ledge just below the sink as he began to hyperventilate.

No. What he saw couldn't be real. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to control the ragged gasps tearing at his chest.

But denial only lasted a few moments. Curiosity, morbid and terrifying, got the better of him. He swivelled his neck to look in the mirror once more—he had to know.

The sight made his breath hitch in his throat; it was beyond shocking. It was so surreal he found it hard to process. His face, the one he had always known, had been completely changed.

Impossible as it was, he looked like a woman—and a high-maintenance one at that. Heavy, fluttering lashes cast shadows over his cheeks; his lips were thick, bloated pillows; and his complexion was impossibly round and shiny, framed by a chic platinum bob.

“What the fuck is hap....” He tried to cry out but stopped mid-sentence, his hand flying to his throat. Speaking hurt just as much as it had earlier, but the high-pitched squeak was gone. It had been replaced by something much worse.



His voice was now husky and low, yet unmistakably feminine.

Somehow, he not only had the face of a woman now, but a voice to match.

Shaking violently, he looked around the empty salon, his brain misfiring, not knowing what to do.

Suddenly, the back door of the salon slammed as Nancy returned from her smoke break.

Taylor jumped, adrenaline flooding his system. His head spun around as his heart rate spiked. He spotted his white fluffy jacket hanging by the door—and the thought of escape overwhelmed him. He didn't think; he just moved. Bounding across the room, clumsy and loud in the heavy boots, he snatched the jacket from the rack and burst out the front door before his brain could catch up with his actions.

* * * * *

Twenty minutes later, Taylor was back stomping through the snow. His panic had been replaced by a miserable, bone-deep chill, made all the sharper because he'd left his hat and mitts back at the salon. He was hungry, confused, and utterly distraught.

He didn't know what was happening or what to do. A million thoughts raced through his mind, swinging wildly from one extreme to the other. One moment, he was convinced Nancy at the salon was some sort of crazed lunatic—and if he hadn't escaped when he did, who knew what she would have done next. The next moment, his panic switched to something far simpler: where was he going to sleep that night?

Before he knew it, he was approaching Katie's cabin. He hurried toward the door, a desperate hope flaring in his chest that his cousin would be inside. He needed answers, but right now, he would settle for a blanket and a hot drink.

He reached up to knock, but the door swung open before he could touch it, almost sending him tumbling down the front steps.

Jordana stood there, framed by the golden warmth, looking more beautiful than ever.

"Taylor, there you are," she said, her voice taut with urgency. She stepped quickly to the side, holding the door wide. "Come in. I was hoping you were going to show up."

"I... thanks," Taylor rasped, grateful for the invitation and relieved he didn't have to offer any immediate explanations. The promise of warmth was overpowering, and he stepped gladly over the threshold, the door clicking shut behind him to cut off the biting wind.

The cabin was inviting, with the smell of pine needles and the sound of crackling wood, but the cozy atmosphere soon evaporated.

"Taylor, this is Regina," Jordana said, moving to stand beside a raven-haired woman.

Regina possessed an intimidating stillness. Her jet-black hair was cut into a severe, razor-sharp bob that framed her pale features. She was dressed entirely in black—an oversized sweater, tight leggings, and long socks.

She didn't look nearly as friendly as Jordana. She didn't look friendly at all. Her dark eyes narrowed, glaring openly at the feminised man in the fluffy white outfit as he stood shivering opposite her.

"You're just in time," Regina said, her tone flat and unsettlingly empty.

She didn't move to welcome him; instead, she stood rooted to the spot, glaring at Taylor. Her dark eyes swept over him, clinically analysing his fresh platinum bob, the layers of white fur, and his swollen, needle-plumped lips with a look of severe judgment.

"We're just about to go to the hospital," she announced, her gaze finally snapping up to meet his terrified eyes. "Katie's had an accident."

“An accident!”

Taylor’s reply came out in his new, husky feminine voice, the pitch now seemingly locked in that register. “Is she okay? What happened?”



She was headed to the salon when she slipped on some ice,” Jordana said, joining the conversation. She managed a weak smile, though it did little to hide the anxiety in her eyes. “Broke her ankle and fractured her wrist in the fall.

“So, that’s why she didn’t make it to the salon,” Taylor said, the new piece of information, making what happened ever so slightly clearer.

“But you did, by the looks of you,” Regina announced. Her stare intensified, sharp and accusatory. “Thought you’d have a little makeover at your cousin’s expense while she was lying in a ditch, did you?”

Taylor started to stammer, his hands trembling slightly at his sides. “No, I... It isn’t what it looks like. There’s this woman at the salon and... well, it’s a long story. But she’s not right. I should call the police.”

“Well, let’s do that later. Okay?” Jordana said with a sympathetic smile, trying to cut the tension. “First, we should get to the hospital and see if Katie’s okay, don’t you think?”

Taylor nodded silently, shrinking under Regina’s continued glare, feeling humiliated in all sorts of new ways.

* * * * *

It was only a ten-minute drive to the hospital, but it seemed much longer. They took Regina’s Ford Raptor—a massive, matte black truck that made light work of the snowy conditions. Inside, the cabin was silent, save for the low, guttural hum of the engine. Regina drove with both hands on the wheel, her eyes fixed on the road, filling the cab with a cold, heavy silence that discouraged anyone from speaking. Jordana sat in the passenger seat, attempting to break the ice by flicking on the radio, but after ten seconds of static and blaring car dealership commercials, she sighed, muttered that “everything is just commercials these days,” and clicked it off.

In the back seat, Taylor made himself as small as possible. He alternated his gaze between the blurring white landscape outside and his own lap, where the sight of his nylon-clad thighs fuelled his growing rage. He didn’t dare speak. He just sat there, knees pressed together, terrified that if he opened his mouth, his infuriating husky rasp would say something he’d regret.

The silence followed them into the hospital. Taylor kept his head down, the heels of his platform boots clomping loudly against the linoleum. He huddled into the collar of the fur jacket, wishing he was invisible, while Jordana spoke briefly to the receptionist.

Moments later, he was standing outside a patient’s room, his heart hammering in his chest. His panic had nothing to do with his cousin’s condition—he knew she wasn’t in danger—but was driven by pure, selfish dread. He was petrified to walk in there dressed in her clothes while sporting the hairstyle she was supposed to have.

Luckily, the wait was short. Any longer, and he might have actually listened to the voice in his head screaming at him to run. Jordana led the way, Regina followed closely behind, and Taylor brought up the rear, dragging his feet with every reluctant step.

They entered to a happy greeting from the bed, which was strangled instantly into a sharp, confused silence.

Katie was propped up on a hospital bed, looking battered but surprisingly cheerful. Her right leg was encased in a heavy white plaster cast, propped up on a pillow, while her right arm was bound tight against her chest in a blue sling. Blonde, wavy hair framed a face dusted with freckles that stood out against her pale skin.



She looked at her friends, smiling, until her blue eyes drifted to the person standing behind them, causing her head to tilt sharply as her brows knitted together in total confusion.

“Taylor,” she said slowly, squinting as if trying to bring a blurry image into focus. “Is that you? Why are you dressed like that? And what have you done to your hair? Your face?”

“I... erm...” Taylor started to quiver, feeling a wave of embarrassment like never before.

“Isn’t it obvious? She took your appointment at the salon,” Regina cut in, her voice slicing through the room. “She went looking for you, and when she got there and found a free makeover on offer, she must have jumped at the chance.” She spun around, pinning Taylor with a glare. “Sound about right?”

“No, it wasn’t like that!” Taylor spluttered, his voice tight with panic. “I don’t know what happened.”

“Wait,” Katie said, holding up her good hand. “Let’s all just calm down a minute, okay? I’m starting to feel like I hit my head harder than I thought. First of all, Taylor isn’t a she... he’s a he. And the Taylor I know wouldn’t have voluntarily done this to himself. Tay, what happened to you?”

The confirmation that Taylor was male caused Jordana and Regina to swivel their heads instantly, scanning his feminised frame from head to toe with fresh eyes. Jordana’s mouth parted slightly; she had harboured suspicions at the cabin door, but after seeing him return from the salon, she had convinced herself he was a woman. Regina was in the same boat; she’d only seen him stomping away through a window earlier, and once introduced to the finished product—complete with that feminine voice—she had assumed he just had some masculine traits.

The next fifteen minutes erupted into an emotional, chaotic Q&A session. As the story unfolded—the deer, the throat injury, the frozen clothes, and the gaps filled in regarding Katie pre-booking all her treatments so Nancy had never actually seen her or heard her voice—it painted a chain of events so unlikely that if Katie hadn't known Taylor his whole life, she never would have believed him. Taylor was a lot of things—lazy, unmotivated, and notoriously unreliable—but he wasn't a liar. He was, to his own detriment, one of the most truthful people Katie knew.

As the dust settled, the concern for Taylor's well-being and the wrecked Audi began to subside, and the conversation took a lighter, more familiar form.

"You know, Tay, Regina's right, I should be mad at you," Katie said, a mischievous smile finally touching her lips. "You took my makeover, and now you look prettier than me."

"Yeah, very funny," Taylor replied, rolling his eyes. "Why the hell did you book so many treatments anyway?"

"Because it was free," Katie replied with a shrug. "It's all part of the package for performing at the carnival this year. Jordana asked for a hair and makeup budget when we were negotiating the contract, and the Mayor said we could each have a day at a local salon, anything we wanted."

"Yeah, he's probably regretting that decision," Regina announced, leaning against the wall. "I mean, a few activities and a free cabin are pretty standard. But if he had known Katie was going to book every service available, he would have just given us the three hundred bucks we asked for."

"Hey, you know I can't say no to free things," Katie said, feigning a hurt expression. "It's a real problem, you know."

"A problem I now have to deal with," Taylor said, bowing his head with a husky sigh.

"Well, it's a problem we're all going to be dealing with," Jordana announced. Her voice lost its temporary lightness, sounding suddenly very serious.

"Oh yeah, how so?" Katie asked.

"Well, you're not going to be able to perform like this," Jordana said, gesturing to the heavy cast on Katie's leg. "And if we cancel the show, we're going to be in breach of contract. We'll have to pay for the cabin, the activities, and all those expensive treatments your cousin had today."

Katie's face dropped, the colour draining from her freckled cheeks. "Oh my god! I never thought of that. What are we going to do? That's thousands of dollars."

"There's not much we can do," Jordana said with a sympathetic smile, trying to be the pragmatist. "Accidents happen. We talk to the Mayor and see if we can work something out."

"Or, the show goes ahead as planned," Regina announced.

Her voice was calm, but it carried a weight that made everyone turn in her direction.

"It seems to me like we already have the perfect stand-in," Regina said coolly. "Someone who has already got the look."

All eyes shifted to Taylor.

He froze. "What? Me? No way." He shook his head violently, his platinum bob bouncing. "You can't expect me to perform with you guys." His panic made his voice crack and rise higher. "Katie, tell her!"

Katie looked at him, really looked at him, and the cogs in her head began to whirl. "You know... It's not that bad of an idea. It's a simple dance routine, and you could just mime along to the song. With a little practice, you could do it."

"No!" Taylor cried, stamping a platform boot. "I'm not prancing around on stage in a stupid costume! I'm not doing it, and you can't make me."

"Oh, it's below you, is it?" Regina pushed off the wall, stepping into his personal space and giving him a death stare. "You're too good to do what we do, is that it?"

"No, I... didn't mean it like that!" Taylor stuttered, shrinking back. "I just mean... I'm a guy, and you're girls?"

“You don’t sound like a guy right now,” Regina shot back, her words stinging. “And you certainly don’t look like one either. Besides, if you say no, no one here is going to help you out of your mess. You’ll be stuck here in these clothes, with no car, no money, and no way home.”

“That’s not fair,” Taylor cried, his jaw dropping slightly as he froze, his wide eyes rimmed with heavy lashes staring ahead in pure disbelief.



“‘Not fair’ is flaking out when we need you,” Regina countered. “And leaving us with that massive salon bill you racked up today. Unless you’re planning to cover the costs yourself?”

Taylor went quiet. He opened his plump lips to argue, but quickly closed them again. He was broke. He was stranded. He was cornered.

“Yeah, didn’t think so,” Regina added with a smirk.

“So, it’s decided then,” Katie said, her voice brightening into cheerfulness. “Taylor’s going to step in and save the day.”

“I didn’t say that,” Taylor mumbled in a defeated voice, tugging at his fluffy white jacket.

“Hey, it won’t be so bad, promise,” Jordana said, stepping in to try and console him. She flashed him a beautiful, encouraging smile. “I’ll teach you everything you need to know.”

“Thanks, Tay,” Katie beamed from her bed. “You’re the best cousin ever. You always come through for me when I need you.”

* * * * *

After a half-decent night's sleep—achieved only when he finally passed out from sheer exhaustion—Taylor woke the next morning to the sound of Jordana’s sweet voice.

He batted his heavy lashes open and looked up at her, wondering for a fleeting second if he was dreaming. However, the realisation that he was actually in a waking nightmare soon dawned on him the moment he went to rub the sleep from his eyes, and Jordana gently intercepted his wrist.

“Be careful with those nails,” she chuckled, holding his hand up to display the long ombre extensions from the day before. “You’ll hurt yourself if you’re not careful.”

Taylor groaned as the reality of his situation came crashing back. “Do I really have to go this morning?” he asked, his voice laced with hope. “It might be safer to just cancel, in case I mess up or something.”

“You’ll be fine,” Jordana replied, shaking her head. “Now, go hop in the shower while I find you something to wear. And be careful not to wet your hair.”

Taylor returned ten minutes later, feeling somewhat refreshed, to find the bed made and an outfit laid out on the duvet. He winced at the sight: a turtleneck sweater, leggings, and a pair of warm socks, all in an aggressively girly shade of pink. But if the outer layers made him wince, the padded bra and matching panty set next to them made him want to run for the hills.

He had just finished squeezing himself into the tight pink fabric when Jordana breezed back into the room, balancing two mugs of coffee. She paused, inspected his silhouette from top to bottom, and gave a firm nod of satisfaction.

“Not bad,” she said, handing him a mug. “Regina was right; adding the stuffing to the bra really completes the illusion.”

Taylor ignored the comment and sniffed the coffee, wrinkling his nose. “I’m not really a coffee drinker,” he muttered, trying to shift his thoughts away from his strange-fitting underwear.

“Well, in that case, we might as well get started with your makeup,” Jordana said with a bright smile, gesturing towards the en-suite.

Knowing resistance was futile, Taylor followed her into the bathroom, wearing a miserable expression. That expression didn’t improve as Jordana gave him a quick tutorial, promising she wouldn't do anything too dramatic—just a “put-together daytime look.”

When she was finished, Taylor stared at his reflection and cringed. Between the transformative effects of the Botox and filler, and now with his skin contoured, eyes brightened, and lips painted, he looked nothing like the man he identified as.



“Why does everything have to be pink?” he moaned, staring at the stranger in the mirror.

“Well, it will help people see you as a woman,” Jordana replied cheerfully. “Plus, Katie loves pink. Since you’re borrowing her clothes, you’re going to have to get used to it.”

Taylor let out a long, defeated sigh, accepting that today was destined to be just as humiliating as the last. He followed Jordana back into the bedroom to finish getting dressed, stepping into a pink, quilted one-piece snowsuit that zipped tightly up the front, and pulling on a pair of bulky, moon boots. He bit back his complaints; as bright and ridiculous as the outfit was, it was better than the drafty skirt he’d been stuck in yesterday. And at least he’d be warm. He clung to that small mercy, repeating Jordana’s reassurance like a mantra—it’s always worse in your head.



* * * * *

Regina drove him into town on the way to her salon appointment. While she wasn't exactly making conversation, the icy tension from the previous day had finally lifted. She knew he was nervous, and she seemed to appreciate that he was taking one for the team.

“Look, don't overthink it,” she said, breaking the silence as she pulled up to the curb near the town square. Her tone was surprisingly encouraging, almost supportive. “Just copy what everyone else is doing, and you’ll be fine.”

Taylor nodded, managing a weak smile, and climbed out. As the truck pulled away, rumbling down the street, he was left standing alone on the cobblestones, a solitary figure in bubblegum pink against a backdrop of white snow and wooden chalets.

He didn't have to look far for his destination. In the centre of the square, framed by picturesque alpine shops and snow-dusted pine trees, a small group had already gathered. It was a morning session of Snow Yoga—one of the complimentary wellness activities Katie had enthusiastically circled on their itinerary. Now, it was Taylor’s turn to endure it.

He plodded over, the clunky moon boots making footsteps feel awkward and heavy. When the instructor, a woman with terrifyingly perfect posture, looked up, Taylor braced himself.

"Hi, I'm... uh, Katie," he said, his voice still sultry and feminine. He half-closed his eyes, waiting for the accusation, for the finger-pointing, for the laughter.

"Katie! Wonderful, you made it," the instructor beamed, checking a clipboard without checking for an Adam's apple or a bulge in his tight ski suit. "Grab a mat and find a space."

The disguise held. Taylor grabbed a patterned mat and unrolled it, trying to ignore the way his pink snowsuit rustled loudly with every movement.

The next hour was as painful as it was humiliating. Having not done any physical exercise in what felt like forever, Taylor’s body screamed in protest at the very concept of flexibility.

"Let’s begin with Downward Dog," the instructor chirped.

Taylor followed the others, bending at the waist and planting his manicured hands on the mat. It was a delicate operation; the long extensions meant he couldn't press his fingers completely flat without risking a break. He had to keep the tips slightly elevated, shifting the majority of his weight back onto his palms. It was only a subtle adjustment, but it was enough to mess with his balance, making the pose more challenging than it should have been.

Glancing around through the V of his legs, he realised he didn't stick out nearly as much as he’d feared; the other women were similarly bundled in designer winter gear, making his bright pink ensemble look like just another fashionable choice. That didn't make the indignity of the pose any easier to swallow. As he held it, his platinum bob hanging in his face and his eyes fixed on his own pink moon boots, he felt the blood rushing to his head while his unused muscles trembled.



From there, it only got worse.

"Transition into Cobra," the instructor commanded. Taylor dropped his hips, but his stiff lower back refused to cooperate. While the instructor curved gracefully, Taylor looked more like a plank of wood stuck in the snow, gritting his teeth as he tried to force his body into an arch that just wasn't happening.

"Now, stand tall for Tree Pose!"

This was a disaster. The thick platform soles felt like standing on marshmallows, creating a total disconnect between his feet and the mat below. As he hoisted one massive, padded boot against his inner thigh, the spongy suspension of his standing leg buckled under the shift in weight. He wobbled violently, arms windmilling as he fought for stability on the soft, unfamiliar soles.

The torture continued, pushing his stiff ligaments to their absolute breaking point. All the while, the town square buzzed to life around them, with tourists and locals pausing mid-stride to gawk at the spectacle. Taylor felt like a neon-pink beacon, straining and trembling on his mat. He kept his head down, wondering which would give out first - his dignity or his legs.

* * * * *

A few hours later, the relief of escaping the humiliating yoga session was short-lived. Muscles he didn't even know existed were aching, but as he tottered through the town center with Jordana, that physical soreness was overshadowed by a deep, exposed vulnerability.

He couldn't understand why she had insisted on dragging him out into town for the afternoon, especially when hiding back at the cabin seemed like a much safer—and certainly more comfortable—alternative. And, of course, a trip to town meant they couldn't just throw on sweatpants and a cozy sweater. No, they had to look "put together," as Jordana put it.

In reality, that meant a makeup touch-up and parading around in another one of his cousin's girly outfits—clothes he would never choose in a million years. But the real horror hit him when he realized the catch: to wear it, he'd need to shave his legs!

He had complained, protested, and pouted the entire time, but it hadn't changed a thing. Jordana had just calmly talked him through the process, teaching him how to avoid nicks and reasoning that it needed to be done eventually, so he might as well get it over with.

Now, the sensation of thin black nylon sliding against his smooth thighs felt startlingly different from the thick, opaque tights he'd worn the previous day. These felt lighter, daintier, and without the barrier of leg hair, the caress of the winter wind felt uncomfortably intimate.

The rest of the outfit didn't help his confidence. The cushioning plod of his Moon Boots was gone, replaced by the distinct click-clack of knee-high leather boots with a high block heel. Above them, he wore a pleated black miniskirt and the same pink sweater from that morning, which still clung tightly to his padded bra. Topping it all off was a cropped, glossy puffer jacket in a loud bubblegum pink, framing his face in a massive, voluminous faux-fur hood that perfectly matched his knitted mittens.

Beside him, Jordana looked effortlessly chic in earth tones. She wore a thick cream cable-knit sweater tucked into a plaid skirt of beige and black, all pulled together by a long, structured camel trench coat. Like him, she wore sheer black tights and knee-high boots, though hers were brown leather with a slightly lower heel that looked just a bit more manageable.

"Don't look so terrified," Jordana said, her tone supportive but amused. "That meerkat-on-alert look you've got going on is the only thing that's going to give you away. Seriously, you look great."

"Everyone's staring at me," Taylor hissed, his eyes darting around frantically.

"Of course they are," Jordana chuckled, giving his glossy pink sleeve a light tap. "You're a beautiful woman in a cute outfit. People are going to look."

"Stop messing with me," Taylor snapped, his voice tight as he concentrated on not twisting an ankle. His high block heels clacked loudly against the uneven, snow-dusted cobblestones, making every step feel precarious. "I'm not beautiful. That's ridiculous."



“I’m not messing with you,” Jordana replied, her voice losing its teasing edge. “If you don’t believe me now, you will by the end of this weekend. You’re a looker, Taylor. Like it or not.”

Taylor glanced down at the little skirt swishing around his upper thighs, watching the hem flutter and bounce with every step. His legs were already burning from the morning’s yoga, and the high-heeled boots were making it ten times worse. He ignored Jordana completely, knowing only that if he didn’t sit down soon, he was going to collapse.

Jordana seemed to read his mind. “Anyway, come on, let’s get out of the cold,” she said, steering him toward the entrance of a nearby coffee shop. “Let’s warm up in here. I’ve heard it’s rated pretty highly.”

They stepped inside, the distinct click of their heels and a bell chiming overhead announcing their arrival. The café was a welcoming space with a rustic, old-world charm—lined with dark wood panelling and filled with small, wooden tables bathed in the soft, golden glow of hanging pendant lights. The air was thick with the scent of roasted coffee and the low hum of conversation.

Following Jordana’s lead—while keeping his head low—Taylor stuffed his mittens into the pockets and shrugged off the puffer. Losing that big, voluminous layer changed everything. He felt instantly on display, realizing just how tight the sweater and how short the skirt actually were as he hung the jacket on a hook by the door.

He quickly stepped back to Jordana's side as they waited to order, trying to shrink behind her and make himself as small as possible while the barista took their requests.

Moments later, he found himself sitting at a small square table right in the center of the room. He shifted uncomfortably, feeling the cool, smooth vinyl of the chair press directly against the back of his barely covered thighs. He stared down at his steaming mug of hot chocolate and the golden, flaky pastry sitting next to it, but the knot of anxiety in his stomach was pulled so tight that the thought of eating made him feel physically sick.

Jordana took a slow, deliberate sip of her coffee, her eyes locking onto Taylor over the rim of the cup. "So," she started, setting the cup down with a soft clink against the saucer. "We have a slight problem."

Taylor's eyes snapped up to meet hers. "A problem?" he repeated, his voice jumping an octave. "What sort of problem?"

"Well," she said, her tone light but firm. "Remember that box you were driving up here? The one we need for the show? It's still in the Audi, isn't it?"

Taylor flinched. The memory of the breakdown was still fresh—the biting cold, the pain in his throat, the outfit. "Erm... yeah. Obviously. I mean... I was freezing, and I wasn't about to carry a big old box with me. At the time, I was more worried about not dying of hypothermia."

"It's okay," Jordana said soothingly. "That's perfectly understandable. I would have done the same thing." She leaned in slightly. "But now that you're safe, we need it. The show literally can't happen without it."

"Well, it's either still on the side of the road where I left it a few miles outside of town," Taylor said, his voice trailing off. He paused for a moment, blushing as he recalled sitting in the passenger seat of the Ford F-150 like a rescued damsel. "Or... that guy I mentioned. The one who dropped me off at the cabin. He said his brother ran a garage in town, and he'd call for a tow. So... it could be there."

"It is," Jordana said casually.

Taylor blinked, his long lash extensions fluttering. "Really? How do you know that?"

"Daniel stopped by the cabin this morning while you were at your class," she replied, a teasing smile playing on her lips. "He's a handsome one, isn't he?"

"I hadn't noticed," he stated flatly.

"Well, he is," Jordana chuckled. "Anyway, he wanted to let us know the car was safe at his brother's. Though he did mention there was some damage to the rear axle that needs fixing."

Taylor's eyes went wide. "That sounds expensive," he groaned.

"Yeah, most likely," Jordana said with a dismissive shrug. "But we can worry about the bill later. Right now, we just need the box."

"Okay, well, that doesn't seem like such a big problem then," Taylor replied, the tension in his shoulders finally easing. "So, you can just go around to the garage and pick it up."

"It's not quite that simple," Jordana sighed, shattering his momentary relief. "The garage is locked up tight until after the holidays."

"Then we ask him to open it," Taylor reasoned, his voice lifting with hope. "If we explain that we need the box for the carnival show, surely he'd help us out."

Jordana offered a small, satisfied smile. "Exactly. And you'll have the perfect opportunity to ask him later tonight. When he stopped by this morning, he asked if you could meet him to discuss the repairs over a drink. I told him you'd love to."

Taylor froze, the blood draining from his face as he stared at her in total disbelief. "Wait. Me? Meet him... like, at a bar? I can't do that!"

"Why not?" Jordana asked, acting like it was a perfectly normal thing for an eighteen-year-old man to do.

“Well, for one, I’m underage,” Taylor stammered, his voice bordering on frantic. “And he probably won’t even recognize me now anyway!”

“In Ontario, you’re underage. In Quebec, the legal age is eighteen,” Jordana corrected, completely unbothered. “And just tell him you went to the salon. It’s not that unusual.”

“Please, Jordana, I can’t do it. It’s too much,” Taylor pleaded, his stomach doing flips.

“Listen, Taylor,” Jordana said, her voice dropping the playful edge and turning stern for the first time since they met. “This whole situation is unfortunate and unusual. But you agreed last night to help us out. And you know the consequences if you don’t.”

“But... what do I even say to him?” Taylor asked nervously, burying his hands between his nylon-covered thighs.

Jordana smiled, a mischievous glint returning to her eyes. “You’ll figure something out. Try asking him nicely.”



* * * * *

The heavy oak door groaned open, and Taylor was immediately hit by two things: the wall of dry, wood-smoke-scented heat from inside the pub, and the terrifying realization that he was actually doing this.

“I can’t,” he whispered, his balance faltering as one heeled foot hit the welcome mat. He tried to backpedal, but a hand pressed firmly into the small of his back, cutting off his escape.

“You aren’t backing out now,” Regina murmured near his ear, her voice low to avoid a scene. “Just breathe. We’re right here with you.”

Taylor wasn’t breathing. He was hyperventilating. He stood in the entryway, trembling visibly, his eyes darting around the warm, dimly lit interior. The place was rustic and cozy—stone walls, a crackling fireplace, and strings of festive lights casting a soft glow over the patrons. To Taylor, however, it felt like walking into a lion’s den.

“I can’t go in dressed like this,” Taylor hissed. “Look at me. I look ridiculous. Why can’t I keep my coat on?”

“You look hot,” Jordana corrected from his other side, checking her own reflection in the windowpane. “Which is exactly the point. The coat just gets in the way.”

Taylor certainly didn’t feel hot—far from it. Stripped of his winter coat in the freezing vestibule, his skin was still prickling from the sudden drop in temperature. He glanced down at himself and felt a fresh wave of nausea. The outfit Jordana had curated for the evening’s “mission” was designed to impress—to ensure he caught Daniel’s eye—but for Taylor, it was a sensory overload unlike anything he had ever experienced.

He was wearing a black, off-the-shoulder velvet top that left his collarbones and neck completely exposed to the drafty air. Tucked into it was a black leather micro-miniskirt that was so tight he could barely take a full stride, worn over a pair of sheer black pantyhose that felt slippery to the touch. But the worst offenders were the shoes. They were his cousin’s prized possessions: a pair of towering, black platform pumps with red soles—stilt-like heels that pitched his weight entirely onto his toes and made him roughly six feet tall.

“The skirt is too short,” Taylor whined, tugging fruitlessly at the hem of the leather with his claw-like nails. “And these heels... I’m going to break my neck.”

“You’re very dramatic, aren’t you, Taylor?” Regina said as she nudged the door shut behind them. “If you made it from the truck and up that icy path without tripping, I’m sure you’ll manage on this flat wooden floor.”

“Remember, you’re just a pretty girl, dressed up and out for a drink at Christmas,” Jordana added. She reached out to remove a stray strand of platinum blonde hair that had stuck to his sticky red lips, taking a moment to inspect the smoky eye makeup she had meticulously applied earlier. “Daniel’s going to love it.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Taylor gulped.

“We’re going to be right over there,” Regina said, pointing a manicured nail toward a table in the far corner. “Moral support. And because I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

“Go on,” Regina added, giving him one last nudge. “He should be here any minute. Get a spot, order a drink, and look helpless. It’s your best look.”

Before Taylor could protest, the two women peeled away, slipping into the shadows and leaving him completely exposed.

The pub hummed with the low murmur of the early evening crowd. Taylor swallowed hard, his throat clicking dryly. He took a tentative step, and to his hyper-aware senses, the sharp clack of his platform heel against the wood echoed through the room like a gunshot.

He froze, waiting for the room to turn and stare, but the hum continued. Only a few heads turned his way—lazy curiosity rather than shock. Taylor exhaled a shaky breath and forced his legs to move again. It was a terrifying balancing act; the heels forced his feet into such a steep, unnatural arch that he felt completely disconnected from the floor. Left. Right. Don't fall. His ankles wobbled dangerously with every step as he made his precarious, clicking journey toward the bar.

Taylor reached the bar and clamped both hands onto the edge to steady himself. For a moment, the relief of simply not moving was enough to slow his heart. But then a flutter of long lashes and a flash of platinum hair in his peripheral vision dragged reality crashing back. He was out in public—exposed, uncomfortable, and completely out of his depth in a tight leather skirt that barely covered his backside, and heels that made every step pure agony.

A bartender appeared in front of him, polishing a glass with a dish towel. He fired off a greeting in rapid French, eyebrows lifted in friendly expectation.

Taylor loosened his grip, straightened, and stared back with wide, frightened eyes—his mind utterly blank as the silence stretched, thick and awkward.

The bartender's smile didn't falter. He switched smoothly. "Ah. English? What can I get you?"

Taylor panicked, suddenly realising he'd never actually ordered a drink in a bar before. He didn't have a usual. He didn't even know what people drank in places like this. Panic clawed at his throat. He ransacked his memory for what his mum or aunt would ask for. He needed to say something—anything—that sounded like a woman who belonged here.

"I'll have a glass of wine, please," he managed, voice tight.

"Excellent choice." The bartender leaned in, still cheerful. "We have a lovely Pinot Noir from the Okanagan, a heavy Cabernet, a crisp Sauvignon Blanc if you prefer white, or—"

It was a tidal wave of words. Taylor blinked, the names washing over him like static. Heat crept up his neck, clashing with the cold draft on his bare shoulders.

"That one," Taylor blurted. "The white one."

The bartender cocked a half-smile, amused but professional. "Coming right up."

Taylor exhaled, his shoulders slumping slightly as the man turned away. He had survived the first hurdle.

"Taylor?"

The voice came from his left—deep, familiar, and pitched like a question.

Taylor pivoted too fast. His ankles wobbled violently in the platform pumps, and he had to slap a hand back onto the bar to stop himself from wiping out. He looked up and found Daniel there—full beard, flannel shirt, masculine and unfairly comfortable. He was smiling, though his eyes were wide as they took in the sight of him.



“Oh. Hey,” Taylor squeaked, locking his knees as his legs turned to jelly inside the sheer hose.

“Wow,” Daniel said, letting out a breathy laugh as he stepped closer. His gaze swept over Taylor’s platinum bob and cosmetically altered face. “You look... different.” He paused, realizing how that sounded. “In a good way.”

Taylor forced a smile onto his glossy, ruby-red lips. “Yeah, I went to that salon in town. Nancy did a real number on me.” He replied, punctuating it with a nervous, high-pitched giggle that made him cringe internally.

“Ah, that explains it,” Daniel said, leaning an elbow on the bar next to him. “I hear she’s a bit eccentric, but people seem to love her work.”

Taylor just nodded enthusiastically, terrified that if he tried to speak, he’d say something stupid.

“Well, like I said—you look great,” Daniel added, clearly clocking the nervous energy rolling off him. “Can I get you a drink? What are you having?”

Taylor's stomach dropped. Had he already messed up? "Oh... I, uh, I already ordered," he stammered, the flush of humiliation rising again. "Sorry. I probably should've waited."

"No, no. It's fine," Daniel said easily. "Don't worry about it."

The bartender returned and set a tall, stemmed glass in front of Taylor. Daniel nodded to him. "Bonsoir, Henry."

"Monsieur Daniel," the bartender replied warmly.

"Put this on my tab, would you?" Daniel gestured to Taylor's wine. "And I'll take a Creemore Lager."

"Of course. Coming right up."

Taylor just stood there, grinning like an idiot, lightly tapping his long nails on the bar—feeling small despite the six-inch heels.

"So," Daniel said, turning his full attention back to Taylor. "Would you like to sit by the bar? Or somewhere a bit more comfortable?"

Taylor looked down. The barstools were tall—intimidatingly tall. Getting onto one would mean hoisting his legs up, and in his micro-miniskirt, that was a guaranteed way to flash the entire pub. He didn't trust himself to do it in anything resembling a ladylike manner. And once he was up there, he'd be on display for the whole room.

He looked back up, following Daniel's outstretched arm towards a plush sofa near a faux fireplace.

Taylor grimaced internally. It would be intimate—and would likely give the wrong impression—but it was the lesser of two evils.

"The sofa," Taylor decided. "Let's do the sofa."

After an awkward, ungainly drop onto the sofa, Taylor immediately ended up wrestling with his skirt—tugging the leather down, smoothing it, shifting his hips as those infuriatingly tall heels pushed his knees up towards his chest. Eventually, he managed something that passed for ladylike: legs folded at the thigh, posture upright, hands carefully occupied with his glass. It looked right. It didn't feel right. Keeping his legs pressed together meant an uncomfortable, constant pressure on what he had tucked between them, but he forced himself to ignore it.

Daniel, on the other hand, sat down with ease and, for the first ten minutes, did almost all the work. He said it was good to see Taylor again, and how lucky the timing had been yesterday—him driving by and being able to help. Taylor answered in small pieces: a few words here, a nod there, the sort of polite noises that kept the conversation going without risking saying something wrong.

Daniel didn't seem to notice the strain behind it. He just kept chatting, easy and steady, filling the gaps so Taylor didn't have to.

The warmth from the fire and the first glass of wine soon began to take the edge off Taylor's nerves. By the time a second glass arrived, he caught himself thinking—quietly, cautiously—that this wasn't so bad. Daniel was friendly and... normal. And if he'd suspected anything was off—if he'd looked at Taylor and seen the truth, a petrified man in a stuffed bra—surely there would've been something by now: a pause, a question, a flicker of doubt. Instead, Daniel kept meeting his eyes, smiling, and treating him like the lady he appeared to be.

That made it easier to talk.

Taylor found himself drifting into a familiar complaint: not knowing what he was meant to do with his life, his mum constantly on at him, the maddening way older people spoke as if their generation had written the rulebook. Daniel didn't laugh. He just nodded, then offered his own version of the same problem—his dad had wanted him to take over the family business, and for years, Daniel had gone along with it because it was easier than having the fight. Eventually, he'd stopped pretending. He'd left for Montréal, worked bar jobs, saved what he could, and tried to build something that actually felt like his. Even now, with him back in town and doing alright for himself, the tension with his father hadn't magically disappeared. Moving home had been about family, not forgiveness.



As Daniel talked, Taylor found himself slipping out of that constant, tense awareness of what he was wearing. It still snapped back into focus now and then when he'd jab himself with one of his absurd nails, or brush a hand over an abnormally silky thigh and get a jolt of wrongness—but it wasn't consuming him the way it had before.

He even started to relax enough to tease.

When Daniel made a comment about how “brave” it was to wear heels like his in winter, Taylor shot back with a dry little smile and asked if Daniel was qualified to give fashion advice, following up by asking if he owned a different flannel shirt for each day of the week. Daniel laughed, and the sound of it—warm, genuine—made Taylor feel at ease.

After a while, Taylor excused himself to use the bathroom, more for a breather than anything else. The second he was inside, Jordana and Regina slipped in after him.

They looked delighted.

“You’re doing amazing,” Jordana cried, her eyes shining like she could hardly believe it was working.

Regina leaned in, all business under the satisfaction. “Keep it going. And remember what we came for. Ask about the box in the car.”

They touched up his lip gloss with quick, practised movements, straightened the sleeves of his velvet top, then shooed him back out before he could work himself into another panic.

Back on the sofa, Taylor waited for a gap in the conversation and brought it up—trying to sound casual. Daniel’s expression shifted into something thoughtful. He paused, then said tonight wasn’t ideal because his brother was away until morning. But he was going over the following evening for a family get-together, and he could probably slip out and open the garage then.

Relief hit Taylor so hard it almost made him light-headed.

By the time the third glass of wine was in him, the drink had made him bolder in all the worst ways. The conversation swung into hockey, and suddenly Taylor was talking like himself again—competitive, cocky, trying to outdo Daniel story for story. Daniel seemed genuinely entertained by it, clearly amused that someone who looked so polished could be so aggressive on the ice.

Then Daniel, grinning, announced he was the best pool player in town.

Taylor glanced past him and spotted the table at the back of the room. In his head, it wasn’t a pub anymore—it was Steve’s basement, a battered table, years of muscle memory. And in that moment, he forgot the skirt, forgot the heels, forgot the nails, forgot the fact he was meant to be “a lady”.

“Prove it,” he said, far too confidently.

Daniel agreed—on one condition.

If Taylor lost, Daniel wouldn’t just pop over for the box the next evening. Taylor would come with him to the family gathering as his date.

If Taylor won, Daniel would cover the repair costs for the Audi.

Drunk and certain of himself, Taylor agreed instantly.

He regretted his decision the moment he tried to chalk his cue, the blue cube slipping from his long-nailed grasp and skittering across the wooden floorboards. It only got worse when he tried to bend and pick it up—his tight, restrictive skirt creaking and refusing to give—until he had no choice but to accept Daniel’s offer to help, blushing in embarrassment.

The game went about as badly as you’d imagine. Taylor very quickly discovered that the pool was a much more challenging game when dressed as a tottering blonde in a micro-miniskirt, all lashes and lip gloss, trying not to look as out of his depth as he felt.

To take a proper shot, he needed to bend and get his eye down the line of the cue. The skirt simply wouldn’t allow it. Every time he tried to lean over the table, the leather cinched and resisted, forcing him into an awkward half-bend that left him too high and too far back to see anything properly. The heels made things worse. They wouldn’t let him plant his feet flat; he was perched on the balls of his feet, his ankles working overtime. If he leaned even a little too far forward, the soles skated against the wooden floorboards, and his stomach lurched with the fear of falling.

And then there were the nails. Normally, he’d plant his fingertips on the cloth and form a steady groove between thumb and index finger for the cue to slide through. With the acrylics, his fingertips couldn’t touch the felt—only the hard tips did—leaving his usual steady bridge wobbly and unstable. He had to play in a whole new way, flattening his palm and curling his fingers up to keep the nails off the cloth. It felt awkward, forced, and completely unnatural.

He didn’t pot a single ball!

But that still didn’t make it quick, because Daniel kept missing easy shots on purpose—simple ones he’d normally sink without thinking—giving Taylor chance after chance and stretching the whole thing out into a slow, public embarrassment.

After fifteen humiliating minutes, Taylor had had enough. He knew he couldn't win and just wanted it over. He was sick of being on display, sick of his restrictive outfit, and felt stupid for challenging Daniel in the first place. He lined up on the black, choosing the quickest way to finish it, even if it meant handing Daniel the win.

He bent from the waist as far as the skirt would tolerate, blonde hair tickling his cheek as he tried to judge the angle from too high up—looking through fluttering lashes and guessing the line he couldn't properly see.

Daniel had positioned himself behind the shot at the far end of the table, cue in hand, like he was simply waiting for his turn. Taylor's eyes flicked up for half a second and caught Daniel watching him instead of the table—his gaze locked on the tight leather moulded around his backside, lingering there with lazy, obvious interest. Taylor snapped his focus back to the table and hit the ball too quickly, just to end the moment.



The shot was awful. The ball spun off and rolled a few useless inches.

“Shit,” Taylor snapped, louder than he meant to.

Daniel only chuckled. “It’s alright. Pool’s harder than it looks.” He nodded towards the table and stepped closer. “Want me to help you line the next one up?”

“No,” Taylor said quickly, cheeks burning. “It’s the wine. That’s all.”

He battled on for another five minutes, stubbornly refusing the help, until Daniel mercifully ended the game.

They returned to the sofa, and Daniel ordered another round as if the game hadn’t happened. To his credit, he didn’t gloat. He just talked in that easy, matter-of-fact way of his, saying he’d played on that table for years, and that Taylor shouldn’t feel bad about losing because he honestly couldn’t remember the last time anyone had been able to beat him.

Daniel rolled straight into another story. Taylor smiled when he was supposed to and made the right little noises, but the confidence that had pushed him into the challenge was dead. The drink didn’t blur the humiliation; it sharpened it. He kept picturing himself at the table, wobbling, awkwardly bending, and Daniel watching, so he kept his answers short and let Daniel do the talking.

From across the room, Regina and Jordana clearly noticed the shift in mood. They crossed over with bright smiles as if they’d only just spotted him.

“There you are,” Jordana said, cheerful as anything. “We’re heading back now. Need a ride?”

Daniel looked up, ready to suggest he could give Taylor a ride back, but the crossdressed man beat him to it with a quick, breathless “Yes,” already pushing himself up onto his aching feet.

Daniel’s smile faltered for half a second, but quickly returned. He walked them to the exit, all charm and good manners.

“Thanks for tonight,” he said, stopping with Taylor by the door. “I had a great time. And... I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Taylor managed a tight nod.

He glanced toward the door, ready to make his escape, but made the mistake of looking back. Daniel was staring up at the ceiling.

Taylor’s eyes followed, and he saw it hanging.

Mistletoe.

His heart dropped.

Daniel didn’t hesitate. He leaned in with a small, satisfied smile. Taylor tried to turn his head away, but not fast enough. The kiss landed crooked at the corner of his mouth, brushing his cheek, and for a split second, he could smell the beer on Daniel’s breath and feel the rough bristle of his beard scrape against his inflated lips.



Not knowing how to react, Taylor just stood there, blank and stunned.

Regina's hand closed around his wrist. "Come on," she said, sweet as anything. "Time to go, Missy."

He stumbled into the vestibule, heels clattering sharply as Jordana and Regina guided him out. The door shut behind them, and the noise of the pub dropped away, leaving only the pounding of his wine-induced headache and the frantic thump of his heart. He lifted a hand to his mouth on instinct, clumsy with drink and acrylics, and smeared at the corner of his lips as if he could wipe the kiss away.

"Oi—leave it," Jordana murmured, catching his wrist gently and lowering his hand before he destroyed his lipstick completely.

Regina had already yanked his coat from the hooks and shaken it open. "Arms," she said briskly, steering him into it like she was dressing a small child. When the collar was straight, she leaned in, eyes sharp with curiosity. "Well? That 'see you tomorrow' comment. Does that mean it worked? Are we getting the box back?"

Taylor gave a small, exhausted nod.

"Good work, Taylor," she replied, bright with satisfaction. "Honestly. That couldn't have gone better."

Taylor didn't reply, staring through her with a glazed-over expression.

"Come on," Jordana said more gently. "Let's get you to bed." She and Regina slipped on their coats, then each took one of Taylor's arms and led him outside.

The cold hit his pantyhosed legs like a slap. Snow crunched underfoot as he staggered forward, each step a careful negotiation with the stiletto heels sinking into the snow. As they made their way to Regina's truck, Taylor could only focus on one thing: how glorious it would feel to finally kick off the damn heels and be done with this ridiculous night.

* * * * *

Taylor woke to a world that was too bright, too loud, and entirely too painful.

It was one of the worst hangovers of his young life—a throbbing, full-body punishment for drinking wine like water the night before. His head felt like it was being squeezed in a vice, his stomach was doing slow, nauseous somersaults, and the muscles in his legs ached with a deep, burning fatigue.

To make matters worse, the first thing he saw was Jordana. She was standing over his bed, annoyingly cheerful and already dressed, ushering him up with a clap of her hands.

"Up you get, sleeping beauty. Shower time. You've got somewhere to be."

Taylor groaned, pulling the duvet over his face, but he didn't have the strength to fight her. He shuffled to the bathroom like a zombie. It was only when the hot water hit his skin that the fog began to clear, and unfortunately, the memories came rushing in to replace it.

The date at the pub. The crushing embarrassment of the pool game. And then, the finale: the kiss. The memory of the rough stubble against his chemically plumped lips made him cringe so hard he nearly lost his footing on the wet tiles.

The shower helped steady him, but he still felt fragile as Jordana sat him down to start the transformation. She worked quickly—styling his platinum bob and applying bright, daytime-appropriate makeup that looked far too fresh for how wretched he felt inside—before presenting the outfit.

It was another skirt.

"Seriously?" Taylor croaked.

"It's cute. Now get dressed."

The process began with the underwear—black panties and a matching bra, the cups stuffed with socks to fake a silhouette he didn't have. Taylor nipped back into the bathroom to slip into the skimpy set, grimacing as he tucked his privates away exactly as he'd been instructed the day before. He returned to the bedroom, sat on the edge of the bed, and grudgingly began rolling the sheer black tights up his hairless legs. A beige cashmere sweater followed, which was at least soft against his skin. Finally, he secured the skirt around his waist—a short, brown plaid wrap-around number with a high slit running up his thigh that felt drafty even indoors.

But the real argument started with the shoes. Jordana presented him with a pair of black, knee-high leather boots with thick platform heels. They were the same ones he'd worn to the coffee shop the previous afternoon.

"Jordana, please," Taylor begged, rubbing his aching calves through his pantyhose. "My legs are killing me. Can't I just wear something flat? Ugg boots? Please, anything else?"

"Nope," Jordana said, popping the 'p' as she handed them over. "These are Katie's go-to for days like today. Besides, you need the practice."

“Practice for what?” Taylor grumbled, slipping his foot into the stiff leather. Jordana didn’t answer.

Forty-five minutes later, after managing to nibble on a single corner of dry toast, Taylor was back in the passenger seat of the truck. He spent the ride staring down at his shiny thighs, nervously picking at the hem of the little skirt. At least Jordana was driving this time, humming along to the radio while she navigated the snowy roads, heading into town for her own salon appointment.

She pulled over just off the main street, the truck idling with a deep rumble that vibrated through Taylor’s sensitive skull.

“Alright, this is you,” she said, unlocking the doors. “Listen, don’t overthink it. Just smile, try your best, and if you mess up, people will just think you’re another girl trying a new hobby for the first time. You’ll be fine.”

Before Taylor could protest, she practically pushed him out.

“Have fun!” she called, and then roared away, leaving him stranded on the sidewalk.

The wind hit him instantly. It whistled up the snow-covered street, biting right through the thin tights as if they weren’t even there. Taylor shivered, tugging his coat tighter around his feminized body. He shook his throbbing head, wondering for the hundredth time how he had let himself get roped into this mess.

He took a deep breath of freezing air, which did nothing for his nausea, and turned toward the wooden building in front of him. It was time for the candle-making class his cousin had signed up for—and that he now had to suffer through, trying to appear cheerful while wearing her clothes, and praying he didn't throw up.

The moment Taylor stepped through the door, the shop’s atmosphere assaulted him. It wasn't just warm; it was stifling—a humid, invisible wall thick with the cloying scents of lavender, vanilla, and hot wax that made his already fragile stomach turn over.

Before he could consider a strategic retreat, he was intercepted by an instructor vibrating with terrifyingly high energy.

“Welcome! Here for the beginner’s pour?” she chirped, brandishing a clipboard.

“Yes,” Taylor replied. The syllable slipped out naturally, soft and breathy, bypassing his conscious control. “I’m Katie.”

“Katie... Katie... Ah, here we are.” She ticked the name off her list with a flourish. “Hang your coat over there and grab an apron. You’re right on time, hun. We’re just getting started.”

Reluctantly, Taylor surrendered his fur jacket—his armour against the world. Without it, he felt suddenly exposed, painfully aware of the cute outfit leaving him vulnerable to scrutiny. He took down a navy blue apron and looped it over his head, glancing nervously toward the other participants to see if they were wondering what a man was doing there dressed in a picture-perfect autumn ensemble that felt entirely like a costume. The thought hammered in his mind as he fumbled blindly behind his back, his fingers failing to secure the strings around his waist.

“Having trouble there, hun?” The instructor’s voice right beside his ear made him jump. “Here, let me help you with that.”

Taylor squeaked out a thank you, freezing as the woman tied a secure knot at the small of his back.

“There you go. Pretty as a picture—I love your outfit,” she added with a warm smile, pointing a manicured finger. “You’re at station four, just over there.”

Blushing furiously at the compliment, Taylor squeaked another thanks and shuffled toward a wooden table in the center of the room. His platform boots clunked heavily against the floorboards, a jarring sound in the cozy space. He scanned the area for a stool, a chair—anything to take the weight off his throbbing feet—but to his dismay, the room was devoid of seating. It was a standing workshop.

He let out a low, internal groan. Two hours. He was going to have to stand in these heels for two hours.

He took his position at station four, shifting his weight in a futile attempt to relieve the crushing pressure on his toes. He felt painfully conspicuous, teetering on the edge of a humiliating stumble, while the instructor launched into a cheerful, five-minute monologue about the history of soy wax and the importance of 'scent throw.'

"Alright, ladies, let's get hands-on! Grab your pitchers!" the instructor finally announced.

Taylor reached out, but his grip faltered immediately. Click. The long, ombre acrylics struck the metal handle loud enough to be heard. They felt like foreign objects glued to his fingertips, rendering his hands clumsy and useless. He couldn't wrap his hand around the handle naturally; instead, he had to pinch it awkwardly between the pads of his fingers to keep the hard tips from driving into his palm.

Around him, the other women moved with an envy-inducing ease. Dressed far more casually than he was, they chatted and laughed while measuring out fragrance oils, completely unbothered.

“Careful with the pour,” the instructor advised, drifting past him. “Slow and steady.”

Startled, Taylor turned too abruptly. The hot liquid wax sashed violently against the rim, threatening to spill onto the floorboards.



“Whoa, keep it over the table, hun,” the instructor scolded gently. “I wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself.”

"Sorry, won't happen again," Taylor blurted out. The words were smooth and feminine, requiring no effort to produce—the ease of it sent a fresh spike of anxiety through him; the fact that his voice still hadn't recovered was becoming a genuine problem.

The rest of the workshop blurred into an agonizing test of endurance, every minute standing in place sending fresh shockwaves of fire up his calves. He moved through the remaining steps like a robot, nodding mechanically at the instructor while silently counting down the seconds until freedom. When the class was finally dismissed, Taylor didn't linger for the post-pour social; he grabbed his finished candles, muttered a breathless goodbye, and practically fled out the door, the freezing winter air hitting his flushed face like a blessing as he limped toward the parking lot.

Jordana was already there, idling at the curb. Taylor hopped in, nearly collapsing into the passenger seat, thankful to be off his feet and—more importantly—hidden behind the frost-coated glass.

"So, how was it?" Jordana asked with a bright, expectant smile.

"Don't ask," Taylor replied with a heavy sigh, slumping low in the seat. "How was the salon?"

"Great," Jordana chirped, putting the car in gear. "I didn't go crazy like you, just a trim and a fresh manicure. What do you think?" She dangled a hand over the center console, showing off oval-shaped nails painted a soft, icy blue.

"Very nice," Taylor lied, forcing a tight smile. "Can we go back to the cabin? I seriously need to rest."

"Not yet," Jordana replied breezily.

Taylor whipped his head around, giving her a look of genuine alarm. "What?"

"We have to make a stop first. It won't take long, promise."

The stop, to Taylor's dismay, was a brightly lit local boutique that smelled aggressively of potpourri. It was here that his misery found a new stage. While Jordana tore through the racks with the focus of a tactical strike team, flicking through hangers in a rapid-fire rhythm that grated on his last nerve, Taylor simply loomed. He dragged his clunky boots through the aisles, arms crossed tight over his chest, offering nothing but noncommittal grunts whenever she held up a garment for inspection. She didn't seem to care; she would answer her own questions, replace the rejected item, and dive back into search mode.

Then, she stopped.

"This is the one," she announced, her voice pitching up with triumph. She pulled a hanger free and spun around.

It was a striking mini dress in a deep forest green, cut from soft, shimmering velvet. It featured long, elegant sleeves and a wrap-style bodice that created a distinct V-neckline—stylish, undeniably, feminine, and far too short for Taylor's comfort.

"Here. Just try it on."

She thrust the garment into his space before he could protest. Taylor took it automatically, his long, manicured nails clicking softly against the hanger. He held it up against his padded chest, the rich green fabric contrasting sharply with his beige sweater and white jacket. He rubbed the velvet sleeve with his fingertips; on Jordana, this would look great. On him? In public? The thought made his skin crawl.

"You can't be serious," he deadpanned, giving her a flat look. "This is a hard pass."



Jordana's sunny disposition evaporated. She didn't just frown; she recoiled, her patience finally snapping.

"Well, if you don't want my help, find your own dress, Miss Miseryguts." She crossed her arms, giving him a look that made him want to disappear. "The women are all wearing green tonight, just so you know. I'll see you back at the cabin."

She turned and started walking toward the door.

That woke Taylor up fast. He couldn't be left here—alone, holding a velvet dress, in the middle of a women's boutique.

"What? Wait!" Taylor scrambled after her, the sound of his heels clattering on the hardwood floor echoing throughout the space. "Look, I'm sorry! It's just... a lot. Don't go. Of course, I want your help."

Jordana stopped. She turned back, saw the genuine panic on his face, and sighed. "Okay. I get it. It is a lot. But you have to cheer up and work with me here, Taylor. Being around you is killing my Christmas vibe."

“Okay, I’ll try,” he promised, nodding quickly. He looked down at the tiny green dress, trying to get his breathing under control, when a thought hit him.

He looked up slowly, eyes narrowing. “Wait. How do you know everyone is wearing green?”

“I asked Daniel if there was a theme, and that’s what he said,” Jordana replied matter-of-factly.

“Oh, okay...” Taylor nodded, then froze. “Wait. Asked Daniel how?”

Jordana chuckled, looking entirely too smug as she leaned against a display stand, eyes locked on his face. “He gave me his number to pass on to you when he came around the cabin. But since you don’t have a phone and would panic about what to say, I’ve been texting him on your behalf. How else do you think we knew where to meet him for your date last night?”

“It wasn’t a date,” Taylor stammered, face heating up as he remembered the kiss. “And... what exactly have you been saying to him?”

“Oh, nothing bad,” she replied playfully. “Just that you had fun and were really excited to see him tonight. I might have thrown in a few compliments, too. You know, normal stuff.”

“You said what?” Taylor squeaked, his voice cracking violently. He stared at her, wide-eyed and horrified.

“Well, what did you expect me to say?” Jordana shrugged. “Daniel is our ticket to getting that box back. If we need to flirt a little to get it, so be it. Remember, the show can’t go on without it.” She pointed a manicured finger toward the fitting rooms. “Now, go try on the dress. And come out with a smile on your face. We still have a lot to do before tonight.”

* * * * *

That evening, Taylor found himself back in the biting cold, his body seizing with violent shivers as the wind sliced right through his sheer tights like razor blades. The rest of his outfit, partially hidden beneath his fur coat—for now—was infinitely worse than anything he had been forced to endure before.

He stood before the massive, mansion-like house on the edge of town, the structure looming over him in the darkness. He reached out to press the doorbell, his hand trembling uncontrollably. He had to line up the tip of his long acrylic nail with agonizing precision, slowly pushing it against the button until a loud, echoing ding-dong resonated from deep inside the house.

Then, time seemed to stand still.

For what felt like an eternity, he waited on wobbling ankles, his patent platform pumps—with their terrifying six-inch heels—doing their absolute best to topple him. His arches screamed in protest, cramping under the strain, while the wind swirled around his feminized frame. The only sound, apart from the relentless gale, was the chatter of his teeth as he stared at his reflection in the frosted glass panel of the front door.

The image was blurred, but what he could see did little to settle his frayed nerves: a cute platinum blonde bob, fluttering lashes surrounding eyes heavy with sultry makeup, and huge, glossy red lips. It definitely wasn’t the reflection of a man!

To make matters worse, the newest, horribly uncomfortable addition to his look cemented the illusion. Rolled-up socks weren’t an option with the plunging neckline of the little velvet dress; instead, Jordana had engineered a painful alternative. She had pushed the skin of his chest together, wrapping heavy-duty tape around his torso to force his flat chest into two fleshy mounds. With jelly-like inserts slipped underneath and a tight strapless bra locking it all in place,

the result was a frighteningly real cleavage. The crushing pressure of the tape rivalled both the tight tuck between his legs and the waist clincher digging into his ribs, creating a trifecta of absolute misery.

With his heart pounding in his chest, Taylor seriously considered turning around and bolting. But one glance down at those ridiculously tall heels—supposedly his cousin’s favourite pair when she was trying to impress—put an end to that idea. The thought of navigating the long, slippery walk back to the cabin in them was a suicide mission.

Then, a shadow darkened the glass panel. The door swung open, releasing a welcome blast of warm air and revealing a brunette woman who looked the picture of festive comfort. She was dressed in a green sweater and knee-length red skirt, but it was her footwear that sparked a pang of genuine jealousy—stylish ankle boots with heels less than half the height of the pumps currently punishing his own aching feet.

“Oh, hey,” the woman announced with a bright smile. “You must be Taylor? I’m Melody, Antoine’s wife.”

Remembering Daniel mention his brother’s name was Antoine, Taylor forced a smile onto his plump lips. “Hi Melody, it’s lovely to meet you. Here, this is for you?” he said, passing over the bottle of wine that had been chilling his left hand to the bone.

Melody took the wine, inspecting the label. “Ooh, French. You have good taste. But sorry, where are my manners? Please, come in! You must be freezing.”

“Thanks,” Taylor replied sweetly as he clicked his way inside, the warmth wrapping around him as Melody closed the door behind him.

“Here, let me take your coat,” Melody offered, stepping in to help.

Taylor obliged, letting the heavy fur slide from his shoulders. As she turned to hang it, he took a shaky breath, his eyes wandering up the grand, sweeping staircase to the high ceilings above. Okay, someone is doing very well for themselves, he thought, momentarily distracted from his nerves.

“Oh, wow,” Melody breathed, turning back. Her eyes swept over the shimmering green velvet. “I absolutely love that dress. It is so festive.” She paused, her expression dropping into a playful pout. “Though honestly? You could have been a little more considerate. You’ve made my outfit look like an old sack.”

Taylor’s stomach dropped. “Oh... God, sorry. I didn’t mean to... I just... um...”

Melody burst out laughing, reaching out to gently squeeze his arm. “Oh, aren’t you just the cutest? Relax, I’m only messing with you. Come on, follow me to the kitchen, and I’ll introduce you to everyone.”

Ten minutes later, having survived the initial gauntlet of family introductions—a thoroughly overwhelming blur of awkward handshakes and polite small talk—Taylor found a momentary sanctuary in the house’s massive living room.

He stood positioned between a towering, beautifully decorated Christmas tree, heavy with gold and red ornaments, and a rough-hewn stone fireplace where a fire cracked and roared. Sipping on a flute of champagne, he let the bubbles distract him as the heat from the hearth radiated into his nylon-clad legs, finally chasing away the numbness in his toes and fingertips. Taylor tried to mentally catalogue the people he had just met in the kitchen.

There was Melody, the effervescent hostess whose energy seemed to fill every corner of the room. Then her husband, Antoine—whose booming laugh and commanding presence made it immediately obvious he was the one bankrolling this lavish estate—and their son, Sebastian, who had offered a quick, toothy grin before immediately returning his undivided attention to a toy truck. Finally, there were the parents: Jacqueline, a woman with a sharp, observant gaze that seemed to miss nothing, and her husband... Mathieu? Or was it Matthias?

Taylor furrowed his brow, staring down at the fascinatingly deep cleavage Jordana had sculpted as he pondered the name, until the sound of a man clearing his throat behind him made him jump.

He carefully swivelled on his stilettos, steadying himself before looking up. Suddenly, he was face-to-face with Daniel, fresh from the shower. For once, the man wasn’t wearing plaid. Instead, he was dressed in a crisp red shirt, his face lit up by a huge, genuine smile.

“Wow,” Daniel beamed, his eyes sweeping over the green velvet dress and the sheer tights. “You look better every time I see you.”

He crossed the distance between them in two strides, leaning in to plant a soft, lingering kiss on Taylor's cheek. He stepped back, keeping his eyes locked on Taylor's.

"Seriously," he added, his voice dropping an octave. "You look stunning tonight."

Taylor felt the blood rush to his face, turning him beet red beneath his makeup. He tightened his fingers around the delicate stem of his glass, forcing himself to smile to mask the sudden wave of embarrassment crashing over him.



The embarrassment from the compliment lingered, a hot flush that refused to fade as Taylor desperately searched for a topic to divert attention away from his appearance. He shifted his weight, the movement sending a fresh spike of agony up his calves as a six-inch heel caught on the rug beneath.

“So,” Taylor managed, his voice still sounding foreign to his ears. “How was your day?”

Daniel leaned casually against the rough stone of the fireplace, looking entirely too comfortable in his slacks and crisp red shirt. “Busy, actually. Spent half the afternoon running around helping a friend find a gift for his wife. It’s a nightmare out there. What about you? Did you get up to much?”

“I... took a class,” Taylor blurted out. “Candle-making.”

Daniel’s eyebrows shot up. “Candle-making? Sounds... fun.”

“It’s harder than it sounds,” Taylor replied, the words tumbling out a little too fast to pass for relaxed. He took a nervous sip of champagne, his mind racing for a way to shift the spotlight. “It’s actually very... technical. But I’d rather hear about your shopping trip. Did you manage to find something?”

He nodded along as Daniel launched into a detailed recount of his afternoon, feigning interest while his focus narrowed entirely to a silent battle to find an ounce of comfort. Simply standing still had become a torture all its own. The heavy-duty tape binding his chest pinched mercilessly with every breath, while the velvet dress seemed to cling tighter to his figure with every passing second. Down below, his toes screamed in protest, feeling as though they were being slowly crushed in a vice.

“Dinner is served!” Melody’s voice rang out from the hallway, saving him from having to hear about the unusually long queue in the local sportswear store.

Daniel stepped forward and offered his arm with gentlemanly flair. “Shall we?”

Taylor simply nodded, looping his arm through Daniel’s and clutching the solid muscle of his bicep to steady himself. He took a cautious step, his six-inch heels sinking slightly into the rug before clicking onto the unforgiving hardwood. The journey to the dining room was a slow, mincing shuffle. Every step sent a spike of agony up his calves, his hips rolling in a wide, exaggerated sway as he fought to stay upright on his cousin’s towering platforms.

They entered the dining room, and for a second, the sheer festive grandeur of the space made Taylor pause. It was a scene straight out of a holiday card. A brass chandelier cast a warm, golden glow over the long wooden table, catching the sparkle of crystal glasses and illuminating a centerpiece of flickering candles and holly. At the head of the table sat a massive, golden-brown turkey, still steaming, while through the large window behind it, snow fell softly against the dark blue night, perfectly framing the warmth inside.

As he was shown towards his seat next to Daniel, the realization hit him with the force of a physical blow: this wasn’t just a casual family meal. This was Christmas dinner. He was crashing their most sacred family occasion dressed like a provocatively wrapped Christmas present.

Sitting down offered a fleeting moment of relief for his throbbing feet, but the respite was short-lived. As he lowered himself onto the wooden chair, the hem of the green velvet dress rode up dangerously high, leaving nearly the entire length of his nylon-clad thighs exposed. He tried to discreetly tug the fabric back down, but found it impossible; the dress’s silky slip lining just glided helplessly over his smooth tights, refusing to catch. Defeated, he gave up, clasping his hands tightly in his lap and praying no one would notice.

And the embarrassment didn’t let up from there.

As the side dishes were passed around family-style, Antoine handed Taylor a heavy ceramic bowl filled with roasted potatoes. “Go ahead, help yourself.”

“Thank you,” Taylor said, forcing a smile. The weight of the overloaded bowl normally wouldn’t have posed a challenge, but the extreme length of his nails forced him into a weak, awkward grip that quickly had his hand trembling. He reached for the large silver serving spoon with his free hand to scoop a portion onto his plate, but the mechanics were all wrong. His index finger slipped against the polished silver handle, twisting the utensil violently in his grip and turning it into an impromptu catapult.

Two roasted potatoes launched themselves from the bowl, bouncing across the table with a dull thud-thud before rolling to a stop near the centerpiece.

The table went silent for a split second before Antoine let out a hearty chuckle. "Slippery little devils, aren't they?"

"Oh God, I am so sorry," Taylor stammered, his face burning hot beneath his makeup as Sebastian erupted into giggles and the rest of the table joined in.

He managed to get through the rest of the serving process without launching any more vegetables, but his heart was still hammering against his ribs when it was time to tuck in.

Everyone settled in, adjusting their chairs and silverware. Beside him, Daniel picked up his linen napkin and unfolded it. He shook it out to place it on his lap, his hand accidentally brushing against Taylor's smooth thigh where the dress had ridden up.

Taylor gasped, his body jerking involuntarily. The sensation of Daniel's touch against the sheer nylon of his tights sent an electric jolt straight up his spine. It reminded him instantly of how he was dressed, making him feel incredibly exposed. He froze, staring straight ahead at the turkey, praying his foundation was thick enough to hide the crimson flush spreading across his cheeks. Daniel didn't seem to notice; he simply turned to cheerfully engage his mother in conversation, leaving Taylor to suffer the sensory overload in silence.

When Taylor finally managed to compose himself, he picked up his fork and knife gingerly to avoid another disaster. He carefully loaded a piece of turkey, dabbed it in gravy, and maneuvered it past his plump lips. To his surprise, the food was delicious, and as the conversation flowed around the table, momentarily diverting the spotlight, he was just starting to think he might actually survive the night. He was mid-bite when Sebastian, who had been studying him with the intense, unfiltered curiosity of a child, suddenly broke the rhythm of the meal.

The table chatter died down as the boy pointed a fork at Taylor and shouted. "Are you Uncle Daniel's girlfriend?"

Taylor almost choked on his turkey, breaking into a fit of coughing, and hastily grabbed his wine to wash things down.

"Sebastian!" Melody scolded gently, though she was smiling behind her glass. "That's not polite."

"I... we're..." Taylor wheezed, dabbing at his watering eyes with a napkin and wondering if he had smeared his mascara. He looked at Daniel for help, but Daniel was simply grinning, clearly enjoying the squirming.

"We're just good friends, buddy," Daniel finally answered, shooting Taylor a playful smile. "Taylor is just joining us for the holidays."

"Oh, okay," Sebastian said with a nod. "But if you want to make her your girlfriend, it's okay with me. She's very pretty, and you're always so lonely, Uncle Daniel."

The boy shoved a massive forkful of food into his mouth, leaving a heavy, stunned silence in his wake. It was an awkward beat, but as the wine continued to flow, the tension finally began to dissolve.

As the meal progressed, the combination of the alcohol and the genuine warmth of the family allowed Taylor's nerves to settle at last.

Soon, he stopped fussing over the short hem of his dress or the clumsy length of his nails. He found himself swept up in the dinner table tales, and before long, he was relaxed enough to join in, adding a few witty remarks that poked fun at Daniel and earned appreciative laughs from the rest of the table.



By the time the dinner plates were cleared and everyone was served a slice of rich, dark Christmas cake, a true sense of ease had taken hold. The festive atmosphere had finally softened the sharp edges of his anxiety, leaving him feeling—for the first time all night—almost at home.

However, the peace was shattered when a small, giggling figure suddenly appeared behind them. Sebastian was beaming, holding a sprig of green mistletoe high over the heads of Taylor and Daniel.

"Kiss!" the boy shouted excitedly.

Taylor's eyes grew wide with fear. He glanced around the table, hoping for an out, but all he saw were smiling, expectant faces watching him. He looked back at Daniel, whose only response was a playful shrug before he began to lean in for a smooch.

Feeling the weight of the family's gaze and the pressure of his own disguise, Taylor didn't fight it. He squeezed his eyes shut and hoped it would be over quickly. The sensation was strange and deeply disturbing; he had only ever kissed a few girls in his life, and this felt different—entirely different. For one, none of those girls had beards. And with his own lips filled and expanded, they felt clumsy and sensitive against Daniel's.



"Ewwww!" Sebastian shrieked in a delighted, entertained voice.

Sebastian was already moving; he spun away and darted toward his parents, thrusting the mistletoe over their heads with high-pitched chants of "Kiss! Kiss!" This gave Taylor the opening he needed to pull back, but Daniel stayed put, his face hovering just inches away with a pleased, self-satisfied grin. Flustered and feeling Daniel's presence far too close for comfort, Taylor turned away.

Seeing his cake, he fumbled with his dessert spoon and managed to secure a piece. He guided it past his enlarged lips, filling his mouth with the rich sponge, desperate for the distraction—and even more desperate to remove the taste of Daniel.

The festive cheer continued for a while longer, a blur of laughter and storytelling, until the dinner finally drew to a natural close. As the conversation tapered off, Daniel's father stood up and gestured toward his two sons. He invited Antoine and Daniel upstairs, mentioning he had something he wanted to discuss with them in private.

With the men gone, the task of clearing the table began. Jacqueline started gathering the silver and crystal, and Melody immediately rose to help. Realizing that, in his cute little dress, he was effectively one of the girls tonight, Taylor prepared to join them. He pushed back his chair and rose onto his high-heeled feet, masking a slight groan as the movement sent a fresh wave of pain through his stiff ankles and crushed toes.

He reached for his plate, intent on helping, but Melody quickly shook her head. "No, no," she insisted with a bright smile. "You're a guest. Go through to the living room and relax."

"I'm happy to help," Taylor countered, but Melody was firm, ushering him toward the door.

Left with no choice, Taylor turned and began an uncomfortable, mincing shuffle out of the dining room. He navigated the transition back to the living room and found his way to the large, patterned sofa. He sat down carefully, smoothing his short green velvet skirt and crossing his long, nylon-clad legs in a practiced, ladylike manner. As he looked around the grand, decorated room, a heavy sense of being an imposter washed over him. He shouldn't be here, and he certainly shouldn't be kissing Daniel.

After a few minutes, Melody entered the room. She sat down close to Taylor, resting her hands casually as she leaned in to peer directly into his eyes.

"He likes you a lot, you know," she said with startling directness.

"Huh?" Taylor responded, his thick, red lips parting in surprise as he looked at her with wide, uncertain eyes. "Oh, yeah. But... I'm not sure why."

Melody scoffed playfully. "Well, I think that's pretty obvious. Have you seen yourself in a mirror lately? And on top of that, you're well-mannered, and I can tell you're a good person. That's rare, you know?"

Taylor sat in silence, his mind racing. The thought that he could be someone's dream woman—him, of all people—was a concept he found impossible to process. His expression fell into a look of genuine confusion and distress as Melody's tone shifted from playful to serious.



"Just go slow with my brother-in-law," Melody added, her gaze softening as she watched him. "He's been through a lot." Taylor looked up, his brows knitting together. "What do you mean?"

Melody sighed, glancing toward the door to ensure they were still alone before continuing. "You know, you're the first woman I've seen him with since Rochelle," she said, pausing as if expecting a question.

"Who's Rochelle?" Taylor asked, his curiosity momentarily overriding his own unease.

Melody gave a sad, small smile, her eyes searching his. "Rochelle was Daniel's fiancée. They met when they were kids and dated throughout school... they were inseparable. He looked after her for years when she got sick. A rare form of leukaemia. The doctors could do nothing."

Taylor felt a wave of genuine shock, his breath catching as the weight of her words set in. "That's awful," he whispered, his gaze dropping as his voice trailed off. "Did she..? Is she...?"

Melody nodded slowly. "I wasn't part of the family yet back then, but I knew her from school. It was just awful that something like that could happen to someone so full of life. It hit Daniel the hardest, of course. He shut down—didn't eat, didn't speak to anyone for weeks—and eventually, he just packed a bag and announced he was going to Montreal. It was years before he came back."

Taylor sat frozen, the weight of the story making his heart sink as he stared at Melody in stunned silence. Realising he was no longer just a crossdressed imposter but was a potential heartbreak in the making.

"He mentioned Montreal," Taylor said, his voice barely a murmur. "But he said it was because of his father."

"Well, I'm sure that was part of it, too," Melody replied. "Daniel and Mathieu have always butted heads."

Taylor sat in silence for a moment, nodding slowly as the pieces of Daniel's guarded personality finally began to fit together. He looked at Melody with wide, worried eyes, the weight of his secret pressing down on him. "I don't want to hurt him. He's been so kind to me. You know I'm leaving in a few days, right?"

Melody gave him an understanding nod. "That's okay. Just don't promise anything you can't keep. A little fling might do him the world of good—help him dip his toe back into the world of dating."

Taylor swallowed hard. A "little fling" sounded terrifying, especially since he'd be playing the part of the girl, having to endure more of Daniel's kisses. He looked down at his long, nylon-clad legs and imagined Daniel's hand tracing its way under his dress, the mere thought of it making his heart hammer against his ribs in a mix of pure nerves and mounting dread.

"Anyway," Melody said, oblivious to the spiral she'd just started, as she pushed herself up from the sofa. "It was really lovely to meet you, Taylor. I'd better get back to help Jacqueline with the dishes, or she'll be moaning about it into the new year."

She gave him a quick, friendly wink before heading back the kitchen. Taylor watched her go, his throat tight as she disappeared from sight, leaving him alone in a silence that felt far too heavy.

The silence held until Daniel appeared ten minutes later. For ten minutes, Taylor had nothing to do but sit and feel the velvet of his dress cling to his altered silhouette. His eyes were drawn to the deep cleavage fashioned from his own skin—his nipples now sore under the tape. As he blinked to remind himself that the feminine body he saw belonged to him, the sweeping weight of his lash extensions fanned air down onto the bright red, rubbery lips, jutting out from his face. A face that was becoming disturbingly stiffer by the hour as the Botox slowly froze his facial muscles. He was trapped in the femininity—yearning only to kick off his heels and massage his aching, arched feet through their silky nylon shell.

When Daniel finally settled onto the sofa beside him, he looked relaxed and at peace, blissfully unaware of the quiet, physical war Taylor had been waging with himself.

"Everything alright?" Daniel asked, catching the slightly glazed look in Taylor's eyes. "Sorry, I didn't warn you that tonight would be such a full-on Christmas production. I had a feeling that if I told you the truth, you might not have shown up."

"No, it's alright," Taylor replied, pinning a soft, pleasant smile in place. His mind was still reeling from the bombshell Melody had dropped, but he kept his voice level. "You have a really nice family, Daniel. You're lucky."

They chatted for a while longer, a low-stakes conversation about upcoming holiday plans. Taylor remained a polite and engaged participant, though his mind was racing with the weight of his new realization. He was seeing Daniel through a different lens now—one shaped by the shadows of grief and loss Melody had just revealed.

Eventually, Taylor glanced at the clock on the wall and offered a small, apologetic smile. "Oh, look at the time. Jordana will be here soon to pick me up. Do you think I could... You know, grab that box before I go?"

"Of course," Daniel said, standing and offering a hand to help him up. "It's just out back in the garage. Let me grab the keys."

Taylor took Daniel's hand, feeling the quiet strength in the man's grip as he allowed himself to be pulled up onto his sharply inclined feet. They moved toward the back door with their fingers interlaced—a gesture that felt strangely, almost disturbingly, natural in the moment. Daniel plucked a set of keys from a hook, the metal jangling as he tossed them into the air and caught them in his palm with effortless coordination.

"Need your coat?" Daniel asked, nodding toward the distant hallway.

Taylor looked through the back window at the garage standing like a dark sentinel across the lawn. "I'll be fine," he insisted, loathing the thought of clicking his way back to the front door when the destination looked so close.

Daniel chuckled, a low, warm sound that seemed to vibrate in the small space between them. "Suit yourself," he murmured, turning the handle and stepping out into the night.

Taylor shuddered instantly, reflexively smoothing his hands down the velvet sleeves of his dress. For all its thick, luxurious snugness, the fabric was a useless barrier against the winter night rushing in to greet him.

Leaving the cozy kitchen for the frozen garden was a violent shock, a physical blow that snatched the breath from his lungs and sent the cold piercing through his nylons like needles. He moved with precarious care, his black platform heels crunching and wobbling over the frozen crust of the snow. Sensing the struggle, Daniel immediately moved closer to act as a windbreak, sliding a strong arm around Taylor's shoulder to steady his balance.

At the outbuilding, Daniel hauled open the large sliding door. It rolled back with a heavy, mechanical groan, revealing a space that offered no sanctuary; the air inside was just as dead and frigid, thick with the scent of motor oil and cold iron. As the overhead fluorescent lights flickered to life with a buzzing hum, they illuminated rows of tools mounted in meticulous, clinical order on the pegboard.

In the center of the concrete floor sat the dark Audi, its charcoal paint gleaming under the harsh light. Daniel navigated around the vehicle and popped the trunk.

"There," he said, nodding at the sturdy cardboard box as his breath bloomed in a thick white cloud. "Safe and sound."

Taylor clicked across the oil-stained concrete on his stilettos, moving around Daniel to peer into the back of the car.

The box stared back, present, and untouched. A wave of relief crashed over Taylor, so potent it almost made his knees give out. The tight knot of anxiety that had been coiling in his stomach for days unspooled in an instant; suddenly, the world felt manageable again.

He spun around, eyes shining, and found Daniel watching him with a gentle smile. Without thinking, Taylor threw his arms around the man's neck. "Thank you," he breathed, the words thick with genuine gratitude.

"You're welcome," Daniel replied, sounding surprised by the sudden surge of emotion, though his arms came up immediately to wrap securely around Taylor's waist.

For a moment, the garage fell silent, save for the low hum of the lights and the sound of their breathing clouding the freezing air. They just held each other, a quiet island of warmth in the middle of the cold, mechanical room. When they finally pulled back just enough to look at one another, time seemed to stand still.

Daniel's eyes lowered to Taylor's mouth, and instead of pulling away, Taylor found himself submitting. He closed his eyes, letting the moment take over. The kiss was slow, deep, and startlingly tender. Taylor melted into the contact, his knees growing weak as he allowed Daniel to take his full weight, one heel kicking up instinctively as he leaned into the embrace. His hand slid down from the back of Daniel's neck. His initial impulse was to push away and create distance, but as his palm met the warmth of Daniel's chest, the resistance vanished. Instead of shoving, his hand simply rested there.

Taylor felt the unnatural fullness of his glossed lips sliding against Daniel's, a wet, slickness that quickly turned into something deeper as their saliva mingled and their tongues danced. The freezing garage seemed to disappear, replaced by the intense heat of their bodies fused together. Taylor didn't just lose himself; he was totally submerged, his mind foggy and overwhelmed by a tide of sensation that left no room for rational thought, swept away by the raw intensity of the connection.



Then, he felt Daniel's palm drifting. The strong hand traced slowly down the side of the rich velvet dress, skimming over the fabric until it passed the hem and landed directly on the sheer, cool smoothness of Taylor's pantyhosed thigh. The sudden touch made Taylor gasp, a sound that was immediately swallowed by Daniel's mouth as the kiss grew hungrier. Then, slowly, Daniel drew his hand upwards, skimming along the slick nylon and slipping under the dress until it rested firmly on Taylor's backside.

Taylor felt a heat seeping through the layers as Daniel began to lightly squeeze and fondle. The rhythmic kneading pressed deep into the soft roundness of his bottom, shifting the silky panties and the pantyhose covering them in a

slippery, frictionless caress. It was a sensation unlike anything Taylor had ever experienced, a completely new and alien input to his nervous system that he didn't know how to process as the wet sounds of their kissing filled his ears.

Suddenly, Daniel's fingertips curled lightly, running along the crack of his backside. A sharp jolt of panic pierced through the haze as Taylor realized things were going too far, especially with those fingers hovering mere inches away from his tucked member. His eyes snapped open, and he pulled back, breaking the seal of their lips with a sharp intake of breath.

Sensing the sudden retreat, Daniel stopped immediately. He didn't question it or push further; he simply released Taylor's slick, nylon-covered backside and withdrew his hand from beneath the velvet hem of his dress. He took a respectful step back, giving Taylor the space he clearly needed and allowing the freezing air to settle between them once more.

Taylor stood there for a second, chest heaving, the ghost of Daniel's touch still lingering on his skin while the winter chill nipped at his flushed face. He smoothed his dress down frantically, needing something to do with his trembling hands to regain his composure.

"Erm..." he started, his voice quivering slightly. "I should probably get going. I've got a long day tomorrow."

Daniel nodded, though his eyes were still dancing with a glint of amusement, seemingly unfazed by the abrupt end to the moment. "Yeah, the big show." He grinned, tilting his head with boyish charm. "I can't believe I got to kiss one of the Snow Queens. That'll be a story to tell the grandkids one day."

"Yeah, right," Taylor let out a low, humourless chuckle. He reached into the trunk and grabbed the cardboard box, holding it close to his chest like a shield. "I'm just filling in for my cousin. I don't know the songs, and I'm so terrified of the thought of standing up there in front of everyone. I'll most likely trip on my heels and fall off the stage. Now, that'll be a story for the grandkids."

"Hey, stop that," Daniel said softly, cutting through the self-deprecation. He leaned back against the dark Audi, crossing his arms comfortably. "I've literally never seen you in flat shoes. In fact, the first time I saw you, you were hiking along a deserted road in high heels."

He pushed off the side of the car, stepping just a little closer to emphasize his point. "You won't fall. You're too graceful for that. You're like the most feminine person I've ever met."

Taylor felt the air leave his lungs. It was meant as a compliment, but Daniel's words were perhaps the most emasculating thing he could have said.

"Seriously, you'll be fine," Daniel added, continuing his pep talk before the silence could stretch too long. "Besides, if you're that worried, I'll make sure I'm in the front, so I can catch you if you fall."

"So... you'll be at the show?" Taylor asked, his voice tight. The support was welcome, but the idea of Daniel seeing him perform brought on a new wave of anxiety.

Daniel nodded, his expression softening into something more sincere. "I'll be there. Perhaps I'll see you after?"

"Perhaps," Taylor replied with a smile. He glanced towards the exit. "But first, I need to get back inside without breaking a leg on that icy grass. Will you help me?"

"It'll be my pleasure, Your Highness," Daniel replied, taking the box from Taylor and offering him an elbow to link his arm through.

* * * * *

Taylor sat motionless on a rickety wooden chair in the cramped backstage dressing area, the muffled sounds of the gathering crowd filtering through the wooden walls. He glanced into the illuminated vanity mirror, the ledge beneath it cluttered with the various cosmetic bottles and sprays—most of which were now painted onto his face.

He stared at the reflection, his breath hitching in his throat. It wasn't just the lingering shock of the salon visit; this was an escalation he found hard to process. His face felt heavy, plastered with thick, theatrical foundation and contouring that enhanced his feminine features and erased his masculine ones. Above, his hair had been through its own transformation. The platinum blonde fringe he had hated for making him look "too girly" was gone, ruthlessly swept back and pinned tight against his scalp. The rest of his shoulder-length hair had been yanked into a high, severe ponytail, thickened with heavy clip-in extensions that dragged at his roots before being woven into an intricate, artificial French braid.

He dropped his gaze, but the visual assault continued. Through the fluttering veil of his voluminous lashes, he saw his chest emerging from the bodice of a dress as eye-catching as it was uncomfortable to wear. Translucent panels of stiff mesh and rigid boning squeezed him with a vice-like grip, the fabric encrusted with blue crystals that looked like frozen shards of ice. Inside, heavy padding added to the torture, ruthlessly pushing his taped skin upward to create a scarily realistic cleavage.

Above, his shoulders were completely bare, save for two wisps of sheer, glitter-flecked tulle that drooped around his upper arms before flowing into a long, floor-length cape.

While below, the skirt portion of the glittering gown was a humiliating paradox of volume and exposure. In the front, the fabric ended aggressively high on his pantyhosed thighs; yet behind him, a cascading waterfall of ice-blue velvet and satin pooled on the dusty floorboards. The masses of fabric hid his chair completely—a mocking contrast to how unguarded his thighs felt despite the layer of synthetic compression that made his legs feel packaged and suffocated..

His eyes travelled down to the floor to land on the shoes that terrified him the most. They were monstrosities of blue glitter that severed his connection to the ground with thick blocky platforms and the highest stiletto heels he had ever seen. A dainty sparkling bow sat over the open peep-toe that would leave his nylon-clad toes exposed to the freezing outside air. The torture devices, parading as shoes, forced his feet into a painfully steep arch secured only by a thin strap digging into his ankle. He could already feel a burning strain in his calves and he hadn't even attempted to stand yet.

A shiver rattled through him causing the crystals on his gown to tremble and refract the light. He pictured the scene waiting for him outside where steam would be rising from the crowd's breath in the negative temperatures as they watched and judged. He knew some would be filming him as he pranced around the stage to forever immortalize the moment. Visually he might appear as a magical Snow Queen who was imperious and cold. In reality he was an eighteen-year-old boy about to totter out almost naked into the freezing Canadian winter propped up on sparkling stilts while the biting wind cut right through his humiliating costume.

"Try to relax," Regina said, her voice cutting through the fog of Taylor's panic. She was seated at a dressing table to his right, adjusting the bodice of her own costume—a mirror image of Taylor's, but in a vibrant, sunny yellow.

"Relax?" Taylor replied with a nervous gulp, the sound audible in the small room. He tugged uselessly at the stiff boning of his waist. "I can hardly breathe in this dress, and I think I've forgotten everything we rehearsed."

"It doesn't matter," Jordana answered calmly. She was standing by her own vanity, smoothing down the front of a candy-pink version of the gown. "Your makeup came out beautiful; no one is going to guess you're not a woman. Besides, we're all miming. Just smile and mouth the words. No one will know if you mess up."

"And what if I trip and fall?" Taylor asked, his voice rising an octave as he looked down once again at the towering blue platforms that made the ground feel terrifyingly far away.

"You'll get back up, smile, and carry on," Regina said with a nonchalant shrug, checking her reflection. "You won't be the first performer to have a mishap on stage."

"You won't fall," Jordana added firmly, turning to reach for the cardboard box that had been sitting on the floor—the very box Taylor had retrieved from the Audi. She lifted it effortlessly onto her dressing table, setting it down with a faint, hollow thud. "Put that out of your mind. It will be over in a few hours. Now, for the finishing touch."

Taylor watched, mesmerized, as she opened the flaps. He finally got to see what was so important that he had been forced to drive all the way up from Ottawa to bring—the crucial item that the show couldn't go on without. Jordana reached in and slowly pulled out a shimmering band of jagged, ice-blue glass.

“No queen is complete without a crown,” she said, strutting across the room to hand it to him.

Taylor accepted the object with trembling, manicured fingers. It was almost weightless, formed from translucent, vertical crystals that jutted upwards like jagged shards of ice.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he said, staring at the prop in disbelief. “A crown? That was the emergency? You made me cozy up to Daniel... for a crown?”



“We asked you to meet him,” Regina said, dismissing his complaint without looking away from her mirror. “Any ‘cozying up’ you did was because you wanted to.”

Taylor opened his mouth to snap back, then closed it just as quickly. A flush of heat crept up his neck. She was partly right. No one had forced him to kiss Daniel—or to kiss him more than once, for that matter. If he had found it as disgusting as he wanted to believe, surely he would have found a way to stop it.

“Hey, none of that matters now,” Jordana said, clapping her hands together to break the sudden tension. “We have a job to do, and there are hundreds of people out there expecting a show. So, we’re going to attach our crowns, look pretty, and give them the best damn show they’ve ever seen.”

* * * * *

As the MC completed their introduction in French, Taylor shivered to the side of the stage, propped up by Jordana, his legs violently wobbling. He felt more frightened than at any point in his young life. He could see the crowd of people who had packed into the town square—an overwhelming mass of expectant faces illuminated by the harsh stage lights.

The piano intro began, delicate and chilling.

“Come on,” Regina called out, giving him a gentle shove.

The three performers tottered onto the stage. Taylor focused entirely on placing one glittery, blocky platform in front of the other as his knees threatened to buckle. They made it to the center, the freezing night air prickling against his skin. Regina and Jordana smiled and waved with practiced grace, while Taylor looked on like a deer in the headlights before they separated. Regina took the right side of the stage, Jordana the left, leaving Taylor stranded in the center, clutching an ice-blue microphone stand decorated to look like a jagged crystal sceptre.

He brought the mic towards his terrified face a fraction of a second late as the first line played.

“The snow glows white on the mountain tonight, not a footprint to be seen...”

When he finally started to move his lips, they felt enormous and swollen, the heavy layer of sticky gloss coating them, making him have to peel them apart.

“A kingdom of isolation, and it looks like I’m the queen.”

The lyric stung with its accuracy. He stared out at the sea of people through the heavy, voluminous eyelash extensions that weighed down his eyelids. To them, he was a vision of feminine power—a platinum blonde queen with an hourglass figure and endless legs. But inside the illusion, he was just a scared imposter, trapped in a role he felt wholly unqualified to play.

“The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside...”

A gust of freezing wind caught his glittering gown, whipping the fragile skirt around his legs. He tried to mimic Regina and Jordana as they struck a pose, shifting his weight to one hip, but the movement sent a sharp warning shot of pain through his calves. His freezing nylon-clad feet slid forward in the brutal platform sandals, placing all his weight onto his toes. His legs trembled, and his ankles groaned as he fought to stay upright.

“Don't let them in, don't let them see...”

He squeezed his eyes shut for a brief moment, channelling the panic. Don't let them see the boy, he told himself. Don't let them see what you are. He gripped the microphone stand so hard his knuckles turned white, using it as a crutch to keep his balance.

“Be the good girl you always have to be...”

The lyrics hit a little too close to home. He tried to remember the dance moves Jordana had drilled into him, raising a hand to his chest to feign emotion. As he did, the rough sequins on the side of his bodice scratched against the tender skin of his inner arm.

“Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know...”

He took a shaky breath, the corset restricting his ribs so tightly he felt lightheaded. The music swelled, building toward the chorus. He saw Jordana motioning from the corner of his eye, signalling him to move, to be bigger.

“Well, now they know!”

Taylor threw his free arm out in a jerky, desperate motion. The chorus hit. The drums kicked in, and something in Taylor snapped—or perhaps, unlocked. The sheer absurdity of the moment—the cold, the fear, the ridiculous shoes—crested and broke. The adrenaline that had been paralyzing him suddenly surged into motion.

“Let it go, let it go! Can't hold it back anymore!”

Taylor stepped forward in time with Jordana and Regina. The thick platforms stomped onto the stage floor with a heavy, authoritative thud that vibrated up his shins. He felt a strange surge of power. He tossed his head, and the blonde braid whipped around his shoulders.

“I don't care, what they're going to say!”

He strutted to the edge of the stage, the terror replaced by a strange, dizzying high. The thin straps of the shoes dug mercilessly into his ankles with every step, the steep arch straining his calves to their limit, but he didn't falter. He let the pain ground him.

The minutes that followed dissolved into a blur of swishing fabric and glittering light. Taylor lost all sense of time, letting the rhythm drive him forward. He wielded the mike stand like a baton, hitting his choreographed moves in time with the girls like he'd been part of the act for years.

As the music swelled for the final crescendo, he planted his feet, chest heaving, ready to deliver the last lines.

“Let the storm rage on...”

He struck the final pose, gripping the ice-sceptre mic stand, and grinning out at the crowd. He wasn't just playing the part of the ice queen anymore; in that moment, in freezing wind, with his feet bound and his dress whipping around his legs, he felt like one.

“The cold never bothered me anyway.”

As the final note faded into the night, there was a heartbeat of silence. Taylor held his breath as reality came crashing back. The town square erupted. The applause washed over him, loud and approving. Taylor stood in the center of the spotlight, breathless and trembling—not from the cold anymore, but from the dizzying rush of adrenaline.

The relief hit him with the force of a physical blow, instantly followed by a surge of euphoria so potent it made his head spin. It was a raw, electric energy he had never felt before—a mixture of shock, pride, and pure survival instinct that made him feel ten feet tall. But as the applause began to dip and Regina nudged him into position for the transition, the adrenaline high curdled slightly into a sobering thought. He had made it through the opener, but the night wasn't over; he still had to survive four more songs.



* * * * *

Once the curtain fell, the night was far from over. Their duties had shifted from performing to mingling; they were expected to roam the winter carnival, greeting the crowds and posing for photos in their Snow Queen personas. To navigate the busy market, the queens transitioned into a more "casual" version of their characters.

Taylor shed the cumbersome, floor-length ballgown for a sparkling light blue mini-dress trimmed with plush white fur. It wasn't total freedom—he still had to suffer the squeeze of a tight waist cincher and the pinching tape that pushed his chest into the illusion of breasts—and the short hemline left almost the entirety of his legs on display. Yet, compared to the extravagant costume he had just performed in, this new dress offered a welcome range of movement.

The biggest relief, however, came from the footwear. He slipped into a pair of knee-high light blue boots that matched his dress. The heels were just as dizzyingly high as the sandals he'd worn on stage, but the experience was completely different. Being zipped securely inside the boots made his ankles feel stable, the rugged grip sole offered actual traction on the snowy ground, and the soft fur lining felt warm and snug against his calves.

With his makeup touched up and the long blonde braid and jagged crystal crown still firmly in place, he took a deep breath and set off into the chilly Quebec night.

The three queens drifted through the snow-dusted winter market like colorful exotic birds—Jordana in candy-pink, Regina in sunny yellow, and Taylor in his ice-blue ensemble. By this point, the anxiety that had plagued Taylor for days had subsided, replaced by the confidence of his disguise. He knew he looked the part and felt a surge of assurance standing there, dressed just like the other two women.

After an initial flurry of excitement—people rushing over to praise their performance and snap selfies with the "Snow Queens"—the novelty settled down. The market returned to its normal pace, allowing the trio to wander past the stalls with only the occasional interruption. They paused to sample local delicacies, debating whether they had done enough mingling to justify disappearing back to the warmth of the cabin.

They were examining a selection of maple-glazed pastries at a corner stall when Jordana spotted a familiar figure approaching. She glanced at Taylor, who was too busy inspecting the stall's offerings, then nudged Regina. She flashed a knowing smile and nodded toward the exit, and the pair slunk away silently around the corner.

“Wow,” Daniel’s voice came from directly behind him.

Taylor spun around, the sudden movement momentarily throwing him off balance from atop his platform boots, but he caught himself just in time.

“That was quite the performance,” Daniel said with a warm smile, his hands tucked into his coat pockets.

Regaining his composure quickly, Taylor looked at the man who had occupied so much of his mental space over the last few days. But this time, instead of the nervousness that usually defined their interactions, Taylor felt a sudden surge of confidence, leaning into the role.

“You liked it, did you?” he purred, surprising even himself with the playful tone. He rested one manicured hand on the ledge of the wooden market stall to steady himself. “Did you have a favourite queen?”



Daniel chuckled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Well, the pink one was definitely the best dancer," he admitted, stepping a little closer. "But the blue one was definitely the most beautiful."

Taylor fought the urge to look away, but held Daniel's gaze. "I find that hard to believe," he replied with a coy smile. "But thank you for saying that. And... thank you for being so helpful these last few days."

"I mean it, Taylor," Daniel said, his voice dropping to a more serious register. "You're a beautiful person, and I've really enjoyed getting to know you." He hesitated for a moment, glancing around the market. "I know you're still working right now, but do you have time to hang out for a while?"

Taylor turned, ready to ask Jordana and Regina if it was allowed, only to realize for the first time that they had vanished. He scanned the immediate area, but the pink and yellow figures were nowhere to be seen among the market patrons. Smiling to himself, he shook his head, realizing exactly what they had done. He turned back to Daniel.

"I have a little time," he said softly. "But can we find somewhere warm? I know I'm supposed to be a Snow Queen, but I'm starting to lose feeling in my hands."

"I know just the spot," Daniel replied. He offered his hand, and without a second thought, Taylor accepted it.

Daniel led him away from the main thoroughfare to a quieter spot near the edge of the market, where a circular stone fire pit crackled, casting a warm, orange glow against the snow.

Daniel brushed a layer of loose snow off a sturdy wooden bench facing the flames and sat down. He looked up at Taylor, who was shivering slightly, shifting his weight uneasily from one towering heel to the other.

"You look frozen," Daniel said softly. He patted his thigh with a welcoming smile. "And this bench is ice cold. Come, take a seat."

Taylor didn't hesitate. The relief of taking the weight off his straining calves was too tempting to resist. He lowered himself carefully onto Daniel's lap, angling his snowy white legs towards the warmth of the fire. Daniel's arm reached around Taylor's waist, holding him steady and secure.

"Daniel, wait," Taylor said softly, pulling back just as Daniel started to lean in. He took a breath, staring into the fire. "I have to be honest with you. I'm not... I can't give you what you want. My life isn't usually like this. I mean... I still live at home with my mom, and I'm still trying to decide what I'm even doing with my life. I'm a mess."

Daniel didn't flinch. He just looked at Taylor, taking in the crystal crown, the absurdly high boots, and the worried expression beneath the makeup.

"I understand," Daniel said, his voice easy and reassuring. "I'm not looking for a wife, Taylor. And I'm certainly not asking you to drop everything and move up here."

The knot in Taylor's chest loosened, and he settled deeper into Daniel's embrace.

"But," Daniel continued, a playful glint returning to his eyes, "You were a real hit tonight, so if you happen to find yourself performing at next winter's carnival, perhaps our paths will cross again."

Taylor smiled, a genuine, unguarded smile. "Maybe they will."

He shifted on Daniel's lap, moving closer, and brushed his nose against Daniel's. The first touch of their lips was feather-light, a question asked and answered in a heartbeat. Then Daniel deepened it, parting his lips. Taylor responded instantly, opening to the invitation with a soft sigh. He melted into the kiss, his nails running lightly along the nape of Daniel's neck, losing himself completely in the sensation of being held, being wanted, and the perfect, suspended moment of a winter romance that didn't need to be anything more than what it was.



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The windshield wipers slapped rhythmically against the glass, fighting a losing battle against the falling snow as the Audi glided toward the next town. Inside the heated cabin, the mood was a mix of exhaustion and bickering.

Katie turned in the passenger seat, adjusting her arm sling. She looked over at Taylor, grinning mischievously.

"I have to say," she teased, breaking the silence. "It's actually kind of tripping me out. You look like a hotter version of me right now. I haven't even had a chance to wear those boots yet, and here you are, making them look better than I probably would. It's actually annoying."

Taylor gripped the steering wheel tighter, his long, acrylic-tipped nails awkwardly curled around the leather. "You think I want to be wearing them?" Taylor shot back, keeping his eyes on the icy road. "Driving in six-inch platforms is a safety hazard, Katie. My foot can barely feel the pedals. I should be the one in the Uggs."



Katie let out a sharp laugh and pointed a manicured finger at her feet. Her right leg was encased in a heavy grey medical boot, resting on a cushion, while her left foot was snug inside a tan Ugg boot.

"First of all, they're not six inches, stop being dramatic. And second, hello? Broken ankle?" she retorted. "The Ugg is literally the only shoe I feel comfortable in right now. Besides, they're my clothes. And since you don't exactly have any of your own, you should be grateful I'm here to put together such a cute outfit for you."

“At least let me have the right one while I’m driving?” Taylor moaned.

“What? And ruin the look. No way,” Katie shot back.

Taylor cast a weary look at his lap. Clad in sheer black tights and a dark pleated mini-skirt, he felt ridiculously overdressed for a highway drive. "I hate you sometimes, you know," he sighed, his voice flat and defeated.

"No, you don't," Katie chirped. "Oh my god, stop sulking, Taylor. There are only a few months left of the tour. Think about the paycheck." She leaned back in the seat, looking out at the passing trees. "With the money you're going to make from this, you can finally get out of your Mom's house. And who knows, you might even find a hunky new man to flirt with."

Taylor let out a long, dramatic groan and remained quiet. He couldn't go home looking like he did now. All he had to do was get through the next two months, and things could get back to normal. He stared ahead at the endless stretch of white highway, telling himself that surely, the worst of his bad luck was finally behind him.

The End

