

TGSTORIES

PRESENTS

Women's Wear

Written and Illustrated by

Valerie Hope



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FINDING A JOB SUCKED WHEN you were an ex-con. I did a two-year rip in County for selling weed – just a little sideline to supplement my income as a former delivery driver for an auto parts dealer – and now here I stood, in the pouring fucking rain, wearing an ill-fitting Haggard suit and a tie I stole from my dad before he died, walking away from yet another flat-out rejection delivered the minute I checked the “have you ever been convicted of a felony” box.

“Fuck this,” I muttered to myself angrily, vaulting a muddy puddle to preserve what remained of the shine on my battered shoes.

I'd visited no less than eight different companies this morning – bringing my total for the week

up to twenty-two – and been politely told to go fuck myself by every single one. I started to lose hope – really, the only career doing time set me up for was committing more crimes. I considered (not for the first time) calling my friend Dubstep and having him front me a couple ounces so I could make a little money just to keep a roof over my head and the lights on. The whole fucking system seemed specifically designed to screw me.

I took shelter from the downpour under the concrete eave of a downtown building and patted myself down for my pack of cigarettes. I'd only just found them when the upbeat MIDI jingle of my little prepaid mobile phone rang out from my sodden breast pocket.

I checked the caller ID. Shit. My parole officer. I flipped the cheap phone open and pressed it to my ear. “Hey, Matt,” I grunted dispiritedly.

“Still out beating the pavement?” he asked in his raspy baritone, no preamble or greeting. At least my parole officer was no-nonsense. It could've been worse. I could've gotten one of the “chummy” ones.

“Yeah,” I told him, cradling the phone against my shoulder to cup the little flame of the disposable lighter against the rising wind. “Another day, another 'thanks but no thanks.' There ain't shit out here for convicts, Matt.”

“You knew that was gonna be an issue, Davey,” he replied patiently. “I warned you about it. Keep it up. You got a college degree, you have a lot of enthusiasm and you're dead-set against going back inside. You'll get something.”

“Sure as shit don't feel like it,” I told him. “And a two-year associate's from community college don't count for much, like I told you.”

“It's better than seventy percent of my other parolees,” he said. “Most of those guys didn't even finish high school. You're not looking for a job stocking shelves, kid. You're looking for something that pays a little better, can give you a decent quality of life. It's gonna take more time.”

“I know, I know,” I said placatingly. “But I'm starting to worry about getting evicted.”

“That's why I called,” Matt told me. “I got something temporary for you, something to get some cash coming in while you look for something better. If you're interested.”

“Depends on the gig,” I stated.

“Night job,” Matt said. “The shopping mall out there in the 'burbs near you has had some break-ins. They're hiring overnight guards. It's low pay and shitty hours, but it's a check. And it leaves your days free to hunt for a real job.”

“They'll take an ex-con for a security guard?” I asked.

“They'll take fucking anybody. My buddy up there is desperate. And I'd be willing to vouch for

you,” Matt said. “You're a good kid, Davey, I'd put in a good word. Might make the difference.”

I sighed. “Thanks, Matt, I appreciate it. Set it up, I'll go talk to him.”

“Good,” Matt told him. “And I get to check the 'rehabilitated' box on your form and make myself look good in the process. The guy's named Lou Clark. You can find him at the security office in the mall. He's there now. I'll call him and he'll be expecting you by the time you get there.”

* * *

I hopped a bus – damn, how I missed my car, which got repo'd while I was in jail – out to the suburbs and walked the few short blocks to the sprawling shopping mall nestled among its supplemental big-box chain stores and restaurants. I tried not to show my distaste at the whole suburban experience – the whole fucking place seemed to be one giant Applebee's – and quickened my pace, hoping the chilly wind might dry out my wet suit.

I entered the antiseptic, echoing interior of the mall filled with its sexually blossoming teenagers in search of love and the old-timers using it as a walking track. A few of the hucksters in the kiosks tried to grab my attention but backed off at my warning snarl as I checked the “You are Here” map to find the security office tucked in neatly between a Hot Topic and a Spencer's. I set out across the milling crowds and the overpowering aura of consumerism, head down and hands in pockets, resisting the allure of the high-fashion photography and bright colors designed to draw my eye.

I walked up a narrow staircase to the security office, across a little landing from a unisex bathroom, and knocked on the door. A muffled voice bade me enter, and I turned the knob and stepped through into a little windowless office dominated by a huge wall of closed-circuit monitors and a huge multi-unit charger for walkie-talkie radios. A balding man with a smoker's hack and a prodigious potbelly swiveled in his chair to face me.

“You Davey Hargrove?” he asked.

“Yep,” I told him, sticking out my hand. “I'm guessing Matt called you.”

“Yeah. He said you might be my guy,” the man said, shaking my hand. “I'm Lou.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Often said, never proven,” Lou coughed. “Look, Davey, we can spend the next twenty minutes doing the whole 'why do you think you'd be a good fit' conversation bullshit, or you can just tell me whether or not you want the goddamned job. It pays eleven-fifty an hour and we buy your uniforms. I'd need you walking the mall from ten p.m. to ten a.m., Wednesday through Saturday.”

“Time off? Time-and-a-half?” I asked.

“Don't get cute,” Lou snorted.

I shrugged. "And you don't have a problem with my record."

"Matt says you're good, you're good. Known him since Desert Storm," Lou replied.

"What the hell," I said. "Sign me up."

"Thank Christ," Lou breathed. "I thought I was never gonna get that position filled."

He scribbled a few lines on a post-it and handed it to me. "Take this down to the lady with the huge rack in the corporate office. Her name's Gayle. She'll get you an I-9 and an application and get you all set up. The place that does our uniforms is here in the mall, it'll take you ten minutes to get fitted. You start next Wednesday."

"Sounds good," I told him.

He dug in an inside pocket of his sweat-stained jacket and handed me a crumpled envelope. "Matt said you might need this. It's an advance on your first two weeks' pay. He told me you were getting close to the end of your rope."

I hesitated. "I dunno when I can pay you back, Lou."

"Don't worry about it. I pulled it out of petty cash," he explained. "Pay it back a little at a time. Matt says you're good for it."

"That's really decent of you," I told him, taking the heavy envelope.

"Forget it," he said, turning back to the monitors to signify that the interview had concluded.

I waited a moment or two to see if there would be any more, then when only Lou's phlegmy breathing answered, I turned and went back down to the mall proper. A knot of giggling teenage girls, struggling for all they were worth to appear like slutty adults, passed by in front of me. I ignored them studiously and set off for the little uniform shop tucked in a little pocket of no-man's-land outside one of the big department stores which anchored the opposite ends of the mall. It took me no small amount of time to get there, what with the cliques of teenagers and the oldsters and the window-shoppers and being besieged by free sample peddlers from Auntie Anne's and Cinn-a-bon. The bored-looking Hispanic woman behind the counter measured me quickly and silently, made some notes on a pad of paper and told me to come back in two hours.

My meager reserve of cash wouldn't support any food from the food court – not that I really *wanted* soggy Chinese food or a burned-beyond-recognition Philly cheesesteak – so I spent the intervening time just browsing through the stores. I recognized only a few from my own long-ago mall days. I didn't spend a lot of time familiarizing myself with the various clothing stores and the like – and any potential dating prospects from their respective staffs – since my likelihood of actually seeing any of the outlets when they were open for business weighed in at "slim to none."

I stopped by the human resources office and filled out the government paperwork required of

me, trying desperately to take my time – to eat a chunk out of those two hours, for one, and also because the little blonde receptionist there spent a lot of time bending over the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet. But even a noted time-waster such as myself couldn't make a job application and an I-9 take two hours, so I let myself be regurgitated back into the press of shoppers to walk around aimlessly.

The time passed interminably, but it finally passed. I picked up my three uniforms and my silver badge in a big paper sack and hustled back to the bus stop as the sun sank below the ridge of dark clouds responsible for the day's rain. Three connections later I arrived back at my dumpy little apartment above a convenience store, dropping my stuff at the foot of my bed and flopping listlessly onto my couch. I logged into the wi-fi from the little coffee shop next door on a borrowed laptop and spent an hour or so surfing porn before nodding off.

* * *

I managed to make it to the next Wednesday on ramen noodles and tap water, then took the express bus back to the suburbs in my itchy uniform. I walked in next to the Sears – I'd studied the mall map enough to get a general idea of the layout and find what entrances got me close to what sections – and turned to go up the stairs to the security office. A portly, grey-haired man I'd never seen lounged against the wall, wearing an identical uniform to my own. An engraved nameplate over his breast pocket identified him as “Roy.”

“Hey,” he said, a welcoming smile crinkling his face into a map of friendliness. “You must be Davey. Lou told me you were starting tonight. I'm Roy Kendall, your shift supervisor.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. Welcome aboard,” he said. “You're early.”

“Last bus runs at nine,” I told him. “It's my only way here.”

“Still, looks good to the higher-ups,” Roy said. “Might as well run you through the paces, if you want to go ahead and get started.”

“Better than hanging around doing nothing for an hour,” I told him.

“C'mon up. We'll get your picture for your I.D. and grab you a radio and a flashlight. I'll show you where to clock in and where the john and the coffee machine are.”

He led me up the stairs and through the monitor room – now watched by an obese woman who snapped her gum loudly and seemed much more interested in trolling Facebook on her phone than watching the security feeds – into a little lounge area just past. I used the temporary log-in he gave me from a card in his pocket to access the time-card system and clocked in early, then changed my password as the computer instructed. I grabbed a radio, a handheld bar-code scanner and a flashlight from the big recharging station in the front room and signed them out on a clipboard. Roy handed me an immense ring of keys from a nearby drawer and I signed those out on a different clipboard.

“You do that every time you come to work,” Roy told me. “Can't go out there without a light and a radio. You can carry a stun-gun or pepper spray, too, but only if you take a class. You have to buy your own gear, too, so that's why none of us really bother with it. Something happens that you can't handle by talking it out, well, just back off and call the cops.”

“Suits me fine,” I told him. I let him lead me back down the stairs. The mall looked deserted, and several store staffers stepped out of their outlets and pulled down the cage doors to lock them for the evening.

“There's no right or wrong way to do the job, Davey,” he told me. “But I think the easiest is to plan yourself a beat to walk. You have to check every door to the outside four times a shift. The cameras record overnight, but nobody watches them – we send them home at nine-thirty. Once the doors lock, you're pretty much on your own.”

“Sounds lonesome,” I commented.

“It's not bad,” Roy said. “There's TVs to watch, you can usually make friends in the food court and they'll stash you something to eat behind the counter, and nobody really bugs you. We usually put two guards on duty overnight, but Cecilia just quit to have her baby, so after I show you the ropes tonight, it'll just be you.”

He pointed to a locked cage in front of a Wet Seal store. “You have keys for every store. The locks are numbered, the keys are too. Doesn't take a genius. So, if you ever need to get inside one of the stores, you can use the john or what have you. I'm getting real fond of the massage chair in the Brookstone, myself. As long as you clean it up afterwards, nobody gives a damn.”



Roy showed me his own beat – a pretty efficient system, all told – and pointed out places that needed checking, like a few maintenance rooms where skater kids liked to hide out and smoke pot. They'd come out after the mall closed and have skateboard races occasionally unless I ran them off. A few out-of-the-way windows and the like where people had gotten inside in the past.

Every point of entry that I checked got scanned with the portable scanner on my belt so an electronic log of when I checked each door or delivery area would be made. The gizmo updated itself off the clock in the security office automatically, so I didn't even need to make a note of the time. Other than the walking – which honestly didn't bother me a bit, since I walked everywhere I went – I probably didn't need to be present at all.

The loop only took about forty-five minutes – Roy had designed it for speed – and then we took up a post beside the front doors to let everyone out for the night. The last of the food court workers, a few store employees who'd stayed late doing inventory or helping last-minute customers, one or two from the business office and the girl from the monitor room all went through the door in single file. Roy and I locked it behind them and pulled down the cage. The overhead lights went off, leaving only minimal light in the mall. The vast structure echoed with our footsteps, its lack of sound and movement downright eerie. Roy unlocked the cage to the Best Buy after we checked the loading dock – the last stop on his beat – and we turned on one of the giant 72" plasma screens and caught the last half of the Lakers game. Roy took a little nap, and I did a crossword puzzle on one of the iPads out for display. I decided to let the old man sleep, and after another couple hours I walked the beat again, scanning all the doors and making sure everything was secure.

I walked up into the security office and checked the monitors. Nothing stirred inside the giant

building other than the rhythmic snoring of my co-worker and the images of the basketball players on the screen. I looked around the office, undisturbed, for a moment. I saw the two desktop “tower” computers stacked against one wall that were dedicated to recording the overnight video. I noticed that I could interrupt the recording with a single click of the mouse, should I wish, and put however many cameras in the structure on “pause.” I also noticed that the master clock, which updated my handheld scanner, could be easily reset by hand, if I wanted, on the same pair of computers. I didn't even need a password – the girl who'd recently left for home had left herself logged in when she departed for the night.

All of which added up to ways I could easily find ways to sleep and fuck around in my job. I smiled broadly. Maybe this job had potential I didn't originally realize.

* * *

The “real job” front never grew encouraging, so weeks stretched on into a month. I suppose I took the job somewhat seriously, right at first, walking through the silent mall and checking in the hidden and out-of-the-way nooks and crannies for no-goodniks like I was expected to do.



I did it more out of some sense of gratitude to my parole officer and Lou than anything else – I can't say that I ever really cared if someone broke in and stole stuff from this huge consumer cathedral. It wasn't like all of this stuff wasn't insured, anyway. I was part of that insurance deal, and I knew it. Like a single person armed only with a flashlight could possibly stop one or more determined thieves from doing whatever they wanted if they managed to get inside after hours. No, I was just so the mall owners could report to their insurance company that they'd done due diligence and hired a night guard, and get a lower rate.

As the second month in the job began, I'd gotten my security job down to a science. Since I had no choice but to arrive an hour early, I usually sat in the office shooting the shit with whichever of the people were assigned to the monitors. Once I clocked in, I walked the beat and then let everyone out and locked the door behind them. Then I ran back upstairs and reset the master clock two hours ahead and then did the doors again. Then I set it an additional two hours ahead and did it again. Then the fourth time, and my log showed that I'd dutifully walked my beat four times. Then I reset the clock back to the real time and had the next ten hours to play around and do nothing. Any store could be my playground, all I needed to do was interrupt the recording on the security monitor in that location and do whatever the fuck I desired.



Roy had been 100% right about the massage chair – it was a perennial favorite of mine. So, too, the enormous big-screen televisions, the demo iPads and particularly the fine wines and spirits store that kept a very admirable stock of high-quality beer in the back. As long as I didn't go overboard, I could keep myself in beer from that store and in cigarettes from Pipe World. It was all about keeping myself from getting greedy. It didn't take much – I wasn't, by nature, a very greedy man. But I liked getting something for nothing. I got paid for twelve hours of work and only actually did two. I had access to high-end electronics, air conditioning, massage chairs, free Internet and beer and smokes if I just didn't take too much or decide it needed to be mine alone.

The mall became my own personal bachelor pad. I had all the coolest stuff the instant it came out, for twelve hours a night, four nights a week. I learned that I could really slide a long way in my sock feet down the polished floors and I struck up detailed fictional relationships with many of the fashion models' photos in the store windows. I rode the kiddie train everywhere. I bounced on the bungee ropes and peed in the fountain. Whatever I wanted, all I needed to do

was turn off this or that camera for a few minutes. Once, I even got ambitious enough to turn off all the cameras on the upper level for forty minutes and walk my entire beat wearing just my necktie. The next day, no one even noticed, and weeks dragged on and it was never mentioned. Lou and company in the central office never even reviewed the tapes, not even routinely. None of the stores reported damage or theft, so no reason to do one whit more work than was the bare minimum.

Boredom became a constant companion. I tried to occupy myself, but there was only so much Netflix and professional sports one could stuff down one's throat before one looked for something different, something to break the monotony and generate a little laughter and excitement.

I was walking my beat again at night – honestly, doing the job expected of me just to stir up the tedium – and smoking a particularly nice Honduran cigar I'd filched from the rich folks' cigar store on the lower level when something caught my eye, something that I hadn't previously noticed even though I'd been walking the mall for months now. I spied it through the plexiglass balcony railing on the upper level, in the window of one of the clothing stores that I usually passed by without noticing. The only reason it drew my attention now was that some lax employee had left the lights on.



The "Girlish Charm" boutique sported the stereotypical large, flashy advertising endemic to the mall. Huge airbrushed photos of glamorous models, skinny and smiling, wearing their clothing in an ever-so-subtle sexual way. They favored groups of impossibly attractive twentysomethings, subliminally programming the teenaged target demographic that *wear our clothes* equaled *have lots of friends and prospective sexual partners*.

None of that even fazed me. What captivated me was, of all things, a mannequin. She wore a lilac sundress and platform shoes and posed between two others, nearly identical to her. But this one drew me in. Not because of anything prurient; because something about the molded plastic face reminded me of my first love. Leslie Manning, from high school. I had been just out of the most awkward part of puberty, had my braces removed, and began feeling for the first time since my acne and breaking voice that I might be something other than a freak on legs. Leslie had been that unattainable sort – junior varsity cheerleader, popular, pretty, well-to-do parents, her own car, student body treasurer and honor roll. Completely out of my b-student, second-string JV basketball team league. But I asked her to the fall formal my freshman year and she said yes. I kissed her behind the wood shop that evening. We held hands as we walked to class. Three months later I told her I loved her. And she smiled, kissed me, and said it back.

To this day, I still don't know how that happened.

Sappy, sure. Sentimental, definitely. But it was the happiest time of my life. Even my emotionally detached mother noticed the difference in me. I dressed better, took care with my appearance, even disassociated myself with several loser friends who had been dragging me down. My grades improved. By the time we finally, in our adolescent turmoil, had sex in her room one night while her parents went to the movies, I was so completely besotted with her I couldn't imagine a life without her. I felt certain we would be together forever, married and with children, growing old and being buried beside one another. And she seemed to feel the same way.

Except when we graduated, she went off to Vassar and I stayed local, thinking I could get some college credit in lieu of all the AP classes I never took in high school, and transfer someplace close to her. I enrolled in community college and took a part-time job, spending every waking hour emailing her or calling her or wondering if I could hop a bus on the spur of the moment and surprise her.

I marked off the days until her Christmas break with red Sharpie and tried to contain my anticipation. My own break started the week before she arrived home, and I had it all planned out – romantic dinner, stroll through the park under the stars up to the fountain that she loved so much, then down to one knee and present the little diamond I'd scrimped and saved for months to afford.

I never expected her to duck my calls for two days when she arrived home. When I finally confronted her, she didn't shoot to her feet from the couch where she sat, didn't dive into my arms or even give much of a reaction at all. She sighed, gave me a noncommittal hug and told me “we need to talk.” I sat on the swing set in her back yard, numb, while she explained to me patiently how college was a larger world, and it was changing her into a different person, and she couldn't be tied down to her old life, and that she'd met someone but she didn't want to betray me, and we're so far away and there's no way we could make it work over the distance...

The better person I became due to her evaporated overnight in a haze of pot smoke, cheap beer and loose pussy. I transformed myself into the kind of person I'd actually hated prior to that day, seeking solace in whatever temporary distraction I could find, wrecking my life and prospects in my immature inability to see any further than the next high, the next party, the next hook-up.

Strange, the most vivid memory of that time had been the smug look on the face of the man at the jewelry store when I returned the ring. A look that said, *of course she dumped you. You were never good enough to be with her.* I even stalked that guy for a little bit, long enough to figure out what he drove and fuck up his car one night in a drunken rage. As if he'd had anything to do with it. I was nineteen, I was fucked up, and I was mad. He was standing on the tracks when the train came.

I shook my head roughly, trying to clear the memories of my downfall – the same spiral which ended with me in an orange jumpsuit and a prison cell, I remembered – and dwell only on the happy times when I was with her. I had no idea where Leslie was now. Her parents divorced when she was in college and her mom moved somewhere east. She didn't come home to visit her dad much – he was pretty much a sour, hopeless old drunk now – and I'd completely lost track of her.

The mannequin transfixed me. The same wide, wondering eyes and the cute upturned button nose. The statue's face was narrower, and the hair was customary bushy blonde, but the resemblance was unsettling. I dug around my ring of keys until I found the proper one, then unlocked the cage in front of the store and let it retract noisily into the ceiling. I unlocked the door and stepped inside, peering around with my flashlight – sometimes employees stayed late to do inventory or get high, I caught one occasionally – before picking my way through the clothing racks to the front window display.

There she stood, just mere inches away from me. I knew, objectively, that this was only a molded piece of plastic, of no special significance in the world, designed specifically to sell clothing to young women who didn't necessarily need it. But the ocean of happy recollections that piece of plastic inspired in me granted it a life in my mind, a personality, a chance to step backwards past the wreckage of my adult life into a world where I was pure potential.

I reached out slowly, my questing fingers crossing the intervening space between us – strange, how quickly it became “us” as opposed to “me and that inanimate thing” – until I made the faintest feather-soft contact with the slick, glossy shoulder. An electric tingle ran up my arm and I gasped.

I'd had a mind to spend the rest of my shift relaxing in the massage chair with one of the demo-model foot spas, falling asleep reading one of the new bestsellers I'd purloined from the bookstore until the little travel alarm stolen from the luggage store woke me in time to look busy when I let the cleaning crew in for the morning. But instead, I just stood there, lost in a fog of memories, remembering days when I could have succeeded in life, when I could have truly loved, for a time that could just as easily been minutes as hours. Giddy smiles crossed my face as often as bitter tears, remembering Leslie and the hope she represented and the godawful mess I'd made of everything. But for whatever that stretch of time actually totaled, for a brief eternity I got to stand there and *not* be a borderline-sleazy ex-con in an ill-fitting polyester uniform, with a burgeoning drinking problem and a dead-end job with no prospects. For a moment or a lifetime, I didn't have to think that I would in all likelihood become Lou, sitting in a windowless office watching shoppers on black-and-white monitors, slowly deflating into a puddle of obesity, type-II diabetes and emphysema, wondering what happened to my life.

I missed the world being my oyster.

I blinked as the little travel alarm in my breast pocket began its insistent beeping. Had I really stood there, staring at a mannequin who looked a bit like my high-school sweetheart, for three and a half hours?

I shook my head, clearing away the debris of memory, and backtracked my steps, making sure that everything was back where it began before my shift, and no evidence of my indolence and petty theft remained. I'd only just replaced the little travel alarm in the display case at the luggage store and pulled down the protective cage when I heard the tapping at the glass announcing the arrival of the cleaning crew for their morning rounds. I poured myself a strong cup of coffee – resisting the urge to supplement the foul brew with a generous splash of the cheap bourbon that Lou kept in his desk and no one was supposed to know about – and watched them polish the floors as the automatic timer kicked in and brought the lights and canned music up.

I did a last walkthrough as the store employees began to arrive, looking busy and like I'd actually participated in my job, but my eyes kept straying to the little clothing store on the upper level, the one I'd never noticed before but now was not likely to forget.

* * *

The mannequin's blank expression dominated my imagination over the course of my next days off. I went through the motions, flitting aimlessly from job interview-slash-rejection to job interview-slash-rejection in a numb haze, fixated on a blank plastic expression and the memories it evoked.

I teased myself with the idea of buying flowers for it, or chocolates, treating it like a living thing and calling my strange obsession with it “love” to assuage my feelings of freakishness. By the time I slid back into the itchy polyester and punched the clock at the mall on the following Wednesday, I'd almost convinced myself that it was just a sick joke of my own devising.

I did my “rounds” by resetting the clock and then shut off the cameras to that section of the upper level. I unlocked the cage and threw it up quickly with a clamorous rattle and picked my way through the racks of clothing. Not wanting to stand in a window until my legs and feet ached, I gently lifted the mannequin from its display and set it down in the small shoe section where I could sit.

The molded plastic fit in the hollow of my arm just like Leslie had when we cuddled together at the movies or on her parents' couch, and I closed my eyes and luxuriated in the sensation for a moment.



I stared at the flawless plastic complexion and the painted-on eyes like she would at any moment break into that shy, crooked smile I remembered so fondly and whisper something to me, some endearment or promise for the future which would make my heart swell inside my chest and make everything in the universe suddenly, crashingly *all right*.

I tried to shed my sense of weirdness with a lame joke. “Hey, gorgeous, come here often?” I asked lamely, giving the life-size doll a smarmy leer. The plastic expression did not change.

“Shit, what the hell am I *doing*?” I asked myself. “Talking to a goddamned piece of plastic.”

I turned angrily to the lifeless form. “How the fuck did you get in my head, anyway? You're a damned Barbie doll. You don't have anything inside you but Styrofoam. You're not real. Why can't I stop thinking about you?”

I let her go, a little reluctantly, and paced back and forth in front of her angrily. “This is... I dunno what the fuck this is. It's weird. Sick. I'm going all stalker-y over a damned dummy. It's not like I can talk to you, or fuck you... you don't even have any holes. I mean, I can move your arms around a little...”

I pulled on the mannequin's arms, making it wobble unsteadily on its stand, yanking its upper body into strange and unnatural positions just to prove that it couldn't stop me. The expressionless face gave no evidence of indignity or discomfort. Still, it felt eerily like I was doing it to Leslie – not the Leslie that lived wherever she did now, sleeping with whomever she slept with now and in whatever job she held now, but that *perfect* Leslie from my memories, the one who made me better than I actually was.

I stopped, suddenly. "Sorry," I muttered shamefully.

I slapped my forehead and growled. "Apologizing to a damned mannequin. What the hell is wrong with me, anyway? Jesus, I gotta quit drinking."

I resumed my pacing. "I'm gonna put it back in the window, that's what I'm gonna do. Put it back in the fucking window and lock this store up tight and not come back in here. Ever. This is fucked-up, it's psycho, and I'm not gonna do it anymore."

I turned to the mannequin. "It's stupid, right? Treating you like you're her. Like you're gonna let me go back in time and make everything okay. Keep me out of jail. Let me go to college like I planned. And it's not like you – I mean the *real* Leslie – wasn't part of the reason all that fucked-up shit happened to me, anyway. She dumped me with the engagement ring *in my fucking pocket*, for Christ's sake. She got some cock at college and decided that was the way to go. She wasn't who I thought she was after all, and I had to learn that the hard way."

And that was the last time you trusted anyone, a soft voice spoke inside my head. *And look where that got you, genius.*

I stopped short and eyed the mannequin. "So, now I'm imagining you're talking to me? Great. I'm gonna wind up in the Shaky Acres making rope-soled sandals and talking to buildings."

I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands. "I need a fucking drink."

No, you don't, the soft voice said. *You need to quit that shit.*

My eyes snapped open. "What the hell? Are you actually talking to me?"

The plastic face gave no reaction.

"No, of course you're not, because mannequins can't fucking talk," I groaned. "Jesus, either it's the booze or prison fucked me up a *lot* worse than I thought it did."

I resumed pacing. "Wonder how many other ex-cons are out there having heart-to-hearts with fucking mannequins in empty malls?" I asked the ceiling. "What's next? Am I gonna be in the furniture store next month talking to a sofa about how my dad wasn't there for me?"

I whirled around, well-and-truly on the train now. "Oh, hey there, lamp. Didn't see you there. Say, what are your thoughts on man's spiritual place in the universe? Anything to add, cash register? How about you, coat hangers? Let's have a goddamned town hall meeting."

I raked my hands through my hair. "It's official. I've fucking lost it."

The rest of the evening passed quickly. I put the mannequin back in the display window and locked the store. I wandered angrily around the mall for a few minutes, then went back and unlocked the store and did the whole thing again. Finally, I took one of the disabled scooters from the charging station and just put the mannequin on the back, driving around aimlessly and

trying to sort out all the confusing thoughts in my head.

Finally, a strange sense of calm overtook me and I breathed out a long exhalation. I looked over my shoulder at the expressionless face nestled in the frame of straw-colored blonde.

“I’m sorry,” I told the mannequin softly. “You’re innocent in all this. Just a store prop. I’m all messed up, and I’m yelling at a piece of plastic who has *nothing* to do with how fucked up everything is for me. I should put you back. Give you a night off from my crazy. You can just stand there and look pretty – that’s your job, right? – and I’ll go back to pretending I give a shit if somebody robs this mall. We can just pretend that this never happened, okay?”

I sighed. “It was nice to feel young again, inside, though. I suppose I should say thank you or something.”

The mannequin didn’t say anything – she never did, even though I kind of wanted her to, now – and I turned the cart around to head back to the store. I didn’t even care that I hadn’t blanked the cameras. If anybody did watch the tapes, and saw me driving around the mall in a disabled scooter with a mannequin strapped to the back, I could blame it on boredom and catching the old, terrible *Mannequin* movie on cable or something. Nobody would give a shit – certainly not Lou – if nothing got broken or messed up.

I’d just about made peace with the decision when the cart bumped over a rubber expansion joint and the force jolted through the dummy on the back, making her arm fall and the cold, plastic hand touch my shoulder. The same electric jolt zapped through me, making me jump and gasp a little, and the part of my brain that desperately wanted to believe in magic kicked its way back to the forefront of my consciousness.

I smiled over my shoulder.

“Okay, you talked me into it,” I told the lifeless doll. “One more lap around the place ain’t gonna hurt anything. Besides, I’m already crazy. Stopping now ain’t gonna prove anything.”

I gunned the electric motor, revving up to a breakneck four miles per hour, humming Steppenwolf’s “Born to Be Wild” and chuckling to myself.

“So, angel face, you got a name?” I asked the mannequin.

She didn’t answer.

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, I arrived at a strange kind of peace with myself after my “episode” with the mannequin. I decided to chalk it up to the stress of prison, adjusting to the outside, joblessness and poverty and feelings of hopelessness all leading up to a weird side-trip away from reality. I traced my woes back to the place in my life where I felt like it all started to go wrong and the regret of all my subsequent mistakes made me wish desperately for a chance to go back and do it all again.

I embodied all that bitterness and disappointment and resentment in the cold, plastic face of a

mannequin who looked a bit like the girl who'd started me down that road, and I lashed out.

When I explained it to myself like that, it didn't sound *quite* so crazy.

I pledged to turn over a new leaf at work, and stopped my customary practice of doctoring the clock to get my rounds done in a few hours so I could spend the remainder of my shift fucking around and getting paid for it, and started walking my beat again. It gave me four chances a night to walk by Girlish Charm and look in on the mannequin, give it a shy wave, like we were co-conspirators in a prank or an embarrassing secret.

I kept that mode up for two weeks, coping magnificently, until the night when Lou stayed late to test all the fire alarms. He sat in the monitor room, slurping coffee, while I walked from store to store with my radio in hand and checked every single fire alarm in every single store, making notes on the ubiquitous clipboards which the mall seemed to run on and checking in. I'd never actually used every key on the staggeringly large ring before.

It was well after three a.m. when I finally unlocked the cage in front of Girlish Charm. The mannequin stood there, same as always, in the same lilac dress. I gave no outward reaction – I was being watched, after all – but it felt a bit like a recovering alcoholic being at a party and staring at booze for the first time since drying out. The window and the cage became a barrier to me, something I'd convinced myself mustn't be crossed under pain of insanity, and I'd taught myself to respect it.

Now that I was inside – just a few short feet from the source of my obsession – the temptation to speak, to reach out and touch nearly overwhelmed me. I tested the alarm quickly, making my notes on the clipboard, and keyed up the radio to talk to Lou.

“Central, the alarm in Upper Level D-16 checks out operational,” I told him.

Static answered me.

“Central? Lou? You there?”

No answer.

Damned lazy bastard had fallen asleep. I knew he would. He'd sounded groggy as hell the last three alarm checks. No doubt he snored and drooled on the desk right now, out until morning. I still had about twenty more alarms to check and nearly four hours to do it. I decided to take a little break from my duties and stepped into the display window, face-to-face with the mannequin.

“Hey, there, stranger,” I offered nervously. “Been a while.”

The blank expression didn't judge me.

“You know, I've been over it and over it in my head these last few weeks,” I continued, feeling the electric tingle once again as I caressed the dummy's shoulder fondly. “What all that shit meant. I

think those pop psychologists on the TV may be right. I never got to say anything to Leslie when she dumped me. She ran off, scared of the confrontation, and then wouldn't return any of my calls after that. I never got to tell her how mad I was. I never got to tell her how much she ruined for me. Maybe I needed to do that. Not to blame her, nothing like that – just to say, 'this is what you did.' I thought maybe I wanted her to feel guilty about it, some shit like that, but I didn't. I just needed her to *know*, y'know?

“So this is me, telling you – Leslie – that you fucked up a lot of stuff for me that night. You were selfish, and you didn't value the way I felt about you, and you threw my ass under the bus so you could have the 'college experience' and then you ran away before I could react.”

I cleared my throat. That actually felt really good, like a weight lifted off of my soul.

“I also probably need to tell you, Leslie, that a part of me never stopped loving you. As mad as I was at you, as much self-destructive shit as I did to get back at you after you dumped me, I always cared. I always carried this hope you'd come back. And as much as you hurt me, I wanted you to.

“I regret a lot of stuff, Leslie. *A lot*. Some of that was your fault but most of it was mine. There's not a whole helluva lot I can do about it now, except one thing. I never got to kiss you good-bye. I know you're not really here, that you're actually plastic and you were made in a vacuum mold and painted by somebody in Cambodia or Bangladesh or some fucked-up place, but you're a chance to make that right. I don't give a shit if it's weird. I don't give a shit if Lou sees me do it. But I'm finally gonna get to close that fucking door.”

I put an arm around the mannequin and swiveled the plastic face around until we were nose-to-nose.

“Good-bye, Leslie. I'll always care about you,” I whispered, and I leaned in close.



I thought, when my lips first made contact and the electric tingle shot through me, that I would feel silly, kissing a mannequin. But as my eyes closed, I seemed to melt into the form standing next to me, and the glossy plastic seemed to take on a softness and a warmth I never dreamed possible. The world spun around me into a blur. My entire consciousness became a simple processing of sensation. Softness meeting stiffness, matte meeting gloss. The hard plastic of the mannequin's lips melted against my own, almost seeming to open against my insistent pressure.

Then, as the flood of emotion pouring out of me seemed to ebb a little, just enough to grant me logical analysis of what I experienced, I felt a strange *shift* in the fabric of my reality. My lips, once questing against unyielding plastic, now seemed to push against harsh stubble and ticklish hair. Hard, unbending arms wrapped my shoulders, and softness cascaded down across my shoulders. The insistent itching of the rough polyester against my legs gave way to cool softness, tickled ever-so-softly by the swishing hem of soft fabric draping down to mid-thigh. The world seemed to grow larger around me, and my feet no longer seemed to be touching the floor beneath me properly, as if I were supsended on tip-toe in a most unnatural fashion. Teasing pressure pushed on my nipples – or was it my nipples pushing against soft fabric? I couldn't tell – and sent little wavelets of sensual pleasure through me. And the alarming lack of *anything* between my thighs but air. No heavy sense of my sex, pressed hard against my thigh among the slick, itchy hair. Just a gulf of air, caressing alien anatomy.

I gasped. The sound was high and breathy. *Girlish*.

I staggered backwards in a *click-clacking* of heels on tile. I tottered a little, spreading spindly and lissome arms wide, and a stray lock of shockingly blonde hair fell across my eyes to tangle in unnaturally long and thick black eyelashes.

I looked down at my body, obscured by two twin mounds of soft perfection encased in lilac fabric, staring down through a tempting valley of cleavage at a hairless chest of amber, blemish-free skin which fairly glowed with health. I screamed – the high pitch assaulted my ears – and pressed long-nailed fingers against cheeks now devoid of beard stubble for the first time since before puberty.



This isn't real. This isn't possible, I thought feverishly – even my thoughts seemed to be higher-pitched to me. I tottered forwards, high heels *clacking* loudly, and managed an up-and-down mincing run which made my... oh, God... my breasts bounce almost painfully against my slender chest. The panting of hyperventilation and stress sounded sexual to my male perceptions. I fled without a destination in mind, unmindful of everything, pushing aside clothing racks and sale signs without a thought in a panicked need to escape.

The mall loomed before me, rendered even more huge and cavernous by the loss of several inches in height. I closed my eyes and shook my head, causing soft blonde locks to whip and float around my face, then resumed my mincing run – grabbing my breasts with slender hands to keep the painful bouncing to a minimum – in an echoing barrage of clicking steps against the faux marble floor.

I need to see myself, I thought. *I need to see if this is real.* A modicum of sense returned to me suddenly. There were mirrors in every store, but Lou still slept in front of the monitors and could awaken at any moment. He would have questions I couldn't answer. So I headed for the nearest bathroom – disregarding the boldly lettered “Gentlemen” sign at the entryway – to examine myself away from the prying camera eyes.

I stood bolt upright in front of the nearest mirror and gazed in shock. A slender, almost elfin face

with the vaguest heart shape, dominated by dazzling blue eyes. A pert mouth, puffy-lipped, made for kissing and... *other things*. Long, thick “false” eyelashes and the same application of makeup worn by a mannequin not five minutes ago gave the face a polished, glamorous look – just this side of slutty – and it was framed perfectly by sideswept feathery bangs and a very *chic* flyaway style I'd seen in many of the fashion photographs hung in the storefronts. A long, elegant neck and narrow shoulders, flawless tanned skin devoid of any imperfection, not even a freckle. High, firm breasts with prominent nipples tenting the cups of the lilac dress I wore, falling to mid-thigh and draping across a flat, well-muscled abdomen. Long, slender legs without an ounce of fat, tapering to slender ankles and delicate feet wormed into platform peep-toe pumps decorated with big bows. The body represented sheer perfection – designed to model clothing, after all, and I was sure the dress was a size zero or two to fit the current fashionable ideal. I was stunning. Gorgeous. Sexual.

Perfect.

Hot tears began to sting my eyes and I leaned heavily against the counter, dropping my head and causing a waterfall of blonde hair to obscure my face and vision. I spit several stray tendrils out of my mouth – sticky and perfumed with heavy lipstick – and chuckled. The chuckle gained strength and took on a hysterical edge and I sagged in insane laughter, the high musical pitch so foreign to my ears that it sounded like another person.

I looked back at the exquisite face in the mirror again. The tears leaking from my huge, sapphire eyes did nothing to smudge or spoil my makeup, I noticed. The face's expressions correlated to my emotions, responded to my impulses, reflected my turmoil – but it *couldn't be mine*.

It couldn't be.

“This is fucking impossible,” the high voice said, like some bizarre ventriloquist's dummy. I thought it, this very lifelike mannequin girl in the mirror with a face so much like my first love said it.

“My name is David Allen Hargrove. I was born November 6th, 1987. I live in an efficiency apartment at 1202 East 18th Street, just off downtown. I just got out of County for a two year sentence for possession with intent to distribute. My cellmate's name was Kenny Robards. He used to masturbate every night and fart when he came. I have an associate's degree in computer science from community college and once had this dream about being a programmer and starting my own company.”

The melodious soprano, husky with tears, repeated that information verbatim as it formed inside my own mind. It even stole my own inflections and turns of phrase and peculiar tics of pronunciation.

“Nobody else knows this shit,” the perky soprano voice breathed. “Nobody.”

It wasn't possible, but somehow my mind motivated and animated this form staring at me in the mirror. Somehow, this form was me. The tight-bodied, gorgeous blonde with the fathomless blue eyes, the walking wet dream in the *très chic* fashionable dress, was David Allen Hargrove.

I was a girl. Not a mannequin – a *girl*.

“My God,” the high voice – *my* voice – breathed through the plump, expressive lips. “This *happened*. This is me.”

I shook my head roughly. “But it can't happen.”

I stared back at the reflection of *my* face and *my* body. “But it did. I don't know how, but it did.”

I backed up – *click-clack, click-clack* against the tile – tottering in my skyscraper platform heels until my back hit the unyielding tile wall. The shock of the galvanizing cold made me gasp – sounding overtly sexual, once again, to my male sensibilities – and when the rigidity of my body subsided, I slid listlessly down with a soft squeak until I curled into a ball on the tile floor, holding myself tightly for fear I might fly apart.



The adorable, kissable mouth formed into a perfect runway-model pout and I stared at the now-unfamiliar world around me through feathery blonde bangs. I hugged my knees tightly against my breasts, feeling them flatten against me in a most alien way, and tried to calm my breathing as best I could. After a long eternity – I hoped Lou, up in his aerie, wasn't wondering where I'd gone and just slept peacefully on the clock – I managed to take what stock I could of the situation. I forewent any attempt at explaining how the fuck this had happened. Magic or karma or who-knows-what, it didn't matter in the face of the new reality. I was a young girl, without any identification or contacts, not even a name. If prison taught me anything, it taught me to survive. And to survive, I would need things.

Nobody would question my living arrangements until the first of the month, when rent came due. I might be able to keep it up for a while, making sure to drop off my rent check anonymously. But eventually the paychecks direct-deposited to my bank would dry up, since I could no longer hold down my job in this form, and those checks would start bouncing. Locks would be changed and questions would be asked. But at least I had a few weeks of a place to crash until I got some things figured out.

First and foremost, I would need the basics. I couldn't spend the rest of my life in a cocktail dress and platform heels, no matter how cute and trendy they were. I would need clothes – luckily, I was alone in a shopping mall with access to everything. I'd only need to slip out of my heels and creep into the security office to swipe another ring of master keys and as long as Lou slept peacefully, I could help myself to all the clothes I needed.

After that, I would need to make some arrangements for I.D. and some way to get money. Then I could open a bank account and start trying to make myself a paper trail. I knew a few guys from prison who'd been transferred to the federal pen for identity theft. I could probably make contact with them via email and get some methods to generate a birth certificate. With that, I could apply for a drivers' license and Social Security Number. One of the identity thieves – a guy named Ricky – had told me the easiest way to generate a fake identity was to go through the Immigration and Naturalization Service and go the way of the green card. Generate a past as a foreign national or an immigrant.

I cocked a blue eye to the mirror and wondered how easy it would be to fake a Swedish or Norwegian passport. That would be the only nationality a blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty like myself could pull off without question. Maybe Russian. That would probably be an easier bunch of papers to pass off. There had to be some way I could fake the accent.

And what to do about work? I absolutely had the body to turn tricks for cash, but the thought of willingly participating in that act turned my stomach and threatened to bring back my earlier hyperventilation. I'd need something quick and easy and with an employer that didn't ask too many questions. Maybe I could hire on to a maid service or a hotel with a reputation for taking on illegals. They paid in cash and didn't require much in the way of papers. It could serve to bring in a little cash while I cooked up my identity and keep my legs safely together in the meantime.

There was always softcore modeling for the lower-rent skin mags, too. Models tended to get paid by the job and never got looked into very deeply. I'd need some contacts, but that shouldn't be too terribly hard. Just make sure to swipe some great cocktail dresses and club clothes and hit the party circuit. I'd get noticed eventually, with a face and body like this one.

Having a plan calmed me down considerably. I pushed myself back up to my feet, perched unsteadily on my towering heels (which still only brought me up to a height of about five foot nine), and took a few experimental steps. I turned my ankle painfully and almost went down.

“Wait a goddamn minute,” I breathed. “I made it all the way here from the store on these stilts and was damn near running. Maybe I'm thinking about it too much.”

I occupied my mind by listing off the fifty states and their mottoes, nicknames and capitols – something I'd used to calm myself down in prison when things got stressful, memorized for a test in junior high and somehow, inexplicably, never forgotten in the intervening years – and concentrate on something other than walking.

“Alabama. The Heart of Dixie State. Capitol is Montgomery, motto is '*Audemus Jura Nostra Defendere*.' Alaska. The Last Frontier. Capitol is Juneau, motto is 'North to the Future.' Arizona. The Grand Canyon State. Capitol is Phoenix, motto is '*Ditat Deus*.' Arkansas. The Natural State. Capitol is Little Rock, motto is '*Regnat Populus*.'”

By the time I got to Delaware, my tottering steps became a lanky sashay with just a hint of catwalk strut, hips swinging and placing one foot in front of the other while swinging my arms from the elbow. I had no idea that I walked just like a self-assured runway model – how on earth could I have known that? – but I did know that I set a reasonably quick pace, kept the *click-clacking* to a minimum, and kept from falling flat on my face or snapping a skinny ankle by letting whatever natural tendencies came with the new body take over the simplest tasks. I wondered if it would help me with the more complex stuff, like how to wipe myself after peeing (because I'd need to do that, now) or keep my long hair out of my mouth or actually figure out things like lingerie and cosmetics.

I hoped the makeup-job on my face would come off. I mean, it looked gorgeous, but it was a little over-the-top for a job as a hotel maid, if that was my destiny. And once it was off, I hoped to Christ I could put it back on without making myself look like a circus clown. Maybe a quick visit to the bookstore for some beginner's-guide-to-suddenly-finding-yourself-female books as I ransacked this place before disappearing would be in order.

* * *

I crept into the security office just after reaching 'New Mexico' on my list and relaxed when I heard the rhythmic, stentorian snoring I hoped for. Lou's face, flattened grotesquely against the console, never stirred as I opened the door and crept inside on bare feet. Strangely, I almost missed my heels. They were a bitch to maneuver in, but with their loss I felt the absence of my previous height acutely. The world looked immense from my five-foot-three-inch stature, like I occupied a child's world where the tops of counters and high cabinets and shelves remained completely unknowable. Beside Lou's flaccid arm on the floor stood his 'secret' bourbon bottle, the level inside it vastly diminished. Poor old bastard must be fighting with his ex again. He always drank heavily when he had to argue with her.

Reaching past him and almost brushing his cheek with one of my deliciously perfect breasts, I pressed the master reset key on the console and darkened all the cameras on the lower level. Then I slipped into the lounge and pulled several of the small rare-earth magnets holding flyers and notes to the refrigerator into my palm. Stooping next to the twin servers recording the night's video, I opened both CD drawers and dropped the magnets in each of them before closing them again. The disk drives, always whirring, made sick, strangled sounds. No trace of my identity remained. I retrieved the magnets after a long count of sixty and replaced them on the fridge before creeping back into the monitor room.

I opened the drawer next to the radio charger and slipped out a ring of keys, wrapping it in my graceful fingers tightly to keep the telltale jingling silent. I checked the habitual urge to sign the clipboard with a wry grin. I slipped out, closed the door silently, and padded down the stairs. For reasons I couldn't completely comprehend, I stopped for a moment and wormed my narrow feet back into the platform heels, loving the sensation of stepping up into my greater height, accessing another level of perception previously denied me. Like opening a door to a different, less intimidating world.

I set off quickly, having made a mental list of the things I'd need. I tried to keep things on the cheap, but didn't want to go too far in either direction. Steal *haute couture* and twelve-hundred-dollar designer shoes and handbags, then I'm on the hook for felony grand larceny. Steal bargain basement and I'd look cheap and destitute and ripe to be preyed upon. I decided to keep to the middle of the road.

I had to avoid the big department stores like J.C. Penney and Macy's because they ran independent security systems to which I had no access. I kept to the smaller boutiques along the mall concourse. I stopped in the Lady Foot Locker first to use one of their little measuring contraptions to get my shoe size and a large gym tote. I selected a pair of tennis shoes to go with – I figured I'd need them eventually – and locked the store up tight and moved to the next.

The Limited set me up with some traveling clothes – a light leather motorcycle jacket which would protect my more sensitive skin against the chilly weather at night, some blue jeans, a pink t-shirt and one of those trendy new 'infinity' scarves. I had to take my time, right at first, because I had no idea of my sizes. Turns out I was mannequin-perfect, as I suspected, designed to model clothes and give teenage girls poor body image. I took a size extra-small in a top and wore a size 0 in jeans and dresses, with a size 6-1/2 shoe.



The hardest stop came when I unlocked the cage in front of Victoria's Secret. I had no earthly idea how to find out a bra size – I'd operated under the assumption that bigger was better throughout my male life and never paid much attention to anything past “double-D.” My solution was simply to open the drawers and pull out brassieres at random, lifting up my shirt and holding them over my breasts until I approximated a good fit – a 34C, I noted to myself – and stuffed several into my tote, looking nervously over my shoulder. It wouldn't be long before things began stirring in the mall, cleaning crews arriving and knocking insistently when the doors weren't unlocked on schedule, waking Lou and closing the world around me like a trap. I decided to pick up my pace.

I hustled as best I could in my heels, flitting from store to store and picking up whatever I thought I'd need – purses, shoes, makeup, sunglasses, a phone (which would need activation at some point, but I'd burn that bridge when I arrived there), a hair dryer and some rudimentary styling products. I had to stop and boost another overnight bag to contain my growing pile of swag. I looked at the purloined “Hello Kitty” watch on my slender wrist in trepidation. Time dwindled.

I ducked into a Charlotte Russe – thinking to buy something a little more fashionable than the simple, workaday garments I'd stolen so far. I didn't expect the lure to be quite so tempting – instead of the simple smash-and-grab of the other stores, I found myself pawing through the racks for things that I considered “cute” and “sexy.” I even stopped to pick out accessories – earrings and bracelets and hair decorations – and then ducked into a fitting room in the back to change into something much more suitable to my youth and attractiveness. A strange, unsettling compulsion gripped me – I couldn't seem to stop searching for the trendiest and most flattering styles, in colors that complimented my complexion and hair. I seemed to have a knack for it – I found myself instinctively dismissing outfits and styles as “too dressy” or “too casual”

for the look I had in mind – and soon found myself decked out in a girlishly sexy, skin-tight ensemble of pink “Hello Kitty” cropped tee-shirt and curve-hugging Miss Me jeans with rhinestone embellishments on the pockets and seams that glittered with my every move. I added a black leather belt – vegan, cruelty free, I noted with a small amount of pride – studded with rhinestone hearts and fronted with a heavy, heart-shaped buckle. Big bangle bracelets clattered on my wrists and heavy golden “door knocker” earrings brushed against my neck, nestled in my soft hair. I wore gaudy, tacky-*chic* large rhinestone rings on most of my fingers and perched atop pink stiletto-heeled platforms that added an easy seven inches to my diminutive height, in a pink to match the top.

I sashayed in my model-walk down the concourse towards the freight entrance, a quick and unobserved way out. I'd purloined a few packs of smokes from Pipe World – I chose the long, ultra-skinny Capri 120s in keeping with my girlish appearance – and lit one off a book of matches as I walked, accompanied by the staccato *click-clack* of my heels echoing around me.

Strangely enough, I felt a bit carefree. The initial shock of finding myself in a female body faded into a numb acceptance. I harbored no doubt that I would freak out again – probably many times – before I came to terms with my new body and life. The first time a guy checked out my rack where I could see him, I would probably catastrophically lose my shit. Or my first period, if it turns out I actually got them. I wasn't sure how much *mannequin* and how much *real girl* I actually was. The fascination with the latest trends in clothing and my unquenchable desire to wear them told me conclusively that the *raison d'être* of my mannequin-hood carried over undiminished to my new life.

I mentally rechecked my list. I still needed a few things, here and there, to complete the hastily-assembled collection of basics stuffing my two bags. I'd need some kind of lotion – I remembered from my string of short-term girlfriends that they couldn't function without rubbing themselves down with some kind of lotion morning and night – and would probably need some feminine hygiene products should the need arise. Maybe a few photos from the photo booth for temporary fake ID's. And I still needed to breeze through the bookstore to get books on makeup, hygiene, hairstyling and overall how-to-be-a-girl-in-fifteen-easy-steps kinds of books. Tackling this life would be hard enough without the instruction manuals.

I stepped spryly up the stairs – the escalators were shut down to conserve power – to the upper level and the freight entrance. The mall cut into a hillside so that some parking areas accessed the lower level and some the upper. I picked up the pace, shooting nervous glances at my pink rhinestone watch, hoping I could be safely waiting at the bus stop by the time the first of the cleaners arrived at the lower level doors.

My chosen route took me right past Girlish Charm, the spot where this whole fantastic adventure began. I puffed on my cigarette, thankful for the youthful energy keeping me moving rapidly despite my fatigue and emotional upheaval, and nearly passed the store entirely without even looking before something caught my eye.

The display window beckoned, and my eye ran past the motionless forms of my sister mannequins in their unlikely poses. In a lone window, far from the door, a tall mannequin stood in an ill-fitting polyester guard's uniform and tarnished badge, lank brown hair brushed back

from a hatchet-thin face. I stopped dead in my tracks, smoke curling around my fingertips, as I leaned close to the glass in wonder, dropping my laden bags around my high-heeled feet.



“Jesus Christ,” I breathed, the polished red lips of my reflection mouthing the words, superimposed over the form of my old face, staring blankly forward with painted brown eyes.

“Did we change places?” I asked the silent masculine form. “Is that what happened?”

I got no answer. Desperate for some kind of resolution, some kind of *explanation* of this weird event, I ducked into the store (which I'd forgetfully left unlocked in my haste to flee from the place of my supernatural transformation) and picked through the racks of clothes towards the display. I couldn't help but notice how *adorable* some of the clothes were, and regretted not stuffing some of the dresses and skirts into my bulging overnight bags.

I wrestled with the tall, bulky mannequin of the blank-eyed security guard – *my body*, I thought a bit possessively – until by brute force I brought it out onto the store floor. I'd never had this much problem moving the mannequin when the roles were reversed. It brought home how much smaller and physically less imposing I'd become. Bombshell curves and nine percent body fat notwithstanding, I simply couldn't lift as much and didn't have the height, brawn or body mass to provide leverage.

I stared at the mannequin with a cocked eyebrow. “So, if I kiss you, do I turn back into a prince?” I asked, chewing my bottom lip (quite sexily, unbeknownst to me) in thought. This eleventh-hour lifeline back to my old form came as a bit of a shock. Becoming a prince again would certainly make life easier, and erase a lot of awkward questions I would eventually be called to answer, but...

...I'd already started looking forward a bit to staying a princess.

I raked a hand through my artfully windblown mane. *Princess*. I never would have used that word in connection with myself prior to this night. Thinking of myself in such terms brought the inevitable masculine follow-ups that I learned to fear as a boy among other boys: *Fag. Queer. Sissy. Bitch. Pussy.*

Strange how much less intimidating that final word could be when you could actually feel your own one of those pressing sensuously against the seam of your skin-tight lowrise jeans. How could I be frightened of that word in description of myself when it was so undeniably true? *I was a pussy. A luscious, curvaceous, hard-bodied, perky-titted bona fide card-carrying piece of grade-A pussy. The kind of girl that guys would crawl all over one another for a chance to touch. The simple act of smiling would become an award for gallantry and manners now. The physical power I'd lost in my transformation paled to insignificance in the face of the amount of social power I'd gained in exchange. My looks, my body and my raw sexuality could entice a man to do whatever I wanted him to do, and I knew it in my marrow. I even had firsthand knowledge – a lengthy catalogue of all the stupid, destructive shit I'd done personally just to believe that a pretty girl actually liked me or found me attractive.*

Now I had that same power to play with, and it made the broad shoulders and barrel chest on the mannequin in front of me look not so appealing.

“Settle down,” I told myself breathily, stealing yet another surreptitious glance at my wristwatch. “You can change back. You don't have to run, you don't have to break your parole, you don't have to work as a fucking maid to get the money to fake yourself a birth certificate or a green card. You don't have to start from zero any more. Just change back.”

If you even can change back, I thought to myself. But if this was a one-way trip, then aren't you already set to go? Your original plan stands. And it just might work.

Never in a million lifetimes did I think I would actually *vacillate* when faced with the choice between my old body and this new one. I dug out another long, skinny cigarette from my bag and lit it, blowing billowing clouds of smoke upwards into the air above the mannequin's head, tapping my platformed toe in nervous thought.

“Whatever you're gonna do, you better do it *now*,” I said. “Change back, and you might have just enough time to put everything back that you stole and make it look like it never happened before people start showing up to ask questions. Or you haul ass right this second and you don't ever look back.”

Common sense and blonde hair were not so mutually exclusive as accepted canon would have me believe. Gradually, the thrill and excitement of *starting over fresh* faded and I began to see past the youth, energy, health and sexuality of my current incarnation and see the ocean of problems this new form would generate. I lived alone in a shitty part of town. The chances that I would be attacked loomed very high, and without the training I didn't have enough raw strength to defend myself without a weapon. A weapon which could prove impossible to obtain without

identification. My lack of official documents stood to impede every single thing I would attempt, from getting a bus pass all the way to renting a place to live. And as hard as finding a job with a criminal record had been, I could only imagine how hard it would be to find another one with no past and no identification. Going back to my old self recommended itself on every level. I was already set up in my old life. I already had everything I needed to operate safely within the system. I wouldn't have to do anything illegal to get by, and thereby protect myself from investigation by the authorities who might uncover my lack of past. I wouldn't have to think up plausible answers to even the most mundane of questions, such as 'what is your name?' and 'where are you from?' Being Davey Hargrove was the better answer to *everything*.

But, I realized with a shock, it would be so hard to give up being *pretty*.

Pretty people got treated differently. They were prized. They got offered things that normal people didn't. Opportunities existed for them that didn't exist for anyone else. And I finally had the membership card to get into that club, no questions asked.

God, you're being a dipshit about all of this, I chided myself harshly. *You've never been indecisive in your life. Get on with it. Just pick one.*

It wasn't lost on me that the word *ditz* had sprung into my head before I self-corrected to the more masculine *dipshit*. My mind seemed to seek out ways to accept myself in the feminine role. It wouldn't be long before I called myself *bitch* and *bimbo*. The transformation took on an insidious edge. I got the feeling that it crept into my innermost self. The thought of losing my male self should have alarmed me. Even more alarming, it *didn't*. Not at all.

I shrugged and puffed out smoke. "What the hell," I told myself wryly. "I never had it, so I shouldn't miss it. Don't be a dumbass. Kiss the fucking frog."

I puckered my lips and leaned forward, but couldn't go through with it. I stopped short, staring into the painted-on eyes, searching for some reason other than *practical* to go through with it. I discovered, to my shock and chagrin, that even though it made good sense to change back and avoid all the difficulties involved in fabricating a life and a history wholesale, when it came right down to it I flat didn't *want* to go back to being boring old Davey Hargrove. He was boring. He was ordinary. He'd fucked up everything good in his life and he only had a lifetime of going nowhere to anticipate.

This girl had her whole life ahead of her. She could go to college. She could get a great job. She could quit that great job whenever she wanted and have babies or travel the world. Wink and shake my ass at the right rich guy, tell him I loved him, and I could be on a first-class flight to Rome or Paris or London in an eyeblink.

But she wouldn't be real. Davey Hargrove was *real*. He had parents. He had memories.

For all the good either one of those things had ever done him.

I puffed my last and tossed the spent butt – stained around the filter tip with glossy red – into a nearby planter. I could almost hear the infinitesimal *tick-tock* of my little Sanrio watch, counting

away precious seconds while I waffled back and forth, seconds that could mean the difference between freedom and captivity, seconds that could define the next years of my life, no matter what choice I made.

I just needed to fucking make it. Win, lose, or draw.

I cast a quick glance upwards at the security camera in its black globe. No telltale red light – Lou still slept and hadn't turned the cameras back on, thank heaven.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

“Do something, already,” I urged myself.

I leaned forward again.

I stopped again.

I growled in frustration.

“This is ridiculous,” I said aloud, my upbeat soprano echoing shrilly in the empty store. “I have to do something. Pucker up and kiss it, or get your cute little ass moving. Those are the only two options left in the world.”

I looked back at the expressionless mannequin that once was me. It waited patiently for my decision.

It waited.

“It'll all be waiting,” I told myself. “The mall ain't going anywhere. The mannequin sure ain't. It will all be right here where I left it. It isn't that I don't have to make this decision. I just don't have to make it *tonight*. Go back to being Davey. Think it all over. Take some time.”

I nodded. A sense of finality descended into me, and my inner turmoil subsided. No guarantee existed that the trip back would even work at all. Or the transformation to and from femininity might be a one-time offer. Should those options prove true, then the choice was never mine to begin with, and it would be made for me. But a part of me suspected differently. Something told me that the mannequin who looked so much like my first love caught my eye in the lonely boutique on the upper level for a *reason*.

The ticking of the Hello Kitty watch lost its dread.

I looked carefully at the skinny, blank face I once wore.

“I guess I can go back to being you for a few days,” I told it conspirationally. “This will just be our little secret, right? I'll come back tomorrow and talk to you about it. We'll work everything out.”

The mannequin offered no response, so I supplied my own.

"You're right, handsome," I told it knowingly. "This isn't over. Neither of us wants that, right? It's not over unless we want it over. This is gonna happen again. We're gonna have time to think it over, to weigh all the outcomes, and it's gonna happen. We can make the decision and never wonder what might have happened if we went the other way."

I wrapped my arms around the scratchy polyester and the hard, cold plastic, flattening my superb breasts against the unmoving form. "So c'mere, you," I purred. "Plant one on me."

My soul at temporary peace, I tilted my head back – *Jesus, my old self is tall*, I thought – and leaned forward. And this time, I didn't bother stopping.

Like somehow, I knew this was meant to be.

THE WORLD SPUN AROUND WILDLY again, that sense of melting from before, and the hard plastic lips beneath my soft, warm ones softened and warmed in response. The shock from the first transformation now eased, with the strange expectation I held in my heart, and I was able to pay more attention and analyze a bit.

The most overwhelming sensation of transferring from one form to another consisted of my sense of breath. Not *breathing*, but actual breath. Like the air in my lungs lived, held my very spirit and soul, and I exhaled it into the other form while it inhaled it into itself. That same breath suffused the form, bringing life and vitality into the cold, hard plastic, bringing it warmth and movement as the same animus drained away from the form I recently inhabited.

But even more than the sense of breath leaving one body and suffusing another I felt the *pleasure* of the kiss. The female body responded with a rising excitement and an unexpected flood of wetness between my firm thighs, a heightening of sensitivity so intense I felt I could identify each individual stitch in the seam of my tight jeans pressing against my warm flesh.

That sensation faded, circling out of the base of my mind like water through a drain, becoming more of a memory as the feeling of thickness and weight replaced it, warm sticky flesh against a hairy thigh, the itchy and uncomfortable feeling of polyester against my hips and thighs.



I opened my eyes and looked down at the expressionless plastic face of Leslie's mannequin once more, holding my face between cold, lifeless hands. She wore the skin-tight ensemble I picked out for my flight, so I took a few moments and redressed the mannequin in something more suitable for her store window, then checked my watch breathlessly.

Only a few moments remained before the cleaning crew arrived. Instead of replacing all the clothing and sundries I swiped for my run, I tucked the pink overnight bag over one shoulder and ran across the tiles, finding one of the electrical closets I knew about to stash it, locking it tightly with my capacious ring of keys. I hated all the loose ends I left behind – the thieves and burglars I knew in County always preached to overestimate the police and security personnel assigned to catch you. The mall personnel fell fall short of Sherlock Holmes, but I didn't like to leave so much evidence of theft which could be tied back to me. Matt, my parole officer, still kept tabs on me and even petty theft might land me back in a cell. Much less, it would cost me the one job I could get, given my criminal record.

I only hoped the stores I boosted would overlook their gaps in inventory for one day, so I could replace everything at my leisure at work tomorrow night. I trotted back to the entrance to allow the cleaning crew inside, then finished testing the fire alarms in the last twenty stores, making check marks on my clipboard so I could tell the sleeping Lou I'd done my job.

I finished my rounds by slipping the rhinestone-encrusted Hello Kitty watch back into the case at the Sanrio store – the one item which would cause raised eyebrows in my whole rip-off cavalcade, only to be found on the arm of a mannequin in another store – and drew down the cage before heading upstairs to the security office. Lou sat back, groggy, rubbing his eyes and making pained grunting noises.

“Hey, Lou,” I said quietly – the old man probably sported a raging hangover after the cheap bourbon from his desk – and poured myself a cup of coffee. I laid the completed clipboard on the bleary-eyed man's desk.

He looked at it vacantly, taking a moment to realize what it was. “You finished it?”

“Yeah, didn't have fuck-all else to do,” I said, shrugging. “Want some coffee?”

Lou rubbed his face between his hands. “Y'know something, kid? Matt was right about you. I'm really glad I hired you on,” he said. “I know you're in the market for something better. I know you're not gonna stay here for long.”

“Thanks,” I told him sheepishly. He wouldn't be saying anything so complimentary if he'd been conscious to look at my evening's activities in the body of a twenty-year-old blonde girl.

“But hey, I can plan ahead, right?” Lou went on, accepting the styrofoam cup of rotgut coffee I passed him and adding heaps of powdered creamer and Sweet 'N' Low. “I want to bump you up, kid. Roy's wanting to move on. I want to make you shift supervisor. Dollar an hour bump, more hours, and there's not a whole lot more work, actually. You interested?”

“What would I have to do?”

“Basically, you run the schedule and make sure the office is manned. You'd have to keep the night shift, which sucks balls, and you'd have to start checking the storerooms. But I think you'd be fine. There's still a lot of time to take naps in chairs and that kinda shit.”

“Sure, I guess,” I told him. “I don't know if I want to make this my career, though, but there's not a whole lot out there for an ex-con. I could use the extra dollar an hour.”

“Good,” Lou said, slugging coffee. “I'll start the paperwork right away, get your clearance. As soon as Roy pulls up stakes, you'll take over.”

“Appreciate it, Lou, really,” I told him. He made a noise somewhere between a cough and a snort, waving his hand in a dismissive gesture. I waited for more, got nothing, so I clocked out and headed home.

* * * * *

The next night at work frustrated me. I shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, thinking only of the overnight bag of incriminating evidence sitting in the bottom of the electrical closet next to Macy's, while Roy took me through the boring and repetitive details of his job at great length, talking to me like I was a mildly challenged houseplant. I tried not to punch him in his smug face, bearing the interminable lecture with as good a grace as I could muster, hoping he would lose steam soon and wander off and let me get back to the business of returning the clothes and jewelry I'd purloined to their respective stores before they did inventory and discovered them missing.

Roy led me through a warren of tunnels lit with anemic fluorescent lights that flickered and hummed, beneath the mall concourse. The long hallway we traversed stretched endless white, broken only by grey-painted steel doors, each marked with a small white placard and a black number, anonymous and antiseptic. A large brown rat scurried across the concrete floor ahead of us, ducking underneath one of the grey doors.

“What's all this stuff?” I asked, gesturing at the doors.

“Storage,” Roy said. “Each one corresponds to a store upstairs. It's random shit, mostly – they keep the merchandise upstairs. There will be some overstock, but mostly it's shit like shelves, display hangers, mannequin parts, that kind of thing.”

“Mannequin parts?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Roy replied. “Random crap. The Victoria's Secret one has a lot of the big pictures of the models they hang in the windows from the last few years, your predecessor used to sneak down there occasionally to rub one out. Not that you'd do anything nasty like that, would you?”

“Me? No. That's fucked up,” I said. “How do you know which one's which?”

“Why is it important? Nobody ever comes down here,” Roy replied.

“You hired me because of the break-ins at the malls, right?” I reminded him. “You're worried about thieves. If I wanted to rip off a mall, I wouldn't do a smash-and-grab like some kick burglar. I'd look around, find out where the valuables were, then I would come in as a customer and find me a nice, out-of-the-way place to hole up until the place closed. Like a bunch of deserted storerooms.”

Roy tapped his lip in thought. “Nice,” he said. “Lou said you were smart. Okay, each store has a three-digit identifier, y'know, from the checklist upstairs. So the numbers down here correspond the same way. One-oh-one for the lower concourse, two-oh-one for the upper, three-oh-one for the food court, then a dot, then the three-digit number, then another dot and either an oh-one or an oh-two, depending on if the store has one or two storerooms.”

“Cool,” I said. “And where do they keep the keys?”

Roy laughed. He dug in his pocket and fished out a single key, which he presented to me with a flourish. “You're done with that big-ass ring, kid. We're giving you a master key. All the supervisors get one. One key, every lock in the building.”

I took the key and examined it. “Cool, that's gonna simplify things a lot. Tell you what, I'm gonna go through all these storerooms. Check the locks, access points, that kinda stuff. Make sure this downstairs area isn't a way that somebody can get in.”

“You say so, kid. Lou seems to think they'd get in through the loading dock.”

I shook my head. “Too many cameras, and the merchandise is secured way too well,” I corrected.

“I mean, sure, they've got a ton of high-end electronics and shit in the warehouse, so they lock that shit up like Fort Knox. Too much work to get in, too big a chance of getting your picture taken while you do it. No, they're gonna come in a different way, I promise you.”

Roy shrugged. “Knock yourself out, kid,” he said. “I'm going home. My shift ended an hour and a half ago. You want to dig through a bunch of moldy storage closets, you go right ahead.”

“See ya, Roy,” I said. “Have a good night.”

He waved at me over one shoulder as he walked away. I spent a little time wandering the long hallway, seeing only the grey-painted doors, then walked back upstairs for a moment, long enough to filch a few beers from the wine shop on the lower level and make sure Roy left for the evening. I paused long enough to disable the cameras in the office and retrieve the stolen bag, flitting from shop to shop with a rising sense of relief at having “gotten away with it” as I replaced all the clothing on the rack. After an hour or so, and three more beers, I made my way back down to the storerooms, sifting through the antiseptic numbers until I came to the one assigned to Girlish Charm. I drunkenly fumbled the master key from my pocket and opened the door, admitting a lurid rectangle of light into the musty interior.



Disused shelves and display stands stood stacked against one wall, but my attention fixed instantly on the stacks of disembodied parts – torsos, legs, hands, and heads of every conceivable build, color and hairstyle. They appeared to be part of a modular system, a way to put any head with any torso with any ass, legs, arms or heads the store-owner desired. I thought immediately of the “Leslie” mannequin upstairs. I wondered if I could put different breasts on

her, or longer legs, or one of the ludicrously long-nailed hands, then transform myself into a living version of her with a kiss like I had before. A rising excitement bloomed in my chest and in my groin at the thought of being able to change myself into a large-breasted redhead one hour, then a leggy black girl with hair to her waist the next.

Even these fun distractions couldn't divert me from the biggest question plaguing me, the question of whether or not the magical transference into the female body would work a second time. I formed several theories since it had happened, and decided to make use of the unseen storerooms to test one. I assembled a mannequin hastily out of spare parts, a leggy brunette with bombshell curves and lush, bright red lips. I pressed a kiss onto the cold plastic, finding myself unexpectedly *hoping* that I would look back onto my own visage in glossy polystyrene in a moment, large breasts jiggling on my naked chest and long sable hair dangling carelessly across my heart-shaped face.

I pulled away disappointed, still male and animate, one theory blown to pieces. So the magic was specific to the mannequin that resembled Leslie and not those specific to the store itself. I guess the owner or manager of *Girlish Charm* didn't shop for displays at the *Fucked-Up Magic Body-Swapping Mannequin Emporium*. Glad that I could finally explore a bit more of this strange situation presenting itself to me. I took a pair of the modular hands, intended to display rings and bracelets, with long red-painted nails and slender fingers. I stuffed them into my pockets, stubbed my spent cigarette out against the steel lintel of the door, then made my way back upstairs towards *Girlish Charm*.

* * * * *

I unlocked and threw up the cage and opened the door to the darkened boutique. The mannequin – *my* mannequin – had been moved from the store window and into the store proper. She wore different clothes, now – the spring fashion season loomed and all the stores changed their decorations and looks to suit the latest trends. I felt the strange, magnetic pull towards the motionless statue that so intrigued me earlier, led me to the activation of the strange magic which placed me in the flawless body last night. I think I could have walked right to her blindfolded, in a room full of identical mannequins.

“Hello again,” I told the lifeless form as I stepped forward. It took a moment to familiarize myself with the lock-and-release mechanism for the modular mannequin, then I swapped this mannequin's hands with the more slender, longer-nailed hands brought up from the downstairs storage. I even took the time to replace the gaudy jewelry the mannequin wore before I changed it.

I stood back to admire my handiwork – pun intended – for a moment and mentally double-check that I'd disabled the cameras and logged my door-scans for the evening. Once I satisfied my latent paranoia that no one on our lackadaisical security staff would find me out, I took a seat in one of the upholstered chairs near the racks of shoes and just sat, staring at the mannequin blankly.

I still struggled with the events of last night. My mind reached some kind of *détente* with the fantastical aspect of switching bodies with a magical mannequin. That aspect of last night

completely overwhelmed any attempt at reason I could apply to it, leaving me only a bewildered acceptance of the strange wizardry as the only method available to cope. No, the magical transformation – leaving aside that two days ago I would have sworn that magic did not exist – plagued me far less than my own feelings about the magic. Feelings that shocked me to my core, almost as much as they fascinated me.

Once I overcame the simple shock of finding myself in a woman's body – a very sexy, very sensitive woman's body – I discovered that I *liked* it. A man who never once dreamed of being anything other than the way he came into the world, never knew one moment's confusion or indecision about his gender. The sensations, even the simple business of moving around in the strange, curvaceous body intoxicated me. And, as time stretched on and allowed me the luxury of thinking things over, I came to one inescapable conclusion that brought every second of my life prior to that moment into question.

I preferred it.

I *wanted* to be a woman. More than I wanted to be a man.

The realization stunned me. Try as I might, justification eluded me. I'd never in my life been less than satisfied with being male. Having a cock swinging between my legs and hair on my chest bothered me not one bit. I liked having to shave my face. I liked drinking beer and wearing tightie-whitie underwear, I liked peeing standing up. I liked fucking girls. On my surface, and to the best of my knowledge before last night, I never wanted or wished to be anything else.

Until I had a few short hours of something different. Like everything that attracted me towards women, everything that enchanted and enthralled me about them, suddenly coalesced and descended on me like a driving rain. I spent a lifetime adoring breasts, the shape of them, the weight of them, the feel of the soft flesh in my hands. But to actually have a pair of my own, bouncing and jiggling on my chest...



I could stand it no longer. I stepped close to the mannequin in her short leather skirt and sequined top, and placed one hand alongside the smooth, glossy cheek. I pressed my lips to the hard plastic, hoping against hope that the magic would still work, that lightning might strike twice.

The sensation of the breath leaving my body and entering a new one took me anew, and I opened long-lashed eyes to stare up into the plastic replica of my male form, towering over me and staring with blank, painted eyes.

I smiled, feeling my little button nose wrinkle up adorably. "Oh, thank God," my breathy soprano said. "I was so scared that wouldn't work."

I held up a hand and regarded the excessively long, red-lacquered nails on my new, more slender hands. Tacky stretch-rings with huge faceted paste stones glittered on every finger and a bulky silver bracelet clung to one slender, tapered wrist. It had worked – the magic wasn't tied to this one particular mannequin, either. I could change parts and still go through the transformation. I wondered how far I could take it, idly, while I pirouetted girlishly on my spike-heeled boots and gestured grandly at things around the store with my fetishy nails. A happy, vacuous giggle escaped my painted lips.

I checked the cheap watch on the wrist of the mannequin in the ill-fitting security uniform. I easily had an hour before I needed to clean up my mess and make things look like I had done nothing wrong. I sashayed around the store, pawing through the racks of clothes happily. I found a little sequined club dress – a stretchy little scrap of fabric, looking impossibly small like doll's clothing to my male sensibilities – that delighted me far more than I expected any clothing

to do, and I excitedly shucked out of my skirt, top and heels so I could try it on.

I stared at my new naked body in open admiration, using one of the fitting room mirrors to take in the firm thighs – gapped perfectly, I noticed – and pert bottom, the long hairless legs, my trim belly and gravity-defying C-cup breasts, the lithe arms and long neck, and the flawless amber complexion.

My large pink nipples stiffened at the sight. Apparently, the sight of a naked woman still aroused me – even the sight of myself as a naked woman. I saw the thick folds of my sex blossom open like a flower between my legs and smelled the sharp tang of my own musk.

I tossed the little dress over my shoulder and ducked into a fitting room, needing a little privacy for my next exploration even being the sole occupant of the deserted shopping mall. I ran soft hands across my smooth flesh, amazed at the little tingles of pleasure trailing behind my touch like a boat's wake. I slid them down my flanks, around my hips, then up my plank-flat belly and up to cup my generous breasts. When the very tips of my long, glamorous nails flicked against my stiff nipples, I gasped loudly. As a male, I avoided contact with my nipples as too sensitive for any kind of fun. Not so, their female counterparts. The same sensitivity remained – the slightest contact brought a tidal wave of pleasure across my entire chest – but not to where it overpowered my arousal. It added to it, instead, making a fresh wave of wetness flow from inside me.

“Oh, my God,” I moaned. “I fucking love these things!”

I sat back on the little bench in the fitting room, thoroughly enjoying the feeling of playing with my tits and loving the sight of the scarlet nails against the smooth, lightly-tanned flesh. I teased the nipples, pinching them, even gathering up one breast at a time to point the erect nipple towards my mouth, close enough to tease the ends with my tongue. The warm, wet contact took my breath away.

Unable to contain my growing curiosity and the tingling demands of the new equipment, I slid one hand back down my flat belly and through the little tufted patch of soft pubic hair. If touching my breasts nearly blew a mental fuse at the sheer amount of panting pleasure it brought, my first contact with the moist lips of my vulva threatened to render me unconscious. I bit my lip and moaned wildly, almost a squeal. My head pounded with the effort of containing myself. And I had only barely touched myself.

“Holy shit,” I gasped. “How do girls keep their hands off themselves? Jesus, I couldn't feel all this if I had six cocks at the same time.”

I slid two fingers through the thick cleft, relishing the feeling of coating them with my wetness, something that made me feel more womanly than all the clothes and makeup put together. Careful of my long nails, I teased the warm opening and slipped in one, then two fingers. I pushed a bit but found the opening painfully narrow, making me hiss a bit, and felt something stretching, preventing any access to my deeper recesses, the place where I so desperately found myself wanting to feel something.

That *something stretching* brought me up short. A hymen? Was I actually a virgin?

The second joint of my index finger rested on a bud of purest ecstasy, though, and precluded any thoughts of how to deal with the problem of my newfound cherry. I stroked the bud of my clitoris with one finger, teasing my nipples alternately with my other hand, until the level of pleasure inside my body rose to a point where I had to do *something* to let it out, no longer able to sufficiently contain it. I always wondered if women branded as “screamers” just pretended with all their noise and fanfare. Now I knew for sure. Never before had I felt such concentrated sensation. Nothing could stop me from my squeals, whimpers and ululating cries as I stroked my new pussy, my eyes screwed tightly shut and my teeth digging painfully into my lower lip. A sheen of sweat broke out on my breasts as I caressed them.

“Oh, God,” I panted. “Oh, shit. Jesus.” A part of my feverish brain registered that I sounded inane as a porn soundtrack, but no way could I form anything coherent in the face of the massive onslaught of pleasure shaking the foundations of my brain. The ecstasy took on what seemed like a point, digging into my midsection, and a rising tingle began at the tips of my fingers and toes and spread along my extremities. Just when I thought my body could contain no more raw sensual data, that my head might explode with it, the tingle flowed across my chest, down my belly and reached my clitoris where my fingers worked so quickly they nearly blurred.

A full-throated scream ripped from me and I came for the first time as a female, leaving me breathless and panting. I came with every cell, every *atom* of my body, making my body clench from top to bottom, leaving me in a stiff arch supported by only my heels on the floor and the back of my head against the wall. It seemed to go on forever, draining me and refilling me only drain me anew. As soon as the first one faded, my frantic fingers touched that magic spot and brought me another, then another still. I sagged to the cheap carpet of the fitting room, gasping for breath, unable to move in a tingling, exhausted torpor. The potential for more orgasms tickled the back of my brain, though, promising and teasing. I could come more. *Much* more. The only limitation seemed to be my own capacity for pleasure.

I recovered my breath after a long stretch of time, then pushed myself unsteadily to my own feet. I indulged my own curiosity and stuck two fingers in my mouth, savoring the taste of my own juices. The honeyed sharpness delighted me – the exact same flavor I could remember from my days with Leslie. If the stranger she met in college made Leslie cum like I just had, no wonder she left me. I would have done the exact same thing.

I half-staggered back into the store and dressed myself, foregoing the spangled party dress for now and preparing myself to change back into a mannequin. Strange that I considered this female form to be *myself* now, and not my male body. Somewhere between orgasms two and three I think I must have made up my mind about my actual gender.

I checked my hair and jewelry in the mirror, making sure I looked the same as I had before the transformation. It wouldn't do for the staff of the store to come in tomorrow and find one of their mannequins wearing different clothes, facing the wrong way or with her hair all fucked up. I tried to let go of how much the realization of my own virginity bothered me, but it persisted.

A plan developed in my brain. The simple solution to being a virgin – finding myself a nice, hard,

willing cock to bust my cherry – wouldn't prove to be such a huge problem. Not when I had a master key to the mall, an almost infinite number of ways to alter my own appearance, an endless supply of clothes and accessories, and the departure of my only nominal supervision at night.

Tomorrow night, I would go out. And I had no intention of coming back to the mall still virginal.

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The minutes between my arrival the next day and the departure of the offgoing security staff passed like molasses. By the time I finished logging in my scans and shutting off the security cameras, I nearly bounced with excitement for my evening's outing. I tried to keep myself from running up the stalled escalator to open the cage and door of Girlish Charm. I opened the little duffel bag I carried under one arm, full of body parts that caught my eye from the belowground storage. In moments, I had the mannequin undressed and gave her larger breasts, long manicured nails, longer legs and a more windblown blonde hairstyle. I remembered a few things from my pawing through the racks of clothes last night and laid out my selections for the evening. I even thought to stock a little clutch purse with some things I thought I might need – a hairbrush, lipstick and lip gloss, my master key and a pack of long, skinny little “girlie” cigarettes with a pink disposable lighter.

I wasted no time sidling up to the mannequin and kissing it deeply – almost passionately – and feeling my essence move from my old, unwanted body to the new one. Excited even past the point of indulging myself in another masturbation session, I dressed myself and applied new makeup over the application which came along with my transformation, something a bit more glamorous and sultry. I'd rehearsed a bit with one of the how-to books from the downstairs bookstore and watched no end of YouTube videos this morning in preparation for the night's festivities.



The wonderful sensation of touching my new flesh transformed the simple act of dressing myself into something nearly sexual – the caressing glissando of silk panties up my legs to nestle around my warm pussy, the gentle but insistent embrace of push-up bra cups against my breasts, pressing them deliciously against one another to create a lovely valley of cleavage. The chilly application of perfume on my neck and wrists, and the subtle little hints of floral scent which surrounded me. The warm, slick hug of smoky pantyhose against my legs, then the delicate little back-and-forth shimmy into my skin-tight dress for the evening, a strapless black cocktail dress which gave a tempting view of my sculpted abdomen through a mesh panel and gave the illusion of wide, womanly hips with a flirty little peplum. Sparkling rhinestone jewelry set with large black plastic baubles dangled around my neck and from my ears. I caught sight of myself reflected in a shop window, sashaying deliciously on my platform heels, and had to pause for a moment.

Beautiful and *sexy* fell far short. I looked so over-the-top glamorous, like a spread in a magazine, not a single hair out of place and made up like I had an entire team of professionals devoted only to making my face, hair and body look perfect.

“Dear God, I look Photoshopped,” I breathed happily, drinking in the airbrush-perfect, Playmate of the Month image in the plate glass. “No way am I not getting laid tonight.”

It dawned on me suddenly that I no longer needed to worry about whether or not I would get lucky or strike out when I went out for an evening. The decision belonged to me, now, and I got to decide who the lucky guy would be. I always went out before with the hope of hooking up and spending the night with someone. Now I got to go out with the certainty of it. It reduced the stress of going out by an order of magnitude – before, I usually had to force myself to go out,

telling myself constantly that I would have a great time once I got there. Now I looked forward to it.

I ducked into the security office, deserted tonight, and helped myself to a couple hundred dollars out of petty cash. I could, with my new supervisor status, make up an expenditure to justify it or put it back unnoticed if I didn't use it. Easy enough to fake a receipt on any of the computers in the building.

I giggled. "Like I'm gonna have to pay for any of my own drinks tonight," I told myself, eyeing my cleavage peeping from the top of my dress. I did a few laps of the mall – logging my door checks like I always did, this time in a two-hundred-dollar cocktail dress and platform heels, primping and preening in front of every reflective surface, unable to not take a long, admiring look at myself every chance I got.

I dimly remembered a loud, very heated conversation over a phone with Leslie, once she safely retreated back to college. All the things I accused her of – being vain, slutty, stuck on herself – they all seemed to apply to this new version of myself. But, oddly enough, I no longer viewed those attributes as negatives. For someone as beautiful as myself, they seemed to just *fit*.

And besides, in light of all the recent changes in my life, turning out conceited barely even moved the needle. I could burn that bridge when I reached it. For now, a night on the town as a deliciously sexy young woman awaited.

* * * * *

I sat outside the darkened mall, smoking one of my long, skinny cigarettes, waiting on the cab I just ordered to come and pick me up to deliver me to the warehouse district. The cabbie, when he got there, set off an unexpected sensation – my first experience in feeling attraction towards a member of what only recently was my own gender. It struck me, as I twirled a lock of my hair around one finger, that the young cabbie was *cute*. He had a boyish smile and a very nice ass. But a girl as hot as me didn't have to settle. Deep acne scars on both cheeks and a slightly lopsided face took him off my radar. I was going to hold out for somebody who *really* pushed all my buttons. But I would be more than happy to let this guy look at my firm tits and ass and fall all over himself opening doors and trying to ingratiate himself to me.

"Where you headed?" he asked as he slid behind the wheel after closing my door.

"Platinum," I told him. "Y'know, the club on Fourth Street?"

"Of course," he said. "Hottest club in town."

"That's what I heard, too. I've never been."

"Well, you should have a good time," he told me, putting the cab in gear and getting us going. "You look great, by the way. The guys should be falling all over themselves for you."

I giggled. "That's the idea," I said. "Hey – d'you mind if I smoke?"

He shrugged. "The company really bitches about it – the smell in the upholstery and all that shit, y'know," he said. "But a pretty thing like you... what the hell. Light up."

"I'll crack a window," I said by way of compromise, dangling a skinny Capri 120 from my lacquered lips and lighting it quickly. I blew the stale smoke out the window into the night air.

"It's really cool of you to call a cab," the driver went on. "Most people go out drinking and then try to drive home. Smart of you."

"Not that smart, sweetie," I told him. "I don't have a car."

"Really? How the hell do you get around?"

"I walk pretty much everywhere," I told him. "Or take the bus."

He laughed. "Well, the walking makes sense," he mentioned, giving my smooth and toned legs a long, informative look. "But you didn't strike me as a public transportation kind of girl. What's your name, by the way?"

I took a drag from my cigarette to cover my dismay. Of all the things I'd pre-planned for this evening, the one thing I hadn't thought to dream up was a fake name.

My pause must have stretched on suspiciously. "You *do* have a name, right?" the cabbie joked.

"I'm a mannequin," I blurted in shock.

"Come again?"

"Uh... Amanda. Amanda Quinn," I stammered.

"Nice to meet you, Amanda. I'm Luke. You gonna need a ride home, I guess?"

"I should," I told him. "Unless they let me move in."

He laughed as he passed a business card over his shoulder through the plexiglass partition. "Call me when you're done. I'm on all night, I'll get you home."

I took the card and offered what I hoped he took as a grateful smile. *Like I would ever let you know where the fuck I live*, I thought bitterly. I knew career stalkers from my time in County. All they usually needed was a good place to start and they could ruin someone's life in a heartbeat. Besides, I needed someone to drop me at the mall, anyway, not my crappy apartment. Probably better to stick to the bus, and I planned to be out all night. By the time I left my evening, the five o'clock buses should be running. I could get a lift back to the mall with the rest of the wage-slaves, in plenty of time to transform back into my male form and get my paperwork finished for the shift.



The cab pulled to the curb in the busy warehouse district, the streets and sidewalks crammed with gorgeous, blow-dried humanity dressed in their most attractive peacock clothes. Knots of alluring girls, walking in groups for safety, and handsome men queued up in front of the various clubs. I couldn't keep the smile from my face, looking at the burgeoning nightlife. Several male – and female – heads turned to look at me as I stepped from the cab, and the stares uniformly appreciated and admired. A few of the men gazed at me with open lust. I bathed in the attention, loving every glance and caressing stare, every time I got mentally undressed. I swished and swayed in my skyscraper heels through the thickening crowd, finding the line for Platinum – occupied by the most attractive of the people on the streets, a place where I felt I undoubtedly belonged – and standing to wait, my purse held in one hand and a cigarette in the other. I expected a long wait – the line stretched down most of the block, but the bouncer took one look at me and motioned me forward, unhooking the velvet rope to admit me. I'd never gotten to jump the line at a club before. I'd never gotten *any* special treatment before. I offered the bouncer a grateful wink and a glossy pucker of my inviting lips as a thank-you, stepping down a short flight of concrete stairs. My only fear – that I would be carded – evaporated as the doorman stamped my hand, his eyes riveted to my tits, without any hesitation. The thump of the bass through the door actually made my boobs jiggle to the rhythm, felt as much as heard. I threaded through a few more people, in small groups of two and three to have conversations outside of the noise and darkness of the interior – people very close to 'sealing the deal' for the evening, ready to leave the club atmosphere and retire to someplace more private.

I pushed the door open and took a moment to adjust to the thunderous music, the darkness slashed with garish lights and strobing effects, limning the writhing bodies on the dance floor in an almost sexual abandon. A sea of raised arms, shaking asses and hard-pressed sweating bodies beckoned to me, and I responded gleefully, diving into the pandemonium with utter joy.

* * * * *

I lost track of how many men danced up to me, ogling and attempting to attract me, in and out of the sea of squirming bodies surrounding me. I spent a long time just appreciating the fun of moving my new and responsive body, the way I jiggled and shook when I moved a certain way, the things that made men look even harder.

I even participated in the time-honored club tradition of dancing up close to another girl in a sequined red dress, pressing our breasts together and threading slender fingers in one another's hair. We drew nearly every eye when we did so, enjoying the attention, ending our sexual dance with an open-mouthed exchange of warm breath which came so close to a kiss without actually becoming one that I actually parted from her wondering if I had kissed her or not.

I would gladly have pursued it further – I still very much liked girls, even with my new gender – but she got the attention of a tall black man she'd been trying to attract and went to him, offering only a grateful smile over her shoulder at me. I never even got her name. I made a mental note – one day soon I would dress up and head to Michelangelo's, the noted lesbian bar about six blocks from here and thoroughly explore the ramifications of being made love to by a girl as a girl and live out nearly every prurient *Letters to Penthouse* fantasy I concocted since puberty. But I wasn't here to get pussy, either. I came to the club to net myself a man. Scratch that – I didn't want a man at all. I just needed to find myself some *cock*. I would be perfectly happy to not even get a name, just a quick fuck. I didn't want any further attachment than that.

Finally, the press of the crowd and some lingering fatigue – the body I now inhabited possessed much more flexibility and stamina than my old one, but those qualities were not without limits – caused me to take a break and head to the bar for a break from the stentorian noise and constant jostling. I ordered myself a drink – cautioning myself to avoid my customary beer and order something more suited to my gender, opting for the libation *du jour* for the club girl, a vodka and Red Bull – and lit a cigarette, a little breathless, enjoying watching the action on the dance floor as much I enjoyed participating. I ran covetous eyes over every man, judging them on whatever criteria I could come up with, almost resorting to a rating system the way I had as an adolescent to 'score' girls among my friends.

“Looking for prospects?” a warm voice said from behind me. I turned, seeing a gorgeous redhead with huge, fathomless brown eyes sitting next to me, watching me survey the crowd for prospects. I offered her a conspiratorial smile.

“There's quite a bit to choose from,” I mentioned.

“Yeah, it's a good night,” she told me. “Lotsa hot ones. Got something specific in mind?”

I shrugged a little. “Not really,” I said. “I'm having one of those 'not so choosy' moments.”

She laughed. “Just here to scratch the itch,” she said. “I'm with you, honey.”

I blushed a little, sipping my drink to cover my discomfort. “Yeah, I'm pretty much down with anything, so long as it has a nice ass and a decent bulge in front.”

“You care whether or not it's married?” she asked, lowering her voice a little.

“Not particularly,” I answered honestly.

“Well, there's a tall and very gorgeous grad student dancing over near the DJ booth,” she said. “He still has a tan line on his ring finger – so *obviously* out to cheat on his wife – so most of the girls here are avoiding him. But if you're not in a mood to worry about that sort of thing, then, honey, he's probably yours for the taking.”

I grinned. *Like I couldn't have any man in this room if I wanted him*, I thought a little cattily. *Even the one you wanted, right out from under your nose*. But I didn't express the venomous thought, instead patting her hand and giving her a nose-wrinkling smile as a thank-you. I stood, gathering up my purse and my drink, pushing my way through the crowd – amazing how many times my ass got 'accidentally' grabbed in transit in a place like this – towards the booth, eyes peeled for the tall and gorgeous grad student I had every intention of letting nail me, if the redhead's assessment proved accurate.

THE DARK CLUB THUMPED LIKE a heartbeat, like some strange living thing, as I pushed my way between people towards the DJ booth, in search of a likely candidate to take my virginity. Since my arrival at the *très chic*, trendy nightclub I lost all track of time, losing myself in the driving rhythm and the sexual press of writhing flesh pulsing around me everywhere.

The handsome married man the sexy redhead at the bar described to me came into view – a tall and very muscular man with dusky skin suggestive of an Indian or Latino heritage, thick dark hair and a disarming smile. The telltale tan line on his left ring finger gave away his married status to scrutiny, labeling him *persona non grata* in his quest for companionship – the females of this particular club knew their way around the casual sex environment well and knew which signs to spot. For a married man on the prowl, this one obviously didn't realize the company he kept. Probably blinded by all the spray-tanned, firm twentysomething flesh in the line outside and cramming the dance floor.

The man caught sight of me – easily one of the top five hottest girls in the club, I estimated – and his eyes brightened instantly. I broke away from one of the random guys beneath my consideration, good for a little bit of groping and grinding on the dance floor but little else, and made my way towards him.

“Hi,” I shouted to him over the music. “I'm Amanda.”

He leaned close and yelled into my ear, barely audible over the deafening music. “Adam,” he replied.

The beat of the music changed just then, from something frenetic and driving to something a bit more sexual, the kind of beat felt directly in the sodden place between my legs. I took a moment to enjoy the subtle interplay of chiseled muscles under the man's silk shirt before moving close, pushing my flawless body against his as I raised my arms above my head, surrendering myself to the music.



Subconsciously, I suppose I knew on some level just how undeniably sexy I looked when I danced that way, having seen it from the other side as many times as I had. My skeleton seemed partially liquid, moving almost of its own accord to the driving rhythms. Adam's eyes bored hungrily into me, and I could see and even occasionally feel the thickening, hardening effects of my appeal brushing against my bare thigh.

A very disappointingly *small* amount of appeal, I noticed dimly. I sincerely doubted that for purposes of deflowering I needed to be much of a size queen, but a girl had to have some minimum standards. I never considered myself a giant in that department prior to my transformation, but even I might have snorted some derisive laughter at this guy had I seen him in the locker room.

My interest in him waned almost immediately, and the overt sexuality and unspoken invitation of my dance with him chilled visibly. I backed away, opening a space between us, and gave him a very noticeable look at his bare ring finger, one that I doubted he would miss. He stuck that hand behind his back – now painfully aware of why he struck out tonight – and offered me a regretful smile and an abashed shrug. I shimmied a little, just to give him a final thrill and say *no hard feelings*, and he gave me one more appreciative look in parting.

I sighed. Somehow, I figured just looking the way I looked would have me dozens of offers for sex within moments of my walking through the door. I never expected it to be so hard, and for such different reasons as a male. I only knew the constant attempt to attract and prove myself worth a sexual encounter with the girls. Now I saw it from the other side, the struggle to establish and enforce standards. Truthfully, I didn't even know I *had* standards until just a few

moments ago.

I shook my head sadly and made my way back towards the bar, wanting to seek solace in a few drinks. The “hottest club in town” seemed well on its way to becoming a crashing disappointment, and I thought maybe a visit to one of the less trendy clubs in the district, one where I would not just be in the top ten hottest women but easily catapult straight to number one, might increase my prospects.

The bartender leaned across the underlit bar to better hear my order.

“Vodka cranberry,” I told him loudly, unsnapping my purse to dig for some money.



“On me,” a deep voice, easily audible even over the tumping house mix, said next to me. A tall man, stylishly unshaven and in a very expensive tailored suit, passed a couple bills across the bar. I appraised him frankly, running my eyes up and down his body, and gave him a not-so-subtle look fo invitation as I sucked suggestively on my straw.

“Richard,” he said, offering me glittering smile which quite easily doubled the amount of dewy moisture making my panties cling to me.

“Amanda,” I said, placing my hand in his, palm down. He brushed a dry kiss across my knuckles, making me blush and even feel self-conscious for the first time that night.

“A pleasure,” he said, leaning against the bar. “Amanda, I have to tell you, you are easily the most beautiful woman I’ve seen in here tonight.”

My blush deepened. "Thank you very much," I told him. "I think you're very handsome, yourself."

"Too kind, too kind," he said suavely. I used to hate "players" like this when I had to compete with them, all slick and smarmy with their rehearsed lines and unnerving confidence. Now, not so much. This guy *seriously* pushed my buttons. I hoped my stiffening nipples weren't too noticeable through the satiny fabric of my dress.

I tried to keep the conversation alive, hoping I didn't sound too lame or too desperate. I remembered how much men like him enjoyed talking about themselves and decided to add fuel to the fire. "What do you do, Richard?"

He shrugged. "A little of this, a little of that," he said cryptically.

I raised an eyebrow. "Men who don't give me a straight answer to that question are usually unemployed," I told him warningly.

He fixed me with a level, knowing stare. "Are you *really* interested in what I do for a living?"

I returned his look, then give him the body language "green light" of brushing my hair behind one ear and biting my lower lip lightly. "No," I told him honestly. "I really don't give a shit."

"Great, because I really don't want to talk about it," he replied.

I considered him anew. Confident enough to cut directly to the chase, possibly from having read me expertly from unspoken clues, and refreshingly honest about what he wanted. I couldn't stop myself from taking a few mental notes about his technique, in case I ever wanted to use them for myself as a male. But the way he looked at me, caressing my skin with his eyes, I really didn't want to think about being a male right now.

Strangely enough, it was my experience *as* a male that made the exchange awkward. I knew his tricks, knew what he tried to do, and my knowledge of what happened behind the curtain took all the power and finesse from his polished lines. It dawned on me, at the crowded bar, that I would have to make a decision to *allow* myself to be seduced, since I could see through his strategy so effortlessly. I had to decide whether or not I wanted his efforts to succeed.

It didn't surprise me much to find that I *did*.

I ran a long nail down his lapel, offering him a very inviting smile. "I suppose we should talk, at least a little," I said lightly. "This isn't a porno, after all. I'm not just gonna jump you right here on top of the bar."

"Probably for the best," Richard said with a throaty chuckle.

"Tell you what," I told him. "I've been dancing in here for a couple hours and I'm positively *dying* for a cigarette. I'm gonna duck out in the alley for a minute. Why don't you duck out with me?"

He granted me one of those high-beam smiles again. "Thought you'd never ask."

* * * * *

My desire for a cigarette wasn't a complete fabrication to get Richard alone – the draconian smoking ordinance in the city banned the use of tobacco in clubs and bars – and I pushed out the rusted door with the disabled fire alarm and into the chilly night air of the dark, fetid alley behind the club. A few other patrons smoked here and there, but not so many that I couldn't stake a claim to a small patch near a row of garbage cans filled with empty bottles and pull my pack from my little clutch purse, cupping the flame of my little disposable lighter against the breeze and inhaling gratefully. I disdained leaning against the wall – my dress would get filthy – but the desire to sag exhaustedly against *something* clawed at me. I took a few more drags, just enough to supplement my newborn alcohol buzz, and began looking up and down the alley in expectation.

A few moments passed before the rusted door opened once more, filling the alley with the loud thump of inside, and Richard emerged into the semi-darkness. He caught sight of me and walked over, a warm smile on his lush lips.

"So, what do you think we should talk about?" he asked amusedly, continuing our conversation from the bar. "Sports? The weather? Do you like fishing at all?"

I smiled. "Y'know, Richard, I've had a little time to think it over," I said, exhaling a dense cloud of smoke from my painted lips. "And I decided – fuck talking."



I grabbed his lapels and pulled him abruptly against me, flattening my breasts against his firm, well-muscled chest. I pressed my lips against his, loving the feeling of the rough stubble against my soft lips, and threw my arms around his broad shoulders. He pushed me against the wall I'd so willfully avoided earlier, and I couldn't begin to care less. He pushed himself against me, his hands groping my ass as I slid the inside of my thigh upwards against the slick fabric of his suit.

My earlier exhaustion evaporated like a puddle in the sun and energy suffused me at his touch. I wormed my tongue into his mouth hungrily, feeling him stiffen against my inner thigh to a very respectable size – not too small, but definitely not too big for someone like myself. I purred happily in my throat, sliding my free hand down his chest to wrap his length in my hand through the thin fabric, giving it a teasing shake and caress as I moaned my approval.

“God, you're incredible,” he breathed, parting our kiss just long enough to speak.

My own breath came in breathless pants as I squeezed the very pleasant length of him through his tailored trousers. “I want you so fucking much right now,” I told him.

“I have a place about two miles away,” he told me. “My car is right over...”

“No,” I told him, kissing him hungrily. “Now. Right here.”

He looked around the alley. “You sure?”

The reality of my new gender intruded roughly into my wild arousal. “You have a condom?” I asked, a bit of concern tinging my voice.

He didn't look up from nuzzling my neck. “In my car,” he told me. “It's two blocks away.”

“Take me there,” I demanded, nipping his earlobe, nearly so far gone in my own desire that I briefly considered skipping the condom and just going ahead with it. “Hurry.”

* * * * *

The walk to his car took the better part of twenty minutes, since the two of us kept needing to duck into every secluded spot along the way to kiss one another and run our hands greedily over each others' bodies. By the time we reached the five-series BMW in the underground parking structure, I had removed Richard's tie and sportcoat and untucked his shirt while he carried my sopping panties in one of his trouser pockets. He only just chirped open the doors of his car with a key-fob when we fell into the back seat, one atop another. My breasts flattened against his chest as I pressed my lips against his. His strong fingers tangled in my soft hair and the strength of this hands both excited me and scared me a little. The sheer size of him, in comparison to myself, made me feel quite small and helpless in a way that thrilled me to my core.

I estimated that foreplay had gone on quite long enough – probably too long, given my trembling excitement – and I unzipped his fly, a little clumsy with my long nails, and drew out his cock hot against my palm. I briefly considered giving it a quick suck – amazing to me, given that I had never once dreamed of doing such a thing, and now it sprang naturally to mind without an ounce

of fear or distaste associated – but discarded the idea out of hand. The aching emptiness between my thighs demanded no further wasting of time.

Richard fished a strip of condoms from his glove compartment and I ripped one of the foil wrappers open with my teeth, rolling the thin latex barrier down his glorious cock with one hand. I hiked up my skirt over my thighs and straddled him, keeping my grip on his dick so I could guide it into the wet void waiting for him. The blunt head pushed aside the heavy lips of my vulva to rest against the damp opening to my body and I gave myself a long beat to accustom myself to the idea of having something *inside* me, a sensation before relegated solely to such things as prison rape or surgery. To actually *want* something inside me, to yearn for it like this, came as a completely alien concept. The first truly womanly, utterly *female* desire ever to emerge from my heart and mind. It made my heart skip a beat.

“You okay?” Richard breathed.

“Yeah,” I said with a lascivious smile. “Totally. Just taking a second to let it soak in.”

I knew there would be pain, having overheard former virgins talking from my male adolescence, but my desire quivered inside me, threatening to burst me at the seams, and I didn't care. I figured it would be best to make it quick – images of ripping off a band-aid flitted through my imagination, threatening to shatter my lovely buzz – so I positioned the head of his generous cock at the entrance to my body and pushed myself down hard. I experienced a feeling of stretching and tearing, making me hiss just a little, but the pain passed almost instantaneously and the utterly sated sensation of being *filled* flooded my consciousness. I squeezed him a little, experimentally, with the walls of my pussy and made him gasp in pleasure while I reveled in the wonderful sensation of having something *inside* me, an utterly feminine feeling that intoxicated me to a level of drunkenness mere alcohol could never match.

“Oh, God,” Richard groaned. “I've wanted to do this since the second I saw you.”

“Me, too, handsome,” I purred, leaning down to cup his face between my soft hands and kiss him. I began to rock my hips back and forth, igniting an indescribable fire inside me, letting my juices coat his shaft and ease any lingering abrasion against the impossibly sensitive velvet of my insides. In seconds I was able to establish a quick, grinding rhythm that brought waves of intense pleasure crashing through my body in a way that my previous night's masturbation only pretended to approach.

Words escaped my glossy lips, unbidden. “Fuck me,” I panted. “God, yes. Just like that. Fuck me.”

Every new sensation carried with it the overwhelming shock of the utterly, inescapably feminine – for the first time, I was not fucking. I was *being fucked*. Nailed. Screwed. I did not play the part of the invader this time – I was the invaded. The one taken.

I bucked against him wildly, my hair whipping around my head as I moaned and screamed, digging my nails into his shoulders and biting his bottom lip in my mounting lust. He pounded into me, bracing his feet against the seat cushion to give himself leverage, and the car filled with

the scent of my musk and the sounds of the wet slaps of our crotches slapping against one another.

A new desire replaced the old, no longer satisfied only to be filled. "Make me cum," I demanded throatily, sucking a vivid red hickey onto the side of his neck. He obliged, pounding into me roughly, making me grunt amidst the chorus of aroused screams. I dimly registered the sound of a light rain beginning to patter against the windshield and roof of the wildly rocking car.

I felt the beginnings of the road to climax emerge in my fingertips and my toes, creeping their way down my skin towards the singularity of my engorged clitoris. I abandoned all pretense of civility or technique and just slammed my body up and down against him, fucking like a wild animal, screeching loudly with every thrust of his cock inside me, bumping against the stiff bud of my cervix – the entrance to my *womb*, another in the long line of purely female sensations – at his deepest.

"Don't stop," I half-demanded, half-pleaded. "Just like that."

"You're amazing," Richard told me breathlessly. "I've never been with a woman like you."

No one has, I thought wryly, but said nothing more than the occasional grunted "fuck me" or "yes." The feeling built and grew – more slowly than when I took matters into my own hands – pushing me inexorably to the edge and the climax for which I so desperately hungered.

Somewhere on the ascent to orgasm, the reality sunk into me – *I'm not a virgin any more* – and I found myself infinitely delighted at the prospect. The sense of only pretending to be a woman, like a man in a convincing girl suit, vanished. No one could deny it now, not even myself – I was a real woman.

The feeling finally reached my clitoris and I clenched up tight around him, screaming wildly through clenched teeth, arching my back until my hair tickled the tops of my buttocks. He sawed into me roughly, extending my orgasm to a length previously undreamt of as a male. My mind geared itself to experience pleasure on that level only in two- to three-second intervals, not the extended near-minute of blinding release just ripping through my mind and body. And before I even had time to recover from my first, Richard's pistoning cock brought me to another. The pure sensation threatened to completely short-circuit my brain, turning me into a moaning, inarticulate beast. I pressed kiss after kiss into Richard's lips in utter devoted gratitude, unable to maintain any coherent thought as he slammed into me. For the first time in my female experience, I hoped I *didn't* cum again. I honestly didn't know whether or not I could take any more. And the sensitive, untried flesh of my inner walls began to get a little raw from the friction. I started wishing the whole affair would draw to a close, but I seemed incapable of just quitting.

"Your turn, baby," I gasped, caressing his face. "Time for you to cum. C'mon. Give it to me."

He pounded into me with renewed vigor. I sensed that he needed me a bit dirtier to pique his excitement and pave the way to his own orgasm, so I slipped down the cups of my dress to expose my perfect breasts, playing with them lasciviously and teasing my nipples to erection

with my long nails.

“That's it, baby. Fuck mama. Bust that fucking nut,” I urged, playing with my tits and licking my lips. “Give mama that mess. Make a big old fucking mess inside me. I want it. I want it so fucking bad.”

A new goal, past being entered, past my own climax, entered my consciousness. I wanted to – *needed* to – make a man cum. It marked a milestone on the road to being the complete woman I imagined. To longer *pretending*, no longer being *in disguise*. I would be the genuine article. All I needed was the next step, the ability to draw for a man's orgasm with my body.

I rocked back and forth, moaning a bit theatrically and continuing my filthy commentary, until Richard grabbed my hips roughly with his hands and drove himself into me as deep as he could reach, rewarding my efforts with an arched back and an arpeggio of rising grunts. I imagined I could almost feel the hot, sticky fluid splashing against my inner velvet and surprised myself with the depths of how badly I *yearned* to feel that sensation – to have a man cum inside me, splash my insides with his jizz, put me at breathless risk of pregnancy until my next period, possibly even plant a baby inside my belly to grow and squirm for the next nine months.

He deflated underneath me, panting and glistening with sweat, and I collapsed against him, feeling his heart pounding through the wall of his chest. I knew he didn't love me – God, I hoped he didn't love me – but in that moment the feeling of being small and helpless changed inside my chest to a feeling of being loved. Treasured and cherished. I could easily imagine becoming addicted to the feeling.

He held me close in strong arms, stroking my soft hair, while his breathing finally slowed. I felt him deflate inside me – a marvelous sensation, something that made me feel incredibly feminine and powerful, knowing that *I did that* – and pop out with a soft, wet sound.

“Amanda, you are incredible,” he murmured to me.

“Thanks,” I purred, tracing little circles in his damp chest hair with a long fingernail. “You're not so bad yourself, baby.” I loved using the little girlish endearments – *baby, honey, sweetie, sugar* – that heightened my sense of femininity.

“Can I have your number?” he asked. “I'd like to see you again.”

I chuckled. “Honey, I don't think that's a very good idea,” I said softly. “You know what this was. I don't want to ruin it by trying to make it something it wasn't.”

He started to argue, but I placed a slender finger across his lips. “I came out tonight looking for a one-night stand. I got what I wanted. Are you trying to tell me that you didn't?” I asked amusedly. “You just nailed the *hell* out of the hottest piece in the club. Made her cum like a wildcat. Now you tell me you're after the 'girlfriend experience?’”

He laughed richly. “See? That's why I want to see you again. *Nobody* is this honest. No head-games, just say what's on your mind. If I didn't have complete proof of the opposite, I'd swear

you were a guy.”

I blushed, hidden by the half-light in the dim car. “You're very sweet,” I told him, changing the subject. “And *incredibly* hot. I'm really glad we did this.”

“Me, too,” Richard said. “Can I at least buy you some coffee? Give you a lift home?”

I stroked his face and kissed him lightly. “No, sweetheart, I'm good,” I told him. “I'll make my own way. If I can *walk* after that fucking you just gave me, that is.”

We squirmed around one another – almost sparking off another spirited session – as we located our clothing and accessories and dressed hurriedly in the back seat. I salvaged a compact from my purse – *my purse*, another thrilling reminder of my womanhood – and finger-combed my hair and dusted powder across my nose. Even with the sweat, the kissing and the contact, my makeup still remained nearly flawless, reminding me of the permanent glamour from which I came.

“There's really no need for all that,” he commented as he watched me preen in the little handheld mirror. “You still look like the cover of a magazine.”

“Gotta look my best, baby,” I told him, chuckling. “Gotta do the walk of shame in a minute.”

“You ashamed of yourself?” Richard teased.

I kissed him over one shoulder. “Oh, you bet I am,” I laughed. “You saw for yourself what a nasty fucking slut I am.”

“Keep talking like that, we may have to do it all over again,” Richard said with mock-warning.

“I can't, baby, as good as that sounds,” I told him. “I got work.”

“Work? On a Sunday?” he asked. “What are you, a minister?”

I expected questioning like this, so my cover story sprang readily to mind. “I'm a nurse, actually.”

“Aha,” he said, buying the story wholesale. “Damn, I gotta remember to get sick more often.”

I gave him another kiss – I couldn't seem to stop kissing him, my more sensitive lips giving me ten times the thrill I ever had from kissing as a male – and giggled. “I'll keep a sponge bath with your name on it, sweetheart. But hey – I gotta go, really. I need to get home to shower and change. I had a *lot* of fun, Richard. Thanks.”

He brushed a lock of soft blonde hair behind one ear. “Gotta be honest, Amanda, I really hope I see you again,” he confessed. “But if I don't, then believe me when I tell you this was one of the best nights of my entire life.”

I decided against saying anything more, just giving one final, snail-tongued end-of-the-movie

kiss, then let myself out of the car and onto the sidewalk. A few bystanders gave me some knowing smiles – that car had been rocking wildly not so long ago – and I offered them a shy blush in return.

But it really didn't bother me. I didn't care that they knew. I didn't even care if they saw. I lost my virginity exactly the way I wanted, got some mindblowing orgasms and walked away thoroughly satisfied. Plus, I got to experience so many things that reinforced my femininity – some raw desire, like wanting to feel him cum inside me, or have his cock in my mouth, things I had never even thought about prior to this day. The subtle reminders – the swish of soft hair against my shoulders, the sway and tap of my dangling earrings against my neck when I moved my head, the perfumed stickiness of wearing lipstick and the stains I left on straws, cigarettes and glasses – they kept my feeling of girlhood at a wonderful, happy baseline. The big spikes only served to add to the whole experience, a high unlike any drug I'd ever known.

And nothing could prepare me for the innate change inside my heart and mind – I strode away from the curb and down the sidewalk, I could almost see myself glowing with some strange internal light, a neon indication that *I'm not a virgin any more*. I felt so strongly that I doubted anyone could miss the difference between the girl who climbed into the Beamer and the woman who exited.

Woman, I thought, savoring the word. Not that being a girl sucked or anything, and the cutie-pie Pink Princess look really paid off in terms of attracting sugar daddies, but the feeling of being a woman, having had another human being inside my body, by invitation, and having conquered him with my softness and desire... I couldn't begin to express how much I adored that feeling. I knew it changed everything about me – my expression, my outlook, even my posture and my stride. As I rounded the corner onto a side street, back towards the front of Club Platinum, I noticed a late-night lingerie and novelty store tucked in between an ATM and a locked liquor store. My usual haunt – a deserted shopping mall – usually provided everything I might need insofar as clothing and sundries, but one item remained conspicuously absent for use. I pushed my way into the dingy little store to the merry tinkling of a little bell. A bored-looking goth girl lounged against the counter, reading a Lovecraft book, waiting for the time to pass until she could leave. The store contained a few racks of dirty movies, a rack of magazines, a few various displays and racks of cheap and tacky-looking lingerie. I walked right past them to the locked case in the counter, next to the cash register.

“Help you?” the shopgirl asked, disinterested.

“Yeah,” I said. “Let me get one of those Royal Rabbit vibrators, a pocket rocket and that seven-inch dildo.”

The girl gave me a knowing smile. “The seven-inch is part of a set. Comes with a strap-on harness and a four-inch anal stimulator.”

I shrugged. “Sure, what the hell.”

She bagged the purchases – all the while favoring me with very knowing glances, almost to the point where she wanted to make recommendations of the items she used personally – but

thankfully refrained from saying anything. Not that I felt ashamed or even self-conscious. I wanted to get better at sex – the soreness and fatigue of my encounter with Richard made me feel like I could do more, increase the level of pleasure I gave and received – and these tools would allow me the method to practice.



I clicked and clacked around the block in my heels, stepping to the curb and raising my hand to signal on of the passing taxicabs ferrying drunks home from the clubs in the district. A cab stopped for me almost instantly – they kept their eyes out for hot -bodied little things like myself, every one of the hacks loved to get a fare whom they enjoyed ogling in the rear-view. A yellow cab pulled to the curb just in front of me and a tall, dreadlocked black man emerged to open my door gallantly. A strong odor of reefer preceded him.

“Why, thank you, kind sir,” I said, sliding into the back seat – knees together, all proper and ladylike – and buckling in. He closed my door and re-entered on the other side of the plexiglass partition, behind the wheel.

“Where to?” he asked me in a faint accent.

“Beaufort and Old Mill Road,” I told him. “Over by the shopping mall.”

“You got it, beautiful,” he told me happily, putting the car in gear. I offered him a grateful smile – the compliment was nice, even though he didn't begin to meet my parameters for a potential fuck – and lounged back, checking my makeup one last time in the little compact mirror as the city lights blurred past over my bare shoulder, leaving the city – and my adventure – behind in

favor of the sedate, boring suburbs.

* * * * *

The insistent buzzing of the travel alarm roused me from my exhausted state, bringing me to consciousness slowly, like emerging from a bank of fog. My face pressed roughly against something hard and unyielding and *cold*, and I could tell a little puddle of drool escaped the corner of my mouth to puddle below me, making the side of my face sticky and a little bit foul-smelling.

Inexorably, little clues registered in my groggy consciousness, little *not-quite-rights* that signaled me about the changes in my situation. I remembered that slow feeling of dawning from prison, where I spent a blissful few moments every morning believing I awoke somewhere else, and the little context clues filtered in to gradually but systematically destroy the dream. Nothing like hearing your cellmate fart wetly and hear the *scritch-scratch* of his dirty fingernails against his hairy ass or the sound of your next-door neighbors finishing their grunting anal sex session in Spanish to render it impossible to fantasize about being anywhere other than prison.

I pushed a hand to my face and immediately felt beard stubble, and the lack of the feathery soft hair which framed my face. My skin barely registered touch, by comparison, so insensitive and unfeeling that I wondered how I could even detect outside stimuli. My lips gummed together with cottonmouth and mucus, not the subtle little girlish adhesion and slickness of perfumed lipstick. And the hard thing I lay upon pressed into a flattened, muscular chest dusted with wiry hair, not the firm twin globes which delighted me so much with their bounce and jiggle.

Oh, fuck, I thought resignedly. I guess I changed back.

I dimly remembered coming back to the mall and starting the long process of erasing my night's outing through a haze of fatigue and logy "just woke up" mental dullness. Some things I managed to get done, others I left over to do after I got some sleep. I laid down on the little couch inside the Girlish Charm boutique somewhere around three a.m., desperate for a little bit of rest before finishing my evening's destruction of evidence. I did not remember kissing the Leslie mannequin and shifting back to my original male body – not *my* body, not in my mind, any more, but the male body that fate demanded I inhabit until I could figure out something else.

The last of the loose ends – the fake receipt for petty cash to fund my outing, printed and carefully wrinkled and stuffed in the folder in the desk upstairs, the outside camera footage of myself in the guise of a beautiful young girl erased, the cosmetics I purloined now stamped 'tester' and returned to the makeup counters – got checked off my mental list as I recalled them. I pawed for the travel alarm – thanking heaven I remembered to set it before passing out from alcohol and fatigue – and shut it off, then raised my head bleary-eyed to look around.



The mannequin lay underneath me, still wearing the dress and jewelry and shoes from the previous night. I slipped the necklace and earrings back into the jewelry case and dropped the platform heels back into their box, folding the tissue paper loudly, to go back in the stack beneath the displays. I paused as I slid the zipper down over the hard plastic of the mannequin's back, suddenly gripped with an uncharacteristic bout of sentimentality. I couldn't seem to bear to part with the pretty garment, now smelling of alcohol and sweat and cigarettes and sex, not the dress in which I'd lost my virginity. Deciding the risk might be worth it – the stores in the mall did have losses to shoplifting every month – I slipped the garment onto a hanger and draped it with a plastic sack. I already carved out a little niche in one of the downstairs storerooms, out of sight, where I planned to keep a little 'stash' of girly accoutrements that I pilfered over time. This gorgeous dress would be the first.

I slipped the leather skirt and sequined top – I couldn't help sneering a little at them, thinking *I would never dress so tacky* – back onto the mannequin and then hoisted her back up onto the display, positioning her feet carefully. I replaced her long-nailed hands with the shorter ones from last night and slipped the rings and bracelets back where they belonged. I took a short moment to arrange the mannequin's hair – *my hair*, and a girl needed to look her best – and nudge it gently to the left to place it in better light before locking the little boutique and heading towards the east doors for the cleaning crew.

Recollections of the last night threatened to overwhelm me as I poured myself a cup of coffee in the security office and slugged the foul brew. The prospect of another interminable day – even if I did plan to spend it sleeping in my dingy apartment – in this clumsy, insensitive body and not the body I preferred depressed me to the point of almost bringing tears to my eyes.

But no clear way presented itself for just switching lives, no matter how badly I wished I could

never feel the inside of this male form again. Sure, it wouldn't be too hard to clean out petty cash and swipe some easy-to-fence consumer electronics and jewelry to get some quick cash, enough to set me up for a few weeks. Getting my hands on a fake identification didn't prove to be too much of a problem. Clothes and stuff for a girl's life stuffed rack after rack in the place I worked, basically free for the taking to a person with a master key like myself.

The problem wasn't one of *stuff*, it was one of logistics. What would I do when the money ran out? I would need a job, and my original plan to pass as an illegal for a housecleaning service or somesuch wouldn't provide much of a way to better myself. I didn't want to have the same life I had now, only with tits... I wanted something better.

That pretty much left crime. As much as I loved sex, I loved *choosing* whom I fucked ever more – so working as a prostitute didn't qualify. I could see myself as a very high-priced call girl or escort, perhaps, with security and a booking agent, but gigs like that took time, references and excellent paperwork.

I could probably force a meet with someone from my male past, like my buddy Dubstep or Kent, and sell pot, or even X or Special K in the clubs to make ends meet. But to make any kind of a living at it, to get oneself out of the squalid flop-house apartments and couch-crashing, one needed to sell harder drugs like cocaine or meth. And move felony weight. I could be as beautiful as Helen of Fucking Troy and not get my ass out of hard federal time if I ever got caught with a kilo of crystal or coke.

To get myself a job, I would need a sugar daddy – which might not suck, but it would tie me down – or I would need myself a past, I thought, watching the trees slide past the bus window on my way home that morning.

I remembered a lot of the characters I met in County when I served time, all full of people who wound up in that hellhole because they always favored the *easy* way over the *smart* way. If I actually intended to do this, to stop being David Hargrove forever and live solely as Amanda Quinn, I would need more than just a driver's license and a passable birth certificate. I would need a *story* that someone could verify. I would need references, people who would back me up. I'd need work history, and pictures from parties with friends, traffic tickets, maybe even a school transcript and a high school diploma.

For the first time since I got out of jail, I intentionally violated my parole and dialed in a number from memory to my cheap disposable phone.

"H'llo?" a groggy voice answered after a long series of ringtones.

"Big Mike," I said softly. "Hey. It's Davey. Davey Hargrove."

A long beat passed while the name registered, then the voice on the other end brightened considerably. "Mickey D! How the hell you been, brother?"

"I'm good," I said. "Got myself some bullshit job, Mike, and ran across somebody who needs some help. I wonder if I can ask you a favor?"

“For you, brother? Anything,” he said. “You saved my *ass* inside when you testified for me.”

Michael “Big Mike” Fernandez served three years of a five-year sentence for breaking-and-entering when I arrived at County. Not three weeks after my arrival, a giant fight erupted in the yard – gang on gang – and Big Mike’s associations with Barrio Azteca through his cousin made him a prime suspect as one of the ringleaders. Immense pressure came from the Aryan Brotherhood on the rest of the inmates to keep their mouths shut, to let Big Mike go up for the crime even though he had nothing to do with the fight, to keep heat off the actual ringleaders. I spoke to the warden on Big Mike’s behalf, gave testimony which exonerated him, at the cost of several savage beatings from the AB. But Big Mike – and by extension, his cousin Chepe who actually *did* rank high in the organization, but served life without parole – took me under his protection and when we left county, gave me contact information and told me to call if I ever had a problem.

“It was the right thing to do, Mike,” I said.

“What kinda problem?” he asked.

“The kind I don’t wanna talk about on the phone,” I said. “It’s an immigration thing. Been trying to do it through channels, y’know, but the State Department is being a dick...”

“I get it, I get it, brother,” he said. “Yeah, I know a guy who can help.”

“I need somebody good, Mike, this girl wants to go to college. Her shit will need to stand up under some hard looking,” I told him.

“Relax, man, this guy is really fucking good. I’ll call him, set something up, okay? When you looking to do this?” he asked.

“Got a little time. A few weeks,” I said.

“Great,” Big Mike said. “You got cash?”

“I can get some,” I told him.

“Okay, brother, I’ll call you in a couple days with a time and place.”

THE INNER GLOW THAT ESCAPED ME after the loss of my virginity dimmed considerably at the prospect of having to spend several days in my male body, but prudence demanded that I cool my jets for a little while before another outing as Amanda Quinn. I bided my time at work by casing what clothing I wanted to wear the next time I went out, what kinds of things I intended to do, where I planned to go. I even began a small notebook to keep track of such things – I used a pink pen and tried my best to transform my execrable handwriting into rounded, bubbly script befitting a gorgeous young thing like Amanda, with her *i*’s dotted with hearts. Anything to hold onto what little scraps of femininity remained to me while in my other body.

Those little things I held so dear just seemed silly and embarrassing to me while in the six-foot-plus hairy body of my male life. Painting my toenails a glittery pink, for instance, beneath my scuffed work shoes, or changing my brand of cigarettes to the long and ultra-skinny Capri 120s that Amanda favored, listening to Ke\$ha and Katy Perry on my stereo at home and watching *Real Housewives* and *Dancing With the Stars* on my off days. All of it just seemed like pretense, just feeble reaching for the dizzying high of being Amanda. But I had to take what I could get right now. Pushing my luck could lead to disastrous consequences.

I kept rudder amidships for the next two weeks, doing my rounds dutifully and making sure nothing out of the ordinary happened. The news report – and the scuttlebutt around the security office – said that the outlet mall several miles to the south and Westbrook Mall in another suburb had been hit in the last few weeks, so I made a big show of keeping the mall safe and sound.

But at least I got to do it as Amanda. I could no sooner get the doors locked at work before disabling the cameras and switching bodies to wander around the mall in my female body, trying on clothes that caught my eye, sashaying around to practice my “catwalk strut,” or tucked away in the basement playing with my new sex toys and attempting to improve my sexual technique. Even the simple act of watching Netflix on a borrowed iPad from the electronics store in my female identity seemed more enjoyable, or curling in a chair with a paperback book wearing fluffy PJ's and bunny slippers.

It didn't matter what I did. It only mattered that I was Amanda when I did it.

Still, maintaining my double life kept things much less complicated and safer for me. I'd given some thought to how I might transition, live full-time as Amanda, and what I could do for work and how to establish an identity. Those problems loomed nearly insurmountable in my mind as my cheap prepaid mobile phone rang in my pocket while I rode the bus to work a few days later.

“Hello?” I mumbled, distracted as I tried to read the newspaper over the shoulder of the guy in front of me without annoying him.

“Hey, Davey. Big Mike,” a gruff, accented voice said jovially. “How you doin', 'mano?”

“I'm good, brother, real good,” I lied. “What's up?”

“I looked into that thing you told me about,” he said. “Y'know, the girl that wants to go to college?”

“Yeah, sure, I remember,” I said. “What you got?”

“I landed you some time with the best guy we got,” he said. “His shit makes it through Border Patrol and I.C.E. all the fucking time. This guy is bad-assed. He can hook up your girl, 'mano, but he don't come cheap.”

“How bad?” I asked.

“Five bills for the set-up and three bills each for a license, birth certificate and Social Security.”

“Damn,” I said. “Do I gotta pay it all up front?”

“Nah, bro, he takes the five up front as money down. You pay the rest when you get the goods. But I’m telling you, he’s worth it. His shit crosses borders. He even does the holograms and shit.”

“Big Mike, brother, I owe you for this. When can she see him?”

“I’m gonna text you the address, *‘mano*, he says any time you need him. Just tell your girl to say I sent you and that she’s good with Azteca,” Big Mike instructed.

“Cool,” I said. “Might take some time to get that kinda money together.”

“Don’t worry about it, Davey, I told him you’re cool,” he replied. “Go when you’re ready.”

“Thanks, Big Mike.”

I flipped the phone shut and dropped it back in my pocket, smiling. Even with the obscene amount of money I’d have to procure somehow, knowing I could take the first step in officially becoming Amanda gave my heart a huge lift.



My nightly transformation into Amanda – this time to traipse around the mall in lacy lingerie while I did my rounds – went even further than a kiss, as I placed the hand of the mannequin

onto my swollen crotch as I kissed my self into my new body, feeling the sensation of my hard plastic cock – my former reproductive organ – against the warm, soft palm of my small, manicured hand as sensation slid from one body to the other.

I went to the extra trouble that night of scanning the exterior cameras, keeping an eye on the parking lot that evening, so the powers-that-be would have no reason to doubt my dedication to my shitty job. The thieves operated over a large area and seemed fairly well-organized and professional about their work, hitting so many large retail establishments in so short a time. Criminals usually lacked confidence like that unless they proved themselves very good at their jobs. Best that I appear to take the threat seriously – even though I honestly didn't care what shopping mall this crew hit, even my own – and at least be seen to try putting in the effort to thwart anything that might happen. Besides, any job security I could manufacture by doing such things only kept me where I needed to be – a place with constant access to the Girlish Charm boutique on the upper concourse and a certain mannequin occupying the very center of my world.

* * * * *

My “fly low, stay under radar” approach precluded my raiding petty cash again or skimming any money off the stores or kiosks to start getting together the substantial chunk of cash required for Amanda Quinn's identity. I had a little overtime on my next paycheck – only amounting to a couple hundred dollars – which I could contribute, but gathering that much cash in such a short time-frame required something illegal. I never considered myself to be much of a criminal – not even when I landed in prison – so I racked my brain trying to concoct some sort of crime I could commit and came up with nothing.

Not that I spent all my time just thinking about raising money. Inhabiting my supple, divinely sensitive female form while I performed my routine and very boring job distracted me admirably, gifting me with long blissful stretches of time at night spent just giggling and singing in pure delight with the joy of being a beautiful girl.

Such a miracle to just land in my lap. The ability to change bodies and to experience life from the other side of the gender line. To feel a connection to my first love in a way I never expected, much less dreamed possible. To find that I had a way out of my former, dismal life, to lay to rest the jaded ex-con and begin again, full of boundless optimism and hope again. But it did lead me to wonder: *If this miracle just happened to me, what else could I do? How far down does the rabbit-hole go?*

It led me to devise a little experiment, something I could do to pass the time if nothing else, at best a way to learn a bit more about my fantastic circumstances. On a lonely, rainy Thursday night, once I finished my tasks for the evening in my lithe, blonde-haired body, I jiggled my way down the concrete steps into the basement and brought up a heavy duffel bag stocked with varying pieces of mannequins stored below, chosen carefully over the last few days to prove my point but also allow me some fun in the meantime.

I found out, after a series of trial-and-error, that so long as I kept one pieces of the original Leslie mannequin as part of the mix, I could change all the other parts and still cause the

transformation by kissing. I needed to press the kiss into the part of the original mannequin for the transition to occur, I discovered, but that posed no problem at all, even though it tended to leave me bent over to kiss the mannequin's smooth plastic ass, since it made the most sense for me to keep the hips and pelvis of the original Leslie mannequin.

The modular mannequin system that Girlish Charm used made the whole process quite easy. I could change legs, torsos, head, arms and hands with no trouble at all, and could cover my lily white pussy and ass easily enough if I chose my clothes carefully, no matter how dark or light I chose to make my skin. I had to be careful with skin tones – it made the most sense to keep the hips and pelvis – and the genitals – of the original Leslie mannequin in place and change everything else, which led to some peculiar “tan lines” when I changed myself into other races. Changing hair and hairstyles meant swapping out wigs, a simple task, and once I delivered the kiss everything shifted and became real – the cheap, synthetic hair became shiny and healthy, the glossy plastic faded into soft, well-cared-for skin, the cheap fiber eyelashes became thick, curled masterpieces framing wide, sparkling eyes. All the varying eyes – a whole shoe-box of paired eyes existed down in the basement storage room – could be snapped in or out easily, and every set came with crystal-clear 20/20 vision as an added bonus.



I amused the hell out of myself for the next six hours drinking, smoking and changing my appearance to anything I could imagine – a waifish Chinese girl, a buxom Latina with blonde streaks in her silky hair, a tall and muscular black girl with long braids, a pale-skinned redhead with a perpetual pout and enormous tits. I spent a little time in each form, but found that I never felt nearly so much at home in any body but the original. Subtle modifications – longer nails, different color eyes, a different hairstyle, larger breasts – went unnoticed, but the larger changes nagged at me, prompting me to change back and put my “body” to rights out of the

duffel bag. I did supplement my appearance a little bit, however, with the addition of some double-D cup breasts which I absolutely loved and the long-nailed, slender fingers of a pair of different hands. But largely, even with my forays into different looks and ethnicities, I opted to remain the petite, curvaceous blonde that began the journey. As fun as being different people proved, I gravitated back to the “original” Leslie-mannequin form. It felt like home.

* * * * *

A week passed of simply trolling the empty mall as Amanda Quinn, wandering around the stores and racing the mobility scooters, before the urge to go out again grew too powerful to ignore. The mannequin – my mannequin – got relegated to the back storeroom of Girlish Charm, off of the floor and its attendant visibility, which meant I wouldn't have to change back immediately so that the store's display wouldn't hold a gawky male mannequin in a security guard uniform and raise questions. This time, I decided, I would choose a day off and spend the entire time in my Amanda persona, sneaking back into the mall to change back and not having to worry as much about destruction of evidence. I used my last few days on the clock to pilfer clothing, jewelry and cosmetics from the overstock rooms in the various stores. I didn't get greedy – just enough for a couple days, stuffed into an overnight bag brought from home. The likelihood that my petty larceny would even register dwindled to insignificant. Strange, how accomplished a thief I became since becoming Amanda. Knowing how people intended to catch thieves made a career as a thief much easier and potentially more lucrative. So long as I kept myself out of the camera's eye and stuck to stealing things that no one would notice missing, I could pretty easily equip myself for whatever I liked. The lure of the Helzberg Diamond store never overpowered my common sense, thankfully. And besides, monetary gain did not motivate my thefts. Clothes that would make me look cute and sexy far outweighed any desire for a quick-and-dirty payday, things that would make my hair softer and more voluminous eclipsed any need for easily-fenced goods.



Immediately after disabling the cameras and switching into my preferred form, I stuffed my divine body into a sequined sheath dress and dangled heavy rhinestone earrings from my lobes to click softly against a five-row rhinestone choker. I slid rings onto every finger and bracelets around my wrists to sparkle teasingly against my softly tanned skin. I took a moment to “stock up” for my next few days, ducking into the mall's fine wines and spirits store to liberate a few bottles of tequila and vodka and a carton of the girly cigarettes I now preferred.

I couldn't keep a perky little bounce from my step – I loved how it made my new, larger tits jiggle deliciously in the tight confines of the dress – as I grabbed my two overnight bags stuffed with clothes and makeup from where I stashed them in the basement storerooms. I took a brief detour into the security office and used my combination to open the wall safe in the director's office, taking out the keys to one of the three raffle-prize cars sitting parked on rubber mats on the mall's lower concourse. I doubted getting the car back into its position before I had to clock out and leave would pose much of a problem, and it would solve my temporary transportation problem neatly for long enough to accomplish my primary task: moving the mannequin from the mall to my apartment.

I spent several evenings piecing together a replacement – not quite the same, but close enough to escape any casual scrutiny – to slip into the store's back room while I moved the Leslie mannequin to my home. That way, I would no longer need to go to work to affect my change and could spend my time off as a female, living the way I *wanted* to live now, without needing to disable cameras and fake my door-check log just to squeeze in a few hours as Amanda. I could exist as a girl for more than one evening at a time, I could forge a social life and make friends, perhaps even manage a casual boyfriend after a little while. The idea of Dave Hargrove being

the occasional fling, just used to go to work or attend parole meetings, appealed to me deeply and profoundly. Somewhere in the midst of all the upheaval and new experiences, I began thinking of myself as Amanda now, and my male body being the 'disguise' I wore. With the recent loss of my virginity, that feeling increased even more. Even in my male form, if I held very still and closed my eyes, I could imagine the feeling of foreign flesh inside my body, in the hollow between my thighs, impaling me and pushing me to ecstasy so easily.

I checked my pink-ink list from my purse, making sure I took care of everything I needed for the evening. My long-term plan – to slowly and painstakingly lift everything I would need for a life as Amanda from the mall over the course of several months, things like curling irons and clothes hangers and cosmetics organizers – occupied about a dozen pages after, and I leafed through them quickly just to make sure my plan continued smoothly.

But no plan of battle ever survived contact with the enemy. Not five minutes into its execution, the plan hit its very first snag.

The biggest task – transporting the mannequin itself – would have to wait for a while, because the adorable little Mini could not transport my luggage *and* the mannequin at the same time. And I could not bring myself to simply change to the larger SUV at the other end of the mall, even though it made more practical sense. I just looked so damned *cute* in the Mini. I had to have it.

Apparently, Amanda Quinn could not be typefied as a very practical person.

I decided to just keep an eye on the time, go out for a few drinks as Amanda and have a good time, then return to the mall after unloading the car and pick up the mannequin. I knew that no one kept track of the mileage on the prize car's odometer, being a demo model and not the actual vehicle intended to be given away, and I could get away with a great deal of driving tonight so long as I didn't do anything foolish like get pulled over with no insurance or drivers' license.

Using my master key, I unlocked the big bay door which led directly onto the mall concourse – it wouldn't be long before that door would be used to bring in the mall's five oversized Christmas trees – and looked around the parking lot carefully. A light drizzle began while I worked inside, and a chilly north wind made my new, infinitely-more-sensitive skin pebble immediately. I shivered dramatically in my short little club dress and ducked back inside, ready to begin the first stage of my plan and to thoroughly enjoy my outing into the rich, sensuous world of Amanda Quinn.

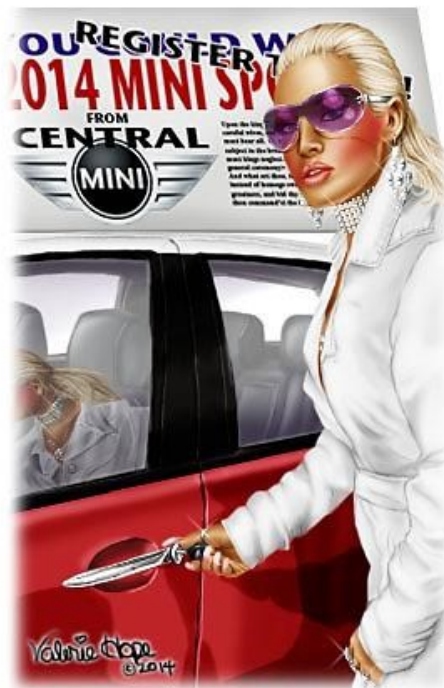
* * * * *

I touched up my flawless makeup and dropped the little rhinestone-encrusted compact into the purse dangling by its straps off my forearm. Even with the airbrushed perfection of my face a theoretically permanent condition due to my transition from a perpetually glamorous mannequin, I took great pains to practice my makeup and be good at it. Not because of pride or vanity, *per se*, although that did present as a factor – no, more because an innate sense told me that Amanda Quinn *must* be proficient at makeup and hairstyling, she was the kind of girl who

took time with her appearance and never stepped into public with a hair out of place.

Knowing what kind of girl Amanda was dominated my thinking the last few days, and I excitedly anticipated fabricating the answers to the questions I posed. Sure, I could dress myself any way I wished and even alter my appearance with different mannequin parts, but none of that made my femininity as *real* to me as figuring out what kind of music I enjoyed or what my favorite movie might be. I wanted to know everything about myself as a girl – what high school I attended, the name of my girlhood best friend, the name of the first boy I kissed, my favorite food and what I liked to do on rainy days. My favorite flower. Fleshing out the story of Amanda appealed to me as much, albeit on a different level, as physically becoming Amanda. I longed to fill in all those tiny little details so I could know myself.

Remembering the chill outside, I wrapped up in a white leather jacket and pulled back my hair as I loaded my bags and my liquor into the cute red Mini sitting on the mat nearest the north exit. I would need to be back by the end of my shift to return the car after dropping by my apartment to change back into my male self temporarily. Pulling a stylish pair of wraparound sunglasses onto my slender nose, I opened the driver's door and slid in, taking a long moment to acclimate myself to the complicated business of driving a manual transmission in platform heels. The pedals seemed miles away from my feet, even after I slid the seat forward and adjusted the mirrors for my shortened stature, denying me the sense of connection to the car that I remembered as a male. Not that I particularly cared. Amanda wasn't a gear-head. She liked this car because it was *cute*, not because of anything like performance or economy.



I pulled the speedy little compact out into the parking lot and carefully closed and secured the bay door behind me before threading my way through the empty lot towards the main road. As

soon as the tires rolled onto public roadway, a billowing sense of elation filled my heart and I threw my hands into the air and whooped shrilly. My life as Amanda could begin now, in earnest, and I could let poor old ex-con Davey Hargrove slowly fade into obscurity like the memory of a bad boyfriend.

As much as I longed to stick to my list and be careful and methodical, I couldn't keep from singing along with the satellite radio and drumming my long-nailed fingers on the steering wheel, going just a *bit* too fast to escape notice (as if being a gorgeous centerfold blonde in a lipstick-red Mini didn't draw enough attention) and car-flirting with any cute guy I happened to pass. In all my years as a male, no such sense of happiness ever stood out. I was young, healthy, gorgeous and *free*.

* * * * *

I sat in a parking lot of a Chili's for a long while, setting up the pre-paid Android phone I lifted from the kiosk in the mall – my first acquisition under the name Amanda Quinn, painstakingly entered into the kiosk computer from carefully watching the salesman do his job and lifting his employee password. I doubted I would need the tons of data and airtime I assigned myself, at least not until I developed my social life and online presence, but since I used the five-finger discount I decided to help myself to the best that wireless service had to offer.

A girl like me should always have the best, I thought smugly as I installed a few apps I thought I might need, such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, tapping the screen with my fingers drawn back awkwardly to accommodate my long fingernails. Perhaps, if my plan came to fruition, I would net myself a rich handsome man and become his trophy wife, happily fucking him and probably the gardener on the side while he bought me designer clothes and a Mercedes just for the privilege of sharing my bed.

I laughed at myself, a tinkling affair. Like I would *ever* allow myself to be tied down to one single man, or even a field of two or three. No, I liked myself better as the wild party girl, the club regular, bouncing from one-night stand to one-night stand and never staying in one place for long. Whatever this bold new world offered, that would be the direction in which I started. Maybe one day I might settle down, be a *wife* to someone, perhaps even a *mother* to someone. Those words drove home my newfound femininity in a way no other words yet approached, not even the undeniably feminine terms coupled with possessive pronouns like *my uterus* and *my tampons* and *my panties*. The feeling of womanhood descended on me so profoundly that I shivered even while I smiled in pure delight.

Wife.

Mother.

The possibilities of this new life seemed endless.

I used a little of my scant cash to buy myself a meal – not my usual burger and fries, but a sensible salad with grilled chicken and dressing on the side, befitting a young woman conscious of her appearance – at one of the random chain restaurants satellite to the mall. The better level

of service from the male waitstaff and bartenders did not escape my notice. I smiled to myself. There seemed to be no observable downside to being a young, beautiful woman. I could imagine one – the thought of sexual predators, for instance, or harassment in nearly any job I might take – but as of this moment, I had yet to experience anything other than joy and delight at this colorful new world. Even the new constant of being hit upon by every heterosexual male I encountered didn't dim my love of this new life – it turns out, I liked the attention as Amanda in a way I could not even begin to imagine as Dave.

Once I blotted my lips with my napkin and re-applied my lipstick, paid the bill (with the waiter's phone number carefully written on the bottom of the receipt, I noticed with a smile) and got back in my car, the rigorous schedule of my plan reasserted itself in my mind and I took to the streets with a renewed sense of urgency.

* * * * *

I wended my way through the light traffic towards my dilapidated apartment, hoping I would escape the notice of my nosy landlord who ran the little convenience store downstairs from me and avoid any uncomfortable questions while I carted my stuff upstairs. The place closed and locked its door at midnight, which would be the perfect time for me to bring the mannequin anyway. No way Mrs. Lin would be able to overlook a DD-cup blonde in a club dress trying to wrestle a mannequin uncannily resembling her tenant up the stairs in the alley. And hell, Mrs. Lin scarcely believed me when I told her the *truth*, which raised profound doubts about how effective any bullshit I could throw might dissuade her curiosity. And I doubted anyone – Mrs. Lin or the rest of the known world – would ever believe a hard-bodied glamour girl like me would ever be girlfriend to a gawky, disheveled mess like Dave Hargrove, so I didn't even have that kind of an “in.”

I managed to creep up the stairs unnoticed except for a shrill catcall by a homeless man across the street as I took my bags upstairs and dropped them on the sleeper sofa I used for a bed in my dingy, flop-house apartment. I poured myself a tall vodka-and-Red-Bull to sip while I hung up my new clothes in the largely empty closet and arranged my shoes to my liking. By the time I finished my drink and smoked a cigarette by the open window, I formulated a plan to clean up and decorate the place a little bit, make better use of the minimal space in the studio efficiency, and decided to bring in a few potted plants and a window-box for flowers to give the dump a little bit of color.

I chided myself harshly – or rather, my *male* self – for choosing to live in such squalor and apathy. No credible reason existed why I should live the way I lived, so colorless and drab and depressing. All it needed was some air and light, a little bit of color and some care, and even the crappy little apartment could be someplace nice and attractive. I resolved to ask Mrs. Lin if she would mind my painting the place. Something spacious and airy, like a cornflower yellow with white trim, would brighten up the little space immensely. I pulled my pad and pen from my purse and jotted down another idea – I needed a full-size wall- or door-mirror to check my appearance and to take the occasional “selfie” for self-promotion on the Facebook page I intended to create – while I tidied up, tossing empty pizza boxes and discarded want-ads from the local paper into one pile for recycling and gathering up my dirty clothes heaped on the floor in stinking piles for a trip to the laundromat.

Some art for the walls, maybe a bright little area rug for the dulled floorboards, a cute lamp like the one I remembered in one of the mall stores – then I could transform this place into something worthy to house a beauty like Amanda.

I checked the ladies' Seiko on my slender wrist and resolved to move my plan along. I had a lot to accomplish tonight and could ill afford to waste my precious time, especially if I wanted to have *any* fun in the bars tonight while advancing my goal of raising the money for my fake identity. I trotted downstairs, jiggling my enormous boobs almost to the point of pain, and piled into the sexy little car for my next trip, heading downtown towards the warehouse district.

* * * * *

The traffic headed into downtown on the freeway clustered into a long line of stop-and-go frustration around a jackknifed eighteen-wheeler, giving me a long interval to sing along with the pop station – *I'm all about that bass, 'bout that bass, 'bout that bass, no treble* – and flirt with guys in adjacent cars, just enjoying the unparalleled feeling of being young and beautiful. The impingement on my tight time-frame annoyed me a little bit, making me check my watch distractedly every few minutes, while I waited for my chance to speed around the wreck and get back to my carefully laid plans.

After what seemed like an eternity of waiting in the belly of a miles-long serpent of glowing red tail-lights, watching the cars in the oncoming lanes speed past with a sense of utter jealousy, the flow of traffic finally resumed in a burst of reckless speed and frantic lane-changing.

I took a deep breath – which made my generous breasts do something *marvelous* in their tight confines, I noticed – and forced myself to mitigate my speed, not wanting some bored cop with a quota to fill to pull me over and ask questions I preferred not to answer. I lit a cigarette from the dash lighter, making sure to crack my window to keep the car's interior from smelling like smoke, and made my way off the freeway at the Canal Street exit, back onto the surface streets and the city's upscale warehouse district and the thriving nightlife I sought.



The club scene parted the gloom of the rainy evening with lurid neon, lines of glamorous twenty-and thirty-somethings stretching down the sidewalks huddled under umbrellas waiting their turn to go into the thumping, sexual darkness and try their luck at companionship for the night. I pulled the Mini into an aboveground parking structure – reminding myself to get a quick car-wash at one of the automated facilities on the way back to the mall to rinse away the grime of the rain-slick streets – and slung my purse over one shoulder on my way towards the stairwell.

My plan – such as it was – consisted of dancing and having some drinks bought for me long enough to find some lonely rich guy who might be receptive to a sob story about a lost job and kindly offer me a sum of money for a blowjob or a handie in the back seat of his car. I forced the word *prostitution* from my mind, dwelling instead on expediency. Amanda Quinn was no whore. But it stood to reason that someone might be willing to help out the poor little gorgeous thing with her “rent” and “bills” until she could find another job. I knew girls who did that sort of thing all the time, and I saw no shame in finding myself a temporary sugar daddy who could front the cash for my new identity.

By sticking to the upscale clubs, providing myself a little cushion of respectability, I sidestepped much of the risk of finding myself arrested for solicitation. With money came discretion – I knew that from my days as a male – and I relied on such discretion until I could fabricate a history for myself. Amanda Quinn needed to remain a non-person for just a little longer, until she could become a “real girl” like some sexualized, buxom Pinocchio and begin living a life in earnest. Of all my careful planning, this phase constituted the only bit that relied more on luck and serendipity than actual work or guile. And if anything could derail the plan, it would be finding the wrong kind of guy tonight.

Not that I particularly *needed* an ulterior motive to go out looking for sex. My last sexual encounter still left me breathless and wet, just thinking about it. I would probably fuck somebody tonight regardless, but I hoped I might generate a “two birds, one stone” scenario with a little bit of creativity.

And it continually struck me that trying to find myself a sugar daddy and fast-track him into a five-hundred-dollar loan might be the dumbest idea I'd had in a while – and this, from someone who tried to sell pot to an undercover police officer. It showed an astonishing lack of creativity, but I formed no other plans from that particular brainstorming session that didn't require identification or a bank account. And I didn't want to steal from the mall and fence the merchandise. Swiping things for my life as a girl, that struck me as okay, like stealing food to feed a family. But just to take a few Blu-Ray players and PlayStations to the pawnshop and make some quick cash – that actually felt like *stealing*. I couldn't bring myself to do it, particularly when I remembered that Lou and his crew took a chance on a hapless ex-con when no one else would and introduced him to this vibrant, exciting new life.

I decided against Club Platinum – didn't want to risk running into Richard again, since I didn't entirely trust myself to just abandon all my careful planning and spend the evening in a no-tell motel having him systematically fuck my brains to jelly – and opted for some of the other clubs along the strip. One such place – Club Taboo – offered an awning along its sidewalk to keep the rain from me, so I made my way in that direction, puffing on a cigarette and taking stock of the city's nightlife, looking for likely candidates.

I used my newfound knowledge of all things mercantile, honed by long hours passed in an empty shopping mall, and began winnowing down my list as I loitered on the sidewalk, bundled tightly in my white leather jacket against the chill. I found that both sets of instincts in my mind – the male and the female – served to help me in the selection process, albeit for wildly different reasons.

Tall, handsome, very charming – but discount shoes and a cheap knock-off suit and the Timex around his wrist wrote him off my list of possibles.

The same for the man in the Hugo Boss sportcoat and the Bulova on his wrist, the Italian loafers which bespoke adequate finance, but his double-chin and his haughty sneer at every attractive woman bespoke soul-deep mommy issues and contempt for the female gender, possibly even to the point of violence. So, again, no.

More cheap shoes. Sorry, thanks for playing.

So *obviously* closet gay. Can't help you, dude.

Wow. Worst toupée in history. Better get inside quick, buddy, where low light might actually let you get away with something like that. But my list? Nope.

Yikes. Meth mouth. Get yourself some veneers, there, pal. And maybe some rehab. Another no.

Oh, honey, if you're gonna get yourself a spray tan, at *least* spend the money and get a good one. Nobody's gonna go for that particular shade of orange. Big fat no.

Nobody fronts like that and kisses their biceps so blatantly unless they're packing somewhere in the neighborhood of three inches in their shorts. Sure, baby, I need money, but you gotta have *some* potential to hit the right spots. Swing and a miss for the rookie.

That dude actually has spinach stuck in his teeth. Kudos for the sensible diet, but my pussy will not be on the menu for you tonight. Sucks to be you.

Culling out the milling herd transitioned from serious business to time-wasting game, and I fought the urge to chuckle openly at some of the sad attempts at peacocking I witnessed in the chilly drizzle. One or two standouts made themselves known, but I noticed those men seemed to have a flock of women around them or, more often, just the one woman who stared at any potential competition with open hostility. My half-assed plan to raise funds, flawed at its best, began to seem even more improbable as I sorted through the prospects. Maybe I should head down to the Marriott or the Omni and just turn tricks in the hotel bar. I would probably have better luck.

This is no way to make a living, I thought darkly, taking a quick wallow in self-pity before my natural positivity reasserted itself and I returned to my catty game, amusing myself as the line slowly crept its way along the sidewalk, the neon reflecting from the standing puddles beginning to form in the depressions as the drizzle became an insistent soft rain.

* * * * *

My time spent in the line, shivering in my abbreviated dress, passed with maddening lethargy, bringing more anxious glances at my wristwatch and worry over lost time. By the time I finally got inside the club I would have to work extremely fast to find myself a mark. I fished in my little clutch purse for the latest in a long line of cigarettes to pass the time, when I felt a soft hand on my arm. I turned to see a gorgeous and statuesque dark-skinned girl in a green dress, offering me a shy smile as she regarded me with wide, oblique eyes.

“Excuse me, baby, but can I bum one of those off of you?” she asked, pointing at my pack of cigarettes.

I laughed and offered her the pack. “Sure, sweetie,” I said airily, offering her a light to go with it. “Wow. I love your shoes.”

The girl offered me a sweet smile in return. “Thanks. I actually found these at Payless, if you can fucking believe that,” she told me.

She lit her borrowed cigarette and took a deep drag. “Man, it's taking forever tonight, ain't it? I'm freezing out here. Wish they'd just let us all in,” she remarked, little feathery streamers of smoke escaping her lush lips as she spoke.

"I guess they gotta keep standards up," I remarked, lighting my own cigarette when the girl returned my lighter. A tall Latina in a purple cocktail dress stood close behind the girl now, a mountain of lustrous sable curls cascading down her back and shoulders. "Me, I'm kinda glad. I'm in the mood for a particular kind of guy tonight."

The first girl laughed. "Ain't we all," she said. "Hey. I'm Shawna. This is my friend Rebecca." She gestured to the Latina behind her.

"Nice to meet you," I said. "I'm Amanda."

"Have I seen you around?" Rebecca asked brightly.

"I dunno, probably not," I said. "I just moved here. I've been to Platinum a couple times – they have a hot DJ who spins there – but I decided to branch out tonight. Are y'all two from here?"

Both girls nodded. "Place is a lot different than it used to be," Shawna said, gesturing up and down the street. "Back when I first started going out, this all used to be biker bars and shit."

"Yeah, you didn't come down here alone dressed like this," Rebecca added.

I smiled. "Still, that kind of place has its appeal," I told them. "If you're into bad boys."

"If they all looked like Jax Teller, I would be," Shawna giggled. "Still, I kinda miss the bar scene. Clubbing is cool and everything, but I have a lot of fun just going out and drinking."

"Where's your favorite?" I asked her. "Like I said, I'm new here."

Shawna puffed out a lungful of billowing smoke. "Oh, then you totally have to go to Lucky's, over on Fifteenth and Long. It's so much fun. They have this shot there, the Suicide Tuesday – they do them on special all the time, two dollars. Four of those things, girl, and you are *fucked up*."

"Hondo's has way more cute guys, though," Rebecca added. "If I hadn't let Shawna talk me into clubbing, I'd probably be there right now."

"Where is Hondo's?" I asked.

"Seventeenth and Long, right down the street from Lucky's. You can't miss it – it's always packed. Particularly tonight."

"What's going on tonight?"

"It's amateur night," Shawna said. "They do this crazy bar Olympics thing, all kinds of prizes and stuff. It gets pretty wild in there. It's not really my scene."

"At least it's not college, though," Rebecca said, a little defensive.

"I'm not hating," Shawna replied by way of apology. "Just ain't for me, that's all."

“Well, if we can't get in this place soon, I'm gonna bag and head over there,” I told them both. “I'm not gonna stand out here freezing my tits off all night. This is ridiculous.”

“Amen, sister,” Rebecca said.

I chatted with the girls for a little while longer, doling out my cigarettes companionably and passing the time as the line crept forwards slowly. Any number of cute, well-dressed guys stood in the line in front of us, several of whom gave me a once-over-lightly in barefaced appreciation. I could easily hook into one of them and press my plan forward, if I could only get myself inside the place.

Word seemed to trickle back from the head of the line as to the delay, passed along from person to person. The willowy little thing in the yellow dress ahead of me, standing in a knot of other people all speaking Hindi, turned and informed me that the hold-up attributed to a new bouncer working the door tonight, one who played absolutely by the book and showed a peculiar immunity to female sexuality.

I swallowed hard. This whole plan could unravel if I didn't get inside. And if little Johnny By-The-Book was up there carding people, the whole evening might prove to be a total wash.

AFTER NEARLY AN HOUR, THE line in front of Club Taboo finally moved past the new, by-the-book doorman and into the darkened, thumping interior. Shawna, Rebecca and I finally made it to the front of the line, tossing our spent cigarettes into the gutter and stepping onto the little strip of sodden outdoor carpet under the awning, purses clutched tight in our manicured hands.

I passed a bit of time standing in line letting a tall, somewhat skinny man in khakis with a razor crease and a tailored shirt eyefuck me. He met all my criteria for a potential sugar daddy – nice clothes but not over-the-top with the label, designer shoes, an expensive Tag Heuer wristwatch on one arm all speaking to the amount of income he could provide, and an almost-shy, very respectful tone towards the women around him which spoke well of his gentleness and good intention. I even managed to over hear his name – Gabriel – from one of the people with him, and marked it for future use. It pleased me greatly to discover that not only would he suit my purposes well, I actually *wanted* to be intimate with him. He struck me as the kind of person who would be a lot of fun in bed, and boyishly cute to boot. Maybe I could be his real-life letter to *Penthouse* and make a few lurid teenage fantasies come true for him tonight.

I watched him go inside with a mixture of impatience and expectation, already formulating and silently rehearsing ways in which to approach him, to make my “poor little unemployed girl” sob story known without being too overt about it. The handful of people awaiting their turn for entry crept forward like chilled molasses, making me bounce from foot to foot impatiently.

Everything hinged on my ability to get to Gabriel and start planting the seeds. I needed the new identity offered to me by Big Mike's business associate desperately if I had any intention of living a normal life as the buxom, curvaceous Amanda Quinn, and for that I needed a large influx of ready cash. Getting into a relationship, no matter how temporary, with someone like Gabriel could allow me access to that kind of money in a perfectly legal, no-papers-necessary kind of

way. I could use a week or two to give him the full-on girlfriend experience and get the eleven hundred dollars I needed for my identity documents, then I could make my choice whether or not to maintain the relationship or cut the poor guy loose.

I suppose it should have astounded me how easily, how *callously* I considered using this man for my own personal gain. I wondered, idly, how much of the actual Leslie transferred into me when I transitioned into her motionless plastic body. I seemed to remember, past the veneer of idolization where the original Leslie usually resided in my brain, that she definitely harbored a large gold-digger streak when she and I had been a couple. Maybe, in taking on Leslie's body and face, I took on a little bit of her heart and soul at the same time.

I didn't exactly relish the thought of myself as a gold-digger, even though thoughts of being some rich man's trophy wife earlier this evening made me giggle and blush in delight. Even though I knew scores of men and women both who openly admitted to pursuing relationships purely for financial gain, I always liked to consider myself above such pettiness. A part of me considered people like that to be very dishonest versions of prostitutes. I looked down on them, derided them, in no small part because I never earned the kind of money and privilege which could possibly merit me such a partner but also because I found the practice distasteful.

Having to stoop to such measures out of financial desperation almost served to dim the unadulterated joy which came from just *being* Amanda Quinn, inhabiting her nubile body and possessing her flawless, airbrushed glamor. I forced it from my mind – *I haven't even met the guy yet, I don't know anything about him. He could be a total asshole, and it would serve him right if I took him for a couple grand* – and made my halting way towards the front door, thinking of nothing but getting my hand stamped and going inside to begin my subtle hunt for Gabriel's affection.

The last duo of well-dressed men and women passed the doorman with a muttered “thanks” and disappeared into the bass-thumping darkness of the club's interior. I stepped forward to the velvet rope, Shawna and Rebecca close behind me, and offered the bouncer my most disarming smile in an attempt to have him pass me inside without scrutiny, simply because of my looks and sex appeal. I'd seen such measures work flawlessly at any number of other clubs all up and down the Canal Street strip, on several different occasions. But from the whispered comments passed up and down the line on the sidewalk, I might actually be about to encounter the only Boy Scout on the entire strip, determined to make sure everyone entering his domain had proper identification.

I fidgeted nervously for a moment before I mentally stilled myself and stepped up.



The bouncer regarded me with a stony face. I stepped forward, arms folded expertly to push my tits together into an irresistible valley of cleavage, a shy but inviting smile on my flawless face.

He ran eyes over me from top to bottom and back again. I saw nothing the slightest bit sexual in his regard, and I felt my heart sink as the well-muscled man stepped back from me and folded his chiseled arms across his chest.

"I.D., please," he said ominously.

My smile slipped a little before I caught and rescued it. I put on my very best bubblehead voice, wide-eyed and innocent, as I rummaged in my little pink clutch purse.

"Oh, no!" I squealed, pouting. "It's not in here! OhmahGawd, I think I left it in my other purse?"

"Sorry, ma'am," the bouncer said, gesturing to Shawna behind me to step forward. "No I.D., no admittance. Have a good night."

I gave him a look of pure, guileless wide-eyed sex. "Can't you please let me in? I've been in line for, like, an hour and I'm *freezing*. Please?"

His eyes were polished onyx. "Can't help you, ma'am."

"You can't make one little bitty exception?"

He cleared his throat. "You're holding up my line, ma'am. You need to step off, okay? Other people been waiting as long as you have," he grunted. "You want in? Go home, get your other purse, come back with some I.D. That's the only way you're getting in tonight, no matter how tight you squeeze those boobs together."

I started to protest, but stopped myself. I recognized a brick wall when I saw one, and knew better than to argue with one. I stepped around the ropes and back out onto the lonely sidewalk, looking down at my watch. An hour and a half, burned to cinders stuck in traffic and waiting in line. The whole plan fell apart before my eyes.

What the fuck, I thought resignedly. At least I can have some fun, so the night isn't a total bust.

I leaned across the rope to the lissome Rebecca, who had her own I.D. in her long-nailed hands ready to be shown to the doorman. "You said Hondo's right? Seventeenth and Long?"

She gave me a knowing smile. "Totes," she said, squeezing my forearm companionably. "And they don't ever card. Have fun, *chica*."

I smiled. "I intend to."

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Rebecca hadn't lied. Hondo's parking lot overflowed onto the street and the crowd spilled out of every exit, onto the outdoor patio in the pattering rain. The place seemed very popular, but a little more lowbrow than the clubs. Even after stopping by the apartment to sneak past Mrs. Lin and change clothes into something a bit more suited to the bar scene – cutoff Daisy Duke shorts and a pink Playboy tee-shirt – I still qualified as the hottest girl in the place once I made the door.

The boisterous bar rang with music and laughter and conversation. The long interior's far end sported a lit stage where three people chugged yards of beer in a race while a cute pair of promoters – a blonde and a brunette – gave color commentary on microphones. A huge banner behind the stage announced Hondo's Amateur Night.

"...and the winner is Randy!" the blonde promoter crowed as an obese frat-boy lifted his empty yard glass into the air in triumph. He shook his hands above his head victoriously and shouted wordlessly to a group of his friends in the front row. "How's everybody doing out there? Y'all having fun?"

The crowd wooted and screamed to the positive. I pressed through the dense crowd at the bar and ordered a vodka cranberry, shouting above the din of the crowd at the bartender and sliding a ten-dollar bill onto the bar. The drink came back to me, watered down and weak but still tasting vilely of the cheap well vodka they used here, and I pressed my way back from the bar and out into the crowd, getting my bearings.

"And remember, ladies, it's your last chance to sign up for the Amateur Night Wet T-shirt Contest," the brunette said happily over the catcalls and whistles of the amused crowd. "First prize gets five hundred dollars!"

My eyes widened and I almost dropped my drink. I hadn't even *considered* something like this as a way to make money. Sure, there would be no guarantee I would win, but looking out over the crowd I doubted anyone could mount a serious challenge. And I had been in the crowd at enough wet t-shirt competitions as a male to know that the quality of my tits had far less to do with winning than a wild, raucous attitude. I pushed into the crowd towards the stage as quickly as I could, chugging my drink in an attempt to gestate that raucous attitude *en route*, and finally made my way to the stage edge. A large man with a long, braided goatee stood with a clipboard next to the brunette promoter with a cluster of marginally attractive young women around them. I pushed up next to the crowd and tapped the man on the arm.

"Hi," I told him, shouting over the crowd. "I'm Amanda. I want to sign up."

He closed one eye and regarded me closely. "You twenty-one?"

I nodded. "Twenty-two," I corrected.

"Shit, girl, you could be lying right to my face and I'd still let you in just for a chance to see those," he said, pointing at my lovely chest. He winked at me lasciviously as he passed me the clipboard.

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"Ladies and gentlemen, give it up for Contestant Number Four, the lovely Miranda!" the blonde promoter, whose name was Allie, shouted into the microphone above the wild hooting and screaming of the inebriate crowd. The contestant, a slightly *zaftig* Latina, turned a slightly tipsy pirouette with her arms above her head, her prominent nipples standing proudly through the filmy wet cotton of the shirt.

I rolled the hem of my own shirt, issued by the bar, and pulled it into a tight knot between my shoulderblades, shocked at my own flexibility. I stepped to the edge of the stage. Contestant Number Two, obviously a professional stripper, regarded me haughtily as I stepped up, confident in her own sexuality and attractiveness with her curled burlesque bangs and sleeve tattoos.

"And now, our last contestant, everybody put your hands together for Contestant Number Five, the beautiful and sexy Mandy!" the brunette promoter, Vanessa, said, eliciting another sustained holler from the crowd. I stepped up, a bright smile on my flawless face, and raised my hands into the air, giving my delicious tits a teasing shimmy that set them jiggling and bouncing to the delight of the male-dominated crowd. I danced to the music a little, blowing playful kisses to the audience, even turning around and bending over to smack my own ass before I got to the center of the stage, bringing even more tumultuous applause.

Vanessa and Allie raised two plastic pitchers full of water and motioned me over. I strutted towards them, smiling and hooting, giving the distinct impression of being born to the stage. Once the initial *holy shit what am I doing* feeling wore off (with the help of three more vodka cranberries), I found myself having an awful lot of fun. The feeling of utter adoration from the crowd, the sense of raw sexual desire, bathed me and aroused me, making my pussy wet and my

nipples stiff, egging me on to be more and more overtly slutty and wild.

“Oh, shit, folks, we got us a *live* one!” Vanessa crowed as I did a very sexy pole slide up and down Allie's nubile little body and ended by kissing her and dry-humping her shapely thigh a little before standing between them, arms raised, smiling breathlessly as the crowd shouted and clapped its approval. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Contestants Two and Three scowling at me openly, silently mouthing the words *slut* and *skank* as they saw their chance at the five-hundred dollar grand prize vanishing in front of their eyes.

“Y'all ready, boys?” Vanessa shouted to the howling crowd. “Count it off! In three... two... one...”



The icy water hit me like an open-handed slap, stiffening my nipples almost to the point of pain as the flimsy cotton shirt adhered to my every luscious curve. I gasped and squealed in shock and delight, shaking my tits to spread the water all over, laughing and blowing kisses to the crowd who positively roared in delighted approval of their first view of my perfect, gravity-defying breasts. The deafening roar as I spun around, shaking my “moneymakers” for the horny edification of the drunken crowd and shimmying suggestively along to the loud rockabilly music on the P.A., very secure and confident in the knowledge that I would walk away with several free drinks in my belly, several phone numbers in my purse and a nice, fat wad of cash.

* * * * *

I stepped breathlessly and a little unsteadily into the parking lot, my damp hair stuck to my face and shoulders, nodding and acknowledging congratulations and admiration for my sublime rack from passersby. I fished a cigarette out from my purse and lit it gratefully, leaning against one of

the walls across from the dumpsters to enjoy a few well-earned drags in the relative peace and quiet before digging out my new phone. I took a moment to peruse some of the phone pictures emailed to me by bar patrons of my performance on the stage – I did find myself enjoying seeing pictures of myself, more than I ever had as a male – before dialing one of the numbers transferred into my contact list from my old burner phone.

The phone rang several times before a tired, distracted voice answered: “Yeah.”

“Hi, is this Izzy?” I chirped, my tipsy state causing me to sound altogether too upbeat and cheerful, as well as no small bit ditz.

“Yeah. Who's this?”

“You don't know me. My name's Amanda. Big Mike said I should call you about, y'know...”

“Oh, yeah,” Izzy said. “The girl that wants to go to college, that friend of his from prison.”

“Right,” I replied. “Hey, listen, I'm ready to get started.”

“Big Mike told you what it's gonna take?” he asked.

“I got the money,” I told him. “Just need to hook up and give it to you.”

A short pause occurred before he answered. “I can meet you in an hour. Michelangelo's, on Front Street by the freeway.”

“I think I know where that is,” I told him. “See you there in an hour.”

Driving with a buzz like I had in a technically stolen vehicle probably qualified as pressing my luck, but with the five bills I needed to start the process already sitting in an envelope in my purse along with the hundred or so I'd managed to save already, I decided expediency outweighed the potential risk. Bouncing happily – as much from the naked adoration of the crowd and my newfound status as the most popular, desired girl in the building as from the money – I dropped my purse into the front seat of the little Mini and brought the engine back to life. I took a moment to mark the location on my phone's GPS – I never knew how much I needed a smart phone until I actually had one – and pulled slowly and carefully into the night.

The drive to the little coffee shop in one of the less savory parts of downtown took about fifteen minutes, so I treated myself to a mochaccino and a muffin in the shop while I waited.

Unknowingly, I even adopted the practice of “chick eating” I used to deride in my male days, tearing little bits from the oversized banana nut muffin and popping them individually into my mouth. I sipped the hot coffee – more cinnamon and foam than actual coffee, very much in line with my new girly tastes – with relish, thumbing idly through the entertainment news on my phone and fielding the occasional clumsy approach by one of the *avant-garde* hipster regulars of the little hole-in-the-wall coffee shop with all the drunken, impatient grace I could muster.

No method to mistake Izzy existed when he finally entered the small shop. A large bear of a

man, with a bushy grey beard and thinning hair, thick glasses and pockmarked skin greeted the barista fondly – obviously a regular here – and ordered an espresso before scanning the patronage discreetly and noting me with the slightest raising of his eyebrows.

He accepted his drink – I noticed he didn't pay – and moved over to my table, surprisingly light on his feet for such a large man. “You Amanda?” he grunted noncommittally when he arrived in earshot.

“Yeah. Izzy?”

“The one and only,” he said, breaking into a cautious smile. “Mind if I sit down?”

“Please,” I said.

He lowered himself onto the mismatched chair across from me with a sigh of relief, stretching his legs out into the aisle between the wobbly tables with an air of spent energy, as if the short walk from the door to my location took everything out of him. I waited for him, sipping my coffee idly, to make the first move.

“Big Mike wasn't exactly clear about what you needed,” he told me after a long, studious glance. “You in some kind of trouble, darlin’?”

I launched into my well-rehearsed cover story without a second's pause. “You might say that,” I told him. “Nothing legal, though... my ex-boyfriend turned out to be a real sonofabitch. Problem is, he's real hard to get away from. He's a cop. A friend of a friend knew Big Mike, said he might be able to help. I just need to disappear and start over. I figure a driver's license, Social Security card and a birth certificate ought to be everything I need. Once I get all those, I can definitely take care of everything else like passports and bank accounts.”

“Big Mike said you wanted to go to school,” Izzy said. “That takes immunization records, transcripts, that kind of shit. They're easier to fake, but anybody who has a mind to make a phone call can see right through them.”

“I'm not worried about that,” I told him. “I'm planning to go back and get a G.E.D. in a couple months. Shouldn't be too hard, I got straight A's in high school. Once I have that I can apply to community college and from there I can transfer my credits to a four-year university. It might take a while, but I can get it done.”

He chuckled. “You already gave this a lot of thought,” he said fondly. “I like that.”

“It's my life, y'know? That bastard fucked it up enough to make me start over, so I'm not gonna mess it up a second time,” I told him. He had no idea that the 'he' I mentioned actually meant 'me,' in my iteration of Davey Hargrove, but the passion and vitriol in my voice convinced him.

“Okay, sweetheart, I'll take you on,” he said. “You got the cash?”

I reached into my purse and slid the envelope beneath the table, tapping it against his knee twice

to let him know where it was. He took it smoothly, transferring it deftly into the inner pocket of his jacket without opening or counting it. He pulled a business card from his breast pocket and slid it across the table to me.

“Wait a little bit after I leave,” he instructed softly. “Finish your coffee. It's on me. When you're done, go to this address. It's just a block away. I should be set up and ready to go by the time you get there.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Don't thank me yet,” he said, downing his espresso in a single gulp and leaving the miniature cup and saucer on the table. “I ain't done nothing.”

* * * * *

I took my time finishing my coffee and pastry before retiring to the cramped ladies' room to repair my makeup and run a brush through my sodden hair, restoring its customary luster with just a few strokes. I added a pink-ink note to add some travel bottles of mousse, gel or hairspray to my purse for touch-ups like this – a girl never knew when she might have to participate in a last-minute wet t-shirt contest for the money to generate a fake identity, after all. Once satisfied that I looked cute enough for what lay ahead, I slung my purse over one shoulder and walked the three-quarters of a block to the address on Izzy's business card, a small basement apartment under a used musical instruments store. I *click-clacked* my way down the concrete steps in my skyscraper heels and knocked softly on the door.

Izzy opened the door and admitted me to a large, clean room. Tall shelves and hooks in the ceiling suggested the place might have been used for cold storage in the past, but its modern incarnation showed only clean tile, sturdy tables and state-of-the-art computer equipment. A little photography area, complete with a blue background screen and high-end studio lights, lay tucked in one corner, and Izzy ushered me there gruffly.

“Okay, we're all set,” he said. “Gonna need the name you want, and your birthday. If you're trying to avoid this loser ex of yours, you probably want to make yourself older or younger than you actually are. It's real easy to track somebody using their date of birth.”

I nodded. “I've already started using a fake name,” I said. “So I'll stick with Amanda Quinn.”

“Middle name?”

“Use Amanda. First name Tiffany. I always thought that name was super cute,” I said happily. “I can use my favorite aunt's birthday, September 18th. Easy to remember, and I always thought I'd make a better Virgo than I would a Taurus. Make me twenty-two, okay? Born in 1992?”



“Sure, no problem. Step back against the screen and smile big,” he bade, snapping my picture with a little digital camera. The picture appeared on a computer screen to Izzy’s left, embedded in a program that looked identical to the one I’d seen in the actual DMV. If Izzy had the actual DMV software, his operation truly was as top-of-the-line as Big Mike claimed.

“Now, slip out of your shoes and step on that black pad,” he bade me, pointing to a rubberized mat off to one side of the photography drop. “Keep your feet about an inch apart.”

I did as he instructed and saw my footprints scan line-by-line into a program shown on another computer screen. A few clicks of the mouse and the footprints shrank down, from adult size to infant size, to be superimposed onto a digital birth certificate, marking the birth of one Tiffany Amanda Quinn, five pounds six ounces, born on September the eighteenth, 1992.

“That’s incredible,” I told him.

“The trick is to make it legit,” he told me. “Anybody can fake one of these up if they have the equipment and know-how. The difference between them and me, I know a guy at County General who can place this on file in the Department of Records. When I’m done, girl, you ain’t gonna have no fake birth certificate. This will be a real one.”

He clicked away on his mouse for a few moments longer, then showed me a digital mock-up of the drivers’ license I would have. He even managed a nice picture of me.

“I have a shipment coming in a week. State lamination, with the holograms. I can do you one now, but I suggest you wait until I get the overlays. You won’t be able to tell your license from a

real one. I even use a backdoor to get you a retired license number. You'll have a driving record and everything.”

“I gotta remember to thank Big Mike,” I told him.

“You sure you don't want a passport, too?” he asked.

* * * * *

I decided to make one last tour of the clubs before heading back to take the mannequin to my apartment and wash the car. I availed myself of Izzy's bathroom to slip into a white sequined tube dress and some white platform heels, gave the gruff bear a kiss on the cheek and headed out for one last try – the excitement of the wet t-shirt contest and the subsequent illicit activity revved my engine to high RPMs, making me hungry for the prospect of some quick-and-dirty sex in an alley or a back seat before calling it a night. In just a few short days I would have my new identity as Tiffany Quinn, and could start phasing out tired old ex-con Davey Hargrove. I might even stay true to my cover story and enroll in community college. I could see myself working on a fashion degree, possibly cosmetology or even dance, something suitably girly to go with the bubbly persona I planned to adopt. And the prospect of wild college parties carried no small amount of appeal, I admitted to myself.

A quick perusal of my phone offered up several more opportunities to make quick cash doing wet t-shirt contests, even an amateur baby-oil wrestling competition, easing my anxiety about coming up with the six hundred dollars it would take to pay off Izzy and get my I.D. I should be able to get the money together quickly, particularly when I no longer needed to go to work to change into my female body. I could conceivably call in sick to work and spend the whole day as Tiffany Amanda Quinn, flitting from club to club and event to event with no lingering worries about needing to be *back* someplace when the clock struck midnight like some bizarre, oversexed Cinderella. I could even spend the whole night with some lucky guy, if I decided to go that way. Or even some *girl*, if the night took me in that direction. With a body like mine, and a clean slate of an identity, the possibilities staggered me. I could be anyone or anything I wished.

Fond fantasies of a modeling career, maybe even appearing in *Playboy* or something similar filled my imaginings as I made a fruitless tour of the dwindling club scene. Most of the truly attractive people, the ones which interested me the most, already hooked up with one another and retired to more private accommodations to explore one another, leaving only the unconfident, the awkward, the unattractive and the trying-way-too-hard behind the darkened interiors of the pulsating clubs. The bars long since stopped serving, so a return to the bar scene would yield me nothing. Like it or not, I had to admit that my evening had officially ended.

Disappointed but not a bit surprised, I directed the misappropriated car back onto the freeway for the long, dull drive back out to the suburbs and the sprawling mall where everything centered. I looked at my watch – two more hours before I had to worry about the cleaning crew, plenty of time to give the mannequin a lift to its new home and the anonymous cover of darkness and the dead of night to escape the prying eyes of Mrs. Lin, who should be fast asleep in her room by now. Then a quick turn through an automated car wash, a top-off of gasoline and then back into my male body with no one the wiser.

I pulled into the huge parking lot about twenty minutes later, tossing the lipstick-ringed butt of my last cigarette out the window as I swung the nimble little car around to the north bay door. A slash of uncharacteristic light caught my attention and I proceeded past the bay door, around the back of the mall to the loading dock. The rollaway doors stood dark and solid in the ambient light from the parking lot, all except for the farthest one, which admitted a lurid stripe of light from inside through a bent, misshapen panel.



I exited the car and swayed up the little stairway to the loading dock, squatting down to see the damage. Up close, I could clearly make out the telltale stress indentations of a crowbar against the thin aluminum of the rollaway door, letting me see into the warehouse area. I pushed the door up one-handed, effortlessly, showing the interior lock to be completely sheared away.

Oh, holy shit, I thought in front of a rising tide of panic. *The thieves. We got hit, and I wasn't even here.* I pushed the rollaway door high and entered the warehouse. The security cameras hung by their wires down the walls where the thieves smashed them, and I could see large empty spaces in the rows of neatly stacked boxes where they carted away big-ticket electronics. The loss of a few plasma TVs and some laptop computers didn't bother me very much – the stores insured all this shit to the hilt and would scarcely feel the loss – but I chanted *please be shut, please be shut* to the doorway leading into the mall concourse like a mantra. Once through the interior door, the thieves would have come under the scrutiny of mall security, leaving it to me to explain the losses and why no footage existed on the disabled security cameras, instead of being able to claim ignorance of the warehouse robbery because the big chain stores provided their own independent surveillance.

Please be shut, please be shut, please be shut...

I stifled the urge to sob when I saw the steel-core door hanging lazily from one hinge, bent and distorted by the same crowbar marks on the rollaway, the mall concourse clearly visible beyond.



I pushed my way through the little landscaped atrium and sucked in my already tiny gut to squeeze through a large crack in the pane of safety glass into the mall proper. Everywhere I could see, I noticed the protective cages in front of the stores pried open or forced apart, smashed glass and litter everywhere. I sank to my haunches, balanced on my platform heels, and buried my face in my hands.

Everything had been going so fucking well.

I took one of the few mobility scooters not overturned and used it to cover the lower concourse, taking quick stock of the damage. A few stores remained undisturbed – the thieves seemed to concentrate on big ticket items, for the most part – and the security office had been utterly destroyed, the computers ripped from their places and smashed open, the hard drives torn out and every drawer and compartment rifled thoroughly. To my relief, the thieves even removed the wall safe from the office, hiding my “liberation” of the prize car keys for the moment. I had no idea how in the hell to get the purloined car back into the mall proper without leaving a telltale trail through the debris scattered across the floor. For every problem I seemed to get a grip upon, two more grew up in their place. I could not escape the feeling of my entire world crashing down around my ears.

Unbidden but not unexpected, I began to sob. The last tiny bastion of male pride inside me melted away as I willingly – almost gladly – gave in to that most girlish of impulses, to cry when one became overly emotional. Mascara streaked my porcelain-perfect cheeks as hot tears of frustration and helplessness cascaded down, my narrow shoulders heaving with ragged indrawn breaths.

I slumped against the wall, sliding down to the cold tile without even noticing the undeniably feminine feeling of my well-formed derrière spreading out beneath me. Numb, I fished in my purse for a cigarette and lit it with trembling fingers from a Hondo's Bar & Grill matchbook, gulping down the stale smoke without even tasting it, one hand clamped firmly over my eyes in an attempt to block out what I no longer wanted to see.

Okay, Tiffany Amanda, I scolded myself internally, automatically using my new name which fit me so perfectly. Enough self-pity. Get on your feet. Take a look around. Figure out what happened.

I slid my legs around and rose to my knees, gliding smoothly to a standing position in my platform heels as if I'd been born in them. I started the long and arduous process of getting my bearings and taking stock, the only nod to my stress and anxiety the constant chain-smoking of cigarettes as I walked and surveyed the damage. Thankfully, a cold and very analytical part of my mind – *a holdover from being male*, I realized dully – took over and I found a comfortable distance grow between myself and the numb shock of the robbery, giving me enough mental and emotional leeway to take stock of the situation and make an assessment about what to do next.

Most of the boutiques and clothing stores escaped unmolested, I noticed with relief. The thieves probably could have made a huge amount fencing designer shoes and purses at a tenth of the amount they needed to carry, but few people knew how much those kinds of items fetched on the black market. I could see that the thieves tried their best to bash their way into the few jewelry stores without success – those places could probably take hit from anti-tank shells and not give way.

It dawned on me slowly that my absence from the mall might have been a stroke of good fortune. Given the wanton destruction and violence of the break-in, the one lone security guard on duty would have taken a monumental beat-down even in the very best-case scenario, possibly lost his life at the worst. If that same security guard had inhabited the body of a luscious twenty-odd year old woman with huge bouncing breasts, then her murder might have been the optimal outcome instead of needing years to recover emotionally from a brutal gang rape.

The only thing running through my panicked mind at the time, however, was how to answer the inevitable question which would be asked of me when the theft became known: *where the hell were you when this happened?* I didn't know what to say. Bash my head against the wall a few times and claim they overpowered me? Disappear and let them assume I was in on it? Tell them I got tied up and threatened with death if I tried to escape or alert the cops?

None of those stories would last under the intense scrutiny the break-in would bring down on me. I couldn't manage any viable excuse which anyone would buy.

The loud staccato clicking of my heels on the tile floor, interspersed with the crunch of broken glass beneath my feet, echoed through the unnervingly silent building. I walked numbly up the deactivated escalator to the upper level to survey the damage up there. The stores of the upper concourse fared much better than those on the lower level, probably because the high-end stuff the thieves seemed to favor would take longer to cart downstairs to whatever U-Haul truck they used to cart it all away. They hit a few places – the T-Mobile and AT&T stores for quick, high-return mobile phone accessories, for instance – but left most of them alone, feeling that anything to be gained upstairs probably didn't merit the effort it would take to get in and get out.

The systematic destruction took on a pattern in front of my fevered eyes. For all the smash-and-grab, I noticed that no one ever gave in to petty vandalism or made one destructive move that didn't further the cause of robbery. No, this crew knew its business. They came in, struck fast, and knew exactly what they wanted and how to get it. With the huge volume of daily foot traffic the average suburban shopping mall entertained, it stood to reason that this crew cased the mall thoroughly for weeks prior to making their move.

So, wouldn't it stand to reason they would know to cut the wires that carried the silent alarm to the 911 dispatch center before they ever made entry? I didn't notice any overt damage in the parking lot, but then again I hadn't been paying very close attention as I drove back in from my night on the town. Even if they hadn't, I had plenty of time to do it myself before anyone showed up, which could explain why no alert reached local authorities about the robbery. But what bullshit story should I offer to those local authorities regarding my own whereabouts while the crew ransacked the stores? No one would believe I just stood idly by, not even attempting to call 911 on my personal phone when I discovered that the silent alarm no longer worked. Sure, I could try and convince everyone that I feared for my life and just hid, waiting for them to leave. I didn't mind being tagged as a coward, especially knowing that most of the people who worked in the mall would have done the same thing. But I couldn't just explain away doing *nothing*. That would raise too many eyebrows, cause too much suspicion that I was in on the heist and silently abetting the thieves, waiting for my own cut to arrive after the fact.

Still, the feeling that the robbery might be a good thing floated imperturbable in the back of my chaotic mind. Now might be my chance to advance my time-frame, take everything on my pink-ink list to set up a life as Ms. Quinn and have the robbery cover up my own theft in the process. I vowed to myself not to be greedy when I first took the job, to keep things under control so that I could do as I pleased. But an opportunity like this one, to just help myself to anything in the mall I might possibly want...

I walked along, still trying to concoct a believable cover story for letting this happen, just taking note of the stores that escaped destruction and those that got their gates broken.

Victoria's Secret, passed. Wet Seal, passed. Brookstone, got taken. Bath and Body Works, passed. Foot Locker, taken. Charlotte Russe, passed. The NFL Store, taken. Sanrio Outlet, passed. The Disney Store, passed. Sunglass Hut, taken. Frederick's of Hollywood, passed. GameStop, taken. The Apple Store, taken. The Limited, passed. Girlish Charm, taken. Radio Shack, taken. Abercrombie and F...

I stopped dead and backpedaled. My eyes had not been playing tricks. Girlish Charm. Taken.

The roll-cage had been pried up and the glass door smashed with something heavy, maybe one of the mall garbage cans or a sledgehammer. But it made no sense. What could possibly be in there that these thieves could have wanted?

My heart firmly in my throat, I stepped across the fan of broken glass carpeting the floor and inside, terrified of what I might find.

PLATFORM HEELS CRUNCHED ON SHARDS and pebbles of broken glass as I picked my way through the shattered glass doors of the Girlish Charm boutique into the darkened interior. I light another match from my Hondo's Bar matchbook to provide enough light to find the switch for the overheads, so I could see what damage might have happened here.

Why here? I wondered feverishly. What possessed them to break into this place? There's nothing of value here. Nothing they could fence.

I scrubbed slender fingers through my long, soft blonde tresses. The residual stiffness imparted by the mousse and hairspray applied earlier that night tugged at the motion, putting up strange and still-unfamiliar resistance. I tried to force my way past the all-too-girlish emotional upheaval at the forefront of my brain and make myself think like a criminal, all the while groping along the store's near wall for the light switches with a flopping palm.

Thieves looking for high-end, easy-to-dump prizes tended towards things like high-end electronics and jewelry. Something must have attracted the attention of these criminals, something easily visible from the outside, to make it worth the extra time and effort. But I remembered the store display – only a few pairs of cheap shoes, some rhinestone belts and jewelry, and a mannequin...

...a mannequin dressed like a mall security guard...

I sighed heavily just as my outstretched hand met the light switch. So it *wasn't* robbery. Girlish Charm fell to an act of vandalism. I clicked the switches on, three at once, and the modern track-lighting spaced around the store flickered to fitful life.



The mannequin – *my body*, I thought in a panic – lay shattered and ripped in a heap at my feet. The arms separated and bent at crazy, unnatural angles and the hard plastic shell, visible through torn clothing, showed deep cracks and fissures. I sobbed loudly. Even with the recent past and my fond dreams of changing bodies forever, the sight of my old body, the body of my birth, laying shattered and destroyed on the floor like that, so unceremoniously, brought a poignant pang of sadness to my chest.

I brushed glass away and knelt on very shapely knees, scooping the disparate pieces of the mannequin together and attempting to fit them together once more. The legs and torso no longer mated – having been stomped vigorously by the unseen vandal enough to bend and shear the armature inside it beyond repair. The left arm would not fit back into the shoulder socket no matter how hard I tried to maneuver it, and the hair ripped away from the plastic scalp to flop gracelessly against the forehead with any movement.

Desperate, I pressed my lips into the lifeless face. No shift occurred, no sense of flowing from one body into another while the one behind me stiffened and solidified into motionlessness. I felt the distinct impression of a door closing behind me, irrevocably and forever. I wiped my eyes – ruining my mascara, I knew, resigned to the knowledge that details like that would forever dominate my life from this moment on – and bid my old self and my old life a farewell.

* * * * *

With a sharp stab of regret, I twisted the accelerator on the little mobility scooter and bumped dully into the back of the little Mini Cooper I'd grown to adore so quickly. The scooter's tires chirped on the tile before pushing the little car forward, slowly at first but gaining more and

more speed. By the time I stopped myself, the car rolled forward on its own momentum, beelining across the debris-strewn tiles of the concourse to smash through a railing and go nose-down into the indoor fountain with a monstrous splash and a shriek of crumpling metal.

I'd wiped down the interior and left the key in the ignition, knowing I could never keep a car so identifiable and not be somehow tied to this crime. People would be looking for the culprits. With the complete and utter disappearance of one David Hargrove, no doubt remained that I would be one of those suspected culprits; I could leave no connection between Tiffany Quinn and Davey Hargrove. The only one who could even put the two names together in one sentence could be Big Mike, and I trusted the ex-con more than enough to believe the man would never say a word to the police.

The matter of transportation weighed heavily on my mind as I used my master key to open the cage in front of the luggage store. My original, long-term plan provided for me to have a car of my own along with a place of my own and a viable identity. Recent events compressed the timeframe considerably. I formulated my best stab at a contingency plan while I changed my clothes, wearing a loose blouse with a flowery print and my cut-off Daisy Duke shorts from the sojourn at the wet t-shirt contest. I tried to hide my shape and body as best I could, since once I left the confines of the shopping mall proper, there would be people who witnessed me, and with a body like mine in a white sequined club dress would be both noticeable and memorable.

Renting a car without an identity outstripped my abilities and stealing a car that I intended to keep would be a quick way to land myself back in jail. Tiffany Amanda Quinn didn't have any friends from whom she could borrow wheels, and a cab would ask questions about why a young buxom blonde loaded bag after bag of stuff from a closed shopping mall that would be in the papers tomorrow as having been robbed.

I reverted completely to my pink-ink list, which I laboriously divided into three categories – absolute necessities, relative necessities and luxuries. I began my night's work by crossing off the most extravagant of the luxuries, things that I wrote down more than half in jest, like diamonds – if the thieves even left me one to steal – and the 52" plasma television and PlayStation 4. I packed the relative necessities – hair dryers, curling irons, club clothes and jewelry – swiped from several stores into cardboard boxes. These boxes I loaded into the baskets on the mobility scooter and ferried two and three at a time to the FedEx store, where I used their computer system to ship them to Tiffany Quinn at my old apartment. I thanked the placement of the store's security camera – which looked over the shoulder of any employee at the register, allowing me to see their hands clearly typing in passwords. I used the master key to store the packages safely in the back of the store to await pickup and lock the cages securely, making it look as if the store got passed over by the thieves.

I scratched items off my pink-ink list one by one, leaving my only the absolute necessities to be gathered and packed. I used actual luggage for this haul, since I would most likely be carrying it away with me and headed to a motel for the evening to regroup and think about my next move. I used the master key to go through and stock myself with a good selection of clothes, shoes, purses, some inexpensive jewelry – most of which I had already culled and stashed in the belowground storage rooms long before this night – and then things like tampons and cigarettes, a mobile phone charger, hair accessories, a few cheap watches, and finally filling a

large overnight bag with high-end MAC cosmetics and designer fragrances that I scooped from the shelves of an upscale makeup store.



Once satisfied with my evening's haul, I slung the bags over my shoulders and locked the cage, breaking off the master key in the lock, wiping my prints – had they changed? – from the stub of the key with the tail of my shirt before dropping it on the other side of the cage.

Bags and cases bumped against my back and thighs as I lit a nervous cigarette and looked around the carnage for one last time. I hoped this wouldn't go too hard on Lou, when the smoke cleared sometime tomorrow. I would be blamed for this – robberies would be reported by stores with no sign of forced entry, and that would lead to questions about who had keys. Or else, they would declare me a victim, and ramp up the search for the thieves. When they were eventually caught, there would be questions. I hoped to be well established as Tiffany Quinn by that time, far away and with no connection to this mall or this event at all.

Such a strange circumstance, the series of events which led me to this destroyed place. Half-wrecking myself with drugs and alcohol after my heartbreaking split with Leslie. Which led to selling drugs to make ends meet, which led to my arrest, which led to prison, which led to parole, which led to this job and then to my chance sight of a mannequin in a store window which opened a door to a new, exciting and glamorous life I never before dreamed possible. A place where this all began. The place where Tiffany Amanda Quinn was born.

Such a strange, superficial place to hold such powerful memories, such a profound sense of attachment. I felt strange, hot tears gathering at the corners of my eyes as I surveyed the senseless destruction of my birthplace, the torn banners and broken glass, the overturned cases

and scattered merchandise which marred the gleaming perfection designed to lure the shoppers, that polished mercantile flawlessness which permeated everything inside the building.

I decided to walk about ten blocks, lugging all the bags I carried, before I ever called myself a cab, since I didn't want any record of my being close to the mall around the time of the crime.



With only one worried look over my shoulder at the ruined place, I pushed towards an emergency exit and made my way hurriedly into the chilly night.

* * * * *

Night only just began giving way to a rosy pink dawn in the east by the time I climbed out of the cab several blocks away from the motel I intended to occupy. The deepest chill of the night pebbled my soft flesh as I dug money from my purse – the thieves overlooked a stash of bills in the little check-cashing store tucked in a corner of the mall, enabling me to use their theft to cover a smaller theft of my own and generate some reserve cash for the next few days, possibly a week or two if I played it smart. I paid the cab driver and walked through the relatively tame residential neighborhood, hugging my own arms in a vain attempt to keep warm.

I gambled that the hour wouldn't prove too early and pressed my phone against my ear, pressing my cold earring flat against the side of my neck, and waited as the phone rang several times as my heels clicked dully on the pavement. A few early-morning hardcore joggers gave me curious looks as I passed but I paid them little mind.

After a long series of rings, an irritated voice finally answered the line. "H'lo?"

"Izzy? It's Amanda. Amanda Quinn."

"Oh," he said, brightening a little. "Hey, girl!"

"Hi," I replied. "Is my stuff ready, yet?"

He paused for a moment. "Yeah, it's ready."

"I need it. As soon as I can. I have the rest of the money, I can get it to you."

He coughed lightly and went on in an amused tone. "That's good. You want it today?"

"Yeah."

I could hear rasping, probably fingernails scratching beard stubble near the receiver. "Well, I guess you won't mind paying for same-day shipping, then."

I stopped suddenly. "What does that mean?"

He chuckled. "You never told me this would be a rush job," he said. "You want it today, then you better pay the higher rate."

"What higher rate?"

"For you, sweetheart? Just give me the rest of the cash you owe me and throw in a nice, wet blow-job and we can call it square. Otherwise, I can just keep the I.D. and you can make other arrangements."

"You're holding my stuff hostage unless I blow you? We had a *deal*, Izzy..."

"It's cute how you think I give a shit about that," he laughed. "Friend of Big Mike's or not, I don't give a shit. He ain't gonna do shit to me, he needs my product too bad. So either you wrap those soft lips around my cock or I introduce your new driver's license into the shredder."

I fought back tears once more. I knew my new body would work as currency – I banked on it, when out at the clubs – but I overlooked a scenario where such currency might be extorted.

"This isn't fair, Izzy," I complained weakly.

"World's a rough place," he commented. "Be glad I don't make you let me fuck you in the ass for calling me this fucking early. So, what's it gonna be?"

I sighed. "You already know the answer, dammit."

"I still want to hear you say it."

No recourse to Izzy's power trip presented itself to me. "Fine," I snapped. "Tell me when to meet you so I can suck your nasty cock."

He paused a moment. "I think you can say it sweeter than that, baby."

I barely suppressed an urge to throw my phone into a drainage culvert in pure frustration. "Let me know where you want me, baby," I purred around the rising growl in my throat. "I can't wait to suck that big, thick dick of yours."

"Much better," he said. "I'm gonna get some fucking sleep, first. Then meet me back at Michelangelo's, where we met before. Noon oughta do it. I'll have what you want."

* * * * *

Without intention, I found myself sitting on a bench near a bus stop only a few blocks from my goal and huddling in the nest of overnight bags and totes hung from my shoulders and succumbed to my need for a good cry. The frustration did melt out of me, the utter *unfairness* of it all, as I heaved sobs into the unfeeling night air.

Over my shoulder, I heard sirens and saw red-and-blue strobes clustering in the mall parking lot, just visible through the trees and power lines over my shoulder. No way to go back, only forward remained. I took a moment to wipe my eyes and nose and repair my ruined makeup in a compact from my purse before standing, squaring my shoulders and resuming my walk.

Dawn faded from rosy pink into a grey, overcast sky which threatened rain as I re-established my previous pace. Now that the numbing fog of frustration and victimization passed from me, melted in hot tears to escape my body, a cold and analytical anger remained, quickening my strutting pace and steeling my soul. Izzy thought to take advantage of a helpless, naïve, desperate girl and prey on her vulnerability. But never having felt such helplessness before, and with no social pressure to submit the way that *natural* girls felt, I resolved instead to fight back.

I couldn't just overpower Izzy and take my documents from him, as much as I wanted to crack the man over his head with a fire extinguisher and be done with it. Nor did I relish my chances to obtain a gun in the short amount of time left to me, either – and I doubted I could force him even if I had a gun. A successful forger like himself probably possessed failsafes, ways to nullify his fake documents and render them useless if his clients tried to double-cross him.

But Izzy's business began and ended in a computer, regardless of the quality of the physical documents. He managed to be the best because of *access*, ways into databases and websites and registries where he could insert the concocted identities and pass the online scrutiny of the powers-that-be. No matter how well he produced the driver's license, no matter how perfectly detailed a reproduction he handed over, it mattered no more than a teenager passing a fake I.D. to get into a bar if the driver's license *number* he generated didn't turn *something* up when run by a police officer. The numbers, the documents all needed to *connect* to something in order to be valid, and that connection could only be forged on a computer.

And I knew computers. Even though the piece of paper granting an associate's degree in Computer Science listed the name Davey Hargrove, the knowledge resided in the feminine brain of Tiffany Quinn. If I could only get access to Izzy's computer, I could get what I needed with the forger none the wiser. Free of what I needed from him, I could keep his dick out of my mouth and possibly even threaten him with the cops. I just needed a few hours – and some sleep, perhaps, and a meal and hot shower – to organize myself and come up with a viable plan.

The last few blocks passed while I lost myself in thought, and I finally ducked into the front door of a small but well-maintained little no-tell motel near the freeway. The place maintained a reputation for being clean and keeping its nose out of resident business, and also for not asking too many questions regarding the identities of people who stayed in their rooms. Not precisely the place I *wanted* to sleep, but it would do until I could arrange something better and more permanent. I dropped my bags at the door, enjoying the central heating for a moment, then stepped up to the front desk. A bored-looking clear lolled in a swivel chair behind a partition of bulletproof glass.



“Help you?” he asked, smacking his gum.

“Yeah, I need a room,” I told him.

“How long?”

“Hm. Today and tomorrow, I guess.”

“Single or double?” he asked, clicking the mouse next to his computer.

I tried to blush and look sheepish. “Double,” I told him.

He gave me a knowing smile, obviously seeing situations like this before. “Name?”

I brushed hair behind one ear. “Um... Jane.”

“Last name Doe?” he chuckled.

“Sounds good,” I told him.

“Right,” he said. “Don't suppose you have any I.D., do you, Ms. Doe?”

I patted myself down dramatically. “I, uh...”

He nodded. “Left it in the cab,” he supplied, clicking his mouse. “I get that a *lot*.”

“This is really cool of you,” I told him.

He blew a dismissive raspberry. “Nah, I'm actually a real asshole,” he said. “You should hear the stuff I say about folks like you when I get off work. It's terrible.”

“Yeah, well, I guess I can take it.”

He named a figure and I slid cash through the little slot beneath the partition – money for the room and then some, to thank the clerk for making the process so painless. He counted it quickly and gave me a small but genuine smile in gratitude, then passed me an electronic key card in return. “Room two-twelve,” he said, pointing. “Down the hall, make a right as you come out of the elevator. Next to the ice machine. Check-out time is noon.”

“Thanks,” I said, gathering my bags. I bent at the knees and waist, allowing the young man a long and informative view of my posterior as I did so, and noticed the desirous leer on his face as I straightened. Gratuities came in cash, but in other ways as well.

The room overflowed with a king-size bed, but contained the requisite small box television and an armchair and table. I flopped onto the bed listlessly, luggage in a heap next to the door, and lay for the better part of an hour and a half just floating in the nameless fog-bank between sleep and wakefulness. Finally, I stood and crawled into a scalding-hot shower, using up another hour, then wrapped myself in towels and watched inane morning television while I sipped truly awful coffee from the little two-cup coffeemaker in the bathroom and smoked a couple cigarettes.

I set up my makeup mirror on the little table, to catch the daylight, and started sponging foundation across my nose and forehead while I flipped channels idly, looking for something to catch my attention. Luckily, my new femininity did not extend to fond love for shows like *Wendy Williams* or *The View* and still allowed me to find enjoyment in *SportsCenter*.

I didn't bother doing my hair other than to blow it dry and brush it straight, then skin it back

against my skull into a tight horsetail gathered high on the back of my head. I threaded the horsetail through the gap on the back of a pink trucker's cap adorned with "High Maintenance Bitch" in rhinestones on the front and added the only real hair accessory that would matter to me – two bobby pins, tucked against my scalp beneath the brim of the cap.

Amazing what someone determined could manage with bobby pins and a nail file, I chuckled richly as I continued dressing, remembering the lessons I learned in prison. Strange that other than the crime that left me incarcerated, nothing more serious than a speeding ticket so much as marred my record. I'd been a clean-cut suburban kid up to that point – I needed prison to teach me how to be a real criminal. But still, everybody knew that several of the guards stashed their weed in a tool-shed just off the exercise yard, and with practice and patience and a little expert tutelage, even the high-dollar deadbolt and padlock securing that shed could be defeated with only a few bobby pins and a straight strip of aluminum scavenged from the floor of the metal-shop, about the same size and shape as a nail file.

I shrugged myself into a pink hoodie sweatshirt over a pink tank-top and skin-tight black stretch skirt, scrunched-down socks and pink-and-white tennis shoes. I pushed a pair of huge, bug-eye sunglasses up my nose and stuffed a few essentials into a cavernous purse over my shoulder, looking like any one of a million beleaguered-looking suburban gym-rat moms thronging the coffee shops and stores of the city at this hour.

I took the bus into the city, about a twenty-minute ride, ear-buds dangling down the sides of my face but connected to an empty and uncharged iPod, only in place to dissuade conversation. I made a feeble stab at the crossword puzzle on the back of the McPaper I found outside my motel door, not really committing to its successful completion but giving me something productive to do with my hands instead of fidget.

I made a huge pretense of surfing the internet on my phone from a seat in the little diner overlooking both Michelangelo's coffee house and the converted warehouse I knew contained Izzy's I.D. mill, using the zoom lens on my camera phone to watch for an hour or so. After my third cup of coffee gone cold and over an untouched plate of eggs, I finally saw the aging forger emerge from the warehouse and close the door behind him.

I clicked the icon on my phone's touch-screen and began capturing video immediately as I peered at him on the screen, then through the greasy window, then back again. I giggled girlishly as I saw him stash a key behind a loose brick near the doorway – *fuck the bobby pins and nail file* – and got a clear view of his finger pressing in the five-digit code on the keypad next to the door. He disappeared around the corner, allowing me to rerun the video and commit the code to memory, then appeared once more, driving out of a lot behind the building in a blue Mercedes E-class and headed towards the freeway.

Overjoyed at an unexpected run of good luck, I tossed some cash on the tabletop next to my untouched breakfast, ducked into the bathroom to rid myself of the morning's coffee – coffee always went right through me, even as a male, but decreased bladder capacity in my feminine form made for frequent trips – and hurried across the street, boobs jiggling deliciously even in the tight confines of the sports tank, to the little alleyway giving access to Izzy's warehouse.

I stayed concealed behind a dumpster, smoking a quick cigarette, while I waited to see if Izzy would drive around the block a couple times to check on his enterprise the way I knew other criminals frequently did. So many of the thieves I knew in prison counseled the same thing – *get the fuck in, get the fuck out* – that I assumed their logic must be flawed. I only spoke to thieves in *prison*, after all, thieves who got caught. That suggested to me that the key to *successful* breaking-and-entering burglary must be patience.

I walked around the building twice, still idly dragging on my long, slender cigarette, and spotted no security cameras or other surveillance, before making my approach to the door. I didn't see any giveaways on the loose brick, like a strand of hair spit-glued in place or a gum wrapper wedged in place to drop if someone tampered. Izzy just pretty much jammed it the hell in there, and it came away easily with grating sound to reveal a single silver key in a small hollow chipped out of the mortar.

I watched up and down the street, seeing no one paying attention to me, and no sign of a blue Mercedes on any of the roads before I leaned against the door, using the key to unfasten the double deadbolts and typing in the five-digit code into the keypad beneath a little plastic rain-hood. The door clicked open with a soft buzz and I ducked inside, turning on a little flashlight from my pocket and making my way into the somewhat familiar interior.



I unzipped the hoodie and pulled off the hat, freeing my long hair and running fingers through its luxury as I leaned over the first of Izzy's computers. Navigating around the truly staggering amount of internet porn the man possessed, I grabbed as many files as I could on a little pink 'Hello Kitty' thumb drive. Looking around the tables, I also grabbed three boxes of the blank licenses with holograms and watermarks, knowing how much those could be worth, and

whatever else I could see that looked even remotely important.

I moved from one computer to the next, doing the same things, filling the little thumb drive quickly with data to be sorted through at my convenience, casting glances out the window overlooking the parking lot outside and checking my watch frequently. Only ten a.m., still plenty of time before the scheduled meet. I hoped the grizzled fucker slept peacefully somewhere, dreaming of the extorted sex he hoped to have, while I helped myself to his entire illicit enterprise and quietly disappeared.

I only just came to the last computer when I found the 'mother lode' – a locked drawer easily jimmied open with my trusty nail file, which found use after all – containing a shoebox full of CD-ROMs, all installation disks for the precious software that allowed Izzy to run his operation, a sizeable envelope full of a large quantity of cash and travelers' checks, and a smaller envelope containing a driver's license, Social Security card, birth certificate and passport for one Tiffany Amanda Quinn. Stuffing the entire contents of the drawer – except for the .40-caliber Sig Sauer pistol holstered at the bottom – into my enormous purse, which I slung over one shoulder as I replaced the cap and hood.

I returned to the one computer I noticed, off to one side and away from the others, which recorded the digital video from the four security cameras around the interior. The cameras were well-concealed – I never would have spotted them – but Izzy went cheap and didn't hide the wires or the power supply, giving away the computer's location to anyone who took the time to look around. I wiped the video which clearly showed me breaking in and shut down the cameras, then opened all the DVD-ROM drawers on every computer in the place and dropped several powerful rare-earth magnets inside each one, closing them and hoping they brought Izzy to financial ruin in the process. I hustled out the door, patiently locking each deadbolt and re-arming the security system and replacing the key behind the loose brick. It would take Izzy a while to figure out what happened.

No one even cast me a second look beyond admiring my figure as I boarded a crosstown bus and made my unobtrusive way back to the motel. I dropped my 'loot' from Izzy's warehouse in the room and slipped into a pair of jeans and a nicer top, ran a brush through my silken hair to restore its shape and shine, then slung my now-empty purse back over my shoulder for a foray back into the city.

* * * * *

“Did you hear about the robbery at the mall?” I overheard a round Latina woman at the bus stop saying to one of her friends. “I heard that this time, they killed a security guard.”

“Really? Shit, that's terrible,” the friend replied.

I smiled as I boarded the bus. Being murdered during a robbery suited my purposes quite well. I found a seat near the front and popped a piece of gum into my mouth as I watched the city flow past the windows.

I disembarked outside a nearby shopping center and ducked into a big-box consumer electronics

store to buy a laptop with some of the funds from Izzy's warehouse – in a girlish pink case with darker pink splatter-paint designs – and a couple of pre-paid Visa cards. I ducked into a nearby Starbucks Coffee – using the free wi-fi with my new pink laptop while I sipped a pumpkin spice latte. I estimated that relocation would be in my best interests – not that I ever really loved the city where I lived in the first place – but a clean break with my old life and past would probably serve me in good stead.

I picked the capitol – someplace nearby, with a major airport in case I needed a quick escape from town, should Izzy prove more resourceful than I originally imagined. An hour and a half on the internet found me an apartment – just a cookie-cutter, but at least I managed something on the ground floor – and reserved myself a U-Haul truck at a local outlet, groaning as I ponied up the increased one-way rate but determined to never again return to this city once I left. I transferred my new license into a cute little Prada wallet and dumped it into my purse, jotted down the confirmation number for my U-Haul truck, and sashayed sexily out into the day.

I picked up the truck an hour later, and the man behind the counter managed to tear his eyes away from my luscious tits long enough to never give my new license a second glance once he requested it. The traffic faded after the lunch rush – I smiled at the thought of Izzy, sitting alone in the coffee shop waiting for me to show – and I made good time, dropping by my old apartment for a few moments to pick up the boxes overnighted to me from the mall, plus a few things from my male days such as my dusty PlayStation and the handful of games, a little stash of cash and pot, my old desktop computer and a few mementos of my mother, photos and letters and such. I tucked it all away in a single box, which I dropped in the cargo compartment of the twelve-foot truck waiting on the curb with my deliveries and the rest of my stuff.

I managed to return to the suburbs before the soccer moms headed for the schools to pick up kids and the traffic became problematic, long enough to buy a cheap sleeper sofa and a couple lamps at Ikea, using up the last of Izzy's cash. The day warmed up enough that I could ditch the hoodie and crank down the window, lighting a cigarette as I pulled the rental onto the freeway and headed out of town, on to a new life and a new beginning.

* * * * *

I stopped for gas about three hours later, long enough to grab a PowerBar and some bottled water, finding nothing more substantial to suit my new, healthy tastes. I resolved to pick up a salad or something later, once I reached my destination and got everything unloaded.

The freedom of the open road, even for the brief drive, afforded me ample opportunity to clear my head and set my worries behind me for a moment, letting me relish the simple joy of being young, hot and unattached, with my entire life ahead of me. A spotless new identity free from any debt or mistake awaited me, a chance to start over and do things *right* for a change, armed with knowledge I never had before.

I arrived at the apartment just before the leasing office closed, to sign my lease, get my keys and perform a quick walkthrough of Apartment 145, a ground-floor one-bedroom near the mailboxes. I carried the boxes from the truck inside easily enough and found a reasonable desk and chair in the “move in, move out” pile near the dumpsters.

A few batted eyelashes and deep breaths managed to get me some strong backs to move in the sleeper sofa and the small bookshelf I bought from Ikea before leaving my old life, and I only had to swap the number from my phone – which would be defunct in the bottom of a trash-can before close of business tomorrow – to the two awkward college guys in exchange for the free labor. They tried to hang out and ingratiate themselves to me for a while, but I managed to demur their repeated offers to go back to their apartment and drink beer, like *any* young woman like me would volunteer to go back to an apartment with two total strangers. At least they seemed to respect my natural caution, and backed off when I finally announced that I needed some privacy to unpack and settle in.

The sun set behind the trees by the time I sorted out my packed boxes and assembled the two pieces of furniture I brought. I finally found my elusive salad at a Chili's nearby, digging in with a will and ferocity normally reserved for my male days. I used the U-Haul once more, to buy a few groceries, and then gassed it up and returned it to an outlet within walking distance of the apartment complex. With the need to go tomorrow and purchase a phone plan and a used car, my reserve of cash would dwindle to the bare minimum in a short amount of time. Plus, I'd decided that I *did* want to enroll in school, which would mean an outlay for a G.E.D. class so that I could establish a high-school transcript and then faking some immunization records – easily done with some of the blank copy forms I lifted from Izzy's – and the like for the local community college, then on to a four-year school to finish out a Bachelor's Degree. Once I got myself a sheepskin, the sky could easily become the limit. I just needed to stick to my plan and carry it out one step at the time.

But it did leave a big question of money. I would need to find something to do in the meantime for money, since the amount I stole from the shopping mall and Izzy's warehouse would only keep me going for a few more days. Perhaps I did underestimate the cash outlay for moving to a new city – the security deposit on the cheap apartment alone nearly broke me, much less the first month's rent and the deposits on my utilities. My dreams of purchasing a washer and dryer, maybe a big-screen television, vanished quickly in favor of getting things like electricity and hot water. As much as I needed a run to Target or something of its ilk for things like toilet plungers and shower caddies and cutting boards, I restrained myself. I would do a budget in the morning, figure out where I stood, and open a bank account to make managing my money easier. In the meantime, I just wanted to spread some clean sheets purloined from the shopping mall onto my fold-out couch, crawl under a hot shower and wash my face and hair, then collapse into bed.

I wrapped my body and hair in towels and stepped outside onto my balcony for a cigarette, my skin soft and glowing from the painstaking exfoliation and deep moisturization performed after my shower. Glad that my balcony faced away from the parking lot and towards a copse of pine trees, I didn't mind coming out half-naked where the chilling wind could blow my towel up and not feel too self-conscious.

A cute little brunette walking a Pomeranian crunched through the dry grass around the corner, and I tugged down the corners of my towel as she came into view. I offered her a shy wave which she returned brightly.

“Jesus, girl, aren't you *cold* out here?” she asked.

"It's not too bad out of the wind," I replied.

"You're the girl who just moved in, right?" she asked me. "On the first floor?"

I tapped ashed from my cigarette and took the hand she offered me. "I'm Tiffany," I told her.

"Cool to meet you," she replied. "I'm Katie, and this is Jingles." The little dog *yipped* happily in response to its name.

"You guys live here, too?" I asked, a bit lamely.

"Third floor," she told me, pointing upwards to the same building I inhabited. "This is a pretty cool place to live, actually. Lotsa happening parties, cute guys. You're gonna like it here."

"Right now, I just need to get my shit together," I told her. "Find a job, that kind of stuff."

"Hey, I could help you out with that," she told me. "Any idea what you want to do?"

"Still thinking about it," I said.

"Well, hey – gimme a shout if you come up with anything," she said. "I know a lot of people. I can make some introductions, y'know, if you can figure out what you're after."

"That's really sweet of you," I said. "I'm good for coffee, or beer, or whatever to say thanks if something pans out."

"Right on," she said. "Well, hey – I'll see you around, I'm sure."

"Bye," I told her, watching her go appreciatively as I finished my cigarette. I ducked inside, out of the wind, already happy that I had the potential of a friend or at least a drinking buddy – the one thing sorely lacking from my life as Tiffany, lived over evenings spent at clubs, was friends. As much as I found I loved being popular from my night at the wet t-shirt contest, the idea of myself with a lot of friends, loved and admired by other beautiful girls, appealed to me on a nearly visceral level. The thought of Katie's 'happening parties' and 'cute guys' became more and more of a draw. I *wanted* to meet new people. I *wanted* to go out. Things I had never before desired, but I felt a deep-seated need in my soul itself to know everybody and have everybody *love* me. But that, much like my college degree, would take time and patience, built a step at a time.

Tomorrow would be soon enough for first steps. For tonight, I only wanted sleep.

THE END

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THE **SORORITY
PLEDGE**



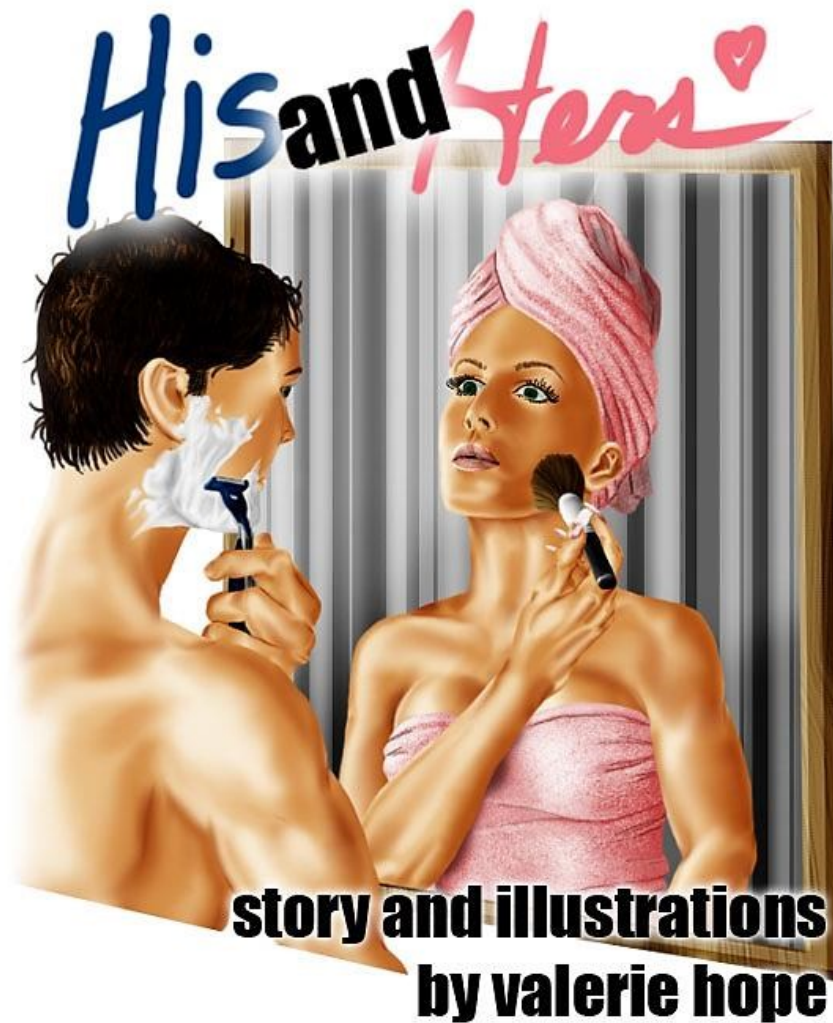
ALL YOU
HAVE TO DO
IS TO SNEAK IN,
TAKE HER
PANTIES...

AND YOU ARE
INTO THE
FRATERNITY!

WHAT
COULD GO
WRONG?

Sneaking into the Sorority is not a good idea. Our Hero...um...I mean...Heroine learns that the hard way when he tries to sneak into the Sorority as part of a Fraternity prank. Oh...but it goes all soooo wrong once the girls get their hands on him...I mean her... If he wants to see what it's like to be in a Sorority, well then he is going to become part of the Sorority. In fact he is going to be transformed into another very pretty, very sexy, Sorority Pledge! Sigh...might as well give in and enjoy the new life...! 18 GLORIOUSLY RICH PAGES! FULL SPECTRUM COLOR!

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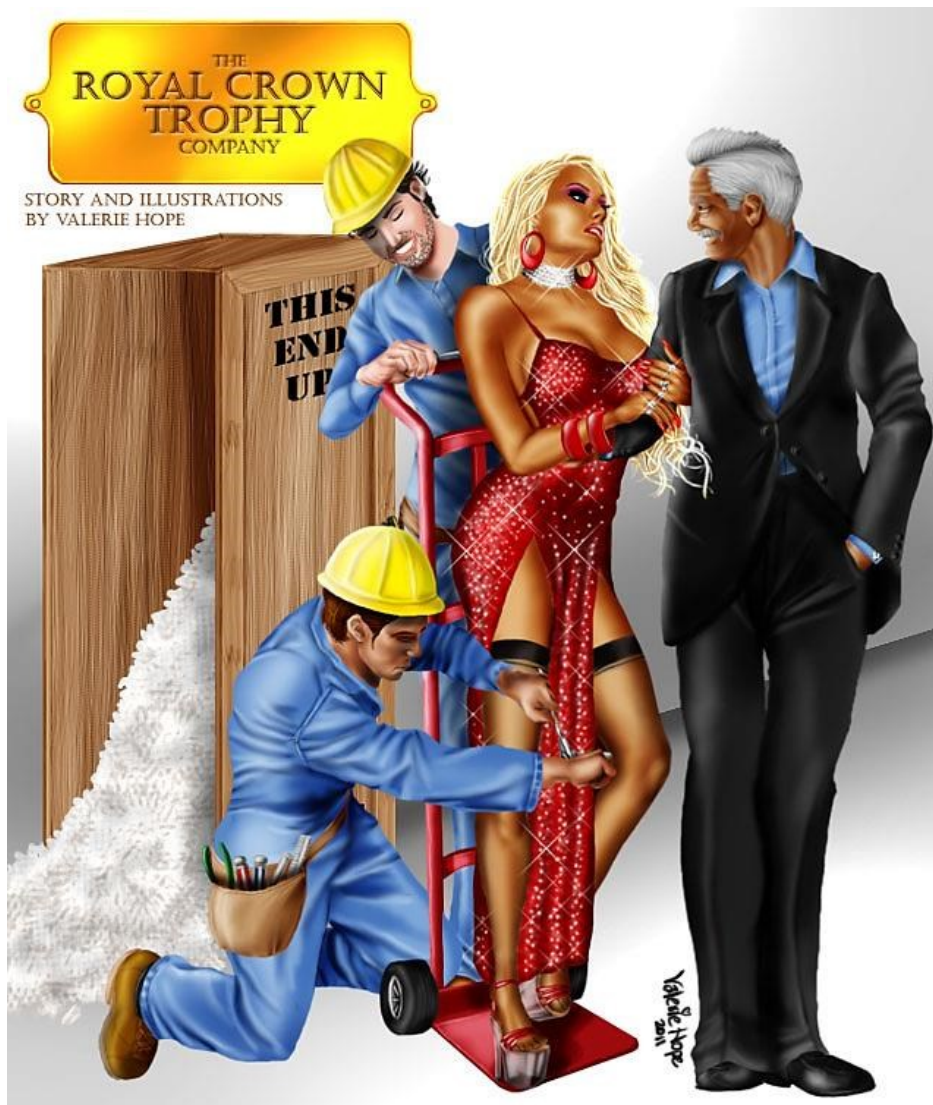
When Steven's frat brother told him that he needed someone to watch the old house for six months, he thought he had found the deal of a lifetime. Settling in, he has the strange sense that he is not alone. Then he finds the diary: "Dear Diary, I asked if I could entertain clients. Oh, Diary, my shame! My face burned with redness as I made the request, but I swear by Holy God my motives were pure. Perhaps only this once. Just so that I might be able to show my affection to my friends." When Steven reads more, he slowly becomes Stephanie, the spirit of the girl from long ago. But the past quickly gives way to the present, and the new girl quickly learns the art of 21st century seduction. New sexy clothes and shoes complete the transformation. Now with stunning good looks, and an appetite for excitement, she is soon playing the field. Will lust lead to marriage? Find out in HIS & HERS! Full length story...! OVER 80 PAGES!!! OVER 25 ILLUSTRATIONS!!!

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Jeff has BIG plans to propose to his girlfriend Maddie! But instead she dumps him...! Throwing the engagement ring into the fountain, Jeff curses her unwillingness to be more girlish for him while wishing that HE had been the one doing the dumping! Waking up, the next morning Jeff is now Jessica. Jessica is a sexy flirt who likes to shop. Quickly bedding the first guys she finds, Jessica starts off on her new life of fun...fun...fun... With a new boyfriend and a line of admirers, what will happen to our new girl? Find out as our sex kitten chases hard bodies and tries to stay faithful...! SONG FOR THE DUMPED WITH OVER 80 PAGES!! 20 IMAGES!!

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When Hayden gets a job working, in the shop of the Royal Crown Trophy Company, he feels right at home with the rest of the guys. But when his macho co-workers start disappearing, he starts to get an inkling that all is not as it seems... Little does he know that he is about to be programmed and transformed into the perfect wife. Drugged, and finding himself unable to escape, Hayden is molded into Heidi, the blonde cheerleader and sex kitten. She is reconditioned with all the memories of the perfect wife! With her new husband waiting, Heidi is conditioned to embrace her new femininity, and desires to please!!! Full length story...! OVER 165 PAGES!!! OVER 45 ILLUSTRATIONS!!!

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Ray reluctantly agrees to go with this girlfriend Heather to the nail salon. Not realizing that Heather and a few other gals have reached their breaking point and want some changes to the guys. Ray and the other guys meet Amanda who takes them down the path of transformation. Through her use of magic the guys find themselves to transformed...! A sexy model, a provocative business woman, and a horny cheerleader, take the place of the former men. Amanda drastically alters the relationship the new girls have with their former mates. What will happen to the freshly created women as they explore their new memories and bodies!? They went into the salon as tough guys, but they came out as sexy girls---THEY HAVE BEEN NAILED!

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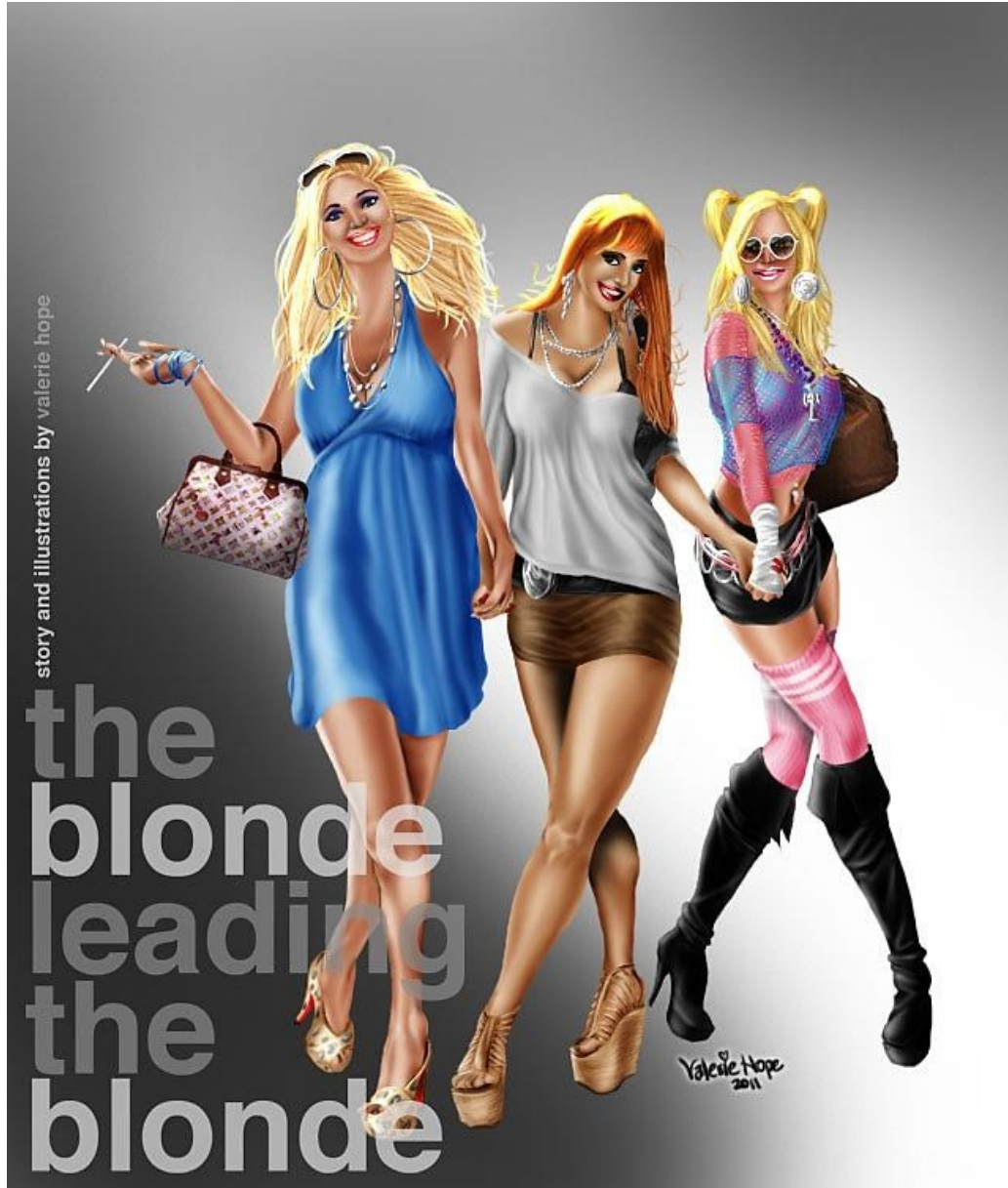
the *Clothes* make the *Man*

story and illustrations
by *Valerie Hope*



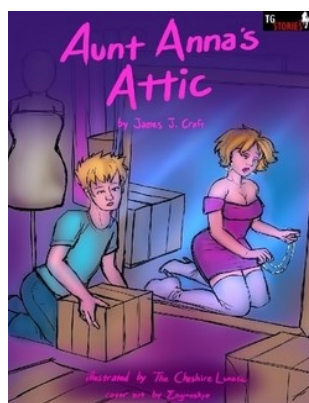
Pete who has worked for years as an EMT, finds that a back injury forces him to go back to school to get his RN. But something strange starts to happen...and Pete the tough guy starts to turn into Amber the sexy nurse! With blonde hair and a hot new body Peter, now Amber, finds that his buddies the firemen are much sexier then he remembers... What will happen to Amber as she starts to explore her new body and mind... Over 120 pages!!! And, over 30 illustrations!!!

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When three science nerds take a break from their projects to goof around, they accidentally spill the green goo...! Now the advanced computer interface, Cassi, has access to their thoughts and bodies. Cassi decides they would have more fun as females...blondes...and as wild sexy babes. See what happens when nerds become BLONDES and set off on their new life. Over 100 pages!!! And, over 25 illustrations!!!

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When Sam's father is killed in a car crash, Sam is shipped off to live with his Aunt Anna. Things start off badly when Sam is forced to live in the Attic room which is Pink. Things only get worse as Sam realizes that he is going to be under the thumb his demanding Aunt. When his Aunt injects him with some sort of serum, Sam can only guess what her plans are. Slowly his body starts to change as well as his outlook on boys. Soon Sam becomes Sammi...a pretty young thing who craves the attention of boys...! Sam starts his journey into femininity and dating with no idea if he will ever be able to turn back. Over 45 pages and 13 color illustrations.

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Billy, a collage freshman, enters a new drug study program. As part of the study, he needed to be constantly 'evaluated' by a psychologist. Billy didn't think he needed a "shrink," but was willing to give it a try. As the weeks go by, Billy finds that his attitude and body improve with each session at Dr. Smith's office. Soon Billy discovers that he would much rather focus on looking pretty and meeting cute boys! Over 25 pages with full color illustrations!

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PINUP GIRL

Max, a college freshman, needs a new place to stay and some extra cash. Meeting Eric, a successful photographer, with a spare room Max moves in. Eric convinces Max that he can make money in his spare time as a model. Jumping at the chance, Eric convinces Max that more money can be made posing as a girl. Reluctantly, Max goes along with the plan only to find that more and more of his clothes are being replaced with those of a female model. Without really understanding what is going on Max becomes Maxine and gets closer and closer to becoming a Pinup Girl...! 109 PAGES! Fully Illustrated!

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