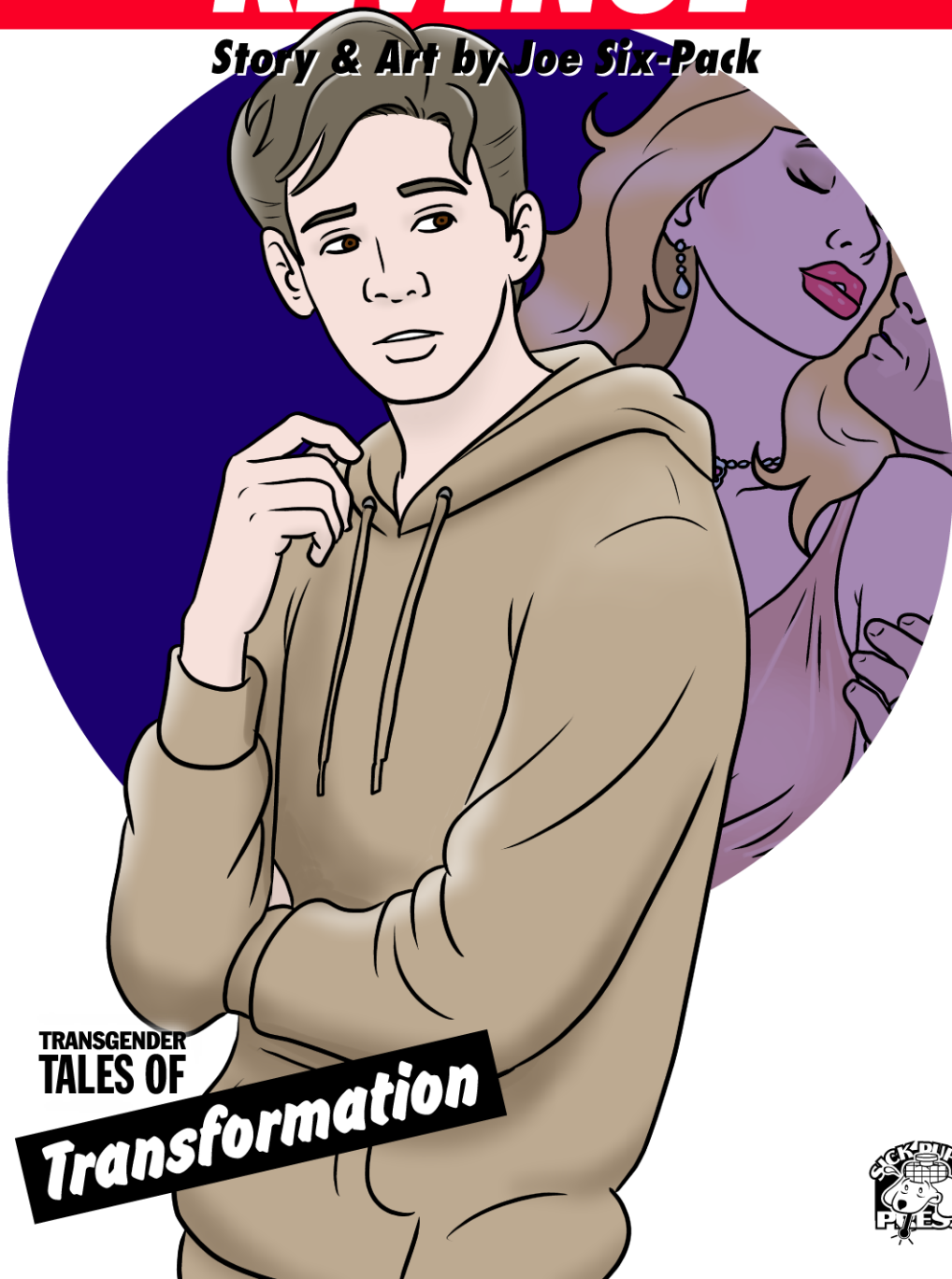


ADULTS ONLY

103 pages **33** illustrations

HIS PRETTY REVENGE

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack



**TRANSGENDER
TALES OF**

Transformation



J O E S I X P A C K

HIS PRETTY REVENGE

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack
A Tales of Transformation story



2026 Edition

Design & layout © 2026

Story & Illustrations © 2026 Joe Six-Pack

All rights reserved.

The body text is printed in New Caledonia.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the copyright owner. All characters and situations are fictional.

Printed in the United States of America.

j6p@sixpacksite.com

www.sixpacksite.com

HIS PRETTY REVENGE

“Call me Ishmael,” A.J. said to his phone, in a ridiculous accent. “I’m Ishmael. No one named A.J. lives here. Can’t help you.” He ended the call as quickly as he could.

In truth, he was a little astonished his phone was even working. He hadn’t paid the bill in months. What possessed him to actually answer the call was beyond him. He’d been more than willing to let it go to voice mail. The twenty new messages on his phone demanding money was a testament to that. He dropped the phone on the carpet and kicked it away like a curling stone to the other side of the room. He didn’t need these constant reminders.

He went back to his laptop to try and finish the paper he was writing, but so far “The” was the one only word he’d managed to get down. As usual, it was overheating, the keys red hot and getting soft. Any more heat and he’d leave fingerprints molded in them. He closed it and let it cool down, since he didn’t have anything to type anyway. All he could think about was the looming prospect of hearing a series of ‘ka-chunk’ noises, coming from a staple gun being applied to his front door, affixing the eviction notice he’d been expecting for days. That was, if he could hear it over the groans of his stomach.

A.J. walked over to the dwindling 24-pack of ramen cup noodles and plucked another one out. He’d bought it at Costco with a bad check and was down to his last three. He didn’t even like Picante Shrimp.

Against the wall, his phone chirped. He languidly went over to check, dreading another message from someone, but instead it was from Carter. He was in the neighborhood, and wanted to meet up at a café a block away. A.J. hated Carter. He was a smug jackass. But he would buy the coffee, so he grabbed his jacket and headed off. He wondered if he would be allowed to get back into his place when he came back.

A.J. had never been to this particular café. One look at the price list, and he knew he would never be back. The cost of a cup of coffee was as much as he spent on food in three days. Yet here he was, feeling like he was trespassing as he stepped outside, looking for Carter.

“That didn’t take you long,” Carter said. “Must be hard up for free coffee.”

“I was already in the area,” A.J. said. “I can buy if you want.”

Carter looked over his friend, with the tattered edges to his pants and the many stains on his hoodie sleeves. He was so bluffing. “That’s okay, I got it.”

“Nah, it’s fine,” A.J. replied.

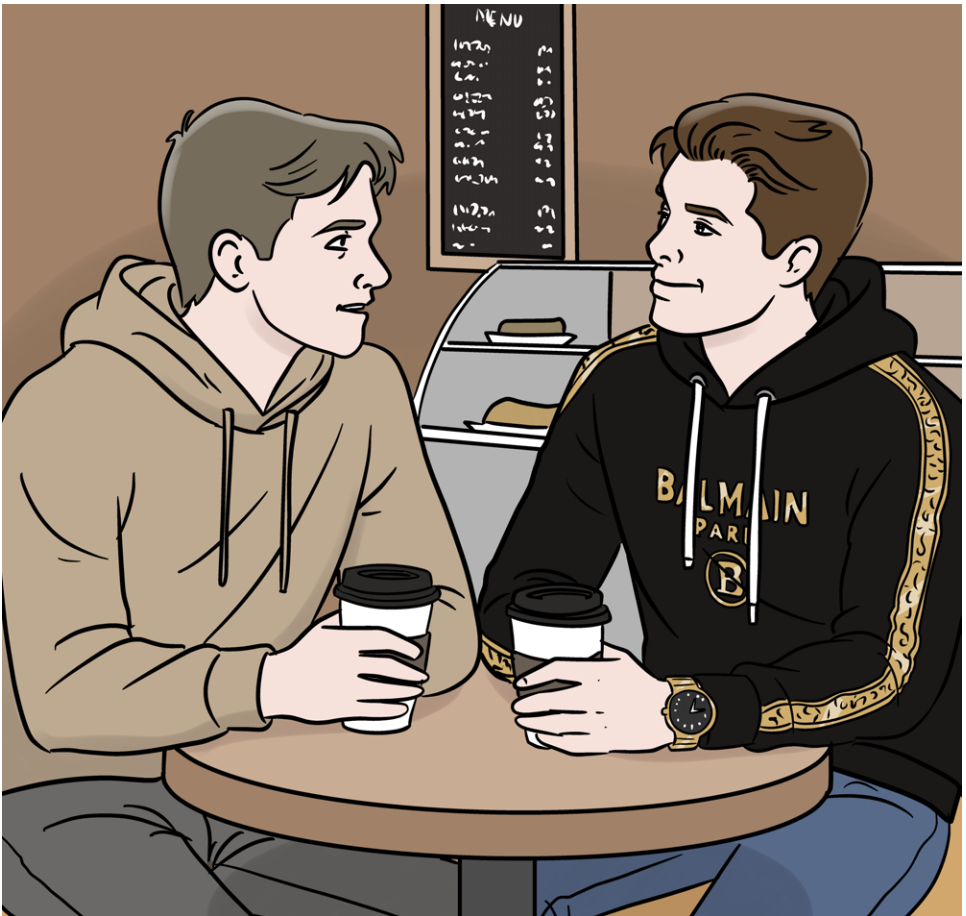
“Go ahead and order,” Carter answered as the got to the counter.

“All right,” A.J. said. “If you’re sure.”

After that pantomime was over, they found a table and stared at their cups for a while. Smalltalk was attempted, abandoned, and the restarted again. Carter mostly just wanted to talk about classes they shared.

A.J. looked at the hint of a reflection he could see in the café window. It looked like he felt. Barely alive. Barely even allowed to participate in life like everyone else could. He had to worry about money so constantly, he had no room to do anything else. Not a single brain cell for a spare thought. He was living in a state of paranoia, which controlled his every decision. He couldn’t go out. He couldn’t get a drink. He couldn’t do anything where he might be asked to chip in. He couldn’t do anything that would cost him money. He couldn’t do anything that *might* cost him money.

Leaving his apartment was a risk if the landlord decided to change the locks while he was gone. Eating a meal meant no meal later. Turning on the heat meant a bill he couldn’t pay. Watching a video worked against his data plan



limit. Even changing his clothes meant trying to find quarters on the street to run the washing machine.

Employment was the obvious solution, but assuming he could even find something, he would have to drop classes. The last five jobs he applied for never called back, and even before that he had been interviewing with nothing coming through. Finally, he had just given up.

His attention focused back on Carter, and as it did, he nearly coughed up his drink. Carter had new sneakers, a new iPhone and a designer hoodie. He wanted to ask, but he didn't. It felt like he'd be giving Carter some kind of credit, and Carter didn't need any more of a swelled head. Still, his friend was loaded, and he needed to know how.

"So, why'd you text me?" A.J. asked. "I can think of a few people you'd want to hang out with besides me."

"You're always putting yourself down, A.J." Carter said with a bemused smile. "Stick up for yourself, dude."

"Yeah, sure, I guess. Listen, where does one come up with money... to pay for coffee and not worry about it?" He figured that was an innocuous enough question.

Carter gave his friend a shrug. "I just look after my money, that's all."

"You have more to look after than I do," A.J. remarked, hoping Carter would bite and spill some secrets of how to get a few extra dollars.

"Knock on wood," he only said before sipping his coffee.



"Nice shoes," A.J. said when he saw him after their shared psychology class the next day. "I saw where those for for seven hundred."

"Yeah, I think I got then for twenty off," Carter answered.

"Good deal. Still, that's what, six hundred and eighty? On shoes?"

"I suppose it is," Carter said, before taking a turn on the walkway and heading off to his next class.

The evasion was just fueling his interest. A.J. knew his friend was hiding something, and he was going to get it.



Two days later, A.J. was at a party Carter was attending. "Hey, A.J. I didn't think you liked parties," Carter said with a smile. "Are you stalking me?"

“C’mon, dude,” A.J. said, terrified that he had been figured out so easily. “I get out.” He needed to know. He needed to know how Carter got so damn rich. He knew he wasn’t from a wealthy family. He had figured something out, and the more A.J. thought about it, he was sure his friend had a secret income source.

“Yeah, that’s you all over. Mr. Social. I’ll let you mix.”

“No, hey... Where you goin’?...” A.J. said, desperate to get him to blab about his money train.

“Talk to you later,” Carter said, sensing he was about to get trapped.

“Fuck,” A.J. said, headed for the door. That was the only reason he even got himself invited to this party. He kept the free beer, though.



It was during their developmental psychology class that Carter looked over to his left to see A.J. sitting next to him. A.J. didn’t even take this class.

“What’s up, A.J.?” Carter asked, putting his pen down as turning to face him in his seat. “Something on your mind?”

A.J. knew he had pushed it too far, but he was desperate. He couldn’t worry about being polite. “Look, you gotta tell me. We’re bros, right? You wouldn’t hold out on your bro, would you?”

Carter inquired, “Tell you what?”

“Where are you getting all that money?” A.J. finally asked.

“You’re nothing if not persistent,” Carter said. “You wouldn’t even believe me if I told you.”

“I’ll believe anything. I’m desperate.”

Carter seemed to contemplate the statement. He fiddled with the drawstrings on his \$400 hoodie. “Come to my place tonight.”

“Just tell me, man.”

“Not here. I don’t want anyone to overhear me.”



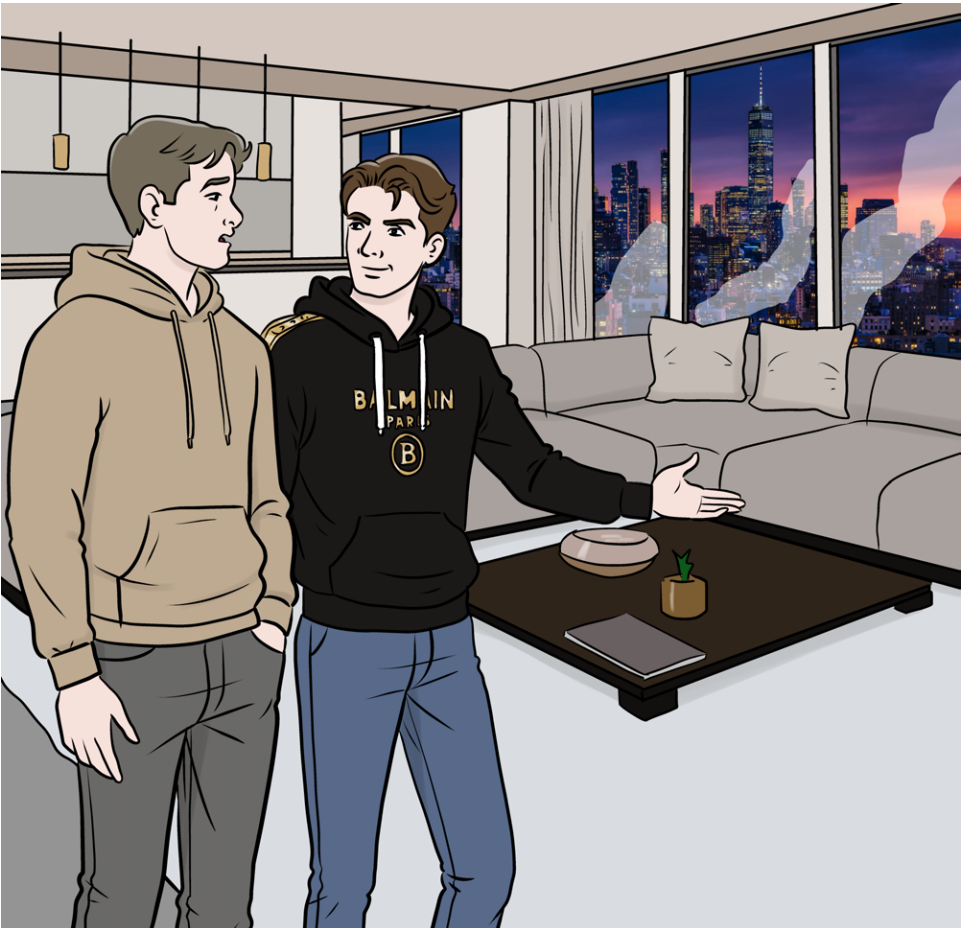
A.J. paced his apartment for the last half hour before he was due to head over to Carter’s place. He had been expecting many different answers from Carter to explain his extra cash, along the line of “I don’t own a car” or “I don’t have a girlfriend.” Instead, A.J. now had a mystery. A mystery that had been eating him up for the whole day. Did Carter deal drugs? Did Carter sell organs? Was he a gun runner? Why couldn’t he just tell him in the classroom?

It felt like something was up. Ot maybe Carter was just being a drama queen like he always was. He had known him since high school, and he had been a bit melodramatic even back then.

Taking a breath, A.J. headed the three blocks over to the apartment building Carter has told him to come to. It was the top floor. He had to ride the elevator up to the very top of the 20-story building, tall for this area, and when the doors opened up, it wasn't just an apartment. It was the penthouse.

What, A.J. thought to himself, the hell?

Just a single step into Carter's place let A.J. know something was really out of whack. It wasn't exactly decadent or ultra-luxurious, but it wasn't the kind of place your average starving student would have. The square modern furniture, the mid-century modern cabinets and the slate rock floors seemed to indicate Carter was not using financial aid to pay his tuition. "What is this supposed to be?" A.J. said, looking around, his arms out in bewilderment. "What am I looking at?"



“Hey, A.J.” Carter said, head into the foyer. “You’re early.”

“What’s going on? This can’t be your place. This is... I don’t...”

“You like it?” Carter replied. “I just got it paid off.”

A.J. Suddenly came to a stark realization. “Hey, I gotta go,” he started backing his way out of the apartment. “I just remembered I gotta go to a study lab.”

He didn’t want to turn his back on Carter. He needed to make sure he wasn’t about to get in any kind of trouble. The only explanation in his head was that his friend from school was now involved in something bad. Organized crime. Drugs. Something like that. It was the only explanation. If he valued his safety, maybe even his life, he had to get out of here. Fast.

“You wanna beer?” Carter offered.

A.J. Stopped backpedaling. “What do ya got?” He followed Carter into the kitchen. Five minutes later, he was dinking fancy imported beer — from a glass — on one of Carter’s rectangular couches.

“You looked terrified there for a minute, A.J.,” Carter said in between sips. “What are you afraid of?”

“I... Uh... I just thought I could pick up some tips on how to make some extra cash... I have a lot of bills.” A.J. gestured to the environment around him with the glass of beer. “But, uh... I’m not sure I want to get involved in whatever you’re doing. I’m just a college student, Carter. I study books.”

Carter couldn’t help but let a laugh escape from his lips. It was too strong to keep down. Then he had trouble stopping it. “I work at a bar, A.J.”

A.J. Nodded, smiling. For a moment he accepted that as the proper answer before doing the easy math. He stopped smiling. “You can’t earn this much from a job wiping up sticky tables.”

“Nah,” he put down the beer. “I don’t work for the bar. I work *at* the bar... I’m a...” He paused. Then he stood up. “Here, follow me.”

The confused college student followed his long-time acquaintance into a huge bedroom, floor to ceiling windows, larger than his entire apartment. A door on the side of the room led into a walk-in closet, and A.J. Followed carter inside.

Once in, he noticed the hoodies and ball caps on one side, and the sexy, glittery dresses on the other, with high heels on a giant rack. He figured that a guy with as much money as Carter now had would have a pretty fancy girlfriend. “Nice,” he said, looking at the dresses.

“Yeah,” he said, grabbing a short glittery dress off the rack. “My clients love them.”

A.J. nodded along before it sunk in what Carter was saying. “These... These are yours?”

“That’s how I make my money, A.J. I’m a hostess.” He put the dress back and picked a different one, holding up to his frame. “The guys really like this one.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I’m a hostess, A.J. I put on makeup, a wig, a nice dress and some high heels and I go sit at the bar and guys buy me drinks.”

A.J. Stood there, awaiting for the funny part of the joke, the punchline, the thing that would explain why Carter would say this, but nothing more seemed to be coming. “What do you mean?”

Carter put the dress back. “What I mean is that there are a lot of men who want to be in the company of a cute boy dressed up like a girl. They’re willing to pay quite a bit of money for that. A lot of them are very rich.”

“No, really,” A.J. Said with a smile that hoped to elicit a “just kidding” response. He continued to wait. “Oh, come on, dude.”

“I’m serious, A.J.,” Carter replied. “It pays better than you could imagine. I mean, look at this place.”

“I... I... I mean you’re not serious. Tell me you’re fuckin’ with me.”

“Yeah, I’m serious. Hey, I get it. It’s really kinda weird. But you know, bringing home a grand every night gets you over the weird part pretty fast.”

A.J., feeling a little more threatened by the dresses than he had a few moments ago, exited the closet quickly. He needed some space to breathe. He paced back and forth out in the bedroom. “So you’re gay?” he asked Carter when he exited the closet.

“No, dude. You know that. You and I had the same girlfriend back in high school. Remember Julie?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. So.... I still don’t get it.”

“So this bar I work at is a high-roller bar in the financial district. They have this arrangement. Men buy girls drinks, but the drinks are... like, two hundred to five hundred dollars.” He sat down on the very plush and very large bed. It looked as soft as a marshmallow to A.J. He could remember what a bed felt like. “That buys them time with me. They talk to someone who fulfills a little fantasy for them for a little while. A lot of guys like to talk to men dressed as cute girls. Then they either buy me another drink or move on. Simple as that.”

“That’s not legal. That can’t be legal.”

“It’s not,” Carter confirmed. “But the enforcement of that kind of thing is kind of... *lax*.”

“So you’re tellin’ me, you dress up as a chick and guys fuck you?”

Carter smirked. “See, that’s what I always liked about you A.J. Your close attention to details.” He stood up. “Let me start again. I work in a nice bar. The management there rents me a table for the night. A few hundred dollars. Men

come in, they choose someone they want to talk to. Lonely guys, kinky guys, whatever. They buy me a drink for a few hundred dollars. The bar takes a cut, I take a cut. All I do is look cute in a dress, smile, laugh, maybe talk a little to get things started and play the role. No sex. No touching. House rules.”

“So when do you fuck...”

“They don’t fuck me, A.J.!”

A.J. tilted his head. “Then I don’t get it.”

Carter sighed and explained again. Then again. At that point, A.J. seemed to get the idea. But he needed to go over the situation once again before he could see the light of recognition in his friend’s eyes.

“So what’s in the drinks?” A.J. asked.

“Tonic water, most of the time,” Carter answered. “You have to stay sober. Sometimes the guys at the bar put real alcohol in there if they’re trying to prank me.”

“So this is the big secret,” A.J. said.

“That’s it. That’s how I earn all my money. That’s how I’m getting through school and not worrying about what I spend.”

A.J. fell onto the rectangle couch and laid back in a decidedly un-rectangular manner, his legs splayed apart and his head sunk in between his shoulders. “This sucks,” he said. “I was hoping I could use whatever you were doing to help me out. I’m really in deep right now.”

“I kinda figured that,” Carter said. “That’s why I decided to tell you my little secret.”

“Yeah, but what good does that do me?”

Carter smirked. “You could pull it off, A.J.”

“What off?”

“You could be a hostess. You’re slim, not too tall. Boyish face. You could do this work.”

A.J. looked at his beer, quizzically. “How strong is this import shit? Cuz you’re drunk.”

“It’s a lot of money. It’d solve all your problems. You should consider it. You’re easy to talk to. You could be a good hostess.”

“Me? Look at me! I’m a guy. Not like you, you can get away with it.”

“Thanks,” Carter said, sarcastically. “I was just trying to help. Told you my biggest secret.”

“Yeah, sure. Appreciate it. But what good does it do me?”



Back in his apartment, he lived like a prisoner. A.J. was startled by the distant sounds of a door closing down the hall, hoping this wasn't going to be the landlord. Or the police. He jumped when his phone went off, hoping it wasn't someone sending him a pic, that would trigger his data limit. He stared at the the last cup of noodles on his counter, knowing he had to make it last. He had nothing else.

Not for the first time that night, he wandered into the bathroom to look at himself. He pulled his scruffy brown hair out of his face. He turned his chin left and right. He put on a smile.

Then, just as soon as he had, he marched back out to his futon on the floor and laid down on it. As he did, he could hear a girl laughing outside his window, down on the street. He remembered fun. He remembered when he wasn't too scared to even breathe for fear he would lose everything.

Yet, despite this, he'd slave through even the lowest of low-wage jobs instead of doing what Carter was doing. No amount of money could make him dress up like a woman and try to act nice for perverts and creeps.

His affirmation was interrupted by footsteps. Heavy footsteps. Footsteps someone made when they were determined and focused on a task. Not the kind of light, weary footsteps of the students who lived in this building. These were threatening. Threatening, at least, to a young man who's existence was hanging by not a thread, but by the spindly fibers of the thread.

Wham! Wham! Wham! Came the strikes to his front door.

It turns out his fears were well-founded.

"Open up! I know you're in there, Jones!" It was the gruff, slightly foreign voice of his landlord.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

It felt like he was going to bust right through. "I'm worried about your safety, Jones, so I'm coming in for a welfare check!" He was always making up excuses to allow himself into the room.

The door lock turned. A.J. scrambled, hitting the light switch off and dashing to where he couldn't be seen. The door opened, and the chain kept it from opening any further.

"You owe me two grand, Jones! I'll get you fuckin' evicted! I will! I swear to God I will, you fuckin' deadbeat!" The chain rattle as the landlord shook the door and pressed it to the max a few times. "If I ever get my hands around your scrawny throat I'm gonna choke my two grand out of you!" He said, before the air was still again. Charged with electricity, but still.



It took a full twenty minutes before A.J. even dared poke his head out and verify the landlord was gone. He closed the the door again, ever so quietly.

Things even got worse from that point on. He had a part-time job finally, filling tacos at a greasy fast food Mexican place. After buying his uniform, paying for the food handlers test and paying into the union, he showed up the first day to be told they didn't need him. A.J.'s first and only pay envelope was a bill for the uniform.

The electricity had been shut off. So now he spent a couple of hours each day at the local cafe recharging his phone. Pretending like he was a customer, sipping from the same empty cup he had fished out of the trash days ago. He got tossed out twice over the course of the week.

His classes were a joke, as he had long sold his textbooks. He was always scrounging for other classmates' notes. It was his only hope of getting a decent grade.

Every day, he would see Carter sitting in class, walking around campus, enjoying a cup of coffee at the cafe as if he had no cares in the world. Just a smug, conceited little jerk who was showing off to everyone that he had no money problems, and rubbing A.J.'s face in it. At least that's how it felt to A.J. There wasn't anywhere he could go without seeing Carter, just living a normal life. He hated him so much.

That night, as he sat in his apartment, the radiator ice cold, the lights out, his face only illuminated by the four inch screen of his phone, he found his thumbs

trembling as he brought up the message app. “You said I could be a good hostess?”



The place where they finally stopped was not quite what A.J. had been expecting. He didn't catch the name of it because Carter was already pushing him through the door. Inside, the air was cool and the lighting low enough that everything took a moment to come into focus. It was nice. He wasn't expecting nice. He was expecting sticky floors, cheap junk on the walls and sneering faces here. After all, what kind of place would offer this kind of service? A place where you paid to flirt with a crossdresser? He really wasn't expecting nice.

Jazz came from somewhere — a speaker, maybe a small live setup in the corner, A.J. couldn't tell. The walls were sparkling, with gold trim and mirrors. It was the kind of place where you couldn't tell where reality ended and became a reflection. But it made the place look large and spacious, as well as bright and cheerful. The low booths ran along both walls, each one occupied. Men in suit jackets that fit properly, men with good watches, men who looked like they paid attention to the details. Across from them, figures in dresses, in heels, in hair that caught the golden light in the room. A.J. looked longer than he meant to. A woman in a red dress laughed at something, touching the wrist of her companion with two fingers. Another sat with her hands folded on the table, playing with a strand of pearls at her throat. A.J. looked away.

He looked away because he suddenly realized he wasn't looking at women. He was looking at men *dressed* as women.

“This way,” Carter said, already halfway to the back.

The woman behind the desk didn't look up when they walked in. She had greying hair, crafted like she had placed every single strand where she wanted it by hand, and she was tapping through something on a tablet with one hand while the other rested flat on the surface of her busy desk.

“Ms. Sandra,” Carter said. “Got a fresh recruit for you.”

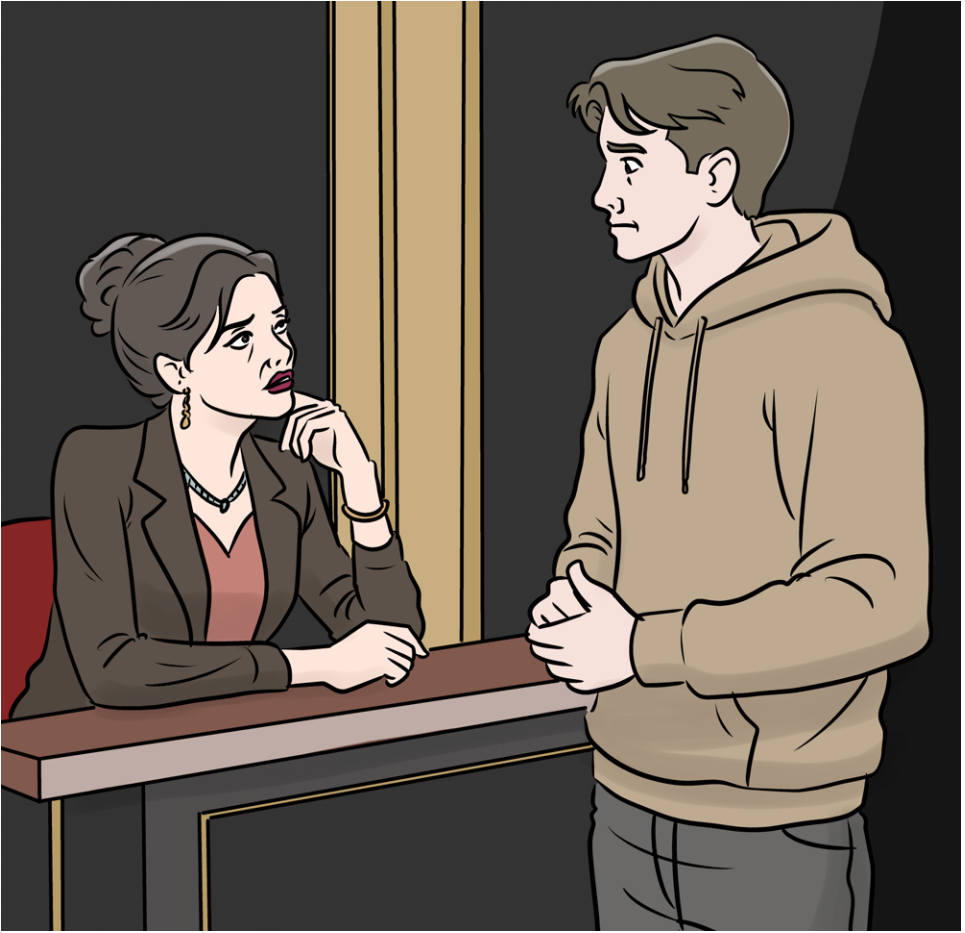
She kept her eyes on the tablet. “This one?”

Then she looked up, and A.J. understood immediately that being looked at by Ms. Sandra was not the same as being looked at by other people. It was more like being dissected.

“He's not dressed,” she said to Carter.

“He's kind of new to this,” Carter explained.

A.J. was not used to being talked about, instead of talked to.



“I wouldn’t usually even consider it...” She said. She smirked at Carter. “But since it’s you, Carter...”

“There’s a lot of potential,” Carter said, looking at A.J.

“You don’t have the eyes for it,” she said. She wasn’t unkind about it, which almost made it worse. “But the bone structure’s decent. We can make it work.”

A.J. stood there. He’d been trying to think of something to say since they’d walked through the front door, and now, in the back office, facing this woman, he was still coming up empty. “So what happens now?” he asked.

She set the tablet down and leaned forward on both elbows. “We see if you can pass.”

“Pass what, exactly?”

Carter laughed a little from somewhere behind him. Ms. Sandra didn’t.

“There’s a difference,” she said, “between looking like something and actually *being* it. Anyone can put on a dress. That part’s easy. What’s not easy is sitting

across from a man who's paid a week's salary to talk to you and still making him feel like he's getting a bargain." She picked the tablet back up. "That takes something else."

"And if I don't have that something else?"

She glanced at him over the top of the screen. "Then Carter wasted my time." She looked at Carter. "Well, let's give him a table for a few hours. But first... You gotta get him dressed."

"I'll take him to to Felix."

"Good luck," she replied, raising her eyebrows.



The alley was narrow and easy to miss. Carter stopped at a door with no sign, just a rusted handle and a strip of yellow light coming from underneath, and pushed it open without knocking. A.J. followed him inside.

The salon, if it could be called that, was one long room with cracked tile floors and lighting that bathed the premises in sorrow. A row of mirrors ran along one side, each framed by bulbs, some of which had burned out. The counters were cluttered — open product containers, brushes dried with old makeup, a power strip with too many things plugged into it. The smell of product and something chemical sat in the air. In one of the chairs, feet up on the counter, a man dressed in a silk shirt.

He was vaping, exhaling a long cloud toward the ceiling. His eyes were suspicious, but unconcerned. The man was appeared to be flamboyantly gay, and he seemed to be well aware of that.

He saw A.J. and clapped his hands once, loud.

"Fresh meat!"

A.J. felt his face go hot. The man was already out of the chair, circling him before A.J. had even cleared the doorway, looking him over the way someone looks at a used car they're not sure they want to buy.

"Jaw's a little square," the stylist said, mostly to himself. He lifted A.J.'s chin with two fingers. "Brows are a disaster. But the eyes are... You don't have the eyes for this. Well, we'll see what we can do. Nice lid space." He dropped A.J.'s chin. "What's your name?"

"A.J."

"What's that stand for?"

"Arthur Jones."

“A.J. was the right call,” the man said with a scrunch of his features. “I’m *Feeeeelix*,” he said with a dip of his hips. He didn’t offer his hand as he was already pulling a measuring tape from the counter. “Arms out.”

A.J. held his arms out and Felix worked fast, calling numbers to no one in particular. Chest, waist, hips. He wrote nothing down.

“Behind the curtain,” Felix said. “Strip.”

A.J. didn’t move. “What?”

“Your clothes. Take them off.”

“I’m not…” A.J. turned to Carter, who had already dropped into one of the salon chairs and was scrolling his phone. “I’m not doing this in front of…”

“Dude.” Carter didn’t look up. “Get used to it.”

A.J. stood there another moment, then went behind the curtain.

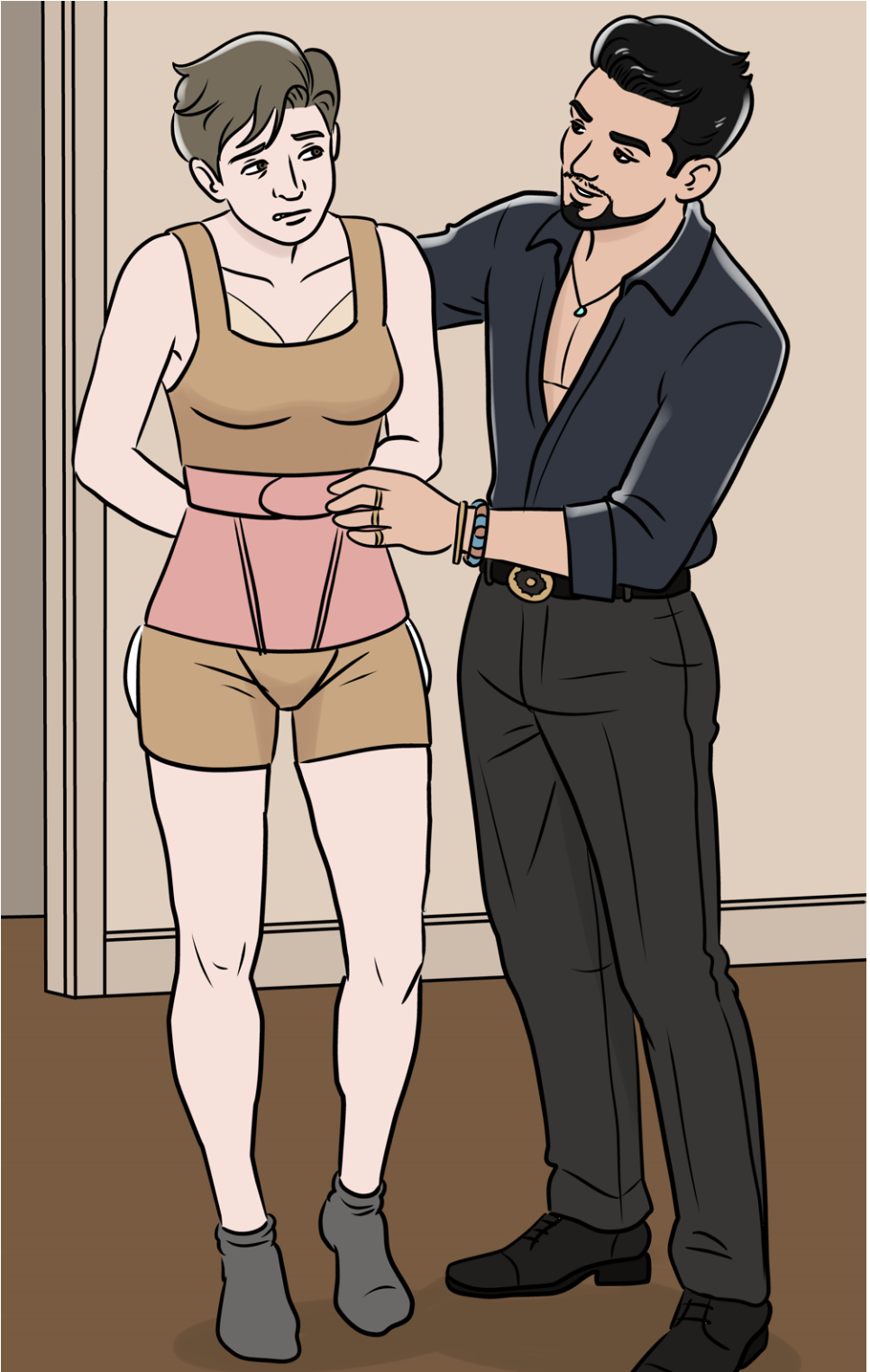
A bra was first. The one A.J. was strapped into had thick foam padding that added a full rounded shape to his chest. Felix clipped it at the back and pulled the straps until they sat flush, then adjusted the cups, pressing the padding into place with his palm. A.J. stared at the curtain, trying not to think about a man adjusting his imaginary breasts for him.

The body shaper came next. It was a thick, mauve-colored tube of compressive fabric, and Felix worked it up over A.J.’s legs with both hands, rolling it past his thighs and up over his midsection until the waistband sat just below his ribs. The compression was immediate and total. A.J. exhaled and couldn’t fully inhale again. The shaper crushed his waist inward by what felt like half — but was really only an inch — and the displaced volume had nowhere to go but out, pushing at his hips, rounding what had been flat. A.J. looked down at himself and then looked away. His torso no longer looked like his own body.

The padded panties went on last, and they were padded at the seat and hips with a soft silicone insert that sat flush against his skin, adding a low curve to his backside that he could feel when he shifted his weight. They also required an indelicate adjustment to his penis to give him a flat appearance.

“Sit here,” Felix said. “Felix’s lawn mowing service is ready to get started.”

The shave took a long time. Felix started with A.J.’s legs, working from ankle to thigh with a fresh razor and short, deliberate strokes. The shave was long and laborious, leaving skin that looked pale and unfamiliar against the salon light. By the time he got to A.J.’s face, they were on the sixth razor. Felix tilted A.J.’s head back, worked along the jaw, under the chin, and the upper lip. When he finished, he pressed a warm towel to A.J.’s face and held it there for a moment. As soon as he was able, the young man ran his fingers along his cheek. Then he felt his legs. His skin felt new and too smooth to be real. It was alien to him. He couldn’t stop touching it.





The makeup chair he was sitting in faced the biggest mirror, and A.J. had no choice but to watch as the makeup was applied. He kind of wished he'd only see it when it was all over, as this felt like slow torture, his manhood being wrung out of him like a wet dishtowel. Felix started with a primer, pressing it into A.J.'s skin with his fingertips, filling in the pores and flattening the texture. Felix used some dabs of red lipstick on his jawline, which looked weird at first, but it hid his bluish skin where his beard would be. Then came the foundation which was a shade lighter than A.J.'s natural tone, applied with a damp sponge in small circles until his face was even and matte and the shadow of his shaved jaw had disappeared entirely. Without that shadow, his face looked different. Softer at the edges. Less defined in the way men's faces are defined.

Felix loaded a narrow brush with a cool-toned brown powder and worked it into the hollows beneath A.J.'s cheekbones, using small strokes and then blending the edges until the contour looked like shadow rather than product. He repeated it along the jaw, blurring the squareness Felix had noted at the door, rounding the corners of A.J.'s face until his jaw no longer read as a jaw but as a gentle taper. A.J. watched his own face narrow in real time.

The eyes took the longest. Felix used a flesh-toned base across the whole lid first, then built a pale shimmer onto the center and a medium brown into the crease, working it back and forth with a fluffy brush until the depth made A.J.'s eyes appear larger and set further apart. He lined the upper lash line with a thin stroke of black, flicking a small wing at the outer corner, then ran a nude pencil along the waterline. The mascara went on in four slow coats, separating each lash, and by the final coat A.J.'s lashes were long enough that he kept looking up, the lizard part of his brain convinced he was being attacked by a raven. Felix finished with a muted rose lipstick applied with a brush, pressing A.J.'s lips together at the end with two fingers to set it.

A.J. looked at his own mouth in the mirror and didn't recognize it. Nothing about it was familiar. Not the shape, not the color, not even the skin around it.



The wig was deep brown and fell to the shoulder, straight with a slight curve at the ends. Felix positioned it on A.J.'s head and pressed it down at the temples, then used a small brush and a dot of product to melt the lace front into his hairline until there was no visible edge, just hair that appeared to grow from his scalp. He adjusted the slightly off-center part and smoothed the length over A.J.'s shoulders.

The dress was black and fitted, with a high neckline and a hem that fell mid-thigh. Felix held it open and A.J. stepped in, and then Felix zipped it at the back in one motion. The fabric pulled against the shaper underneath, and the combined effect was a silhouette with a defined waist, a rounded hip, and a chest that was no longer flat. A.J. stood still and felt the dress sit against him in ways he had no frame of reference for.

The heels were block-heeled and low, but A.J. still shifted when he put them on, his weight redistributing in a way his ankles weren't ready for. He found his balance after a moment, standing with his feet slightly apart.



Felix stepped back and tilted A.J.'s chin up with one finger, studying his face with the dispassion of someone checking their own work.

"Eh," he said. "That's as good as we're gonna get it."

A.J. looked in the mirror. A dark-haired, fine-featured young woman stared back. He stood up in surprise, showing her narrow waist and a rose-colored mouth and lashes that fluttered. He stood there looking for a long moment, searching for himself in the reflection, and found nothing he recognized.

"You did your best, Felix," Carter said, getting up from his chair.

"I... I... I thought I came out pretty well," A.J. said, in a quiet voice.

"Oh, sweetie. You look fine!" Felix said. "A real girl next door kind of fine. It's just that..."

"Well, let's wait to make a final judgement until we see you in action," Carter interrupted. "It's got a lot to do with attitude."

"Yes? Yes!" Felix escorted the two towards the exit. "It's always about the attitude. You never can tell until then. I'm sure it'll be fine. I'll bill Ms. Sandra!"

And suddenly Carter and A.J. were in the alley. Alone.

"Well, we outta get back," Carter said.

"I'm in a dress," A.J. said, very aware of the situation. "I'm in a dress in a dark alley."

"Don't worry about it. I do this every day. Just look like you know what you're doing."

"I can't move," the young man in the black dress reported.

"I'm not holding your hand, dude," Carter said as he headed off towards his car.

"Wait... Wait..." A.J. called after him, trying not to shout. He didn't want to attract any attention. He took the smallest, most tentative step. The heels hit the pavement and the sound was different from any sound his feet had ever made: a distinct, small "clop" with each step. He kept close to the wall and looked straight ahead and told himself that no one was watching.

A man on his phone looked up.

A.J. felt the look land somewhere in the center of his chest. He pulled his arms in and kept walking.

"You're stomping," Carter said. "Walk from the hip, not the knee. And stop crossing your arms — you look like you're being escorted somewhere against your will."

"I *am* being escorted somewhere against my will."

"You know what I mean." Carter slowed just enough to let A.J. pull level with him. "Nobody knows you're not who they think you are, okay? They're just

picking up on whether you seem comfortable. Right now you seem like a man who's marching to a firing squad."

"I would welcome bullet right about now."

"Well, stop it."

They passed a restaurant with outdoor seating. There were three men at a table, mid-conversation. One of them glanced over. His eyes moved across A.J. the way eyes do when they catch movement, and then he went back to his conversation. A.J. kept his eyes forward and his jaw tight.

"He looked at me," A.J. said.

"Yeah, because you were staring at him. Eyes forward, chin level. You keep looking at people like they're going to lunge at you."

A.J. adjusted his chin. The wig moved slightly in the breeze and he resisted the urge to grab it.

"You're doing a thing with your shoulders," Carter said.

"What thing?"

"That hunching thing. Pull them back."

A.J. pulled his shoulders back. The dress shifted, the heels clicked, and for approximately four steps he walked like a person who had chosen to be outside. Then a woman coming the other direction made brief eye contact with him, frowned slightly, and looked away, and whatever he'd assembled fell apart again.

"She knew," A.J. said.

"She didn't know anything. She was squinting because the headlights are in her eyes." Carter pointed down the block. "There's the car."

A.J. walked the last thirty feet without speaking. Carter unlocked the door. A.J. got in, pulled the door shut, and sat there.

"That was humiliating," he said.

Carter started the engine. "You made it, didn't you?"

"Yaaay..." A.J. said, his voice dying. "Yay for me."



A.J. followed Carter back into the bar, his shoulders clenched and his head scrunched like a turtle. This would be an easier task, getting rejected by Ms. Sandra. At least he was expecting the hatchet, and she looked like she would have no trouble putting him out of his misery.

"Well, I've seen worse," Ms. Sandra said, seeing the young man standing in the black dress. She sighed. "Might as well give him a booth for the evening."

She glanced at Carter.
“You know what to do.”

As the door shut behind him and he was out in the hall again, A.J. was in a bit of a shock. He was sure he’d already failed at this task. “I really didn’t think I’d get this far.”

“Well, you did,” Carter said. “Now I have to get you ready to do this.” Carter walked A.J. to a narrow corridor off the main floor and stood with his arms crossed. “Voice first. Higher than you think you need to go, but not fake high. Soft. Put air in it.” “And when he says something that isn’t funny, you laugh anyway. Small laugh, not a performance. A quick giggle. And you let him talk. You’re not there to have a debate, you’re there to make him feel like he’s the smart one.”

“That’s it?”

“No, but I only have a minute. Flatter him. Not empty flattery, though. Compliment him for his mind, his taste. Men like him



want to feel interesting. Complex. Charming.” Carter straightened up. “You ready?”

A.J. was not ready.

The lounge floor felt different now than it had when he first arrived. The jazz was the same, the lighting was the same, but now A.J. was part of the business rather than an outsider. As he took small steps, the dress moved when he moved, the fabric pulling slightly at the hips with each step. The heels demanded a particular kind of walk that sent his hips doing the wrong thing, in his mind, and he was not ready to give up on walking the way he was used to. He found a booth near the back and sat down, smoothing the dress under him the way Felix had done in the salon when making final adjustments, pressing the fabric flat with both palms in one efficient motion.

“How do I look?”

“Tense. Act like you’re just slightly drunk. It looks sexy to guys.”

“I can’t even act right now. I’m panicking.” He looked around. “Any chance I can just *be* slightly drunk, rather than pretending?”

“Do your best, dude,” Carter said before walking away.

The young man in the black dress sat there for fourteen minutes before anyone approached.

The man was somewhere in his fifties, in a suit that cost more than A.J.’s rent. It was dark navy with peaked lapels, and he also wore a gold watch that caught the low light. He scanned the room once before his eyes settled on A.J.’s booth.

“New here?”

A.J. kept his voice soft, pushing air through his throat more than using his vocal cords. “Yes. I’ve been dying to meet some new people. You could join me.” In the car on the way back from the salon, Carter had made him practice the same sentence twelve times. *You’re dropping it at the end. Carter told him. Someone who’s nervous lets the voice fall back into the chest. Keep it forward, keep it light. Stay confident. End your sentence like a question.*

The man smiled and signaled the waiter’s without looking at him. He ordered something off a special “hostess” menu, and the waiter nodded. A five-hundred-dollar drink. That meant that A.J. was engaged for a full hour, bought and paid for.

A drink appeared in front of A.J. He lifted it and took a small sip and kept his face still. It had real alcohol in it. He looked over beyond the man’s shoulder to see Carter giving him a thumbs-up. He had spiked it for him. Thank God.

The man introduced himself as Richard and then immediately began talking about a logistics company he ran out of two offices, one downtown and one he was thinking of closing. A.J. nodded. When Richard paused, A.J. asked something vague about if he was happy, and Richard spent nine minutes on the



answer. A.J. nodded through it and remembered what Carter had said in the car. *You're not there to be interesting. You're there to be interested. There's a difference and it matters. Ask a question, then get out of the way. Emote as necessary to stay involved.*

Richard moved from the company to his divorce, which had been finalized eight months ago, and which he described as an expensive lesson in the fundamental unreliability of women. A.J. produced the small laugh when it seemed expected, adding a slight lift at the corners of his mouth. *Not that big,* Carter had said about his smile when he was practicing in the car. *You're not auditioning. It's just a signal that you're sympathetic and engaged. Small and easy, like you've heard something that quietly amuses you.*

A.J. touched his glass when Richard touched his. He kept his shoulders back and his chin level and his hands loose in his lap rather than gripping the edge of the seat, which is what he wanted to do. When he shifted his weight, he felt the shaper underneath the dress compress with him, holding his waist in its fixed, tight grip. Richard said something about his ex-wife's lawyer and shook his head slowly. A.J. tilted his head to the side, just slightly, and made a soft sound of sympathy. Recalling Carter's advice was helpful. *The head tilt is important. It says you're listening without making you look like you're concentrating. Women do it without thinking. You're going to have to think about it every single time.*

He was thinking about it every single time.

The hour moved like frozen molasses uphill. Richard finished a third drink and settled back in his seat with the satisfied looseness of a man who had been listened to at length. He looked at A.J. with something between warmth and distance. "Tell me about yourself," he said to A.J.

They're going to ask you to talk about yourself, Carter had told him. *If you feel uncomfortable, and you will, deflect. Always deflect.*

"There's nothing else you'd rather talk about?" A.J. said in his new soft, breathy voice. "I just like talking to people. That's all."

"Enjoyable evening," he said, as he buttoned his jacket, and walked toward the bar without looking back.

A.J. sat in the booth for a moment. The jazz continued. Someone laughed across the room, and it made A.J. nearly jump out of his seat. He was so wound up he could have just burst out crying or screaming.

"Looks like you survived," Ms. Sandra said as she helped him up from his seat. A.J. exhaled slowly. "Did I pass?"

She looked at him the same way she'd looked at him in the back office, silently judging, and let the pause run longer than was comfortable.

"You're back tomorrow," she said. "Get a new dress."