

ADULTS ONLY

115 pages 33 illustrations

# IT'S A SHORE THING

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack



**J O E   S I X   P A C K**

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SHORE  
THING**

**Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack**  
**A Teens Transformed story**



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Printed in the United States of America.

[j6p@sixpacksite.com](mailto:j6p@sixpacksite.com)

[www.sixpacksite.com](http://www.sixpacksite.com)

## IT'S A SHORE THING

The stench of fried onions and damp beer coasters hung thick around their table at Geno's. Justin picked at the crust of his cheesesteak, watching his father wipe grease from his chin with a paper napkin.

"They made me an offer I couldn't turn down." Michael Morris pushed his chair back, belt buckle catching the fluorescent light. "Regional manager. Forty-two percent increase, plus they're covering the relocation expenses."

Justin's mother, Elaine, smoothed her mustard-stained menu. "The schools in Broward County are supposed to be excellent. And the weather, Michael — no more shoveling snow."

Now he knew why his parents took him out to his favorite cheesesteak restaurant. He suspected something was up. He was not wrong.

"That's great for you guys." Justin dropped his sandwich onto its wax paper. "What about my classes? What about the tuition I already paid?"

His mom, sitting across from him in a stained Eagles hoodie, nudged his knee under the table. "It's *community* college, Justin. If you want, we'll pay you the seven dollars you spent."

"One hundred and thirty-eight," Justin asserted.

"We're not discussing this as a negotiation." His dad raised his hands in surrender, a gesture Justin had seen throughout eighteen years of compromise. "This is happening, regardless. The movers arrive Saturday."

"You scheduled movers before you even told me?" Justin pushed away from the table, chair scraping linoleum. "You actually did this without talking to me first?"

"Everything's set, Justin." His mother tossed her napkin on her empty basket. "The realtor found us a lovely place with a pool."

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?"

"Because you were going to react like this," his father replied, wiping his mouth. "We'd have to listen to your whining for months."

His mother stood up, slinging her purse strap over one shoulder. "It won't be half as bad as you think."

"Philly is my life," Justin said, overstating things a bit. As they hit the pavement outside, he was begging his parents to see reason. "I grew up here! And I'm gonna go to Temple! After I get my grades up, yeah, but I'm going!"



“Do you have the money to get an apartment?” His father said with a chuckle. “As long as you live with us, Justin, you don’t have a choice. It was your idea not to get a job.”

“I’m 18!”

“I got my first job when I was 12,” the father said.

“Mowing lawns doesn’t count.”

“Well it taught me how to make a living and provide for myself. Something you’ve never done. You should have been saving your money.”

“I didn’t know you were gonna move to Florida!” Justin tried to get out in front of them as they walked, hoping to get them to stop. “This is a joke, right? You can’t do this to me!”

Justin glanced from his father’s satisfied expression to his mother’s pity smile, then followed them back home without another word. He wasn’t winning this one.



Justin lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. A ceiling he’d seen every day of his life until now. In a matter of days, it wouldn’t be his too look at anymore.

The screen of his phone illuminated his face. He picked it up and thumbed through photos until he found it: Dennis and him on the beach. The sun had baked their shoulders red. They peeled for days. Dennis's smile was wide, showing crooked teeth. Their arms were slung around each other's shoulders.

When Dennis first went to Atlantic City, he had gone with him, to help him adjust. But that was two years ago, and he hadn't seen him since. Just texts.

He opened his messages. The last one from Dennis was a single thumb-down emoji, sent three days ago in response to a question about the Flyers.

Justin typed: "You up?"

The three dots appeared and disappeared. Then a new message: "Rough night" and then "Talk later" was the follow-up. No more dots after that.

Justin stared at the words. He switched to their older conversations, from months ago. Dennis liked to complain about his aunt, living in Atlantic City and working at a hotel. He called her a control freak, but the language was casual.

That was Dennis. He was never one to get too excited about stuff. He had a very level head, which was a nice counter to Justin's less restrained approach.

They had been living on the same block for a long time. Dennis and his family moved in ten years ago, and they had gone to school from grade school through high school. They played on the basketball team together. Over the years they had grown close, almost as close as brothers.

So two years ago, when his parents divorced, he really felt for him. Justin's parents may have been callous jerks who never told him anything, but at least they didn't tear the family apart.

Dennis was the subject of court proceedings to determine custody and the fight was so fierce, Dennis wound up with neither parent, and was living with his aunt.

She ran a hotel, casino and nightclub in Atlantic City, and that's where Dennis lived now.

Justin put the phone down and pushed off the bed and walked to the window. The streetlights glowed yellow on the pavement below. He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and took out the two twenty-dollar bills folded inside.

It felt like his entire world was being taken from him. Stolen from him. Ripped from his arms. Why did things have to change?

It was some kind of sense of needing to control his life again that made him decide what he was going to do next.

"What brought this on?" his mother slid a plate of scrambled eggs across the kitchen counter, the ceramic scraping against the formica. "Atlantic City? That's not exactly a summer camp."

Justin sliced at the eggs with his fork. "It's better than Florida. Three months." He pushed a piece into his mouth. "I'm goin'."

His father sipped his coffee, the mug leaving a ring on the newspaper. "And Dennis's aunt is okay with this?"

"She won't even notice I'm there." Justin lied smoothly, the practiced confidence of a teenager who has spent years navigating parental questions. "May not even tell her."

"We should call her." His mom wiped her hands on a dish towel. "It's only polite."

"I'm not asking if I can sleep over at her place," Justin stood up and rinsed his plate. "I'm not a kid." He wanted it to be a surprise for Dennis. He sounded like he could use some good news, if his texts were any indication.

"Still..." His dad said.

"Either I go there for the summer, or I'll be with you guys for the whole move, making everyone's life miserable. Your choice."

"Call us when you get there," his father said.

That afternoon, Justin zipped up his duffel bag in the bedroom. The clothes inside were folded without precision: jeans, hoodies, socks. Nothing fancy. Nothing that required special care.

A few blocks away, he handed over his two twenties to the ticket booth lady. That was his fortune spent on a bus ticket.

The bus doors hissed open. He grabbed his duffel bag from the back seat. His father rolled down the window.

Justin climbed aboard, found a seat, and tossed the bag into the overhead compartment without looking back. There was nothing to look back on. Everything was already gone.



It was almost certainly the wrong thing to do. Who knows what his parents would do with his stuff. Maybe they'd throw everything out instead of paying to move it. That was something he could see his mom doing without a second thought. She was like that.

But he couldn't stay there. He couldn't watch his room, his stuff, his life broken down and packed into boxes. An empty room. An empty house. A life abandoned.

It was certainly the wrong thing to do, but he felt like he had to do this. He knew he was running away. But he didn't question the cowardice of running

away from his problems, his only question was if he was running away fast enough.

The bus lurched to a stop in Camden. A mechanical issue, the driver announced, forty minutes at least. Justin stepped out into the humid air, watching three guys exit the bus behind him. Their sneakers were pristine, expensive fabric extended from the ankles.

“You heading to AC?” The tallest one asked Justin, already pulling out a pack of cigarettes. “We’re hitting the tables tonight.”

“Just visiting a friend.” Justin shifted his duffel bag to his other shoulder.

“What’s her name?” One asked.

“And what’s she look like?” Another added.

“Nah,” Justin said, smiling and laughing. “My bud. He’s just my bud.”

“You guys got any pussy lined up?” The tallest of the three asked, elbowing Justin as he said it. “Nothin’ like some Jersey snatch. Those girls lay out for everyone.”

“Hey, I didn’t come all this way to just shake a guy’s hand. Me and my friend, this one time, he and I are fifteen, raid his dad’s liquor cabinet. We’re wasted, walking down Kensington, and this car pulls over. Two chicks, maybe thirty-two maybe older. They’re blind drunk. Moms on vacation or some shit. You can see the vodka bottles in the back seat.”

“I know what’s coming next,” said the shortest of the frat boys.

“They need directions. My man Dennis gives them these directions which have them circe the whole city twice and then wind up at a motel just two blocks away. Dennis makes us go get a couple of rooms and we wait until they show up again, and he tells them they must have gotten lost, but why not rest here?”

“Ah, no way, dude.”

“Bro, I’m telling you, Dennis is with the blonde, I’m with the redhead, and Dennis is all ‘I’m so young, I’ve never seen a vagina before, does it have tentacles like the comics say?’ and she’s all ‘no’ and he’s all ‘yes’ and they get in an argument, and he says he needs to see it to believe it.”

“Oh come on,” one the frat boys say.

“No, really! Anyway, cut to the good part. He’s licking her pussy and I’m on the other one, I’m down there for what feels like an hour, my jaw’s killing me, and she’s just, like, ‘You look like my son, please call me mommy.’ Then she rolls over and goes to sleep. Dennis and I walked home at dawn, smelling like cunts and dollar store vodka. Best night of my life. That’s the kind of guy my bud is.”

“Bro, that’s epic.” The taller frat boy slapped Justin on the back. “My name’s Chet. We’re staying at the Tropicana. You should come by Saturday. Bryce knows the assistant manager. We got everything comped.” The second guy pointed his thumb at the tallest one. Bryce nodded, uninterested.

“AC is perfect for a weekend.” The third one added, “The whole city is falling apart, and the Shore scene is trashy — but in a wicked cool way.”

“The girls, though.” Bryce exhaled smoke. “Jersey Shore girls are hot.”

“Fake tans, fake nails, tons of attitude.” The second one laughed, pulling out his phone. “Here, put your number in. We’ll text you the party address.”

Justin typed his number into the phone, watching them exchange identical looks.

Back on the bus, the landscape flattened. Atlantic City appeared first as a line of tall buildings against grey sky, then as streets with shuttered storefronts and trash cans overflowing onto sidewalks. The bus deposited him at the terminal, which felt like a new level of hell, in concrete form. He could count four police cars stationed around the place.

Three blocks away, the boardwalk stretched out along a greyish beach, the wood weathered and splintered in places. Further down, the casinos rose like glass cliffs, their names lit up against the afternoon sky: Caesars, Hard Rock, Ocean. Justin followed the numbers on his phone to the address Dennis had given him.

The hotel was older than the casinos around it, a ten-story brick building with faded gold lettering that read “The Aquarius.” The lobby was quiet, the carpet thin under his shoes. At the front desk, a woman with dark hair pulled into a tight bun stapled a receipt with mechanical precision.

“Can I help you?” She asked, not looking up.

“I’m looking for Dennis Kowalski. Or his aunt Nicky”

“You’re Justin.” She set down the papers. “Dennis mentions you all the time.”

“How did you...”

“Dennis doesn’t have a lot of friends. And he shows me pics of you. You send a lot of pics.”

“You gotta be aunt Nicky,” Justin shifted his duffel bag to his other hand.

“I gotta be.” She came around from behind the desk, extending a hand. Her grip was firm, brief. “It’s good to meet you. You’ve been a great friend to my nephew.”

“We’re best buds.”

“You didn’t tell him you were coming, did you?”

“Nah. I wanted to surprise him. It’s been two years since we saw each other. We grew up...”



"Dennis is away," she interrupted. Justin's head jerked back. "Visiting family. His father's side, downstate."

"He didn't mention that."

"It was last minute." She straightened her blazer. "He'll be back in July."

He did the math. That was 4 weeks away. "So I'm here alone?" Justin asked.

"Looks that way."

"I... Uh... Thought he would be here. I, um..."

"You need a room?" the woman said, walking around behind her desk again. "I'll put you up in one of our spare suites."

"I... Don't have..." Justin was a bit embarrassed. His plan was to room with his friend. "I don't have any money."

"I guessed that. The room isn't free." She kept typing on her terminal, her posture unchanged. "My dinner server walked out last week. You can work bussing tables, helping in the kitchen. 6 to 11 p.m. We'll call it even."

"Sure." Justin nodded. "Uh, that works."

"Good."

Justin followed her up a staircase. The carpet on the steps was thin in the middle, worn down by years of footsteps. It hadn't been replaced in a while.

Justin was curious. This had all happened so fast. "So you give rooms to all your employee?"

"Only the ones who are childhood friends with Dennis," she replied.

On the third floor, she unlocked a door and pushed it open. The room inside was small but clean: twin beds with crisp white duvets, a desk against one wall, a window looking out at the pool and the other wing of the hotel.

"This is yours, at least until I need to fill it with a paying customer. I think you'll be good for a while." She stood in the doorway, not entering. "How long do you think you'll stay?"

"Well, I really wanted to see Dennis. So... Four weeks?"

"Sounds good. I'm happy to help."

Justin dropped his duffel bag on one of the beds. "This is great. Thanks."

She pulled the door nearly shut. "The uniform is black pants, white dress shirt. Be ready by five tomorrow. And by the way, my name is Nicole, not *aunt Nicky*." The lock clicked as she closed it completely.

Justin tossed his duffel bag onto the bed nearest the window. The springs creaked under its weight. He walked to the window and looked down into the courtyard below. It was just a sad pool with a few sick-looking plants in concrete boxes.



Justin unzipped his bag and pulled out a stack of t-shirts. He didn't have any black pants. Hopefully they'd wave that until he could get a pair. As he tossed them into the dresser drawer, movement across the courtyard caught his eye. A figure stood at an upstairs window directly opposite his room. It was a girl, or the shape of one, with long dark hair. She stood perfectly still, watching him.

Justin stopped messing with his clothes. He held a t-shirt in his hands and watched back. The figure didn't move for several long seconds. Then the curtain was pulled shut with a quick, decisive movement.

He stood at his window for a moment longer, looking at the closed curtain across the way. He finished dumping his clothes in the dresser, then lay down on his bed.

"Hey, where you at?" a text came on his phone. It was Dennis.

"You'll never guess," Justin replied. "In your hotel" he typed. "When U back?" The message sent, then nothing.

"Hello?" he typed a few minutes later.

"No way" Dennis typed back. "Something just came up"

"What?" Just toyed.

"C U ltr" was the reply, and nothing more. Justin could just imagine the look on his best friend's face. Although he expected more of reaction, even just through texts. He was never able to predict people's reactions very well.



At 4:55 p.m., Justin put on the only spare pants he had, grey ones, and a white shirt tee shirt. The manager tsk-tsked him for his non-uniform uniform, but Justin was going to have to endure it until he got his first paycheck. The restaurant was quieter than he expected, with only eight tables occupied.

"Table three needs setting." A woman in her twenties, Maria, pointed without looking at him. "Then clear table six."

Justin set up the table and stacked plates. Between trips to the kitchen, he leaned against the service station.

"I saw girl in the window across the courtyard," Justin asked Maria. "Black hair, kinda tan, kinda tall. Know of anyone around here like that?"

"If that's Crystal, Nicole's niece..." Maria shrugged, gathering silverware into a roll. "I wouldn't start anything. Keeps to herself. Works in the club."

"The club?"

"The casino lounge." Maria tucked the silverware into her apron. "It's called Paradise. Our kitchen doubles for the kitchen for Paradise. She's in training I think."

Justin wandered over to the archway that led from the restaurant into the club called Paradise. It was a swanky joint, if ever he saw one. Shiny black tables, deep red carpeting, neon signs, black marble walls and columns. It looked a bit out of time and kind of silly. It was like an old 80s-90s casino but amped up to lean into how anachronistic it was. Why would anyone want to be in a place like that?

This young man didn't have any answers. Justin never understood gambling anyway. He was not going to lose a cent gambling for as long as he was going to stick around in Atlantic City. He had decided on that.

He'd see how this part-time job was going to work out. He didn't ask for it, but it was a job, and he needed money. Badly. And it came with a free room. So at least for now, he'd see how this was going to go.

When he saw Nicole walk through the closed restaurant, he dashed over to talk to her. "Uh, hey... Your niece, Crystal," Justin said, aligning salt and pepper shakers nearby to pretend like he was there for a reason. "Dennis never mentioned her."

"Family on my brother's side." Nicole smoothed her already smooth hair with her palm. "She's been through a difficult time. Finding her feet here this summer." Her tone offered no opening for further questions. "I told you black pants." She moved on to wherever she was going.

Justin understood. He'd been told what he would be told. He finished his tables and walked back to his room. Across the courtyard, the window to the girl's room was dark, the curtains drawn. Justin pulled the cord to close his own curtains, then clicked off the lamp.



Justin's phone revealed the time to be 10:45 by the time he woke up enough to check. He had been up to 3, so it figured. Nothing was where he thought it should be. He'd only woken up in a hotel room a couple of times before and was not used to being in another bed or bedroom. He dressed and made his way down to the hotel gym. The space was smaller than he expected — a treadmill, a weight bench, a few dumbbells, and a mirror along one wall. He expected to be alone.

Crystal stood at the side of the room, blocked by some machines. Justin's arrival had gone unnoticed, and he slowly walked around to get a better look at her. She wore platform black pumps, her legs extending upward into a leopard-print miniskirt that ended just below where her thighs met. A white cropped tank top exposed a strip of tanned midriff. Her dark hair fell in loose waves around her shoulders. Not exactly a workout look.



In her hands she held a tray. It looked like the same kind that was in his room with the ice bucket and sterilized glasses on it. She pivoted slowly on one foot, then the other, completing a full circle. The tray remained perfectly level. Her posture was rigid, her chin tilted slightly upward. She did this again. And again.

Justin walked to the weight rack, lifting two ten-pound dumbbells. He positioned himself just out of direct view, watching her reflection between his own sets of bicep curls.

She was amazing. This close to a girl, things usually got worse, like a bigger nose or a crooked smile. But this girl, Crystal, was better the closer you got. Her face was perfect, not a blemish, not a bump. Her eyes were bright. Her smile was pleasing. She had a body that she obviously was proud of, and there was no reason to think she was mistaken in that belief. Her body was the kind only young women can have — thin, curvy and faultless.

In the light from the window, Justin could see the details. The spray tan was uniform, the color of expensive furniture. Her nails were squared off, painted coral. Her hair had volume at the roots, falling straight around her face. Small gold hoops caught the light. A thin chain circled her right ankle.

He had no idea what she was doing, but as long as she kept doing it, he wasn't going to ask any questions. She was twirling and turning and he got to see every inch of her.

After her fifth rotation through her odd routine, Crystal stopped. She looked directly at Justin through the mirror, apparently noticing him for the first time. Her expression didn't change, but she held his gaze for several seconds before placing the tray on a bench and stepping out of her platforms. Without a word, Crystal tucked the tray under her arm. She walked past him, her head tilted down, moving too quickly to be stopped. As she passed, Justin caught the scent of something floral. He glanced down at the gold anklet dangling around her ankle bone.

Justin stood in the empty gym for a moment after she left. He set the dumbbells back on the rack with a soft clang.

Somewhere in the depths of his mind, the memory of Chet and Bryce percolated up. He recalled what they had said about Jersey Shore girls who were easy lays. He was embarrassed for himself.



Justin lay on his hotel room bed, cell phone in hand, scrolling through old texts from Dennis. He still hadn't responded. Just had sent a number of text, telling him not to be embarrassed by him being in Atlantic City just when he decided to visit family, but to reply. He even sent texts explaining how he would

stick around for a few weeks and work in the hotel restaurant until he got back. Nothing. It wasn't like Dennis to get so easily flustered.

The window across the courtyard glowed yellow with lamplight. Justing reached to pull his curtains just a bit so he could look. He had been waiting for this.

Crystal stood at her window. The outfit was a uniform. A black satin bodysuit cut high on her hips, with a white cotton tail attached at the back. A stiff white collar circled her neck. Sheer black stockings covered her legs. A headband with black rabbit ears sat in her dark hair. White cuffs encircled her wrists. Black patent heels raised her height.

She placed an imaginary tray on an invisible table in a weird squat, not bending over, but just bending at the knees. It looked like she was trying to get it right. Her body pivoted smoothly, the heels steady on the ground. She turned toward the window, her mouth curving into the same practiced smile Justin had seen in the gym. She held the expression for several seconds before her face went blank again.

Justin watched as she reset — shoulders back, head tilted, hands positioned precisely in front of her. She repeated the sequence. Place, turn, present, smile. The movements were more economical this time. She did it again. Then again. She was getting better at it.

His phone buzzed with a message: “How's Dennis?” It wasn't from his friend. It was from his mom. He sighed. Justin glanced at Crystal's window, then typed back: “Fine.” He continued watching as she completed another rotation, the white tail shifting slightly with the movement.

Justin stood at his window, nose pressed to the glass. Crystal repeated her routine again — squat, place, turn, present, smile. It was the same movements followed by the same facial expression, executed with the precision of someone rehearsing a role. Justin watched as she completed the sequence a fifth time, then a sixth.

Crystal turned toward a different angle of her room, presenting to an imaginary table positioned more to the left than before. As she pivoted, her gaze swept past her window and locked onto Justin's. He had let his little slit open up wider, without realizing it, exposing his face. Both of her hands froze in mid-air, the imaginary tray suspended. Her eyes widened, the practiced warmth vanishing from her face.

She lunged for the curtain, fingers fiercely grasping the fabric. It slid shut with a flourish. In that half-second before the fabric fell, Justin saw an expression of panic and humiliation. Now he felt like an absolute ass.



Justin stood outside Nicole's suite on the third floor. He checked his appearance in the elevator mirror — jeans, t-shirt, hair still damp from his shower. He knocked.

Nicole opened the door, already dressed in a navy pantsuit. Her hair was pulled into its usual tight bun. She looked him up and down once.

"I need to talk to Crystal," Justin said. "I wanted to apologize."

Nicole stepped aside, gesturing toward the living room. "She told me about it. Come in."

The suite was larger than his room, with a sofa and two armchairs arranged around a coffee table. Nicole walked to a connecting door and knocked twice.

"Crystal, honey, come out here a minute." Her voice was calm but carried authority. She returned to the sofa, sitting with perfect posture.

He felt like an absolute idiot. He hadn't realized that the waitresses of the club were dressed in bunny girl outfits. He had no idea. It wasn't until he bothered to look during his last shift that he noticed all the girls who worked there were dressed like that. He thought he was just watching some bizarre cosplay or something when he was spying on Crystal. No, she was just doing her job, and practicing to do it well. He could respect that.

What he could not respect was himself for ogling her on three different occasions. Each time, she had to stop doing what she was doing and run off.

Justin remained standing near the doorjamb. From the connecting room, he heard the sound of a drawer closing. Then footsteps.

Crystal emerged. She wore dark-wash jeans that fit like they'd been tailored to her body, with a white bandeau top exposing her midriff and the curve of her chest. Wedge sandals added three inches to her height. Her hair was teased out, falling around her shoulders. Makeup was applied evenly — foundation, eyeliner, mascara, nude gloss on her lips. Gold hoops hung from her ears, a thin chain with a small charm rested against her collarbone.

She looked at Justin, then at Nicole, then back at Justin. She stood uneasily, weight shifting between her feet.

"I wanted to apologize," Justin said. "Last night. This morning. I shouldn't have been staring."

Crystal's expression didn't change. She glanced at Nicole briefly.

"It's rude," Nicole said, though her tone remained neutral. "Crystal has privacy concerns."

"Yes, I understand." Justin nodded. "It won't happen again."

Crystal looked at the floor, then toward the exit. "I have to get ready for my shift." Her voice was higher than Justin expected, softer.

"Of course." Justin stepped back toward the door. "Sorry to bother you."



Crystal returned to the connecting room without another word. Justin walked out into the hallway, hearing the door click shut behind him.

Justin walked back to the elevator, down the the other wing, down the hallway to his room and sat on his bed. The image of Crystal in the doorway remained — how the light from the window caught the chain around her neck, how her eyes moved quickly between him and Nicole, then to the floor. In the daylight and at close range, she was beautiful. The kind of beauty that seemed natural even though Justin knew it required time, products, technique.

Later that evening, as he carried plates from the kitchen to the dining room, he saw Crystal again. She moved through the lounge in her uniform, the rabbit ears standing out against the shining liquor bottles behind the bar. She set drinks on tables with the same precision he'd witnessed her practice.

Justin watched from the connecting doorway of the restaurant. It wasn't one thing. It was everything. The way she held her shoulders, slightly back, sticking her chest out. The way her hands rested on her hips when listening to an order. The tilt of her head when a customer spoke, slightly to the left.

When their shifts ended, Justin followed the hallway toward the elevator. Crystal walked ahead of him, far enough that she didn't seem to know he was behind her. He watched her walk — the movement of her hips, the specific placement of each foot in the heels. She was so smooth, like she had been practicing this for months.

The elevator doors opened. They entered together, standing on opposite sides.

"You work in the lounge?" Justin asked.

"Sometimes." Crystal kept her eyes on the floor indicator.

"How's the pay?"

"Better than bussing tables." The doors opened on the third floor. She stepped out first and moved toward her room without looking back.

He glanced down the hallway at her disappearing back. Sticking out his foot to block the door from closing, giving him extra time. There was something in the line of her jaw under the makeup, something in the turn of her shoulder, something familiar that he couldn't place.



The next afternoon, Nicole found Justin refolding napkins in the empty restaurant. She placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Crystal doesn't have many people her age here. It would be good for her to get out."

"I'm not sure she wants me to get much closer to her," Justin said, stacking the clean napkins.

"She's shy. Walk on the boardwalk. Get some saltwater air." Nicole's tone left no room for negotiation. "You both need it. She'll meet you in the lobby at two tomorrow. Wear something presentable."

At two o'clock the next afternoon, Justin waited in the lobby. Crystal emerged from the elevator wearing the same tight jeans and a pink halter top, her wedge sandals tapping against the marble floor. She didn't make eye contact.

"Ready?" Justin asked.

Crystal nodded toward the glass doors. "The boardwalk's this way."

They walked in silence for the first ten minutes, Justin matching her pace. Her hips moved in rhythm with her stride, the wedges tapping slightly on the wooden planks.

"The funnel cake stand is good," Crystal said suddenly, pointing with her chin. "The pizza by the slice place makes the sauce too sweet."

"You've tried them all?"

"I live here." She stopped at a railing overlooking the beach. "What do you do?"

"I was starting community college in the fall. I live in Philadelphia. Well, I used to." Justin leaned against the railing. "Now Florida, I guess."

Crystal turned to face him, wiping something from the corner of her mouth. "Florida sucks."

"Never been."

"It does." She adjusted the strap on her sandal. "The sun is brutal."

Atlantic City was not like Florida much at all. Despite there being a beach and an ocean, Atlantic city was more grey, more colorless. The buildings were more weathered and utilitarian, not like he imagined Florida was. There they had bright white buildings and neon art deco in the bright sun with green palm trees.

The wind was cold, a bracing sensation. The sun was dimmer, like it was farther away, the waves harsher. Even the seagulls seemed mean. Still, it was better than Philly this time of year.

They continued walking, passing souvenir shops and arcades. When they reached the pier, Crystal stopped. Justin stood beside her, hands in his pockets.

"I haven't eaten," Crystal said. She was walking to a food stand.

"What looks good?" Justin asked, scanning the menu board.

She leaned over the counter to talk to the guy naming the food. "Cheesesteak. Whiz wit."



Justin stood still. That was a local term. A local way to order a cheesesteak.

“Whiz *what?*” the guy behind the counter said.

“With cheese whiz,” Crystal explained.

Justin watched her mouth move as she talked, the shape of her jaw under the foundation, the way her brow furrowed slightly when concentrating. The recognition assembled itself piece by piece, then all at once.

The blown-out hair, the strapless top, the wedge sandals, the coral nails, the gold hoops — all of it was a costume. He recognized the structure of his chin, the familiar mannerisms he hadn't seen in years.

He looked at her across the table, his sandwich frozen halfway to his mouth. The name clicked into place.

“Hey,” Justin said, his voice lower than before. “Dennis.”

Crystal's sandwich flopped onto her paper wrap. Her eyes widened as she stared at him, recognition dawning in her expression before she could hide it. She looked down at her lap, then back up at Justin.

Dennis pushed his untouched cheesesteak away from him. “Don't,” he said quietly. “Not here.”

They walked back towards the hotel in silence, avoiding each other's gaze. The parking area was deserted, overlooking another parking lot and a distant bridge over a river. They sat down on a curb stop.

They sat in silence for a moment. Dennis opened the tiny gold clutch he'd been carrying and pulled out a cigarette and a lighter. His fingers moved with practiced ease around the small lipstick tubes and compact inside. He lit the cigarette with a flick of his thumb, the flame trembling slightly.

He took a long drag and looked out at the river. Justin watched Dennis's hand holding the cigarette. It trembled, just slightly, between drags.

“I knew this was a bad idea,” Dennis said, his voice changed somehow, lower than Crystal's but not quite Dennis's. “She told me no one from before would recognize me.”

“How long?” Justin asked.

Dennis turned to look at him, smoke curling around his face. “Almost a year now.” He took another drag from the cigarette. “Nicole helped me.”

Dennis took another drag from his cigarette, smoke curling from his nostrils. He flicked ash onto the concrete.

“After I moved here, it was boring. Hotel was dead, Nicole was always working, I didn't know anyone.” He adjusted the strap of his top, a nervous gesture Justin had never seen him make before. “Met some kids. Local guys. They had this thing going on along the boardwalk. Pickpocketing.”

“Pickpocketing?” Justin repeated, watching Dennis's hands.

"I was just a lookout. Not my fault if tourists can't keep track of their wallets." Dennis crushed the cigarette with his heel. "One day, we're on our way uptown when cops pull us over. Find a bunch of stolen shit in the trunk. I took the blame for the whole thing. Said it was mine."

"Because you were eighteen?"

"Because I was stupid." Dennis reached into his clutch for another cigarette. "Thought I'd get a fine, community service. Nothing serious."

"How did *this* happen, though?" Justing asked, gesturing to his feminized friend.

"I'm getting there, asshole." Dennis paused with the cigarette halfway to his lips. "When Nicole came to get me, she was dead to me. I'd never seen her like that. Not yelling. Just cold, you know? Like she was calculating to the decimal how much I'd disappointed her." He lit the new cigarette, the lighter flame steady this time. "Took my phone. Grounded me to the hotel. But worse — she said I needed to learn consequences. That I clearly didn't understand how the world worked."

Dennis took a final drag from that cigarette, flicking it away. He watched the ember bounce off the asphalt.

"The guys I took the fall for? They weren't exactly grateful." He smoothed a wrinkle in his jeans. "Got worried I'd talk, I guess. Next thing I know, there's jewelry from the casino showing up in my locker at work."

"They framed you?"

"With witnesses and everything." Dennis's hand moved to his face, hovering near his cheekbone before dropping back to his lap. "Cops weren't happy to see me again. This time, I actually got charged."

"Whoa? no shit?" Justin said, genuinely shocked. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want anyone to know that!"

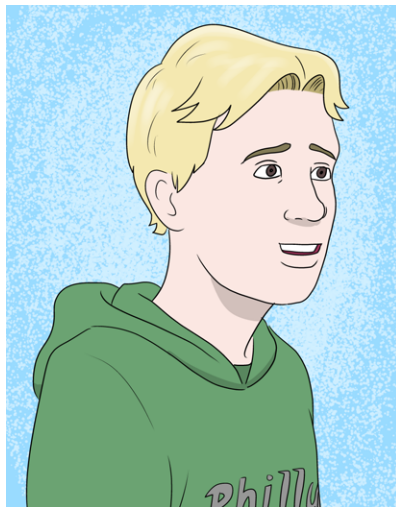
"Wow," Justin repeated. "But they didn't find you guilty, did they?"

"They didn't? Well, then the three years I was sentenced to the Juvenile facility in Cape May was some kind of mirage I guess." Dennis stared out the at the sky.

"Three years? But it's... It hasn't been three years."

"I got out after three weeks." He paused. "Medical exemption."

"Lucky."





“No, not really. After a couple of weeks, I got into it with three guys. Or they got into it with me. Woke up in a hospital. The medical exemption was my busted face. Fractured orbital bones. Cheekbone. Nose, obviously.” Dennis rubbed his nose unconsciously. “The reconstruction took two surgeries.” He reached into his clutch for another cigarette, then stopped, his hand closing around the lighter instead. “They said to send me back was a danger to my safety. I just finished my probation.”

“Jesus Christ,” Justin said, taking a closer look at his friend’s face to see the damage. There wasn’t anything to see, really. “Does it still hurt?”

“No,” Dennis replied. “Not in the way you’re thinking, at least.”

“Sucks, dude.”

“After I got out of surgery, Nicole said I couldn’t be Dennis anymore.”

“What?”

“She said she thought I was being targeted. Like the guys who busted my face were working with the guys who framed me. They wanted me to keep quiet, or just get rid of me. She said that she didn’t want thugs coming around, ready to do even worse. She said she thought the mob might be involved.”

“Seriously?”

“I can’t really say she’s wrong. I don’t think the guys in that pickpocketing gang were that connected, but the again, who the fuck knows?” Dennis held his cigarette in between two very long coffin-shaped fingernails.

“So it was either go home, wherever that was, and hope no one followed me, or pretend to be someone they’d never suspect. And Crystal was born.”

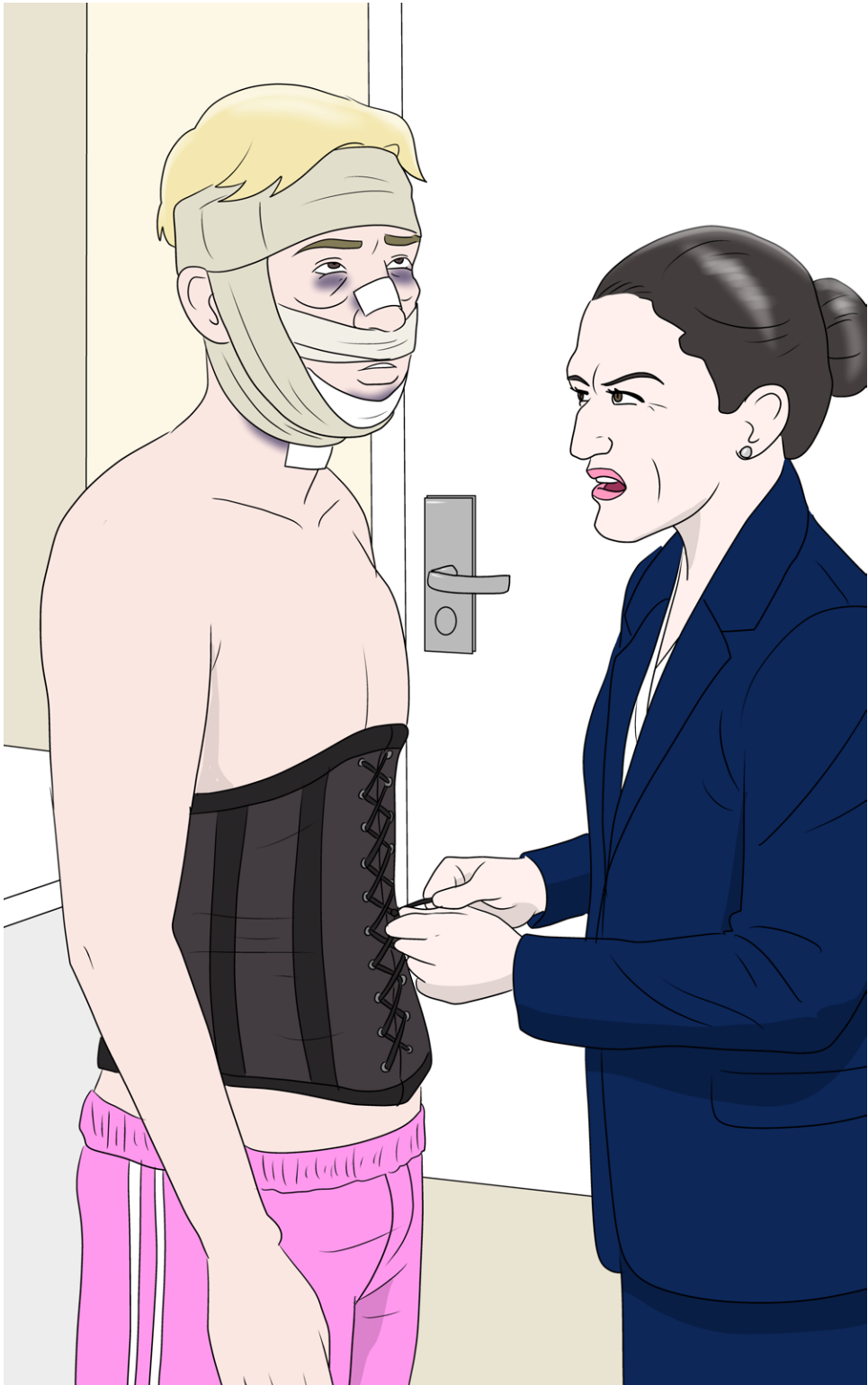
“Wow. That’s a lot.”

“Then I had a third surgery, a reconstruction that was done by some plastic surgeon Nicole knew from the casino.” Dennis stared through the garage to the other side, where some pigeons were picking at a discarded fast food bag. “Pretty good guy, apparently. But when the bandages came off...”

He paused, touching his cheekbone. “The cheekbones were higher. Softer than before. My nose came out smaller, straighter. The whole face just... changed.” Dennis turned to face Justin, the afternoon light catching his jawline. “I looked in the mirror and didn’t know who was looking back. It wasn’t Dennis. And it wasn’t anyone I knew.”

“Recovery meant weeks in bed.” Dennis’s voice carried across the empty parking lot. “My body started changing too. Weight in my hips, chest got... softer.” He gestured vaguely at his chest with one hand. “Nicole’s doctor said it was a hormonal response to trauma and the medication. Called it normal.”

He kicked at a loose rock with his wedge sandal. “By the time I could get out of bed, none of my old clothes fit. Nothing looked right.”



“Nicole bought support garments for recovery.” Dennis stared down at the concrete. “What she actually bought were corsets.”

Justin turned in his seat to look at him. “Like what?”

“Real ones. Boned. With laces.” Dennis adjusted his top again, his fingers moving to his lower ribs as if checking for something that wasn’t there. “She said they were medical. Better posture while my body healed. My back was a wreck after being in bed for so long.”

“You wore them?”

“All the time. At first just to sleep, then all day.” Dennis’s hand moved from his ribs to the small of his back. “First time she laced one on me, I could barely breathe. But it fit. That’s what I kept thinking. It actually fit.”

The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the parking lot. Dennis reached into his clutch and pulled out a compact, checking his reflection quickly before snapping it shut.

“She bought other things too. Underwear, stockings. Called them a medical necessity.” Dennis’s voice was flat. “That’s how she framed everything.”

“When did the bunny girl thing start?”

“As soon as I could walk without wobbling.” Dennis kicked at the dashboard with the toe of his wedge sandal. “Nicole said I needed something useful to do. Said the club training would help with posture and balance.”

“This so fucked up, Dennis.” Justin was beyond trying to understand the story. He just was trying to catch up with everything, and failing.

“Dinner rush coming up, I gotta start getting ready for my shift.” Justin got up quickly, but Dennis didn’t he held out his delicate, jeweled hand with shiny long fingernails for assistance. A moment of hesitation was Justin still being unsure what to do and how to react. He pulled Dennis up, and he wobbled on his heels for a moment before walking toward the hotel’s parking entrance with the same measured pace Justin had seen him use in the gym.

Justin was reluctant to ask his most obvious question, but he had to. “Um... I don’t wanna ask too many questions but... The boobs?”

“Nicole gave me these supplements. She said it would help with the disguise. That was six months ago. I started growing tits a month ago, they’re supposed to get bigger, too.”

“Why did you take them?”

“You ever spend a month in bed healing up from guys kicking your face in? If it came with pain killers, I was gonna take whatever I was told to take.”

“Fair,” Justin said.

"Then I noticed things changing. Not just my chest. My voice started dropping differently. My skin got softer." They got to the elevator. "Nicole said it was just part of recovery. Normal healing process."

"But Nicole was right. No one has ever asked about me." Dennis's voice remained flat, without bitterness. "People looking for Dennis Kowalski would be looking for a boy. Not Crystal."

The elevator dinged, the doors opened. Smoothing his pants with practiced movements before stepping with Justin through the open door.

"The worst part?" Dennis asked, one hand on the car roof. "It worked. No one bothered me. Not once. I became invisible to exactly the people I didn't want to see me anymore."

Dennis took a final drag from his cigarette, his knuckles white around the filter. He stubbed it out on the elevator floor, then kicked it into the gap.

"That's the short version." His voice was flat as he turned to face Justin. "I gotta go home and not think about this. I'm done talking for now."

"What happens now?" Justin asked.

"We see what happens." Dennis straightened up, flipping his hair over one shoulder. "Same as always."

"It's good to see you."

"I guess you know why didn't reply to your texts."

"It's a pretty good excuse, so I'll let it pass."

Justin could just make out a grin hiding behind Dennis's turned away face and under his hair. He grabbed another elevator to his floor, his hips moving in the same rhythm Justin had been watching a little too closely.



Justin walked the boardwalk that night, past all the closed stands and tucked-away beach equipment. He took a bench overlooking the ocean, letting the cold wind slap him around. The water appeared gray under the hazy sky. Tourists passed in the shadows, their voices as distant as they had ever been.

Was there anything he could have done? He wasn't sure. Was there anything he could do now? Maybe, but he'd have to work on it. The one plan he had, to run was immediately fraught with the complication that he was already on the run.

He thought about the afternoon with Dennis in the car garage, cigarette smoke curling around the interior, the way his hand had trembled and his voice got weaker the longer he talked. When had he picked up smoking, anyway?

Three hours later, Justin returned to the hotel. The lobby was quiet as he passed through to the restaurant. Everything was closed. Nicole was at the desk, though, even at 1 in the morning. She was reviewing some printouts.

“Justin.” She didn’t look up from her clipboard. “Good thing you’re here. I can’t leave the desk. I need fresh linens delivered to room 617 and housekeeping isn’t answering their phone. End of the sixth-floor corridor.” She slid a key card across the counter. “Just take the cart.”

Justin stood there and looked at it. “Look, I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.... But I’m not comfortable with this.”

Knowing what he knew, knowing that this woman had been behind Dennis’s change into Crystal, he wasn’t sure how to feel. Dennis seemed disgruntled, but not to the degree Justin really thought he should be. He really couldn’t read Dennis’s feelings.

“I know you signed up as kitchen help,” Nicole continued, “but I just need you to do this for me, this one time, okay?”

Justin wheeled the linen cart toward the elevator, the wheels squeaking against the marble floor. The sixth floor hallway was quieter than the third, with thicker carpet that absorbed sound. He stopped outside room 617, key card in hand.

He wasn’t sure where to put them. On the toilet lid? In the sink? The bed? The floor? He opted for the bed. He loaded them off the cart, which was stuffed full of clean white towels and then headed out.

That’s when he realized what he had in his hand. A card key for the entire hotel. He could get into any room. He wheeled the cart to the floor and walked to the room Nicole and Dennis stayed in. Well, technically it was two rooms.

He whisked his card through the reader and the door popped open. The lights were out and he flipped them on. It was like any hotel room, maybe a little more lived in, but just like his room. Then he made his way over to the door to Dennis’s room. He was still working at Paradise, and would be for another hour or so. He opened the door, hit the lights, and when he looked up, he saw the room was overwhelming.

The bed was covered in leopard-print, matching the curtains. A vanity mirror stood against one wall, ringed with bulbs. On the dresser, makeup was arranged with precision — foundations lined up by shade, palettes stacked in rows, brushes standing in cups. At least thirty products, all showing use.

A silver tray held several perfume bottles with labels facing outward. Jewelry boxes, some open, some closed, filled the remaining space.

Four bunny girl uniforms hung on a clothing rack near the wall. Black satin bodysuits, each one pressed flat. White cotton tails fixed at the back. White collars and cuffs clipped beside them. Rabbit ear headbands hung from each

hanger. Nothing was tossed over a chair or left half-done. Everything had been dry-cleaned and hung with care.

He stepped closer, then stopped.

“Jesus,” he said under his breath.

Along the wall was a full shoe rack. Every pair was heels. Some were low, most here at least three inches, narrow and impractical for moving around. Others were platforms, five inches at least. There were at least fifteen pairs. None looked new. The soles were marked. The straps had small creases. The heels had been used.

Justin looked back toward the vanity.

Framed photos were tucked into the mirror frame. Crystal with other girls from the hotel, all of them tan, all of them laughing. Crystal in the bunny uniform at what looked like a work event, shoulders back, smile fixed. Crystal on the boardwalk in a tiny sundress, sunglasses on, caught mid-laugh.

He leaned in closer to the last photo.

The girl in the picture had her head tilted back slightly. Her hair was shiny. Her nails were visible around the sunglasses. The dress was short. The smile looked real and carefree.

Justin reached for the edge of the frame, then pulled his hand back and turned toward the door.

On the wall beside the vanity, Justin noticed a whiteboard.

The handwriting was neat and rounded.

Monday — tray work, posture, 9am-12pm.

Tuesday — diction, voice, 2pm-5pm.

Wednesday — figure training, 9am-5pm

Thursday — flirting practice, 10am-3pm

Friday — giggling practice, 11am-1 pm

Saturday — gym, 10am-11am

Sunday — Jersey Shore binge night

He stood in the middle of the room and read it twice.

The room felt arranged around the schedule. The uniforms on the rack. The heels lined along the wall. The photos tucked into the mirror. Nothing looked accidental. Nothing looked temporary.

The door opened behind him. Justin turned.

Dennis came in carrying a small shopping bag in one hand and the gold clutch in the other. He wore a cropped denim jacket over a tiny floral sundress that ended at mid-thigh. Strappy heeled sandals raised him a few inches. His hair

was pulled high into a ponytail. His makeup was done: smooth foundation, dark liner, mascara, gloss.

He moved through the doorway without looking down at his feet. The heels did not slow him.

Then he saw Justin.

He stopped completely.

The shopping bag lowered slowly to his side.

Justin said nothing.

Dennis looked at him, then at the whiteboard, then at the clothing rack, then at the mirror where the framed photos were tucked into the edge. His face changed in small increments. He went from surprise to upset in the space of a bout 10 seconds.

“I thought you were working,” Justin said.

“Got the night off,” Dennis explained. “You broke in?”

Justin looked toward the chair by the door. “Nicole gave me the housekeeping key card to do an errand.”

Dennis’s fingers tightened around the handles of the shopping bag. “And you came here.”

Justin did not answer.

Dennis looked at him again, reading his face with more care now. The whiteboard. The uniforms. The shoes. The photos. He had seen it all.

“It’s a bit more than I thought,” Justin said. “I mean... It looks like...”

Dennis closed the door quietly behind him.

Then he crossed the room, set the shopping bag beside the bed, and sat on the edge of the leopard-print bedspread.

“Okay,” Dennis said. “Sit down. There’s more to the story, obviously.”

Justin remained standing just inside the doorway.

Dennis folded his hands in his lap, adjusting the hem of his sundress. “My mom told me about Nicole once. Before I moved here.”

Justin stayed silent, unwilling to interrupt in any way.

“She said Nicole doesn’t think much of men.” Dennis looked down at his hands. “Just so you know, she said. I didn’t understand what that meant then.”

He stood up and walked to the dresser, opening a drawer and closing it again without taking anything out.

“It started small.” Dennis moved to the closet, sliding open the door. “A bag of things taken to donation. A drawer cleared out.”

Justin watched him from across the room.



"You can't wear that while you're recovering," Dennis said, mimicking Nicole's tone perfectly. "It'll irritate the incision." He turned to face Justin again. "Those jeans don't fit you anymore. We'll get you something comfortable."

He closed the closet door and leaned against it.

"I was on medication. I could barely get to the bathroom by myself." Dennis hugged his arms around his chest. "Nicole would bring me things to wear. Softer. More fitted. Feminine cuts."

He walked back to the bed but didn't sit.

"Then one day I went to find my basketball jersey. The one from sophomore year. It can't be replaced." Dennis's voice remained flat. "It was gone."

He looked at Justin directly.

"I asked Nicole where it was. She said I'd outgrown it." Dennis smoothed his sundress over his hips. "She meant physically, I think. But I knew she meant in every way."

Dennis moved to the closet and opened the door again, though he didn't look inside.

"Then one day I came back from a doctor's appointment. The closet was cleaned out." Dennis ran his hand along the doorframe. "All my clothes were gone. The whole closet. Replaced. Dresses on one side. Skirts on the other. Tops folded on the shelf."

He closed the closet and moved to the dresser, pulling open a drawer.

"Lingerie. Bras. Panties. Dancers gaffs." Dennis pushed the drawer shut with his hip. "It was all in my size."

Justin remained by the door.

"She didn't discuss it. She just did it." Dennis walked to the vanity and picked up a nail file, setting it back down without using it. "At first, I thought maybe she was just being, you know, thorough. But then I remembered what my mom had told me about her."

Dennis looked at Justin in the eye. "I'm not sure she's doing this for my well-being," he said.

"So? Go. Leave. We'll get out of here together."

"Well, yeah. See, I told her that I thought she was going too far and I needed to leave. Then she reminded me that I had nowhere to go. Neither of my parents have room for me in their lives anymore. And even if I tried to go to them, I look like... This."

"So you gotta make some explanations. No big. They love you. They get you. They know you'd never want this."

"That the thing. She's got all the evidence. Receipts, pics, medical records. Everything. And she made sure I signed and paid for everything."