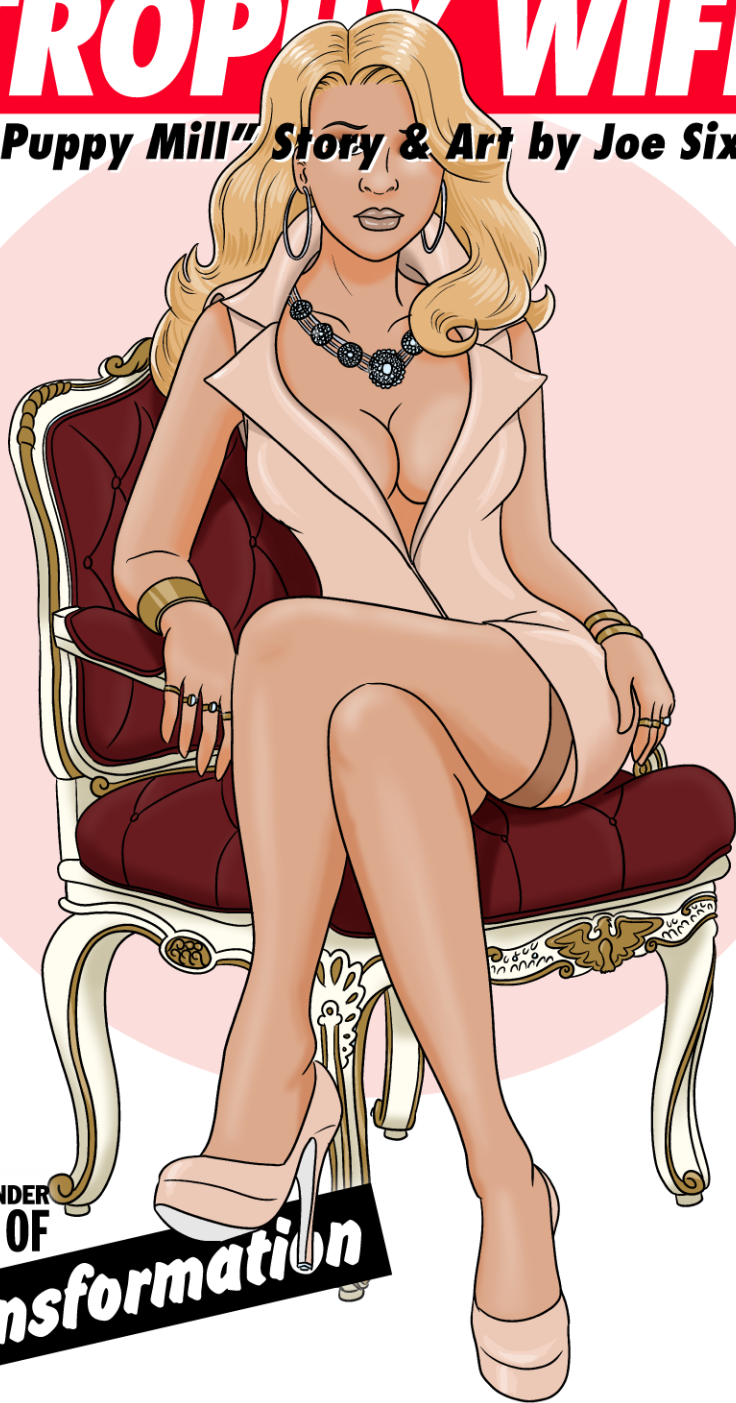


ADULTS ONLY

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HIS LIFE AS A TROPHY WIFE

"The Puppy Mill" Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack



TRANSGENDER
TALES OF

Transformation



J O E S I X P A C K

***HIS LIFE AS
A TROPHY
WIFE***

**“The Puppy Mill”
Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack
A Tales of Transformation story**



2020 Market Edition

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THE PUPPY MILL

CHAPTER 1

As was the custom for Saturday night at the Pacific Grand Theater, the seats were crammed with Martians. From wall to wall, with barely enough room to maneuver down the aisles, Martians were dressed in silver jumpsuits, ray guns drawn, ready to for the show to begin.

The reason for this intergalactic incursion in this small, squalid theater in Los Angeles was the weekly showing of *King Kong Versus the Martians*. It was a horrible film, a truly terrible piece of entertainment that let the viewer stupefied at the level of its' incompetence. It's only entertainment value was as a specimen of horrible 1950's B-movie filmmaking.

It was such an acutely bad film that it had gained a following just on that single, sad, attribute. A big cult following, as a matter of fact. For the last two years, on Saturday night at 12 midnight, the theater showed the film to a group of crazed fans, who could recite every line in the film by heart. The crowd was well within the hundreds, all regulars.

In those two years, the moviegoers had tried to out-do each other every night. Maybe one would come with a home-made prop from the film. The next week, another would want to top him and arrive with a helmet made to resemble the one the Martians wore. Another would top that the next week. After two years of this, now the patrons would show up in full, elaborately made costumes. It had also evolved into its' own live performance, as regular fans eventually were brought up on stage to act out the parts as the movie showed behind them.

One of the people who had been there from the very beginning was a struggling actress by the name of Sasha Davies. Sasha was senior in college back when she was killing a dateless night at the Saturday midnight shows, and was now the keeper of the website and social media accounts dedicated to the show. She also played "Wendy" the 12-year old girl in the film who takes in one of the Martians and shows them human kindness. She was one of the old-timers, at the age of 24, having been there from the first show. She enjoyed the sense of responsibility she felt as one of the organizers, and lived her whole week for Saturday night.

Which is why, when she met Nicholas O'Brien, she had a hard time explaining why she wasn't available for dinner on the weekend. In fact, she had been seeing him for well over a month before she decided she had to come clean about her other life.

This was actually a relief for Nick, as he was sure that yet another girlfriend was going to break up with him. When he learned the reason why he was never

able to get a hold of her at certain days and times, learning that Sasha was just out pantomiming a film was the least worrisome reason behind that kind of behavior.

Nick was from the East Coast, having grown up in and around New York for a long time. But once his parents had passed away, he realized he had little to tie him to his home town. He decided upon trying his luck in Los Angeles as a TV writer. Work wasn't too hard to find if you didn't mind writing junk for fools. He did a few public service spots, a couple of never-to-be-aired sit-coms and some other miscellaneous work before the Writers' Guild went on strike.

With no work, Nick's fortunes took a definite turn for the worse. A small check from the union at least kept him from starving, but that was all it did. As the weeks and then months went on, Nick found himself more and more dependent on Sasha for everyday living expenses. He was eating her food, using her car and living in her apartment most of the time. Finally, Nick suggested that they move in together.

Sasha took the suggestion as a positive step forward in a relationship, but with the strong suspicion that it was because Nick could no longer survive on his own. She knew she was right, but her emotions led her to letting Nick move in.

Living together was easy. They had similar interests and liked the same music, movies and TV shows. Splitting costs between them worked better, just as Nick hoped. Things started to normalize, and he just had to wait until the strike was over. Things would get even better when that happened.

Meanwhile, Nick was pretty much powerless to resist his girlfriends' suggestion that he come with her to the Saturday night showings. He was a little nervous about Sasha's odd attachment to that movie and was content to let her have that part of her life to herself. But he capitulated.

Two months later, he was in costume and performing on stage just like Sasha. He had gotten into the event just as deep as his girlfriend.

In fact, when Sasha announced she had accepted a role in a downtown stage production, it was often Nick going by himself to the Saturday night shows.

Sasha was sick that she missed her very first shows at the Pacific Grand, but her dream was always to act in a big play, and she couldn't refuse the opportunity. She kept in touch with everybody else involved, and interrogated Nick about every last detail of every show she missed — who had flubbed a line, who had the weirdest costume, who played which parts. She wanted to know every last bit of information.

Nick was happy to tell her everything he could. He knew how much those shows meant to her, and the demands of being in a stage production were stealing every last minute of her time. The truth was, he was starting to miss her. She wasn't home for more than an hour or two before she was asleep and

up early the next morning. Sasha seemed to thrive on the work, but Nick was lonely.

Then came the stunner. The production Sasha was in was going to tour. A long six-month traveling show... In Europe. She would be able to fly back for a few days here and there... but...

Nick did what he thought a man should do. He told her to follow her dream. Sasha almost took it the wrong way, as he seemed so resolute in telling her to leave. But Nick told her in no uncertain terms why it needed to happen.

"It's what you worked for, it's what you deserve, and I'll be here when you get back," he said.

"I don't want you thinking I want to leave you," she replied.

"You're not leaving me. You're just going to be working for a little while," he held her small trembling hands firmly. "You know this will be worth it. You can't turn your back on this for me or anything else."

"You know I would. You know if you asked me I'd stay."

"I'd never ask you that. I'd never hurt you like that."

"I won't go. I'm not going to go."

Nick knew that if she didn't take this chance, she'd regret it for the rest of her life — and he'd regret being the one who stopped her.

"Maybe we shouldn't be seeing each other, then," he said, trying to sound like he meant it.

Sasha's delicate and beautiful face looked like it had shattered in horror. "What? What are you..."

"I'm saying that if you think I want to be in a suffocating relationship with someone who can't let go, you're crazy." Nick was practically choking on the words, every sound stinging him as he spoke.

"Nick, you're kidding, right?"

Nick, wanting desperately to say 'yes,' said "no." He was pushing the love of his life right to edge, but it was for her own good. "I don't want some clingy girlfriend who can't support herself. Besides, I've been thinking that maybe we shouldn't be confined by this



whole 'relationship' thing."

The life seemed to escape Sasha's face, and she dipped her head. Staring down at her shoes, she just said, "oh."

She was off and on a flight just two days later. Nick watched from the terminal as the plane pulled away, unsure if he had just destroyed the best thing that had ever happened to him. Not only was he feeling like some part of his insides had been ripped from him violently, but he knew the cold reality of the situation. Sasha was going to have to live out of hotels for a while, and he could no longer expect much money at all from her. He was going to need to find work.

With nothing but time on his hands, Nick looked for a job. He had little luck. He didn't have a very good skill set in the first place, and because of the strike, the whole entertainment economy was too depressed to be hiring.

Of course, he still had *King Kong versus the Martians*. With so much idleness, it wasn't long before he had taken Sasha's leadership spot in the group. He was even making costumes and re-designing the website. After all, it was all he really had now of his girlfriend — besides the occasional text message.

One night, he did everything up special. He sunk his heart and soul into making a big splash at the show for that week.

He made his own costume by hand, meticulously sewing it to match the 1950's original in every detail. He paid special attention to his stage makeup, doing it over and over again to get it just right. He ordered some boots and other accessories over the internet, and even found a wig identical to the character he was going to play. Night after night, he practiced his role until he had it perfect. Nick was determined to be the hit of the show.



CHAPTER 2

Although he didn't know it, the first time Nick had met Roger Van der Slyke, he was wearing a dress.

Roger was in his early forties, with a little bit of grey at the temples of his well-groomed dark head of hair. He countenance and cool demeanor spoke of a man sure of himself and always in control. He gave every appearance of being cultured and refined. But that didn't explain why he was at this particular low-brow bar at two in the morning.

Mr. Van der Slyke was a man who could be easily described as handsome. He had the right amount of wrinkles in his face to make it interesting. He was ruggedly built, with strong, sharp shoulders that looked like he could carry quite a burden. Then, his slow, measuring gaze let you know he had you sized up and figured out before he even had spoken a word to you.

Dempsey's Bar was Nick's usual watering hole, and he was here on this night every week. Everyone knew him by name, and he knew everyone who came to Dempsey's. That's why Nick had spotted him immediately when he had come in. He had never seen this guy before, and didn't want to look like a weirdo, even to strangers. The man's presence made him more than a little uncomfortable. Especially as he was dressed.

Every Saturday, after the movie, the "cast" of the show and a few long-timers would come to Dempsey's to celebrate another fun night. They'd still be talking about the show, and still be dressed in costume. Which usually wasn't a big deal, as everyone in Los Angeles was used to the bizarre by now. A bar full of silver-lame'd jump-suited, green-skinned people wasn't really that out of the ordinary.

The problem for Nick was that tonight, he was in a dress. A white pleather dress, with white go-go boots, long green legs and shocking sea-green hair down to the small of his back. He had decided to shock the group by playing the part of the Martian queen — and doing it convincingly.

The group was indeed surprised, not only that Nick had shown up in drag, but by being so good at it. Nick had the voice, the look, the mannerisms and the lines all down. He was sexy and vivacious. They had never had a better performance in all the months and years they had been doing this show.

"Is it wrong to be attracted to this dude?" One of the cast members asked another.

"One-time exception," replied his friend. "You agree, Matt?"

Matt, a scraggly but good-natured office worker and one of the longer-serving members of the cast just grinned. "Hey, it's not gay if they look cute," he said. "And Nick is a fucking knockout."

Sure, he was probably a little tall for the role of a female queen, but his slender build, big eyes and boyish face looked great under the make-up. Plus, his long, shapely green legs (in tights) were making most of the men in the show seriously reconsider their stance on heterosexuality.

To make the night even more interesting, Nick had spent the whole night in character, as the gorgeous actress Alexis Summers, who played the original part. Nick carried on as if he really was Alexis, in town for an "acting gig" and just "doing a job." He refused to answer to his name and would only speak as Alexis, down to her famously dramatic laugh, dry wit and penchant for flirting with men.

But his friends all played along, even returning some of the playful faux come-ons and having fun with it. Everyone in the show had a blast with Nick's performance.

However, Nick suddenly realized how convincing he was when Roger Van der Slyke sat down next to him and started to talk.

"Haven't I met you somewhere before?" Roger said, "And if I have, how did I ever let you go?"

Nick suddenly sat up straight in his seat and inched away. "I'm not interested," he said in his regular, deep, speaking voice.

Expecting more of an outraged outburst, Nick was surprised to see that the man's only reaction was to raise an eyebrow and let a smirk gradually crook his lips.

"Fascinating," Roger said. He laughed a brief, but genial laugh. "I hope you don't think I come on to all the men in dresses I meet."

Taken aback by his reply, Nick relaxed and smiled. "No problem," he said.

Roger then quickly excused himself and returned to his own table seat. Nick, by the end of the night, barely even remembered the encounter, as it was one of a dozen passes made at him by other men. He also had a few of his own friends have a go at him after they had three or four drinks that night.

"I suppose I should take it as a compliment," he said before leaving for home. Nick had expected to have to deal with a few misguided males that night, and he had fended them off like a seasoned pro.

Eventually, it was time to head back to the apartment, and Nick gave his friends a dramatically overdone air kiss as he left. The night was everything he had hoped. He and his friends had a great laugh, he had been the hit of the show, and had successfully topped everyone else with his amazing impersonation. He had already committed to the cast to do the same performance next week, and he was wondering if he could pull off this act again.

He was eager to get in from the cold air and get out of the incredibly uncomfortable boots by the time he had gotten back to the apartment. Checking his

messages, Sasha had already left two. She was probably eager to know how the show went. How was he even going to tell her what he had done? Well, it was bound to get to her sooner or later. Heck, the guys at the show were probably already texting her about it right now.

Deciding to go all out, Nick got back into the boots and checked the make-up and hair. He set up a tripod and camera in front of Sasha's *King Kong vs the Martians* posters and struck a few poses as the Martian Queen.

"I knew I shouldn't have left you alone," Sasha replied by email when she saw the pictures. "I don't want you using my lipstick," she teased. Nick was eager to tell her everything that had happened that night, and went on in detail about every last bit of information he could recall.

"Sounds like you had the night of your life. I bet they want you to do it again next week." Sasha replied.

"Of course," he wrote back. "They need their queen."



A week later he was even better. He had the whole act down, and carried off his performance without a snag. They even applauded him when he was done for the night. He had never seen anyone get that kind of reaction in all the shows he had attended.

"That was crazy, dude," Matt said to him. "You're so good as a woman, you've messed up my relationships for the rest of my life!"

Nick had gotten a lot of comments like that all night long. But he was still having fun with it. Someone had even given him a bouquet of martian-green roses tonight. If he was going to have to come to each show as the Martian Queen, so be it. He was having a great time.

When the after-show party had broken up, Nick found himself not wanting to leave. He had grown addicted to the comments and compliments.

When he realized this, he was really quite embarrassed. Maybe he needed to take a break from this, after all. Just for a little while.



For Nick in the real world, work was still tough to find. It didn't help that he was sinking so much time and effort into his performance at the movie show that his check on want ads often skipped a day or two. Or three.

But he did manage to get an interview or two a week. After all, it had been almost a month since Sasha left, and the bills still kept coming in.

Just as he had feared, the money needed to pay for rent and basic utilities, added to Sasha's expensive living expenses in hotels, left virtually nothing for Nick. He was beyond struggling. Nick was essentially destitute. He was selling some old CDs and DVDs to have enough money for cheap meals. He knew he had to do something, and it was going to have to happen fast.

It was time for him to consider taking whatever work he could find. Even minimum wage would help at this point. He resolved himself to just do whatever he needed to do to make it right. He couldn't ask Sasha for more money, and being self-supportive was just the mature thing to do. Monday morning, he'd get it done. He'd rejoin the workforce.

Just after he had one more night as the Martian Queen.



There wasn't more than one or two people left at the bar Saturday night, and Nick was finishing off his last drink of the evening. He was alone, all of his friends had gone home. That left Nick with his thoughts about getting work. He really did need the money, but he hated having to get a job. That was one of the reasons he was a writer. He just did what he needed to do, make a few jokes, write some trite dialogue and he got paid for it. He didn't even have to go in to most places he worked for. He just sent them the scripts.

Now, that was about to change, and he was desperately trying to think a way out of it. That was when the bartender dropped off another drink.

"From the guy over in the corner," he told Nick.

But by the time Nick had bothered to look in the corner, the man who sent the drink was sitting down across the table from him.

"I'm not who you think I am," Nick said.

"I think you're a man in green wig and tights," the man replied.

"Well then, I guess I *am* who you think I am."

He pointed at the drink. "I just ordered that for you. My mistake. I didn't recognize you."

"Do I know you?" Nick asked.

"Not really. I accidentally tried to pick you up a few weeks ago."

"You and about a hundred lonely guys at this bar."

The man offered his hand. "Name's Roger."

Nick shook it. "Nick."

"You must be a part of that midnight show they do around the corner."

"What if I said if I wasn't?" Nick responded.

"Then you've got some issues," Roger leaned back in his seat.

The two men had struck up an easy friendship. Quickly, Roger started in on his background. He was an executive at a local chain of hospitals, and was divorced. He and his wife hadn't gotten along for a long time, and had separated years ago, only making it official recently. He said it was going to hurt him at work, and was trying to drink away the sense of dread he had about losing his job.

Nick told him his own story about being out of work and his girlfriend half a continent away for the next several months. Both understood, and both were sympathetic to each others' plight.

"Does she know what her boyfriend is doing in his spare time?" Roger asked.

"She's the one who started this whole thing," Nick answered.

"Did she have anything to do with the costume? With the training?"

"Training?" Nick said. "No, this was all my doing. I'd be too embarrassed to ask anyone for help. Let alone a woman."

"If you don't mind me saying, and please don't take this the wrong way, you make one hell of a beautiful woman."

Nick batted his eyelashes. "Tell me something I don't know." He took a swig of his drink. "My mother would be so proud."

"You've really gone all-out," Roger said, looking Nick up and down. "Shaved your legs, can't see any stubble on your chin... Long nails..." He stared at the appearance of cleavage in what really wasn't Nick's bosom. "Quite a job."

"I've got a lot of free time recently."

"The dress fits you perfectly. Did you have it made for you?"

"I can sew. Learned in high school."

"High school?"

"It was either that or auto repair. The sewing class had much better looking girls in it."

"Gotcha." Roger smiled. "Another drink?"

"Better not," Nick shook his head. "I'm a bit out of it."

"You live far from here? I can drive you home."

"That's okay."

"If you're drunk, you really shouldn't get in your car."

"You were drinking, too."

"I've been having a little tonic water." Roger then lifted Nick's key in the air.

"Besides, I stole these, and you're not getting them back."

Nick sighed heavily. "Fine."

"It won't be so bad. You ever taken a ride in a Porsche Carrera?"

"Lead the way," Nick said, getting up.



On the way home, once Nick had been able to give coherent directions, the two started to talk again.

"You can't be too sad about the divorce if you get to keep this baby," Nick rubbed his hands along the sleek, smooth leather seat he was in.

"It really doesn't make up for the loss of a companion," Roger said. "It's hard to snuggle up with a car at night."

"Did you love her?" Nick asked.

"For a while. But she had different interests. Especially when it came to men. The people I work for couldn't learn about it, so I tried to keep it quiet as long as possible. But it eventually came out. No I'm not going to get any farther up the chain. And forget about starting over. It's too late."

"Who do you work for that would care about a divorce?"

"St. McGivens Hospitals," Roger replied. "They own about a dozen hospitals in the state, another thirty-eight around the country."

"Why would they give a damn?"

"Because they're majority owned by the Church."

"Oh."

"They've all heard about my marriage and how it went south. They know I was going to have to get a divorce, although I don't think they've figured out that it's actually happened. Sooner or later someone's going to invite my wife to a party or something, or drop by. Then they'll know. It's just a matter of time."

"The church guys don't like divorce?"

"Legally, they can't discriminate like that. In reality, though, no one has ever become an executive of that company who had anything less than a one-hundred-percent rock-solid home life."

"It's not your fault, was it? They can't blame you."

"They can and they do," Roger said, curtly. "It's their religious conviction. It's not like I can fight the word of God."

"That would pose its' challenges," Nick admitted.

"What about you? You a big B-movie fan?"

"Not really. Just something Sasha, my girlfriend, got me into."

"Why do you do it?"

"Oh, the people who come are really great, they have a lot of weird, funny ideas and..."

"No, I mean why dress up like this? Like a woman?"

Nick looked over at Roger to see what the expression on his face was. There was no malice or ridicule there. He seemed to really want to know.

"Well, I could have gone as one of the kids in the story, but I'm a few feet too tall for that. The only other major adult character is the Queen."

"You don't do bit parts, in other words."

Nick laughed. "I guess not."

The car pulled to the gate for Nick's apartment building, and Nick got out.

"Thanks for the ride. Hey, do you come to that bar often?"

"Once and a while. It's on the way home from work."

"Well, we're there every Saturday night. You might even like seeing the show."

"Thanks. Maybe I'll drop by."

"Thanks again," Nick said, before walking to the gate. He punched in his code to open the door, not getting the response he wanted. He tried it again. And again.

"Having problems?" Roger called from the car.

"Must be hitting the wrong buttons," Nick replied. He hit another button.

"Hello?" The crackling speaker on the door said.

"Hey, this is Nick in 213. Your neighbor. The code's not working. Can you buzz me in?"

"It's three thirty AM!" The speaker replied.

"Sorry," Nick said. The door buzzed open.

As Nick headed in the door, Roger dashed in behind him. "Hey, hold up a minute. That isn't your stuff on the street, is it?" Roger pointed back out the door at a small pile of furniture and clothing placed on the curb.

"What?" Nick replied, straining his vision for a moment to see what Roger was talking about. "No... Aw, fuck!" He immediately recognized the things on the curb as his stuff. He dashed for it quickly, then realized that he needed to check the apartment as well. "Could you just keep an eye on that for a moment?" Nick asked Roger. "Just for a sec? I'll be right back!"

Nick reversed direction and ran up the stairs to his apartment, putting his keys in the lock. Or at least trying to. They didn't fit. "Goddamn!" Nick yelled. He struck the door with his fist and then grabbed his green-haired head in exasperation. "I don't fuckin' believe it! The locks are changed!"

Suddenly, the doorknob jiggled and the door cracked open, held in place by the security chain.

"What do you want, Nick?" The voice on the other side of the door said.

"*Chet?*" Nick yelped, hardly able to believe who it was. "What the fuck!"

Chet was Sasha's older brother of 24, who Nick rarely saw. He rarely saw him because he couldn't stand the guys' guts. Neither could Sasha, for that matter. She barely even talked to him, except when she had to go to a family dinner or when Chet needed a few bucks to pay a "loan" off.

"You ask me? You're the faggot in the dress," Chet responded.

"It's for the show, you asshole! Sasha's movie show!"

There was a pause from Chet. "Look, all I know is that Sasha called me to get your stuff out of her apartment. Something about dressing up like a woman while she was gone."

"She knows why! You're making this up!" Nick kicked the door.

"Dude! She doesn't want you here! I'm gonna call the cops, okay? You're trespassing!"

Nick was fiery red with anger. "This is my place! I'm gonna call the cops on you!"

"Not here, not now," Roger said, suddenly appearing from behind Nick. He pointed around the hallway where all of the neighbors had stuck their heads out of their doors, curious to see what was causing all the noise.

Nick looked back at the slice of Chet's face visible through the crack in the door. Chet quickly slammed it shut.

"Fuck!" Nick yelled loudly.

Roger put his arm behind Nick and started to escort him away. "We'll sort this out in the morning. You can spend the night at my place."

Without even breaking his eye contact with the door of his apartment, Roger led Nick down the hallway.

"Jesus Fuck!" Nick yelled out again, because he had to let the world know how angry he was.



Nick dropped the handset in the cradle of the phone. He had been calling people all morning.

"What'd he say?" Roger asked, from the couch where he was watching a football game.

Nick had just gotten off the phone with a lawyer, and was \$200 poorer for the consultation. "He said there's not much I can do, unless I want to go to trial about it."

"You should."

"I'm not going to sue my own girlfriend. It's her name on the lease."

He had spent the night at Roger's house, a surprisingly luxurious and large place. If one had used the term "mansion" they might have been overstating things, but not by much. It was unsettling to be in such a strange place under such stressful circumstances.

Roger took a sip of beer. "Have you been able to get in touch with her?"

"She's not taking my calls, and she's not responding to emails or texts."

Roger took a moment to look away from the TV. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not giving up that easy. I'm pretty sure that turd Chet is at the bottom of this. He probably fed her a line and got her to believe what he wanted her to. Now he's got a place to stay. The lying little pipsqueak probably thinks he's real smart. Well, as soon as I can get in touch with Sasha, we'll see who's smarter."

"Meanwhile, why don't you just take it easy," Roger suggested. He was lying back with his feet up on the coffee table. "This is getting to be a pretty good game. Have a beer."

"I guess," Nick said, moving over to the adjoining couch. He popped open a can and took a sip. "This a projection?" He asked about the TV. "60 inches?"

"102. And it's plasma. Biggest one they make."

"Damn," Nick said in awe. "You're not hurting for money, are you?"

"I do alright. Did you see this QB in college last year? They couldn't stop him. Now, in the pro's he can't do a damn thing."

"That's the transition to the pro game and the speed. Hey, maybe I need to start looking for a room right now. I'll probably have to get one of the guys to put me up for the night tonight."

"Stay here. I have a big house and I'm always having friends and associates over."

"I appreciate it, Roger, but we just met and I don't even know when I'll be able to get a place of my own. Thanks for the offer, but..."

"Yeah, I didn't think you'd go for it, but I thought I'd just put it out there."

"Again, I appreciate it, but I've got to make a go of this on my own."

"Understood." Roger took another swig of his beer. "Of course, if you're looking for work, I can help there."

"You're not going to offer me a job, are you?" Nick replied.

"No, I'm about to offer you a very serious proposal." He paused. "I'm not kidding about this. It's going to sound weird, and I don't want to freak you out. But it's a very real, very serious offer."

That sounded chillingly strange. Nick's eyes glanced over the room looking for an escape route. He didn't think he'd really need it, but he was already feeling a little creeped out. If Roger popped up with an axe, he knew where he needed to go.

"Shoot," Nick said.

Roger chuckled. "This is going to be difficult to even say." He cleared his throat. "You seem to have a talent for imitating women, Nick. You do a very good job. And I'm having women problems in my life."

Nick shivered involuntarily. He nonchalantly sniffed his beer for any drugs and checked his escape route again. He sensed trouble. Big trouble.

"I'm not sure how to phrase this without it seeming completely irrational, but..."

"You probably should stop right there, don't you think?" Nick suggested.

"I've been working up the courage to say this for the last day or so, so I'm going to finish." Roger took a deep breath. "I'd like to pay you good money to go out in public as my girlfriend."

"I gotta go," Nick said, getting on his feet.

"Look, I know it sounds stupid, but I'm really desperate."

Nick grabbed his coat. "Thanks for the beer and a place to stay last night. I'll pick up my stuff later."

"Five thousands dollars for just an afternoon's work. One time. A few hours at a basketball game and it'd be over with."

"Hey, I'm sorry, dude — but that's really nuts." Nick slipped a baseball cap on his head and headed out the door.



Four days later, after staying on five different couches and not one step closer to getting in contact with Sasha, Nick's initial brick-wall resistance to Roger's proposal was now paper-thin.

Every time he looked at the ever-scarcer assortment of dollar bills in his wallet, he could only hear that figure again. Five thousand dollars.

After all, he was already doing an impersonation of a woman every week. Some of the newbies at the show didn't even know that he really was really a guy. So it wasn't like he couldn't get away with it. How long is a basketball game anyway? Two hours? He'd be in and out in a blink.

Roger was a decent guy. He liked sports, bought the good kind of beer and...

Five thousand dollars.

It would sure solve a lot of problems. His aching back told him that one more night on a couch was going to be his limit.

"If I was going to do this — and I'm not saying I am — exactly what would we be talking about?" He asked Roger when he called him up.

Roger, sounding slightly stunned to even be discussing the matter, seemed to be less than totally prepared for an answer. "Uh... Well, I have these two tickets to the Anaheim Shock game next week. I got them from my boss, and he expects for me to bring someone."

"Your wife."

"No. He knows about me and Kathy. But I've been generally leading him to believe that I'm in another really serious relationship. Well, engaged, to be specific."

"I thought you said that you were in trouble no matter what with a divorce."

"If I can convince the higher-ups that my marriage never meant much, they could pull some strings and have it annulled. But I have to convince them that I'm on my way into a real, for-keeps marriage. Someone stable and down to Earth."

"That would be the part I'd be playing — if I were to do this?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you just get an actual, real woman to do this?"

"I don't know a lot of real women, Nick. I'm sorry to say."

"You could hire an actress cheaper than me."

"And pay extortion for the rest of my life?"

"Yeah, I guess I wouldn't exactly be making a federal case out of this, would I?" Nick realized.

"Right. As for what it would involve.... I uh..."

Nick interrupted. "I figure it's just showing up for two hours, you be seen with me, we leave and that's the story."

"Uh, yes. I suppose so."

"Do you have five thousand dollars to pay me?"

"Yes."

"Will you pay me in advance?"

"Yes."

"Can I pick out the clothes?"

"Y...Yes."

"If I don't think I can pull this off, can I back out?"

"Just give me fair warning."

"When's the game?" Nick said, not really even believing he was agreeing to this.

"Next Friday. That's about... Eleven, no, twelve days away."

"I need a place to stay while I work on this. I don't want to have to get a hotel room for two weeks as I practice, and I sure as hell am not going to be in the same house as you."

"I have a cottage out back. You can use that. It's not part of the house, and you'll have complete privacy."

Nick let out a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. How had his life come to this? "I don't have a car. Can you pick me up?"



True to his word, Roger set Nick up in a small two-room cottage that was out behind the house. It obviously hadn't been used in a while and everything had a layer of dust on it. It was furnished plainly, with simple tables, chairs and a bed.

After stewing for a few days, unhappy with himself and the very odd situation he now found himself in, Nick finally got around to the business at hand. He needed to make himself over as a female.

He asked Roger exactly what he was expecting.

"Something a lot like the woman you pretend to be Saturday nights." Was the quick answer. "A nice sense of humor, a warm personality and a dazzling smile."

Nick was quite leery that Roger was more than a little taken with the character he had been playing. But it was just two hours. The world wasn't going to come to an end over two lousy hours.

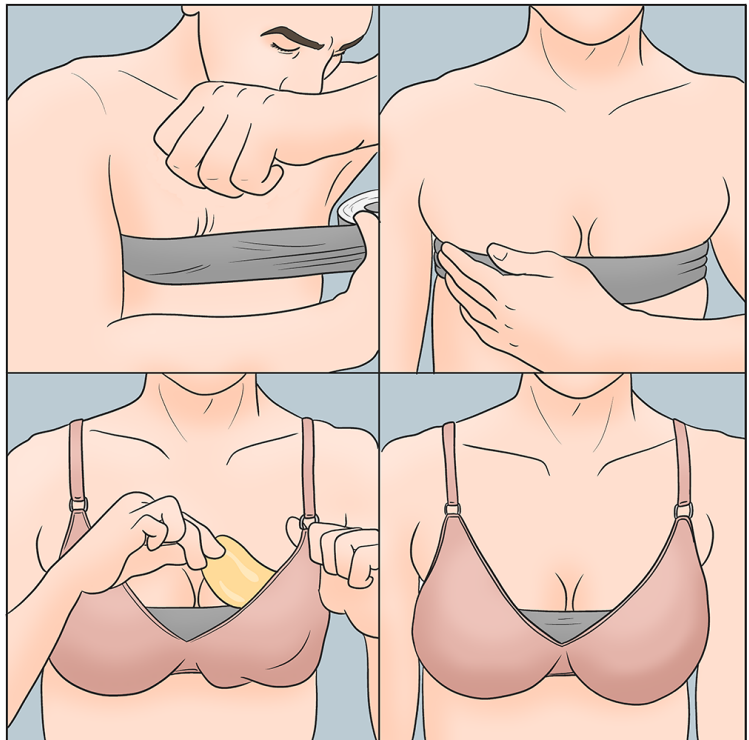
Nick took an examination of himself in the mirror. One of the reasons he had been bale to get away with his impersonation was his slender build. The other was that the Martian Queen was somewhat Amazonian in her proportions, which suited him.

But now, he wasn't going to have that to fall back on. He was going to have to look like a real woman in the real world. Whatever he chose, he was going to have to make sure his clothes covered him fairly loosely. A dress didn't seem right to wear to a game. A blouse or something was way too formal. After thinking about it for a while, he came upon a clever solution. He'd just wear an oversized, loose basketball jersey. It would cover his male body thoroughly and be appropriate to wear to a game. Simple and effective.

He'd get some tight jeans, and a pair of tennis shoes. Voila! Done. No sweat.

The next day, Nick went out and bought everything he needed. That included a dark blond wig that went down to his shoulders. The same place where he had gotten his Martian Queen costume thought nothing about selling him more women's stuff.

He tried it all on that night. It was not what he had hoped for. He originally thought that the combination of a big



head of hair and ample bosom was enough to get the job done. The sight of himself in the mirror wasn't going to fool many.

Why could he look like a woman in the Queen getup and not in regular clothes? It wasn't the green skin, was it?

No. Or rather, a partial "Yes." Nick decided that it wasn't the green, but the skin. He showed a lot of "leg" in his Queen outfit, bared his arms and featured a deep valley of cleavage. He was a convincing female because he was showing off his body, not because he was dressed appropriately. He had to re-think his approach.

It went through a few versions and re-starts before Nick was satisfied with the result. Then, finally, after five days of preparation, he was ready for Roger to see what he had done.

As Roger had said, he wanted a chance to back out of this deal if Nick couldn't pull it off. "It's probably more of a risk for me than it is for you," Roger quipped. He wanted to see the "look" while he could still gracefully get out of going to the game.

Seeing how this was still kind of a "rough draft" version, Nick didn't go too crazy getting ready. He knew that when he finally did go to the game, he'd have to be meticulously careful over every last detail. But for right now, he did the bare minimums. He lotioned up his skin, he shaved closely on his face and legs, applied the shaping undergarments, the padding undergarments, and finally the undergarment undergarments. He used a little bit of concealer to blend the edge of the wig into his scalp, and drew the hair down to frame his face. He put on his bra and used the pads he wore for being the Martian Queen, which Nick thought for some reason looked twice as big as they usually looked. It was probably just his paranoia about someone paying him to dress like this.

Nick also decided to invest in a pair of panties for this exercise, since the bottom half of his costume was going to be much tighter than his Martian dress. He always seemed to check girls out for VPL himself, so he was well aware that he'd better be showing some. Visible panty line, that is.

"All right, here we go," Nick announced as he came into the living room, ready for inspection. He was more than a little nervous. This whole exercise had started as a dress-up game, but it was beginning to feel a lot more serious. Besides, he really did need that money. He stepped around the corner, into full view. "What do you think?" He asked.

Nick had chosen an outfit that reveal the best parts of his body and conceal the worst. He had gone to a smaller, cropped version of an Anaheim Shock top, tied off in a big knot under his so-called breasts. The sleeveless top bared his shoulders and thin arms well.



This left his midsection without coverage, but a yellow t-shirt hugged his thin — even slender — tummy. His body then billowed out to show a seemingly well-developed and well-rounded butt. He wore a denim skirt that ended a few inches above his knees, and revealed his long and shapely legs for the world to admire. He wore a pair of grey leather two-and-a-half inch ankle boots which he had little trouble walking in, thanks to his high-heel experience.

“What can I say?” Roger remarked. “Wow.” He shook his head in amazement. “You look incredible. I think you could really break someone’s heart.”

Nick grimaced, knowing Roger was laying it on a little thick. Nick had spent enough time in front of the mirror over the past few days to know he didn’t make for a stunningly attractive woman. There was something to be said for covering your face with green make-up — it hid quite a bit. With his mannish shape and features, he knew at best he looked like a the sort of woman who was going to have to get by on having a great personality.

“How did you get your...” Roger searched for a polite word, but then realized he didn’t need to be polite. “How did you get your ass to look like that?”

“Padding. You can pad your butt just as easily as padding a bra.”

“And your waist?”

“A body-shaper is taking it down to twenty-eight inches.”

“Absolutely amazing.” Roger’s eyes lingered on Nick, looking him over from head to toe.

“I think it’s still missing something,” Nick said, nervously scratching his arm.

Roger leaned back to consider this, a look of concentration on his face. “Maybe. I’m not sure.” He thought about it for another few seconds, and snapped his fingers. “Jewelry.”

Nick nodded. “I just don’t have the money to go out and buy a lot of stuff. Especially just for one night. Does it make that much of a difference?”

“It would be stranger to see a woman without wearing some sort of jewelry than with it.”

Nick thought about it. “I guess you’re right. I still can’t afford it, though.”

“I’ll cover it. A ring, a necklace and a bracelet or two.”

“And earrings.”

“Ha. You’re already spending money like a woman.”

“And you’re going to help me spend it. Let’s go to the mall.”

“Now?” Roger replied.

“Better sooner than later.” Nick advanced towards the front door.

“Looking like that?”

"We probably should practice being a... Well, being a couple."

"Right now?"

"Don't chicken out, Roger. If you want this to succeed, we're going to have to work at it."

"I guess you're right." Roger went for his jacket and his car keys.



The automatic glass doors to Woodfield Mills Mall whisked open and Nick tugged Roger inside. It was clear to Nick that his companion wasn't looking forward to this visit.

"So where's the closest jewelry store?" Roger asked, headed for a directory.

Nick led him away. "We'll just find it as we do a little window shopping."

Roger groaned.

Nick had been out in public several times in a dress, and he was used to the feeling of a skirt on his legs and the cool air passing over his exposed skin. He had learned a lesson as the Martian Queen, which was that as long as he just acted like nothing was wrong, no one was going to accuse him of being dressed in drag. He merrily clicked along the tiles in his heels.

Roger, meanwhile, had his head on a swivel and was looking every which way. "I don't think anyone suspects." He said to Nick.

"Of course they don't," Nick stopped by the window of the Coach store. "Half the women here look like overdressed drag queens anyway. I'm going to get a better purse in here, bring your credit card."

"I've got five hundred in cash in my pocket."

Nick took a second look at the purse he had in mind. "We'll need the card."

"What's wrong with the one you already have?"

"It's too big and clunky. Smaller is better."

When they finally arrived at a jewelry store, Nick was swinging his new bag back and forth under his arm. He was also sporting a nice new white leather jacket and had filled his new purse to the top with new make-up, hairbrushes and a sparkly pink cell phone. "Everything a real woman would need," Nick told Roger.

Roger knew this was neither the time or place for him to get into a fight about money. Nick pretty much had him over a barrel.

"I'd like to see your engagement rings," Nick said, in his most lilting female voice

The salesgirl's face immediately lit up. "This must be a very special day for you two!"

"You have no idea." Nick fed his arm through Roger's and leaned in tight. Then, he looked up, smiled, and batted his false eyelashes at him.

Roger's head jerked back in surprise. He then looked at the salesgirl. "You got anything used?"



Once the two returned to Roger's house, he made Nick promise to not lose the receipts for anything they had purchased. "Otherwise, I thought that went pretty well," Roger said.

Nick took off his small jacket and put it away. "It took forever for you to loosen up," he kicked off his boots and went over to the kitchen for a beer.

Roger followed him. "I loosened up? When was that? I'm still scared stiff."

Nick held out his hand to show the ring on it. "I don't know why I let you buy me the cheapest ring they had. I'm beginning to feel like this engagement is a sham!"

"I'm sure your heart is shattered."

"My finger is shattered. This thing is way too tight." Nick worked it around his finger.

"It'll be okay tomorrow." Roger took an offered beer from Nick and popped the top. "But seriously, you do one damn good job of impersonating a woman."

"Well, that's nice of you to say so, but I made a ton of mistakes today." He popped his beer. "Did you see me get in and out of the car? I looked like a drunkard. I nearly fell off my heels a half dozen times. That guy in the leather store? He had me read all the way."

"Really? I though we were great."

"We won't last half an hour unless we get a lot of practice in." Nick examined his beer can, and then put it aside. "Let's get started right now. From this moment on, you and I are going to be living together as a couple." Nick took an opened bottle of white wine from the fridge and poured himself a modest glass. "Until we get home from the game, we're going to stay in character."

"Isn't that a bit extreme?"

"Yes, but if you say this is as important to you as it is, then spending the next..." Nick did the math. "56 hours as a couple will be worth it."

Roger took a deep breath. "No. I won't do it. You're fine as it is."

"I'll pull out of this deal right now."

"Okay, okay. Fine. We'll have it your way. We'll be a couple through the game."

"Good." Nick took a sip of his wine, leaving a red lip imprint on the glass. "Now, what do you want to have for dinner, sweetie?"

Roger rolled his eyes. "It really doesn't matter... uh...." Roger thought for a moment. "What should I call you, anyway?"

"Sweetie, honeybunch, dearest, babycakes, snuggle-wuggums..."

"No, no, no. The name. What's my fiancée's name?"

"Did you give them a name? The people at work? What did you tell them?"

"I... Uh... I guess I did." Roger scratched his chin. "I must have." Roger put down his beer and checked his phone. "Let me check my calendar..." He scrolled through a few appointments. "Here it is. '7:30, Game with...' Oh yeah. Now I remember. *Crap.*"

"What?"

"'Game with Dee Dee.'"

"*Dee Dee?* Are you serious?"

Roger threw up his hands. "I used to have a girlfriend named Dee Dee... It was just the first name I thought of..."

"Whatever. It's just for show, right? I get to choose the last name at least. We'll go with Dee Dee..."

"Summers." Roger interrupted.

"What?"

"Dee Dee Summers. I had to give a name for picking up the tickets at the Will Call booth."

"When were you going to tell me this?"

"I was hoping never."

"Fine. Roger Van der Slyke, I'm Dee Dee Summers."

Roger shook Nick's hand. "Hi Dee Dee. How about we order out for dinner?"

Nick wrapped his arms around Roger's neck. "I think that's a wonderful idea, honey."

"You enjoy making me sweat, don't you?"

"Absolutely."



By the time the Friday night game came around, both Nick and Roger were feeling well prepared. Although Roger couldn't have been more uncomfortable with having a fake girlfriend, he eventually got into the swing of things. He even helped with the dishes as Nick washed and Roger dried.

"Are we ready to go yet?" Roger asked.

"Here I come!" Nick said, putting the final touches on. He looked even better than the first time, this time accented by some modest jewelry and more practice in the skirt and heels. The time had done him well, as he carried himself as convincingly as a man was able to. It was time to meet the boss.

"You ready?" Roger asked Nick.

"I'm as ready as I could possibly be. You nervous?"

"Extremely."

"So am I. But all we need to do is just not screw this up, and we'll be fine."

They drove the thirty-five minutes to downtown, then spent another hour finding parking. The center was packed tonight, full of enthusiastic fans. Nick looked like any other female fan, wearing team colors and showing a little sex appeal.

By the time they had gotten to their seats, Roger's co-worker was already waiting for them.

"Well, look who finally decided to show up!" said the man, good-naturedly.

"I forgot how bad parking was downtown during the game," Roger said, apologizing. "Gene, this is my fiancée, Dee Dee. Dee Dee, this is the Senior VP of personnel, Gene Kramer."

"Ah, the famous Dee Dee. Good to finally meet you!" Gene shook Nick's hand. Nick made sure for his hand to be girlishly limp. "This is my wife, Margot."

"Hi Margot," Nick sang in his practiced female voice. "I love your earrings." In truth, they were a little gaudy, but Nick had learned that women always compliment other women when they meet.

"Hello, Dee Dee. I'm so glad we had a chance to finally meet Roger's elusive fiancée!"

Elusive? Nick wasn't sure how long Roger must have been telling them this story. It didn't really matter though. It wasn't going to be for long.

When they had exchanged pleasantries and settled into their seats, Nick whispered over to Roger, "Executive VP of Personnel? I thought we were meeting the Chairman of the Board."

"I guess they must have switched on me. We'll just go with it."

They all sat down to watch the game, almost sounding natural and relaxed. Roger less so than Nick. Roger was clearly sweating this one through. Nick was trying to stay chatty, and he was probably even a bit annoying at times. But that was in character for Dee Dee. Even when Roger and Gene went for food, Nick was able to bluff his way through a conversation with Margot about what seeds to plant in the garden for the upcoming winter.

By the end of the night, with both Roger and Nick desperately watching the clock tick down second by second, they felt free and clear. In fact, the pressure they had both put on themselves was probably much more than they needed worry about. There hadn't even been a hint of a problem.

The most uncomfortable moment of the night was watching the Shocker Girls cheerleaders strut their stuff on the court. Nick was worried that compared to the sexy, ultra-feminine girls on the squad, he fared so badly, one might doubt his disguise. They had some real lookers on that cheerleading team, he thought to himself.

As the buzzer sounded to signal the end of the game, the crowd started to filter out. The Shock had lost by ten. "Well, you can't win 'em all," Gene said, imparting sage wisdom.

"I guess you can't. I'll see you Monday at work, Gene."

Margot leaned forward towards Nick, and Nick had to think for a moment why, but he quickly realized it was a farewell gesture. Nick leaned forward, too, as they lightly hugged each other. "I hope your garden comes out well in the spring!" Margot said to Nick.

"Yours too, Margot," Nick replied. "I'll see you."

"We'll be at the Anniversary Ball," Margot answered.

"I always look forward to it," Roger said.

"Can't miss it," Nick said. "Good-bye, guys!"

"Good night, you two!" Gene answered.

Once they were out of earshot, Roger grasped Nick by the arm, tightly. "Why did you say that?"

"Ow!" Nick answered. "Say what?"

Roger had to shout over the din of the crowd. "That we can't miss the ball?"

"I didn't say that!"

"What?"

"I said, I didn't say that!"

"Yes you did!"

"We'll talk about it in the car!"

By the time they did reach the car, both were so beat and exhausted that neither of them remembered to bring the subject up.

CHAPTER 3

Nick quickly used the five thousand dollars to try and get back in his apartment. He phoned Chet up, and Chet said that he'd need enough to move Sasha's things out of the apartment "for the time being" and Sasha had extended her trip and wasn't planning on coming back for a while. After that, Chet agreed to let Nick take over the lease.

Nick still had no luck getting in touch with Sasha, and was of half a mind to put a thousand down and go fly out there and confront her. He was just about to do it, too, when Chet told him of some sort of "court order" that would have him arrested on sight if he got within 500 feet of Sasha.

What had happened? Nick had no idea how this seemingly wonderful relationship had soured so fast. Whatever the cause, he was still sure that Chet was feeding her stories. He was a little twerp who never worked a day of labor in his life. He was always trying to weasel his way in on Sasha and what money she had. Now, Chet had three thousand dollars of Nick's money, as well.

Then, only a day after he had packed up his stuff from Roger's house, he got a call.

"I'm just asking for one more quick appearance," Roger said on his end of the phone.

Nick wasn't sure he was actually hearing correctly. "You have to be kidding me," he replied.

"The office now knows that I have a fiancée, and now the chairman of the board wants to meet you personally."

"I clearly told you that I..."

"And then you said you'd see Gene and Margot at the ball!"

"No I didn't!"

"Well, they said they were looking forward to seeing you there. I have an invitation in your name!" Roger said, getting angry. "I mean, Dee Dee's name. Anyway, I really need you. Five thousand's my offer."

"I can't let this be a regular thing, Roger. Once I can explain away as a lark. Twice and it becomes serial behavior."

"I'll do whatever it takes, Nick. You really have me in a tough spot. I need to produce Dee Dee one more time."

"That idiot who stole my apartment already told my girlfriend what I was up to, what if he finds out that I'm pretending to be someone's fiancée? I'll never see her again!"

"We didn't get caught the first time, and we can do it again. I'm begging you."

"Same terms as last time?" Nick said, hating himself instantly.

"All the way."

It wasn't but six more hours when Nick found himself moving back in to Roger's cottage. He was none too happy about the situation, and he was sour enough that he didn't even talk to Roger for two days solid.

This time, Nick found himself faced with a new challenge. His previous appearance was in a casual setting, wearing casual clothes. Now, as Roger told him, this was a formal affair. It was a black-tie event. That meant he was going to be on display. He was going to have to look good. Beautiful, even. A great dress. Impeccable make-up. Elegant hair.

"Ten thousand dollars," Nick said, when he finally spoke to Roger.

"Uh... I don't know if..." Roger was slow to reply.

"I'm going to really have to go even farther this time. I'm going to have to drop weight, buy a whole new set of shoes, a dress, jewelry, a new wig... Everything needs to be done over and done better.

"Six thousand?" Roger offered.

"Seven. Or I'm out of here."

"Seven, then."

"And no dancing."

"That goes without saying."

Nick took a new tactic for finding his dress this time. Since changing in a dress shop was just far too risky, he opted to buy as many dresses as Roger's credit card could hold, and then try them out at home. He'd then return the rest. After a lot of trips, he had finally found something that didn't make him look like a longshoreman in a dress or a semi-finalist in a cross-dressing pageant. He found a black velvet dress with a cream colored collar that went around the sides and covered the upper arm, giving the dress an off-the-shoulders look. A long split on the right side compensated for its tight fit.

The dress managed to show off his best assets, and conceal his nonexistent assets, while still looking attractive. He added a pair of velvet black pumps with an adventurous three-inch heel, pearl earrings and bracelets.

He worked on this new type of evening look, and it was about three days of makeup work until he was satisfied with his darker mix of colors and more strikingly defined appearance. As for his wig, Nick managed to find a close cousin to his "original" Dee Dee wig, but this one was parted to the side, and broke into waves and curls below the chin line.

He had picked a small clutch purse in the same cream color and had stuffed it with a few emergency repair items. Once he had worked up the courage, it was time for Roger to see the results. He had let him sweat it out this time, and

didn't let him see the finished product until the night of the ball.

"Dammit," Roger said when he saw his date. "You may be too good to be true."

"Of course I am, darling," Nick said in his feminine voice, "at least you have the good taste to know it."

"You've even got panty hose on."

"Silk stockings and garters, Roger. Only the best when you're paying for it."

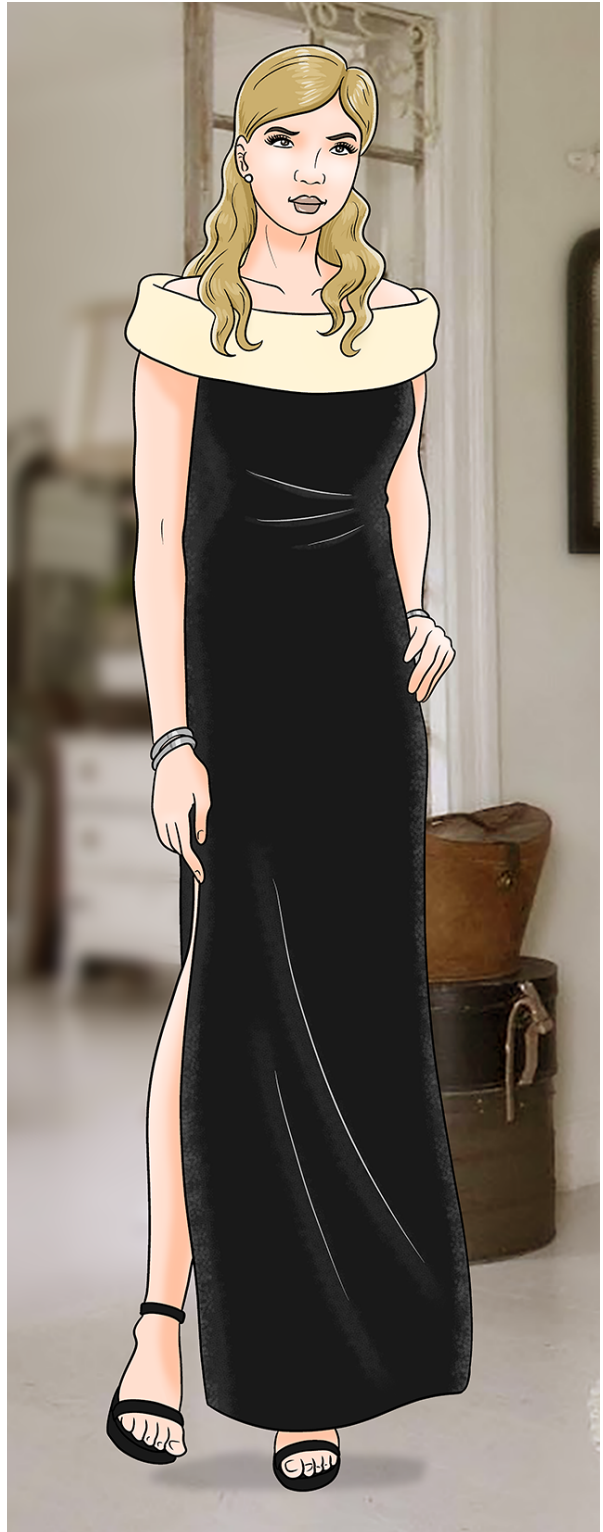
"You're wearing a garter belt?" Roger opened the front door for them to leave.

"And the body-shaper has my waist down to twenty seven inches."

"That's unnatural."

"Well, I'll explode in five hours, so we better get back as quick as we can."

The conversation was sparse between the two as they drove in, but Roger did let Nick know about what to expect from the evening. It was an annual event, the Anniversary Ball, celebrating the founding of the first hospital owned by the church. There would be a few members of the clergy there, but most would be other executives at St. McGivens. There would be



cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, a dinner served, and some dancing with live music afterwards.

The first people they saw when they entered were Gene and Margot, who immediately welcomed them. Nick even got the womanly double-kiss-on-the-cheeks treatment from Margot, which he was able to return without looking awkward.

Gene then led them over to another, older man who was already eyeing them. "Dick, look who's here. It's Roger, and his fiancée. Dee Dee, meet our Chairman, Dick Porter."

The older man smiled broadly as he adjusted his bifocals. He removed a cigar from his fat lips and moved it to the hand that was holding a martini. "Dee Dee...?" He asked, as he offered his free hand.

"Summers. Dee Dee Summers." Nick shook Dick's meaty paw. Dick then took the opportunity to turn Nick's hand to examine the engagement ring.

"So our Roger here is going to make an honest woman out of you, hmmm?" Dick said. "He must be quite a guy to reign in a filly like yourself."

This was the man who was the chairman of the board on a church-run hospital chain? Nick was trying not to look as put off as he felt. The man drank, smoked and was rudely suggesting Dee Dee was a bit of a slut. Double standards, anyone?

"Yes, Roger is quite the... Man," Nick choked out.

Sensing a truly awkward moment about to hit, Roger quickly placed his hand around Nick and swept him away. "I'll catch up with you later, Dick! I promised Dee Dee I'd get her some caviar before it was all gone!"

"That was your boss?" Nick asked.

"The one and only," Roger said, still gently guiding Nick along to a table.

"We're trying to impress... Him?"

"He's sharper than he looks." Roger then pulled out a chair for Nick and motioned for him to sit down. "You can have a seat while I go out and mingle."

"Sit here? By myself? I'd almost think you're ditching me."

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"None at all."

Nick quickly got the attention of a server and had a drink and a plate of hors d'oeuvres delivered, and he read and re-read the program for entertainment. That lasted only for a short while, before he started to get a little anxious. He checked his cell phone and regretted not putting any games on it.

Looking around, he had already lost track of Roger, and started to look a little closer at the decor. It was a very extravagant affair. Not one of those "trying to

look expensive" type of business parties, but an honest-to-goodness formal ball. In fact, as he looked around at what the women were wearing, it occurred to Nick that his dress probably looked a bit cheap in comparison.

"Dee Dee, there you are!" A voice said, interrupting Nick's thoughts. It was Margot. "I can't have you all alone like this! I must introduce you to the other wives!"

"I really don't want to..."

"Impose? This is a social event, and we're just being social!" She stuck out her hand to help Nick up, and Nick was powerless but to take it.

Margot led Nick over through the crowd, saying pleasant but quick 'hellos' to people as she passed by. Eventually, they found a group of women who looked like they owned the place. They stood tall and proud, surveying the room with skeptical eyes. As Nick and Margot approached, they were given just a moment of attention, before the eyes of the women went back to scanning the crowd.

"Girls, I'd like you to meet Dee Dee Summers," Margot said.

None of the women even blinked or bothered to face them.

"She's the fiancée of Roger Van der Slyke!" Margot added.

That grabbed the attention of all four women in the group and immediately turned to look.

"You don't say!" One of the women said.

"The famous Dee Dee in the flesh!" said another.

"I'm Brenda Gardner, my husband is Carl, the CFO." She was a slightly aged woman with a heavily made up face. Brenda looked Nick over carefully, even looking closely over each of Nick's shoulders. "I was beginning to think you were just a figment of Roger's imagination."

"Oh," Nick replied, unwilling to expand on the subject.

"I was thinking that our Roger wasn't into girls," said another woman. She was in her thirties, with a reddish tint to her black hair. "But I suppose that's why you're here. Isn't that right... Dee Dee?" That sentence contained at least two insults, an insinuation that Nick wasn't who he said he was and a subtle test to try and uncover any deception. Nick immediately started to realize that this was going to be an interrogation, with only surface pleasantries.

Nick decided to keep his answers short and simple. "I'm not sure I quite understand what you're talking about."

The one woman who hadn't spoken yet gently shook Nick's hand. She was a very striking woman with auburn hair and a warm smile. She was noticeably younger than the others. "Never mind Gwen, Dee Dee. She's a suspicious old bat." The woman with black-red hair smiled back. That must have been the

Gwen she was referring to. "I'm very glad to meet you and I'm so glad Roger has finally found someone to settle down with. Have you two set a date?"

"No, I don't think we have," Nick replied.

"You don't *think* you have? Don't you *know*?" Gwen interrupted.

"Well, it all depends on Roger's schedule. He's so busy." Nick quickly said, trying to patch his error.

"Of course," the auburn-haired woman said, with no trace of suspicion. "The company can work the executives so hard sometimes."

"Yes," Nick said. Desperate to fill the conversation, he then added, "He tries so hard to impress. He's especially concerned about making an impression with that chairman of the board over there. He'd do anything to..."

"You mean my husband, Dick?" The auburn-haired woman said, innocently.

"Your *husband*?" Nick clarified.

"Yes, I'm Hayley. Hayley Porter."

Nick gathered himself. He had no idea. Now he was on the hot seat with the woman who could easily ruin Roger's career. He quickly rewound over the things he had just said in her presence. Had he screwed up? Well, had he screwed up enough to cause real damage? He hoped not.

"I hope you're not insinuating that my husband is susceptible to brown-nosing or would curry favors for a promotion," Hayley said.

Nick had just stepped in it. "Uh... I... I... I..."

"Actually," Hayley continued, "that sounds exactly like my husband. The little toad."

Margot giggled. "Now, now. Hayley. You did marry the man."

"That I did. Now Dee Dee, darling, don't let yourself be dazzled by the elegant surroundings and the smell of power. Only get married if you really love him."

Gwen snorted. "Love is highly overrated. It's security you need. Just don't sign a pre-nup, sweetie."

Brenda then stopped drinking long enough to talk. "So when's the wedding? When do you two make the greatest mistake of your lives?"

"Please, Bren!" Margot said, continuing to giggle, "They might actually be in love, you know. I hear such things are still possible."

"So are you thinking of a spring wedding?" Hayley asked.

"I really... It's not something we've quite worked out... yet..." Nick was searching for any sort of answer. He really was starting to worry that he wasn't nearly as prepared for this as he thought he was.