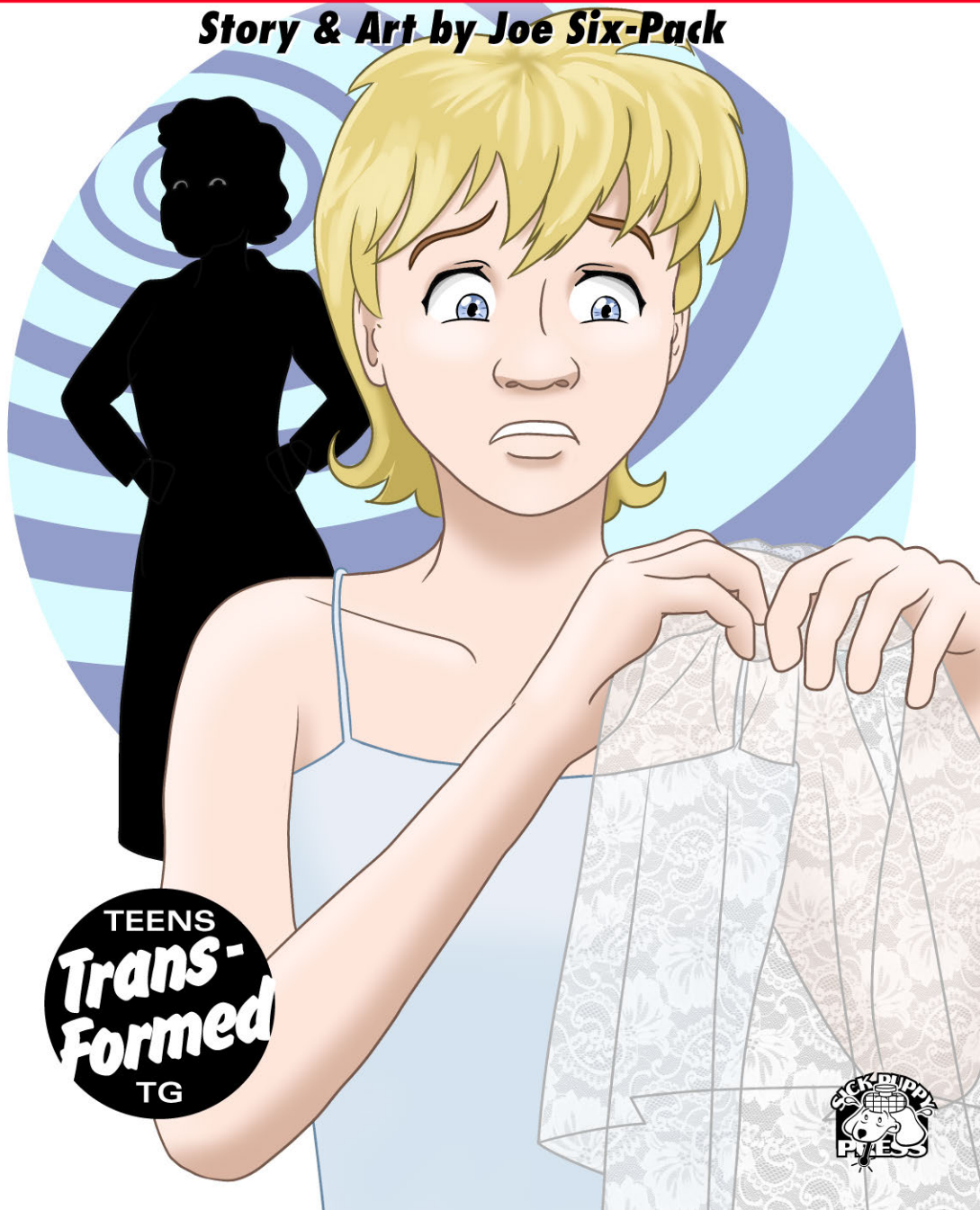


ADULTS ONLY

70 pages 27 illustrations

BRIDE TO BE

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack



TEENS
**Trans-
Formed**
TG



J O E S I X P A C K

**BRIDE
TO BE**

**Story & Illustrations by Joe Six-Pack
A Teens Transformed Story**



2021 Market Edition

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BRIDE TO BE

Bounty Falls is a small town up north, on the border. It's about fifty miles from the nearest big city, and mostly isolated.

In the winter, it's frozen solid. The snow is deep and the icicles grow long. The two or three thousand people who live there bundle up and slog along in the frigid temperatures, just like any other northern town. They like their basketball and hockey.

In the spring, though, the snow melts and the temperatures go back to bearable. That's when the town comes alive. The trees go green, the lawns grow in, and birds come back and the river starts to flow.

That's why they call it Bounty Falls, of course. The town is built on the edge of the most spectacular waterfall in the Western Hemisphere. It's only 275 feet tall, but it's wider than any other in North America. It fills the lower part of town with mist, and bathes the whole area in a dream-like fog. Combined with the cliffs, the trees and all the natural beauty of the area, it's a magnet for tourists.

They pack the town every spring and keep coming and going until the fall, scared away by the first brown leaf. I was never sorry to see them go, even if the economy of the area depended on them. I was a kid, what did I care about an economy?

More importantly, Bounty Falls is so ethereally beautiful, it's a prime spot for weddings. We had more per day than any other city, except Las Vegas, in some years. They come from all over the world to little Bounty Falls, spend a day at a bed and breakfast, get hitched, take tons of photos, and are then on their way to a honeymoon somewhere else. There are quickie weddings and big, full-spread church events, and everything in between.

My dad owned and operated a small bar hidden away for the locals. "Tourists not welcome," said a sign above the door. He spent most of his time there, as did my mom, who handled the accounting and cooked the food. I rarely visited the place, because the laws in the state prohibited it until I was 21, so I had a lot of time to myself at home.

I wasn't a loner, but I wasn't the most social kid, either. That was kind of normal for Bounty Falls. The tourists kind of squeeze the natives out of the town and we didn't spend a lot of time outside, where we were bound to stumble across the dumb tourists who were always lost or asking stupid questions. We all tended to keep to ourselves.

My house was at the top of a hill, in between our two neighbors, the Kline-manns and the Shaeffers. They both had kids, so that was a plus.

The Klinemann family moved in about the time I turned 15. They had two daughters, Bridget, 19 and Laura, 15. Meeting Laura was, singularly, the moment I realized I was a male. She was the dream in my head when I stained the sheets at night, to put it bluntly. I remember spending most of my high school years trying to impress her, usually failing miserably.

She was a wonderful girl, smart, take-charge and assertive. Unfortunately, she had a thing for big, dumb jocks. Guys who were just walking sacks of meat. I was thin, in advanced classes and had athletic skills that went no farther than playing ball with my best friend, who lived in the house on the other side of ours.

The Shaeffers had lived in their house practically forever. They had been a pretty normal family, and their son, Cole, was my age, and we grew up together. Cole and I were practically brothers, and we kind of shared in just about everything we did. We spent the days, from the time we woke up, to the time we went to sleep, doing stuff together.

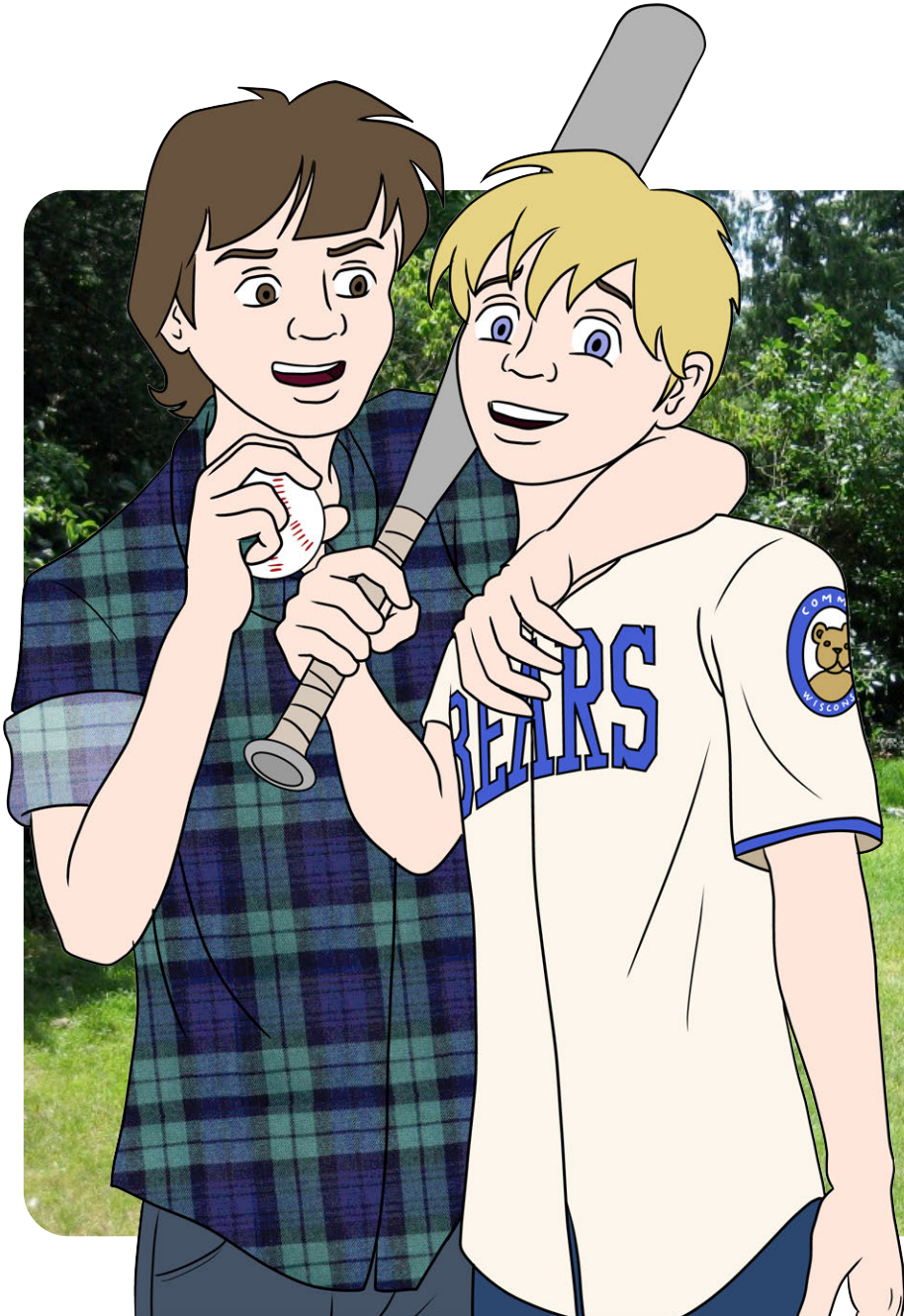
Cole had two sisters, Claire and Caroline, who were older. They didn't bug us much, because they were always doing girl stuff with their own friends, or helping out with the family business.

The family business was as wedding planners. That wasn't unusual for Bounty Falls, as a lot of the families ran little mom and pop businesses based around weddings. There was a lot of business to be had, you know.

Things changed, though, when I turned 12. Cole's parents divorced, and his mother moved away. It was an angry divorce, and the mother took custody of the girls and moved out. That just left Cole and his dad living in their house.

Cole's dad did some wedding photography, freelance, to keep the bills paid, but it wasn't long before he ran into health problems. It was just after my 15th birthday when he died of pneumonia, related to a circulatory problem. I didn't see Cole for a while. His mom had taken him in, and he was pretty devastated about the whole thing. We'd trade emails, but he didn't have a lot to say.

So it was a big deal for me when his mother moved back into the house, bringing my friend back with her. She got back into the wedding business, and started up a place in town called "The Precious Moments Wedding Boutique," a full-service shop, that handled everything – clothes, hair, rehearsals, hiring the priest, travel, and everything in between.



Like I say, weddings do good business in Bounty Falls, and they were always busy. That was cool, because his mom and his sisters were working the weddings, leaving us to do what we pleased.

Every day after school, Cole would be waiting for me, with some dumb idea or plan for the rest of the day. He was home schooled, so he had more free time than I did, and he came up with some weird stuff.

We built a car out of spare parts we found around town. It never ran, but it was a fun project. We told ourselves how cool we would look in our full-custom sports car that could go an estimated 200 mph, and seat 13 people with a hot tub and gun turret. Come to think of it, I don't think we ever got the motor to turn over.

We made probably a dozen music videos, all of them embarrassingly bad. We built the same tree house five times. It never lasted more than a few days before falling apart.

In the winter, we always tried to make a hockey rink, but I guess living on top of a hill without a pond made that difficult. We make some kick-ass snowmen, though, and a hill makes for great tobogganing.



As time went on, the family business got even more busy. I guess Cole's mom was good at what she did, and there was more and more pressure.

I knew this, because Cole started to talk about it more and more. I don't blame him, I'm sure he was just as bored with it as I was, but I also suppose it was all his family talked about. I was natural for him to mention it from time to time.

It started to become more of a serious thing that summer, when he mentioned his sister Claire was leaving for college. She was the younger of the two sisters, and her older sister Caroline was already attending a college out west.

"Your mom's gonna have to hire a girl or something," I said. Claire practically ran half the business, and even I knew they couldn't keep the place open without her.

"Yeah. Or something," he replied.

I should have seen it coming, but I didn't. As the weeks went on, I saw less and less of Cole. He was "pitching in" at the boutique, he said. His mom didn't give him much of a choice. I know he objected to it, because he told me, and I saw his arguments with his mom. But what can you do? She was his mother.

By the time July came, I hadn't seen Cole for days. I banged on their door this one afternoon, but the house was locked up, and nobody was home. So, figur-

ing that Cole was at the boutique, I decided to take a walk into town and hassle him at work.

It was a half hour walk, and when I got there, the place was just as busy as it usually was. In fact, I got all the way inside without Cole's mom even seeing me.

With no sign of Cole, I headed to the back.

"Hey, have you seen Cole?" I asked the girl steaming a dress.

"What?" Was the reply. "Derek?"

I then realized it wasn't a girl at all, but Cole. He was dressed up in this ridiculous apron, frills all over the place, with a big bow in the back. His head was obscured, and it looked like a dress to me, so I naturally assumed it was a girl. It wasn't my fault. He even had his hair drawn back into a stub at the base of his neck.

"What are you doing here?" Cole yelled back. He quickly dropped what he was doing and tried to hide behind a counter to obscure that dumb apron. I guess he was afraid I would make fun of him. He was right.

"Me? What about you? You look like a fairy."

Cole quickly fussed around, reaching back to try and untie the bow that held the apron on. "Shut up! Mom told me I had to wear it! I had no choice!"

"I'm sure. Heels and wig and you have an outfit."

"It's not a dress!" He yelled.

"What's going on back here!" Cole's mom said, sticking her head through the door. "I have customers!"

She took a look at me and nearly snarled. "Cole, this isn't a playground. Cole has serious work to do, and he doesn't need you distracting him. He has to get the wrinkles out of all these bridesmaids dresses before five!"

"Yes, Mrs. Shaeffer," I said, doing my hang-dog look of remorse. "Sorry."

She was quick to get rid of me. "Cole, please show Derek out the back way. You two can see each other when we get home." She then closed the door and went back to her oh-so-precious customers.

Cole stopped fussing with the apron. "Sorry, Derek. She says you gotta go."

"I heard her," I replied. "I'm standing right here."

He started to shoo me out to a back door loading area. "C'mon, don't get me in trouble!" He said.

"If you've got to wear that, you're already in trouble," I told him.



“Derek...” he whined.

“Fine, I’m going.”

He grabbed the latch of the door and unhooked it. Cole grabbed the handle and tugged at it, struggling to move it. He wasn’t that strong, you know. He was

a bit small and thin for his age, but that didn't stop him from acting like he was six feet tall.

I pulled the latch for him, undoing it.

"I was gonna get it," he said. "I nearly had it."

I took a step outside. "Yeah, okay. I'll see you back home, I guess."

"Okay. Sorry," he apologized. I guess for his mother, or maybe the apron.

"No big," I said. Just as he closed the big metal door, he turned his head around. I noticed that his hair, which he had pulled back into a stubby tail at the back, like he did from time to time, wasn't fastened with a rubber band. It was tied with a long violet satin ribbon.

Before I could ask, the door slammed shut.



That night, Cole got home some time after 6:30. Fortunately, it was the summer, and we still had a couple of hours of daylight left. But when I saw my friend drag his butt out of his mom's car like he was about to drop dead, I knew we weren't going to get much done tonight.

"Hey," was all he said, when he saw me. His eyes were half-closed. I also noticed his hair was untied. I let the question of the hair ribbon go.

Seeing how tired he was I had to say something. "Man, you got your ass whipped at work."

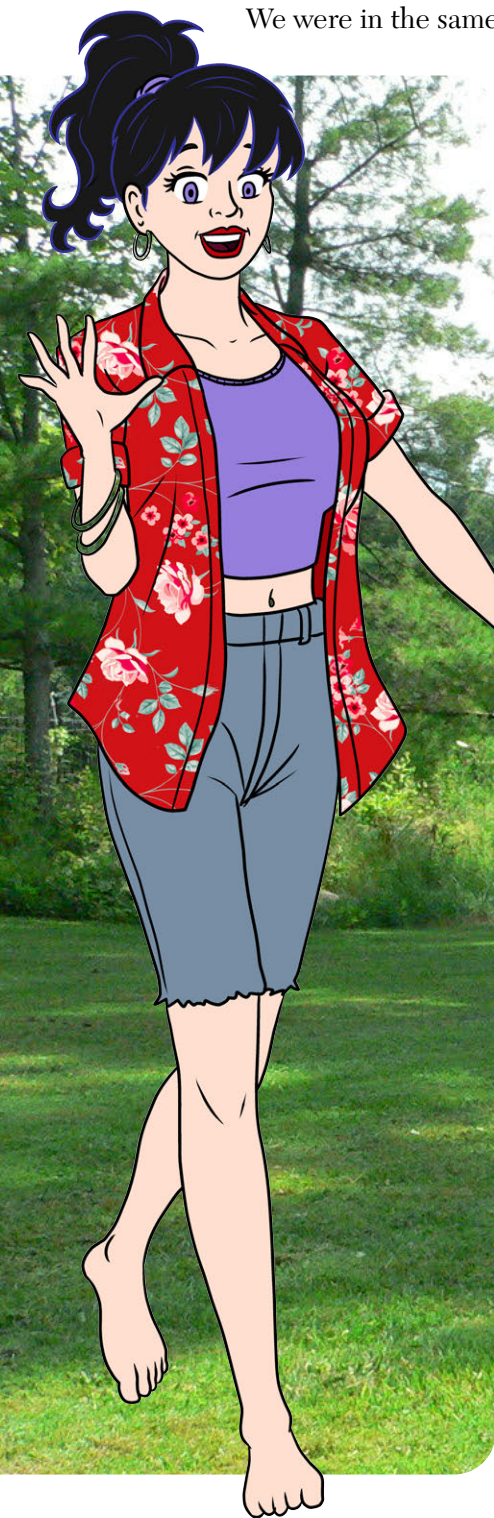
For some reason, Cole quickly, instinctively, covered his butt like he was about to get spanked. "No," he said, immediately moving on. "I'm just not used to working all day."

"Okay," I said, unsure of what I had just seen, or how to interpret it. "Yeah. You wanna just play some video games?"

"Hey, guys!" Said a voice off to the side. I turned to look, and bounding across my front lawn was Laura Klinemann, barefoot in cutoff jeans and a loose dress shirt. My God, she was beautiful.

I just kept staring at her, unable to really process anything. My crush on her just froze me up whenever she was around.

Trying to break the incredibly awkward moment, she spoke. "So... I hadn't seen you since school got out, Derek."



We were in the same grade, both Juniors next year in school. We didn't share any classes, but I kinda saw her in the halls from time to time. She was so pretty.

"Hey, Laura," Cole said, filling the silence. He was always smooth with girls. That guy never had any problem talking to them. I guess that's from living in a house with two sisters. "Derek and I were gonna kill off the rest of the day on his Xbox."

"Oh, can you teach me how to play?" Laura asked. "I can't play video games worth crap. I'm so bad."

If had been a more clever person, or just had a couple of functioning brain cells, I would have understood that she was making a very obvious pass at me. I didn't get it.

"We only got two controllers," I said. "Just for me and Cole." I'm such an idiot when it comes to girls. Not too many bothered with me, anyway. Like I said, I was a little bit of a science geek, and kinda gawky.

"No, I'll just watch you guys," Cole said. "I'll probably just fall asleep anyway."

So we headed up to my room, and I set it up. I spent the next couple of hours showing Laura how to play Call of Duty, and just like he promised, Cole fell asleep five minutes in.

I didn't realize it then, but my friend had just set me up on my very first date. I mean, not a date-date, but you know, being with a girl on something like a date. Not a mistake or random, but intentionally spending time with a girl. You get what I mean.

So, I guess Cole was my wingman that night.

Like I said, we were best friends.



It got to be a regular thing, me going down to town to see Cole. We eventually figured out that if I showed up at lunch time, his mom couldn't complain when he was on his break.

No matter how many times I got on him about the apron, he still wore it, working in the back. He took it off when we went out to eat, of course, but that ribbon in his hair stuck around.

I did ask him about it once, and he said that it was his mom's thing. She tied the ribbon every day, explaining that she didn't want to get his hair all over the dresses.

And the apron? "Because Mom says I'm a mess," he said. "She also thinks it keeps me more 'well behaved,' whatever that means."

It wasn't just the one apron, either. He had a few of them back there. One was pink and ruffled, another was powder blue, and a third was practically a dress. It was yellow and had sleeves.

The first time I saw him in that one, he blushed beet red. But he didn't stop wearing it. "It's Mom's favorite," Cole explained.

You know I also gave him crap about the hair. I yanked on his ribbons whenever he turned his head. "Knock it off!" He'd protest. "Quit it!"

We got in a few scuffles about it, while were hanging around outside the boutique. There wasn't much to do on his lunch break but make a short walk around the block. He didn't have lunch money, and the tourist restaurants were way too expensive anyway.

There was a small park not too far away, but we only went there a few times. When we came back from lunch one time covered in sweat from playing basketball there, Cole's mom 'banned' us from going back.

She fussed over him all the time. I mean, she wasn't this bad before the divorce, but ever since they moved back, she was always on Cole about his posture, his smile, his hair or whatever.

The first thing she did whenever we came back from lunch was to "fix" his hair. She'd pull out a brush from her purse, you know one of those round pink types of brushes only girls use, and comb it through several times.

Not that it didn't make an improvement, as his hair was always neat and clean, but really, who cares? He worked in the back.



Work was draining the life out of Cole, and I could see it every day when he got back home. He just didn't want to do any of the things we liked to do. No building stuff, no ball games, nothing. He even passed on video games.

We still hung out, but he was elsewhere, mentally. He wasn't into talking about things we liked to talk about. I was worried he was growing up or something, maybe leaving me behind.

I think he was more and more into the business. Again, it was probably unavoidable, given he spent almost all day immersed in it. When he did try to talk shop, it was my turn to not be interested.

One day, about the middle of July, I guess, I noticed he was wearing some new clothes. His ratty sports t-shirts he (and I) liked to wear were replaced by larger, wider-necked shirts that usually had horizontal stripes or other designs on them.

It wasn't the shirts that I noticed first, though. It was his jeans. We both wore baggy jeans because we were active, even

though the trend was for "skinny" jeans. Skinny jeans are fine for posing in front of the school and looking cool and stuff, but too tight to actually do anything in.

“You’re caving in to fashion,” I told him, pointing at his jeans. He wore dark blue jeans that clung tightly to his legs.

“It wasn’t my idea,” he said. “I don’t need anything to emphasize how skinny I am.”

“You move around in them okay,” I said, tugging at one of his belt loops. To my surprise, the waistband of the jeans stretched. “That’s not...”

“They’re stretch denim,” he explained, “or something. They’re comfortable enough, but they feel weird. Look, the pockets aren’t even real.” He tugged at the pocket to show they didn’t open up. They were just for decoration.

“You gotta stop letting your mom buy your clothes,” I said.

“Like I could stop her.”

I didn’t think much about it until I was at school the next day. Laura was eating her lunch just a table away, and I was getting a good look at her. It was then I realized she was wearing the exact same brand and design of jeans Cole was.

My best friend was wearing girls jeans, and I thought it was hilarious. Boy, did I give him hell about that for a while.



The family and I went camping for a week at the end of the month, and I really wanted to bring Cole along, but he said that the shop was too busy, and he needed to help out. That was disappointing. I sulked for days. We always had a big summer camping trip, and we always went together, every year.

It was a dull trip. If you’ve ever spent a week with just your parents and a tent in the woods, you know what I’m talking about. Dad tried to get me into fishing, and Mom wanted to teach me all about birds native to the area.

I mean, seriously? I can’t fault them for trying to be good parents, but, come on. Fishing and birds?

Anyway, we got back, and I was never so happy to be home. The first thing I did was head on down to the Boutique and see what Cole was up to.

The good news was that he no longer wore those dumb aprons. The bad news was he was working in the front of the store, doing the work his sister usually did, showing customers photos of wedding locations and making catering arrangements.

It was a little spooky to see him acting all nice and smiling for customers. He never acted that way in real life.

I said he wasn't wearing the big poofy apron, but he was wearing a white smock that went down to his ankles. At most angles, he looked like he was in a skirt. He was also wearing a white polo shirt with "The Precious Moments Wedding Boutique" logo stitched on it in pink and gold.

Once the customers were gone, I went inside. "I leave for a week, and this is what happens to you," I said.

"Don't blame me! Claire's leaving in two weeks. Mom's giving me her responsibilities." He picked at the shirt. "This is the uniform, and she says I have to wear it."

"That sucks," I said. "How are you supposed to do what Claire does? Your mom has to hire a girl to do this."

"That's what I keep telling her," Cole replied, looking down at his feet.

"Lunch break?" I asked.

"Oh, I can't!" He said. "There's so much to do! I have dresses to clean, ceremonies to schedule, flowers to arrange... Mom is gonna kill me unless I get this all done!"

"Yeah, sure," I said. I knew he was taking this job too seriously, but I didn't want to argue with him. "Where is she?"

"She's overseeing a ceremony at the old church by the park."

"And she left you alone?"

"You don't think I'm responsible enough?" Cole said, as if I was trying to insult him.

"No, no. I just... She usually doesn't trust you like this."

"Maybe I earned it, did you think about that?"

"Fine, fine. Forget I said anything."



“Did you have a nice time camping?”

“It sucked,” I said.

Cole turned to put a box up on a shelf, and then I noticed something very odd about him. He was still wearing jeans, but he had rolled the cuffs up just under his knees, showing his lower leg. His t-shirt also had rolled up sleeves, and showed off his arms. Neither his arms or legs had any hair on them.

“What’s the deal with your skin?” I asked.

“Huh?” He said, puzzled.

I rubbed my arm to indicate what I was talking about. “No hair.” I then rubbed my leg as well.

I’d never seen anyone get so flushed so quickly. I thought Cole was going to burst like an old thermometer, his face was so red.

“The...” He stumbled through the words. “I... You see...”

“Let me guess,” I interrupted him. “Your mom made you.”

Cole just dipped his shoulders in sad acknowledgment.

My instinct was to rub his face in his shame, but I didn’t. I could see it in his eyes. He wasn’t just embarrassed, he was frightened.

“Is it obvious?” He asked, meekly.

“No. I guess not. Only if someone knows you like I do, I guess.”

Maybe that calmed him down, I don’t know. But all of the sudden it occurred to me that all these strange things that had been happening, like the aprons, the change in clothes and his new job weren’t just a bunch of random stuff. His mom was taking control of his life.

“Hey,” I asked him, “maybe you should come over to my house when you get off tonight.” Some time away from his mother would be the best thing for him.

“I can’t. My Aunt Virginia is coming to stay with us. We’re picking her up at the bus station after work.”

“Aunt Virginia?”

“She’s my mom’s sister. She’s coming to help with the business.”

I headed for the door. “See you later, I guess?”

“Yeah,” Cole replied, shooting out a quick breath of air to calm down. “See you then.”



Well, he didn't come over that night or the next. I don't think I actually saw Cole again for several days. I emailed him, even if he just lived next door, and he said that he was too busy, and his Aunt was still "settling in."

I don't know, maybe it was like a week later when I finally saw him again. He was out in his yard, sitting on a bench, just doing nothing. I saw him from my bedroom window and went down to go talk to him.

As I approached, he just had this kind of far-away stare in his eyes, and I don't think he actually noticed me until I was practically right next to him.

"Derek! What are you doing here?" He gasped.

"I live thirty feet away," I replied.

"This isn't a good time." He started to get up, but did it awkwardly, like his ribs were hurting. "I gotta go back in."

I poked him in the side. "You pull a muscle or..." I stopped talking when I felt something under his shirt with my poke. It was stiff.

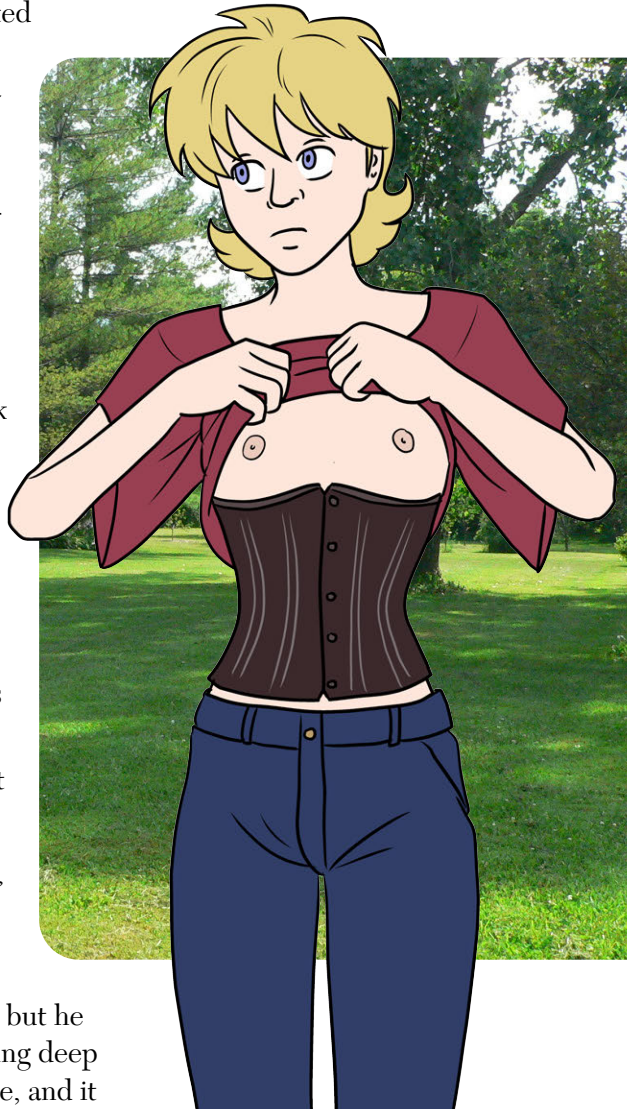
Impulsively, I lifted his shirt. Cole just as quickly tugged it back down. But I had seen what I had seen.

"What are you wearing?" I asked.

"Nothing," he replied. Realizing how pathetic he sounded, he came up with an explanation. "It's for my posture."

I knocked it with my knuckles. It was almost hard. "Looks uncomfortable," I said. "How's that supposed to help with your posture?"

"Aunt Virginia says I slouch." It looked like Cole tried to wriggle into a more comfortable position, but he didn't seem to find it. He was taking deep breaths in between every sentence, and it



looked like that he was having trouble. “Mom’s been saying the same thing forever. So they told me to wear this for a month. If I stop slouching, they’ll let me take it off, and I get a reward.”

“Yeah,” was all I could say. It sounded like punishment to me, but he made it sound like an opportunity. I lifted up the shirt again to get a better look. It was stiff, made of thick material and had a heavy shoelace-type deal up the back. I could understand about the posture thing, but it also had a pinch in the waist, like it was trying to cut him in half. It looked like torture. I had no idea how that would help.

“Cole!” I heard a woman shout from inside his house.

“Break’s over,” he said, and got up carefully.

“Break? From what?” I asked, “It’s Sunday.”

“I gotta go, okay? I’ll email you.” Cole scurried away to his back door. I noticed his steps were short and he was taking great care to walk, as if he were on a tightrope.

“When?”

“Cole! Now!” The voice from the house yelled, even louder this time.

“I’m coming, Auntie Virginia!” Cole replied.

“Email? When?” I wanted to know. I didn’t like being blown off.

“When I can!” Cole said, before leaving. I heard the door lock as he closed it behind him.

I hung around for a minute, just because I don’t like being told to leave. Heading back to my place, I saw the computer was free, so I got on. After a few minutes of searching, I finally found a picture of what Cole was wearing. A corset.

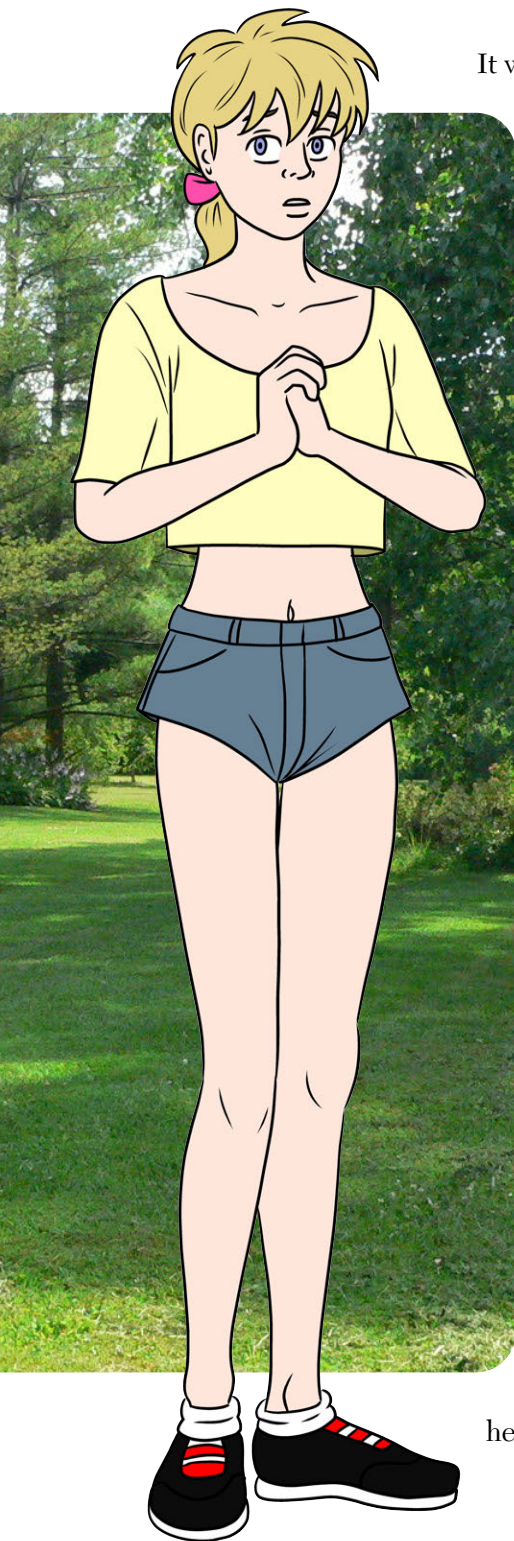
I didn’t know what a corset was, and by the time I was finished figuring it out, I wished I never knew. It was for “figure training,” or rather, to shape a woman’s body more “pleasingly.” In other words, it made a girl’s waist thinner and her boobs bigger.

There were some mentions of corsets for men, but they didn’t look anything like what Cole was wearing. He was wearing a women’s corset.

Why?

I asked myself that same question for several days. I didn’t come up with an answer I liked.





It wasn't always like that, fortunately. Cole would get to spend some time outside every so often, and as long as we didn't make a lot of noise, he and I could at least just talk for a while.

He was obviously having trouble with his mom, sister and Aunt Virginia, who I had avoided so far.

Yes, it was still summer for a few weeks, and a hot one, but I don't think that excused him for wearing the tiny denim shorts I had gotten used to seeing Cole in. He was a little self-conscious about it, too, and always curled his long, hairless legs under him when he sat.

They certainly weren't like any pair I'd wear. These were so small and tight they practically could be called briefs. I didn't say anything, because he had just been so fragile and defensive lately. I wanted to use what time we had together doing fun stuff, not arguing over dumb things like clothes.

In the end, though, we never really did much. We just sat there as I talked and Cole listened. At least, I think he was listening. It was hard to tell sometimes, as he had that distant look in his eyes all the time now.

I'd tell him about stuff going on around town, new video games coming out and other stuff, but he just smiled back from time to time, politely. I guess that's what scared me most. Not that he didn't seem interested in anything I had to say, but that he was being polite. That wasn't like him.



On one of the last weekends of summer, since I hadn't seen Cole around, I worked up the nerve to knock on the Shaeffers front door. Just as I feared, that was when I met "Aunt Virginia."

Claire had left for college last week, so it was a fifty-fifty chance of either Cole's mom or his aunt, and I rolled snake eyes.

She opened the door, keeping the screen door between us shut. "Is there anything I can help you with?" She said, coolly.

The woman looked just like Cole's mother, but much older and way more intimidating. She dressed differently, too. She wore much more jewelry, had much neater hair and, overall, looked much more... Well, there's no other word for it. Intimidating.

"Is Cole home?" I asked, trying not to sound scared.

"No," she said, and started to close the door on me. She stopped, and then re-opened it. "You're Derek, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said, adding a hasty, "Ma'am."

She stood there, looking me over. It was creepy. She examined me from head to toe. I had seen that look before. We used to have a cat who looked just the same way before she attacked a bird.

"Nice to meet you, Derek." She raised her head, pointing her nose in the air and smiled. "I'm afraid you're late. My nephew is already gone." She then closed the door without another word.

I had only known her for fifteen seconds and I already hated her.

"Who was that?" I heard Cole's mom say. The windows of the house were open, and I could hear them talk as I slowly walked away.

"Your neighbor's boy," Aunt Virginia said. "Surely he's not the one you were afraid of?"

Afraid of? Me?

"They've been very close," Cole's mom answered. "He's..."

Aunt Virginia interrupted. "I don't think we need to worry about him. He's not going to give us any trouble. There... Problems... Fine young lady..."

I could only hear selected words as I walked father away. I had to keep moving or be caught eavesdropping. I don't know what they really meant by me being "trouble," but Cole's mom had definitely called me worse over the years. I remember she called me a "reprobate" when we accidentally burnt that old shack down a couple of years ago. I had to look up what it meant.



If Cole wasn't at home, like his aunt claimed, where was he? The Boutique was closed today, so where else would he go? I thought maybe I was being lied to. It wouldn't have been the first time.

So I hung around my house for an hour. "Do you need something to do? Why don't you clean your room?" My mom suggested. That was her way of getting rid of me, and it sure worked.

I didn't have much choice but to wander around, and it eventually brought me by Laura's house. Her mom was out front gardening, and spotted me walking along the sidewalk.

"Hi Derek. I suppose I should have expected you. You're practically inseparable." Laura's mom was talking like I knew what she meant. I just went with it.

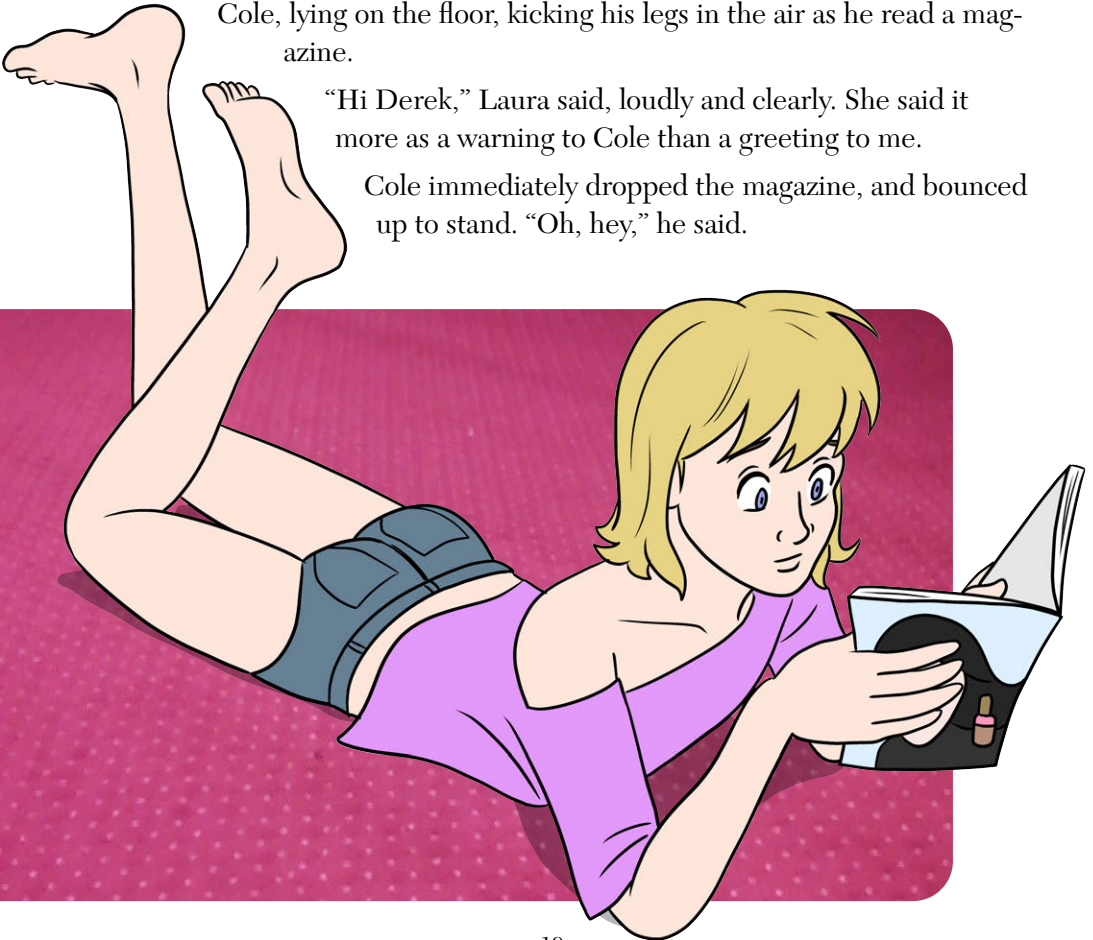
"Uh, yeah," I said.

"Well, go on up," she said, and went back to digging in the dirt.

I walked through the house timidly, unsure what I was missing. Upstairs, with her door open, I stuck my head into Laura's room. There, I found Cole, lying on the floor, kicking his legs in the air as he read a magazine.

"Hi Derek," Laura said, loudly and clearly. She said it more as a warning to Cole than a greeting to me.

Cole immediately dropped the magazine, and bounced up to stand. "Oh, hey," he said.



“Hey, guys...” I said, unsure what I had just walked in on. Laura was sitting on her bed, painting her nails, dressed in casual sweatpants and a t-shirt. She was breathtaking, even just like that.

My buddy was in his denim shorts, his new favorite thing, and a new loose short-sleeve shirt that was falling off one of his shoulders. He looked guilty for some reason, but I couldn’t figure out what for.

“I was lookin’ for you,” I said to Cole. “Your aunt said you were out.”

He was looking very guilty. “Yeah, I, uh, well...”

“I stopped by the boutique yesterday,” Laura interjected, “and we were talking, and someone said we should get together...”

“My aunt kind of arranged it,” Cole said.

Laura put her nail polish away. “She can be kind of...”

“Intimidating,” I said. “Yeah, I know. I got the feeling she didn’t much like me. Maybe she wants you to have new friends, Cole.”

Laura nodded. “Actually, that’s *exactly* what she said.”

“Laura!” Cole sniped.

“Oh, sorry,” she apologized.

“Figures. How long is your aunt staying?” I asked.

“Staying?” Cole replied. “She moved in. She lives with us now.”

“Great,” I said.

“You don’t get to pick your family,” Cole said.

He sat back down where he was and started to leaf through the magazine again. Laura was blowing on her nails to dry them. Suddenly, I felt like a third wheel.

“I’ll, uh, be home if you want to come by later.” I headed for the door.

“You should stay!” Cole said, again being polite.

“I got stuff to do. School’s coming up.”

Cole put on a pouty face. When the hell had he started to do that? “Okay, you sure you don’t want to stay?”

I glanced down at the magazine he was reading. It was full of pictures of fashion models walking the catwalk in dresses and skirts.

I then caught a look at his hair, which was perfectly combed, and had a slight flip at the end. I quickly took a look around Laura’s room, where I saw a hair curler resting by a mirror, and dozens and dozens of skirts and blouses lying around.

I then placed the loose shirt Cole was wearing – it was Laura’s. I’d seen her wear it several times before. It was one of my favorites.

My heart was racing. I was almost ready to drop to my knees in a cold sweat. “No, I gotta go.”

As I raced down the stairs, I was sure I heard the both of them giggle.

Giggle.



School started, and I barely even saw Cole for a month. Going back was like going into a whole different world, really. There were hundreds of people to deal with, a schedule to keep and assignments to complete. My head was way deep into it, and I guess I wanted it that way.

After a while, I did come by the shop. It wasn’t too far out of my way from my trip home, so there was no excuse to avoid it. I never brought up what I think he was doing at Laura’s house. I didn’t even know where to start, I guess.

“Five minutes,” his Aunt Virginia told him, when I came by. “Five minutes and back to work.” Her version of five minutes was about 90 seconds long.

I was surprised to see that although Aunt Virginia was involved with the family business, she didn’t actually do much. With her and Cole’s mom, you figure they’d run the front and Cole would be in the back doing whatever, but instead, Cole was still working the front of the store, and his aunt “supervised” by keeping an eye on him.

“Business should be slowing down soon,” Cole said. I had come by to find him in his white polo and smock, and his hair tied in a pink ribbon.

“Can’t be soon enough,” I said. They shut the store down in October, just a few days away, and kept it shut until March. Without the store, maybe I’d get so time back with Cole.

“You said it,” he replied.

I noted that something had changed in the store. “What happened to the tuxedos?”

The store had displays in the front of flower arrangements, gowns, dresses and tuxedos for the weddings. But now, it was just flowers, gowns and dresses.

“Mom and Aunt Virginia said we needed more space for the gowns,” he explained.

I didn't know much about the wedding business, but it sure seemed to me like most weddings did need something for the groom to wear. "Huh," I said.

"Actually," Cole said, "to quote aunt Virginia, 'Why waste space on men?'"

I looked over Cole's shoulder to see his aunt giving me the eye. She obviously had some beef against men. "That's not surprising."

"Is school fun?" He asked.

"It's school. Same old same old."

"You have customers," his aunt said, sharply. "Say goodbye to your little friend."

47 seconds. New record.

"But Auntie..."

"Say goodbye."

"I'll see you," I said, making it easy.

"Yeah. See ya," Cole replied.

His aunt immediately grabbed him by the shoulders and steered him to a couple waiting nearby. "These customers are interested in our 'Touch of Tus-cany' package," she said.

They were immediately too busy for me, so I just showed myself out. As I passed through the door, I could swear the couple called Cole "Miss," but I wasn't sure.

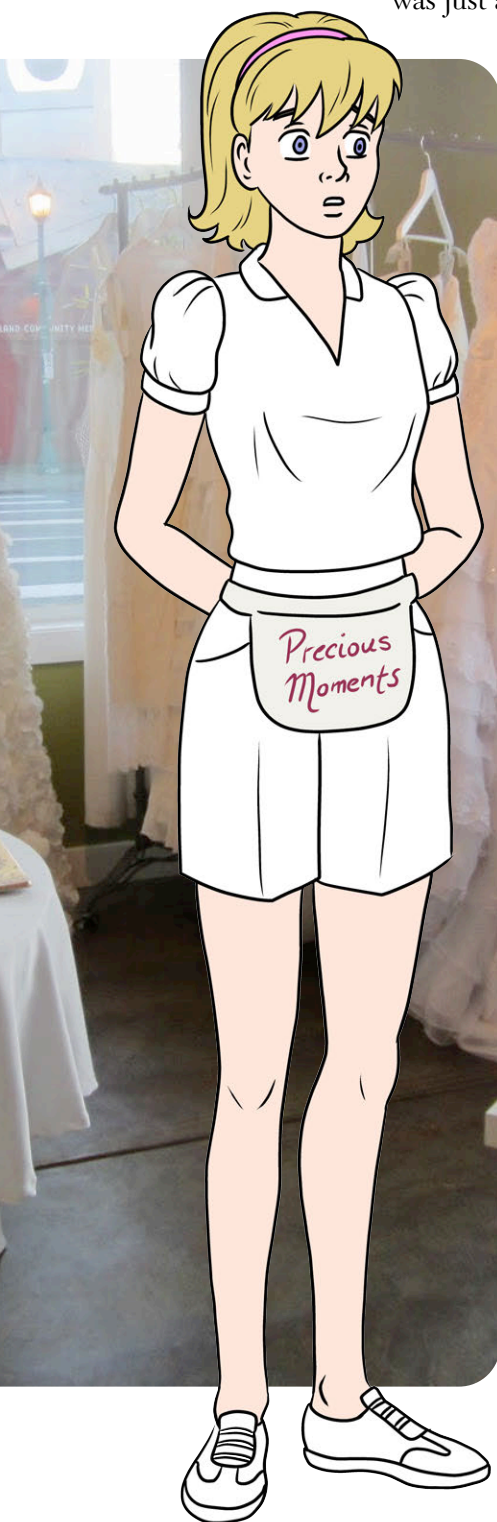
If they had, he didn't take the time to correct them.



The thing I never really realized about Cole was how isolated he was. I mean, I was always around him, but outside of me, his family and a few people up on our hill, no one really knew him. In Bounty Falls, life revolved around the High School, with games, festivals, plays and other activities. He wasn't involved in any of that. Since Cole was home-schooled, he never showed up on the town's radar. I'm sure few even knew he existed.

This became very obvious to me the next time I stopped by the store, a couple of weeks later. If I was worried about how he looked before, it was nothing compared to this.

His ribbon he had tied at the base of his neck had now migrated into becoming a hairband, leaving his now chin-length hair free. His white polo shirt, which



was just a standard cotton shirt, had been replaced by a very similar top, made of shiny, satiny stuff.

Cole was wearing giant white shorts, or “culottes” as he called them. They made his long skinny legs look even longer and slimmer. I figured that when the temperature dipped like it did in the fall, he’d want to be back in jeans as quickly as possible. I guess I was wrong.

He wore two small canvas shoes on his feet, without socks. Lastly, his long smock was now a tiny little apron he tied around the back. It had the store logo on it.

To me, I knew now there was no other way to say it – his mom and aunt were dressing him like a girl. I suppose it was obvious, with Aunt Virginia’s barely disguised hatred of men.

Now her deranged view of the world was taking its toll on my friend. Cole was paying for his aunt’s intolerance dearly, in my opinion.

“Derek!” Cole said, when he saw me. He walked right up to me, like nothing was wrong, and hugged me.

Yeah. Hugged me.

“I missed you!” He said with a smile.

Every other time I had caught him wearing something girlish, he had cringed and hidden himself away. No more. He acted like it was perfectly normal to be wearing girls clothing in public.

Like I said, I guess that’s when I realized how unknown he was in this small town. No one knew enough about Cole to realize this was wrong.

“We close down on Monday,” Cole said with a grin. “Isn’t that great? I’ll have so much

more time!”

I was a little fazed and was still trying to process the situation. “Great, yeah, great.”

“Five minutes,” his Aunt Virginia said from across the store.

“Let’s go outside,” Cole said, taking me by the arm out the front door. Once were there, he looked back inside the store, and only began to talk when he saw his aunt was distracted. “Sorry,” he said.

“You’re dressed like a girl,” I said.

“Thank you, Captain Obvious,” he replied. He glanced back inside. “She’s gonna interrupt us any second, so listen, I need you to come by tonight. Okay?”

“For what?”

“I gotta... I just gotta talk to you.”

He made it sound very serious. “Sure. Sure.” I picked at his shirt. “Weird.”

“Mom and Aunt Virginia say our customers relate better to girls.”

“Back to work,” I said, noticing his aunt was already coming for him.

“Please come over tonight. I don’t care what they say, just tell Mom you have to come up to my room, okay?”

“What about your aunt?”

“She’s going to be out. So you gotta come, tonight.”

“Yeah, I said I would.”

His aunt opened the door and put her claw on Cole’s shoulder. “Back inside,” she commanded. She never even acknowledged my presence.

Cole turned and followed her into the store, looking over his shoulder back at me, like a puppy in a kennel.



For the rest of the day, I drove myself nuts trying to guess what Cole wanted to say to me. I pretty much knew what had been happening to him, so I didn’t expect any news there. Maybe he was moving away again. Maybe he had been told to stop hanging around me.

About six thirty or so, I went on over to his house. I had waited for them to drive back up from work and given them time to eat. I didn’t want to make it look like I was planning this.