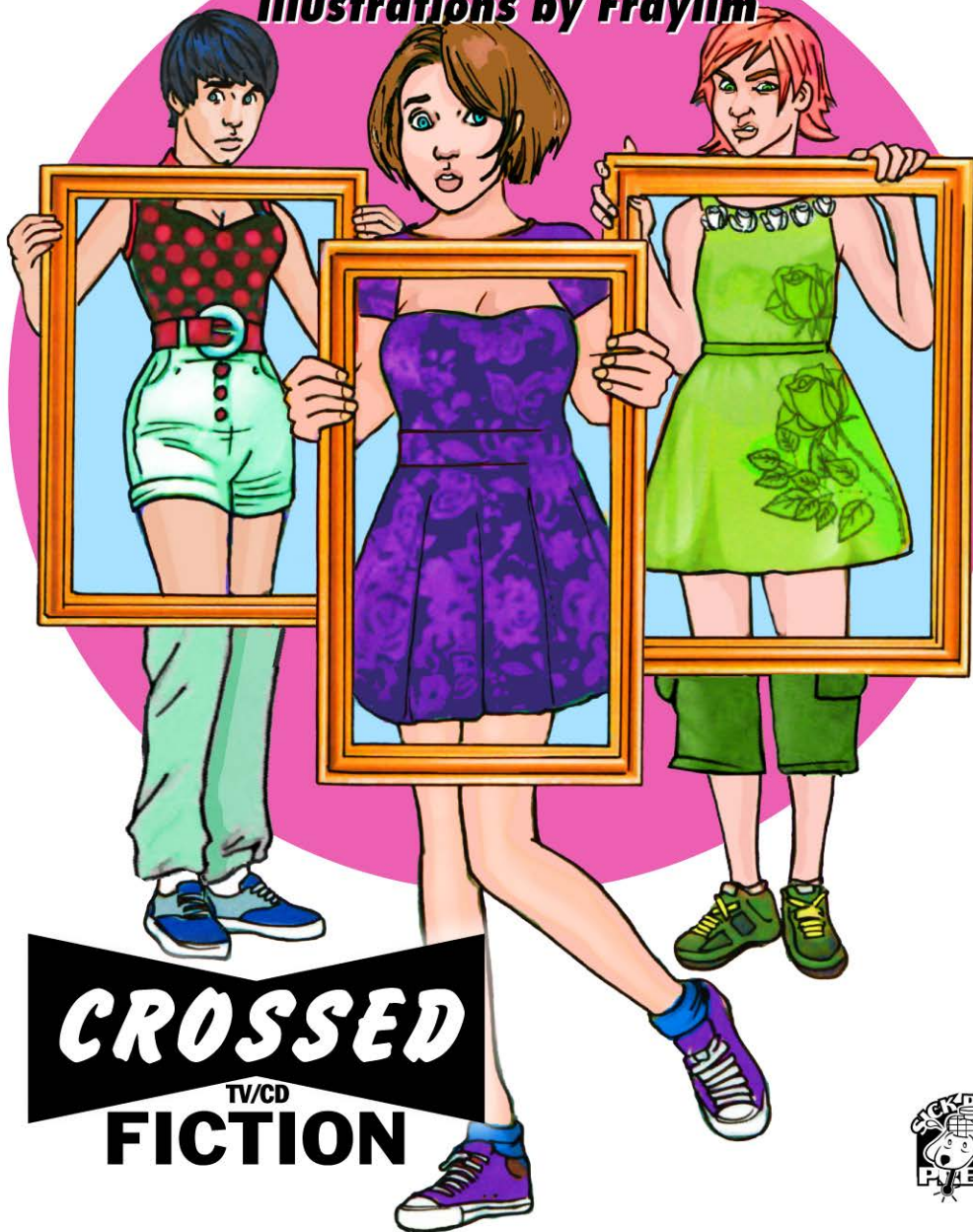


ADULTS ONLY

67 pages 29 illustrations

FASHION VICTIMS

**"Shop 'Til You Drop" by Lauren Bliss
Illustrations by Fraylim**



CROSSED
TV/CD
FICTION



LAUREN BLISS

FASHION VICTIMS

**“Shop ’Til You Drop” by Lauren Bliss
Illustrated by Fraylim
A Crossed Fiction Story**



2015 eBook Edition

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SHOP 'TIL YOU DROP

On the last Saturday before school started for the year, James Sanders was dropped off by his mom at Fair Oaks Mall. Their conversation the previous morning about getting ready for school had led him here – to the place he most hated. The place he feared. The place that felt like it was sucking a little bit of his soul every second he spent in it. The mall.

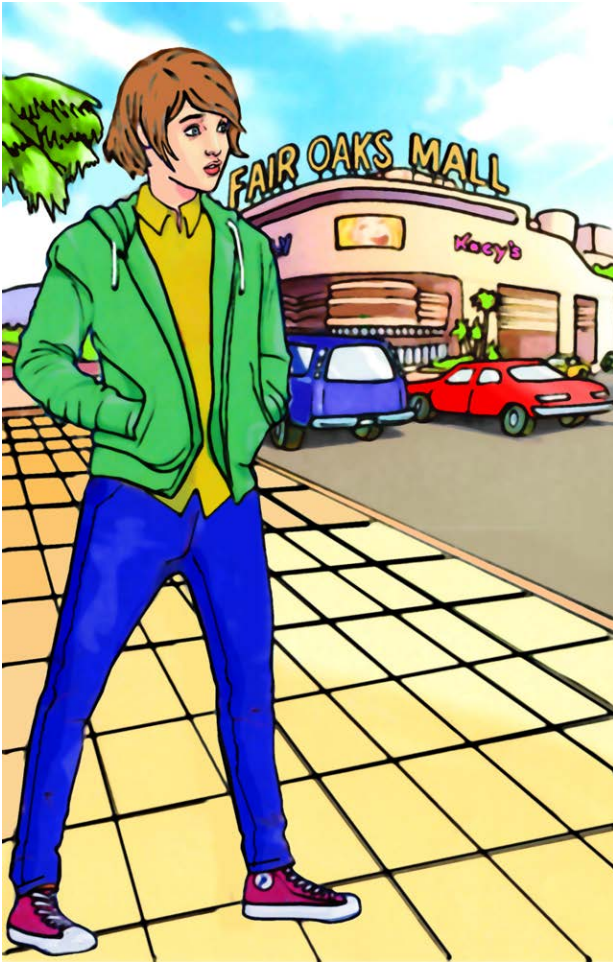
He wasn't exactly a social butterfly. James was kind of a dweeb. His long, stringy black hair hung in his face, and he always wore his favorite shapeless hoodie everywhere he went. He looked like the poster child for the slacker generation. Whatever adults saw as being wrong with today's youth, James was symbolic of almost all of it. He didn't care for much else besides gaming on his console and watching TV, and his ambition and drive had long since been lost, probably under a heap of old unwashed t-shirts at the foot of his bed.

Earlier that week, his mother noticed all his clothes were tattered and faded, and she suggested that he needed some new things before school went back in session. James had no interest in any such thing. The stores would be crowded with people, and James was not a people person. It also sounded a lot like work. They argued for several hours, sniping back and forth in a passive-aggressive way, until finally they came to a compromise that he could go shopping for his own things. She was okay with him having his own style. She just wanted him to be clean.

"You'll need 5 or 6 new outfits, plus some gym clothes," she said, handing him her credit card, "And you might as well get a haircut while you're in there. If you think you're responsible enough, you can go ahead and get a new phone as well. I'll call the phone store, and let them know you're coming. Text me when you're done, and I'll come get you."

So now, as he watched his mom motor away, it was just him versus the mall. Being a typical grumpy teenage boy, he took this opportunity as a punishment, and full of dread, made his way to the entrance. As he entered the food court, he saw the old, noisy arcade on his right, and his trip to the mall came to an abrupt end. He decided that this would be the best way to kill off the afternoon. Playing *Time Crisis* was a lot of fun, but it was a quarter-eater. After about 20 minutes, he burned through his personal fortune and realized he needed to find something else to entertain him. According to his master plan, he needed at least an hour and a half before he could call his mom and tell her "he couldn't find anything."

The one thing about the mall he did like was all the pretty girls. There were girls working in shops, girls looking through clothes, and girls just plain hanging around. Too bad none of them would ever take an interest in him. As long as



he kept his distance, though, he was fine. He could gawk and leer all he wanted, without any risk of human interaction.

It wasn't that James hated the way the mall looked or how it was built. He didn't have a problem with the food court. He liked the arcade, as old as it was, and he actually liked riding up and down the escalators. Especially backwards. No, it was that Fair Oaks Mall just gave off the worst vibes. It was all about money for fashion. Insane amounts of money. Money that could be used for things so much cooler than fabric stitched in some sweatshop in China. The conspicuous consumption was enough

to make anyone dizzy, but it made James sick to his stomach. Not that he was against spending money on cool stuff, but this mall had nothing cool in it. It was crammed full of stores hocking the craziest styles and fashions to the teenage girls who hopped from store to store all day long.

The whole place was a tribute to the stupidity and folly of chasing fashion. So much money, time and energy wasted on trendy clothes. Didn't women understand how style was just a lie? That it was just some corporate bigwig deciding what was in and out? While they were busy spending time figuring out which colors to wear and how long their hemlines should be, the world burned outside. It really did make him crazy. The futility of life was never more acute to James than when he was at the mall.

He walked around from shop to shop, looking at nothing, avoiding the people hawking sunglasses and trinkets. After a few minutes, he decided to go outside and sneak a cigarette. He had been smoking for two years now, his mom none

the wiser. It was out next to some trash cans hidden by the mall entrance that he ran into the last person he'd ever expect to find at the mall: Bret Jacobs.

Bret was the cool guy at school. The alpha cool guy. He was the same age as James, but that's where the similarities stopped. James was a part of the scenery. He was no more interesting than a desk or a table. But Bret had everyone's attention with his chiseled features and devil-may-care attitude. He could have had any girl in school he wanted, and he frequently did.

"Hey," was all he said. "Do I know you?"

James prayed he could just speak calmly. He didn't want to sound like an idiot in front of Bret. "We go... To school... Our school... Which we go to... Together."

"Gotcha," Bret said, bobbing his head. "Comin' up soon."

"Yeah," James replied, unable to expand on the thought. "Here for back to school clothes?"

"What?" Bret looked confused. "Nah, I get my stuff downtown. Where they have the real deal stuff."

"Of course you do," James said, under his breath. He should have assumed Bret had much better sources than mall stores. "So, what're you doing around here?"

Bret smirked. "Back to school season. Lots of girls. The place is packed with them. There's some choice beauties around here today. That's what I came for." He revealed a camera phone in his pocket. "I like to take pics for mementos. Just a secret between you and me."

The thought that he was



sharing a secret with Bret – *The Bret Jacobs* – was almost dizzying. “Right. Sure. You got it.”

“Hey, you know the best spot?” Bret said, finishing his cigarette. “Right outside the dressing rooms at Jillington’s. They have some high-class bitches there.”

“Really?” That made sense.

“You have to check it out,” Bret said, heading back to the entrance and leaving. “Hasta La Vista.”

James had to calm himself. He actually sat down on the ground to keep from falling over. He had just had a conversation with the coolest guy in school. Bret Jacobs. *Bret Jacobs!*

He finished off another two cigarettes to calm himself down. If this was sign, maybe this was going to be a good year, after all. Maybe things were looking up. Maybe he’d be able to hang out with Bret or something. Maybe they’d become best buds. All of the sudden, James couldn’t wait for school to start.

With a spring in his step, James returned to the mall. Bret was right. There were cute girls everywhere you looked. At the store, eating food, hanging out with friends. This was prime girl-watching territory.

Coming across Jillington's department store, curiosity got the better of him and he made his way inside. The three-story shop contained everything you could think you’d need for the plastic artificial happiness all these fashion zombies craved. At least, that was James’ opinion. The first floor was for electronics and appliances, and bored salespeople with nothing to do. That floor was for the male customers, if they even had any. Jillington’s was definitely geared towards female customers, and the busy floors were above. The second floor held all make of clothing for sophisticated women of any age, and was always buzzing with activity. The third featured a full service salon and makeup department.

Wandering aimlessly around the store, he ran up the ‘down’ escalator to the second floor, causing several shoppers to dodge him coming the wrong way. Once he had gotten to the top, James happened upon the dressing rooms.

Well, he had let Bret’s suggestion lead him here, really. The girl didn’t disappoint up here. They were some well-maintained girls, that was for sure. Thin, rich and crazy beautiful. That was when the wicked little part of his brain made a crazy suggestion. He’d never seen a girl naked in person before – was it anything like the internet?

That would be a good story to tell Bret. He’d be able to say he followed Bret’s suggestion – and went one step beyond. That would certainly make an impression. Feeling a bit sneaky, he crept into the dressing area to try and sneak a peek. Checking under stall after stall, he saw no one’s feet. He had

struck out. About to get back on his feet and leave disappointed, he heard from behind him: “What are you doing?”

He glanced up to see a pretty brunette staring holes through him. She was thirty something, wearing a simple short black skirt, black heels, and a white button-down blouse. Her hair was pulled back into a simple ponytail, and her name tag said: Pamela.

Trying to think of any excuse he could, he reached randomly into the nearest clothing rack, and grabbed the first thing he could find. “I was just wanting to try this on. I’m shopping for my back to school wardrobe.”

“Really?” the attendant replied, very skeptically. As she stood with her hands on her hips, he noticed that above her name on her name tag, it said ‘Store Manager.’

“Uh... Yeah,” he said, nervously. “My mom dropped me off with her credit card. I’m supposed to get some new school outfits, and gym clothes. I’m also supposed to get a haircut, and pick out a new phone.”

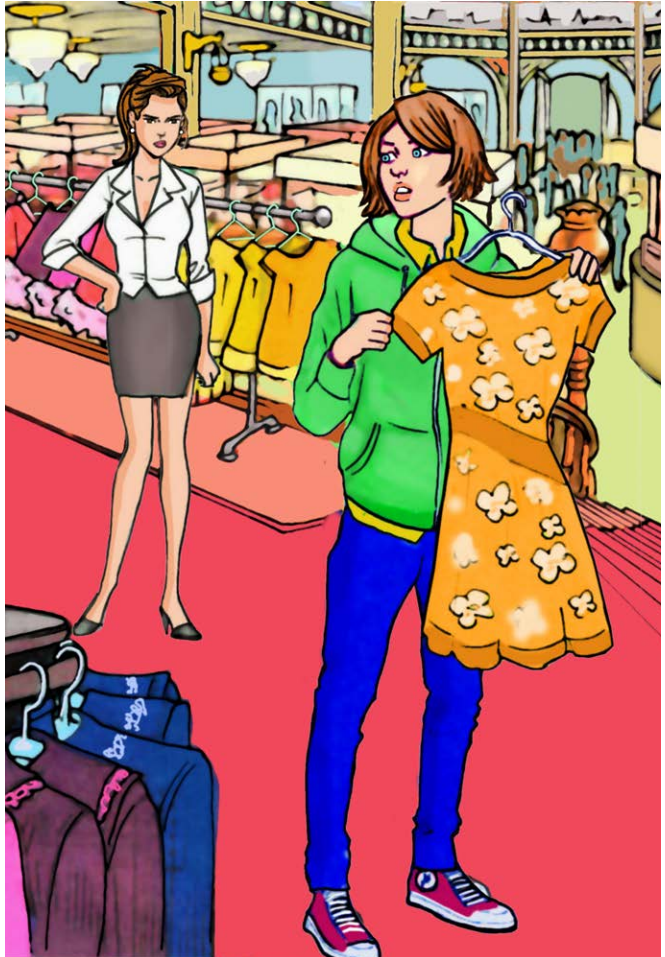
“So you want to try on that, then?”

“Yes, Ma’am!” James replied, earnestly.

“That *dress*,” Pamela emphasized.

Looking down he realized he was holding an orange and white print dress in his hands, he returned his gaze to her, blushing profusely.

But James had chosen the wrong person to mess with. Because even though James had a tiny little wicked part of his brain that had just gotten him into trouble, Pamela had a much bigger and much more



developed part of her brain that was ten times as wicked. She already knew what she wanted to do. Her tone quickly changed to a perky salesperson, trying to help a customer.

“Well the color isn’t really right for your current hair color. And with your fair skin, that hair color is all wrong for you. We can take care of that up in the salon. Come with me and we’ll get you started up there.” She put her hand on the small of James’ back and started to guide him. “While you’re getting the works I can go ahead and arrange a few things for you to try on when you get back.”

Ready to make an escape, the boy said, “No, that’s all right. I don’t think it’s for me.”

Seeing him trying to run, Pamela grabbed his arm and said, “But I insist. I know that I, and the styling experts at Jillington’s could bring out your best features. Unless, that is, you don’t *really* want that new wardrobe. That would mean you were lying to me. I wonder what security would think of a boy back here in the changing area, who didn’t want to buy anything. What else could he be doing in this dressing room?” Pamela tugged at James, getting him to move in the direction of the stairs. “I hire all the employees, you know. I make sure I’ve got the biggest, meanest security people I can find. They’d love to meet someone like you. Would you like to meet them?”

“N... No Ma’am,” James stuttered.

“Oh, maybe some other time, then. So let’s get you started on your day of beauty! You should go ahead and give me your wallet, so I can get your store account started for you.”

Realizing his defeat, James reached in his pocket, and handed over his wallet. Taking his card and ID out, Pamela examined it. The last names on the cards matched. That part of his story checked out, at least.

If he wants a new look, I’ll give him one, she thought to herself. “You’ll just love what Jillington’s full service salon can do for you, sweetie.”

She checked the ID card for a name. “Jamie. That’s a very pretty name,” she said, placing the cards back in the wallet. “Follow me, Jamie. I’ll take you up to get your hair fixed. It looks like you’re overdue. I know how that goes.”

Leading the frightened boy up in the elevator, they headed toward the salon. Entering, they were greeted by a middle-aged green-haired woman in a leopard-print top.

“Hi Louise. This is Jamie. I found him downstairs trying to find a new dress for his back to school look. I figured you could help him get the style he seems to be going for. I’m thinking he should go blonde with a soft perm, and maybe French tips. Also, all that body hair definitely has to go.”

A little taken aback, Louise looked at the young boy quizzically. “Are you sure that’s what you want?” she asked him.

Frightened, he looked towards Pamela, who was sporting a serious glare. He realized he had no way out. The grip of fear on his mind made James want to do just about anything as long as he could avoid the mess that he had gotten himself into. “Y... Yes? I think that would be great. Whatever you think is best.”

Louise smiled wryly. “Well, if you insist!” She brightened up, as she put aside her concerns and examined James as she would any client. “I guess we should get moving! We have a lot to do before you’re ready to make a splash at school!”



In a daze, James was led to the back of the salon and asked to disrobe. He put on the pink terrycloth robe that was offered to him, and waited lying on the table. It was only then did he begin to understand that he was in a women’s beauty salon, naked under a robe and waiting for God knows what here on a table. He felt like he was a Thanksgiving turkey waiting for the hatchet, his body to be ravaged after the deed had been done.

A small woman of Asian descent stepped into the room with a serious scowl on her face. James said hello, but she shook her head and said, “No English.” Quietly, nervously, he waited as she applied wax to his legs, and covered it with strips. The warmth of the wax was almost relaxing, making him feel a little at ease, but then he was brought to a rude awakening by the sudden tug on a strip that took all of the leg hair with it. He quickly understood that the dozen of other strips were going to be removed the same way. He attempted to scoot off the table, but he was efficiently restrained by his torturer. “No!” She barked in her accent. She grabbed him by the ankle to keep him still. “You no move or it *really* hurt!”

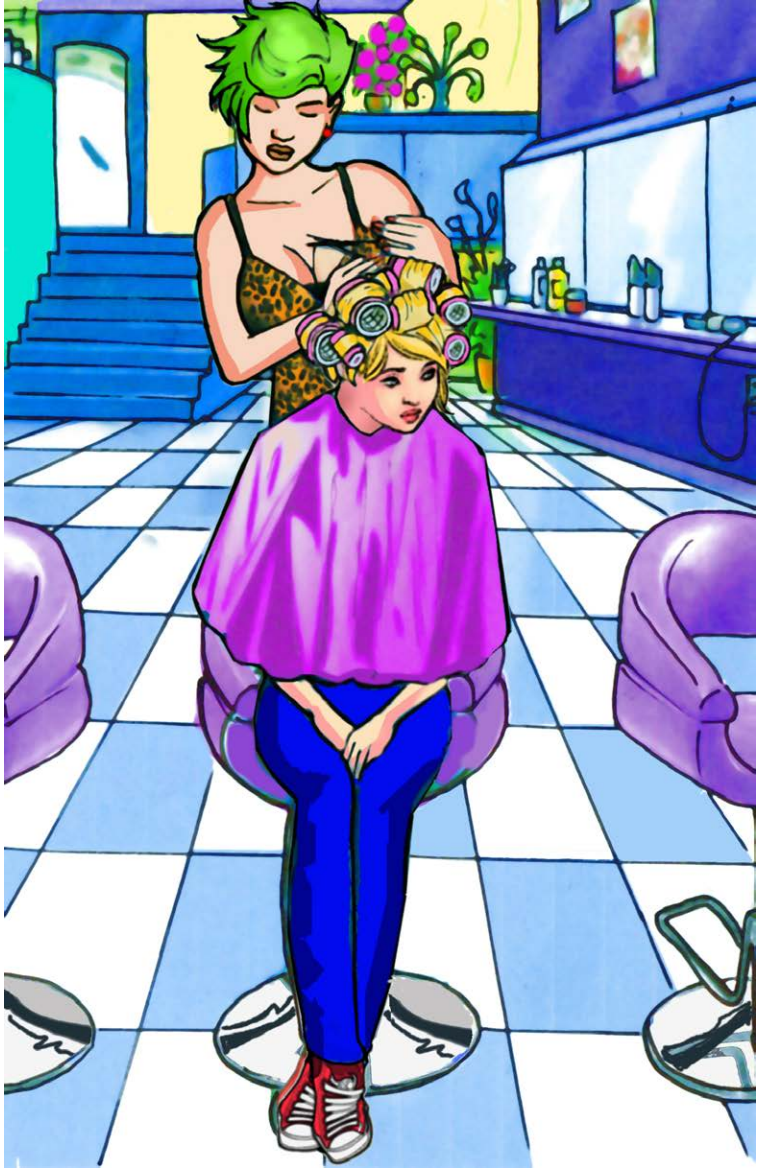
After finishing the legs, the small woman made her way up the rest of James’ body. All the way up – even up to his face and finishing with the eyebrows. As he laid there, in shock, he felt as if his skin was on fire, like the worst sunburn he’d ever had. Only then did the Asian woman begin to rub lotion all over his sore body, to help with the redness.

After a few minutes to cool down, Louise brought him a bag, and something on a hanger. In the bag he found a pair of yellow satin panties and a matching yellow bra with a little bow between the cups.

“Who are these for?” He asked Louise.

“Who do you think, sweetie?”

James gulped and picked them up. He was in much deeper than he first thought. Slipping on the panties was easy enough, although they felt all kinds of wrong on his body. Then it was time for the bra. After struggling with it for a minute he managed to arrange it in place. Feeling that the bag had more inside it, looked inside to find a pair of medium-sized breast forms with a little note attached to them. "For a 'girl' like you who could use a little help," the note read. Trying to get through this humiliation as quickly as possible, he did as he was told and inserted the breast forms into the cups of the bra.



It was the oddest thing to look down at his body and see himself. His body looked so strange without hair, and the bra and panties shaped him in ways he'd only seen on girls. His emotions were tumbling inside of him like an unbalanced clothes washer.

“Don’t dawdle now,” Louise said, as she returned to the room. She hung a dress on a hangar and left without further comment. James recognized the garment as the dress he has randomly yanked off the rack earlier. Sighing, he put the dress on looked at himself in the mirror. What he saw was a skinny young girl with a plain face beneath her arched eyebrows, and stringy unkempt hair. Her dress was a tight fitting orange-and-white print knee-length sheath. It had a braided brown leather belt around the waist. He thought that the dress looked very sophisticated for a girl his age, but still very age appropriate. Something a fashionista would wear.

Knowing that there was no point in trying to delay the seemingly inevitable, he was going to have to leave this tiny little room. Summoning all his courage he stepped out into the main area.

Louise was already waiting for him by her salon chair. After sitting him down she began the process of bleaching his hair. While coating his head in a smelly acidic liquid, she rambled on to James about how her daughter had hair the same color, and about how she knew he would look just ‘precious’ when he was done. He thanked her, as best he could, and hoped that he would be able to undo this when it was all over.

Louise applied a gel bleach to James’ hair, waited, then rinsed it out. Then she did it again, and then a third time. After 20 minutes under the dryer, he was washed out, and she began cutting his hair. She first cut straight bangs across his forehead, and he noticed her cutting a lot around the ends, but for all the cutting, not much length was coming off. When she was done, she rolled his hair up in rollers, and it was under the dryer again. While he was waiting for his hair to dry, the small Asian woman returned and started working his nails. It took almost an hour. When she was done he had a nice set of French tips, and shiny, clean, well-rounded toenails. After the soft perm she tweaked her creation, combing and spraying his hair. Once she seemed satisfied, she suddenly spun James around to see himself. “Meet the new girl on campus!” Louise said. His reflection in the mirror was that of a young girl with blonde hair and bangs. Her hair curled in well-crafted flourishes that cascaded around her head like crashing ocean waves and floating clouds of mist.

“I think you could do with a bit a fancy style for your debut, don’t you?” said the nice woman, smiling politely. She teased the crown of his hair a little, creating a little bump, and gathered it all back and secured it in a half back with a matching orange barrette. “All done,” she said. “Pamela will meet you out front, so you can go to the makeup counter.”

“Thanks,” he almost whimpered.

“Oh, don’t forget your shoes!” Louise said, handing over a pair of white 4 inch pumps. James slipped his feet into them and made his way out the door, weaving from side to side as he tried to understand how to walk.

“Don’t you look pretty?” Pamela said, grinning ear to ear. “Come this way. We need to get your face looking as adorable as the rest of you.” The two made their way over to the cosmetics counter, with Pamela guiding him through the crowd. Sitting there were three girls, all wearing similar outfits to Pamela’s, but more heavily made up, almost to a caricaturish



degree. “Girls, this is Jamie,” Pamela said to them, “She needs a smoking *hot* look to go with the new hair. Make her look completely kissable.” Jamie was quick to notice her change of pronouns. He was grateful he didn’t have to explain himself and that this was getting less embarrassing, if only by a little.

The girls were excited and eager, and immediately started working on his face. After about an hour of brushing, painting, and coating, James was handed a mirror. His face now looked bright and flush, with big blue eyes, and long lashes. His lips were a soft pink, and they looked a little bigger thanks to the lip plumper they used. As he was staring at the image they created, they snuck in and sprayed him with a rose-scented perfume.

Pamela had returned and chimed in. “Thanks girls. Great work, as always. She looks amazing.”

“He was a great subject,” one of the girls said. “Oh, I mean ‘she,’” the girl added, with a sinister giggle.

Taking James by the hand, Pamela walked him to their next stop. “We’re off to the jewelry counter now,” she said. She was really starting to enjoy this. She loved her job. He was starting to look so pretty, she almost forgot he was simply a pervert getting what was coming to him.

At the jewelry counter they had him try on several bracelets and necklaces, seeing which worked well with his complexion, and what seemed like his style. James was just hoping that the worst wouldn’t happen – but then it did. “Time for earrings!”, Pamela squealed. She picked out several styles, ranging from long dangly ones, to simple studs. Pamela finally decided on a pair of large wide silver hoops. Next thing he knew both his ears were pierced, and he was sporting the new earrings.

“Looks like you’re all set,” Pamela said. “Now, it’s time to shop ‘til you drop.” “Let’s just get this over with,” James said, wobbling behind her in the unfamiliar heels.

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch, miss prissy. This is the fun part!”

She took him back to the same dressing room where she had caught him. Brining in stacks and stack of clothes, she made him try on outfit after outfit, taking pictures of him posing in each one. Pamela made him pose and smile in each picture as she added various accessories.

James felt like he had tried on the entire store, although it had only been a few dozen outfits. After a few outfits for gym, it was into the dresses. Flare dresses, open-back rompers, mesh-top dresses, flouncy lace dresses, zip-front denim dresses, strapless dresses and crochet dresses. All of them short, skin-bearing and expensive.

When they were finished he was returned to the orange dress, while Pamela sent the photos to her color printer, and the clothes to the back for packaging.

“Well, I guess we’re all done here. I’ll run your card and get you ready to go. I would have to say that this was probably my most successful makeover. But you have to remember that what makes an outfit is the accessories.” She placed a knee length white satin coat, with a single row of buttons down the front on his shoulders. She then handed him a brown buckled handbag, and showed him how to hold it over the crook of his elbow. She then placed a pair of large white-rimmed pair of sunglasses above his new bangs. “Here’s a new wallet for you. I’ve already moved your ID and your mom’s card over to it. I think the pink leather suits your new look better. There’s also all of the makeup that we used earlier in the purse. It’s going to take a bit of time to get your things ready to go. Didn’t you say you’re supposed to go get a new phone?”



“Yeah. I’m supposed to get a smart phone. My contract is up. But I think I’m going to wait ‘til later. It just doesn’t seem that important to me right now.”

“Nonsense!” Pamela said with a wave of her hand. “I’ll go with you. I’m taking my break soon. It’ll be fun!”

James hung his head, and resigned himself to the fact that this woman had him firmly under her thumb. The two made their way down the thoroughfare of the mall, Pamela looking confident and sexy in her stride, and James looking like he had just discovered the ability to walk. She gave her charge tips on how to hold up his head as he swiveled his hips, and he did his very best. That wasn’t easy, as they were getting a lot of attention from all the passers-by. None too soon for James, they head into the phone store, and Pamela made sure she was the one who spoke to the man behind the counter.

“This is James Sanders. He’s supposed to pick up a new phone.”

While James lowered his eyes in shame, the man snickered, and showed her the options.

“He’ll take the pink one with the sparkly crystals,” Pamela decided. “I think it’s the cutest.”

After his service was transferred, and Pamela took a quick snap of James in his dress for his profile picture, they made their way back to the store to grab his purchases. Before giving him his new phone, she made sure to text his mother to come pick him up. After retrieving his new things, they headed toward the main entrance, so James could await his fate.

It was a horribly torturous fifteen minutes as James stood on the curbside. He wasn’t sure which he was more afraid of: being recognized by someone – or *not* being recognized. He had to admit, Pamela had thoroughly transformed him, and was nearly unrecognizable as James. Or simply as male. That absolutely terrified him.

When his mother pulled up, she got out of the car, and started looking for him. James tried to ignore her, hoping she would leave, but soon enough she recognized her own son. “James? Is that you?”

Pamela quickly jumped in. “You must be Mrs. Sanders,” she said with a practiced smile, “Jamie here has just been a thrill. I’m the manager of Jillian’s Department Store. I saw her in the dressing room holding a dress, poor thing, all confused and uncertain. So I just felt compelled to offer her some help. She told me she was getting some back to school clothes, but the poor thing didn’t seem to have any fashion sense, so I just had to help her out. We’ve gotten her several new outfits for class, and gym, and also for any important social functions she’ll have to attend through the year.” She handed over a loose-leaf binder. “We’ve compiled a photo album of her modeling her new clothes.”

As she stood there, stunned, James’ mother flipped through the first couple of pages of the album, looking at her son in flamboyantly feminine outfits. The first that caught her eye was his new gym clothes. They were a pair of pink short shorts, and a white tank top, with pink and white trainers. The second was a legging and sweater dress combo with a cowl neck, and knee high boots. The next was a flashy one, with him in a white off-the-shoulder dress, with a flouncy skirt that fell to mid thigh, and a black ribbon tied around the waist into a large bow at the front. His feet were perched atop a pair of white strappy 3 inch heels, and his head was topped with a white large-brimmed boaters’ hat with a big black bow on the left side.

After putting the album back in the bag, Pamela had loaded all of the packages, filling up the entire trunk and backseat of the car. James sat in the passenger seat, about as embarrassed as a boy could be in his situation.

Without really much idea of what in the world had happened to her son and the misadventures he must have gotten himself into, Mrs. Sanders thanked Pamela, even though she knew she wasn't getting the whole story. As Pamela waved on energetically, they pulled out and headed home. The new mother/daughter duo then drove home in the most uncomfortable silence anyone could think of. It was only broken once. "At least you'll be one of the most *stylish* people in school," James' mother said.



"Oh my *God!*" Melody said, spilling over on the sofa. James' sister was fit to be tied as she laughed louder and harder than James had ever heard her laugh before. She had just gotten sight of James as she had arrived for dinner. "That's really you!"

"Now, now, don't tease your brother," James' mother said, as she stuck her head out from the kitchen. She could barely be heard with the whooping cackles Melody was belting out, and it didn't calm the young lady down one bit.

James had expected nothing less from his older sister, who had always looked for every opportunity to humiliate and demean him. Even though she had moved out a couple of years ago, she still spent a lot of time at the house, and always seemed to be hanging around. She and her boyfriend Carl were practically residents in the Sanders' household, and rarely missed dinner. Melody wasn't exactly the domestic goddess her mother was.

"Set the table?" James' mother asked her son.

"Yes," James grumped. He went into the kitchen, the door behind him barely muffling the sound of Melody's



hysterics. "You still let her come over with me dressed like this?" He asked his mother as he grabbed the flatware.

"She was going to know sooner or later," was her simple answer.

As James set the four places at the table, Melody had calmed herself enough to hover over her brother's shoulder as he made the table. "You lost a bet. You're in hiding from the mob!" She asked. "No! You got a part in a play as a girl and you're practicing!"

"No," James mumbled. "Leave me alone."

"Oh, no chance," Melody said.

"Is Carl coming over, too?" James asked.

"He'll be here after he's watched the game with his pals. If there's free food, he'll be here. I just hope he didn't get too drunk."

"Great. Just great."

"So? What's the story?"

With a heavy sigh, James explained it to her. He left out the whole 'peeping tom' part, but he did tell the story in as much detail as he could, hoping for some degree of sympathy. He got none.

"You are such a chump," she said, after hearing the tale. "And you know.... There's something you're still not telling me. Some busy store manager isn't going to randomly terrorize their customers by forcing them to get a makeover fit for a beauty queen." She tapped her chin in thought. "Plus, that doesn't explain why you're still dressed up like this."

"That's my fault, I suppose," their mother said, coming in to check on James' progress. "I got a little over-zealous."

"She threw all my clothes out," James said. "Even my favorite jeans!"

"They were full of holes and stunk to high heaven!" His mom defended. "But perhaps I did throw out more than I should have."

James turned to his sister. "This is all I have to wear. She threw every last stitch of my clothes into the trash. My shoes, my socks, my underwear... Shirts... Pants... Sweats."

"She did that to me when I was seventeen, remember?" Melody said with a smirk. "You should have seen it coming."

"You dressed like a homeless person," James jabbed at his sister. "I was never that bad..."

"Yes you were," both Melody and their mother said simultaneously.

"So, it's been three days. Why don't you just go out and buy some new stuff?" Melody asked both James and her mom.

James looked to his mother for an answer to that one.

“Do you have any idea how much this all cost?” She said. “I had to phone up the credit card company to raise our limit! I still haven’t heard back from them. Besides, I know Little Miss Bottle Blonde here isn’t telling me everything that happened. So if he wants to get proper clothes for school, James is more than capable of going back to the store and returning these clothes. Then, and only then, he can get what he wants to get.”

Melody turned her attention to her brother. “I’m not going back to that store,” he said. “You can’t make me.”

“Hey, anyone home?” Carl yelled out bombastically. “Is everyone in the kitchen?” He had just walked in the front door.

“Aw, crap,” James said to himself.

“Oh my God!” Carl yelled upon seeing James. “That’s really you!” He started to yuk it up and his girlfriend joined him. “You’re in a dress!”

James wanted to crawl under a rock.



Pamela started her morning like she usually did. She threw water on a couple of fires with her staff, resolved a half-dozen customer issues and sat in on a conference call with other regional store managers. It was just a little bit after eleven when her boring routine turned around. She heard, from behind, the clicks of heels on the tile sales floor. She glanced aside to see a young blonde girl walking towards her. “Well, hello there, Jamie,” she said with a smile stretching from ear to ear on her face. She never thought, after she had taken that little perv James and gave him the makeover of a lifetime, that she’d ever see him again.

“I need a refund... or an exchange... or something,” James said. “School starts Monday, and I definitely can’t go back with the clothes you sold me.”

“I don’t see why not,” came Pamela’s reply. “You look gorgeous. All the girls will die with jealousy over you. Let me get a good look at you.”

James was wearing a sky blue cap-sleeved sheath, with sequins. It had two large buttons on opposing sides of the waist, and beneath them a few pleats before the skirt flared out slightly, down to the knee. He stood atop a pair of matching blue sling-back open toed wedges, with little bows on the toe. His blonde hair was styled in a painstakingly carefully way, with his bangs falling softly on his forehead. He dug into his blue and white vertical striped handbag, and pulled out a receipt.

“I’ve got all the clothes in the car,” he said, waving the slip of paper furiously in her face.

"I don't see why'd you want to. You look great. Did you put that outfit together yourself?"

"I had to wear this. I told my mom what happened, and she's refusing to pay for anymore clothes. She even threw out my old things, before I even got home. You can't do this to me. If I have to wear these things to school, I'll be the laughingstock of the place."

"But you're wearing..."

"I had to wear something to get here, and this is all I have now!"

Pamela pointed to his hair and face. "And the..."

"I didn't want to look like a guy in a dress!" He dipped his voice down lower, to keep from being overheard. "I had to make myself look pretty!"

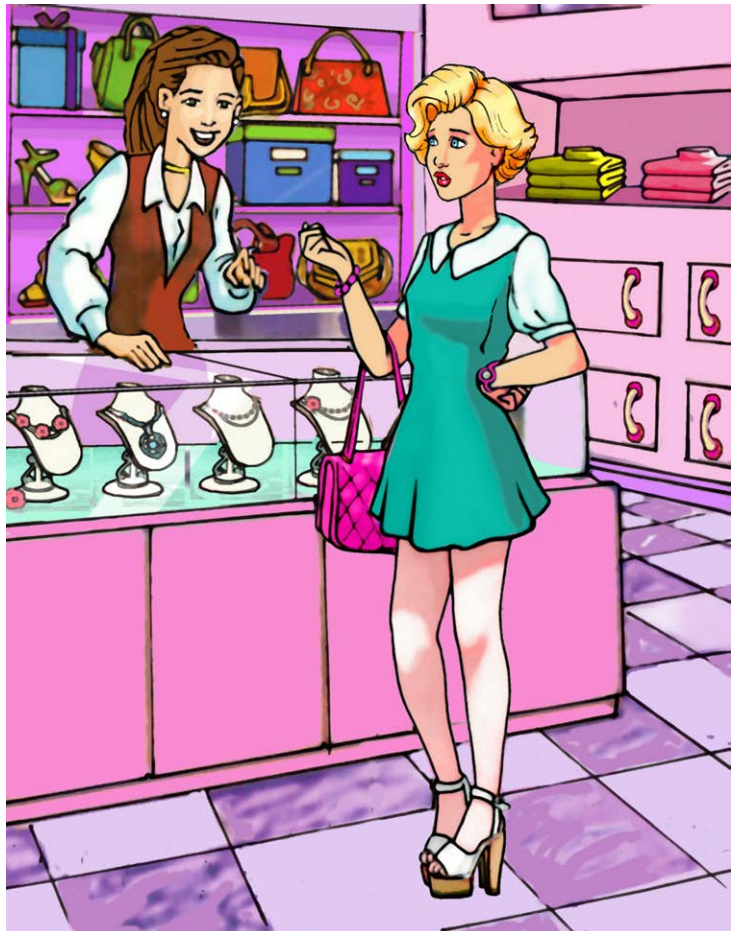
Pamela's wicked grin faded, as she placed her hand on her chin, and thought for a second. She examined the receipt. "I'll be happy to exchange these for you, Mrs. Helen Sanders. I just need to see your ID."

"That's my mom's name. I used her card! You know that!"

"I'm not normally supposed to do exchanges for someone who's name isn't on the receipt..."

"Don't do this to me!" James whined.

"...But I think we can work something out," Pamela continued. "I need some help around the store today. If you really dressed yourself, then I can use you. I need a sales



associate on the floor.”

James’ stunned expression said it all. “You want *me* to *work* here?”

“Of course. You very obviously have an eye for style. You’re sure someone didn’t help you?”

“And put up with them making fun of me?”

“Interesting. Well, it’s simple work, really. Show the customers around the department, and make suggestions for things that would go well with their purchases. If you can do that, then I think I can help you out.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have come back here,” he said.

“But you did. Now would you like to help us out in the Juniors section?”

“No,” James said.

“I knew you would! Follow me!”

After a quick description of what he was expected to do – help out customers selecting clothes, add as much as possible to every sale and direct everything else to the registers – Pamela left James alone to fend for himself. She just pinned a little blank name tag for Jillington’s to his dress and he was now an official salesgirl.

James didn’t have to wait for his very first customer to come along. “Do you have this in robins egg?” A woman asked, holding a tank dress.

“We... We don’t have eggs,” James replied.

“It’s a color.”

“Really?”

“Do you have it? It’s the same color... as the dress you’re wearing.”

James looked down at himself. “Huh. Well, what we got out is what we got.”

“Could you check?”

“Not really.”

Five minutes later he was helping out another customer, a white-haired woman with her daughter.

“What would go with these pants?” The woman asked James.

“I dunno. A shirt? Was that a trick question?”

As the minutes ticked by, James faded deeper and deeper into his section. Wherever customers were, he would go where they weren’t. He figured as long as he could just hang out for a few hours, not get into trouble and avoid people, he could get out of here with his money or at least an exchange, and it would be over and done.

“Hi, I’m Trianna!” Said a girl who had snuck up behind him. James turned his head around to see who it was, but just as he did, another voice came from his other side.

“I’m Brianna!” Said another girl. Now James had to swivel his head back around to take a look at her. Then back again to Trianna, and then back once more to Brianna.

They were both blonde, both had the same pasted-on smile, both were wearing practically the same outfit, and both were wearing name tags for Jillington’s. If one were to ask central casting for retail employees, they would have produced girls who looked like these two. They wore tight v-neck cardigan sweaters with long sleeves over white scoop-neck tops. Brianna had it in pink, and Trianna in a slightly different pink. Both wore black knee-length pencil skirts, and Brianna had black knee-high boots and Trianna had dark brown knee-high boots. The easiest way to tell them apart was to note that Trianna wore a white hairband while Brianna favored a pink scrunchy.

“Are you new?” Trianna asked. “We haven’t met.”

“Yeah, we haven’t met.” Brianna echoed. “I love your hair. I bet Louise did it. I know her work anywhere! She’s *so* good.”

Trianna agreed. “I only let Louise work on my hair. No one else. So who are you again?”

In between the two chatterboxes, James felt like he was under a machine-gun attack. “I’m...” He was going to have use that name Pamela had given him. “...Jamie.”

Brianna made a funny face, her pink painted lips becoming crooked. “Jamie? Isn’t that, like, a boy’s name?”

“That’s so totally a boy’s name,” Trianna said.

“No, my aunt had a girl parakeet that was named Jamie,” Brianna said. “So I guess it can be a girl’s name, too.”

“Yeah, okay, I guess.” Trianna then turned attention back to James. “So, um, did you know you’re in our zone?”

“You’re totally in our zone,” Brianna confirmed.

“See, we all have zones, and we all get paid for what gets sold in them, and it’s, like, totally important and stuff that we don’t go into other people’s zones, okay?”

“Oh... Okay...” James replied.

“Great!” Trianna chirped. “So, just scoot over there a few steps, okay?”

James moved a step in the direction she was indicating.

“Just a few more.”

James complied, continuing to move as she directed.

“One more. And another. And... There!” Trianna smiled brightly. “And that’s your zone, ‘kay?”

“So stay in your zone, and we won’t have to report you!” Brianna said with her best smile. “Isn’t that great?”

“Um, yeah,” James said. “Great.”

“Well, we have to get back to work now, because we’re sellers. *Top* sellers.”

“Number one,” Brianna emphasized.

“So, bye!” Trianna said, as she and Brianna then turned their backs to James. “Did you see her? She’s so fat!”

Brianna concurred. “What’s Pamela thinking? She’s so ugly and fat!”

“I can hear you,” James said, from just a foot away.

“Stop listening to our private conversation!” Trianna hissed.

“So rude!” Brianna added.

“Hi,” a girl said, approaching Trianna and Brianna. “I was thinking about this sweater and...”

Trianna didn’t wait for her to even complete her sentence. “That sweater looks so totally prefect you!”

Brianna was just as enthusiastic. “You are definitely meant for that sweater. You have to get it!”

The girl took a second look at the gaudy mix of orange and turquoise stitching on the oversized sweater and shrugged. “If you say so...”

“I won’t let you leave without buying that!” Trianna said. “It’d be a crime!”

The girl’s attitude perked up. “Okay. Yes. You’re right. I’ll get it.” She turned and walked to the register.

“Great! Fill up on fashion at Jillington’s!” Trianna spoke the trite corporate slogan like it was the name of a passionate lover.

As soon as she was out of hearing range, Brianna and Trianna gave each other a high-five. “You nailed that sale, girlfriend!” Brianna said.

“I know, right? She was like ‘what about this sweater’ and I was all ‘you should get that’ and then she totally got it! It’s so easy for pros like us!”

“She looks *awful* in that sweater!” James piped up, annoyed. “She’s going to feel humiliated in that piece of trash!”

Brianna clicked her tongue. “You just wish you were as good at selling as we are.”

“We’re top sellers!” Trianna pointed out, again. They both headed off to their station, leaving James by his lonesome self. He was absolutely fuming at the

attitude of the two girls. He was reminded of exactly why he hated the mall all over again, at double the intensity. This day couldn't end fast enough for him.

An older woman was wandering in his direction. "Do you have foundation garments?" She asked.

"Me? No."

"No, the *store*, dearie."

"Beats me. Go ask that lady at the register. She might know."

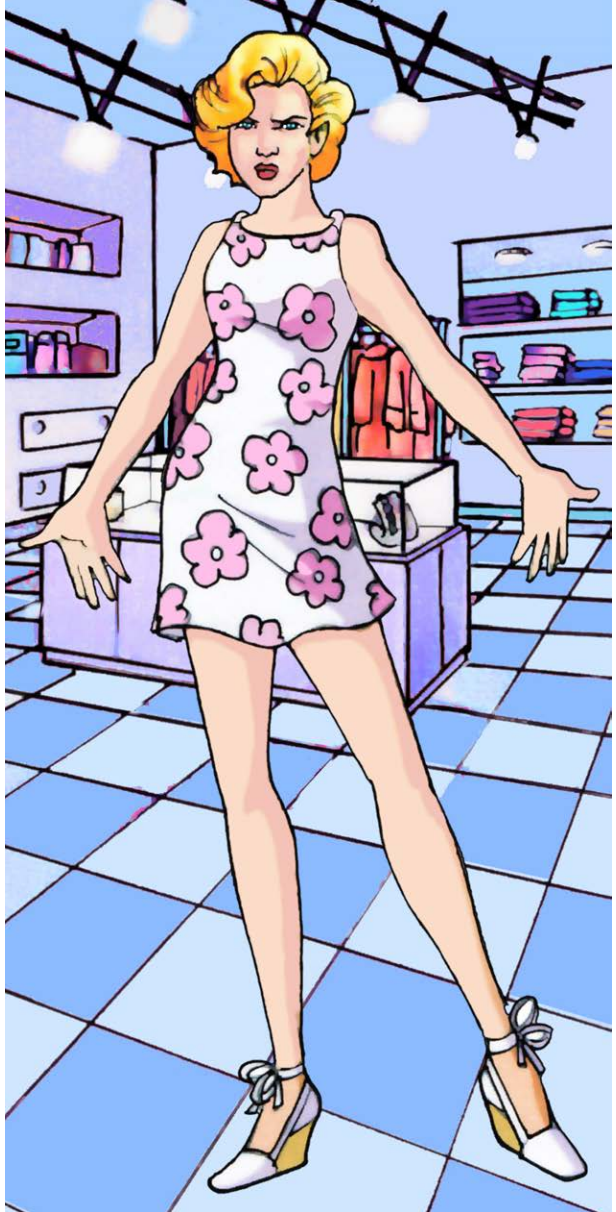


Over on the other side of the store, Pamela was minding to her duties when she was confronted by the white-haired woman and her daughter. "You have some very poor customer service here!" She said. "I used to like shopping here, but your salesgirls are so rude!"

"I... I'm sorry you had such a poor experience I..."

"Shove it, lady!" the daughter said, piping up. "My mom doesn't deserve to be made fun of!"

As they left without accepting any offer of reconciliation, Pamela knew exactly where this complaint had come from. Over the course of the next hour, she heard three more.



“Jamie,” she muttered to herself. Pamela had to stop and consider that maybe, this time, she had been a bit too clever with her little pet project. She thought he had him so thoroughly frightened that he’d obediently do whatever she wanted and get a free employee for the day. Still, the boy did have potential. He had co-ordinated a delightful outfit and expertly done his own makeup and hair. No, she was going to cut bait. She’d just refund his money and get him out before he messed up her store’s reputation.

“Excuse me, are you the manager here?” A man holding a clipboard asked.

“Uh, yes,” Pamela replied, already suspicious. Clipboards were never good.

“I’m with the mall. I’m evaluating stores to make sure everyone is in compliance with mall policy.”

Pamela perked up and put her best smile on to make sure her new favorite person in the history of ever was at ease. Or at least she was going to act like he was her most favorite person in the history of ever, because the mall evaluation was as important to her job as anything else in her life. The mall sent these reports directly to corporate, and Pamela knew that ensuring that her store was in 100% compliance with mall policy was a requirement of keeping her job.

“How very interesting!” Pamela sang in a sweet voice that could have been yanked from the throat of a Disney princess. “You must have such a fascinating job!”

The clipboard man ignored her blatant attempt to cozy up to him. “I wanted to ask about gender compliance. Our checks seem to indicate that you employ 73 percent women and 27 percent men. We do have a requirement that every store have no less than a 70-30 balance. Are you not aware of this?”

Pamela had to restrain her need to groan. She knew very well that she was skirting the gender compliance rules, but how many men could she hire in a store that was obviously made to appeal to women? She already had more male salespeople than she would ever need working the electronics floor. She really had intended to hire more men, she had just let it slip away from her a little.

“Wait!” Pamela said, suddenly realizing the serendipitous moment at hand. “I just hired a boy. He hasn’t shown up in our list yet!” That was going to save her. “He’ll put us over the minimum!”

“I see,” the man said, clearly skeptical. “I’ll need to see him to verify.”

Pamela led the clipboard man over to the Juniors section, where James was slumped against a wall, nibbling at a stray thread on his dress, trying to bite it off. “There he is,” she said, keeping a distance from James.

“Pardon?”

“That’s Jamie. He’s... Well... He’s a he.”

“You don’t say.”