

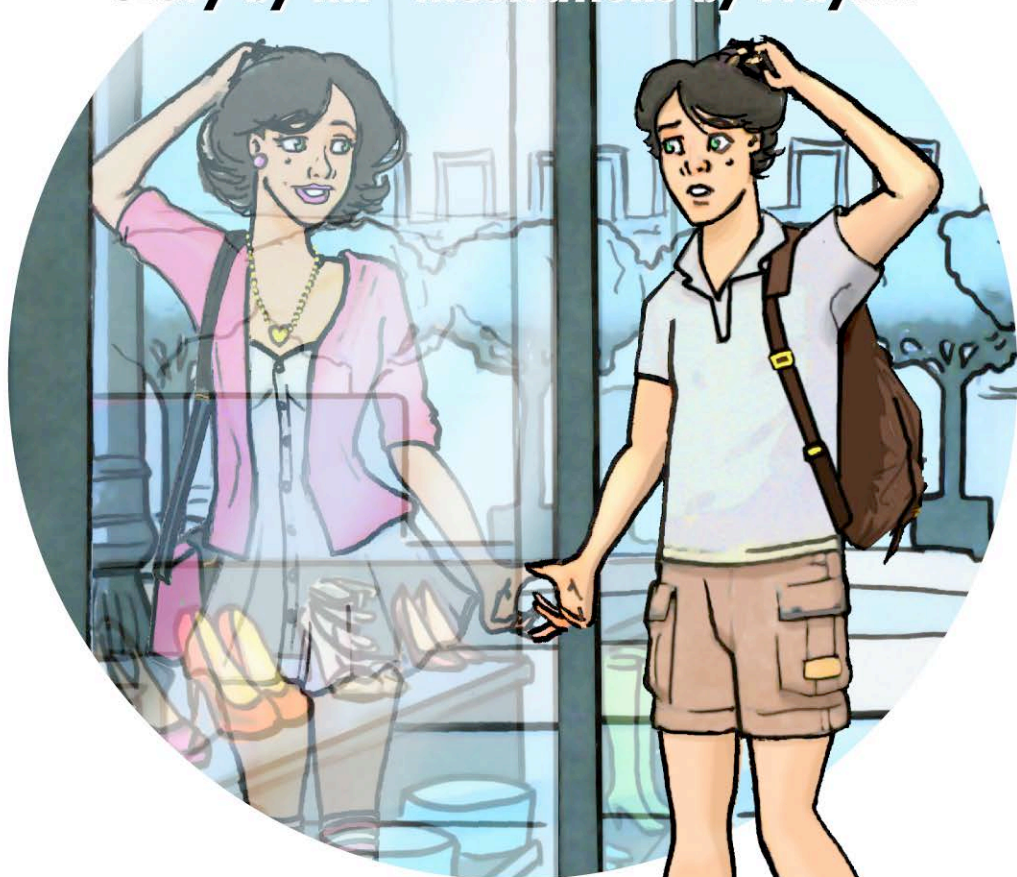
ADULTS ONLY

151 pages **40** illustrations

BLONDIE HE'S NOT

PART OF THE "BLONDIE" SERIES

Story by KK - Illustrations by Fraylim



CROSSED
TV/CD
FICTION

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BLONDIE HE'S NOT

**Story by KK – Illustrations by Fraylim
A Crossed Fiction Story**



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BLONDIE HE'S NOT

Mark Summers ended up getting his job at *Tiffany's Twist Hair and Nail Salon* by complete accident. Sure, he was trawling the mall with a big stack of resumes, since his mom was determined he get a part-time job now that he was seventeen and in his final year of high school, but his preferences leaned more towards HMV or EB Games. In fact, he'd been heading towards the latter store when he was distracted by seeing the most beautiful girl he'd ever laid eyes on in his entire life.

She was strutting along gracefully on designer stiletto sandals, wearing a flouncy white miniskirt that rustled around her slender, tanned thighs with each dainty step, paired with a skimpy lavender tube-top that was just barely restraining the biggest, most perfect rack Mark had ever seen. Her golden blonde hair fell in a perfect cascade around what was truly the face of an angel: big blue eyes with unbelievably long lashes, a tiny, delicate nose, high cheekbones, and thick, pouty lips covered in a shimmering pink gloss.

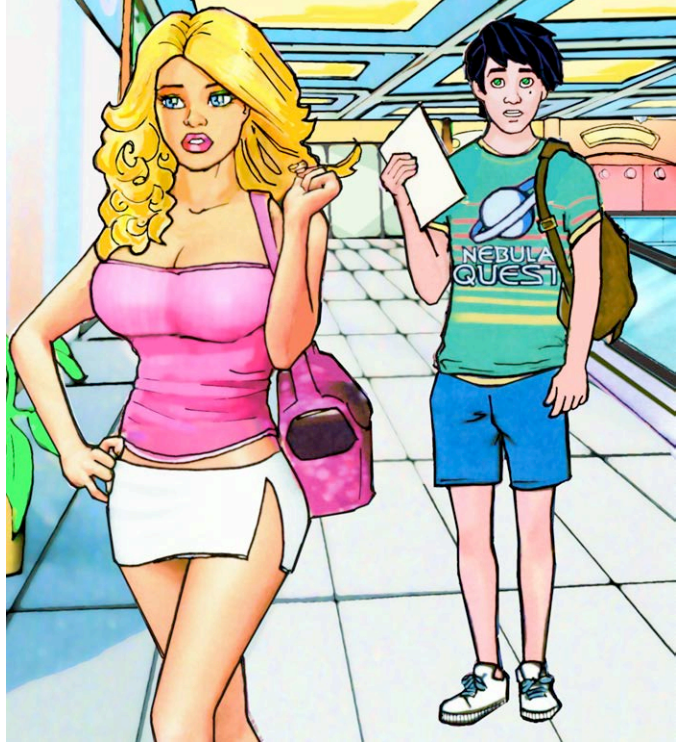
As a sunbeam caught her gleaming silver hoop earrings and glittery pink nails, not to mention that mane of perfectly-coiffed blonde hair, Mark could practically hear the heavenly choir singing. It was hard to blame him for stopping dead in his tracks as the blonde beauty swished towards him, rummaging for something in her small white purse. Mark couldn't help but stare at her chest. Unfortunately, she seemed to sense it and glanced upward, blushing slightly as she realized where exactly he was looking. Mark, to his credit, managed to blush about twice as brightly, quickly looking away as she passed.

No doubt about it, he was utterly and completely love-struck. Sure, his mom would have taken issue with the shortness of the girl's skirt and the revealing top, but Mark certainly didn't. Between the designer outfit and her incredible good looks, he instantly knew she was a million miles out of his league. But then again, Mark could immediately tell that this girl wasn't some stuck-up blonde bimbo strutting around the mall in a slutty outfit to tease all the guys who wished they had her and the girls who wished they *were* her. No, there was something different about her. She was *mesmerizing*.

Without even realizing it, Mark – still clutching his resumes – did a complete 180 and started following the blonde back the way he'd come, mesmerized by the measured swing of her hips and the clip-clop of her high heels. Yes, there were hot girls at his high school, particularly on the cheerleading squad, but none of them could measure up to this vision. Mark had to find out more about her, or get her name at the very least. He stumbled after her, unable to take his eyes off the taut curves of her legs and sashaying bottom, trying desperately to think of something he could say to her. Maybe she would drop her purse, and he could help her collect her things, or maybe she would stop and look at a

map, and he could help give her directions, or, or...

Mark was so caught up in his fantasies that he nearly followed her right through the glass door of a trendy hair salon, but he managed to stop himself just in time. He watched forlornly through the glass as the blonde was greeted by two attractive beauticians in matching smocks, exchanging hugs and air kisses. His view was cut off, however, when a fashionably-dressed red-haired woman planted herself in front of the door with a bemused expression on her face.



“May I help you?” she asked, opening the door. “We’re all booked up for the afternoon, if you’re trying to make an appointment.”

Mark blushed to the roots of his hair. “No, uh, no, I wasn’t, uh, trying to make an appointment,” he stammered. “I was just...”

“Just what, honey?” the woman asked, smiling and raising one pencilled eyebrow.

Mark swallowed, staring downward, and there he saw his salvation. “I was wondering if you were hiring?” he asked in a near whisper, holding up his stack of resumes.

A broad grin spread across the woman’s face. “Oh, why didn’t you say so!” she exclaimed, putting out her hand to shake. “I’m Tiffany, the owner.”

“Mark,” Mark said, shaking her hand. “Mark Summers.”

“Well, I can see you don’t have much experience with nail care,” Tiffany said, looking down at his fingers. “But we could use someone to do some of the cleaning up...” She plucked a resume from Mark’s stack. “I’ll give this a little read-through,” she explained. “And if you seem like a good match, I’ll call you, okay?”

"Yeah, okay," Mark said, certain he wasn't going to receive a telephone call, and even more certain that he wouldn't want to work at Tiffany's Twist Hair and Nail Salon anyways. He went up on tip toes to peer over Tiffany's shoulder, hoping for one last glimpse of the blonde angel, who was leaning back in a salon chair having her nails done. Their eyes met for just a moment, and Mark's heart fluttered.

"That's one of our regulars," Tiffany said, seeing where his gaze was pointed. "She's a darling. Comes in all the time, sometimes two or three times a week! Quite the high-maintenance girl, but I'd say all the work is worth it, wouldn't you?"

"Definitely," Mark gulped. "Uh, what's her name? Just out of curiosity."

"Candi," Tiffany said. "You know, if you ended up working here, you'd probably have plenty of time to get to know her."

"Candi," Mark echoed dreamily. He said his goodbye to Tiffany and wandered away from the salon in a daze, only stopping to dump the rest of his resumes into a trash can. There was only one job he wanted now. It was true, working at a beauty salon wasn't what he'd had in mind, but two or three times a week, it would be totally, *completely* worth it.

Mark had a feeling he would be spending a lot of time sitting beside the telephone for the next few days.



Mark arrived back at the small shabby house he shared with his mother in a daze, still thinking about the blonde at the mall.

"How did the job hunt go, sweetie?" his mom called from the kitchen, where she was washing dishes.

"Good," Mark said. "Really good."

"How many of those resumes did you drop off?" his mom followed up, coming around the corner with a dish rag in hand.

"Uh, one," Mark admitted sheepishly.

"One?" his mother questioned, eyebrow raised. "You printed off a big stack of them this morning!"

"I'm starting slow!" Mark said evasively. Then, before his mom could interrogate him any further, he slipped into his room and closed the door behind him. Usually he liked being greeted by the familiar sight of all his Nebula Quest posters and Batman paraphernalia, but today he frowned as he looked around his room. Girls like Candi definitely didn't go for guys like him, who looked forward to comic conventions all year and loved arguing about whether the Star Wars Extended Universe could still be considered canon when the new movies

came out. No, they went for *popular* guys. Athletic, handsome, and usually wealthy, to boot.

“Funny how those three things always seem to go together,” Mark muttered under his breath. He was none of those things. The only sport he’d ever been good at was badminton, which didn’t exactly cut it with the jock crowd, and while he was sort of good-looking in a clear-skinned, pretty-boy kind of way, his bad haircut and out-of-date clothes pretty much covered that fact up. His mom, meanwhile, was working two jobs just to make rent. No, he was definitely not a cute blonde’s type.

Sighing, Mark booted up his computer and checked his IMs. As usual, most of them were from his best friend Louis. Louis was an even bigger geek than Mark, but by sheer luck was also tall and strong enough to play on the football team. His easy-going nature meant he got along with pretty much anyone, popular or otherwise, but he was generally a bit of a loner – except where Mark was concerned.

Mark clicked through the links Louis had sent him with a wry smile growing on his face. The latest movie adaptation of their favorite superhero comic had absolutely butchered the hero’s costume, and Louis was not happy about it. As Mark was scrolling through angry comments, a brand new message popped up.

DID U SEE THE MOVIE STILLSP? IT LOOKS LIKE SHIT COVERED IN MORE SHIT

Mark smirked as he typed his reply. YA I SAW IT. LOOKS LIKE SMT YR MOM WOULD WEAR.

A new message appeared instantly. STFU MARCI. U GET A JOB YET?

Mark made a face. He hated that nickname. So he’d played a girl’s role in a play one time in grade school, so what? He decided not to tell Louis he’d ended up applying at a hair salon. NOT YET, JUST HANDED OUT RESUMES 2DAY. PROB WONT GET A CALL 4 A WHILE.

“Or not at all,” Mark added to himself. After all, what kind of hair and nail salon would want to hire a teenaged guy?

Louis’ latest message popped up. APPLY WHER U CAN WORK W SOME HOTTIES. LOTSA CUTE GIRLS WORK AT THE MALL.

Just then, he heard his mom shouting from the kitchen. BRB, he typed, then got up and left his room. His mom was holding a telephone in her hand, looking just as surprised as Mark was soon to feel. She covered the receiver in one hand. “Sweetie, you applied at *Tiffany’s Twist*?”

“Long story,” Mark gulped, grabbing the phone. “Thanks! Bye!” he told his befuddled mother and headed into another room for privacy. “Hello?” Mark said to the phone.

“Hi, Mark!” came a familiar chirpy voice. “It’s Tiffany. We spoke earlier today.”

"Hi," Mark managed to spit out before she began talking again.

"So I looked over your resume, and it's not amazing, but everyone has to start somewhere, right?" she said, briskly. "My assistants, Helga and Inga, well, you'll meet them, they're twins. They do amazing work, but they're not much for cleaning up afterwards, and it's been getting on my nerves for weeks now. Basically, I'm going to let you have the job. What size smock should I order?"

"Wow, uh, thanks!" Mark stammered. "And... Small."

"Thought so," Tiffany said. "Okay, can you come in on Monday after school? I know classes are starting up again for you youngsters."

"Uh, definitely," Mark said.

"See you then, honey," Tiffany chirped. "Bye!"

Mark hung up the phone with a huge grin on his face. Sure, he wasn't popular. But he was going to be working at a salon frequented by the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen in his life, and maybe, just maybe, if they got to know each other as friends first...

Mark went to his computer to type out a reply to Louis. **THINK I JUST HIT THE JACKPOT 4 CUTE GIRLS, MAN. I'LL TELL U ABOUT IT @ SCHOOL.**

Mark logged off and checked out his reflection in the mirror. Since he was going to be working at a salon, maybe they could help him find a cooler hair-style, and with the money he was soon to be earning, maybe he could buy some nicer clothes. Mark grinned to himself. Up until this point, his high school career hadn't been much to talk about. In fact, he'd been planning to keep his head down as he always had, save up for college, and then move away to get a fresh start somewhere nobody knew him. But this was his senior year, and maybe if he tried hard enough, things could turn out differently.



On Monday morning, as Mark dragged himself out of bed, he found it hard to muster the same level of enthusiasm. He hadn't started earning money yet, and that meant he was still dressing in his usual cheap no-brand jeans and bulky lint-magnet sweater. Worse, he then managed to miss the school bus while searching for his binder, meaning he had to take the city bus and arrive late to his first class of the school year, English.

He had been planning to sneak in quietly and immediately head to the back of the classroom, but when he opened the door he stopped and froze. Sitting near the front of the class, legs crossed beneath a short, clingy skirt, was none other than Candi, the blonde angel he'd seen in the shopping mall. Mark blinked, mouth agape.

The teacher, standing impatiently at his desk, cleared his throat. "Mister..." he trailed off as he checked his attendance list. "Summers?"

"Uh, yes?" Mark said, tearing his eyes away. "That's me."

"Would you please take a seat so we can begin class?" the teacher asked dryly, raising an eyebrow. Mark flushed red from tip to toe, hurrying to the safety of the back of the class, where a few empty desks still lingered. He ended up three desks behind the mystery blonde.

Mark had always gotten average grades in English – as with most classes – but he struggled to pay attention to even a single word that came out of the teacher's mouth. He was far too occupied sneaking glances at Candi whenever he got the chance, and it seemed he wasn't the only one. What were the chances that she would be attending the same high school as him? Mark wasn't one for mysticism, but he figured that this had to be fate. Somehow, some way, he would find a way to woo her.

When he finally got the chance to relay that thought to Louis, as they ate lunch at their usual spot in the least-noticeable corner of the cafeteria, his best friend nearly choked on his tater tots.

"Woo her?" he coughed. "What year is this? Mark, buddy, I think you're what modern medical professionals refer to as 'love-struck.' And, also, delusional."

"I know she's a little out of my league," Mark admitted grudgingly. "But I have classes with her all the time, and then I'll be seeing her at the salon..."

"At the salon?" Louis frowned. "Wait, is that the job you were telling me about?"

"Yeah, but keep your voice down," Mark hissed. "I don't need people teasing me about working a girly after school job."

"I hate to break it to you, Mark, but you were never exactly the manliest guy to begin with," Louis pointed out. "I don't think anybody would be, well, shocked."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mark asked indignantly, but both boys immediately lost their train of thought as the school's most popular swept into the cafeteria, laughing and giggling, with a new face in tow. Candi was laughing along with them, if slightly nervously, and Mark's heart sank to realize she seemed to have already slipped into the echelon of girls who never so much as looked his way: cheerleaders.

"Well, that's no surprise," Louis said forlornly, shrugging his shoulders. "Birds of a feather flock together. I heard she's old friends with Miranda, and that's why she picked this school."

"Miranda, the cheerleader?" Mark asked.

"That's the one. So I'm sure she'll be on the cheerleading team in no time. And that means you'll have some friendly competition for her, too."

Mark looked around the cafeteria and winced. From the way they were watching Candi, it seemed like just about every guy in the place had the same agenda as he did on their minds, and that included some of the best-looking and most popular guys in the twelfth grade.

“Good luck,” Louis said, patting his friend on the shoulder as he rose with his empty tray. “You’re going to need it.”

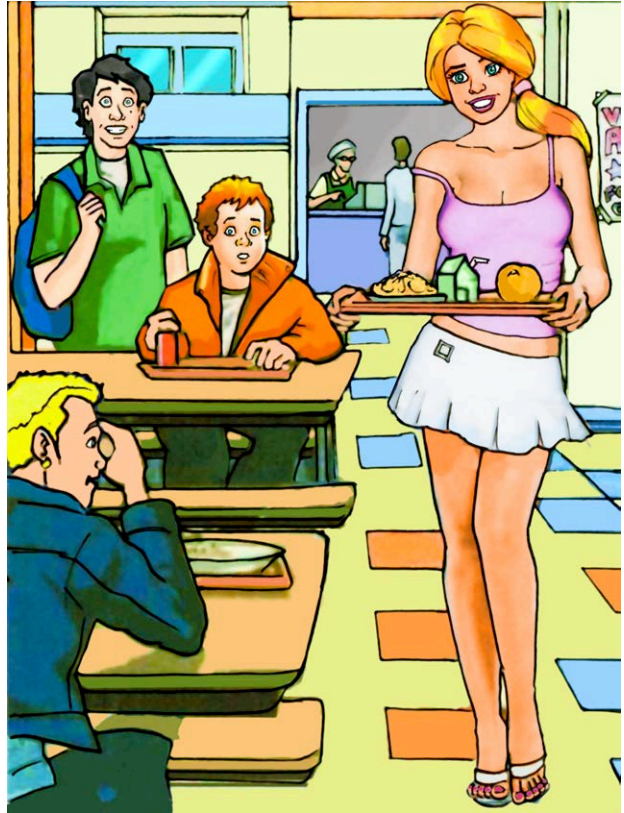


When the final bell rang, Mark headed straight for the shopping mall on the city bus, figuring he would have time to grab a bite to eat at the food court later on. The mall was already bustling with people when he arrived. Mark made a bee-line for Tiffany’s Twist, hoping he wouldn’t run into anybody he knew on the way and have to explain his new place of employment. Of course, it wasn’t as if he knew a lot of people, anyways.

The salon was in full swing when Mark made his way through the doors. Tiffany, chatting away happily, was giving what looked to be a very elaborate hairstyle to a middle-aged woman, while the two attractive blondes Mark had seen the other day were working on another client’s fingernails and toenails, respectively. He had to do a double take. Apart from their hairstyles, they were completely identical!

“Mark, honey! There you are,” Tiffany drawled when she caught sight of him. “I’m just finishing up here, and then I’ll show you around a bit. Your uniform hasn’t come in yet, but I found you a shirt for the meantime. It’s on my desk in the back office, so why don’t you go change into it right away?”

“Sure,” Mark said, trying to sound enthusiastic even as both of the blonde twins shot him slightly unfriendly looks. He could guess that they weren’t used to having boys in the shop. As he made his way to the back, where a small of-



fice was located, he couldn't help but notice them putting their heads together for a moment and then, casting a glance in his direction, starting to giggle. Mark grimaced, but tried to ignore it even as his cheeks blushed red. So, maybe he was going to get a bit of a ribbing for the first few days. So what? He was getting paid, and, more importantly, he was going to be up close and personal with Candi Wethers, whenever she showed up to have her gorgeous blonde hair done.

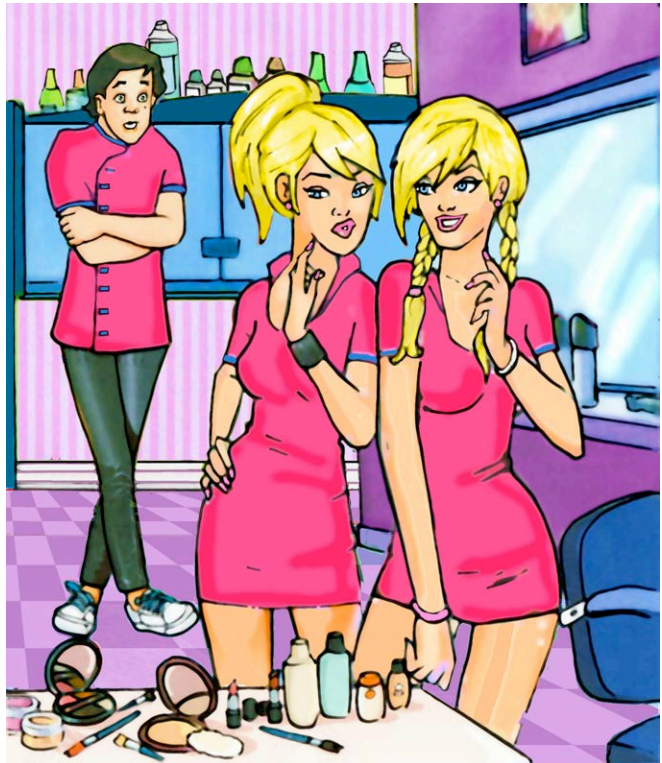
On the spotless desk inside the office, Mark found a neatly folded blue smock. He took off his sweater and pulled the smock on instead. It was a little big on him, but skinny as he was, he was used to that. As he re-entered the main part of the salon, Tiffany was just sending her latest satisfied customer on her way.

"Okay, honey, time to put you to work," she said teasingly. "But first, introductions! This is Helga, and this is Inga. Don't get them mixed up, or they'll never forgive you, believe me. Helga and Inga, this is Mark." Both blondes looked up from their work and gave non-committal waves to the new employee, which Mark returned. As they continued pampering the woman in the salon chair, Tiffany took Mark on a small tour around the salon, showing him the contents of the supply cupboards, the hair dryers, and how to work the register. At the end of the informal orientation, she handed him a broom and dustpan.

"Of course, for the first little while you'll probably mostly be cleaning up after everyone," Tiffany said. "Bagging hair, getting rid of used waxing strips, et cetera. Think you can handle it?"

"Definitely," Mark said, thinking to himself that it wasn't exactly rocket science they were doing here.

"Great," Tiffany said. "I'm going to take my lunch break now, but I'm sure Inga and Helga will keep you busy. See you soon!" The hairdresser slipped on her coat and departed the salon, leaving Mark at the mercy of the



twins. True to Tiffany's word, they found all kinds of ways to keep him on his feet, whether running back and forth to get them cotton swabs and a new bottle of nail polish remover, cleaning the salon windows, or mopping the floor. However, despite being demanding, both twins were quite friendly to him, asking him questions about school and his hobbies. Neither of them had ever watched *Nebula Quest*, which Mark found baffling, but they were equally disturbed by the fact that Mark didn't know the difference between shampoo and conditioner.

A few of the clients did a double-take when they saw a young man working in the salon, but most of them smiled at him. It was the 21st century, after all, Mark reasoned, and there was no reason a guy couldn't work in a beauty salon. The fact that he was working and making small-talk with two tall, beautiful Swedish women felt a little bit like some weird fantasy come to life, but he only had eyes for one blonde, and looked up whenever a new client entered the salon in hopes it would be Candi. When Helga noticed his constant distraction during a lull in business, he explained, after much badgering, that there was a girl who came here often that he was hoping to see. The twins teased and prodded him until he finally divulged her name, at which point both of them burst into giggles.

"We love Candi!" Inga exclaimed. "She's one of our regulars. She has an appointment for next Thursday, I think. Such a nice girl!"

"Is she?" Mark asked eagerly. "I mean, she's in my English class, but school's only just started and I haven't gotten a chance to really talk to her."

"Oh, she is a sweetheart," Helga giggled. "When she first came to Florida, though, you wouldn't believe what a tomboy she was. That was before she, uh, 'blossomed.'" Helga cupped her hands around an imaginary bosom, making Mark blush.

"She's *definitely* not like most girls," Inga chimed in. "So you have a crush, do you?"

"No!" Mark said defensively. "I'm just... I'm interested, is all."

"Well, we know all Candi's little secrets," Helga said. "Girls tell their beauticians everything!"

"In that case, I was sort of curious what her, uh, 'type' is," Mark said hopefully.

"I think you are her type," Inga giggled. "Same type." Mark frowned. The twins' English was very good, but occasionally things seemed to get lost in translation.

"I mean, what kind of guy does she like?" he clarified. "Probably dumb hand-some jocks, right?" He laughed weakly, hoping against hope that they would answer in the negative. Helga and Inga looked at each other, and both of them smiled simultaneously.

"Well, a pretty girl like Candi is very particular about her appearance," Helga said. "And she likes guys who are the same way. Very neat, very well-groomed."

"Oh, yes," Inga agreed. "She's always complaining about big burly football player types with dirty fingernails. She hates that!" Mark self-consciously shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Interesting," he said innocently. "So she doesn't like, uh, big guys?"

"To be honest, I really don't think she does," Helga said. "They're often very loud and boorish and full of themselves. And messy. She likes a stylish dresser."

"Stylish dresser, clean fingernails, well-groomed," Mark muttered under his breath. "Got it."

"She doesn't meet too many of those types," Inga said. "She was just complaining about it the other day when we did her pedicure. Too bad, isn't it, Helga?"

"Such a shame," Helga agreed. "Well, Mark, I can see streaks on those windows! I think you'd better give them another wipe before Tiffany gets back."

"Sure thing!" Mark chirped, grabbing the spray bottle and some paper towels. As he walked over to the windows, his mind was bubbling with possibilities. Maybe, just maybe, he could be Candi's type after all. Armed with the twin girls' helpful information, he immediately began to put together a plan to get Candi's attention.



The next day, Mark showed up to school with the first step of his plan in full effect, wearing a preppy sweater vest and button-up shirt that Helga and Inga had helped him find quite cheaply after work. Nobody seemed to notice, which was about par for the course for Mark's social life. If he had a superpower, it was definitely invisibility. Even so, Mark felt a little bit more confident than usual. He even considered actually saying 'hi' to Candi when she walked by with Miranda, but he decided to wait until they were introduced at the salon on Thursday.

"You look weird today," Louis said, as they grabbed their usual table at lunch. "Is that a sweater vest, dude?"

"I'm trying out a new look," Mark said defensively. "You could stand to clean up a little yourself, you know."

"Whatever," Louis said. "I have a feeling I know what this is all about. Stage one for *wooing* the girl of your dreams?"

"The girls at the salon told me she likes a guy who can dress well," Mark admitted. "But I wanted to dress better this year anyways."

"Maybe try actually talking to her?" Louis suggested dryly. "Instead of just hoping she'll come up and complement your sweater?"

"She has a salon appointment next week Thursday," Mark said. "That's when I'll make my move."

Louis just shook his head, returning to his mashed potatoes. Eventually they started talking about Superman vs. Batman, one of their favorite arguments, but neither of their hearts were really in it. Mark, for one, was too busy glancing across the cafeteria to where Candi was sitting with the cheerleaders. Just like Inga and Helga had said, she didn't look all that happy with the way the jocks were vying for her attention. And they definitely had dirty fingernails.



For what it was worth, Mark wasn't alone in his little obsession over the hot new blonde on the block. In fact, it seemed like the whole school was buzzing about her – especially after her soccer tryout scandal. The story was that after she failed miserably to make the girls' soccer team that she'd "accidentally" walked into the boys' changing room and started stripping down. Most people were of the opinion she'd done it intentionally to make a first-week splash nobody would ever forget. Mark had staunchly defended her honor to the few people who would listen to him. It wasn't so outlandish to accidentally walk into the wrong changing room. Mark had nearly done it himself once.

After the locker room incident, or perhaps because of it, Candi also seemed to be at odds with the resident queen bee of the cheerleaders, Amber Sweet, which in Mark's opinion was only another point in Candi's favor. He still remembered Amber teasing him mercilessly all through the seventh grade because his mom cut his hair into a bowl cut. In any case, wherever Candi went, drama seemed to follow, which only made her all the more compelling. Especially since she was still rebuffing the advances of the school's handsomest jocks.

At work after school on Thursday, Mark was so distracted by Candi's impending arrival that he ended up mopping the same square foot of tile for about half an hour straight, watching through the glass windows of the salon for her approach. His uniform had finally come in, and he wasn't too pleased about that since it consisted of a pink smock and white shorts that were slightly too short for comfort. But maybe Candi would think it looked stylish?

"Mark, honey, why are you so spacy today?" Tiffany asked, gently steering his mop towards the next tile over. "You're not yourself."

"Uh, sorry," Mark said, as the twins exchanged a knowing smile. "Just thinking about school."

"Well, think about school while mopping the *whole* floor, okay?" Tiffany suggested. Mark nodded contritely, but just then the salon doors gave their customary chime as two new clients entered the establishment. Mark's head whipped around so fast he nearly sprained his neck. An attractive middle-aged blonde woman entered, and clicking along in her wake, wearing a casual yet flirty short navy dress, was Candi.

"I don't see why I need to get another bikini wax," she was saying in a sour tone. "I mean, it's not bikini season anymore, right?"

"Oh, Candi, don't be such a little powder puff," the woman, who Mark instantly knew had to be her mother, replied. "It barely stings!"

Mark straightened up, ready to say something suave, though exactly what he wasn't sure, but both blonde beauties swept right past without even noticing him, greeting Tiffany and the twins. It wasn't until they'd all exchanged hugs and air kisses, and Candi was seated in a salon chair to have her beauty treatment, that her eyes finally fell on Mark, widening with what almost looked like fear for a strange moment.

"Oh, that's our new employee, Mark," Tiffany chirped. "I thought Helga and Inga could use a bit of help with the more menial things, you know, and he's a real dear, they just love him."

"H-hi, Candi," Mark said, and immediately gave himself a mental slap. *I should have pretended I didn't already know her name*, he thought angrily. *Now it looks like I'm some kind of stalker!* "We, um, we go to the same high school..." Mark trailed off, trying to salvage the situation. "I'm three seats behind you in the English class we have together!" He was doing his best not to stare at her breasts, but she must have caught him at it, because she folded her arms protectively with a small blush, not saying a



word. Mark stood there awkwardly for a second, slowly realizing that Candi wasn't going to say anything back to him, then dashed away to the sinks he'd already cleaned with his tail between his quaking legs. He didn't dare go anywhere near Candi and her mother for the duration of their appointment, staying on the far side of the salon as much as possible, and he felt relief mixed with agony when they finally sashayed out the door again.

"I can't believe how badly I messed that up," Mark moaned pitifully, when Helga came over to give him a consoling pat on the shoulder. "She barely even looked at me. It's like I was part of the wall that came to life and started stuttering."

"That's not what happened at all," Helga said. "She's just shy, and seeing a new face in the salon probably startled her. You know, she asked about you while we were doing her pedicure!"

"Bull," Mark muttered. "You don't have to lie to make me feel better, Inga."

Helga glared daggers at him.

"Sorry!" Mark exclaimed. "Helga, I mean. It was just a slip of the tongue, I know which of you is which."

"Hmph!" Helga exclaimed. "After that, I don't think I'll tell you what she said!"

"I will," Inga beamed, coming over to dry her hands on a towel. "She said you need a haircut!" Mark groaned in response. "Hey, that's a good thing," Inga insisted. "She said with a nice haircut, you'd be sort of cute."

Mark's ears perked up immediately. "Wait, like, what kind of cute?" he demanded eagerly. "Like, puppy dog cute? Or, like, handsome cute?" The twins looked at each other and shrugged simultaneously.

"Cute," they answered in chorus.



The following Monday, to nobody's surprise, Candi was a member of the cheerleading squad. Mark had no interest in sports, but suddenly he could picture himself going to quite a few football or basketball games this season. It was his last year, after all, and it was an important part of the high school experience. He told as much to Louis, who was a back-up benchwarmer for the football team, over a game of *Mortal Kombat* after school.

"So you have an interest in sports all of a sudden?" Louis said suspiciously, raising a skeptical eyebrow. "I seem to remember being completely unable to make you watch the Super Bowl, never mind drag you to one of our high school games. Or, for that matter, get you outside to throw a football."

"Oh, you know, tastes change," Mark said evasively, concentrating on the game. As per usual, it was barely a contest. Mark was undefeated amongst his friends at Mortal Kombat, though he didn't have a huge number to compare himself against.

"Yeah, and I noticed you started trimming your fingernails, too," Louis said. "Tastes, huh?"

"Inga and Helga did it for me," Mark muttered. "Just to look neater. You know, working in a salon, you have to look the part."

"So are you going to be wearing makeup next, if you have to 'look the part?'" Louis asked mockingly.

"Don't be a dumbass," Mark said hotly.

"I'm not," Louis said. "That's why I know it has nothing to do with working there and everything to do with your stupid fantasy plan to somehow make the hot new blonde in school fall for you. And that's why you want to go to football games all of a sudden, too."

"So what?" Mark demanded, tossing his controller aside. "What's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong with it is that it's never going to happen," Louis said flatly. "Never. We're geeks, Mark, and she's a frigging beauty queen. It just *doesn't* happen. Got it?"



“Screw you, man,” Mark said, getting up from the couch. “At least I’m trying to make some changes instead of sitting around feeling sorry for myself. I’ve got homework to do.” He picked up his backpack and put it on. “See you around.” Mark marched angrily out the door. Sure, Candi was out of his league for now. But maybe, just maybe, he could change teams.



As September passed, Mark didn’t see as much of Candi at the salon as he would have liked. Tiffany mused that she was keeping very busy with cheer-leading practices and probably hadn’t had much time to pamper herself lately. Mark still had that morning English class with her, but Candi had taken to showing up late with Miranda, skinny lattes in hand, meaning any chance to talk with her was minimal.

But at least he could make some changes to his wardrobe while he bided his time. Inga and Helga were both fashion mavens, and more than happy to give him some tips about creating a dressier, classier look for school. Soon his old baggy jeans and sweaters were a thing of the past, replaced by stylish skinny jeans, khakis, loafers, vests and scarves. Mark was still faithfully putting at least a little money towards his college fund with each paycheck, and the twins had an eye for a bargain, but he still ended up spending more money than he’d ever expected on clothes, some of which he found a little bit too metrosexual for his liking. He assumed it was a European thing, the bright colors and snug fits and shoes with a bit of a lift.

One perk of the job, however, was free hair cuts and manicures, which Mark, remembering Candi liked a well-groomed guy, began to take advantage of entering October. Helga agreed to trim and shape his hair a bit, and gave him some new shampoo to use, but she suggested he keep growing it out to give them more to work with. She said she was envisioning a very “Hollywood” look, with big moussed volume on top and the sides combed back, but he needed a bit more length to pull it off. Mark chose to trust her judgement. He liked Helga and Inga quite a bit, especially since the feeling seemed mutual. It was strange being able to make small-talk with two attractive women who didn’t treat him like gum stuck to a shoe. Lately they had been trying really hard to get him to listen to Smooch, a Swedish pop trio they were constantly playing in the salon, and he in turn had been trying to get them to watch an episode of Nebula Quest.

Despite their differences, they all got along pretty well, and Helga and Inga even picked Mark up from school to go for lunch on a Friday. Boy, had that been something – two tall, pretty blondes pulling up to the front of the school in a cute little Prius had definitely made a bit of a splash, and Mark had only wished that Candi could be around to see as he casually hopped into the car with them. He had never felt so cool in his life. Of course, Louis had been

pretty mad that Mark ditched him for lunch, but lately they hadn't been hanging out so much anyway. Mark tried to persuade him to come shopping for some jeans that didn't have holes in them, but it was to no avail.

"You're getting way too into shopping, dude," Louis said, pushing his food around his cafeteria tray. "And is that nail polish you're wearing?"

"It's a varnish," Mark defended himself. "Helga said it would dry clear, but I guess it's a little bit pink. Nobody else noticed." He frowned. "And as for shopping, there's nothing wrong with looking good, is there?" In fact, just the other day he'd had a girl in his Math class come up and compliment him on his style. Even if Candi hadn't noticed yet, other people were, and that meant he was on the right track. More heartening still, October was now drawing to a close and Candi still hadn't shown any interest in dating any of the eligible jocks in the school. All Mark needed was a chance to talk to her alone.

"Hey, Helga said there's going to be a little work party for Halloween," Mark remembered. "You could probably come, if you want."

"Wait, so we're not eating candy and watching Nightmare on Elm Street at my place like usual?" Louis asked, frowning.

"We do that every year," Mark said, shrugging. "Do you want to come to the party or not?"

"I'll pass," Louis said. "You guys will probably spend the whole time doing each others' hair."

"Very funny," Mark said. "You sure you don't want to come? It's just a casual thing. You probably wouldn't even have to bother wearing a costume."

"No, thanks," Louis said firmly.

"Your loss," Mark shrugged. Just then, he received a text message from Helga, asking if he wanted a ride to work after school since they were starting their shifts at the same time. He grinned and started texting her a reply, barely even noticing Louis get up and leave.



On his last work shift before Halloween, Mark was trying to gauge whether or not he would need a costume for the party. He casually asked Inga what she was going dressed as, and rather than a typically bubbly reply, Inga gave a sigh.

"We *were* going to go as Smooch," she pouted.

"Smooch?" Mark echoed. "Oh, right, that band you like so much."

"Yes, the best band on Earth," Helga chimed in from across the salon. She plucked a CD case off the stack sitting beside the radio and brought it over. The album cover showed two very sexy girls, one blonde and one brunette, dressed in tiny sailor costumes and draped over the shoulders of a handsome

blonde man in the middle with an impressive mustache, who was wearing a sailor cap and faux navy uniform. Mark had heard Inga and Helga singing the lyrics to “Loveboat” enough times to know the album cover was a reference to their hit single. “I was going to be Astrid,” Helga continued, pointing to the blonde girl. “And Inga wanted to be Nikki. But we have nobody to be Alix, because our friend got sick with the flu. And we already bought the costume and everything!”



Mark stared at the picture of the mustachioed “Alix,” thinking that no guy in their right mind would let a flu stop him from dressing up in a costume that ensured two gorgeous Swedish girls would be hanging off of him all night. Struck by sudden inspiration, Mark cleared his throat. “Uh, you know, I don’t have a costume yet,” he said casually. “If you think I can fill in, I could go as Alix.”

Both Helga and Inga gave a simultaneous squeal of delight. “Oh, but we couldn’t ask you to do that, Mark, really...” Inga gushed. “Are you sure?”

“Why not?” Mark shrugged. “I mean, if your friend already had the costume ready to go, it would be a waste not to have the whole band, right? I’d be happy to wear it.” He looked over the white navy uniform again, thinking it might even look kind of sharp on him. And he still wasn’t able to grow facial hair, so a stick-on mustache would be a whole new experience for him.

“You are so sweet!” Helga exclaimed delightedly. “You can come over early tomorrow night and we’ll get you into your costume before everyone else shows up, okay?”

“Sure,” Mark said, thinking it was an added bonus to show up early, before things were in full swing, and then get to adjust to the party as more and more people showed up. And being in a group costume meant Inga and Helga would want them to stick together all evening, too. Mark grinned a little bit at the mental image of having both Swedish girls on his arms and looking like a total ladies’ man. Definitely a step up from watching movies in Louis’ basement!



The following evening, Mark's mother voiced few reservations about him going to a Halloween party consisting of only adults, worrying if there was going to be any drinking going on as she drove him to Helga and Inga's apartment. "I don't want you getting drunk," she said sternly. "You're underage."

"Mom, Tiffany's going to be there," Mark said, embarrassed. "She's like, thirty something, and responsible enough to be a business owner. And she's our boss, besides. It's not going to be some crazy party, just a little get together."

"She was quite nice," Mark's mom admitted grudgingly, having recently received a free manicure while picking him up from work. "Just don't let yourself be pressured into anything by those two crazy Swedish girls, okay?"

"I won't," Mark said, rolling his eyes as the car came to a halt outside the apartment address Helga had texted him. "Thanks for the ride, mom. See you!" He got out and closed the door, then skipped up the steps to the apartment entrance. It felt a little strange showing up to a party empty-handed, but it wasn't as if he was old enough to bring a bottle of wine, anyways. At least he was dressed sharply in slacks and a pink polo Inga had picked out for him – he knew she'd appreciate that. He buzzed the number of the apartment, and a Swedish-accented voice came out of the speaker.

"Yes, hello?"

Mark could barely hear Helga, or perhaps it was Inga, with the sound of loud music and shrill laughter in the background. Feeling slightly nervous, he put his finger on the button and said. "Hi, it's Mark."

"Mark! Come on up, darling!"

Reassured that at least one of the twins was very happy he was here, Mark made his way up the stairs to their apartment. He could hear laughter and some kind of techno music through the door, and he had to knock extra loudly to be heard. Then the door swung open, and he was met with the sight of Inga wearing a bright white navy sailor's uniform, complete with fake anchor tattoo on her arm, cap on top of her slicked-back blonde hair, and a thick blonde mustache perched on her upper lip.

After a brief moment of confusion, Mark realized he had made a big, big mistake. "So you're, uh..." Mark trailed off, swallowing.

"Nikki!" Inga yelped. "Yes! What do you think? I think I'm very handsome." She giggled, grabbing Mark by the hand. "And Helga is already all dressed up as Astrid. Now all we need is our Alix!" Mark let himself be dragged into the apartment, trying to think up some kind of last-minute excuse. Those darned Swedes and their weirdly-spelled names!

"Hey, look, Inga, I didn't realize that Alix was the, uh..." Mark gulped, losing his train of thought as Helga sashayed out into the living room wearing the female sailor's outfit from "Loveboat." It was even skimpier than what Mark remembered from the music video, consisting of a tiny navy mini-dress with a

skirt ending mid-thigh, a bright red scarf around her neck, white gloves and a cute white sailor's cap set atop her piled-up blonde hair, white stockings, and bright red heels.

"Ooh, Nikki, you found Alix!" Helga squealed, putting her hands on her hips and giving Mark a wink. "What do you think of the costume? I think we're going to look hot!"

"Hot," Mark echoed weakly. "Right."

"Come on, Mark, we have to get you ready!" Inga exclaimed, grabbing him by the arm. Mark quickly found himself being manhandled into one of the twins' bedrooms, a scenario that had crossed his mind a few times while working at the salon – their job necessitated an awful lot of bending and twisting – but in his fantasies Inga had never been wearing a bushy mustache.

"Boxers or briefs?" Helga demanded, already rummaging around in her dresser while Mark stood dumbly in the middle of the room, letting Inga drape the costume up against him to check the size.

"Uh, I'd prefer boxers," Mark stammered. Helga rolled her eyes.

"Mark, I do not wear boxers," she said. "I meant, which are you wearing?"

"Oh!" Mark exclaimed. "Boxers."

"No, no, no," Inga said, mustache twitching with distaste. "You will have to change. Wearing boxers under this skirt will look too strange."

"Blue or pink?" Helga asked.

"Pink? What?" Mark was distracted from hearing her question as Inga quickly and efficiently shucked off his polo shirt and discarded it on the floor. He hugged himself instinctively, embarrassed at his scrawniness.

"Pink it is," Helga said cheerily, tossing him a pair of pink nylon panties. Mark held them up in astonishment. He had never seen a girl's panties outside of underwear ads, or his mother's laundry, and never ever dreamed of wearing them. "Go put them on, and these too," she directed, handing him a pair of white stockings. "Then we'll put your bra on."

Mark was glad to momentarily escape to the bathroom, clutching the panties like a life preserver. He closed the door behind him and slid down to a sitting position with a groan. *What have you gotten yourself into*, he thought. *Okay, Mark, just relax.*

"It's Halloween," he muttered. "Guys dress up as girls all the time, and it's funny, and nobody thinks anything of it," he reminded himself. "It's just a costume, so man up." It was hard to "man up" while putting on pink panties and thigh-high white stockings, but Mark did his best to keep a stiff upper lip as he wriggled out of his pants and boxers and set them on the counter.

The panties were made of a slippery, sensuous material that made him shiver as he pulled them up his legs, and even made his little soldier stir a bit in response. He quickly added the white stockings, which were more or less very long and very thin socks, not the sheer pantyhose his mother wore, for which Mark was grateful. They clung tightly to his legs and somehow made them look longer and slimmer in the mirror, while also hiding the fine covering of hair he had below his knees. Feeling extremely silly, Mark snatched a towel to wrap around his waist as he exited the bathroom.



Of course, Helga snatched it from him the instant he was out. “Ooh!” she exclaimed. “Nice legs, girl! Maybe we’ll have to get you in for a waxing.”

“Depends if I get a discount,” Mark said bracingly, doing his best to keep his sense of humor. The twins both laughed.

“For you, Mark, it’s free,” Inga beamed. “Now, bra!” Mark obediently stuck his arms out while Inga slipped the feminine contraption onto his chest and did up the clasps, then tightened up the straps so the empty cups were snug against his chest. Of course, they didn’t stay empty for long. Helga, approaching with a wicked grin and a balled-up pair of pantyhose in each hand, made sure of that. Mark couldn’t help but blush as she fiddled around with his ‘bust’, making sure his fake boobs were the same size.

Hair and makeup were next, with Helga masterfully pulling his hair back and upward under the sailor cap and using a ‘sock bun’ to make it look as if he had quite a bit more hair than he really did, while Inga, mustache twitching with concentration, used his face as a canvas for elaborate false lashes, powder blue eye shadow, mascara, blusher, and a bright red lipstick. She even used a pencil on his eyebrows to give them a more feminine arch, and judging by her ‘oohs’

and ‘aahs,’ she was delighted at the transformation. Mark, turned away from the mirror, wasn’t able to judge her handiwork for himself. He had to content himself with blinking his newly-long lashes, trying to get used to the fluttery things, and doing his best not to lick the waxy-tasting lipstick coating his mouth.

He sat down on the edge of the bed while the twins slipped his feet into a pair of fire-hydrant red pumps just like Helga’s. The complicated buckles were done up with a series of authoritative clicks that Mark felt were sealing his fate of wearing them until the twins agreed to take them off for him. Standing up shakily as a baby deer, trying to ignore the tug of the bra straps on his shoulders, Mark let Inga support him by the arm as he stepped into his costume. The dress was a tight fit, even for Mark, and he had to suck in his tummy when they zipped him into. The material, like the panties, was very cool and slippery against his skin, giving him tiny goose bumps. It felt like it was hugging him very tightly around the waist and chest, but the skirt was so short, light, and flouncy he worried it was there it at all!

“Oh my God, Mark, you are an adorable Alix,” Inga exclaimed, clapping her hands together in delight.

“And sexy!” Helga added. “How are we going to keep the boys away from you?”

“Get real,” Mark said, flushing deeply. “I’m sure I look ridiculous.”

When he wobbled his way over to the mirror to look, however, his prettily made-up eyes went wide as dinner plates. Contrary to his prediction, his reflection was of a cute, dare he say it, sexy teenaged girl! The costume fit his slender frame like a glove, with Helga’s padding job providing a small but noticeable bust, and his legs looked incredibly long and slender perched in the bright red high heels. As for his face, he barely recognized himself! Inga had done his

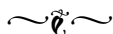


eyes very dramatically, with the fluttering false lashes and bright blue eye shadow, and together with the glossy red lipstick, he looked like a very pretty, if overdone, young ingénue.

“Is that really me?” Mark gasped. The twins nodded, giggling furiously.

“We have such a talent for this, Inga,” Helga smiled.

“We really do,” Inga agreed. Just then, the buzzer sounded for the apartment door. “Come on, Alix,” she said, adjusting her false mustache with a grin. “We are Smooch! Time to greet our adoring fans!”



Mark was terribly nervous when the guests started to arrive, especially Tiffany, who had to do a dramatic double-take to recognize Mark in his get-up. She just shook her head at the twins' ingenuity and smiled, telling him he looked very pretty. The other guests were people Mark didn't recognize, and since the twins insisted on introducing him only as 'Alix,' he was totally unable to tell how many of them were aware of his real gender.

As Mark had predicted, the twins insisted all three of them stick together throughout the party for the sake of the costume. However, instead of being the mustachioed stud in the middle, Mark was now relegated to hanging on Inga's arm as one of "Nikki's" mincing escorts! Inga took great pleasure in playing it up to the fullest, and Mark found himself being constantly steered around the party with her hand in the small of his back, or wrapped possessively around his waist, and she even swatted him playfully on the bum from time to time for a laugh. Helga was enjoying herself just as much as "Astrid," making fun of the tabloid-fodder love triangle that Smooch was famous for by draping herself all over "Nikki" and shooting Mark catty looks.

Their costumes were the hit of the party, and not just because of the twins' antics. Mark caught more than a few guys checking out his and Helga's legs! At first Mark was too nervous to do anything but smile and laugh weakly as not only "Nikki," but several guys in costume, playfully flirted with him. As Helga kept him steadily supplied with a drink in hand, however, he began to loosen up and play along a bit himself, batting his fake eyelashes at "Nikki" and pouting angrily whenever "Astrid" took too much of "his" attention. Before long he was even mincing around the party with the same exaggerated hip-rolling gait that Helga had adopted, teasingly swishing his bottom from side to side with Inga's arm around his waist.

Tiffany had left relatively early, meaning he didn't have to worry about his boss seeing him do anything too embarrassing, and between the alcohol and the attention from everyone who loved their costume, Mark found he was starting to really have fun. He even agreed to pose for several pictures with the twins, one of which saw him leaning forward coquettishly, hands on his knees, to give

“Nikki” a kiss on the cheek. In another, he struck a sexy pose with “Astrid” where each of them cocked their hips and blew kisses at the camera.

All the guys at the party, who were older than Mark by at least five or so years, rather than making smart remarks, thought it was great that he'd committed to his costume, although some of them were a little frazzled when Inga revealed that Mark was their male co-worker from the salon. Even that didn't stop them from making flirty comments, and a few actually asked Mark to dance, which he blushing turned down.

Gradually, the party died down and people began to make their exit, leaving Mark, the twins, and a handful of the more inebriated guests all sitting in the living room, chatting happily and drunkenly about just about anything. Somehow, without Mark even noticing, Helga and Inga had each managed to attach themselves to a very handsome man who had flirted with them earlier in the evening, one a pirate and the other a firefighter. The talk had turned quite suggestive, with everyone recounting stories of wild parties from their youth and the strange places they had woken up... And who they had woken up with.

“How about you, Alix?” Inga asked teasingly, turning to face Mark on the couch. “How many boys have you taken home?” Mark blushed furiously as the others chuckled.

“Well, the tabloids haven't caught on yet, but Alix actually prefers girls,” Mark said, thinking fast. Everyone laughed aloud, and he felt proud at having turned the tables.

“Is that so?” Helga giggled. “And how many girls have you kissed, Alix?” Embarrassed, but not nearly as embarrassed as he would have been if totally sober, Mark held up a ‘zero’ with his thumb and fingers. Everyone groaned.

“Really?” Inga asked. “Mark, you've never kissed a girl?” Mark shrugged his shoulders, fiddling with the hem of his skirt rather than meeting her eyes.

“I guess I've just never, um, had the right timing,” he said. *That's being generous*, he thought to himself. *Heck, I've never been close!* Suddenly he wished the party could be over and he could go home. No wonder he'd never kissed a girl. Here he was wearing high heels and lingerie for a Halloween costume!

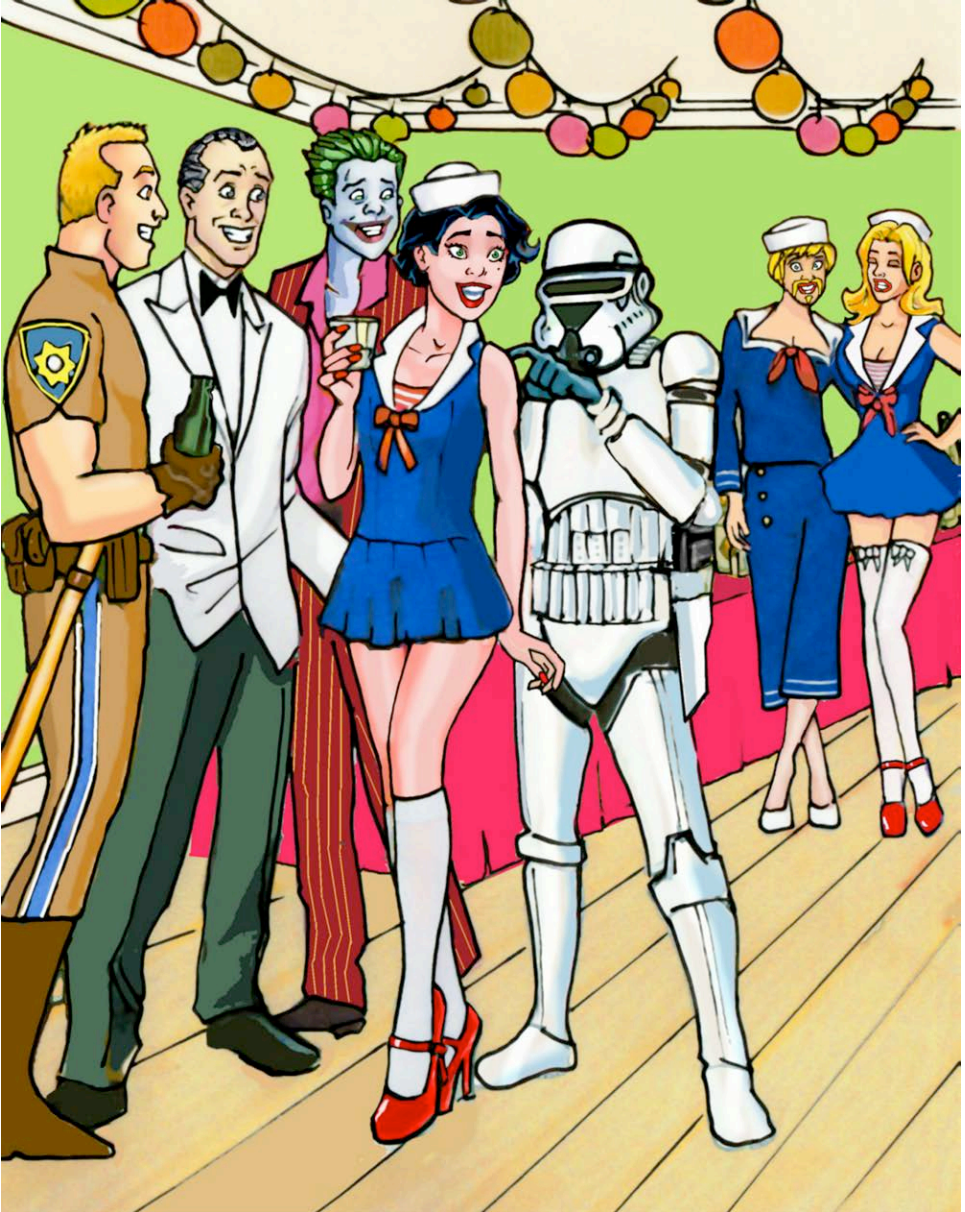
“Well, we can fix that,” Helga said playfully, setting her hand on Mark's knee. Mark's mouth fell open, but before he could ask her exactly what she meant by that, she leaned forward and kissed him full on the mouth! Mark trembled as her small wet tongue pushed between his lips, then he awkwardly cupped her face in both hands and kissed her back, pretending for a second that it was Candi he was canoodling with. Someone wolf-whistled loudly, and when they ended the kiss everyone was clapping.

“Better than *my* first kiss, I can tell you that,” said the guy in the firefighter costume, laughing. The pirate nodded, grinning widely, looking not at all peeved that Helga had kissed Mark instead of him. Mark, for his part, could

hardly believe what had just happened. His head was spinning. He'd just gotten his first kiss from a very attractive young woman in a skimpy sailor costume. Sure, he was dressed in the same outfit, but who cared about those little details?

"Wow," he said. "Uh, thanks."

"Helga, you are corrupting our young friend!" Inga said, swatting her arm playfully.



"Alix is a good kisser," Helga defended. "Her lipstick tastes nice! Or is that mine?" She gave an inebriated giggle, fixing the smudge at the side of her mouth.

"Now you know what it's like to kiss a pretty girl," Inga said proudly. "It's all about confidence! Isn't that right, handsome?" She turned to her male companion on the couch, removing her mustache, and an instant later they were necking furiously. The few remaining guests seemed to take this as their cue to leave, and they headed for the door, thanking the twins for throwing such a great party.

"No problem," Helga said, clinging to her pirate-costumed beau. "Mark, do you want us to call you a taxi?"

But Mark didn't hear her. The excitement of the evening, not to mention his first taste of drinking, had totally wiped him out, and he was passed out on the couch, snoring gently. From the smile on his lipstick-coated mouth, he'd had an enjoyable time of it.

"Well, what he doesn't know won't hurt him," Inga laughed, snapping a photo of their sleeping charge. "Now, the two remaining members of Smooch are giving a very special encore performance in the bedroom, if anyone is interested."

The twins linked arms, sashaying towards their room, and the pirate and firefighter exchanged a slack-jawed look before hurrying after them. Fortunately for all involved, Mark was a very deep sleeper!



The next morning, after experiencing his very first kiss, Mark also got to experience his very first hangover. He woke up to the smell of coffee under his nose and gave a small groan of anguish. His head was pounding. He opened his eyes to see Inga, dressed normally and no longer wearing a mustache, holding a cup of coffee.

"Here," she chirped. "Best cure for a hangover. Drink up!"

"Oh, man," Mark moaned. "My head!"

"That's what you get for drinking underage," Helga chimed in, coming into the apartment with her arms full of groceries. "Don't worry, we texted your mom to say you were spending the afternoon with us. And assured her you drank only soda pop!"

"We're such a bad influence, Helga," Inga sighed. "Well, Mark, did you have fun last night?" The evening's events all came rushing back and Mark looked down at himself, finding he was still dressed in the sailor costume, although the stuffing had come out of one of his bra cups, leaving him slightly asymmetrical, and someone had helped him out of his high heels at some point. He'd also

managed to lose his sailor cap, though his hair was still pinned up. Grinning sheepishly, Mark accepted the coffee.

"Yeah, it was pretty fun," he admitted. He blinked. "Did those eyelashes fall off?"

"We took off all your makeup while you were passed out," Helga said. "It's bad to sleep in it, and you get eye shadow stains everywhere!"

Mark sipped at his coffee while the twins raved about how well the party had gone, feeling distinctly silly sitting on the couch in a skimpy skirt, then went to the bathroom to change back into the prior day's polo and slacks. He had to call Helga in for help unzipping his dress, which was a little embarrassing, but soon enough he was back to his normal clothes, apart from the pink pair of panties in lieu of his boxers, which had somehow gone missing.

"You can keep them," Inga giggled, after Mark had spent ten minutes searching fruitlessly for his original underwear. "Don't worry, I have plenty."

Once his face scrubbed was clean of makeup, Mark looked pretty much like himself again, although his hair was still a bit poofy from the previous night's stylings, and his nails still had that annoying pink gleam from the nail varnish Helga had foisted on him at work. More or less satisfied with his appearance, he walked out of the bathroom. "Hey, so did everyone else go home last night?" he asked. "I seem to remember there were a couple guys who..."

He trailed off as he saw a very tired-looking pirate sipping coffee in the kitchen, then blushed at the obvious implication. The pirate, for his part, seemed strangely startled to see him.

"Uh, Helga, who's the kid?" the guy asked awkwardly.

Helga and Inga, who were busy putting groceries away, looked up and started to giggle.

"That's Alix, silly," Helga said. "Don't you recognize her without her face on? Or maybe you spent too much time staring at her legs!"

"Wha?" The pirate's mouth hung open in confusion, then all of a sudden his cheeks turned red.

"I told you Alix was our co-worker Mark," Helga giggled. "Don't you remember?"

"Jesus, I thought you were... You know..." The pirate trailed off, shaking his head. "Sorry, I thought it was another one of your pranks. You know, part of the joke. I didn't believe you were actually a dude! Sorry, uh, Mark."

Mark could feel his own cheeks flushing beet red, and suddenly wished he could drop through a convenient trap door in the floor. He'd made such a convincing girl that this guy hadn't believed the truth even when it was presented to him. No wonder he had gotten such a kick out of Mark and Helga kissing, instead of being jealous. He'd thought he was witnessing a cute young teen

queen getting her first taste of girl-on-girl action! “No problem,” Mark said in a near whisper.

After a slightly awkward breakfast, the pirate, whose name turned out to be Matt, showered and changed into some spare clothes he'd wisely packed in advance. The twins suggested he give Mark a ride home on his way, and, perhaps wanting to make up for the earlier embarrassment, Matt said it would be no problem at all.

“And Matt, be sure to say hi to your firefighter friend,” Inga said mischievously at the door. “He had such a nice hose! Bye, Mark, see you at work!” The twins both waved goodbye as Mark followed his ride out of the apartment to where he'd parked his car on the street.

“Got pretty filthy last night,” Matt said conversationally. Mark blushed furiously.

“Uh, I wouldn't know,” he said. “I passed out, remember?” Matt looked taken aback, then broke into an awkward laugh.

“No, dude, I meant the car,” he said. “I drove through a big puddle and need to get it washed!”

“Oh, right,” Mark said sheepishly. He climbed into the passenger's seat and made some stilted small-talk as they drove about how each of them had met Helga and Inga, but when the topic turned to the party, Matt seemed a bit uncomfortable, avoiding looking over at his passenger. Mark couldn't help but think, ruefully, how differently he'd behaved when he thought ‘Alix’ was a girl! Matt was the kind of handsome, muscular, athletic guy who'd probably run his high school and never would have looked twice at a twerp like Mark unless it was to shove him into a locker, but he'd definitely liked looking at ‘Alix,’ chatting friendlily, being genuinely interested in what Mark had to say, telling funny jokes and helping him open a bottle at one point. He'd also been one of the guys who asked Mark to dance!

Now that the makeup was off, however, it seemed like Mark had gone right back to being a non-entity, but worse, because Matt now had the uncomfortable memory of accidentally being attracted to a very pretty boy. Mark slouched lower in the seat, wishing he had a rock to crawl under. For a night, it had seemed like he was popular for once, but now that it was morning he was back to being a geek.

“Hey, look, school carwash,” Matt said, breaking the long drawn-out silence and pointing to a large cardboard sign on the corner. “I used to go to that high school.” Mark looked up and realized they were near his school.

“I go there right now,” he said.

“Oh, cool,” Matt said. “Is that old hard-ass Mr. Dickson still coaching the basketball team?”

"I'm not sure," Mark admitted. "I'm not really into sports." Matt nodded, as if Mark's answer confirmed what he'd already been thinking, then looked over with a serious gaze.

"I have a cousin who's gay, so I'm totally cool with, uh, stuff like that," he said. "I was just a little surprised to find out you were a dude, that's all."

"I'm not gay!" Mark protested. "It was just a Halloween costume! Guys go in drag for Halloween all the time." Matt's forehead wrinkled in surprise.

"Oh, shit," he said. "Sorry. Guess I kind of assumed. I mean, usually when guys go in drag, they look like... Hilarious. Not...uh..." He trailed off, embarrassed. "Do you dress as a chick often? Because you seemed pretty good at it, is all I'm saying."

"That was the first time," Mark said sourly. "And the only time."

"Well, for what it's worth, you make a pretty hot chick," Matt laughed. "But I see some even hotter ones getting set up in the parking lot. How about we support our school carwash? It'll be quick."

"Yeah, sure," Mark said, trying to pretend he hadn't heard the compliment. As Matt pulled into the parking lot, Mark immediately realized what had drawn Matt in as he looked out the window at a parking lot full of dirty cars and scampering, bikini-clad cheerleaders. He had totally forgotten the cheerleading team was doing a carwash today. And if the whole team was here, that meant...

"Whoa, check out that blonde with the tits," Matt gaped. "You think she's really in high school?"

Mark followed his gaze, and sure enough, it was Candi Wethers, clad in a denim miniskirt and a tiny pink bikini top that was struggling to contain her cleavage. He momentarily lost his power of speech watching her bend over to pick up a bucket of soapy water. "Uh, yeah," he managed to spit out a moment later. "She's in my English class."

"Jailbait," Matt said sadly. "Well, she's too young for me, dude. You ever talk to her?"

Mark blushed. "Not really," he said. "I mean, I've never gotten a good chance." To his surprise, Matt grinned.

"Hey, no time like the present, buddy," he said, putting the car in park. "Why don't you go ask her how her Halloween was? Just be cool about it."

"Right now?" Mark asked weakly.

"Yeah, Mark," Matt said enthusiastically. "What have you got to lose? Look, kid, any dude who's confident enough to swish around a party in high heels and a dress all night is confident enough to go talk to a hot blonde. You even got action from Helga before I did, remember? So go give it a shot."



Mark stared out the window, watching Candi trying to slyly adjust the strings of her bikini top without giving anyone a show, and he realized Matt was right. Here he was, still watching her from a distance like a creep, when there was no reason on Earth he shouldn't go right up to her and strike up a conversation. He felt a sudden swell of confidence as he thought back to the prior night's party. He'd been funny, confident, and cool, dressed in a flirty sailor costume or not, and he'd even kissed a very good-looking co-worker. Helga wasn't on Candi's level, but she was close, and if Helga liked him, why shouldn't Candi?

"You're right," Mark finally said. "You're right. I'm going to go talk to her."

"That's the spirit, buddy," Matt said, seemingly pleased with himself at having inspired Mark to action. "Get going."

Mark opened his car door, and felt his knees knocking together almost instantly. Candi was standing with her back to him, waving her cardboard sign like a ring girl, and Mark's mouth went suddenly dry at the prospect of talking

to her. Matt gave him an encouraging nod, and Mark walked forward determinedly, trying to look manly and confident. He was just going to strike up a casual conversation, ask her about her Halloween, and then suggest that they... What? Study English together! It was the perfect excuse to get her phone number. Emboldened, Mark started walking quicker, but got a sudden flash of panic as he realized that Miranda, Candi's best friend, was now skipping over to join her. His step faltered slightly. If he got shot down in front of Miranda, everyone would hear about it. He didn't know if he could bear the humiliation!

His feet carried him forward until he was standing directly behind the two beautiful cheerleaders, and, screwing up every last bit of courage he had, Mark announced his presence.

"Hey, Candi, how's it going?" he asked. He immediately kicked himself for sounding so hesitant. Candi turned around, giving Mark an eyeful of cleavage he wouldn't soon forget.

"Hi, uh..." Candi frowned, clearly struggling to remember Mark's name. Mark felt a sinking sensation, and wanted more than anything to take back the last thirty seconds. She didn't even know his name. Two months of the same English class, and seeing her at the salon, and she didn't even know his name. Mark went red with embarrassment as Miranda giggled and whispered something to Candi.

"Hi, Mark," the brunette said. "Did you finish that essay for me yet?" Mark's mouth went dry as he tried to stammer out a response. He'd forgotten he agreed to help her out with her essay, hoping it would lead to seeing Candi outside of class.

"No, that's what I...uh...why I'm here, uh..." Mark trailed off, running a hand through his hair, unable to meet either girls' gaze and feeling about a centimeter tall.

"Hey, is that a manicure you have going on?" Miranda demanded quizzically. Mark slipped both hands behind his back, cursing Helga's 'nail varnish.'

"They said it would dry clear," Mark sighed. "Um, perk of the job." He took a deep breath, trying to regain his bearings in a situation quickly slipping out of his control. It was now or never, and what was the worst that could happen? He licked his lips, swallowed, and started to make his move. "Uh, Candi, I was wondering if..."

"Not now, Mark," Miranda cut him off. "Candi likes big, strong, hunky men, not little girly boys who paint their nails." She gave Candi a wink. "Now come on, I see a really dirty jeep coming in." Miranda grabbed Candi's arm, linking it through her own, and the two girls sashayed off towards a filthy 4x4 in serious need of a wash. Candi gave him what might have been an apologetic glance over her bare shoulder, or else she was just still trying to remember which class

they had together. Either way, Mark felt like curling up into a little ball and dying on the spot. He beat a hasty retreat back to Matt's car.

"Didn't go so well, huh?" Matt asked sympathetically. "Hot girls can be bitches, sometimes, dude."

"Think you can skip the carwash for now?" Mark asked miserably. "I'd rather not have to look Miranda in the face after that."

"Sure, buddy," Matt said, reversing out of the parking lot. "Hey, at least you tried. That took balls, right?"

But no matter what Matt said, Mark felt worse than he ever had in his life. Maybe 'Alix' was a hit, but 'Mark' was still a total loser, no matter what, and like Louis had said, geeks just didn't date cheerleaders. Mark was so distressed he didn't even thank Matt for the ride home as he got out of the car. He was already dreading school on Monday.



Despite his fears, Mark didn't return to school to overblown stories of his attempt to make a move on the hottest girl in school. Everyone was much too busy with other gossip. Apparently, as Mark heard it, Amber had played a cruel trick at her Halloween party that nearly led to a drunken Candi being taken advantage of by Joe, one of the school's most notorious womanizers. That was until Amber's boyfriend Tom, basketball captain and best-looking guy in school, had intervened and punched Joe out cold. Tom had then used the whole thing as an excuse to dump Amber, and rumors were swirling that Tom and Candi would be an 'item' before long.

The fact that Mark had not only blown his big chance talking to Candi, but that she was now finally dating a popular jock, drove Mark into a true funk. Sure, she now remembered his name often enough to borrow notes from him in English, but Candi was now officially off the market, and Mark didn't have a chance to compete against a guy like Tom. After moping all through November and spending December's holidays locked up in his room playing video games, Mark had to admit that he was well and truly depressed. Every time his mom tried to talk to him about it, he just muttered some excuse about teenage hormones and slipped away, but he knew what it really was: heartbreak.

As far as work went, the twins did do their best to cheer him up, understanding that Mark's depressed mood was caused by Candi getting a boyfriend. They gave him an expensive assortment of skin creams and moisturizers for Christmas, which was a nice enough gesture that Mark felt obligated to start using them, and whenever Candi came to the salon they found ways to let Mark always either be on break or working on the opposite side of the salon. Even looking at her from a distance was painful, and he didn't think he would be able to manage hearing her chat away to Tiffany, especially if her boyfriend Tom

came up in conversation.

As another measure to try to distract Mark from his depression, Helga and Inga started teaching Mark the basics of manicures, pedicures, and waxing. When he protested that no customer would trust a teenaged guy to do their nails for them, they started to teasingly call him 'Marci' around the salon. Mark couldn't help but wonder if Louis



had put them onto it somehow, but he hardly ever saw Louis these days, especially since the twins usually picked him up to go out for lunch. Mark didn't want to hear an 'I told you so' about Candi, so he mostly avoided his former best friend in the halls, too.

Mark didn't really mind the good-natured ribbing from the twins, but he was startled and a little bit disturbed the first time a customer mistakenly referred to him as 'Marci,' too! He supposed that with his longish hair, which was very full and glossy thanks to his new shampoos and conditioners, and his pink smock, the woman had managed to mistake him for a girl. When he voiced his concern to Tiffany, she just chuckled.

"You might as well play along," she said. "Like you said, women are more comfortable if they think it's a cute young girl doing their nails, not a boy!" Mark wasn't sure how he felt about this peculiar development, but he had to admit that the customers who called him 'Marci' were a whole lot friendlier, and, since they tipped so much more, he stopped bothering to correct them. Tiffany seemed to have this in mind when she gave Mark his usual trim – he found himself with a slightly more feminine style than usual, bangs included.

"It's... Not what I usually get," Mark said to Tiffany, trying to point it out without offending the skills of his boss.

"It suits you," Tiffany told him. "And I like it."

That meant arguing about it was going to put his employment in jeopardy, and not worth the risk. Looking in the mirror, he tried to push and pull it into his more familiar style, and he supposed he could comb it into a more masculine shape for school.

Helga and Inga were big fans of Mark's new hairstyle, but they suggested it would look even better with some curl to it. "Please, Mark?" Helga pleaded after work. "It would look so cute! Nothing permanent, or anything."

"Forget it," Mark said, not in the mood to be accommodating. "My mom is already giving me funny looks since you two plucked my eyebrows... just getting the stray hairs, my ass!"



"You look much nicer!" Inga pouted. "It's good to be well-groomed. The men in Europe are much more particular about such things, believe me."

"Well, this is America," Mark grumbled. "And I don't want curlers in my hair, thanks."

"Why not?" Helga whined. "Everyone thinks you're a girl, anyways!"

"That's not true," Mark said, flushing. "Just the old ladies who can't see without their glasses."

"Really?" Inga smiled. "How about a little bet, then? If more than five customers call you 'Marci' tomorrow, we get to do your hair for the week. If not, we do all the sweeping for a week."

"Sweeping *and* window cleaning," Mark said, driving up the bargain.

"Deal," the twins said simultaneously, sticking out their hands to shake. Mark shook them each in turn, but their humungous grins made him wonder if he'd gotten himself into something he would regret. His suspicion was confirmed the very next Saturday. The twins had him work the register all morning, and despite doing his best to draw attention to his nametag, which clearly read 'Mark', it was barely eleven o'clock by the time six different customers had all casually called him 'Marci.'

Mark had to take a good long look at himself in the mirror during his break. With his trimmed eyebrows and clear, smooth complexion, the delicate bone structure of his face that he'd inherited from his mother was quite apparent – more so than it had been before, he was certain. And with his unisex haircut, especially those darned bangs, he guessed he could see where the customers were making their mistake. He did look awfully androgynous, and even, dare he say it, a little bit girly.

Displeased though he was, Mark was a good sport and over lunch he allowed Helga and Inga to use curlers, a hot iron, and some hairspray to create his new 'do, a short but undoubtedly female style with curls that bounced around his face. If he'd looked a little bit girly before, now, even without makeup, he suspected there was a lot more answering to 'Marci' in his future. The twins were delighted with how it turned out, snapping several photos, and they were still teasing it with their combs when Tiffany showed up.

"Hey, I don't pay you three to give each other free perms," she said, frowning. "Although that does look marvelous, honey, your hair really holds a curl well. I just got a last-minute call to do makeup for a photo-shoot and I need an assistant. Mark, do you want to earn a little extra?"

"What about us?" Helga pouted. "We like earning extra!"

"Mark is a harder worker than either of you," Tiffany said matter-of-factly. "Not that I don't love you girls. Now, Mark, are you up for a day on the beach?" Mark fluffed out his new hairstyle, gritting his teeth. He wasn't crazy about the

idea of going out in public with this obviously female hairstyle, but at the same time, a day on the beach sounded a heck of a lot better than another afternoon in the salon. Especially if he was getting a bonus!

"Sure," he said, giving the twins a triumphant look. *Looks like I'm getting out of window washing anyways!* he thought happily. He waited while Tiffany packed up her makeup case and hair products, then followed her out of the nearest mall entrance to her car. His heart was pounding, but he kept his head down and nobody so much as batted an eye. Mark suspected that with his new haircut, most people genuinely assumed he was a girl unless they took a close look.

Still, he was glad for the shelter of Tiffany's car as he sidled into the passenger seat and did up his seatbelt. The fact that he was passing as a girl so easily was a little disturbing to him, and at the same time, he was scared that some eagle-eyed observer would realize the truth.

"Well, this should be fun," Tiffany said, climbing in on the other side. "And maybe the drive will give us a chance to get to know each other a little better. I know I'm your boss, but I'd like to be considered a friend, too, just like I am to Helga and Inga."

"Oh," Mark said, wriggling down in the seat to be sure nobody would see him. "Yeah, that would be cool with me."

"It's been great having you around," Tiffany continued, as she drove them out of the parking lot. "And I love that you're such a great sport, putting up with the twins' teasing. I know they can be a bit much at times."

"No, no, they're great," Mark said automatically, despite his new 'look' giving evidence to the contrary. "I mean, we've all gotten to be really good friends."

"I'm glad!" Tiffany smiled. "For a while there you were in quite a funk, and I worried it might have something to do with them teasing you." Mark swallowed.

"No," he said truthfully. "It was, uh, something else."

"Well, I'm glad you've put it behind you, 'Marci'," Tiffany said, putting emphasis on the nickname. "This should be a fun afternoon! It's a beach shoot for Radiance Suntan Lotion, and I'm doing the makeup for the female model." She looked over at Mark and winked. "I bet you remember her, she's one of our regulars. My masterpiece! 'Candi' ring a bell?"

Mark's mouth went dry. He'd spent the past months trying to avoid thinking about or even seeing Candi, and here he was driving to an intimate photo shoot to see her in a swimsuit. Despite himself, his heart raced at the thought of the beautiful blonde wearing her bikini, but it was accompanied by a sense of misery, as well. If Candi ever needed one more shred of evidence that Mark was not man enough for her, it was the fact that he'd spent the morning having his hair curled.

“What’s wrong?” Tiffany asked. “I thought you’d be ecstatic! You like Candi, don’t you?”

“She’s out of my league,” Mark muttered, thinking of Louis’s pronouncement.

“Well, she does have a very hunky boyfriend,” Tiffany admitted. “But maybe you should try to be friends with her. I bet you two have more in common than you might think!” She smirked slightly. “And you know, relationships in high school are so unstable. People break up all the time, and if you’re waiting in the wings as a supportive friend, who knows what might happen?”

Mark shrugged and gave his boss a non-committal smile. Sure, it sounded good, but what girl in their right mind was going to break up with the most popular jock in school to date a dweeb like Mark?



When they got to the beach, a photographer and his crew were already getting set up, though Candi hadn’t arrived yet. Tiffany, suggesting that Mark might want to avoid getting sand in his work shoes, loaned him a pair of sandals that fit surprisingly well. He stood awkwardly in them, trying to ignore the fact they had a definite bit of heel, while Tiffany shook hands with everyone. The photographer, a Frenchman named Jacques, gave Mark a curious side-long look, then broke into a grin.

“Ah, yes,” he said, in a thick French accent. “The androgynous look is very ‘in’ this year on the runways. If you were taller, darling, I would suggest you to a fashion show. You are nice and thin, with such good skin and, how does one say, bone structure.”

“Uh, th-thanks,” Mark stammered, completely unsure if he’d been mistaken for a girl again or not. Fortunately, Jacques was quickly distracted by someone carrying his camera bag upside-down, which threw him into a rage, and Tiffany took Mark over to the screen to help her set up her mirrors and lighting. The male model showed up first, an extremely ripped and handsome guy who gave Mark a curious look before sitting down in Tiffany’s chair for a few minor touch-ups to his shaggy surfer-style hair. Mark couldn’t help but think, ruefully, that it was yet another guy he didn’t have a chance competing against.

A short while later, he heard the sound of another car pulling up, and the very enthusiastic greeting from Jacques informed Mark that the star of the show had just arrived. Tiffany and Mark had just finished laying out the makeup table when Candi teetered inside on her usual stiletto heels, which were now sinking deep into the sand, looking slightly anxious.

“Candi, honey, isn’t this exciting?” Tiffany beamed, greeting her with an air kiss. “They were going to fly a makeup artist in for this shoot, can you believe that? When I’m right here, and I know your contours and color palette like the

back of my hand! Ridiculous! And boy, that male model, what a hunk, don't you think? Marci, come bring Candi her robe!"

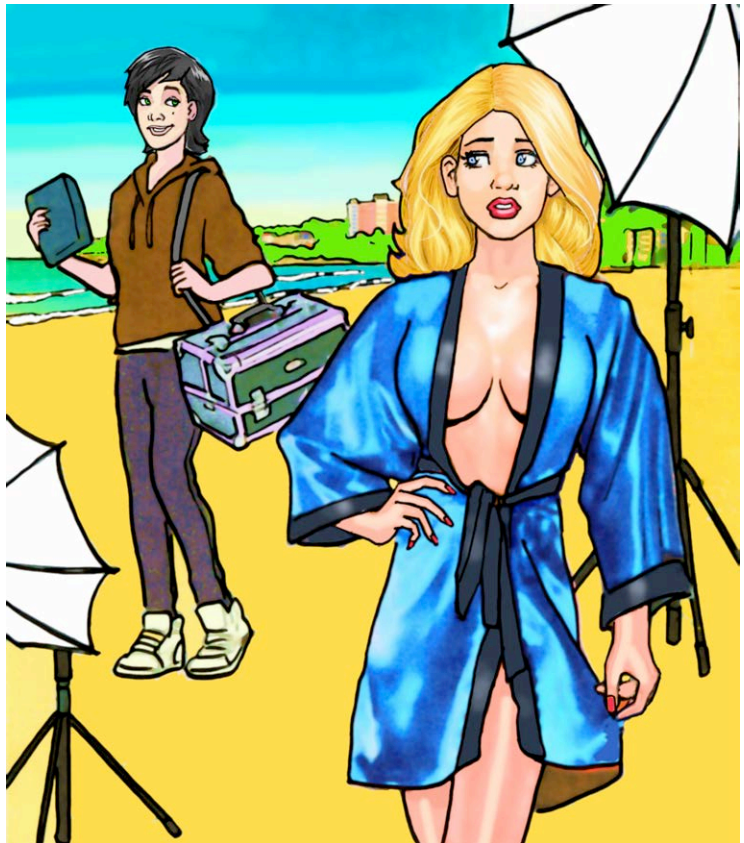
"Marci?" Candi asked, confused. Mark, blushing, took the flimsy robe off its hanger and brought it forward. He could feel Candi's confused gaze taking in his new hairstyle, not to the mention the long purple smock and women's sandals he was wearing. Would the humiliations never cease?

"Oh, the twins always call him that and it's become a bit of a habit," Tiffany laughed. "They do love to tease, and make these little bets and such. That's why his hair is so lovely at the moment. Don't be embarrassed, Mark, we love that you're such a good sport. Now, give us a little privacy and go grab my hair-spray from the van, okay, darling?"

Mark hesitated for a moment, trying to think of something to say to excuse his appearance further, but as per usual Candi's beauty made it extremely hard to think of anything intelligent. Mark ended up just nodding and hurrying away to go fetch the hair-spray, inwardly cursing. Candi now not only thought he was a geek, but a complete sissy, too.

By the time he found the hair-spray and returned, the photo shoot was underway. Once,

Mark would have felt like the luckiest guy on Earth, getting to follow Tiffany and the photographer around to various points on the beach in order to get the perfect shot of Candi in bikini-bottoms and nothing else (though she was always using the 'hand bra' and wore her robe between shots, so Mark never caught so much as a glimpse of nip-



ple). Now, however, it seemed like the universe was laughing in his face. After he'd finally given up on his stupid fantasy of asking her out, and finally come to terms with never being with her, he'd been given an opportunity few guys at school could brag about: seeing Candi Wethers topless.

The agony was compounded yet again by the way the male model, Nicholas, flirted with her so confidently, swaggering around and showing off his six-pack, while Mark stumbled around on cork wedge sandals wearing a long purple smock that fluttered in the wind like a dress. He had never felt like less of a man, even at Halloween when he was all dolled up as Alix from Smooch. But everyone's attention, fortunately, was reserved for Candi. At least she didn't seem to be enjoying herself much, either, not with her hair needing constant fixing and her robe threatening to blow open in the wind. She looked as relieved as Mark felt when the photographer finally got his perfect shot and they were all allowed to go home.



Mark tried phoning Louis when he arrived home, but there was no answer. So, after changing back into his normal clothes and doing his best to "masculinize" his hair with a comb and hefty amounts of gel, he walked over to his former best friend's house, feeling oddly nervous. He stood on the front step and rang the doorbell, as he had a million times before, and Louis' mom opened the door and greeted him happily as if nothing was amiss.

"Hello, Mark, long time no see!" she said. "How's your mother been?"

"Oh, she's good," Mark said. "She told me to say hi from her. Uh, is Louis around?"

"Just a second," Louis' mom said. She turned and shouted, "Louis! Your friend Mark is here!" There was an indistinct reply, to which she scowled, then turned to Mark and said, "He'll be right here. Come on in, Mark."

Mark stepped inside reluctantly as Louis' mom bustled back to the kitchen. A few moments later, Louis came down the stairs with an unfriendly look on his face. He crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Hey, man," Mark said tremulously. "Uh, you weren't answering your phone, so I was just seeing if you wanted to hang out."

"Really?" Louis said. "After ditching me all year to hang out with your girlfriends from the salon, you all of a sudden want to hang out again?"

"Look, Louis, you were right, okay?" Mark said desperately. "I never had a chance with Candi, and it was dumb of me to value that over our friendship in the first place." He sighed. "Look, I've just had a really rough couple of months

coming around, all right? And I was hoping we could bury the hatchet and be friends again. I need someone to talk to about all this... All this stuff going on."

"You've had a rough couple of months?" Louis asked disbelievingly. "What about me? You dropped me like I was hot garbage! I've been eating lunch by myself in the cafeteria while you hang around with those Swedish chicks!"

"I'm sorry," Mark muttered. "I just wanted to feel cool, you know? For once in my life. And I thought maybe it would help me get closer to Candi somehow. And besides, Helga and Inga are really awesome friends."

"Are you kidding?" Louis demanded. "Do you think they're actually your friends? Mark, they're just messing with you for fun. You're like a new toy to them that they get to play dress-up with. I mean, look at your hair! They're messing with you, dude, they're not really your friends."

"Giving me fashion advice isn't messing with me," Mark said angrily. "And the hair was a bet, that's all. You're just jealous that I'm at least hanging out with girls!"

"Whatever, Mark," Louis said, shaking his head. "Go tell it to your new friends. I'm sick and tired of trying to be friends with someone as selfish as you."

Mark stared at him, open-mouthed, but he once again couldn't come up with anything to say. He just shook his head furiously and slowly walked out the door. Not only was he never going to get a girlfriend, but now his best friend in the world wanted nothing to do with him, either. *Well, screw him*, Mark thought. *Helga and Inga are cooler than he'll ever be.*



After his falling out with Louis, Mark found himself spending more and more time outside of work with the twins. They seemed happy enough to accommodate him, treating him like the little brother they'd never had, but only in the kind of activities *they* already liked doing. That meant Mark found himself swapping video games for sappy chick flicks, and surfing the web for cruising the mall in order to shop for new clothes. His mother seemed happy that he had found close friends among his co-workers, and even suggested that he got along with them so well because of his high 'maturity level.' Since Matt, the pirate from Halloween, had started dating Helga steadily, he even had a 'positive male role model' for once, since they often all hung out together for movie nights.

Louis's harshest accusations and warnings gradually fell out of Mark's consciousness, and he didn't make much of a fuss when the twins started to steer him toward more unisex fashion choices, like tight white jeans and more colorful printed shirts and scarves. As Jacques had said, 'androgynous' was in, and

the twins had tons of European fashion magazines to prove it. Sure, he heard a little bit of snickering at school from the jocks, but none of them would know fashion if it hit them in the face. If Mark ever did complain, Helga was quick to point out that she'd bought Matt something similar – although it always managed to look a lot more manly on his broad frame and muscular body.

Mark kept secretly hoping for a repeat of Halloween, where Helga (or Inga, he didn't even care which at this point) gave him some more kissing lessons, but they seemed to be treating him more and more like 'one of the girls,' inviting him over for spa days and having him join in when they watched romantic comedies and did each others' hair on girls' nights. On one of these occasions, he even agreed to let them 'experiment' on him by doing full makeup! Mark was more than a bit uncomfortable when Helga sent photos of the results to Matt, but he took it in stride and with good humor.

At work, Mark was in for a bit of a surprise when he found, at the beginning of March, that Tiffany had replaced his "Mark" nametag with one that read "Marci."



"I want you to start helping with the waxing," she explained. "But customers are a lot more comfortable if they think it's all girls doing it. It's not such a big deal, is it? After all, we've been calling you 'Marci' for months now." Mark was a little off-put, but he couldn't argue with the logic. Still, he couldn't hide his reluctance as he looked at the name tag, considering how Louis would bust a gut laughing if he knew.

"Well... I..." Mark started to say, in opposition to the idea.

"And since you'd be doing more, you'd definitely deserve a raise," Tiffany added, raising an eyebrow. Now it was Mark's eyebrows that raised. He was still scrimping and saving for college next year, and a raise could only help. He pinned the new name tag to his smock, and Tiffany gave a satisfied smile. "Oh, and one more thing," she said. "Since you're going to be 'Marci' at work now..."

She led him to the back, and handed him a bag branded with the name of a very well-known lingerie outlet. Confused, Mark looked inside to find several sets of basic cotton bras and panties. His face immediately went red.

"It just wouldn't do for a customer to realize you're wearing boxers and nothing else underneath that lovely smock," Tiffany explained apologetically. "I know it's a little unorthodox, Mark, but Helga and Inga mentioned you've worn lingerie before, so..."

"That was just for Halloween!" Mark protested.

"Well, this is just for *work*," Tiffany wheedled. "You would only have to put them on once you get here, of course. Please, Mark? You've been such a big help here, and the customers really seem to like 'Marci.' Did I mention the raise?"

"But what if someone who still remembers I'm a guy sees me with the 'Marci' name tag?" Mark demanded.

"Then they'll rightfully assume we are a very open-minded establishment," Tiffany said with a grin.

"All right," Mark said, blushing again. "I'll do it. So long as you and the twins take a vow of silence."

"Oh, Mark, we never divulge that kind of secret," Tiffany said with a wink. "Now, where do we stand on light makeup?"

And that was how Mark ended up putting on mascara and lip gloss before the start of each shift. He usually remembered to take it off, too – except for one occasion where his mom asked him, startled, if he was wearing makeup. When he explained that it was just a joke of Helga's, unsure if she would approve of him cross-dressing at work, she assured him that there was nothing wrong with 'experimenting' and that it might even help him 'find himself.' Mark hoped she wasn't going to start to think he was gay or something, and after that he was extra sure to remove all of the makeup before he left the salon.



It was in April, when Tiffany started mentioning doing a promotion for group rates for prom hair and makeup, that the twins innocently asked Mark who he was planning to ask to the dance.

“Oh,” Mark said, surprised. “I hadn’t really thought about it.” In prior years, whenever he’d thought of prom, he’d figured he would end up skipping the whole thing and watching movies with Louis instead. Now, however, Louis wanted nothing to do with him. Besides that, he’d noticed that some of the girls at school were a whole lot friendlier with him than they’d ever been before.

“Inga thinks you are too scared to ask anyone,” Helga said conspiratorially, as Inga rang a customer through.

“I’m not scared!” Mark said indignantly. “I just hadn’t thought about it, that’s all.” Now that he *was* thinking about it, though, he felt pretty nervous about the prospect. Maybe one of the girls from his Math class who complimented his style all the time?

“I know you’ll be able to get a date for prom, of course,” Helga said. “You’re a good-looking boy who any girl would love to go to the prom with. But Inga thinks otherwise, and anyways, she wants to make you a bet!”

“It’s not that you wouldn’t be a good date, Mark,” Inga said, coming over. “But I know how shy you get around girls that you like, that’s all. Believe me, I would be happy if you prove me wrong! Except, of course, Helga and I would have to be your servants for a week.”

“Huh?” Mark said.

“That would be my end the bet,” Inga explained. “I would have to do whatever you want for a whole week. And Helga thought it might be sort of fun, so she offered to join in. Maybe you could make us wear French maid outfits and clean up your room?” She and Helga both giggled, and Mark gulped at the mental image of Inga and Helga mincing around in maid costumes at his beck and call.

“But what’s my end of the bet?” Mark asked, frowning. The twins looked at each other.

“For your end of the bet, if you don’t find a date, we get to pick one for you,” Inga said. “You see, we have a cousin in Sweden who is coming here to visit. Tall, blonde...”

“Your age, and very attractive,” Helga chimed in.

“Big chest,” Inga added. “Anyways, we thought our cousin might enjoy the cultural experience of going to an American high school dance, and that maybe the two of you could go together?”

Mark's eyes lit up at the idea of a younger, bustier version of Helga and Inga escorting him to prom. He hoped she was the kind of smoking hot blonde who could even make Candi jealous... Boy, would that be something! Then, Mark frowned. This seemed too good to be true. Basically, he won either way, so why bother making it a bet?

"What's your cousin's name?" he asked suspiciously. The twins looked at each other and giggled.

"Sven," Helga said. Mark's eyes narrowed.

"And is that one of those funny Swedish names that sounds like a guy's, but is actually a girl's?" he asked pointedly. Inga and Helga gave him a sheepish grin.

"No," Inga admitted. "It's a guy's name."

"I knew it!" Mark said. "You said a big chest!"

"Oh, yes," Helga said. "And big arms, and big shoulders. Very muscular."

"Very funny," Mark said sarcastically.

"It's not to embarrass you," Inga said quickly. "It's to embarrass him! You see, we prank each other all the time, but Sven is still one up on us. When we were younger, he persuaded our whole school that we had herpes. Nobody wanted to date us for a whole year!"

"Well, some people still did," Helga admitted. "But we have been trying for years to get him back, and now we have the perfect prank!"

"Yes," Inga beamed. "You see, Sven thinks he is quite a ladies' man. He's very proud of his macho reputation. And it would be extremely, extremely embarrassing for him if he were to go on a date with a boy by mistake."

"Yeah, well it would be embarrassing for me to go on a date with a boy on purpose!" Mark said. "I'm not showing up to my prom in drag."

"So you think you can find your own date, then?" Inga asked.

Mark weighed the risks. On one hand, the almost unthinkable – masquerading as a girl at prom. On the other hand, Inga and Helga, his slaves for a week, wearing whatever he wanted. It was only the start of April, and prom was well into May. That had to be ample time to find a date, didn't it?

"You're on," Mark said. "Better go buy those French maid outfits!"

The twins giggled as they shook on the bet, but this was one Mark was determined not to lose. He had a lot more than his hair at stake this time around.



Mark knew he needed to get to work on finding a prom date as soon as possible, but he ended up spending much of the next week procrastinating. It was surprisingly difficult to work up the nerve to ask, and it seemed equally difficult

to ever find a girl who was apart from a large group of her friends. He didn't want to risk asking in front of witnesses, especially after Miranda had so gleefully shot down his attempt to talk to Candi at the carwash, and that meant he needed to find a way to get them alone first. He came very close to asking Chrissy, a pretty girl from his Math class, but at the last second changed the question from "would you like to go to prom with me?" to "would you like to go to the vending machine?" which earned him a strange look.

One of the most aggravating obstacles to his actually asking someone was the fact that he couldn't stop daydreaming about going to the prom with Candi. Sure, she was still dating Tom, but Mark remembered what Tiffany had said about high school relationships. Candi didn't look awfully happy with her boyfriend pawing at her all the time, and maybe, just maybe, they would break up before prom. The idea of going to prom with the most beautiful girl in school, who was now not only head cheerleader but also an up-and-coming swimsuit model, was a fantasy that got Mark through English class without hearing a single word the teacher said, instead staring at the back of Candi's perfect blonde hair.

It wasn't until a week later that he finally built up the courage to approach her after class. She looked as gorgeous as ever, wearing a blue cardigan over a white blouse with several buttons undone, presenting her cleavage to full effect, and a blue-and-pink checked miniskirt. Miranda was nowhere in sight, and Candi didn't seem to be in much of a hurry, checking her red lipstick in her compact mirror, so Mark made his move.

"Candi?" he said breathlessly. "Hi."

Candi looked up, settling her purse on her shoulder. She looked slightly surprised to see him, but not unfriendly. "Hi, Mark," she said. "Um, what is it?"

Mark took a deep breath, then disgorged the words he had been reciting in his head. "I was just... just... well... I was wondering if maybe you would go to prom with me?" he asked. To his surprise, Candi blushed.

"I'm sorry, Mark," she said, sounding genuinely sympathetic. "I'm going with Tom... And he's waiting for me at my locker, so..." Mark knew he should have expected no less, but he could still feel a sinking sensation at her words.

"Oh, okay," he said. "It's just that, well, Inga and Helga's cousin is going to be visiting from Sweden in May, and they made me agree that if I don't find a date, we would go together, and..." He trailed off, embarrassed to be babbling for no reason. As if Candi cared about the twins' cousin, or the dumb bet they'd made! However, instead of giving him an unimpressed look and clicking away to meet her boyfriend, Candi shifted her stance slightly, adjusting the strap of her purse, and gave him a small, awkward smile.

"Going stag is nothing to be embarrassed about," she said kindly. Mark gulped. He couldn't believe it. He was actually having a conversation with

Candi Wethers, the most popular girl in school, and she wasn't looking for an escape route! He searched desperately for the next thing to say, but ended up right back on the subject of prom.

"Yeah, the thing is, I, um, it was this kind of bet, and if you have any friends who might go with me, could you please...?" Mark trailed off again, cursing inwardly. Why was he still going on about prom? He could find his own date, and now he just looked desperate.



"Mark, I honestly don't have a lot of friends," Candi said seriously. "People don't really listen to what I have to say, anyway. They all think I'm some dumb blonde bimbo." She shrugged helplessly. "I really do have to go," she said. "See you in class!" Mark's mouth flapped open. He wanted to tell her that *he* didn't think that, *he* thought she was amazing, and beautiful, and special, but he couldn't put the words together, not even when Candi hesitated one last time.

"I know how hard it was to ask, though," she said. "I would go out with you..."
 "Really?" Mark gaped.

"...If I didn't have ninety percent of the boys in this school trying to take me out already," Candi continued. "Don't let those girls at the salon push you around. You need to do what you can to keep them from telling you what to do."

Mark had no idea what she meant, but he managed to squeak out a "thanks" as she swished away on her high heels. He'd just had a conversation with the most beautiful girl in school. Hardly even caring that she'd turned him down, Mark floated away on cloud nine. If he could ask Candi Wethers to prom, he could ask anybody...



Mark returned to his task with newfound determination, but unfortunately, he soon discovered that he was entering the game quite a bit too late. Every girl he managed to query, most of whom seemed to have no idea who he was, informed him that they already had dates lined up, even though some of them seemed very apologetic to tell him as much.

"I would have loved to go with you as friends," Chrissy from his Math class said sadly. "I know you would have picked the sharpest tuxedo and looked great in the photos. But Henry asked me first, so..."

"It's no problem," Mark said sadly. "Don't worry."

"It's too bad you can't go with who you really want to, huh?" Chrissy said sympathetically. Mark looked up, puzzled. Did she know he'd asked Candi to prom? "You know," Chrissy continued. "Some cute guy."

"What?" Mark spluttered. "Chrissy, I'm not... I'm not gay!"

"Oh!" Chrissy blushed furiously. "Oh, crap, I'm sorry, I guess I just assumed from the way you dressed so nice and everything..." Mark just shook his head in exasperation and moved on. He asked another three girls by week's end, but all of them gave him strange looks, struggled to remember his name, and were already going with someone. At work, Helga and Inga loved to probe innocently about his efforts to get a date, and Mark staunchly returned that he was "working on it" each time they did so. As the month wore on and his options dwindled, Mark felt an increasing sense of desperation. What good was a stylish wardrobe and the ability to talk to girls if every single one of them was already taken? He kept hoping someone would break up with their boyfriend, or some guy would have to suddenly move across country, leaving his date without an escort to prom, but it was to no avail.

By the Friday before prom, Mark was really desperate, and he realized it was time to lower his standards drastically. At lunch hour he went to the band room, where the school's nerdy girls usually hung out together, and found Melissa, a girl whom he'd been friends with in elementary school. She was shy, with braces and a few zits, but she was nice, and Mark knew he'd be doing her a big favor by asking her to prom. To his horror, however, she turned him down!

"Sorry, Mark," she said. "I'm already going with someone."

"Oh, that's okay," Mark said, trying not to seem surprised. "Uh, who? If you don't mind my asking."

"I think he's a friend of yours," Melissa said sheepishly. "You know Louis, right?" Mark's mouth dropped open in shock. So Louis, who had always said prom was a big fat waste of time, was not only going, but he was also going with the girl who had been Mark's last and final hope! Mark gritted his teeth in fury. *What a weasel*, he thought. Swallowing his pride, Mark asked if she had any friends who might need a date.

“None of them are going,” Melissa admitted. “They think prom is really superficial.”

“Yeah, it really is,” Mark said, forcing a laugh. “You know, I probably won’t go, either.” He trooped out of the band room in a daze. He’d lost the bet, but there was simply no way he was going to put on a dress for prom. There had to be some way out of it. He would just have to tell Inga and Helga he was backing out. Heck, he would even offer to be their servant for a week.

I’m not going to prom, Mark thought as he walked to his next class. *They’ll just have to take “no” for an answer.*



“Mark, you lost the bet fair and square, and we’re not going to take no for an answer!” Inga shrieked. It was the very next morning at work before the salon opened, and Mark had found himself cornered by the twins almost immediately. He’d considered skipping work, but Tiffany needed all hands on deck now that it was prom season, and besides, the twins knew where he lived. Instead, he tried inventing a fake girl he was going with, but they’d seen right through it, and now Inga and Helga were both advancing on him threateningly, scissors in hand. He could tell they were serious when they started calling him ‘Mark’ again instead of ‘Marci!’

“Look, I’m sorry, but there’s just no way I’m doing it!” Mark said, cringing away from Helga’s snapping hair scissors. “I’ll do something else, but going to prom in a dress is too much, okay? Don’t you understand that would be social suicide for me?”

“How?” Inga challenged.

"What do you mean, how?" Mark spluttered. "I'd be a total laughing stock if anyone found out."

"Who is going to find out?" Helga asked. "Don't you remember Halloween? I told my dummy boyfriend flat out that you were a guy, and even then he didn't believe me!"

"That was at a party full of people I didn't know!" Mark protested. "And half of them were drunk, besides."

"So, you know everybody at your high school?" Inga asked skeptically. "Marci, you always complain how nobody ever remembers your name! Or which class you have with them! Or that you even go to the same school!"

"Didn't you have more fun as Alix at Halloween than you ever have as Mark?" Helga asked, wheedling. "It could be just like that! Fun!"

"Guys are not supposed to wear dresses to prom," Mark said through gritted teeth. "Okay? It's just... It's weird, and it's humiliating, and..."

"Why?" the twins chimed simultaneously.

"I don't know, it just *is*!" Mark snapped. "And I'm not going as another guy's date! He'd figure it out instantly anyways and probably try to kick my ass, and then what's the point of your big prank?"

"Sven has a good sense of humor," Inga argued. "If he finds out, he'll simply be embarrassed, that's all. Which is what we want!"

"Look, Mark," Helga said, deathly serious. "We have been planning this prank for far too long to let you back out now, okay? Sven is already eagerly awaiting his chance to meet you. He has a suit and everything!"

"What if I refuse?" Mark asked flatly. The twins looked at each other again, then grinned.

"Well, there are two of us, Marci, and only one of you," Inga smiled. "And you are very small."

"Ha!" Mark scoffed nervously. "I'd like to see you try!"



Ten minutes later, Tiffany walked in on quite a scene: a squirming Mark with his smock pulled up over his head was pinned to a salon chair by Inga, who was wrestling fake nails onto his fingers one at a time, while Helga spread wax over his bare legs and shouted at him to hold still, narrowly avoiding having her head kicked off.

"Girls!" Tiffany barked. "What on Earth is going on here?"