

J O E S I X - P A C K

WELCOME TO CANDLEWICK

**Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack
Book One of the “Housewives of
Candlewick Court” series
A Tales of Transformation story**



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WELCOME TO CANDLEWICK



THROUGH THE GATES

Vance Wentworth the Third, the heir to the vast Wentworth estate and the patriarch of the venerable Wentworth family slid into Quentin Stillman's office under the cloak of darkness — and under a real cloak as well.

He didn't have much of a choice, in his position.

The time was late, but as Vance knew from years of experience, his former employee was going to be burning the midnight oil. Stillman was always that way, since the day he had hired him on as the lead architect of Emerald Estates.

From Vance's standpoint, though, this dedication to work was why he regarded Quentin as a sucker. A loser. A chump.

Other people might have thought Quentin was some kind of hero, but he wasn't. To Vance Wentworth, all that work and sweat for so little gain was just running around in circles. To be rich, successful and prosperous, you didn't have to work. You just needed to be smart. Smart and willing to make tough decisions. Life was about risk, not sweat.

If Quentin Stillman didn't have the guts to make those kinds of choices, then he was just as weak-minded a man as any given mouth-breather begging for change on the street, in Vance's opinion.

Hearing the door, Quentin looked up from his computer. "Carolyn? Is that you?" He checked again. "Carolyn?"

Not getting any reply, but definitely hearing noises, Quentin immediately snapped off all the lights, turning the office pitch black.

In the dark office, Quentin stood up from his chair. "Hello?" He called out again. "Is that the blueprint courier?"

"No, Stillman," said Vance, stepping out of the shadow into the weak light of the office.

"Mister... Wentworth?" Quentin asked, puzzled.

Puzzled for a couple of reasons. First, the last time he had seen Mr. Wentworth, it was when he was summarily and angrily fired from his job as lead architect of the Emerald Estates development. His last words to him had been something along the lines of "You won't even be able to get a job



designing doghouses in this town!” Then he was grabbed by burly security men and dragged out of the office he had worked in for three years and literally tossed onto the street. He figured that was the last he’d ever see of the imperious Mr. Wentworth.

The second reason Quentin found himself puzzled was that Vance Wentworth was supposed to be dead.

Or at least, assumed to be dead. His yacht had gone missing seven days ago, with him aboard. The coast guard had been searching with no sign of it.

“Stillman,” Vance replied. The shocked young man reached for his pocket. “Don’t use your phone,” Wentworth instructed. “I locked the front door. No one’s going to bother us.” He took off his cloak and tossed it over the back of a chair. He unbuttoned his suit jacket button and sat down, kicking out the tails of his coat. “You seem surprised to see me, Stillman.” He grinned a smug little smile as he adjusted his tie.

“You’re faking a disappearance,” Quentin said, quickly figuring it out.

“An unplanned extended sabbatical.” The man leaned back in the chair to get comfortable. “I can’t help what the media assumes is a death at sea.”

“There are Coast Guard ships braving high seas off Nantucket looking for you.”

“That’s what they get paid for.”

Quentin finally felt at ease enough to sit back down in his seat, but he did so slowly. When dealing with Vance Wentworth, Quentin had learned, one always needed to move cautiously and never let their guard down. “I see.”

“I won’t waste your time. I’ll get to the point.” Wentworth crossed his legs. “There’s a hit out on me. Someone wants me dead.”

“Someone’s trying to kill you?”

“That’s what I said. Keep up.” Wentworth was a large man, his girth hid by a fine Italian suit, and he had a knack for looking relaxed no matter where he found himself. As he looked right now, he was a portrait of smugness. “*So what do I do?*” I asked myself. Well, I need a place to hide for a while. Until I can figure it out.”

Quentin looked like he didn’t believe the words coming out of the man’s mouth. “And you came to me? For help? You do remember that you fired me.”

“Nothing personal, Stillman. Just business. Besides, who better to ask for help than you? No one would ever suspect it.”

“No one. Let alone me. I don’t think I’d be particularly inclined to help, especially after the way you treated me.”

Wentworth was prepared for this objection. “I’ll have you design the new tower I’m putting up in New York. More business than you could ever dream

of. The centerpiece of your career. The prestige project you've always wanted. It's yours."

Stillman contemplated the offer for a moment. "That's a pretty big thing to just give away, and you never give anything away for free. Who's after you? They must be dangerous."

"Wish I knew. I have private eyes working on it. My best people. Top people. I'll find out. Could be any time. I have my suspects, though."

"Who?"

"Ex-wife? Thalia was always talking a mean game. Threatened to kill me almost every day we were married. Maybe she took her settlement and bought herself a hit."

"She was always nice to me," Quentin said.

"She was nice to the little people," Wentworth commented. "Maybe it's her, maybe not. It could also be my business partner."

"Craig Luger?" Quentin asked. The accusation of being in cahoots with Luger would have sent any self-respecting businessman into a rage. Wentworth's expression didn't change. A lifetime of hearing that harmful allegation had dulled his emotions on the subject.

Craig Luger was a wanted man, a billionaire fugitive. He had been implicated in everything from drug smuggling to sponsoring terrorists, had more money than God and used it to stay one step ahead of the authorities. He hadn't been seen in public in ten years, but that didn't stop the cable TV networks from constantly speculating what nefarious deeds he was up to, like a modern-day Billy the Kid.

"You got a big mouth on you, Stillman. That'll get you in trouble one of these days." And that was all Wentworth had to say about that.

The association wasn't hard to understand as it had been rumored for years that Wentworth's operations had a line of credit financed exclusively by Craig Luger. Of course, if anyone could prove that, it would destroy Wentworth.

Vance was essentially beyond the reach of law enforcement, due to his position in society and huge bankroll. He feared no one, with one exception. If there was anyone who could get to him, it was a man with even bigger pockets, like his alleged partner, Luger. So, it stood to reason that if Wentworth was in business with him, and he had double-crossed Luger, he would be rightly terrified. That seemed like a good reason he'd be desperate enough to darken the doorstep of an ex-employee he had fired with extreme prejudice.

"So what do you want from me?" Quentin said.

"I need a place. Somewhere no one is going to find me. Got the best in security. A fortress. That's what I need. So, I figure who knows about such places? Well, an architect would. He knows buildings."

“So I find you a place to hide in exchange for the tower project?”

“I’ll need to stay for a little while. Maybe a couple of months. And make sure it’s nice. I’m used to staying at the classiest places in the world.”

Quentin Stillman folded his hands on his desk as he took a moment to think about it. “I’ll need some money up front.”

Wentworth reached inside his suit and produced an improbably fat stack of one hundred dollar bills. He tossed it on to Quentin’s desk. “Money’s not a problem.”

Contemplating the situation, Quentin stuck out his jaw and let his lids fall over his eyes. “I’ll need a couple of days. How do I get in touch with you? Who do I need to talk to?”

“No one,” Vance Wentworth said, sternly. He stood back up, and buttoned his coat. “You talk to no one but me. And I’ll see you in 48 to 72 hours. I’ll be ready to move then.”

“I can’t say if...” Quentin stood up.

“Sit down.” Wentworth commanded. He grabbed his cloak from the chair. “You stay right where you are. I don’t want you to see where I’m going.”

Quentin sat again, gritting his teeth. It was not hard to read into the look on his face a feeling of instant regret. Vance Wentworth was trouble waiting to happen, and as abrasive as they came. “Fine. You can see yourself out?”

“I’m trusting you to take care of all the details.” Vance said as he covered himself up. “Do good and I’ll take care of you. You’ve got my word.”

He strode on out of the office and into the night air, leaving behind a conflicted and pained expression on Quentin’s face. He got up, headed to the front door and locked it shut. Looking outside, there was no sign of Wentworth, with the small office park looking as still as a graveyard.



Three days later, an unmarked black SUV drove through the gates of the Emerald Estates development.

In the front seat, driving, was Quentin. In the back seat, yapping, was Vance Wentworth III. “This place really came out beautiful. First class. Gorgeous. The best.”

“It’s been a while since I was here last,” Quentin said. Indeed, Emerald Estates was the project he was working on when Wentworth fired him, but had never been back to it since.

An enormous development situated in rolling, tree-lined hills, Emerald Estates was one of the hottest properties in the country. Located adjacent to a

highway, it was ten minutes to downtown and twenty minutes from the mountains and lakes. At one time it had actually been a part of the national parks system, but a few well-placed campaign donations in Washington got the site decommissioned and ready for the trees to be cleared and houses to be built.

Wentworth, on behalf of the development company Magnum Properties, had bid for the property, and lost, but sued the winning bidder out of his land rights, thanks to a battery of high-powered attorneys he kept on retainer. The courts awarded him the deed and Quentin was brought in to design the houses.

“Nice idea,” Wentworth said to Quentin. “Have me hide out in my very own development. Last place anyone would look.”

“That’s the plan,” Quentin said.

“But we have 100% occupancy here with a waiting list. Did you kick someone out? Where are you even gonna put me?”

“Candlewick Court.”

“Ah.” The mention of Candlewick Court broke Vance Wentworth’s spirit for a moment. “That thing.”

‘That thing’ was a sub-development of the larger Emerald Estates site. A failure, by every account. A dismal failure. Although the low-range, mid-range and high-end houses had all sold out, the ultra-premium Candlewick Court houses remained completely unsold to this day.

The Candlewick Court houses had been built, demolished, re-built and the plans for them revised several times. The houses were nowhere near ready on time, blowing through innumerable deadlines. They were years behind schedule.

These were Quentin’s houses, the ones he was personally in charge of designing — and the delay and cost over-runs were exactly why he and Vance Wentworth had come into conflict.

Quentin had guarded their development jealously, and had been given authority to take as much time as needed to make sure it was all perfect. When he finally did reveal his plans, they were strange and bizarre, and Wentworth could never get him to properly explain why he had made the choices he had. Quentin was adamant that houses had to face a certain way, that the windows had to be a certain size, that the walls had to be made of certain materials. Even on his own internal blueprints, there were whole rooms that were blacked out, redacted so no one could see what they were built for. In addition, the arrangement of the houses was done in a particular pattern, arranged almost like Stonehenge, and the roads built with rare materials that had to be imported from the other side of the globe.

From Wentworth's perspective, these so-called 'premium' houses appeared, at first glance, to be no different from the mid-range houses on sale. For all the care used in building them, they appeared to be plain houses at inflated prices, starting at 2.8 million dollars. No buyer would pay that kind of money for the exact same house they could get for under \$600,000. Vance had argued, quite rightly, that they would never sell at that price, or even a quarter of that. These last six houses were dragging the entire development into ruin. Without the premium profit from those residences, the entire enterprise was in fiscal jeopardy.

In Wentworth's opinion, if he could just add in premium features to the houses of Candlewick Court, they would be sure sellers. Add swimming pools, decks, and guest houses along with upscale landscaping and lighting, and they might have a winner.

But every time Wentworth would direct Quentin to change the plans, he would get overridden. His wishes were constantly being subverted and vetoed. Quentin would be told to go back to his original blueprints and ignore Wentworth's demands.

That was because Quentin had two bosses, essentially. One was Wentworth and the other was someone neither of them had ever met, and only heard from through email. Those emails were from "Magnum Properties," who were Wentworth's financial backers in all his development endeavors — a company many suspected was being run by Craig Luger.

No one at Wentworth's firm or Quentin's firm had actually met with anyone at Magnum, and they had no physical presence at the job site. They were like phantoms, directing everyone remotely by texts and emails, and bypassing Vance Wentworth III at every turn.

That made Wentworth furious, because he had been working with Magnum Properties for years, trouble-free, and never had so much as a text message from them. All of the sudden, on this Candlewick Court project, they acted like Wentworth didn't even exist. "They're pissing in my mouth!" He bellowed at the time. "Magnum is treating me like an illegitimate retarded child!" He told his confidants. His anger built and built through the two-year scope of the project, and the only person he could take it out on was Quentin. Which he did, repeatedly, until he finally dismissed Quentin from the project entirely.

Quentin Stillman had every right to sue, but never did. He walked away from the project, and returned to running his firm. Fortunately from the development, his plans were already finished, and Magnum Properties kept Wentworth from any further interference. It wasn't long before Wentworth himself moved on, too frustrated to bother with the troubled project.

As they stopped at the gates for Candlewick Court, Quentin swiped a card through a reader and the heavy gates opened.

“Security. I see. That’s why you chose this place,” Vance Wentworth said. “And a little bit of irony, I suppose.”

Quentin kept his mouth shut as he drove through the gates.

The small complex of six houses usually didn’t see much activity. Ever since these residences had been built, they were almost forgotten. Regularly maintained, kept clean, and the lawns mowed, but otherwise ignored, which was easy to do when it was sealed off like it was, with heavily-reinforced castle-like walls wrapping around it.

Even though this part of the Emerald Estates development was already walled off and gated from the rest of the houses with inappropriate levels of security, yet another wall wrapped around 105 Candlewick Court.

It was thick iron, fifteen feet high, with spikes at the top. Not ornamental spikes — the piercing-the-internal-organs-of-an-interloper kind of spikes. It was nicely disguised with ornate touches and a red brick base, but it was definitely designed to stop anyone from attempting to get inside.

If one looked closely, they would have noted that the windows didn’t just have the blinds drawn, but had been painted over in white from the inside. There was no mailbox. There was no knob on the front door. Everything about 105 had been engineered — architected — to be as secure a site as possible.

The trees were far enough away from the house so no one could use them to climb inside. The driveway was curved to prevent anyone from speeding a car to crash through the gate. Cement pillars also prevented a car from getting too close. Black shrouded cameras were mounted just away from sight, covering every inch of the grounds.

The thick concrete abutments and structures, along with the dull appearance of the house, made the place look dreary, especially on this overcast day. It was a very grey house.

The SUV had come to a stop inside the gates at 105, and Quentin had stepped out. He had to open Vance Wentworth’s door for him before the mogul bothered to leave the car.

“This is it? Is this it?” Vance said, looking up. It wasn’t a very big house by his standards, although it was the largest in the entire Emerald Estates complex.

“Yes, sir,” Quentin said. “This’ll be your home for...”

“Save it,” Vance said looking around. “Let’s take it inside where no one can see us.”

Quentin pressed a button in his pocket and the door opened by itself. Wentworth wasted no time and raced inside as if he were being chased by daylight.

Inside the doorway, the house was dim and moody, and Wentworth was more at ease. “What about food? Are the sheets clean?”

“Everything’s taken care of,” Quentin said.

“I don’t want anyone to be able to call me. But I need a contact to pick things up for me.”

“There’s a mobile phone in the bedroom if you need it. An untraceable line.”

“Internet?”

“If you need it, give me a call.” Stillman made a curious trip across the foyer to the far wall of the room. He looked up into the skylight, and continued to stare at it for several seconds.

Confused, Wentworth followed, trying to figure out what was so important.

“I’m the only one here, right, Stillman?”

“No one but me even knows you’re here – or even alive.” Quentin continued to stare into the light, just shielding his eyes slightly.

“Do you see something up there?” Wentworth asked. He gave it look for himself.

It was nothing remarkable, just a stained-glass-like window that was mounted as a skylight. It covered the entryway to the house in light and shadows, and made it look a bit like a church.

“It’s a classy touch,” Wentworth observed. “Is there something wrong with it?”

“I think it’s working fine,” Quentin replied.

Wentworth headed towards to hallway. “Let’s take a look at...”

Quentin blocked his departure with his arm. “Just a second,” he said.

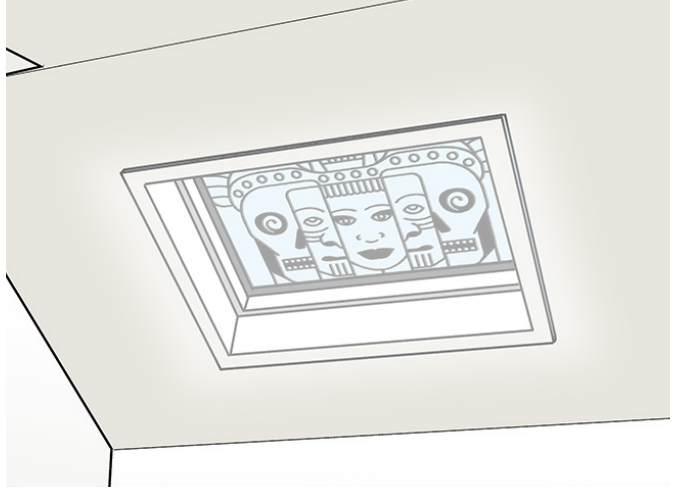
“A second for what?”

Quentin remained silent, still looking up at the window. Finally, he seemed to be satisfied with whatever it was he was looking at. “Okay. What were you saying?”

“What about TV? I watch a lot of TV. Gotta have my Hannity.”

“The cable is hooked up, but they need to turn it on at the main office. It won’t be long.”

“Perfect, perfect.”



Quentin took Wentworth on a quick tour, covering the kitchen, the garage, the living room, family room and the upstairs with bedrooms and bathrooms. They ended at the master suite.

“Clothes? I’m not brining anything. I need...”

“Everything is taken care of. I’ve thought of everything.” Quentin turned around and headed back downstairs to the front door. “You’ve got the place for as long as it takes.”

“Yeah, great. Perfect. Got it.”

They returned to the foyer, and Quentin picked up the remote entry device from where he had left it when they arrived.

“You can leave that with me,” Vance said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Quentin replied, keeping it.

Quentin exited through the large, heavy door and turned around as he hit the button in his pocket again, and waved goodbye to his former boss. The door closed slowly. “I’ll see you later, Mr. Wentworth.”

“Yeah. High security. Good stuff.”

The heavy metal door closed with a thud. As it did, Quentin listened for the four metal doors that enclosed the foyer to close as well. Now, Wentworth would find himself trapped in a small room with no light and no way out.

The industrial burners in the basement fired to life, creating a low rumble, shaking the ground where Quentin stood. Inside, the fire they produced should have been flooding the foyer with 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit of heat right about then.

Even with the metal enclosure, for a moment the painted-over windows flickered red from the inside as the light from the impossibly intense fire radiated throughout the house.

Then, a fierce rush of air from the house’s powerful exhaust fans coursed through the building, and as Quentin looked up at the roof, he saw the black smoke and ash pour out of the chimney. Inside, nothing but a light bit of dust would be on the tile floor where Wentworth once stood.

“To think... *We* were trying to find *you*,” Quentin said with a laugh, “And you walk right into my office.” He shrugged and walked back to his car, his task complete. They had built 105 Candlewick Court to be a top security facility, in the likely eventuality that they would have to abduct Wentworth and hold him until he released the rights to Candlewick Court. Now, with the world assuming he as dead, there was no reason to worry about keeping him alive. No one was going to miss him, and the contracts would all default to Magnum Properties.

As of this moment, there was nothing to prevent the company from finally green-lighting the Candlewick operation. “Mr. Luger sends his regards,” Stillman said to the smoke in the sky.



IN THE FAMILY WAY

PART 1

“Ping,” the computer said.

The sound of the ping meant that an email had come in. Not one of the dozen or so unwanted advertisements that came in every single day, nor communication from a friend. This was the email Colin Finch had been waiting for all year long.

“We got him!” He yelled into the hallway of his apartment. “*Woo hoo!*” He shouted, slamming his fist into his door in celebration.

“What, he emailed back?” His 19 year old brother, Elliot said, emerging from the living room.

“He wants to meet her,” Colin said. “He wants a date! I finally hooked me a big one!”

It had been just over a year, actually, that his grand master plan had been in effect. He had dreamed up the scheme after hearing about something called “catfishing” on the news. You trick men into giving you money over the internet by posing as a female. The idea was so simple Colin had to try it.

He set up dating profiles on various dating sites and waited for the responses. Colin would text chat with the desperate men who replied for a while, and could get ten, twenty, even a hundred dollars from time to time, but he was after bigger fish. Over time, he learned a few tricks and refined the profiles to try and attract only the loneliest, wealthiest, and most gullible of men.

Colin had created profiles for various women; like Natasha, an eager, assertive Russian bride, or Penelope, a young homesick French student. It was the profile he had created for “Ms. F” — a fictional woman in her early thirties with a daughter — that had gotten the most feedback. There was just something about a sexy single MILF that lured the most trusting and wealthiest of lonely men.

Colin Finch, aged 23, and a community college drop-out, was a schemer. Multitudes of folks search their entire lives to find their passion, and he had found his. The appeal of making money off of people who were dumb enough to give it to him was that one true passion. He wasn’t quite what one could call a “con man” as his plans weren’t that sophisticated. He was just a petty criminal who liked to trick people.

Ever since his mother was killed in an accident working at the chemical plant, it had just been him and his brother. His father had been sent to jail years ago

and they hadn't spoken in over a decade, so he wasn't much help. Both Colin and his brother still lived in the same apartment where they had grown up, and the insurance settlement with the chemical company kept the rent paid and the lights on, but it wouldn't last forever.

The last thing Colin wanted to do was get a job, and his younger brother Elliot was even less motivated to do so.

"What was that all about?" Said Sloane, Colin's girlfriend. She was in the bathroom, getting ready for her shift at Burger Boom when she had heard the shouting. Her greasy shirt and smock were already in place, and her hair was tucked under the regulation Burger Boom visor.

"Brundell emailed back. He wants to meet Ms. F!" Colin said, with pride and excitement.

"He's paying for everything?" Sloane replied, only half-curious about it. She was fully informed on what Colin was up to, but even then, this was her boyfriend's thing, not hers.

"Everything. Full ride. He just wants to know where he can send the cash." It wasn't the big payday Colin was planning and waiting for, this was just a few bucks. He had claimed that 'Mrs. F' needed to pay for a sitter, go to a salon and buy some nice clothes for the date — at least the part about needing money to buy a dress was true. The rest was profit.

What Colin ultimately had in mind was much, much bigger than this. A date was just the first step. It was a simple plan: First win him over, then develop trust, then date, get engaged, then move in and clean up. Once they'd taken up residence in the chump's house, then they'd pull off the really big haul.

"So what are you going to do next?" Sloane asked as she stuffed her phone and keys in her pockets.

"Well, we choose a day and time for the date, and then you go out with him."

"Oh, no babe. We've gone over this." She feathered some stray hairs behind her ear. "I told you, I'm not doing it. You need to find someone else!"

When Colin had set up the dating profile, it needed photos, so the logical person to use was the only girl he really knew well enough to do it — which was Sloane. They made her up with heavy makeup to obscure her features a little and then got a brunette wig for her to wear over her red hair. She looked quite convincing as a thirty-three year old woman, eleven years older than she really was.

"No, you said you *were* going to do it," Colin countered.

"Uh, I think *you* said I was, and you didn't let me talk. But I never actually said I would. You know I'm on probation! I already have two strikes!"

"You can't back out on me now! This whole thing needs you! It can't happen without you!"



Sloane pulled a hoodie on and headed for the front door. “We’ll talk about this when I get back from work, okay? But I *never* told you I was doing it.”

“C’mon babe! You can’t let me down!”

“We’ll talk later!” Sloane repeated and left.

“Sloane... Baby...” Colin called after her as the door clicked shut. “Fuckin’ cunt,” he added, when he couldn’t be heard.

“I told you she’d back out,” Elliot teased, yelling from the living room.

“Shut up!” Colin snapped back. He stomped all the way down the hall to face his younger brother. “If she isn’t going to do it, you know what my fallback plan is,” he said, deliberately staring right at Elliot.

The nineteen year old didn’t bother to wrest his eyes away from the TV. “Hey, I’m all in, and you know that. I’m far too deep into this train wreck of a plan to back out now. But I’m not dressing up like a woman.”

“Well, if Sloane isn’t going to do it, you may not have a choice!” Colin called back as he returned to his room.

“Like fuck I don’t!” Elliot replied.

Colin sat down at his laptop and hammered out the details. He wrote an email to this Martin Brundell character asking for him to pick the time and place for the date. Brundell selected a coffee shop downtown, and wanted to do it two days from today. Colin told him that ‘she’ would be on time and was ‘very excited to meet him’ and that ‘she’ would be wearing a blue dress.



Two days later, sitting in Colin’s van outside the coffee shop, he was coming to a very stark conclusion. His girlfriend was not showing up.

“Don’t say no until you hear the whole plan,” he had told her yesterday.

“I’m saying it anyway,” was her reply. “I’m not doing it.”

“You just have to think about it,” Colin had said to her, trying to cajole and guilt her into doing it. “You know I trust you. Even if you say no now, you’ll be there for me. I know you will.”

“Screw that.”

“I’ll be waiting for you, all you have to do is show up.”

So now, minutes from the rendezvous, Colin had to face the fact that Sloane had not, in fact, shown up — and he was in deep, deep trouble.

“Hey, uh, Elliot...” He said to his brother, who was playing his portable game system with all the focus he could muster. “Elliot!” Colin had to say again.

The game made a “pause” sound as he hit a button. “What?” Elliot answered, peeved.

“I really need you to come through for me, bro,” Colin said, putting his hand on his shoulder. “I’m really counting on you to man up and take on this challenge.”

Elliot already knew what his brother wanted. “Why don’t *you* do it? You can wear the dress.” He gestured over to the assembled supplies they had taken with them to prep Sloane. She was supposed to be coming off her job and wasn’t going to have time to change on the way, so they were going to give her the makeover in the van. At least, that was the original plan. “It’s because you think I look more like a girl than you do, isn’t it?”

The answer to that question was a resounding ‘yes,’ but Colin was far too smart to say so. The fact was that the Finch boys, Colin Finch and Elliot Finch, had not been blessed with height or muscle. Colin was five foot nine on his driver’s license and five seven in reality. Elliot, in addition to being only five foot five, was a downright slender one hundred and ten pounds and still retained the smoothness and roundness of childhood in his skin. He also kept his hair long to the point where it covered his eyes most of the time.

“You? No,” Colin said, lying. “It’s because you’re just a far better actor than I am. It’s really all about attitude. You can do it way better than I ever could. I believe in you!”

Unfortunately for Elliot, even though he had heard this BS from his brother all his life, he was still a dupe for this kind of compliment-laden pep talk.

“You *really* think I can?” He replied.

“Absolutely,” Colin said. “I just wish I had a fraction of your acting talent! Let’s get you in the outfit and then you can see for yourself.”

“I guess... No promises, though.”

“Oh, I think you’ll be more than convinced,” Colin said, seeing the reluctant grimace on his kid brother’s face. He helped Elliot out of his clothes, which were just jeans and a t-shirt, and sat him down on the floor of the van to do his face. Not that Colin had a lot of experience doing makeup, but he knew enough to do the basics of lipstick and mascara. Fortunately, puberty had barely even laid a finger on Elliot, and he had no beard or rough skin that needed covering.

Once he had Elliot made up, he worked very quickly to get the dress and wig on him, just to keep Elliot from getting second thoughts. He knew it was a matter of time before Elliot fought back.

He was too late. “I’m not doing this,” Elliot said. “Gimme my clothes back. I’m not doing this.”

“Give it a chance, Elliot, I know you can do it!”

“Like fuck. This was a bad idea. A stupid idea. Get this junk offa me!”

Colin's reassuring hand on his brother's arm quickly turned into a wrestling hold and Elliot was squirming to get out of the grasp. He started to kick and Colin twisted himself sideways to try and subdue his frightened brother, but the scuffle was just a mess of limbs and cursing for about a minute. Elliot got free and lurched for the door, letting himself out.

"Fuck this!" He yelled, before slamming the door behind him.

Just seconds later, Elliot re-entered the van through the front door, sat in the front seat and pulled a blanket over him, aware that he still had a face full of makeup and lingering outside was not a good idea.

That was that. Colin was out of options. If he was going to make this happen, he was going to have to take total control.

"All right, buddy, it's down to you," Colin said to himself. "Nothing to lose now."

He brushed his hair back and out of the way as he checked the time. He only had ten minutes. His skin wasn't quite in as good a condition as his brother's, but fortunately he had shaved that morning, and there was only a hint of masculine hairs on his chin.

Some mascara, a dash of blush on his cheeks and a careful coat of lipstick on his lips was all he had time for. He fit the wig over his head and, seeing the whole picture, was hopeful that this Brundell guy had some bad eyes.

He stripped himself down to his underwear and pulled the dress on like a t-shirt. The young man stuffed the backside of his briefs with his folded-over shirt to give him the appearance of a female butt and then used the built-in bra in the dress to pad out his chest, filling it with his socks.

He had bought a cheap gold-finished necklace, earrings and bracelets, common to middle-aged women, and picked up a pair of calf-length boots at the thrift shop. With those on, he was complete, and turned to his brother. "How do I look?" He said. Colin cleared his throat and tried it again with a falsetto and a smile. "How do I look?"

Getting no reply from the blanket, Colin had to look in the mirror and see if there were any details he need to take care of. He was a mess. Unfortunately, his time had run out and there was nothing he could do about it.

"Let's just go home," the blanket said.

"Too close," Colin answered, as he untucked the long wig hair from the collar of his dress. "I'm going to be late."

"Seriously, let's get outta here before we do something stupid," Elliot threw the blanket off of him and leapt into the driver's seat. He started the van. "I'm serious, Colin, let's not get ourselves in any deeper, okay? I don't want to break the law."

“I don’t want to break the law!” Colin said, mocking his brother’s choice of words in a whiny voice. “This is what’s going to pay for the next ten years, Elliot. The settlement is going to run out sooner or later.”

His single-minded dedication to seeing his plans through was usually Colin’s most powerful asset, however on this occasion, it was sending him headlong into disaster. Yes, he fit some basic requirements of what a woman might look like, but his overall appearance was of a girl who had gotten into her mommy’s makeup case and was playing dress-up.

He threw open the rear door and stepped out — into the rain. The clouds opened up the bomb bay doors and it had just started to downpour the moment he got out of the van. Colin ignored the cosmic intervention and tugged his dress into place.

“Colin! Don’t!” Elliot yelled. Colin just slammed the door shut on him.

Even as the rain started to increase in intensity, Colin was determined to soldier on. He took a deep breath, swelled up his chest, squared his shoulders and headed to cross the street.

He stumbled as he walked in the raised heels for the first time, almost spilling over onto the wet pavement.

With desperation, Elliot jumped out of the van and ran over to Colin, grabbing him by the hand and pulling on it. “This is messed up, man! Let’s just call the guy and say we got lost or sick or something!”

“Don’t pull on me!” Colin said, trying to shake his brother off. “I’m *doing* this, okay?” By this time, both young men were sopping wet, as the intensity of the rain was making it impossible to see or hear very well. It was the kind of intense rain that was not only a sheet of water from the sky, but it created a mist from how hard it was hitting the ground.

“C’mon! Let’s go!”

“Keep your hands to yourself!”

“Oh, hello,” said a man who had approached the two boys, unseen. He was holding a folded newspaper over his head to shield himself from the rain. “Are you... Ms. F?”

Both Colin and Elliot were too shocked to do much more than stand there, looking stupid.

“I recognize you from your profile,” the man said. It had to have been Doug Brundell, the contact from the dating site. He was a tall man, but slightly out of shape, and wearing a department store suit. “I’m Doug,” he said, offering his hand for a shake.

Still unable to really say anything, Colin fought to get his fist back from Elliot and shook Doug’s hand. “Yeah,” he squeaked.



Then Doug turned to Elliot. "And this must be your daughter," he said.

Elliot and Colin exchanged a quick, confused glance at each other. They couldn't quite understand how Brundell had marked them as the women he was supposed to meet, but here it was, happening. The fact was that the rain was obscuring vision like fog, and it had matted their hair down as well as smudged their makeup to the point where they didn't look any worse than any real female, wet from the rain.

"I didn't know you'd be bringing her, she's adorable," Doug said. "I hate to do this, but a meeting popped up at the last minute. All I had time for was to come by and express my regrets personally. I was really looking forward to this. You don't know how much."

"Oh... Uh... Okay," Colin said in his wildly undulating falsetto.

"Can I give you a... Uh, rain check?" Doug said with a smile.

"Sure."

Doug sighed. "Phew. I can't tell you how much that means to me..." He was searching for something to call Colin. "I still don't know your name."

"Cuh..." Colin started to say, about to give his real name like he had every other time he'd been asked that question. With no time to think, he just spat out the first thing that came to his mind. "Dorothy." Shoot, why had he watched the Wizard of Oz last night? Now he needed a last name... What had he called this profile? Ms. F? "Dorothy Farmer."

"Very pretty name." Doug looked at Elliot, also searching for something to call him.

"Ehhhhhmily," Colin quickly improvised.

"Good to meet you, Emily," Doug said.

Elliot took a step back to hide behind his brother.

Doug turned, in anticipation of leaving. "Anyway, I have your email. I think maybe the zoo. We can bring the kids. I'll get in contact with you... Dorothy."

"Okay," Colin said.

"You don't need a ride or..."

"I'm good."

"I look forward to seeing you again... Dorothy." It was not lost on Colin that Doug was saying the name "Dorothy" as if he was immediately smitten. Doug headed back across the street and disappeared into a crowd of umbrellas.

As soon as he was out of sight, the two boys ran back to the van and locked the door behind them. They sat, huddled against the wall of the van, side by side, looking like they had just survived a hundred foot ride off a waterfall.

Elliot was the first to speak. "I can't believe he thought I was your daughter..." he grabbed the hand mirror and had to check for himself. He had to be honest and say that dripping wet, there wasn't much to distinguish him male or female.

"All right. So far, so good," Colin said, regaining his confidence.

"You're lucky we even got through that without getting the cops called on us."

"Lucky nothing!" Colin declared, getting up and maneuvering to the front seat. "I don't believe in luck." He started up the van and put it into gear, which he found a bit difficult in the boots.

"That was all luck!" Elliot said. "And if you're smart, you'll just let it go, okay? Just try coming up with a safer way to make money! This is crazy!"

"Hell no! This just tells me we're on the right track!"

Elliot joined his brother in front, climbing into the passenger seat. "Don't be stupid!"

"Listen, you better get used to it, because you're going on that date to the zoo, as Dorothy's daughter, like it or not!"

"Fuck that shit!"

Colin used his free hand to grab his brother by the shirt. "Listen, unless you want to get some crap job somewhere, you'll do what I tell you to do! I'm sick of your whining and not helping!"

"Back off!" Elliot said, trying to free his brother's grip on his clothes.

"You never help pay for anything, you're always complaining, and you just eat, play games and watch TV all day! What good are you?"

"Stop it!" Elliot said, almost sounding like he was whimpering a little bit. His brother knew what nerves to strike when he wanted to.

Colin released Elliot and put both hands on the steering wheel. "Your problem is you don't know who's boss. If I'm the one bringing home the money, then I'm the one calling the shots!"

Elliot just turned away and stared out the side window, his arms folded.

Colin wasn't finished. "You're going to help me out, and you're going to do the best you can! We're in this together, and I need you to pull your weight!"

The younger of the Finch brothers began to wipe his finger in the fogged window. His brother was a royal asshole, especially when he was right.



The next day, Colin was still drying out his clothes and the wig as they hung in the bathroom. There was no question in his mind that he had some kind of

insane good fortune in pulling off his little ruse as “Dorothy.” He still was waiting for Doug to email him and tell him he saw through it all, but instead he had already gotten two messages from Brundell saying he was “so sorry” and “really wanted to make it up to her.”

So now, with a new date only a couple of days away, he needed to figure out how to do the job professionally. Without that rain shower, there was no realistic way that things could have worked out so well.

“Hey, Sloane, this is Colin. I need your help. Can you come over? Call me.” He had been leaving messages and texting her for over two days now and still didn’t have a reply. It felt like maybe he was being given the final brush-off. Granted, the only thing he wanted from her was help in getting dressed up to look like a real woman, so maybe it was for the best right now.

His brother was still locked up in his room this morning, and without anyone to bounce ideas off of, he went to the tried and true replacement for human interaction, the internet.

Colin needed to know how he could look his best, as a woman, and at the same time, make Elliot look a girl. Doing the math, he figured that since “Dorothy” was supposed to be 34, the earliest he could have her giving birth would be at 18 or 19, so that made “Emily” to be about fifteen years old. Elliot was nineteen, and looked younger — but not as young as a fifteen year old girl. He was going to need some help on that front.

Then there was his own appearance. Socks and balled-up shirts were not going to work this time around to “fill out” his figure, so he needed to find better equipment. He also hoped that this date was just going to be the first of many, if things went the way he planned, so spending a few extra dollars to get it right was going to be worth it.

To his surprise, there was a whole industry devoted to his problem. Not only was he able to find the things he needed to disguise himself as female, he had to actually had several choices as to which ones he liked.

His first concern was the padding. Wrap-around butt enhancers and breast forms were the first things he bought. He figured on a B sized bust at first, but the C cups were a little cheaper, so he got those. According to the measurements on various sites he was visiting, Colin had a slender enough waist for a decent figure, but he did buy an elastic waist cincher to make sure he’d look great. After all, if he was going to disguise himself as a woman, he wanted to be good looking one.

That was the easy part, though. The young man then had to make some decisions about his face. On one hand, he thought he should buy some stage makeup to make him look older and middle-aged, but his ego and vanity kept him from doing it. He wanted to look cute, not old. So instead, he bought the

“deluxe” makeup kit and a few pairs of false eyelashes. Because that’s what middle-aged women used, to the best of his knowledge.

When it came to choosing clothes, he had so many choices that it became impossible for him to figure things out. There were way too many styles, colors and trends for him to even begin to understand. Was Dorothy going to need a formal outfit? A casual outfit? Was she sporty? Outdoorsy? Trendy? Classic? There was no answer to these questions.

So what Colin decided to do was build a profile of who Dorothy Farmer was, and the best place to start was to figure out what kind of woman Doug Brundell wanted.

He had previously found a lot of information on Brundell, in his research on the man, making sure he was wealthy enough to pursue. He was very well-to-do, much more than he appeared to be. His name came up often when it came to medical advances. He had received a lot of notoriety in the field of experimental gene splicing, and was a “pioneer” in genetic manipulation. Colin didn’t quite know what that all meant, but it sounded impressive.

Colin also tripped across old “personals” ads Brundell had placed. By searching his email address, dozens of brief ads came up from almost all the local papers and news sites. The ads told a story all by themselves. In his own words, he was looking for “a kind soul” who was “great with kids.” One ad asked for an “easy laugher” and a “wholesome girl next door” with “classic family values.”

Colin made a checklist. Nice person, likes kids, laughs, wholesome, classic and wants a family. He could picture that type of woman in his head: A motherly type who was the nicest mom on the block. She laughed at anything even close to being funny, liked the timeless classic look and was very protective of her family.

That made his decisions much easier. He found lots of “vintage style” clothing and bought enough for a couple of complete outfits. He picked out high heels, because that was definitely the sort of woman Dorothy was. He selected just a basic set of jewelry, including a classic pearl necklace. That was going to be her style. Kind of like a modern June Cleaver, but a little more light-hearted. Doug Brundell was going to eat that crap up.

“Heee hee hee,” he said aloud. He needed to develop a convincing feminine giggle, but it sounded forced. He was going to practice until he got it right. “Heee hee hee,” he repeated. Any bystander would have assumed the boy had lost his mind.

What he also found in his research on Brundell was a history of posted ads to look after Doug’s son. He couldn’t find a name for the kid, but Colin saw several posts for a nanny, an au pair and a “minder.” That didn’t sound good.

Either Brundell was a snob and never satisfied, or the responders had quit after dealing with the little runt, and Brundell didn't seem like the picky type.

So he made himself a promise: no matter how awful that kid was, he was going to be the picture of tolerance and composure. His whole scheme might just depend on it.

Just as important was Elliot and his ability to imitate a young girl. Not only was the Brundell guy evaluating "Dorothy" as a girlfriend and potential wife, but he was evaluating "Emily" as a daughter. No matter how Elliot felt about it, Colin was going to have to make his brother play the part, and play it convincingly.

Once Brundell trusted them completely, then Colin would take advantage of it. Colin hadn't decided if he was going to just loot his house, steal valuables or just blackmail him. Stealing seemed the easiest, but blackmail had a big upside, too. Maybe he'd do them all.

For now, though, he would need something for Elliot to wear and become the young girl he had to be. Also, since the things he ordered weren't going to arrive for a couple of days, he needed to locally buy the things "Dorothy" was going to wear on the first date. "Back tonight," he wrote on a note and stuck it to the living room TV, the surest place Elliot would look. He grabbed his coat, wrote down Elliot's shirt, pant and shoe sizes, and headed out shopping.



The next morning, Elliot was in the living room, having fallen asleep in front of the TV the previous night. Colin had come home, gone to his room, and left his sleeping brother undisturbed. It wasn't until nine that he thought he should try and wake him up.

"Let's go!" Colin said kicking his brother's legs off the coffee table. Or, at least, the pile of pizza boxes that was about coffee-table height.

"Stop it!" Elliot responded, waving his brother away and rolling over. Only he stopped halfway when he began processing the slight glimpse he had just seen. Then he opened his shocked eyes wide open and took another look.

"Let's get a move on, lazy bones!" Colin sang, with a mischievous smile.

"Oh, God," Elliot said, sitting up straight. "Why are you dressed like that?"

Colin was in a blue striped shirt dress, tied at the waist and a hem down to mid-calf.

He had on a pair of black two-inch heels and the long dark-hair wig, now dried out. "Because I need the practice. I don't want to feel like I'm wearing something weird. I have to be comfortable."

“Or you just decided the hell with it and become the woman you always yearned to be,” Elliot quipped.

“Uh huh. Let’s see how funny you think it is when you put on your outfit for the day.”

“Get out of my face,” Elliot said as he turned around and tried to go back to sleep.

“I’m not kidding, Elliot. Get up and get dressed. I want to see what it looks like on you.”

“Fuck off.”

Even in his heels, Colin had the strength and stability to grab his brother by the shirt and yank him off the couch and up onto his feet. “Don’t let the dress fool you, asswipe. I can still fuck you up something nasty.”

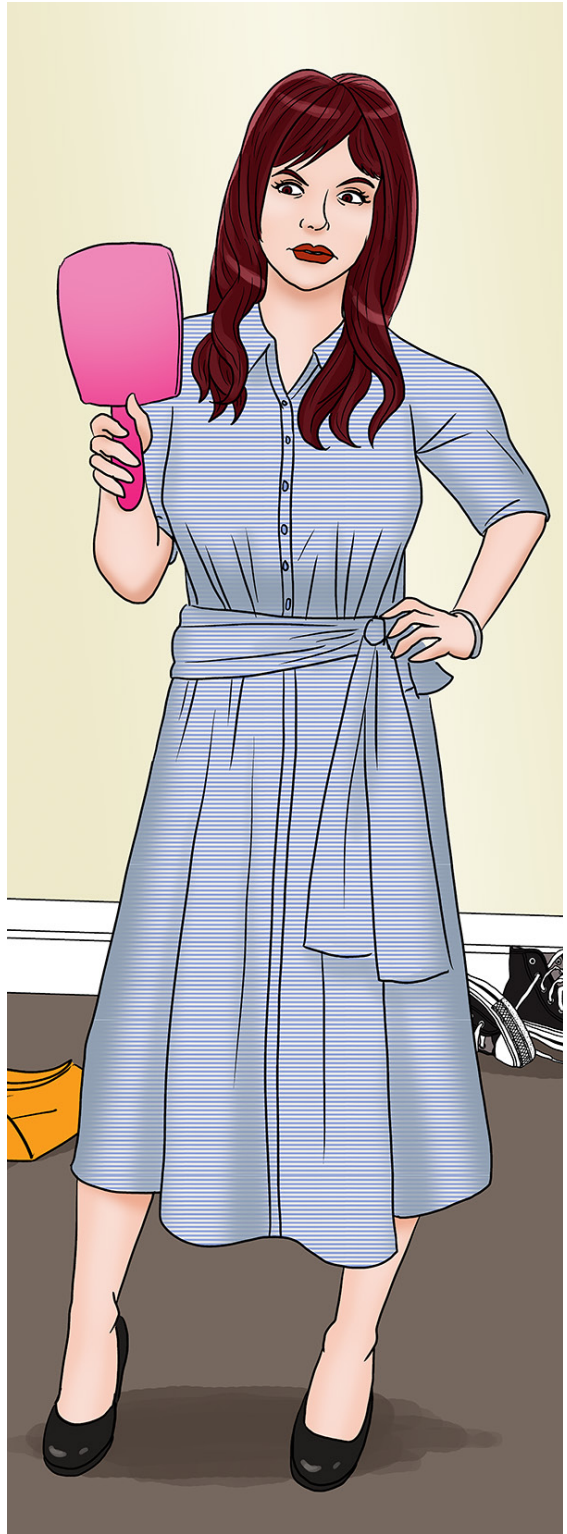
“Jesus Christ, Colin...”

Not taking any more delays and insults, Colin pulled on his brother’s shirt until he got moving toward his room and then pushed him the rest of the way there.

“Knock it off! I’m serious!” Elliot was saying to no avail.

“So scared,” Colin replied. “I’m shaking.”

Finally, with one broad swipe of his arm to get Colin to stop pushing him, Elliot stood his ground. “I’m not doing this, okay? This fuckin’ plan of yours is fuckin’ crazy! Now leave me the fuck alone!”



“Leave you alone?” Colin said pushing his brother one last time with a big, powerful shove. “Yeah, I can leave you alone! I can leave you alone on the street, okay? You’re nineteen, Elliot! You don’t even have a right to live here! It’s all in my name and I can kick you out any time I want to!” He hovered over his brother, even taller in the heels, and set his jaw hard. “You eat, you sleep, you watch TV and play video games! That’s all you ever do, and you whine and cry every time I get the crazy idea you might help!”

“I help a lot!”

“You help emptying out the fridge! You help drinking my beer! You help taking up space and consuming oxygen! Now I have this one shot at getting out of this rut, paying our own way and trying to get ahead, and all you can do is give me crap for it! Well, let me tell you, if you don’t do what I tell you to do, we’re both screwed when the settlement money stops coming in! Six months! That’s all we have!”

“Six months! You never said that! I didn’t know it was six months!”

“I’m saying it now!” Colin straightened his back and wanted to regain his composure. Truth was, they still had five years of income, but Elliot needed a good scare. “Look, I know this is weird, I know it’s even a little perverted. This isn’t my best idea I’ve ever had. But it’s the one that’s *working*. We got a real chance here. I have to ask you for your help.” He could see by the lack of an angry response that he was getting through. “I can’t do this without you, and really, I don’t want to. I gotta have you by my side on this one, dude.”

“I’m not doing it,” Elliot said, softly.

“Elliot. It’s all we got right now. It’s all we got.”

After a moment more of introspection, Elliot took his shirt off.

Colin pumped his fist while his brother had his eyes closed. “I’m gonna make this as easy as possible, okay? No reason to make this too tough on you.” He took the shirt as Elliot got it off and he tossed it on the laundry pile in the corner. The jeans were next. “Shoes and socks too.”

Colin fetched a few bags from his shopping trip and dropped them on the ground. “We’ll go with this,” Colin grabbed a polka-dot long-sleeve dress in purple and handed it over. Elliot pulled it on as Colin chose a pair of purple tights and a sequined purple shirt to match.

Elliot just sighed as he put it all on. He finished up with a pair of black flats.

“Now let me comb your hair out a little...” Colin said, doing his best. It still wasn’t quite what he wanted. “And put on this hairband.”

Elliot had to figure out how to do it right, as he never knew a hairband could have teeth, but they did. He slipped it on, keeping his long hair out of his eyes for once. “Well?” He asked.

Colin waited a little too long to make his answer sound confident. “Good...” He said, not completing the thought. “So, what do you think about having someone do it professionally?”

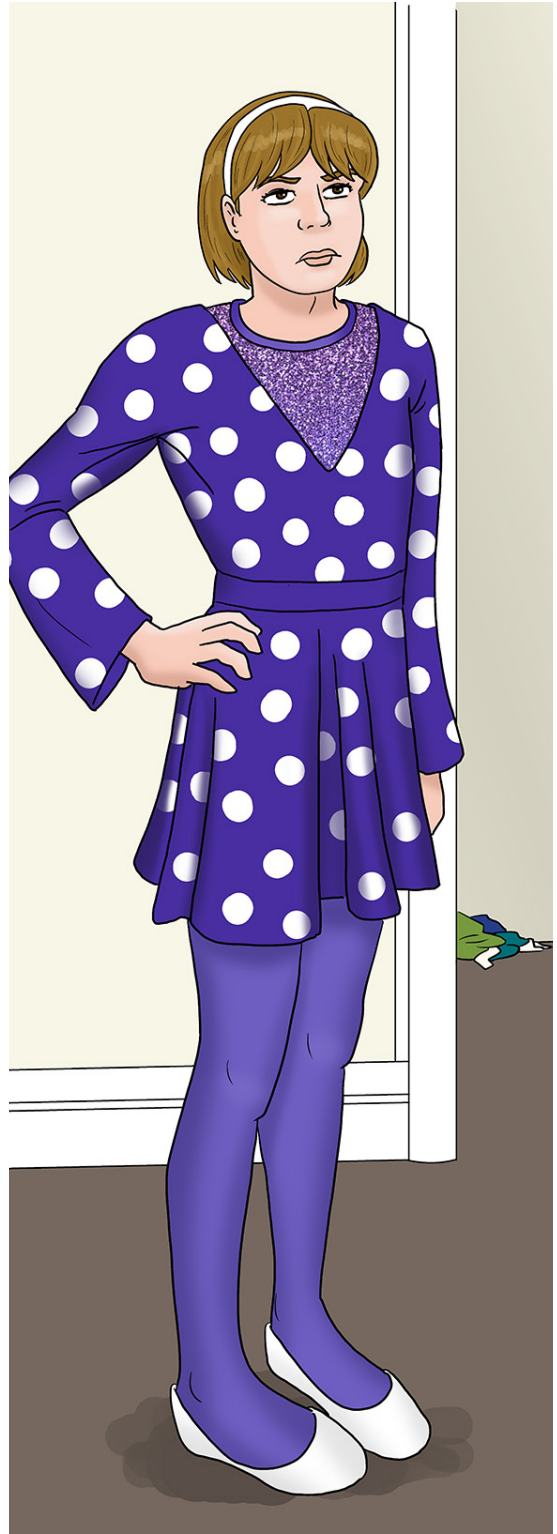
“I’m not going out in public like this.”

“It’s easy. You can just be a shy little girl. Just ‘yes mommy’ this, and ‘no mommy’ that. Easy stuff.”

Elliot snorted out some air in disdain. “Look, for one, only little girls say ‘Mommy.’ If I’m supposed to be fifteen, and a girl, then I’d be calling you ‘Mother.’ Second, these are clothes for, like, an eleven year old. Fifteen year olds would not be wearing something like this. So, if we go out, I need to get some better looking stuff.”

It was hard for Colin to keep from smiling. Even though his brother had been fighting this every step of the way, seemingly disgusted, he had independently done the same age math that Colin had done to arrive at Emily’s fifteen year old age. Not only that, but he had already pictured who Emily was, and how she would dress. His little brother was way more into this than he let on.

“Well, I guess we can do that,” Colin said. “I don’t have a lot of money, but we could get another outfit or two. Maybe.”



“We have to,” Elliot said, “or this isn’t going to work.”

Colin tried to look put out. “I *suppose* I understand. Man, I just hope we can do it.” He still had hundreds to spend, he just had to make it sound like it was going to be tough. “But you should probably keep that on to go shopping.”

“I guess,” Elliot said.

“No, that’s ‘Yes Mother.’”

Elliot smiled. “Hah. Yes, Mother, dear.”

“So, uh...” Colin was now the one at a loss for words. “I don’t know how to say this, but...” He took a moment to force the words out. “In your opinion, do I look convincing enough, looking like this?”

“If you told me you were a man, I’d probably believe it,” Elliot said. “But if I wasn’t looking for it, I’d probably not be able to tell.”

“So what am I getting wrong?”

“Well... It’s not just like a single ‘thing’ it’s kind of the whole package. It’s more like an impression you get.”

“Huh. So, like the way I talk?”

“More like the way you act. You don’t use your hands like a woman, or move like a woman, and you don’t react like a woman.”

“React?”

“Women smile or frown or look intense or... They just always have something going on with their face. You just kind of have a blank, dead, look.”

“All the time?”

“No, sometimes you look like you’re smelling a fart.”

“So women are more expressive, is what you’re saying.”

“That’s it.” Elliot pointed to Colin’s hands. “But it wouldn’t kill you to get some long nails, too.”

“Good idea,” Colin said. “Do you think they can do nails at the salon?”

“Besides hair, I think that’s *all* they do at salons.”

“Great. Let’s go while we still have the nerve, okay?”

“Yes, *Mother*,” Elliot replied, with dripping sarcasm.



“You go in,” Colin said.

“No, ladies first!” Elliot said, pushing.

“I insist!”

“No, you...”

Now it was staring to look ridiculous, as the two boys were right up against the glass front door at Second Looks Salon, and they were perfectly visible to everyone inside.

With a swift side-step, Colin got behind Elliot and guided him through the door first. They only took about five steps inside and waited for a moment, to see if anyone was going to jump out of their chairs and yell “impostors!” No one did, so they continued on to the reception desk.

The receptionist was chipper and ridiculously cute. “Hi, there! Welcome! Do you have an appointment?”

“Oh...” Colin said in his ear-withering falsetto. “No we don’t”

“Hair or nails or both?”

“One of each. Hair for my... *Daughter*... And nails for me.”

“No problem, I have a spot open for your daughter and I should have a nail spot open in ten. Let me go check,” the receptionist said, and walked into the back.

“So far, so good,” Colin whispered.

“I can’t feel my legs,” Elliot said. “I’m so fuckin’ scared.”

“Good little girls don’t swear.”

“Fuck you, *Mother*.”

The receptionist returned. “I do have a spot for you right now, sweetie. What’s your name?”

Elliot looked like he was about to turn to stone, he was so scared.

Colin stepped in. “Her name is Emily, and she’s just a little scared. It’s her first trip to a salon.”

The receptionist felt the need to bend over to talk to Elliot, even though he was just a few inches shorter than Colin. “Oh, I see. Don’t worry, we don’t bite. You’ll be with Sharon. She’s nice. Follow me.” She turned and beckoned Elliot to follow her.

Colin had to physically grab Elliot and pull him forward by the hand to get him to move.

Colin and Elliot were introduced to the stylist, a woman who obviously had been smoking a butt just five seconds ago, but looked pleasant enough. Colin handled the introductions as he gently pushed his brother forward, trying to get him up on the chair. “This is my daughter, Emily, it’s her first time at a salon and she’s just a little tongue-tied at the moment.”

“Hi Emily, I’m Sharon.”

“...” Elliot replied.

Colin had to fill in the silence to keep it from getting too awkward. “Emily’s been a bit of a tomboy for most of her life, and now she wants to try and see what she’d look like with a hairstyle more common for girl her age.”

“I see. Anything in mind?”

“Nothing too drastic. Something that’s cute, but easy to maintain.” Colin stood closer to Sharon so he could whisper in her ear. “She’s kind of self-conscious about how masculine she looks. Anything to try and make her look as feminine as possible.”

“Got it,” Sharon said, adding a wink. “I know just what to do.”

“Are you going to be okay by yourself, Emily?” Colin said, patting his brother’s knee.

Elliot glowered back. “Yes, Mother,” he said with only a trace of a feminine tone.

“I’ll just be over here,” Colin said, pointing in the direction of the nail stations.

Elliot clenched his jaw, feeling absolutely ridiculous. “I *got* it, Mother.”

With a smirk, Colin headed away. A Korean woman was standing by, looking a little impatient, so Colin assumed that she was waiting on him.

“Nails?” The woman asked.

“Yes,” Colin replied.

“Long?” She asked.

“Uh, okay.”

“Almond? French?”

“Almonds?” He could go for some almonds right now. He didn’t know they served shacks here.

“Feet?”

“My feet?” He was not expecting there to be this many questions. “Yes, I have feet.”

“Facial?”

“Sure, okay.”

“Wax?”

“Wax.” He was agreeing to everything, just because he figured they knew best.

“Brazilian?”

“No, I’m an American.” Did he look Brazilian? He was just trying to look like a woman.

“Massage?”

“Uh huh.”

“Hair?”

“Uh. It’s a wig, actually.”

“We do wigs.”

“Not today.”

“Have seat,” the woman commanded.

Nothing in the world could have prepared Colin for what he was in for. Hours passed in what seemed like seconds. From the moment he sat down at the nail station, he was bombarded with a furious onslaught of activity, smells, occasional pain and luxurious comfort.

“Are you finished yet, Mother?” he heard. Colin opened his sleepy, over-relaxed eyes and looked over to see Elliot standing next to him.

“What?” he mumbled in his usual deep voice. He was far too laid back to remember to use his female voice. As he eased up the reclining chair, he was in back to an upright position, Colin tried to get himself back to reality.

He was dressed in a pale pink terrycloth robe, his hands sporting new bright red oval tips, one inch in length. His face was aglow, smooth and shiny. His legs were also smooth, and his toenails were red, just like his fingernails. He also felt a sense of relaxation and contentment he had never quite known before. The pampering had worn him down to the point where it would have taken a lightning strike to get him moving.

It was only after a few moments of enjoying his contented state that he realized that Elliot was done and ready to go. Then he got a good look at his hair.

Elliot’s longish hair was now curled in little ringlets at the end, and parted in the middle. He had straight-cut bangs the length of his forehead, ending just above his eyes. The stylist also added a touch of gloss to his lips and a sprinkle of glitter to his eyelids. He was absolutely precious.

“You told her I was fifteen, right?” Elliot said. “I look like a tweeny bopper.”

Colin wanted to gush about how good he looked, but held it in, knowing it would set his brother off. He honestly did have the face of a twelve or thirteen year old. “I think you look very convincing. It really does make you look like a real girl.”

“I know,” Elliot said, his voice dipping down to almost a whisper. “Don’t make fun of me, please.” He scrunched up his shoulders and looked down at his feet, feeling very vulnerable.

“You’re doing great,” Colin said with a little punch to the shoulder. “I gotta go get dressed again, so wait for me, okay?”

Elliot took two steps before turning back to Colin. “I’m kinda freaked out a little, you know what I mean? Mind if I come with you?”

Colin thought about it and decided that wouldn't raise any eyebrows. Everyone thought they were just a mother and daughter. He got up and pointed to the back. "Sure, the dressing area is this way."

"I'm not gonna be able to go out like this," Elliot said, flicking a curled ringlet with his finger.

"Wear a cap. You'll be fine."

They both got into the changing room and Elliot took a seat on a small bench. He watched as his brother took off the robe and revealed the bra and panty set he was wearing.

"You, uh, are just wearing that for the disguise, right?" Elliot asked.

"I've always looked at women closely, curious to see the lines and creases that indicate what they're wearing under their clothes. I figure if I'm doing that, and I'm not a perv, most other men certainly are." Colin smirked nervously at his brother. "So I don't want anyone to see boxers under my dress. That'd give everything away."

"I guess that makes sense. But it sure is weird."

"Tell me about it." Colin stepped out of his salon-provided slippers and kicked them aside.

"They did your toes, too?"

"I got kinda carried away," Colin picked up his dress and turned to the mirror. Before he put it over his head, he saw himself in the mirror for the first time since his beauty treatments, and almost gasped. He had no idea they had done so much work on him. His face was totally made over in a sophisticated but basic style. The coral lipstick and bargain mascara he had been using were clearly inferior to a real, professional, make up job. "Crap! Do I look like that for real?" He said.

"Yeah, it really makes you look more like... Well... A mom."

Colin took a second look after he got the dress on. His face did have that sort of maturity to it that middle aged women have. Not a "aged" look, but a kind of placid and wise kind of look. He liked it. "I'm going to get whatever they used on me. I really like the color."

"They did a great job," Elliot agreed.

"On both me and you, right?"

Elliot turned away from the mirror. "Don't remind me."

Colin stepped into his boots. "I'm ready to go if you are. I just need to pay. Meet me in the van."

"I'll just stick around with you, okay?"

Colin figured his brother's nerves were responsible for making him a little clingy at the moment. "Yeah, okay, fine. You still want to go shopping?"

"Actually, maybe we should just go home."

"Yeah, this is a lot to process," Colin said, taking one last admiring glance at himself in the mirror.



As Colin drove the van along the highway back to the apartment, he was beginning to get the idea that he could actually pull this off. It was completely disconcerting to look in the rear view mirror and see a mature, grown woman staring back. So every time he got a little flustered about his own appearance, he would glance over at his brother.

He hadn't noticed it before, but Elliot's hair was not only styled in a new, childishly feminine way, but the hair itself was lighter. He wondered if that was intentional or just a product of being styled. At the very least, the lighter hair made him look more like a young girl.

Colin also wondered what Elliot was going to do with his hair after this was over, as those severe, wide bangs were going to take a while to grow out. He might even have to consider getting a short buzz cut and starting over.

Right now, Colin really had no idea what might be on Elliot's mind as he was being unusually quiet and keeping to himself. Maybe he was having just as difficult a time as Colin was, believing that such a simple thing as clothes, makeup and hair could transform someone so completely.

From the neck up, he'd swear he was looking at any average mom he'd ever known. He could easily see himself at home or at a PTA meeting or baking cookies for a school bake sale. He might just try showing up at a school soccer game fully dressed up and cheering on a random kid, if he was feeling mischievous.

As Colin pulled the van into his assigned parking spot at the apartment building, Elliot was out of the van like a shot and headed up the stairs. *Must not want anyone to see him*, Colin said to himself.

He wasn't that worried, as he had come to trust his disguise. He had fooled a whole business at the salon, and if trained beauticians couldn't spot a wolf amongst the sheep, he was going to be fine taking the elevator up at his leisure, as routinely as he always did.



On the morning of the big date, Colin woke his brother up from his spot in front of the laptop. A game of Call of Duty had been in progress, and a “disconnected” message was on screen. Once again, he had probably spent all night campaigning and fallen asleep in the middle of it.

“Come on, dude. Big day today,” Colin said, snapping the earpad of Elliot’s headset against his head. Elliot woke in a quick furious shake, and then slumped back in his chair.

He checked the time on the computer clock. “Man, it’s like two hours away. Why’d you wake me up?”

“If my girlfriend is anything to go by, two hours is barely enough. She takes forever.”

“Ex girlfriend.”

“Maybe. I guess.” Colin shrugged. “We’ll see. You wanna get started?”

“No.”

“Great. I was thinking we should get in character early enough that we don’t screw things up this afternoon. So I’m going to just call you Emily for now, and you call me Mother.”

“In character? Like, acting?”

“Might as well.” Colin cleared his throat. “Now, let’s get dressed Emily, sweetie. Mommy has a lot of work to do.”

Elliot groaned. “This is gonna be a long day.”

“Pardon?”

“Nothing, *Mother*,” Elliot answered. “Just don’t push it, okay?”

“Somebody woke up a grumpy-puss.”

“See? Just like that.”

“I put your outfit on your bed. I’ll be squeezing into my bodyshaping stuff.”

“Do I have to put the dress on *now*?”

“If you want to be comfortable, yes.”

A few minutes later, as Colin went about getting dressed, and was kicking off his pants, his brother came storming into his room. “What the hell is this?” Elliot yelled, holding his assigned clothing.

“Don’t cuss. Do you want a time out?”

“Colin!” Elliot snapped, not playing along.

“It’s a romper. A one-piece that’s like a shirt and shorts...”

“I know what a romper is. Girls my age don’t wear this kind of thing!”

Colin noted that he was putting himself in ‘Emily’s’ place again. “Girls of any age wear rompers. They’re very popular. Coming back in style.”

“I’m not wearing it.”

“You don’t have to wear it, Elliot. It’s for Emily to wear. Emily would wear it.”

“No I wouldn’t! I mean, *she* wouldn’t!”

“Look, you don’t decide who Emily is. I don’t get to decide who Emily is. Doug Brundell is the only person who gets to decide who Emily is. He’s the one who needs to fall in love with her. So Emily has to be the adorable, lovable, cute-as-a-button, sickeningly delightful little girl he’s going to invite into his home, along with her vivacious mother, so we can rob him blind.”

“It’s pink,” Elliot pointed out.

“It’s salmon.”

“Salmon *are* pink.”

“Not on the outside.”

Elliot emitted some sort of a noise between an annoyed grunt and a whimper. He gripped the romper in one hand, turned and left. “If one person laughs at me, I’m going to punch their teeth out one by one!” He said, returning to his room.

Finally, it was time for Colin to get dressed. He was feeling a bit divided, with one half dreading the process of making himself up as a woman again, and the other half intensely curious to see how all the new stuff he had to put on, and new tricks he had learned, would look. He decided to let the curious side of him take control.

He had a new padded panty brief that would also keep him “under control,” as well had give him the wide hips he needed. Figuring out what to do with the extra loops of fabric in the crotch of the “gaff” was a mystery until he read the directions — then he was a little horrified. Still, he went through with it, and when he was done, he saw no trace of his manhood. He was freaking uncomfortable, but it did the job.

Next was a “waist nipper” to try and take in his sides in a little and give him that female contour to the midsection. That was awfully tight as well, and once on, it made it nearly impossible to bend over. After that, he had a bra that was supposed to be a perfect fit, but felt a little snug, pinching his shoulders. He dropped in the breast forms, spent a minute pushing them into place, and decided on using a dab of the included adhesive jut to keep them from moving around on him.

His legs were still baby smooth from the salon waxing and the pantyhose slid up his legs quickly without fuss and he tussled with them to get them straight. That meant it was time for the dress, and Colin took a deep breath and yanked it over his head. It fit well, which was pure luck, because he had no idea how to order for the right size. It was shorter than he thought, ending just above the knees. The previous dress covered his knees, and he felt a little exposed

wearing this new one. This dress made him almost feel naked.

He got the wig on, but just before he was ready to get a look at himself, he heard another loud yell from his brother's room.

"This is not working!" Elliot yelled.

"Hang on," Colin said, coming to the rescue. "What's not working?"

"Look!" Elliot said, displaying himself in the romper. But before he could get all melodramatic about it, he saw his older brother. "Whoa," he said.

"What?" Colin thought maybe he had put the wig on backwards or something.

"Whatever you bought makes a big difference."

"Really?" Colin said, smiling in satisfaction. He almost got to take a peek in a mirror, but Elliot was back on topic.

"This is a joke!" He complained. "I look like a freak!"

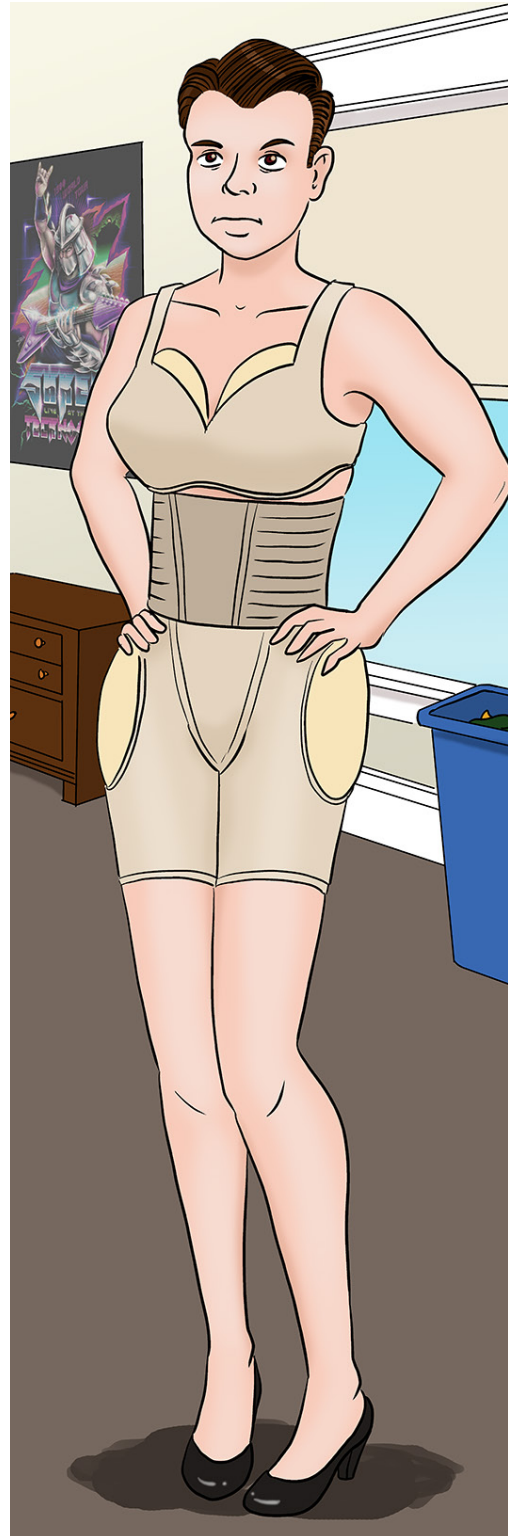
"You need to put on the full outfit, including the tights, okay?" Colin said, pointing to the other stuff left on the bed. "So take that off and we'll get started again."

"It took me ten minutes to figure how to even get this far."

"Now you know, so it'll go faster the next time."

Elliot got out of the romper and the first thing Colin did was hand him the panties he had ignored. "Step one," he said.

"No way."



“It only fits right if you’re wearing these. It bunches up if you don’t.”

Colin shed his underwear and put on the panties. “This just gets better and better,” he said, frustrated.

“Now the tights.”

Elliot sat down on the bed and fought with the white tights to get them up his legs.

“See, the tights, being white, make your legs look bigger and thicker. Without them, you look like a beanpole.”

“Yeah, all right. Fine.”

“Now the romper again,” Colin instructed, taking Elliot’s usual clothes, folding them and putting them neatly aside. “Now how does it fit?”

“Better,” Elliot mumbled.

“Pardon?”

“Better, Mother,” Elliot said, louder.

“Now I assume you can handle the rest. I have to finish up.” Colin went back to his room.

Finished with the clothes, it was time for the detail work. The private bathroom was an ungodly mess of unwashed tiles and a scum-ridden sink and tub. The young brothers had high tolerances for uncleanliness, or at least low tolerances for cleaning. As Colin leaned over the sink and started to apply his makeup, he saw his brother behind him in the mirror, looking on. He had put the hairband in his hair and put on his flats, and was leaning against the door jam.

“What is it?” Colin asked as he started to powder his face.

“Nothing. I just... You know... You sure do look a lot like...” Elliot stopped himself and then walked away.

Colin took a second look at himself. He kinda guessed what Elliot was about to say: ‘You sure do look a lot like mom.’ The resemblance hadn’t gone unnoticed. Colin had seen it the first time he tried the wig on. He had been trying to put it out of his mind, though. Dressing up like this and pretending to be a woman was stressful enough. He didn’t need to have the ghost of his mother staring back at him in the mirror.

As he got to doing his fake eyelashes, he could see Elliot hanging around outside the bathroom again, just kind of staring on. “This takes a while, you know,” Colin said. “There’s much more to it than you think.”

Elliot wasn’t replying, but Colin was used to one-way conversations.

“Hopefully, this will just be a first date. There will be others, so I need to be good at this.” He looked back to see Elliot pretending like he wasn’t paying attention. “You might have to be Emily once or twice more. That’s why I want

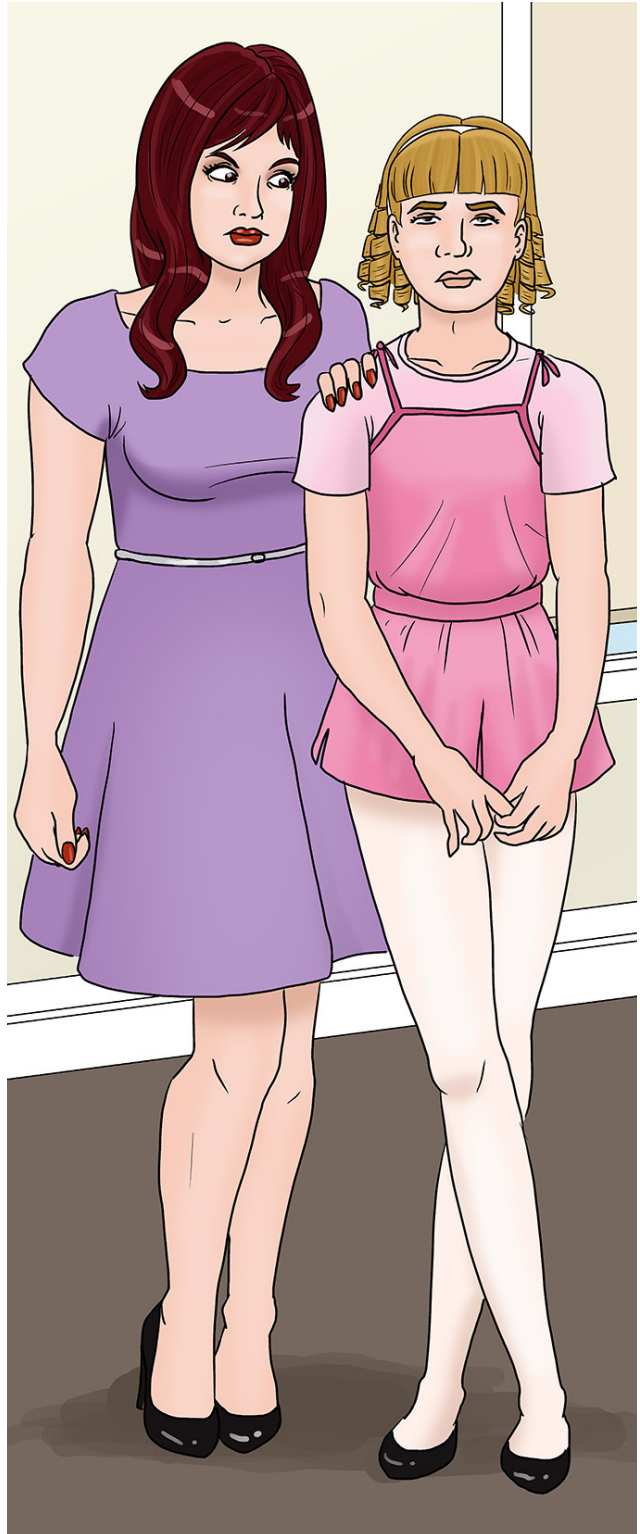
us to be in character. We need to be familiar with these roles.”

“You’re serious about wanting me to call you mother?” Elliot asked.

“Yes I do. It’s better than blurting out our real names later on... Emily.” Colin ran the red lipstick around his lips to fill in the outline he had just painted. He puckered and then blotted them on a piece of tissue. “Okay, now I want to get a look at us in the closet mirror.”

Colin left the bathroom and stepped into his heels. He had chosen a slightly higher heel this time, as he was comfortable in the more modest heels he had worn the last time, and could take a risk. When he walked over to the mirror, he could tell he was going to need to get the hang of them.

Standing side by side, it was disconcerting, seeing their reflections. Colin was blown away at how the new undergarments had turned his straight-as-a-board male body into a curvier feminine figure. His face was so different, it



wasn't at all like he was seeing an image in a mirror, it was like looking at another person behind glass. He was almost embarrassed to make eye contact with her.

Looking down at Elliot was also odd. Elliot looked for all the world like this woman's real daughter. She was a younger, smaller version of the mother. Maybe it was just the heels, but Elliot looked shorter than he usually did, and the difference in their appearance was unsettling. Colin almost felt like he had graduated into adulthood while Elliot was being sent back to childhood.

"Mom?" Elliot finally said, breaking the stunned boy's fixated stares.

"Yes, Emily?" Colin replied.

"I think you'd look better with some jewelry."

"You might be right," Colin said. "Why don't you watch some TV?"

"Okay," Elliot said, walking out and heading for the living room. He glanced back three times to look at his reflection and at Colin.

Once the TV was on, Colin walked down the hallway to the big doors, where the master bedroom was. It was his mom's room. His dad also lived here for a little while before he was sent away, but he only thought of it as his mom's room. The room had a musty smell to it, and only half the light bulbs worked. The boys almost never went in here, as it was like a shrine in some ways. It was left exactly like it was the night their mother died. Her things were still hanging in the coset, a jacket left on the bed.

Colin walked over to her vanity, and aside from the yellowing and tarnished bottles of creams and lotions, there was a small box of jewelry. He picked out a pair of clip-on hoop earrings. He saw a nice silver bracelet and added that to his wrist. As he passed the closet, he saw a black purse. That was one thing he had forgotten about. He picked it up and carried it out with him. Quietly, he left the room and shut the door behind him. He didn't want Elliot to know what he had just done, disturbing the sanctity of their late Mother's room.

Back in his own room, with everything in place, he looked at the new woman in the mirror. "I'm Dorothy Farmer," he said. "I'm Dorothy Farmer," he said again, but with more confidence. "I'm Dorothy Farmer," he said with a bright smile. "Look out, Doug Brundell. You don't have a chance." He added a near perfect feminine giggle at the end of his line. He had been practicing.

"You went into Mom's room, didn't you?" Elliot said from the hallway. Startled, Colin turned to see his brother looking on. "Yeah, you did," Elliot answered the question himself, recognizing the purse. He turned away without another word and returned to the living room.

Colin didn't feel quite right with himself. He had never stolen anything out of that room before. Still, it was necessary. It wasn't frivolous. Disguising himself was the biggest part of providing for both him and his brother. He had always

been the one to make the decisions, and now... Well, it felt like he was the only adult here. The ends justified the means, and he had no one he needed to answer to but himself.

Twenty minutes later, after figuring out what a normal woman might put in a purse, and adding what he might need for the trip, it was time. "Are you ready to go, Emily?" Colin asked as he put the car keys into the purse and walked over to where his brother was sitting.

Elliot looked up at Colin with just a hint of awe in his eyes. To him, he looked bigger than he had before. Was it the shoes? It just struck him that his big brother, as Dorothy Farmer, was almost a different kind of person. A grown-up. More than that, he looked like... A parent.

The realization caused his heart to wither for a moment. His first impulse was to reach out for her, for a helping, warm hand that only a mom could offer. Elliot had to remind himself that Colin was still Colin, just in a different guise. But seeing him like this only made it startling clear how much he missed having a mother in his life. He didn't know until that moment what a huge hole there was in his heart.

"Do I look okay?" Elliot replied, getting to his feet.

"You look fine, sweetie," Colin said, pushing a strand of hair up behind Elliot's ear. "Let's go, I don't want to be late."

After a squabble about if Emily was old enough to sit in the front seat, the two were off for the zoo. Colin wanted to be a little early, so he could park his rusty van far away enough that Brundell would never see it. It didn't fit with the image of Dorothy Farmer he wanted to project.

"So how old are you, Emily?" Colin asked his brother.

"Whut?" Elliot replied.

"For practice. You're gonna get some questions," Colin told him. "So, Emily, how old are you?"

"Fifteen."

Colin gave Elliot a little bit of a look. "Let's go with fourteen."

"Fine," the younger brother said.

"And what grade are you in?"

"Eight." The boys had worked this out over the past couple of days, coming up with answers to all the stupid questions they might be asked.

"Where do you go to school?"

"Ridgeview Middle School."

"What's your favorite food?"

"Ice Cream."

“Do you have a favorite book?”

“The Cupcake Diaries.”

“Oh, do *you* keep a diary?”

“Yes, I write in it every day.”

After practicing for the past two days, both of them were not only feeling comfortable in their roles as mother and daughter, but they were almost bored by these questions. Fortunately, as a by-product they were sounding much more natural, less like the helium-fueled screechy mental patient voices they had used at the beginning. Their female voices were now carefree and almost pleasant to listen to.

“So what do you do for a living, Mother?” Elliot asked, turning the tables.

“I’m a full-time homemaker and raising my beautiful daughter Emily,” was Colin’s confident reply.

“If you could have anything in the world, what would it be?”

“I already have what I want, a beautiful daughter.”

Elliot groaned at that sappy reply. “How do you make your money?”

“Settlement from my ex husband.”

“Oh, I see. What was his name?”

“Uh... I...” Colin hadn’t worked that one out yet. “Shit.”

“Mother, you said a bad word!” Elliot teased in his little-girl voice. “I’m telling!”

“You are so asking for a spanking, young lady!” Colin replied as he pulled into the zoo parking lot.



Doug Brundell had a rewarding and fulfilling career as a genetic scientist. Amongst his peers, his work stood out with cutting-edge thinking from a razor-sharp intellect with the innovation of a turn-of-the-century industrialist. His work was the cornerstone of his entire profession. He was the rock star of genetic science conventions and the authority to be consulted by international medical governing bodies to set policies for future work and roadmaps for where the field was headed.

Outside of the lab, however, Doug was a marshmallow.

Like a lot of organizations, when there’s someone working so far ahead of the curve, the management has no idea what to do with them. In the course of working for Regent Medical for the past fifteen years, Doug had practically built the very industry that they profited from, but at the same time, his

breakneck pace of developing new technologies created chaos for the executives. With one announcement, Doug Brundell could destroy an entire aspect of their business and replace it with something new. That was exactly the sort of thing middle managers live in fear of, and it made tensions between Doug and his superiors strained and volatile.

All Doug wanted to do was work in his lab, but he was constantly being pushed and pulled between his managers and embroiled in the politics of Regent Medical. He had absolutely no talent for it, and just did what he was told to do by whoever said it loudest.

Even though he was on the precipice of some truly mind-bending breakthroughs like limb regeneration and nerve self-repair, things that would change the very foundations of the human condition, Doug was very worried he was about to be fired. With his nose so deep into his work, he had no allies in his company, and almost everyone wanted to see him dismissed for one reason or another. Some were scared, some were jealous, others greedy and just about everyone was intimidated by his genius.

He had been married once, to a nice woman who had no trouble telling Doug what to do, and making him miserable. It was only after three years that she grew bored and moved on to a younger, more assertive man and Doug was free. The divorce was swift, and Doug got to keep most of what he wanted, but was also now the single father of their son Aiden. That in itself was a new level of misery.

So that's where his life stood at the moment, he was stressed out with every aspect of his life, and had the thinning hair and expanding paunch to prove it. The only thing that gave him any joy was doing his work, and lately, he was finding that wasn't enough to keep away the blues.

Fortunately, he was just socially adept enough to know that what he needed in his life was a partner — a wife — but he lacked any insight as to how to go about it. Posting on dating sites was actually the at very outer edge of his understanding of modern relationships. Beyond that, he had no ideas, so he was a little desperate.

As Doug pulled into the zoo parking lot, his son kicking the back of his seat as he did so, he was hoping beyond hope that this date was going to work out. “Stop doing that, please,” he asked his son. He didn't comply.

Doug needed this. He *really* did, and he was having severe reservations about bringing Aiden with him. He was just enough trouble to screw this up.

This was far as he had gotten with a date since the divorce, and his palms were sweating. He made a note to himself to find a cure for sweaty palms when he got back to work on Monday.

Not that he didn't have reservations about this “Dorothy Farmer” person. She seemed awfully young, maybe too young for a 40 year old man like himself.

Besides that, even though they had only seen each other once, in the rain, he had come away with a couple of impressions. She seemed nervous and distracted, although maybe that was just because it was a first date. She also appeared to be uncomfortable in her own skin, yet that could just be the effects of being drenched in a downpour.

But raising a kid on her own was a big plus, one trait that outweighed all the others. If she had the fortitude to raise a girl, single, then he the most important attribute he was looking for: motherhood.

Aiden, his 14 year old son, was very close to being a lost cause. He had trouble in school, and Doug had been called in to more than a few parent-teacher conferences to talk about his son's anti-social behavior. His son's testing showed an intelligent mind, but his schoolwork was abysmal, and his grades were almost bad enough to hold him back a year. He had no friends that Doug knew of, and spent most of his time in his room, listening to the most awful music one could imagine.

Doug was convinced that in a year or so, he'd go full goth. Aiden had already gotten a black trench coat for his birthday. The boy needed a caring touch, a woman's touch, to keep him from sinking into the abyss of introversion and alienation he was surely headed for.

"Please be on your best behavior," he asked his son as they got out of the car. "Please," he begged.

Aiden just shrugged while he looked away.

At a bench outside the Zoo entrance, Colin and Elliot were waiting impatiently. Doug and "Dorothy" had agreed to meet at this spot, and the two disguised boys had been there for about five minutes.

"Everyone is looking at us," Elliot said, under his breath.

"No one is looking at us," Colin muttered back. "At least no more than you'd expect for any other mother and daughter out for a day at the zoo."

Elliot gripped the edge of the bench and grunted. "I hate this!" he said in a quietly restrained shout.

"The whole point of this is for the both of us to be charming and wonderful," Colin said for the fourth time since they sat down. "Stop being so anxious and pour on the cuteness."

"I know," Elliot agreed. "I'm sorry, Mother."

"It's all right, honey. Just keep smiling." Colin suddenly sat up straight. "I think I see them."

"Where?"

"There," Colin pointed at a car that was parking. It was a shiny new Lexus. "Yeah, he's loaded."

“This is really going to happen, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Now, one last time. Your name is Emily, you are fourteen and you are as sweet as sucking on a stalk of sugar cane.”

“Yes, Mother!” Elliot replied with a cheerful eagerness that even surprised Colin. “I can’t wait! I hope he likes me!”

Colin had to linger for moment in consideration that he was being set up by his younger brother, but he seemed sincere in his attempt to be authentically Emily. He matched it. “I’m sure he will, sweetie. You have nothing to worry about, my pretty little girl.”

“Here they come!” Elliot grabbed his brother’s red-nailed hand and hung on.

It was a slow approach as they were a fair distance away. Colin noted that Brundell was dressed in jeans and a Tommy Bahama shirt, and looked completely out of his element. He didn’t take to the casual look very well, and he may have been trying to oversell it a bit. Maybe he was trying to play down his wealth. His son was in all gloom, with a grey T, dark jeans and a black trench coat, and looked like a handful.

Doug, for his part, recognized Dorothy immediately, and gave a little wave to acknowledge her. It was the first time he’d been able to get a clear view of her. As he got closer, he noted that she was a sturdy woman, but not chunky, who looked more than anxious. He still hoped that was just because they were essentially meeting for the first time. Her daughter, though, was as cute as a button, standing by her mother’s side, clutching her hand.

Finally, Brundell was close enough that they could start talking. “You made it!” Colin sang out, loudly.

“You haven’t been waiting for long, have you?” Doug replied.

“Not that long. We wanted to be early,” Colin said, Doug now within casual conversation distance.

“You look great,” Doug said. “Oh, this is my son, Aiden.” He put his hands on the shoulders of his boy, who shrugged them off immediately. Aiden didn’t even bother to make eye contact with Colin.

“I hate the zoo. I told you that. Why do I have to be here?” He whined.

“This is Dorothy, I told you about her,” Doug said, trying to steer the conversation. “And her daughter Emily. She’s about your age.”

“Great. Can I wait in the car?” Aiden asked. “Who are these people?”

“Shut it!” Doug barked, already tired with his son’s attitude.

“Sucks,” Aiden mumbled.

“I said shut it!” Doug repeated, louder.



Colin knew this was an opportunity to demonstrate some “mothering” skills and show he was good with kids. In fact, considering the law of first impressions, this was likely the most important moment in the whole scam.

“Hi, Colin. I know the zoo’s a little dorky for young adults like you, but there’s something everyone can like about this place.” Colin lowered his voice, like he was about to tell a secret. “In fact, did you know they slaughter hundreds of animals every day here and then feed them to the exhibits in front of everyone to watch? You might just get lucky.”

That got Aiden’s attention. He was rightly suspicious of “Dorothy” and didn’t like being talked to like he was a gullible kid, easily swayed with patronizing promises. But he didn’t interrupt.

Colin recognized skepticism when he saw it, so he backed off that approach. He thought of something a little more sneaky. “Oh, Doug, that reminds me — please make sure we don’t go to the reptile exhibit. I get a little queasy when they feed the live mice to the snakes.”

“Where’s that?” Aiden asked. “Just, you know, curious.”

Gotcha, Colin thought to himself. “Oh, we won’t go there. So don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah,” Aiden replied. He walked over to a large map of the zoo mounted on the gates and started scanning it. While he was doing that, they finished up introductions.

“It’s nice to be able to meet you, Emily,” Doug said to Elliot. He bent over to talk to him, even if he wasn’t that much shorter. “You look much cuter when you’re dry.” He added a chuckle to indicate he was joking.

“Thank you, Mr. Brundell!” Elliot replied with enthusiasm. “You look better, too.”

“She’s a charmer, that’s for sure,” Brundell said to Colin.

“Emily has always had a way with people,” Colin said.

Then the easy topics of conversation dried up and an awkward, lengthy silence followed. “Uh, let me go get the tickets,” Doug said to break the moment.

“How tall are you?” Aiden asked Elliot, apropos of nothing.

“Um... Five foot five inches,” Elliot answered.

“And when were you born?”

“June 3rd, two thousand...”

Aiden interrupted with a superior smirk. “Good. I’m taller *and* older than you.”

Eager to stem Aiden’s bad attitude, Colin made a suggestion. “Well, why don’t you look after little Emily, then, Aiden. Your father and I may want to talk a little.”

“I’m in charge?” Aiden said, a toothy, wicked smile came across his face, as he glared at Elliot. Elliot looked back at his brother, trying to impart every way he could say “no” though the glare in his eyes. Of course, that’s what Colin expected, but he wasn’t about to change his mind.

“For the afternoon, yes. I’d consider it a favor.”

Elliot, for all his good acting so far, couldn’t help but slump and let his face fall. He dared not speak a word, so all he could do was go along with Colin’s lame plan. “I’ve never been to this zoo before. Could you show me around?” he said, like a death row prisoner politely asking for his last meal.

“We’re gonna do what I want to do!” Aiden asserted.

“Here we go,” Doug said, returning with the tickets. “Two adults and two students.”

Aiden quickly grabbed the two student tickets and headed for the entrance. “C’mon Emily. You’re with me.”

As Elliot trudged his way behind Aiden, who had grabbed his hand and was tugging at it, an astonished Doug turned to his date.

“He was cussing me out not ten minutes ago about coming to the zoo. Now he’s never been more excited,” Doug said. “You sure do have a way with kids, Dorothy.”

“I’m just like any other mom,” Colin responded with faux humility. “Now let’s go in before they get too far ahead of us.”

A brisk low-speed chase through the first few exhibits ended with Doug and Colin finding the “kids” in front of the lion den, watching as two men threw large hunks of meat over a wall and into the enclosure. Aiden was pointing things out, obviously enjoying the show. Elliot looked to be holding steady.

That gave Colin a chance to sit down, as his heels did not work well for walking quickly, and he needed a blow. Doug joined him. “I’m glad we could make this work,” Doug said.

“Me too. So tell me about yourself,” Colin asked, not missing the opportunity to get his date talking.

“Well, I’m a doctor of sorts, but I mostly work in the lab.”

“Oh, so it’s technical kind of work?” Colin asked, playing as dumb as he could get away with.

“It might be a little heady for most people,” Doug conceded. “I do a lot of medical research.”

“Like curing cancer and things like that?”

“More or less. Same idea.”

“Oh, it must be fascinating!” Colin gushed. He was probably pouring it on a little thick, but Doug seemed to be the sort of person who needed things to be obvious, especially when it came to social interaction.

“Well, I mean, I find it endlessly engaging and challenging, or else I wouldn’t do it. Of course.”

“You must be very smart.”

“I try not to think of it like that. I do very well in my field, though.”

“Do I sense a little modesty, Doug?” Colin wanted to start using his first name as much as possible.

“I’m not much of a boaster, I guess,” he replied.

“Go on, you can boast a little. I give you permission,” Colin then threw in one of his giggles because ‘Dorothy’ was an easy laugher.

Colin’s brain was in overdrive. Not only was he trying to hit one of a dozen points he wanted to hit during this encounter, like touching Doug on the arm, making eye contact, looking shy and demure, and others, but he was also coping with his appearance. He never really thought about it before, but women don’t just “wear” clothes or “look” good. They have to constantly maintain and supervise their appearance. They have to manage their skirt, maneuver in the heels, keep their hair from flying apart, avoid quick movement so the breasts don’t squirm out from their resting place, and still look like they have everything calm and under control. Was he giving off the right body language? Was he sitting fully upright and at attention? Was he smiling hard enough? Too hard? It was a test of Colin’s powers of concentration to not only do all these things but also keep listening.

“...manipulating a person’s DNA, which has endless potential.” Doug said, completing a sentence that Colin completely missed.

“Oh, it certainly does,” Colin quickly added, not knowing quite what he was commenting on. “The kids are moving on. We better keep up with them, so we don’t lose them.”

“It’d be okay if we did,” Doug suggested. “Just kidding.”

The attempt at humor was just the opportunity Colin was looking for to make physical contact. He slapped Doug on the thigh. “Don’t be silly,” he said, adding another giggle. He was getting good at that. They got up and headed in Aiden and Elliot’s direction.

“It’s tough being a parent, sometimes,” Doug said, as he had to quicken his pace to stay in sight of the ‘kids.’

Colin didn’t want to sound in any way like a beleaguered parent. “Well, I won’t say it’s easy. Still, there’s nothing more rewarding than being a parent.”

“Even alone?”

“It has it’s challenges. How about you?”

“I’ve been raising Aiden by myself for a long time now, and I know I’m not doing the best job in the world.”

“He looks like a fine young man to me,” Colin said, to butter Doug up. “Kids go through some difficult things at that age.” Elliot and Aiden were getting farther away and they had to pick their pace up. It wasn’t easy as Colin was limited to small steps in uncertain footwear, but he was just able to do it.

“I’m not going to lie,” Doug said, huffing a little. “Being a single father is difficult. Especially with a job like mine. And I’m just tired of doing it alone.”

Colin had little sympathy for Doug, being filthy rich and sad because he didn’t know what to do with it all. Heck, he should just put the little brat at a boarding

school somewhere, in his opinion. Let your money solve your problems for you, was Colin's attitude. However, Dorothy had to be understanding and very sympathetic. "I know it can't be easy. My father raised me alone too." That was a flat-out lie, but he was trying to form a little bit of a bond between them.

"Really? You were an only child?"

"My mother died in childbirth. We lost her and what would have been my baby sister. I was only three at the time, so I don't remember it. From then on it was just me and him."

"He never remarried."

"No, he never had another relationship again. It was probably the biggest mistake he ever made. So lonely." That little stinger would hopefully would plant the right idea in Doug's mind. Maybe it would also get him some sympathy points. Dorothy was a blank slate, and Colin had every intention of making her fake history as compelling as possible. "I don't want the same thing for Emily. When her father left us, we never saw him again. Six months later I was told he'd been lost at sea on an oil rig."

"I'm sorry," Doug offered.

"He wasn't the best husband or father, but he provided for us. We still live off a settlement from the oil company. Until it runs out, anyway. I just wanted to make a fresh start for Emily and me. To get a second chance at having a family." That explanation was a little close to the truth, as the loss of his mother was almost the very same story. Still, Colin figured it would be easier to keep his story straight if it was familiar.

"So is that what you're looking for?" Doug asked. "A father figure?"

"That would be high on the list. What about you?"

"Well, I guess kind of a mother figure. I've always wanted someone to look after the kid. Raise him in a traditional way with traditional values, and not afraid of... Well, not be afraid of women."

Check, check and double check. Colin had read the man like a book, and Dorothy was going to be that woman he wanted. "I think they're slowing down, finally," Colin said, watching Elliot and Aiden run up to look at the monkey habitat.

Doug slowed to a stop and put his hand on his knees as he bent over. "Oh, thank God. I'm completely out of shape."

"Here, let's get a seat," Colin said, directing him to a bench. As he sat down, Colin went to go fetch a bottle or water from a nearby vendor. Doug was obviously not just "out of shape," but in poor health. He wasn't drastically overweight, but he had a belly that was going to just get bigger if he didn't start some kind of exercise. "Water," Colin said to Doug, handing him the open bottle. Doug guzzled it, pausing to take big gulps of air.

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” Doug was halfway through the bottle before he was able to stop gasping and settle down. “Embarrassing. Sorry.”

“You just need a little encouragement to be in shape, that’s all.”

“I never have time. I work all day long.”

“That sounds rough!” Colin said, sounding as compassionate as he could.

“They have to let you have some personal time, you know.”

“I’m probably going to quit, anyway. Then I’ll have lots of personal time.”

Doug straightened some wrinkles out of his shirt. “I should have quit years ago. The office politics are killing that place.”

That set off alarm bells in Colin’s mind. He was a rich guy making bank. Quitting his job, right now, was the last thing he wanted Doug to do. He wanted him getting as much income as he could, like a farmer stuffing a goose before making them a holiday dinner. “You shouldn’t say things like that,” Colin countered. “Everyone feels like quitting their jobs, but it’s never a good idea.”

“I can get any genetic research job in the country. I wouldn’t be out of work for long. I hear a new company is starting up in Fargo.”

“But you can’t!” Colin objected. If he was going to steal from Doug, he wanted him to stay where he was and as rich as possible. “You can’t... *Give up...* Like that.”

Not until that moment did Colin truly understand the influence a woman has on a man. Because as soon as he said it, Doug sat up straighter and nodded. “You’re right. I shouldn’t give up on a job I’ve had for this long. I can’t throw it all away without giving it one more shot.”

“That’s the spirit!” Colin chirped in a high-pitched, effusive tone of voice he reached for the very first time. “You’ll do great!”

“I’m going to go right in there Monday morning and...”

Both Colin and Doug’s attention turned to Elliot and Aiden, as they heard some squabbling coming from their general direction, but they couldn’t make anything out from here.

“Oh, here we go,” Doug said.

Aiden and Elliot were arguing, but it was definitely Aiden who was being the more demonstrative of the two. “You might want to stop your son,” Colin said to Doug.

“Like there’s anything I can do. He does what he wants. If I get in his way, it’s another month of therapy for the both of us.”

Aiden started to tussle and push Elliot, and it looked like something physical was about to get started. Colin was concerned that Elliot might start fighting back, and even at his marginally smaller size, he was still a nineteen year old man, and could easily deck a fourteen year old kid.

“Doug, you have to stop your son!” Colin implored, deciding Doug better handle it. He was not going to try and get in a struggle when wearing his heels. Colin got up and headed in their direction, forcing Doug to get up and follow.

“I’m sure they’re just being kids,” Doug said.

“Well, it needs to stop before it gets worse,” Colin said. He knew that he might be putting a damper on the date, but if Elliot swung back at the twerp, this was going to get nasty, and fast. “Please, Doug!”

“All right, all right.” He was close enough to talk to his son, but he didn’t get in his way. Instead, he just leaned into Aiden’s field of vision. “Hey, champ. What say we, uh... Hey... You want a snow cone? You like grape. We can get...”

“Move!” Aiden commanded his father. “I’m talking to this skanky know-it-all! You’re in my way!”

Doug got clear of his son, and turned back to Colin and said, “See?”

Frustrated, Colin had to take command from the ineffectual Doug. He got in between the two, just as Elliot was raising his fist. “Let’s stop this right now!” He said. Turning to his brother, he said, “This is not the way a young lady behaves!” Copying something he had heard said by mothers throughout time.

“Yeah!” Aiden snarked.

She quickly stuck a finger in Aiden’s face. “As for you, you’re the older one here and I expected you to look out for my daughter!” Colin was trying not to think about how ludicrous and bizarre his position was, and just tried to say the things a mother in this situation would say.

“She started it!”

“It’s easy to win a fight when you pick on little girls!”

Aiden looked to his dad for some kind of intervention, but he wasn’t going to get any. “She’s being a smart ass!”

“And you’re being a dumb one! What were you fighting about anyway?”

Looking sheepish all of the sudden, Aiden just folded his arms and looked at his feet.

Elliot spoke up. “He said the monkeys had hemorrhoids, and that’s why their butts looked like that.”

Colin and Doug glanced at each other, confused, and then took a look at the exhibit. “Those are Macaques,” Doug said. “They just look like that, naturally.”

“That’s a lie. It has to be,” Aiden said. “Those monkeys have a problem. I don’t care what people call it. That’s not normal.”

“Is that what this is all about?” Colin said. “You’re arguing about *monkey butts*?” Immediately as Colin said the words, both Aiden and Elliot started to smirk. It was something about hearing the term out loud that broke the

tension, and they started to snicker. Colin then walked away, heading back to the bench where they had been seated. “Ridiculous. Come on, Doug.”

By the time they had wandered through most of the park, Doug had spilled most of his life and his ambitions to Colin, and he couldn't be happier. With every word, he was just providing another opportunity to take advantage of later. It became pretty clear to Colin that Doug was basically looking for a combination of a Stepford wife and Mary Poppins. He'd become that woman, and more, to trap Doug.

Coming to the end of the afternoon, and the end of the visit, Colin noted that Aiden and Elliot had steered them towards the Cave exhibit, where they kept the bats and the snakes.

“Oh, no,” Colin was forced to protest, “I specifically asked not to come here!” He tried to make it sound as if he really meant it.

“Too late!” Aiden proclaimed, dragging Elliot inside and forcing the “parents” to follow.

Colin played along, trying to stay in character as he walked inside the dark exhibit hall. He hammed it up a little, acting timid and uncertain.

Aiden was enjoying it, looking like he had just won a major victory in “tricking” “Dorothy” into the one place she didn't want to go. Fact was that Colin always liked this exhibit when he was a kid and his mother brought him to the zoo, and he was actually looking forward to seeing it again for the first time in years.

“Now, don't be nervous, Dorothy,” Doug said, trying to console his date.

“Are you sure?” Colin replied, putting a trembling uncertainty in his voice.

Aiden was sure enjoying the moment, but that was the whole idea. By giving him a rare taste of responsibility, hopefully a brat like Aiden would respond well. So far, so good. He might be able to turn the kid around.

As for Doug, it was clear to Colin that he was not a very attentive father, and just a broken man, emotionally speaking. His wife must have been a shrew, destroying him, and now his son and job were chipping away at whatever was left. He was just lovesick, and was wide open emotionally. Colin almost felt guilty taking advantage of him — but not quite.

“Eeek!” Colin shrieked when they came to the snakes. He recoiled and covered his eyes, just like any stupid girl would.

“Hold on, we're just passing through,” Doug said, guiding Colin through. He was holding Colin by the upper arms, and navigating the way. “Just another few steps.”

As soon as they were out in the daylight again, Colin dropped his hands and smiled thankfully at her date. “Oh, my knight in shining armor,” he said.

“Uh... Well...” Doug stammered as his cheeks blushed red.

This was just too easy, from Colin’s point of view.

“Listen, do you want to go grab dinner tonight?” Doug asked.

“Dinner?” Colin replied. Hell no, he was lucky enough to get this far without blowing the disguise. Besides, he didn’t have anything to wear. “I’m just a little tired. I need to take it easy tonight.”

“Oh, okay,” Doug frowned like a puppy who’s nose had just been batted with a newspaper.

“But, tomorrow or the next day, yes.” Colin didn’t want him to think he was shooting him down.

“Oh, good,” Doug replied, a smile back on his face. “Listen, if you’re tired, I might just have something for you...” He fished around in his pockets for a moment before finding a small pill bottle. “Vitamins. I take these to keep my stamina up. Made them myself. Some of the latest research.” He pressed the bottle into Colin’s hands. “Take one a day, Emily too, and you’ll both feel like new people in no time.”

“Vitamins?” Colin asked, skeptically.

“Well, okay, not your traditional vitamins, but they do the same job. You’ll be amazed at the positive effects they’ll have on your life. Like I said, you’ll feel like a new person. Literally.”

“Well, okay...”

“And don’t forget, Emily too. One tablet every day. No more, no less.”

“Uh, sure. Got it.” Colin was puzzled as to why

Doug was being so specific about it, but he put the bottle in his purse. “I really enjoyed our afternoon together.”

“Me too. I really did. I can’t wait to see you again.”

“You will,” Colin said, knowing he had won the day. “You will.”



AGENT OF CHANGE

PART 1

Dr. Susan Hackstaff, M.D., had barely put her white coat on when she heard a shout.

“*Hey!*” Yelled a loud, piercing voice from outside her exam room. “Is there anyone here?”

The doctor leapt to her feet and scurried out into the hallway. “Oh, hello,” she said, greeting the visitor and potential patient. “The receptionist must have stepped out for a moment.”

“C’mon in, Dad!” the visitor yelled out the front door. “They’re actually open!”

It was true that they were open, but only by about three minutes. Total.

Dr. Susan Hackstaff had just opened her new clinic 180 seconds earlier, for the very first time. Seasons Recuperative Solutions was the name she had chosen for it, and had spent the better part of a month filling it with equipment and working on the interior. Finding a staff had proven more difficult. People were far more expensive than office chairs.

So yes, the receptionist was not at the front desk, but that was because there was no actual receptionist.

“All right, all right,” said the father as he came through the front door. “Don’t get excited,” he told his son. He gave a quick look at the doctor. “You the nurse?”

“I’m the doctor,” Susan replied, curtly. “Dr. Sus...”

“Yeah, okay, look. Here’s the deal. My boy here wants an operation. What’s it gonna cost?”

“Well, why don’t we go into the exam room and...”

“What’s *that* gonna cost? Insurance said they ain’t gonna cover this.”

“If you could just...”

“Dad!” The younger teenager whined. “Don’t ruin this for me! You always ruin everything!”

“Let the adults talk!” The father barked back at his son. “What’s it gonna cost?”

“No cost to talk,” Susan said, adding on a sigh. This was her first potential patient, and she needed the money bad. “Follow me, if you would.”



“You heard her,” the father said, pointing his son down the hallway. “That way.”

“I *know*, Dad.”

Bert Thurman, as the father introduced himself to Dr. Hackstaff, was not in the mood to listen to anyone. “The kid says he wants to lose some weight,” he told the doctor. “I think he’s fine, but...”

“Let me tell her, Dad!” the son whined. His name was Logan Thurman, and was just sixteen. “I inherited a lot of money from my grandma’s death, and Dad said I could get anything I want so I told him that really really wanted to get thin so I started working out and I didn’t lose any weight and then I went on a diet and...”

“Okay, okay,” Susan said, trying to slow the kid down.

Logan continued. “But my Dad said, and he *promised* me, that if I couldn’t lose weight any other way, I could see a doctor and do it that way. That’s what he said, he said. He *promised* me.”

Susan already didn’t like these two. The boy was a spoiled brat, and the father was an overbearing lunkhead. If they weren’t her first possible patients, she would have declined. Lord knows that she didn’t want her first Yelp review to be a negative one.

“So let’s have you take off your shirt,” Susan asked the kid.

“Wait. What’s the cost?” Mr. Thurman asked, yet again.

“I’ll let you know when I’ll need to charge for something,” Dr. Hackstaff said. She then took a seat in the only other chair available, intentionally blocking out the father. “Oh, if you want to have a seat, there’s a brand new comfy sofa out in the hallway,” she informed him.

Given how unsettled the father looked, Susan was willing to bet that the man’s deep love of sitting outweighed his desire to keep being a nuisance, and she was right. “I’ll be right outside if you need me, Logan.”

“*Okay*, Dad!” Logan moaned.

Once he was gone, the doctor started in on her usual routine questions. “So you have a concern about your weight?”

“I’m fat,” Logan said. “Everyone says so.”

“Let’s have you step on the scale,” she asked. Logan came up as 185 pounds and 5’ 6” tall. “That’s not *that* overweight. At your age, I’d expect you to be only fifteen pounds lighter, and you’re still within normal numbers for...”

“My Dad promised me!” Logan interrupted. “If you don’t do it...”

“Now, hold on there. What exactly do you want me to do?”

“Lipo!” The boy said with a smile. “Suck all the fat out and make me thin! Suck it all out! *Shhhlorp!* You can do that, right?”

“Well, yes, it’s technically feasible. I’d want to ask you a few more questions, do some tests, the usual procedure. Normally, this is an operation I’d do on mature women, not on a teenage boy.”

“You mean overweight women like you?”

Susan narrowed her eyes, but tried to just breeze on through that incredibly offensive comment. “Women who had fat that resisted diet and exercise. Now you say that you’ve been exercising?”

“I bought a gym membership for after school. I didn’t lose anything!”

“How often did you work out?”

“I went twice and I didn’t lose any weight at all. It was a total rip-off.”

“I see. You also tried dieting.”

“I’m practically a vegetarian. Except for bacon and hamburgers. And pizza rolls.”

This was clearly shaping up, in Susan’s mind, as a textbook case of resetting her patient’s expectations. This boy wanted the easy way out, and she wasn’t that kind of doctor.

...*Anymore...*

“Maybe you should take some time to think about...”

“Dad! She won’t do it!” Logan yelled out loud so he could be heard through the exam room door. “*Daaaad!*”

“I didn’t...” Susan began to speak.

“What’s going on in here?” Bert Thurman said, bursting into the room. “What are you telling my boy?”

Susan really wanted this time to be different. She had hoped she was going to make a new start in this town. That’s why she had moved out here and taken up the offer to start the clinic.

But these two were pushing her buttons, and awakening the fire that burned within Dr. Susan Hackstaff, a fire which burned with an intensity that few could even comprehend. A fire which burned for justice. Justice against men. Horrible, stinking, rotten men.

“Let’s talk about scheduling,” she said.



Logan Thurman strutted down the hallway of his school with a cocky smile. He was scheduled for liposuction tomorrow, and he felt like he was on top of

the world. No one would make fun of him when they saw him next. By then, he'd be skinny and fit, just like the popular jocks that always got all the girls. This was his last day as a pudgy kid, never to be ridiculed again.

"Hey, Lard-ass Logan," said Greg, his best friend, as he caught up to Logan. "What you smilin' for? Find a spare cupcake in your pocket?"

"No!" Logan replied, as if it were a serious question. Then he imagined how nice it would be if he did, indeed, find a bonus cupcake in his pocket one day. "No," he repeated.

"Anyway," Greg said, as he pushed Logan into a metal locker, roughly. "I'm going to kick your ass in the parking lot after school."

This was the person Logan referred to as his best friend. People who *really* hated him didn't even bother to beat him up, most of the time.

"I can't... My Dad's picking me up and I'm going to be out of school. For, like, a week or more," Logan said, as he rubbed his newly bruised shoulder. "You won't even recognize me when I get back."

"Well, I better just kick your ass *now*, I guess," Greg said as he slammed Logan back into the lockers.



"Is that where you're going to cut me open?" Logan asked as Dr. Hackstaff drew a short dotted line on Logan's waist. "Because blood makes me throw up."

"You'll be anesthetized," Susan explained to her patient. "You won't be awake."

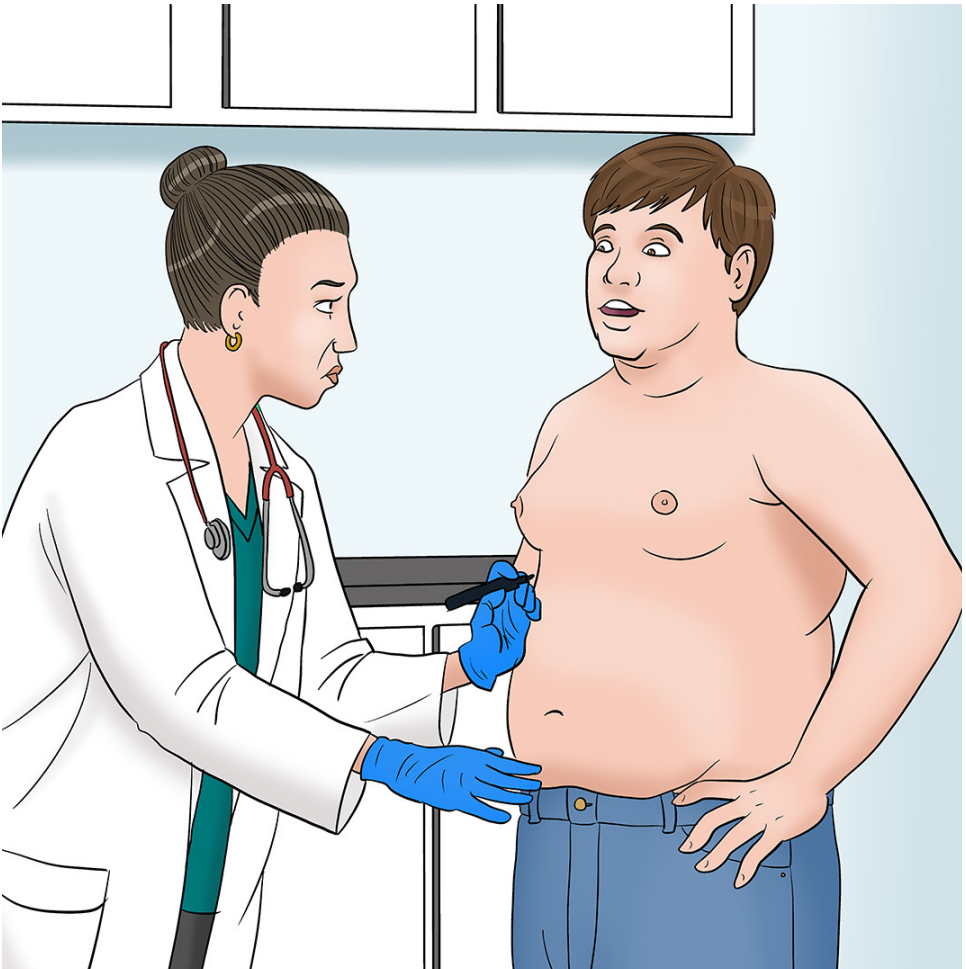
It was the day of Logan's surgery, and he was giddy. He couldn't keep his hands still in anticipation of what was about to happen. No more fat jokes. No more being called "husky." No more splitting his pants in public. No more feeling guilty about eating a whole quart of Cherry Garcia while on the toilet. No more being picked on because of his weight.

"What kinda drugs are you gonna give me? Can I take them at home, too?"

Dr. Hackstaff had rarely heard such a blatant attempt to get hard drugs from her, so she just smiled back, knowing what she was about to do was going to make her feel a lot better.

"We'll talk after the procedure," she said. She found a spot and injected Logan with a syringe. "This may pinch," she said, after she stuck it in. "You'll start to feel a little drowsy."

However, the good doctor hadn't injected her patient with something that was supposed to put him to sleep. She had put a powerful hypnotic drug into his system that was about to leave him very suggestible.



“Now today, I’ll be removing the fat along your waistline — do you understand, Logan?”

The boy nodded as his eyes were losing their focus.

“Later on,” Susan said, “we’ll take care of the other parts of your body, and we’ll have different appointments for future procedures. For now, it’s just your tummy.”

“Yeah... Just my tummy...” Logan replied, as the drug had already kicked in. “I thought we were going to do the whole thing?”

“No, no. That would be dangerous. One thing at a time. You agree, don’t you?”

“I... I guess...”

“Good, good.”

“Think how sexy you’re going to look with that slim waist of yours. I bet you can’t wait to show it off.”

“Sexy?” Logan responded. He really hadn’t thought of it that way, but that certainly could be true, he decided. “Yeah... Totally sexy.”

“I bet you’ve bought yourself some tight-fitting clothes to show everyone how good you look. Stretchy pants and skin-tight tops. You’ll want to let everyone see the new you.”

“You think I should?” Logan asked.

“Of course you should. Why, if I were you, I’d be wearing nothing but skin-tight clothes so everyone can see how you’re changing. That’s what you want, right?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I want. I want everyone to see the new me. I’m going to get some tight clothes right away.”

“I knew you would,” Dr. Hackstaff replied with a smile. Of course he was going to, because that hypnotic drug wasn’t any old drug, but an exotic cocktail of mind-controlling substances direct from the deepest forests of the Amazon — her special blend.

She had sworn she’d never use the stuff again, but it was just taking up space in the office drug cabinet, and this little turd really did deserve everything that was coming to him. Now, for the next few minutes, the boy was helpless but to obey her commands.

“Okay, how much should we remove from your waist? If we take out too much, it might look a bit unusual, but we’d have to do fewer procedures.”

“I don’t want to look weird,” Logan said.

“So, all right, we’ll do it in three more tummy operations, then. After a while, you won’t even feel the pain. Then we can do the rest of it.”

“Three more?” Logan was clearly imagining how much pain he’d be in, and how much time he’d be recuperating. “Maybe we should do it all at once then.”

“Medically speaking, I shouldn’t allow it to be done at once. A gradual change in your shape is the best path. Of course, people might not notice the changes, because they’ll happen so slowly, but this will be safer.”

“No! I want people to notice!” Logan objected. “And you just said you could do it all at once!”

“You’re going to have a very narrow waist, and your legs and chest will still have fat. Is that what you want?”

“Yes!” Logan replied. “Suck out all the fat in my waist! Get it all! Make me thin!”

“Only if you’re sure.”