

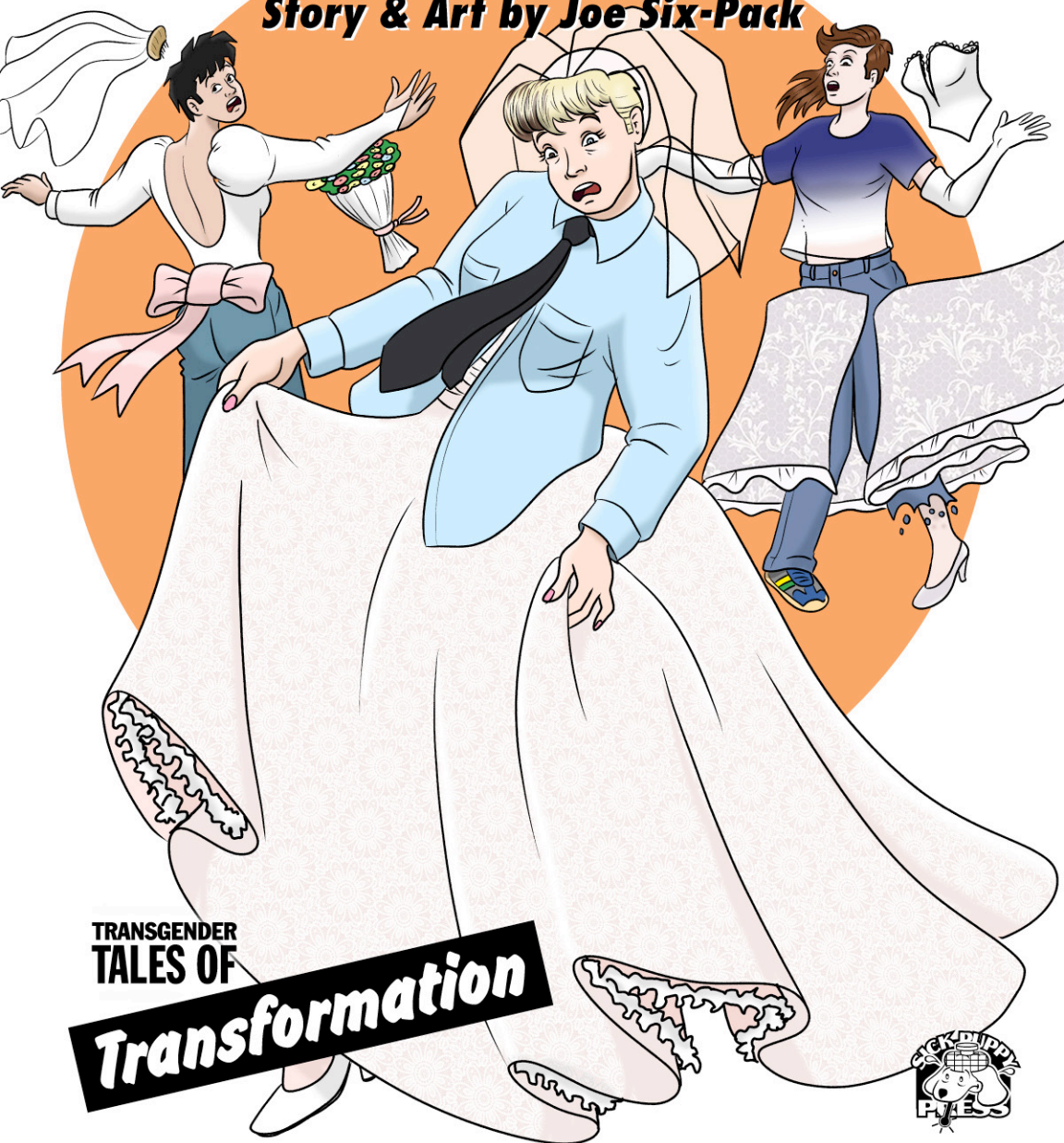
ADULTS ONLY

159 pages 39 illustrations

# BRIDES OF CANDLEWICK

THE HOUSEWIVES OF CANDLEWICK COURT #3

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack



TRANSGENDER  
TALES OF

**Transformation**



**J O E   S I X - P A C K**

# ***BRIDES OF CANDLEWICK***

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



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## PREVIOUSLY

*In the story “In the Family Way,” con-artist Colin Finch, along with his 19 year old younger brother, Elliot, have been slowly closing the noose on their diabolical plot. Their prey, single father Doug Brundell, seems unaware that he is being set up by the two young men. Which seems improbable, as Colin has been masquerading as dream wife Dorothy Farmer, a traditional single mother. They lured Douglas into a relationship, building trust so the Finch brothers can take the poor man for all he’s worth.*

*But after months of setting up Doug Brundell, and finally getting the man to propose, Colin finds himself hopelessly entangled in his role as Dorothy. He doesn’t seem to really understand that he’s been physically and mentally changing, slowly but surely, into a woman, nor does he recognize that his fully-gown brother appears to be a little girl. As he and Elliot move in with Doug at Candlewick Court, Doug’s own son is becoming just as feminine as Colin and Elliot. Together, they are quickly turning into a suburban family straight from the 1950’s. Will Colin be able to rescue himself from the role of the perfect housewife? Who is responsible for these bizarre changes? Has Candlewick Court claimed it’s first victims? The story concludes in this book.*

*We also met the Greysons, a new family that had just moved into Candlewick Court. But no sooner had they moved into their new house than problems arise that threaten to end their stay in the new housing development. Now, father Adam Greyson is dealing with the powerful people and entities behind Candlewick Court, and he is about to learn how relentless and sinister those forces are.*

# THE BRIDES OF CANDLEWICK



## IN THE FAMILY WAY

### CONCLUSION

Colin woke up before the birds were chirping, as he normally did, because doing his morning hair and face was an hour-long process. He carefully got out of bed and slipped his feet into his high-heeled bedroom slippers. He quickly put on his floor-length marabou-trimmed silk robe and tied it around his tiny waist.

As he headed for the bathroom, he was careful as not to wake Doug. Although he had sworn he wasn't going to share the master bedroom with Doug several times over, he had convinced him that they should at least share the same bathroom — and that bathroom was inside the master bedroom. So every morning, that meant sneaking into Doug's room and starting his beauty routine quietly.

Unfortunately, there was no time to think, as the clock was ticking. It wouldn't be long before the sun rose and the kids and Doug would wake and need their clothes laid out for them, their breakfast made and everything ship-shape to begin the day.

Early on, when he first started the new routine in the new house, he had to use one of his scarves to cover his unmade hair, but Colin could see the disappointment on Doug's face, and made the effort to have his hair done just the way he liked it, so he could greet Doug with a pretty face first thing in the morning. Colin's makeup was a quicker affair, as he only needed a little bit of color for now. He finished his makeup and hair at the vanity in his little pink room, as a radio played a sunny little song.

Earrings in and housecoat on, Colin was down in the kitchen heating up the stove for bacon, sausage and hash browns, and then prepping toast and fresh squeezed orange juice. On Sundays he did flapjacks. Once the coffee was brewing, it was six thirty and time to gently wake the others. After living as the unofficial housewife of 101 Candlewick Court for three weeks now, he had grown used to the routine.

He flicked the lights on in the kids' room and opened up their closet. He picked out dresses with undies and shoes for both Elliot and Aiden. "Rise and shine," he sang out in his gentle feminine voice.

Doug needed just a little prodding, as Colin started the shower and gave his fiancée a little kiss to wake him. Once he was up and in the bathroom, Colin picked out one of his best suits with shoes, socks, shirt and boxers. It took him a little longer to pick out just the right tie.

Then he flew down the stairs to fasten his pinafore apron and put the meat and potatoes on the stove.

“Do you need any help, Mommy?” Elliot asked, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“Could you begin making the toast, sweetheart? Please and thank you!”



Elliot pushed a step-stool up to the counter so he was tall enough to work the toaster. He flipped the top on the breadbox and helped himself to the fluffy fresh white bread inside.

“What about me, Ms. Farmer?” Aiden asked, as he appeared in the entryway.

“Yes, sweetie. Could you pour the juice and the milk into carafes?” Colin requested.

“Thank you so much.”

When Doug appeared, ready to eat, the full breakfast spread was waiting for him, steaming hot. “Good morning, honey,” Colin said, pouring him a cup of coffee.

“It looks delicious,” Doug said as he kissed Colin on the cheek. “The *breakfast* is what I... Meant... Not...” His voice trailed off as he couldn’t find a way out of his faux pas.

“Just eat,” Colin teased, poking Doug on the tip of his nose.

The girls and Doug chowed down as Colin hovered, refilling cups and glasses and providing seconds for whoever looked like they needed it. He would grab something to eat later, as he usually did. It was more important to make sure everyone else was being well taken care of. He dreaded the thought that someone at work might think that Doug had anything less than a hearty home-cooked breakfast each and every morning.

Colin gave Doug his briefcase and a good-bye kiss as he went off to the office. As soon as the



door shut, it was time to get those dishes in the sink. Once he made sure the kids were occupied watching TV and playing with their toys, then it was time to go back upstairs. He sat back down at his mirror and washed his face clean, now ready to apply his all-day makeup. For this, he needed to be more careful and precise. His lips needed to be red, but not too dark. His eyes had to be just right. His face had to appear clean and fresh, and then he had to do his hair so it would withstand the rigors of his daily chores.

He dressed in one of his new dresses. Three weeks later and he was still working his way through his last haul at Madame Fifi's. He had a nice powder blue full-skirted house dress with a white collar today, and his favorite pair of around-the-house heels. By now, he had already started to plan out dinner for the evening.

After making the beds and putting away the pajamas, he hoisted the laundry hampers downstairs and into the laundry room. He got the clothes started and then headed back to the kitchen to clean his soaked dishes and pans.

"Let's see that sparkle!" He said as he held up his last plate to the light. It gleamed like a polished mirror. Now he had just enough time to begin making lunch for the three of them. It was a nice day outside, so he brought the girls some PB&J sandwiches and Tang outside on the patio.

It was the first time that day he could relax. He wasn't hungry, so he just sipped on a cup of coffee and nibbled on some toast. "It's getting a little chilly these days," he said to Elliot and Aiden as they ate. "It'll be Fall soon."

"It's almost time for school," Aiden said with a groan.

That made sense. Since Aiden was fourteen, he would be worried about that kind of thing. All kids his age were. "Will you be a Freshman or Sophomore in high school?" Colin asked.

"Huh?" Aiden replied, puzzled, then washing down his food with a drink. Elliot giggled to himself.

Colin wasn't sure what was so odd about his question. "I don't even know what high school you go to."

Aiden just looked puzzled. "I don't get it," he said.

"You're funny, Mommy," Elliot said just before taking a big mouthful of sandwich.

"Smaller bites, sweetie," Colin reminded his brother. He then tried one more time with Aiden. "Don't you go to high school, honey?"

Aiden just slowly shook his head as he chewed.

In the distance, the dryer buzzed and Colin set aside his napkin. "I've got to get that. I'll be right back."



As he walked back into the house, Colin wasn't sure what to make of that exchange. Surely Aiden was of age. Doug hadn't said anything about him being home-schooled. In fact, he could distinctly remember that Doug had told several stories of how Aiden was having trouble in school and had personality conflicts with his teachers.

Once he started folding the clothes from the dryer, however, Colin's worries were pushed aside as he focused on his task. He had learned the hard way that thinking and doing chores did not mix. When Doug was pointing out to him that his shirts were incorrectly folded and his socks unmatched, Colin had to admit he had been too preoccupied to do his chores well enough to match Doug's expectations. He pledged to just think about the work in front of him and nothing else. He wanted to focus on the most important thing, and that was pleasing Doug.

Once that was taken care of, he picked up the girls' glasses and paper plates and took care of them. It did seem like he never had time anymore to do much of anything. Things were always so busy around the house. It would all be worth it when he was able to finally get access to the bank accounts, ransack the house and make a run for it. He had not yet figured out exactly *how* he was going to do all this, nor had he figured out *when* he was going to do it, and until then, there were other priorities. For instance, he did have to start defrosting the vegetables from the freezer for dinner.

Maybe tonight, when he was done tucking the kids in and ready for bed, he might have some time to think about his plan.

By six, after the house had been vacuumed and dusted, the toilets scrubbed, and the laundered clothes all put away, Colin did his face again for the evening look. A little darker lips, a shade heavier on the eyes, longer lashes, and a deeper foundation. He added fancier jewelry and changed once more, now into a nice midnight blue off-the-shoulder dress he had been dying to wear. Pumps with a stiletto heel finished the ensemble. He lost himself in his bewitching reflection.

"Fiddlesticks!" Colin blurted as he saw what time it was. He ran downstairs to check the roast, and could already smell the smoke. "Oh my, oh my!" He said as he pulled the meat from the oven. "No, no! My roast!"

"Mommy!" Elliot called, running into the room. "Abigail dropped her doll into the toilet and it's stuck!"

"Maybe if I can trim off the ends..." Colin said as he held his face in his hands.

"Mommy!" Elliot repeated, tugging on Colin's dress.

"Mommy will be with you in a minute, honey!"

"But Mommy!"

“Please, sweetie, this is an emergency!” He was trying to fan the smoke away and opened up a window to help. The mashed potatoes on one of the burners suddenly turned into a bubbling cauldron and the top popped off, sending potatoes onto the burners, which, naturally, caught fire.

“Fire, Mommy! Fire!” Elliot hollered. He started to cry.

“Eeek!” Colin screamed. He grabbed for the potholders and hoisted the pan to the sink. It was quickly flooded with water, and the burner was turned off and he covered it with a lid to smother the fire. “Dinner is ruined!” He wailed. Noticing that he had splattered a bit of potatoes on himself, he then added, “And so is my dress!”

The front door opened up. “Honey?” said Doug. “Is that smoke?” With his coat still on, he dashed through the kitchen door to find Colin in a mess of smoke, burnt food and a screaming child. “What in the Sam Hill?”

An hour later, as they waited for a pizza to be delivered, and cleaned up the mess, Doug had taken Colin aside. “Darling,” he said, “I know you want to help around the house, but if this is what’s going to happen, maybe we need to re-examine this whole arrangement.”

“But darling...”

“Don’t interrupt me!” Doug commanded. “No, I don’t think you take being a homemaker seriously enough! I won’t have a woman who is anything less than totally focused on being a mother and a wife! Is it time to call the engagement off?”

“Please, no!” That horrified Colin. That would be the end of his grand plan. “Honey, I know this doesn’t look good, but I’ll try harder, I promise! Please!”

“I don’t know, Dorothy.” Doug rubbed his chin.

“I want to prove to you I can do it!” Colin declared. “I will be the best little homemaker in the neighborhood!”

“Don’t promise too much. You might regret it.”

“I’ll re-double my efforts. I’ll concentrate only on my duties. I will!”

“All right, but I don’t want a repeat of what happened tonight. I work hard all day, and I want to come home to peace and quiet.”

“I’m vey sorry, Douglas,”

“If I know everything is being taken care of here at home, I can focus on my job. If I have to worry about you and the kids... How can I possibly concentrate on work? Like today. Today was madness. I can’t pull through days like today with other problems on my mind.”

Colin already knew what he was going to do. He was going to be perfect. He would be like one of those ladies in the old movies Doug loved so much. Always there for her family and in complete control of all things domestic. No

more leaving dinner to the last second. He'd have it all planned out days in advance.

From now on, he'd take a few minutes just before Doug came home to pause, make sure everything was ship-shape, the girls were quiet, and Doug's chair and slippers ready for him. He knew his place, and it was to support Doug in every way. He didn't know where he would find the time, but he would have to do it.

"Now get me a drink," Doug said.

Colin got up and walked briskly over to the antique liquor cabinet he had just stocked. "Gin and tonic?"

"That's right. And don't forget the lemon," Doug said.

Colin merrily made his fiancée the drink the way he liked it. Doug didn't have to say please or thank you. After all, he was just doing his job — a job he was going to have to do much better, starting now.

Colin put the drink in Doug's hand, and Doug grabbed Colin's wrist before he could get away. "Have a seat," he told Colin, tapping his lap. "I had a rotten day and I need to get it off my chest."

The young man in the dress reluctantly did as he was told, and Doug guided Colin's arms around his neck. "Like this?" Colin asked.

"Thatta girl," Doug said, placing his free hand around Colin's back. "Now let me tell you about my day..."



"Mommy!" Screeched Elliot from upstairs.

Colin was on a stool, dusting the top of a bookcase and sighed. He hoped whatever it was would pass.

"Moommmmyyyy!" Elliot wailed again.

"What now?" Colin said, wiping his brow. He carefully stepped down and then headed upstairs, holding his long skirt up as he did.

"Mommy!" Elliot screamed again.

"Mommy's coming!" Colin yelled back. Today, Aiden was at the office with his father, as part of a "bring your daughter to work day," leaving Colin and Elliot by themselves in the big house. He reached the top and made the turn into the children's room.

Elliot was sitting in the middle of the room, in his party dress, and legs splayed out. Tears were rolling down his flushed cheeks. "I fell down," he said, sniffing. "I got a boo-boo."

Colin groaned. He was all for Elliot's impeccable performance as a child, but sometimes it was just too much. "Knock it off, Elliot," he said. "I don't have the patience today."

"Kiss it and make it better?" Elliot said raising up his apparently unharmed elbow.

"You're a grown man," Colin said. "Act like it."

That was when Colin could see the pouty lower lip on Elliot start to tremble, just like a little girl would do. Was his brother so deep into the impression that he had begun to believe he really was 'Emily?' Colin had considered this before, but had chosen to believe otherwise. Now he was worried. Really worried.

"Elliot. Please. Don't push me."

"Are you mad at me, Mommy?" Elliot replied, rubbing a eye with his hand.

"Come on, get up." Colin roughly grabbed his brother by the arm and got him to his feet. "You're nearly old enough to drink beer, for God's sake. Act like it for once." All Elliot did was look up at Colin, eyes wide and lost. "You know your birthday is coming up in a couple of weeks. The big two-oh."

"I'm seven!" Elliot replied. "And a haf!"

"Now you're just being ridiculous."

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Elliot asked. "You're acting all funny."

"That does it," Colin said. "I'm gonna snap you outta this."

A half hour later, the boys were dropped off at their old apartment building. It had been over a month since they had left it, but it still looked like the same depressing, decaying building they had grown up in. That would never change.

Colin had an odd feeling of discomfort. A cold breeze caused him to shiver. This place was both very familiar and unfamiliar to him. Had living in the bright, clean suburbs made him forget where he came from?

The reason for the trip was to see if he could find a set of keys he was sure he had accidentally left behind in the move. He had been meaning to do this for a while, but trying to shake Elliot back into shape was the excuse he needed. The hope was that seeing these familiar surroundings would jolt Elliot back to reality.

Colin tapped the keycode and headed inside with Elliot holding his hand. He looked even more intimidated than Colin felt. They trudged up the concrete steps in the cold stairwell that they had climbed and descended a million times before.

"You remember this place, don't you, Elliot?" Colin prodded.

Elliot didn't answer. Colin opened the front door and found the apartment dark, lit only by the light of the overcast sky outside. He stepped inside, only to

find a pile of mail on the floor. It must have been accumulating since the day they left, pushed through the mail slot in the door.

“It’s our old apartment. I bet that brings back memories,” Colin said out loud.

Curious, Colin picked a handful of mail up. As he did, Elliot ran past, into the apartment. He was about to go after him, but Colin did a double-take when he looked at the mail.

Letter after letter was addressed to “Dorothy Farmer.” He had never signed up for anything as Dorothy. Why was he getting mail in her name? Then he looked closer. The electricity bill was for Dorothy Farmer. The solicitations for credit cards were for Dorothy Farmer. There was even a letter from the DMV to renew the ID of Dorothy Farmer.

Colin grabbed another pile of mail. There was nothing for Colin Finch, nor Elliot Finch. Not a single thing.

“Mommy!” Elliot called. It sounded like it was coming from Elliot’s room. Colin flipped on the lights and got another shock. The place was clean and tidy. All the furniture in the apartment had been covered in white sheets. He distinctly remembered leaving the place in a bit of a wreck. Someone had been here, but who, and why?

“What is it?” Colin said, coming to Elliot’s room.

“Lookit!” Elliot said, showing off the pile of stuffed animals that was resting on his old bed. “I musta forgot to take ‘em!” He picked a giraffe up and hugged it. Elliot’s room, over the years, had taken on the look of a bombed-out bunker. But now, the walls were bright and white with pink polka-dots. The furniture was white and clean.

“This... This isn’t our apartment,” Colin concluded. He backed out, being careful not to touch anything. That was when he noticed that there was a sign hanging from Elliot’s door, that read “Emily’s Room” in purple and pink sparkles.

To further investigate, he headed to the next door, and found his old room, the one he had abandoned after taking up residence in his mother’s room. Opening the door, he expected to see the broken bed he used to sleep on, the mountain bike he had been meaning to fix for the past five years and the piles of trash bags in the corner that contained all their old male clothes.

Instead, there was a sewing machine. Also, a small sewing desk, a collection of thread spools and a dress dummy. The walls were painted a plum color and had a white lace detail pattern winding along, waist-high. A small antique lamp with stained glass shades was shining light on a picture frame. It was a picture of Doug.

If that wasn't enough to convince him that this apartment belonged to his alter ego, there was a small framed crochet piece on the wall that read "Dottie's Hideaway."

That sent a disoriented Colin back out into the main living room. He wanted to sit, but everything was covered.

"Can I take these back wif me, Mommy?" Elliot said as he carried an armload full of stuffed animals out of his room.

"Set those down, okay?" Colin said, his voice low and serious. He directed Elliot to drop them on a table. He removed the sheet that was covering it, to find an antique table with a lace cover that he had never seen before in his life. A tiny gasp escaped his red lips.

He turned back to his brother. "Tell me that you remember, okay? Please. Just tell me that you remember Elliot. And Colin. And who we used to be."

Elliot, a stubby finger in his mouth, looked back blankly.

"Please. For goodness sake! I feel like I'm going crazy." Colin held his head in his hands, trying to make any sense of his memories.

"You're not crazy, Mommy," Elliot said.

Colin's head jerked back up. "You... You remember?"

Elliot, still with a finger in his lips, looked around suspiciously, one way then the other. In the slightest way possible, he nodded.

"Your name is Elliot. Mine is Colin. That's the truth, right?"

Elliot nodded once more.

"Thank God," Colin said, with his relief as visible as if it were a plume of steam rising from his head. Then he had another urgent question. "Why... Why didn't you just say so?"

"I... I thought you were testing me." He still spoke in that slightly lisp, trilling voice of a little girl. "You said we were going to pretend until it was over."

"I didn't mean... I didn't mean it like that..." Colin said. "But you really do know who you are, right?"

"I'm Emily," the younger brother said. "Or Elliot. I'm bof."

"Both?" Colin said. "And who am I?"

"Mommy. And Colin."

"No, I'm just Colin, okay? I'm just pretending."

"You don't want to be my Mommy anymore?" Elliot said, his hands up against his shoulders. His big, innocent eyes began to tear up.

“No, no, no, sweetie,” Colin said, with his Dorothy instincts taking control. He immediately brought Elliot in for a hug. “We’ll always have each other. I just don’t want to stop being Colin.”

“You’re not going to take my Mommy away?” Elliot asked.

*Oh God*, Colin thought to himself. *Why did he have to put it that way?* “No, of course not,” he finger-combed Elliot’s hair as he spoke. “I’ll still be your Mommy. I’ll be... Uh... Both, I guess?”

“I wanna go home,” Elliot said, burying his face into Colin’s side.

Colin was going to point out that this was their home, but he was feeling the same way. He just wanted to be back at his house, looking after the kids and making dinner. “I’ll get a car,” he said, working his phone with his free hand.

This whole con was getting out of control, and now, he realized it was messing with their minds.

Elliot spent the whole ride back to Candlewick Court in his brother’s arms. At home, Colin started dinner and made preparations for Doug’s arrival, knowing that with two hours left, he barely had enough time.

Colin’s state of mind was not done any favors as he returned home. A door off to the side of the living room immediately caught his attention, because that door hadn’t been there when they left. Timidly, cautiously, Colin went to go investigate, and found that Dottie’s sewing machine and supplies had followed him back here. When he sat down to see if the sewing machine was real, he found himself instinctively starting it up, threading the machine and operating it skillfully. He mended six pairs of Doug’s socks before he even realized what he was doing.

But it couldn’t be real, could it? Colin tried to find some rationalization for the seeming teleportation of the sewing supplies from the apartment to the new house. Maybe Doug had arranged it? Maybe they had left the apartment the moment before the movers had arrived, and then arrived home just as they had finished moving? That had to be the reason. It just had to be.

Time was wasting, though, and dinner still needed to be made. There was no time to get side-tracked by his faulty memory, he told himself. He headed to the kitchen where he fried up the stove burners.

By the time Doug came through the front door, Colin was greeting him with his slippers and a kiss. He had learned the value of being fully prepared and focused for Doug’s return every night, and had banished his daytime doubts to a distant part of his mind. He had gotten very good at compartmentalizing lately.

Aiden was with him, excited and a bundle of energy after having spent the day with his father at work. “Did you enjoy your day at the office with your daddy?”

“It was the bestest!” Aiden proclaimed, jumping up and down in his mary-janes. “We made copies and stapled papers and this nice lady took me to the cafeteria and we saw the scientists and then we had a meeting and...”

“What did you two do to occupy the day?” Doug asked Colin.

“We went down town and saw our old ’partment!” Elliot replied for Colin. “Oh, and I got my toys back from my old room and wait until you see ‘em! So many!”

“Show me!” Aiden demanded, with both the young kids excitement levels at maximum. They ran upstairs as fast as their little legs could take them.

“No running in the house!” Colin scolded. He walked over to the minibar and began mixing Doug’s evening drink. “Did it really go all right? No questions?”

“It was the strangest thing,” Doug said. “I assumed I’d have to do a lot of explaining about Aiden now being Abigail, but no one seemed to care at all. The ladies were fawning all over her, telling me how adorable she is. The fellas were warning me about raising a heartbreaker.”

Colin handed Doug his drink as he sat on Doug’s lap. “And you were worried.”

Doug sipped from his tumbler. “I’m just not sure if my co-workers were being tolerant and understanding or if they just never paid any attention to me and my family before.”

“They pay attention to you now that you’re a vice president, though.”

“Damn straight they do — if they know what’s good for them,” Doug said.

Colin loosened Doug’s tie. “No one said *anything*?” He asked, still puzzled.

“No, not a word.”

“Strange,” Colin observed. Could it be that these strange happenings weren’t just limited to him?

“I like the new furniture, though,” said Doug as he gave Colin a playful pat on the bottom. “From your old apartment?”

“Furniture?” Colin made a little smirk.

Doug used a flick of his head to indicate where he was looking. “That mirror’s new, isn’t it? Or am I that unobservant?”

Colin looked and saw that, indeed, a full-length antique wooden-framed free-standing mirror was placed by the front door. He had never seen it before. Should he tell Doug about the new sewing room? Surely he had noticed it. No, Colin decided, he didn’t want to cause dear Douglas any stress. That just wouldn’t do. He detached from Doug and went to go take a look at this new mirror.

“Is dinner ready? I need to go clean up.” Doug stood and put his drink down.



“It’ll be on the table in five minutes,” Colin said as he examined the mysterious piece of new furniture. “Pork chops.”

“Outstanding! Love your glaze,” Doug said, as he left for the washroom.

Colin put on his rubber gloves and tightened his apron as he prepared to go back in the kitchen and finish up dinner. But Colin couldn’t help but be drawn to the mystery of the mirror. He took a close look at it to make sure he wasn’t just making a silly mistake. It was definitely hand-crafted, in an old-world way. Looking at it from top to bottom, he focused in on the base. The wooden feet of the mirror were distinctive. That’s when he recognized it. It had come from the apartment. It had been covered by a sheet, and that’s why he hadn’t placed it before. The feet, though, had caught his attention earlier this afternoon, they were distinguishing enough to remember.

“Mommy?” Elliot said as he had come back down stairs. “Did you bring all my toys here?”

“What’s that, sweetie?” Colin replied, only half paying attention. He was preoccupied by the mirror.

“All my toys and stuffed am-in-als are in our room!” He looked a little worried. “Remember, Mommy? I didn’t take everything. I couldn’t carry it all But it’s all there now!” He came up to Colin’s side and embraced his leg for comfort.

“What did you say?” Colin was still transfixed, trying to figure out how this had all happened. As he cradled Elliot’s head with his hand, he looked up and saw their reflection. “Oh my goodness,” he said with a gasp.

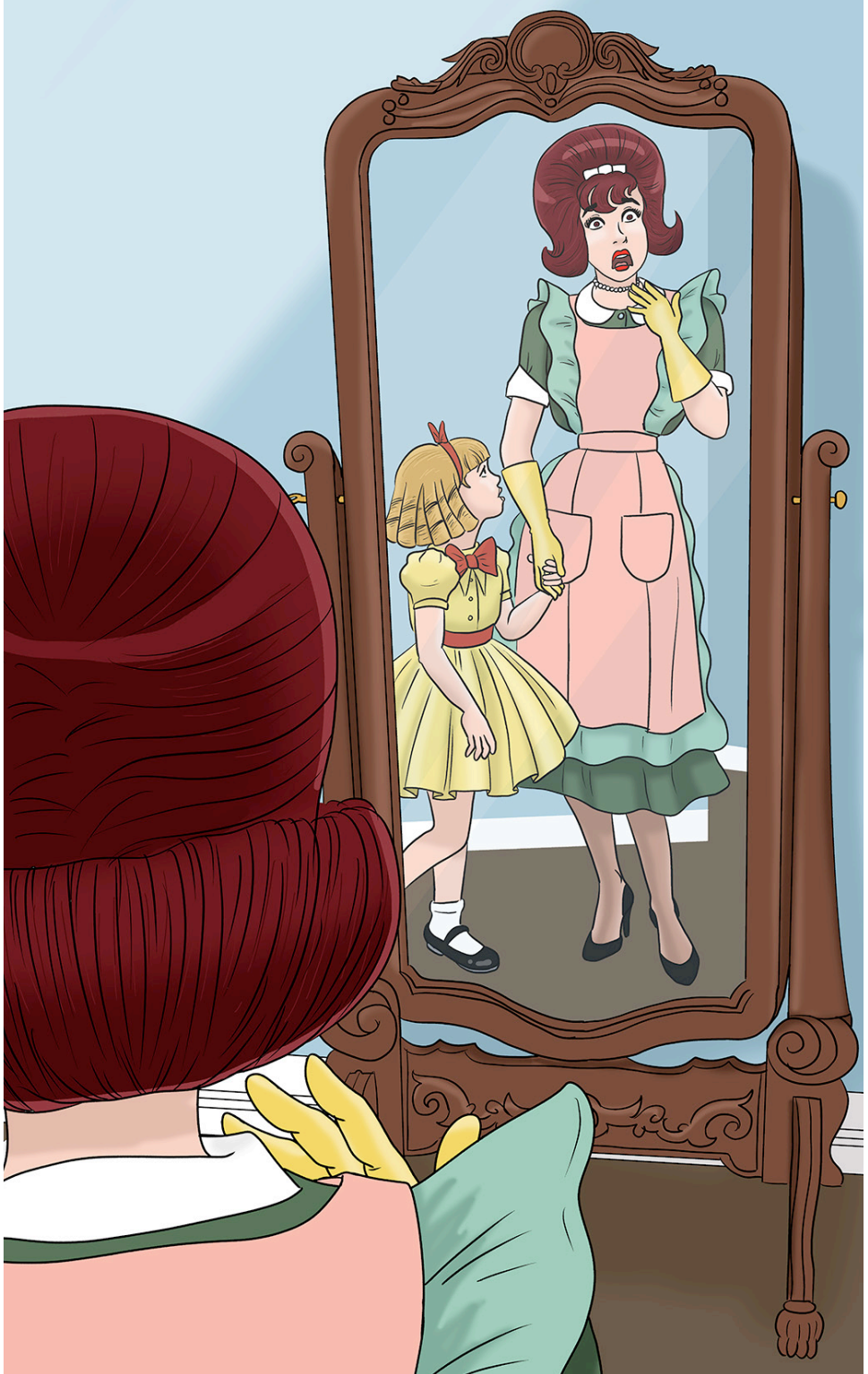
It was now, at this moment, that for the very first time, Colin saw what he and his brother had become. He saw the reflection of a young mother, with a thin body and a bust. She was immaculately dressed and carefully made up, looking like picture postcard from the past. By her side was a little girl, no more than six or seven, her face innocent and filled out by baby fat.

This wasn’t someone else, though — it was him. Him and his brother. Elliot stood by his side, but this person didn’t even resemble Elliot. This was a young girl, a *little* girl. She was barely three and a half feet tall. She was so tiny, not like the nineteen year old young man Elliot was supposed to be.

These changes weren’t subtle. How had Colin let it go by virtually unnoticed? He could barely even understand what he was seeing.

Sure, he knew he had lost weight. Sure, he had felt some flab in his chest. But now, looking at himself in this mirror, it became perfectly clear that he had somehow deluded himself into ignoring something very disturbing.

He had become the very embodiment of a housewife in the prime of the suburban age of America. He could have stepped out of an old movie or TV show. He was shorter, slimmer, and with breasts.



Once again, he was drawn to the fact that he had breasts — how could that have possibly happened? How could any of this have happened?

He wasn't even *sure* it had happened, really. He had to move his arm and shake his head a little to verify that the reflection was truly him. The reflection did just as he did. Everything seemed to check out.

Half of him wanted to panic. That half could clearly comprehend the unbelievable reality that was laid out before him. He was no longer pretending to be a woman, somehow he had become a woman — at least in appearance. The same fate had befallen his little brother. It was horrific and terrifying. They were no longer themselves. His mind wanted to fall apart from a confusion it was never built to deal with.

But the other half of him merely regarded the reflection as what it would expect to see. It expected to see a woman with a tiny waist in stylish, vintage clothes. It expected to see an atomic-age housewife with her darling little girl by her side. It expected to see Dottie.

He removed the yellow rubber glove from his right hand. Reaching out to touch the image, his long, nimble fingers, tipped with shiny red nail polish clacked on the glass of the mirror. What could have caused this? What corruption of reality had occurred to...

"I'm so hungry I could eat a horse!" Came Doug's voice.

Immediately, Colin snatched back his hand and ripped his attention away from the mirror. He had forgotten all about dinner, and that was the most important thing in the world right now. "You go upstairs and get Abigail, okay? Wash up. We're eating."

"Yes, Mommy," Elliot said, happy to have something to do, and ran up the stairs.

Colin was already speeding his way to the kitchen. "What did I say about running in the house?"

"Sorry, Mommy!"

Three minutes under the broiler would heat everything back up and the potatoes were fine as they were. The gravy was in a pot and just needed a few seconds on the burner. Where had he put the gravy boat? It was on the top shelf, left cabinet, two doors over from the sink. *Oh, there was no time to waste! Douglas expected his dinner!*



As the days passed, it was nearly impossible for Colin to gather his thoughts. In the back of his mind, he knew that something indescribably strange had been happening to him, but he could not spare the time to think about it.



There was always something that was more important.

If he wasn't in the kitchen, cooking and cleaning, he was looking after the girls and taking care of them. There were trips to the grocery store, to the salon, to the dry cleaners and so much more. The girls needed exercise, and Douglas insisted they be walked to the park at least once a day to play.

At home, there was always laundry to be done, the furniture and floors must be kept clean, the bathrooms sanitary, and clothes and linens must be kept organized. A new responsibility had been added to Colin's duties as well — sewing.

Colin had found that there was nothing quite as calming as sewing in his life. All his worries drifted away when he was at his sewing machine or crocheting something. He had just begun work on a quilt project and was making quick progress. In fact, if he had a minute of spare time, he found himself at his increasingly beloved sewing machine, trying something new.

Still, Colin was helpless but to put every ounce of concentration and focus he had into housekeeping. He only had a moment or two to spare in between tasks to contemplate what had become of him and his brother, and how it had all come to be. It took him days just to form a single thought.

Somewhere in his mind, he did recall that single moment just a few days ago where he had seen himself and Elliot in the mirror. He still felt that pain in the pit of his stomach when he realized that he had changed dramatically, alongside his brother. The changes were too severe to put down to diet or makeup. They appeared to have turned into the people they were pretending to be. But that was just insane. Could it be true? He had no time to even think about it, though. Colin was so busy.

"Douglas, honey," Colin said to him as they ate Dottie's delicious tuna noodle casserole for dinner. "I was wondering about getting a car for myself. Using car share services can't be cheap, and it does take so much time out of my day."

"A car?" Douglas replied with bemusement. "You're serious?"

"Well, I could certainly use it for groceries, running errands, shuttling the girls around... A car would be ever so helpful."

"No, I don't think so," Doug said, chuckling dismissively.

Colin was shocked. Doug didn't even entertain the thought. "But... Why not?"

"First of all, I am not going to be responsible for putting another woman driver out there on the roads!" Doug said, with a laugh.

"Woman driver!" Colin replied, offended. "That's the most absurd thing I've ever heard! That's incredibly sexist!"

"Now, now, don't get all emotional, darling," Doug responded. "I think that statistics bear me out on this. Besides, it's exactly that kind of outburst that

makes you a poor choice behind the wheel. A calm, cool head is needed to drive a car.”

“Honestly, Douglas! Of all...”

“Secondly, I don’t want you running all over town. You can always call for a car if you need to go somewhere. You’re a homemaker, Dorothy, and your life is here, tending to the house and our precious girls. That’s your place. Or do you have better things to do?”

“L...”

“Well?” Doug snapped, with a withering glare.

“No, of course not,” Colin replied. He wanted to fight back, but not at the dinner table, and not in front of the kids. Besides, deep in his heart, he felt the same way Doug did. “I didn’t look at it that way.” Colin released his anger and smiled. “Of course, you’re right, darling. I’m sorry.”

“Now, that’s my girl,” Doug said, with a satisfied grin.

So Colin would find himself just as busy as ever, and his urgent need to stop and really think about his situation was delayed yet again.

“Tell you what, while Dottie does the dishes, we’ll all play a few games of Candy Land.”

“Candy Land!” Elliot and Aiden sang out, excitedly.

Colin wasn’t sure he liked being treated as simple-minded as one of the children, but a fun family board game did sound nice. “That would be wonderful, darling. But before anyone gets to play, I want to see three members of the clean plate club!”

“Awwww!” Aiden and Elliot chimed.

“You can do it. You’re almost finished already.” Colin looked down at his own plate, and as he used his fork to scrape up the last few bites of dinner, he wanted to be angry with Doug. Having a car would solve so many problems and give him back time. Time he needed to think. To refuse his request because he was a woman was downright... *Insulting*.

Or it would be, as he reminded himself, if he was a woman.

Still, Doug did have a point about staying home to watch over the children, Colin reasoned. He had to admit that Doug’s heart was in the right place. Colin knew that Doug really was a big old teddybear, even if he had been acting more and more dictatorial lately. Besides, he was right most of the time, in Colin’s opinion, and it was thrilling to see him finally take charge.

It’s also important to work together as a couple, and in any partnership, someone has to take the lead, and Colin figured that for many reasons Doug should do it. And truthfully, letting Doug make decisions had paid off so far, Colin admitted to himself, and he was a very smart man. Colin was starting to

understand that Doug was as smart and as confident a man as he had ever met, and to defer to him was just natural.

Doug probably made the right decision, Colin finally admitted as he finished up cleaning the pots, pans and dishes for the night. As he untied his apron and hung it up, he could hear the kids and Doug playing their board game out in the living room and laughing. Perhaps, he reasoned, he had been all wrong about the car. He wasn't that good a driver, and Doug knew that. Yes, Doug was certainly correct. He was too emotional, and it was good thing he wasn't on the roads, causing accidents.

So Colin came to a decision. Doug was right, as he always was. Women just shouldn't be behind the wheel, as emotional as they were. Their place was in the home. *His* place was in the home.

Colin returned to the living room, where the girls and Doug were playing their board game on the floor. He sat next to Doug on the clean, freshly vacuumed floor, leaning against his fiancée, and tucking his legs under him. "Forget I even brought up the car thing, darling. You were right."

"That's my girl," Doug said. "I knew you'd see it my way. Care to fix me a drink?"

"I'm sorry, I should have asked you before I sat down. How thoughtless."

"It's alright. You can get it for me now."

Colin, having gotten a full thirty seconds of rest, quickly rose up on his heels. "I'm so sorry," he said, mortified. "I'm just a mess tonight. Please forgive me." He mixed the drink and returned to Doug, carefully handing it to him. As soon as he took it, Doug cocked his arm and then swatted Colin on his derriere.

"Ooot!" Colin replied with a shriek. That wasn't just a playful swat, he realized, it was a spanking.

Aiden giggled. "Your Mommy got spanked," he teased Elliot.

Looking at Doug, shocked, Colin tried not to rub his throbbing bottom. He couldn't believe he'd just been spanked — and right in front of the girls! It was humiliating. Although, Colin had never been more impressed with Doug. He was commanding and decisive. He was so dominant, it made Colin quiver with excitement. He had never felt stronger feelings for him than he did right now. It was a shame they didn't have a physical relationship, Colin mused.

"Well, I deserved it," Colin said, sticking his chin out. "Let that be a lesson to you girls, don't ever put your needs before of the head of the household. Douglas had a hard day at work and all I was thinking about was myself." He turned and walked away. "I need to go check on something," Colin said. He was hoping there was some lotion in the bathroom cabinet to deal with the soreness on his tooshie.



At 101 Candlewick Court, a parcel delivery driver caused a stir in the Brundell household — especially for Colin.

“But I didn’t order anything,” Colin protested, cleaning his hands off on his pinafore apron. He brushed aside an imaginary stray hair from his bouffant. His high-heeled feet were pigeon-toed in anxiety.

The driver, a large, burly man standing in the doorway in his rugged, dusty shorts and florescent-striped work short was looking around for the camera. The one that would tell him that he was on some sort of prank show. He had seen a lot of weird stuff in his three years doing package delivery, but this was a new one. The woman before him looked like she had just dropped out of the 1950’s or something.

“Well, this is the right place, and you are...” He checked the name on the address label. “Mistress Dorothy Farmer?” To which he added, under his breath, “Seriously?”

“Yes, that’s me,” Colin replied.

“Then it’s yours,” the deliveryman said, and handed over his bulky, dirty electronic tracking device to be signed.

Colin signed it, careful not to let any of the grime or masculinity wash off on him, and asked for the boxes to be set down inside. The deliveryman wasn’t used that that level of service, but complied for the pretty lady.

“What’d you get?” Elliot said as he came trampling down the stairs, followed by his inseparable mate, Aiden.

“Well, I don’t know...” Colin said, his red-nailed hands on his wide hips. “Help me get it open,” he asked.

The two youngsters attacked the boxes like weasels clawing for their last meal, ripping them to shreds. Once the boxes were open, Elliot held up the contents. Clothes.

“Ribbons, shirts... Petticoats... Jumpers...” Colin said, going through the boxes. “Socks... Hats?” He picked on up. It was a beret. And everything had a crest design sewn into them.

“This letter came with it, too, Mommy,” Elliot said, holing a single page letter high above his head so Colin could take it.

“It’s from... A private grade school?” This was all confusing to the feminized young man, and he had to pause and read through the whole letter. As he did, re realized that all the clothes were too small for him, and were obviously school uniforms. “These are for you two,” he said to Aiden and Elliot, as he continued to read.



The two kids gasped and giggled with glee as they began to pick up their new maroon colored gifts and examine them even closer.

“I guess you girls are enrolled in school for the Fall...” Colin said, as he got to the end of the letter, welcoming “Abigail and Emily” to “The Margaret Wrenshaw Primary School” for the new school year.

“Can we try them on?” Elliot begged.

Colin was re-reading the letter for the fifth time and just nodded, not even realizing he was responding. The two former teenage boys grabbed the contents of the boxes and gleefully ran upstairs, giggling.

There was no indication of who had signed up Elliot and Aiden for a private school, but it did have all of their information correct, and they wouldn’t have sent a couple of hundred dollars worth of clothing on a whim. This had to be Doug’s doing, but that assumed that he had forgotten to tell Colin what he was up to.

Since Aiden was now apparently going to school as a girl, maybe Doug had tried to find a place to take him, as few schools would probably allow it. However, Aiden was still fourteen, and according to the letter, he was enrolled in the 3rd grade. None of this made sense. He reached for the phone, but was remembered that Doug had left strict instructions not to call him during the day unless it was an emergency. This was certainly important... But was it an emergency?

Undecided, Colin put the phone back on the hook. There were so many things that confused him these days. Now, he had to find a way to get his nineteen year old brother into school as a pre-teen little girl. Surely this was going to expose his plan, and ruin the whole scheme. Colin flopped down onto the couch, his hands holding the sides of his face. He felt like his head was going to explode.

The anxiety in his life was mounting by the day. The burden of keeping this ruse going was overwhelming, and keeping house for two girls and Doug was causing his nerves to feel like they were unravelling. The world felt like it was caving in on him, ever closer, ever more, every single moment.

Colin could feel his heaving chest as his breath became labored. He needed to find a way to relax. He needed a time out. Now, what had Doug suggested to do when he felt like he needed to take a break?



“So what do you feel like today, sweetie?”

“Just give me the works, Hildy,” Colin said as he went limp in Hildy’s salon chair. He arranged his skirt to avoid creases and then let his hands fall away and

leaned back. A warm towel was put over his eyes. He already could feel the anxiety draining away. Doug was right, a woman's second home was in a salon. This was the perfect way to unwind and feel fresh again.

"Well," Hildy said, poking at Colin's hair, "I do have some ideas. I think you should go more conservative and traditional. It will take some time, though."

"Oh, Hildy, I have nothing *but* time. Are my girls behaving themselves?"

The hairdresser looked across the salon, where Elliot and Abigail were sitting in chairs, playing on a couple of tablets. "They're little angels."

"Then do whatever you want to do," Colin said. "But do it slowly."

"Now, I've been studying up, and I have a great look for you."

"As long as Doug likes it, it's fine with me."

"Oh, he will *love* it. Classic vintage style." Hilda got to work, starting to wet Colin's hair. "After all, I need to practice for my new job!"

"New job! I'm losing you? But..."

"I'll be working at a new place. In a couple of months, I'll have my own little mini-salon."

"Well, congratulations." Then Colin was alarmed. "But what about me? Who can do my hair now?"

"You can come to my new place. It's inside a store called 'Madame La Fifi's.' It's out by the old..."

"The old bowling alley! Yes, I know. I don't want to burst your bubble, sweetie, but someone must be playing games with you. They tore that place down."

"They changed their minds," Hildy said. "Instead, they're going to refurbish it back to its heyday. At least that's the plan."

Colin whipped off the towel from his face to see if she was serious. "Don't tease me, Hildy! You wouldn't do that to your best customer, now would you?"

"I'd never tease you, Dottie."

"They're saving Madame La Fifi's?" Colin said to himself, breathlessly. "How... Delightful!"

"You'll love it, too. I hope you'll come and see me. And if you have any friends..."

"I'll practically be your shadow, Hildy!" Colin was truly excited at the prospect of a fully restored Madame La Fifi's, and was trying to control his breathing. "What a wonderful surprise. When do they re-open?"

Hildy shrugged. "It'll be a month or two. They have a lot of work. I mean, a *lot*."

"Oh, now I have to wait!" Colin pouted. He slumped back in the chair.

Hildy put the towel back over Colin's face. "Now just lie back and enjoy yourself."

That's exactly what Colin did, as he began to daydream about shopping at a such a wondrous place like Madame La Fifi's back in it's prime. It seemed almost magical. He saw himself spinning down the aisles, his petticoated skirt twirling around his legs as he danced back and forth between those glorious racks of shimmering, sheer, stylish, beautiful clothes. If he had been more aware, he would have realized he was humming a happy tune as he enjoyed his shopping fantasy.



Later, in the park, Colin was seated on a bench, his long legs bent to the side as he kept feeling his hair. It certainly was going to take a little while to get used to it, but Hildy was an absolute genius. This was going to take a bit more maintenance than he had to do previously, and he was going to have to be up an extra half hour to do it all. He made a mental note to set his alarm for 4:30 from now on.

Oh, he did hope that Doug would like it. If he didn't, he'd have to back to the salon tomorrow and have it done a different way.

Still weighing on his mind was trying to carve out a few moments to take a long look at himself in the mirror again. That nagging memory of seeing himself and Elliot as real females was playing on his mind constantly. But still, he had no time to just take a second look and see for himself if he were imagining things or overreacting or... If it were true? If only had could find the time.

The young man in feminine disguise watched his two charges play. Elliot and Aiden were taking turns pushing each other on the swings while singing "Frère Jacques."

He couldn't help but worry for them. What would happen to Aiden when he and Elliot ran out on them, stealing Doug blind? They way he and Elliot had bonded, it was hard to imagine a separation of two without deep, lasting trauma.

"Oh well," Colin said to himself. "That's the breaks. He can cry into his money pile. What's left of it." Colin got up and dusted his skirt off and slung his purse on his shoulder. "With their money, Aiden can buy new friends." Saying it out loud was more to try and convince himself he was indifferent than anything else.

"Is this seat taken?" Said a voice to his right. Colin turned to see a young woman clutching a book in her hands. She was probably in her mid-20's, wore glasses and a drab but still cute outfit of a long skirt, cardigan sweater and tennis shoes.

“No, not at all!” Colin sang back with a smile. “My name is Dottie. Those are my girls, Emily and Abigail.”

The willingness to share his assumed identity and refer to the two young men as “my girls” surprised Colin, but it felt natural, in a way. After all, he was quite proud of how well-behaved Elliot and Aiden were today — and they were just adorable in their little outfits.

“I’m Karen,” the woman said as she sat. She planted her thick book in her lap and opened it up to a bookmarked page. “Nice to meet you.”

For whatever reason, the first thing Colin checked on was if she was wearing a ring. She wasn’t. *Poor thing hasn’t found Mr. Right*, Colin thought to himself. *If she waits much longer, her looks will fade and she’ll be an old maid.*

The young woman had just begun to read her book, when she stopped and raised her head. “You know, I hope you don’t mind me asking, but why are you dressed like that?”

“Dressed like what, my dear?”

“Uh... Well, in that kinda retro-look.” She immediately became embarrassed. I mean, I don’t want to... I mean... If you don’t want to talk about it...”

“Please don’t be embarrassed. It’s just us ladies, here,” Colin said. “I picked this outfit up at Madame La Fifi’s. Between us girls, my Douglas just goes wild for the modern look. He can’t keep his hands off me.”

“Oh, I see,” Karen said, visibly puzzled. “Modern look?”

“So what do you do for a living?”

“I’m a schoolteacher.”

“How nice! Maybe you know. Have you heard of Wrenshaw Primary School? It’s a local school, but I had never heard of them before today.”

“I can’t say that I have.”

“It’s puzzling. Maybe they’re new.”

“They would have to be. I know all the schools in the area...”

“I’ll have to ask my Douglas.”

“Um, do you know where they are? I’m out of work at the moment, and maybe...”

“I have their card!” Colin said. He used his long-nailed fingers to flick open the clasp of his purse and took out a card that had come with the school uniforms. “Here. Good luck.”

“Oh, thank you!” Karen said, taking the card and examining it. “They’re not that far away, actually.”

“I like the name. It sounds prestigious. And traditional.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Karen replied. “Well, still... A job’s a job. I’ll give them a call.”

Checking the time, it was already running late. He had to have dinner in the oven in a few minutes. He hoped the steak had thawed by now. “Girls! Time to go!” he called out.

“So good to meet you, dear,” Colin said. “And don’t worry if you don’t find work, after all, you still have some time to find a man.”

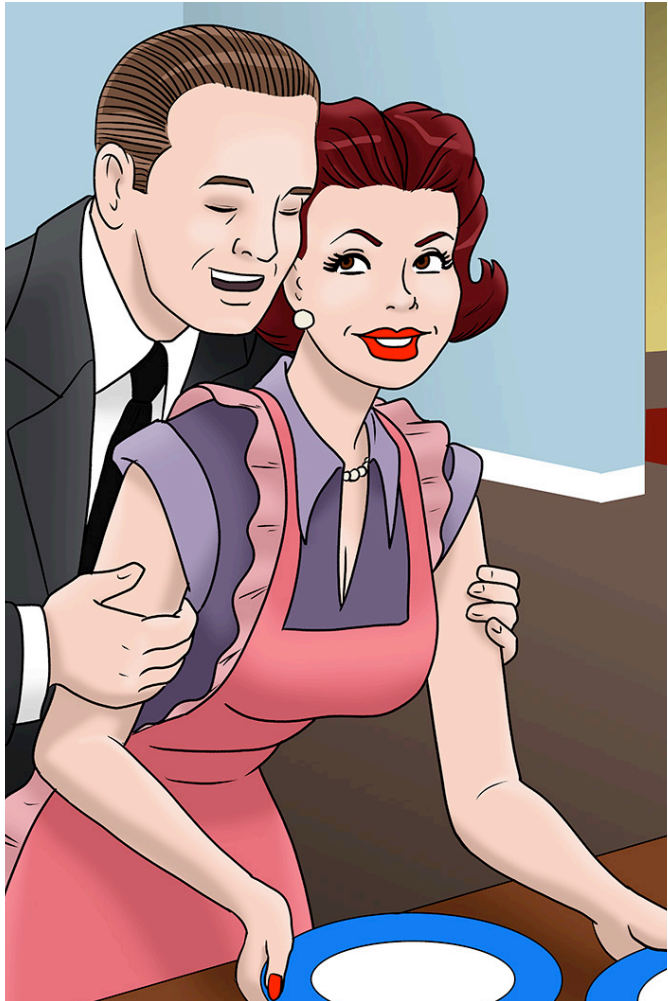
Karen was too shocked to mount any kind of coherent reply. “Uh, yeah...”

A few hours later, when Colin greeted Doug at the door, drink in hand, he kissed him on the cheek and took his coat. It was only when Colin had laid out the dinner spread that Doug made a double-take. “Did you do something...?” He asked. “Is that a new dress?”

“Her hair, Daddy!” Aiden said, rolling his eyes. Elliot held his tiny hand over his mouth as he giggled.

“I’m just teasing,” Doug said with a smile. “I love the new look. It’s like coming home to a whole new woman!”

Colin’s skin went flush at the remark. He actually started to feel a little warm and knew he was blushing. Getting a compliment from Doug was the best feeling in the world to him. He was so preoccupied that he never even bothered to ask if Doug had been the one who signed the kids up at the new school.



With the kids away at their new private school, Colin had spent the morning cleaning and then some grocery shopping. He was having a more and more difficult time making decisions. One laundry detergent claimed it would get clothes cleaner, but another one said that it would get them whiter. It made it so difficult. "If only Douglas were here," he said to himself, "He could tell me what to do."

After a couple hours choosing groceries, Colin finally made it back home and was putting away the cans in the pantry when he heard the school bus pass by. The 'girls' had been at Wrenshaw Primary for over a week, and there weren't any problems. No one at the school had said anything but glowing comments about how well-behaved they were. As for their part, Aiden and Elliot had been delighted to be at a new school and were already bringing friends home to play. Aiden in particular seemed to be overjoyed, the weight of his boyhood having been left behind.

Colin was at the door to greet them as they came running across the yard, squealing and laughing.

"Did you have a nice day at school, girls?" Colin asked as they approached.

"We made paper airplanes!" Aiden declared.

"An' then we flew them!" Elliot added.

"Sounds like fun. Come on, let's get you changed and then I'll take a look at your homework, okay?"

"Okay!" Aiden said.

"Okay, Mommy!" Elliot sang. They both came in and dropped off their lunch boxes in the kitchen and then carried their backpacks upstairs, their short skirts fluttering as their young, energetic legs propelled them upstairs like they could fly.

Colin finished up with the groceries and then headed upstairs, hearing the constant chatter of the two kids before he even got into their room. They were halfway undressed, carefully putting their sweaters and skirts away for use tomorrow. That curious sensation Colin had been experiencing lately swept over him, a feeling that his brother and Doug's son were somehow out of place. He felt the same way every time he did his hair and face. Fortunately, it wasn't as strong as it used to be.

"Paper airplanes?" Colin began. "What else?"

"Nothing," Elliot said.

"Oh, um... We did have the exam today."

Colin nodded along as he picked up their blouses and put them in the hamper. "What subject?"

“No. A doctors-type exam, Mommy!” Elliot said with a smile.

“Doctors?” Colin repeated.

“Our physicals,” Aiden clarified.

A cold chill came over Colin. A physical exam would have exposed their secrets. Elliot would have been spotted right away. “Doctors? Did they... Did they have you undress?”

“Yup!” Aiden said.

“That’s how it works, Mommy,” Elliot said with a laugh.

It had happened. They had exposed themselves. He was worried this could happen, with the both of them so caught up in their characters that they would forget who they really were underneath their clothes. “Did they say anything? The doctors? Did they want me to talk to anyone?”

Elliot and Aiden looked at each other, puzzled. Then they shook their heads. “No, Mommy,” Elliot replied as he shimmied into his after school clothes.

Now Colin knew they were in trouble. “Did they act strangely? Did they want you to come out of class? Did they give you a note to give to me?”

“No,” Aiden replied.

“Nuh-uh,” Elliot answered. He looked into a mirror to put his hair bow into place.

*What could that mean?* Colin thought to himself. *Surely, the doctors had seen the truth for themselves.* He figured that the school administration had immediately been alerted to the fact that Elliot was a boy in disguise. They may or may not have known about Aiden, but Elliot would have been a complete shock.

Unless, of course, Elliot had been clever enough to make himself look like a girl where it counted. “Pumpkin,” she said to Aiden. “I think your braids unravelling. Why don’t you go into the bathroom and do them over, okay?”

“Okay!” Aiden said, and dashed off.

Now with Aiden out of the room, he could check with Elliot on what exactly had happened at school, and figure out how bad the damage was. “Take off that dress, sweetie,” he said to his brother. “I want you to show me what you showed the doctor, okay?”

“But I just put it on!” Elliot whined.

“Please, honey.”

Elliot pouted, his lower lip sticking out, but did as he was told. He wriggled back out of his dress and tossed it aside, petulantly stomping his feet a little.

## ESSENCE OF ROSE

“What’s that?” Carmen asked, as she looked up from her knitting. “It looks like a wedding invitation.”

“I think that’s what it is,” her husband, Pierce replied. The envelope was embossed in floral detail and printed on textured, fancy paper stock. He wedged his finger into the flap and tore it open. Pulling out the card, he read it aloud. “You are cordially invited to the wedding of Rosalyn and Derek Whitaker.”

“Fucking Derek,” Carmen said.

Pierce Lawson was used to that type of response from his wife. In a way, he didn’t blame her at all. His job, as a merchandiser for Rothway Federated Stores, meant he had to develop close relationships with his biggest and most important suppliers. Pierce’s biggest and most important supplier, by far, was Derek Whitaker.

“He’s not *that* bad,” Pierce felt the need to say.

Carmen focused her eyes on the twirling needles in her hands. “You’re right. He’s worse.”

Knowing his wife like he did, Pierce walked up to her side and kissed her on the cheek. “He’s definitely not worth fighting about, that’s for sure.”

“Well, I’m not going, if that’s the next question,” Carmen said, kissing him back on the nose. “No matter how handsome my escort is.”

“It’s not a formal thing,” he answered as he put the invitation, along with the rest of the day’s mail, on the coffee table. “You don’t have to dress up.”

“I don’t have to dress up because I’m not going.” She smiled back and then went back to knitting the sweater she had been working on all week.

Pierce had to at least do what he could to cajole Carmen into going. It was no real negative if she didn’t go, but it would be a big plus if she did. It was true that Derek Whitaker was not the nicest human being on this Earth. In fact, Pierce had always found him irritating and pompous. He had an ego big enough to rival the Goodyear blimp and had to be the center of attention no matter where he was. Derek was an overgrown frat boy who wasn’t bright enough to recognize that almost everyone hated his guts, and worst of all, he was actually quite handsome.

In terms of business though, Derek held all the cards, and it was Pierce’s most important job to keep him happy. “It’s just about networking, honey,” he explained to his wife.





“You dragged me to his Fourth of July party instead of going to my folks’ house last year.” Carmen was not going to be coerced. She had good reason to hate Derek. “You forced me to go to his birthday party instead of taking those tickets from my brother to go see Book of Mormon. Then there was the time I had to tell my best friend to go to Barbados without me when you decided I needed to be here to have a Christmas party to entertain him and your co-workers.” Carmen was trying to keep her tone civil. “And he cancelled on us anyway. That was all in the name of ‘networking.’”

“It’s just an hour. We drive there, smile, hand over a present and go.”

“You always say that it’ll just be a minute or two, and it turns into twenty or forty or an hour. You get to talking about business and it’s goodnight Gracie.”

“Carmen, I’d like you to go. Please.”

“No,” she said for the third time.

“Please.”

“Pierce, do you have any other friends? I mean, outside of business?”

Her husband didn’t have an answer for that. This had been a steady complaint from his wife for a while now. He had to admit that he spent a lot of time on his networking, probably at the cost of maintaining some of his personal friendships. But he had friends. Lots of friends. Just because he hadn’t been keeping up with them for a few years didn’t mean they weren’t friends anymore.

“I don’t mean to be vicious,” Carmen said, realizing she might have gone over the line there. “I just don’t want to go with you and waste most of a day being pleasant to unpleasant people.”

“You know I won’t *make* you do it,” Pierce said, eager to cut through the tension. “I love you too much to do that.”

“I know, honey.” She had one last comment to make before she let it go, though. “I feel sorry for whoever this Rosalyn is, though. That poor girl probably doesn’t realize she’s marrying into your business relationship with Derek. She’ll never see her husband with all the time you two spend together!”

“Laugh it up,” Pierce said, relaxing into his favorite chair. “But I still have to go. And since you refuse, I’m not even going to put your name on the gift.” He stuck his tongue out at her, in jest. Inside though, he envied her. She wasn’t going to have to drive an hour down the highway to some forgotten little church in the back woods, sit alone through an awkward hour or two of trying to talk to people he had never met before, and pretend like he was happy the whole time. But he couldn’t avoid it. He had to go.

Pierce’s job as a merchandiser was to secure the best products for his particular area of the business. He was assigned to ladies’ perfumes & toiletries, right out of college. Now at 28, Pierce had built a strong reputation

within the company for his ability to wrangle the exclusives all their competitors couldn't get. That reputation was going to be his ticket up the ladder. That reputation was everything to him.

That reputation hinged on Derek Whitaker.



“What do you think?” Derek asked, his bottles and jars lined up on Pierce’s desk. “Rothway would be nuts to miss out on these babies. These are the hottest goddamn products in the biz!”

This happened four years ago, the very first time Pierce had met Derek Whittaker. It was a sales call, Derek demoing the products he represented to the new buyer at Rothway — which was the young Pierce — just three months into his new job.

“The demand for this shit is crazy, my man!” Derek continued. “Not only are they just flying off the shelves, but the margins are batshit insane! If my boss knew I was even talking to you about retailing this stuff, she’d beat my ass until it bled!”

Pierce doubted anyone could even try to do that to Derek. He was a big man, six feet two or three, over two hundred pounds and all muscle. He didn’t even have a neck. His big shoulders just merged right into his jug-shaped head. Unless his boss was a feral gorilla, Derek seemed safe from physical threats.

“Well, what I’m most interested in,” Pierce said to the big man hovering over his desk, “is not so much the grooming products, but that perfume.”

“Ah, *Reminiscence!*” Derek said, picking up the bottle. “The ladies are buying this crap up!” He gave a couple of pumps into the air.

“Smells like roses,” Pierce observed.

“It smells like money to me! Fat stacks of cash.” He held up the frosted fancy glass bottle to ponder. “Margins Mother Teresa would slit a leper’s throat for!”

Pierce winced at that tasteless remark, but soldiered on. This was where he was going to make his mark at this new job. His career was going to be made if he could just get one hit product. He had done his research, and not only was *Reminiscence* ready to blow up in terms of popularity, but Derek was right about the margins. He had decided this was going to be his first big score for the company.

If there was one thing his father had taught him about business, it was one motto: Be selfish. No matter the cost, be it hurt feelings or a dent in the wallet, be selfish. Want the best. Get the best. Steal the best. That was how he had gotten Carmen, and it was how he was going to get rich.

Pierce drummed his fingers on his desk. “I want it, and I want the North American exclusive on it.” He brought out his personal checkbook. “Now tell me what I need to do to get it.” He filled in the check and asked, “One or two T’s in Whitaker?”

It was a bribe, plain and simple. Pierce wasn’t going to toil for years to wait for his big break. He was going to make it himself.

“Well, let’s talk,” Derek said, finding a seat.

They knocked out a dollar amount quickly and Pierce cut the check and handed it over. It was understood that this meant Pierce was going to get the exclusive on the fragrance *Reminiscence* for at least five years. Of course, Derek thought he was fleecing the poor fool, but Derek knew that if Rothway was going to retail it, it was going to have decent sales, and that meant residual commissions. For each bottle Rothway would sell, Derek would make a tiny percent, but it added up to potentially millions. So he was on board with whatever Pierce was going to do and back it with everything he had.

“I’ll need to run it past my boss, which will be a challenge. She’ll be a royal bitch. But I do have more than enough...” He kissed the check and tucked it into his pocket. “...Motivation.”

“*She?*” Derek inquired. “Sounds like a tough customer.”

“Rosie Vollbrecht. Beautiful gal, really gorgeous — totally frigid, though. She must jam ice cubes up her snatch every morning before she leaves for work.”

Again, Pierce winced in mental pain at Derek’s way of phrasing things. “You think you can do it?”

“Yeah, I can do it. I know just how to handle it, too.” Derek smirked, a grin that made Pierce immediately regret what he had just done. “In fact, I may just be able to defrost the ice queen herself with this.”



It was just a day later that Pierce got an unexpected, face-to-teeth-gnashing-face visit from the woman in question.

Derek was right about his boss. She was a beautiful woman, blond with fair skin and delicate features like an antique porcelain doll. She was almost too perfect. Her sparkling blue eyes were precious jewels and her plump pink lips like the petals of a dewy flower. A girl like her wasn’t supposed to be working behind a desk, dressed in a pale grey suit, slogging through an ordinary office workday. Girls like her were seen in pencil sketches of the gardens of ornate palaces or in paintings, lounging on plush cushions in the golden light of morning.

“Oh, Hi. Ms. Vollbrecht, isn’t it? Or do you prefer Rosie?”

“I prefer Rosalyn, which is my name,” she said, with a frown. “Only that neanderthal of a sales rep calls me Rosie, and I’ve told him several times to stop it. It borders on sexual harassment.”

“I see,” was the only thing Pierce could say.

“Now I understand that you and Derek think you’ve worked out some sort of exclusive with *Reminiscence*,” she said as she stood at the front of Pierce’s desk. “There is no such agreement, and Derek was not supposed to make *any* exclusive agreement at *all* regarding *Reminiscence* — or any product we sell.”

Pierce wasn’t going to let it go that easily, no matter how beautiful she was. “I have a contract, Ms. Volbrecht. A signed contract. Was he not authorized to bargain on your behalf?”

“He... He was authorized, but he was not supposed to sign a contract.”

“There’s a crucial difference between the term ‘supposed’ and ‘authorized,’ ” Pierce said with calm confidence. “What you want me to do is tear up a perfectly legal contract that will net my company quite a bit of money, just because you’re asking me to.”

“That idiot had no right!” Rosalyn said, her anger flaring up. “That scent was the last my mother made for our company, and it was *not* for sale!”

“Your mother?”

“My mother made all of our perfumes. She worked for years making unique fragrances that have kept our company going, even years after she passed away! My one responsibility to her was to make sure that we kept her company — her dream — afloat using the products she created. And *Reminiscence* was our last chance! Now, that idiot has signed it away!”

“I can’t help you, Ms. Volbrecht. I have a contract and I expect it to be honored. Besides, this is a lot of money. Your company will make more money in one year than you have in fifty. We have five hundred stores this will be sold in, and it will be promoted and marketed like no other fragrance you’ve ever made. You know that.”

“Like hell! I’ll sue! Derek Whitaker is a scum-sucking dirtbag who will rot in hell before I let him get this commission!”

Pierce was slowly starting to understand the dynamic here. Rosalyn Volbrecht had some serious beef with her top sales rep, and didn’t want him, and only him, to make such an important sale.

“Let’s be rational about this. I don’t want personal animosities to get in the way of something that will make both of us very happy.”

“I’ll be frank with you, Lawson. My father has been pressuring me to get married to Derek for years. He’s dead set on it. What he sees in that low-life degenerate, I can’t even fathom.” She finally took a seat and rested her head in her hands. “I’ve told my father I’d never marry him. I made the excuse that I

would never marry down to his middle-class level, the one thing that my father accepted as a reasonable justification.” She sighed and lifted her head back up. “I know it’s not your problem, but if he gets this sale, he’ll be our top earner. He’ll make millions. He will finally have the status my father has been waiting for.”

“You can still say no, I’m sure.”

“You don’t know my father. He won’t be defied.”

“Ms. Volbrecht, I don’t know what you want me to do. This exclusive is going to make my career. Do you really think I’ll sacrifice that for your... Social and romantic obligations?”

“If you were a decent man, you would.”

“You’re just trying to play to my sympathies. I won’t trade in my happiness for yours, plain and simple. I have a wife and a new house to think about. I have to do what I have to do. As someone once told me, no matter the cost, be selfish.”



In the present, Pierce had been driving all morning, and he had to stop and ask for directions twice to find the small church located in a desolate field. It looked like it had been neglected for decades, and it was hard to believe it was even standing, looking at the condition it was in. It was almost spooky.

This was going to be awkward, seeing Rosalyn after all this time. He could only assume that she had warmed up to the idea of marrying Derek, as her father had passed away a year ago, relieving her of any obligation to his wishes. Yet, here they were, about to tie the knot.

Still, he was hoping to avoid her, because it was bound to be a bit tricky. As he got out of the car and carried the small ribbon-wrapped gift box with him, he noticed that although he was running kind of late, there were only nine or ten other cars there. It didn’t look to be a particularly well attended affair.

On the steps of the church, a few pale pink and white ribbons tied to the iron railings were fluttering in the breeze, and a short man with thick glasses was waiting. He was looking very anxious as he kept glancing at a list he was holding. He then looked around and then adjusted his collar, and then back to the list. The black rose he had in the lapel of his black suit designated him as one of the wedding party.

“Hi, uh... Is this the Whitaker wedding?” Pierce asked.

“Yes!” The small man replied, briefly straightening up from the slight hunch in his posture. It was if he hadn’t even noticed Pierce pull up and walk over to the steps. “Yes! Are you here for the bride or the groom?”

“Uh, groom.”

“Name?”

“Pierce. Pierce Lawson.”

His smile was immediate and broad. “Ah, yes. Mr. Lawson. Very glad to see you. Rosalyn and I were afraid you wouldn’t make it.”

“Rosalyn?”

“My sister. You might know her as Rosie. She’s not too fond of that name, actually...” The small man’s eyes wandered away for a moment and then refocused on Pierce. “Well, you’re here, and that’s what’s important. Let’s get you seated, Mr. Lawson. My name is Proctor, by the way.”



“Well, Pierce is out at the moment,” Carmen said to her visitor. “He’s at one of his... *Business* engagements.” She led the woman inside and offered a seat. “I’m sorry he’s not here. Is there anything I can get you some tea? Coffee?”

“No thank you, I’m fine.”

Carmen had put her knitting to the side to answer the door. She didn’t want to get up from her seat as she was cozy and warm, curled up on the sofa in a blanket, but after the second ring, she had to attend to it. The woman there said she was Pierce’s co-worker, so she invited her in.

“Actually, I’m being a little facetious. He’s at a wedding. Probably someone you know. Derek Whitaker?”

“I couldn’t really say. Do you know when he’s going to be back? I can’t get him on the phone.”

“A couple of hours, I suppose. Probably longer if he starts to talk shop.” Carmen nestled down back in her spot. “He always talks shop.” She poured out some hot water from a kettle she had standing by. “What did you say your name was?”

“Rosalyn. Rosalyn Vollbrecht.” The fair-skinned beauty brought out a small perfume bottle from her pocket. “We were supposed to be talking about our best selling product, *Reminiscence*.” She spritzed it into Carmen’s face.

The young wife involuntarily squinted at the spray. Carmen then felt a little woozy. She blinked a few times as she reopened her eyes, her head feeling a little foggy. “Perfume?”

“Yes, my mother designed it herself. Her legacy to me.” Rosalyn put the bottle back in her pocket. “Maybe I *will* have some tea. Is it all right if I stay and wait for Pierce?”

Carmen poured a second cup for her guest. “I don’t see why not.”



The aisles of the church were sparsely populated. Seated on the groom’s side by himself, Pierce only saw two other people on his half, which he assumed were Derek’s parents, though they didn’t seem to be terribly interested in the proceedings. The woman was doing a crossword puzzle as she waited and the father was watching something on his phone.

The bride’s side only had six people, and only two of them were sitting together. Other than some sparse coughing, they were all seated quietly, waiting for the ceremony to begin. What made it strange was that all six of the bride’s guests were staring at Pierce. He had no idea why, and had to fight the urge to glance back. That would make it even more awkward.

Looking at the scant crowd seemed to confirm what Pierce knew about Derek — that he was a world-class asshole. Not even his own family wanted to show up at his wedding. Piece figured that it really shouldn’t come as a surprise that he was so disliked.

Checking his phone, he saw that it was almost ten minutes past the time on the invitation. The ceremony should have begun by this point. He also noted that his phone had no signal, so even if he wanted to call Carmen and beg for her forgiveness for being late coming back, it would be impossible.

That was when he finally saw Derek for the first time, dressed in his wedding tuxedo. He stuck his head out from the back, and then a moment later came out to talk to the priest, who was waiting patiently. After a few moments of discussion, which looked more like an argument than anything else, he and the priest left through a side door.

There was some rumbling and murmuring coming from the bride’s guests, undoubtedly from uncertainty. That was when Pierce felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Proctor, lurching over from the row behind. “Mr. Lawson. I wonder if I might prevail upon you for a favor...”

“A favor?” He replied, trying to speak softly enough not to be heard by the other attendees. “What kind of favor?”

Proctor looked over at the other aisle and saw the bride’s guests all fixing their gaze intently on the both of them. “Let’s go outside for a moment.”



If anything, the temperature outside the church was even colder, especially as the wind had picked up, blowing over the featureless plot of land. The sun was



dimmed behind clouds, and the sky was quickly becoming overcast. They met out in back of the church, in a small forgotten graveyard that was encircled by a knee-high picket fence.

“I didn’t want to say anything in there,” Proctor said, his hand on Pierce’s shoulder, “but the bride is delayed.”

“Delayed? How long?”

Proctor looked uncomfortable. “She... She probably won’t be able to make it. At all.”

“Shoot. Derek must be devastated. Did you want me to go talk to him?”

Proctor blocked his way back into the church. “No, no. That’s not why I wanted to talk to you. Rosalyn... Rosie is just unable to physically be here. She’s still completely committed to the marriage.”

“Well, that’s good,” Pierce replied, though puzzled.

“The thing is, both she and Derek want to do the ceremony today. We rented out the church, we’re paying the priest, we can’t get back the money, the guests have all flown out here from out of state... So, we need a stand-in for Rosie.”

“Is there anyone to do it?”

“We’re not on the best of terms with the bride’s side of the wedding party. They... They’re not really approachable on something like this.”

Pierce could believe that. They had been silently hostile ever since he had arrived.

“We’re out of options, Pierce.” Proctor clasped his hands together, in a pleading gesture. “Would you stand in for Rosie?”



Rosalyn had removed her shoes and was curled up on the sofa right next to Carmen. The blond-haired girl was feeling the sweater Carmen was knitting. “That’s impressive. I’d never have the patience for something like this.”

“Well, I have a lot of free time, by myself. Pierce works so hard.”

“Sometimes people work *too* hard, always wanting more, and ignoring what they’ve already got.”

Carmen sighed. “Tell me about it. Just between you and me, I don’t know where Pierce and I are headed. Sometimes it feels like a dead end.”

“I know what it feels like to be trapped,” Rosalyn said, sipping her tea. “It’s not fun.”

“I shouldn’t be telling you all this. I hope you can be discreet.”

“I won’t tell a soul,” Rosalyn said, making a zipped-lips gesture with her free hand. “Does Pierce talk about his work much?”

“Sometimes it seems that’s all he talks about. Especially that perfume you have there.”

Rosalyn took the bottle from her pocket. “*Reminiscence*? Well, it was his first big break. He owes a lot to this fragrance. Of course, this particular bottle is a special formulation. One not available in stores. I had it made just for me.” She spritzed it at Carmen. “It has kind of a magical quality, don’t you think?”

“It does have a... *Special* feeling to it,” Carmen said, as her expression glazed over. She had let her knitting fall into her lap.

“Carmen?” Rosalyn said, noting the dazed look in her eyes. “Carmen? You don’t look well. Why don’t you stand up and I’ll help you take that blouse off, darling.”

Carmen let the knitting drop to the floor, unnoticed, as she got up onto her feet. “Yes,” she said, “I do feel a little out of sorts... Darling.”

“You’ll feel better in a moment,” Rosalyn offered, as she started to undo the buttons.



In the changing rooms of the church, Pierce was standing by himself, unsure to what he had just agreed to do.

Proctor had assured him that it was a formality. The marriage between Rosie and Derek would be legal, even if there were a proxy in her place. The ceremony was just something they had to go through with, procedurally, and Derek would be eternally grateful for his assistance.

Of course, Pierce could also calculate what might happen if he refused. That exclusive for *Reminiscence* would be in jeopardy. He couldn’t risk offending Derek under any circumstances. His whole professional life hinged on having Derek on his side. In a way, he had no choice in the matter. He was trapped.

“Oh yes, thank you again,” Proctor said, as he returned to the changing room. “Derek was very happy to hear the ceremony was going on as expected. And I know Rosal... *Rosie* will be overjoyed.”

“I feel like an idiot. I hope there won’t be any photographs. This is embarrassing enough anyway.”

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Everyone surely understands that you’re helping us out in a tough spot.” Proctor smiled. “But I promise. No photos.”

There was just something about Proctor that didn't make Pierce feel he was quite telling the truth. "Alright, then. I guess I should ask: what do I need to do next?"

"Just be ready to say the words. That's really all you need to do. We'll take care of the rest."

"Easy enough, I suppose."

Proctor turned to leave, but stopped himself. "Oh, one more thing. Would you mind carrying a few things through the ceremony? It's kind of an old tradition. Something old, something new... You know they saying goes."

"Sure, certainly. What would you like me to do?"

"This is the ring she would have used. Just carry it in your pocket, so we can say it went through the ceremony." Proctor handed it over to Pierce. "Don't lose it. It's a family heirloom."

"I'll be careful with it."

"Please do. That's both something borrowed and something old. And, uh, to fill the something new and something blue, she was going to, uh... Well... This is difficult to say..."

"What?"

"She was going wear these," Proctor said, producing a powder blue set of finely stitched, silken panties and a matching bra.

"Heh," Pierce remarked. "Okay. Should I just..."

"I'll just fold them up and maybe you can use the other pocket of your suit to carry them."

Pierce watched as the strange little man carefully, respectfully, folded the garments up neatly. Pierce took them and quickly put them away in his coat.

"Fine. Wonderful. Thank you so much. Again, thank you." Proctor backed out of the room, smiling and nodding in appreciation. "We'll be getting started in just a few minutes."

Once he was alone, Pierce stood still for a while, and then began to pace a bit. With only his thoughts, he began to doubt himself once more. How in the world he could find himself in such a ridiculous situation was beyond him. Maybe, he thought, needed to re-think this business arrangement with Derek.

That when he got a mischievous thought. Making sure the door was closed, Pierce slowly took the powder blue undergarments out of his pocket and gave them a sniff.

They smelled like... nothing. They were new. That figured.

He quickly tucked them back in his pocket, and then tightened his tie. No one would be the wiser.

As he began to pace again, Pierce tried to think about anything else but what he was doing and why he was doing it. Unfortunately, he became distracted when he noticed a white, lacy dress hung up in a cabinet. He knew immediately what it was, it was Rosie's wedding dress.

Still curious, he leaned over and gave the dress a deep sniff.

It smelled like...



Roses.

Carmen giggled. Rosalyn smelled like roses. It had to be, didn't it? Her hair smelled like roses, her neck smelled like roses, even her nipples smelled like roses.

With both women disrobed from the waist up, their arms in an embrace and nuzzling each other's necks, Carmen found it so funny that Rosalyn smelled like roses. Magical roses. She was right. That perfume almost felt like it had cast a spell over her.

After all, it wasn't every woman Carmen took her clothes off for. In fact, Rosalyn may have been the very first one. It was hard to remember.

"Do you still feel neglected, sweetie?" Rosalyn asked.

"No!" Carmen replied, with a happy enthusiasm. "I've never felt better."

She backed out of the embrace and dove in on Rosalyn's lips. She wanted her to know just how much better she was feeling now.

Even her lips tasted like...



Roses.

A swirl of roses, mesmerizing roses that had made him woozy. It was almost as if he could see the trails of the fragrance wrap around his head and caress his face. His eyes involuntarily closed as he let the wonderful, mind-melting scent take over.

"Five minutes!" Proctor said, breaking Pierce's moment. The short man was sticking his head in the door, his expression a little more haggard than the last time Pierce had seen him. "Five minutes, and you don't even have the dress on yet?" He howled. "We're out of time!"

It took a moment for Pierce to fully comprehend though the fog of his mind what was being asked of him. "But I wasn't supposed to wear a dress..."

“Whoever heard of a wedding without a dress?” Proctor said, locking the door behind him. He started to help Pierce slip out of his suit jacket. “Quickly, now.”

Without any real resistance, but without helping, Pierce found his clothes being liberated from his body. A team of women flooded the small room and began to prepare him. He wasn’t even sure how his pants were removed, as he had never stepped out of them. It wasn’t long, though, before he had his arms in the air as the dress lowered onto his body. “At least I’ll have an amusing anecdote to tell my wife,” he told himself. No sooner than had the dress come to rest then the wedding march began outside.

Proctor quickly reached up and placed the veil on Pierce’s head. “We have to move, now!” He insisted.

“But how? Why do I have to...?” Pierce was still confused. “This doesn’t...” A spray of atomized perfume hit his senses and Pierce was unable to complete his thought.



## FIT FOR THE PART

“Hey, I got this,” Henrik said, as he hoisted out his wallet, disrupting the very fabric of the universe.

Every head at the restaurant table snapped in his direction, shocked that he was offering to pay for their food and drinks. Henrik had a reputation as a world-class mooch, and it was a well-deserved one. In fact, the only reason he was even allowed to come to dinner that evening was because his friends liked making fun of him whenever he developed a case of alligator arms.

Andy and Greg were dumbfounded enough, but that didn’t stop them from smiling with financial relief when they saw the shiny, untouched credit card emerge from Hendrick’s never-before-seen wallet, blessed by fate to be witness to this rarest of phenomena.

Not as impressed was Rajit, who could not believe Henrik was going to pull this shit on him. “Seriously?” Rajit said, rolling his eyes. “Who do you think you’re trying to fuckin’ fool?”

“What?” Henrik replied, knowing his reputation. “I’m just paying for a nice night out with my fellow thespians.”

“You want something,” Rajit concluded. “Something big.”

“I want to pay for our dinner, that’s all.”

Rajit and Henrik had a bit of a history. They had been bitter rivals since they had signed up for the arts school two years ago, both vying for the same top-billing parts in every school production. Their battles were legendary, and probably far more interesting than any actual theater production they had yet participated in.

Both Andy and Greg had tried to keep this dinner secret from Rajit, dreading the experience of having to sit through a meal with the two adversaries passive-aggressively arguing through it, but that subterfuge had failed, and both had wound up coming along.

All four of the young men at the table were members of the Upton Square School for the Performing Arts, all celebrating another day’s classes completed. It was late, as it usually was when they wanted to go out and do something after the last class of the day, and the restaurant’s staff was hanging around, ready to shut down for the night.

“Is that even a real card?” Rajit asked. “Who would give you a credit card?”

Henrik was still smiling. “You sure don’t know how to enjoy a free meal, do you?”

“I just think... Hey, forget the card — where did you get the money?”



“I... Uh...” That question seemed to wipe away Henrik’s smug expression. “Doing some stuff after work, that’s all.”

“Stuff?” Greg asked.

“What kinda stuff?” Andy followed up. “I could use some money, too.”

“Yeah what kind of stuff?” Greg eagerly waited the answer.

Knowing that he had to be truthful, because his story could easily be checked out by his friends, Hendrick tried to be as honest as he could, without embarrassing himself. “I just get paid a little bit to, you know, be a kind of companion.”

Andy didn’t know what to make of that cryptic answer. “Companion? To who?”

“Corey,” Henrik said. “He’s not familiar with the town, so he asked me to show him to some nice places to kill an evening.”

“Corey? Corey Roberts? The same one who’s teaching our classes?” Andy said.

“The Corey Roberts who’s a huge Hollywood star?” Said an equally incredulous Greg. “Or was.”

Corey Roberts was a former comedic child star who was now a late forty-ish actor, and was now teaching acting. Recently, the actor had gained a notable reputation as one of the most talented acting coaches in the world, and the boys were excited to have the opportunity to study under him. So far, though, he hadn’t been very sociable during classes and he didn’t spend any time before or after a class with the students. At least, it hadn’t appeared that way.

Henrik tried to look nonchalant. “Yeah, so, I just take him places and we spend the evening out.”

“He’s gay, you know,” Rajit said.

The only ones who were shocked by that comment were Greg and Andy, and Henrik’s cool reaction seemed to indicate he knew of Corey’s sexual nature beforehand.

“I don’t think that really matters... It’s just a rumor...” Henrik said, now starting to sink into his seat. “He’s not really gay, in the usual sense...”

Greg was working this over in his mind. “So let me get this straight, you’re taking money to be a man’s friend?”

“You’re a male escort!” Andy suddenly blurted.

“Ha!” Rajit laughed, seeing the trouble this could cause Henrik. “You’re a male gigolo! You fuckin’ whore!”

“Hey, I make good money! And there’s no sex or anything! It’s easy cash!” Henrik said defensively.

“I don’t care what you call it,” Rajit countered. “You’re selling yourself to be a man’s boy toy.”

“Fuck you!” Henrik snapped, offended. “I make more money than I ever have before... And who do you think is gonna get the best grades in class?”

That stung Rajit. He hadn’t figured that part out yet. The asshole was getting paid real money, not that that chicken scratch the student loans afforded students, and he had the clear advantage to get the top grade Rajit thought he was on his way to earning.

“Yeah, sure,” Rajit said, pretending to not be worried. “You’re lucky he asked you first. You probably didn’t even negotiate. If I had to sell myself, at least I’d get top dollar, straight A’s and a written recommendation.”

“Yeah, sure you would,” Henrik replied.

“I would! I bet you I could show him a better night on the town that you — and replace you — you fairy!”

“Yeah, right. Sure.”

“I’ll prove it!” Rajit said, getting up from the table and tossing his napkin down like a gauntlet.



“Oh!” Rajit said as he ran into his instructor, the aforementioned Corey Roberts. The collision threw his papers everywhere. It was the next afternoon,



and Rajit had been waiting for twenty minutes for Corey to show up at the rear entrance to the classroom, just so he could *accidentally* collide with him.

“Whoops!” Corey said in his deep baritone voice. He backed away a step. “I’m sorry. I didn’t see where I was going.”

“Oh no, totally my fault,” Rajit replied as he bent down to start to pick up the scattered papers. He had no idea what the papers actually were, he had just grabbed something off a nearby table.

“Here, let me help,” Corey then bent down to assist in the task, grunting a little as he did. “You... You’re one of the students, aren’t you?”

“I’m Rajit Dalal. I’m in your afternoon class.”

“That’s where I know you,” Corey said with a snap of his fingers. “I knew I recognized your face. We better hurry up, class gets going in five minutes and I still need my coffee.”

Corey wasn’t looking at Rajit’s face, so it was understandable that he didn’t immediately place him. He was also distracted by Rajit wearing a tight, thin tank top which showed off his lean but well-sculpted shoulders and arms. Rajit had also left his beard grow into carefully manicured stubble today, and a fresh haircut also enhanced the young man’s appearance.

“I’m surprised we haven’t met before, Rajit...” Corey said, his tone indicating a bit of interest.

“Well, I’m kinda shy...” Rajit replied, trying to appear bashful. He had never put the moves on a man before, so he hoped this was going to work. What do gay men find attractive, anyway? He had no idea. But it did seem to be working. “Hey, I’m going out for drinks after the show, want to come along?”

“Wish I could, but I already have plans.”

Rajit already knew he was talking about Henrik, and quietly growled deep in his throat. There was only one sure-fire way he could think of to make Corey reconsider. “Do, uh, do your plans involve taking you to the best bar in the city?”

“I really do have plans,” the instructor said as he moved on.

Rajit wasn’t dissuaded, though. He saw the way Corey was looking him over. He was interested. Very interested.



Drama instructor Corey Roberts began class by surveying the ten students that were taking it. They were all young men, in their early twenties, and all of them were relatively handsome, as actors tended to be. They dressed in loose casual clothes, ready to have to move around if the workshop demanded it. It

wasn't an academic class, but an acting workshop, so everyone had pushed the desks aside, and were standing in the old, wood-floored room, waiting around for some direction.

Rajit waited patiently, pleased that the instructor's eyes briefly lingered on him — and Henrik was eying the both of them. He was rightfully suspicious of Rajit's new taste in clothing, and was slowly coming to the conclusion that he was trying to horn in on his after-school companionship arrangement.

“Good afternoon, folks,” Corey said as he set his coffee aside. “Yesterday, we worked on removing your inhibitions. How to work beyond self-consciousness and truly inhabit the emotions and mindset of another person, to assume the role without any hesitation.”

“We know, you nearly put us to sleep,” said Greg, who was feeling a bit brave.

Corey, true to his nature, grinned back and nodded. “Yes, I noticed few of you nodding off yesterday. That's why you'll be happy to hear that I'll be lecturing you from *Greystoke on Acting*, Chapters 12 through 23.”

A collective, muted, moan came up from the class. They dragged the desks and chairs back to the center of the room to sit on, and dropped like sacks of flour, already dreading the next hour or two of listening to a speech.

“Chapter 12,” Corey said in a flat, monotone voice. For an actor, he certainly didn't read very well, Rajit thought to himself. “Stanislavsky and Brecht hold opposing viewpoints about the actor and emotions in their analysis of acting styles. These styles are diametrically opposed, yet they have wielded great influence over western acting in contemporary theater, where we see three general styles which differ from each other relative to the relationship of the emotions of the actor to those of the character..”

Two hours later, the sharp sound of the instructor's book being shut startled the students back to life. “And that will do it for today. I'll see you all here tomorrow,” the instructor said.

Before they had even cleared the sleep from their eyes, the instructor was gone and out the door.

As the class cleared out, Henrik blocked Rajit's exit. “You were trying to turn him on, weren't you?” The blond-haired Henrik asked.

Dressed as he was, Rajit would be foolish to deny it. “No I wasn't,” he said. “Oh, you mean my clothes? My girlfriend's idea. That's all.”

“Sure it was. Look, I need the money way more than you do. Just back off and find your own opportunities, okay?”

“Hey, if Corey wants to go out one night and socialize, I'm not going to say no.” Rajit fried back. “And if he wants to help out with a little financial assistance, that's fine by me.”

“I’ll kick your fuckin’ ass if you do,” Henrik growled, betraying his temper. He had grown up in a lower-class family in urban Detroit, and he had no problem using his fists to solve his problems.

Conversely, Rajit, who had been upper-middle-class all his life, living on a safe suburban estate, lacked the common sense to back down. “Whatever, asshole,” he said as he walked past his rival.

“You don’t wanna make trouble for me!” Henrik yelled after him.

“Big words, faggot,” Rajit said as he left.



The week went on much the same until Friday, when Corey finally did something else but put his class to sleep with his reading.

They held a workshop, as Corey assigned a series of emotions to each student and had them act out a short scene, changing their emotion every time they did it.

It wasn’t an easy exercise, either, as none of the students could really recall much about the readings. In fact, if you had confidentially asked each student, they were all sure they had fallen asleep during every class this week. They fumbled for answers whenever the instructor quizzed them, as they had little clue as to what he was talking about.

Rajit was especially out of sorts, as Corey had taken some special interest in his case, almost picking on him for his performance.

Not that Rajit was doing a bad job of emoting his parts, it was that he couldn’t back up his choices with facts from the class text. He couldn’t even answer the name of the book they had listening to all week. He was graded a D for the week, much like the other eight students. Everyone was feeling bad about their work.

Except for Henrik, that is, who accepted his B grade with a smile. He had been just as lost as everyone else, and couldn’t answer a single question to the instructor’s satisfaction. Yet, somehow, he had gotten the best grade in the class.

Greg and Andy knew why, too. As they watched Corey run his eyes up and down Henrik’s body, they understood that Henrik was absolutely right when he claimed that he’d get the top grades by socializing with the teacher. Rajit also knew it, but instead of apathy, he was feeling anger.



“Happy Monday everyone! So this week, I’m going to push you a bit out of your comfort zone,” Corey announced to his class. “With the extremely poor scores earned last week, it seems clear that we need to do something to change things up. Something big.”

Rajit was still seething over Henrik’s grade, and had spent most of the weekend fuming. He didn’t want to just throw himself at the instructor, especially because he wasn’t gay, but if there was any other way to pass this class, he hadn’t been able to come up with it.

“Getting past your inhibitions and being able to emotionally connect with a character is at the core of acting,” Corey continued. “And if you can’t do that, you can’t call yourself an actor. So drastic times call for drastic measures.” He headed for the door. “Don’t go anywhere, I’ll be right back.”

The class was slightly surprised to find themselves alone without a teacher, and they immediately started to stir. Rajit took the opportunity to shoot a glare at Henrik, who played it cool and kept a smug look on his face.

“You’re whoring yourself out for grades,” Rajit said to Henrik. It didn’t seem to phase him.

“Chill, okay?” Greg told Rajit.

Rajit wasn’t giving up on Henrik. “There was no way to pass that review on Friday. None of us got anything right. Even you, butt boy.”

Henrik was too self-satisfied to let that bother him.

“I know you’re fucking him,” Rajit said very quietly, just so Henrik could barely hear him.

Both Andy and Greg also heard him and couldn’t believe what Rajit had said. However, their reaction was nothing compared to Henrik, who immediately dropped all pretense of looking cool.

The young man immediately lunged for Rajit, and was blocked by Andy and Greg. He tried to bust his way past them, but he could see the instructor returning from the hallway, so he had to control himself.

The rest of the class mumbled amongst themselves as they saw what Corey was doing, which was wheeling in several racks of clothing.

“I perfectly understand if you don’t want to do this assignment,” the instructor said, as he settled the fourth and final rack into place. “I’ll still have to fail you, but I will understand.”

He walked out in front of the racks and got up close to his students. “Your assignment is to pick out a few nice dresses here and then wear them for the rest of the week.”

The lack of a reaction from the class was just a clinical symptom of shock.

“I’ll assign you a character, a female character, and you’ll be portraying that character.”

There was still no reaction from the class, even though they had already progressed on from the disbelief stage to the fear stage.

“If you have a job, I’ll give you a waiver for that, but otherwise, for the next five days, you’ll be in character — and if wearing a dress all week doesn’t break down your inhibitions, nothing will.”

“Are you serious?” Asked one student.

“Does the school administration know about this?” Asked another.

It was clear by the answers Corey gave that he was prepared for all these responses, and defused every concern and objection easily.

“This is a load of shit,” was the final objection from the students.

“If you had been able to learn how to do this last week, we wouldn’t be here,” Corey explained. “Now you can either do this or flunk out. That’s what it comes down to.”

With no other complaints, the instructor explained further. “Here’s how this is going to work. Each of you has an envelope. Inside you’ll find a name, a back story and profile for your character. You will be playing that character all day, every day until Friday. At that point, I’ll pick the student who has been the worst at this role, and he will be excused from the activity but will receive a poor grade. Then, every week we’ll excuse the next worst, and so on...” He walked nearer to Henrik and looked directly at him as he spoke. “...Until we have determined the best actor amongst you, and they will receive an A.”

“What is this, RuPaul’s Drag Race?” mumbled Greg, quietly.

“Our other teachers aren’t going to like this,” observed Andy.

Corey frowned. “If they have a problem, tell them to contact me. I’m in the staff phone directory.”

At that point, collectively, the class moved on from the fear stage into the traumatic stage. They were really going to have to do this.



After class, Andy and Greg were examining the strange, alien items they had been given. Each student had received two dresses, two blouses, two skirts and two bra and panty sets. Every student was also given one wig.

All of these items were obviously from the costume department of the school, as they were quite dated in style. “This looks like something my grandmother would wear,” observed Andy.

“You really think we should go through with this?” Greg asked his friend.

“We’re actors. It’s just a role. Everyone we know will understand.”

“They’re going to make fun of us,” Greg observed.

“They’ll fuckin’ tear us to shreds,” Andy verified. “But they’ll still understand.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to explain this to my roommate,” Henrik said, as he approached Andy and Greg. He was flipping through the contents of the envelope he had been given by Corey. “What’s your packet say?”

Andy and Greg both opened up the manilla envelopes they had picked out, as they hadn’t checked yet.

“Gladys Peterman,” Greg read. “Age 28, single, waitress at Mac’s Diner, wants children. Born on July 8th, 1927. Lapsed protestant, estranged from her father. Likes to dance, has a pet parakeet named Petey, amateur photography enthusiast. I gotta build a character from that?”

“1927?” Greg said. “That means this is supposed to be, what... 1955?”

“That’s about what these clothes look like,” Henrik said as he looked over the dresses they had been given. “So I guess we’re doing a period piece or something.”

“Students will need to provide period-appropriate shoes, purses, makeup and accessories,” Greg stated, further reading from the papers they had been given. He flipped the last sheet over to see if there was anything more. There wasn’t. “So who are you supposed to be?” He asked Andy.

“Mary Connors,” he said, reading from his sheets. “Age 27, single, junior secretary at Allied Industrial, seeking a husband. Born on October 3rd, 1928. Devout Catholic, lives with mother and father, aspiring nun. Plays piano and collects matchbook covers.” Andy sighed. “Great. I’m a prude.”

Henrik checked his sheet. “Jayne Silvers, Age 25, in a relationship. Singer and dancer at the Starlight Club. Born on March 17th, 1930. Catholic, lives with younger sister, avid movie fan, loves glamour and fashion, wants to be a wife and mother.” Henrik looked up to see Andy and Greg both looking at him suspiciously.

“What?”

“Why does your envelope have your name on it?” Greg asked.

Henrik looked and saw it was labeled for him. “Didn’t everyone get one of them?”

“Mine was random,” Greg said, displaying his blank envelope.

“Mine too,” Andy said, displaying his.

Henrik felt a little creeped out. That meant that his envelope was something Corey had chosen for him.



“Fuck if I know,” Henrik said, hoping he didn’t look nervous and uncomfortable. He wanted to change the subject. “Hey, where’s that asshole Rajit?”



“Uh, Mr. Roberts, I thought I’d ask again... I’m going out tonight and... I was wondering if you wanted to come along?” Rajit asked Corey, after intercepting him in the hallway.

The middle-aged man shook his head. “It’s just Corey. And I appreciate your persistence, but as I already said, I’m otherwise engaged.”

“I’ll be wearing this,” Rajit added, holding up one of the better looking dresses he’d just been assigned. He was not going to let that douchebag Henrik get the all the attention, steal the best grade and lord over him, even if that meant putting himself out there a little.

“I, uh... Huh,” Corey replied, looking over Rajit from head to toe. “You know what I’ve really been looking for, Rajit?”

Rajit shook his head.

“Traps,” Corey added. “Know a place?”

“Yeah, sure!” Rajit replied, with certainty.

“So, I’ll meet you at campus corner at six,” Corey said, patting Rajit on the shoulder as he passed by, on his way out.

“Yes!” Rajit pumped his fist in triumph. Now he just had to figure out what a trap was.



Sitting outside a trap bar in his car with a pair of binoculars, snacking on stale pretzels, wasn’t the way Henrik planned on spending his night. Still, he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. When he had been brushed off by Corey, he had no choice but to tail him and see what he was up to. When he saw that he was being escorted by Rajit, he was enraged— and when he saw that Rajit was dressed better than he was, it was absolutely infuriating.

What Henrik hadn’t told his fellow theater students was that Corey had been after him to go to one of these crossdressing bars, and he had politely refused. That Rajit was willing to accommodate him was surprising, but it only showed Henrik how underhanded and sneaky Rajit truly was.

As he watched the two leave the bar about a half hour after midnight, with Rajit swiveling his hips, laughing and cooing up to Corey like he was his girlfriend, Henrik felt like slamming his head into the car dashboard. He had underestimated how low his rival was willing to go just to spite him. That was a mistake he wasn’t going to make again.

Henrik decided on his course of action. He wasn’t going to lose Corey’s favor, his recommendation, and most importantly, the money. If he was going to have to do whatever it took to win him back. That meant that he was going to have to do something he did not want to do, or think he would ever *have* to do.

He was going to have to win the heart of a man.



The next day’s class was already a couple of minutes behind schedule as the various students waited for the instructor, taking his sweet time to get to the classroom.

Today was the first day that the students were dressed up in their assigned roles as women, so there was a lot of apprehension and tension in the room.



Andy was dressed in a woolen grey skirt suit, as befitted his role as a secretary. To add his own touches to the character, he had found a pair of 2-inch black heels and pinned his wig up. For his first try, he was doing a pretty decent job of selling his character.

Greg was also standing by, waiting for class to begin, looking incredibly awkward in his outfit. For his waitress character, Gladys, he was dressed in what was supposed to be a fifties waitress uniform, an aqua colored shirt dress with mint trim. He wore white canvas shoes, short white socks, and was chewing gum. It wasn't the most original take on a fifties waitress, but he was doing what he could while feeling extremely uncomfortable. The look of a fifties waitress wasn't a natural match for his Asian-American features, and shaving his beard and mustache made him feel naked.

"So how many people have you freaked out?" Greg asked Andy.

"Just about everyone who sees me," Andy replied. "I'm so sick of explaining it, I'm thinking about having cards printed up that I can hand out that just say 'It's for an acting role.' What about you?"

"Everyone keeps trying to make me take their order," Greg whined. "I go to the library, someone asks me to take their order. Student Health Center, take an order. Bookstore, take an order. I'm fucking sick of it."

"Hey," Andy said with a smile.

"Don't you even," Greg fired back.

"Hey," Andy repeated.

"I swear to God."

"Take my order."

"Fuck you," Greg muttered.

Andy and Greg were exchanging mutual expressions of disbelief and dread when they noticed Henrik's presence close behind them.

"Henrik?" Andy asked, startled to see him. He wasn't startled that he was present, he was startled by the way Henrik looked.

"Yeah," Henrik replied, trying to appear confident. If Andy and Greg thought they looked halfway decent, they were forced to re-think that when they saw Henrik.

His sideburns had been shaved away, and his beard regrowth was invisible. His eyelids had a dusting of eye shadow and false eyelashes were glued in place. His lips were glistening red. Henrik also had sculpted his eyebrows thinner, neater, and bolder. His short wig had been carefully combed, looking natural and healthy.



Below his neck, Henrik was wearing a plum colored dress with a shin-length hem, matched with black velvet open-toe pumps. Henrik looked amazing, especially for being a man.

“Who beat you with a beauty stick, Henrik?” Andy inquired.

“Jayne. I’m Jayne as far as you’re concerned... Mary.” Reflexively, Henrik’s eyes flicked to look across the way at Corey, who had just walked in, minding his own business and checking something on his phone. He wanted to see

some kind of remorse or any kind emotion for betraying him by going out with Rajit, but there was nothing.

“Hi... *Girls*,” Rajit said with a smile. He had just finished talking with some of the other students and was just now getting over to his friends. “Don’t we all look *mah-velous* today?” He said, vamping it up.

This was just a way for Rajit to call attention to himself, as he looked even better than the other three, and better than anyone else in class.

He was wearing green short-sleeve cotton dress with a full skirt that ended below his knees. The skirt was at least three times as wide as he was. Rajit also had black heels he was stumbling around in.

“And who are you supposed to be?” Greg asked.

Rajit’s red lips smiled and he flickered his thick black lashes. “Joy. Age 24, born 1931, chorus girl. Wants a relationship with an older man and loves the theater.”

Henrik’s neck nearly snapped, turning his head as heard that last sentence. It sounded suspiciously like something Corey would have wished for himself.

“Did your envelope have your name on it?” He asked Rajit.

“My what?” Rajit replied.

“The envelope. The ones we all got with the bios in them.”

“I think so. Didn’t everybody’s?”

Henrik wanted to go and punch Corey in the nuts right now, but he just clenched his jaw to keep his mouth from moving and trained his eyes on the floor so he didn’t have to look at the man. He was being cheated out of the grade he thought he had already earned.

“How much time did you spend getting ready for class?” Andy asked Rajit, still amazed by the work he had put into his look.

“Is it wrong to want to look a little better?” Rajit replied. He knew what he looked like, and there was no sense trying to deny it. If he just copped to it, Rajit figured, maybe he’d stop getting questions.

“Ooo-kay,” Andy said. “I think you went a little far, though. Were you *trying* to look like a drag queen?”

Rajit didn’t answer the question. He was resigned to the fact that he was going to get razzed, but if it meant that he could earn some “extra credit” from Corey and get the recommendation Corey would give him, it would all be worth it. “Shut up. I think we’re about to begin.”

Andy and Greg dutifully looked for any indication that class was getting underway, but they didn’t see it.

“I don’t think so,” Andy said.