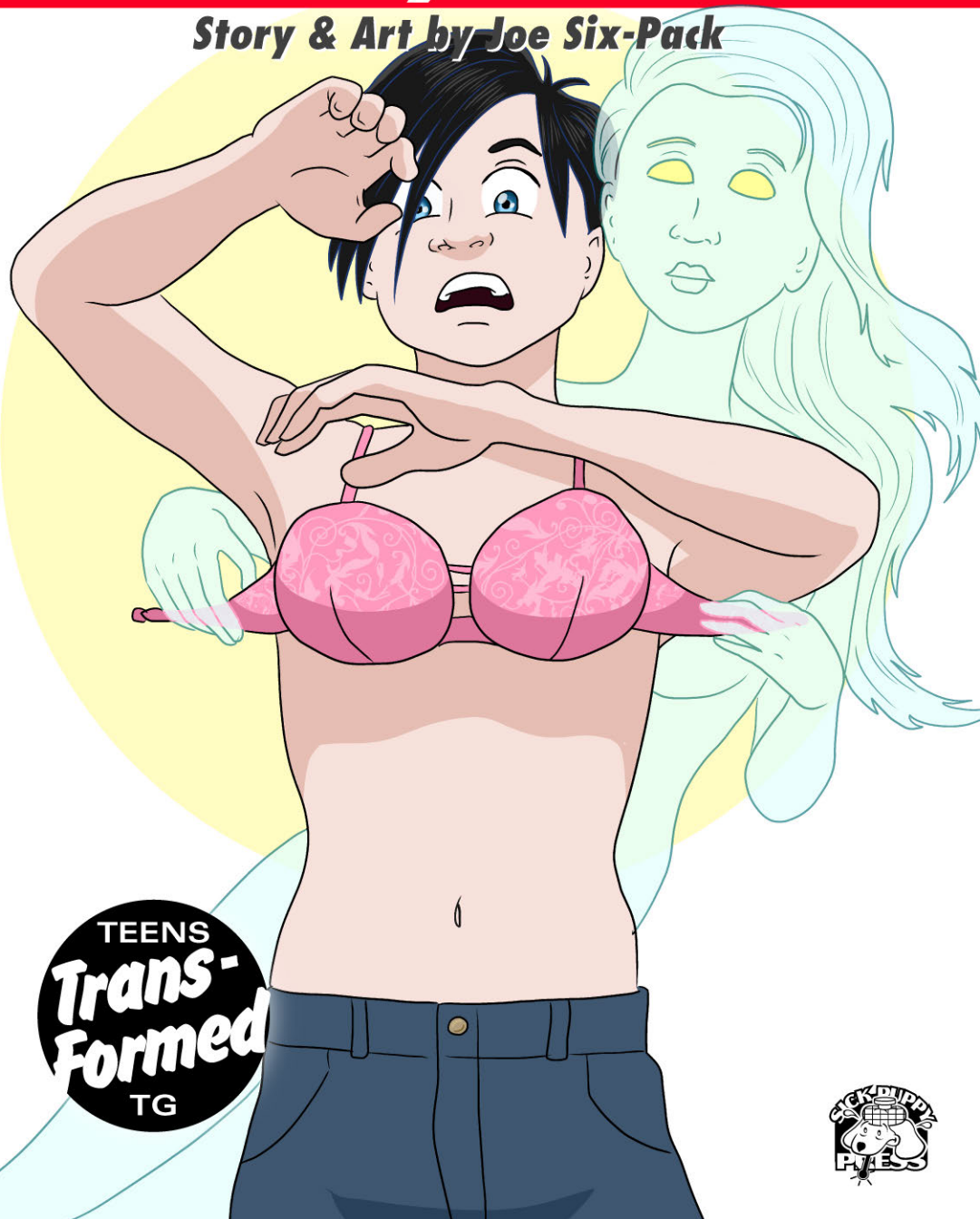


ADULTS ONLY

109 pages 34 illustrations

MY BROTHER, MY MOTHER, MY DOLL

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack



TEENS
**Trans-
Formed**
TG



J O E S I X P A C K

***MY BROTHER,
MY MOTHER,
MY DOLL***

**Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack
A Teens Transformed story**



2022 Digital Edition

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Printed in the United States of America.

j6p@sixpacksite.com
www.sixpacksite.com

MY BROTHER, MY MOTHER, MY DOLL



Amelia Bickford had tears streaming down her face, and her cheeks were bright red. Then again, she was often like this. She was known as a fussy child, loud and prone to fits of emotion. At seven, she cried a lot and made quite a bit of noise.

However, none of it was her fault.

Little Amelia had a good excuse for her behavior, and that was because of her brother, Tucker. An example of why she behaved the way she did was what he happened to be doing right now, which was holding her favorite doll just high enough so she couldn't reach it or jump for it, although she was doing both.

"Give it *baaaack!*" Amelia wailed, her pudgy arms reaching upward in despair.

"Oh, is this yours?" Tucker said, apparently puzzled. "Well, there you go," he said, flicking the tiny doll across the small living room and on top of a bookcase. "It's all yours."

"Tuuuuuuckerrrrr!" Amelia cried, seeing her favorite doll disappear to somewhere she could never get to.

Too easy, Tucker thought as he walked away. His sister was way too easy to tease. She was just gonna get picked on for the rest of her life, in his opinion, and so he really wasn't doing anything life wasn't going to do to her later on. He was doing her a favor, really. He was getting her ready for what she'd face when she grew up.

It was a small apartment they both lived in with their mother, where the sounds echoed off the walls like a cavernous tunnel, and Amelia's continued crying and screaming were filling the house with the shrillest notes of lament. The sad furniture and spent carpet looked depressed to be present and the hopelessly out of date decor added to the squalid nature of their dwelling.

"Amelia!" Darcy Bickford shouted. "I told you to never climb the bookshelf!" She shouted at her daughter. "You'll fall and snap your neck! And I'm not going to waste my life wiping the chin of an invalid!"

Little Amelia froze where she was, one foot already up on a shelf. "But Tucker took my doll!"

"That doesn't give you an excuse to climb the furniture!"

"It's on tooooop!"

"Tucker!" Mrs. Bickford yelled as she fished through a drawer for something. "Get your butt in here!" She continued to rummage in the drawer as her son arrived looking put out to walk the seven feet from his bedroom.

“What?”

“You *know* what! Get your sister’s doll!”

“She can get it herself,” Tucker replied. “She’s always throwing it around.” He then left, back to his room.

“There they are,” Darcy Bickford said, pulling up her sleeve. She pulled two nicotine patches out of a small box, removed the adhesives and slapped them on her upper arm. “Thank God,” she said.

“Mooom!” Amelia hollered again.

“Not now, honey,” the mother said, putting her sleeve back and massaging the arm to get the medication flowing into her faster. “Mommy needs some mommy time.” She retreated back to her bedroom, where she had only briefly emerged from to get her patches. If history was any indication, Amelia wouldn’t see her for a few more hours.

The seven year old’s only recourse was to go back to her brother. “You heard what Mom said,” she said to him as he laid on his bed, pounding the buttons of his Xbox controller.

“Get outta my room,” he replied. “It’s private property.”

“You gotta get my Shelbie doll down!”

“Leave,” Tucker said.

“Pleeeeeease?” The little blonde girl begged.

Tucker jumped from his bed and forced Amelia back out his door and closed it on her.

With nothing else to do, Amelia shuffled into the living room, looked longingly up at the top of the bookcase, where she imagined her pretty doll with her shiny blond hair tangled up in cobwebs and covered in dust. It was a Sunday, and living in an apartment meant that there was nowhere to go or anything else to do by herself. She dropped herself onto a cushion, turned on the TV and played *Frozen II* for the 108th time. It wasn’t as good as the 107th time.

She felt incomplete. Amelia carried her Shelbie doll around with her no matter where she went. It was the last thing her dad gave her before the divorce and leaving for Madagascar. She never let her Shelbie doll go. It didn’t matter to her that it was a knockoff of a Barbie doll or that her left leg fell off a few times a day. Shelbie was her doll, her best friend and her constant companion. The young girl spent much of the day talking to it like it was her sister and closest confidant. The secrets she had told Shelbie were her deepest-held thoughts.

So as Elsa sang away on the TV, Amelia’s eyes were pointed up at the top of the bookshelf, looking to her small eyes like it was the tip of Mount Everest, unassailable and farther away from her than anything else she could imagine.

About an hour later, a thundering crash came from the living room, causing Darcy Bickford to drop whatever it was that she was doing in her room and come running out. Sure enough, she found her bookshelf toppled over onto a chair, books, pictures and nicknacks dumped on the floor and one very red-faced daughter looking up at her, clutching her Shelbie doll. The temptation to climb that bookshelf had been too much for Amelia's impulsive adolescent mind to resist.

"Amelia Elizabeth Bickford!" her mother yelled. "What have you done! I told you not to climb the bookshelf!"

"I didn't!" Amelia lied.

"Don't lie to your mother!" She turned to the hallway. "Tucker!" She shouted. The bookshelf was too big for her to push it back upright and needed the help of her son. Darcy had never been the most athletic of women, and she had been in poor health lately. She turned back to her daughter with a scowl. "You could have killed yourself!" She scolded.

"Yeah, I wish," Tucker said as he came in, looking at the toppled furniture. "What the fuhh...?"

"No swearing!" Darcy yelled. "Put the shelf back up."

"Why should I?"

"Because I told you to, Tucker!"

He didn't have to wonder who did it, as his little sister was standing with her doll, looking like she was about to go in front of a firing squad, trembling. "You're in *real* trouble now, twerp," Tucker said to his nervous-looking sister. She clutched her plastic doll tighter to her chest.

"Start picking up the mess you made, Amelia."

"Yeah," Tucker seconded, piling on.

"It's not my fault," Amelia said, reasoning that she was forced to do what she had done.

Darcy wagged her finger. "Not today, young lady! I don't want to hear it! Now get moving!"

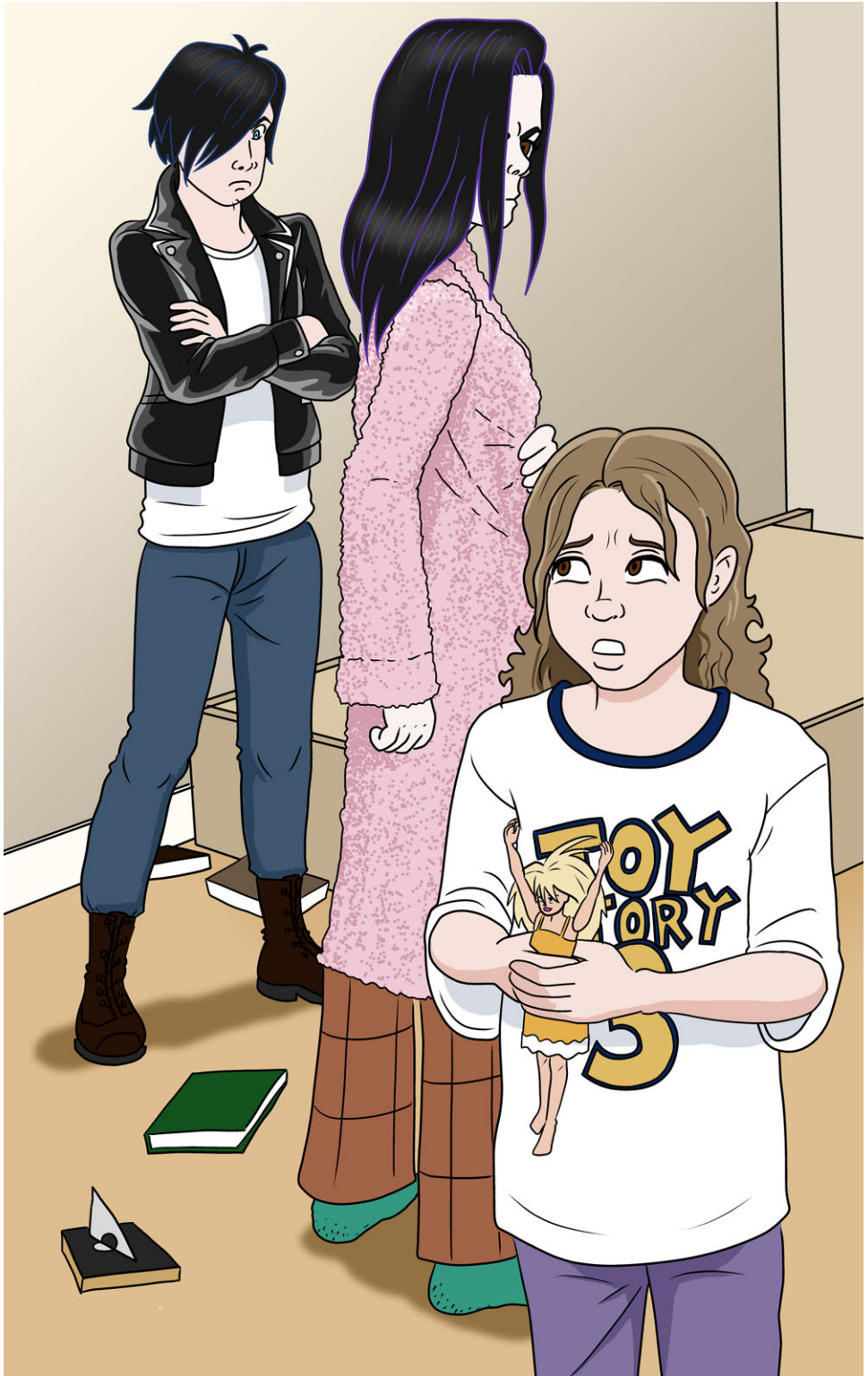
Amelia walked over to the piles of junk that had come off the shelves and started to stack the books.

"If anything is broken, you'll be paying for it out of your birthday money!" Her mother said.

"Aw c'mon mom!" Tucker said. "That's all?"

Taking her son's suggestion, she came up with more. "And you're not allowed to watch TV or videos for the rest of the month!"

"Moooom!" Amelia complained, knowing she had little else in her life. She also glared at her brother for making it worse.



She put her doll down to use both her hands, and her mother quickly swiped it away. “You can have this back when you’ve earned it back,” she said.

“That’s not fair! I didn’t...”

“Not one more word, Amelia, or so help me!” She briefly raised her arm, but quickly brought it back down. Even she knew not to hit her own kid, despite her anger. “Now I’m gonna go back in my room and try to get some sleep! If you make any noise, I’m gonna double your punishment!”

Darcy Bickford turned and headed down the hallway, looking back over her shoulder so her daughter knew she was angry.

“You are so screwed,” Tucker said to his sister. He easily pushed the bookcase back upright, despite complaining as he had.

“It’s not my fault,” Amelia said, quietly.

“Hey, stop shoving!” Tucker yelled at the top of his voice.

“I didn’t!” Amelia yelled back, objecting to being falsely accused.

“Yes you did!” Tucker yelled back, louder. “Liar!”

Darcy reappeared from the hallway and pointed at her little girl. “You just doubled it, missy!” She said with a furious snarl, and left again.

Amelia looked up at her brother who’s gloating smile was the most infuriating sight she had ever seen.



Four days later, having gotten her doll back from her mother after cleaning her room, clearing the table and putting the dishes in the dishwasher every day, seven year old Amelia was playing house with Shelbie.

In the room next to hers, the over-modulated rumble of heavy metal music was being played at max volume. It was her brother’s room and he had been doing that for the last two hours. She could also hear clanking and thuds that indicated he was lifting his weights.

Their mother wasn’t responding, as she had gone to bed early with a couple of cans of beer and was probably out cold. She did that most weeknights.

“Don’t worry, Amelia,” Amelia said as the voice of her Shelbie doll, as if it could talk. Of course, to her, it could. “Your Mommy loves you.”

“I wish you were my Mommy, Shelbie,” she said back to her doll as she combed its synthetic hair. “You’re prettier and nicer than my real Mommy.”

“That’s not true,” Amelia had Shelbie say. “She really does care for you. One day she’ll stop being so sad and she’ll tell you how much she loves you.”



“Nuh-uh. She’ll never be okay. It’s because Daddy left,” Amelia said back to her doll. “That’s when Tucker started to act like a big jerk too. I wish I had a brother that was nicer to me.”

“He loves you too, Amelia. But sometimes boys are stupid.”

Amelia giggled at the joke her doll made. “Boys are dumber than girls. We’re the smart ones.”

“Not all boys are stupid, Amelia.”

“Tucker is.”

She looked at her doll for a counter-argument, but none came. “Let’s bake a cake!” She had her doll say instead.

“Maybe later,” Amelia replied to herself. “I don’t feel like playing right now. I’m gonna go to bed.”

It was only six, but the little girl had no interest in staying awake and being miserable. The life had been drained out of her, and it could be seen easily on her weary, emotionless face.

“We could play a game!” Her doll said.

“What kind of game?” Amelia asked, intrigued.

“The wishing game!” Shelbie replied.



Darcy Bickford had a pounding, mind-shattering headache when she woke up. As a 36 year old young mother, she was used to having to deal with headaches instigated by her insolent children, but this one was different. It wasn't just the beers she had chugged last night, either. She had experienced every variety of hangover almost every night of her life and this wasn't one of those.

This felt much worse, and was making parts of her head hurt that had never hurt before. Her vision was blurry and she had a taste of metal in her mouth. It was Wednesday morning, and she needed to get up and get her kids off to school, but she couldn't gather the strength.

All of the sudden, she felt urgently sick. She dashed from under the covers and into her bathroom where she vomited into the toilet. She kept going, too. Just when Darcy thought she was done, more came. Her long, black stringy hair was getting into it, as well. When she was sure she was done, she got up, leaning against the sink for strength and rinsed her hair out. Even with it still wet, she headed back to bed, her feet feeling like lead and her eyes uncontrollably spinning.

She let her groggy, achy head drop back down onto the pillow. The kids would have to fare for themselves for once, she thought to herself as she nodded off.

Out in the kitchen, Tucker sat at the breakfast table, slumped in his chair. “Where's my breakfast?” He asked the air. Despite everything, Tucker always had a hot breakfast every morning cooked by his mother. It was her one dependable trait, besides sleeping. Eggs, sausages and toast.

“Mommy isn't talking,” Amelia said as she came from the hallway. “She's kinda sleeping.”

Tucker got up and with the angsty, melodramatic body language teenagers are so good at, and walked down the hallway to go check for himself. Sure enough, as he poked his head into his mother's room, he saw her lying in bed, completely out of it. Her mouth was open and she was making wheezing sounds.

“Mom?” He asked. There was no answer. “Mom!” He tried a little louder. Nothing. “Hey Mom!” He said a third time. “Fuck this shit,” he said as he gave up, closing the door.

“Is Mommy coming?” Amelia asked as she sat in her spot at the table.

“Don’t look like it.” He opened up the fridge to see what he could do. He was a stubborn kid, and he was going to have his regular breakfast one way or another. He’d seen his mom do this so many times he already knew the process. He heated up the frying pan, plonked a few frozen sausages on it and stuck some slices of bread in the toaster.

Tucker crushed the first three eggs he tried to crack, but got it right after that. With the sausages done, he put those on the plate while the eggs cooked. What he wound up with was soggy and kind of miserable, but edible. It was better than what his mom usually made, strangely enough. She wasn’t a particularly good breakfast cook, just a dependable one.

“Can I have some?” Amelia asked, looking at her brother’s full plate.

“Make your own.”

“I’m seven years old,” she replied.

Knowing he would catch shit from his mother if he starved his sister, he scraped off some eggs from his plate, broke off half a sausage and gave her one of his four pieces of toast. He put them on a napkin for her, serving as a plate.

“Thank you,” she replied.

He immediately regretted being nice to her, and it made him feel like crap. She was such a little pain in his ass all the time. She didn’t deserve nice things, in his eyes. Life would be a lot better for him if she’d never showed up. His dad would probably still be around if it wasn’t for her, too.

Now that he had given her food, that was the end of his obligation. He abruptly moved his arm and swept the napkin of food off the table, sending it and the contents to the floor. “Clumsy,” he said to her. “Now clean it up.”

Amelia looked up at her brother like she had been just kicked in the face. Then resignation set in, her eyes dipped, and she climbed off her chair. She grabbed a sponge from the counter and began to wipe up the food on the mustard-colored linoleum.

Tucker finished his food with a smile on his face.

“You made food?” Came a voice from the hallway. Both kids looked to see that it was their mother, but with bags under her eyes and speaking in a low tone that made her sound like death. “Or did I make it?” She said. “I can’t.... You better get going for school.”

“Are you okay Mommy?” Amelia asked.

“School’s not for another half hour,” Tucker said, interrupting a reply.

“You’re gonna have to walk, so you need to go early. Plus, you gotta take Amelia to her school first,” Darcy said. “She can’t walk alone.”

“Aw, c’mon!” Tucker objected. He was used to his mother driving them every morning, even if it was a walkable distance.

Darcy put her hand to her forehead and turned away, stumbling. “I gotta get back to bed. Get going! And promise me you’ll look after your sister!”

The two kids headed down the stairs of their building. Amelia had her pink coat on and a purple backpack shaped like a teddy bear. Tucker just had his favorite leather biker jacket. He headed off and led his sister a block down the sidewalk, not caring if she could keep up or not. He turned a corner and went another few hundred feet before running across a busy street in the middle of the block, in the opposite direction of Amelia’s elementary school.

“Hey!” Amelia said as he left her. When he reached the other side of the street, she had to scream to be heard over the traffic. “Mom said you have to take me to my school!”

He simply waved her objections off and headed down the sidewalk to his high school, ditching his sister. Tucker never looked back as he left his seven year old sister screaming loudly on the other side of the road. He had better things to do with his time than worry about her.



That evening, when Tucker got back from school, the first thing that happened was a desperate question from his mother. “Is Amelia with you?” She asked, breathlessly. She was seated on the couch, looking as haggard as Tucker had ever seen her, wrapped in a comforter. Her skin was pale white and she was sweating.

“No. Why would she be?” He replied.

“She hasn’t come home!” his mother replied with a crack in her voice. She was clutching her phone in one hand and had a cigarette in her other hand. He hadn’t seen her smoke for years. She was falling apart. “I went to go pick her up, but she wasn’t there!”

Tucker had come from basketball practice, which kept him two hours after school was over, and Amelia’s elementary school got out an earlier before his did. She was usually here, watching her movies by the time he got home.

“I’m calling all her friends. No one has seen her since school got out!” His mother said, frazzled and shaken. “Do you know where she might have gone?”

“No, why would I?” Tucker answered. He was sure she must have made it to school after he ditched her, so it wasn’t his fault if she got lost after that. He headed to his bedroom to take his jacket off and play some video games.

“Don’t go too far, we may need to go drive the neighborhood,” she said.

“She’s a girl, not a lost dog, Mom.”

“Do you have any better ideas?” She said. “That’s the last thing I’m going to do before calling the police!”

Crap, Tucker thought to himself. If this had anything to do with ditching that brat this morning he was going to hear about it. He’d be in deep shit. He pulled off his jacket and was about to toss it on his bed when he noticed a small box there.

He picked it up. It was a box for “Lasting French Nail Kit.” It was a box of long press-on fingernails. He picked up the box and carried it back out to his mother, who he assumed must be the owner of the kit.

“Yes, Amelia Bickford...” his mother was frantically talking into her phone. “Dirty blonde hair... 4 foot 3, 55 pounds... She had a pink jacket and purple backpack...”

Tucker figured this was probably not the time to talk to her about anything, so he just tossed the box on the kitchen counter where she’d find it later. For now, he just wanted to put on some metal and clear some Duty Bound levels on his Xbox.

Closing his door, he turned to jump on his bed, but the box was there. The box for the press-on nails. He didn’t understand. He had just gotten rid of it. He picked it up and carried it out of his room again. The box he had left on the counter was gone.

Tucker thought about this for a moment, but he couldn’t explain it. The young man tried to remember the last few minutes, and found no gaps in his memory. Puzzled, he placed the box on the breakfast table this time, grabbed a can of soda and went back to his room. Before going through his door, he looked back to verify the box was still on the table. It was.

He nearly backed into his room, keeping his eyes to the kitchen. Then he turned and found the very same box on his bed again — and this time, there was his sister’s doll next to it. Sitting on the bed with her vapid, plastic gaze, Amelia’s Shelbie figure was laid on her side, arms bent. He picked it up to confirm it.

The thing was, Tucker knew all too well that her sister never let go of her doll — *willingly*.

It was here as a message. There was no other reason. Just what that message was, he didn’t know. The doll’s presence seemed a threat, like a warning that whoever was doing this business with the nails was in possession of Amelia. Yet they were alone in the apartment, weren’t they?

Tucker rushed out into the hall, holding the doll, and checked every room. He kept quiet so as to not worry his mother. He flicked on every light and looked in every corner of every room. He tossed to doll into the laundry room haphazardly, sure he didn’t want to be caught with it.

Then he looked around the kitchen, laundry room, bathrooms, and then the living room, staying out of view of his mother who was practically crying into the phone, desperate to find her daughter. No one else was here.

He returned to his room again, looking at his bed right away. The doll was there. The doll and the box. They had kept reappearing on his bed, and he was unable to get rid of them. He had watched the entire process of getting rid of the box, and it had come back like a magic trick.

Or... Something more like *magic* than a “trick.”

It was stupid. Silly. However, he couldn't explain any of this. He sat down on his bed and picked up the doll carefully, then put it aside. He then picked up the box. The only thing he could think of was that these fake nails were there for a reason. For him to put them on. They only thing to do was to... Use them.

With a sick feeling in his stomach, Tucker opened up the box and slid out the plastic clamshell container inside. He popped it open, causing nearly all the fake nails to jump out and fall to the floor. The sudden movement shocked him and he could feel his heart pounding. He looked around again to make sure he was truly alone.

He picked the loose nails up off the floor and put them back in the plastic. The instructions were simple. You removed a backing and then the adhesive stuck to the fingernail, like glue.

Tucker was about to do just that when he stopped, stood up and had second thoughts. The muffled sounds behind his door from his anguished mother made him sit back down again. He peeled off the backing of the biggest nail and applied it to his left hand thumb. He shivered as he did.

He finished one hand and then did the other. He felt like fool, looking at the shiny pink nails. No, fool wasn't the right word. He felt gay. So damn gay. No sooner had he applied the last nail when a cry came from outside his door. Tucker leapt up and out in the hallway was Amelia, who was quickly engulfed in a bear hug from their mother as she continued to cry. His sister was still dressed in her pink jacket with purple backpack.

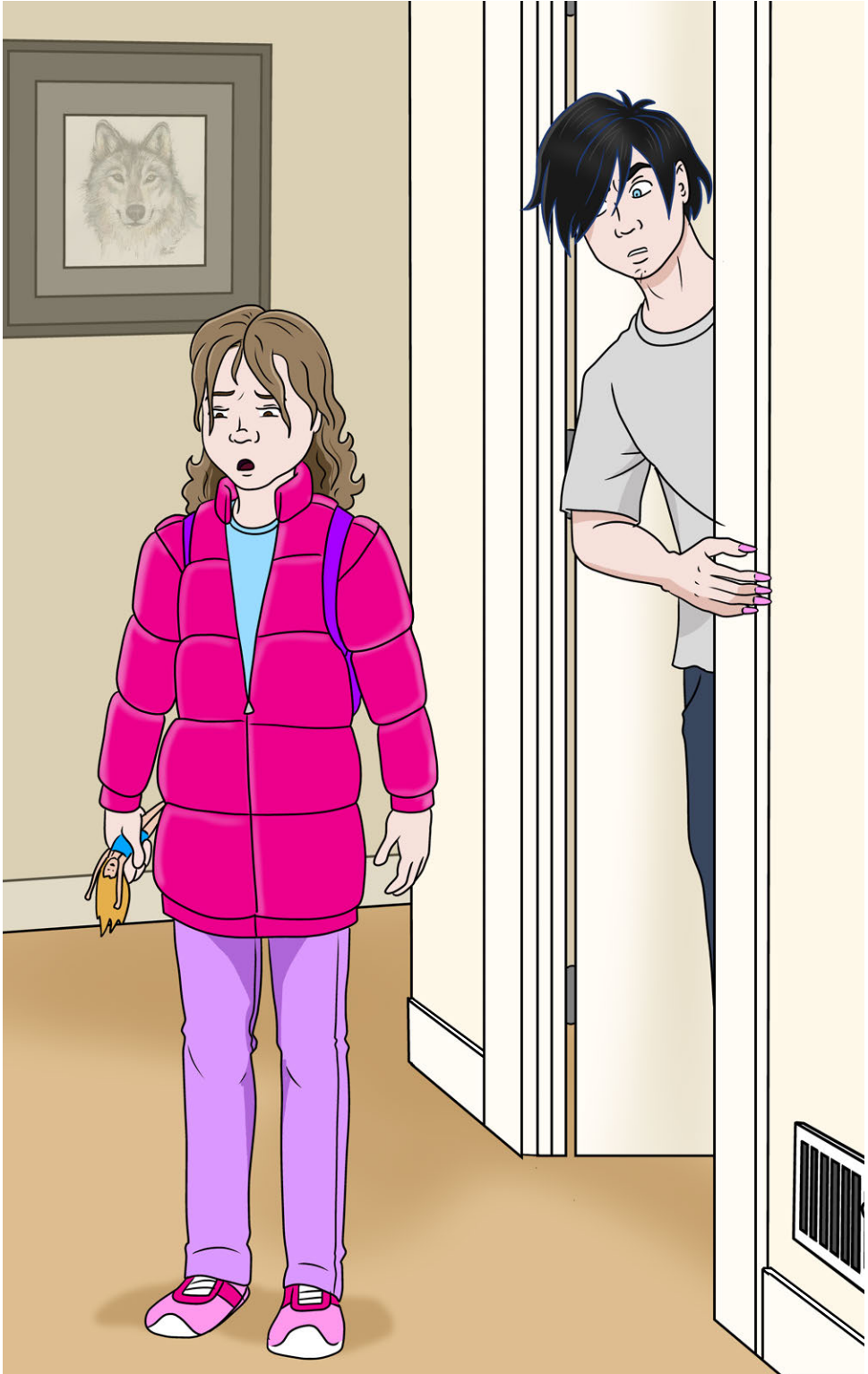
“Where did you come from, sweetie?” Darcy asked in between sobs. “Where were you? You didn't come through the door. Were you hiding this whole time?”

“I don't know, Mommy,” Amelia said. “Why are you so sad?”

“You were missing for so long, baby...” Darcy said.

Tucker looked around again. How *did* she get here? She couldn't have been hiding. He'd checked the whole apartment just minutes ago. Where had she come from? Why had she returned just at the moment he'd finished applying the press-on nails?

Remembering what his hands looked like, he shoved them in his pockets.



Could it have been... He fulfilled what he was asked to do, and... That was why Amelia was back? That someone... Something... Had released her? Or *returned* her?

“Why didn’t you talk to an adult, honey? Like a police officer? Or a Teacher?”

“There weren’t any adults where I was, Mommy,” Amelia said, sound somewhat tired. “It was all dark and I was alone and.... I’m hungry...”

“I’ll fix you Mac and Cheese. Okay? Your favorite!” Darcy said, embracing her daughter’s face with her hands. “I’m so happy you’re okay!” She lingered for a moment before letting go and heading for the kitchen to microwave a mac n’ cheeze bowl.

Amelia turned around and saw her brother for the first time. She looked confused and out of sorts to Tucker, so he didn’t say anything and just stared at her. She said nothing back. With that, he returned to his room and shut the door.

Tucker felt more perplexed than he ever had been before. Had this proved some kind of presence? Some kind of spirit... Or whatever? He didn’t even know. Now he had these ridiculous fingernails and he had no idea if it was just some stupid coincidence or his sister was pulling some kind of bullshit.

The pinky nail felt loose, so he started to work it a little, and get it off his finger. He couldn’t keep them on, especially if he was going to be seen by anyone. he continued to work the nail until it finally gave way, and it came off.

A scream came from the kitchen.

Tucker opened his door and snuck down the hallway to peer around the corner. Amelia was slumped over, unconscious.

“Baby! Are you okay? Are you okay?” His mother was shaking Amelia’s shoulders gently.

Tucker, still holding the detached nail, pressed it back onto his pinky. Instantly, Amelia woke up.

“I’m so tired Mommy,” Amelia said, weakly.

Her mother lifted her up out of her chair and set her down on her feet. “Let’s just get you to bed, okay, sweetie? It’s been a long day.”

“Okay, Mommy,” Amelia said.

As they approached, Tucker slipped back into his room and closed the door. He knew now. There was a connection. He had to do what this *thing* wanted him to do. Then and only then, his sister would be free.

However, even if he did want to take the nails off and just say ‘fuck it,’ they were glued solid to his fingers. The box proudly proclaimed they would last for two weeks.



The next morning, Tucker once again woke to an empty house. His mother was still in bed, and no food had been prepared. Tucker half expected this, as his mother was likely going to be even more tired than she was yesterday, after having spent a good portion of it freaked out about Amelia. What he didn't expect was that Amelia showed up on time and as if nothing had happened yesterday.

Even stranger, she carried her Shelbie doll with her. As far as he knew, it was still in the laundry room. He never had a chance to put it back. That is unless... It found its way back to her on its own.

"What?" Amelia asked her big brother when she came into the kitchen. She saw him staring at her as he moved a frying pan over the gas flame.

"Nothing," Tucker said, turning away. He had both his hands in hockey gloves, concealing his nails. Amelia only noticed it when he served up the food, giving Amelia a proper portion this time. He didn't need her collapsing on him now, and if she did, it wasn't going to be something they could pin on him.

"Why're you wearing gloves?" She asked.

"I'm cold," he replied. Working a knife and fork in thick gloves proved to be more challenging than he assumed, but it would take much more than that to keep a teenage boy from a plate of hot food. Halfway through, he heard some bumping around coming from his mother's room.

"You gonna be able to drive us?" Tucker asked, as he opened her door.

"Yeah, sure," Darcy replied, with little enthusiasm. "Tell me when you wanna go." She pulled the covers off her and reached for her robe.

"You need to see a doctor, Mommy," Amelia said as she poked her head from behind Tucker's hips.

"No doctors!" Darcy said, loudly. "No doctors, okay? I'll be fine. Mommy will be just fine."

For reasons neither of the Bickford kids understood, their mother had always hated doctors. She had taken them in for check-ups yearly, but otherwise avoided them at all costs. Tucker was sure there was story behind this, but she had never been willing to tell it, nor even wanted to discuss the topic.

"We can walk," Tucker said. He had the distinct feeling that he was pushing his mother beyond the breaking point. She didn't just look sick, she looked frail and weak like he'd never seen her — or anyone — before.

"No, I can do it," their mother said, still reaching for the robe, and then missing.

"Well, we're leaving now, so it's too late anyway," Tucker said.



"I'll just... Stay in bed today, I guess," Darcy said, letting her one extended arm go limp like a cut wire. "If you kids are okay with walking... Maybe you need to look after your sister a bit, okay?" She pulled her bedsheets up to her chin. "Just until I get better."

"Aw, c'mon, Mom..." Tucker whined. Even as charitable as his normally selfish heart was feeling at the moment, he still hated his sister.

"Just for a while. Not too long." Quickly and silently, she fell asleep.

This was not fair. He wasn't sick. Why should he have to do everything? Tucker sighed. "Get your coat," he said to Amelia. "I'm not waiting for you."



School was not fun for Tucker, having to explain to everyone why he was wearing big oversized hockey gloves all day long. He came up with different excuses over the course of the day, from being cold, to having hurt them lifting weights, to getting ready for hockey season, to trying to set a new fashion trend.

The only people he couldn't fool were his own teammates at basketball practice, and he knew this, so he begged off practice for the day. The coach allowed every player to do that once a season, and he opted for today. He sat on the sidelines getting razzed by his friends for the gloves and for being a wuss about it. Tucker would have looked up "how to remove press on nails" on the internet, but his gloved fingers were a little too fat to press keyboard keys right now. He would have to wait.

When he got home, Amelia was sitting on her cushions, watching *Happy Feet*, while his mother was nowhere to be seen. "Quiet," Amelia said. "Mommy's sleeping."

He went into his room and landed on his bed, exhaling in one big explosion. That was a day that would go down in the annals of suck, he told himself. He was tempted to rip the nails off his fingers right there and then, but he was still not sure about what the... *Consequences* might be. Was this a trick or a prank? Tucker simply couldn't believe that something otherworldly was really making him do this. It just wasn't possible. Besides, they were going to have to come off before his practice tomorrow. He couldn't get out of it.

Tucker still had a few hours to figure it out, so he put off the decision until later. Right now, he wanted food.

He headed for the fridge, intent on grabbing a soda. There were none. "Hey!" He objected. "Where..." He looked around and the only can he spotted was the one in his sister's hands. "Did you take the last soda?" He sniped at his sister.

"I don't know..." Amelia replied, honestly. She hadn't checked.

"You fuckin' did!" He growled.

“You swore!” Amelia said, shocked.

“I’m gonna do worse than that if you drank the last soda!” He yelled back.

“You’re being loud!”

Tucker’s temper was already on full tilt. He walked through the kitchen and into the living room, grabbing for Amelia’s doll. He quickly swiveled herself away and kept it out of his reach. “Stop it! Stop it!” She yelled.

Instead, he grabbed the soda can she had let go of. It was empty. That was his favorite flavor, too. He’d been looking forward to it all day. Now it was gone. He gripped the can and crushed it with his bare hand. Then he tossed it against the wall.

“I’m gonna be in my room! Interrupt and you’ll get it worse than the can,” he said, with a crazy look in his eyes.

He set himself up in his room by blasting his music and grabbing his heaviest barbells. He did arm curls until he was pouring sweat, intending to work through his anger, but instead feeding it. He slipped the volume up every few minutes to pump up the energy as he moved from his weights to his Xbox, and turned up the volume to be heard over the metal music.

“What do you think you’re doing?” His mother yelled as she barged into his room. He couldn’t hear a word of what she was saying and just kept playing. It was a fifty kill streak in *Duty Bound* and he was in the zone. There was no stopping him now. “Turn that off and pay attention!” His mother yelled again. “I was sleeping!” She still couldn’t be heard.

She left and pulled a trick she had only done a couple of times. She flipped the breaker switch on the apartment power panel and sent Tucker’s room into darkness. She was irate, throwing his controller down in anger and going to confront his mother, when she met him in his doorway. “What is this?” She said, holding the crushed soda can in her hand. “That poor girl has been through hell, and you do this?” She yelled. She bent over and grabbed the small but loud bluetooth speakers from his shelf. “You’ve lost your privileges!” She yelled, and carried it back into her room.

Tucker was on the edge of violence, madder than he had been in a long time, but there was no way he could actually hit his mother. This was his boundary, but he was raging like a bull tied back with a fraying rope. “I bought that with my own money!”

“And this too,” Darcy said as she yanked the black video game player from his floor and took it, and the controller dragging along behind on its cord. “You have to stop acting like some wild child!” She said.

“Give that back!” Tucker yelled at her. “Give it back!” He rushed her from behind, but before he could do anything, she collapsed. The energy she had spent had left her empty and in her weakened state, fainted onto her bed, the expensive video game console falling to the floor after bouncing on the mattress.

“Shit!” Tucker yelled, grabbing his head. He thought he’d just killed his mom. “Shit shit shit!” She got on his knees as he came to her side and jostled her. “Come on, Mom! Mom! Wake up! Mom!” he got up, paced around in a tight circle and went right back to what he was doing. “Mom! You’re okay, right? Mom?”

Finally, she stirred and rolled over onto her side. “No doctors...” she mumbled, her eyes till closed.

“Oh. Thank fuckin’ God,” Tucker said. “Thank God thank God thank fuckin’ God.” He helped her fully onto the bed and she laid on it properly, her chest moving just enough to tell Tucker she was alive and breathing. He grabbed his head again and tried to think of what to do. The only bit of medical science was what he knew from weightlifting. “You need protein,” he said. “I’ll make you some food, okay? All right?”

He quickly zipped into the kitchen to make something. He had seen his mother make dinner before, and he kind of knew what to do. Tucker grabbed some ground meat from the freezer, microwaved it until it was soft and then kneaded it out into patties. He used the frying pan to cook them up, then with tomatoes, lettuce and onion and buns — he had made burgers.

“Here, you need strength,” Tucker said, presenting his mother with the food he had cooked. She wearily opened her eyes and sat up in bed.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea...” Darcy said.

“Just eat it,



okay? You need to eat.”

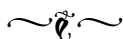
She only got two bites in fore she had to roll out of bed and throw up. She didn't even make it to the bathroom. Tucker grabbed some paper towels and laid them over it, afraid to even touch the half-eaten meat laced with stomach juices.

“I'll just leave it here, okay?” He said, with the plate next to her bed. She fell asleep again, looking more tired and sick than ever.

He returned to to the kitchen where Amelia was almost done eating her burger. “Is Mommy okay?” She asked.

“Yeah. Maybe. Probably.” He sat down at the table, his own dinner sitting in front of him. He didn't touch it.

“You make yummy burgers,” Amelia commented with a full mouth.



The next morning, the first thing Tucker did was check on his mom. The room stank, as the vomit on the floor was particularly acrid and vile. He had the feeling no one was going to clean it up unless he did, so he quietly wetted some more paper towels and wiped up what he could, dumping it all into a garbage bag and then tying a serious knot into the top to make sure none of it's disgusting contents could escape. There was still a distinct stain on the carpet, but he didn't know how to fix that. His mom did, though, and when she was healthy enough, she'd take care of it. Probably.

“Mom? You awake?” He asked quietly from her bedside. He only received some moans and indistinct mumbles. “We're gonna go to school, okay?” Tucker said. He knew she'd kick his ass if he missed any school. Well, when she was better. “I'll see you later, right?”

He fixed breakfast again, and put the dirty dishes in a precarious pile in the sink, assuming someone else would take care of it. That pile had been building for a few days now. After all, he'd never worried about dishes in his life, and he wasn't about to start now. If his mother couldn't do it, then he'd get Amelia to. She was a girl. She knew how to deal with dishes.

Tucker had no plan to deal with the gloves on his hands, but he had to go to school, and hoped he'd come up with something during the day to get through basketball practice. It was in his shop class that he figured out a way to get them off. He pocketed some acetone and a screwdriver from the shop materials, and although he had to miss the next class as he pried them off his fingers, at last he was finally free of them.

The problem was that Tucker was so worried that he had just consigned his sister to some horrible fate that he couldn't keep his mind off of it. Practice

went badly. Passes sent to him sailed by his hands, he missed screens, didn't switch off, and his shots landed woefully short of the rim. "You're sittin, Bickford," the coach told him before practice was even over. "Just try not to get a rash when you're on the bench."

He made his way home and slogged his way up the stairs. All this crazy crap had just ruined his Friday. He'd never sat for a game in his life. Not that he could blame the coach after his performance and skipping a day, but that still didn't mean he couldn't be angry about it — and Tucker was very, very angry. Especially when he remembered that he didn't have his weights, music or his game console to deal with his rage.

A moment inside his apartment, though, and he forgot all about his basketball game. The lights were out, and in the center of the living room was a pile of dishes rising like a tower. As if that wasn't creepy enough, it was surrounded by burning candles.

Tucker hugged the wall as he made his way around the tower, wanting to stay as far away from it as possible. Once he made it to the hallway, he ran to check on his mother. She was asleep in bed, oblivious to the world. He wanted to keep it that way, so he left her alone. He checked in on Amelia, who was in her room, playing with her Shelbie doll. That was something of a relief, as his removal of the fingernails hadn't thrown her into peril again. However, her presence also made the young man wonder what she had seen or heard.

"Uh, hey..." He said, as Amelia looked up at him. "You uh... How long have you been home?"

"Since three," Amelia said. "Mrs. Karlson drove me home. Her car smells like fish."

"So... You been in here since then?"

"Uh-huh. After I checked on Mommy."

"You didn't hear or see anything out in the living room?"

"No." She got curious. "What's out there?"

"Never mind that. You just stay here, okay? I just wanted to... Watch some sports on the TV." He knew she'd have no interest in that. "So don't bother me."

"Ugh," Amelia said. She turned back to play some more, and Tucker backed out of the room.

He approached the bizarre, twisted sculpture in the living room. He knew what it meant. If it was from... whatever this thing was that was messing with him. It wanted him to clean the dishes.

He flicked the light switch, but nothing happened. It remained dim, just lit by the candles and the twilight from outside. Tucker approached the candles and nothing happened. He blew them out, and still nothing happened. Finally, he



picked up one of the candles, and nothing changed. Quickly, he packed up the candles and put them away where his mother kept her junk. Then he carefully dismantled the precarious tower of plates and dishes and began to scrub them clean.

Only after every dish was rinsed, put through the dishwasher and put away in the cabinet did the lights flicker back on. It was just in time, as Amelia wandered out of her room and grabbed an apple from the fridge.

“Are you gonna make dinner?” She asked her brother.

He was about to tell his sister to do it herself, but he had the very distinct impression that the lights might go out again if he did so. “Yeah. Um... I’ll see what we have.”



The next day at school, Tucker couldn’t concentrate on anything. His mind was all over the place, running a million miles an hour trying to figure out what his life had become. He avoided his friends, unable to really process any kind of conversation, and he kept his head down in class, not making eye contact with anyone.

It was during lunch that he approached Mr. Hiddleman, the history teacher. He was one of the few teachers who hadn’t given him a demerit yet.

“Uh, Mr. Hiddleman?” Tucker said, after waiting for the classroom to empty out.

“Mr. Bickford? Something I can help you with?” Said the older man, adjusting his glasses.

“Yeah, um. Kinda? Maybe?” Tucker was uncharacteristically nervous. He had a delicate question to ask. Unfortunately, Tucker didn’t do delicate. “So, you believe in Ghosts? I mean, they’re not real, right?”

“I should say not,” the teacher replied. “It’s just wives tales and... We’re not talking about religion, are we?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Good, good. A teacher can get in a lot of trouble talking about religious beliefs.” He looked up at the borderline delinquent. “Unless someone’s put you up to this?”

“No...”

“All right. What brings this on, if I might ask?”

“Well I think a ghost poisoned my mom and kidnaped my sister. Then it made me wash the dishes.”

“Tucker...” Mr. Hiddleman pursed his lips, made a face, furrowed his brow and took a deep breath. “Are there problems at home?”

The kid had a very clear impression that he had just made a big mistake. “Uh, forget I even asked, okay?”

“Do you need to see the counselor?” The teacher asked. “Or maybe the district psychologist might be able to help you.”

“I gotta go,” Tucker blurted and made his expedited exit from the classroom. That was not what he had expected. Well, to be honest, he had no idea what to expect, asking such a weird question, but being labeled as insane was not what he thought was going to go down. That sealed it for him. He couldn’t ask adults for help. They just wouldn’t understand.

Neither did he, really.



The next day came and went without any further complications in Tucker’s life. He spent the Friday night basketball game sitting on the bench and wasn’t even subbed in. That was fine with him. He didn’t even know what the score was, he was so distracted. Half the time he expected a scream to come from the crowd or the lights to go out. He was not able to focus on basketball in any way.

He walked home, alone, and dreaded even stepping foot in the apartment. He had no idea what to expect.

That night, however, he just saw Amelia watching a video. His mother was still in bed, but she was reading a book, and told him that she had ordered out for pizza. Seeing her awake and lucid was nice for a change. She didn’t give him his stuff back, though. He was still being punished.

Saturday was almost normal. Expect for his mother being largely bedridden, he was just lying around on his bed for most of the day. His sister did whatever she did, and he didn’t have much to worry about.

Sunday afternoon was even slower, and Tucker was getting bored. He thought about picking on Amelia to pass the time, but he wasn’t as enthusiastic about messing with his sister at the moment. He looked through the cabinets of the kitchen for something to make for dinner, and settled on some canned ravioli, which he made for the three of them.

He cleaned the dishes and headed back to his room when he saw the box. It was on his bed, and waiting to be noticed. A different one, this time, but it was a box. His stomach turned. He had thought maybe things could be normal again.

The box was for Lustria Hair Color, Honey Blonde. Hair dye. Blonde hair dye.

Defiantly, he tossed it in the garbage. Not only that, but he stomped on it once in the can. Then, knowing the routine, he left his room and walked to the bathroom. He turned around and came back to see the box back on his bed.

Only, it wasn't. It was still in the trash. It was leaking and smelled noxious, but it was still in there. He made another departure and return, and there was no change. No reappearance of the box. Tucker sat down and took a deep breath. Had he done it? Was this weird unexplainable phenomenon weakened enough that it couldn't do what it had done days ago? The frightened young man could only hope.

He stepped out of his room and went into the living room, hearing the irritating kids' song coming from the TV Amelia was watching. He was envious that she got to watch what she wanted to watch, since their mom had let her out of her punishment for good behavior. Maybe it was time to see if he could get her into trouble again with their mother. She wouldn't like that, would she? Tucker considered this a definite possibility for the evening's entertainment.

Looking around, though, he didn't see her. Her video was playing, but she wasn't there. He got that sinking feeling again. Tucker checked her room. The lights were out. Empty. She wasn't in the bathroom. She wasn't in the laundry room. Their mother had dozed off and Amelia wasn't in there, either.

What was in front of the TV was the doll, though. The Shelbie doll. Left behind.

Tucker put his shoes and jacket on and gathered up the last bits of cash he had. Quickly, he ran out of the apartment and sprinted down to the corner drug store, where he bought one box of Lustria Hair Color, Honey Blonde. He knew this was what he had to do. Then he ran back home.

In the bathroom, he powered through the instructions as fast as he could. He washed his hair, put the gloves on, mixed the liquids and drenched his hair in the stuff. He waited, rinsed, and dried it off. He, Tucker Bickford, now had blonde hair. It wasn't quite the blonde that was on the box, as dye could only lighten dark hair so much, but it was quite bright, and very different from his natural black hair. In comparison, it looked almost white to him.

A thump came from the living room. He covered his head in a towel and ran out to check. Amelia was there, slumped over and unconscious, her doll by her side.

"Hey, hey," Tucker said to his sister, his voice tentative and low. "Wake up." He poked her gently in the side. "Wake up, wake up."

Amelia's eyes slowly opened. "I'm cold," she said. It was warm in the apartment, especially after running a hot shower to wash his hair. She shouldn't have been cold.

He looked around, and grabbed the quilt that normally hung over the couch. He grabbed it and wrapped her hastily in it. “How about that? Is that okay? You all right?”

“It was dark...” Amelia said. “I musta had a bad dream.”

“Yeah,” Tucker said. “Just a bad dream. Sure. That’s what it was.”



Eventually, he had to reveal his hair to his family, which he did in his typical Tucker way, by pretending it was no big deal. He just went about his normal Monday morning routine, took a shower, got dressed, made breakfast for him and Amelia and then told his mother they were headed out. The shocked look on his sister’s face was galling, and despite her many questions, he refused to even discuss the strange change in his appearance.

Darcy Bickford took a moment to trust her hazy senses before demanding an answer as to what Tucker had done and why. He held the advantage, as he needed to leave for school and couldn’t delay. His mother was clearly not pleased, to say the least.

Those reactions were nothing compared to what he had to go through at school, though. He was walking up the steps to the front gate when he found the box in his pocket. He didn’t even need to look at it to know what it was, but he did anyway. “Lasting French Nail Kit” read the box.

By the time he went to his locker for his books, his blond hair and long pink nails were plain for everyone to see.

The combined attention of hundreds of immature students was a relentless gauntlet of agony. Girls teased him. Boys called him gay. The gays called him a kindred spirit. The teachers threatened him with detention for the disruptions he was causing. The staff watched him like a hawk, trailing him wherever he went, expecting trouble.

As the day went on, the taunting went to the next level. Words became actions. Years of violent behavior and bullying students came back to torment Tucker. The guys bigger than him took great pleasure in pushing him into the lockers, and the guys smaller than him made every attempt to trip him or bump into him to make him lose his balance. If he were so unlucky as to fall to the ground, there were no shortage of kicks coming to jab him in the ribs. The staff just watched.

Eventually he started swinging back, which wasn’t easy with long nails, and he whiffed on most of his attempts. He managed to wrestle one kid to the ground, but was pulled off before he could do any real damage. In one of his scuffles, he lost his big black leather jacket, and never found it. In his last class before



lunch, as the teacher turned their back someone tried to give him a wedgie, and he shot up in his seat and leapt at them right then and there.

He was in detention to end the day for fighting as many people as he had, even if he was the one getting picked on. By the time he was heading home, skipping practice, he was too stunned to even feel anger anymore. Everyone had turned against him. Everyone. His confidence had been shattered, his facade of toughness torn away from him, just as his jacket had been stripped from him.

“I can’t go back to school tomorrow,” he told his mother when he got home. “Don’t make me. Please.”

“You’re not missing school,” Darcy said, only half-aware of the world around her. She had slipped back into her fever and wasn’t able to hold a thought for very long. “I’m your mother and and I’m not letting my son skip school...”

“Please, Mom, just this once! Please!”

Her head turned away as she started to drift off again. “No excuses... Can’t miss school... Not raising a thug...”

He went his room and shut the door. He couldn’t go back to school like this. He looked like a flaming twink with the hair and nails. He was just going to get beat up even more if he showed up in the halls again. There was no way to survive.

Knowing he had no choice, he realized he was going to have to do something he hadn’t tried since he was ten. “My name is Darcy Bickford,” he said in the girliest voice he could muster. “And I need to take my son out of school.”

It wasn’t a very good imitation of his mother, but he knew the school wouldn’t recognize her voice from the thousands of parents that regularly contacted them. All he had to do was to plausibly sound like a woman. They also knew he didn’t have a father, so he had no options. “My name is Darcy Bickford and I need to take my son out of school,” he said in a slightly higher register. “My name is Darcy Bickford and I need to take my son out of school,” he tried to say in a smoother tone. “My name is Darcy Bickford and I need to take my son out of school.”

After hours of practicing, he had it down. His 15 year old voice wasn’t so deep that he couldn’t push it back into a more childlike tone, making it sound more feminine. He practiced the words over and over, again and again.

“My name is Darcy Bickford and I need to take my son out of school,” he said the next morning when he called up the office on his mother’s phone. “Yes, this is his mother.” Tucker waited for a reply, silently sure he was going to be discovered. He was put on hold. He had to stay focused, but hearing this alien voice coming from his own throat was disconcerting.

Finally, the lady came back on the line. “Forms? Of course. I understand,” Tucker said in reply to her instructions. “Could you mail me the documents?”

I'll be tied up all week." The one-minute call felt like it was going on for an hour. He concentrated on every sentence, making sure his words flowed like a song, in just the way women spoke. Finally, the office lady on the other end of the line confirmed it. "Thank you so much," he said in the way his mother did. "I really appreciate it. Good-bye and thank you again."

He dropped the phone and fell over on his bed, trying to calm his nerves. Pretending to be someone else was more terrifying than he thought it would be.



To keep up appearances, Tucker still walked his sister to school, but he headed straight home after that. Amelia didn't need to know that he was skipping. In his plan, he figured he'd take at least a week off. If he took a second week, he could get a bonus two days for a school holiday coming up, so that was pretty likely.

Basketball was a memory now. There was no going back. He hoped by baseball season, everyone of his jock teammates will have forgotten about this episode.

At home, he had nothing to do, and two hours into his first day off, he found himself sneaking into his mom's room to grab his Xbox. She stopped him. His stupid nails had knocked over a picture frame and woken her up, her head rising from her pillow slowly like a reanimated zombie.

"That's two more days, Tucker!" She scolded. "Two more days without your stuff. You don't disobey your own mother!" She squinted suspiciously at him. "Aren't you supposed to be at school?"

"Teacher in-service day," he said.

Darcy wasn't sure about that at all, but her memory was failing her, and she didn't even really know what day it was in the first place. "Don't let me catch you again, or I'll add another week..." She laid her head back down. "Now be quiet and let me get some rest... Lousy cheating kid..."

Tucker headed out, defeated.

He spent several hours in his bedroom, surfing the web on his mom's phone, which was really the only entertainment he had. The only games she had installed were Candy Crush and Cash Bash Casino. He was grateful he'd lifted her PIN number for the phone years ago. He had been saving it for a real emergency, and this was just that.

"Ewwwww!" Came a whine from outside his door.

He put down the Candy Crush and looked at the time. 3:00. Amelia was back from school. That didn't explain what she had just said, though.

Tucker was unable to resist looking for himself, so he opened up his door and went out, aware he was giving away the fact that he was home when he should have been at school.

“Huh?” Amelia said as he took off her backpack. “Why are you here?”

“In-service day,” he said. Even a seven year old knew what an in-service day was, as it meant a day off from school. “I bet you wish...” He stopped talking because of what he saw.

The kitchen floor was covered with mud and trash — and candles.

“Why did you do this, Tucker?” Amelia asked him.

“I didn’t!” he said.

“Did Mommy do it?”

“No!” Tucker said with a dismissive tone. “Stupid.”

“Then who did it?”

“Who cares? Not important. Go to your room.”

“But...”

Tucker didn’t know what was going on, but he knew he didn’t need Amelia getting in the middle of it. “Just go, you little snot!”

Amelia looked up at her brother with her big, round eyes and then scooted off without any argument. As soon as she was gone, Tucker grabbed the candles, blew them out and put them away. He then looked at the mess that had been made and had no idea how to even start cleaning it.

Tucker returned to his room, and wondered if he could hire someone to do it for him. He picked up his mom’s phone again and looked up any cleaning services in her address book, but there weren’t any. He sat back down and eventually found himself playing Candy Crush again.

A crash came from the kitchen and he dropped the phone, running to the kitchen to see what might have caused it. It was a very guilty looking Amelia with an apple in her hand and laying down in the muddy trash.

“I fell,” Amelia said, explaining the obvious.

Tucker grunted in displeasure. “Yeah. Get up.” He reached out his hand to help.

“You have pretty nails, just like mommy,” Amelia said.

“Take my fuckin hand, little shit.” He got his sister back to her feet and led her to the bathroom. “Lets get you in the shower.” On his way down the hall, his mother’s door opened up.

Darcy Bickford was on her feet and looking very worried as she used her hand to keep her robe shut. “What was that noise?” She then spied her daughter covered in filth. “What in God’s name is going on?”