

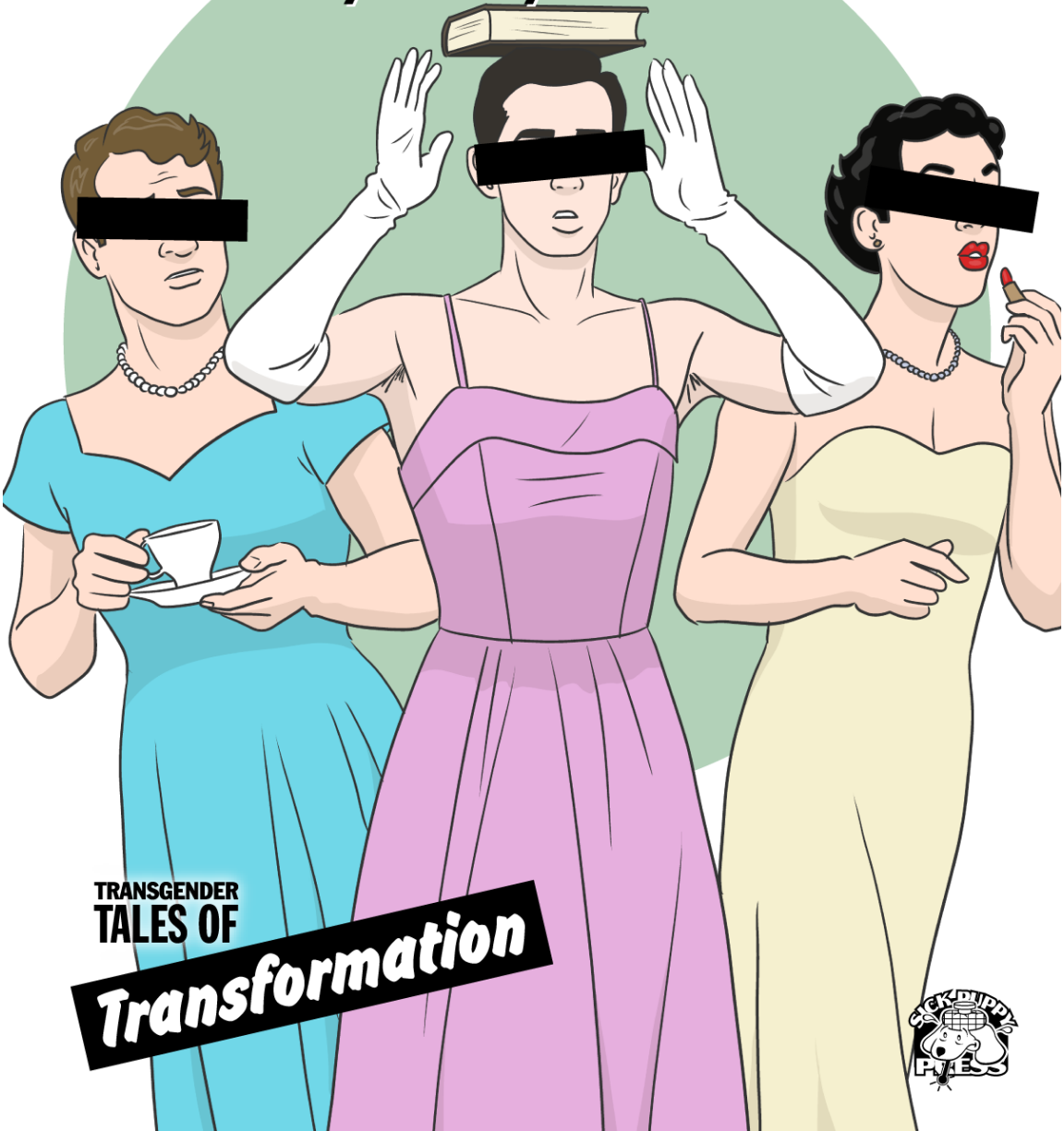
ADULTS ONLY

178 pages **39** illustrations

CHARM SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL

CHARM SCHOOL BOOK 2

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack



**TRANSGENDER
TALES OF**

Transformation



J O E S I X P A C K

CHARM SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack
A Tales of Transformation story



2025 Edition

Design & layout © 2025

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CHARM SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL

THE EMBEZZLER

The motel room looked like a crime scene — a crime against interior design. Air-raïd architecture with cinder blocks made up three walls and the bed was from the 1960's. The TV was the cheapest selection at Circuit City in 1999. The painting over the bed had a corner peeling up and the matador painted on it was either toro-ing a bull or mass of pudding. Gavin sat on the edge of the bed, peeling the label off a bottle of warm beer and pretending it wasn't the last one. Empty takeout containers were stacked like a hopeless game of Jenga near the trash, and his duffel bag sat half-zipped in the corner, as if it was trying to hide from him.

The blinds had been shut for five days. He hadn't seen the sun in four. He figured he'd need sunglasses if he ever dared to open the damn things. But that would mean facing the outside world, and Gavin Larkin — formerly CFO of Norwell Financial Group, current fugitive with ten million dollars stashed across three offshore accounts — wasn't ready for sunlight.

His burner phone was dead. Not that it mattered. No one worth hearing from had that number anyway. He picked up his real phone, the one he'd promised himself not to touch. Thirty-eight missed calls from his wife. Two from a blocked number, which probably wasn't his lawyer, and probably was someone who'd like a word with him in a federal interview room.

"Hell with it," he muttered, tossing it facedown.

He took a long drink from the beer, then reached for the notepad on the nightstand. It was crinkled, damp at the edges, with scribbled names of countries — Belize, Moldova, Cambodia — under a shaky heading: *No Extradition*. He'd crossed most of them out. He wasn't even sure how to get to Moldova. Did Moldova have an airport? A navy? Could you sail there? That was a problem for a braver man. Or at least a braver man with a boat.

He circled "St. Kitts" twice. Had a nice ring to it. Tropical. Beaches. Surfing. Lack of police.

He scratched at the stubble on his chin, looked at the bank statement printout one more time. Ten-point-two million. It was almost laughable. He'd spent twenty years in accounting lamenting how invisible he was, so he worked his way up the org chart. Now he wanted to be invisible again.

He started to draw a crude sketch of a boat.

Then came the knock. Not the loud kind. Not police loud. But sharp. Precise. Too confident for housekeeping, too late for food.

He froze. Reached slowly under the bed, wrapped his hand around the pistol he was hiding under there. Just in case. He held it behind his back.

He moved to the door, keeping low, looked through the peephole.

A woman. Mid-fifties, plain-faced, looking bored. It made her instantly suspicious. She wore a purple skirt suit and held a leather case, overstuffed with papers.

She wasn't fidgeting. She wasn't looking around. She just stood there, waiting.

Gavin opened the door two inches. The chain held it from going any farther. "You lost?"

She met his eyes. "Mr. Larkin. I can help you disappear. Permanently."

He didn't open the door further, and his grip on the pistol didn't loosen. This mystery woman wasn't blinking. That was either very good or very bad.

"You should leave."

She didn't. "The police are narrowing their radius. You have maybe three days before they track you down."

He closed the door, tucked the gun into the back of his pants, undid the chain and then opened the door. "Who the hell are you?"

She stepped past him and into the room without waiting to be asked. She sat in the only clean chair, adjusted her skirt with the sort of practiced calm that made him even more baffled. Her case thudded onto the stained carpet.

"Merill Thorne. I work with people like you."

"Who are 'people like me?'"

"Mr. Larkin, you embezzled ten million dollars. You're sleeping on a motel mattress that has twenty years of nocturnal emissions on it. You know you don't have a lot of time and you need a place to hide. Those are the kind of people I work with. People who are terrified of being found."

He shut the door. "You're with the FBI?"

She arched one brow. "The FBI does not knock."

"You look like a funeral home director."

"Sometimes I feel like one." She opened the briefcase, not for him, just to check something inside. "I'm here to offer you something no one else can."

He waited. She didn't fill the silence right away. That unsettled him more than if she had.

"Well?" he said. "Let's have the pitch."

"No one will find you. Ever. You don't need to leave the country."

"Sounds like a scam."

"It's not."



He folded his arms. “What’s the catch?”

“You give me two-hundred fifty thousand. Cash. Up front.”

Gavin barked a laugh. “What, you set me up in a cabin with a beard and a wood stove?”

She tilted her head. “You’d still be found, and the lifestyle is less than ideal for a multi-millionaire. No. We offer... a very livable solution.”

“Livable?”

“We place you somewhere no one would ever think to look. Somewhere that would never, under any circumstance, be connected to someone like you. It even has police protection, in a way.”

“Witness protection for fraud guys.”

“Hardly. We don’t waste resources. You have money. You’re being hunted. This is a place where you can hide, and no one will ever find you. Guaranteed.”

He stared. This guarantee was tempting.

"You're going to kill me."

"No."

"This is a cult."

"No."

"You think I'm stupid."

"No."

She pulled a card from the briefcase and placed it on the bed. Thin vellum. Bone-white. No phone number, no email. Just a title:

The Priscilla Dandridge Charm School for Young Women

He blinked. "You... You have to be kidding."

"No. I'm not."

"I'm not a young woman."

"That isn't important."

He held out his hand for the card. She pulled it back before he could touch it. Slid it into her bag. "I can't leave these lying around. You'll get the full details when you're committed."

"What am I committing myself to?"

"A way out. A way back to normal life. It doesn't come cheap."

"You're just going to turn me over to the police."

"I would have already done that if I wanted to." She sighed. "We don't make this offer more than once." She checked her watch. "And I never stay in the same place for more than five minutes."

"It's been three."

"It takes a minute to walk to my car and start the engine. 10 a.m. tomorrow. I'll be in the parking lot outside." She stood. Smoothed her skirt again. "Come ready with the money. Or don't come at all."

Then she walked out, same deliberate pace, same posture.

Gavin stood in the middle of his mess, the beer sweating in his hand.

He looked at his notepad. At the scratchings of a plan that led nowhere. He sat down hard on the edge of the bed and let out a long breath.

"Hell," he muttered. "I don't have anything else."

Then he started figuring out how to get the money.



Merill waited in the motel parking lot like someone working at the DMV: bored, listless, and calm enough to make anyone who saw her nervous. Gavin approached her sedan slowly, envelope clenched in his right hand. She rolled down her window and accepted it. Inside was \$250,000.

“Now what do I get for that?”

“Get in the back,” Merill said, eyes fixed on the rearview mirror.

He opened the door, hesitated, then ducked inside. Hanging neatly from a hook above the window was a garment bag, matte black, with gold lettering he didn’t care to read. At his feet was a white cardboard box, plain except for the label that read, “New Student Kit.” He wasn’t sure he wanted to open it.

Merill turned the key, starting the engine without another glance. “Time to disappear.”

As the car rolled onto the road, Gavin cleared his throat and pointed at the bag. “This wasn’t part of the deal.”

“It’s all part of the process,” she said. Her eyes flicked to him again in the mirror. “And the deal was for you to vanish without a trace. Remember?”

“Yeah,” Gavin muttered. “But...”

Merill interrupted him without raising her voice. “I didn’t promise you’d *like* it.”

Gavin took a deep breath, unzipped the garment bag, and froze. Inside was a sky blue shirt, delicate and gauzy, paired with a pleated plum skirt. Underneath was a padded bra — white, carefully stitched, disturbingly realistic — and thick grey tights folded neatly alongside shiny black Mary Jane shoes. The cherry on top was a wig, honey-blonde with neat bangs, resting atop the box like a sleeping pet.

“Seriously?” Gavin asked, holding up the skirt like evidence in a courtroom. “You’ve gotta be kidding.”

“No joke,” Merill said calmly. “Put it on. You need to look the part.”

“The part of what? A high-school cheerleader?”

“The part of a young lady enrolling at a charm school,” she said, eyes forward. “If anyone sees you, they’ll just think you’re another student.”

Gavin stared at the clothes, but they stared right back. “I’m not wearing a skirt.”

Merill met his gaze in the mirror again. “I hear orange is the new black. Maybe you’d like that instead.”

He picked up on the insinuation he’d be in an orange prison outfit if he didn’t play along. He cursed quietly and started pulling off his clothes, sliding into the bra first, fumbling with clatch clearly not meant for fingers like his. The skirt

was worse. Gavin's face felt hot as he tugged the waistband into place, silently wishing the windows were tinted.

"Thirty minutes," Merrill reminded him. "Traffic's light."

"This is some kind of front, right? Just a way to hide people. It's not really a school, is it?"

The middle-aged woman just grunted. "It's as real as far as anyone knows."

By the time Gavin finished, Merrill had pulled off to the tire pump at a gas station. She climbed out and opened his door. Without a word, she reached into the box and pulled out tubes, brushes, and powders.

"Wait," Gavin protested, backing up into the seat, "you're not putting that stuff on me."

She cupped his chin firmly but gently, tilting his face upward. "Hold still. This is delicate work."

As she dabbed foundation onto his cheeks and blended carefully, Gavin cringed. Her touch was gentle, professional and oddly comforting. She knew what she was doing.

"A little warmth around the eyes," she murmured. "Softness around the jawline. Chin up."

Gavin jerked back slightly, blinking. "I'm going to look like a clown."

She leaned him toward the rearview mirror, revealing a face that looked different — softer, younger. "You're going to look like a woman. At least from a distance. Good enough for our purposes."

Merrill got back in the car without another word and drove through streets lined with strip malls, nail salons, and fading storefronts, passing a liquor store with a flickering neon sign. Gavin slumped lower in his seat, hoping no one could see him as they stopped at red lights. No one did.

When Merrill finally parked, Gavin stared out at an old strip mall — drab, peeling paint, stores closed long ago. One glass door, barely hanging onto its hinges, had a sign carefully painted in flaking gold letters: *The Priscilla Dandridge Charm School for Young Ladies*. Gavin swallowed, heart sinking.

They stepped inside, and the interior was the exact opposite of the drab storefront. A mix of modern tech and 1960's furniture all in pristine condition, as if used every day, and somewhere down the hall echoed laughter and whispers, the steady click of girls' shoes. Gavin tugged at the hem of his skirt, wishing it was longer, feeling suddenly vulnerable, exposed, ridiculous. No one even glanced his way.

Merrill led him to the reception desk, where a woman in a lavender blouse with neatly combed hair smiled brightly at him.

"This is Blair Dahlgren," Merrill said clearly. "New student."



The receptionist, a Middle-Eastern beauty whose desk plaque read “Rani” handed him a laminated ID card. Gavin stared at it dumbly.

“There’s a mistake here,” he said, voice cracking slightly.

Merill’s tone was firm, confident. “No mistake. You’re Blair Dahlgren.”

Rani nodded politely. “Welcome, Blair.”

Before Gavin could object further, they were ushered upstairs, down a hall, into a richly decorated office cluttered with Hollywood memorabilia. Eleanor Tuft sat at a side desk, overlooking a parking lot, perfectly poised, with silver-blond hair and eyes that were immediately judgmental. She rose with a careful smile, adjusting the swan-shaped brooch pinned elegantly to her blazer.

“Ah. Blair,” Eleanor said warmly. “We’ve been expecting you. I’m sorry Dianna isn’t here, but I’ll be happy to show you around.”

Rani entered quietly, serving them tea in porcelain cups. Gavin accepted his with shaking hands, feeling oddly clumsy, and never more out of place. Eleanor leaned forward slightly, her gaze soft but intense.

“You’re here to reclaim what the world tries to take from you,” Eleanor said gently. “Poise. Beauty. Femininity.”

Gavin opened his mouth to speak, but Eleanor raised one manicured finger, stopping him with a gentle smile.

“You leave,” she said softly, “when you have found the woman inside you.”

Gavin tried to laugh, desperate for any sign of humor or irony. No one joined him. He wanted to explain that he was just here to hide. Not a student. He had no interest in actually being a student in some grandiose charm school — if that was even a real thing. Yet, he didn’t say a word, too scared that he’d break whatever protocol this was. His freedom was on the line. He could put up with this a little while longer. Or, at least until someone broke character and leaned in to tell him what he was really here for.

Merill placed a steady hand on his shoulder. “Trust the process, Blair. We never fail to bring out the charm in everyone.”

Then she slipped quietly out the door, leaving Gavin alone with Eleanor, who guided him down a long hallway and some stairs to a soft-pink dorm room with a vanity mirror, pink bedspread, and an empty wardrobe that somehow felt expectant.

When Eleanor left him alone, closing the door gently behind her, Gavin stared into the mirror, wondering what he had just done. This was a front, wasn’t it? This wasn’t real. He wasn’t a student in a girls’ finishing school. That would be ridiculous.

THE TROUBLEMAKER

The screech of the tires was what had first attracted him to the Porsche. The first time he'd heard it was when he saw his father squeal out of the driveway at an insane speed, jetting down the road. It swerved along, hugging the curves like it was on rails, even as it was going over 120.

Right there and then, Connor Keough knew he was going to drive that car for himself, no matter how much his Dad threatened to punish him. He was warned repeatedly that his very life would be in danger for even touching the car, but what did his Dad expect him to do? He was a teenager, for God's sake.

It felt so good, to hear that motor purr as he drove it out of his Dad's garage. It was a dream to drive. He felt like he was king of the world. His school friends were certainly impressed, that was for sure. As he ran the main drag of town, they all looked. Every one of them.

The screech of those tires had him the first time he heard it. That was what captivated him.

However, the second time he heard the tires screech, it was as he lost control of the \$280,000 car. It was followed by the sound of crunching metal and exploding airbags.

He was perfectly fine, a tribute to German safety engineering. Connor walked away. Or, more accurately, he ran away. He knew he couldn't be caught. He ran all the way back home, terrified.

His dad had slaved away for decades to save up for that car — as Connor was regularly reminded by his father — and he had basically sacrificed everything to get it. Connor even suspected that it was the reason he'd divorced his mother, just to save money for this project. It meant everything to him.

Fortunately for Connor, his father wasn't around at that moment in time. He was overseas, on a business trip or something, and would be gone for another few days. As far as Connor was concerned, as he pictured at the heap of smoking metal he had left on the highway, those few days were his last on Earth. For now, he was being looked after by his new step-mother Zlatica, whom his father had met through the internet and married a few months ago. She was from Macedonia, wherever that was. Fortunately, she was too busy calling family and shopping to pay much attention to him.

They weren't a rich family at all. No, the Keoughs were just middle class, and the car was something his father had been saving up for over twenty years. Now Connor Keough, just 17, knew his father would be out for blood when he arrived back home. He could already see his insane rage-filled eyes.

It was hard to imagine what his already ill-tempered and wrathful father would do when he had a good reason to kill his only son. That time Connor had



set the gazebo on fire wasn't going to even compare, and he'd just barely escaped strangulation from his father's crazed, homicidal clutches.

If Connor was going to survive his father seeing the wreckage of his life's fondest desire, he was going to need a place to hide, and he knew it. It also needed to somewhere he could never be found. Because that was a necessary requirement at this point.



“31st and Regent,” the robot lady said over the sound system of the bus.

That was his stop, according to his phone. Connor got up, lost his balance and then used all the rails he could to maneuver to the back door of the relatively empty bus.

It had been a week of nerve-wracking emotions for Connor. He had been dodging his step-mother every day, sneaking around the house like a burglar just to get food. That so-called step mother of his, Zlatica, was a relatively newly-wed wife didn't know about the attic above the garage and Connor had been hiding out there, only coming out when she was off on one of her many shopping trips.

He knew he was living on borrowed time, but he had no idea where he could go. He didn't have a lot of money to spend for himself. His friends had nope'd out on him and even that crazy uncle who had promised him a room any time for any reason, denied him.

That had led him to get desperate. His searches for staying in a hostel somewhere were fruitless, since he was neither a student nor a foreigner. A check on finding a cheap room was brutally eye-opening as to how expensive rent was, and that had left him with his last idea: school.

After several web searches, he'd finally found a place that would cover his tuition, provide him room and board — and not ask any questions. In fact, they had a reputation on the internet for accepting just about everyone who applied.

He stepped off the bus onto the hot concrete of Hollywood, hearing the unfamiliar hollow noise of his heel strike. It shocked him. He had never, after all, worn heels before.

The school he had wound up applying for was the Priscilla Dandridge Charm School. A school for girls.

In a way, it was the perfect cover. No one, especially his father, would even think to look for him at some has-been charm school for girls. He knew nothing about the place, except that it was in a bad part of town, it was a forgotten piece of Hollywood history and it had two stars on Yelp.

So with nothing but the dress on his shoulders and his phone, he headed across the street to see if he could fool them into believing he was a girl.

The girl at the reception desk, a Pakistani girl named Rhandi, didn't seem to even blink when Connor showed up in the front office of the Priscilla Dandridge Charm School, and Connor breathed a sigh of relief that he had fooled someone.

Fortunately, Connor had long hair and was thin with delicate features. With a little bit of color on his lips and some mascara on his lashes, he met the mandated minimum requirements to be mistaken for a girl.

His luck seemed to be holding up, as he was whisked into an interior room to wait for the paperwork to be cleared. “Good morning, Miss LaFontaine,” said an older woman who arrived just a minute later.

Connor snickered at the made up name he’d filled out the application with.

The older woman, dressed immaculately and elegantly, continued. “I’m Miss Tuft. I’m the director for this school and...” The woman’s older eyes looked around for a moment. “Do you have a parent or guardian with you, Miss LaFontaine?”

“They... Uh... Couldn’t make it,” the teenage boy said.

“Yes. Yes. So sorry to hear that.” The older woman sat down at the table Connor was at, on the opposite side. She seemed to pause for a moment before continuing. “We will have to check with them, of course.”

“Of, of, of course,” Connor said. He was prepared for this moment, though, and had devised a plan of true genius. “Good luck, though. Mom’s from Macedonia and doesn’t speak a word of English.”

“I see. And your father?”

“In a coma.”

“I’m so sorry. That’s rather unfortunate.” She drummed her fingers on the table. “It does complicate things a bit.” She stood up, only after just having sat down. “Let me show you to your room, Miss LaFontaine.”

“Cool!” Connor replied as he shot up to stand on his heeled feet, only losing his balance for a moment. He had passed. He was home free.

“Follow me,” Elenor Tuft said with the slightest of slight grins.

They made their way through the narrow halls of the somewhat cramped school, heading up one staircase, and then another. “It’s a cozy little school we run here, Miss Fontaine. But don’t let the size fool you. We have many students attending here. Over 55, and that number is growing every term.”

“Got it,” was all the small talk Connor could muster. He was a little on edge, suddenly aware that he was in a building filled with nothing but women, and he was the only man around. He didn’t know if he should be excited or terrified. At the moment, he was experiencing a little bit of both.

“Your room is right over here,” Ms. Tuft said, opening the door for Connor and letting the door drift open. Inside was a standard dorm room, with a bed, desk and closet. A very small bathroom was tucked away in the corner by the entrance. The only thing of note was the color of the room, which was a pale pink on the walls and bedspread, and white everywhere else.

“Not gonna use the closet, I guess,” Connor said, just to say something. “I don’t really have any luggage.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll find a use for the closet, Ms. LaFontaine.” Elenor didn’t betray her thoughts any further. “While you settle down, and get used to the room, I need to reply to a message. I’ll be back in just a moment.”

“Sure.”

Elenor walked to the end of the hallway, out of Connor’s sight. He looked around a little more. It wasn’t much to look at. It certainly wasn’t as nice as his own room, and only a quarter of the size.

With little to hold his interest, he looked out the open door and noticed that there was a padlock on the door of the room opposite his own.

He went to get a closer look, and as he did, he could hear something behind the door. A mumbling.



After she was past the other dorm rooms, Elenor held her phone to her ear.

“Well?” She said, without even saying hello.

“Only child,” the woman at the other end of the line said. “Full name Connor Frederick Keough, 17 years old. Parents divorced, and living permanently with his father and step-mother. Family income of 115 thousand annually, father is a hydraulic engineer. Junior at Fairfax High.”

“Where did this kid even come from?”

“Well, we’re still pulling information on him. As far as we can tell, he filled out an online form last night and just waltzed in the front door today. I didn’t even have a chance to run him through the database yet.”

“He sounds like a runaway.”

“I’ll have to investigate to be sure. He certainly isn’t running away for the usual reasons.”

“So... Any liabilities?”

“Just the unknown.”

“Thanks, Merrill,” Eleanor said as she ended the call. It wasn’t the first runaway kid to show up at the Dandridge School. Heck, it wasn’t even the first one this week. They had a protocol for this kind of thing. They put them up, put him through orientation, integrated them into classes, and if there were any reasons to not allow them to continue, they’d find a way to kick him out. Over time, they had learned that most of the boys who wound up at their front door needed their help.

Their very *special* kind of help.



The sounds coming from behind the padlocked door were sounding more and more troubling to Connor. He decided to see if he could hear anything further by getting closer.

“How do you like the room?” Elenor said, inserting herself between Connor and the mysterious door. “Not very spacious, I know, but I’m sure you’ll grow to love it.”

“Uh, what’s happening over there?” Connor asked, pointing at the door.

“Quarantine,” Ms. Tuft replied as she gently funneled Connor back into his dorm room. “Poor girl is having a horrible time with the flu. She keeps walking in her sleep. We’re keeping her door locked for her own safety and the safety of others.”

“Oh,” Connor said. That kind of made sense to him. He wasn’t sure, though.

“Why does a charm school even need dorms?”

“Most don’t,” Elenor said. “But then again, they’re not very good schools. Here, we’re fashioning the next generation of dynamic, effervescent young women as they become business leaders, artists, wives and influencers for the next generation. You can hardly do that on a part-time basis.”

“I thought it was just going to be classes on setting tables or something.”

“Hardly! Now, get some rest. I’ll have your schedule ready for you by five, and you’ll start classes tomorrow.” She stepped to the doorway in her black high heels, turning back to look over her shoulder. “I’ll see you later, Miss LaFontaine.”

The door was closed, and now Connor was alone with his thoughts, which was as good as leaving him abandoned.

There wasn’t a TV in the room, so he grabbed his phone and started watching some of his favorite YouTubers... For about twenty seconds, at least. Then there was a knock at his door.

“Starla?” Said the woman who had let herself in.

“Who?” Connor put the phone down and sat up messing up the skirt of his dress. “Oh... Uh... Yeah.”

“I’m Dianna Dandridge. I’m the Headmistress.” She stuck out her hand to shake, which Connor did, with all the warmth of being handed an electric eel. “I hear you’ve just enrolled. Welcome!”

Diana Dandridge was tall for a woman, and her height — in addition to her mature, timeless beauty — made her quite intimidating. Especially to a teenager who had poor impulse control and raging hormones. “Hi,” he said.

“How are you liking the room?” Dianna asked. “I myself stayed in one of them when I first took the job. It was... snug.”

Connor was at a loss. He had a lot of questions, none of which he thought he could get away asking. He shoved away questions about being a boarding school, the mumbling across the hall and that he had fooled so many people so easily. Instead, he focused on the one question he thought he could ask.

“The room’s okay. Uh... Who sends people to this school?” He asked. “Just curious. I mean, aren’t charm schools kinda broke?”

“I suppose,” Dianna replied with a laughing tone. “We’re one of the last ones standing. But there will always be a place in this world for the feminine charm that only a woman can bless the world with.”

“You know, it’s 2025. Boys can be feminine, too.” He didn’t really care much for the topic of gender fluidity, but he liked messing with adults about modern attitudes.

“Yes, I’ve heard that! It’s *exciting*, isn’t it?”

“I guess.”

“I’m afraid we have a no-phone policy,” Dianna said, holding her hand out. “You’ll get it back when you leave.”

Connor reluctantly handed his most precious possession in the world to her, a faint notion in his mind he was giving up something he really shouldn’t. Yet, he needed to follow the rules — for the moment.

“Well, I’m not just here to welcome you,” the elegant older woman continued, “I was sent to take you downstairs to the conference room. We have an orientation for all new students.” She cleared the way for Connor to exit the room, beckoning him to exit with her.

As he passed her and headed into the hallway, he gave that padlocked door a lingering look.

Picking up on that, Dianna frowned. “Poor girl. She’s been sick as a dog. But she’ll be right as rain soon.”

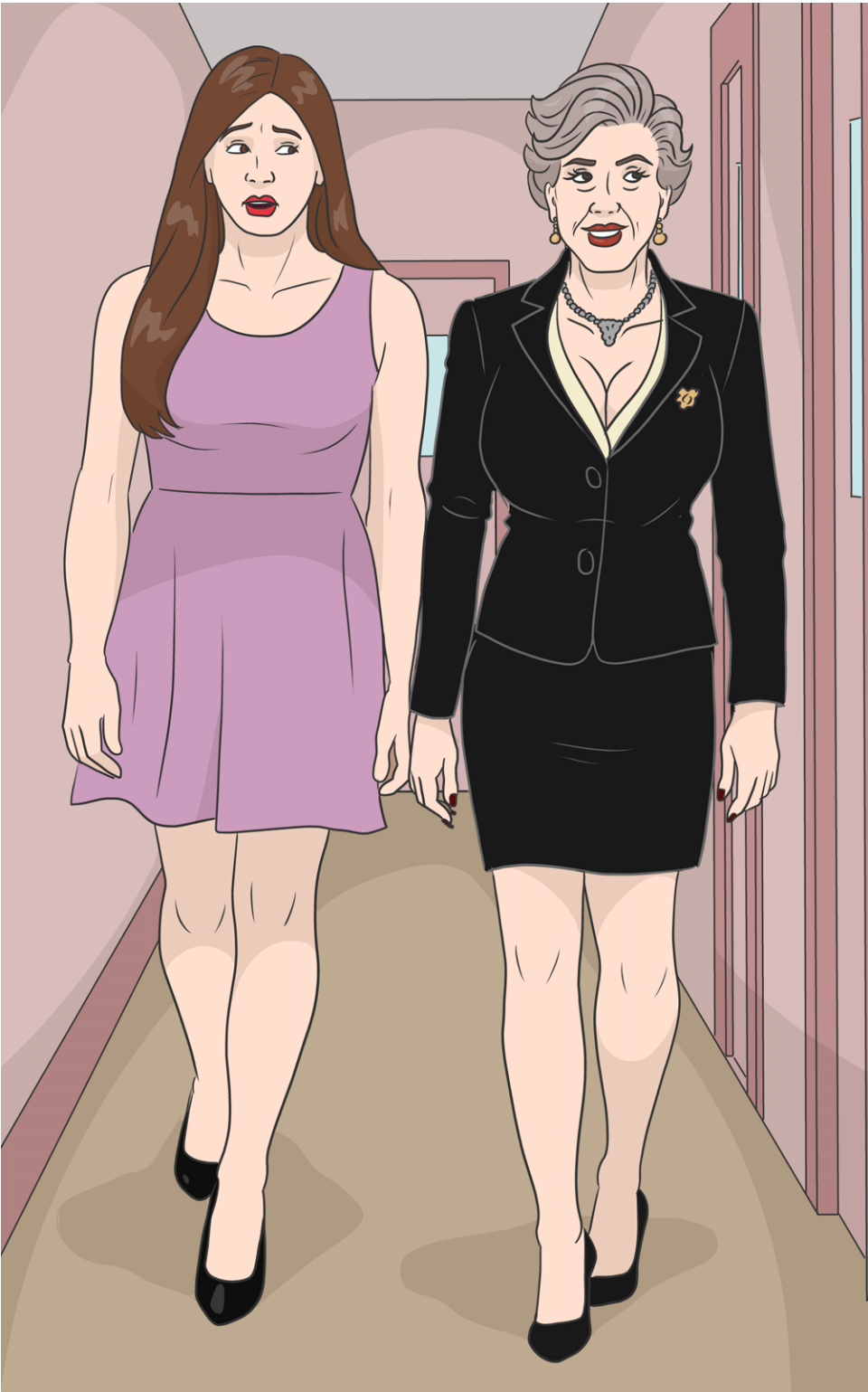
“She sounds pretty bad...” Connor said.

“Our people are very good at fixing what ails you,” Dianna said, proudly.

The conference room for the school was actually the very same room he had been sent to when he first arrived. When they got there, there was a girl sitting at the table, looking very uncomfortable. Dianna opened the door for Connor, but didn’t pass though, closing it behind him. As he took a seat next to the girl, he noticed a bead of sweat was trailing down her forehead.

“Hey,” Connor said to her.

Her eyes flared to life, a wild, terrified expression on her face. Her long brown hair flew as her head snapped. She said nothing. After a moment, she let her



head drift down to staring at her lap.

A minute or two passed in silence, just the two of them in the room, waiting for things to get underway. Connor got a little fidgety, having to rely on his unreliable imagination to entertain himself.

“Ever been to a charm school before?” Connor asked, expecting icy silence.

“Charm school?” The girl replied. “This is a prison.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Connor decided that *not* talking was the best option.

He just sat still and took a few deep breaths. It was just an ordinary room, like you’d find in any given office, with a styrofoam ceiling and white walls.

They were taking their time, Connor thought to himself as the minutes ticked away. He was concerned that the school had forgotten about him and this edgy girl, but not enough time had passed to go check.

“They sent me here to get rid of me,” the girl said. She had a very deep voice for a girl, and her words sounded gravely serious. “They’re not going to win. I can survive this. I can survive whatever they throw at me.”

“Yeah. That’s the spirit,” Connor said, in order to say something. It did not appear that his companion even heard him.

“I’m not going to let them make me into... One of *them*...” The girl continued, her voice even deeper than before.

As for Connor, he couldn’t have been happier how things were going. He had a free ride in a place his father would never think to look, and all he had to do was learn how to hold out his pinky while sipping tea — or something like that. He didn’t understand why this girl was so worked up. Why would anyone ever be so serious about a charm school?

Finally, the door opened, and Elenor Tuft entered and stood at the head of the table. It was at first a great relief to Connor, but that was very quickly eclipsed by a sense of foreboding.

“First,” she began, with her hands folded together, “let me say welcome to you, Starla, and you, Vivian. You’ve made the best decision of your life, coming to the Priscilla Dandridge Charm School for Young Ladies. Our graduates are given the tools for a lifetime of happiness and security, and the best days of your life are in front of you.” She paused as she gathered in the confused expressions of the students in front of her. She seemed to enjoy it.

“One of the first questions our students ask,” she continued, “is who is Priscilla Dandridge and why should I care? The truth is, it doesn’t really matter. All that’s important is that Priscilla has spent her life studying the qualities of femininity which make women charming, to be lovely and to be loved. Over the years, she’s refined those lessons to impart to our students. We will instruct you on all the things a young lady needs to know about projecting herself at her

very best, and how to make her way in life using these qualities to find the things she wants in life.”

Elenor paused. “In short, this may not feel like it, but this is a day you will remember for the rest of your life. The day you began your journey into true femininity, and the day the world truly opened up to you.”

Connor didn’t expect such a passionate presentation. It was just a freakin’ charm school, after all. He gave a glance to his companion, who’s name was Vivian, apparently, and she was still looking at her lap, but her hands were clenched into fists. The girl apparently just really, *really* didn’t want to be going to a charm school.

Ms. Tuft began talking again. “Now don’t take my attitude to mean we’re a permissive school. We can and we will enforce discipline here.”

The moody girl suddenly spoke. “What can you do to me that...”

“We will enforce our rules, Vivian. And you will comply. We won’t tolerate disobedience.”

“You can’t hurt me!” Vivian yelled.

“Starla, would you step outside for a moment? I need to talk to Vivian.”

Surprised to be asked, it took a moment before Connor stood up and headed out the door. He stood outside for about two minutes before Elenor came out.

“The poor dear is just exhausted,” she said. “On her last nerve. Why don’t we continue this as we tour the building?”

“Uh... Sure,” Connor replied, wondering why Vivian wasn’t joining them. He followed Ms Tuft anyway, assuming it was nothing to worry about.

“Tell me about yourself, Starla.”

“Me? I uh, well, I’m a girl...” He said, realizing as he said the words that no real girl would actually have to declare that they were a girl. “I, um... I go to Fairfax High. I’m a Junior.”

“Hobbies?”

“No. I mostly just hang around with my friends.” Although none of his friends were willing to give him an alibi for the car accident. Some friends they were. “That’s about it.”

“I see. Well, there are lots of fun activities here, and I’m sure you’ll make even more friends at the school.”

“Great. Great.” He had no interest, and didn’t seem to be able to disguise that.

They came to a long hallway with a dozen or so doors along the walls. It looked ancient, like a movie set from the 40’s. He expected to see men in trench coats and fedoras come out of the doors. “This is our main hall for classes,” Elenor said as they walked. “This is Figure and Exercise, the next is Cosmetology. That’s Ms. LaMay’s class. You’ll like her.”

Then Ms. Tuft stopped at the next door and looked through the window in the door. “Oh good,” she said. “We’re lucky enough to find a class in session. Why don’t we go in?”

Before Connor could even object, the door was open and he was being ushered inside. It was like any other classroom, but with chairs instead of desks. There were about eight girls inside, and as they entered, all of them looked in Connor’s direction.

It was one thing to fool some old ladies that you were a girl, it was another to have a bunch of girls your own age stare at you while you were standing in a flimsy dress. Even a real girl would have felt intimidated. As a guy, Connor felt a level of humiliation and shame he had never felt before.

“Eyes up front, please,” the instructor said.

Elenor gestured for Connor to take a seat at the very back, and they both sat down to observe, as the students kept gawking.

“Girls, attention please. Girls!” The instructor made a couple of sharp claps to get their attention.

“That’s Mrs. Dandridge...” Elenor began to say.

“We’ve kinda met,” Connor interrupted.

Dianna Dandridge once again had the eyes of her etiquette students on her, and continued with her lesson. “Now, since you surely have been practicing, I want to see your progress on curtsying.” She looked to one of the students seated in the front row. “Sasha, you’re first.”

A girl with her brown hair in pigtails stood up, and took a step forward. She then froze in place, looking back at the students, then at Mrs. Dandridge, and then back at the students again.

“Sasha?” Mrs. Dandridge asked.

The girl didn’t respond, as her eyes kept darting around the room. “What am I doing here?” She asked herself aloud. “What’s happening to me?”

“Sasha?” Mrs. Dandridge asked again.

“I’m not supposed to be here!” The young lady cried out, louder.

“Eleanor?” Mrs. Dandridge asked her friend. “Could you...?”

The older woman quickly got out of her chair and approached Sasha. “Sweetie,” she said calmly to the panicky girl. “Why don’t you come with me, all right?” She put an arm around her shoulders and led her out of the room, as everyone looked on in silence.

“Genie, why don’t you give it a try,” Dianna said.

A blond girl, with quite possibly the brightest smile Connor had ever seen, practically leapt out of her chair and stood in front of Mrs. Dandridge.

“Turn so the class can see you, sweetie,” Dianna told her.

“Yes, Mrs. Dandridge,” the girl said in a sweet, slightly southern accent. She turned around and did something Connor had never seen before, some kind of elaborate bow while holding out her skirt.

“Very nice, Genie,” Mrs. Dandridge said. “Try to get even lower, and more bend in the knees. But very nice.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Dandridge,” Genie said before scampering back to her chair.

“Now I want to see your curtsy, Laura,” Dianna said.

“Curt-see?” Connor mumbled to himself. He’d never even heard this word before.

“Yes, *curtsy*,” Mrs. Dandridge said, hearing the loud mumble. “In fact, why don’t you come up to the front, Starla. Hold on for a moment, Laura.”

Connor was hesitant to move from his spot. “Uh, I’m... Not...”

“Come on, come on. Every student learns to curtsy. Now’s a good a time as ever to get started.” She stepped forward and waited for Connor to meet her.

Connor didn’t have any options, and walked in his one-inch heels and sun dress to the front, where he kept his eyes low so as to not make eye contact. He was mortified and he hadn’t even done anything yet.

“Very good,” Mrs. Dandridge said. “Now here’s how we do a full curtsy. First, you grip the sides of your skirt or dress with the tips of your fingers and thumbs, like this.” She acted out what she was instructing. “Bow your head, and as you do, take your right foot and step it back a few inches, taking your weight off it, like so.”

The young man couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He had never heard of this before, and had no idea why anyone would need to know this. Was it a dance move? A religious ceremony? He was baffled, and just stood there, gawking.

“Now bend your knees and hold it, for a moment or two.” Mrs. Dandridge showed him, keeping a reverent expression on her face. “Then, still gripping the skirt, put your right foot back in place and slowly stand back up, and when you do, release the skirt and now you can return your head to a normal position.”

Mrs. Dandridge had performed her curtsy with grace and ease, as if she had done this mysterious action a million times in her life. It was genuinely impressive to have done what she had done, in three-inch heels, and not topple over.

“Now why don’t you give it a try?” Dianna said, stepping aside to give Connor the stage.

Connor didn't know what to do, stepping into place.

"Grip the hem of your dress," Dianna said, prompting him.

The embarrassment of the moment made this task nearly impossible, and he would up gripping his dress like he was holding on for life.

"Now the right foot."

Without really thinking, desperate for any help, he did exactly as told. That unfortunately sent him right over, as standing on one raised-heel foot was a little less stability than he was used to.

"Oh my goodness," Dianna said, approaching Connor, whose face was planted firmly on the floor.

Connor quickly righted himself trying to look like he was in control and everything was fine. The wobble from his heels indicated that it was a bit of bravado.

The girls in the class all giggled and snickered at him, and no amount of preparation could have steeled him for the embarrassment of having a room full of girls laugh at his mistake. If he had thought just being stared at by the girls was the deepest humiliation he could feel, that notion was proven wildly optimistic, and poor Connor nearly fell to pieces on the spot.

"All right, Starla," Mrs. Dandridge said. "We've all stumbled in our first attempt. Go ahead and return to your seat. Thank you for trying."

He had never been happier to be dismissed and nearly ran to the back of the room.

This was a mistake, he thought to himself as he sat down. *This was a huge mistake.*

The door to the classroom opened, and in came Sasha with Elenor behind her. This time, Sasha looked a little dazed, but had a smile on her face. Also, as Connor noted, she was wearing a different sweater, for some reason.

"Welcome back, Sasha."

"Thank you, Mrs. Dandridge," she said in a soft voice. "I apologize for my behavior. It was very unladylike."

The headmistress nodded. "That's quite all right. Just one of those things."

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to look feminine and beautiful," Sasha said, apropos of nothing.

"There never is," Dianna replied. "Now would you like to show us your curtsy?"

"Oh, may I, Mrs. Dandridge? I would be ever so pleased." Connor watched as Sasha, with eagerness, stood in front of the class and did a curtsy that was immaculate. Or, at least Connor assumed it was immaculate, as both the class and Mrs. Dandridge applauded her.

Connor didn't know what had brought about the dramatic change in Sasha's behavior, but figured it must have been a stern lecture from Ms. Tuft.

Elenor tapped Connor on the arm and headed for the door. That was his silent cue to leave, which he was grateful for. Back out in the hall, Ms. Tuft was almost going to continue on down the hallway, but paused. "You didn't have any luggage, did you..."

"No," Connor said, ready with another flimsy explanation. "You see..."

"Well, you're going to need something for the days ahead. We'll need to see Bianca... I mean Ms. Newman. Follow me." She reversed course and headed the other direction, until they came to a door labeled "Fashion."

"I really don't need..."

"Yes, you do."

"I can't pay for it."

"It's included in the tuition."

"No, really... I don't..." The last thing Connor wanted to do was to be examined closely. He hadn't even bothered to tuck himself. He'd be found out instantly if he had to change clothes with others watching. "Please. I... I..."

"This is not a debate, young lady."

"I can't... I'm very shy about my body."

"Oh, yes. I see." Elenor gave him as much honest concern as she could muster. "You won't have to undress. Ms. Newman is very good at figuring your size just by getting a look at you." This was one of the many, many excuses Elenor had invented to soothe the nerves of boys in dresses.

"Maybe we can do this later," Connor said as he walked away.

He hadn't gotten very far before he heard a stern "Starla!" from Ms. Tuft's lips. "You come back here right now!"

Connor found himself doing just that, unable to ignore the old woman's sheer willpower and commanding voice. She was a woman who wasn't going to put up with a lot, and Connor had just found her limit.

"Shall we go in?" She said, in a much kinder, but still determined tone.

Connor was greeted by an empty classroom, surrounded by racks and racks of clothing.

"Bianca?" Elenor called out.

"Yes?" A woman's voice rang out from somewhere in the jungle of fabric.

"Dianna?"

"No, it's Elenor!" Ms. Tuft yelled out. "And I have a needy new student with me!"

“Oh?” the voice said, distractedly. “Oh!” It then said, revising her level of enthusiasm. “A new student!” From behind a rack came a woman in a direction neither Connor nor Elenor had been looking. She marched right up to Connor, her hands grasped together by her face. “How wonderful!”

She had short black hair, combed very tightly to her scalp, and was as skinny as a rail. “Meet Starla LaFontaine,” Elenor said.

“Starla!” Ms. Newman said, looking Connor over. “What a name!”

“She’s had some trouble bringing a change of clothes with her,” Elenor explained.

“Oh, the usual, then,” said the skinny woman. “A new student clothing care package.”

“Does this happen often?”

“Almost all the time,” Ms. Newman replied. She stepped back a few paces and critically evaluated her assignment. “Medium 8 tall,” she declared.

“What’s that mean?” Connor asked.

“Your size, silly.” She then started off for the rack again. “I’ll have a week’s worth of separates you can mix and match.” Connor had no idea what that even meant. “While I’m gathering it all together, why not pick out your undies over there.”

“Over where?” Connor inquired, but the woman was already gone.

“Over here,” Elenor said, pushing him gently to a number of plastic tubs. They were all filled with panties and bras.

Before him was the holy grail of teenage boy desires. Girl’s underwear. Not only that, but bin after bin after bin of it. His instinct triggered him to recoil in horror, part of his little mind sure that such tempting bounty could only be the work of the darkest heart of evil.

“Is something the matter?” Elenor asked, coolly.

“No.. Uh...” Connor tried to calm his nerves. “Just that... I uh... Thought I saw a bug.”

“Well, don’t get bitten. Now pick out some things you like.”

He went for what he thought should be the most normal and uninteresting pair of panties and bra he could find, a pair in beige.

“Nude, hmmm?” Elenor said, looking at his choice. “Bold.”

He immediately put them back and picked up a set of made of white, plain cotton. Glancing at Elenor for her reaction, she gave none, with only her usual cool and reserved expression. Connor had feeling she could stop a bullet mid-air by staring it down.

“Well?” She asked him.

“Well what?”

“Put them on.”

“Uh... I... I’m already wearing...”

“No you’re not,” she said, cutting him off. “No sign of it.” She picked at the shoulder of Connor’s dress. “Of course, only a woman might notice. Or a particularly horny boy.”

“But...”

Elenor looked through her narrow, suspicious eyes at Connor. “In this school, you’ll be wearing panties and a bra in all classes and at all school activities. It’s a *requirement*.” She pushed the bra and panties the boy was holding closer to him. “Best get started now.” She glanced at a stand-up screen nearby. “You can change there.”

Connor headed to the screen slowly, unsure how he had already found himself in such a spot. He figured he’d have to cover for his true identity at some point over the course of the weeks ahead, but he had only been here for a couple of hours and he was already on the brink of discovery, with nothing but a thin paper screen between him and a complimentary ride to a local detention facility.

“Go on,” Elenor instructed. “Don’t take all day. Or do you need help?”

“No!” Connor yelled. “No, I’m fine. I’m good. No problem.”

The older woman began to walk in Connor’s direction. “I can help with...”

“I said no!” Connor yelled loudly.

Elenor froze on the spot. She frowned. Then she let it go. “You are making a very poor impression, young lady,” she said sternly. She turned around and headed back to the middle of the room. “Don’t forget to adjust the shoulder straps for the right fit.”

Connor took a deep breath, made another scan of the room to make sure no one could see, and hoisted the dress off of him. Predictably, he was wearing just a pair of grey boxer briefs below.

He picked up the bra, and figured out if he had it inside-out or not, and then put his arms through. The boy had seen enough soft porn in his life to know how to put on a bra, and was even able to close it in back. What he was puzzled by was that it fit him — cups and all.

He had a male chest of course, being a male, but the cups of the bra were nearly pocketless. He figured that maybe this was meant for a younger girl.

A disgusted grunt emerged from deep in his throat somewhere as he mentally acknowledged that he was wearing a bra. A bra for a girl. Girls underwear. He, for the rest of his life, would remember this moment and cringe.

He reached for the dress and before he was even able to touch it, he heard Elenor cough. "Panties too," she said.

Dejectedly, he put the dress back on anyway, and slipped out of his boxer briefs with the dress on. He didn't care if the panties were inside out, facing the wrong way or on fire. He just put them on as quickly as he could do it.

Connor waited until Mrs. Tuft spoke before he budged, not wanting to be seen before he had to be seen.

"Ready?" The older woman asked.

Without comment, Connor shuffled out from behind the screen, his shoulders slumped in defeat.

Elenor walked over to him slowly, never breaking her gaze from him, and stopped only to feel the strap under the shoulder of his dress. "Turn around please."

Confused, Connor had to think about the request, but then did as instructed, reluctantly. The next thing he knew, he felt fabric whisking across his bare butt.

"The skirt was caught in the panties," Ms. Tuft explained. "You want to watch for that."

Connor looked down to see the hem of the dress wafting as it settled. He had no idea what to do with this information, except be terrified.

"Here we go!" Ms. Newman said, carrying out about eight overstuffed shopping bags. She looked like a Christmas shopper who had burned through all her credit cards. "One new student care kit."

She held out her arms, holding the bags for Connor to take.

"I'm not here for that long," he said.

"This is just for the first week," Elenor replied.

"First week?" Connor was alarmed.

"Please take the bags," Ms. Newman said with strain in her voice, as she was still holding them up. "They're very heavy."



They resumed their walk along the hallway, with Connor toting the too-many bags, trying not to look like he was having difficulty. Which he was.

Not only were the bags heavy, but the feeling of the smooth panties and tightness of the bra were sensations that were driving him nuts, and much like putting shoes on a cat, he was trying to wiggle his way out of them. He was so preoccupied he didn't even notice that he had been led into the cosmetology classroom.

Connor suddenly became aware of surroundings when he saw the tables with lighted mirrors arranged in rows. On each was a mess of bottles, jars, brushes and other beauty items.

“Set those down and take a seat,” Elenor instructed. “Jasmine should be here any moment.”

“For what?” Connor asked, knowing full well for what.

“To give you your first lesson in...”

“Your first lesson in beauty!” Jasmine said, crashing through the door.

“Beginning your lifelong love affair with the wonderful woman inside you!”

Connor picked up the bags. “No, that’s okay. I’m good.”

“Oh, to be you!” Jasmine practically flew over to him, and took the bags away. She twirled gracefully and pushed Connor down into one of the chairs. “Just about to learn the secrets of beauty and to walk through the door that will lead you to the rest of your life! To experience it all for the first time again! I’m ferociously jealous.”

Connor tried to get up from the chair, but was pressed down by Ms. LaMay from behind. “No need to be scared, little one!” She sang out. “We all get scared when we’re face to face with change, especially when your face is due for a change! That’s a little joke.”

No one laughed. Jasmine LaMay was used to that reaction.

“I’m feeling kinda tired,” Connor said. “I’d like to just go to bed...”

He didn’t even get a chance to finish his sentence before he felt a swat go across his backside. Elenor unrolled the magazine she held in her hand and put it back on the counter nearby her. “You will sit,” she said, with purpose and gravity. “And you will not speak.”

Connor dropped himself back in the seat.

For an hour, Connor sat still as Ms. LaMay slowly went about the business of giving him a makeover. She explained every step along the way, the choices she was making and the look she was going for.

Connor didn’t understand a word of it.

Instead, the young man was laser focused on the gunk being layered on his face. With every dab and every stroke, he was watching what little sense of masculine pride he had fade behind a mask of beige and mauve paint.

The foundation smoothed out his rough complexion. The blush returned color to his cheeks for the first time since he was six. The eyeshadow made his eyes look larger and eyeliner and mascara grabbed attention and shouted to the world how much of a girl you were. The lipstick just amped the femininity up a hundredfold.



Another bag was added to his collection, full of this girlish cosmetic slop, and Connor was on his way. He found himself passing by what felt like a thousand people on his way back to his new room.

Finally alone, he forgot all about relaxing and unwinding after his very long morning. Instead, he just kept staring at his transformed face in the mirror above his desk. "It's all under control," he told himself, aloud. "Just gotta weather the storm."



It wasn't very long before a growl came from deep within Connor's stomach, sounding quite un-lady-like under the lady-like dress he was wearing. This brought to mind the most urgent question a young man like Connor had on his mind at any given time — where was the food?

The website had said that "room and board" was covered, and after he looked up what that was supposed to mean, he understood this to indicate food was free. So where was it?

Connor stumbled out of his room in his heels, stepping over the bags laid on the floor that he hadn't bothered to unpack, then getting to the hall and checking to see if anyone was looking.

It was bad enough that he was wearing this ridiculous getup, but now he had a face full of makeup that made him look like a clown, in his opinion. Connor didn't want anyone to see him, or failing that, as few people as possible. He was about to make a break for it when the door across the hallway — the one that had been mysteriously padlocked — creaked open.

He had to see what was happening, so he retreated slightly into his own doorway, curious to know what kind of wreck of a human being would emerge from the wailing and screaming he'd heard earlier.

"Who are you?" Said the girl who emerged from the darkness, squinting. "What day is this?" She added before waiting for a response.

She was a little on the tall side, and a little broad-shouldered, but she was undeniably cute. She had just a hint of makeup on, her short hair was cut in a bob with straight cut bangs and here eyes sparkled blue.

If he was going to be trapped in a girls' school for a while, at least he had a pretty neighbor.

"Tuesday," he answered. "Not me, I mean the day."

"Fuuuuhhhh..." she said, letting the word go unfinished.

"You sounded really sick this morning," Connor said. "Kinda like you were hallucinating and stuff."

“What did I say?”

“Dunno. You were mumbling.”

“I wish I could remember... everything is always so hazy around here.”

“This whole place gives off some weird vibes, that’s for sure. You know, I hope it’s okay to say that you’re kinda cute.” Despite being in a dress and masquerading as a girl, Connor could not suppress his instincts. He was flirting.

The girl wasn’t having any of it. “Listen, this is very important,” she said. “Before this place gets to you...”

“Hold on,” Connor interrupted. “First things first. Where’s the food around here?”

The girl paused. “You don’t understand. This place is...”

Connor pushed his finger up against her lips to silence her. “Okay, okay. We’ll talk about your problems later. I’m hungry!”

The girl swatted his hand away. She took a step back, shocked, and then gave Connor a good look over. “Downstairs and to the left,” she said.

“Awesome!” He said. “See you later!”

“I doubt it,” the girl said to herself.

The cafeteria was a joke, in Connor’s eyes, and the biggest disappointment of the day so far. He barely even got a handful of food, and was still hungry as he left. At least there wasn’t anyone else there, except for one very bored and disinterested lunch lady.

When he got back to his room, a note was posted to the door. He picked it off and read it, surprised and miserable to find that it directed him back to the cosmetology classroom “immediately.”

It took him a while to find the class, and when he did, his worst fears were realized. It was Ms. LaMay again, and there was a hair styling station in the middle of the room.

“Here she is,” Ms. LaMay said. “It’s your first day, so I’ll let you off on being so late.” She whisked away the smock that was resting on the chair, leaving it ready for someone to sit on.

Him. It was for him. He knew it was for him.

“Have a seat, Starla!” Ms. LaMay said.

There was no way out, and he knew it. Knowing he was accepting more humiliation, he climbed up on the chair.

“What’s going on?” He asked, his nerves giving him away a little as his voice warbled.

“It’s a surprise!” Ms. LaMay said, gleefully.

“Are you going to give me a girl’s hairstyle?” Connor asked.

“No!” Jasmine said with a grin. “We’re just going to work on that skin of yours.” She held up a device Connor had never seen before, but kind of looked like a tattoo needle.

“What’s that going to do?”

“Just give you a little shave,” Jasmine said. “Nothing to worry about.”

“I’ve never seen a shaver like that.”

“Well, you’ve never had a shave like this.” She tapped a dial on a control panel the needle was attached to and a little spark sound came from it. “It’s like a hi-tech shave of the future.”

Suddenly aware that he might have been spotted as male, he panicked. “I don’t have a beard! I’m not a man!”

“Heaven forbid!” She poked at some spots on Connor’s chin. “That’s why a lady doesn’t want any facial hair to show, and we can take care of that with a quick little zap!”

“Zap?”

“Let’s get that makeup off and we can get started.”

“We just did the makeup a few minutes ago!”

“So we’ll do it again!”

An hour later, and after being jabbed hundreds of times, he finished with a face that felt just as smooth as when he arrived, but his eyebrows looked much thinner than he remembered. He wasn’t worried, as when he was a little kid, he’d shaved one of them off on a dare and it grew back in a couple of weeks. No doubt, he believed, they would be back to normal soon enough.

Ms. LaMay then coached Connor through the process of reapplying his makeup, a task he couldn’t have been more annoyed and frustrated to do.

“Soon, you’ll be able to do this in just a few minutes,” Jasmine said, encouragingly.

“Does it have to be so complicated?”

“Oh, sweetie, I haven’t even shown you the complicated techniques yet.” She smiled. “Doesn’t that fill you with delicious anticipation?”

“Yeah,” Connor forced himself to say.

“Now, let’s get those clothes off,” Jasmine said. She dropped a terrycloth robe in Connor’s lap before he could object to having to strip again. “And put this on.”

“Why?” He whined. “I did the dress up thing! I’m wearing the panties and stuff!”

“This isn’t about fashion, honey. This is about your body.”

A few minutes later, Connor had dressed in the provided robe, along with a pair of spa slippers. If he had been a smarter man, he might have figured out how to avoid this situation, but he was a little preoccupied with managing the overwhelming sense of panic inside him.

“Now, have you ever had a leg waxing?” Ms. LaMay asked.

“Why would anyone do that?” Thinking about how one would wax a car, with washing and buffing, Connor was at a loss to understand why one would do that to their body.

“Well, it’s a day of new experiences, isn’t it?”

The warm wax that was spread over his legs felt great at first. It was comforting and pleasant. Then came the ripping.

The horrible, horrible ripping.

At first, he thought there had been some kind of mistake. Then he was assumed he was being punished. Finally he had come to the conclusion that he was just being tortured.

“No, that’s the way it works,” Jasmine LaMay answered as she merrily ripped another patch of hair from Connor’s legs. “It tingles a little, doesn’t it?”

“Mmmm-hmmm,” Connor relied, with his lips curled inward in pain, eyes watering and his fingers stuck in a claw grip on the armrests.

“Only about thirty more to go,” Jasmine said, “before we do the other leg.”

Somewhere around the middle of his left leg, Connor’s stamina gave out and he fell unconscious. One might call it fainting, but surely he would be offended by that characterization. What made his situation even worse was when he awoke some time later, he cleared away his black hair to see where he was. The problem for him wasn’t so much that he had blacked out, it was that he had started the day with sandy blond hair.

“Did you do something to my hair?” He said, as he saw Ms. LaMay cleaning up her tools.

“You’ll have to be more specific, sweetheart. We’ve taken some away, we’ve styled some, we’ve...”

“This hair!” He shouted, tugging on the lustrous bouncy hair hanging from his scalp.

“You like it?” Jasmine asked, defying her student’s obvious distress.

“What did you do?”

“Here,” she said, handing him a mirror. “Isn’t it wonderful? It’s like a whole new you!”

Connor took the hand mirror and looked at himself, sick with the results. No part of his face had been left unchanged. He was looking at someone else’s face in his own reflection.



“At first, I wasn’t sure if I should go lighter, but the more I looked at your complexion, darker was definitely the way to go, I think you have to agree. Then maybe highlights? But no, I’ve always liked just flat black. A shimmering, shiny flat back, with blue undertones, but just black...”

As the woman babbled on, Connor was trying to remind himself that this was all undoable. If his hair could be dyed black, it could be dyed back. The thin eyebrows would grow back. The makeup could be washed off. There was nothing done to him that couldn’t be fixed. He told himself these things over and over until he began to believe them.

“...So I gave a little wave to it and volume up top,” Jasmine was saying. “So many girls like their hair flat, practically all of them, but it’s been going on so long that it only means that it’s fashionable to go back to volume, and...”

“You said you weren’t going to give me girl’s hairstyle.”

“Yet. Did I say ‘yet?’ I should have said *yet*.” She smiled. “How do you like it? It’s fabulous, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh,” Connor said, handing the mirror back.

“Oh, I suppose it is a big change. You’ll get used to it.”

Connor wanted to say something very rude and very loud, but he held his tongue. He was in a girls school, as it was probably for the best that he look as much like a girl as possible to keep himself hidden here, away from his crazy father. He was willing to accept that a different hair color would help him with his goals more than it hurt his pride.

“I’m sure I will,” Connor growled as he got up from the salon chair.

The whole hair ordeal Ms. LaMay had run Connor through lasted until dinner time, and he wearily walked down the hall to go to his room, his modest heels clip-clopping on the hard floor. The only thing that could distract him from his internal sense of foreboding and dread was the smell of food.

Hoping that dinner might be a bit more satisfying than the bird food they served at lunch, he headed to the odd cafeteria room. He stopped at the threshold, as the room was packed with girls — all the students and some of the teachers.

The growl in his stomach pushed him forward, and made him ignore his considerable misgivings. He had to remind himself that he had just endured the terror of a makeover, and was just as convincing a girl as half the students. It wasn’t like this was exactly a beauty pageant. The few girls he had seen so far weren’t much to look at, and his current appearance was at least a match for them.

He looked around for a place to sit, and there were plenty of tables. It was an odd dynamic. The uglier girls tended to sit alone, but the more attractive the girls were, the more likely it was that they sat together.

In fact, now that he got to see the entire student body, he rescinded his judgement of the girls here. There were some stone cold foxes. Incredibly sexy girls who had no right being this beautiful in this crummy school, if he was being honest

In fact, his neighbor, the girl who had the lock on her door, who was kinda cute, was sitting by herself, looking slightly distraught. Connor got through the line quickly, keeping his head down and his eyes averted. It wasn't until he had left the line that he saw the paltry chicken breast and Brussel sprouts he was going to have to subsist on tonight.

For the not first time, he considered his options on leaving the Priscilla Dandridge Charm School. Maybe he could find a cooking school to hide out in instead. They would have food.

Connor watched his neighbor closely as he ate, watching her. She seemed almost lost, spending more time staring at her food rather than eating it, and he began to feel a bit sad for her. That was shame that she seemed so sad, in his judgement, because he always docked one point off for being sad. She was a seven and now a six.

Finally, it was time for him to call it a day and retreat to his room for the rest of the night — and wash all the crap off his face.

“Hello, Starla,” said the voice of Mrs. Dandridge herself. Her presence caused Connor to emit a very subtle gasp and sent him back against the doorframe. She was sitting on the lone chair in Connor's room, waiting for him. She stood as he entered. “I hope you enjoyed tonight's meal. I selected the menu myself.”

“Yeah. It was fine,” Connor said, getting his breath back from being startled.

“Nice and filling for a growing young woman like yourself.”

“Filling. Uh huh.”

“Anyway,” she continued, “because we enrolled you late into our current class, I wanted to give you a little crash course so you can catch up with the rest of the students when you start tomorrow.”

“Really?” Connor whined.

“Don't worry, I'll make it fun.” She handed him a book.

“At least it's just reading,” he said, amused. “Thank God.”

“Actually, this is for your head. This is a posture and deportment lesson! Balance it on your head as you walk down the hallway.”

“Hrgh,” he grunted. Being strangled by his father was looking more and more appealing.

THE NEPHEW

The front door slammed against the wall with a bang that shook the picture frames against the striped vintage wallpaper of Yvonne Langthorpe's home. Her tiny black and white portraits of long-dead relatives rattled. The ivory and jade statuettes on the bookshelves shifted. The dark wood tables and chairs clattered.

Albert Morris, seventeen years old, five feet one-and-a-quarter inches tall, mud on his pants and a smug grin on his face, didn't even blink. He kicked the door shut with the back of his foot and tossed his hat onto the polished sideboard without a second thought. His bag followed, landing with a thud that knocked over a wooden vase. The vase wobbled once, twice, then fell over, spilling the water and flowers on the floor.

Yvonne Langthorpe appeared in the doorway like a summoned ghost in the shadowy, ancient interior of her victorian home.

She was stiff-backed, arms folded, eyes sharp. The black leather of her skirt creaked when she moved. Her blouse was buttoned all the way to her throat, the sleeves starched so crisp they looked like armor. Her bun — tight and perfect — didn't dare budge.

"You are a menace," she said.

Albert didn't look up from where he stood peeling off his socks in the foyer. "Good afternoon to you too, Aunt B."

She didn't respond. She stepped over the mud-streaked carpet like it was a biohazard and crouched beside the toppled vase. She picked up a flower with two fingers and held it in the light.

"This is intolerable!"

"So are you," Albert said under his breath.

Her head snapped in his direction indicating she had heard that remark.

Albert didn't care. He bent to unlace his cleats, using the wall for balance. "Maybe don't put fragile stuff on those rickety tables."

"Normal people walk with care. You come in like a herd of livestock."

Albert shrugged, his sock dangling from his hand. "I'm tired, okay? I've been out with the guys all day. I need to blow off some steam." He tossed it across the way onto a vintage upholstered chair.

Yvonne rose, slow and cold. "You have the manners of a troglodyte! Pick up your filthy things this instant!"

Albert laughed and kicked off his other cleat. It spun in the air and hit the wall, leaving a dark smear. "Whoops."

Yvonne's lips barely moved. "You have five minutes to clean that up."



He straightened, stretched like a cat, and gave her a lazy grin. "I was gonna shower first. Kinda ripe."

"Don't test me, Albert."

He rolled his eyes and sauntered into the kitchen, leaving blades of grass behind him in a trail. The wood floor squeaked under his bare feet. Yvonne followed, heels clicking like a ticking bomb.

"How dare you ignore me!" she yelled, blocking Albert's path.

"Come on, Aunt Yvonne. I don't want to fight."

"You look like you've been in a fight already. No doubt that little big man complex of your getting you into trouble again."

"I'm not little!" Albert fired back.

It was a typical response. At seventeen, he was the shortest young man in all of his classes, and was easily mistaken for a fourteen year old. As is such the case with many men his age, he had become violently defensive about his height, ready to scrap with anyone who challenged him, who accused him of being anything else but a rugged, manly man.

"Well at least you make a big mess," Yvonne quipped.

"I don't want to fight!" Albert repeated.

Yvonne's nostrils flared. "You think this is a fight? We haven't even begun to talk about all the filth you track into this house, your mess that you leave wherever you go and your complete disregard for my authority!"

"You say that every day," Albert said, looking over his shoulder.

Her voice didn't rise. It just got tighter. "You've been here two months. That's sixty days of filth, broken things, and smart-ass remarks."

"Do you have a problem with me?"

She didn't answer. She just stared at him, and for a second, Albert saw something flicker behind her eyes. Not anger — she always had that. Something colder. Something like contempt.

"You're a *man*," she said finally, "and that's the problem."

Albert's smile faded. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You talk loud. You don't listen. You stink. You wreck everything you touch. That's what little big men like you do."

"*I'm not little!*" Albert shouted, rattling the stained windows.

Yvonne walked to the window, drew the curtain aside, and looked out at the street like the conversation bored her. "I didn't want you. I told your father that."

"Yeah," Albert muttered. "He didn't want me either."

That hung in the air longer than either of them liked.

Yvonne turned back. "You'll mop the floor before dinner."

"I've got homework."

"Then you'll mop after dinner."

"Then I've got a life."

She smiled, cold and crooked. "Not anymore."

Albert stood there and gritted his teeth. His hands tightened into fists. He didn't speak. Not because he had nothing to say, but because he knew it wouldn't matter. Not to her. She never shut up.

She left the room, her heels clicking again. This time, it sounded like a countdown.

Albert stared at the muddy floor. He went to the fridge, grabbed a can and took a sip of soda. Then another.

He didn't like her. She didn't like him. That was clear.

But something about the way she'd said "man" stuck in his head. She said it like it was a swear word.



Albert had just wanted a protein shake. He'd crammed banana and milk into the ancient chrome beast and flicked the switch without the lid fully on. It only lasted a moment. The blast did not *entirely* paint the kitchen in a wet, sticky mess of peanut butter and pulp. It was just a little splat. No more than a teaspoon full.

However, aunt Yvonne reacted like it was a nuclear fuel spill. She appeared in the kitchen doorway upon hearing the blender turning on, reacting to the noise as a siren call. She didn't have to know a mess was going to result, and she was not disappointed.

Yvonne didn't say anything. She simply pointed out of the room. Albert tried to pour the shake into a cup, but she grabbed it away. "Go," she said. "Now."

That's what Albert did, without saying a word. There was no point in saying something his aunt would just swat down. It was best to let her calm down and then show his face sometime later. Maybe by dinner she'd calm down. Maybe Christmas.

It was the next afternoon that Albert finally showed his face outside his room. He could recall the times he'd pissed off his mom and she'd gotten so angry she actually said a cross word to him. He missed her more every day. But after her death, and his father drowning himself in booze after she was gone, he was now living with his aunt, and the difference in his lifestyle was impossible to

cope with. Even the air felt different in Aunt Yvonne's house. It was like moving to a different biome.

However, the young man's ravenous appetite finally dictated that he needed to find a moment where he could pop on down to the kitchen and grab something before running back to his room. He heard a car pull up in the driveway, and looked outside. He saw an older woman in a plum skirt suit amble out of an old car and ring the doorbell. She was toting an impossibly overstuffed leather case by her side, looking almost comical.

His aunt invited her in, and they talked. This was his opportunity, so he snuck down the stairs to the kitchen in stealth mode, and grabbed the only snack in the house, horrible whole wheat crackers his aunt seemed unduly fond of. Before he could do much, however, he heard the little meeting break up. The front door closed as his aunt said her farewells.

Aunt Yvonne was quickly in the kitchen with him, and looking very creepy. She was smiling.

He sighed and started putting the crackers back. "If this is about the smoothie, I already apologized."

Yvonne stepped closer. "You wreck this house. You mouth off. You break things that don't belong to you. And you keep doing it. Over and over."

"Oh?" He replied. "Send me to another relative? Put me in a foster home? Jail?"

She didn't blink. "Charm school."

Albert blinked. "What?"

"I just enrolled you. You start Monday."

He sat forward, laughing like she'd told a bad joke. "Charm school? What is that?"

"You're about to find out." Yvonne didn't move. "The Priscilla Dandridge Charm School for Young Ladies. Ms. Thorne was just helping me out with the paperwork."

The irreverent bemusement coming from Albert stopped. He stared at her, jaw slowly going slack.

"The *what* now?"

She stepped closer. "You'll live there. Nine months. You'll attend classes. Grooming. Deportment. Manners."

"It's for girls."

She nodded. "Well, I didn't tell them about that little detail. No matter. We can just put you in a dress. I'm sure you'll be discreet."

Albert stood, as tall as her now, all shoulders and teenage indignation. "You can't make me wear a skirt."

“I can. And I will.”

“I’ll run away.”

“I’ll send the police after you.”

“You’re insane.”

“No,” she said. “You’re wild. Untamed. *Feral*. Now you’re finally going to come to heel.”

Albert’s fists clenched. “This is a joke. You can’t seriously think playing dress-up’s gonna change anything.”

She didn’t yell. She never did. “You don’t listen. You don’t think. You don’t *care* what you do or who you hurt. But you will learn. You will learn how to move gently. Speak softly. Show respect.”

Albert’s face burned. “So if I act like a ‘girl,’ that makes me better?”

“Yes.”

He couldn’t breathe for a second. It wasn’t the answer that bothered him, it was how fast it came.

“I’m not going.”

“You are.”

“I’ll tell Dad.”

She laughed. Just once. Sharp and cold. “Tell him. See if he answers.”

Albert didn’t say anything. There was nothing left to say.

She turned to go, then paused at the door. “There’s a cot at Ravenhurst Military Institute with your name on it. Barbed wire. Drills at dawn. Full-year term.”

Albert swallowed. “You’re blackmailing me.”

She shrugged. “Call it what you want. Pick one. You’re no longer welcome here.”

Then she left, heels clicking, but this time they didn’t sound like a countdown.

They sounded like laughter.

Albert stared at the floor. Then at the photo on the wall — his mom, smiling beside a much-younger Aunt Yvonne, both dressed in summer white, back when the woman could smile.



Albert stood frozen in front of the mirror, his reflection almost unrecognizable. He didn’t see himself anymore — not the careless kid who

charged into every room like he owned the place, but a nervous stranger in a short denim skirt and pink ruffled blouse. His fists alternately curled and uncurled at his sides, his twitchy legs brushing awkwardly against the unfamiliar softness of nylon tights.

“You can’t be serious,” he muttered, his voice trembling just a bit. “This — this is insane.”

Yvonne stood behind him, towering like a warden at inspection. Her expression was unmoving, unreadable, severe.

“As I have said a hundred times today, your decision is yours. Charm School, Military School or the winds of fate.”

“You’re making me do this!”

“Do not use that tone of voice with me,” she said sharply. “Not here, not at the school. You’re *Alice* Morris now. Remember it.”

He turned slowly to face her, his cheeks burning under the subtle blush she’d insisted on applying. The mascara felt heavy on his eyelashes, and the gloss on his lips tasted strange — fake, like plastic candy.

“This is a joke, right? I mean, you want me to promise you that I’ll behave or something, right?”

Albert swallowed, glancing away. His reflection mocked him, stared at him from under softly curled hair that brushed his shoulders. His eyes stung, anger mixing with shame, creating something painful and confusing in his chest. The fact he hadn’t gotten an answer was truly troubling.

Yvonne stepped closer, brushing imaginary lint from his blouse. Her voice dropped even lower, harsh but quiet, chilling in its absolute certainty. “You will smile. You will speak softly. Or else.”

He met her gaze defiantly, though he felt small — smaller than he’d ever felt before. “Or else what?”

Her eyes narrowed to slits. “Or *else*.”

Albert’s throat tightened. He couldn’t respond. He felt trapped, cornered, like he’d been trapped in a cage and had no way out. She’d done this deliberately, forced him into dressing up like a sissy. She loved it, too. He could see the smug smirk she was trying to hide.

“Repeat after me,” Yvonne said. “The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plains.”

“The rain...”

“In a more feminine voice, Alice.”

Albert grumbled. He cleared his throat and tried again, in a weak falsetto. “The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plains.” He forced himself to speak in the high, girlish voice she’d coached him to use. It was shaky, uncertain — he hated it instantly.

