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MALL MAKEOVER MADNESS

**“A Day at the Mall” by KK
Illustrations by Fraylim
A Teens Transformed Story**



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j6p@sixpacksite.com
www.sixpacksite.com

A DAY AT THE MALL

Normally Derek Washburn would never get up before noon on a Saturday, especially not to go to a silly fashion show at the mall, but as The Platteville Tribune's nearly-official photographer, he had a job to do. He had loaded up with flash cards, intent on taking as many pictures as he could to impress his editor. It was shaping up to be a busy day at the shopping center, between the fashion show being sponsored by Claire's, which several girls from his school were taking part in, and a skateboarding competition later in the afternoon. Derek had been tasked with capturing both with his camera lens.

So, bright and early in the morning, Derek was pulling on his usual uniform of jeans, a green T-shirt, and his favorite jacket. Yawning, he stumbled down the stairs and nearly poured orange juice into his cereal before his mother stopped him.

"There's my favorite photographer," she said, putting the milk into his grip instead. "Are you going to be awake enough to work that fancy camera?"

"Hope so," Derek said, spooning cereal into his mouth. "The boss said if I do a good job with the photos, maybe they'll actually consider letting me write an article to go with them. Nothing big, just, you know, a little blurb. But it's a foot in the door, I guess."

"Any ideas?" his mom asked. "Maybe you could interview some of the models while you're taking pictures? Or do some kind of creative comparison between modeling and skateboarding? They both require balance, poise, and creativity, after all."

"Yeah, and both of them end up all over the internet if they wipe out," Derek quipped. "At least the skateboarders get helmets."

"There's that journalist's wit of yours," his mom said. "I'm sure you'll come up with something interesting."

"Thanks, mom," Derek said, starting towards the door. "I'll buy lunch at the food court. See you tonight!"

"Uh, Derek, honey?" his mom said pointedly, holding up his camera case.

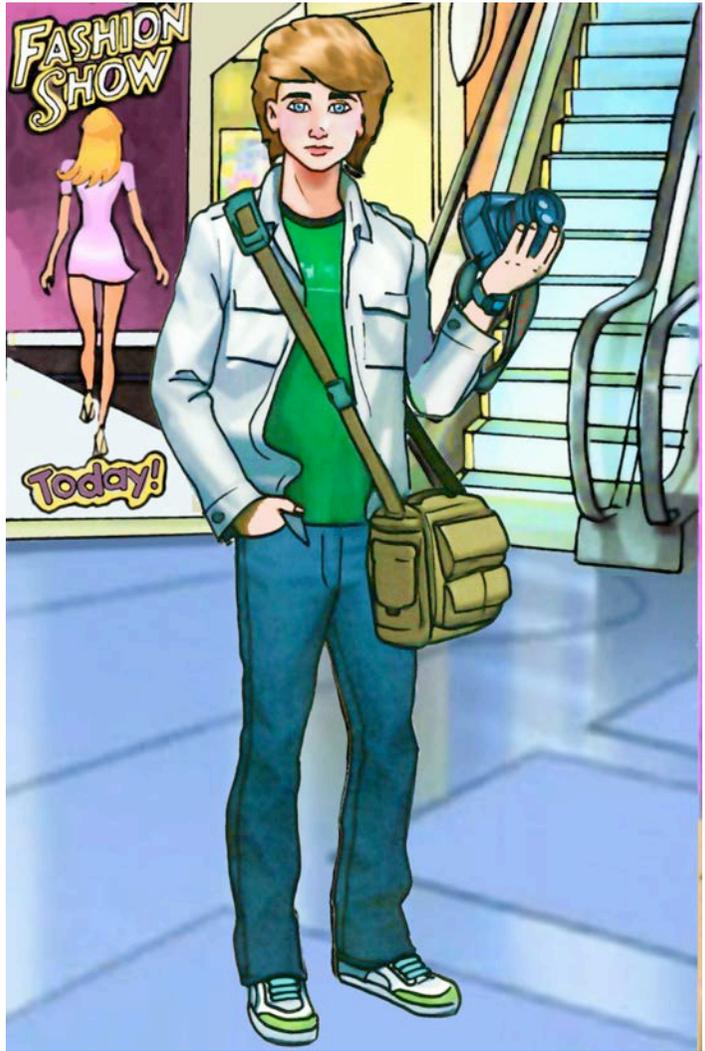
Derek sheepishly retrieved it, gave his mom a hasty peck on the cheek, and was out the door.



Derek's house was only a ten minute walk from the shopping mall's west entrance, and from there the fashion show was another five minutes' walk indoors. It was taking place outside Claire's, a very fashionable women's

clothing store that had decided to sponsor said show in order to generate interest in their new retro-inspired clothing line for young women.

Even if Derek hadn't known where to find the store, he would have been able to guess based on the hubbub alone. A catwalk was being set up in a cordoned-off area of tile, and a number of people were bustling in and out of the curtains that had been erected to serve as the backstage. Several curious bystanders had already paused to check things out, even though by Derek's watch the show wasn't going to start for nearly an hour. Plenty of time for some "behind-the-scenes" shots, he figured.



As he approached, it was with a sense of resignation. Sure, Derek liked taking photos, but his true love was journalism. He was already editor of his school newspaper, but his next goal was getting something published in the local Tribune. If he could somehow spin something interesting out of this fashion show, or maybe out of the skateboarding competition, maybe he would finally get his wish.

Not wanting to be accused of being a peeping tom, Derek paused awkwardly outside the curtain and cleared his throat. "Excuse me, I'm Derek from the local newspaper, I called yesterday about coming down and taking some photos before things kicked off?" he called through the curtain. "Uh, so if anyone needs to put clothes on, or anything..."

The curtain was instantly yanked aside and Derek was met with the sight of a very pretty, professional-looking young woman with black hair pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a wool miniskirt and crisp white blouse.

“Hi, I’m Eva, Claire’s assistant manager, we spoke on the phone,” the woman said quickly in a posh British accent. “I’m running the fashion show promotion. Come on back, snap a few pictures, but please be quick about it. We’re in the middle of a bit of a crisis.”

“What kind of crisis?” Derek asked curiously, smelling a story. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

“I’m sure the girls can fill you in,” Eva said. “I’ve got to be running along to let wardrobe know about it...” She bustled off, leaving Derek to enter the backstage on his own. When he did, he found a collection of seven attractive girls, ranging from his age to a few years out of high school, all standing in a circle around a single cell phone.

“Can’t you just come anyway?” one of them was pleading.

“Are you sure it’s *that* contagious?” another chimed in.

“Come on, Jenny, we need you!” a third exclaimed.

Derek was still too sleepy to comprehend exactly what he was seeing, but, figuring it might be important, he raised his camera and snapped his first photo of the day, capturing the pandemonium of the scene. A of the girls’ heads turned instantaneously at the sound of the camera shutter. Wilting under the combined angry gaze of seven good-looking girls, Derek gave an awkward wave from behind his camera.

“Oh, it’s just you, Derek,” said Catherine, a beautiful brunette from his school’s cheerleading squad. He nearly didn’t recognize her with her hair done up in an elaborate bouffant style.

Being on friendly terms with her and most of the other good-looking girls at school was the one benefit of being the school’s resident camera geek and photographer: all of them were unfailingly nice to him, because each and every one of them wanted to be sure he captured their “good side” for the yearbook photos, and some even occasionally wanted him to use the expensive school camera to do photoshoots for them and their friends.

“He goes to our school,” Catherine explained to the girls around her. “He’s taking photos for the paper. Don’t mind him, he’s sweet.”

“Yep,” Derek said. “Sorry, for, uh, interrupting your... thing.”

“It’s a lost cause, anyway,” Catherine said. She picked up the phone and switched it off speakerphone. “Well, you’re really leaving us in a lurch, Jenny,” she said angrily into the receiver. “But if having measles is more important to you than the fashion show, maybe you’re better off staying in bed.” She snapped the cell phone shut, shaking her head.

“What’s going on?” Derek asked, as the other models, bickering loudly, resumed getting their hair and makeup in order.

“Jenny bailed on us at the last second,” Catherine said sourly. “She was supposed to be our eighth model, and now we’re only going to have seven.”

“And that’s... Bad?” Derek guessed.

“Well, duh,” Catherine said. “It totally ruins the symmetry. We’re short one blonde, now.”

“Right,” Derek said weakly. This was not exactly the basis for a riveting piece of journalism. “Fashion show disaster!” he muttered to himself. “Brunette overrepresentation scandal shakes fashion world to its core.”

“Huh?” Catherine inquired.

“Nothing,” Derek said hastily. “I’m just, you know, looking for things to write about. Sorry about Jenny bailing on you.”

“It really is a shame,” said Eva, reappearing behind him and making him jump. She was busy furiously crossing things off on her clipboard. “We had just a lovely set of outfits for her.”

“Can’t one of the other models wear them?” Derek asked, confused.

“That would cock up the wardrobe changes all over again,” Eva said, exchanging a sardonic look with Catherine, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Besides, the outfits were picked out with her in mind. She has that rather androgynous, waif-like figure, with the boyish hips...”

“Flat chest,” Catherine interjected cattily.

“And fair complexion,” Eva finished. “We’re looking for a last-second replacement, but...” She shrugged her shoulders, as if to say, what’s the use?

“Well, I’m sure you’ll find someone,” Derek said, making to slyly drift away from the conversation. “I mean, who wouldn’t jump at the chance to be a fill-in for a model, right?”

And with those words, Eva and Catherine exchanged a look of sudden realization. Derek had just unknowingly sealed his fate.

“Not so fast, mister,” Catherine said, grabbing Derek by the arm before he could slip away. “*You* were a model for that fundraiser last year at school, and I seem to remember you did pretty well up there!”

“Wearing a tuxedo, yeah,” Derek said, not sure he liked this new thread of conversation.

“Well, I bet with some coaching you could definitely pull off a few trips down the catwalk in heels and a cute skirt,” Catherine said excitedly. “I mean, you’ve totally got the same body type as Jenny, no offense.”

“You know, Derek, you really do,” Eva said thoughtfully. Without warning, she

whipped off his jacket, giving him a thoughtful up-and-down look. “Similar complexion, too.”

“You *seriously* want me to fill in for Jenny?” Derek asked, flabbergasted.

“At least give it a try,” Catherine pleaded. “You might look really good! You know, your mom told me how someone mistook you for a girl in the grocery store that one time...”

“That was ages ago,” Derek said, going bright red.

“And you haven’t exactly hit puberty in a big way, no offense,” she continued. “I think you’ll look cute!”

“As much as I’d love to help you out, I’m supposed to be taking photos for the school paper,” Derek said. “And, you know, writing stuff. Drag is not in the job description!”

A smile spread across Eva’s face. “Derek, I think the article practically writes itself!” she said slyly. “Come on, don’t you see it?”

“I’m afraid no...” Derek trailed off. Suddenly, a quote from one of his favorite journalists appeared in his mind’s eye. “The difference between a good reporter and a great one is that the great one is willing to take the story just a little bit further, and a little bit further after that... and, if the opportunity presents itself, a lot further.” All at once, Derek saw how he could take the story a little bit further, with a must-read hook — the kind the newspaper would be nuts to turn down.

“An insider’s perspective,” he muttered to himself. “My day as a female fashion model. Wow, that’s... That’s a great angle.”

“I knew you’d get there,” Eva said with a wink, handing his sweatshirt back. “Thanks for volunteering! I’m sure you’ll be great.” Before Derek could say another word, she once more whisked herself away with her clipboard, barking orders.

“Girls!” Catherine cried joyfully. “Come meet Jenny’s replacement!”

Derek gulped, realizing he had just officially become the reporter who would do anything for a scoop. But he couldn’t deny it was a great idea for a story that the newspaper would be sure to like. “Just one problem,” he said, as the other models flocked over, curious to hear Catherine’s news. “I’m not blonde.”

Catherine gave him a sly smile. “Not yet,” she said. “But you will be.”



The reaction of the other models ranged from skeptical to almost frighteningly enthusiastic about the idea, but all of them agreed it would be a shame for Jenny’s outfits to go to waste.

“Like this one,” Catherine said, sliding a particular hanger out of its place on

the clothing rack. “Isn’t it just to die for? Here, check it out.” She handed him the hanger and Derek awkwardly accepted it, holding up a one-strap red dress with a flared skirt. He was pretty sure it was the first time he had ever held a dress, much less one he was going to be putting on later. He was surprised by how light and airy the material was, and the thought of walking around wearing it suddenly made him feel extremely anxious. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea... But at the same time, how could he pass up a hook like “just one of the girls”? Or maybe “Model behavior: My day on the runway”.

“Uh, it’s nice,” Derek said, trying to hand it back. “It’s very... Girly.”

“It is,” Eva agreed, suddenly appearing from behind him again with one hand on her hip. This time, Derek actually did jump, and let out a small yelp of surprise, too. “That’s part of the theme,” she continued, ignoring his display. “You know fashion is always cycling round, and right now people want that sort of nostalgic feel for yesteryear, back when coffee cost a buck, and men were men and women were women, and all the rest.”

“How does she pop out of nowhere like that?” Derek asked Catherine under his breath. She just shrugged.

“Beats me,” Catherine whispered back. “She’s like *The Flash*.”

“The who?” Derek asked, confused.

“He’s a really fast guy from a comic book,” Catherine explained, then, when Derek gave her a surprised look, she explained, “My brother is a big dork. My greatest fear is it might rub off on me.”

“The collection is more or less entirely skirts and dresses,” Eva continued, cutting short their chatter with a stern look. She took the red dress out of Derek’s hands and returned it to the clothing rack. “I think it’s a bit played out, to be honest, and that’s why I’m so glad you volunteered,” she said. “Having a male model doing these ultra-girly outfits puts a nice modern spin on things. You’re like our very own Andrej Pejic.”

Catherine put up her hand. “Didn’t Andrej Pejic end up getting a...”

“No time for chit-chat, Catherine, you should be getting your makeup done,” Eva said, shooing her away. “Now, Derek, I want you to meet Roxie, our very talented hairdresser who has graciously agreed to give you some much-needed personal attention. Come on, over here.”

Derek found himself being steered over to a mirror, where a spunky green-haired woman he could only assume was the hairdresser was putting the finishing touches on one of the model’s curls.

“Roxie, this is Derek, the young gentleman who volunteered to fill in for Jenny,” Eva said briskly by way of introduction. “He doesn’t have a lot of modeling experience, but I think he has the look. And some nice hair to work with, too.” Derek shrugged modestly. His near-shoulder length brown hair was

better cared for than most boys' — he used his mom's all-natural, keratin-infused conditioner because he liked the smell.

"Hiya, Derek," Roxie said, offering a surprisingly tight grip on her handshake as the model got up and headed off for makeup. "So, are you ready for your blonde moment?"

"Wait," Derek said nervously. "You're going to bleach my hair? I was thinking a blonde wig, or something."

"Where's the fun in that?" Eva said. "Models have to spend hours having their hair done, you know. Don't you want your insider perspective to be accurate? Which is more intriguing, 'I threw on a wig' or 'I got my hair bleached, permed, and styled for this article, so you damn well better read it?'"

"You can dye it back, though, right?" Derek said. "I don't know if blonde is really my thing."

"Lots of guys are trying it out," Roxie said casually, popping her chewing gum. "But yeah, we can dye it back after a couple days, no sweat."

"We're decided, then," Eva said, beaming.

"Don't worry, I've already got something in mind," Roxie said with a wink. "Hop in the chair, Derek. We're gonna make you a star!"

"Who could say no to that?" Derek said weakly, plopping himself down in the recently vacated chair, reminding himself that great journalists went just a little bit further once more.

"Just lean back and relax," Roxie instructed. "So, what made you want to volunteer to be a fill-in model?"

"Well, I'm an aspiring journalist," Derek said, following her directions. "And I'm trying to write something really interesting about this fashion show, so..."

"Say no more," Roxie said. "That's a great idea! And don't worry, I have a feeling you're going to look every bit as pretty as the other models."

"Thanks," Derek said wryly, as Roxie draped a purple sheet around him. He made some small-talk and did his best to ask a few intelligent questions about the process as Roxie got started transforming him into a blonde.

"Ready to see the new you?" Roxie asked at last, whisking the purple sheet away.

"Ready as I'll ever be," Derek said. She spun him to face the mirror, and his eyes widened instantly. Gone was his normal head of chestnut brown hair, and in its place was an extremely feminine shade of blonde done up in a Marilyn Monroe style cut. Derek could hardly believe how much the new hairstyle changed his appearance — if he squinted, it was easy to think it was a girl in the mirror, not him.

"Retro, yet modern," Roxie said proudly. "What do ya think?" Derek opened

his mouth to formulate some kind of reply, but before he could say even a single word...

“Love it!” Eva said, appearing with her clipboard once more.

“How does she do that?” Derek whispered furiously.

Roxie shrugged, lifting her hands and grinning.

“No time for chit-chat,” Eva said. “Great work, Roxie. Love the Marilyn Monroe homage. Very glamorous. Come on, Derek, time to get you through makeup.”

Derek gulped, flashing back to bad memories of his female cousins attacking him with lipstick and mascara when he was nine years old. But great journalists went a little bit further for a story, and then a little bit further again.

“Lead on,” he said. “I want to look good for my close-up, right?”



As Eva led him over to the makeup table, the other models, all of whom were now fully made-up and getting into their first outfits for the show, oohed and aahed over Derek’s new hairstyle.

“I knew you’d make a foxy blonde,” Catherine said delightedly. “Just wait until

you're all dolled up in makeup and heels!"

"Can't wait," Derek said, giving the "thumbs-up" signal. He felt a little weirded out by all the attention as the models clustered around him, complimenting the color choice and how well it matched his complexion. Normally he would have loved to be at the center of attention of a group of beautiful young ladies, but it was a little different knowing he would soon be joining them in dresses. Before having his makeup done, Eva sent him behind a panel to change out of his normal clothes and put on a robe, instead.

"Normally the girls just run around in their underwear, but I figured you might be a little bit shy," Eva explained. "Careful taking your shirt off, you don't want to mess up that gorgeous hair of yours!"

Derek accepted the robe and hurried behind the panel, glad to get away from the cooing girls for a moment. Surely they were having him on about how good he looked. He was still a guy, wasn't he? Derek took off his green T-shirt, lifting it carefully over his head so as to not touch his hair. Next, he kicked off his sneakers and wriggled out of his blue jeans, leaving him wearing his briefs and nothing else.

"Incoming!" one of the girls called from the other side of the panel, and before Derek could ask what she meant, a bra and a pair of panties flew over the top. With an expression of wonder mixed with terror, Derek picked the flesh-colored strapless bra up off the floor and held it up. He'd seen similar garments in his mom's laundry basket, but he had no idea how to put it on. The panties, meanwhile, were white and somewhat strangely shaped.

"That's a gaffe," Catherine called helpfully. "Eva says it's what male ballerinas wear so their junk isn't, like, distracting to the audience."

"I don't think they're called ballerinas if they're male," Derek called back, more to delay the inevitable than anything. The pocket in the front of the garment finally made sense. "She really just had one of these lying around?" Derek asked, stepping out of his briefs. The cold air-conditioned air of the mall immediately made him shrink a little bit down under, but he figured it could only help with what was to come.

"I guess her boyfriend is a dancer," Catherine said thoughtfully. "Or maybe a cross-dresser?"

Wasting no more time, Derek tucked his manhood into the garment, sucked in a breath, and yanked it up his legs. Tears immediately leapt into his eyes at the painful sensation of constriction. With his equipment crushed back inside him, looking down, all he saw was a flat, feminine V. It was unsettling, in more ways than one, to say the least.

"Do you need help with the bra?" Catherine called.

"No!" Derek said immediately, not wanting her to come back and see him in the gaffe. "Uh, I can, uh, figure it out myself," he added hastily. Determined to

do just that, he put the bra around his waist, and, after a few minutes of struggling with the hooks, managed to position it snugly around his chest so the padded cups were centered properly. He supposed ‘flat-chested’ for a girl and ‘flat-chested’ for a guy were two very different things, because the padding gave him small but noticeable boobs that tented the fabric of his robe when he put it on.

“Cute,” Catherine said, as Derek rounded the corner of the panel, clutching the robe around himself in an unintentionally girlish pose. If this was a preview to what wearing a dress was like, Derek was definitely not a fan of it. The skimpy material of the robe seemed to offer barely any coverage at all, and it ended mid-thigh, swirling around his goose-bumped upper legs. The cold air-conditioned air of the mall had free reign underneath, an extremely strange sensation for any guy who had spent a lifetime in bifurcated garments.

“Thanks,” Derek said weakly.

“Nice legs, girly,” Catherine grinned. “Here I thought we were going to have to shave you! How lucky are you? I would kill to not grow leg hair.”

“I get enough ribbing about that in the locker room,” Derek said, blushing. “Can we not dwell on my lack of body hair?”

“We don’t really have time,” Catherine agreed. “Eva wants you to get your makeup on right away.” She pointed to the makeup table, where an open chair was waiting. Clutching anxiously at the hem of the robe, Derek headed over and sat down.

The makeup artist was not as talkative as Roxie, but she obviously knew what she was doing, giving his face a thorough inspection and holding up several possible shades to evaluate his skin tone before even laying a hand on him. When she did, she worked quickly and efficiently, turning his head this way and that as she blended her little powders and brushed them across his face with practiced motions.

While the makeup artist worked, Catherine and another one of the models quickly and efficiently did his nails, using fake gel nails glued on overtop of his neatly-trimmed ones with little sticky tabs. They were already a soft pink, meaning no polish was required.

“Total lifesaver,” Catherine remarked. “But your toes are going to need painting.”

Derek tried not to squirm while she started on his feet, instead attempting to pay attention to the process as the makeup artist blended his concealer with a tiny sponge before starting on his eyes, using a chocolate brown liner on his upper and lower lids. He was surprised by how much bigger it made them look, and how it subtly changed the shape of his face, to boot. He managed to avoid any eyebrow plucking, with the makeup artist saying full eyebrows were currently in-style, but she did color them with a bit of pencil to define their

shape. A hint of brown eyeshadow and a coating of long-lasting mascara for his lashes finished off his eyes, and then she set to work lining his lips with a dark red pencil before filling them in with a creamy strawberry-colored lipstick. By the time she'd finally set everything with a bit of powder, Derek could hardly believe what he saw in the mirror.

"Holy crap," he said faintly, his vocabulary failing him for once. "I look... Uh... Whoa..."

"Gorgeous!" Catherine said delightedly. "I knew you had potential, but this is, like, scary good. You're gorgeous."

Derek gulped, but she was right. Staring back at him from the mirror was a beautiful young blonde, all made-up, and try as he might he couldn't quite reconcile the idea that it was him. She smiled when he smiled, tilted her head when he tilted his head, and everything else, but it was like another person entirely. The long pink nails only added to the picture, making the girl's hands look slender and feminine.

Derek had never been a particularly macho manly-man, but seeing what a pretty girl he made was enough to give any guy's ego a beating. He looked every bit as beautiful as the other models, and maybe even better than a few of them. His dark, luscious lashes fluttered whenever he blinked, giving his eyes a limpid, sensual appearance, and his lips looked thick, pouty, and perfect. His smooth complexion and highlighted cheekbones did the rest. He was stunning.

"Derek?" Eva had appeared yet again, seemingly out of nowhere, but this time Derek was too entranced with his reflection to jump in surprise. "Oh, wow," she said, which was obviously high praise from her. "Great work, Leigh. He's a doll."

The makeup artist gave a grunt of satisfaction, packing up her brushes.

"We can't call her Derek," Catherine chimed in. "She's way too fabulous. How about Darla?"

"Or Dana," the other girl said.

"Dakota?" Eva suggested. "We can decide later. Time to get you into your first outfit, and then it's ten minutes of Modeling 101 before you're on the catwalk for the first time. Okay?"

"Okay," Derek said vaguely. "Wait, what?"

"Snap out of it, girl," Catherine said. "There's plenty of time to admire yourself later. Time to get dressed!"



Travis Fulton and Sean Spriggs had gotten up far too early, and then walked the three miles it took to get to the Twin Pines Mall, and they were cheesed

off. No because they were tired or because of the distance, but because they couldn't use their skateboards. Platteville had draconian laws forbidding the use of skateboards on streets or sidewalks, forever to the displeasure of many teenage boys in the area. Of course, being hardcore skaters, Travis and Sean frequently disregarded these laws, and being the rebellious suburban kids they were, didn't care who saw them skating on the sidewalk.

They didn't care as long as they police weren't around, that is. What made their walk this morning so grating was that whenever the two boys looked around, sure enough, there was a cop car in sight. So they had to walk the whole way with the board tucked under their arms.

The two teens had been on their way to Boarded Up, the mall's main skateboard, snowboard, and BMX shop, to scope out Travis's competition before the summer's biggest skate contest, sponsored by both the store and a local radio station. They had forgotten all about their bad mood in an instant, because a fashion show featuring a whole ton of seriously good-looking girls was going on beside the food court, which was more than enough to distract two high-school boys.

"Show us your boobs!" Travis yelled at a carefully calibrated volume that was loud enough to be heard, but not by any of the girls.

Sean shoved him five feet away. "Knock it off!"

"What? Do these chicks go to our school? And since when are you so opposed to catcalling at a hottie?"

"I'm not," Sean said. "It's just that I know classy chicks like these are out of your league anyways, man."

"Riiiiight," Travis drawled. "I know what it is. Karen wants you to be more respectful of women, right? Man, that girlfriend of yours has got you by the balls these days."

"Don't be jealous, dude," Sean said, raising an eyebrow. "You had your shot with her. She had a problem with you being a liar, remember?"

"You can be respectful all you want around her, but be honest, man, you wouldn't say no to a bit of grinding on any of those girls," Travis grinned, raising his skateboard to make sure his wordplay didn't go unnoticed. "I'd like to pop-shove it to her, if you know what I mean. I'd like to mess around in her, uh, half-pipe."

"Okay, that one didn't even make sense," Sean sighed. "But I think your subconscious is telling you we gotta get going. You want to see who all signed up, don't you?"

"Just so I know who I'll be dominating, that's all," Travis said cockily, grinning. "And once I win, the girls are going to be all over me. Even that blonde."

"Keep dreaming, dawg," Sean said. "But you better keep your trash talk in

check. You don't want to end up..."



"Disqualified?" Travis shrieked. "Are you kidding me? Why?"

The bearded college student behind the counter of Boarded Up stuck a finger in his ear, wincing. "Look, I just know what Brad told me, okay?" he said. "You're the kid who tried to loosen Toby Miller's trucks before the last run to make him wipe out. They caught you with the wrench in your hand and everything. So this year, you're automatically disqualified."

"I was trying to tighten them back up when they caught me!" Travis protested. "They totally misread the situation."

"Why did they need tightening?" the student asked, scratching his beard.

"Because I loosened them," Travis snapped. "But that's not the point. There was remorse! In court, that means you get off."

"I don't think you've ever been in court," the counter guy said. "Or even, like, watched Law and Order."

"He loves that show," Sean interjected. "That's what makes it so sad."

"Let me talk to Brad," Travis pleaded. "He knows me. He'll see reason."

The man shook his head wordlessly, instead holding up the sign-up sheet, where Brad had crossed out Travis's name in bright red marker and written 'cheater' in huge letters beside it.

"Dude, I thought it was water under the bridge," Travis said, turning to Sean, ashen-faced. "It was a whole year ago, and the only reason I did it was because that douchebag Toby laughed right in my face when I wiped on my big finish!"

"Yeah, it still gets a chuckle from me just remembering it," said a smug voice from behind them. Travis turned around to find his biggest rival, Toby Miller, last year's winner and all-around insufferable douche-face, grinning at him. He already had his helmet on. "Looks like the competition just got a whole lot less stiff," he added. "Not that I was worried. You crack under pressure, Travis. Always have, always will."

"I shine under pressure," Travis snapped. "I'm like... I'm like a..." He trailed off, unable to think of an apt comparison.

"Well, too bad I won't get another chance to beat you this afternoon," Toby said, sneering. "Maybe they'll let you back next year. Cheaters never prosper, Travis. See you later."

Toby strutted away, adjusting his elbow pads, and it was all Sean could do to keep Travis from running after him and tackling him from behind.

"I gotta beat him," Travis said desperately, struggling against Sean's headlock.

“I gotta wipe that smug look off his face. There has to be a way I can still enter!”

“It doesn’t look like it, dawg,” Sean said, shrugging his shoulders sadly. “You’re persona non grata.”

“Is that Latin for screwed?” Travis demanded.

“I don’t actually know,” Sean admitted. “But the competition starts at one, so unless you have any bright ideas...”

“What if I wear a disguise?” Travis suggested. “What if I pretend to be, like, foreign? I have to prove I can beat Toby fair and square. No cheating required. I’ve been busting my butt all year at the skate park – you know that!”

“So you want to cheat your way in to prove you’re not a cheater anymore?” Sean asked skeptically.

“Well, yeah, but only to get in,” Travis defended himself. “After that, fair and square. Just pure talent, dawg.”

“Well,” Sean said thoughtfully. “You might just be on to something with that disguise idea. Do you remember two Halloweens ago? When Karen wanted to dress you up as a...”

“Nope,” Travis said. “Nope, nope, nope.”

“Liar,” Sean said, shaking his head. “I’ll give her a call.”



A ten-minute ride later, Travis and Sean had left their skateboards in the garage of Karen's house and were now sitting on the floor of her room. Even though Sean had been dating her since the start of the school year, Travis had to admit he still felt a little weird around her, since they'd been a couple for an ill-fated month in the ninth grade. Not that he would ever show it, of course.

"So, care to run that by me again?" Karen asked, folding her arms. She was wearing hip-hugger skinny jeans and a tight T-shirt that showed off her boobs, which had definitely grown since ninth grade, a fact that Sean did not let Travis forget. She was also extremely cute, though not in the bubbly cheerleader way — she had a lip ring and a tendency to dye her hair too often.

Sean pressed his hands together, as if in meditation. "We want you to help dress up Travis as a chick so he can enter the contest and win it all, proving once and for all that he is not a cheater, and is also better than Toby Miller," he explained.

"Travis, is this true?" Karen asked, putting her hands on her hips and raising both eyebrows.

"It sounds pretty nutty hearing it out loud, but yeah," Travis admitted.

"So you want me to give my egotistic, chauvinistic ex-boyfriend a makeover?" Karen asked incredulously, starting to grin. "And do his hair? And makeup?"

"Nothing crazy," Travis protested. "Just enough so people won't recognize me. I mean, it's the last thing they'll expect."

"Christmas is early this year," Karen said, pretending to wipe a tear from her eye. "I'm just... so, so happy." Without even one more moment's hesitation, she bounced away to her closet and threw it wide open, humming happily to herself.

"She's got that evil gleam in her eye, in case you haven't noticed," Sean said, inching towards the door. "Uh, have fun, dawg. I don't think I can contribute much here."

"Yes, shoo," Karen ordered over her shoulder. "Give us ladies some privacy, okay, sweetie?"

Travis made a grimacing face. "Suddenly I think I would be a lot more comfortable with Sean here," he said. "You know, moral support and all."

"You got this, dude," Sean said, already halfway out the door. "I'm going to go spread the word."

"What word?" Travis demanded.

"That Travis Fulton's ugly cousin from New York is entering, and she's pretty good for a girl," Sean said. "Duh."

"I want to be from Los Angeles!" Travis shouted, but Sean had already shut the door behind him. He turned to his ex-girlfriend, and realized that Sean had

been dead-on about the evil gleam in her eye, and she even had the sinister smile going on, to boot.

“Don’t worry, Travis,” she said, holding up a pair of skimpy black bikini panties, the sight of which that would have made his day under any circumstances. “Your cousin is going to be *faaar* from ugly.”

Travis gulped.



Despite the fact that Karen was clearly enjoying herself way too much, Travis had to admit that it was sort of fun hanging out with just the two of them again, even if he was currently wearing her underwear.

“Are you sure you don’t have anything more plain?” Travis asked, fiddling with the empty cups of the frilly black bra she’d stuck him in.

“Thank Sean,” Karen said dryly. “He’s the one who bought me the set for my birthday last week. As far as I’m concerned, it’s all yours.”

“Hold on, what?” Travis demanded, putting his hands on his hips. “Why? Didn’t you like it?” He snapped his fingers. “Wait. He was being presumptuous, wasn’t he!”

“No, it’s just that he got my size wrong,” Karen said casually. “And lost the receipt, which is, you know, so Sean. Don’t worry, the birthday sex was still awesome.”

“Well, thank God for that,” Travis said, trying to disguise his disappointment. “So, how am I supposed to get into your panties?” He wriggled one eyebrow suggestively.

“One foot at a time, doofus,” Karen said, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah, but what about the, you know, equipment?” Travis asked.

“Can’t you just tuck it all back there?” Karen asked questioningly. “Like, back where it came from? I saw it on RuPaul’s Drag Race. It doesn’t look too hard.”

“Race-car drivers are into some weird stuff, man,” Travis said darkly, giving his crotch area a dubious look-over, then holding up the black panties. “Okay, I’ll try.”

“You’re going to need this, too,” Karen said rather ominously, handing him a roll of tape.

“Jeez,” Travis muttered. “This just keeps getting better. Give me some privacy, will you?”

Karen dutifully turned around, eyes covered, while Travis took a deep breath and committed what felt like a serious crime against his manhood. The sensation was incredibly uncomfortable, but Travis quickly secured himself

with a piece of sticky tape and pulled the panties on, eyes smarting with tears.

“Woo,” he gasped. “Okay. Done.”

Karen turned around, and she flashed him a surprised thumbs-up. “Wow, that actually looks really realistic,” she remarked. “The battle of the bulge has been won.”

“Or lost, depending on how you look at it,” Travis grimaced. Karen giggled, and despite himself Travis couldn’t help but grin along with her. That is, until she got out a disposable razor and a can of shaving cream from her under her bathroom sink.

“Nope,” Travis said. “Not shaving my legs.”

“Come on, just below the knee,” Karen protested. “You barely have any on them anyways.”

“Exactly!” Travis exclaimed. “I worked very hard for what little leg hair I have. It’s staying.”

“You have to wear tights, then,” Karen said, crossing her arms.

“Fine by me,” Travis said, crossing his own.

“Sexy fishnet ones,” Karen added.

Travis wavered. “Only below the knee?” he asked for clarification.

“Only below the knee. And I hear it even grows back!” she said sarcastically.

“Here.” She handed him the razor and the can of shaving cream.

Travis shook his head ruefully, then sighed and headed for the bathroom.



When Travis returned with his knees and calves fully denuded, Karen tossed him two pairs of balled-up pantyhose.

“Hey, I thought you said no tights,” he said suspiciously.

“Yeah, I did, those are for your boobs,” Karen said casually. “You’re a little flat on top, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“The things I do for my skateboarding career,” Travis muttered, stuffing one into each empty bra cup. Karen came over to even him out a bit, then handed him a pair of baggy purple cargo shorts.

“Did they have to be purple?” he whined. “Come on, Karen.”

“Hey, you’re lucky you aren’t wearing Daisy Dukes right now,” Karen said. “Honestly, you’ve got really pretty legs and you should probably take advantage of them. Nothing wrong with distracting the competition a little, and I bet the judges wouldn’t mind, either.”

“That is so wrong,” Travis groaned. “And also, you know, immoral. I definitely do not need to flash leg to win this thing.”

“Immoral, says the guy entering under a false name and gender,” Karen quipped. “Put ‘em on before I dig out a skirt.”

Grumbling, Travis complied, tugging the purple cargo shorts on. He had to admit they were pretty much the same as his ones at home, apart from the color, of course. He would be able to skate in them just fine. The Hello Kitty T-shirt she’d picked to go with them was not exactly to his liking, especially in the way it rode up to expose a tempting strip of midriff, but, as she pointed out, it definitely wasn’t mesh. Looking at her unimpressed ex, who was desperately trying to tug the hem of his shirt down in a way that actually looked sort of cute, she couldn’t help but laugh a little.

“Yeah, yuk it up,” Travis said sourly. Karen patted the bed beside her, where she had spread out a towel and was now unscrewing the cap on some pink nail polish. Travis sat down reluctantly--he had already agreed to having his nails painted, as she’d assured him it was one of the little things that automatically made people think ‘girl’ when they saw it.

“Sorry, Travis, it just reminds me of that Halloween when we were dating,” Karen said, dipping the brush. “You were this close to going as Tinkerbell, remember? *This* close! Now, put your hands down and spread your fingers.”

“Yeah, well I backed out for a reason,” Travis said, blushing. “It was fun anyways, though, wasn’t it?” He followed her instructions, putting his hands on the towel while she got started on his thumbnail.

“Tons of fun,” Karen admitted. “You looked pretty handsome as Peter Pan, too, in the end.”

“And you were a pretty sexy pirate,” Travis grinned.

Karen smiled at the memory. “Yeah, we looked pretty good together.”

“So why did we break up?” Travis asked, trying to make the question sound casual. Karen stopped what she was doing and looked up.

“Well...you were a huge jerk,” she pointed out.

“Obviously,” Travis said. “I mean besides that.”

“Hmm,” Karen said, returning her concentration to his nails. “Part of it was a total lack of empathy.”

“Moving stuff with my mind?” Travis guessed. “I guess I am kind of weak in that department. But one time, after I watched *The Matrix*, I swear I nearly made a spoon bend.”

“You’re thinking telepathy,” Karen said, finishing his last nail. “I mean empathy, as in, you never saw things from anyone else’s point of view. Particularly, never from mine. Okay, wave them around a little so they dry faster.”

“Alright, so I’m not a sensitive dude like Sean,” Travis said sourly. “But you gotta admit, we have some crazy sexual chemistry, right? I mean, the tension right now must be killing you.” To his surprise, a mischievous smile spread across Karen’s face. She trailed a finger down his chest.

“It kind of is,” she purred. “Close your eyes for a second?”

Travis swallowed. “Hey, I don’t know if we should rekindle this flame, Karen,” he said, closing his eyes all the same. “I mean, Sean is my best friend, and I know you’ve still got feelings, but... *Ouch!*”

He opened his watery eyes, blinking away tears of pain, and saw Karen brandishing a pair of tweezers with one of his eyebrow hairs caught in its pincers. She had a satisfied smile on her face. “You have a few scraggly hairs,” she explained. “Let’s get those cleaned up, shall we?”

“Do I get a veto?” Travis asked hopefully.

Karen only shook her head, grinning evilly. Travis groaned.



Half an hour later, Sean let himself in through the front door of Karen’s house, tucking his skateboard under his arm. As far as he was concerned, he had gone above and beyond the call of duty. He’d spent a good hour huffing it around the mall, and had managed to drop the fact that Travis’s cousin was in town, and also entering the skate competition, into at least a dozen different conversations. He’d even managed to convince one particularly gullible friend that he’d met Travis’s cousin the previous summer, and, just for his own amusement, let it slip that ‘she’ had a huge crush on him.

The rest was now up to Travis. Well, and Karen. “Hey, I’m back!” he called up the stairs. “How are things looking?”

“Hold on a sec!” Karen’s voice called. Sean heard a few mysterious thumps, followed by some profanity he recognized as Travis’s, before Karen emerged at the top of the stairs. “Okay,” she grinned, skipping down to stand next to him, giving him a quick peck on the cheek. “This is going to be good. May I introduce the new, and improved, *Miss Fulton?*”

She was met with the sound of crickets. Turning, she glared up the stairs. “Travis, come on!” she called. “Get down here already!”

“Fine!” came Travis’s voice, sounding none too happy. “Just tell him not to laugh, alright?”

“Hand to God,” Sean said, crossing his fingers behind his back.

“He promises not to laugh,” Karen called. “Now come on!”

The first thing Sean saw were an old pair of Karen’s pink-laced sneakers on the

stairway. From there, his eyes travelled up a pair of slender, shapely calves, a pair of baggy purple cargo shorts, and a skin-tight T that exposed a flat, nicely-toned stomach. Finally Sean's eyes rose to his friend's face, which had been utterly transformed. High, plucked eyebrows. Brilliant green eyes outlined by kohl and plenty of mascara. Thick, pouty lips coated in pale purple gloss. There might have been some blusher on his cheekbones, too, but it was hard to tell since he was blushing like a fire hydrant. Karen had even managed to take Travis's formerly shaggy red hair and work it into a sort of bob, a very chic, edgy look that framed his face quite nicely.

"Whoa," Sean said. "Dawg, you look..."

"Don't say it," Travis growled.

"Pretty freaking good," Sean finished. "I mean, wow. This could work. You look like a cute skater chick."

"I know," Travis said sadly.

"Hey, is this why you backed out of the Tinkerbell costume on Halloween?" Sean asked, suddenly suspicious.

"It's not my fault I make a convincing girl," Travis said, shrugging his slim shoulders. "But it doesn't mean I have to like it! Now, are we going to get this show on the road, or what?"

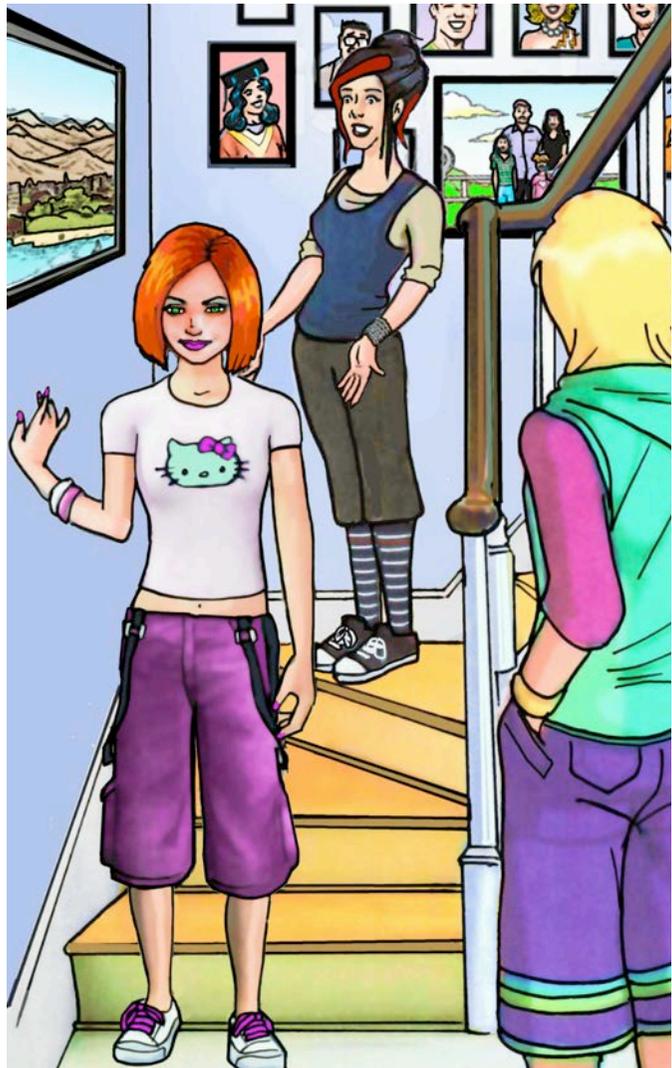
"You got it, dude," Sean said brightly.

"Oh, by the way, your name is Trixie."

"What?" Travis sputtered. Even Karen broke out in giggles.

"I thought it would suit you," Sean said, shrugging.

"I have never hated



anything more,” Travis grimaced.

“Well, wait until you see what I did to your board,” Sean grinned. “It’s over in the entry...”

Travis didn’t wait to hear the second part of the word, taking off like a shot with an expression of total terror on his prettily made-up face.



The damage wasn’t as awful as Travis had feared. Sean had used pink tape and some Hello Kitty stickers to disguise his distinctive skull-and-crossbones board bottom. If anyone really sharp eyed recognized the wheels, Sean said they could just pretend ‘Trixie’ had borrowed them for the competition. Karen even managed to dig up a pink helmet from her BMX gear, and a few minutes later, all three of them set off for the mall.

“Well, how is it?” Sean called. He was walking with Karen while Travis skated up ahead, leaning back and forth, trying to get adjusted to not only Karen’s sneakers, but also the experience of skateboarding in girl’s clothes.

“It’s actually not that bad,” Travis admitted over his shoulder. “Like, these panties are pretty comfy, dude. They don’t get bunched up like my boxers. Maybe I’ll have to keep ‘em.”

“In your dreams,” Sean said, giving Karen a look.

“Hey, what about your voice?” Karen said quickly. “You might walk the walk, but you have to talk the talk too, you know.”

“Any suggestions?” Travis asked, casually landing a kick-flip.

“Yeah,” Karen said. “Remember when you used to always make fun of my little sister by imitating her?”

“I would never do that!” Travis protested, in a scarily realistic high-pitched chipmunk voice. “Do you think I’m a big meanie?”

“Now try that,” Karen continued. “Except tone it down a notch or two.” Travis was silent for a moment, weaving along the sidewalk.

“Like this?” he finally said, in a voice that was still quite high-pitched and girlish, but more credible for a teenaged girl. “How’s this sound? Hello, hello, testing, testing.”

“Perfect,” Karen said, with no small satisfaction.

“I’m Trixie Fulton,” Travis trilled. “I’m from L.A. and I totally shred, so get ready to lose to a girl. Woo! Suck it, Toby Miller!”

“That-a-girl,” Sean said, grinning. Travis shot a smile back at him, which

looked pretty darn cute with all the lip gloss and mascara, then landed an ollie off the curb.

“I’m ready,” he announced, still in his sugar-and-spice girl voice. “Let’s do this thing.”



The sight of some skater kids slacking off and practicing their tricks was the last thing Denny needed to see. They were almost blocking the entranceway to the Twin Pines Mall, like they were some kind of gatekeepers of coolness to get in. He had always been threatened by the skater kids. Or the brainiac kids. Or the goth kids. Or the jocks. Really, just about any clique at all, to be truthful. The skaters were especially off-putting, with their skateboarding skills and chilled-out attitude.

It didn’t help that two of them were cute girls, which made him feel a thousand times more distressed. He had been hopeless with girls for as long as he could remember, and at his high school he was more or less invisible to the opposite gender — a super power he could do without, thank you very much.

“I’m not her type anyways,” Denny muttered, looking at the red-haired girl with a knowing grin on her pretty face. The redhead was no doubt into cool, rebellious guys who were athletic, even if they weren’t into organized sports. Denny, on the other hand, was shy, nerdy, and a day-dreamer, whose favorite “sport” was finding rare superhero comics. His specialty was finding ones with bizarre super-powers. Those were his favorites. Denny put his head down and held his breath as he stepped by the skaters, successfully avoiding being noticed in any way, and made it inside unscathed by social interaction.

The one spot in the mall he felt completely at home in, without having to worry about the popular kids picking on him, was Clay’s Comics Emporium. He had spent nearly as much time there as he had at his own house. Almost every day after school, or later on the weekends, he would come and browse and talk comics with Clay, the owner, and Winston, his slightly older friend who had graduated from high school last year and landed a job there.

Yes, it was a thousand times better than hanging out at his house, where his beautiful Chinese mother was constantly in a shouting match with his American businessman dad — usually by long-distance telephone. And it was a million times better than school, where he was in constant danger of being stuffed into a locker. Clay’s Comics Emporium was his oasis, his sanctuary, a place of peace and quiet where he could spend hours upon hours quietly browsing the aisles and arguing about superhero continuities in total tranquility...

Denny rounded the corner into the small shop, already smiling, and narrowly avoided being struck by a flying paperweight.

“I can’t believe this!” Clay was shouting, his normally composed face was bright red with anger, spittle flying from his mouth. “People *love* my shop! There are *plenty* of customers!”

The tirade would have been far more intimidating if Clay wasn’t a short, pudgy little man with a goatee and a Star Trek T-shirt. All the same, Denny could see that Winston, tall, scrawny, and bespectacled with unkempt dirty blonde hair, was doing his best to calm his boss down.

“Calm down, Clay,” Winston said, putting his hands in the air like one would with an angry bull. “What exactly did he say on the phone this time?”

“Sure, sure, sales are down a little,” Clay continued to rant. “And maybe our clientele isn’t *varied*. Maybe we don’t ‘reach across the gender gap.’ But the customers we have are loyal! They keep coming back! I mean, look at Denny!”

“Must be the great customer service,” Denny muttered, picking up the paperweight and returning it to the counter. “Nice to see you, too, Clay. What’s going on, guys?” Clay opened his mouth, but before he could reply, Winston jumped in at lightning speed.

“They’re threatening to shut us down because 1a, we aren’t attracting new customers, and 1b, we have, like, zero female customers,” he explained.

“It’s this new higher-up pencil-pusher who firmly believes young women are the biggest untapped comic market out there,” Clay sighed. “And if we can’t prove we’re appealing to that demographic, well, we’re sunk. He’s coming by today for another ‘inspection,’ which really just means sitting here and making notes on his clipboard every time another girl hurries past giving us a twenty-foot radius like we’re selling crack instead of comics.”

“Maybe we should advertise crack,” Winston said wistfully. “That would get at least some new people in here.”

Denny didn’t even register his friend’s joke, caught up as he was with processing what he had just learned. If Clay’s Comic Emporium couldn’t prove they appealed to girls, they were going to be shut down. Denny had seen girls in Clay’s Comic Emporium exactly zero times. Therefore, Clay’s Comic Emporium was totally screwed.

The news hit Denny like a physical blow. His one safe haven, his one private oasis, was going to be shut down for not appealing to the opposite, and absolutely terrifying, gender? It was unthinkable to him.

“But they can’t just shut you down,” Denny said desperately. “I mean, it’s your shop! It’s named after you.” Clay and Winston both gave Denny a weird look.

“Excuse me?” Clay asked. “Clay’s Comic Emporium is a chain, and we’re just one small, struggling location.”

“But... But your name is...” Denny trailed off.

“Oh, yeah, that’s a total coincidence,” Clay said blithely. “Though I think it

may have helped me out on my resume.”

“You get enough customers to squeak by, don’t you?” Denny demanded. “I mean, if it’s a matter of me buying more often, I can ask my dad to up my allowance and...”

“It’s not about having enough customers,” Clay said sadly, shaking his head. “It’s about showing them we’re attracting new customers. Particularly, young, female customers.”

“But this is the one place in the mall I don’t have to worry about making an idiot out of myself around girls!” Denny blurted, then blushed brightly. Rather than laughing, Clay and Winston both nodded sympathetically.

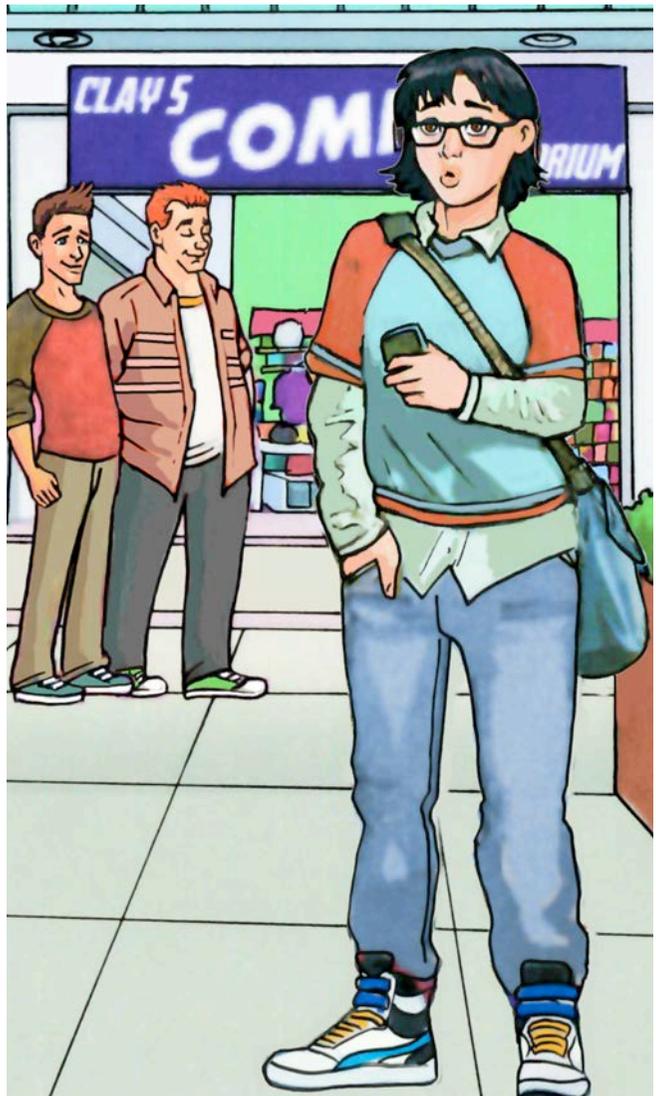
“I know, Denny,” Winston sighed. “But things don’t look so great. What time is he coming by?”

“Six o’clock,” Clay said darkly. “So we have two hours to contemplate our demise.” Both of them sat down in silence, staring morosely at the floor.

“Well, we had a good run,” Winston said. “I guess I can try getting hired at the book store, they do some comics.”

“I should be able to get a management gig at McDonald’s,” Clay admitted.

Denny couldn’t believe his ears. His whole world had just been turned upside-down, and they were already talking about finding new jobs? Denny cleared his throat. “Hold on,” he said, trying to sound forceful with a voice that was still yet to break. “You guys are just giving up? Just like



that?”

“What are we supposed to do, Denny?” Winston asked sadly. “Unless you have some way of getting a bunch of girls in here before six o’clock... Heck, even *one* girl...”

“What if you just hire somebody?” Denny asked desperately. “Like, online?”

“And get arrested for soliciting?” Clay quipped. “No thanks.”

“Winston, what about your sister?” Denny probed. Even thinking about Winston’s hot, popular younger sister Catherine made Denny feel his usual stammer coming on. She was in his grade, but he was more or less certain she had no idea he existed.

“My sister wouldn’t set foot in this place even if I paid her,” Winston said mournfully. “And besides, she’s busy doing some sort of fashion show thing all day outside Claire’s.”

“Besides, the inspector would see right through it unless they actually knew something about comics,” Clay added.

Denny closed his eyes and thought hard. He couldn’t let Clay’s Comic Emporium go down without a fight. The inspector needed to see a girl hanging out here to persuade him they were appealing to the young, female demographic. A girl who knew about comics, no less. The answer was obvious.

“We’re totally screwed,” Denny admitted, sitting down himself. All three of them sighed in unison. Denny looked around the shop, wondering if it might just be his last visit. The rows and rows of comics and memorabilia gave him a lump in his throat from nostalgia. He looked to the back wall, where limited edition posters were hung inside glass cases. His eyes travelled to his favorite, one depicting Superman and Wonder Woman flying through the sky.

Sitting down, he could see his reflection in its glass case, his fine-featured face and longish black hair. And if he shifted just a little bit in his seat, his face lined right up over Wonder Woman’s. Well, he was no superhero in real life. Not even a female one. Nobody could save the comic shop, and he was just going to have to accept that. Sighing, Denny took off his glasses and cleaned them on his shirt, then stopped. He looked at the poster again, and a crazy idea popped into his head. A crazy, stupid, harebrained idea that probably didn’t have a chance of working. But he knew he had to try.

“Guys,” Denny said, taking a deep breath. “I think I just came up with a plan.”



A few minutes later, all three of the guys were seated around a table usually used for Dungeons and Dragons, now discussing the finer points of Denny’s crazy idea.

“It could actually work,” Winston said excitedly. “I mean, be honest, Denny, you haven’t exactly hit puberty in a big way. Your voice is still high, and you’re kinda little.”

“Plus, those androgynous half-Asian features are a big plus,” Clay said. “You might actually make a pretty good-looking girl, if you put your mind to it. But where are we going to get clothes for you?”

Denny took a deep breath and turned to his best friend. “Winston, you said your sister is busy here at the mall all day, right?” he said.

“Yes...” Winston said suspiciously.

“So that means she’s not at your house,” Denny followed logically. “Meaning you could hurry home, sneak into her room, and...” He gulped. “Get me an outfit.”

“You realize she’d kill me if she knew I was in her room, right?” Winston asked. “Let alone her closet. Are you sure you just don’t want something of hers that you can sniff, lover boy?”

“This is an emergency,” Denny said, blushing. “I’m just thinking logically. I can’t go to a store and buy girl stuff as a boy.”

“Okay, I can get the clothes,” Winston said. “But no way am I going into her underwear drawer, got it?”

“Fair enough,” Denny said, only slightly disappointed.

“You’re going to have to do something to your hair,” Clay pointed out. “And girls wear makeup, too, right?”

“Got it covered,” Denny said brusquely. “My mom owns a salon here, remember? If I explain what’s going on, she should be able to help me out.”

“It wouldn’t bring, like, dishonor on your family, or something?” Clay asked quizzically.

“I’ll be lucky to get a family discount,” Denny shot back dryly. “Okay, so if I’m getting the hair and makeup taken care of, and Winston is getting me clothes, that just leaves underwear.” Both Denny and Winston shot a look at Clay, who immediately turned beet red.

“Wait a second, where am I supposed to find women’s underwear?” he spluttered.

“That’s up to you,” Denny said, shrugging even as he blushed a bit himself. “My mom goes to Victoria’s Secret.”

“So does my sister,” Winston added. Denny raised an eyebrow at him. “She’s always coming home with shopping bags!” Winston defended himself. “And quit thinking about my sister in her underwear!”

“I’m not!” Denny protested, lying outright. “Uh, where were we? Right, so both of you meet me at the salon in an hour, got it?”

Clay and Winston exchanged slightly bemused looks.

“What is it?” Denny asked, frowning.

“It’s just that you’re so take-charge about it,” Winston said. “Like if we’re the X-men, you’d totally be Cyclops right now.”

“Usually you barely make a peep,” Clay pointed out.

Denny felt his newfound confidence beginning to slip. “Is it... Is it a bad thing?” he asked. “It’s just that this is really important to me. Your comic shop is where I feel at home, Clay. The only place, actually.”

“It’s not a bad thing at all,” Clay said. “Lead the way, Denny. Or shall I say Denise?”

“We can think of a name later,” Denny said, grimacing. “Let’s get going. I’ll see both of you at my mom’s salon in an hour, right?”

“Right,” Clay and Winston both said. Clay flipped the store’s sign from Open to Closed on their way out of the door, then locked it behind them.

“Hey, what’s with the new hours?” a pimply-faced young teen demanded sourly, arriving on the scene with a comic book return in his hand.

“We’re trying to keep from going out of business,” Clay shouted. “Sorry.”

The three guys hurried away, splitting up into three separate directions, leaving a seriously confused customer standing outside the shop.



Denny had rarely ever set foot in his mom’s beauty salon, usually preferring to wait outside on the occasions he needed to ask her for a ride home or something of the like. His dad had bought the place a few years back as a way to keep his wife busy — Denny’s mom was a serial spender, and he figured it would keep her from shopping so much.

Naturally, it had taken less than a year for her to grow bored with it, and hand off all the boring day-to-day operations to Li, a streetwise woman who had run a very successful spa in Chinatown. Now Denny’s mom usually spent her time at the salon having her hair done and gossiping with the women who worked there, despite nominally being the owner.

And unfortunately, she wasn’t currently there.

“You just miss her,” Li said frankly, from behind the counter. “What you need, Denny?”

Denny shuffled his feet nervously behind the counter. Li, despite her occasionally brusque manner, was a family friend. Still, she was also very attractive, and Denny, having always had a bit of a crush on her, couldn’t help but dread her laughter when he explained the situation. Denny looked around,

and thought that at least he'd come at a good time. Aside from one lady having her nails done at the far end of the salon, the place was more or less empty. Gathering his courage, Denny put his hand on the counter and leaned forward conspiratorially.

"I need a makeover," he whispered.

"Yes," Li agreed, to his surprise. "More mature clothes, more stylish haircut. You handsome boy, Denny, but you look sloppy." Denny flushed at the backhanded compliment, simultaneously pleased she had called him handsome and affronted she thought he needed a change in style. He liked his hair long, and he liked his superhero T-shirts just fine.

"Not that kind of makeover," he said, swallowing. "I mean, like, the kind you do here. Let me explain..." And so he did, going over the plan to save Clay's Comics Emporium in detail while Li listened, looking either amused or confused by turn. When he finally finished his tale, he held his breath, awaiting judgment.

"Good plan," Li said at last. "You make good girl, too. But, there big problem, Denny."

"What problem?" Denny asked, frowning.

"You no have appointment," Li said firmly, pointing to her list.

"But you guys aren't busy!" Denny spluttered. "Can't you just squeeze me in?"

"No," Li said. "Customer come soon for big appointment, the works."

"What if you ask her to reschedule?" Denny suggested. Li snorted.

"Ask good customer reschedule to give Denny free makeover?" she demanded. "Bad way to run business. Sorry, Denny. Try other salon."

"I'm not going to another salon for this!" Denny exclaimed. He fumbled in his pocket, pulling out the cash he'd been planning to use on a rare comic book.

"Look," he said. "I'll pay, okay?" Li gave the money in his hand a skeptical look.

"Customer wanted the works," she said. "Manicure, pedicure, waxing, brows, hair, makeup, everything."

"I'll pay the same rate for hairstyling and a bit of makeup or whatever," Denny reasoned. "Look, this is an emergency, Li."

Li sighed, plucking the money from his hand. "Okay," she said. "I reschedule other appointment. But we are honest salon, Denny. You pay for works, you get works."

"Well, let's not get carried away," Denny said nervously. "Uh, you mentioned waxing?"

"Yes," Li smiled. She looked Denny up and down with an interested gaze that made him blush all over. "Much potential," she said. "You will blossom into very beautiful young lady with our help."

“Well, we’ve only got an hour,” Denny pointed out hopefully.

Li’s eyes widened. “We must hurry,” she said. She snapped her fingers, and two salon girls came rushing over. “Denny needs the works,” she announced. “Get him in chair. Fast!”

Denny gulped as he was led to the salon chair, wondering what exactly he’d gotten himself into.



Winston double-timed it back to his house on his bike, pedaling as fast as he could until he rounded the bend into his neighborhood and saw his house fast approaching. His sister was at the mall for her fashion show all day, but judging by the car parked in the driveway, his mom was home. That made things slightly more difficult, but not by much. He stopped his bicycle in the driveway, carefully putting down his kickstand, then went up the front steps to let himself inside.

Entering his sister’s room was a crime more or less on par with murder — which was also the penalty. Up until now, Winston had never had a reason to invade his sister’s room, and so long as she respected his boundaries, he had no problem respecting hers.

Until now, that is. This was a desperate time, and it called for desperate measures. Winston stepped into his house and immediately he could hear the sound of his mom in the shower upstairs — her bathroom was, incidentally, right beside his sister Catherine’s room. As long as she stayed in the bathroom, however, it would be easy enough to sneak in and out with nobody the wiser.

The door slammed shut noisily behind him, and Winston cursed himself for forgetting to stop it.

“Catherine, honey, is that you?” his mom’s voice called, after the sound of the water disappeared with the turn of the tap. “Are you done already? I thought the fashion show went all day?”

Winston considered his options. Then, putting on his best imitation of his sister, he called back, “We’re not done yet, I just had to come home to grab a few things!”

“Very funny, Winston,” his mom shouted. “Why aren’t you at work?” Winston shook his head, grimacing. Ever since his voice changed, that particular trick hadn’t seemed to work very well.

“I’m on break!” he called back, using his normal voice. “Keep showering! I’ll be in and out in a minute.” He hurried up the stairs, passing the bathroom door.

“How long a break?” his mom asked. Winston was now standing in front of the

forbidden door, wiping his sweaty palms on the seat of his pants.

“Uh, an hour,” he said, saying the first time that came to mind, which was when he was supposed to meet Clay and Denny at the salon.

“Okay,” his mom said, turning the shower back on. “Make sure to eat something!”

Winston waited until his mom started singing again — there was no way she could hear him over that racket — then, steadying his nerves, he grabbed the doorknob and let himself into Catherine’s room.

Immediately, he could see why she never let him or his parents inside. The place was an absolute mess, the floor covered in clothes, and every available surface littered with fashion magazines and makeup products. Winston couldn’t help but feel some optimism. In a mess like this, there was no way she would miss a few things.

He started hunting around, trying to remember what sort of things went with what. He never paid much attention to what his sister wore, and now he regretted it. He was hopeless with matching — his awful sense of style was one of the things his sister harped on most, and she hated being seen in public with him. Discarding yet another combination, Winston closed his eyes and tried to think of a particular outfit.

He realized, in a flash, that it would be easiest if the outfit consisted of only one item of clothing: a dress. He was so pleased with his deduction that he didn’t even give a moment’s thought to the possibility that Denny might be less than pleased with it. He went to the closet and yanked out a little yellow summer dress with a bow from the very back. He vaguely remembered her wearing it only once, which was perfect. She would never miss it, especially for only an afternoon. A grin spread across his face as he also stumbled across a pair of sandals in the same color. Sure, they had a heel, but the important thing was that they matched.

Winston stuffed the shoes and dress into his backpack and slipped out the door, only pausing to grab a few familiar-looking bracelets from her vanity that he was pretty sure she’d used to ‘accessorize’ the dress, whatever that meant. Victorious, Winston closed the door behind him as silently as possible. He practically skipped his way past the bathroom door, where from the sounds of it his mom was blow drying her hair. He was nearly out of the house when he heard the bathroom door open...

“Wait just a minute, young man,” his mom said sharply.

Winston gulped. How did she know what he had in his backpack? Did she have X-ray vision? He had long suspected as much. His palms began to sweat. “Yes, mom?” he asked innocently.

“You thought you could just waltz in and waltz out without me realizing, didn’t you?” she asked, stepping out of the bathroom with her towel wrapped around

herself.

“Realizing... What?” Winston asked faintly. His mom wagged a finger at him, glaring.

“You didn’t mow the lawn before you left for work this morning!” she exclaimed. “I’ve been telling you all week, and you keep making excuses, but we’re having company over tonight and I do *not* want to fire up that big dirty lawn mower and do it myself when I have dinner to cook!”

“Oh, phew,” Winston muttered, breathing a sigh of relief. “I can do it when I get back from work?”

“They’ll be here already,” his mom said impatiently. “Now, Winston.”

“But I have to get back to the mall!” Winston protested, checking his watch. He was supposed to meet Clay and Denny in little more than half an hour.

“If you start now you’ll be back in time,” his mom said. “And don’t pretend your boss is a stickler for punctuality, you show up late to work half the time anyway.”

“But mo-om...” Winston whined.

“No buts!” his mom said firmly. “Get going!”

Winston groaned and hurried his way to the garage to get the mower.



As soon as Clay saw the pink sign that read “Victoria’s Secret,” he immediately felt his resolve starting to weaken. In all his twenty-eight years, he had never actually gone inside a women’s underwear store, and certainly not unaccompanied. The intimidating posters of scantily-clad models seemed to be glaring at him, as if to say, “begone!” And the aisles filled with all things lacy, frilly, and colorful, were occupied only by women. Clay felt his steps beginning to slow down as he got closer and closer to the store.

In the window display, a pretty young shop assistant was putting lingerie on a mannequin. Clay was going to have to ask for help, and he didn’t think he could manage striking up the courage to talk to the mannequin, never mind the actual girl. He could feel sweat already dripping down his forehead. Gritting his teeth, Clay marched right past the open door, his feet carrying him safely away on autopilot.

“Come on, Clay, you coward,” he muttered, drawing an odd look from a passerby. “This is important. This is to save your store, remember? You’re a grown man, and there is absolutely no reason you can’t go in there and buy some underwear.”

Gathering up every bit of resolve he possessed, Clay stopped, spun on his heel, and hurried into Victoria’s Secret before he could stop himself. As soon as

he entered the store, he felt like every woman in the place turned to give him a suspicious glance. Of course, the fact that he was sweating buckets probably had something to do with it.

“Hi, can I help you?” chirped a voice. Clay turned, and found himself face-to-face with the pretty shop assistant.

“Hello, miss,” Clay said abruptly. “I am here to buy some underwear. For my, uh, girlfriend.”

“Cute!” the girl beamed. “Well, what’s the occasion? Anniversary?”

“Yes!” Clay said, seizing upon the excuse. “Our five year anniversary.”

“Wow, congratulations!” the shop assistant squealed. “That’s so awesome. We have some really pretty new stuff that just came in, come look...” She ushered Clay to a display where several lacy bra and panty sets were being shown. “So, what does she like?” the shop assistant quizzed. “What kind of girl is she? Is she a real girly girl?”

Clay, who’s brain had momentarily seized up at the dizzying array of options, had a hard time processing the question. “Of course she’s really a girl!” he gulped. “Whatever do you mean?” The shop assistant gave him a funny look.

“I asked if she’s a *girly* girl,” she said. “Like, pastels? Bows? Pink?”

“Oh, right,” Clay said. “Uh, yes?”

“Great!” the shop assistant chirped. “Here’s a really cute set. See the little ruffles? Now, what size is she?”

“Small,” Clay quickly. “I’m not sure about her cup size. But, uh, quite a bit smaller than you.” He immediately cursed himself for the backhanded compliment, but needn’t have worried. A satisfied smirk appeared on the shop assistant’s face.

“So, an A-cup,” she said pleasantly, pulling a bra and panty set off the rack. “Well, some girls are just unlucky. If we get her something in this push-up style, though...”

“It’s not her fault,” Clay blurted, feeling the bizarre need to defend his imaginary girlfriend. “She’s still in high-school, after all.”

As everyone within hearing distance turned to stare, Clay immediately wished he could sink through the ground. He could practically see the shop assistant doing the mental math.

“If this your five-year anniversary, and your girlfriend is still in high-school...” she trailed off, looking horrified.

“I’ll take this,” Clay blurted, grabbing the bra and panty set. “Big hurry! Let’s get to the check-out! Okay!”

The shop assistant took his purchase to the counter and rang it up in total silence, while Clay continued sweating buckets. He barely bothered to even

look at the price, forking over his credit card without a second glance, and as soon as he had the bag in hand, he took off like he was being chased by a fiend from hell, vowing to never go back to Victoria's Secret again.



As Nick Carmichael and his girlfriend Jessica Sanders headed towards Heavy Notes, the music shop where Nick worked, he couldn't help but glance at the big, nervous looking guy speeding away from Victoria's Secret. He looked like he had just been chased from the store. "Some dudes are just afraid of anything that has to do with girls," he mused, in his laid-back way. Jessica didn't make any comment, only shaking her head with a momentary glimpse of a mysterious smile on her face.

"Why don't you buy more stuff from Victoria's Secret, sweetheart?" Nick asked, winking to show he was joking.

"You're the one getting the makeover today, not me," Jessica said.

"Right, right," Nick sighed. He took off his backwards ball cap in order to run his fingers back through his long, wild mane of brown hair that had been part of his signature look for years, ever since he started working at the music shop. The rest of the look included a sweatshirt with shoulder spikes and a skull design, ripped jeans, floppy Converse sneakers, and a shirt tied around his waist to really complete the grunge rocker look. Not exactly a clean-cut employee, but customers got a kick out of it, he figured, and besides, Nick thought he looked pretty damn cool.

Jessica, however, thought otherwise. She'd been pleading with him to try a button-up shirt and a haircut for ages, but it wasn't until she signed him up for a reality web show that did the whole "extreme makeover" thing that Nick took her seriously. He couldn't remember what it was called — Brand New Boyfriend, or something dumb like that — but it was apparently one of YouTube's most popular channels, and Nick wasn't about to miss a chance at internet stardom.

"I'm really going to miss this hair," Nick said, almost sniffing a bit with the emotion. He'd had his long wild hair for so long that parting with it would feel like losing an old friend.

"Oh, honey," Jessica said, patting his face. "I will, too. But you're going to look so much hotter without it."

"I better," Nick grumbled. "Why are we heading back to Heavy Notes, again?"

"Phil wanted to get a couple more minutes of footage of you in action," Jessica said. "Which is about as much action as you ever accomplish when you're at work."

Nick only shrugged and gave an innocent grin, not even bothering to argue

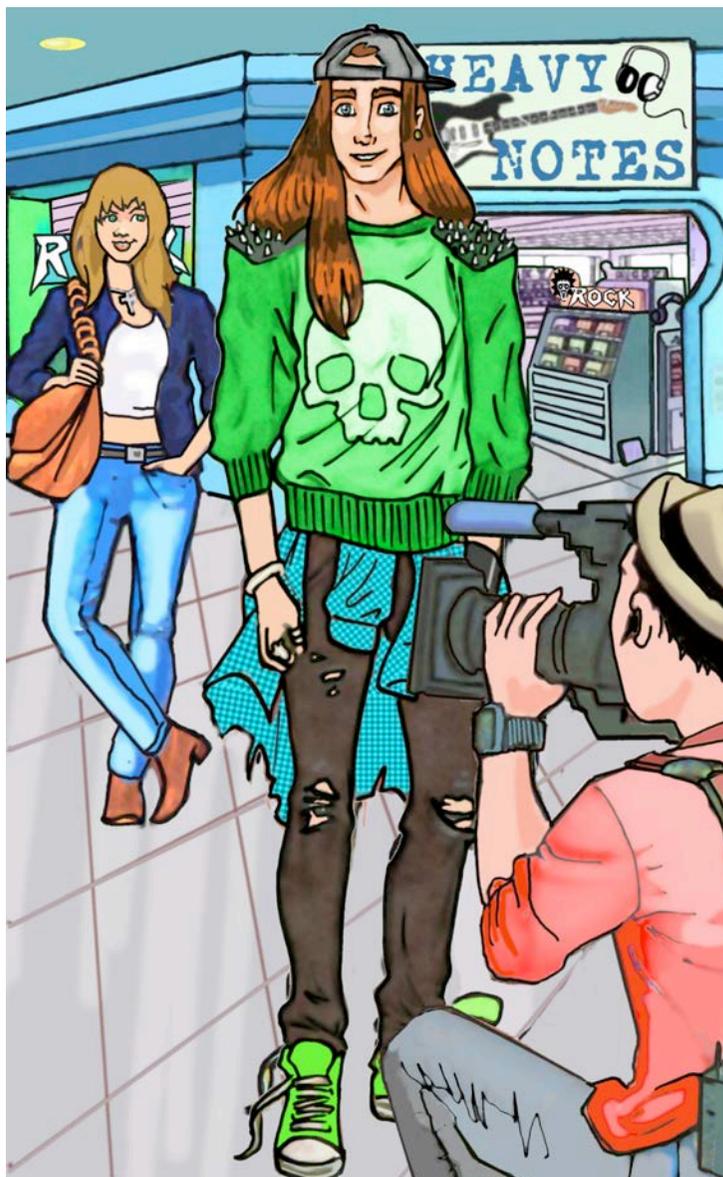
with her assessment. He knew he was a slacker, through and through, but it was a good life. He loved rock and roll, and this way he occasionally even got to meet guys from the bigger local bands.

As they walked past the electric guitar display into the music shop, Nick saw Phil, or, as he preferred to be called, 'Phillipe,' deep in discussion with Nick's boss, Jimmy. That probably wasn't a good thing, seeing as Jimmy rarely, if ever, had anything positive to say about Nick. The young slacker was somewhat knowledgeable and not bad with customers, so long as he wasn't hungover and grouchy, but between his constant tardiness and general laziness, he was no employee of the month candidate, that was for sure. Jessica thought Nick was lucky to still have a job there.

"What's up, Jimmy," Nick said loudly, walking inside. "Hey, Phil, buddy. How we doing today?"

Phillipe was the producer/host of this video, and had been hanging around Nick from the past day, getting 'background' video of his life. "Hi, Nick," Phillipe said, raising his video camera immediately. "Today, we introduce you to the new you."

Nick couldn't help but roll his eyes, disliking



Phillipe as much as he had the previous day. He was a film student with a scraggly beard, beanie cap, and eyebrow piercing, who had a slow, surfer dude style of speaking and a mellow attitude that ground Nick's gears.

"Just make sure you get a shot of our current sale," Jimmy said to Phillipe, then, turning to Nick, he said, "Enjoy the day off, Nick. Sounds like it's going to be an interesting one. Hi, Jessica."

"Hey, Jimmy, hey Phillipe," Jessica said. "So, a few more shots here, then off to the barber shop, right?"

"Exactly, sister," Phillipe said. "Let's get some shots of Nick with a guitar. Let that chest hair breathe, my man. You need to look manly, so the contrast is better." He shot a look at Jessica. "Uh, the lighting contrast, I mean."

"Right, right," Nick said excitedly. "Let me grab the Fender. Hey, can you get a fan to like, blow my hair back? That would be bitching!"

Jessica and Phillipe exchanged a grin. "Whatever you want, baby," Jessica said. "Whatever you want."



Nick actually had a surprisingly good time showing Phillipe and his video camera around the music shop, posing at every opportunity, leaning back against the wall with his arms crossed and a cool scowl on his face, or intently pretending to tune an expensive guitar. Before long, however, it was time to head off to the salon where a barber was waiting to turn Nick into a short-haired, boring version of himself.

Of course, he hadn't been expecting it to happen at Lovely Lotus beauty salon. As Nick and Jessica walked through the doors, followed by Phillipe with his camera, Nick couldn't resist shooting a snide remark over his shoulder.

"Let me guess," he said. "This was the cheapest place?"

Phillipe gave an apologetic shrug, careful not to move the camera with it. "We're a YouTube channel, my man. Not, like, MTV."

"They do great manicures here," Jessica said helpfully.

Despite his misgivings, Nick automatically turned up the charm as soon as they were inside, greeting the small team of waiting beauticians and what he assumed to be the salon's owner, an attractive thirty-something Asian woman named Li.

"Apologies for reschedule," she said briskly to Jessica. "We have emergency appointment earlier. You are Nicky, yes?"

"Uh, no," Jessica said, exchanging another grin with Phillipe. "This is Nick." She indicated her boyfriend, whose confidence in this endeavor was disappearing rapidly by the second.

“Ah,” Li said, with a small smile appearing on her face. “Déjà vu. Okay, Mr. Nick, right this way.”

“You got it,” Nick said reluctantly, taking the opportunity to slyly check out her stocking-clad legs as she spun and swished away, leading him to an empty salon chair. He took off his leather jacket, which has hung on the coatrack nearby, and hopped into the chair, leaning his head back while Li draped the barber towel around him.

“We do your hands and feet at same time,” she said. “Stick them in trays, okay?” Nick shot a questioning look at Jessica, eyebrow raised in an unimpressed way.

“Great manicures, remember?” she said. “Your nails could do with some attention.”

“Yeah, yeah, why not,” he sighed, poking his hands out. At the same time, one of the beauticians was removing his shoes, followed in short order by his mismatched socks, exposing his foot odor to the world. She quickly lowered them into a basin of warm, scented water, which Nick had to admit felt incredibly good.

“We wash your hair first,” Li said. “Tip head back and close your eyes, Mr. Nick.”

“This might not be so bad after all,” Nick muttered, following her directions. Her soft, assured hands moved expertly around his scalp, massaging him firmly as she wet and shampooed his hair in the sink positioned directly behind the chair. It felt nice! Maybe he could get Jessica to wash his hair for him in the future...

Nick drifted along, trying to imagine what he would look like with short hair, while Li worked on his hair, another beautician scrubbed at his cuticles, and a third massaged his feet. He could actually see why girls liked this stuff. It was really relaxing. He let his eyelids slip shut.

“How am I doing, sweetheart?” he asked. “This is really tough on me.”

“You’re doing great,” Jessica said, but not sounding quite as sarcastic as he’d expected her to. Curious, Nick opened his eyes, and found his left hand was sporting long, carefully-filed oval nails, polished a shiny fuchsia.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” he barked. “No-no girl nails on big man, Li!” He looked down, and yelped, realizing his toenails were currently being painted the same shade.

“We give you works,” Li said, rolling her eyes. “Like you made appointment for, Mr. Nick.”

“What the hell is going on here?” Nick demanded, trying to struggle out of the salon chair. “Jessica, sweetheart, you got some explaining to do! Why am I getting done up like a chick?”