

Fuss!



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By Cooper and Kadee

“I have to get to the salon,” Danielle said, plucking at a long strand of her hair. “Split ends.”

“Hate. And who has time for it?” Samantha sat at the little table in the kitchenette, laptop open, reviewing spreadsheets while nibbling on her salad.

Nick, the CEO and founder of their little three-person startup, snickered. He was rifling through the refrigerator looking for something to “borrow” for lunch, despite the fact what food was there all had been labeled with either “Sam” or “Dan.”

“What’s funny?” Samantha said.

Nick took one of her Yoplait cups and pulled his head out of the refrigerator. “You love going to the salon. Come on. All girls do.”

“Really? And where did you learn that? Cro-Magnon magazine?”

Nick ripped the foil top off the yogurt, found a spoon in the dish rack, started eating. “I think it was in Sexist Pig Today.”

“I go because it takes an army to take care of all this hair,” Danielle said. “As well as a small fortune.”

“It’s so expensive,” Samantha chimed in. “Did you know a woman’s haircut costs twice as much as....”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. And it’s worth it when you go to the club and the guys are all over you. You’d cut it all off, but you know men love it.”

“You think I go through all this for you?”

“You’re not doing it for the ladies,” Nick answered, then double smirked.
“Unless you are?”



“Most guys don’t notice shit,” Samantha said.

“You think our lives revolve around you?”

“Okay, Okay,” Nick said, amused that he’d triggered this little female tirade.

“Blah blah blah, women are all victims. I get it.”

“You really don’t” Danielle said.

“That’s my yogurt, by the way,” Samantha said.

“I know,” Nick said, his smirk growing larger. *They love our little game*, he thought. *All these woke women are the same. They talk big about equality, but they love a dominant alpha who puts them in their place.*

Danielle and Samantha exchanged a glance. *Jerk*. But what could they do? He would never change.

Nick, having gobbled down the yogurt, tossed the empty cup in the sink along with the spoon. The girls would clean it up. “Ladies,” he said, “it’s been a pleasure. Now, you can go back to gossiping.”

Nick went back to his office, checked to make sure he didn’t get any yogurt on his pristine white shirt. He’d heard that Steve Jobs wore the same uniform every day— a black turtleneck. He’d decided to do the same and had chosen an old school white dress shirt as his uniform. He liked the idea of projecting traditional, 20th Century roll-up-your sleeves masculinity. Sitting at his desk, he forgot all about the latest little exchange. Nick, in fact, considered himself a very progressive and modern man, not a sexist at all. He’d partnered up with two women, hadn’t he?

The sexist banter was all just— what? Goofing around. That, at least, is what he told himself.

Danielle sat in the salon recliner while her stylist, Vanya, trimmed off the ragged ends of her long, thick hair. She decided to get a blow out as well while she was at it. “My boss actually gave me shit about taking care of my hair,” she was saying, half talking to herself.

“Why would he do this?” Vanya asked.

“Because he’s an asshole.” She told Vanya all about how he was always making rude, demeaning comments in the office, how he expected her to clean up after him even though they were supposed to be equal partners. “But what’s

the point of complaining?” Danielle finished, having complained for ten minutes. “He’ll never change.”

“Perhaps he will,” Vanya said. “Let me get you a special gift for him.”

“A gift for *him*?” Danielle said, appalled. “Were you even listening?”

“I hear you. This gift is special, for sexist pig. It will help him change for the better.”

“Seriously?”

“Trust me. Now,” Vanya spun the chair around so Danielle could see herself in the mirror, “how do you like your hair?”

The blowout had given her all kinds of volume, and all the ends now ended in sharp, perfect trims. “Good,” she said. “Great, even. Gorgeous. Thanks.”

“Soon, your boss will appreciate what you go through.”

As Danielle paid at the front counter, Vanya handed her a gift bag— white with gold lettering spelling out the name of the salon in gold cursive: Baba Yaga. White tissues spilled out the top of the bag. “Give this to him,” Vanya said.

“I don’t think he’s going to use whatever is in here,” Danielle said, chuckling.

“Just give it to him,” Vanya said. “You will see the changes.”

Chapter Two

Danielle, of course, couldn't help but look to see what was in the bag, chuckling with amusement at how Nick would react when he saw the samples of skin cream, concealer, and a pair of eyebrow tweezers. The thought of him plucking his eyebrows made her giggle. She would love for him to get a taste of the pain she had to put up with all the time. There were also five gift certificates for free salon visits.

Now that, she thought, was an incredible injustice. Vanya had never given her five gift certificates, and she was a regular, and it wasn't like Nick would ever use them. Still, she decided to give him the bag. There was just something about what Vanya had said—he will change. She got up and went to Nick's office, which was actually a conference room he'd commandeered. Their company rented a corner in a shared workspace near Union Station in NYC that featured workspaces, a lounge area and the kitchenette. There were also bigger rooms for presentations and meetings shared by everyone who rented there.

"Knock, knock," Danielle said as he pulled open the glass door and poked her head into the room.

"One sec," Nick said, working intently. "I just need to reach a good stopping point." He typed away, worked the mouse. "Getting the new flyers ready for Spring."

Danielle sat, the gift bag in her lap. "I hope we can really get into the market in Brooklyn this year," she said. "Basic Soda is a good product, but we just can't seem to get traction."

In fact, they had chosen to enter a competitive, even saturated market with their line of “homemade, natural” sodas. If sales didn’t pick up soon, they had little chance of bringing in new investors. They were all worried about it.

“Done!” Nick said, spinning his monitor around so Danielle could admire his handiwork.

“Nice,” she said. In fact, it was a first-rate design. Nick was a hard worker and talented, which was one reason she’d partnered with him despite his reputation.

“Looks great. And, I brought you a gift.”

She put the pretty bag on his desk.

“What’s this?” He asked, recoiling from the femininity of this mysterious object he’d been offered.

“Just something to thank you for being you. I gotta get back to the old grindstone.”

“Okay. See ya. And, thanks for the bag o’ fru fru, I guess?”

Dannielle left, thinking, *He didn’t even notice my hair. And he thinks we do this all for them.*

He pulled the tissues out of the bag, dumped the contents on his desk. Shook his head. *Crap*, he thought, sweeping the contents into the trash bin next to his desk. *I’m sure she meant well.* He would fake thank her later, force a smile. He knew how sensitive women were about this sort of thing.

After work, Nick stopped by Lovecraft, a hipster bar in the village full of all kinds of creepy horror shit. He liked it, and there were always a lot of hot ass women there. It only took two drinks, and he went home with a tall red head. An hour later, he left her apartment, feeling satisfied. She’d been a pretty good lay.

Back home, he went to the bedroom, which he called his “Sex Lair” and tossed his keys in the dresser. Then— wait? What? That bag, the one Danielle had given him. It was sitting right there on the dresser. He dumped out the

contents. *I threw this away, didn't I? Been working too hard*, he told himself. *Playing too hard.*

As he was about to get in bed that night in his usual manner— boxers and a t-shirt, he noticed his hands. They were dry, had red patches. He glanced over at the dresser. Why not? He decided, getting up and opening the little tube of skin cream, that promised “silky smooth skin with a healthy glow.”



Women, he thought, rubbing the cream on his hands, then his face. Always with their priorities so screwed up. Who needs glowing skin?

In the morning, however, looking at himself in the mirror, he changed his mind. His face? His skin was, he wasn't even sure what word to use—luminous? -- and his complexion was so *even*. Plus, the red blotches were gone from his now smooth, soft hands.

There was only one problem. His night of drinking had left dark circles under his eyes. With the rest of his skin looking so damn good now, that dark skin just wouldn't do. He went back to the dresser, saw the concealer. "No one will notice I'm wearing this stuff," he mumbled as he applied a drop of the concealer to the tip of his finger and applied it smoothly over the dark circles. As soon as he finished, he corrected himself, pleased at how much better he looked, with the skin under his eyes matching his bright, smooth complexion. "They won't notice I'm wearing makeup," Nick re-assured himself, "but they will notice how damn good I look." Smiling at himself in the mirror, he mimed a pistol with his hand, pretended to shoot and said, "Go crush the world you handsome man."

He got dressed, feeling extra good, humming to himself. Then, as if it had all just been part of his daily routine for years, he grabbed the concealer and skin cream, tossing them into his satchel before heading off to work.

"Good morning, girls," Nick said as he jumped over the back of the couch in their little lounge area and plopped into his seat. Danielle and Samantha were there, reports ready.

"Good morning," they answered, each one immediately noticing Nick's bright, fresh face. His complexion looked a little lighter, and they couldn't help but notice he was now clean shaven for the first time either of them could even remember. With their practiced eyes, they couldn't help but notice his concealer. Samantha almost thought he must be wearing foundation with how bright and even his face looked, but she couldn't see any. The concealer, though, was evident.

“So, let’s take another leap to glory,” Nick said, getting his laptop and papers out of his satchel, which was an “Indiana Jones” style bag. “Another leap to glory” was Nick’s catch phrase, which he shouted every morning, thinking he was inspiring his partners.

Danielle hid her surprise. Nick had actually used some of the cosmetics she’d given him. She remembered Vanya’s words: *You will see changes*. Those words now seemed almost ominous. Nick wearing concealer? It didn’t seem possible. And she was jealous of his gorgeous skin. She almost commented but felt the better of it. Her gut feeling was that he’d just be embarrassed.

The meeting started. Halfway through, without even thinking, Nick dug into his



satchel, pulled out the tube of skin cream and rubbed it over his hands, then on his face before tossing the tube back into his bag. He’d done the whole thing while they talked, like it was an old, absentminded habit.

Samantha glanced at Danielle— what’s going on?

Danielle just raised an eyebrow.

When the meeting ended, Nick trotted off to work in his space. Samantha leaned over Danielle. “Did you notice Nick was wearing concealer?”

“I did. Guess he had a rough night? Wanted to look pretty?”

“I guess.” Samantha said, packing up her stuff. “He did look kinda good in a metro-sexual way.”

Toward the end of the day, Nick pulled out his lotion for the fourth time and—oh, no. The little tube just made a squirting sound, and only a tiny bit of the precious skin cream sputtered out. “No,” he said in a whisper. “No. No.” He suddenly felt himself panicking. He needed that cream. For a moment, he thought to buy something else, Vaseline or something, but no. He needed *that* cream. It was *his* brand.

He looked at the tube. Baba Yaga. A quick Internet search, and he found it was available exclusively at Baba Yaga Salon, and it could not be ordered over the Internet. “Very poor business practice,” he mumbled, mildly annoyed. “They could make so much more money if they mass-marketed.” Oh, well. No matter. The salon was not far. He’d just stop by on the way home.

He threw his satchel over his shoulder and headed out. “Gonna head out a little early, girls,” he called as he left.

“Do you think he’ll ever figure out we’re women?” Samantha called out over her cubicle.

“You know,” Danielle said, smiling. “I think he just might.” He’d already used the concealer and skin cream. She imagined him sitting at a mirror, carefully plucking his eyebrows. She couldn’t help but laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nick wearing make-up.”

Samantha laughed. “I never thought I would see the day.”

Focusing back on work, Danielle dismissed the idea of Nick plucking his eyebrows. Really, there was no way, she decided. It would be funny, though.

Nick used his phone to find Baba Yaga. It was located down a narrow, alley like street among twisting and confusing old streets that had escaped the city's attempts to regrid everything in straight lines years ago. Once more, he thought, bad business. Terrible location. He really should offer them consulting. Stepping into the salon, his skin crawled, and he could feel his nutsack wrinkle up and try to hide. It was utterly feminine, from the soft lighting to the soft colors, the waterfalls and the soft, new age music. *Lord*, he thought, frowning. *And women wonder why men don't take them seriously.*

A young woman in a smock greeted him. "May I help you?"

"Yes," Nick said, feeling slightly embarrassed. "I need some more of this." He held out the tube. As the girl looked at the tube, Nick sized her up and rated her—a solid 7, he figured. Fuckable.

"Of course." The woman led him to a shelf full of all kinds of mysterious tubes and bottles. Right next to them was a rack full of makeup of all kinds.

Nick almost swooned when he saw the shelf lined with Baba Yaga skin cream. "This. Yes." He said. The tubes here were larger than the little sample, but he still grabbed two. "I just ran out, and I've been panicking!" He gushed, then realized what he'd said. "I mean— my girlfriend just ran out. This isn't for me, of course."

The young woman looked at his bright skin and smiled. "Of course not. Should I gift wrap them for you?"

"Yes, yes," Nick said, deepening his voice. "She'll love that."

The girl wrapped the skin scream in tissues and then carefully placed them in a bag like the one Nick had- white with gold letters— then rang up the purchase. "That will be 199.47."

"What?" Nick spat. "For two little tubes?"

An older woman approached. "Hello," she said. "I'm Vanya. So pleased to welcome you to my salon. Is there a problem?"

"Yes," Nick said. "200 dollars for skin cream?"

"Beauty does not come at a discount," Vanya said. "My products are the best in the world. All natural, organic, and ethically sourced."

"But a hundred bucks for a little tube?"

"There are less expensive brands, but none are better for your skin, I assure you. And, what's more," she stepped closer and wrapped her arms around Nick's arm, pressing her body against his. Nick's head swam with the scent of her perfume. "You deserve to pamper yourself."

"I- I," Nick stammered, handing over his platinum card. He had no choice. He wouldn't trust his skin to any common skin cream. He handed Vanya his credit card. "You're very persuasive." And then he did something he had not done in years: He offered a sincere apology. "I'm sorry for being so rude."

"You're emotional," Vanya said. "Now come. We're ready for you."

Emotional? Nick thought as Vanya led him back to one of the salon chairs.

"Sit. Relax."

"Wait," Nick said, shaking his head. "No. I just came for the cream."

"You have an appointment," Vanya said. "Don't you remember?"

"I don't..." but then Nick started to wonder. Did he make an appointment? "No, I didn't..."

"Then why do you have the gift certificate in your hand, darling?"

Nick looked down to see he was, indeed, holding one of the gift certificates. I must have made an appointment, he decided. His brain was messed up. It was just like when he thought he threw the bag away when he'd actually brought it home. "I'm confused," Nick admitted.

"Sit down, sweetie," Vanya said. "Let us take care of you."

Nick sat. “What’s the appointment for?” He asked as one of the girls fit the smock around his neck.

“To have your hair done, of course,” Vanya said. “Now relax... relax.... Relax...”

The girl spun the chair away from the mirror. Nick relaxed, a deep feeling of calm coming over him as the girl began to work. Time became a blur. He remembered chatting with the girl— something about her boyfriend, who sounded like a jerk-- and then the chair turning, turning, and he now stared at himself in the mirror.

He’d had the same haircut for years— a basic bro--tight on the sides, combed over on top. But now, he had— there was no other way to say it-- what to him was a girl’s haircut. His hair now flowed down to his chin line, bangs swept across his forehead, and the cut had a rounded quality that softened his features. His mouth dropped open. Eyes went wide. Shocked, he couldn’t even speak.

Vanya and three of her girls stood behind him, smiling brightly. Vanya ran hands up the sides of his head then tossed his hair— it had so much bounce, and it was so shiny. “You look soooo handsome,” one of the girls cooed. “Doesn’t he? What a stud.”

“Stud?” Nick managed in a tight, strained voice. He thought he looked like a girl and not a stud at all. He couldn’t believe how feminine this haircut made him look. “What did you do to me?”

“Exactly what you asked for,” Vanya said. “Don’t you remember?”

“I don’t... I asked for this?” Nick said, now turning his head side to side, brushing one of his soft hands through his bangs, admiring the way they bounced back into position.

“Of course you did,” Vanya said. “You really should do something about those eyebrows.”



Vanya handed him the gift bag with his new purchases and shooed him out the door. Instead of putting it into his satchel, he hooked it over his other arm and made his way home, worried that everyone was staring at him, but truly no one paid any attention. It was New York, after all. As for Nick, he enjoyed the feeling of his hair

bouncing as he walked, the way the breeze tossed it. Occasionally a strand got in his eyes, but he just brushed it away with a jaunty wave of his hand in a new move he decided was totally so cool.

Back home, he put his shopping bag on the dresser, went to the mirror and admired his new haircut. Bold move, he decided. I made a bold move. But he frowned as he looked at his bushy eyebrows. Vanya was right. They just detracted from his perfect new hair. Maybe they could use a little shaping? Some guys get their eyebrows threaded, he told himself. He thought about making an appointment to have them done professionally--

But no. Come on. He was an old school man's man. The thought was ridiculous. He ordered some food. Ate. Sat down to watch Chicago PD, his legs

spread wide, a bottle of beer at his crotch. As he watched, he couldn't stop looking at the women on the show, but he wasn't thinking about who had the best tits, which ones he'd like to fuck. He found himself obsessing on their sleek, perfectly shaped brows. He reached up and kept touching his own, which felt and looked like caterpillars. Before he knew it, he found himself with his legs tucked under him, tweezers in one hand, a mirror in the other. "Ow! Ew! Oh!" Every single hair he pulled sent a jabbing pain that made him yelp. "This is hell," he whispered.



When he was done, though, he felt it had been more than worth it. He stared at himself in the mirror, smiling. His brows were now slender and sharply defined. They made his eyes seem bigger, prettier. He took the mirror to bed with him, falling asleep as he admired his hair, his skin and those delicious eyebrows.

In the morning, he wasn't so sure. Rubbing lotion into his hands and on his face, he saw a girl in the mirror. It was his face, for sure, but with his bob and the way he'd plucked his brows, his looks trended more toward feminine than masculine now. Shit. How would the girls react? How would everyone react? There was nothing for it. Putting on his concealer— he wasn't sure he needed it, but he would almost feel naked without it – he got out a brush and began to brush out his hair. Vanya had told him he would need to brush it constantly to keep the bounce and shine. Soon, his arm ached from the repeated motion, but he couldn't argue with the results. So, his new hairstyle would take a little fussing over, he realized, but it was worth it. His old hairstyle had been so BORING.

Nick hadn't even noticed that his face was smooth and stubble free. He no longer needed to shave.

Chapter Three

As Nick entered the shared workspace, he passed Giselle. She and her all-girl team of programmers were trying to build non-sexist video games. That interested him not at all, but her long, lean body did. "Morning," he said, telling with her with his eyes that he was ready to fuck whenever she was. She'd been clear she wasn't interested, but Nick liked the challenge of wearing a girl down.

"Mornin- Nick?" Giselle, who'd been walking past, stopped.

“Yeah?” Nick said. His bangs fell across his eyes, and he brushed them back with a delicate wave of his hand.

“I love your hair,” Giselle said, taking in his bright skin, the feminine arches of his brows. Was this the same asshole who’d been trying to fuck her all these months?



“Thanks.” Nick ran his fingers through his hair, gave it a little toss. “I decided to go for something a little different.”

“Well, you look fantastic,” Giselle said, cupping his cheeks. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks?” Nick said, puzzled, but glowing from her compliments. Her

demeanor was totally different, so he decided to make a pass. “Hey, do you wanna get together for drinks some day after work?”

“Some wine and a little girl talk?” Giselle said. “Sure. Look, I gotta run, but we’ll set something up. Bye, honey.”

Giselle walked away. Wine and girl talk? Oh. Nick laughed as he headed to their space. Obviously, she was joking. His concerns about looking too feminine evaporated. Based on Giselle’s reaction, he was more of a player than ever.

Back at their space for the morning meeting, Nick hopped over the couch and plopped down, his hair bouncing. “Morning, girls,” he said.

Samantha and Danielle looked at him, faces stunned.

“What?” Nick said, hooking his hair behind his ear. Suddenly, all his fear and anxiety returned. His new hairdo was a terrible mistake. He looked like a fool. What was I thinking? He wanted to crawl into a cupboard and hide.

“I — I love your hair,” Danielle said, her bright smile reflecting her delight not just at his pretty bob but — yes. He’d plucked his eyebrows, and into the same shape of just about every fashionable young woman in New York.

“Thanks,” Nick said, smiling with relief, giving it another toss. “I just wanted to do something a little more, I don’t know? Fun?”

Samantha’s stunned look grew more so to the point of shock. Not only the hair, but the way Nick was talking, moving? He’d even adopted a slightly sing-song speaking pattern, and he seemed so happy to get Danielle’s compliment? Samantha, feeling cruel, decided to see if she could provoke a similar response. “You look gorgeous,” she said. “Just like Emma Watson.”

“Oh, stop,” Nick said, his smile growing wider as he felt himself blush.

He didn’t even notice I compared him to a woman, Samantha thought. “Did you do your brows?”



Nick's face froze as he ran his index finger over one of his slender brows. "Oh, just a little," Nick said, insecurity returning. "You know. To look more professional?"

"They look sexy. You should definitely keep them that way," Samantha said.

"Oh, she is so right," Danielle chimed in, nodding.

"Thanks, guys," Nick said, flushing even more, pleased to the core with the praise from women. "I was actually a little worried about it?"

"You shouldn't be," Danielle said.

"Well," Nick said, waving a hand. "Enough about *my hair*. Let's get to work."

When the meeting finished and Nick left, Samantha crossed her arms and gave Danielle a hard look.

"What?" Danielle asked.

"Something weird is going on," Samantha said, "and I think you know what. I mean?" Samantha waved her hand dramatically and said, "Enough about *my hair*."

Danielle chuckled. "I guess I kinda have an idea." Making sure Nick wasn't listening in, she told Samantha all about Vanya, the bag, and how as soon as she'd given it to Nick he'd started to change.

"It sounds like a bunch of bullshit," Samantha said. "Other than the fact I am seeing it for myself."

"I know."

"How far is this going to go? I mean, how much is he going to—change?"

"I have no idea." Danielle said. "Maybe I'll ask Vanya?"

Danielle had every intention to ask Vanya, but she got distracted with this, that and the other. Time just got away from her, and as much as she was enjoying Nick's new self, he just wasn't the center of her universe. Samantha, likewise, got focused on her own life, and when Nick's new self did cross her mind, she shrugged. Who had the time?

Nick went to his cubicle and focused on his work. He found when he leaned forward that his bangs kept falling in his eyes, so he adjusted, sitting with his back straight, typing away, pausing occasionally to put on more lotion. When he got to a tough part of any task, he dug his hands into his thick hair and tossed it in frustration.

Lunchtime. As usual, Samantha and Danielle were there, chatting. "Girls," he said, opening the fridge and looking for some food to pirate. He saw a sandwich—something fancy in a croissant, labeled Samantha, but as he started to grab it, he felt an odd feeling he'd never felt before in his life. He didn't even know the word for it. He just felt like he shouldn't pirate her food. Like it was wrong or something.

Weird, he thought, but closed the fridge. "I'm going to go out and get something," he said, doing his little hook the hair behind the ear move.

"Okay?" Samantha said.

"Bye," Danielle said.

Nick left. "That's a switch," Samantha said.

“For the better.”

Nick walked out into the city. Sidewalks were nowhere near as crowded as they used to be with so many people working from home since Covid. He missed the old hustle and bustle a bit, but it did mean he never had to wait long at any of the restaurants that had stayed open. His mouth watered as he pictured a big, juicy burger from Bare Burger, but then he caught a glimpse of himself in a storefront window. He turned, admiring his hair, but at the same time— his body? He didn't look fat, and he wasn't thin. He looked-- bumpy? Lumpy? Thick? No, he told himself. I *am* fat. I'm disgusting.

He wasn't, but that's what he now saw in the mirror.

Instantly, he knew he simply had to go on a diet.

All thoughts of burgers vanished, and he hurried to the nearest Whole Foods for a kale smoothie, carefully checking the calories on his phone. Smoothie in hand, feeling really jazzed about losing weight, when he got back to the office, he frantically researched different diets. After dithering for two hours, he finally settled on The South Beach Diet. It really was *everything*. There would be no more ordering out. From now on Nick would prepare his own, healthy meals. He stopped by the grocery store and floated around, pleased and excited as he shopped for lean, healthy foods, loading up on greens to make so many salads.

Chapter Four



Nick's morning routine now included fussing with a measuring tape to check his waist size, getting on the scale and almost crying because he was still so fat. He needed to get down to 120 pounds. When he started, he'd carried a solid 175 on his 5' 9" frame, mostly muscle from sweating it out at the gym. Now, logging each calorie into his diet APP meticulously, keeping himself to 1000 calories a day, where the average man needed 2000, the muscle melted. Starving and

aided by Vanya's magic, he lost weight rapidly, dropping 10 pounds a day. The first couple of days, no one seemed to notice, but the weekend came, and by the time Monday morning rolled around, he weighed a spritely 135.

Checking his measurements, his tape measure showed his waist had slendened down from a disgusting 38 inches to a little over 31. Yet, he hurled the tape measure across the room. He was nowhere near the 24-inch waist he needed to be happy.

A few days later, looking in the mirror, Nick could see he'd lost almost all of his muscle. He could see the ribs in his chest and ribcage, and his arms were like twigs. Am I there? He wondered. Did I reach my weight goal at least? "120.... 120... please.... Please..." He whispered as he got on the scale. The digital readout flashed, 131.

"No! No!" Nick screamed. "I'm still fat." He'd been hungry every minute since the day he started his diet, starving himself and it still wasn't enough. *It's not fair,* he thought. *Some people are just naturally skinny, and I have to work so hard.*

Well, he would just stick to his diet. He would get down to 120. Nothing could stop him.

He'd worn sweatpants and a sweatshirt all weekend, had the heat up to sweat off the fat, so when he put on his work "uniform" his clothes hung off him like a tent. When he tried to put on his belt, he found that he'd run out of loops. Grabbing a pair of scissors, he dug a new hole so he could pull it tight around his waspish waist, but it was clear he was going to need new clothes.

He headed to the office.

Samantha and Danielle noticed it immediately when he came bounding into the office, not just because of how baggy his clothes had become, but his cheekbones were now more angular than ever. Nick ran up to the couch and planted his arm on the back, meaning to leap over as usual, but in addition to all the muscle loss he also had very little energy due to his crash diet. Instead of

bounding over the couch, he ran into it and kind of rolled over it and then off it, landing on the floor in a tangle of knees and elbows.

“Are you okay?” Danielle said.

“Oh, my God!” Samantha shouted, as they both stood.

Nick, his bangs all in his eyes, waved them off, laughing, trying to play it off. “Epic fail,” he said. “Houston, we do *not* have liftoff!” He got up and took his usual seat on the couch, taking a moment to fix his hair. “Mondays, am I right?”

“Are you alright?” Samantha said. Looking at how emaciated he’d become and how fast, she felt legitimately concerned for his health. Neither she nor Danielle immediately made the connection to his other changes, which had been totally cosmetic.

“Nothing bruised but my ego,” Nick said.

“No, I mean...” she gestured at his body. “You’ve lost a lot of weight.”

“Yeah, have you seen a doctor?” Danielle said. “It might be Covid?”

“What?” Nick felt himself cringe at the attention being paid to his fat, gross body. “No! I’m doing The South Beach Diet,” he said. “I mean, I know I have a long way to go, but I’m really serious about getting healthy this year.”

Like most women, Samantha and Danielle had friends who’d suffered eating disorders, so hearing the skeletal Nick talk about having a “long way to go” set off alarm bells. Danielle, starting to suspect Vanya was behind Nick’s weight loss, did not find this latest change amusing. “Nick, this is not healthy. You must be starving yourself.”

“I’m so totally *not*,” Nick said, feeling defensive as he so totally was starving himself.

“You should probably see a doctor,” Samantha said. “What have you lost? 30 pounds?”

Nick huffed. “More like 40, and you guys are so over-reacting to this.”

“You shouldn’t lose weight that fast. It’s not good.”

Nick stood, put a hand on his hip and tossed his hair in fury. “Thanks for your support!” And then he turned and stormed off to his space.

Danielle and Samantha huddled, whispering. “Is this part of your thing?” Samantha asked, having begun to put it together.

“I think it might be,” Danielle said.

“You need to stop this. He’s become anorexic. I am not good with this anymore.”

“I totally agree. I’ll talk to Vanya. I— I never thought it would go this far.”

Nick threw himself into his work, as he always did when he was upset. But, he couldn’t stop thinking about the morning meeting. Jealous bitches, he kept thinking. Of course, they feel threatened seeing me get so thin.

After an hour, adrenaline burned, he felt himself flagging, sagging, struggling to think. He needed energy, and he needed it now. He needed coffee. Standing up made him feel a little dizzy, but gathering himself he headed out to Starbucks. As he waited in line, he found himself drooling at the thought of a Caramel Latte, but no. He’d worked too hard. So, he settled for a Venti. Black. Hadn’t he heard somewhere that caffeine was an appetite suppressant? He sure hoped so, because his stomach was *aching* for food.

Nick worked in his office the rest of the day, avoiding the *bitches*. He did make two more coffee runs. He and Danielle and Samantha exchanged emails and files, working that way. Nick didn’t know if he’d ever forgive them for body shaming him the way they did. The day ended, and when Nick left the office space, he actually felt his spirits lift. Shopping for new clothes. That would be fun. Night had fallen, and a chill winter breeze tossed his hair. He could see the Empire State Building off in the distance, the top lit blue and gold. It was a perfect night in NYC.

Nick usually got his white shirts and black pants at Brooks Brothers, so he walked in that direction, enjoying the crisp night air, and he soon found himself

lost in thought, his attention bopping from topic to topic— TV shows, songs, diet tips, hair tips, back to TV Shows... In fact, his energy starved brain had become scattered and unable to focus.

“Wait,” he said to himself, realizing that he’d been walking aimlessly, completely forgetting his plans to hit Brooks Brothers. “Where am I?” Looking for a landmark, he saw a familiar sign: Baba Yaga.

He decided to stop by, let Vanya know how much everyone loved his haircut. Stepping into the salon, he once more felt a little grossed out by its excessive feminine energy. “Nick,” Vanya said, rushing up and greeting him with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “You are just in time for your appointment.”

“Appointment?” Nick said, head instantly swimming from her perfume.

“Of course. To work with our stylist, Natasha. You need new clothes, right?”

“I do,” Nick said, remembering that, of course, he’d come here to see the stylist. For new clothes.

He handed Vanya the gift certificate he suddenly realized he was holding. “You’re getting so skinny!” Vanya, who was a full-bodied woman, gushed. “I’m jealous!”

“Thanks,” Nick said, pleased someone was happy for him.

Natasha entered. Nick rated her a nine. That skin, and he could only wish to have a waist that small. “Oh! So pretty!” She said, greeting Nick with a hug and a kiss. “Let’s go next door and get you some clothes!” She took his soft hand in her own and dragged him toward the door.

“Next door?” Nick said, following along.

“Baba Yaga Boutique,” Vanya said. “Exquisite clothes. Imported. The finest materials.”

“You’re going to love the way you look,” Natasha said, giving Vanya a wink.

They entered the Baba Yaga Boutique. Nick stopped dead, and Natasha almost yanked him off his feet. “What’s wrong?” She said, dragging Nick into the

store. He shook his head side to side as he looked in horror at racks of dresses, skirts and blouses, looking like a child being dragged to the dentist by his mother.

“These are women’s clothes,” Nick said. There was another clerk there, and a couple of young, hip, female customers. They all stopped what they were doing and looked at Nick, who was terrified, and not just that Natasha was about to try and get him to put on a dress. No. He was terrified because part of him thought he might just like it.

“We have a men’s section,” Natasha said, giving his hand a squeeze. “You silly goose. Please, just trust me.”

“The men’s section is really good,” one of the hip young shoppers said.

“My boyfriend shops there all the time,” the other chimed in.

“Do you trust me?” Natasha said.

“Okay. Yeah.”

“Come. Let’s have some fun.”

The sign above the section she led him to read “Gender Free.”

Samantha and Danielle had agreed to grab a bite and then head down to see Vanya together. Samantha had mixed feelings. Baba Yaga was something off the rage among hip young professional women; she’d been hearing about the uber-maternal salon named after a witch from Russian folklore for months now, with girls constantly Instagramming their haircuts and make-overs, #babayaga. The owner, Vanya, a Ukrainian immigrant, had a cutting-edge feminist sensibility she infused into her business, and a lot of the young women who went there for a trim and some “advice” even called her Mother.

Yes, seeing Nick inflicted with anorexia, starving himself, made her blood boil. Eating disorders were no joke and no one, she felt, not even Nick, deserved that as some kind of twisted punishment.

Danielle opened the door to the salon and let Samantha enter first. As soon as she walked in, she put her hand to her chest, overwhelmed by the maternal

energy. “Oh, my God,” she said, feeling a sense of safety and calm wash over her.

“I know,” Danielle said.

Vanya approached. “Ladies, ladies,” she said, a broad, confident smile on her face. “Come. Come. I will allay your fears.”

“You know why we’re here?” Danielle said.

“You know I am a psychic,” Vanya said. “Why would that surprise you?”

Sometime later, the girls weren’t even sure, the women left Vanya’s den, hugging, laughing, and no longer worried in the least about Nick’s health. Vanya had explained that Nick was merely experiencing something every woman went through as he struggled to meet unreasonable body standards. “Look at his skin. His hair. My magic keeps him healthy.” Vanya showed them to the door, and Samantha backed out, waving, only to collide with someone behind her.

“Oh,” she said, turning. “I’m so sorry.” The girl she’d bumped into had almost fallen into the street, but a passing man grabbed her arm and pulled her back and steadied her on her feet. “Oh, my God,” the “woman” said. “You totally saved me.”

Samantha did a double take. “Nick?”

“Samantha?”

“Nick?”

“Danielle?”

Nick had decided to wear some of his new clothes out of the boutique. He simply had to! Samantha took in the leather bolero jacket, crop top, leather pants, and the cutest little belt with gold loops. Samantha couldn’t help but notice he had a nice, taut tummy and trim little waist. The clothes clung to his new shape, showing off just how slender he’d become, and he was almost a whole new person. He looked like a skinny girl.

“Did you get your hair done?” Nick said. He was starting to develop a feminine eye, and it didn’t look to him like either one had had anything done.

“Oh, no, I just– I love your outfit,” Danielle said, wanting to change the subject.

“Oh, thanks,” Nick said, putting a hand on his hip and lifting a knee, thrilled they’d noticed.



“You’re so trendy,” Samantha said.

Nick tossed his hair. “I had a little help from my *stylist*.” As he said “stylist” he raised a slender eyebrow. He felt having a personal stylist was such a sign of status.

“Well, we’re off,” Danielle said, grabbing Samantha. “Meeting some friends.”

“Bye,” Nick said. “So great to *bump* into you. LOL.”

Nick carried his shopping home, still buzzing from the shopping experience Natasha had given him. He would go so far as to call it transcendent. It was like an acid trip, trying on all the outfits, coming out of the changing room, turning, listening to Natasha gush, or shake her head and say, “not for you.”

Shopping had always been such a boring chore for him, and Natasha had shown him how it could be a sport. It was like hunting, and when he did find just the right top and just the right slacks, it was GOAL.

Back home, he bagged all of what he thought of as his fat clothes for a donation to Goodwill. Then, he carefully hung his new clothes in his closet. He stopped and stared at them, lined up so sharp and perfect and new, and he sighed, thinking, “I’m going to need a bigger closet.”

At last, he could relax and watch some Chicago PD. Taking off the soft t-shirt he’d worn under his new jacket, he undid his waist trainer with a sigh of relief. Natasha had talked him into it, telling him he could never diet his way to the 24-inch waist he’d confessed to her he was working toward. The waist trainer hurt. It cut into his sides and felt like it was crushing all his internal organs, but what choice did he have? He knew he couldn’t get the kind of body he needed without sacrifice, something Natasha had emphasized. “All those people out there unhappy with their bodies,” she’d said as she’d strapped Nick into his girdle, “they lack the will to beauty.”

He snorted. One thing he would never lack was the will to beauty.

The next morning, Nick went through his new and ever-growing routine. Hair. Skin cream. Concealer. Waist trainer. He fussed for half an hour before even getting dressed in his new work outfit. Gone were the days when he was out the door 15 minutes after rolling out of bed.

Once more, the scale and measuring tape left him feeling crushed, but Natasha had assured him his body would learn to adjust to the demands of the waist trainer, and gradually what was now forced would become natural. He couldn't wait.

Lastly, the new work uniform he and Natasha had worked out: a flouncy white silk shirt slightly off one of his round little shoulders, a Basic Soda tank top, tight black leather pants, and his new saddle shoes.

Nick was glad Natasha had talked him into the "bro length" pants, which hugged his calves and ended just above his new shoes. It would be a shame to hide them under long, sloppy looking pants, he'd agreed. He wanted everyone to see his petite ankles. Vanya had assured him little, "classical" ankles were all the rage among trend setting men these days.

There was a new kind of confidence in Nick's step as he bopped on down to the office this morning. He felt trendy, fashionable, brave. He'd been wearing the same boring clothes for so long, and it just made him feel like a completely different man as he strode down the sidewalk now, hands tucked into the pockets of his bolero jacket, glancing in the storefront windows, checking himself out the whole way to work.

As he passed the Gamer Girl's workspace, he crossed paths with Giselle again, and she greeted him with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "This," she said, holding her palm out toward Nick, "works. All of it!. And *where* did you get those boots?"

Nick hooked his hair behind his ear. "Baba Yaga," he said, adding a little whisper to the words, as if he were revealing a big secret.

"Of course," Giselle said. "Where else would a girl like you shop?"



Nick laughed. He was enjoying their flirtatious banter. “Only the best for this *girl*,” he said, thinking Giselle had meant to be ironic. “Hey, how about we get that drink tonight after work?”

Giselle handed him her phone. “Give me your digits.”

Nick did, more excited than he’d been about the possibility of hooking up with a woman than he’d been in a long time. “Call me,” he said as the conversation ended, and they headed their separate ways.

Danielle and Samantha had thought they were ready for anything after their talk with Vanya, but neither could hide their surprise when Nick walked in looking like a very fashionable young woman of

Manhattan. They loved his new look, and they told him so in gushing voices. Like a lot of modern women in NY running a start-up, Danielle and Samantha dressed down most days unless they had a client coming into the office. So, they both sat in their comfortable jeans and hoodies, while Nick walked around

the couch— there would be no more jumping after yesterday and besides— in those saddle shoes? He was already the most femininely dressed of the three.

Nick sat down, got his work material out of his satchel, placed them in neat piles on the coffee table and then, hands in his lap, looked at the two of them expectantly, raising one slender eyebrow.

Danielle realized he was waiting for one of them to take the lead. “Let’s get to work,” she said.

Nick smiled, brushing his bangs back out of his eyes. He crossed his legs, drawing attention to the shiny buckles on his new boots.

“Cute shoes,” Samantha said. She loved drawing girly reactions from the new and evolving Nick. He did not disappoint.

“I am so in love with them,” he said, twiddling his foot. “I saw them, and I just had to have them. It was *primal*.”

“I know the feeling,” Danielle said.

There was something bothering Nick. He felt another one of those weird new feelings. “Guys,” he said. “One thing before we start?”

There was a lift in his voice. He was asking permission.

“Sure,” Danielle said.

“I just wanted to apologize for my outburst yesterday. I feel terrible.”

Nick? Apologizing? Could it get better than this? The women forgave him and assured him it was all behind them. Nick almost cried, but he somehow managed to hold back the tears.



Chapter Five

The week passed. Nick settled into his new routine, checking his waist, his weight, pleased both were getting smaller, but impatient that they weren't dropping fast enough. He got used to feeling hungry all the time. His waist trainer helped, as it made it so he couldn't even eat all that much even if he wanted to. Samantha opened the refrigerator one day to see a salad labeled "Nick" and the next day, and the day after that the rarely used "Crisper" drawer was full of kale and baby spinach and all the makings of smoothies.

Nick even started joining Danielle and Samantha for lunch, nibbling on his salads like a rabbit, while the girls ate – bread? How do they get away with it? He fumed, but he hid his jealousy behind smiles and laughter.

Nick spent his nights curled up, watching TV while idly shopping online, searching Pinterest for outfit ideas, sometimes plucking his eyebrows, making sure they stayed perfect. He didn't buy anything. He was totally devoted to Baba Yaga and his stylist, Natasha, but he just put together a board of possible looks to show her next time he dropped by, eager for her feedback. He just adored online window shopping, and even went for walks some nights just to do a little real world window shopping, the urge to buy more clothes and shoes growing stronger every day.

Looking in the mirror one morning, he saw his bob had gotten a little shaggy. Time for a trim, he realized, and what luck. He still had three gift certificates. This time he called and made an appointment. It was actually kind of exciting, the thought of visiting his salon, and, of course, he would pop into the boutique for a sec. It was the perfect Friday evening after a long week at work.

“Extensions?” Nick asked, sitting in the beautician’s chair, the smock already secured around his neck. “You mean, like, for long hair?”

“Oh, yes,” Vanya said, fluffing his hair. “It’s time. You’re ready.”

Nick had come to love his cute bob. “I don’t know.”

“You’ll be like Russell Brand, or Captain Bird,” Vanya said.

“Captain Sparrow?”

“Yes. So handsome.”

“I’m really not sure.”

“I am. Now, relax. Let me work my magic.”

Nick fell into the same, hazy space as always, zoning out, totally tuned into the chimes and the sound of the waterfall. He only snapped out of it when Vanya spun him around so he could see himself, once more Vanya and the girls standing behind him, smiling. “Gorgeous,” Vanya pronounced.

“So handsome!”

Nick starred. Again. He had serious hair. It was long, silky and thick. And— he reached up and gingerly touched one of the large hoop earrings dangling from his ears. “Earrings?”

“Just like the Captain Bird,” Vanya said. “Just like you asked for.”

“I asked for these?” Nick said, confused.

“You begged for them,” one of the girl’s said. “And you were so right. You look amazing.”

“I— do I?”

With hair now pouring down over his shoulders, and the earrings, and- was he wearing mascara? “I look like a girl.”

“Like Captain Bird,” Vanya said. “You love it.”



Nick shook his head. It was too much, but-- he-- “I love it,” repeated, realizing that he did love it. He looked so glamorous.

“You love it,” Vanya said, kissing him on the top of the head as she massaged his shoulders.

Natasha approached. “And just wait until you see some of the new clothes that just came in from Paris.”

Shopping! All thoughts about his hair and earrings and make-up vanished. “New clothes?” He asked, voice rising with excitement. “Paris?”

“Come,” Natasha said, as Vanya removed the smock. One more she took his hand and led him like a child. “You’re gonna love the way you look.”

As Nick made his way home, shopping bags dangling from each arm, he once more that feral feeling, like he was a hunter in the boutique jungle, coming home with his trophies. He saw women glancing appreciatively at his haul, sometimes even enviously. He felt like he was in a one-man parade, hailed as the shopping king.

“Nick,” Frankie the doorman said, opening the door open for his ever-changing client. “Good to see you.”

“A pleasure,” Nick answered, then, unable to stop himself, he brandished his bags. “I went a little overboard tonight.”

“You deserve it,” Frankie said.

“I really do,” Nick said, tossing his long hair as he turned on his heel and headed toward the elevator.

Frankie got back behind his desk, glanced at the security cameras to make sure everything was good. Nick actually looked kinda terrific with that hair. Frankie wondered if it was a wig, but he was sure the hoops were real. *Good for him*, Frankie thought. *He seems a lot nicer since he started changing.*

Nick, though, was about to face a bit of a crisis.

After putting all his new purchases in his closet, including a couple more pairs of shoes, he placed the wooden jewelry box Natasha had insisted he buy on his dresser. Opening it, his eyes sparkled with delight at the bracelets, rings, necklaces he'd bought. He slipped one of the bracelets on, admiring how it looked on his slender wrist, then giggled. He'd never appreciated jewelry before, but now it was like he was seeing it for the first time. He couldn't wait to show it off.

Carefully putting the bracelet back in the velvet lined cubby, he started to take his earrings off, but decided to wear them a little longer. He liked the way they felt, brushing against his cheeks, and he'd already become addicted to toying with them with a free hand, while also teasing his long hair. He made a space on his corner of his bathroom sink next to his concealer for his manscara and guyliner.

Undressing, he slipped into his new nightshirt— a long t-shirt that hung down to his knees, and it was made of the softest and comfiest material. He'd curled up in a corner of the couch, started streaming the latest episode of *You* on Netflix, and was shopping online, playing with his hair, when his phone buzzed.

I wonder who would be texting me this late? He wondered, pausing his show. Maybe it was Giselle? A booty call? When he checked his phone, though, his eyes went wide:

SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY ALERT! YOUR CREDIT CARD HAS BEEN SUSPENDED! Call XXX-XXX-XXXX to speak to a service representative.

“Oh, shit,” Nick hissed. Had someone stolen his credit card number? Or, maybe even stolen his identity? Damn. Damn. Damn. He found his cell phone and dialed the number. “Don't put me on hold.... Don't put me on hold....”

The line clicked. “All our representatives are busy right now....”

“Damn.” Nick paced, chewing on his thumb. As mentioned, the business was struggling, and he’d been living off money he’d saved from his last corporate job, plus a nice buyout he’d gotten when leaving. He wasn’t broke, yet, but the last thing he needed was his credit getting all screwed up by some scumbag. “Come on.... Come on....”



Nick found himself getting angry. No doubt some slimeball had stolen his credit card number somehow, gone on a buying spree, or maybe hit a strip club. Jerk. He spat. Scumbag.

Finally, an actual person picked up the other line. Nick frantically began to geyser words at her, “I got an alert, and I don’t know but I can’t really deal with this and it was probably a Russian mobster jerk who...”

“Just calm down, and I will do my best to resolve this problem, miss.”

“Miss? I’m Nick. I’m a Mr. A guy.”

“Oh. I am so sorry. If you would give me your name and account number....”
The service agent kicked herself. She’d been trained to remain gender neutral.

Nick took a couple deep breaths to calm himself, gave her the information finding his lower register. There was the sound of keys clacking, some electronic beeping. “Okay,” the girl said. There has been an unusually high amount of traffic on your card at a vendor you had not previously frequented.”

“Where? How Much?”

“4,251 dollars, at a Baba Yaga Enterprises.”

“4,000 dollars” Nick said, stunned. “Are you sure?”

“At Baba Yaga.”

Nick was thinking about his shopping sprees. He actually had no recollection of how much he’d spent. He’d been on such a shopper’s high, he’d never even asked about a price, had handed over his card, all while floating on a cloud of shopper mania.

“Do you recall those purchases, or maybe suspect foul play?”

“I’m not– I do shop there. For my girlfriend,” he added. “I mean, you know. But, 4000?”

“May I suggest you check your receipts or your credit card report online? If you suspect theft, we will rectify the situation. Please be assured we will take care of this as soon as possible, but it’s best to confirm.”

“Okay. Yeah. I’ll check.”

“In the meantime, would you like me to unlock your card?”

“Yes,” Nick said, as he had the sinking feeling that he was, indeed, the jerk who’d spent 4000 dollars.

He ended the call and opened up his online account on his smart pad. His heart sank as he looked down the list of purchases, and he couldn’t help but feel utterly shocked at the prices. 250 dollars for a– why did it say blouse? 180 for

leather capris? What the hell were capris? 199 for another blouse. 480 for a bracelet. Xena Boots. 220. Darcy Boots. 230. Lacey Bootettes 250?

He went to his closet, checking labels, cross-referencing with the bill. His shirts, not blouses— were all of the thinnest material. Why so expensive? Every purchase was accounted for— right down to the 80-dollar tube of mascara and the 65 dollar eyeliner.

Vanya had insisted that her products were all of the finest quality, but still? Could this be right? He remembered how much he'd paid for his skin cream. Panic. I have to return all this! I can't afford it right now!

But looking at all his new shirts and pants lined up neatly and primly in his closet, he reached out and ran his fingers along the cool fabric of one of his new shirts. No. He needed them. They would just have to start making money. Find a way.

Nick poured himself a glass of cucumber water, curled up on the couch and unpaused *You*. He picked up his tablet and went back to shopping, looking for an escape from the anxiety gripping him. Shopping always seemed to calm him down. He found a really cute new juicer that would perfectly match the kitchen decor at the office. Buy Now. He paused, his mouse floating over the button. It's only 150 dollars, he thought, clicking BUY. It felt good. Nothing like a little shopping to ease the mind. He'd worry about the money later.

Getting ready for bed now took almost as much work as getting ready in the morning. Nick had to clean off his manscara, his guyliner, blush, and instead of just brushing his hair he now ran a wide toothed comb through his luxurious hair first, to work out any tangles. It took so much time to fuss over long hair. He carefully slipped his hoops out of his new piercings and made sure to rub lots of lotion not just on his hands and face, but his slender arms and smooth, hairless legs. Natasha had reminded him he had skin all over his body.

Finally, he drifted off to sleep, thinking about the splash he'd make when he showed up at work tomorrow. He couldn't wait to see the girls' faces.

He got up an hour early the next day, running through a few sun salutations, then began to put himself together doing his hair, his face, taking his measurements, dressing in one of his flouncy new blouses. He wiggled into his tight new leather jeans, and then almost danced as it came time for— jewelry. He draped a half dozen bracelets over one arm, slipping in his new hoops for what he'd convinced himself was that perfect pirate look. Putting both hands on the edge of the kitchen sink, he leaned forward and said, "Go get, em, tiger."

The outfit was bold and daring. Fashionable. And Vanya had been so right about the hair. His long, flowing mane made him feel strong, powerful, like a lioness— a lion. And the blush had really brought out his cheekbones. He felt like money.

At work, his new look received all the glowing praise he hoped for and needed. All through the morning meeting, he kept plucking at his hair, toying with his earrings. And, Danielle noticed, occasionally wincing and putting his hand to his chest.

"Something wrong?" Danielle asked, remembering making the same gesture when she'd been a tween girl.

"My chest is aching," Nick said, not thinking much of it. "I think I strained something doing yoga."

Samantha and Danielle exchanged a glance. They were both pretty sure Nick was about to pop out his own little boobies. "Maybe you're about to experience a growth spurt?" Samantha said with a wicked smile.

"Oh, I think I'm done growing," Nick said, plucking at his long hair.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Samantha said.

“What does that mean?” Nick said, hand still gingerly on his aching chest.



“Oooookay,” Danielle said, wanting to end it before Samantha spilled the beans. “I think we all have plenty to do today.”

“Yes,” Nick said, standing, adjusting his outfit, tossing his hair. “We really need to sell some soda! I had no idea how expensive fashionable clothes are.”

You mean women’s clothes, Danielle thought, remembering Vanya’s promise: *He’ll know what you go through*. While she dressed down for the office, she spent a bundle on her “going out clothes” and, like Nick, she often seethed at how a paper-thin scrap of cloth cost more than a thick, solid hoodie.

Later, once they were sure Nick was off and working, Samantha and Danielle huddled in Danielle's cubicle. "I can't wait till he gets his boobs!" Samantha said. "We should buy him a training bra. Have a party for him!"

"I bet they have some really pretty ones at Baba Yaga," Danielle said. They were both giddy watching a man, especially a man like Nick, having the full female experience.

"Too expensive," Samantha said. "We can do Woolmart or go Amazing Essentials."

"Um, I don't think he'd be caught dead in a Woolmart bra," Danielle said. "Way too much of a fashionista."

"Seriously." She considered. "His eyes are really popping now."

"Oh, my God! Those long, curly lashes," Danielle said, wistfully. "It's not fair."

"And I doubt he even appreciates them."

"I love picturing him doing his mascara."

"He has to be spending more time getting ready than we are." It was true. Just as they dressed down most days, they also preferred the clean, fresh scrubbed look for work. They really only got all dolled up when they went out or for a special occasion. Who had the time?

Nick, meanwhile, was once again feeling light-headed, energy deprived. It was time for a coffee run, only now one of those strange new feelings once again came over him. Instead of just running out to get his fix, he decided he should see if the girls wanted anything. Samantha's cube was empty, so he headed over to Danielle's and caught a snippet of their conversation.

"It's so much work putting on my face to go out," Danielle was saying. "I can't imagine doing it for work every morning."

So true. Nick thought, thinking about how long it had taken him to get ready. He wanted to jump in on the conversation and commiserate about how much

work it was to be stylish, but it just seemed too girly. Instead, he popped around the entrance to the cubicle and said, “Hey, ladies.”

Samantha and Danielle froze. Shit. How much had he heard? “Hey,” Danielle said, trying to gauge his reaction.

Nick just smiled, fussing with his hair. “Um, I’m running to Starbucks? Do either of you want anything while I’m out?”

Samantha and Danielle exchanged one of their ever more common hell freezes over glances. “That’s so sweet,” Danielle said. “Yes.”

Nick pulled out his phone. “I’m going to order ahead so I don’t have to wait.” He raised one slender eyebrow. “I love their APP.”

Danielle and Samantha gave him their orders. “I’ll be back in a jiff,” Nick said, turning with a dramatic swirl of his long, silky mane.

“Did you notice we graduated to ladies?” Samantha said.

“I did. I almost feel like a real person.”

Samantha sat back. “I can’t wait till he gets his boobs!”

Danielle chuckled, then waved her hand, mimicking Nick. “Enough about my hair!”

They couldn’t control their laughter.

On his way back from Starbucks, tray full of drinks clutched carefully in his hands, Nick ran into Giselle. “Oh, my God,” She said, taking him in. “You just keep getting more glamorous.”

“Oh, I just decided to, you know, go bold?”

“Did you ever.”

“So, um, why didn’t you call?” Nick asked, unable to hide his hurt. He’d been checking his phone constantly waiting for her call since the day he’d given her his number.

“Oh, babe,” Giselle said, touching him on the arm. “Just, you know. Busy. Hey, speaking of which, how about tonight, after hours? Come by the office.”

“Okay,” Nick said, excited, his mind filling with delightful images of them doing the nasty on the desk in her office.

“See you, then.”

“Bye.”

He found Danielle and Samantha still in Danielle’s cubicle, handed them their drinks.

“Thanks, sweetie,” Samantha said, testing him, wondering how he would react to being called “sweetie.”

“Oh,” Nick said with a little shrug of his rounded shoulders, actually a little flattered she’d called him sweetie. “Anytime.” There had always been a little or maybe a lot of tension between him and his partners, but he was really glad they were being so nice to him now.

Back in his office, Nick checked his emails. No new clients had emerged from their flyer campaign. How could they boost their sales? He wondered, tugging on his hoop. There had to be a way.

Chapter Six

By the time Nick packed his stuff up and headed out to meet Giselle, the building was half-deserted. Nick had never been so nervous. NYC was all about hook-ups, and he'd had a few since moving here. He knew just how to play it. Usually. But there was something about Giselle throwing him off. It wasn't just that he'd worked so long and so hard to score with her, there was something else. It was one of those new feelings he didn't have a name for, but did he actually like her?

As he came to the door of Gamer Girls, he swallowed the breath mint he'd popped in his mouth, mussed his hair, and entered, hoping to minimize the foreplay and get right to fucking. There was no one in the lounge area, but he could see a light on in one of the cubicles. Nervously twisting his bracelets, he called, "Gisselle?"

"Come on back," Giselle answered.

Nick imagined her waiting for him, maybe in just a bra and panties, maybe with a glass of champagne, but when he came around the cubicle she was sitting at the computer, working intently, just wearing her regular clothes. "I'll be ready for you in just a... there."

Giselle got up. Nick looked her in the eyes, smiled, tugging on his hoop. "Should we get to it?" He said, and then bit his lip.

"Yeah," Giselle said, moving behind him.

"Whaaa?" Nick suddenly worried she was going to try something too kinky. Pegging had become something of a trend in the city, with women getting into the strap-ons, and he tensed and was about to tell he was not into ass play involving *his* ass, but Giselle put her hands on his shoulders, steered him to the chair where she'd been sitting and sat him down. "I want you to beta test Game 3.1," she said. "I'd like your insights."

“Beta test? Aren’t your games for girls?”

“My games are for everyone,” Giselle said. “Fem-positive. Misogyny free.” She handed him a controller, put a notepad and a pen on the desk. “Take notes. I’ll be in the next room if you have any questions.”

Well, shit, Nick thought, holding the controller. He’d given himself a case of blue balls thinking about banging Giselle all day, and all she’d wanted was to use him for her stupid game. He assessed. She’d taken his number and never called. She’d hinted they would get together and never committed. She had referred to him a couple times as *girl*.

She’s been negging me, he decided. Not teasing me.

Mind games. Asshole.

He almost got up and stormed over to give him a piece of his mind, started to walk out, but... he really did like her. And maybe he was wrong? She was busy, and she maybe was just busting his balls a little? He didn’t want to overreact, and he didn’t want to cut her off. Better just to give her some notes. Help her out. I wonder what a girl game will look like, he wondered. Win a gossip battle? Find a husband?

He unpaused the game. Giselle had already set up a character for him and he was “in world.” His character was female, with long, brown hair and named “Nicki.” Coincidence, he decided.

It did not turn out to be a video game version of “Gossip Girl.” And it was *hard*.

The first three times he tried the mission— gain entrance to Windstorm Tower and defeat the boss, Lord Dunsany, he died. He tried head on assault. He tried sneaking. The first two times, he got killed before even reaching the upper level. The third time, he reached Lord Dunsany, but died after a single thrust from Dunsany’s flaming longsword.

Giselle looked over the top of the cubicle. “How’s it going?”



“It’s too hard,” Nick said, plucking at his hair. “The Boss is unbeatable.”

“Change strategies,” Gisselle said with a smirk, then vanished.

“I tried everything.”

“Not yet. You can beat it. I’ve beaten it three times. Don’t give up.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yup. Want a hint?”

“No,” Nick said. “I’ll get it.” He considered himself a master gamer, and he wanted to impress Giselle. Besides, if a girl beat it, then he would, too. Sneaking his way back to Dunsany, he tried dodging and dodging, then lunging in for quick strikes. It worked for a while and extended the fight, but eventually Dunsany impaled him on his blazing blade, lifting Nicky into the air as she died, kicking and thrashing, her body engulfed in flames.

Nick was impressed with the graphics and even the violence. He hadn’t expected that in a girl game. “How about that hint?” He called, frustrated.

“Think like a woman,” was all Giselle said.

What did that even mean? The game reset, and he was once more outside the tower. What to do? He decided to look at the Map, and he noticed there was a town nearby, Roseville. At least that was girly. Heading over to Roseville, expecting to find some girly, fantasy world village smothered in roses, he instead found a fairly typical town of stone walled buildings with thatched roofs, traders and temples. When in doubt, head to the tavern.

Nick discovered he could recruit NPCs to help him with his mission. Each one asked a favor in return, and for the next few hours— he lost track of time as he became engrossed in his miniquests— he met different characters, had conversations with them, did them favors, and one by one built a group of friends who would help him on his mission— a huge, barbarian warrior, a pretty little elven ranger, hooded sorcerous and chubby monk who was a healer.

Once he’d gotten their “Friendship” meters up to the point where they were ready to join him, Nick asked each one for help, and they all agreed. “Yes!” He said, pumping his fist, his bracelets flashing. “Let’s see how Dunsany likes me now.”

He led his party to the tower, and they hacked their way to the top. The sorcerous cast a protection spell on Nick, which more than doubled his armor class, and while his friends hectored and distracted Dunsany, he returned to dodging and striking.

In only a few moments, Dunsany dropped to one knee and hung his head. "I am defeated," he said. "I submit."

"Yes!" Nick shouted. Giselle came around and stood behind him.

Nick was given three choices: 1. Kill Dunsany 2. Take his armor and weapons and exile him. 3. Ask him to join you.

"What should I do?" Nick asked Giselle.

"What you think is best."

Nick bit his lip. He clicked, "Ask him to join you."

Dunsany placed his sword at Nicki's feet. "I swear to you eternal friendship" he said, and then a box appeared, "Dunsany has joined your party."

"Looks like I made a friend," Nick said.

Giselle smiled. One of the purposes of the game was to teach the importance of making friends and working with a group. Nick had clearly been influenced. "Good choice," she said. "Every decision you make in the game changes the storyline. Dunsany will be a very important ally. He can also become a romantic interest."

Dunsany? Yuck. "How about the little elf girl?"

"You can end up sleeping with any of your friends," Giselle said.

Nick looked up at her. Was she dropping a hint? "How about that drink you promised?" He said, once more playing with his hair.

"Sure, and you can give me some feedback. I'm very interested in your impressions."

Nick followed Giselle to a wine bar around the corner. She held the door for him. He let her. She was obviously into the whole liberated woman thing, he

decided. It was dark and cool, with little lamps on each table. It had probably been more crowded before Covid, Nick thought, but the tables were now spread out 6' apart. Their table in the corner had an intimate feel, like they were the only two people in the bar. The waitress came— Nick admired her skin— and Giselle said, “Two glasses and a bottle of *The Prisoner*.”

“Um, I'll just have some soda water, with lemon,” Nick said. “I'm counting calories?”

“Two glasses,” Giselle repeated, and the waiter scampered off.

“I really can't,” Nick said. “I'm on a diet.”

“You have lost a lot of weight,” Giselle said. “You look great.”

Nick tugged on his hoop and looked away. “Thanks?”

She's so bashful now! Giselle thought. She usually preferred more confident girls, but there was something about this being Nick that his shy, demure nature really turned her on.

The wine came. Giselle picked up her glass. Nick shook his head, no. “A little wine won't hurt,” Giselle said, “and you can't let me drink alone. That would make me an alcoholic.”

“Okay,” Nick said. “I guess you're right.” They clinked glasses, and Nick took a dainty little sip. “It's good.”

“For a hundred dollars a bottle it should be.”

“A hundred?” Nick said, remembering his debt problems.

“Don't worry. It's on me. My way of saying thanks.”

“Are you sure?” Nick said.

“I got it, sweetie. Now, tell me about my game.”

They leaned in close, staring into each other's eyes. Giselle idly ran her finger along Nick's fingers, his knuckles. The top of his soft hand. Nick, plucking at his hair, tugging on his earring, went on and on. Despite his former persona as a dumb bro, he'd been to college, and he'd seen what she was going for— instead

of the typical male, going it alone adventurer, this game had emphasized the importance of friends, allies, working as a team. “It’s almost like relationships are the most important thing?”

“Smart girl,” Giselle said.

Nick winced. She called him a girl again. He couldn’t tell if she was teasing, negging, what? He didn’t have time to try and figure it out. Giselle cupped his cheek, leaned in and kissed him. Nick’s whole body tingled, he curled his toes, and the ache in his chest intensified, but now it felt— good? Giselle’s kiss lingered, and Nick leaned closer, feeling her tongue slip between his lips and find his, and their tongues slid over each other as Giselle let her free hand slide inside his blouse, and she dug her nails into the sensitive flesh, and it was— Nick pulled away.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s sensitive,” Nick said, pulling the top of his shirt closed, not sure what he was feeling but aglow with the full body thrill he’d gotten from her kiss. As skinny as he was now, the one glass of wine had left him dazed and tipsy. Giselle’s eyes were hot and wet with intensity, like a hungry wolf. She scared him now, but also... fascinated him.

Giselle got up and took his hand. “Come on,” she said.

“Where are we going?”

“My place.”



Chapter Seven

Nick woke up the next at home, tangled in his sheets, face down and aching in places he didn't even know he had. Blurry memories of the night before came back to him and left him cringing with pleasure and shame. He'd finally gotten into bed with Giselle, and it had been nothing like what he'd imagined. He sat up, letting his legs hang over the edge of his bed, pulling the tangled hair out of his eyes, tossing it back over his shoulders. Looking down, he saw scratch marks all



over his tender chest. She'd loved it when he told her his chest was sensitive, that it hurt, and she had hurt him, and he remembered gasping with pleasure as she raked her fingernails across his tender chest. His chest looked puffy now, and his nipples felt swollen. Oh, well. The swelling, he figured, would go

down with time since, he believed, Giselle's rough play had caused it.

His recollections of the night were hazy. Another drink. They'd made out on her couch, and he'd been hard as hell, ready to fuck her, but then... everything

was coming back to him in jagged fragments, like he was seeing it all through a strobe light. She shoved his dick away and told him to strip and get in bed.

Cut to him, laying on the bed, playing with his hair. Giselle coming out of her closet, wearing a strap on— huge. Nick remembered panicking, backing away...

She got him on his knees, his face planted in the mattress, and she'd pegged him, pegged him hard. He felt himself tearing on the inside— pain again, but pain that terrified him because it came fused with pleasure... he'd panted and squealed with each thrust, his voice seeming to rise higher and higher.

He cried after. She held him. Then, she'd pulled him to his feet, slapped him on the ass and said, "You don't have to go home but you can't stay here."

Nick had dressed, and as he was about to go out the door, she said, "Be good, babe."

And then he'd made his bleary, disheveled way home, hair and clothes a mess. He passed a couple drunk girls heading from some bar, he supposed, and they gave a knowing once over and a look like— someone got her eyes fucked out. It was his first walk of shame, though he now suspected it wouldn't be his last.

Nick covered his face. Fuck. She'd been like an animal, and as scared as he'd been to cross the threshold and let her stick that— beast— into him, he had to admit, and it shook him to admit, to realize— deep down, he'd wanted it.

He'd liked it.

That's why I was crying, he admitted to himself now. I liked it, and it scares me how much I liked it. Who I am?

Fuck.

He glanced at the clock. Shit. He had to get ready, or he'd be late.

Thinking about all the empty calories he'd consumed, he rushed to the scale, terrified he had gained weight, then almost fainting with relief when he saw he had still lost 5 pounds. Thank God for small miracles.

He hurried to shower, wondering how he would ever get his hair and makeup done in time.

After the night he'd had, he was thrilled he had concealer. Thank God, he thought as he hid the dark circles under his eyes. He didn't even want to think about how embarrassing it would be to show up at work with raccoon eyes.

He managed, and he felt triumphant as he checked himself out one last time before heading out the door. His hair and makeup looked great, and no one would ever guess he'd been up late drinking and— well, you know. His confidence surging, his shame receding, he strutted out onto the sidewalks of New York, bag over his shoulder, checking himself out in the storefront windows.

He was thinking about Giselle's video game. Relationships. Maybe that was the key to selling more soda? He'd been selling instead of connecting. His head began to fizzle with ideas, and by the time he got to work, he was bubbly with excitement.

"Dan. Sam." He said as he came sashaying into the office. "I have an idea." He couldn't contain his excitement and didn't seem to notice that after his first pegging, his voice had changed, rising from a bass to a tenor. More, the frequency had increased as well, giving him a more feminine buzz.

"Shoot," Danielle said, giving Samantha a little glance, seeing in her eyes she had also heard the change.

Pacing, fussing with his hair and bracelets, he explained. "We create and label the sodas with the name of their business. We make the flavors to suit their menu— different for a Guatemalan restaurant than an Italian, perfectly paired to complement their flavors." He stopped pacing, putting a hand on his hip. "Bespoke soda."

He started to pace again, twisting his bracelets furiously.

"It becomes something people feel they can only get at *that* location. Plus, it gives our partners ownership over the product. Instead of one size fits all

marketing, we build a unique relationship with each partner. Less selling, more connecting.”

Done, without even thinking about it, he cupped his aching breast and massaged it. He felt like a hard lump had developed under his nipple. “And?”

Danielle and Samantha exchanged another glance— who the hell is this? But, they nodded. “I like it.”

“Me, too,” Samantha said.

“Now, it’s going to be a lot of work. A lot of cold calling.”

“And now I don’t like it so much,” Danielle said. She hated sales, as did Samantha.

“Don’t worry,” Nick said. “I’ll do it. I’m a great salesman,” he said, tossing his hair. “Not to brag or anything.”

“So, what do we do?” Danielle asked, impressed with Nick’s energy and passion.

“Design and logistics. We’re going to need new flavors, and we need to figure out how to make all this happen. We built everything to scale up to mass distribution of a few products. Now, we’re scaling toward small scale massive products.”

“On it,” Sam said.

“I’ll start working on the flavors,” Dan added.

Nick smiled. “You guys are the best. Now, come on. Group hug.”

Dan and Sam got up, and they all three hugged. “I love you guys,” Nick said, once more finding himself almost teary eyed. “You’re the best partners ever.”

It was a little much. Danielle almost found herself missing the old, cold Nick. *Almost.*

Nick wanted to rush out and start selling right away, but he knew preparation was key. He sat down at his computer and began putting together a whole new information packet, brochures, the entire style, look and content of all their

materials had to change, and he needed something portable he could carry with him as he went door to door. His eyes fell to his satchel. He would need a new bag, for sure. The old school satchel didn't match his trendy, fashion forward look at all. He'd ask Natasha for recommendations.

He spent a lot of time wiggling that morning. His butt hurt, but he was so into his work he didn't focus on it at all. Just another war wound. Sex could be dangerous. Later, he made his usual coffee run, bringing drinks back for his super amazing partners, and later he ran out to the store and bought a bunch of yogurt, labeling it "Danielle." He just really needed to make it up to her for stealing all her yogurt in the past.

Friends do not do that to friends, he thought, pleased with himself as he looked at the refrigerator shelf and slowly shut the refrigerator door. He wanted to be a good friend now, and he had Giselle to thank for showing him how with her amazing video game.

Giselle. Just thinking of her made him conscious of the painful claw marks across his chest, his aching booty. He didn't even know what to think. She was—rough, and she scared him. What if she wants a relationship? He wondered, back in his office. What if she doesn't?

What do I want?

He thought about the pat on his ass. "You can't stay here. Be good." I was just a fuck, he told himself. This is New York. But, why did it seem like he was more than that to her? Wasn't he?

He really had no idea, so he plunged back into his work, so he wouldn't have to even think about *HER*.

Samantha and Danielle found a moment to compare notes on Nick's new voice. "He definitely sounds more like a woman," Danielle said. "He didn't seem to notice, though. Or, maybe he doesn't care?"

“It’s almost one of those in-between voices,” Sam said. “Like, if he called you on the phone, you wouldn’t be sure.”

“He was so perky this morning!”

“I know. And are group hugs going to be a thing now?”

“God. I know. It’s like we’re turning into a sorority. I am kinda excited about his ideas, though.”

“Me, too. I hope they work. I’m about three months from moving back in with my parents.”

“Do you think he can sell— like that?”

“He sold me.”

Nick was really excited about the work he was doing. The colors, graphics, everything emphasized connection and support. He wouldn’t be selling anything. He would be there to help *them* be successful. He’d taken to wearing a cardigan around the office, and he pulled it tight as he looked over his work. He was always so cold anymore. He’d talk to the management about it one day.

“Babe.”

Nick yelped and jumped in his seat. He’d been so focused on his work he hadn’t even heard or felt Giselle enter. Seeing her, flashing back to getting pegged by her, all his confused emotions rushed to the surface— fear, need, anxiety and doubt. Lust. “Oh,” Nick said, instinctively sitting on his hands, shielding his booty, even though he was sitting. “You scared me.”

Giselle smirked, thinking, she’s cute when she’s startled. “I just wanted to check in. See how you’re doing.”

That’s so sweet, Nick thought. *Or, is it a mind game?* “I’m good,” he said, his voice rising another half octave, now a middling alto. The mere presence of Giselle and her feral energy triggered a feminine change. He shied away from Giselle, feeling vulnerable, unsure, though he longed for her touch.

“I know that was your first time. It can be a lot. You’re sure you’re fine?”

“It wasn’t my first time, I mean it was for– that– but it isn’t like, well–” Nick found himself flustered and tongue tied. He wanted to get up, run, get away from her, but he was locked in her eyes, in those strong, green eyes.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Giselle said. “Just take a deep breath and calm down. You’re shaking.”

Nick realized he was, and he took a couple deep breaths as he’d been told to, calming himself.

“You’re great,” Giselle said. “We should get together again. Soon.”

“Really?” Nick said, surprised and excited, surprised he was so excited.

“Really. Be good, babe.” Giselle turned, took a few steps, came back and leaned on the corner of Nick’s desk, reaching out and toying with his hair. “You look gorgeous with long hair. Keep it.”

“You think so?” Nick said, staring up at her, eyes wide, thrilled at the compliment.

“Oh, yeah, but—”

Nick’s heart froze But? Oh, no! What was wrong?

Giselle let the *but* hang in the air, enjoying the panicked look of insecurity on Nick’s face. Then, she stood, turned her back and said, “You’d look even better as a blonde” as she walked away.

Blonde? Nick thought, grabbing his hand mirror from his desk drawer and looking at himself, fussing with his hair. “Blonde?”

Nick’s hand went to his throat. For the first time, he heard the change in his voice. Gone was the strong, manly bass he’d been so proud of. He’d sounded like a child– or a woman. “Blonde?” He repeated, just testing his voice, making sure he’d heard what he thought he heard, and once more he heard a distinctly woman’s voice say the word. He felt a surge of throbbing in his chest, and put his hand gingerly on the puffy, soft tissue. When his fingers brushed his swollen

nipple, he felt a surge of pleasure as his nipple grew hard, “What’s going on?” He said out loud, testing that voice. He tried to find a lower place and said, “What’s going on?” Again, but as much as he didn’t want to face it, he just sounded like a woman doing an impression of a man— and not a very good one.

Don’t think about it. Focus on work. He turned back to his computer, intent on focusing, getting stuff done, but he couldn’t help it. After a couple minutes, he found himself once again gazing at himself in his hand mirror, fussing with his hair. “Blonde?”

Maybe he’d ask Vanya what she thought. And Sam and Dan. Changing hair color was a huge and important decision. It could change his whole life. Who knew what the blonde ramifications might be? Would people think he was dumb? He’d be foolish not to ask for advice.

That afternoon when the three of them gathered for lunch— Sam and Dan had gotten over their initial resentment over him intruding on their lunch duo— he waited for a pause in the conversation and then said, “Can I ask you guys for a little advice?” He now sounded just like them, though his voice was maybe a little higher.

Nick? Asking for advice?

“Sure,” Samantha said. *I hope it’s about boys.*

“Well,” and he fussed nervously with his hair. He took a deep breath. Better to just come right out with it. “I’m thinking about going blonde?”

Yes, Danielle and Samantha exchanged a glance of amusement.

“Absolutely,” Samantha said.

“Go for it,” Danielle added. “Yes.”

“Seriously?”

“You’d make a perfect blonde,” Danielle said.

“And you’ll sell way more soda,” Samantha assured him.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Nick said. He did not want them to know he was really thinking about doing it because of Giselle’s comment. “Thanks, guys.”

Nick cleaned up after himself, also taking care of Samantha and Danielle’s now empty containers. “Okay. I’m going to get back to putting together the new marketing stuff. Bye, guys.”

“Bye,” Samantha and Danielle answered in unison.

“Wow,” Danielle said. “I guess we’ve been promoted to guy now.”

“I feel like an actual dude. Do you think he’ll do it?”

“I know he will. And now he’ll have to worry about his roots, getting touch-ups. It’s too perfect.’

“You’re really enjoying this.”

“Like you aren’t.”

“Did you notice he’s starting to tent a little?”

“He’s getting his own pair of little boobies.”

“We really need to get him a training bra.”

Chapter Eight

Nick now wanted to be blonde. He needed to be blonde. Giselle wanted him to be a blonde. He wanted to please her. It was as simple as going to the salon and saying, “make me blonde.” It was simple, but it wasn’t easy. He felt being a blonde would make him a whole new person, and how would people react, and what if he didn’t like it? Blondes. The jokes was always that they were dumb. Would people think he was dumb? Plus, who knew there were so many varieties of blonde? He thought, paging through his “blonde looks” folder. There was platinum, medium golden, strawberry, pink— that was just pink, why would they call it blonde?-- ash, dirty, medium ash? The list was endless, and then he had to think about whether he wanted highlights and, if so, what color or colors. Fussing over the decision for hours, Nick finally tossed his smart pad aside in despair. He couldn’t make up his mind, so he decided he would do what every red-blooded male did when got his hair dyed: he would ask his stylist to decide for him.

Neurotic, insecure, worried, Nick made an appointment at Baba Yaga. He wouldn’t even tell the girl what for in case he changed his mind, and she didn’t seem to mind. When he got to his salon, he almost turned and left. He was so nervous, but as he stood there at the door, it opened and Vanya stood there, smiling. “Come in!” She said.

“Oh, hi,” Nick said, Vanya drawing him in. As he entered, he instantly relaxed. He’d been so wrong about this place, he thought, as he remembered how it had once made his skin crawl. It had such a warm, nurturing vibe. He found himself sitting, smock around his neck, all the girls gathered around.

“Relax,” Vanya said, rotating the chair so that it faced away from the mirror. “Let us take care of you.”

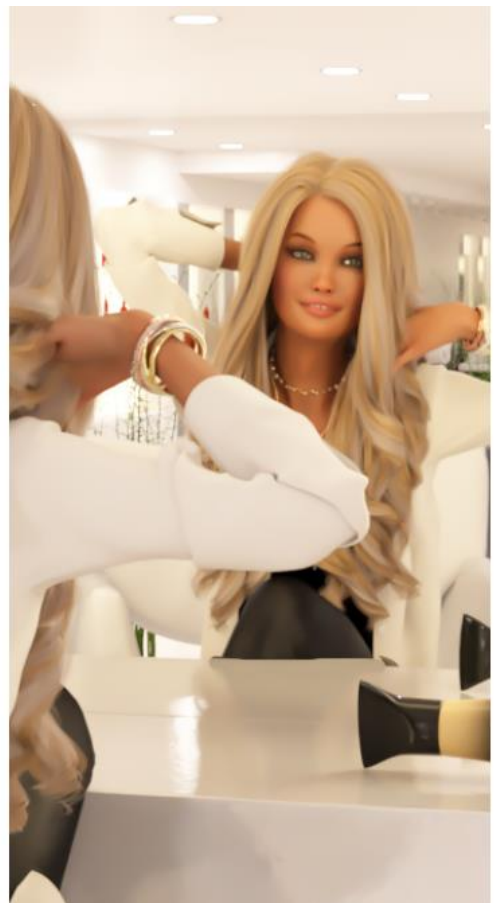
“But you don’t even know why I’m here,” Nick said.

“I know,” Vanya said, patting his hand. “Vanya knows before you do. Natasha?”

Natasha stepped into view, smiling down at Nick. “Honey blonde,” she said. “And big.”

“Honey,” Nick mumbled as he drifted off. Yes. It just felt right, like he’d always been a honey blonde, just waiting for the right moment to show his true blonde self to the world.

Nick snapped awake sometime later, he had no idea how much time had passed, as the chair spun, and when he saw himself in the mirror he could only whisper, “Oh, my god” and he dug his hands into his shiny new locks. He looked like a woman, with a definite pretty, sweet, dumb blonde vibe. For a moment, he felt sick. How could he have thought he wanted this? He was all man and-- His hair sparkled— just like his jewelry. He loved shiny things. And there was sooo much hair now. Other women would be so jealous, envious, in awe of his hair.



Nick mussed his hair some more. Vanya and the girls were all smiles and nods, waiting for Nick to announce his verdict. He met their eyes in the mirror and gushed, "I..... *LOVE* it."

Vanya hugged Nick from behind, and one of the girls came walking in with a cupcake, a single candle flickering. "For me?" Nick asked, drooling at the sight of all that creamy frosting but thinking it would all get straight to his waist.

"Your birthday." Natasha said, handing Nick an oversized white leather purse with a gold clasp and shoulder strap. "You're reborn today as a glamorous blonde beauty."

Nick took his new "bag" from her. It was so pretty and would look perfect with his outfit when he went out on sales calls. He started to cry. He didn't even care about his makeup. "You guys."

Vanya handed him a tissue. "You deserve it," she said, giving Natasha a wicked little wink. "Always remember, you deserve it."

Nick didn't pick up at all on the irony in her voice. He could be really quite naïve.

If Nick thought he had to spend a lot of time fussing with his hair before, it now threatened to become a second career. His golden mane now trailed all half way down his back, and it had gotten so thick and curly it was so much harder to manage. In addition to his wide tooth comb and brush, Vanya had explained that if he wanted to keep all that volume-- and did he ever-- he would need to use a "volumizer" each morning. Add another 15 minutes to my morning routine, he thought, though he was smiling and giggly as brushed out his hair that night.

He had also bought a whole new sack full of expensive new hair care products-- hair primer, hair perfecter, satin pillowcases because they don't absorb moisture and would be so much better for his hair, a cleansing scrub to keep his scalp healthy and a scalp massaging brush...

Oh, I had no idea how much effort went into long hair like this, Nick thought. Have women been working this hard all this time? Of course, he'd had girlfriends with a ton of what he'd considered junk hair products, and he'd always teased them about how ridiculous it was for them to buy so much useless crap. He'd thought they were just being airheads, but what he now realized is they had no choice if they wanted serious hair. He would need a bigger house just to have room to store all his hair and makeup gear, all his clothes and shoes.

His hand went to his chest. It was aching more than ever.

In the morning, he would finally discover why.

That night as he slept, his chest rounded and rose, two firm, perky breasts budding like roses. They reached an B cup and seemed to hesitate, trembling, like newborns looking around at a brand-new world, and then like a baby's first smile, they spread and rose to a pair of perfect C cups:





The next morning, Nick sat on the edge of his bed holding and squeezing his firm, heavy breasts. I've got got tits, Nick was thinking, struggling to accept what he was seeing as he stared down, his hair falling around his face like a curtain. Jugs. Bongos. Headlights. Melons. Fun pillows.

All the nicknames he and his guy friends had ever used to refer to a woman's breasts now flowed through his brain, as did memories of how fascinated he'd been when the girls back in school had begun to pop out their cupcakes. He had obsessed over getting girls to let him see them, touch them, and it had drawn him into spending hours at night looking at porn—naked women with those mysterious, fascinating tits, the big, meaty nipples, lacy bras... Looking at tits, playing with tits, they had been part of what defined him as a man.

Having tits is what defined a woman.

It was like Nick's whole world had turned upside down. He had breasts now, and he could feel his soft hands holding them, lifting them, his sensitive nipples growing hard, standing at attention, turning into hard little erasers pressing against his palms.

He had tits. Nick, the guy, had boobs. Puppies. Twins. He'd now possessed the the objects of his own obsession.

Nick might have spent hours staring at and exploring his girls, struggling with the existential identity crisis they had awoken in him, but he had to get ready for work, and there just wasn't time. Removing his hands from his girls, Nick stood, feeling his chest sway. It was so weird to feel his chest *move*. I'll just have to deal with it, he thought, tossing his hair back over his shoulders.

As Nick did his makeup, he noticed his face had softened—his chin was less square, nose smaller, eyes bigger. He supposed maybe his hormones were off somehow, which explained his new puppies, his face. He felt a little self-conscious—he looked even more like a woman, and a pretty one at that. What would people say? What would they think? He was a guy, and yet looking back in

him in the mirror as he put on his lipstick was what looked for all the world like a girl.

When he dressed, he decided didn't need a tank top under his over-sized blouse anymore. He didn't even really think about it, but he'd seen a picture in a fashion magazine of woman dressed like that, and she'd looked so sexy. Giselle would like it. He was sure. That's all that really mattered.



Samantha almost screamed with joy when the busty blonde Nick came sashaying into the office. The crescents of his newly blossomed breasts were visible, jiggling slightly with each step. Plus— that hair! Nick looked almost like a Barbie doll with all that blonde shimmering around his face, bouncing as he walked in and took his seat, slipping his purse off his shoulder.

Danielle and Samantha couldn't help but stare, first at all of that hair, both of them thinking that must be so much work. And then, dropping down to take in those breasts.

"I know?" Nick said, turning slightly to the side so they could appreciate his bust. "I really don't know what happened."

Samantha half regretted never getting around to buying that bra to gift Nick on the day he blossomed, but on the other hand she fairly loved the idea of him going around braless like some hip, trendy cosmopolitan woman.

"I woke up this morning and I had these puppies," Nick said.

"Well, they look great," Danielle said.

"Guys aren't supposed to have jugs," Nick said, wanting to be re-assured.

"But, if you have to have them, at least you have an awesome rack," Samantha said.

"Really, you have a really great breasts," Danielle said. Both women were loving the role reversal.

"So perky," Samantha said.

All the attention to his amazing yet should be shameful new breasts made Nick uneasy. Are they harassing me? Are they really happy for me? He was so insecure anymore. Unsure how to react, he smiled. It was his default expression. Eager to draw their attention to his fabulous hair, he dramatically swept it back, shook his head, his hair swirling around his head.

“Your hair has so much bounce,” Samantha said. “You make such a perfect blonde.”

Such a perfect blonde? Thinking of all the stereotypes of blondes being ditzy airheads, once more Nick wasn't sure if he was being harassed, teased, complemented. He just smiled through his confusion. I mean, these were his friends, right? His partners? Or, he wondered, were they frenemies?

I'm just being overly sensitive, he decided, once more hiding his insecurities behind a big smile.

Nick couldn't focus on work that morning. It wasn't just his energy starved brain. He couldn't stop thinking about Giselle. Finally, checking and double checking himself in the mirror, fussing over his hair and makeup, he decided he would just go see her. He'd made up an excuse on the way, maybe some more thoughts on her awesome game. “Sam? Dan?” He called out in his high voice as he left. “I'll be back in a jif.”

“Okay, blondie!” Samantha answered.

Blondie? Nick's insecurities returned. He was almost sure she was mocking him.

Nick walked into Giselle's office. Her team all had their heads down, intensely coding. Nick twisted his bracelets, walked into Giselle's office. “Hi!” He said, but before he could even start to offer his excuses for the visit, Giselle looked up and took him in, her eyes instantly hot and hard as she enjoyed the sight of his epic blonde mane, his firm young breasts.

“Hey, gorgeous,” she said, getting up, grabbing Nick's shirt and pulling him in for a force of nature kiss that left him weak in the knees. She ran a hand through his hair, letting it trail down his neck and then gave his breast a little squeeze. It was the first time anyone had touched his chest, and the fact that it was Giselle sent tremors through Nick's body. His cheeks grew hot.

“Didn't I tell you you'd look fucking awesome as a blonde?” Giselle said.

“So, you like it?” Nick said.

“I love it.” She kissed him again, this time putting both hands on his ass and giving it a firm squeeze as she did so. Then, when the kiss finished, she nuzzled his ear, whispering, “You’re the hottest bitch in this place.”

Nick giggled and tugged on his hoop. He trembled with excitement and need, hoping Giselle was about to bend him over on her desk and take him, but instead she suddenly cooled. “Fucking hot as hell, babe, but I actually have a lot of work to do.” She thumbed toward the door. “I’ll text you later.”

Nick hid his disappointment behind a bright smile. “Kay,” he said, exiting, his mind awirl with neurotic confusion. He just couldn’t figure out what was going on between him and Giselle. It was making him crazy.

Chapter Nine

Nick started going out to make his sales calls. He had this new blonde confidence that made him feel unstoppable, and, indeed, he started making sales right away, business taking off. Owners of food trucks, bodegas, restaurants, they loved the idea of being able to offer customers a unique product, something they could only buy at their locations. And the profit margins were sweet. Everyone just assumed Nick was a woman, and he couldn't blame them. Feeling that starting every meeting by explaining he was actually a guy would not help him move product, Nick just accepted that the world saw him as a female, and he quickly became okay with that. He was killing it, selling soda, and his money problems going away. Nick was far more successful as a woman than he'd ever been as a man, even if he did worry all the time now.

Of course, it helped that Nick had stuck to his no bra look. It couldn't be denied that a glimpse of those milky crescents was melting the minds of his male clients, and his gorgeous blonde hair and sexy voice helped seal the deal. Nick learned to be flirty and fun. Much to his relief, no one tried anything gross, but he'd found that a giggle, a smile and a toss of his gorgeous blonde hair often turned a 'I'll think about it' into a "why not?"

He was equally successful with women of all orientations. They were all in awe of his hair, how put together he was, and stereotype or no, he was able to bond with them, sharing hair styling tips, talking about makeup, the challenges of being a woman in a still male-orientated business world. Soon, Sam Dan and Nikki found themselves running a booming business, their biggest challenge keeping up with the flurry of new orders. Sam was going out of her mind managing the logistics, and Dan felt buried under all the paperwork. As they took

the city by storm, there were articles in the Wall Street Journal, the Post, the Times about this insanely successful new business. Sam and Dan were always portrayed as the brains behind the operation, while Nikki was their “super salesgirl.”

Nikki should have been happy, but he still didn't feel fulfilled. There was



something missing from his life: a serious relationship. Things with Giselle stayed confusing. She'd ignore him for days. Then, he'd get a text at 9:30: Come over. Ugh. He was already in his pajamas, hair up, face scrubbed clean of makeup. How could she be so inconsiderate? But, Nikki would get up, and spend the next hour fussing over his hair, doing his makeup. Giselle always said she didn't care, that he looked great without it. Yeah, right. She'd never even seen him without it since they started hooking up, and besides, that's what

they all said. No one ever meant it.

Giselle liked him to be ultra-feminine, so that meant a lacy, push up bra, squirming into a little black dress, picking out his jewelry and heels. It was so much work! And then it was always the same after she'd fucked his brains out— a slap on the ass and a goodnight kiss. Then, of course, he had to go through his whole getting ready for bed ritual again, taking off his makeup, letting his hair down, brushing it out— it took forever. But time and again, when he got that late night booty call, Nikki just couldn't find it within himself to say no.

Nikki found himself pouring out his soul to Dan and Sam. “I know she cares for me,” he insisted, “and she’s so busy with her business and all. She told me once things calm down?”

He'll understand what you go through, Danielle remembered Vanya saying as she listened to Nikki sounding like every young cis woman in New York. The guys in New York were notorious for their inability to commit, and so, it turned out, were a lot of the women. “Nikki,” she said, covering his hand with her own. “I think you’re Giselle’s fuck buddy.”

“Totally,” Samantha agreed, actually sympathizing with Nick. She’d been trapped in the same kind of relationship.

“Fuck buddy?” Nikki didn’t want to believe it. Ideally, fuck buddies were in agreement that they only wanted to fuck and there were no emotional attachments. “No, she told me...”

“I know it’s hard to hear, but she’s just keeping you around for sex.”

“I don’t think she’d do that to me.”

Poor girl, Danielle thought. She’d been there, herself. It was so hard to believe someone you cared about would treat you that way. Nikki really was getting the whole female experience. “Then here’s what you need to do. Put it on the line. Tell her you want a relationship.”

“Your needs matter, too.” Samantha said.

“And if she says no?”

“You have to cut her off.”

Nikki wasn't sure if he could do that, but Sam and Dan wouldn't let him off the hook. They were on him constantly now to “have that conversation” and it was only when they bullied him into it that he finally found the nerve to tell Giselle how he felt. He'd texted her a couple times asking to meet for coffee, but she's always been too busy, babe. So, the next time she texted him for a booty call, he decided the time had come to put his foot down.

He showed up at Giselle's wearing jeans and a t-shirt, clean scrubbed and his hair in a no-nonsense high bun. He could see the look of resignation in her eyes. “Oh, boy,” she said, bracing herself for the onslaught of drama.

Nikki gathered all his nerve and blonde confidence. He was a gorgeous, successful young woman, and Giselle should count herself lucky to even have a chance with him! They didn't sit. Nikki took up a position in front of Giselle, crossed his arms and said, “I'm going to put it all out there.”

“Shoot,” Giselle said, thinking, *bitches*. She'd been through this a dozen times with clingy girls like Nikki.

“I've been your girlfriend for over six months—”

“Girlfriend?” Giselle said. “Hold on. You're not my girlfriend. We're just fucking.”

“What?” Nikki said. “But, I've gone to dinner parties with you, and—”

“I just needed some arm candy,” Giselle said. She learned it was good to just shut this shit down. “Look, you're a hot girl and a good fuck, but I don't want to marry you.”

“But you said you cared.”

“You know,” Giselle said, not in the mood for an hour-long telenovela drama with this crazy chick, “this isn't working for me. We had some fun.” She opened the door. “But it's over.”

Nikki cried all the way home, then curled up into bed and ugly cried himself to sleep.



Chapter 10

Nikki decided to make a fuss over his big day. After checking with Vanya first to make sure it was okay with her, he ordered flowers, balloons, catering. He scheduled professional photographers to capture his special day. Thank goodness sales had picked up and he had a little money now! He sent GIF invitations to Sam and Dan, and then he just had to order some old-fashioned paper ones on off-white paper with gold lettering. He was so excited. He even invited a bunch of the new girls he'd met, some favored clients. Everyone was used to the idea of his magical changes, and he just wanted everyone to be there when he became a woman, fully and true.

Oh! And he would need a new dress, heels, maybe a purse and some special jewelry. The days leading up to his change party were a frenzy of anxiety and worry as he shopped relentlessly. He fussed and fussed. There were so many *almost* perfect dresses. Almost wasn't good enough. Nikki needed the perfect dress, and he found himself crying as his special day approached. He couldn't settle on the right dress. He must be perfect. Everything had to be perfect and he couldn't— Wait. Then, there it was. Omigod. Yes. Yes. It was like that dress had been his soulmate. Like he'd been waiting all his life for it to appear.

Nikki clapped and giggled. It was like winning the Oscars.

After a momentary release, Nikki's anxiety, of course, only came back stronger. He was so worried about his hair and makeup. Of course, for such a special occasion, he made an appointment at Baba Yaga for the morning of, but what if something happened? What if his hair was ruined?

And what if all this worrying damaged his skin? He needed to glow.

Nikki switched from coffee to chamomile tea, sipped a special herbal tea at night before bed to help him sleep. Took coconut oil and biotin supplements. There was just so much to worry about as a girl.

He had his whole outfit delivered to Baba Yaga. He would change there. So, the morning of he put on a peach track suit and a pair of white sneakers. He fixed his hair and checked it twice, switched his purse three times to find one that looked just right with this outfit. Nikki wouldn't leave the house unless everything was on point. Other girls could be so judgmental, and even though he was just walking to the salon, he couldn't stand the thought of any other women looking down at him as— shabby.

Vanya greeted Nikki with a hug and a smile when he showed up for his make-over and blow out. "How do you feel?" She asked as she led him by the hand to the salon chair.

"Terrified," Nikki admitted. "I just want everything to be perfect! My friends will all be here, and there will be pictures and..." He started to hyperventilate.

"Relax, sweetie," Vanya said, seating him, then massaging his shoulders. "Mama Vanya and her girls are going to take good care of you."

The sound of Mama Vanya's voice was so soothing, her hands working the tension out of his shoulders, Nikki sighed. This salon? It was just so special. He couldn't imagine what his life would be like without it. It was like— heaven.

Once more, Vanya and her team did not disappoint, and when Nikki looked in the mirror after they'd finished, he squealed. "You are a magician."

"Sorcerous," Vanya corrected, "and it's easy to work with a girl who has such a perfect face."

Nikki giggled.

The caterers had arrived and were setting up, the balloons and flowers had been delivered, crowding the room with pretty. And, almost just right? Nikki almost bit his nail, but pulled his hand away at the last second. His nails were perfect, and he didn't want to risk ruining them, but he couldn't resist the urge to fuss over things. "Maybe those flowers over there, and more balloons on that—"

“Go. Change,” Vanya said, putting her hand on the small of Nikki’s back and steering him away. “Mama Vanya will take care of everything.”

“But, um...”

“There’s no need for you to fuss,” Mama Vanya said, amused and pleased. “You know I have perfect taste. I always take care of you.”

“Thank you, thank you,” Nikki said, finally able to just let it go. I mean, if she couldn’t trust Mama Vanya, who could she trust?”

Danielle, Samantha and all the guests arrived. The room filled with small talk, idle chatter. Vanya pulled Danielle aside. “Did I not tell you Nick would come to understand what a woman goes through?”

“You did,” Danielle said. “But I never expected it to go this far. Nikki is more feminine than I’ll ever be now, and he fusses over his— everything.” Danielle frowned. “I still wonder if maybe it was too much?”

“And yet?”

“And yet... I like Nikki better than I ever liked Nick, and I think he’s better off like this— we all are. I mean, that girl can sell some shit. Maybe I’m just rationalizing because he doesn’t steal my yogurt anymore.”

“Nick was just another underachieving, entitled and insensitive male. Nikki is a light in this world! People feel happy just to see her pretty smile! Do not feel conflicted. Good work has been done.”

Nikki finally made her big entrance. Everyone stopped and stared. His dress, his hair and makeup? It was all on point. He’d never looked prettier, and he was so happy as he made his rounds, greeting everyone with hugs and giggles and air kisses.

“It’s time,” Vanya said, taking him by the hand and leading him to a private room. It would be unladylike for him to let everyone watch as he got his vagina, of course. As he was about to pass through the door, he looked over his shoulder and smiled, almost wistfully, then waved and disappeared.

When Nikki emerged after her final transformation, everyone clapped. Camera flashed. Blushing, Nikki did a ballet bow, then ran to Danielle and Samantha and gathered them in for a group hug. “I’m a girl!” She said, struggling to keep from crying tears of joy, failing, her mascara running down her cheeks. “My makeup!”

“It’s okay,” Samantha said. “You even look pretty when you cry.”

Epilogue

“I have to get to the salon,” Nikki said, plucking at a strand of her long, golden hair.

“Split ends?” Danielle asked.

“Hate,” Samatha added.

“Yes.” Nikki said, allowing herself a rare frown. “Plus, I am so overdue to have my nails done. They are atrocious.” He held up his hands, showing off what looked to Sam and Dan like perfect nails.

Samantha and Danielle exchanged an amused glance. They were both still enjoying seeing Nick obsess about everything— just like a girl. Well, he was a girl.

“It’s just so much work,” Nikki went on, fishing some hand cream out of her purse and rubbing it on her hands. “And my boyfriend doesn’t even notice! Men have no idea.”

No, they certainly don’t, Danielle thought. But now you sure do.

The End

