



Fuss!

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 cream 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 shoed 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, shouting, “my hair!”

“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.

“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. 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 Pinterplace 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,” he 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.