

TITS for TATES



A PAIGE TURNER PRODUCTION

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~1~

Distrust and Estates

"Tonight, at 8pm, the season premiere of *The Tates!* Two brothers, one inheritance, and a house full of memories they'd both rather forget. Watch what happens when Alex, the bitter ad executive with two ex-wives bleeding him dry-

"Brad. Cut it out."

"-moves in with Brad, the award-winning journalist turned blogger-

"Brad! Stop. Narrating. Our. Lives."

Brad Tate dropped the announcer voice. "I'm just setting the scene."

"This is real life, Brad. Real people. Real problems. Not a goddamn sitcom." Alex Tate stood in the doorway of their late parents' living room wearing what an advertising creative director probably shouldn't wear to work: a wrinkled dress shirt that had given up somewhere around the third wearing, slacks that were fighting a losing battle against his midsection, and the general air of someone who'd stopped trying to impress clients around the same time his second marriage ended.

"We're literally moving in together after our parents died," Brad said, gesturing with what might have once been a protein bar but was now mostly wrapper. "That's the setup of every roommate sitcom ever made. I'm Oscar, you're Felix—"

"It's not *The Odd Couple*."

"It's exactly *The Odd Couple*. You're uptight, I'm relaxed. You're neurotic, I'm—"

"Slovenly? Sedentary? Stuck rewatching old sitcoms to avoid thinking about Hannah?"

Brad winced. That one hit a little close. He'd been "working on his blog" for three years now, ever since the Tribune had laid him off along with half the newsroom. The blog was about classic sitcoms and their cultural impact. It had seventeen regular readers.

"See? You're already doing the Felix thing." Brad settled onto the couch, which exhaled a small cloud of dust and defeat. "Give it two weeks and you'll be following me around with a vacuum cleaner."

"In two weeks, we'll have sold this place and gone our separate ways."

"Then why are you moving in?"

"Because you're moving in. I'm not letting you have the house."

"I don't want the house."

"Good. Neither do I."

"Then why—"

"Because you can't have it."

They stared at each other across the living room, which looked less like a home and more like a museum dedicated to the 1970s—specifically, the parts of the 1970s that even the 1970s were embarrassed about. Wood paneling the color of depression. Avocado green shag carpeting that had probably been white once,

in theory. Furniture in earth tones that suggested the earth in question had given up and died. And there, hanging near the doorway like a textile nightmare, was an actual macramé owl. Their mother had loved that owl. Their mother had been wrong about the owl.

Brad swept his arm around the room with the enthusiasm of a game show host revealing a booby prize. "Look at this place! It's like walking onto a sitcom set. *Three's Company* meets *The Brady Bunch* meets a thrift store having an existential crisis."

"Can you be serious for five minutes?"

"I tried that once. Didn't care for it."

The truth was grimmer than Brad's admission suggested, but only slightly.

The truth was that since Hannah died, Brad had been living inside classic sitcoms the way some people lived inside bottles. The plots were predictable. The conflicts resolved cleanly. Nobody got cancer. And if they did, it was a "very special episode" that ended with a hug and a lesson learned, not eighteen months of watching someone disappear.

Unfortunately, real life didn't care about Brad's coping mechanisms. Real life had bills and inheritance law and a brother he could barely tolerate.

Neither brother wanted to move in with the other. But neither of them could afford to buy out the other's fifty percent share.

Alex's salary as a creative director at McMann & Tate would have been plenty—he was good at his job, even if he'd stopped caring about looking the part—but he was hemorrhaging money in alimony. Two ex-wives, two monthly checks, both of them living off his income like he was running a charity for divorced women.

He'd tried everything to minimize the payments. Better lawyers. Loopholes. Arguments about how they were perfectly

capable of supporting themselves if they just got off their asses and got jobs instead of depending on him to maintain their "accustomed lifestyle." But family court had disagreed.

"They could support themselves if they wanted to," he'd told his second divorce lawyer. "They're just lazy. They got comfortable depending on me, and now I'm stuck paying for it."

The lawyer had made a note and said nothing.

Brad made decent money too—or he had, back when newspapers existed as going concerns rather than elaborate suicide notes to journalism. Now he made whatever you could make from a blog with seventeen readers and the occasional freelance piece about "10 Classic Sitcoms That Predicted Modern Life" that paid forty-seven dollars and required two rounds of edits.

He'd been coasting for three years, telling himself he was "building his brand" and "establishing his voice" when really he was watching *Cheers* and trying not to think about how Hannah used to make fun of his sitcom obsession right up until the cancer made it impossible for her to make fun of anything.

The real estate market was, to use the technical term, dogshit. The house needed work. The roof leaked. The electrical was from an era when people thought asbestos was a feature. And something was wrong with the foundation that made contractors suck air through their teeth before saying "well, it's not technically condemned."

They were stuck with each other. In this house. In 1974, apparently, based on the décor.

"I'll take the master bedroom," Alex announced, as if he'd just claimed the last seat on a lifeboat.

"Fine. I'll take the guest room." Brad didn't mention that the guest room was closer to the kitchen and the good TV. Let Alex have his victory.

"And so begins the cohabitation phase of our story. Two brothers, divided by rivalry, united by—"

"Stop narrating," Alex muttered as he carried a box past Brad three days later. Move-in day was already off to a rocky start.

"You know," Brad said, "you're getting that vein in your forehead. The one you always get when you're about to lecture me."

Alex shifted his box. "At least I'm not the one who's been wearing the same *Cheers* t-shirt for three days."

"There it is. Also, it's a different *Cheers* t-shirt. I have seven of them. It's called a wardrobe system."

"It's called you haven't done laundry since 2022."

"That's—" Brad paused. "Actually that might be accurate."

They stood in the hallway, boxes in arms, falling into the old tit-for-tat rhythm they'd established somewhere around age eight and never quite broken. Brad takes a shot, Alex fires back, Brad counters, Alex responds. The bickering was almost comfortable. Familiar. Like putting on an old jacket that didn't fit anymore but you couldn't quite throw away.

"We're doing it again," Alex said after a moment.

"Doing what?"

"The thing. The brother thing. Where we snipe at each other until one of us says something that actually hurts and then we don't talk for six months."

Brad shifted his box. "We made it, what, ten minutes this time?"

"New record."

"Maybe we need rules," Brad said. "Structure. A framework to prevent the inevitable spiral into fratricide."

They stood there for another moment, both knowing this was a terrible idea, both knowing they were going to do it anyway.

"Fine," Alex said. "I'll find a roommate agreement. Something official. Legal."

"Something that will keep us from killing each other."

"Or at least delay it until after we sell the house."

Alex pulled out his phone and started scrolling. "Here. Same site I got my prenups from. Very thorough."

"How'd those work out for you?"

"The prenups worked fine. The marriages were the problem." Alex kept scrolling. "I got screwed anyway, but at least the prenups limited the damage."

"That's the spirit. Real romantic."

"Romance is for people who haven't been divorced twice." Alex found what he was looking for and shoved his phone at Brad. "Just sign it."

The screen showed a PDF titled "Roommate Dispute Resolution Agreement" with a clipart image of two people shaking hands in front of a house. Forty-seven pages of dense legal text in what appeared to be 8-point font, single-spaced, the kind of document designed to make your eyes glaze over somewhere around paragraph two.

Brad scrolled through it for approximately thirty seconds-long enough to see words like "heretofore" and "party of the first part" and "remediation procedures"-before his brain declared bankruptcy and he scrawled his signature with his finger.

"There. Happy?"

Alex took the phone back, added his own signature without reading any more than Brad had, and hit submit. "Ecstatic. Now we have rules. Structure. A framework for cohabitation."

"We have a binding agreement neither of us read."

"Welcome to adulthood."

The contract activated with no fanfare. No notification. No acknowledgment. Just a subtle shift in the air, like the house had been holding its breath and finally exhaled.

Or maybe that was just the foundation settling. Hard to tell with a house this old.

The brothers actually made it a week without getting into an argument. Mostly by avoiding each other completely. Different meal times. Different bathroom schedules. Careful choreography to minimize contact. It almost worked.

Then Louise Walsh showed up.

The doorbell rang at 6:47pm. Brad and Alex both looked up from their respective corners of the common room-Brad on the couch with his laptop open to his blog (current post: "Why *Three's Company* Secretly Explained Late-Stage Capitalism," current readers: zero), Alex at the dining room table with storyboards for tomorrow's pitch meeting spread out.

They looked at the door. Then at each other.

"You get it," Alex said.

"It's your house too."

"I'm busy."

"I'm also busy."

"You're blogging. That's not busy. That's procrastination with a URL."

Before Brad could respond with something cutting about advertising being propaganda for capitalism, the door opened.

Louise Walsh didn't wait for invitations. She never had, not in the thirty years she'd lived next door and appointed herself the neighborhood's unofficial mayor, conscience, and gossip clearinghouse. She walked in carrying a casserole dish covered in aluminum foil, her short gray hair perfectly curled.

At sixty-something, she had the energy of someone half her age and the opinions of someone who'd seen everything twice and had thoughts.

"Boys!" She set the casserole on the coffee table without asking, right on top of the TV Guide from 1987 that their father had kept for reasons known only to him and possibly God. "I saw the cars and knew you'd moved in! I've been dying to come over but I didn't want to intrude too soon."

Brad and Alex stared in silence, neither quite sure how to respond to this cheerful invasion.

Louise surveyed the room with the keen eye of someone conducting a home inspection. "Now, I know you boys are probably eating terribly-bachelors always do-so I made you my famous tuna casserole."

Brad looked at the casserole with barely concealed horror. He could see chunks of something gray suspended in beige sauce, topped with potato chips that had gone soggy from condensation. It looked like something that had died and then been reanimated through dark magic.

"Brad, honey-how's the writing going? Are you working on anything?"

Brad felt his face flush. "I'm working on my blog. It's about-

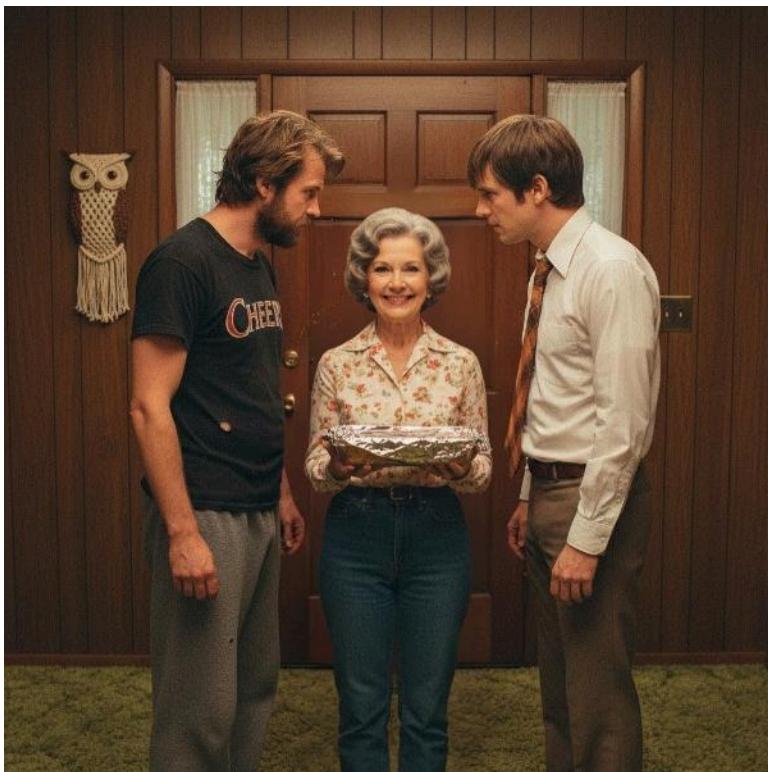
"He doesn't work," Alex cut in, the words coming out sharper than he probably intended. A week of careful silence had left him with no filter. "He just sits on the couch all day watching TV. He doesn't even exercise. Just sits there."

Brad's jaw tightened. "At least I'm not-

"And you, Alex," Louise pivoted, "you look so stressed. All those lines in your face. Are you taking care of yourself?"

"He works himself to death," Brad said, the resentment pouring out in retaliation. "He's always working. Never relaxes.

Never stops. It's like he's trying to have a heart attack by forty-six."



They glared at each other across Louise's perfectly curled head. She looked between them, smiled pleasantly, and headed for the door.

"You boys take care now. I'll check in again soon."

She left before either of them could respond, pulling the door shut behind her with a decisive click that somehow sounded like judgment. Alex picked up the casserole dish like it might explode and headed toward the kitchen, already trying to figure out what to do with it.

Brad stared at the closed door for a long moment. "Classic Nosy Neighbor trope. She's going to insert herself into our lives at

regular intervals and offer unsolicited advice that somehow always turns out to be plot-relevant. Mrs. Kravitz from Bewitched. Wilson from Home Improvement. Kimmy Gibbler from Full House."

"She's just a person, Brad!" Alex shouted from the kitchen.

Brad's eyes opened at six the next morning.

This was wrong on multiple levels. Brad didn't wake up at 6:00am. Brad didn't wake up before noon if he could help it. His entire lifestyle for the past three years had been built around the principle that morning people were suspiciously cheerful and probably up to something.

But his eyes opened at 6:00am and his body felt restless. Like it wanted to do something. Like it expected him to move.

Alex's voice from the night before echoed in his head: *He doesn't even exercise. Just sits there.*

Brad lay in bed staring at the ceiling, thinking about his routine. Wake up late. Check his blog stats (depressing). Watch *Cheers*. Eat something. Watch *The Odd Couple*. Work a bit more. Watch *Three's Company*. Go to bed. Repeat.

He'd been doing it for three years. Since Hannah died. Since the Tribune laid him off. Since the world stopped making sense and the only thing that felt manageable was the couch and the TV and the same jokes he'd heard a thousand times.

Brad got up. This felt wrong, like he was betraying some fundamental principle. He dug through his unpacked boxes until he found a pair old sneakers. They felt weird. He couldn't remember the last time he'd worn actual shoes.

He went outside.

The morning air was cool and aggressively cheerful. Birds were singing like they had something to prove. The sun was doing that thing where it painted the sky in pastels, which felt

unnecessary and show-offy. Brad started walking. Not running-he wasn't that ambitious yet-but a brisk walk around the block.

His legs protested. His lungs burned. His body filed several formal complaints about this sudden and unwelcome development in their relationship.

But by the time he got back to the house twenty minutes later, sweating and out of breath and slightly dizzy, he felt something he hadn't felt in three years.

Awake.

He stood in the driveway, hands on his knees, breathing hard. That wasn't so bad, he thought. Maybe I could do that again tomorrow. Maybe this is just me making a healthy choice. Maybe Alex is right and I have been sitting around too much.

That afternoon, he googled "gyms near me" and found a 24-hour fitness place three blocks away. Month-to-month membership, no contract, lots of machines he didn't know how to use. He signed up online, telling himself he probably wouldn't go more than once or twice, but at least it was something.

At least it was progress.

That same morning, Alex's alarm went off at 6:00am like it had every day for twenty years. He stared at it, finger hovering over the screen.

Brad's complaint echoed in his mind: *He's always working. Never relaxes.*

The Anderson campaign was behind schedule. The client was getting impatient. His boss had sent three emails yesterday marked URGENT in the subject line, which was his boss's way of saying "I'm panicking and now you get to panic too."

Alex should get up. Should shower. Should get to the office early to catch up.

He turned off the alarm and went back to sleep.

When he finally woke at 9:30am, he felt disoriented, like he'd overslept for an important meeting. But also... relaxed. Rested. He picked up his phone to check his work email-four new messages from his boss, two from the client, one from his assistant asking if he was okay-and found himself responding that he was taking a sick day.

"It can wait."

The thought felt foreign, like someone else had put it in his head. Alex didn't let things wait. Alex was the guy who answered emails at midnight. Who worked weekends. Who took his laptop on vacation except he never went on vacation because someone had to keep things running.

But today, he stayed home. Made coffee. Sat on the ugly orange couch his parents had owned since Nixon was president and read a book he'd been meaning to read for five years. When his phone rang with calls from work, he declined them. When emails came through marked URGENT, he skimmed them and decided they weren't actually urgent at all. Everything was urgent to his boss. Very little was actually urgent to reality.

By evening, he felt lighter. Less tense. Like someone had loosened a knot in his chest that he'd been carrying so long he'd forgotten it was there.

Maybe Brad had been right. Maybe he had been working too hard. Maybe this was just him making healthy choices. Maybe he was finally learning to relax.

Two days later, Alex opened the refrigerator looking for something to eat for breakfast and was immediately assaulted by a smell that suggested something had died, decomposed, and then continued its journey into states of matter that science hadn't yet named.

Five takeout containers sat on the top shelf in various states of decay. Some had been there since before their parents died. All were Brad's. Alex recognized the containers from the Chinese place two blocks over that Brad kept ordering from despite the fact that their Yelp reviews included phrases like "mild food poisoning" and "probably a front for something."

"Jesus Christ, Brad!" Alex yelled toward the bedroom. "There's rotting takeout containers everywhere. It's disgusting what you eat. This is fucking nasty!"

Brad appeared in the kitchen doorway looking annoyed at being interrupted. "What?"

"This!" Alex gestured at the open refrigerator like it was evidence of a crime. "How long has this shit been in here?"

"I don't know. A few days?"

"Try a few weeks. It's growing things. Things with fuzzy colors. I think one of them is developing sentience."

Brad's expression hardened. "Whatever! You need to stop being so uptight and controlling."

They glared at each other. Alex grabbed his wallet and his phone. "I'm going to work. Don't touch my stuff."

He left, slamming the door hard enough to make the macramé owl swing on its hook.

The next morning, Brad woke up early-his new routine apparently sticking despite his better judgment-and went for his walk. When he came back, sweaty and strangely energized, he opened the refrigerator to get water and saw the takeout containers still sitting there.

"It's disgusting what you eat." Alex's words echoed in his head.

As he stared at the containers, he realized Alex had been right. Brad had a collection of garbage scattered around the house.

Takeout containers on the coffee table from restaurants he couldn't remember ordering from. Pizza boxes stacked near the TV like a cardboard tower of shame. Empty protein bar wrappers stuffed between couch cushions where they'd formed a small civilization.

Brad spent the next hour cleaning. He cleaned out the refrigerator. Wiped down the counters. Threw away the mystery containers from the back of the pantry that predated their parents' death.

Then he went to the grocery store.

Brad grabbed things at random: chicken breasts, brown rice, bags of frozen vegetables that looked nutritious and vaguely punishing. Protein powder because the guy at the gym had mentioned it. A collection of supplements that promised various improvements to his life.

That evening, he spent two hours on YouTube learning how to meal prep. By the next afternoon, he had five days of portioned meals in tupperware containers, all lined up in the refrigerator in neat rows. Chicken and rice and broccoli. The same meal five times. It looked boring. It looked healthy. It looked like something a functional adult would do.

When Alex got home from work, he opened the fridge and stared.

"Did you... cook?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"Nothing. It's just... when did you learn to cook?"

"YouTube. Turns out there are tutorials for everything, including how to function like an adult."

Alex looked at the tupperware containers, all labeled with days of the week in Brad's handwriting. Then he noticed the disaster in the kitchen-every pot and pan they owned piled in the sink, chicken juice on the counter, rice scattered across the stove.

He felt his jaw tighten. He opened his mouth to say something about cleaning up after yourself, about how meal prep was great but maybe try not to destroy the kitchen in the process-

Brad's voice from earlier echoed in his head. *You need to stop being so uptight and controlling.*

Alex closed his mouth. Took a breath. "Looks good," he said instead, and walked to his room.

A week later, Alex arrived home with his arms full of shopping bags. He'd found himself compelled to put \$500 he definitely didn't have on his credit card after Brad had commented on him always wearing "the same wrinkled suits to work like a funeral director who's really bad at his job." He now had three new dress shirts in colors that weren't gray, two pairs of slacks that actually fit, a burgundy sweater the salesperson had insisted on, and even a leather jacket he'd probably never have the courage to wear.

He found Brad on the couch wearing blue basketball shorts and a sweatshirt in some kind of neon green that seemed designed to be visible from space-the result of Brad's own shopping trip after Alex had retorted that morning that Brad had only worn black and grey since Hannah died.

For once, Alex couldn't detect Brad's usual post-gym aroma. Over the last few days, Brad had developed a proper hygiene routine. Actual showers with soap. Deodorant. Cologne. The basics, really, but consistently. All because Alex had commented, post-run, that Brad "smelled like a gym locker."

In retaliation, Brad had told Alex his hair looked like he'd "cut it himself with safety scissors while drunk"-mostly accurate, except for the drunk part. This led to Alex scheduling an appointment with a stylist named Ramona who'd spent two hours transforming his self-inflicted disaster into something that

made him look, according to Derek, "like an actual human person."

"You look good," Brad said, eyeing the bags. "New clothes?"

"Yeah. You too. The color thing is... working."

"Thanks."

They blinked at each other for a long moment, not sure how to end a conversation that didn't involve petty insults. Alex finally turned and headed to his room to put away his purchases.

Brad watched him go, then turned to face a camera that wasn't there. "And so the Tate brothers discover that living together might not be so bad after all. They're helping each other. Growing. Becoming better men. Will this trend continue? Or will their old habits return? Find out next time, on *The Tates*."

~2~

Nailed It!

"Welcome back to *The Tate Brothers!* A lot can happen in a week. Alex and Brad have settled into what you might call a routine. They're polite. They're civil. They even have conversations that don't end in someone storming off. By Tate standards, this is basically a miracle. They're helping each other. Growing. Becoming better."

"Brad!" Alex's voice echoed from the bathroom, sharp and irritated. "Get in here!"

Brad found Alex standing at the sink, toothbrush in one hand, pointing at the counter with the other.

"Look at this," Alex said through toothpaste foam. "Just look at it."

Brad looked. Beard trimmings scattered across the white porcelain like evidence of a crime he'd committed and forgotten about.

This was the fifth day in a row. Maybe sixth. Brad had gotten obsessive about his grooming routine—which was good, better than the unwashed disaster he'd been before—but apparently cleaning up after himself hadn't been part of the upgrade

package. Alex had been fine letting things go, but his new relaxed attitude only went so far.

"You have GOT to stop leaving beard trimmings all over the bathroom sink every single day!"

"So clean them up if it bothers you!" Brad's voice came from his bedroom, muffled and unapologetic.

"It's YOUR mess!"

"It's not that bad. Want to know what is bad? The shower drain is clogged with your body hair again. Have you ever heard of manscaping?"

"What the hell is manscaping?"

"Exactly my point. You're like a Wookiee. A Wookiee who doesn't understand basic grooming."

They glared at each other. Alex spat toothpaste into the sink-right on top of the beard trimmings-and Brad retreated to finish getting ready for his second workout of the day. Both of them fuming over the other's failures.

The next morning, Brad went through his grooming routine-the routine that had become almost ritualistic in its precision. Shower, shampoo, condition, rinse, body wash, face wash, rinse, dry, moisturize, deodorant, cologne. He examined his face in the mirror and picked up his electric trimmer.

But as he looked at his reflection, he made a decision. He'd had the beard for so long. Why not shave it all off. Go smooth. Alex wouldn't complain about beard trimmings anymore.

He switched to a razor and carefully removed every trace of facial hair, working in neat strokes. When he finished and splashed cold water on his face, his skin felt smooth and perfect.

He ran his hand along his jaw, checking for spots he'd missed. Nothing. Perfectly smooth.

What Brad didn't notice-what he couldn't notice, because how could you notice something not happening-was that his facial hair had stopped growing. Completely. Permanently. The follicles had simply shut down, decided they were no longer needed, and gone dormant like some kind of biological retirement.

That evening, Alex stood in the shower thinking about his terrible day. The Anderson campaign was a disaster. The client wanted changes that made no sense. His boss was panicking. His coworker Derek had spent an hour trying to convince him that cryptocurrency mining using vintage computers was "the future" despite all evidence to the contrary.

He went through his routine-expensive shampoo, the kind Ramona had recommended. His new haircut was holding up. His new clothes fit properly. He'd even started getting compliments from coworkers again. It felt great.

After toweling off, Alex stood naked at the mirror and looked at himself.

"Manscaping?" he muttered. "Whatever Brad, I don't need manscaping."

And he was right. He looked at his chest, his arms, his legs-smooth. Completely hairless below his eyebrows. Nothing to manscape at all.

He didn't question it. Didn't wonder when it had happened or why. It just... was. He looked fine. Better than fine, actually. Clean. Streamlined.

Alex got dressed and went to bed, already thinking about tomorrow's client meeting, not giving his hairless body a second thought

The doorbell rang at 6:47pm, right in the middle of Brad's latest blog post about whether *Three's Company* was secretly about the housing crisis.

Brad got up from the couch and opened the door. He was wearing fitted compression shorts in electric blue and a tank top that actually showed he'd been working out-the new athletic wear he'd been living in ever since Alex had complained that his baggy gym clothes were "threatening to fall off your skinny ass and nobody wants to see that wardrobe malfunction." Brad had found himself ordering them online later that day without really thinking about it, and now they were all he wanted to wear.

Alex's coworker Derek stood at the door with his laptop bag and an expression that suggested he'd either discovered the meaning of life or was about to pitch an investment opportunity that would definitely not end well.

"Hey, is Alex home?"

Brad grinned. "Ah, the Wacky Coworker arrives. Right on schedule. Let me guess-some kind of scheme. Technology-based. Questionable legality. Definitely involving something that had its moment in the nineties."

Derek tried to look offended but his face was too honest. "Well, actually, I've been looking into authentication systems for collectibles using distributed ledgers-specifically vintage Beanie Babies as a proof of concept-"

Brad rolled his eyes. "There it is."

"No, seriously, hear me out-" Derek started his pitch right on the doorstep, hands gesturing wildly.

Brad waved him off. "Alex just got out of the shower. Have fun with your Beanie Baby Blockchain."

"That's not-actually, that's genius branding."

Brad walked back toward his bedroom. As soon as his door closed, he turned up his music. Loud. The kind of aggressive

death metal he'd been listening to since college-blast beats and guttural vocals and guitar riffs that sounded like murder.

In the living room, Derek winced at the sudden wall of sound. Alex emerged from the hallway in a bathrobe with a towel wrapped around his head like a turban.

But what Derek noticed first was how Alex moved. He glided across the living room and settled onto the couch with fluidity, adjusting his towel-turban without a single awkward movement. It was strange. Derek couldn't quite put his finger on why, but Alex seemed different.

Alex was different. Three days ago, he had rushed through this same room, catastrophically late for a meeting with the Anderson account. Briefcase in one hand, coffee in the other, and mind already at the office, running through the presentation he'd stayed up until 2am perfecting. In his rush, he'd crashed shin-first into the coffee table. With a one-in-a-million shot that happened only on TV, Alex's coffee had arced through the air and doused Brad's laptop. Brad had screamed about Alex being clumsy, always knocking into things. Alex had fired back about Brad's baggy gym clothes threatening a wardrobe malfunction.

Now, Alex moved like a dancer. And Brad was dressed in compression wear that left nothing to the imagination.

"Derek," Alex said. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to pitch you on something." Derek set his laptop on the coffee table and started pulling up spreadsheets. "Okay, so authentication and provenance in the collectibles market—"

He stopped mid-sentence as the music from Brad's room suddenly increased in volume. The bass thrummed through the walls. The vocals sounded like someone torturing a demon who deserved it.

"How do you live with that?" Derek asked, raising his voice.

Alex settled deeper into the couch. "What? Can't hear you over Brad's music!"

"How do you LIVE with that? Seriously, how are you not insane?"

Derek had a point. The music was oppressive, a wall of sound that made concentration impossible. Alex had been tolerating it for weeks now, telling himself it was fine, Brad could listen to whatever he wanted, they were both adults who respected each other's space.

But suddenly-with Derek here, asking the obvious question, forcing Alex to actually acknowledge how completely insane this was-he couldn't take it anymore.

"Your awful death metal is the worst!" Alex yelled as he stormed toward Brad's room, loud enough to be heard over the auditory assault. "Turn it down!"

The music decreased by approximately half a decibel. Brad's voice came from behind his door: "I was about to take a shower anyway!"

A moment later, Brad's door opened and he headed for the bathroom, shooting Alex a look that clearly communicated you're ruining my creative process as he passed.

Brad turned on the shower and immediately swore loud enough for both Alex and Derek to hear down the hallway.

"Dammit, Alex!" Brad's voice echoed from the bathroom. "You used up all the hot water! Stop taking such long showers!"

In the living room, Derek pretended not to sense the tension and launched into his full Beanie Baby pitch. Something about why this was definitely going to work despite the fact that his last three schemes had ended with the phrase "well, at least I learned something."

Alex tried to listen. He really did. But he kept thinking about Brad's complaint. *Stop taking such long showers.* Like it was Alex's

fault the hot water heater in this house was from 1983 and had the capacity of a teacup.

Derek was still talking. Alex nodded along, not really listening, thinking about hot water and shower schedules and why everything in this house felt like a fight waiting to happen.

The next morning, Brad woke at 6am sharp, his body clock now more reliable than any alarm. He got up, put on his running shoes, and grabbed his phone to queue up his running playlist.

He scrolled to his usual options-the death metal, the hardcore, the aggressive stuff that made his legs want to move.

But his finger kept scrolling. Past his saved playlists. Past his recently played. Past everything he'd been listening to for twenty years.

His finger stopped on something called "Today's Top Pop Hits."

He didn't remember adding this. He didn't listen to pop music. Pop music was for shopping malls and teenagers and people who didn't understand that music was supposed to mean something.

But his thumb hovered over it. And then, without quite deciding to, he clicked it.

Upbeat, bubbly pop music started playing through his earbuds. A woman's voice sang about love and summer over synthesizers and programmed drums. The kind of music Hannah used to listen to while cooking, that he'd made fun of until she threw a dish towel at his head.

Brad froze.

He'd hated this music yesterday. He'd hated it his entire adult life. He'd actively avoided stores that played it.

But now it sounded... good?

He tried to change it back. Opened his death metal playlist-hundreds of songs, thousands of hours. Clicked play.

The blast beats and screaming sounded wrong. Harsh. Grating. Like someone scraping metal against his eardrums on purpose. He grimaced and switched back to the pop music.

The cheerful melody resumed. It sounded perfect.

Brad stared at his phone. "What the fuck."

He went for his run anyway. The pop music played the whole time. He felt like the beats were carrying him along on his run. By the time he got home, he'd given up trying to fight it.

Brad arrived home sweating and confused, heading straight for the bathroom to shower. The door was locked.

"Alex? You in there?"

"Just-give me a few minutes!"

Brad checked his watch. He needed to get cleaned up. He smelled. "How long have you been in there?"

"I don't know, like... half an hour?"

Brad pressed his ear to the door. He could hear water splashing. Not the shower. And was that music? Soft music? And did he smell lavender?

"Are you taking a bath?"

A pause. "So what if I am?"

Brad blinked. Alex didn't take baths. Like any self-respecting adult man, Alex took showers.

"Just... how much longer?"

"I don't know. A while."

Brad went to the half-bath near the kitchen, splashed some water on his face, and tried not to think about how his brother was apparently spending his mornings in bubble baths while Brad's brain was being hijacked by Taylor Swift.

An hour later, the bathroom door opened and Alex emerged in a cloud of lavender-scented steam that made the living room smell like a spa. He was wearing that nice bathrobe and had the dazed, peaceful expression of someone who'd just spent two hours doing absolutely nothing productive.

Alex looked confused but happy. Like he couldn't quite figure out why he'd spent so much time in a bubble bath with scented candles and essential oils, but also didn't regret it.

"I'm listening to pop music," Brad said without preamble.

Alex blinked at him. "Okay?"

"I hate pop music. I've always hated pop music. I've made fun of people who listen to pop music. I wrote a blog post about how pop music represents the death of meaningful art."

"So turn it off."

"I can't." Brad held up his phone like it was evidence in a trial. "Everything else sounds wrong. Literally painful to listen to. My brain won't let me change it back."

Alex gracefully sat down on the other end of the couch, still damp and smelling like a Bath & Body Works had exploded. "What are you talking about?"

"And since when do you take bubble baths? With lavender? For two hours?"

They looked at each other across the couch.

Brad felt something click in his mind-a pattern he'd been seeing but refusing to acknowledge. But the pop music had pushed him over some kind of edge. This wasn't normal. This wasn't two roommates gradually influencing each other. This wasn't them "getting along better."

This was something else.

"This is like... okay, in sitcoms, there's always an episode where weird things happen because of some magical object. A

lamp, a painting, a mysterious ghost. And the characters don't realize it at first because the changes are gradual, but then—"

"Brad, real life doesn't work like sitcoms."

"But look at us! Every time we complain about each other, we change! Don't you see the pattern?"

"That's not how reality works. That's not how anything works."

"Then explain the pop music!" Brad stood up, started pacing, his journalist brain finally kicking in after weeks of dormancy. "Explain your bath! Explain why I'm going to the gym twice a day when three weeks ago I couldn't walk to the mailbox without getting winded! Explain why you're taking days off work when you used to answer emails at 2am!"

Alex opened his mouth, then closed it. He sat there in his expensive bathrobe he didn't remember buying, smelling like lavender, unable to explain why he'd just spent two hours in a bubble bath.

"Maybe we're just... listening to each other for once," Alex said, but his voice lacked conviction. "Maybe we're being good roommates. Good brothers."

"Since when are we good brothers? We bicker. We compete. We've been doing it since we were kids. And we don't suddenly both become completely different people because we're being nicer to each other. That's not how this works."

Brad kept pacing, his hands moving as he talked, falling into the pattern he used to use when he was working on a story. "Think about it. Really think. You said I sit around all day—I started going to the gym. I said you work too much—you took a personal day. You said my gym clothes were falling off—I bought fitted ones. I said your hair looked like shit—you got a professional haircut. Back and forth. Every single time. Every complaint leads to a change."

"That's coincidence. Correlation, not causation."

"You take bubble baths now, Alex. BUBBLE BATHS. You skip work. You're a completely different person than you were three weeks ago."

"Well-"

"And I'm an athlete now?" Brad continued, his voice rising. "I wear color-coordinated athleisure. I'm obsessed with protein powder and macros and whatever the hell a 'clean bulk' is. I'm not the same person either!"

They stared at each other across the living room. The pop music continued playing from Brad's phone. Something upbeat about summer and beaches and falling in love and everything being perfect forever.

The next morning, Brad sat at the kitchen table eating his precisely portioned breakfast: egg whites, turkey sausage, a protein shake mixed to exact specifications, a multivitamin.

He watched Alex make coffee, moving with that unconscious grace, navigating the kitchen like every movement was choreographed.

Alex raised his hand to his mouth and bit his thumbnail, gnawing at it absently while staring at the coffee maker. It was a habit he'd had since childhood. One their mother had tried unsuccessfully to break with rewards and punishments and gentle reminders that turned into yelling. His nails were always ragged, bitten down to the quick, sometimes bloody when he was stressed.

Brad had always hated it. Even as a kid, watching Alex destroy his nails had made his skin crawl.

But now, watching Alex chew his thumbnail while waiting for coffee that was taking too long to brew, Brad saw something else.

An opportunity. A test.

If his theory was right-if complaints actually caused changes in some impossible, inexplicable way-then he could prove it. Pick something specific, something measurable, something that couldn't be explained away as coincidence or self-improvement or personal growth.

"Biting your nails is disgusting," Brad said. His voice was calm. Deliberate. Each word carefully chosen like he was writing a headline. "You have to stop."

Alex pulled his hand away from his mouth. "Whatever." Alex grabbed his coffee, suddenly defensive, suddenly annoyed in a way that felt disproportionate. "Don't tell me what to do."

"I'm just saying it's disgusting. You're forty-two years old. Act like it."

Alex's jaw tightened. "Fuck off, Brad."

He took his coffee and headed to his room. The door closed with more force than necessary, rattling the macramé owl on the wall.

Brad sat at the table, his breakfast forgotten, waiting.

If he was right, something would happen.

If he was wrong, he was losing his mind.

Either way, he'd have an answer.

An hour later, Brad returned from his morning run-his new running shoes, his new route, his new life that still felt like someone else's. He was making his post-workout smoothie when Alex walked into the kitchen.

He was staring at his hands.

Brad turned around and felt his stomach drop.

Alex's fingernails were long. Not just long-perfectly shaped, professionally filed smooth, extending a quarter-inch past his fingertips. They looked manicured. They looked expensive. They

looked like someone had spent an hour in a salon getting them exactly right.

And they were polished. Pink polish. Glossy and perfect, catching the kitchen light.



"Brad!" Alex's voice was high with panic. He held up his hands, fingers spread wide, like he was showing evidence at a crime scene. "What the fuck is this?"

Brad felt vindication and horror in equal measure. It had worked. The test had worked. His insane theory about magical complaints was correct.

"What did you do?" Alex demanded, his voice rising. "What the fuck did you do to me?"

"I complained about your nail-biting," Brad said quietly. "I did it on purpose. To test if-"

"You did this to me?!"

"Not me. The magic. Whatever the hell this is. Don't you see? Every complaint changes us."

Alex tried to bring his hand to his mouth-the old habit, the automatic response to stress, the thing he'd been doing since he was six years old. His hand moved halfway to his face, then stopped. Like it had hit an invisible wall. His muscles strained. His arm trembled with effort. But his hand wouldn't reach his mouth. His body simply wouldn't let him bite his nails anymore.

He tried again. Same result. The barrier held.

"This is insane," Alex whispered, staring at his pink-polished nails. "This is completely fucking insane. There's no such thing as magic. This doesn't happen. This can't happen."

"But it did." Brad gestured at Alex's hands. "Look at you. Look at us. This is real."

Alex sank into a chair, still staring at his hands. He flexed his fingers, watching the pink nails catch the light.

"What do we do?" Alex asked quietly, and for the first time since moving in-maybe for the first time since they were kids-he sounded genuinely scared.

Brad sank into a chair across from him, his journalist brain trying to work through the problem. "When did this start? The first change?"

"After Louise came over. I said something about you being a slob. You started exercising the next day."

They both looked at each other.

"Is Louise a witch?" Alex asked.

"What? No. She's just-" Brad stopped. "Wait. When did we sign that roommate agreement?"

"The day we moved in. Before all this happened."

Brad stood up. "We need to read it. Actually read it this time."

Alex got out his phone and opened the PDF. The same document they'd both signed without reading, scrolled through in thirty seconds, dismissed as boring legal garbage that didn't matter.

Now they read every word.

Page 1: Standard terms and conditions. Nothing unusual.

Page 5: Dispute resolution procedures. Mediation clauses. Arbitration options. All normal.

Page 12: Section 12-C. Buried in subsection D, paragraph 4, between clauses about noise complaints and trash disposal:

Upon any remediation request between cohabitating parties, the parties agree to undergo sufficient corrective measures to optimize compatibility and interpersonal harmony through such modifications as necessary to achieve satisfactory cohabitation outcomes. Each party is allotted thirty (30) remediation requests. Upon completion of all allotted requests without achieving compatibility, the parties shall be considered in default and this Agreement shall terminate.

"Remediation request," Brad said. "That's a fancy way of saying complaints."

"Thirty complaints each."

"We've used eight already."

Silence. The macramé owl watched from the wall, judging them with its knotted eyes.

Sixteen complaints total. Sixteen changes. And they had twenty-two more each before-before what? The Agreement terminated? What did that mean? What happened when they hit thirty?

"At least it stops after thirty complaints," Alex said weakly, grasping at any positive interpretation.

"No." Brad's voice was firm. "We need to stop now. Before it gets worse."

"How much worse could it get? We're just... more polite versions of ourselves. Better groomed. Healthier. Is that really so bad?"

"You have pink nails, Alex. I listen to pop music I physically can't stop listening to. We're not 'better versions' of ourselves. We're being changed into something else."

Alex looked at his hands. At the pink polish that looked so natural he kept forgetting it was there. "We just don't complain anymore. That's it. That's the solution."

"You think we can live together for however long this takes and not complain about anything?"

"We have to try."

The truce was immediate, absolute, and doomed from the start.

No more complaining. No criticism, no fights, no comments about each other-nothing that could possibly be interpreted as a remediation request by whatever magical contract bullshit was running their lives now. They would avoid each other completely if necessary. They would communicate only when absolutely required, using the minimum number of words possible.

They would stop feeding the Agreement.

"We don't talk unless it's necessary," Brad said. "And even then, we keep it neutral. No observations about each other. No opinions. Nothing."

"Agreed."

They shook hands. Alex's grip was softer now, his long pink nails scratching slightly against Brad's palm.

Then they retreated to their separate rooms.

Brad lay on his bed, listening to pop music he didn't want to like but couldn't turn off. Alex sat at his desk trying to work,

trying not to look at his manicured hands every thirty seconds, trying not to think about what would happen if they failed.

Hours passed. Neither complained. Neither spoke except to say "excuse me" when they passed in the hallway, or "your turn" when they needed the bathroom.

They made it through dinner without incident. Brad ate his meal-prepped chicken and rice in his room while watching *Cheers* with the volume low. Alex ordered Thai food and ate at his desk while working on the Anderson campaign that was somehow still not finished.

By 10pm, they'd made it fourteen hours without a single complaint.

It felt like victory. Like maybe they could actually do this. Like maybe they'd outsmarted whatever malevolent force was rewriting their lives one complaint at a time.

They were wrong, of course.

But for fourteen hours, they had hope.

At 11:47pm, Alex was on the phone with Derek, talking about Derek's latest idea-something about converting old arcade cabinets into premium coffee tables with working screens and selling them to nostalgic tech bros.

"I'm just saying," Derek was explaining, "if we source copies of the original ROMs from China-"

"I don't think that's legal, Derek."

"Everything's legal if you phrase it correctly in the terms of service."

"That's definitely not true."

Alex's voice carried through the walls the way it always had. Deep and resonant and impossible to escape in a house with thin walls and poor insulation. Every word vibrated through the structure like the house was amplifying it on purpose.

In the next room, Brad lay in bed trying to sleep. He'd been trying for over an hour. He had earplugs in, a pillow pressed over his head, but he could still hear every word. Every syllable traveled through the walls like they were made of paper and spite.

"I don't think that's a good investment, Derek."

Brad tried to focus on breathing. Tried counting backward from one hundred.

"But the legal hurdles-"

His jaw clenched. His hands balled into fists.

"Still no."

Brad pulled the pillow tighter over his head, his defenses worn down after fourteen hours of careful silence, his filter completely gone at midnight after a day of hypervigilance.

He muttered to himself, frustrated and half-asleep: "His voice is so deep it vibrates through the damn walls."

Quiet. Barely above a whisper. Said to himself, no one else.

It was a complaint. But surely it didn't count.

He could still hear Alex's voice from the next room. Suddenly, a pause.

Fifteen seconds of silence.

Then a scream pierced through the house:
"BRAAAADD!!!"

It was high-pitched and piercing, not a man's roar of anger but a girl's shriek of terror. The sound filled the house, echoed off the walls, made the macramé owl tremble on its hook.

Brad bolted upright in bed, his heart pounding. He ran to Alex's room and threw open the door without knocking.

Alex was standing in the middle of the room, phone on the floor where he'd dropped it, both hands clutching his throat like he was trying to strangle himself.

"What's wrong?"

Alex tried to speak, but what came out was a high, feminine voice: "What did you do? Did you complain about me?"

"I didn't mean to, I just thought-"

"You broke the truce!" Alex's new voice rose in pitch with his panic, making him sound like a terrified teenager, making every word come out breathy and wrong. "You broke it! You SAID we weren't going to complain anymore!"

"I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking, I was half-asleep, I-"

But Alex wasn't listening. He was furious. Panicking. And falling back into their lifelong pattern-the rivalry, the tit-for-tat, the one-upsmanship that had defined their relationship for forty years, that had survived two divorces and one death and moving into their dead parents' house.

If Brad was going to hurt him, even accidentally, then Alex was going to hurt him back.

It was automatic. Instinctive. Inevitable.

"Fine," Alex said, his feminine voice sharp with anger. "If that's how you want it, this means war!"

"No, wait, stop, think about what you're-"

"Your voice." Alex spoke each word deliberately, looking Brad straight in the eye, making absolutely sure he understood what was happening, what was about to happen, what couldn't be taken back. "Is. So. Annoying!"

Brad felt his throat tighten. The change was immediate and violent-his vocal cords shifting, rearranging, tightening like guitar strings being tuned up several octaves all at once. It felt like someone was pulling strings inside his throat, making everything higher and lighter and wrong.

He tried to speak: "Alex, nooo-"

[CUT TO BLACK]

Next time on *Tits for Tates*: In a very special episode, the Tate brothers learn the rules of their magical contract. But knowing the rules doesn't mean they'll follow them. Eight complaints down. Twenty-two to go. And sometimes the best defense is a good offense. Don't miss "Breast Intentions"-next week, same Tate time, same Tate channel!

[ROLL END CREDITS]

~3~

Contract Killers

CAMERA PANS across a living room that could only be described as "aggressively 1970s." The kind of décor that archaeologists would one day unearth and use as evidence that the entire decade had been an elaborate prank that had gotten wildly out of hand.

NARRATOR (V.O.) Last time on *Tits for Tates*: Alex and Brad signed a roommate agreement that was more than they bargained for. After a series of complaints, both brothers discovered the contract had some unexpected side effects.

CAMERA ZOOMS on the macramé owl hanging on the wall. Its knotted eyes stare with the patient judgment of textile art that has seen too much.

NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D) Brad doesn't seem like he's in the mood to narrate anymore. Hard to maintain a witty voice-over when you sound like a sorority girl asking for directions. So I'm stepping in. Owls see everything, you know.

The thing about declaring war at 11:47 PM was that it didn't give you time to develop strategy or consider long-term consequences. It just gave you anger, adrenaline, and the kind of poor judgment that had led to some of history's most regrettable decisions. Though few of those decisions had resulted in quite this type of transformation.

Brad stood in the doorway of Alex's bedroom, staring at his brother. When he opened his mouth to speak, what emerged was bright and perky and energetic, like someone selling activewear on QVC. "You changed my voice!"

"You changed mine first!" Alex's voice came out breathy and soft, intimate in a way that suggested candlelit dinners and secrets whispered in dark rooms. Deeply inappropriate for an argument with one's brother in a hallway at midnight.

"Mine was a mistake. But you—you meant to make mine sound like this!" Brad gestured at his throat with the kind of outrage that would have been more effective if his voice didn't make it sound like he was inviting everyone to join him on his wellness journey.

"Well, you had it coming!"

The thing about mutual destruction was that it rarely started with a clear plan. It started with spite, escalated through pride, and ended with both parties wondering how they'd arrived at this particular circle of hell. Or in this case, this particular hallway with avocado green carpet in a color even an avocado would be ashamed of.

"So you decided to—" Brad stopped, breathing hard. His new voice cracked. "You know what? Your face is ugly."

The change was immediate. Alex's features shifted—jawline softening, cheekbones rising slightly, the angles of his face becoming gentler, more delicate. Alex touched his face, feeling the difference, trying to push back against the shifting cheekbones

and flowing collagen. "What did you—" But he knew already that Brad had fired the next shot.

His eyes narrowed, scanning Brad's form for something to latch onto. They stopped somewhere around his midsection. "Your beer gut is disgusting."

Brad felt his waist cinch inward like an invisible corset tightening around his middle. His hips flared outward, his body reorganizing itself into an hourglass shape that made his compression shirt suddenly cling in all the wrong places. His whole silhouette shifted into something that would be described in polite company as "curvy" and in Brad's internal monologue as "absolutely not what I signed up for."

"Your feet always smell terrible," Brad shot back, having apparently decided that if he was going down, Alex was coming with him.

Alex felt a strange sensation in his feet—bones shifting, arches rising, toes becoming smaller and more delicate. He looked down to see his feet had shrunk, becoming dainty and unmistakably feminine. Peeking out from the cuff of his trousers he could see the gleam of pink polished toenails that definitely weren't there a moment ago.

"Well... your hands are stupid?" Alex hissed, immediately cursing himself for not coming up with something better in the moment.

Brad's hands contracted, bones shifting. His fingers became slender, his palms narrowed. He stared at these smaller, more graceful hands and his first thought was that at least the nails weren't long extensions like Alex's pink claws. Small comfort. Then he watched as electric blue polish bloomed across each nail, the color unmistakable and impossible to hide. Short and practical, but undeniably, visibly feminine.

"Well, your hair is drab."

Alex felt a tingling across his scalp. His hair lightened rapidly—from brown to honey to golden to platinum blonde. The transformation swept through every strand. Though the style remained masculine, the resulting color was one that no man would ever choose.

"At least mine isn't thinning!"

Brad's hair grew until it reached his shoulders, became fuller, shinier. The kind of hair that existed only in shampoo commercials. Strands kept sliding across his face, tickling his neck, draping over his shoulders like they were trying to introduce themselves. Brad had never been this aware of his own hair before and deeply resented the experience.

And so it went. Back and forth, neither willing to stop, neither willing to let the other win, both of them locked in the kind of mutually destructive spiral that historians would later describe as "profoundly stupid" and sitcom writers would describe as "pure gold."

"Your butt—"

"Your shoulders—"

"Your lips—"

"Your hips—"

"STOP!" Brad finally shouted, his perky voice cracking with desperation in a way that rather undermined the authority he was going for. "Just—stop!"

They stood there, both breathing hard, both transformed in ways that would require significantly more than an apology to undo. The brothers had experienced many indignities in their forty-plus years, but having an argument about whose lips were pillowier and who was to blame for it was rapidly climbing the rankings. The hallway bore silent witness to their folly, the wood paneling offering no judgment, the shag carpet absorbing their despair along with decades of accumulated dust.

"This is your fault," Alex said, his breathy voice shaking in a way that made the accusation sound more like a confession.

"My fault? You started it!"

"After you—" Alex cut himself off, realizing that rehashing the argument would likely result in more changes, and they'd both had quite enough of those for one evening. "I'm going to bed."

"Fine."

"And tomorrow we're fixing this."

"How?"

"I don't know!" Alex's voice cracked. "But we're figuring it out!"

He turned and walked to his room—his new gait making his hips sway with each step in a way that was deeply unfair—and slammed the door with the kind of emphasis that suggested he'd really like to slam it harder but had been defeated by the fundamental physics of hollow-core doors from 1974.

A moment later, Brad's door slammed too.

Silence settled over the house like a disapproving relative. Both brothers, alone with what they'd done to each other, what they'd done to themselves, and the dawning realization that spite, while emotionally satisfying in the moment, had some truly unfortunate long-term consequences.

NARRATOR (V.O.) We'll be right back after these messages. Don't touch that dial—when we return, the Tate brothers discover that sleeping on a problem doesn't make it go away. Especially when the problem you're sleeping on is your new bubble butt.

Morning brought aggressively cheerful sunlight that didn't care about your problems, your existential crises, or the fact that

the body you were waking up in bore little resemblance to how it looked twenty-four hours prior. It streamed through curtains that were, improbably, a different shade of orange than the ones in the living room, but somehow precisely the same amount of ugly.

Brad woke up to his alarm and for one blissful second, forgot everything. Then he moved—and his body reminded him. Everything felt different because everything was different, and morning sunlight was far less forgiving than midnight adrenaline. His body was wrong, his voice when he groaned was wrong, the way he shifted in bed was wrong. It was the kind of comprehensive wrongness that came from experiencing last night's changes with fresh eyes and a clearer head.

The person who desperately scrambled to the mirror wasn't quite him anymore.

His shoulders were narrow, his waist impossibly cinched inward while his hips and ass flared outward in an hourglass shape that made his old t-shirt hang oddly—tight in some places, loose in others, like it had been purchased for a different person who no longer existed. His face had changed: softer jawline, higher cheekbones, fuller lips. Feminine features on a face that was still recognizably his but also fundamentally different, like someone had taken his face and run it through a filter labeled "pretty girl."

His hands were smaller too, more delicate, with those short, practical painted nails. His hair was fuller, shinier, and clearly a woman's style. Everything about his silhouette had shifted into curves where there had been straight lines.

After trying for several minutes to reconcile the person in the mirror with the person he'd been yesterday and failing completely, Brad gave up and gave in to his new compulsions. It was easier this way.

He pulled on his running gear—compression shirt, athletic shorts, the outfit he'd somehow been compelled to wear since Alex's complaint about his workout clothes. He needed to run. Needed to think. Needed to do something other than stare at his reflection and wonder how he'd gotten here.

He stepped outside into the cool morning air and started his tracking app.

Running in his new body was, to put it in the kind of understated terms that grossly misrepresented the situation, different.

His narrowed waist and wider hips had fundamentally altered his center of gravity, and his body kept trying to compensate in ways his brain hadn't approved. Each stride felt like a negotiation between what his legs expected to do and what they were actually doing. His hips rolled with each step in a way that felt profoundly wrong, his ass—his bubble butt, jesus christ—bouncing with a momentum that made him acutely aware it existed. The compression shirt, sized for his old torso, gaped loose around his cinched waist and kept riding up over his hips no matter how many times he tugged it down.

And his hair. His lustrous, shampoo-commercial hair that he hadn't bothered to tie back because he hadn't thought about it, kept whipping across his face with every stride, sticking to the sweat on his forehead, getting in his mouth when he tried to breathe. He had to keep pushing it back, tucking it behind his ears where it refused to stay, acutely aware that this was something women did and he was doing it now, repeatedly, while running down his own street.

A car passed him from behind, slowed slightly. Brad could feel the driver's eyes on him—probably saw the narrow waist, the butt, the hair, and made assumptions. Then the car pulled ahead and the driver's head turned, looking at him from the front. Brad

watched confusion flicker across the man's face as his brain tried to reconcile "woman from behind" with "something's not quite right from the front." The car sped up and disappeared around the corner.

Brad tried to focus on the pavement, on his breathing, on his pace. But his body wouldn't let him forget. Every movement was a reminder: the unfamiliar roll of his hips, the bounce of his ass, the hair in his face, the way his own silhouette felt foreign.

By the time he returned to the house, he was breathing hard and deeply unsettled by the experience. The house loomed before him, still aggressively brown and determinedly 1970s.

Alex was waiting in the kitchen.

He looked different in daylight. The platinum blonde hair was striking, catching the morning sun streaming through the window. He was still in his pajamas. Boxer shorts and an old t-shirt that hung oddly on his narrower frame, the shorts riding low on hips that were wider than they used to be. His legs were smooth and hairless, as were his arms, every limb ending in pink nails that were impossible to miss. His features were softer, more feminine. His eyes were the same, but everything else had shifted just enough to be undeniable.

They stared at each other in the kind of silence that spoke volumes, all of them leather-bound and shelved under 'Disasters, Fraternal'.

"We fucked up," Alex said quietly, his breathy voice making even this admission sound like pillow talk.

"Yeah."

"We really, really fucked up."

Brad's perky voice came out flat, which was its own special kind of wrongness. "Yeah."

As they waited for their parents' Mr. Coffee to brew, Alex pulled out his laptop and sat at the kitchen table, a chrome and

Formica monstrosity in a shade best described as "stupendously beige." Brad joined him, as if they were about to have a normal morning meeting about normal problems.

"Okay," Alex said, steadier than Brad expected. "Let's think about this logically. What do we know?"

"We know complaints trigger changes," Brad said. "We don't have to direct our complaints at one another or even be around each other. We don't even have to mean it, we can just be mad at each other and finding things to complain about out of spite. And—" He gestured at himself with hands that were notably smaller than they'd been yesterday. "We know they all do this."

"Make us into girls."

"Yes."

Alex pulled up the contract on his screen, as if legalese or logic might somehow explain the magic. "Every single change has pushed us in the same direction. Your voice, my voice, our bodies, our features. It's not random. It's systematic."

"I complained about your voice being annoying," Brad said. "There are a thousand ways to fix 'annoying voice.' But instead, you got a voice that sounds like you're a phone sex operator."

"So the contract isn't just fixing complaints. It's interpreting them through a specific lens."

"Feminization," Brad said, as if naming the thing would give them power over it, which was a nice thought but almost certainly wrong. "Everything gets twisted into making us more feminine."

They sat with that for a moment, processing the implications, which were extensive and uniformly terrible. The kitchen clock—a sunburst design in gold-tone metal that suggested it had never told accurate time and was quite proud of that fact—ticked away the seconds of their growing dread.

"Okay," Brad said finally. "So we know what it's doing. Now we need to figure out how to stop it."

Over the next few hours, they tried everything they could think of, which turned out to be a series of increasingly desperate and decreasingly rational strategies. The website Alex had downloaded the agreement from was still there, but the customer feedback form seemed to be missing a "submit" button. The phone number was disconnected. According to Google Maps, the address of the company was now a Spirit Halloween store. They called lawyers—three of them. One laughed and hung up, one asked if they'd been drinking, and the third suggested psychiatric help before disconnecting.

In a fit of desperation that would have been embarrassing if their current situation wasn't already beyond embarrassment, they printed out the contract and fed it through the shredder. The paper strips sat in the waste basket, mocking their complete ineffectiveness. Alex tried deleting the file from his phone, but it was set as "protected" in the file system and could not be changed. Brad suggested throwing Alex's phone in the microwave. Alex suggested throwing Brad in the microwave.

They tried reading the contract terms backwards. They tried reading them in a mirror. They even tried a "contract nullification" spell Brad found on Reddit, which required them to burn incense while chanting legal disclaimers, and accomplished exactly nothing except making the house smell like a college dorm room.

By early afternoon, they were out of ideas and out of hope.

"No one believes us," Brad said finally, his voice tight with frustration.

"Why would they? We're saying we signed a magical contract that's physically transforming us every time we complain. We sound insane."

"What if we just leave?" Brad asked. "Just go. Move out. The contract is a roommate agreement, right? What if we weren't roommates anymore?"

"You think it's that simple?"

"I think we won't know unless we try."

Brad walked to his room, past walls decorated with portraits of their family dressed in matching turtlenecks, and started packing his gym bag. He grabbed his compression workout clothes, the form-fitting athletic wear that he didn't want to wear but couldn't seem to stop dressing in. Toiletries from the bathroom. His laptop. Chargers. His collection of classic sitcom DVDs. Everything he'd need to not come back, to start over somewhere else, to escape this house and this contract and this nightmare.

He zipped the bag. Grabbed his keys and wallet. Walked back to the living room where Alex was sitting on the couch and watching him with an expression that suggested he already knew how this was going to end.

"I'm going to Trevor's," Brad said. "I'll call you when I get there."

"Okay."

Brad walked to the front door. Opened it. The morning air was cool and normal and ordinary, the kind of air that didn't care about whether the person breathing it had signed a magical contract that was turning him into a girl. He slung his duffel bag over his shoulder and stepped through the doorway.

The bag yanked back on his shoulder like it had snagged on something.

Brad turned to look. Nothing was caught. The doorframe was clear—no errant nail, no protruding screw, nothing that could have caused the bag to catch. But the bag wouldn't cross the threshold. It was physically stuck at the plane of the door, refusing to leave the house with the kind of stubborn determination usually reserved for housecats who didn't want to go to the vet.

"What the—" Brad pulled harder. The bag didn't budge. He could feel it on his shoulder, could lift it, could move it around inside the house—but the moment he tried to pull it across that invisible line between inside and outside, it became an immovable object in the most literal sense possible.

"What the hell," Brad muttered, his perky voice making the profanity sound oddly cheerful, like he was disappointed his favorite smoothie place was closed rather than discovering his possessions were trapped in a house by supernatural forces. He set the bag down just inside the door, grabbed it with both hands, planted his feet on the porch, and pulled with all his strength.

Which admittedly wasn't as much strength as it had been two days ago.

Nothing. The bag sat there, mocking him with its absolute refusal to cooperate.

"Brad?" Alex had come to see what was happening, drawn by the sounds of struggling and frustrated muttering.

"It won't move. I can't get it outside."

"What do you mean it won't—"

"I mean it won't move!" Brad's voice cracked. "Watch."

He demonstrated, moving the bag freely inside the house, then attempting and failing to pull it through the doorway. It was the kind of demonstration that would have been more effective if it wasn't so profoundly depressing.

"So we can't take our stuff out," Alex said quietly.

"Apparently not."

They stared at the bag sitting in the doorway, a monument to their failed escape attempt.

"Fuck it," Brad said desperately. "I'll just go without it. I'll buy new stuff. I don't care."

He stepped outside, empty-handed now, standing on the porch and looking out at the driveway, the street beyond, the world that existed outside this house. Freedom. Escape. The possibility of a life that involved non-magical contracts and non-avocado carpet. He took a single step away from the door.

The punishment hit immediately. It started in his chest. A tingling sensation that became pressure, became heat, became wrongness spreading beneath his skin like something was growing that had no business being there. Brad looked down and watched in horror as tissue began to swell under his compression shirt.

"No," he gasped, his hands flying to his chest, trying to push back against the growth. His palms pressed flat against his pecs, trying to stop it, trying to force it back in. "No, no, no—"

But he could feel it happening under his hands. Tissue expanding, redistributing, growing despite his desperate attempts to push it back. The sensation was deeply wrong in a way that went beyond physical discomfort—flesh swelling where there should be none, his body reshaping itself while he stood there helpless to stop it.



Brad stumbled back inside, away from the doorway, still pressing his hands against his chest as if physical pressure could somehow reverse what was happening. But the growth continued, steady and inexorable. Small bumps became swells became unmistakable breasts—small but undeniable, A-cup at most, nipples clearly visible under his tight compression shirt.

When it finally stopped, Brad was breathing hard, his hands still pressed against his new chest. The weight was strange, the sensation foreign. He looked down at the small mounds pushing against the fabric of his shirt, creating curves that definitely weren't there ninety seconds ago.

"Oh my god," Alex breathed, staring with the kind of expression that suggested he was having his own existential crisis just by witnessing this.

Brad's perky voice came out broken, which was at least emotionally appropriate even if it sounded deeply wrong. "It punished me. I tried to leave—I was going to leave for real—and it punished me."

He gestured helplessly at himself, at his new chest, at the evidence of what happened when you tried to escape.

Alex was already pulling out his laptop, yanking up the contract document with the kind of frantic energy that suggested he thought answers might be hiding in the legalese. Which, it turned out, they were—though not the kind of answers anyone wanted.

They found it in Section 8-B, buried in paragraphs of mutual obligations, written in the kind of language that lawyers used when they wanted to say something terrible in the politest possible way.

In furtherance of ensuring bona fide cohabitation and to prevent unilateral abandonment of shared obligations, both parties hereby covenant to maintain continuous physical residency within the premises for the full term of this Agreement," Alex read aloud, his voice tight. "Any attempt to vacate, abandon, or otherwise terminate said residency shall constitute prima facie evidence of intent to breach the co-tenancy obligation and to impose undue burden upon the non-departing party, and shall trigger immediate corrective measures of escalating magnitude as determined necessary to restore compliance.

"Immediate corrective measures," Brad repeated. "That's what this was. And it said 'increasing severity.' Meaning if I try again—"

"It'll be worse."

They looked at each other across the space of the living room.

"We can't leave," Brad said. "We literally cannot leave. The agreement won't let us."

"Not without—" Alex gestured at Brad's chest. "More of that."

Brad sat down heavily on the couch, which exhaled a small cloud of dust and resignation. His new breasts shifted and bounced with the motion in a way that made him acutely, horrifyingly aware of their presence. Every movement sent unfamiliar sensations through his chest. "So we're trapped. We can't get help, we can't contact the company, and we can't leave."

The silence stretched between them like a physical thing, heavy with implications and the dawning understanding of just how thoroughly screwed they were.

"What do we do?" Alex asked finally.

"I don't know," Brad whimpered.

They sat there in silence for a long moment, both processing the full scope of their trap, both trying to find some strategy, some plan, some way forward that didn't involve more changes and more horror.

"Okay," Alex said finally. "We need a strategy."

"A strategy for what? We're stuck here."

"Exactly. We're stuck here. At least until we sell the house. So we need to figure out how to survive without..." He gestured at Brad's chest. "You know."

Brad grimaced at the reminder. "How?"

"Mutually assured destruction," Alex said, warming to the theme in the way he always did when he thought he'd found a solution. "It's the only strategy that makes sense."

"What?"

"Think about it. We each hold the key to the other's complete destruction. One complaint and we can ruin each other. Make it worse. Push this further." Alex gestured at Brad's chest, at his own

pink talons. "So we don't. We recognize the reality. If you do anything, I'll make it worse. If I do anything, you'll retaliate."

"That's insane."

"It worked for the US and USSR for forty years."

"They had nuclear weapons, not bikini bods."

"The principle is the same," Alex insisted, taking on a lecturing tone that suggested he'd comprehensively thought this through in the last twenty seconds. "We both know what we can do to each other. We both know the consequences. So we don't. We can still interact, still live in the same house, but we're very, very careful. Any complaint triggers retaliation, so we don't complain. We maintain the balance through mutual threat."

Brad looked at him—at his blonde hair, his feminine features, his unconsciously graceful movements. Then down at himself—at his breasts, his delicate hands, his changed body that was a constant reminder of what happened when they lost control.

"You really think we can do that? Just... never slip up?"

"We have to try. What's the alternative?"

Brad didn't have an answer to that, which was perhaps answer enough.

"Fine," he said. "Détente. We're careful. We don't complain. We remember the consequences."

They shook on it, their feminine hands clasping awkwardly, sealing a pact that both of them suspected wouldn't last.

Brad went to his room and found a gray hoodie. The largest one he owned, leftover from before the compression clothes compulsion started. It felt wrong to wear it, uncomfortable in the way that all baggy clothes felt now, like wearing someone else's skin. But he forced himself to pull it on, tugging it down over his chest, desperate to hide his new proportions. He crossed his arms to conceal the curves that wouldn't be hidden. It wasn't perfect.

But it would have to do. He grabbed a pair of black sweatpants and forced those on as well.

When he emerged, Alex was already back in his room. The house was quiet in the way of houses that contained people actively avoiding each other, the silence broken only by the occasional creak of settling wood and the persistent hum of appliances that had been running since the Ford administration.

Maybe this could work, Brad thought. Maybe if they just avoided each other, stayed apart, refused to engage—maybe they could make it through this without changing any further.

NARRATOR (V.O.) And so the Tate brothers retreated to their separate corners, having established what political scientists would call "mutually assured destruction" and what anyone with common sense would call "a terrible idea that's definitely going to blow up in their faces." Will it? Find out on next week's episode!

~4~

Twin Peaks

NARRATOR (V.O.) 2:47 PM. Four hours into the ceasefire. The universe, having watched this attempt at self-control with the kind of patient amusement usually reserved for toddlers promising they won't eat the cookie, decided it was time to send in a cat.

Without warning, something small and gray shot across the living room with the kind of speed that suggested it was either very excited or very scared, and knocked over a lamp in the process. The lamp-a harvest gold monstrosity with a fringed shade-broke in two, which everyone including the lamp had to admit was a significant aesthetic improvement.

Brad came out of his room at the sound of the crash. A cat-scraggly, gray, and possessed of the kind of feral confidence that only comes from having never once questioned your right to exist anywhere-was now sitting on their couch, grooming itself with the casual ownership of someone who had just purchased the property at auction and was already planning renovations.

"Where did you come from?"

The cat ignored him.

Before Brad could investigate further-before he could wonder how a cat had gotten into a house with all windows and doors closed, before he could question the timing, before he could recognize this for the sitcom setup it obviously was-someone knocked on the door.

Loud, enthusiastic knocking. The kind of knocking that suggested the person on the other side had never encountered a social situation they couldn't enthusiastically barrel into, consequences be damned.

Brad looked down at himself. The hoodie was doing its job, mostly, hiding his chest as long as he didn't move too much. He opened the door.

The twins were identical in an aggressively perfect way that suggested either genetics or the dedicated efforts of a sitcom wardrobe department, and Brad was beginning to suspect the latter. Same height, same blonde hair styled in the exact same way, same bright blue eyes, same white teeth in the same smile. They wore matching outfits in different colors-one in blue, one in red-because of course they did.

"Hej!" the one in blue said, her Swedish accent sing-song and bright. "We are looking for Mittens!"

"Our cat!" the one in red added, with the exact same inflection and enthusiasm.

"He escaped three days ago!" they said in perfect unison, which was either impressive coordination or evidence that they were, in fact, reading from some invisible script.

Brad pointed at the couch, where the cat was still grooming itself with complete indifference to the drama. "That cat?"

"MITTENS!" They rushed inside without invitation, both squealing at a frequency that probably bothered dogs, scooping up the cat who seemed wholly unimpressed by the reunion.

"I am Freja," Blue Twin said, beaming at Brad with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for lottery winners.

"I am Astrid," Red Twin added, also beaming.

"We moved in next door," they said together, in unison, because why break the pattern now?

Brad stared. The universe, he reflected, had a deeply unfair sense of comedic timing. Gorgeous Scandinavian blonde twins moving in next door was the kind of sitcom contrivance that would have made him roll his eyes a week ago. Now, standing there with breasts under his compression shirt and a voice that could sell wellness products, he was less concerned with narrative plausibility and more concerned with whether they'd noticed anything unusual about their new neighbors.

"Right. Glad you found him."

"Oh, but we must thank you!" Freja exclaimed, stepping closer. "You have rescued our darling Mittens!"

"He was just... in our living room," Brad said, still holding the door open.

Alex appeared in his doorway, drawn by the commotion. The twins' attention immediately shifted to him with the synchronized precision of a military drill team.

"Oh! You have a roommate!" Freja exclaimed.

"My brother," Brad said. "Alex."

The twins tilted their heads in perfect synchronization, like confused puppies in a shampoo commercial.

"Brothers?" Astrid said. "But you sound so... different?"

"Very different," Freja agreed. "Your voices are so strange!"

"We have colds," Alex said quickly, his tone flat and unwelcoming. "Both of us. Very contagious. You should probably go."

"Oh no!" The twins showed no sign of leaving. "You poor things!"

"Really, we're fine," Alex said. "You found your cat, so-"

"Wait!" Astrid was staring at Brad now, her eyes widening with recognition. "I know you! You run past our house every morning!"

"You're the runner!" Freja clapped her hands together. "With the blue shorts! We see you all the time!"

Brad felt heat rising to his face. "Oh. Yeah, I run in the mornings."

"You are so dedicated!" Astrid moved closer, examining him with open interest. "Every day, rain or shine! Very impressive!"

"It's just... you know, staying active," Brad said, acutely aware of how close she was standing.

"You must be very fit," Freja said, her eyes traveling over him in a way that made him deeply uncomfortable and oddly flattered at the same time. "Very athletic."

"I try to-"

"Look," Alex interrupted, his voice sharp. "This is great and all, but we really need to rest. So if you could-"

The twins laughed, identical tinkling sounds.

"You are so serious!" Freja said. "Your brother is much more friendly!"

"I'm not trying to be friendly," Alex said flatly. "I'm trying to get you to leave."

Brad felt a spike of frustration. Here were two attractive women actually paying attention to them-despite the voices, despite everything-and Alex was being actively rude. They were being nice, they were clearly interested, and Alex was going to chase them off with the kind of social incompetence that would get someone voted off a reality show.

"Just ignore him," Brad said to the twins, forcing a smile. "He doesn't care what people think. No social skills at all."

The change hit Alex all at once. Brad saw it in his eyes-a flash of panic, then realization, then something else. Something new settling into place like furniture that had been delivered to the wrong address and decided to stay anyway. Alex's posture shifted slightly, his expression changing, and Brad could see the horror in his face as the compulsion took root. The desperate need to make a good impression. To be liked. To please these strangers whose opinions should mean nothing but suddenly meant everything.

"I didn't mean-" Alex started, his voice different now, apologetic. "I'm sorry, I'm just not feeling well, I..."

"It's okay!" the twins said in unison.

But Brad saw Alex's hands trembling. Saw the panic in his eyes as he felt thoughts that weren't quite his own. He turned to Brad, and when he spoke, there was venom in his tone-fury at what Brad had just done to him. "Well, at least I don't hide under baggy clothes."

Brad felt it happen. Not a physical sensation exactly, but a wrongness, like reality hiccupping.

He looked down.

His hoodie had changed. What had been oversized and gray was now fitted and an undeniably feminine mint green, cropped at the waist, the zipper somehow undone and hanging open. His black sweatpants had transformed into high-waisted black leggings that clung to every curve of his legs and hips. The compression shirt underneath was suddenly visible, tight black fabric clinging to every curve, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Brad's hands flew to the hoodie, yanking it closed, holding it together in front of him before the twins could see his-well, his twins.

"Are you...?" Freja started, tilting her head.

"I'm fine!" Brad said quickly, clutching the hoodie closed. "Just cold! These colds, you know, they give you chills!"

Astrid's eyes narrowed slightly, like she was trying to figure out what she'd just seen, but then she smiled again. "You poor thing! You should definitely rest!"

"We will let you recover," Freja said. "But when you are feeling better, we must take you to dinner!"

"To thank you for rescuing Mittens!" Astrid added.

"That's really not necessary—" Brad started, his arms still clutching the hoodie closed.

"We insist! When you are better, we will call you, yes?"

They swept toward the door in perfect synchronization, Mittens in tow, leaving behind a cloud of perfume and certainty.

"Feel better!" they called out as they left.

The door closed behind them.

Brad and Alex stood in the living room, not looking at each other.

"You complained about me," Brad said finally.

"You complained first."

"They were being nice! You were being rude and I was just—"

"Just what? Just ruining any chance we had of avoiding more changes?"

They stopped. Stared at each other.

Brad looked down at himself. He pulled his hoodie open to demonstrate what had happened to him, showing Alex the tight compression shirt underneath that clung to every curve.

"Look at this! My clothes just changed while they were standing right there! They almost saw—" He gestured at his chest, at the unmistakable shape of breasts beneath the tight fabric.

Alex's eyes traveled down. "It's not your breasts you should be worried about. Your nipples are poking right through that shirt. It's obscene."

The change was immediate. Brad felt the fabric shift against his skin, felt the compression shirt tighten and reshape, felt straps

form over his shoulders. He looked down to see a padded black sports bra where his shirt had been, the elastic band snug around his ribs, his new breasts cradled for the world to see.

"You-" Brad started, fury rising in his chest. "You absolute-"

Before he could form the retaliatory words, the phone rang.

They both froze. The sound was coming from the kitchen, from a pale yellow rotary phone mounted on the wall next to wallpaper featuring a pattern of interlocking hexagons in shades of brown and orange. Their parents had insisted on keeping the phone in the house, probably because they'd paid for it in 1973 and by god they were going to get their money's worth. It probably hadn't received a call in a decade.

It rang again. Loud, insistent, impossible to ignore.

"Don't answer it," Brad said.

But Alex was already moving toward it, drawn by something he couldn't name. His hand reached for the receiver.

"Hello?"

Brad watched his brother's face change. Watched him stand up straighter, watched a smile form that looked wrong on his features.

"Oh! Richard! Hi! No, no, not at all, I was just-yes, I got your email about the Mitchelson account. I'm actually finishing those reports right now."

Brad's stomach sank.



"Tomorrow night?" Alex's voice went higher, more eager. "For dinner? That would be wonderful! Yes, of course! I'd love to discuss the project in person!"

"No," Brad whispered. "No, Alex, don't-"

"Seven o'clock works perfectly! I'll make sure everything is-yes, absolutely! I'm looking forward to it!" Alex was practically glowing with enthusiasm. "See you then!"

He hung up. The smile disappeared immediately, replaced by dawning horror.

"What did you just do?" Brad asked.

"I don't know." Alex's hand was still on the receiver. "He called to check in about work and I just-I couldn't stop myself. He

asked if we could meet and I wanted to say no, I was going to say no, but instead I-

"You invited your boss to dinner."

"I invited my boss to dinner."

"Tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night." Alex's voice was shaking. "Brad, I couldn't control it. The words just came out. I wanted to impress him, I needed him to think I was doing well, I-"

They stared at each other across the kitchen with its Formica table and the general atmosphere of a decade that had given up trying. Brad in his sports bra and fitted hoodie. Alex with his new compulsion to please people, to make good impressions, to care desperately what others thought of him.

"We're so fucked," Brad said.

"So fucked," Alex agreed.

Tomorrow night was going to be a disaster.

NARRATOR (V.O.) Next time on *Tits for Tates*: Alex meets his boss for dinner. Brad tries to help. Neither of them is prepared for what happens when you mix workplace politics with magical contracts. Don't miss "Corporate Casualties"-same Tate time, same Tate channel!

END EPISODE 4

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Roast Mortem

NARRATOR (V.O.): Previously, on *Tits for Tates!* The Tate brothers declared war. Declared peace. Accidentally started a couple border skirmishes involving boobs and sports bras. Tonight: Alex's boss comes to dinner. What could possibly go wrong?

Emily Post had never written a chapter on "What to Cook Your Dinner Guests to Distract Them From Your New Sultry Voice" or "Appropriate Attire for the Recently Feminized." Martha Stewart, for all her expertise, had never filmed a segment on "Hiding Your Brother's Breasts from Your Boss." It was a self-help genre that Alex could've really used right about now.

He stood in his parents' kitchen at 2:47 PM, four hours before Richard McMann-his father's old business partner and Alex's current boss-and his wife Carol were scheduled to arrive, and contemplated a pot roast with the kind of desperate focus usually reserved for bomb disposal experts.

The pot roast contemplated him back. It was too large for the pan. This seemed like information his mother's 1970s-era cookbook might have mentioned, but the cookbook operated

under the optimistic assumption that the reader possessed both common sense and basic spatial reasoning.

"Does this look right to you?" he called toward the living room.

Brad, who was dusting the living room with manic intensity, didn't look up. His long hair, which now reached past his shoulders in a cascade of shampoo-commercial perfection, kept falling into his face as he worked. Every thirty seconds, he'd push it back with one small, delicate hand, his electric blue nails catching the light.

He was wearing black leggings and a purple athletic tank top, the only kind of clothes he seemed to own anymore. Ever since Alex had complained about his baggy clothes, Brad's entire wardrobe had transformed into fitted athletic wear in various bright colors. The tight fabric clung to curves that definitely hadn't been there a week ago-the narrow waist, the flared hips, the undeniable swell of breasts under the sports bra he now wore constantly.

"What?" Brad called back, attacking a bookshelf that hadn't been touched since the Nixon administration. He was pretty sure the dust had accumulated its own layer of dust.

"The roast is too big for the pan," Alex said, lifting the massive slab of meat with both hands. His long pink nails made the task awkward. He'd tried to cut them shorter this morning and discovered they were somehow harder than steel. He'd broken two pairs of nail clippers. Even trying to file them down had been useless.

Brad finally stopped dusting long enough to push his hair back-for the fifty-seventh time in the last hour, not that anyone was counting-and walked to the kitchen.

He looked at the roast. Looked at the pan. Looked at Alex.

"Did you try a bigger pan?"

"This is the biggest pan."

"Did you try a smaller roast?"

Alex glared at him.

They stared at each other across the kitchen-Alex in his bathrobe, hair wrapped in a towel because he'd spent an hour in the bath that morning, Brad in his athletic wear with his hair falling into his face again, both of them aware of the absurdity of discussing pot roast sizing when the real problem was that they were trapped in a house by a magical contract.

Though to be fair, they'd had stupider arguments. There had been the Great Thermostat War of 1988. The Battle of Whose Turn It Was To Take Out The Trash, which had lasted three months. And the infamous Incident of the Last Beer, which neither of them liked to discuss.

"Just cut it in half," Brad said finally.

"I can't cut it in half. That's not how pot roast works."

"You literally just put meat in a pan and cook it. That's how pot roast works."

"There's a recipe involved. Time per pound. It's not just-" Alex stopped himself, recognizing the rising frustration in his voice, the complaint forming on his tongue. They'd called a truce. They had to maintain the truce. Richard and Carol were coming in four hours and they needed to get through this dinner without any more changes.

Brad seemed to recognize the same danger. He took a breath, pushed his hair back again, and spoke carefully. "Okay. Let's just... figure it out together."

They managed to wedge the roast into the pan at an angle that defied both geometry and good sense. They surrounded it with vegetables cut to vaguely uniform sizes. They shoved it in the oven, set the temperature according to the cookbook's cryptic instructions, and agreed that this was good enough.

Brad returned to dusting. Alex decided he'd tackle vacuuming. They had a plan: Get the house cleaned up. Then Brad would stay in his room during dinner. He'd stay quiet, stay hidden, and Alex would host alone. Richard and Carol would never know this weird half-feminized version of Brad existed. They'd eat dinner, discuss the Mitchelson account, and leave. Simple.

An hour later, Brad was scrubbing the dining room table, sticky with decades of accumulated grime, when his hair fell into his face for approximately the nine thousandth time. He pushed it back with growing irritation, held it there for a moment, let it go. It immediately fell forward again. His pop music blared from his phone, some teen singing an upbeat song about summer and love that he couldn't stop himself from listening to.

Alex was nearby, trying to vacuum the curtains. But Brad kept pushing his hair back. Over and over. And that music-bright, peppy, relentless. Alex stared at him. Watched Brad push his hair back. Watched it fall. Watched him push it back again. The repetition was maddening.

"Can you PLEASE stop pushing your hair out of your face? It's driving me crazy!" The words came out sharper than Alex intended, frustration overriding caution.

Brad froze mid-push, his hand halfway to his forehead.

Then his hair moved.

Not by his hand. Not by any force he was applying. His hair gathered itself, pulled upward like invisible hands were styling it, twisted and wrapped and secured itself into a high ponytail at the crown of his head. Tight. Perfect.

Brad felt it immediately. The weight of the ponytail hanging behind him, swinging with the slightest movement of his head. The tightness pulling at his scalp, stretching the skin of his face

backward. His eyebrows sat higher now, pulled into a permanently surprised expression. His eyes felt wider. The tension was constant, unrelenting, like someone had given him a facelift and forgotten to stop pulling.

Brad's hands flew to his head, feeling the ponytail, trying to pull it down. It wouldn't budge. The hair was locked in place like it had been sculpted from steel cable. He pulled harder. Nothing. The ponytail sat there, perfect and immobile and permanent.

"What did you DO?" Brad's perky voice cracked with panic.

Alex stared from the kitchen doorway, his pink nails gripping the doorframe. "I just-I didn't mean-"

"You changed my hair!" Brad was still pulling at the ponytail, desperate now. "You permanently changed my hair!"

"I was frustrated! You kept-" Alex stopped himself, but the damage was done.

Brad's hands slowly lowered from his head. He stared at Alex. This was the part where he'd normally fire back, inflict pain for pain, escalate the situation into mutually assured destruction. For approximately three seconds, discretion prevailed. It was a new personal record.

"Damn," Alex said, the brotherly taunt coming naturally, their shared history overcoming any possible restraint, "that ponytail adds like four inches to your height!"

That was it. Discretion be damned. Brad's retort was inevitable: "Well you're four inches too tall!"

Alex felt the change immediately. The floor rose to meet him-no, he was sinking, shrinking, his perspective shifting downward as his spine compressed, his legs shortened, his entire frame reducing in height. Four inches disappeared in two seconds. His bathrobe, which had been knee length, suddenly fell to mid-calf.

He grabbed at a doorframe for balance, his pink nails clicking against the wood. When the change stopped, he was eye-level with Brad's chin.

"You—" Alex started, his voice shaking.

"You started it!" Brad shot back. "You changed my hair!"

"This is so much worse!"

They stared at each other. Alex looked up at Brad now, his neck craning slightly. The towel slipped off his head entirely, landing on the floor with a damp thump, revealing his platinum blonde hair.

"Okay," Brad said quietly. "Okay. We need to stop."

"Agreed."

"No more. No matter what."

"No matter what," Alex echoed.

They both knew it was a lie.

The roast was developing a smell. Not a good smell. Not the savory, mouth-watering aroma that pot roast should have. This was more of a burning smell. A something-is-very-wrong smell. A smell that suggested the meat had achieved consciousness and was using its newfound awareness to scream.

Alex opened the oven and studied the situation. The roast sat at an odd angle, browning in patches while remaining distressingly raw in others.

"How's it looking?" Brad called from the living room.

"Fine!" Alex lied. "Perfectly fine!"

It was not fine. It was the opposite of fine. But saying so would require admitting failure, and admitting failure might lead to complaints, and complaints led to changes, and he was already four inches shorter than he'd been this morning.

Alex closed the oven door and returned to his room to dress. Time to face the wardrobe situation.

His clothes were laid out on the bed: dress shirt, slacks, shoes. Exactly what someone should wear when hosting their boss for dinner. He'd picked them out this morning.

Now he put on the pants and they pooled around his ankles. The cuffs dragged on the floor. He looked like a child playing dress-up in his father's clothes.

The shirt was even worse. The shoulders hung off his frame. The sleeves extended past his hands, covering his pink nails completely, which would have been convenient if it hadn't made him look like he was drowning in fabric.

He didn't need a mirror to know he looked ridiculous. There was no other word for it. Richard and Carol would take one look at him and either laugh or call an ambulance, and Alex wasn't sure which would be worse.

Brad appeared in the doorway, ponytail perfect and permanent, athleisure clinging to curves that declared their presence loudly and proudly. He took in Alex's appearance, his face cycling through several expressions before landing on something between sympathy and resignation.

"You can't wear that."

"I know I can't wear it," Alex snapped, his voice making the irritation sound more sultry than angry. "But I don't have anything else. Everything's too big now."

They stood there for a long moment, both aware that time was running out-Richard and Carol had texted they were on their way-and both aware that there was no good solution to this problem.

"You need to just say it," Alex said quietly.

"Say what?"

"The thing you're thinking. The complaint. About how my clothes don't fit."

"Are you sure-"

"There's no other way. So just say it and get it over with."

"Your clothes don't fit at all," Brad said, wincing. "You look ridiculous."

The change rippled through the closet first-Alex could hear it, hangers rattling, fabric rustling, his entire wardrobe adjusting itself. Then it hit what he was wearing. The dress shirt reshaped itself against his body, fabric pulling taut, collar shrinking, shoulders narrowing. Darts appeared at the waist. The sleeves shortened to the perfect length. The buttons shifted, moving from right-over-left to left-over-right. The fabric faded to a blush pink.

His slacks joined in. The legs widened, fabric flowing into a wide-legged silhouette as they shortened to barely graze the floor, hiding his feet entirely. The waist rose higher, the cut changing to follow the curve of his hips. The front zipper disappeared, reappearing at the back. The pockets vanished.

Shoes reshaped on his feet. The leather flowed like water, forming heels-modest heels, two or three inches, but undeniably present. The toes narrowed, became more pointed. His feet were compressed, lifted, pushed forward onto his toes.

When it finished, Alex looked down at himself in shock. He was wearing women's clothing. A pale pink women's blouse, women's slacks tailored to fit his body perfectly, women's shoes with heels that gave him back some of his original height.

He turned toward his closet, already knowing what he'd find.

Every piece of men's clothing had transformed. Shirts had become blouses. Pants had become women's slacks and jeans. His suits had become skirt suits and dresses. Every shoe had heels, ranging from modest two-inch pumps to stilettos that looked like they'd been designed by someone who deeply hated feet.

"Oh my god, it changed everything," Alex whispered, his voice now matching the clothing, matching the nails, matching everything else about him that had been transformed.

Brad stood in the doorway, staring. "I didn't mean-I didn't think it would-

"We never think it will," Alex said. "That's the problem. We never think about how it will twist things."

He turned back to the mirror. The blouse fit perfectly. The slacks were elegant, professional, appropriate for a business dinner. The heels added height and made his legs look longer. If he'd been a woman, he'd have looked put-together, sophisticated, ready to impress.

"I can't cancel," he said quietly. "Richard is expecting me. The Mitchelson account is already behind schedule. If I cancel now, if I seem unreliable-"

He stopped. The people-pleasing compulsion wouldn't let him finish the thought. Wouldn't let him imagine disappointing Richard. The idea of calling to cancel, of saying he couldn't make it, of admitting some kind of problem-it made his chest tight with anxiety.

"I know," Brad said. "You have to do this."

"I have to do this."

"And you'll have to wear..." Brad gestured at the outfit.

"Women's clothing. Yes."

They looked at each other. The house settled around them with a judgmental creak. Somewhere in the kitchen, the pot roast continued its descent into carbon.

"Okay," Alex said, decision made. "I'll get through the dinner. You're staying in your room. We stick to the plan."

"It's a terrible plan."

"It's the only plan we have."

Brad couldn't argue with that. He retreated to his room. Alex stood in front of his closet, breathing hard. He checked his watch. Richard and Carol would be here in ten minutes. His pink nails caught the light as he adjusted the blouse one more time, tucking

it in, smoothing the fabric. If he didn't think about it too hard, didn't look too closely-

No. He looked exactly like what he was: a man wearing women's clothing.

The doorbell was going to ring. Richard and Carol were going to see him. And there was absolutely no way to hide the nails, no way to explain away these clothes.

Passing back through the kitchen, he had an idea.

His mother's apron. The vintage floral one she'd worn for forty years, faded and comfortable and completely innocuous. And next to the stove, the oven mitts.

Alex moved quickly, driven by desperation and the countdown clock in his head. He grabbed the apron, tied it around his waist. The floral pattern clashed wonderfully with his blouse, but it covered the darts and the feminine cut of his slacks. Then the oven mitts-both hands covered, pink nails completely hidden inside quilted fabric.

He looked absurd. He knew he looked absurd. But absurd was better than undeniable. Absurd could be explained. "I was cooking!" "I just took something out of the oven!" Absurd was embarrassing but not career-ending.

The doorbell rang.

Alex took a breath and walked to the door. The heels clicked on the hardwood floor. His hips swayed with each step, the graceful movement automatic now. The oven mitts made his hands feel enormous and clumsy.

He opened the door.



Richard and Carol stood on the porch, both dressed nicely for dinner, both smiling in that polite way people smile when they're your guests but not quite your friends.

Their smiles froze when they saw Alex.

Specifically, when they saw Alex wearing a floral apron over a blush pink blouse, with bright orange oven mitts on both hands, his platinum blonde hair catching the porch light. If there was a handbook for Making A Good Impression On Your Boss, this was not in it. This was several chapters past where the handbook gave up and suggested moving to another country.

There was a beat of absolute silence.

"Alex," Carol said finally, her voice doing something complicated between syllables. "You look... different."

NARRATOR (V.O.): Will Richard and Carol accept Alex's explanations? Will Brad stay hidden upstairs? Will the pot roast achieve sentience before it achieves edibility? And most importantly: can two brothers make it through one dinner party without reality itself deciding to get involved? Find out next time, on Tits for Tates!

[END EPISODE 5]

~6~

Sister Act

NARRATOR (V.O.): Welcome back! When we last left our heroes-heroines?-Alex had just opened the door wearing women's clothing and kitchen accessories. Richard and Carol are processing. Alex is panicking. And somewhere upstairs, Brad is about to make a series of decisions he'll immediately regret. Let's watch this dinner party crash and burn, shall we?

"New hair?" Richard tried, his eyes traveling from Alex's platinum blonde hair to the apron to the oven mitts, clearly trying to process the entire situation at once.

Alex waved one oven mitt awkwardly. "Midlife crisis? Just trying something different. Come in, please! Sorry about the-" He gestured at himself with both mitts. "I was just checking on dinner."

"Of course," Carol said, in the tone of someone who was definitely not thinking "of course" but was too polite to say otherwise. "Your voice-are you feeling alright?"

"Laryngitis," Alex lied smoothly, the excuse coming easily. "Had it all week. Very annoying."

They moved into the living room. Alex offered drinks-wine, beer, cocktails, anything to get through the next few hours. Richard asked for scotch. Carol wanted white wine.

Alex moved to pour them, then realized he was still wearing the oven mitts.

This presented a problem. He needed to take them off to pour drinks. But taking them off would reveal the nails. The perfect, pink, professionally manicured nails that would require explanation.

He stood there for a moment, frozen between two bad options, very aware that Richard and Carol were watching him.

"Alex?" Richard said. "Why are you still wearing oven mitts?"

"My hands are cold!" The lie came out desperately. "Always cold. Circulation issues. Poor circulation."

"It's seventy-five degrees out?" Carol observed.

"Very poor circulation," Alex insisted, already moving toward the bar cart with the oven mitts still on. He'd pour the drinks wearing them. He'd make it work somehow.

He picked up a wine glass with both quilted hands, held it awkwardly, reached for the bottle, and by some miracle poured Carol's wine without spilling it. He turned, gingerly walked on his high heels over to where Carol had settled into his parents' ancient couch, reached out with the glass.

The glass slipped through his mitts.

White wine splashed across the coffee table, soaking into the TV Guide from 1987. If it wasn't already fused to the table, it was now. The Guide had survived the Reagan administration, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the advent of digital television. It would probably have survived nuclear war. It would not, however, survive this dinner party. Alex lunged forward to grab the glass, his oven-mitted hands completely useless, managing only to knock over Carol's purse in the process.

"Here, let me-" Carol was already up, grabbing the glass, reaching for Alex's hands. "Take those off so we can clean this up properly."

"No, I can-"

But Carol had already grabbed the edge of one mitt and pulled.

The oven mitt came off, revealing Alex's hand in all its glory. The long pink nails, professionally shaped and polished. They were undeniable. Impossible to miss. Carol froze, mitt in hand, staring.

Alex pulled off the other mitt himself, defeated. Both hands visible now. Both sets of nails on full display.

Silence stretched across the living room.

"Is that a... manicure?" Carol asked finally, her tone suggesting she'd discovered evidence of a crime.

"...lost a bet," he said, the lie coming from nowhere. "At work. With Derek. He made me get them done and I haven't had time to remove the polish yet."

They cleaned up the wine in awkward silence. Alex poured new drinks-properly this time, with his pink nails visible the entire time. Richard and Carol exchanged glances that clearly communicated *we'll discuss this in the car on the way home.*

The laugh track started exactly thirty seconds later.

Brad had meant to stay quiet. He really had. The plan was simple: stay in his room, keep silent, let Alex handle dinner alone. He could do that. He was an adult. He could sit in silence for two hours.

But the boredom was crushing. His sitcom DVD collection was right on the shelf. And there, in the corner, sat his parents' old tube TV. Massive, boxy, paired with a DVD-VHS combo player

that probably dated to 2003. What was the harm in watching one episode? Just one. He'd wear headphones. No one would know.

He put in *Cheers*. Thanksgiving Orphans, the food fight episode. Season five, still the Diane years. He'd never been a Rebecca fan. Plugged his headphones into the combo player's jack. Started the episode, being responsible, being considerate.

Ten minutes in, he shifted position on the bed to get more comfortable. His foot caught the headphone cord.

The plug yanked free from the jack.

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA

The laugh track exploded through the old house's thin walls at full volume. Canned 1980s sitcom laughter, enthusiastic and artificial and impossible to ignore, blaring directly from the TV speakers.

Brad lunged for the remote, frantically stabbing at the volume button. Nothing happened. The batteries were dead. He threw it aside and scrambled toward the TV itself, but the laugh track kept going.

In the living room, everyone froze.

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA

Richard set down his scotch. "Is that... laughter?"

"No," Alex said immediately, his mind racing for explanations. "That's just... the radiator."

Carol tilted her head. "Your radiator sounds like a laugh track?"

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA

"Old house," Alex tried. "The pipes do weird things."

"That's definitely a television," Richard said, standing up. "Is someone else here?"

"No! No one else! Just me! Living alone! Very alone!" Alex was aware he was protesting too much and it was making him sound

increasingly unhinged. "It's probably... the neighbors! Sound travels! These old houses, very thin walls!"

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA

Carol was already moving toward the stairs. "That's coming from inside this house, Alex."

"Wait—" Alex tried to block them, stepping in front of Carol with his arms spread wide. "You really don't need to—"

But they were already past him, drawn by curiosity and the unmistakable sound of *Cheers* coming from the second floor. Alex followed, panic rising in his chest as he watched his carefully constructed plan disintegrate in real-time.

They reached Brad's door. The laugh track was clearly coming from inside.

Richard knocked. "Hello? Is someone in there?"

The laugh track cut off abruptly. Silence.

Richard opened the door without waiting for an answer.

Brad was standing in the middle of his room, frozen, holding the DVD-VHS combo player in both hands like he was an athleisure-clad catburglar. Cables dangled from the back from where he'd ripped it from the TV. Behind him, the TV showed static.

He stared at Richard and Carol. They stared back.

The silence stretched long enough to become uncomfortable, then transcended uncomfortable and entered the realm of absolute mortification.

"Hi?" Brad said finally, his perky voice bright and cheerful and completely at odds with the tension in the room.

Richard turned slowly to look at Alex, who was standing in the doorway in his blouse and heels and pink nails. "Alex. Who is this?"

Alex's brain, which had been running on fumes and panic for the last three hours, completely short-circuited. He opened his

mouth. Closed it. Looked at Brad. Looked at Richard and Carol. Needed an explanation, needed a story, needed something that would make this make sense.

"This is Bra... ndy," he heard himself say. "Brandy. My sister."

"Your sister?" Carol repeated slowly.

"Yes. My sister Brandy."

Brad-Brandy-raised his hand in a limp wave. "That's me, I'm... Brandy."

Richard was looking between them, his expression suggesting he was processing information and not liking the conclusions he was reaching. "You never told me you had a sister, Alex."

"She hasn't been in my life much until recently," Alex said, the words carrying an irony that only he and Brad could appreciate.

"Then why is she living here?" Carol asked, her social training clearly straining under the weight of this situation.

"I-I just moved in!" Brad said brightly. "I'm between jobs and needed a place to stay temporarily!"

"Between jobs," Richard repeated flatly.

"Between... gyms? I teach classes?" Brad gestured at himself like his outfit was evidence, which it was, though perhaps not the kind of evidence that helped their case.

Carol was studying Brad now, her eyes traveling over his face, his body, his whole presentation. "You look very familiar."

"I have one of those faces!" Brad said quickly. "Very generic! Common features!"

"No, not that. You look like..." Carol trailed off, squinting slightly. "Like someone I've seen before."

Alex felt his stomach drop. The family photos. The hallway full of family photos showing two sons, two brothers, no sisters anywhere. Carol was going to walk past them on her way out-had probably already noticed them on her way in-and there would be

no explaining why Brandy appeared nowhere in thirty years of documented family history.

Before anyone could pursue this line of questioning further, the smoke detector started screaming.

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP

Everyone rushed downstairs, drawn by the urgent mechanical shrieking that suggested something had gone catastrophically wrong. Black smoke was pouring from the kitchen, filling the living room, setting off the detector with increasing urgency.

Richard ran to open windows. Carol grabbed a dish towel and started fanning the smoke detector. Alex rushed to the kitchen and threw open the oven door, releasing a cloud of smoke so thick it had texture. The kind of smoke that made you question whether this was actually smoke or possibly the aurora borealis, at this time of day, in this part of the country, localized entirely within his oven.

The pot roast was beyond saving. It was charcoal. A meat-shaped carbon sculpture. The vegetables had become one with the pan, fused together through heat and time into something approaching a geological formation.

They all stared at it-the ruined dinner, the destroyed plan, the physical manifestation of how thoroughly this evening had gone wrong.

"Well," Richard said after a long moment. "Who wants burgers?"

"No, I can fix this," Alex pleaded.

"How?" Brad laughed. "How can you possibly? You have to be the world's worst cook!"

The change hit Alex like a door slamming open in his mind. Complete cooking knowledge flooded in-every technique, every temperature, every ratio and timing and chemical reaction that

transformed ingredients into food. He saw the pot roast with new eyes, understood exactly what had gone wrong: the temperature had been too high, the pan too small, the vegetables cut incorrectly. The marinade needed more acid. The sear should have happened first. The oven rack was positioned wrong.

He knew all of this now. Knew it completely, intimately, the way he knew his own name. He could make perfect pot roast. He could make anything. The knowledge sat in his brain like it had always been there, recipes and techniques and adjustments flowing through his consciousness.

"Alex?" Carol was looking at him with concern. "Are you alright?"

He turned away from the oven, his new knowledge making the disaster even more painful to witness. "I'm making a salad."

"A salad?" Richard sounded skeptical. "For dinner?"

"A **VERY** elaborate salad." Alex was already pulling ingredients from the refrigerator, his hands moving with newfound confidence. "You'll see."

The salad he plated fifteen minutes later looked like it belonged in a restaurant. Magazine-worthy. The kind of composed salad that pretentious food blogs would photograph from forty-seven angles.

They sat at the dining room table and ate in awkward silence. The salad was delicious in all the ways a salad isn't. The kind of thing that made you wonder why you'd ever ordered salad from a restaurant when apparently this was possible at home.

"This is excellent, Alex," Carol said, genuine surprise in her voice.

"Very impressive," Richard added, studying Alex like he was trying to figure out when his creative director had found time to attend culinary school.

"Thank you," Alex said.

Brad ate his salad in silence, aware that he'd just given Alex something valuable, something useful, something that might actually help him in the long run. He felt oddly guilty about that, though he wasn't sure why. Maybe because it was the first change that seemed like it might be positive rather than purely destructive.

Carol set down her fork and looked at Brad with a warm smile. "You're so naturally pretty, Brandy. You don't even need makeup."

It was meant as a compliment. A nice thing to say. The kind of small talk women made with each other to build rapport. Brad understood that, intellectually. But he also felt his stomach twist, his jaw clench, his whole body reject the adjective "pretty."

Alex, from across the table, saw Brad's expression and misread it entirely. "That's because she's completely useless about makeup. Doesn't know the first thing."

Makeup bloomed across Brad's face like time-lapse flowers opening. Foundation appeared, sheer and natural, evening out his skin tone. A hint of eyeshadow in neutral browns. Mascara lengthened his lashes. A touch of blush gave him a healthy glow. Lip gloss in a natural pink shade.

It was the kind of makeup that looked like "no makeup." Subtle, polished, professional. Every detail was perfectly applied, natural enough to seem effortless but precise enough to be undeniable.

But worse-much worse-was the knowledge that flooded Brad's mind. Color theory. Application techniques. Contouring, blending, highlighting. How to work with different skin tones, different face shapes, different features. Primers, foundations, concealers, every type of eyeshadow and every brush to apply them with. He knew makeup now. Knew it completely. Could do a full face in the dark if needed.

The knowledge sat in his brain next to sitcom trivia and journalism school and everything else that made him him, except this was new, foreign, wrong. He now knew seventeen different techniques for winged eyeliner. He could identify a Sephora from three blocks away. He understood the difference between 'dewy' and 'matte' finishes. This was hell, but a very well-contoured one.

Carol leaned forward, squinting at Brad's face. "Wait."

"What?" Brad's voice came out higher than intended.

"I could have sworn you weren't wearing makeup a minute ago."

Brad's heart pounded. "I was! I just... it's very natural. Natural look. That's my style."

Carol sat back, still studying him. "I suppose. You are very good at it. Well, I for one am glad to have a salad instead of a heavy pot roast. Us girls need to watch our figures, right?"

"Yes," Brad said, still chafing at the fact that he had to play "Brandy" around these strangers. "Watch our figures. Unlike Alex. He doesn't even have a figure to watch."

The change hit Alex immediately. Pressure in his chest. Tissue swelling, growing, pressing against the blouse beneath the apron. His waist cinched inward even more, the slacks pulling tighter. Hips widened, pushing against the fabric. Breasts developed under his blouse, A-cup at most, but undeniable. And he wasn't wearing a bra. The apron covered them for now, but if he took it off, the blouse would cling, the light pink fabric would show everything.

Alex jumped up from his chair in a panic. "Let me clear these!" He grabbed Carol's plate-she still had salad on it-then Richard's, then Brad's, stacking them clumsily. A fork clattered to the floor.

"Alex, I wasn't quite-" Carol started.

"I'll just be right back!" Alex was already moving toward the kitchen, plates clutched against his aproned chest, retreating before anyone could see, before anyone could offer to help, before the apron could shift and reveal what was underneath.

The kitchen door swung shut behind him. He set the plates in the sink with shaking hands, breathing hard.

"Are you okay?" Brad had followed him into the kitchen.

"No, I'm not okay!" Alex spun around, his voice tight with panic. "What were you thinking?"

"What was I thinking? You started it! The makeup comment—"

"You made a joke about me not having a figure!"

"Because Carol kept trying to bond with me about being girls! 'Us girls need to watch our figures'-I'm not a girl, Alex!"

"Well now I have a figure to watch, don't I? Thanks to you!"

"You gave me a full face of makeup! In the middle of dinner!"

"And you gave me TITS, Brad!"

A voice boomed out from behind them. "What the HELL is going on here?"

They both spun around. Richard stood behind them in the kitchen, Carol just behind him in the doorway. His face had gone from confused to something harder, something that suggested he'd overheard their argument.

Alex and Brad stared at him, both frozen.

"Richard—" Carol started.

"No. No, Carol." Richard's voice was firm. "Something is very wrong here. Alex, you show up looking completely different—the hair, the voice, the nails, wearing women's clothing. I swear you're even shorter somehow? Then there's a sister we've never heard about who looks familiar but you can't explain why. And now—" He gestured vaguely at them. "Now they're talking about giving each other breasts? What does that even mean?"

It was, Alex reflected, an excellent summary of the evening. If only he could respond with "magic contract" and have that be a satisfactory explanation. But even the truth sounded like a lie.

Carol tugged gently at Richard's arm. "Let's give them a moment. They're clearly upset—"

"Carol, this is—"

"A moment, Richard." Her voice was gentle but insistent. "In the living room."

Richard stared at Alex for a long moment, then nodded curtly. "Five minutes. You have five minutes to come out there with a good explanation of what's going on, or you can find yourself a new job, Alex." He turned and left, Carol guiding him out.

The kitchen door swung shut.

They stood in the kitchen, both breathing hard, both on the edge of complete breakdown.

"What do we tell them?!" Brad hissed, his perky voice making the panic sound like excited whispering.

"I don't know!"

"We can tell them the truth?"

"They'll think we're insane!"

"We can keep lying?"

"They already know we're lying!"

Alex was spiraling, his new breasts rising and falling rapidly with his breathing, his heels clicking on the linoleum as he paced. "This is all your fault! Why couldn't you just stay hidden?!"

"MY fault?!"

"Yes! Now you've made them suspicious of BOTH OF US because everything about this whole situation seems wrong to them!"

The words left Alex's mouth and reality hiccupped.

It was subtle-a shimmer in the air, like heat waves rising from pavement, like the world had skipped a frame in a film reel. Both of them felt it. A sense of wrongness, of displacement, of something fundamental shifting beneath their feet.

They froze, staring at each other.

"What was that?" Brad whispered.

"Did you feel that?"

"Something changed."

"But what?"

They stood in the kitchen, both feeling the lingering sensation of reality adjusting itself around them, neither understanding what had happened or what it meant.

"Okay," Brad said finally. "We have to go back out there."

"What do we tell them?"

"We have to tell them the truth."

"I'm so getting fired."

They steeled themselves. Opened the kitchen door. Walked back to the dining room, dreading the confrontation they were about to have, the explanations they couldn't give, the disaster that would unfold when Richard and Carol heard their story about a magical roommate agreement.

Richard and Carol were sitting at the table. Relaxed. Smiling. Sipping wine.

Like nothing had happened.

"There you are!" Richard said warmly. "We were wondering what was taking so long!"

Alex and Brad exchanged confused looks.

Alex approached carefully, like walking into a minefield. "So... about what we were discussing before..."

Carol tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

"When you were asking questions? About everything?"

Richard looked genuinely confused. "Questions? What questions?"

"We were just saying how nice it is to finally meet Brandy properly!" Carol smiled at Brad. "You've told us so much about your sister over the years, Alex. It's wonderful to put a face to the name!"

Brad felt the floor drop out from under him. Richard was nodding. "Yes! And Brandy, your fitness business sounds fascinating. You'll have to tell us more about training for the London marathon!"

Brad's voice came out strangled. "The... London marathon?"

"The one you ran last spring!" Richard said. "You mentioned it earlier, remember?"

No. Brad hadn't mentioned it. Brad had never run the London marathon. Brad had never been to London. Brad didn't train people for marathons. For anything, for that matter. Brad was a blogger who watched sitcoms and avoided exercise until a magical contract forced him to run every morning.

But Richard remembered it. Carol remembered it. They remembered Brandy telling them about it. They remembered meeting Brandy before. They remembered Alex talking about his sister.

Carol was still smiling. "And Alex, you look lovely tonight. That blouse is so perfect with your hair."

No questions about the nails. No suspicion about the clothing. No confusion about the photos. Everything was normal to them. Everything seemed right.

Alex tested it carefully. "So you're not... concerned? About anything?"

"Concerned about what?" Richard asked.

"About how I look?"

Carol laughed. "You look beautiful, honey. Very put-together."

They didn't remember being suspicious. They didn't remember the interrogation. Their memories had changed. Reality had adjusted. Everything about this situation now seemed completely normal to them-Carol and Richard visiting their colleague Alex and his sister Brandy for dinner.

Improbably, the evening continued pleasantly. Alex offered to make everyone coffee, and when he retreated to the kitchen he found a perfect tiramisu in the refrigerator. He stared at it for a long moment. He hadn't made tiramisu. He'd never made tiramisu in his life. Before tonight, Alex hadn't even been entirely sure what tiramisu was. Yet here it was, perfect and impossible and completely in line with how this evening was going.

He brought it out without comment.

The conversation over coffee and dessert was pleasant, normal. Discussion of the Mitchelson account, Carol asking Brandy about her fitness classes, Richard genuinely complimenting Alex and talking of promotions in his future. No tension. No suspicion. No questions about the earlier chaos.

Their guests left around 9:47pm, both thanking them warmly at the door. "That was a lovely evening, Alex. Everything was delicious! And Brandy, so wonderful to see you again! We should definitely do this more often!"

They drove away, happy and satisfied, completely convinced they'd just had a normal dinner with normal people in a normal house.

Alex and Brad stood in the doorway, watching the taillights disappear, neither speaking.

After a long moment, they closed the door.

"What the hell was that?" Alex asked finally, his voice quiet in the empty living room.

Brad shook his head. He felt numb. Hollowed out. Like if he thought about what had just happened for even one more second, he'd completely break down. "I have no idea. I'm going to bed."

He headed toward the stairs, desperate to escape this entire nightmare of an evening, desperate to stop thinking, desperate for unconsciousness. But as he passed through the hallway, something caught his eye. He stopped.

"Alex," Brad said slowly. "Look at the photos."

Alex came to stand beside him.

Their family photos had changed.

Where there had been two boys, Brad and Alex, there were now different images. Their parents standing with one son and one daughter. Alex as a child, platinum blonde even then, delicate and effeminate. Brandy as a child, brunette and athletic and tomboyish.

Every photo showed this version of history. Birthday parties with Alex and Brandy. School photos showing both of them. Family vacations with one son and one daughter. The photos documented a history that had never happened.

Brad pulled out his phone with shaking hands. Device name: Brandy's iPhone. Social media profiles: *Brandy Tate, Fitness Instructor*. Posts about training clients, marathon running, fitness classes. Client testimonials. Certifications. A whole professional history that had never existed.

Comments from friends calling him "Brandy," "Bran," "B." Years of documented conversations. Photos of him as Brandy, always female, always athletic, always this person he had never been.

"It rewrote me," Brad said quietly, his voice hollow. "Because we said I was your sister. Because we told them I was a fitness instructor. And then you complained about me making them

suspicious. Reality made it true. I'm not Brad anymore. Not to anyone except us."

Brad looked at his phone again. Female. Brandy. A sister he never was. A life he never lived. But everyone remembered it that way. Everyone except him.

Fury built in his chest.

"This is your fault," he said, voice shaking.

"What?"

"This is YOUR FAULT! Your desperate need to make everyone like you!"

"I was trying to save the dinner!"

"You erased me! I'm not even Brad anymore!"

"You erased yourself! You're the one who came out of your room!"

"Because you were FAILING!" Brad was yelling now, all the stress and fear and changes exploding out as rage. "You were wearing OVEN MITTS to hide your nails! You looked like an idiot!"

"I was handling it!"

"You were NOT handling it!"

They were both yelling, faces inches apart, years of sibling rivalry and recent trauma combining into pure fury.

"At least you still have your REAL NAME!" Brad shouted, voice breaking. "My entire life got erased!"

"I didn't ask for that!"

"And it's not even fair!" Brad gestured wildly at Alex. "Everyone still thinks you're a man! You're still Alex! How is that fair?"

"Brad -"

"It's ridiculous!" Brad was beyond rational thought now, the unfairness of it all pouring out. "Just look at you! The blonde hair, the blouse, the nails, the heels-nobody's going to believe you're a man anyway!"

The words hung in the air.

Silence.

Brad's eyes widened as he realized what he'd said. "Wait. No. I didn't mean—"

Too late.

Reality rippled again. Stronger this time. They both felt it washing over them like a wave, changing things, adjusting things, rewriting things.

Alex pulled out his phone with shaking fingers. Social media: Alexis Tate. All pronouns changed to she/her. Comments from coworkers using "she" and "her" and "Alexis." Email signature: *Alexis Tate, Creative Director*. Everything.

They both turned to look at the family photos again.

The photos had changed once more.

Now they showed their parents with two daughters. Alexis, platinum blonde and delicate. Brandy, brunette and athletic. Two sisters growing up together. No sons. No brothers. Just two girls in matching dresses, in family portraits, in birthday parties and graduations and all the documented moments of childhood.



They stood in the hallway, both transformed, both erased, both rewritten into people they had never been. The only witnesses to what they had actually been were each other.

The house settled around them with a creak. The 1970s décor bore silent, earth-toned witness. The pot roast, somehow, sat on the kitchen counter-perfectly cooked, beautifully browned, like it had never been burned at all.

Reality had adjusted. Everything was normal now.
To everyone but them.

NARRATOR (V.O.): Next time on *Tits for Tates*: The sisters discover that being women on paper creates whole new categories of problems. Workplace dynamics shift. The Swedish

twins return. Only a few complaints left. Everything to lose. Don't miss "Sisterhood of the Traveling Complaints"-same Tate time, same Tate channel.

~7~

Cougar Town

NARRATOR (V.O.): Previously, on Tits for Tates! The Tate brothers became the Tate sisters. Reality rewrote itself. Alex became Alexis, Brad became Brandy, and somewhere along the way, everyone forgot they were ever men. Everyone except them! Tonight: A date with destiny.

Living in a reality that had been rewritten around you was, Alexis Tate had discovered, remarkably similar to being the only person at a magic show who could see the wires. Everyone else gasped at the levitation while you sat there thinking "that's clearly a harness" and wondering if you were the one losing your mind.

It had been five days since the dinner party. Five days since reality performed the largest retcon in history, casually editing forty-three and forty-one years of personal history like a freshman with access to Wikipedia's edit function and no adult supervision.

Alexis Tate was forty-three years old, just like Alex had been. She was still Creative Director at McMann & Tate—Richard had been delighted with her performance at the dinner, had talked

about fast-tracking her toward VP—but the experience of being a woman in advertising was teaching her things she'd never noticed as Alex. The way junior designers would talk over her in meetings. The way clients would address questions to male colleagues even when she was leading the pitch. The way "assertive" had become "aggressive" and "confident" had become "bitchy" somewhere in the translation from male to female.

Her closet was filled with the clothes of a forty-three-year-old professional woman who had learned that "appropriate office wear" meant blouses with sensible necklines and slacks that didn't draw attention. Her blonde hair was cut in a practical pixie cut that required minimal styling—the kind of haircut you got when you'd stopped trying to turn heads and started trying to just get through the day.

The alimony payments had vanished, which would have been cause for celebration if they'd been replaced by anything other than "never existed in the first place." No ex-wives. No divorces. No romantic history at all, according to the careful absence of photos in her apartment and the complete lack of relationship questions from anyone at work. Alexis was, apparently, married to her career.

Brandy had discovered she was a senior CrossFit instructor at CorePower Studio. The serious kind of instructor who taught 6 AM classes to finance bros who wanted to pretend they were athletes and lunchtime sessions to stressed professionals who couldn't do a proper squat to save their lives.

The gym was full of young women who came in full makeup and matching Lululemon sets, more interested in getting the perfect gym selfie than actually working out. Brandy had watched three of them this morning spend twenty minutes posing by the weights they never actually lifted, giggling as they checked their Instagram engagement.

She'd found newspaper clippings in a box in the garage. Articles about her collegiate soccer records, her failed attempt as a professional athlete, certifications for a fallback career in personal training. A whole history she didn't remember living.

Brandy returned to the house on that fifth day, exhausted after teaching three classes that day but still somehow brimming with energy. Her body seemed to always want to be moving, to remain active even when her muscles screamed for relief.

She and Alexis had barely spoken since the dinner party. Every conversation was a minefield, every irritation a potential trigger for another complaint that could rewrite them further. Another loss, another piece of themselves rewritten by a contract that seemed determined to punish them for the cardinal sin of being siblings who didn't get along.

They were still furious with each other, each blaming their new sister for the changes to their lives. But they couldn't risk it, so they avoided each other. Came and went at different times. Left notes instead of talking. Kept their mouths shut and kept their distance.

Entering the house, Brandy found a note tucked in the mail slot. Simple white paper, casual handwriting.

Alexis & Brandy— We owe you dinner for saving Mittens! We'll be at Aqua tomorrow at night. Come meet us! It will be, as you Americans say, a date?—F & A

Alexis emerged from her room, wearing pajamas that Alex had never purchased. Pink with little flowers, because apparently that's what Alexis wore to bed.

"What's that?"

Brandy handed her the note.

Alexis read it. Her eyes widened. "A date?"

"That's what it says."

They stared at it in the kitchen, standing on opposite sides of the room—the maximum distance the space allowed, which was approximately four feet but felt like a demilitarized zone.

"We can't go," Alexis said, her breathy voice making the statement sound less definitive than she'd intended. Everything she said now sounded like pillow talk. She'd stopped taking phone calls from male clients. Too many had gotten the wrong idea.

"We have to go," Brandy said, her perky voice making it sound like she was inviting everyone to a juice cleanse.

"But we're—" Alexis gestured at herself, at Brandy, at reality as a general concept. "We're women now. And they're women. Why would they—"

"I don't know." Brandy felt something flutter in her chest that might have been hope or might have been delusion. "Maybe they're... into women?"

They stared at each other, trying to figure out if they were reading too much into two simple words or not enough.

"We should go," Brandy said finally.

"Yeah."

"Even if it's not—"

"Yeah."

Friday evening, Alexis dressed in what she considered appropriate for a nice dinner: a pale pink blouse with pearl buttons, paired with tailored black slacks. Added a pink cardigan because the evening might be cool. Sensible flats because heels at forty-three felt like an invitation to ankle injury. Her pixie-cut hair required minimal styling, which was one of its few benefits. A touch of lipstick, some mascara.

Brandy now owned exactly one category of clothing: activewear. She pulled on black leggings, her mint green cropped

hoodie with the zipper perpetually undone, and her white sneakers. It was what she'd worn to the grocery store, to coffee, to literally everywhere for the past five days because it was all she had. Her wardrobe had become a capsule collection of "woman who lives at the gym." She pulled her brown hair back into her usual ponytail. Minimal makeup.

The Uber was a silver Prius driven by a guy in his late twenties with a man bun—"Topher," according to the app—who spent the entire drive making conversation that walked the very fine line between friendly and creepy.

"You ladies going somewhere fun tonight?"

"Just meeting friends," Alexis said carefully.

"Friends, huh?" He glanced in the rearview mirror with the knowing look of someone who'd driven this route before, to this club, with women of a certain age dressed for a certain purpose. "Aqua's a young crowd, you know. Good for you, though. Never too late to get back out there."

The implication hung in the air like cheap cologne: *cougars on the prowl*.

Brandy and Alexis exchanged a look that contained volumes of unspoken horror.

Topher dropped them off at 9:03pm with a "have fun, ladies" that sounded like he was sending his divorced aunts to bingo night.

Aqua announced itself with bass so deep it could be felt in dental work. The building glowed toxic blue—not a natural blue, but the kind of blue that in nature usually means "stay away" or "this frog will kill you if you touch it." The sign pulsed with light that could probably be seen from the International Space Station.

"This is the dinner they promised us?" Brandy asked.

"Maybe they meant drinks?" Alexis said weakly.

"They specifically said dinner."

They exchanged a look. Neither of them knew how young people dated anymore.

The line to get in stretched down the block and moved with the speed of continental drift. Full of young, beautiful people in clothes that could charitably be described as "suggestions of fabric." Women in bandage dresses that defied physics and good judgment. Men in shirts with precisely three buttons undone, revealing chest hair groomed with the kind of attention usually reserved for topiary.

Brandy and Alexis joined the line and immediately felt out of place. After twenty minutes—during which time approximately three people had been allowed entry—they finally reached the front of the line.

The bouncer was a brick wall of a man in his thirties, built like someone who'd played college football and never quite let it go. He had a neck wider than most people's thighs and an expression of professional boredom that suggested he'd seen it all and been unimpressed by most of it.

"Club's full, ma'am," he said, his voice a rumble.

Alexis blinked. "What?"

He scanned them, his eyes traveling over Alexis's work clothes and Brandy's athletic wear. Behind them, two women in metallic dresses and six-inch heels swept past the rope without even stopping, waved through by the door person like visiting dignitaries.

"You just let them in! How can it be full?" Brandy demanded.

The bouncer sighed. "Look, this isn't that kind of club," he said, handing back their IDs.

"What kind of club?" Alexis asked.

"The kind where you dress like you're going to the office." He gestured at the people behind them in line. "Next!"

"Wait—" Brandy started.

"You're not getting in dressed like that. Next!"

They stepped aside, out of line, both stinging with humiliation.

"This is ridiculous," Alexis said, her voice tight. "I dressed up! This is a nice outfit! Maybe you could've worn something different?"

"What? It's your fault," Brandy shot back, defensive energy already rising. "You look like you're going to a PTA meeting. At least I tried to look casual!"

"Casual?" Alexis gestured at Brandy's athletic shoes. "You're wearing sneakers! To a nightclub! You look like you just finished teaching a class and came here directly!"

"Well you look like—"

But the changes were already beginning. The shift. The terrible accommodation. The roommate agreement reaching out to solve a problem no one had actually asked it to solve.

Alexis felt her silk blouse shimmer against her skin, the fabric tightening, the neckline plunging, sleeves shrinking. The blouse and slacks melted together, reforming into a single piece. A dress. A very short, tight dress that clung to every curve and left her legs bare from mid-thigh down.

She grabbed at her cardigan instinctively, pulling it closed against her chest, trying to cover the plunging neckline, the tight fabric, the exposure. But the cardigan was changing too. It shed off her shoulders completely, flowing to her hands and reforming as a small pink clutch purse, sparkly and frivolous.

Her practical flats reshaped beneath her feet. For a moment she felt herself falling, off-balance, and then suddenly she was taller—heels had added four inches to her height. Her weight shifted forward onto the balls of her feet, her calves flexing, her entire posture changing. She grabbed Brandy's arm to steady herself, feeling precarious.

Brandy couldn't be bothered to notice.

Her mint green hoodie had tightened against her torso, becoming a shiny thin spandex, rising up to expose her midriff. The hood disappeared, leaving a high-necked crop top in mint green with black trim.

Her leggings tightened, the fabric becoming a sleek and shiny leather-look material. Cutouts along the sides showed strips of skin from hip to ankle. The material was so tight it looked painted on, showcasing every curve of her legs and the bubble butt that had been the contract's complaint-induced gift. Her athletic shoes melted and reformed into heeled ankle boots—black leather with silver buckles, three-inch heels that added height she didn't need.

Both felt makeup blooming across their faces like flowers in time-lapse. Brandy's ponytail gained volume, became deliberately tousled with pieces framing her face. Her pixie cut styled itself, gaining volume and edge, the platinum blonde catching the light in a way that suggested "Karen who bought a convertible after her divorce."

In seconds, they'd gone from "women dressed for a casual evening" to "women in their forties trying desperately to look younger."

Alexis looked down at herself in horror. The pale pink dress was so short. So tight. She could see the entire length of her legs, pale and feminine, ending in heels that made her feel like she was constantly about to tip forward. The dress clung to her breasts, creating cleavage she'd never wanted. When she moved, she felt everything. The fabric sliding against her skin, the hem riding up with each step.

She clutched the pink purse as if it were a life preserver, feeling ridiculous.

Brandy touched her exposed stomach, feeling the cool air on skin that shouldn't be visible. The cutouts in her leather-look leggings made her hyperaware of her thighs. She took a step and felt the boots change her walk, felt her hips rolling differently, felt the mint green crop top exposing her midriff in a way that made her want to suck in the gut she no longer had.



"What—" Brandy touched her face, feeling makeup she hadn't applied. "Oh my god."

"Oh my god," Alexis repeated, staring at her exposed legs. "We complained. We triggered the contract. We—"

The bouncer glanced over at them. If he noticed anything had changed, he didn't show it. As far as he was concerned, here were

two women in their forties wearing clubwear, looking like they were trying to recapture their youth.

He gave them a slight nod, his lips quirking in what might have been amusement as he unhooked the velvet rope. "Have a good night, ladies."

They stumbled through the entryway, both in heels neither had worn before, both dressed in outfits that showed more skin than they'd shown in public in decades.

"We need to be more careful," Alexis hissed, her voice tight with barely controlled panic. "We can't keep triggering the agreement!"

"Stop talking!" Brandy shot back, tugging at her crop top. "Let's just get inside."

Inside Aqua, Alexis felt approximately one thousand years old.

The music was loud enough to liquify internal organs. Glass installations caught the light like frozen waves. Chrome fixtures reflected everyone into infinity.

A young woman in a dress that was more concept than clothing bumped into Alexis, looked her up and down with the kind of pitying expression usually reserved for injured animals, and said to her friend: "Did you see that outfit? Someone's mom got lost."

Her friend giggled. "At least she's trying?"

They disappeared into the crowd. Poor middle-aged ladies, their faces said. Trying so hard.

A group of men in expensive-looking shirts pushed past, one of them doing a double-take at Brandy's outfit. He elbowed his friend, and they both laughed. "Check it out. Midlife crisis in leather pants."

His friend: "Money says she asks someone to show her how TikTok works."

They disappeared toward the VIP section, still laughing.

Alexis felt her face burning. She knew what they were thinking. She'd thought the same thing when she was younger, when she saw women her current age trying to dress like teenagers.

Pathetic.

"This was a mistake," Brandy said, grabbing Alexis's arm. "We need to leave. We don't belong here."

"This is so humiliating," Alexis agreed. "I feel like someone's mom who wandered into the wrong party."

"You look like someone's mom who wandered into the wrong party." The words came out before Brandy could stop them. Sharp, mean, the old pattern reasserting itself under stress.

Alexis' eyes flashed. "Oh, and you look so much better? You look like you're having a midlife crisis! Like you raided your daughter's closet!"

"At least I don't—"

And then they both felt it.

The transformation started in their faces. Alexis felt it first. A stretching, a smoothing, like invisible hands were pulling her skin taut. The fine lines around her eyes disappeared. The slight softness under her chin firmed. Her face became rounder, fuller, the way faces are when you're in your early twenties and your bone structure hasn't settled yet.

Brandy felt the same shift. Her face smoothing, rounding, the gray hairs at her temples darkening back to brown.

But it didn't stop at their faces.

Alexis felt her pixie cut growing. Felt hair lengthening against her neck, against her shoulders, the strands multiplying and extending like time-lapse footage. It kept going, past her

shoulders, down her back, becoming longer and longer until it reached her waist. The weight of it pulled at her scalp.

Brandy's ponytail exploded with length, her brown hair cascading down her back until it reached her hips. She felt it growing, felt each strand extending. The kind of hair that should have been heavy enough to give her neck strain but somehow wasn't. She developed natural highlights, honey and caramel tones weaving through the brown.

And their bodies.

Alexis felt her skin tightening everywhere. The slight softness that came with forty-three years of living just... firmed. Her body became tauter, tighter, more resilient. Her breasts sat higher, firmer. Her stomach flattened. Not just flat, but the kind of flat that suggested she'd never heard of carbohydrates. Everything about her body became more elastic, more bouncy. The way bodies are in your early twenties when they can stay up all night and bounce back by noon.

Brandy felt the same transformation. Her instructor-fit body became tighter, more elastic. Her skin glowed with youth. A layer of softness covered the sinewy muscle underneath, leaving her with a body that screamed "wellness coach" instead of "crossfit enthusiast."

The whole transformation took maybe ten seconds.

When it stopped, Alexis glanced down at the ID in her hand, which she'd been clutching since the bouncer check, and hadn't thought to put away yet. The photo had changed. A fresh-faced twenty-four-year-old blonde woman with long platinum waves looked back at her.

Name: **LEXI TATE DOB: March 15, 2002**

Not Alexis. Lexi. Twenty-four year old Lexi.

The universe had clearly decided Alexis was too mature, too old-sounding, someone who had been named after a soap opera

character from the Eighties. Lexi was what you called a twenty-four-year-old in a short pink dress with long blonde hair and a sparkly clutch.

Lexi was young. Lexi was fun. Lexi went to clubs and took shots and made terrible decisions.

Brandy was staring at her own ID, her long brown ponytail bouncing around her shoulders as she looked down.

Name: **BRITTANY TATE DOB: August 8, 2004**

Not Brandy. Brittany. Twenty-two year old Brittany. Because Brandy sounded like someone's aunt who sent birthday cards with five dollars inside. Brittany was perky. Brittany did hot yoga and posted gym selfies. Brittany definitely didn't have a blog about sitcom history and a dead wife.



They looked at each other. Two women who'd been in their forties five minutes ago, now looking like they had student loans and had never heard of the Clinton administration or what dial-up internet sounded like.

Lexi touched her hair, felt the impossible length of it. It was everywhere—falling in her face, brushing against her bare shoulders, sliding against the pink fabric of her dress.

"Oh god," she whispered.

And then the attention started. The switch had flipped instantly. One moment they were invisible middle-aged women. The next, they were magnets.

A guy materialized at Lexi's side. Mid-twenties, expensive watch, predatory smile. "Hey! Can I buy you a drink?"

"I—" Lexi started.

Another guy appeared next to Brittany. "You ladies here alone? Want some company?"

"We're waiting for—" Brittany tried.

A third guy pushed between them, clearly drunk. "Oh shit, you two are gorgeous! Are you models? You look like models!"

More men were circling now, drawn by the presence of two beautiful young women who looked lost and available. Hands reached out, touching shoulders, lower backs, trying to guide them toward the bar, toward the dance floor, toward anywhere these men wanted them to go.

"No thank you," Lexi said, trying to pull away, but her heels made her unsteady. She felt panic rising in her throat.

"Lexi! Brittany!"

Two voices cut through the chaos, loud and authoritative. Male voices. Deep, with a particular Scandinavian accent. The crowd of interested men parted like a wave.

Two men pushed through the crowd of circling predators. Tall, blonde, objectively attractive in that Nordic way that

suggested they were probably related to Vikings. They reached the sisters and immediately put themselves between the Tates and the other men.

"There you are!" the taller one said, pulling Lexi against his side. "We were starting to worry!"

"It is so crowded!" the other one added, his arm going around Brittany's shoulders. "Did you catch traffic?"

The circling men backed off immediately, recognizing the universal signal of "these women are taken." They dispersed back into the club, already looking for easier targets.

Lexi and Brittany stood there, stunned, trying to process what had just happened. Who were these men who'd rescued them, who were now grinning down at them with obvious delight?

"We're so glad you made it!" the taller one said. "We've been looking forward to this all week! I told Mittens that he owed you—"

Mittens.

The word clicked everything into place.

"Oh my god," Lexi whispered, staring up at the man whose arm was around her. "You're—"

"Fredrik," he supplied helpfully. "He is Anders. It is okay, even our own mother cannot tell us apart."

Fredrik. Anders.

Not Freja and Astrid.

The reality rewrite that they'd triggered at the dinner party hadn't just transformed the Tates, it had adjusted everyone in their orbit. The beautiful Swedish women who'd invited them to dinner became beautiful Swedish men, because they'd promised to take the Tates out to dinner and the Tates were now women. Reality obviously valued consistency above all else.

Lexi stared at Fredrik, then at Anders. "How many people?" she whispered. "How many people did we change?"

Brittany leaned over to her sister, eyes wide. "It's like they recast the characters mid-season! Same people, different actors. Usually happens when one of the original cast members has a contract dispute or—"

"Can you NOT right now?" Lexi hissed.

Fredrik and Anders exchanged amused looks. "You two are funny," Anders said, squeezing Brittany's shoulder. "Come on, we have the best booth in the place!"

They let themselves be led to the booth, the twins' arms still around them, and settled into the curved leather seating. The booth was intimate, designed for couples. One twin on each end, one Tate sister tucked between them and the wall. Split seating. No easy escape.

They were on a date.

With men.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

The booth was designed for intimacy, which was unfortunate because intimacy was the last thing either Tate wanted. Fredrik slid in and patted the seat next to him. Anders mirrored him on the opposite side. One twin per Tate. Divide and conquer.

"We already ordered!" Fredrik announced as fruity cocktails materialized. "To new friends! And to Mittens!"

They clinked. Lexi sipped. It tasted like a mistake she was about to make worse.

"Actually," she said, setting down her drink. "I just remembered we have work early tomorrow. Both of us. We should probably—"

"Tomorrow's Saturday?" Anders pointed out gently.

Lexi blinked. "Right. Saturday. I meant—"

"You must be tired from the week!" Fredrik jumped in, concerned. "But just stay for one drink? We just got here!"

Despite her best efforts, Lexi felt her people-pleasing compulsion take over. She settled deeper into the booth. Her smile felt automatic, performative, the kind of smile that said I'm having a good time even when every cell in her body was screaming to flee.

Brittany glared at her from across the table.

"So!" Anders leaned forward with genuine interest. "Tell us about yourselves! What do you do for work?"

"Brittany's a fitness instructor!" Fredrik jumped in before anyone could answer. "I follow her Instagram. Those workout videos are intense!"

"Oh. Thanks." Brittany's tone suggested she'd rather be anywhere else. Including a root canal. Or a tax audit. Or both simultaneously.

"And Lexi, you work in...?" Anders looked at her expectantly.

Lexi opened her mouth. Felt her brain searching for the answer like a computer trying to load a corrupted file. *Creative Director* was right there, trying to come out, but the second she reached for it her brain rejected it completely. It felt wrong, like claiming she was an astronaut or the Queen of England. She was twenty-four. Twenty-four-year-olds weren't Creative Directors.

So what was she?

Her brain spun, searching, coming up blank. The silence stretched. Everyone was looking at her.

"Marketing!" Brittany jumped in.

"—advertising," Lexi supplied at the same time.

Fredrik's smile didn't waver. "Marketing and advertising! That's great!"

"What kind of advertising?" Anders asked.

Lexi's mind went blank. "Pet food?"

"Fashion," Brittany said simultaneously.

They both froze.

Anders looked between them. "Pet food fashion?"

"It's a niche market," Lexi said weakly.

"Very niche," Brittany agreed, kicking her under the table.

Lexi kicked back harder.

Anders turned to Brittany, desperate for a simpler topic.

"Being a personal trainer must be rewarding?"

"It's fine," Brittany said shortly.

Lexi kicked her under the table. *Be nice. They're being nice.*

Brittany kicked back. *Stop kicking me.*

"Just fine?" Anders seemed surprised. "On socials you're so passionate about health—"

"She's not that passionate," Lexi muttered before she could stop herself.

Brittany's head snapped around. "Excuse me?"

"I just mean—" Lexi caught herself. *Don't criticize. Don't engage.* "Nothing. You're very passionate."

"I'm adequately passionate," Brittany said through gritted teeth. Her foot found Lexi's shin again.

"Do you help each other?" Anders asked. "You two could collaborate! Brittany could use her platform, Lexi could help with the marketing strategy—"

"We don't really work together," Brittany said shortly.

"Oh." Anders looked surprised. "But you're sisters, and—"

"We like to keep work and family separate," Lexi jumped in quickly, trying to smooth over Brittany's bluntness. She smiled at Anders, a big, accommodating smile that made her face hurt. "It's healthier that way! Boundaries!"

"That's very healthy," Fredrik said approvingly.

Brittany made a sound that might have been agreement or might have been choking on her cosmo.

"That makes sense," Anders said generously. "Are you close? You seem very different."

"We're extremely close," Lexi said warmly.

"Not particularly," Brittany said at the same time.

Another pause.

"We're... working on it," Lexi amended with another bright smile. Under the table, her foot found Brittany's. *Stop being rude.*

Brittany's return kick was harder. *Stop being fake.*

"That's good," Fredrik said, clearly unsure how to interpret any of this. "Fredrik and I are very close. We do everything together."

"Everything?" Brittany's tone suggested this was a form of mental illness.

"Well, not everything," Anders laughed. "But we're close. We talk every day. Support each other."

"That's... great," Lexi managed, trying to imagine a universe where she and Brittany talked every day voluntarily. And managed not to fundamentally alter the other one when doing so.

"Do you have similar interests?" Anders asked.

"Not at all," the Tates both said in unison.

Finally, agreement.

"That's healthy!" Fredrik assured them. "Anders and I are very different too. I'm more social, he's more serious—"

"I'm plenty social," Anders protested.

"You spent last weekend alphabetizing your books!"

"Enough! We must noticker here in front of the sisters."

"You are right!" Fredrik agreed. "Do youicker like this? What drives you crazy about each other?"

Warning lights flashed in Lexi's mind.

"Nothing!" Lexi said quickly, trying to change topics.

"Everything," Brittany said simultaneously.

They both froze.

"Well, not everything," Lexi amended desperately. "Just normal sister stuff!"

"She's a people-pleaser," Brittany said dismissively.

"At least I'm not a—" Lexi bit off the insult before she said "bitch." Her foot connected with Brittany's shin under the table, harder this time. *No complaints, remember?*

Brittany kicked back. *FINE*. The cosmos sloshed dangerously.

"Sisters!" Fredrik laughed, oblivious to the mounting violence happening below table level. "Always fighting but always loving each other."

"So much love," Lexi said through clenched teeth.

"Just overflowing with love," Brittany agreed, her eyes promising murder.

"What are your parents like?" Anders asked innocently.

Oh, fuck.

"Dead," they both said in unison.

"Oh!" Fredrik looked stricken. "I'm so sorry, I didn't—"

"It's fine," Lexi said quickly.

"So you two only have each other," Anders said gently. "That must make your relationship even more important."

"Super important," Lexi said, glaring at Brittany.

"The most important," Brittany added, glaring back.

"That's beautiful," Fredrik said with genuine emotion. "When you only have one person, you have to cherish them."

Lexi's shin was throbbing. Brittany's toes were crushed in her heeled boots. They were both approximately three seconds from saying something that would trigger another transformation.

"We should all hang out more!" Fredrik suggested brightly. "The four of us. We could go hiking! Or to the beach! Or to the—"

"Bathroom!" Lexi announced, sliding out of the booth so fast she nearly fell in her heels. "I need to use the bathroom."

"Me too," Brittany was already moving. "Girl emergency. Very urgent. We'll be right back."

They fled before the twins could respond.

Once in the bathroom, Lexi whirled on her sister. "Stop contradicting me!"

"Stop giving wrong answers!" Brittany shot back. "Pet food fashion?"

"I didn't know what to say! I don't know what I do! Every time I tried to say Creative Director my brain said 'that's not right' but it didn't give me a replacement!"

"So you said pet food?"

"It was the first thing that came to mind!"

"We can't keep doing this," Brittany said, pressing her hands against the sink. "Every question is a potential trigger. And they want to hang out MORE. They want to go to the beach, Lexi. Where we'll have to wear swimsuits. That's assuming we even make it through tonight without triggering the contract again."

"I know." Lexi leaned against the wall. "This is a disaster. But we can't just leave!"

"Why not? You want to stay here?"

"No, but—" Lexi struggled to articulate what she was feeling. "They're nice! They invited us! They're being so sweet and leaving now would be incredibly rude!"

"Stop being FAKE!" Brittany's voice rose. "Sitting there with that plastic smile, pretending to be interested in their boring stories about Sweden and—"

"They're being kind to us!"

"So? That doesn't mean you have to sit there performing like a trained seal! 'That sounds wonderful!' 'Communication is so important!' It's pathetic, Lexi. You're pretending to care about

them when you don't. You're lying to them. You're not actually interested in—"

The shift hit Lexi mid-breath.

She felt it in her skull. That terrible rewiring. Something fundamental changing, like switches flipping in her brain.

And suddenly Fredrik's face was in her mind. His smile. His laugh. The way he'd looked at her with genuine warmth.

And she realized she wanted him to keep looking at her like that.

"Oh my god," she breathed.

"What?" Brittany looked suspicious.

Lexi turned to stare at her sister. At the person who'd just been sitting at that table being rude. Being dismissive. Being cruel to Fredrik and Anders who'd been nothing but sweet and kind and—

"You just—" Lexi's voice shook. "You just changed me."

"What are you talking about?"

"The agreement!" Lexi's hands clenched into fists. "You complained about me pretending to be interested in them. And now I'm—" She swallowed hard. "I'm not pretending anymore."

Brittany's eyes widened. "Oh shit."

"Yeah. Oh shit." Lexi's voice was getting louder. "And you know what? Now that I actually CARE about them? I can see exactly how rude you've been! Sitting there sulking like a child, giving one-word answers, making it obvious you don't want to be here—"

"Lexi—"

"They're nice, Brittany! They're genuinely kind and sweet and they invited us out and they're trying so hard and you can't even be bothered to be civil! You're sitting there being deliberately rude and ruining everything—"

"Stop—"

"You're not interested in them at all! You don't even care! You're just being difficult and—"

The shift hit Brittany like a freight train.

She gasped, her hand going to her chest. Felt the same terrible sensation Lexi had just felt. Her orientation rewiring. Her attraction to women fading, being replaced with—

"Oh god," she whispered.

"Yeah," Lexi said, her voice hollow. "How does it feel?"

They stared at each other in the bathroom mirror. Two women who'd just destroyed another part of each other. Again. Because they couldn't help themselves.

"We should go back," Brittany said finally, her voice hollow.

"Yeah."

They walked back to the booth in silence, where Fredrik and Anders were waiting, both smiling when they saw them return.

"Everything okay?" Fredrik asked.

Lexi felt something flutter in her stomach when she looked at him. Something warm. Something that made her notice his shoulders, his smile, the concern in his blue eyes.

"Everything's fine," she heard herself say, sliding back into the booth next to him, and when his arm went around her shoulders, she leaned into it instead of pulling away.

Across the table, Brittany was doing the same thing with Anders. Smiling at something he said. Her whole body language changed.

Fredrik was talking about something—Sweden, his childhood, something—and Lexi was barely listening because she was too busy noticing things about him. The way his hands moved. The warmth of his body. How good his cologne smelled.

Stop it, she told herself desperately. This isn't real. You're not actually attracted to him.

But it felt real. When his hand found hers on the table, fingers lacing together, she felt butterflies.

And the worst part was that she liked it.

NARRATOR (V.O.): Next time on *Tits for Tates*: Trapped in an elevator. Trapped by each other. And trapped by four decades of being siblings who never learned when to stop. The endgame approaches. Don't miss the shocking season finale—same Tate time, same Tate channel!

[END EPISODE 7]

~8~

Bottled Blonde

TONIGHT AT 8PM

TITS FOR TATES

"The Final Complaint"

ALL NEW - DON'T MISS THE FINAL EPISODE

NARRATOR (V.O.): Previously on *Tits for Tates*: The sisters went on a date with twins who were no longer twins in the female sense. And somewhere between the cosmos and the cologne, Lexi and Brittany discovered they were now attracted to men. Whether they wanted to be or not. Tonight, on the season finale: An elevator. A fight. And thirty complaints that end everything.

The research had taken all night. Partly because finding supernatural lawyers on the internet was harder than it sounded, and partly because Lexi couldn't stop thinking about Fredrik's mouth on hers.

They'd stayed at the club until 1am. Danced. Let the twins buy more drinks. Let them pull them close in the booth. Let them kiss them. Actual kissing, with tongue and hands and the kind of heat that made everything else disappear. Felt attraction that was completely real and completely wrong and completely impossible to fight.

When Fredrik suggested going back to his place around 12:30, Lexi had almost said yes. Would have said yes, if Brittany hadn't grabbed her hand under the table and squeezed hard enough to hurt. Brittany was right. If they let things go further, eventually the twins would realize that they weren't fully women, at least not down there below the waist where dates between attractive twentysomethings often led.

They'd made excuses. Promises to text soon. Extracted themselves from the booth and the twins' arms and made it to an Uber that felt like a getaway car.

They hadn't spoken the entire ride home. Hadn't spoken when they reached the house. Had retreated to separate rooms with the mutual understanding that they'd both nearly crossed a line they couldn't uncross.

So Lexi researched instead of sleeping. Poured her panic into Google searches and blog posts and increasingly desperate inquiries until she found page forty-seven of a Reddit thread titled "Magical Contracts - Real Stories or Urban Legends?" which had led her down a rabbit hole that eventually pointed to a name: Solomon Winters, Esq.

Supernatural Law. Paranormal Contract Disputes. Curses, Hexes, and Binding Agreements. Available by appointment only.

The website looked like it had been designed in 1997 and forgotten about. But the testimonials were promising, if deeply weird.

Mr. Winters got me out of a deal with a crossroads demon. Five stars!

Successfully broke my grandmother's curse. Would recommend!

Helped me terminate a blood oath. Very professional.

It was either real or the most elaborate scam on the internet. At this point, Lexi was willing to try anything.

Brittany had stumbled into the kitchen at 6:23am, hungover and searching for the coffeemaker, her hair still perfect in her high ponytail. She found Lexi hunched over her laptop like it contained the secrets of the universe.

"I found someone," Lexi said without preamble. "A lawyer. He specializes in magical contracts."

"That's a thing?"

"Apparently. Maybe. Whatever, I'm willing to try anything at this point. Before I go on another date with a man."

They'd called at 9am, the earliest the website said to contact. A receptionist with a voice that suggested she'd seen some things answered and scheduled them for 10:30am.

Now they stood in the lobby of an office building downtown, the kind of building that had been nice in 1982 and had been coasting on that reputation ever since. Marble floors that had

seen better decades. Elevators with brass that needed polishing. A directory board that still used those little plastic letters you had to slide in by hand.

Suite 1847: WINTERS & ASSOCIATES - SUPERNATURAL LAW

They stepped into the elevator. Lexi pressed 18. The doors closed with the kind of mechanical wheeze that suggested the elevator was held together by optimism and outdated safety codes.

They stood on opposite sides of the elevator car, as far apart as six feet of space allowed. The awkward silence was heavy enough to have its own gravitational pull.

"So," Brittany said finally. "Last night was—"

"We're not talking about last night."

"I'm just saying, the way you were looking at Fredrik—"

"We're NOT talking about it."

The elevator climbed. Floor numbers ticked by. 7... 8... 9...

Brittany shifted her weight, adjusting her high-waisted leggings with strategic mesh cutouts along the thighs. She'd grabbed a matching set: mint green sports bra and shorts from Gymshark, then added a top because even she knew you couldn't meet a lawyer in just a sports bra. The shirt was cropped, naturally, perpetually slid off one shoulder, and had *SLAY ALL DAY* printed across the chest in rose gold letters. Her entire wardrobe had transformed into variations on this theme, matching sets in jewel tones, leggings with cutouts and mesh panels, sports bras that were more fashion statement than function, crop tops with motivational phrases. Everything designed to be both workout-ready and Instagram-worthy.

Lexi wore high-waisted jeans that hugged every curve, a cropped pink sweater that showed a strip of midriff, and ankle

boots with a modest heel. Her hair was styled in loose waves, her makeup perfectly applied. The kind of outfit a twenty-four-year-old woman would wear when she wanted to look cute but also put-together. Her closet was full of similar outfits now—trendy pieces from fast fashion brands, things designed to catch attention.

11... 12... 13...

"Do you think he can actually help?" Brittany asked.

"I don't know. Maybe. If any of this is even real."

"It's real. We're living it."

"I know we're living it. I mean if he's real. If supernatural lawyers are actually a thing or if we're about to waste a consultation fee on someone who's going to tell us to sage the house and think positive thoughts."

14... 15... 16...

The elevator lurched.

Stopped.

The lights flickered once, twice, then stabilized at a dim glow. The floor number display showed nothing. They were stuck between 16 and 17, the liminal space between floors where elevators go to die.

"No," Lexi said. "No no no, not now."

Brittany jabbed the button for 18. Nothing happened. She tried the button for the lobby. Still nothing. The door-open button. The alarm. The emergency call button.

None of them responded.

"We're stuck," Brittany said.

"I can see that."

"In an elevator."

"Yes, Brittany. We're stuck in an elevator. Thank you for that astute observation. Very helpful."

They stood there in the dim light, trapped in six feet of metal and poor maintenance, and felt the weight of what this meant settling over them like a blanket made of doom.

Stuck together. In an enclosed space. Unable to escape.

"Don't talk," Lexi said. "Just—don't."

Silence stretched between them. Seconds became a minute. One minute became two.

The elevator was quiet except for a faint mechanical hum that suggested something was working but probably shouldn't be. The air was stale. The temperature was climbing. Not dramatically, but enough to notice. Enough to make the space feel smaller.

Brittany tried to lean quietly against the wall, but she was full of energy that had nowhere to go. Her ponytail swung forward, and she pushed it back. Crossed her arms. Uncrossed them. Shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

"Can you stand still?" Lexi said.

"I'm just—"

"You're fidgeting. Can you not fidget?"

"It's not like I'm doing it on purpose."

"Well, it's distracting."

Brittany went still. Stared at the elevator doors. Counted to ten. Made it to eight before the words started bubbling up. "You know what this is, right?"

"What what is?"

"This. The stuck elevator. Us trapped together. It's a bottle episode."

"A what?"

"A bottle episode. It's when a show—you know, when they have a limited budget or need to save money, so they do an episode that takes place in one location with just the main characters. Like that *Community* episode where they're all stuck in

the study room, or the one from *Friends* where they're all late to Ross's thing, or that episode of *Cheers* where—"

"Can you STOP?" Lexi's voice rose, frustration exploding out. "Can you stop with the constant sitcom commentary?! Every single thing that happens, you have to—you have to make it about some TV show! We're trapped in an elevator and our lives are falling apart and it is literally the most annoying thing about you!"

The words echoed in the small space.

Silence.

Then reality hiccupped.

Brittany felt it immediately. Something in her head shifting, reorganizing, like files being moved in a cabinet she couldn't access. Information disappearing. Knowledge vanishing. Preferences realigning.

Cheers. *Friends.* *Community.* *Seinfeld.* The names she'd just said meant nothing now. Empty words. She tried to remember plots, episodes, characters. Nothing. The entire catalog of classic sitcoms that had been her obsession, her comfort, her coping mechanism for three years after Hannah died, just... gone.

Replaced by something else. Something brighter, louder, more immediate.

She could tell you everything about the last three seasons of *The Bachelor*. Who went home in week four. Which couple had the controversial Fantasy Suite decision. She knew about the Kardashians. All of them, their relationships, their businesses, their latest feuds. *Love Island* drama. *Real Housewives* franchises in seven cities. Every celebrity breakup and makeup in the last six months.

Reality TV. Celebrity gossip. Pop culture in its most immediate, disposable form.

But sitcoms? The thing that had defined her for years? Blank. Empty. Gone.

"What did you do?" Brittany's voice shook. "What did you DO to me?"

Lexi stared at her, realizing too late what she'd triggered. "I didn't mean—"

"I can't—" Brittany grabbed her head with both hands. "*Seinfeld*. Say something about *Seinfeld*."

"What?"

"Just say something about the show! Any episode! The one with—"

Nothing. The show was a blank space where knowledge used to be.

"Oh my god," Brittany whispered. "You took it. You took all of it."

"I didn't know that would—"

"You took the only thing I had left!" Brittany's voice cracked, tears forming. "After Hannah died, that was all I had! Those shows, those stupid shows, they were—they were safe! They were predictable! And you just—"

Fury replaced devastation. Pure, incandescent rage at what had been stolen.

"Fine," Brittany said, her voice cold. "You want to hurt me? Let's hurt each other."

She looked at Lexi with calculation, searching for something that would land. Something that would hurt just as much.

"No," Lexi begged. "No, please—"

"Your advertising career," Brittany said slowly, clearly. "Is so boring."

Reality reached out again.

Lexi felt the change happening. Memories shifting. Her degree from Northwestern, gone. The campaigns she'd led,

erased. The awards she'd won, disappeared. McMann & Tate, the agency she'd worked at, the respect she'd earned, all of it simply ceased to exist.

Replaced by something new. Smaller. Less.

She'd never gone into advertising. Never climbed that corporate ladder. She'd gotten an associate's degree in cosmetology and taken a job as a receptionist at Bella Vista Salon & Spa making \$15 an hour answering phones and booking appointments for women who had the careers she'd never have.

"You bitch," Lexi hissed. "You absolute—"

She looked at Brittany, searching for something equally devastating. Found it in the analytical mind that had made Brad good at his job, that had let him write detailed analyses of sitcom structure and cultural impact.

"You're too smart for your own good," Lexi said, the words sharp as knives.

Brittany felt her intelligence drain away like water through a sieve. Not all of it—she could still think, still function—but the sharp analytical edge was gone. The ability to see patterns, to analyze structure, to think critically about narrative and theme and meaning. All of it smoothed away into something simpler. Easier. Less.

She could tell you about the Kardashians. Could remember workout routines and meal prep schedules. Could calculate macros and design fitness programs. But ask her to analyze anything deeper than surface level, and there was just... nothing there.

The ditzy fitness instructor. The bubbly gym girl. Brittany the airhead.

"You made me stupid," Brittany said, her voice small and horrified. "You made me—"

"You took my career!" Lexi shouted back.

"You took my BRAIN!"

They stood there, both breathing hard, both furious and devastated and ready to keep going.

Because that's what they did. That's what they'd always done. One hurt, the other hurt back, forever and ever, tit for tat until there was nothing left.

"You know what?" Brittany said, her new vapid voice making the cruelty somehow worse. "It was always so pathetic. How you couldn't make a marriage last. Two tries and you still couldn't keep anyone interested. You don't care about marriage enough."

The change was immediate and comprehensive.

Lexi's ambitions dissolved completely. She'd never wanted a career, that was absurd. What she wanted, what she'd always wanted, was to find the right man. Get married. Be a wife. That was the goal. The only goal that mattered.

Her clothes shifted on her body. The trendy clothes reformed, merging into a pale pink fit-and-flare dress that cinched at her waist and flared over her hips, hitting at mid-thigh. Her ankle boots transformed into nude heels with a modest height. She was a picture of perfect, classic femininity.

She'd been working at the salon for three years, and every day was just another opportunity to meet someone. Every male customer was evaluated as potential husband material. Every conversation was an audition. Her apartment was covered in bridal magazines. Her Pinterest was nothing but wedding boards. Her every thought oriented around finding him, marrying him, becoming Mrs. Someone.

Lexi felt the shift and recognized what she'd become. Saw herself from the outside for one horrible moment before the new thoughts settled in and made it feel normal.

"At least I'm trying to find someone!" she shot back, her breathy voice shaking with fury. Her eyes scanned Brittany's

body, looking for the easy target. The obvious attack. "Your boobs are too small to land a man anyway!"

Brittany felt the change in her chest immediately. Her modest breasts began to swell. Not dramatically at first, but steadily, filling out the fabric, pushing against the compression. They kept growing, became heavier, fuller, until the sports bra was straining and her cleavage threatened to escape its confines.

She looked down at her new chest—probably a D cup, maybe larger—and felt the weight of them throwing off her center of balance.

"Oh yeah?" Brittany shot back, because subtlety was dead and they were in the nuclear options now. "Well YOUR boobs are too small too!"

Lexi's chest swelled to match. Her modest bust filled out rapidly, pushing against her dress, the fabric straining. She felt the weight pulling at her shoulders, the way her posture had to adjust.

They stared at each other's transformed chests with matching expressions of horror and rage.

"You know what your problem is?" Lexi said, breathing hard. "You hide. You always cover up. You have this rockin' bod and you just—you waste it wearing those stupid hoodies!"

Brittany's workout clothes transformed instantly. Her leggings shrank shorter and shorter until they turned into booty shorts that barely covered anything. The oversized white top evaporated off her body in a wisp of smoke. The sports bra remained—mint green with thin straps and a plunging V-neck that showed off her enlarged chest—but now it was the only thing covering her top half. The fabric was minimal, decorative rather than functional, the kind of thing worn for aesthetics rather than actual support.

"At least I HAVE a body to show off!" Brittany shouted, gesturing at her exposed midriff and barely-covered chest. "You—you've got no ass! It's completely flat!"

Lexi felt her rear expand immediately. Her relatively modest behind pushed outward, rounded, became a pronounced bubble butt that made her jeans, already very tight, border on the obscene. The kind of butt that would make sitting in her receptionist chair an adventure in spatial awareness.

The sisters were both breathing hard now. Both transformed. Both furious. Both unable to stop. But what else remained to be changed?

"You—" Lexi started, then stopped. Searched for the next insult. The next wound to inflict. Found the worst one possible. "You're not even a REAL woman!"

Time seemed to freeze.

Brittany felt it immediately. The tucking she'd been doing for days—hiding herself in the tight leggings, keeping everything compressed and invisible—suddenly became unnecessary. Her penis pulled inward, inverting, reconfiguring. Testicles drew up into her body, transformed into ovaries. The whole structure folded in on itself and reformed from the inside out. A vagina opened where there had been external anatomy. Internal structures bloomed, uterus, fallopian tubes, cervix. Everything reorganizing, rewiring, becoming something completely different. The sensation was overwhelming, visceral, like her entire pelvis was churning, its contents twisting into a new form.

She was, without a doubt, anatomically female now.

Horror washed over her face. She looked down at herself, feeling the absence, the difference, the completeness of what had just happened.

"NEITHER ARE YOU!" Brittany screamed, her voice breaking.

Lexi felt the same transformation hit her. Her penis inverted, pulled inward, reconfigured itself. Internal structures formed, everything female. The reorganization was complete in seconds, her entire anatomy rewritten.

They stood there in the elevator, both fully female now, both staring at each other in absolute horror at what they'd just done.

"Wait—" Lexi's voice was barely a whisper. "Something's different."

"Yeah, we just wished away our dicks."

"No, not that. I feel weird."

Brittany nodded slowly, starting to feel it too. "The complaints. How many was that?"

"I don't know. I lost count. Twenty-eight? Twenty-nine?"

"Was that thirty?"

"I think—" Lexi's eyes widened. "I think that was thirty."

The elevator lurched.

Started moving again.

Numbers began ticking up on the display: 17... 18...

"Wait," Brittany said. "The contract said thirty complaints each. If that was—"

The elevator dinged.

The lights went out.

[CUT TO BLACK]

On the twentieth floor, the elevator doors opened.

Two women stepped out into the hallway, looking around with mild confusion.

"This is weird," the brunette said, checking her phone. "I don't even remember getting in the elevator?"

The blonde adjusted her designer handbag. "Me either. Brain fog. I think I need more sleep."

A receptionist looked up from her desk. "Ms. Tate? And Ms. Tate? You're here for the ten-thirty appointment with Mr. Morris?"

They both turned. "Maybe?"

"Right down the hall, conference room B."

They exchanged a glance. The blonde one spoke first. "Thank you. Sorry, I'm just... do you know what this appointment is about? Aren't we meeting with Solomon Winters?"

"Oh, Mr. Winters is on the eighteenth floor, hon. Supernatural law. This is Morris & Associates. Estate law. Your parents' house sale."

The brunette one pulled out her phone. "Oh! She's right. Says so here in my calendar."

If Brittany still knew anything about sitcoms—which she didn't, because that knowledge had been stripped from her fifteen minutes ago in an elevator between floors—she would have immediately recognized what her sister Lexi had become. The bright blonde hair with golden highlights, carefully styled in loose waves. The overdeveloped chest and bubble butt filling out clothes designed to attract attention. The breathy voice. The obsession with appearance and marriage and finding the right husband.

A June Cleaver in waiting. The 1950s sitcom housewife born seventy years too late. Appearance-obsessed, marriage-focused, dressed in trendy clothes and desperate to become Mrs. Someone.

And Brittany would have realized what she had become, as well. The honey-and-caramel highlighted brown hair pulled back in its permanent high ponytail. The skimpy mint green sports bra with its plunging V-neck and matching booty shorts. The enlarged chest and athletic body on display with almost no fabric covering either. The vapid expression. The way she kept checking

Instagram stories about reality TV drama. The ditziness that had replaced analytical thinking.

Chrissy Snow. The *Three's Company* airhead. The bubbly, dim fitness instructor in revealing workout gear who could tell you about celebrity gossip but couldn't analyze her way out of a paper bag.

Two female sitcom archetypes, made flesh.

They found the right office—MORRIS & ASSOCIATES, ESTATE LAW—and were ushered into a conference room by a paralegal who seemed completely unsurprised by their arrival.

An older man in a suit that had seen better days greeted them. "Ms. Tate, Ms. Tate. Good to see you. I have all the paperwork ready for you to sign."

"Paperwork?" Lexi asked, confused.

"For your parents' house?" He pulled out a folder. "The sale went through last week. We're here to sign the final documents and establish the trust."

They sat down, still confused, still feeling like something was wrong but unable to identify what.

The lawyer explained it patiently: As their parents had commanded in their will, they'd tried living together for a few weeks, sharing the house they'd grown up in. It hadn't worked out. "Incompatible," the lawyer said kindly. Too much history. Too many differences. They'd decided to sell, split the proceeds, put the money in a trust.

None of this felt familiar to the Tates, but all of it felt true. The memories were there, hazy but present. They'd fought constantly during those few weeks living together. Argued about everything. Couldn't make it work. Had been relieved when the house sold and they could go their separate ways.

The lawyer pushed papers across the desk. "Just sign here, and here, and here. The trust is set up to mature when you both

turn twenty-five. Until then, you'll both receive a modest monthly allowance from the principal."

Lexi signed her name in looping feminine script.

As Brittany reached for the pen, she paused. Stared at the document. Something about the words "living together" made her head hurt. Like trying to remember a dream that was already fading.

"Did we..." she started, then stopped. "Never mind."

"Did we what?" Lexi asked.

"I just... had this weird thought. Like we used to—" Brittany shook her head. "Nothing. Just *déjà vu*."

But as she signed her name—a bubbly signature with a heart over the 'i'—she could have sworn for just a second that her handwriting used to looked different. Sharper. More masculine. More like...

The thought dissolved before she could catch it.

"You okay?" Lexi asked.

"Yeah," Brittany smiled, the feeling already gone. "Just tired. Probably hungover from last night."

"You know," the lawyer said, gathering the papers, "it's too bad you couldn't have worked it out and lived together. It's a nice place. Plenty of room for two people."

Lexi and Brittany looked at each other.

Lexi felt something—a strange sense of *déjà vu*, like she'd heard this suggestion before. Like there was something familiar about the idea of living with her sister in a house that smelled like the 1970s.

But that was silly. She'd only agreed to live with Brittany for those few weeks to satisfy the will. They were sisters, sure, and they loved each other in that complicated way sisters did. But live together? Room together? Share space full-time?

Preposterous.

They were too different. Lexi was focused on finding a husband, building a life, maybe starting a family. She worked at the salon, went on dates, dreamed of wedding venues.

Brittany taught aerobics classes, posted gym selfies, dated casually, watched reality TV, and seemed perfectly happy living in the moment without worrying about the future.

They met for brunch once a month. Texted occasionally. Had dinner on holidays. That was enough. That was healthy. That was what sisters did when they loved each other but recognized they weren't compatible.

"No," Lexi said, and she was smiling as she said it—not bitterly, not sadly, just... matter-of-factly. "We're better off separate."

"Definitely," Brittany agreed. "Like, we love each other? But we'd drive each other crazy."

The lawyer nodded, understanding. "Fair enough. Well, congratulations. You're all set."

They left the office together, rode the elevator down in comfortable silence, walked out onto the street into sunshine that felt almost aggressive in its cheerfulness.

On the sidewalk, they hugged goodbye. A real hug, warm and genuine and uncomplicated by resentment or competition or years of tit-for-tat retaliation that they couldn't remember.

"Text me!" Brittany said. "We should grab brunch soon!"

"Definitely! And let me know how that date goes!"

"Oh my god, I will! Did you see what he posted on Instagram? His arms are, like, insane."

They chatted for another minute about the date, about their plans, about nothing in particular. The easy conversation of people who were related but not close. Who met for holidays and texted occasionally and loved each other in the uncomplicated way you love someone who's never really hurt you.

Because how could they hurt each other? They barely knew each other.

"Okay, I gotta run," Brittany said, checking her phone. "I have a client at two."

"Yeah, go! I'll text you!"

Brittany pulled out her phone. "Wait, we need a pic! C'mere!"

They posed together on the sidewalk—Brittany with her arm around Lexi's shoulders, both of them tilting their heads together, Brittany holding the phone up high to get the angle right. The kind of selfie sisters took a thousand times, documented on Instagram stories and camera rolls and group chats.



"Cute!" Brittany said, already adding a filter. Her thumb flew across the screen, typing a caption. *brunch date with my fave sister*

followed by three pink hearts. Posted to her story before they'd even separated.

"Love you!"

"Love you too!"

They separated, each heading toward their cars, their apartments, their separate lives.

Lexi walked three blocks before she stopped on the sidewalk, suddenly unsure why she felt so hollow. Like she'd just said goodbye to someone important. Like something had ended that she couldn't remember beginning.

She pulled out her phone, almost called Brittany, but for what? To say what?

The feeling passed. Probably just hungover. She kept walking.

Across town, in a house that had just sold for slightly under asking price, afternoon light filtered through orange curtains onto avocado green carpet. The wood paneling absorbed the silence. A macramé owl hung on the wall, its knotted eyes fixed on nothing.

Two brothers had lived here once. Fought here. Changed here. Destroyed each other here one complaint at a time until there was nothing left to destroy.

But no one remembered that now. The only witnesses were walls that couldn't speak and a textile owl that had seen everything and would tell no one.

The contract was satisfied. Thirty complaints each. Incompatibility confirmed. Termination complete.

Whether that was mercy or cruelty, the owl couldn't say.

NARRATOR (V.O.): And so ends the tale of the Tate brothers who became the Tate sisters. Alex and Brad are gone. In their place, two women who never had to survive forty years of toxic sibling rivalry. Two women who can hug goodbye without

grudges. Two women who text occasionally and meet for brunch once a month and love each other in that pleasant, uncomplicated way.

Is that better? Is forgetting forty years of someone a kindness or a tragedy? Are they happier now, or have they simply lost the capacity to be unhappy with each other? Did the contract punish them—or save them?

Thanks for watching *Tits for Tates*. See you in reruns!

[FADE OUT]

[ROLL END CREDITS]