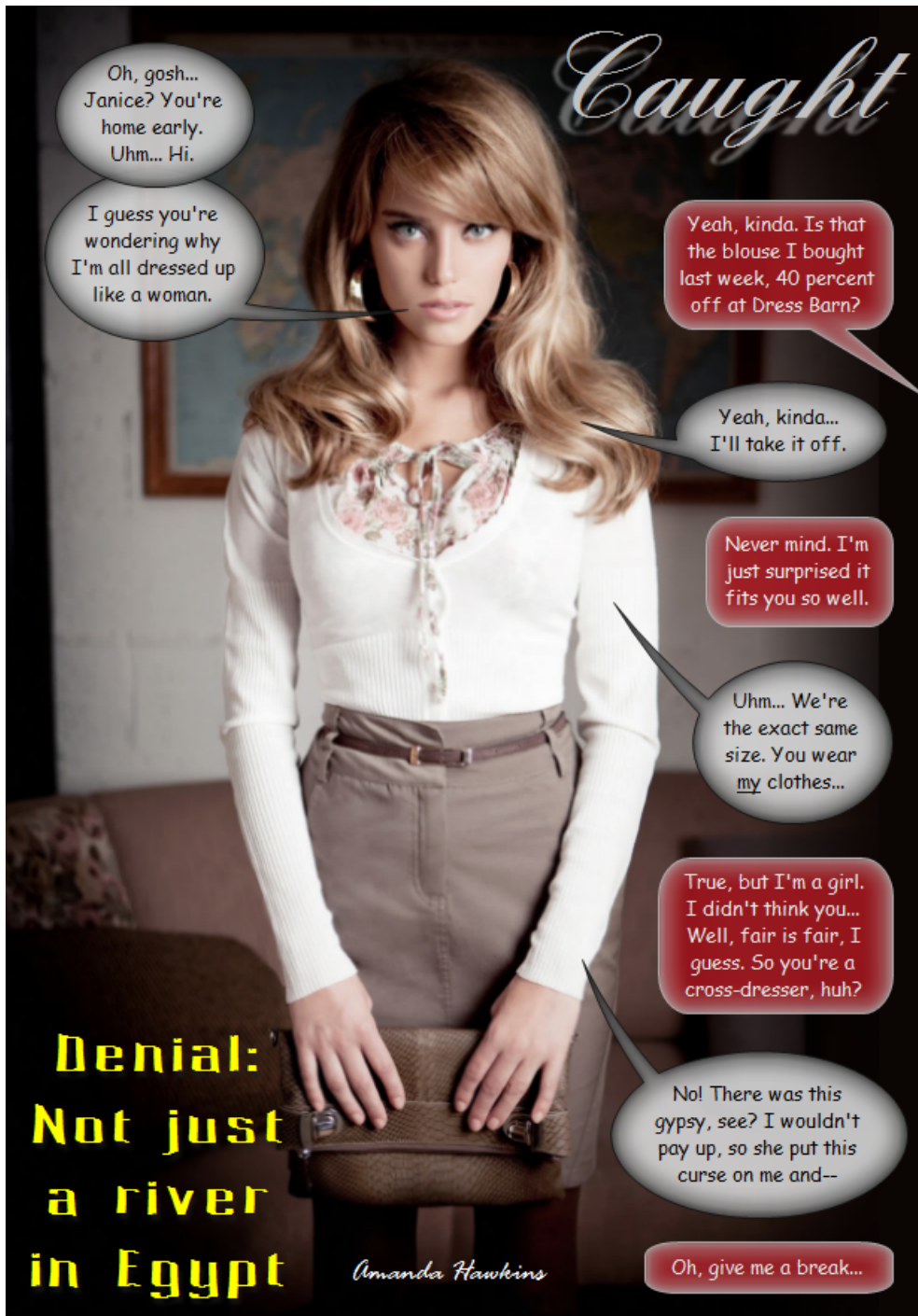


Caught: The lies we tell, the web we weave, when we seek so desperately to deceive...



Caught

Oh, gosh...
Janice? You're home early.
Uhm... Hi.

I guess you're wondering why I'm all dressed up like a woman.

Yeah, kinda. Is that the blouse I bought last week, 40 percent off at Dress Barn?

Yeah, kinda... I'll take it off.

Never mind. I'm just surprised it fits you so well.

Uhm... We're the exact same size. You wear my clothes...

True, but I'm a girl. I didn't think you... Well, fair is fair, I guess. So you're a cross-dresser, huh?

No! There was this gypsy, see? I wouldn't pay up, so she put this curse on me and--

Oh, give me a break...

**Denial:
Not just
a river
in Egypt**

Amanda Hawkins

<Scene: The living room of a small starter home in the burbs. The front door is open. Two women face one another: the blonde holds a purse, the brunette with a suitcase at her feet.>

"No, I'm serious! She was a real live gypsy. She had those robes they wear and a crystal ball and everything."

"Okay... I'll bite. So *why* were you consulting this old gypsy in the first place? And please don't tell me she accosted you in the street. Gypsies don't carry crystal balls around like handbags—they're breakable!"

"I know. I broke hers—by accident. You know me, fumble-fingers Frank. That's why she put a curse on me."

"Let's hope 'Francine' is a bit more coordinated. Looks good so far, the way you're cruising in those heels."

"Thanks. So, uhm... some of the girls from work wanted their fortunes told, see? We were at lunch, so they—"

"The girls will back you up on this?"

"Well, sure. They joke around a lot, though, so they might pretend—"

"Of course. I should've known. Do go on. I'm on the edge of my seat. You went and smashed the poor old gypsy lady's crystal ball, right?"

"By accident, yeah. I knocked it off the table. She asked me to wave my hand over it and I just—"

"I get it, I get it. Did she ever get around to mentioning what your fortune might be?"

"No, she went straight for the curse."

"Who can blame her? And what was this curse, exactly?"

"I don't remember the exact words. It was something about 'hungering for the form of a woman'. I was hanging out with all these women, so I guess she figured I should *be* one too."

"Mmm. And the fact you're about the right size was just blind luck. Hey, is *that* why you married me in the first place? So you could wear my gear?"

"God, no! How could you think that? I mean, I'd be lying if I said I didn't *notice* it right off the bat. That day in first-year Psych class, I was sitting right behind you. I mean, how could I *not* notice?"

"Whatever. I'm just glad you didn't decide to become a brunette. I take it that's a wig? She didn't curse you into getting extensions?"

"It's a wig. I... bought it on my way home. The wig shop on Elm Street."

"Got a receipt, did you?"

"Of course. But... I shredded it. So you wouldn't find it and—"

"You're standing there *wearing* the thing! That's a bit of a giveaway."

"Yeah, but all this stuff was supposed to be packed away and hidden by the time you got home. Tomorrow."

"Mmm. Sorry about that. The client had business elsewhere, so I thought I'd grab an earlier flight and surprise you. Mission accomplished, huh?"

“Totally. I should go change.” <turns to leave>

“Not so fast, toots. This ‘hungering’ you mentioned. When did it kick in? Right away? Back at your desk after lunch? On your way home?”

“Uhm... at work. I started getting this weird longing, you know? Like an itch I couldn’t scratch. There were all these women around and all I could think about was how I should look more like them.”

“So you decided to raid my closet. Good job the wig store was open. I’d have thought it closed at five.”

“I left early. I wasn’t getting much done anyway.”

“Uh-huh. How on earth were you able to do your makeup so well? Assuming you did it yourself.”

“I was surprised too, how easy it was. Must be part of the curse. Like being able to walk in heels and knowing what clothes to wear and stuff.”

“Must be. Where were you headed just now, by the way? Before I opened the front door and you nearly jumped out of my favorite pair of Dolce & Gabbana slingback pumps—with the cutaway peep-toe that shows me you took the time to paint your toenails. But not your fingernails, oddly enough.”

“Uhm... out? Out. To the mall, I guess.”

“To the mall? Your first time out of the house as a woman? That must be part of the curse too. To give you this itch, this *need*—to expose yourself, to risk being discovered. Aren’t you terrified?”

“I just figured, since I didn’t look half bad anyway... Geez, I just *had* to, Janice. I didn’t have a choice.”

“I believe you. *That*, I believe. As for the rest of your little story... not so much.”

“But I thought—”

“C’mon. You’re a cross-dresser, aren’t you.”

“No! Are you serious? Dress up like a woman? Me? You can’t believe I’d do something like that.”

“You’re dressed like a woman right now.”

“Well, yeah... Look, I didn’t want to say this before, ‘cause I didn’t want you to think any less of me. It’s like this... I’m being blackmailed.”

“Blackmailed? Goodness me. That sounds serious.”

“It could be. Some of the girls at work found out I’d been stealing from the company—”

“Again with the girls? I’ve met some of them, you know. They all seemed very nice.”

“You don’t have to work with ‘em. Anyway, it was nothing major—just pens and paper, a few staplers, one or two coffee mugs... that sort of thing.”

“Hmm. Is the swag here at the house? I’d like to see all these staplers and coffee mugs.”

“I took them back, after they found out.”

“Of course. And then they decided to blackmail you. Into dressing up like a woman, I suppose.”

“It’s my punishment. That’s where I was going when you came home. I’m supposed to meet them at this wine bar they hang out at.”

“Hmm. I’m curious... since there’s no curse and no magic involved, how did you manage to do up your face all nice and pretty like that?”

“Uh... One of the girls came over and helped.”

“Really. Which one? And where is she, pray tell? Up in the attic? Hiding in our closet?”

“She left, before I got dressed. Tiffany.”

“Sweet little Tiffany? A nasty ol’ blackmailer?”

“Yeah, you never know. I should probably hit the road.” <edges toward front door> “If I don’t show up, they’ll text my boss and I’ll get fired.”

“We can’t have that. Would you mind if I tagged along? For moral support if nothing else.”

“I, uh... don’t think they’d like that.”

“Why not? Surely being paraded around in front of your wife would be *so* much more embarrassing.”

“You’d think so, but... They said I had to *pass* as a woman, see? Maybe get a guy to buy me a drink. If you were there, watching, it’d be way harder to pull that off. Better not risk it.”

“I see what you mean... Tell you what, I’ll call the girls and see if it’s okay. What’s Tiff’s number?”

<shrugs> “Dunno. Sorry.”

“Seriously? You work with these women. I’ve seen you call them. Hmm. I bet your cell phone is right here in your—in *my* purse.” <takes purse> “I’ll just check for myself. Any objections?”

“Please... Janice. Don’t.”

“All right. Calm down. Let’s sit for awhile.” <both women seat themselves on couch> “Truth time, babe. The girls had nothing to do with this. Right?”

<blonde sighs, lowers gaze> “Right.”

“Thought so. Those girls wouldn’t blackmail a fly, and they’re too smart for all that fortune teller nonsense. Now if you’d said they wanted to dress some guy up like a pretty doll, and you gallantly volunteered for the job because you’re the smallest male in the office, I might’ve believed *that*.”

“Hey, ye—”

“Don’t bother. That ship just sailed. What’s going on here, Frank—or rather, Francine. Is being a cross-dresser so much worse than being a kleptomaniac?”

“I am *not* a cross-dresser!” <stamps her foot>

“You’re doing one hell of an impression, sweetie.”

“I didn’t *want* to. They said... they said they’d kill *you* if I didn’t.”

“Who? The girls? So they’re not just blackmailers in pencil skirts? They commit murder too?”

“It wasn’t them. It was a couple of guys—big guys, tough-looking. Like mob—”

“Snappy dressers, were they? Nice suits?”

<nods eagerly> “Yeah, like that.”

“Sounds like mob goons to me. So they told you to cross-dress ‘or else’? Gee, that’s rough. I bet they provided the wig too—and a quick makeover at a salon that owes the gang a few favors.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Sure I do! Why wouldn’t I? It’s just so gosh-darn *plausible*. But why on earth would the mob—any mob—want to turn you into a woman?”

“I found out what they’re up to.”

“What they’re up to? Aren’t mobs up to pretty much everything these days? Drugs, guns, gambling, even political influence—you name it, they’re into it.”

“I saw them coming out of the ceo’s office at work. I didn’t hear their conversation, but they seemed to think I did. A couple of their goons grabbed me.”

“You’re lucky they didn’t bump you off.”

“Maybe that’s Plan B. The ceo threatened to fire me if I told anyone, but that wasn’t good enough for the mob boss. He wanted more leverage.”

“Lemme guess. He told you to dress up as a woman, in your wife’s clothing no less. Then a few pics of you getting dressed, and on the receiving end of a total makeover, and your lip is zipped for good.”

“You know me better than that. I can handle a few embarrassing pictures. But threatening you was a different matter. I had to do what they wanted.”

“I appreciate your sacrifice, ‘Francine’. But where *are* these fellows from the mob? You know, the ones documenting your journey to womanhood?”

“They left.”

“Uh-huh. Just before I got here. That figures. So... where were you off to just now, before I opened the front door and you nearly jumped your pumps? A wine bar? Maybe the mall?” <laughs>

“You don’t believe me.”

“Why should I? It’s got *bogus* written all over it.”

“I’m sorry. I really am. Can I go change now?”

“Don’t apologize. Look, there’s nothing wrong with you being a cross-dress—”

“Janice, I am *so* not one of those!” <pretends to wipe away tears> “Why won’t you believe me?”

“Oh, I dunno... Maybe because it looks like you just stepped off the cover of *Redbook*—for an article on how today’s pretty little homemaker doesn’t have to spend a fortune to look sweet.”

<long pause> “You think I’m pretty?”

“Of course. Have you seen a mirror lately? What am I saying, of course you have.” <grins> “Francine, you’re prettier than I am. Not by much, mind you. And I’m just back from a sixteen-hour cross-country flight, so that gives you a bit of an edge. But yeah—you’re fucking adorable.”

“Thanks... I guess. Not that I care about that sort of thing, you understand.”

“Of course not. Why would you? It’s not like you’re one of those awful cross-dressers.”

“Damn straight.” <stands up> “Sorry I wore your new blouse. I’ll take it off. Should I have it cleaned before putting it back in your closet?”

“Don’t bother. It’s yours now. Looks better on you anyhow. Same goes for the cute skirt and whatever delicates of mine you might be wearing underneath. Not the shoes, though. I’ll have those back.”

<blonde sits, begins taking off shoes>

“Not now, silly. Later on, when you get back from wherever you’re going. Speaking of which, I’ve kept you long enough. You must be running late.”

“Yeah... I should go.” <stands>

“So where you off to? The mall? Meeting the girls at a wine bar? Photo spread for the mob?”

“To be honest, I was just gonna wander around for awhile in the car. Maybe get some drive-thru.”

“That’s it? Nothing but fast food for a pretty thing like you? Maybe we should hit that wine bar after all. I’m sure the girls would love to meet Francine.”

<blonde sits down, hard> “You wouldn’t.”

“Is that a problem? You still haven’t told me what’s going on here. Assuming, of course, that you aren’t actually a cross-dresser.”

“For God’s sake—can’t you just let it go?”

“Not a chance. You wear my clothes, you owe me a big fat explanation. That’s the deal.”

<long silence> “All right. I’ll tell you.”

“The truth would be a nice change of pace.”

“On Saturday, after you left for your trip, I went up to the attic, see? You wanted me to go through all those boxes from my parents’ estate—”

“Oh God, here we go again.”

“So I did that and I found an old music box. Inside was a little ballerina, pirouetting ‘round and ‘round while the music played. I think it belonged to my great-grandmother, on my mother’s side. She was a wonderful dancer as a child and everyone said she’d wind up joining the ballet for sure, but then she got sick with lockjaw and died young—”

“How young are we talkin’ here? She had to be old enough to get preggers with your grandma.”

“Did I say grandmother? I meant grand-aunt. My grandma’s aunt, Mirabelle—who she never met, of course, because she died so young.” <blonde cocks an eye at brunette, who shrugs> “So anyway, I find myself listening to the music box—for quite awhile, actually—and the tune kinda got stuck in my head.”

“This music box—can I see it?”

“I put it back where I found it. And there’s a lot of boxes up there, so I’m not sure—”

“I’m game if you are.”

“Some other time, okay?”

“I’ll take you up on that.”

“Whatever. For some reason, up in the attic, I started thinking about the clothes in your closet and what it might be like to... you know, wear them. So I tried some stuff on and spent the day walking around the house in heels. That’s how I got used to them.”

“Sure. It was like you couldn’t help yourself, right? Like you weren’t in control of your actions.”

“Kind of, yeah. Like I was possessed or something. The next day I went out and bought the wig, and dressed up again, and watched a whole pile of vids on feminine deportment and stuff like that.”

“Gee, is *that* why you look and act so much like a real woman? You kind of brainwashed yourself?”

“It’s more than that. Sometimes I’d stare into the mirror and whisper ‘Mirabelle’ to myself, over and over. Like I was turning into—”

“Oh, I know! You think your grand-aunt’s *ghost* was hanging out in that music box, and when you opened it she totally got inside you. And she’s in there now trying to turn your body into *hers*.”

“Maybe. It would explain—”

“Hey, how do I know you aren’t *her* now? Maybe my poor husband is trapped somewhere inside that pretty blonde head and all this time I’ve been talking to his great-grand-aunt Mirabelle.”

“Uhm... I guess you don’t. But I—”

“The ballet—is that where you were going? I heard there’s a show on downtown. Maybe you could talk to the director afterward and see if you can score an audition. Hold on to the dream, right?”

“I wasn’t doing that. I’m still Frank.”

“Okay, but for how much longer? By this time next week you could be signed up for ballet classes and even gender conversation surgery. What’s to stop Mirabelle from taking over for keeps?”

<blonde shrugs, looks confused>

“Jeez, Frank, do you even care? What you need is a nice big exorcism, and the sooner the better. So let’s hit the church and find you a priest!”

“I don’t want to do that.”

“Why? Is it too late? Are you Mirabelle already?”

“I’m not her. It’s just that she takes over now and then and makes me dress—”

“C’mon, ‘Francine’. I’m not buyin’ this crap.”

“I knew you wouldn’t believe me. That’s—”

“You got that right.”

“That’s why I didn’t tell you before.”

“For Christ’s sake, just say it! I—am a—fucking—cross-dresser. How hard is that?”

“But I’m not! If it wasn’t for my aunt’s ghost I’d be wearing sweats, watching porn, and pigging out on fried chicken right now.”

“That’s *it*, Frank. Being a cross-dresser is no big deal, but lying to me is something else. I wouldn’t leave you for dressing up in my clothes, but I just might if you don’t tell me the truth. Right now!”

“Oh, for the—they told me not to tell you.”

“Who did? Mirabelle? The girls? The goons? The pink fairies who turn bad boys into good little girls?”

“The people from the *show*. They said we’d forfeit the prize money if I told you the truth.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“If I tell you, that fifty grand is out the window.”

“I’ll take the chance. I got a nice bonus coming my way this year. We can take the hit.”

“Okay, here it is. There’s this TV show, see? They give a guy a complete makeover—you know, turn him into a woman, so he can pass for the real thing. Then he goes out to places like the mall, or a wine bar or whatever, and if people—guys in particular—treat him like a genuine lady...”

“And they film the whole thing. Must be a cable show. Put out and you get fifty grand.”

“It isn’t like that. There’s no nudity or anything. Just a few drinks, maybe dance with the guy...”

“A stolen kiss in a booth at the back of the club. Some harmless necking. Then out to the back seat of his car, and your heel-prints on the ceiling.”

“I wouldn’t cheat on you.”

“Frank wouldn’t. But Francine isn’t wearing a ring, is she? That girl’s footloose and fancy free.”

“I still wouldn’t do—what you said.”

“Things get out of hand, girlfriend. You might not have a choice.” <smiles> “On the other hand, with those cameras around it’s not like he’d beat the rap.”

<blonde stares at the floor>

“Maybe I should go with. We girls have to look out for each other. You haven’t been one very long, so maybe you don’t know. We’re a tight gender.”

<blondes looks up, smiles shyly> “You still don’t believe me, do you?”

“I’m not an idiot.”

“Okay, let’s go out. Not a wine bar. We can try that pub the next block over. Grab some dinner.”

“Now you’re talking. And while we’re at it, you can tell me all about how you’re a cross-dresser. Okay?”

“Sure. Whatever it takes.”

<The two women move to the front door. The lights go out, the door closes behind them. Heels click on the sidewalk and slowly dwindle into silence.>

<Director: “Cut! That is a goddamn *print*.”>

<Producer: “That’s *gold*, Jerry—gold!”>

<Director: “Somebody call the crew at the pub. They are fucking *on*, and I want two cameras on both their faces while he tells her how he grew up wanting *so* badly to dress up like a goddamn chick.”> ■