

## Laurel

*Kiana Noelle Johnson*

was always the best. His cousin was still mostly silent, only adding a brief comment here and there. Roy could hear Kevin sigh every now and then. Roy leaned closer to his own window and peered into the passenger seat. Kevin looked like he was barely listening to his mom and seemed to prefer staring at the sky.

Aunt Claire's story and the van both slowed as they pulled up to a gas station. It was the first one they had seen for a while on the stretch of endless fields. His aunt glanced back at Roy, and fully turned in her seat with a loud gasp. "Roy! What did you do to the window?"

Roy looked up from the dead display and stared at the window. A mess of fingerprints were dotted and dragged across the once blank slate. The late-evening sun highlighted every marking.

"You need to clean that while I refill the tank." She left without another word, and closed the door.

Roy waited until she was occupied with filling the tank, and then he left to go inside the gas station. He wondered what the chances were that they would have a small portable charger for phones and iPods. Or at least an adapter he could plug into one of the outlets in the van. He found nothing, so he started browsing the candy and snacks instead. The bell at the front door chimed, and Roy looked up and saw his cousin enter the store. Kevin walked around, intently scanning the aisles before looking up and noticing Roy. His cousin broke eye contact first and went down a different aisle, and the awkward moment passed.

Roy decided against buying any snacks and instead just bought water and left the store. His aunt walked past him as he approached the van, muttering about using the restroom and then leaving. Roy slid open the van's side door, sat down, and almost closed it when his cousin ran up to him.

"Wait, Roy!"

Kevin stopped next to the open door, and Roy wondered what the point of running had been if they were going to be in the same vehicle. He noticed his cousin holding a small bag and was surprised when it was offered. "I thought it could be useful," Kevin said.

Roy took the generic plastic bag and opened it to see a yellow notepad and a pack of two pencils with a mini sharpener. Roy looked up at Kevin, but he had turned his attention to the lines of fingerprints on the window. Kevin moved one finger above a cluster of prints and outlined a shape. "This is interesting. Is this a tree?"

Roy stared, still holding the notepad and pencils. "Yeah."

"Whatever you were doing seems a lot more interesting than hearing the same road trip stories my mom always tells. Mind if I sit next to you and we can talk about it?"

Roy scooted over, offering the open seat. "Sure, Kevin."

His aunt returned as Kevin sat down and closed the door. She went back to the driver's seat and looked back at Kevin and Roy sitting in the back seat, but she didn't comment. Wordlessly, she turned on the radio, and quiet music filtered through the van as the sun continued to go down.



The model in the picture was gorgeous.

Long, tanned legs commanded the centerfold, crossed chastely at the ankle as the woman smirked at the camera. Auburn hair tumbled down one shoulder, and the model's eyes twinkled on the page. Her body was flawless, Photoshopped to perfection. Mason stared hard, envying her pouty lips and unblemished face. He traced the curves of her body with his fingers and glanced down at his shapeless one, annoyed.

"Mason!" His little sister's voice interrupted his musing.

"Not now Kenya!" he yelled down, quickly checking that the stairs to the attic were folded in so she wouldn't be able to climb up. The last thing he needed was an inconvenient five-year-old witnessing his transformation.

"But I'm hungry!"

"Kenya, not now!" he said again, rolling his eyes.

Straining his ears, Mason listened for Kenya to stomp away. Once the tell-tale stomp of her cowboy boots faded, he stood up, placing the magazine on the floor, and walked to the corner of the attic. He reached for the key around his neck and knelt to unlock the heavy wooden chest that hid conspicuously in the corner.

Reverently, Mason opened the lid and lifted out his favorite dress, a navy A-line with a bright red bow adorning its collar. Smoothing out the wrinkles, he laid it on the floor and stripped down to his boxers.

He kept his legs shaved for swim team, so he didn't need pantyhose. Next came the shoes—glossy black pumps—and the makeup. He took extra time to dig out his favorite shade of lipstick and don the curly brown wig he had bought for times like these.

This was his favorite part of the day, when nobody was home save his little sister and he could pretend that he was her.

Laurel Sterling—once Mason—spun around and watched the dress settle around her knees.

Crash! The loud noise startled her, and Laurel was instantly put on high alert when Kenya's wailing followed. She kicked off her heels and pushed the ladder, shimmying down and racing to the kitchen at breakneck speed. Her mother would absolutely kill her if anything happened to Kenya while she was supposed to be looking after her.

Laurel followed the cries to the kitchen, and the sight that greeted her made her heart stop.

Kenya stood forlornly in the middle of the kitchen floor, tears making her brown eyes gleam innocently while the shards of glass around her hinted otherwise. Her little mouth was already forming a pout, but when she saw Laurel it quickly changed into a grimace.

"Mason?" Kenya asked, confused.

Laurel stopped. She had forgotten what she was wearing, that her five-year-old sister might not be able to understand fully what being transgendered meant.

"Um," Laurel said intelligently. "Right now," Laurel paused, searching for the right words. "Right now I'm your older sister, Laurel."

Kenya tilted her head to the side and moved towards Laurel carefully, her boots crunching the glass under her feet.

"I've always wanted a big sister," Kenya said, smiling. She ran her tongue where her two front teeth had once been and smiled wider.