Amanda Hawkins

Miss American Girl: A promise to his sister led Marcus into a world of womanhood...

Your name is Marcus. You have just suffered through six hours in a beauty salon. You have experienced more beautification procedures than any man in recorded history—any man, that is, other than a badly aging drag queen desperate to look like Marilyn Monroe one last time before the end. And all because of a promise to your dying sister that cannot be broken.

The ladies in the salon took great delight in your transformation, from strip mining your entire body of its hair—excepting only scalp and eyelashes—to the subtle details of the makeup they’d applied. Every square centimeter of exposed skin has been artificially softened and moisturized. Top-of-the-line breast forms—grudgingly supplied by your parents—have been applied to your chest, as well as a disturbingly realistic silicone vagina to your groin; all glued in place in such a way as to appear a part of you.

But that isn’t the worst part. Only the day before, a brief surgical procedure shaved your trachea and tweaked your larynx, leaving you with a smooth throat and a feminine voice—one you have not yet been allowed to use. One advantage of that—for your tormentors—is that you have been unable to utter a single word of protest at what has been done to you. Not that you really intended to, given your promise. But still...

Your hair is quite long for a man, so it was less of a shock than it might have been when they cut and curled it into a feminine style; adding waves, curls and highlights. While that was going on, a cosmetician worked on your face. Various shades of foundation and blush, plus a great deal of contouring with a makeup sponge, completely restructured your features; narrowing certain aspects of your face, including nose and jawline, while emphasizing other areas, such as the forehead, eye sockets and cheekbones. That provided an appropriate base for the surface details to follow: outlining eyes and mouth, shading lips and eyelids, and finally painting your lips and enlarging your eyelashes with mascara and false lashes. No effort was spared.

Watching all this take shape in the mirror, you thought to yourself that you really are being transformed into a woman. The shaving and skin prep alone, as well as the feminine hairstyle, took care of that. The cosmetic changes to your face simply drove the point home, as well as changing the context of what you now saw. No longer did you appear to a normal woman who just popped into the salon for a refresh; now you are a glamorous young lady, a model perhaps, being prepped for a long walk down a short runway.
Nothing could be more appropriate, in fact, because tonight the catwalk beckons you—in the form of the pageant your sister once dreamed of entering.

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Phyllis is pleased. “Exxxcellent.” She runs her fingers through the twin ponytails of your long hair, one pinned above the other. “You’re turning out very nicely, Marcus. No one will know you were once male. In fact, all of us gals are starting to wonder if you ever were.” She explains how she sectioned your hair to create two distinct ponytails, so that one lays overtop the other. “The result is a single, much longer and thicker tail, with bouffant detailing at the top. Very chic. Not the sort of style any man I ever heard of would wear.”

All you can do is nod. She has been making little gibes like that the whole time, about your manhood—or lack thereof. Unfortunately, you’re in no position to argue. She and the other ladies have effectively turned you into a woman, and a very glamorous one at that. If and when you are allowed to open your mouth and speak, you will sound like a woman as well. Your promise has trapped you.

In the last few months, your mannerisms have become vastly more feminine; this due to four sessions a week with a psychologist who specializes in gender transformation and indoctrination using deep hypnotic conditioning. This wasn’t some cheap stage magician making a volunteer from the audience cluck like a chicken; it was a professional seeking to install an entirely new self-image into the deepest layers of your mind. Here again, no effort was spared to provide you with both the physique and the bearing of a woman with enviable beauty.

Phyllis finishes arranging the two ponytails, artfully blending them together. “That’s it,” she says. “You’re done. Wakey, wakey, Marcus. It’s time to get you dressed. You have a big evening ahead.”

Slowly, you lift yourself from the salon chair. There she is, standing before you, the woman you have become: immodestly clad in a strapless bra and a tight half-slip, under which a pair of red panties has literally sealed you into womanhood with a kiss (with the appropriate graphic). You can scarcely grasp that this lovely creature is actually you, but mirrors don’t lie. Not unless they’re magic, and even then you might indeed be the fairest in the land. Time will tell.

“Good luck out there,” Phyllis says, smiling. “I think you’re gonna need it.”
Bethany, one of the younger salmon girls, escorts you through the adjoining door into the neighboring bridal boutique. “I can’t call you by a boy’s name,” she says. “I heard Phyllis taking to your parents before. Your sister’s name is Marissa, right? Is that what they’re planning to call you?”

You nod, feeling a fresh burst of shame. What kind of man would agree to be turned into a woman, assume his sister’s identity, and then take her place in the pageant it had been her dream to win? Perhaps not much of a man, you decided, but a darn good person. Even your parents weren’t exactly thrilled about your decision to honor the promise your sister extracted from you on her deathbed. Only your own heightened sense of honor brought you here, to the threshold of a store specializing in gowns and dresses for women who need to look their best for the ‘big night’. But as far as you’re concerned, you just want to look your best for Marissa.

The owner of the boutique is a middle-aged woman named Lynette, with graying blonde hair pulled into a messy bun. “So this is our would-be Miss American Girl,” she says, studying you from head to foot. “Phyllis sure did one hell of a number on you, didn’t she, boy?”

“Her name is Marissa,” says raven-haired Bethany. She shrugs when Lynette flashes her a glare. “It is now. Also, she’s not allowed to talk.” She points to your neck. “Not until tonight. Sore throat.”

“Oh, that’s right. You got snipped in there, didn’t you?” Lynette steps behind you and trails her fingers through your ponytail. “Quite lovely. You’d be making a smashing bride, you know. I could fit you out right now in a gown that would land you on the cover of Bridal Fantasy. Not the next issue ‘cause it’s already gone to press, but maybe the one after. Would you like that? I’m serious. I know a lady who can make it happen.”

You shake your head. But part of you wonders what it might be like. Lynette laughs. “Not your style, eh? I bet you’re one of those girls who can’t wait for the honeymoon. You’ve been saving yourself for that one special dude and now the big day is here, but you can’t control your urges—so there you are on all fours with your gown hiked up over your hips, while the best man takes you doggy-style and busts your cherry all to hell.”

Bethany touches your arm. She catches your eye and shakes her head. You nod. The woman is just bitter, you think, probably because you look prettier than she ever did. Bethany addresses Lynette: “Let’s just get her dressed for tonight, okay? Do a good job and maybe she’ll come back for the bridal gear. Hey, maybe I can be a bridesmaid!” She smiles at you.

Lynette shrugs. “Why not? I always hated these pageants anyway. Bunch of tarted-up debutantes who think they’re better than me. Serve them right if a man turned out to be a prettier girl than any of ‘em.”

You’re led over to a long rack of bridesmaid dresses. Lynette measures your waist and your hips, then your bustline, all the while muttering away to herself. “Six six,” she says to no one in particular. “Can you believe that? A guy who fits a size six. What’s the world coming to?”

“That’s impressive,” Bethany says. “I’m a tenner myself.”

“Got just the thing,” Lynette says. She moves down the line of dresses and finally selects one. She holds it up: it’s a white dress with floral decor, with a long pleated skirt and not a whole lot of bodice. “Whaddya think, girl? This oughta show those bitches that you’re all woman, all the time.”

You nod. It’s a lovely dress and if this lady thinks it might look good on you, who are you to say otherwise? Besides, you want to get this over with.

They lead you to the change rooms. Bethany hands you a garter belt and a pair of sheer stockings, and instructs you on how to put them on. You look confused. She ends up in the change room with you, tightening the belt and attaching the garters. Then Lynette comes in and together they squeeze you into the dress. Bethany looks doubtful. “Are you sure about this?”

Lynette is annoyed. “Of course I’m sure! Whaddya think I’ve been doing for the last thirty years? Stuffing pretty young things into gowns, that’s what.” She digs the zipper into the small of your back and yanks it closed. Then she pulls up the bodice (such as it is), settles the waist in place around yours, and ties off the part of the dress that wraps around your rib cage and knots in the back. “Nothing,” she says, vigorously tightening the knot, “could possibly be girlier than this.”

Bethany nods, pursing her lips. “Girlier than me,” she says wistfully.
Your parents arrive to escort you to the pageant. They watch you trying on shoes until you find ones that Lynette feels properly complement your dress: a pair of pink d’orsays with narrow four-inch heels, ankle straps and peep-toes to show off the hot pink golden-shimmer nail polish Bethany applied back in the salon. You notice your mother tearing up. You realize that you must look exactly like Marissa by now, and it’s only been a few months since she passed away. Your parents have gone to the wall to help you make Marissa’s dream a reality, and now it’s all they can to keep it together. You know then what you have to do to make this easier on all of you: for the duration of your time as a woman, you have to become Marissa. You have to forget about Marcus and act as though her death had never happened. Then, for a time, it will be as though Marissa is still alive.

Smoothly, you rise to your feet. Feminine grace comes easily to you, thanks to the hypnotic conditioning of the deepest parts of your mind. You smile at your parents. You lift your arms and give them a quick twirl. “What do you think, mummy?” That was what Marissa often called your mother when the two of them were discussing girl stuff. It used to make you gag, but now it felt right. You strike a pose. “Am I not the perfect Miss American Girl?”

You notice Lynette shake her head and grimace, but she doesn’t matter. Only your parents matter. Your mother sweeps you into a hug. “My little girl,” she says, now fully in tears. “You look so pretty—so pretty. Of course you’ll win—of course you will!”

Your father hesitates, then gives you a firm shoulder-to-shoulder embrace. “You sure do got a chance,” he says, “a real good chance. Heck, them there judges—they’d have ta be right blind…” He blinks a little, then steps away. “Miss American Girl,” he mutters.

You arrive at the pageant. It’s being held in the new convention centre downtown. Your parents have booked a room in the hotel across the street and you go there first to freshen up and relax before you’re due backstage. You feel perfectly fresh, but your parents are nervous wrecks. “Are you sure you know what to do?” your mother asks.

“You won? But—”

Of course I do.” Without turning, you gaze out the window. Sixteen stories below your feet, the city spreads out like a map come to life. You feel that somehow it exists just for you. “It’s no different from any other pageant,” you say. “Sort of like the Miss Valentine’s pageant in February. I won that one, didn’t I? I’ll do the same thing here.”

You glimpse your father’s face reflected in the window. “You won? But—”
Your mother elbows him in the ribs. “Herbert! Of course she won, don’t you remember? They crowned our little girl Miss Valentine and they handed her that bouquet of roses and she walked down the runway and I was ever so proud!” She urges your father to ‘get with the program’.

He raises his hands and backs off. That’s when you know you’ve won. Not the pageant, but the role of being your sister. From this moment forward you must be Marissa in mind and body, or risk ruining the image you and others have carefully constructed over the last—how long has it been? Several hours in the salon, but before that was surgery, deportment lessons, speech therapy, hypnotic conditioning... your sister wasn’t built in a day. A brand new Marissa is the result of weeks, even months, of preparations.

You only have to convince yourself you really are a woman—that you truly are Marissa—and you will be. It’s a kind of magic, and it all takes place inside your head. You feel warm hair flowing down your back, the swirl of pleated hem against your thighs, the insistent tug of breasts on your chest—and you smile to yourself. This is how Marissa feels. This is how you feel.

You join the other girls backstage, meeting them for the first time. This isn’t like the big pageants, like Miss America or Miss Universe, or even Miss Ohio; it’s much smaller, there’s no talent competition, and the first two rounds are brutal in weeding out most of the contestants. The networks want a tight focus on a smaller field, so the audience has time to get to know the finalists. Frankly, the whole thing is one big advertisement for beauty products, so a pretty face is all that really matters. Your sister didn’t care about any of that, though; she just wanted to walk down the runway with everyone looking at her—and to know that she was the prettiest of them all. After the deep conditioning you received, that’s what you want too.

The first segment has all fifty contestants parade across the stage, down the runway and back; not one at a time, but separated by about twenty feet. The announcer calls out each girl’s name and where they’re from. The viewers vote on who is allowed to continue. In a single stroke, half the field is eliminated; only twenty-five girls remain. You are one of them.

The second segment randomly divides the girls into five groups of five. The audience is asked to choose one girl from each group. To make that choice, the five of you stand in a line, facing the crowd, and answer questions put to you by the emcee. You pass that test easily, because you are well-spoken and your voice is smooth, melodic and feminine—which came as a big surprise because it’s only now you’ve been able to hear yourself speak. You sound very much like your sister, which really shouldn’t be a surprise at all.

Five lovely girls are left and you are one of them.

Backstage, you all stand well apart from each other, pretending not to check the others out. A woman approaches you; one of the pageant organizers. Your presence is required in what she calls ‘the red room’. She takes you there, ushers you through the door and closes it behind you.

You are alone in the room with a man. You recognize him: he is one of the judges, a minor sitcom star, aging badly, who now makes a living simply by being a celebrity. He is acerbic, sarcastic, and three sheets to the wind.

“You’re the prettiest girl here,” he says, “yer probably gonna win.”

You thank him. “But, ahm... shouldn’t I be out there right now?”

“Plenty of time. Lots of ads, lotsa talking, and four other gals to interview on stage. Plebs can’t get enough of that shit. Lotta time.” He grins.

You edge toward the door.

“You’re a pretty girl—only you ain’t a really a girl at all, are ya?”

Your eyes widen. “I don’t know what you mean, sir. I should go.”

“You’re mistaken, sir. It was my young brother who suffered the injury. I really am Marissa.”

He grins, showing you his perfect teeth, several of which look sharper than they should be. “Good idea. Siddown. I’ll show ya how the system works.”
You sit. The man is a villain but you need his vote. You need to win; your sister’s dream depends on it. It’s your dream as well. He drops his pants and sits beside you. He guides your slim hand toward his groin.

“It’s real simple,” he says. “Do me and ya get my vote. But you better hurry.” He glances at the clock. “We got about five minutes.”

It’s stiff, more so than you ever were. The man’s lecherous mind has done most of the work for you. You touch him ‘down there’, barely able to believe what’s happening. It’s just wrong, isn’t it? To treat a woman this way?

“Better hurry up, babe,” he says, leaning back. “Put your lips into it.”

That’s when you know what he wants: for you to debase yourself. For you to do whatever it takes to win, because that’s all that matters. You sit there, frozen, his thing pinched between your fingers like a smouldering cigarette. Girls do this all the time, you remind yourself. The man’s eyes are closed. He’s waiting, tense with anticipation.

What would Marissa do? She was desperate to win, you think, that’s why she made you vow to take her place. But to win—at any cost? She was no fool, your sister. She knew what an act like this would cost her in the long run: self-respect. She was big on that sort of thing.

But now you are Marissa; you’re all that’s left of her. And you made her a promise: to do whatever it took to come out on top. You need what this man is offering: his vote. He cracks one eye to peer at you. “Time’s a’wasting,” he mutters. Your fingers close around his member. How bad could it be?

No, not his vote, you realize—all you really need is for him not to convince the others to vote against you. He can’t do that if he isn’t on stage. You recall reading the man’s bio the day before. His vanity is the stuff of legend, as it is for too many men in Hollywood. And there was something about a receding hairline…

You drop the stiffie and grab the mop of drooping curls decorating the top of his head. A ripping sound reaches your ears: velcro. Then you’re on your feet and heading for the door, with the screech of his anger echoing off the walls. But the wig dangling from your left hand is your guarantee that the man won’t be posturing for the crowd anytime soon.

You pass the judge’s table as you stroll onto the stage. You drop the wig in front of the lone vacant seat, then take your place with the other contestants. The other four judges look confused before conferring amongst themselves. Then you hear them laugh.

When your turn comes to converse with the emcee he asks why you’re here, why winning this pageant is so important. The others spoke of their desire to help others, to be a positive role model for young girls, to make a difference in a world riven by greed and ignorance. You speak instead about your late sister: of her desire to help others, to serve as a positive role model, and to show a nation ruled by searing self-interest that being a good person is more important than getting rich. You speak of how you, as her younger sibling, promised to bring her story to the world.

Thunderous applause; more for you than any of the others. The audience loves a good sob story. This one just happens to be true.

The vote comes in: you won. You are the new Miss American Girl. The next year of your life will be spent criss-crossing the country, opening malls and cutting ribbons at county fairs. And it wasn’t because of the strength of your story, you realize, as you receive a bouquet of roses from last year’s winner, or the sacrifices you made to get here—you truly are the prettiest girl in the pageant, just as your sister would have been.

You step up to the podium, knowing what must come next. You think about the scandal that will surely erupt, the damage to the pageant’s credibility, the disgrace for a judge who would force himself on innocent girls—that much you can live with. In all likelihood you will be disqualified, stripped of your title and the tiara that graces your layered ponytail, ridiculed by the press; you might even end up in jail. But your sister’s story must be told.

The full story, including the role of the younger brother who adored her, who looked up to her as a role model, and who promised to never let her down. You kept your promise; you won the pageant. Now it’s time to pay the price. You take the microphone and speak: “Thank you for choosing me as the new Miss American Girl. Now let me tell you about my sister—my real sister. Her name was Marissa…”