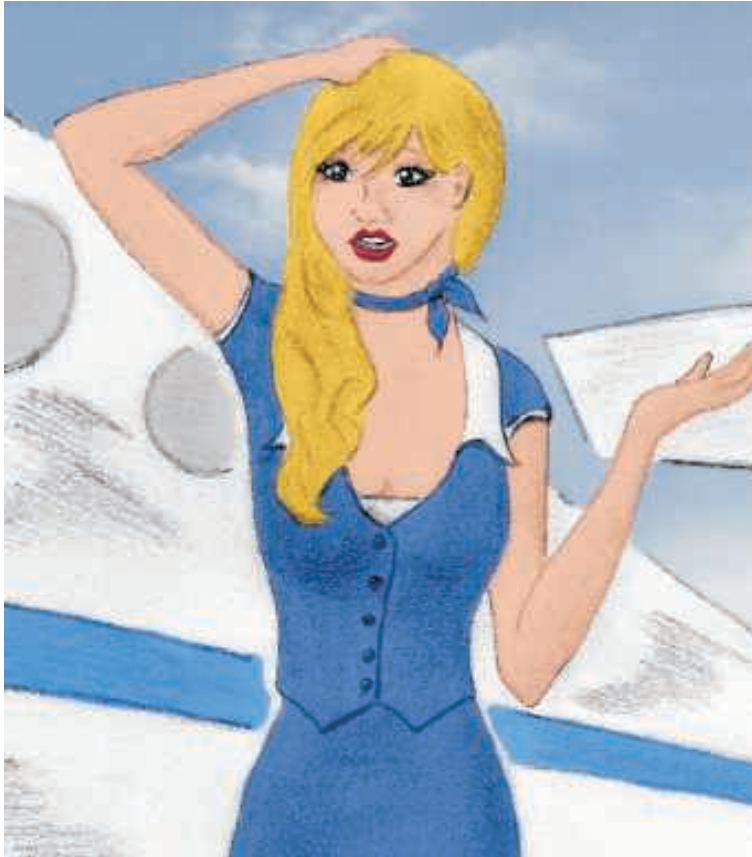




*Reluctant Press presents:*

# Coffee, Tea, Or She?

Briana Vermont



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A 'HER TV' E-BOOK

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# Coffee, Tea, or She?

**By Briana Vermont**

## **Chapter One Valerie, Darling**

Captain Ryan Powell held up his scotch and water and considered it. To Ryan Powell, scotch represented the ultimate in perfection. The feel of the tumbler in his hand, the glistening caramel color, the clink of the ice cubes as it is swirled, the scent which hints at the taste to come. Nothing else could compare to a scotch at the end of the working day. Powell closed his eyes, and tipped the glass to his lips. Perfection.

Powell set the glass on the bar, and looked around the hotel lounge. It was completely deserted. "Good,"

thought Powell to himself. He had little interest in conversation. In a few minutes he would be heading up to his room to turn in for a few hours.

“One more, the same,” he said as the bartender wandered past his place at the bar.

“Orange juice for me, please.”

Powell turned at the sound of the feminine voice in time to see a young woman lift herself onto the barstool to his right. She crossed her long legs and straightened her short skirt, a combination he couldn't help but admire. Long blond hair, attractive face and figure. ‘Stewardess,’ he thought to himself as he noted her uniform, although ‘flight attendant’ seemed to be the preferred term for some reason.

“It's a little early to be drinking, don't you think?” suggested the girl playfully.

Powell tilted his drink to his lips again, finishing the last of the golden elixir. He set the glass back down, then spoke to her without turning his head. He could play games too.

“Not for me,” he said as the bartender arrived with their fresh drinks. “Just got off the night shift. Flew in from Minneapolis an hour ago. As far as I'm concerned it's late in the evening.”

“I know how that is,” said the girl. “Crazy shifts, living out of a suitcase, day and night a blur. Still, I expect most people might be a little disconcerted to see their pilot downing his second scotch at six in the morning.”

“There's nobody here to see,” he replied, gesturing around the empty lounge with his glass. “And you wouldn't tell on me now would you, Miss,” he checked

the name tag that was pinned to her jacket, "Valerie Darling? May I call you Darling?"

"Ooh, very clever," said the girl with a smile. "Imagine, all these years with this name and I've never heard that one before."

"Give me a chance," replied Powell, sipping his scotch. "I actually get more clever on my second drink."

Valerie laughed. "So you know my name, but I don't know yours."

"Powell. Captain Ryan Powell," he told her.

"Ah, a pilot. And at such a young age," Valerie flirted.

Powell laughed. "Maybe not so young as I appear," he told her. "My boyish good looks make me seem younger than I am."

"And modest, too," she smiled.

"What can I say?" he said, raising one eyebrow in self-mockery. "I'm just a charming guy. And what's your story?"

"Flight attendant, obviously," said Valerie, gesturing along the length of her uniform (or what little there was of it). "Although I'm trained as a pilot as well. Just can't seem to pass the damn test. The written part kills me every time."

"Not to worry," Ryan told her. "You'll pass it. You've got what it takes to be a pilot."

"Oh, and you can tell this how, from my uniform?" she asked.

“Parts of it,” he said playfully as he eyed certain parts. “But the truth is, I can see a little bit of me in you.”

“Wow!” laughed Valerie. “That second scotch really does make you clever!”

Valerie looked at Ryan. She sipped from the straw in her orange juice, smiling, not taking her eyes off him. She swivelled her bar stool back and forth, considering.

“You know,” she finally said. “I have my room for another four hours until I need to leave for my flight. How would you like to take me to breakfast, and then see what happens from there?”

Ryan smiled. “I believe I would enjoy that very much.” He raised his scotch, and clinked Valerie’s orange juice. They both finished their drinks, and Ryan pulled a twenty from his wallet which he set on the bar. He stepped down from his barstool, then took Valerie’s hand to assist her as she stepped down from hers.

Valerie smiled as she stood, then looked into Ryan’s eyes. She looked down into Ryan’s eyes. WAY down. Valerie was tall for a girl, but not overly so. And she was wearing three-inch heels. But still...

Ryan no longer looked like the dashing, mature, sophisticated pilot she had thought she was speaking with. He was just, really, short. He suddenly looked like a little kid, a twelve-year old boy, wearing his father’s coat and hat which were much too big for him.

Ryan watched the expression change on Valerie’s face. The expression was one that he had seen so many times before. It articulated her disbelief, and then her horror. It was the frenzied look of a trapped animal,

looking for a way out. He had thought that this time might be different. Of course, he always thought every time might be different.

"If you want to change your mind, that's all right," suggested Ryan miserably.

"No!" said Valerie a little too loud. "I still... you know, breakfast and, uh, whatever would be great. Except, I really should get ready for my flight. I need to get back to my room, do some ironing, you know?"

"Sure, I know," said Ryan, masking his disappointment. "I should get back to my room as well."

"Right!" said Valerie as they exited the lounge. "You just got in. You must be exhausted. I'm really sorry. It was thoughtless of me. I'm really sorry."

"Not a problem," Ryan lied. They walked in silence to the banks of elevators that went to the many floors of the hotel.

"Well, this is my elevator," said Valerie holding out her hand. "It was nice to meet you."

Ryan looked embarrassed, and didn't take her hand. "Um, this is my elevator as well," he told her. He pushed the button and they waited, together, in an uncomfortable silence, scanning the numbers above the elevators, mentally attempting to coax them to move in their direction.

After what seemed like ages, an elevator finally made its way to the ground floor. The doors opened and an elderly couple got out, pulling several pieces of luggage behind them. Ryan patiently held the door as they exited, then continued to hold it for Valerie as she entered.

Ryan stepped in, and the doors closed behind him. He pressed the button for his floor.

"Nine, please," Valerie requested.

"I've, uh, already pressed it," said Ryan awkwardly. "That's my floor too."

Ryan and Valerie stood in opposite corners of the elevator, watching the numbers above the doors as they scrolled by. Slowly. Very slowly. Every second seemed like an eternity, as the floor numbers counted up in excruciating thoroughness from two through nine.

At long last the doors opened. Ryan held them as Valerie stepped out, and turned to the right. Ryan stepped out of the elevator and followed her.

"My room is this way," he explained.

"Yes, mine too," Valerie replied.

They walked together to the end of the short hallway, where it joined another hallway at a T-junction. Valerie and Ryan both turned left. They continued walking, side by side, without saying a word, the embarrassing tension weighing on them both.

Finally they arrived at Ryan's door. "This is my room," said Ryan in awkward relief. "See, 937. My room."

"Yes," said Valerie painfully. "My room is down there, just a little further."

"I figured," said Ryan. Then, into the extended silence he offered, "Well, it was certainly nice to meet you, Valerie Darling."

"Oh! Yes," said Valerie. She stuck out her hand once more, extending it down toward him. "Nice to

meet you as well, Captain Little. Powell! Captain Powell. Captain Little is my, uh, was, some other guy."

Ryan looked at the hand, still hanging there awkwardly in front of her, and shook it briefly. Valerie then turned, and walked quickly down the hall toward her room. Ryan continued to watch, then called out, "Good luck with your pilot exam."

"What?" said Valerie, intent on her getaway and not really listening. "Oh, right. Yes, thank you." She turned again, and continued quickly down the hall toward her room.

Ryan slid his key card through the lock and stepped into his room, closing the door behind him. His thoughts were an infuriated, muddled mess, impossible to decipher, let alone record. He took off his pilot's cap, looked at it for a long moment, then threw it against the wall. The dull thud that resulted seemed enough to calm him without the need for further demonstration. He took off his jacket and laid it over a chair. He loosened and removed his necktie. Then there was a knock at the door.

Ryan looked through the peep hole, where he saw Valerie standing nervously. He opened the door.

"Miss Darling, what a pleasant surprise," he said sarcastically. "What can I do for you?"

"Hi Ryan. Um, Captain Powell. Can I call you Ryan?" she asked.

"Sure, we're friends now," he said flippantly.

"It's just, I feel bad about what happened," she offered.

"Don't waste another minute on it. It happens all the time," he told her truthfully. "You go to your room,

get ready for your flight, and don't worry about me. I'm a big boy." He knew this was the wrong thing to say the second it was out of his mouth.

"Okay," said Valerie, turning away from the door. But as the door began to close she turned back again, catching it and holding it open.

"It's just," she said hesitantly. "I wanted to ask, how tall are you?"

Now Ryan was annoyed. He would have normally lied by a couple inches, but instead told her the truth. "Five foot four, as if it's any of your business."

"That's the same as me," Valerie told him. "Except for my heels. I mean, without heels I'm five foot four as well."

"Well, thank you for stopping by and sharing that," said Ryan. "I feel so much better about myself now. So if you will excuse me, I'm going to take a short nap. Maybe read a short novel. I have things to do, shortly!"

Valerie caught the door as he tried to close it again. "It's just..." Ryan looked at her with exasperation. He would never get rid of her!

"When I saw how... not tall you were," continued Valerie, "and I must have had a terrible look on my face, it wasn't that I couldn't picture us, you know, 'being together'. The thing is, I did picture us. You know, you and me, 'together'. And it scared me."

"Of course," said Ryan. "You were terrified. 'Me and that little guy' you thought, 'in bed together!' The horror."

"No, it's just..."

"Look, would you please just leave?" Ryan finally said.

"It scared me, because I suddenly wanted you so much," she confessed quietly.

Ryan was ready to shove the door closed, forcefully if necessary, but this stopped him. He wasn't sure if he had heard correctly. "I'm sorry, you suddenly what?" He asked.

"For the longest time, as long as I can remember, I've had a fantasy," Valerie continued. "And when I saw you I thought, so here's this guy, you know? And you were perfect, everything I needed. Everything I wanted. Except fantasies aren't supposed to be real. They're just crazy things to think about, right? If they actually come true, what kind of person does that make you? So I got really scared.

"But then I thought, well why not? I don't know him, and he doesn't know me, and we'll probably never see each other ever again. And so what if he came to my room and we played out my fantasy, and then I could rock his world? You know, just to thank him for being so understanding, by giving him everything? Then we could go our own ways. I mean, what do you think?"

Ryan's mouth hung open for a very long time. Eventually he managed to say, "Sure. I mean, sounds great. Why not? Just... what did you say this fantasy involved?"

Valerie leaned down, took Ryan's face in her hands and kissed him, her tongue gently licking his lips. "I can't talk about it in the hallway," she whispered. She turned his face in her hands, looking critically at him and said, "Why don't you shave? Shave real close and smooth, then come to my room. Room 942. I'll tell you everything then."

Valerie turned, and the door closed behind her. Ryan could still feel her warmth on his lips. He dashed to the bathroom to shave.

\* \* \*

Ryan knocked on the door to room 942. He didn't have to wait long before it swung open. Valerie stood in the opening wearing a short, white hotel bathrobe. He had one in his room as well, but it looked much better on her.

"Hi, I'm glad you came," she said. "Come on in."

Ryan stepped into the room, and the door closed behind him. Valerie kissed him quickly, then led him further into the room. She had taken off her high heels and was standing in her bare feet, so they were level when she kissed him. He might even be just a tiny bit taller than her. Ryan's confidence was growing.

Ryan looked around the room, almost identical to his own. The pieces of Valerie's stewardess uniform which she had just recently been wearing were draped over a chair, the same chair that held his jacket in his own room. Except her chair also held a bra, panties, and stockings. The same ones she had been wearing, he had to assume. Ryan looked back at Valerie in her bathrobe.

"So, maybe you should tell me about this fantasy of yours," suggested Ryan.

Valerie sat on the bed. Her robe slid up her thighs, and gaped slightly at the top providing a view of her modest breasts. With a shy smile she patted the spot next to her, encouraging Ryan to sit down. Ryan sat without ever considering any other option.

"I know this is *my* fantasy," Valerie began. "Not yours. So if you want to leave when you hear it, that's okay. It's kind of kinky, so if you're offended I won't mind if you just want to leave."

Ryan watched her lips move as she spoke, mesmerized. He looked down at the two inches of Valerie's thighs that remained unrevealed by her robe and said, "Hey, don't worry. I'm up for anything."

"Thanks, you don't know how much that means to me," she said. Then she took a deep breath and told him, "I guess it all comes down to, I really hate my name."

"Hate your name?" Ryan said in surprise. "But you have the most beautiful name I've ever heard. 'Valerie Darling,' it's perfect. It's like poetry."

"I know, but that's part of the problem. Everyone thinks I'm a character from a romance novel. Or they just make fun of me. The boys have always called me by my full name. They'll say to me in a breathy voice, '*Valerie, Darling!*', or just '*Darling*'. No one has ever called me just Val, rhymes with pal, you know what I mean?"

"Sure, I understand," said Ryan. "But how does this lead to your fantasy?"

Valerie blushed all the way down to her bathrobe. "I've just always wished someone else could be Valerie Darling. And I could be the one who meets her in a bar, and I would be the one picking her up and looking so suave, calling her '*My Darling*', and sweep her off her feet back to my hotel room."

Ryan looked at her oddly. "And so, what does this have to do with me?" he asked.

Valerie smiled shyly, glanced over at the pile of her clothes on the chair, then back to Ryan.

“What?” said Ryan. “You can’t be serious! You want me to dress up like a stewardess, then go down to the bar?”

“No!” laughed Valerie. “No, of course not! We would just stay right here in my room. I just want to dress you in my clothes, and use a little makeup on you, but we won’t leave this room. We’ll just pretend to be at the bar, sitting at that table over there, and then I’ll bring you back here,” she said as she stretched out on the bed.

Ryan looked at the beautiful, semi-naked girl rolling on the bed next to him. “We won’t leave the room? You swear?”

“I swear,” said Valerie. “Two hours from now you’ll be cleaned up, back in your own room in your own clothes.”

Ryan thought about it. He looked at Valerie, rolling on her bed, her robe riding up ever higher. She was gorgeous, but was she worth all that? Yes, she really was. She was a little weird, but Ryan found himself saying, “Sure, why not? I’ll be your Darling.”

Valerie rolled over and sat up, hugging Ryan. She kissed him again as she said, “Oh, thank you! This will be fun, you’ll see!”

\* \* \*

“And so, after two years stuck in the continental United States, today is my big break,” explained Valerie as she applied some finishing touches to Ryan’s makeup. “Today I start with a new airline that special-

izes in South American flights. I'll be in Costa Rica tonight!" She picked up a thin brush and dark powder to do some touch-ups on Ryan's eyebrows.

"That's fantastic," said Ryan through his luscious, red hot-chili lips. "You know, I'm starting a new job today as well. No more Midwest milk runs for me. Now it's major routes only, and it's possible I may pick up some intercontinental flights as well."

"That's great! You go girl," said Valerie, still not happy with his brows and working hard at correcting them. "I'm really happy for you. Except what do I keep telling you about your voice?"

"Sorry, Valerie. I'll try to do better," replied Ryan, a few tones higher. It bothered Ryan that it was so easy for him to sound like a girl. Because of his small size he had always overcompensated in other areas. He developed masculine mannerisms, developed tastes for sports and other manly pastimes, and whenever he spoke he always lowered his voice. It bothered him to find out that this was still his natural voice.

Valerie had promised this would be fun, but that may have been wishful thinking on her part. The two of them had struggled to come to agreement on almost everything she wanted from the start.

The first thing Valerie requested was that he should take a shower. Ryan was agreeable to that, but when he was finished he found she had removed all his clothes and left him nothing but a matching lacy pink bra and panty set to wear. Ryan couldn't see why he should wear anything other than his own underwear, and he didn't want to sit around looking ridiculous in *her* underwear for an hour getting his makeup done. They finally agreed he would wear the bra and panties, but

could wear a hotel bathrobe over them while having his makeup done.

Next, Valerie opened her travel case and pulled out her ladies' combination trimmer and shaver, then expected him to just sit still while she shaved his chest and legs! Ryan informed her that there was no way this was going to happen. Valerie pleaded, and eventually convinced him that a lot of guys shaved their chests these days. Ryan finally agreed to shave his chest, but only down as far as his bra. He completely refused to allow her near his legs, however. They finally compromised again, having Ryan wear a pair of dark blue pantyhose to disguise the hair on his legs. Valerie didn't like this, as anything other than sheer skin-tone stockings was not allowed under the Flight Attendants' Dress Code for her new airline; however those were his final terms.

Their biggest disagreement by far was over Ryan's eyebrows. Valerie wanted to thin them of course, while Ryan didn't want to allow the girl anywhere near them with her tweezers. They finally agreed that a minor 'cleanup' was acceptable, but each and every hair to be removed had to be decided by committee. By the time the cleanup was complete, Valerie had decided on a way to achieve the effect she wanted with makeup, anyway. At this point, she didn't even bother to ask him about painting his nails.

The rest went relatively smoothly. Valerie had Ryan arrange two chairs in the small space of the bathroom, where the light was best and she could work on his makeup. She used generous amounts of concealer, foundation and powder to smooth out his skin tones. Fortunately, they had very similar coloring and so most of her usual makeup was perfect for Ryan. It was easy

for her to blend the foundation with a sponge until it covered his entire face, giving him a flat, pale appearance. She worked the foundation into his eyebrows, causing them to all but disappear. Then she used a brush to apply powder, setting the result.

Next she worked on his eyebrows, since for some reason this seemed to be the feature which concerned her most. She applied a dark powdered shadow with a thin slanted brush, creating a thin line along his brow, exactly at the height where she wished she had been allowed to thin his actual eyebrows. The result was actually quite nice, although not exactly what she had in mind. No matter, she would move on, while she thought about what to do with them.

For his eyes she had three shades of eye shadow, the same as she used every day on herself. The darkest was almost black, and this she applied in a line along his upper lashes. The medium brown was still quite dark, and this she applied to his lids as high as the crease. The medium brown was also applied beneath his eyes, along the lower lash line. A third, lighter shade of brown was applied above his lids to his brows. She then used a sponge to make sure the colors blended well, without any harsh edges. She smudged the coloring beneath his eyes to give them a subtle, glamorous look.

Valerie selected a black eyeliner pencil and used it to line the outer two-thirds of Ryan's lower lids, a thin line just beneath the lashes. Then she lined the upper lids, all the way across and even a bit beyond with an upward slant, giving him a look of long, thick feminine lashes. Everything she did she explained to Ryan, making sure he understood not only how but why. As if he would ever need to do this to himself!

Two coats of mascara on both upper and lower lashes completed the eyes. His eyelashes were dark, long and lovely, the effect of clever use of makeup, but also due to naturally long lashes. Valerie complimented him.

Next was the blush. Valerie made Ryan smile in order to find the curves of his cheekbones. Then she used a large soft brush to apply powder blusher, dusting along the cheekbones to his hairline. She used her fingers to blend the powder in with his foundation, giving his face a perfect, flawless complexion. Finally the flat, pale appearance from the foundation was gone and his face began to pop!

And then his lips! Valerie ensured his lips were soft and supple by applying moisturizer with her fingers. Then she applied foundation and powder to smooth every line and crevice. Next a bright red lip liner was used to outline his lips. Valerie drew a perfect cupid's bow on his upper lip, then extended it across to the corners. The lower lip was lined as well, but slightly below his natural lip. Ryan's lips were thin, and Valerie had in mind something a little more full. Her favourite bright red hot-chili lipstick filled in the outline beautifully. Ryan's lips were perfect. Lush, full, and invitingly kissable.

Valerie worked a while longer, touching up, performing a bit of contouring, filling out his lips, and always coming back to those eyebrows, but finally the result was perfect.

"Valerie Darling, you are an absolute doll," Valerie said to Ryan. "Now let's get you dressed!" Valerie led Ryan out to the bedroom, where they found his stewardess uniform on the chair where Valerie had left it.

Ryan removed his bath robe, and was once again standing in the hotel room wearing nothing but Valerie's bra and panties, feeling ridiculous. Valerie sorted out her blouse from the clothes on the chair and handed it to him. Ryan quickly put it on, but fumbled with the unfamiliar buttons.

"Here, let me get those," said Valerie, doing up the buttons for him. She did up the bottom four buttons but left the rest undone, exposing breasts and just a bit of bra in the 'V' of his blouse. Then she handed him the short skirt he had so admired on her just an hour or so earlier.

Ryan stepped into the skirt and pulled it up to his waist. He wouldn't admit it, but it was such a relief to be wearing the skirt, to be wearing anything to cover those panties. He reached around behind and did up the zipper. Valerie had to help him with the tiny clasp at the top, then he did up the belt. It came to the exact same notch that Valerie herself always used. They really were the same size.

Valerie held the vest for Ryan as he slipped his arms through. Ryan did up the buttons himself this time, while Valerie explained how a stewardess ties the scarf around her neck.

The final item was the shoes. When her shoes fit Ryan, Valerie was ecstatic.

"I can't believe they fit you! I always thought I had small feet, and worried that any guy who would fit my clothes would have big man-feet. But your feet are so tiny; they look so cute and dainty in those shoes!"

"Okay. Uh, sure. Thanks," said Ryan. Valerie had him try to walk in the heels, which was difficult at first, but not as bad as he had thought it would be. She in-

structed him for a few minutes, and he was walking steady and confident like a beautiful young woman in no time.

“You’re so pretty, Darling,” said Valerie. “Close your eyes, I’ll take you to the mirror!”

Ryan closed his eyes and allowed Valerie to guide him to the bathroom mirror. When he opened his eyes, he saw himself for the first time with full makeup, dressed as a stewardess, standing next to Valerie in her bathrobe.

“Do you see, I did your makeup to match mine!” she said in excitement.

Ryan could see that was exactly what she had done. He stared at himself, and couldn’t believe it was him. “This is amazing. It doesn’t even look like me. It looks like you. I look like you. I can’t believe it.”

“That’s the magic of makeup, Valerie my Darling,” she told him. “I thickened your lips, widened your nose, rounded your cheekbones. You really are Valerie Darling, all-around gorgeous girl and Flight Attendant extraordinaire!”

Ryan continued to stare, looking back and forth between himself and Valerie, comparing. They weren’t identical twins, obviously, but the makeup and contouring made their features similar enough that someone might mistake them for sisters. She would be the younger, prettier sister he thought, with an unexpected twinge of jealousy.

“It’s amazing,” he said. “It’s too bad my hair is so short, not at all feminine, or I would really look like a girl.”

“Ahh!” screamed Valerie. “Argh, stupid me. Just a minute.” Valerie ran out to the next room, rummaged

in her luggage for a few moments and returned with a plastic bag.

“I forgot to give you this,” she said, opening the bag and pulling out a wig of long blond hair. She shook it out and handed it to Ryan.

Ryan looked at it. “Why do you have a wig?” he asked.



“For bad hair days,” Valerie explained. “Mostly. I guess I bought it thinking it would be handy if I ever got anyone to come to my room and dress up like me. I do wear it sometimes. It doesn’t matter why, just put it on!”

Ryan put on the wig, flipping the long blond hair up over his head and then shaking it out down his back. Valerie helped him to straighten it and comb it out until it looked perfect. Ryan looked in the mirror again, comparing himself to Valerie. It was no contest; now he was the younger, prettier sister! This realization gave him no sense of satisfaction, just a weird feeling in his stomach.

Valerie hugged him and laughed. “Oh, thank you for doing this Ryan! You’re absolutely perfect, totally adorable! I can’t believe what a pretty girl you are!”

“I look like you,” said Ryan, slightly stunned.

“That’s what I said! Totally adorable,” said Valerie.

“So, what do we do now?” he asked.

“Okay, now you sit at this table. You’re Valerie Darling, sweet and delectable stewardess, and you’ve just flown in for the weekend. And I’m another girl just passing through the bar, and see you, and fall in love like everyone who ever sees you... No, not like that, keep your legs together when you sit. Maybe cross your legs. Yes, much better! Your legs are too much, really sexy!”

Ryan felt more than a little ridiculous, but he played along...

“Well, hello there gorgeous,” Valerie said, sitting next to Ryan at the table. “What’s your name?”

“Valerie,” replied Ryan. “Valerie Darling.”

“Valerie Darling? That’s a bit long. How would it be if I just called you Darling?” sad Valerie, unable to hold back a huge grin.

“Well, I usually like someone to buy me a drink first,” said Ryan.

Valerie was about to respond, when they were both startled by an enormous racket coming from the hallway.

“What on earth is that?” shouted Ryan over the repeated ‘Clang! Clang! Clang!’ sound.

“I have no idea!” Valerie called back. Still wearing nothing but her white bathrobe, she went to the door and looked out in the hall. The moment she opened the door, the muffled ‘Clang! Clang! Clang!’ became a deafening “CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!”

Within moments, Valerie noticed doors all up and down the hallway opening, with concerned heads popping out. Some of the people began filing into the hallway, making their way toward the floor exits. Valerie stopped a couple who passed her room.

“Do you know what’s going on?” she shouted over the noise.

“No idea!” screamed the wife. “Sounds like a fire alarm!”

“Is there a fire?” Valerie yelled.

“I don’t think so!” shouted the husband. “Probably just a false alarm, or a fire drill! We’re going down to the lobby to check it out!”

“Okay, thank you!” shouted Valerie, having only heard about half what he said. She went back in her room and closed the door. It was a relief to have the

alarm muffled once again, to a point where it was tolerable.

“What’s happening out there?” Ryan asked.

Valerie found a pair of panties and put them on under her robe. Then she dropped the robe and quickly fastened a bra. She spoke as she got dressed.

“They said it’s just a fire drill,” she told him as she grabbed the most convenient clothes in the room, Ryan’s shirt and pants. She stepped into the pants and did them up as she continued, “You stay right here and I’ll go downstairs to check it out, okay? Don’t change one thing, promise?”

Valerie stepped into a pair of her shoes at the door. She grabbed Ryan and kissed him then said, “I’ll be right back!” She left the room, still buttoning the shirt.

Ryan stood in the room, wearing his stewardess uniform, high heels, makeup and long blond hair, listening to the muffled clanging from the hallway.

“At least I can take off these shoes,” he said, removing the high heels and setting them near the door. He was so tired, having just finished a night flight and expecting to go to bed well over an hour ago. The nervous energy he had burned through during his makeover had exhausted him. With nothing else to do, Ryan lay down on the bed and closed his eyes, waiting for Valerie to return.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Miss Taken Identity**

Valerie exited the stairwell, having finally arrived at the ground floor. Most people were leaving the building through a doorway into an alley behind the building, but Valerie turned in the other direction, toward

the hotel lobby. She cornered the concierge and asked what was happening.

"It's likely nothing, Miss," he told her. "We've received an alarm from the seventh floor. Please just leave the building and cross the street. Someone will let you know when it's safe to come back inside."

"Okay, thank you," said Valerie, turning back toward the stairwell.

"No, Miss," said the concierge. "You have to leave through the nearest exit. Please use the front doors."

"Oh, I'm not leaving yet," she explained. "I'll leave soon. I just need to go back to my room and tell my friend what's happening."

"Ma'am, it's a fire alarm," he told her. "You can't go back. You have to leave. Now. Through the front doors."

"But my friend is waiting for me," Valerie persisted. "In my room. I don't want her to worry."

A fireman passing by heard their conversation. "Did you say there's someone still upstairs? What room?" he asked.

"My room," said Valerie. "Room 942. I just have to go tell her what's happening and then I'll leave."

The fireman pulled a radio from his belt. He pressed the button and spoke, "Do we have anyone on nine? Anyone on nine, come back."

The radio squawked. "Mike here. Just checking nine, all's quiet. Appears to be cleared out, over."

The fireman spoke into the radio, "Mike, Steve here at ground. We've got a report there may be someone still in 942, can you check it out?"

“Roger that, Steve,” squawked the radio.

The fireman turned to Valerie. “We’ll take care of your friend, ma’am. I’m sure she’s fine; the real action is on seven. Now you need to leave through those doors immediately.”

“Yes sir,” said Valerie, doing as she was told. She left by the main doors, crossed the street past all the fire trucks, and moved down the block to watch.

\* \* \*

Ryan woke and looked around his hotel room. It couldn’t be time to get up yet, but something woke him. The alarm! He tried to shut it off but it just kept going.

Not the alarm. There was an alarm, but it was not the one beside his bed. And someone was pounding on his door. Ryan stumbled to the door and opened it.

“What?” he managed to say before his senses were overwhelmed. A deafening alarm was clanging, and an enormous man in a yellow fireman’s uniform was filling the doorway.

“Miss, you have to leave the building,” shouted the fireman over the alarm.

“Miss?” said Ryan, still trying to wake up. He looked down at himself, noticing for the first time his long blond hair and stewardess uniform, and it all came back to him. “I was asleep. I just woke up,” he said as if that explained anything. He tried to close the door, but the fireman held it open. The fireman entered the room. Ryan backed away onto the bed, trying to stay out of the man’s reach.

“Miss, there’s no snooze button on a fire alarm,” the fireman said. “You can’t go back to bed. You need to leave immediately.”

“I’m waiting for a friend,” Ryan tried. “I’ll leave when she gets here.”

“Your friend is out of the building by now,” yelled the fireman over the alarm bell.

“Okay, thank you for letting me know,” Ryan said, figuring that being polite and cooperating might buy him some time. “You go ahead, I just need to collect a few things.”

The fireman decided not to waste any more time. He grabbed Ryan by the arm, and dragged him toward the door.

Ryan was frantic. He couldn’t go out like this! “Wait!” he shouted. He looked around the room – what happened to his pants and shirt? “Please, give me a minute. I just need to find a couple of things!”

The fireman stopped long enough to look Ryan over, then quickly scanned the room. Finding what he was looking for he picked up a pair of Valerie’s shoes and her purse and shoved them at Ryan. “This is all you need. Let’s go.” He shoved Ryan into the hallway. “Put on your shoes!”

Ryan looked at Valerie’s high-heeled pumps in his hands. Slowly he put on the left one, then the right. When he finally had Valerie’s shoes on his feet, the fireman began dragging him down the hallway.

“Okay, please wait!” said Ryan, trying to stop the huge man with little success. “I need to go back! There are just a couple other things in the room I need to bring!”

The fireman had had enough. Without so much as breaking stride he grabbed Ryan and lifted him, throwing Ryan up and over his shoulders as if he were putting on a scarf. Ryan squirmed, but he was like a doll in the huge man's hands. The fireman carried Ryan across his shoulders to the end of the hallway, and didn't put him down until they were in the stairwell.



"Do you think you can walk the rest of the way?" the fireman asked.

"Yes, I can walk," said Ryan. "But you don't understand! I can't leave like this. I just need ten minutes..."

The fireman had had all he was going to take. He grabbed both of Ryan's hands in one of his own enormous mitts, then sitting on the stairs he dragged Ryan across his lap. From this position he delivered three sharp smacks to Ryan's bottom. Valerie's fitted skirt and pink satin panties provided little protection against the stinging spanks Ryan received.

"So, are you going to be a good little girl?" asked the fireman.

"No!" said Ryan. "Five minutes... No! Just two..." The next three smacks brought tears to Ryan's eyes.

"I can do this all day," the fireman said. "You should know I've raised three daughters, and I'm completely immune to all forms of feminine arguing, pleading, and tears. So are you going to be a good little girl, or do you need another spanking?"

"No! I mean yes," said Ryan in defeat.

"Yes you're a good little girl, or yes you need a spanking?" the fireman asked, raising his massive hand.

"Yes I'm a good little girl!" Ryan screamed.

"That's better," said the fireman, lifting Ryan to his feet. "So tell me again, one more time because I like to hear it. What are you?"

Ryan hesitated, frowning adorably as he rubbed his stinging bottom, but said with a pout, "I'm a good little girl."

“You see, that wasn’t so hard now was it?” said the fireman. “Now you get out of this building as fast as you can. Tuck in your blouse and dry your eyes. You want to be pretty when you get downstairs.” Ryan turned to go down the stairs, but the fireman caught him taking a look at the ninth floor door. He grabbed Ryan and spun him around, then pulled Valerie’s purse out of his hands.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Ryan asked, trying to pull the purse away as the fireman pawed through it.

“When I’m on your airplane and there’s an emergency, we’ll do things your way,” said the fireman as he searched the purse. “When you’re in my burning building, we do things mine.”

The fireman found what he was looking for – Valerie’s hotel room key card. Holding it up in front of Ryan’s face the fireman folded the plastic card in half with one hand, *twice*, then unfolded it and ripped it in two. He put the pieces back into the purse, and handed the purse back to Ryan.

“Now I *know* you won’t be sneaking back to your room,” said the fireman. “Not that you ever considered doing such a thing because we both know what a good little girl you are, right?” Ryan nodded, his stomach feeling worse than his bottom with the knowledge that he was not getting back into that room.

“After you get the all clear, you can get a new key at the front desk. Now get that pretty little backside of yours moving!” yelled the fireman.

Ryan ran down the stairs before the fireman decided to do something else to him.

\* \* \*

Ryan reached the ground floor, exhausted. Walking down nine flights in high heels was not something he had ever expected to do. However, he completely forgot about his sore feet and exhaustion as he exited the stairwell and was immediately confronted by three enormous firemen!

"Um, I need to go to the lobby? To replace my key card?" Ryan told them meekly.

"Pretty little blond stewardess," said one firemen to the others.

"Valerie Darling," another read from his name tag. "And isn't she just a little Darling?"

"Yep, matches the description," said the third. All three laughed as Ryan turned beet red.

"We've been instructed to use 'all necessary force' to make sure you get out of the building *immediately*," Ryan was told. The firemen raised and exercised their right hands as if in preparation for a spanking.

Ryan didn't bother arguing, but ran as fast as he could in Valerie's high heels toward the rear exit. Looking over his shoulder he saw the firemen pointing and laughing. One pulled out his radio, presumably to report what happened to every other fireman within a three-county radius.

Ryan was out on the street. He was dressed like a pretty blond stewardess, and shut out of his hotel. This was humiliating, but what could he do? He couldn't even ask for help. I mean, what would he say to anyone? The police might just arrest him. He was pretty sure this was illegal in some States and he didn't want

to guess wrong about this one. There were plenty of firemen around, but he didn't want to guess what they would do. Something painful and humiliating he assumed. Then he realized what he needed to do! He had to find Valerie. She had his pants and shirt, and his wallet would be in her back pocket with his room key card, now that he thought about it! She got him into this, and only she could get him out.

"Aero Miedo?"

Ryan spun around to see who had spoken. He found a large, impatient man standing there, holding a clipboard and smoking a cigar.

"Aero Miedo?" repeated the man, speaking around the cigar without removing it from his mouth.

"I'm sorry, my Spanish is a little rusty," Ryan said.

"No, Ae-ro Mi-e-do!" said the man in annoyance, without any hint of a Spanish accent. He pulled the cigar from his mouth and continued, "You work for Aero Miedo. You're a stewardess for Aero Miedo! You're wearing an Aero Miedo uniform?"

Ryan looked down at himself. "Oh. Yes. I am," he agreed. He looked back at the man and said, "Do you work for Aero Miedo? I'm looking for someone. A stewardess. Another stewardess. A different one, not me, obviously. Like me, though. A lot like me."

The man tried to ignore Ryan as he read his name tag, then compared it to the clipboard. "Valerie Darling. Ha, great name. I'll just call you Darling okay? Come on, let's go." He led Ryan to a Van and opened the door. Inside were several members of what was obviously an Aero Miedo flight crew.

“What? No,” said Ryan as the man tried to get him into the van. “I can’t go anywhere. I have to go back to my hotel room!”



“The hotel can’t give us any estimate on when we’ll be allowed back in, Darling,” the man explained. “If we wait around here we might just miss our flights. So all the crews are being taken to the airport to wait for their planes. Don’t worry about your luggage. Someone will pack up your room, and you should have your bag in time for takeoff. If not it’ll be on the next flight out.”

“But I need to find someone!” Ryan said in desperation. “Another stewardess.”

“Does she work for Aero Miedo?” asked the man.

“Yes,” replied Ryan.

“Then she’s already gone to the airport, Darling. If she’s not on this van, she left on one of the earlier ones.”

“Are you sure?” asked Ryan.

The man had no more patience for Ryan. He waved the clipboard and said, “She’s at the airport! Everyone is accounted for! Get on the van!” He then smacked Ryan’s bottom with the clipboard for emphasis. Ryan climbed quickly into the van, sitting in the last remaining seat. The van started up and pulled into traffic. Ryan looked back as the hotel receded in the distance.

“Pretty scary, right?”

Ryan looked around to find a pretty brunette stewardess seated to his left. “What, that man?”

“The other stewardess laughed. “No, silly! The fire alarms! Evacuating the building, all those fire trucks. Thank goodness the firemen were there. They were so polite and helpful. It was so reassuring to have them there. Did you meet any firemen?”

Ryan tried hard not to think about his meetings with firemen. "One of them carried me off my floor," he told her, leaving out the part about the spankings.

"Wow, that is so exciting! Hi, I'm Julie." The girl held out her hand to Ryan.

"Hi, I'm..." said Ryan, taking Julie's hand but not sure how to introduce himself.

When he didn't say anything, Julie read his name tag. "Valerie Darling? Oh, I wanted to meet you! This is so great. We're on the Costa Rica flight together!"

Normally Ryan would have loved the idea of flying to Costa Rica with a beautiful young stewardess. But only if he was the pilot, not another stewardess. "That is, so great," Ryan repeated back to Julie.

"Valerie Darling, that is such a great name! Do you mind if I call you..."

Ryan braced himself for it. He was really, really starting to hate the name 'Valerie Darling'!

"Val?" asked Julie.

"What?" said Ryan, not quite understanding what he had heard. "I'm sorry, did you say you wanted to call me Val? Val, rhymes with pal? Yes! Yes, please call me Val. I would love it if you would call me Val!"

'Val' and Julie chatted like best girlfriends for the rest of the ride to the airport.

\* \* \*

Valerie waited across from the hotel for a while, watching the fire trucks and the firemen coming and going. When it became obvious that the hotel guests

wouldn't be getting back into the hotel for some time she decided that, rather than waste her time standing around here, she would go shopping for a bit.

There was still plenty of time until her flight, and she didn't feel at all conspicuous in Ryan's shirt and pants. In fact they fit her quite well, and actually looked quite stylish. Ryan told her that his flight was long after hers and so he would not miss them. She would come back in a couple of hours and see if the hotel was reopened.

\* \* \*

Ryan was used to attracting attention in airports. Everyone stops to look at members of the flight crews as they head toward their planes. They especially watch him as the pilot, in his sharp, crisp uniform, the pilot's cap making him six feet tall in everyone's eyes.

Yes, he was used to being looked at. What he was not used to was having his legs looked at. He was not used to men leering, gesturing, commenting and laughing with their friends. Ryan walked through the airport, his hips swaying with the rhythm of his high heels, trying to act as if he was not petrified. He stuck as close as he could to Julie, pretending none of this mattered. Inside, he was dying. He had to find Valerie as quickly as possible and get out of here!

"Valerie Darling, Julie Newman," said a severe, older woman as she approached the two. "You two need to come with me."

The woman marched off. Julie and Ryan looked at each other, but neither knew what was going on. They

shrugged to each other, and followed the woman into some offices on a lower floor.

“Excuse me,” Ryan finally said. “What is this all about?”

“I’m Mrs. Blucher, head of personnel for Aero Miedo,” she explained sharply. “You’re both new to the airline and need to get your security badges.” She looked Ryan over critically. “You’re out of uniform, Missy!”

Ryan looked down at himself. Skirt, blouse, vest, heels, scarf, and so many under things he didn’t want to think about. What could he possibly be missing?

Mrs. Blucher waited for him to figure it out, but it was soon obvious he didn’t have a clue. “Colored pantyhose are not allowed!” she yelled at him. “You would know that if you’d read your manual.”

“But, her hotel just burned down,” said Julie in support of her new girlfriend. “She barely got out alive. A fireman had to carry her. I’m sure she did the best she could.”

Mrs. Blucher glared angrily at them both, but relented. “I expect you to change before your flight,” she said, then turned and led the two girls into a room.

“Thanks, Julie,” Ryan mouthed to his friend. Julie mouthed, “You’re welcome” in return.

“Brian, Valerie Darling and Julie Newman,” said Mrs. Blucher by way of introduction. “Head shots for security badges.” Mrs. Blucher did not waste words. She spun on her heel and left.

Ryan and Julie were left alone in a small room with a man, apparently named Brian, and his photographic equipment.

“Newman and Darling, Beautiful and Gorgeous,” said Brian. Julie giggled, and Ryan blushed, for entirely different reasons. “So who’s first, Beautiful or Gorgeous?”

“Please Val, can you go first?” asked Julie. “I get so nervous when I have my picture taken.”

“Come here then, Gorgeous,” said Brian, leading Ryan by the hand. “Let’s show Beauty that there’s nothing to be afraid of. I’m a professional, and you both are going to look amazing. Now just sit here.”

Brian sat Ryan on the floor, on a pile of soft blankets. The last thing Ryan wanted was to have his picture taken dressed like this, but he couldn’t see any way out of it.

“That’s it. Knees together, legs to the side. Now lean back. Further. Still further, way back, that’s it. Let me get your hair, over the shoulder like this Hmm, let’s loosen the vest, let it hang, casual like. And one less button on the blouse, just a tease of bra showing. Oh yes! And smile, eyes wide, mouth open just a little, what are you thinking about you naughty girl?”

The situation was so absurd, Ryan laughed. And Brian took his photo.

“You are gorgeous, Darling!” said Ryan. “Now you go sit over there while I do your incredibly sexy friend.”

“Isn’t this just supposed to be a head shot? For a security badge?” asked Ryan, finally having a second to actually think about what was happening.

Brian helped him to his feet. “Anyone can do a security photo. I told you, I’m a professional.”

Brian took Julie's photo, posing her and getting her to laugh for a beautiful result. It didn't take long for him to produce their badges, along with five-by-seven glossy photos, one for each girl. Ryan looked at his. It really was gorgeous, incredibly sexy. He would have been turned on if it had been anyone else. He quickly stuck it away in his purse.

"What are you going to do with these?" Ryan felt he should ask.

"Oh, who knows? Maybe nothing, maybe lots of things," said Brian. "I could use them in website photos, posters, publicity shots. Let the public know we got the sexiest stewardesses, you know? But always tasteful, right?"

Julie couldn't stop looking at her photo. "This is so great! Thank you Brian."

"You're very welcome," replied Brian, seeing the two girls out the door while admiring his own copies of their photos. "You both be sure to come back for the calendar, right?"

\* \* \*

Valerie returned to the hotel after a couple of hours, carrying her shopping bags. She had managed to find the cutest outfit for Costa Rica. Valerie was so excited – she couldn't wait!

All of the fire engines and ambulances were gone, although a couple of police cars still sat across the street from the hotel, their lights flashing. Valerie entered the building through the front doors and approached the front desk.

"Yes Miss, may I help you?" asked the Desk Clerk.

“Hi, yes. I just wanted to make sure it was okay to go back to my room,” Valerie said.

“What floor are you on?”

“Nine.”

“Oh yes, no problem,” the Clerk told her. “There was a small fire in one room on the seventh floor, and there’s still a bit of a mess. Wet carpet, cleaning crews, maintenance equipment. Avoid the seventh floor, please. But there’s no problem on nine.”

“Nobody was hurt, were they?” Valerie wanted to know.

“Oh no. It was just a guest, smoking when he shouldn’t have been. Managed to set his drapes on fire. But it was easily contained and no one was hurt.”

“Well, that’s a relief. Thank you!” said Valerie as she left the desk, heading toward the elevators. She pressed the button and waited. A few moments later an elevator door opened, and a man exited pulling a luggage cart stacked high with suitcases.

“Hey, Aero Miedo!” she called out to the man, noticing that he wore a uniform for the airline. “I work there too!”

The man barely acknowledged her with a grunt and a nod as he manoeuvred the luggage cart through the doors. Valerie stepped past the cart and into the elevator, unconcerned. It was too bad she didn’t look at the cart more closely, as her own luggage was right on top. She pressed the button for the ninth floor.

When Valerie reached room 942 she knocked quietly.

“Valerie, Darling! I’m back. Did you miss me?” she called through the door, giggling. There was no response so she knocked harder.

“Darling? Ryan! Open the door Ryan. This isn’t funny!” Valerie pounded on the door but there was no response.

Valerie was mystified. Ryan had to be in the room, didn’t he? She noticed a cleaning cart at the end of the hallway. Walking toward it, she found a member of the housecleaning staff.

“Hi, sorry to bother you,” Valerie said to the woman. “I’m locked out of my room. Could you possibly open the door for me?”

“Oh, no,” said the woman. “This I cannot do, I am very sorry.”

Valerie assumed the woman simply did not understand. “You see, I’m locked out of my room. It’s right over there. Room 942. You can open the door for me. You can open all the doors, right?”

“Yes, I can open all doors, for cleaning,” said the woman. “But I must never open a door for anyone. This is the most important rule!”

“But it’s my room!” said Valerie. “I left for the fire alarms. I don’t have my key!”

“I am sorry,” repeated the woman, remembering her one-hour first-day training video. “This is the most important rule. You must go to the front desk for a new key.” With that she turned back to her work, and would not say another word.

“Just great,” said Valerie, trudging back to the elevators with her packages.

\* \* \*

Airline personnel are generally allowed to avoid all the long lines that travellers need to go through, however this doesn't mean they completely bypass customs and security. Ryan approached the airport security with Julie.

"Hi, oh I love your bag!" Ryan was greeted by a security guard. She was young, and one of the rare friendly, chatty types of security guard as opposed to the usual sour, grouchy type.

"Bag?" said Ryan, looking around. "What bag? Oh, my... this bag. It's a purse. It's my purse."

"Well I love it! Where did you get it?" asked the security guard, as if the two of them were best girlfriends.

The discussion of purses is a strictly female preoccupation. Ryan had no idea how to discuss a purse. "Oh, you know. Nowhere special. The mall, I guess? I've had it a while."

"Really?" said the guard. "I assumed it was a new line. I've only seen one other like it, and believe me in this job I see everything! I thought you'd have to go somewhere special, like New York."

Ryan realized the girl was becoming suspicious. He really didn't want to be questioned by security! "Do you know, I think it was New York. Just last month. Sorry, I'm not myself today. My hotel burned down."

"Oh no, that's terrible!" the girl said. "Is everyone okay?"

"I think so," Ryan said. "I guess it didn't really burn down. I didn't actually see any flames. But a fireman carried me out of the building."

"Oh, you poor thing," sympathized the girl. "Well, I won't keep you any longer. Can you tell me where you're going?"

"To my plane," Ryan said, becoming confused and unable to concentrate on the questions she was asking.

"Yes, but where is the plane going?"

Ryan's mind went blank. Valerie had told him, but he couldn't remember. "I, uh, I'm not sure. Julie!" he called to the other stewardess, still waiting her turn to go through security. "Where are we going?"

"Costa Rica!" Julie called to him.

"Costa Rica," Ryan relayed to the security guard.

"Wow, you're really shaken up, I can tell," the girl said. "Can I just see your passport then?"

Passport! Ryan's passport was back in his room at the hotel! "I, um, don't have it," he explained.

"Really?" said the girl, taking Ryan's purse and looking through it. "Can I take a look? Oh goodness! This is beautiful." She pulled out Ryan's glamour shot. Passing it to another security guard she said, "Guys, take a look at this! Isn't she beautiful? Did Brian take that for you?"

Ryan watched as his photo made the rounds of the male security guards. "Um, yes. Brian."

"He's so great! I have to get him to do my security badge. Our guy is just awful. Are you doing the calendar?"

Ryan watched his photo disappear into a back room. "With my luck, yes, I expect I will."

The security guard went back into Ryan's purse. "You'll be so pretty. Now let's see, the other girl who had this purse had her passport in a special pocket. Yes, here it is!"

Ryan stared in horror as he saw the girl retrieve Valerie's passport from his purse! It had Valerie's photo, not his. The security guard opened the folder and looked.

"You see, you always take a beautiful photo," she said, glancing at the picture of Valerie.

"Thanks," said Ryan, grateful that the girl didn't pick up on any differences. Just then, the door to the back room opened. Two policemen were escorting a man in handcuffs through the door, and out of the airport.

"This is just a mistake!" the man was saying, although the policemen ignored him. "There's no need to arrest me!"

"What was that all about?" Ryan asked the security guard, as he watched the man escorted out of the airport.

"Oh, he tried to go through with someone else's passport," explained the guard. "He claims he just picked up his brother's by mistake, but we can't take any chances. He'll be spending some time in jail before it all gets sorted out." Ryan got a sick look on his face as he looked at Valerie's passport, still in the girl's hand.

The guard placed the passport back into Ryan's purse, then put the purse on the conveyor belt to go

through the x-ray machine. "Okay, you can go through. It was fun meeting you!"

Ryan walked through the metal detector and picked up his purse, then waited for Julie. His glamour shot photo never did get back to him.

\* \* \*

Valerie approached the front desk, again. A new Desk Clerk had replaced the one she had spoken to only fifteen minutes earlier. This one was a young woman, very attractive in glasses with her hair in a bun. Valerie had to wait a few minutes as the Desk Clerk checked in a young couple, although it seemed much longer. Valerie finally reached the desk for her turn.

"Hi, I seem to be locked out of my room," she told the Clerk. "I left in a hurry because of the alarms, and I guess I forgot to take my card."

"That's not a problem," the Desk Clerk told her. "What's your name and room number?"

"Valerie Darling, room 942," Valerie told her.

The young woman tapped on her keyboard, watching the screen in front of her. Suddenly she had a curious look on her face. She continued typing some more, but whatever it was she was looking at didn't seem to be an improvement.

"I'm sorry, Miss Darling," the Clerk apologized. "But, my information says that you checked out already."

"What?" said Valerie, not believing what she had heard. "No, that's not right. I left, because of the fire

alarms. But I never checked out. All my things are still in my room!"

The girl typed some more, but continued to shake her head. "This says you checked out. Your bill was paid in full."

"Room 942!" said Valerie. "Valerie Darling! There's some mistake. I need to get into my room. I need to pack. I need to leave for my flight soon!"

The clerk typed a bit more, but did not indicate any change. Eventually she looked up toward the back and called out, "Oh, Dennis!" Dennis was apparently a bell-hop, who came over to the desk.

"Dennis," explained the Clerk. "Miss Darling says she hasn't checked out of her room, although the computer says she has. Could you take her up to room 942 and see what's happened?"

Dennis turned to the elevators, and Valerie followed.

Valerie talked almost nonstop, all the way to the ninth floor. "I really don't know what this is all about. Could it be something to do with the fire? Anyway, I certainly never checked out! All my clothes are still in the room. I need to pack. I have a flight soon, you see."

Dennis' expression never changed. He simply led Valerie to her room, and opened the door. Valerie thanked him and pushed open the door. And stared. Then she ran into the room, leaving Dennis at the door.

"This isn't right!" she said, starting to panic. The room was empty. She looked in the closet but her clothes were gone. Her shoes, her purse. Even her special shampoo and her toothbrush from the bathroom. Everything was gone!

“This is the wrong room,” she said, even though she knew it wasn’t. Housecleaning had not been through yet, and she recognized the chocolate bar wrapper she had thrown at the garbage but missed last night.

“Room 942,” said Dennis, looking at the numbers on the door. “Were you sharing the room? Maybe your boyfriend packed. Maybe he’s waiting for you somewhere.”

“Of course!” said Valerie, remembering about Ryan. “That little bitch! He took everything!”

Valerie sat on the unmade bed, clearly distraught. She looked up at Dennis. “Can I just sit here? Just for a minute, to collect my thoughts?”

Dennis looked at his watch. “You’ll have to leave when housekeeping gets here,” he told her.

“Just a few minutes,” Valerie repeated. “I promise.”

Dennis shrugged his shoulders and left.

Valerie thought what to do, although she didn’t have many options. Or any options, for that matter.

There was something uncomfortable underneath her in the bed, some lump she was sitting on, but when she felt through the covers she couldn’t find it. Finally she realized.

“Ryan’s wallet!” she said, finding the wallet in her back pocket. She wasn’t used to pockets, and had forgotten all about it. Opening it she found his room card.

“Well, let’s just see what’s in room 937!”

\* \* \*

Ryan couldn't believe they had made it! Finally, he and Julie arrived in the airport staff lounge. His nightmare journey through the airport was finally over. All he needed to do now was find Valerie, change clothes, and get back to his hotel. He took a quick look around, but didn't see her. The lounge was never this full, but because of the number of people evacuated due to the hotel fire, the lounge was practically standing room only.

"Who are you looking for?" Julie asked as she tried to keep up with Ryan.

"A friend of mine is supposed to be here," he said as he darted in and around people, looking everywhere for Valerie. "I was told she would be here."

Julie followed him for a while. Ryan became more frustrated the longer he searched. Finally Julie suggested, "Maybe he can help."

Ryan looked up, and saw the man with the clipboard from outside the hotel. Julie was already speaking to him.

"My friend is looking for someone, but we can't find her," she explained to the man. "Do you think she might be somewhere else?"

The man looked up and saw Ryan. "You again," he said with exasperation. "I already told you, everybody's checked off the list. Everybody's here."

"Could you please just check to make sure?" asked Julie.

The man rolled his eyes. "Okay, so what's the name?" he asked, checking his clipboard.

“Valerie Darling,” said Ryan.

The man checked his listing. “Darling, Darling, here it is. Valerie Darling. Picked her up outside the hotel, brought her to the airport. She’s here.”

Then he looked more closely at Ryan. “Wait a minute. I remember now, you *are* Valerie Darling! Your nametag says so. What are trying to pull, sweetheart?”

Ryan didn’t know what to say. He turned red and stammered, “Yes, that’s my name. I just, my friend’s name is... I can’t remember her name. I forget. Can you please check my name again?” The strange conversation had attracted a lot of attention, and people all around started listening.

“Look, sweet cheeks. I don’t know what you’re trying to pull,” said the man. “I picked up one Valerie Darling. Not two, just one, and that one is you. Whatever your problem is, please try to fix it without involving me!”

“Do you remember what your friend looks like?” asked Julie. She was trying to be helpful, but she just managed to reinforce everyone’s opinion that Ryan was some kind of dumb blond.

Ryan was no longer listening, however. He was going into shock as he began to realize – Valerie was not here! When the man had told him everyone was being taken to the airport, he meant everyone except Valerie. Like he said there was only one Valerie Darling here, and that was Ryan. He literally had no clue as to where Valerie might be right now.

“Valerie Darling. Valerie Darling. Please come to reception,” said a voice over the intercom.

Ryan looked up. “Yes!” he thought. “It must be Valerie, trying to find me. She made it!” Ryan ran to

the reception desk as fast as his high heels would allow.

"You called for Valerie Darling," he told the girl at the desk as he arrived out of breath. He looked around, but didn't see Valerie anywhere. The only person he saw was...

"Good day Miss Darling," said Mrs. Blucher. "I see you have not yet corrected your uniform blunder!"

"No, Mrs. Blucher," said Ryan, looking down at his dark blue pantyhose. "I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do."

Mrs. Blucher continued to chastise him. "So, while you were having your fun, taking the pictures like the playboy model, I have corrected your mistake." She handed Ryan a new package of ultra sheer, skin-tone stockings. "You will put these on immediately."

Ryan took the package and stared at it. He couldn't wear these! There was a very good reason why he had not worn sheer stockings in the first place. He needed to wear dark, opaque hose to cover the hair on his legs!

"I... can't wear these," he said lamely.

"You must wear them and you will wear them," said Mrs. Blucher. "They are part of your uniform and the airline requires it. You will go and change immediately, or I will have security escort you out of the building!"

Ryan couldn't afford to get security involved! If they checked his passport he might just be arrested. He couldn't go to jail like this!

"But you see," said Ryan, deciding to tell the truth since he had nothing else, "I can't wear sheer hose be-

cause I haven't shaved my legs. It will show through! The dark blue hides it."

Mrs. Blucher rolled her eyes. "Do you have the ladies' razor in your luggage?"

Ryan remembered that yes, Valerie had an electric razor in her luggage – they had used it to shave his chest. He involuntarily covered his exposed cleavage with his hand and said, "Yes, except my luggage is still at the hotel."

"Always the excuses, you!" said Mrs. Blucher in frustration.

"So you see, I can't shave my..." Ryan's heart sunk as he looked down the hall. A large cart of luggage was being guided toward the lounge.

"Luggage for Aero Miedo flight staff," said the man with the cart as he reached reception.

Mrs. Blucher smiled. "Do you have the luggage for Miss Valerie Darling?" she asked.

The man checked his clipboard. "Valerie Darling? Uh, yeah, got it right here." He reached up on top and pulled down the case Ryan had seen in Valerie's room, then set it in front of Ryan. "Here you go, Darling."

Mrs. Blucher looked at Ryan with a satisfied grin. "No more excuses, pretty girl! You will go to the ladies' room to shave your legs. Then with the proper stockings you will report to work. Now hurry! Your flight is soon."

Mrs. Blucher escorted Ryan to the ladies' room, and saw him go inside. The washrooms were large, meant for staff who needed a little privacy to shower and change between flights without the time to go to a hotel. Ryan had his own private space.

He stood there in front of the mirrors, looking at himself. He was beautiful in his uniform with his long blond hair and flawless makeup. Ryan reluctantly opened the luggage and looked inside. All of Valerie's things were there, including the electric ladies' trimmer. He pulled it out and looked at it. He didn't know if he could go through with it. No, he couldn't! He couldn't shave his legs!

Ryan heard music coming from the luggage. Digging down through the bras and panties, dresses and bikinis, high heels and nighties, he found the source. Ryan pulled out Valerie's cell phone – he recognized the tune immediately.

"I Enjoy Being a Girl. Just perfect..." he said. Ryan wasn't sure if he should answer or not. As the alternative was to begin shaving his legs though, he decided to chance it.

"Hello?" he said uncertainly.

"You bitch!" Valerie screamed at him. "So you finally decided to answer the phone. I've only been calling you for the past half hour!"

"Valerie, thank goodness it's you!" said Ryan with relief. "Where are you?"

"That's a very good question," Valerie replied. "It seems you made one mistake when you decided to steal all my things. You forgot that I had your hotel room key. So you may have stolen all my things, but now I've stolen all yours!"

"What are you talking about?" said Ryan. "I didn't steal anything!"

"No? So where's my stuff, bitch? My luggage, my clothes, my passport?" yelled Valerie.

"It's all safe, right here with me," Ryan tried to explain. "I'm at the airport."

"Trying to make your getaway, thief?" accused Valerie. "You even took my uniform! I'm going to lose my job because of you."

"I'm wearing your uniform!" Ryan told her. "You're the one who dressed me this way!"

"You're still wearing it?" said Valerie. "Why would you try to get away dressed like a stewardess?"

"Look, I didn't steal your things, okay? I'm at the airport, and everyone thinks I'm you. Valerie, they want me to fly to Costa Rica like this. They want me to wear sheer stockings. They want me to shave my legs!"

"Are you still wearing my best bra and panty set?" she asked. "Those are expensive! I didn't expect you to be wearing them all day. I need those back! Those are brand new. I haven't even worn them yet!"

"You can have them," said Ryan, trying to be patient. "Please, just come to the airport. Bring some clothes for me, and you can have all your things! Please, just hurry."

"You've completely sucked all the fun out of my fantasy!" she screamed furiously.

"Look, I don't care about your fantasy! We've moved beyond that! Just get down here, and get down here quickly because I'm not going to shave my legs just to save your job!"

Valerie quietly fumed at the other end of the line. Eventually she said, "Listen here, bitch. You don't tell me what to do, understand? You stole my new satin and lace push-up bra and panty set, you stole my things, you stole my life, you stole my job! Now if I lose

my job because of you, you are dead, little girl. So if you have to shave every inch of your body you do it! You shave your damn legs, and get out there and smile and be the prettiest little airline hostess this airline has ever seen, or I will destroy you. Get it?"

Somehow, Ryan realized she meant business. "Okay," he agreed meekly. With a hint of pleading in his voice he asked, "So, are you coming?"

"I'm coming." Valerie hung up.

Ryan closed the phone and put it into his purse. He looked at the trimmer again, realizing that, for many reasons, he was now going to shave his legs. He stepped out of his heels, setting them aside. He stripped off his skirt, hanging it on a hook to keep it off the floor, and wriggled out of his dark blue pantyhose. He put his left foot up on the handy step provided at just the right height to assist a girl in shaving her legs. Then with a sigh, he pushed the button that started the tiny trimmer blades whirring. He worked his way up from his ankles to his thighs. The trimmer left trails of soft, silky smooth skin all the way up his legs.

### **Chapter 3**

## **Come Fly with Me**

Ryan ran through the halls of the airport toward his gate. There was a trick to running in heels. "Heel, toe, heel, toe..." he repeated to himself as he placed one foot in front of the other. If he swung his hips with each tiny step, he found he could run in heels almost as fast as a man could walk. He pulled Valerie's luggage behind him, like a poodle on a leash.

Each step created a little breeze against his smooth, bare legs, a reminder of the fact that he had just shaved himself from the hips down. Each step caused a tin-

gling all the way up and down his legs as his silky smooth nylon-clad thighs rubbed together. Each sway



of his hips was like an eye-magnet for every man within sight along the lengthy corridor.

In his short skirt and naked legs, Ryan felt completely exposed. Why was the gate so far?

"Finally!" said Ryan breathlessly as he teetered up to his exit gate.

"So, our Princess has finally arrived," said Mrs. Blucher, standing behind the counter waiting for him.

"And in her complete and proper uniform. This is very good. You look like a proper stewardess. Don't you feel so much more feminine now?"

Ryan turned bright red because, yes, he did feel completely feminine. He just really didn't want to.

"Thank you Mrs. Blucher. Yes, I do," he answered timidly.

"Now get to the plane!" Mrs. Blucher commanded. "You are late, and Julie has been doing both your jobs!"

Ryan wanted nothing more than to leave and leave quickly, except he had to make sure of one thing.

"Mrs. Blucher, I have a friend who is bringing me something I need. When she gets here, could you just make sure she gets through? I wouldn't ask, except it's very important."

"So now I work for you, Princess?" said Mrs. Blucher sarcastically.

"Please, Mrs. Blucher?" pleaded Ryan. "I promise, I'll do my job and not think about anything else. It's just very important that my friend get through to see me."

Mrs. Blucher stared at Ryan. Finally she said, "Get to the plane. Be a good girl and we shall see."

"Thank you, Mrs. Blucher." Ryan hurried past the airline counter, into the temporary corridor which connected the airport terminal to the plane. He could feel Mrs. Blucher's disapproving eyes glaring at his back.

\* \* \*

"Ooooh, YA! Now that's what I'm talkin' about!"

Ryan rounded the last corner leading to the plane door to find Julie, standing with the pilot and co-pilot. The pilot was a large man with a Texan drawl, and the manners of a hyena.

"My word, this little lady is even purdier than the last one! Check out them legs, would you?"

"Just great," thought Ryan. "Two Texans."

"Valerie, Darling," said the co-pilot, slowly reading Ryan's nametag. "How bout we just call you Little Darlin'?"

"I wish you wouldn't," Ryan managed to say.

"Ah'm Jim," said the pilot. "An' my uncouth co-pilot here is Bill. He don't know how to treat a lady."

"Ah apologize," said Bill. "If you don' want ta be called Little Darlin', why we'd be just as happy ta call you Hot Legs!" Jim and Bill laughed as if they couldn't control themselves.

"Your legs really do look amazing," said Julie, hoping to ease the situation. "You should wear sheer hose all the time. You look gorgeous."

Ryan blushed, not knowing which comments were worse. "Thank you Julie," he finally said, realizing that she was simply trying to be a good, supportive friend.

He turned to the two Texans and told them, "You may call me Valerie. No nicknames, no sexist remarks, just Valerie!"

The two men were just about done laughing. "Sure thing, whatever you say. We don't mean no offense, Little Darlin'."

"That's right," said Jim, wiping his sweaty brow with a handkerchief. "We was just out to lunch at the best seafood place, and you wouldn't believe the number of raw oysters this guy can put away. He's got so much sexual potency now, it's oozing out his pores!"

Both of them were sweating like pigs, Ryan noticed. As sexual potency goes, that was a huge turnoff. Bill stumbled.

"Is he drunk?" Ryan asked, watching Bill try to regain his balance in the confined space.

"Na, course not," said Jim. "We didn't have nothin' to drink since last night. Bill ain't bright, but he's not stupid. Come on Bill, we got work ta do."

Jim led Bill into the cockpit, laughing. "Hot Legs, good one! Oh man, she does have hot legs!" Jim took one last look before closing the door, leaving Ryan and Julie alone to greet the passengers.

"Aren't pilots just so gorgeous?" said Julie.

"Are you kidding me?" asked Ryan incredulously.

"Maybe it's the uniform, but whenever I see a pilot I just go all weak in the knees!" said Julie.

"Okay," agreed Ryan reluctantly. "Except those two are just total jerks."

"Yeah," agreed Julie with a sigh. "I guess they are. But really, really hot. I think they liked you."

The first passengers were arriving and so Ryan didn't answer. He was just so glad he was getting off this plane before it took off.

"Hi, I'm Valerie," he said to the first passenger, with as much of a smile as he could manage. "May I see your ticket please?"

\* \* \*

Ryan stood as high as he could on his tip-toes, reaching up to the overhead luggage bins. It didn't take him long to realize that every time he did this, all seated passengers got just a glimpse of his pink satin and lace panties. Wherever Valerie was, he hoped she would hurry! This uniform was just so humiliating.

"There," he said, fitting the man's backpack in amongst the luggage and closing the bin. Ryan turned and smiled, to find the man not looking at his face. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Um, n-no," stammered the man. "Not here. I mean, not now. I mean, I'm good. Really good."

Ryan sighed. If one more guy asked him to get something out of an overhead bin he was going to scream.

"Miss, could you get me my jacket from the overhead bin?"

Ryan screamed silently in his head, then turned and smiled pleasantly. "No problem!" he said in the perky manner he had learned to affect. He reached up to find the man's jacket.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the pilot over the intercom. "You may have noticed, our flight was sched-

uled to leave about fifteen minutes ago, but we're still at the gate. We got a bit of a late start and we're still receiving some luggage and supplies. However, all passengers are on board so we will be leaving ASAP. In the mean time, I would ask that you sit back and watch our lovely flight attendants as they demonstrate the safety features of this aircraft."

"Here you are sir," said Ryan with a smile, handing the man his jacket, then racing to the front of the plane. He wondered what they were doing in the plane's hold, as the plane seemed to rock with every luggage pallet received. He found it difficult to keep his balance as he ran down the aisle to where he was to perform his safety demonstration.

Ryan had never had to perform this demonstration. He was a pilot, not a stewardess. However he was certainly familiar with the safety features. He was also able to see Julie ahead of him, giving the same demonstration to the economy passengers, so he simply followed whatever she did.

Ryan identified the aircraft safety card. He pointed out the emergency exits, with their evacuation slides and emergency floor lighting. He demonstrated the use of an oxygen mask and a life vest, emphasizing how it could be inflated by blowing in a tube. Every man on the plane sat and watched, having not only permission to stare at Ryan's feminine figure but an obligation to do so. The plane rocked throughout the demonstration until Ryan thought he might get seasick.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," said the pilot over the intercom. "We have all our luggage and are ready to depart. Please remain in your seats, turn off all electronic equipment, and buckle your safety belts."

This was it. He couldn't wait any longer. Whether Valerie was here or not, Ryan had to get off. He ran to the exit and went to open the door.

"Valerie, what are you doing?" said Julie, stopping him from opening the door. "We're moving! What are you doing?"

"No, we're still at the gate – I need to get..." Ryan looked out the tiny porthole window, and realized they were no longer at the gate!

"When did we leave the gate?!" he said in a panic. "We have to go back! Turn the plane around!"

"All flight personnel please sit in your seats for takeoff," said Jim.

"Come on, Val," said Julie, trying to calm her friend. "You need to sit now. Sit now, talk later."

Julie sat Ryan into his flight attendant's seat, buckling him in. Then she sat in her own seat, barely getting the belt done up before the plane rushed down the runway. Within moments they were in the air. Ryan pushed his long blond hair away from his face so he could look out the porthole at the airport, receding in the distance.

"She didn't make it," he said quietly, sitting in shock. "Valerie didn't make it, and now I'm the stewardess on a six-hour flight to Costa Rica. This can't be happening to me!"

"Come on Val," said Julie brightly. "Time to go to work!"

\* \* \*

Ryan checked the flight manifest and advanced down the row to the next passenger.

"Hi, Mr. Benson! I'm Valerie Darling and I'll be looking after you throughout the flight. Have you had a chance to look over our dinner selections?"

"Well, hi yourself Miss Darling," replied the passenger in a friendly manner. "Actually, it's Dr. Benson, but you can just call me Roy if I can call you Valerie."

"Oh, I'm sorry Dr. Benson," Ryan apologized. "Roy," he added.

"That's perfectly alright. At my age, I'm just pleased to get any attention at all from a pretty young thing like yourself."

Ryan felt himself blush, and knew it probably made him look adorable. "About dinner," he said, attempting to change the subject. "We have two selections, chicken or fish."

Dr. Benson checked his menu. "What would you recommend?" he asked.

"Personally, I'd recommend that next time you pack a lunch," Ryan told him, making the man laugh. "But if I had to choose, I would go with the chicken as the lesser of two evils."

"I'll have the chicken then," said the doctor.

"Excellent choice," said Ryan with a smile. He turned with a flip of his skirt and met up with Julie at the front of the plane.

"That's all the orders for business class," Ryan said, checking the lists and setting them aside. As the stew-

ardess with the most flight experience he was expected to take charge, even though Julie likely knew more than he did. "Did you get the orders for the pilot and crew?"

"Oh, I'm sorry Val!" apologized Julie. "I didn't know you expected me to do that. On my other flights, the senior stewardess always did that."

"No worries," said Ryan, thinking quickly to cover his lack of knowledge. "I'm not concerned about who does what, so long as it gets done. I'll get their orders like usual, while you get started on economy."

"Thanks, Val!" said Julie, then turned and walked toward the back of the plane. Her long hair swung back and forth as her hips swayed, and Ryan had some trouble taking his eyes off the very attractive young girl.

"Stop it!" Ryan finally told himself. "I'm Valerie, she's another girl just like me, and I have work to do!"

Ryan turned to the cockpit and knocked on the door. A moment later the door opened, and Ryan entered.

"Hello, little Darlin'," said the pilot, but his voice was strained. "What can I do you for?"

"I'm here for your dinner orders sir," said Ryan. "Who gets the chicken and who gets the fish?" Airline rules state that the pilot and co-pilot can never eat the same meal, ever since the Airport disaster movies from the seventies!

Jim looked slightly green. "I don't think either of us needs any dinner, thanks."

Ryan looked at the pilot. "You don't look so good. Are you alright?"

“We’re both fine!” the pilot blustered in an attempt to get Ryan to leave him alone, but instead he drew Ryan’s attention to the co-pilot for the first time.

“Is he unconscious?” Ryan asked incredulously.

“Look, he didn’t feel well after lunch. I told him he could sleep it off. I can fly this plane just fine without him for a couple hours!”

“He’s drenched in sweat,” said Ryan. “I don’t think he’s asleep, I think he’s passed out. And you don’t look so good, either.”

The pilot blinked sweat out of his eyes. “Look, Hot Legs, I don’t need your amateur nursing advice, okay? You’re nothing but a glorified waitress, so go make yourself pretty, smile nice for the passengers, and let the men get to the real work. You’re dismissed, Baby Doll. Get that prime booty out of my cockpit!”

Ryan had to say something after that tirade. What he came up with was, “I don’t want your cockpit anywhere near my prime booty!” He wished he hadn’t.

Ryan left, furious. “Ewww, men!” he said, stamping his foot and balling his hands into tiny fists. He then calmed himself, flipped his long blond hair over his shoulder, and went to help Julie taking dinner orders in the economy section.

\* \* \*

“How was everything, Dr. Benson?” Ryan asked as he cleared away the dishes from the doctor’s tray.

“Just like mother used to make,” the doctor replied.

“Really?” Ryan said in surprise.

“Mother was never much of a cook,” he admitted. “Dried chicken reheated in plastic wrap was one of her specialties.”

Ryan giggled. “Well, I did try to warn you! Maybe I can find some way to make it up to you later.”

“Now, don’t get an old man’s hopes up like that,” the doctor joked.

“I was thinking something like a drink,” Ryan said as he blushed again. Just then the plane shook violently.

“That’s been getting worse,” said Dr. Benson.

“Yes, I’ve noticed,” replied Ryan. “But the pilot must not be concerned. He still hasn’t put the seatbelt sign on.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said the doctor. “It’s probably just due to the weather. It can’t be easy to fly through rain like this.”

“Rain?” said Ryan. “What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you noticed?” said Dr. Benson as he raised his window shade. “It’s coming down cats and dogs out there!”

Ryan looked out at the outside world, and a look of horror spread across his face. Dark clouds surrounded the plane, and rain pelted the wings and windows. No sane pilot would ever fly through a storm like this!

“Excuse me, I need to check on something!” Ryan managed to say. He dragged his cart as quickly as he could down the aisle, fighting the ever increasing bumps and dips of the aircraft, to the flight attendant galley where he quickly locked it down. Then he turned to knock on the cockpit door. Except against all regulations, it was already unlocked.

“What on earth is going on in here!” Ryan demanded as he entered. Except there was no one there to answer him. Both the pilot and co-pilot were in their seats, but unconscious. A bolt of lightning ahead of the plane lit the interior momentarily, adding to the eerie horror of the scene.

Ryan simply stared for a moment, but then he acted. Reaching past the pilot he flipped the switch to turn on the seatbelt sign. Speaking into the microphone he announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is your capt... your stewardess speaking. We’re going through a bit of turbulence at the moment, and we need you to return to your seats and fasten your seatbelts. Thank you for your cooperation. Julie, please report to the front.”

Ryan clicked off the microphone, then turned to the pilot. Gently slapping his face, he tried to wake him. “Jim? Jim! You need to wake up!” His face was drenched in sweat, he was burning up with fever and would not wake, but he was breathing.

Julie poked her head around the door with a polite wrap of her knuckles. “Knock, knock! What’s up, Val?” she said. Then Julie took in the scene with dismay. “Valerie! My god, you’ve killed them!”

Ryan looked up from where he knelt beside the pilot. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he said to her with derision. “They’re both alive, and I have no idea what happened to them. All I know is, neither of them is flying this plane. We need to move them so that someone can take over.”

Julie stood behind the pilot, trying to lift, while Ryan straddled him from the front and tried to push. As he strained and groaned with effort, he couldn’t

help thinking how much Jim would have enjoyed this if he had been conscious.

“Val,” Julie said hesitantly. “Who’s flying the plane right now?”

Ryan groaned and shoved. “Autopilot,” he managed to say. “Taking us straight into the middle of this storm!” It was soon obvious that two little girls were not going to be able to lift either of these Texans out of their comfy bucket seats.

“We need some help,” Ryan realized. “Julie, get some damp cloths, try to cool them down. I’ll see if I can find someone who can help us.”

Ryan left Julie alone in the cockpit, then raced down the aisle, looking for someone who might be able to help. The answer was obvious.

“Dr. Benson!” said Ryan breathlessly.

“Roy, please,” he replied.

“Of course, Roy. I was just speaking to the pilot, and he wondered if you might be interested in seeing the cockpit.” The plane shook, and Ryan had to hold on to the seat for balance.

“He did?” said Roy. “Is this really a good time?”

“Oh yes!” said Ryan frantically as the plane rolled left, then right. “He told me I should insist.”

“Well, all right then,” said the doctor. He unfastened his seatbelt, then stood and preceded Ryan down the aisle.

Dr. Roy Benson was unprepared for what he saw in the plane’s cockpit. He raced over to the co-pilot to check his pulse.

“What’s happened to these two?” he asked.

"We don't know," said Julie. "We just found them like this."

"The co-pilot may have been unconscious for about an hour now," said Ryan. "I don't know about the pilot; we just found him five minutes ago."

"How were they acting before this happened?"

"Very, very rude," said Ryan. "Complete chauvinists!"

"Is that unusual?"

"Probably not," said Julie.

"Anything medically relevant you can tell me?"

"They were both very sweaty," said Ryan. "They were shaky, and the co-pilot was stumbling earlier."

"What have they eaten?"

"Neither of them ate anything," said Ryan.

"They ate lunch at a fish place!" Julie remembered. "They talked about raw oysters. Is that important? Do you know what's wrong with them?"

"My best bet is food poisoning. Toxic shock, possibly Botulism. They both need immediate medical attention."

"Dr. Benson," said Ryan. "I know we need to do something for these men right away. But we have a more urgent priority. We need to move them so that someone can fly this plane!"

Between the three of them, they managed to manhandle the pilot out of his chair and onto the floor. Julie ran to get pillows and blankets at the doctor's orders, while Ryan jumped into the pilot's seat.

"You're not planning to fly this plane yourself, are you?" asked Dr. Benson in shocked surprise.

"Don't worry, I'm a fully qualified pilot," Ryan told him as he adjusted his skirt and fit the seatbelt between his breasts.

"Then why are you just a stewardess?"

"It's... a long story," Ryan said, avoiding the question. He put on the pilot's headset, flipped off the autopilot, and began ascending.

"Mayday, mayday," he said into the headset. "This is Aero Miedo flight zero-seven-three, bound for Cost Rica. Pilot and co-pilot are unconscious, being attended by medical personnel. We have flown into a storm, attempting to climb above."

"AM073, this is ground control. We've been trying to raise you for some time. Situation understood. Please note, you have flown deep into hurricane RuPaul. We note your autopilot is disengaged. Who is in control of the aircraft?"

"This is... Flight Stewardess Valerie Darling," Ryan informed them hesitantly. "I'm a qualified pilot."

"Darling, please re-engage autopilot immediately! We are checking your passenger manifest to see if there is a pilot on board your flight."

"Negative, ground control," said Ryan. "I repeat, I am a fully qualified pilot."

Ground control said nothing for a while. Then, "So why are you just a stewardess?"

Ryan pursed his bright red lips. "I... guess I never passed the written test," he said in embarrassment, remembering what Valerie had told him.

Dr. Benson looked out the window. "Should we be flying toward that lightning?" he asked.

"No choice," said Ryan. "There's lightning all around us. It can't hurt us, though. Planes are hit by lightning all the time. They're made to withstand direct lightning hits without damage." As if to prove his point, at that moment the plane lit up with a lightning strike.

"You see?" said Ryan, checking his instruments. "No damage..." Except the instruments indicated the left engine was on fire, and then the entire left side of the control panel went black. Ryan pulled back on the yoke, but without hydraulics he didn't have a hope of controlling the plane.

Ryan jumped from the pilot's seat as the plane went into a dive. Reaching across the unconscious co-pilot he flipped switches, bringing the automated fire retardant controls back on line, then putting the plane back on autopilot.

"Help me move the co-pilot," he said to Dr. Benson. "I need to get access to his controls."

"Do you think that's a good idea?" asked the doctor, looking at the blacked-out half of the instrument panel, and the maze of flashing warning lights on the working side. "Maybe you've done enough damage." However he assisted, and with the help of Julie the three managed to get the co-pilot out of his seat and onto the floor. Both unconscious men needed to be moved out to the galley, as there was no room in the tight cockpit. They tried to hide this from the passengers, but weren't completely successful.

"What's going on up there?" the man asked his wife as she returned from the bathroom.

"The pilot and co-pilot are both unconscious, just stretched out on the floor up there!" she told him.

"Both of them?" said the man, not quite able to believe it. "Then who's flying the plane?"

"One of the stewardesses, apparently," she replied.

"Which one? The brunette, or the strange little blond one?"

"The blond, I think."

"My god, we're going to die."

Meanwhile, Ryan hopped into the empty co-pilot seat and brought the plane back under his control. He finished his ascent above the clouds, then requested a new flight plan from ground control.

"Any chance of another lightning strike?" asked Dr. Benson.

"None at all," Ryan informed him. "We're well above the storm now. Lightning sometimes strikes upward from the clouds, but it's rare." At just that moment a lightning bolt shot up ahead of them, shaking the plane with its near-instantaneous boom.

"All right then," said the doctor dryly. "I'm sure you're the expert." He left, and closed the door behind him. Ryan cringed with embarrassment, and put his pretty blond head down on the panel as warning lights continued to flash all around him.

\* \* \*

"Okay Valerie," said the voice from the control tower. "Good girl, that pass went really well. I think

you're getting the idea. Just stay calm, because now we're going to land this plane for real."

This was Ryan's second pass at the runway. The control tower refused to believe he was anything other than a frightened little girl, in way over her head in attempting to land a jet aircraft, and was talking him through the process repeatedly.

"It's about time," said Ryan, although not into the radio. Pushing the button to talk he said, "Thank you, Control. And I repeat, we are low on fuel. We need to land immediately."

"Don't you worry about a thing, little girl," replied the control tower patronizingly. "My screen shows you have plenty of fuel. Now circle for your approach, just like we practiced."

Ryan knew that the fuel he was reading was for the burnt out engine number two, and was useless to them. It couldn't be used in engine number one because of the fire. He had flown the plane on one engine, conserving as much fuel as he could, but the only tank available was almost bone dry. However there was no point in explaining it to them again. He had wasted a lot of fuel in test passes at the runway, as no one believed he could actually land the plane, but he still had enough left to land.

"Now lower the landing gear, that's a good girl," he was told. Ryan gritted his teeth at the remark, and lowered the landing gear. Then he stared at the control panel in horror.

"Control, the front landing gear has not locked!" he yelled into the radio.

"Now don't panic sweetheart," he was told. "Everything is just fine. Bring her a bit to the left..."

“Control, check your monitor! Without a lock the landing gear will buckle and we’ll crash!”

“Holy crap!” replied the tower, panicking. “Take her up! Take another pass! We need to figure this out.”

“Control, we are out of fuel and out of time. Have ground crews ready, I’m bringing her in.”

Ryan flipped the landing gear controls a couple of times, hoping he might achieve a lock. It was no use, the two rear landing gear were fine but the front gear was going to buckle as soon as they hit the runway. But Ryan had a plan.

“Miedo 073, pull up! Do not land,” shouted the panicking control tower. When it was obvious Ryan had every intention of landing he continued, “You’re too high! You’re overshooting the runway. Get your airspeed up, you’re going to stall!”

“Negative, Control. Please stand by.”

Ryan slowed the plane as much as he dared. At this speed he was not going to overshoot, he would land on the runway. His intention was to keep the nose up and land on the rear wheels only, at as slow a speed as possible. Then with a little luck, he could bring the plane almost to a stop before dropping the nose of the plane on the crippled landing gear. He’d never done such a thing before, and didn’t know anyone who had. But he was out of fuel, out of time, and out of options.

A plane going slow enough to barely avoid stalling is still going pretty fast. Ryan set the plane down on the runway on the rear wheels, nose up, then manipulated the flaps to keep the nose up as he reversed the engines, slowing the plane. It almost worked, too.

A sudden gust of wind upset the precarious balance Ryan was trying to maintain. The nose of the plane

came down, the crippled landing gear crunching underneath. The plane still had plenty of forward momentum, but with the gear slammed into the runway the plane spun, continuing down the runway backward and dragging the nose, sending up sparks.

As the plane spun it tilted, hitting its crippled wing on the ground and cracking open the remaining fuel tank. It didn't have a lot of fuel, but what it had spilled out on the runway, leaving a flaming trail as the sparks from the landing gear ignited it.

The engines were currently in full reverse, but with the plane skidding down the runway backward this caused the plane to pick up speed. Ryan decided to just continue like this, as he was currently looking at a line of fire behind the plane which he hoped to leave behind them. When they were beyond the flames he threw the engine into full forward, bringing the plane to a stop just short of the terminal.

Ryan turned off the seatbelt sign. This was Julie's signal to open the doors, extend the emergency exit ramps, and get everyone out of the plane. Once he felt ready to breathe again, Ryan got up and went to help her.

\* \* \*

Ryan assisted the last of the passengers onto the exit ramp, an obnoxious businessman who refused to leave his briefcase behind. Ryan considered knocking him over the head with it, but instead just gave up and let the man have his precious. He was gratified to see that the man managed to knock himself in the head with it as he slid to the ground.

That just left Julie, the pilot and co-pilot, Dr. Benson and himself. The pilot and co-pilot were awake, but very weak. Julie went first, together with the co-pilot wrapped in blankets, in order to prevent him from getting hurt on the way to the ground. Emergency personnel were at the bottom, and took the co-pilot away on a stretcher to a waiting ambulance. Dr. Benson wrangled the extra girth of the pilot onto the ramp, and slid down with him.

Ryan watched, all alone in the door to the crippled and mangled plane, as emergency personnel lifted the pilot onto a stretcher, Dr. Benson overseeing as the attending physician. From his vantage point Ryan could see much of the devastation. Small fires still burned here and there, and there was an enormous rut down the length of the runway, the pavement tossed aside like the parting of the Red Sea. A couple of overturned airport service vehicles lay among the devastation, obviously having gotten in the way of the massive plane. Flashing lights were everywhere, indicating fire trucks and ambulances, airport security and emergency response vehicles.

A small group of passengers stood nearby. As Ryan looked at them a few applauded, and others joined in. Ryan smiled at their appreciation. Then he leapt onto the emergency exit ramp, sliding to the bottom feet first as he had instructed so many others. At the bottom he stood and adjusted his skirt.

“Miss? Miss, are you the stewardess who landed the plane?”

Ryan turned to see who was speaking. A female news reporter had run out to the plane, past the disinterested and ineffective airport security, her camera crew trailing behind.

“Um, yes,” said Ryan, blushing at the attention. “It was nothing really. I’m actually an experienced pilot.”

“Has anyone told you the estimated cost of the damages?” the reporter asked, shoving her microphone in Ryan’s face.

“Um, no,” said Ryan, not expecting this question. “But everyone got out safely.”

“Not everyone,” pressed the reporter. “The last two were taken away in ambulances. What do you say to passengers and their families, expecting a nice holiday and instead being seriously injured in a plane crash?”

“That was the pilot and the co-pilot!” Ryan tried to explain. “They weren’t injured in the crash. They were poisoned, or something.” The interview was not going well.

“Do you realize the damage you’ve caused? Do you even know how much this plane is worth?”

“Somewhere around \$100 million, but you know they lose value as soon as you drive them off the lot!” Ryan replied sarcastically.

Fortunately before Ryan could really lose his temper, Dr. Benson appeared. “This little girl is a hero,” he said, stepping between Ryan and the reporter like an overprotective father. “And don’t you dare say she’s anything less. She took over a crippled plane in the middle of a storm, and got everyone on the ground safely. That makes her a hero in my book.”

“Yeah!” said Julie, arriving on the scene as well. “And if they ever recover the black box, that will prove it!”

The reporter turned to the camera, seeing her attack story turning against her. “Some are calling Valerie

Darling a hero. Others remain unconvinced. Live from the devastation, this is Maria Garcia Ramirez."

## Chapter 4

### When in Costa Rica, Do as the Costa Ricans Do

Ryan stood in the hotel check-in line, Valerie's cute little suitcase trailing behind him. He tried to adjust his skirt down for the thousandth time today – he would be so glad to get to his room and find a pair of pants! The line moved forward again, and he and Julie moved with it.

There were now only two men in line ahead of them. They seemed to know each other as they were talking and laughing. Julie seemed interested, and it was all Ryan could do to keep her from introducing herself. The men had looked at the two of them a couple of times, but the look on Ryan's face told them that these two women were not interested. One of the men laughed, and the other joined in.

"What? What's so funny?" Julie asked with a giggle before Ryan could intervene.

"We were just talking about what happened at the airport," said the taller, handsomer (by Julie's standards) one. "You must have heard about it. Some crazy, dumb blonde stewardess poisoned the pilot and co-pilot, then took over the plane and crashed it on the runway! Is that insane? We were lucky our plane even landed. The airport is down to one runway, and a lot of planes have been diverted."

Julie looked embarrassed. "Um, that's not what really happened," she said.

"Really?" laughed the second man, not picking up on Julie's tone. "Because I'd love to hear the real story!"

“The real story is that girl is a hero!” shouted Ryan, unable to take the humiliation any more. “The real story is, the pilot and co-pilot poisoned themselves by eating at a cheap seafood place, then flew the plane into a hurricane! The real story is that girl took over a plane that was already in flames, with one engine and no fuel and no landing gear, then landed it and got all the passengers out safely! And now, just because she’s a *dumb blonde* and not some swaggering jerk, everyone gets to laugh at her!”

“Wait a minute,” said the second guy with sudden recognition. “It’s you! You’re the one, from the news report! The dumb blonde stewardess!”

The first man had the good sense to look ashamed. “Look, I’m sorry,” he apologized. “We really didn’t know. We just heard it on the news, that’s all. I’m Don, by the way. This is my friend Frank.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Julie, smiling and accepting his hand as if the previous conversation had never happened. “I’m Julie, and this is Valerie.”

“Valerie Darling!” said Frank, moving up to Ryan. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget that name. How about we meet up later at the bar for a drink?”

“Not likely!” said Ryan, shocked that the man expected him to forget, he’d just called him a dumb blonde!

“Next,” called out the hotel desk clerk. Don and Frank moved up to the desk, Frank looking back with a wink.

“They’re cute,” said Julie. “I think Frank liked you. And that Don, he’s so tall and dreamy, do you mind if I take Don?”

“You can have both of them for all I care!” said Ryan, still worked up. “No, I take that back. You should have nothing to do with them. They’re both jerks and as long as you want to be friends with me, I expect you to hate them both.”

“Next, please!” called out the desk clerk, as Don and Frank stepped aside with their luggage. Ryan and Julie approached the desk.

“Hi, I’m Valerie Darling. I have a reservation.”

“Oooh, a celebrity!” said the clerk as he checked his computer screen and Ryan blushed with embarrassment. The clerk quickly took Valerie’s credit card information. “You are very fortunate senorita. All we have available is a suite, so we will upgrade you, no charge.”

“Oh nice!” said Julie excitedly. “You are so lucky.”

The clerk handed Ryan the key card for his room. He then turned to Julie as Ryan stepped off to the side, sorting out his luggage, purse, wallet, credit card and room key.

“I’m Julie Newman,” said Julie. “You should have a reservation for me as well.”

The clerk checked his computer screen. “Pardon, senorita, you do have a reservation but the hotel is completely full. We have no room for you.”

“What?” said Ryan, returning to help his friend. “How can you not have a room? That’s the whole point of a reservation! So you will have a room!”

“This is true, senorita” replied the clerk. “But the accident at the airport, so many flights do not leave. All these people, they return to the hotel. And so now, we have no more room. For this I am truly sorry.”

“But what will I do?” said Julie, dazed and confused. “Where will I stay?”

“Perhaps, a friend will share her room with you,” the clerk suggested, indicating Ryan. Valerie looked at him hopefully.

“What?” said Ryan, realizing what Julie wanted. “No! I mean, not me. I’ve had such a bad day. I really, really need to be alone for a while. You understand, don’t you Julie? We’ll find someone else to share with you.”

“I guess so,” said Julie sadly.

“Hey,” interrupted Frank. “I’ve got a big room, with a big bed. You can sleep with me tonight.”

Julie looked up, her big blue eyes still on the verge of tears. “Okay, thanks,” she said quietly.

“No! Not him! Not them!” yelled Ryan. Then, with a look as if he had just swallowed a lemon he told her, “Okay. You can stay with me tonight.”

Julie brightened immediately, and hugged Ryan. “Oh, thank you Valerie! You are the best friend ever!”

Don came over to join the group. “Look, I’m sorry we got off on the wrong foot. We’re not usually like this. Well, Frank is, a bit, but definitely I’m not. Can we make it up to you? Maybe buy you girls some drinks out by the pool later?”

“That would be nice,” said Julie. “I’d really like that.”

“Definitely not,” said Ryan. “We’re going to bed. I’m catching the first flight out of here tomorrow morning.”

Ryan grabbed Julie's hand, and dragged her to the elevators.

\* \* \*

"But why do you have to leave so quickly?" asked Julie as the two girls unpacked their bags. "We were supposed to stay for the weekend. We're in Costa Rica! There's the beach, and the pool. Look, you even brought a bikini!"

Ryan looked at the tiny strips of cloth he had pulled out of Valerie's bag, and quickly shoved them back to the bottom.

"I'm not going to the beach, and I'm certainly not wearing that!" he told her. Then he cooled down. "I'm sorry, Julie. It's just, I'm really upset after everything today. So I signed up to work the first flight back to the States tomorrow. I just need to go home, okay?"

"I guess I can understand that," said Julie sadly. She looked in Ryan's suitcase and perked up immediately. "Is this what you're wearing to bed tonight?" she asked with excitement, pulling out a pink cotton babydoll nightie and panty set.

"No!" said Ryan, looking at the tiny dress. It looked like something meant for a baby girl, not a grown woman. And certainly not for a grown man! He rummaged in Valerie's luggage as he said, "No, I'm wearing... something else... there must be something. I can't believe this! Not one single thing with pants!"

Ryan turned to Julie and took the nightie from her. With resignation he told her, "Yes, this is exactly what I'm wearing tonight."

“Oh good!” said Julie. “I have a nightie too. This is going to be fun. Just like a sleepover! Do you remember when you were a girl, and everyone had sleepovers and we all wore our cutest Nighties?”

“Not really,” said Ryan. “But I’m sure you’ll remind me of everything. I’m going to have a shower, okay?”

“Sure, I still have some unpacking to do,” said Julie.

Ryan went into the bathroom with his nightie, and stripped down to his panties. Looking at the nightie, he sighed with exasperation. Then he shaved every square inch of his body that he could reach.

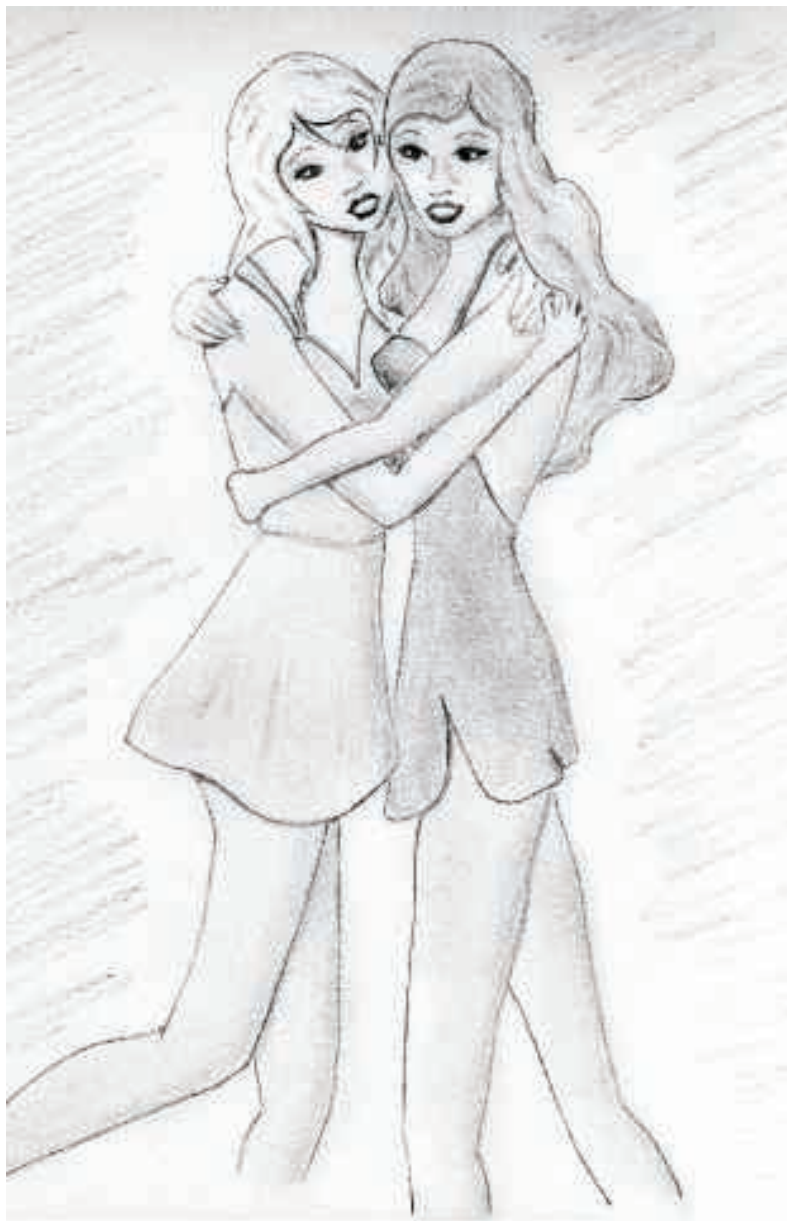
\* \* \*

Showering for Ryan was a particularly distressing event. His hairless body not only looked feminine, but felt feminine as well as he lathered and rinsed his chest, arms and legs. It did feel good to be free of his wig though, and wash his hair. Washing all the makeup off his face was also a relief.

But then he had to go back and face Julie, for their sleepover! Ryan put on the panties from his nightie set, then slipped the nightie over his head and down his body. It felt so nice to put on fresh, clean clothes after a shower, except it felt so feminine! Ryan was extremely confused. At least it wasn’t see-through, and the short skirt would allow him to keep his secret.

Next Ryan put on his blonde wig, straightening it on his head and giving it a quick combing. Finally he put on a little makeup, just like Valerie had shown him. He didn’t want Julie to notice anything non-feminine about his face! Giving himself a final check in the mirror, Ryan noticed how really pretty he was. Not some-

thing he was especially proud of, but there it was. He really was pretty. Ryan went back into his suite to face Julie.



Julie bounced up to Ryan, laughing, wearing her own sexy nightie. Hers was red satin, and if Ryan thought that he looked feminine, he just had to look at Julie to remember what a woman *really* looked like.

Julie hugged Ryan. "Look at us!" she giggled. "We look like two little girls on a sleepover! So what do you want to do first Valerie? We can do makeovers, or do each other's nails, or play Truth or Dare?!"

"Um..." said Ryan, not liking the choices much. "Nails, I guess?"

\* \* \*

"Did you feel the earth move last night, because I sure did," said Julie in a soft, sultry voice.

Ryan had barely opened his eyes only to see Julie, possibly the most beautiful woman he'd ever known, within kissing distance.

"What?" he stammered. "Did we... I mean, I'm not sure but I'd think I'd remember..."

"I never felt an earthquake before," said Julie as she popped out of bed. "It woke me up around three. The bed lifted right off the ground, and everything was shaking!"

"Oh, that." Ryan sat up, and noticed he was still wearing Valerie's pink babydoll nightie. As he straightened it he noticed the beautifully shaped, pink-painted nails on his hands. He quickly checked – yes, his toes still had pretty, feminine little pink-painted nails.

"That was fun last night," said Julie. "I just love manicures. Your nails really needed it. You did a nice job on mine as well."

“Thanks,” said Ryan, unable to believe what was happening to him. He jumped up quickly and ran to the bathroom to check himself over.

The first thing Ryan noticed was the shower cap on his head. That’s right, he remembered making some excuse that he wore a shower cap to keep his hair from tangling overnight. He took it off, and replaced it with the blonde wig he had hidden in a drawer. Ryan quickly shaved his face as close as he had ever shaved in his life, then did his makeup. When he was done he returned to the suite.

“Do you need the bathroom any more?” asked Julie. “I’d like to take a shower.”

“Oh, no! You go ahead,” Ryan told her. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to hog the bathroom. I’ll get dressed out here.”

“No problem, I have sisters!” Julie told him. “I’m used to waiting for girls in the bathroom.”

With Julie out of the room Ryan quickly stripped, tossing his nightie in Valerie’s suitcase. In the suitcase he found a clean pair of panties and a new bra. He put these on, then the same pair of stockings he had worn the previous day. His stewardess uniform was hanging over the back of a chair and he quickly dressed, ready for another day of work!

Julie came out of the bathroom, thankfully not naked but wearing a bikini top and bottom. Ryan was just finishing packing his things.

“I have to go now,” he announced, closing his suitcase and slipping on his pumps.

“Wait just a minute, I’ll go down with you,” Julie told him. She went to the closet and pulled out a simple, light cotton dress that she slipped over her head,

pulling it down over her body until it barely reached her thighs. She completed the outfit with some flip-flops. She looked so cool and breezy, Ryan envied her. Ryan, in his vest and stockings and wig and scarf and hat! He was *so* overdressed for Costa Rica.

The two girls left their suite, and talked about meaningless things as they waited for the elevator. Julie saw Ryan to the check-out desk, then left for the breakfast room. Ryan approached the desk.

"Hi, I'm Valerie Darling, room 602. I'm checking out."

"Certainly Miss Darling," responded the clerk as he punched the information into his computer. "I hope you had an enjoyable stay."

"Everything was very nice," Ryan said, trying to be pleasant. After all, nothing that happened was the hotel's fault, was it? "Could you also arrange for a taxi to take me to the airport?"

The clerk looked at Ryan strangely. "You have not heard?" he told him. "The airport is closed."

"Closed?!" said Ryan, unable to believe it. "Why? What happened?"

"There was a plane crash last night," explained the clerk. "It destroyed one runway. Then the second runway was damaged by the earthquake. It could be several days until the airport reopens. Do you still wish to check out?"

"No," said Ryan, trying not to cry like a little girl. He waited for the clerk to hand back his credit card.

"One moment, *senorita*," the clerk requested. He looked puzzled and said, "I am afraid your credit card has been rejected."

“Rejected?” said Ryan. “No, that’s not possible.”

“It says here,” the clerk insisted. “Your card has been cancelled. You are Valerie Darling, yes?”

“Well I’m...” said Ryan, suddenly remembering that he was not Valerie Darling. Valerie must have cancelled all her cards! Now what would he do? “Um, that’s my only card. I’ll call and settle this with the card company later.”

“Please let us know as soon as it is fixed,” the clerk insisted.

Ryan made his way to the breakfast room, dragging his suitcase behind him. He had no idea what to do about the credit card. But at least now he could have something to eat with Julie.

“Val, over here!” called Julie as she saw her friend enter the room. Ryan steered toward her voice, and looked up to find her sitting with...

“Don? And *Frank!*” he yelled.

“Please Valerie,” pleaded Julie. “We’re just having a nice conversation. Please, just join us.”

“I’m sorry about last night,” apologized Don. “We promise to be good.”

“Speak for yourself!” laughed Frank. Ryan gave him a look of disgust, but sat anyway.

“I’m glad you’re staying for breakfast,” said Julie with relief when Ryan didn’t make another scene. “I thought you had to run to catch your flight.”

“It was cancelled,” Ryan told them. “The entire airport is shut down, maybe for days.”

“Wow, you personally brought down a major international airport,” laughed Don. “That’s impressive!”

“I did not close the airport!” Ryan defended himself again, his painted eyes flashing and tinted lips pouting. “The earthquake did that! If you will recall, what I did was save the lives of several hundred people!”

“Haha,” laughed Frank. “That really didn’t do much for the airport!”

“Don was just about to tell us what he and Frank are doing in Costa Rica,” Julie interjected.

“Gay honeymoon?” suggested Ryan. Frank suddenly looked offended, but to his credit Don laughed.

“Haha! No, Frank should be so lucky,” quipped Don. “No, we both work for an American bank. We’re down here auditing our South American trading operations. Plus I have some personal business to take care of. Family matters.”

“What a shame, you have to work while you’re here,” said Julie.

“Hey, work doesn’t start until Monday morning!” said Frank. “We’ve got all weekend to play. Who wants to go out to the pool?”

“I do!” laughed Julie, and she, Don and Frank got up from the table. “Val, go get changed and meet us at the pool!”

Ryan was horrified by the idea. “No! I mean, I don’t have anything appropriate to wear!”

“Hey,” said Frank, obviously working on an obnoxious comment. “Come up to my room. I have something that will fit you perfectly!”

Ryan was quite sure Frank was not talking about clothes. But his comment gave him an idea. Frank did have something that would fit him perfectly – pants, and a man’s shirt! If he could get Frank to take him to

his room, and get him to take off his clothes, then Ryan could grab up Frank's clothes and run...

*"What are you thinking?"* Ryan thought to himself, dismissing the idea as the insane thoughts of a desperate man. *"That is the worst plan of all time!"*

"You can borrow anything of mine that you like," suggested Julie. "Please Val, go put on your bikini! Let's have some fun."

"No thanks," said Ryan. There was no way he would ever go to the pool in a bikini! And certainly not in front of Don and Frank. "I'm just going to stay in our room."

Don and Frank left, but before Julie could get away Ryan called her back.

"Julie, I've had some trouble with my credit card. It looks like it was cancelled. Do you think you could fix things at the reception desk? I'll pay you back. I have the money, really!"

"Oh no!" said Julie. "Of course, I'll cover the room. Can I do anything else?"

"No, thank you. You go have fun. But I'm still going back to the room."

\* \* \*

Ryan sat in his room, alone, watching television. Having nothing better, he still wore his complete stewardess uniform. He had to wear his wig, makeup, and full women's clothing in case Julie came back! So far he was unable to find anything of interest on any channel, though.

Costa Rica seemed to offer plenty of news channels, but not much else. Lots of international choices – CNN, BBC, Sky News, several Spanish speaking and local offerings. But every one was reporting the same story – the earthquake, and the plane crash. They all seemed to treat it like one story, as if he had personally caused the earthquake as well.

Ryan flipped to another channel. The American channels seemed to think it was newsworthy to report what all the late night comedians had to say the night before:

“Did you hear this?” Jimmy Kibble said. “A stewardess beat both the pilot and co-pilot of her flight into unconsciousness midflight, then somehow managed to destroy two runways landing the plane herself! If you think your coworkers are difficult to get along with just be glad you don’t work with this nut job.”

In another clip, Sarah Goldman had already worked an impression of Valerie Darling into her stand-up act. “My goodness,” she said in her sweetest baby voice. “So many pwetty fwashing wights! What does dis but-ton do? NNNEeeOWWKrrrKshhh!!!”

Someone working on the black box flight recorder had apparently posted video from the cockpit to YouTube, and most of the stations had picked it up. Just one clip that they played over and over, of Ryan straddling the unconscious pilot and attempting to lift him out of his seat. That’s not what it looked like.

And of course, no one could ever get enough of his comment, “You know they lose value as soon as you drive them off the lot!”

“Why is it so hot in here?” Ryan asked out loud, looking for anything to distract himself from the televi-

sion. He stood and crossed the room to check the thermostat.

"It's set for sixty-eight degrees," Ryan noted. "So why is the temperature seventy-six?" He tried adjusting the controls, but saw no change. He should have been able to hear the fan going, blowing cool air into the room, but there was nothing. The temperature suddenly increased to seventy-seven.

"This is ridiculous," said Ryan, sweating terribly in his vest, wool skirt, stockings and wig. He picked up the phone and dialled the front desk.

"The air conditioning isn't working in my room!" Ryan told the clerk, putting on his most outraged female voice. "I need you to send someone up to fix it immediately."

"Apologies, senorita," said the desk clerk with regret. "There is nothing we can do for you. We have turned off the air conditioning to the entire building."

"Turned it off?!" shouted Ryan. "Do you know what the temperature is? Why would you do such a thing?"

"It is the earthquake," said the clerk. "Many power lines are down, and power plants have been damaged. We need to conserve power and have been asked not to use air conditioning. Many apologies, but it is a national emergency, and necessary to ensure hospitals and emergency operations may continue. Please be assured we will keep the electricity and lights to the rooms as long as we can."

"Oh," said Ryan. "Okay. Thank you."

Ryan hung up. He had just enough time to note the temperature was seventy-nine degrees before the lights went out.

\* \* \*

“Valerie! I’m so glad you changed your mind!” laughed Julie, waving her friend over to where she sat by the pool with Don and Frank.

Ryan had no option. The heat in his room was unbearable, and with no lights, electricity or television it was deadly boring. So now he nervously approached the pool, wearing Valerie’s pretty blue flowered halter bikini and high-heeled sandals. Everything he could find in either Valerie’s or Julie’s luggage was the same! Skimpy, sexy beach wear was the only thing he could find to wear in the Costa Rican sun. Fortunately Valerie’s bikini had a tiny, matching wrap-around skirt that would hide his secret. Barely. Ryan was sure that he looked completely ridiculous.

“You look completely gorgeous!” said Frank.

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Thanks, Frank,” he muttered.

“It’s true!” said Julie. “That bikini is so hot. Where did you get it? You look so cute, I’m actually jealous!”

Ryan was humiliated, and tried to cover himself with his hands. “Could we talk about something other than what I’m wearing, please?” he pleaded.

Then he noticed Frank’s scotch. The tumbler, the ice, the glistening caramel-colored liquid. Suddenly he wanted the comfort of a scotch in his hand. He could endure anything, any feminine humiliation, so long as he could have his one, masculine concession – a scotch on ice.

“Where can I get one of those?” Ryan asked.

“All you need to do is ask,” replied Frank. “What can I get for you?”

“Exactly what you have there,” said Ryan.

“Sit down and relax, beautiful,” Frank told him.  
“I’ll be right back.”

Ryan sat in a lounge chair by the pool with Julie and Don. Don looked at him and asked, “Did you put on any sunscreen?”

“Oh no, I completely forgot!” said Ryan. “Does anyone have some I can borrow?”

“Sure Valerie,” replied Julie. She handed him a bottle and told him, “You can use mine, no problem.”

“Thanks Julie,” said Ryan as he squeezed the sunscreen lotion into his palm. Ryan had an awful lot of exposed skin, but started with his face, then worked down over his neck, shoulders, arms, chest, and legs.

“Don’t forget your back,” Julie warned him. “Lie down, I’ll get it for you.”

Ryan lay face down on the lounge chair and pulled his hair over one shoulder to expose his back. Sleepy in the hot sun, he closed his eyes and let Julie massage the lotion up and down his back.

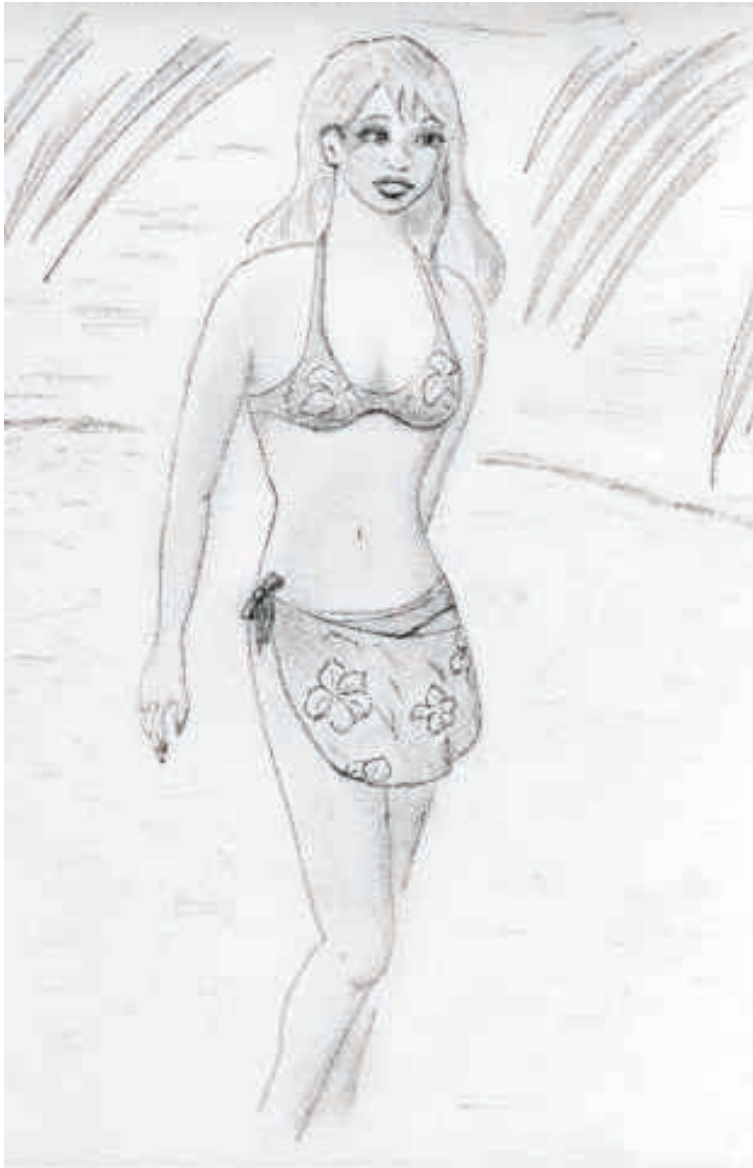
“Mmm, Julie that feels so good,” said Ryan dreamily. “You have such strong hands. You can give me a massage any time.” Julie massaged the lotion into his shoulders and all the way down to his highly-exposed bottom, then worked her way back up again.

“Hey!” called out Frank playfully. “You trying to steal my girl?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Ryan, rolling over on his lounge chair to see what was happening. The first thing he noticed was that it wasn’t Julie massaging his back, it was Don. And he no longer had his

hands on Ryan's back. When Ryan rolled over, Don's hands somehow ended up cupping Ryan's breasts.

Ryan looked down at Don's hands. "That was you, rubbing my butt?" he said.



“Um, yes,” said Don. “Julie looked comfortable where she was, so I thought I could do your sunscreen for you.”

“Are you done now?” Ryan asked calmly.

“Yes,” replied Don. “Um, yes. Your back is covered now.”

“And are you done feeling my chest?” asked Ryan.

“Oh!” said Don, suddenly realizing he still had hold of Ryan’s bikini top and his demure breasts. He pulled his hands away. “Yes, they’re all fixed now. I was just adjusting them, you know, for your comfort.”

“Thanks,” said Ryan as Don got up and moved away. “I’m sure they’re fine now.”

“Nice going, Don!” laughed Frank. “Way to cop a feel!”

“Could I just get my drink, please?” asked Ryan, unable to endure one more humiliation.

“Of course, milady,” said Frank. He handed Ryan a glass.

“What the heck is this?” said Ryan, his voice practically a squeal. “Where’s my scotch?”

“Trust me, you don’t want a scotch,” said Frank. “Scotch is for men. You’ll like this.”

Ryan looked at his drink. The pink liquid was served in a martini glass. In addition to the pink liquid, the glass contained a cherry stuck through with a tiny plastic sword, a paper umbrella, a little plastic monkey, and a straw. Oh, and the rim of the glass was coated in pink sugar crystals.

“What is this thing called?” Ryan had to wonder as he held the ridiculous concoction at arm’s length.

"It's a Glamour Girl," Frank told him. "The perfect drink for our glamour girls!"

"It's really good," said Julie. "Try it!"

Ryan wrinkled his nose. Shoving all the decorations to one side, he raised the glass to his lips and tried his Glamour Girl. The sweet, fruity mix was surprisingly smooth, covering the taste of the alcohol. He quickly finished.

"Okay, that was good," he said. "Bring me another."

## **Chapter 5**

### **A Night to Remember**

Ryan sat by the pool for the rest of the morning, and half-way into the afternoon, soaking up the sun and drinking Glamour Girls. The sweet, fruity taste covered the alcoholic content quite effectively so that Ryan had no idea how very drunk he had become. Frank and Don would occasionally jump in the pool for a swim, but Julie and Ryan simply sat and tanned. The two gorgeous girls inspired every guy who walked by, and prompted many reactions from irate wives and girlfriends, but no other guys approached them. It was obvious to all that they were with Frank and Don.

"So have you girls thought about your plans for tonight?" Don asked as the four of them sat around a small poolside table sipping their drinks. Ryan's inebriated reactions were slow, and before he could say anything Julie answered.

"No plans. We're up for anything fun! Why, what did you have in mind?"

"How about dinner in the formal dining room," suggested Don. "Some drinks, dancing, maybe a jazz

bar or a romantic walk on the beach. You know, see where the evening takes us.”

“That sounds so great,” said Julie.

Ryan felt nauseous at the thought of the evening Don outlined. Just the thought of what he would be expected to wear for formal dining. Then dancing, and romantic walks? And he knew where the evening was supposed to take them!

“No!” Ryan shouted involuntarily. When he regained control of himself he added, “No, we’ll get our own dinner.”

Don and Frank were used to “Valerie’s” strange behaviour, and knew what to do.

“Look, you two girls decide and let us know,” said Frank. “We’re going for a swim.”

As the men left, Julie appeared thoughtful. She asked Ryan, “Does this mean you straightened out your credit card problems?”

“Um, no,” said Ryan. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s just, dinner can be expensive. Don and Frank will play for everything.”

“Can’t you pay?” asked Ryan.

“I’m already paying for the room, and I don’t have much credit left on my card,” Julie told him. “And the boys have been so nice today, paying for all our drinks. Please Val, we should do this. It’s going to be fun, I promise.”

Ryan knew there was no point in arguing. He had no money, so had to cooperate with anyone who would pay his way, whether that was Julie or some

guy who wanted a romantic evening. That reasoning, plus all the Glamour Girls he had been drinking, led him to finally say, "Okay. We can go to dinner with the boys."

"And dancing!" shouted Julie as she stood. She grabbed Ryan's hand and lifted him from his chair, leading him toward the hotel. As they passed the men in the pool she called out, "We'll meet you in the dining room at seven!"

Julie led Ryan through the hotel. He was fairly drunk, but it eventually occurred to him that he should ask, "Where are we going?"

"We're going to get ready for tonight," Julie told him.

"But it's only three o'clock," Ryan said, squinting at the tiny bracelet watch on his wrist.

"I know!" said Julie. "Only four hours, we'd better hurry." Julie led Ryan to the hotel salon.

"Welcome to Ultimate Beauty," said the girl at reception. "I'm Cindy. What can we do for you ladies today?"

"We have big dates tonight," said Julie. "Two very special guys and we need to look gorgeous! We need our hair and makeup done." Ryan tried to object when he found out Julie's plan, but the best he could manage was to collapse in one of the hairdressing workstations.

"Of course!" said Cindy. "Let's see, you have such beautiful hair..."

Cindy stopped as she held Ryan's hair, and looked more closely. "I don't understand," she finally said. "Did you want me to style your wig?"

"Wig?" asked Julie. "What are you talking about?"

Ryan sobered up quickly, realizing he had to get out quickly. No one could know he was wearing a wig! Except Julie and the stylist were blocking his way. Before he could even move she said...

"Your friend is wearing a wig, see?"

Ryan had no chance to object as Cindy ran her fingers into his hair, lifting the wig and exposing him. Ryan saw the looks of horror on the two girls' faces. His makeup must have been mostly worn off since this morning, his boyish body was covered in an absurd disguise of a bikini and tiny skirt, and now with his man's haircut there was nothing remotely feminine about him. His secret was exposed for everyone to see!

Cindy was the first to speak. "You poor girl!" she said. "Where did you get this terrible hairstyle?"

"Oh, Valerie," sympathised Julie. "I had no idea. No wonder you wear a wig. What happened to your hair?"

Ryan realized that they still didn't know! He had to lie, and it had to be convincing. He would only get one chance at it. He only hoped his alcohol-addled mind could get it right.

"Lots of girls have short hair," he said, trying to look distressed. "I wanted a short style for the beach, but it turned out just awful. So I bought the wig. I've been growing it back for a couple of weeks now."

Cindy gave Ryan an understanding look as she worked with his hair. "Not every girl can wear such a short hairstyle," she told him. "A girl needs some ultra-feminine feature to get away with it. A tiny perfect nose, or big eyes and high cheekbones, or full lips. You're a beautiful girl, but none of your features are feminine enough to work with this hair. It makes you

look like a boy in a bikini." Not unreasonably, as he was a boy in a bikini!

"Can't we do anything?" Julie asked. "It must be very uncomfortable wearing that wig all the time, especially in the hot sun."

Cindy looked at Ryan for while, thinking. Finally she announced, "I think I can help you, but you have to trust me."

"What does that mean?" Ryan wanted to know.

"Just say that you trust me," Cindy told him.

"I'd really like to know what you're going to..." Ryan tried to say.

"Please, Val!" pleaded Julie. "Just say that you trust her. I trust you Cindy! She can fix it, I know she can, Valerie!"

"Okay," said Ryan reluctantly. "I trust you." After all, there was no need to worry because what could she do? With so little hair to work with, she couldn't really do much at all.

"Then let's get started," Cindy said. She pushed the chair Ryan sat in back, so his head rested in a sink. "You just close your eyes while I wash your hair."

The warm water running over his head was so relaxing, and Cindy's fingers running through his hair felt so nice, that Ryan soon drifted off to sleep...

\* \* \*

"Valerie? Wakey, wakey!"

Ryan opened his eyes. Everything looked strange. Where was he? He had fallen asleep at the...

“Beauty Salon!” shouted Ryan as he sat bolt upright in the beauty workstation.

Cindy giggled. “That’s right! You’ve been asleep for hours, but you’re still at the beauty salon.”

Julie joined in the excited atmosphere. “I can’t believe you slept all afternoon! I was so excited, it was frustrating that I couldn’t say anything to you! But now you just won’t believe what Cindy has done.”

Ryan looked about the salon in shock and dismay. But Cindy and Julie directed his eyes to the mirror in front of him. His stomach flipped when he saw himself...

“What have you done?” he almost cried.

“I know, isn’t it amazing?” exclaimed Julie.

Amazing was not the word Ryan was looking for. Horrifying was more like it. His normally brown hair had been bleached pure white, with pink streaks! And little pink sideburns curled at the front of his ears. There was no way to simply become a man again. Even with the right clothes and opportunity, he was a girl permanently until he figured out what to do about this hair!

“I told you to trust me,” said Cindy, holding a mirror so he could see this nightmare all the way to the back. “As I told you, none of your features are ultra-feminine enough for a short hairstyle. So we had to make your hair the ultra-feminine feature!”

“You sure don’t look like a boy in a bikini now!” said Julie. “But that’s not the best part.”

“There’s more?” said Ryan with some trepidation.

“I had my assistant put this together for you,” said Cindy, holding up a handful of pink-streaked white

hair. "It's a half-wig, to match your new hair. It's much lighter than a full wig, and adds length at the back and sides. You can wear it to look glamorous in the evening." Cindy put the wig on Ryan's head to show him.

"You see?" explained Julie. "You can look so cute with short hair on the beach, but then be elegant and glamorous in the evenings with long hair!"

"Or in cooler weather you can wear your full wig if you like," Cindy told him. "We washed and reconditioned it," she said, handing him his old blonde wig.

Ryan looked at his long, pink-white hair and tried to hide his revulsion. The look on his face was one of total surprise. Then he realized why...

"My eyebrows!" he squealed. "What have you done to them?"

"I thinned them out," said Cindy as she primped his hair, blending the half-wig in with his real hair. "Gave them a high arch. Aren't they just so pretty now? Very feminine."

"Am I wearing earrings?" Ryan asked, finding it difficult to see himself in the mirror as Cindy fussed about.

"I got a second piercing," said Julie. "Then we noticed, you didn't have any at all! I'm surprised you slept through it. I chose the pearl studs for you, I hope you like them."

"It looks like you've thought of everything," Ryan said.

Cindy laughed. "Let's do your makeup now, for your romantic evening."

\* \* \*

“Hurry Val, the guys will be waiting for us!” Julie said as the two girls fussed about their room, finalizing their outfits for the evening.

Ryan looked at himself in the full-length mirror, and couldn't believe what he saw. He was wearing his new half-wig, so his hair was long and full, bleached white with cute pink streaks. His makeup was perfect, professionally done by Cindy at Ultimate Beauty. His lashes were long and dark, his eyebrows thin arches, his lips full, his ears accented by tiny pearls. His nails were painted a very pretty pink.

But the dress he had found in Valerie's luggage and was now wearing was what concerned him at the moment. It consisted of a pink satin lining underneath, covered by a sheer chiffon covering. The covering was longer than the satin lining, giving the entire outfit the appearance of being slightly longer than its tiny mini-length. However this was deceptive, as the chiffon was practically see-through! The dress was strapless and gathered at the waist, and from there hung down to barely cover Ryan's hips. The short skirt combined with his silver sandals with three-inch heels made his legs look as if they stretched forever. Ryan was way too pretty to go out like this!

“I can't believe I have bikini tan lines,” Ryan complained, looking at himself in the mirror.

“Don't worry, everyone does,” Julie told him. “Wear a strapless bikini tomorrow, they'll go away.”

“Julie, please don't make me go out like this!” whined Ryan. “Don and Frank can't see me this way!”



Julie picked up Ryan's clutch bag and shoved it into his hands. "No more excuses, Valerie Darling! You know the boys are waiting, and you promised me we would go out for a fun evening. Now move it, young lady!"

Julie opened the door, and shoved Ryan into the hall. Unsteady in his high heels, Ryan was unable to put up any resistance. He reluctantly headed to the elevators, his hips swivelling with each high-heeled step.

"You know, you have nothing to worry about," said Julie as they waited for the elevator. "The guys are going to think you're beautiful."

"That's what worries me," said Ryan.

The elevator arrived and the two girls entered. As it descended, Julie asked Ryan a question that had been on her mind.

"Valerie, I wanted to ask you, which of the guys do you like best?"

Ryan tried to hide his revulsion. "I like them both the same," was the nicest thing he could think to say.

"It's just, I really like Don. So do you think I can take Don, and you can be Frank's date?" asked Julie.

"Frank?" exclaimed Ryan. "You have got to be kidding! He's such a jerk." But seeing the look on Julie's face Ryan reluctantly agreed. "Okay, if there is a choice to be made you can have Don."

"Thanks Valerie! You're the best."

The elevator doors opened, and the girls stepped into the lobby. Every man in the place watched as they strutted toward the restaurant. But when they arrived the doors were closed and locked. Ryan and Julie stood there, staring through the glass door, looking helpless.

"Can I help you ladies?" asked a young woman from the nearby concierge desk.

"We were supposed to meet our dates at the restaurant," said Julie. "Except for some reason it's closed."

“The power is still out,” the girl informed them. “So the restaurant is closed for now, but they’ve set up a barbecue on the patio. I’m sure you’ll find your dates out there.”

Ryan thanked the girl, and he and Julie continued out to the patio.

“That was lucky she told us,” said Julie.

“Yes,” said Ryan. “We might have had to miss our date,” he added sarcastically. “We would have had to go out together, just the two of us. No Don, no Frank, what a pity...”

Don and Frank were waiting for the girls on the patio. As they approached, Frank came forward and took Julie by the hands, pulling her into a friendly hug. As Ryan watched, Don put his arms around him, holding him tight. When he finally released him, Don had one more surprise move. With one hand placed at the back of Ryan’s head, Don pulled him in for a quick kiss on the lips. Ryan was mortified, and blushed a very pretty shade of pink.

“Valerie, you look amazing!” said Don, looking Ryan up and down while still holding him close.

“Yeah, what happened to your hair?” laughed Frank, looking at Ryan while holding Julie. “Did you get caught in a candyfloss machine?”

Frank was definitely the tactless one. Don tried to cover by saying, “Every time I think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met, you go and make yourself over into something even more incredible.”

“Isn’t she just the cutest thing?” Julie complimented Ryan. Frank held onto her as she continued, “Your new hair is just perfect, and that dress is adorable on you!”

“Um, thanks,” said Ryan, squirming in Don’s embrace. Attempting to change the subject he asked, “So how does this barbecue work?”

“Come on, I’ll show you,” said Don, escorting Ryan out onto the patio, where several large barbecues had been set up. The smell of barbecue pork was incredible. Ryan was suddenly very aware that he hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast.

Don continued to escort him past the barbecues, and from there out to the beach. The beach was lit with a path of torches, leading the guests to an area set up for the evening festivities. Don had to hold Ryan close as walking in heels over the sand was almost impossible. Ryan finally removed his heels as Don steadied him, and continued barefoot. Still, Don never let him go.

All the guests were arranged on towels and blankets on the sand around an impromptu stage, well lit by an electric generator. Don helped Ryan down, assisting him into a half-sitting, half-kneeling position that was necessary to keep his very short skirt from riding up. Don sat beside him, always with one arm around him, sometimes on his shoulder, or at his waist, or touching his knee. Ryan tried his best to ignore the unwanted attention. Frank and Julie were seated nearby, with a similar arrangement. They seemed to be having an animated conversation, and Julie was laughing a lot. Ryan smiled, wishing it was him with his arm around her.

Drink orders were taken and brought out. Ryan was sipping his Glamour Girl when the entertainment began. Being an impromptu evening, the entertainment was a mixed bag. There was a hot and sexy Latin dance performance, a native flame juggler, a beautiful Span-

ish Flamenco dancer, and a jazz quartet. Ryan managed to forget all his troubles, and simply had a wonderful time. He laughed and applauded for the acts, and talked with Don about every last detail.

The entertainment ended, but it seemed the dinner wasn't quite ready. Ryan looked over and saw Julie waving to get his attention. Don helped him up, and he and Julie left for the ladies' room. Ryan and Julie stood at the mirror, fixing their makeup.

"Wasn't that salsa dancer just so gorgeous, Val?" asked Julie.

"Oh, she was amazing!" agreed Ryan, applying his lipstick.

"Not the *girl*, silly!" giggled Julie. "The guy! Didn't you just want to jump up and grab him when he ripped his shirt off?"

"Um, right," stammered Ryan. With a hint of revulsion he continued, "He had, like, ripply muscles and everything."

Ryan decided to change the subject. As he powdered his nose he said, "Julie, I'm really sorry about what happened with Don. I know we agreed, you liked Don so you two could be together. It's just, there was nothing I could do. If you want to change dates when we go back, that's fine with me."

"No, thank you but that's okay," said Julie. "Don is so handsome, you two really belong together. And I'm having a good time with Frank."

"With Frank? Are you sure? He's just so..." Ryan wanted to say annoying, but this was Julie's date they were talking about! So instead he said, "colourful."

Julie smiled. "He's actually very nice, once he stops trying to show off. He and I are having fun. What about you and Don? Are you having fun?"

Ryan started to deny it, but couldn't. "Yes," he admitted as he powdered his shiny chin. "He's really a very nice guy. And we have a lot to talk about. I guess I'm having fun."

"I'm glad," said Julie, but then turned serious. "I'm not an idiot, Valerie. I know something is bothering you. But whatever it is, can't you just forget it for one night? Tonight you're a beautiful girl, and you're with the perfect guy. Forget about everything else, and just have fun."

Perhaps it was the Glamour Girl in him, but Ryan agreed. "You're right, Julie. I'm a girl on a date, on a beautiful beach. Nothing else should matter. From now on, no more thinking, just fun."

Ryan put a little powder between his breasts to help with the heat, then placed all his things back into his clutch purse. He and Julie went back to the beach, and their dates.

Ryan had another cocktail, and loosened up considerably. The four friends were able to find a place where they could sit together, and laughed and talked all night long. Dinner was amazing, the most delicious barbecue pork Ryan had ever tasted. The dinner was complemented by fresh bread, an amazing orange and honey salad, and wine that just kept flowing.

By the end of the dinner, Ryan couldn't tell you what they had talked about. All he knew was that he had a wonderful time, laughing at everything. He talked with Julie like two best friends. Don kept one arm at Ryan's waist, but Ryan stopped noticing after a

while. Don kept the conversation light and lively, and Ryan got so carried away he even hugged Don back a few times. Even spending time with Frank didn't seem that bad. Julie was right. Tonight he was a girl, and if he was to have any fun at all he needed to simply enjoy being a girl.

After dinner Don helped Ryan to stand, and suggested a walk on the beach. The two held hands as they walked on the white sand. Ryan soon realized that he had lost track of Julie, but he assumed that she was with Frank, enjoying the romantic moonlit evening. Ryan was a little drunk, and ran and laughed and splashed in the ocean up to his knees.

Ryan laughed at Don, standing on the beach in his long pants and shoes, unwilling to come into the water. Ryan laughed and splashed water at him. Don told "Valerie" that she had to come out of the ocean eventually, and when she did he would get her back! And he was right. Ryan did have to come out of the ocean, and Don was waiting for him. Sweeping a giggling Ryan up into his arms, Don carried him back up the beach. Ryan was laughing so hard that his weak, girlish protests didn't persuade Don in any way to let him go. Don carried him to a spot where the sand was soft and dry, then laid him down, pinning Ryan under his greater weight. Don kissed Ryan passionately.

Suddenly it occurred to Ryan what was happening, what he was doing. He put one tiny, delicate hand on Don's chest, and gently pushed him away.

"It's getting late, and I'm cold," he said. "We should go back to the hotel."

Don stood, and lifted Ryan from the sand. Ryan retrieved his shoes and clutch purse, and the two walked back to the hotel. Neither spoke, but Don held Ryan

close, his arm around Ryan's shoulders to keep him warm.

And as they walked, Ryan remembered his plan from earlier in the day. The plan he had dismissed so quickly. The plan which, if he had followed through, might have prevented him from losing his eyebrows and piercing his ears and bleaching his hair! And now he was on a date with a man, acting like a giggly little girl, kissing on the beach in the moonlight! If this continued, where would it end? He needed to get some men's clothing, and he needed to do it now before anything else happened! Ryan put his plan into action.

"Don," said Ryan shyly, being new to this side of things and unsure how to proceed. "Could we go to your room for a while? Not for any big reason, you understand! Just, you know, for a few minutes. Just so the night doesn't end just yet."

"Sure Valerie," agreed Don. "I know what you mean. I don't want the evening to end either."

Don led Ryan to his room. Inside Ryan noted it was quite a bit smaller than his suite. Still, it had two twin size beds, a desk and a small bathroom. Ryan entered, and sat on the end of one of the beds. Don sat beside him, one hand cupping Ryan's neck, the other stroking Ryan's thigh. This was the tricky part – Ryan needed to get Don out of his clothes. Once he accomplished that he would grab the shirt and pants, and run! He would figure out the rest later, but first he needed some men's clothing.

Ryan smiled demurely up at Don. Reaching up with both hands he undid Don's top button, then one more. Don grabbed the hem of Ryan's dress and lifted it up, past his waist, and over his head. Ryan shrugged out of

the pile of satin and chiffon, now dressed only in his panties and strapless bra.

*"That's okay,"* Ryan said to himself. *"It doesn't matter if I lose these feminine clothes. All I need is his shirt and pants."*

Ryan continued to unbutton Don's shirt, eventually loosening it from his pants, pushing it back over his arms and dropping it on the floor, all the while Don was kissing his neck and stroking him over his bra. Ryan was working on Don's belt, when there was a knock on the door.

Ryan looked at Don in shock. "Are you expecting someone?" he asked.

"Uh, Maybe," said Don evasively. "What time is it? Eleven thirty? It's later than I thought."

Don jumped up, grabbing his shirt and doing up his belt as he walked to the door. Ryan cowered on the bed in his bra and panties, but as Don opened the door he was able to see it was a young Spanish girl.

"Senor," she said. "I have stayed as late as I can. Now I must go home."

"Can't you just stay a little longer?" asked Don. "Come back in an hour. Half an hour?"

"Please senor, I have school in the morning. Please you must pay me now, for I must leave."

Ryan couldn't imagine what this conversation meant. He listened from his hiding place for any clues.

"Can you take a credit card?" asked Don.

"Please, it must be in cash," said the girl.

"Okay, just a minute. I don't have cash so I'll need to go down to the desk with you."

Don turned apologetically to Ryan. "I'm sorry, Valerie. I didn't want you to find out this way. I was going to tell you, really. Can you just wait here for a few minutes? I need to go down to the desk to get money for the babysitter."

"Babysitter?" said Ryan in surprise. Then he noticed the tiny, two-year-old girl holding onto Don's leg. Don put on his shirt, then left Ryan and the little girl alone, staring at each other.

"What's your name?" asked the little girl after several moments of awkward silence.

Ryan attempted to act as if this was a perfectly normal situation – having a polite discussion with a baby in a man's hotel room while wearing only panties and a strapless bra. "My name is Valerie."

The little girl continued to stare. "You have pretty underpants," she finally said.

"Thank you," said Ryan. The little girl reached up to him, and not knowing what else to do he reached down and lifted her into his arms. The little girl lay there sleepily.

"Can I have pink hair?" the little girl said, her eyes closing.

"Sure," agreed Ryan as the little girl drifted off to sleep. "That would be nice."

That was how Don found them a few minutes later when he returned. Ryan was rocking the little girl slowly in his arms, singing quietly to her. Standing there in his bra and panties, seeing the baby nestled in his arms, it was hard for Ryan to keep his maternal instincts from kicking in, and it showed.

“You look beautiful,” Don said. Ryan blushed, and with Don’s help tucked the baby into the bed.

“This is Mina,” Don explained. “I told you this morning I had some personal business to take care of here. This is it.”

“You have a daughter?” said Ryan, having figured this out long before but finally feeling it was his opportunity to express a little outrage. “Why wouldn’t you tell me this? Where is her mother?”

Don sat on the bed, looking at the baby while Ryan stood, expressing his anger as only a woman in her underwear can.

“I met Mina’s mother Maria three years ago, here in Costa Rica. We got married, and I took her back to the States. She was never happy and came back here. It was only later that I learned she was pregnant, but I was never able to see her, and never allowed to visit the baby. Maria died two months ago and I’ve been trying to get Mina ever since. The papers are all finalized, and now I’m here to pick her up and take her home.”

“Oh,” said Ryan, having no idea how to react to this story. “I’m, um, really happy for you, I guess.” Ryan picked up his dress and hurriedly threw it on over his head, his plan for getting Don’s pants and shirt completely blown. “Look, I have to go now. I, uh, really had a nice time. I guess. Really.”

“Me too,” said Don, walking Ryan to the door. “Maybe we can try again some other time.”

“Sure, that would be great,” said Ryan as he rushed for the door.

“I hope it’s okay if I don’t walk you to your room,” said Don, gesturing at the sleeping baby.

“No, of course, I understand. Um, goodnight,” said Ryan. He felt something more was required and so gave Don a quick kiss before leaving.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Ryan’s Maternal Side**

Ryan sat with Julie in the hotel restaurant, enjoying his breakfast. Both girls wore bikinis, ready for the beach. Julie wore a plain cropped top and colourful skirt over hers, and Ryan covered up with a gorgeous off-white crochet dress.

“Balerie!” someone called out in a high, baby voice. Ryan and Julie looked up to see Don at the front of the restaurant. Mina had escaped from him, and was running toward the two girls.

“Good morning, Mina,” said Ryan, lifting the tiny girl onto his lap. “Don’t you look pretty today? Julie, this is Don’s daughter Mina.”

“Hi Mina,” said Julie. “Valerie has told me all about you.” Mina suddenly turned shy, and hid her face in Ryan’s bosom.

Don arrived moments later. Julie asked, “Are the two of you going to join us for breakfast this morning?”

“I wish we could,” said Don. “Except we have to just pick up something quickly and leave. I have to work this morning, and I need to drop off Mina at the hotel daycare.”

“Stay Daddy,” said Mina quietly around the thumb in her mouth.

Don knelt down and pried out the thumb as he spoke to the little girl. “I’ll be back tonight. But you’ll

have a lot of fun at the daycare. There will be lots of toys and fun games to play."

"Play with Balerie," said Mina, standing on Ryan's lap and wrapping her arms around his neck.

"No Mina," said Don. "Valerie and Julie have other things to do."

"No, really we don't," said Ryan, wrapping his arms around Mina as if he might not give her back. "We'd love to look after Mina today, wouldn't we Julie?"

"Sure, I guess we could," replied Julie.

"Well, if you really don't mind," said Don. Ryan didn't have to answer, as he already had Mina seated in his lap and was feeding her bits of breakfast off his plate. No, he didn't seem to mind at all. "I'll make it up to you. How about I take all three of you girls to dinner tonight?"

Ryan looked up. "That would be nice," he said. He couldn't believe that he actually meant it!

After Don left, Julie asked Ryan, "Are you sure you want to look after a baby all day Valerie? I mean, she's absolutely adorable, but it might be hard work."

Ryan looked as happy and proud as a new mother. "Of course I want to do this," he said. "Look at all the little dresses Don left us in her baby bag. This is going to be so much fun!"

\* \* \*

And so "Balerie" and "Yulie" looked after Mina every day that week. As long as the airport remained closed, the two stewardesses were trapped at the hotel.

Having nothing else to do they found that looking after Mina during the day, taking her to the pool and the beach and the playground, was actually a lot of fun. Anyone seeing the three girls would have assumed that Ryan was Mina's mother, the way he fawned over her. The girls would often go shopping, and Ryan loved to find pretty little things for his beautiful baby girl.

Having to share a room with Julie meant Ryan had no option except to continue as Valerie, but he was becoming somewhat of an expert at the feminine arts. He found a cream for sale in a market that reduced the hair on his face to a fine down. He found that he barely needed shaving every other day, and the cream seemed to eliminate the hair on his arms, legs and chest completely. A little practice with makeup was all he needed to become an expert at the things all women learn – how to keep skin tone soft and even, how to ensure his makeup was applied symmetrically, how to accentuate his most feminine features.

Every night when Don and Frank would get back from working at the bank, the girls would run off to get ready for dinner. Most of Mina's little clothes had ended up in the girls' suite and so Ryan and Julie would take her with them. Ryan would pick out a little dress for the baby girl and help her into it. Then he and Julie would look through their closets, trying to find the perfect outfit for their date. Neither had brought enough clothes to go on a date every night for a week, but they did what they could. Ryan ended up wearing the same little black dress twice, but justified it because it really did look adorable on him. Both girls bought new outfits on Friday, a floral print linen sun dress for Julie and a white, mid-length dress for Ryan, in chiffon again because it felt so light and cool.

Once all three girls were dressed, Ryan and Julie would do their makeup. The bathroom had plenty of room for two and the girls stood side by side as they applied their feminine magic, covering minor imperfections, deepening their eyes, bringing out their full, red lips. Mina would stand on a stool to see what was happening, and the two women would occasionally dab a bit of makeup on the child's face, making her feel like one of the girls.



The men always chose a restaurant, and Ryan soon learned to order only a light salad. The men could eat a full meal every night, but the girls started to feel very full after a couple of days. Ryan became just a little vain about his narrow waist, and wanted to look good at the beach in his bikini! With Mina in the middle, it wasn't entirely clear who was with who – was Ryan with Don or Frank? Which one was with Julie? It didn't seem to matter, as the four became friends and simply enjoyed their time together. Ryan spent most of his time each meal looking after Mina anyway, making sure she had something she enjoyed to eat, and ensuring the little girl felt included in the grownup conversation.

After dinner Mina would be sent away with a babysitter so that the four could enjoy some adult time. Don and Frank seemed to know every exciting and interesting spot in Costa Rica! They would take the girls to see the most unimaginable scenery – beautiful waterfalls set in thick tropical forests, or stretches of white beach under a romantic full moon. They took the girls to a street fair for a night of lively music and fun, where Don bought Ryan an orchid to wear in his hair. And they went to a club one night where Ryan had to quickly learn how to dance as a girl! Don was an excellent partner, however. Being a fairly large man, he made Ryan feel quite tiny and feminine in comparison. With Don leading, Ryan found it quite natural to twirl and to be dipped as he was led backwards in his high heels.

After a fabulous evening, Ryan always found some excuse to go back to Don's room to see Mina before she fell asleep. He would tuck her into bed and tell her what a wonderful day it had been, and that he would see her in the morning. As he reluctantly left, Ryan

would give Don a goodnight kiss. Not a real kiss of course, but the kind of kiss any girl might give to any guy she knew.

By the end of this magical week, Ryan had quite forgotten that he had ever not been Valerie Darling.

\* \* \*

“Daddy, Daddy!” shouted Mina. She jumped up from where Ryan had been attempting to put more sunscreen on the struggling infant. Keeping her still was always a challenge, but with the added incentive of her father arriving back at the hotel from work she easily slid through Ryan’s gooey fingers.

Frank and Don found the three girls where they usually found them, sunbathing beside the hotel pool. None of the girls wore any more than the briefest of bikinis, not even Ryan. He had become quite adept at concealing himself no matter what he might be wearing, never offering anything but the most ideal of feminine forms to the eyes of the world.

“Hello, sweetheart!” said Don as he lifted his daughter into the air, tossing her briefly and making her giggle.

“Hi Frank! Hi Don,” called out Julie, chasing after the little runaway while Ryan stayed behind, wiping his hands on a towel. “So how was work today?”

“Difficult,” laughed Frank.

“It was certainly a challenge this week,” agreed Don. “Trying to do an audit with only intermittent electricity. But we got in all our interviews, and got most of what we needed from printed reports. So if

they can just get the airport open I think we can finish the rest from the office back home on Monday."

"Back home?" said Ryan, a note of disappointment in his voice. "You're not leaving already, are you?"

"Our flight's on Sunday," said Frank. "Assuming, of course, that the airport is actually open. The latest news is they expect flights to begin tomorrow morning, so our Sunday flight should be on time."

"Oh. That's... great," said Ryan, although he didn't sound as if he meant it. His bottom lip pouting as he watched Mina, held aloft in her father's strong arms. "Can I have Mina please? We should go get ready for dinner."

"Of course, here's the big sack of potatoes," said Don as he pretended to throw the giggling infant to Ryan. Ryan took her and held her protectively, as if to say he thought Don's play was too rough and that Ryan would never let anything harm her. Mina put her arms around Ryan's neck and relaxed completely in his arms.

Ryan started to leave, but Don stopped him. "Valerie, do you think I could have a few minutes with you before dinner? Alone. I mean, just you and me? I have something important to ask you."

"Sure Don," said Ryan. "Where were you thinking?"

"How about down on the beach, at seven?"

"No problem. See you then," agreed Ryan. He and Julie turned and walked to the elevators, dropping off their towels at the towel return on their way.

“So what do you think that was all about?” said Julie when they were alone in the elevator. “A secret meeting, just the two of you?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” said Ryan, setting Mina down on her feet and taking her hand.

“I don’t know,” said Julie mischievously. “It sounded pretty serious. Maybe he plans to propose!”

“Julie!” scolded Ryan, putting his hands over Mina’s ears. “Don’t say things like that. Mina doesn’t know you’re joking.”

“It’s just possible is all I’m saying,” said Julie.

“I expect he just wants to ask if we’ll look after Mina tomorrow, while he and Frank go off golfing or some such boys’ thing,” Ryan told her.

“Well, I still think it’s mysterious, and you should try to be a little more romantic!” said Julie.

The elevator doors opened and the three girls went to their room to change. Secretly, Ryan was excited that he would get to wear his beautiful new summer dress to his rendezvous with Don.

\* \* \*

Ryan walked toward the beach, enjoying the feel of a slight evening breeze against his bare legs. As he approached he noticed that Don had already arrived, and so he quickly checked his bracelet watch. It was five minutes past seven, so he wasn’t too late. It always seemed to take a little bit longer for a girl to get ready than she thought it would.

“Hi Don!” said Ryan with a smile as he ran out to him across the white sand. “Sorry I’m late!”

“Not a problem Valerie,” responded Don. He seemed to be having some difficulty speaking as he stared at the vision before him. “You look absolutely beautiful.”

Ryan did look beautiful. His deep tan, acquired from days on the beach wearing only a bikini, contrasted beautifully with the white of his new chiffon dress. He had adorned it with a long string of pearls, drawing attention to his demure breasts as the pearls swung to and fro in a cheerful, feminine manner. The dress had short, ruffled sleeves which made his arms look long, thin, and elegant. It gathered just below his breasts so that the skirt flowed over his hips, where the feminine hemline emphasized his long legs.

The sun was just dipping below the horizon, bathing the beach in a pink and orange glow. The air was still and warm, the only sound was the soft pounding of the surf as the waves rolled to the shore. It was a perfect evening. They say that every woman has a moment in her life when she truly is the most beautiful woman in the world. If that’s true, then this was Ryan’s moment.

“Thank you,” said Ryan, biting his lower lip adorably as he blushed.

“You’re so beautiful,” said Don.

Ryan giggled. “You said that already!”

“Yes,” said Don, continuing to stammer as he looked at Ryan. “It’s just, I mean...”

Ryan smiled, enjoying his strange power over Don. “You wanted to ask me something?” he finally suggested coquettishly.

“What? Right!” said Don, closing his eyes and shaking his head in order to end his reverie. But when he

opened them, Ryan was every bit as stupefying as before.

"I had planned everything I wanted to say," said Don. "Now it all just seems so inadequate."

"Just tell me!" laughed Ryan, taking Don by both hands and looking up into his face. "What could be so difficult? Tell me your big secret!"

"I just," began Don, only faltering slightly, "wanted to thank you. For everything you've done this week. Everything you did for Mina. I know she adores you. Her life hasn't been easy, these past few months. To have someone like you, to take care of her and be with her, it's just been exactly what she needed. I just wanted to thank you."

"Oh Don," said Ryan, giving him a brief hug. "I've loved every minute of it. I only wish she were mine! I'm going to miss her so when you leave."

"The thing is," continued Don. "I've realized something this week. I thought that I could simply pick up Mina, bring her home, and she would somehow fit into my life. I thought I could go off to work every day, leave her at a daycare, pick her up at night, feed her and put her to bed. But now I know, it's not that simple! I've never had to take care of a child before. I've seen how naturally you interact with her, how you instinctively know just what to say, what to do. Valerie, I don't know if I can do that alone, without you."

Ryan laughed again. "Don, I've never had a child either! It's not so difficult. It just comes naturally. You're going to be fine."

"I'm not so sure," said Don hesitantly. "You're a woman. Women seem to have instincts that men lack when it comes to children. And Mina especially needs

a mother right now. She needs some stability, some consistency in her life. Valerie, I don't want her to lose you, so soon after losing her mother. It would be too painful for her."

Ryan pulled away from Don, suddenly seeing where this was heading. "What are you saying, Don?"

Don pulled something out of his pocket. Ryan couldn't see what it was, but he didn't have to. Don bent down on one knee in the sand, taking Ryan's left hand, and held out the little box. Inside was the most beautiful diamond ring Ryan had ever seen.

"What I'm trying to say is, Valerie Darling, will you marry me?" proposed Don as he slipped the engagement ring on Ryan's dainty hand.

Ryan stared at the silver band adorning his long, feminine fingers, the diamond sparkling in the setting sun. It was so obvious now, this was what Don had been planning all along. How could he have not even suspected?

"Oh no, Don," said Ryan. "No, I'm so sorry but I can't marry you! There's... so much you don't know about me."

"I know that you love Mina," said Don. "And I know she loves you. Please Valerie, can't you see how perfect this would be?"

"That's just it," said Ryan. "You don't want to marry me. You don't love me! You just want a mother for Mina. You need a babysitter, not a bride."

"I knew I was doing this all wrong!" Don berated himself. He stood and held Ryan, forcing him to look into his eyes. "Valerie, I do love you. From the moment we met I haven't been able to think of anything else. You are the most beautiful, desirable woman I've ever

known. I know that you could have any man you wanted, and maybe I'm a fool to think that you would settle for me. But in the short time we've been together I've felt such a connection, and I know you've felt it too. That's got to count for something!"



Ryan broke away from Don, distraught and overwhelmed. "I have my own life," he said. "A different life. You don't know who I am, Don!"

"I know the girl I've spent this incredible week with," said Don. "Her name is Valerie Darling. She's sweet, kind, and caring. She loves life, and laughs easily. She has a shy smile, and a soft heart. I know there's more, and I want to see it all."

"Not everything," Ryan muttered. Turning to Don he told him, "I can't be a mother. I'm away all the time. I have a career, as a pilot."

"Do you mean as a stewardess?" asked Don, slightly confused.

"Right," said Ryan, blushing with humiliation. "I'm a stewardess. But I want to be a pilot. Just, you know, that written exam."

"I thought your career was kind of over?" said Don cautiously. "Crashing that plane and all?"

"I didn't crash the plane!" Ryan defended himself. "I saved all those people!"

"All I know for sure is that I love you, and Mina loves you, and I'm pretty sure that you love us. What else could I possibly need to know about you?"

Ryan thought desperately. With tears forming at the corners of his eyes he said, "Don, you just don't understand. I can't get married! One day you might want to have more children. And I can't! I can never have children! I can never give you a son!"

Don thought about this. "Are you sure?" he asked. "Doctors can do so much these days. Maybe there's a procedure, or even a cure."

Ryan found a tissue in his evening bag and dabbed at his eyes. "Trust me, there's no cure for what I've got."

"But don't you see?" said Don. "This is perfect for you. Mina can be your child! The three of us are so happy together. I don't need a son, I don't need any more children. I just need you."

Ryan took one last look at the ring on his finger, then pulled it off and placed it in Don's outstretched hand. "No Don. I just can't. Please don't ask again."

Don looked at the ring in his hand. It may as well have been a dagger in his heart. "I can't do it alone," he said. "I thought I could, but I can't. Mina needs a mother."

"Then find someone else," said Ryan, choking back a sob. "It can't be me!"

Ryan turned and ran, unable to face Don as tears streamed down his face. Ryan ran down the beach, as far and as fast as he could, barely able to breathe as he held back his emotions. When he was well out of sight of the hotel Ryan fell to the sand, sobbing aloud as he pounded the beach with his delicate, manicured fists. He didn't understand what he was feeling, or why he was feeling it. He only knew that turning down Don's proposal, which should have been the easiest, most obvious decision of his life, was turning him inside out with misery.

When he was all cried out, Ryan wiped his face and blew his nose. He stood and walked back to the hotel, going straight to his room, trying to avoid all the other hotel guests. Once in his room he took off his beautiful dress, washed his face, put on a nighty and slipped into

bed. He surprised himself by finding more tears, and cried himself to sleep.

\* \* \*

Ryan woke as the door to his suite opened. Julie slipped in quietly, not realizing that Ryan was already awake. Ryan didn't feel like talking and so he lay still as Julie set about getting ready for bed. Julie removed her dress, setting it across a chair to be dealt with in the morning. She quietly slipped into the bathroom where she washed off her makeup and brushed her teeth. When she was finished she came back to the suite and quickly changed into her nightgown, then slipped into bed.

The two girls lay in bed, side by side for a few minutes. It was obvious to Ryan that Julie was not sleepy, though. She fidgeted, couldn't stay still, hummed and giggled to herself as if thinking about her evening. Eventually she turned to Ryan.

"Valerie?" she whispered. "Val, are you awake?"

"Yes," replied Ryan quietly. "I've been awake for a while."

"Sorry," said Julie. "I tried to be quiet coming in. But since you're awake now can I show you something?"

"Sure. What is it?" asked Ryan. Julie thrust her hand out at him, but the room was almost completely dark and he had no idea what she was trying to show him. He tried to take whatever it was, but she didn't seem to have anything in her hands. The only light in the room was from a pale shaft of moonlight coming through the balcony doors, so Ryan took Julie's hand and lifted it to catch more of the light. Then he saw it.

“Julie, where did you get this?” he asked, his heart suddenly turning cold. On her hand was an engagement ring – *his* engagement ring!

Julie laughed. “Don gave it to me! Val, can you believe it? We’re getting married!”

“Oh Valerie, he was so nervous. All through dinner he barely had anything to say. And after dinner we went on a long walk, all around the hotel, but he was still so quiet! But finally he worked up his nerve. He took me down to the beach, and he actually got down on one knee! It was so romantic. Oh Val, all this week I thought it was you he wanted, but he asked me and Val, I’m just so happy!”

Ryan should have been happy, and yet looking at his engagement ring on Julie’s hand he was devastated. Julie was his best friend, she and Don would be great together, and Ryan was now completely off the hook. So why did he feel so miserable?

Ryan hugged Julie in the bed, not saying anything for a while. Eventually he managed to tell her, “That is so great, Julie. I’m really happy for you.” He tried not to let her see he that was crying again.

“Thank you Val,” said Julie with a final squeeze before she let go and rolled over to her side of the bed. “I know you liked him, and I was scared about hurting you.”

“No, you and Don are perfect for each other,” said Ryan, rolling to his side and using a blanket to wipe his eyes.

“We’re having a ceremony tomorrow afternoon. The hotel is arranging everything for a wedding on the beach.”

“It sounds perfect, Julie.” Ryan tried to go back to sleep, but Julie wasn’t finished yet.

“Val?” she said after a couple minutes of lying together in silence. “I was just wondering. What was it that Don wanted to ask you?”

“What do you mean?” said Ryan.

“This afternoon, Don said he had something important to ask you. Then you went down to the beach to meet him?”

Ryan thought quickly. “He... told me he wanted to propose. To you. He wanted to ask me if you would say yes.”

Julie sounded relieved. “Oh good. I hoped it was something like that. So what did you tell him?”

“I said,” Ryan said with some difficulty, “that the two of you would be perfect together.”

“Thank you, Val.” Julie stayed awake for a while longer, holding her hand up so she could see her engagement ring in the moonlight. Ryan rolled over so he couldn’t see, and drifted into a restless sleep.

## **Chapter 7**

### **A Dream Wedding**

The next morning Ryan was too busy to waste any time feeling sorry for himself. The girls were up and out of bed by seven, there was so much to be done. Both he and Julie were showered, dressed, had eaten breakfast, and were ready to hit the stores by nine.

There was no time for a formal bridal gown and bridesmaid dress, so Ryan and Julie concentrated on some high-end women’s dress shops they were familiar with. Fortunately Ryan found a perfect dress for Julie in the second shop they entered. The first dress

Ryan picked up was a knee-length, white sleeveless style that suited Julie beautifully. It had lace trim around the bodice and the hem, making it perfect for a bride getting married on the beach. The salesgirl found a pink sash that finished the dress perfectly.

Finding Ryan an appropriate bridesmaid dress took a bit longer, but eventually the girls found him a beautiful, pale pink satin dress that suited his figure perfectly. It had tiny spaghetti straps emphasizing his long arms and narrow, feminine shoulders. A white sash was tied in a bow at his waist, and the dress hung loosely to his knees. The white and pink combination matched the pink streaks in his platinum blonde hair as if they were designed together. And they even found a matching dress in the children's section that would be perfect for Mina! Ryan also found a beautiful silver necklace that he planned to give to Mina, so she could always remember this day.

Next was hair and makeup. Ryan and Julie dropped off their dresses in the suite, and returned to the hotel salon. Cindy had been advised to expect them by the hotel, and fit both girls in immediately. Makeup for a beach wedding can be tricky since the girls will be out in the hot sun, but Cindy had some experience at this type of thing. Within an hour both girls had their hair adorned with tropical flowers, and their makeup styled so as to be minimal while emphasizing their natural, youthful beauty. Cindy had just the right products to ensure the dry air and hot sun wouldn't spoil the beautiful result.

Ryan and Julie moved so quickly that they were actually ready by noon, a full two hours before the wedding. In the hotel lobby they found that the wedding was posted as one of the day's activities. Since Julie

and Don knew very few people in the area, the hotel had suggested inviting other hotel guests to attend. They often did this type of thing apparently, and the weddings were frequently well-attended. The hotel was also able to arrange for a minister, photographer, and flowers on short notice. Everything would be perfect.

With two hours and little to do, the girls had a quick lunch and then went their separate ways to think their own private thoughts.

"Julie? Are you in here? Oh blast, where is she?" Ryan said as he burst into their suite, searching for Julie with only ten minutes to go before the wedding!

"Valerie, is Julie here?" asked Ryan, following her into the suite.

"Don, what are you doing?" said Ryan, nearly falling as he twisted around in surprise at the voice suddenly behind him. "You're just lucky Julie's not here! You can't see the bride before the wedding!"

"I'm not looking for Julie," Don told him. "Valerie, we need to talk."

Ryan turned serious. "Don, we have nothing to talk about. You're marrying Julie. She's the one wearing the engagement ring, not me. I said no, and now nothing could ever change my mind. Julie's my best friend, and I could never hurt her that way."

"I know," said Don, taking Ryan's hands in his. "I'm not here to ask you to marry me. I'm committed to marrying Julie. She's a beautiful girl, and good with Mina, and if it weren't for you I would have asked her to marry me in a heartbeat. I just wanted to tell you, I looked for you last night. I know you told me not to ask again, but I wanted to find you. I wanted to be

sure. I wanted one more chance, to get the words right, to persuade you that whatever problems we might have we could fix them, together. Except I couldn't find you. And so I proposed to Julie. I'm sorry."

"Don, don't be sorry!" Ryan told him, standing on his toes to put his arms around his neck. "You and Julie are perfect for each other. You're going to be very happy. Happier than I could ever make you, believe me."

"I still love you, Valerie Darling," Don said, holding Ryan tight.

"And I... I love you, Don," Ryan confessed, surprised at how naturally, how easily the words came to him. He gave Don a quick kiss and then separated saying, "Come on now. Let's get you married!"

Ryan led the way into the hall, pulling Don by the hand. Don pulled the door closed behind them.

The room was quiet and empty for several long moments. Then the door to the spacious walk-in closet opened. Julie entered the suite, a look of numb confusion on her beautiful face.

The hotel had done a fabulous job converting the beach into an open air, seaside wedding chapel. A white awning had been raised near the water's edge to provide shade for the bridal party during the ceremony. Rows of chairs had been set out for about fifty guests, covered with white cloth wraps to make them look neat and clean.

Most of the seats were filled. In the front rows were a few friends of Frank and Don from the bank, as well as a few Aero Miedo employees. Jim and Bill were there, out of the hospital, laughing and looking as if nothing had ever happened. Dr. Benson was in the

third row, and Mina's South American grandparents were there as well. The rest of the seats were filled with hotel guests, anxious to see a happy couple commit their lives to one another.

The hotel's Assistant Manager, who was also the hotel's flustered wedding planner, breathed a sigh of relief when the elevator doors opened and Julie emerged.

"Thank goodness you're here," he said, rushing up to Julie and checking her over front to back, top to bottom. He grabbed the hesitant bride and hurried her out toward the beach. "Everyone has been looking for you. Where have you been? You simply can't do this to me. Here she is! Everyone, places! Places!"

The Assistant Manager left Julie with Ryan and Mina, then rushed off to cue the music. As the music started, Ryan quickly hugged Julie and kissed her cheek.

"Good luck Julie," he said with a smile, a tear glistening in his eye. "I'm so happy for you!"

"Valerie..." replied Julie, but whatever she wanted to say was lost as the wedding began.

In spite of her coaching on flower girl duties, Mina appeared to forget everything as she walked down the aisle, surrounded by so many people. As she stood in the middle of the aisle, her basket of flower petals in her hands, Ryan rushed up to help her. He gently reminded her, reaching down and showing her how to take petals from the basket and scatter them. With a renewed sense of duty Mina continued down the aisle, scattering a few petals, then dumping the remainder at the front. Looking up she saw her father, and so smiled

and took his hand. The hired photographer took pictures of every moment.

Then it was Ryan's turn. In his pink satin dress, his white hair adorned with tropical flowers and holding his beautiful bridesmaid's bouquet in front of him, he was a strikingly beautiful woman. He slowly proceeded down the aisle, nodding to the guests, greeting the few he knew with a quick smile. When he reached the front he took Mina's hand from Don's, and led her to stand on the bride's side.

And finally the moment everyone had waited for. Julie appeared at the back of the impromptu chapel, looking amazing in the bright tropical setting. She proceeded down the aisle, and arrived at the front where she and Don looked into each other's eyes.

"Please be seated," the minister told the wedding guests. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the joining of Don and Julie, who, of their own free will, have..."

The minister spoke for another ten or fifteen minutes on the duties of marriage, of commitment and shared goals and love. Most of it was fairly standard, other parts he had obviously made up. Some of it may well have been improvised on the spot. What he actually said would ultimately make no difference however, as the main participants weren't really listening. Don, Julie, and Ryan stood silently, each lost in their own personal thoughts as the minister spoke.

"Do you, Don, take Julie to be your lawfully wedded wife? And do you promise to love, honour, and cherish her, as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," said Don.

“And do you, Julie, take Don to be your lawfully wedded husband? Do you promise to love him, to honour and cherish him, as long as you both shall live?”

Everyone waited for Julie’s reply. Except she simply stood, silently, seemingly lost and not knowing what to say.

“Julie?” prompted Don.

“I...” said Julie, then paused, gazing down with a look of angst. Finally she blurted, “I can’t! I’m sorry Don, but I can’t marry you!”

Don was bewildered. The crowd of mostly strangers looked on in fascination as he said, “Julie, why? You were so happy last night. What’s happened?”

“You don’t love me, Don,” said Julie, finally gaining the courage to look up at him. The crowd on onlookers, many of whom had all but fallen asleep, sat up and paid rapt attention. No one was missing a word of this!

Don was stunned. He held her hands and looked into her eyes as he responded, “That’s not true, Julie! I do love you. I asked you to marry me because I love you.”

“Maybe you do love me,” Julie conceded, “But you love her more!” Every eye on the beach followed Julie’s gaze.

“Who, me?” said Ryan, suddenly finding himself the focus of all attention.

Julie turned to Ryan. “I heard you and Don earlier, in our room. I know that he proposed to you before me, Valerie! I know that it’s really you that he loves!” There was no vindictiveness in her words, there was only her pain.

All heads in the crowd turned to Ryan, waiting for his response.

“Yes he asked me to marry him, but I turned him down,” Ryan told her. “And if you overheard us, then you know that he loves you too.”

The crowd turned to watch Julie.

“I know,” said Julie. “But not as much as he loves you. Oh Valerie, all this week I’ve watched you, and envied you! You and Don found each other, and were so perfect together, and I wanted so much to feel a connection like that. Then when Don proposed I thought it had all come true! I thought he and I could have the love that I’ve seen between the two of you. Except we can’t! Don’t you see Val? It doesn’t matter if Don loves me or not, because now I realize that I don’t really love him. This shouldn’t be my wedding, it should be yours.”

Julie stepped back, bringing Don and Ryan face to face. Ryan stared up into Don’s face, immobilized from the shock of standing in the place of the bride!

Don turned to Julie. “Julie, I promised you...”

“It doesn’t matter Don,” she told him, removing the engagement ring and handing it to him. “I’m fine. Please, marry Valerie. She’s my best friend, and all I want is for the two of you to be happy. The two of you belong together.”

Don turned to Ryan as Julie stepped aside to the bridesmaid’s place. He took Ryan’s slender hand and placed the engagement ring on his finger.

“Valerie, you know how much I love you. I promise you, whatever problems we might encounter, we’ll get past them together.”

Ryan stared at the sparkling diamond, then looked up at Don. "Don, I already told you I can't marry you." Ryan was very conscious of the large crowd, growing larger as everyone on the beach was drawn to the spectacle. He looked at the crowd, intent on his every word. He turned back to Don and said, "I told you, I, um, can... never have children."

The crowd reeled.

"And I told you that doesn't matter," Don said, gazing lovingly into Ryan's beautiful eyes. "We have Mina. The three of us can be a family. I'll never need any more than that."

The crowd settled back in relief.

"But," said Ryan, breaking off from Don's gaze. "I never told you why I can't have children."

The crowd leaned forward.

Ryan gave the crowd a nervous glance before continuing. "I have a, uh, sort of a... birth defect." Ryan glanced down at himself and continued, "Down there? So I, um, don't really feel like a, uh, complete woman."

The crowd's eyes opened wide.

When no one spoke Julie tried to help, saying "Val, I've seen you practically naked. Whatever it is, it must be very small." Ryan grimaced.

Don assured him, "Valerie, whatever it is, it doesn't matter to me."

Ryan looked up at Don. With no more hesitation he blurted out, "Don, I can never have sex with you!"

The crowd's mouths dropped open.

Don took Ryan by the chin, forcing him to look up into his eyes. "Valerie Darling, I love you, and if all I

ever did for the rest of my life was look at you, it would be enough. You're beautiful, you're fun and exciting and sexy, and you're all the woman that I will ever need, just as you are. Valerie, I love you, and you love me. That's enough. Please, will you marry me?"

Mina wrapped her tiny arms around Ryan's shapely leg. "I uv you too, Ballerie," she said in her tiny voice.

Ryan lifted the little girl into his arms and kissed her. A tear rolled down his cheek.

"Marry us?" Mina asked.

The crowd leaned forward till they nearly pitched out of their seats.

"That's not fair," said Ryan, the tears coming faster now. Ryan was completely swept up in the emotions of the moment. Wiping his face with a tissue supplied by the minister, Ryan finally said, "Okay. Yes! I love you Don, and I'll marry you!"

The crowd stood, and burst into applause!

When the crowd finally settled down, the minister took charge.

"Technically, I should go back to the beginning and start all over again. However, most of that whole ceremony is to ensure that two people love each other, and truly wish to spend the rest of their lives together. I believe we have seen without a doubt that Don and Valerie belong together. So let's skip to the end! Don, do you take Valerie as your wife, to love, honour and cherish?"

"I do," said Don happily as he gazed into Ryan's eyes.

“And do you Valerie take Don as your husband, to love honour and cherish as long as you both shall live?”



Ryan had only lived as a woman for a week, and yet all thoughts of any other life were gone at that moment as he realized every woman's fantasy. Gazing up into Don's strong, manly face he answered, "I do."

Frank handed Don the wedding ring, which he slipped on Ryan's finger to rest beside the matching engagement ring.

"By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

The crowd stood and applauded as Don kissed Ryan passionately. Then with their arms around one another, Ryan reached down and took Mina's hand. The crowd continued to applaud as the three of them walked down the aisle toward their new life together.

## **Chapter 8**

### **A few More Surprises**

"Where's Binky?" asked Mina, clearly distraught.

Ryan searched the back of the taxi, but there was no Binky in sight. "Don, did you pack Binky? Is he in the trunk?"

"Relax ladies," said Don. "He's in my carry-on. I figured he might be needed."

Don opened his backpack and pulled out the rather threadbare but much loved horse, and placed it into Mina's very anxious hands. Crisis averted, Mina went back to staring out the window, while Ryan returned to thoughts of his new life as an unemployed housewife. No, it was better than that. It really was.

"Look Mommy," said Mina, pointing out the window. "It's you!"

Children say a lot of nonsense and so parents don't always pay the attention they should. But this time

when Ryan followed Mina's stubby finger he received the shock of his life. And after this week, that was saying something.

"Oh, my, word!" Ryan gasped. There at the entrance to the airport, twenty feet high was – Ryan. The photo taken for his security badge was now a billboard, displaying an amorous Ryan lounging provocatively in his stewardess uniform. In huge, bold letters the caption declared, "Aero Miedo – For the Flight of Your Life!"

Don laughed. "Didn't I tell you that big things lie ahead for you?"

Ryan was hardly amused. "Brian, I am seriously going to have to kill you," he muttered.

The taxi rolled up to the terminal and let out the young family. Don wrestled the bags from the trunk while Ryan monitored Mina and paid the driver. After several long lines to handle tickets, luggage, security, and Customs, and then a lengthy wait followed by some minor delays, they finally made their way onto their plane home.

"Tickets, please," requested the pretty young flight attendant as everyone entered the aircraft. She looked at Don's tickets as he handed them to her. "You and your daughter are in seats 14H and 14J. Down this aisle, on the left. Tickets, please?"

Ryan handed the girl his ticket. The girl read it and said, "Valerie Darling! I love that. You're in 14G, down this aisle on the right."

Ryan was about to proceed when he was stopped by another woman, dressed in the blue uniform of a pilot.

“Valerie Darling!” the woman exclaimed. “I was hoping I might run into you down here. I think you might just have something of mine!”

Ryan looked up at the woman, into the face of Valerie Darling! “Oh my gosh! You’re...” he exclaimed, but then read Valerie’s name tag. “Ryan Powell?”

“It’s pronounced Ree-Anne,” Valerie told him.

“Well, Ryan,” said Ryan, pronouncing it Ree-Anne, “Anything of yours that I have, you can have back. Even your name. I’m done with it.”

“I’m not sure I really want it any more,” said Valerie. “Anyone with the name Valerie Darling is going to find it difficult in the aviation business after the way you crashed that plane and shut down an entire country for a week.”

“I didn’t crash the plane!” complained Ryan. “I saved all those people. And the earthquake shut down the country, not me.”

“Not the way I heard it,” Valerie replied. “Anyway it doesn’t matter. I’m very happy to go on as Ryan Powell. I’m a full pilot, without ever having to worry about that final written exam. You can keep the name as long as you like.”

“Sweetheart, what’s the matter?” asked Don, returning to see why Ryan hadn’t taken his seat.

“Oh, just talking to an old friend,” Ryan explained. “Ryan, this is my daughter Mina, and my husband Don.”

“Wow, you really do work fast!” laughed Valerie. “I guess you really meant it when you said you didn’t need the name any longer. So what’s your new name?”

“Oh, it’s...” said Ryan, then stopped. “I don’t know! Don, you never told me your last name!”

“It’s Love,” he informed Valerie, shaking her hand. “Don Love. Pleased to meet you. Val, I’m going to get Mina settled, okay?”

When he had left Valerie burst out laughing. “Valerie Darling-Love? That’s your new name? Oh wow, better you than me! So where did you find that hunk of man? I wouldn’t have thought that he was your type. And I sure wouldn’t have thought that you were his!”

“it’s a long story,” Ryan admitted. “The short version is, he doesn’t know. I didn’t tell him, and I don’t expect I ever will.”

“I bet!” laughed Valerie. “So tell me, how do you manage the sex?”

Ryan turned a deep shade of scarlet. “We’ve, uh, sort of found, other ways to handle that.” With no more explanation than that Ryan made his excuses to leave. “I’ve really got to get back to my family. So, is there any business left between us? Anything you need from me?”

“No, we’re square,” Valerie informed him. “Have a nice life, my Darling-Love!”

“Have a nice life, Captain Ryan Powell,” replied Ryan, pronouncing it Ree-Anne.

Ryan went down the aisle and found his seat, across the aisle from his husband and daughter.

“Valerie Darling-Love,” he tried aloud. “Valerie Love? Mrs. Donald Love, maybe.”

“Can I still call you Darling?” Don asked.

“Only if I can call you Love!” she replied. Then Valerie Love adjusted her seatbelt, and sat back to enjoy the ride.