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FEMININE FORTE

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FEMININE FORTE

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by Dee Raymond
Re-Edited by Sandy Thomas

The six Pearl City club dancers brought their final flashing routine to a stop with a short, girlish, "Ohh!" and a back kick of imitation peacock feathers. They paused briefly, perspiration glistening upon their heavy stage makeup. A smattering of applause broke out in the three-quarters filled club.

As the musical group played a rapid set from "Can-Can", the girls pirouetted and tripped off the stage. The scarred and black-mustached manager of the club glanced up from the sports page and nodded silently in their direction as they enter their dressing room. Ava, the last of the line, emphatically closed the door behind them as the manager made as if to follow them.

"Strictly a Tuesday crowd!" murmured Cathy, the lead singer of the group, while she removed her blonde pony tail.

"Sure doesn't help when someone like him is out there, does it?" sighed Joanne, wiping away at her heavily blued eyes.

"Come on!" said Jean crossly to Ava, who sat sprawled and wearily on one of three chairs in the room. "If he does

want me," Jean continued, "I want to be in street clothes, not like this." Jean had already removed her tiny sequined bra. The brown nipples of her ample bosom appeared to peek between her long brunette hair.

Meanwhile, Ava smiled weakly and began to remove the imitation pearl from her hair so she could release her pony tail hair piece.

Debbie and Carol, the other 'stacked' members of the "Pearl City Revue", also hastened to remove their costumes. The room was a firmament of activity as tiny sequined bras, hose, g-strings, panties, bracelets, and hair pieces went flying in all directions. Girls among girls. Only Ava seemed uninterested in hurrying to be rid of her stage brilliance.

The door was suddenly hammered upon. All activity stopped. Cathy stood up from her makeup table, a large eyelash in her hand, and went to answer the pounding. All the girls watched as she opened the door a fraction of an inch.

"Yes?" she asked.

"It's Ava," came back the young voice of Alan, the second barman. "He wants to talk to Ava."

A look of shock crossed Cathy's face. She bit her lip furiously as she closed the door. She had been sure that it would be her this time.

As Cathy turned, she saw stunned looks on the faces of the other girls. In Ava's eyes she saw shock turn to fright, as Ava realized whom it was that had been requested.

Cathy began to smile despite herself. So too, the other girls. as they relaxed, a smile of relief began to cross their faces.

Only Ava, knocking over a bottle of nail polish remover in a sudden gesture of nervousness, appeared tense or upset.

"Oh Ava. . .it's you he wants. . .! Kathy giggled.

Gently Jean came over to her and touched her arm, causing Ava to jump nervously. "Hold on, Ava," Jean soothed, "We'll all help you get ready. We don't want to blow this one."

Robert Cort groaned inwardly to himself as the bartender brought him yet another drink "on the house". He was rapidly becoming irritated with the whole Pearl City set-up. The overly darkened lighting, black leather booths and soft musical tones of the Pearl City quartet, spoke to him of sleazy, almost illicit sexuality.

The only bright spot of the evening was the confirmation of the fact that Arthur Mayer, the Coordinator of Staff Development, to use his fancy title, was correct again. Cort wondered to himself how Arthur does it? The Pacific Studio's chief talent scout had spotted and recommended uncountable talent from out of the way joints and cabaret clubs like "Pearl City". I wonder how much of a rake-off the manager will want for this girl's contract, Cort thought moodily. The expensive Scotch in such a place forewarned of the expensive tastes in the management.

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the girl, the "talent", he had come to see. The waiter hovered about as the girl sat down. Under Cort's steady gaze, he vacillated for a moment and then withdrew to the bar. Cort turned his full attention to the girl.

Ava Saunders, aware of the scrutiny, looked directly ahead of her to the far wall of the club. Her blonde hair was short and combed forward over her forehead. The back of her hair was very short but thick and brushed down about the nape of her neck. Very cute, pixie.

Cort smiled inwardly, and thought, "I've more hair than her."

Her eyes appeared dark in the gloomy atmosphere. Cort noted that her skin was just as smooth and soft after the removal of stage makeup as it had appeared under the heavy stage lights.

He saw her hands were long, thin and quite still as she waited for him to complete his inspection. The narrow straps of the halter dress revealed high, well-rounded breasts. Her legs were hidden in the long fold of the silk dress, but he had seen enough of them in the show to form his judgment of them.

He sighed to himself. Even her deportment was first class as she sat and waited for his inspection to complete.

The heavy silver and jade earrings were just the touch required for the aura of class that exuded from her.

His pulse quickened. He thought, Mayer was absolutely correct: she was an adequate dancer, had excellent timing in the sketches, her voice was husky and rich, and she looked gorgeous.

Cort picked up and drained the Scotch. "Well, Miss Saunders," he said, "Let's pick up the manager of this club and talk about buying out your contract."

• • •

Jean Roberts, possibly the best dancer in the "Pearl City Revue", tiptoed quietly from the room where her oldest son, Cameron, was now sleeping soundly. His restlessness when she had arrived home each night about three o'clock had become a feature of their stay in Las Vegas. He needs to be away from this place, she thought; at least to a city where he can meet other kids at regular times.

She thought of their bank balance and sighed. If only they didn't change costumes so much, but that was what brought the Revue its recurrent bookings. Her income hadn't really suffered either, steadily increasing over the last four years; until now, perhaps, at last, their big break was in sight.

Jean had reached the kitchen at last. She plugged in the kettle and began to put Sanka into two cups. She realized what she was doing and looked anxiously at the clock; four thirty. Just as she contemplated whether to put the coffee back or not, she heard the key in the motel room door.

A swish of silk and the scent of the familiar Channel perfume announced Ava's arrival. She shivered as she came into the kitchen. She slowly removed Jean's jade earrings. Her expression was thoughtful.

To Jean's expert gaze, she could still see much of the terror that Ava must have felt when Robert Cort asked to speak to her.

In her usual, precise way. Ava placed Jean's stole back in the open box that Jean had left on the motel room's chesterfield before leaving for the club that night.

Ava entered the kitchen, and started to make coffee.

Jean spoke to her quietly, "Leave that for me. Go and close the kid's door tight before you tell me anything."

Ava's face showed a flash of worry as she whispered, "Was Cam up again?"

Jean nodded a "Yes" and began to butter crackers to have with the cheese and pickles she was preparing as a snack before bed.

Ava disappeared down the hallway and was gone for about ten minutes. She returned, and while wiping the makeup from her face with a small blue facecloth, she said in low, husky tones, "I still forget. Poor Cam has lipstick all over him again."

She sat down opposite of Jean, her exotic appearance had changed into that of a pert teenager.

"Tell me how it went," Jean asked. Even at this ungodly of an hour she couldn't help but admire Ava's natural freshness.

"He wants me," Ava answered. "At least he wants me in a film. It's suppose to be a comedy with some dancing that Pacific's getting ready to shoot. There's another film too, a detective story. I would be the only female lead, and have a romantic entanglement with the male star."

"And the rest of the group?" Jean's eyes had become hard.

"Not interested." Ava's eyes were troubled as she went on, "He struck up a deal with Storey to buy up my contract for twenty-five grand. The legal papers are to be signed tomorrow."

Jean's eyes opened wide at the figure and she commented, "Phew! He must want you bad!" Her eyes became more hooded, her expression bland as she added, "I guess he wants other favors from you too?"

Ava was startled by this comment, "No!" she said agitated, "They only talked about contracts and future pay-offs, depending how well I might do." Her hands shifted nervously as she spoke. Jean's eyes were brooding as she spoke, "You'll have to think about it. Won't you dear?"

"What do you mean?" Ava gasped, her eyes wide with horror. You know I can't possibly accept this engagement..

I even tried to tell them that, but they just refused to listen."

"Why can't you take it?" asked Jean with great surprise." As Ava appeared to unleash a torrent of words upon her, Jean raised her hand to stop any comment, and went on to explain, "Oh, yes! I can guess what some of your scruples might be, but, let's be frank about this situation. I'm not getting any younger."

Jean stopped to drain the last of the coffee from her cup, then thoughtfully continued, "It's obvious that my talent isn't going to give Cam and Margot the place in the sun we want for our children. Let's face it, Andy, you're the bread winner of this family." She smiled, "Come to bed now. Your wife wants to celebrate a little good fortune with you in bed tonight."

• • •

Robert Cort completed his overview of the rushes from Pacific's current comedy production. He left the projection room most satisfied. Arthur Mayer met him as he was leaving.

"Well, Arthur", Cort said jovially. "You should see your protegee now. Her acting abilities have been a phenome-

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nal surprise to everyone here, excepting yourself, of course. We've already built up Ava Saunders' role three times."

"Ava Saunders." Mayer's expression betrayed nothing of his inner thoughts, as he continued, "Ah, yes. How is the delightful Miss Saunders behaving herself?"

Cort led Mayer into his office, just behind the projection rooms. This location actually made the whole area his private theater. Cort beamed, "Arthur, don't you hear me? I couldn't be more ecstatic over one of your finds. Your bonus will be considerable for this one."

"Oh," Mayer commented as he sat down across the room from Cort's large, glass-topped, mahogany desk.

Cort went over to his drink cabinet, flicked the lighting switch which brought up the wall lights to a comfortable glow, then closed the drapes, shutting out the high-rise lights of the city.

As Cort started to prepare the drinks he questioned Arthur, "What do you mean, 'Oh' in that tone of voice? Come on Arthur, Give! And why did you want such an urgent meeting with me tonight? Found a new talent that can't wait until tomorrow, eh?"

"I only wish it were." Mayer's whole expression had become gloomier than it normally was as he explained his concern, "I'm afraid," he said softly, "I may have done Pacific a great disservice."

Cort smiled as he approached Arthur and handed him the Bloody Mary that the scout was notorious for drinking no matter what the occasion. Cort's voice was good humored as he moved to the overstuffed swivel chair behind this desk and said, "Nothing you say is going to upset me tonight, Arthur. The rushes show we've got a great film in the can, and a year from now we'll have a bright new star in Ava Saunders."

"She's that good, huh?" muttered the old man as he slowly sipped the tomato juice and vodka.

Cort shook his head as he began enthusiastically, "Her timing on the comedy sketches is phenomenal. As for sex appeal, well, she's got the whole crew eating out of her hand. She's just what this studio needs right now to lead us into the black."

"Yes, I can see that," Mayer commented as his naturally grim mouth became even grimmer. "Robert, just how well do you know this, er, young lady?"

Cort sat up straight in his swivel chair. Alarm was beginning to wash across his face, exposing how young he really was for such a post. "What do you mean?" he asked anxiously, "Do you have something to tell me about Ava Saunders?"

Mayer nervously ran a hand over his nearly hairless scalp, smoothing the heavily greased sides even tighter to the sides of his head. For the first time Cort realized that Arthur Mayer, the great Arthur Mayer, was nervous and upset, which increased his apprehensions.

"J-Just tell me," Mayer said shivering even though the whole building was temperature controlled, "how well you know Ava Saunders, and your relationship to her. Then I'll tell you my information."

Cort glowered, This was certainly a most unusual request. Particularly from Arthur Mayer, who was only too aware of the status and requirements of each executive within the studio. He was making a serious breach of the company's general etiquette with his persistence.

Knowing that only something quite extraordinary must be in the wind to make the Staff Development chief act this way, led to Cort's almost gentle reply, "I expect Ava to serve as the hostess to my weekend parties at Whiteside. She's an exceptional hostess, and very charming in conversation with both the executive and artistic crowd. I must admit I enjoy her company at my house immensely, but I'm afraid

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I blackmailed her into serving as hostess, primarily to introduce her to everyone."

He paused, took a deep draught of his Scotch and losing himself in a thought continued, "Funny, you know, but I now get calls from people asking to come over for the weekend. That never happened before Ava. Tommie Scopes was telling me only the other day, but I thought he was joking, that everyone comes only to meet Ava. He could be right though."

Cort caught himself and turned his gaze back to the probing, grey eyes, framed in rimless glasses, across the table from him. He said firmly, "We're not lovers, though that's not for the want of suggesting on my part. I think she likes me well enough, but it's pretty clear she's not the type. I know that's pretty unusual in this business. I guess she'd have to be pretty much in love with a guy, even married to him, before she'd go to bed with him."

As he downed his second drink he raised a quizzical eyebrow to the other man and harshly asked, "Enough for you?"

"Oh, oh, yes!" Mayer nodded, his troubled voice an odd contrast to his appearance of calm. He fell silent, beginning a rapt perusal of an out of place thread on the knee of his trousers.

"Well, come on man," Cort started angrily. "What is it that I ought to know about Ava Saunders?"

"It's not her real name." responded Mayer, worry still tinged in his voice.

"Is that all?" exploded Pacific's President, his voice full of incredulity.

"I think I'd better start at the beginning," said Mayer, almost in a whisper. He waited a moment until Cort nodded for him to go on. "I usually get tips that put me on to the kind of talent we want. Believe me," he grimaced, "it costs me plenty to pay off all the people who recommend..."

"Who recommended Ava?" interrupted Cort, trying to interrupt on of Mayer's long winded, roundabout, grumbling orations.

"Oh!" Mayer's stream of thought was interrupted. "Oh, no-one," he mumbled, "I was passing through Vegas but I

didn't want to gamble. I only stopped in the place for a nightcap. They were doing that sketch where she was the dizzy blonde nurse. It just knocked me out. I must have watched her for three or four weeks. I just couldn't believe such talent was in such a place. And what legs!" He broke off to finish his drink, his eyes downcast, obviously ruminating on some private scene of Ava's loveliness.

Cort waited, his irritation growing. He prompted, "Then you recommended her to us, officially."

Mayer's preoccupation was so unlike him that Cort had begun to feel more uneasy. Mayer went on, "What? Oh, Yeah, that's right. And you bought out her contract." He went back to fiddling with the loose thread on his pant leg, "And you broke up a pretty fair cabaret revue of its kind."

"So what?" said Cort indignantly. "It happens all the time. That's show biz"

Mayer informed his boss, "But one of the group, the lead singer, Cathy Lord, was still smoldering when I talked to her at the 'Red-and-White' yesterday."

"The Red-and-White?" Cort frowned, puzzled, "I can't say I know the place."

Mayer smiled, shocking Cort. He had never seen him smile before like this. The icy smile on his thin lips gave Mayer a sly, predatory look. He went on to inform his boss, "It's a club below the 'Pearl City'. Cathy wasn't one of Ray Storey's favorite people. It appears he took advantage of the break up of the group to fire her."

Cort shrugged, "So? Some bitter ex-friend of Ava's has a story for sale."

Mayer nodded in agreement, "Three years ago, Jean Roberts hired on with the 'Pearl City Revue' when their principal dancer left to get married. They kept losing girls that way. It was Jean who brought Ava into the group. Apparently, they worked together in revues around Chicago."

Cort frowned. "So what are you going to tell me? I know that this Jean Roberts woman is sharing the house Bessill leased for Ava. She's got her kids there with her, hasn't she?"

Cort's smile was filled with relief. "So you're trying to tell me that Ava's been pumped up a little. There's nothing

wrong with that today. Even the public accepts that kind of operation."

"Pity she didn't have a more radical operation," said Mayer darkly. "You see, Mr. Cort, Ava Saunders' real name was, and still is, Andy Roberts."

Cort sprang to his feet. "What the hell are you trying to say?"

Mayer removed his glasses and rapidly began to wipe them with a grey, silk handkerchief. "Cathy Lord plans to sell a story on how Pacific was hoodwinked into making a film in which its leading female star is, in reality, a man, living, in fact, with his wife and kids, right here in this city, next door to the studio where he flaunts his fake breasts, pretty legs, and beautiful miniskirts in Pacific's top productions of the year." His curled lip of distaste matched the disgust in his voice.

Cort choked on words that wouldn't come. He slumped back into his upholstered chair. Stinging ants seemed to be tearing at his gut. He could hear his heart starting to pound. He brushed his head with his hand. It was damp. Oh, what a mess, he thought, just as everything had been going so well. He could have brought Pacific to the black - and all the while, that darn thing had been laughing at him behind her, no behind his, back. Red waves of rage passed through him and he began to smash upon the glass top of his desk with his fists. Across from him, Mayer sat open mouthed, petrified by the sight of the President of the third largest U.S. film studio throwing a tantrum.

The object of Cort's well-based fury was at that particular moment hopelessly entangled within the arms of his wife. Their emotional needs satisfied, they were exchanging gentle petting in anticipation of their untangling with restful sleep to follow. Jean's fingers caressed Ava's longer and thicker hair. As Ava sighed, then moved nearer, Jean lowered her head and kissed the nipple of Ava's swelling breast.

Ava's body went rigid with shock, and he whispered, "Don't. Oh, please, don't."

Jean giggled in the darkness, "Why not?" she murmured, "Let's face it girl, you'll enjoy it more than me."

"Please, Jean," Ava tried to sit up. "Please don't call me girl." He wiggled free of his wife's arms and sat up.

"Sweetheart, what's the matter?" said Jean as she put her arm around him and tried to pull her husband back down beside her.

As he resisted, she lay back and pulled the sheet up about her. She said softly, "I guess you don't find this whole business as humorous as I do."

Ava swung his long, slender legs onto the bedroom floor, then slipped on his high heel mules. He reached into the bed, found his baby doll panties, and slipped them on. He moved away from the bed and seated himself in front of the mirror. Putting on the dim, bed side lamp, he picked up a brush and began to brush out the growing misplaced curls about his forehead.

Jean looked across at the slim, feminine figure in front of the mirror. No vestige of masculinity could be seen. He had even learned in the last five years to brush his hair in a very feminine manner. In a short time, the curls were in place and his new hair style, with curly bangs on either side of his forehead were in place. Ava then found the top to his pajamas, slipped it on, and sat by the bed.

"Jean," he said, in the familiar husky tones she had spent so much time teaching him, "Can we talk now?"

Jean smiled, "We can talk anytime, darling."

Ava's voice was urgent, "No, I mean about us and how all of this is going to end."

"Oh, that again," said Jean with annoyance. "Do we always have to talk about that? Let's just live life as it is, Ava, and take our good fortune as it comes."

For a few moments, Ava sat and carefully considered what she was going to say next. Then she said, "I have to go back. I must, if only for our son's sake." His words had a desperate edge to them.

Jean looked over the feminine creature seated so demurely on the edge of the bed. She read his feelings and realized, "You really mean it, don't you? I thought we were having fun. . .two show girls, dancing and trying to make it in show biz?"

The blonde curls nodded emphatically, "I don't know how you can be so casual about this." There was puzzle-

ment in Ava's voice as she went on, "Aren't you worried about how dressing and working as a woman might affect me? Most wives would be worried sick if their husband wore lingerie and dresses all the time."

"I'm not most wives and they don't meet you here in bed!" Jean reached over to take Ava's hand. I know how much of a man you really are and how much you need me. Besides," she said, squeezing the well manicured fingers enticingly, "after five years, could you go back living as a man? I've watched you at work and you can't tell me that you don't enjoy being a girl."

Jean sat up and continued, "Look, Ava, do you remember how I got you into this situation?"

"It was my fault," Ava answered in a whisper, "I got you pregnant. It was only fair that I took the job to keep it open for you."

"But I forced you, didn't I?" Jean retorted. "I had to keep that spot open at the Blue Note."

She moved to sit beside Ava so that she could put her arm around his shoulders as she continued, "Well, my stage career is over now, and, if you really want to, darling, you can end yours too."

Ava half-turned and kissed Jean fully on the lips.

Surprisingly Jean felt wetness on his cheeks. "Thank you," he said huskily. "We'll skip out as soon as I can get our money together. Then we can go back to have the implants removed and you can try to be a man again."

"What if I can't?" Ava whispered.

"Remember the first day we came up with this idea? Jean asked. "You kept saying, 'I can't' but I insisted---giving you a snifter of brandy to calm your nerves then another? Remember how together we shaved your legs in the bathtub and how you couldn't believe how smooth it felt to be hairless?"

Ava nodded, a smile came to his lips.

"Do you remember what I said to you that night?"

Ava was silent.

"I gave you a pair of my most feminine white panties---the ones with the wide lace panel and high waist-band. I put them in your hands and told you to envision how nice they feel and what it would be like to wear them everyday."

Ava blushed at the recollection. That had been his last day in male underwear or any male clothes for that matter.

Jean then whispered, "I told you that night that I'd change you and now look at you. . .sweet, soft and feminine like a dainty little girl. . .and still wearing panties."

This brought out a lot of emotions. Jean again lowered her head and kissed the nipple of Ava's swelling breast.

Ava's body again went rigid but then relaxed as Jean desirously consumed first one then the other conspicuous pink tip. He whispered, "Oh, please, don't."

"This sucking will make them big and sensitive," Jean giggled in the darkness, "Let's face it, I'm not ready to give up my girlfriend yet and you're enjoying it more than me."

She was right. Ava laid back and allowed Jean to 'make love to him.' She treated his body like a girl's and when he responded back, it was more like a girl. He had learned to cherish her aggressiveness. . .giving his wife the entire realm of his girlishly soft and tender physique.

They clung tightly together, until, at last, fatigue overcame them and they fell into a restless sleep. Ava laid awake in his babydoll nighty knowing that he was losing his male spirit. Could he even make love to his wife like a man anymore? Could he even get excited without Jean fondling his breasts or telling him how shapely and girlish he had become. Somehow, Jean knew just what to say to get him excited. How luscious his breasts were, or even simple comments like; "That short white dress you wore today does wonders for your hips." He was confused. . .tears came to his eyes.

The following day, Ava slept quite late and was in a somber mood when he finally arose. Quite unlike himself, he spent much time in front of the mirror studying his face before making up. Jean was surprised to see him powdering and rouging his cheeks, something he rarely did on a non-working day. Today, however, he even put on his false eyelashes and dark eyeliner with heavy eyeshadow and highlights about his eyebrows.

Jean could hardly believe it when he put on the long fall which permitted long golden strands to cascade over his shoulders and down his back like a great lion's mane.

The "wetlook" lipstick completed the glamorous look that Ava for some reason seemed intent on producing for that day.

Ava put gold chain earrings in his pierced ears but had difficulty choosing any other clothing for the day. It took him a while to settle on a white strapless bra and white lace panties with an old fashioned garter belt and light toned stockings.

He paraded around like that for a while, looking at himself in the full-length wardrobe mirror, trying to decided upon a dress to wear. It reminded Jean of Ava's first days of dressing like a girl. . . everything had to be just right.

Finally he chose a dress with two tiny straps over the shoulders, low cut at the front and fairly short with a mass of petticoats gathered to a narrow waist. When at last he was fully dressed he looked ready for a cocktail party, even though it was only midday.

Jean was about to tackle her moody husband in regard to his dress when the door bell rang. She could see through the porch window that Robert Cort had arrived. Leaving Ava contemplating a number of perfumes, she went quickly to the door to admit the boss of Pacific Studios.

As she ushered him through the door she said cheerily, "Bob, how nice to see you."

Bob Cort glowered at her so fiercely, Jean felt she had been slapped. No point beating about the bush, he thought savagely. He stated, "Is your husband in?" spitting out each word, anger clearly in his voice.

Jean stepped back, stung. She felt a hot flush pass right over her. He knows, she thought wildly. Surprisingly, her knees were shaking. Her lips quivered as she tried to reply, but no words passed her lips.

Suddenly, with a look of contempt on his face, Cort strode past her into the small living room and spat out, "Why don't you go get 'him'?" he said, punctuating the "him" with a sneer. "I've got quite a lot to say to you both."

Astonished, Ava just nodded at Jean's flustered report of Cort's entrance. Coolly he stood up from his vanity table, smoothed out the blue silk dress, and checked his hair one last time. Taking Jean by the hand, he led her

down the short flight of steps to where Cort had seated himself, frowning and sullen, at the far end of the living room.

Quite deliberately, Cort remained seated as the two entered. Ava acted as if he were hardly put out at all. Keeping a tight hold of Jean's hand, he led her to the loveseat opposite the one Cort had seated himself in. Sitting down, he casually and girlishly smoothed the back of the dress which caused a gentle rustle of his petticoats. As he kept hold of Jean's hand, he crossed one of his nylon stockinged legs over the other, again causing a distinctly feminine rasping sound.

Seeing Ava dressed so, Cort was shocked by the undiluted sex appeal of the "woman" who sat opposite him. It was next to impossible to think of such a glamorous object as a man. There was absolutely no masculine gesture or point of reference to give him away.

Cort spoke right out, "Cathy Lord has let us know what gullible fools work at Pacific, and, in-particular, what a fool I was." His words, intended to be harsh, sounded merely matter-of-fact.

Ava nodded in agreement. "She'd be the one," he said huskily, absentmindedly squeezing Jean's hand tighter. With his other hand he flicked a strand of hair back over his shoulder, displaying his brightly painted fingernails.

His darkly outlined eyes met Cort's for the first time. He stated flatly, "Well, Jean and I had already decided to quit this whole business. I guess you'll fire us first, before we can quit."

Cort stood up. He found his hands were shaking and he felt he needed a drink. He looked about the room as he spoke, "Tell me," his voice seemed shaky, even to him, "Why, for heavens sake, should you be quitting now? You had everyone fooled up to yesterday."

Ava shrugged, "My son needs a father," he said, "That should be reason enough."

Cort had found the liquor cabinet and as he was pouring himself a double or triple rye he spoke over his shoulder, "So now you think you'll just pack up and go quietly."

"Why not?" Jean had finally found her voice. "You surely can't have any further use for Ava now that you know that he's, well, he's my husband."

Cort turned to face them and grimaced, "Oh, Spare me," he growled. He tipped up the drink and swallowed half of it, his guts started to settle as the alcohol burned its way down his throat to his stomach. "But it's not going to happen that way."

"What do you mean?" Jean was puzzled.

Cort's voice was grim as he explained, "I've just come from a meeting with the Chairman of the Board and the two major stockholders of the corporation. Some decisions were made."

The two female figures riveted their eyes on him as he drained the rest of his drink and continued, "First of all," he moved over to sit across from them again, "Cathy Lord will be paid off for her silence about Ava Saunders with the guarantee of a number of parts in future productions."

"You'll pay off a blackmailer?" Ava's voice was incredulous as she interrupted.

"Why not?" Cort growled his answer. "As soon as she's appeared once or twice, she'll be in no position to do anything. Blackmailers go to jail, you know. If any of this becomes public, we'll make sure she ends up there."

It was Jean's turn to interrupt, "And what about Ava? she asked, her voice rising with disbelief, "She, er, I mean he, wants out."

Cort smiled, showing his excellent white teeth. There was no amusement in his eyes, at all. He went on sternly, "Some of the decisions were made about Ava's future."

Jean felt Ava's hand tighten its grip on hers as Ava whispered, "Well?", almost afraid to hear his response.

"First," Cort's voice had a grating edge, "You're not quitting now. Especially since we're paying off Cathy Lord. You're staying under contract and you'll have the lead in two Broadway shows that we've bought the film rights to. You'll get a piece of the action, a very small piece, with the guarantee of a quarter of a million at least for the two. Bessill already knows that. We'd worked that out before Cathy dropped her bombshell."

He paused and looked at them for a short time, as they looked back, uncertainty covered both their faces. "My principles were pretty upset when they heard about Ava and how close I came to wrecking the studio. Also, they don't trust you as much as they did. Somehow, the Chairman got the idea you might be about to skip out on us."

He smiled grimly as he continued, "So you'll both move into Whiteside with me where I can keep a close eye on you. You can carry on your marriage just as you have in the past, as far as I'm concerned."

"And what if we refuse?" Jean was surprised at the ice in Ava's voice.

Cort winced as he answered, "Then we'll co-operate in the most fantastic publicity campaign you ever saw to make Ava Saunders the most celebrated freak of the century. I can't imagine what kind of father Cam or Margot will have to look up to then."

Jean tightened her grasp on Ava's hand. She turned to her husband, "Darling," her voice was full of fright, almost to the point of panic, "do we have any choice? We can't let the media crucify you. Think of how that would hurt the children."

"And lastly," Cort had slumped into his chair now, his face showing great fatigue, "To protect Ava from undue gossip, my bosses insist there will be a wedding arranged before the start of filming. The marriage will be between Robert Cort and Ava Saunders."

Seeing the horror wash across their faces, he held up a hand and quickly continued, "No, No! It won't mean a thing. I'll be around to be a father image to your kids, if you want me to, but I won't get anything else from this name-only marriage. This will just be to tie you to Pacific as securely as it's possible to tie anyone. We have a lot of money at stake."

"B..But..." Jean was in a state of shock. Cort stood up and made toward the door.

He turned and face his stunned audience, "It will be a white wedding, of course," he said bitterly. "And you can expect that wherever I go, I'll expect my wife to be with me, dressed or undressed in the latest fashion, as the case may be."

He opened the front door and said, "You can talk it over, like how you'll arrange things at Whiteside, but that's the way it's going to be, or like me now, you'll find your lives hardly worth living from now on." He stepped out the door and was gone.

Dazed, Jean stood up and looked down at her husband, still sitting cross-legged, displaying the slimness of his well-formed, beautiful legs. "We can't leave, Ava," she said, resignation of her fate entering her voice, "We should quit, but think what that will do. They'll sue us. If you think you can't possibly go through with this, then, just say so. I'll understand. We can run away and try to find somewhere to hide. There might be somewhere we can go if we put our minds to it."

Ava had been thinking. He shook his head, causing his earrings to jangle. He yawned and stretched his bare arms above his head, causing his breasts to tighten and rise up within his dress. "Don't worry about it at all, Jean," he said smiling and running his tongue over his shiny lipstick. In as sultry a voice as Jean had ever heard, he murmured, "Maybe it'll be fun and there's a lot of money involved."

Jean smiled and said, "That's my girl."

• • •

Robert Cort was absolutely furious. Jean Roberts wished that the ground would open up and swallow her. She blinked back tears, thankful for the non-run mascara that she was wearing on her eyelashes.

"I don't know where he's gone, honest!" she said tearfully.

Robert Cort's single word expletive conveyed both his emotion and disbelief he had in her answer. "There's absolutely no way," he spoke harshly, "that one of the world's most famous and beautiful *woman*," he stressed the last word, "could possibly be missing for the last three days. You must know where Ava is!"

Despite his youth, not yet forty, Cort's hair showed grey streaks only along the sides. Yet, his moustache, which he'd only recently grown and which his wife abhorred, was thick and black. With his face so angry and his natural

hawk-like nose and chin, Robert Cort was positively predatory as his dark eyes glittered at Jean.

"H-How should I know where he is?" Jean dabbed at the expensive makeup on her face. "I'm just his dresser these days. You're Ava's husband, aren't you?"

"In name only," the bitter words were spat out of the hard compressed mouth. "In name only, Jean. Don't you ever forget that!"

Jean quivered and seemed to shrink before the President of Pacific Studios forceful attack. Not since the wedding day of Robert and Ava had she seen him so upset.

Not that you could have seen anything wrong in the picture on Cort's desk. Ava was positively ravishing as a bride in his white, lace dress. His shoulder length hair with the crown of flowers woven in, the veil gently pushed to one side, gave him a sexy look, even in his bridal wear. Robert Cort, with the calm, fixed smile on his face, had not erupted until later, in the privacy of the bridal suite, where Ava and Jean had clung together, absolutely terrified by the dimensions of Cort's rage.

"Call your friends," Cort barked, "He may be visiting one of your old friends from the Pearl City Revue."

Jean shook her head, "N-No," she stammered. "We've only seen Cathy Lord in the last couple of years. That's only because she has been under contract here."

"I know that," Cort's manner was even more rude. He stood up and began to stalk about his dimly lit office. "We'll have to bring in a private detective," he said at last. "We can't have the studio's biggest star lost out there."

"But what will you tell them?" whispered Jean anxiously. "You couldn't tell them that..."

"No. Of course not," Cort interrupted with a snarl. "There are some things we can't tell anyone." He glared at her as he strode back and forth. His mind was working at a fevered pitch, "We'll have to tell the media that Ava Saunders is ill and won't be making any personal appearances for the next month. You'll confirm that he is with you at Whiteside. Prime Cameron and Margot to back up your story." He scowled as he mentioned Jean's children, to whom he'd been a father over the last five years.

He picked up the calendar from his desk and glanced at all the appointments and interviews that Ava would miss over the next week - or longer.

Jean was watching Robert thoughtfully and quietly asked, "Publicity isn't needed for any of Ava's films, is it?"

Cort answered with a low scowling tone, "There is some publicity which could wreck all our careers. But I just don't know."

He seemed to lose his train of thought. Suddenly Jean realized just how really worried he was.

He ran his fingers through his short hair and continued. "She could have gone off with a man, you know. She may have had an accident and be in a hospital somewhere. A time bomb ready to go off in Pacific's corporate face." His expression darkened even more, "He could be off on a jag, or in the kind of hospital that does a special kind of surgery. We have to find him," he went on, a touch of desperation joining the bitterness, "not for publicity sake, but for our own."

Jean had started to cry as she said, "I don't know how he could do this to me."

Robert turned back towards the dark window that looked out over the studio's complex. His eye caught the picture that the publicity department had put on his wall. It was nearly a life-size picture of Ava in a black evening dress. Tiny, silver straps over his shoulders held up the open front of the gown. A slit up the side showed off his beautiful legs and the open-toed high heels. He was smiling gaily at the photographer, his lips parted in fun, his eyes filled with mischief. This photograph showed well why Ava was the darling of the media; he was so attractively feminine and vivacious.

He was everything a woman should be, thought Robert, angrily of Ava. If something could be done with grace and charm, Ava could do it, plus add a feminine touch. It was such a pity that Ava Saunders was really a man.

• • •

Arthur Mayer recently appointed Director of Pacific Studios, the "discoverer" of Ava Saunders, and long-time talent scout for the studios, had found just the man whom

Robert Cort wanted. Glen Grippe was only recently an exile from regular police and detective ward. Eager for new and exciting cases, he had, however, been long enough on his own to understand the realities of the term "private investigator".

"The job Mr. Cort has for you," Mayer explained quietly, "is a job that requires a fine sense of discretion."

Grippe nodded with understanding, "I can be very discreet, if the price was right."

Mayer went on, "You will be very well paid. Should you succeed, the company would be willing to extend to you a retainer so that your services will always be available to us."

Grippe blinked and jerked his head. His first thought was very discreet, indeed. He was definitely intrigued. A permanent retainer! A god send. . . maybe he could pay his rent this month. It was what he had been hoping for, No, needed ever since he left police work. He was about to subject Mr. Mayer to a barrage of eager questions, but they were interrupted by the sudden arrival of Pacific's President.

Cort strode toward the shinny, glass-topped, mahogany desk. Mayer leapt from the high, leather, padded chair, and hurried over towards the chair beside Grippe.

Glen tried to immediately size up the company's President, looking over Mr. Cort's tanned, muscular figure at a glance. He noticed the expensive sports shirt and well-tailored slacks. The grim expression on the mouth, and the quick glance from beneath the dark brows spoke of an unrestrained, relentless intelligence. The man must be a tireless worker thought Grippe. I'd bet that he drives secretaries insane. Already Glen could feel dislike rising within himself. This wasn't his kind of person. He wondered what a super dish like Ava Saunders saw in him.

Cort was quite disappointed by Mayer's choice of detective. Grippe was young, sandy haired and apparently open and honest. Cort would have preferred someone older, grayer, and more devious. He frowned, but remembered Mayer's success rate at discovering talent. Only Ava had fooled Mayer, but then she'd made the studio's money on all her fourteen pictures so far.

Cort sat down and looked directly at the pale eyes which were so busy sizing him up too. He stated flatly, "My wife, Ava Saunders has been missing for five days." Grippe's face registered only polite surprise. Cort was irritated by his expression and continued, "It will be your task to find her."

"All right," Grippe replied calmly.

There was silence for a moment as each man eyed the other coolly.

"This will not be an easy task," instructed Cort. "You must not involve the police, nor the media, in this affair. And neither must you let it be known to anyone that she is missing. You must phrase your inquires to suit this purpose."

Grippe's expression hardly changed. "Just how much do you want me to find her?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Cort snapped back.

"You're tying both my hands behind my back," Grippe said bluntly. "If I can't even ask someone if they've seen her, how can I possibly make progress?"

"That's your problem," retorted Cort. "Our retainer will be very generous. We expect a very discreet level of performance from those who work for us. We expect the best---and we pay for it."

Grippe nodded. Cort reached into his pocket and brought out a check. He slid it across the top of the desk. Grippe had to fight to keep the emotion out of his face. It was enormous! He'd have had to work two years for the Police Department to make that amount of money. The rent was paid.

"There'll be your expenses on top, of course," Cort's smile was amused and Grippe hated him even more. It was enough to have to work for the man, but to have to know that the others knew how much he needed this job was downright humiliating.

• • •

"She never did drive herself before," said Poole, the old, grey haired black who manned the gate in the late afternoon at the studios, "which is why I remember her going off."

"Must have given you a surprise, eh?" Grippe chuckled.

"Why?" the old man bristled. "I seen them all, you know. I seen every big star come through this gate."

"Yeah," agreed Grippe. "But how did you know it was her? Every girl in the world dresses like Ava Saunders these days."

"She stopped right here," said Poole, pointing at Grippe's car. "And she still had her stage make-up on."

"Stage make-up?" asked Grippe, doubtfully.

"Sure," the gatekeeper smiled, spreading his hands wide. "I went right over to her, and she asked me if it was all right to go out. Yes Sir! I looked right into that car. She was wearing a little dress like a slip. Boy, you should see those legs and her shoulders ain't bad, either. He laughed at his own witticism.

"She was wearing a little mini-dress?" asked Grippe, again with doubt in his voice. "How about her hair?"

"All over the place. She's got a real mane," the old black man laughed coarsely. "Just the kind I likes."

"We all do," said Grippe with a smile.



"Yeah, I remember the lady," said the motel owner. "Couldn't really forget her. Looked just like Ava Saunders, you know. Something wrong with her?"

Grippe shook his head. "Not her, the car," he said. "The red Corvette. Her husband is being held on a hit-and-run charge up in "Frisco. Supposed to have been that car. My boss wants him out as soon as we can. So, I got to get to her."

"Well," the motel owner shrugged. "She sighed in as Roberts, see?" He turned the motel register so Grippe could read the list of names. "She was pretty upset, you know."

"What?" asked Grippe quickly.

"She'd been crying. Her eyes wee all puffy and red, you know. Still, she looked gorgeous."

"What was she wearing?" asked the detective.

"Oh Boy!" the motel owner slapped the desk and grinned, "She had this little dress that just came to here."

He touched the top half of his thigh. "Silk-like, and was she stacked!" His hands made a gesture as if supporting two large weights on his chest. "She was showing me everything, even the frills on her panties, you know. I thought she was a high-class hooker at first. Can't be too careful in this business, you know. But Nah, she was too classy for that."

"You saw her the next day?" Grippe was sure now that Ava Saunders, Mrs. Robert Cort, had stayed at the Golden Arrow Motel. But where had she gone when she left?

"Wouldn't have missed it," chortled the motel owner.

"Why?" Grippe questioned.

"Some of the construction boys from Sinclair came out and saw her," the man shook his head. The comments they was making were just downright crude. She had on this black skirt and black tights, with a real tight black sweater. Oh Boy, did that ever show her off."

Then the motel owner closed his eyes as he remembered the sight with ecstasy. "She had this loose type shirt over the whole outfit. Her hair was tied with a ribbon in the back. She sure could use make-up all right, too."

He started to chuckle as he went on, "As she was coming to pay her bill, Tommy, this big ole' construction guy, he says he wants to get into her panties. Well, she heard him and stopped and faced him. Then she just looks him up and down says he could wear *all* of her clothes if he liked to. She told him she just loved sissy men."

His chuckling increased, "Well, you ain't never seen anyone as red as Tommy. Boy, he was the color of that Corvette! Then the rest of the guys started to tease him, too."

The owner started to regain some composure as he said, "She came over here and gave me a wink when she paid me. I ain't seen anything like the way she walked to that car. I just lie awake nights thinking about that sashay!"

Grippe laughed. He wondered how this guy would react if he told him who had really been staying in his roadside motel. The guy would likely have a heart attack! He signed and reminded himself he must be discreet.

"But the car," Grippe enquired, "Did you see where it went?"

"Sure did," said the man and he pointed up the highway, eastward. "Due east. Looked like she was going a long way, too."

Grippe frowned and asked, "Why'd you say that?"

"She had a raincoat attached to one of her cases. I said she ought to put it away, but she said she'd need it soon as she go where she was going."

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The sale price on the Corvette was quite a bargain. "Bought it from the original owner," said the proud salesman. "Only got 2,500 miles on it."

"Yes," said Grippe. "It's the car I want. But how do I know the mileage is correct?"

"I wouldn't turn the mileage back," huffed the car salesman. "It's against the law. Besides, that's what was on the car when it was brought in for sale."

"Can I check with the last owner?" asked Grippe. "If I can, we'll have a deal for sure. If what you say is true."

"Well," the salesman was doubtful. "I bought it from this hot, blonde chick who was just passing through."

"Oh yeah," Glen Grippe spared no sarcasm in his voice. "Could be a hot car then."

"Oh, no, no. She had a proper bill of sale," the salesman said rapidly. "I checked it out with the dealer in Los Angeles. It was her car all right. See?" He had been fumbling through some papers and he showed the bill of sale to Grippe. He pointed to a portion of the document as he spoke, "Look here. A. Roberts, and there's her signature. It's the same on both, or I'm a Dutch uncle."

"How did you know it wasn't a forgery?" asked Grippe.

The salesman laughed as he explained, "I got the salesman in Los Angeles to describe the Roberts dame." He shook his head, as he continued, "There just can't be two chicks in the world with a figure like hers."

"A good figure, Huh?" Grippe sounded interested.

"Man, you haven't seen anything like this doll," the salesman was just warming up. "She was wearing this sweater, and she wasn't wearing no bra, see? And those white boots and mini-skirt. I mean, I was biting the carpet

when she talked to me. You know," he laughed, "she really was a dead ringer for Ava Saunders."

"Ava Saunders?" Glen was very doubtful. "Oh, come on. No one looks like her. She'd have to have been fantastic."

"She was! She was!" The salesman was becoming belligerent. "She was even better than Ava."

"So, didn't you try for her?" Grippe was still very doubtful.

"Of course," said the salesman. "But you know girls like that. Much too high class for the likes of us." His eyes flickered from Grippe to the glass wall that showed his own reflection and then came back again.

"Why'd she sell the car?" asked Grippe.

The salesman shrugged. He was watching an older couple who were standing outside the window looking at the newer models on show. The husband was obviously trying to persuade his reluctant wife to enter the showroom. "How should I know?" the salesman asked.

Grippe considered. "Well, I guess she didn't intend to stay around here if she sold the car."

"Right," said the salesman. "She said she wouldn't be needing the car back home - wherever that was."

• • •

It hadn't taken Glen Grippe more than a phone call to find out that the studio handout on Ava Saunders was completely false. She wasn't born on the day, or in the place, that the studio said that she was, nor even in that state. With Robert Cort locked into meetings with Pacific's Board, Grippe took the opportunity to look over Ava's most recent film, which had been set up for a private showing to VIP's, critics, and friends, in the small theater in Pacific's twin towered administrative complex.

Within minutes, Glen Grippe found himself absorbed in the character that was Ava Saunders. Ostensibly, the role was simply a vehicle for the star and the studios to make money. Neither the sets nor the supporting actors or actresses approached the calibre of Ava. But then, it was hard for established stars to act with her, for she'd stolen every picture she'd appeared in.

Despite her skimpy dresses and the magnificent costumes she wore, Ava rose above the lackluster material she'd been given to work with. Whether dressing or undressing, she made of each movement, the taking off of an earring, the adjustment of a slip strap, or the fixing in place of a garter, a work of feminine art. Her dance routines, intended merely to parody Astaire/Rogers, quickly turned into something more, and it was quite a shock to realize that the slim figure could dance so well.

Even the vacuous, empty handed blonde that Ava portrayed so easily was bestowed with characteristics, a frozen look, a twitch of an elegant hand, the pursing of her red lips, that showed the blonde to be aware, and yet trapped, in the role others had forced her to play. Her tragic death, so melodramatic with an actress of less character, and her puzzlement at the unjust fate she had received, carried off the show to a superb climax.

Glen Grippe left the theater with a strange glow about him. She was an original. He sensed this awareness in others about him, too, and was jealous. He had fallen in love with Ava Saunders and he didn't want to share her with anyone else.

• • •

Cathy Lord had obviously been working on a bottle of Scotch long before Grippe arrived just before six that evening. In one of the supporting roles in Ava's latest film, she was often described as an "old friend" of Ava's. The way she was hitting the bottle, thought Grippe, would soon make her fit the description of "old."

"Yeah," said Cathy unsteadily. "We're great friends." There were lines about her mouth and eyes that spoiled her generally haughty attractiveness. Relaxed as now, she appeared and even sounded bitchy. "Of course she got the breaks, you might say, and the rest is history."

"Did you see much of her on the set?" Grippe persisted in his attempt to tie down the relationship between Ava and Cathy Lord.

"Everyday," said Cathy, eyeing the decanter on the table.

"You knew her from the time she got started in the business?" Grippe knew it was a stupid to try and question a drunk.

"Oh, yes," said Cathy, absently. "I was in the revue when Jean brought Ava in."

"Jean?" asked Grippe quickly.

"Yeah, Jean," replied Cathy, suddenly focusing all her attention to him. She gave him a wide smile that made all her lines and wrinkles disappear. "Jean Roberts. She lives with Ava and Bob out at Whiteside. Didn't you know that? She works as a kind of dresser/secretary to Ava."

Grippe got angry. Robert Cort had not mentioned this person to him, the one person in whom Ava might have confided if she had decided to run away from her husband. He rose to leave.

"There's more to that, you know," Cathy said carefully, "than meets the eye. We used to call Jean, Ava's wife, if you know what I mean." She smiled brilliantly at the detective.

Grippe froze, his hand on the apartment door. He could feel the pulse beating intensely in his forehead. He was suddenly short of breath as if he had been kicked in the pit of his stomach. He jerked around to face the red-headed singer and snarled, "You saying that Ava Saunders is a lesbian?"

Cathy opened her eyes wide in feigned astonishment. Then a wicked smile slowly crossed her face as she sarcastically answered Grippe's question, "I've always felt so sorry for Mr. Robert Cort. Imagine, never getting to sleep with the most beautiful thing in the world - even when you're married to it!"

With a snort of disgust, Glen tore the door open and slammed it on his way out of the apartment. A friend of Ava Saunders, he ragged. With a friend like that, Ava wouldn't need an enemy in the world.

The more he thought of Cathy Lord, the more he recognized in the jealousies that Ava must arouse in the competitors. It was truly amazing, he thought, the lies and deceptions, the failures would use to justify their lack of success. Still, he's gone out to see Jean Roberts. Funny how Ava had used that name in the sale of her Corvette.

But the more he thought of Ava, the more he knew Cathy Lord's story for what it was; a pack of lies brought about by jealousy.

• • •

Meanwhile, the object of Grippe's attention was nearly half a continent away, trying to make the nurse-receptionist clear about the request she had just put before her. "I'm sorry, Miss," the receptionist answered at last, "Dr. Aaronson no longer practices at this clinic." She looked at the woman opposite her, trying to work out what was familiar about her. She had dark hair, thick and carefully arranged. She didn't wear very much make-up, and she seemed quite young. She was very pretty and her dark pantsuit didn't disguise her attractive, very feminine figure.

"Oh, dear," Ava said softly, trying to figure what to do next. "I-I particularly wanted to see him. He operated on me some years ago."

The receptionist was very polite. She knew Dr. Aaronson's reputation as a plastic surgeon, but this woman didn't look like she's ever had her face done. She decided to try and satisfy her curiosity, "Dr Aaronson has retired." said the nurse. "We do have several fine surgeons here at the clinic. If you could tell what type of surgery you had in mind..." The nurse's voice trailed off as she saw Ava shaking her head vigorously.

"No. Uh-Thank you." Ava stood and was about to leave the office when a thought struck her. She said to the nurse, "Excuse me. Does Dr. Aaronson still live in Mallory Park?"

"He does. Yes." The nurse answered, a bit startled by this sudden question, "I could contact him for you if you like. His number is unlisted."

Ava hesitated, then considered, "Uh-Yes. Please."

"And who shall I say wants to see him?" the nurse asked.

Again Ava hesitated, wondering about the wisdom of giving her name, but she had to see the doctor. "Ava Roberts," she said at last.

In saying the name, the nurse finally saw the resemblance she had been looking for. The girl resembled Ava

Saunders, the movie star. And she even had the same first name.

When the woman had left, leaving the address of a local motel as her address in town, a very curious nurse-receptionist looked up the files on Ava Roberts. The surgery had been done over eight years ago and had been a simple breast enlargement procedure. The intriguing and stunning fact, a talking point for the nurse and his friends for days after this visit, was that Ava was short for "Andy", and Ava Roberts was clearly listed as 'male' in the doctor's records. "His", that is "Andy's" profession was listed as "female impersonator."

"And he's just fantastic," the receptionist told all her friends. "He must of had his face done to resemble Ava Saunders." Then the thought struck her that made them all giggle at the time. The nurse wondered out loud, "I wonder what operation he wants from poor Dr Aaronson this time!"

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Jean Roberts did not like the detective or his questions. His antagonism was matched by that displayed by Glen Grippe. At the threat to call Robert Cort, the detective smugly told her to go ahead. It took awhile but she finally managed to get Robert out of a board meeting.

Cort barked into the receiver, "What's so important, Jean?" He was clearly angry at her interruption.

"Th-There's a man her, a Mr. Grippe," she stammered. He says he's working for you, and he's asking a lot of personal questions about Ava."

"Put him on." Cort snapped.

When Grippe got to the phone, his smug expression soon changed. Jean was pleased to hear Cort's voice echoing from the receiver. "That's all very well," snapped Grippe in return. "I know that she is your wife, but I have to know more about her to find her. You held out on me about Jean here. Why didn't you tell me that her best friend was living at Whiteside with you both?"

Whatever Cort's answer was, it was obviously to the point for Grippe was shortly left holding a buzzing phone.

He turned to Jean, animosity in his eyes. "Just tell me one thing," he said, "are you sleeping with Ava Saunders?"

The expression of shock in Jean's eyes covered her thoughts. "What?!" He hands came up to her face, "How-ever could you say such a thing?!"

"I didn't say it!" snapped Grippe, then he stretched the truth, "It's all over town. It seems everyone knows but your studio bosses."

"Oh Dear!" Jean dropped hard in a chair. "Oh my!" She stared wide eyed at the detective as she started to realize the truth.

Meanwhile, Grippe was feeling cold chills again. Her reaction to his accusations was surprising, to say the least. He had a feeling, but he desperately didn't want to believe it, that Cathy Lord had been pretty close to the truth. It would explain Robert Cort's funny attitude, too. Suddenly, Glen felt quite sick. He really didn't want any part of this at all, any more.

Tears started to flow freely down Jean's face. "So, that's why Ava left," she sobbed.

"Yeah, probably." Grippe's tone was sour, even to him-self.

"It's just for the children," said Jean as she searched unsuccessfully for something to wipe her eyes.

As Glen handed her his handkerchief, sour turned to surprise, as he asked, "What do you mean?"

"Ava couldn't stand to have the children hurt," Jean said tearfully, "Not even by a untrue rumor."

Grippe was startled and puzzled. "You mean she's not a lesbian?" he asked bluntly.

Jean was really shocked as she barked her answer to Grippe through her tears, "Whatever Ava is, she is not a lesbian."

"But she doesn't sleep with her husband," Grippe took a shot in the dark, trying to make some sense in his own mind.

"Well," Jean was mopping up her tear ravaged face now. "They do both live here, and they go out together."

"There's more than that to a marriage," Grippe said pointedly. "By the way, where is home for Ava? And why does she use Roberts as a mane to travel under?"

Jean stiffened. She used Roberts?" she asked.

Grippe nodded in agreement. "Where is home?" he repeated.

Jean answered flatly, "Nowhere, really. We've been just about everywhere through the Northeast and Midwest."

"She told the guy she sold the car to that she was going home. Now what would that mean?" Grippe pursued relentlessly.

The effect of the last information upon Jean was startling. Her lips quivered and tears almost immediately began to spring anew from her already red-rimmed eyes. "So that's what..." she sobbed in a low tone. Then suddenly she stood and between the tears, ushered Glen Grippe to the great oak doors of Whiteside and pushed him out.

Glen sat for a long time in his air-conditioned automobile in the lone, tree-lined driveway. Finally, reluctantly, he drove away. He soon found a spot that concealed both his car and himself, but which Jean would have to pass either in her way to Pacific Studios or to the airport.

His wait was long and tedious. After five hours, a cab passed his waiting spot, headed in the general direction of Whiteside. He was rewarded a little while later by a clear view of Jean's profile as the cab sped past him. He let the vehicle take a good lead, and would have lost it but for the fact that he had figured her probable destination. As he figured, Jean had a plane ticket waiting for her at the airport.

Grippe barely had time to call Cort's office and leave a message, before he too, had to run to catch the plane for Chicago. Unlike Jean, he travelled economy class.

• • •

Samuel Aaronson remembered Andy Roberts. He had been extremely doubtful about what he had done for that young boy. But the girls he was with (what were their names?) a Jean and a Cathy, among others (he remembered), were so insistent. There must have been six of

them, he thought, or did Andy make six? Anyway, he pumped them all up, given them all really nice boobs.

But the boy? Giving a boy a full set of boobs. . .he said no, a dozen times, but the girls had insisted. The boy, well, he was shy and didn't say much, but he went along with what the girls wanted. As excited as the girls were to have their breasts done, they all seemed more excited about Andy's.

Aaronson remembered how they behaved when he visited them all in the wards. Andy, of course, had been in the same room as the women. The doctor remembered how the second day of recovery all giggled, teased and joked about their new prominences. . .all but Andy. He had a bewildered expression in his eyes. . .a look of disbelief at what he'd done. The doctor remembered the girl, Jean saying to him, "Don't worry. . .you're going to love having tits."

The next day, they were all released. *All* dressed up in the sexiest of lingerie, naturally! Each had a exquisite new 'larger cup' brassiere to wear home. The girls had Andy's brassiere wrapped up with a big pink bow. From someplace came a bottle of champagne and Jean made a toast, "To Andy. . .a sweet boy who's now one of us. We all chipped in and bought you the most lacy, silky, ruffly, pretty brassiere made just the dainty and feminine girl dancer we all know you'll become."

Dr. Aaronson remembered how embarrassed the young boy looked realizing that he was going to *need* to wear a brassiere from now on. All the girls were giggling and having fun but Andy had that frightened look on his face.

Making matters worse, Cathy giggled, pushing her new chest out and running her hands over her new larger lace bra, "I can't believe Andy is actually going to be wearing these. He's going to look so cute as one of us showgirls. Jean how did you ever get him to do this?"

They all chuckled at Cathy's crack but the doctor was getting more concerned about the boy. . .for the last three days he'd just stare at the ceiling and didn't say much.

"Lift up your arms Andy," Jean said, "We'll help you this time."



“Dr Aaronson remembered the boy he gave breasts to. . . the terrified expression on Andy’s face when he realized he HAD to wear brassieres now.”

The tone of Jean’s voice clearly indicated that she meant business, and being the docile and submissive boy that he was, he removed his hospital robe and eased his swollen lady-like breasts out of the white clinical support bra then slowly raised his arms.

“That’s a good boy”, Jean said comically as she guided Andy’s arms thru the straps of the delightful brassiere she had been holding. “Oh my,” she said as she put the cups over Andy’s tender breasts. “You are almost as ‘stacked’ as me.” All the girls breasts were still a little sore and

tender so Jean took her time fitting the cups before she turned him around so she could pull the elastic band secure around his chest and fastened the catch. "How's that feel?" Jean asked.

Dr. Aaronson felt skepticism as he watched the boy's eyes study his feminine shape reflect in a mirror. They were perfect breasts . . .but should he have agreed to put them on a boy? Chest wise, he knew that all had the best 'boob job' money could buy. He just hoped all got what they wanted.

As the prepared to leave the hospital, you really couldn't tell Andy apart from the others after they finished fixing his hair and put him in a lovely low-cut sundress. He walked out of that hospital as a fine and attractive a young lady as any who'd ever come to the clinic. Samuel Aaronson had even forgotten all about it over the years until that call! Well, of course, he's like to see Andy Roberts again.

He called the number he had been given by the receptionist at the clinic. A soft, feminine voice answered. The old doctor replied, "Could I speak to Andy Roberts, please?"

"Speaking," said the soft voice of a woman and the doctor was nonplussed. "Who is this?" there was a touch of anxiety in her voice.

"Doctor Samuel Aaronson," he answered.

"Oh," there was obvious relief in the voice. Then a pause before the feminine tones continued, "Do you remember me doctor?"

"If you're the Andy Roberts I gave a nice pair of round women's breasts, then I remember you. Only boy I ever did." The doctor tried to keep all of his feelings out of his voice.

"I-I'd like to talk with you," the 'woman' said.

Dr. Aaronson considered. He was retired for a year now. He ought to say definitely not. There was no reason for him to have to see a former patient, but he was intrigued. And Dr. Samuel Aaronson was nothing if he was not a curious man, so he went ahead and said, "All right." He proceeded to give the address of his Mallory Park home. "Come right over and see me whenever you can," he said hurriedly, feeling guilty for reasons that he couldn't ex-

plain at all. He found his hand sweating when he hung up the phone.

• • •

Jean Roberts waited in O'Hare airport in Chicago for quite a time before she caught the flight to Cincinnati. Grippe filled out his time by buying a photo magazine which featured nothing else but photos of Ava, or as the heading on the magazine said - AVA!!! There were photographs of her from all of her films as well as many 'candid' shots.

There were pictures from her wedding day, being embraced by Robert Cort in what seemed at this distance in time to be a tight, tense embrace. There were photos of her kissing all her leading men. She was pictured in bikinis, ball gowns and mini-skirts, but never, Glen was pleased to seem was she ever shown in slacks, shorts, trousers, or pants.

At the end of the article, there was an interview with Robert Cort, and his plans for Ava's future. "In our next picture," Cort was quoted as saying, "there will probably be a frontal nude shot of Ava, from the waist up, at least. The script calls for it, and, of course, it will be tastefully done. We haven't cast the actor's part yet, but I'm already jealous of whoever it's going to be. Ava and he will have to be very compatible, considering the days they'll have to spend working on the love scenes, if you could call them that. it makes me wish I'd never given up acting when I did eight years ago. Ava could do very well critically with this picture, as will the right actor..."

Then Cort went on to discuss Ava's future in more general terms. It was his intention, he made clear, to make Ava the next Marilyn, Brigitte and Raquel, rolled into one. It seemed obvious to Glen that the whole magazine had been published to serve just that end. The posed pictures of Ava, in black stockings and garters, her long blonde hair, tossed carelessly over a bare shoulder, like another in the see-through blouse, tantalized in just what it didn't show.

Grippe had become so engrossed in his magazine that he nearly missed the plane for Cincinnati. As it was, he had to scamper to make the lineup, and just as he reached

the line, so did Jean Roberts. "You!" she gasped, her hand flying to her mouth.

Grippe gave her a crooked smile. "Yes." he said, lamely.

"You're following me," she hissed accusingly, as they passed ticket inspection together. Her eyes widened even more as she saw the magazine in his hand and its title.

He gave her the magazine. "What else could I do?" he asked, "I'm being paid to find her and you know where she is, don't you?" He moved quickly to board the plane. He was seated quite close to her on the journey. He observed that she spent almost the whole trip poring over the magazine and the photos of Ava.

• • •

Dr. Samuel Aaronson hadn't quite known what to expect. Some kind of oddball, he thought. He hadn't expected anyone quite like the 'woman' who had been on his doorstep when he answered his front door. He knew that it was Andy and he sat in the doctor's study now, like a queen. No, that was an unfortunate choice of words. He was a woman, a lady, that was oblivious.

He was sipping on the sherry he had preferred to her, quite nervous, looking about at his many volume library. When he crossed his legs, the dark-stripped pantsuit when was wearing was quite masculine, as were so many

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fashions. His hair was meticulously curled, dark and brushed under at his neck line. Must be a wig, he thought, his experienced eye failing to be convinced that women could take so much trouble over her hair these days.

His fingernails were long, pointed and clean, yet unvarnished. He wore little make-up as if he was deliberately trying to downplay his feminine attractiveness. Yet, despite that, he was definitely femininity attractive. It had been a long time since Dr. Aaronson had his 'juices' stirred, as his dead wife referred to those reactions. However, this person, he must try to think of 'him' but it was the 'her' that was stirring his 'juices'.

Andy's blue eyes, fringed by long, very dark lashes, were watching the doctor as he fussed about with the glass in his hand. Finally he had to sit down opposite Andy and look into the smooth, unlined face, at the pert, little nose and the soft, femininely shaped mouth. "You are Andy Roberts, aren't you?" Dr. Aaronson asked.

In reply, Andy gave him a California drivers license. It was made out to 'Ava Roberts' and in it, he had long, blonde hair, and his make-up was well done. The doctor wanted to look at it longer. There was something familiar about the image, but Andy recovered the license quickly and tucked it away in his long black purse.

"You do remember me, Dr. Aaronson?" Andy asked anxiously.

He nodded. "You were a boy then," he said as gently as he could. "Are you still one today?"

Andy's hand made an odd, nervous gesture as if he were going to reach for a cigarette from his purse, but he didn't. "I ought to say no," he said in a very low tone. "But I am. Still a man, that is." Andy's blue eyes came up, glanced at him and then shyly looked away quickly.

The doctor found that hard to believe just looking at Andy. "You're wearing a wig," he said. He was startled, his hand reaching up to touch his hair. "No one else would notice, I think, except someone like me. Someone in the business. Why don't you take it off?"

Andy hesitated, and then gave a wan, little smile. "It's very hot," he said at last. He stood and moved gracefully over to the only mirror in the room, and took off the brown

wig. His blonde hair had been piled up on top of his head and secured by tight bands. Now, he released the hair and it cascaded down over his shoulders. And Sam Aaronson had the shock of his life as he finally pinned down the identity of the shapely blonde in his library.

"You're now Ava Saunders!" He spoke hoarsely, his whole body tightening and constricting.

"Yes," his voice was smooth and confident. He eased out his hair from its bands. A quick shake and all of his hair was loose, but in need of arrangement. He reached for a comb and a brush from his purse to begin some feminine primping. It was then that Sam Aaronson studied the beautiful face about which he'd often dreamed. He was stuck by his sorrowful expression, how truly sad he appeared.

"I didn't know what I was doing to the men of America, did I?" the doctor said, and was rewarded by a look that showed so much pain and sorrow in the blue eyes that he was forced to look away.

"I didn't want you to do it," Andy said softly, a catch in his voice.

"Did you ever had the other surgery after I finished with you?" Dr. Aaronson was succeeding in putting the conversation on a less 'cozy' footing.

Andy was still adjusting his blonde curls. "Only had my ears pierced," it was only a whisper.

"You only had the breast implants," his tone was incredulous. "But you must have had female hormones?"

Andy shook his head again.

"I'd like to examine you," he said, "but you know I'm not in practice any more. I can't do any further surgery on you. Nothing as complicated as what you're after."

The blue eyes regarded him blankly for a little while. Then, understanding dawned in Andy's eyes. "Y-you think I want you to make me more of woman!" He was clearly astounded at the thought.

It was Dr. Aaronson's turn to be puzzled. "Well," he said harshly. "Why else would you be here in my study?"

Andy took a deep breath and headed back for his chair. "I want them taken away," he said in such a low tone the doctor was hardly sure he'd heard correctly. "I want you

to remove the implants," Andy was going on hurriedly, looking at the books, and showing him the exquisitely feminine profile of Ava Saunders. "I want to be a man again."

"You want to be a man again!" Aaronson couldn't have been more amazed. He had never heard such a request in all his years as a plastic surgeon, and he'd heard plenty of strange ones. Here was the most beautiful movie star in America, and 'she' wanted to be a man. But the thought that really jolted him the most was the lingering idea that the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen was already a man!

"I don't want to wear dresses anymore," Andy was going on in a very unsteady voice. "Nor feminine lingerie either. I'm wearing pajamas at night time, and I'm trying not to use makeup. Though I have to sometimes. I have so little of my eyebrows left. It's going to take a while to grow them again. I-I'll have to use false ones I-I think for a while."

"You'll cut your hair, too?" asked Dr. Aaronson, trying to be as calm and professional as possible.

Andy turned to face him, his dark lashes brushing against his soft cheeks. "Yes," he murmured opening his eyes. There was real hurt in them. Dr. Aaronson felt a compelling need to reach out and try to comfort him, to hold him close.

"As soon as your get rid of my...my female appendages, I'll cut it all off," his hand caressed the blonde locks in a wistful feminine gesture. "Then I suppose I'll have to dye it."

There was silence while the two regarded one another for a long moment. Dr. Aaronson observed Andy---his small chin thrust forward in determination, looking very much like a spoiled little girl, pouting to get her way.

"All right," said the doctor finally. "I'll examine you. You'll have to take your blouse off."

"Shirt!" demanded Andy, as he undid his jacket buttons and slipped it off. It was clear then, even as Dr. Aaronson could see, that he was indeed wearing a pink shirt.

"If you so much want to be a man again," Aaronson asked, "why are you still wearing mostly women's clothing?"

Andy smiled and the whole library at once seemed to light up with femininity. "The suit's as masculine as I could find," he answered. "And it's a pretty effective disguise."

He slipped off the shirt. He was wearing a lacy pink slip over his bra. The doctor nodded at his unspoken question and went back for his bag that he always kept in his desk drawer. As he turned back, Andy had taken off the short slip and the bra that held his female dimensions at bay, but he still kept an arm across his breasts. He bit his lower lip in a girlish nervousness and holding the wispy lace bra up, said, "I've had to wear these since you did this to me."

"Oh, come on. . .lets see em'," the good doctor growled. "We're both men here, aren't we?" He knew however that being male with such female attributes rightly could cause some embarrassment.

Andy gave him a funny smile and took his arms away with an awkward, nervous gesture. His breasts were full, firm and luscious. . .just the way the doctor had 'built' them. Breasts that unmistakably should only appear on a developed woman. Dr. Aaronson tried for a minute to imagine having breasts himself. . .but the concept was too alien.

Aaronson suddenly realized that the view he was looking at would have been worth millions to any movie maker, a frontal, bare breasted look at 'Ava Saunders'. It certainly would have been worth every penny of the money, thought Dr. Aaronson.

He hardly knew how to start the examination. His narrow waist, soft, hairless skin, and the general development of his upper arms and breasts were so womanly that he was sure Andy was playing some elaborate joke on him. Dr. Aaronson only remembered giving the boy 325cc inserts---about a "B" cup and not what he found was almost a "C". The rosy pink nipples were malleable, responsive and extended. "They've developed and blossomed," the doctor said, asking, "Did you use a breast pump to stretch the aureoles?"

Andy bushed and nodded. He was quite agreeable to the complete examination he suggested. He was over his

initial embarrassment, though he wouldn't look, at the doctor directly. Finally after fingering the waist band, Andy slipped off the pink, spandex and nylon panties. He was exactly as he said he was. Dr. Aaronson affirmed that Ava Saunders was definitely a man.

• • •

Jean Roberts wouldn't let Glen Grippe ride with her in the cab to the hotel, not even when she knew he would go to the same hotel and take a room as close to her as he could. Despite his attention, she found a pay phone booth, closed the door and made a long series of calls from the hotel lobby, while the detective sat impassively in the center of the hotel lounge, clearly keeping her under close observation.

The arrival of a stone-faced Robert Cort the following day did little to give the detective any further clues upon the disappearance of Ava Saunders. Cort took the detective's report impassively, in the suite Grippe had reserved for his boss. "Very well," said Cort upon the completion of Grippe's presentation. "I think I will take it from here Grippe."

The detective stared at the Pacific Studio President. "You mean I'm released?" he asked, stupefied. "I can go back to California?"

"That's exactly what I mean," stated Cort, stalking over to the door of his suite, "I shall go and see Jean now. Please submit your itemized expenses to Arthur when you get back to California."

Cort didn't know or cared whether the young detective would follow his instructions or not. He strode quickly along the passageway to the room that Jean had taken. He expected the detective would return reluctantly to California. After all, Pacific's business was not to be lightly disregarded- and humoring the President of that company was something that Grippe would know that he had to do to keep his retainer.

"Well, Jean," Cort said to her shocked face when she opened the door. "So you know where 'Mrs. Cort' is after all."

Jean Roberts had never been good at concealing her emotions. Despite her greatest effort, she knew that her face was telling Robert Cort all he wanted to know. Desperately, she looked away from her husband's husband.

"Well," Cort said testily. "And where is he, my wife; your husband?"

Jean tried not to answer. The tall man stood in front of the door, his hands on his hips, very intimidating. Just as she had thought of a lie that might be convincing, the phone rang. Cort answered it first.

"Mrs. Roberts' suite," he snapped. He listened for a few seconds then said, "Go ahead. Mrs. Roberts is working for me on this matter. You can give me the information directly." He took out a silver-topped pen from his inside coat pocket and quickly scratched on a pad next to the phone. With a growing sense of dread, Jean saw the name of Aaronson appear on the pad.

"The phone number is unlisted?" Cort's tone showed his surprise. "No never mind," he added. "Mrs. Roberts and I will go over to see Dr. Aaronson directly at the Clinic. By the way, what was the doctor's specialty when he was in practice." He waited a moment. "Plastic surgery," he stated, then he replaced the receiver. Bitterness was still written on his face as he spoke to Jean, "So? Just what is Ava up to this time?"

Jean's hands twisted nervously. "I think," she said unsteadily, "I think he's going to...to become a man again."

For a moment Cort just stared at her. Slowly shock rippled across his hard, predatory face. Then amusement began to fill his dark eyes. He threw back his head and let out a wild guffaw, "Ava Saunders?" He sneered, "That queen, becoming a real man?" He began to laugh, convulsively. He laughed so hard he had to sit down on a chair to recover.

"What's so strange about that?" Jean asked indignantly when Cort's laughter had subsided a little.

"He loves it!" jeered Robert Cort. "He loves to be a woman. He loves every outlandish womanly costume I have the designers put him in. He loves every frill, every touch of feminine finery, and even all the kisses and hugs and he gets from his co-stars. He likes dresses, and

women's lingerie. You've seen the look on his face when I bring him a new dress and he shows it off to us. And look at all the handsome men I put *him*," he sneered with that word, "next to in all his films. He's got his every feminine fantasy fulfilled."

"He wants more," whispered Jean in contradiction. Tears were coming unchecked to her eyes. "He wants to be a real father to Cameron and to Margot."

"They've got along fine enough without *his* father image so far," said Cort harshly, his humor entirely gone. "Now, don't start blubbering. I don't care if he has any more operations or not. That's not going to make my marriage any more real, no matter what he does to himself."

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Jean opened her eyes wide in an expression of sheer fright. "You don't think . . ." she began wildly.

"What else?" asked Robert Cort gruffly. "After all, Ava's been living the life of the sexiest women in American for the last three years at least. Stands to reason, that he would change. . .he's going to want to start returning some of those kisses he's been getting."

"But, . . ." Jean began, shaking her head.

"You just don't want to face up to it," said Cort, smiling as he cut her off. "This Aaronson, he's the one who fixed up all your breasts, right?"

Jean nodded. Robert Cort was wrong, she was sure, but doubt kept nagging at her. Andy had been so funny lately, and she could hardly remember the last time they'd been to bed together, for other than sleep, anyway. And he'd grown so feminine.

There wasn't a man who didn't try to paw him all over. Yes, he had told Jean all about 'her' admirers and they had many laughs, but oh, what a fool she had been, she thought bitterly. She should never have encouraged him to be a female impersonator in the first place. She shouldn't have forced him to have his breasts enlarged for the show. . .even though some of the costumes were skimpy. She remembered how confused that made Andy when they realized he couldn't just 'strap them down'. No, they stood out proudly on Andy's thin frame. . .sassy symbols of womanly development that made it impossible for him to ever go out as a man. After that she had encouraged him to become more feminine; electrolysis, pierce his ears, grow his nails and they sometimes even double-dated with men. She knew he liked the feel of women's clothes - but now see what she'd done. She was losing her husband, she now realized it all seemed true. He must be changing into a real woman.

• • •

Samuel Aaronson, after years of living alone since his wife's death, was not used to having a woman, or even a pseudo-woman, about his house. It hadn't taken him long to persuade Andy that he needed 'her' close by to be available for the results of the tests he was having made.

But it was rather disturbing to have Andy, AKA Ava, moving gracefully in and out of his familiar rooms. His blonde hair and trim figure erased any vestige of maleness that might have lingered in Aaronson's mine after the examination.

Despite his statements that he wanted to dress like a man, Andy no longer wore the masculine suit in which he had arrived at the doctor's home. He avoided pantsuits, and one evening, wore a 'movie' outfit for the doctor. The silver lame dress was very tight, just wisps of straps over his bare shoulders. There was an open panel at his tiny waist to show off the jewel in his navel. The skirt clung to his legs, same for the open slits that showed off his stockings and dainty high heels. He had painted his nails and wore the kind of make-up that turned him into the glamorous star that he was. Dr. Aaronson had found him too beautiful to imagine as a boy. What could you say to such a gorgeous enigmatic figure?

Today Andy wore a soft, pink, woolen-knit dress with a middle-length skirt. He was also wearing stockings. The doctor had seen the garter belt on his bed when he had gone by Andy's bedroom. He also wore black high heels. He wore lipstick, mascara, eyebrow pencil and eyeshadow too, but not too heavy.

He was so much a woman---with or without a bra. He was disturbing in that part of his anatomy, the sudden bounce of his pendulous breasts bringing on all kinds of disturbing thoughts to the doctor.

He was just wondering how he could approach Andy upon the results of some of his tests, when he heard the sound of a car in the drive-way. Andy was sitting in the library armchair, his feet curled up beneath him in an unconscious feminine mannerism. He put down the Jacqueline Susan novel and glanced at the doctor anxiously. "You're expecting someone, Sam?" he asked. His voice dismantled the doctor's assurance.

The films 'Ava' had made had not exaggerated his femininity and living with only accentuated that low, sexy voice, and the self-deprecating smile. Well, male or female, Sam Aaronson wasn't sure that he'd be able not to make a 'pass' at 'her' very soon.

"No," he said. The bell clanged heavily. It could be heard in any part of the quiet old house. "You stay in here. I'll see whoever it is into the living room."

She nodded, following him to the door. Then, she turned off the library light and left the door just slightly ajar as he went down the hallway.

Sam didn't recognize the young man who stood there. "Dr. Samuel Aaronson?" asked the young man. Even as Sam nodded, the man was presenting him with a California private investigator's license. "My name is Glen Grippe. I have been hired by Pacific Studios to find a certain person. I have reason to believe that she is here."

Grippe stepped past Dr. Aaronson with an invitation to enter the wide hallway. "I don't know what you're talking about," the doctor shuddered out. Then he began to pull at the detective's sleeve, but the detective was already off, strolling along the hallway, glancing into the living room, then the music room, and strolled up the broad stairway.

"Is she upstairs?" inquired Grippe. "Or...?" he turned and indicated the closed door of the library.

Samuel Aaronson had always been a forthright man, and deception was largely beyond him. "Young man," he began firmly, after a momentary pause, intending to tell the detective to get out of his house immediately.

But Glen Grippe had already turned the knob on the door of the library and entered, despite Aaronson's sudden objections. The detective had to fumble to find the light switch. He'd have recognized Ava Saunders anywhere, but he had made the task so easy, because she looked so lovely.

"Miss Saunders," Glen said formally, but he also gave her his best smile.

"Y-Yes," Andy had retreated across the library floor to a dark, leather armchair. Strangely he seemed frightened. Andy shook his long, blonde hair at Aaronson.

"This is atrocious!" the white-haired doctor shouted. "You can't invade my house in this manner!"

Grippe glanced over his shoulder and spoke, "You want me to leave with this story? And the lady's husband just a few minutes behind me? Should I go to the nearest phone and call in a newspaper photographer?"

"No, no," it was Andy who answered the detective exchanged glances. "I don't think we want any publicity at all. I don't want to hurt anyone."

Grippe was surprised at her coolness. He knew the old man was a plastic surgeon. He was supposed to be retired. Was there something about Ava that wasn't as real as it was supposed to be?

Still, as Grippe looked at Ava over, he knew nothing would really matter. Even if she had undergone some surgery, Ava Saunders was everything now that he had ever wanted in a woman, and he knew most men would agree with him. "I'm here to make sure no one gets hurt." he said grimly.

Ava stared at him. He sat down again, smoothing his dress behind him. "And just why are you really here, Mr. Grippe?" Andy asked with a frown.

"Your husband, Mrs. Cort," Grippe pointedly, "is very worried by your sudden disappearance. Not to mention the board of directors at Pacific Studios. Everyone is worried about you and afraid that something terrible might have happened to you." He glance at the doctor, then turned towards Ava and asked, "If it's not too rude a question, why are you here?"

He turned so he could see the doctor's reaction then followed up with, "Why didn't you tell anyone where you were going?"

Andy became very tense. "Those questions are very personal," he answered quietly, crossing his legs, showing his shapely thighs to Glen with a flash of garter, "and my answers are personal, too."

Grippe nodded. Well, he'd done his job. Now, he supposed, he'll have to call the man who had employed him. It didn't seem right, not at least without offering his help. "Your husband knows where you are," he said, observing the nervous way Ava bit at her pink lower lip. "He'll be here soon." He paused, "I work for him. So, I have to phone him." He shrugged. "If your running away from him, I can get you a head start to wherever you're going."

Again, Aaronson gave Andy a look of disgust and looked back at him as if on the point of saying something. "No," he said, at last, his slim hands with long pink fingernails

brushing his hair over his shoulders, "We all have to face up to it some time or other. Call him to come over."

Robert Cort had not been able to track down Dr. Samuel Aaronson, nor had Jean. Despite Grippe's message, Cort raged at him for ignoring his order to return to California.

"Very well," said Grippe calmly. "I'll have to leave Aaronson's right now to make the plane."

"You wait right there, mister," Cort snarled back, "Since you're there, you wait right there until I arrive."

Ava Saunders refused Grippe's suggestion that she might wish to change for the arrival of her husband. At Grippe's use of the word "husband", Andy would glance at the doctor, who glowered back at him. Apart from being angry, Aaronson now kept his thoughts and opinions to himself. "A husband," the doctor thought, "I guess Andy's more of a woman than I thought."



Robert Cort did not enter the doctors home alone. "Jean!" exclaimed Ava when the blonde-haired woman entered. Jean looked quickly at Grippe, and Grippe felt sick. Ava paid attention to the woman and greeted her warmly, but she ignored Robert Cort. Cathy Lord was correct, Grippe thought bitterly, Ava Saunders was a lesbian.

"Very well, Grippe," Cort was as abrupt as ever. "You can leave now. Jean and I have a lot to talk over with Ava."

Grippe nodded, accepting his dismissal as a matter of course. He stalked from the library without a backward glance. Ava stared at him in puzzlement.

"It was the way you greeted me," said Jean, the worried frown her face easing. She took in Andy's casual wear, and his almost lack of make-up. "Cathy told him we were lesbians and he probably thinks you confirmed it."

"So this is your husband, *Andy*," Sam Aaronson's tone contained the sneer he couldn't quite hold back.

Cort glanced at Andy. "How much does he know about you?" He demanded. He understood even before Jean the strained relationship between the feminine figure and 'her' doctor.



*"Andy had everything men wanted in a woman. . .
most were willing to overlook the flaw."*

"Everything," Andy said softly, staring right back. "Dr. Aaronson is the surgeon who gave me the breasts I have today."

Aaronson grunted. "Not entirely," he said. "I gave you only a good start."

Andy's blonde mane swirled as he turned to him. "Wh-what do you mean?" he asked.

Aaronson settled back in his armchair. "How are you, Jean?" he asked remembering now who she was. Jean looked at him, flushed, and then looked away. "Yes, I remember how you girls convinced me to give a young boy breasts. You said it was all in fun. . . a female impersonation job. Have you had all the fun you wanted? Has HE had fun?" he nodded at the blonde who sat back in an armchair, his hands with such long, feminine fingernails, clasped in front of him.

"I don't understand," Jean appeared confused. "What do you want with him again, Andy? Are you having trouble with your implants? Why didn't you tell me?"

Aaronson answered for Ava. "He wants to get rid of them," he said. The shock on Jean's face was followed by an angry snort from Robert Cort, who turned away to lean on a bookcase, his back to them. "But I can't do that, of course."

It was Andy's turn to be shocked. "You can't," he seemed about to cry.

"Someone, I presume it isn't you, has been feeding you female hormones. For a long time," said Aaronson as bluntly as he could. "They have feminized you everywhere, from your hair and lack of hair to the rounding out of your figure. Your breasts have budded and developed around the implants---I could tell that from the moment I saw you. Even your dainty arms, legs and your rounded hips are signs of secondary female development. You have a female musculature now. Even with large doses of male hormones, it's going to take a really long time, to get you back to even a semblance of your true sex."

"No," both Jean and Robert spoke at once. Then they stared at one another.

"So," said Dr. Aaronson, "I wondered which of you had been doing this. I would guess it was the both of you!"

Jean protested as tears came to her eyes, "But the dosages were very light." She turned to the husband of her husband. "You said so, didn't you Robert?" Robert gave her a grim little smile.

"They weren't to harm Andy, you said," Jean's hysteria was rising in her voice. "Help him be all that he can be. . . you said." She was quoting Robert Cort from memory.

"And what am I, Jean?" There were tears as well as a hurt expression in Andy's eyes. He asked again, "Just what am I?"

Bob Cort cut in savagely, "You're a actress and a wife. . .my wife!" He turned from the bookcase, his eyes blazing. "My wife, whom every two-bit actor gets to hold and caress on the movie set, but whom I never get to touch. You're my wife, the most beautiful 'woman' in the world, but behind closed doors you insist that I treat you like another man. Well I can't!" His voice was becoming unsteady. There was something wild-eyed and scary about the way he was eyeing his 'wife'.

Robert went on without thinking, just feeling, "I can't treat you with kid gloves anymore. You can't possibly be a man anymore, that's obvious. But you can be *more* of a woman. I know if you just got used to 'acting' like my wife, you'd grow to love being a woman. I just know it. . .and then you'll be a *proper* wife."

Jean was as scandalized as Andy. Jean just blurted out, "Oh! How can you say such a thing!" She stood and looked for a moment like she might strike Bob.

"Oh, Bob," Andy said as he bit his lower lip. "Have we hurt you that much in this business?"

Robert Cort stepped away from the bookcase, eased around the sofa and sat down. He put his head in his hands. "I'm a man but I'm also human. Living with you at Whiteside is torture," he said huskily. "You float around the house in those lacy negligees like a dream. . .my dream wife but always out of reach to me. You never let me touch you."

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"You hold me when we dance," said Andy, unsteadily like Bob. "And we go to lots of dances. You even kiss me for the publicity shots, and you've had me do lots of them. You always kiss and hold me when we have guests at Whiteside, or even when we go out."

"I kiss you," stated Bob Cort, looking up at 'her', all his sureness gone. "You never kiss me. And when I bring you home, you go off to bed with Jean. You never think of me. I've been good to you. . .you could just kiss back once in a while. Hell!" He stood up and strode back to the bookcase. "How could *I* have this conversation with a man?" His mouth was twisted in self-contempt.

"You're having it!" Dr Aaronson cut into the embarrassing silence. "Now, I don't want to intervene in your Hollywood affairs, but I'll tell you plain, Andy or Ava or whatever. . .your best bet in the future is to stay in your dresses. It'll be a lot of anguish and torture for you to try to change back and represent a male. Also you'll disappoint a lot of idolizing men. . .me with dreams of the perfect woman." He smiled and went on, "Besides, you've been turning on an old guy like me ever since you got here. It's time you faced what they have made of you."

Andy refused to smile. "I can't do it," he whispered. "I've got to make the break this time." He looked over to Jean, "You can understand why I can't let you talk me out of it this time. I don't even care if you expose me to the public for what I am."

Andy glanced at Cort's tightly-held back. "You see what's happening. Just being around you has been feminizing me. I must have been feeling it. . .feeling confused. Am I a wife or a husband?" His long blonde hair shook and trembled, "No, Bob. I've only ever loved Jean and I don't want anyone else, male or female. Maybe I could accommodate you, let you hug me, return your kisses, or even let you pet me, but what if I did learn to enjoy you. . .what about Jean, my children. I don't think either of us could live with the consequences. I can't be a man and a woman, a wife and a husband, can I?"

Jean came over and took Ava's long, slender hand. "Maybe you can. We'll stop the hormone treatments," she said rapidly. "Just come back with us to Whiteside. I'll be like before. . .I think we've all been reasonably happy."

"No!" This time it was Andy and Bob who spoke together.

"Well, it's nice to see you people agreed," Dr. Aaronson interjected as he stood and ambled towards the library door. "You're all welcome to stay the night. You can sort out who sleeps with whom and where. Andy can show you all where the bedrooms are." With that, he left them all alone.

There was a considerable silence, which was broken in time by Andy. "We'll have to go through a divorce, Robert. After all, people think we're married."

"It isn't necessary," Cort said, having returned to his sofa seat. "We can carry on as before." He looked at her evenly, all emotion drained from his face. "I'll still look out for Cameron and Margot as if they were my children. I'd rather have you near than gone."

Their conversation was interrupted by a persistent ringing of the front doorbell, which Robert Cort went to answer. He returned to find Jean and Ava in a tight embrace, both crying and kissing at the same time.

"It's the media!" Cort snapped savagely. "They've heard that 'Ava' is here and they've come to see you and take pictures."

"Oh!" Andy kept one arm about Jean, and dabbed at his eyes. "I suppose I'll have to go meet them."

"Not like that!" Cort, quickly becoming the President of Pacific Studios again said horrified. "You'll have to change into something more glamorous, and you need more make-up."

Andy shook his head. "But I can't..." he began.

Jean interrupted, "I'll come and help you. You have to show them what they really came to see." She stood beside her husband, comparing their slim, girlish figures. "You just remember," she said wryly, "you're only bigger than me in one place and it's the only place that counts to be my husband in bed. The rest of the time. . .you should really take advantage of being Robert's wife."

• • •

"Here she is, my wife," said Robert Cort, standing aside so that 'Ava' could be seen by all the reporters.

"Wow!" gulped one of the men, as flash cameras popped. Andy smiled, fluttered his false eyelashes and moistened his already glossed over lips. His black, silk strapless dress, hugging his figure tightly, stopped just above his knee, so that when he sat on the sofa, the men were able to get a glimpse of his well-formed thighs.

Robert Cort sat beside Andy and took his hand, holding it so that the photographs would catch his scarlet lacquered nails. He put one hand about Andy's trim waist and he leaned back against Robert, comfortably adjusting his skirt, but not before all the men had an even better view of his shapely dark-stockinged legs and the dark garters he wore.

With the excuse of visiting and 'old family friend' who was needless to say very sick, Robert and 'Ava' put on a display of conjugal happiness and affections that Robert didn't want to stop even when the reporters had left. In fact, he drew Andy closer to him and began to kiss and pet in a frenzied manner which had never happened between them before.

"Oh, Bob, please. I'll try. . .," said Andy, trying to take his hands to push them away, but 'her' husband was persistent. He pushed Andy down on the sofa and easily held him there. His lips found Andy's and he even seemed to be enjoying the struggle that he was putting up.

With Jean upstairs and Dr. Aaronson probably awake as well, Andy didn't want to shout. "Just relax dear," Robert whispered. "Just act. . .act like my wife. That's all I ask. . .just what you'd do with some leading man in a film."

With some reluctance, Andy began to return the passionate kisses being poured onto his mouth and cheeks, and then down to his neck.

Robert held her even more tightly about the waist, pressing their bodies closely together. Andy put his arms around Robert's neck and held him lightly. . .like a wife. Robert did care about him deeply. . .maybe he'd been too puritanical about being touched.

When Robert became engrossed enough that his hands were smoothing Andy's skirt and pressing the soft hem of the nylon panties against him, he pushed hard and sud-

denly he was free. As Andy scampered from the room, tripping as the thin strapped high heels snagged in the carpet, he heard his 'husband' laughing. Not his usual harsh, raucous laugh, but the honest laughter of someone ruling the fact that he's been taken advantage of, by someone as clever as himself.

"You'll change, my darling," Robert laughed. "I'll make you forget you were ever a man."

• • •

Under great protest, she did the scene. She had to re-do it several times. She was unable to look into the camera, sultrily push back her mass of blonde hair, and allow the man to open the back zipper of the tight dress. She was even able to kiss him and left him run his hands down her body, slipping the silk dress away from her.

She was able to stand in front of him, push him onto the bed, and slide out of the black, silk slip in her most seductive manner. She could raise her leg and slip off her black high heel, ever so slowly. She could even let the man undo her garter and take off her stocking. She did the other, caressing her leg as she did so. She could sit with her back turned to him while he released her bra, but then it became very difficult.

As he kissed her, she had to remove the bra and let the camera and crew take a full view of her breasts. She had to hand away the pair of black lace panties as she took them off. Her only clothing left was a flesh colored bikini that covered her greatest of secrets.

Whenever the man's hand touched either of her breasts, she jumped or quivered and the scene was ruined. As for the thirty seconds of caress that the take called for, it was clear that it was going to take many attempts to get such onto film.

The only hope was to get used to what was happening and still act while terrified.

• • •

"It'll be all right, darling," Jean said to Andy as they laid together at the end of another frustrating day of

filming on what the papers were calling the most 'explosive' film of the decade to be shot in Hollywood.

"I don't think I can bear it," said Andy. He was still in the dark pleated dress that he had worn to the studio that morning. "And he always tries to French kiss me too!"

Jean reached over in sympathy and pulled Andy towards her. They embraced easily. Jean caressed Andy's feminized waist and put one hand beneath his skirt, slipping between his thighs. Andy began to giggle most femininely but pulled his wife closer to encourage her to continue.

"He told that columnist," Jean said as she released her husband's dress zipper, "That he couldn't let anyone else do that to his wife in public. Is he any good otherwise?"

"As an actor, he's terrific," said Andy. "He's turning this into his picture, but he flubs the scenes deliberately, he doesn't care about going over budget, just so that he can spend more time feeling me."

"Poor Bob," Jean breathed, slipping the bra from her husband's breasts. "Fancy having to become an actor again just to touch you like this." Her hands caressed the beautiful breasts. She was glad he liked such feminine things like garter belts, and frilly panties. "Where is Robert taking you tonight?"

"It's some big fancy award party," Andy began to giggle. "Robert wanted me to ask if you wanted to go. . . That director keeps asking if you'll go out with him again."

"I'll pass tonight," Jean said. "You know that Robert would like nothing better than to 'find me a man,' and get me out of the way."

"I know," Andy admitted blushing feeling his wife play with the hem of his panties. "I do get a little jealous when we double-date but I really shouldn't. . . after all, you put up with all this."

Jean reached over and dimmed the light. "Let's not talk about him anymore tonight, darling. I have all the 'man' I want right here in these frilly panties." Jean continued to caress her lady-like husband. She treated him like what he appeared, a sexy woman---that always brought out the male in him. She whispered, "A beautiful woman like you has to expect to be treated well by men. They'll want to

kiss you and caress you. . .you'll just have to put up with it."

Andy was already too busy with Jean, removing her clothing. Since the hormone treatment had been cut back to half, or maybe it was because of the all day wrestling matches with Bob Cort, he couldn't get enough time in bed with Jean.

After he was through here, he would have to dress in some fantastic, sexy gown---definitely feminine and glamorous, just so her 'husband' could show him off to the rest of the film community. But then since everyone wanted him to be a beautiful woman, he's just have to get used to what beautiful women put up with. It was getting easier all the time.

The End

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