

# The Lab Rat



**Jessica Matthews**

An "Adult Tv" Novel

## **Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers**

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# The Lab Rat

by Jessica Matthews

Linda and Martina found George in the postgraduate bar. 'I just heard,' Linda said, hugging him tightly. 'You didn't get into the research programme this year. But don't give up; it's not the end of the world. You might get a research post next year.'

'I don't think I'll be here to try,' George replied. 'I've run out of money, and by next year, there'll be another crop of enthusiastic graduates competing for the same few posts anyway, and I'll be a year out of date.'

'Don't be so pessimistic.' Linda clung onto him. 'I've got faith in you. Think of all the plans we've made.'

'I hate to feel that I've let you down.' George and Linda had planned their careers together, moving up the academic ladder as a unit. 'You've got a place for next year. I can't hang around and be a burden, especially when I can't contribute much.'

'Why George, I need you.' Linda's eyes filled with tears. 'I don't want to lose you.'

'And I don't want to go, but there are things we can't control. I think we should be prepared for plans to change.'

‘I’m not losing you!’ Linda held onto George’s hand with a look of desperation. ‘We’re going camping next week, and we’re not going to talk about anything like this until we’re back and everything has been tried.’

‘You know I love you, Linda. You know I want to build our lives together, but I’m not going to hold you back. I’ll go and see the professor again and grovel and beg if I have to, but there must be something I can do here.’

‘That’s more like it! Now take me home.’

‘I think you kids had better hold on,’ Martina said. ‘You’ve been the most beautiful couple ever since you arrived here. I remember when you moved in together. That tiny apartment you had off campus. If you could survive there, you’ll survive anywhere.’

‘If only I could be on my way towards tenure like you.’ George smiled wistfully. ‘I want to give Linda so much. It’s a bit hard to see where we go right now.’

‘I’ll give it some thought,’ Martina said. ‘Ask around.’

‘I’d be happy to take anything, even a lab rat’s job to stay on.’

‘There must be something.’ Linda brightened. ‘Every research lab has to have a few lab rats.’

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A week or so later after the camping trip, there was a message on the answering machine when Linda came out of the gym: ‘Hi Linda. Could you call me or drop round to my office when you get this message. I think I may have found something for George, but I’m not sure he’s going to like it and I wanted to talk to you first. Love you both, Martina; and you know my number.’

‘I’m so glad you came round,’ Martina said as she and Linda settled into a booth in the coffee shop later that day. ‘I was dreading trying to explain this on the telephone.’

‘That sounds really mysterious.’ Linda’s eyes widened with anticipation. ‘You might as well tell me

straight. What isn't George going to like? If it's something that allows him to stay with the University, I'm sure he'll be so pleased.'

'Well, I'm not so sure, and I don't want to mention it to him without talking to you first,' Martina said. 'It's a behavioural research project, with funding that isn't entirely clear. They need a lab rat with some qualifications in psychology, behavioural science, or some related field.'

'You're making it a little spooky.' Linda laughed.

'Maybe it *is* spooky,' Martina said softly. 'But there's a guarantee of a scholarship once the programme is completed.'

'I'm sure George would jump at that!'

'So am I. And that's why I wanted to speak to you before I breathe a word of this to him.'

'So come on, tell me. What are you not saying?'

'Are you ready for this? Here goes. They want a boy with a certain set of characteristics. George would fit them. They want to change his appearance so that he looks and sounds like a girl. When they've done that, they want to send him out into the world and watch how he adapts or fails to adapt. He'll have set objectives, and be required to provide a written account of each stage as the programme develops. He'll get no direct help from the programme director or any of the staff, but they will provide basic necessities.'

'What kind of basics?'

'I'm not altogether sure, but a basic income, somewhere to live, and a car was mentioned. There was some suggestion of a clothing allowance as well. And I think any candidate would be able to negotiate extra benefits.'

'He'll like the car, but it's a bit much to take in.' Linda sat back. 'I can understand how they might want to study behaviour, but I can't understand who would fund it.'

'Or who would be a volunteer for the programme.'

'You said George would fit the characteristics. How would he?'

‘He’s the right age, the right build, and has the relevant qualifications. His sexuality is known, and he has no adverse markers like prejudices, religious or political activism. In short, he’s as clean a lab rat as they could wish for, provided—’

‘Provided what?’

‘Provided that he’s willing to go along with the programme, and that he accepts all the conditions, and he’s willing to undergo a little modification to fit in.’

‘Don’t make me ask too many questions.’ Linda sighed. ‘Just tell me the worst.’

‘He’ll have to accept some minor and reversible cosmetic changes to alter his appearance, otherwise the whole experiment fails before it starts. He has to be believable in his altered role so that the research makes valid observations.’

‘I don’t think he’ll like the cosmetic changes bit.’

‘Oh, it’s not that special, just some hair removal, a bit of dentistry, maybe hair colouring, nails; nothing permanent and nothing that we don’t go through every week. Think of it as us girls getting our own back on a man.’

‘I like that interpretation.’ Linda laughed. ‘Will he have to do hobble skirts and six inch heels too?’

‘I’ve no doubt it could be arranged,’ Martina replied. ‘I know the professor in charge.’

\* \* \* \* \*

‘So that’s the programme.’ Martina handed a sheaf of papers to George. ‘It’s a bit unusual, and quite demanding. You’d be both the subject of the experiment and the reporter too.’

‘I remember some years ago, a researcher stained his skin from white to black, to write about the differences in attitude he experienced,’ George said. ‘I guess I could do the same. I’m not clear about how much they intend to change me physically though.’

‘I don’t think that’s been finalised. They didn’t think they’d get the funding or find a subject, so I think there’s a lot of the programme which is open to alteration and negotiation as it goes along.’

‘Think of it like going into space.’ Linda said. ‘You’re going on a journey into the unknown.’

‘Now you’re just being silly.’ George laughed.

‘Not really.’ Martina said. ‘It’s something which people have done before, masqueraded as the opposite sex, but this is a different angle. Your behaviour will have to change in reaction to your changed appearance and people’s expectations of you. You’ll have to work hard to avoid being found out. You’ll have to be really careful in some situations too.’

‘It’s a challenge,’ Linda said.

‘But I haven’t even applied yet,’ George said. ‘I’ll have to read through all these conditions and be sure I know what I’m letting myself in for.’

‘But you’ll do it, I know you will,’ Linda replied. ‘You want that guaranteed scholarship at the end more than anything.’

‘Yes, I’m desperate to stay in the university. I need that scholarship if I’m going to progress.’ George pulled out a sheaf of papers. ‘I got the application forms here.’

‘What? They’re not online.’

‘No, the lady in the office explained that they didn’t want applications from all over the place. They’re only issuing forms to people within the university itself, with the right qualifications. I have the academic qualifications, but I have to pass a medical if I’m selected.’

‘We’d better make a start then,’ Linda said. ‘When do they have to be in?’

‘As soon as possible.’ George replied. ‘They ask some very personal questions. I’m a bit scared to give so much personal information.’

‘You shouldn’t be,’ Linda assured him. ‘Think about it. They want to start with a clean subject, a neutral. They don’t want someone whose hobby is entering beauty competitions.’

‘Why ever not? Surely they’d be ideal?’ George asked.

‘No, they would be entirely wrong,’ Linda replied. ‘Remember what Martina said. They want to change you and then see how you adapt in various situations. They don’t want someone who has a good idea of how to act anyway. That would give an entirely false picture and spoil the results.’

‘I understand,’ George said. ‘But I’ll have to do forms alone. I think there are too many personal questions about things since I was a young teenager.’

‘And even though we’ve been together for the past year, you don’t want me knowing your secrets.’ Linda laughed. ‘It’s all right with me. Your past is a deep and dark secret, never to be revealed.’

‘I’ll fill them in tomorrow, and hand them in to the office as soon as I’ve done them,’ George said. ‘Now, where was I talking you for dinner?’

\* \* \* \* \*

‘I wonder what it will be like to have a girlfriend,’ Linda said as George’s hand started early morning wandering while they lay together.

‘It will still be *me*, even if I’m selected,’ George said, sliding down the bed, his tongue flicking across her stomach as he moved further. ‘And why are you asking that question?’

‘I was wondering if I should ask Martina. You know: get a little girl-on-girl practise in so that I’m ready for the new you.’ Linda stopped talking and moaned softly as his tongue found a special spot.

Then the alarm rang. George abruptly got up.

‘That’s not fair!’ Linda complained.

‘You’re right,’ George agreed, ‘but I’d better get these forms completed and handed in.’

‘I still don’t understand why it’s on paper and not online.’

‘I’ve read the forms and the questions they ask,’ George said. ‘I’m not sure I’d like to put all this information online.’

‘So you do have secrets.’

‘Whatever; it’s just better not going online. Now I’m going to get into the library, look up a few things, and get the forms handed in.’

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A couple of hours after George handed in the forms, his cell phone rang. ‘Is that George?’ a cultured, feminine, accented voice asked. ‘This is Professor Zenakis. I’ve received your forms and wondered if you’d come to my office for interview tomorrow morning.’

‘Does that mean I’m in with a chance?’

‘I can’t say, but I’d like to meet you.’ The professor gave directions to her room. ‘I’ll see you at ten.’

Some hours later, George was sitting with Linda and Martina having coffee in one of the shops on the mall nearby.

‘I’m not sure what I’ve let myself in for,’ he said. ‘Maybe it’s a bad idea after all?’

‘Don’t back out without even trying,’ Linda said. ‘It’s your chance for the scholarship next year.’

‘You can’t give up,’ Martina joined in. ‘It may be the chance of a lifetime. You’d get a publication out of it and who knows where that might take you.’

‘Straight to the mental institution,’ George said. ‘I think I must have been mad to apply. I can’t see myself living as a girl for however long this stupid project takes.’

‘We live as girls all the time,’ Martina snapped back. ‘What’s wrong with that? Are you superior? Can’t you do it?’

‘Okay, I was only saying—’ George said limply.

‘Just go for it,’ Linda said. ‘No more doubts, just do it. I really think you should, if only because I’ve never heard of anything like it before.’

‘Yes, think of the income, the expenses paid, the car, not to mention the scholarship after the project,’ Martina added. ‘I’ve never seen such a generous offer before.’

\* \* \* \* \*

Full of trepidation, George crossed the campus well before the appointed hour, to find the professor’s door locked in a seemingly empty building. He wandered aimlessly around, and watched as he waited. At ten past the hour, he saw a woman approach the door, unlock the keypad and enter. Her waited a few moments and then knocked on the door.

He entered. The office was larger than he expected, with not only a desk but a conference table and soft seating area beside a balcony, with a view of the countryside around the campus. This was clearly a more prestigious office than those he had been in during his undergraduate years.

‘You must be George.’ She held out her hand for him to shake. ‘I’m Anna Zanoukis. I know I don’t look like a Zanoukis, but grandfather came from Greece.’ She was a short blonde lady, with blue eyes and seemingly bundled-up energy, dressed all in black, with bangles that jingled as she shook his hand. ‘Yes, I’m George,’ he said lamely.

‘We’ll have coffee and then we can relax and talk through your application and the project as a whole,’ she said. ‘Let’s sit on the balcony and then we can get to know each other.’ She took his arm as they took seats in the sunshine. After the coffee machine buzzed, she brought two cups with cream and sugar.

‘It’s an unusual project,’ George started hesitantly.

‘Yes, it is, and that’s why it needs a special person to carry it forward,’ Anna replied. ‘I didn’t realise how difficult it would be to find someone when I started, but here you are.’

‘Am I the first candidate?’

‘No. But looking at your application forms and your appearance, you could be the right one.’

‘My appearance?’

‘Appearance is really important. This is a serious piece of research, but I do need someone who is going to look the part. You’re a little chubby for what I had in mind, but I’m sure with a bit of diet and exercise you could meet the targets. Without giving away secrets, I thought your application forms and now your appearance make you the strongest candidate. Tell me: have you a girlfriend?’

‘I do, she’s Linda, and she’s the one who encouraged me to apply for this.’

‘And she’ll support you? She does realise that you’ll be looking and acting like a girl throughout this project?’

‘I think she knows what to expect. We have discussed it. We read the description of the project together.’

‘Okay. Now, you know we’re going to change your appearance, and we require you to comply with that change and not to cheat for the duration of the project.’

‘Cheat?’

‘Once we decide you’re feminine, you stay feminine in dress, speech, behaviour, and the rest for the duration. No sneaking back into being one of the boys, wherever you are, and whoever you’re with.’

‘No—no of course not,’ George stammered. ‘I wouldn’t cheat, as it would negate the whole project. I have to admit that I really want the scholarship at the end.’

Anna smiled and shuffled the papers on her desk. ‘We may be able to let you start the scholarship early if all goes to plan,’ she said. ‘First I need you to sign these papers, and then the doctor should be ready to give you your physical.’

‘There’s a lot of reading here.’ George flipped through the papers he’d been handed. ‘What does it all mean?’

‘It means you consent to being on the programme, and that you agree to comply with whatever needs, demands or instructions follow. You know the basic idea anyway.’

‘Yes, you’re going to make me look like a girl and then measure how I react and people around me react. It’s a bit more complicated than that, I’m sure, but that’s the basic idea.’

‘Right, and if you’re happy with that, sign and we’ll get on. It may be that part of my programme could be completed as you start on the scholarship programme. That’s a good place to measure social interaction later in the programme.’ She smiled and handed him a pen.

George signed, and returned the papers to her. ‘I’ll put a copy in your email,’ she said, putting the papers into her desk drawer. ‘Now it’s time for your physical examination. It’s room 442 in the medical block. I’ll call and let them know you’re on the way.’

\* \* \* \* \*

‘They were really expecting me,’ George told Linda that evening. ‘I had everything measured and recorded. They gave me a sedative for some of the tests, and I remember an injection.’

‘It’s good you’re not afraid of needles.’

‘I never have been. And they told me to run every morning to get the weight down.’

‘I’ve never been able to persuade you to do that.’ Linda laughed. ‘Maybe this is going to be good for your health too?’

‘There were so many things—it was sign here, sample there, and then the measurements, far too many to understand.’

‘Did no one tell you what was going on?’

‘No, I must have fallen asleep afterwards, because the next thing I remember was a nurse telling me I could get dressed and go home. There was no one else to ask, and I still feel a little strange. Not unwell, just relaxed and spacey, if you know what I mean.’

‘Is it a bad feeling?’

‘No, rather the opposite. I feel as if there’s nothing to worry about. Everything feels good and easy.’



‘Maybe you’d better sleep it off.’

‘A good idea.’ George held out his hand to pull her up, and suddenly they were kissing like the first time. Clothes lay where they fell as they tumbled into bed.

‘I think you should go for a medical every day, if it leaves you feeling that horny,’ said. Her hand stroked his groin softly.

‘Maybe this is part of the programme,’ he said as he knelt between her legs. He pulled them up until they rested on his shoulders, and then he slowly moved towards her.

‘I can feel you,’ she whispered. ‘You’re going in the wrong way.’

‘It feels right to try,’ George said in a manner that suggested he wasn’t quite listening to her.

She felt something cold and then a finger tantalising her, slipping in and out easily. His penis followed, pushing and insisting. She moved away, afraid of the pressure. George moved with her, and then slapped her bottom hard. As she recoiled, she felt her muscles tense and relax, and then he pushed again and was in.

He held still, allowing her to get used to the intruder. He heard her breathing coming faster and saw her face tense. He pushed again and again, feeling his sac against her skin. He couldn’t stop and tried to go deeper and deeper until spasms of pleasure overtook him. Spent, he relaxed and allowed his shrinking member to be expelled. Linda sobbed.

‘I’m sorry. I really don’t know what made me do that. I know it’s what bad girls do,’ George said.

‘You don’t seem quite yourself,’ Linda said. ‘Maybe it’s because of all the stress you’ve had today.’

‘I have to see the programme psychologist tomorrow.’ George replied. ‘I’ll ask—’ He didn’t finish the sentence as he fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

George knocked on Professor Zenakis’s door, and entered.

‘I hope yesterday wasn’t too much of an ordeal.’ Anna said as she kissed him warmly on both cheeks. ‘And how’s our little girl today?’

‘It seems so final when you say it like that.’ George blushed.

‘It’s what you’ve signed up to do,’ she replied sharply. ‘It’s too late to have second thoughts.’

‘I know, I wasn’t thinking of that. It simply hit me as you said it.’

‘No problem.’ She took his arm and they sat on easy chairs. ‘Today we’re going to show you the accommodation we’ve reserved for our programme, and get some basic administration sorted out. If we’ve time, we’ll start your transformation too.’

‘Transformation?’ George asked.

‘Naturally,’ Anna replied. ‘It’s got to be done quickly and completely, before you’ve time to make mental pre-adjustments. This is an exercise in immersion and then in learned behaviour. I gather you didn’t read all the programme notes.’

‘I don’t remember seeing any programme notes.’

‘I’ll see you get another set.’

The door opened after a soft tap. ‘Sorry I’m late.’ A lady walked in and greeted Anna in a familiar way. She turned to George. ‘I’m Judith, your psychologist,’ she said, holding out her hand.

‘Judith will be taking you through all the formalities and basic routines,’ Anna said. ‘She’ll be your main contact for the next few weeks. I’ll leave you two together.’

‘Just a couple of calls and then we’re on our way,’ Judith announced, taking her phone and talking urgently to some assistant.

George allowed his mind to wander. What had he let himself in for? *Transformation*, she said. He wondered what sort of girl they’d change him into. Would she be pretty or plain, confident or quiet?

He thought of what he knew. They weren't going to change *him*, only his appearance. He'd agreed to it all. It felt scary.

'Come on.' Judith patted him on the shoulder. 'You were miles away.'

'I was daydreaming,' George replied. 'I have no idea what I've let myself in for.'

'Does it matter? You're in for the ride now, wherever it takes you.'

They walked across to another office, smaller this time, but with shades drawn so that it was subdued and peaceful. There were easy chairs, and throw rugs in muted colours. George flopped, rather than sat, in one Judith indicated, as she walked to the desk and pulled out an iPad.

'I checked the readings from your medical yesterday, and it's all perfect. You're an inch taller than our theoretical target, and a few pounds heavier. We can change that, though, with a bit of exercise and diet. Your physical shape is well within the parameters we set, so I think a couple of weeks work on the weight should be sufficient for us to start in earnest.'

'That's good.' George nodded. 'What do I have to do in the couple of weeks, apart from lose some weight?'

'Laser hair removal is the first thing. We can't have a bearded lady or a girl with a moustache. You're to be treated every day, weekends included, until you're completely free of male facial hair. Your appointment is set for nine, and on weekdays you'll come to my office as soon as you can after treatment.'

'But I don't have to shave every day.'

'And after this you won't need to shave at all.'

'When do I get my apartment?' George asked. 'I have to give notice on the student rooms I'm in.'

'You can't move into your accommodation until you're presenting as female, but I can show you around today after we've conducted a couple more tests. If you have your bank details, I'll arrange your signing on bonus and future payments into your account. I can show you the type of loan car we'll be pro-

viding, but again, it won't be delivered until you start girlhood.'

'It's too good to be true.' George couldn't help himself. 'Do I have to stay in my new accommodation all the time?'

'No, you're a young woman for the duration of this project. We expect you to have friends, and a social life. I think you mentioned that you have a girlfriend. All you have to do is present as a girl all the time once we start. There's no sneaking back into boy mode allowed, and it's probably not going to be possible anyway.'

'Not possible?' George asked.

'Oh, don't mind the phrase. You'll be having so much fun, you won't notice after a few months.'

'I guess you know what you're doing.' George hesitated to voice his doubts. 'A few months?'

'Well the programme doesn't have an end date,' Judith said. 'We don't know where it's going to take our research, so as long as the funding is there, we'll carry on. You read the options clause in your contract of course?'

'Options? No, I don't remember.'

'Basically, it says you're with us for a year minimum after the programme commences, and the professor can require you to carry on for a maximum of five years, with an escalator clause for your fees. There's a dispute process outlined if you disagree and terms can't be agreed.'

'Five years is a long time,' George said.

'It is, but with a budget such as this project has, I think you'll be sad if it ends—but that's a long way in the future. Let's get down to today's business. Here's the plan for your apartment. You can see it's in the campus, but on the top floor of the new building beside Grogan College.'

'That looks far more than I could afford.' George looked over the plans.

'Parking is in the basement, and you get the use of the gym and pool on site. You'll enjoy it. You can take

the plans with you. Oh, I nearly forgot. You have a nail appointment at three this afternoon.'

'I have a nail appointment?' George tucked the plans into his pocket.

'Stop being a parrot.' Judith laughed. 'Yes, a nail appointment. The professor wanted you to have something girlish today, as a sign of commitment or as a sign of what's coming. You can call it either way. And don't look so shocked. You're having a French manicure with small extensions, nothing too adventurous. You'll know it's there, but a casual observer might never notice. There are far more exotic things for you to choose later.'

'Okay, I guess I'll find out later.'

'So down to today's session.' Judith came and sat across from him. 'I want to go through a few visualisations with you, to help you into the role you're undertaking. They're designed to increase your confidence, and reduce any anxiety reflex as you go about your day-to-day activities.'

'That seems a great idea,' George said. 'I don't really know what I'm going to be doing.'

'Let's help you with that.' Judith dimmed the lights and started to talk softly. 'Imagine you're used to being a girl. You're relaxing in a warm comfortable place. Everything's going so well.....'

Judith continued to talk softly as George relaxed into the images she was creating for him. His eyes closed and the room seemed to fade away. He knew she was still talking, but it seemed so natural now, so peaceful, and he allowed himself to drift away. When she told him to sleep, it seemed the natural thing to do, as she took him through his nail appointment this afternoon, then further and further into the future, with images of pleasure and warmth.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Hi guys.' George kept his hands in his pockets as he joined Linda and Martina in their favourite diner, after his nail appointment was done.

The girls looked at each other and then, together, at George. Martina broke the silence. 'So tell us about your day. You don't look any different.'

'It's not been that sort of day. It was all administrative stuff, a bit of psychology stuff, and I've got to lose a few pounds in the next two weeks. I have a diet sheet, and an exercise plan, but with the schedule they've given me, I don't know how I'm going to fit it all in.'

'Did you get the car?' Linda asked.

'The car comes with the accommodation when I move in.'

'And that's when you officially become female?' Martina asked.

'I'm not becoming female!' George protested, unwittingly removing his hands from his pockets and gesturing with them. 'I just have to look as if I am.'

'Your nails!' Linda took his hand. 'They're beautiful. I want some like that, only longer.' Martina took his hand and inspected them too.

'It's a token,' George said. 'Judith, the psychologist, said I had to have something changed today. She said no one would notice—but you did immediately.'

'But they're beautifully done,' Linda said. 'You must love them.'

'It's a bit scary. I don't know what to do, other than keep my hands in my pockets—but I've just failed to do that.'

'I'm sure if you act normally and confidently, no one will notice,' Linda said. 'We noticed because we were expecting something, and looking. No one else knows what you're doing, and so they won't see what we've seen.'

'I suppose that makes sense in some way or other.' George put both hands on the table in front of him.

'And you can prove it by going to get our drinks from the bar,' Martina said with a smile.

He looked at one, then the other. Martina shrugged and indicated with her hands that he should be going. Reluctantly he stood and pushed both hands deep into

his pockets. He paused and then took his hands out of his pocket, his wallet from his jeans, and walked to the bar.

They watched as he was served and carried their drinks back. 'Well?' Linda asked.

'No, no one seemed to notice a thing.'

He was so conscious of his nails as he unfolded the apartment plans to show them. By the time they'd pored over the plans and asked questions, he'd forgotten all about his nails.

\* \* \* \* \*

After ten, as he walked from the laser treatment, he reached the main block where he had his next appointment.

'Today we're going to do a little more visualisation, and then afterwards you've an appointment at the dentist,' Judith said as George settled into her office the next morning.

'I couldn't afford the dentist,' George replied. 'But I don't think I have any problems.'

'I'm sure you're right, but the programme includes a lovely set of teeth for the girlish smile.' Judith smiled in a way that George thought might be teasing, but then maybe not. 'Did anyone notice your hands?'

'My girlfriend did almost at once, and her friend too. I think they were searching for something anyway.'

'Are they supporting you in the programme?' Judith asked.

'Yes, they saw the project being advertised and encouraged me to apply. I haven't dared to say anything to anyone else. I've avoided talking to the guys, but most of them have graduated and left anyway.'

'It's good that you have some support.' Judith came and sat opposite him again, dimming the lights as she passed the controls. 'Do you live together?'

'Not quite.' George answered. 'I'm there most nights, but we haven't moved in together properly. She's cool

with me taking the accommodation you've planned for the project.'

'Because we'd like you to live there doesn't mean you can't have friends over to stay. We expect you to socialise and have friends just as you've been doing up to now.'

'Maybe not with the same guys from the tennis club and the football team.' George smiled.

'Maybe they wouldn't understand,' Judith agreed. 'But you're free to associate with anyone at all, and there's no block on what you say or who you tell. The only rules are about your appearance and dress.'

'I understand that. It's something I've been trying to get my head around.'

'Okay, I think that's an area we can work on today in these visualisations. Do you remember how we started yesterday, and how you found it so easy to relax into your feminine form? I want to take you back there. Take some deep breaths and relax, deeper breaths, slowly, and deeper relaxation. You may close your eyes if you wish, if you feel comfortable and relaxed.'

Once again, the room seemed to fade away. George listened, and then didn't listen. Maybe he didn't understand he was listening, absorbing all the details and scenarios that Judith was taking him through.

Judith watched him too. She knew she was skilled, and could talk most of her subjects into a trance-like state. She stayed slow and even, as she took him deeper, describing how he would dress as a woman, about makeup and hair, heels and hose, perfume, and the power a woman can have over a man simply by being feminine.

She noticed nothing to suggest her suggestions weren't being absorbed comfortably. She watched him breathing contentedly and resisted the temptation to play a little with him, to test how and if he was really in trance.

\* \* \* \* \*

George awoke. Judith wasn't there any more. He wondered where he was; then he remembered he was in the dentist's office. His tongue felt furry, and there was a strange taste in his mouth.

'It's all over,' the dentist assured him. 'We had no problems. I'm sure you'll be delighted when you see the result.'

George took some water and rinsed his mouth. 'Thanks, doctor,' he said. He coughed.

'I'm not speaking easily, doctor,' he said. 'Is that normal? My voice sounds higher than it should.'

'Oh, that's nothing to worry about. It's a small extra procedure that I was asked to do for you. It should raise the pitch of your voice slightly, and there'll be no pain. That bit of discomfort you've noticed will be over in an hour or so.'

'No one told me about that one,' he complained.

'It was on my notes for your treatment today.'

'I've no doubt it was, doctor. I'll say thank you graciously. You've been very kind and gentle with me.'

'Of course.' The doctor replied. 'If you'd like to sit with my receptionist, she'll look after you.'

'Do you like your new teeth?' the receptionist asked. 'I think they look really beautiful.'

George looked in the mirror. A full, even set of pure white and feminine teeth smiled back at him. 'Yes, I'm amazed,' he said. 'But I wasn't told this was scheduled at all.'

\* \* \* \* \*

'Good morning, George.' Judith greeted him as he was walking towards the building which contained her office. 'Did anyone tell you that you have a lovely smile?'

‘Yes, in the laser salon.’ George replied. ‘All the staff came to look as if I was a zoo exhibit.’

‘The price of beauty is often high.’ Judith grinned.

‘What have you in store for me today?’

‘I thought we could start with some more visualisations. I’m finding that you can relax so easily when we do them, which surprises me because all of this must be so stressful, especially as you think of what’s to come in the next few months.’

‘I hadn’t thought of it as stressful, although I’m sure my first weeks appearing as a girl will be really weird,’ George said. ‘And I’m not really listening to the visualisations. I seem to drift away and dream through them.’

‘That’s excellent.’ Judith said. ‘It means that your unconscious mind is processing them internally. We’ll see if we can take that further.’

George didn’t have the heart to tell her that he didn’t really understand what she was explaining, and simply agreed that it would be a good idea. ‘Are there any other surprises for me today?’

‘How strange you should ask.’ Judith smiled. ‘I think it’s body waxing this afternoon.’

‘That hurts!’ George blurted out. ‘Not that I’ve been there—but I’ve heard the girls talking.’

‘It’s something we girls have to get used to. You’re no exception—and you’ll get used to it quite easily.’

‘I wonder if I’ve bitten off more than I can chew.’

‘Oh, come on, admit it. You’re excited by the idea of playing the girl’s part. You want to know what it feels like.’

‘Yes, you’re right,’ George admitted. ‘It’s only been a few days, but I find myself getting impatient to get started properly.’

‘The secret is thorough preparation. That’s what we’re doing now. The better we prepare you, the easier it’s going to be in the future.’

‘But I thought I was to go into this with *no* real preparation.’

‘That’s true; you’re going to have to work out virtually everything for yourself, but we want you to *look* like a girl from the start. We don’t want you to be a figure of fun, or exposed to ridicule. That would end the experiment before it starts.’

The visualisation session was over before George realised that it had started. ‘Is that it?’ He asked.

‘You drifted away almost the second we started.’ Judith said. ‘Don’t tell me that you can’t remember anything.’

‘Nothing really.’ George thought some more. ‘I do have a picture of the girl I want to be, though. It’s not clear, but I see me as fashionable and outgoing, enjoying being a girl, with hair and makeup, dresses and heels. Is that silly?’

‘No, it’s good that you can do that. These sessions must be working for you to have such a clear picture. I’m impressed that you can see the fun side of being a girl.’

‘And today is the hair removal shop.’

‘Yes, but it’s a beauty salon, or simply a salon. It’s never a *shop*. You’ll enjoy the pampering today. It may hurt a little, but the rest of the treatment is wonderful.’

‘I’ll believe you. Where do we go?’

‘You’re on your own today. It’s the salon across campus, near your new apartment. There’s only one in the mall there, you can’t miss it. You’d better run; they’re expecting you in about fifteen minutes.’

George complied. He caught a glimpse of himself reflected in the shop windows as he approached the salon. There was something about his walk, and the way he held his hands and arms. His head was held high, and he saw that his hips were swaying and his chest was held forwards. ‘I’m walking like a girl. How do I know how to do that?’ he thought. ‘It must be the visualisation sessions, but I don’t remember anything about this.’

He entered the salon. ‘You’re here for the full body wax,’ Alicia said, examining his arms. ‘You don’t look too hairy, so this might not be the endurance test you’ve no doubt been warned about.’

I'm sure you'll be a gentle as you can,' George replied.

'Naturally, I'll do my best. Now go behind the screen and strip off. Don't worry; I've seen it all before.'

George complied, and soon was lying nude on her bench. The initial shock as the wax was applied and the hairs pulled off made him jump, but wasn't as bad as he had feared.

'We have to suffer to be beautiful,' Alicia said, smoothing more wax onto his leg. Methodically and quickly, she removed all his body hair until she came to his private parts.

'Now, this is going to hurt,' she warned as she clipped away the longer hairs. His penis rose as she moved it from side to side. 'I'll deal with that,' she said teasingly, and applied some body oil before stroking him to a climax. 'There, that wasn't so bad,' she said as she wiped away the evidence. 'Now, no apologies.'

George winced as she pulled away the hairs from such a sensitive area. It was repeated several times until he believed it must be raw and bleeding. It wasn't, and when he was massaged with soothing lotions, he sighed with relief.

He dressed slowly, enjoying the sensation of clothes against his hairless skin for the first time, and wondered why he hadn't done this before. He looked at the time, sent a text, and arranged to meet Linda at their favourite restaurant for dinner.

\* \* \* \* \*

'I can't believe it's really you!' Linda said as they slipped into a booth. 'You look the same, but there such a difference.'

'Nothing's really changed,' George replied.

'There's so much changed,' she said. 'I know you're wearing the same clothes, and look the same, but it's your walk, your posture, your body language. Yes, you're still George, but it's as if there's a whole new *you* waiting to get out.'

'You do talk nonsense sometimes,' George said lightly.

'No, there are changes. Linda took his hands across the table. 'Look, a few days ago you were hiding these nails, now it's as if you've had nails like this forever, and when you're smiling—oh my; you've had your teeth veneered. They look fabulous. Look, there's Martina over there, I'll call her over and ask what she thinks.'

George was about to ask her not to, but it was too late and Martina joined them. Linda repeated what she'd told George about his changes.

Martina looked at him. 'You are really different. It's your aura,' she said. 'I can't place it, but it's not the same as it was. What have they done to you?'

'They've done nothing really,' George replied. 'You've seen my nails, then they arranged for me to have my teeth fixed, and today I've had a body wax.'

But your posture is different,' Martina said. 'It's something I can't identify, but you seem different. Your voice is softer and your, your—I can't describe how different you are.'

'I'm truly just the same,' George insisted. 'Let's change the subject.'

'I bet he'd make a beautiful bride,' Martina said sarcastically. George pulled out his tongue.

'I see what you mean,' Linda said. 'Weeks ago he'd have been sarcastic back, now he pulls out his tongue like a girl.'

'Stop it!' George laughed with them.

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'I do like the feel of you,' Linda said later as they lay together. 'It's a nice sensation feeling your skin like that.'

'I didn't know how you'd react,' George admitted. 'They sent me for a body wax today, and I don't think there's a hair between my eyebrows and my toes.'

‘I know, and I can feel it. You must stay like this, I mean even after this project is over and you’re back to being a boy again.’

‘I’ll have to think about that,’ George replied. ‘You heard what Martina said; you said it too. There’s something different about me. I’m not conscious of changes, but today as I walked past some shops, I could see something different in my reflection. I couldn’t describe it and I can’t now. It registered on me though.’

‘Oh shut up, and do what you’re here to do to me.’ Linda kissed him and they tumbled together as if it was all brand new.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘I’ve nothing scheduled for today,’ Judith announced as they sat in her office. ‘It’s a review day, and we’ve little to review.’

Is that good?’ George asked.

‘It is. Your weight is dropping, and I know you’ve not had time for much exercise, so it must be the diet.’

‘It’s easy to follow. I’m deliberately being careful,’ George replied.

‘The laser clinic reports that your hair growth is controlled and suggests weekly sessions rather than daily. Does that agree with what you feel?’

‘I didn’t have a lot of beard, and now I don’t think I have any. It’s a relief, really; no more shaving rashes.’

‘That’s probably because they’re taking care of your skin. You will have to get into your own skin care routine.’

‘How will I remember?’

‘It’ll be second nature, and you’ll be putting on and taking off makeup every day, possibly several times a day.’

‘Okay, so what’s listed for next week? I think I’m getting a little impatient with all the preparations.’

‘To fail to prepare is to prepare to fail,’ Judith said sternly. ‘There’s a lot of investment in this project, and we have to get it right.’

‘I’m not sure what it’s intended to prove, or to demonstrate.’

‘But dear boy, you’re the lab rat in this experiment. You’re not meant to know. Your task is to behave as you will in the circumstances we create, and which we will monitor.’

‘Oh. I’m sorry I asked.’

‘Don’t take offence. I was a little harsh. I understand your wish to progress, but there are a few things to do before we unleash your inner girl on the world. Maybe in a week or so your weight will be down to target, and we can start on hair and makeup lessons. You can start regular appointments with the hairdresser when you go into full-time girl.’

‘I thought I was to be full-time girl without any training.’

‘You were and you are. We are only making sure that you look the part.’

‘That’s okay, but my friends think I’m becoming girlish right now.’

‘It’s because they know what’s happening and they’re reading things which aren’t there. Okay, your hands are moving differently, but that’s mere adaptation to the nails, and you aren’t self-conscious about them as you were initially. And I’m sure they don’t think you’re talking differently simply because we fixed your teeth.’

‘That’s not what I meant. I can’t quantify it, and I don’t recognise the things they say are there. Am I acting differently?’

‘I think that subconsciously, with all the scenarios we’ve gone through – or rather, you’ve dozed through, there’s bound to be a little mental preparation that seeps into your daily behaviour. I don’t think it’s something that anyone would notice. I suspect your friends are teasing you a little.’

‘That could be true. I think they’re curious too, and they’re waiting to see where this takes me.’

‘So am I. I’m finding this more exciting than I expected. I wondered—seeing we’ve nothing scheduled for today, if you’d like to try something else with me.’

‘You’ll have to tell me what it is first.’

‘You have responded so completely to the visualisations that we’ve done, I think we could try some deeper exploration.’

‘You’ve got me there. I don’t know what you mean.’

‘I think you’d be an easy subject for some really deep hypnosis. I’ve some skills there and I’ve used it before, but I’ve never seen anyone more likely to respond.’

‘Does that mean you’re going to make me bark like a dog?’

‘If that’s what you want, yes, I could do that easily.’

‘Go on, then. It’s a challenge.’

‘Do you consent to being hypnotised?’

‘Yes,’ George said immediately, dismissing the tingle of fear which came with that consent.

‘Okay, sit comfortably, and we’ll start. You’re going to have real fun with this, I promise you.’ She started speaking slowly and rhythmically, slowing him down, checking and rechecking.

George relaxed visibly, and closed his eyes without any prompting. His breathing slowed and when Judith lifted his arm, it flopped back with no resistance. She told him that she was going to wake him, but on the command, he would immediately go back to sleep. She did this several times, sending him deeper and deeper each time.

It was time to test her control, and she instructed him to deny that he had been hypnotised, but that when he did, he would fall back into her trance. She did this several times and then woke him to tell him what she had done.

‘That’s not true,’ George replied. ‘I’ve never been hypnotised.’ And he fell back into trance one more.

‘On my command, you’ll wake, and every time you try to speak, you’ll bark like a dog and make other dog-

gie noises. They are the only sounds you can make from now on. Each time you'll think you're going to speak normally, but only doggie noises will come out. You'll hear them and try to correct yourself, but as you do, even more doggie noises will come out. You'll realise what is happening and that I've made you do this, just as you challenged me. You'll feel really excited and happy that it's worked. Now wake!

George blinked a couple of times and sat up attentively. 'Do you think you've been hypnotised?' Judith asked.

'Woof!' said George. He looked at Judith and nodded.

'Do you understand what's happening?'

'Woof, woof.'

'Let's try something more, then. Sleep.'

George looked for a moment; then his eyes closed and he relaxed once more.

Judith took him deeper once more, watching and waiting for his face to give her signals that he was obeying. 'This time when you wake, not only will you continue to make doggie sounds, you'll accept commands like a most obedient dog, the most obedient dog in the world. You may nod if you understand.'

George nodded, and Judith gave the command, 'Wake.' He looked round and waited.

'Sit.' Judith said. George sat half kneeling, arms forward to the floor in imitation of a dog's position. 'Good boy!' she said. George's bottom moved as if to wag a tail.

She spent a few more moments playing him as a dog, and then put him back to sleep and removed the dog commands. She allowed him to keep the memories of being made to behave as a dog, but prohibited him telling anyone about it other than her.

She played him again with different commands. 'You will behave like a rag doll, no control over limbs, just flopping everywhere, little movements but no big ones. You'll be conscious and able to talk normally, but you won't remember being hypnotised to do this.'

Once again she tested the command with his nod and then said, 'Wake.' He flopped.

'I can't sit up.' He complained. 'Did you put something in my drink?' He did exactly as he had been ordered, and flopped some more. She took him back and removed the command.

Next she stuck his bottom to the chair, so that no matter how he tried and pushed and pulled, he would remain stuck. This time, he would know that she had hypnotised him to remain so.

She woke him and sure enough, he remained stuck. Tiring of the game, and having proved that she could hypnotise him, she put him back into sleep, and told him that he would find that following her commands was easy whenever she wanted him to go back into trance.

Almost as an afterthought, she took him deeper. 'You know you are becoming a girl in appearance. You want to help the change along. There is nothing you desire more than to see yourself as a girl and behave as one through this project which you have willingly joined.'

She allowed him to nod his understanding. 'When you are released from this trance, you will have an overwhelming desire to have your ears pierced twice in each ear. This desire will hit you the next time you are out with Linda. Whatever she says, you will insist on carrying out this instruction. When you have done so, you will feel really pleased with yourself and want to wear big gold hoops in your ears to show everyone.'

George woke and smiled. 'I never realised you could do all that to me,' he said.

'I am a magician.' Judith laughed. 'It was only a bit of fun, and you did challenge me.'

'Yes, it's entirely my fault,' George agreed.

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'Have you got the weekend off?' Linda asked lazily as she stroked George's penis into life on Saturday morning.

‘Yes, I’m not going anywhere today. I’m going to stay here and do this.’

‘I wonder what it will be like when your project is running, and I have a girlfriend instead of a boyfriend?’ Linda asked. ‘It sounds gross. They’ll think I’m a lesbian or something—not that there’s anything wrong with that, but it’s just not *me*.’

‘It’s only clothes,’ George replied. ‘Stop worrying.’

‘It *isn’t* only clothes,’ Linda insisted. ‘Already your nails are better than mine, your teeth make mine look dull, and your whole manner seems changed.’

‘You’re imagining things. I’m the same as ever.’

‘Except you’ve no body hair, and you’re getting slimmer by the day.’

‘I thought you liked the smooth skin.’ George remembered their previous night together.

‘I’m a little scared about where this may be leading you.’ She stroked him harder and then climbed on top of him, taking him deeply inside her, the right way this time.

‘It’s leading me to a scholarship when the project ends. Meanwhile I get an apartment, a car and an income, plus the freedom to do whatever I want.’

‘As a girl,’ Linda said in a flat tone.

‘As someone with the outward appearance of being a girl, but it will be *me* inside the illusion. I’ll be the same.’

‘I’m not so sure. You may be on a one-way ticket.’ Linda started to move and tease him. George moaned as they set about their pleasure.

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It was mid-afternoon before they dressed and headed out for a late lunch. They passed a jewellery store and Judith’s command kicked in immediately. If George had been able to remember the command, he would have been surprised by the strength of the de-

sire it aroused in him. As it was, all he had was the desire.

‘I’m going to get my ears pierced,’ he announced.

‘But we’re going for lunch.’

‘We can do that afterwards.’ George headed into the store and waited his turn. Linda followed him. As he was about to speak to the female clerk, Linda turned and called, ‘You can catch me up. You know where I’m going.’

George waved her away; the command was stronger than any feeling he had for Linda, much as he treasured her. ‘I want my ears pierced,’ he said. ‘Two holes in each lobe, and I want some big gold hoops to go in them.’

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‘What have you done?’ Linda gasped when she saw his hoops. ‘They’re outrageous on a man.’

‘I knew you’d like them,’ said George, the instruction kicking in forcefully.

‘I’m not going to say another word,’ Linda snapped. ‘I’m going to ignore them as much as I can—but they’re really too big to ignore. Couldn’t you have got something smaller?’

‘But these were what I wanted,’ George said. ‘I think they’re just divine.’

He saw Linda’s look as soon as the word slipped from his lips. He made a mental note to ask Judith about it. His vocabulary wasn’t supposed to change, as far as he knew.

‘I’ll call Martina,’ Linda said. ‘We’ll ask her what she thinks of your new earrings.’

Linda fell silent. They ordered and ate in silence. Martina came through the door as they were drinking their coffee.

‘Mmmm, they’re certainly striking,’ she said, lifting the earrings in George’s right earlobe, ‘and heavy too.’

‘I think he’s being stupid,’ Linda said.

‘Maybe not,’ Martina replied. ‘They’re certainly too much for George, but maybe for the person he’s to be, they’ll be right.’

‘Maybe so,’ Linda acknowledged grudgingly. ‘But I wish he’d waited until after—you know, the change. And he said they were *divine*. When did he last use a word like that? It’s a bit embarrassing when your boyfriend is so obviously enjoying things which should be reserved for *us!*’

‘The feminine mystique, you mean,’ Martina said, ‘but at least we know why he’s doing it. It’s not as if his other—oh, you know—preferences were changing too.’

\* \* \* \* \*

There was something restrained about their love-making that night. Linda’s coolness remained. In her mind there was confusion and uncertainty. She knew George loved her and was faithful. If only he wasn’t becoming more girlish by the day! It was a relief to her when he decided he’d better go back to his own place for the night.

Sundays were the day when Linda went to visit with her parents. George went once every so often. He sensed they wanted someone better for their daughter. Any passing physician or nuclear scientist would do, as long as he wasn’t in the state of grubbing around for a scholarship. Usually, though, she invited him. Today she called to announce that she was going and left, without saying when she’d be back.

He changed and jogged round the park and along an old trail through the woods. He nodded to other regular joggers, the girls so fashionable in their tiny shorts and tight tops. Normally he wouldn’t have noticed what they were wearing. He’d note their breasts, as would any other red-blooded man, but he noticed other things now: how they ran, their body language. He felt so drab compared to them, in his old grey trainers and sweat shirt. Maybe he needed to smarten up.

Normally his mind would relax as he ran. The sounds and the scents of nature would calm him, but not today. Linda had been cold ever since he’d had his ears pierced. She’d never been like this before. Theirs

wasn't a difficult relationship, and they'd always been able to talk and laugh, solve problems together. She knew where the project was taking him. Maybe she wasn't prepared for the physical manifestations to come.

He wasn't going to change as a person. He was sure he'd always remain the same George that he'd always been. Linda simply needed to be more accepting and tolerant. It could all be fun, and it was for their benefit that he was trying so hard to advance his career.

He heard nothing from Linda during the remainder of the day, and slept soundly, with dreams of dancing and dresses, whirling and laughing. He tried to capture the moment when he woke, but like all such dreams, they vanished in the light of morning.

After his run, he showered and changed. He set off to walk to Judith's office. The rain started. He looked up at the grey clouds.

'It will be wonderful when I get the car to keep me dry,' he thought. 'I'll be able to go everywhere with Linda in it, and we'll have money to go places and do things together.'

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'Hi, George!' Judith greeted him with a hug and a kiss on each cheek. 'I love those earrings. You're getting into the spirit of this project really well. I'd guess you've had a great break.'

'It's been different,' George said slowly.

'Okay, we can talk about that later. You've a review meeting with Professor Zenakis in a few minutes, and then you're going to start hair and makeup lessons. I can see your weight has dropped, so the wardrobe people can set up your apartment with a basic range of clothes, but with your allowance, you are expected to shop for yourself.'

'I'm not confident about that,' George admitted.

'Use your girlfriends,' Judith said. 'That's the secret, go shopping in a group, and try everything. They'll tell you what's good and what looks hideous.'

‘And if they don’t, I end up wearing something totally hideous!’ George replied. ‘What’s to stop them doing that?’

‘They’re your girlfriends. They like you and they won’t let you buy something silly. You’ll make mistakes and buy things that you’ll never wear, but every girl does that. Don’t worry, just shop for the fun it gives.’

‘I’ve walked round the shops with Linda many times. It’s awful.’

‘That’s because you’re thinking as a man. You know that, when you’re asked for an opinion, it’s approval that’s needed, not an honest opinion. A good boyfriend shopping experience is to say how good everything looks, her bum isn’t too big in it, and best of all, pay the bill and smile all the time.’

‘I try to do that.’

‘Girls shopping are more honest. They feel the material, look at the stitching, check for something that might fray. They try it on and look how it hangs and moves. Then they show and tell. You’ll get the idea.’

Professor Zenakis was waiting for them and they sat in the easy chairs in her office. She looked him up and down. George felt like a specimen in her laboratory – if she had one.

‘You’ve done well,’ she said at last. ‘I think we made a good choice.’

‘I agree,’ Judith said. ‘We’re moving quite quickly, the building blocks are there as you can see, and today we start on cosmetics and appearance.’

‘When do we go live?’

‘I think at the beginning of next week, certainly no later than Thursday.’ Judith consulted her notes. ‘The wardrobe needs measurements, the car’s ready for delivery, the apartment has the basics already installed, and our design team has made sure it’s suitably female in design.’

‘George, I’m sorry to talk around you.’ Anna Zenakis turned to him. ‘You do understand what comes next, and why all the preparation.’

‘I think so, professor.’

‘Call me Anna.’ She smiled. ‘I think this week is going to pass very quickly. You’ll be changing so fast you’ll hardly have time to catch your breath. We’ve a new range of safety measures to protect you, because I can’t pretend there’s no danger if you’re discovered by someone who may be unfriendly to boys dressing as girls. Of course, we hope you will be so convincing that it will never happen, but I’d never forgive myself if you came to any harm.’

‘That’s reassuring,’ George said. ‘What are these safety measures?’

‘The first is this. It looks like an ankle chain, but it’s a GPS, a monitor for your vital signs, and other things we don’t need to list.’ Anna handed a slim silver chain to him. ‘It fits with a one-way clasp and you can’t take it off, neither can it slip off. It’s almost indestructible and will always have your location.’

‘And if you twist it as hard as you can and hold it for ten seconds, it will sound an alarm,’ Judith said. ‘It’s fantastic technology.’

‘It’s also leaving me no privacy,’ George said.

‘That’s possibly true,’ Anna said. ‘It doesn’t record sound or vision, though. It only shows where you are and what your mood signals may be.’

‘So it knows if I’m having sex?’

‘Not exactly, but it could be inferred from the general data being transmitted. It won’t show who might be with you, and I promise that no one will be prying into anything you didn’t want to tell us.’

‘Can I be sure?’

‘It’s in your terms and conditions. Maybe you didn’t read them all, and I don’t blame you.’

‘I’m being silly. Of course you’re being protective. How does it fit?’

‘It goes just above your ankle, and you have to choose which leg, because it has a one-way catch. I have a special tool to remove it, but you won’t be able to.’

‘Why is that?’

‘Your arms won’t be able to reach easily, and it takes two hands to hold the tools and a third to pull it apart.’

‘So maybe I won’t grow another hand.’ George held the object. ‘It looks pretty but plain. I do like it as an object. It’s wide enough to be seen, but thin enough to fit closely.’

‘And it won’t snag your stockings,’ said Anna, closing the clasp just above his left ankle. They heard a click as the lock engaged.

‘Is it transmitting now?’ George asked.

‘It’s always on once it’s locked.’ Anna checked that it was loose enough to turn easily. ‘There’s no switch anywhere until the lock is released.’

‘Okay, what else is there?’

‘A single girl’s best friend is a prominently worn wedding set, third finger, left hand.’ Anna walked across to her desk and opened a drawer. ‘These are real, and we had them resized for you. There’s a chain for you to wear them round your neck if you feel the need.’

‘They look expensive.’ George stared at the three rings in the box.

‘Try them on and make sure the size is right,’ Anna said. ‘They *were* expensive. Like a few girls of my age, I made a mistake, and these rings were one of the remainders.’

‘And you don’t mind giving them to me like this?’

‘They were just a reminder of something I don’t treasure. Don’t get me wrong, they’re not tainted, and they’ll make someone happy. This project is very dear to me, and it seemed sense to put something personal into it.’

George removed the rings from the box and placed the plain band on his finger, then the circle of diamonds, and finally the sparkling solitaire. They fit together snugly and almost filled the space between his knuckle and first joint. They would be impossible to miss.

'They'd look wrong if your nails weren't pretty.' Anna held his hand and looked down.

'They're a bit tight, but they fit easily—and don't they look magnificent!' George held his arm out, fingers splayed, and looked. He brought his arm in and turned and twisted his hand to all angles, looking and admiring them.

'Keep them on,' Judith said. 'Get used to the feel, and stop looking at them every other second.'

'They are spectacular together,' Anna said. 'Remember they're for defence, when you don't want men to bother you. Some won't recognise the signal, so beware. Sometimes, you may not want to wear them so that you can attract more attention. It's up to you to feel your way.'

'Relationships are difficult at any time,' Judith said. 'Follow your instincts and keep safe is the only rule. Don't do anything that you're not comfortable with.'

'I have a girlfriend,' George said. 'She's been supporting me.'

'This is a difficult programme to follow. She may find it difficult, and the next few weeks in particular will be testing,' Anna said. 'She can contact me if she wants to do so. I'll give you a card with all the numbers.'

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'You really like wearing those rings.' Judith caught him looking at his hand again.

'I shouldn't,' George admitted. 'But it's fascinating to see them together, and I'm a little afraid to take them off in case I lose them.'

'You have the neck chain, and it might be better for you to wear them there for the time being. You are going to makeup and hair school every afternoon this week. They know who you are and what we're doing, so expect them to be thorough.'

'I've never worn makeup since school,' George said. 'I was in the chorus in something or other. My costume was like a dusty sack.'

‘No dusty sacks in this project.’ Judith pulled a sheaf of papers from her drawer. ‘You’re going to have accounts at some of the best stores in town, as well as your allowance. You’re due at school in half an hour. It’s quite near, and so you’ve time for coffee on your way.’

\* \* \* \* \*

‘You must be George. I’m Helen and I’m your tutor this week,’ a trim dark-haired woman greeted him just inside the secure entrance to the school. ‘I’ve been briefed on why you’re here. I can make you up to be as fabulous as possible, if you like.’

‘Well, er—I don’t want to look like a drag queen.’ George suddenly felt cold inside.

‘If I make you anything less than a beautiful woman who could fit in anywhere without being detected, I will think I’ve failed,’ Helen assured him. ‘I’m not going to fail. You’re going to look so good, you’ll ask me to let you go home in full makeup.’

‘But I’m not dressed for that.’

‘I’d say you could get away with it, depending on how brave you feel. You’ll need a wig, but fortunately I have some that would be perfect depending upon your preference.’

‘I’ve never worn a wig,’ George said. ‘I think I’d be afraid of it blowing off once I got outside.’

‘That couldn’t happen with one of mine,’ Helen said. ‘I’ll show you when we get that far.’

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When Helen had finished working her magic on him, George gasped as the girl in the mirror came into view. He knew it must be him, but only by the clothes he was wearing. The girl had hair which flowed over her ears and almost down to the shoulders. The earrings moved gently as he turned his head.

‘It’s darker than I expected,’ George said.

‘That’s because it’s longer than you’re used to,’ Helen replied. ‘And you have to pass girl tests before you can be more blonde.’

‘Okay, now I know you’re kidding.’

‘Today’s idea is that you blend in rather than stand out,’ Helen said. ‘I could make you up differently, but being the centre of attention wouldn’t be helpful at this stage.’

George gazed upon the girl in the mirror, his new self. Her eyes were dark, with muted greys and browns shading into perfect eyebrows, arching smoothly above. The lashes were generous, long and thick. There was no way that these could be mistaken for natural lashes. Her lips were shiny and smooth, a muted colour which held no reds, but maybe a hint of pink and apricot tones, with a deep sheen which made them look generous and luscious at the same time. ‘I’d like to kiss her,’ George thought—but then he told himself off for vanity and stupidity.

‘So when you’ve finished admiring yourself,’ Helen said, ‘you have to decide if the girl in the mirror is going home with you or staying here.’

‘Staying here?’ George asked.

‘As some smears on cleansing tissues.’ Helen held out a packet. ‘You’d better take these makeup remover pads anyway.’

‘I’d like to stay like this,’ George said slowly. ‘I’m a little nervous, but I think I look fabulous. I don’t want to go back, and I can’t explain why.’

‘That’s okay, take your time.’ Helen held his hand. ‘Just let your mind become calm.’

‘I knew this moment was coming, but I didn’t expect it today. I wasn’t prepared for the feelings I’m having. It feels so comfortable to see myself like this. I like myself like this too. I want to share it, but I’ve no idea how or even why.’ The words tumbled out as George tried to rationalise his thoughts.

‘So are you going straight home?’

‘No, I’m supposed to meet Linda – she’s my girlfriend – and Martina. They work together and stop off at our local diner on the way home.’

‘Maybe they’d be a good test for you,’ Helen said. ‘Let me get another top for you to wear and then you can decide.’

She returned with a dark silver top, sleeveless, but with lots of material draped down the chest. ‘This will hang in soft folds and disguise your lack of decent boobs.’

‘I don’t have boobs.’ George felt suddenly embarrassed.

‘You know what I mean. The drapes will hide that.’

‘Okay, I’ll try it, and if you think I look okay, I’ll do it. I’ll meet them at the diner.’

‘You’ll look good, I’m sure. Use the wedding set, though. You’re new to this and you need a bit of protection.’

‘You’d think I was setting off to another planet where the natives were hostile.’ George laughed.

‘Don’t laugh; you *are* heading to another planet. It’s called “Girl,” and the natives can be positively frightening.’

Half an hour later, George took a deep breath and set off along the street. He kept his head high, but avoided any eye contact as he walked. A few deep breaths, and then he was feeling easier. No one seemed to notice him.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘Excuse me ladies, would you mind if I sat here?’

‘We’re holding that chair for my boyfri—oh, my goodness!’ Linda said.

‘*What?!*’ Martina looked up. ‘You can’t be who I think you are!’

‘It depends who you think I can’t be.’ George sat down and looked at her.

‘This calls for some explaining.’ Martina stood up. ‘But hold it until I’ve got us all a cocktail.’

‘So what do you think?’ George asked Linda.

‘I don’t know what to think,’ Linda replied. ‘I didn’t expect such a big change so quickly. I didn’t expect my boyfriend to be such an attractive woman.’

‘Hey, it’s still the same *me* inside. It’s only makeup and a wig.’

‘It’s such a shock.’ Linda held his hands noticing the rings for the first time. ‘And just when did you get *married?*’

‘It’s a disguise,’ George explained. ‘I was told it would stop unwelcome attention.’

‘Whoever told you that didn’t tell you that it will present a challenge to some guys. But you’re going to learn all that anyway.’

‘You’re scaring me.’

‘It’s only the way of the world. It’s all about the old battle of the sexes, and the rules are different depending upon which side you’re on.’

‘And I’m switching sides.’ George was thoughtful. ‘Maybe that’s one of the things they want to study.’

Martina returned, ending their conversation, and handed across glasses filled with a pink liquid. ‘Is this girly enough?’

They sipped through the straws; one round followed another.

‘Don’t look now.’ Martina nodded surreptitiously towards an adjacent table where three men had paused their drinking to stare openly in their direction. ‘They’re looking at you, George.’

‘Don’t be silly.’ He blushed.

‘They weren’t paying us any attention until you came in.’ Linda said.

‘What do I do now?’ George felt panic rising. ‘I can’t do this. I’m going.’

‘Sit still, don’t draw attention to yourself. Smooth your hair gently, and use your left hand.’ Martina turned again to look at the men.

George looked quizzically at her, and then slowly did as he was told. As his hand rose, he noticed the rings

glittering on his finger. He allowed the hand to linger longer and then played with the softer ends, twirling a strand through his fingers.

‘It’s working.’ Linda whispered across the table. ‘They’re looking at each other and deciding you’re not going to play their game.’

‘What do we call you?’ Martina asked suddenly. ‘You can’t be George all the time. You don’t look a bit George right now. How about Nicola?’

‘Nicola?’ George repeated.

‘Yes, then you can be Nik the tomboy, Nikki for the pet name, Lola for the slutty, sexy one, and simply Nicola. It’s feminine and works in all situations.’

‘Well, all right. What could possibly go wrong?’

\* \* \* \* \*

The weekend was fun, and nothing did go wrong. In jeans and a sweatshirt, George was himself again, as complete as ever. They lazed in bed, took in the shops, went to a movie and dinner with friends. If any of them spotted anything about George, they didn’t say, and Martina was the only other one in on the secret.

The next couple of weeks were more of a routine. George announced he was to be called Nicola when dressed as a girl. Even when he was dressed as a boy, ‘Nik’ seemed like a good name for him.

Throughout it all, Judith maintained his visualisation sessions. George remembered little of them consciously, but his behaviour and confidence seemed to flow. Except for the weekends, his days were totally feminine.

Gradually everything about him became altered. Even when he was in boy mode, he couldn’t hide those girlish gestures which had become second nature.

‘Nik, do you have to do that?’ Linda would chide him when he stopped to look in the window of a boutique or shoe shop. ‘It’s not what a boyfriend should do.’

‘I’m only taking an interest,’ he defended himself when one day she caught him testing lip colours on the back of his hand.

She was less than pleased when she had to pull him away from the free testers of perfume in their local department store. ‘You smell better than I do anyway,’ she told him.

Professor Zenakis saw him more often now, as time passed. ‘I’m assessing when we should make this more formal,’ she told him. ‘I want you to be fully feminine before the next batch of students comes into the department, so that gives us a bit of time.’

Lessons on makeup and hair followed daily through the week. Deportment and voice coaching were added to the daily routine, and George was sent out en femme to complete local errands, a little shopping, or simply to walk in the lunch hour. Driving, when it was added to the schedule, seemed natural too, even in heels. ‘I’ve been walking in them for weeks, so what could be difficult about driving?’ he asked, the first time he was sent out on the road alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘Strip!’ Judith commanded when he arrived on Monday morning. ‘No protesting, you’ve nothing I haven’t dealt with before.’

He stripped to his underwear. ‘I can’t wear those!’ He saw what was laid out in front of him when he turned.

‘You’d better get used to the idea. It’s bra and panties every day from now on.’

‘But—’

‘No buts, it’s what you signed up for. I’m sure you’ve helped people to take these off, so you can guess how to put them on.’

‘Well—okay.’

There was a shift in his mind as a picture of himself dressed in seductively fine lingerie flashed across his memory. Without knowing how or why, he tucked his penis carefully downwards, grateful that the panties

were of a substantial material. He fastened the bra at the front, twisted it round, and then slipped the shoulder straps into place. Something felt incomplete, and then he knew what it was.

‘I need breasts to fill the cups.’ He looked round to see a pink box, plain except for a fancy bow on the top. A thrill went through him as he opened the packaging and placed breast forms into the cups. He felt the new weight and a deep relaxation, as if of one reaching a pinnacle of success.

‘That feels strange,’ he said. ‘I should feel wrong, but somehow it feels right—as if something missing up to now has fallen into place.’

‘It’s your future,’ Judith told him. ‘You’ll have to wear the correct underwear from now on. You’ll have to get used to different styles and colours, and you’ll probably be able to make choices instinctively.’

‘I do seem to have some memory—’ He looked at her, a little puzzled.

‘It’s been in the visualisations we did. Underwear for girls, course 101.’ Judith laughed. ‘I knew you weren’t paying full attention. Fortunately, your unconscious mind was taking it all in.’

‘It feels sort of thrilling, good but a little wrong at the same time.’

‘Hold those feelings.’ Judith told him. ‘You’re wearing breasts all the time from now on in. Those forms should give you a full ‘B’ cup, but you’ll probably want a bigger size to keep proportionate.’

‘They feel big already.’

‘That’s because it’s the first time. There’s no use in turning you into a girl if we turn you into a flat-chested one. You’d never get sufficient attention, and the study wouldn’t tell the professor as much as it should.’

‘Okay, I get that.’ He ran his hands under the bra, feeling the weight of the false breasts they held. ‘It feels different, but surprisingly good,’ he admitted.

Judith heard the remark, and knew that her visualisation sessions had taken root in his mind. All was going really well.

‘They don’t feel like breasts I have handled before,’ George said.

‘Well, they couldn’t. You didn’t grow them from being twelve years old.’

‘You know what I mean. They don’t feel natural.’

‘They’re the best we can do,’ Judith said. ‘There are other shapes, but basically you wear them inside a bra or you glue them to your chest. If you use the glue, then you have to use a solvent to get them off or your skin may flare up. There are better prosthetics they use in films, or perhaps for really close work, but they’re expensive and take a lot of time to make, fit, and camouflage.’

‘So this is the simplest?’

‘Yes, unless you go for implants, in which case the world is yours.’

‘You’ll have to explain.’

‘Oh, come on. You’ve seen the pictures. You’re a chick with a dick. You have real cleavage for guys to stare down. You have the real thing between your legs for them to fantasise about. You’re something special, exotic even. Why wouldn’t you want to do that?’

‘I hadn’t thought that far,’ he replied. ‘This is an experiment, right? It’s not a change of sex. I don’t fancy doing it with guys.’

‘Don’t dismiss anything out of hand,’ Judith said lightly. She knew all about the visualisations, and even more about the triggers which lurked in his subconscious.

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Through the next few days, he became used to the weight and feel of the breasts. He had to take them out of the bra each night, but after showering, they were the first thing on his mind in the mornings.

‘Goodness, it spooks me!’ Linda said as she watched him get ready to start another week. ‘I almost got used to seeing you in a dress and heels, but now with a bra

the shape of breasts there, it seems more than real. I feel almost as if I'm becoming a lesbian.'

'Don't be silly,' he replied, looking critically in the mirror as he finished his makeup with another coat of mascara. 'You know why I'm doing this. I think it's fun.'

'My definition of fun doesn't include watching my boyfriend turn into my girlfriend!' Linda snapped back. 'I know why you're doing it, but it's your choice, not mine.'

'It will come to an end,' he tried to reassure her.

'I know, but will you lose all the girly actions and words?' She was near to tears. 'I do try to understand, but it's hard going out with you when all the guys are eyeing you up, wondering what it would be like to get you into their beds.'

'They'd have a shock.' They looked at each other before laughing and hugging.

'Careful, you'll spoil my makeup,' he said, and they hugged again.

The walk to Judith's office seemed easier by the day. As Nicola, he could smile and wave to familiar faces that he saw regularly. If they spotted anything incongruous, their faces never showed it.

'Your new bra is waiting in the dressing room,' Judith told him when he finished yet another session of visualisations. Whilst he never remembered them, he knew they were making his transition easier.

'I'll not ask why,' he said as he stood and obediently went to change.

He returned. 'The breasts are far too small for the bra. What were you thinking of?'

'These.' She held up another pink box.

'It's far heavier,' he said as he turned the box round to open it. He removed the packaging and removed one in his hand. 'These are far too big. I'll be bent double with them.'

'Don't be a baby; put them in and let them settle.' She watched as he placed them gently into the cups

and adjusted them. ‘There’s a dress to go with them if you put it on.’

‘Isn’t this a bit tacky?’ he asked when he returned wearing a leopard-skin form-fitting dress. ‘If I wriggle a little, the top of the breast forms will be visible.’

‘It’s only for today, not a lifestyle change.’

‘I feel top-heavy.’

‘And won’t all the boys know it.’

‘Stop it! I can’t let anyone see me like this. They’ll know straight away.’

‘Their minds won’t work that fast—well, the boys’ minds won’t. The girls would guess almost at once. You need more makeup on your eyes, brush your hair out, and refresh your lipstick. We have an appointment with the professor.’

‘What size am I?’ he asked.

‘You’re double ‘D’ but just for today. It’s for the experience. I think you’ll be a big ‘C’ when you’re ready to go full time. It seems to fit your figure.’

‘So that’s all right then,’ he answered. ‘I could probably cope with that.’

\* \* \* \* \*

‘My boobs are jiggling,’ he whispered to Judith as they walked across the square leading to the professor’s office. ‘I think they’re all looking at me. I look ridiculous, especially in this dress.’

‘No, you don’t. The dress is only for showing off. Play the game and smile sweetly. You’re an attractive blonde with bigger than average breasts. It’s natural for all the boys to look at you. Come on, you did the same.’

‘I guess I did, but this is different.’

‘How so? It’s no different simply because you’re the object of the stares.’

‘It feels that way.’ He was grateful for the sanctuary of the building and the professor’s office.

‘Congratulations, you’ve turned out better than we ever thought.’ Anna Zenakis walked round him as if looking at a specimen.

‘I wish I felt as confident,’ he replied.

‘I’m sure that a few more sessions of visualisation could help you with that. It’s all designed to build up your confidence, as well as reinforcing learned behaviour.’

‘I’m so grateful,’ he replied. ‘I couldn’t have done this without Judith’s help. I seem to sleep through the visualisation sessions, but I always feel so much easier after them.’

‘I think that you’ve passed some important milestones and we’re ready for you to go full time female.’ the professor announced.

It took George by surprise. He felt a rising panic, but as suddenly as the bile rose in his throat, it subsided. ‘I think Nicola is ready for anything,’ he heard himself saying.

‘Good,’ she replied. ‘We’ll use the first couple of days next week to work on your final appearance, and then your apartment should be ready by Friday. Judith has a team organising your wardrobe there, and all the other things you’ll need. You’d better warn your friends that it’s goodbye to George for the foreseeable future, because they’ll be seeing Nicola all the time.’

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‘I knew this was coming, but it’s still a shock,’ Linda cried when George told her that evening.

‘It’s still me,’ George protested.

‘But this is the week they’re going to make you over into the long-term Nicola!’ Linda cried. ‘No more George, even at the weekends.’

‘We’ll still be together,’ he protested. ‘You’ll love my new apartment, it’s so lush and the views are dreamy.’

‘Listen to yourself!’ Linda snapped. ‘A few weeks ago, you’d never have used words like that.’

‘They’re only words. I’ve got to stay in character or the whole experiment fails.’

‘And what’s the experiment about, anyway? How will you know if it succeeds or fails? How long does it go on? You’ve no idea, have you?’

‘I know what I’ve been promised at the end of it all, and that counts for a lot!’ he snapped back. ‘And it’ll be all worthwhile. I may even become famous.’

‘I don’t want us to fall apart over this,’ Linda said softly.

‘I know it’s a bit strange, and a big step.’ He took her hands. ‘Goodness knows how all this preparation has been playing with my mind, but we’re both sensible. Let’s see how it all plays out.’

\* \* \* \* \*

Monday was a blur of visualisations, one after another. George always fell asleep during them, but always responded positively afterwards, full of enthusiasm and energy.

‘We’ve arranged your first job in the university library,’ Judith said. ‘You’ll be quite menial, returning books, dealing with information queries and computer stuff. It’s nothing that you don’t do for yourself, but some students need a lot of help, especially the older ones. You start next Monday, and the job’s full time.’

‘I remember being an undergraduate here. I always felt sorry for the girls working all those late hours.’

‘It couldn’t work without a rota. Your boss will be Mrs Armitage. She won’t know you because she’s only been in post for a few months, and we won’t be telling her anything about you.’

‘Surely, she must know something.’

‘Okay, you’re probably right. I’ll tell her that you’re my intern, just out of a bad break-up, and need a bit of time in a gentle occupation to get your life back on track.’

‘Will I be on the rota?’ Nicola asked.

‘Yes, there’s some late night and weekend working involved. I know we’ve fixed this job for you, but there’s nothing to prevent you applying for other jobs if you feel inclined. Your salary will go to your bank – we’ve a new account in Nicola’s name – as will your allowance from this project. You’ll be fine.’

The next days started with more visualisations, and slowly Nicola could feel things shifting in her mind. It was always Nicola now, as her body language shouted *girl* to anyone around. George seemed far away inside, watching and noting, but never interfering.

Gradually, she and Judith mixed more with the staff of the building, and shared lunches. As the days passed, Nicola came forward more and more. She laughed at the stories of inept boyfriends and husbands. It was a shift without being realised as it progressed.

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‘Your hair seems long enough to style now. You won’t need a wig for everyday use unless you want to do a dramatic change,’ the stylist told her as she leaned back to have her hair washed. ‘You can put these headphones on and relax whilst cosmetic magic takes place.’

Nicola pushed the earbuds into place. She could feel relaxation as if in waves gently pulsing through her. Soon she was dozing off.

‘Time to get you dried and finished.’ The stylist brought Nicola out of her trance-like state and held up a mirror.

‘Why, I’m almost too blonde!’ Nicola heard herself saying. Inside, George was unsettled to hear how easily the words escaped.

‘It’s a new colour, and with the highlights and low-lights, it’s totally feminine. I love it.’ The stylist said. The noise of the drier precluded much conversation.

Soon Nicola was back in Judith’s room. ‘I like that colour,’ Judith said, fingering Nicola’s hair, which was smooth and straight now that it had grown almost to shoulder length. ‘It’s a total girl colour. Even if you

were to put on a suit and brogues, it would still shout *girl* at everyone.'

'I know. It makes me a little afraid.'

'Do you mean that?'

'Well not really. I'm a little apprehensive maybe, but I'm totally committed, and this hair colour makes it easier for me to envisage complete immersion in girlhood.'

'I thought it would. We'll run over to your new apartment, and I'll show you all you need to know. Your car's waiting there in the underground, and I've arranged a delivery service to keep your refrigerator and store cupboard replenished.'

'You seem to have thought of everything.'

'I hope we have, but there are bound to be things, situations or emotions which we can't predict. You're on your own there, and that's something for the Professor to evaluate.'

'It sounds scary, but I'm really looking forward to everything,' Nicola said. 'It's strange. There's a bit of George inside telling me different things, but as Nicola, I feel entirely different, excited, optimistic—I'm not explaining this well, am I?'

'You're doing fine,' Judith replied. 'It's why we used all those visualisations. They help you prepare for situations and allow your mind to process them quickly and easily as they arise.'

'And I hardly remember a darn thing about them.' Nicola laughed.

'That's natural, but they're in there somewhere for when you need them.' Judith said. 'Now the formalities. Here's your bank and credit cards, your driving licence, your new social security number and all the documentation you'll ever need. There's even a birth certificate in there if you need to produce it.'

'Won't they get spotted for fakes?'

'No, they're all produced through the professor's office with the consent of the authorities. This project has been a long time in preparation, and the only thing

that can go wrong—if anything does go wrong—is you. But I’m sure you’ll cope fine.’

‘George may be bumbling inside somewhere, but I’m happy.’

‘Good. Here’s your appointment card for the salon each Friday. They’ll do your nails and hair, and anything else you need. You’ll be getting a makeover each week, and probably some lessons on changing styles of hair and makeup. You’re going to be a fashion icon.’

‘Won’t that make me stand out too much at work?’

‘Not really. It’s a university environment. You’re allowed to be a little eccentric any way you want.’

‘You mean I could ask to be a brunette one week, or a redhead.’

‘As long as it’s feminine, you can do whatever you want. If you get it wrong, just ring the salon and they’ll fix it, no matter what. If you get a hot date, they’ll do you something really special.’

‘Hey, you’re going a bit too far.’

‘Don’t rule anything out. We want the full range of your experiences, whatever they may be. And that’s the last thing. Every Friday, after the salon, you’ll be seeing me or Professor Zenakis for a weekly account of whatever you’ve been doing. We want you to keep notes. Don’t write anything substantial, just note any stray thought you have about being a woman: things like how the girls treat you, how the men treat you, and that sort of thing.’

‘Even if it’s only an impression?’

‘*Especially* if it’s only an impression, even if it’s embarrassing. We want to hear the bad as well as the good. Everything counts, and it goes without saying, everything will be confidential.’

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Nicola changed into a grey figured silky dress. It flared from the hip and moved deliciously as she walked. Grey sling-back heels and a matching shoulder bag completed the outfit. A touch of nerves hit as

she looked at herself in the mirror: the nails, the rings, the hair, the makeup. She shook her head and collected her thoughts once more. Then she felt suddenly confident.

They drove to the edge of the campus where Judith parked and walked her up to a low-rise apartment block. The elevator took them to the top floor, where Judith produced keys and unlocked the door. With a flourish, she handed the keys to Nicola and waved her inside.

‘Wow, this is beautiful. I love the light and airy feel, and all these colours are so soft and feminine.’ Nicola walked from the open-plan lounge and kitchen, through to the bedroom with adjoining bath and shower. ‘It’s got everything a girl could wish for.’

‘Look in the wardrobes,’ Judith said. ‘It should have all you need for the first couple of weeks. There’s a laundry and cleaning service booked for every Friday,’

‘But they said at the salon that I have a hair and nails appointment every Friday.’

‘You don’t have to be here to supervise the cleaners.’

‘No, I guess I’m not used to it all yet. Is that my balcony?’ Nicola pulled back a gauze curtain, opened a glass door and stepped outside. ‘What a view. And I’ve got sun loungers and parasols. This is heaven.’

‘I’m going now,’ Judith said. ‘You’re on your own. The professor or I will see you each Friday after the salon just to review things.’

‘This all seems so quick.’ Nicola felt a tear forming. ‘I know you’ve been working for ages to get me here, but suddenly it all feels overwhelming.’

‘I’m not surprised. It will take a few days to get used to being a single girl on your own for the first time.’ Judith hugged her. ‘Your car keys; I nearly forgot. It’s the white Beetle in the basement car park. You’ll find it okay; it’s in your apartment’s dedicated space.’

‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘Don’t say a word.’ Judith opened the door. ‘Just be a good girl, or maybe a bad girl. Have fun.’

And she was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘Seeing as how I have the car, I might as well use it,’ Nicola thought, and called to arrange to meet Linda as they usually did on Friday evenings at their usual diner.

She took longer over getting ready than ever before. Being so blonde seemed to lighten her spirits, and make dressing and makeup so much more fun.

She did her eyes and applied false lashes. She added a few gold bangles from the jewellery box he found in a drawer, and added a ring on her right ring finger, a single gold chain necklace with a small diamond, and matching earrings which dangled almost down to the ends of her hair. She dressed in a classic little black dress, with black heels, and set off for the garage.

The Beetle sat waiting for her, parked in a generous space so that the door could open wide, and he swung in. ‘That wasn’t elegant,’ she thought as she settled into the driver’s seat, positioned the mirror, and flexed her feet onto the pedals, started the engine, and set off.

‘Is that really you?’ Linda asked when she saw Nicola. ‘You look so different from yesterday, even this morning.’

‘It’s only a new hairstyle.’

‘No, it’s more than that. It’s the way you’re standing and moving. Your breasts are bigger too.’ She moved to feel them through her dress as they hugged in girl style. ‘They don’t feel real, though. I think I’d hate it if they did.’

‘You must come and see my apartment.’ Nicola’s voice seemed breathier with excitement. ‘It’s really so divine, with a terrace and real elegance.’

‘You’re doing it again!’ Linda said. ‘Your words, your body language, it’s all so—*convincing*. Relax and stop acting so flamboyant. We got you a white wine rather than beer.’

‘Darling, I’m *meant* to be convincing,’ Nicola replied. ‘If I wasn’t, there would be no project and none of the fun I’m having.’

‘You mean you’re really enjoying this?’ Martina chipped in.

‘Of course I’m enjoying it all. I think having a chance to be a girl, even if it’s only for a while, is simply so exciting. I think I look good and really feminine. I’m suddenly so much more confident now that it’s all coming into place.’

‘Does this mean you’re a full-time girl from now on?’ Martina asked.

‘Of course. It’s going to be so much fun.’ Nicola flicked her hair back behind an ear and noticed an elegant man looking at her intently. Her training kicked in and she ran her left hand through her hair, just to make sure he could see the wedding set which she wore nearly all the time now.

As her eyes wandered the room, she realised she was checking out the other girls as if they were her rivals. She watched their gestures, and mentally criticised their dress, or their makeup. How had she suddenly become such an expert?

‘Please come and see my apartment.’ Nicola stood to leave. ‘I’d love you to be the first to see it.’

‘You mean you’re not coming home with me?’ Linda asked.

‘I’d rather *you* came home with *me*. I haven’t brought anything to wear tomorrow, and my makeup is all there anyway.’

‘You didn’t worry about that until this week,’ Linda grumbled. ‘But I’ll forgive you this time. It must have been a traumatic week for you as much as anything else. I’ll come over tomorrow afternoon—s long as you promise to show me how to do eyes like yours.’

‘It’s simple, darling.’ Nicola smiled. ‘I have the technology and the skill.’

\* \* \* \* \*

Parking the Beetle was easy, and Nicola determined to get out more elegantly. She rehearsed it in her mind before opening the door. So intent was she on improving her own elegance, she entirely failed to notice that

a man was standing very near, looking on. He suddenly appeared at her side as she was closing the door and blipping the locks.

‘I haven’t seen you around here before,’ the man said with a big smile, ‘and believe me, I couldn’t have missed anyone as beautiful.’

‘I’m very new; just moved in today,’ she said, looking at him properly for the first time.

‘I do hope I’ll see more of you.’ He shook her hand, holding it longer than strictly necessary. ‘I’m Darren from number five on the second floor. I guess you got the top one as it was the only one empty.’

‘Yes, how clever of you to notice.’ Nicola blushed. ‘May I have my hand back, please?’

He was a little taller than her in her heels, with dark hair which flopped endearingly across his forehead. A slim and muscular body too, she noted; quite dishy. They exchanged polite ‘good nights’ as he went to another car around the pillars, and she went to the elevator.

‘What was I thinking?’ Nicola asked herself as she unlocked her apartment. ‘Since when do I think of a man as *dishy*?’

The thought stayed with her as she unlocked her door and stepped into the apartment. She leaned back against the door, and suddenly burst into a tearful moment.

‘I didn’t realise what a stressful day this has been!’ she said to herself as she took off her shoes and padded across to the kitchen area to get some water from the refrigerator. ‘I’ll certainly sleep tonight.’

Nicola slipped into a bedtime routine which must have been instinctive. She undressed and rummaged in the drawers until she found a nightdress. It was a soft ivory, silky, and almost floor-length. She sat in front of her bedroom mirror and pinned her hair back.

She took a last critical look, assessing how her makeup had fared since she applied it, and then removed her false lashes. She cleansed her face carefully with soft cotton pads and gently removed the remaining makeup around her eyes.

‘I don’t want to think about the day,’ she said to herself. ‘There’s so much happened and so much to do. I really need to rest and focus on focus on how I get through the next few months.’

She fell into bed, switched the lights off and slept.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘I can’t believe you!’ Linda looked at Nicola when she arrived the next afternoon. Nicola hugged her and they air kissed like they’d been doing it all along.

‘I love the blouse.’ She looked him up and down. ‘It’s really dressy, but casual with those jeans.’

‘I’m still exploring the wardrobe, but I loved this taupe colour, and the way it moulds itself without clinging too much. I can’t wear a lower neckline. I’ve no cleavage to show, and no one wants to see the padding in my bra. Do you think it’s too much with these jeans?’

‘You’d never have known what taupe was a few weeks ago.’ Linda looked at him again. ‘You look far too beautiful to be my boyfriend.’

‘It’s all me under the makeup,’ Nicola replied. ‘I’m expected to act female at all times.’

‘Maybe not tonight, if I stay over?’

‘Well, maybe not whenever you stay over.’

‘And I can’t believe *this!*’ Linda said as Nicola showed her around her new home. ‘It’s beautiful. I wish I could afford something like this.’

‘It comes with the job,’ Nicola replied. ‘I’m not complaining, though. I think it’s pretty swish myself.’

‘It’s beautiful, but so feminine. The wardrobes are full of really good outfits, clothes for every occasion—but have you no boy clothes here at all?’

‘No, that’s not allowed. From now on, I have to be female at all times.’

‘How long will that be? I’m not sure I can cope with it if it’s too long.’

‘It could be extended to five years according to the contract, but they’ve never said it’s going to be longer than this academic year.’

‘And have they told you what the objects of the study actually are, or are they simply observing you, and then drawing conclusions from what happens?’

‘I’ve no idea. They told me that I’ve to carry on and adapt to the new circumstances. I haven’t to give myself away, or reveal my true sex to anyone unless there’s no alternative. I have to work, socialise and behave normally.’

‘As normally as any man dressed as a woman all the time!’ Linda laughed. ‘You couldn’t make it up.’

‘I can understand it, though. If I knew all the objects of the study, I might channel my behaviour to meet those objectives and my behaviours would be distorted, rather than simple adaptation.’

‘I get that, but don’t you think it’s strange?’

‘The lab rat never knows its place in the experiment.’

‘That’s simply silly.’

‘No, but it’s *real*. I like the new me, and I like the challenges they’ve set me. I think I’m being pretty well looked after anyway. I couldn’t get a job and have a place like this otherwise.’

‘Don’t let it go to your head. It has to end sometime.’

‘I know that, but I’m going to enjoy the experience. Who knows, I may even get a book deal out of it.’

‘Are we going to dinner? This could go on forever without hitting a conclusion.’

‘Sure, I booked somewhere really nice. One of the girls in the salon said it was the best around. It’s a little formal, so I have to change first.’

‘Do I have to change too?’

‘No, you’re beautiful. It’s me, I can’t go in jeans. Let’s sit on the balcony, have a glass of wine, and then I’ll change and we’ll go. It’s only a short walk; we’ll be there in a couple of minutes.’

\* \* \* \* \*

‘How do I look?’ Nicola emerged from the bedroom in a tight red shift, with matching stilettos and a black leather jacket slung over her shoulder.

‘Girlfriend, you put me in the shade!’ Linda said.

‘Don’t be silly, you’re beautiful,’ Nicola replied. ‘Let’s go before they give our table away.’

It was still warm as they headed down the street, although the sun was setting fast. The buzz of the mid-evening trade going from bar to restaurant to club was all around them as they walked. No one seemed to pay them any attention; they were simply another two girls heading out for the evening. It was pretty much the same in the restaurant as they waited to go to their table.

‘Don’t turn around,’ Linda hissed, ‘but there’s a guy towards the bar staring so hard at you. I think he knows who you are.’

‘Where?’

Linda told her. She turned as casually as possible without being obvious. There at the bar was Darren, who waved when he caught her eye. He seemed to be part of a regular crowd from the way they were behaving.

‘It’s a neighbour,’ Nicola said. ‘I met him when I moved in.’ At that moment the waiter came and they went to their table. ‘I really don’t want to be on display for him and his friends tonight. I want us to have an easy evening.’

‘Me too,’ Linda replied. ‘Are you sure we can afford this place?’

‘Relax, I have an income now, and if I can’t treat my girl what can I do?’

‘It seems naughty when you say it like that. They’ll take us for lesbians.’

It was like old times as they ate and drank together, chattering as if George was still there instead of Nicola. The only difference was that this time they both chose

the salad, and avoided the desert. As they were considering an aperitif, the waiter appeared with two glasses.

‘From the gentleman at the bar,’ he announced. ‘He asks if he may join you for a moment.’

‘It’s him!’ Linda whispered.

Nicola turned round and raised her glass in thanks. ‘Tell him only for a minute,’ she said to the waiter.

‘I hope you’re settling in,’ Darren said after introductions had been made. ‘It’s a pleasant place to be—and I hope to see more of you.’

‘Well, we are neighbours,’ Nicola replied, remembering to flash her left hand in front of him. She almost prayed the rings would work and he’d be put off asking too much.

He seemed to notice. After a few moments of small talk, he excused himself and returned to his friends.

‘You’ve made a new friend, Linda said sarcastically. ‘He seems quite attracted to you.’

‘Nonsense!’ Nicola snapped back. ‘I only saw him once as I was parking the car.’

‘Did your training include a course on dealing with men who want to pick you up after seeing you only once?’

‘No,’ Nicola acknowledged. ‘If only he knew.’

Linda laughed. ‘If only he knew, he’d probably be mad at least and violent at worst. You could put yourself in dangerous situations if you’re not careful.’

‘Then I’d better be careful,’ Nicola replied. ‘Although I’d guess he’s too much of a gentleman to be dangerous.’

Linda said nothing, but noted the remark and the glance which Nicola threw his way as they left.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘That was lovely.’ Linda stretched before getting out of bed the next morning. ‘I was so worried that we’d not be the same, with you being in this project.’

‘Why would I be different?’ Nicola asked innocently.

‘Why indeed?’ Linda counted off on her fingers. ‘You’re blonder than I am. Your makeup last night was perfect. You’ve learned to give girl signals with your hair. You always wear the right jewellery. Your dress, with those heels and the leather jacket, was a killer image, and your walk with that hip wiggle was perfect too.’

‘What hip wiggle?’

‘If you don’t know, I can’t explain. It was as if you were born to stilettos.’

‘I was just walking normally.’

‘It was a little strange, though, watching you cleaning off your makeup, and putting on a nightgown before we settled on the couch,’ Linda said. ‘I thought it would be a turn-off, but it wasn’t. I rather liked it, and it even touched a few fantasies. Can we do it again?’

‘I don’t think there are any alternatives for the foreseeable future. And, if it helps, I enjoyed it too.’

‘Do you really like being a girl?’ Linda asked.

‘I’m *not* a girl. I’m only pretending. My breasts come off at night; I have to be careful that my penis doesn’t show as an unsightly bulge in my clothes. You spent years learning about makeup and hair; I had to learn it all in a few weeks. I struggle to do anything with these nails, and I’m learning something new every day. Apart from that, I’m your normal, average boyfriend.’

‘Okay, point taken. But I don’t get the feeling that you’re unhappy.’

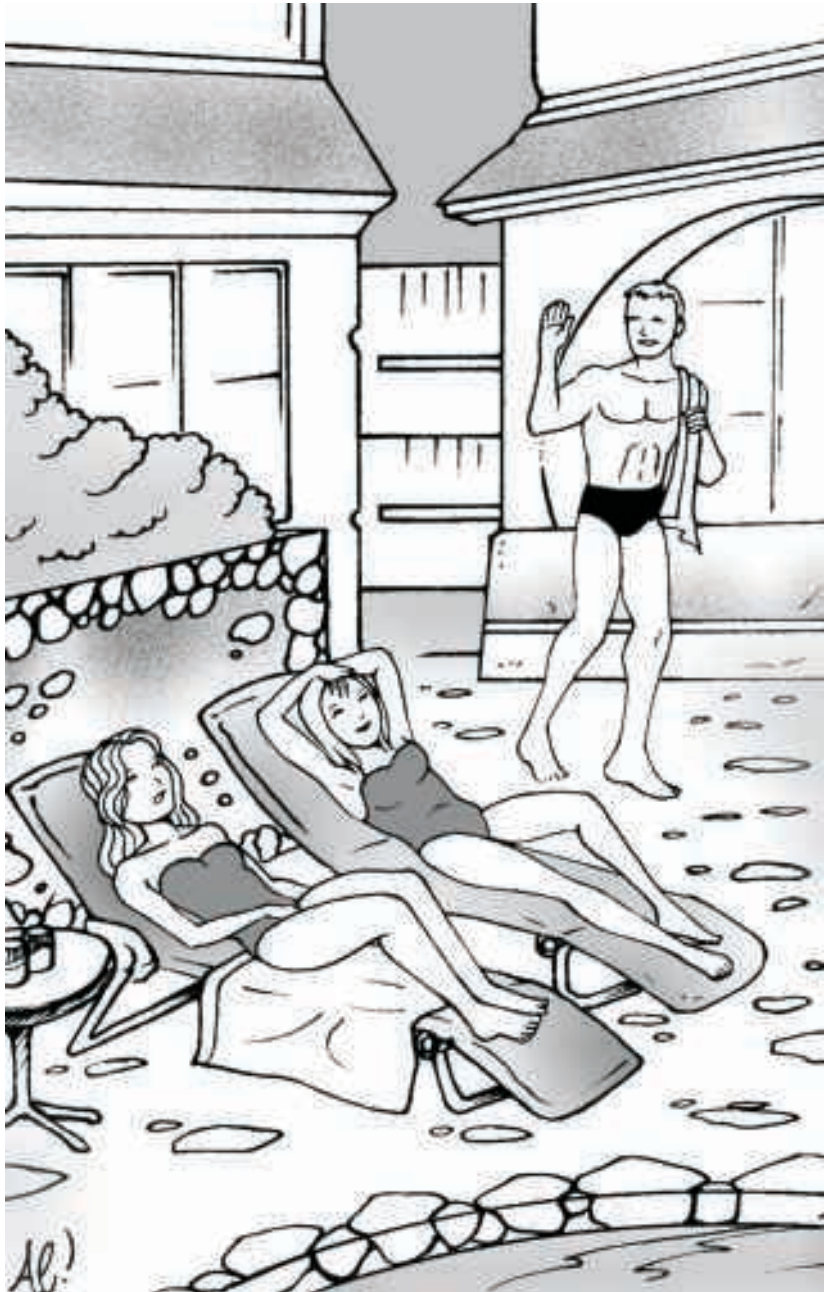
‘Why should I be unhappy? Look at this place, look at the car I’ve been given to drive, and think that I’m getting paid as well as having an expense account.’

‘What would you do if I weren’t here?’

‘I’ve no idea. No idea at all.’

‘Let’s change the subject. Can we use the pool outside?’

‘I guess so—but I don’t know if there’s anything suitable in the wardrobe.’



‘Let me look. I’d love to lie outside in the sun.’

Linda went into the bedroom, with Nicola following, and started a methodical search through the drawers. After rummaging through the third one, she pulled out two suits, a red one and a black one with a white traced pattern.

‘I think they have been specially selected,’ Linda said, examining the material and the style. ‘They’re one-piece and not very daring, but the little skirt decoration should hide your bulge as long as you’re careful.’

‘I have very tight panties that I wear under everything. They’ll fit underneath, but I’m not sure I want to.’

‘Sure you do.’ Linda said. Brush your hair through, a bit of light eye makeup, lipstick, sunglasses – I saw some somewhere – and we’ll go sit for a while.’

Nicola did as she instructed. They went down and settled together on sun loungers. ‘Oh, no!’ Nicola whispered.

Linda looked up to see Darren, a towel slung over his muscular shoulder, walking into the pool area. He smiled and waved, before diving into the water and swimming rhythmically up and down. Linda watched in open admiration. Nicola tried to ignore him and made no gesture which might have been construed as interest.

‘I think I’m getting a little sunburn,’ Nicola said to Linda. ‘I think I’ll go inside.’

Linda shot her an angry look and watched as she stood, slipped into her sandals, and walked away. Darren waved. Linda shrugged her shoulders towards him as if to say she didn’t understand either, and followed.

They drove out later and dined at a seafood restaurant on the other side of town. ‘You’d better drop me back at my place, Linda said. ‘I’ve a long week at work, and I need to do some preparation.’

Nicola didn’t ask any questions, guessing that Linda had some reservations about staying in her

apartment again, and thinking she needed time to get used to it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nicola was up early the next morning and walked to the university library to start work. She knew where Mrs Armitage had her office, although they'd never met before. She knocked and entered when a voice called.

'I'm Nicola,' she said. 'Professor Zenakis said I was to report to you.'

Mrs Armitage shook her hand formally and welcomed her.

'Anna told me all about you,' she said. Nicola blushed at that, wondering exactly what she knew. 'She said you'd been interning with her, and that you'd be the ideal person to fill a vacancy here.'

'I'm looking forward to it.'

'I'm sure you'll love it. You're familiar with the library itself, I understand, and your computer skills are excellent. I hope you've got over the bad breakup that made you move here. Men can be such bastards, can't they?'

'I don't want to talk about it,' Nicola said, understanding what Mrs Armitage had been told. 'It's all in the past.'

'I quite understand. A girl can always make a new start, and this is as good a place as any. Come, I'll introduce you, and you can get started on the help desk.'

The first week was such a nervous time. Nicola met so many new colleagues, men and women, old and young; she struggled at first to remember all the names. It was a relaxed atmosphere, though and once she realised that people just accepted Nicola for who she was, she began to relax more and even to enjoy work.

Days turned to weeks. Nicola changed from tawny blonde, to mink, then to grey and back again, exploring every shade. Her nails changed too, from stiletto to almond, and back again, longer and shorter as the

technician suggested. Her makeup was always precise, with false lashes quite often, and almost always when she was working the evening part of the rota,

Shopping was something she learned easily too. It was always better done in company, with a friend to say what was good, what was great, and what made the bum look too big. At first it was Linda, whose enthusiasm varied. As Nicola grew more confident, she went with one or more of her colleagues, and quickly decided which of them had the better taste in dresses, shoes, and all the other essentials to a girl's life. She took such a pride in her appearance that she got teased for being so girly.

The Friday sessions with Professor Zenakis followed the salon visit each week. At first their conversation was a little stilted as she asked about Nicola's weekly experiences, but as familiarity took over, she found their chats were easier, like meeting an old friend. It did cross her mind that their conversations didn't seem to be directed to any end, but it wasn't a worry.

The afternoon always ended in Judith's office. She always asked if Nicola had any concerns about the events of the week, and talked through any difficult situations, spinning them into a mode of coping strategies. Always there was a relaxation exercise, a visualisation, which Nicola loved but never remembered.

Each weekend, Linda came over, or occasionally Nicola stayed over at her place. She saw less and less of Martina, and guessed she disapproved and was deliberately avoiding her. As Nicola got bolder, she learned the gentle art of harmless flirting, and danced enthusiastically in the clubs—separating from Linda to dance when an attractive man asked her, but always avoiding anything more intimate.

In quiet moments, Nicola thought what had made her divide men into those who were attractive and those she didn't put in the same category. The realisation that she'd been thinking this way hit her hard.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nicola's days at the library flew by, between the help desk and the back office work in reservations and

overdue books. The academic staff were the worst offenders, far more difficult to deal with than the students. One of his tasks was to call the offenders, or their faculty offices, to recover missing books.

‘I’ve been waiting for you to call.’ A familiar voice made Nicola lift her head from the screen. Unconsciously, she tucked her hair behind an ear and looked up to see Darren grinning at her.

‘And why is that?’ she asked coyly.

‘I hoped it would give me an excuse, so I could invite you to get with me for lunch.’ He was full of confidence and charm. Nicola found herself flattered, succumbing to this charm offensive, and wondered if she dared to give in.

‘Okay, but I have only forty minutes,’ Nicola found herself saying.

‘That’s too little time,’ Darren replied. ‘It will have to do for now, but how am I to convince you that I’m your future boyfriend in such a short time?’

‘I don’t know that you can convince me of that at *any* time,’ Nicola replied. ‘All you’ve done is to convince me to have lunch with you.’

‘It’s a start. And you have to know that I can be both persistent and patient.’

‘As well as charming?’

‘Of course.’ Darren gave her a big smile. ‘I’ll wait at the staff entrance.’

One lunch became two, and then it became alternate days. Nicola never really knew when Darren would appear, and he never did so when she was on the later rota.

Darren *is* an attractive man, Nicola thought. If I was really a girl, I’d like this guy. But I’m not really a girl, so I shouldn’t like him. I shouldn’t be agreeing to go for lunch with him. But it’s only lunch. What possible harm could come from lunch?

It was a question she came to ask herself many times in the next days and weeks. Darren revealed himself as a professor in the History of Art Department. He knew so much about everything in that

world, and his conversation was never less than enthusiastic and amusing.

Nevertheless, Darren's invitations to receptions and evening events were firmly rebuffed.

'What would he think if he knew the truth?' It was a sobering thought, holding Nicola back from things which, in her heart of hearts, she knew she would enjoy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Then there came an offer Nicola couldn't refuse.

'It's a Cezanne exhibition preview,' Darren explained. 'We cajoled and bullied some of our wealthiest alumni, and then when they were on board we did the same with some of the country's finest galleries, and I think we have the making of a fine exhibition. It's certainly the best I've ever seen here.'

'Cezanne was always my favourite,' Nicola replied, tempted beyond anything to accept the invitation.

'It's a selective showing, with drinks and nibbles. A few experts and some of the sponsors will be there to bask in the adulation of people like me, who can't afford to be collectors on that level.' Darren seemed so proud.

'I can't say no.' Nicola knew it wasn't sensible, but then what was the point of always being sensible? 'How formal is it going to be?'

'A bit dressy, to be honest. Tuxedo for the guys, gowns for the ladies. Our sponsors expect that kind of thing.'

'I don't know that I've anything suitable. I'll have to go shopping.'

'I'm sure you'll enjoy that.'

Nicola related all this to the professor at her next Friday meeting and to Judith afterwards. Neither expressed any surprise at the information, and both strongly encouraged her to enjoy the occasion.

She told the girls in the library. Before she knew it, they were searching online for the best dress and accessories for her debut at a formal occasion.

‘I bet you never dressed up like this since your prom,’ one girl told him. ‘I wish he’d invited *me*, but it seems he’s only got eyes for *you*.’

‘Is it that obvious?’ Nicola asked. ‘I haven’t encouraged him. I’ve only had lunch with him a few times.’

‘But we all noticed the way he looks at you,’ another chipped in. ‘You can’t be that blind. You’ve *got* him, girl.’

‘I’ve got him?’ Nicola thought about it. ‘I’d better be careful.’

‘If I were you, I’d be careful he doesn’t get away!’

Then the day arrived. All the preparations were over and it was time to get ready. The salon was wonderful.

‘I love the way you’ve made me look formal and casual at the same time,’ she said, turning her head to look left and right in the mirror. ‘The hair looks like it’s escaping from the up do, yet I know it’s so secure.’

‘Do you like the colour?’

‘I really do. It’s like a softer, more restrained shade than my usual blonde. I think I should become more sophisticated in the future.’

She dressed in a creamy white dress, floor length, which draped around her slim hips, with slim-heel shoes in a matching colour. Earrings and a bangle were all the accessories she needed to make it right, apart from the ever-present rings on her left hand.

‘You look wonderful!’ Darren said on picking her up and escorting her to the waiting car. ‘You’ll love the preview.’

They arrived at the viewing and were greeted by a waitress offering champagne. Nicola felt a frisson of fear as she saw the assembled gathering. Darren took her arm and steered her around, chatting here and there, admiring and almost touching the pictures. Nicola loved them.



‘You’re an expert?’ An elderly man in a tuxedo which did little to disguise his girth came and stood too close to her. She could smell cigars and whisky.

‘I wish I was,’ Nicola replied. ‘It’s beautiful, the way the olive groves have the right colour and there, the figures are stylised yet so real.’

‘They’re both mine.’ The man swelled with pride. ‘You could come and have a closer look. I’ll give you my private number. Call anytime, little lady, and I’ll look after you.’

Darren arrived at his shoulder, said something Nicola didn’t catch, and then steered her away.

‘That was getting creepy,’ Nicola hissed.

‘I know what he’s like; that’s why I rescued you,’ Darren replied. ‘See, I’ve become your protector now. You can’t refuse me dinner after this.’

‘Okay, but no funny business.’ Nicola hoped she wasn’t going to regret being so impulsive.

Darren was easy company over dinner in a little Italian place near the exhibition, but Nicola started to feel danger signals flashing when Darren escorted her back to her apartment. They’d both had a little wine and an aperitif beforehand. The coffee afterwards didn’t do anything to lessen the slightly tipsy feeling.

Darren kissed her as she put the key in the lock. She knew it was coming and did nothing to resist. She opened her lips and allowed Darren’s tongue to explore further.

‘What am I doing?’ Nicola’s brain shouted. Then the reply came: ‘You’re being kissed, and you’re enjoying it.’

They were inside now. Darren’s hand was running over Nicola’s rear, and then climbing to her padded breasts.

‘No!’ Nicola pushed his hand away, panic rising. What if he realised it was all stuffed and false? Nicola knew she didn’t want that to become apparent.

‘You’d better go,’ Nicola said when another kiss broke. ‘It’s not that I don’t want you to stay, I do—but I don’t know what I can handle if you do.’

\* \* \* \* \*

And then, one wet Wednesday evening . . . .

‘Is that Professor Zenakis?’ said a voice on the telephone. ‘We have a patient admitted and the only identification in her purse was your card. It’s a blonde lady—only she might not be a lady, if you know what I mean.’

‘Who’s speaking?’ the professor asked.

‘I’m Mary, the ward clerk at the Sisters of Mercy emergency room.’

‘Okay, I think I know who it is. Can you tell me what happened?’

‘We think someone grabbed her purse, she grabbed back and then got beaten and kicked. The guy got away, but she’s got a badly broken nose, a fractured cheek, and probably other injuries. Honestly, he made a real mess of her face. It’s awful. The police have been here, but they went away when they realised she wasn’t going to be able to talk to them.’

‘Is she conscious?’

‘No, and doctor’s administered a sedative to keep her quiet.’

‘I’ll call someone out at once. Your patient is fully insured, so do everything she needs.’

‘Even though she might not be a *she*?’

‘Do *everything* she needs. I’m sure you understand that,’ Professor Zenakis snapped back. ‘I’ll call out our medical team and they should be with you as soon as possible, if you’ll warn your doctors there.’

‘What, tonight?’

‘As soon as I can. I’ll be there in about twenty minutes.’

She parked in the hospital bay. Mrs Armitage met her as she walked to the doors. ‘Professor, I just heard,’ Mrs Armitage said.

‘You probably know more than I do, Mrs Armitage,’ the professor replied.

‘One of the girls saw what happened and called to tell me. Nicola had finished work and was walking home as she did every night. Apparently her bag was snatched and she fought back. It’s as simple as that, but she seems to be dreadfully hurt. The girl was in tears telling me. She was the one who called the ambulance, and I left her talking to the police. Nicola wasn’t conscious, but the girl said her face was really bad.’

‘I’m on my way to talk to the doctors here now,’ the professor said. ‘I’ve got our own medical team coming and they’ll be able to tell me more when they’ve seen her. I’m told she’s sedated so she can’t tell us more.’

‘Shall I come in with you?’

‘No, it was good of you to come, but leave her with me. I’ll call you when I know anything.’

Anna was shown into a small room where Nicola lay on a hospital bed, with dressings on her nose and butterfly dressings on her lips. Her eyes were closed and the incipient bruising was vivid and angry across her face. Wires attached to monitors festooned the bed.

‘It must have been some really determined kicks to do that,’ an attendant nurse told her. ‘It looks bad. Usually we reassure patients by telling them it’s not as bad as it looks, but this time I can’t say that—and she’s sedated anyway.’

‘I’ve called out our own medical team from the university,’ Anna replied. ‘They should be here soon.’

\* \* \* \* \*

‘Richard, they told me you’d arrived and were doing an examination.’ Anna rose from her chair in a small waiting room as a white-coated Doctor Adams entered. ‘How is Nicola?’

‘It’s difficult to say. I’ll arrange for her to be transferred to my clinic, and keep her sedated. There are a lot of things to consider and of course, the swelling is in the way of thorough diagnosis. The nose is hideously broken, that’s obvious, and the cheek is probably broken too, although the extent to which it is displaced is hard to assess.’

‘When will she be transferred?’

‘As soon as possible. I’ll call you when I have more news. There’s no point in rushing and I think sedation until we’ve done some repairs is the best way forward.’

‘I agree. The project was progressing so well; it’s dreadful that this should have happened.’

‘Who has legal authority to deal with her treatment?’

‘I think I have. Nicola signed a contract for the project which includes a clause about medical treatment. We didn’t envisage this kind of problem, but I’ll have the lawyers look at it and let you know if there’s a problem.’

‘And you’re taking responsibility for the treatment.’ Richard asked. ‘It’s mainly plastic surgery, and insurers can be tricky.’

‘Yes, we’re fully insured. Do everything necessary, and more if you think it’s going to help. Department funds will cover if the insurers won’t.’

One week turned to two. Linda and Martina visited the clinic, but as Nicola was so deeply sedated, they realised there was little point in continuing until she was able to know that they were there. Anna spoke to Richard Adams every day as they waited and assessed Nicola’s condition.

‘I think we’re in a position to start surgery in a few days,’ the doctor told her one day. ‘I know Nicola is a male, despite dressing and acting otherwise. Was this a long-term project of yours?’

‘Yes. I’d like it to continue if that’s going to be possible.’

‘I have some sketches based upon what we’ve found. I can’t consult him. I think it would be too distressing to bring him out of sedation merely to find how much damage there is. I’d rather complete restorative surgery and then reduce the medication.’

‘That sounds sensible.’

‘There’s a *but* coming,’ Richard said, emphasising the operative word. ‘I need to know what to do. He was living as a female. Do I repair his face on that basis, an

attractive nose, female cheek bones, and whilst I'm doing major facial reconstruction, would he like a brow lift and some work around his eyes?'

'I think that would be something he'd like,' Anna replied, without being fully sure it was true.

'I'll have to do some work around his lips too, so should they be from the book of kissable lip designs?'

'You've a book of lip designs?' Anna asked incredulously.

'Of course not.' Richard laughed. 'I'll do my best to make them as attractive and female as I can, if that's going to be okay.'

Surgery was scheduled after much study and consultation. Nicola emerged even more bruised and battered than before, but as the days passed and the discolouration faded, she began to look more like her own self, albeit an altered version of her old self. The sedation continued until her recovery was more assured, and then gradually reduced.

\* \* \* \* \*

'I feel like I've been run over,' Nicola mumbled as she slowly came out of the haze. 'I remember being hit and falling.'

'It's okay.' A nurse had been stationed to wait for this moment. 'You're safe in hospital, and well on the mend.'

'Hospital? What happened to me?' The nurse gave him a potted version, and called for the doctors to come. The duty doctor looked at the notes and called Doctor Adams, who in turn called Anna Zenakis. They arrived in his room together. Anna told him what they knew of how he was injured and how long he'd been in treatment.

'That sounds really bad,' Nicola replied. 'No wonder I feel like this. How long have I been here?'

'I think this is week eight,' Anna replied. 'You were really badly beaten.'

‘I hardly remember anything. Have the police been here?’

‘Yes, but they have no cameras in that area to show what happened, and I’ve to call them if you remember anything.’

‘Nothing at all, apart from the pain. I remember trying to reach that alarm on my ankle, but I don’t think I set it off. This place must be costing a fortune.’

‘You’ve had the best care possible. Doctor Adams is a wonderful plastic surgeon. When all the swelling has gone, you’ll be okay.’

‘When the swelling is gone,’ the doctor added, ‘you’ll look better than ever before, although pale from being in hospital for so long. When you feel ready, you can get up, and in a few days you’ll be released to go home.’

The doctor left them alone. ‘What happens to me now?’ Nicola asked.

‘I hope you’ll carry on from where we were. Nicola was doing so well, I don’t see why anything should change. Sure, we’ve been put back a few months and you’ve had a horrible experience, but the choice is yours.’

‘I’d like to carry on,’ Nicola replied. ‘I was enjoying being one of the girls in the library. I’ve enjoyed playing this role and acting it out. I don’t think I’ve been spotted as a fake, although I have no idea what I’m going to look like after all this.’

‘I think you’ll look fine. A visit to the salon, and getting back to routine should make all the difference.’

‘I’ve noticed that there aren’t any mirrors in here. Am I badly scarred?’

‘Not at all. Richard Adams is one of the best cosmetic surgeons in the area, and you’ll look absolutely normal.’ She handed him a small mirror from her handbag.

‘I look a funny colour. The bruising will take some disguising, but you’re right. I do look normal.’ Nicola pulled her hair back. ‘I hate these dark roots.’

‘And with that you’re *really* getting back to normal.’

‘Do I sound too girly? Am I getting too vain?’ Nicola looked away from the mirror, handing it back.

‘No, surprisingly, you’re where I would have guessed you might be when we started this project. I’ll tell them you’re ready to be moved to a more comfortable room, and I’d guess you’ll be home before the weekend.’

‘Could you book my salon for Friday? I really need hair and nails attention.’

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Later that day, Nicola’s first visitors arrived—Linda and Martina. They found her wearing a hospital gown, sitting in a reclining chair in her room.

‘I came to see you when you were admitted here,’ Linda said, ‘but they would only allow me a glimpse into the room.’

‘I wouldn’t have known you were here anyway. I’m coming to terms with what happened, but really I don’t remember a thing. Maybe when I go back, I’ll remember something.’

‘You’re not going back to that ridiculous project, are you?’

‘Yes, of course I am. I have had a couple of days to think about it, and I really want to continue.’

‘It’s hard for me, though, George. Surely you can see that having a girlfriend when I should have a boyfriend is crazy.’

‘But you know why I’m doing it. I want a better life, and to do that I need qualifications.’

‘I do understand, but it’s hard not knowing when you’ll be back to normal—if you ever will.’

‘You know I will.’

‘I’m not so sure. Everything about you screams *girl* right now, even when you’re in here. Your voice and the way you talk, your gestures; there are so many things.’

‘It’s all learned behaviour.’

‘I worry if you’ll ever be able to unlearn it.’

The visit ended on the sour side, with a tear or two, before Linda kissed him and promised to try to understand.

‘Hi, beautiful!’ Nicola’s next visitor breezed in without knocking, a huge bunch of flowers and chocolates in hand. ‘I brought champagne, but they wouldn’t allow it on the ward,’ Darren said, bending to kiss her cheek. He took her hand. ‘I was so shocked when I heard what had happened. They wouldn’t let me see you, and I’ve sneaked past security without asking today.’

‘It’s kind of you to come—and you shouldn’t have brought these,’ Nicola replied. She felt something shift deep inside her, almost as if she was switching mentally into full female mode. ‘As you can see, I’m mending and I’ll be back home soon.’

‘I do hope so, I’ve thought about you a lot.’

‘A lot?’

‘Oh, missed opportunities, lost times.’ He took her left hand and played with her rings. ‘I know these are only for show.’

‘No, they’re not!’ Nicola pulled her hand back and looked at the rings glittering there. How used she’d got to seeing them there.

‘Yes, they are. If they were for real, there’d be flowers, an attentive partner, someone calling daily, and there’s not.’

‘I don’t want you to go there,’ Nicola said. ‘I don’t want to talk about it. I’ll maybe see you when I get home.’

‘Okay, I’ll take that as a date when you can tell me your secrets and I’ll tell you mine.’

\* \* \* \* \*

‘Thank goodness to be home at last,’ Nicola said, walking through her apartment as if reassuring himself that it was all still there after so many weeks away.

She discarded her clothes, entered the shower room, and luxuriated for far too long, allowing the hot water to sooth and relax her. She patted herself dry with a soft towel and wiped the mist from the mirror to take a good look at herself properly.

‘Ugh, the roots don’t look any better for being better lit.’ She ran the comb through her hair, tucking hair behind her ears. ‘It’s grown a lot,’ she noted, and then laughed to herself. She combed it down, noting that it almost reached her shoulders. She liked the idea that it was so much longer.

Inspecting herself in the mirror, Nicola wondered if she was really looking at the same face she had known before. It was the same, but yet subtly different. It *must* be the same, of course, she thought—though she considered to wonder as she looked at herself carefully while putting on her makeup and brushing her hair.

After squirting perfume several times on neck, wrists and chest, Nicola dropped her robe and dressed quickly: black tights over black panties, a matching balcony bra to hold the breast forms, a classic little black dress, and simple black court shoes with four-inch heels. She walked towards the full-length mirror on the wardrobe door, and twirled left and right. Satisfied, she sighed and then turned back.

‘Is this really me?’ she thought, looking more closely. ‘The hair needs retouching badly, but there’s something sexy about the dark roots. It’s as if I’m too cool to care about perfection.’

She held a mirror to get a side look in the bigger one. ‘My eyes look bigger. Maybe it’s because I’ve not had any makeup for weeks, but I haven’t seen myself for weeks either.’

She turned and looked again and again. ‘Did my nose have this gentle upturn at the tip? Maybe it’s that way because it was broken so badly. I never realised I was this pretty.’ This was the thought that ran through Nicola’s head as she grabbed her car keys and a favourite leather jacket, and headed towards the underground parking.

It was early evening when she parked at the rear of the university library. She could see Mrs Armitage’s office was still lit. Nicola knocked and entered her office.

‘Nicola!’ She stood up and hugged her, air kisses on each cheek. ‘Let me look at you.’ She stood back. ‘If I didn’t know better, I’d say that you’d been to a beauty spa for the past weeks, not spending them in hospital. You look wonderful.’

‘I feel good too.’ Nicola sat down. ‘I was wondering when I could come back to work.’

‘As soon as you’re ready,’ Mrs Armitage replied. ‘We’ll be so pleased to have you back. Let’s look at the rota.’

It was arranged for her to start in a few days. This settled, Nicola went down to her old work station, where the girls on duty welcomed her and made it feel as if she’d never been away.

Back in her car, she telephoned Linda. ‘Guess where I am,’ she asked when the call was answered. ‘I’m on my way to pick you up. Let’s do dinner somewhere.’

They did dinner and Nicola stayed over. It was the same as before, but as she drove home the next morning after dropping Linda off, she thought carefully, and detected some change in mood.

\* \* \* \* \*

Linda came to Nicola’s apartment for the next weekend. It seemed normal on the surface, but there was something. Nicola tried to think what, but couldn’t work it out.

It came on the Sunday morning. ‘We’re invited to my cousin’s wedding,’ Linda announced.

‘That’s nice,’ Nicola relied absently.

‘No, listen! My *boyfriend* and I are invited to my cousin’s wedding. I want to go. I want you to come as my *boyfriend*.’

‘But that would mean breaking my contract! I can’t!’

‘If you want to be with me, you can and you will. Who is there to know? You go brunette for a change. You come over to my place, get rid of the makeup, and dress normally as my boyfriend. We go to the wedding,

and you can change back and no one will be any the wiser. It means a lot to me, and I really want to go.' Linda was adamant. 'You either come with me, or that's the end of this relationship.'

'If the professor finds out, I'm in big trouble.'

The professor isn't going to find out. It's only two days you're going to be away from home. The wedding is in an exclusive resort fifty miles away. How could they find out?'

Nicola went brunette that week, and asked for natural-length nails that wouldn't look out of place anywhere. The professor's interview was perfunctory, confined to how she felt about returning to work. Judith's visualisation was directed, she said, towards helping him over the trauma of the past weeks, although as usual, he remembered nothing afterwards.

Come Friday, Nicola drove to Linda's place and parked as usual. He did as she asked, removed his makeup, and dressed as a boy in clothes he'd last worn some months before. They fit him, but were a bit loose.

'I'm so glad to see you back as George!' Linda kissed him over again.

'It does feel strange to be dressed so drably,' George admitted. 'When I catch a glimpse of my reflection, I think to check my makeup.'

'Yes, and you smooth your hair into place, even though it's tied back like a boy style,' Linda said. 'I think you'd better take off those rings too.'

'I'm so used to wearing them all the time, I forget they're there,' George replied. 'And they've left a real groove in my finger.'

\* \* \* \* \*

'There, we're back.' Linda stated the obvious as they returned from the wedding. 'That wasn't so hard, was it?'

'I guess not,' George replied. 'As long as no one finds out.'

‘You did get some strange looks, though,’ Linda said. ‘Your body language was very girly, and some of the phrases you used made me cringe.’

‘It wasn’t deliberate. I was trying to be natural.’

‘You’re more natural as Nicola than you are as George now. I really worry about you changing back.’

‘It will be okay,’ George said, wanting to change the subject.

‘Stay as George this evening,’ Linda asked. ‘Let’s go see Martina and waste time in the diner like we used to.’

‘I don’t think I dare. It’s too near. I might be seen. I’m going to change into Nicola as fast as I can.’

‘That’s mean!’

‘That’s common sense. I don’t want to take any risks.’

‘But then we’ll be three girls, and I want to be part of a couple.’

‘We can still be a couple.’

‘I don’t want to be seen as a lesbian!’ Linda snapped. ‘Don’t even think it! You go home, and I’ll see you next weekend.’

The week continued easily. The work pattern felt like it had never been interrupted, but George felt unsettled, as if a sense of foreboding were settling over him.

On Friday, he’d decided that he’d been brunette for long enough and went back to a really blonde shade of blonde. ‘Just do whatever you like, as long as it’s blonde,’ he said. ‘And really excessively feminine nails this week. I feel drab and dull, and I don’t want to next week.’

‘It will be fabulous!’ the stylist announced. ‘It’s a new shade that no one’s been brave enough to try. I’ll have to get a picture on my phone when you’ve had your makeover. Hold your hand up too. I want those big almond nails in the picture. That pale oyster colour really goes with the hair.’

‘I love it.’ He agreed. ‘I didn’t appreciate that being darker makes you feel so much more serious.’

‘Oh, but you’ll never be able to do anything with those nails.’

‘Just watch me,’ he said. ‘You have to use the balls of your fingers and hit the keyboard lightly. It’s easy once you get in the habit. It becomes second nature.’

George went for his appointment with the professor with a light heart, loving the admiring glances he got in the street, even though he wondered if some of the women thought he was simply a bimbo, showing off too much.

Pride comes before a fall. He knew there was something wrong as he sat in front of the professor’s desk. She looked at him silently for a few minutes. He didn’t know what to say and looked away, uncomfortable with the atmosphere.

‘What happened at the weekend?’ she asked eventually.

‘I think you know.’

‘Yes, but I’m waiting to hear it from you.’

‘I had to attend a wedding with my girlfriend,’ he said slowly. ‘It was doing as I was asked or lose the relationship.’

‘I’m sure there would have been another way round it if you’d really tried. You could have called me or Judith for help.’

‘I felt that there was no choice.’

‘And that leaves *me* with no choice either. Your contract contains a break clause for exactly this situation. Under it, you’re required to repay all the expenses we have incurred in taking the project this far. That’s probably in six figures by now.’

‘I don’t have that money.’

‘And you *won’t* have, either.’ She raised her voice. ‘You’ll be out of the university, out of a job, and basically unemployable.’

‘I don’t want that!’ He sobbed despite trying to keep his dignity. ‘I’m really sorry, I let you down. It won’t happen again if you allow me to continue.’

‘You do have an option, but it’s not one you’re going to like.’

‘What’s that?’ His hopes rose again.

‘I am able to allow the project to continue if you agree to steps being taken to prevent the repetition of behaviour which may jeopardise the success of the project in the future.’

‘I don’t understand. What does it mean?’

‘It means you get breast implants.’

‘But—that’s *permanent!*’

‘Yes it’s permanent, at least until they’re removed the same way they were put in.’ Anna held his gaze. ‘It means you can’t decide to break the dress code, because they’d be there on your chest and you couldn’t decide to take them off for a weekend jaunt, whatever your girlfriend may wish.’

‘How long do I have to decide?’

‘You have to decide right now,’ Anna said sternly. ‘Either yes to implants, or get out and pack up this instant.’

‘And when would I have the surgery if I decided to do that?’

‘On Monday morning. The recovery period is only a few days, and you’d only be in the clinic for a few hours.’

Okay,’ he said. ‘Implants it is.’

‘A wise decision. Please tell Judith what you’ve decided and I’m sure she’ll be able to help you visualise a quick recovery and how to have fun afterwards.’

‘I’m truly sorry to have let you down.’

‘I’m sorry too, but this is but another step on the road. I’m sure we won’t have any problems like this in future.’

He told Judith what had happened in a stuttering, stumbling way. She said nothing until he had finished and explained what Anna had decided. She took his hands and when he was comfortable, asked him to relax as usual. He drifted away as she talked, and felt calmer and easier than he had for weeks.

‘That decision was coming anyway,’

‘I think it was always at the back of Anna’s mind,’ Judith said. ‘She didn’t know how to introduce it, but then you gave her the opportunity to use it as a penalty, or a guarantee for your future behaviour.’

‘Can I ask you where this is all going?’

‘I don’t know. I’m a hired assistant, not really significant in the planning. I do what I’m asked to do.’

‘Am I meant to become a girl at the end of all this?’

‘I really don’t know. My job is only to help you to keep calm and happy through each stage, and to make it all easier for you.’

He said nothing about it when he spent the weekend with Linda. He didn’t know what to say anyway.

\* \* \* \* \*

On Monday morning, a car arrived to take him to the clinic. Within a few minutes, he was reclining on a stretcher, wearing a gown which closed with ties down the front. Nurse fitted a cannula into the back of his hand and attached it to a drip on a stand attached to the stretcher.

‘Good to see you again.’ Richard Adams, dressed in scrubs, opened a file and looked at it through half-moon glasses. ‘I have these measurements from when you were with us some time ago. Anna asks that you have a high-profile implant, with a size slightly bigger than your frame would suggest.’

‘What does that mean, doctor?’

‘In your case, something between a C and a D cup bra, with an appearance that a boyfriend might describe as “perky”. You’ll love them. The looks and the

attention you'll get will be guaranteed to make sure you won't go anywhere without being noticed.'

'That's what I'm afraid of,' George replied. 'Can you make them a bit smaller?'

'Don't get me wrong.' The doctor took his pulse. 'You'll not be a freak, far from it. You'll simply be an attractive young woman with an elegant profile—and of course you'll have a cleavage to make men drool, I promise.'

'I'm scared. I don't want to make them drool, or to be a freak,' he said as the doctor opened the valve and the drip started to flow.

He felt it almost at once. An easy feeling drifted over him. He wanted to talk but the words wouldn't come. His last thought was that, whatever he wanted to say, it was too late now. He was conscious of the stretcher being wheeled into a brightly lit room, and then he drifted further away.

His next thought was that a truck had driven over his chest. He took a few deep breaths and felt awareness returning fast.

'Why on earth did I agree to this?' He asked himself as he blinked and peered down towards his chest where some sort of dressing concealed a mound. 'I must be mad.'

A nurse in scrubs checked on him a few minutes later, and when she saw that he was awake, called for Doctor Adams.

'Well, that was quick and simple,' the doctor told him. 'In a few days, the bruising will be gone and you'll look as natural as a man with breast implants can be made to look. The sutures will dissolve when they've done their job, and there should be hardly any scarring.'

He gently felt around the dressing as he spoke. 'Your new assets will bring out another dimension of your personality, I'm sure. I've never had an unhappy patient in the years that I've been doing this. When you're fully recovered from the anaesthetic, a car will take you home. No straining for the next few days, give it time to heal, and for the bruises to fade. You can call

me at any time if you need to. You'll know when everything's in place.'

'In place?' He asked.

'Your breasts will feel a bit high on your chest, but as the bruising recedes and the skin moulds around them, they'll hang lower and settle into a natural position. Whatever you do, don't go braless for at least six weeks, even in bed.'

'Is that it?'

'Yes. You're the owner of the best boobs I've seen this month,' he joked. 'Treat them gently and they'll give you hours of fun.'

'I'm too scared to think of fun. Whatever I've done, it's too late now,' he thought when he was alone. 'And what's Linda going to say when she finds out?'

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Fortunately, Linda was out of town visiting her parents through the weekend. George returned to work after a couple of days, happy that the weekend was going to be trouble-free, even if it was only postponing something he didn't know how to deal with.

He breezed through his Friday salon appointment, feeling good. He allowed the stylist to make his hair big and bouncy, platinum for the first time in ages. To complete the picture, his nails were silver stilettos, quite impractical, but he didn't feel like being practical at all.

Maybe it was the breasts. They were there, and nothing that he could do would disguise them. If he didn't wear a bra, the discomfort was awful. When he did wear a bra, the breasts spoke for themselves, prominent on his chest, impossible to conceal, difficult to minimise.

In the office, there was no comment. They'd been used to seeing him with padding concealed under his clothes. Showing a bit more flesh, or changing his style of clothing, was simply something that girls did from time to time.

The professor was gentle and pleased, reassuring him. 'I love it that you've finally got real breasts. It will help you develop as a woman, and make the project move faster.'

With Judith, there was more reaffirmation.

'I guess it's made me feel different,' George replied. 'Look at me, blonder than ever with ridiculous nails—and, you know what, I feel really great, and powerful too. Is that strange?'

'I'd say it's embracing femininity,' Judith replied. 'You really want to see how your breasts look in something low cut and daring. You want to try out your sexuality for real.'

'I think I do. And my girlfriend is away this week.'

'That means you can put off things you don't know how to explain.'

'Thankfully, it does. I have no idea how to explain why I have bigger breasts than she does.'

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One problem remained. He had to tell Linda that he wasn't going to be with her at the weekend. That wasn't going to be easy, but it put off his having to explain his breasts to her. He telephoned and couldn't get her. He blurted out an excuse into her answering machine, promising to be there the next weekend. It came quickly.

'Hi George.' Lynda called his mobile.

'I can't talk now,' he replied. 'I'm at work.'

'I missed you last weekend,' she said. 'I only wanted to say sorry for being so mean. I know you're in the project to make life better. I shouldn't have been so mean. I should have supported you more.'

'That's okay.' He didn't know what had happened to make her say these things.

'I'll make it up to you at the weekend,' Linda said. 'I'll see you on Friday as usual. Martina sends her love as well.'

‘I’ll see you then.’

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‘I can’t put off seeing her,’ he explained to the professor after his salon session on Friday afternoon. ‘And it’s not as if I can take off these breasts either. I don’t know how to explain. I don’t know what to say to her.’

‘You could tell her that if she hadn’t got you to break the programme, you wouldn’t have had to get the operation.’

‘That was your choice,’ he said softly. ‘I know I was in the wrong, but I didn’t expect you to do *this* to me.’

‘I was hoping all along to get you to have breasts of your own. I wanted it to be your decision when you morphed into being a girl, but you gave me the opportunity. What else could I do?’

‘Okay, I appreciate what’s done is done.’

‘And I think you rather like the idea.’ She smiled. ‘I know it’s only been a couple of weeks and you’re perhaps still healing, but I’ve noticed the way you dress, the way you carry yourself. You like playing the game, showing off, making boys look at you.’

‘It’s fun,’ he admitted. ‘But that doesn’t make it easier to explain to my girlfriend.’

‘I’m sure you’ll work it out.’

I can help you to visualise the conversation,’ Judith said when he arrived for her session later. ‘There are ways of expressing yourself which could help.’

‘I don’t see how,’ he replied. ‘I’m dreading having to explain.’

‘Perhaps there’s an easier way,’ Judith replied. ‘Try and visualise it all. You’re meeting as you usually do. Relax and let me guide you through a scenario.’

His head was nodding and his eyes were closing at those words. He wanted to allow his mind to relax and wander into her directions. Thus it was that, an hour later, he was shopping for a new outfit to meet Lynda and Martina.



He changed in the shop. Tight denim jeans, with booties, only a three inch heel, but they were black suede, and a statement in themselves. His top was dark blue, figured and tight.

‘Darn it,’ George thought. ‘I can’t hide, so I might as well be proud and show them what I’ve got.’

He selected a dark grey leather jacket – he liked leather jackets anyway – and this one was fitted closely to the waist, with a zipper to the stand-up collar and small zips to fasten the sleeves tightly to his wrists. A matching handbag, with a silver chain shoulder strap, completed the outfit.

He touched up his makeup, outlining his eyes one more time to make sure it was heavy and perfect; he took a deep breath and was on his way.

In the diner, he spotted them waiting at the usual table. He air-kissed them both and sat down. Slowly he reached for the zipper on his jacket, and playfully, slowly lowered it, revealing real cleavage.

‘They look real!’ Martina gasped.

Linda stared, open-mouthed. ‘Are they real?’ she asked.

‘Yes and no.’ He replied. ‘They’re not real breasts, they’re implants and I can’t take them off.’

‘Do you want to?’ Martina spluttered and stuttered.

‘Why did you let them do that to you?’ Linda asked.

He explained about the break in his contract and the penalty for doing so. ‘I had no choice,’ he said. ‘It was this or being forever in debt and having no job.’

‘Surely that would have been better,’ Martina said.

‘Not from where I was standing. I had no choice.’

‘But you don’t have to show them off like that.’

‘Don’t be silly. I’m a girl, or playing the part of a girl. Why would I go around hiding, even if I could? There’s no way I could hide *these*.’

‘I guess not,’ Linda said softly. ‘Do they feel real? They really look it.’

'You can feel later. I *think* they feel real. There's certainly a weight to them. I can't go braless for long without knowing about it.'

'Maybe that's not something I want to hear from my boyfriend,' Linda said. 'How big are they?'

'I'm a small D cup.'

'I don't know what to say.' Linda's face coloured up in anger. 'I don't think I want a boyfriend with bigger breasts than I have. Look at you: you're blonder than me, your makeup's better than mine. The guys all looked at you when you came in, and you walk with a wiggle that I could never do. That does it. This is the end.'

'But—I don't—'

'Don't say a word. Martina and I are going. I don't want to see you again, ever!' She took Martina's arm and half dragged her away. People looked at the commotion as they left.

'Well, I guess that went well,' he said to anyone who could hear. He saw that he had become the centre of attention and that the place had fallen silent. He got up and left as softly as he could.

Round the corner, he took a deep breath. Some things were inevitable, he thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

Darren was another matter.

'Are you free on Saturday evening?' he asked when he passed through the library a few days later. 'I've an invitation from one of our patrons and it's "plus one" where I'm expected to bring a partner.'

George noticed Darren's eyes drifting downwards. He was getting used to the effect of open buttons lower down his blouse. The weekend's shopping trip had been successful, with a couple of dresses, blouses, and some really tight tops.

'I'm sure you could find someone else,' he said, hoping that the answer would be that he couldn't.

‘Maybe, but I’d love that to be *you*. I don’t want it to be anyone else.’

‘Okay.’ George feared he was allowing things to get deeper and deeper, into something that he couldn’t handle. ‘Is it another formal occasion or can I be casual?’

‘Casual would be good. Maybe smart casual. I’m sure you’ll look wonderful.’ Darren’s eyes strayed downwards again. George caught his gaze.

‘Forgive me,’ Darren said. ‘I’m not used to you wearing something so low. I guess I always thought of you as a little shy.’

‘Maybe I’m learning something new about how to handle men,’ George replied enigmatically.

The week went slowly. Friday’s appointments came around. ‘Do I stay platinum?’ he asked the stylist. ‘I’m going to something that might be a bit formal.’

‘Do you want to stay platinum?’ she asked.

‘I think I do,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘I’ve really enjoyed being blasé, and obvious and the centre of attention.’

‘Then go girl. Be yourself. You don’t have to please anyone else.’

‘But I do think these nails have to go.’ He gestured with his fingers. ‘I’d better be a little more conservative this week.’ He settled for shorter nails.

‘Can I have them with a French manicure? I’d like the acrylic and fade the colour from deep red to almost white at the tip.’ He said.

He saw the professor and Judith. He told them what he was doing and where he was going. A few words of approval, and he was on his way back to his apartment.

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Saturday was a day of preparation. George had looked through the wardrobes in a way he hadn’t done before. ‘Maybe I’m looking with a girl’s eye now’—the

thought filtered through as he discarded dress after dress.

Then he noticed a deep red one. He held it against him and looked intently. He did a twirl and liked the way it flared and then fell elegantly.

'This looks good,' he thought. 'I'll shower and try it, then if it's not right I can always use the little black dress again.'

He showered and washed his hair. He dried it carefully, so that it hung smooth and straight over his shoulders. He shook his head, watching it in the mirror as the locks swayed and fell back into place.

'Start from the skin out,' he said to himself, and then wondered where this phrase had come from. Maybe it was one from Judith, who always had something reassuring to say.

Pink panties with red flowers, boy boxer style, went over his elastic restrainer. A matching bra, a balconette this time, held his breasts comfortably, but prominently forward, with generous cleavage between the cups. A garter belt, matching the set, held up stockings of nude taupe. His shoes were nude sandals with a thin platform sole, and straps going round his ankles. Rings, earrings, necklace and a couple of bangles completed the look.

His hair was to remain heavy and straight. He wanted it to fall and move, sway when he did and fall when he leaned forwards. He knew it would fall back into place.

Then he stepped into the dress again. He smoothed into place and reached to the back to pull up the zip, from below hip level to just above the line of his bra.

'I should have thought about these zippers before I kept these nails,' he grumbled to himself. 'I'll never get out of this dress.'

He wriggled and pulled. It slipped into place just as if it had been measured to do so, without a spare width of thread, yet without a hint of being over-tight.

Once the dress was on, he turned to the mirror. The scoop neckline was lower than he expected it to be. 'Can I do this?' he asked himself. 'Will they think I'm

showing too much?’ He adjusted the neckline slightly and stood back from the mirror, smoothing the fabric over his stomach.

‘You’ll do,’ he said, blowing himself a kiss and laughing. ‘If they don’t like it, they can please themselves.’

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‘You look wonderful.’ Darren collected Nicola and kissed her on the cheek. His hand drifted to her waist, then to her butt as he gently escorted her from the building.

The waiting limousine took them across town to a mansion in its own grounds, brightly lit and full of people dressed brightly. Voices and music, the clink of glasses and laughter could be heard as they left the vehicle and entered the doors. Formally dressed waiters and waitresses offered drinks from trays as they circulated the room.

They circulated. Darren introduced her here and there, seeming to know everyone. Nicola felt herself slipping into full female mode as she laughed at jokes, waved her hands, touched the sleeve of the men chatting to them, and held their eyes when they rose from cleavage to her face. She smiled everywhere, accepting the unspoken interest and lust in their eyes. If only they knew.

They danced, badly in the rock numbers, smooching in the slow ones. Nicola allowed Darren to lead, and swayed easily to the beat. Darren’s hand slipped to her butt again. She looked at him meaningfully and nodded her head towards the errant hand. It rose to her waist, and then drifted down again, a finger wandering dangerously into the top of the crack.

Nicola felt it and looked at Darren. She wriggled, pushing slightly against the finger, but decided she liked it anyway. If this was what it was like to be a girl in these situations, it felt good. It felt *too* good; she didn’t want the dance to end. Her hand slipped to the back of Darren’s head and ruffled the hairs behind his ears. They looked at each other. Oblivious to the rest of the room, they kissed and kissed again.

‘Everyone’s looking at us.’ She blushed as Darren whispered it in her ear.

‘I’m sure they’re not.’ She looked round and found that she met the eye of several people. The women stared; the men looked away as she held their gaze. ‘I think you’re right,’ she said. ‘You need to cool it, or your reputation’s going to be shot.’

‘What about yours?’ Darren laughed. ‘A girl should be beyond reproach.’

‘Maybe, but there are secrets and there are secrets. Maybe I’m Cinderella and I’m going to disappear.’

‘Not from me, you’re not. I’m the handsome prince, I’ll have you arrested.’

‘But this isn’t your party.’

‘Darn. I forgot that. Maybe we’d better mingle.’ He took Nicola’s hand and they walked to the edge of the dance floor and then began to circulate around. They chatted meaninglessly as they smiled, holding hands round the room. When they got to the door, he pulled Nicola to him and steered her outside.

He waved, and a car appeared almost at once. They were on their way out of the drive in an instant.

‘You planned that!’ Nicola said as Darren grinned conspiratorially, put his arm around her shoulder, and pulled her close. They kissed again. ‘I could get use to this,’ Nicola thought.

‘Yes, I confess, I want you alone. You look so beautiful tonight; I want you all to myself.’

‘Wow!’ Nicola thought. ‘This man is mine.’

She snuggled into the crook of Darren’s arm, and pulled his arm forwards so that the hand played lightly with her breast through the dress.

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‘What am I doing?’ The thought paralysed Nicola suddenly. ‘He’s going to want more, and find that I haven’t got what he thinks I’ve got. What do I do?’ In a daze, she allowed Darren to lead her from the car, up

the elevator and into his apartment. Darren laid her on the couch, took off his jacket and tie, and then sat beside her. Darren's hand stroked her calf and then played higher to her knee, and then her thigh. The fabric of the dress rose upwards too.

'Take my shoes off, please,' Nicola said, raising her foot so that Darren could do as she asked.

Acting on impulse, Nicola rolled to her knees in front of Darren, who kissed her again. Fumbling with her nails, she undid the trouser belt and then the button and zip on the front of Darren's trousers. Her hand stealthily reached inside. Darren looked her in the eye, a smile playing on his lips.

The bulge was all too apparent. Nicola's hand reached inside and eased Darren's cock out of the confines of his clothes. She looked at it, the veins standing out, as her fingers clasped it as a precious gift. She saw her nails, ridiculously long, gently stroking the sac and the underside. Her head went lower and then he was licking the tip.

It tasted a little salty but not unpleasant. It smelled of male sweat, but clean and not strongly. It was an attractive scent, yet a strong one.

She swirled her tongue around the tip and then enveloped it in her mouth. She gasped for breath, gagged a little, and then taking a deep breath, pushed down, keeping her teeth away, and allowed the tip to hit the back of his throat. She sucked his cock. It seemed the natural thing to do.

'If I can get him to cum, he'll not be looking for a pussy,' Nicola thought, sucking again.

Darren moaned, and ran his hands through the hair behind her ears. He held her closely and began thrusting his penis in and out of her mouth. It went on and on. Nicola could feel Darren stiffening further and with a moan, he held still. Then it started to pulse and Darren was shooting something to the back of his throat. It came and came.

He held himself still and then with a sigh, Darren released his grip on the back of her head. She allowed the cock to soften in his mouth and then pulled back, releasing it to lie, much reduced, against her clothes.

The taste was in her throat, and in her mouth. She swallowed and wiped a stray drop from her chin. She saw it white and liquid on her finger. She looked up at Darren and licked it off, seductively, on auto-pilot. How had she known to do all these things? Maybe it was primeval instinct.

‘I must look a mess.’ She pushed her hair back and ran fingers through to straighten it.

‘You look beautiful.’ Darren pulled her close again and his hand started to raise the hem of his dress.

She froze in fear, and then stood suddenly. ‘I have a confession,’ she said, suddenly clear as to what she had to say, and suddenly afraid of the consequences.

Darren pulled her back down. His hand returned edging up the thigh, feeling the edge of her panties.

‘I have a penis,’ Nicola said.

‘I know,’ Darren said.

‘You know?’ It was a shock.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Darren said, reaching for her again. This time she allowed herself to be drawn toward him and as if in a trance, watched as Darren removed her panties, and then the strong garment which held her penis so tightly. The dress followed and then the bra. She stood fully naked before Darren, who stripped quickly.

Darren picked her up again, took her into the bedroom, lay her down on the bed, and coaxed her penis into life. In turn he licked and played with it, took it in his mouth, and sucked it to full size. As he did so, Darren’s own penis rose. Nicola looked at it, seeing for the first time how strong it looked and how much she had to take into her mouth.

Darren flipped her over so that she was kneeling, with her head on his elbows before him. She felt a finger at her hole, and then something cold as the finger played around the opening.

She moaned as the finger entered; then another followed and worked its way round, and round, in and out. Darren licked the skin around the hole and another cold sensation was followed by the fingers working more determinedly and more strongly inwards.

She gasped as Darren shifted and was kneeling behind her. She knew what he was feeling now, as Darren eased her back slowly. The tip of Darren's penis was edging slowly forwards, entering. It hurt, but now whatever feeling he had before was lost in a gasp of animal desire, and she moaned with the pain, yet pushed back, even against the growing pain. Darren pushed too, working himself in and out, further in each time.

Nicola gasped again, and suddenly felt something slipping inside her. It was Darren. Nicola was being taken like a girl. She tried to think of it, but her mind was flowing away from thought into pure sensation.

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'I was so afraid,' Nicola said when Darren woke and held her in his arms. 'I don't feel in control of anything anymore—what do I do, what do I say.'

Darren kissed her, and then kissed her again. 'I think you should relax. You're a beautiful woman. You don't have to think about things you don't understand. Enjoy what you have.'

'But I'm confused! What do I have to do? Am I Nicola now, for good? Has George disappeared forever? What should I do?'

'Do you need to think so deeply?' Darren asked. 'Why can't you accept the things that are, and forget about the things that might have been, or maybe never were?'

'Tell me about it,' Nicola replied. 'I live as a woman. I have breasts. I've been dumped by my girlfriend. I've slept with a man. What else could there be to confuse me?'

'Nothing. You've had a few shocks. If Nicola feels right, then let Nicola be who you are.'

'I think I am Nicola now. I want to be her. I love being a girl, having you around, but I don't know how you knew about me.'

‘Anna Zenakis is my cousin,’ Darren confessed. ‘I sponsored the programme. I asked her to find out if a decent man could be changed.’

‘But you’re in the History of Art department!’ Nicola said. ‘You don’t do psychology, or any kind of mind experiments. And how could you afford it?’

‘I do have some funds. Father invested well, and it’s been passed down to me. All you’ve had has come from my funds.’

‘So I’m your kept woman. Is that what this has all been about?’

‘Of course not. Anna set up the programme for me. I wanted a wife. There, I’ve admitted it. It was all for selfish reasons.’

‘But why *me*? Why should you think you’d the right to mess with my life?’

‘I wanted it to be someone who I could relate to,’ Darren confessed. ‘And yes, I wanted someone to seduce and change for my own purposes. That’s why I sponsored it all.’

‘I still don’t understand.’

‘I wanted to create a real girly sort of girl. The makeup, the hair, the nails, the clothes and the shoes. I figured that, for the right kind of intelligent man, the opportunity to play with all the mysteries of the opposite sex would be irresistible.’

‘It has been fun,’ Nicola admitted. ‘But what about the visualisation sessions with Judith, and the weekly reports to the professor?’

‘Oh, don’t worry about Anna. She’ll get a book out of it. The names will be changed, but she’ll have something to write about. As for Judith, she’s a psychologist, an analyst, and she’s also fascinated by hypnosis. Your visualisations were trances to prepare you for whatever was to come next. They were to help you feel confident and comfortable, and let you slip into a girl mind set.’

‘It certainly worked. But what happens to me now?’

'I'd love you to stay female. I'd love to be closer to you, and maybe when you get used to being as we are, we could take it further.'

'Further? I don't think I could be more female without major surgery. And don't ask me to do *that!*'

'I don't expect surgery. I love the equipment you have. Think of it as every girl's dream, the white wedding, the big dress, the occasion, the honeymoon, and the hours of excitement that comes with all the arrangements.'

'Would you really do that for me?'

'Of course! Haven't I explained enough?'

'Are you *proposing* to me?' Nicola was dumbfounded. 'I mean, I like you. I love the sex. I think I love being this female me. Am I enough for you? Do you want to marry me?'

'Too many questions,' Darren said. 'And *yes* to all of them. You've always had the rings; now they'll mean everything.'

'I think I've fallen in love,' Nicola replied. 'And I don't really understand how that could ever have happened.'

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