

PRESTOCHANGO



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Chapter One

The audience watched silently, every eye transfixed to the stage. They were sitting in the lounge of a rather low-grade hotel/casino in Dead Springs, Nevada. Dead Springs had tried for years, unsuccessfully, to promote itself as the next Las Vegas. Unfortunately its name, its frightening proximity to several old nuclear test sites, and its general lack of redeeming qualities had left it little more than a sparsely visited tourist trap. The aforementioned casino was “Nero’s Palace,” the largest one in town.

What the audience was paying so close attention to were the two people on the stage. The first one was a tuxedoed man of about twenty-three. He was good looking, though not spectacularly so. Average height, with black hair and more muscular than most guys his age. At the moment he was being shackled to a very large drill press. He was known as Brian the Great, Master of Illu-

sion, Escape Artist Extraordinaire. His driver's license said "Brian Howard." He loved magic and hated his job.

The person who was shackling Brian (the Great) to the drill press had often been told that she could have made a good living as a model. Unfortunately the people who told her this were usually drunken businessmen who were trying unsuccessfully to get her into bed, so she had never taken them seriously. Actually, she was extremely good looking. She had very long, platinum blonde hair, long legs, and an ample chest. She also had a very attractive face that looked good, even without makeup. She looked to be about twenty, though she was actually slightly older than Brian. She was wearing a bikini top, a leather mini-skirt, and fishnet stockings (the management insisted on this outfit because it drew customers). Her name was Tracy and she'd been Brian's assistant and friend almost as long as he'd been a magician. She liked her job more than Brian did, though she always felt there was more to life.



A promotional poster from Brian and Tracy's magic act.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen," said the magician "as the lovely Tracy finishes shackling me down, I shall begin the most dangerous trick of the night. When I give the word, Tracy will start this machine of death and dismemberment." He motioned to the drill press with his head. "If I cannot free myself from these fetters about my wrists and ankles in precisely thirty seconds, I will be impaled by this skewer of doom. Anyone who is not prepared to witness my gory demise, please leave now. But don't worry, I've studied with the master sorcerers of Tibet and India." Actually, except from a brief trip to Tijuana, he had never been out of the country. "I have learned things that prevent me from being bound by material objects."

With that, Tracy pulled the lever that started the machine. Brian struggled against his bonds. The drill moved closer and closer to his body. Twenty-five seconds later, Brian was standing next

to the drill press bowing to the audience. He could have gotten out in around ten seconds, but he had to keep up the suspense. He then made some blatant plugs for the casino and thanked the audience. He and Tracy linked arms, bowed, and the curtain fell.

Tracy and Brian walked silently back to Brian's cluttered dressing room. As soon as they were alone, Brian fixed her with an unfriendly stare.

"How can you do this to me?" he barked. "This is the break I've been waiting for all my life! I'll never have another opportunity like this again!"

A couple of days ago, a man from the audience had approached Brian and Tracy. He turned out to be a talent scout from a major casino in Las Vegas. He had been so impressed by their act that he offered them a year-long contract to perform at the casino. It had been Brian's dream come true. He had always wanted to perform in front of a sizable audience in a classy place. Instead, Nero's was the best he could manage. The contract paid more for a year than he and Tracy made in three. It looked as if he had finally realized his goal. Unfortunately there was a major problem. Tracy didn't want to go to Las Vegas.

Tracy looked Brian in the eye. "I'm sorry," she said. "I wish I could help you. I know how much this means to you. But the fact is, I am in love. I'm getting married in a couple of months, and Las Vegas isn't in the cards for me."

A few months ago, Brian had called an audience member up on stage to test and make sure that the chains he was tied up in were real. The volunteer was a man named David Stepstone. He was an Australian businessman whose company's travel agent had unfortunately believed the claims made by the Dead Springs chamber of commerce and had sent him there on a business trip. When David and Tracy met up there on stage, something had clicked. David took Tracy out to dinner that night. Every weekend after that David flew out to the States to see her (he was quite wealthy). Tracy nearly drove Brian nuts talking about him. About a week ago he popped the question. Tracy said yes. They would be married in the states, and then move to Australia together. Which was bad news for Brian.

"Isn't there any way you could postpone the wedding for a while?" he asked, knowing the answer already.

"No, of course not. Look, you're making too big a deal about this. I'm not the magician, I'm just the assistant. I'm sure you can find another pretty face in Las Vegas."

Brian lost it. "Another pretty face! Another pretty face! Do you think that's all you are to me? Tracy, if it wasn't for you, I couldn't do half my routine!"

While most pretty magician's assistants were simply there to look good, this was not the case with Tracy. Tracy actually helped Brian perform his tricks. She could easily palm things that he had made "disappear." She slipped him lock picks and skeleton keys when he needed them for escapes. She distracted the audience when Brian needed their attention to be elsewhere. She

knew all the cues; where to stand, what to say, when to smile, when to look scared, what to do. They had developed the act together.

“Look Tracy,” Brian went on, more calmly, “It would take me at least three months to train another assistant from scratch, and until then I could only do my most basic tricks. I couldn’t do anything too complicated without you, and I wouldn’t dare do any dangerous escapes.” Dangerous escapes were the highlight of his act.

Tracy sighed. “Brian, if I had never met Dave I’d be as excited as you are right now. But we can’t chance facts. I’m not as young as I used to be. I want to have children. I’m tired of wearing next to nothing, getting leered at by every drunk in town. I want to settle down and have a normal life. I’m in love with David, and I can’t put everything on hold now. I’m sorry Brian. You’re my best friend, but this is something you’ll have to do on your own.”

“I see.”

“This will all work out for you,” she said unconvincingly.

“I’m sure it will. Heck, there’ll be other good job offers. Something will come up,” he replied, even less sincerely.

Tracy patted his hand, got up, and returned to her dressing room.

As soon as Tracy left, Brian got out a bottle of Scotch from his desk and poured himself a belt. He wasn’t fooling himself. This Vegas job was a one time shot and without Tracy it wouldn’t happen.

He took a drink and thought back to when he and Tracy had first met. It was years ago. He had been a street magician in Dead Springs. She was a waitress. She had stopped to watch his act. Afterwards, she stayed to talk and offer some suggestions. They became friends immediately. When Brian was offered the job at Nero’s he asked Tracy to be his assistant.

Tracy and Brian had been through a lot together. They had even been lovers, briefly. It happened after Brian’s girlfriend and Tracy’s boyfriend had both dumped them within two days of each other. Tracy and Brian were emotional wrecks after that, and found comfort in each other’s arms. Their romance had been fulfilling and had helped them both emotionally, but it hadn’t lasted. They both knew that while their friendship would always be there, and that they enjoyed the time they spent making love to each other, they weren’t meant to be together. After about a month they decided to just be good friends, and unlike most ex-couples, they did just that.

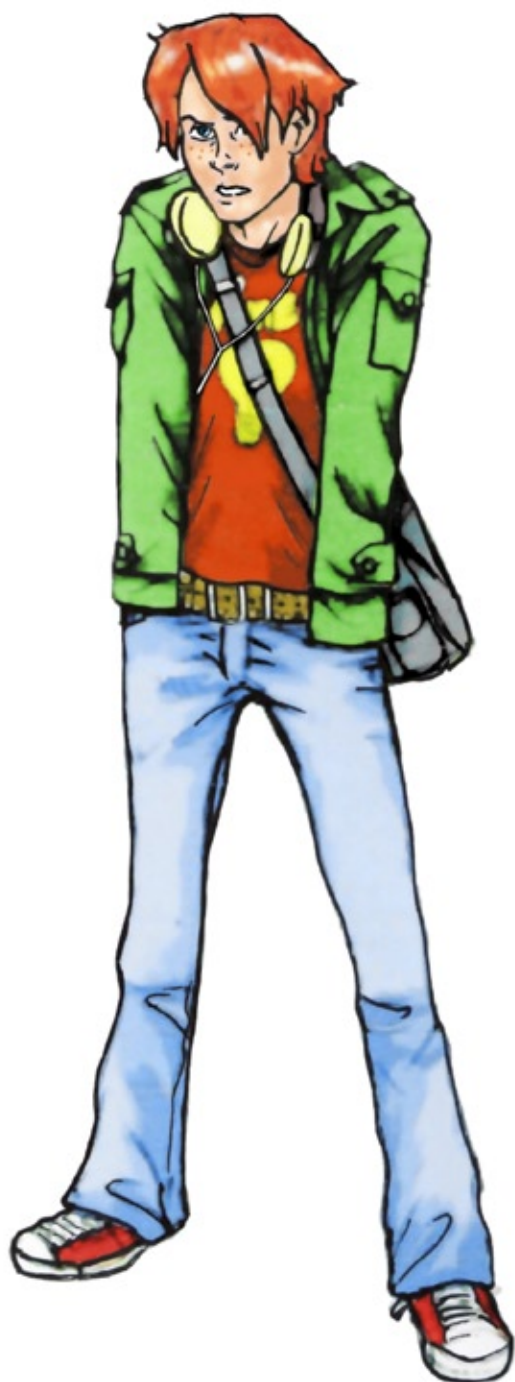
Brian groaned and poured himself another drink. Tracy was right, she needed to get on with her life. He knew she’d be happy with David, and he wanted that.

He turned and faced the other inhabitant of the room, Harvey, his pet rabbit. “Looks like it’s just you and me again, Harv.” Harvey had no comment. “I just had hoped that this Vegas thing

would work out somehow. I guess it's not going to be. Too bad lovely assistants are so hard to come by."

Brian stretched back in his chair. In a little while he'd go apologize to Tracy and wish her well. For now, he was going to sulk, something he was rather good at.

Brian wasn't the only one thinking. Tracy had been staring at her reflection in her dressing room mirror and worrying for the past half-hour. She felt horrible. She had been so excited about getting married that she hadn't thought how this would hurt Brian. He had been right; it would be impossible to go to Las Vegas without a skilled assistant. Unfortunately, she was the only one besides Brian who knew the act very well.



Ray

She then had a thought. She wasn't the only one who knew the act. There was one other. Ray. Ray was a hotel employee whose main job it was to help out with the magic act. He was eighteen. He knew the act almost as well as they did. He was a friend of both Brian and Tracy. With some serious training he could be a competent assistant...

No, that would never work. No magician had a male assistant. They were always good looking women. Ray would never work. Unless...

Unless Ray could somehow become a beautiful woman! The idea wasn't as far fetched as it seemed. Tracy started thinking very hard. Ray was not very masculine. He was shorter than she was. He didn't have much of a beard and no chest hair. He was slender and non-muscular. He had a fair complexion with a lot of freckles. Most fortunately, he had long, red hair, which could easily be made up to be feminine.

Tracy formed a picture of Ray in her mind. Add a form fitting dress. Add a lot of makeup and a manicure. Add some high heels and a female hair cut. Add some earrings and a lot of padding in the chest and hips. Add shaved legs and plucked eyebrows. With a little coaching on the fine points of being a woman, Ray could pass a young lady, at least as seen from the audience! Ray could be Brian's assistant, and a lovely one at that!



Tracy, Ray, and Brian.

Ray never enjoyed having his picture taken, his clothes were always the wrong size and he could never afford a good haircut.

There were just two big problems. The first one was that Brian would almost certainly veto the idea. The second one was even bigger. How could Ray be convinced to work as “Rhea” for an entire year?

Tracy figured she could convince Brian to at least consider the idea. But Ray? What would he think? Still, it was the only solution as she could see it. She got up and walked back to Brian’s dressing room.



Chapter Two

Brian was still stretched out in his chair when Tracy came back. Before he could apologize for yelling at her earlier, she told him that she had come up with a wonderful solution to the dilemma.

“Really?” asked Brian, hoping that it really was something that would work.

“We get Ray to be your assistant!” Tracy replied with a big smile. “He knows our act, with a little training he could be ready to take over for me...”

“Nope,” Brian cut her off “Nothing doing. Thanks for the suggestion, but it won’t work. I need a female assistant. Ray wouldn’t look right. The only magicians I’ve known who’ve had male assistants were women.”

“Just hear me out. I know Ray wouldn’t work as a man. But what if he wasn’t a man? What if he was a woman?”

“Then that would be a great answer to my problem. Unfortunately, Ray is not a woman.”

“I think I could change that.”

That shocked Brian. “What do you mean by that?”

“Look, with a new wardrobe, a haircut, a makeover by yours truly, and some other ‘improvements,’ I think I could make Ray into a passable female. It’s worth a shot.”

Brian thought about it. Tracy was quite good when it came to makeup. During the off season at the casino she often made extra money by doing makeovers for other female performers.

Ray really wasn’t a macho man. He was more, well, delicate. He could also learn the role of Brian’s assistant before the Vegas job was to start. And from an audience member’s point of view no one would really be able to tell he was a guy. This would solve the problem at hand. It was quite tempting.

“So Ray actually told you he’d be willing to do this? I never would have thought he’d agree.”

“Well...” said Tracy nervously, “he hasn’t exactly agreed to do it. In fact, I haven’t even asked him yet. I wanted to get the O.K. from you first.”

Brian was brought joltingly back to reality. “You haven’t asked him? Why in God’s name would you think he’d want to do this in the first place? If you ask him he’ll laugh in your face! No male would be willing to become a girl for a year!”

“Calm down Brian. It would only be for a couple of shows a night. He could be himself for the rest of the time.”

“No, he couldn’t! Don’t you see, if the casino hires him a woman, then they can never see him as a man! This means he’d have to dress as a girl, not only for every show, but for every rehearsal, every staff meeting, every time he might be around anyone from work! Hell, he’d have to show up for work already dressed like a girl, which means he would have to get dressed up at home! And what would his neighbors think if they saw him in a dress? Not to mention that his paychecks would be made out to his “female side.” No bank would cash them to anyone except Ray in drag!”

The smile quickly left Tracy’s face. “I hadn’t thought about all that.”

“That’s not even the main problem. If word ever got out that Ray wasn’t really a girl, it would be a major embarrassment to the casino. We’d both be fired, probably sued, and rest assured that we’d never work the entertainment circuit again! My career would be over and Ray would probably be humiliated for the rest of his life!”

“I guess it was a dumb idea.”

Brian stopped. He realized he'd been yelling at Tracy again. “No, it wasn't a dumb idea. It was actually a pretty clever solution, but I don't think it will work. The only way I'd consider it is if we could somehow to convince Ray to live as a woman, twenty-four hours a day, for twelve months.”

“You don't suppose there's any way to get him to do it? Any way at all?”

Brian was about to say no, but stopped. Wasn't there anything that would make the offer attractive to Ray?

Well, for starters, there was the money. The job of Brian's assistant paid a lot. Tracy didn't know it, but Ray was poor. Really poor. Brian wasn't sure where his parents were, all he knew is they weren't around. Even though Ray was only eighteen, he had dropped out of school two years ago to support himself. Though Ray would never admit it, Brian knew he was in serious financial trouble. Besides the casino work Ray had two other jobs. He never had enough cash for lunch, so Brian always bought him some. Once Brian had driven him home after work and was shocked at how run down Ray's apartment building was, even by Dead Springs standards.

For Brian this new job meant recognition, a chance to do what he enjoyed, and maybe a new car. For Ray, it might mean a chance to escape the grinding poverty he had known all his life.

Then there was something else. Ray had once told him that it was his lifelong dream to become an actor. Ray wasn't fooling himself, he knew what the odds of that happening were, especially for a scrawny kid who had never had any sort of training. Still, he often thought about it and hoped, futilely, that it might someday happen.

Maybe they could convince Ray that becoming a woman was just an acting role. A somewhat unorthodox role, granted, but a role nonetheless.

Brian looked at Tracy. “Maybe we can convince him. But it's a big maybe. I'll tell you what.” Brian stood up. “Go run your idea by him and see what he thinks. I can almost guarantee that he'll say no. But later, after he's had a chance to think about it, we'll sit down with him and try to talk him into it. Maybe he'll agree, though I wouldn't bet on it.”

Tracy smiled. “I sure hope so. I want this to work out for you.” She gave him a quick hug and turned to leave.

“Hey Tracy,” Brian called after her.

“Yes?”

“I never congratulated you on your engagement. Good luck. I'm glad you're happy.”

Tracy smiled at him again and left.

Brian watched her leave. He didn't think that another scotch would go down well, so he settled on a beer. He hoped to God that this job would work out for him. On top of everything else his best friend was moving to Australia. And Harvey was poor company.

Twenty minutes later, Ray burst into Brian's dressing room. He was quite angry.

"Do think I'm some kind of a pervert?" he practically screamed at Brian.

Brian Couldn't answer. His mouth was full. What his mouth, and in fact most of his esophagus, was full with was a two and a half foot long, genuine replica of a Japanese samurai sword. He had won it in a poker game at magicians' convention in Reno last summer. Brian had an odd hobby of swallowing swords and knives to help himself relax. Though lots of people, Ray and Tracy included, found it quite odd, he couldn't think of an easier way to relieve stress. Since sword swallowing required absolute, 100% concentration, there was little room left for worrying about other things.

"Ist jagga unghoth," mumbled Brian, and he began to withdraw the weapon. While he was doing this, he ventured a look in Ray's direction. Ray was mad, all right. Apparently being asked to become a cross-dresser didn't sit well. Brian studied Ray for a couple of seconds. He definitely had a latent feminine quality about him. Nothing too obvious, he certainly didn't look like a total sissy, but it didn't take a lot of imagination for "Rhea" to come into view. Full lips, high cheek bones, not much of an Adam's apple... this could really work.

Brian finished with the sword and placed it back in its sheath. "I take it this is about my job offer?"

"Job offer! Do you think I'm some kinda queer? Do you think I like dressing as a woman? Do I look like some kind of sicko?" Ray really was screaming now.

"Calm down Ray! No, of course I don't think you're a pervert. Look, just listen to me a minute." He motioned to his other chair. "Would you like a beer?"

"Uh, no thanks."

Brian opened one for himself. He rarely drank this much, but he figured he needed something to boost his confidence for the pitch he was about to make. "Now listen, Ray. I wouldn't ask you to do this if I had any other options. Now I don't think that you are a transvestite, or gay or anything. I'm just asking because you know the act better than anyone other than me and Tracy, and without an assistant I can't accept this job."

This seemed to mollify Ray. "O.K., but that's a lot to ask someone, to change their sex for twelve months. I wish I could help, but it's not worth it."

"Are you sure it's not? Do you know how much it pays?"

Ray shook his head. Brian named a figure. Ray tried to cover his surprise and failed badly. “That much?” he asked in disbelief.

“Plus expenses. If you do this job for the whole time you can save up quite a nest egg.”

Ray thought about it. He really needed the money. Working three jobs meant that he had no life outside of work. He never had enough to eat. Yesterday his landlord had told him in no uncertain terms that if he didn’t get his rent paid soon he would no longer have a place to live. Still, he wasn’t convinced that taking this job was the way out.

“But if I dress as a woman all that time, what will people think?”

“Do you know anyone in Las Vegas?”

“No.”

“Then no one will ever know but me and Tracy, and we’d never think anything was strange. Hell, it was our idea.”

“But being a girl full time? What kind of life would that be for me?”

“You told me yourself you wanted to be an actor. This is just a role. If you wanted a chance to do some serious acting, this is it!”

“I want to be an actor, not an actress!”

“C’mon, lots of famous actors wore dresses for movie roles. Take Tim Curry in “The Rocky Horror Picture Show,” or Anthony Perkins in “Psycho.” They dressed as women, but no one thought they were strange. People knew they were just doing it for the movie, not for any other reason.”

“But this isn’t like a movie role. I’d have to stay “in character” all the time! Actors’ roles don’t affect the way they live off camera!”

“Ah, but you are mistaken! Tom Hanks gained thirty pounds for his role in “A League of Their Own.” Sigourney Weaver shaved her head for “Aliens Three. Jackie Chan wound up in intensive care on no less than three occasions (Brian was an avid reader of celebrity gossip magazines). If you ask me, you’d be getting off pretty easy, only having to wear dresses and high heels for a while. After a year you go back to being Ray, richer, and no one’s the wiser.”

He could tell Ray was almost convinced. But not quite. “Look,” Brian continued, “when’s my next performance here?”

“Uh... one week from today.”

“Really? Why such a long time from now?”

“Fumigating. Hotel guests have been complaining about scorpions.”

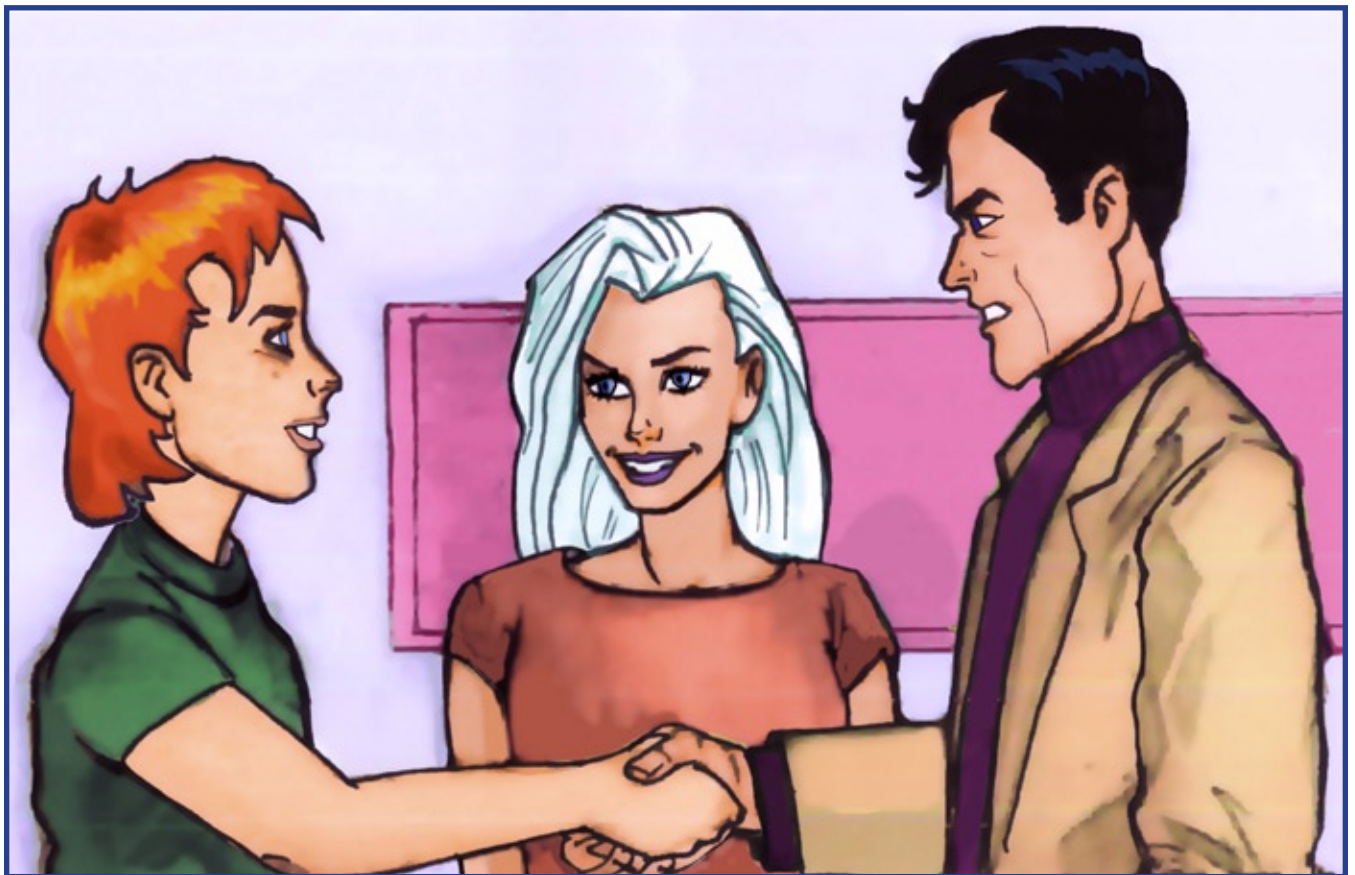
Scorpions? though Brian. God, I need a new job!

“Listen Ray. I have three more magic acts to do before I have to make a final decision about the Las Vegas job. I’ll tell you what. For the next week, let Tracy turn you into a woman on a trial basis. New makeup, clothes, hair, etc. Have her coach you on how to act. No one will know. When it’s time for the next act, both you and Tracy can be my assistants. If all goes well, think about coming to Vegas with me. If you don’t like it, or you think it won’t work, then we’ll all forget it ever happened. C’mon, you’ve got nothing to lose!”

Ray thought about it. He knew that it was a bad idea, and it was probably doomed from the start. But it could be his only chance for a decent life.

“O.K. I know I’m going to regret this, but if you promise not to make any smart aleck comments, and SWEAR not to tell any one, I’ll be your assistant next week.”

Both men stood up and shook hands.



"I hope I'm doing the right thing," thought Ray. "What if Brian thinks I'm some kind of a sissy?"



Chapter Three

Ray took a deep breath and knocked on the apartment door. He couldn't remember the last time he had been this nervous. It was the day after he had agreed to become "Rhea." Tracy had told him to come by her place today so she could start "making a woman out of him."

The door opened. "Hi!" said Tracy. "C'mon in. Sorry about the mess, I've just been getting my stuff packed for Australia."

Ray looked around the apartment. There were boxes everywhere. Books, pictures, clothes, and about twenty copies of "Bride's" magazine were strewn everywhere.

He sat down on an empty chair. Tracy sat opposite him, on the edge of her coffee table. "Ray, thanks for coming today. I can only imagine how hard this must be for you. I'm very proud of

you for doing this. I have a feeling that this is going to work out great for you and Brian. And who knows, it may not be as painful as you think.”

“I sure hope not. I’m only doing this for the money. And to help Brian, I guess.”

“Believe me, Brian appreciates it.” Tracy had talked to Brian last night after Ray had gone home, and she was amazed at how relieved he seemed. “Now what I’m going to do today is change your physical appearance. I’m going to use make-up, clothes, and a new hairstyle. When I’m done with you, you probably won’t even recognize your face in the mirror. You’ll have the face of a young woman, the body of a young woman, and you’ll be expected to act like a young woman. If a stranger were to see you, it would never occur to them that you were anything but female. But Ray, remember, none of this is real. It’s just a costume. You’re just acting. Make-up washes off, clothes can be changed, and you can go back to being a guy. So don’t be so nervous. In a year everything will be over.”

“Hey, I only agreed to do the last three shows here! I haven’t agreed to go to Vegas yet!”

“All right, all right! Settle down, Ray! Now are you ready to let me work my magic?”

“I suppose.”

“Wonderful. Now I’d like to get some measurements first.”

Tracy measured everything about Ray: height, weight, shoe size, waist, hips, inseam, bust (bust?), etc. When she was done, she smiled.

“Perfect. You’re almost my size. With a little alteration, you could wear any of my old things. Since I’m moving so far away I can’t take everything, so I can just give them to you!”

“Y-your clothes?”

“Of course silly! How do you expect to live like a girl if you have nothing but T-shirts and jeans? I don’t think you’d like to go shopping for dresses just yet.”

“I see your point. But don’t you think your clothes would look silly on me?”

“No, not at all. Like I said, I’ll have you so made up that your best friend wouldn’t recognize you. I have dresses, blouses, sweaters, skirts, I even think you’d look good in this one-piece swimsuit, though I don’t think you’re ready for a bikini just yet. I don’t think my shoes will fit you, so I’ll pick you up some of your own. Also, you’ll need to have your own intimate things: panties, slip, nylons, bra...”

“Wait a minute! No one will see that stuff! Why should I dress like a woman underneath?”

“Because I don’t like turning out a half-finished product. I’m supposed to make you into a lady, and ladies don’t wear men’s briefs!”

“Well if I’m going to be prancing around in a dress, I guess my choice of underwear doesn’t make that much more of a difference, does it?”

“Good attitude. Shall we begin?” Ray nodded in agreement. “Wonderful. Now first, I’d like for you to go take a shower. While you’re in there, I need you to shave.”

“But I shaved right before I came over here,” Ray protested, running his hand along his smooth cheek. He had shaved, but his beard was so light it probably wasn’t necessary.

“No dear, I mean your legs, chest, and armpits.” She handed him a towel and a feminine looking razor.

“I was afraid you meant that.”

“Now take your time in there, do a thorough job. You can use my soap and shampoo. I’ll be getting things ready for the next stage in your “transformation.”

Ray shuddered and walked into the bathroom.

Ray stepped into the shower and let the hot water cascade over his body. All night long he had secretly hoped that Tracy would decide that there was no way he could ever pass as a woman, but apparently this was not to be. For the next few shows he was going to be “Rhea.”

He wondered what his parents would think of his transformation. He really didn’t care. His mother had died when he was two. He and his father were never what you’d call close. His father was the macho, jock type and didn’t do much to hide his disappointment in his non-athletic, long-haired, weak looking son. When Ray was fifteen he woke up one morning to find that his father had left during the night. He didn’t really miss him, but he did miss the income that his father provided. Ray already was working full time then. He had to drop out of school and get two more jobs just to pay the rent and buy food.

Ray looked down at his slender, pale, freckled body. Despite several attempts at working out he never really gained any muscle tone. He had no chest hair, and only a few strands of hair on his face, not enough to really qualify as a “beard.” He had let his hair grow long, not so much a fashion statement, but because he never had enough money for a haircut and was afraid what it would look like if he tried to do it himself.

He had never had much luck with women. Despite his efforts, he rarely had a girlfriend. He could never afford to take them anywhere nice. Also, he spent most of his time working so he couldn’t spend very much time with them on the rare occasions when someone was attracted to him. He tried to tell himself that it was no big deal, but in reality he was lonely.

Ray lathered himself with Tracy’s soap. It was perfumed and had a distinct feminine odor to it that he feared would stick with him after the shower. The same with the shampoo. He finally decided not to put off the inevitable and shaved. It wasn’t as difficult as he thought, and he only nicked himself twice. He hated to admit it to himself, but he rather liked the feel of hairless

armpits. He was worried about his smooth legs though. It was almost always hot in Nevada, so he usually wore shorts. What if someone noticed? What would they think?

Ray stepped out of the shower and dried himself off. He put on a little deodorant he found on the sink. He was mildly amused that it was the kind that billed itself as being “strong enough for a man, but made for a woman.”

“You finished in there?” Yelled Tracy through the door.

“Yeah, all done,” replied Ray, wondering with fear what the next indignity would be. He soon found out.

“Good. Slip this on.” Tracy opened the door a crack and threw a rubber-like contraption in to the bathroom. Ray held it up and studied it. It looked like the bottom half of a bikini made out of very sturdy rubber. It seemed way too small for him. There was practically no room up front!

“What the heck is this? I can’t wear this. It’s too small. You forget that I, uh, have parts you don’t!”

“That’s the whole point, silly.” She replied again through the bathroom door. “In case you haven’t noticed, the costume I wear on stage doesn’t leave much to the imagination. We can’t really have you hanging out everywhere. That garment is designed to, shall we say, “conceal” anything that we don’t want the audience to know about. That is actually one of the larger models I could find. If you decide to go on to Vegas we’ll have to find something a lot smaller. Now it may be uncomfortable at first, but you’ll get used to it.”

Ray opened his mouth to protest, then shut it. What was the point of arguing? Tracy would never change her mind. Besides, she knew what she was talking about. He’d much rather bear the humiliation of wearing that “thing” than to having his real sex found out. He’d never live that down!

He grunted, groaned, and bit back curses until he had it on. Tracy was right, it was quite uncomfortable. His testicles were jammed back into their recesses as if he had been in extremely cold water. His penis was squashed flat between his legs. He regarded his new profile in the mirror. There was only a slight bump where his maleness used to be. Ray couldn’t think of a worse embarrassment. But at least he hadn’t agreed to anything long-term yet. After he finished the Nero shows he could always go back to what he did before. Then again, working three jobs wasn’t exactly what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. Being a magician’s assistant, even a female one, would be considerably easier. He wished there was some simple answer to his crisis.

“All right, what now?” he asked, dreading the answer.

“C’mon out! Let’s see how you look.”

“Come out dressed like this? But I’m only wearing...”

"I know, but I have to dress you from the skin out. Don't worry, you're a girl today so there's nothing to be ashamed of."

Ray growled to himself and came out into the living room.

Tracy appraised Ray with a critical eye. She walked around him and studied him as if she was examining a used car. "I can definitely make you into a woman," she decided finally, much to Ray's embarrassment.

The first thing she did was put a girdle on Ray. "Is this really necessary?" asked Ray for the umpteenth time, as Tracy pulled it tighter and tighter.

"Well, we want you to have an alluring hourglass figure, don't we? Of course, this wouldn't be necessary if you lost a few pounds. I think we'll put you on a diet for a few weeks. Nothing too serious, just more vegetables and less junk foods and red meat."

Ray was getting more depressed by the minute. On top of everything, it looked like he would have to give up the cheeseburger he usually ate with Brian for lunch everyday.

Tracy pulled something out of a bag. "This is something I picked last night." She held up something that looked like a padded bra. "It was designed for women who have had mastectomies. It's a bra with silicone inserts. They feel realistic and from outside your clothes it's impossible to tell the difference. These will give you a very ladylike chest." Ray blushed down to his shoulders.

He tried it on, with some assistance from Tracy. Next came some lacy panties. Ray took a quick look in the mirror. He looked as silly as he felt.



*"I'm doing this for the money," thought Ray,
"I'm doing this for the money."*

“That’s it for underwear. Here, no need for you to stand around shivering.” Tracy handed him a bathrobe. It was, of course, pink and feminine. Ray slipped it on.

“Now for your hair and makeup. You’ll eventually have to learn to do this on your own, but for now I’ll do it, so you can just sit back and relax.” She gestured to a recliner.

Ray sat down. Tracy took out a large make-up kit, shone a bright desk lamp over his face, and got to work. Her expert hands treated Ray’s face to a parade of moisturizers, creams, rouge, lipstick, eye shadow, and mascara.

“The trick,” muttered Tracy, half to herself, “is not to use too much. A lot of young girls starting out with makeup use way too much and end up looking like sluts. No, just a little bit goes a long way...”

Ray sat for what seemed like hours. Still, he had to admit it was relaxing just sitting back and having someone minister to you, even if they were giving you a makeover. Especially if they were a pretty woman like Tracy. Ray had never told anyone, but he had always had a bit of a crush on her. He found that the feel of her hands gently caressing his face aroused him slightly.

At one point, he felt several sharp pains at the lower part of his forehead. “Hey, are you plucking my eyebrows?”

“Yes, yours are too bushy too be feminine.”

“Well cut it out! You never asked me if you could do that!”

“Too late. I’ve already done one. If I stopped now, you’d be lopsided.”

Eventually, she finished. She leaned back and looked at him with a satisfied grin. Ray made a move to look in the mirror, but Tracy restrained him. “Not till I’m all done.”

Next, she went to work on his hair. She looked at him disapprovingly. “You men never take care of your hair. Yours is so long and red any woman would be jealous, but you’ve let it go to pot. Untreated split ends. What kind of shampoo and conditioners do you use?”

“Uh, supermarket brand shampoo, no conditioner.”

“That does it. I’m giving you some of mine. And before the shows next week I’m taking you to a beauty salon, no ifs, ands or buts. I can’t sit back and let you destroy this great hair of yours. For now I’ll see what I can do.”

Ray was too tired to argue but he knew he’d never be caught dead in a salon.

Tracy went to work on his hair. First she trimmed the ends to even them out and get rid of the split ends, over Ray’s protests. Then she endlessly combed and teased his locks till he thought he’d go crazy. Finally she sprayed on some hairspray.

“That’ll do for now. Let me see your nails.” Ray held them up for inspection. “Just as I thought. You bite them don’t you?” He nodded guiltily. “You’ll have to use the press-on kind until they grow out. In the meantime don’t bite them! Also, no more heavy lifting at work. Your hands have to stay soft and feminine and lugging around heavy boxes doesn’t help.” Tracy smiled. “We also don’t want you developing muscles in the wrong places.” Ray managed a thin smile. He had never really enjoyed all that manual labor and now he had an excuse to get out of it. He watched as Tracy neatly filed down the jagged ends of his nails. She then applied the plastic nails. They were very red and rather long. Ray wondered how he was supposed to manage to do anything with his hands with the silly artificial nails stuck to his fingers. He figured it would be simpler once his own grew out.

Tracy turned her attention from Ray to the large stacks of clothes that littered her apartment.

“I suppose you don’t want anything too flashy. I’ll try to find you something conservative. Ah, I think this will do the trick.”

Tracy held up a light pink cotton sweater and instructed Ray to put it on. It fit surprisingly well, Ray admitted to himself. He then pulled on some very tight denim shorts that Tracy handed to him. The outfit was completed by a denim blazer. While the mirror was still forbidden to him, Ray regarded what he could see of his body. Everything was wrong. The sweater was far too girlish; the color would never look right on a man, and the neckline, while conservative, was much lower than it would have been on a man’s sweater. To make things worse, the ridiculous bumps from the silicone inserts gave him a large swelling in the front. The shorts came up to the middle of his thighs when he sat down, which accentuated his already feminine looking legs. The blazer was a woman’s, clear and simple. It even buttoned the “wrong” way. While Tracy had instructed him to wear it unbuttoned, he knew it was only a matter of time before he’d have to get used to the buttons being on the left.

Tracy stood back and took in the sight of her creation. The smile on her face showed that she thought much more highly of Ray’s appearance than he did. The ordeal ended when Tracy clipped some earrings on his lobes and a bracelet on his wrist. She then looked him over once last time.

“Now this isn’t perfect. We still don’t have shoes for you, and this outfit doesn’t match your coloring perfectly, but I think that this is pretty good for the first time. Tomorrow, after we get you some of your own things and treat you to a day at the beauty parlor, you’ll look like you’ve been a woman all your life.” Noticing Ray’s unhappy look she continued: “Remember, none of this is permanent. This is just a costume and it doesn’t make you any less of a man. Now take a look at yourself... Rhea.”



Ray braced himself and took a look in the mirror. The image took a moment to register. He had been so convinced he would see an awkward young man in drag that the reflection came as a total shock. The clothes, the make-up, the jewelry... even the shaved legs and new hairdo. He was looking at the image of a young woman! An awkward, nervous young woman, but a young woman nonetheless. The smooth legs. The subtle, yet obvious chest. The lips crimson from lipstick. The thin eyebrows and the long red hair. The cheeks slightly reddened with blush. The woman's clothes. One might even say he looked pretty!

Tracy chuckled. "Surprising isn't it? I guess Brian isn't the only magician in these parts."

Ray was quite speechless. Almost dreading the answer he asked "So do you think I'll make it as a lovely assistant?"

Tracy didn't pause. "Well, you're going to need a lot of coaching in the art of being a woman, not to mention a lot of new clothes. But I have faith in your acting abilities. If you are willing to try your hardest and approach this is a mature way, then I guarantee that you'll do fine. Will you give it a shot?"

Ray looked at himself in the mirror again. Well, at least he didn't have to worry about not passing as a woman. If Tracy could teach him about makeup and he kept pretty much to himself, then there was no reason anyone would have to know. Still, he felt very apprehensive.

"All right. I'll do the next three shows. But I haven't agreed to anything else. If anything goes wrong, if I get found out or if I can't cut it as a woman, then the deal is off. Okay?"

Tracy winked at him. "You got it. Now let's go over to Brian's and tell him the good news."

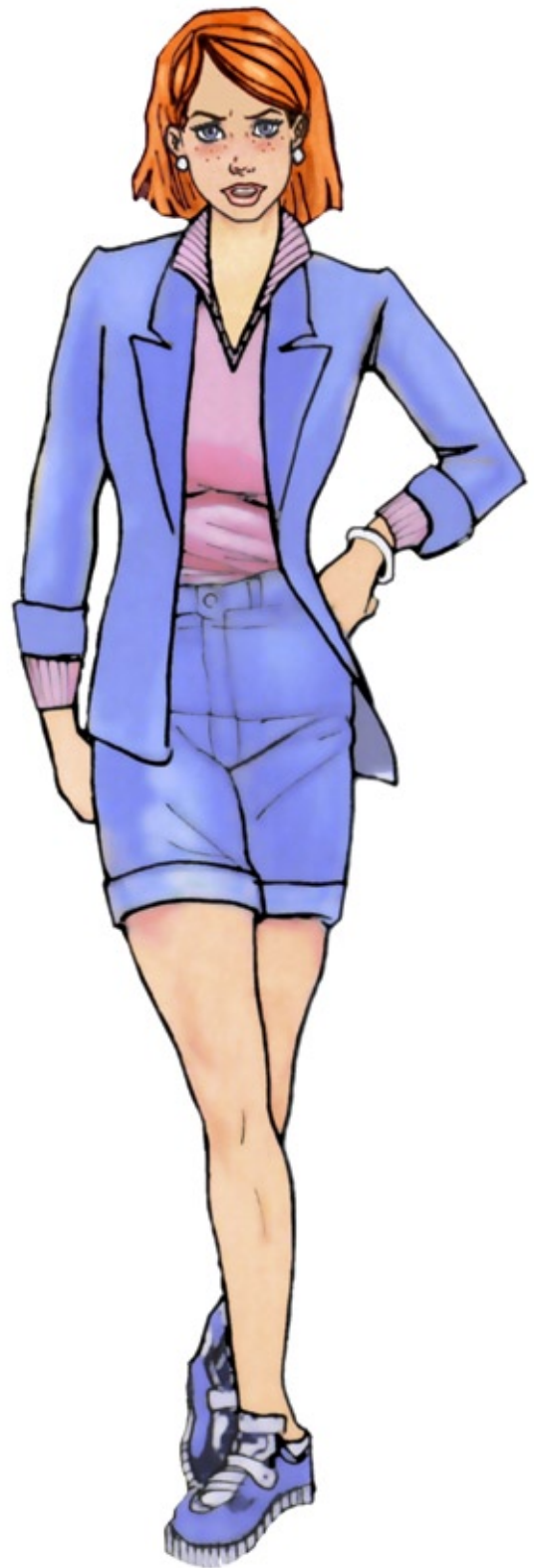
"OK, let me just get changed back..."

"Hold on Ray. Brian said he'd have to see you dressed up before he gave his final OK, and now is as good a time as any. We'll take my car, no one else will see you."

Ray was beginning to realize that all arguing was futile. "Fine. Can I at least take my wallet?"

"Women don't carry wallets, but I guess you need to take it with you. Here, put it in this." Tracy handed him a purse that had seen better days. "It's not much, but it will do for now."

Ray put his wallet into the purse and followed Tracy out the door. He had never felt so vulnerable in all his life. He wondered when he had begun to lose control.



Ray couldn't believe that the girl staring back from the mirror was really him!



Chapter Four

Tracy pulled up into Brian's driveway. Brian lived in a low-grade suburb of Dead Springs. Tracy regarded the run down house: peeling paint, a yard overtaken by weeds, the Ford Pinto up on blocks, the garish plastic flamingos... Tracy sighed. She hoped that Brian would hurry up and get married; he was one of those bachelors in dire need of a woman's care.

Ray looked like he was going to his own execution. The entire ride there he had stayed hunched down in the seat and cringed whenever a car pulled up near. Despite Tracy's assurance that no one could see him, he felt as if the entire state of Nevada was looking at him and snickering. He wanted to hurry up and get the meeting with Brian over with and get back into his own clothes. Ray and Tracy wordlessly walked up to the front door and knocked.

Brian had been watching his tape of Penn and Teller and eating a microwave burrito. He wasn't expecting any guests. He figured it was just Herb, his neighbor, coming to borrow something, so he shouted "Come on in!"

He was pleasantly surprised to see Tracy. "Hey, didn't expect to see you tonight!" He said with a smile. "Who's your friend..." He suddenly did a double take when he realized who the young lady with Tracy was. There was an awkward pause.

It was the normally quiet Ray who broke the silence. "So... what do you think?" He looked intently at Brian.

Brian was suddenly at a loss. If he told Ray he looked like a girl it might upset him and make him feel unmanly. On the other hand, if he said the costume was unconvincing, Ray would probably back out of the deal. Brian decided to tell the truth.

"Tracy did a wonderful job on you, Ray. If I didn't know you I never would have thought anything was out of the ordinary. With all that makeup and the clothes you look like a woman."

This seemed to relieve Ray. "I guess that's the best I could hope for. I've been so nervous that someone will realize I'm not a girl."

"So will you be my assistant for the next few shows?"

"You really don't think anyone will recognize me? Anyone I know, I mean."

Tracy cut in. "Ray, or should I say, Rhea, no one will have a chance to. You'll get into costume at my place, and will keep out of everyone's sight. None of the casino employees will see you up close and no one in the audience would recognize you if they saw you as Ray. I wouldn't have suggested this if I thought you'd be discovered."

Ray sighed. Brian noticed with silent bemusement that this made his chest stick out even more.

"I guess the world won't end if I agree to go along with this. O.K., for the next three shows you've got yourself a new assistant."

Tracy and Brian smiled.



Chapter Five

After the night when Ray had first been dressed by Tracy, he never knew a moment's rest. Tracy was determined to eradicate eighteen years of male programming and replace it with femininity... in one week! Every day, 8:00 a.m. sharp, Ray was to be over at Tracy's for training.

The day after he had agreed to be an assistant on a trial basis, Tracy dressed him in an old skirt and blouse and dragged him protesting to the local mall. The first humiliation of the day happened when he was lead to a beauty salon where Tracy was apparently well known. As they sat in the waiting area, Ray ventured a whispered question.

"What are we doing here? I thought you were going to do my makeup."

“I’ve been thinking about it,” replied Tracy. “Since this is going to be your first experience as a woman in public, I want you to really look the part. I’ve ordered what is known here as “The works.” When they get done with you, you won’t recognize yourself.”

“I already don’t recognize myself! What’s the big deal? You said yourself no one will suspect. I really don’t think we need any outside help!”

“You know, a lot of young women would kill for a chance at an appointment here.”

“That’s just the point,” Ray almost shouted “I’m not a young woman! You act like I should be enjoying this!”

“Look,” said Tracy, looking Ray straight in the eyes “You are going to be Rhea for at least a week, maybe a lot longer. You can either act like a guy forced to be a girl and make this next week an endless hell. Or, you can act like a young lady and enjoy all this. Just relax, it won’t be as bad as it seems.”

Ray grudgingly saw the logic in that. “All right,” he replied “but just remember, this isn’t easy for me.”

“I understand. I’ll tell you what. For the next week, Ray doesn’t exist. You are Rhea. And there isn’t anything strange about Rhea wearing dresses and getting made over, is there?”

“I... I guess not.”

“There. Just relax. Try to look at things as a woman would. I promise you nothing bad will happen. Just try to keep an open mind. Will you do that?”

“All right.”

“Good. Who knows, after all is said and done, you might find you understand women just a little bit more. Then you could explain them to Brian.”

Both Tracy and ‘Rhea’ grinned.

“Tracy!” a voice called “I haven’t seen you here for ages!” Ray and Tracy looked up. An attractive brunette who looked to be in her mid-thirties, was standing before them. A nametag on her shirt identified her as “Molly.”

“Molly!” shouted Tracy. They gave each other a quick hug. “It’s been so long!”

“So why haven’t you been around here lately? We’ve all missed you!”

Tracy grinned. “I’m getting married.”

With that, half the employees of the salon surrounded Tracy. Everyone wanted to know about the guy, to see the ring, to bombard her with questions. Ray remained in his chair, feeling nervous and slightly left out.

Finally, the excitement died down. “So what can we do for you today?” asked Molly.

“Nothing for me today,” replied Tracy “though I’m sure I’ll practically be living here the week before the wedding.” Molly smiled. “No, today I want you to see what you can do with my friend Rhea.” Tracy indicated Ray. She then pulled out a credit card and handed it to Molly. Give her ‘the works.’

Something occurred to Ray. These beauty treatments were far from cheap, and here Tracy was, paying for the whole thing. For decency’s sake, he had better act like he enjoyed this. He managed a realistic smile. Molly lead him out of the waiting room and into the main part of the salon.

The few times Ray had scraped up enough money for a haircut he had always gone to a cheap local barbershop. He was used to the “wash, shampoo, cut, pay” routine. In his mind that is what he pictured this treatment was going to be like. Once again, he was in for quite a shock.

This salon was about the size of a bus terminal. It was decorated in style: plush carpet, expensive wallpaper, delicate furnishings. Quite a step up from the shag carpets and stained wallpaper of Nero’s Palace. Soft music played in the background. Several customers, all women, lounged about while they were peered, made over, and manicured. Ray had never even suspected this place existed.

Molly escorted Ray to a chair in front of a mirror. Several beauticians followed. They studied Ray. They discussed among themselves possibilities for his hair, his makeup, and his nails. Ray began to feel trapped and a little scared. Having Tracy make him over was one thing, but professionals? What if they realized who he really was?

He turned to Tracy for moral support. To his horror she was heading out the door, back into the mall.

“W-Where are you going?” Ray said, barely remembering to keep his voice soft and feminine.

“I just have to pick up a few things. I’ll be back to get you later.” She noticed his scared expression. “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine!” Then she was gone.

Molly handed Ray a pink bathrobe and motioned to a dressing room in the back. She instructed him to change into it.

Ray did as he was ordered. The dressing room was very large. It was more like a locker room than anything else. There were even a few showers in the back for people who wanted to clean up before being made over.

Ray looked at himself in the mirror. He had to admit that even this way, wearing just a bathrobe and a little makeup, he still looked very girlish. Maybe it was the long red tresses that now hung loosely around his shoulders. Maybe it was the way he nervously clutched the robe around his slim frame. Maybe it was the scared, innocent look in his eyes. Whatever it was, Ray definitely did not look like the picture of manhood.

Ray was so absorbed in contemplating himself that he did not notice when someone came out of the shower area. It was not until he heard a voice behind him that he realized that he was not alone.

“Would you hand me that towel?” asked a feminine voice behind him.

Ray turned in shock. Not four feet in front of him stood a very beautiful young woman. She looked to be about seventeen or eighteen, around Ray’s age. She had straight black hair, long legs, and was very tan. She was wet from just getting out of the shower. She was not wearing a stitch of clothes.

Ray nearly panicked. For a few seconds he could do nothing but stare. He was in a girl’s shower room! He had to get out of there!

The young woman didn’t seem upset at all. “Could you hand me that towel?” she asked again.

Ray snapped out of his frightened state. “My God,” he thought as he passed her the towel, “she doesn’t suspect a thing! She thinks I’m just another girl.”

“I’m Kayla,” said the girl as she dried herself.

“Oh, uh, I’m Rhea.”

“Nice to know you. You seem a little jumpy. Is something wrong?”

Ray used every bit of willpower to keep his eyes focused on Kayla’s face and nowhere else.

“Oh, no! I mean, uh, this is my first time here, and uh, I’m a little nervous.” Ray hoped that didn’t sound too strange.

Kayla smiled. She wrapped the towel around her head. Her hair was now covered. The rest of her remained free and unfettered. “Don’t worry honey. They treat you great here! You’ll come out looking like a million bucks. Is your hair naturally red?”

“Yes... yes it is.”

“Lucky girl. Something about a redhead really attracts a guy’s attention. Well, I have to get back out there before they give my appointment to someone else. And hey, don’t worry, you’ll have the time of your life.”

Kayla gave Ray a friendly, one-armed hug. She donned a bathrobe like Ray's and went back to the salon. That was the closest Ray had ever been to a naked woman, especially one as gorgeous as Kayla. He felt faint all over. With a lot of effort he managed to find his way back to Molly without falling down.

"Let's face it," he thought. "There might be a definite plus side do all this."

Molly met Ray at the door of the dressing room and motioned for him to sit in another chair. She looked him over for another minute, then smiled.

"Rhea," she began "It's nice to have an attractive young woman in here for once. Between you and me, most of my clients are ugly old women. You and Kayla are the only pretty girls we've had in here all week."

Ray mumbled an embarrassed thank you. Not only was he easily passing as a girl, he was passing as a pretty one.

"I think I know the perfect look for you. When I'm finished you'll look like you just stepped off the cover of Vogue. And honey," Molly leaned closer and whispered "The guys will be lined up outside your door. You could have a new man take you out every night of the week."

While Ray never had any formal acting training, he still had done a lot of practice on his own. This is probably why he was able to manage to smile sweetly while his stomach had tied itself into a panicked knot.

"Are you ready to begin?"

Ray managed another sweet smile.

"O.K. Oh, one thing before I begin. No peeking until I'm finished with you." Molly turned the only nearby mirror so that Ray couldn't see his reflection.

Ray's stomach tied itself into a bow. Tracy had done the same thing to him. When she was finished with him he looked like a young woman. What would he look like when Molly finished?

Ray's time in the salon passed in a blur. Once, several months ago, he had gone to see an auto race at the local track. One memory that stood out was seeing the pit crew in action. Several mechanics would leap on to a car before it had even stopped moving. They would each rush in, perform some sort of repair, and rush off again. Within thirty seconds, the car was repaired, tuned up, and racing again.

Ray felt a lot like that car. A legion of beauticians rushed around him, each one rapidly performing some process of beautification. He was being overhauled, just like an engine. When they were finished, he would leave the beauty shop as a new person. All he could do is sit back and pray for the best.

His hair was washed and put up in rollers. His skin was treated to a variety of ointments and creams. No less than three manicurists filed, sanded, and painted his finger (and toe!) nails. Ray tried to keep still as his face was painted, washed, and painted again. Several times he tried to sneak a peak in a mirror, but could never get a good look.



After a day in the beauty salon, Ray didn't look like an awkward girl. He looked -- pretty!

Ray wanted to scream, to run, to blurt out the truth. All his life he had tried to fight his sissy image, now he had surrendered to it! Of course, to tell everyone he was a man would be a worse humiliation. Finally, everything was complete. Several salon employees stood around the chair, admiring their work. He was eventually led over to a full-length mirror.

Ray had often hear the age old account of people who have had cosmetic surgery. The doctor takes off the bandages, and voila! A whole new person. Didn't even recognize the reflection. Ray had always thought that was total garbage. No matter how 'changed' someone was, they would always recognize themselves. One look in the mirror changed Ray's attitude completely.

Someone he didn't know peered back at him from the mirror. Someone with long, curly red hair that hung silkily down to her shoulders. Someone with long, red nails, and delicate hands. Someone with pale, soft looking skin. Someone with a mouth that was painted an exotic red and cheeks painted a delicate pink. Someone pretty. Someone feminine. A woman. Ray knew, though his mind refused to process the idea, that he was that someone.

It was a transformation that not even Brian could top. Ray grinned in spite of himself. The tiny hope that had kindled inside of him since he had first agreed to dress as a woman, the hope that he could never pass as a woman, died. He turned to the staff.

"You guys did an incredible job. I can honestly say I have never looked this pretty in all my life." With his best forced smile he slinked back to the changing room and donned his old clothes.

When he came out, the beauticians presented him with the shampoos, conditioners, gels, and makeup that could keep him looking that pretty for over a month. When he walked out into the waiting room, Tracy was waiting for him.

“Rhea!” she exclaimed “you look positively darling! While, you’ll be the envy of every girl!” Molly came over and joined them. “Not to mention, the desire of every guy!” Tracy and Molly laughed. Ray blushed down to his shoulders.



Chapter Six

Ray followed Tracy out into the shopping mall. “Just a minute,” said Tracy. “I picked up a few things while you were getting made over. They said they’d send someone up to take the bags to the car... ah, there he is now.”

A good-looking teenage boy approached them, staggering under the weight of several dozen shopping bags, each bearing the name of a trendy clothing store attached to the mall. Ray was horrified to see that the boy carrying the bags had been in several of his high school classes, before he had dropped out. His name was George. Ray quickly turned away and hoped that he wouldn’t be recognized. The three of them headed out towards the parking lot.

Ray glanced over once to see if George seemed to recognize him. To Ray’s horror, George smiled and winked at him. “Oh my God,” thought Ray “he knows. He knows it’s me and by tomorrow

so will everyone in town.” Ray wished that he could disappear. He wished he could just start over in another town. To be a man again. The walk to the car seemed to be fifty miles, as he waited for George to let on that he knew who he really was.

When they got to the car, George smiled and winked again as he loaded the bags into the trunk. He accepted a tip from Tracy and went back to the store. He looked back and grinned once more at Ray. Ray wanted to die. He got into the car as quickly as he could. Maybe, if he was lucky, George would keep the secret to himself. Maybe...

“Rhea, now that you are all made up, lets go over to my place, and... what’s wrong honey? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

Ray could hardly find the words. “That boy... the one who took your bags... he knows me... we went to school together... he knows I’m a guy... my secret’s out... my life is ruined...” he choked back a sob.

“Now none of that” replied Tracy sternly “you’ll ruin your makeup. Now what makes you think he recognized you?”

“You saw him! He kept smiling and winking! He knew who I was! You don’t think he’ll tell anyone do you?”

Tracy smiled. “Rhea, I don’t think you have anything to worry about. If anyone told him you were a guy, he’d probably laugh.”

“But you saw the way he kept grinning. Why else would he?”

“C’mon, think for a minute. What makes guys smile?”

“Well, I...” Ray’s eyes opened wide “you don’t think... I mean, he couldn’t have been... could he?”

Tracy smiled. “Speaking as someone who knows, I’d say he was definitely flirting with you. Good thing you were scared, if you had smiled back he probably would have asked you out.”

Ray was too stunned to respond.

“Listen Rhea, I picked up a few things for you. I’m going to take you over to my place and try them on you.” Without waiting for Ray’s reply, she pulled out of the mall parking lot.

When Tracy began to unpack the bags of clothes she had bought for Ray, he realized that she had picked up more than “a few things.” She had picked him up an entire wardrobe. He now had enough women’s clothes to last him indefinitely.

Ray was slightly upset. He had accepted the fact that he would be dressing in women’s fashions for the next year or so, but he didn’t like the idea of Tracy spending so much money on it. It was almost as if she expected him to dress like a woman long after the Vegas gig was over.

“What’s the deal, Tracy? I thought we agreed that I just wear your cast-offs. I don’t like you wasting all your money on me.”

“Well, at first I thought you’d make do in my clothes, but then I decided that if you were going to live as Rhea for a year, you were going to do it in style. If you have to be a woman, you might as well be dressed as nice as you can. Don’t worry about me, this is just my way of saying thanks for agreeing to do this.”

Tracy then began to show Ray what she had bought for him. Ray hoped that she had picked some fairly androgynous clothes, but that was not the case. Everything was clearly meant for a woman.

First came the underwear. While Ray would only be allowed to take of his ‘sex hiding device’ when showering, Tracy still insisted that he wear a nice pair of panties over it. Ray had hoped that they would be bland cotton ones, but he was once again disappointed. Everything Tracy had picked out was either made of silk or black lace. For the first time, Ray was glad he’d have to wear the ‘device.’ Those panties didn’t leave much to the imagination.

After he had recovered from the shock of the panties, he began to look at the hose that Tracy had bought. Most of it was regular bland nylons in a variety of colors to match whatever outfit he was wearing. However, there were three or four pairs of black, fishnet stockings. These were clearly designed to be erotic; to show off a woman’s legs.

“Hey, what’s with these?” asked Ray.

“What’s wrong with them?” replied Tracy, the very picture of innocent intentions.

“Women never wear hose like this unless they are trying to turn on their boyfriends or are posing for one of those calendars you always see in gas stations!”

“Well, you can wear them during the act... I always did.”

“Nice try, but I know it’s the hotel’s responsibility to provide the costumes. Seriously, what did you expect me to do with these?”

“Well,” said Tracy with a coy grin “I’m sure you’ll figure out something”

Ray, at Tracy’s request, began to try on the outfits. She had really gone to town. Blouses, camisoles, skirts, dresses, sweaters... Ray would not have to worry about having nothing to wear for a long time. The clothes made him uncomfortable. Not only were none of them androgynous, none of them were conservative. Every skirt was cut short. Every shirt was sleeveless. Every dress showed off either his back or shoulders. Each dress also was cut just short enough in the front to expose as much skin possible without revealing he didn’t really have breasts. Each t-shirt didn’t come down all the way, a small portion of his midriff was almost always exposed. Everything seemed to be trimmed with lace and frills. Tracy had even purchased a pair of strapless ‘falsies’ so they wouldn’t show when he wore gowns that exposed his shoulders. Every shoe, except for

a pair of woman's sneakers, had high heels. There was not a single pair of jeans in the pile. Ray would be wearing skirts for quite some time. With the exception of a woman's cardigan and jacket (with matching skirt), there wasn't a single dull thing in the bunch. He would not only be wearing woman's clothes, he would be wearing sexy women's clothes.

Tracy had even bought him a swimsuit! It was one piece, of course, green, and cut somewhat modestly. There was full coverage in front, though the back was still exposed. Ray was glad that he had such freckled skin; he'd hate to get a sun tan around that suit! He also realized he would have to wear his 'sex hiding device' very tight if he didn't want to draw attention.

Ray also noticed a very erotic red lace teddy in the pile. Tracy had gotten him a pair of pink pajamas to sleep in, so he wondered why she had bothered with the teddy. It left nothing hidden. Ray chose to believe that Tracy thought he might want to wear it on hot nights. He hated to think that she might have had another reason for getting it!

In addition to the clothes, Tracy had purchased the accessories he would need to be a successful girl. There were a couple of purses for Ray to carry his makeup in. There was a blow dryer and a curling iron for his hair. There was a makeup mirror, tweezers, and cotton balls to help with his makeup. There were even several pieces of jewelry: gold necklaces, bracelets, and a pair of diamond earrings. Ray was surprised to notice that they were made for pierced ears.



Where in the world was Ray supposed to wear THIS?

“Now what’s the deal with these?” asked Ray. “You know my ears aren’t pierced.”

“I guess I was a little premature in getting those,” replied Tracy, a little guiltily. “I was hoping that you’d decide to get pierced. It would really be a lot more convenient for you, and the holes would heal up after you go back to being a man. I guess it’s up to you.”

“I’ll think about it.” muttered Ray. He knew by now that if Tracy expected him to get pierced, he’d really have no say in it.

Tracy was still looking through the pile of clothes. “Oh, when I saw this I just had to get it for you! Try it on Rhea, I can’t wait to see what you look like!”

It was a yellow party dress. Tracy helped Ray climb into it and zipped up the back. She then slipped a diamond necklace around his neck and clipped matching earrings to his lobes. Ray walked over to the mirror. As he passed over a floor air conditioning vent, a gust of cold air blew up his short skirt, giving him goose bumps. He regarded his reflection. The draped neckline started just off the shoulders, and dipped down to a V just before his ‘cleavage’ would be seen. The skirt came up to well above his knees. The girdle he was wearing underneath, gave Ray a distinctive hourglass shape. He looked like a young debutante on her way to a dance. Ray couldn’t help but smile; he really did look cute. He noticed that smiling seemed to make him look more natural than the nervous frown he had been wearing.

Tracy was smiling too. “You look absolutely darling, Rhea. You know, I grew up with five brothers and no sisters. I guess I never realized how much fun it is to help a girl blossom into a young woman.”

“C’mon Tracy,” said Ray “I know I agreed to be Rhea for a while, but you know I’m not ‘blossoming.’ I’m doing this out of circumstance.”



Ray had to admit, he didn't look half bad.

“But you are enjoying it, aren’t you?”

“No!”

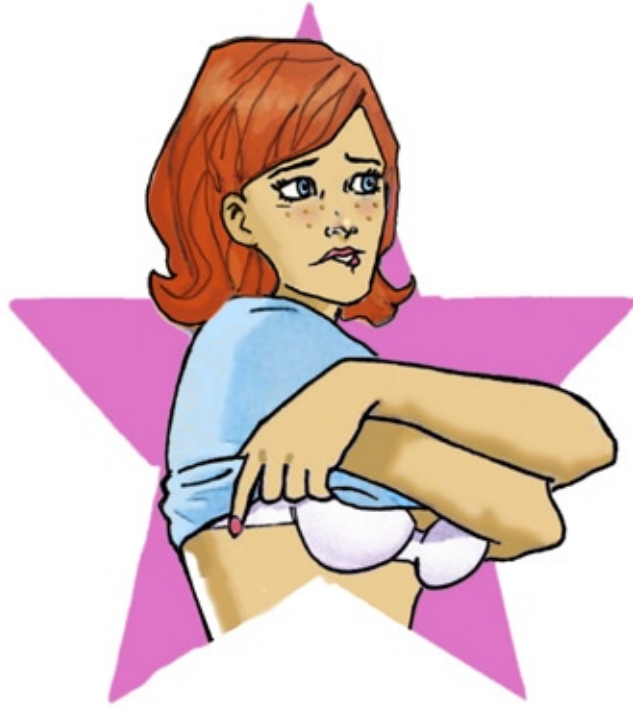
“Not even a little bit?”

Ray looked at Tracy. He supposed he should be completely honest with her. “Well, I can’t say that I like dressing as a woman. But, well... I dunno, it’s hard to explain. I don’t think I’ve ever had a new set of clothes in my life, now I have a whole new wardrobe. Except for you and Brian, no one has ever done anything for me, and today I spent the whole day just laying back and letting people serve me. I’ve never considered myself good looking, now everyone does. Don’t get me wrong, I like being a guy a thousand times more than being a girl. I guess I just like having a chance to like the good life, so to speak. Hell, I guess anything beats shopping at the Discount Clothes Mart.”

Tracy tried not to show her alarm at that last comment. The Discount Clothes Mart was a local second-hand store. It had closed down recently when the owner was arrested for stealing clothes from the city morgue. Tracy realized that Ray was looking at her intently. “Does that make sense?” Ray asked nervously. “Enjoying being pampered for a while? Do you think that’s weird?”

Tracy took Ray’s hand in hers. “Rhea, it just shows that you are an intelligent person who realized an opportunity when you saw it. Believe it or not, you are going to have the time of your life. If I wasn’t getting married I’d be so jealous!”

Ray smiled a relieved smile. “Well, if you are going to make me into a woman, you better show me how to act! Just what do women do in the bathroom for six hours?”

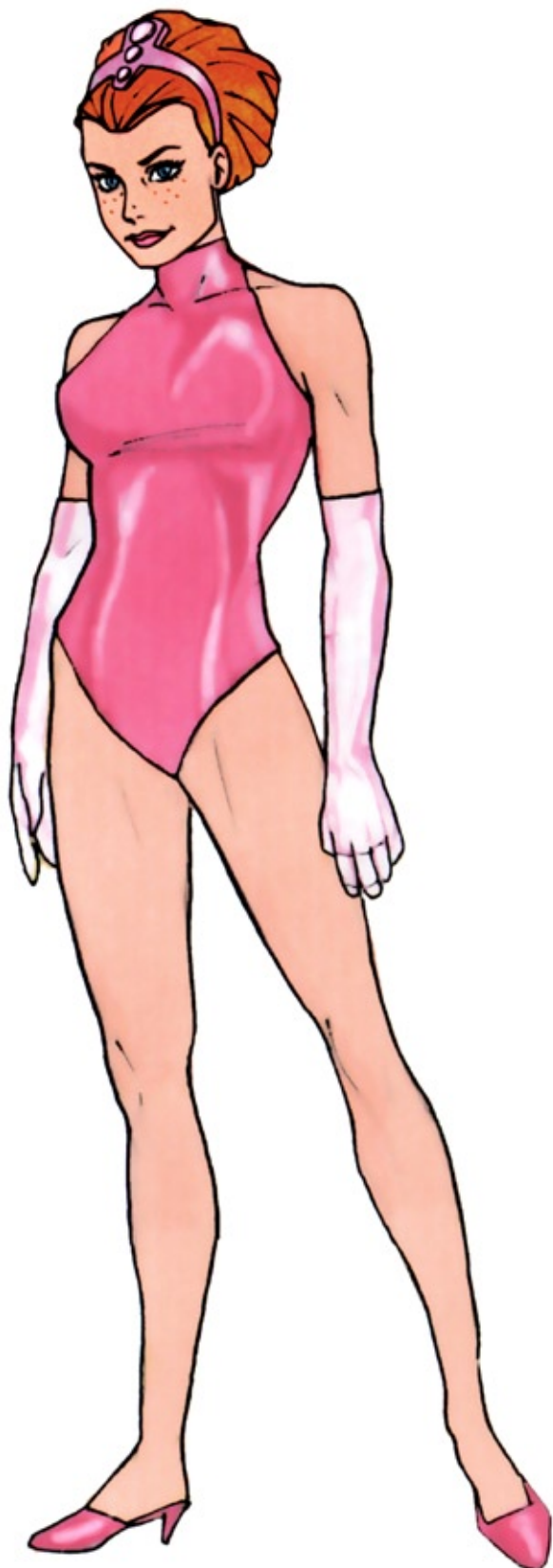


Chapter Seven

One week later, Brian stood on stage performing what might be his last act in Dead Springs. He had really outdone himself that night: all his tricks went off flawlessly, all his illusions had left the audience dumbfounded, all his escapes were breathtaking. He couldn't stop thinking about how great it would be to do his act in Vegas, in front of an audience roughly four times as large.

A few feet away from Brian stood Tracy. This was definitely her last performance in Dead Springs. While she had been wonderful tonight, someone else would be assisting Brian with his last trick...

And now, ladies and gentleman, for my grand finale. This is a trick of unmatched peril. I warn you, I have never attempted this trick before; anything can go wrong. Tonight I will saw my lovely assistant in half!”



This was one of the oldest tricks in the history of stage magic, but the way Brian built it up made the audience feel they were about to watch something new and daring.

“Now,” continued Brian “When I told Tracy about this trick, she flat out refused to have anything to do with it.” There was a smattering of laughter from the audience. “So let me introduce you to my other lovely assistant, Rhea!” Brian rolled the ‘r,’ making the name sound somewhat exotic.

Ray, aka Rhea, stepped out onto the stage. Though this was the third time he had done this, he was still nervous as heck. He was wearing spiky high heels, and a pink, one-piece body suit. Ray’s bare, hairless legs almost glowed in the spotlight. Elbow length gloves covered his hands, leaving his slender, freckled shoulders naked. Beneath his costume, padding created what Ray did not have, hid what he wasn’t supposed to have, and basically squeezed his body into ways it wasn’t supposed to go. A splash of red around his lips and black around his eyes completed the image. For the first time, Ray had done his own makeup.

There was a chorus of wolf whistles and rude comments from some men in the audience. Obviously, no one suspected a thing. Tracy winked at Ray from across the stage; she had put up with that every night for several years.

Tracy wheeled a gurney into the middle of the stage. Brian took Ray by the hand and led him to the table. Ray lay down on top of it. Brian chained Ray’s arms to the table above his head. Tracy chained his feet. Brian then

No one in the audience suspected that Brian's lovely new assistant was hiding a secret.

took out an open-ended, lidless box about one foot in length. He placed this over Ray's midsection and clamped it to the table.

Tracy left the stage. The house lights dimmed. The only light on the stage was a spotlight focused on Ray's prone form. Ominous music began to play. Brian slipped on an executioner's mask. Out of what appeared to be thin air he produced a chainsaw bigger than most of the audience members even knew existed. He revved it up and with some maniacal laughter began to saw into the box, and presumably into Ray's stomach.

Ray closed his eyes and relaxed. Brian always played this trick for all it was worth, so there would be nothing for him to do for a few minutes.

Despite everything, Ray still couldn't believe what was happening to him. Here he was, dressed in a ridiculously skimpy outfit, pretending to be a woman! The worst part was, no one even suspected. It was just over a week ago that he had first agreed to do this, now he was practically living full time as a woman. He hadn't even agreed to go to Las Vegas with Brian yet.

Tracy had him on a tight schedule. If he was to pass as a woman for a year he had better learn to act the part. Every gesture, every word, every action of Ray's had to be girlish. Ray could not just play the part of a woman, he had to become a woman. If being feminine wasn't second nature to him by the time the Vegas gig started it could jeopardize the whole thing. Ray couldn't act like a confident, self-assured woman like Tracy, either. That would draw too much attention. No, the Rhea Tracy had in mind was shy, submissive, and quiet.

As Tracy made plans for her wedding, she coached Ray on the finer arts of being a woman: "Never tell anyone to do anything, and never, ever demand anything. Even if you are well within your rights, when you need something the first word out of your mouth will be 'please.'"

"Stand up straight when you walk. Guys tend to walk with their heads forward. A lady should walk with her hips forward. Eyes straight ahead, and wiggle a bit while you walk." Ray had to practice that quite a bit!

"Don't do any heavy lifting or any hard work. If you need a big job done, ask a guy."

"Never hold a door open for anyone, even another woman. Never offer to pick up the check unless you are with a female friend. Every so often duck into the bathroom and fix your makeup. And for God's sake make sure you don't go in the men's room by mistake."

"Women have a 'breathier,' more silent voice. We're going to have to practice this a lot, though your voice isn't too deep. No shouting for the next twelve months."

"No more beer or whiskey. If you want to drink, drink wine. No more burgers or fats. You have to stay slim and pretty for this gig."

"Try to take up an interest in feminine things. Ladies don't watch sports and they definitely don't play them. You might try teaching yourself to sew. And get a subscription to some beauty

magazines. That would be the natural thing for a woman your age to do. They're also great sources for fashion and makeup tips."

Finally, Tracy added something that Ray found very disturbing. "Rhea," she began. "I need to talk to you about something very important. I know you don't think it will concern you, but believe me it will. You need to learn how to handle the attentions of gentlemen."

Ray groaned. Still, if he was going to do this, he had better learn the correct way to handle himself.

"Like it or not Rhea, men all have one thing on the forefront of their minds, and I think you know what that is. No matter how good of a friend you are with a man, no matter how much he claims to respect you, deep down, maybe even subconsciously, he is thinking about having sex with you. It will go doubly for you since you are so pretty. I'm not trying to condemn guys, it's just the way they are. I've put up with it since I was about thirteen. I'm going to give you some feminine wisdom that will help keep you in control.

"Whether or not they realize it, guys are overt in their quest for sex. They'll make lewd jokes, they'll put their arm around you in a 'friendly' hug, some will even pat you on the rear. All women have to put up with, but you shouldn't have to let it go too far. If a guy is getting a little too friendly, just look him in the eye and tell him to cut it out. Stand your ground, just don't make too big of an issue about it."

"Another thing you'll notice is that guys tend to stare at you. Some guys are sneaky about it, others will give you a full leer. There's not much you can do about that; they always deny it if you confront them. Also, a lot of guys are in the habit of talking to a woman's chest instead of her face. Brian does it. David does it. You even do it sometimes." Ray flushed with embarrassment, he never recalled doing that!

"Now odds are guys are going to ask you out. Knowing you, you'll probably give them an emphatic 'no.' There's nothing wrong with that. Just don't be rude about it, you don't want to crush some poor guy's ego." Tracy paused.

"Something else?" asked Ray.

"One thing. I need to tell you how to behave if you do decide to go on a date with a man." Ray was about to interrupt, but Tracy cut him off "This is for your information only. I know it will probably never come up, but just in case."

"Even if a guy says he wants to take you out as a friend, he wants to get into your panties. Always keep that in mind. If you don't know a guy too well, arrange to meet him rather than having him pick you up. He'll pay for the date, don't worry about that at all. Try to keep the conversation steered toward him and his interests. Guys love to talk about themselves."

"Now most guys will try to sleep with you on the first date. First they'll kiss you, then french kiss you, then a quick grope, and before you know it they're taking off their boxers. The thing to re-

member is a guy can only get as far as you let him. They can be persistent, but once you tell them to cut it out, they'll stop. A proper lady gives a gentleman a closed mouth kiss at the end of their first date and nothing more. What you do on the next dates is up to you."

Ray had felt very uncomfortable during this whole speech. Just was Tracy expecting him to do when he was dressed as a woman? Still, all knowledge was helpful. When this whole ordeal was over maybe he would understand women well enough to get a few dates.

As Ray laid on the gurney, he kept thinking about Tracy's lessons in womanhood. Would they be enough? Could he pull this off? He was startled from his thoughts by disquieting sound of a chainsaw cutting into metal. Brian had sawn all the way through Ray's middle and into the gurney. Soon he was finished.

As the amazed audience watched in silence, Brian slid two metal sheets into the slit the chainsaw had made in the box over Ray's midsection. Tracy came back from the wings. Brian pulled on the gurney near Ray's head and Tracy pulled the gurney near his feet. The two halves separated. Ray's head, arms, and upper torso went wheeling towards the left of the stage while his feet and lower torso went the dead opposite direction. As the audience broke into thunderous applause, Brian and Tracy bowed. They then exited the stage in opposite directions, each pulling half of Ray behind them.



Chapter Eight

Ray, now in one piece, collapsed in a chair, totally spent. He was sitting in Tracy's nearly empty dressing room. He had changed out of the silly stage costume and into his new bathrobe. All the Nero shows were finished. He had performed all the shows he had agreed to. Each one of them had gone off without a hitch. That was both good and bad. While he was delighted about not being caught, he now knew he had no reason not to agree to go to Vegas with Brian.

The odd thing was, he wasn't upset about the prospect as he had been when Tracy had first suggested it. Ray had gone from viewing womanhood as a hideously vile embarrassment to just a really big inconvenience. Brian was right. If he looked at it like an acting job then it really wasn't that bad. Besides, he really had no choice right now. Last night his landlord told him that he had 30 days to vacate the premises, due to failure to pay rent. There was nothing left for Ray in Dead

Springs. This Vegas gig could give him a rare chance to make a clean break. A year from now he could start over in a different town with a little cash.

Brian burst into the room. He was smoking a cigar and looking very pleased. "Ray," he practically shouted, "You were phenomenal! Not only did you play the part of a woman convincingly, you did your part of the trick perfectly. It took Tracy three months to learn how to get sawn in half."

Ray tried not to let his pride show. It was nice to perform on stage.

"Well, anyway," Brian continued "you've done everything you agreed to. But what do you say? Will you come to Las Vegas with me?"

Ray closed his eyes. "O.K. You've got yourself an assistant. I know I'll end up regretting this, but money's money."

Brian smiled a very relieved smile. "I promise you, you won't regret this. You're a real pal. I'll make this up to you somehow."

Ray was about to tell Brian not to worry about it when there was a knock at the door. Without thinking, Brian hollered, "C'mon in." Ray shot him an angry glance. He was still in his makeup and looked like a woman.

A tall, good-looking man with a mustache came in. He was holding a large bouquet of flowers. "I'm sorry," he said with a thick Australian accent "I thought that this was Tracy's dressing room. Oh, hi, Brian."

"Dave, you old son of a gun!" said Brian with a grin. "Tracy didn't tell us you were in town!"

"Well, she doesn't know. It's a bit of a surprise, actually. So who's your friend?" David motioned to Ray.

"Oh, this is Ray." Ray shot Brian a warning glance. "Er, uh, Rhea... he, I mean she, will be my, uh, new assistant. She'll be taking over Tracy's job."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Rhea," said David, and without warning bent over and kissed Ray's hand. It was an awkward moment for Ray and Brian. David had met Ray before, and he didn't even recognize him. Fortunately at that moment Tracy came in. She took one look at David and screamed with joy. David and Tracy kissed for a long, long time as Brian and Ray tried to look interested in the floor. After Tracy and David had finished their smooching and their sappy sentiments, David spoke.

"Hey, what do you say we all go out to dinner? My treat!"

"Wonderful!" said Tracy "Just give Rhea and me a chance to change. She quickly hustled David and Brian out of the room before Ray could protest.

Forty-five minutes later the four of them were sitting at a corner table in one of Dead Spring's more reputable nightclubs. Ray was quietly suffering the night away in a short cocktail dress that Tracy had forced him to wear. He kept glancing at the clock, hoping that someone would decide it was time to go home. Unfortunately everyone else seemed to be having a great time. Brian was finishing a story about a failed underwater escape attempt he had made several years ago.

"So anyway," he continued "by the time they finally fished me out of the water I had been without oxygen about seven minutes. I was in a coma for a couple of days. Doctors said I might have brain damage! Tracy, you remember don't you?" Tracy nodded glumly. Brian seemed to think that this story was hilarious, though she always cringed when thinking of how he had nearly drowned. "Now get this! That failed attempt was the most popular show the hotel had in (ha, ha) years! I mean me nearly drowning really (ha, ha) brought in some cash! Ha, ha!" Brian became aware of the awkward silence.

"So... David" Ray ventured "besides seeing Tracy, what brings you to our town?"

"Oh, not a lot," replied Dave "my company is interested in buying a clothing store here. It seems the owner was arrested and..." at that moment the club's D.J. burst out yelling.

"Hey all you kids out there tonight! What d'ya say we get this party mooooooving? I want all of you to get out there on the dance floor and show me you know how to have a good time!" Couples began to get up out of their seat. David and Tracy got up to dance.

"Say, why don't you two join us out there?" asked David "There's no point in Tracy and I having all the fun!"

"NO!" said Brian and Ray at the same time, a little too loudly. David shrugged. Soon, he and Tracy were out on the floor, moving in time to the rock and roll beat.

Brian and Ray sat at the table, nursing their drinks. Brian wanted to ask the cute brunette two tables down to dance but didn't feel right leaving Ray all alone. Ray just wanted to leave, but he didn't want to mess up Tracy and David's reunion. Brian eventually excused himself to go to the bathroom.

Ray began to think. Would all of his nights be like this? Sitting around bored while the 'normal' women went out and had fun? That seemed like an unhappy prospect. Still, it was not like Ray went out that much anyway. Ray's thoughts were interrupted by a loud, slurred voice: "Hey, sugar, wanna dance?"

Ray looked up to see a middle-aged gentleman who was obviously quite drunk. His bloodshot eyes leered at Ray's chest. His shirt was unbuttoned halfway down his hairy chest. He was a most disgusting specimen.

"No thank you." replied Ray curtly.

"C'mon, just one dance sweetie." The man grabbed Ray by the arm.

"I said no!" Ray looked around for help. Brian was nowhere to be seen. Ray caught a glimpse of David and Tracy across the room, but they were too caught up in each other to notice him.

The drunk roughly pulled Ray by the arm onto the dance floor. Even though the music was loud and raucous, he pulled Ray right up against his body. Ray could smell the whiskey on his breath. "Now this ain't so bad, is it baby?"

"Let go of me!" Ray didn't know what to do. The man was a lot stronger and obviously would not take no for an answer. Should he put up with it or scream or what?

"Mind if I cut in?" Ray and the drunk turned around. It was Brian. The drunk was about to protest, but Brian's height, muscular build, and somewhat deranged expression changed his mind. "Sure pal, she's all yours."

Standing a couple of feet apart, Ray and Brian began to dance. Ray tried to move with the beat; Brian did some bizarre techno-disco moves. Ray grinned to himself. Thank God for Brian! They'd dance a couple of numbers and then sit down for the rest of the evening. Ray shuddered to think what might have happened had Brian not been there.

Suddenly, the D.J. called out to the crowd "O.K. men, I want you to take that pretty lady you are with and hold her, squeeze her, pull her close to you! Let her know you loooooove her!" The house lights went dim. The music softened to a slow dance number. The couples began moving closer together. A few men snatched a kiss from their dates. It was romance time.

Brian and Ray came close to panicking. They would look damned ridiculous if they didn't slow-dance to this song. Brian glanced over his shoulder. The drunk was watching them like a hawk, waiting for a chance to cut in. Brian clenched his teeth and put his arms around Ray's waist. After a few seconds Ray put his arms around Brian's neck. Ray was a lot shorter than Brian, so they ended up pressed rather closely together. Very slowly, they began to dance.

Fate was conspiring against Ray and Brian that night. The D.J. only played slow, romantic songs for the rest of the evening and the drunk never stopped watching them. He desperately wanted to feel Ray up on the dance floor, but he didn't want to tangle with Brian. After about forty-five minutes, Brian suggested they sit down. He hadn't be so uncomfortable dancing with someone since junior high school. If the drunk tried to butt in he'd just pop him one.

Ray and Brian sat down unmolested. There was a note on the table from Tracy:

Dear Brian and Rhea,

Dave and I took a cab back to his hotel. Don't wait up! Sorry to run out on you two like this, but you guys looked like you were having such a good time dancing we didn't want to interrupt! Have fun, you crazy kids!

Tracy

Brian and Ray groaned. Neither of them was amused by Tracy's joke about them enjoying dancing together (at least they hoped she was joking!). They quickly left the club.

Brian drove Ray home in his dilapidated Pinto that he had recently gotten running again. The whole trip was spent in awkward silence. The car rattled to a stop in front of Ray's apartment building. There was a long pause.

"Uh, listen Ray..." began Brian, embarrassed "Uh..."

Ray also seemed embarrassed. "Don't worry about it Brian. Thanks for saving me from being groped tonight. I owe you one." Ray smiled a weak smile and got out of the car. Brian chugged off.

Ray quickly changed into a nightgown and went to bed. He had given up trying to hide his cross dressing from his neighbors. Either the people in his building didn't care or didn't notice. Most of them were vagrants or drug dealers, so Ray really didn't care what they thought. He'd be moving out soon anyway.

For a long time Ray sat up and thought. Had he made the right decision? Would Vegas really not be that bad? Would dressing as a woman result in more miserable nights like this? Could he make being a woman fun at all?

On the other side of town, Brian was also sitting up thinking. One thought flashed through his mind over and over. It wasn't about the drunk, or about his new job, or the insanity of dressing his friend like a girl. It was that for one brief, brief, second tonight on the dance floor, he had forgotten that the beautiful girl he held in his arms was anything but what she appeared to be. Brian wouldn't admit it, even to himself, but for that short moment he had enjoyed dancing with Ray.



Chapter Nine

Two weeks later Tracy officially became Mrs. David Stepstone. The ceremony was smaller than they had originally intended. After trying to organize a big affair, they both finally decided it was more trouble than it was worth. They decided on a small church wedding and then a private reception at a rented hall with just their immediate families plus Brian and Ray in attendance. As the couple said their vows it was hard for anyone in the audience to believe there was ever a happier couple. At the reception everyone was consumed by their own private thoughts.

David was thinking what a lucky chance it was that he happened to meet his life mate, even though she had lived thousands of miles away. He was also excited about his upcoming honeymoon. Tracy couldn't believe that she had finally gotten married. She was looking forward to spending the rest of her life with her man. She wished Brian would hurry up and find someone, he was getting a little too old for his hedonistic lifestyle. Ray looked with envy at David. Why

couldn't he be half the man David was instead of wearing this formal black dress and fending off passes from Tracy's brothers? Brian was wishing he hadn't volunteered to lead David's drunken bachelor party the previous night. He now had the mother of all hangovers. He also kind of envied Tracy and David. Perhaps he should start thinking about settling down himself.

At the reception, while David was talking to his parents and Brian was in the kitchen making an ice pack for his throbbing head, Tracy pulled Ray aside.

"So Rhea, I guess tomorrow you and Brian are off on your big adventure."

"Yeah. I tell you I have never been so nervous. Not in my entire life."

"C'mon Rhea, you'll do great."

"You keep saying that. I'm not so sure."

"You're just jittery. It'll be fine."

Ray took on a very serious expression. "This is no time for false optimism. I've been O.K. up till now because I knew I could always count on you to help me. Tomorrow you'll be half way around the world! I can't call Australia every time I have a problem! How am I going to cope without being able to ask about the female lifestyle?"

Tracy paused. She looked like she had something on her mind. "Rhea, I've thought about this. I didn't know how to broach this subject, but just hear me out. How would you feel about letting someone else in on our secret?"

Ray's guard instantly went up. "Who? You didn't tell David did you?"

"Relax honey, no one else knows, though I think David would be understanding if you ever wanted to tell him. No, I was thinking of a friend of mine in Vegas. She specializes in helping men become women. I guarantee you she would respect your privacy. She is very understanding and you'd have someone you could candidly talk to."

Ray was terrified of letting anyone else know about what he was doing. Still, Tracy wouldn't steer him wrong. If she said her friend was understanding and confidential then she would be. It would be safer to go to Vegas if he knew he could count on professional advice. "O.K. Yes, I think I should talk to her."

"You're making the right decision. I'll give you her number so you can look her up once you get settled in. In the meantime I'll give her a call and brief her."

As Tracy got up to talk to David, Brian staggered back and sat down next to Ray. He was clutching his ice pack to his head. Ray smiled to himself. He had seen Brian in this condition many times.

"You don't look so hot, Brian," quipped Ray.

“I feel like hell. You look good though.”

“You really think so?” asked Ray, somewhat surprised.

“Yeah. You’re really getting the hang of passing as a woman. You’ll do great. Woman or not, you’re going to have the time of your life in Vegas.”

“Speaking of which, what time does our flight leave tomorrow?” asked Ray.

Brian pulled an airline ticket out of his vest pocket and gave it to Ray. “Nine in the morning. Only I’m not flying with you.”

“What?” Ray was shaken “Why not?”

“I’ve got to take my magic equipment with me. Not exactly the type of stuff I want to take to an airport.”

Ray thought about it. Swords, a shot gun, knives, saws, explosives... not the sort of things you should spring on airport security. “I see your point. But why can’t you just have it shipped?”

“Well, I gotta take my car anyway. I figure I’d just slap a trailer on the back and haul it myself. If I leave when I get home from here I’ll make it to Vegas by the time your flight arrives. I’ll meet you at the airport.”

“How can you do this to me?” whispered Ray, sounding both angry and scared. “You’re going to make me ride the plane by myself? As a woman?”

Brian looked at Ray very sternly. “Listen, Ray. If you really want to, you can drive through the desert in an un-air-conditioned clunker with me. I’d prefer the flight myself. Just think though, do you really want to spend the next year never leaving my side? I’ll be there for you as much as you need me, but we aren’t going to be joined at the hip. Sometimes I won’t be able to be with you and sometimes you won’t want me to be there. We’ll both have lives of our own. Like it or not, you’ll have to do some things on your own. This plane ride will be a fine way to practice.”

Ray wondered why he ever bothered to protest about these things. He never got his way. “O.K., I guess you’re right. But what if they ask for ID? That is a problem, you know.”

“Ah, I almost forgot.” Brian snapped his fingers. An envelope appeared in his hands. He handed it to Ray. Inside was a birth certificate and a driver’s license made out in Rhea’s name. The picture on the driver’s license was blurry but very definitely of Ray in female garb (it was a picture Brian had secretly snapped after the first show). “How did you do this?” asked Ray, amazed.

“Ah, never underestimate the power of magic.” Or of a \$50 bribe at the DMV and a friend at city hall he thought.

Ray sighed and tossed back his flaming red tresses, revealing his newly-pierced ears. So it was settled. Tomorrow there would be no going back. For twelve months Ray would not longer exist.



Chapter 10

As flight 595 (Dead Springs to Denver with stops in Las Vegas and Salt Lake City) lifted off, Ray finally began breathing again. He had gotten no sleep last night. Every time he closed his eyes he had terrifying visions of what going out as Rhea alone for the first time would be like: everyone seeing right through his disguise, crowds of commuters laughing and pointing, being refused admittance to the plane, being arrested for impersonating someone else. Each fantasy was worse than the previous. He would have cancelled the whole thing then and there had Brian not be depending on him. He rehearsed over and over in his mind what he was going to say, how he was going to act, what he would do if he was discovered. Once he got there the whole routine was an anticlimax. He checked in his many suitcases of feminine clothes without incident and the boarding agent took his ticket without comment.

Ray sat back in the seat and relaxed. To his surprise, Brian had booked him in first class. Every so often a cute little stewardess would ask him if he would like something to drink or anything else to make him more comfortable. While Ray enjoyed the attention, he felt a wisp of sadness. He could never ask out that girl, or any girl, for a whole year. Even though he had never been popular with women, it hurt him to give up all hope of female companionship while in Vegas.

The flight landed in Las Vegas. Ray picked up his purse and small Carry-on bag, straightened his skirt, and disembarked. After a quick detour into the women's room to check his makeup, he went to claim his baggage. After waiting nearly forty-five minutes at the baggage carousel, Ray realized his bags were not coming. Fighting back panic, Ray went to the lost luggage counter.

A surly fat man waited on him. Ray gave his name and presented his claim check. After a brief look at a log book, the man said "Sorry, it's not here."

Ray was shocked "But it went with my flight! Please check again."

"Sorry lady, it ain't here."

Ray's nightmares were coming true. "All of my clothes were in there... practically everything I own! Please, if I don't get my bags I don't know what I'll do!" He didn't either. He was unprepared to shop for an entire new wardrobe the day he began his new job; not to mention the fact he had little money.

"Look lady, it's not here. Come back tomorrow, see if it showed up. Next!"

Tears welled up in Ray's eyes. He wanted to hit the man, to scream at him, but he just didn't have the nerve. Why couldn't he be confident like other men he knew? His abusive father probably would have punched the clerk in the face (and spent the night in jail). David would have stood his ground and not left until he got his luggage and an apology. Brian... well, he probably would have made such a screaming spectacle of himself that the clerk would have found his luggage just to get rid of him. But Ray... all he could think to do was to cry, which would not have been manly.

A brilliant thought hit Ray. Why in the heck should he be manly? For all the world knew he was a woman, and hey, women cry! Ray let loose a few experimental tears. The clerk's stern look soften just a bit. Ray turned on the waterworks. "All my things," he sobbed "please, you have to help me!" He was really bawling now.

"Hey pal," a guy behind Ray shouted at the clerk "can't you see you're upsetting her? Would it kill you to check?"

"O.K., O.K., just let me look." He disappeared into a back room. Ray sad down on a bench and wept. His tears were no longer real, but he was good enough at acting to make them seem authentic. The man behind Ray sat down next to him and placed a comforting arm around his shoulder. Ray remembered what Tracy had said about guys using any excuse to touch a pretty girl. Ray wanted to shrug his arm off, but decided to keep up his facade (as long as the guy didn't get any friendlier!).

Soon the clerk returned. He apologized for the mistake; Rhea's luggage had been accidentally delivered to the wrong gate. Ray thanked the man beside him and disentangled himself from his arm. With a sneer towards the rude clerk he walked off to claim what was his. With the help of an airport porter he brought his cases to the front of the airport and waited for Brian to show up. Brian was late, of course, so Ray had some time to reflect (and to fix his makeup).

Ray had been working in the magic business for quite some time. He had become cynical about so-called miracles and mystic happenings. Yet despite his skepticism, Ray felt like something amazing had just happened. Until that day, Ray had never had the courage to stand up to anyone. He always, always ended up doing whatever anyone wanted him to do. He never could stand up to bullies, his father, rude people, or bosses. He couldn't even stand up to Tracy and Brian when they asked him to dress as a woman. And yet standing up to the rude baggage guy came easily. He wondered why. Maybe because he no longer had to be worried about appearing wimpy compared to who he was standing up to. Maybe because people went out of their way to help pretty women. Maybe he was just using his new identity as a chance to develop a new, confident personality. Whatever the reason, he enjoyed this new found confidence.

Brian eventually pulled up in a cloud of smoke.

"You're late," said Ray, mimicking a bored female.

"Yeah sorry, my radiator went out..."

"Well, why don't you load up my stuff. We're late as it is." Ray sauntered over to the passenger door and stood there. Brian suddenly realized Ray expected him to open the door for him. Brian complied, slightly confused. Ray slipped in. Only when Brian was busy loading up Ray's bags did Ray allow himself a grin. If Brian wanted him to be a woman for a year then Brian had better be prepared to make some sacrifices as well.

Brian finished cramming everything into the trailer and the trunk. What was with Ray? He was acting so different, so unusual, so... well, confident. Hmmm, maybe this job would be good for him. Still, it made Brian a little nervous how quick he had jumped to obey. He never would have done that for any other man.

Brian and Ray arrived at the hotel just in time for their appointment with Mr. Penny, the talent coordinator who had hired Brian. Ray had never met this man and was a little nervous about passing his inspection.

A hotel clerk directed Ray and Brian to Mr. Penny's hole-in-the-wall office. Mr. Penny turned out to be a gruff looking bald man in his sixties who smoked a constant stream of smelly cigars. He and Brian shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. Brian then introduced Rhea, his new assistant.

"Pleased to meet you little lady. You're even prettier than Brian made you out to be!" he squeezed Ray's hand. "Well, I've scheduled your first show for a week from yesterday. That should give you enough time to settle in. I hope you have something spectacular planned for us, I've really been hyping you two!"

“You bet,” replied Brian. “In fact we...”

Mr. Penny interrupted, as if he had not heard him “So have you guys lined up a place to stay yet?”

“Well, no actually. We figured we’d check in here for a couple of days until we could...”

Mr. Penny interrupted again. “Listen, we’re remodeling the west wing. They’re going at it one floor at a time, but what with construction traffic and debris we’ve had to shut down the whole wing. That means we’ve got about a hundred perfectly good rooms sitting empty. How’d you guys like to move into one of ‘em for a much reduced rate? If you don’t mind a little sawdust in the halls I think you’ll find you’ll be quite comfortable. If you don’t care for it, you can try to find your own place.”

Brian and Ray agreed. Brian was the kind of guy who could sleep in a luxury hotel suite or the back of a van and never notice the difference. Ray was just glad that he would be able to live where he worked. This would cut down on unnecessary trips dressed as Rhea.

“So,” asked Mr. Penny with a lecherous grin. “Will you be requiring two rooms or one?” Ray blushed at Mr. Penny’s insinuation that he and Brian were romantically involved. Brian asked for two rooms and arranged for a porter to take their stuff up.

After everything had been moved in the rooms Brian drove off to return the trailer to the rental company. Ray went and took a shower. The room was beautiful. A soft queen-sized bed, color TV, full shower bath, clean towels; a far cry from the “No-Tell Motel” type in Dead springs. There was also a door adjoining his room with Brian’s. This way they could communicate in private. Ray scrubbed his slim, freckled body clean, and slipped into a robe. He blow dried his hair and slipped it into a ponytail. He then put on just a bit of lipstick and eyeliner. Then he put on a tight pair of jeans over the rubber device used to hide his penis. Finally he slipped on the falsies and threw on a cropped T-shirt that showed off his midriff. By now, Ray had grown quite used to making himself pretty; even in those old clothes he looked good.

After Brian returned Mr. Penny introduced them to other members of the hotel staff. Brian arranged for rehearsal and went over what he would need for the upcoming act. They would be performing three or four times a week. Brian did arrange to have the next day off to take care of some business, after that they would fall into the regular work routine.

After the meeting ended, Brian asked Ray if he wanted to go down to the casino and shoot some dice. Ray declined, saying that he just wanted to rest. Brian retired to the casino to lose whatever cash he had on hand. Ray went back up to his room and began putting his clothes away. While he was doing this he came across the phone number Tracy had given him at the wedding; the number of her friend who apparently could help Ray with his femininity. Ray decided he shouldn’t put it off. He wanted to get to know her as soon as possible, so that if there was an emergency he could call her right away.



Chapter 11

Early the next day, Ray slipped on a simple white blouse and black skirt, walked out of the hotel and hailed a cab. By now he had grown used to the weird and absurd in his life. Though his plans for the day would be considered bizarre by society's standards, Ray now just looked at them as something to be tolerated.

The previous night he had called Tracy's friend, a Dr. Amy Hathaway. He tried to explain his situation as best he could over the phone. Dr. Hathaway had arranged an appointment for the next day.

Dr. Hathaway's office turned out to be in a small clinic in a suburb of Las Vegas. The building was very nondescript; the cab driver had to circle the block a couple of times before he found the right address. Ray paid the driver and walked in.

Ray was quite nervous. Tracy had told him that this doctor specialized in helping men become women. Just what did that mean? Did she advise cross dressers on how to look feminine? Did she give them psychotherapy to help them act more feminine? Did she perform sex change operations? If the last were the case, then Ray wanted nothing to do with her! Still, as long as he was here he decided to have a look. With Tracy on the other side of the world it would be a relief to speak to someone about his 'condition.'

Ray walked into the waiting room. He was half expecting it to be filled with drag queens; men poorly disguised as women. Ray nearly lost his composure when he saw what was waiting for him. There was only one male in the waiting room, a good looking young man dressed normally. Ray couldn't imagine that he'd ever pass as a girl. Everyone else in the waiting room was a woman. They were of various ages, ranging from plain to beautiful, but they were all unmistakably women! Ray signed in with the receptionist and buried his face in an old copy of "Time." He hoped that he could just pass in and out of here silently. Surely the doctor wouldn't mention his need to look female in front of any of these real women!

After 15 minutes Ray was called into the office. A nurse lead him into a small examination room. Soon, Dr. Hathaway came in. She was a friendly, attractive woman who looked to be in her late thirties. She smiled at Ray reassuringly and asked him a few generic questions about his health. She then sat down in front of him and asked him why he was here.

Ray took a deep breath and began to explain everything: how he used to be a stage hand, how his boss need him as an assistant for his magic act, how he had to dress as a woman against his will, how he had agreed to do this for a year, how Tracy had trained him, and about how he didn't think he could handle this on his own. Except for asked a couple of brief clarifying questions, Dr. Hathaway was silent. Ray finished by asking her if she could help Ray keep up the subterfuge.

Dr. Hathaway sat and thought for a bit. Finally she looked at Ray. "Rhea," she began "I would be glad to give you any sort of advice on how to be feminine. We can schedule a weekly session were you can talk about what is going on and ask me any questions you have. If something comes up during the week I'll give you my cell number so that you can contact me. But Rhea, I think there are some things you have overlooked. First of all, do you know what I do here?"

Ray shook his head.

"Rhea, I'm a psychologist and a plastic surgeon. My main specialty is helping men, who for one reason or another, want to become women. Some of my clients have desired to be female all their lives. With some it was a sudden decision. Some come to me because of outside factors: job, society, significant others. Some just want a slight alteration in their features, some want a total sex change. Whatever reason they come, I try to help them."

Ray was stunned. Why would anyone willingly go through all this? Ray figured that Dr. Hathaway was exaggerating the amount of men she helped so that she could put Ray's mind at ease.

“C’mon, Dr. Hathaway,” said Ray “you must be exaggerating. I only saw one guy in the waiting room and he didn’t look a thing like a woman.” Ray noticed the doctor’s smile. “What’s so funny?”

“I’m sorry Rhea. It’s just that you paid me a great compliment. Actually, every woman in the waiting room is, or once was, a man. The guy you noticed is actually the fiancé of one of my ‘faux females.’”

“But, there’s no way... they all look so girlish! They look so delicate! They have breasts!”

“Rhea, surgeons can do amazing things. C’mon, let me show you something.” Dr. Hathaway pulled a photo album out of her desk. “I’d like to show you some photos of some of my past clients. Don’t worry, they gave their permission. Take a look.”

Ray began to look at the photos. One page there was a photograph labeled ‘before.’ It appeared to be a photograph of a high school swimmer before a meet. He looked to be about 17 years old, handsome, and thin. Ray turned the page and looked at the photograph labeled ‘after.’ To Ray’s surprise it was a wedding photo. He scrutinized the groom. He sure didn’t look anything like the original guy. Dr. Hathaway tapped the picture of the bride. To Ray’s shock he realized that he had been looking at the wrong person. The high school swimmer wasn’t the groom, he was the bride! Only now he was wearing a wedding gown! His nose was smaller, his lips were fuller, and he had definite cleavage. He was looking rapturously at the groom.

“Amazing, huh?” asked Dr. Hathaway. “This is a picture of Cindy. Until she was twenty she was known as Carl. Carl was a macho guy when he was in high school, but after he graduated he began to feel like he was living a life that didn’t suit him. One day when he was in college his roommate came home to find him decked out in a dress and heels. Instead of being condemning, the roommate suggested that Carl see a psychologist. Carl finally realized that being macho and tough wasn’t what he wanted. What he really wanted was to be submissive and feminine. He was referred to me, and well, you can see the results!”

Ray couldn’t contain his amazement. “And he got married to a man?”

“She sure did.”

“But... how did she tell her new husband about her past?”

“She didn’t have to. That’s her old roommate. Apparently the idea of his friend’s mind in the body of a woman appealed to him.”

Ray slammed the album shut. “I’m sorry. This is just too bizarre. Men becoming women? It sounds like a bad science fiction movie! I’m really not sure that I want a part of this.”

Dr. Hathaway didn’t look at all surprised. “Rhea, you’d be crazy if you didn’t have some doubts. I’d be unprofessional and irresponsible if I tried to convince you to do something you didn’t

feel comfortable with. All I want to do is show you that womanhood is not a terrible thing. You might find that it is not as inaccessible as you might think.”

“I could never do what Carl, er, Cindy did!”

“Don’t be so sure. If I saw you on the street I would never, ever have taken you for a man.” Ray groaned. “Listen,” continued Dr. Hathaway “would it help if you talked to someone who was undergoing the transformation? There is a patient in the other examination room who could answer all your questions from a firsthand experience.”

“OK,” said Ray.

Dr. Hathaway left. Ray sat in befuddlement. He could not get the wedding photo out of his mind. A guy just decided he wanted to be a woman and then to become one so flawlessly! It just didn’t make any sense.

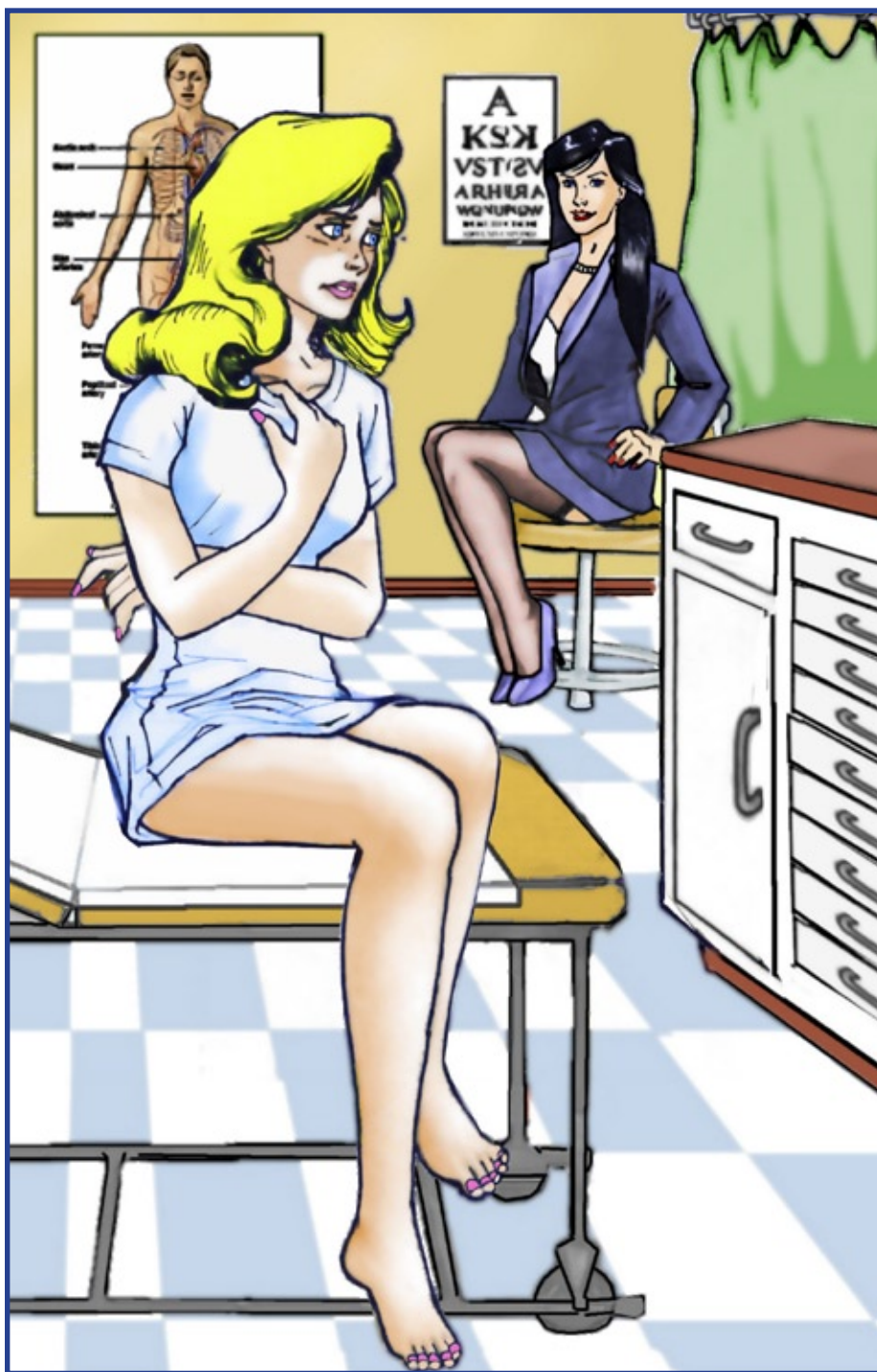
Dr. Hathaway returned in few minutes, followed by two women. One was a tall, willowy woman with straight black hair. The other was shorter. She had poofy blonde hair, full lips, and a slightly nervous look about her. She was wearing a hospital gown. Both of the women were very pretty. Dr. Hathaway introduced them. “This is Mary,” she motioned to the brunette, “and this is her husband, Lee.” Ray numbly shook hands with them both. Except for his well manicured nails, feminine hair, and gold stud earrings, Lee was wearing nothing feminine. The androgynous hospital gown covered most of his body and certainly gave no clue to his gender. And yet he looked unmistakably feminine. How could this have happened?

Lee smiled understandingly at Ray. “I bet you are pretty confused, Rhea. I think it would help if we explained how I came to be like this.”

Ray nodded. Mary began to explain. “Just a few years ago, Lee and I were a regular married couple. I was a lawyer and Lee was a mechanic. I was perfectly happy with Lee as a man, and he loved being a guy. Things were perfectly normal. Then one day we got invited to a costume party at my office. Lee and I decided to send him in drag. I got him all dolled up in my old prom dress. I did his hair, his makeup, and bought him some heels in his size. We were both surprised at how feminine he looked. Well, we went to the party, and to our surprise, not one person recognized him. We were both shocked, but decided to go along with the joke. I introduced Lee as a friend of mine. He was a hit! No one ever suspected his gender at all. I even convinced him to dance with a couple of the guys. Well, after we went home that night, I had Lee put on one of my nighties and we made love. We both had a wonderful night, but we assumed that was it. Neither of us knew the other was thinking about what it would be like to do it again.

“After a few months, a coworker gave me some copies of pictures he had taken at the party. There were a couple of really good ones of Lee. I took them home and showed them to him. I commented on how flawlessly feminine he looked. Lee disagreed. He said his hair still looked masculine, his makeup looked sloppy, and he looked very uncomfortable in his dress. I half jokingly asked him if he would like to dress up again and get it right. He agreed, making it clear it was just for a joke. When I first dressed him up I had done a poor job; I had only expected it to be

for a party. This time I went all out. I ordered him a nice little pink blouse with a matching skirt. I got him panties, nylons, and some heels in his size. I padded one of my own bras. We spent an entire Saturday getting him dolled up. I think we were both surprised at how good he looked. I had been married to him for years and still barely recognized this sexy lady in front of me. It seemed a shame for us to go to all that trouble just to take all his finery off again, so I suggested we go to a quiet nightclub in another town. We sat in a corner booth and spent the whole evening fending off would-be suitors. We had the time of our lives.



Mary explained how her husband became her wife.

“After that night I dressed him up more and more. I got him his own clothes and taught him how to do his own makeup and hair. We never really discussed why we were doing it; I just loved dressing him up all soft and pretty and he was beginning to like it too. About that time I got a better paying job in another state. Lee was able to quit work and we could seriously feminize him now that no one in the town would know him.

“I insisted that he dress whenever we were home alone. Soon that wasn’t enough for us, so about three nights a week I would take him out dressed as a girl in public. No one recognized him. He began to worry that someone might notice his beard, so I had him start on electrolysis treatments. We had a wonderful woman to do the electrolysis. She gave us the number of a doctor who prescribed Lee some estrogen injections. That really helped Lee cope with his new

found identity. He started to truly be a woman, not just act like one. I even noticed him sizing up a couple of guys (Lee blushed when Mary said that). When I got transferred to Nevada I gave all his male clothes to goodwill. He now lives as a full time woman. He's since had a nose job, a lip enhancement, and of course, a boob job. Right now we are trying to decide whether or not Lee should have a sex change operation."

Lee had been pretty quiet through the whole narrative. He seemed slightly embarrassed, though to Ray it seemed he was most embarrassed when Mary would talk about the times when he was a guy. It was almost as if Lee was trying to forget his male roots. Ray was a bit confused. "How exactly did they did this to you? I'm a little confused."

Dr. Hathaway answered. "Well, as you probably know, electrolysis can take away facial and body hair permanently. The thicker the beard, the longer it takes." Ray unconsciously thought of his sad crop of facial hair. Dr. Hathaway continued. "Now giving a man injections of estrogen can have varied results. The most common effects are the softening of the skin, the lessening of facial and body hair, a reduction in the coarseness of regular hair, lessening of muscle tone, a diminishing of the male sex drive, a redistribution of fat in the chest and hips, and increased nipple size and sensitivity. I can do other things as well: breast enhancement, facial plastic surgery, tummy tucks, anything that can make a man look more feminine. After a man lives as a woman for a while I can refer him to a colleague of mine for a full sex change. Then the man becomes a woman forever."

Ray's head was swimming. A woman forever? He was certainly glad he was just there for a little advice on how to act. He was shocked when Dr. Hathaway asked him what he would like to have done.

"Well, nothing of course. I'm just here for a little advice. That's all."

Lee spoke up. "Rhea, I think you don't understand some things. Being a woman isn't all in the act. You have to think of every contingency. One slip up and everyone will know your secret. Once a man accidentally walked in on me in a public dressing room. He was someone I knew and from what he saw he could easily tell I wasn't really a woman. I figured my cover was blown but for some reason he never told anyone. That was when I decided to have my breasts done. Rhea, if you want this to work you'll have to do more than dress up."

Ray was afraid to ask. "Well Dr. Hathaway, what did you have in mind? Keep in mind I won't do anything that will still affect me when the show is over."

"I understand. First of all I want to start you on electrolysis. Nothing gives away a guy faster than 5 o'clock shadow, though it looks like you don't have much to worry about."

"Now wait a minute! That's permanent! I'll never be able to grow a beard if you do that!"

Dr. Hathaway looked stern. "Can you grow one now?"

"Well, no."

“Odds are you will never have a heavy beard. If you can’t grow one by now I doubt you ever will. You’ll only lose a few hairs and you won’t have to worry about that giving yourself away. Would you rather lose your beard or be exposed as a man?”

Ray sadly nodded in submission. Dr. Hathaway continued.

“Now I want to get you started on feminine hormones. This will give you a lot of subtle feminine traits. When the show is almost over I’ll cut you off and start you back on male hormones. By the time the show is over most of the traces of femininity will be gone and within half a year you’ll be as manly as you ever were. If any signs of femininity are left over I’ll correct them with surgery. That is, if you want to go back to being a man.”

Ray ignored the doctor’s implications. “But will hormones really change me that much? I mean, I won’t grow boobs, will I?”

The Dr. thought a moment. “Like I said, hormones are tricky things. Dressing and acting like a woman takes care of the major changes. The hormones will take care of the subtle things. Now you won’t be able to function as a man, I won’t lie to you. Once you are off them you’ll be fine. About breasts, that’s hard to say. They will definitely increase, probably to the size that you would look like a flat-chested woman. A good rule of thumb is that you’ll probably grow to one bra size less than what was average for other women in your family. If you decide you want a larger chest I can give you some lovely implants.”

Though Ray had never known his mother, but he had seen pictures. She was a very buxom woman. If the doctor was right, these hormones could give him a good-sized chest. Ray thought for a minute. The whole process seemed terrible, but there was one thing that convinced him to go along with it: His white-hot fear of being caught.

Ray agreed to the electrolysis and hormones. Mary and Lee told him he was doing the right thing and then went back to their examination room. Dr. Hathaway gave Ray a reassuring smile and an injection in the arm. Ray scheduled a weekly electrolysis appointment and a monthly shot and went back to the waiting room to take care of the bill.

As Ray filled out some forms, he took a couple of nervous glances at the “women” in the waiting room. He tried to picture them as men. Most were taller than typical women, a few had large hands, and their jaws were a little more prominent than what was standard female size. Of course, no one would notice these things under casual inspection; Ray only noticed because he knew their secret. Ray made a vow to himself to never let himself get that far into femininity!

Ray left the office. He looked at his new, female-style watch. It was still early. Brian was out getting his car worked on so there would be nothing to do back at the hotel. He decided to get a bite to eat. Remembering Tracy’s warning about fatty foods he decided to try out a nearby vegetarian restaurant.

He was about to sit down at a table when he recognized the man from the clinic sitting at a nearby table. He was the guy Dr. Hathaway said was the fiancée of a feminized man. The guy was

sitting next to a very petite, olive-skinned woman with curly black hair. Ray shook his head. They looked like any happy young couple. To Ray's horror, they waved at him and motioned him over. Ray couldn't think of a way to refuse so he joined them.



Ray would never have guessed Tanya was really a man.
Tanya would never have guessed Ray was really a man

The man introduced himself as Aaron, his fiancée's name was Tanya. Ray nervously introduced himself as Rhea. Tanya shocked Ray by complimenting him on how feminine he looked (the restaurant was nearly deserted so they didn't worry about being overheard). Ray smiled and told Tanya that "she" also looked like a real woman. Ray was actually glad to be complimented like this; if Tanya thought he looked feminine then maybe he didn't have anything to worry about.

As they talked, Ray felt surprisingly comfortable. It was nice to talk to someone who was in the same boat as he was. Ray found himself opening up about why he was doing this and about his fears.

"I was nervous at first, too," said Tanya. "I thought the whole world was looking at me. But once I started telling myself that I really was a woman, then things were a lot less stressful. If you let it, womanhood can be the best thing in your life."

Ray thought about it. "So," he asked "if you don't mind me asking, how did you become Tanya?"

Aaron and Tanya giggled. "Well," Tanya began "It started in high school, back when I was known as Tommy. I was always different, if you know what I mean. I had such a crush on Aaron I could hardly stand it, but Don was the captain of the football team and I didn't think he'd be interested in a little sissy-boy. I felt like I was alone in the world. Finally I broke down and told my sister about how I felt. She was very understanding. She was also very frank with me. She told me that since Aaron was only interested in woman then he'd never be attracted to me unless I was a woman. I was about to despair when she asked me if I'd like to be a woman. The thought had never occurred to me, but if it meant Don might find me exciting I would do anything.

"Prom was coming up next month. For four weeks my sister gave me a crash course in womanhood. Out of those instructions came Tanya. Before I knew it was at the senior prom in a gown and heels."

Aaron began to speak. "The first time I laid eyes on her I was enchanted. My girlfriend had dumped me the week before and I was dateless. I asked Tanya to dance and then stayed close to her all night. God, talk about your love at first sight! When I kissed her I knew that she was the one for me!"

"Of course," continued Tanya "there was a little something he didn't know! I led a double life that year; Tommy during the week, Tanya on the weekends. I was never comfortable with being a woman, but if it meant belonging to Aaron I was prepared to do it forever. It broke my heart every time he would get fresh and I would have to fend him off. I really wanted to give myself to him, but I couldn't risk him finding out."

Aaron started narrating again. "When I proposed, she had to tell me. I was pretty mad, I stormed out and swore I'd never talk to her again. That resolution lasted five miserable days. I couldn't get her out of my head! Finally I drove to her house at five am and told her I still loved her. She's been on estrogen for two years now, in a month she'll have a full sex change operation."

Ray left the restaurant in awe and took a cab back to the hotel. It was all too much for him. All those men becoming women! The worst of it was, he had practically agreed to join them! Taking female hormones? That wasn't part of his original deal!

By the time he can back, Brian had been home for a few hours. He idly asked where Ray had been, and didn't press the issue when Ray said he'd just been 'out.' Ray turned down Brian's invitation to hit some bars, saying he wanted to go to bed early.

When Ray was alone in his room, he took a long hard look at his naked body in the bathroom mirror. He still had a guy's figure when he was unclothed. Ray wondered how long that would last. What would Brian think if he grew breasts?



A promotional poster for Brian and Ray's first performance.

Chapter 12

The lives of Brian and Ray settled down into the fairly routine lives of entertainers. Rehearsal in the day, performances at night. Of course, Ray had some things going on in his life no one ever would have suspected.

The changes in his body were one new thing. After only a few weeks there were some noticeable happenings. His slight muscle tone had decreased. His hips were wider. His beard was gone, thanks to the combination of electrolysis and hormones. His skin was slightly softer and his hair was a tad silkier. His nipples were a little larger, darker, and more sensitive. He had two very small deposits of fat on his chest, these would most likely increase in size with time. His penis seemed to shrink. He couldn't remember the last time he had had an erection.

Another odd change involved his mind. He had stopped constantly thinking of himself as a cross dresser, though he still couldn't bring himself to think of himself as a woman. He lusted after women much less, though the desire was still there. He stopped looking at dresses and makeup as ways to mask his appearance and began to look at them as ways to make himself look more attractive. It was all very strange to Ray.

Being a magician's assistant was a lot harder than Ray had expected. It wasn't due to the cross dressing, though. Brian insisted on everything being perfect. He would practice with Ray and Don (the stage assistant) for hours at a time. If anything went wrong it wasn't going to be for lack of practice.

The act was a sensation. People came from all over to watch Brian's illusions, escapes, and tricks. Ray would distract the audience with erotic movements, slip Brian the tools he needed to perform his tricks, and generally be of service. Ray had been transported, vanished, sawn in half (and thirds, and fourths), and transformed into a variety of things.

Brian's odd magical quirk was that he would never undo his illusions that involved Ray. If he made Ray vanish, that would be the last the audience saw of him. If he transformed Ray into a rabbit, then a rabbit he would stay. If Ray were sawn in half, Brian would simply wheel the two halves into the wings, he would make no pretence of reattaching them. Ray had always thought



Thanks to the hormones, Ray looked feminine, even without makeup. What changes were still to come?

this was funny when it was Tracy who was on stage. Now he didn't appreciate it so much. He had never realized it before, but Brian was subtly dominating his assistants. It was all an illusion of course, but Ray was somewhat miffed at being treated like a prop.

Ray also began to realize how vaguely sexual his role in the act was. Allowing Brian to tie him up, shackle him, lock him in boxes – while Brian never touched more than Ray's wrists or ankles, Ray was acting very much the part of the submissive woman.

Once, a loud heckler disrupted Brian's act. Instead of having security throw him out, Brian called the man on stage to help with a trick. He had the man step into a 'magic closet.' He then said some magic words. While the audience was distracted by Brian, Don escorted the man out of the theater, via a secret passage. Brian had originally planned to just make the guy disappear. Ray, who had not yet been introduced to the audience that night, decided to play a practical joke. He slipped into the box after the man had left. When Brian opened the box, expecting to find it empty, there stood Ray (or, from the audience's point of view, a sexy woman). Ray began pretending like he was the heckler. He begged Brian to change him back into a man. Brian quickly caught on. As the audience roared with laughter, Brian refused, saying he needed a pretty female assistant. Only Brian and Ray knew the truth that lay behind that routine!

After Ray had gotten the hang of the routine of the job, he found that it was not as stressful as he had expected. Thanks to the hormones, passing as a woman was no longer a chore. Ray began to enjoy the city of Las Vegas. There was always something to do.

That was another thing. It was rather unique to Ray that he had time to do anything. When he lived in Dead Springs he was working three jobs. As soon as one shift would end he would have to rush right off to his next job. He would be lucky to cram in five hours of sleep every day. Now, when he was not performing or rehearsing, his time was his own. He also had spending money for the first time in his life. At first, Ray would hover close to Brian every second they had free. They would go out to see shows, take in the sights, and have a good time. Soon, Ray noticed that Brian was getting just a bit reluctant to spend time with him. It wasn't hard to imagine why; a guy like Brian would like to spend his time trying to meet women and having a cute redhead at his side wouldn't help him. Ray began to find things to do on his own.

Ray had become good friends with several female performers at the hotel. He would often hang out with them after business hours. It made him feel good to have friends in the city. He didn't feel like a lonely freak anymore. Of course, if they girls ever found out his secret...

Ray enrolled in a night school that would get him his high school diploma by the time he was done with the Vegas gig. Of course, it would say "Rhea" on it, but he figured he'd find a way to fix that when the time came.

It was quite odd. Rhea existed in the eyes of the hotel, his friends, the bank, the DMV, and his school. As far as he knew, Ray no longer existed anywhere except in his own mind and the memories of Brian and Tracy. Could it really be that easy to change identities? He hoped it would be this easy to change back.

One afternoon between rehearsals, Ray joined Don, the stagehand, for lunch. Don was a handsome, muscular, black man who had the same job Ray had in Dead springs. He had a good sense of humor and became friends with Brian and Ray almost immediately.

Ray viewed Don as sort of an enigma. Like Ray, Don was born poor. Like Ray, no one had ever given him anything; everything he achieved he had achieved on his own. But there was a difference. Don was effortlessly attractive to women, Ray looked like an attractive woman. Don went to college at night, in a few months he would start law school full time. Ray had to dress as a woman just to escape the poverty level. They had both started off low in life. So how come Don was such a successful man and Ray wasn't?

The answer, thought Ray, was fairly obvious. Don was manly. He was tall, muscular, and had a thick beard. He had a deep voice, and dominantly male features. The very thought of him dressed like Ray now did was so ridiculous that Ray had to force back laughter.

That night, as Ray was removing his makeup, he took a long look in the mirror. His electrolysis treatments had stopped; the combination of the treatments and the hormones had eradicated all traces of his light beard. He now had a slim, hourglass figure. He no longer had to wear the corset. He male organs had shrunk. He could no longer get an erection if he wanted to. The rubber restraining device kept everything hidden under his panties. He chest was budding. It wasn't the chest you'd see on a man. It was the chest you'd see on a twelve-year-old girl who was just starting to develop in earnest. He had to buy a smaller pair of falsies to accommodate the extra growth.

Ray sighed. He had always wanted to get his hands on a pair of woman's breasts. Now it looked like his wish was coming true.



The hormones changed Ray's body in ways both subtle and not so subtle.



Chapter 13

It was a hot Nevada day. Most of the guests of the hotel were taking advantage of the heat to lounge around one of the hotel's pools. People swam, ate, and sunned themselves. The men tried to attract the attention of the many beautiful women around the pool.

One woman attracted particular attention. She was a young redhead. She was wearing a pair of sunglasses and a modest one-piece swimsuit that covered her chest and front, but left her freckled back, arms and legs exposed. She lay back on a deck chair, drinking in the sun, ignoring the many men who tried to catch her eye. There was just something about her: mysterious, aloof, and erotic. Gorgeous but apparently unobtainable.

The men at the pool were crestfallen when a handsome man came up and started talking to her right off the bat. They chatted so easily, he must have been her boyfriend. Every man at the pool-side felt a twinge of envy. A few recognized him as the magician from the hotel lounge.

“Lucky bastard,” muttered a visiting businessman. “Them entertainers get all the chicks they can stand.”

Ray patiently listened to what Brian was saying. When he finished she calmly told him that he was deranged.

“C’mon,” pleaded Brian “I’ve done straightjacket escapes for years. So what’s the big deal if I try it underwater? Right here in this pool, even?”

Ray sighed. “Have you forgotten how you nearly drowned last time you tried that?”

“Have you forgotten how much money we made? This is going to be the biggest hit of the season!”

“No, Brian, it’s just too dangerous.” Ray immediately regretted saying that. Brian never, never, turned away from danger. Before Ray could stop him, Brian was already on his way to Mr. Penny’s office to pitch the trick. Ray groaned, threw on a robe, and followed.

Mr. Penny listened to Brian’s spiel with interest. Then he grinned. “Brian my boy, this could be the show that makes you a real star. When could you be ready to perform?”

Brian did some mental calculations. “Well, with constant practice, I think I could be ready in about two and a half months.”

“Great,” said Mr. Penny. “I’ll start hyping it immediately. This’ll make us a fortune!”

Ray felt helpless. Here was Brian, risking his life for some dumb publicity stunt, and all Mr. Penny could think about was the financial aspect. Ray wanted to object, but didn’t. What good would it have done? If someone like Don had raised objections, Brian and Mr. Penny might have paid attention, but not Ray. Ray hated to admit it, but society was sexist. Women’s opinions were not taken seriously.

Ray needed someone to talk to who would understand. He left the office and went looking for Susan, a new friend of his. Susan was an older cocktail waitress who served drinks to the high rollers in a uniform that covered less than most swimsuits. Though she’d never see forty again, Susan kept herself in incredible shape. Ray found her sunning herself back at the pool. Her bikini clad body was just as taut and firm as a woman half her age. She frowned when she saw Ray and asked what was wrong.

Ray was soon pouring out his heart to her. How women were never listened to or respected. How they were always treated as second class citizens. Susan listened with a smile.

“Rhea, I’m surprised it took you this long to figure it out. No matter what the politicians say, it’s a man’s world. All they want from you is to be great in bed, take care of the kids, and cook the meals. But we are not powerless. You could have had Brian begging your forgiveness for even considering such a stunt.”

“Oh, give me a break,” said Rhea. “The more I told him not to, the more insistent he was. It was like he had to prove he could do an underwater straightjacket escape.”

“That’s my point. The more you tell a guy he can’t do something, the more he’ll want to show you he can. Here’s what you do: after work tomorrow, invite him to your place for a couple of drinks. Put on some soft music. Start telling him what great show he put on, how he outdid himself. Massage his tired shoulders. Wear something low cut and bend down in front of him a lot. Then, while he’s enjoying this relaxing evening, burst into tears. When he asks you what’s wrong, tell him you know that you are being a silly female, but you just couldn’t bear it if something happened to him. Tell him it would mean ever so much to you if he would just reconsider. No man can resist a crying female. He’ll be eating out of the palm of your hand.”

Ray smiled to himself. He’d seen Brian get stupid over women before. Of course, Ray was different story...

“Do you really think women can control guys so easily? I mean for real?”

Susan chuckled. “Watch this. Hey, you!” She snapped her fingers at a boy lounging near the pool. He was obviously a college student, young enough to be Susan’s son, and quite handsome. He immediately raced over.

“Go get me that umbrella,” said Susan, looking at a magazine and not saying please. Immediately, the young man raced to grab her the beach umbrella. When he returned, she looked up.

“No, not that one, the yellow one!” Her voice was exasperated. Without hesitation, the guy ran to get the completely identical umbrella. Ray chuckled into his hand as Susan sent him on several more errands. He never would have done those things for a man. But when a pretty woman told him to hop to it, there was no question.

Eventually, Susan grew tired of her new toy. “Okay, bye now.” She waved her hand in dismissal.

The boy looked hurt, he hadn’t even gotten a thank you. Ray was a little annoyed as well. Susan, realizing she’d crossed the line, rewarded her new servant with a sincere smile. “On second thought, why don’t you go get us a couple of mai tais? You can rub lotion on my back while you tell me about yourself.”

To Ray’s surprise, the guy didn’t move. “I’m only nineteen,” he said eventually.

Susan laughed. “Then go get us a couple of Kool Aids and I’ll rub your back.” As the guy ran to bring the drinks, Susan smiled at Ray. She was right, it was easy to get a guy to obey. Ray would have to learn to harness this power.

Ray returned to his room and changed into a light summer dress. Before he could plot how to get Brian to give up risking his life, there was a faint knock at her door.

Ray checked to make sure his fake boobs were in place, then opened the door. It was Rosie, a young Puerto Rican showgirl. She worked in the hotel's cabaret, part of a troupe that did risqué dance numbers for the guests. She was usually cheery, but today she wore a grim expression.

She soon confessed her problems to Ray. Rosie was two months pregnant. While unplanned, she was going to keep the baby. Unfortunately, a pregnancy would not fit in with her job.

"It normally wouldn't be a big deal," said Rosie, as Ray held her hand. "I'm going to graduate college in a semester, then I can get a real job. But I'll have to quit work now, which means no money, no insurance."

Ray hugged the young girl. "Maybe Mr. Penny would keep you on..."

Rosie shook her head. "We discussed it, and he was sympathetic. But he just can't justify paying me my salary and keeping my insurance, if I'm not working. But I think I have a solution."

Ray listened as Rosie outlined her plan. If five girls from other shows would agree to take over Rosie's job, one night a week, then Rosie could stay on the payroll until she graduated. Then she could start her professional career without financial worries, about three months from now.

"So have you gotten any volunteers?" asked Ray, relieved that her friend wouldn't be broke and unemployed.

Rosie sniffled. "Four girls said they'd do it. But I just can't find the fifth. I've asked everyone. Well... almost everyone."

It suddenly hit Ray. He was supposed to be the fifth dancing girl!

"Please," begged Rosie, almost kneeling in front of Ray. "It won't work unless someone can cover all my shifts. I know it's a huge favor, and I can't pay you back! But it's really a lot of fun! You just follow the other girls. I know the costumes are ridiculous, but you have a great figure. One night a week, for two and a half months. Please, Rhea. If not for me..." She didn't finish, but let her hands creep down and cover her already expanding belly.

Ray's head was spinning. Become a showgirl? While the hormones had caused him to blossom rather amazingly, those costumes, with their feathered headdresses and tassels, left nothing to the imagination.

Ray muttered 'I'll think about it,' and hustled his friend out of the room. He couldn't stop thinking about her big, brown eyes, so filled with desperation. How could he let her down?

Ray studied his slender, smooth body. Passing as a girl? No problem. Wearing a one piece swimsuit? Piece of cake. But those dancing girl costumes? From neck to navel, those girls wore sequins, some flesh-colored material, and nothing else! Ray couldn't hide the fact he didn't have real breasts. But how could he explain that to Rosie?

It was obvious Ray needed professional advice. He walked over to the phone and dialed. “Hello, Dr. Hathaway? This is Rhea. Do you think I could see you today? It’s an emergency.”

Dr. Hathaway was silent as Ray poured out Rosie’s tale of sadness. She would occasionally make notes or consult Rhea’s chart.

“So Dr. Hathaway, do you think you could give me some more hormones? I have to fit into that costume in just under a month.”

Dr. Hathaway smiled. Rhea was really starting to sound like someone who wanted to be a woman forever. “Rhea, I’m afraid it’s not all that simple. The hormones in your body are competing with your male hormones. Your breasts are developing nicely, but I wouldn’t recommend a bikini for at least another year.”

Ray began to panic again. “Isn’t there some way you can block my male hormones? If I can’t do this for Rosie, she’ll have to drop out of school.”

“I’m sorry Rhea. The only way to let the estrogen take over totally is to remove your testicles.”

“Absolutely not!” shouted Ray.

“Calm down. Even if you asked me to, I wouldn’t. That is not the solution to your problem.”

“Is there a solution?” asked Ray.

“Yes. I could give you breast implants.”

“You mean... a boob job? That’s kind of permanent, isn’t it?”

“Yes and no. If you had it done, you’d have to have several operations to put you back to manhood. Until then you’d always have to wear a shirt, and you’d need to wear a bra. This is a big step. But it is not permanent. Implants can be removed.”

“Can I have a while to think about it?”

“Well, not long. This is major surgery. You’re going to be black and blue for several weeks. If you want to look nice next month, you need the surgery very soon.”

Once again, fate had conspired against Ray. “O.K. Just promise me you’ll only make them as big as absolutely necessary and that you’ll give me my flat chest back when I need it.”

“O.K. If you want it back. You might find you enjoy having breasts.”

A traveling musical act was scheduled to perform at the hotel in one week, and Brian and Ray had a couple of days off. Ray scheduled the surgery for that time slot.



Chapter 14

About a month and a half later, Brian was almost ready to do the underwater escape. In the meantime, his magic acts were getting more and more outrageous. At the moment he was shackled spread-eagled to the floor of the stage. Above him dangled an 8000 lb. air conditioning unit on loan from the contractors who were renovating the hotel. The unit was held in place by a stout rope that was slowly burning. Brian tried desperately to free himself before the flames burned through the rope, thus dropping the air conditioner and crushing him.

Ray stood off to the side. He always hated this trick, even though it was all an illusion. Brian would build up the tension until the audience was sufficiently on edge, then would roll away. At that cue, Don would cut the rope from his hiding place in the rafters, dropping the monolithic

AC and making it look like Brian had narrowly escaped death. Of course, the rope really was on fire, but Brian was always out of the restraints long before he was in any actual danger.

Ray adjusted his skirt and waited. Second ticked by. Brian threw off one set of cuffs. He seemed to really be milking this trick for all it was worth. Ray really wished Brian wouldn't take risks like this. He really should...

Everything suddenly went in slow motion. Brian's panicked yell. Ray's horrified realization that Brian was stuck. Don's frantic efforts to douse the flames with the emergency fire extinguisher. Then... the rope breaking. The four-ton machine plunging twenty feet. The loud crash as it hit the stage. The dust and confusion. The lifeless pile of debris on the stage. The horrified silence of the audience.

Then... a disheveled and bruised looking Brian climbing out of the rubbish. "Whoa!" he said with a smile "I have got to work on that trick some more!" The audience burst into laughter. The air conditioner wasn't real. It was a cardboard model. The whole thing had been a joke.

The thunderous applause was still ringing in Brian's ears as he triumphantly walked off stage. He still had it! "Tired routine, my ass!" he thought, in reference to a criticism of his act that had appeared in a local paper the week before. Man, if that didn't show 'em, nothing will.

He was wearing a huge grin when he came upon Ray. "Rhea! Was I cooking tonight or..."

SMACK!

Brian staggered back from Ray's open handed slap across the cheek. "Hey, what's the big idea...?"

"You JERK!" screamed Ray. "Do you have any idea of the HELL I just went through? Why didn't you tell me you were going to pull as stunt like that?" Ray looked like he was going to cry.

"I... I'm sorry... I... wanted to scare everyone... I didn't mean..."

"You bastard! You couldn't tell me?"

"I wanted it to look real... I..." The entire back stage crew was looking at Ray and Brian now. Tears were building up in Ray's eyes.

"I hate you! I never want to talk to you again!" Ray ran off in the direction of the dressing room, sobbing.

Brian looked around. All the stage hands quickly avoided his gaze. All except Don who was smirking at him.

"Oh, not you too!" said Brian.

Don shook his head. "You got to admit, that was pretty poor judgment on your part. Heck, you nearly gave me a heart attack! Think what you did to poor Rhea!"

Not for the first time in his life, Brian wished he had thought his plans through. “I guess I owe everyone an apology.”

“Hey,” said Don with a smile. “Don’t mind me, I’m thick skinned. But I think you had better practice eating crow for the massive apology you’re going to have to make to Rhea.”

“Yeah... any advice?”

“Be charming, suave, and don’t be too proud to beg. Oh, an another thing...”

“What’s that?”

Don was grinning again. “Well, since you apparently need me to tell you the obvious, here’s another bit of information. Rhea’s nuts about you.”

Brian tried to cover his surprise. “You gotta be kidding!”

“C’mon, open your ears to the gossip! Don’t you think it’s weird the way she never dates anyone, but is always hanging around you? The way she freaked out when you dropped the chainsaw on your foot last week and had to go the emergency room? The way she is always cutting down your dates? There’s only two reasons a woman would act like that, and since she’s not your mother, I think we both know the reason.” Don’s condescending grin now reached from ear to ear. Brian suddenly felt very embarrassed. He excused himself to go apologize.

As he walked to the dressing room, he mulled over was Don had said. It was obvious his good judgment had taken a holiday when he decided to pull a stunt like that without telling anyone. But the other thing Don had said bothered him. Ray was a guy! He’d never be interested in Brian like that. Don was 100% mistaken. Yep. Dead wrong. 180 degrees off... yep...

Brian eventually tracked Ray down, back in his hotel room. He had changed from the sultry stage costume into a more comfortable sun dress. Brian knocked on the open door that connected their two rooms.

Ray was staring at the wall. “Go away!” he said.

“C’mon Rhea, please?” Brian didn’t realize it, but he had been calling Ray Rhea for some time now, even when they were alone. Ray turned around and shot a withering glance at Brian.

Brian looked sheepish. He snapped his fingers and out of nowhere appeared a bouquet of roses. He handed them to Ray with a humble look.

Ray almost succeeded in hiding a slight smile. Brian leapt at the advantage. “Rhea, I’m sorry that I did such an unprofessionally stupid thing. You’re my assistant and my friend and what I did tonight went beyond the bounds of decency. I was a jerk and I thought only of myself. Do you think you can find it in your heart to forgive me?” He looked at her with puppy dog eyes.

Ray widened his smile a bit more. "I dunno. Will you promise never to make changes to the act without telling me?"

"I promise."

"Will you promise not to agree to try some new dangerous stunt without consulting me first? I'm part of this act too and this underwater straightjacket thing makes me sick."

"O.K. From now on I'll talk with you first."

"And will you take me out to dinner tonight?"

"Yes."

"O.K. You're forgiven. This once!" They both smiled. Ray began to giggle. It was a very girlish laugh. Brian thought of what Don had said and he began to feel uncomfortable. He began to look around the room for something to distract him.

Everywhere he looked he was evidences of Ray's feminization. Panty hose drying in the shower. Back issues of Cosmo. A pair of earrings sitting on the coffee table. A pair of high heels in the closet. Brian's eyes fell on a pile of cassette tapes. "Hey, new music?" he asked.

Ray seemed to be nervous. "Oh, that's nothing!" He squeaked. This of course made Brian all the more interested. He read the title.

"Self hypnosis? What is this? Trying to learn Spanish while you sleep?"

Ray seemed acutely embarrassed. "No..."

"Well, what is it for then?"

Ray hemmed and hawed. Finally he said "They train me to think more like a woman, O.K.?"

Brian refused to believe it. He read the label. It gave no indication of what message the tape conveyed. It simply said that one side contained subliminal messages to be played while sleeping, the other side contained voice messages for when awake. Brian popped the tape in to Ray's stereo. A sultry woman's voice began talking:

"You are a beautiful woman. Gorgeous, even sexy! Men find you attractive. They want to touch you, kiss you, make love to you. You enjoy this attention. You enjoy the affections of men. You like being submissive. Letting a man kiss you is the natural thing to do..."

Brian quickly snapped off the tape. "Rhea! What in the heck are you listening to garbage like that for? It's going to make you sick in the head!"

"It's just to make me feel girlish. You came in at a bad part of the tape. Most of it is about cooking and clothes."

“This is getting out of hand! You were doing so good pretending to be a woman! What do you need some tape to make you think you’re a woman for?”

Ray was silent for a long time. When he talked, he seemed to be talking about something totally off the subject.

“Brian, when you are on stage you act different.”

Brian was a little confused. “What do you mean?”

“You act all mysterious and occult. You’re not the fun-loving lunatic we all know and love.”

Brian pretended he didn’t hear the last two words. “Well, sure I do! I’m just trying to be your typical stage magician. It’s called a stage persona. Everyone does it.”

“I’m sure they do. My point is this: Imagine what it would be like if you could never lose your stage persona. If you always had to be this mysterious enchanter, you could never be yourself, not for one moment.”

Brian was beginning to get the picture. Ray continued. “I can’t ever stop being Rhea. Not ever. Do you know how hard it is to always remember to use the women’s room? To never pick my teeth or burp? To never, ever be able to ask out a pretty woman? I need to learn to think like a girl if I’m going to live like one. We’ve been lucky up till now, let’s not blow it.”

Brian looked Ray in the eyes. “I just don’t want to make you unhappy. I know you agreed to do this for me and I don’t want you to end up doing anything to permanent.”

Ray giggled. Brian asked what was so funny. Ray answered “Well, it’s too late for that. Thanks to Rosie, I had to do something very permanent last month.”

Brian felt very uneasy. “What?” he managed to squeak out.

“Turn around and close your eyes,” said Ray. Brian obeyed. He could hear the sounds of Ray undressing. “O.K., have a look.”



Hey, my eyes are up here!

Brian fell out of his chair. Ray was wearing a short, pink cocktail dress, similar to other ones she'd worn. But this one was cut much lower in the front. Much, much lower. Brian blinked, and looked again. Ray had breasts! Real breasts, that jiggled happily out of the top of his dress. Brian (who had his hands on many pairs in his life) guessed them to be 'C' cups. They were slightly bruised from the recent surgery, but were real!

Brian said something incoherent. He then stared at them for a full five minutes in stunned silence.

Ray finally broke the silence by telling him he was worse than some of the tourists at the hotel. This brought Brian joltingly back to reality.

"How...?" he stammered.

"Implants. It's the latest thing," giggled Ray. "Now these cost me a lot of money. I suggest you find something nice to say."

Brian wanted to tell Ray that he was a complete nutcase, that he had gone too far, and that he should never have had that done. But what good would that have done? What's done is done.

"Rhea... they look very nice. Very feminine. You look great."

"Thanks Brian. I know you think I'm crazy, but this will be more convenient in the long run. Now that I've started thinking of myself as a girl things are so much easier. We'll sort it all out after this gig is over. Well, if you're taking me out tonight, I'd better get ready." Ray stepped into his bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Brian watched as Ray's red hair disappeared behind the door. He then numbly staggered

back to his own room. Ray had looked just like a female. Brian had a hard time admitting it to himself, but Rhea was quite attractive. Brian knew that if hadn't known Rhea's secret he would be doing back flips with excitement of the prospect of taking "her" to dinner. He also knew that under normal circumstances he would have tried to get Rhea into bed long ago. Finally, he realized he had stared at Rhea's new breasts a bit longer than curiosity demanded.

Brian began to wonder if Ray was the only one who was thinking of Rhea as a real woman.





Ray had signed on to be a magician's assistant. So why was he now performing as a showgirl?



A promotional poster for Brian and Ray's act.

Chapter 15

Ray stood atop the high dive, fifteen feet above the hotel's swimming pool. He was wondering if it would be possible to find a bikini top that left less to the imagination. This one covered little more than his nipples (which were clearly outlined through the thin fabric). Next to Ray stood Brian. He was bound in a straight jacket, leg irons, a length of chain wrapped around his body, and a pair of manacles holding the arms of the straightjacket together. He was also wearing his magician's hat.

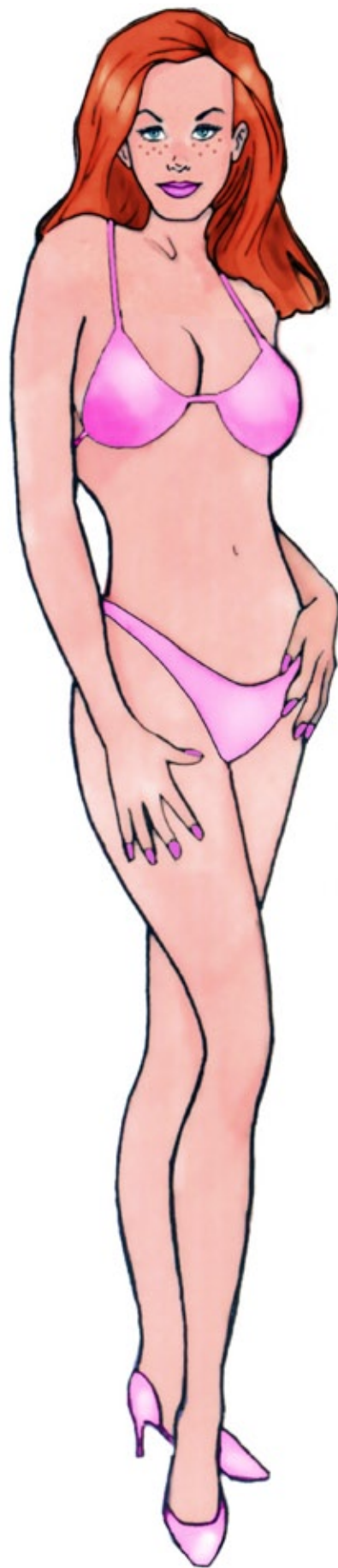
Beneath Ray and Brian stood a crowd of several hundred. Mr. Penny had been hyping this escape for months; it seemed as if the whole population of Las Vegas had turned out. The stands the hotel had set out were full to capacity, many more spectators watched from the field beyond with binoculars. A local TV station was even there to cover it. An ambulance and two EMTs stood by. Don, armed with bolt cutters, stood at the shallow end of the pool, waiting to give emergency assistance.

Brian was in rapture. He had never performed for an audience like this. This was his dream. Ray, on the other hand, wished he could get out of the uncomfortable bikini and high heels and into a nice warm bath. The cold air at this height was doing little to conceal his already erect nipples. It was so embarrassing. The only thing he was doing was holding the microphone for Brian. Still, it was a big crowd, and Mr. Penny had insisted that Rhea dress sexily.

The trick went off as planned. With a final farewell to the audience Brian flipped into the pool. He stayed underwater just long enough to make everyone nervous, then came out panting, free from the chains. Ray pretended to be greatly relieved, even though he knew Brian could have escaped from five straightjackets in that time.

Ray climbed down, and locked hands with Brian. They both took a bow. Ray, on the spur of the moment, reached up and kissed Brian on the cheek. That was the only time during the trick that Brian seemed nervous.

As soon as Ray could, he excused himself from the tangle of photographers and autograph seekers and walked into the pool locker room. He kicked off his high heels, threw on a robe, and headed back to his room.



Was the crowd more interested in Brian's escape attempt, or his cute little assistant?

Before he could reach the door to the hotel, he heard someone behind him nervously say “Excuse me?”

Ray turned around. Behind him was a young man, about 20 or 21. He had a lantern jaw, dark hair, and was of more than average height. He was rather handsome. For some reason he looked very uncomfortable.

“Uh, hi,” he stammered. “Uh, that was a good show you guys put on.”

“Thanks,” replied Ray. “If you like, you can buy a video of it in the gift shop.”

“Uh, O.K. Um... listen... would you... uh, like to have dinner with me tonight?” he suddenly blurted out. “My name is Larry.” He added, almost as an afterthought.

Ray was prepared to say no. Since he had become Rhea, dozens of guys had asked him out. Ray remembered what it was like being rejected as a guy, so he always let them down gently. That is, unless they were jerks. Then he took great pleasure in giving them a coarse ‘no.’

There was something different about this guy, though. He seemed so uncomfortable. It was like he was sure Rhea would turn him down, but didn’t want to give up his only chance to ask ‘her’ out. Ray smiled to himself. Larry must think that Rhea was some sort of model or famous performer that he didn’t have a chance with. Well, what the heck!

“O.K.” said Ray. “Meet me at 8:00 at Pancho’s.” Pancho’s was a bar/restaurant in the hotel. It was nice, but not too pricey.

Larry looked like he had won the lottery. “Great!” he practically shouted. “I’ll see you there!”

Ray sat in front of the makeup table that he had had installed in his hotel room. He was trying on various shades and colors, so see which would go best with the new outfit that hung in his closet. It was a racy little black skirt, with a matching red blouse and pumps. Ray had also purchased a little black purse, some earrings, and some black nylons. Even though Ray had no intentions of becoming romantically involved with Larry, he might as well look his prettiest.

Brian banged on the door, then staggered in right after Ray said “Come in.” Ray sighed. Brian was still wearing the soaking wet clothes he wore during the trick.

“Rhea!” he shouted. “We were great! They loved us!” Ray smiled. Brian always said they loved ‘us,’ or ‘we’ did it, even though Brian was the one the audiences came to see. He really did consider Ray an important part of the act.

“Congratulations,” smiled Ray. “You did great. Are you ever going to change your clothes?”

“In a minute. Say, why are you getting all dolled up? Got a hot date tonight?” Brian grinned.

Ray grinned back. “As a matter of fact, I do.”



Ray recalled Tracy's advice about dating. Looks like tonight, he'd put her counsel to good use.

Brian stopped grinning. "A date? With who?"

Rhea slowly applied some lipstick, just to add to Brian's suspense. When he was confident it looked okay, he said "Larry. A nice young man I met after the act."

Brian said several incoherent things before he got out a complete sentence. "A guy! Are you nuts? Why?"

"Well, you don't expect me to sit at home on a Saturday night, do you?" said Ray, coyly.

"That's not the point! You... you're a guy too!"

"Not as far as Larry is concerned. Don't worry, he'll never find out."

"What if he tries to hold your hand?"

"I suppose I'll let him."

"What if he tries to kiss you?"

"Well, he is paying for dinner. I suppose a nice kiss would be in order."

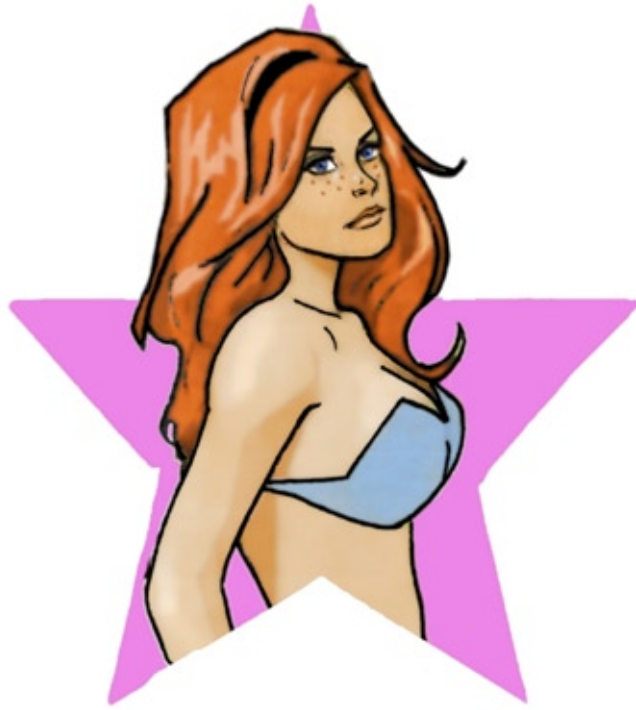
"What if he tries to get you into bed?"

"He probably will. Don't worry, I'll just excuse myself. It wouldn't be lady-like to sleep with him on the first date. Do you like these earrings?"

"What are you dating a guy for anyway?" Brian was hollering now.

"I can't very well date a girl, can I? Look, I'm not attracted to him, if that's what you mean. I just don't think there is anything wrong with going out to dinner with someone. If he gets too serious, I'll just break it off."

Brian was about to say something else, but Ray cut him off. "Get out of here, I have to change for tonight." He smiled. "Don't wait up!"



Chapter 16

It took Ray over two hours to get ready for the evening, but the results were well worth it. Powdered, perfumed, and primped, he looked like he belonged on the runway of a fashion show. The short skirt and low cut blouse showed off just enough flesh to be erotic, but not enough to be slutty. Ray checked his makeup one last time, then headed off for Pancho's.

Larry was waiting in the lobby. Ray took a lot of pleasure in Larry's open-mouthed, stunned reaction. Apparently Ray looked even better than Larry had remembered. Ray gratefully accepted the small bouquet of roses he offered. Ray then offered his arm to Larry, and arm in arm, they walked into the restaurant.

Ray could tell that Larry was trying to do everything he could to impress Rhea. He pulled out Rhea's chair, complimented Rhea repeatedly on 'her' looks, and tried to act macho. Ray remembered Tracy's advice about what to do on a date. He steered the conversation towards Larry's interests.

Larry was an engineering student at the University of Las Vegas. He worked nights as a bartender at a smaller casino. He was an amateur boxer and photographer. Ray listened with interest like a good girl should. Ray found himself becoming impressed with Larry's stories. He was apparently quite an athlete, with intelligence to match. Larry, despite all his accomplishments, seemed just slightly unsure of himself around Ray, which Ray found quite cute. Ray also found himself 'checking out' Larry's body. Aside from his handsome face, Larry had the well developed muscles of an athlete. While Ray didn't actually feel lust for Larry, he was developing quite a crush on him. Ray attributed this to a combination of hormones and the hypnosis tapes.

Larry finished talking about himself when the dessert arrived. Tracy was right, guys tended to talk about themselves a lot. Larry asked Rhea to tell a little about 'herself.'

Ray told what was almost the truth: he had just graduated high school (he had in fact received his diploma in the mail the previous week) and that he was working as Brian's assistant for a year. Of course, Ray left out any reference to his life before this year. Larry thought of him as a woman, and Ray was determined not to destroy his misconception. Larry seemed enamored with what Rhea did as a magician's assistant. Soon Ray was reciting lots of stories about his career in magic.

After dinner, Larry asked Ray if he would like to go for a walk. Soon they were walking down the neon lit streets of Vegas. As they walked side by side, Ray noticed Larry doing something a bit odd with his hand. First he'd hold it a bit out to his side, then quickly retract it. Ray blushed internally when he realized that Larry wanted to hold his hand, but was too shy to make a grab for it. Ray moved his small hand, ever so slightly, in Larry's direction. That seemed to give Larry the confidence he needed. He gently wrapped his strong hand around Ray's long-nailed fingers.

Eventually, they wound up in front of Ray's hotel room door. Larry seemed quite disappointed when he realized the date was over.

"I... I had a really good time Rhea."

"So did I Larry."

"Can I see you again?"

"You bet. Give me a call."

"O.K..." Larry hesitated. Ray suddenly realized that Larry was trying to decide whether to kiss him. Before Ray could react, Larry suddenly moved forward and pressed his lips against Ray's.

Everything seemed to go in slow motion for Ray. The pressure of Larry's lips on his own. The slight scratchy feel of his chin. His hot breath. His hand pressed gently on Ray's cheek. It seemed to go on forever.

Larry finally pulled back. "Good night, Rhea," he said and was gone.

Ray quietly slipped into his room. He then undressed and drew himself a bath. As he laid back in the bubbly water, he thought back over the evening. He had dated a guy! He had held hands with a guy! He was been kissed by a guy! Ray couldn't help giggling.

When he first had agreed to be a woman, such an evening would have been sheer horror. Now, he simply felt giddy. What caused this strange new attitude? The hormones? They hypnotism? Maybe just being treated like a woman all this time?

Ray didn't feel uncomfortable, or disgusted; just a little nervous. He would have to be careful with Larry. He couldn't let him go too far for obvious reasons. At the same time, he didn't want to hurt Larry's feelings.

Ray dried himself off and slipped on a pair of panties. He regarded his reflection in a full length mirror. He certainly looked like a pretty teenage girl. He acted like one too. It wouldn't be easy going back. He'd have to take massive doses of male hormones, have several operations to put his chest back to normal, and probably drop out of society for a while he changed. Even then, he would still look rather feminine.



"In just a couple of months I'll be living as a man again..., right?"

Still, it had been worth it. He had graduated high school. He had a huge nest egg saved up. He had some great acting experience. It would be rough going back from Rhea to Ray, but one thing was certain: he was looking forward too it. Being a woman had its advantages, but he was a man, and it was about time he started acting like one.



*A promotional poster from Brian and Ray's magic act.
Mr. Penny realized that Brian wasn't the only draw for the show.*

Chapter 17

Ray went out with Larry several times in the next few weeks. Movies, dinner, ball games; typical get-to-know-each-other dates. Larry always tried to go a little farther with Ray, but was always denied. Ray only allowed him some open-mouthed kisses, and once, when Ray was a bit drunk, to put his hand under his blouse.

One night, when Ray and Larry were driving out to the desert to see a fireworks display, Brian sat in his hotel room thinking. This dating business of Rhea's had made him feel quite uneasy, and he decided to think it out.

He lay down on his bed with a bottle of beer and began to think. Every time Rhea talked about going out with Larry, Brian felt sick to his stomach. Why was that? He came up with several possible answers.

Was he feeling guilty because Ray's feminization had gone so far? No, he thought. All Brian had wanted was for Ray to dress like a woman. This business with breast implants and dating men was Ray's doing, not his.

Was he worried about Ray? That could be it. Brian knew how guys thought. It would only be a matter of time before Larry seriously started to try to get into Ray's panties and he probably would not like what he found.

Still, Ray was very confident. He could probably keep Larry at bay forever. Ray wouldn't be one to get himself in a compromising position, and Larry seemed like someone who could take 'no' for an answer.

Was Brian feeling a little disgusted because he thought Ray might be homosexual? Brian thought about it and dismissed it. Gay people never really bothered him. There were several



Though Ray kept telling himself he wasn't serious about Larry, he always treasured the look on his date's face when he picked Ray up.

openly homosexual men working in the hotel and Brian never went out of his way to avoid them. If Ray turned about to be gay then it shouldn't be any different.

Brian opened another bottle of beer. His thoughts were taking him in places he didn't like, but he had to be honest with himself. He thought of his attitude towards Ray over the past year. When Ray first started being Rhea, Brian always felt nervous and uncomfortable. He knew Ray wasn't happy and he partially blamed himself. When Ray began to grow more confident, Brian felt slightly proud. It was like when he had first seen his tomboyish kid sister in her prom dress: Ray had become a beautiful young woman. Then... well, Brian really hated to admit it, but he had caught himself looking at Ray in ways he wouldn't look at a male friend, such as when Ray was lying by the pool, or in his skimpy costume, or even laying next to him on the bed as they watched TV and talked. Whenever he caught himself, he always felt guilty, as if he had been caught leering at his best friend's wife. Why was that?

Brian thought and thought. Every man has a weakness when it comes to women. Some like blondes, some like athletic women, some like big busted ladies. With Brian, it was redheads. There was something about a woman with red hair that drove him nuts.

Brian really didn't like this line of thought. Could it be that he was attracted to Ray? That he was jealous of Larry? What could this mean?

Brian felt scared. Was he gay? It seemed doubtful. If he was gay he would more likely be attracted to Don or some other guy. Ray... well...

After much thought, Brian came to several conclusions:

- 1) Rhea, looked, acted, thought, and expected to be treated like a woman.
- 2) If Rhea was a real woman, Brian would be very attracted to her.
- 3) Brian had developed a massive crush on Rhea.

This last conclusion was the hardest to admit, but it really didn't seem so strange. Rhea looked very attractive, it was natural for a guy like him to think she was pretty. Lots of other guys did.

Brian downed another beer. Now that he had admitted it to himself, the course of action seemed clear. He'd put all these thoughts aside, let Ray behave how he wanted, and help him go back to manhood as soon as he could. They only had a little over a month left on their contract. Besides, it wasn't as if Ray felt the same way about Brian!

Brian was interrupted by a knock at the door. It was Ray. He was still wearing the tight T-shirt and cut-offs he had worn on his date with Don. He long red hair hung in disarray about his face. The T-shirt showed off his figure, the cut-offs showed off his slim, freckled legs. Brian realized he was staring and looked away. Ray came in, helped himself to a beer, and sat on the edge of Brian's bed.

“How was your date?” asked Brian.

“It was fine... no, that’s not true. Larry and I broke up.”

“Oh, uh... I’m sorry.” Brian wasn’t sure if he was supposed to offer sympathy or not, though he did feel a slight bit of jealous triumph.

“Don’t be,” replied Ray in a melancholy voice. “It wouldn’t have lasted anyway.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Well, we were in the desert, lying on a blanket, watching the fireworks... Larry rolled over towards me and... well, you can guess.” Ray smiled a little.

“That jerk! I ought to bust his head!”

“Calm down, Conan. You’re the last guy to get self righteous. Larry didn’t force himself on me or anything. If I was a real girl I’d have gladly given myself to him. But I’m a man, at least mentally. I can’t make love to a guy, and I really don’t want to. Larry didn’t deserve to be led on, so I broke up with him.”

“Well, you’ll be going back to being a man, soon. Maybe it’s for the best. How did you let him down?”

Ray suddenly seemed silent. “Well... I told him that I was getting back together with an old boyfriend.”

“You got to be careful when you use that excuse. It could be easy to prove this ‘boyfriend’ of yours doesn’t exist.”

Ray began to blush. “Oh, he exists all right.”

For no particular reason, Brian suddenly felt very scared. “Who is he?”

“You.”

“Me? What right do you have to say something like that? Why didn’t you ask me?”

“I panicked. Don’s dating someone else and you were the only other guy I could think of. Don’t worry, it won’t be too hard for you.”

“What makes you think I’m going to go along with you?”

“Because I’ve been dressing like a woman for almost a year, just to save your career. The least you can do is act like my boyfriend. Half the hotel staff thinks we’re dating anyway. And don’t give me any macho crap about not wanting to date a guy. I gave up my manhood for you, so you can make this small sacrifice for me.”

Brian was backed into a corner. “So... what do I have to do?” he asked.

“Just take me out to dinner every now and then. Hold my hand in public. Give me a kiss every so often. You know how it’s done.”

Brian was internally freaking out. This would not be helpful in his efforts to think of Ray as a man. Ray misinterpreted Brian’s scared expression. “C’mon,” said Ray. “You’ve kissed lots of women. Just close you eyes and pretend I’m the playmate of the year.”

Ray was sitting quite close to Brian now. They both closed their eyes and kissed. Ray then left for his own room. Brian laid back and stared at this ceiling. He could still taste Ray’s lipstick.



A promotional poster for Brian and Ray's magic act.

Chapter 18

The last five weeks were the easiest for Ray and the hardest for Brian. Ray took to the role of Brian's girlfriend quite well. They began to spend almost all their free time together. Ray rather enjoyed the company of the big, handsome magician. They did all the things new couples do: dancing, flirting during solemn events, buying little gifts for each other.

For Brian, the last few weeks were rough. It was hard dating someone who he knew he wasn't supposed to be attracted to, but was. Ray was really starting to get to him: giving Brian hugs while he was wearing a little bikini, massaging his shoulders, dozing off on his chest as they lay in bed. It seemed everything Ray did was calculated to turn Brian on. This redhead was constantly on Brian's mind. Brian caught himself kissing Ray a lot more than was needed to convey the image that they were dating (he occasionally had to stop himself from kissing Ray behind closed doors). Brian could have insisted that Larry was long gone and there was no need to keep this up, but he never did. Not that Ray ever complained. He seemed to like Brian's attentions.

The worst part of it for Brian was that Rhea would disappear in a few weeks, never to return. At first Brian welcomed the end of this curious relationship. Now he dreaded it. He often wondered how Ray felt about him, but was afraid to bring it up.

One day before their contracts expired, several important things happened to Ray and Brian. The first thing was that the both received incredible news over the phone.

Brian nearly crashed into Ray as he darted from his own room to Ray's. "Rhea! I have the most amazing news!"

"So do I!" said Ray. He was wearing a white crop top blouse that showed off both his freckled shoulders and stomach, with matching cotton pants.

"You go first," said Brian, trying to concentrate on what Ray was saying and not what he was wearing.

"I just got off the phone with Tracy. She's pregnant!"

Brian embraced Ray with an enormous hug. "That's incredible! I know how much she's wanted a kid. Did she say anything else?"



Ray had plenty of attention from plenty of men, yet it was always Brian he found himself thinking of.

“No, she’s at the doctor’s. She just found out herself. She said she’ll write us a detailed letter as soon as she can. So what was your big news?”

Brian grinned. “You’re not going to believe this. I just got off the phone with a talent scout for the David Letterman show! They want me to appear on the show!”

Ray shrieked a very feminine shriek and jumped into Brian’s arms. “That’s wonderful! Are you serious?”

“You bet,” said Brian, guiltily enjoying Ray pressing against him. “I go on after the dog that can deal blackjack.” He smiled at Ray. “I’ve finally done it. This is the big time. I could never have done it without you.”

Suddenly Ray felt scared. He disentangled himself from Brian’s grasp. “Did... well, am I expected to go on with you?”

“They said you were welcome to, or if you couldn’t make it, they could provide me with a girl who’s had experience with stage magic.” Suddenly Brian felt scared too.

“What did you tell them?” asked Ray.

“I told them that naturally I would prefer you, but I’d have to ask you first. What do you say? National television! The taping’s scheduled for two months from now.”

Ray looked Brian straight in the eye. “Brian... there’s nothing more I’d like to do than to be with you in your big moment. But... our contract is up. Now I have to go back to being what I really am: a man.”

Brian felt sick. “It’ll only be a couple more months. Couldn’t you wait until after? They’re prepared to pay you a nice sum of money.”

Ray took Brian’s hand. “If you really needed me, I’d be there for you, but you don’t. The girl they’re providing you with will be fine. Brian, I’ve already given up a year of my manhood. It might take me another year before I’m all male again. I’m sorry, I can’t put it off any more. Besides, I want to maintain low profile when I change back, and going on national TV won’t help that.”

Brian clutched Ray’s hand tighter. “Rhea... I don’t want you to change back...”

“C’mon Brian, you’ll do fine without me.”

“It’s not about the act, Rhea!”

Ray was quiet for a while. “What do you mean?”

Brian decided it was time to be honest, both with himself and with Ray. “Rhea... these past few weeks, well months... I’ve developed feelings for you. I tried to deny them, but I can’t.

When I was pretending to be your boyfriend, well, I enjoyed it. I kind of wished we weren't just pretending..."

Ray smiled. "Brian, I'd be lying if I said I never felt the same way about you."



Brian put his hands on Ray's hips. "What I'm trying to say is... well... I care about you. A lot. More than a friend. I... well... I wish you could just stay Rhea. You've become a beautiful young woman. Do you really need to go back?"

Both Ray and Brian were surprised at the longing and desperation in his voice. It was a while before Ray spoke. "Brian, if I was a real woman I'd never leave you. Never. I'd love to be at your side, always. But let's face facts. I may look like a woman, but I'm not. I may act feminine, but I still think of myself as a man. I have to go back to manhood."

Brian tried to keep the hurt out of his voice. "So what are you going to do?"

"I've been talking to Tracy and David. By the way, David knows about me. Tracy was right, he understood. Anyway, I've decided to move to Australia for the next few months. No one but Tracy and David know me there. I can have my breasts removed, get on male hormones, and come back to the States as a man."

*The hotel employees bought Rhea this shirt,
"To have something to remind her of her year in Vegas."*

Brian couldn't remember the last time he had felt this bad. "I'm going to miss you, Rhea. I can't say that your choice isn't making me miserable, but I know you have to do what you think is right."

"I'll miss you Brian. I'll still be in your life. I'll just be your friend, not your girlfriend. I have to go pack now. I guess this is good bye for a while."

"I guess so. Do they get Letterman down there?"

"I'm sure they do. Good bye Brian. And thanks. If it wasn't for you I'd still be broke in Dead Springs."

"Good bye Rhea."

Ray smile and began to leave. Without thinking, Brian grabbed him around the waist. After a split second's hesitation, Brian kissed Ray. Every other kiss they shared they could justify as 'part of the act.' Not this one. They were alone. He kissed her hard and deep. Full of passion, full of fire. Not a friendly kiss, not a stage kiss, but a kiss. The kiss that a man can only give to a woman he cares very deeply for. This kiss lasted a long, long time.

And Ray kissed back.

Ray suddenly pulled away. "I have to go," he said, and was gone. Both he and Brian had tears in their eyes.



Chapter 19

Two months later, Brian appeared on the David Letterman show. Every trick was amazing. Brian was witty, joked around with Dave, and basically impressed everyone. It should have been the happiest day of his life. It wasn't.

The female assistant he had been provided with was attractive, professional, and did everything right, but all Brian could think was "She's not Rhea."

Brian's career really took off after that. Instead of signing on with another resort or casino, he went on the road, making very large sums for weekend appearances. He was a hit. But the whole time, all he could think of was Rhea.

He didn't know why Rhea's absence bothered him so much. No other woman had messed him up like this before. Brian tried to tell himself that he was just sore because Rhea had left so sud-

denly and there had never been any closure to their relationship. He hated to think he harbored such strong feelings for someone who, for all practical purposes, no longer existed.

Not that Brian lost track of Rhea/Ray. Several times a month he would receive a letter from either Tracy or Ray. Tracy talked almost unceasingly about the expected baby: baby names, shopping for baby clothes, her baby shower. Ray's letters were usually more detailed. He would talk about the culture shock of living in Australia, Tracy and David's palatial house, finding an apartment, the beautiful oceans. Brian searched and searched for a reference to Ray's change back to manhood, but could find none. He couldn't even tell which name he was referring to himself as; he never put his name on the return address and his signature was too scrawled to make out.

It was obvious what was happening. Ray probably had already successfully made it back to manhood. He was trying to forget what had happened in the past year. It hurt Brian that what had passed between them could be written off so easily, but he really couldn't blame Ray. It was probably embarrassing for him and he didn't want to be reminded. Brian didn't realize it, but he was in for a major shock.

The shock came early one afternoon. Brian had just finished off a six city tour and was planning on spending some time resting in the apartment he rented and lived in when he wasn't on the road. He checked his mail.

The first few letters were depressing. Two more of his letters to Ray came back marked "Moved, no forwarding address." This had happened several times before. Tracy would always sidestep the issue when Brian asked. She claimed not to know Ray's whereabouts. Brian got the impression that Tracy knew more than she let on, but wasn't talking.

Brian leafed through the rest of his mail. Bills, junk mail (Bryan Howard, you've just won \$1,000,000!; Mr. Howard, let us send you and your wife a trial copy of Shimonize Car Wax). Same old garbage.

The last thing in the pile was a medium size package. Brian assumed it was the "Wackiest Bloopers of the NHL" tape he had ordered. One look at the package showed him otherwise. There was no return address. It was postmarked in an Asian alphabet that Brian didn't recognize. Brian looked at his own address. It was Ray's unmistakable handwriting.

Brian dashed inside and opened the package. Inside was a short letter and a flat package. He read the letter.

Dear Brian,

I am so sorry I haven't responded to your letters in so long. Believe me, you've been on my mind! I saw a tape of your Letterman show, you were fabulous!

Brian, there has been a lot going on in my life. Too much to express in this one letter. I've been doing a lot of soul searching. There are some things we need to discuss. I am out of Australia at the moment, but I should be back in a month. Are you busy then? Do you think you could come visit me? It would mean a lot to me.

I've taken the liberty of arranging an airline ticket for you to come down here when I get back. You can pick it up at the airport. Please come, it would mean the world to me.

I miss you!

(at this point was an illegible signature)

P.S. I never told you, but I've been on TV as well! My dream to act finally came true. For the past season I've been starring in the Australian action show, "Summer Heat." Unfortunately my character got killed off in the last episode so I won't be back next year (Ray had drawn a little smiley face here). Enclosed you'll find a magazine that interviewed me recently.

Brian tore open the package and began flipping through the enclosed men's magazine, searching for Ray's interview. Of course he would go see Ray. It was obvious Ray had completely gone back to manhood. Ray would never be allowed on some macho Australian action show if he looked feminine. Brian tried to picture a now muscular Ray driving some sports car, making out with beautiful women and chasing down drug dealers (or whatever the show's premise was). He just couldn't get his mind around it.

Brian couldn't find the interview and turned back to the



cover. He took a bite of the sandwich he was eating and nearly choked to death. There, right on the cover was Rhea! Not Ray, but Rhea! It couldn't have been a mistake. The red hair, the freckles, the slim figure! Ray had not only not changed back to a man, but he looked even more girlish than Brian remembered. She was dressed in lingerie, the sort of outfit designed to be sexy while covering more skin than a one-piece swimsuit. Still, it was quite obvious Ray hadn't gone through with his plans to have his implants removed.

Brian turned to the interview. It consisted of about ten mindless questions and an equal number of cheesecake poses, as well as some stills from the TV show. There was Ray, showing off his incredible body, for all of the Southern Hemisphere to see! What happened to Ray's plans to become a man again? What was he trying to tell Brian?



Photos from Rhea's photo spread.

Brian was stunned to say the least. He sat and stared at the blank screen for some time. He then got up and called the airport.

One month later, Brian was in an Australian airport. He collected his luggage and looked around. He hoped that Ray would meet him at the plane. He looked through the crowded terminal. Suddenly, he saw a familiar person. It was Tracy. She recognized him at the same time. Then ran towards each other and hugged (it was a long reach for Brian; Tracy was over eight

months along). After catching up, Brian broached the subject that had brought him halfway around the world.

“So... uh... where’s... Rhea?”

Tracy smiled. “Brian, a lot has happened since Rhea moved down here. She should be the one to explain. C’mon, we’ll take a taxi.”

Brian and Tracy stepped into the cab. Tracy gave the driver directions. They came to a stop in front of a modest, though well kept, bungalow. “This is your stop Brian. Rhea said go right in. I’ll see you later.”

Brian found himself standing alone on the porch of the little house. After the slightest hesitation, he knocked.

“Come in!” said a familiar feminine voice. It was Ray/Rhea.

Brian stepped in. When he saw what was behind the door, he realized his long trip had been worth it. There stood Rhea (for it was ridiculous to think of such a female person as ‘Ray’). Rhea was wearing the same cropped top he had been wearing when he and Brian parted company. His red hair was pulled back into a pony tail. The warm Australian sun seemed to have given him even more freckles. Rhea was smiling nervously, as if trying to gauge Brian’s reaction.

“Hello, Brian.”

“Hello, Rhea.” There was a long pause. Rhea finally broke it. “Brian,” began Rhea “Have a seat. There’s a lot I need to tell you. You have every right to be mad at me, but just give me a chance to explain.” Rhea sat down on the couch. Brian sat next to him, a blank expression on his face. Rhea began.

“Brian, when I first left the U.S., I had every intention of going back to being a man. I rented this little place, started researching doctors, and made plans to have my breasts removed. All I wanted was a way to go back to being Ray. As you can see, it didn’t turn out like that.

“When I first got here I wanted to catch up with Tracy and David. We spent so much time talking and sightseeing that I never got around to beginning the change. By that time I had become friends with a lot of Tracy and David’s friends, and was doing a lot of stuff with them. I kept telling myself that next week was the week. Then, at a party, I met a guy who was an agent. When I told him I was interested in acting, he told me I should try out for that part in “Summer Heat.” Before I knew what was happening, I had signed a contract. Obviously, I couldn’t let on that I wasn’t really a woman.

“One night I sat down to think. I realized that for the past months I had just been making excuses. I didn’t want to change back. Now that I was a woman I was popular, confident, and exciting. The thought of going back to being boring, unattractive Ray just didn’t do it for me. I talked to Tracy. We decided the best course of action.

“Soon, I set off for Thailand. In a secluded clinic, I became the woman you see now. Totally and irreversibly. Ray will never be back, Brian.

“As I recovered in Bangkok, I still felt that there was something wrong with my life. At first, I was terrified I had made the wrong decision. After a while, I realized that that wasn’t it.” Rhea moved closer to Brian. “It was you Brian. I missed you. I missed everything about you. Every night as I lay there I wished that you’d come in through the door and carry me off into the sunset. I cried and cried when I thought of how stupid I was to leave you. That was when I wrote you.

“Brian, when I left, you said you wished we weren’t just pretending that I was your girlfriend. Well, thanks to my surgery, we don’t have to. I know you probably hate me for leaving, and I wouldn’t blame you if you stormed right out of here. But remember this Brian: I love you.”

Rhea had not looked Brian in the eyes since she had started talking. She (for she was a she now) finally looked up. Brian had never seen such longing and desire in anyone’s face before (though if he had looked in a mirror at that moment, he would have).

Brian was confused for a number of reasons. Jet lag, thinking Rhea was gone for good and then having her appear again, Rhea’s gorgeous body, her startling speech, the slight, cute Australian accent she had developed. There was one thing, however, he was not confused about at all.

“I love you too, Rhea,” said Brian. He then kissed her. Hot and deep, passionate and loving. Rhea kissed back. After a long time, Brian stood up. Then, much to Rhea’s delight, he slipped one arm around her back, one under her legs, and carried her into the bedroom.

Many, many hours later Brian and Rhea lay naked under her sheets, pale in the moonlight. Neither of them had spoken for some time. Both had their arms wrapped tightly around each other. They had been apart long enough; neither wanted to let go of the other, ever again. Brian lovingly ran his hand down Rhea’s back and caressed her tight buttocks. Rhea squealed. They kissed.

“Rhea, you’re fantastic,” said Brian, with deep feeling.

“Brian, you’re the greatest magician in the world,” said Rhea.

That struck Brian as a bit of an odd thing to say. “Why do you bring that up?” he asked.

Rhea smiled. She sat up in bed, unashamedly revealing her naked torso. “Because, Brian, you changed me from a skinny, unpopular boy with low self esteem into a beautiful, exciting woman who is madly in love with the man of her dreams. A year and a half ago I was afraid to even slip on a dress, now I have to wear a bra. Twelve months ago I wished I had a girlfriend, now I am your girlfriend! Only a master magician could have performed a transformation like that!” She leaned over and kissed Brian. Their bare chests touched.

Brian wrapped his strong arms around the little redhead. “In that case Rhea, I’d like to transform you into something else.”

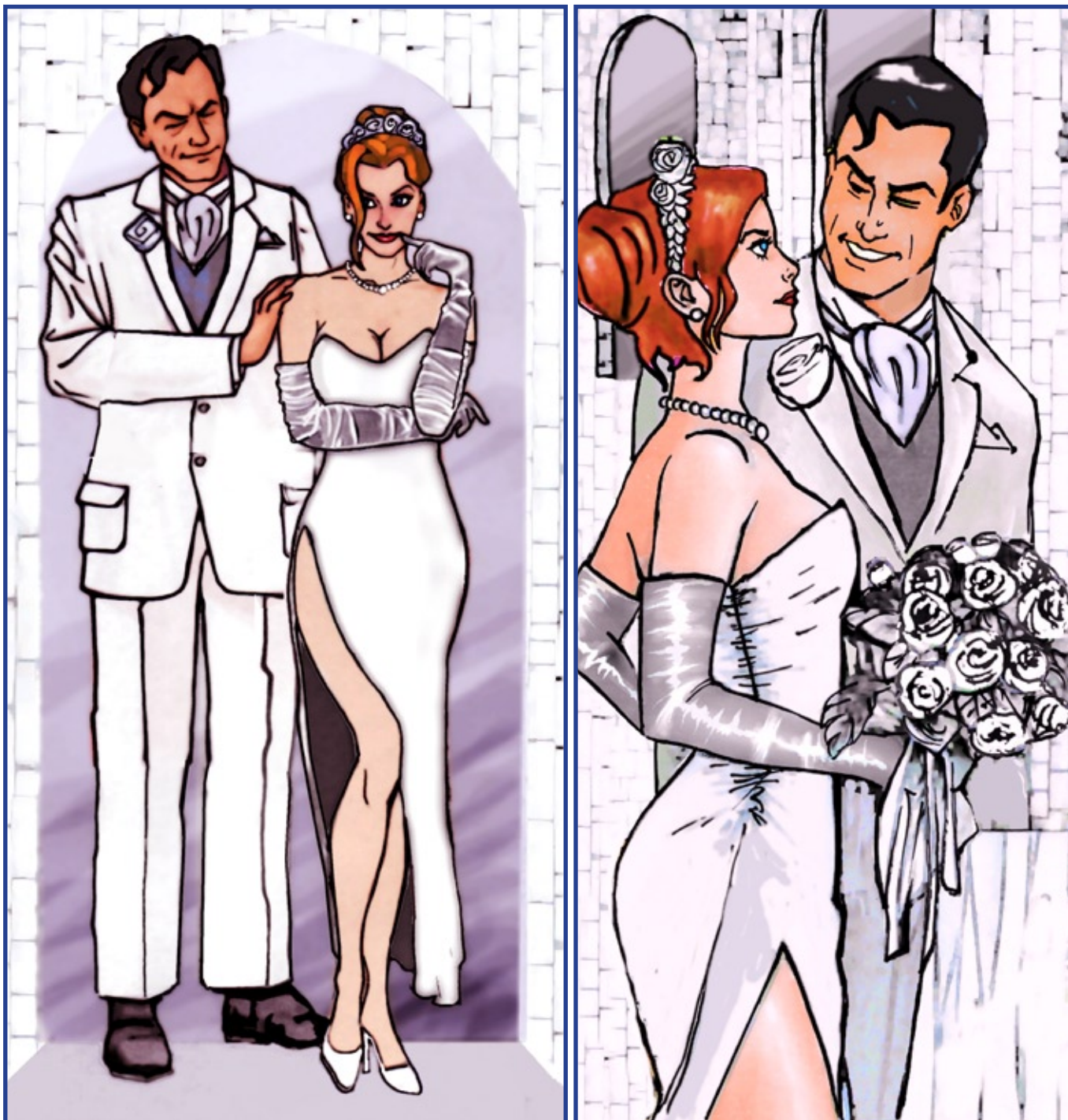
Rhea was shocked. “Into what?”

Both of Brian's hands were busily caressing Rhea's body, but nevertheless, she felt something hard and metallic magically slide around the ring finger of her left hand.

Brian positioned himself on top of her. "I'd like to transform you from my girlfriend into my wife."

"Brian," she said, as she felt Brian enter her, "that's a transformation I'll readily undergo."

Neither of them said anything else. There was no need to.



Photos from Rhea and Brian's wedding.



A photo Rhea and Brian sent to Tracy from their honeymoon.