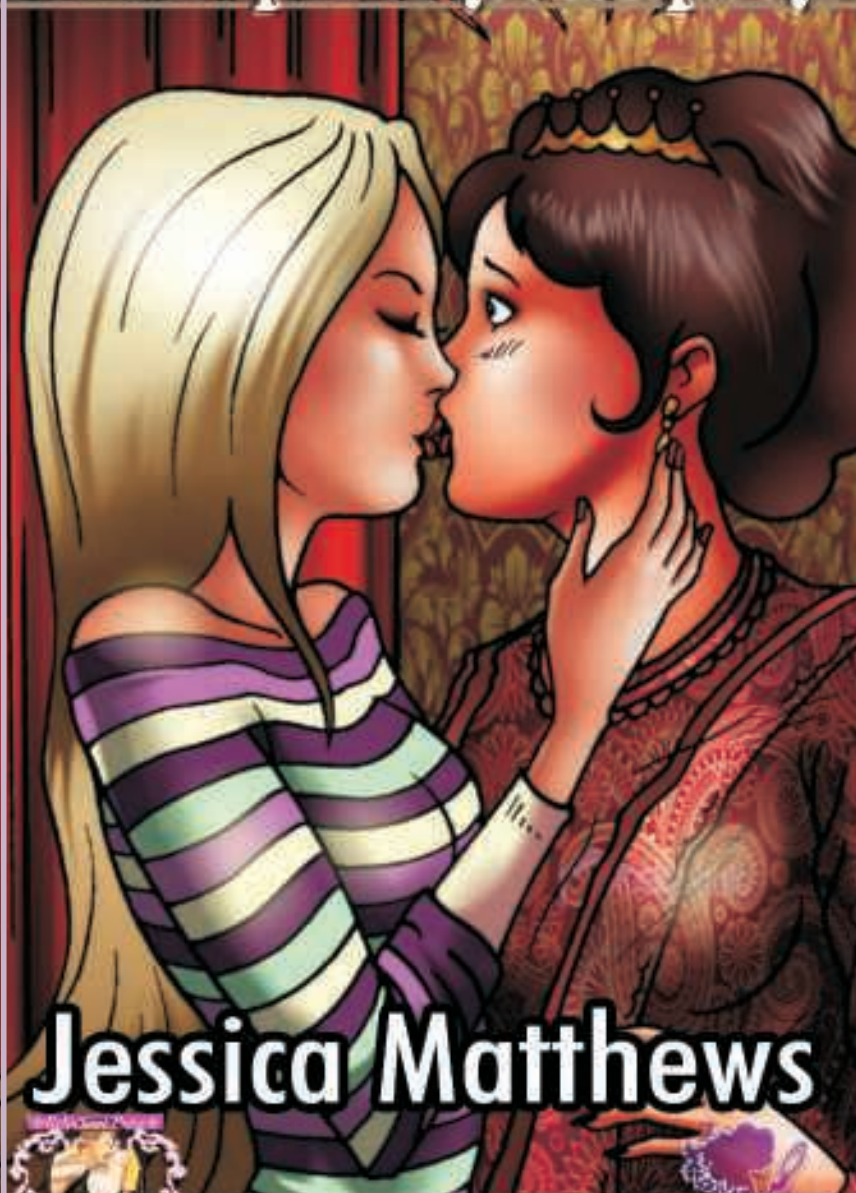


The Repertory Company



Jessica Matthews



An "Adult Tv" Novel



Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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The Repertory Company

by Jessica Matthews

The theatre was old, but a fixture in the town. It was built many years earlier in a different economic age, when tourists were plentiful, and actors were willing to work their way through the provinces. Now it was largely amateur, with a core of stalwarts from other professions. There were some wives and daughters of the wealthy, and the others were those who caught the theatre bug early and fitted their lives around productions, going from job to job, and coming alive when on stage. The building was placed into a family trust to protect it from financial ruin, but still had a precarious existence.

‘Could I have your attention, everyone?’ Marshall Hemming came onto the stage of the tiny theatre clapping his hands.

He waited until he had the silence he wanted. ‘Our trustees have appointed Melanie Baxter as our guest director for the next production. As you know, her work is nationally reviewed, and we are grateful this this is to be sponsored by our Arts Board, otherwise we couldn’t afford someone of her stature.’

He stood aside and held out his arm to the wings. Right on cue, Miss Baxter stepped forward. The small theatre troupe applauded. A spotlight cut in, holding her as she stepped to the front of the stage.

‘Hello,’ she said, smiling broadly. ‘I’ve been away from small theatres for too long, and I’m really pleased to be coming back to direct your summer season production. I know that this is an amateur group, and that most of you have to make a living elsewhere, but I’m sure that together we can do something special.’

She stood back, smiling and waving. Marshall shook her hand and they kissed the air as the rest of the committee and sponsors joined them on stage.

‘We invite you all to an informal reception in the bar, and hope you’ll all have the chance to meet Miss Baxter before the evening is over.’ Marshall beamed over the members of the theatre group.

‘What do you think of that?’ Courtney Roberts pouted into the huddle at the back, ever the ingénue.

‘I think she’ll be fun.’ Daniel Stone, leading man in so many productions, offered an opinion to general agreement.

Courtney took his arm; they moved away towards the bar and the excited voices moving the same way.

‘And what does it mean for *you?*’ Henry Potter, oldest member and stalwart of many productions, grinned.

‘I guess I’ll be painting scenery, lifting and carrying props, and filling in a prompt just like always.’ Ian Morgan shrugged his shoulders. ‘I really don’t know why I joined. I may get past the first readings once in a while, but they always dump me after the audition. Perpetual understudy for everything other than a lead, that’s me.’

‘Come on,’ Henry replied. ‘They also serve who only carry a spear.’

‘And hold the prompt book,’ Ian added, as they followed into the bar.

They pushed through the small crowd, consisting mostly of amateurs, with a few who were ‘resting’ long

term, having married into money in the town's tourist trade.

'I'm Melanie Baxter.' Ian was surprised by her hand offered to him as he reached the bar.

'I'm Ian Morgan.' He spluttered. 'Prompts, spear carrying and scenery painting a speciality.'

'I'm sure that's not why you're here.' Melanie looked directly into his eyes.

'No, that's true.' He replied. 'I don't seem to fit with the productions our previous directors have chosen.'

'We shall see how you fit into mine.' She replied, turning back with a wave rather than a dismissal.

'I could get on with her.' Henry said as she walked away. 'Just what this place needs: a bit of a shake-up.'

'Couldn't agree more.' Ian nodded. 'I wonder what we'll be doing.'

'What we'll be doing is several weeks of rehearsals, with Daniel getting ever more pompous, and Courtney ever more simpering.' Henry predicted. 'We'll get to the week of the show, five performances, Tuesday through Saturday, and then we'll have a party.'

'And Daniel will be condescending and apologetic, Courtney will be charming, and then we'll all wake up with bad heads and do it all again for another show in three months.'

'Oh, the joyous life of the amateur theatre.' Henry sighed. 'At least we have a proper director this time.'

'Is she really good?' Ian asked.

'She seems to be, and she's well connected.'

'I've looked through the suggestions you sent,' Melanie said slowly. 'I've also looked through the financial statements. If your group is to survive, you need to make some serious money in the next summer season.'

'That's why we thought of the classics,' Marshall nodded. 'Ibsen or Chekhov, something uplifting.'

'It's hardly amusing in these recessionary times, though,' Melanie said cautiously, watching the reaction of some of the other committee members around the table. 'We don't have to make a decision tonight, but I have in mind something lighter.'

'I don't think we should pander to the lowest tastes,' Marshall replied.

'I don't care what taste we pander to, we need bums on seats,' Melanie said. 'The Casey Trust gave me a remit to do all I can to make this venture viable. That's why they gave you this sponsorship. You only have one chance, and I'm determined that I won't be leaving here with a failure on my back.'

'So what do you have in mind?' Marshall's displeasure was barely disguised.

'I don't know, and that's the truth,' Melanie replied. 'I have a few ideas, but I really want to talk them through with the cast I have to work with. I want it to be something fast and funny; it's got to be familiar enough to bring in the crowds, and it needs a feel-good factor too.'

'I don't know how the cast will take to that idea,' Marshall cautioned.

'Oh, don't be an old fuddy duddy, Marshall,' said a voice from the far end of the table. The attention shifted to that end of the room. 'I'm sorry, Miss Baxter, we haven't been introduced, but I'm Harriet Casey, and my family have owned this building for generations. I'm fed up with old ideas which have brought the place to near bankruptcy. If you want to get bums on seats, as you say, then I'm on your side.'

'Thank you, Mrs Casey,' Melanie was grateful for an ally. 'Perhaps you'd like to tell me about the theatre's past productions.'

'Oh, don't get me started on all that,' Harriet laughed. 'I could bore you with my scrapbooks for a week or two.'

The meeting rambled on, as these things do. There was no helpful suggestion and no real direction.

Melanie sat quietly, catching a sympathetic look for time to time from Harriet. Marshall closed the meeting when it became obvious that his suggestions were being stonewalled.

‘I would like to talk one afternoon if you could spare the time.’ Harriet handed a card to Melanie. ‘I’m mostly at home, so just call to say you’re on your way.’

Harriet Baxter, in her elegant home representing a grand style from the previous century, graciously greeted Melanie when she called the next day.

‘I guess the Casey Trust must belong in your family.’ Melanie waited as Harriet poured tea from a flowered pot.

‘Grandpa actually.’ Harriet replied. ‘He made a fortune in the stock market, but all he really wanted was to be on the stage. It wasn’t *done* in the Casey family, though, and he was always a man to do his duty. Father, on the other hand, always wanted to be a stockbroker, and nearly killed himself chasing bigger pots of gold.’

‘And did he catch them?’ Melanie couldn’t resist the question.

‘Yes and no. He did really well, but it almost killed him. After mother died, I came back to look after him, and now there’s only me.’ She hesitated. ‘Me and the theatre trust, of course.’

‘And the trust picked me.’ Melanie looked quizzically at her host.

‘Well, I am the trust, really, so you are my choice.’ She replied. ‘Of course, I don’t go round telling everyone that—the lawyers are ever so discreet when the awards are announced—but I really did want you to come.’

‘And did you have a project in mind?’ Melanie caught the twinkle in the older lady’s eye.

‘I thought we should try something really light and easy.’ She replied, picking up a folio from the rack beside her chair. ‘It was one of the first productions years

ago, and I thought a revival, with your touch of course, would go down well. I know they'll hate the idea, but really this is a vacation town. We need something light. Entertainment isn't a rude word.'

'Okay, so what is it?'

Harriet looked at the folio again, and then passed it over. '*Charley's Aunt*.'

Melanie gasped.

'By Brandon Thomas, 1892,' Harriet said. 'Out of copyright and due for a revival anyway.'

'Yes, I know the piece, but I've never seen it performed.' Melanie flipped through the pages of the yellowing folder.

'It's entirely predictable really, but with the right setting, and decent casting, it could work,' Harriet continued. 'I think it should be updated a bit too, you know, given a modern setting. Do take it away and see what you think.'

'Do I *need* to think?' Melanie asked.

'Well, not really. I am on the board, and as this is being underwritten by the trust, I think this time they will defer to my wishes.'

'What will Marshall Hemming say?'

'Leave him to me, my dear.' Harriet smiled. 'More tea?'

* * * * *

'I believe you took tea with Miss Casey.' Marshall Hemming's demeanour shouted his displeasure. 'Really, we can't have this. A low farce, indeed! We have better things in mind, surely?'

'I've looked at the balance sheets, and if Miss Casey feels that a low farce is appropriate, then a low farce it shall be.' Melanie wasn't going to give any ground to this pompous tirade. 'We need something to bring in the crowds or this place is going under.'

'Miss Casey would never allow it.' Marshall spluttered.

'She may not want it, but the figures really tell their own story. You may have chosen the programme in the past, but now I'm here, it's my turn. I'm sorry if you don't like it, but *Charley's Aunt* it shall be.'

'I shall protest to the board!' Marshall replied.

'I'm sorry you feel that way.' Melanie tried a softer approach. 'I value your experience and all you've done here. The board brought me in to do something different. I want your support, but there can be only one director here, and believe me, I'm it.'

Marshall stood back, his thought processes visible to anyone who might have looked. He took a deep breath. 'Of course.' He said. 'I will not stand in your way. We both want the best for the theatre.'

'I'm glad you said that, Marshall.' Melanie took his arm and walked towards her office. 'I want to discuss some casting ideas with you.'

* * * *

'*Charley's Aunt*.' Henry announced. 'Better than all that social issue, tragedy stuff we've done recently.'

'I've heard of it.' Ian replied. 'It's a period piece. I can't see Daniel Stone in the leading rôle, though. He's not going to be happy.'

'No, that's true.' Henry laughed. 'It won't do him any harm to come down off his high horse for once.'

'Bet he still gets to be the lead, though.' Ian scoffed. 'I'll get the smallest part again.'

'Melanie has auditions planned, though. She and Marshall Hemming are trying to pretend that they're together on this, so he's sitting in.'

'I can't see Marshall getting a say in her decisions, though. She's a tough reputation, and from what I hear, her cast do wonders for her.'

'I'm just pleased to see Miss Casey and her trustees making such a brave decision,' Ian replied. 'I really

want to have some fun here, and it's time we lightened up.'

'So you're going to audition?' Henry asked.

'Of course.' Ian struck a pose. 'I may be only a spear carrier, but I have aspirations.'

'Er—there are no spears in this one.'

'You know what I mean; I'll probably be the servant who has two lines in act three.'

* * * * *

'Come in,' Melanie called, standing up as Ian came into her office. She held out her arms and greeted him warmly.

'That's more than I expected.' Ian blurted out in surprise. 'Are you sure you know who I am?'

'Of course I do.' Melanie sat down. 'I wanted to hear you read and to see if you'd fit into my plans.'

'Plans?' Ian asked.

'I'm told you could do comedy, and that you never got a chance before. I know your old tutor at college, and you're the right physical shape for what I have in mind.'

'Okay.' Ian said slowly. 'So what part would that be?'

'Lord Fancourt Babberly; Babbs for short.'

'Isn't that one of the leads?' said Ian, shocked.

'It is *the* lead.' Melanie replied. 'Babbs is Donna Lucia, from Brazil – where the nuts come from, as the play keeps repeating. You're Charlie's Aunt.'

'And you don't want me to audition?' Ian asked.

'No, I want to know if you're willing to do it.' Melanie handed him a folder. 'Here's the edited script, and my plans for the production. These are only notes, and I hope you won't discuss them with any of the other members of the company until we get into rehearsals.'

'Wow, thanks for trusting me.' Ian took the folder.

‘There’s more to it.’ Melanie said slowly. ‘I’m updating the play to modern dress, despite the old-fashioned nature of the plot. Of course, there are some inconsistencies in the way society worked when the play was written, but it’s a farce and it can take it.’

‘I’m confused. Where do I fit in with this?’ Ian asked.

‘I want a glamorous and believable Charley’s aunt. I think you could do it. It’s going to be a lot of work and some of it may not be comfortable, but if you’re willing, it could lead to better things.’

‘Well, there’s not a lot of career development in carrying a spear, or a tray.’ Ian said. ‘I don’t know that my reputation has grown in the last few years. It could get me a career in pantomime, or burlesque.’

‘It could be fun.’ Melanie’s expression was encouraging.

‘What would I have to do?’

‘First you say nothing. We do the rehearsals, and the dress rehearsals as normal, and then before the first night, we really work on Charley’s aunt herself. I have some sketches here.’ Ian walked round the desk to look. ‘They’re rough sketches, but you get the idea if you look at this sequence. Take it away, keep it secret, read it tonight and we’ll talk tomorrow.’

‘I think I get the idea.’ Ian said, handling the folder back to Melanie.

‘I thought you would.’ She replied, ‘but could you do it for me?’

‘I think so. Even if I fail, it’s going to be fun.’

‘Is it going to be difficult for you when we get to the performances? The idea is that you’re going to be a very feminine Charley’s Aunt. I envisage the first scenes with you as Babbs are going to be the most problematic. You’ll have a wig and maybe a beard to look quite manly, and then with a change of clothes and make up, hey presto, female.’

‘I don’t think I know how to act female.’ Ian said slowly.

‘Don’t worry. By the time we get to that stage, you’ll have learned.’

* * * * *

‘You’re doing *what?*’ Henry asked next day after Ian had returned the script outline to Melanie. He was clearing away old scenery in the wings.

‘I’m not going to spell it out,’ Ian replied. ‘Largely because I don’t know how it’s going to work.’

‘But you’ve got the lead role.’

‘But I’m not sure that I got it on my ability as an actor.’ Ian said. ‘Melanie hinted that it was because I was the right size for something she had in mind.’

‘Lots of leading men have been small in stature but huge in talent.’ Henry replied.

‘Maybe in the movies, but on the stage I can’t stand on a box so that the leading ladies aren’t taller than me.’

‘Stop worrying. It sounds a lot more adventurous that all that worthy stuff Marshall and his cronies have planned in the past.’ Henry said. ‘I wonder how she’s managed the rest of the casting, though.’

‘I saw Daniel and Courtney earlier. They looked like they were plotting something, but as soon as they saw me they started whispering, so I don’t know what they think about it all.’

‘There are roles for them, surely.’

‘There are four substantial male parts and a valet too, apart from Babbs.’ Ian explained. ‘And four female, including the real Charley’s Aunt. When it’s explained, I hope Daniel won’t think that he should have played Auntie. He’s not the right presence.’

‘Presence, that’s a good word to describe him.’ Henry replied. ‘What you mean is that he’d be a Neanderthal aunt. From what you told me, that’s not what Melanie has in mind.’

‘I’m not really sure what she wanted, but you’re right.’

'Hello there.' Harriet Casey appeared before they could say more. 'I've come to see Melanie, if she's available. Are you excited by our new production?'

'Yes, I am, Miss Casey.' Ian replied.

'I think you should be. Melanie told me what she has in mind for you. And between you and me, I am so pleased that we're doing something like this. It's not been a lot of fun in watching the audiences as we've depressed them with morally uplifting classical theatre.'

'I'm sure we've not depressed them.' Ian replied.

'So maybe it's only me.' Harriet smiled. 'Theatre should be about so much more.'

'Harriet, I thought it was you.' Melanie came into the auditorium. 'I expect you want to know far more than I want to tell you.'

Harriet laughed politely. 'I really want you to tell me that we've a cast, and that they're going to work together on this.'

'We have and they are.' Melanie replied. 'I was about to put up the cast list and the rehearsal schedule.'

* * * * *

They took the first act carefully, each actor taking their place with greater or lesser comfort. Daniel accepted his role with grace. Courtney was easily accommodated as there was no rival for the female lead, and slowly an ease developed as lines were memorised and direction choreographed.

'Jack and Charley.' Melanie called. 'Remember, you really are in love with Kitty and Amy, so let's see some hidden passion. You are undergraduates, hence the need for a chaperone, because you're also irresponsible. Remember too that you're a bit bumbling and frustrated. This is a period piece even if we're doing it in modern dress. Babbs, you're a bit worldlier, but mischievous rather than an out-and-out rogue.'

'So why does Jack have a costume in his room? In the original, it was supposed to be for a play. Are we staying with that?'

‘Yes, he’s a student, so why shouldn’t he be doing silly student things?’ Melanie replied.

‘So why does Babbs try it on?’ Daniel asked.

‘He’s playing it for laughs,’ Melanie answered. He doesn’t think, he simply does it, perhaps to embarrass Jack. Now we come to the next bit. Babbs is persuaded to dress as Donna Lucia, who really is Charley’s aunt from Brazil, where the nuts come from. She has to impress both Jack’s father, Sir Francis, who knows she’s a wealthy lady, and also to appear safe to Amy and Kitty.’

‘In the script, Babbs seems to get familiar with Amy and Kitty,’ Ian said. ‘At the same time, he has to both attract and appall Sir Francis. When Sir Francis is repelled, Amy’s father comes onto her, attracted purely by her money. I have no idea how I can do all that.’

‘Part of it is costume, part timing,’ Melanie replied. ‘Don’t worry; it’s all going to come together.’

‘Now then we come to the second act. This is going to be fast and furious.’ Melanie stood and walked round the cast. ‘Babbs is charming Amy and Kitty. The boys are worried, knowing who he is, whilst the girls clearly have no idea. Sir Francis proposes. Babbs, instructed by Jack, turns him down. At the same time, Amy’s father becomes more insistent.’

‘It’s going to get really physical. The real Charley’s Aunt arrives from Brazil, where the nuts come from, and pretends to be someone else to discover her impersonator. Her ward and Babbs are lovers anyway, which puts Babbs in a ludicrous situation, compounded when he’s told to be nice to Amy’s father because he holds the trusts which would allow the girls to marry.’

‘In act three, Babbs is with the girls. We can hint that they know who he is, but they don’t let on to taunt him. The ward, who is called Ella, realises that Charley’s Aunt is her beau, and she likes this version of him. Tricks abound, and Babbs gets marriage consents for Jack and Charley. The real aunt is revealed as Charley confesses. At this point, Charley’s Aunt is going to act all coy and girlish, and leaves with Ella.’

‘So Babbs gets the girl?’

‘That’s right. ‘We’re doing a happy ending. It’s a change for this company, I know.’

‘It’s fiendishly difficult to pull off well, but simple in the end. There’s no intellectual content,’ Daniel said. ‘It’s hardly worthy of our talents.’

‘It may not be what you expected to do, but low comedy takes as much skill as high tragedy, if not more. The roles are unbelievable, the characters are cyphers, but the situation is full of energy and opportunity to show real stagecraft. I’m sure you’ll give me a good Sir Francis.’

As she said this, the thought slipped through her mind that he was so stiff and pompous, he couldn’t help but play it the way she wanted. ‘Better not to tell him this,’ she thought.

‘I think Melanie’s right.’ Courtney chipped in. ‘It’s camp, but what’s the harm in that. The play’s been revived and revived. It’s over a hundred years old, but we all know about it, so let’s do it.’

‘Thank you, Courtney. I’m sure you’re going to be beautiful as Kitty.’ Melanie handed out cast sheets. ‘Here’s a rehearsal schedule, and a breakdown of the scenes and rough directions. You all know how to block your lines, and we don’t have too much time to waste, so let’s stick to it and be ready to roll. You’re all on file for costume sizes, except Ian, so I’ll see the rest of you at first rehearsal later.’

* * * * *

‘Are you working at the moment, Ian?’ Melanie asked as he followed into her office.

‘Yes and no,’ Ian replied. ‘I’m working from a tiny office on the ground floor of the building where I live, doing remote helpdesk and software stuff for various companies.’

‘So you don’t have to go into an office or factory every day?’

‘Goodness, no. I work alone usually and see no one. It fits around this place, and because it’s dealing with remote computer access, I can do it almost any time of

day.' Ian held out his bag. 'I've got my laptop here, and I can work through the bits of rehearsal when I'm not needed.'

'That's better than I could have ever hoped.' Melanie clapped her hands in delight. 'That means no one will know what we're doing.'

'But what *are* we doing, apart from rehearsing?' Ian hesitated.

'We're going to create the best Charley's Aunt that's ever been.' Melanie replied.

'You'd better explain.' Ian sat down. 'I'm beginning to think that I've let myself in for more than I realised.'

'Possibly you have.' Melanie agreed. 'But you're going to have fun, I promise.'

'I'm not sure that I liked the way you said 'fun' there.' Ian said. 'Perhaps you'll tell me the secrets before I get too far into this.'

'You're into it already.' Melanie said lightly. 'I can't go changing the cast now.'

'Okay, but it's just because I like you.' Ian laughed too.

'I don't want this to get round the rest of the cast.' Melanie confided. 'But I want the most glamorous aunt possible. I want to get through the rehearsals without them suspecting what we're planning.'

'I can't tell them. I don't *know* what we're planning.'

'Okay, we're going to create Charley's Aunt without them seeing you as Auntie in rehearsal.' Melanie explained. 'Don't cut your hair, slim a little if you can, and keep it secret. I plan that you should be a fabulous aunt, and to do that, we're going to have to work hard to get you ready. I want you to be able to walk, talk, act and even think as if you were the aunt, so that the secret of the disguise becomes compounded.'

'Okay, I'm with you so far.' Ian wasn't really following as much as he pretended.

‘So in effect, we’ll be disguising you as Babbs for the first Act, and then removing the disguise as you become the aunt.’

‘But I’m still male, aren’t I?’ Ian was more confused.

‘Yes, it’s the illusion that I want to be crucial.’ Melanie replied. ‘You’re the right size, well, more or less, and height. With hairdressing, makeup, voice and posture lessons, you’ll be perfect—at least, that’s the plan.’

‘I think I understand.’ Ian paused. ‘I work alone, so I could practise female things at work and no one would see.’

‘Correct, and no one would notice if you were wearing heels and make up, if your hair changed colour. You’d have to remember to disguise yourself as Ian when you came to rehearsals, but we can work on that easily.’

‘Hair changing colour?’ Ian asked. ‘I’m not sure I want to go that far.’

‘Oh, come on now.’ Melanie grinned. ‘Do you really want to play this role full-blooded, and give it your all?’

‘I guess, when you put it that way,’ Ian replied with a dramatic wave and bow. ‘I shall do it and never mind the consequences.’

‘What consequences would they be?’ Melanie softened her tone. ‘You live and work alone, no one’s going to see you, and apart from me, no one’s going to know what we’re doing until we reveal all. You come to rehearsals normally; we work on the changes in the way I want you to act in secret. Who’s to know?’

‘I think they’d notice if I came to the dress rehearsal in a real dress.’ Ian laughed.

‘Sure, but you’re not going to.’ Melanie replied. ‘The plan is that we get you ready for the part, and every time you come to the theatre before the first night, you just look like Ian.’

‘Won’t they spot me for a fake?’ Ian asked.

‘I’d guess that Daniel and Courtney have hardly noticed you in previous productions.’

‘They never spoke to me much, unless it was to say something like get out of the way.’ Ian remembered past insults.

‘You’re here because you enjoy the theatre rather than for the companionship of your fellow cast members.’

‘That’s not true,’ Ian said. ‘They’re just distracted, with bigger roles.’

‘And petty jealousies too,’ Melanie interrupted. ‘I know these theatre people.’

‘I don’t mind them. Henry and I carry on regardless.’

‘Yes, there’s Henry. He’d spot anything different. Had I better ask him to join the conspiracy?’ Melanie asked.

‘Leave him to me.’ Ian got up and went towards the door. He opened it and hesitated. ‘Whatever you’ve planned, I’m in. I’ll do whatever you want. I promise.’

‘I’m sure you’ll remember those words.’ Melanie smiled and waved him away.

* * * * *

Rehearsals started almost immediately. ‘I don’t want anyone watching old movies,’ Melanie ordered. ‘They cut the text differently, and weren’t confined to the stage as we are. I want your interpretations to be fresh and individual.’

‘Fat chance.’ Daniel scoffed rather too loudly.

‘You’re free to walk away any time you want to.’ Melanie snapped back. ‘Comedy is a skill every stage actor needs, from your credits, there’s not a lot in that category.’

‘This is farce.’ Daniel replied. ‘It’s hardly comedy.’

‘No; just listen to the laughs if you get it right.’ Melanie softened her voice. ‘There’s plenty of space for you to develop your craft here, and for us to go together as a team.’

‘Can I say something, please?’ They turned to see Harriet Casey, walking forward from the rear of the auditorium. She mounted the stairs in the wings and came onto the stage. ‘I love this theatre; that’s why my trust has subsidised it for so many years. Now, we’re less well off than we used to be, and there has to be some income. The site is valuable, and developers are sniffing around. I want it to continue, but theatre only lives for the audience. It can’t live in a vacuum.’

A silence followed, as Harriet looked them over. ‘I wanted Melanie to bring a fresh look. I chose the play. It’s the first thing I played in when I got the theatre bug, and before I went into the family business. Daniel, I know you’re a good person and a serious actor. I want you to stay and help out. Please give Melanie your support. Give her an easy time.’

Daniel blushed. ‘I guess I was a little hasty.’ He muttered almost inaudibly. ‘I’ll play it for all it’s worth.’

‘I want you to play it for all the theatre’s worth; no weasel words; in or out wholeheartedly. There’s no half way.’ Harriet’s voice rose. ‘If there’s not a decent balance sheet, there may be no theatre in this town.’

‘Please, Daniel.’ Courtney took his arm. ‘You’re a great actor; you can make it work for us all.’

Daniel sighed, and looked around the company. ‘I guess I’m in; I’m with you,’ he said with a slight smile.

* * * * *

‘That was a scary moment,’ Henry, who got the valet’s role, said to Ian as they tidied up and cleared the chairs away after rehearsal. ‘I thought Daniel was going to be difficult.’

‘No, he was simply throwing his weight around,’ Ian replied. ‘He knows that if he’s not acting here, he’s not acting anywhere.’

‘That’s true,’ Henry agreed.

‘And he’ll do it justice,’ Ian said. ‘He wants to be the star. He wants a good review, and a bit of fame, even if it’s only in this town.’

'The acting accountant,' Henry muttered. 'Still, we all have to have a day job in the amateur theatre, or some other means of support.'

'You could have a rich husband instead.' Ian waited for a response.

'Courtney, you mean.' Harry nodded. 'She's a good kid, a bit over the hill for the ingénue, but she loves the place and she'll keep Daniel on side.'

'They have a thing going? I never noticed.'

'It was before you came here.' Henry explained. 'It was a minor scandal, but Daniel's business needed Courtney's husband, so it cooled and now it's become quite amicable.'

'I wonder who's going to get the ingénue part. If I'm supposed to be in love with her, I would hate it to be Courtney.'

'Never fear, she's going to be Kitty or Amy, whichever has the most lines. I think you should wait and prepare to be surprised.'

'You know something,' Ian accused.

'My lips are sealed.' Henry turned out the lights and led the way towards the exit.

* * * * *

'Ian, I'd like you to meet Charlotte,' Melanie said as Ian came into her office. 'She's going to be your Ella.'

'Wow, that's wonderful,' Ian blurted out without thinking as he looked at her. Charlotte was small, blonde, and perfectly proportioned. She looked about twenty. 'I mean that it's good to meet you. I couldn't guess who could take that role.'

'I'm new in town.' Charlotte explained.

'That's going to cause confusion,' Ian said. 'You'll get called Charlie too.'

'No, I'm usually Lottie.'



‘Before you get any ideas, Lottie’s my cousin, and qualified in stage arts,’ Melanie said. ‘She’s going to help me design Babbs.’

‘So you’re not twenty.’ Ian could have kicked himself for being so obvious as soon as the words were said.

‘No, I’m not telling you my age.’ Lottie smiled at his discomfort. ‘But I will say that I left drama school three years ago. I’ve been in special effects, but when Melanie got this job, I begged leave, and came out here.’

‘Special effects sound fun.’ Ian tried to sound sensible this time.

‘I needed fun for a while, but then I got lucky. I wrote a couple of books under a pseudonym. They sold well, and turned into movies and a television series. I don’t really need to work again.’ Lottie replied.

‘So were you good at monsters?’

‘I was, but I needed a change from scars, blood, vampires and aliens—so I got you instead.’

‘So we’ll be seeing a lot of each other.’

‘Probably more than a lot.’ Melanie said. ‘I’ve asked Lottie to work her magic on you.’

Ian looked at Lottie. ‘Don’t look so scared,’ she said. ‘I’m really good at what I do, and I’m really going to enjoy this one. Take me for coffee and we’ll talk it through.’

* * * * *

‘So what do we need to do?’ Ian asked as they sat across a table.

‘First I need all your measurements.’ Lottie opened her bag, rummaged inside and pulled out an organiser folder. ‘I want you to fill this out with all your clothes sizes, plus I’ll need to hold a tape measure around your hips and bust.’

‘I don’t have a bust.’ Ian laughed nervously.

‘Precisely.’ Lottie replied. ‘That’s why I need to know what size to make it.’

‘You sound like you’ve done this before.’ Ian asked.

‘Yes; well almost, but not quite. At theatre school I got side-tracked into the makeup and prosthetics. I spent hours in the workshops and didn’t spend enough time on stage. I was the go-to girl if there was a witch or wizard, open wounds, or something totally weird. I could mould it, paint it, fit it and that’s how I won an award, and got to work in the movies.’

‘So why come here? This is a backwater with no one important to see your work.’

‘That doesn’t matter. I’ve plenty of stuff in production and I have a reputation. I can afford some time away, and I’ll use your pictures in my portfolio. I’ve never really been asked to do something so authentic or natural before.’

‘So I’m natural?’

‘That’s what Melanie wants. When Charlie’s Aunt appears, Melanie wants her to look feminine, fashionable, elegant and totally natural, if a little eccentric on the side.’

‘That’s a lot of adjectives.’ Ian said. ‘It’s a tall order. I don’t think any of those words could be used to describe me.’

‘By I’m finished, they will all describe you. You’ll be the most natural and the most desirable aunt ever seen. Melanie explained that the aunt doesn’t have to be old or frumpy. She can be young and—for want of a better word—vampish.’

‘I’m not sure the rest of the cast will be delighted to see me taking star billing,’ Ian said. ‘They can be precious.’

‘I’m sure they can. I’m sure *you* can be just as precious too. If you’re able to pull it off, the role could be your escape route to something better.’

‘I never thought of it that way. It would be good to do more acting and less computer stuff. I seem to be sorting out the same problems over and over again, one company after another.’

‘Just like the theatre then; no change there.’

‘So what’s the master plan?’ Ian asked. ‘I’m not pushing, but I need some idea of what times you want me, and what you need me to do. You have the rehearsal schedule, but all the costume and makeup is going to be time consuming, and I still need to make a living.’

‘Yes, I’ve been thinking about that.’ Lottie pulled out her organiser and thumbed through the screens. ‘You live and work at the same place. I can come to you and we can work around your schedules.’

‘Okay.’ Ian smiled. ‘That sounds good.’

‘And I warn you, it’s going to be hard work. I am a perfectionist, and quite strict.’

* * * * *

‘That man!’ Melanie threw her bag onto the desk. ‘He may have said he’ll help, but every darn obstruction, every niggle, every hold up...’

‘I guess you mean Daniel Stone.’ Lottie grinned. ‘He’s winding you up.’

‘I know, and I try to be sweet and understanding, but it gets so hard. He’s learned all his lines easily, but delivers them in the unfunniest way possible. He’s determined to make it heavy; there’s no feeling of spontaneity, no life.’ Melanie sat heavily. ‘Goodness knows how the full-cast rehearsals will run with that attitude.’

‘You’ll be fine.’ Lottie opened her folder on the desk. ‘And you’ll feel better when you look at these drawings.’

‘You’ve done the designs for Donna Lucia already?’

‘I took the sketches you gave me, and then with Ian’s measurements, and a few ideas of my own, I went shopping. I know we don’t have a huge budget for costumes and props. I went to see what was available, rather than having too much made. If you’ll approve the sketches, I can get on with some purchasing, and even better, some borrowing from people I know.’

‘That’s wonderful. Has Ian seen these?’

‘No, not yet. I’ve decided that Donna Lucia has a hint of the exotic, and an undergraduate irresponsibility just like the rest of the boys..., and she’s a young aunt, thirty-ish rather than middle aged. I wanted you to approve these designs.’ Lottie said. ‘Then I can work on Ian.’

‘I certainly approve, but I think you’ll have to work hard to persuade Ian into some of these designs.’ Melanie shuffled through the pages. ‘They’re a bit daring.’

‘You said glamorous, with a hint of eccentricity, if I remember correctly.’ Lottie flipped through to one of the later pages. ‘How’s this for the final scene?’

‘Can you get him to look like that? It seems exactly what I could have wished for.’

‘Leave him to me. I’m sure we’ll get along fine.’

‘From the way he blushes around you, not to mention the stammering, I’d guess that Ian doesn’t have a lot of experience with the ladies.’ Melanie observed.

‘And if you’re thinking that I could easily take advantage of him just so that he does exactly what I want, you’re dead right.’ Lottie winked and gathered up her papers.

* * * * *

‘Hi Ian, is it all right if I come in?’ Lottie asked as she entered his office.

‘Just let me finish this call.’ Ian turned back to the screen in front of him and continued what was obviously a technical conversation.

‘How are the rehearsals?’ Lottie asked when he put the phone down.

‘Pretty good now.’ Ian turned away from his desk and deliberately turned off the monitor. ‘Courtney seems happy, and in turn, that makes Daniel easier. Don’t say anything, but they come and go together and whisper in corners. They think no one’s noticed.’

'Is that bad?'

'Not really, it happens. They get hot, they cool it. When they're cool, it's harder work because the script doesn't flow. This time, we're doing well. You need to know them to see it in action, but we're more than up to schedule.'

'I brought a few things round for you to try.' She dropped bags and boxes onto the floor, as the telephone rang again. Ian switched the monitor back on.

Lottie looked round. The office was spartan, with several computers, a big steel cabinet with flashing lights, and untidy stacks of manuals and papers piled on every surface, except the one directly in front of Ian. She wandered round; through a door at the rear she saw a small kitchen with a bathroom attached. She noted it for future reference.

Perching on a desk where Ian could see her, she waited for his call to end. She saw him appraising her as she thumbed through her papers, one leg swinging idly with a red stiletto sandal dangling from her toes. She saw him shift his eyes deliberately back to the screen, and a blush rising from his neck as he turned away. Finally he ended the call.

'Can you put it on an answering machine for a few moments?' she asked. 'I'd like to introduce you to Charley's Aunt, Donna Lucia from Brazil - where the nuts come from.'

Ian flipped a couple of switches, clicked his mouse, and turned. 'You have my undivided attention,' he said.

Lottie passed him her drawings one by one, noting his silence as he flipped from one to the next. His eyes widened; he swallowed hard and gasped, 'These can't be me!'

'I don't see why not.' Lottie stood over him. 'If I can create all kinds of ugly monsters, I can easily do attractive.'

'But me, attractive? Like *this*?'

'Sure, but why don't we work together and try before you say it can't be you?' Lottie stroked his hair and then lifted his chin so that his face was tilted towards

her. 'I've had less promising raw material to work with.'

'You're the boss,' said Ian, hesitantly. 'I don't want to be made into a laughingstock, though.'

'There's no danger of that. All you have to do is believe in me, believe in yourself, and believe in Melanie. We can do it together.'

'Okay, where do we start?'

'Earrings. No self-respecting lady from Brazil would be caught dead without them.'

'Then it's fortunate that I have pierced ears.'

'You have?'

'Clearly you missed my cameo as Third Pirate in the television version of *Sinbad*, not to mention the promotion I received to re-create the role on stage.'

'Okay, I give up.' Lottie smiled. 'What was the role on stage?'

Ian paused for dramatic effect. 'I played the role of the First Pirate in that production. It ran for a whole week. I was hoping for further promotion, but then I moved here and joined this company. It's been downhill ever since.'

'So we'd better get you used to earrings once more.' Lottie said.

'I don't think that's going to be too difficult.'

'Maybe not, but there's more.'

'Don't forget, I've a business to run here. I can't afford to scare the customers away, even if most of them are online customers.'

'No one's coming here to see you, so we can start right away.' Lottie turned to her packages. 'First of all, I need you to get used to wearing heels. Nothing says *girl* better than how she walks in high heels, and I bet you've not had a lot of experience there.'

'None really.' Ian watched a pair of black court shoes being placed on the desk in front of him. He touched one as if afraid to do so.

'The heels are only four inches, just comfortable for walking and just prominent enough to make a statement to the audience. I want you to wear them all the time you can from now on, so that you walk in them just like you'd been doing it since you tried on mummy's shoes when you were a little girl.'

Ian pulled off his trainer and picked up the heel as if commanded. 'Wait!' Lottie said. 'You can't put them on with those hideous socks. You need stockings or tights so that you don't stretch them all out of shape. I bought tights today. Take these and put them on.' Ian looked at her sheepishly. 'You can change in the bathroom.'

'I don't think I can.' Ian felt a cold sweat at the thought.

'Come on, it's too late to be modest.' Lottie said. 'If you didn't want to be an actor, you shouldn't have signed up.'

Ian picked up the shoes and the stockings and walked into the bathroom without another word. A few moments later he hobbled back.

'You look like a cross between a cowboy who's lost his horse, and a truck driver.' Lottie laughed.

'You can laugh,' Ian snapped. 'I can't imagine how you can walk in these things.'

'Er, just look at what I'm wearing.' Lottie lifted her leg to show a higher heel on a smaller foot. 'It's easy. You just need to get the feel. It will all become natural within a few weeks. No, forget that, we don't have a few weeks. Just take my word; it's all going to feel so natural and soon you'll wonder what all the fuss was about.' Lottie walked around him, almost doing a pirouette. 'See, it's comfortable and natural. Lead with the toe, let your hips swing naturally, and ignore the heel.'

'It's the heel that I'm going to fall off.' Ian took a few more steps.

'No, you're not. It must be easy because girls do it all the time, no thought involved.'

'But you've been practising since you were little.' Ian stumbled and propped himself up against the desk.

‘Think of it like riding a bike, or learning to swim. Once you get the basics, it’s easy, and all you have to do is work on style and speed.’ Lottie skipped a little. ‘I’ll let you kiss me if you can catch me.’

He took a few steps towards her as she danced away. He turned to follow her and fell. ‘Okay, that’s enough.’ Ian said fiercely—but then he giggled as he saw Lottie’s smile.

‘Seriously.’ Lottie helped him up, and then kissed him lightly on the cheek. ‘I really need you to do this. I know what Melanie is expecting when she starts directing on the stage. I’m in charge of getting you ready, and I’m not going to let her down. I need you to promise, all day, every day, keep the heels on. I’ll bring some others now we know that those fit, but keep them on.’

Ian got a perfunctory hug as she left. He tried to make it longer, but sensed that she was holding back. He wondered what he had done wrong.

* * * * *

Rehearsals again. Sometimes they were a pain, with actors wanting to do it their way, instead of trusting the director. Melanie wasn’t like that. She teased and cajoled, but was very firm in trying her way at least a couple of times before allowing any discussion. Nearly always, she was exactly right, and the action or the delivery of lines worked. When there was a change, it was nuanced: a line altered to fit a voice, an action tailored to look more natural.

‘I really love working with Melanie,’ Ian said when Lottie let herself into his apartment a couple of days later. ‘Everyone seems to have their lines, and she’s taking us through the physical part. She wants a lot of movement. It’s really good; we’ve been too static and tied to the script for ages.’

‘So you know why I insisted you practise in the heels.’

‘I know, but I wore trainers to the rehearsal.’

‘Good, we don’t want to give away anything.’

'Yes, and I was glad of the relief; my feet really hurt.' Ian replied. 'But I kept my promise. I have been in heels every minute at the office and here.' He raised a foot to show her. 'I think I'm getting better, but the walk doesn't feel entirely natural.'

'It will come.' Lottie took his hand and pulled him to her side. 'Keep in step with me.'

They walked across the room, heels clicking on the wooden floor. 'Try more leading with your toe,' she said. 'Lean a little back and imagine your elbows anchored at your waist, hands a little forward.'

They turned. 'Feel the walk, don't just walk it. Imagine standing proud, chin up, breasts to the fore. Impress the boys.'

'Lottie, something's missing in that instruction, and I never impressed anyone.'

'You know exactly what I mean. Now turn again. Allow your hips to sway more, feel the rhythm. Once more, imagine walking away from someone you really want to impress, let your sway do the talking, make his eyes follow you.'

'Lottie, I don't think that's likely.' Ian snickered.

'Oh, come on.' Lottie pulled his again, her hip touching his. 'Work with me, get into character.' They walked again and turned. 'Imagine Daniel ogling your behind.'

Suddenly they were both laughing at the thought. A moment came and passed, but something subtly altered between them. Lottie held him as his balance threatened to give way. After a swift hug and meeting of eyes, they broke apart, the moment noted but nothing said.

'We have work to do this evening.' Lottie turned and picked up the bags lying at the door. 'I want to take a cast of your chest so that I have something to work on, and then I want to try a wig cap and wig.'

'Cast?' Ian asked, puzzled.

'Sure, I'm special effects, remember? The first special effect is your boobs.'

‘You’re joking.’

‘Not at all. Melanie wants a really glamorous Charley’s aunt, and glam means just that.’ Lottie looked quizzically at him. ‘Just trust me.’

‘Okay.’ Ian pulled a face which said he wasn’t sure where this was going, but said no more.

‘The cast of your torso is so that I can build upon it.’ Lottie explained. ‘In the workroom, we have boobs of all shapes and sizes. I decide upon what’s proportionate, sculpt it onto a negative of your case, and make a latex mould.’

‘Boobs of all shapes and sizes.’ Ian mused. ‘Now there’s a concept.’

‘Don’t get silly. I have to make models to be shot and injured in all sorts of ways. I make models for courses, for first aid demonstrations, and other stuff, so naturally the workroom has all shapes and sizes of body parts in stock. Designs need working patterns.’

‘Yes, but it’s a silly concept.’

‘No, it’s serious. I need them for other things than lecherous actors. I do medical prosthetics as well as special effects. It’s not all blood, gore and alien monsters. Some of the work is really practical and makes a difference to people’s lives.’

Lottie worked quickly. Working with powders and liquids from her case, she mixed and timed it all carefully, keeping up a constant stream of chatter and instruction. Ian watched and lay still as he was instructed whilst the cast hardened from neck to navel.

‘Ouch, ouch, ouch.’ He winced as she prized it slowly from his skin.

‘Hmmm.’ She ran a hand over his chest. ‘You’re not hairy, but I should have asked you to shave there. No need to now. The cast seems to have plucked all the hairs away. Now you’ll only have to shave your legs and arms.’

‘Shave my legs...’ Ian started to protest. ‘Oh, yes, I can see what you mean. Girls don’t have hair there.’

‘No, and we don’t want to spoil the illusion.’

‘Won’t I be too far from the audience for them to notice anyway?’

‘Maybe, or maybe not. It’s all part of the illusion. You’ll know and feel it, and that will reinforce the role you’re playing.’

‘But I’m a man in the play.’

‘Yes, but a man impersonating a woman.’ Lottie replied. ‘We have to use every little thing we can to make it seem natural as well as amusing. You’ll know the secret, and the audience will know the secret. The rest of the cast will know the secret, but the more you play it in character, the greater the reaction. That’s why Melanie wants to do the play this way.’

‘Who said that to get into character, you start with the shoes?’

‘I don’t know, but I’m sure they’d have included something about hairy legs.’

‘Okay, leg and arm shaving it is.’ Ian agreed. ‘I’ll do it tomorrow; it should last until the run is over.’

‘No it won’t.’ Lottie replied. ‘Even waxing would have to be done again before then, but waxing would require a salon visit, and we don’t want the secret of your transformation to get out until the first performance. You’ll know when to shave again.’

‘So why—oh, never mind, it’s all part of the preparation.’

‘Right, welcome to my wonderful world of leg shaving. Armpits too, and any other body hair you can find. You need to do it at least once a week.’

‘Can we keep a secret so long? Won’t anyone notice? What about the dress rehearsal?’

‘Melanie’s going to say your costumes haven’t arrived. Then when we actually get to the first performance, that’s the first time they’ll see you. I promise it won’t be anything like they’re expecting.’

‘Why did I let myself in for this?’ Ian raised his eyes to heaven.

‘Because you like the idea, really.’ Lottie said. ‘All actors love a difference. Now, the wig fitting.’

Ian sat silently as Lottie worked. He wasn’t allowed to watch as she fitted a stretchy cap over his head and pinned it securely. He glimpsed the wig as she took it from the stand in one of her cases, and felt her pulling and combing it into place.

‘It looks just like me.’ Ian saw it in the mirror for the first time. ‘There’s no change.’

‘I know; it’s perfect.’ Lottie teased it a little more. ‘It’s for you to wear at rehearsals, so be careful not to let anyone know what’s going on.’

‘That’s silly.’ Ian played with the wig, testing its security.

‘You don’t get it.’ Lottie said. ‘We’re going to use your own hair for Charley’s aunt. It’s going to be obvious that it’s your own hair and not a wig, so we don’t want them to know until performance.’

‘This just gets more and more complicated.’

‘Trust me. You’ll enjoy it all.’

* * * * *

‘Can we get a coffee together after today’s session?’ Ian asked as Lottie packed her effects away.

‘Sure we can, as long as it’s just a coffee.’

‘Oh, sure.’

‘Sorry, that sounded rude. I didn’t mean it to be. It’s because I’ve had bad experiences, and I don’t mix work in the theatre with pleasure. I try to keep my relationships separate.’

‘That sounds like you had problems—not that I want to pry. I just wanted it to be friendly.’

‘Okay, I’m sorry.’ Lottie took his hand. ‘We’ll go for coffee, but as long as you remember, I’m not looking for a relationship, and’—she hesitated—‘you might as well know, the rumours will catch me up anyway. I

had a bad break with a girlfriend last year. That's one of the reasons why I came here to do this show.'

'I promise to ask no questions. All actors are trained to listen.'

'Sure, and then to embellish and spread everything they hear.' Lottie softened her voice. 'Friends?'

'Friends.'

'So how often does my friend have to shave?'

'Not every day. I had some dermatitis when I was younger, and after laser treatment, the hairs never really came back. I have a few stray whiskers, but I could never grow a beard or a moustache.'

'We can work with that very easily.' Lottie felt his chin. 'It feels smooth, and with some creams it will be smoother and you'll have a great complexion for me to work with. I'm going to arrange some salon visits for you, and I'll get them to check what's happening. If there are stray hairs, they can laser them away there and then. It will be entirely painless.'

'I guess I don't mind. I never fancied having a beard anyway.'

* * * * *

'How's our leading lady doing?' Melanie breezed into the office.

'He's got his first manicure today.' Lottie looked up from her sketch pad.

'That's going to make his life difficult. He spends all day on a keyboard.'

'He'll get used to it.' Lottie laughed. 'Once they're on, they're on. I told the manicurist that they had to be very strong and secure, very plain French manicure, not too long, but long enough for him to be conscious of them all the time until he gets used to them. I want him to be moving female as well as looking the part.'

'Are we going too far? He's an amateur actor, and he's got to live here after the production is forgotten.'

‘That’s why it’s important to get it right. I’m doing what you asked and creating Charlie’s Aunt. She’s the main reason that your production is to stand out. Sure, he’s an amateur, but underneath it all, I think he loves the challenge and the opportunity to stand out.’

‘Yes, he was a bit retentive when he grumbled to us about always getting the bit parts.’

‘I can understand that.’ Lottie held out her pad to re-examine the sketches. ‘He’s not the dashing juvenile lead. Opportunities must be scarce in a company like this.’

‘You mean Daniel, of course.’ Melanie replied. ‘He’s over the resentful stage, and now he’s working with Courtney and the other members of his clique, he’s proving his stagecraft. I still think he could be difficult.’

‘Wait until he gets his first glimpse of Charley’s Aunt. She’ll be so perfect, that he’ll wonder who the substitute could be. Bet he makes a pass.’

‘You’re on.’ Melanie held out her hand to shake. ‘We shouldn’t really—how on earth will Ian handle that?’

‘I have no idea,’ Lottie said sweetly.

* * * * *

The next couple of days passed relatively normally for Ian. He got up, dressed and went to his office, like every other day. He wasn’t in the rehearsal schedule, and had time to work some more on his lines. Lottie called every day to check up on his attention to her rehearsal schedule, outside the theatre ones.

‘How are the nails?’ she asked innocently.

‘I think I’m getting used to them.’ Ian held out his hands for her to inspect them. ‘At first I always kept my hands in my pockets when anyone was around, but then I started to forget myself and carried on as normal. No one noticed except when I went for coffee yesterday. I was complimented, would you believe?’

‘Who by? What happened?’

‘It was a regular customer.’ Ian replied. ‘She has computer processing for her business, but always calls in person to discuss any problems. We went for coffee. She saw my hands, and I simply told her it was for a production. She knows I make a fool of myself on stage. She promised to buy some tickets, so it wasn’t wasted.’

‘You didn’t tell her too much?’

‘I didn’t tell her a thing, but I think she guessed something from the title.’

‘And there’s no such thing as bad publicity.’ Lottie sighed, gathering up her bag and cell phone. ‘I’ll see you later.’

Ian hugged her before she left. It was a real hug; warm, but a little mechanical at the same time. Quickly forgetting this impression, he turned back to his work schedule for the day.

As he worked, he practised using his own voice, and then using a breathier version, with a higher pitch, trying to sound more like Charley’s aunt would have done in his mind, if she were real, and if she were really a lady as well. It was all so complicated, but he wanted to be whatever he could. He practised walking just as Lottie had instructed. Toe forward, swaying from the hips, elbows in, he repeated to himself whilst walking across the office, heels clicking.

The hours flew by. He tried a soft-shoe shuffle as music played in the background, twirling and dancing as his confidence grew.

* * * * *

Ian danced and twirled across the office as a favourite tune played. It seemed to be natural to be doing it in heels now.

‘Very good.’ He turned to find Lottie and Melanie at the door watching him.

‘How long have you been there?’ he asked, surprised that he hadn’t locked the door.

‘Long enough to see what a star you’re going to be.’ Melanie hugged him theatrically, and then Lottie did

the same, more warmly, with a secret smile as she broke away. 'Are you ready for phase two?'

'Phase two?' Ian asked.

'That's right, and I've come along to watch Lottie perform her magic.'

'Today's the day.' Lottie raised her bag to show him. 'This is where female begins to take shape.' Clearing a space on the desk, she laid the bag and opened it. Moving the packing away gently, Ian saw a naked female torso.

'What's that doing here?' He asked, thinking that it was a stupid remark as soon as the words left his lips.

'That is a theatrical-grade, latex and compound prosthetic, made to close-up film standards,' Lottie said. 'In other words, they're your boobs.'

'Mine?' Ian looked again.

'Yes, you'll be wearing them under your clothes in the first scene, and then when we do the quick change, it will really look spectacular.' Lottie said. 'They attach with a breatheable adhesive, and once you're used to them, you'll be walking and standing just as a woman would do.'

'And you'll have boobs just like a woman would do.' Melanie stared into the packaging. 'A push-up bra and these babies will get a gasp from the audience.'

'But isn't that taking the plot a bit far?' Ian asked.

'It would be if we were doing this as a period piece, but we're not. We want it to be a spectacular show, and you're our secret weapon,' Melanie said. 'The audience wouldn't be surprised to see a good female impersonation; they've seen what Las Vegas can do, and so we're doing the same.'

'And this is the first prosthetic test.' Lottie said. 'I need to try these on you, get a reasonable colour match and make sure the fitting is going to last through the performance. If it's good, then I need to make a couple more casts and then we don't have to panic if there's an accident with one.'

They look real.' Ian said. 'It's almost as if there's a bit of a body in there.'

'Well, there's not.' Lottie laughed. 'No people have been harmed in this production.'

'Not yet.' Ian chilled as he looked more closely.

'You can touch,' Lottie said. 'They won't bite, and they're going to be fixed to your chest, so don't be bashful.'

Ian touched and couldn't resist cupping his hand around the breast form as it lay there. 'They feel very real.' He blushed. 'Not that I've a lot of experience.'

'They're modelled on mine.' Lottie said.

'Oh, I'm sorry.' Ian blushed again.

'I wasn't saying that to embarrass you,' Lottie said softly. 'I was only trying to assure you that they were a sensible size.' Then she blushed and looked away. They giggled like they couldn't help it.

'Stop it, you two.' Melanie clapped her hands. 'This is serious work, and being silly doesn't help. Ian, get stripped off and ready, then Lottie can find somewhere to work.'

'I need you lying down or reclining.' Lottie said, serious once more.

'There's only the bedroom.'

'Then the bedroom it has to be.' Melanie kept the authority in her voice. 'We need to get to work.'

* * * * *

'I think you handled the stairs really well,' Lottie said as they pushed open the door to Ian's bedroom.

'I have been practising, like you said,' Ian replied. 'You'll have to excuse the mess; I wasn't expecting visitors.'

'This is the first thing to get used to.' Lottie held out a tiny flesh-coloured garment. 'It's a dancer's belt, a gaff, or whatever you want to call it; maybe a medieval instrument of torture. It goes under everything to keep

your male bits firmly out of the way, and give you a smooth shape at the front.'

'Isn't that a bit unnecessary?' Ian asked.

'No it isn't. Get changed and, while you're doing it, please tell me how you expect to find anything in this mess.'

'It's not so bad.' Melanie resisted the urge to tidy up. 'I'm going to sit and watch. I've always wanted to see how these things are done.'

'There are trade secrets here,' Lottie warned. 'If you give them away, I may have to kill you. It took me ages to get this technique right.' Ian took off his shirt and lay back on the bed. 'First I have to swab all over the make sure the skin is free of all oil and moisture, then we proceed. Quiet now, and don't distract me.'

Melanie watched as Lottie took the prosthetic from the case and held it against Ian's freshly cleaned chest. She saw Lottie placing it and carefully marking his skin where the edges touched, and then moved round the side to see how the spare moulding was trimmed away and then feathered into contact with Ian's skin. The breasts looked natural and firm, with nipples dark against the rise of flesh, giving a look as if they were purely real. The top of the silicone skirted round his neck, whilst the sides went almost to his arms. The bottom edges were the ones which took most attention.

'I've got to get the breast to look natural and to drape exactly where it should be,' Lottie said once more as she removed and re-positioned the prosthetic. 'It's got to be exact, because the glue is a one-time fix. It isn't going to slip and slide to give me a second chance to get it right.'

Satisfied, she stood back. 'Now comes the real test.' She said, taking out a canister of adhesive. 'Don't you dare move a muscle. Shallow breaths and try to hold as still as still can be.'

Working quickly, she applied adhesive to his skin and to the back of the prosthetic. 'Hold this away for me, Melanie,' she said. 'Just keep your side away from contact until I get this positioned right, and then I'll come round and take it from you.'

Ian watched as his chest was covered; he held his head still and away, keeping his neck taut as the upper edge was secured in a curved shape beneath his collar bone. He saw how Lottie's tongue was held between her teeth in concentration. She frowned and pushed down the edge, and then went to take the other side from Melanie.

'We have to make sure the edge is taut, and get it just so. I don't want the boobs to be lopsided.' She explained. 'It's looking good.'

She stood back and then started to work on the feathered edges, trimming and gluing, placing and smoothing once more. She stood back.

'Okay, you can look now,' she said.

'Ian looked down. 'I think I can see the join.'

'Yes, but the next one will be a better colour match. It's difficult to guess skin tone exactly, but I know what shades were in this mix, so I can correct the next one. Whatever I do, there has to be some makeup anyway to make it look right, but we want a bit of cleavage to show, just to titillate the audience.'

'It'll titillate Daniel too.' Melanie stood back to look. 'He won't be able to take his eyes off them.'

'Courtney won't like that,' Lottie said.

'They're not too big, are they?' Ian asked.

'No, they're on the small side, but proportionate.' Lottie said. 'You couldn't drive big ones anyway.'

'Drive?' Ian laughed.

'You know what I mean.' Lottie smoothed the join again and applied a touch more adhesive. 'I think you can sit up and look at the full effect.'

'Are you sure?' Ian asked.

'Of course I'm sure.' Lottie helped him up. 'They're your boobs now, and there they stay until I give you the solvent.'

'Solvent! They need a solvent?' Ian looked in panic.

‘Don’t worry, it’s all safe. You’d hate them to fall off in mid scene.’

‘Or when Daniel gropes them.’ Melanie stood back.

‘They look so real.’ Ian was standing in front of the mirror, turning left and right. Carefully, he touched the breast and lifted it against his skin. ‘Is this what real breasts feel like? The weight seems wrong. I’m front-heavy.’

‘That’s because you’re not used to them,’ Lottie replied. ‘They are the right weight and they’ll move just like the real thing, but like the real thing, they need a bra to keep them comfortable and sit correctly inside your dress. Let me help you.’

‘Is this really necessary, and did it have to be pink?’ Ian protested as she pulled his arms into straps and then fastened the bra behind him.

‘Get used to it.’ Melanie inspected the look. ‘Half the world does this every day; welcome to our world.’

‘Okay, but do I have to wear a dress as well?’ Ian said slowly, still looking at his reflection in the mirror.

‘Of course.’ Melanie replied. ‘It can’t be any other way. We don’t have time to pad your hips in the quick change, so jeans and the like are quite out of the question, and anyway, Charlie’s aunt is flamboyant and feminine. She’s a bit exotic, because she’s from Brazil, where the nuts come from.’

‘I brought a dress,’ Lottie said. ‘Let’s try it.’

‘Sure, don’t mind my feelings.’ Ian was secretly surprised and pleased. He walked a few paces to follow Lottie from the bedroom. ‘Hey, my boobs jiggle when I walk.’

‘He said that as if it were a discovery.’ Melanie and Lottie shared the joke.

‘Get those jeans off and then step into this.’ Ian did as he was told and Lottie held out the dress for him to step into. ‘It’s not really for the play, just a little black dress I picked up to try for size and style. It may give us an idea of what we need to do next.’

Ian heard the zip being pulled up his back and felt the dress tightening around his hips. He stood as Lottie pulled it into place. 'Not bad,' Melanie said as Ian walked a few paces away and turned to walk back to them. 'Love the walk; that's far more elegant than a lot of women do. He's the right shape, and moves the right way. In fact he looks quite demure.'

'I think I'm showing a lot of flesh.' Ian pointed into his new cleavage.

'Nonsense, it's what modern women wear.' Melanie stepped closer and peered down. 'Just about right.'

'I think so too.' Lottie agreed. 'Your posture's changed. You're walking like a woman.'

'I think I'm conscious of this weight on my chest.' Ian stood as if to emphasise his breasts.

'Goodness, he's only had breasts for a few minutes and already he's showing them off, like a starlet with new implants.' Lottie said.

'I think the audience will believe in the character when we're ready to go, as long as the hair and makeup are as good.' Melanie allowed herself a smile once more. 'How does it feel, Donna Lucia?'

'Funnily enough, I feel fine.' Ian agreed, trying out his Donna Lucia voice for the first time with them, a little softer and huskier, with a trace of accent. 'I thought it was all going to feel really strange and awkward, but now in this dress, the heels and all the walking and movement I've been doing make sense. I feel a little elegant.'

'Elegant is good, and I love the voice; keep that in,' Melanie said. 'You'll need that, with perhaps a little hauteur to put Daniel down.'

'I'd like a bit of sexy in there too,' Lottie said. 'I knew this would work, but even without makeup and hair, I can believe we're building Donna Lucia's character the way you wanted.'

* * * * *

'So, Donna Lucia.' They sat at Ian's table, wine glasses in front of them, as Melanie poured from the

bottle she had brought. 'I see her as a big character, blonde of course, lots of jewellery to hit the stereotype of one who comes from Brazil.'

'Where the nuts come from.' Lottie and Ian chorused together, and then laughed.

'Be serious.' Melanie faked telling them off. 'Can you do that?'

'I need to run some tests,' Lottie replied. 'I have to get Ian used to the makeup and try different styles, but it shouldn't be too difficult if Ian can take a few days off to work with me.'

'Sure, no problem.' Ian said casually, secretly delighted at time with Lottie. 'I can put the office onto answering machine, transfer the urgent stuff to my mobile, and work around whatever you need. I already booked time off from my clients for rehearsals and performance week.'

'You're in rehearsals every other day from now on.' Melanie checked her schedule. 'Then we're into the first performance on Tuesday and the final on Saturday.'

'With a surprise party for the cast and crew afterwards, as usual?' Ian asked.

'Did you say party after the last show?' Lottie asked.

'It's traditional,' Ian said. 'It's usually fun, except when Daniel and Courtney have a big row and throw food and drink at each other. Even that can be fun when Courtney's husband joins in, and then Daniel's wife gets too drunk to know what she's saying.'

'Sounds wonderful.' Melanie looked hard at Lottie, eyebrow raised quizzically.

'Sorry, it only happened once,' Ian said sheepishly. 'Don't expect it to happen again. We usually stand around talking, flirting if you're lucky, and laughing at the mistakes. The post-mortem comes when we start the next production.'

'I can think of a way to make the party go with an added swing.' Lottie nodded towards Melanie. 'Talk to you later.'

‘Can I have the solvent before you go?’ Ian asked.

‘Sure, this was just a fitting, now I know what I need to do.’

‘Can I ask a silly question?’ Ian asked. ‘When we get to performance, do I have to wear them for a week?’

‘Oh, no.’ Lottie shook her head. ‘We’ll have a new prosthetic each day. Your skin needs to breathe and relax.’

‘Thank goodness for that.’

‘And there I was thinking how great you looked with breasts.’ Lottie hugged him more warmly than before. ‘I can’t wait to meet the real Charley’s Aunt.’ She kissed him quickly, and then turned as if embarrassed. A strained silence hung between them as she removed the prosthetic, and packed everything away.

Melanie watched. She wondered how well she really knew Lottie.

* * * * *

‘It’s been difficult turning up with this wig on every time,’ Ian called in Lottie’s makeup room the next day after the rehearsal. ‘Why do I have to wear it? I look exactly like myself anyway.’

‘You’ve done well. They’re used to it, and today is when the real transformation starts. I’ve booked you in for hairdressing after the salon closes. Rena’s going to do it for free, in return for a credit in the programme.’

‘Am I dressed for that?’

‘Jeans, tee shirt, leather jacket, trainers; yes I think you’re dressed for it.’

‘Are you sure this is necessary? I’m worried about how I’m going to look for my clients.’

‘Does it matter? You can tell them you’re an actor, they’ll understand; or you could keep the wig on.’

‘I suppose I could. It’s just that I’ve never done anything like this before.’

‘Don’t worry.’ Lottie gathered her sketches into a folder. ‘You are in the very best of hands.’

They walked to the salon on the next block from the theatre. Ian knew it as the most expensive in town. It was almost empty. The sweet scented air, with a slight chemical undertone, surprised Ian, who had never dared to enter the place before.

‘Hi, Lottie,’ said the only lady remaining in the place, whose name badge said Rena. ‘Is this Ian?’

‘Yes. He’s very nervous, so be gentle with him.’

‘Don’t worry.’ The lady took Ian’s hand. ‘Girls come here every day, and almost all of them survive.’

‘Survival?’ Ian asked. ‘Do I have to worry about that as well?’

‘Of course not. Come round here into the back salon. We’re all ready for you.’ Rena guided him into the rear of the salon. ‘There’s only us girls here.’

Ian was quickly installed in a chair, where Rena took a comb to his hair. ‘Good texture,’ she said to Lottie. ‘We could do with a little more length, but never mind.’

‘I think there’s enough for a longish pixie cut,’ Lottie said.

‘Oh, there’s plenty for that.’ Rena brushed it a different way. ‘There’s quite a lot of length over the ears too, fortunately. So if you’ll take your earrings out, we’ll get you washed and started.’

‘Do you know, I never noticed the earrings,’ Lottie said, looking at the gold hoops Ian was wearing.

‘I thought I should make sure the holes were comfortable.’ Ian replied. ‘If I put base metal in the holes, I seem to get a rash.’

‘Good thinking.’ Rena wrapped a towel around his shoulders and swung the chair backwards to a sink. ‘I always read about all the stuff actors do to prepare, but I never thought of that detail.’

‘Ian’s a true professional,’ Lottie assured her. ‘Even though it’s an amateur production, each actor gives it their best.’

Ian relaxed as Rena washed his hair and towelled it gently. He sat silently as she combed and cut his hair, stepping back and forward, checking the length. It was all heavy and damp. Ian watched as little snippets fell.

‘I’m sure you’ve no idea what it’s going to look like,’ Rena said softly, ‘but it’s going to be absolutely beautiful when I’m finished. I can see the way your hair wants to lie, and I can cut the shape with that.’

‘Does that mean he’ll be able to wash it and finger fix?’ Lottie asked. ‘That’s going to save a lot of time.’

‘I thought that’s what you wanted. You said it was to be concealed part of the time. I guessed that means squashed down somehow.’

‘You’re right, of course. That’s really reassuring.’

Ian said nothing as a strong-smelling paste was produced and then brushed into sections of his hair. Rena chatted inconsequentially all the time as he sat watching a timer count down to the next stage. He tried not to think what could go wrong, but worried that it would all go wrong and he would end up bald.

A rinsing again. Leaning back, he noticed that there were no mirrors in which he could see what was going on. He was towelled again, and a different paste, more sweetly scented, was brushed into his hair, section by section again. His head was wrapped in foil and heat lights were arrayed around him. Once more the timer was placed in front of him.

‘Why can’t I see what you’re doing?’ Ian asked.

‘I don’t want to scare you.’ Rena made a mock threat with some scissors, and then put a few women’s hair-dressing magazines in his hands. ‘This is where I ask if you would like coffee.’

‘Are you sure this isn’t going to be silly?’ Ian asked when he and Lottie were alone.

‘Silly or not, it’s too late to stop now. You saw the sketches, Melanie approved the sketches, and she tells

me that rehearsals are going well. What could go wrong?’

‘What indeed?’ Ian smiled as he took his coffee.

‘And now, the moment of truth approaches.’ Rena removed the heat lights and the wrapping from Ian’s head. ‘A final rinse, and then after a bit of hairdresser’s magic, we see what we have created.’

A rinsing and then more towels. Ian caught just a glimpse of his hair as it fell into his sight, but it was soggy and didn’t really look anything but wet. He moved to a chair in front of a mirror which had been draped with a towel. Rena started drying and brushing.

‘What do you think?’ She asked.

‘With the right makeup, when she’s wearing the costume, I think we have a perfect Charley’s Aunt,’ Lottie said.

‘What do you mean calling me *she*?’ Ian asked quietly. ‘And more importantly, when do I get to look?’

‘Now?’ Rena asked Lottie, who nodded back.

The towel was removed from the mirror with a flourish. Ian sat silently looking at the reflection, turning his head left and right.

‘Say something’ Lottie said.

‘I’m speechless,’ Ian replied. ‘If I didn’t know who I was staring at, I’d be asking her out on a date. Well, I would if I had the courage. I don’t know what you’d call this colour, but I’d call it a bombed-out bleached blonde.’

‘It’s silver grey with ash and platinum highlights.’ Rena said. ‘My own mixture.’

‘I think it works as a look.’ Lottie said, looking over his shoulder into the mirror. ‘With makeup and costume, I think we’ve got it right.’

‘There’s makeup out back.’ Rena said, ‘If you want a quick tryout, I’d love to see what we’ve created.’

‘I’m game,’ Ian said. ‘And I’m just the blonde airhead in front of the mirror.’

‘Okay, earrings back in,’ Lottie said. ‘I’ll go and see what we have.’

Ian stood closer to the mirror. Pulling his hair behind one ear and then the other, his hands trembled as he fixed the earrings. His hair was not just blonde; it was almost white, and almost silver. It shouted ‘female’ from every angle.

‘I’ve taken all this stuff.’ Lottie showed it to Rena. ‘Can you put it on the bill?’

Rena nodded and Lottie started to work quickly, brushing a light foundation over Ian’s face, shaping and contouring with different powders. Ian watched as his face seemed to change shape before his eyes.

‘Lips or eyes first?’ she asked Rena. ‘This is only an impression, but you can see where it’s going.’

‘It’s going amazingly.’ Rena nodded. ‘I think lips then eyes. It’s more dramatic that way.’

‘I never thought of it like that,’ Lottie replied as she pulled her face in front of Ian in unspoken instruction of the expression she wanted him to adopt. Most of the time it was simply to keep still and look forward. Ian watched when he could, but Lottie was back and forth in front of the mirror all the time. She switched from lips to eyes.

‘I think heavy black liner is essential, and lashes too,’ she explained as she worked. ‘Charley’s Aunt is from Brazil, where the nuts come from, as the play keeps repeating. She’s not a bimbo, or a matron. She’s essentially a proud and feminine woman, with a touch of the exotic.’

‘But isn’t the audience supposed to know she’s in drag?’ Rena asked.

‘Exactly right. But there’s drag and there’s drag. This is the glamorous end of drag. Ian’s going to be sharing the joke with the audience and the boys who are in on it, but he has to be authentic to the rest of the cast.’

‘So you’re trying to make an impression with both the play and the spectacle.’

'You could say that. It's an old chestnut of a play but, to get people in, Melanie wanted something simple, with a twist. She knew I was free, and asked me to come and design for her. What do you think now?'

'I think these eye lashes are going to take some time to get used to,' Ian said.

'I think he looks fabulous,' Rena replied. 'I can't see much of Ian left. I don't know how you managed to do so much with so little effort.'

'It is my day job,' Lottie laughed. 'Special effects are usually far more complex, but we do have a couple of surprises left.'

'I can't wait,' Rena replied.

* * * * *

'And I want to try one more thing before we wash this off,' Lottie said. 'Come on, Ian. Let's get you home.'

'Home? I can't go through the streets like this!' Ian protested.

'Well, I'm not going to change you back, and you left the Ian wig at home. If you wash the makeup off, you'll look a bit strange, probably a bit effeminate and silly. If you simply walk back with me, we'll look like two girls together. What's it to be?'

'You win,' Ian sighed. 'But please make sure no one tries to pick me up.'

'Remember how I told you to dress to come here? This was why; so you could walk with me and not stand out.'

Thanking Rena, they left the salon and walked through the streets. The daylight had faded and the first streetlights were flickering on.

'It's easier than you thought,' Lottie said as they walked arm in arm.

'I hardly dare breathe! What if anyone should notice?'

‘They’d see two girls walking. Look around, there’s the sort of casual interest from men, but that’s everywhere a girl goes.’

‘Thanks so much. I was trying to avoid noticing that.’

‘Don’t worry, it doesn’t mean anything. It’s when they look away that you know there’s something wrong.’ Lottie squeezed his arm gently. ‘Come on, act the part. Head up, slink a bit as you walk, shoulders back, chest out.’

‘I don’t have a chest.’ Ian laughed.

‘Well, nobody’s perfect.’

They arrived at Ian’s block without incident. Ian put his key in the lock and turned the latch. Lottie was in before him, pulling him in and kissing him on the lips.

‘I knew I was going to do that as soon as I finished your makeup,’ she said, running her hand gently through his hair.

‘I thought you didn’t mix business with—’ Ian never finished the sentence as she kissed him again, harder this time. He felt himself responding. Sensing it, Lottie pulled back.

‘You reminded me of someone,’ Lottie said. ‘For a moment, I thought—well, I don’t know what I thought.’

‘You’re safe with me,’ Ian said. ‘I won’t bite.’

‘It’s not that.’ Lottie looked at him. ‘It took me back.’

‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘I will, on one condition. We don’t do it here.’

‘But where? I can’t go out like this.’

‘If you want to hear the story, you’ve no choice. No one will know or suspect. Trust me, a little touch-up here and there; a little padding and you’d pass for a girl anywhere. You’re already wearing earrings, but I think some heels rather than those trainers would be good.’

‘But where could we go?’ Ian felt panic rising. ‘They’ll know me anywhere.’



‘Of course, you’re the man about town, known in all the best places,’ Lottie teased him.

‘I’m just scared. Out there isn’t the stage.’

‘Come on, let’s get you ready. What about that little Italian place on the road out of town near where Mrs Casey lives? It’s good and the lighting is soft. You go get some other shoes and I’ll call ahead to make sure we get a decent table. It will look like girlfriends sharing a meal after work.’

‘I don’t know....’

‘I do. Let me freshen your makeup first, and then quite by chance, I happen to have some of the jewellery pieces for Donna Lucia too, so you can try them on. They’ll go with the accent.’

* * * * *

‘The butterflies in my stomach are buzzing like a wasp’s nest,’ Ian said an hour later as Lottie prised him out of her borrowed car.

‘Oh, come on, don’t be a wuss.’ She took his arm. ‘We’re girlfriends out to share a meal and secrets. Keep your voice low, remember all the things we said about body language, and just do it. Think of it as a dress rehearsal. You’re playing the part of my exotic girl friend from Brazil.’

‘Where the nuts come from.’ Ian took a deep breath and started to walk. ‘My boobs are jiggling and these huge hoops in my ears are making me very self-conscious.’

‘Hey, play the part, no rush. Small steps, elegance, remember.’ Lottie tugged his arm to slow him, and together they crossed the street to the trattoria.

Once inside, Lottie took over, and soon they were seated in a corner booth. The lights were low; Ian kept silent as an overly fussy waiter laid the table and lit a candle for them with a more-than-theatrical flourish.

‘See, no one’s noticed a thing,’ Lottie assured him.

‘Okay, you win.’ Ian tried once more to relax. ‘I wish my heart wasn’t thumping so hard.’

‘It isn’t.’ Lottie reached across the table and took his hand. She straightened Donna Lucia’s rings on his hand. ‘Your imagination is running wild.’

If there were to be any secrets revealed, they didn’t follow. Lottie ordered for them both, and that ate their pasta, sipped their frascati, and Ian listened as she told tales of past projects, famous actors, and quick visits to exotic locations for makeup and fittings on set. Most of her work was based in her workshop and hardly glamorous at all.

‘There’s something you’re not saying,’ Ian interrupted. ‘You’re talking a lot, but saying a little.’

‘Oh dear, am I that obvious?’ Lottie paused. ‘Okay, here goes. I told you that I don’t mix work and personal stuff, but that could be changing. I came here to get away from things for a while, and suddenly, here you are. I could keep my distance from Ian very easily, but Donna Lucia...

‘I don’t understand.’

‘It’s hard to explain, but you’ve been so good about all this, and I’m finding it difficult to deal with—no, I don’t mean difficult. Give me a minute; I don’t know what I mean.’

‘Take a deep breath and start again.’

‘Okay, here it is.’ Lottie looked him in the eye. ‘I’m not an easy person to get on with. I’ve had failed relationships with girls and boys. Looking at you, I find myself thinking that it may be time to give it another go, with a playmate, and maybe also a soulmate. There—now I’ve said it.’

‘But I look more like your *sister* than your *boy-friend!*’

‘Maybe that’s the attraction.’

Ian sat back and took a deep breath. ‘I need to think this through.’

‘No, there’s nothing to think through.’ Lottie poured more wine. ‘I like this version of you, and if you want to see where it takes us, maybe we could have something special.’

‘But where does Ian stand in all this?’

‘I think you should ask where Donna Lucia stands in all this. Ian is merely where she was coming from.’

‘I’m not sure I understand it all.’

‘Don’t try, just let it happen.’ Lottie took his hand and smiled. ‘But we have to get you a new name. Donna Lucia sounds like my maiden aunt.’

‘But she’s Charley’s Aunt.’

‘Precisely. That’s why we need a new name. Come on, play with me here. Are you a Lesley, Sue or Jane, or something else?’

‘Maybe I’m a Lucy.’ The words were out of his mouth before he had time to think.

‘That makes sense. Lucy it shall be.’ Lottie reached for his hand. ‘I’m sure we’re going to be good for each other, Lucy.’

* * * * *

‘I must say that this has been a terrible dress rehearsal when the main character hasn’t got his dress yet.’ Daniel Stone looked at his fellow cast members and then at Melanie with some disdain. The cast were assembled on stage, having changed and prepared for home.

‘Well, you know the old saying that a bad dress rehearsal guarantees a great show,’ Henry muttered drily.

‘And that propaganda is hauled out by its hind legs every time a dress rehearsal goes down the tubes!’ Daniel snorted. ‘Pah! As far as I’ve seen, an awful dress most often will mean an awful opening; a superb dress rehearsal is always preferable. It gives an impetus to what follows.’

‘Saint Genesius, the patron saint of actors, will see us through,’ Henry said with authority. ‘He’s kept us going this long.’

‘Never mind, Daniel.’ Melanie looked him in the eye. ‘At least we know that everyone knows their lines and

their timings, and it will be a little more exuberant when we have an audience tomorrow night.'

'I thought it went well, Daniel.' Courtney's voice faded as she realised he didn't appreciate her intervention. 'I'm sure we'll all do well tomorrow. Break a leg, everyone.'

'Right, everyone.' Melanie clapped her hands to stop the babble of conversation that was rising. 'I'm not going to say more tonight. I'll pass out a few notes tomorrow, but all in all, we're where we should be.'

'Except for Donna Lucia's costume.' Daniel had to have the last word.

'Lottie and Ian, can you come through to my office please.' Melanie ignored Daniel. After all, she knew things that he didn't.

'So tell me, did the costumes work?' Melanie asked as the door closed behind them.

'Yes, easily,' Lottie said. 'We worked out how much makeup to use for Babbs, and then how to alter it quickly for Donna Lucia. The secret is lots of black round the eyes, redder lips and of course the eye-lashes.'

'I'm sure they're so big they could be seen from the next town, never mind the back of the auditorium. When I blink, I'm never sure I can lift my eyelids again.' Ian smiled as he said it.

'Taking it off is a bigger problem.' Lottie said. 'What I'm going to do is to wipe the lips, and maybe leave the eyes, like a conspiracy with the audience. After all, the blonde hair will be covered by the dark wig, and the change and change back will be quicker that way.'

'And what about the breasts? They're such a part of the illusion.'

'Lucy's been wearing them all week.' Lottie said.

'Lucy?' Melanie looked at them both.

'It's my female name when I'm out of character,' Ian explained. 'Lottie says it makes things easier for her to remember who I am.'

'I'm sure she does.' Melanie looked meaningfully at Lottie, who smiled sweetly back.

'Anyway, Lucy has been very good all week,' Lottie said. 'She's stayed in character as much as possible, and that means heels, bras, panties stockings, makeup and lashes, the lot.

And she's got the walk, the mannerisms, and the accent perfectly. I can't wait to see it all come together tomorrow.'

'And are you wearing breasts now?' Melanie asked in surprise. 'I don't see them.'

'It's a sports bra, and a baggy sweatshirt, with a jacket over,' Lottie said. 'I made a longer-lasting prosthetic to ease the preparation time each day. Lucy's been wearing it for four days now.'

'It took some getting used to,' Ian said. 'Especially in the evenings. Going to bed in a sports bra and nightdress was a new experience. Waking up with breasts was really weird too, until I got used to the idea.'

'I think you were really great going along with it all,' Lottie said. 'I almost felt like I had a new girlfriend.'

* * * * *

The first-night crowd came in. The great and the good of the town were greeted by Harriet Casey and Marshall Hemming. Melanie was there too at the start, but quickly excused herself to go backstage. Lottie and Ian had been there since early afternoon, practising costume changes as they had practised in Ian's office, but now in the dressing room.

It was all before them. Melanie heard the call for beginners and whispered a silent prayer, and then retreated to the rear of the stalls where she could watch the play unfold. But she couldn't rest. First-night nerves always made her want to run and never do it again, but the lure of the theatre drew her back and back again.

She couldn't resist being there for the first transformation scene. The audience gasped as Ian stood there to take applause simply for his appearance. There was

nothing male about this lady. Donna Lucia was dressed in a dark crimson dress with a neckline that left little to the imagination, and cut in to a tight waist. She looked a cross between a rather sexy Marilyn and a haughty untouchable lady. She slinked across the stage in a way that was never rehearsed or thought of in the dry runs, turning and looking over her shoulder at the audience, winking, and waiting for their applause to die down, and then delivering her first lines in such a smouldering accent that even Melanie was transfixed.

It had to happen: Daniel fluffed his next lines as he watched Donna Lucia. The prompt could be heard as a ripple of laughter in the audience added to his discomfort.

From there the show progressed easily, through the next changes in the first and second acts, and the interval. Lottie made sure that Ian stayed apart from the rest of the cast in the break, and talked him through the next changes.

The third and final act contained all the revelations. Courtney, playing Ela, was so fluent and her scenes with Ian went so well that a little jealousy, or maybe anger, in Daniel's performance gave an extra edge to the show. For Ian's confession that he is a man and not Charlie's Aunt, he remained in full feminine finery, retaining the mannerisms and accent. He played it like a flirt, with a light touch, as he confessed his feelings to Ela.

At the final curtain, the cast took a bow and three curtain calls. Then there was such a buzz backstage, as Melanie and Lottie joined them. Lottie took Ian's hand and kissed him gently.

'Wonderful, wonderful, just wonderful!' Melanie said. 'It all went to time, the modern dress worked fine, and you did the theatre proud. Let's do it all again tomorrow, and the champagne's on me on Saturday when we finish the run.'

* * * * *

'Saturday already.' Marshall Hemming was in his office. He handed a glass to Daniel Stone. 'We're in danger of running into profit this season if bookings stay

as they are. There's talk of another week before the touring companies come in for the remainder of the season.'

'I know, and I'm pleased, although part of me wishes we could get our hands on the theatre and knock it down. There's a profit to be made in real estate in this town.'

'We'd never get permission. It's a heritage building, one of the oldest working theatres in this part of the country, and they've a generous backer in Harriet Casey. She's nothing else to do with her fortune and I believe she's left it all in trust to preserve the theatre.'

'So, short of a fortuitous fire, the building's there for all eternity.' Daniel tossed back his drink in one and held out the glass for another.

'Should you be drinking so much when you've a performance this evening?' Marshall asked.

'Call it Dutch courage.' Daniel gulped his second glass. 'To tell the truth, I didn't want to do this play, and I certainly didn't want to see that jumped-up stage hand turn into the star. He needs taking down a peg or two.'

'And how would you propose to do that?'

'Don't ask now, but don't watch me after the curtain falls this evening.' Daniel tapped the side of his nose, signalling secrecy.

* * * * *

'That was a wonderful performance,' Melanie told the assembled cast after the curtain had fallen and the audience had cleared. 'I've asked you all to stay because Mrs Casey has an announcement to make. Harriet, would you like to tell them now?'

'Well, firstly, let me congratulate you all. I think I've enjoyed it more each evening, and the good news is that we've been asked to do another week, but just for four performances. There's some work to be done before the next touring company are here, but there's time to fit it all in. I'm so pleased, the fortunes of this old place have really been boosted this week, and an-

other would be wonderful. Thank you all.' Harriet smiled and clapped as she stood down.

'And now, there's an early champagne supper for everyone.' Melanie announced. 'But be careful; don't forget next week's performances need to be sparkling too.'

The cast and everyone else in the theatre gathered round, drinking, chatting and circulating as one does at a party. Ian hadn't had time to change, and remained as Donna Lucia, giggling, flirting and generally staying in character as if it was natural to her. Even her gestures and those unconscious hair signals as she looked at anyone seemed to come so naturally.

'You've really changed.' Lottie pulled Ian away from a group of stagehands. 'Lucy has taken you over.'

'Do you mind, I'm Donna Lucia,' Ian replied, a little towards tipsy already.

'I rather like it.' Lottie gave him a quick kiss on the lips. 'Enjoy, and I'll see you in a few minutes.'

It may have been half an hour or more later when Lottie looked for him. She looked from group to group; she went to the dressing room, and into the auditorium. Then, feeling worried, she clapped her hands for attention. Everyone turned to look at her.

'Has anyone seen Ian?' she asked. 'He seems to have disappeared.'

'I think I saw him going towards the private boxes,' Harriet said. 'He was leaning on someone, a man. I thought he was just going for a little air after all the excitement.'

Lottie rushed from the stage and through the backstage door into the stairwell leading to the boxes, calling his name. The light was poor here. The first box was empty, and she was about to leave the second when a noise called her back. Ian was lying on the floor between the seats and the front of the box. He was breathing normally and seemed quite oblivious to his surroundings.

She slapped his face, and got an incoherent mumble. Turning him into recovery position, she called for help.

* * * * *

‘There’s nothing obviously wrong with him.’ The emergency doctor had examined Ian, and accompanied him home to see him settled, after tactfully getting rid of all the concerned onlookers.

‘He’s had a bit to drink,’ Lottie said.

The doctor felt his pulse once more and lifted his eyelid. ‘Does he do drugs?’ she asked. ‘I’ve taken a blood sample to check if there’s anything we need to know.’

‘No drugs as far as I know.’ Lottie looked puzzled. ‘Do you think that’s what it could be?’

‘I’m having some suspicions. He’s dressed in such a wonderful costume, yet it’s a little torn. Do you mind helping me to turn him over?’

Gently, the doctor started to raise the skirts of Ian’s dress. Suddenly she stopped and pointed to his panties.

‘I can’t imagine he tore that himself,’ Lottie gasped in shock.

‘No but someone else could have done so.’ The doctor reached for her bag, and took out some objects.

She put on surgical gloves, peeled the wrappers from her instruments, and took out a sample phial. Carefully she took some swabs and placed them safely to the side; then, unwrapping some larger disposable wipes, she cleaned up the tops of his thighs and up to his anus.

‘I hate to tell you this, but I think he’s had sex with someone, some man, and none too gently either.’ She wrapped her samples carefully. ‘He’ll probably have no memory of what happened if, as I suspect, he’s been given Rohypnol. It may be something to report to the police.’

‘Rohypnol?’ asked Lottie. ‘I don’t know what that is. Could he have taken it by mistake?’

‘Not likely, in my opinion.’ The doctor paused. ‘It’s the date rape drug.’



‘The poor thing!’ Lottie said in shock. ‘I should have been more careful, but it seemed such a friendly party. He can’t have been out of my sight for more than a few minutes—well, half an hour or so.’

‘It acts very quickly. It’s usually slipped into a drink, and the effect is clear for someone to see if they’ve administered it and they’re looking for the signs. You’ll have to talk to him tomorrow. He’ll sleep it off now, be a bit thick-headed when he wakes, but should be pretty normal after that, physically at least. Maybe you need to know who saw him leave the crowd. I’ll leave you to talk it out, but here’s my card, and I’ll store his soiled panties and the samples carefully in case you need them.’

‘In case I need them? I don’t understand.’

‘Evidence. There’s DNA in these samples.’

Lottie did her best to clean Ian and made him as comfortable as she could. She removed his clothing and left him naked under a cover, as she sat in the chair to watch over him through the night.

* * * * *

‘My head hurts,’ Ian groaned, as he woke slowly.

‘Don’t try to sit up.’ Lottie was immediately awake. ‘I’ll get you a drink.’

‘I feel like I’ve been hit by a train.’ Ian groaned again. ‘I didn’t have that much to drink, did I?’

‘What do you remember?’ Lottie asked gently.

‘I remember feeling so happy, and maybe I drank too quickly. You know how I’ve been this week; it’s as if Donna Lucia and Lucy have freed me from being dull old responsible Ian. I was giddy with it all, and then Daniel came to tell me that he’d been wrong to oppose the play and I was wonderful in my part. He didn’t even mind being upstaged because he knew I’d go on to better things.’

‘Did he give you a drink?’

‘Why, yes. He did, handed it to me most graciously, and raised his glass and drank it down in one. I did the

same and we laughed. It felt as if he wanted to make friends with me after all this time. I remember laughing at some joke he made. Then it all goes fuzzy.' Ian shifted to sit up.

'Ouch, I'm sore.' He wriggled as if to get comfortable, 'and I'm all wet down there, and it's a bit slimy too, running down my leg.'

Lottie handed him a towel. 'I can't put this any easier, I'm sorry, but I think you've been drugged and raped.'

'What? But—why don't I remember?'

'What don't you understand about being drugged?' Lottie asked. 'You probably won't remember anything, and didn't feel anything either.'

'I certainly feel sore now.' Ian answered.

'The doctor said you probably would. She spent some time examining you last night, and took all kinds of samples in case you wanted to call the police.'

'But I don't remember a thing.' Ian started to cry.

Lottie held him until the sobs stopped. 'I think you'd better sleep a little. I'll clean your makeup and help you settle.'

As Ian was falling in and out of sleep, Lottie cleaned his face, and removed his false boobs, cleaning the skin so that it could breathe for the first time in a few days. As they came away, she realised they could not be used again. Whoever had handled Ian so roughly, had also handled his prosthetics too roughly for them to be used again.

* * * * *

As Ian slept, Lottie and Melanie met in Harriet's house. Lottie swore them to secrecy and told them what she knew.

'I know it's awful, but what are we to do?' Harriet asked. 'We can't go on with the show next week.'

‘Don’t say that. Ian has a few things to think about,’ Lottie said. ‘It’s his decision in the end, and we’ve a few days before the next scheduled show on Wednesday.’

‘But we’ve nearly booked up.’ Harriet said. ‘Maybe we should be cancelling and giving money back—but I think it’s been a success, and goodness knows we need the money.’

‘Give it a couple of days. I think there’s more to our Donna Lucia that we know.’

Ian slept through Sunday. He shuffled about in the evening, barely communicating. Lottie didn’t attempt to open any conversation, just treating him gently as they sat together. When she judged it right, she led him into the bedroom, and got in beside him.

‘I still don’t know what happened,’ Ian said.

‘It doesn’t matter.’ Lottie held him closely. ‘Whatever it was, it’s slipping into the past, and it’s not something you willed upon yourself.’

‘I think I may have been acting a little too Donna Lucia, and not enough Ian. I should have changed, but I felt so comfortable as Donna Lucia and I was having such a buzz after the show.’

‘Hold onto the good memories.’ Lottie kissed him gently, suddenly surprised at how much she really wanted to be with him. ‘I’m here with you.’

Ian turned and kissed her again. ‘I’ve just realised that I’ve lost my boobs.’

‘You’re going back into them on Tuesday.’ Lottie replied. ‘I’ll have to use different ones, though. They were damaged in—whatever happened.’

‘Hush, I don’t want to think about it.’ Ian kissed her again as they twined into one another and, with a growing urgency, made love as if there were no cares in the world.

* * * * *

‘Did we really do all those things during the night?’ Ian said sleepily. ‘It’s the greatest cure for feeling bad in the world.’

‘And are you really feeling better?’

‘If you’re asking if I want to do the play this week, then *yes*. I’ve really loved it all, with the obvious exception—yet I’ve no memory of that, and there seems no lasting damage.’

‘I’m serious. There’s someone who was with us on Saturday night who did that to you. Are you sure you’re safe to go on?’

‘Yes, I’m sure it’s what I want. I’ve really loved it. From being a bit-part player, I’m suddenly getting a break.’

‘But you’re mostly playing a woman.’

‘Maybe that’s part of it too. I feel free and able to vamp it up. It’s fun, and it’s exciting to go out with you, still in character, and fool them all.’

‘You’ll not fool them again. The paper’s got reviews and pictures. Look, there’s Donna Lucia, and one of you in the background in this photo of an older production.’

‘But the review says it’s a success; let’s go with that. There’s no picture of Lucy there, so I guess she’s still free to go anywhere. But I don’t feel like Lucy any more. I’ve lost my shape and my hair’s a mess. Look at these roots.’ Ian scraped his hair back from his forehead to show dark roots under the blonde.

‘What a Diva!’ Lottie laughed. ‘We’ll do something about that right away.’

‘Can we do it quickly, please?’ Ian said softly. ‘I don’t want to lose my confidence.’

After a flurry of activity, Ian was once again lying across the bench whilst Lottie glued his breast prosthetic in place. She had him lie still as she inspected the seams, until she was satisfied that they were undetectable.

The salon was booked and Ian walked confidently through the street and into the brightly lit foyer. Lottie spoke to the receptionist.

‘I’ll collect you in a couple of hours; they’ll ring me when you’re ready.’

Ian was taken into the back and seated and draped, whilst two ladies fussed with his hair.

‘We both went to the show,’ one said. ‘We’re going again on Friday. You were lovely, and we so enjoyed it all.’

The stream of gossip and small talk continued as they worked, leaving his hair wrapped in tinfoil parcels whilst his nails were filed, shaped and extended.

‘I don’t remember this last week.’ Ian protested.

‘It’s all right,’ he was told. ‘Lottie told us what we have to do.’

Over two hours had elapsed when Lottie returned. ‘You look a dream!’ she said when she saw him.

‘I’m not sure that’s an appropriate greeting for a would-be leading man,’ Ian replied sternly, and then broke into a grin. ‘Can you believe how they’ve done my hair? I didn’t think it could have grown so much in a week. I know this style will get crushed with the wig I have to use on stage, but they’ve told me how to deal with that.’

‘It’s not a problem,’ Lottie replied.

‘If that’s not, then these are going to be.’ Ian held out his hands. ‘Look what they’ve done to my nails.’

‘They’re beautiful, quite feminine, just what you needed.’ Lottie examined the polish. ‘I love this deep oyster colour; it’s won’t show up too much on stage until you change into Donna Lucia.’

‘Surely that can’t be right.’

‘Oh, but it is. You don’t realise, but Donna Lucia seems to take you over. Everything is physical, you’re much more expressive. It’s as if a larger character has taken over from dull old Ian’s male character.’

‘So no one will notice.’

‘Not until Donna Lucia starts waving her hands, and making those big gestures.’

‘I didn’t realise that there was such a change. Melanie said nothing.’

‘That’s because she didn’t have to. It was almost as if putting on those rings and bangles made you more conscious of hands and arms, and your gestures shifted to fabulously feminine and confident. You honestly didn’t know you were doing that?’

‘I never thought of it. I let the character use the words and behaved as I felt it.’

‘Well, it worked. Now for somewhere to sit and talk with my girlfriend.’

‘Before we go, these breasts feel heavier than they did last week.’ Ian stood and fondled his fake chest. ‘They look perfect, but are you sure they’re the same size?’

‘They’re bigger,’ Lottie admitted. ‘They were all that I could fix given the time scale. I expected to be able to re-use the ones from last week. Don’t think about it, you’ll soon get used to how they feel.’

‘But I always get stared at—you know—down there, before anyone looks at my face.’

‘Welcome to womanhood.’ Lottie laughed. ‘It’s what we girls get every day.’

‘I’m not complaining. It’s been fun being the centre of attention, you know, the star instead of the extra.’

‘Even though you’re acting as a woman most of the time?’

‘Yes, it really is liberating. It’s like I’ve left dull old Ian behind and turned into Donna Lucia on the stage. I don’t feel anything like her male alter ego, strutting round. It feels unnatural. And I like being Lucy too.’

‘Don’t get too carried away; there’s always next week.’

‘Don’t I know it?’ Ian said. ‘I can’t see me getting lead roles in the future. You’re going back to the city, and I’ll just fade away into computer services once again. Maybe they’ll let me sweep the stage.’

‘There may be a way for you to stay on the stage,’ Lottie said out of the blue. ‘I’ve been a design consultant for a company, and they’re casting soon for a tour, which may get a run in the city.’

‘So where do I fit in?’

‘Leave it with me. I’ll speak to the casting director.’

And they sat and talked, of all kind of inconsequential things, Lottie carefully guiding the conversation so that she gathered Ian’s thoughts for her next step.

* * * * *

‘That was a good performance all round,’ Melanie said after the cast had taken their final bow on the Wednesday of the second week. ‘A longer run must suit you all.’

‘But some of us will be happier when this one is over,’ Daniel sneered. ‘It’s a waste of our talents. We have a fine leading lady in Courtney here—and she’s upstaged by a third-rate drag act! It may be bringing in some money, but it’s not proper theatre.’

‘Daniel, I know how you feel. It’s low comedy, but it pays the bills.’

‘But there must be a better way,’ Daniel said. ‘I’m not doing anything like this again.’

‘It’s only three more performances, and then it’s over anyway,’ Lottie interrupted. ‘I think you can manage that. After all, you were really warmly applauded and got decent reviews.’

With that and a few murmurings, the cast broke up.

And it was a success. The local paper review got syndicated, which was unusual in itself, but then the box office got more calls, more reservations. Ian lapped it up, becoming more confident as the next performance approached. On Tuesday there had been a full dress rehearsal, so Ian had to be ready early.

‘I do wish this could go on longer,’ he said with a sigh.

‘I think I have some news.’ Lottie fussed around as Ian removed Donna Lucia’s costume and sat at the mirror, quite unconsciously and naturally, in bra and panties.

‘Just let me get ready and you can tell me all about it,’ Ian said as he first removed his heavy stage makeup and then set about applying street make up. After that, it wasn’t Ian who turned to her, it was Lucy.

Lottie helped him into a short black dress, and pulled the zip up the back. She fussed a little getting the neckline where she wanted it, with a little cleavage showing. Ian tugged it a little higher, which got him a look of disapproval. She fastened black platform heels onto his feet.

‘There.’ She stood back to look at the overall effect. ‘I think I can take you to dinner now that you look respectable.’

They walked out through the stage door and into the street. Ian’s confidence was high, and it showed in the way he held himself, with his clutch bag in one arm, and his other arm linking with Lottie.

‘I think you’ve done this deliberately,’ Ian whispered as they walked towards the restaurant.

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ Lottie replied innocently.

‘Yes, you do. I’m the more glamorous here. I’m getting the stares and the looks. I know it’s not because I’m being read. It’s the women as well as the men. I’ll have to get used to being ordinary again next week.’

‘How would you feel about leaving all this and trying for a career in the theatre professionally?’

‘I’d jump at the chance, but there’s not much call for slightly built actors who are shorter than most of the leading ladies.’

‘Have you seen *La Cage aux Folles* on the stage? The musical, not the original play?’

‘No, but I saw the film and the American remake. It was a wonderfully silly plot, but I know it’s run as a musical for ages.’

‘And how would you feel about staying feminine for a little longer if you could get a part in a new production?’

‘I don’t want to be a drag queen in a chorus, if that’s what you mean.’

‘No, that’s not the idea. I sent some photos and a bit of video from my phone to the casting director. I told them about Ian, and Lucy and Donna Lucia.’

‘So why would they be interested? It’s not as if I’ve done anything professionally.’

‘Don’t be negative. I’ve got an interview and a reading for you the week after we finish here. Of course, you’ll have to remain in character as Lucy. It’s her they want to see, and the part they’re considering is Albin.’

‘Albin? Isn’t that the gay woman who’s at the centre of the play? He lives with Georges, who runs a drag show. I didn’t mean gay woman, but you know what I mean. It’s a big part, but I don’t know anything about being gay.’

‘It’s called acting, dear. It’s what you’ve been doing all week. You didn’t know about being a woman until this part came along, and now look how easily you slip into being Lucy.’

‘That’s true,’ Ian admitted. ‘But Albin? That’s a big part, aren’t I too young?’

‘Not for this production. They want glamour above all, and whilst you may be too young to pretend to be Jean-Michel’s mother, the idea is that you’re his step-mother. Father has taken a younger second wife—well at least, as far as his fiancée’s parents are concerned.’

‘And Jean-Michel knows that Albin is his father’s partner, even though the age is little more than his own?’

‘Of course. I think it’s a great idea because it allows more ambiguity; it gives an extra *frisson* in the scenes between Albin and Jean-Michel too. But I may be forgetting something. Have you ever been in a musical before?’

‘Yes, we did *A Chorus Line* a couple of seasons ago. I took dance and singing lessons for that. I didn’t get a decent part, but I was understudy to all the male leads. I had all the dance routines to learn, and I rather enjoyed the dancing part.’

‘But did you dance in heels?’

‘Of course not, but I bet I could now.’ Ian twirled around, and curtsied gracefully, as they arrived in the restaurant foyer. ‘And backwards in heels too.’

‘If you’re sure that’s what you want, I’ll ask. It may be harder work than you think, though.’

‘It’s a dream, though: getting away from continual disappointment that I don’t get better roles here. If I try and fail, it’s better than wondering what might have been, if I do nothing!’

* * * * *

‘Oh that was so beautiful.’ Harriet said over and over again at the last night’s party. ‘Donna Lucia, you were the most beautiful actress we’ve had this season. I’m so pleased you stayed in character to come to the party.’

‘Thanks a bunch,’ Courtney muttered to Daniel as they stood on the edge of the gathering assembled in the restaurant.

‘I bet Ian’s forgotten how to act out of drag.’ Daniel whispered into her ear. ‘I can’t see him getting another role here.’

‘I don’t think you’ve made many friends in the company, dear boy,’ said Henry, still in costume as the butler. ‘I hear they tried something on with you last week.’

‘I’ll not ask what you heard,’ Ian replied, whispering once more. ‘You might want to let slip that the doctor has samples if I want to go to the police.’

‘And why haven’t you done so?’ asked Henry.

‘I truly don’t remember what or who did it. I was a bit sore, and I haven’t really worked out how I feel about it all. I didn’t want it to spoil the last week though. The show seemed more important than me.’

‘But I believe it was rape,’ Henry said.

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ Ian closed the subject. ‘Just let them know....’

'I'll follow your feelings then,' Henry replied. 'And I must say that if I didn't know it was you under that Donna Lucia costume, and of course if I were thirty years younger, I'd have been tempted myself.'

'If you were thirty years younger, I might be tempted to let you,' Ian replied in Donna Lucia's voice, looking at him coquettishly. 'And think what a scandal *that* could have caused!'

'Has Ian told you the news?' Lottie joined them. 'He's going to audition for a professional role on *La cage* next week.'

'I thought once you'd discovered drag, you'd never be able to leave it alone,' Henry said. 'You've certainly got all the mannerisms and style to carry it off anywhere, on or off the stage.'

'It was never my intention...' Ian started.

'I knew he could do it,' Lottie interrupted. 'See how he played this week, even though I fitted him with bigger boobs that he expected.'

'I wish you luck,' Henry bowed to take his leave. 'This lot will never forgive you, though, but I'm so pleased.'

* * * * *

'What do you mean?' Ian asked on Monday morning. 'I was expecting that you'd be removing these breasts and I'd be back to normal.'

'Breasts are normal. Lots of people have them.'

'You know very well what I mean.'

'I know very well,' Lottie said, 'that you have to stay female and go to see the producers in character. I pulled a lot of strings to get you this chance, and you're not messing it up. They're expecting a glamorous female impersonator, and that's what they're going to see.'

'But I thought the part was for a guy!' Ian protested.

'Yes, of course. But a certain sort of guy—one who looks good in skirts and heels.'

‘But surely I don’t need to stay female all the time. The audition isn’t until later in the week.’

‘Of course you do. It’s on Friday, and I want you to breeze in as if you’ve been wearing heels all your life. Completely natural is the idea.’

‘But isn’t Albin just meant to be a sort of effeminate man who dresses up?’

‘He may have been played that way in past productions, but they want a more believable feminine approach in this production. The joke is going to be how feminine Albin can be, and his effect on Charles’ son’s future father-in-law.’

‘But I have work to do this week.’

‘It’s not as if anyone will notice. You work alone, and no one’s going to know if the hand working the keyboard is male or female.’

‘And if someone calls into the office?’

‘They you’re Ian’s new secretary. Vamp it and charm them.’

‘But how do I work with these talons?’ Ian held out his hand, still elegantly manicured.

‘Just do it. Lots of girls manage, and there’s no reason why you shouldn’t. Use the balls of your fingers, rather than the tips. There’s always the spelling checker if you get it wrong.’

‘Not when I’m writing a programme. I have to be accurate.’

‘So be accurate. I’ve worked so hard to get this audition through, it’s your big chance, so don’t spoil it.’

‘I’m not sure I want my big chance to be in a dress, heels and makeup.’

‘No? You’d rather stay here, with bit parts, and grow old thinking of what might have been?’

‘Okay.’ Ian relented. ‘Female it is.’ He flicked his hair and pouted, then laughed.

Lottie laughed too. ‘Who knows, you may snare a rich husband, and never have to work again.’

‘Ugh. Don’t even joke about it. I’ve been raped once, and it isn’t something I want to repeat.’

‘One bad experience isn’t a lifetime, Ian. Good experiences are where you find them; don’t shut off your mind to whatever comes.’

‘To tell the truth, I don’t really remember much about it. I guess it’s escaped my mind anyway.’

‘It took a good girlfriend to make me realise all I was missing. I know we nearly had a fling, but that would have spoiled everything. This way we can keep working together.’

‘I think I understand that. Am I to stay Lucy, or should I adopt something more exotic?’

‘No Lucy Morgan sounds authentic enough for the billing, unless you want it to be Ian instead, to emphasise that you’re male under the makeup.’

‘I hadn’t thought of it quite like that. I think Lucy, but don’t ask me why.’

‘So, Lucy, I’ll leave you to work until it’s time to get you ready. Don’t forget, full makeup and heels all week. Lashes, and dress it up in the evenings. Imagine you’re still playing a part all the time.’

* * * * *

‘There’s a car coming for us at ten in the morning,’ Lottie announced. ‘We’re meeting the producer and director for late lunch, and then they want you to do some private readings with the director.’

‘So what do I have to do?’

‘Everything, really. Your salon appointment is this afternoon, and again at eight in the morning to make sure that not a hair is out of place.’

‘Why this afternoon?’

‘I’ve been thinking about that. I decided you need more hair, so you’re having extensions, and your roots done. Don’t complain, but you’re having killer nails and permanent eyelash extensions as well.’

‘Aren’t these killer nails already?’ Ian held out his hands.

‘No. And you’ll enjoy the salon, all that pampering. It’ll make you feel really feminine.’

‘But they know who I am.’

‘All the more reason to enjoy the feelings. They’re really excited for you.’

‘You’ve told them?’

‘Only that you have a big audition.’

‘I’ll be there forever.’

It will be a long afternoon, and of course, when you get back, I’ve a new set of breasts to fit. I’ve been ever so careful with these, and I’m sure they’ll look really impressive, even close up.’

‘How do I get rid of all this after the audition?’

‘You won’t need to if all goes as well as I expect. I’m going to need a production line to keep you in breasts. You’ll be full time in rehearsal, and all that entails; the costumes and hair, the dialogue rehearsals, the dance classes. You may not be coming back to computer work here.’

‘I’m scared,’ Ian admitted. ‘I don’t know if I really want to be masquerading as a female all the time. How do I get a date?’

‘How did you get a date before?’

‘Okay.’ Ian sighed. ‘You got me there. I never was a success. Maybe I was too serious about acting?’

‘Or maybe a computer geek wasn’t an attractive proposition. I know you’re a nice guy, but believe me, if you get this part, there’ll be dates galore and parties and a whole theatrical circle of real friends. It’ll be the greatest fun. Just keep your courage.’

‘I guess you’re right.’ Ian smiled. ‘You’re the boss.’

Ian was in the salon from early afternoon to beyond closing. It seemed as if he was being treated as a special customer, with all the girls taking time to chat, even if they didn’t know where he was going. Many of

them had seen *Charley's Aunt*. There was a little glamour by association with the star of the show.

Nothing was left to chance. Pedicure was followed by manicure; nail extensions longer and redder than ever before, with gentle points rather than straight across as before. Ian looked at his fingers with scepticism.

'How do I do anything with these?' He asked.

'You do everything with them easily.' The girls showed him their nails. 'You'll find they're natural in a day or so.'

As this was going on, his hair was being treated: strands were lifted and sectioned, colour brushed into each division covering the re-growth from the roots. Swatches of hair were brought and compared, straight and luxuriant. After his hair had been washed, coloured and dried, there began the process of attaching them in smaller swatches.

Progress was slow, with Ian feeling new sensations as his hair grew heavier. Slowly strands of the new length were draped over his shoulders, and still the process continued from the top of his head, over his ears, round the back and down to the nape of his neck. This blonde was special, flowing and rippling as the hairdressers' hands shifted it and added strand after strand.

They took a break, excusing themselves as their hands needed to rest. Ian wasn't allowed any rest, though; he changed to another chair, where he was reclined whilst two girls started on his eyelashes, one at each side. On and on they worked, slowly and methodically. After what seemed to be ages, Ian was returned to the hairdresser's chair and the expansions started again. Eventually, Lottie appeared and it was over.

'No makeup?' Ian asked. 'I feel quite naked.'

His hair swished and swung across his shoulders, and when he approached the mirror, his new eyelashes looked full and lush against his skin.

'That's all for the morning,' Lottie told him. 'You're here very early and everything has to be exactly right. You only have one chance to get this right.'

* * * * *

Ian was in a daze as he went from salon to car. It had all been such a rush, and yet so organised. His makeup was far too elaborate for the day, yet it looked so simple. The contouring made his features so soft and feminine once more. The hair, artfully arranged in a loose yet firm bun, looked as if it was about to tumble into a waterfall of blonde at any moment. And his eyelashes were so long and heavy with mascara.

He shrugged his dress higher. He'd thought it fine when Lottie presented it, but now it seemed a little too tight, a little too low-cut, a little too informal for the day's meetings. It was too late to change now. And were these heels a little too high for comfort?

'I should be used to this,' Ian thought, trying deep breaths to settle the butterflies flapping in his stomach. He picked up his handbag and once again took the mirror. He touched up his lipstick, pale and shiny, lips outlined to make them look bigger than they had ever looked before.

Sensing his nervousness, Lottie tried to make some conversation. After getting only monosyllabic responses, she sighed and settled back to watch the road pass by.

The car turned into a private drive, winding through watered lawns to a single-storey house, with high columns supporting a portico that screamed opulence. The chauffeur's screen came down silently. 'Welcome to Mr Cameron's home,' he said.

He got out and proffered his hand; Ian stepped out of the car. Lottie followed, and together they walked up four steps to the raised area around the door. There a lady in beige, holding a clipboard, gave them a welcoming smile. 'You must be Lucy Morgan,' she said, offering her hand to shake. 'And Lottie Baxter, welcome again. Mr Cameron is in the conservatory and asks that you join him there.'

Mr Cameron appeared to be the epitome of a genial theatre producer, dressed casually in a background that stressed his success. 'I'm hoping that my son will be with us soon,' he said. 'He's going to direct this production, and I know that he's been to see your last pro-

duction twice. He's told me that you seem ideal for Albin.'

'That's very kind, sir,' Ian replied nervously. 'I hope I don't disappoint him in the flesh.'

'I'm sure you won't, my dear.' He moved to indicate that they should move into an area with a table set for lunch. 'I know you have to meet with our costume director, Lottie. The car will take you through; meanwhile I'm sure Lucy will be able to join me for lunch.'

'Er—right,' said Lottie, realising that she had been dismissed. 'I'll see you later.'

'I'm sure Steve will be with us soon,' Mr Cameron said after Lottie had left. 'I can only apologise. He must have been held up at the theatre. But come, my dear, you can tell me all about yourself whilst we wait.'

* * * * *

It was nerve-wracking. Mr Cameron appeared to have had Lucy's life, and Ian's, thoroughly researched. There was little he didn't know, and although his questioning was gentle, it was carefully directed.

'And how do you feel about taking this extraordinary role for an extended period?' he asked.

'I'm really excited by it all.' Ian heard himself, and mentally kicked himself for sounding too trite.

'Steve has some radical ideas for this production. I think our modern audiences will love it.'

Ian was beginning to feel uncomfortable when Steve arrived in a flurry of motion and papers, laptop falling towards the hard floor when Ian caught it.

'Phew. That was close. All my notes and photographs are there.' He collected them more carefully. 'You're Lucy; I'm so pleased you could come.'

He hugged Lucy naturally and genuinely, air-kissing both cheeks. 'I must say, you're as lovely in the flesh as I hope.'

'Thank you.' Ian blushed. Lucy wasn't used to male compliments.

'I saw you twice as Donna Lucia.' Steve continued. 'I know you'd be right for me, well, I mean our production, but I do need you to read and take a few costume tests. You're familiar with the basic storyline?'

'Yes, but it calls for Albin as an aging drag star.'

'True, but in this production, she's going to be young and fabulous. That's where you come in. Albin's alter ego, Zaza, is going to be flamboyant in the night club scenes, but in a feminine flamboyance, not an exaggerated drag way. The bit where all Albin's drag dresses are removed can stay in, because Albin is really feminine in this production, not over the top.'

'But how do you overcome the Uncle Al bit in scene two?'

'We substitute Aunt Alice. He's stepmother to Jean-Michel, despite being not much older. She's elegant and confident, and in the 'Chez Jacqueline' scene when Albin is persuaded to perform a song, Albin will reveal himself as a female impersonator, but won't be pulling off a wig to show a bald head. We've still a little work to do on that scene.'

'So Jean-Michel's future parents-in-law are right-wing bigots. They're in a sticky situation when their daughter refuses to give up Jean Michel, and they have to hide in the drag review to avoid being shown up in the press with Albin and George who are known as gay activists.'

'That's easy. We dress them in the most flamboyant of drag outfits; put them in the chorus, where they fail to co-ordinate with all the routines. They escape with the cast, and the young lovers, leaving Georges and Albin to the grand finale rather than the low-key ending in some productions. I think that's where you're at your most glamorous. I want the audience to gasp when they see you there.'

'You seem to have it all worked out.'

'Yes, I have. What the public need is a spectacle, maybe a fairy story, with a happy ending. They want music and old-fashioned glamour, and if it's telling a tale of toleration and acceptance of people's lifestyles, then that's good too.'

‘Wow, I hope you’re going to pick me for the part!’ Ian gasped and then blushed. ‘I’m sorry; I shouldn’t have said that before you’ve made up your mind.’

‘I think I’m pretty sure.’ Steve took Ian’s hand and looked at it, turning it over as he spoke. ‘We have to listen to you read, and do a couple of costume tests, but I’m hoping you’ll be with me—er, with us when the production opens.’

* * * * *

‘I’ve been working so hard.’ Ian said as Lottie fussed around him. ‘I don’t know if I can take time out to have dinner with Steve.’

‘You can and you will.’ Lottie said. ‘I’m having some trouble keeping up with your need for these breast forms, and as these are new, you don’t want to waste them.’

‘Waste them?’ Ian said. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean that you need a gentleman to appreciate how good they look.’ Lottie laughed, and then held up a dark red dress and black one. ‘Which do you think?’

‘The red.’ Ian said immediately. ‘It’s such a floaty skirt, and the bodice will cling so closely.’

‘Okay, and you didn’t notice that it was lower cut so that he could see more.’ Lottie smiled to herself. ‘You’re quite the diva already.’

‘Oh, no; don’t say that!’ Ian replied, as he touched up his mascara, squinting into the hand held mirror. ‘I’m scared, I don’t know what he expects, and I don’t know how I feel about what I think he might expect.’

‘Can you try that again in English?’

‘You know what I mean. I owe him so much. I’ve got this dream part, and I love all the rehearsals. I’m a little worried about the opening night; after all, the audience have to judge me and the show. I’ve this wonderful apartment and a car whenever I need it. I feel like a kept woman—except that I’m not a woman. Arrgh, I’m so confused; I don’t know what to say.’

‘Don’t say anything. Just go and have a wonderful date with Steve.’

‘Is that it?’ Ian looked up. ‘Is this a date? What am I expected to do?’

‘I’m sure there’s not an answer to that. Stop over thinking it all. You go, you enjoy yourself, and you relax. Steve will be good company, and a gentleman in everything. It’s like he’s been treating you with kid gloves all along. He’s not going to change into a monster.’

The door buzzed and Steve was there, red roses held out and accepted with another blush, and then they were in the car and on the way to a restaurant. Steve had chosen one on the estuary, with river views and a band softly playing a Latin style in the background as they took their seats.

‘How am I doing?’ Ian asked.

‘I couldn’t ask for a better leading lady. You’ve charmed the rest of the cast, you’ve worked harder than any of them, and you’ve never given less than your all. I’m so pleased.’

‘You say that as if there’s something with a big BUT coming.’ Ian spoke before he thought what to say.

‘If you want a BUT, then I’ll give you a gentle one. It’s your breasts.’

‘They’re glued on, I know. I can’t grow a pair.’

‘Hush, hush. That wasn’t a criticism, but I’ve been talking to Lottie and she can’t keep up. She’s worried your skin underneath may be irritated too much, and she’s worried that the dancing may cause them to, er—drift.’

‘She’s never said anything to me.’

‘Okay, I didn’t mean to upset you.’ Steve poured wine into Ian’s glass. ‘Have you considered getting implants?’

‘No—I don’t know what you’re suggesting. I’m not an actress, I’m an actor.’

‘An actor who plays a part beautifully.’ Steve tried to lighten the atmosphere. ‘I mean that if you did consider it, then the company would pay, and of course, you could have them removed when the run ends. It would give great publicity to the show, and I’m sure it would make life easier for you.’

‘I don’t know what to say.’ Ian avoided Steve’s eye.

‘Just think about it. You’ve been dressed as a girl for the past few weeks; you’ve never expressed any intention to dress as a boy. It’s a natural thing to consider. If I’m honest, I don’t want you to dress as a boy anyway.’

‘Please don’t say that. I’m not a girl. I was attacked because I looked and acted like one.’

‘No one’s going to attack you here, or in my production.’

‘Okay, I guess I over reacted. But now can we drop the subject, please?’

* * * * *

‘How was your date?’ Lottie asked next morning.

‘It was really dreamy. The restaurant was lovely and everything was so perforce. You were right, and I was wrong to worry so much. Steve was the perfect gentleman.’

‘So there’s nothing to worry about.’

‘Well there was one thing,’ Ian said slowly. ‘He said you’d been talking and that you were worried about how secure my breasts would be with all the dancing.’

‘That’s true. They’re the best that I’ve made, but given the dancing in the show, and all the need for them to be perfect, I do anticipate a problem.’

‘But Steve suggested *implants*.’ Ian’s shock showed on his face as he spoke. ‘That would mean that I’d *always* have breasts.’

‘Let’s just consider where we are, my dear,’ Lottie said slowly. ‘This is a day off, and I’ve come to take you for coffee and a catch up.’

‘Yes. I really do need you to be a friend.’ Ian grasped her hand.

‘And when I arrived, you were ready.’

‘Sure.’

‘And your makeup is perfect, you’ve put on lashes. Your dress is perfectly in fashion, your shoes and bag are matching, and I can smell that wonderful perfume from here.’ Lottie said. ‘You’re wearing the breasts I made for you. So what’s the difference if you had implants? It’s not like you’re dressing so macho on your days off.’

‘Am I really that used to being feminine?’ Ian asked. ‘It’s true, really. I never thought of jeans and a shirt today. I wanted to dress up nice and be girlfriends with you. It all seemed so natural.’

‘And you look wonderful. Your eyes are confident, your walk is confident. No one could mistake you for some boy.’

‘I need to think things through, don’t I?’ Ian shrugged. ‘Let’s go and get coffee. I’ll think later.’

‘Don’t think too much, just follow your instinct.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know where it may lead.’

‘But are you seeing him again?’

‘He’s taking me to a concert on Sunday and then for drinks with the sponsors.’ Ian replied. ‘I’m going to need you to make sure I don’t let him down.’

Lottie smiled. ‘He must be keen.’

‘He’s really kind, but I don’t know why. He knows I’m only a boy in makeup.’

‘And have you never thought that it could be the main attraction?’ Lottie asked.

‘You don’t mean....’

‘I do mean...’ Lottie smiled. ‘Don’t throw away a good friend who wants to be on your side.’

‘I hadn’t thought about it like that.’

* * * * *

The week's rehearsals were hard. Lines were blocked and perfected, stage moves practised until they were perfect. Ian had never worked so hard in rehearsal before, but he loved the challenge. He determined to be as good as those who had been in the profession far longer than he.

The thing they feared did come to pass: the breast forms Ian was wearing became insecure. Lottie could see something was wrong by the expression on his face.

'I could feel something as we went into the tap routine,' Ian said.

Lottie ran her hand under the shoulder strap of the practise dress he was wearing. 'We need to go to and see to this.' She signalled to the director, and they left the stage.

'I think it must be the perspiration,' Ian gasped, flopping into a chair in his dressing room, and kicked off his heels, resting and getting his breath back after the energetic routine. 'Is there no waterproof adhesive you could use?'

'That is the waterproof adhesive. It's surgical strength, and the best we have. Keep still and I'll make some repairs.'

The bell rang after a few minutes, and Ian stood to return to the stage. 'That feels secure now,' he said.

* * * * *

'How's my girl?' Steve breezed into the apartment, handing roses to Lottie.

'He's going to be down in a moment,' she replied, emphasising the 'HE' part. She dropped her voice. 'Be careful, Steve. I don't think he knows what he feels right now.'

'But doesn't the producer always get to seduce the leading lady?' Steve asked.

‘I hope you’re joking.’ Lottie replied. ‘He’s a good kid. A little bewildered with all the things happening right now, but underneath, he’s gentle and good-hearted.’

‘Don’t worry.’ Steve looked serious. ‘I’ve kissed so many frogs; I’m not going to mess up when I get a chance with a real princess.’

‘Hi, Steve.’ Ian entered, dressed in a simple black dress, straight and floor-length, with a plain necklace dropping into a scooped neckline, black heels showing as he walked elegantly across the room. His eyes were smoky with long black mascaraed lashes; his nails, deep red and their now usual extravagant length. He wore plain earrings which dangled from his lobes and shimmered as he moved. He hugged and air-kissed Steve as friends do, two silver bangles jingling on his left wrist.

Steve held onto his hand as Lottie wrapped a black pashmina around Ian’s shoulders. They walked to the elevator silently, with a pleasant air of tension between them, and then to the waiting limousine at the door.

Once in the concert hall, Steve was swiftly greeted by acquaintances and friends. Ian was introduced as Lucy, and the more people he met, the more nervous he became. Steve must have sensed it all, because Ian was steered away from the crowds and into a private box, where chilled champagne awaited them. Steve popped the cork quite ostentatiously, and as it flew towards the stage, they both laughed. The tension was broken.

‘Won’t they all be wondering who you’ve brought to the concert?’ Ian asked.

‘Sure they will. They’ll all know I’ve brought Lucy, who’s the most beautiful woman here tonight.’

‘Aren’t you afraid they’ll find out who Lucy really is? I’d hate your reputation to be spoiled.’

‘Let them think what they will. They won’t be anything but pleasant to us, wherever we go and whoever we meet. I think they’ve all given up on trying to marry their daughters off to me anyway.’

Ian relaxed as the music started. Steve seemed genuinely surprised that he knew Bach and Beethoven,

and even more surprised at the look of real enjoyment as the orchestra played on. Ian hesitated for just a moment as Steve took him backstage after the final encore, hanging back as Steve chatted effortlessly to the conductor and the soloists, and smiling graciously as he was introduced. The conductor kissed his hand.

Steve helped him into his wrap as they walked the short distance from concert hall to late night restaurant, where more champagne awaited them.

‘I thought your rehearsals were wonderful this week.’ Steve kissed Ian’s hand and held on, sitting closely around their table.

‘I’m so pleased.’ Ian replied. ‘Everyone has been so helpful. I was afraid there would be jealousy and backbiting, but there’s nothing but love.’

‘It’s so good to see a show coming together like this.’ Steve held on to Ian. ‘I’ve done it so many times, but this one has a really special feeling.’

‘My instinct tells me that you’re going to say that’s because I’m in it.’ Ian laughed.

‘Of course, my dear.’ Steve replied. ‘And the producer always seduces the leading lady.’

‘Is that what this is?’ Ian was suddenly serious. ‘Is that what you’re doing?’

‘No—I mean yes.’ Steve blushed – a really rare occurrence. ‘I’m not usually the one to seduce the leading lady. I leave that to the directors, but with you—yes, I am trying to seduce you. Does it upset you?’

‘You know I’m just an illusion.’ Ian replied.

‘And a very desirable one.’ Steve edged closer. ‘I’ve never wanted anything so much as to be successful with you.’

‘I don’t know what to say.’ Ian blushed.

‘Don’t say anything, let’s eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow, or soon afterwards, we face the critics.’

They ate little, making small talk. Ian consciously decided simply to let it happen, and not to think too

deeply. Steve for his part, was charming and as he promised, as seductive as he could be. In the limousine on their way to Ian's apartment, he put his arm round him, and held him closely. Ian could feel his hand caressing his false breast, and decided to ignore it. He rather liked the feeling of being the centre of someone's attention.

'I suppose I should ask you up for coffee?' Ian said softly as they arrived.

'Yes, you should, and I will accept.' Steve replied. 'I don't really want this evening to end. It's been magical for me.'

'Don't get carried away.' Ian said. 'Remember what's underneath all this makeup and finery.'

'I do.' Steve laughed. 'Why do you think I'm coming up for coffee?'

There was a note from Lottie when they entered the apartment. She'd gone out on a date of her own with an old girlfriend. Ian silently thanked her and wished her well.

Ian went into the kitchen and started to fill the coffee percolator. Steve followed, put his arms around Ian, and kissed the back of his neck.

'Hey,' Ian protested, turning into his embrace, 'you'll never get coffee if you don't let me get on with it.'

Steve kissed him full on the mouth, holding him more tightly. The kiss was gentle, and he broke it, backed away and they looked into each other's eyes. They kissed again, harder this time. When they broke, Steve was kissing and kissing, nibbling at lips and neck, ears and eyebrows. They kissed again, and in unspoken consent went into the lounge and fell together onto the couch.

Ian could never tell how he got out of his dress. He heard the zipper as it was released down his back, and kicked off his heels as the dress fell to the floor. Suddenly, he was in bra and panties, and feeling both excited and vulnerable.

'I'm scared, Steve,' he said softly as he saw the bulge in Steve's pants.

'I'm not going to hurt you,' Steve said. 'I know what happened to you, but that was then, this is now. You're with someone who wants you, not someone who wants to humiliate you.'

'I think I know that.' Ian touched Steve's pants, feeling the urgency underneath. 'But I'm still scared.'

'Don't be afraid.' Steve took Ian's hand and placed it inside his pants. 'There's nothing scary about wanting something or wanting someone.'

Ian's hand seemed detached from his body as he watched it wrap itself around Steve's penis, feeling it grow as his fingers explored from base to tip.

Instinctively, Ian reached forwards and kissed the tip. He knew what he was doing, knew perhaps that he shouldn't be doing this, but still he drew closer with his lips. He kissed the tip again, and then swirled his tongue around the tip. He heard Steve moan softly.

A thought flashed through Ian's mind: 'Stop or it's too late.' It flashed by, and he swirled his tongue around the tip again and then wrapped his lips around the top. He could taste something slightly salty, not unpleasant, but something he'd never tasted before.

There was a new urgency in Steve's breathing, and his hands gently took the back of Ian's head, pulling him further and further onto the shaft.

Ian's thoughts again registered what was happening, but the moment took over and he allowed Steve to thrust deeper, and deeper. He sucked at each thrust, and then he could feel the shaft stiffening and expanding. Suddenly he could feel a spasm, then another, and liquid filled his mouth, he gagged and swallowed, then again and again. He allowed his mind to be carried away in Steve's thrusting, pulsing, pumping energy.

Then it slowed and stopped. The spasms faded, the emission disappeared. The shaft softened and limply withdrew from Ian's throat. They fell together into an embrace on the couch. Steve's breathing seemed soothing as Ian laid his head on his chest. He felt Steve's arm enfolding him. The taste at the back of Ian's throat impinged on his thoughts. He realised what he had done, and done willingly.

‘I think you’d better go,’ he said to Steve, who allowed him to push himself up. He sat at the end of the couch.

‘I didn’t mean for that to happen, if you didn’t want to.’ Steve reached for Ian who retreated away from him and further back into the end of the couch.

‘I don’t know.’ Ian felt tears rising. ‘I don’t know if I wanted it. I wanted it when I did it, now I don’t know if I wanted it. I’m confused. I don’t know what I want.’ Ian sobbed. ‘Please go.’

* * * * *

‘Are you all right?’ Lottie found Ian lying in the big bed, awake and tearful. ‘Steve called me to come and see you.’

‘Lottie, it was amazing, and it was awful. I didn’t know what to do, and then I was doing it. I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t stop myself.’

‘Hold on there.’ Lottie said. ‘I don’t know what’s gone on, but I guess you and Steve did something together, and it was your first time.’

‘Of course it was my first time.’ Ian sobbed. ‘I didn’t even know what to do until I was doing it.’ He looked up and saw a glint in Lottie’s eye. ‘Okay, I did know what I was doing, and I couldn’t stop myself.’

‘But did Steve force you into anything?’

‘No, it just happened.’

‘Oh dear, you have a lot to learn. There’s many a pregnancy started like that.’

‘I can’t get pregnant.’ Ian laughed. ‘Even a girl as dumb as me knows that.’

‘So was Steve gentle, or did he force you into doing anything you didn’t want to do? He’s very worried in case he’s hurt you.’

‘You can tell him I’m okay. I guess I was a little shocked at what I could do. I mean, I didn’t even know how to do the things I did, but I did them.’

‘And how did that make you feel?’

‘I felt really powerful, as if I was in control, and then I wasn’t. I guess something took over, call it instinct.’

‘I think you had a very feminine experience. It’s what some women feel, maybe what all women should feel: that power of their sexuality when they’re with someone who wants them.’

‘If you put it like that, maybe you’re right. Maybe I should call Steve.’

‘I think you should, but not before I’ve fixed your breasts. Didn’t you notice, the join is separating again? I’ll have to repair these. The new set isn’t ready, and isn’t going to be for a few days.’

‘I’d better be careful in rehearsal then.’

Ian called Steve, and a date was arranged after the next week’s rehearsals. It was going to be an easier week, because the costumes had arrived; fittings, hair, and makeup tests were being finalised; and the publicity pictures were being taken. Ian spent so much time in the salon that he hardly seemed to be rehearsing at all.

‘I’m ever so self-conscious,’ Ian confided to Lottie. ‘I’ve tried to keep out of the way. These breasts aren’t looking good.’

‘And there I was thinking you’d be pleased to be free of them,’ Lottie said.

‘You know I’ve changed. This show is my big chance, and I don’t want it to go wrong.’

‘It’s weekend now anyway. The new ones will be ready for Monday, so relax and enjoy the rest.’

‘But Steve’s taking me out again tomorrow. We’re going on his boat in the afternoon, and then dancing in the evening.’

‘I’ll do my best.’

* * * * *

'Hi, gorgeous!' Steve breezed into the apartment, took Ian into his arms, and kissed him fiercely on the lips. 'I've been dreaming about you all week.'

'Don't be silly.' Ian tried to act cool, but blushed.

And then they were off. Steve drove this time, an elegant old Mercedes soft-top, with the wind almost threatening Ian's extensions.

'Be careful,' Steve cautioned as the boat powered away from the quay. 'The sun and the wind can quickly burn your skin.' Ian took the hint, tied a sun hat over his hair, and slathered sun cream over his exposed skin. In spite of himself, he asked Steve to do the bits he couldn't reach, and discovered that he was thrilling to the touch of his hand, rubbing sun cream so gently.

'I think we'll tie up at that jetty.' Steve pointed to the shore. 'You'll love the seafood there.'

A long lunch under sun shades ensued. Ian was conscious of the drift in himself towards the role of Steve's girlfriend. He knew, as much as Steve did, that it was all an illusion, but if he put his thoughts into words, he knew that the illusion was one that he wanted to continue.

Steve took him home to change for the evening, and didn't linger. Ian hurried into the apartment and called Lottie.

'My breasts are coming apart,' he said as soon as she answered. 'I could feel them slipping away inside the swim suit top I was wearing. Fortunately I could put a wrap over it as we had lunch, but I'm sure Steve noticed.'

'But he wouldn't say anything.'

'No, but I was so self-conscious.'

'I'll come and see what I can do.'

Two hours later, Ian, dressed to kill in a deep red dress with a high neckline, waited for Steve to come and collect him.

'Is this all right?' Ian asked Lottie for what seemed like the fifteenth time.

'Of course it is. Ladies don't have everything on show all the time. The higher neckline, with your hair all piled up, looks wonderful. The red sets off your blonde hair so well, and the simple earrings, dangling down, emphasise how long and slim your neck is. He'll be delighted.'

Steve's look said as much when he collected Ian. They sat in the back of the limousine once more; Steve's arm pulled Ian closer and closer as they drove. Ian could feel the warmth, and smell his woody scents. He hoped it didn't clash with the perfume he'd used.

'You dance beautifully,' Steve whispered as he held Ian closely.

'I'm a professional now; what do you expect?' Ian replied, putting his head on Steve's shoulder as the music slowed. 'I can do anything after all this last week's rehearsal. Backwards in heels is no problem at all.'

'You're delightful. But—what's wrong?'

'I think my boob is travelling independently.' Ian groped at his breast through his dress. 'I need to go to the bathroom.'

He emerged some minutes later and walked slowly to Steve who was waiting nearby. 'I'd better call it a night.' Ian said.

'I can offer coffee again,' Ian said as the car came round to pick them up. 'You'll have to bear with me, though. I'm going to have to do something with this as soon as I get home.'

Steve went to make the coffee. Ian scurried into the bedroom where he inspected the damage. The dress fell around his feet and he stepped out of it. The breast was coming away from his skin, it was loose, yet he did not have the solvent to remove it easily.

He wondered what to do. He didn't want to damage the prosthetic, and rummaged for a full bra to hold things together and to cover the join which was now so visible. He found an elaborately decorated one in a sort of baby peach colour, with full cups and a dainty bow in the centre.

He dressed quickly, finding the matching panties in a boy boxer style, and then pulled on a full-length oyster-coloured robe with a tie belt. He released his hair so that it hung like a heavy blonde curtain around his shoulders. He slipped on some mules with a tiny heel, and took a deep breath. As he stepped back into the lounge, he glanced in the mirror and realised that the robe was transparent.

Steve noticed it too, and came to kiss him. Steve's eyes appraised everything and his look was one of complete approval. They sat on the couch; Ian snuggled into Steve's shoulder, with his arm over and resting gently on the bra.

'I love it that you have breasts too.' Steve said. 'I can picture you with real ones so easily. Ones that stay on and don't need glue to keep them in place.'

'I think these are nice breasts.' Ian said dreamily.

'I can feel the join.' Steve laughed. 'Are they coming apart?'

Ian didn't want to do anything to draw attention to his problem, and turned into Steve to kiss him as a distraction.

The distraction became a desire, and Ian forgot why he was worrying and concentrated on the body next to him. Instinct took over once again, this time bolder and more blatantly. Ian's hand found Steve's growing shaft and stroked it, watching as it grew.

'I never thought I could do this.' Ian licked the tip and allowed it to slip between his lips. His tongue rubbed up the underside.

'You're doing it very well.' Steve moved round to give greater access.

As he did, Ian felt a hand sliding underneath him, and there was a tug as his panties were pulled aside. A finger probed. A strange feeling, but not unpleasant, he thought as he continued to give attention to the shaft in his lips.

A second finger entered, and began to play inside the passage. Up and up it went. Ian could feel himself tensing, and willed his muscles to relax. He took a

deep breath and tried again as he breathed out. The fingers slipped further inside.

‘What are you doing?’ he whispered, raising his head to look at Steve.

‘I’m gently trying to open you up,’ Steve whispered back. ‘I want to come into you, to take you as a woman.’

Ian took a moment for the words to register. A woman? That must mean him. ‘I’d like that,’ he heard himself saying.

Steve moved from under him and Ian allowed himself to be positioned on his back. Gently, Steve raised his legs so that they were resting on Steve’s shoulders as he slowly moved upwards, kissing Ian’s body from navel to chest through the robe which had become loose as he moved.

Ian felt suddenly scared. He remembered that night so many weeks ago now, when his consent had not been sought. True, it hadn’t tonight, but his body was urging him on. He couldn’t stop as sensation overlapped with sensation.

Something cold was spread on his bottom and the fingers worked it up and inside him. ‘It will make it easier,’ Steve said softly, as Ian could feel the tip of something that wasn’t a finger begin to probe for an entry.

‘That feels too big,’ Ian whispered.

‘It isn’t.’ Steve replied. ‘You have to allow it through. Breathe deeply and relax the muscles.’

Ian did as he was told, making his breathing audible so that Steve could hear when he was breathing in and out. With each breath out, Ian tried to relax the muscles which seemed to want to clamp as tightly as possible, and still the tip of something was at the entrance.

He forced relaxation, and then felt the tip push harder and travel a little further inside. Another breath and a little further. Ian gasped. He couldn’t talk, and couldn’t think. Only the tip of that shaft was in his mind.

He pictured it, probing and insisting. He forced another breath out and pushed down as the tip pushed up. A bit further. Several times he forced relaxation on unwilling muscles and then suddenly, a slide and slip and it was in. He could feel; Steve's sack against his skin. It couldn't go further.

It hurt too. It was a sharp pain, but Ian didn't find it an unwelcome one. He knew what he was doing. He knew who was doing it to him. He wanted it to go on and on. Time seemed to hang on a thread as every sensation was concentrated on that one thrusting motion. Ian could feel Steve tensing. His shaft seemed to grow, and then a pulsing.

Ian's grew too, and before he had time to think what was happening, he was in climax too, spurting all over his own stomach as Steve burrowed inside him.

Ian knew what was happening. Steve was coming inside him. There was no doubt. He was being used as any woman might be, and despite a nagging feeling at the back of his mind, he knew that this was what he wanted. It was making him complete as Steve's property.

'Property,' he thought, as he felt Steve's thrusts weaken and die. 'That's old-fashioned. Maybe I'll be his partner. That sounds nicer.'

Steve withdrew and stood beside the couch. Ian could feel a wet trickle onto the top of his thighs.

'Please fetch a towel from the bathroom,' Ian asked. When Steve did so, he tucked it under himself as Steve sat down. Feeling light-headed and somehow satisfied, he took Steve's flaccid shaft in his hand and started rubbing it gently, feeling the lubrication remaining as his hand slipped up and down.

'This should be ever so messy,' he said softly.

'I cleaned it in the bathroom,' Steve replied. 'I think it likes you; it's starting to grow again.'

'Not yet,' Ian replied. 'It's going to take a while. Remember which of us is measuring it with his hand.' He rubbed a little more vigorously.

'Careful,' Steve cautioned.

'Tell me a story,' Ian said. 'It doesn't have to be true, but make it a happy story for me.'

'How about the one where a leading theatre producer falls for his leading lady? He can't keep his hands off her, and when he discovers she's really a boy in disguise, his joy is complete. He knows where there's equal marriage and so he presents her with a great big diamond, and asks her to marry him.'

'If only fairy tales could come true.' Ian sighed.

'How about the one where the girl has played with the boy's penis so carefully, that it's ready for action again?'

'That sounds a good story, but I'm all messy.'

'It's all lubrication.' Steve replied. 'It won't hurt as much this time.'

'Who said it hurt?' Ian replied. 'I never did.'

'You forget, I could see your face, and I'm so proud of the way you were forcing the muscles to relax, just to let me in. I could see.'

'I wanted it. My body took over. I wasn't thinking of anything but getting that glorious shaft inside me.'

'Then turn over.' Steve helped Ian onto his front and then raised his behind so that as Steve knelt, his shaft was poised at the entrance. 'I'll be gentle.'

'Just get on with it.' Ian pushed back, feeling the tip once more.

'Hey, don't be impatient.' Steve pulled back and then thrust forwards forcefully. Ian gasped. 'I'll teach you to be impatient.'

Steve stayed large this time for much longer. Ian moaned, feeling Steve's ball sac hitting him as he was pounded hard. They turned over and lay side by side, then spooned, all the time with Steve in control, keeping Ian suspended on the end of his penis, thrusting and forcing the pace, until he came again, pulsing, pushing fluids into Ian, who moaned and whimpered a little at the ecstasy of it all.

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Ian was not long out of bed when Lottie arrived in the morning. He heard her coming in, and went immediately to the mirror to check his makeup and hair as if she was there to check up on him. He tried to look innocent, as if nothing had happened.

‘I see someone had a busy night.’ She took in the mess in the lounge and the look on Ian’s face which said it all. ‘I guess we both got lucky.’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’ Ian replied.

‘Of course you don’t, but you have the look of a lady who’s been on the receiving end of a rather interesting and pleasurable experience.’

‘Okay, so it went a bit far—maybe.’ Ian admitted.

And your vote would be for it to go a bit far again.’ Lottie laughed. ‘Well I have some good news and some bad news to begin the week.’

‘Are you supposed to ask which I want first?’

‘Okay, which do you want first?’

‘The good news of course.’

‘The surgeon can see you this afternoon.’

‘The *surgeon*?’ Ian asked incredulously. ‘What’s the *bad* news?’

‘The prosthetics had a flaw and we don’t have any in stock. Given the problems we’ve had, and the fact that you’re contracted to this show for the foreseeable future, implants seem the only way forward.’

‘You’ve been talking to Steve!’ Ian snapped. ‘Did he set you up for this?’

‘No he didn’t. And look; it’s a day off and you’re in full makeup, with hair attractively in place, heels on your slippers. Given that you’ve been living as a girl for the past few months, and seeming to enjoy it, I’m surprised that you haven’t been begging for implants already.’

‘But it seems so *final*,’ Ian replied. ‘This way, I can go back to my old life if this fairy tale ends.’

‘Admit it!’ Lottie snapped back. ‘You don’t want it to end. You’d hate it if it had to end. You’re more girlish than any girl I know. That’s the attraction for Steve; he knows you’re going to be the perfect girlfriend every time.’

‘Have you asked him about this?’

‘No, of course not. Why? What’s he said?’

‘He’d like me to have implants too. I think he’s afraid of seeing the join, or watching them fall off at an embarrassing time.’

‘So we go see the surgeon? I’ll have to tell the director and Steve. If you do have the operation, there’s going to be some recovery time.’

‘So I’ve got to decide soonest. It seems like it’s all decided. All I have to do is present myself.’

‘I’ll make some calls.’ Lottie picked up the telephone.

Ian sat quietly on his own, not listening as calls were made and times were booked. He thought of the steps that he had taken to reach this point. From bit part player, to Donna Lucia. He thought hard and remembered the feeling of liberty once he had got over the shock of presenting himself as a woman.

Lucy had become his alter ego in his mind. Perhaps it was really time to allow this alter ego to take over. After all, he’d been so happy in the woman’s role with Steve. The doorbell sounded. Lottie went and returned with Steve.

‘I’ll do it,’ Ian said as they both looked at him. ‘Book me in before I change my mind.’

‘That’s wonderful; a good decision.’ Lottie replied.

‘Will someone tell me what’s going on?’ Asked Steve.

‘Implants,’ Ian said. ‘It’s what you wanted.’

‘It is; I won’t deny it. It will be great publicity for the show, and

‘Is that all you think about?’ Ian stood, tears forming in his eyes. ‘I thought you’d be pleased for me; for us; and all you can say is the show.’ He sank to the chair and sobbed.

Steve looked at Lottie and then turned to Ian. ‘It’s not like that. I didn’t know about this decision until I came in here. Lottie told me there was a problem with the prosthetics and I came to ask if there was anything we could do. I also came to ask you to wear this for me.’

‘What is it?’ Ian sniffed behind a tissue.

‘It’s here in this box.’

Ian took it gingerly and opened it. ‘It’s too beautiful. I don’t know, I can’t—it’s a ring for a pretty girl to show her friends; to wear with a wedding band....’

‘And that’s what I intend for you,’ Steve said. ‘I waited for someone like you, never imagining that you’d come. And here you are, more perfect than I could have wished for. We’ve not been together long, but I know it’s right.’

‘Steve, I want to accept, but you really don’t know me.’ Ian sobbed again. ‘I’m a bit-part actor in an amateur show. I carry the spear in the back row. I was always a boy until a couple of months ago. And now I don’t know if I should go back to that. It seems so long ago.’

‘Please accept me.’ Steve went on one knee in front of Ian. ‘I’ll see that everything is right. I’ll not force you anywhere you don’t want to go, today or any other day.’

Ian took the ring from its box and slipped it onto his left ring finger. He held the hand out, the diamond facing towards him and turned his wrist, watching it sparkle.

‘Call the surgeon,’ Ian said. ‘Tell them I’m ready today, right now. I want breasts of my own, and Steve, if you want this ring back, you can’t have it. Whatever you’re proposing, I accept, you crazy fool.’

* * * * *

‘I told them to get on with it,’ Ian explained to Lottie when she visited the recovery room. ‘I’m all purple and bruised down there and it feels as if I’ve been hit by a truck.’

‘You didn’t let anyone see the surgeon with you. It must have been scary, thinking about what you were doing to yourself.’

‘Not really. They said what they put in, they can always take out. It may leave a scar, but life gives you scars sometimes anyway.’

‘They do look big. Am I allowed to say that?’

‘You may say that. And they’re proportionate, my surgeon says; big but believable, high profile, or something like that, and as natural-looking as they can make them. When the swelling goes down and you get used to them, they’ll look as natural as yours, but bigger.’

‘And are you really okay?’

‘Of course. I really am Lucy now, so get used to calling me that. It’s all your fault anyway; it started with Donna Lucia taking over my life. I must have been crazy.’

‘Or I must.’

‘Let’s both be crazy together.’ Lucy smiled. ‘If these things weren’t so big and so sore, I’d give you a great big hug.’

* * * * *

The opening night arrived, a frightening night for any producer and director. Would the public like the play? Perhaps even more importantly, would the critics like it? In the end, everyone liked it.

‘I always had a feeling that I wasn’t right with my identity,’ said Lucy to an earnest interviewer. ‘Now, although I’m just a boy with breasts, I feel as if everything’s come right. And I have a wonderful husband. I’d never have met him if it wasn’t for the show.’



‘Have you really had time to feel that you’re just a boy with breasts?’

‘If I’m honest, no. I live in a girl’s world. On stage or off stage, I haven’t tried to be a boy in ages, and I don’t think I could remember how to be one anyway. Now I have to get to the party.’

Lucy took her place in the anteroom, and checked her makeup and hair once again. A touch of lipstick, and there was her cue to be ready.

‘We delayed the opening for two weeks,’ Steve said to the six-month party. ‘It was worth it. Our star allowed us to gain a great deal of publicity and interest, as well as attracting more paparazzi photographs than anyone outside of royalty. I give you, our star, Lucy Morgan.’

There was a smattering of applause, and then it grew louder as Lucy entered the room. She was out of costume in a strapless dress of shimmering grey silk, which ended above the knee. Her matching grey heels looked far too high for comfort, yet she almost skipped across to take Steve’s hand.

Henry Potter was there with Harriet Casey from the old theatre, and he blew a kiss across the room. Lucy waved and blew one back.

All attention, although no one said so, was on her breasts. Just a tantalising glimpse of cleavage was available over the top of the bodice, which seemed to be holding generous but proportionate orbs. The two rings on her left hand glittered as she waved. She raised her left hand to her husband’s neck, and pulled his head down for a quick kiss on the lips, before turning and waving again.

Then the party began.

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