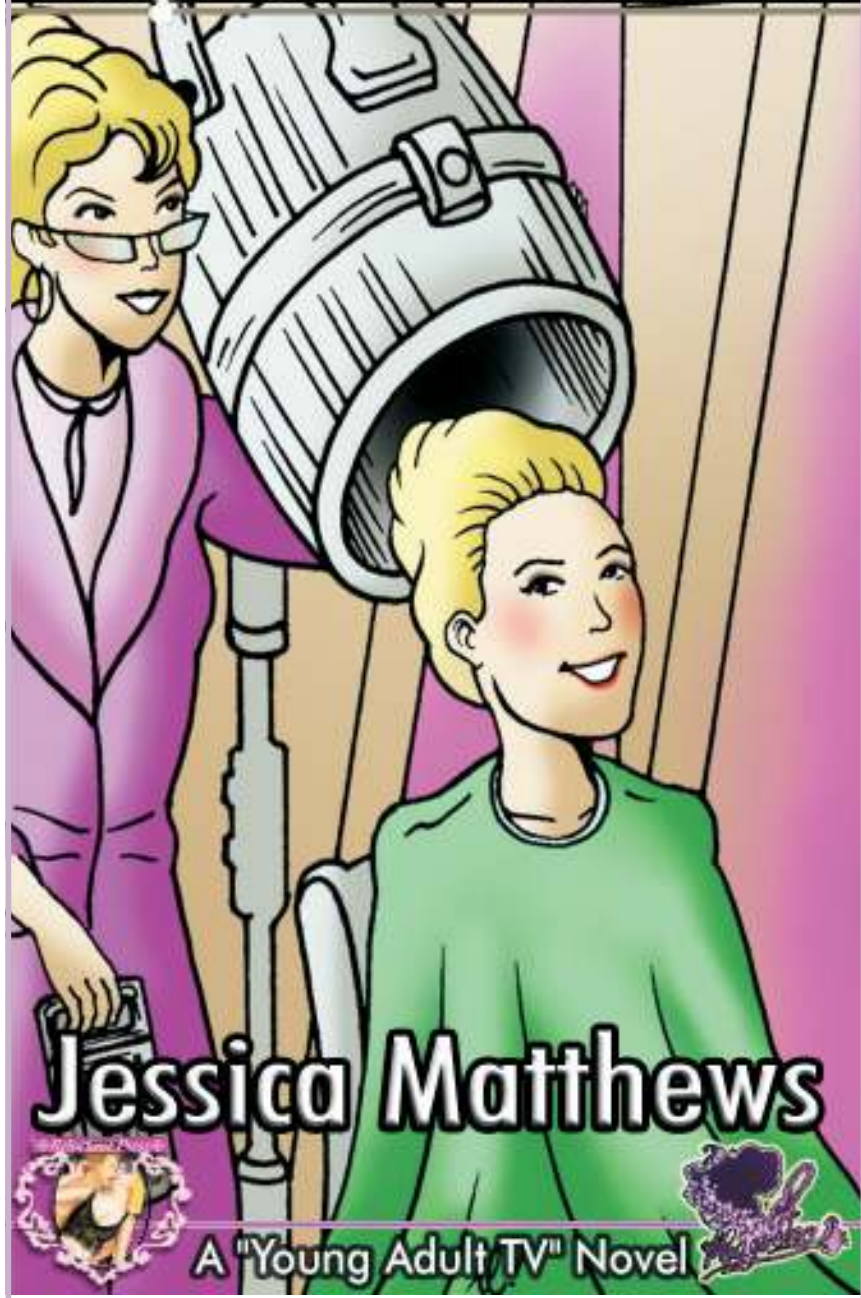


# Stepmother's Solution



# Jessica Matthews

A "Young Adult TV" Novel



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# Stepmother's Solution

**By Jessica Matthews**

“The dirty, cheating, lying, rat,’ she said slowly.

Emma couldn't believe what she was looking at. The photograph from the plain envelope that had come in the morning's post was its own evidence.

“Stuart, how could you?” she cried, wanting to throw the image away, but to do so would be to deny the evidence before her. “And with Serena too; she used to be my best friend. They're holding hands and smiling for the camera without a care in the world.”

She looked again, more carefully this time.

“That's Stuart, there's no doubt about that. He's wearing the gold watch that I bought for our second anniversary so it can't have been taken that long ago.”

She took the picture through to the big family room and went to the kitchen window to get more light on the image.

“That looks like the Adelphi Club logo. The club he said we couldn’t get in because the membership was closed. I know Serena couldn’t be a member, not with those fees.”

She turned the picture over and took a deep breath. Her therapist had taught her the technique. Count to six as you breathe in, hold it for four, then count six again as you breathe out, then another four before you breathe in.

“If that’s supposed to stop me from getting stressed, it isn’t working.”

She looked at the picture once more. It showed Stuart and Serena, their hands clasped together looking into each other’s eyes, flowers and wine-glasses on the crisp white linen of their table.

“She’s wearing a wedding set.” Emma stared at Serena’s left hand, surprised that she hadn’t noticed that before. “That makes it certain that they shared a room.”

She couldn’t bear to look any more and put the picture back into the envelope. There was nothing else inside and no marks except for their delivery address and a local postmark from the day before.

“Somebody sure doesn’t like him,” she mused and half-heartedly began the tasks of her day.

“Maybe it’s someone who doesn’t like me?” Unable to resist, she took the picture out again.

A paper she'd missed before fluttered onto the floor. She picked it up. "I thought you should know," it said.

She looked at the note. It was printed on plain paper in a really big font, the kind of paper that litters every office in the land. There was no way to tell who'd sent it. She looked at the photo again. It looked like it could have come from the same printer.

"I guess everyone has a camera on their mobile phone," she thought and looked yet again. "It looks like it was taken recently, maybe early spring. I wonder where he was supposed to be then."

She walked through to Stuart's den and flipped open his desk calendar; the one he kept at home so that she would know when not to book anything because he might be away on company business.

"That's the only time it could be." She saw four days blocked out in April with the word "conference" scrawled across them all. "And I trusted the bastard with everything I had."

A tear ran down her cheek. She rubbed it away and saw the black marks on her hand. Now it had ruined her mascara. It wasn't a good start to her day.

"Don't get angry, get even," she told herself.

\*\*\*\*\*

Emma had been one of the computer operators in the actuary's office. Stuart had been one of those self-proclaimed Masters Of The Universe who appeared from time to time to demand some obscure documentation or statistics. She'd been very good at finding whatever it was he wanted.

When his wife decided that life would be better with her tennis instructor and left Stuart with his son Casey, who was ten at the time, she'd stepped in. Collecting him from school turned to baby-sitting as Stuart went from date to date.

When he was promoted again, she started working from his home, filling in between her own career which was stalled because of him, and the responsibilities of a part-time mother/ confessor. When another of his flings turned sour, she was the one he turned to.

"I don't think this could work," Emma told him bluntly but he persisted.

Dates were few and far between but they'd take Casey here and there together. The boy wasn't keen on ball games or fishing, which was as well because Emma had no interest there either. He started ice skating and started to compete in figure skating and then ice dancing with a partner his own age.

It all came to an end badly. An accident on the ice; a collision with another competing couple which might have been careless or deliberate, no one knew. His knee was shattered badly and had to be reconstructed over several operations and painful physiotherapy to get it strong and working again.

"I think your days as a competitive skater are over," the surgeon's verdict was final.

It really affected Casey but Emma was always there for him, encouraging him in his exercises, making him follow a routine, and never skimping no matter how painful or boring it was.

Eventually, after a chance meeting with an old school friend, she got him interested in dancing. He couldn't have the ice but he could have the ballroom

floor. The leg strengthened as he danced but it was soon clear that the competitive ballroom styles were far too demanding for the fragile knee.

He had to settle for being part of a team in sequence and formation dancing.

“It keeps me off the streets,” he joked. “And I get to meet all the prettiest girls first.”

“So how come you don’t bring any home?” his father asked.

“They soon discover that they prefer the jocks,” he replied.

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“Is Emma going to be my new mom?” Casey asked his father one afternoon as they returned home from a trip to the lake.

“I don’t know.” Stuart looked at Emma and Emma looked back at Stuart.

“I don’t know either,” Emma said, hugging Casey to her.

“I’d sure like it to be,” he said.

“He’s fourteen going on thirty,” Stuart joked.

“He’s a good kid; you should be really proud of him,” Emma said. “You could try spending some more time with him. Boys need their fathers.”

“I know, but it’s not that easy,” Stuart said lamely. “There’s always work and more work.”

“That’s an excuse,” Emma replied. “If he were into ball games you’d be there, beer in hand, chanting

and cheering with the other dads. He can't do that sort of sport and he's very conscious of it. He thinks he's letting you down."

"He's not and I hope you tell him so."

"I can tell him but it's some sort of demonstration from you that he needs."

"Dancing's not my thing."

"But it's *his* thing now," Emma almost shouted. "It takes a lot of discipline, practice, and determination just like any other sport."

"It's as well that he has you to support him." Stuart turned away, aware that he was losing the argument.

"You know you should do more for him," Emma tried again.

"I think he needs his mother more than ever."

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It started unpromisingly. Stuart and Emma started dating occasionally, then regularly. Stuart liked that she wasn't as high maintenance and demanding as the girls he'd been seeing. Maybe she wasn't as glamorous but Casey liked her and that counted for a lot back then.

The ring was a surprise at Christmas. Emma accepted and Casey beamed his happiness all through the holidays. She moved in almost at once. She was so afraid. Could she bond with this damaged child who'd been injured and abandoned by his own mother?

They married in the Spring and Emma gave up her career to be a full-time mom to Casey and set about doing her best for her new husband. His shirts were always ironed, his shoes polished, and his suits dry cleaned and pressed regularly. She even cleaned his golf clubs.

As it turned out, it was easy. Casey made it so, treating her as if she was always the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night in his life. Casey was her delight, especially when her wishes to have a child of her own seemed to be difficult and complicated.

It was also too good to last as the anonymous photo showed.

“Could my infertility be the reason for Stuart seeing Serena?” she asked herself. “I can’t deal with this now.”

She carried the envelope around the house as if wanting to hide it and forget the contents. She knew she couldn’t but she didn’t want to think about it, didn’t want to look at it again right now.

“I know,” she decided. “I’ll put it in my dressing room. Stuart never goes in there.”

She cleared a space in her lingerie drawer and laid the envelope on the bottom. She covered it with silks and satins, as if to expunge its contents.

“And I thought that this marriage would last more than a couple of years.” Emma closed the drawer but she couldn’t close the image which stayed in her mind.

She may have hidden the picture but it lived on in her mind.

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Casey arrived home from school. She heard him opening the garage where he stored his cycle.

"I must compose myself. It's not Casey's fault and I don't want him to feel that there's anything wrong," she told herself.

She looked in the mirror, checking that her face showed nothing of her upset as she waited for him to come through to the family room.

"Hi Emma," he called as he dropped his bag on the floor. "Only a few days to go, then it's the summer vacation."

"It seemed such a long way off and now suddenly we're here." Emma smiled and rubbed her hand through his tangled hair. "Your hair needs some attention. It's lovely when it's so long but the tangles are awful."

"That's only the wind when I was riding home," he replied. "I use your shampoo and conditioner most days in the shower."

"I can see that now." Emma looked more closely. "There are no split ends and it all looks good, just in need of a brush through. Have you thought about what you're going to do over the summer?"

"Dad said he'd be away for the first couple of weeks. Some course or other that he has to attend."

"I didn't know." Emma thought she knew why she didn't know but didn't say anything. "Maybe we could do something?"

“That would be good.” Casey smiled up at her. “I’ve applied to work at the local theatre when the summer season starts but that’s not until the third week of the summer break.”

“What would you be doing?”

“Anything they’ll let me do,” Casey replied. “I could be a waiter, an usher, a ticket seller, even a cleaner. I really just want to be around the place.”

“I’ve met Melanie Baxter; she’s in my book club and we have coffee occasionally,” Emma said. “I think she’s the artistic director of the theatre. Maybe I could put in a word.”

“That would be great,” Casey replied. “She was the one who revived the place. Remember that production of ‘Charlie’s Aunt’ a couple of seasons ago?”

“I do remember it,” Emma replied. “Your dad took me to see it. I remember that I thought the title role was being played by a woman. It was only when I read the programme and looked at the pictures that I realised that it was a man after all.”

“I saw it too. I thought it was great to see real actors instead of a movie. I loved the way that guy could be such a lady.”

“That must have been a challenge for him.”

“Yes, but think what fun it would be too,” Casey said. “I wonder what it would be like to be somebody else.”

“I’ll call her and ask if she can see you.”

Emma was so pleased to see Casey enthusiastic about something. She had a feeling of dread at the thought of what was to come. She knew that she’d

have to have a serious talk with Stuart but she didn't want to do it where Casey could overhear.

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Emma was thinking about their dinner when her mobile rang.

"Your dad's going to be working late and he may bunk down in the office," Emma said listlessly. "It's you and I for dinner again; we won't see him until after that conference."

This wasn't the first time that Stuart had sent this message. Now Emma had cause to wonder what was really going on. Her curiosity was steadily being overtaken by a desire for revenge. How dare he treat her like this when all she'd done was look after Casey and him? It was unfair and unreasonable.

"It's my fault," she thought. "I should have kept an eye on our finances. I never had to think about what he was spending and where he was spending it before."

She went back to the den and rifled through the drawers but there was nothing about finance there. A couple of flash drives took her eye and she pocketed them, intending to look at them later.

"It's probably all on the computer," she decided, then realised that while she had her laptop, she didn't know the password to the machine which Stuart used.

"I'm going round in circles," she decided. "I think it's time for dinner. I'll have to act like nothing's happened."

Casey chattered his way through dinner. “I’m really excited to maybe work in the theatre for the vacation. It beats fast food places hands down.”

Emma nodded along, agreeing with him, and chipping in when it seemed an answer was required. She was really distracted so that when she pulled out a tissue from her jeans pocket, the flash drives fell to the floor.

“I remember those,” Casey grabbed them. “I wondered where they’d gone.”

“One of those looks like any other,” Emma said.

“No, these are a special colour. They’re from when Cousin Ruth and I were the kids from hell.”

“I’m sure you weren’t that bad.”

“Of course not; it was only a silly name we gave ourselves.” Casey switched on his laptop. “I really liked Ruth; she was such good fun.”

“It’s a pity her parents had to move east with his job.” Emma remembered that Ruth and Casey had parted tearfully when she was just getting to know him.

“She’s going to pre-med courses next year so she won’t be able to come out for a visit.” Casey flipped through the folders and clicked on one. “I don’t know if I should show you these but here goes.”

He turned the screen to Emma. A series of pictures of two girls doing things together, having fun, and posing for the camera with changes of hair, clothes, and makeup.”

I recognise Ruth but who’s the other girl?” Emma took the laptop and flicked through more pictures.

“This is a striking portrait.” She stopped at the next one; a close up of a really pretty girl in her mid-teens.

Casey looked at her as she looked from screen to him, a puzzled look on her face. “I thought I knew all your cousins but I’ve no idea who this is. She’s really striking.”

“It’s me,” Casey smiled.

“Really? That’s you?” Emma looked again. “I can see it now but I wouldn’t have guessed it was you. You’re a boy after all.”

“Would you let me show you some more? Promise that you won’t tell Dad that I have them.”

“I’d *love* to see some more.” Emma came to lean over him.

Her breast nestled against his ear as he clicked from one photo to the next. She didn’t realise at first but then noticed that he was slowly moving towards it, nestling his head almost into her cleavage.

“He’s a breast man, just like his father.” She filed the thought away for future reference.

“We used to try and look as identical as we could,” Casey said, halting at a double portrait.

“You look really pretty and you’re really believable as a girl.” Emma really was impressed. “You look happy and confident too, or was that only for the picture?”

“No, I loved it.” Casey admitted. “It was far better than being me.”

“I bet the boys gathered like bees to honey.”

“That was fun too.” Casey blushed even harder. “Ruth made me go on a date. I was really scared but I enjoyed playing the game.”

“You were lucky not to have been found out.”

“I told him that it was the wrong time of the month. Fortunately he had a sister so he knew what that meant. I had to kiss him when we sat in the back row at the movies.”

“That was brave.”

“Not really, I was acting the part. It seemed natural at the time. He was gentle and I think he really liked me. He never found out.”

“What a time you must have had.”

Emma thought about all she was hearing. It could be useful for the future, especially now that Casey was opening up to her and letting her into his secret world.

If anyone ever saw photographs his son pretending to be a girl, Stuart would probably be so embarrassed that he couldn't cope with it.

“Ruth used to do my makeup and hair. We bought clothes from thrift shops and pretended we were sisters. We went everywhere, shopping, to the movies, the beach... Everywhere.”

“Who allowed you to do that?” Emma was horrified. “Where were your parents?”

“They didn't know until we slipped up.”

“What did you do?”

"I wore earrings and forgot to take them out." Casey looked up at her. "Wasn't that so stupid?"

"Okay, I interrupted; you tell the story your way. I can't believe that there's much more to tell."

"We did more than that. Sometimes we were punks and goths, even though we didn't really know what that meant. We copied pictures from magazines and tried to copy their look. People looked at us and then looked away quickly in case we were infectious."

"I always thought they were a waste of good makeup."

"Me too; I much preferred being pretty."

"Didn't your parents notice anything before?"

"It was when Dad was working long hours and Mom was working on her tennis," he said without irony. "They were happy to leave Ruth to look after me until, stupidly, someone let Mom see that picture. We both got into big trouble over that."

"I can imagine..." Emma looked again as Casey pointed out what she'd missed.

"You've spotted it," Casey giggled. "Ruth took me to get my ears pierced but I insisted and got them double pierced instead. They didn't notice for ages until I had those two big dangling earrings, then they actually noticed. You should have heard the row."

"I'm not surprised."

"They never spotted that I had my belly button pierced as well."

"You didn't!"

“I did and it’s still open.” Casey pulled up his shirt. “See, there’s a tiny gold keeper there, keeping it clean and open. I keep the ear piercings open and clean too but Dad would go ape if I wore earrings in public.”

“I really didn’t know.” Emma looked at his ears. “I see the holes now. They are clean and neat. You must show me your earrings. I’d love to see you wearing them, or maybe you’d like to try some of mine.”

Casey’s smile told her that she’d struck a chord with him. They were co-conspirators.

“I’d love that. You have such tasteful jewellery.”

“I’ve your Dad to thank for most of that.”

A thought was building at the back of her mind. If Stuart hated Casey’s earrings, maybe she could get the boy into wearing them. That would be a bit of revenge. But surely there was more she could do if she really thought about it.

“Maybe I’d better not try your earrings, much as I’d love to,” Casey said. “I don’t want to get you into trouble. Dad’s talking about sending me to a military cadet school next year. I’d have to live in a barracks and being even slightly different would get me bullied.”

“Military cadet school?” Emma repeated. “I’ve never heard him talking about that before.”

“Surely he told you. He says I need toughening up.”

“Do you want to go to a school like that?”

“What do you think? I can’t think of anything worse. I don’t expect he’ll give me a choice though.”

“Surely your knee isn’t strong enough.”

“You know that, I know that and they’ll probably know that when I do my physical, but for a donation from Dad they’ll ignore it and decide that I’m the ideal cadet.”

“That’s awful. I can’t believe he’d be so cruel.”

“They’ll shave my head, put me in a uniform and I’ll probably end up killing myself if I can’t get away.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Emma said. “Never. You hear me? We’ll think of a way out of it.”

An idea was already forming in her mind but it would take some planning and Casey would need some persuading. Would he really, though? He’d exposed a few thoughts and past experiences.

Stuart would never forgive her but she could live with that!

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Next day, Emma had some plans in her mind. They weren’t fully formed and she knew that persuasion was better than force.

It was a long shot but Casey seemed to be half way there. Emma wondered if with a little persuasion and a lot of help, the girl who was so obviously lurking somewhere inside Casey could be liberated.

Stuart would hate it. He’d probably want to leave town. Emma was already thinking divorce and settlement. The more Stuart fought, the more she could push Casey inner female to the fore. She may even be able to make it look like Stuart was rejecting them because of his own son’s lifestyle.

Stuart's moods weren't always as calm and controlled as he liked people to think. Serena probably only knew the work side of him, plus however long they'd been sleeping together. She may not be prepared for the recriminations if Casey appeared to be more attractive than she did.

A plan was coming together. Did she feel bad about using Casey this way? Not really. He could always reject her suggestions.

Next Saturday morning, she was sitting in the family room when Casey stumbled into the room. She passed toast to him, along with butter and preserves.

"How would it be if you and I did something together?" she asked. "I don't think we could revive the Kids From Hell but there's only ten years between us. We could be Big Sister and Little Sister if you'd like to play a dressing-up game with me."

"Could we? Please say we can. It would be great."

Casey had expected that he would take some persuading but this surprised and delighted her at the same time.

"We'll have to plan carefully if we're going to look alike. I'll have to dress younger and you'll have to dress older. We can have the same hairstyles and do the same makeup."

"It's going to take a bit of time to get right." Casey's enthusiasm was transparent. "I used to be good at makeup but I'm a bit out of practice."

"I'll have to colour my hair to get it to your shade," Emma said slowly. "We don't have to be exact copies of each other, just similar enough so that people will guess we're sisters."

“Won’t Dad object if you change your hair?”

“He probably won’t notice. He’s not been here that much recently.”

“I did wonder about that,” Casey said. “I don’t want to lose you, whatever he’s doing.”

“What do you mean?” Emma couldn’t help herself and as soon as the words left her mouth, she wished she could take them back. “Do you know something that I should know?”

“I didn’t mean that I know anything.” Casey looked shocked at her outburst. “He just seems distant recently.”

“Maybe there’s a reason for that,” Emma tried to smooth things over. “He’s very busy at work.”

“He’s far too busy to have time for us.”

Emma said nothing, preferring to let Casey calm down. She registered that he wasn’t entirely unaware of things not going right and filed that away to use to her advantage if the opportunity arose.

“You’ll have to help me.” Emma opened a web browser. “I need a hair colour as close to yours as possible. You’re what a girl would call a tawny blonde.”

“You’ll never get that off the web.” Casey looked at her. “The screen colours are never true.”

“So we’ll go to the shops and look at the shade cards and the boxes,” Emma said. “You can walk along with me and tell me what makeup you’d like to try and we’ll get that at the same time. Maybe we can buy you some clothes too.”



“Can I get a real manicure if I look good enough?” Casey’s eyes sparkled at the thought.

“Of course you can. I’d say that was essential, wouldn’t you?”

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Their first stop was a huge department store on the outskirts of the town centre. The scents of expensive perfume filled the air as they walked in past the clinically dressed girls offering free samples of the latest fragrance.

They looked like mother and unwilling son as they walked in. Emma had dressed as expensively as she could, trying to look like an upper class lady.

Casey had chosen their theme. He dressed down trying to look younger than his age, like a scruffy and unwilling boy being forced to accompany his mother

“We’ll do the hair colourants first.” Emma directed him towards the appropriate area.

Casey bent down and hid beneath the shelves as Emma compared the examples on the boxes to his hair.

“I can’t see my hair and the shade on the box at the same time. The lighting isn’t very good. Don’t they have a shade card that we could take to the door?” he asked.

With a little fuss and two assistants running round to search, Emma got a shade chart. Together they took it to the door and looked at it in daylight.

“Remember, you’re not supposed to be very interested,” she warned Casey who was forgetting where he was.

“Okay, I think this one,” he decided and then slunk away, keeping in character.

Emma walked back, deliberately chose a shade lighter than the one he picked and put it face down in the shop’s basket. She hoped he’d not notice the substitution. Another part of her rapidly evolving plan was being formed as she went along.

“Pick up anything you think you want. Don’t hesitate; if you think it’s going to look good, grab it. Your father’s credit card can take a bit of punishment on our behalf,” she told Casey.

They prowled through the racks of makeup which were crowded with giggling groups of schoolgirls, using the testers and probably pocketing some of them. Emma spotted a little hesitancy on Casey’s face as he pushed through them.

“Hold this piece of paper and then it will look as if you’ve got my list. When you have a few things, dump them in my basket.”

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“We need to get you some proper clothes.” Emma led the way towards the boutique department.

“I looked at the sizes in your boy stuff and I can use that to guess your girl sizes.”

“But there’s so much,” Casey replied. “It wasn’t like this when we used to go through the thrift shops.”

“Look and learn. Girls do browsing. They examine how things are made, look at the colours of one garment to another to see how they’ll match.”

“Do they ask if their bum would look big in this?” Casey grinned.

Emma did too, really happy to see that he was getting into the swim of things now that they were away from all the girls in the makeup aisles.

“We’re going to get a couple of basics today. When you’re female, I expect you’ll be able to come shopping with me and we can do it properly.”

“That makes sense,” Casey agreed. “Can I get some jeans and a denim skirt like that tight one over there?”

“Isn’t it too short?” Emma knew she shouldn’t have said that.

She put her hand over her mouth, then riffled through the rack, selected the size and put it in her basket. To her surprise, Casey returned with a pair of jeans. He watched as she selected a couple of tight tops and a loose shirt, shaking his head and nodding imperceptibly as she moved along the display.

“I’ll get the lingerie for you,” Emma announced. “I think some stockings and tights too.”

“Thanks Emma,” he whispered. “I hoped you’d say that.”

“You need some breast development to,” Emma said. “No girl of your age would settle for being flat-chested when there are inserts to go inside a bra.”

She sent him to the perfume area when she went in search of the silicone pieces. To her surprise, there were some almost lifelike breast forms. She thought hard but only for a moment, then chose a moderate sized pair. “B” cups would look fine on him, she thought.

Casey tried to look disinterested as Emma browsed and selected the flimsiest and sexiest items with lace and bows, in delicate colours, but he couldn’t quite make it. His face glowed as she looked to him for a nod or a shake of the head.

Emma noted all his reactions, storing them in her head for later reference.

“After we get a couple of pairs of heels, some sandals and a pair of flats, you’re done for now. You can always use boy trainers with almost anything these days.”

“What about a jacket?”

He looked over towards the other side of the floor where a display of tight-fitting leather jackets were displayed.

“Are you sure that you dare wear something that tight?” Emma asked.

“My sister’s going to be wearing something similar,” he replied with a straight face. “I think I should keep up with her.”

“I’ve created a monster.” Emma led the way and insisted that he try the jacket on before he chose it.

“Do I have to? People might see me and wonder why a boy’s trying on a girl’s jacket.”

“Too small or too big would be wrong. I can guess what look is in your mind,” she whispered none too quietly. “Allow for your boobs too.”

Casey was still blushing when Emma paid and they left the department and went to the pay station.

“It’s such a lot,” the assistant explained. “I have to call a manger to authorise your card.”

“That’s alright. It’s my husband’s card and he can afford it.” Emma waved her hand conspiratorially.

Then it was all paid and an assistant was summoned to help carry it all to their car. Casey tagged along behind, acting like it had nothing to do with him.

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“Did we really buy all this stuff?” Casey looked at all the girl’s clothes makeup and accessories spread across his bed.

“You’ll need more if you really want to play at being my sister for more than a day or two,” Emma said. “We didn’t get you any purses, although you can use mine. Same with jewellery perfume and all the bits and bobs that go with being a girl.”

“I remember. Ruth was always giving me stuff she had.” Casey touched some of his new lingerie.

“I can tell that you can’t wait to try it all on.” Emma stroked his hair. “I think I’ll leave you to a dress-up game all of your own.”

“Would you please?” Casey smiled. “I can’t wait. Can you tell so easily?”

“You’re not disguising your reluctance at all.” Emma smiled.

Casey giggled. “I’m so excited; I can’t believe it.”

“I’m going to do my hair so that it matches yours.” Emma stood with her hand on the door. “That’s going to take me a couple of hours or so. How would it be if I tell you that I’ve invited my sister to come for dinner at seven?”

“Okay,” Casey said, looking thoughtful.

“That means all dressed up, makeup, heels, the full works. You can raid my wardrobe if you need to; help yourself to anything you want. The jewellery box is on the dressing table too.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Do you need me to help with your makeup?”

“I think I can remember what Ruth taught me,” Casey said. “I never said but I have borrowed some of your eye makeup occasionally, just to practice.”

“If you’d asked, I could have bought you some.” Emma thought a white lie would be better than expressing any other thought. Stuart would never have allowed that.

“I wish I’d had the confidence.” Casey smiled and came to hug her. “You’re the best sister ever.”

“You’ll soon find out,” Emma said gently and went to her bathroom.

She looked at the instructions on her hair colourant box and paused, thinking that Casey knew so little of the things she had in mind. Another thought came to her. Would he mind even if he knew?

Casey was much more complex than she had ever guessed. He was a good kid. Was she using him or was he really using her? She shook her head. It didn't matter; the aim was to get at Stuart. That was looking promising right now but there was a long way to go.

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“Oh, my goodness!” Emma looked at her new hair colour now that it was dry. “That’s different. I’ve never been this blonde before. It’s lighter than I intended it to be.”

She sat at her dressing table and used blow drier and barrel brush to make her hair as big as she could. “I’m usually much more restrained. Stuart would think I’ve gone to Bimbo Land.”

She did her makeup carefully. She wasn’t out to seduce Casey but it could have been the same thing. She wanted to ease him into the idea of femininity; how he could look so spectacular if only he wanted to enough.

“All I have to do next is to convince Casey that he’s like to do his hair just like his sister.” She examined it closely. “I think his hair is a little longer than mine, with a similar texture.”

She played with her hair a bit more. “Maybe if I dried his hair like this, he’d decide that he’d like to be blonder too.”

Emma set two places at the dining counter in the family room and fussed around with plates and green salad, chicken portions, crisp white wine and water. She picked some flowers from the patio garden and put them in a vase beside the wine.

Waiting for seven was awful. She was tense and, although she tried her counting exercise, the tension remained. She didn't know what to expect but hoped that her suspicions were good and that Casey would be someone she could love as a sister should.

She hoped he would be so pretty and feminine that Stuart would hate him on sight. And if he could be persuaded to start dating boys, it would be even better. Stuart would never live it down, macho pig that he'd revealed himself to be.

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As Emma was sitting with her thoughts and fears, Casey was wrestling with his own doubts and insecurities. It was a day to remember for sure. All that they'd bought seemed to be telling him that he should be a girl delighting in good fortune.

It all seemed so simple. Ruth had been the one to open his eyes to different possibilities and all the characters he could be. Skating had seemed a way of sublimating those thoughts when she'd moved away. Was it the dancing that brought him back to these forbidden feelings?

Maybe it was Emma but she knew nothing about the things before she came into his father's life. Casey knew he loved Emma. She'd filled a void that he never knew could ever be filled. She didn't know about his hidden past and his secret feelings.

If only she hadn't found those old pictures.

"Is it too late to go back?" Casey wondered as he looked at himself in his mirror.

What did he see? He was dressed in that deliciously tight denim skirt, so tight that it clung to his bottom and had a hem that held his thighs tightly.

The pale pink top clung to his chest where he'd padded out the bra cups with those breast forms. He was delighted to find them amongst his purchases. Emma hadn't told him about those and he'd expected something much less exciting.

He loved the feel of the stockings too. He hadn't seen the garter belt going into the basket but it matched his bra and panties. Emma must have sneaked it in, perhaps guessing his fascination with the little things, those little mysteries that girls knew and boys wanted to find out. Probably not this way, though, he mused.

And the panties had their own effect. He couldn't help it. He couldn't stop it. His penis responded as if it had a mind of its own. He almost didn't make it to his bathroom but fortunately did so before an accident filled them. As it was, it wanted to grow again, even though he willed it not to spoil the line of his skirt. Any little bulge would show under that stretched denim.

He watched his hand as it raised a mascara wand to his eyes. The painted nails were too short to make his hands look feminine and elegant. He knew he hadn't made a good job of painting them but there wasn't time to waste if he was to be as ready as he wanted to be by seven.

The time was getting close. He knew Emma was down in the family room so he slipped into her room and selected big earring from her jewellery box. She knew his ears were pierced so why not show off?

He took drops with deep red stones and a second pair set with lighter red stones. If they clashed with his pink top, it didn't matter. They were a statement this time.

He had his own silver chain round his neck and a thin chain for his left wrist. They were boy things but it didn't matter. Girls wore the same things anyway.

What should he do for shoes? He looked at the side of his room where he'd arranged all of the new purchases. He closed his eyes, imagining how he'd look in each of them. The nude-coloured sandals seemed to shout at him to be chosen.

He slipped his stocking foot under the straps—he'd remembered to paint his toenails—then fastened the single ankle strap. He stood and took a few hesitant steps across the room. He stood still, willing himself to get a better balance and posture. It seemed to work as he crossed the room again.

He looked in the mirror. It was almost seven and he'd done nothing to his hair. He loosened it and ran his fingers through from the back of his neck to his front hair line, then tossed it back in a messy tumble. He scraped it over his ears with his fingers, watching the earrings tangle and free themselves from his locks.

A final look and he was ready. The he remembered something. He pulled up his top, exposing the tiny gold ring in his tummy bottom. It had been there for ages and never revealed or disturbed. This was the time.

He'd kept the thicker silver ring that he'd worn before. Only Ruth had seen it after he left the piercing salon. It had several silver chains falling from it, with

their own smaller hoops at the ends. Let loose, it would tinkle as he walked.

He could hide it in inside his skirt and panties, or he could let it fall over his waist. Emma knew anyway, he thought as he saw them handing over his skirt. With a deep breath and a shrug of his shoulders, he took a final look in the mirror, picked up the purse he had borrowed from Emma's room, and stepped out on his way.

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"How do I look?" Casey's heart was in his mouth as he appeared before Emma, fully dressed and made-up for the first time.

"You look... amazing. There's nothing more I can say." Emma stood and looked, taking it all in slowly. "I can't see anything boy in there. Maybe you were born to be a girl."

"Not with what I've got in my panties." Casey's huge grim said it all, as he twirled and mimed a few dance steps, showing off his newfound skill in heels.

"Seriously, you do look amazing." Emma was really surprised by how complete the transformation had been.

"You don't look so bad yourself," Casey said. "I didn't think your hair would turn out that colour though. It's really blonder than mine. I thought we were going for the same look."

"We were and we are," Emma said. "I was surprised by how much lighter it turned out to be."

"You can always dye it back."

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Emma said. “Two colour changes in a couple of days might damage my hair too much.”

“I guess you’re right but I was so looking forward to trying to look as identical as I could.”

“I’m so sorry to disappoint you,” Emma said slowly, thinking that her plan might work. “We could always dye your hair with the same colourant and be identical that way.”

“Could we please?” Casey’s enthusiasm was spontaneous.

“But how do we explain it to your father?”

“We tell him it’s a dare from school...,or a craze; all the boys are doing it. The surfer look is back.”

“That might work.” Emma tried to disguise her enthusiasm. “I still think it might shock him.”

“I doubt he’ll even notice me,” Casey said bitterly.

“I’m sure he will.”

“He’ll only tolerate me until he gets rid of me to that military cadet school.”

“We’ll have to think of something to get you out of that.”

“Please, I’ll do anything,” Casey said. “I’m so scared of that. It’s everything I don’t want to do.”

“Leave it with me,” Emma said and changed the subject quickly. “I did speak to Melanie Baxter at the theatre. They should have something for you to do in about three weeks when they’re rehearsing their next show.”

"That's great," Casey said. "Maybe I could tell Dad that I got my hair dyed for a show."

"I never thought of that one," Emma lied; it had been in the back of her mind if all else failed. "I'll go early and get a colourant for you and we can do it together in the morning."

They sat opposite each other. Casey didn't complain about his chicken and green salad as he ate, taking smaller mouthfuls more slowly than he used to. When he finished, he reached for his purse, pulled out a mirror and refreshed his lipstick, then checked his hair. Emma loved it.

"I think I'll like being blonder." Casey looked at his hair again. "It's going to make me feel more like a real girl."

"Is that what you want; to feel like a real girl?"

"Right now I think I do," Casey said slowly. "I love feeling like this and looking like this. I was always so drab before. I don't know if that's a good idea to try and be a real girl though, even if it were remotely possible."

"People can have such different lifestyles now though. Think about what you see on television."

"They may be the exception. I bet a lot of heartache follows some of them around. They seem really popular though."

"That's because some of them are really pretty and look for all the world like a real girl," Emma said. "Then there are others who seem to be taking every bit of womanhood and exaggerating it to a ludicrous degree."

"That's not what I would want to do."

“I agree but have you thought about the downside? If you’re an attractive woman, then the boys and the men too, are people you’ll have to learn to deal with.”

“I’m not hard for a girl to deal with.”

“That’s just you but think of some of your friends. They’re attracted to a pretty girl, like bugs to a decaying body.”

“That’s not a great picture,” Casey laughed. “But I can guess what you’re trying to say.”

“You can ignore them, you can be rude to them, but some will persist. They think they’re so irresistible that you’re playing hard to get.”

“So you’re saying that I’ve a lot to learn.”

“Yes and I’m saying be careful what you wish for, it may come true,” Emma said. “You’ll learn by your mistakes anyway but learning to handle a good put-down is really important to keeping the wolves at bay.”

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“I’ve arranged for you to see Melanie at the theatre this afternoon,” Emma told Casey when he appeared next morning with all the makeup cleaned off, looking very much as he normally did.

“I thought she’d better see you as you are. She knows that I have a stepson and even though she’s used to seeing everything in the theatre...”

“I know. She’d better see me like this. Maybe you could explain the changes to her when the time comes.”

"I think we'll worry about that when we have to," Emma said. "Are you still sure that you want to do this? It could mean that you're stuck as a girl for the summer."

"I'm sure," Casey nodded. "I can always tone it down, maybe wear a wig if I have to be a boy again."

"I think the way you're going would make it impossible for you to get away with impersonating a boy," Emma laughed.

"You can't blame me. This is so amazing that you're letting me do all this. I'd no idea how much I wanted it until... well, until you showed me that it would be okay."

"I think it would be safest for you to start work as a boy," Emma said. "That might avoid a bit of complication."

"I can understand that but you said that Melanie was a good person and you didn't tell me that there could be problems."

"Don't forget your father."

"I think he's forgotten us," Casey said. "I'm so glad that I have you."

Emma sat in a coffee shop watching as Casey went into the theatre.

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"I'm Melanie and I'm responsible for this theatre." She was warm and friendly as she took Casey into her office. "Emma's a good friend and she's told me such a lot about you."

“I’m so lucky to have her as a stepmom,” Casey said.

“I think so too.” Melanie sorted through some papers and read from one. “This says you’ve finished school and may be going to college or having a gap year.”

“That’s right. My dad wants to send me to a military cadet college but I don’t want to go.”

“I can understand why,” Melanie agreed. “I can’t think why anyone would volunteer for that sort of life unless they decided on a military career.”

“I’m more into things which have a creative side,” Casey said.

“Emma said that too. I think she has a plan to help you but she wouldn’t tell me anything about it.”

“She’s been great. I don’t think I could have survived my father if she hadn’t been around.”

“We’ll take a walk through the theatre as we talk. It’s less formal and you can get a look at everything backstage from dressing rooms to the fly sheets.”

“I’d like that,” Casey replied.

“Emma said you had a bad knee injury.”

“I used to be a skater but the accident really ended that. I did ballroom dancing, sequence, and formation after that. It was less demanding on the knee.”

“That could be useful here.” Melanie took him onto the stage. “We have a dancing school doing displays here. Their dancers are used to the routines but not used to the rake of the stage or the restricted spaces. Do you think you could help with that?”

"I'm sure I could," Casey agreed. "I only stopped dancing when the troupe I was with broke up. People seemed to be going in all different directions at the time. It never really got going again."

"That's not uncommon." Melanie led the way through the dressing rooms and wardrobe areas. "You'll have to be adaptable when you work here. You could be collecting and carrying, serving in the bar, or even going on as an emergency understudy."

"I'd love to work here." Casey's eyes shone with enthusiasm. "I'll do anything."

"In that case, you've got the job. I'll call Emma with the details when the season opens."

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"Is that really my hair?" Casey looked in the mirror after Emma had made it look so big with her blow drier. "We're the same colour now."

"I've never been this blonde before," Emma admitted.

"I think I'm going to be this blonde forever."

"For better or worse." Emma looked at him again. "I think we'd better do something with those eyebrows before you put on your makeup."

"How did you know that's what I was planning to do next?" Casey looked at her. "I was thinking of that manicure you promised me."

"Brows first, then I'll take you to the nail salon, provided you can convince me that no one's going to find out that you're really a boy."



"It's a deal." Casey turned to the mirror and looked at his brows. "Don't make them too thin; that's not the fashion right now."

Emma worked on his brows. Thin and highly arched may not be the fashion of the day but she wasn't going to let that put her off. She plucked away, leaving them thicker, but making them as high as she dared.

"That's a bit more than I expected." Casey looked at his new brows.

"I did have to get them even. You can fill them in with a pencil or some of those new brow products," Emma said. "I'm going to book you in for that manicure and I think waxing as well."

"But I'm a boy."

"I'll be really careful," Emma said, looking at him with a glance that reminded him that he'd just stated the obvious. "I'll go on the web and find somewhere discrete, somewhere they won't embarrass you."

"I know it's going to hurt." Casey started his foundation.

"It will hurt but you'll love the sensations that come with having no body hair."

"I haven't got much anyway." Casey started to work on his eyes. "I couldn't grow a beard or a moustache even if I ever wanted to."

"And moustaches are required for all military cadets."

"Don't even joke about it."

“How about this thought...” Emma’s idea was forming slowly. “You could turn up for your interview in the highest heels and the tightest dress...”

“And call the colonel ‘darling.’” Casey grinned. “That would make sure I got rejected.”

“Either that or you’d be clapped in irons and thrown into the dungeon.”

“I don’t think they’re allowed to do that these days.”

“But I don’t want you to risk it.”

“If being a full-time girl will get me out of going there, I’ll do anything.”

“You probably will be doing everything before I’m finished with you,” Emma thought. “Your father’s going to love having the most feminine son in town. Revenge is sweet indeed.”

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“Is this really me?” Casey was almost bouncing with joy as they drove homewards that afternoon. “You were right about the feeling of having no body hair. I didn’t think I had much but the way my clothes feel now that I have none at all is so different.”

“I told you you’d love it.”

“And they were so nice,” Casey said. “It was worth driving across town to that salon.”

“It seemed the best option,” Emma replied. “You didn’t mind that it was such a gay place?”

“They didn’t try to do anything wrong.” Casey turned to look at Emma. “Even the one in drag was nice, although I was a bit scared at first.”

“Not everyone is as lucky as you. Some will never pass for real girls. And your new nails aren’t going to disappear if you’re not admiring them every few moments.”

“I know but I love this feeling of having long elegant nails. It’s so feminine and the deep red was the only colour I could choose.”

“You’re such a stereotype.”

“Would you help me please?” Casey asked, suddenly serious. “I think I want to stay as a girl from now on. No more being a boy until I have to.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. I feel really comfortable as a girl, like I might fit in.”

Emma delighted to hear him saying that. It was all falling into place so easily. Stuart was going to hate it all but Casey’s enthusiasm was a surprise. She expected to be using much more pressure and threats, yet here she was, achieving all she wanted with gentle persuasion and encouragement.

Most surprisingly, he welcomed every little aspect of her feminising him but then he hadn’t encountered the prejudices that may follow; he hadn’t encountered boys yet either.

“What about the boys?” Emma asked bluntly. “Have you considered the effect you’re going to have on them?”

“You started to warn me about that before.”

“I was really serious. You’ve been a little sheltered so far. You’re really pretty and you’re going to attract a lot of boys and men too. It can be fun but you have to stay safe and manage how far you let them go and how close you allow them to get.”

“I’m not entirely naïve,” Casey said. “I have thought about it. I want some fun being a girl but I know that keeping safe is doubly important.... because... because of the sort of girl I am.”

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The bubble had to burst and it did so a couple of days later. Casey had been getting bolder, venturing out close to home at first, then further away, but always in safe places where there were people around. He knew he was getting admiring glances.

He stayed aloof, ignoring the whistles and calls from boys and men. He declined the invitations for coffee or something stronger.

It started when he came home.

“Get changed quickly,” Emma hissed as soon as he came through the door. “Your father’s going to be here any minute.”

“I didn’t know he was coming back this week.”

“Well he’s back now and sounds to be in a filthy temper.”

As she spoke, there was the sound of a car outside and the door slamming. Casey bolted for the stairs.

“I didn’t think you’d be back today.” Emma went to greet him at the door with her arms wide.

“Things happened,” Stuart grunted, rewarding her welcome with a perfunctory kiss before brushing past her to his office.

“Shall I get you something to eat?” Emma followed him as he slammed his document case on the desk and opened his laptop.

“I’ll be going out again soon,” he replied. “I’ve got wall-to-wall meetings for the next few days. I’m moving up the greasy pole of this company and I’ve got to act fast.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“I think Serena’s got most of it covered,” Stuart replied, ignoring Emma’s questioning look, and pointedly not bothering to explain why Serena should be so involved.

“Has that useless son of mine been doing anything sensible?”

“He’s got a job with the theatre for the summer season.”

“They’ll soon knock that out of him when he goes to the academy.”

“I don’t think he wants to go there.”

“Who asked him?” Stuart asked angrily. “I’ve set up an admission interview. I may not be here, so you’ll have to take him when the date comes through.”

“Where are you going to be?”

“I’ve a lot of travelling to do. I need to get this company moving and I need to make sure we’re all moving in the same direction.”

“Does Serena know which direction to move as well?”

“Should that question mean anything to me?” he snarled.

“I don’t know.” Emma smiled sweetly. “I was only asking because you seem so stressed.”

“She sorts things out and that relieves me of the stress,” Stuart snapped back. “I thought she was your friend.”

“I haven’t seen her in months.”

“I guess that’s because I keep her too busy.” Stuart’s tone softened.

“That could be it,” Emma said softly and turned away. “Can I get you anything or won’t you be staying long enough?”

“I’m only here to change clothes and re-pack my suitcase,” he said, pushing past her. “Is Casey around?”

“I think he’s in his room.” Emma looked towards the stairs. “Shall I call him?”

“It would be good to touch base with him before I go.”

“I’ll get him.”

Emma suddenly got a horrible picture in her mind of Stuart blundering into Casey’s room and seeing all the makeup and heels, the clothes and lingerie. She doubted the female Casey would be any tidier than the male one had been.

It was a small relief as Casey appeared, coming down the stairs. He had a beanie hat jammed down over his head to eye level. His hands were in the pockets of his jeans.

“Thank goodness,” Emma said to herself. “He’s hidden the hair and nails.”

And then Emma got a huge waft of a flowery perfume as he passed her.

“Please don’t let this become a big scene,” Emma said a silent prayer.

“Good to see you, Dad,” he mumbled.

“You too.” Stuart was as uncommunicative as ever with his son. “Don’t go getting too many fancy ideas at that theatre. Remember where you’re going in the Autumn.”

“I know where I’m going all right,” Casey said softly.

“Better get a different deodorant too,” Stuart said. “That’s a bit girly.”

“Thanks, Dad, I’ll remember that,” Casey said.

Emma looked at him but couldn’t work out what was going on behind his inscrutable expression.

Before they could say more, Stuart pushed past them and headed up the stairs with his suitcase in his hand. Emma and Casey exchanged glances. Emma signalled for him to get out of the way and he took the hint with a glance back.

There were sounds of crashing and banging. Emma went to see what was going on and saw Stuart

pulling clothes out of his wardrobe and laying them on the bed. He packed his case as untidily as ever.

“Are you going to be away long?” Emma asked, trying to straighten out his shirts so that they wouldn’t get too creased.

“I may be a week or two, maybe longer.” He snapped the case shut. “There should be an Uber here in a minute or two.”

“I’ll go and look,” Emma said as a car horn hooted outside and Stuart’s mobile pinged at an incoming message.

“Got to run.” He looked at his screen and shoved the mobile back in his packet. “Take care.”

He pushed past and ran down the stairs. Emma followed and was in time to see the car pulling away. There was a female head visible through the back window and they appeared to kiss as the car turned out of the drive.

“Serena, you don’t know how lucky you are.” she said to herself as the car disappeared.

“Was that for real?” Casey appeared from behind her.

“I guess your father may be finding comfort elsewhere,” Emma said.

“Does that mean what I think it means?” Casey asked.

“I think it does,” Emma sighed. “Serena was in the back of the car with him. Maybe it was never intended to last.”

“You’ve still got me.” Casey put his arms round her and held her closely. “I’m going to be the best daughter you never knew you had.”

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“Emma, could you come and see me when you’re passing the theatre?” Melanie’s call took her by surprise.

“Sure, I’ll call in later if you’re going to be there. What’s it about?”

Emma couldn’t think of anything problematic. Casey had only started work there the day before.

“I’d rather not say over the phone but it would be good to see you anyway.”

It was mid-afternoon by the time she got there. Melanie took her by the arm and they went outside and into the coffee shop across the road.

“I don’t know how to ask this, so I’m going to be blunt,” Melanie said. “Have you noticed anything unusual about Casey’s behaviour recently?”

“What kind of unusual?” Emma said innocently.

“How about we start with his hair and work down to the remains of eye makeup on his face. If we cast our eyes further down, he’s got the most flamboyant manicure that I’ve ever seen on a boy and remember, I’ve spent years in theatres.”

“He’s having a few issues; doing a bit of experimenting,” Emma replied.

“I think you and I know that it’s a bit more than experimenting.”

“I think he likes pretending to be a girl.”

“He’s in the right place for that.” Melanie nodded. “Has he worked it all out yet?”

“What? Do you mean has he decided if he wants to do it with boys or girls yet?”

“That’s exactly what I’m asking.”

“Then I have to say that I don’t know. At the moment he’s entranced by the idea of being a girl. I don’t think he’s thought about relationships yet.”

“That could be difficult.”

“I used to think that it was all so simple,” Emma sighed. “Now the more I read and hear, the more difficult and messy I think it is.”

“Sex is always messy,” Melanie said.

“He’s levelheaded so far. I think he’ll work it out,” Emma said.

“I can guess how much he thinks the theatre could be good for him.” Melanie looked thoughtful.

“He saw your production of ‘Charlie’s Aunt’ and was really impressed.”

“Don’t tell me that started this off.”

“No, I can’t pretend it did,” Emma replied. “But Ian Morgan, your female lead, really impressed him.”

“Ian was very good, once I’d convinced him to take the role. He’s still playing girl parts, I believe.”

Emma took a deep breath and decided to confide in Melanie. She told her about Casey’s dressing-up games with Ruth. She told her that Stuart was deter-

mined to send Casey to a military cadet school and that this was his way of making sure that they rejected him.

Melanie was instantly sympathetic. "If Casey the girl turns up for work, tell him I won't mind at all."

"That's really good of you."

"Don't thank me; he's still going to have to work," Melanie replied. "He told me about his time as a dancer and I was hoping to use his skills to help with the shows that the amateurs put on before the real season starts."

"He was a really good dancer," Emma said. "His father hated it but after his horrible knee injury, he had to find something suitable after skating."

"He did formation dancing too, he said."

"He's good. I remember Casey demonstrating steps to the dance studio. He did the boys part and then he did the girls part. When one of them challenged him, he did it again perfectly in heels."

"Be honest with me; at home is he a boy or a girl?"

"He's a boy who dresses like a girl," Emma said. "I should have known there was something there when I first saw how he moved in heels."

"How good is he as a girl?"

"I'd say he's as authentic and real as possible." Emma thought carefully. "He's as obsessed about makeup and hair as any teenage girl could be."

"Tell him to be a girl whenever he wants to but he's to come and see me first."

“Thanks Melanie.” Emma said. “The interview for the cadet school’s coming up soon. I think he intends to go in full female mode and make sure he’s rejected.”

“Won’t Stuart get upset?”

“Maybe we both *want* Stuart to be upset for different reasons.” Emma looked away, embarrassed to have admitted it.

“There’s a lot you’re not telling me.”

“You know the basics. Casey doesn’t want to go to military cadet school. He likes being a girl.” Emma paused. “Stuart’s been seeing Serena...”

“Do you mean ‘seeing’ as in the biblical sense?”

“Do I think they’re sleeping together?” Emma looked at Melanie directly. “Yes I do. Someone sent me a photo of them together. It didn’t look like a work meeting.”

Emma’s eyes filled with tears for the first time since the photograph arrived.

“I think Stuart is getting comfort elsewhere these days. He’s got little time for either of us.”

“Oh, you poor dear. That must be so hard on you both.” Melanie held her hand tightly.

“Don’t worry about us.” Emma dried her eyes. “He’s still paying the bills. It’s probably because he’s making so much that he doesn’t care, so we’re doing okay.”

“Hasn’t he noticed Casey changing?”

“He did tell him that his deodorant was too flowery, but that apart, I think they avoided contact pretty well.”

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“Melanie called me in to speak to her before I finished at the theatre this afternoon.”

“I’ve always liked Melanie,” Emma said, guessing what might be coming.

“I’ve been working through the wardrobe and clearing out the dressing rooms,” Casey said. “We’re getting things ready for the amateur shows.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Don’t rush me.” Casey hesitated. “I think I should have been more careful.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“My nails.” Casey held up his hands. “They’re beautiful, and I didn’t want to cut them. Someone saw and I think they told Melanie. She said it would be fine with her if I decided... if I wanted...”

“If you wanted what?”

“If I wanted to be a girl while I was working in her theatre.”

“And is that what you want?” Emma asked. “Your father might be a problem.”

“I can live with that,” Casey said. “It’s not like he really cares.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know how to show he cares.”

“Like he wants me to be all military.” Casey sneered at the thought.

“Maybe he’ll get over it,” Emma sighed. “I think we know where that plan will be going, especially when I take you to the interview. It’s come through for a few days’ time.”

“That helps. I’ve decided anyway,” Casey said. “I’m going to be a girl. Melanie’s cool with it. I’m not going to make any big announcements; I’m just going to turn up for work. They can take me as I am.”

“That’s brave.” Emma hugged him. “Have you thought that you’ll meet some people from school, from dancing; people who’ll know who you are.”

“I’ve thought of it. I doubt that they’ll recognise me. I have changed a bit. I can’t say I know how to deal with it but hey, it’s not my problem. I’m going to be who I want to be. If it’s a problem, it’s theirs, not mine.”

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Emma waited next morning; Casey was taking ages. He’d asked for a ride to the theatre. He was late. She tried to guess what was happening.

Was he having a bad hair day, today of all days? Maybe his makeup wouldn’t look right. Perhaps he was trying on every combination of clothes he had. Could he have broken a nail?

Time was passing and while he wasn’t expected to keep strict times as the theatre wasn’t open to the public, he was expected to turn up. Emma called several times.

“I’m coming,” was the only response she got.

She asked if he needed any help.

"I'm okay," he replied.

Eventually she heard him coming. She closed her eyes, hoping that she wouldn't see a disaster when he appeared.

"How do I look?" he asked.

She opened her eyes to see a blonde girl with almost perfect makeup. Her complexion may have been a little pale and her eyes rimmed by a little too much black, but this was what he wanted to be today. Silently, she praised his courage.

"You look like a girl who's ready for a day at the theatre," Emma said.

"I wanted to see you before I went anywhere else," Casey said as he entered Melanie's office an hour or so later.

"This is me." He spun round on his heels and looked her in the eye.

"Okay, this is you," Melanie laughed. "I didn't think you'd be turning up dressed as a boy, so do be careful. You're going to attract lots of attention looking like that. What can I say? Enjoy it but for goodness' sake be careful."

"I'm always careful." Casey didn't understand.

"You may be careful as a boy but you don't look anything like a boy right now. You're a girl, going on to be a woman. That makes life different."

"I guess..."

“Don’t guess; stay safe,” Melanie said. “Always carry your mobile in case you need it to call for help.”

“I do that anyway.”

“It’s more important for girls,” Melanie said. “Don’t get caught without money, in case you need to get a cab home quickly.”

“Okay.”

“And the most important rule of all is this one. Never be with a guy alone, unless you’re really sure of him. Boys can be bigger and more forceful. They may not want to take no for an answer.”

“Like in that court case with the movie producer.”

“Exactly so; there are many ways that you can become a victim,” Melanie said. “You’ve got a lot to learn. Take it slow and, above all, be careful.”

“I promise,” Casey said. “I know I’m new to all this but it feels right for me. I’ll remember what you say.”

“You look truly gorgeous. I can’t believe it really. Lecture over, let’s think about some work.” Melanie shuffled some notes around and picked one. “There’s a dancing school coming in for a first stage rehearsal this afternoon. Can you be there to help them?”

“I’d love that.” Casey almost skipped out of the office.

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Casey called Emma to pick her up from the theatre. It was far later than she’d been expecting to be called. Apparently there had been much more for Casey to do that day.

“How was my girl’s first day?” Emma asked, sensing that he was bubbling with excitement.

“It was amazing,” Casey said. “Everyone seemed to accept me. There was an older actor called Henry who knew Ian Morgan. He told me all about him and said he’d email to tell him about me.”

“I remember who he is,” Emma said. “He was Charlie’s Aunt.”

“And that’s not all; it gets better,” Casey said. “There was this dancing school and I knew the choreographer. It was the first time on stage for their students. I danced with them. I even demonstrated the difficult bits.”

“Backwards in heels presumably?” Emma laughed. “You could do those things years ago.”

“This was different. I don’t think the students knew anything about me. It was like I was directing the rehearsal. And of course I can do it backwards in heels. I haven’t lost *all* my dancing skills.”

“It’s like riding a bicycle. You never forget a skill once learned.”

“I learned a new skill today too.” Casey turned to Emma.

“You’ve got false eyelashes,” Emma noticed. “I’d have seen them immediately if I hadn’t been driving.”

“Aren’t they just beautiful?” Casey said. “One of the dancers showed me how easy it was to wear them. I was doubtful; all that glue seemed to stick everywhere but where I wanted it.”

“It looks like you got it right.”

“I know and the effect is really special. It feels so feminine.” Casey looked at her reflection in the car’s vanity mirror.

“You had a good day then?” Emma asked. “No regrets?”

“None and it gets better but I don’t know if you’re going to like this,” Casey said more slowly. “The choreographer; he’s called Darren Fox. He’s asked me to go for pizza with him. We swapped numbers. I said I’d ask you.”

“What would you do if I said you shouldn’t go?”

“I’d probably plead for a while until you said I could.”

“You’re probably too old for me to be choosing your friends,” Emma said. “But I will worry. Not every girl is like you.”

“I know; Melanie gave me a lecture on staying safe today.”

“I can guess why. You don’t look like a guy in a dress.” Emma hesitated. “Maybe if you were to go on a foursome, you’d be safer.”

“But I don’t have a girlfriend to ask along with her boyfriend.”

“Perhaps this choreographer does?”

“Wouldn’t that sound like I didn’t trust him?” Casey asked. “Or he could think that perhaps that I didn’t like him enough.”

“I think you’re going to have to make that decision.” Emma thought it would be better not to say too much. “Please make sure you’re safe though.”

"I'll be safe." Casey sounded a little exasperated.

"I'm not saying it to be difficult. I'd hate you to be exposed."

"I think he knows."

"Are you sure?"

"Not at all; it's the way he looked at me. When I saw him talking to Melanie, they were both looking at me as if they were talking about me. I saw his eyes open as if he was both pleased and surprised." Casey's words tumbled out in a torrent.

"I can't say don't do it. I don't want to make decisions for you but stay somewhere in public if you do go on this date. Watch out in case he drinks too much and gets out of control."

"Anything else?" Casey grinned across the car.

"Take some condoms. I know he can't get you pregnant so I don't have that worry but I'd hate for you to catch some other infection."

"You sound like my mother," Casey said.

They looked at each other and simultaneously burst out laughing.

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The week went quickly.

"I've heard nothing from your father," Emma told Casey as she picked him up from the theatre on Friday evening. "I've tried to call him, just for the sake of calling him."

"No message either?" Casey asked.

“Not a word. although I did leave a chatty message for him. I don’t know if he ever played it,” Emma said. “It’s hard. We seem to have nothing to say to each other. I know he’s your father but I don’t know him anymore.”

“I can understand that. I don’t think I know him either.” Casey sat silently looking out of the window. “I told Darren he can pick me up tomorrow for that pizza.”

“So you decided.”

“I thought it would be good,” Casey said. “If this is the new me, I shouldn’t hide away. I’ve got to go out sometimes. I don’t mean that going to the theatre isn’t going out, but... you know what I mean.”

“Does Melanie know?”

“I asked her about Darren,” Casey replied. “She says that she didn’t tell him too much about me, but she thinks he knows.”

“How could that happen?”

“I think it was the connection through the dancing school. He remembered someone called Casey apparently and put two and two together.”

“But you’re not sure?”

“I’m not sure of anything right now but I’ll never forgive myself if I chicken out.”

“Do you like him?”

“You’ll have to define ‘like him’ before I can answer that question,” Casey prevaricated, wondering how to answer that when his feelings were all at sea.

“Okay, do you see him as boyfriend material?”

“I don’t know... I think I do, if that’s possible.”

“Anything’s possible. This is the twenty-first century.”

“I’ve no idea what Darren might be thinking, so who knows what may be possible.” Casey’s face said she was building castles in the air, rather than thinking things through.

“I’ll be worrying all the time you’re out,” Emma said.

“Please don’t repeat all the warnings. I got the message from you and from Melanie too.”

“I’ll try to say nothing more.” Emma stopped outside the house. “It’s going to be difficult though.”

“How about you come with me and pick out a nice dress?” Casey said. “I can get open with a high neckline and a lock on the zipper so that he can try but he can’t get it off.”

“Don’t even joke about it,” Emma laughed. I think you’ll be okay and your father’s credit card can take another hit for the fanciest dress you can find.”

“Not too fancy; it’s a pizza restaurant, not somewhere dressy,” Casey smiled back. “And don’t worry, I’ll be careful.”

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Their first stop was almost inevitably at the mall’s nail salon. Casey breezed in like a regular and was soon chatting away to the manicurist. Emma was far less used to this treatment since she’d married Stu-

art but today she indulged herself too. It wasn't as dark red as Casey's; neither were her nails extended as long but she liked the result.

"This makes me feel really feminine." Casey held up his hands for Emma to see.

"I can believe that. I don't know how you manage to do anything with them that long. I'd be breaking them every day."

"I'm careful but it's addictive."

"I held my breath when your father called the other day. If you'd pulled your hands out of your pockets, he'd have had a fit."

"He's probably going to find out sooner or later. I think I'd go for sooner. Let's get the big row over."

"Be careful what you wish for..."

Emma knew that the letter for his school interview was sitting in a drawer at home. It was for the next week. She intended to tell him but not today so she changed the subject.

"You're really a girl when you go shopping like this." Emma carried three parcels back to the car.

Casey had four. "It's no use having a credit card if you don't bend it from time to time, they say.

"Especially when your father never seems to look at the accounts."

"I think that little black dress will be wonderful, especially with the shoes and purse to match."

"You'll look good anywhere in that dress, I was really pleased that you went back to it, even though it

was the first you tried on and we had to go through another five shops before you decided to go back.”

“I had to be sure,” Casey said. “Can I raid your jewellery box when we get home?”

“Of course, it’s yours to borrow anytime.”

“I’ve been wearing these small studs all week. I think I deserve a change.” Casey replied. “I thought those drops with the sapphires at the bottom in my lower holes, with the sapphire studs in the higher ones.”

“They’d look good with the dress. Your taste is impeccable.”

“None of that trashy stuff for me,” Casey said. “I’m a classy, high maintenance sort of girl. Would you help me to blow dry my hair when I’ve showered and washed it?”

“Wouldn’t you prefer a long soak in a bubble bath?”

“You’re teasing; stop stereotyping me.” Casey looked sternly at Emma but with amusement on his lips. “I’m not that predictable. Besides, I want to have time to get the makeup perfect. If he’s being brave enough to take me out, I have to look my best.”

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“Hi, I’m Darren.” Emma opened the door to get her first glimpse of him. “I’m here for Casey.”

She saw his Ford Ranger in the driveway, clean and nearly new.

“Come in,” Emma invited and waved to a chair in the family room. “He should be ready, after three hours of preparation.”

Emma silently kicked herself. She’d referred to Casey as “he” when Darren probably knew Casey as ‘she’. She looked at him and smiled as she went towards the stairs. He didn’t seem to have noticed her slip up.

“Are you ready? Darren’s here for you,” she called, still hoping Darren hadn’t heard her mistake.

“Don’t worry. I know girls are always late getting ready,” he said a little nervously.

Phew, he probably hadn’t noticed the slip, Emma thought.

“I didn’t expect to see Casey at the theatre,” Darren said. “She was a great help with training the amateurs.”

“Dancing was always a big thing after the knee injury,” Emma said, carefully avoiding using a pronoun.

“I think we lost contact... not that we were ever really in contact,” Darren said. “I think we were in the same formation competitions at one time but on different teams.”

Emma felt awkward as she tried to smile and make conversation. If he knew Casey was a boy and not a girl, why didn’t he come out and say it? Skirting around the issue was doing nothing for her anxiety.

He didn’t look dangerous. He seemed to be a little older than Casey but only by a couple of years. He was clean and tidy, nicely dressed in chinos and an off-white shirt. He didn’t look like a drinker or an

abuser. Emma mentally herself off internally for that thought.

“We’re only going for pizza,” Darren said as if sensing her nervousness. “I’ll have her back about ten.”

Emma smiled and was about to answer when they heard a noise from the stairs. Casey appeared, smiling and looking totally composed and ready.

He smiled at Emma and gave a slight nod of thanks, then went to Darren who stood up and smiled. Casey put both hands on his shoulders, tiptoed in her black stilettos and air kissed him with an easy familiarity.

Within a couple of moments, they were out of the door and driving away. Emma still didn’t know if he knew the truth about Casey.

The time seemed to fly by. Darren was a good talker and they were able to share reminiscences about the dancing schools and teams they’d both been in. It was surprising how many times their paths had almost crossed.

“I promised your mom that I’d have you home by ten.” Darren looked at his mobile to see the time display. “I think we’d better move.”

“I can call her and say we’re on our way if you want to stop and talk a little more. There’s a nice spot near the river and the night air smells almost heavenly.”

“Would she mind? I don’t want to get in her bad books so quickly.” Darren pulled off the road and onto the grass, then the pebbles at the riverside.

“She’s my stepmom and she’s really cool with everything I do. She’s like an older sister to me. Well, that’s what we pretend sometimes.”

“You look very alike.”

“That’s because we use the same secret hair products and, of course, we have good genes.”

“I think I’m getting to like your genes.” Darren took Casey’s hand and looked at it.

Casey called Emma and got her okay.

“She says if you get me back after eleven she’ll put the cops on you for child abduction.”

“That’s no good if we don’t get locked up together.”

“Would you like us to get locked up together?” Casey asked, releasing her seat belt and leaning in towards Darren.

“It could be fun,” he replied, moving a little closer but hesitating even though Casey expected him to close in for a kiss. The moment seemed to go on and on.

“If you’re wondering, then yes, I’d like you to,” Casey said as Darren moved closer.

Their lips touched, just a fractional touch, then they moved apart, still looking into each other’s eyes. Like magnet and steel, they came together again, this time harder and with a lot more meaning.

Casey felt the tiny prickles of his whiskers, even though he looked clean shaven. She felt his lips on hers, firmer and with a tongue that tickled her lips. They broke apart and then again they locked lips, this time without restraint. Casey’s lips opened. Darren’s tongue entered and wrestled with hers.

She felt his hand in her hair at the back of her head, holding the kiss. It wasn’t threatening or un-

pleasant, but comforting and gentle, holding her lips to his.

Casey felt his hand across her midriff, rising towards her breast. She knew that Darren could feel the bottom of her bra, and swiftly she took his hand and pulled it away.

“I think we’d better head home,” Casey said. “We don’t want to get on the bad side of Emma.”

When they arrived at the driveway, Casey kissed him quickly, then ran into the house with a wave.

Their paths didn’t cross at work for a few days, although they exchanged a few text messages about nothing in particular.

Casey thought it was good to have a friend to keep in touch.

Their next date wasn’t really a date. It was a quick coffee and a long shopping trip. Casey and Darren browsed through all the boutiques and department stores in town, and trawled the shoe shops too.

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Both Emma and Casey had been dreading the interview at the cadet school but they couldn’t ignore it any more. Preparations were essential.

“That’s a stunning dress,” Emma said. “I wish I could look that good in something so tight.”

“I went shopping yesterday for something special for my interview,” Casey said. I took Darren along but all he did was saying that he loved everything I tried on.”

“If he approved this dress, then he was right.”

“He was definitely right. I love the baby blue shade. The way the subtle flower pattern goes on the diagonal is perfect. It goes over my bust on the left and emphasises the curve, or it will when I put my breast forms in and you zip me up at the back.”

Emma pulled up the zipper. “Wow, that’s really tight and quite short too. I can see every muscle of your behind and your panties.”

“That’s the effect I wanted.” Casey turned and held out her hands. “I got my nails done to match.

“The silvery blue contrast on your middle finger is perfect but they’re a little longer than before.”

“I didn’t go to stupid length though. I only wanted them to be really noticeable.” Casey looked at her nails. “Could I borrow some things from your jewellery box again?”

“What were you thinking of?” Emma asked.

“I’d love those sapphire earrings, both the drops and the studs again. I think they’d be great with this dress.”

“I agree and if you look, there’s a sapphire ring in there too. It’s quite big, like a dress ring, with a square cut stone and small diamonds all the way round. I think it might fit your middle finger too.”

“Don’t laugh but I think you’ll have to help me with the earrings.” Casey held up her hands with those longer nails.

“That’s what vanity does for you.” Emma found the piercings and gently put the earrings in.

She found the sapphire ring and slipped it onto Casey's hand. It was a little tight but fitted her right middle finger. Casey held out her hand and smiled as she admired it.

"It's stunning," he said. Was it another gift from Dad?"

"Yes, he knew how to treat a girl in those days."

"He probably still does."

"Probably, but it's not me anymore. Those heels are a great match for the dress too," Emma changed the subject.

"They took a bit of finding. I think Darren was sick and tired of shoe shops by the time I found them."

"Has he seen you in the dress?"

"Not yet but he may get that pleasure later if all goes well."

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"Drive around again," Casey said. "I don't want to be there too early. I want to walk in with two minutes to spare."

"Why so close to time?" Emma asked.

"I don't want them to see me, think about what they might do, then put me off," Casey said. "If I'm there on time, they'll be so pleased I've turned up, I'll go straight in to interview. At least that's the plan."

Three minutes before the appointed hour, Casey got out of their car and started to walk up the steps towards the gothic columns which surrounded the



entrance. His heels made a pleasing click on the stone.

It was dark inside and he blinked, before walking towards a reception desk, where a forbidding and disapproving glance welcomed her.

"I'm Casey," he said. "I'm just in time for my interview, I think."

"Your interview?" the stern-looking woman asked. "We're interviewing military cadet candidates today, not domestic staff."

"I know that's why I'm here. I've the letter somewhere in my purse."

"But this is an all-boys academy."

"I know and that's what I am; all boy."

Casey did a twirl just as the intercom buzzed. He couldn't hear what was said at the other end.

"I don't think..." the receptionist said before being interrupted. "You'd better go in; the General will see you now."

Casey walked across the hallway to the huge double doors at the end with the word "Commandant" in gold lettering across the front. His heels seemed to click louder in this echoing space. He knocked and entered.

"Hi General," Casey said on entering and clicked his heels across to a chair in front of a big desk.

He sat on the chair in front of the desk, and straightened his skirt, then placed his purse on his knee, dropped it and made a show of finding it and settling it back there. He crossed his legs, letting a

shoe dangle from his toe, before uncrossing them and slipping his foot back into the shoe.

He pushed his fingers through his hair; looked as if he was thinking about it and then did it again, this time drawing some blonde strands over his cheek before pushing them back again. He saw the commandant watching as if entranced but not wanting to show it.

“I think there’s some mistake,” the General said, looking a little flustered and shuffling papers on his desk. “I don’t interview domestic staff.”

“There’s no mistake, General. I’m certainly not here for domestic staff. That’s not my style at all,” Casey said in an affected drawl. “I’ve the papers you sent me in my purse and they said to be here now, so here I am... ready to be interviewed.

“But this academy is for boys only.”

“That’s fine and it’s why I’m here.”

“We have a sister academy for girl cadets.”

“I’d never fit in there. I’m for the boys section.”

“But you’re not eligible.”

“I’m certainly not eligible for the girls’ academy, not with what I’ve got in my panties.”

“And you’re certainly not eligible here.”

“Why not, my Daddy wrote to you to get this interview fixed. He sent a big cheque along with my medical records so that you’d ignore my damaged knee.”

Casey shifted her leg and pointed as obviously as possible to a knee. The commandant’s eyes followed.

"I damaged it ice dancing. You know, on skates. I had to have it reconstructed."

Casey drew out that last word as if long words were a problem, then re-arranged his skirt and sat back again.

"Do you mean your leg is likely to be a problem?"

"That's why Daddy sent that big cheque; to cover any problem you might have with my medical records. I guess it was all right because he got a big thank-you letter and here I am with you."

"But this is an all-male institution."

"And so am I, General; all male that is."

"This is nonsense, we won't accept you."

"That's discrimination," Casey said. "Isn't that unlawful these days?"

"Not in this case."

"I wonder what Daddy's lawyers would say about that."

"I don't care, your father's going to receive a letter turning down your application."

"Does that mean you'll be sending his cheque back? I guess with a place like this, there's some pretty big bills to pay."

"He'll get it back as fast as I can find it," the General stood. "Now I'll bid you good day."

"Why thanks. It's sure been a pleasure meeting you."

Casey stood and held out his hand to be shaken. The commandant took a step forward and automatically held out his hand. Casey grasped it lightly, stepped in on tiptoes and planted a big kiss on his cheek. As he pulled away, Casey was delighted to see a perfect lipstick mark on the man's reddening face.

He sashayed to the door, emphasising the movement of his rear. He turned to catch him watching, as he knew he would be. He turned, blew a big kiss to him, and left the room.

Casey's heels clicked again as she walked past the sour-faced receptionist.

"Thanks so much," he said. "I think that went really well."

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"Drive, drive, drive." Casey got into the car and fastened her seat belt. "I think I got away with it. The poor man didn't know what to say in the end."

Emma took her at her word and sped away. Once they left the grounds, she slowed down to a sensible speed.

"Your father's going to explode."

"Only if he reads his mail," Casey said bitterly. "He probably leaves that to Serena these days."

"I guess we'll have to live with that."

"It was great in there." Casey bubbled with excitement. "I said almost everything I'd rehearsed."

"You rehearsed for the interview?" Emma asked in surprise.

“It was Melanie. I told her where I was going and that I wanted to make sure they got every reason to refuse me,” Casey said.

“Surely the dress was enough,” Emma said. “How many more reasons did they need?”

“Melanie pretended to interview me yesterday. She was far tougher than the old guy in there, but it helped me to work out all the things I wanted to say and do to make sure they rejected me.”

“So we have Melanie to thank. I’m so pleased you got what you wanted.”

“Melanie was great. She suggested a few tricks; body language stuff, then she suggested that I talk in a drawl, as if I was a bit stupid.”

“Melanie played a wonderful southern belle once. I can’t remember the play but she was so funny with that affected drawl.”

“She tried to teach me that southern accent, but I don’t think I got it properly. I think what I did worked anyway.” Casey thumbed away at her mobile and put it into her purse with a look of satisfaction.

“If you can drop me at the mall, Darren will bring me home later.”

“He seems to be turning into a regular date,” Emma said. “I don’t know how much he knows or how much you’ve told him, but be careful. If he doesn’t know and then finds out, it could be really awful.”

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“How much does Darren know about me?” Casey asked Melanie as they worked through a rehearsal

schedule. "I used to think that he knew about me; what I was. Now I'm not so sure."

"I'm not really sure either," Melanie replied. "I know that he remembers you from dancing but I'm not sure if he remembers you as a boy or thinks you were one of the girls."

"I think it's getting to the stage where I need to work out an answer to that."

"If he doesn't know, it's going to be an awful shock when he finds out." Melanie stopped what she was doing and looked up. "Maybe you'd better let it cool down before it gets too serious."

"I think you're right." Casey sighed and looked sad. "I don't know how to ask him if he knows. I don't know how to tell him if he doesn't. I don't want to end it altogether; he's been so gentle and such fun. Oh, what do I do next?"

"I can't advise you." Melanie put her arm out to hug him. "I've seen all kinds of relationships in my years around theatres but I've never come across anything like this before."

"What did Ian Morgan do?"

"His case was completely different. All the actors knew him and there was some resentment when he got the star part. When he dressed as a girl and later when he went on to professional theatre, everyone knew he was a boy underneath."

"This whole dance around sex is such a messy business. Why can't people simply be friends?"

Melanie looked at Casey; Casey looked at Melanie. They both started to smile and then to laugh.

“That made no sense whatever,” Melanie said. “For what it’s worth, I think you should speak quietly to Darren and give him the opportunity to decide where you’re going next.”

“Does that mean you think I should tell him everything?” Casey asked.

“Yes, I think so. Do it gently and somewhere that you’re going to be safe. If he’s upset and if he has a temper, you need to choose the place and the time carefully.”

They worked through the morning, then as Melanie went out for a meeting, Casey returned to the rehearsal schedule. A disorganised troupe of early teenagers was scheduled for two hours on the stage. It would be their first time and Casey knew that whatever their director had done, there would have to be some modification to fit the space.

He thought about Darren again as they gathered and listened to their director. It was time to concentrate on them. The Darren problem would have to wait.

“Melanie doesn’t know how much Darren really knows about me,” Casey opened the subject with Emma as they lounged about that evening.

“I’ve been worrying about that too,” Emma said. “You seemed to be getting very close and then this last week or two, Darren seems to have disappeared.”

“That’s down to me,” Casey said. “I’ve had to make excuses. I’m busy or I’m too tired. I’ve even said that I’m washing my hair, then *your* hair.”

“If he falls for that old line and stays around, then he must be really keen.”

“I know and he *is* keen. I can feel it,” Casey replied. “Heaven help me but I’m keen too. I’m so scared of what he knows and how he’s going to react when he finds out what’s in my panties.”

“Melanie doesn’t know anything?” Emma asked.

“She’s not sure.”

“You’ll have to excuse this question but be honest. How close has he got to finding out?”

“He’s not really come close,” Casey replied. “He’s so polite and respectful.”

“Has he kissed you?”

“Yes, he kisses really nicely,” Casey replied. “I could tell he wanted to kiss me that first time but I had to tell him he could before he got the courage to actually put his lips to mine.”

“How did that make you feel?” Emma wondered out loud.

“I loved it; it was like as if I went all squishy inside. I wanted him to do it again and again but then I could feel his hands.”

“Were they wandering where they shouldn’t go?”

“It was nothing like that. I don’t think it was really deliberate but his hand touched the underwire at the bottom of my bra. I froze and pulled away, then I got him to drive me home.”

“But that must have been a week or more ago.”

“It was and somehow it didn’t put him off. He’s still calling and wanting to see me.”

“I think you’ve gotten to the stage where you’ve got to be honest,” Emma said. The longer you leave it, the worse it’s going to get.”

“I know but how do I do it?”

“You do it somewhere where you’re going to be safe. I can’t pretend that this isn’t a big thing. If he hates the idea of being deceived by a boy, things could get dangerous.” Emma squeezed Casey’s hand in sympathy. “It’s awful to risk losing someone you like so much but think what could happen if you’re not honest.”

“I know.” Casey took a deep breath. “I’ve got to be brave and get it over with.”

Emma didn’t say more but secretly thought about the dilemma. She’d wanted to use Casey to get back at Stuart. His betrayal was unforgivable.

Was she responsible for this mess? Had she used Casey for her own ends and manipulated him beyond reason? That wasn’t true either. Casey had been a very willing victim, if victim he was: he was so clearly willing to be a girl.

“I think you’d better tell Darren. Have a heart-to-heart, but don’t leave it. The longer it goes on, he may decide he’s had enough, give up on you altogether, and you’ll lose him anyway.”

“I’m scared it may go wrong.” Casey turned to her, eyes full of tears, and mascara running down his cheeks. “But you’re right. I’ve got to talk it through with him and do it soon.”

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“Have you been avoiding me?” Darren’s voice on Casey’s answering machine said. “I can’t seem to get any time with you. I’m pining, really pining. I thought we had a good thing starting. Please call me. I miss you.”

Casey played the message to Emma and again to Melanie. Both gave the same advice.

“You’ve got to meet with him. It can’t be worse than this.”

Casey agreed but summoning the courage to do so was difficult. He knew that there were only two possible outcomes; to carry on and grow closer, or the big break up, with or without recrimination.

“It’s really scary,” he explained. “I know I’ve got to do something but how and when is the problem.”

Darren’s truck drove by slowly again today,” Emma said when Casey arrived home. “I think he’s beginning to haunt this lane.”

“Melanie’s seen him outside the theatre too,” Casey replied. “She asked him why he wasn’t coming in but he made some excuse about forgetting something and drove away.”

“He’s probably as confused as you are.”

“But he doesn’t know why,” Casey said. “I’m the one with the problem, not him. I wish I’d never met him.”

“You don’t mean that,” Emma sympathised but had no idea what might solve their problem. “Would you like me to talk to him?”

“Yes... No... I don’t know.” Casey’s tears started to flow again.

A couple of days later, Emma saw that truck parked near the theatre. She opened the passenger door, hauled herself in and looked at Darren. He didn’t seem to be getting much sleep, she thought, as she considered what to say next.

“How’ve you been?” she asked, knowing how lame it sounded.

“I’ve been better,” he replied, turning to look at her. “I don’t know what’s going on and it’s driving me insane. I can’t sleep, I don’t want to eat. I’m working but that’s about all. Why won’t Casey return my calls? If she sees me, she turns away.”

“It’s complicated for Casey.” Emma remembered not to say that it was difficult for *him*, using the wrong pronoun. “Casey’s a little confused by this relationship. The feelings are new and coping is difficult.”

“If she’d talk to me, I’d try and sort it out.” Darren looked at her earnestly. “Can’t you tell her that I miss her and that I’d do anything to make it right?”

“I can say that but I don’t know if I’ll be listened to.”

“Do you know what the problem is?”

“I think I do but it wouldn’t be fair for me to discuss it.”

“But I have no idea what’s wrong.” Darren was calm and near to tears. “Is it women’s problems?”

“You could say that,” Emma replied. “It’s not easy for Casey being a woman with all these feelings around.”

“I’ve been thinking hard,” Darren said. “I know about the military cadet school that her father wanted her to attend. It didn’t seem real. I looked it up on the web. It’s a school for boys, not girls. That got me thinking. Am I thinking in the right direction?”

“You could be but you’d have to talk to Casey about that.”

“Would you tell her that I think I know?” Darren said. “Just that; I think I know and it doesn’t matter.”

“I’ll try.”

Emma did the only thing she could think of. She went to see Melanie. They sat in the coffee house near the theatre talking it through openly, when Darren’s truck stopped outside.

“Where’s Casey?” Emma said. “I’d better warn her.”

“Somewhere in the theatre, I think,” Melanie replied. “But I think we don’t warn her. I’m fed up with this. I’m going to take Darren in and bang their heads together.”

“I think I’d better come with you. One of us will have to pick up the pieces.”

Emma watched as Melanie hauled him out of the truck and marched him into the theatre. She followed, heart in mouth, wondering what would come next.

“Casey, there’s someone to see you,” she shouted down the auditorium and pushed Darren forward. “Sort it out, one way or the other, please. When you’ve done so, Emma and I will be next door, probably with something stronger than their coffee.”

“I couldn’t have done that,” Emma said as they walked out again.

“One of us had to,” Melanie replied. “They were never going to make a decision themselves.”

An hour passed. One drink turned to another and then a third as a second hour ticked away.

“We’re going to be well over-served before they’ve sorted out.” Melanie raised her glass in a mock toast.

“If they sort anything out. I think they’re both afraid to say too much, in case they scare the other away,” Emma said. “Oh, the joys of young love. Why is it always so messy?”

“If it’s messy, it’s usually good in the end,” Melanie said. “That’s why I never married.”

“And some men should never marry,” Emma said.

“We are cynical.” Melanie raised her glass again.

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“Here we are,” Darren said to Casey as they sat on the edge of the stage. “I want to say that you’re not going to make me go away. That’s not a threat. You know I’m not like that but I can be persuasive sometimes.”

“It’s not you, it’s me.” Casey thought for a few seconds of silence. “I’m not who you think I am.” She

turned and looked at him. “Underneath all this, I’m a boy just like you.”

“Is that what this has been all about?” Darren asked.

“It’s a pretty big thing.” Casey realised what the words could mean and blushed. “I didn’t mean that.”

“I guessed there was something about you...”

Darren looked directly in Casey’s eye. Clearly, he was thinking hard, then his face turned to a grin.

“If I show you mine, will you show me yours?”

“You can’t mean that surely.” Casey couldn’t believe what the words meant or if he meant them.

“I do,” he said. “Let’s get this out of the way and then we can start to enjoy being boy and girl friends together. It won’t be the most unlikely story that this theatre’s ever staged.”

Casey flung himself at Darren. Darren’s arms stopped him from going headlong into the orchestra pit and suddenly they were kissing. They parted and looked at each other. Both started to speak and then they kissed again.

“I was so afraid you’d hate me,” Casey said. “I didn’t know what I could say.”

“How about ‘Shut up and kiss me again?’”

“I think Darren and I have sorted ourselves an understanding,” Casey said when they went hand-in-hand to the coffee bar.

“That’s wonderful,” Melanie said. “You’ve saved me from a terrible hangover tomorrow.”

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“What do we do now?” Darren and Casey were sitting by the lake again in his truck.

“Who knew we’d end up here again?” Casey replied. “This is where we first kissed.”

“So we could kiss again.” Darren pulled Casey closer and time seemed to slip away.

“It’s getting colder,” Casey complained. “I do believe that there’s a lodge round the other side of this bay where we could get a nice warm room.”

“What would Emma say?”

“Probably the same as your mother would say; keep safe and always use a condom.”

“I’m not sure my mother would put it exactly like that. I’ve never been with a boy like you before.”

“Neither have I.” Darren pulled the truck off the parking area and set off along the road.

“So it’s a whole new experience for both of us.”

“Do you think we could figure out what to do?”

“I’ve no idea, I think so, but it’s going to be fun trying.”

“How difficult could it be?” Casey asked. “I’m the girl in this relationship. That means you get on top of me and do things. I think you have to put something inside me. I wriggle and squirm, then gasp with pleasure. You feel great *because* you’ve made me gasp with pleasure.”

“Then you tell me that I was wonderful; you’ve never felt anything like it and the earth moved.” Darren pulled into the lodge car park.

“That will be very true. I’m looking forward to it, so let’s go. I’ll call Emma and tell her we won’t be back for dinner.”

“Seriously, I’m excited but a little scared that we may not get it right the first time.”

“So we keep trying,” Casey said. “I can think of some things to do if at first you don’t succeed. I bet I could make you wriggle and squirm too.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

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“You bitch.” Melanie could hear Casey’s father shouting at Emma as she held the telephone receiver far from her ear. “You let him deliberately foul up his school interview.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Emma replied calmly.

“I’ll be a laughing stock at the golf club.”

“Only if you go round telling everyone.”

“I’m sure not going to do that.”

“Maybe you could get Serena to do it for you?” Emma couldn’t resist the jibe.

“Leave her out of it; she’s nothing to do with it.”

“But she may have a lot to do with it,” Emma said. “I have some wonderful pictures from the Cadet

School. I'd love to share them. Should I could leave a set for her at that hotel you were sharing recently."

"What hotel?"

"The one I got the picture from where you and Serena were holding hands. Would you like me to send a copy?"

"Bitch."

"No need to abuse poor Serena, I'm sure she's as taken by you as I was."

"Remember who's paying your bills."

"I do remember and you need to remember who has some wonderful pictures to share if you stop paying the bills, or try evicting your son and I from this house."

"No son of mine would do what he's done." Stuart sounded somewhere between hysterical and manic.

"I'll be sure to tell him what you said. Shall I ask him to call you from the hotel where he and his boyfriend are staying? I believe they've taken the honeymoon suite and I'm sure they'll have more pictures to share."

She smiled to herself as she ended the call, leaving him shouting to himself.

"Sometimes a girl has to do what a girl has to do."

THE END