

Weaver's Tale



by PJ Wright

Part 1

“ARE YOU SURE this is what you really want to do?” I regretted the words almost before they’d left my mouth. But they were said and it was therefore too late to take them back.

Not that I was entirely sure I wanted to even if I could.

Joey turned and looked at me over his shoulder, his expression unreadable. He didn’t say anything. He just stared.

I struggled to find more words of my own, but nothing came and I could only shrug. “What do you want me to say? This is just so...”

“What?” The word was inflectionless and therefore terribly charged.

“‘Hard.’ ‘Strange.’ ...” More struggling for the words that just didn’t say what I felt I had to say. “‘Uncomfortable!’”

My cousin turned to face me and then sat on the edge of his bed, his hands folded in his lap, the open boxes and tissue wrapping and those... *things* scattered to either side. “I hoped we were beyond this. That you understood.”

“I do!” Well, given what I’d just said that was patently untrue. “Okay, I *want* to. I want to be supportive and... All the things you need me to be right now. But...”

“But it’s easier to ‘understand’ when it’s all hypothetical and in the abstract? But now, when it’s starting to be real...”

“Real’. Yeah, well.” I made a vague gesture toward the items spread around Joey. “Maybe that’s part of the problem.”

He wouldn’t meet my gaze or follow the gesture to what was lying beside him. “Really? Is that really the only objection?”

“Oh come on. You know it isn’t. It’s... That stuff is... What it means and what you’re going to do with it is...”

He interrupted by raising his eyes to mine. “It’s the ‘what I’m going to do with it’ that’s the real problem, isn’t it?”

“Well, ‘duh!’ Look, what do you want me to say? At least I’m being honest and open. I know that’s part of what you wanted, anyway.”

“Aw, Max. It is. You know it is.” He sighed. “And you’re right. I need to not try and fool myself by pretending this is all easy and simple and that anyone who finds out and disapproves is the oddball and the exception.”

I folded my arms and nodded, grateful for what felt like an objectively neutral point I could make. “Disapproves.’ You know as well as I do that’s a pretty tame word for what might happen. You’re setting yourself up for some potentially *very ugly* stuff. *Dangerous* stuff.”

He dropped his gaze and went back to staring off into space. “I know. And I’m going to be careful for that reason. But...” He shrugged and then again turned that tragic, helpless expression that I’d seen so often lately back toward me. “It’s not like things aren’t ugly right now. It’s not like I’m doing this lightly, just for fun you know.”

My breath escaped in a long sigh and again I could only shrug. “I know. And that’s why I’m here and... All the rest.” Joey started to say something but I cut him off. “Look, moot point. You’re going to do this and I’m going to help. And if I have reservations then I have reservations and like you say, that’s just the reality of it. So what the hell? Right?”

He nodded and offered me a sad little smile. “Right. And I was going to say that your reservations notwithstanding, you’re here for me when I need someone to be here and that’s... That’s *important* to me, Max.”

I tried to trivialize it with a negligent little flick of my hand. “Hey. What are cousins for?”

“Usually less than this.”

“Yeah. Well. Whatever. So, anyway. Do you need me to help with...” I instantly regretted the words and the offer, because with it made I belatedly realized ‘helping’ – participating in applying

any of those things, even touching them at all – was the last thing I wanted to do.

Joey chuckled. “I wonder which of us would be the more embarrassed if I let you help. Look, let’s make this easy. Why don’t you go out to the kitchen and make some lunch and then watch some TV and I’ll... If I actually need you for anything, I’ll give a shout. Okay?”

“That works for me. So...” I jerked a thumb over my shoulder in the direction of the bedroom door. “... I’ll just be out in the...”

“Right.”



HALF AN HOUR. Then an hour. Then an hour and a half.

Lunch was bland and tasteless. The TV’s offered fare, equally so. I sat and flicked listlessly across the channels, trying not to hear the occasional soft, unidentifiable noises coming from down the hall. Ready to jump – literally! – at any call for assistance coming from that direction.

Why did this feel so awful? So strange and embarrassing?

I knew stuff like this happened. I knew that guys sometimes dressed like girls. And I’d known that Joey was one of them. Of all our family, now that Joey’s folks were both gone, I think I was the only one who did. And it wasn’t all *that* terrible.

Was it?

I mean, it’s not like something I’d brag about to the guys at work. But on the other hand, if one of them – Big Mike for example – were to find out and start ribbing me about it, I could just shrug and give him a, ‘What can you do about family, right?’ grin. And it’d work. After all, it wasn’t like *I* was the one parading around in a pair of pink panties.

Okay. So maybe it was strange and embarrassing. But again, not *that* strange and embarrassing and not something that was embarrassing to me. At least not directly, but only by familial implication.

So why did it *feel* so strange and embarrassing?

I gazed again at the door leading to the hallway and eventually to Joey’s bedroom and chewed on my lower lip.

That stuff... The ‘torso’ and the... Well, you couldn’t call it a mask because it was just bits and pieces. Maybe that was why! That was the problem! Because it was so clearly high-tech and not at all like the Halloween masks you got from the five-and-dime, because that damn torso – even just

lying there, *flaccid* and fake on the bed – had looked so damn *real*... Real skin with veins and freckles and even a little mole for Christ's sake! Real boobs. And between the legs...

When Joey got all that stuff on, would it be so...

What? Drag queen obvious and therefore comical and... *Safe*.

That was it, wasn't it? 'Oh hey, it's just a gag folks. Sure, Joey's wearing a dress but it's all in fun. No harm, no foul, right?'

But if it wasn't comical and obvious... If it wasn't therefore 'safe'...

If all that crap made it possible for him to really *fool* someone who didn't know any better. I realized I was biting my lip so hard it was starting to hurt.

Joey already had that voice that he'd learned to do from someplace on the Internet. At first, it wasn't all that much. Just Joey speaking in a crummy falsetto. But then, with practice over time; not so crummy. And not a falsetto any more. A girl's voice. A girl's laugh. Hell, even a girl breathing – because you could hear a difference if you really listened and hadn't that been a creepy realization? Not only that there was a difference, but that Joey could fake a female voice so well that you could hear the difference on him!

Put that 'weird-me-out' voice together with an absolutely, *undetectably* real-looking chick's body, and what would you have?

"Hey, Max. Can you give me a hand in here?"

What would you have? Maybe it was time to find out.



I STOOD IN the door, staring at Joey sitting on the bed.

He was sitting with his back to me, his head turned not quite far enough around so we could see each other eye-to-eye. But he was turned enough that already I could see what that 'not really a mask but something else' had done, at least to his profile.

And it wasn't Joey's profile any more.

I stood there, staring. Trying to figure out just exactly what made it not his profile.

The forehead was wrong. It was...bigger? No. ... Maybe. ... No, it wasn't just that his eyebrows were a lot more slender and arched now, it was because there was less of them – of brow ridge – and so his forehead was smoother. More rounded.

Bigger lips. *Girl* lips.

Girl cheekbones. Higher. More prominent.

But that was nothing – the face. Small potatoes.

Sitting as he was with his back to me, it was impossible not to notice the suddenly slender waist. The now rounded hips. And most of all; the upside-down-heart-shaped girl's ass my previously rail-thin male cousin now suddenly possessed.

And, of course, the big, gaping seam that started about two inches above that triangular bulge of muscle above the cleft of that – God help me! – *really* sexy ass, growing wider until it was even starting to fold backwards up near where the fake torso ended at the base of Joey's neck.

Clearly, getting rid of that seam was where Joey needed help.

And once I'd helped him and that seam was gone...

“Max?”

I snapped back to the here-and-now. “What?”

Those girl lips quirked into the beginning of a sheepish little smile. “Kind of amazing, huh?” He spun around so now he was sitting three-quarters toward me and lowered the arms he'd had folded against his chest. I gaped and felt my jaw drop open. Had he been holding those arms folded against his chest to keep the still 'unfastened' fake torso from slipping down his real chest? Or had he been sitting like a girl would sit out of modesty because she didn't have anything covering her tits?

Because Joey now had tits. *Absolutely real tits*. Or they would have been, except that by lowering his arms and therefore no longer pressing it against his chest, that fake girl's skin had indeed slipped down just far enough for a little wrinkle to appear in a horizontal line about three inches above a pair of big, plump nipples that I just couldn't draw my eyes away from for more than a second or two.

He chuckled deep in his throat and I felt a little thrill of ice water skate down my spine. “I'll take that as a 'yes'.”

“Huh?”

“That expression. I'll take that as a, 'Yes. Pretty amazing.’” Then he spun around so he was sitting with his back to me again, reached down and tugged that *skin...* those *tits...* back up into place, as casually as you'd run a finger around the collar of a tee shirt that had snugged a little tight against your throat. “Okay. So, what I need you to do is to take that tube of gunk and put a thin layer – the manual says, 'Like thickly buttered toast' – in a strip about an inch or so wide from just below where the seam starts... You might have to, you know, put some on your finger and sort of reach down inside...”

“Joey...” I had to swallow against my dry mouth to get the words out.

He plowed ahead like I hadn't interrupted, the words coming a little too fast and a little too nonchalant now. "See, what has to happen is; that stuff is both a glue and a kind of a... you know; a crack sealer. So you put enough on so that when you press it down and together, some of it kind of comes up and spreads over..."

"Joey. I'm not so sure I can..."

Again he spun around but only just enough that I could see his profile but not look into his eyes – or he into mine. "It's okay. It's not... I mean, it's not like you're... Like *we're*... Max, please. I can't finish this by myself and..." His giggle was almost panicky. "It's a bad design. I mean, how does someone without anyone to help them...?"

I couldn't meet his gaze as I stepped around and collected the tube of 'gunk' from the beside table. Then standing behind him again, I squeezed some out onto my first two fingers. It was sort of like toothpaste, but more sticky. Like thick Elmer's glue. But more or less flesh-colored. Then forcing myself not to think about it and after one spastic little hitch when they were halfway there, my fingers were down inside the skin and I got a brief sensation as to what it felt like – *skin*, already starting to warm to body temperature – and then I was slowly drawing a layer up the line of Joey's backbone.

"Like thickly buttered toast."

"Yeah. I got it."

"Once you're all the way up, you need to start back at the bottom and sort of press it together and down until a little bit of it kind comes out of the crack. And then you hold it for a second, then move up a little bit more..."

"Okay."

"If you see too much of that stuff... If it looks like it's going to be enough to leave a noticeable bump... See, it should kind of spread out and flatten out..."

"*Okay.*"

It took about ten minutes of strained silence to finish the operation.

I stepped back and tried to appraise my handiwork with as much dispassion as possible. "I can't see the crack – the seam itself – anymore. But I can still see the goop. It's too... The color's too light and it's too shiny."

"That's okay. It darkens and dulls as it dries. It's color-matched to the skin. I already used it around my thighs and I saw that the manual is right about it..."

It *was* darkening and getting less noticeably shiny as it dried. The seam *was* disappearing, undetectable now down near the cleft of that way too alluring make-believe ass. In just a few

minutes there would be no way to tell at all that there had ever been a seam and that therefore this was all a fake. “Joey, take it off! Take the damn thing off!”

This time he spun full around. “What?!”

No wrinkle now. Just two tits that *jiggled* in an *absolutely real* way with the suddenness of Joey’s movement. “Take it off! You’re going to... This is *dangerous!* This is *wrong!*” There was a weird light in Joey’s eyes and those previously luscious fake lips were now pressed together in a thin line. I stammered, “There’s no way to tell now. That it’s all just... Some guy is going to look at you. And you’re going to string him along and make him want to get you into the sack with him and...”

The light in his eyes was now dangerous – scary dangerous – as Joey finished turning all the way around to face me. Then he spread his legs, leaned back on his elbows and presented me with the final element; an absolutely convincingly authentic pussy crowned with an absolutely convincingly authentic little thatch of fur, turned on that girl voice and in a slut-y growl that perfectly matched the slut-y pose purred, “Oh, gee! I hope so ‘cuz I’m so fucking *horny* today.”

I actually stumbled back a step. “My God! Joey... *God!*”

That got him. He slammed his legs together, those fake eyebrows now just about crawling off the top of his head. “Max! God, I’m sorry! *I’m sorry!* I don’t know what got into me. I’d never...! You know I’d *never...*!”

But I was already down the hall, out the door and gone.



-YOU’RE OVER-REACTING.

It kept circling around in my head as I drove aimlessly through the gathering twilight.

I am?

No answer. Just a fist-sized knot in the pit of my gut.

Why was this getting to me so?

-You know why.

Bullshit. It wasn’t that. It couldn’t be that!

-Those jiggling tits. That gorgeous ass. Most of all that hot little pussy. You wanted them. They turned you on.

Shut up! That’s sick. I know it was all fake. That it was really Joey.

-Oh sure. You 'know'. But logic has little to do with the hard-on that was pressing against your jeans.

My mind seized up and I immediately silenced the nagging little voice's next impending taunt with a mentally clenched fist 'shutupshutupSHUTUP!!'

Finerty's Bar up ahead. Not driving so aimlessly after all. The subconscious mind at work – at least when it wasn't harassing me. A cold beer or three and permission to simply not think about it for an hour or two, by which time my well-lubricated subconscious might be more amenable to reason.

Dave, the 'Finerty' himself, was standing in his usual spot behind the bar. "Evening, Max. The usual?"

I started to sit on one of the stools, but changed course at the last minute and headed instead for one of the dark booths in the back. The usual – a Bud draught – didn't seem like quite enough tonight. "Yeah. And a whiskey shot too. And keep 'em coming."

"Boilermakers?" That got a raised eyebrow from the usually taciturn Dave. "You working on something tonight?"

I could only shake my head and point at my destination booth. 'Working on something?' Yeah. You could say so.

Dave had been tending bars long enough to know not to press. He just brought me a replacement beer and a shot when the first one quickly disappeared. And then another, about an hour later when the second one disappeared not quite as quickly.

Dusk was turning into late evening, 'the regular crowd was shuffling in' as the Billy Joel song went, and the operation of three drinks... well, two and a quarter... did indeed seem to be making my nagging little mental nemesis more mellow.

Then my male instincts alerted me to the arrival of a new possibility. 'Pretty girl at six o'clock'. Someone new had just come through the doors. An unescorted young pretty, no less. Just the thing to set my wolf's ears twitching.

Shoulder-length, dark red curls. A flirty, just over the knee-length spring dress that accentuated a pair of *flawless* legs and was just low-cut enough to allow a glimpse of cleavage but not low-cut enough to ease any doubts about getting a slap for noticing.

I don't know if she'd spotted me as she came through the door or if it wasn't till she'd almost made it all the way in to the bar before she caught sight of me sitting back in my dark corner. But catch sight of me she did. For just a fraction of a second, an almost *predatory* little grin played at the corner of those glossy red lips and glowed in the depths of those eyes.

I think my heart literally missed a couple of beats.

Then the little grin that nobody would believe I'd seen was gone and her expression was again completely neutral and innocent as she casually smoothed her skirt against that heart-shaped ass that I could appreciate so much better than any of the other males in here tonight – having seen it in all its naked glory just a little over two hours ago – perched herself on the stool with a very modest crossed-ankles pose (notice the ankle chain and the sexy 'strap-y' sandals?) and waited for Dave to make his way down the bar to take her order.

It was like in the movies. My field of vision contracted down to this sort of tunnel. Then Dave appeared at the edge of that tunnel. He was going to recognize Joey and all hell would break loose. Dave didn't tolerate any 'shenanigans' in his bar, proudly Irish name notwithstanding. He'd grab Joey by his scrawny little neck and physically toss him out the door. And then he'd come for me. (Why I thought he'd come for me... Guilt by association.)

Except Dave set a coaster on the bar and came as close to smiling as he ever comes. "What'll it be, Miss?"

"Umm... A fuzzy navel! Please." Followed by her hands folded in her lap and a shy little, 'I'm not flirting!' smile.

"Coming right up."

As soon as Dave had gone, she casually brushed an errant lock of hair out of her eyes and then casually looked around the bar. Sizing up the room. Glancing once in my direction and looking right through me.

-Do something!

What? ... Why? This is Joey's problem.

Then, for some reason, I realized that I wasn't the only one staring. Three guys sitting at a table diagonally across from me, wolves' ears also a-twitch, eyeing the lovely little babe sitting all alone and lonely on the barstool.

I managed to croak, "Dave!" and catch his eye. I waved him over. He arched an eyebrow at my only one-quarter gone boilermaker. "The... girl at the bar. Tell her that drink's on me. Tell her now. In fact, set her up with another one."

Dave's eyebrow arched a little higher. "I guess you *are* working on something tonight."

"Just..." I made a vague, urgent little gesture with my hand.

He stood there for another agonizingly long moment staring at me in obvious puzzlement, then trudged back to the bar where he took more time building a second fuzzy navel, which he finally set before 'the girl'. She looked appropriately surprised. "From the gentleman over in the

corner booth.” Dave nodded in my direction. Joey turned on his stool, batted his not obviously fake eyelashes at me and smiled a demure little smile with those artificial lips.

I stole a quick, sidelong glance at the three wolves at the table. Apparently they’d gotten the message and from the neutral expressions you could tell they were content to merely circle the prey and wait their turn.

For now.

I managed to stand up and make my way on rubber legs over to the bar. Dave was a good enough bartender that he could make it clear when he wasn’t eavesdropping. Still, it was little more than a whisper when I said, “Joey. For fuck’s sake...”

That dangerous glow was back in his eyes, but his expression was as neutral as the wolves’. In his girl’s voice he whispered back, “If you call me ‘Joey’ one more time tonight, I’ll slap your face, make a scene and have Dave throw you out on your ass.” Then she extended her right hand in a limp wrist-ed offer of a female handshake – the kind with the palm down like you’re supposed to kiss the back of the offered hand and not shake it – and in a slightly louder return to that shy ‘I’m not flirting!’ persona she simpered, “My name’s Angelina. Like Jolie. But everyone calls me Julie.”

‘Julie’, not quite ‘Joey’.

I held on to her fingertips for a second then growled, “Come with me.”

She retrieved her hand, folded it again in her lap and then smiled down at it like I’d just said something really clever or charming. “Another once only warning. You don’t tell. You ask. You persuade. You fail to persuade in very short order and one of those three over there behind me gets lucky tonight. Maybe more than one.”

“Jo...” I managed to bite my tongue before the rest of it came out. But I couldn’t quite bring myself to say ‘Julie’ instead. “Please come back to the booth with me. *Please.*”

Those frightening eyes that *so* didn’t match the ‘I’m still not flirting!’ smile bore into mine for a long second. Then she stood up, collected her first fuzzy navel off the bar and glanced meaningfully at the second – the one I’d bought her. I grabbed it and she led me across the room at a very casual stroll. I could feel at least three sets of eyes burning into my shoulder blades the whole way. Once we reached the booth, she again primly pressed her skirt against the shaped silicone of her make-believe ass and slid halfway around so she was sitting looking out at the room.

I slid in behind my three-quarters of a boilermaker.

And then we sat.

After what had to be at least a minute and felt like an hour, in his pretend girl voice Joey sighed, “Well. Isn’t this fun? Already getting bored. And you don’t want me bored because if I get too

bored I might go find some other way... or someone else... to amuse me.”

“And what if I let you go?”

“Fine.” She started to slide back around so she could stand up.

“Wait!”

She didn’t even look at me. She just kept sliding. “*You – don’t – order. You – ask.*”

“Please wait. ... *Julie!*”

That bought me a momentary reprieve. At least she stopped sliding and met my gaze – or actually my ‘desperate stare’. “Please stay. Please talk. Please tell me *why...*”

“‘Why?’ You son of a bitch. You can ask me why?”

I realized that my brain had been grinding gears and futilely spinning wheels since the thunderclap of recognition several minutes ago now. “I don’t... I don’t understand...”

She hissed, “You were the one who was supposed to *be there* for me. But when it really came time to be there, you just slapped me in the face like all the others. So fuck you!”

“I didn’t mean to. I swear to God.”

Her tone changed abruptly from furious hiss to nonchalant conversational, like we were discussing the weather. “I’m ‘wet’, you know.”

“What?” The jarring non sequitur made no sense.

“‘Wet’. Female sexually aroused. I stopped off at the Walgreen’s on the way and bought a little tube of ‘personal lubricant.’ Then sitting out in the parking lot, after I’d made sure no one was looking, I hiked up my skirt and slid down my panties and squeezed a little into my...”

“Jesus!”

She giggled. *Giggled.* “Not really. I’m lying.”

“I knew you were.”

“I’m not wearing panties. I’m wearing a black silk teddy. So I had to sort of tug the material to one side with one hand and stick the tube in with the other. It was a real juggling act. Especially since I had to be careful not to get too much in there. I don’t want to walk around *dripping*. I mean, I’m on the make it’s true. But you can’t be too obvious, now can you?”

It felt like I’d tried to swallow a bowling ball and it had gotten stuck halfway down my throat. “For whatever you think I did, I swear to God I’m sorry.”

It was like I hadn’t said anything. “I think I did a pretty good job, though. And with the way the material of the suit warms up so nicely to body temperature, I’m betting who ever gets lucky tonight will find me just *deliciously hot* and *wet.*”

“I’m sorry for what I did. Not ‘what you think’. I know that was... I’m trying to say I’m sorry. Please let me...”

“Oh! And I’ve also got these! You’ve *got* to see these!” She dug for a moment in the purse she’d had slung over her shoulder the whole time and finally pulled out a plain little black box, about four inches on a side. She looked around with a patently artificial ‘furtive’ expression and then made a show of lowering the box out of sight below the table. “Slide around a little. I don’t want everyone to see.”

I just sat there, trying to find the words that would reach Joey and allow me to mollify him enough so he’d end this.

“Slide around. Don’t make me ask twice again tonight. For anything.”

I slid around, closer to Joey as he semi-whispered, “Of course, this is going to be a juggling act too. At least a little bit. But I’m sure I can find an appropriate excuse to slip away long enough.”

I could now see what was in the box he held cradled out of sight below the table. I managed not to recoil.

“Aren’t they *wicked*?” This time the giggle was intentionally artificial. “They’re almost an *inch* long! And almost half-again as big around as mine, but so authentic! And they’re made for real women! You can tell because they’re hollowed out. See?” She used a pair of glossy fingernails to pluck one out of the box and turn it over for my inspection. “They’re hollowed out like that so your real nipple fits inside and the fake areola can slide down and lie flat and cover your real one. The glue it comes with is supposed to be really strong, too. I don’t know if I...”

“Please stop.”

“...want to put that to the test, though. I mean, if you’re sucking on it, your lips would be pressing against that fake areola, right? So I don’t think... But if you were to, say, bite down on it and tug...”

“What can I do? Please, tell me what I can do to make it better. To make it right. I’ll do it.”

All her attention was focused on the little box as she closed it then stowed it back in her purse. Then she turned her face away, back out toward the bar and again tucked that errant strand of hair back behind her ear.

The silence dragged.

Still pointedly not looking at me, in a low, quiet voice she finally said, “I don’t know if I was intentionally looking for you here tonight. Odd. I mean, I know you like to come here. And maybe, in the back of my mind, I was thinking, ‘He’ll probably need a few drinks to calm down so I bet he’ll be at Finerty’s.’”

I grabbed at the opening like a drowning man must grab at a passing plank. “I was wondering the same thing earlier. I don’t think I headed here intentionally. I was just sort of driving aimlessly but

I wound up out front. So maybe my subconscious and your subconscious... Maybe we both know each other better than we think.”

The expression I got clearly snarled, ‘*We don’t know each other at all.*’ Then she turned an again studiously neutral expression back out toward the room. “In any event, I got all dolled up – prim and proper on the outside, slinky slut underneath – picked up a little tube of ‘wet pussy’ on the way and now here I am. So I guess at least part of the plan is pretty obvious.”

“Is that what you want? I’ll do that if you want.”

Again she hit me with an expression that dripped scorn and disdain. “Oh, my gallant hero. You’d really do that for me? Make *such* a great big sacrifice for me? Golly, if I wasn’t hot and wet already...”

“Joey, I’m begging you. Don’t do it. Don’t. *It’s so dangerous.* You’re going to get hurt. You know I’m right. You said so yourself.”

Maybe he missed it – me calling him ‘Joey’. Maybe he wasn’t as deeply into character as ‘Julie’ as he thought. Or maybe there was still a chance of reaching him and he wasn’t quite ready to make good on his threat. Not yet. He just stared out into the room.

And then something cracked in that brittle façade and he whispered, almost too softly for me to hear, “Is it really so wrong? To want this? I just want to be... To have a few minutes of...” The dangerous light was gone from her eyes. Instead they were now starting to shimmer from the tears starting to well up. “*You* hurt me. Would it really be that much worse if some stranger did too?” She didn’t wait for an answer (that I didn’t have anyway.) “Christ. Maybe that really is all I deserve. Maybe you’re right, the world’s right, and I really am just a disgusting little freak.”

“I’m not disgusted and you’re not a freak.” The big surprise was my discovery of the fact that I really and truly meant it.

“Then what? If you could see your face now. If you could have seen your face back in my bedroom...”

“You can’t ask me not to struggle with this. This just doesn’t happen every day. It’s new and it’s... It’s so much to deal with all at once and you can’t demand that I just ‘get over it’ in an instant and then expect me to.”

A tear finally slid down her cheek. “I’m sorry, Max. You’re right. God, I don’t know what I’m doing. I was just so hurt and so angry. But you’re right. It’s not your fault. You did as much as

anyone could expect. I just have to accept that I'm..."

I found myself taking one of her hands in mine. "Attractive. Alarmingly so, if you'll pardon my saying."

She blinked in surprise and used her free hand to smudge the tear across her cheek. "What?"

"You were going to say, 'I have to accept that I'm a disgusting freak' again. But the simple truth is that at the moment, what you are is a stone fox babe that three guys over there would pawn their souls for a chance to get between a pair of sheets."

"Really?"

"Look, at this point I figure all I have is honesty. Okay? So I'm going to be honest and say that *I* wouldn't pawn my soul for a chance." I plowed ahead so fast that I didn't even pause for breath and so I ran out of air halfway through the next sentence. "But *not* because you're a..." Gasp. "... disgusting freak, but because I know more than I should, than would make this work between us. But if I didn't know, like those three over there don't know... You wouldn't have to worry about asking me twice. You bet your ass you wouldn't."

"Wow. Well..." Again she dabbed at her tear-stained cheek with her free hand. "I guess I'm getting a little bit of what I want, anyway."

"How so?"

"Feminine wiles. Turn on the tears and you can get a man to say whatever you want."

I started to jerk my hand away but she laid her free hand atop it to capture it. "No! Oh Max, please. I'm not nearly that calculating. I wasn't pretending. *I swear* I wasn't. I can't turn them on and off. Fake tears, I mean. I'm just... In retrospect I'm just wishing... But I guess to say 'I'm not that calculating' after what I've done to you tonight isn't particularly persuasive."

Did I believe him?

Yeah. I did. To prove it, I laid my hand atop his hand atop mine. It actually didn't feel that ugly or repulsive to be sitting holding hands like that with my male cousin. Of course, outward appearance might have something do to with it too.

After a while, I had to ask. "So, what now?"

That sad little smile became wry. "Are you asking me if I'm going to go trolling for those three over there and see which one gets to lay me? N-o-o. I don't think so."

"I'd be lying big time if I said I wasn't relieved."

Wry became wistful. "I guess this is as good as I should expect it to get. No. Really. You're right, Max. You've been right all along. Make-believe only goes so far. If you push them, fairy tales

wind up with you getting shoved in an oven by the wicked witch or eaten by the big bad wolf. So I'm going to finally wise-up and listen to my wise cousin and not push."

"Drink your drink. Drinks."

"Hmm?" Still wistful but now maybe a little playful too. "Trying to get me drunk so you can have your way with me after all?"

"No. So I can buy you another."

She arched an elegant eyebrow.

I shrugged. "Hey, who's to say that two can't play? As far as those three over there are concerned, you're a stone fucking fox and you've picked me over them. So why not promote the appearance of victory?"

The wistful, playful smile softened into something else. "And I said you weren't there for me. I wanted to hurt you so badly for betraying me. Maybe I'm not a disgusting little freak. But I am an ugly, ungrateful little idiot. And I'm very, *very* sorry, Max. I can only hope that someday you'll find it in yourself to forgive me."

"Sure. Why not? Maybe the very next day after you find a way to forgive me."

We sat there for a while. Me holding hands with my male cousin. Or with the genuinely stone fucking fox everyone else saw. Depending on your point of view. The awkward panic had long ago vanished. So much so that after two and two-thirds of a boilermaker for me and half a fuzzy navel for her, it didn't seem at all threatening to ask, "So. Are you really wearing a black silk teddy?"

"Yup."

"And are you really...? You know. Down there?"

That got me a sheepish little grin. "Yup. And to save you the trouble of asking; yes, there really is a 'down there' down there, and it really works. Well, as much as any guy would need it to, if you take my meaning."

I found myself laughing. "Wow."

Joey joined me with a feminine giggle that now actually sounded kind of sexy. "Hey, speaking of working anatomy; are you drunk enough yet for me to slip in to the ladies' room so I can put on my high- beam nips?"

Apparently not quite drunk enough not to feel a little knot again starting to form in the pit of my stomach. "Uh, why would you want to do that?"

"Those three are still glancing over this way occasionally. But I think they've pretty much given up hope and what's the fun of that? I want to tease them by keeping them interested in what

they can't have. So why not show them just how turned on you're making me?"

Was I getting drunk or not? Was there another potential explanation for how quickly the little knot untied and instead how interesting (and potentially fun) that proposal suddenly sounded? "Wouldn't they get suspicious?"

"Huh?"

"You know, if you go to the can and when you come back a few minutes later your... You know."

"Pfft. Like three half drunk guys are going to be big experts on female arousal? Or like you are, for that matter?"

"Or you?"

"You'd be amazed at the things you can learn on the Internet." She made a big show of snuggling a little closer. "Besides, who's to say that you haven't got me so hot that I just had to excuse myself to the powder room for a few minutes to... you know, 'ease the tension' for myself. And as a result, when I came back..."

"Yow! Does it really work like that?"

Joey rolled his eyes and chuckled in an almost male voice. "Lord, give me strength."

"Well how would I know? And anyway, like you say, they're not going to know either. So what the hell? Why not?"

She leaned over and gave me a little peck on the cheek. "Be right back." Then she collected her purse and sauntered off down the hall that led to the rest rooms. Leaving me to sit there for a few minutes in quiet contemplation, pondering the questions of why that little kiss on the cheek didn't feel at all objectionable (surface appearance again?) and when Joey had perfected that absolutely perfect hip- swinging female strut I'd admired from behind as he made his exit for the ladies' room. In high heels no less!

And then she was back and it was true – you couldn't not be turned on by the now subtly altered (they'd looked bigger in the box) curve of her breasts. She slid in next to me and again cuddled up close.

"Nice?"

"Einstein was right. For every action, there's an equal and opposite reaction."

"I believe it was Newton. And I'm half tempted to reach down and explore your reaction mass. But it's going to take a lot more fuzzy navels for me and a lot more boilermakers for you before that would be comfortable. So let's not spoil a good thing."

“Indeed. Let’s not. ‘Cuz I have to say, this really is turning into a good thing.”

The wicked/playful vanished from her face, replaced by what I could only call ‘beguiling hopeful’. “Oh Max. Really?”

“Still going with honesty, I have to say that you reaching down between my legs is not... That would be a mistake. But as for the rest, yeah. This is starting to get fun. Spies and private eyes and Mission Impossible.”

Her smile bloomed. “I can live with that.”

I indicated my empty glass. “You’ll notice that I used your momentary absence to good effect. Three boilemakers definitely adds to the pleasure of the game. You’re falling behind, by the way.”

“Sorry.” She obediently wrapped her glossy lips around the twin straws of her still unfinished first fuzzy navel and took a long pull. The level in the glass dropped significantly, almost to the bottom.

“Whoa! Careful, tiger. Let’s not... Friends don’t let friends drive drunk. Let’s remember there are larger issues here.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just saying, Julie tipsy might be even sexier than she is now. Joey bombed might ruin Julie’s performance, if you take my meaning.”

“Oh! I see. Good point. But not to worry. I’m sure Joey can handle one or two, or even three fuzzy navels without endangering the game. And as for Julie... Hmm. I wonder how well she handles the booze?”

“Let’s not... A sloppy drunk isn’t attractive, male or female.”

“I quite agree. But giggle-y? And maybe a little careless?”

“Careless?”

“Oh, you know. A dress strap that keeps sliding down. I gotta have some way to show off at least a little black silk or what’s the point? A skirt that doesn’t always stay properly down over my knees. That sort of thing.”

“Oh. Okay. It’s a shame you’re not wearing stockings. That’s always a treat – catching a sly glimpse of that... What do you call it? That dark band at the top.”

“I am wearing stockings.”

Three boilemakers down and my Sherlock Holmes prowess was still sharp. Not bad! “You can’t be.”

“Huh? Well, I am.”

“You can’t be, and for two reasons.”

“Okay, Sherlock. Make me a liar.”

“Ha! I was just thinking Sherlock Holmes! Anyway... One: you can’t be wearing stockings because I saw your toes when you were sitting on the barstool.”

“You saw my toes? What the hell is that supposed to prove?”

“You can’t be wearing stockings because they... You can’t see a woman’s toes for that opaque part over...”

“Oh, big genius expert you turned out to be. They’re called ‘sandal foot’. They’re sheer over the toes exactly for that reason – so that clunky opaque stuff doesn’t ruin a cute pair of sandals.”

“Really?”

“Well, I’m not going to slide out and stand up and hold my foot out for your inspection because that’s a little stupid.” She thought about it for a moment, her expression becoming just a little bit calculating. “Or maybe...” She dismissed the idea. “Anyway, when we get a chance, be sure you look. If you look really closely and the light is right, you’ll see the fabric over the top of the space between. My toes, I mean.”

“Oh.” That was strangely sexy, for some odd reason.

“What’s your second proof, oh great and wise detective?”

“You couldn’t... Umm... When you... With the tube of ‘wet...’ You know. Anyway, you couldn’t use that and still be wearing stockings.”

That earned me a soft, condescending little chuckle. “Lord, I don’t know if this is fun because it’s so easy, or if it’s so easy it’s less fun than it might be.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, you’re a complete innocent when it comes to lady’s underwear, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

“Look, you’re thinking I couldn’t get to my pussy because the pantyhose would be getting in the way. Right?”

“Right.” Before she could continue and maybe to distract from my disquiet over the casual ease with which she said ‘pussy’, I jumped in with, “And don’t tell me you slid it down – your pantyhose, I mean – because you said you’re wearing a teddy. And I know you have to... You can’t just slide it down. A teddy. It’s one piece. You have to take it off. And therefore you couldn’t slide a pair of pantyhose down because the... you know ... the part of the teddy between your legs wouldn’t let you.”

As I'd been going on, she'd rested her chin in her hand and continued to smile that condescending smile. "You're only making it worse."

I glared a challenge.

"Okay. First off: I never said I was wearing pantyhose. I said I was wearing 'stockings.' And I am. Sandal-foot hold-ups, to be precise. Not pantyhose so no panty to wrestle with. Second: even if I were wearing pantyhose, the fact that I'm also wearing a teddy – which I also am, by the way – wouldn't prevent me from slipping my pantyhose down. What do you think? That women get undressed when they have to go to the bathroom?"

"Well... I don't know. How would I know?"

"Then seize the opportunity to learn a thing or two for future reference. As much as I don't particularly want to stick my hand between your legs either, neither do I want your hand down between mine. But it'd almost be worth it so you could feel that there are a pair of snaps on my teddy – on 'the part between my legs' – so I can unfasten it and not have to take it off if I need to... you know." Then the wicked grin was back as she purred, "'Ease my tension' for example."

"That is at once both strangely erotic and strangely disturbing."

"It is, isn't it? Why is that?"

I actually tried to think about it for a moment. "I haven't a clue and I don't feel like trying to figure it out. Stockings, huh? And what's 'hold ups'? Are you gonna try and mug me later?"

"'Hold ups' means they... You don't need garters. They have an elastic band hidden in the lace upper hem. Therefore, they 'hold up' all by themselves. And we really do have to figure out a way for my skirt to... What's the right word? 'Betray me.' 'Cuz I'm especially proud of them. The stockings. Almost as much as my teddy. Which I've given up on showing off, by the way."

"More's the pity, I guess. Maybe later, when we get home." That seemed to give her pause, which was interesting. But I didn't feel like pressing the sudden advantage. Instead I asked, "So. How does one get her skirt to 'betray her'? Make it jealous?"

"I don't know. Try letting it catch you looking at another woman and we'll see what happens."

It suddenly struck me as so surreal that I just had to laugh.

"What?"

"It's just... How do you do that?"

"What?"

"You don't just look like a woman. You're thinking like one."

More genuine cause for pause, apparently. At least that's what her puzzled frown suggested. "I am?"

"Well it sure feels like I'm sitting here, talking to a woman."

That got me a little snort of amusement. "I'm wondering if that's a compliment or an insult."

"It's neither. Just an observation."

"Hmm. Well, to tell the truth, while I am concentrating – rather hard – on doing some things... Uh... 'Like a woman.' Voice and mannerism and so forth. I can't say I'm honestly sitting here, consciously making myself 'think like a woman.' What, specifically, makes you say that I am?"

"Well, that right there. Challenging me like that."

"I beg your pardon? Challenging you is a feminine trait?"

"Uh... Okay. Maybe not. Maybe it's because a woman is sitting there challenging me and that makes it feminine."

"How many boilermakers have you had?"

I chuckled. "Okay. I'm not being very eloquent, I admit. I can't really put my finger on it, but it doesn't feel like... I'm not sitting here, kidding around with my cousin Joey. I'm sitting here with..."

"What? Sitting here with what?"

I spread my hands and shrugged. "Chatting with a pretty girl. What else?"

"Hmm. Interesting. Very interesting, in fact. Well, first – thank you! And second; so you're saying... What? That surface appearance is sufficient for... To create a different dynamic?"

I thought about it. "I guess so. And you're right, that is interesting, isn't it?"

"I don't think we're supposed to acknowledge it might be as simple as that. I don't think that's anywhere near politically correct enough. In fact, at this point I think I'm supposed to get angry and accuse you of trying to steal my dignity as an individual or something."

"Let's save a little effort and just say you did if anybody asks."

"Fine. But anyway, I'm really and truly not sitting here trying to... well, I don't know what, specifically. So I don't know what else it can be except 'if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck...'"

"'Treat it like a lady?'"

She shrugged and I enjoyed the fact that I didn't have to be polite and try to cover my appreciation for the way the fabric of her dress shifted over those two beguiling bumps.

"Do me a favor and at least try not to drool, okay?"

My retort was interrupted by the appearance of Dave at our table. “Take that empty for you, Miss?”

“Oh, yes. Thank you.” And then she treated Dave to another ‘I’m not flirting – at least not with *you*’ smile.

“Max. Another?”

“Umm, no. I think we’ll call three my limit for tonight. I’ll just sit here and think about life, the universe and everything before I head home. Clear my head for driving and all that.”

“Um hmm. Sure.” He was almost leering. Well, why not? Let him leer because that meant ‘let him be a little jealous.’ He turned to Julie. “I’d ask you if you want another. But I can see you’ve still got one in reserve.” She just continued to smile. Dave headed off to see if the three little wolves needed refills.

“I notice you didn’t ask Dave not to drool.”

I wondered when Joey had found the time to do some extensive practicing in a mirror before setting out tonight, because his ‘wide-eyed innocence’ was just absolutely perfect. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Come on. I was watching. It’s not like his eyes were always gazing directly into yours.”

The scandalized embarrassment was good too. “Max! Shame on you! Dave was a perfect gentleman. Why, with all your staring at my boobs, I should think the evidence of just how impressive I thought he was would be apparent.”

“Aww, I’m crushed! I thought those high-beams were for me.”

“‘High-beams’? ‘High-beams’? Whatever do you mean?” She made a big show of glancing down, and then with a theatrical gasp she covered her breasts with her hands and gave me more of the wide-eyed innocence routine. “Oh! How dare you! You beast! Men!”

“Women!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, like you had those...” I made a vague little gesture, trying not to be too obvious about it. “... specially made or something? Remember how proud you were about how they were hollowed out to accommodate a real woman?”

“Hmm.” Then, almost in a whisper, Joey’s male voice growled, “Women!”

Dave had collected my empties along with Julie’s, so I was reduced to raising an imaginary glass in a toast. “Women. God love ‘em ‘cuz where’d we horny males be without ‘em?”

Julie raised her glass as well. “Hear, hear!”

“So, anyway and returning to the burning question at hand; how does a woman get her skirt to betray her? ‘Cuz you with those perky nips flashing me a glimpse of stocking would be a real treat.”

“Well, crap! I don’t know. Uh... Maybe if I...? No. That’s stupid. Uh...”

“Maybe if you stood up, dropped something and then bent over?”

“That wouldn’t get you anything unless I spread my legs shoulder width apart and then flipped the back of my skirt up over my head as I bent over.”

“Hmm. Tempting, but probably impractical.”

“Probably, yes.”

“Point of information in passing, is it really hard to wear a skirt?”

“I take it you’re asking, ‘Is it hard to keep your modesty while wearing a skirt?’”

“Um hmm.”

“Well, I guess the answer would be; Not as hard as you might think, but harder than it probably looks.”

“Why do you do it, then?”

The easy-going smile slipped. “You mean me, personally?”

“No. I really and truly mean, ‘you women’.”

“Oh. Well, as for me personally, to show off my dynamite legs, of course.”

“And did I mention just how dynamite they truly are?”

“Nice save. Two points for you.”

“Seriously, why do women wear skirts if they’re such a bother?”

“Historical precedent, of course. I mean, as little as fifty years ago, it was considered almost risqué for a woman to wear pants. But nowadays... Well, to show off your legs. I mean, that really is one motive. To show you’re a woman.” He thought about it for a moment. “And...” His voice trailed off.

“‘And?’”

An impish little grin. “Skirts are a bother, but they’re also fun. I mean it’s... *feminine* ... to feel a flirty skirt swirling around your knees. It’s feminine to... To sort of make a game... Well, no ‘sort of.’ To make a game out of sitting and standing and walking in different ways to show off your legs and your skirt. It’s a prop. It’s part of, like I say, ‘the game’.”

“Women really think about that kind of thing?”

“Not every minute of every day. And by the way, you’re asking me what women think?”

I realized the implications of the fact that I was, indeed, asking the pretty young woman sitting next to me to explain how she and other women thought. “I guess that you *can* take as a compliment.”

This time the expression – slightly flustered and more than a little pleased – had no artifice at all. “Wow! Uh... Wow!”

“Which ultimately brings us back to the question of how a woman gets her skirt to betray her.”

“I could just stand up, hike it up to one hip and smile.”

“Let’s not start a riot. We might want to be able to come back here some day.”

“It’s a shame that Dave doesn’t have a dance floor. I’m sure Julie is tipsy enough by now to get a little overly daring with some of her dance moves. Out on a dance floor I really would hike it up to one hip and smile. For a second, anyway. Gotta get the motor running on this handsome guy sitting across from me.”

“Your trip to the powder room took care of that.”

“Thought it might.”

I surprised myself by saying, “As for dancing, there’s always tomorrow night.”

She gazed for a long moment into my eyes. Then softly, again almost a whisper, “Really?”

“Why not?” Yeah. Why not, when you got right down to it? “Look, if it’s understood that it’s never going to be more than... This was fun. Or at least, after we got past...”

“Yeah.”

“So what the hell? Watching a pretty girl pretend to get tipsy so she’ll have an excuse to flash a little thigh should certainly be more fun than sitting at home watching a rerun of ‘Casablanca’ on the Turner Classics channel.”

“But not as much fun as getting to pretend to be tipsy so you can flash a little thigh – if you were so inclined, that is.” Joey glanced at a stylish woman’s wristwatch that I hadn’t noticed until now. “And on that no-kidding wonderfully upbeat note and because if I’m going dancing tomorrow night I need to get some sleep tonight...”

“Yeah. Work day tomorrow.”

“Yup.”

I slid around and got to my feet before Joey had managed to slide the longer distance around the other way. As a result, I got to extend a gentlemanly hand to assist the lovely young lady to her

feet. Joey, still not quite to the point where he could use that hand for assistance, glanced up at me and smiled. And then, for just an instant, that calculating grin flashed across her face. Taking advantage of the fact that I was blocking the view from the rest of the room, instead of continuing to slide sideways, the luscious little honey with the beguilingly distracting bosom turned her legs toward me and slid forward. Her skirt promptly rucked up just enough for a quick flash of flesh-colored lace. Then she was taking my hand in her hand and using her free hand to tug the hem of her skirt back down where it belonged as she stood up and the glimpse was gone.

My grin probably matched hers. “Voilà!”

“Easy when you think about it, actually.”

“So, regarding that black silk... Want me to swing by your place for a few minutes?”

She settled the strap of her shoulder bag purse comfortably on her shoulder and started to stroll away with another reprise of that female strut that still amazed me. “Oh, I think not. Why answer all the questions tonight, now that we know there’ll be other nights in which to work on them?”

I knew the three wolves were watching and that just added to my smile as I sauntered along behind the stone fox beauty that they could only dream about, as we both headed for the door into the future. Or maybe the parking lot. It all depended on your point of view. “You know, Louie, this just might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

Part 2: Independence Day

JOEY LEANED BACK against the sofa with a sigh. “Why is there never anything good on TV in the afternoon?”

In a wry tone I replied, “Why limit it to afternoon?”

“Good point.”

I picked up the remote and switched to the History Channel, one of what I thought were the few remaining beacons in an otherwise dreary wasteland. ‘Modern Marvels -The History of Bricks.’ “You know, I once heard some commentator say that all the good plotlines were used up by the time they’d finished filming the last episodes of ‘I Love Lucy’ and the old ‘Dick Van Dyke Show.’ That ever since then every sitcom has been a rerun, even if you haven’t ever seen it before.”

“Are there any games on?”

I used the remote to bring up the on-screen program schedule. “Umm... Golf.”

“Golf is not a game.”

“Then what is it?”

“To watch? Boring.”

“Okay. Uh... A retrospective of Super Bowl VII on the NFL channel.”

“Christ. Even the sports are reruns. What’s on the SciFi channel?”

“Let’s see... ‘Demon Lake’.” I punched the ‘More Info’ button. “‘Summer vacationers at a secluded lake- side cabin are terrorized by giant, mutant turtles.’”

Joey used his knack for counterfeiting a completely believable female voice – in this case the dim-bulb, damsel-soon-to-be-in-distress staple of every ‘B’ horror movie ever made and squealed, “Run for the trees, Wilbur! They can’t climb the trees!”

We both laughed at that one. (Joey, still in his female voice.) “Right, Jane! And you run and hide in that old deserted mansion up on the hill so they can’t get us both at the same time!” After the laughter died down, the silence dragged.

Finally Joey grumbled, “How sad is this? Not even nearly through the first half of the first day of a three- day weekend and already we’re reduced to watching bad monster movies for something to do.”

“Wanna run down and rent some videos?”

“I can’t think of any recent movies I want to see that I haven’t already rented.”

In the back of my mind, the suspicion had been growing as to what Joey really wanted to do. I hit the ‘Mute’ button to silence the screams as ‘Jane’ was no- doubt run down and devoured by some giant shell-backed reptile. “It’s still early.” (A little after one in the afternoon.) “Plenty of time to slip into ‘Julie’ and go out party-ing this evening. Or to Finerty’s.” Since that first memorable night, Joey and I had ‘made the club scene’ twice and been back to Finerty’s once. I had to admit it was a pleasant change to just knocking around the house watching insipid TV.

But Joey surprised me with an unenthusiastic shrug and a clearly disinterested, “Okay. If you want.”

“Hello? What’s brought this on?”

“What do you mean?”

“This sudden disinterest in...” I couldn’t think of any polite way of saying, ‘dressing up in a disturbingly convincing fake skin and pretending to be a girl’ so I just let the obvious conclusion to the question hang.

All that got me was another lackluster shrug.

“Okay. I’m confused. I thought that Julie was... You know. I thought you enjoyed that. Rather a lot. I mean, we kind of paid some dues for you to get all the kinks worked out of the roller-coaster ride at the beginning. Remember?”

“It’s not that I don’t enjoy...” His mouth quirked into a little moue of disgust. “‘Enjoy’. Yeah. Great word choice.”

“Well, what then?”

“It’s...” He folded his arms and then stared down at his lap. Shaking his head he muttered, “I don’t know how to say it.”

“Try.”

“Look, don’t get me wrong. This is not in any way shape or form on you. Okay? I need to be real clear right up front about that. You’ve been super, Max. No kidding.”

I didn’t quite know where this was going. “Since we’re being honest, let me say that I feel I’ve more than gotten enough out of it to justify the effort. I mean, I’ve had my fair share of fun too. So no concerns there. Okay?”

Joey turned an arched-eyebrow frown at me that clearly asked, ‘You’re not just saying that to be nice?’

The challenge irked me. “I was honest-to-God just sitting here thinking that those nights out with Julie sure beat sitting around the house watching bad TV. I swear I was.” And then I waved my hand to dismiss the distraction. “But anyway, we’re agreed that it’s not my fault and I’ve been a wonderfully supportive cousin and just generally all around good guy. So what’s the problem?”

“It’s...” Then he sighed and went back to his folded-arms stare at his navel.

“Is it already becoming a little bit too ‘been there, done that’ already?”

“No. ... Yes. I don’t know. It’s not so much that as it’s... It needs to be... *More*.”

I wasn’t sure I liked how that sounded. “More what?”

“More... I don’t know.”

But I suspected he did know, he just couldn’t figure out how to say it. “Look, not trying to pick a fight or anything but do you need to go find that tube of...” Almost as a joke, we – which is to say ‘Joey’ since I still couldn’t bring myself to say it aloud – had started routinely referring to it as ‘a tube of wet pussy.’ Not that the topic had come up more than a few times. “...of personal lubricant?”

Joey glared at me. “Nice.”

“Hey, I thought this was all about honesty.”

He softened. “I’m sorry, Max. And you’re right. It’s not like I don’t deserve the question. But you can relax. That’s not it. Well...”

Uh oh. “Yes?”

“Look, it’s... What am I trying to say? It’s... When I’m out with you... That is; when Julie’s out with you... You’re great. And it’s a lot of fun. It really is! And you do everything that I could possibly expect of you. And more. But...”

“But?”

“I’m still Joey. It’s what you said that one time, ‘spies and private eyes and Mission Impossible.’ And that’s great. But...”

“But it’s still make-believe? Maybe because I’m in on the gag?”

“Exactly!”

Uh oh indeed. “Joey. I thought we’d settled this. If you involve someone else, some guy – or hell, some girl for that matter – you’re opening yourself up for so much risk.”

“I know. I know. And I’m not thinking about ditching you and heading back to Finerty’s to see if those three are still sitting at that table. But... Okay, see – what it is; you’re right. You’re in on the gag and so that’s all it can ever be. A gag. You’re pretending to treat me like a woman because you know that I’m pretending to be a woman.”

“And that’s not enough, huh?”

“Well, it’s a rather one-dimensional fantasy.”

“Don’t I recall a smart young woman once remarking that fantasies, or at least fairy tales, usually turn out bad when you push them too far?”

“I get that. I really and truly do. But jeeze! There’s got to be some way we can... you know; push the fairy tale just a little bit further than this.”

I really, really didn’t like the way this was tending. But on the other hand, it did seem like a not entirely unreasonable request. “What did you have in mind?”

Joey threw up his hands and snarled, “I have no idea.”

An uncomfortably tense silence descended. I glanced over at the muted TV. An amply endowed young woman in a midriff-baring tee shirt and impractically short shorts was creeping down the shadowy halls of what looked like a long-abandoned old mansion. I muttered, “Predictable” beneath my breath.

“What?”

And then an idea occurred to me. “Okay. What about this? The problem is... The dangerous part seems to me to be when someone gets... Uh...” I waved my hand in frustration, looking for the way to say what I was thinking. “...invested in Julie.”

“‘Invested’? What am I, a stock portfolio?”

“You know what I mean. Like, if some guy thinks he’s hit the jackpot and is thanking his lucky stars, but then suddenly finds out that the ‘she’ he’s worked so hard to get into the sack with him isn’t so much a ‘she’ after all. That’s when *bad* things happen. Right?”

“Umm... Well, I don’t know how your hypothetical ‘he’ is going to figure that out. I’m pretty sure I could more than... But never mind. I see your point.”

Thank goodness! “But, I mean; there have to be other ways, lots of other ways, for Julie to interact with the world that don’t involve that kind of ‘investment’. That are less ‘high stakes.’ But still let other people interact with you on... er... ‘the right terms.’ See what I mean?”

Joey looked suitable thoughtful as he considered it. “Okay. That makes sense. So what are we talking about here?”

“Well... I don’t know. Umm...” I wracked my brain but all that came to mind was, “Clothes shopping?”

That earned me a well-deserved snort of disbelief. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You think we’re going to have fun with you standing around in some clothes store while I’m in a little closet in the back room wrestling into some overly-tight something so you can pretend to ogle me for a few seconds, and then we repeat the process a few dozen times? I’ll pass on that, thank you.”

“Okay. Fine. What else do real women do?”

Joey was back to glaring at me in frustration. “You mean like; ‘everything?’”

“No. I mean like... Well, something it would be fun to be a woman doing.”

“And that would be...?”

“Look, this is your big fantasy. Not mine.”

“Maybe you should just tell me again what an all around good guy you are and we’ll leave it at that.”

“Hey! Fine. Suit yourself. We’ll just sit here all weekend staring at the TV and bickering. You can pretend you’re my wife and call it an absolutely authentic exploration of being married to a jerk of a husband.”

Joey bolted upright. “That’s it!”

“Oh please! You’ve got to be...”

“No, asshole. Not that! The weekend. Fourth of July weekend!”

“Yes, Gracie. It’s the Fourth of July weekend. Good for you. You’ve figured that out all by yourself.”

“Don’t you get it, numb nut? It’s the perfect opportunity for a whole bunch of people to interact with me in a perfectly safe setting.”

Well, at least Joey clearly knew what he was talking about. Which was good, since I didn’t have a clue.

He jumped up from the sofa and made a beeline for the hall to his bedroom. “I gotta shower and shave. And then you gotta help me with Julie. But I’m sure we still have time, at least for your part of the plan.”

“My part of the plan? What part? What plan?!”

“The clothes shopping part.” And then he was around the corner and gone and a minute later I heard the shower start.

I blinked at the vacant hall for a moment. Then figuring I had about half-an-hour to kill while Joey was in the shower, I reached down, picked up the TV remote and turned the sound back on just in time to hear the cliché scientist remark that the safest place to be at the moment was probably up in the trees.



“WHICH ONE DO you like better, honey? This one...”

My beautiful young wife held the hangar with the fire engine red ‘Bay Watch’ one-piece swimsuit at neck height and allowed the fabric to drape over her delightful curves. “Or this one...” Electric yellow with an orange and red daisies print. A two-piece string bikini, with very small pieces.

“I like that one.”

Julie rolled her eyes. “Men. You would. Advertise as much of my cellulite to the world as possible. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“You’ve got cellulite?” (More accurately, ‘You’re wearing a fake girl skin with simulated cellulite?’ Answer: ‘No.’ Having seen the luscious counterfeit ass, hips and thighs that fake girl skin created in all their glory, I knew that was indeed the correct answer.) Not waiting for a reply to my rhetorical, I continued, “I’m curious. Why do you women ask for men’s opinions if you’re never actually interested in the answer?” A middle-aged guy walking past on his way to the escalator actually chuckled softly, earning a venomous glare from Julie at his retreating back.

“Humph! It’s only to flatter you apes into thinking you actually have some relevance in the world.” Then she turned back to her perusal of the other possible swimsuit candidates for ‘tomorrow at the beach’ hanging from the rack. (Even with our combined best efforts, Joey and I hadn’t

managed to create Julie until a little after five. We got lucky though because the mall was open until seven tonight. So we figured we'd get Julie's swimsuit today and then make an early start for the beach tomorrow.)

I cuddled up close behind 'my sweetie', looking, I hoped, like the young husband who still couldn't keep his hands off his new bride. I wrapped my arms around Julie's waist and rested my chin on her shoulder and whispered just loud enough for her to hear, "Like you're really going to buy that 'hide the goodies' one-piece?"

I could see enough of her face to tell that she was pretending (?) a studious little scowl of concentration for the contents of each hangar as she pulled it off the rack and examined it. She whispered back, "You couldn't feel the material. That thing would look like it was painted on. I bet I wouldn't even need my 'high beams' to turn heads." Then, in a louder voice, "Max. Please, you're distracting." Joey turned sideways, like Julie was trying to sort of twist out of my embrace. And in the process, I'm quite sure he intentionally rubbed that fake ass against my groin. Even through my jeans, I could distinctly feel the material of the infamous spring dress (Joey only had the one) sliding over the silk underneath.

"Oh. Sorry, hon." I unwrapped my arms but left my chin on her shoulder just long enough to whisper, "You are a complete slut. Black silk teddy?"

In a matching whisper, Joey replied, "Nope. Something else." Then he lifted another hangar off the rack and spun around to face me, again holding the hangar up at shoulder height and allowing at least the ... 'bra', or whatever it was called... to drape over his make-believe tits. "Oh honey! Isn't this one cute? This one! Please? Please? *Please?*"

I pretended to examine the suit carefully. As far as I could tell, it was the same as the yellow one from a moment ago, except this one was sky blue with white daisies. "If that's the one my little snuggle bear wants."

"Yay!" She pressed close against me with the swimsuit and hangar pressed between us and in a whispered growl delivered to my chest snarled, " 'Snuggle bear'?" Then she leaned back, gazed adoringly up into my eyes (where did Joey get all these disturbingly believable expressions from?) and cooed, "Thank you, Sugar Lumps!"

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing. And Joey burst out laughing – fortunately still in his counterfeit girl voice. It didn't matter though. What would passersby think? (If they were paying particular attention at all, which they didn't seem to be.) That we were a weird couple? Just so long as they thought that Joey was the weird *female* half of that couple was all that really mattered. And either Joey would have to screw up really badly – which I was by now pretty sure was a low order-of-possibility chance – or you'd have to be a mind-reader of extraordinary prowess to know that this

incredibly foxy little honey was anything other than the well-deserved stuff of a male sexual fantasy that she certainly appeared to be.

With her newfound treasure in hand, Julie headed off deeper into the women's fashions section of the local Macy's. "Come on. I need a cute tee shirt to match this and some new shorts. Oh, and some flip-flops. For the beach. And maybe some sunglasses. And a hat?"

Trailing along in her wake, I added, "And some sunscreen. Wouldn't want you to get an uneven tan."

Joey stopped dead in his tracks and turned to me with a, 'Yikes! I hadn't thought of that!' expression. "You're right! Good catch!" (About half of Joey – legs, arms, and at least half of his face – was still genuine, tan-able, sunburn-able skin. But the other half was some kind of high-tech latex/silicone/something-or- other that I assumed would stay the same 'girl next door peaches and cream' no matter how much sunlight hit it.)

The cosmetics counter – perhaps in anticipation of just such a 'weekend at the beach' as we were planning – had a large display of various sunscreen products. Joey selected a 'bulletproof' SPF 200 and then we headed over to casual/sportswear.

We found a pale blue tee shirt with a cluster of dark blue daisies emblazoned across the breast – a nice match for the bikini. Then we spent a few minutes looking for a pair of shorts. I kept snuggling close, pretending more of that newly-wed husband's inability to keep my hands to myself to whisper requests for ever more abbreviated shorts. Joey finally whispered back a growled, "Christ. How about just a g-string with a smiley face?" He was only kidding.

I think.

The twenty-something salesgirl manning the register gushed about how cute the bikini was. And Joey giggled agreement. And then they giggled about how well the tee shirt matched, "*so perfectly!*" Joey paid for it with cash. (Paying with a Visa card issued in the name of 'Joseph T. Adanno' would have been a little problematic.) I got to carry the loot as we headed for the door. We'd almost made it when Joey's head snapped around at some aisle-side display.

"Oh honey! Look! Isn't that just the *cutest* dress?"

I followed the line of her pointing finger to three mannequins, one standing, two sitting. All three wearing dresses. "Which one?"

"That one! The one on the left. Though... The one in the middle is cute too!" She turned a pair of big, beseeching, starving orphan eyes on me.

Juggling the heavy shopping bag in my left hand, I reached out with my right and checked the price tags. "Yikes!"

Joey cuddled close and if anything, those eyes got even more limpid and big as he whispered, “Come on, man. I’m tapped out. And I can’t keep wearing the same damn dress everywhere.”

“Fine. Which one?”

“Well... Look, I’ll pay you back for one. But, I mean... I can’t keep wearing the same *two* dresses any more than I can wear the same *one* and...”

“Fine.”

“Yay!” Julie scampered off to find a salesgirl so she could get the two dresses in her size. My not so problematic MasterCard groaned under the load. Then we had to head over to lingerie. “Gotta get some new stockings and some new...” A little giggle that for the first time I suspected wasn’t just for show. “...undies.”

Clothes shopping was turning out to be every bit as not-fun as Joey had predicted and the irritation was starting to show in my voice. “You have to have new stockings and undies for each dress?”

The bland, matter-of-fact, “Yes” seemed to be all the answer required.

Two pairs of pantyhose, one pair of stockings (not ‘sandal foot’ but most definitely ‘hold ups’ this time), two new pairs of panties, two new bras and what I guess is the female version of a tee shirt called a ‘chemise’ later and my MasterCard was now whimpering pathetically. The worst part was my suspicion of Joey’s secret enjoyment of the fluster and embarrassment I tried – unsuccessfully, I’m sure – to conceal as he wandered around the intimates section, blithely handling all the silk and lace with me in tow, trudging dutifully along in his wake, now with a pair of heavy and getting more so with each step shopping bags.

The third sales girl we encountered tonight – another twenty-something little cutie – unintentionally put the frosting on the cake while ringing up all that stuff that a man wasn’t supposed to be seen anywhere near (at least not in public!) by asking Julie, “Is this his first time lingerie shopping with you?” Julie smiled and hugged my aching right arm. “Yes. We were married in April.” “Oh! Congratulations!” She turned to me with what I’m sure was intended to be a very encouraging smile. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, you know. I only wish more husbands were so nice about tagging along.” Julie hugged my arm even tighter and gushed, “He’s a treasure!”

I tried not to look at the total as I signed the charge slip. ‘Treasure.’ How appropriate.



HOME AGAIN AT last! Well, back at Joey's place actually. But I got to finally drop those heavy bags on the floor. No need for further masquerade. 'You want 'em moved, tote 'em yourself!'

Joey surprised me by reaching around behind himself and tugging down the zipper of his dress as he again made a beeline for the bedroom. As I stood there blinking in surprise and he disappeared around the corner, over his shoulder he said, "Bring the stuff."

More pack mule, eh? "Uh... Excuse me! What are we doing?"

His disembodied voice floated back from the direction of the bedroom. "We gotta make sure that bikini isn't a little too revealing."

That got a snort of disbelief from me. "Are you kidding? I've seen more material in a table napkin. How can it *not* be too revealing? I thought that was the whole idea."

Joey reappeared in the hallway door, his dress already abandoned. Nothing now but an embarrassingly sheer pair of shiny pink panties and an absolutely shameless, all business frown. So that was what I had felt that dress rubbing against. I hadn't consciously noticed the one other time I'd caught a glimpse – put it down to the panic of the moment – that Julie had her pubic hair neatly shaved into a vertical line no more than an inch wide. Sort of like the bar of an exclamation point, the top of the cleft of her barely glimpsed fake vagina forming the period. I felt a mounting pressure against the front of my jeans. "We have to make sure that I'm not showing any seams or... you know ... other give-aways." And then he was gone again.

"Oh. Right." Not showing more than she intended to. Right.

I stood there for a moment in befuddled indecision, staring at the bags at my feet, trying to remember which one held what. It was apparently too perplexing a question to sort out so I just grabbed all three and trooped off toward the bedroom.

Joey was standing there, waiting for me, the pink panties now also discarded and lying in a strangely erotic little tangle on the floor beside the discarded and equally erotic dress. "Give me." He reached out for the bag in my right hand without hesitation. Apparently he knew just which bag held what.

After a moment and apparently as a result of my failure to hand him the bag he was reaching for, he added puzzlement to that all-business frown and in his Joey male voice asked, "Max?"

"Huh?"

Joey's sudden grin was both smug and taunting. "Holy smoke! The lights are on but suddenly nobody's home. I'd ask you not to drool again, but by God I think you already are!"

I gave up even trying for some kind of pride-saving clever reply. "Wow! Just... *Wow!*"

He switched back to his girl voice and giggled, "Why, thank you kind sir!"

I finally managed to find the anchor to reality needed to comment, “Well, nothing in front. That’s for sure.”

Joey’s eyes opened wide and his eyebrows climbed halfway up his forehead. “What? I rather beg to differ! By that expression of yours I suspect there’s quite a lot in front!”

“No! I mean; no visible seams or tell-tale give- aways.”

“Oh! Okay.” He turned around. “How about in back?”

I had to swallow before I could say, “Uh... None that I can see.”

He reached behind with his right hand and gathered the mass of russet curls to one side. “Anything at the neck? I mean – the hair would probably hide it if there was, but why take the risk? Right?”

“Right. Sure.”

With his hair still pulled to the right, Joey turned to again grin at me over his left shoulder and to chuckle, “Jeeze, Max.”

The again irksome quality of it finally allowed me to speak like something more than a moonstruck calf. “Uh, pardon me! But you’re not standing here, staring at what I’m staring at. And if you were, I’d defy you to be coldly analytical.”

After a moment of smirking some more like the cat that had caught the cream, Joey’s grin softened into a more introspective smile and he glanced away, down at the floor.

“What?”

“It’s funny.”

“What?”

“I’m just thinking... It’s tempting to do something... you know, ‘naughty.’ To tease you some more.”

“But?”

Then Joey surprised me by letting go of his hair and instead using that arm to shield his bosom. “Would you... Turn around, Max. Please.”

“Are you kidding me?”

The smile slipped. “No. Really. Please turn around. I’d rather you not be staring at me any more.”

The tone in his voice made it clear he really was serious. Serious enough that I turned my back. Then, over my shoulder I growled, “What is *this* all about?”

I wished I could see his face now, because now Joey was not only being serious, he sounded genuinely flustered. “I’m not sure. It’s... Hard to explain.” I didn’t press. After a moment he murmured, “In the department store... I mean, yes. We were kidding around. But, after a while and with the other people, the sales girls and all... After a while there were little flashes of it being...”

“Not so much a fantasy?”

“Yeah! A little. And now... I don’t know how to say it. And I’m not losing it! Okay? I just... I don’t want to be so obvious and... Christ! I don’t even know what I’m trying to say. I just don’t want you staring at me like that right now.”

“You want me to wait out in the living room? I don’t mind.” Strangely enough, I didn’t. Well, actually, considering the show I’d just gotten and the show I suspected I’d be missing, I did. But...

“No. I still want you to check out how well the bikini looks. So hang on just a second. Just don’t turn around.”

“Okay.”

I heard a shopping bag rustle. Then I heard some soft sounds which I took to be Joey sliding the... if the ‘top’ of a bikini is a ‘bra’, is the ‘bottom’ a ‘pair of panties’?... up his legs. More rustle. More soft, unidentifiable sounds. Then Joey’s male voice muttering, “How do you...? That can’t be right. How do you...? Oh, Christ. It ties! You have to tie it to the right size. I hate things that tie in the back. Just a sec...” More sounds of struggle. Then, “Fuck! Max, c’mere. I need you to...”

After an odd hesitation, I turned around. Joey was standing there, again with his back to me and his hair gathered in his right hand over his right shoulder, his left hand holding a pair of the strings against the back of his neck. “I need you to tie these together. Like the laces of a shoe.”

“Okay.” I stepped up behind Joey and took the two strings in my hands. When he let go, the sudden slack in the strings caused the two little triangles of material in front to slip down and his breasts popped free. “No. You’ve got to keep it tight.” He let go of his hair and reached down with both hands to re-arrange the disarrayed bra. As a result, his hair swung back and covered my hands and I couldn’t see what I was doing with the two strings.

“You’ve got to... I can’t see for your hair.”

“Okay. But you’ve got to pull those two strings tight or I’m going to flop out again. Ouch! Hey! ‘Tight’, not ‘bondage!’”

“Well, excuse me, but this is a little new to me. Okay?”

With Joey using his left hand to press the strings against his chest to hold the whole affair at the proper tension, and with his hair again gathered over his right shoulder in his right hand so I could see what I was doing, we finally managed.

I stepped back to admire my handiwork and Joey turned from side to side so I could get a good, overall view.

“Good? Okay? No tell-tales?”

“Nope. None that I can see anyway. And believe me, I’m looking.” There was enough of the return to ‘playful banter’ in Joey’s sly, “No doubt”, that I felt comfortable observing, “You were right, by the way. At this point, those ‘high beam nips’ would be over-kill. You’ve got more than enough going on without any need for artificial augmentation in that department.”

Joey glanced down and then chuckled, as he wryly observed – rather disconcertingly in his male voice – “Well shee-oot! That’s...rude!”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think too many people are going to complain. At least not if they’re of the male persuasion. And the women can go hang, as far as I’m concerned.”

He turned around so his back was to me again. “I can’t feel so I can’t tell. How much butt am I showing off? Too much?”

“Well, again...”

“No, seriously Max. You’ve got to... Pretend you’re me for a second. Is it too much?”

“Joey, I don’t know. I mean, you’re showing about... ‘a quarter’ together with some impressive ‘cleavage’. But is that too much? Look, let’s be honest here. I don’t think there’s enough material to cover much more. Do you want to...? Reconsider?”

“Well, no. Hell, real girls are wearing *thongs* these days, for heaven’s sake. So I guess a little cheek and a little crack...”

“Like I say, I really don’t think you’re going to be getting any complaints from the guys, if that matters.”

“Hmm. Okay. Let’s check out the rest of the outfit.” He rummaged around some more in the bag and pulled out the tee shirt and the shorts. He set the tee shirt on the bed and then started to step into the shorts.

“Want me to turn around again?” It was disconcerting to realize that I wasn’t being sarcastic, but rather solicitous.

“No. This isn’t...” Then he paused, bent over at the waist with his boobs just about tumbling out of that skimpy little bikini top and the shorts halfway up his legs and gazed up at me again with that puzzled expression. “Okay. Weird. I was going to say, ‘This isn’t getting dressed because I’m not...’ A bikini isn’t underwear so you can look. Is that about strange or what?”

Oddly enough, the answer was easy. “Not really. Or at least no weirder than some other things that women do. I mean, a bra and panties are probably every bit as concealing as that little

nothing of a swimsuit. But a woman that would freak if I was looking at her in a bra and panties will happily parade around all day in a bikini.”

Joey shook his head and finished pulling the shorts up to his waist and fastening them. “Weird. Okay. How’s this?” He struck a sort of arms out at his sides modeling pose.

“Very chic. No, really. You could just go with that. Without the tee, I mean.”

“Yeah, but I want to be able to make a big show of taking it off.” He collected the tee shirt and then pulled it over his head. I couldn’t help but notice that when the bunched-up lower hem encountered the thrust of his breasts, the shirt kind of tugged them down, and then after it had passed, they sort of ‘sprang back up’ with just a little hint of bounce. “Hold it a second. Take it back off. Just like you put it on.”

“Why...?”

“Just do. I want to see something.” Specifically, I wanted to see if the opposite reaction would occur when an upward-moving hem contacted those delightfully mobile boobs.

It did.

I described what I was observing to Joey and from his expression it was clear that the ‘playful fun’ – read ‘sly sense of mischief’ – was back.



IN RETROSPECT, I feel bad about what happened next.

I keep telling myself that I wasn’t completely to blame – that Joey was every bit as responsible for it as I was.

That’s what I keep telling myself.

The sense of ‘playful fun / sly mischief’ was back, so rather than more of that solicitousness – which in retrospect I’m also trying to convince myself wasn’t rather strange – I instead opted for a wicked little smile. I’d set the other two shopping bags down when I’d gone to help Joey with the two string ties of his bikini top. Now I bent down, picked them up and offered them to Joey with a sly, “Okay. Let’s see the rest.”

At first Joey seemed perfectly willing to comply.

“Sure! But this time you do have to scoot.”

“Huh?”

“Out. Off to the living room. I’ll be out as soon as I get this outfit off and the first dress on.”

“The first dress? What about the rest?”

Joey's smile faded. “What ‘rest?’”

“Three pairs of stockings, two pairs of panties, two bras and that... whatcha-call-it. ... *That I paid for.*”

“Max, look... I thought we'd agreed... That you understood it isn't fun any more for you to be staring at me when...”

I was staring to get pissed off too. “No, you look. I've been an all around good guy, you said so yourself. And as a result I've paid some dues here, I think. Remember that first night in Finerty's, for example?”

Joey nodded and made an obvious attempt at being reasonable. “Yes, Max. You have been very...”

I cut him off. “I think I've really gone out of my way to accommodate you and your fantasy. And I have no objection to doing so, now or in the future. As I say, it's been a lot of fun – it really has – and so it's all good. But what about my fantasies? Huh? Especially when it doesn't cost you anything.”

“When it doesn't cost me anything?! Who are you to say...?!”

“Joey, I realize that I'd be asking a lot from a real girl. A good girl would probably slap my face and a bad girl would demand a lot of money up front. But you, my friend are neither a good girl nor a bad one. *You're not a girl at all.* Okay? And if you were one, with the way you conduct yourself you'd be a very bad one. So let's not get all...”

Joey stabbed a finger at me and snarled, “Okay. You stop right there because I don't have to take that from you!”

“What? Me questioning your ‘virtue?’”

That brought him up short. He fumed and fumbled for a minute before not-quite-snarling, “It's still insulting.”

“Look, I'm not actually challenging anything that's *real*. I'm not questioning your virtue because... Well, because it isn't *your* virtue that's on the line. If it's anyone's, it's ‘Julie's’ – *and she doesn't really exist.* This is all just a fantasy.”

“Fantasy', huh? Okay. Fine. Let's talk about fantasy.” He stabbed a hand into a bag and came out with one of the bras. He pressed it to his tee-shirt-clad chest and then leaned over in a classically slutty, teasing pose and switching on his girl voice, he purred, “Is this what you're looking for, lover? Big, soft tits in soft, silky lace? Does that get you hot? No problem that they're on your male cousin Joey, huh?”

Providence watches out for fools and small children, they say. That's what I put it down to anyway. I almost said it. I almost said, 'Yeah – and which of us does that make the bigger pervert?'

Thankfully, I managed to choke back the words.

Joey glared at me, shoulders rocked back, bent provocatively forward at the waist, that bra still pressed to his make believe bosom which was also provocatively thrust forward.

I glared at Joey.

Then, at the same instant, like someone had thrown a switch connected to both of us, we looked down at the floor or aside at the wall, our challenging glares melting into embarrassed fluster.

And then just as if another switch was thrown, we both spoke in unison:

"Max, I'm sorry, I..."

"Joey, I don't know what..."

We grinned sheepishly at each other.

It was Joey who took the initiative. "I'm sorry. I am. You're absolutely right. I..."

"No! It's my fault! It's you who's right. I had absolutely no right to..."

"Of course you did! All day long I've been teasing and seducing. How could I expect anyone not to respond at some point?"

That stopped me for a second. "You've been teasing and seducing all day?"

"Uh..." Joey suddenly realized he still had that frilly bra pressed to his chest and quickly tossed it aside to land on the bed. I couldn't help it, the relief of tension erupted as an amused snort. Joey grinned too. "Well... Hell, you really are a treasure in some respects. I mean, jeeze Max! You really are 'easy'." He quickly added, "I don't mean that as any kind of a dig! Really! I mean; it's kind of nice that you're...uh..."

I didn't want to be grinning, but I couldn't help it. "A naïve little twit?"

"*No!*" Clearly Joey couldn't help smiling too, though bless his heart, you could also see he was trying to be sincere as well. "Not naïve! You're just... When it comes to girls, you're a nice guy. Kind of innocent. And that's a *good* thing!"

I tried to toss it off but the nonchalance was too obvious so I gave it up pretty quickly. "Well, for what it's worth, I really and truly wasn't questioning your – that is; Joey's – virtue. 'Julie' really is make-believe and we both know it. But as make-believe goes..." I spread my hands and chuckled. "Damn! I don't know, but I have to believe that after a while it'd be hard...*awfully* hard... not to get at least a little caught up in it. And I'm not sure that's a *bad* thing. Especially if it doesn't hurt anyone."

Joey made his way over to the foot of the bed and sat down. Then he brushed that stray lock of hair out his eyes and murmured, “Well, there’s the problem. I am getting close to hurting someone. I’m getting close to hurting you, Max.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, come on. You don’t need to go overboard on being nice. I’ve been teasing and playing you all day. And then when you finally react like anybody would, I get all high and mighty and make a really miserable crack about what kind of fantasies you might have – fantasies that I’ve been trying to plant!”

I started to reassure Joey that he wasn’t the only one who could make horrible cracks about fantasies – ‘who does that make the bigger pervert?’ – but again was smart enough to squelch the reply before I made it. Instead I fumbled around with, “That still doesn’t give me the right...”

“‘The right’? Bull! You said it yourself; it’s not like Julie has any virtue to challenge. And it’s not like I’m protecting anything of my own. In fact, what the hell is this all about, anyway? So what the hell! You wanna play? Sure! Let’s play!” And he started to tug the tee shirt off.

“Wait!”

A pair of eyes peered at me over the top hem of the tee shirt and a muffled voice asked, “What?”

“I’m not so sure... Maybe this isn’t such a good idea.”

He slowly lowered the tee shirt then folded his hands in his lap. “Why not?”

I didn’t quite know why it wasn’t a good idea, but I knew it certainly felt like it wasn’t. “Uh...”

His eyes got big, his eyebrows pressed together, his lower lip started to quiver and in his Julie voice he murmured, “Don’t you think I’m pretty any more?”

“*What?!*”

His reply was an overly theatrical sob followed by a wailed, “The honeymoon’s over!” Then he faked a sniffle and gazed at me with his chin on his chest and pouted, “If I could turn on the tears, I bet then you’d let me get all sleazy for you.”

I could only chuckle. “Then thank heaven for small favors that you can’t because after everything else today, that’s probably more aggravation than I could survive.”

Julie stamped her foot and whimpered, “Fuck you!” Then we both laughed until our sides ached.



I NEVER DID get to see the rest of that... of 'my' lingerie in action. At least not that night.

We played around a little more with the bikini/tee shirt/shorts outfit. We experimented, trying to find the best way to take off the shirt and the shorts. Which method got 'the most bang for the buck.'

Joey's first attempt with the tee shirt was for him to cross his hands – left hand on the right side lower hem, right hand on the left side lower hem – and then pull the shirt up and over that way, ultimately uncrossing his hands at the top while simultaneously turning the tee shirt inside out. "Well. That's not bad." ('Not bad'. Yeah. Right.) "But it doesn't do that 'make my boobs bounce' thing."

The second attempt was a kind of slow, languorous... "Are you really going to do it that way?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, frankly, that looks like there should be some sleazy bump and grind music playing in the background."

"Too obvious, huh?"

I thought about it for a second. "But you know... Do it again, about... two-thirds of that."

"Two-thirds', huh? Okay." Joey put the tee back on and then gathered up the hem and started to slide it up. "Wait." He rearranged the tee shirt, thought about it for a second then again slipped it off all the way. It didn't matter how many times I saw it, that bouncing boob shtick worked every time. "Well?"

"Uh... It's still a little... But I can't say I haven't seen girls do it that way. Just don't do any 'more' than that. And remember in the back of your mind, you're thinking, 'God, I'm such a *sexy* little bitch!'"

"Okay. Good. That's what I'm looking for." Joey did it one more time, just to make sure he had it right.

He did.

"Okay. Now the shorts."

He stood up and started to unfasten them and I couldn't help it, I started to laugh.

"What the hell is so funny?"

"You're doing it again."

“What?”

“Who are you supposed to be, Jessica Rabbit? ‘I’m not bad, I’m just drawn that way.’”

“You got all that from me unbuttoning my pants?”

“More from that *expression* on your face.”

“A little over-board, huh?”

I nodded. “Oh, just a ‘little’, yeah.”

The second time, the expression was still a hint too much ‘serious concentration’, though I was going to let it pass. But Joey hit the abort button almost as soon as the shorts started to slide down his legs. “Whoa! Oops!”

“What?”

“Got a piece of the... What do you call it? The ‘bottoms’? ‘Panties?’”

“I have no idea.” Joey didn’t know either? As ‘well-versed’ as he’d given me ample reason to believe he was, did that mean that nobody really knew what to call them?

“Got a piece of them and they were coming along with the shorts. Bad enough, but like I say, I can’t ‘feel’ what’s happening. If I hadn’t been looking...”

“Well, make sure you’re looking is all I have to say. Unless, of course...”

Joey frowned at me. “What?”

“Hey, I’m sure stuff like that happens in real life. I remember this one time, I was coming out the door of the 7-11 – you know, over on Madison – and there was this woman... A complete *babe!* Anyway, it was windy and she was wearing this light dress and the wind caught it. She was walking away, with her back to me...” I smiled at the still very clear memory. “No panties. Very nice.”

“Hmm. I don’t know... I mean, unintentional ‘up- skirt’ does sound sexy and we might consider that for another day. But dropping your drawers... That just seems more ‘crude’ than ‘hot’ to me. If you know what I mean.”

I thought about it and I could in fact see what Joey was saying. “So just make sure you’re watching.”

“And by the way, you just make sure you’re watching too, please. Especially my butt.”

“Uh...?”

With a little touch of exasperation, Joey reminded me, “I can’t feel it back there either. Remember? I can’t tell if it’s sliding down all the way. And I can’t very well keep an eye on it, now can I? So you’ll have to...”

“Oh! Right! Well, it’ll be a chore – keeping an eye on that lovely little ass – but you can count on me!”

He’d been speaking in his normal, male voice. But for a second Joey switched to his girl voice to simper, “See that you do! And *only* that one!” She gave me a smug little pout and a little sniff and then added, “I’ll watch all the rest and maybe, if you’re good, I’ll point out some of the other nice ones.”

“You know, that’s another unfair advantage you have.”

“‘Unfair advantage?’”

“What I mean is, you can stare at all the pretty girls as much as you want and nobody’s gonna slap your face.”

Joey quickly, emphatically shook his head ‘no!’ “Ho, ho! Oh, I don’t think so.”

“What do you mean? Girls can stare at girls. ... Can’t they? I mean, it’s not like they’re going to think you’re – or rather, that Jessica...”

“You mean ‘Julie?’”

“What? Oh. Sorry. See what you’ve got me thinking about now? Anyway, it’s not like they’re going to think that another girl is staring at them ‘with lust in her heart’.”

“Wow! Okay. One: I said you were innocent when it came to girls, but come on Max! Believe it or not, there are girls out there who actually like looking *at other girls! With lust in their hearts*, no less! Try not to faint, okay?”

I hadn’t thought of that. I tried to cover the vaguely disturbing proof that maybe I *was* kind of innocent after all with a snide, “Oh. Ha, ha. Yeah. I’ve actually heard some vague rumors about that. Smart ass.”

“Two: Since you’re a guy, does that mean you get to stare at other guys and nobody is going to, maybe, ‘take offense’ after a while?”

“Umm... Well, that’s just ‘one’ again. But... uh... It’s different for girls.” That sounded pathetically lame, but I couldn’t think of a way to make it sound better by adding to it.

“‘Different’ how, ‘Mister I’m Suddenly An Expert On Women?’”

“I... It’s amazing the things you can learn on the Internet.”

That got me a ‘thumbs up’ and a patently taunting, patently insincere smile of ‘encouragement’. “Clearly.”

“Well, but seriously... Umm...” I realized that by continuing to struggle, ‘I was only making it worse.’ “Okay. So maybe I won’t be jealous of your getting to hang out in the ladies’ can either.”

Joey laughed. “Yeah. You can pretty much not worry about that. ‘Been there, done that’ and I gotta tell you...” And then that wicked gleam of mischief appeared in his eyes and suddenly he got struck a flirt-y seductive pose with his hands pressed palm-to-palm between his thighs and his shoulders rolled forward and in his Julie voice he cooed, “I have to tell you Max, darling... It’s just so... *So...! Ooo!!*” She faked a believable little shiver of desire. “All those beautiful, half-naked women in harem outfits and slinky little bits of lingerie, lounging around on pillows and eating grapes and doing the most *sinfully naughty things* to themselves and to each other...!”

“All right. All right. I get the message.”

“I promise you that what it is; it’s every bit as erotic as the men’s can. Except it’s got a bunch of overweight cows and a bunch of screaming little kids and you get to stand in line to wait for a still-warm-from-the-last-user toilet seat that...”

“*Never mind!* I get the picture. Jeeze, leave me a few fantasies intact, okay?”

Switching back to his male voice, Joey thoughtfully remarked, “You know, absent the perfectly understandable... Well, I sure wouldn’t want a woman in drag hanging around in the men’s room. Embarrassing? I get that. But beyond that, I have to tell you I don’t really know what the fuss is about. I mean; the very few times I’ve been in there and there’s anybody else in there with me, I swear my foremost thought is, ‘Get me out of here as fast as possible ‘*cu*z I really don’t want to be here!’”

I sat there pondering it all. So long in fact, that Joey finally asked, “Max?”

My grin must have been half-pensive, half-rueful. “Don’t take this the wrong way, okay? But...”

So that’s what an ‘uh-oh’ expression looked like? I wondered how often Joey had seen that on me. “But...?”

“I almost wish...”

“Yes?”

“I almost wish I had a ‘Julie’ of my own.”

“Oh? Why?” Give him credit, Joey looked like he was at least trying not to grin in triumph.

“‘Spies and private eyes and Mission Impossible.’ ‘Life, the Universe and Everything.’ You’re learning stuff, my friend. And though, of course, I’m not – I can see how some folks could be just a little jealous.”



WE SPENT SEVERAL minutes before heading out Saturday morning discussing our ultimate destination. Though we'd obviously already reached agreement that this was to be a day at the beach, that still left the question of 'which beach', since we had quite a few to choose from.

In the end, Joey and I settled on a place called "Twelve Mile", a little over an hour's drive up the coast. Upon consideration, we thought it offered a couple of advantages over several, closer candidates.

First, it was a little over an hour away. That appealed to both of us for one simple reason; we weren't as likely to run into anyone we knew there. We both quickly agreed that just seemed 'easier'. I'd be willing to bet that Joey would have also agreed with my unspoken thought that not running into anyone we knew was also 'safer.'

Second, and in a rather amusing commentary on what we were contemplating doing, it was also 'safer' for another reason. "Twelve Mile" had something of a notorious reputation for being... Shall we say 'free spirited'? If the worst-case actually came to pass and Julie were to suffer some kind of 'wardrobe malfunction'... Though it was by no means a sure bet, the chances were still at least fairly good that her feminine charms wouldn't be the only ones on display at any given moment.

Not that that had anything to do with my quick agreement to the hour-plus drive required to get there.

In any event, a little after seven on an already absolutely gorgeous summer morning, Joey – which is to say 'Julie', also gorgeous in her new tee shirt, shorts and flip flops outfit (the skimpy little bikini under it all) – piled into my Jeep and off we went.

The conversation was light, inconsequential and at first concerned the same mundane topics that Joey and I always talked about. Which is to say; that had nothing to do with 'Julie'. I was already becoming quite comfortable with it all.

That is until we turned onto the Coast Highway and got up to highway speed and I had a sudden alarm as I noticed Julie's curls starting to fly in the wind coming over the windshield. "Hey! That wig isn't going to come off, is it?"

Joey was blithely unconcerned. "Not unless my head does too."

"Good. 'Cuz I don't want my bald-headed cousin chasing it down the side of the road."

"I'm not bald-headed. I'm wearing a... Umm... Whatcha-call-it underneath. A... You know, like a stocking cap. To hold my hair down. So even if my wig came off, which it won't, you'd just have what looks like a girl whose wig came off chasing it down the road."

"Very reassuring."

"Seriously. Don't worry about it."

We drove on in silence for a while. Then just because – as I say, familiarity had made it all quite comfortable – I casually asked, “So what are you hoping for today, anyway?”

Joey glanced sidelong at me. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I’m just wondering... What would you like to have happen today? What would be fun?”

Evidently Joey could tell that I really didn’t mean anything by it, because his shrug was as nonchalant as his reply. “Oh, I don’t know. Nothing special. Just hang around for a lazy day.” Another sidelong glance, this time with a heavy accent of ‘wry’. “Not looking like I’m looking at the pretty girls. Letting all the handsome guys try not to look like they’re looking at me – which I intend to make as difficult as I possibly can, if you get my drift. That sort of thing.” A few tenths-of-a-mile passed. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh nothing. I’m just thinking...” My voice trailed off and I suddenly found something very interesting to look at over on my completely unremarkable side of the road.

“Thinking what?”

“Nothing. It’s not important.”

“Max...”

My tone of voice was as six shades of embarrassed as my sheepish grin must have been. “I was just thinking... Shit.”

“M-a-a-x...?”

“If I was a pretty girl, or more specifically, if I could be a pretty girl for a day, what would I like to do? What would I like to have happen?”

Joey gave me another rendition of that ‘cat who has cornered the cream’ grin. “And what have you decided?”

I took my eyes off the road just long enough to stare into my cousin’s eyes and say, “You realize that you – *Julie* – are the *only* person with whom I’d ever discuss this, right? I mean, I don’t expect to ever hear any of my friend ribbing me about...”

Joey chuckled. “Oh, I don’t think you really need to worry about that ever happening. I just... You know. I just can’t imagine the topic ever coming up. Given the circumstances.”

I returned my attention to the road. “Good.”

Another tenth-of-a-mile passed.

“M-a-a-x...?” The distinctly audible note of glee made it perfectly clear that I wasn’t going to get away without at least some kind of answer. Probably a rather lengthy one.

Unfortunately, I really didn't have one and I said as much. "I really don't know. Seriously, Joey. I mean, being a spectator, I've kind of gotten interested in the whole thing. But it's not... I just don't... That's not a put-down or anything, by the way! I mean, I'm *not* trying to insinuate that I... Or that it's only something that you... Uh..."

Joey let me off with another light chuckle. "I know, Max. Don't worry about it. I realize that this is more... 'my thing'."

"Good. So, anyway... What would be fun for your 'thing'? Or, let's make this less threatening and ask, 'What would a girl want to have happen today?' Since even if you're not trying to think like a girl, you seem to have some pretty good insights."

"Well... Who's to say that my insights are valid?"

"Who's to say they aren't? But anyway, in your opinion as a more than usually informed observer, what would a girl want to have happen today?"

"Well, the obvious one for one thing. Skimpy bikinis exist for a reason. So I'd like to show off... Or rather, your hypothetical typical girl would like to show off a good body if she has one. Beyond that..." Joey thought about it for a while as the scenery rolled past. Then he shrugged, "Beyond that, lie in the sun and have fun."

"Oh. Okay."

"You sound less than satisfied with that answer."

"No. ... Well, you have to admit; you've gone to a little unusual effort if all you're interested in is lying in the sun having fun. Joey could do that."

"You're forgetting the 'showing off a good body if she has one'."

"True." More scenery. Then, "Is that really all it is? Being noticed and appreciated as a pretty girl?"

Joey's reply wasn't so much defensive as it was really not able to come up with the right words to say what he was feeling. "What do you want me to say, Max?"

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to put you on the spot. I'm just curious. But I'll stop now."

"No. 's okay. It's a fair question." He thought about it for a while longer. "I guess the real answer is; I don't know what I want to have happen because I don't really know what *might* happen. That is to say; the kind of things that can happen. And like you, I'm curious to find out."

"Could I go back and amend my original answer? My 'pretty girl for a day' one. 'Cuz that's pretty good."

"Thank you."

I was smart enough to let it go at that, which seemed to satisfy Joey. But it was a little frustrating. I would have loved to hear some ‘pretty girl’s day at the beach’ fantasies.



JOEY AND I stood at the top of the little incline that led down to the beach proper and scanned the scene. In an aside I murmured, “What do you think?”

With his right hand shading his eyes and in his Julie voice that I assumed was now switched on ‘for the duration’, Joey replied, “I like it. Not too empty. Not too crowded.” Which I thought was a pretty good analysis. The beach was about a mile long, running more or less north to south, bracketed at either end by rocky points that jutted out into the surf. And maybe fifty or so yards from the foot of the dune grass covered incline to the water’s edge. In that space, there were no more than roughly thirty people.

At that instant I spotted a pair of twenty-something girls, quite unconcernedly strolling by about twenty yards away, and quite obviously availing themselves of Twelve Mile’s aforementioned ‘free spirit’. “Ooo! Me like-ee too!”

Julie followed the line of my stare and then reached over and gave my arm a gentle smack. “You pig!”

“Yeah, you’re voice says ‘no, no!’ but that gleam in your eye says ‘yes, please!’”

“Humph!” She glanced quickly again at the two who were sitting down on a blanket about halfway to the surf and then turned back to glare at me some more. “Okay, that one. The brunette on the right. If those don’t just scream ‘plastic surgeon’ I don’t know what!”

I already knew ‘Julie’ well enough to recognize her ‘I’m playing with you’ tone of voice, though I doubt anyone else would. “If you girls are so disgusted by that, why do so many of you...?”

I hadn’t even realized that another couple, about Joey’s and my age, were walking past. In a reprise of the incident in Macy’s, the man kind of chuckled. At the same time his female companion speared me with an almost exact copy of ‘Julie’s venomous stare’ from that same occasion. Then her eyes caught Julie’s, Julie rolled her eyes and gave an exasperated little sigh. ‘Men! What can you do?’ And then the couple was past and Julie and I were alone again. “Very nice! Now, see? That’s the kind of thing that ‘I would like to have happen.’”

I just smiled and shrugged. “Actually, it was unintentional. I didn’t even know they were there. It just seemed like the right thing to say. To ‘Julie.’”

“Well, hold that thought because it is indeed the right one.”

“By the way and just for reference, do they really scream ‘plastic surgeon?’”

“How would I know? I was trying to come up with a... ‘The right thing for Julie to say’.” Julie again shielded her eyes with her hand and her gaze slowly panned across the length of the beach as though she was again surveying the whole and not any particular part of it. Then she turned to face me apparently intending to shield her words and her expression and – still in Julie’s voice – growled, “God damn! I don’t know if those are ‘home-grown’ or ‘store-bought.’ But when you get right down to it, *who cares?! Let’s set the blanket over there near them.*”

“Excuse me! I thought you couldn’t look at girls.”

“I’m not going to look. I’m just going to... Uh...”

“Do me a favor and at least try not to drool, okay?”

“Fuck you!” We both tried to moderate our grins as we slowly headed over in the two topless girls’ direction. Julie again glanced that way, briefly, then went back to staring at her feet as she murmured, “Do you think I could strike up a friendly conversation? You know, one girl to another. ‘Oh my dear! You simply *must* tell me who did your boobs! They’re absolutely gorgeous! May I give them a little squeeze, just to check out the workmanship?’”

“I don’t know if you could get away with it or not. But I’ll tell you what, I’d love to be there to watch it if you could!”

We set the blanket up about ten yards or so from anyone else, including the topless pair who had in the mean time both stretched out on their stomachs, apparently intending to work on tanning their backs.

So that was one distraction handled, at least for the moment.

I was pretty sure that if I didn’t raise my voice much above a low, almost-whisper it wouldn’t look or sound too suspicious, but I could still say what I had to say and only Julie would hear. “It’s probably just as well. Unless you took your top off, next to those two I don’t think you’d be much more than part of the scenery.”

“I was seriously considering it. I still might. ‘What does a girl have to do to get noticed around here?’”

I had worn my extra-dark-lenses aviator sunglasses for just this contingency. “Take your top off and I’ll tell you.”

“Huh?”

“You tee shirt. Take your tee shirt off and I’ll tell you. You can’t see him but I can. He’s sort of behind you. Don’t look! Anyway, it’s the guy from up on the hill and his wife. He’s just glanced this

way a second time. Take your tee shirt off and we'll see if a girl can get noticed. Just like you practiced it.”

“Okay.” Julie fiddled around for another moment with her bottle of sunscreen and a paperback she'd brought along. Then, just as casually as you please, she slipped her tee shirt off. (Thinking about it after the fact, I've decided I could watch that 'make my boobs bounce' routine all day, every day and it probably wouldn't ever get old.) Julie never once glanced in the guy's direction. In fact, watching her out of the corner of one eye as I tried to covertly observe the guy out of the corner of the other, I have to say Julie's performance was flawless. It looked so casual and 'no big deal' – and yet it so very definitely was! She folded up her shirt and as she turned toward me (and her face away from her audience) to set it on the blanket beside her, she whispered, “So?”

I reached over as if I were going to collect her tee shirt and put it in our picnic basket for her. “Well, one – you really are one 'sexy little bitch.' Those two got nothing on you. And two – now you know what a girl needs to do to get noticed around here.”

She smiled a nonchalant little smile and in a normal speaking voice and said, “Oh, good. Darling, would you rub some sunscreen on my back? I don't want to burn.”

“Of course, hon.” Again I looked down, like I was rummaging around in the picnic basket (though the bottle of sunscreen was sitting right there on the blanket.) “Don't want to drop your pants too?”

She turned her head and looked down so she could tap the bottle and murmured, “Always leave 'em wanting more.” Then she stretched out on her stomach. I was reaching for the bottle of sunscreen when I noticed she was untying the string on her bikini top – the one that circled her chest versus the one that I'd twice tied for her around her neck. (Once last night and once this morning.)

“What are you doing?”

She turned her head and smiled at me. You had to be sitting as close to her as I was to see the gleam of mischief in her eyes. “Tan lines, silly!”

The stuff in the bottle smelled like coconut, which is a fragrance I love for some reason. I rubbed a generous splash between my hands and then reached out for Julie's back. And froze just before I actually touched her artificial skin.

Sensing something was wrong, she turned her head onto one cheek and looked at me over her shoulder. “Max?”

“Christ. What if...” Then I remembered to keep my voice down. “When you take this thing off, what do you do?”

“You want to discuss that now?”

“What do you do?” Calm down, lower your voice I told myself. No need to panic yet.

“There’s a solvent. You just wipe it on, wait for about five minutes and then...”

“That solvent, is it alcohol? Is that damn goop, the stuff in the cracks, alcohol soluble?”

“Why is that...?”

“The sunscreen is alcohol based!”

“Fuck!” Julie chewed her lip for a second. “I don’t know what that solvent is. It does smell like rubbing alcohol though. A little.”

“I don’t think we dare take a chance, do you?”

“No! Umm... Hmm... I could just put it on my arms and my legs and my face. The sunscreen.”

“That’s going to look a little odd. And could you keep it away from the seams? Especially on your face? There have to be a whole bunch...”

“There are. Fuck, Max. What are we going to do?”

“Max?”

I spun around to see who was speaking.

Ed Wahl, my boss from work was striding down the beach toward me with a smile on his face, his wife Jo close behind. “Well fancy running into you here.”



I SCRAMBLED TO my feet. “Ed! Wow! Uh...small world. Yeah. Hi, Jo.”

She returned my smile, though it looked a little forced. “Hi, Max.” Then she looked rather pointedly down at a spot to my immediate right. Ed seemed to be interested in the same spot.

“Oh! Uh...Ed Wahl and his wife Jo, this is my cousin Jo-lie ... Andrews.”

Ed’s eyebrow arched and Jo asked, “Julie Andrews?”

Julie giggled. “Mr. and Mrs. Wahl. A pleasure.

And no, my parents weren’t addicted to ‘The Sound of Music.’ It’s actually ‘Angelina’. But everyone calls me ‘Julie’.”

Joey’s cool was both amazing and incredibly comforting. The minute I’d seen Ed, I had been ready to throw myself at his feet and start begging for forgiveness. But Julie was so perfectly polite,

which is to say perfectly blithe and charming. She'd even remembered her current state of undress and rather than sitting up (as I'm sure I would have) instead she had come sort of half-way up onto both her elbows with her left hand pressing down against the sand supporting her weight and more importantly, her right arm – just so casual and natural-looking – pressed against her chest, holding that unsecured bikini top very modestly against her breasts.

We stayed like that for an interminable minute; two rather off-balance males, one calm, collected, easily smiling female (Julie) and one (mysteriously) uncomfortably-forcing-herself-to-look-pleasantly- smiling female (Jo). Finally Ed broke the silence.

“Well. We won't interrupt you any more. I just wanted to make sure it was you and to stop by and say 'Hi.'”

In a sunny voice Julie asked, “Why don't you join us?” and my heart just about lurched out of the bottom of my feet.

In a noticeably cool tone, Jo replied, “Oh, no thank you. We were just passing by. Come on Ed. Let's set up over there.” And she pointed off into the distance.

“Oh. Okay. Well...have fun you two!”

I offered a belated, “Yeah! And you two too” to their receding backs. Then I flopped back down on the blanket and waited for my heart to calm to something like only a few hundred beats a minute.

Julie snarled, “Want me to get you a paper bag to breathe into? Or are you just going to have a nice, quiet seizure and get it over with?”

I could only gape at her with an, ‘Are you nuts?! Don't you know what could have just happened?!’ expression of disbelief.

Julie rolled her eyes. “Oh brother.” Then she glared at me again. “And by the way; ‘Jo-jo-Julie Andrews’??”

“It was all I could come up with on the spur of the moment.”

“What's wrong with Julie Adanno, moron? You think my real last name is going to mean anything to your boss who doesn't know me from Adam?”

“Uh... Uh...”

Julie's snort was equal parts disgust and sarcasm. “Maybe you should just wander over that way a few miles before you fuck it up for both of us. Maybe you're not so good at ‘the right thought’ after all.”

I tried to reclaim a little of the initiative. “Speaking of the right thought, ‘Why don't you join us?’ Are you freaking nuts??”

“Oh, please. It was *obvious* she wasn’t going to say ‘Yes.’”

I glanced off toward Ed and Jo, already two little figures dwindling into the distance. “Yeah. What the hell was that all about? What was eating her?”

“For Christ’s sake, Max. What woman wants to tag along with her husband to a topless beach so he can ogle all the bare breasts?”

“Oh.”

“Why do you think I sat up and made such a big show of mine? ‘Of course, dear! Join us and I’ll let your horny husband play with my naked tits for a few hours.’ If that didn’t get her moving along, dragging Ed by his ear, I don’t know what would.”

“You call that making a big show?”

“It’s all relative, Max.”

“Wow.” Then after a second, “*How do you do that?* Where does that come from? If I sit here and think about it, now that you’ve explained it to me, I can see that you’re absolutely right. But how did you do that so quickly in such a panic?”

“Well, Max... Dear... Only one of us was panicking. Though God knows why he was.” Before I could protest, she continued. “And what do you mean, ‘How do I do that?’ How do I do what?”

“It’s that whole thinking like a woman thing again!”

Julie shook her head and looked way, out toward the ocean for a while as she thought about it. “I think you think it’s harder than it is. I think you think that there’s a lot more... *mystery* to it, to a woman’s mind than there is. For Christ’s sake, Max. Women are people too you know.”

“Yeah but... But see, that whole thought process you went through... How to get Jo to want to leave... It was just perfect. Obviously, since it worked so well. But it never would have occurred to me.”

“Gee, no shit?” She mimicked a brain-damaged country rube tone. “‘Jo-Jo-Julie Andrews, hy-yuk, yuk, yuk!’”

“No! It’s not just that! Any guy would have... Most guys wouldn’t be able to...”

I hadn’t seen that dangerous light in Julie’s eyes for a while, but it was back now. “So what are you saying? That I’m not like most other guys?”

“No! You know I’m not. Please don’t start that all over again. Okay?”

“Humph.” She went back to staring out at the ocean. “Then what’s the reason, Sherlock? How do you explain my incredible mental powers of deduction and insight?”

"I...guess I can't." Julie sighed. "Look. I'm really and truly not knocking you because I'm really and truly not thinking anything along those lines. Okay? It's not that I'm...disapproving, it's..."

Julie interrupted with a disgusted, "Gee, thanks!"

"...it's that I really and truly am just amazed by where this is coming from. I mean, your insights. Call me a moron and bungling idiot all you want, but I really don't think I could..."

She sounded both resigned and also perhaps the beginnings of conciliatory. "You're not a moron, Max. I'm sorry, that is a little too... I mean, he wasn't *my* boss so I guess I should make some allowances for you getting flustered."

"Yeah, but see? It wasn't just being flustered. Even if you'd given me a few hours to map it out, I don't think I could have come up with what you came up with in, like, a split-second."

Julie had laid back down, flat on her chest. So when she shrugged, it wasn't much more than a little twitch of her shoulders. Then she sighed and went back to staring out to sea. Finally, she turned her head and gazed up at me again. "I wish you weren't so... I wish there was a chance of making it work."

"What?"

"Getting you 'a Julie of your own'."

"Why?"

"Face it, Max. You're too broad through the shoulders and too muscular through the legs to ever..."

"No. I mean, 'Why do you wish you could get me a Julie?' Not, 'Why wouldn't it work?'"

"Oh." Another little twitch of the shoulders. "I'm sitting here, wondering if perspective really does have that much to do with it. With the ability to think in the magical, mysterious way you seem to think I'm thinking. And I have to admit, I guess there is a little... 'something' to it. To 'perspective' – whatever that means – making it possible."

It was my turn to gaze out to sea and think about it for a while. I wouldn't have admitted it aloud to Julie, but a dark little corner of my mind was attracted to the possibility of not just being a spectator. But then the rational majority voice growled, 'You really want to practice taking off *your* tee shirt and seeing how much of a bounce you can get out of *your* fake tits?' The voice ignored the gleeful, hopeful little nod from the dark corner and went on to snarl, 'Well, it'd never work anyway. Julie's right. You'd just embarrass yourself. So forget it.' I sighed, "In the end I guess I'm going to just have to take your word for it. And I'm going to quit worrying about it and enjoy the show. 'Cuz as shows go, this one's pretty good. Better than man-eating mutant turtles any day."

That seemed to be more than enough answer for Julie. Which was good, because it really was the answer. One that worked pretty well for us from then on.

And the show really and truly was every bit as good if not far better than reruns of Super Bowl VII or tree-climbing mutant turtles. After we'd come to our accommodation and things were comfortable again, Julie very casually untied the top string on her string bikini top, nonchalantly discarded it and sat up for a while and we chatted. I was very urbane about it. 'Innocent about girls'? Bah! Man-of-the-World! That's me! At one point I even got to give a subtle little nod in the direction of the two topless girls and inform Julie in my semi-whisper tone of voice, "Well, what do you know? I guess there really are some girls who like to look at other girls with lust in their hearts."

Julie smirked. "Maybe I need to reconsider having that friendly girl-to-girl chat. I'd be very happy to let her play with mine for a while as I'm playing with hers."

"And I could charge admission."

Then Julie remarked, loud enough for anyone who was listening to hear, "Uh oh. I think I'm starting to burn already" as she gazed down at her chest. (Nobody was listening, though.) I casually suggested that it might be better if she put her tee shirt back on and she readily agreed. No bikini top underneath. I discovered that configuration not only produced 'bounce' with the passage of a tee shirt's hem, it also created a little side-to-side residual shimmy, which was very nice. And that subtle little bumps beneath a tee shirt are every bit as nice as subtle little bumps beneath bikini tops.

Also nice is watching a pretty girl rub suntan lotion on her exposed arms and especially her shapely legs. (Though the boundary line between Joey skin and Julie skin was safely beneath the bottom hem of the shorts and the sleeves of the tee shirt, watching her rubbing oil on a pair of shapely breasts would have to wait for another day and a trip to the store for some water-based sunscreen. Ah, well. Something to look forward to.) So all in all that was a nice resolution of the alcohol-based sunscreen dilemma.

About an hour later there was some kind of blow-out off in the distance followed by a hasty de-camp of Mrs. Wahl closely followed by an apparently chastened Ed. Another reason *not* to look forward to next Monday – besides the ending of a three-day weekend. Ed could be kind of a moody guy even at the best of times. And this clearly wasn't going to be the best of times.

After a while, I fell asleep in the sun (and got a nice sunburn for my efforts. Neither of us had remembered to put sunscreen on *me*.) Julie read her paperback.

No pirates ever came charging out of the surf to rip the bodice of Julie's gown thus baring her heaving bosom as she sobbed and whimpered for mercy. Which meant that I didn't get to rescue her, let her drape her arms around my neck and press that heaving bosom against my chest as she purred, "My hero! And now for your reward!" Nor did she ever get to glide languidly along the edge of the

waves in a clinging, diaphanous, see-thru outfit as dolphins frolicked and little baby angles fluttered around her head. So maybe not every one of my secret, 'what would you like to have happen?' fantasies – which is to say, her fantasies that I could have talked her into describing and then claim were all her fault – got realized. Oh well.

It was still a pretty good day.

And I've been thinking about the 'perspective' thing too. It's a rather diverting contemplation, at least on a philosophical level. 'How different is different, and why?' Maybe 'a Julie of my own' might supply some answers, but that's not going to happen. It's neither practical nor anything that I'd ever have the courage to try. I'm not nearly as brave as my cousin when you get right down to it.

Or as imaginative. Or as daring. ... Or as skinny. Which is just as well, I suppose.

That really ... 'interesting' ... evening a few days later when there was absolutely *nothing* on TV whatsoever and instead I got to see all of 'my' lingerie in action for example...

Perspective really can be a wonderful thing, sometimes.

Part 3: Night Passage

I STOOD THERE in the doorway of Joey's bedroom with my arms folded and my stomach in a knot. "Is it too late for me to try one more time to get you to see reason?"

'Julie' didn't even bother to turn her head to look at me. She just kept carefully applying her lipstick, "It was too late two attempts ago."

The fact that I was trying to reason coolly and calmly with a half-naked girl dressed only in lacy-sheer panties and a rather abbreviated bra as she sat at her makeup table applying her lipstick wasn't helping. So it came out as a snarl when I said, "I never should have helped you with that damn suit this afternoon. I never should have done the back seam for you." I guess in the back of my mind I was trying to make some kind of implied threat. 'If you do this, I'll never help you again.'

Julie remained unconcerned. "I would have just figured out some way to do it myself, Max." She pursed her artificial lips and studied the reflection in the mirror. Apparently satisfied, she screwed the top back on the tube of lipstick, set it aside and then turned halfway in her seat so she could look me in the eyes. (And I found myself wondering if it was harder to try not to be distracted by lacy panties molded to that gorgeous fake ass – or by the profile of two equally fake but equally convincing tits framed by more silk and lace.) Julie's tone was maddeningly calm and reasonable, "Look, this just isn't as bad as you're making it, okay?"

“How can you say that? Do you even understand... Do you have any concept of...”

“*Of what?!*” It only disconcerted me all the more when that snarl was delivered – as all the rest had been – in Joey’s also absolutely believably female ‘Julie’ voice.

I finally couldn’t keep my cool anymore. “*Of tricking some guy you work with every day into taking you home and screwing you!*”

“Oh for the love of...! How many times do I have to say it? *That isn’t going to happen!* Why can’t you get that through your thick skull?”

“How do you *know* it isn’t?”

“Because I won’t let it!” I started to offer my rebuttal but Julie held up her hand (with enough emphasis that I now had to try not to be distracted by a little jiggle from those oh-so-real-looking tits.) “Stop! Just...stop. Max, please. Let’s both take a deep breath and count to ten, okay?”

I forced to myself to let some of the tension and anger out in a long, drawn-out exhale. Then I shrugged and stared down at my toes.

Julie continued in that same conciliatory tone. “I don’t know what it is. Why you... Okay, look. It’s not wholly unreasonable, I grant you. I mean, for all your patience and understanding, I know that in the back of your mind you’re always thinking...”

“What?” I didn’t mean for it to be a snarl, but it was.

After a moment Julie continued in a slightly less conciliatory but still trying to be reasonable tone, “You’re thinking that this is all about sex. And as I say, I can understand where that’s coming from. If I’m going to the trouble to change my apparent gender, and if gender is the foundation of sex, then I must be after the sex, right?”

What could I say? When you got right down to it, that thought always had been in the back of my mind. I just stared at my toes.

“But see... It isn’t!”

I finally glanced up. Julie was staring at me with a very earnest, almost pleading expression. “What isn’t what?”

“Gender isn’t about sex. Not always. Look, think about it. How many first dates end up with the girl and guy in bed? Huh? And this isn’t even a date! This is just you and Dan and Joey out for drinks at Finerty’s and a chance for Dan to meet your cousin Julie. And I swear to you... *I swear to you...* that being the case, Dan’s going to have hit the jackpot if he gets anything more than a passing glimpse down the front of Julie’s dress. And furthermore, if she catches him trying for that glimpse things are going to get a little chilly in Finerty’s tonight. Max, you have to understand that the

chances of him actually getting Julie out of that dress tonight are absolutely *zero!* *Zip!* *Not* going to happen, because I'm simply not interested in that so I'm not going to allow it."

"And what if you don't have anything to say about it?" And there it was, my real fear in all of this. Maybe I trusted Joey enough not to live down to my worst expectations. But what about Dan? What did I really know about him anyway? He was just some guy that worked in another part of Joey's office.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Christ! I mean what if Dan decides that dress is coming off no matter what you – what Julie – has to say about it? What then?"

Julie shook her head, started to suck on her lower lip but then – perhaps remembering that carefully applied lipstick – thought better of it. "Man, where do I even start? Okay. First off, sure – that kind of stuff occasionally happens. But Dan isn't that kind of guy. He just isn't. If anything he reminds me of you in that respect. When it comes to girls, he's kind of innocent. That's why I – or rather why Joey invited him tonight."

"Yeah, but don't they always say it's the quiet ones, the ones you'd never expect who turn out to be..."

"And that's why you're going to be there."

"You expect me to come charging to the rescue?"

"No. I don't expect there to be even the slight possibility of you needing to, since it's three people and Dan will never have any... Look, a girl doesn't get into that kind of trouble in the middle of a public place with her own cousin sitting beside her. Okay?"

"So why is it three people if it isn't ever going to amount to anything anyway? Isn't that going to... you know ... 'crimp Julie's style'? Why do I need to be there?"

"God! Are you not even listening to me? Or are you just intentionally choosing to be difficult?"

"What?"

"'Crimp Julie's style'? Haven't I already tried four or five times to tell you that Julie isn't going to have 'a style' tonight. She's not going to be putting the moves on anyone. She's going to keep her ankles crossed and her hands in her lap and be a perfect little Catholic school girl."

"Then what the hell is the point? Why does Dan have to be there at all?" This time I got to interrupt her attempt at a rebuttal. "And why that?" I pointed at her skimpy little bra. "Huh? What's the point of that?"

She glanced down, apparently genuinely confused about what I was pointing at. “What’s the point of what?”

“That ‘fuck me now!’ little nothing of a bra you’re almost wearing!”

Julie clenched her fist and actually growled. “Arrgh! It’s not ‘fuck me now’ if nobody gets to see it. *And nobody will!*”

“Then why wear it?”

Julie buried her face in her hands but then almost immediately jerked them away with a grumbled, “Fuck!” She studied her hands then studied her reflection in the mirror. Apparently the damage to her makeup wasn’t serious because instead of trying to repair it she turned to face me again, spread her hands... And then sat there in silence looking for the right words.

I started to say something, but she immediately raised her hands palm up in another emphatic command to ‘stop!’ “Just...” Then she went back to thinking. Finally, in an introspective tone she said, “Why am I doing it? What’s the point? You and I, Max... It’s been fun. It’s been everything I could ever have asked... Yeah, yeah. I know. We’ve been all through this already. But the one thing it’s never been, the one thing that *it can’t ever be* with just you and me... I’ve never gotten to be the girl, Max. I’ve only gotten to pretend to be the girl.”

“Yeah, but Joey you’re...”

“I’m not saying it right. Look, I know I’ll always be pretending to be the girl because I’m not a girl. I’m a guy. I get that, okay? I always have. I guess what I’m trying to say is that with you it’s always... Like you once said, you’re always in on the joke so that’s what it always is. What it always has to be. But I want it to be more.”

“I guess that’s my problem; the ‘more’ that it might possibly be.”

Julie sighed. “Max, please. You have to understand that there’s ‘more’ than just sex. You ask about this bra...” She glanced down at her chest and I couldn’t help but follow her gaze. “Okay. Maybe it is a little bit ‘fuck me now.’ But I’m not wearing it because I want... God, how do I say this? I’m wearing it because I want to be the girl wearing a skimpy little bra under her dress, knowing what effect seeing it would have on a guy, playing with little fantasies about how he might try to woo me into a chance at seeing it, all the while knowing in the back of my mind that he’s never going to. I want to be the girl who would feel sexy because she’s *concealing* a daring, skimpy little bra like this. Not because it’s going to get her laid. But because...” She looked for the words for a moment longer and then sighed. “I can’t put it into words, I guess.”

Maybe it was finally starting to sink in. “I’m not sure I... Okay, so you’re saying... What?”

“Come on, Max. We’ve both been there. Admiring the hot little babe. Wondering what it’ll take to get into her pants. Wondering what’s under those pants in the first place. Or under that blouse. Mentally undressing her. Planning little strategies for making it something more than mental. And knowing all the time that it’s only fantasy. That it’ll never happen. Right?”

“I suppose.”

“So haven’t you ever wondered, even fleetingly, what might be going through *her* mind? ‘God, what a stud! Wouldn’t I love to get that in bed for a few hours? Has he noticed me yet? Maybe I should show a little more leg. What if I dropped something? A napkin or something. Would he pick it up for me?’”

I wasn’t sure I even wanted to try and answer that. “Joey, to be honest I can’t say that I...”

He interrupted me again. At least this time his tone wasn’t confrontational. It was more a gently stated request. “Could you... Look, it might be a good idea if you started calling me ‘Julie’ when I’m... You know. That’d be a hard mistake to cover, especially with someone who knows me as Joey.”

My stomach that had been relaxing knotted up again. “See? See the kind of things that can go wrong?” I clenched my fists and tried to suppress the churning emotions, working instead for reason and persuasion. “This is such a *tightrope* you’re walking. And eventually you *are* going to fall off! Look, I get the fact that you want something more out of all of this than I’ve been able to give you. I’m not sure I understand entirely what that something is. But I understand that you want it. Okay. Fine. But we don’t always get everything we want in life. Sometimes the cost is...”

“Max...” Julie sighed again and glanced away. “Maybe you’re right.” My stomach started to unclench again at the possibility of Julie finally starting to see reason, but the moment was fleeting. “Maybe having you there tonight isn’t such a good idea after all.” The knot in my gut seized up again, more twisted than ever. Joey taking such a big risk with me there to cover his back was bad enough. But Joey out there on his own...

“Now wait a minute!”

“No. I think I’ve made up my mind.”

It was sliding out of control. I flailed around for some reasonable argument. “So... How is that going to look to this Dan guy? I mean, first Joey calls and says he can’t make it so it’s just Max and Julie. And then Max doesn’t show up. You think that’s going to be a really fun evening? I mean, I don’t know about you – which is to say you; ‘Joey’ – but for me ‘Max’, that’d be pretty daunting. Talk about awkward!”

“People do it all the time, Max. It’s called a blind date. Besides, it might be kind of fun to play awkward and embarrassed and shy.”

Play? This was shaping up to be a complete disaster. “Okay, but what about the whole, ‘three people so no...’ You know; no threat of... Of...”

Julie had turned back around all the way in her chair, showing me her back again. Body language for ‘this discussion is coming to an end.’ Her tone of voice – ‘long-suffering patience running out’ – made the inference complete. “Get off it, Max. You and I both know that isn’t really going to happen. I mean; yeah, I’d humor you enough to discuss it, to give you that rationale for tagging along. But we both know that in reality it’s just not... Look, it’s getting late and I really need to finish getting dressed. So maybe... Thanks for your help with the suit and for offering to come along tonight. But I don’t think...”

“Joey...”

“I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow.”

I knew Joey well enough to know that the discussion had, indeed, come to an end. I was dismissed.



I HELD THE cell phone against my ear and tried to sort out the sudden flurry of emotions. Apparently the upper-most emotion – my growing unease taking the first steps toward panic – translated sufficiently through the pause for Joey to ‘hear’ it. “Look, Dan... I’m sorry about this. But both Max and I just can’t get out of it. I mean, maybe we can swing by later. To Finerty’s. But...”

“No. I understand. I mean, stuff happens. It just seems...”

“‘Seems’ what? Think we’re setting you up?”

I managed to find a soft chuckle. “I don’t know. Are you?”

“Man, you think I’d throw a lamb chop like Julie in front of a starving wolf like you if I had any choice in the matter?”

“Yeah. Lady-killer. That’s me.”

“Actually that’s why I’m calling you; to make sure you’ll still be there to take care of Julie, versus calling Julie and warning her to run for the hills while she’s still got a chance to save herself.”

“Needs looking out for, does she?”

“To be honest, yes.” Pause. “Okay, that didn’t come out right. I don’t mean she can’t be trusted on her own. Just the opposite. What I mean is... Okay, see? This is why I thought of you

when I heard she was going to be in town for a few days. She's a really good kid. But she's a little... Not a whole lot of experience, if you know what I mean."

"And when it comes to inexperienced girls, you immediately thought of me?"

"Again, to be honest, yes. I thought of you as someone I could trust to show Julie a good time and still be... well, trustworthy."

"I'm not entirely sure, but I think that's a compliment."

"You can be sure. It is."

"Oh, well. Since you're being so nice about it..." Since you're being so nice about it I don't see any graceful way to get out of this mess. More's the pity.

"Anyway, I gotta run. I told Julie what you look like so she shouldn't have too much trouble picking you out. She told me she's wearing... Oh, she's about my height. Shoulder-length, curly, dark red hair. And she's wearing a white, sort of white floral print dress. Gold and white or something."

"I'll keep an eye out for her."

"Thanks, man. Look, don't worry about it. I know you and I know Julie and I'm sure you two will hit it off. Okay?"

"Yeah. Okay."

"I'll be expecting a full report tomorrow. Just remember that we're first cousins so don't do anything I wouldn't do. Right?"

"Right. Talk to you tomorrow." I hung up and put the phone back in my jacket pocket. I glanced at my reflection in the mirror behind the bar. You could read the question quite plainly in the expression on the face of the guy looking back at me; *'What have you gotten yourself into?'* Good question. I'd had to think about it when Joey first proposed this outing. In the end I'd only said 'yes' because it had sounded pretty safe: Joey and his other cousin Max to take the 'edge' off of things. I didn't know Max at all. Never met the guy. But whether I knew him or not, with two other guys along it wasn't a date. It was... Well, not a date, anyway. Certainly not a blind one! But now...

This was a mistake. I just wasn't a social animal. The temptation to beat a hasty path for the door was pretty strong. And but for that guilt trip that Joey had just laid on me, 'Take care of my innocent little cousin,' I'd probably give in to temptation. But if I beat feet now and something happened to Julie...

What could happen to her? She was an adult, right? Old enough to go out to a bar on a blind date with some guy, right? I glanced toward the door, telling myself that it was not with the idea of

heading that way – at least not yet – but rather only to gauge how far it was from my barstool and how inconspicuously I could beat a retreat in that direction. Just in case.

Of course at that moment it opened and in walked a real looker in a ‘sort of gold and white print dress.’ She had long, curly, dark red hair and a tentative expression on a gorgeous face with more than enough of a family resemblance to Joey to torpedo any lingering ideas about beating a retreat with anything like a clear conscience. There could be very little doubt that Julie had just arrived.

She stood there in the door, scanning faces. I was trying to figure out the best way of catching her attention (and wondering one last time if there might still be a way of escaping her notice and thereby getting myself out of this) when her gaze turned to me and she noticed me obviously noticing her. A tentative little smile tugged at the corner of her lips and I surrendered myself to the inevitable. I tried for a smile of my own as I remembered enough of Mom’s lessons in manners to stand up. With her ‘tote bag’ purse carried in both hands in front of her, more or less casually down at waist level – like you always see girls carrying them when they’re in a sort of uncertain social situation – Julie made her way from the door over to me.

“Dan?”

“Julie?”

Her smile became a little less tentative. “Julie.”

I tried to match her smile. “Dan.” She didn’t quite giggle, but her eyes were twinkling enough that I managed to relax to the point that I didn’t sound completely doofus when I asked, “Would you like to sit at the bar or...” I nodded vaguely in the direction of the booths in the back.

“Oh, I think the bar is okay.”

I was wracking my brain for the appropriate manners with respect to pulling out a barstool for a lady, but she solved the dilemma by casually (and gracefully) seating herself without a lot of assistance from me. I reclaimed my stool next to her.

And then we just sat there for what seemed like an hour or two of uncomfortable silence. Finally she tucked a lock of hair behind one ear and tried to speak with casual nonchalance. “Well. This is...awkward.”

I wracked my brain for a suitably disarming, suitably clever reply. “Yup. Awkward all right.”

Her expression took on a slightly wry shade. “I’m going to kill Joey for this.” Then, almost immediately she turned to me with a look of incipient fluster. “Oh! Don’t misunderstand! Please, I... I didn’t mean anything about... It’s not that you... Oh, boy!”

I finally had to laugh. “Yup. Pretty awkward, all right.” That got her smiling too, though the smile was still more than a little flustered. “Look, if it helps at all, I’m sitting here thinking that rather than killing him, if anything, I need to find a way to say thanks to Joey.”

She arched her eyebrow. “Uh...I’m going to take that as a compliment?”

My, but this was going well. I fell back on my last card: comedy. “How about if I go outside this time and you sit here at the bar and we just try this again?” Thankfully, it worked.

Her smile relaxed and the twinkle was back in her eyes. “Oh, I don’t think we need to go to all that bother. How about if I just hold out my hand...” And she did, like she was expecting a handshake. “...and ask if I mentioned that my name is Julie?”

I took the offered hand gently in mine. “The pleasure is truly all mine, Julie. I’m Dan Faustino.”

“‘Faustino’? Really? I’m ‘Adanno.’ What part of Italy...?”

“We’re Milanese. On Dad’s side.” Duh. Thus the last name, moron. “Umm...obviously. My Mom’s folks are...well, a little bit of most of Central Europe, I think.”

Julie was nodding and smiling, her hand still resting lightly in mine. “We’re Sicilian. *Tuto Siciliano*, both Mom and Dad.” She gracefully reclaimed her hand.

“Ah! You speak Italian?”

Her smile became just a touch impish (and more than a touch sexy as a result) as she nodded and replied, “Yup. And you just heard the entire repertoire. Well... ‘Lasagna’ and ‘spaghetti’ are in there too. Somewhere.”

“No provolone? No pepperoni?”

The ice was starting to melt. “Only on pizza. Rarely in conversation.” I wracked my brain for more clever examples of ‘Italian In Everyday English’ to keep the ball rolling but she spared me the effort by asking, “How about you?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you speak Italian?”

“High school German, which I’ve probably completely forgotten. If I ever actually knew it in the first place.”

She wrinkled her nose and I decided that I definitely owed Joey a note of thanks because this was one hot little honey once she started loosening up. “German. Eww! The language of, ‘Why use a sentence when you can turn it into one incredibly long word instead?’”

“*Ja! Der Ubervordmachenmitdein...* Umm...”

She smirked, "I suspect you're making that up."

"No! Really?"

More laughter meant more ice breaking and more at ease and that meant I had to remind myself not to let my gaze linger on those hands she'd folded in her lap. There was another slight pause, which Julie finally filled. "So, you work with Joey?"

"In the same firm. But he's in Commercial Accounts and I'm in Residential."

"Oh, really? So do you... Are you the guy who shows folks around new homes?"

"No. I'm not a salesman. I'm... I guess you could say I'm more 'management.'" Or perhaps you could more accurately say 'glorified file clerk'. For some reason, my claim of working in management brought another twinkle to her eyes. Could I actually be making a bit of an impression? If so, how could I capitalize on the first, faltering steps?

"Management? Really. So, does Joey work for you or..."

"Oh no. As I say, he's in an entirely different division in a pretty big firm. He's...umm... So, what do you do?"

"Well, oddly enough, I'm in real estate too. I'm a secretary for a small office. Two licensed realtors. Mostly residential, but we do a little commercial too."

"Isn't that a coincidence?"

"Isn't it?"

The next incipient conversational lull was thankfully averted by the timely arrival of the bartender. "Evening, folks. Is this all going to be one tab?"

I quickly said, "Yes."

He nodded. "So what'll you have?" Before either of us could answer, he turned to Julie and asked, "The usual?"

"Yes, please."

He turned to me. "And a refill on that draft?" I nodded. "Coming right up." Then he was gone to fetch our order and something odd occurred to me.

"The usual'?"

"Hmm?"

"He asked you if you wanted 'the usual'. Have you been in here before?"

"Oh! Yes." I thought I detected a slight bit of 'flustered' for some reason. "Joey and Max brought me in here night before last. My first night in town. I guess two bachelors... Well, you know. They needed something a little more entertaining than a rented video."

“Oh. Sure.” I gazed down the bar at the bartender who had drawn my draft beer and was putting together one of those ‘umbrella in a glass’ chick drinks. Orange juice and... something. Not vodka. Something in a small, dark bottle. “Wow, he must have some memory.”

“Really! But then I guess that comes with working in a bar.”

The bartender finished mixing Julie’s drink and was heading back in our direction when Julie went to set her purse on the floor at her feet. But she bobbed it as she was turning on the stool and it fell to the floor, spilling a few items when it hit. Julie growled, “Oh, shoot!” and started to climb off her stool to retrieve it. I beat her to it and hopped off mine. “I’ve got it.”

“Thank you.” She sighed. “What a klutz. Way to make a good first impression, Julie.”

“Not to worry.” Then I managed to restrain myself from saying what I was about to say and what I was definitely thinking; ‘It gives me a chance for a closer look at those luscious legs of yours.’ And now that I was down on one knee no more than a foot away from them, I had to say there were indeed luscious! Not fat, which I don’t like. And not muscular, which I really don’t like. More or less perfect – at least what I could see of them, anyway. Julie’s skirt was a little longer than knee-length, so at the moment I was limited to admiring only her calves and ankles. But as I say, they were everything I liked. In the quick glimpse I allowed myself as I was kneeling to retrieve the spilled items, I also noticed that Julie wearing a pair of ‘strap-y’ sandals and, from the slight hint of material visible over her toes, she was also wearing sandal-foot stockings.

I don’t know why, but those kinds of stockings have always been a particular ‘turn-on’ for me. Perhaps it’s something about the ‘mystery of women’. ‘I’m using artifice and wiles but I’m trying to be subtle about it. I’m not making the trick obvious.’ I find that erotic.

Then I forced myself to concentrate on gathering up the spilled items instead of lingering too long in my admiration of Julie’s legs to the point that it became a stare versus just a quick (and hopefully permitted) glance. The catastrophe of the spilled purse didn’t seem to be too great, just a few loose items to collect. A makeup compact. A hairbrush. A handkerchief. A lipstick.

And a little ‘roses and daises’-paper-wrapped, otherwise nondescript and unidentified cylinder about twice the size of the lipstick.

Having grown up the middle sibling between two sisters – one just lately turned thirty and the other nineteen – I knew what sandal-foot stockings were. I also knew what that little paper-wrapped cylinder was. Both my sisters carry a tampon in their purse, ‘Just in case.’ Julie, who was watching my progress in retrieving her spilled items, murmured, “Oh. Umm...”

Strangely enough, instead of making the situation just that much more awkwardly embarrassing, I found myself smiling up at her as I casually collected ‘the item’ and dropped it into her purse. Perhaps it was simply a case of, ‘If you’re embarrassed then I’m not.’ Or maybe I was

telling myself, 'If I pretend not to know what it is by not acting flustered or hesitant, maybe you'll think you've gotten away with another little feminine secret and that'll put you at ease.' In any event, I congratulated myself on sounding blissfully nonchalant as I said, "There ya' go. Should I just...?" She nodded. "Just set it on the floor, please." I did then reclaimed my stool.

It's hard to tell if a girl is actually blushing when she's already wearing blusher. But I would have bet that Julie was. She took a deep enough breath for her shoulders to rise, exhaled it in a long sigh through her nose and then with a rueful little smile asked, "So. How do you like me so far?"

I silently offered myself more self-congratulation over my gentle, genuine chuckle. "So far, so good. How about me?"

"So far, so good."

Sometime during my expedition down to retrieve the purse the bartender had arrived, delivered our drinks and departed. I took a sip from my beer. Julie took a sip from her... "What is that? That drink."

"It's a Fuzzy Navel."

"What *is* a Fuzzy Navel, anyway?"

"It's orange juice and peach schnapps."

"Orange and peach? Eww."

"No! It's good! Really. Here..." She held out the glass to me, offering me a taste. I noticed the two little straws had traces of lipstick on them about the same time Julie noticed the same thing. "Oh. Uh..."

I smiled. "I'll take your word for it."

"Okay. But it really is good. You should try it sometime."

"I'm more a draft beer kind of guy. I don't like mixed drinks all that much."

"That seems to be the case with most guys. Why is that? Why don't you macho men allow yourselves the simple pleasure of a good mixed drink?"

"I think we're afraid of poking an eye out on the umbrellas."

"Oh, 'ha ha'. Well fine, be that way. More for me, then."

"So. You're only visiting town, huh?" The more I got to know her, the more the fact that she was only going to be around for a few days seemed to be a shame.

"Um hmm."

"Where are you from?"

"Originally, from right here. But after college I moved up to Astoria."

“Astoria... Oregon, right? Or is it Washington?”

“Just barely Oregon. It’s a beautiful little town. Right at the mouth of the Columbia River. Thus the ‘just barely.’ The river is the state line. Have you ever been there?”

“Nope. I’m afraid I don’t get around much.”

She considered her drink or maybe the surface of the bar for a moment’s silence then softly said, “Really? I find that hard to believe.”

“What makes you say that?” That little smile tugged again at the corner of those lovely lips. “You just don’t strike me as a ‘stay at home’ type is all.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“If that’s the case, then it’s a shame.”

“Why is that?”

“Because... Well, awkward first moments notwithstanding, you seem to be a nice guy. The kind of guy girls like to be around. So it would be a shame if...”

I wasn’t wearing blusher so my blush was probably painfully obvious. “You get all that from the first five minutes, do you?”

She nodded, her expression now both earnest and sincere. “Yes. I do. At the risk of sounding not at all feminist correct, women can tell things like that fairly quickly. Call it survival instinct.”

“Well, maybe you need to get in touch with Darwin and have your instincts checked then.”

That got me a little knit to her eyebrows. “Don’t go out of your way to put yourself down, Dan. That’s *not* something that women find attractive.”

“It’s hardly putting myself down if it’s just simple truth. You don’t know all that much about me.”

“Don’t I?” She reached out and laid a soft hand atop mine. “Let me tell you what I know. You’re a nice guy who doesn’t think he’s a particularly special guy. The kind that girls could never go for. Which, by the way, is exactly the kind that most girls do go for – at least the smart ones. And when they’re not putting themselves down. The guys, I mean. So anyway, you stay at home and watch TV. And when Joey invites you out for a few drinks your first reaction is to try and come up with a sufficiently believable excuse to duck the invitation. How’m I doing so far?”

I could only shrug and turn away. Julie reclaimed her hand, clenched them both not so casually this time in her lap and in a very chagrined tone murmured, “Oh! Umm... Oh, boy. Way to go again, Julie!”

I managed to smile. “No. It’s okay.”

“Oh sure. Guys just love to have some pushy chick they’ve never met peer into their soul and tell them all about how they need to... Yikes!”

“No. Really. It’s okay. I mean, it’s not like you’re not right.”

“Yeah but...” She offered me a distraught ‘Now I’ve done it!’ apology expression. “...Yikes!”

“Okay.” I wanted to lay my hand atop hers but that didn’t seem quite right. So instead of reaching out, my hand just kind of twitched. Enough for her to notice. Way to go, Dan. “How about if I say that guys like that... Like me... When a girl... Umm...”

She was back to that earnest, sincere peering into my eyes. “What? ‘When a girl...’ What?”

I shrugged, looking for the right words. “Maybe it’s enough to say that the next time Joey invites me... Maybe if there’s a chance there are a few more girls who... Girls like you...”

Somehow, it was the wrong thing to say. She turned away and again tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. A mannerism, apparently for when she was off- balance. “Oh. Umm...” The pause was long enough for it to start getting uncomfortable. (Like things weren’t already becoming uncomfortable again.) “Dan... As a wise man once said, you don’t know me. You don’t know anything about me.”

Now I really wished I could take her hand in mine. “Shall I tell you what I know?”

She surprised me by again turning that earnest expression on me, this time with eyes that were almost... ‘Haunted’. “No. Please, don’t.” Then she turned away again. “This was a mistake.”

“Julie?”

She stared down at her hands for a moment longer then again turned to me, this time with sad little smile to go along with ‘earnest’. “It’s nothing. Silly. I just should have made sure I was w-a-a-y more drunk before I started saying things like that so you’d have the proper context.” Then she reached out and again took my hand. At least this time it was tentative enough that I felt a little better about my own hesitation. “Look, the point is – and then change of subject please. The point is that if you think you’re not... That to tell yourself you’re not good enough to have a little fun and a little... Well, you’re wrong is all. I know enough from just a few minutes to know at least that much.”

I laid my hand atop hers and it didn’t feel so awkward after all. “So, how about those Dodgers?”

“Huh?”

“Change of subject. ‘How about those Dodgers?’”

The sad little smile became winsome and she even laughed softly. “Oh. Okay. Umm... Lovely weather we’re having for this time of year, don’t you think?”

“So tell me, do you come here often?”

“And what’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this, anyway?”

“Uh, I think that’s my line – being that I’m the boy and you’re the girl.”

“Oh. Sorry. Uh... Your turn.”

“That last one of yours doesn’t count.”

“Does too.”

“Who says?”

“Me. Don’t argue.” We were both trying to suppress the giggles at this point.

“Well la, de, dah! Fine. How about that Presidential campaign?”

“I was told never to discuss politics or religion.”

“Not even with a politician or a priest?”

“Well, yes. But you have to be careful to talk politics with the priest and religion with the politician.”

“That doesn’t even make sense. Shouldn’t it be ‘politics with the politician’ and ‘religion with the priest?’”

“Have you ever tried talking politics with a politician?”

“Oh. I see.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank me’?”

“For noticing I’m very wise.”

“Beautiful too.”

With another soft laugh she reclaimed her hand. “Okay. That’s enough cliché for a few hours.”

“It’s not cliché to say you’re beautiful. You are. Or am I not supposed to say things like that?”

“Oh God, yes! Every other sentence, please. Just don’t expect me to gracefully acknowledge it. It’s the female version of that fear of getting your eye poked out with the umbrella. It’s just not something we do.”

“I’ve noticed that about you. Women in general I mean.”

“What? That we can’t take a compliment?”

“No. That you’re insecure about your looks.”

“I beg your pardon! Who’s insecure about her looks?! Are you saying I have something to be insecure about?”

“Holy smoke! ‘Insecure’, not ‘paranoid’! And besides you don’t and you aren’t and ... and... You started it!”

She finally relented with a soft chuckle. “I’m teasing.” Side-long glance. “Well, sort of. Anyway. It’s not that women are insecure about their looks. Well, most women.” She thought about it for a second. “Okay. So maybe they...we...are. But that’s just...It comes with the job.”

“Again, and if it matters, I assure you quite solemnly that you have nothing whatsoever to be insecure about.” She got this lovely, slightly embarrassed smile. She started to say something. Reconsidered it. Started to say something else... The plucked the little umbrella out of her drink and pantomimed sticking it into her eye. When the chuckles died down again I asked, “But seriously, though. Why do some women...if it’s like you say, why do some women feel insecure when they really have no reason?”

“My, but you’re just bound and determined to turn this into Psychology 101, aren’t you?”

“Hey, once again – you started it.”

“No I... Oh. Well, if you’re going to count that.”

“Returning to the question at hand.”

“Pooh. I’m fresh out of good distractions so I guess I have to answer. Umm...” Then she shrugged and smiled. “Lord, I don’t know. I suppose it has something to do with how important appearance is to a woman. We’re judged on our appearance far more than men are so...”

“Okay, not to be confrontational or anything...”

“Why stop now?”

“Um hmm. Anyway, how do you know you’re judged more on your appearance than men are?”

“Pfft! Are you trying to say that we’re not?”

“I’m saying how do you know you are? More than men, I mean. Isn’t that rather...? I thought politically correct demanded that you not be judgmental. That everyone be equal and so forth. That it was incorrect to make sweeping, gender-based...”

She was waving her hands. “Yeah. Whatever. But seriously, are you actually trying to tell me you don’t think women are judged on their appearance more than men are? I mean, come on!”

“My point is; how would you know what it’s like to be a man? To be able to make a valid comparison, I mean. Hell, I get judged on my appearance all the time.”

“Yeah, right. Even granting that for the sake of argument, you don’t get judged nearly as often or nearly as hard as a woman... As I do!”

“But how do you *know* that? Have you ever been a man?”

“Have you ever been a woman?”

“Typical female non-answer.”

I think she would have stamped her foot if she could. (That is; if she wasn’t sitting up on a barstool with the heels of her sandals hooked on one of the rungs.) She had this sort of, ‘Oh yeah?!’ half-smile, furrowed-brow expression that I *hoped* meant ‘You’re being a complete jerk but this argument is nonetheless entertaining.’ “*It is not a non-answer!* It’s a perfectly valid reply! And by the way, now who’s making sweeping, gender-based generalizations?” Before I could object she plowed ahead. “Okay, tell the honest truth. If you’d been sitting here and some scarecrow with frizzy hair and a potato bag dress had come slouching through the door, would your first thought have been, ‘I bet she has a wonderful personality?’”

“Okay, what would you have thought if you walked through the door and the only guy matching Joey’s description...”

She interrupted me with, “I asked first!”

“Typical female evasion again.”

“*It is NOT!*” She reached out and gently swatted my thigh with another – and this time barely suppressed – giggle. “Jerk! Fine. You can’t answer so I win.”

“I wasn’t aware it was a contest.”

“Well, that’s not my fault. You should have been paying more attention. In any event, I’ve won and now you have to...umm...”

“Uh oh. Here it comes.”

“Hush! You have to... to... Ha! You have to go out at least the next two times Joey invites you for drinks! And I’ll be getting reports from him just to make sure do, too! Furthermore, I hope he sets you up with a baggy-dress, frizzy-hair scarecrow! Then you can tell yourself that appearance doesn’t matter and see if you can believe it.”

“And what do you have to do?”

“Huh? I don’t have to do anything. I won.”

“That hardly seems fair.”

“Well life isn’t fair sometimes. What would you want me to do?”

“Oh, I don’t know. How about if those next two times Joey fixes me up with you again? That ought to be punishment enough for losing any bet.”

Instead of replying in kind to that jab, her smile slipped and she turned away, tucking that strand of hair behind her ear again. Damn! ‘Off balance’ again. *But why?* “Julie... I’m sorry. Clearly I’m saying something wrong, but I don’t know what. And I really don’t want to. I mean, is it...? Is the thought of another date with me...?”

Her eyes snapped back to mine. “*No!* Oh God, no! Don’t for one minute think...” Then she glanced away, down at the hands folded in her lap again.

“Well then what? Do you have some fatal disease and you’re only going to live for another day or two?” Oh Jesus! What if that was actually the case?

Fortunately her reply was a little snort. “Hardly.”

“Then what?”

She sighed. “Look, it’s... Okay, here’s what it is: The bottom line is that you *mustn’t* think this has anything whatsoever to do with you. Okay? You need to know, to *believe*, that you’re... That I’m having more fun than I’d ever hoped. It’s just... There’s... ‘stuff.’ ‘Personal stuff’ on my part that’s...”

What was going on here? Was there something in her background or her past? Something that made it difficult for her to hear that she was pretty or that would allow her to get too comfortable with a guy in a setting like this?

Could that ‘something’ be the reason that cousin Joey thought she needed looking after by a trustworthy guy?

The pieces were starting to fit together. Now, what kind of ‘something’ could have happened to her? The obvious possibility was a bad experience with some other guy in the past.

I reached out and gently stroked her hand resting on the bar. Of course, as soon as I did I had a sudden worry that maybe as a result of what had happened to her, she might not like being touched by a man. Fortunately she didn’t seem to mind. She just turned that earnest expression on me and gazed into my eyes as I said, “I’m not going to press. I just want to say that whatever the ‘stuff’ is... Well, I can only hope it’s not the kind of thing that... That whatever it is, it would keep you from believing that I’m the only one who’s good enough or nice enough to deserve to have a little fun and... Umm...”

After a moment she turned the hand that I was gently stroking over, taking my hand in it. Then, gazing down at it she softly murmured, “See? I apparently don’t need to have my instincts checked after all. They’re working just fine. I obviously can recognize a really nice guy when I see one.”

Okay. So maybe I wasn't a complete klutz with women after all. Needless to say, the almost giddy little knot in my chest made it impossible to keep looking into her eyes. I glanced away, this time entertaining no doubt whatsoever that my cheeks were aflame.

I hadn't noticed him coming in – my attention had been elsewhere just a moment ago – but I noticed him now. He was staring directly at Julie and me with a pensive little frown on his face. The instant he noticed me noticing him, however, he quickly turned away and skulked over to one of the booths in the back.

I guess Julie read something in my sudden change of expression because she turned her head to follow my stare. I felt her hand tense in mine as she immediately turned her face away – back to me – and whispered a throaty, almost masculine, “Shit!”

My eyes snapped back to her. “What? Do you know that guy?” Good lord! What if she hadn't had some bad experience with a guy in the past? *What if she was still* having it? What if that guy was stalking her or something?

She looked back at me and again she must have read my thoughts in my expression. Thankfully, her frown relaxed and she actually smiled. Slightly. “Yeah, I know him. Don't panic, Dan. It's not what you're clearly thinking. See...that's my other cousin Max. I guess someone's checking up on us.”



‘OKAY, DON'T PANIC,’ I told myself. Yeah, it was stupid to just stand there in the door gawking like a moron. But no harm done. Only that ‘Dan’ guy had caught me in the stare and he didn't know me from Adam. I'd turned away before Julie – before *Joey*, damn it! – had seen me so no harm, no foul.

She hadn't seen me, had she?

Sitting hunched over the table in my booth with my hand still up against my face, like I was leaning on it, I sneaked a quick peek in that direction.

Given the way she was sitting, she'd have to turn almost three-quarters of the way around on the stool to see me sitting back here in this booth. And since she wasn't turning around to glare... And since Dan's attention seemed to have returned to Julie...

And since they were still holding hands and he was smiling... I was okay for the moment. Until Julie decided to stroll off to the ladies' room to glue on those damn ‘high beam nips.’ Or get out her tube of...

Okay. There was no reason to think things like that. Julie wasn't that kind of...

Wonderful.

Joey, old son, be proud of yourself. You're definitely getting to be the lady tonight. I wonder if I'll ever tell you that I'm sitting here, trying to reassure myself with the fact that 'you're not that kind of girl.'

As for the rest, as for Joey going somewhere like the restroom and catching sight of me in the process... Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

"Julie... Look, I know I said I wouldn't press, but..."

"But?" She was looking into my eyes with an expression of... Well, it was hard to tell just what it was. Maybe a little pissed off. Maybe a little embarrassed. Maybe a little resigned.

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but do your cousins usually check up on you while you're out on a date?" I remembered to smile to try and rob the words of the easily implied wrong meaning. (Like there was any 'right' meaning to a question like that – unless it was clearly a joke, which this clearly wasn't.)

She started to turn her head to look at her cousin who was now sitting more or less behind her in a booth. Then she thought better of it and settled for a little sigh. "Apparently he does."

"Well. To coin a phrase, 'Isn't this awkward?'"

"Yeah. How about that? Dan, I'm so sorry." I could actually chuckle at this point. "Hey, it's not your fault. Umm... Is it? No! Wait. Forget I said that!"

"It's okay. Goodness, you must think you're out with a real winner. She comes complete with lunatic stalker family members. Imagine the wedding! In any event, and if you can still believe anything I say, I assure you this most certainly is *not* my idea."

I gave her hand (that had been resting in mine the whole time) a reassuring little squeeze. "I believe you."

"Thank you."

"Of course..." She looked into my eyes again and arched one eyebrow. "Well, it's kind of hard not to ask the question; is he here to check up on you? Or on me?"

"More like on both of us."

"Umm... That being the case..."

"Why do we need checking up on?" I nodded. She looked away, staring at the bottles on the wall behind the bar and thought about it for a long time. Then she turned back to me. "Okay. But you get to answer a question first."

“Shoot.”

“When you first noticed Max, you kind of freaked. I mean, more than you would if you just noticed some guy looking at us. May I ask why?”

“Uh...”

“Dan?”

“You had just been mentioning that you had ‘personal stuff.’ And of course, even if I wasn’t going to be a complete ass and ask you what that meant...”

“It’s still perfectly natural to wonder.”

“Yeah. And then... Well, two plus two... You’re sitting in a bar with a guy on a first date and... I mean, there’s something... For some reason it’s all a little... And then I see some guy staring at you.”

“Yeah.” Again she turned away, back to looking at the bottles instead of me as she used her free hand to tuck a different strand of hair behind her left ear this time. After a while she sighed and I got the impression she’d reached some kind of decision. Still not looking at me, she very softly said, “You’ve sort of guessed it.”

“Okay. Say no more. It doesn’t matter to me if...”

“No. I want to tell you this.” She finally turned back to me and once again gazed into my eyes. “Max is... God, he’s such a wonderful, *wonderful* guy. You have no idea. He cares for me. A lot. In fact, maybe a little too much. But, anyway... Four years ago, back in college, I was dating this guy and it... Okay, I wasn’t so smart about things and...”

“Julie. You don’t have to...”

“No. It’s okay. It wasn’t... It didn’t get as bad as you’re thinking. I mean, he never... But it was starting to get a little creepy. Well, I finally wised up to the point where I could see it was heading in a bad direction.” She tried to toss it off with a forced little smile. “Stupid me, right? I mean; to get myself into a situation like that. Maybe my instincts weren’t so good back in those days.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Anyway. I tried to break up with him but he wasn’t too good about taking ‘no’ for an answer, you know?”

“And Max made sure he finally did?”

She nodded. “Look, as I say; it never amounted to more than an ugly scene one night. Okay? I mean; I didn’t wind up at some crisis center or...”

“Julie...”

“No. Please. You have to understand that it wasn’t that big a deal. I mean, yes – it was ugly and embarrassing. But no more than... I mean, it was just life. You know?” Again I nodded, but apparently Julie needed more because she squeezed my hand and looked even deeper into my eyes. “No. You have to tell me that you really and truly understand that this wasn’t some kind of big soap opera...something. It was just that one night. Life went on. It didn’t mean all that much then and it doesn’t mean anything now. So you can’t let it get in the way of... Umm...”

I was getting good at this! I knew I was smiling and it was a genuinely sincere and gentle smile. And I really and truly meant it when I said, “Now that I know, I promise you it won’t get in the way.”

Unfortunately Julie still had that ‘haunted’ look in her eyes. “Dan, I... I’m just so sorry about this. I wish I didn’t have to...” Then she couldn’t look me in the eye any more.

God, there was something more going on here. I could sense it, but I realized that I couldn’t ask for anything more than I’d already gotten. “Uh... ‘Change of subject?’”

She turned back to me with that same sad little smile. “Please. Got any more clichés?”

“Uh. None spring to mind. Umm... How about family? That seems like a safe topic.”

She brightened a little. “Okay. You want to go first?”

“Well, how about this Max? He’s not a paranoid psycho after all?” Big gamble – but she had spoken with such affection for him just a moment ago...

Bingo! Her smile immediately bloomed and the ‘haunt’ went out of her eyes. “Max! Wow! Where do you begin?”

“You really like him, don’t you?”

“‘Like’? Try love.” Then she chuckled softly. “It seems so strange to say that about a...cousin. But I really and truly do.” Maybe I was still thinking too much about what might be going on – what might yet to be said about ‘something’ – that I was hearing things that weren’t there. But I could have sworn she was going to say something besides ‘cousin’.

Let it go.

“So maybe when you finally catch up to him after tonight, you’ll only beat him a little bit?”

“Humph! We’ll see.” She put on a mock-angry expression. “But o-o-o, boy! Is he gonna get it! I just wish there was some way...”

“‘Some way’?”

“Some way I could get even with him for his suspicion.”

“So you do think he’s suspicious of me.” I resisted the urge to glance over in Max’s direction.

Julie caught my gaze before I could turn it too far in Max’s direction. “Let’s just bear in mind the far more important fact that I’m not, okay?”

“Well, but come on. I mean; it’s not like he’s completely... That he doesn’t have any reason to...”

“Don’t start that again. *I* know he doesn’t have any reason to be suspicious and that’s all that’s really important.”

“Yeah, but still...”

And then, just like that and right out of the blue, Julie’s free hand was caressing my cheek and her lips were pressing against mine.



IT WAS HARD to figure out what was going on, especially since I only got occasional, profile glimpses of Julie’s face. And especially since I couldn’t just sit there and stare. Dan pretty much ignored me after that first time he caught me gaping at them. But all he would have to do was turn slightly and he’d be looking right at me.

Still, even from the scatter glimpses I could safely manage, it was clear they were having a real roller-coaster ride. Dan’s express ran the gamut from grinning to earnestly sincere. And apparently even before my arrival, he was holding her hand. Well, to be fair, they were each holding the other’s hand.

And there seemed to be something – some kind of tension. Then it passed and Dan was smiling. Then there was some more tension. Then he seemed to be trying to reassure her about something.

And then, before what Julie was doing really had a chance to register, she was holding his face in her hands and kissing him.

So maybe I wasn’t getting so good at it after all. In retrospect (all I have is retrospect – the actual kiss itself is more or less a blank) I realize that I just sat there like a lump for the second or two while Julie pressed her lips against mine. Then she leaned back and I searched for the right words, but nothing came.

There was a long pause as she gazed into my eyes. Then, very softly and in a very neutral tone of voice she asked, “Dan, please tell me the truth. Should I apologize for that?”

I meant for the reply to be nonchalant, but ruined it when I had to clear my throat before the words would actually come. “What a silly questi...”

“Please don’t make a joke. Please just tell me the truth.”

I dropped the useless attempt at trivializing the reply. “It really is a silly question because the honest answer is, ‘Of course not.’”

“All right.” She signaled for the bartender. When he arrived she said to him, “May we have the check, please.” He nodded and went to get it.

She had that strange, unreadable expression on her face again. I was completely lost at this point and I said so. “Is the date over?”

Again she searched my eyes. “Do you want it to be?”

“No.”

Finally a little smile quirked the corner of her lips. “Good.”

“Then what?”

“We’re going somewhere else. I don’t care if it’s a bar or a restaurant or...you choose. Just so long as it’s somewhere that’s just ours. Someplace where Max will just have to trust you as much as I do.”

I paid the tab and left a good tip. (You never know if you’ll want to come back to a place.) Julie collected her purse off the floor. We got about half way to the door before she said, “Stop.” Then she turned and looked at Max for... I don’t know. Just a second or two. It felt longer at the time, though. I couldn’t read his expression and I couldn’t read hers. They didn’t say anything, they just stared at each other. Then Julie turned away and reached out and took my hand. I took that as the signal it was time to go and we headed for the door.



JOEY’S KEY TURNED in the lock a little after eight the next morning. I used the remote to mute the morning news on the TV. In the background, I heard him pouring himself a cup of coffee. After a while, he came into the living room, coffee cup in hand, and sat down in the chair diagonally across from me.

We sat there for a while in silence.

Then, in a flat tone of voice he said, “I promised you a report. Do you want it?”

I didn't try to make my own tone anything other than the naturally neutral it felt like it should be, and that's how it sounded: genuinely neutral. "No."

There was another silence. Then, "Why not?"

There was no point to be made other than the obvious one, so again my reply was simple and honest. "I don't want to make you hand in a report that you don't owe me."

After a pause Joey softly said, "I believe you believe that's the case."

"I do."

"All right."

More silence. Not tense. Not angry. Just quiet and introspective. Then Joey took a sip of his coffee and in that same quiet tone said, "After we left Finerty's, Dan took me..."

"You really don't owe me this, Joey."

"I know. The fact that I don't owe it to you is the reason I'm giving it to you."

"Oh."

"After Finerty's, Dan took me to a restaurant. An expensive one. He bought me desert and coffee. We talked for a long time. Closed the place, in fact. We were the last couple in there. At the start last night, I'd parked my car at the Ramada over by the airport and then took a cab to Finerty's. So I had Dan drop me off there – at the Ramada – like that's where I was staying. He offered to walk me to the lobby, but I told him that was all right. I'd be fine. I went in through the front doors and then took the elevator up to the third floor. Then I walked all the way to the end of the hall and took the stairs back down to the ground floor. I walked around to the corner facing the parking lot and checked to make sure he was gone. When I was sure he was, I got in my car and went home."

I just sat and waited for Joey to go on. After a while, he did.

"He kissed me again in the parking lot before... Well, that's not right. I kissed him the first time. But he kissed me the second time. He thinks he's so awkward and he doesn't get it right. But I think... I'm no expert or anything, but I think a girl would like to be kissed like that. No big, torrid romance. Just... Holding her and gently kissing her."

"Is Julie going to be in town for a few more days?" It didn't sound probing or suspicious. Just genuinely curious. Which it was.

"No. She's leaving in..." Joey glanced at the clock on the TV cable box. "Oh, she's already left. Twenty minutes ago."

"Oh."

“She’s going to be back in town in two weeks, though. Maybe. The schedule isn’t set in stone yet.”

“Okay.”

“She’ll call Dan.”

“Okay.”

“She gets down here from Astoria fairly often, actually. Her office does a lot of work with a couple of the agencies here. She does meetings and things with one or both of the agents in her office. Takes notes. Stuff like that.”

“I see.”

“I figure maybe three dates spread out over... Oh, two months or so. The first one will be like this one. The second one, maybe a little more romantic if Dan can figure that out. I bet he can. The third one... Or do you think it should be more? Should I wait until the fourth or maybe even the fifth date before I have sex with him?”

Joey wasn’t teasing me or taunting me. He was asking a serious question. I answered him just as seriously. “It’s really up to you.”

“I don’t want him to think Julie is too easy. But on the other hand, I don’t want him to think she’s... You know. That she’s playing... I did tell Dan that she’d had a bad experience with another guy. So maybe it should be a little longer than just three...”

“I understand. I think you’ll just have to let things happen and decide when the time is right.”

“Yeah. I guess that would be the best.”

There was another long silence. I finally asked, “And what then?”

“After we...?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know. Maybe one or two more times. Then I think Julie’s going to get this really fantastic job offer out in New York or something. Chicago. I haven’t really planned that part out fully.”

“Oh.”

“I think it might be best if she just... You know. ‘I’ll write. And I have your phone number.’”

“But she never will. Write or call, I mean.”

“No.”

“You don’t think that’s a little cruel?”

“By then Dan will have someone else. You and I will see to that. He has to say ‘yes’ the next two times I – that is me; Joey – invites him out for drinks. I’m sure two times will be enough to show him how much fun he’s missing. And then... Julie’s not going to be the possessive type. If he’s got someone else, well...”

“How did you get him to do that ‘two times’ thing?”

“He lost a bet. Rather clever on my part, actually.”

“I see.”

There was the longest silence yet as Joey stared into his coffee cup and I looked out the window at the cloudy day outside.

“Max. What am I doing?”

“What you need to do, I think.”

“Really?”

I shrugged. “Like I’ve said before, Joey; I can’t judge you. But that’s a two-way street. And like you’ve told me, I’m not your conscience. You have to figure this one out for yourself.”

“I’m really not out to hurt Dan, you know.”

“I know.”

“But you still disapprove.”

“Again, it’s not up to me to approve or disapprove.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Joey, you really do have to make your own decisions here. I admit that I’m more than a little afraid. Both for you and Dan. The stakes are still as high as they ever were. More so, now that you’re letting Dan believe there might be something between Julie and him.”

Joey looked deep into the depths of his coffee cup as he softly said, “Are you sure there isn’t? Are you sure it’s just what I’m ‘letting Dan believe’?”

It was my turn to let the silence linger for a while. “Is there something?”

“Between Dan and Joey; no. Of course not. Between Dan and Julie... I don’t know.”

“What do you think?”

“I think... Like I say, I think Julie likes to be held and gently kissed. I think she likes to be wanted that way. I think she likes to truthfully tell Dan that she’s attracted to him because he really and truly is such a nice... That it feels good to be able to sincerely compliment him and encourage him.”

“And to have him compliment and encourage you – Julie – in return?”

Joey nodded and then finally met my gaze. “Is that wrong?”

“You have to decide that for yourself. If you wind up hurting Dan... I don't know, Joey. I guess I really and truly don't have an answer – either ‘no’ or more importantly ‘yes’. At least not at this point.”

Joey glanced again at the clock then finished the coffee in his cup. “Well, I gotta get going. Busy day at work today.”

“Yeah. I should start thinking about heading out too.” Pause. “Are you going to see Dan today?”

Joey stood up. “No. I'm out of the office all day today. We've got a day-long conference with the contractor for that new high-rise. Maybe tomorrow. Or maybe... Well, we'll see.”

“Don't wait too long before you invite him out for the first of those...”

“Yeah.” Joey started toward the kitchen to put his empty cup in the sink. Then, without turning he softly said, “Max...”

“Yeah?”

“I just... I wanted to say...”

“I'll talk to you tonight, Joey.”

“Okay.”

It was hot and muggy all day. But it finally cooled off around quitting time when a little thunderstorm blew in from the ocean.

Part 4: Performance Review

HOW DO YOU know when you're going insane?

Was it when you started asking yourself the question, 'Am I going insane?' Was that the sign that you were? Or was it just the opposite? Was asking yourself if you were going insane like saying, 'I'm choking!' If you can say it, or say anything for that matter, then you aren't. You've just got something stuck in your throat. And though having something stuck in your throat can be terrifying, if you can get enough wind into your lungs to speak then you're not technically choking.

More to the point, if you're still in touch with reality enough to question your sanity, are you still okay?

I stared at the reflection staring back from the mirror.

This was 'in touch with reality'? A guy staring at a reflection in the mirror that wasn't him, but rather was a sexy little bitch in a push-up bra, garter belt and frilly panties combo, showing lots of tits and lots of ass and pretty much making her 'take me now!' desires abundantly clear?

-What in God's name was I doing?!

The months up to now, first meeting Dan then building a relationship with him. Tentative at first working up to trusting as the dates added up. Making Julie real for him. (And for me.) And

then last night and again tonight – especially tonight. Getting closer. Touching. Cuddling. Knowing glances and thoughts expressed in throaty purrs. Parting kisses that didn't just 'linger' and a body that stayed hugged close as she murmured, "Are you sure you don't want to come in? Just for a minute?"

Female enticement to the point that even a shy, reserved guy like Dan couldn't say 'no'.

All of it building to this: Joey Adanno in the fake persona and Hollywood special effects body of a woman, luring another male into a motel room with the intention of seducing him into bedding 'her'.

Where was reality in that?

Where was *sanity* in that?

In the first break from the deception in hours, in a masculine growl not loud enough to carry beyond the bathroom door, I snarled The Question at the reflection frowning back at me from the mirror: "*Why?* Why are you doing this? What do you want?"

I want to know. I want to understand.

-What?

I want to know what she knows. I want to understand it in the way that she understands it.

-That's insane. You can't know or understand it that way because you're not her. You'll never be her.

Then who am I?

-You're no one! You're nothing. You're not real.

Then who are you talking to?

- Bullshit. I'm talking to myself.

Then it's you who wants to know and to understand isn't it? Because someone certainly does. If not, why all this effort? Who's doing all this if not 'me' – which we apparently agree is just you talking to yourself.

I had no answer for that. I had no rebuttal to offer the reflection of tangible evidence in the mirror. But neither was I sure I accepted the answer my alter ego was offering. 'To understand'? What did that mean?

You know what it means. Why are you fighting it so? There's no deep mystery here. You're just being what you've always been: Curious George the Explorer. First on your trike. Then on your bike. Then in your car. What's around the corner? What's over the next hill?

-And you, you're the next corner? You're the next hill? You want me to believe it's that simple?

Why not? It is.

-That's crazy! This is nothing like...

It's everything like. It's exactly like. You turn the corner to see what's there. You climb the hill to see what's on the other side. And once you've done it – once you've turned the corner or climbed the hill and looked around – then you know what you didn't know before. Julie already knows so much more than you. And she's about to learn so much more.

It made a crazy kind of sense. There was a seductive logic to it. Maybe that's why I still resisted. Maybe there was already way too much seduction going on around here tonight.

-What if there are some things that I'm just not supposed to know?

Oh, please! What an empty, meaningless evasion. Why shouldn't you know these things? What does it hurt?

-Dan. What if it ends up hurting Dan?

How could it hurt him?

-If he finds out.

How will he find out? If he hasn't figured it out by now...

-You don't think there's just a wee bit more risk in this? Something this real?

Julie is every bit as 'real' for this as she was for getting Dan up to this point. You know that's so. You've learned everything you need to know. You've practiced everything you need to do.

-But what if...

No! You're just looking for rationalizations now.

And so I was. Two months of intensive study and intensive 'practice' and I did indeed know everything I needed to know and could do everything I needed to do. Or at least as well as I needed to for tonight. Julie would be more than sufficient to the task because Dan hadn't studied and practiced. Because Dan hadn't turned the corner or climbed the hill and so Julie did know much more than he did.

It wasn't even a close contest. What male, no matter how experienced – and I knew beyond question that Dan was anything but experienced – would know to say, 'Wait a second! Real girls don't purr like that when someone fondles their breasts. Real girls don't arch their backs and gasp like that when they have an orgasm?'

Especially since real girls did do those things.

Or at least they did in the hundred-and-one porn movies I'd studied and then learned to mimic in minute detail. Dan wouldn't discover the deception because he'd never have the chance – or for that matter, the inclination to look for it. I'd see to that. Or rather, Julie would.

The reflection stared into my eyes and I wondered if I didn't now detect a little gleam of triumph there. 'Julie.' Was that really even a meaningful distinction, other than as the identification of an admittedly intricate prop?

I was just talking to myself after all. I realized that. Of course I did. So maybe I wasn't going insane after all.

Maybe I was perfectly in touch with reality because 'Julie' was perfectly real. I could feel the kiss of that lock of hair on my cheek. (Or at least that part of my 'cheek' that was actually 'mine' and not the glued-on prosthesis that created 'hers'.) I could cup her breasts in my hands and feel their weight. So maybe it was just a question of degree. Maybe there was 'real' and then there was 'real'. Tangible versus metaphysical.

Or was there even that much of a distinction?

'Julie' was also metaphysically real because I was real and I was 'Julie' – at least in as much as anybody was. I gave those soft, round breasts a squeeze. Somebody sure as hell was very real indeed.

The vixen in the mirror fondled her breasts and leered at me with a smug, knowing little smirk and a dark light burning in her eyes.

I snatched my hands away and stumbled backwards a step, away from that image in the mirror.

-Wrong! This is so terribly, horribly wrong! It's... evil.

Evil? I resent that! What are we doing that's even wrong, much less evil?

-What we're doing to Dan. What we're making him do just so we can know something we're not supposed to know. That's...that's...evil.

'Making him do'? You really believe you have that kind of power? He chose this. He wants this every bit as much as you do. You're not making him do anything.

-Now you're the one rationalizing. Dan doesn't know what's really going on so he can't really choose. He didn't choose to have sex with another guy.

Except as far as he's concerned, you're not another guy. As far as he knows, when the night is over he'll have had some marvelous sex with a beautiful girl. And for all practical purposes that's exactly what will have happened so he'll have gotten exactly what he chose.

-But I'm not a 'beautiful girl'. Don't you understand that? Don't you see...?

Look in the mirror and tell me I'm not a beautiful girl. Pull down those panties and tell me I'm not.

-Plastic! Fake!

Irrelevant! For Dan, it won't make any difference. Flesh or silicone. Indistinguishable. Add the practiced performance and from Dan's perspective...

-But not from my perspective!

You're getting exactly what you want too. Everybody is getting exactly what they want, in as much as it really matters.

-No! It's all rationalization. It's wrong and you can't make it be right.

All right. Fine. Let's assume it's wrong in some kind of hypothetical, morality play way. Who gets hurt?

-I've already said. Dan.

Okay. So let's assume that there's some kind of metaphysical harm done to Dan's karma or something. How are you going to prevent that at this point in the game?

-I do the right thing. I call it off.

How? March out there and say, "I've changed my mind. Get out." That's not going to hurt Dan a lot more tangibly?

Once again I found myself staring at the girl in the mirror, glaring a challenge back at me. And once again, I had no answer.

Calling it off now, after all the seduction... If some girl did that to me I'd certainly feel betrayed and used. And I'd be terribly hurt. I'd torture myself with wondering what I'd done wrong to make her change her mind like that.

It was still evil. It was still wrong for me to do this. But despite my doubts, it was too late now to put things right no matter which way I turned. It was too late now to escape without paying some kind of penalty.

So now it boiled down to a simple decision as to what was the lesser of two evils.



THIS WAS INSANE. What did I think I was doing? The smart play now would be to just make a mad dash for the door. My legs tensed in preparation for standing up from where I was sitting on the edge of the motel room bed.

Oh sure. Just run for it. And what will Julie think when she comes out of the bathroom and you're gone? What do you tell her later? That space aliens kidnapped you?

-At least she won't think whatever you know she's bound to think if I hang around and we actually...

So that's it? You just give up? You give up any chance for anything more with her?

-What more can there be? I'm just kidding myself and you know it. What could a girl like Julie possibly see in me? Why should I hang around long enough for that fact to get painfully obvious?

So you declare defeat without even trying and prove you're the loser you think you are?

-What do you want? No matter what I do I'm going to disappoint her.

She apparently doesn't think so.

-That could mean anything. It could mean she's just... I don't know. Feeling sorry for me, or...

The hug at the door to go along with those bedroom eyes sure didn't feel like pity to me.

-How can you know what she's thinking? Or what any woman is thinking for that matter?

Is it really important? She says she wants you. Why are you in such a hurry to disagree?

-What if I wind up hurting her?

I don't think that's a particularly pressing concern. Let's face it, when it comes to physical attributes you're not all that...

-That's not what I mean and you know it. I mean what if she only wants to... You know; romance but not... What if I force her and that's not at all what she wanted or intended? What if it's... What if I wind up raping her?

Just go slow and let her set the pace.

But what if that's not what she wants either? What if you're right and she wants me to... You know. Now we're back to being a disappointment.

The little voice in my head fell silent. Apparently I didn't have all the answers after all. What a great time to find that out.

And then the bathroom door opened.



HE WAS JUST sitting there on the edge of the bed, in the exact same position where I'd left him. He hadn't even taken his coat off.

In the abrupt, stilted silence, I suddenly felt like a complete idiot. How could I have overestimated my feminine wiles so badly? Now the bra and panties outfit didn't feel sexy. It felt

ridiculously brazen and sleazy. I realized I was standing there with one hand – my left hand – just hanging awkwardly and my right hand nervously plucking at the strap of the bra, trying in a ridiculously futile attempt to tug it up so as to cover... Well...something, anyway. Anything. “Oh. Uh...”

He stared at me with a ‘deer in the headlights’ look that I knew my expression mirrored. “Umm... I...”

“Dan... I’m sorry. I thought...”

“No! It’s not... You’re not...”

We stood there, staring. When I couldn’t bear the thunderous silence any longer and had to say *something*, “Christ. I can’t even run. For the bathroom or...”

“Julie, no! It’s not you who should... I’m so sorry. I never should have... To put you through this.”

“Huh? ‘Put *me* through’? It’s me who’s... To insult you like this by assuming.”

“Insult me?! My God! I mean; for someone like you... A girl as beautiful and as...as... To even go out with me more than once is so much more than...”

“Stop it! Stop putting yourself down like that! What do you think that says about me? I mean, if you really were such a loser – *which you aren’t* – that would make me stupid about my choices and...”

“No! It’s not *you* that’s stupid. It’s *me*! God, I’m such an idiot.”

“*Stop it!*”

“I can’t help it. I don’t even know what I’m doing here.”

“You’re here because I invited you. Because I wanted...”

“No! I mean I don’t know what I’m doing or how I’m supposed to...” Then he was staring at the clenched fists in his lap and whispering, “See, I’ve never... This is the first time I...”

I had thought that Dan was inexperienced, but I had no idea just how inexperienced he really was. Without intentionally making it do so, my voice dropped to a gently feminine murmur. “You mean ‘the first time’ as in...?”

All he could do was nod and stare at his fists, his cheeks positively glowing crimson with embarrassment.

Holy smoke! Jackpot!! You own him!

-Shut up! Just shut up!

I crossed from the bathroom door over to the foot of the bed and knelt at his feet. Then I reached out and tried to take his two rock-hard fists in mine. He still couldn't meet my gaze. Instead he tried to pull away. "Just let me go."

I couldn't help it. It wasn't planned or performance when I chuckle/growled deep in my throat. "Oh, no. You're not getting out of here now."

That brought his eyes back to mine. He stared into them with an expression that was equal parts lingering embarrassment and mounting confusion tinged with anxiety. "What...?"

"Don't you get it? *I understand now*. Everything. Oh, Dan... Don't you see? Don't you see how *perfect* this is going to be? I mean, I wanted you before. But now..."

His eyebrows were just about to climb off the top of his head. "What are you saying?"

I'd seen this exact scene in at least two of my porn 'training films' – maybe more. I couldn't immediately remember, but that wasn't important. What was important was that now, more than at any other point tonight, I knew just exactly what to do. I knee-walked up even closer to him then leaned forward from the hips, pressed my big, soft, (fake) tits against his thighs and smiled up at him as I purred, "I'm saying that you don't need to worry about anything anymore. Not a thing. Nothing can go wrong now because now there are no expectations. We just take it soft and slow. You just trust Julie and everything will be okay." I slipped my hands out of his lap, casually reached behind myself and with a quick, practiced motion unhooked what now felt like the absolutely *perfect* to the occasion push-up bra, then let it slide down my arms. "Okay?"

Though the delicious, tentative uncertainty was still writ large on his face, the first hint of a smile appeared at the corner of his lips. "Okay."



GRAY LIGHT OUTSIDE the window.

What time was it? Apparently sometime after we'd finally fallen asleep, we'd drifted apart on the bed. Dan was lying on his side, turned with his back toward me. He wasn't exactly snoring, but he was breathing very slow and very deep. Clearly out of it enough for me to risk cautiously rising up on one elbow to peer over him at the clock on the bedside table.

4:38 AM.

I desperately needed to take a leak. How strange. Wasn't the need to take a leak after sex a female thing? That little detail hadn't been covered in any of the porn tapes. At least not in any context that I cared to trust as 'mundane authentic' anyway. I briefly flirted with the question of

whether or not it was also a male thing, but quickly set the whole question aside. When it came to experience enough to know what was normal for guys after sex; though Dan might still be the less sexually experienced male in the room, the gap between us was already drawing depressingly close.

Forcing myself to set aside the urgency of my need as much as possible, I slowly, quietly slid first my feet, then my legs, then my hips, then the rest of me out of bed. Dan stirred once and mumbled something unintelligible – the apparent result of a disturbed dream. (What was he dreaming about?) But then, after a tense moment for me, his breathing settled back into that deep, slow rhythm. I tiptoed across the room to the bathroom and managed to close the door without disturbing him again.

For a second I was sleepy-disoriented enough to forget that I couldn't stand in front of the toilet but rather had to turn around and sit down. Once seated, I couldn't help but think about 'down there' and what had just recently been going on.

Let's not go there, okay?

-For the first time tonight, you and I agree.

Business concluded, I stood and by reflex reached for the flushing handle, but paused. Maybe I could escape from the bed and successfully tiptoe into the bathroom, but in this little motel suite a flushing toilet would certainly wake Dan.

And then the performance would have to begin again.

As quietly as possible, I gently lowered the toilet seat lid and then stepped away without flushing.

Just make sure that once he's awake, you're the first one in here again. You don't want him to be greeted with...

-Noted.

I slouched over to the mirror and once again regarded the girl who this time was staring back with sleepy, heavy-lidded eyes, tousled hair...

My heart slammed into my throat.

...and the skin of her left cheek peeling away just far enough to reveal another skin lurking beneath – complete with an already clearly noticeable need for a morning shave.

Calm down. Calm down. No harm done.

-No harm done?? What if he fucking saw? What if...

Chill. He didn't notice.

-How do you know?

Call me a cock-eyed optimist, but I think that's the sort of thing someone would comment upon. 'Marvelous sex, babe. But why is your face peeling off?'

My mental nemesis was right. If Dan had noticed something as grossly out of place as Julie apparently shedding her skin, me noticing the give-away in the mirror now wouldn't be the first I'd have heard about it. My heart sank back down into my chest where it belonged and I felt my panic-fists unclench.

And then they clenched again.

Suddenly I wanted to seize that hanging flap and use it as a beginning to tear it all away. I wanted to grab that tangled mass of fake hair and rip it off. I wanted to sink clawed fingers into those perfect, pretend boobs and pull until they stretched like taffy and tore...

What the fuck is wrong with you?

No answer presented itself as the seizure of self-loathing passed.

-Post coitus depression.

Very funny. Let's remember that you're still walking the tightrope until you can gracefully get rid of Dan. Start shedding now and you're asking for a post coitus punch in the nose. Just fix it while we have this nice quiet-time opportunity to do so.

-But maybe I really should peel it off and start over. I mean, I'm betting it came loose sometime during the night because of that five o'clock shadow growing and pushing it loose.

No. Just fix it and trust that the patch will hold. If you start peeling you're committed to at least an hour or two putting it all back on once you get it off. If Dan wakes up, how are you going to explain hiding in the can for two hours?

-But still...

No. Just 'trust Julie' and fix it.

Fate had smiled on me in that my disguise had stayed intact until Dan was no longer in a position to catch me out. It had smiled on me in another way too. Though my suitcase – the prop supporting the fiction of Julie's out-of-towner status – was out in the bedroom, the little over-night case was in here, in the bathroom. I opened it and burrowed down past the 'mundane' tubes of makeup, hairbrush and other miscellany until I found the box of 'Always' panty-liners. Well, that's what it was supposed to look like, anyway. (Not that it shouldn't. That's what it had once been, before being emptied of its contents and then co-opted for a more nefarious purpose.) Opening it, I removed the tube of adhesive and the less mundane makeup required to 'fix my morning face' in a way that I bet few other women needed to fix theirs.

Lacking a clock in the bathroom or a wristwatch (triggering the realization for the first time that Julie didn't own one) I couldn't measure how long the repair process took. But soon enough the Julie façade was restored to its former believability. Once I had checked and double-checked the proof beyond any lingering doubt, I spent several more minutes examining the rest of the illusion for any other telltale flaws.

All intact. And just in time because no sooner had I whipped the last lingering fears that there was some betraying telltale back into their dark mental corner, I heard noises out in the bedroom. Dan was apparently awake.

Showtime again.



AT FIRST IT was that old cliché. I didn't know where I was or how I'd gotten here. But the confusion quickly passed as the memories came flooding back.

Julie.

I lay there staring up at the ceiling trying to make some sense out of it all. But there was just too much and all of it was so...

How could something be at once so intense and yet so vague? I could pick out specific details of specific memories if I wanted to try. The feel of her hand on my cheek. The depth of her eyes as she lay beneath me, staring up into mine. The softness of her skin. The hardness of her nipples as they pressed against my chest. The whimper-y little moans that almost frightened me enough to make me stop when I finally, tentatively began – and the sudden insistence of her embrace and the even greater urgency of her whimpers when it looked like I was going to try to stop.

That heart-hammering, breathless instant when I finally knew what being a man with a woman was all about.

Her cuddling close after. Pressing herself against me in the safety of my arms. So small and delicate and vulnerable.

The individual details – those I could grasp and understand. But the whole...

How had I earned all that? More importantly – so much more importantly! – had I been worthy of that? That trust? That giving? In that instant, holding Julie tight in my arms, I had been so sure. But now...

You simply can't bring yourself to believe it, can you?

-It's too easy. It's too...

You don't even know the word. You can't even put a name to the doubt.

Before I could reply (assuming I had a reply, which I didn't) the toilet in the bathroom flushed. A moment later, the door opened and Julie was standing there. Once again we stared at each other in the suddenly awkward silence, Julie hugging herself in that female self-embrace, each hand cupping the opposite elbow.

She was wearing an abbreviated little Japanese pint robe with, wide, elbow-length sleeves and a mid-thigh length hem. It was tied with a sash at the waist, but open enough at the collar and at that hem and of sheer enough material for me to see that it was all she was wearing.

She started to say something, but at that instant the toilet finished flushing with a loud gurgle. Julie flinched and glared over her shoulder at the offending fixture. "Oh Christ."

Maybe I smiled. If I did, it wasn't much. The moment wasn't made for smiling.

Julie turned away from the now softly 'running' toilet. "Well. If that wasn't romantic, I don't know what is."

"It's okay." I searched for something more to say. Something clever or urbane. Nothing came.

Julie hugged herself tighter. After a moment she sighed and murmured, "It shouldn't be like this. It should be easy now. After... But it's not. If anything it's even more awkward."

"I know." Then I finally realized the right thing to say. "I should go."

She stood, irresolute for a moment longer and then she crossed from the bathroom to the bed. Still in her own embrace, she sat on the edge of the bed next to me, staring down at her lap. After another long, stilted silence, she leaned over and brushed her lips against my cheek. Her robe was loose enough and open enough so that with her leaning across and down I couldn't help but notice just how much of the curve of her breasts I could now see.

The sudden tension in my groin caused an equally sudden tension in my chest. The animal that lived below my waist wanted her again. But the angel that lived in my chest knew that this time, if I took her, it really would be rape. The words came out without my even thinking about them. "I'm sorry."

She pulled back just enough to stare into my eyes. Then she whispered, "I'm not", took my face in her hands and kissed me full on the lips this time, deep and long.



THE GRAY LIGHT outside the window was rapidly brightening into a beautiful fall morning. Birds were chirping. Bees were no doubt buzzing. In any 50's Hollywood movie musical, this would be the point where the female lead would burst into her 'love aria.'

Instead of bursting into song and finally alone after Dan had made his quiet departure, I sat on the edge of the bed staring down at the feminine hands folded in my lap. I waited for them to tense into fists again, but they didn't. They just lay there. Limp. In a detached corner of my mind I realized that 'Julie' had to lean forward if she wanted to look at those hands. If she sat normally – that is to say, if Joey sat normally – he wouldn't be able to see those hands because the thrust of a pair of fake tits would obscure the view.

That realization still didn't bring any clenched fists. Apparently Cinderella-after-midnight sitting amidst the ashes wasn't prone to bouts of self-loathing.

At least there was one bright spot. I no longer worried about my sanity. Delusional folks didn't appreciate the reality of 'the morning after' the way I was appreciating it at the moment.

After a while I decided that Dan had been gone long enough for him to have really and truly departed and it was finally 'safe.' I began methodically removing all the bobby pins securing my wig. When I was fairly sure I'd gotten them all, I reached up and grasped a fist- full of hair at the point where the bangs sprang from my ersatz hairline and stripped the wig backwards off my head. I'd missed one bobby pin after all and paid for that oversight with a brief stab of pain as it took a little tuft of my real hair along with it as a parting gift. When the wig was finally laying beside me on the bed in a tangled heap, that detached corner of my mind observed that it was a shame there was no mirror in here. For some reason I'd always found a woman removing a wig to be marvelously erotic.

It's because you love illusion.

-Oh yes. Illusion is just so absolutely wonderful. You're a whine-y little pain in the ass, do you know that?

-Sure. After all, I have you to constantly remind me, don't I?

You got everything you wanted. Last night couldn't have gone any better. You couldn't have wished for anything more.

-So why does it all feel so...?

No reply. Why should I expect one? As I'd admitted, it was just me talking to myself after all. And since I had no idea why I felt so...

...empty...

...why should I be able to explain that feeling to myself?

Last night had gone perfectly. The seduction. The sex.

Was it because it was all pretend? Was that why it seemed so... So...

Empty.

That was the only word. Was the emptiness because now, in the quiet solitude, there really was nothing – at least comparatively speaking? The adrenalin high arising out of the constant threat of discovery was gone. The laser-sharp need to concentrate on the performance, the gamesmanship of analyzing the situation and picking the best ‘move’ out of all the possibilities – or of having to improvise on the spot – all in a heartbeat or two... That was now passed as well. The show was over, at least for the moment. Was it natural for an actor to feel this way in the dressing room after a standing ovation worthy performance?

‘An actor.’ ‘Performance.’

Pretend.

For some reason that thought was like exploring a broken tooth with the tip of my tongue and I shied away from it.

Could this emptiness be the residue of the guilt I’d felt before the curtain had gone up? The guilt over what I was doing to Dan?

No.

No guilt now, after the fact. My mental nemesis... *I had been right. Dan hadn’t gotten hurt. Indeed, if I were any judge of such things I’d say just the opposite.*

Really? “I’m sorry.” How do you explain that?

-Always the contrary, aren’t you? That wasn’t regret. That was just the awkwardness of an awkward situation speaking. The ‘morning after’ with the girl you’ve just screwed.

‘The girl you’ve just screwed’. There it was again. The pretending. Joey Adanno appearing in the role of ‘the girl who just got screwed.’ Rave reviews all around. Applause, applause!

Except...

The seduction had been all meticulously plotted and carried out. That was undeniably true. The sex was just as contrived and performed – at least on my part. (Concentrating on the carefully choreographed thrusting hips while trying not to be distracted by how incredibly *erotic* ‘her’ gasps and moans and ultimately her cries were in my own ears.)

But then... After...

They say that sometimes actors – good ones – can lose themselves in their roles.

Snuggling close in Dan’s arms without actually planning that part of the scene. Feeling him holding me tight. Letting another person that close into my space, because I wanted him there. Had

I let the girls I'd screwed that close into mine? I didn't remember now what it felt like laying in bed with them 'after'. But I knew I'd never forget what it felt like laying in Dan's arms.

-Maybe you were right. Maybe 'she' does know so much more than me.

No reply. Apparently I had nothing more to say to me.

6:51

In two hours Joey Adanno needed to be at work. The magical world of insight and revelation was over. For now. Now the mundane world was calling.

For a brief moment I toyed with the idea of calling in sick. The odds were good that I'd be fairly useless at work today. 'What's wrong with you, Adanno? You're a thousand miles away.' 'Sorry, boss. Just mulling over the insights one gains after a night wild of sex.' Applause, applause.

I stood up and headed to the bathroom for the mirror, the intentionally off-putting box of Always panty liners and the bottle of 'girl skin solvent' it contained. Time for work. Time for the real world. Though I'd have to find a few moments alone around lunchtime when I could steal away to a payphone or perhaps the Holiday Inn's lobby – you never knew these days, what with 'caller ID' and all.

I'd have to be careful to make sure it was discreet. Somewhere where I wouldn't be overheard. Without all the props and makeup, that would be a hard performance to explain to any passerby.

'Dan? Hi.' ... 'Yeah. Me too. I've been kind of floating all morning.' Soft, feminine chuckle tinged with just a soupcon of ruefulness. 'I'm afraid that meeting – you know, the one I'm in town for – I'm afraid my boss is thinking he could have just as profitably brought the office trash can instead of me for all the support I was lending. I just can't stop thinking about you.' ... 'Really? Good. I'm glad.' ... 'It was just as magical for me.' ... 'Of course, silly.' Another feminine chuckle, this time tinged with a touch of naughtiness. 'Even for a first time, I'm sure you know enough about girls to tell at least that much. About me, I mean.' ... 'Oh, Dan! Of course I'm not teasing you or putting you down. How can you think that?' ... 'Okay, maybe just a little bit. But if I am teasing, it's only the kind of thing you do with someone you... You know.' ... 'No, I don't know. Not next week, I'm sure. But maybe the week after. Or the one after that.' ... 'I know. It'll be hard for me too. But I'll be thinking about you until then.' ... 'Yes.' ... 'All right. Until then, then.' Finish with a soft, throaty purr. 'Meanwhile, I'll be seeing you in my dreams.'

The curtain falls.

Applause, applause.

And always...always...leave 'em wanting more.

