



Reluctant Press presents:

Uncommon Attraction



Philippa Peters

AN 'ADULT TV' E-BOOK

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UNCOMMON ATTRACTION

by **Philippa Peters**

I. SOUP OF THE DAY

I couldn't believe it when I looked up and saw who it was; Melissa, our receptionist, was leading to table seven, one of my tables. I stood stock still in shock and Greg, one of the bus boys, walked into me. We were lucky not to crash right there in the middle of Turo's restaurant.

Why, oh why, did he have to pick this restaurant, my restaurant, at least the one I worked in, to bring his latest conquest to, for a night out? I stood there, blank for a moment, as Greg worked his way around me and then, trembling, I retreated to the kitchen.

My tight black skirt had never felt so tight, my waist cinch seemed to cut into me and my bra was stupid and wrong. The long braid down my back swung as I turned my head to avoid more of the bustling workers in the kitchen. I could feel the golden hoops bouncing on my neck.

"What's the matter, Angie?" Maury, my boss, asked me. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I have, I thought, I have. Then, I jerked myself together. There was a mirror on the Out door for us to check our looks before we went out into the restaurant proper. I looked at myself, at the heavy, blonde bangs across my forehead, at the heavy, womanly makeup I wore when I was working. There was a chance that he wouldn't recognize me. It had been what, over a year at least, since he'd last seen me. I might seem just a little familiar to him. I might. I shuddered and my short, dark skirt pulled at my thighs.

Maury looked concerned. "What is it? Are you sick?" he asked anxiously. Like everyone else in the restaurant business, Maury was deathly afraid of his staff getting sick and infecting the patrons in some way.

I shook my head and my braid swung across my back, the soft white silk of my blouse caressing my soft, hairless skin. "No," I said, taking a deep breath, feeling my padded chest rising. "I just thought I saw someone I knew from the past. A bad experience. I needed a moment before I served new customers."

Maury smiled at me and patted my hand. "That's a good girl," he said. He held the door for me to go out and wait tables for Ian Pennington and his popsy, as my father had always called the girl friends Ian paraded past the town in his open sports car.

My heart was pounding as I got iced water and went to the table, placing it in the proper position in front of them. She looked up and smiled at me, blonde, in her forties, definitely not a popsy. Expertly made up, fashionably dressed in a little black dress and pearls, she looked able to fit in wherever they were going or had been. I think I might have seen her somewhere before.

“May I get you something to drink?” I asked in the lilting accent it had taken me so long to perfect.

Ian didn’t look up from the menu. “White wine, Jane?” he asked, frowning at the menu. “I’ll have a Scotch and water on the side.”

I should have known that right away. I quietly stated what the specials of the night were and retreated. I had managed to stay slightly behind Ian as he listened, nodded at what I had said as he went on studying the huge menu we served at Turo’s.

I felt nothing but relief as I gave the drinks order to John, the bartender. I had got past Ian. He hadn’t recognized me. I picked up his drink orders and headed back as daintily as I could, swinging my hips on my high heels, high heels that Maury insisted that his waitresses wore. It made our legs look longer, he insisted. It would raise our tips. He was right.

I placed the drinks in front of them and stood back a little, waiting for the order. Of course, they wanted the lobster bisque soup that we were famous for as well as the veal Maury claimed was the freshest in town. Ian snapped the menu to and looked up at me for the first time since he had sat down at my table.

The shock on his face was almost instantaneous, blowing any hopes I had that he might not recognize

me. "Good god, it's you," Ian said as I stood there, my temperature rising, knowing that I was blushing, embarrassed beyond belief as his eyes went up and down my body from my heels and dark stockings, my short, mid-thigh skirt, to my curvy figure, my bustline and my hair, makeup and earrings.

"I will go and put in your order," I said, turning away quickly as I heard his popsy ask him what the matter was. I didn't hear his reply as I got myself once more into the safety of the kitchen. I gave the orders directly to Maury's brother, Arturo, the head chef.

"You don't look good," he said to me directly as I hesitated about going back.

"Must be something I ate," I said, a running gag between us since he knew I always ate in the kitchen and loved everything he cooked.

Arturo smiled at me, patted me on the arm and went back to his cooking. I thought about the other customers I had and forced myself to leave the safety of the warm kitchen. Ian's chair was empty. Luckily, no one wanted my attention immediately.

"So, how is your wonderful sister?" asked a sneering voice from just behind me. I nearly jumped a foot in the air. My face must have shown my fright as he smiled and looking pleased with himself to have come on me undetected. My sister always referred to him as 'that bastard Ian' and I could see what she meant.

"You must have me mistaken for someone else, sir," I began but he smiled even more widely at me. He peered at the nametag on my chest.

"Angie," he read, his eyes on my chest. "As fake as the shape under your blouse?" he sneered again. "I thought you would be a Brittany or an Ashley. Aren't

those the types of names that all drag queens use these days? What were you for me?"

He knew very well. He hadn't been drunk. He had known precisely what he was doing to me as I had known what I had done for him. I saw the woman at his table frowning at us, as we stood beside table two that I had started to clean up, the twenty per cent tip left there very welcome. 'Jane' seemed concerned that we were talking together, clearly knowing each other from somewhere.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said softly, trying to fake being as puzzled as I could be. "I think you have confused me with someone else." It had been Jessica, the name my sister had conjured up, not Brittany or Ashley, as I am sure he knew very well. If he couldn't remember that, maybe he was as big a womanizer as my sister claimed Ian was.

"Oh, come on, Nicky boy," he said, his voice dropping in volume. "I never forget a pair of legs as pretty as yours."

Ian sauntered off to his table with a smirk. I was left there, stricken with fear, shame and embarrassment, as Ian went back to his lady friend. They began an animated conversation then. I could guess what the subject of that conversation was. It would be all about me, Nicholas Walton, the son of Preston Walton, artist, neighbor to the Penningtons of Longview.

I turned on my high heels, my hands shaking, and headed back to the kitchen. I had to get out of there. I had to leave. I couldn't bear it to see the kind of looks I knew I would get from her. I knew it would spread quickly through the restaurant. Soon, everyone would be looking at me, the boy in a girl's skirt, his face madeup, his hair in braids, wiggling his hips like all of

the other waitresses, and flirting with the young male customers to win more money in tips.

Other waitresses would be looking at me, making snide remarks. Then, it would be Maury, who would be astounded at first before being angry. He might come after me. I'd seen him use his hands and fists before on the help that didn't measure up to his standards. He'd certainly fire me.

"The soup is ready!" Maury hollered at me as I shook and tried not to think how silly I must look, a boy as a waitress. "You're table seven, Angie! Serve them now!"

Both Maury and Arturo demanded that we serve any table as soon as it was ready. Anyone could have been there and picked up that order. It was just my luck that it was me and my table.

I picked up the serving tray automatically and was a step towards the Out door before I realized what I was doing. I halted, shivering. Janice, another waitress loaded with a big order, pushed me forward and I went through the door.

"Out of the way, sleepyhead," she said cheerfully. "Got customers to serve."

I edged out along the pathway between tables. I nodded to a man at one of my tables who held up an empty beer glass.

"Miss, miss, waitress," said an older woman at another table where there had been an accident.

"I'll just be a moment," I said quickly, trying to give her a reassuring smile, hastening to offload at Ian's table.

“This trannie was amazing,” I heard Ian say as I set the tray partly on his table and served her, his woman, with the first bowl of soup and bread rolls warm from the oven. “She had me completely fooled. It was all some kind of blackmail scam, really, but my masculine charm laid her low.”

“But you said she was a man?” said the woman, aghast at what he was describing. “Don’t tell me that you couldn’t tell the difference between a man and a woman?”

Ian smiled at me. “It isn’t easy to tell, is it, Angie?”

The woman looked at me, her eyes widening. “Our waitress is a boy?” she asked incredulously. Her words carried to the nearest table. I saw the startled looks on people’s faces. I was crimson myself and wanting only to die, on the spot.

“You can recognize one like her right away,” Ian mocked. “When you see luscious lips like those ...” He never got to finish the insult he was about to give. I tipped the bowl of hot bisque onto his nicely starched shirt front and all down the front of his beautiful Savile Row suit. Then I fled from the commotion. I went out straight through the kitchen into the waitresses’ area, grabbing my purse, coat and umbrella and headed out through the back door.

I heard someone shout behind me. It was Maury. I heard him running behind me, the click of my high heels never having sounded louder. “What are you doing, Angie?” Maury yelled into the dark night as I scurried across the parking lot next to Turo’s. “You can’t treat a customer like that and run away, no matter what he said to you!”

Then, Maury turned and hurried back into the restaurant. What his irate customers would then tell him about me would scorch the inside pages of the Sunday newspapers, I was sure. I belted my raincoat, and hurried as fast as I could to the series of bus stops on Market Square Street. There was a Number Eighteen about to go. I ran for it and got on quickly. It wasn't exactly right for me to get back to my Houghton rooms but it was moving out and that's all I wanted it to do.

"Almost missed it, love," said an old man, sitting just inside the door

"Yes," I said, sitting down opposite him, crossing my legs, one stocking sliding over another. I saw the old man's eyes light up as he had a good view of my thighs as my coat opened. I eased my skirt down with my red-tipped fingernails and thought grimly how he might react if he had heard Ian Pennington earlier that night. If only Ian had told the truth about Jessica and him, I thought, but it was all so mixed-up in my mind now that I doubted I could sort it all out properly.

II. HORS D'OEUVRES

I was going to be a rock musician. That was why my hair was so long. I was going to be the next Robert Plant or, if my father would buy me a guitar, maybe the next Jimmy Page. So I wouldn't let anyone cut my hair when I was a teenager. It was Mom who insisted that I wash it well and comb and brush it properly. She fended off all the snide remarks I got from the rest of the family. It was a horrible shock to us all when she ran off with another artist, a rival of my father's, going

to live with him. I was eighteen by then and wondering what to do with myself

Mostly what I did was go down to the pub with school friends, drink away my allowance from my father and occasionally give my sisters a hard time. Then Bonnie married and went off somewhere in the mountains. Eva was the one who dated Ian Pennington. I could never 'get' her. She really didn't care what I said or what jokes I made about her. Her reputation was even worse than Bonnie's but what could you expect, most people said, after my mother ran off with Douglas Redford?

None of that really meant anything to me. It had always been said in the family that I was the one who had inherited my father's artistic talent. For a time, I believed it as well. So I wasn't going to be a rock star. I'd always been able to draw and my cartoons of my friends and teachers graced many a pub table top in Moston or Pixley, the local towns within walking distance of our country cottage. We lived right on the edge of the Longview estate of the Penningtons.

What I did for a long time after school was to paint. Not at all like my father. He hated my paintings, daubings he called them. He hated them because of the acrylics I used instead of the oils which he tried to impress on me were the true expression of art, his art. He told me that I would never sell one. At the time I didn't care about that at all.

Dad didn't paint at all after Mom left and drank all the time. He'd ask me from time to time what I thought of his work, fuzzy architectural pieces. Privately, I thought his latest work was painfully derivative of the masters of Impressionism but I couldn't tell him that.

Still, being at home had the advantage that I could use his 'studio', the ramshackle building that had once been a cowshed at the back of the farmhouse-cottage we grew up in. Since my father rarely painted any more, it gave me access to canvases, brushes, paint and thinners, easels and even frames, which made my work look professional, even if no one would ever see it but me.

My father was rapidly becoming the town drunk after Mom left, berating her to all his friends, which is why I went out so much. I hadn't an inkling about how strong Eva's infatuation with Ian was until she stomped in one night as Dad and I were eating leftovers of leftovers for supper.

"Did you see the evening paper?" she stormed when I asked her if anything was wrong. There was always something wrong with Eva. She stormed in everywhere she went. "Did you see what Ian said about me?"

Dad unfolded the previously unread *Post* and turned to the page Eva directed him to. 'Moston's most eligible' ran the headline with an article about Ian Pennington and his brother, Gordon, the horse rider and motor car race driver.

"There," said Eva, pointing. "See what Ian said. He's tired of going out with girls who are female impersonators. He wants his next girl friend to be the real thing. Ooh, he thinks he's being so clever!" She actually stamped her foot then on our hardwood kitchen floor, frowning at me as I winced. "Everyone knows we've been going out for the last six months!"

"Until you dumped him for his brother," I put in, which was true.

“You should have heard the women at Athenia’s laughing about me until Sharon shushed them up,” Eva went on grimly. “Ooh, I can never show my face in there again. I just can’t. Not until I get that bastard Ian back.”

Eva was looking at me as she said that. I made the mistake of flicking back the strand of hair that had fallen over my face. “Nicky,” she wheedled. “How would you like to help out your favourite sister in getting her own back on a crummy ex-boy friend?”

“No,” I said, and stood up to dump most of supper in the trash can.

“Two thousand,” she said, taking a wad of money from her purse and waving it at me. “Gordie took me to the races today and his trainer told us where to bet.”

I could believe that. Eva loved all kinds of racing, fast cars and fast horses. The Penningtons had a horse bloodstock farm and a horse training establishment on their estates at Longview.

“What do I have to do?” I asked facetiously. “Kill him or dispose of the body?”

Even Dad looked mildly interested when I said that. Eva smiled her best smile at me. She looked very beautiful when she did that but I knew it was like the smile on the face of a cobra before it strikes. “Both,” she purred at me.

Mom was fast asleep in front of the television in our Houghton flat, the empty gin bottle clutched in her hand. Sighing, I kicked off my high heels, hung up my

coat and minced over to her. I clicked off the TV and she awoke slightly.

“Eva?” she murmured.

“Yes, Mom,” I agreed and pulled her to her feet. She was already in her nightdress and robe, still very frail long after the birth of my half-sister, Grace, and the surgeries that had followed. Her hair was gray now as she refused to dye it back to her favored sungold when she had eloped with that deadbeat, Douglas Redford.

After I settled Mom, I looked in on Grace. She slept, well, like a baby, and that always made me smile. She shared the room with me as I didn’t trust Mom at times around her. I didn’t need a light to find the hanger for my blouse and the one with clips for my skirt. I hung them and headed to the bathroom, closing the door softly before I put on the light. A girl looked back at me from the mirrors of the vanity and from along the glass panels of the bath and shower.

I undid the bands that held my hair and let it free, a golden corona thick about my shoulders. I shook the braids free, a girlish gesture, and felt a twinge of emotion as I looked at myself in the short, white slip over my dark panti-hose. I took off my big earrings and put in my studs, delaying the obvious for as long as I could.

I liked looking at myself as a girl. I could get off on me, I knew. I was guilty of rampant narcissism. I knew it and wished I had a girl like me whom I could talk to or be friends with, but I had no-one, save for Mom. Oh, there were the girls at Turo’s, more acquaintances than friends, but they all had boy friends. On weekends, they were totally engaged in what their men wanted to do.

I slipped off my panty-hose first. That didn't change how I looked, my legs so hairless and smooth. On a whim, I had painted my toenails a few days before and most of the red lacquer was still in place. I took off my slip and so my chest was revealed. There was something there that aped a girl's chest. The gel-filled bust beneath my bra came off with its tape and showed me a flat-chested girl.

My padded panties, when removed, still left doubt as to my true gender. My waist-cinch, my little corset, hardly seemed to constrict me at all as it had when Eva first put it on me. I wore a gaff under my panties but it was little more than a tight pair of panties holding my male parts snugly in place. With it on, in my makeup but without my bra, I looked very much like a teen-aged girl about to bud, so to speak, or, I suppose, a drag queen.

I took off the gaff and there was no doubt what I was. I removed my makeup with Noczema and had to scrub my eyes to get rid of the eyeliner and mascara. I set my hair in two very thick pigtails to sleep in and eyed myself. I was a hairless freak, thanks to my sister. My eyebrows had gone almost completely missing after the first time she had dressed me and they had never grown back.

Once I had painted on canvas, I thought; now I painted on myself. I scowled at my art work. I couldn't help still 'doodling' a lot. Turo had seen me do quick caricatures of Maury when he was in one of his moods. He'd laughed his head off. He'd even kept a couple of the napkins I had drawn on and had them framed with photographs of Maury and himself. He told me I'd be famous some day.

Dad had told me enough times so I knew how little talent I really had. He'd said that I showed no desire to dedicate myself to art. Well, I didn't, not to his art, anyway. To be an artist, I had to go to college, my father rambled on. Fat chance of that now. I might be 'artistic' for the rest of my life but not in any serious, professional way, not like my father.

I pushed my hair behind my head. Maybe if I did have it all cut off? No, I still looked girlish. I would have to cut my bangs, too. I let my hair go. In my pyjamas, I looked like a young girl about to go to bed. When did my waist ever get to be so thin, I wondered irritably. I didn't really have a figure as such, not without a lot of padding, and I supposed it was easier, certainly it was less painful, to add rather than to suppress.

Now that would be a picture that I should draw, I thought, looking at myself. That would be realistic enough to please my father. He might even confuse it with his own, as he had done once before. Jane Elgart, his agent, had gone off with some of my last year's portfolio in with his street scenes and landscapes. Which is one of the reasons I never got considered at art school since my portfolio was incomplete. Jane Elgart! That was the woman with Ian! What was he doing taking her out to supper, I wondered. Perhaps he fancied older women now, I thought maliciously.

Before I went to bed, I checked my purse. I had had several good tips. It would have been a monster night but for Ian Pennington. I regretted it now. I shouldn't have dumped the soup on him. I should have gone home sick the moment I spotted him. I should just have borne his comments and insisted he had made an error in identifying me. I could have got by Maury and

Arturo, I was sure. They liked me. They liked my sassy attitude and tomboy habits, as Arturo called them.

I'd got up from one of the tables when I was there six months before with Mom and Grace. The brothers were desperately short of help. They only had two people serving and over fifty tables to be served. Maury had been joking, I think, when he dropped the check on us, apologized for the lack of service. He'd smiled as he asked me if I wanted a job.

I had jumped at the chance to Maury's great surprise, I think. And I had helped him a lot. Maury had hired me at the end of the evening. He said I had a really nice manner with the customers. But he did want me to wear a skirt the next day and more makeup. I hadn't been wearing any and probably was completely androgynous. Maybe that was why I got over two hundred in tips that very first night. I hadn't realized that Maury had thought I was a girl. I hadn't realized that everyone had.

I swore I wouldn't go back the next night. No way was I ever going to dress up again, not after what had happened with Ian Pennington weeks before. But when I got back to our Fetton Lane rooms, there was Mom sitting outside, drinking a flask of gin, while Grace was crying in her bassinet. Mom was completely disoriented, hardly realizing that we had been evicted because she had drunk away the rent money.

The two hundred plus from that first night at Turo's had come in real handy to get us a room for the night and to find us a place the next day. I bought my first skirt, panty-hose, blouse, shoes, female underwear and makeup and became Angie Nicholson, the name of an upper-class girl I knew back in Moston.

It served anyway to get me 'temporarily' employed at Turo's. No-one asked me again after the first month who I was. I was even paying taxes, for goodness' sake, as Angela Nicholson. I was the girl that everyone had supposed me to be the first night I had worked there.

Now, after one rash act, I had lost it all. I had had one of the best jobs in town. It was trendy or it would never have drawn Ian Pennington there. A weight settled on me as I realized what I had done. Where was I going to find another job? Could I get another job as a twenty year old man who looked like a teenaged girl? I shivered when I thought about it and damned 'that bastard Ian' again. He had shamed me once more. It was more than I could bear to hear him putting me down to a woman like Jane Elgart.

It was all his fault, I thought miserably. No, it was all Eva's fault. Then, as I climbed into bed, I had to admit the truth. It was all my own fault, the predicament I was in.

III. APPETIZERS

"I won't do it," I said, aghast at Eva's crazy suggestion. She had tossed the money on the bed in her room where we had retreated and she had made her outlandish proposal.

"He said he wanted the real thing," she cooed, her face animated as I hadn't seen it in years. She was usually sneering at me. "So, we'll give him a real female," she smirked. "Impersonator, that is."

“But I’m not a female impersonator,” I insisted, a sick feeling in my stomach since Eva had made the suggestion in the first place.

“But you could be,” Eva said. “You have lovely hair.” I reddened at that. “And really, with my help, you could look like a woman, I promise you.”

“I won’t,” I said stubbornly. “Besides, Ian knows me. He would recognize me.”

“Not after I get through with you,” she promised. “Oh, he might notice a slight family resemblance between our cousin, Jessica, and me, but that will be all.”

“Jessica?” I asked, a flutter inside me at the name she used.

“Remember when you came in from painting and I was making out with Ian on the couch? You never even noticed us! Two weeks ago last Tuesday?” she asked.

“Remember what?” I began. I didn’t ever recall her making out with Ian in our house.

“You came in with a painting smock over your clothes,” she said, a strange smile on her face. “You had your hair pulled back in a pony tail, and a wide, a really wide, red rubber band holding it back. It looked like a red ribbon.”

I recalled it. It had come off some packaging of Dad’s. I’d just used it because I nothing else. “So?” I asked.

Eva laughed. “We hunkered down and were real still,” she said. “You were humming a Spice Girls’ song, right up there in falsetto. Ian thought you were a girl. He asked me who ‘she’ was.” Eva over-emphasized the ‘she’ making me blush as I felt another strange flutter of emotion. I hated it when I was called

'miss' in the village by people who ought to know me. Ian should have.

"I told him you were my cousin, Jessica," Eva giggled. "Ian said you were pretty. I never contradicted him or told him I was joking because he started kissing me again as you went upstairs doing Celine Dion and that *Titanic* song about the heart going on."

I winced and flushed as I did remember doing that, laughing at myself as I was doing it. It had been on the radio in the studio. I hadn't bothered to change stations. Trust Eva to catch me on the one night I wasn't doing *Stairway to Heaven*.

"He didn't know you then and he won't know you again when I make a real Jessica out of you," Eva said, smiling at me, attempting to be friendly. Like the smile on the face of a crocodile, I thought with a shudder.

"No," I said, shaking my head, feeling very chilled all of a sudden. "What will everyone be saying about me, even if I did fool Ian for just a little while? I'd be the laughingstock of Moston."

"No," said Eva. "It's Ian who's going to be the laughingstock. That's the idea. You'll be anonymous. That's why I'm going to dye your hair. How will you like being a redhead?"

"I won't," I said. "I'm not doing such a stupid thing."

Eva sighed and opened her purse. Notes, big ones, fell from her fingers. There must have been five thousand on the bed. "Gordon's share," she said. "I'm supposed to be holding it for him. I'll tell him I invested it in a ring." She laughed and rolled over the moneyed quilt to her dressing table. "Yes, this one will do," she said holding what looked like a diamond ring to me.

“Don’t you recognize it? Mom threw it at Dad when she stomped out. It went under the sofa and I picked it up.”

I looked at my sister. We looked a little alike but her hair was darker than mine, ash-blonde she called it. She always wore it tight back on her head in a chignon. I always knew she was vindictive person but this was ridiculous. “You hate Ian Pennington this much?” I asked, collecting the bills on the bed and putting them together.

“Oh, yes,” Eva murmured, lying back on her bed. “He humiliated me. I want my revenge.”

I counted over five thousand and there was still more on the bed. Eva sat up suddenly, reached over and took the wad from my hand. “If you want it all, little brother,” she said, her mouth in its characteristic smirk, “you are going to have to earn it. Are you in?”

“Tell me your whole plan,” I squawked nervously, feeling most silly and stupid that I should even be considering getting dressed in girl’s clothes.

“Here,” she said, counting out five hundred. “Put it in your pants’ pocket. That’s just for trying. Let’s see how much of a girl you make. If it doesn’t work, if you or I think it wouldn’t work, all you’ll have to endure is me calling you sweet Jessica for a while. You’ve heard a lot worse than that anyway, haven’t you, with your hair like that?”

I had. Much worse. The kids at school weren’t the worst. It had been guys like the Rugby Club members who had been the worst with their shrill whistling and high-pitched put-ons that had, to tell the truth, never really bothered me. But Neil and Ronnie, longhairs like me, had cut their hair after one bad hazing at school. I

didn't care. My girl friends had begged me not to cut it which was enough for me. Come to think of it, that bastard Ian Pennington had been an outstanding rugby player and had been a member of the Rugby Club at about that time.

"You have to take this seriously," said Eva crossly when I reacted to the strange perfumes I smelled wafting about the bathroom. "You have to remove all your body hair as well, under your arms and on your legs, on your chest and arms. I know you're really fair like Mom but we girls don't want hair anywhere. Don't shave your face. I'll get that with wax and Alec."

"Alec?" I had to ask.

Eva laughed at her own joke. "Alec Trolysis," she said. "Dad bought me my own machine when I took that beauty course."

And never finished it, I thought, like everything else Eva had ever started. If anyone had asked me what she did, I'd have been hard pressed to answer. She had started and abandoned so many things. What she was best at now, my sister, was being a sponge. She sucked money out of Dad like a vacuum cleaner.

I thought taking a bath, and washing my hair, would have been the easy part but it wasn't. As soon as I was in the water, Eva came in and poured more stuff in the bath. I thought I was in a flower garden. Then she supervised my removing my body hair as I tried to keep my private parts, well, private.

I asked her to leave the bathroom but she wouldn't. "I want to see what I'm paying for," she said. "I want it done right."

Eva did leave at some point and came back with what was to me a stack of women's lingerie. After I had

soaked for nearly an hour, she let me out. I felt instantly weird as I dried myself. She gave me the bottom of one of her bikinis to put on over my private parts and, well, with all the feminine fragrances, the clothing, even what looked like rubber breasts, I couldn't really get the bikini on.

"Well," said Eva. "Run the water really cold for a while in the bath and sit in it."

I did. When I got out, the white bikini fitted me very snugly. I didn't know where I had disappeared to but I had definitely shrunk!

"Just like when you go swimming," said Eva smugly. She had me put on some other panties, padded ones, that I wouldn't have believed she owned.

"Well, we girls aren't all perfect as we're growing up," Eva said in answer to my question. "We need help at times. Those panties were Bonnie's once, then mine, now they're our little sister's."

I objected as she smiled at me. "Softer," she said. "Don't speak from down there. Lift your voice. Speak from your head. Put on that upper-class accent that you use when you tell jokes."

"Oh, I'd rather not," I said in plummy tones and she laughed.

"That's the one," Eva said. "Now keep it up there." She had been playing with my hair all the time. Now, she started twisting it here and there, braiding it, I realized, and pinning it with pink little plastic bows.

"Couldn't you find another color?" I asked.

"Higher," she said. "I won't answer you unless you speak properly, like a girl."

I protested and Eva wouldn't answer me until I tried to be higher. "No, I couldn't," she answered to my original question. "Besides, you look pretty in pink."

She had decided not to dye my hair, she said later. It would just have taken too much time. Besides, if we didn't like it, it would take at least as much time again to get my hair back to its natural blonde color.

I nearly freaked when she began to cut my hair. "Oh, don't be so stupidly boyish," my elder sister said. "I'm just taking the scraggly lengths away. I'm surprised you don't have birds and squirrels living in this mane." She began them with a curling iron as I contemplated what she was doing to me. She did something to the front of my hair, rolling the front in papers and cutting again, not listening to my strenuous protestations.

"This will comb out easily," Eva said as she warned me not to move or she'd burn me with the curling iron. It smelled like my hair was burning. "I wish I had such nice hair as you do. You know, with a really good cut from one of the better places in town, you'd look stunning."

"I don't want to look stunning," I protested and had to say it twice more before Eva deigned to reply.

"All girls do when they go out," she said.

"Go out?" I squeaked.

"Of course," Eva said. "How else are you going to meet Ian unless we go out dancing? I can't very well invite him here to have sex with my cousin, can I?"

"Have sex with him?" I screamed, getting up from the bathroom commode where I had been perched.

“Of course not,” said Eva, laughing. “It’s not going to come to that. But we do want Ian to be interested in you. That’s what I’m paying you for.



"I want some interesting pictures of the two of you dancing, cuddling. If you could get a peck or two on your neck, that would be the ultimate. Just enough to make him look ridiculous when it turns out he's been nuzzling a boy, the real thing. Let him live down public ridicule for a while as this family's had to for long enough."

I knew what she meant by that. Eva had the reputation she had gained as a chaser after anything in trousers. But the worst was Mom's elopement. It had hit us all hard. Now we had heard that she was pregnant with Redford's child. I must admit that I hated her for a little while there as Dad now seemed permanently retired to his bottle of booze.

Eva put what she called a waist cinch on me. I called it a corset and she laced me in it tightly. She used tape about my chest and, with the bra padded with what seemed to me to be gel packs, I felt suddenly very constrained. She put a dark-colored, filmy slip with thin straps over me to cover the cinches I was wearing. I moved to her bedroom where I got to look at myself.

At first, I just saw my shape, my hairless legs and the way my chest stuck out. I looked like I had a girlish figure. My hair was like any girl's hair in a hairdressers' with parts curled and wrapped but it was shaped about my shoulders and cheeks, very much in a female style. I protested and was ignored as Eva steered me to the commode with my back to the mirror.

Eva waxed my face and eyebrows. While she was doing that, she had me put on a garter belt over my panties. The touch of the garters dancing on my thighs was the most ludicrous yet. While before I had just been feeling pulled, belted and constrained, these were

exotic and something that no man should feel. Then, she had me put on stockings and attach them.

It was enervating, to say the least, spine-tingling, as the soft nylon eased itself over my smooth leg and, with trembling fingers, I attached the stocking to the garter belt. Then I had to do the other. Eva noted my reaction and laughed at me.

“Now you feel like a woman,” she said. “That’s why I had you wear them. They make me feel girlish. Ian loves his women to wear garter belts and stockings. Let him get a flash and he’ll be all over you.”

My face was itchy before Eva removed the wax and rubbed lotion all over my face and neck. She got out Alec, “for a few strays,” she said, before she put makeup on me. It felt as if my eyebrows were frozen as she plucked away, painted me and worked for what seemed like hours on me. I didn’t realize it at the time but she thinned and shaped my eyebrows most femininely. And they didn’t grow back, as she said they would.

Eva gave me false eyelashes, making up my face with rouge, eyeliner and eye shadow, painting my lips pink, to match my dress, she said, and finally covered me in translucent powder. It had taken an hour and a half and she began to take off the papers and clips from my hair.

“Take a look,” she said as she brushed some makeup on my chest where the tape had created a crease.

A very pretty, blonde-haired girl looked back at me from the mirror. An intense, sick feeling swarmed through my stomach and threatened to overwhelm me as I realized that it was me I was looking at. I did look

like a real girl. She, the girl in the mirror, was me! I felt a quivering all through me. I couldn't do this but there was Eva, smiling in triumph, spraying me with a fragrant cologne, putting perfume behind my ears and at the cleavage that I seemed to have.

"Stunned, are you?" she asked, laughing at my reaction to myself. "I knew you'd make a lovely girl. You should have been born a girl. Bonnie and Mom always said so."

I'd ignored such comments, growing up, but now it was terrible, looking at myself, with my eyes all sultry and so blue! I shivered, my groin so tight, hurting. I stared at myself, my feminine figure and my legs in the stockings. I wanted to caress this girl myself but it was me.

I tried to conquer my conflicted emotions, determined at one moment to immediately head to the bathroom and become me, Nicholas; at another, I was elated to feel the light slip move against my stockings. I was paralysed by the feelings of softness and pleasure that I felt. It was so weird.

"Well, that's all fixed," said Eva. I jumped as she put cold metal, a gold chain about my throat. Then, she put earrings on my ears, big ones, pink like my lipstick. "We'll be going out at eight with Gordon and Ian, over to Bingham. There's a charity dance there at the Ballroom. Gordie has tickets."

"Me! Go out as a girl!" I squealed. "I can't do that!"

"Say it right," Eva insisted. "Say it right!" I tried and eventually repeated my disbelief in high, breathy tones that she frowned at but she said would do. She did my nails, or rather, she glued these bright pink, acrylic nails to my own fingernails which changed

them completely, making my hands look so feminine. Then she added thin pink bands to my arms before she ushered me to her wardrobe.

“You’ll look great in this,” Eva said and took out a dark pink dress, the silk, outer covering having lighter circles of pink all over. The inner part was lined in white silk and the petticoats, I guessed that’s what they were, made the dress shapely. It rustled even as Eva took it off the hanger.

“I can’t wear a dress like that,” I protested again, strange, eerie feelings going through me. I actually felt excited and really eager to see how the girl I was becoming would look like in such a dress. I was even strangely glad when Eva ignored my protests and had me step into the dress. She pulled it up about me and arranged the neckline and the sleeves. She pulled my waist cinch even tighter before she zipped me into ‘my’ dress.

Moving before in my stockings, in the light slip and with my arms brushing my fake bust had been a spine-tingling experience. Now, moving in the dress, with the rustle of petticoats and their constant, light, airy touching of my legs, was shattering. Eva let me go to the mirror. I looked at myself, my beautiful, girlish self. I shook and my dress shook with me. I had such a figure for a girl. I was pretty! I couldn’t and didn’t want to believe that ‘she’ was me.

“Shoes as well,” said Eva, smiling sardonically at me. “Wow, I did better than I thought, didn’t I?” She stood beside me, her own light hair blonde-streaked and brushed back in a tighter chignon. “I have to dress up now and try to compete with my kid brother! Anyway, put on these shoes,” they were pink high heels, “while I get ready.”

I wobbled as I slipped my feet in them. They were actually small for me. I could barely walk in them. Eva made me take small steps and put one foot in front of the other, my hips swaying and the dress swirl about me girlishly, filling me with exciting feelings and emotions.

"Now, I just want a few pictures of you and Ian nuzzling," said Eva. I felt my temperature spiking and goose bumps breaking out on my fevered skin. "Don't worry about Ian really. He's always courteous, a gentleman. I was the one who chased him, you know. He won't leave you standing at the front door without a chaste kiss goodnight. That's the money shot, brother. It'll be very light and quick. You whisper how much you enjoyed the night, come in and run upstairs. We can giggle over the photos I'll have of you and Ian."

"I-I have to kiss him?" I squeaked in dismay.

"He'll kiss you," said Eva, pouting as she put on bright red lipstick. "Don't worry. It won't be a passion-rouser though if you could get him to do that, I'd double what I'm giving you. He thinks you are Cousin Jessica, up from the country, shy and naïve, who doesn't dress up often, and whom I am lumbered with for the night.

"Ian's doing Gordon a favor and keeping you, Jessica, out of my way with Gordon tonight. Little does he know the surprise we have planned for him. Wait till he reads the *Post* on Friday. I hope we get a picture good enough to print."

Eva was gloating so much over her revenge on Ian that I couldn't get a word in edgewise. I had to wonder if such a revenge wouldn't rebound on her relationship with Gordon. Or was she just using him, too, as she was using me. My picture with Ian in the *Post*?

Surely people would recognize me, I thought in fright. I looked at myself in the mirror in my dress and with the figure I had, my bangs in my hair, the pink barettes and the waves bouncing in at my neck. I wouldn't recognize myself, I thought with a thrill, as my skirts rustled.

Me going out on a date with a man? How did Eva do it? How had she got me into this? After this deception, despite what Eva said, I'm sure Ian would make my name mud around Moston for quite a long time.

IV. SALAD

Grace's calling woke me in the morning. I was dreaming of all the people in the restaurant I served as a girl. Oh, Eva, I was giggling with her, what do you think of me now?

Luckily, Grace was laughing and grinning as I groggily got out of bed and changed her. She wanted to play and she was at the age where it was always fun. Any little thing turned her on. She chased out the lingering dreams I had of Ian grabbing me as he had in Moston. I could still see him, as I saw him in one dream or another, every night, taking me hurtfully by my arm and snarling into my face that I should know how to behave properly as a girl if I was going to dress like one.

Then I remembered where I was. I remembered that I had had a terrible night at Turo's. I remembered my dreams full of Ian chasing after me, telling everyone to stop the drag queen, the boy in the dress. The driver leered at me and the man who had travelled with me

on the Eighteen had stroked my arm and whispered at me to come with him, "There's a good lad."

The wavering shadows of the tree outside Grace's window kept her entranced while I got changed into jeans and a dark shirt, socks and running shoes, shoving my hair back into a thick pony tail. Even when I went out like this, I had become hardened to most people calling me 'miss' rather than 'man'.

Mom didn't respond right away when I called her for breakfast in the new rooms I had secured for her in Houghton, paying for it by getting the job at Turo's. I didn't know how to tell Mom how silly I had been, or how Ian had found me at last. That meant that he would tell Dad and the others all about me.

Someone might come after Mom. Maybe, Dad would. I played with Grace and took her out for a walk. It was only when Mom hadn't woken up by the early afternoon that I got worried as I couldn't wake her at all.

I called for an ambulance. The paramedics worked on her for quite a while, in contact with doctors over their radios for some time. Then, since she was not responding, they took her in to the hospital. Grace awoke and clung to me with so many new faces about. I dressed her, put on my jacket and we went with the ambulance while the feminine part of me kept asking me inside if I really could look after Grace without my mother's help.

We were in the hospital for most of that day. I got a few funny looks that I stared down. I did have to identify myself as Nicholas, after all. I was exhausted as I had to hold Grace for most of that time. Then, just after I had laid her down there in a cot in a strange room, they came for me quickly to go to Mom. She never re-

gained consciousness, though, slipping away sometime in the night while I held her hand.

The aftermath was awful. Dad refused my phone call. Redford, the man she had eloped with 'no longer is living at this number.' Bonnie I talked to, in as deep a voice as I could muster. She said to do anything I wanted and not to bother to call her again. She and Mom hadn't talked in ten years. She agreed with Eva that the Mom that they had known had died years ago to them.

Eva I didn't even try to call. After breaking up with Gordon, she'd hooked up with some Australian racing driver and was reported, in the last paper I saw that used her name, to be going to marry him last Christmas in Melbourne.

The hospital authorities were kind but cautious. As I explained to them, I had no money, there was no insurance, and there was no-one else in the family to care. I don't know why I protected Dad by not telling them about him. I was most concerned in getting away myself with Grace before the social workers twigged onto the fact that she wasn't mine.

Mom was duly cremated and I spent a little of the dwindling money I had in paying a neighbor, she had two babies of her own, to babysit Grace while I attended to the formalities. I used up more money posting a notice of her death in the *Moston Evening Post* which I knew would annoy my father but was after all the least I could do. I didn't know who her real friends were in Moston but there must have been some.

It pained me to think that I didn't know my mother at all after all the years I had lived with her. I hadn't known that she had liver disease and should not have been drinking at all. I didn't know anything of what

caused her to run away from Dad. I didn't know why she hadn't aborted Grace or how she had alienated my sisters. Well, in Eva's case I understood. If ever I thought of 'that bastard Ian', I would also think of 'that bitch Eva', the two architects of the strange half-life I was living.

The superintendent of the buildings in Houghton was very clear about it. Since my mother, the tenant of 313, was dead, I had to move out. It didn't matter that Mom had never worked a minute since I had found her in a women's hostel, drying out and pregnant at the same time. I had paid every penny of the rent. But it was a subsidized rent, the super leered at me, having called me 'miss' twice already, for an unmarried mother and her child. I was neither of those, was I? He wanted me out by the weekend.

Only when he left did I realize how much the super had intended to insult me. I had tried to dress like a boy during the day. Only at night, in going out to my job, did I dress as a girl, leaving my Mom, who usually called me 'Eva' and thought that my sister was there to visit and check on her.

The super had been looking at me as if he knew what I was. But if he knew I couldn't be Grace's mother, I thought with a tremble, why had he called me 'miss'?

I almost took the scissors to my hair right away. I couldn't say, any more, that I kept my long hair because the girls liked it. I hadn't been near a girl since I came to town, anyway, and started searching for Mom. Any girl who looked at me now just looked at my thin, shaped eyebrows and were as polite as polite could be. I think that they all thought that I wanted to be a girl just like them. Just as the super did. No wonder he was

determined to run me out of the flat I was paying for. I had to go before he thought about me looking after Grace and got Social Welfare after me.

Mom had called me 'Eva' half the time even when she had given me her purse to hold, and her jacket when we were at Turo's that time. We were living then on Fetton Lane, near Turo's. She remembered so many happy times there with Douglas, she said. It was a wonder after the impulsive move I had made to get a job there as Angie Nicholson that Mom had managed to get home safely with Grace.

Well, she hadn't really as I had found out when I got home, laughing to myself about what gullible fools there were in the world, absolutely certain that I would never be back at Turo's again. If only Mom hadn't drunk away our rent money, I would never have gone back and tried so hard to be a convincing Angela. I tried always, anyway, in my heart of hearts, to say to myself that I wouldn't be doing this, if we hadn't had to have the money. I couldn't help having to dress so primly as a girl, I told myself, in Mom's once fashionable black coat, using her makeup and cologne, her blouse and underwear and stockings to start with, buying myself a skirt under the knowing eye of tarted up shopgirls, all to get us some money.

Now I was at that point again, thanks to that bastard, Ian. Thanks to him, I was out of my job as a waitress. I hadn't really tried to get a job again as me, Nicholas, but I had been thinking about it. If I got funny looks as a boy out in the world, I got nothing but approval as Angie.

I'd even been propositioned by young men on the buses that I rode late at night which made me feel really weird. None of them attracted me in the least. It

was their girl friends that I was interested in. I often found myself staring at girls and the way they had made up or the way they had done their hair so attractively. Or I liked the dress or blouse they wore or their soft skin and figure.

Of course, I thought of how I could do that, too, or should do that, as Angie. That was only natural, wasn't it, when I was dressed as a girl, wanting everyone to think I was a girl. I stared at the girls and sometimes got funny looks for it because I was interested in girls and the way they dressed so stylishly. I constantly told myself that I had to do what I did. Angie had to dress, like the girls all around her, to fit in.

I had to think of Grace as well. With Mom dead, I didn't want to lose her to the social welfare system. I took out my 'special' suitcase with a feeling of dread, at least of dreadful purpose, and transformed myself once more into the waitress, Angie Nicholson. After all the years, I still had the padded panties and gel-filled bra that Eva had put on me way back when.

Just a few touches of makeup, lipstick, dangly earrings, I had long ago got my ears pierced, another leer-ing session from some knowing girl at a beauty counter in a shopping mall, dark panty-hose, dark skirt, white blouse, and I was set. I was trying now to make people see me as a girl. I had to wear high heels, as I was trying to be a girl, not caring if I was taller than some boys. They made me walk like a girl and that was important.

In Mom's coat and a purse on my arm, I wasn't questioned as I got a room, I couldn't call it an apartment, in a rat trap in Lower Gunning, on the third floor. It was falling down about the tenants but it was cheap. If I could find cheap babysitting too, for Grace, I

could at least try to work as Angela. I knew I would never be employed as Nicholas. Sooner or later, if I tried to stay in Houghton, some busybody would have sicced Social Welfare onto me.

Getting a job wasn't too hard. They were used to illegal immigrants in Lower Gunning but the pay was awful, tips few and far between. Then again, we shared our tips at Jim's Diner. Since the three other girls seemed to get next to nothing in the way of tips, I found myself only getting back a quarter of what I declared. It took me a couple of pay cheques to realize what was going on. They pocketed more than they put in and I learned to do the same.

I tried, too, to work nights where I could. I could get school girls to come in to babysit Grace more cheaply than when I employed their mothers during the day. But it was wearing. I hated it, particularly the flirting that I had quickly realized was an integral part of the 'culture' of Jim's Diner. I learned how to do that by watching the other girls and so I survived. For another six months, anyway.

Then he walked in, Ian Pennington. He didn't smirk at me this time as he sat at the front counter and waved off Edna, the middle-aged, gum-chewing waitress, and pointed to me. "I want her to serve me," he said firmly, his grooming immaculate as you would expect.

My heart beating fiercely, I tried to sound pleasant as I poured him a coffee, feeling Edna scowling at me. So now he was about to louse up even this last, tiniest bit of the world that I could call my own. "Would you like to see the menu, sir?" I said in my softest tones as I placed the plastic menu beside him. He was scowling so furiously at me, looking me over as if he had never seen a man in a dress before, that I couldn't resist add-

ing the words that popped into my head. "Today's special is soup of the day."

"No, thanks," Ian said. I think a grin momentarily played across his taut mouth. "This jacket," it was black leather, "and these pants are brand new." He tasted the coffee and pulled a face. "What time do you get off?"

I hesitated. Why would he want to know that?

"She gets off at eleven," cut in Edna, industriously wiping down the counter which she never had done to my knowledge, ever before.

"I was sorry to read about your mother," said Ian, looking intently at me. "There was a lot of talk about her, you might like to know, all of it complimentary, by people who knew her. Your father didn't have a memorial service for her which everyone says was wrong. Anyway, he's the reason I'm here. You do know that he was found dead in bed two months ago by his cleaning lady?"

Ian paused as if he expected some big reaction from me. I'm sorry. I had none. I had known that some day his excessive drinking would take him, as it had my mother. I never bought a paper and so, if he had had an obituary, I supposed he would have for the artist he had been, I hadn't seen it.

"You came here to tell me that?" I asked, puzzled.

"Well, you didn't respond to the notices in the papers," Ian said, still staring at me, making me feel most uncomfortable. "My father is a lawyer. You should remember that. He is your father's trustee. Though it's mostly debts that have to be paid off by his estate, there is a little money left to be divided between his, his children."

I stared at him. Dad left me money? He'd always promised that his 'pennies' would promote kennels and cats' homes after his death.

"Is it worth the trip?" I asked, thinking of how much Dad had gone through, how he had been such a spendthrift, with virtually no income the last few years.

He raised an eyebrow to me and looked at the still interested Edna.

"I mean," I said. "If it's a couple of hundred, it's not worth my while to take time off or pay for a bus ticket and hotel for Grace and me."

Ian frowned at me, pushing the coffee away. "Who's Grace?" he asked.

Just then, one of my tables needed service and I had to hustle away. More people came in. Suddenly we were very busy for a short while. When I looked back at the counter, Ian was gone.

"I rang it through for you, Angie," said Edna, smirking. "Left you a twenty for a cup of coffee. I put it straight into the jar." The tips' jar, she meant, to be shared out between all the waitresses. "He says he'll be waiting for you out there," she pointed to the small parking lot beside the diner. "Boy, some girls have all the luck."

V. ENTRÉE

Eva led me downstairs as the thought that other people were going to see me as a woman pierced my brain and I was suddenly terrified. I might have fallen down the stairs as she pulled on me, my skirts swirled softly, enticingly, about my stockinged legs.

Dad came round the corner, looked up the stairs at me, frowned and said, "Who's this?" while I was dieing of fright.

"This is Jessica, a friend of mine," said Eva lightly. "Ian and Gordon Pennington are coming over for us in a few minutes."

"Oh," said Dad, looking at me. "Pretty little thing, aren't you? Can't expect anything else from Ian's pop-sies, can we?"

I was blushing with embarrassment. My own father didn't recognize me at all!

"Come and talk to my father, Jessica," said Eva sweetly. "He's a nice old man, really. A dirty-minded, old man, I must admit. But he's harmless."

My father leered at me, going into his disgusting act as the old lecher. I had seen the act before when Eva had brought her friends over. Now he was directing his lecherous asides at me and I was supposed to be femininely amused! I wasn't. I was appalled that he couldn't see that he was talking to his own son about getting into 'her' panties later that night.

We were saved more disgusting conversation by Ian's call on his cellphone that he and Gordon were turning into our driveway. Eva stood up, kissed Dad and indicated to me that I had to do the same. It was sickening as I left lipstick marks on my father's cheek. He squeezed my waist and assured me that if Ian wasn't up to the job, I was welcome back at Walton Place, the fanciful name he'd given to our house, anytime.

So, indignant, overheated, frightened and trembling, I followed Eva out of the main door, my dress flickering about me, to meet our 'dates' for the evening.

But in getting away from Dad, I hadn't thought about what I was getting into.

Suddenly there was Ian Pennington and his face kind of lit up when he saw me. "This is my very na\ve cousin, Jessica," smirked Eva as she flounced over to Gordon. I remained stunned in terror as my worst fears were realized. Ian Pennington was smiling at me as if I really was a girl.

"This is Ian," Eva went on. "And this is Gordon. He's mine and Ian's yours. Be nice to Jessica, Ian. She hasn't worn a dress or heels in ages. I don't think she's ever been to a dance with a boy partner. She was always the 'boy' in dancing classes, she was telling me."

Ian looked down at me. I'm sure he could see how much I was blushing. The cooler air rushed about my legs, reminding me that I was standing in front of two boys who must have seen me at school sometimes. I was standing in front of them in a pink, femmy, frilly dress, however, my face made up and my hair curled like a girl's.

"I promise you, Jessica," said Ian with a smile, "that I will be nice to you tonight." He put his arm about my waist. He was taller than me but his dark suit, his blue shirt and blue tie made him look quite slim and sinewy. I jumped in fright at his touch and he noticed right away. He took my soft hand in his hard, rough one. I was reminded that here was a man who was long out of school, working hard on the land, and very successful at everything he did from training horses to farming.

I almost melted as I teetered in high heels, the dress swirling about my bare-feeling legs, along the short space of the driveway to the Mercedes sedan. "Out to impress you," laughed Ian as he held the door for me. I

got in daintily, my heart thudding in my chest. I sat, smoothed my skirts under me, and lifted my stockinged legs into the car, just as Eva had had me practise in the bedroom. I felt so awful. It wasn't like fancy dress, as Eva had said it would be. This was arousing and embarrassing. I felt idiotic but, at the same time, I liked the way I was fooling Ian and Gordon.

I felt a sickness coming on as I saw Ian looking at my legs as I rustled and crossed them in the back seat of the car as Eva had said I should. Ian smiled at me again, showing off his nice, straight, white teeth. I had heard him described often as handsome and, close to, I could understand why. His blue eyes were large and dominating but nothing about him was gross or over-exaggerated.

He had a strong chin, a straight nose and the set of his eyes was just right for symmetry. I supposed that a girl should like a guy like that, with short, dark, wavy hair, parted to one side. Ian caught me looking at him. I hastily looked away, flushing again, as he smiled at me from the front seat where he sat with his brother, the driver.

Eva squeezed my hand beside her and ran her stockinged leg against mine, sending shivers through me. She kept up a long, detailed conversation with Gordon about what he had done all day and how she had missed him.

Ian was out in a flash in the Bingham Ballroom parking lot. He helped me out of the car while I shivered and shuddered all over as I saw all the prettily-dressed girls. They chattered volubly, flooding up to the Ballroom entrance with their dates, so many men

in well-cut dark suits, unlike the motley of colors we girls wore.

Ian took my hand and tucked it under his arm as the 'other' girls did with their dates. The pressure of his arm moved me forward. I heard the click of my heels on the pathway as we joined the crowd heading to the entrance.

"You're Eva's cousin," Ian said, smiling as the wind rustled my skirts and blew my hair across my face, suffusing me with feminine feelings.

I nodded. I had to speak and so I tried, in my fake upper class accent, as softly as I could, in the high register Eva had told me would work. "Well, we call ourselves cousins," I said, "but the connection is four generations back."

I waited. Ian nodded and said, "I wish I could say the same about Gordie and me." He totally accepted my voice! He didn't immediately haul me to one side and start a confrontation with Eva about me.

Instead, Ian greeted several people in the line. Some I recognized, people from school, but no-one who was a close friend.

We were swept into the Ballroom which was packed, the floor already covered with hundreds of dancers. We had to stop many times so that Ian could chat to people and introduce me. "Charmed, I'm sure," I learned to say many times, as I let my feminine hand and its long pink nails hang limply in the grip of many men, most of whom I knew by name. Those introductions made my knees shake but no-one said a thing to me about being Nicholas in a dress. It was quite exciting after a while.

Ian steered me expertly through the crowd as I felt so weird. Everyone seemed to think I was a girl! I was glad that they did but I shouldn't be feeling as I did, I thought in dismay, glad to be accepted and acknowledged as female. Ian had a table on the first tier, separating us from the dance floor. He held my chair, took my wrap and asked me if I would like a martini to drink.

Eva arrived at that moment and cut him off there. "Jessica doesn't drink alcohol," she said with a laugh, Gordon's hand about her waist. "Just orange juice for her," she told Ian who looked at me, a little startled. He didn't know that her last instruction to me was to take the tiniest sips and make one last all evening. She did not want me going to the bathroom more than was absolutely necessary, and she didn't want me drunk.

"We're dancing," said Eva, taking Gordon's hand after dumping her purse on the table next to mine.

"Would you like to dance?" asked Ian politely with a smile, holding his hand out to me as I had done to many a girl in my time. How could I say No? With my heart a-flutter and my legs wobbling, I held onto his hand as he led me out onto the floor just as the band slowed down to a waltz. I knew it would be terrible and horrible. I couldn't dance with a man. It was a disgusting thought to even think so. I was in a dress, for goodness sake. I was on stilt-like high heels and my hair was flowing about my partly bare shoulders.

But it wasn't bad at all. Ian held me firmly and directed me the same way. My feet, even in high heels, naturally moved out of his way as I felt his legs moving against my thighs through my swishing dress. It was terrifying to have to surrender control and dance backwards most of the time but Ian's hand on my back was

so reassuring as he directed me through the huge amounts of traffic on the floor.

“That was great,” Ian said, looking down at me and keeping his arm about my waist, rocking me a little so that my dress, my dress (!), sent cascades of strange emotions through me, none of them unpleasant. “You really must be a great dancer to be able to stay out of the way of my feet.”

“I think it’s you,” I said timidly, looking him in the eye as I was supposed to, but having to shake my hair back into place and feeling my earrings pinching me. “I thought it would be terrible to dance backwards.”

The band began again. Ian swept me off into several numbers in a row, including a couple of rockers in which we did the old twist, which he knew, and some of the new moves that I had learned dancing with girls at school. I felt such a fool but he was eager and paid me so many compliments about being a great dancer. I felt very girlish as my skirts swirled airily until he put his arm about me and demanded that we rest. My feet were hurting me so that I didn’t mind.

We got back to our table and Eva’s purse and her wrap were gone. A photographer came weaving through the crowd taking pictures along with someone else who was writing down the names of people whose pictures the cameraman took.

“Mr. Ian Pennington,” said the writer in a dark, rumpled suit as the cameraman smiled at me as I sat with my orange juice. “But I don’t know the young lady.”

“Jessica Walton,” said Ian, his mouth becoming a thin, firm line as he spoke. “A cousin of Eva Walton,

whom you know well. Get it right this time, Dan. I expect to see that apology in the next *Post* by the way."

"Oh, you will, you will," said the writer, edging away from us as the cameramen took several more pictures of us.

"What was that?" I asked as Ian stared moodily after them as they went on to another table.

"You didn't see the *Post*, our local rag, today?" Ian asked, turning his attention to me, taking my hand in his. I felt so guilty that he should do that and think I wanted him to do it, which I did. "They printed an article today on Gordon and me and they were also supposed to have the Anderson brothers in it as well. They garbled it all up and had some guff that I was supposed to have said but was really said by Ian Anderson, not me.

"It really upset Cynthia Moore, she's the blonde on Jeff Brady's arm over there, and whom I was supposed to be bringing tonight. I really don't care now though," he squeezed my hand and I felt my throat get dry. It was hard to swallow, "because I got the best of the deal getting to bring you here.

"Anyway, the *Post* will retract the article tomorrow and reprint the truth. There's also bound to be pictures of all the leading lights of Moston here tonight to show how charitable we are. Your picture will be there for sure. You saw how that cameraman kept taking your picture. You're the most beautiful girl here tonight and here come the vultures all wanting to dance with you."

Ian was right. All his friends came to our table. I wasn't off the floor for the next hour or so as men loved, it seemed, to hold me close, pressing my fake boobs into them, my skirts rustling and exciting me as

they whirled me in various personal moves on the dance floor. I wobbled a few times but didn't fall, finding that a smile and an 'Oops, my fault' went a long way.

I enjoyed myself, particularly when Ian cut in and danced with me. In the last dance before they took a buffet intermission, the waltz was very slow. Ian took my arms and put them about his neck, both of his arms about my waist, pulling me tight to him. My head was on his shoulder, just like other girls and guys were doing. I went rigid with shock as I remembered who I was. I felt my stockings tug on my garters as he hugged me and we swayed together.

"Jessica," he whispered. I raised my madeup face to him and he lowered his head, gently kissing my pink-painted lips. I didn't know what to do as fright coursed through my body. A man was kissing me. Me! Another man! And it wasn't just any man. It was Ian Pennington! I felt myself tingling and breaking out in goose bumps all over as his warm, dry lips took possession of mine, covered with pink lipstick. I was so stiff that I couldn't move. I felt his hand on my bra as he pushed me gently forward.

The flash of a light bulb broke us apart. "Damn!" Ian snarled as, when I could see again, I saw the grinning photographer from the 'local rag' disappearing towards the main exit. I trembled as I realized what I had done, what I was still doing with my arms about Ian's neck.

"I shouldn't have done that," Ian said, as I swayed, my body stiff against his, my skirts swirling. I felt so strange and girlish that I wanted to run from the floor but his arms restrained me like bands of iron. "But you smell so sweetly and look so beautiful, Jessica. I've

been wanting to taste those luscious lips of yours from the moment I first saw you. If you don't want me to do it again, you only have to say so."

I didn't say so. I was terrified. My senses were reeling far too much for me to even risk a squeak which would have certainly given me away. He kissed me again and I really was weak at the knees. I don't recall kissing a girl had ever ravaged my emotions as much as letting Ian kiss me did.

The break started. We looked at each other, me openly shivering.

"I don't want to share you with my friends," said Ian thickly. "Besides, it just gets boozy now. There's usually at least one fight that they take outside to the parking lot. How about we go for a little drive and find out a little more about each other?"

"No car," I breathed at last, my waist tight and hurting.

He grinned. "My Aston Martin is outside. Gordie picked me up here and we drove over to your place."

"You-You had this all p-planned," I whispered, realizing we were still standing there with no band playing, lots of people milling about, our arms about each other.

"I didn't know what to expect," Ian said, hugging me tightly. "Well, I did see you once over at Walton Place. You didn't see me?" I flushed at that, thinking of the falsetto voice I had been singing in and wondered why he didn't mention it. "Now I've seen you again and have danced with you. I want to know more about you. Why has Eva never mentioned you before? Is she jealous of someone as beautiful as you?"

I recalled what I was doing with Ian, what Eva wanted me to be doing with him, and what she wanted photographs for. She wouldn't have paid the newspaper photographer to take pictures of Ian and me, would she? I knew the answer to my own question. She would have. I had to leave, I thought in a panic. I had to find Eva and let her know how wrong she was about Ian.

"Let's go," I said, breaking free of him and swishing for my purse and wrap. One look at the smile on his face as Ian put his arm possessively about my tightly constricted waist told me that he had misinterpreted me. I saw smiles on the faces of people I had been introduced to as Jessica, knowing smiles, as I minced out of the dance as Ian's girl. I only hoped that my sister hadn't been badmouthing him to the *Post*. That would be terrible for both of us and I was not going to go down alone.

Ian took me over to his sports car and helped me get in. He had the top down as it was a warm night. I could just imagine my father saying, "There goes Ian and his blonde popsy," as we roared off into the night.

VI. A SECOND ENTRÉE

I slipped out of the back door and was gone through the streets of Lower Gunning before Ian could have found me. He couldn't have known that I had been paid that day. I took my share out of the tips can when no-one was looking and I was gone from Jim's Diner.

Ian must have tracked me down because I used the Angie Nicholson identity. It must have been that. At

my next job, I was Jessica Freeman, a nice touch of irony I thought, in a rough dive in the Inner Harbour district where the manager, Toby, kept complaining to me about not dressing sexily enough. He wanted cleavage and I refused politely. "If you weren't so good at your job," he grouched, as I pitched beer to four and five tables at a time, really hustling for sales commissions and tips, "you'd a-been outa here last week."

Foolishly, I worked late one weekend, six months after Jim's Diner. I say foolishly because the moment I left the Flamingo Bar I knew I was being followed. Sheer terror went through me as I sped as fast as my heels would let me through Dickens Street,

Martins Avenue, and through Harbour Square, full of bars and late night rowdy drinkers but he was still behind me as I turned onto Eighth and the Low Bridge, a short trip into Lower Gunning proper.

I heard him running after me and stories of women being raped flooded my consciousness. I kicked off my heels, picked them up and started running as fast as my skirt would let me. My earrings careered about my bare neck and I felt my carefully pinned back hair starting to come loose.

"Jessica!" someone yelled from behind me. "Jessica, slow down. It's only me, Ian Pennington."

I stopped at the end of the bridge. Ian came jogging up to me in his nice suit, white shirt, and fancy tie. He had a cellphone in his hand, telling someone where he was.

"This time you didn't come in," I said, breathing hard. "You just waited till I left and followed me."

Ian nodded taking in my heaving chest, the blouse sticking to me and my fake boobies, my skirt torn a lit-

tle, my purse across my shoulder, my hair wild now instead of being pinned back. I hit him with my high-heeled shoe out of frustration and anger.

“What was that for?” Ian asked in bewilderment.

“For scaring the living daylights out of me,” I screamed at him, still breathing hard as a sleek, dark, Mercedes sedan came across the narrow bridge. “Do you know how many girls have been stalked and raped in this area over the years?”

“Then why are you walking through it?” Ian Pennington asked angrily. “Besides, you’re not a girl.”

I should have hit him again. “How nice of you to notice,” I said bitterly, hopping in my ruined panti-hose as I put my high heels back on my feet.

Ian opened the door of the Mercedes. “Get in,” he commanded. I could see by the little light of the few streetlights that his face was quite angry. “We’ll take you home.”

“It’s only just up around the corner now,” I said as I sank back into the luxury of genuine leather coverings. The chauffeur needed me to direct him while Ian sat glumly beside me as we went into a corner of the world I’m sure he’d never seen before.

Ian insisted on accompanying me to my door, up the smelly staircase. There must have been a drunk who’d thrown up there in the stairwell as Ian gagged.

“This is it,” I said, finding my key in my purse. “You can leave now.”

“We have to talk,” Ian said as the door flew open. Maria came out, armed with a baseball bat, her sixteen year old face a mask of determination. She might have

taken Ian's head off if I hadn't stopped her and reassured her that he was with me.

"The Chinos were around earlier," Maria explained. "They were looking for the blonde bimbo," that's what people in our block called me, "to come out and play."

She stared threateningly at Ian as he entered my room and looked about, wooden-faced, at my dump of a place. I paid Maria with my tip money. She went down one floor to the apartment she lived in with her mother. I waited till she called up that she was home and then went in to face down Ian once more.

"Still dressing as a woman," Ian said scornfully, looking at me as I hung my little jacket on the back of the door.

"Shush," I whispered and tiptoed over to look in on Grace. He had followed me and bumped me as I turned away quickly as she sighed in her sleep. He pointed at her questioningly as I motioned him to the 'kitchen' part of our bedsitter.

"Grace Margaret Redford," I whispered to him and his eyes widened as he caught the connections. "My half-sister," I added, as if he wouldn't know that.

"You're her ..." Ian paused and worked out what he wanted to say. "You're raising her?"

"It's that or welfare and she would almost certainly be gone to adoption," I said calmly. "Mom wouldn't give her up and she sort of left her to me. That's why I have to work." I indicated my waitress gear. "If you would just stop coming after me, I'd get by."

"Don't build any fantasies on my coming after you," Ian hissed, trying to control both his face and his level of voice. "It's not because I want you or anything about you. I prefer real girls as I told you once before."

No, I promised my father I would try once more to find you and let you know you have about fifty thousand coming."

"Fifty thousand?" I gasped.

Ian smiled grimly at me, looking me up and down. I was used to men doing that to me now. I was able to steel myself and not look away as he studied my short skirt, my ruined pantyhose and my woman-shaped tush.

"It brought Eva and Bonnie out of the woodwork," Ian said quietly, still staring at me, his eyes flickering over me. I was aware of every feminine fakery I had attached to me, from my panties to my styled, curled, long, blonde hair that I wasn't even trying any more to keep androgynous. Why should I? Everyone around here knew me as Grace's mother anyway.

"They signed the legal releases to get your father's estate wound up but, of course, it needs you to complete the deal," Ian went on, pulling out a thick envelope of papers and showed me which documents I had to sign. "Use your real name," he added with a tight smile as I read the front page in the dim light. "Not Jessica Freeman."

I glanced at him. "I'll use Smith the next time," I said frankly.

Ian then took out a photo of us at the Bingham Ballroom, me in that wonderful pink dress and he in the dark suit. I flushed as it showed us kissing, me clinging to him as if I was in rapture. I hadn't realized what a wonderful figure I had had then, either, in all my female padding, my cleavage seeming so real.

"You'd be found," Ian said thickly. "No matter what it was that you were calling yourself. You're too

striking a blonde not to be noticed, Miss Smith. As if you didn't know."

"Where did this money come from?" I asked in bewilderment. I knew my father had mortgaged our home to the hilt and had thought life insurance a large waste of money.

"Jane Elgart found a treasure trove of your father's paintings in the studio," Ian said, his eyes still studying me, examining my femininely styled hair in detail. "She saw Preston before he died and got him to sign his new works. She said he was always like that, not signing anything until he had a sale or an exhibition. She was afraid there'd be a lot of unsigned work after he died and there were a few. I actually bought some of his new work myself. Really, they're sure to grow in value in the future."

I signed in all the right places, my hand trembling. I bit my tongue and said nothing of his Philistine values. It was just like him, I thought miserably, to buy my father's work because they would accrue in value now that the artist was dead. My acrylic nails were long gone. My own nails were shorter but I had filed them femininely and kept them clean. I saw him looking at them as I shakily handed back the papers.

"Thank you, Good Samaritan," I murmured nervously.

Ian nodded, scowled, and pocketed the papers. "It will take a while yet," he said. Then he blurted out, "Couldn't you have got a job as a waiter, at least?"

"I tried when I got to town after I found Mom," I said. "I couldn't get hired unless I cut my hair. I was going to do it when I got the job at Turo's."

“They miss you there,” Ian said quietly. “I’ve been back several times, hoping you’d go back. Maury knows it was my fault, not yours, what happened. He said he still has money of yours that you never collected at the end. If I found you, I was to say that you could come back any time.”

That shook me. Ian Pennington had covered for me. I hadn’t thought that he would, not after what there was between us and after hearing what he was saying.

“Let my dad’s office know if you change your address,” Ian said as he handed me a business card for his father’s law office. “They’ll make sure you get the cheque when it’s all settled.”

I stood up and went with him to the door. He looked quizzically at the lock. “This wouldn’t keep anybody out,” Ian said pointedly.

“Well, it’s only until our cheque comes,” I said lightly. “Then maybe I can find a better place and a better job.”

Ian nodded grimly. “Try Turo’s again,” he said. Then he was gone.

I don’t know why but I felt so bereft after I closed the door. I suddenly felt so alone. I found myself actually crying. It was crazy and I didn’t know why. He was ‘that bastard Ian’ but that wasn’t true at all. He was actually a genuinely nice person. He was nice to everyone, even stupid, mixed-up misfits like me.

I had frantically called Eva on Ian’s car phone when he saw my distress. He was not heading back right away to Walton Place. “Call her on Gordie’s phone,”

Ian said. I got through, first to Gordon, and then to Eva.

"You had it wrong," I said breathily. "The *Post* had the wrong story. It wasn't Ian who said anything bad about you. It was a mix-up."

"I know," Eva said and laughed.

"You know?" I asked, stunned. "So it's all off?"

"Of course it is," she laughed. "Has Ian tumbled to your act yet?"

"No," I said shakily and Eva laughed even more.

"Well, just enjoy, little sister, enjoy," she said smugly. "And whatever you do, don't let him get you away from the dance early. You go with him and you'll be signalling him you're going to put out for him. Has he kissed you yet?"

"N-No," I lied.

"Where are you calling me from? Are you in a car?" Eva suddenly wanted to know.

"G-Gotta go," I said, hanging up as I realized where Ian was taking me as he eased into a parking spot, the town spread out before us from the top of the cliff, Moston's version of Lovers' Lane.

He pressed a button and the top of the car started to come up and begin to cover us. I wiggled in my seat as he smiled at me, my fear and embarrassment getting worse and worse. "Oh, Ian, you, you misunderstood me," I whispered, setting back in my seat as he made sure that we were completely covered. Should I get out and start running in my high heels, I thought, panic-stricken.

"Hey, I know what girls think when guys bring them up here," Ian said with a smile. "But most often, it's just for this." He put on the radio, and settled his seat back, showing me how to do mine. "This car is way too uncomfortable to do more, particularly with this gear shift between us. So tell me all about Jessica."

"I'd rather hear about you," I murmured as Ian leaned over to me, taking my hand in his and began kissing it. I was rigid in embarrassment as my dress rustled as I moved to get away from him.

"I'm not a person to be scared of," Ian said. He smiled and suddenly put up his seat. "And I'm going to prove it by taking you home early."

He drove me back very sedately to Walton Place and parked right outside my front door, as my heart was going like a trip hammer again. In one way I was relieved that Ian was dumping me. In another, I felt strangely disappointed. I remembered too, my nerves in a frantic mess, what Eva had said to me earlier about the goodnight kiss. Ian came round the car and helped me out, taking my key from my quivering hand, his arm about me as he escorted me to my door, the noise of music within reaching us through the closed door.

"Thank you for a lovely evening," I said anxiously, hardly able to look at him as he pushed open the front door. He came in with me, as we both heard the television blaring away. My father was on the couch, passed out, liquor bottles everywhere, oblivious to the TV, which Ian mercifully turned off.

"You won't have seen this before," Ian said with a frown, "but Eva's dad gets this way sometimes." I would have corrected him but I couldn't. "Let's get him to his bed." He picked Dad up and took him off as I scurried about and cleaned up the living room.

I sprayed the air and turned on the air conditioner. It was much more pleasant when Ian finally came back. "It was hard to get him changed for bed," he said, sitting on the long sofa, opposite where Dad had been.

"C-Can I get you a drink?" I asked nervously.

"I think so," Ian said with a smile as I looked nervously at the kitchen. "I could sure use a Scotch about now but I don't think there's anything alcoholic in the place." He settled for a coke. I poured it into a glass with ice, shivering as I bent down as Eva told me I should, my skirts flaring out about me, putting the drink in front of him.

"Come here," Ian said as I nervously fluttered about, not knowing quite what to do. He patted the sofa beside him. I nervously sat beside him as he took off his jacket. I knew he was going to kiss me, give me my goodnight kiss as Eva had called it. I shuddered all over as he lifted his arm and hugged me closer to him.

"Jessica, Jessica," Ian whispered. I felt myself almost melting into him as he took my hand in one of his, his arm about me. He kissed me full on the lips. I quaked as I felt the same strange emotions flooding through me again. He parted my lips with his tongue and we were French kissing. He explored my mouth, something I had always done with girls who would let me. Now I was on the receiving end and it was incredibly different.

I should have pulled away right then and told Ian I wasn't a girl like that but words failed me, particularly as I enjoyed his kissing me. He put my arm about his neck and increased the pressure on my lips giving me a strange, wonderful pleasure in kissing him. His hand brushed my padded breast which I didn't react to at all. How could I? I felt only the increasing tightness of

my bra and waist cinch as he kissed me again and again on my face, on my neck and most enjoyably on my swollen lips.

Ian pushed me over. I was lying down on my couch and he was on top of me, caressing me in my dress. His hand touched my leg and the edge of my skirt and I nearly jumped a foot in the air. I felt him smile but he didn't stop kissing me and directing me to hug him and squeeze him. He stroked my hair, my dress and then my stockings. When he caressed my soft garter belt, terrified, I felt his lust for me, hard against my petticoats and soft thighs.

We rolled off the sofa onto the carpet, me at first on top of him, relieved, clinging to his mouth with mine, thinking for a moment that I was safe but then he rolled. I was pinned to the carpet, my legs outside his, as he began to kiss my chest and open my dress.

"Ian," I gasped, every sense in me reeling under his frenzied assault. Ian ran his hands over my hips. I almost swooned at the incredibly elated feelings I felt. I writhed under him and that only encouraged him to do it again. He pushed up my dress, tracing my stockings up my thighs, gently caressing the soft skin above my stocking tops. I couldn't help squeezing my legs about his hips, his manhood seeming to explode from his pants.

"No, no," I said weakly as I felt him against my panties. Ian pressed against me. Fully clothed, we made love as a man and woman do. I was the woman and I loved every second of it. I only wished I had been real enough to accommodate him more as he came against my panties. I whimpered and exulted that a man like Ian could find me so desirable.

When Ian was spent, I thought I was safe again. I wanted to enjoy him longer and so I started to kiss him. It seemed to delight him. We rolled again and again, every nerve in my body on extended overload, feeling somehow so womanly, not denying my loving man anything as he undid my dress, my waist cinch and my bra, stroking and stroking me as he buried his tongue so wonderfully in my mouth.

If Ian was disappointed in my lack of breasts, he didn't let on. He rolled and slipped my dress away so that his hands could get more fully onto my hips and legs and little slip. I felt him grow against me and thought he was going to release himself as he had before, but he didn't. When he thrust my panties down, panic set in.

"No, no," I gasped loudly.

"Oh, baby, you can't lead me on like this and then say 'No'," Ian groaned, as his hands were about my panties pressing me passionately into his huge erection. I struggled but he kissed me as I was just holding him. I stupidly kissed him, too, so excited, my own passion rising. He gently rolled me onto my back from my side. He was most eagerly kissing me for the umpteenth time when he discovered what I had in my panties that I shouldn't have.

"What the hell?" Ian gargled, freeing his mouth from mine and looming over me, my legs trapped outside his. Ian was still caressing my stockings as he snarled, "You're a boy, not a girl!"

If I had been close to euphoria only moments before as he treated me as the most desirable woman on the planet, it all changed in a moment. I was on the opposite side of that feeling. I hated myself. I was so

ashamed and tried to stop his hands still playing with my garters and stockings.



"I'm so, so sorry," I said, my feelings distraught, pushing down my dress. "I-I just wanted to help Eva get you back after what you said in the paper."

Ian was stunned. He held me down, pinning my shoulders as he looked me in the face, frowning. A light suddenly went on. "You're Nicholas, the younger brother," he gasped in understanding. "You're the one Eva hates because you have artistic talent like Preston and the girls have none."

I didn't think Eva hated me any more than she hated anyone else. "Let me up," I pleaded. "It's all gone wrong. She's not having this put in the paper tomorrow after all."

"That's what she said?" Ian asked harshly and I nodded weakly. "And you believed her?" he added savagely.

Ian was still very erect as he stared down at me. I could feel him against my stockings. I didn't dare to move for fear of arousing him more.

"You want to be a girl, do you?" Ian asked then and there was something in his tone that frightened me.

"No, no," I began. Suddenly he was kissing me again, gently, and my whole body flared, the deep shame I was feeling mixing with elation, as he kissed me. He stroked my legs and pulled my panties all the way down. I wriggled and writhed but he was far too strong for me. Ian was in the sway of some passion as great as my own.

I felt so guilty, so shamed, as I clung to Ian as he lifted my legs and entered me. I clung to his kiss and caressed his body with my hands as he began to thrust back and forth into me as if I was a woman. He came quickly but I wanted him to go on. I loved it. When he

broke off our kiss, I held onto him and began to kiss his face and neck and chest in thanks for the incredible elation I was feeling.

With an oath, Ian pushed me off him. With more oaths, he pulled out of me and pushed me away from him. He sat up and looked at me in pure hatred. "So, now you're a woman," he said bitterly. "I hope you enjoyed it. If you ever tell anyone what I did to you, I'll nail your drag queen, she-male hide to your front door! You'll be the joke of the whole of Moston."

Ian got up and pulled on his clothes as, whimpering in distress, I tried to get my dress back about me and a pair of panties over my garter belt. I struggled after him as he charged out. I meant to close the door behind him. Suddenly, he whirled around. "By the way," he said. "Thank you for a lovely evening."

Ian put his arms about me and thoroughly kissed me, his tongue so deep and pleasurable in me that I touched ecstasy and shame in the same moment. Ian must have kissed me for five minutes at least until he broke off. He left me gripping the door frame, my hair dishevelled, my makeup a mess and the imprint of his kiss like a brand on my lips. It remained with me, a pleasurable hurt, for over a week.

VII. ENTRÉE: THIRD COURSE

Ian came back, driving the Mercedes by himself the next day, just as I was getting Grace into her push chair to take her to the river to throw stones and run free on the little green space we had in the neighborhood.

“You don’t work on Mondays,” Ian said huskily, his eyes widening as he saw me in jeans, loose sweater, my face devoid of makeup, my hair controlled by a rubber band, old runners on my feet.

“Who dat?” asked Grace, pointing and grinning at Ian in his immaculate suit and camelhair overcoat.

“Ian, darling,” I said, flushing as I thought how that must sound.

So Ian became Yan to Grace. I took him up on his offer to take us over to Westleigh and the wading pool and swings in the huge park there.

“I’ve never seen you look so boyish before,” Ian said, his tone quite clipped as we got into the car. Grace smiled and babbled at us both from a child’s car seat I hadn’t seen there before.

“I only wear drag to work,” I said, smiling at him, crossing my legs in my jeans, the gesture coming so easily to me. He winced as he looked at me and the feminine way I sat in the front seat of his car.

That seemed to help Ian, however, to come straight to the point. “I talked to my father this morning,” he said quickly, assuredly. “He agreed with me that the firm could advance you half of the money, without interest, from your father’s will, to get you out of that rathole you’re currently living in.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said flippantly. Ian snorted in exasperation. He took Grace out of the children’s car seat. He took her over to the swings as I got to watch her for once and listen to her squeal with enjoyment as she ran about on the grass, yelling, “Find me, Yan. Find me!” She hid behind thin saplings of the ‘forest’ as she knowingly called the new plantings of Westleigh Park

Ian treated us to lunch. I don't know how often he had been in McDonald's before but not often with a person like me. Our server hesitated, looked at my nails, smiled and called me 'miss' which caused Ian to hold his breath all the way back to our table next to the children's playpen. Grace tried to bury herself in the collection of plastic balls. She surfaced for a drink and a bite or two of her burger. Then, she was back jumping up and down in excitement as some older girls pulled her in to 'swim' and play.

"She's fantastic," Ian said, watching her ordering other kids about who listened to her not at all. "I can see why you couldn't give her up." He frowned and looked at me. "You must get that a lot, the reaction of our server."

I nodded, but I didn't really. Most people called me 'miss' however I was dressed, with and without makeup. "If I wear a bra, I don't," I answered and had to smile as Ian winced again. His everyday thoughts were clearly not like mine. He didn't have to decide what gender he wanted to be day by day. He was a man. Well, I was, too. Sort of.

I kept trying to give Ian opportunities to leave now he'd brought us the promise of money. He didn't though. He wouldn't let me wake Grace as she napped in his car. We sat uncomfortably apart as we talked about nothing at all, touching on all things Moston. He got the true story about how I had become a waitress.

"I don't think you'll ever be a rock star," Ian said to me as Grace awoke and I put her to the blanket I had set out to change her. "More like a diva I would think."

I had to laugh at that one and Grace joined in too. She wanted to throw her rocks then. Ian could skip

stones as I never could. I threw a few stones for Grace but he threw them much further.

"I can't believe it," Ian said to me as Grace started building a dam on the grass. He skimmed a flat rock twenty bounces across the water. "Do you know that you even throw like a girl?"

"Oh, now that hurts," I said, in most accented and lilting feminine tones, and we both burst out laughing together.

Ian wanted to treat us to supper but he agreed that we should change, back at my room, first. "I think I have a tie somewhere," I said seriously and was rewarded by having him stagger as if he had been punched. I let him down easily. "You weren't thinking that way, were you?"

"No," Ian agreed as he concentrated on driving carefully. "I was thinking of you as I first saw you, pretty in pink."

"Oh, yes," I agreed. "Eva's creation. No, I'm afraid that I only have variations on what I wore yesterday if you want me in drag, dressed as a woman, that is." I reddened as he looked at me sharply.

"I thought," Ian began and stopped. "Do you have a boy friend?" he asked. "Have you ever had a boy friend besides me?"

I shook my head. "You were my one and only," I said lightly. "I swore I'd never ... well, you can guess what I swore. I haven't got my life quite back together yet but, with Dad's money and a mannish haircut ... You know, I don't understand that. Dad had nothing but debts. And he was far too drunk most of the time to be painting. So where did this money really come from that I'm inheriting?"

Ian didn't answer as we approached my rooming house. He was looking at the people on the street and I could sense his apprehension. As we sat in the car, a number of sullen teenagers and young men were watching us. 'Chinos', Maria had called them, one of the local gangs, our block a sort of meeting place for them lately.

Ian wouldn't set us down there. He drove us off despite my protests and found a mall in a better neighborhood, Colborn. He took us into a small restaurant that had pizza for Grace, fishes in aquaria that absorbed her for minutes at a time, and crayons and coloring material to keep her busy.

"You know, I do owe you the deepest apology for what I did to you," Ian said after a long, moody silence, his voice clipped and heartfelt. "I've been trying to find the right time to say it. I know this isn't it but I have to get this off my chest. I'm sorry for what I said to you after, after, I took you as, as a woman. What I said to you at Turo's, as well. I can't believe how awful I have been to you, so condescending and bitter, when, when, it was my fault all of it."

"You shouldn't apologize," I said slowly, looking at his ravaged expression. "As I recall, I could have stopped at any time. Even when you did stop, wasn't I the one trying to get you to keep on going?"

That shook him. I don't think he remembered it quite the way I did. "But I raped you," Ian whispered, his face haunted, and I finally knew why he had kept coming after me. He felt as guilty as I did about our one night stand.

"If you did, I loved every second of it," I said, knowing that without makeup, I was bright red. "No, no jokes. You didn't rape Jessica back then. She was ev-

ery bit into the moment as you were. But we both know now that it will never happen again." Then I thought about it. "You don't think that that one incident means you're gay, do you?"

Ian was startled. "No, of course not," he snapped.

"Good," I said, fighting and succeeding to control my racing pulse and seething emotions. "Because I think that way too. It was just one incident. If I succumbed to the pressure of the moment, it doesn't mean I'll ever be so stupid as to be Jessica ever again."

"Me neither," Ian added fervently with a shudder. "I won't be that stupid as I was, I mean." He didn't tell me that I was being Jessica every day at work, wasn't I?

We wandered through the mall, most businesses closed. I was able to gain a measure of self control, to be numb again. But Grace had to have a ride on the horse first. It was time then to take her home for bed. When she got tired, she wanted Yan to carry her to the car. Ian was a good sport and did it, driving us back to my apartment.

There were no Chinos in sight as we went up the smelly staircase. Grace was revived by her bath, her play and reading time. She gave Yan her favorite book to read before announcing she was tired. She kissed Ian goodnight and gave him a bright smile before she kissed me. "Night, mommy," she said with a giggle. Sometimes she called me that when we were around other kids a lot, listening to them. But I was teaching her to say Nick or Nicky.

"She calls you Mommy," said Ian in disbelief, a cup of coffee suspended in front of him.

"Only when she's joking," I said lightly, blushing again. "It comes when she's around other kids a lot and

she hears them using the word. You'd better get down and check out your car," I added. "Really, this is a bad place for crime."

My words were drowned out by the sudden noise of a siren. Ian dashed downstairs and found his lovely car badly scratched by thwarted thieves who hadn't been able to get into it.

"Oh, Ian, I'm so sorry. Your lovely car!" I said as he touched the deep scar in the passenger door.

His siren had brought more people out onto the street. "Hey, man," said one punk from across the street. "Get your car outta here and leave our women alone."

Ian looked at his car, at the punk, and then at me. "Go pack everything you want to take," he said, his voice strong and fierce. "Bring Grace down and let's get out of here. Don't worry about the car. You can't stay one more night in this place, Jessica," he actually named me, something he'd avoided, sending a spasm of delight through me, "not with the locks you have. Don't worry about a job and an apartment. I'll find both for you and Grace in the next few days. Maybe then I won't feel so guilty any more."

VII. DESSERT

I told Eva on the following day after making love to Ian that it went just as she had predicted with him. He brought me home, I told her with a blush, gave me a light kiss at the door and that was that. The *Post* told a different story with pictures of us in quite a clinch, my mouth stuck to his as I appeared to be draped about his neck.

Eva teased me unmercifully all night and the next day. She refused my demand for my money. I'd checked my room and the drawer where I'd put my jeans and the downpayment of five hundred. It was gone as well. Eva said to keep the clothing I had worn. She was never going to use it again. I could, though, she said, laughing at me. I stored the stuff in my suitcase under some shirts and socks.

Dad stared at me as I berated Eva in front of him for stealing my money. "What have you done to your eyebrows?" he asked. "And your hair?" He looked at me very thoughtfully. "You're not turning into a nancy boy, are you? Jeez, I think you are. That Jessica girl who was here last night. She was you, wasn't she?"

What could I do? I denied it. Dad called me a liar, told me I could pack up my panties and get out of his house. I stomped off to the pub where I got the same treatment. "Gosh, kid, what did you do to your eyebrows?" was the mildest thing anyone said to me.

My clothes were packed in two suitcases and on the front step when I arrived at home that night. That settled it. I left. It took me nearly all night to carry the two bags to the station but I was on the first train to town the next morning and searching for Mom and Douglas Redford by afternoon.

I finally awoke and got out of bed in my pyjamas, restless as could be as I realized where I was, in Ian Pennington's home. I panicked for a moment when I saw the empty cot in the adjoining room but Ian came in and stared at my hair in its pigtails and pins.

“Grace is downstairs with Mrs Reece, my house-keeper,” he said. We had driven almost all night as Ian insisted that I would only be safe in his house at Longview. I had lain Grace down in a crib he said that he and Gordon had slept in. I was given the adjoining third floor room where their nanny had slept. His parents were in the South of France, Ian said. Gordon was riding in Italy for the next two weeks at least. “You met Mrs Reece’s husband, Charley, my chauffeur and auto mechanic. He’s got the Mercedes in for repairs this morning. Do you have a driving licence?”

“Only as Nicholas Walton,” I said.

Ian grimaced. “We need to get you one as Jessica Freeman which is the name I’ve given to my staff for you.”

“I’m to be a woman then?” I asked, staring at him, knowing how I looked in my pyjamas.

He flushed. “You are,” Ian said, not looking at me. “You know you look like a girl even in pyjamas like that. Why don’t you just become a woman full time?”

I had asked myself that question many times, wondering what kind of person I was. But I didn’t feel like a woman. As a waitress, I always felt like a man in a woman’s skirt and underthings. Except for that one night with Ian, I hadn’t felt like a woman, ever. But I could feel that emotion returning as Ian looked at me. There was no way I could stay in his house and have him look at me, all of the time, like that.

“I had to get you out of that place,” Ian said and I agreed. Maria had said that the Chinos’ leader, Ricardo, fancied me and I should think of carrying protection. That had made my insides curl to think what it

would be like if he got me alone. Maria had meant I should think of carrying a knife or gun.

But had I now jumped right from the frying pan into the fire? The trouble was that I didn't know what it was I was doing any more. Once I had had plans to be an artist, go to art school, be like my father, but the breakup of my parents ended that. I had just been marking time when Eva had made her money offer. I had been drifting again over the last years with Mom and Grace. Did I really want to be a woman full time? In Ian's house in Moston, it appeared that I wasn't going to be given a choice.

I didn't dress in a skirt, though, as I combed out my hair and put on female underclothes, including my gel-filled bra. With a sweater and jeans, a little makeup about my eyes, earrings and lipstick, I looked like a million other women, or so I thought, as I skipped down in my low heels to join breakfast in the kitchen of Ian's enormous house.

Mrs. Reece was a sharp, birdlike, little woman who didn't approve of me from the start, though she adored Grace. Ian came in from his study where he was working. He saw how I was dressed, grimaced and asked me if I would go with him to Moston.

"Sure," I said. "Grace loves to ride in cars."

There was an awkward pause for a moment. "Could she stay with Mrs Reece today?" asked Ian. "I've been talking to Cynthia and she says she'll meet us for lunch. We can take the Aston Martin and be there in fifteen minutes."

"Who's Cynthia?" I asked, puzzled.

"Cynthia Moore is my fiancée," Ian said easily while, behind him, Mrs Reece's eyes gleamed as she

gave me a 'So there' kind of look. "She's in real estate ..."

"I'm not going to live in Moston," I said flatly. I don't know why but the idea that Ian had a fiancée made my nerves go on edge. "I'm only here to pick up a cheque."

"Cynthia knows the right people to find a place for you and Grace," Ian said firmly.

I would have to be away from Grace. She was used to babysitters but I usually had her through the morning, the most active part of her day, through lunch, and, when I could work breaks at the Flamingo Bar, I would get home and put her to bed which I did most nights of the week. I set up a routine for the babysitters and they seemed pleased to follow it. I wondered how Mrs Reece would follow a schedule that I set out for her.

In the end, Ian relented. "I'll cancel it with Cindy," he said, obviously using his pet name for her. "Expect her on the weekend, though, Mrs Reece. I have theater tickets for Saturday and we'll be going up to town in the afternoon." He turned to me. "We should take Grace shopping this afternoon, shouldn't we? And you need a new wardrobe."

Ian invited me into his study to talk about the 'business' we had between us. Grace became clingy, as I started to move off, so I picked her up and took her with me, ignoring Mrs Reece's assertions that she could manage. Ian looked back at the Reece woman in the doorway, his glance warning me that she was listening avidly.

"Here's the letter I sent my father this morning," Ian said easily. "I sent him your documents by courier.

I'd like you to stay here until my father is here to discuss the terms of the will with you." Ian droned on as Grace played with his pens and some scrap paper. Mrs Reece drifted away, satisfied I was some sort of client, I suppose.

That, of course, was not why I was so still and reserved as I sat and listened to Ian. My attention was fully taken by the pictures he had on his walls. Both were signed by my father and I knew them well. The red and orange acrylics of the picture on the left behind his desk hinted at a landscape but were really an intense layering of paint that had been inspired by a broken rock formation. So was the second, on the right, though its green and blue tones hinted at a portrait though it was also inspired by the same formation. I knew 'Desperation' and 'Resolution' well. I wondered where the third of the trio, 'Reconciliation' was. I had considered it the best of the three when I had painted them.

VIII. THE CHEESE PLATE

That afternoon went by as every afternoon that week, organized by Ian, went by. We shopped. Ian, I discovered by week's end, seemed determined to buy me every pretty piece of feminine lingerie and every stylish dress and outfit in town. I'm sure he wanted to see them on me as my wardrobe filled, the drawers in my room became overloaded, and Mrs Reece's tight-lipped smile became more and more pronounced.

With all the finery for me and, to a lesser extent, Grace, it would have been churlish of me not to dress

for dinner after a tired Grace had wormed stories out of both of us before going to sleep.

To supper, I wore my feminine padding and a pink blouse and maroon, pleated skirt and burgundy low heels and stockings. I put makeup on my face, still using the lessons I had been given by Eva, except that I used one of Mom's red lipsticks, a Ravishing Red that she'd asked for and I'd bought her but she'd never used. I followed what Eva had shown me to do, putting on Coty Lemon perfume, before I questioned myself as to why I was doing it.

I had expected Mrs Reece to be there for supper with us. Ian was surprised at my query. "Her day ends at six," he said. "She left us a casserole here and fresh bread." He opened a bottle of wine and poured two glasses.

"What shall we drink to?" he asked with a tight-lipped smile.

"World peace," I joked as Ian held a chair for me. I loved the little touches he had made all day, treating me as if I was really a woman, though he, of course, knew differently. I set the wine down before I smoothed my skirt beneath me.

Ian smiled and sat opposite me. "World peace," he said gravely. "And a new start for you and Grace."

"A new start," I agreed and sipped my cold, white wine. It was delicious. I could definitely get used to living like this, I thought, thinking back on the afternoon and how friendly everyone had been as Ian had had me try on so many beautiful female dresses. His compliments and those of the salesgirls who served me made me quiver with such strange emotions. It was so nice to be complimented and admired, even though it

was all wrong and I knew I was wrong to enjoy it even a little bit.

I wanted jeans and sweaters but it was his money. So, I ended up with very feminine dresses and 'sexy' outfits. Well, I could sell them later, I thought, and get something more unisex but Ian was determined to buy me a complete female wardrobe.

He insisted I watch some television with him after we had put the dishes in the dishwasher. "Grace gets up very early," I protested.

"One episode of *The Office* won't deprive you of your beauty sleep," Ian said lightly. I followed him into his living room, sitting on the sofa opposite him. He started a tape of the program, getting up and sitting beside me, filling our glasses again.

Ian glanced at me as he sat. I realized how tense he was. I was much more used to my femininity than he was. I slipped off my shoes and tucked my legs underneath myself, trembling at the softness about my legs. I shouldn't embarrass him. I should wear my jeans and no makeup or perfume the rest of the time I was in his house.

"Lovely wine," I said nervously, giving him a little smile. This must be hard for him, I thought, to be with a man in a dress, to make small talk with 'her', just generally not to ask all the questions he might want to ask me about myself, to stay with safe topics. Ian had done really well all through dinner, all day, in fact.

Suddenly, he reached over, took my glass and set it down with his on the coffee table in front of us. I was puzzled for a moment but then Ian took my hand and looked at it hard, at my longer, shaped nails. "You

even have feminine hands," he said, stroking them and I felt a sudden constriction in my chest.



“Ian,” I said shakily. “You, you should sit over on the other sofa.”

“You feel it too,” Ian asked, moving right against me. I put my feet down, preparing to move myself away but Ian put an arm about my shoulders, shocking me. He knew what I was. It wasn’t like when we danced and he had no idea I was a man. No one had held me since Ian had at Walton Place, no one. I wouldn’t let anyone get close. Well, I couldn’t, could I?

“Feel what?” I asked, knowing exactly what he meant as strange emotions swirled through me as he hugged me to him. Wearing a dress with a pleated skirt and hearing the stockings rasp on the hem as I moved made me shudder as I knew what he must be thinking of me. I had wanted him to think of me as a girl, I thought with a shudder.

“I have to know,” Ian murmured. I turned to him, knowing that he was going to kiss me and knowing that I wanted him to, no matter what he thought of me and why he did it. I wanted to be kissed like a girl. I was wearing makeup and perfume in order to please and to fool him with my femininity. I know what he wanted to know but I already knew how I wanted him to make me feel.

Ian was looking at my lips as he pulled me to him. My heart was fluttering just as every woman’s romance novel says that the heroine feels as the hero kisses her. It was marvellous to feel Ian’s lips on mine. I resisted his tongue for just a moment and then gave that up as well as wonderful, elated emotions flooded through me. It was exactly like it had been before. The feelings I called my girlish feelings came to the fore as I leaned back submissively, girlishly, welcoming his mouth on mine. He put his other hand about my waist and drew

me to him, kissing me harder and exploring my mouth again with his. I co-operated with him in every way that I could, running my hands softly through his hair and he became so aroused, so loving.

I was quivering all over as we came up for air, both of us ignoring the program on the television. "Just like last time," Ian murmured, nibbling on my earlobe, making my earring dance delightfully on my neck. "Do you feel the same way?"

I could have lied. Perhaps I should have. But a yearning rose inside me. I liked him holding me. I shivered in excitement at his touch. He repeated his question as he nuzzled my neck and kissed my face.

"Oh yes," I whispered, nodding my head. He took that as permission and climbed on top of me. I wanted him to kiss me. I wanted him to probe my mouth with his tongue. I felt so weak and shivery as he kissed me hard, ignoring that I was a man. I loved him for that. He stroked the skirts of my dress and I didn't stop him at all. I loved the feel of his hands on my stockings even if it was through my dress.

"Oh, Jessica," Ian moaned. "I didn't think I could be so aroused again by you. But I am. Come to bed with me."

I shook under him as I realized what he meant. I couldn't do it. I couldn't let him make love to me again as if I was a woman, could I? Not again. Not now he knew what I was. It would be no passionate accident this time. I would really be letting another man have me as if I was a woman. I would be choosing to be all the things he had called me last time. He ran his hands over my hips as he kissed my neck.

"I-I can't be away from Grace," I whispered, my chest heaving as his hands caressed me. I felt his manhood against me, through my skirt. I felt such thrills, knowing how Ian wanted me. Ian wanted me! I did the only thing that I could, that I wanted to do. "C-Come to my bed and you can leave w-whenever you feel you must."

Ian stood up and pulled me to my feet. He kissed me and hugged me to him, stroking my hair and hugging my body against his. He held my hand as he turned off the television, the lights and led me up to my bedroom.

I had second thoughts as he entered my room, the connecting door to Grace's room still ajar as I had left it. "Put on one of the nighties I bought you," Ian whispered as he took off his shirt and pants.

Shame flooded over me. "Ian," I said helplessly as I saw him getting into my bed and I knew he was naked. "We shouldn't do this. We-we aren't gay, are we?"

Ian laughed quietly. "I'm not," he said, but I heard the note of nervousness in his voice. "Come to bed, woman," he said.

I sat down, shaking with fright, apprehension and distress at what he wanted to do to me. He pulled me into the bed, kissed me and opened my blouse and my skirt. He kissed me gently, caressing me through my feminine underwear. I loved it. I loved the way he made me feel. I could close my eyes and imagine I was really a woman with her boy friend.

Ian took my clothes from me and I didn't object. I couldn't as his soft kisses and gentle caresses of my legs and panties elated me so much. Each of his kisses made me quiver. As he took off my stockings, I began

to tremble under his touches and I couldn't stop. Only snuggling up to him and kissing him made my convulsions ease but he liked me shaking with desire like that. His hands stroked my inside thighs as I drew tighter to him to feel his pleasure.

It didn't take long until I was as naked as Ian and he was on top of me as before. He made love to me and it was as thrilling as I remembered it. I couldn't think as I was engulfed with emotions that seemed like love to me. I wanted to please him in any way that I could. He wanted me to be womanly and so I tried to be his woman. He took me, entering me rather savagely, but I loved the pleasure it gave me as he came with me as he would with a woman. This time, he didn't stop quickly. I kissed and kissed him as I wiggled and wriggled for him to increase his pleasure in taking me.

We lay together after Ian exhausted himself. He kissed and fondled me. I did the same so nervously for him as he played with my hair about my naked body. He played with me, inciting wave after wave of pleasure in me while he moaned and grunted quietly as he made love, penetrating me incessantly.

I kissed his chest and nipples and his abs, when Ian swung me on top of him, but he didn't want me to go lower on him, not then anyway. He planted me firmly on him so that he could caress my hair as I put my legs beside his hips and to let him fill me again. He put a pillow under my back and he came delightfully inside me. He kissed me so hard that he really did bruise my lips as I found out in the morning.

"Now you know why I had to find you, Jessica," Ian whispered, pressing my naked body to him, on top of me again, stroking my legs as I whimpered under him. "After the dance, what we did was the most ex-

cruciating sexual experience of my life. I had to see you again. I've thought of nothing else but making love to you again since you disappeared. I did think I hated you. But every time I look at you, all I can think of is kissing you. Then, when we start kissing, I don't ever want to stop."

"I feel the same," I whispered as he made tender, gentle love to me, pleasuring me until I stiffened too. I was haunted with shame as I clung to my so considerate lover.

"I thought you must want to be a woman," Ian said some time later. "Keeping Grace, the way you have, was a big indication. When I saw you with her, the way you treat her, I knew you really wanted to be a woman, a mother. You would have to become more feminine, sooner or later, wouldn't you, if you wanted to keep her? She's about at the point to start asking questions of you. It's for her, isn't it really, not me, that you must become a woman. I can help you do that."

He was right, I finally admitted it to myself. I had been kidding myself for so long and I shouldn't have. I couldn't have if both ways, not with Grace. I had been thinking that I could. I had been trying to be myself and not Jessica. But Grace did need a 'mommy' and, my senses reeling, I knew that that was what I was to her. I couldn't disappoint her. I was responsible for her.

Ian helped me some more to feel like a woman, made me feel that I could be Grace's mommy, in fact. His kisses and stroking were so enticing, his hands squeezing my hips hard as I raised my legs about his sides and let him into me as a woman could. He pressed down so hard on me that my littler man-thing fluttered against him, and when he touched it, I exploded all over him, to his bewilderment.

“You said you weren’t gay,” Ian said angrily, as I writhed again, gasping at the incredible release I was experiencing.

“Think of it as an extra long clitoris,” I muttered as I clung to him. Ian found an extra gear and ground me beneath him, burying his tongue urgently in my mouth as he flooded me elsewhere.

“A clitoris?” Ian asked eventually with a laugh, pressing me to him. “We definitely have to do something about that, woman.”

That made me even more loving. Ian called me ‘woman’ and I loved it. He was exhausted and went to sleep lying over me. It was awkward but I didn’t care. He had called me ‘woman’. He understood me before I had understood myself.

When Grace woke and called me from Ian’s arms, Ian got up and slipped back to his room. I felt a glow all day and Mrs Reece noticed right away. “What did you do last night that made you so happy?” she asked. Ian came into the breakfast room and complimented me on my pretty dress which I had worn to please him. Mrs Reece looked at me sharply. I flushed, confirming her suspicions while Ian only looked very smug as he filled his plate “to keep up his strength”, he said.

IX. COFFEE WITH CREAM

Ian hired a day nanny for Grace, a really nice Irish girl, Katie, who loved kids and whom Grace took to right away, especially her bright red hair. It gave me time to do something I had never done before on Fri-

day afternoon, and which amused Ian no end at my discomfort. I went to a hair salon and beauticians'.

Ian had made the appointment. It was all paid for by him. Gerard cut my hair. Yes, he was obviously gay and enthusiastic about his job, complimenting me on the beauty of my hair, and cutting it as I knew he would into a layered look that was so fundamentally feminine that I could not have gone anywhere after, in makeup or not, and been called anything but 'Miss' or 'Madam'.

Wearing a soft grey silk blouse that showed off my bra and slip straps was another giveaway that I was a woman as were my very pale green and white suit with a flared skirt, my white stockings and my blocky, medium high heels.

The makeup artist gave me incredible amounts of data on how to do my makeup and make myself beautiful with such subtle shadings about my eyes and eyebrows. I was certain I could never replicate it. It was with a sick feeling, knowing that I had crossed a line I had promised myself I never would, that I finally left *The Kindest Cut of All* and met Ian in the mall, sitting, waiting for me, his face showing a play of changing emotions that mirrored how I felt.

"Wow," Ian said, with a huge, delighted smile at my appearance, the one word encompassing all my emotions at once. "You look fantastic." He stood up and I slipped my hand under his arm. I felt like a woman. I know I looked like one and, worst of all, I was enjoying it all.

"Thank you, kind sir," I said, feeling elated at my image in every window and marble column we passed. He looked at me and smiled. He had been my lover each night for the past three days. I had dressed in a

different nightie each night as he came to claim me as his woman, as eager as I to make love, to bring me to the most intense, passionate state of being that I had ever felt.

“I want to kiss you right here,” Ian said hoarsely as we sauntered down Moston Mall. “And then we could make love.” I flushed as I was wanting to do the same. I noticed that other people were looking at me as we hugged each other. Most were smiling at us, especially the women.

“Look at this,” Ian said, stopping outside another couturier’s. There was a black dress in the window, a cocktail dress, it said, with spaghetti straps in silver.

“No more dresses,” I said, squeezing his arm. “You must be running out of money by now. Save some for Cynthia.”

Ian frowned and turned back to the dress. He just wouldn’t talk about her to me. “I think you’d look fantastic in that,” he said ignoring my words.

I had to smile. “How would I keep it up?” I asked lightly. “I’m not engineered for such a dress.” I had no problem now with the feel of skirts about me and the aroma of feminine perfume. I didn’t mind men looking me over. Working as a woman had done that for me, at least. So long as I could cling to Ian’s arm, I was safe, I thought from being accosted.

“That could be fixed,” Ian said soberly. I flushed to the roots of my lovely, new hairdo as I realized what he was saying.

“Pardon me,” I gasped as he eased me over to another window to look at a pink dress, cut so deeply that a woman couldn’t have worn a bra to have put that on.

"Women have implants all the time," Ian said gruffly, not looking at me. "You could too. It's a simple procedure and you could even wear that one." He nodded at the pink dress.

"It costs a lot of money," I said, trying to make light of his suggestion, pulling him on past the display of women's finery.

"For your birthday," Ian said seriously, "as a gift from me, would you like to lose your padding and be like all other girls?"

"I am not a girl," I said softly, as he took my hand and studied the beautiful nails on my manicured fingers. "This is only a uniform I'm wearing until I get my own place, if Dad's money will allow me that. Then I'm going to get a crewcut, find a job, and look for a girl friend who'll help me bring Grace up properly." Well, I did mean most of it but maybe the crewcut remark was going too far. Or the girl friend.

"And in your spare time?" Ian asked me with a dark frown on his face, looking me up and down as my skirt swayed against my stockings so pleurably.

I could guess that he really wanted me to say that I would still dress as a girl but I didn't know what I was going to do. He wanted me to be a girl in the future and, for him, I would have been if he would ask me. I shuddered as I had visions of myself as his mistress, of he making love to me in some love nest, before he returned home to his wife and children. If he asked me, I would do that for him, I thought heatedly, having to press my pointed fingernails into my palms to drive such a vision of the future away.

What I couldn't tell Ian was that I would like to paint again. I had casually spoken to him about the

paintings in the study. He had told me that they were painted by my father. He had paid twenty-five thousand each for them at the auction of Dad's works organized by Jane Elgart.

Twenty-five thousand! I couldn't believe it. Ian went on that art experts thought that they were the best of my father's work, obviously inspired by the 'tragedies' of his later days. I couldn't tell him the truth. He might sell them, he said, as Elgart had offered him fifty thousand to buy them back but he enjoyed them too much to let them go

"You should be think of Cynthia," I said lightly as we stopped for coffee. "This going out and showing me off," I indicated a table where people who knew Ian, having spoken to him as we entered the tearoom, were now watching us surreptitiously, "is going to get back to her. She'll have questions you probably shouldn't answer honestly."

Ian flushed and looked at the people watching us. He frowned very deeply. "You really don't know why they're looking at you?" he asked, leaning forward and taking my hand in his. "It's because they all want to do this. You are the most beautiful woman in the place. You could have any one of them, you know. Go through with a sex change in time and you could marry very well."

The odd feelings I had been countering with rationalizations all day, for the whole week, actually, crystallized at his words. So that was where he was coming from. Being in my bed, with me in a frilly nightie for him each night, wasn't enough. He wanted to change me into some idealized fantasy of his own.

"That's just horrible," I muttered at him. "How, how, could you ever suggest such a terrible thing?"

Haven't you been listening to me at all? I am not a pretty doll for you to dress up and remake as your own personal fantasy."

Ian Pennington was thunderstruck. I don't think he had thought it through what he was doing to me, buying me so much and so many female things. He let my hand go as if he had been stung. We didn't speak at all as we left *Victoria's Tearoom*.

After I put Grace to bed by myself that evening, I changed back to my jeans and sweater but I couldn't do anything about my hair. It just fell into place about my neck and chin. No point removing my padding, I thought sourly. Mrs Reece must be wondering about my femaleness by now with how I changed my shape from morning to night but she might not. Some things didn't naturally occur to people, not if they had no experience with, let's face it, with drag queens like me.

I'd promised a sullen Ian that I'd come back and watch reruns of *The Office* with him, to actually watch them with him this time. I wasn't expecting to find another blonde, pretty woman in the living room, sitting beside him, his arm about her, on the sofa.

"Come in, Jessica," Ian said to me as I looked at him in surprise. "This is Cynthia Moore, my fiancée. Jessica's the one I want you to find a place for in town."

Cynthia regarded me suspiciously. "Is Grace asleep now?" Ian asked. Only because I had been with him for the last few days, and observed him minutely as he talked to so many people, did I realize that his casual question was for the effect it would have on his girl friend.

"Yes, she's down now till morning," I said brightly, ignoring the pangs of jealousy I felt coursing through

me as he squeezed Cynthia's waist as he had squeezed mine. "My little girl," I added as Cynthia looked puzzled.

"You're Jessica Walton," she said suddenly. "You're the girl who was in the *Post*, kissing Ian at the County Charities Ball, after that horrible, malicious article came out."

Well, that killed Ian's idea of presenting me as Jessica Freeman, I thought in amusement. Ian scowled at me and made as if to speak but I beat him to it.

"Yes," I agreed. I tried to smile as I felt a horrible pang of dismay go through me as Ian caressed Cynthia tenderly and squeezed her hand. "Ian was very kind to me that night," I said, forcing a smile. "I'd never been to a dance before. Eva Walton, my cousin, you probably know her, persuaded Ian to take me.

"I was so young and so excited. It was such a laugh when the papers came out with my picture in it. I thought I'd get a second date with Ian but Douglas showed up and I was in town before I knew it. Now there's Grace."

Let her make of all that as she would, I thought bitterly. "I do have to be in bed by ten," I said, smiling at Cynthia, very pretty and very well dressed in a fashionable pantsuit, an original designer-made item. It was like one I had admired but Ian wouldn't buy it for me. He would buy me any dress or skirt I wanted but he wouldn't buy me pants because there should only be one man in any family, he had said.

"Grace is up early and very lively in the mornings," I went on as Ian continued to nuzzle his girl friend. "I'll try to keep her as quiet as I can when we get up."

Cynthia hung on to Ian as we watched the comedy together. I was genuinely yawning by nine thirty and begged off as 'Cindy', as I was to call her, said she was glad to meet me and we'd talk the following day. She and Ian were smooching before I got out of the room.

It was awful sleeping alone. I half expected the door to open at any time and Ian to slip into my bed. But it didn't happen. I had dreams of him in bed with Cynthia that only made me more and more frazzled. I hated everything about her, the way she had touched Ian, the way she had smiled at me, the way she had smiled at Ian and the way he had smiled back. I hated her and knew why. I was jealous of her, sleeping with my man.

X. FRUIT

The two bedroom apartment in Westleigh was perfect but I couldn't afford it. I couldn't have afforded even to furnish it but Cindy said that Ian had told her that I was about to come into a lot of money. His father had approved me buying anything up to four hundred thousand.

"What?" I gasped and Cindy was amused.

I don't know how I managed to be so civil to her. I felt sure she must sense the jealousy I felt as she referred to Ian so casually as if he belonged to her.

"You have an inheritance coming?" she asked. "Oh," she suddenly brightened. "From Preston Walton. Was he your father or something?"

"Something," I said, watching her as she began scribbling on her notepad.

"If this is what you want," said Cindy, picking up the photographs she'd spread over Ian's desk, "I'll start negotiating on it right away. We can go up to town and see it on Monday for sure. Since it's empty, you could be moving in next week some time if you let me swing the deal for you."

What else could I do? I agreed to let Cynthia finalize the deal for me, feeling somewhat dazed by the amounts of money that she was throwing around. I had no idea how I could pay for any accommodation at all at any price.

I tried to talk to Ian about it but he seemed to be avoiding being alone with me since his fiancée had put in an appearance. I felt so awful. I was actually feeling jealous and smarting that he said nothing about the pretty, black dress I had worn for him, the one he had chosen for me.

Ian and Cindy dressed up early on the Friday afternoon and went off to dinner in town. They didn't come back until Sunday. I couldn't seem to stop being so bitter and angry with Ian as he went out with that blonde bimbo clinging to him, just as I had earlier in the week. I was left to make conversation with Mrs Reece. She was really glad for me, she said smugly, that I was getting a place of my own. I should be able then to get a boy friend of my own as well, she added pointedly.

Cindy left me a note that Ian set beside my breakfast plate at the start of the week. We could have the following day in town together.

“Your girl friend is very nice,” I told Ian, crossing my stockinged legs with a definite rasp and swish of the thick maxi-skirt. He gave me a quick look before smiling at me in amusement as if he knew why I was wearing a dress and had acted so femininely.

“Yes, Cynthia is very nice,” Ian agreed. “You could learn a lot from her.”

“Of course,” I said angrily unable to hide how I felt.

“I meant about real estate and how it works,” said Ian, smiling at me. I knew he was just covering up. He probably had really meant that I could learn how to be a more natural woman from Cindy. I didn’t doubt that I could. I needed to learn from someone.

It was clear to me that Ian had slaked his thirst for me and for the experiment he had made in making love to me. He was back with Cynthia. I didn’t doubt that he was comparing what he did with her to what he did to me. Since he had another date with Cindy before I went up to town with her, I guessed that things were going well between them. I was obviously losing out in the battle to be his woman. That thought left a deep wound in my mind. I wanted to weep. But I had to accept it, I knew. I really should have been pleased that I had had Ian all to myself for a little while at least.

Cindy was certainly lively, and in a very good temper, as she drove me up to the city, admiring my black, straight skirt and the white, feminine blouse I wore with the matching jacket. Since I had to be a girl all day, I tried not to over-dress.

Cindy was really pleased to be going into town. She had places she wanted to visit and she hoped that I didn’t mind going with her. I didn’t mind but I think I was taken advantage of. We seemed to be on a fabu-

lous shopping trip with Cynthia wanting to try on one designer gown after another in the boutiques she insisted that I visit with her. It was an education, of course, to see her talk to the salesgirls and bargain with them over accessories to wear with each outfit.

"I just don't get away often to town from business in the country," said Cindy gaily as we stored another set of parcels in the back of her car. "That's why I'm hoping, in a way, that this deal for you falls through and we have to come up to the city many times to find you just the perfect place."

"It might fall through?" I asked Cindy in surprise as she had told me that the place I had seen in photographs was mine. All I would have to do was sign for it, Ian had told me as I left, he giving Cindy a kiss as she got into the car. He didn't even come around to my side of the car to hold the door for me as I slid in, my high heels wobbling under me.

"We have to meet Ralph," Cynthia said, looking at her watch. "He'll either have the papers with him, signed, or he'll have another offer to put on the table for us."

I couldn't believe the house when I saw it on the tree-shaded cul-de-sac, the lower right floor converted into an apartment that would be mine. A tall, handsome man, his eyes dark and flashing, his curling hair grey along the sides, was waiting for us as Cindy parked the car in the driveway to a two-car garage.

"Ralph Emden," said Cindy flirtatiously as the tall man, a few years older than her, took her hand and lifted it to his lips to kiss it. "Ralph, I'd like you to meet Jessica Walton, who made the offer to buy the apartment."

Ralph's eyes sparkled. He took my hand as well and brought it up to his lips. I flushed as he kissed my hand. "Delicious," Ralph said to me. "Coty Lemon, I believe, but your perfume is Dior, isn't it?"

I nodded in agreement, feeling so ill-at-ease, as this strange man looked at me with evident interest. Cindy was smiling in self satisfaction as Ralph held onto my hand. We walked into the house with him paying me compliment after compliment.

It was a marvellous place, particularly when I thought of the Lower Gunning apartment I had last had with Grace. Grace would have her own room and there was even a sewing room, as Ralph called it.

I didn't want to confuse the man but there was no way that I was into feminine pursuits like sewing. What I saw, however, was a room where I could paint. I just didn't know how I could pay for such a place, not with any job that I would have to take locally as a waitress.

"Now, about our offer for the place," said Cindy with a confident smile on her face.

"I talked to the Barretts," said Ralph with a frown, "and they wished to me to make a counter-offer. Really, we are so close on this one," he added, smiling at me as I froze inside, knowing that all of Cindy's talk had just been too good to be true.

Cindy had taken the paper Ralph had almost reluctantly released from his briefcase. "Twenty thousand is not close at all," said Cindy crossly.

I let her argue with Ralph over that as it didn't make any sense to me. I couldn't afford what I was supposedly offering, never mind what the Barretts apparently wanted for the apartment. All the time, I felt

Ralph looking at me, however. He smiled, complimented me on my skirt and blouse, raising goose bumps in me, and said that it was just a counter-offer.

"All this talking is making me thirsty," Ralph said after a while. "Can't I at least treat you ladies to a drink and we can continue on in more convivial surroundings, where we can even sit down?" He closed his briefcase, winked at me as I felt a tingle of nervousness pass through my feminized body.

"Is there any point to continuing?" asked Cindy. But, when I got daintily as I could into the car with her, she smiled confidently at me as we followed Ralph's car to the local watering hole. "I told you he'd come back with a counter-offer, didn't I? Do you see he's on the phone right now? I bet he's telling the Barretts that we didn't take the deal at all. You want to bet that he'll suggest a price we can settle at over drinks."

"Look, Cindy," I began again.

"I know, I know," Cindy laughed at me. "You can't afford anything. I've heard that. But it's the Penningtons who are buying this place for you. You can work out the cash settlements afterwards with Ian. He's absolutely sure that you're going to get a huge cash settlement from your uncle's estate when it's all settled. Since his father is Preston Walton's trustee, he ought to know, shouldn't he?"

Ian knows very well what he is doing, I wanted to tell Cindy angrily. He is buying me off. But he really didn't have to. Yes, he might feel guilty about what he had done to me. He had called it rape but I wasn't a woman so how could he have raped me? It was worse than rape, however, what he was doing to me now. He was showering me with women's clothes and jewellery and things. He was encouraging me to be as feminine

as I could possibly me. He wanted me to become a woman through surgery.

Yes, Ian had finally got enough of me in bed, I thought miserably. He had his real woman now, the smiling, laughing Cindy, the woman he was going to marry. He was ashamed about what he had done with me, last week and before, and was buying me off. But it was a steep price to pay, I thought sourly, to get rid of me.

We went into the pub where the owner seemed to know Ralph and treated him as an old friend. Ralph took me by the arm and complimented me on my lovely hair as he ushered us into the lounge. The negotiating went just as Cindy had said. I sat there, as they argued, my legs crossed, and compared myself to the other women in the place who all seemed to be dressed as fashionably as I was.

Ralph suddenly looked me very firmly in the eye, a change from where his eyes had been wandering to ever since we came into the pub. He said that he was certain that he could get the Barretts to agree to split the difference between my offer and theirs. Cindy said I had to go to the bathroom with her to freshen up my lipstick just as she did.

"I told you so," said Cindy. "Shall I tell him that you agree?"

"You should talk to Ian first," I told her. "Really, I have no money at all. I can't commit Ian to paying out such a huge amount of money."

"But didn't you just love the apartment?" asked Cindy in surprise. "Ian said that you would once you actually saw it."

“Yes,” I told her, looking away as she lifted her skirt and rearranged the pantyhose that she was wearing, totally oblivious to the fact that I could see the tops of her legs. She adjusted her bra then, squeezing her breasts this way and that, right in front of me.

“You must have a much better-fitting bra than I do,” Cindy said to me as she leaned forward, re-doing her lipstick with a gloss that made her lips gleam. She wanted to know then what brand that I wore, where I had bought my bra and if I had been fitted for it by a salesgirl.

I barely knew the right names. I did know that I had never let any other woman but Eva, assist me in any way with a bra, taping my chest muscles into bra fillers.

“We’re going to think about your offer,” said Cindy breezily as we returned to the table with a concerned Ralph Emden.

“I hope that doesn’t mean you’re going to give up on the condo,” began Ralph, pretending to be alarmed, I felt. He did get up like a gentleman, holding my chair for me to sit daintily, even as Cindy sat down by herself.

“There are some other places that I want Jessica to see,” Cindy went on with a smile that seemed to irritate Ralph, I thought. “The Barrett place is very nice but there are several other condos on the market at that price that offer more in the way of amenities.”

“But the location,” began Ralph again, his forehead furrowed in concern.

“It’s a nice spot,” agreed Cindy, “but I want Jessica to look at a few more places before we make any further offers.”

“Well, in that case,” said Ralph Emden with a smile, closing his briefcase with a loud snap. “Why don’t we stop talking about real estate? Let’s talk about where I am going to take two lovely, young women to dinner while you’re in town.”

“Ralph,” said Cindy, smiling and leaning back in her padded chair. She waved her hand at him so that he could see her ring finger. “Can’t you see that I’m engaged?”

“Of course, I can see that,” said Ralph, looking at me with a big smile as my stomach churned with the bitter feeling rising inside me. “So you can be chaperone while I take Jessica to dinner and dancing. How does the *Tower Club* sound, at nine?”

“You can get into the *Tower Club*?” asked Cindy in disbelief.

Ralph smiled and took out his key ring. There was a black stone square set in gold attached to it, an outline of the famous tower in gold on the stone. “A Charter member,” he said with a smile to me. “Where are you ladies staying in town?”

I don’t know why Cindy was so excited to go out with her business rival. “I can’t go,” I told her when Ralph was up at the bar settling the bill.

“Of course you can,” hissed Cindy. “Your nanny will look after Grace and Ian is there as well. I’ll explain it to him. We can check in at the Montfort and get you a dress to wear from their shop. I can wear the black dress I bought at *Florsheim*. I’ll put yours on my credit card as well and we’ll let Ian pay for them both. I haven’t been to the *Tower* in an age, not since Gordon Pennington was last in town. And I’m not passing up

an opportunity to go to the in-place in town, not for anything!"

XI. COFFEE, TEA AND ME

"We'll be home by lunch tomorrow," Cindy said smugly, holding her beautiful dress against herself as she waltzed about the room she had taken at the Montfort for us to share that night. She had spoken to Ian and hadn't let me get in a word to him at all.

I hadn't brought an overnight bag with me as it hadn't been intended that we stay the night. Cindy had all of her purchases from that afternoon. She'd given me a black lace lingerie set, bra, panties, garter belt and slip, and dark stockings as well from among her parcels.

Cindy wanted me to buy a strapless gown. I couldn't possibly do that. She thought the dress that I finally chose for Ian to buy me was way too conservative. I didn't as I selected the long, blue gown, my nervous stomach reacting to its shapely, sequinned, tight fit with an attack of butterflies.

I had a date with a man and it wasn't Ian. Well, Ian didn't want me after all. Gosh, I just couldn't seem to stop the attack of the gollywobbles I was having. I was sharing a hotel room with an eager young woman who thought nothing of parading by me in just her panties, removing even those as she scooted into the shower to ready herself for our visit to the *Tower Club*. Why not, I thought, my mouth dry? I was a woman just like her, wasn't I? Cindy certainly thought so. So much for womanly lessons for me, Ian, I snarled inside my mind.

I was just as reckless as Cindy as well though I did lock the bathroom door as I showered and perfumed myself for the night out. I made sure that I was taped and tucked, my panties and bra in place before I went out into the main room where Cindy was making up her face with practiced ease. She thought my locking the door was 'quaint'.

I would have liked to retreat to the bathroom to put on my dress but Cindy kept talking to me, telling me to hurry up as she had just talked to Ralph and he was on his way. My whole body ached as she watched me attaching my stockings to my garter belt, she admiring the black lace panties she had bought.

Cindy made a mess of one of her eyes and started again. Cindy had noticed the padding in my panties and laughed at it.

"If the men only knew what we do to amuse them," she said as I flushed and put on the long dress, fastening the high collar about my neck as it swirled about me.

"You have to leave your hair loose," insisted Cindy as she came over and fastened me tightly at the back. "Um, you smell so lovely." She ran her fingers lightly over my bare arm and bare back, sending cold chills all through me. She had me sit in front of the mirror and showed me how I should wear my hair, parting it for me, using just a few hair pins to hold my streaked hair from falling in front of my face. When had my hair ever got so long and so curly, I wondered, as it fell in layers onto my shoulders, my face never having looking so feminine.

I had to do my own makeup as well while Cindy accessorized both of us, commenting on how little makeup I was using but how it became me so. Little

makeup? I gulped as I looked at my eyes. I had painted them as the girl at the beautician's had done a week ago. I outlined my almost non-existent eyebrows, blushed my cheeks as the girl had showed me how to do and powdered my face before putting on my lipstick.

"Oh, you're so beautiful," murmured Cindy, supposedly sharing her perfume with me, her hand almost drowning my shoulders and neck as she sprayed me with the cologne from my purse. "And so quick."

There was a tap at our door. Cindy ran eagerly to let Ralph in while I put on the high-heeled shoes that Cindy insisted that I buy to go with the dress. The price went on her credit card as well. "Ian is good for it," she had insisted. I didn't doubt that he would be. It would be a small price to pay for having another man take me off his hands, I thought cynically.

Ralph came impetuously to me as soon as he entered our room, almost brushing Cindy out of his way to get to me and take my hand. He caressed my newly varnished nails as he lifted my trembling hand and kissed it again. I got butterflies in my stomach as I turned to pick up my purse. The girl that I had become for the evening looked out of the mirror in fright at me.

My hair bounced at my neck, my face so femininely madeup. No, no man would look at me and see me as anything but a young, pretty girl. My golden stud earrings gleamed as I lifted my head and swayed my loose hair back. I shuddered as Ralph smiled at me in the mirror as he put his arm about my slender waist and ushered me to Cindy who was standing, offering me the coat she had also bought for me to wear.

I could only mince in the dress as it was so tight about my hips and thighs.

“So beautiful,” murmured Ralph, as I flicked my hair girlishly over the high collar of the coat that matched my deep red dress in.

Even though it was the Montfort, Cindy and I were like queens passing through the elevator and the foyer, out to the limousine that Ralph had waiting for us outside the hotel. He looked handsome as well in his tux but there were many people about the Montfort’s main reception area in tuxes though most of the women there were older, way older than Cindy and me.

“Don’t leave,” said one silver-haired man with a smile as I tried to glide daintily across the foyer, ignoring all the glances and smiles thrown my way. “Pretty girls can’t be leaving the banquet before I even get a chance to amuse you.”

Ralph ushered us to the car, ignoring the man and the woman who was trying to shush him. She at least seemed as embarrassed as I felt as well with all the men and women looking at us, rustling and swaying our slim, feminine forms out to the limo. “Some guys,” Ralph said as I sat and lifted my stockinged legs nervously in after me. “He really must have had too much to drink.

Ralph put me on his right arm, Cindy on his left, to enter the prestigious club. The first people I saw was a famous television actress with a long, lean man whom the maitre d’ referred to as “Your Lordship”.

“That was Ashley Goodwin and the Earl of Aberavon,” said Cindy in excitement to me. “I wonder who else is going to be here tonight.”

“It is a weekday,” said Ralph with a smile at her eagerness, his hand seeming to tighten about my arm as an attendant disappeared with our coats. I shivered as I

looked at the girl in the mirrored hall, wiggling so femininely on the arm of a tall, well-dressed man. She looked so pouty and that was because I wasn't smiling, not like Cindy. I had to learn to smile more, I thought, looking at the woman I appeared to be, shivers running through me. I had to learn to pretend that I enjoyed being in a nightclub, looking for all the world like a woman who belonged here.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Mr Emden," said the maitre d', not even asking Ralph for identification, but escorting us immediately into a lively, noisy night club, and thence to a table set for three. I was astonished to see the size of the note that Ralph gave to the man just for seating us. It was more than I earned on most nights at Turo's.

"I thought I should feed you first," said Ralph with a smile, "rather than try the tables right away." He indicated a tall doorway where brilliantly dressed people were heading, many with drinks in their hands.

"Well, look who's here!" said Cindy in excitement. I waited for her to tell us which of the fantastically well-dressed people was a well-known celebrity. "There's Jeff Brady from Moston!" She waved to someone. "You don't mind if I just go over and say hello, do you?"

And with that, Cindy got up and disappeared into the crowded club. I was left with a man at a table, a man who stretched out a hand and took mine familiarly with his.

"I don't think that we'll see Cindy for a while," said Ralph, his dark eyes smiling at me. "She loves to gamble and that's why she wanted to come here so avidly. You, I think, are not the gambler that she is."

"I'm not a gambler at all," I agreed as Ralph got to his feet and led me, all a-quiver, to the dance floor, my dress rustling so prettily, a match to any those worn by the women dancing. He didn't ask me at all if I wanted to dance. I might have said 'No' as I felt for a time that there were many eyes on me watching me being whirled about as if I was truly a girl. As I anxiously expected, Ralph was a much more skilled dancer than me. He seemed to be proud of his skill, loving to twirl and spin me while I just shivered and quivered and hoped that I wouldn't fall down. It wasn't at all like dancing with Ian who had been the first man whom I had danced with.

"There," said Ralph at last as my feet were getting sore, leading me back to our table. He put his arm about me and squeezed my waist. "You haven't danced a great deal with a real ballroom dancer, I think."

"Not at all," I admitted with a girlish squeak as he kissed my perfumed shoulder.

"A girl like you," Ralph said with assurance, "would soon make a first-rate partner with a few lessons. I would love to be the one to coach you and take you into some ballroom competitions."

"Oh no," I gasped, quivering as we arrived back at the table, his hand squeezing my waist very tightly. A waiter arrived immediately to open a bottle of champagne and a plate of hors d'oeuvres appeared in front of me at our table.

"They know me well here," said Ralph with a knowing smile as he invited me to try the oysters that he put onto the plate in front of me.

“There’s a lot of money in real estate?” I asked nervously.

“Oh yes,” said Ralph. “Though if you must know, darling Jessica, the apartment that I am selling off for the Barretts is very small stuff. Their daughter has got married and moved up to a four million condo that I sold her and her new husband. I’m just selling off the apartment she had while she was at university as the family doesn’t need it any more. Quite frankly, I could sell it at any price I liked but I do have a reputation to maintain and Cindy’s offer, to tell you the truth, is very low. The place will go pretty soon at much closer to the asking price than the four twenty I decided to counter with.

“But here I am, talking real estate again. I am so sorry.” Ralph smiled at me and ran his hand lightly over my arm. “I won’t do it again this evening.”

Ralph was as good as his word as he set out to charm me and I must admit that I didn’t mind being charmed. After having Ian pass me by in the hallways of his house without a comment, not even ones about what pretty dresses I was wearing, it was nice to have Ralph compliment me.

We danced some more but the floor was filling up and so we got to dance clingily in the waltzes that seemed to dominate the later part of the evening. I began to feel familiar tingles as Ralph pressed my head into his shoulder. We went dreamily along, me trying to be as convincing a girl as I could be. I really liked it after a while, even with his hand getting lower and lower down my back.

We gamed a little, or rather Ralph did, his arm about my shoulder or my waist all the time. He loved to stroke my bare, smooth skin and I began to feel re-

ally girlie as he did it. He introduced me to people who knew him well, wealthy people, who clearly accepted him as one of their own.

I noticed their looks at me, clearly wondering who I was to be with such an obviously attractive man. I'd read once that Marilyn Monroe had described sex appeal as being physical beauty in a woman but money in a man. I don't know if Ralph was manipulating me at all but I was beginning to see him more and more as an attractive man as the night wore on. I found myself giggling a lot more than I was used to doing, not minding at all his little touches of me even as he talked to others about money and business and about which games were working out best for the gamblers that evening.

I crossed paths with Cindy as she and Jeff Brady, I remembered the name or I think I did from the dance where I had first gone with Ian, came giggling away from the blackjack table, Cindy carrying a tray of colorful chips.

"You've had a lot of luck tonight," observed Ralph with a grin, "just as I have."

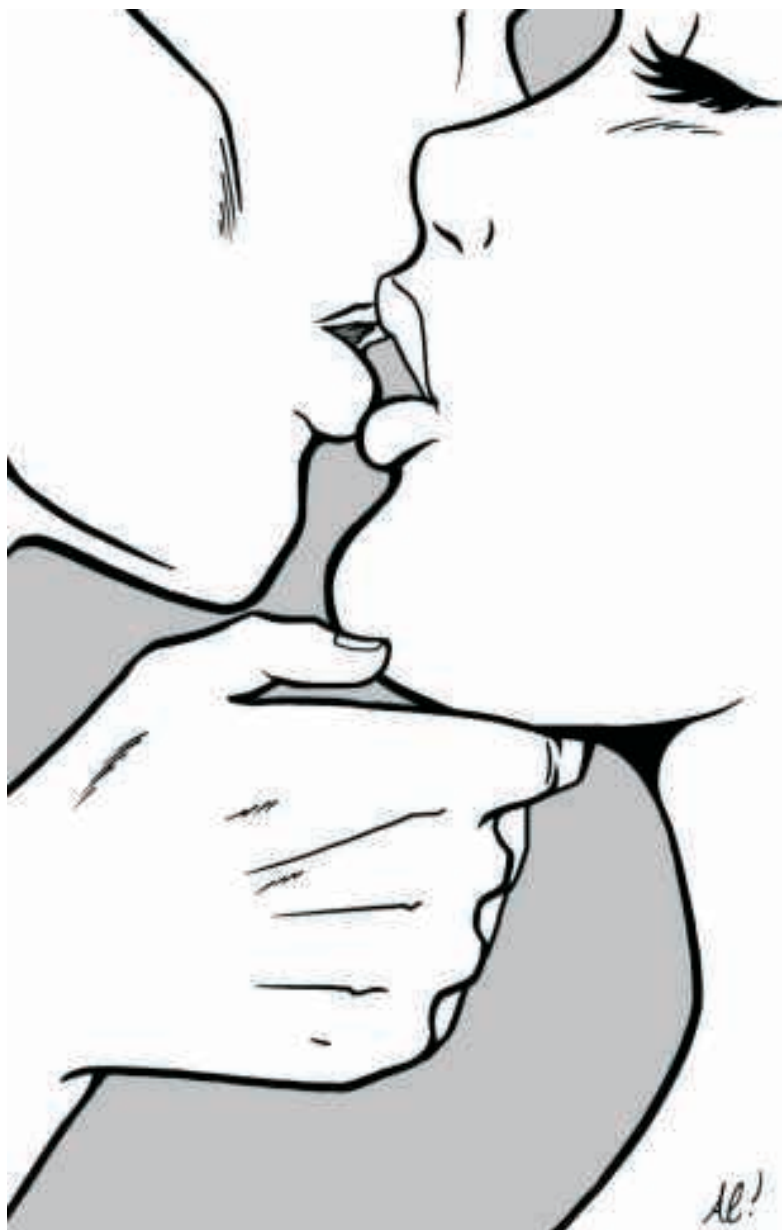
Cindy gave me a meaningful look that made me feel very queasy inside. "You can cash us out," she said then to Jeff and I had to accompany her to the Ladies' Room.

"You need to touch up your lipstick," Cindy told me. "You are getting on all right with Ralph, aren't you? He seems quite smitten with you."

"He's quite nice," I agreed cautiously.

Cindy smiled. "Look, I'm on a hot streak with Jeff," she said. "I'm going to play it out for a while. You and Ralph don't have to wait for me to come back to the

Monty. You can take him back to our room if you like. Have you seen the way he is looking at you? Enjoy yourself."



Of course, as soon as I mentioned that Cindy wouldn't be coming back with us, Ralph offered to take me back to our hotel room. Shakily, I agreed that I was ready to go and I was. My tuck was definitely beginning to become very numb. I knew I must take away the tight taping and very soon, some worries afflicting me at what I might be doing to myself.

Ralph's gentlemanly act didn't last longer than us getting into the back of the limo. He'd had his arm about me most of the night. When he did it again in the back seat, I did snuggle up to him a little, used to his suit brushing against my thin dress and my stockings.

Ralph reached over and held my chin steady as he lowered his lips onto mine and we kissed. I gently moved his hand away and kissed him in return. It wasn't like kissing Ian. It was kind of odd but still very nice. It was odd because it was a man kissing me and I liked it. I felt all quivery as I let this attractive man kiss me. I responded as any good girl should.

He stroked my hair. I loved it and kissed him gently, knowing that most of the lubrication between our lips came from my lipstick. Ralph opened my coat then and put his hand about my slender waist, pulling me to him. He told me what a lovely girl I was. I loved his compliment, rewarding him with another kiss, feeling so much like a pretty girl. It was so easy to think of what I was doing as rewarding Ralph for the lovely evening he had given me.

The drive back to the Montfort ended too quickly. I was still in Ralph's arms, enjoying his mastery of me, his hand finally reaching my thigh when the valet opened the door to the car to let us out.

"Oh, I am sorry, sir, madame," said the valet though he didn't sound sorry at all.

"I'll walk you up to your front door," said Ralph hoarsely as I took his hand from my thigh. The valet grinned at me, extending his hand to assist me from the limo.

"I'll do that," snapped Ralph as he eased himself out of the seat and got out of the car ahead of me.

I loved walking through the foyer with Ralph's arm about me. I didn't mind the looks that we got at all. In fact, I welcomed them. I was just a pretty girl going to her room with her escort. The lucky man would soon be back down and covered in my lipstick, I thought wickedly, loving the eager feelings rising inside me. As soon as the elevator door closed, Ralph had his arms about me again. I wanted as much excitement from his kisses as I could get. So, I pressed against him, my arms about his neck, bouncing my 'breasts' against him, which he loved. I kissed him thoroughly, opening my mouth a little and so his tongue uncoiled into me and I clung to him, flooded with girlish emotions just as I was with Ian.

But Ian wasn't ever again going to do this with me, I thought, as I welcomed this man kissing me and kissing me, staggering along the hotel hallway with caresses almost every step of the way. We stopped at my doorway. I let him press me against the wall, his mouth on mine, his hands travelling down from my waist and frantically beginning to fondle my padded derriere.

"We should get in off the hallway," murmured Ralph, holding me so tightly to him that I feel his arousal just as I had once felt Ian's and it had made me want him so much.

"Just for a moment," I said, smiling up at Ralph's attractive, manly face.

“Just for a moment,” he agreed thickly, taking my key and opening the door.

Right away, Ralph eased me out of my coat and pressed me against him. I tried to lose myself in kissing him as I did with Ian but it was hard. I didn’t feel the excitement that I had with Ian. Kissing Ralph was pleasant but it wasn’t really much more than that.

I was quite unprepared when Ralph guided me to the nearer bed and fell on it with me underneath him. He kissed my chest and his hands caressed down the sides of my dress and down my thighs. If it had been Ian doing that I would have been in heaven. But this wasn’t Ian. This was Ralph.

“No, no, Ralph,” I said as one of his hands began to undo my dress at the back.

“Oh, come on, Jessica darling,” Ralph said to me thickly. “After working me the way that you have all night, you can’t start getting all coy with me now.”

His hands undid the hook on my dress as I pushed him to one side of me in the bed. Ralph grabbed me then and kissed me with much more force than he had used on me before. He rolled over on top of me, his whole body gyrating as he held me down.

Ralph tried to force his legs between mine but my tight dress saved me. We began an intense wrestling match. He rolled me on top of him but that was only so that he could slide the zipper down on the back of my dress and undo the collar at my neck.

I began to shout as Ralph tugged at my dress and the top half began to fall away from my body. Ralph put his hand over my mouth and held me down easily as he pulled my dress from me. He pushed my slip up over my pantyhose, stroking my legs as I wriggled and

struggled to get free of him. I could feel his huge erection on my thighs as he opened his pants and jammed himself against my panties, my legs flailing in the air as he held me down, ignoring my screams and my feeble attempts to hit him and get him off me.

I was panicked and on the point of hysteria when the door opened and Cindy stormed in. She saw what was going on and completely misread it.

"Sorry, kids," Cindy said angrily. "But the show is over, unless you want to do it right in front of me. Can you believe what Jeff Hardy did? He and his brother took off with all my money. I didn't have a thing to play with. So, I have to sleep here tonight. But don't mind me, if the two of you want to get it on."

Luckily, Ralph cared about another woman eyeing his pulsating erection. He sat up. I was able to get my legs in front of him and push him away from me, rolling right off the bed and moving, panic-stricken, right onto Cindy's bed where she was sitting to take off her evening dress. She looked at me in surprise.

Ralph reversed himself and furiously began to pull his pants back on, not saying a word. I could think of nothing to say as I tried to pull the slip back down over my legs.

"You came at a most opportune time," said Ralph to Cindy through gritted teeth.

"Look," said Cindy, getting up and out of the way. "Don't mind me."

Ralph's expression was totally hostile as he looked at me. I was retreating across the second bed in our room and putting Cindy again between me and Ralph. I could make a dash for the bathroom and lock myself

in there, I thought hysterically, but that would leave Cindy to face Ralph.

"Let's just leave things as they are," said Ralph bitterly, picking up his jacket and putting it on. "Let's just leave it as a case of bad timing."

He went out, slamming the door. I scampered around Cindy to lock it.

"Jeez, I'm sorry, Jessica," said Cindy sorrowfully. "I should have waited downstairs till I saw him go. I was just so mad with Jeff for going off like that."

XII. AND ONE MORE FOR THE ROAD

"I talked to Cynthia," said Ian sharply to me as I assisted Grace in making the dollhouse furniture fit in each of the rooms.

I knelt on the carpet, my linen dress spread out femininely about me, and smiled at Grace who looked up at me in concern. She gave Ian a smile, I noticed with a start, and held up the little, womanly figure that she had found in one of the bedrooms.

"Look, Yan," Grace said, her cheek dimpling as she smiled. "Pretty, like mommy."

"Yes," agreed Ian, giving me a quick frown. I don't know whether it was because he was considering how pretty I was in my white linen dress or whether he didn't like her calling me 'Mommy' as she shouldn't.

Grace's smile could have melted an iceberg. She soon enticed Ian into helping her as well with the figures in the huge dollhouse that he had allowed her to play with when I hadn't been there. He knelt beside it

and helped Grace position the dolls. All of it, the dolls and the dollhouse had once been his mother's, he had told Kate, who had told me.

Ian knelt beside Grace and played with her. She was so cute in her green, tartan dress, black, shiny shoes and green, ribbed tights. All had been gifts from Ian as he had showered Grace with dresses, shoes and underwear as much as he had showered me.

Grace babbled on as I fitted a dressing table together and set it beside the pink bed for the little girl doll that Grace was showing 'Yan' how to dress.

I couldn't resist. "Yan is better at undressing the girls than dressing them," I murmured. Luckily, Grace didn't really hear me. Ian, though, glared at me.

"You didn't take the apartment," he said grimly.

"It was too much money," I told him. "And the realtor wasn't ready to sell."

"It wasn't what Ralph told me," said Ian, frowning again.

"Well, he wanted more than I was prepared to pay," I said, thinking that he would have no idea what I really meant.

Ian pulled a face at me. "So I heard," he said. I was surprised to see that his teeth were gritted. He looked quite angry as well. "Cynthia told me all about what went on in your hotel room."

That took my breath away. I quivered as I thought of what she might have said. She had agreed to say nothing, absolutely nothing, about the way I had embarrassed myself with Ralph Emden.

I couldn't believe the fury that I read on Ian's face. "Consenting adults in the privacy of their own bed-

room," I declared sweetly to him while my insides churned. I'd tried to tell him once that what we were doing together so wonderfully in my bed was wrong, even the fantastic sensations that were turning me into a complete wreck. He just ran his hands over my legs and I was a mess of nervous agitation, convulsing even before he penetrated me.

That's when Ian had quoted that line to me with a beaming smile on his face. That was just before he had kissed the tops of my stockings and followed my garter belt up to abdomen and my panties, my flesh totally quivering in ecstasy and desire. He had used his tongue and his teeth to pull down my panties and to arouse the secret that I had concealed for so long from others. He had taken my stiff, aroused manhood into his mouth for the first time and had done to me what I had anxiously done to him on several wonderful occasions already. That had been on our last time together. Perhaps that was what it was that had finally driven him away from me.

Ian was glowering at me, his eyes sort of unfocussed. I guessed that he was thinking as well what he had been doing to me after he had said that.

"You realize what might have happened if Cynthia hadn't come into the room right then?" Ian demanded furiously.

I shrugged, my hair brushing my shoulders, my earrings giving a little jingle. I tried to pretend that I was indifferent to what he was saying but really I felt like crying. I had gone with Ralph to capture the wonderful feelings that I had had for such a short time with Ian. I was totally ashamed of how I had led the other man on as Ian had just accused me. I had done the same thing to Ian once before and look what had hap-

pened to me because I had given in to my baser emotions. I really had to learn to control myself, I thought miserably.

I shrugged again as Ian repeated his question, demanding an answer. "Who knows?" I said flippantly. "I might be engaged to be married now." I smiled and handed Grace some chairs, suggesting to her where she might put them in the dollhouse.

"Don't worry," I said to Ian's attempt at a stonefaced expression. I could recognize that he was seething in anger with me. "I wouldn't have cheated on my fiancé. Besides," I couldn't resist one last dig, "Cynthia really isn't my type."

I think that if Grace hadn't been there, Ian would have grabbed me and I would have been in big trouble.

"Mommy! Yan!" cut in Grace unexpectedly, looking most upset with the pair of us. "No fighting!"

"No, darling," I agreed, putting my hand on her back and stroking her gently as she turned to look at Ian opposite us.

"No, we weren't fighting," said Ian at exactly the same time.

"Did, did you miss Nicky the other night when I had to stay in town?" I asked my half-sister to change the subject.

"Miss you too, Mommy," said Grace, leaning against me. Ian smiled grimly.

"Kate was here, though," I murmured into her ear. "And Yan as well."

"Miss you, Mommy," Grace said, turning and getting up on her knees to give me a big hug and a kiss on my lipsticked mouth. She loved doing that and looking

at herself in the mirror, her lips covered with my lipstick.

"She really did miss you," said Ian quietly then, making me feel even more guilty at what I had done on my night in the town with Ralph Emden. How could I tell him that it hadn't been my idea to stay uptown but it had been his precious girl friend who had wanted to stay?

"Well, I'm here now," I said, my stomach churning as Grace hugged me again. "And I'm not going anywhere without you, darling, in the next little while."

Ian frowned at that. Oh no, I thought. He thinks I will be staying here forever like a limpet or something. He thinks I am going to be a leech and stay here forever.

"Can, can I get an advance, some money, from this inheritance that I'm supposed to be getting?" I asked Ian nervously then.

"What do you need money for?" Ian asked me, his lip curling. I could hear the sneer behind his words.

"I want to look at some realistic places in town Grace and I could live," I told him. "All right, I won't go back to a place like Gunning but Houghton would be okay and a lot cheaper than the palace you wanted to buy for us."

"I'll get Cynthia to set something up," Ian said harshly, repeating it gently and forcing a smile to Grace who curled into me, her arms about my neck, clearly a little scared by his harsh tone.

"No," I said, giving him a sugar-sweet smile. I felt bad inside as this was the first time we'd actually talked to each other since he had made love to me for

the third time. He had slid from my bed as Grace had called me, his lips imprinted on mine.

“You will need Cynthia to keep an eye on you,” said Ian, his eyes glittering. “She’ll keep you out of trouble.”

“Mommy in trouble?” asked Grace in alarm.

“No darling,” I told her quickly. “Yan didn’t mean that Nicky is in trouble.”

“Of course he didn’t,” said Ian in a stage whisper, getting up and moving towards the door of the playroom. He said it very softly. I don’t think he intended Grace to hear but she did. She put her head on my padded breasts and her little fingers clung to my bra straps beneath the linen dress.

“We do have to find a new place to live as soon as we can,” I said to Ian. “We have quite overstayed our welcome here, haven’t we?”

Ian stopped at the door to the playroom.

“Kate can put Grace down for a nap,” he said angrily. She was about the house somewhere, probably helping Mrs Reece with the household chores. I’d asked her to leave me and Grace together for a while as I wanted to reassure my little sister that I was always going to be there for her, despite me being away for over a day and a half.

“We’ll discuss your money over a drink in Moston,” snapped Ian. “We can go out for lunch.”

“I doubt that Grace will have a nap today,” I said with another attempt at false sweetness, the butterflies returning to my stomach as they always did when I attempted to dispute what Ian was saying.

Grace let me down completely then by yawning and asking me to put her down for a nap. How could I refuse? I took her to her bedroom and she was asleep in seconds after I tucked her in.

Kate was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs as I swished down in my linen dress and its ruffly skirt and petticoat. I don't know why but I'd even put a ribbon in my hair to hold it back. The touch of it on the nape of my neck sent all kinds of girlish tinglings through me.

I'd been tempted to lay down with Grace and go to sleep with her but Ian would definitely have come looking for me. At least, I had thought that he would. I think he had a lot of home truths still to tell me.

"I thought Grace would have a little nap today," said Kate cheerily. "She didn't get much sleep while you were away. I think she was worrying about where her mommy was."

"You should have called her," Ian scolded me, coming out of his study with my coat on his arm, opening it up so that I had to put it on. Kate must have noted the undercurrent of bad feelings that flowed between the two of us, I was sure.

"I didn't have a phone, or the money to even make a phone call," I told him, trying to be civil. It wasn't strictly true. I did have some cash, the last of my earnings from the Flamingo. I had been selfishly trying to hang on to it. I should have used some of it and called Grace, I thought miserably. Ian was right and I could sense that Kate agreed with him as well.

"You don't have to hurry back," said Kate sympathetically as I flicked my hair over my coat collar and swished towards the door where Ian was waiting im-

periously for me. "I promised Grace we'd go down to see the horses in the stables this afternoon. The foals are out with their mothers and she loves to see the littlest ones."

Ian put his arm under mine in glum silence and matched his stride to the short, mincing steps I took in my high heels. He held the door of the same sports car for me in which he had once driven me up Lovers' Lane. I looked up at him as I slid in. No, the look on his face said that would be the last place he would be driving me to.

We went down to an inn outside Moston. The lounge was filled with long-haired girls, staring up adoringly in the faces of their well-heeled boy friends. How I had hated the type when I had lived in Moston. The girls never looked at me and the men were just so superior. I hated them all. Now I was one of those girls but I didn't intend to be as adoringly vacant as the girls I saw looking at me, my ribbons, and my summery, swishy dress.

"On this business of money," Ian began as we sat in a pretty, green-painted lounge. He went on and on but I didn't hear him at all. "What's the matter?" he finally said, really irritated with me, turning and looking over his shoulder.

At first, Ian didn't see what I was pointing at, the blue painting so badly displayed on the green wall across the lounge from him. I had to get up and swish my dress to get past the close-up tables and show him the outlines he must have seen a hundred times before in his office. I climbed on a chair to the amusement of several people at various tables, aware that more than one of the men was trying to look up my dress as I stretched to take the painting down.

"It's upside down," I told the pub owner who came out from behind the bar, glaring at me and demanding to know what I was doing. Ian put his arms about my lower body and lifted me from the chair onto my so high, strappy high heels, ones he'd liked so much in the store that he'd insisted on buying me them in white, tan and red.

I turned the picture and Ian saw it. "It's a third one," he said, astonished.

"You have Desperation and Resolution, the red and the orange versions," I told him, my dress shivering against me as Ian held me and stared into my feminine face. "The blue was meant to go with the other two and is called Reconciliation. See how the red and orange are there in the lines and how the turbulence of the other two is being submerged by the creeping carpet of shadows. This one united the paintings you have. It completed the set."

Ian turned to the pub owner. "I have to buy this painting," he said huskily and I shuddered as he took it from me. I put my long-nailed hands on my face to stop myself from speaking as the bar owner told Ian that he couldn't just walk in his bar and walk off with his painting.

"I'll pay you thirty thousand for it," said Ian and the bar owner looked at him as if he was crazy.

"You know who painted that?" the man blustered while all around us people gasped. There was a buzz of talk as Ian wrote out a check for the man.

"Preston Walton," said Ian. "My, my girl friend recognized it on your wall."

"You know Preston Walton?" asked the bar owner sharply, taking my hand and pulling me into another

bar where I had to gasp even more. There, in what the bar owner called the back bar, where pub games were going on was a long line of pictures above a line of dart boards.

“You recognize those?” asked the bar owner while the bar patrons whistled and asked me to come over and sit in their laps.

Of course I recognized the pictures. I had painted every one of them. There were portraits of my mother and others I had done of my father over the years. Only on the last ones had I used acrylics in the background. They gleamed brightly in the poorly lighted room.

“He said he would come back and sign them and I’d make money on them,” the bar owner said, snapping the check Ian had put in his hand. “But then I heard he’d died. The gallery I tried to sell them to said they weren’t authentic.”

Well, they weren’t. My father hadn’t painted any of them.

“You recognize them?” Ian asked me, clutching my blue painting under his arm. I nodded to him, my hair floating over my face, wanting to cry at all the memories that floated back. I had painted my father often in my attempts to please him.

“Don’t go up there!” Ian said to me as I got up on a chair again. The men whistled and said things about my legs and my stockings as I took down a portrait of my mother. I could feel the tears coming to my mascara’d eyelashes as I brought it down and turned it over. On the back, I had printed ‘N Walton’ in capitals as I had on things that were mine. Where I had printed that, someone had added ‘Presto’ in front on the ‘N’. It wasn’t my father’s signature.

"I showed them that," said the bar owner. "But they said that he always signed the front of his paintings. He didn't write on the back of them."

I stood there shaking as Ian gave the man Jane Elgart's number and told him to be very careful with the paintings as each was worth at least as much as he had just paid for the blue one. The bar owner was stunned. "If that's true, I've won the lottery!" he exclaimed.

I wanted to tell him the truth but I was tongue-tied. Ian put his arm about my shoulder sympathetically, clearly recognizing the woman in the portrait. It was how my mother used to be. It wasn't at all the woman she had been at her death. I looked at the arching of her eyebrows and the curve of her mouth. I saw them every day on myself. Was I unconsciously trying every day to look like her, to take her place?

I shuddered, tears falling from my eyes, while the loud men were shushed by others. I gave the picture back to the bar owner, my hands shaking, and let Ian take me back to his car where I had a good cry, grieving for my mother as I never had before. Ian seemed to understand a little as he took me back to Longview and let me go off to my room by myself.

I repaired my face, freshening my lipstick, tiptoeing into Grace's room. She wasn't there. I went downstairs in search of Kate. Ian was on the phone in the hallway, waving to me.

"Yes, do that," Ian said, smiling, yes smiling at me. "Jane is on her way to the pub right now," he went on. "She'll be paying you the commission for finding the missing Waltons." He seemed to think I should be happy about that. All I felt was sick as I stood there, my dress touching my stockings gently as I swayed, re-

minding me that he was looking at a man in a woman's dress and he was smiling at me.

"You'll also be glad to know that I called Ralph Emden about Caroline Barrett's condo and told him to go ahead with the deal he proposed," he said, looking very pleased with himself. "Cindy can take you up to town and you can decorate it as you want as soon as you like since it's empty."

I couldn't believe him. I wanted to slug him right then. I couldn't talk to him at all. I grabbed my coat while Ian was glowering at me again and asking me what was wrong now. I remembered what Kate had said about the horses and would have headed there as Ian had to answer another call.

Ian was so wrapped up in that that I didn't think he even noticed me leaving. But he did come up behind me near the stables as I was trying to smile and listen to Grace telling me all about the foal.

"I'd think you could be a little more grateful, Jessica," Ian said at me when Grace raced off with Kate and the groom to feed another of the foals that came wobbly-legged out of the horse barn.

"A little more grateful as I was when you brought me here and before your fiancée put in an appearance?" I asked him snappily. Ian recoiled away from me, finally stomping off back to the house. I didn't see him again until Sunday, the most fateful day in my life, the day when all the problems that were swirling about me came together, exploded and solved themselves. I had no idea it would all happen so quickly as Ian's attempt to control me shattered completely.

XII. THE BILL

If the last week had been bad, and lonely, for a self-pitying, jealous me, Sunday was awful. Eva, my sister, arrived like a thundercloud. I could hear her arguing with Ian from the garden where I was trying to ease the discomfort I felt in missing Ian in my bed, and in my life, by playing with Grace, trying to make up a little for the neglect of leaving her with Kate for such long periods of time.

Eva came storming out of the house into the back garden as if she owned the estate. "So who's your new popsy, Ian?" she snarled. "Aren't you going to introduce us?"

I had no idea where Cynthia was but she was somewhere in the house. I had heard her come in with Ian and that was why I had moved out to the garden. Eva was so angry, her voice loud and penetrating, that Cynthia, like me, wherever she was in the house, must be hearing every word.

I picked up and cuddled a frightened Grace to me. Eva didn't recognize me at first as Ian came running out of the open French window doors to the patio and gardens.

"You go out the other way," Ian said angrily, taking Eva by the arm. "I said we'll discuss this tomorrow after I speak with Gordon and my father."

Eva suddenly stopped as if she had been struck. She turned and looked at me, her mouth open in shock. She took in my long, flowery, summer dress, my white, low heel sandals and my beautifully cut hair. She stared aghast at the little girl holding onto me so tightly.

“Nicholas?” she said in a low whisper. “Nicholas? Is that you?”

“Jessica,” said Ian huskily as I was speechless in the shock of seeing her. “You ought to know that. You named her.”

Eva’s face lit up for a moment and she began to laugh, laugh with delight as I could only stand there and quiver in shame at the look in her eyes.

“Oh, this is too rich,” Eva chortled. She turned to Ian. “And are you tapping my little brother? You are, aren’t you? And where does she come from?” She nodded at Grace. She laughed again. “Don’t tell me he got you pregnant?”

On those last words, Cynthia came to join us in the garden. She knew Eva but Eva didn’t know Ian was engaged to Cindy until a furious Ian made the introduction and put his arm through hers. Cindy took his hand off her and gave him a distinctly frosty look.

“He’s engaged to you?” Eva asked in surprise as she glanced at a trembling me before her eyes went back to Cynthia’s large engagement ring. The implication was very clear. She seemed to have guessed that Ian was engaged to Cynthia while he was sleeping with me.

“Mommy,” said Grace. “I tired.”

“It is your naptime, isn’t it, darling,” I said in my most feminine voice. I tried to smile at the stiff faces about me. I didn’t correct Grace on what she called me. “Excuse me, will you, while I put my little girl to bed.”

I think Eva’s face was the most contorted, she was probably in shock, as I left them there, a group of statues, and fled with Grace to the safety of our third floor rooms. I lay on my own bed as I listened to Grace talk-

ing to herself as she settled down and finally went to sleep. She had loved mommy's pretty dress. She loved her 'pretty mommy', loved my dangling earrings and my lovely perfume. She was going to be a Mommy, just like me.

I lay back on my frilly bed, shaking nervously at the strange thoughts swirling through my mind. I could become a woman, I knew. I could with my new money. I tortured myself by dreaming about Ian and myself. No, I could never become his mistress. Not after Eva had finished with me. What a story she would have for the newspapers. I shook as I imagined picking up the Sunday papers and finding myself spread all over the center pages. I imagined the headlines, "My brother: Pretty in Pink," and the photographs Eva would have to accompany the story.

If Eva needed money, I didn't doubt she would sell me out. What was worst of all was that she would sell Ian out too, and Grace. And all because of me and my perverted desires. Oh, why did I ever listen to her? There must be something wrong with me. No real boy would ever have allowed himself to be dressed up for a ball in the first place. How many lives I had wrecked, I thought unhappily, and started to cry.

That was when Ian came quietly into my room and found me. "Well, that was an afternoon and a half," he said, distressing me more by lying on the bed beside me.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry," I wept, pulling away from him a little. "You were only trying to be kind ..."

"I want to make love to you," Ian said gruffly, reaching out and touching my waist and hip but I remained still and kept apart from him.

“And all I do is cause trouble for you,” I went on, trembling as I tried to ignore what he had said. “I have to get away from you and Cindy before Eva wrecks your lives as well as mine.”

“My sister-in-law is not going to wreck my life,” Ian said with a slight smile. I didn’t get it. He kissed my cheek gently and I felt myself stirring with the same emotions I always felt when he touched me. I felt so girlish and so enjoyed the feeling, wanting him to take me but I knew he couldn’t, not now. He had had his time with me. He proved my belief true as he stopped kissing me.

“Cynthia has gone,” Ian said soberly, nodding when I turned to look at him in alarm, my skirts rustling so femininely as I moved. “Now we have a bigger problem, my darling girl. We have to face Eva. Let me tell you that she is not going to ruin your life or Grace’s.”

“But Eva knows,” I protested shakily, tremors and excitement running through me as what he was saying to me slowly filtered through to me. Cindy was gone? For good? Ian stood up and pulled me after him. I smoothed down my dress, while he smiled at me. I nervously ran my fingers through my layered hair as Ian took me in his arms and kissed me, really kissed me. I melted willingly, in ecstasy, into his arms. I would have done anything for him but what he wanted me to do was to go down to the living room to meet my fate.

Eva openly leered as I entered hand-in-hand with Ian. “My, what a pair of girlie-men,” she sneered. “Can’t make it with real women? Or were you really gay all the time?”

Ian was instantly furious. I could feel it in the way he held on to me so wonderfully tightly. "Jessica is twice the woman you are any day," he snarled.

"In bed, too?" Eva asked, her lip curling.

"Especially in bed," Ian answered. I could sense the violence building in him.

"Please, Eva," I had to cut in before he hit her in her sneering mouth. "It's not like that at all. Ian isn't telling you the truth. He's just repeating what you're accusing him of. He isn't tapping me and I'm not in his bed."

"Then what?" Eva asked, indicating my dress and hair. I could sense that Ian was looking down at me in shock. He wanted to confront my sister with his love for me, he told me later. I loved him even more when he said that and appropriately rewarded him at the time. Then, I just wanted to save him from being savaged in the newspapers.

I gave Eva a fast, abbreviated history of Mom, Grace and me. "She's my sister?" asked a startled Eva.

I told her about Mom dieing and how the only job I could get was as a waitress.

"Thanks to you," I said and her eyes slitted. "I would never have thought that I could dress like a woman if you hadn't taught me and there's the thing you did to my eyebrows. They've never grown back."

She actually grinned at me. "Alec is like that," she said. "Sometimes, it works too well."

"It made life very embarrassing for me," I explained. "I was humiliated by everyone wherever I went for a job. I should have given up Grace to Social Welfare. But I thought it was important that she be brought up by family. Would you like to take her?"

“Me?” Eva asked in total surprise. I had her un-snarky attention for the first time.

“If Ian hadn’t had a conscience and brought me here from Lower Gunning, I’d likely be dead,” I told her. “Grace would be in a foster home.” Ian pulled me to him, still holding my hand, his other arm about me possessively as Eva smiled at us, knowingly.

“I am the reason you didn’t get your money sooner, Eva,” I told her, smoothing my dress beneath me, loving the feminine touches I felt, loving even more, the touch of Ian’s hand on me. “All the beneficiaries had to sign the right documents for the money to be issued. I just did it after Ian brought us back to Moston. He thinks it’s his fault I’ve been dressing like a girl. He wouldn’t believe me when I told him it was your fault.”

Eva was about to protest but I persisted. “I know, of course, that it’s really all my fault,” I told her. “Anyway, it’s over now, isn’t it? You can take Grace. I can get out of everyone’s hair, get my hair cut, get back into jeans and a t-shirt and try my hand at something else.”

Eva gaped at me. “You’re still holding hands,” she sneered. “You were holding hands when you came in.”

“Ian had to pull me in here to face you,” I said anxiously. “I really didn’t want to, not, not dressed like this. Now that Cynthia’s gone, though, I can change back.”

“Grace called you Mommy,” Eva said obstinately, frowning as she stared at me. I tried to move out of Ian’s grip upon me but I couldn’t break it. He was insisting on still holding me as if I was a woman.

“She’s started doing that because of the other children she plays with,” I said, my nerves still fluttering as she stared at me. “She normally calls me Nick or Nicky.”

Eva stared at me and then she came over to me and raised my dress, seeing my stockings, my garter belt and my panties as well as my slip. I flushed scarlet and fought to push down my dress while she touched my padded chest.

“Well done, little brother,” Eva said pointedly. “You almost had me fooled. You shouldn’t wear Ravishing Red and French perfume and tell me you’re not a drag queen.” She stared at a tense, seething Ian beside me. “So you brought my femmy little brother into your house all out of the goodness of your heart?”

“No,” Ian said thickly. “I’m gay, remember?”

Eva threw back her head and laughed her nasty laugh. “Yes, I know, that’s the biggest lie yet,” she said. “And no, Nicholas, I don’t want to raise my half-sister. That’s what she is, right? You can go on playing Mommy. Ian can go on playing Daddy, too. But I will take my money. And I think it will be a hoot if you’re a bridesmaid at my wedding.”

“Wedding?” I gasped. “But it’s Ian and Cynthia who ... Oh!”

Eva smiled while Ian grimaced angrily at her. “I very much doubt that,” Eva said smugly. “Not after the way she stormed out of here, convinced that Ian here was really Grace’s father. She was going over to Jeff Brady’s house where she spent this last weekend, according to her.”

I looked at Ian. He nodded and took a ring from his pocket.

“Oh, come on,” said Eva in disgust. “You can’t give Jessica that one. She deserves a new ring and I have to her bridesmaid, too. After all, I only came back to Moston in the first place to marry Gordon. Who knew,” she smiled at me, “that we’d be sisters-in-law.” That set her off in another huge laugh.

Ian looked at me, his face shadowed. “I was not going to propose to you with this ring,” he said to me, staring at Eva angrily.

“Oh, this is too rich,” mocked my sister while I squirmed and flushed under her searching gaze. “My little brother, a blushing bride.”

“Ignore her,” said Ian furiously. “She only came back for the money.”

“Of which there’s precious little unless we sell some paintings,” said Eva, her humor turning to anger. “Jane Elgart said that there were seventeen paintings on the list she made with Dad, which are all sold, but she had ten or more unsigned ones.”

“We are working on that,” Ian said thickly. “Your father was giving them away to settle his bar bills, like one I have in my study.”

Eva cut him off, walking away to Ian’s study. We trailed after her. Ian took the time to hug me, exhilarating me. “I was glad to see Cindy go,” he whispered. “I really didn’t know how to tell her that I wasn’t going to marry her. She thought I was using you to make her jealous. And she was, jealous of you.”

Jealous of me? I thought wildly. No, that was exactly how I had felt. I had been womanly jealous of her. Ian paused with me for a moment. We kissed in the hallway. Eva looked back and caught us. I actually didn’t care. I didn’t pay any attention to the nasty things

she said as Ian kissed me, making me feel like a woman. I wanted so badly to be his woman.

We had to follow Eva to the paintings, however. I stood there trembling as Ian held me as she looked at them. Her lips clamped together as she went up to the Desperation painting first and studied the signature.

"It's Dad's writing all right," she said, going to the other.

I felt the heat rising in me again and my hands began to shake as I saw the smirk on her face. Ian looked at me in puzzlement as he felt my hands quivering. I hadn't thought that Eva ever took any interest in painting but the way she studied Resolution made it clear she knew. She smiled as she saw the unsigned Reconciliation.

"It's his signature but it isn't his painting," Eva declared while Ian gasped beside me. "No wonder he gave them away. Is this what you and Elgart are passing off as my father's work?"

I thought Ian looked like he had been poleaxed. "They're forgeries?" he asked incredulously, looking at my flushed, guilty face. He let go my hand, went to the side drawer of his desk and pulled out a catalogue. "Those two were authenticated by five different art experts, besides Jane, who got them directly from him."

"My father never used acrylics," said Eva, laughing again, looking at me in my dress and newly shaped hair. I felt like a small boy with his hand caught in the cookie jar.

" 'A departure from all his usual trends'," read Ian. " 'Walton incorporates acrylics ... creative explosion of color ... his drawing, a talent unknown ... beautifully

rendered here at the end of his life ... this outburst ... brought about by the desertion of his wife ...'."

"Rubbish," said Eva and I agreed with her. "He thought acrylics were a fad. He'd never have used them. Nicky was the one who used acrylics."

Ian stared at me and saw the nervousness in my face. It took him a moment or two to make the connection. "You-You painted these?" he asked me in a choked voice.

What could I say with Eva gloating at me? I nodded. "S-Sorry, Eva," I said, holding onto to Ian's hand. "I didn't want to s-say anything and take away your inheritance. S-Sorry there'll be no money for you now."

Her face was a picture in itself. Ian's wasn't much different. They were both looking at me in horror.

XIII. AFTERDINNER MINTS

"Eva and Gordon, the couple who left us together way back when, remember them," Ian said bitterly as I creamed my face and put on my nightie to go to bed with my future husband. "It appears it is on again. He says that they will be getting married this time and guess who Eva wants to be her bridesmaid."

I couldn't believe it. "She didn't come to Longview really for that," I said.

"No," he agreed. "Someone phoned her about us in the pub. She came to get the paintings and cut Jane Elgart out."

I swallowed hard.

"The inheritance thing was my way of getting you out of that ugly form of existence you were sinking into," said Ian. "You don't need an inheritance. I would spend every penny I have on you, you know, to make you happy if you would let me."

"Cynthia?" I asked nervously.

Ian shrugged and put his hand in his pocket. He took out the ring she had been wearing even that afternoon. "She said she was relieved to give it back to me. It was really only my money that she liked about me. And if I was cheating on her now, what would it be like when we married? And, of course, she's right."

Ian pulled me tighter to him and kissed my moist cheek very tenderly, giving me goose bumps at the casual way he treated me as if I was his woman. "I won't and can't give you up, even if you are," he paused and grinned at me, "a truly great artist."

My future husband kissed me and my padded breasts bumped into his chest as he moved in on me, his hands on my hips. "We do have to do something about those," he said as he kissed me while I surrendered to him completely.

I had my T and A work done just a week before I was a bridesmaid, in pink, at Eva's wedding. Ian was the best man for his brother and I got to meet his parents for the first time. They adored Grace who was at her precocious best. Luckily, we had Kate there to cope with her and so I was able to talk to them about Ian's plans for us to marry in three months in the South of

France, having a holiday-honeymoon and wedding combined.

They were delighted that Ian was adopting Grace and giving her his name. "Our first grandchild," cooed Mrs Pennington. "This is the way to do it, you know. Not painful at all, like the other way."

Eva kept me on edge the whole time. She'd come over for 'girl talk' several times, fascinated that I was being a woman for Ian in every way I could. "He really is tapping you?" she asked in one of our talks. "You let him get inside you?"

I was as pink as the dress she had had me try on to be her bridesmaid. "He makes me feel I'm a woman," I agreed.

I didn't tell her that I had started hormones, very large doses that left me woozy at times and very demanding of my very patient lover. My paintings in the little studio Ian had set up for me in the renovated attic verged on the erotic. I had hidden them away until he found them and brought some to our bedroom, 'for inspiration', he said, as if he needed any.

I was going to get my breasts and hips done before the wedding so that the low cut dress Eva had chosen specially for me would be showing all me and, when Ian ran his hands over my hips, or my chest, it would be all me that he felt. I didn't tell her that I had promised my lover that I would wear a bikini for him on my honeymoon.

"I can't believe it," Eva said for the tenth time. "My real sister won't come to my wedding and my brother, my bridesmaid, will likely outshine me on my wedding day."

Ian had arranged an 'inheritance' for her so that she wasn't totally beholden to Gordon for money which was another reason why she was so happy. Dad's 'new' art work, mine, Ian had made Jane Elgart acknowledge as done by Preston's son. She and Ian had started buying back those already sold but, it was strange, many collectors had refused their offers, saying they liked what they had and expected that Nicholas Walton would soon eclipse his father. Jane was pressing Ian to find me, Nicholas Walton, off somewhere on a round the world trip, gathering in new experiences, as Ian told her.

"I only hate the snide remarks you'll have to endure when we meet Eva," Ian said as he kissed me and draped my legs about his as we lay in bed together. "That's why I am glad we're not even going to be living on the same continent as Eva and Gordy." They were going to settle in America, Gordon had said, looking after family investments there, when his riding and racing days over.

I could have set up as an artist after all, I realized, as Ian began to stroke my legs and stockings and I let him. He moved on me, kissing me as I thought how I could be away from him and set myself up properly as the son of my father, as I was meant to be. Then, his hands eased my panties from me and I gave myself to him, as he stroked my hair and told me he loved me and wanted me to be his wife.

It was a far better offer than being a struggling artist.

XIV. A GENEROUS TIP

There were no snide remarks as I helped my sister get married and demurely carried her flowers and mine to the wedding car. The low-cut dress showed off my new attributes which now had no soreness and were inspiring my fiancé to new heights of passion and ecstasy in our bedroom. The delicate touch of silk on my smooth legs was exactly what I wanted to feel as my dress swirled so delightfully about me. Delicious feelings of feminine daintiness and love for Ian rolled through me all through the ceremonies. I flushed as Eva looked at me and once mouthed, 'This will be you very soon!'.

Ian waited till our wedding night three months later, after I had been proclaimed as his wife, to tell me that he loved me and how much he loved me in my white wedding dress, my figure rounded in all the right places. That night he proved how much he loved me, again and again. I had been anxious that he would not realize how much I had changed through using hormones. I wanted to be feminine. I wanted to be girlish. I wanted to be womanly for him. I loved it when his hands caressed my rounded buttocks and he kissed my breasts ardently as if he would never stop.

I wanted him inside me, trembling and shuddering with no longer suppressed emotions each time he ran his hands between my legs and parted me for his thrusts and attacks. My mouth was as usual swollen after his intense attentions. I wore the skimpiest of female lingerie as he loved taking me with my garter belt and stockings on, fondling my soft chest mounds, my nipples so hard with desire and passion for him.

When I changed into a black, string bikini, my augmented thighs, hips and tush so perfectly female, he didn't want me to go on the beach where other men could ogle me. He kept me occupied for hours in our chalet, in 'woman's work', until hunger forced us out. I finally got to show myself off to the world as a shapely woman. I loved the attention I got, the way men looked at me so approvingly. I loved the way Ian looked so tense and jealous of other men as I appraised them frankly and wondered aloud what kind of lovers they would be.

My husband didn't even like the way the waiter ogled me as I kept my wrap demurely about my rounded posterior as we women did in the resort. He didn't like the way the man had looked at my high, rounded breasts, barely covered by my bikini top. He knew I couldn't wait to get down onto the beach where I could take it off. I told him sweetly how much I was looking forward to that.

"I remember the last time you got angry with the server in a restaurant," I said with downcast eyes as our server went nervously away, his admiration for me as a pretty woman in a bikini giving me a warm, elated feeling.

"So?" Ian said, a little puzzled.

"I'm feeling awfully jealous," I murmured.

"Jealous," he asked, frowning as only Ian can.
"Why? What of?"

"Well, if he hears you and drops soup in your lap," I smiled at my husband, "will you want to marry him as you did the last server who did that to you?"

*****end*****