Felix Beswicke was a closet cross-dresser who hit the jackpot: a girlfriend who knew his secret and wanted to help. But within her offer to teach him the ways of women lay the promise of... murder.
Dedication

*Time*...

(Use it well, my friends)

*Amanda Hawkins*

Ticking away the moments that make up a dull day
Fritter and waste the hours in an off-hand way
Kicking around on a piece of ground…
Waiting for someone to show you the way

Every year is getting shorter,
ever seem to find the time
Hanging on in quiet desperation…
The time is gone, the song is over…

*Home, home again*
I like to be here when I can
When I come home cold and tired
It’s good to warm my bones beside the fire
Far away, across the field
The tolling of the iron bell
Calls the faithful to their knees
To hear the softly spoken magic spell

(With thanks and apologies to Pink Floyd)
ONE

My new face arrived in a box. Serena opened it with the kind of reverence usually reserved for uncovering artifacts in a pharaoh’s tomb. She ran her finger down the cheek. “Check out that finish,” she said. “Soft as a baby’s butt.”

I stroked the nose. It was indeed soft. Actually, it felt like the real thing. How did they even do that? The mask was the result of our visit to a special effects shop in Vancouver, two weeks before. They catered to the movie industry, but Serena had arranged for us to have casts made of our faces—and based on the resulting molds they designed a prosthetic disguise for each of us. This particular ultra-thin latex mask would fit only me, and with its raised cheeks, full mouth and sculpted eyebrows, it would make me look like someone else. A female someone.

“You won’t need foundation,” Serena said. “Or blusher, or finishing powder—or contouring, for that matter. It’s subtle, as makeup should be, but it’s all there.”

“Lucky me,” I said, sort-of meaning it and sort-of not. The eyes and the mouth hadn’t been colored. Those were things a woman would want to personalize.

“Believe me, it’s a time-saver.” Her mask was just as sophisticated as this one, but with a squarer face, bushy brows and day-old stubble—or so I’d been told. She didn’t want me to see what it looked like—her box remained closed. What I did know was that it didn’t look me like. Nor did my future face resemble Serena’s. The artists at Studio F/X had begun with old photographs of my mother, mixed in various aspects of my old girlfriends, and then balanced the left and right halves, because a symmetric face is a beautiful face.

I shivered. For the first time I realized that not only was this going to happen, but it might even work out the way Serena wanted it to. I wanted it to work too, but I was less eager than she was to present myself to her and the public in general as a member of the opposite sex. Then again, on a more basic level I had to admit that it was certainly exciting. A cross-dresser’s dream come true.

Serena teased the prosthetic from its base, leaving behind what looked like a death mask of my old self. In a way, that’s exactly what it was, if you think of my masculine identity as being on the chopping block. At least temporarily.

Serena coated the back of the mask with a liquid adhesive. I lay on the bed and she applied it to my face. “Hold still,” she said, smoothing out the edges and adjusting
the fit around my eyes. “We’ve only got a minute or so.”

“Hww lnnng,” I said, without moving my lips.

She frowned. “I just—oh. You mean, until you can take it off?” She tucked the mouthpiece under my lips. “I’d give it at least twenty-four hours. Any earlier and you risk damaging the mask—not to mention your skin. Your so-called beard won’t grow much under there, so I’d say you’re good for two or three days.”

I rolled my eyes. I’d just shaved, twice, but the thought of stubble trying to poke through that perfect pearly finish was almost obscene. The Y-chromosome had a lot to answer for.

“Relax your mouth. Let the glue set.” She patted down my nose and ran her fingers outward across both cheeks, then over my jawline and down my throat to where the mask merged seamlessly with my torso—a perfect match for my skintone. “The mouthpiece is a solid piece of memory foam. It’s soft enough to move with your lips, when you’re talking or whatever, but when you relax it pulls your mouth into a slight smile. Nothing over the top,” she added, with a smile of her own, “just a coy little upturn. It’s the sort of expression we women are trained to make from the time we’re little girls.”

That was news to me. I studied her face. It was true; she was often one to smile, at least when she was around me. I wouldn’t think she’d need that kind of assistance, but maybe her mask was different.

She must have noticed my puzzlement. “I’m not criticizing. Mine does the same thing, only it forces my mouth into a straight line. A man who always smiles would make people wonder. They’d probably think I was drunk.” She moved to dresser and opened a second box from Studio F/X.

I knew what was coming. I shrugged out of my bathrobe and lay back down. The skin of my chest was clean, dry and utterly hairless. The rest of my body was the same way, as of an hour ago; ready to be transformed.

Serena peeled the breast forms from their bases and painted the back of each with the same liquid adhesive. She applied them to my chest, careful to center each one on the nipple, and to orient them so that each mirrored the other. I held them in place while she smoothed the edges, and kept holding them while Serena installed my womanhood.

With testicles tucked up into my abdomen and my manhood—such as it was—encased in a sleeve that forced it back between my legs, she glued the final prosthetic into place and slicked down the edges. I didn’t need to look; I knew what the result was. To the naked eye, I was female.
Serena ran her fingers over the neatly trimmed triangle of hair that framed my new sex. She smiled. “Looks like Felicia’s back. And this time, she means business.”

Talk like that would usually arouse me, but not this time. The drug she’d injected into my groin, just before my shower, had worked its magic and my little friend remained flaccid. It wasn’t chemical castration, as such, because my libido wasn’t affected—far from it—and the effects, she assured me, were temporary. Although exactly how temporary remained to be seen.

Boyshort panties and a minimizer bra landed on the bed. “Get dressed,” she said. “You’re expected at the salon.”

*

I shuffled down the hotel’s ornate hallway, wearing a basic white blouse, a pair of Serena’s sweatpants, and her ballet slippers. My longish hair, still moist from the shower, barely tickled my collar. I wasn’t likely to turn any heads looking like this, nor did I want to. Fading into the Victorian woodwork seemed like a much better plan. Mercifully, the elevator was empty.

Our suite was on the fifth floor of The Empress, Victoria’s venerable waterfront hotel that dated back, almost, to the turn of the nineteenth century. The beauty parlor was located in the basement, along with a handful of upmarket boutiques offering ladies wear, jewelry, and even cosmetics. Everything a guy like me might need to turn himself into a stylish woman—were it not for the fact that everything I’d be wearing had already been acquired. What wasn’t waiting for me upstairs was prepped and ready to rock in the salon.

“I explained the whole thing to them,” Serena had said, before pushing me out the door. “They’re into it. Heck, one of ‘em even read the book. They’ll turn you into the kind of classy dame a guy like me could really fall for. Now get going.”

Entering Turning Heads was like stepping onto an alien planet; a world of women with sharp eyes and suspicious minds. A planet where anything male was about as welcome as a stray mutt in a room full of persians—cats, that is. I would’ve done a runner right then and there, but the girl at the desk briskly took hold of my arm. She made it look casual, but it didn’t feel that way.

“You must be Felix Beswicke. Your lady friend told us about your ‘date’.” She guided me deep into the salon, past a row of styling chairs and long mirrors on both walls. The space was smaller than it looked. “We all think it’s so awesome that a man would do this for the woman he loves.”

A blonde with a blunt bob-cut smirked at me. “Gotta be the ultimate gift, right?”
The brunette holding my elbow nodded. “So true. Not many guys would agree to be transformed into a woman just so his girlfriend could be the man for a change. It’s kind of romantic, don’t you think?”

I was obliged to agree, omitting the part where Serena had to talk me into it. As for my prior history of cross-dressing, that was neither here nor there.

The brunette sat me down at the end of the row—in full view of the entire staff and three other customers—and introduced herself as Bethany. “Your girlfriend gave us the extensions I’ll be applying—and a very nice set it is. Real human hair from one of those donate-your-drapes charities, pre-dyed to match the color of your own hair. Doesn’t get any better than that.”

She didn’t have to tell me. I attended the event with Serena and had to listen to her go on and on about one young lady with gorgeously thick hair halfway down her back, who was donating most of it to the cause. It’s true that the charity often received more hair than it could use, and that the extra was sold on the sly to help cover wig-making costs, but Serena had wanted that exact head of hair and she paid through the nose to get it. It cost even more for a wig-maker to dye the hair and turn it into proper hair-extension wefts. That was a lot of trouble to go to for a nice head of hair. I’d have been satisfied with an off-the-shelf wig, or synthetic extensions, but Serena had high standards.

“She also left this,” Bethany said, brandishing a small spray-bottle with a doctor’s prescription label. “Apparently it tightens the vocal chords, which raises the pitch of your voice, by as much as two octaves. Looks like you’ll be singin’ soprano in the ladies choir for awhile. Isn’t that amazing? Open wide.”

I’m not sure why I complied. She was pretty and I was used to doing what pretty girls told me to do; maybe it was that simple. I felt a frigid spritz and the back of my throat went numb. What the hell—?

She gave it another squirt, then set the bottle aside. “Don’t try to talk,” she said. “You might do yourself some damage. A couple hours oughta do it.”

I picked up the bottle and scanned the label. It was from Serena’s doctor. Two hours or risk tearing the vocal chords. Great. The effects should wear off in two to three days; five at the outside. Terrific. Dressing up now and then was one thing, but to effectively become a woman for days on end? Color me terrified.

Bethany blow-dried my hair and set about sectioning it. The custom-made wefts would be added one layer at a time, fused as close to the scalp as possible, then interleaved with my natural hair. When it was done, no one would be able to tell where one left off and the other began. Barring of course a close encounter with some busybody wielding a magnifying glass.
While she worked, Bethany told the other women about ‘the book’. She focused mostly on the storyline, which seemed to me to be a pretty run-of-the-mill murder mystery, but it wasn’t the plot that had caught Serena’s interest. What got her all fired up was the backstory. Even I had to admit it was pretty inventive.

The place: London, England. The time: the early ‘80s. A childless couple, with good jobs in the City and enough cash to purchase a second property in a mid-sized town a two-hour drive from London. It was a two-bedroom flat on the top floor of a small apartment building. The couple visited the place only once: to ensure the furniture they’d ordered had arrived and that the place was livable. Then they went home.

Bethany kept tugging on my hair, straightening each layer before attaching a long brunette tress. The heat from the glue gun pricked at my scalp, reminding me that this was a serious upgrade to the procedure described in *Practice to Deceive*. The man in the book never went back to their small-town flat—but his alter ego sure did. Once, twice or even thrice a month, he would escape the City—usually after work on a Thursday or Friday—and stop at an inn along the way; never the same one twice in a row. He would prepay for the night—the better to leave without seeing anyone—and spend the evening transforming himself: shaving from head to toe, applying makeup and dressing himself in the clothes he’d brought—usually a fairly conservative skirt and blouse, but a cocktail dress wasn’t out of the question either. With breast forms and a pricey wig, he supposedly made quite a convincing woman. Sometimes he would depart late that same evening and arrive at the flat after midnight; on other occasions, he might stay in the room and dress the next morning. Either way, from the moment he put on his wig to the moment he took it off in yet another inn on Monday night, he wasn’t a man anymore. He was a *she*. He became Penelope.

People in the town knew Penelope as an attractive thirty-something woman who lived and worked in the City but preferred the slower pace of a small town. She was often joined by her ‘husband’, who was of course the cross-dressed wife of the couple that owned the flat. She did the same thing he did, staying at an inn and turning herself into quite a respectable-looking man. Sometimes the two of them would arrive at the flat together; on other occasions by themselves. Their visits usually encompassed a long weekend, but now and then they would stay for the following week as well. Ten solid days of cross-dressing.

Bethany removed the last of the bobby pins and wiped her hands. “All done. Let’s let it sit for awhile, ‘kay? Then I’ll start your blowout. How do you feel?” It was a trick question; she knew I wasn’t allowed to speak. She touched my shoulders. “Glad to hear it, luv. While you wait, Tiff here will do your nails.”
I submitted to a ‘gel’ manicure, wondering what Penelope would’ve made of the resulting set of almond-shaped fingernails. My hands were small compared to most men’s and the procedure left them shockingly female. I held them up to study the deep glossy red of Revlon’s Queen of Hearts polish. Was that what they were turning me into—the kind of woman who could break a man’s heart?

Tiffany took the opportunity to give my toenails the same treatment. Penelope had often painted her nails, but kept them relatively short so as to switch back and forth between male and female with a minimum of fuss. That certainly wasn’t the case here; Serena seemed to be intent on using maximum fuss to turn me into an incredibly realistic woman. It might’ve been a different story if we were doing this twice a month, but for a one-off like this I figured I could live with the hassle. Besides which, it was fun to be pampered.

Bethany set to work with an oversized hair dryer, again sectioning my hair to add waves down the length of each tress and curls to the ends. I imagined myself as Kate Middleton undergoing the same procedure, and the style that emerged wasn’t entirely dissimilar. Chestnut brown hair with a few highlights for definition; to make the waves show up better against a dark background.

Penelope would be jealous, I thought idly, staring at the mirror. In the book she had the right size to pass as a tall woman, and so did I—but with this hair and the mask that had altered my face, I was headed for the kind of glamour that a housewife type like her could only dream about.

Glamour. That’s when it really hit me what was happening. I had been turned into feminine eye candy; the kind of femme fatale that would set the male heart racing. Was that what I wanted? God help me—it was.

“Hard to believe this is a mask,” Bethany said, running her finger along the curve of my jaw. “But, seeing is believing. I bet Penelope would think she’d died and gone to heaven.” She pulled a face. “Too bad she didn’t live long enough to see high-tech stuff like this, huh?”

I could only nod. Penelope was the victim at the center of the murder mystery, and the discovery that she wasn’t who she seemed had thrown the whole town into a very British tizzy. I hoped my outcome would be a little less drastic.

“I won’t spoil the ending,” Bethany told the other girls. “Obviously, her ‘husband’ was the main suspect, especially after they found out who ‘he’ really was. But, you know… it’s never that simple.”

The blonde with the bob-cut shook her head. “It’s so cool, what they were doing.” She studied herself in the mirror. “I bet I could pull that off… don’t ya think? I wouldn’t mind being the guy now and then.”
“A really small guy,” Tiffany said, flashing a fake smile.

“I could bulk up a bit, with padding. Wear lifts. Fix me up with one of those masks and a dark beard… I’d probably look like my dad.” She sounded intrigued.

Bethany sat beside me with a tray full of cosmetics. “Begs the question why.”

“Same reason she’s doing it,” the blonde said, nodding at mirror-me.

“It’s romantic,” Bethany said. She leaned closer and turned my head from side to side. “You certainly don’t need foundation or blush or any of that. Most of the work’s done… I’ll just finish off around your mouth and eyes.”

The blonde added, “It’s the thrill of the chase. Guys have to do all the work, but it must be such a rush when they get what they’re after. I mean, everything’s better when you have to work for it, right?”

“Okay, that’s why you’d do it,” Tiffany said, “but what about the guy? He goes from predator to prey. What’s in it for him?” They all looked at me.

All I could do was shrug. Even if I could talk, I’d never be able to explain to these women what it was like for a guy like me to dress up and become one of them, if only for a short while. The lure of forbidden fruit? A taste of something so exotic it might as well be from an alien planet? They’d never understand. To become what you admire most—who could resist that? Especially for someone like me, who didn’t exactly cut a manly figure (far from it) and whose self-esteem could only be described as ‘lacking’. That, they might be able to grasp.

The blonde rolled her eyes. “Some guys aren’t so good at ‘chasing’. For someone like that, I could see the appeal in letting somebody else do the work for a change. No offense,” she added, before returning to her client.

None taken. I was under no illusion about my masculine attributes, such as they were. They’d been far too easily buried under layers of silicone and latex, and the gorgeously long locks of a young woman who’d given her all for charity. When your masculinity is so easily replaced with feminine refinements, it’s but a short jump to—hey buddy, maybe you were already sort of a woman to begin with. Seeing myself in the mirror, a pretty face framed by that gorgeously feminine hair, I could hardly deny the possibility.

“It’s amazing,” Bethany murmured, “I can’t find the edge of the mask, even when I know it’s there. It’s hidden in the slight fold under your eyes, and in the crease where your eyelid folds back when it opens.” She applied primer to my closed lids and under my brows, then spread black eye shadow to the outer corner and into the crease. “Smoky adds a touch of mystery,” she said, blending the shadow and feathering the corners. A lighter shade gilded the area under my eyebrows.
I turned the notion over in my mind. Being a woman of mystery certainly piqued my interest, but more to the point: I had been turned into a woman with enough innate beauty, and even style, to overcome the limitations of my male body. My lips twitched into a smile. Perhaps this was what confidence felt like.

Bethany ran a gel liner as close as she could to my lashline, top and bottom, then smudged it and blended it into the eye shadow. “That’s the smoky effect,” she declared. “Everything bleeds into everything else.” She stroked a volumizing mascara through my quivering lashes: *Maneater Voluptuous*, from Tarte.

I thought about Penelope, alone in her motel room, turning herself into a woman without the aid of prosthetics, human hair extensions and the practiced hand of a beautician. Everyone in that small town thought she was the real thing, born and raised. What would the people up in the lobby think about me? That’s where I was bound, following a return to the suite to change clothes.

Bethany had lined my lips and was in the midst of applying lipstick and lip gloss when my phone chimed. “Not until I’m done,” she ordered. She finished coloring my mouth with Revlon’s ‘super lustrous’ *Cherries in the Snow* and gave me a quick facial with a setting spray, before whipping the cape away. I was done.

It was a text from Serena: *Im leavN room now. Cum ^ & get dressed. CU in lobby. Stay in character! I mean it! Or else! Luv, S.*

As Holmes might say, the game was afoot.

* 

I strolled down the corridor with a newfound lightness to my step. I was dressed as plain-jane as before and my hair was pulled back into a loose pony, but I knew now I could pass as a woman to any and all comers. No one could possibly gaze upon the face I’d seen in the mirror and believe that its owner was anything but female. It’s strange how confidence can sneak up on you. Spend your whole life without it and then all of a sudden there it is—lifting your feet, straightening your back and giving your hair a shake, all the while knowing that everything is just as it should be. What a feeling!

Our suite was empty, as I knew it would be. Serena’s suitcase was stowed in the closet, along with the Studio F/X boxes. The clothing I was to wear was laid out on the bed. All that remained of my girlfriend was a small jewelry box, which she had given to ‘Felicia’ with her blessings. What a gal.

I discarded the clothes I was wearing, including the undies Serena had given me earlier. Too much ‘boy’ and not enough ‘girl’ for this gal.
A movement caught my eye. Across the room, a woman stood watching me. Her figure wasn’t the absolute best I’d ever seen—in photos, at least—but even so… she was beautiful. She had delicate features and a thick mane of brunette hair trailing over one shoulder, along with clear skin, pert breasts and a neat triangle of pubic hair. Her chin lifted, as if daring me to find fault.

Yes, obviously, I was looking into another mirror. Of course, she was me.

For a long moment I stood, transfixed. How could this be? I had awoken that very morning as Felix, and Felix was male, however imperfect. But now I gazed upon Felicia, in all her glory, and Felicia was female—with no visible imperfections. Oh sure, her waist could stand to lose a couple inches, but the technology was at hand to fix that. Otherwise…

I licked my lips and she did the same.

I gave my head a shake. Time to put Felix out of my mind. The dude was a dweeb. The blonde was right—what kind of guy would willingly let his girlfriend turn him into a woman? A real man wouldn’t do that. So maybe he wasn’t a man after all. Deep down, maybe I’d been Felicia all along.

I stepped into a pair of low-rise hipster panties, in black silk. They fit snugly over my lady bits, leaving me with a classic camel-toe. Nothing male remained, which I found both terrifying and strangely reassuring. I sat on the bed and slid my legs into a pair of nude pantyhose, gently working them up over my hips. Then I strapped myself into an underwire demi-bra, also in black silk.

It’s amazing what a bit of lingerie can do for a woman. I felt even more feminine than before, if that was possible. Still, if there’s one thing I’ve learned as a cross-dresser, it’s that there’s no such thing as ‘too feminine’. I picked up the waist trainer Serena had chosen—which promised ‘instant hourglass curves’, no less, using flexible steel rods—and wrapped it around my middle. I stood up, sucked in my tummy and managed to fasten the double row of hooks in the front before passing out. Phew.

I paced around the suite for a minute or two, getting used to not being able to breathe. After that, it wasn’t so bad. The tight black fabric really did move with my body, like the blurb said. I was able to bend just enough to slip into a pair of high-heeled sandals and, perched awkwardly on the bed, fasten the ankle straps. The things we gals do for love.

The final item on the bed was a black silk slip. I picked it up and let the cool fabric slither between my fingers, like liquid glass. An amazingly feminine garment for my amazingly feminine self. I pulled it over my head, stood up and let it flutter to a stop just shy of my knees. Deep breath, Felicia.
The dress my wife had selected for me was hanging in the closet. It was a cocktail-length bridesmaid dress; black lace over a satin underlay. In fact, I’d been informed it was the same dress Serena had worn for a friend’s wedding, which was before she met me. I suspected she got a kick out of turning her boyfriend into a bridesmaid, but so what? The dress was gorgeous.

I wiggled through the open back, slid my arms into the bodice and reached behind my neck to fasten the keyhole. Tugging at the hem, I stared into the mirror. The result was beyond amazing. The girl was lovely…

I shook my hair loose. Long tresses spilled across my shoulders. Red lips parted. “Oh my…” I blinked, almost in shock. It was a female voice, of that there could be no question. “Is that… is this what I sound like now?”

_Double oh-my._ Her voice was every bit as soft and silky as her hair, or the lingerie that hugged her graceful curves. How could this be? A simple throat spray; two or three squirts and then _this_? Was it really possible to change someone’s voice so drastically? Or—interesting thought—had the spray simply _fixed_ some masculine defect in the way Felix spoke? Which would make _this_ my true voice.

“Oh, come _on,_” I said out loud, “You’re a woman, aren’t you? This is how you’re _supposed_ to sound.” _Why,_ I thought despairingly, did I have to keep reminding myself who I was? Just _go_ with it!

I gave my head a shake and applied a hairbrush to my tresses.

Finally, I opened the jewelry box and picked through what was on offer, feeling just a bit naughty—like a little girl going through her mother’s things. A pair of silver tassel earrings caught my eye. They hung from simple hooks, but as of last month that wasn’t a problem. I removed a pair of dull-as-dirt studs and replaced them with tufts of three-inch glittering threads.

To that I added a double-loop serpentine chain, the dress watch I’d given to Serena for her birthday, a few bangles for my other wrist, and a birthstone ring for my right hand—all in sterling silver. It’s bad luck to wear a birthstone that isn’t your own, but the stone was an emerald and I was born in May. “Isn’t that strange,” I murmured, slipping the delicate band onto my ring finger. Serena was a Scorpio, six months out of sync. Why would she own a ring like this?

“It’s mine now,” I informed the mirror, smiling coyly. In fact, _all_ this was mine—the ring, the dress, the gorgeous hair, this wonderfully sculpted female body…

I spritzed myself with the perfume Serena had left on the dresser.

That simple act gave me pause. Serena had seen me wearing this mask, she’d chosen my hairstyle, she’d picked out the dress I was wearing, and now I even
smelled like her. She would have no trouble picking me out of a crowd, even if I had to share the lobby with a convention of catalog models. But—and here’s the kicker—I didn’t know a single thing about her!

It wasn’t really a surprise. This was her game, her rules. I wasn’t allowed to see her mask, and I didn’t know what she’d be wearing or what her hair would look like. All I knew is that she would be as thoroughly disguised as a man as was I as a woman. But for me, there would be no picking him out of a crowd. I didn’t even know what name she’d chosen. And that was exactly the way she wanted it.

I picked up the clutch Serena had prepared. A glance confirmed that everything I might need was there: a lady’s wallet with cash and non-photo ID, in the name of Felicia Beswicke; cosmetics for simple repairs; kleenex, of course; a tampon with a plastic applicator, no doubt for veracity; and several small discs wrapped in plastic, emblazoned with the word ‘Trojan’. In my innocence I didn’t even realize what they were. Some sort of candy?

I added my room key to the mix, clicked the bag shut and headed for the door. It was time to commit to the role. ●
The lobby of The Empress wasn’t crowded, but it wasn’t exactly empty either. A busload of Asian tourists had arrived and were milling around the seating area like a gaggle of well-dressed geese. I wasn’t sure if they were guests or just passing through, but either way I wasn’t there to mingle.

I skirted the entrance to the tea room and made my way along a corridor lined with potted palms, eyeing the giant chandelier looming over the center of the lobby. I’d heard it was meant to call to mind a graceful fall of flower petals, but to me its misshapen oval sheets of crystal mesh—Swarovski crystal, no less—looked more like a spill of giant potato chips.

Where, I wondered, was I to meet the man my girlfriend had become? The rules of the game didn’t go into that much detail. The lobby: that was all I knew. And the lobby was big. Depending on where you drew the line, it might encompass the tea room, the balcony that ringed the check-in area, and parts of the massive halls that led deep into the Edwardian interior of the hotel. I paused next to one of the huge golden pillars supporting the upper floors. God, what was I even doing here?

Rule number one: stay in character. So, what would Felicia do?

I gave my head a shake, feeling the swish of long hair across my upper arm. I was a single girl visiting Victoria, for the first time, with my cousin—who, alas, had just ditched me to spend the night with her former boyfriend. What would a real woman do then? Well, she certainly wouldn’t waste her time hanging out around here, staring at a bunch of overpriced Pringles. The night was young.

I pushed through the front door. Goosebumps arose on my forearms as cool air washed past. Beyond the ivy-clad colonnade of the veranda, Victoria’s Inner Harbour lay before me; the Parliament Buildings to one side, a riot of small boats moored in the harbor itself. I rubbed my arms, pondering. Should I go on a guided tour of the legislature? Stroll through the provincial museum? Or maybe hit the shops downtown? Ah, now there was an idea. A multitude of trendy boutiques lay only a block or two away; what woman could resist that?

I had enough cash for a new outfit, provided I steered clear of designer labels. So why not throw Serena a curve? A silk blouse, pleated skirt, low heels and my hair pulled back into a ponytail. Let her wonder which girl I might be.
I stopped at the top of the stairs. The rules of the game, such as they were, clearly stated we were to meet in the lobby. What would Serena do if and when she couldn’t find me? Go back to the room? Pick up some other woman who vaguely resembled me? That didn’t seem likely. And the rules said nothing about when.

I smiled to myself. The Prime Directive was ‘stay in character’, and most women in this situation… they’d go shopping, wouldn’t they? Serena might be annoyed, but did I not have to remain true to my new self? Damn the torpedoes.

That’s when everything changed.

Footsteps trod the deck to my right; a masculine voice intruded. ‘If ya don’t mind my sayin’… you sure do look like a gal at loose ends.’

I checked him out briefly, avoiding eye contact. It wouldn’t be in character for a woman to look directly at a strange man, for all kinds of reasons. First impression: he was about my height, somewhat sturdier; well dressed in casual shirt and pants, and one of those trendy blazers without a collar; and an unruly mop of sandy hair. Was that a men’s wig—or Serena’s short blonde pageboy, tinted and restyled?

‘Not at all,’” I said, glancing up the street. ‘‘I’m off to the shops.’’

‘‘Really. But what you’re wearing… it really suits you.’’ He gazed out across the harbor, his smile lapsing into the neutral expression men often wore—as indeed it must, I realized, given the constraints imposed by Serena’s mask. I felt a gentle upward tug on my own lips.

‘‘It’s what we ‘gals’ do,’’ I replied, a bit too abruptly.

He grimaced. ‘‘Sorry. Bad habit. I meant ‘woman’, of course. I’m a modern guy, really.’’ He took a deep breath. ‘‘It’s just—it’s such a lovely evening. There must be something better to do than shopping.’’

‘‘And here’s me thinking that modern men are okay with shopping.’’

He chuckled. ‘‘Oh, we are. But only when we need something. Mostly.’’ He stuck his hands in his pockets. ‘‘Right now, there’s no room in my suitcase for anything else, so what’s the point?’’

‘‘Well, no one’s forcing you.’’

‘‘I guess not. The name’s Reed, by the way. Reed Richter. I’m in town for a short course in Group Facilitation. In other words, how to make meetings more fun and productive. Are you, uhm, from around here?’’

I shook my head, realizing I was in the midst of being picked up. ‘‘My first visit,’’ I said—as a woman, that is. I nodded toward the hotel. ‘‘Going up-scale makes for a nice change from the usual cheap motel.’’
“Me too. My per diem only pays half what it cost to stay here. But sometimes you just gotta pamper yourself. Not literally, of course.”

I managed to stifle a giggle. Was I the kind of girl who would laugh at a lame joke like that? Maybe I was just falling into the role. Men like to entertain women, and we’re expected to laugh on cue when they say something halfway amusing. That in itself is pretty lame when you think about it, but such is life.

Reed got down to business. “I hear that ‘high tea’ at The Empress is one of those must-do things in Victoria. Have you, uh… done that yet?”

Again I shook my head. “Not something one does by herself.”

His eyes widened. “Ah. You’re here by yourself…?”

I flashed him a wry smile. “I am now. My cousin ditched me, for an old flame.”

“Gee, that’s too bad,” he said, not bothering to suppress a grin. “Maybe I can help. Would you care to join me for high tea, whatever that might be?”

I rolled my shoulders. Time to take the game to another level. “High tea sounds awfully boring, don’t you think? There’s a bar downstairs—buy a girl a drink and we can swap stories.” Or lies, as the case may be.

His jaw dropped. “That’d be awesome!” He almost leapt to the front door to open it for me. “So, erm… what should I call you?”

“Felicia.” Like he didn’t know.

* 

Reed was a communications major, now working PR for a small nonprofit and making ends meet by writing content for various company websites, none of which he was inclined to name. He lived across the Salish Sea in Vancouver, in a downtown apartment roughly the size of a storage locker, with enough floorspace to lower a murphy bed. As a result, he didn’t entertain much.

As for Felicia, I made her a software tester—which, sadly, sounded more plausible for her than being a computer programmer—for a small company that specialized in one very specific enterprise application, which I too declined to name. You can only make up so many lies before you start tripping over them. On the side Felicia wrote children’s books; none of which, alas, had yet been published. And yes, she was the sort of author who was uncomfortable discussing her work during the writing phase. Very convenient, that.

We were seated in a dimly lit room with oak paneling. In an earlier age it would have been filled to the rafters with smoke. Two tables away and twenty-four hours
past, Serena and I had split a bottle of wine while reviewing the rules of the game. “What I need from you,” she had said, “is total commitment.”

“I understand. You want me to act like a real woman, 24/7. What I don’t get is, well… why this is so important to you.”

Her steely-blues flashed. “Trust me, it’s important. Not just because you don’t understand women—you don’t understand me. You don’t know who I am.”

I couldn’t meet her gaze. “We’ve been together for six months. I thought I—”

“Trust me, you don’t. Not until some guy picks you up and you spend the evening wondering if he’s going to sweep you off your feet, or whack you over the head and steal your purse. Or worse.”

“Uh-huh. Did that ever happen to you? In real life?”

“Nope. Never got whacked. Had some near misses though.”

“Guys aren’t all jerks, you know. Some of us are halfway decent.”

“I know.” She smirked. “Maybe you’ll get lucky, with your fella.”

It seemed a lifetime ago, that discussion. Nothing makes time fly by faster than being completely transformed into a woman. I returned my attention to Reed, idly running the tip of my finger around the rim of my wine glass. “I don’t usually do this, you know,” I told him. “I never let anyone pick me up before.”

He grinned. “Lucky for me, there’s a first time for everything.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s a good thing,” I pointed out. “Death, for example.”

He laughed. “I’m pretty sure I can do better than that.”

The sun was still up when we left the lounge, emerging from the hotel’s south entrance. A warm breeze sifted through my hair, driving the air-conditioned cool from my body. I rubbed my arms, managing to touch my breasts as I did so. It was a tantalizing reminder that as far as the rest of the world was concerned, I was female. Across the street, the carillon next to the museum tolled seven o’clock, and I couldn’t help wondering—what came next?

This wasn’t a game like Monopoly or Life, where the players take turns. The next move belonged to Reed, and all the other moves too. My role as the girl was to react to what he did—and react agreeably, if the date was to continue. I wasn’t sure what would happen if I didn’t stroke his ego and generally let him have his way, but I suspected Serena would find a way to keep it going. She wasn’t likely to let me off the hook until I’d learned my lesson—whatever that might be.

“I’m thinkin’ jazz club,” he said. “Got comp tickets from the company.”
Nice touch, I thought. The girl wouldn’t want to see them go to waste, so you’re pretty much guaranteed a ‘yes’. Serena was always a stickler for details, which was why she’d gone to such lengths to turn me into a woman. Nothing could be allowed to spoil the effect.

The club was only a few blocks away. “Sorry to say this,” he murmured, as we swayed together on the dance floor, “but I have to assume it’s been quite awhile since your last dance.”

I feigned shyness. “I guess so. I was a wallflower in high school.” The band was playing “What You Won’t Do for Love”, which seemed appropriate.

“Just follow my lead,” he said, nuzzling my hair. Then he kissed me. Nothing deep or passionate, just a quick planting of his lips upon mine. But it moved the game to a whole new level.

“It’s hard to believe you were ever a wallflower,” he said, leading me back to our table-for-two in the corner. “Lemme guess. You were one of those girls who was so pretty none of the guys would dare talk to you.”

“Oh, no. Nothing like that.” I returned to my cranberry martini, which seemed to be rather heavy on the vodka. “I guess you could say I’ve blossomed since then. What about you? Captain of the football team?”

“I wish. Second louie on the debate team. But I did run track.”

I nodded absently. Serena had run track in high school, and played center for the school’s B-ball team. Tall for a girl, short for a guy. Exactly the opposite for me, of course, which is how we ended up being close to the same size—at least in height. Serena was stronger and broader than me. She’d been weight training for months—ever since reading Practice to Deceive, in fact—and she’d enrolled me in aerobics around the same time. Feeling self-conscious, I tugged on the hem of my skirt. This date had been a long time coming. I didn’t dare disappoint.

We talked for over an hour, against a backdrop of soft jazz. Eventually our fingers met in the middle of the table. We both stared as they seemed to move of their own accord; his forefinger touching the back of my hand, then two of my glossy red almond-shaped nails playfully trapping his ring finger. My hand ended up cupped within his, while his thumb stroked the back. A shiver slid down my spine.

“We should go,” he said softly. I wasn’t about to argue.

Hand in hand, we strolled back to the Inner Harbour. The light was fading but the evening was warm. It reminded me not of my first date with Serena, but the second. It was six months ago in another city, fall instead of spring, but the same crisp air and the same time of day. We were living and working downtown, and
we met at a church social. I wasn’t a big church-goer, but I liked the people. That chance encounter led to a real date, then another. We’d gone to a movie revival at the old Rio theater, then down to the waterfront for a walk on the beach, and it felt just like this.

I hadn’t been a woman for long, but you get a sense for these things. From the way Reed held my hand, the way he snuck a peek at me from time to time, I could tell that the evening was trending the right way. The game, as Serena might have said, was well afoot.

A flight of steps descended to a stonework pier. We wandered along peering at the small boats and reading their names. Behind us, the gabled rooftop of the Empress peeked over the granite wall overlooking the marina. When I glanced up, thinking that Reed’s room couldn’t be all that far away, I noticed an older man staring down at me from the stone balustrade atop the wall. Fifty-something, with slightly graying hair, and—oddly—the clerical ‘dog collar’ of a Christian priest. His expression left little doubt that what he saw displeased him.

Well, to heck with him. Reed and I might not be married, but whatever the two of us did was no one’s business but our own. At the end of the pier, bathed in the festive glow of the Parliament Buildings, we ascended to street level and doubled back toward the hotel. At first I thought the priest had amscrayed, but then I saw him across the street lurking in the shadows of a thick hedge that girded the lawn. He wasn’t looking in our direction but I got the impression he had been.

I felt unnerved—and not just because any extra attention directed my way might mean that I’d been ‘read’; with every mirror as my witness, I knew I had little to fear in that regard. But the book that had put me here—in Practice to Deceive, Penelope had been murdered by an English vicar who had somehow gleaned her secret. Seeing one here was the wrong kind of omen.

We gazed across the water as the sun touched the horizon, then turned to face the Empress. Reed leaned on the balustrade and pointed to a window on the third floor, directly above the main entrance. “That’s my room,” he said. Subtle!

I stood next to him, our legs touching. “Interesting. You must have a nice view of the harbor. Mine’s on the far side, facing a parkade.”

“Oh, I do. You should check it out.” He flashed me a sidelong glance.

“Maybe I will.” My fingers brushed his thigh. A girl shouldn’t be too forward.

His arm slipped around my waist. “How about we check out the view over a glass of wine? White or red—lady’s choice.”

“Oh, I’m no expert. The house red should do the trick.”
He drew me closer. “Now you’ve got me wondering what the ‘trick’ is.”

I slid between his legs, facing him. “Getting me in the mood?”

He pulled me into an embrace. Our lips met, parted, then met again. My arms rode his shoulders as he crushed my body into his. Interesting—his hair didn’t feel fake at all. Serena must’ve had her own hair restyled.

We crossed the road hand-in-hand and mounted the stairs to the lobby. The creepy vicar was nowhere to be seen, which suited me just fine. We stopped at the bar so Reed could purchase a pre-chilled bottle, then mounted the stairs to his room.

“Welcome to paradise.” He filled two glasses and—staying in character—he proposed a toast: to new friends well met. We drank, then stood by the window and watched the last of the sun sink into the Salish Sea.

When the wine was gone, Reed set the glasses aside and escorted me to the settee facing the window. I plucked at the hem of my skirt, which seemed to be riding altogether too high. Shyly, from behind a drooping tress of hair, I snuck a look at the man seated next to me. He was smiling.

This had to be part of Serena’s plan—to turn me into a blushing teenager on date night, wondering where all this might lead and if she was in over her head. Well, mission accomplished. My insides were flip-flopping, the wine was melting my resistance, and I felt like putty in the hands now touching my body.

“You are, you know… very beautiful,” Reed murmured.

I didn’t know what to say. Instead, I let myself sink into his arms. I felt… how did I feel? Safe. Cared for. Desired. It was intoxicating. I found his mouth and kissed it; softly at first, then hard. And so it went—but not for long.

A hard knock came at the door: rapid, urgent. Reed sat bolt upright, like he’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar—the jar being me, of course.

He strode to the door and flung it open, physically manifesting his annoyance. I trailed along behind, tidying my hair. Standing in the hall was a man, wearing the red vest of a hotel employee. “Stefan Bezner,” he snapped, tugging on his badge, “assistant manager. I must speak with Ms. Beswicke.”

It’s odd the way the mind works. Now that I was playing the female role, I found myself evaluating men the same way a woman would—as a possible mate, or a potential threat. This man was stocky but not tall; mid-thirties, with a round, puffy face and a shock of sandy blond hair that looked messy. Not terribly appealing, insofar as my limited taste in men ran.

I took a step forward, staying behind Reed. “W—what is it?”
His voice was coarse, like broken glass. “Sorry to interrupt, ma’am. But the hotel has received a threat that, ah—directed at you.”


“It was anonymous. Of course, we’ve been in touch with the police.” He coughed. “There’s no immediate danger, we feel, but they did suggest that you should move to another room. Not your own and not this gentleman’s either.” His eyes darted back and forth. “We’ve set aside a top-floor suite for your use. I’m to escort you there immediately.”

Reed glanced at me and shrugged. “Better do what he says. I’ll get my things.”

Bezner held up his hand. “Not you, sir. Just the lady. We believe the suspect may have seen the two of you together.”

Reed eyed the smaller man, then nodded. He turned to me. “I’m sure this will all blow over soon enough. Maybe we can get together tomorrow.”

“I’d like that.” I gave his hand a quick squeeze.

Bezner wagged his finger at Reed. “Actually, sir, if you wouldn’t mind—it might be helpful if you were to stroll around the lobby for awhile. Perhaps out around the grounds as well. It would give the suspect a chance to see that the two of you are… no longer together.” His gaze slid toward me.

“Sure thing,” Reed said. “Throw him off the scent, right?” He flashed me a grin. “Whatever can be done, shall be done—for the lady.”

Bezner escorted me up to the fourth floor. At the far end of the hallway, a narrow stairwell led up to a thick oak door that opened with an oversized skeleton key. Beyond that was a brightly lit sitting room; not large but lavishly decorated, with sloping walls and dormer windows.

“Your sanctuary, madam.” He closed the door and locked it, pocketing the key.

“It’s… lovely,” I said, struggling to process all that had happened. Was the strange man I’d seen outside behind this threat? Or was it someone that knew who I really was? But who knew, other than Serena and the girls at the salon?

“The garret’s mostly for newlyweds,” he said, lingering on the last word. “But as there are none with us at the moment…” He jerked open the door to the minibar. “Perhaps the lady would care for a drink. On the house, of course.”

Before I could refuse, Bezner had uncorked a bottle of white wine. Moments later, a full glass was thrust into my hands. “Uhm—thanks. You’re very kind.”

He nodded, lifting his own glass. “To your safety, ma’am.”
The wine was fruity and a bit sweet for my liking, with a musky scent that went straight up my nose. One sip was enough. I set the glass aside. “This threat you mentioned—” I began.

He waved one hand and drank with the other. “Please—you need not—be concerned.” He wiped his mouth. “The message made little sense. The ravings of a damaged mind, I’m sure.” He flashed me a sly grin. “You are obviously female.”

My mouth went dry. Reluctantly, I took another drink. “The police… the staff… do they know about this?”

He shook his head. “The fewer who know where you are, the better. Loose lips, eh?” He smacked his lips. “Only the manager knows.”

“Oh, well… good.” I crossed my arms, which served only to remind me of my minty-fresh breasts. “Are there any leads?”

Bezner shrugged. “Who can tell? Police are idiots. Be assured, they will not catch whoever is behind this.” He leaned back and glanced at his watch. He sighed, and his voice softened. “It’s late. You must be tired. Perhaps you should lie down.” He threw a glance at the suite’s small bedroom and its double bed.

My turn to shake my head. “Oh, I couldn’t…”

“Do not concern yourself with me,” he said briskly. “I will turn out the lights, sit right here and watch the door. All night, if need be.”

I stared at the window. From where I sat I could see one corner of the Parliament Buildings, which were bright enough to cast a dim shadow on the wall behind the assistant manager. “I won’t be able to sleep,” I told him, “with all this going on.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “We can talk, if you like. Take your mind off.”

I didn’t relish the thought of chatting the night away with this strange man, especially after almost spending it with Reed. Wasn’t I supposed to be learning how to be a better and more complete woman? I knew Serena wouldn’t approve. This wasn’t going to cut it at all. “You don’t have to stay,” I said, a bit too quickly. “I’ll keep the door locked.” Be sure of that.

Slowly, he shook his head. “I was told to keep an eye on you.”

It wasn’t his eye that I was worried about. Or rather, not just his eyes.

He kept me talking for what seemed like hours. The grandfather clock next to the door crawled toward midnight, each tick slower than the last. Bezner asked one question after another, some of which I struggled to answer. The easy ones were part of my existing cover story—my job, my writing, the girlfriend who’d run off with her boyfriend—but for others I had to lie on the fly.
As the clock struck twelve, he paused and set his glass aside. He’d had too much wine; his eyes were unfocused. “Tell me, what’s it like—to be a woman?”

My breath sucked in. Why would someone ask such a question? Unless… unless he knew. “I’m sorry, I don’t think that’s appropriate—” I shook my head and stood. “I think you should go.”

He laughed. “Why would I want to do that?”

The door was locked and too far away, so I moved toward the window. “Do you really work for this hotel?” He just shrugged. I checked the latch: it was welded shut. “Are you the one who threatened me? Are you working with that awful man I saw outside?”

More laughter. “If I was, you think I’d say?” He tried to heave himself to his feet, but fell back on the couch. “Time for bed,” he muttered, his head sagging.

I hit him with the bottle. It broke over his head and he collapsed on the couch, moaning. There was blood, but not a lot. I fished the key from his pocket and fled the room. If this was part of the game, I was done playing. ●
Reed was still awake and fully dressed when I pounded on his door. His eyes went wide. “Felicia? Are you—what happened? Where’s—?”

“I whacked him!” I pushed past and slammed the door. “The guy was a creep. I don’t know if he really works here or not, but I had to get out.”

“Whoa, whoa—what did he do? Did he hurt you?” He led me to the settee.

I was trembling. “No, no… it’s just—he knew things. He asked about… I think he might be working with… you know, whoever made the threat.”

Reed sighed. “I saw the guy you mean. He was hanging around downstairs. Older dude, with a dog collar.” He pointed at his neck.

I nodded, clutching at my purse. “Oh God—what’s going on? Wh—why me?”

“I hate to say it, but to some guys all women are targets—especially when they’re as pretty as you are. It’s just lousy, that’s all.”

My eyes narrowed. Serena had suggested as much herself, not so long ago—that I wouldn’t understand women until I was the focus of unwanted male attention, and had spent time in the trenches wondering if the guy I was with intended to kiss me or whack me over the head. Or both. Could she have set the whole thing up? Was all this part of the game? Whatever the case, I couldn’t just ask her—or him—about it. Neither of us were allowed to break character.

I slumped in the seat. “Maybe I should just go home.”

“We can leave anytime you want,” he said. “I’ve got a car downstairs.”

“What about your ‘seminar’?” We both knew his excuse for being here was a load of hogwash, but we still had to play the game.

“Screw it,” he said. “Some things are more important.”

*  

I didn’t get much sleep that night. I lay on the bed—fully clothed, as I had nothing else to wear—while Reed watched the door. I had no idea if I really did have something to worry about, but the not knowing kept me awake. Mostly.
When guests began stirring in the next room, and footsteps began padding up and down the corridor, we decided to make our move. Reed brought one small suitcase with him, which I’d never seen before.

We stopped by the suite I’d shared with Serena. Someone had been there before us. My boy clothes were gone, along with Serena’s belongings and the boxes from Studio F/X. “I guess my girlfriend came back,” I said, since the word suited both my cover story and reality. I shot Reed a glance, but he looked blank.

I changed clothes, into a basic black skirt and paisley blouse, then packed my suitcase. Reed—or rather, Serena, since I was about ninety-seven percent certain they were one and the same—would have had plenty of time to remove the missing items while I was up in the garret with the creepy manager. All part of the game, I assumed, to make it look like Serena had already left the hotel.

The rooms were paid for ahead of time, so there was no need to check out. We left our keys behind and headed for the basement. Reed’s car was a rental as well—the same company, same make and model, but not the same color as the car Serena and I had driven here. She must have switched vehicles while I was in the salon—again, to further the appearance that Reed was a different person. Full credit to the girl: she thought of everything.

“I don’t actually own a car,” Reed said, sounding almost embarrassed. “Where I live, everything’s in walking distance. Including work.”

“That’s pretty common these days.” I slung my suitcase into the trunk.

We hit the road and made the ten o’clock ferry. Back on the mainland, we were bombing down the highway into Vancouver when the game changed yet again. I’d been contemplating what it might mean to return home disguised top to bottom as a woman—what would the neighbors think?—when Reed mentioned that it might be better if we went somewhere else for awhile, to lay low. “It’s just that, if this creep is out to get you, and he knows where you live, it might not be such a good idea—ya know—to actually go there?”

In a daze, I stared out the window at the passing fields, green with fresh growth, trying to figure out whether that suggestion came from Reed or from Serena—and did it matter? If it was Reed, he was treating me like a young woman living alone, and then it would be quite appropriate to go elsewhere. But if it was Serena… did that mean the threat hadn’t come from her—that it wasn’t part of the game after all? If so then we probably should make ourselves scarce, at least until we could figure out what the hell was going on.

“I know this place up the Canyon,” he said. “Cousin of mine works there. I texted him from the ferry. He’s got a room for us, it you’re interested.”
Was *this* part of the game? The two of us switch genders in one city, then bog off to the real destination as our new selves. That did fit the pattern from the book, which would suggest that this was what Serena had in mind all along. I let my head rest against the side window. Games can be awfully confusing.

“Felicia? Whaddya say? The turnoff is just ahead.”

*What the hell.* “Okay, let’s do that.”

We hung a left and rode the highway east, then onto the Trans-Canada which took us through the Fraser Valley. Symbolic of nothing, we left Hope behind and headed north up the Canyon, past Hells Gate (and hopefully not onward into Hell itself), and as dusk rolled through the mountains we crossed the river and pulled up in front of an old mansion on a hill overlooking the train station. It looked old, maybe by a hundred years or more.

Having barely slept, I was exhausted. Reed carried both suitcases while I managed to haul myself up the wide flight of stairs to the veranda. I began to suspect that he might have done less guarding and more napping the previous night.

The old manse was now a guest house, the North Bend Bungalow B&B, with a lobby resembling an Edwardian parlor: dark paneling, thick carpeting and lots of stained glass. Reed stopped at the desk and was handed a key, no questions asked. The clerk he greeted in passing was, I supposed, Reed’s cousin, although there was no resemblance I could see.

Four floors later, without benefit of an elevator, I dragged myself into our room and headed straight for the bathroom. Serena had left me a short nightgown—a frilly little thing in black satin—and that would have to do. I didn’t stop to worry about where Reed intended to sleep; dreamland threatened to claim me before the bed could. I hit the mattress and out went the lights.

* *

When I awoke, my mind was swimming in fog. I stared at the antique vanity next to the bed. It was low enough, or the bed high enough, that I could see myself in the mirror: a bleary girl-face with a halo of dark hair and a blanket over the rest. The events of the previous day rolled through my mind like the plot of a Saturday afternoon matinée; oddball characters and a story that wouldn’t convince your average twelve-year-old. But the bottom line remained: I was a girl.

In the clear light of day—or even the watery luminescence from the thick curtains that blanked the window—the whole affair in Victoria seemed like much ado about nothing. I’d been *so* tired and shocked by the threat on my life, and freaked
out by the creep who delivered it, I wasn’t thinking straight. Obviously, it had to be part of Serena’s master plan for the weekend. She didn’t just want me to look like a girl, she wanted me to feel like one too. To feel vulnerable and desired and dependent on male whims, all at the same time.

Well, mission accomplished. I ran my fingers down my front, from modest breasts to flaring hip and a tummy still in thrall to the waist trainer I’d removed the night before. It was a womanly figure, sleek and feminine. And it was mine.

A body stirred behind me. Without looking, I knew who it was: my amazingly imaginative girlfriend Serena, still disguised as the man who had picked me up the day before. An arm flopped across my hip. A male voice muttered, “Hey, babe.”

The game, as they say, was back on. Time to get in character. I half-twisted to look at him. My hand found his and squeezed. “Hey, you. Sleep well?”

“Like a log. How ‘bout yourself? You were pretty out of it last night.”

“Mmm-hmm. I feel like a new woman. Ready to leave all that silliness behind. It was a good idea to come here.” Our fingers remained entwined.

“Glad you approve. To that end…” He stroked my palm. “Do you recall what we were doing, the other night, before being so rudely interrupted?”

“I do.” I wriggled around to face him. “Something like this.” I touched his face with one hand, then moved in with my lips. We kissed; softly at first, then harder. He put his arms around me. I let my body sink into his; the woman into the man. I felt safe, cared for and desired—all according to plan. I was a girl doing the ‘third date’ thing with her new guy, and I threw myself into that role.

Some time later—it was hard to tell how long—I knew what was about to happen. I excused myself and shimmied into the bathroom. I sat, then cleaned up, splashed water on my face, brushed my hair and added a dash of the eau de toilette Serena had given me. Upon my return, Reed was ready.

I slid back into bed. “Oh my, is that for me?” I’d caught a glimpse of the tent in his boxers, and it was impressive. I knew it had to be a strap-on, of course, but as Felicia I had to pretend it was the real thing.

“A lady like you deserves no less,” he murmured, drawing me close.

“You flatter me, sir. But don’t stop.” I raked his chest with red-tipped fingernails, noting the presence of a tight bandeau beneath his T-shirt. Serena wasn’t exactly well-endowed, but it was still an impressive disguise. We kissed, with his arms around my waist and mine around his neck. I nibbled his lips and stuck my tongue as far in as I could. He suckled, then we traded places and I did the same.
“One problem,” I said, when we broke for air. “It’s kinda my time of the month.”

“No prob,” he said, a sly grin spreading across his face. “There’s more than one way to skin a cat—or make love to a lady, if she’s up for it.”

“Well, you certainly are.” I gave him a playful tweak down there. So hard.

“I’m thinkin’ about headin’ around back and gettin’ in that way, if you’re—”

“I’m ready,” I said, a bit too quickly. It’s unladylike to appear too eager, but when you’re in heat… to hell with dignity. I rolled over, facing the opposite way. Under the covers, I felt my nightgown pulled up over my hips. I shivered as strong hands kneaded and parted the soft skin of my—oh! Something stiff and unyielding, yet cushioned, poked at me, probing, probing—ah! It found what it sought.

Oooh. He slid into me, gently but insistently. The male into the female. Strong arms enveloped me. He drew back my hair, streamed it across the pillow, then whispered into my ear. “How’s that feel, babe?”

“Big,” I whispered, and he laughed. I stroked his arm. “Don’t stop now.”

He kissed the nape of my neck. “Wasn’t planning to.” He drew back, then thrust back in—not slowly this time. My back arched. I may have moaned. This was what it was like to be female—to be mounted, to be penetrated.

We continued in this manner for quite some time. I may have made certain noises that probably disturbed the guests in nearby rooms, if there were any. I found time to marvel at how amazingly real a strap-on could feel, although of course I had nothing to compare it to. Even more impressive, the device was equipped with a built-in supply of some thick, warm fluid, which it duly injected at the correct moment—no doubt triggered by a signal from its wearer. I felt the eruption inside me, whereupon Reed sighed and sagged against me.

Feigning innocence, I asked “Is that all?”

“Is that all?” The breath wheezed out of him. “Lady, gimme a break. Do ya know long we’ve been goin’ at it? Hercules himself couldn’t have done better.”

“Never met the man. Wouldn’t mind an introduction though.”

“You wish.” He rubbed my arm, then pulled out and handed me a wad of kleenex. I blotted as Reed disappeared into the bathroom. Moments later the shower came on. I lay in bed for awhile, clenching and unclenching the muscles in my rear end. I’d come a long way, but being a woman still felt like a full-time job.

*
After my turn in the shower, I returned to the room to find that Reed had vanished. For a moment I thought he might’ve abandoned me—love ‘em and leave ‘em?—but then I found the note he’d left on the vanity.

*Meet me at the old church down the road. Look for the steeple; you can’t miss it. Reed*

That piqued my interest: a *church*? Why a church? Was my new beau planning to pop the question and set a world record for shortest engagement? Perhaps being a bride was to be part of my in-depth introduction to womanhood. Felix and Serena certainly hadn’t reached that stage of their relationship—could this be her way of telling me it was time to take it to the next level? Then again, would a marriage ceremony even be legal if we didn’t use our real names?

Probably not, I decided. Whatever happened at the church, it was all for show; all part of the game. I forced myself back into character: what would Felicia do?

She’d dress the part, I decided—just in case. My suitcase had been unpacked for me, so I checked the wardrobe.

I was spoiled for choice: three whole frocks, all of them on the dressy side. I couldn’t re-use the little black-lace number I’d worn for our first date—perish the thought! And the one-shoulder sheath looked a bit too upscale for daytime wear. That left the sleeveless dress with the plunging, but fashionably ruffled neckline. I could work with that; nothing wrong with wearing something to exhibit one’s assets to their best effect.

I dressed quickly: panties and a strapless brassiere, because the dress left no room for any over-the-shoulder straps. That also meant no full slip and no camisole, so I made do with a half-slip. Then the dress, and the same pair of open-toe sandals I’d worn the day before.

I sat down to lightly decorate and feminize my face—which felt like a surprisingly natural thing to do—then stepped in front of a full-length mirror to examine the overall effect. Weeell…

I’ve heard that pretty girls can be hard to please, especially when it comes to their image. The girl in the mirror met my gaze and shook her head despairingly; silly cow that I am, I’d forgotten to wear pantyhose. Sighing, she took a brush to her hair. With great beauty comes great responsibility.

I added the missing hose, packed my purse and strolled out the door. For perhaps the first time in my life, I was actually looking forward to church.
The little chapel wasn’t much bigger than your average single-family home, but even so it was impossible to miss: it had a steeple that doubled its height. I stepped up to the big front doors, shook back my hair, then pushed through and stepped into the nave. Awaiting me in the rear pew was—not Reed, but Serena.

She stood, a smile toying with her lips. “Felicia,” she purred. “I’m so glad you came.” She was wearing a long black cloak, like the robes of a priest. Sticking out from under the hem were a clunky pair of male shoes.

For a moment all I could do was stare. “Why did you change?”

Her smile grew broader. “Change? Whatever do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Why aren’t you—*him*?”

She laughed. “I suppose you’re referring to that nice man who went upside your backside this morning.” She shrugged. “Come with me.” She turned and clumped up the aisle. I hesitated, then followed. She moved with a distinctly masculine gait, while my own mannerisms—dictated by the dress I wore, the lingerie, the heels, even the ebb and flow of long hair across my shoulders—were decidedly feminine. Be sure, I was no longer the boyfriend in this relationship.

Serena took a left turn at the altar and passed through a doorway at the back of the room. Another door—initially locked, but yielding to the key Serena carried—led to a flight of stone steps descending into the earth, dimly lit by a fluorescent tube in the ceiling. I followed her down, my heels clicking on what felt like solid rock. Echoes returned from a great distance.

We emerged into a space almost as large as the church above. Rough-hewn beams formed the ceiling and panels of unfinished hardwood lined the walls. Six rows of backless benches crowded the floor, with an aisle up the middle. The air was cool. I rubbed my arms and shivered. Why would a perfectly ordinary little church need a basement like *this*?

Serena flipped a switch. Overhead, a row of old fluorescent lights flickered to life. I gasped. At the far end of the room, on the stage where the altar would normally appear, sat a squat machine: a set of large interlocking iron gears, supported by rough timbers, poised over a low wooden table. A man lay strapped to the table with wrist and ankle restraints, roughly gagged with a cloth, and what appeared to be electrodes attached to his head and chest. When the lights came on, his arms and legs began to thrash against their bindings. His head turned to face me.

The man was Reed.
“I nearly fell over. I leaned on the pillar at the base of the stairs, gaping first at the man on the table, then Serena, then back at him. It was Reed, of that there could be no doubt. I stared at Serena; it was her, no doubt about that either. “Wh—what’s going on here?”

“If that medieval-looking device seems familiar, sweetie, you aren’t just sucking air. What we have here is a faithful reproduction of the life-sucking machine from The Princess Bride. You know, the one that causes ultimate suffering?” She strolled up the aisle toward the stage.

I found my voice. “Ultimate suff—you mean it actually works?”

Serena laughed gaily. “Of course not. That’s why I had to add the razor-sharp pendulum. Point taken, though; ‘faithful’ may be a slight exaggeration. The device runs on electricity instead of water, there aren’t nearly as many gears, and it doesn’t cause ultimate suffering, as such. However, when I pull this lever…” She hauled back on a long wooden handle that stuck out from the machine. “The pendulum starts swinging—thusly,” she added with a flourish.

I stared at the steel blade, glinting in the light as it swung ponderously a foot or so above Reed’s neck. I couldn’t grasp what was happening. Not ten minutes ago, I was a woman on the cusp of accepting a marriage proposal. One quick turn into the twilight zone landed me in the middle of an Edgar Allan Poe story.

“I—I thought you were him,” I said, pointing at the man on the table.

Her lips twisted. “Is that your excuse? For cheating on me?”

“Cheating? I thought he was you.”

She smiled. “I suppose that was the idea, wasn’t it? But it doesn’t change the facts.” Storm clouds swam across her face. “You had sex with this man. Can you deny it? Do you know what that makes you? Do I have to spell it out?” She spat the final word: “Homosexual!”

My fingers flew to my mouth. I hadn’t realized until she said it, but—the strap-on that pegged me not two hours past wasn’t a dildo after all. It was the real thing! I’d never thought of myself that way, but… but… my mind did a one-eighty.

There was another way to view this. Was I not a woman?
“Mr. Richter here—that isn’t his real name, by the way. He’s an actor I hired to
play the part of your seducer. And in case you hadn’t noticed, missy, that
pendulum is getting lower. Every swing brings it ever so slightly closer to your
boyfriend’s throat.” I gasped, finally grasping the situation.

Serena lifted her hand. “Ah-ah, you can’t just stroll over and turn the machine off.
The lever only sets it in motion; the off switch is hidden around back.” She waved
at the mass of clanking gears beyond Reed. “I guarantee you won’t find it in time.
Oh, and hitting the wrong switch might just bring the blade down right away.” She
flashed a nasty smile, something I’d never seen her do before. “Your only chance
to stop this… is to sit yourself down, right there.” She pointed to a bulky wooden
chair on the right side of the stage. “Otherwise, off with the boyfriend’s head.”

I glanced at Reed, who was nodding eagerly and tilting his head toward the chair.
“He’s, uh… not my boyfriend. We just met.”

“Be that as it may.” Serena crossed her arms and waited.

I closed my eyes, feeling the stirrings of a headache. All this had to be part of the
game. Serena was my—or rather, Felix’s girlfriend. She wasn’t a psychopath—I
hoped—so there had to be some other explanation. This weekend was supposed to
be about forcing me to become more of a woman than I ever would’ve dared on
my own. To that end, she hired a man to seduce me—all the while fooling me into
thinking it was her. Why go to such lengths? Was it really that important for me to
get a real taste of womanhood? If it was, mission accomplished. With Reed’s life
hanging—literally—in the balance, I felt as vulnerable and helpless as any woman
ever could. Whatever the game was, all I could do was play along.

I sat down. Serena tied my feet to the legs of the chair, looped a rope around my
waist and bound my wrists behind my back; I clenched my hands, tensing the
muscles in my arms. She stepped behind the machine. Moments later, the gears
stopped. The pendulum ground to a halt. Reed heaved a muffled sigh of relief.

Serena strolled back into view, then stepped down from the stage. “Back in a jiff,”
she called. “Don’t go anywhere.”

I looked at Reed, half expecting him to get up and walk away. He was working for
her, after all, and the threat to his life might’ve been a trick. Instead, his eyes wide,
he just shrugged; whatever was going on, he didn’t know either.

“Just so you know,” I said, twisting against the ropes that bound me, “when this is
all over, I never want to see you again. Betray my trust once, shame on you.”

He muttered into the gag, then sagged back, staring up at the blade that shone like
quicksilver less than a foot over his head.
Serena returned after a long delay, only she was no longer herself. In her place, wearing the same black robe and the same pair of clunky shoes, was the man I’d seen spying on me in front of the Empress: a middle-aged priest with an unruly mop of graying hair and a black collar with a white tab concealing what was no doubt a flat feminine throat. My girlfriend in clerical drag.

“Well, well, well… what do we have here?” He wandered up the aisle, hands clasped behind his back. His voice was coarse; rough in a studied way. “A couple of deviants, is it? Heretic flies trapped in a Christian web.”

I bit back a sharp reply. “Don’t you think this has gone far enough?”

His eyes narrowed. “Why would I think that?”

“It’s just—I don’t see what I’m supposed to get out of all this. Most women don’t get tied-up as part of their normal day. I look like a woman, I talk like one, I can pass for a woman, I’ve made love as a woman, so what more—”

“Is that what you call it? Making love? Oh no.” His lips twitched. “When a man lieth with man, there can be no love. It is a transgression against God.”

“Okay… I know some people feel that way. They’re entitled. But what’s that got to do with me? I go to church now and then, but—”

A harsh laugh echoed through the room. “You think that makes you a Christian? Hardly. Hard-lee! Felix only went there to meet girls—do you deny it?”

I grimaced. “I better not. You’re the girl I met.”

“You refer to Serena—but as you can plainly see, I am not she. My name… is Stafford Bexley.” He paced toward me, his jaw clenched. “This is no game, my dear. You have sinned against God and you will suffer the consequences.”

I lifted my chin. “I’ve done nothing wrong. I’m a good person.”

“Are you not a man disguised as a woman? Is that not reason enough?”

“What the hell—this was all your idea! The whole weekend: dressing me up like a real live woman, fixing me up with some guy I didn’t even know… not to mention the fact that you’re cross-dressed right now!”

“Who or what I am is none of your concern.” He spun on his heel and paced back toward Reed. “As you well know, Felix Beswicke was a cross-dresser long before he met Serena. She simply brought to the surface a deviance that was already there. I saw you,” he added, as a note of triumph crept into his voice. “Many times did I watch you leave your apartment in womanly garb, to promenade around the neighborhood or to drive off in your little red Mazda. Only twice did I stay to witness your return. God only knows what you were up to the rest of the time!”
I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “You were spying on me? Is that the only reason you started dating me? To lure me into a trap?”

“Late to the truth, I’m afraid. Right on time for the consequences.”

I shook my head. “No way. The game’s over Serena. Untie me. I’m getting—”

“This is not a game!” He slammed his hand down on the lever. Reed cringed and moaned, as the gears once again began to turn. The pendulum renewed its stately swinging, back and forth, edging ever downward. “You will die here—you and this filthy fornicator. First one, then the other!”

My mouth fell open as Bexley hastened around the machine. “Stop!” I cried. But it was too late: he hit some hidden release and the blade fell.

A muffled shriek erupted from Reed. At the moment it dropped the pendulum was passing the midpoint of its swing; its fall took it somewhat toward one side of the table, as Reed twisted the opposite direction. The blade embedded itself to the left of his neck, its keen edge tracing a fine red line on one side of his throat. He stared at me, his eyes pulsing with fright.

Bexley seemed delighted. “How fortunate for you, my friend. Few men manage to cheat the executioner. Perhaps God means for you to survive after all.” He turned his attention to me. “You, my dear, will not be quite so lucky.” He pulled from his pocket a thick plastic bag and a pair of black leather gloves.

That’s when I remembered: in Practice to Deceive, Penelope had been murdered by a local vicar—who stumbled upon her secret when he chanced to notice her entering a lodging house in a nearby town, and later saw a man leave in her stead. He lured her to the basement of his church, serving her tea laced with a fast-acting sedative, and then smothered her with—what else?—a plastic bag. Serena’s plans for me snapped into focus. My god, I thought, she really is a psychopath!

“First things first.” Bexley sauntered around back of the machine. I heard clinking sounds and a quiet trickle of liquid. He returned a moment later holding a bone china teacup adorned with yellow roses. “In a situation like this, it is traditional to offer a lady one last cuppa.” He held the cup for me to sip.

I stared into the amber liquid. Black specks littered the bottom. I met his gaze. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

His bushy eyebrows shot up. “You refuse? Are you sure? Most people I’m sure would rather be asleep when they get smothered.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“As you wish.” He set the cup next to Reed and drew on his gloves.
“You’re making a mistake.” I watched his hands sink into the black leather.

“I think not. The Good Book is my guiding light.”

“You think I’m some sort of deviant. But I’m not. I’m a regular person.”

“You’re a man wearing women’s clothes. I’d hardly call that ‘regular’.”

“You’re wrong. I’m wearing my clothes.” I looked him straight in the eye, daring him to find fault. “I’m a woman, Serena.”

He looked incredulous. “You? Two days ago you were passing yourself off as a man. Not much of a man, admittedly, but most certainly male.” He snapped the plastic bag taut. “I know this for a fact: Serena helped disguise your maleness with that prosthetic obscenity currently affixed between your legs.”

I bit my lip. This had to be phrased just right. “I was male, but I was never a man. You were right about my dressing-up; I’ve been doing it for years. But I never realized what it all meant—until Serena made me do this.”

Bexley stepped towards me. “She only did what you would’ve done to yourself.”

“Yes, she turned me into a woman—because that’s what I am.” I tossed my head to shift the hair from my eyes. “Don’t you see? Back in the Empress, when I was getting dressed, all of a sudden it didn’t feel like I was wearing a disguise—it felt like I just took one off! For the first time in my life, I felt like my real self.”

He stopped, the bag dangling from one hand. “You claim to—to be a woman?”

“Yes! You can damn me for being a cross-dresser before, but even then… I know now that I’ve always been female on the inside. How could it ever be wrong for me to express that on the outside?”

His jaw clenched. “It was wrong. God doesn’t make mistakes.”

I had to find common ground. “You’re right, he doesn’t. But he does give people challenges. At birth, he made me a boy—that was my challenge. I had to figure out who and what I was supposed to be—what God wanted me to be—and then I had to fight for my womanhood. That’s what I’m doing now.”

His head dipped. After a long pause, he murmured, “I must think on this.” He removed the gloves and lay them on the nearest pew, atop the plastic bag. Then he left. Heavy footfalls ascended the stairs. The door at the top opened and closed.

I looked at Reed. His eyebrows rose and he nodded.

“So far so good,” I told him, then set to work once more on the knots that bound my wrists. I relaxed my hands, creating a little slack in the rope, and slid my arms back and forth. It was tight at first, but slowly the rope began to loosen.
Some minutes later, the door opened and footsteps clumped down the stairs. *Too soon!* My hands were still trapped.

It wasn’t the man I knew as Stafford Bexley. Serena’s head was back on the body they shared. She approached the stage, her eyes fixed on me. Thankfully, she ignored the gloves. The plastic bag remained where it was.

She mounted the steps, sparing Reed no more than a glance. “Is it true?” she said through stiff lips. “You claim to be a woman?”

“It’s true.” I strove to further feminize my voice. “I’m *so* grateful to you, Serena. You made me realize who I really am.” I glanced down at the ruffles on my dress, my deep cleavage, my nylon-clad legs… it was no lie.

She shook her head. “What will you do? What can you do?”

“I can put things right.” My voice was firm, yet feminine. “I can change my name. I can be Felicia legally, and physically as well.” I forced a smile onto my lips. “In a few months, you’ll never know I was born a boy. In fact, I hear they do womb transplants these days… my mom probably doesn’t need hers anymore.”

She looked dazed. “That sounds… rather nice. It’s such a pity…” She gazed down at Reed, half-closing her eyes. “I can’t let you live.” Reed’s eyes slammed open.

As if in a dream, Serena picked up the teacup, breathed deep—and drank. For an instant, our eyes met. A sad smile flashed across her lips.

She left the stage to sit on the front-row pew. She picked up the black gloves, but did not put them on. “I shall finish the job,” she said, to no one in particular. “Put the body in the trunk of the car, leave it parked at the hotel. Just like in the book. Then it will… all be… it will all be…”

She gazed up at me. “It wasn’t just lies,” she whispered. “I really did like you.” Then her eyes rolled up and she collapsed.

It took me another fifteen minutes to work my hands free. I quickly pushed the blade away from Reed’s neck, sending it crashing to the floor. Then I called in the Mounties.

*

I left Reed where he was and met the RCMP officers upstairs. I gave my statement to a serious man who seemed to find nothing odd in the fact that I was still male ‘under the covers’, so to speak. As I spun the story, Reed emerged on a stretcher and was carried to an ambulance waiting outside. He ignored me and I returned the favor. I meant what I’d said: the man was yesterday’s news.
The officer inspected the basement for himself, then conferred with the other constables. Upon his return, he sat down and eyed me thoughtfully. “It seems that this woman you called Serena—she was in disguise.”

“I know. Like I said, she disguised herself as the old priest, Stafford Bexley. And I’m pretty sure she was the assistant manager back at the Empress too. What was his name—Bezner. I should’ve known; it sounded so fake.”

“We found those disguises in one of the back rooms.” He glanced toward the altar. “What I meant is that she’s wearing a disguise right now—or rather she was. It has been removed.”

I stared at him. “You mean the clothing she had on? The black robe?”

“I was referring to her face. She—or rather he—isn’t really a woman.”

Voices emerged from the hallway adjacent to the altar. A man clad in a long black robe stumbled out, hands cuffed behind his back and flanked by a pair of stern-looking Mounties. He laughed when he saw me. “Felicia! You managed to cheat the executioner as well! God must have changed his mind—and after I went to all that trouble.” He shook his head. “Such a pity. If only I’d known before.”

“His name is Stafford Bexley,” the officer said. “He’s a pastor-in-training at the United Orthodox Alliance church downtown.”

“I recognize him,” I said, because all of a sudden I did. Not by name, of course, but from a few of the singles parties I’d attended. He wasn’t there to meet people, just help with refreshments. But he had stopped attending, after I met Serena—because he was Serena.

“Don’t look so shocked,” Bexley fleered, as the constables marched him through the nave of the old church. “You pretended to be somebody else your whole life, didn’t you? Why shouldn’t I do the same? Whatever it takes to catch the fly. Isn’t that what spiders do?” He laughed. “Good Christian spiders!”

I watched him go, out the front door to a waiting squad car. The officer shook his head. “I’ve seen a few crazies in my time, but that guy takes the cake. He disguises himself as a woman—for six whole months—and pretends to be your girlfriend, just to trick you into dressing up as a woman so he can kill you?” He let out his breath. “Good lord. And he calls you the deviant?”

I smoothed my skirt, then ran a hand under my hair and drew it forward over one shoulder. A sunbeam settled on my back. I felt curiously light-headed.

Gently, I touched the man’s arm, as women often do. “Please, officer—you won’t be too hard on him, will you? Down there, at the very end—he did what he could to make it right.”
As it turned out, my mother didn’t go for the transplant idea—she thought I was out of my mind. But maybe that was just as well, because after returning home I ended up shelving my female persona. Felicia’s face inevitably had to come off, as all good things must; the prosthetics returned to their boxes and Felix returned to his old life. What I had told Serena was no lie; I still felt that part of me was, and would forever be, female. But a promise made in the heat of the moment to save your life is no basis for a life-changing decision. If I ever become a woman—for keeps, that is—let it be my decision, made in my own good time.

I keep Practice to Deceive beside my bed, where I often read a favorite passage or two before lights-out. Alone in the dark, my mind wanders to what it might be like to have a second home in another city—and a second life as the woman I have already been. And then I dream… of her.